

Town of Southborough



A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

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Executive Summary

The Southborough Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) convened on May 9, 2018 at the St. Mark's School, under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council. Over the course of the day, the TAP, consisting of land use and real estate development professionals, met with local business owners, developers, residents, representatives from the Town of Southborough and other key stakeholders. The purpose of the TAP was to provide guidance to the Town of Southborough in their efforts to encourage the development of its Downtown Business Village District (DVBD) into a walkable retail/restaurant destination and to make recommendations on addressing the Town's wastewater options.

Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process

Offers an overview of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council and its TAP program, while also providing a list of the panel members and stakeholders who took part in the TAP. The chapter also outlines the study area, and describes the process undertaken by the panelists and stakeholders to arrive at the recommendations presented at day's end during a public presentation at the Putnam Family Arts Center at St. Mark's School.

Chapter 2: Background and History

Gives a thumbnail sketch of the Town of Southborough, including its early history as a farming and manufacturing community and development into a residential suburb; key population and demographic information that provides insight into the financial stability of the town; and an overview of the study area, including its historic buildings and parcels being considered for redevelopment. The chapter also includes the series of questions that the Southborough Economic Development Committee posed to the panel regarding redevelopment and wastewater options.

Chapter 3: Assets and Opportunities

Identifies the existing assets and strengths of Southborough in relation to its redevelopment potential.

Strengths include an inventory of historic buildings now being submitted for designation as an historic district; committed town leadership and an engaged community; a public infrastructure project designed to increase the walkability of the downtown; abundant open space and walking/hiking trails scattered throughout the town; and a limited amount of parcels that could be redeveloped in the downtown.

Chapter 4: Challenges

Examines the obstacles the town faces in its efforts to transform the DBVD into a walkable, vibrant retail/restaurant destination. Challenges include the lack of a shared vision for the DBVD among residents, business owners and Town officials; infrastructure issues, including lack of a public wastewater system, inadequate sidewalk networks, and lack of connectivity between the multiple walking/hiking trails; a lack of branding and wayfinding in and to the downtown; no strong retail draw; and the perception of local business owners that the town's public bodies and permitting authorities are not responsive to the redevelopment needs of the downtown.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

Proposes a number of actions that the Town of Southborough can implement to achieve its goals. The panel divided the recommendations into short and long-term goals with the understanding that the short-term accomplishments will lay the foundation for future transformation and create momentum for more comprehensive and complex changes. In the near term, it is recommended that the town begin to create a sense of place by initiating a branding a wayfinding campaign for the DBVD; increase the number of events staged in the downtown to connect people to the business district; and appoint a representative to serve as an advocate for downtown businesses. Longer-term recommendations include coming up with and implementing a solution to the town's lack of a public wastewater system; and implementing form-based code and design guidelines for downtown.

Chapter 6: Funding and Resources

Provides a list of potential funding sources through federal and state agencies, as well as an appendix of articles and papers that could be used for modeling some of the recommended actions.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

Offers a final assessment of how the town can energize their DVBD, reiterating the challenges and new strategies for moving forward.

ULI & the TAP Process

Urban Land Institute (ULI)

The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit 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 1,200 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.

Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

The ULI Boston/New England Real Estate Advisory Committee convenes 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.

TAPs are a specially assembled group of diverse professionals with expertise in the issues posed by the specific project. Each TAP spends one to two days visiting study sites, 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.

MassDevelopment

MassDevelopment is the state's economic development and finance authority. The quasi-public agency 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.



ULI TAP panelists at work

The Panel

ULI Boston/New England convened a volunteer panel of experts whose members represent the range of disciplines necessary to analyze the challenges and opportunities facing Southborough in their efforts to revitalize the DVBD while retaining its historic character. The team was composed of architects, attorneys, designers, engineers, planners, and project managers. The following is a list of panelists:

Co-Chairs

Jamie Simchik, Principal, Simchik Planning & Development

Jillian Bargar, Commercial Real Estate Attorney, Anderson & Kreiger LLP

Panel

Tim Cummings, Director of Economic Development, Nashua, NH

Sarah M. Eisinger, Vice President of Real Estate, MassDevelopment

Tulin Fuselier, PE, Geotechnical Engineering Practice Leader, Weston & Sampson

David Valecillos, Urban Planner, North Shore Community Development Coalition

TAP Associate

Spencer Grassie, Bank Advisory, The Roseview Group

ULI Staff

Manikka Bowman, Director, Policy & Outreach

Sara Marsh, Manager

TAP Writer

Mike Hoban, Principal, Hoban Communications

Panelists have donated their time.

All images used in this report were taken by the panelists.



Panelists on walking tour of study area

Stakeholders

The TAP benefited from the participation of a diverse group of stakeholders – local business owners, real estate developers and owners, representatives from the Town of Southborough (as well as quasi-government agencies), school representatives and residents. The following is a list of stakeholders:

Jack Bartolini, developer/Owner, Bartolini Builders
Bill Boland, Resident and former member of the Board of Selectmen and Finance Committee
Lisa Braccio, Board of Selectman
Kathryn Craddock McKee, Southborough Trails Committee
Karen Cvitkovich, Open Space Preservation Commission
Jon Delli Priscolli, Owner, Burnett House
Paul Desmond, Member, School Committee
Doreen Ferguson, Recreation Director
Karen Finelli, Principal Assistant to Zoning Board of Appeals
Freddie Gillespie, Open Space Preservation Commission
Bea Ginga, Caretaker and Resident, Community House
Ray Hokinson, Resident
Shawn Mauro, Owner, Mauro's Café
David Parry, Resident, former member of the Board of Selectmen
Steve Phillips, Resident
Paul Pisinski, Public Health Director
Mark Purple, Town Administrator
David Vachris, Dean of Students, St. Mark's School
Maria Vagnini, Resident
Carol Yozzo, Member, Council on Aging

Contributing EDC Members

Kathy Bartolini, Member, EDC
Julie Connelly, Vice Chair, EDC
Dominique DuTremble, EDC interim coordinator
Dave McCay, Chair, EDC
Chris Robbins, Member, EDC

The TAP Process

The Southborough TAP was held on May 9, 2018. Panelists from ULI Boston/New England were greeted at the Center Presentation Room at St. Mark's School by a host of representatives from the town. Following the meet and greet session, panelists were taken by van on a tour of key sections of Southborough, concluding with a walking tour of the DVBD.

The driving portion of the tour, narrated by Julie Connelly, Vice Chair of the EDC, began with a viewing of the Southborough Medical Group/Reliant Medical Group and additional medical office buildings on Newton Street. The 75,000 square foot facility offers a wide range of ambulatory services, and is in walking distance to the downtown. Panelists also observed a site across the street from the center which is being considered for a 55+ residential community. The tour then proceeded to nearby 29 Boston Road, where a vacant 24,000 square-foot office building (formerly home to Falconi Oil), located within walking distance to downtown, is available for lease or redevelopment.

The tour then drove past Fayville Hall, a historic (1911) building and parking lot owned by the town that is being put up for sale. Turning right onto Route 9 (Turnpike Road), there are a number of well-leased Class A and B office buildings. Along Turnpike Road is The Crossings at Whites Corner which is a 20,000 square foot office retail plaza. Starbucks, a wine & cheese shop, a cleaner and restaurants are located in this plaza which provides amenities for the office workers. The van then headed onto Route 85 and into the parking lot of Town Center Plaza, which consists of retail, office and professional businesses, as well as the U.S. Post Office.

The van then returned to the DVBD, passing by the Burnett House, a 13-bedroom, 1850 Second Empire-style mansion that is being converted into a high-end boutique hotel by owner Jon Delli Priscoli. There was a brief viewing of Park Street, which is currently home to automotive businesses but contains parcels that may figure into downtown redevelopment plans. The driving tour concluded, and panelists were taken on a walking tour that was also narrated by Connelly, with additional informational support from EDC members. The tour included stops at Newton Street and Main Street, a site that was once home to gas station that is currently vacant land; Mauro's Market, a combination convenience/liquor store; Mauro's Village Café, a popular casual restaurant that serves breakfast and lunch; Southborough House of Pizza, which is located in the historic Old Fire Station; a Knights of Columbus Hall; and a small assortment of businesses, including a dry cleaners, a barber shop and a bank.

At the conclusion of the tour, the group walked back to St. Mark's School. Upon returning to St. Mark's School, the panel interviewed stakeholders, listed in the previous sub-section, in two separate panel discussions, as well as during the luncheon. The panelists then engaged in an intensive closed-door charrette to develop recommendations based on the input from the stakeholders as well as the research conducted prior to the discussions. Panelists then presented their observations and recommendations in an open public forum at Taft Hall in the Putnam Family Arts Center at St. Mark's School that evening.

Background and History

Located midway between Boston and Worcester in the heart of the MetroWest region in Worcester County, Southborough combines a deep sense of pride in the historic character of its town with a strong commercial base. Although largely rural, the nearly 14-square mile town is traversed by two main highways (Route 495 and the Mass Turnpike) as well as a heavily-trafficked commercial thoroughfare (Route 9) that constitutes the town's commercial district.

The DVBD, which is home to Southborough's town offices, historic churches and cemetery – as well as a limited retail base – is preparing a submission to have the area designated as a Main Street National Register Historic District with the National Park Service. Business activity in the DBVD, however, has been declining since 2000, when the U.S. Post Office moved to the Town Center Shopping Plaza near the intersection of Routes 85 and 9 – a five-minute drive away – and residents are also opting for chain retail options along Route 9.

According to a survey conducted by the town's Economic Development Committee in the fall of 2017, the residents have expressed a strong interest in reinvigorating the DBVD by adding restaurants, retail, public spaces, and connectivity to open space while also preserving and restoring its historic character and charm. The town has taken initial steps to improve the infrastructure of the DBVD. The MassDOT TIP funding (\$7.3 million) will improve the infrastructure leading to the downtown area (Sears Road to Park Street). The improvements from Park Street to Boston Road and Newton Street will be funded by the Town's Chapter 90 money and will meet the same federal road standards on lane widths, sidewalks and bike lanes. The work is anticipated to begin in the Spring of 2019.

Despite the stated willingness of the town's residents to redevelop the DVBD, there are significant hurdles to overcome. The most significant obstacle is the lack of a municipal sewer system, further complicated by the fact that the soil composition downtown may not be suitable for alternative onsite septic systems. There are also wetlands and tributaries that have setback requirements that limit the construction of smaller scale septic solutions.



Southborough Pizza in the town's Old Fire Station



Gazebo across the street from Community House

Questions for the ULI Panel

The Town of Southborough enlisted the help of ULI to provide an outside perspective regarding ways to activate the DBVD, as well as developing a plan of action to address the town's wastewater options. The panel was asked to address the following questions, and to offer observations and potential solutions that may arise during the discussions with stakeholders:

1. What planning and/or zoning changes and design features will encourage and allow for small-scale business growth on privately-owned parcels that will compliment residential, local amenities desired by residents; such as (non-chain) locally owned restaurants and coffee shops, and boutique retail and shopping opportunities.
2. Will the town need to consider infrastructure capacity accommodations, including, but not limited to, collective wastewater treatment option to serve the downtown businesses for expanded growth? If so, what are the septic infrastructure options for such systems and the associated funding sources to plan, design and build (are there public or private grant opportunities)?
3. How should the town plan, design and fund (promote and execute) the residents' desire for enhanced trail and recreational connectivity and improved "public spaces" within the downtown?

Town History

According to the Southborough Historical Society, European settlers first came to the region now known as Southborough as early as 1640, and after splitting off as the "south borough" of the then-Town of Marlborough, Southborough was officially incorporated in 1727. The town was primarily an agricultural community until the early-to-mid 19th century, when boot and shoe manufacturers and cotton and woolen goods factories were constructed as industries harnessed the rivers flowing through the town. Railroad connections were established in the region soon thereafter. But in the 1890's, significant portions of farmland were flooded to create the Reservoir system to serve Boston, radically altering the topography of Southborough, and spurring the town's transformation into a residential suburb of Boston. In the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, a number of office parks and buildings were constructed along or near Route 9, which is now home to a diverse group of tenants, including Dell/EMC, Ford Motor Company Regional Training Center, the New England Center for Children and the Sheehan Health Group.

Population and Demographics

Southborough has seen its population grow by nearly 20 percent since 2000, increasing from 8,781 to 10,512 by 2017. The town has a median household income of \$160,818, the highest in Worcester County, and over 60 percent (63.1) of adult residents hold a Bachelor's degree or higher. The total number of Southborough businesses has increased by 230% between 1980 and 2012, from 130 to 430, with a corresponding job growth of 115 percent (4,000 jobs added).

The Study Area

The area defined as the DBVD extends from the Town Hall at 17 Common Street, to Main Street/Route 30 to just past Newton Street to the Main Street Bank. The DBVD is comprised of a mix of commercial and municipal buildings as well as single-family homes, many of which are considered to be historically significant. Historic highlights include the Town Hall, St. Mark's and the Pilgrim Churches, the Southborough Public Library, the Southborough House of Pizza (formerly the Old Fire Station, built in 1927) as well as a number of homes built in the Victorian, Greek Revival and Federal Styles. While the study area itself consists of an approximately 4/10 of a mile corridor, the economic impact area extends beyond and includes the streets that spur off Main Street, including the St. Mark's and Fay School campuses and Southborough Medical Center.

In addition to the historic structures, there are a limited number of downtown sites that could be considered for development/redevelopment, the most prominent being the former gas station (which has been remediated) at the corner of Newton Street and Main Street, as well as other sites.



Downtown corridor bookended by Town Hall and Main St Bank

Assets and Opportunities

The Town of Southborough has a number of strengths that would be beneficial in implementing a successful redevelopment plan that would incorporate the historic charm of the downtown while creating greater vibrancy.

A) Historic Character and Architecturally Distinct Buildings

Historic buildings and places are integral to the fabric of the Town of Southborough and also serve as a great source of civic pride. Structures include a variety of 19th-century homes as well as the English parish-style of St. Mark's Church and the Pilgrim Church, assorted municipal and commercial buildings, the buildings of the St. Mark's School campus, and the Town Common and the Old Burial Ground. The town is currently seeking designation as a National Register Historic District for the Main Street area, which includes 73 properties along Main Street extending from the railroad line at the east end to the Fay School at the west end.

B) Walkable Downtown Corridor in Close Proximity to Institutions

Pending sidewalk improvements (slated to begin construction in late 2018), the DVBD is eminently walkable. The restaurants and retail are located less than one-half mile from the Town Hall, St. Mark's and Fay School campuses, Southborough Medical Center, Southborough Senior Center, the Community House, and the new public safety complex (which will house the police and fire departments). A revitalized downtown could provide these institutions with viable restaurant and retail options that residents currently seek elsewhere.

C) Abundance of Open Space

Southborough residents are passionate about maintaining the rural character of the town by preserving its open space, hiking and walking trails. The Southborough Open Land Foundation has preserved seventeen properties totaling 181 acres of open space in Southborough, ranging from smaller single-acre parcels, to the 56-acre Elaine and Philip Beals

Preserve, which includes programming such as "Art on the Trails," a juried annual outdoor art exhibition and poetry program that runs in the summer months. The Southborough Trails Committee oversees volunteers who create, monitor and maintain the half-dozen town resource trails in Southborough.

D) Strong Fiscal Health of Town and an Affluent Populace

Standard & Poor upgraded Southborough's bond rating to the AAA level in 2015, and the town's 2017 median household income of \$160,818 is the highest in Worcester County.



St. Mark's School

E) Engaged Residents and Local Businesses

As evidenced by the number of respondents (427) to the Economic Development Committee's (EDC) August 2017 survey and the participation level at the TAP interviews and evening presentation, the residents and business owners of Southborough are fully engaged in the decision-making process for the redevelopment of the downtown.

F) Committed Local Leadership

In addition to the formal town government, there are a number of non-governmental organizations that contribute to the well-being of the town, including the St. Mark's and Fay Schools and the Community House, which provide venues and support for many of the town's events. In addition, the Economic Development Committee has been instrumental in not only spearheading the movement to revitalize the downtown, but helping the businesses throughout the entire community grow through outreach and informational programming.

G) Development Opportunities: Including Former Gas Station at Newton & Main

The Newton Street and Main Street site received the original permit from the Town Conservation Commission in 2006 for drainage and storm water improvements, landscaping, and parking. There is an expired septic permit for the parcel for a small, two-story office building and the permit from the Conservation Commission reflect that development intent. The parcel's owner is now considering developing a mixed-use building of the same scale, and has submitted a plan that includes four apartment units and office/retail on the ground floor. The Economic Development Committee had also been considering the recommendation of purchasing select downtown sites for development.



Former gas station site at Newton Street & Main Street

Challenges

Despite a strong desire by a significant portion of the residents to create a more vibrant downtown, a number of obstacles exist to achieving that end, including:

A) Lack of a Shared Vision Among Stakeholders

Although over 90 percent of respondents to the EDC survey indicated that they wanted amenities such as restaurants and coffee shops in the downtown, and a solid majority expressed a desire for additional retail and other “aesthetic community improvements,” there are multiple opinions as to how such plans should be implemented. One of the points of contention seems to be finding the right balance between historic preservation and commercial development/redevelopment.

While some favor plans up to and including mixed-use development and added height or density, others are staunchly opposed to any change to the historic nature of the district. As one stakeholder bluntly stated, “We’re going to fight like hell over anything we don’t like.” Conversely, one business owner described the measures taken to maintain the historic look of the DVBD as “extreme” and of having the effect of stunting growth. Others seemed willing to accept some change as long as the historic character of the center is retained, (i.e. no chain store retail), which seemed to be the general consensus.

B) Infrastructure Issues

[1] Lack of municipal wastewater disposal facilities or public sewer system.

[2] The sidewalk system in the DVBD is either inadequate or non-existent, and there are no bike lanes within the district.

[3] There are no connections between the extensive trail systems located within the town

C) Branding and Wayfinding

The Town of Southborough essentially has two town centers: the DBVD, now being considered for redevelopment, and Town Center Plaza, located approximately 1.5 miles away just off MA-Route 85. The DVBD lacks the branding that conveys its historic nature that would differentiate it from the more substantial retail options and higher traffic count of the Town Center Plaza and Route 9. ULI Panelists also noted that there was a dearth of signage indicating to visitors that they were actually in the Town of Southborough, and more specifically, the DBVD.

D) Perceived Lack of Support for Local Business

During the stakeholder discussions, business owners expressed that they do not feel supported by the town in their efforts to revitalize the DBVD. The participants also stated that the primary reason that the wastewater and sewer improvements have not been addressed is that town officials are concerned that doing so would encourage development that would diminish the DBVD’s historic character.

Business owners added that there was a lack of clarity in zoning regulations, and that the elimination of the opportunity for a use variance by the town hampers development.

Stakeholders further articulated that the various town boards often made decisions that were outside of their authority. Panelists also noted the lack of action on three key recommendations of the 2008 Master Plan:

[1] allowance for mixed-use projects in the DVBD; [2] the establishment of design guidelines or use of form-based code to encourage better building layout and streetscape design; and [3] consideration of zoning incentives to encourage reinvestment and redevelopment of existing properties (i.e. density bonuses for preservation of buildings, streetscape improvements or public amenities, etc.).

E) Lack of Retail Anchor

The departure of the U.S. Post Office for the Town Center Plaza in 2000 was seen as a major loss for the DVBD, and there has been no comparable draw to the area since. The downtown has also lost an independent drugstore and two banks in recent years. As one stakeholder stated, without a retail anchor or destination restaurant in the area, “There’s not a lot of reasons to go downtown anymore.” One stakeholder added that while residents favor local and independent stores in theory, they tend to support chain stores along Route 9.

F) Little Engagement with Student Population

There are 360 students at St. Mark’s School (of which approximately two-thirds board) and approximately 120 students that board at the Fay School (of the 475 total students, K-12). These schools, in addition to the Woodward Elementary School, are all within walking distance to downtown. Stakeholders noted that there are few retail options designed to appeal to the younger student base in the DVBD, other than the Southborough House of Pizza and Mauro’s Market.

G) Parking

There is a perception on the part of business owners and residents that there is insufficient parking in the DBVD, a situation that they feel will only worsen if development moves forward.



Walking path utilized by pedestrians leaving Main St.



Railroad tracks running through study area

Recommendations

A) Short-Term Recommendations

Create a Sense of Place

[1] Branding of DBVD - Although Southborough rightly prides itself on its historic charm, there are few outward indicators informing outsiders of that heritage, either by traditional signage along the roadways or online. By branding the town (and more specifically the DVBD) as historic, Southborough can begin to leverage the classic rural New England character and use it to create a retail/restaurant destination that differentiates itself from retail chain offerings in the area.

The Southborough Historical Commission is currently working on having the downtown Main Street section designated as a National Register Historic District (NRHD) with the National Park Service (which, unlike local historic districts, does not impose any restrictions on property owners, but simply recognizes the area's importance to the community). Once completed, the designation can serve as a springboard for a branding campaign.

One strategy is to establish a sense of place by adding signage in the form of light post banners, hanging plants and string lights to create an actual sense of place in the downtown. In addition, there is currently no mention on the town's website (other than a single page and one paragraph description of the Historical Commission) that characterizes Southborough as a historic place, something that should be rectified.

[2] Increase Downtown Events – Events can be used to connect people to the DVBD, bringing residents into the area to experience the historic character and to associate the downtown with a positive and memorable experience. Events can create relationships between downtown businesses and consumers through activities that draw residents and outside visitors, while reinforcing the DVBD's brand identity.

While the town currently partners with the Community House and St. Mark's School on programming, additional downtown events could include movie nights, antique car shows, food truck and/or music festivals, family events, and student/parent activities (such as Reunion Weekend in May and St. Mark's Prize Day Weekend in June). Events could also be built around holidays (Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day) as well as seasonal events such as an Octoberfest or a SpringFest. Another suggestion is to close off a section of the downtown streets to vehicles on a number of Sundays during the warm weather months to stage these events, reinforcing the downtown as a vibrant place to shop and visit. This would follow an event model in larger cities to close thoroughfares to cars for bike and pedestrian access only.

[3] Utilize Crowdfunding – There are crowdfunding models in place such as MassDevelopment's Commonwealth Places (see Appendix), that assist municipalities with raising funds for events that “engage and mobilize community members to make individual contributions through a crowdfunding platform.”

[4] Activate Underutilized Downtown Parcels – The parcel located at the intersection of Newton Street and Main Street could be used as a site for pop-up events while development plans are being evaluated. For example, it's not the only development opportunity and it seemed to strike a chord with residents in the meeting. The town should also build upon the existing partnerships with St. Mark's School and the Community House to leverage their facilities for events, beyond the programming already in place (such as the annual Santa helicopter visit and Christmas party). The parcels could be used to stage events such as farmer's markets, food truck festivals and ice cream socials to build community within the district.



An illustration created by the panel to highlighting key town owned parcels in study area

Develop a Consensus on Downtown Development

[1] Create a Downtown Vision and Action Plan – Using the 2008 Master Plan as a guideline, engage the citizenry and take a fresh approach to determine what the town wants the DVBD to become – and implement that plan. The plan should include a project overview; zoning diagnostics and framework that would enable the type of development that would be consistent with the vision for downtown; the infrastructure improvements needed to make the plan a reality; and a market assessment to give potential private investors a guideline as to what type of development would be most productive in keeping with the character of the downtown.

[2] Identify Parcels That Town Can Purchase or Control – Based on the results of the EDC survey, it is clear that the town's residents envision the DVBD as a retail/restaurant destination. The town should investigate what parcels may be available for outright purchase, then solicit RFPs from private developers that would ensure that the development is consistent with the vision for the downtown. Another way to keep that vision intact is to offer incentives to property owners that will drive the kind of uses that will fulfill that vision.

[3] Set Aside a Liquor License for Downtown Use Only – Often brew pubs and restaurants help drive the redevelopment of downtowns, and one of the difficulties for such establishments is obtaining a liquor license. Having a liquor license readily and easily available for a project consistent with the downtown vision would serve as an incentive for private investors.

Economic Development Committee Quick Wins

[1] Tap into the Student Base – St. Mark's School considers downtown as part of campus such that students are not required to obtain permission to venture there. The students are given a prepaid card for use in the school cafeteria and on campus, which could also be accepted at local establishments that carry the necessary POS card reader devices. The businesses could then implement reward and discount programs to entice the students to frequent their establishments and build brand loyalty. It was reported that the cost for POS devices for each individual business to allow students to use their cards would be approximately \$1500. Although this has been cost-prohibitive for local businesses to purchase themselves, the devices could be subsidized by the town as part of an economic development incentive plan.

[2] Appoint Downtown Business Representative – In addition to the Economic Development Director, a representative who can specifically address the needs of existing or potential businesses in the downtown should be designated. The representative would serve as an advocate for the businesses and also be responsible for helping them navigate the sometimes challenging permitting or approval processes, as well as acting as a liaison between the businesses, the schools and the town.

B) Long-Term Recommendations

Address Waste Water Issue

The primary barrier to the revitalization of the downtown is the lack of a septic system capacity. In order to move forward in any meaningful way with redevelopment, the first step for the town is to form a sewer assessment technical committee. The committee would then begin prioritizing districts in which to locate wastewater treatment systems. The advantage to this approach as opposed to a town-wide system is that it would reduce the time and expense of immediately implementing a system where it is most needed – such as the downtown.

Implementing the wastewater systems may need to be done as a joint partnership between Southborough and private developers in order to fund the improvement. A feasibility study will also be required for each individual area being considered for a treatment system.

Identify a Local Champion

In order for the Vision and Action Plans to come to fruition, the EDC should identify a local champion to keep the initiatives on track and to shepherd the plans through this period of transition. The individual or organizational entity should be a trusted community leader or group that is free from conflicts of interest, and whose primary purpose is to serve the needs of the town. As we have seen in the past with the largely unimplemented 2008 Master Plan, action is necessary to move plans forward.

Implement Form-Based Code/Design Guidelines

As was suggested in the 2008 Master Plan, the town should adopt form-based code specifically for the DVBD. Form-based code is a land development zoning regulation that uses the physical the form of a building rather than a building's uses (residential, commercial, etc.) as the organizing principle for the code. This will allow the town to retain the historic nature of the business district while allowing for appropriate development as outlined in the Vision Plan.

Establishing design standards will allow the town to specify the appearance of downtown buildings, which in turn will reduce the need for special permits or variances. This will streamline the approval process by establishing by-right development so that projects that comply with the zoning standards can receive their approval without a discretionary review process. It will also provide a greater degree of predictability for potential businesses, landlords and tenants.

Establish a BID or Other Business Association

Business Improvement Districts (BID) or District Improvement Financing (DIF) are typically formed by the private property and businesses owners within a specific district, who pay a special tax or fee to create a fund that will enable them to implement improvements beyond what the state or town government can provide. These funds are targeted specifically for downtown improvements, and can then be used in a number of ways, such as enhancing the appearance of the district through historic façade and streetscape improvements, construction of event programming space, or historic street lighting. An example of a community comparable to Southborough with a BID is West Chester, PA (<http://www.downtownwestchester.com/about.php>). Hyannis is another comparable BID example located in Massachusetts.

Funding Sources

MassDevelopment Real Estate Technical Assistance Program

Works with municipal officials, planners, local stakeholders, and others to provide technical assistance that uses creative solutions and clear action steps to address site-specific and district-wide economic development challenges. Next application round is Spring of 2019.

Public Infrastructure Financing

- Tax-Exempt Bonds for Public Infrastructure
- State Revolving Fund (SRF)
- 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

- District Improvement Financing (DIF)
- Special assessments

Predevelopment Loans

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

MassDevelopment Commonwealth Places

Creative funding program, Commonwealth Places, in partnership with the crowdfunding platform Patronicity to help improve public spaces around the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Current crowdfunding projects funded by MassDevelopment can be found at <https://www.patronicity.com/commonwealthplaces#!/>

US Department of Agriculture

Funding source for sewers for rural areas found at <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-waste-disposal-loan-grant-program>

Conclusions

As evidenced by the EDC survey, the residents of Southborough want to energize their downtown with an injection of destination retail and restaurants designed to capitalize on the historic character of the town. Based on discussions with the stakeholders, there also appears to be a willingness on the part of the town government and its residents to consider the reinvigoration of the downtown as an investment that is beneficial to the entirety of Southborough. Combined with the guiding hand of an involved EDC, revitalization of the downtown is a goal that appears to be achievable.

However, there also appears an expansive divide between two factions of the town: those who would like to see development of the downtown, and those that would like to maintain the status quo. This divide was evident to the ULI panelists during both the stakeholder discussions with business owners and residents and reinforced during the question and answer session following the public presentation by the ULI panelists. Those opposed to development would appear to have an advantage in this dispute, given that there are currently a number of processes in place from an infrastructure and zoning perspective that would make any meaningful development difficult.

In order to prevent further leakage of retail dollars to Route 9 and the Town Center Plaza and to reestablish a DBVD that would serve as a source of pride for Southborough residents, some of those obstacles must be addressed. As stated in the 2008 Master Plan and reiterated by the ULI TAP, the town needs to address its lack of a public wastewater system, beginning with a feasibility study, which must be followed with action and implementation. In addition, there needs to be meaningful changes to the zoning and permitting process that encourages rather than discourages development. Removing these barriers to development in a thoughtful manner that preserves rather than degrades the historic character of the town, would, in the words of the 2008 Master Plan, retain “Southborough’s classic rural New England character and charm while enhancing the village centers and neighborhoods.”