

A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

Town of Hamilton

Hamilton, MA



June 22, 2015



**Urban Land
Institute**

Boston/New England

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Executive Summary

Under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council, the Hamilton Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) convened in Hamilton, Massachusetts on June 22, 2015, bringing together stakeholders, community leaders, and a panel of planning, design, and development professionals for a day-long session focused on identifying the issues, constraints, and opportunities in Hamilton's business district. The report that follows, which summarizes the TAP recommendations, is comprised of four chapters.

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) and provides a detailed list of participants in the Hamilton TAP including town officials, stakeholders, and the panel of land use professionals.

Chapter 2: Background and Assignment gives background information about Hamilton as well as current conditions of the downtown. This chapter also reviews the Town of Hamilton's objectives for the TAP, as stated in its initial application, which were to obtain recommendations on rezoning and potentially investing in a package septic system to allow for residential and business expansion in the downtown.

Chapter 3: Observations and Findings presents the feedback the panel received from stakeholders, the panel's insights about current conditions in the business district and how zoning bylaws and infrastructure limitations are affecting growth.

Finally, **Chapter 4: Planning Considerations** presents the short- and long-term recommendations in the areas of infrastructure investment, village branding parking and zoning bylaws.



Study Area which includes Hamilton Business District, Whenham Business District and Winthrop School

ULI and the TAP Process

a. Urban Land Institute (ULI)

The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. Founded in 1936, the Institute now has over 35,000 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.

As the pre-eminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local, national, and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places.

The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and to help sustain and create thriving communities.

The Boston/New England District Council serves the six New England states and has over 1,100 members.

b. Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) are designed to bring interdisciplinary land use expertise to communities and stakeholders at low cost. Panels are composed of experienced experts in multiple real estate, planning, and architecture specializations who volunteer to spend one full day in the designated area to assess its current challenges and future opportunities. They interview stakeholders, community leaders, and residents; examine future development scenarios; and outline actionable steps for implementation. The day ends in a public charrette that summarizes the panel's findings and general recommendations. This detailed final report is published 6-8 weeks later.



The panelists tour downtown Hamilton.



The panelists during the site tour.

c. Panel Members

ULI Boston/New England convened a panel of volunteers whose members represent a range of the disciplines associated with the planning and development challenges in downtown Hamilton.

Disciplines represented include architecture, development, design, law, and engineering.

Members were selected with the intent of convening an array of professional expertise relevant to the Hamilton Development Corporation's objectives for this TAP. The panelists were:

- **Dick Lampman**, TAP Chair, Barr and Barr, Framingham, MA
- **Sarah Barnat**, Executive Director, ULI Boston/New England and Residential Developer, Boston, MA
- **Phil Colleran**, Principal, CRJA, Boston, MA
- **Ed Hodges**, Principal, Dimella Shaffer, Boston, MA
- **Ryan Leeming**, Senior Designer, New England Development, Boston, MA
- **David Linhart**, Associate, Goulston & Storrs, Boston, MA

- **Craig Lizotte**, Principal, VHB, Watertown, MA

- **Frank Valdes**, Associate Principal, Dimella Shaffer, Boston, MA

Bill Gisness, Hamilton Development Corporation Board Member and Rachel Meketon, Community Projects Coordinator for the Town of Hamilton, served as the primary contacts for ULI Boston/New England for the town.

Michelle Landers and Ileana Tauscher of ULI Boston/New England provided organizational and technical support in preparation for and during the TAP event.

d. Stakeholders

The TAP benefited from the participation of a diverse group of stakeholders — town leadership, town staff, business owners, residents, and local developers — who met with the panel and shared information, ideas, and opinions on a range of issues affecting downtown Hamilton. Stakeholders at the session included:

- **Michael Lombardo**, Town Manager
- **Marc Johnson**, Town Selectman



Sites on the downtown walking tour.



Existing mixed use development in Hamilton.

- **Bill Bowler**, Zoning Board of Appeals Chair
- **Peter Clark**, Planning Board Member
- **David Geike**, Planner Board Chair
- **Patrick Reffett**, Planning Director
- **Peter Gourdeau**, Windover Construction
- **Paul Thober**, The Weathervane Restaurant
- **Charles Vorrias**, Hamilton Dentistry
- **Stephen Boudreault**, Locksmyth's Barber Shop
- **Jim Kroesser**, Lawyer
- **Andrew DeFranza**, Harborlight Community Partners
- **Darcy Dale**, Resident
- **Peggy McNamara**, Realtor
- **Deb Evans**, Realtor
- **Tim Barry**, Realtor

e. TAP Process

The Hamilton TAP was held on June 18, 2015 at the Public Library. In advance of the TAP day, panelists were given briefing materials, including the MAPC and Cecil Group, Inc. reports, prior to the day of the TAP. They arrived at the Public Library in Hamilton, Massachusetts and were greeted by leaders of the HDC. The group then began a tour of the downtown area with particular attention to two sites of interest for future development: a parcel of green open space across from the MBTA station that was purchased by the HDC, and a large site currently used by Dodge Tree Company, which is unpopular with residents because of truck traffic and noise. Experts on the panel engaged with HDC leaders and asked questions regarding current use of the site and what their vision is for the future of the downtown area. They also noted their own reactions to experience of walking through the town and discussed pedestrian areas that would benefit from improvements.

The presentation is available electronically at the ULI Boston/New England website <http://boston.uli.org>.



Existing Mixed Use Development in Hamilton

Background & Assignment

a. Town of Hamilton

Located on Greater Boston's North Shore in Essex County, the town of Hamilton possesses numerous desirable qualities for residents. Its pastoral landscape and proximity to ocean beaches is complimented by its important role in the history of New England. Settled in the seventeenth century, Hamilton became known in the nineteenth century for its equestrian recreational facilities or "horse farms" as well as its architecture, and the appearance of the railroad in the 1840s made it a once bustling center of commerce. Among the many esteemed residents who lived there was General George S. Patton (1885-1945), who is honored by the town's popular Patton Park.

b. Growth Control and the Business District

In the past, Hamilton (and neighboring Wenham) has implemented a number of measures to control growth in order to preserve the town's village character. Bylaws were put in place that made it difficult to create new residential units in the area around the Hamilton/Wenham MBTA station, and the town's geography does not allow for expanding the boundaries of the business district. These zoning restrictions coupled with high construction costs and taxes has deterred developers from investing in Hamilton. While the MBTA offers service to downtown Boston, an infrequent schedule does little to attract commuters to the site for this reason alone. Adding to this is the problem of wastewater treatment. Like many rural-suburban areas across New England and the United States, Hamilton and Wenham are dependent upon individual septic systems. Any substantial new growth that would have an impact on the tax rate would thus require investing in costly infrastructural changes to increase wastewater treatment capacity.

These prior efforts have now begun to have adverse affects on Hamilton's business district. The population

of Hamilton is aging and there is a reduction in the number of younger families with school-age children. School capacity rates are lower than ever before, and the downtown has a number of vacant office spaces, retail spaces and rental apartments. It lacks diversity in residential units, such as multifamily and senior housing. Many business owners and downtown residents share a desire for mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly spaces and more connection between existing office, residential, and commercial spaces.

c. Panel Assignment

In order to address these and other issues, the Hamilton Development Corporation (HDC), a publicly-chartered nonprofit entity dedicated to economic development and infrastructure investment in the Hamilton Commercial District, enlisted the aid of organizations such as the MAPC and the Cecil Group, Inc. to help assess ways of encouraging growth in the downtown area while maintaining its character. Building upon these previous studies, HDC requested and financially sponsored a ULI Boston/New England TAP.

The HDC requested the panel assess the potential impact of three tiers of future development:

- a) The scale and economic benefits that could be expected under the existing zoning bylaws;
- b) The scale and economic benefits assuming a new mixed use bylaw with no infrastructure improvements;
- c) The scale and cost-benefits likely generated by a new mixed-use bylaw assuming infrastructure improvements (primarily roadway, pedestrian, parking and wastewater treatment).

ULI was then requested to address the following questions:

1. **Land Use and Design** - What is the maximum development potential of the business district that still

retains the Village's historic qualities for the three tiers of development listed above? Hamilton appears to lack the housing, tax base and business generation from young people without families and the older generation with no children.

2. Economic Analysis - What would the financial benefit be to the towns and the communities for the three tiers of development listed above in a fully developed business district?

3. Financial Feasibility - Would that financial benefit be sufficient to support the installation of a wastewater treatment facility? What funding options for the facility, including public-private partnerships, are available to the towns?



Hamilton's Business District is home to many independent retailers in small, single story structures.



Some structures in the business district would be appropriate for mixed uses.

Observations & Findings

As part of considering the above questions and building upon existing reports, the ULI TAP panel recommended the following action items for the town, which will be discussed in more detail below:

- a. Implement a downtown district identity program and village “branding”;
- b. Develop a plan for prioritized and phased public realm improvements;
- c. Consistently enforce existing parking regulations in order to increase the number of available spaces;
- d. Modify zoning bylaws and/or adopt the suggested overlay in order to enable maximum utilization of existing building space and to encourage the introduction of more variety into the existing housing options—especially multifamily and senior living units;
- e. Undertake additional analysis and consideration to switching from septic to sewer to allow consensus to build regarding future growth.

a. Panel Observations

Common themes arose in the tour and stakeholder interviews including:

- Concerns over how much future growth the downtown could handle without changing its character;
- Hamilton’s shrinking population, especially young families with school-age children;
- A lack of a clear vision for the downtown’s business profile;
- The town’s dependence on septic and the implications of this for future growth;
- The lack of a variety of residential rental housing options, from multifamily condos and apartments to senior housing;
- The high number of office and retail vacancies;

- Inadequate parking (although some interviewees contested this);
- Lack of connectivity between downtown and residential areas;
- Streets that are unfriendly or even dangerous for pedestrians;
- The need for aesthetic improvements such as wider sidewalks, street lighting, plants, benches, green space and the like; and
- The difficulty of reaching consensus between different community groups in Hamilton, especially those who reside in the area around the MBTA station and owners of surrounding horse farms.

b. Opportunities

Hamilton has numerous assets, including extensive open space, proximity to ocean beaches, Patton Park, and the MBTA station. It has a village feel, a beautiful landscape, successful businesses, and potential to be more welcoming to foot traffic. In addition, there is much interest from the community



Retail businesses in Hamilton.

in participating in the planning process, and the town has had extensive studies completed by Cecil Group, Inc. and MAPC.

Stakeholder interviews with ULI TAP specialists exposed a clear desire for more rental housing in the downtown area. Some business owners have converted, or have the ability to convert, upper level floors into apartments and have invested in increased septic capacities. If it were not for existing bylaws, they feel they could easily rent these spaces right away. Providing a broader view of demand, local real estate agents expressed a growing interest over the last 12-18 months for rental housing in downtown Hamilton by young families desiring to move out of Boston and commute to the city by train. These families are attracted to Hamilton's rural-suburban character, its excellent schools, restaurants, and landscape as well as the MBTA station. The real estate agents interviewed indicated that there appears to be sufficient demand for housing if it were available around the MBTA station. They estimated that, on average, modern two-bedroom apartments could rent for \$2500-\$3000/month.

c. Constraints

These same real estate agents, however, noted a strong resistance to rentals downtown from longstanding residents, especially inhabitants of property outside of the downtown area. Other stakeholders echoed this claim, and provided examples of how hard it is to implement even simple changes due to zoning laws and other legislative hurdles, a lack of clear vision for the town's future, and resistance from established residents who reside outside the downtown area and have the resources to oppose projects they view as unfavorable. Town leaders noted a lack of precedent for large-scale projects that makes it difficult to challenge this resistance.

The town's geography, while one of its greatest assets, is also a constraint. There is little room to grow outside the existing boundaries of the downtown area, and a resistance from town inhabitants to



Vacancy on Bay Road

buildings over three stories. Traffic is difficult, especially along Route 1A, and can make walking in town uncomfortable and, at times, dangerous. The town grew on either side of the railroad and therefore feels as if it is split into two halves with a lack of convenient connection between them that would facilitate foot traffic. Some interviewees expressed a problem with insufficient parking space in the town, but others denied this.

Recommendations

a. Wastewater Treatment and Existing Bylaws

Regarding one of the most important decisions facing the town, whether to invest in switching from septic to sewer, the panel concluded that this would need additional analysis and consideration before implementation could be demonstrated as feasible. Fig. 3 below shows the potential tax revenue and corresponding debt service available for bond issuance based on different numbers of new residential units. Economic feasibility of sewer installation might involve (i) introducing a significant number of new residential units to provide sufficient tax revenue or (ii) allowing a developer to bring in large companies who would invest in and cause infrastructure improvements generally in return for opening a large-scale mixed-use development. This level of development would have a considerable, visible impact on the town's existing character, and thus the panel does not recommend it without a more clear consensus among residents regarding future growth.

Instead, the panel proposed either changing existing bylaws or introducing an overlay zone to allow for mixed-use (residential and commercial) in the downtown area, and allow owners to handle increased septic capacity on an individual level. This would serve to activate existing vacancies above businesses and infuse energy into the downtown area. It may also be a first step in gaining consensus around future growth, which could then lead to a stronger justification for comprehensive wastewater infrastructure improvements. The panel also maintains that introducing more variety into the existing housing options—especially multifamily and senior living units—would help meet the demand expressed by real estate agents.

The panel also suggested that the HDC might consider making Hamilton into a Transit Oriented Development site or TOD. TOD is a program provided by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation and Public Works and the Department of Housing and Community Development. Its aim is to increase walkability and high quality design within a one-quarter

Assumptions	Per Unit Tax	Assessed Value	
Tax Rate Per Unit	\$6,000	\$352,941	
		4% Bond over 20 years	
# of units	Potential Additional Tax Revenue	20 Year Bond	
10	\$60,000	\$815,420	
30	\$180,000	\$2,446,259	Bylaw Change
50	\$300,000	\$4,077,098	
100	\$600,000	\$8,154,196	Public Private Partnership
200	\$1,200,000	\$16,308,392	
300	\$1,800,000	\$24,462,587	

Figure 3: Potential Additional Tax Revenue that could be realized through Multifamily Development.

mile (5-7 minute walk) of MBTA stations across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The program offers grants of up to \$50,000 for design, up to \$500,000 for bike and pedestrian improvements, and up to \$2 million for housing (must be 25% affordable at 80% of the median income) and parking projects. This program would provide funding to make street-level improvements around the area around the Hamilton/Wenham MBTA station. It would also increase property values, thus expanding the municipal tax base and providing more tax revenue that can be used towards additional improvements to the downtown.

b. Public Realm Improvements

The panel recommended that the HDC immediately invest a portion of its operating budget (\$60,000 from the meals tax) in making the village more pedestrian friendly. Improvements might include:

- Widening existing sidewalks;
- Installing new curbing where necessary to clearly separate sidewalks from the roadway;
- Planting trees and flowers;

- Adding new benches, lighting and public art;
- Defining the boundaries of the commercial district with identifiable markers, such as a brick sidewalk and uniform design for lighting structures and seating;
- Increasing connectivity between residential, commercial, and business areas with the creation of new footpaths.

The panel suggested that the HDC create design guidelines indicating approved standards and materials for future development that will assist in unifying the overall village framework.

c. Village Branding

The panel stressed the need for the HDC to engage the community in the process of “village branding.” Village branding serves to strengthen the identity of a town and align conversations regarding the character and pace of future growth; the town of Walden might serve as a positive example [fig. 4]. This process would begin by simply naming the downtown area. The panel recommended that the HDC consider the name “Hamilton Village” or “The Hamlet” to stress its unique character.



Sidewalks throughout the village lack curbing and fail to differentiate the pedestrian realm from the road.

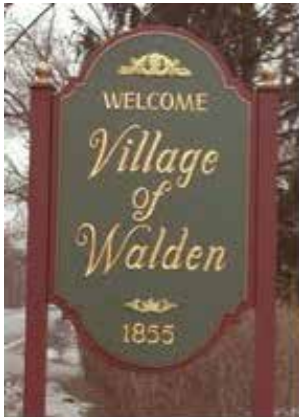


Fig. 4: Village branding in Walden, Massachusetts.

Additionally, the panel strongly suggested that the HDC create guidelines for what types of businesses the downtown would like to support. This can have a tremendous impact on the quality of life and future development of the area, and will help to foster a more unified vision of future development for Hamilton.

d. Parking

In response to stakeholders and residents who expressed concern that more parking would be needed to handle any additional development, the panel discussed existing parking spaces and demand. The panel concluded that making adjustments to existing parking is preferable to increasing the number of available spaces. These adjustments could include:

- Increased enforcement of existing parking restrictions (in particular, time limits) to encourage increased use of the MBTA parking lot for commuters that need to park for the full business day;
- Introducing metered parking;
- Potentially decreasing parking requirements for commercial development.

e. Future Development Scenarios

Using these general points, the panel then examined each of the three scenarios outlined by the HDC:

Option 1: Retain existing bylaws.

Without changing existing bylaws, the panel pointed out that the town could introduce an overlay zone to help control the development of land in the village district. Such an overlay was already proposed by the MAPC in 2014. The underlying zoning regulations would remain, but special permits would allow for modifications that are in line with the guidelines of the overlay. Permitted uses might include multifamily and senior housing; mixed residential and commercial; and accessory infrastructure facilities, such as buildings or stations used to manage infrastructure and communication systems.

The panel also suggested developing the HDC-owned parcel into retail with access from the side of the parcel that faces the MBTA station in order to draw more foot traffic to the area, in connection with the process of village branding.

Option 2: Introduce a new mixed-use bylaw but do not pursue infrastructure/wastewater system improvements.

Changing existing bylaws would allow for more flexibility in regard to building more residential and mixed-use spaces. Upper floors of businesses could be activated and the HDC parcel could be made into a mixed-use space rather than just retail. One panel member, however, wondered if this “option” was viable without making significant infrastructure changes, especially to wastewater treatment. Yet since several landowners have already invested in increased septic capacity, it is presumable that such upgrades would continue to take place on an individual level if bylaws allowed for mixed uses. Additional construction would continue to be restricted to 35’, the height deemed acceptable in previous Visual Preference Surveys among town residents and business owners.

In addition to transforming the HDC parcel, the large space currently occupied by the Dodge Tree Company, which is surrounded by residential, could also be transformed into mixed-use multifamily and commercial to activate the area and offset congestion around the MBTA station. The panel sketched one option that included 75 units with four stories over one story of parking. This goes beyond the three-story limit currently preferred by residents as determined in the Visual Preference Survey noted above. The Willow Street overlay district already allows more height and mixed uses with a special permit and includes the Dodge Tree property. Increased height by special permit, to allows the town to review such proposals for consistency with the town's vision for growth, while at the same time forgoing special permit approval for multifamily or commercial development within certain dimensional parameters. Streamlined permitting—for example, site plan review instead of special permit

approval—would allow developers to advance desired projects with decreased risk and decreased cost.

The panel maintained that, under this option, no additional parking spaces would be necessary. Instead, existing parking regulations should be enforced, and parking meters should be considered. Village branding should be a priority.

Option 3: Implement a new mixed-use bylaw as well as infrastructure improvements (primarily roadway, pedestrian, parking and wastewater treatment).

This is the most aggressive of the proposed options, and would provide the basis for significant population growth in Hamilton and neighboring Wenham. It would allow for considerably more residential units than Option 2, and the panel identified Willow Street



Development potential for Hamilton's central business district.

and the area across from the MBTA station, near Route 1A, as promising locations for new mixed-use development. If desired, additional rental housing could be added over the shopping center around the MBTA station, that has a large parking lot, and upper floors of businesses could also be mobilized. Existing buildings could be redeveloped as mixed-use. Existing restaurants could expand under this option, and new restaurants could be introduced.

The panel concluded that, while this is a viable option for future development, the town of Hamilton might not yet be ready for, or may not desire, this scale of growth, which would certainly change the town's existing character. Members of the panel also expressed concern over the constraint of geography, as there is little undeveloped land in the downtown and surrounding areas to expand the boundaries of the business district. This scale of growth, therefore, may in fact require higher buildings, and this could be unpopular with residents. The panel would recommend working closely with the Town of Wenham to gain consensus before moving forward with this option.

In addition, the panel remarked that a significant amount of new residential (at least 300 new units)

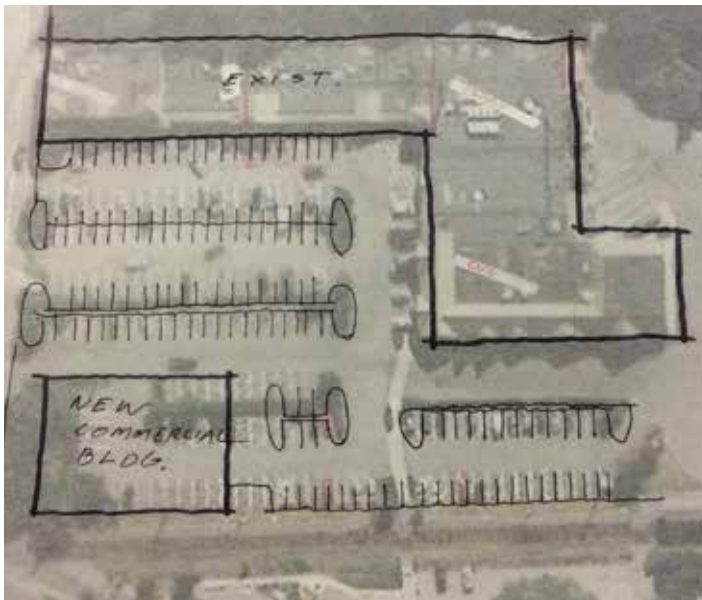
would be required not only to have an impact on the tax rate but also to generate the revenue necessary for major infrastructure improvements if it were the sole source of financing.

IV. Conclusion - What Can and Should Be Done Now?

In conclusion, the panel recommends the following:

- Implement a downtown district identity program and village "branding;"
- Develop a plan for prioritized and phased public realm improvements;
- Consistently enforce existing parking regulations in order to increase the number of available spaces;
- Modify zoning bylaws and/or adopt the suggested overlay in order to enable maximum utilization of existing building space and to encourage the introduction of more variety into the existing housing options—especially multifamily and senior living units;
- Give additional review and consideration to switching from septic to sewer to allow consensus to build regarding future growth.

Depending on the scope of public realm improvements decided upon, these changes could be implemented relatively quickly over the next two to three years.



Development potential for Hamilton Crossing.