

Town of Athol, Massachusetts



A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

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Executive Summary

The Athol Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) convened on October 10, 2017 at the Athol Town Hall, under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England Chapter. Over the course of the day, the TAP, consisting of eight real estate and marketing professionals, met with local business owners, representatives from regional nonprofits, and other key stakeholders. The purpose of the TAP was to devise a strategy that would reinvigorate an underperforming Main Street, and to examine the redevelopment possibilities for a town-owned shopping plaza and its surrounding properties.

Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process

Gives an overview of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs), while also providing a list of the panel members and stakeholders who took part in this particular TAP. The chapter also outlines the study area for the TAP, and describes the process undertaken by the panelists and stakeholders to arrive at the recommendations presented at the public meeting at the Athol Town Hall.

Chapter 2: Background and History

This chapter provides a brief overview of the issues the Town of Athol requested that the TAP address; the manufacturing history of the Town of Athol; and an illustration of the current economic state of the Town and its relationship to the neighboring Town of Orange. It also looks at the Town of Athol as it is today – a regional economic center that continues to rely on manufacturing for its employment base, but whose Downtown is underperforming. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of three areas that could potentially drive economic growth – Downtown/Main Street, the Lord Pond Plaza area and the former Union Twist Drill Co. mill site.

Chapter 3: Assets and Opportunities

The analysis in this chapter examines the strengths and potential economic development possibilities for the Town of Athol. Situated in the middle of largely rural communities, Athol and neighboring Orange serve as the economic/retail center for the region. The architecturally appealing buildings in the Downtown offer a solid base for re-creating an authentic Town Center that could connect to a redeveloped Lord Pond Plaza. Combined with the abundant outdoor recreational activities in the town and region, there is an opportunity to create an outdoor tourism destination supported by dining and retail.

Chapter 4: Challenges

The contents of this chapter identifies the obstacles Athol faces before it can emerge from its economic slump – some complex, some less difficult. The high vacancy rate in the storefronts on Main Street and the closing of restaurants – combined with an unwillingness on the part of the absentee owners of many of the Downtown commercial buildings to invest in their properties – is a major dilemma. The chapter also addresses zoning and parking issues, as well as the lack of well-paid jobs in the Town.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

This chapter offers short and long-term suggestions based on the original TAP request, and expands upon a few key ideas to improve the economic vitality of the town. Recommendations include developing an identity for the Town of Athol and Downtown; methods to address zoning and parking concerns; and longer range development plans such as connecting the revitalization of the Downtown to the recreational tourism attractions available in the Athol/Orange region. The panel also presented a hypothetical case study for a public-private partnership for the redevelopment of the Lord Pond Plaza.

Chapter 6: Funding Sources

This section provides an overview of the various programs being offered by agencies such as MassHousing and MassDevelopment to spur economic growth.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

This final chapter details the conclusions of the study. The availability of low-cost housing, coupled with the abundance of recreational attractions, could position the Town of Athol as a viable live/work/play option, particularly for younger families. However, in order to improve the economic well-being of the town, a plan must be devised to either attract higher paying jobs or develop an economy that capitalizes on the region's recreational assets.

ULI & the TAP Process

Urban Land Institute (ULI)

The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c) (3) non-profit research and education organization supported by its members. The mission of ULI is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and to help sustain and create thriving communities. Founded in 1936, the institute now has nearly 40,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service, including developers, architects, planners, lawyers, bankers, and economic development professionals, among others.

The Boston/New England District Council of ULI serves the six New England states and has over 1,300 members. As a preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI Boston/ New England facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local, and regional leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places.

MassDevelopment

MassDevelopment is the state's economic development and finance authority. The authority works closely with state, local and federal officials to boost housing and create jobs. With the power to act as both a lender and developer, MassDevelopment also works to fill in gaps in infrastructure, transportation, energy and other areas that may be holding back economic growth. MassDevelopment has worked with ULI since 2011 to help sponsor and support the TAP process in cities and towns across the Commonwealth.

Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

The ULI Boston/New England Real Estate Advisory Committee convenes Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) at the request of public officials and local stakeholders of communities and nonprofit organizations facing complex land use challenges, who benefit from planning and development professionals providing pro bono recommendations.

At the TAP, a group of diverse professionals specially assembled with expertise in the issues posed spends one to two days visiting and analyzing existing conditions, identifying specific planning and development issues, and formulating realistic and actionable recommendations to move initiatives forward in a way consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.



ULI TAP panelists at work

The Panel

ULI Boston/New England convened a volunteer panel of eight experts whose members represent the range of disciplines necessary to analyze the challenges and opportunities facing the Town of Athol in their efforts to make the community a more vibrant place to live, work and play. Disciplines represented included architects, designers and planners, as well as business development, real estate acquisition, and marketing professionals. The following is a list of panelists:

Co-Chairs

Emily Keys Innes, AICP, LEED AP ND, Associate and Senior Urban Planner at Harriman

Edward F. O'Rourke, Director of Business Development for Commodore Builders

Panel

Drew Kane, Associate and Senior Urban Designer & Planner at Utile Design

Bridget Kelly, Director of Client Engagement at Nickerson PR

Amanda Maher, Vice President of Real Estate/Municipal Services at MassDevelopment

Bob Maloney, Executive Vice President, Managing Director of Acquisitions at A.W. Perry

John Martin, AIA, LEED AP, Principal at Elkus Manfredi Architects

Matt Mrva, New England Director of Landscape Architecture at Bohler Engineering

ULI Staff

Sara Marsh, Manager, Boston/New England District Council

TAP Writer

Mike Hoban, Principal, Hoban Communications

Panelists have donated their time.



Panelists brainstorming during charette

Stakeholders

The TAP benefited from the participation of the diverse group of stakeholders – local business owners, representatives from area businesses and non-profits, and the executive director of the North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce

The following is a list of stakeholders:

Courtney Fifield, V.P. of Lending & Business Development, Athol Credit Union

Cindy Hartwell, Owner, L.P. Athol, Corp.

Chuck Hartwell, Owner, L.P. Athol Corp.

Sara Lyman, Realtor, Hometown Realtors

Tom Rich, Friends of the Alan E. Rich Environmental Park

Ann Willhite, Owner, Déjà vu Women's Clothing Consignment Shop

Mark Wright, Executive Director, North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau



Cambium Corporation building, also known as the “Casket Factory”

The TAP Process

The Town of Athol TAP was held on October 10, 2017. Panelists from ULI Boston/New England were greeted at the Athol Town Hall by Director of Planning and Development Eric R. Smith and were later joined on the tour by Town Manager Shaun A. Suhoski. Smith led the ULI panel on a 90-minute walking tour along the Downtown district (primarily Main Street) and down to Lord Pond Plaza, a site that the Town is considering for redevelopment, along with adjacent parcels.

Along the way, the panel observed a number of historic structures from the 19th and early 20th century on Main Street that were aesthetically attractive and appeared to be structurally intact. The Downtown business district is mostly populated by independent proprietors and was remarkable for its large number of first-floor vacancies. Highlights included stops at Wilson and Steely Kustom Coachworks, a high-performance auto shop with a street-level showroom, and a brief overview of the decaying Cambium Corporation building, also known as the “Casket Factory,” a one-time shoe manufacturing site that today still produces wooden caskets.

The tour also included a stop at the Lord Pond Plaza (portions of which are town-owned), home to Ocean State Job Lot, Sherwin Williams, and the Senior Center, as well as the town’s municipal parking lot— also used as an unregulated roadway. The plaza is adjacent to two privately-owned properties, a former gas station and car wash which is vacant and under an environmental protocol through MassDEP, and the Eight Dragons Take-Out Restaurant, both of which could be available for purchase as part of a larger redevelopment plan. The tour concluded with a trip through the municipal lot, within sight of two of the shuttered restaurants, the Blind Pig and The Atholl House. Shortly after the TAP visit, it was announced that the former Atholl House would become a new restaurant known as the Main Street Grill. Also, The Blind Pig has been reopened.

Following the tour, the ULI panel interviewed the stakeholders listed in the previous sub-section at the Athol Public Library, in two separate panel discussions. The panelists then engaged in an intensive day-long charrette to develop recommendations, incorporating the information provided in their research prior to the meetings as well as the input from the stakeholders. The panelists then shared their observations and recommendations at a public presentation that evening with staff members and residents of the Town of Athol, as well as business owners and their representatives.

Background and History

The Town of Athol sought the help of the ULI TAP to devise a strategy to reinvigorate an underperforming Main Street and to examine the redevelopment possibilities for the town-owned plaza and its surrounding properties. In addition, the town requested guidance on zoning and parking issues, as well as the feasibility of creating a connection to the proposed mixed-use redevelopment at the site of a 365,000 SF vacant mill.

A) Questions for the ULI Panel

The panelists were asked to address the following questions:

Zoning and Parking Issues

- a) Should the Town rezone the entire “Downtown” defined area, in particular, the business/commercial area to Central Commercial?
- b) How can Athol address parking management under zoning?
- c) Can ULI provide recommendations on how best to manage our Downtown parking meter pricing?

Building reuse/feasibility

- a) What can the Town do to help fill the vacant storefronts and buildings?
- b) Can ULI recommend to the Town what best practices should be taken to develop and implement a redevelopment plan?
- c) Should the Town even be a shopping center landlord or would it be best to have a private-sector developer take over this initiative?

Pedestrian Connections

- a) How can we address the challenges (physical and fiscal) to implement the Millers River Greenway in the Downtown?
- b) Is a physical connection from the Downtown to the proposed mixed-use development at the Union Twist Drill mill recommended and feasible?

B) History of Athol

The Town of Athol was founded in 1762, and within 30 years had become a full-fledged mill town, with nearly a dozen water-driven grist and saw mills harnessing the power of Millers River. The manufacturing base expanded throughout the 1800’s to include the textile, leather, wood, and metal industries, and by 1879, three rail lines were running through the town to transport goods to other regions. In 1881, a manufacturer of precision tools, the L. S. Starrett Company, began operations, and along with the Union Twist Drill Co. (founded in 1905), earned Athol the moniker of “Tool Town.” Starrett remains the town’s largest employer, with approximately 500 locally-based employees. UTD ceased operations in the mid-1980’s, but the mill remains viable for re-use, with the owners considering manufacturing, office, multifamily, and agribusiness options.

C) Athol Today

Located in northwest Worcester County, Athol is the most populous (approximately 11,500) of the nine towns comprising the North Quabbin Region. The town served as a commercial hub for the area during the early 20th century before declining in significance with the construction of the Route 2 bypass during the 1950’s, which diverted traffic from Main Street. Two minor state highways – Route 2A (Main Street) and Route 32 – also run through the town.

In addition to the Starrett Company, the town's next largest employer is Athol Hospital (which merged with the Heywood Hospital in Gardner in 2013), followed by the Athol-Royalston School District. Despite the presence of Starrett and the hospital, Athol is a high-poverty community, with a median household income of \$47,122 (\$37,219 in the Downtown district) compared to a statewide figure of \$67,846. The overall poverty rate for Athol is 17.4 percent (27.3 percent for Downtown) compared to 11.4 percent statewide.

Since the 1960's, Athol has collaborated with the neighboring Town of Orange to promote economic development, and the towns have also joined forces on initiatives such as the now-defunct Millers River Community Development Corporation and the North Quabbin Housing Partnership. As one of the stakeholders remarked during the panel discussion "Athol and Orange are two towns, but they're one community."

D) Areas of Interest

Downtown/Main Street

The Downtown commercial district runs along Main Street from Crescent Street to Johnson Street and includes businesses along Freedom Street, Exchange Street, South Street, and Traverse Street. There are three separate zoning districts in the Downtown area: Central Commercial, General Commercial, and Multi-Family Residential (indicated in zoning map on pg 16).

According to a report prepared in September 2017 by Fine Point Associates for the Town of Athol, the Downtown is comprised of 118 commercial (non-residential) units, of which over one-quarter (29 percent) are currently vacant. Most of the establishments are independently-owned single locations (67 percent), including a half-dozen personal services (hair, skincare, and nail salons) and consignment/used goods stores. National and regional businesses account for 13 percent of the tenants, with public entities and nonprofits accounting for the remainder of the occupancy.

The Downtown has very little business activity after 6 PM, with the exception of the few remaining restaurants. Many of the buildings do not have elevators, making them non-ADA compliant, and thus unsuitable for businesses. Instead, there are privately-owned apartment units on the upper floors, most of which are rented to low-income residents. One strength of the Downtown is the robust traffic count on Main Street. A recent MassDOT single-day study recorded 12,221 cars (eastbound and westbound) traveling on Main Street.

Lord Pond Plaza

The Lord Pond Plaza is a primarily town-owned parcel located off Freedom Street, just outside of the Downtown district. At present, the town parcel contains a Sherwin-Williams paint store, the offices of the North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau and the Athol Senior Center. Ocean State Job Lot owns an abutting parcel in the plaza and remains operational. The 7.91-acre parcel is located on top of the historic Lord Pond and the Mill Brook, which is currently channeled underground. Overall, the parcel is vastly underutilized, with an abundance of impervious parking space, and is used as a cut-through for area traffic. The Town has been considering the Plaza for redevelopment and could include the two adjacent businesses, Mr. Mike's Mobil and Car Wash (closed), and the Eight Dragons Take-Out Restaurant, in any redevelopment plan.

Union Twist Drill Co. Site

Located within walking distance to the Downtown, the former Union Twist Drill Co. mill offers approximately 365,000 SF of space that is zoned for multifamily, manufacturing, warehousing, industrial, and office. The complex of buildings is situated on 13.5 acres adjacent to the Millers River and includes two operational hydroelectric power plants that supply its power. Surplus electricity is sold to National Grid. Since UTD ceased operations in the mid-1980s, the complex has provided warehousing and rentals to non-profit organizations, light manufacturers, and industry service providers. The owners, L.P. Athol Corporation, are seeking a tenant (or tenants) for the building, and are also exploring a multifamily option for 129 market-rate apartments, or a combination of uses.

Assets and Opportunities

The Town of Athol has several strengths that could be leveraged to not only improve the state of the Downtown but elevate the economic prospects of the Town as a whole. Athol is surrounded by rural communities (except neighboring Orange), so the Downtown could potentially be positioned to offer distinctive retail and dining options to capitalize on the visitors drawn to the region's abundant recreational resources. There was also a strong feeling from the stakeholders interviewed that Athol is "headed in the right direction", citing new leadership and investments in the town. These investments include a new elementary school, the expanded and renovated public library, the construction of a new emergency department and medical office building at Athol Hospital, and strong private-sector investment at the North Quabbin Commons development at Exit 18 off Route 2.

Downtown Main Street

One of the most striking features noted by the panel was the beauty and relative intactness of many of the historic structures on Main Street, which could serve as building blocks to creating an authentic New England Downtown. Main Street is also remarkable for its lack of "missing teeth" abandoned or demolished buildings, a scenario found in many older mill town centers. Although many of the storefronts are in need of renovation, the rents are low, with storefronts up to 2,000 SF renting for \$500-\$700 per month. The Downtown area is walkable and connects to the riverfront and residential neighborhoods.

There are limited parallel on-street parking spaces available on Main Street, but ample parking for the area is within a short walking distance in municipal lots. Although there is no direct MBTA Commuter Rail stop, the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority ('MART') G-Link connects Athol to the surrounding communities and to the Fitchburg Line Commuter Rail, which runs to North Station in Boston. Additionally, Main Street has a daily traffic count that was recently recorded at over 12,000 (eastbound and westbound).

Town of Athol

A) Engaged Citizenry and Improved Town Government/Attitudes Toward Redevelopment

Multiple stakeholders expressed confidence in the ability of the Town of Athol to improve, citing the addition of Town Manager Suhoski (3 years) and Director of Planning and Development Eric

Smith (18 months). "The change in Athol as a community in the last three years has been huge, and it comes from the top down," said one business owner, a feeling that was reinforced by other stakeholders. There is a small but engaged Downtown Vitality Committee, which is a town government affiliated, comprised of business owners, local citizens and elected officials. Stakeholders also cited the strong support of the community for charitable works such as the hospital fundraising campaign, despite the relatively low income of much of the populace. The Town of Athol has commissioned additional studies aimed at improving the Downtown, including the recently completed Downtown Athol Analysis of Economic and Market Conditions (prepared by Fine Point Associates in September of 2017) for the Town of Athol; and the 2014 UMass Amherst LARP Downtown Athol Report, which also provide sound recommendations.

B) Housing

Stakeholder Sara Lyman of Hometown Realtors reports there has been a "great recovery" for the housing market in Athol, with her firm registering its best year in the last decade in 2017. Many of the homebuyers are coming to the market from out of the area, with a significant portion being first-time buyers. There are also many homebuyers with young families, which she attributes to the investments that the town has made in recent years, including a new state-of-the-art elementary school, which opened in September 2016. Much of the multifamily housing stock was described as "substandard," market rents in the town are affordable, with two-bedroom apartments in the \$700-\$750 range, according to stakeholders.

C) Union Twist Drill (UTD) Mill

This underutilized mill is currently used as unheated warehouse space but is being positioned for re-use by its owners, the L. P. Athol Corporation. An existing plan of record for the mill proposes the construction of 129 market-rate apartment units in half of the space, while reserving the remaining 180,000 SF for industrial or office use.

One of the stakeholders noted that Athol residents currently do not have the type of disposable income that would support proposed dining and boutique retail if Downtown were to be revitalized, but the mill could bring two things that could improve that dynamic – jobs and/or residents of market-rate apartments.

(Note: Following the TAP, The owners of the UTD Mill were in talks with a firm that would transform the complex into an indoor medical marijuana cultivation facility, potentially hiring up to 200-plus employees. No agreement had been reached, and owners are also in talks with potential investors considering other uses.)

D) North Quabbin Commons

When completed, the mixed-use retail development – anchored by an 80,000 SF Market Basket – will total 300,000 SF. Tenants currently include Marshall's, Starbuck's and several smaller retail tenants, with Hobby Lobby, an eight-screen Athol Cinema, Tully Family Medical Practice and the 110 Grill restaurant scheduled to open in late 2017 or early 2018. According to published research by owner RMD, Inc., the potential population within a 15-mile radius is over 94,000, with an average household income of \$66,789. While some see the Commons as a retail competitor for the Downtown, others envision it as a complementary asset.

E) Town/Regional Recreational Tourism

According to the North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau, 385,000 people visited the area for recreational purposes (hiking, biking, paddling) in 2016 and over 150,000 people attended events. The annual Athol-Orange River Rat Race typically draws 20,000 people to and around Athol in early April,

as does the Johnny Appleseed Fair in neighboring Phillipston each September. The Annual Garlic and Arts Festival in Orange (also held in September) draws an additional 13,000. There is also the FlatRock Disc Golf course, which sponsors several tournaments per year.

In Athol itself, the Bearsden Conservation Area features ten miles of trails within 1,000 acres of forest, with climbing hills and views of the mountains and Millers River. The Alan E. Rich Environmental Park features access (for kayakers) to the Millers River, a park landscaped with native plants, benches and picnic tables, and a short loop trail.



YMCA located on Main Street



Downtown bulletin kiosk to promote local programs

Challenges

Despite the many positive attributes of the Downtown/Main Street and the natural beauty of the surrounding region, there are still many challenges to be addressed before the Town can execute a successful redevelopment strategy.

Downtown/Main Street

A) Condition of Buildings/Ownership

Much of the building stock – while structurally sound – needs re-investment, something that most building owners seem disinterested in doing. According to stakeholders, the majority of the Downtown buildings are held by a small group of out-of-town owners who are unwilling to do base improvements to the buildings or grant any type of tenant improvement allowance to prospective tenants. The focus for the owners instead seems to be on the apartments on the upper floors, which are typically rented to low-income residents, but still generate higher rents than the first-floor commercial properties. The lack of elevators make the upper floors non-compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and therefore not viable for commercial purposes.

The vacancy rate for commercial businesses Downtown is approximately 25 percent, despite the low rental rates. The Lucky Lanes/Jolly Tavern site would appear to be an ideal site for an entertainment venue, but according to stakeholders, would require significant investment, as it has been neglected for an extended period.

B) Lack of Restaurants/Post-Workday Activity

Although there are a handful of pizza/sub shops open on Main Street, several full-service restaurants have closed in recent years. These include The Blind Pig (which has re-opened since the completion of the TAP), Bon Appetit, and the Atholl House, which is slated to become a new restaurant called the Main Street Grill.

Stakeholders said the lunch business for Main Street restaurants was hurt by the reduction of lunch time from one hour to 30 minutes by the Starrett Company, the town's largest employer.

There are few businesses that operate past 6PM in the Downtown, and many businesses maintain inconsistent business hours. Gathering spaces (entertainment venues, pubs, coffee shops, small parks) that could attract townspeople, potential employees of new businesses, or outside visitors during the evenings are sorely lacking.

C) Poor Signage and Wayfinding

Despite having a traffic count of over 12,000 per day (both directions), there is little signage alerting travelers to recreational or retail attractions in the Town of Athol or the region.

D) Safety Issues

Stakeholders articulated the general perception that the Downtown area is unsafe, particularly after dark. The streetscape is poorly lit and there does not appear to be an adequate police presence. Much of the unease in the Downtown area stems from the presence of residents hanging out and creating an environment that feels unsafe, particularly in the area of the municipal lot.

E) Lack of Street Parking

Although ample parking exists in the underutilized municipal lot, on-street parking is perceived as inadequate. A lack of enforcement and/or an inadequate pricing structure allows all-day parking by proprietors and employees of local businesses in front of the stores, according to stakeholders.

Town of Athol

A) Housing

Although housing is relatively inexpensive and there is a strong inventory of rental and single homes, much of the housing is substandard. A large percentage of the multifamily housing stock would require significant re-investment, particularly the older properties, many of which require de-leading.

B) Lack of Employment Diversity

There is a dearth of high wage employment in the Town of Athol. Many of the manufacturing jobs at the Starrett Company pay hourly rates in the mid-to-high teens, even for longtime employees. Although the North Quabbin Commons added approximately 300 jobs since opening in early 2015, most of those (and future jobs at the development) are lower-wage retail positions. (Note: If the marijuana cultivation firm occupies the UTD Mill, those jobs are expected to pay hourly rates similar to the Starrett Company).

C) Lack of Town Staff/Resources

Although stakeholders agreed that the Town has been moving in a positive direction for a few years, there is a perception by some that there is a lack of follow-through by leadership. Stakeholders acknowledged that it might be attributed to a lack of staff and resources.



Vacant Storefronts on Main St



Main Street

Recommendations

Following an intense five-hour charrette, the panelists came up with a number of recommendations that address the concerns outlined in the TAP request.

A) Zoning

- Rezone all split lots to appropriate zoning districts
- Expand the Central Commercial district (refer to zoning map below, dark red indicates the downtown planning boundary)
- Change the following allowable uses in CA as recommended below:
 - Remove golf course as an allowable use
 - Expand Multifamily Zoning to include projects totaling over four units (but not on Main Street)
 - Consider onsite parking requirements for single businesses above 5,000 SF (or another figure deemed appropriate by the Town), but allow on-street parking for smaller businesses
 - Expand the boundary of the Central Commercial district to include Lord Pond Plaza



B) Parking

Short-term Improvements

- Enforce parking meters on a more consistent but less predictable basis to discourage all-day parking by business owners and employees
- Install signage on Downtown streets to direct people to municipal lots. (This work is currently underway through the Athol's Department of Public Works).
- Address deterioration of municipal lots (re-pave, install better lighting, improve landscaping, etc.)

Mid-term Improvements

- Create a parking management plan
- Raise parking fees and dedicate revenues to Downtown improvements



Lord Pond Plaza Lot



Parking Consolidation Plan created within focus area

C) Positioning the Town for Economic Growth

Short Term

Develop Clear Messaging About What Town Seeks to Become

To stimulate real economic growth, the town must first decide what types of job-generating industries it hopes to attract. Although the Union Twist Drill site could potentially draw office or high-tech manufacturing jobs, the Town's prime assets are its outdoor recreational attractions and well-trafficked Main Street. The Downtown could potentially be redeveloped as a regional dining and retail destination that complements the outdoor amenities.

Once a vision for the Town is developed, the following steps should be taken:

- 1) Create a marketing strategy focused on attracting new businesses to fulfill that vision for Athol. Developing a tag line or slogan (while engaging residents and business owners in the process as a way to build community) for the Town and/or Main Street should be strongly considered.
- 2) Review the Town's social media presence and create a social media plan for Athol, highlighting its advantages to businesses as well as recreational tourists. Also, educate Downtown business owners about the importance of establishing an online presence to promote their businesses, individually and collectively.
- 3) Review Athol's Parks and Greenway Network and develop a plan to better promote and leverage this resource, along with Millers River Park.
- 4) Given the existing joint identity of the towns, meet with the Town of Orange leadership to discuss cross-promotion and joint marketing of Athol and Orange, including an events creation collaborative.

Mid to Long Term

Wayfinding – Design and develop well-coordinated wayfinding signage (possibly incorporating a new tagline or identity messaging) for the Town of Athol, Downtown, the Athol Parks & Greenway Network, and other points of interest (including North Quabbin Commons).

Signage should reinforce the new identity of Athol, perhaps positioning the Downtown as a vibrant and unique place once the redevelopment is underway.

Expand/Create Additional Events to Draw People to the Town – In addition to events such as the annual River Rat Race and Big Cheese 5K, develop or expand existing events that leverage the Town and region's outdoor amenities, such as music and food truck festivals, disk golf tournaments, Tough Mudder/obstacle courses, and road races. Events that are built around existing businesses, such as an auto show with participation by Wilson and Steely Kustom Coachworks, should also be considered. Evening events, such as a movie night in the municipal parking lot, could draw people Downtown and help to alleviate the perception of the area as unsafe.

Support the Downtown Vitality Committee – Strengthen and expand the existing Downtown Vitality Committee to support Downtown marketing initiatives, and consolidate efforts geared towards improving the Downtown as a whole, not just individual businesses and storefronts.

Strengthen Appeal of Alan E. Rich Environmental Park – While the park is a wonderful asset, the entrance could be significantly improved, including adding new signage. With additional improvements, the park could serve as one of the touchstones of Athol's recreational marketing campaign, as well as serving as a connection to Main Street.

D) Downtown Strategies

Engage the Community – In addition to the merchant's association, develop a channel to engage the townspeople in the re-imagining of the Downtown, through the development of a citizen's panel or an advisory group to the merchant's association.

Seek Out Federal/State Downtown Improvement Initiatives – There are several state and federal programs designed to help revitalize Downtowns of economically distressed towns. One such program is National Main Street Center, which specializes in bringing economic vitality to older, historic Downtowns.

Activate the Downtown with Pop-Ups – Install creative programming to activate Main Street and increase business activity at night. Pop-up stores could use the vacant storefront space as artist's galleries, venues for food vendors, and concerts. In the short-term, pop-ups could be coordinated with outdoor events (River Rat Race and Big Cheese 5K for instance), until a more permanent Main Street experience could be established.

Create Family-Friendly Activities – Develop family-oriented programming that activates the Downtown at night, including concerts and movie nights possibly using the municipal lot or Liberty Hall in the Town Hall. Implement pop-ups for the holidays (Halloween, Christmas) to bring families Downtown.

Installation of Public Art – Engage local and regional artists to formulate a plan to display artworks in the Downtown district, potentially through a grant by the Mass. Cultural Council.

E) Municipal Strategies

For any economic growth to occur in Athol, the Town must work with current and future employers to create jobs. Below are some possibilities.

Establish Co-Working Space – With the recent installation of fiber optic cable, some space at the Union Twist Drill Mill or some of the vacant Downtown buildings could be transformed into co-working/incubator space. Millennials attracted to the lower cost housing and the vast recreational resources of the region could potentially use the co-working space to create startup tech businesses, which typically create higher wage jobs.

Create Workforce Training Programs – One use for space at the Union Twist Drill mill or other vacant buildings in the Downtown would be the creation of training programs that serve the manufacturing industry. The Town of Athol could explore partnerships with technical colleges such as Quinsigamond Community College or Worcester-based Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MassMEP) to help address the shortage of skilled machine operators (particularly CNC operators) in the region.

Develop Pedestrian Connection from Union Twist Drill Mill to Main Street

– The physical layout of the mill would require some creative adaptive re-use strategies for office or industrial purposes, but the site clearly has potential as a job generator for the town. The owners are in talks with a developer to potentially create 129 market-rate apartments, with the remainder of the space being reserved for industrial/office. The owners are also amenable to leasing the entire building to a single tenant, and have been in talks with a marijuana cultivation user as well as other investors. Creating a pedestrian walkway as part of a larger redevelopment plan for Main Street could enhance the appeal for potential residential and commercial tenants, and serve as a gateway to Downtown when the building finds tenants.

Create a Redevelopment Authority – To assist with the Downtown revitalization, the Town should create a redevelopment authority under Massachusetts General Laws 121A (governing “blighted open areas”) and a redevelopment plan under MGL Chapter 121B (governing “reasonable acquisition cost”). Such a plan would allow the Athol Redevelopment Authority to undertake development activities in the Downtown, including the redevelopment of Lord Pond Plaza and the acquisition and redevelopment of underutilized buildings along Main Street.

Review Streetscape Strategy – Implement a consistent landscaping and lighting scheme for the Downtown streetscape, preferably one that replicates the historic look of the district.

Build Capacity – Where possible, add staff to the Town to help implement some of these changes and explore the possibility of adding volunteers and recruiting some of the town’s younger residents to participate. Although it may be difficult to secure funding, additional police presence as well as regular maintenance (street sweeping, etc.) is vital to improving the Downtown.

F) Redevelop Lord Pond Plaza (Case Study)

The Lord Pond Plaza represents one of the Town’s most promising ways to attract investment and to drive economic activity in Downtown Athol.

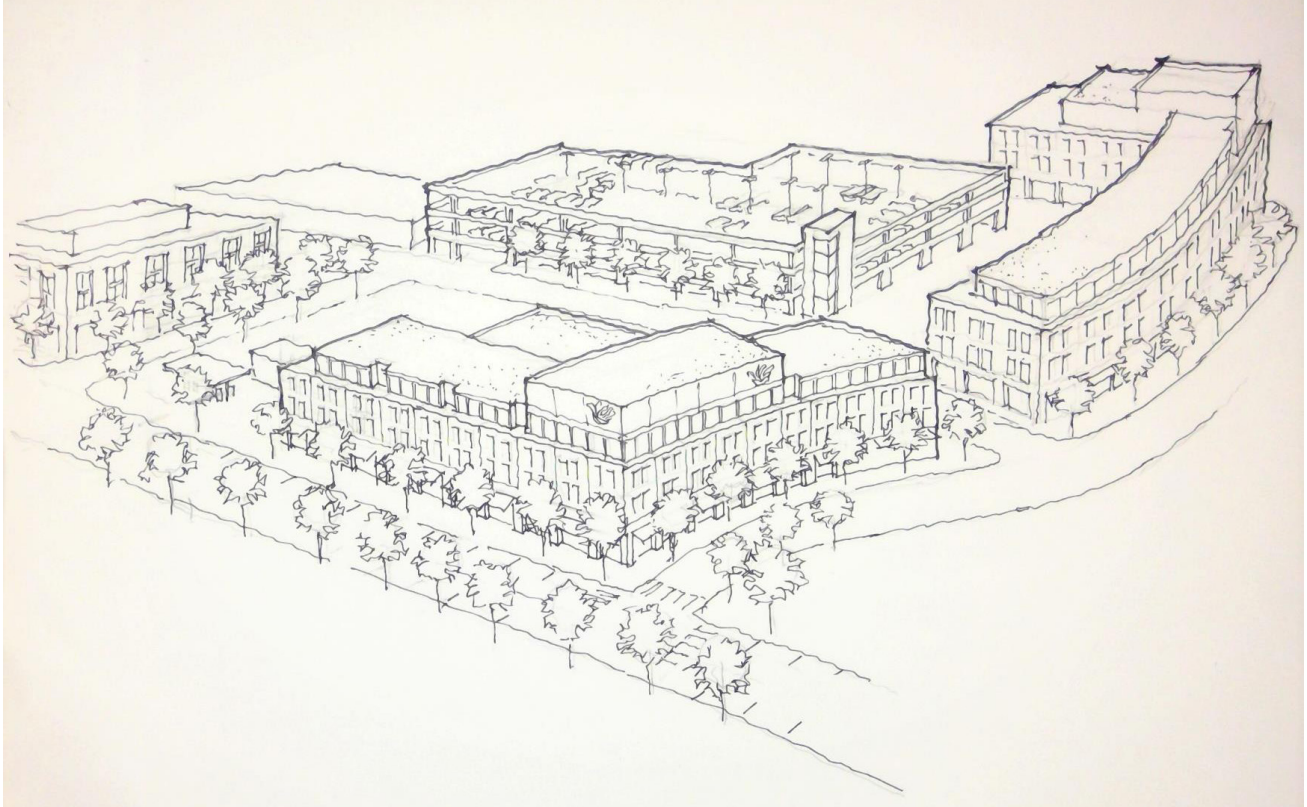
As part of the charrette, the panelists examined the possibilities for Lord Pond Plaza. At the evening meeting, the panelists presented a “fit study” – a vision of the type of development that could physically fit on the site. Although the proposed plan includes parcels that are not owned by the town (the former Mr. Mike’s Mobil and Car Wash and the Eight Dragons Take-Out Restaurant), it is believed that procuring the sites would not be difficult for a prospective developer.

The scenario for the fit study included a mixed-use redevelopment with a 50,000 SF grocery anchor, approximately 175 market-rate apartments, a new senior center, a multi-level parking garage, and a new road that passes through the existing municipal parking lot, which is already being used as a cut-through by motorists. (refer to map on pg 20).

The Town would need to undertake additional planning studies to determine the market viability for this site. One step would be to issue a Request for Interest to developers to gauge the existing possibilities. The concept produced by the panelists could be used to market the site and gauge interest in the project.



Focus area of redevelopment Plan



An illustration of the type of (multi-use) development that could physically fit on the Lord Pond Plaza site

Funding Sources

MassHousing

Workforce Housing Initiative

MassHousing's \$100 million Workforce Housing fund supports the creation of rental housing that is affordable for working families whose incomes are too high for subsidized housing but are priced out of market rents.

MassDevelopment

Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund

MassDevelopment supports the arts with capital grants for the acquisition, design, renovation, and construction of cultural facilities. They also offer grants for development studies. Both MassDevelopment and the Massachusetts Cultural Council administer this fund.

Predevelopment Loans

MassDevelopment provides low interest-rate loans up to \$100,000 with deferred repayment terms to finance predevelopment of real estate projects.

Commonwealth Places

Commonwealth Places provides a creative funding mechanism to advance community placemaking projects throughout Massachusetts. The statewide program will help fund place-based, community-driven projects – art installations, parks, bike trails, markets, and more – that revitalize downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts.

Public Infrastructure Financing

- Tax-Exempt Bonds for Public Infrastructure
- MassWorks Grant
- MassDevelopment issues tax-exempt bonds for improvements to roadways, sidewalks, parks, parking garages, bridges, tunnels, wharves, and a range of public facilities. Infrastructure programs that use this tax-exempt financing includes:

Infrastructure Investment Incentive Act (I-Cubed or I3)

District Improvement Financing (DIF)

Special Assessments

Conclusions

With housing prices in Greater Boston forcing many workers to examine options outside of the Boston Metro and inner suburban markets, there is an opportunity for Athol to re-position itself as a viable live/work/play alternative. The available land and housing stock, combined with the abundant outdoor recreational options such as hiking, biking, and kayaking in the region, should appeal to younger families, particularly with the addition of the new elementary school and modern library. And while Main Street has challenges, the potential exists to re-create Athol as an authentic New England Downtown, utilizing its well-preserved historic building stock.

Given the political will of the town and its leadership, the zoning and parking issues appear to be relatively easy fixes. However, the Town faces two major obstacles in its efforts to recover. The first is the lack of high-paying jobs. Many of the jobs being generated (with the possible exception of the Athol Hospital expansion) are low wage positions, such as the 300-plus retail jobs created at North Quabbin Commons in the last two years (with more on the way).

This may be alleviated by a high-tech manufacturer leasing or purchasing some or all of the Union Twist Drill complex, but that remains uncertain, as the owners have been marketing the space for some time. But even if the mill is re-purposed as a mixed-use complex or a marijuana cultivation facility, it should result in more foot traffic to support the nearby Downtown.

A second issue for the Downtown is the disinterest by the owners of the buildings to upgrade the properties, combined with the presence of low-income housing on the upper floors. A redevelopment authority, with a specific focus on the Downtown, could work with property owners to spur reinvestment in the downtown. If the Town creates this authority, it should also be charged with the redevelopment of Lord Pond Plaza to anchor reinvestment in the Downtown.

The Town of Athol, while facing some major challenges, has the potential to parlay its assets into a long-range economic growth strategy. If the Towns of Athol and Orange could extend their existing level of collaboration to develop a more robust recreational tourist trade – perhaps in collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce’s visitor’s bureau designation – it could serve not only as a driver to revitalize the Downtown of Athol but to benefit the entire region