



ULI TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

SOUTH MAIN STREET

WAKEFIELD, MA

FEBRUARY 26 – MARCH 2, 2021



Boston/
New England

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 shape the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide. Founded in 1936, the institute has grown to over 45,000 members worldwide, representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines working in private enterprise and public service. ULI membership includes developers, architects, planners, lawyers, bankers, and economic development professionals as well as other related disciplines.

The Boston/New England District Council of ULI serves the six New England states and has over 1,400 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 the pro bono recommendations provided by the TAP members.

A TAP consists of a group of diverse professionals with expertise in the issues posed that are specially assembled to spend 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.

A recent independent study by Rivera Consulting surveyed municipalities that received assistance from the TAP programs and reported a positive impact by the TAP process on communities. Eighty-two percent said their behavior and approach to municipal planning and economic development strategies were affected; 67% said there were increased municipal investments related to the stated goals and recommendations of their TAP report; and 62% said at least one key developable asset addressed in their TAP report had been redeveloped, consistent with ULI Boston/New England recommendations.

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Executive Summary

The Wakefield Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) marks just the second TAP under the direction of the Boston/New England District Council of the Urban Land Institute (ULI) to have been conducted primarily virtually. Following the February 26th in-person guided site tour of the South Main St. study area, the remainder of the working sessions and the subsequent public presentation took place over the internet, using integrated audio, video and display images. The purpose of the TAP was to provide guidance to the Town of Wakefield on the redevelopment possibilities for the South Main St. district.

On March 1st, ULI members met with local business owners, residents and non-profit organizations from Wakefield to gain insight into the issues, strengths, and potential solutions for the study area. Panelists then reconvened via Zoom on March 2nd to assess the information and to develop recommendations. The TAP presented their findings and recommendations virtually to Town officials and the general public later that evening via Zoom and Wakefield Community Access TV.

Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process

Provides an overview of ULI's District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) as well as a list of the panel members and stakeholders who took part. The chapter also highlights key elements of the study area for the TAP, and describes the process undertaken by the panelists and stakeholders to arrive at their recommendations.

Chapter 2: Background and History

Gives a brief overview of the issues that the TAP was asked to assess and includes the questions that the Town posed to the panel.

Also provides key population and demographic information.

Chapter 3: Assets and Opportunities

Identifies the positive aspects of the stretch of South Main St. study area that will help the Town to achieve its goals. These include a vibrant multi-purpose community center; downtown residential density capable of supporting restaurants and retail in a revitalized downtown; and close proximity to the MBTA Commuter Rail into Boston.

Chapter 4: Challenges

Examines the obstacles the Town may face in meeting the goal of creating a revitalized downtown. These challenges include: Long-term owners who may not wish to sell, reinvest or redevelop their parcels; inadequate branding & wayfinding; a dearth of arts and entertainment venues; and a lack of crosswalks in the study area as well as an overall poor pedestrian environment, with narrow sidewalks and no trees or greenery on the retail side of South Main.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

Proposes a number of short, medium and long term actions that Wakefield can take to begin the transformation of their downtown, including: centralizing the economic development process; establishing aesthetic guidelines for storefronts; adding a Town Planner; evaluating environmental conditions and gauging remediation costs; initiating dialogue with long-term owners to devise a resolution to the blight problem; and offering a development proposal that allows Town officials and residents to visualize what a redeveloped South Main district would look like.

Chapter 6: Funding Sources/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: Conclusion

Offers a final assessment of the redevelopment possibilities of the South Main St. district, as well as some immediate actions that can be taken.

ULI and the TAP Process

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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 to help the Town of Wakefield to revitalize the South Main St. district. Practice areas included architects, developers, engineers, planners, and communications professionals. The following is a list of panelists:

Co-Chairs

Ed O'Rourke, market executive, Environmental Health & Engineering, Inc.

John H. Martin, principal, Elkus Manfredi Architects

Panel

Jeff Birenbaum, vice president, CHA Consulting

Tanya Mitchell, ULI Advisory Council member

Diana Pisciotta, president, Denterlein

Melvin Vieira, owner/realtor, The Vieira Group

Corey Zehngebot, director of urban design, Graffiti

Panelists have donated their time.

ULI Staff

Michelle Landers, executive director

Manikka Bowman, director of policy and outreach

Sara Marsh, manager

John Wilson, associate

TAP Writer: Mike Hoban, principal, Hoban Communications

Stakeholders

The TAP also benefited from the participation of the diverse group of stakeholders – property owners, Town officials, business owners, representatives from non-profits, and Wakefield residents.



Erin Kokinda, Community & Economic Development Director, leading site tour of study area.

The following is a list of stakeholders:

Chris Barrett, owner/broker, Chris Barrett Real Estate, 73 Albion St.

Adam Colantuoni, principal, Galvin Middle School, 525 Main St.

Bronwyn Della-Volpe, resident, Town of Wakefield

Anthony Guardia, chief development officer, Boys & Girls Club

Beth Hylan, owner, Sweetbay Flowers, 478 Main St.

Liz Hylan-Ferreira, owner, Sweetbay Flowers, 478 Main St.

Alex Kania, executive director, Wakefield Main Streets

Bob Malhoit, president, Wakefield Main Streets

Andrew Marcus, vice-president, Mystic Industries Corp, 474 Main St.

Joel Marcus, president, Mystic Industries Corp, 474 Main St.

Brian McGrail, real estate attorney, 599 North Ave.

Dan McGrath, recreation director, Americal Civic Center, 467 Main St.

Theo Noell, manager of programs and outreach, Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston

Robert Santonelli, property owner, 500 Main St.

John Smolinsky, executive director, Wakefield Lynnfield Chamber of Commerce

Frank Pasciuto, property owner, 456 Main St.

Adam Rodgers, executive director, Boys & Girls Club of Wakefield/Stoneham, 467 Main St.

Colin Young, owner, William Blanchard Company, 486 Main St.

The TAP Process

The South Main Street/Wakefield TAP was held over the course of three days, February 26th and March 1st and 2nd, 2021. On the morning of February 26th, panelists from the ULI Boston/New England District Council were greeted at the Americal Civic Center parking lot (adjacent to the athletic fields of the Galvin Middle School) by Community and economic development director Erin Kokinda for a guided walking tour of the study area. Kokinda was joined by Benjamin DeChristoforo, building inspector; William Renault, town engineer; Victor Santaniello, assessor director; Bill Spaulding, Planning Board chair; and Dan McGrath, Americal Civic Center recreation director.

After introductions and a briefing, the first stop was the entrance to the Americal building, a historic structure built in 1919 that is home to the Boys & Girls Club and the Wakefield Food Pantry as well as a large gymnasium, offices and event space. Panelists continued north on Main, past a 13,000 square-foot CVS and an Eastern Bank branch. Panelists observed that the west side of Main St. has wide sidewalks and some greenery, key elements of a walkable downtown. The group then crossed to the eastern side of Main at the signalized intersection of W. Water St., the primary focus of the study area. Panelists were informed that W. Water/North Main St. area is home to multiple successful restaurants, including the Public Kitchen and a half-dozen Italian eateries. The restaurants are mostly street-level, with largely vacant office space above in the two- and three-story structures.



Galvin Middle School, 525 Main St.



Vacant Storefronts, Main St.



Sweetbay Flowers, 478 Main St.

Panelists proceeded south down Main, which is populated by locally owned businesses, including a hardware store, multiple salon/beauty businesses and a dance studio, before encountering the long-closed Ristorante Molise. The shuttered eatery is a two-story building at 460-468 Main that appears to be untouched on the interior since closing nearly seven years ago, and is considered a blight on the streetscape. To the right of the restaurant is the Mystic Industries Corp, a light manufacturing building set back from Main to allow delivery trucks access its loading dock and office entrance. Next door is Sweetbay Flowers, a floral and gift shop that moved from North Main St. and expanded into the former Stylecraft Supply paint building in November. The shop has injected energy into the district, according to Town officials.

Sweetbay shares a wide driveway leading to a small warehouse for William Blanchard Company, a maker of custom awnings, flags, and tents, which also occupies a manufacturing and sales facility adjacent to the smaller building. A larger warehouse is behind the firm's storefront, facing the future site of the proposed Rail Trail. The remaining large parcel in the study area was home to a pair of buildings housing an auto repair shop and a used auto sales office. The buildings were demolished for redevelopment the week following the TAP. The tour concluded at the corner of Richardson St. and Main, the outer boundary of the study area, which is the site of a small park to be developed by the Town as part of the proposed Rail Trail.

On Monday, March 1st, panelists remotely interviewed stakeholders, listed in the previous sub-section, in virtual breakout rooms. That afternoon and the following day, panelists engaged in an intensive virtual charrette to develop recommendations based on the input from the stakeholders as well as research conducted prior to the discussions. Later that evening, panelists presented their observations and recommendations in a virtual open public forum to Town officials and the general public via Zoom and Wakefield Community Access TV.

Background and History



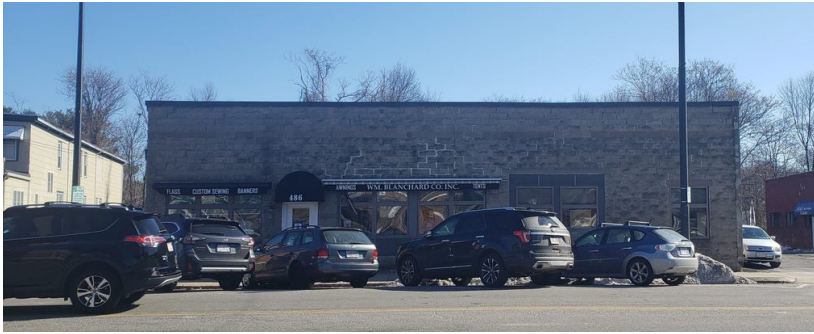
Aerial View of the Study Area, South Main St.

The Town of Wakefield sought the help of the ULI TAP to provide guidance on ways to re-energize the southern entranceway to the downtown. The exercise specifically relates to a number of parcels located on the east side of South Main St. and is one component of a larger downtown revitalization. Following the closure of a popular Italian restaurant in 2014, there has been a steady retail decline along this section of the district, as two shops in the same building closed within the year. The owner wrapped the now vacant building in white vinyl siding some years ago, which has deteriorated and became a neighborhood blight. This has had a negative effect on the neighboring businesses, as four other longtime businesses in close proximity

have closed their doors. The owner of the former restaurant building seems reluctant to negotiate with the Town, and some other owners seem unwilling to either sell or re-invest in their properties. The Town and its residents view the redevelopment of these parcels as a keystone in the revitalization of the downtown, but residents have concerns about the size and scope of any redevelopment.

The panelists were asked to address the following questions:

1. Short Term: Vacant Storefronts. What model bylaws could the Town propose to address empty storefront windows and require better stewardship of buildings?



William Blanchard Company, 486 Main St.



500 Main St.

2. Long Term: Sites under-utilized. Should the Town seek iconic buildings? What are the best uses given the national decline of walk-in retail businesses? What would be appropriate scale of new buildings given the location of these parcels? What model bylaws would the ULI Team recommend to address parking for the uses proposed?

3. Marketability. How can the Town attract good developers to sites that require investment and vision? What are strategies for working with existing property owners to support efforts to identify buyers who will create a ROI for the original owner and invest in appropriate redevelopment?

Town of Wakefield

The Town of Wakefield is an historic suburban community located north of Boston. First settled in 1638 and originally known as Linn Village, the Town incorporated in 1812, and changed its name from South Reading to Wakefield in 1868 in honor of furniture manufacturer and Town benefactor Cyrus Wakefield. Surrounded by Reading (northwest), Melrose (south)

(southwest), Lynnfield (northeast), and Saugus, (southeast), the Town is home to two large lakes: Crystal Lake, which serves as the Town reservoir and supplies drinking water; and Lake Quannapowitt, a 247-acre regional attraction that runs along portions of Main St. (Route 129) and offers walking, running, and recreational activities such as boating and fishing.

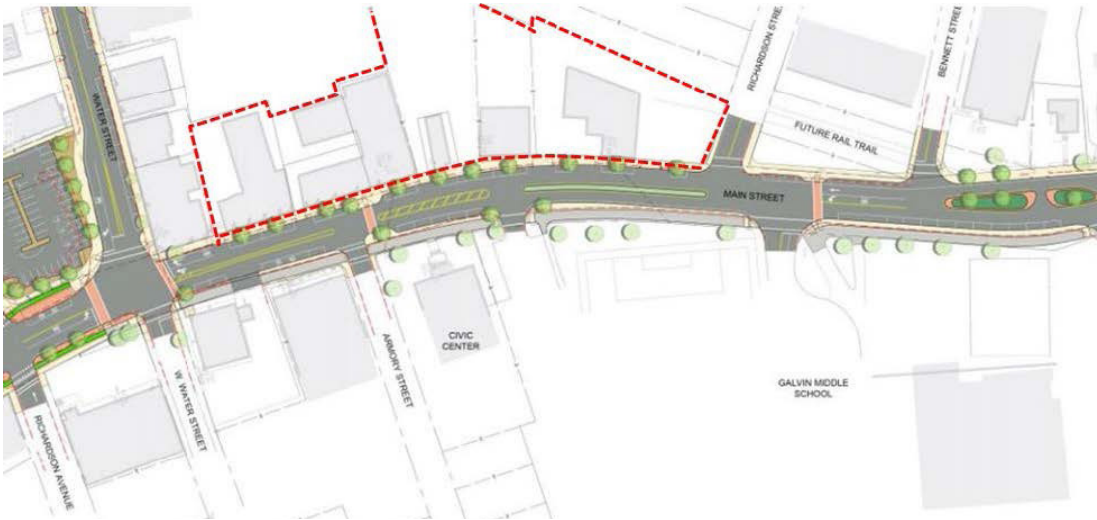
Wakefield is located in close proximity to Interstate-95/Route 128, and the MBTA Commuter Rail connects Wakefield to Boston's North Station via the Haverhill Line, with a stop on North Ave. in the downtown. The commuter rail has created demand for multifamily construction in recent years, with hundreds of apartments and condominiums being completed, under construction or in various planning stages.

A market assessment conducted by Finepoint Associates in 2016 estimated that approximately 86,000 people live within three miles of the downtown, and recommended that Wakefield create more opportunities for residents to “recreate and socialize” as a means to revitalize the downtown. In 2018, Envision Wakefield Downtown was formed to create “a refreshed and improved downtown streetscape” which included the entirety of the downtown Main St. as well as Albion and Water Streets. The project, which has been approved by MASSDOT, will incorporate Complete Streets elements, improve safety for all modes of transportation, improve accessibility, and maintain parking in downtown area as well as other initiatives.

Population/Demographics

The population of the Town of Wakefield was most recently estimated at 27,029 (based on U.S. Census Bureau projections), up from 25,173 in 2010, a 7.3% increase, and is predominantly (93%) white. The average household income is \$129,924 with a poverty rate of 4.16%. The median list price of homes in Wakefield, Massachusetts, was \$529,900 in February 2021, according to Zillow, with owner-occupied units making up approximately 75% of Wakefield households.

Assets and Opportunities



Easy Access from Main Highways. Located just off Interstate 95, less than four miles from the I-93/I-95 Interchange, South Main St. is the southern gateway to the locally-owned shops and businesses of Downtown Wakefield.

Galvin Middle School. Massachusetts schools are set to return to full-time classroom learning this year, and South Main St. will once again be bustling with pedestrian, bicycle and automobile activity. With over 1,000 students during the school day and active playing fields in use on afternoons, weekends and the summer months, there are numerous possibilities for creative retail and food-based businesses appealing to students, parents and visitors to the district.

Americal Civic Center. The vibrant multi-purpose community center is a hub of activity (during non-COVID times), housing the Boys & Girls Club and the Wakefield Food Pantry. The historic building (1913) also offers event and meeting space with the 8,250 square foot Drill Hall (essentially a gymnasium), and the 1,100 square foot Heritage Room, a more formal space. The third floor is comprised of office uses, now occupied by non-profits the Scholarship Foundation and Massachusetts Partnerships for Youth as well as JC Marketing.

Close Proximity to Commuter Rail. South Main is located within a short walking distance to the MBTA Haverhill Line on North Ave., which connects to North Station in Boston.

Nearby Higher-Density Residential Development. In recent years, the downtown has either added or will add a significant number of multifamily residential units, providing the critical density needed for downtown restaurants and retail to thrive. Recent projects include Grayson Lofts at Wakefield Station, a 184-unit apartment community located on Albion St., and The Foundry at Wakefield (83 condos on Foundry St.), as well as 62 and 76 Foundry St. a mixed-use property with 58 apartments and retail/restaurant/service space (currently going through the ZBA).

Planning Underway for Infrastructure and Recreation Upgrades. Envision Wakefield 2030 is proceeding with plans for pedestrian-scale lighting, tree plantings, sidewalk greenery, and additional medians designed to create a more inviting, pedestrian-focused "downtown as destination." A new rail trail is also proposed, to be constructed behind the subject area (with a projected completion date of 2024), creating greater opportunities

for retail and recreational activities within the district. MassDOT has approved the scope of these projects and established cost estimates, and a formal 25 percent design meeting is likely to be held in the summer of 2021.

Existing Zoning Creates Flexibility and Opportunity. The mixed-use zoning overlay district encourages coordinated, cohesive development across lots or through lot consolidation and allows the community to enable and require a mix of uses and to control their features.

Potential to Create Retail Corridor. With over 600 contiguous feet of potential retail/restaurant space in an area with ample

pedestrian foot traffic, South Main has the potential to reinvigorate this gateway to the downtown. Sweetbay Flowers, which moved to 478 Main from a smaller location downtown after the pandemic hit, has thrived in this location, according to stakeholders. It is also worth noting that there have been very few retail closures in the entirety of the downtown during the pandemic.

Available Parking. Since the installation of a parking enforcement officer in the downtown, parking to support retail businesses has improved greatly. There is also significant surface parking during off-peak hours, both on-street and at municipal lots.

Challenges

Gateway to South Main Street District Lacks Appeal. Visitors entering the downtown from I-95 beginning at Richardson St. are confronted with a disjointed collection of buildings and uses that make up the South Main business district. Some are in disrepair (500 Main St. at the corner of Richardson was recently demolished) and could benefit from varying degrees of investment. The 460-472 Main St. property, the site of the long-shuttered Ristorante Molise, is a stark white structure with a series of vacant storefronts that dominates the streetscape. The building (and potentially others along South Main) may also be in need of environmental cleanup, which could negatively impact investor interest in the sites due to the additional cost of remediation.

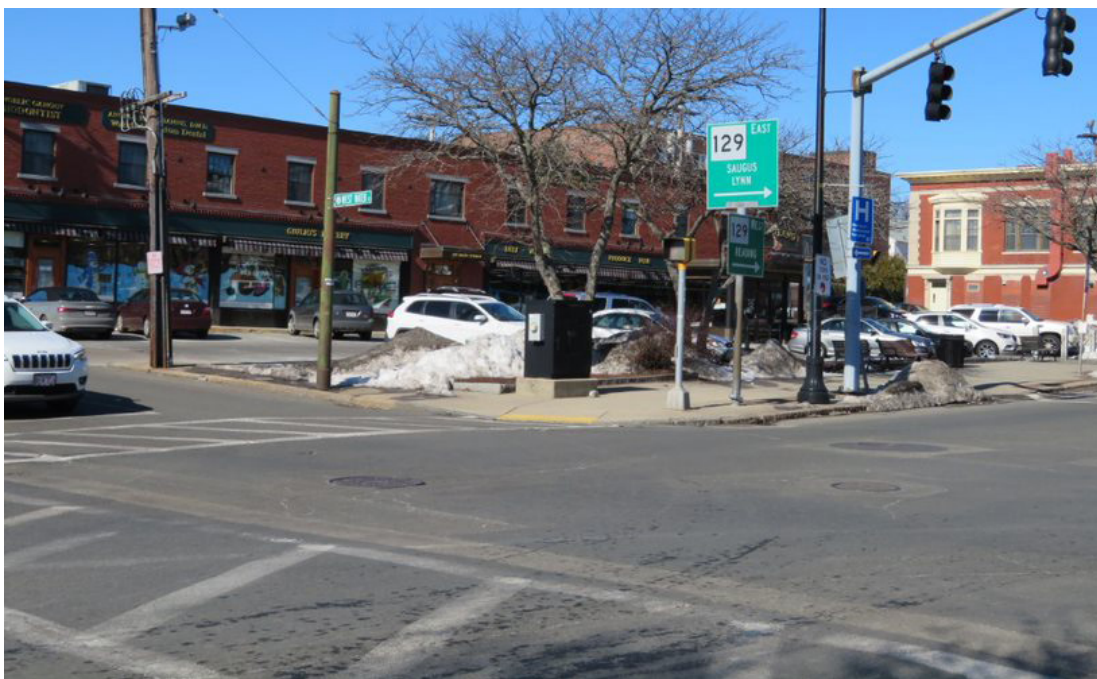
Building Ownership Issues. Many of the buildings are in the hands of long-term ownership, some with limited interest in

selling, reinvesting or pursuing redevelopment plans in line with the goals of the Town.

Current Streetscape Inconsistent With Walkable Downtown Development.

The sidewalks on the east (retail) side of South Main are narrow and do not have tree canopies that could offer shade to pedestrians. Conversely, the western side of the street has wide sidewalks and some tree cover and greenery, but the buildings (Americal, CVS, and Eastern Bank) are set far back from the street and fail to engage at the pedestrian level.

Lack of Pedestrian Connectivity. The absence of crosswalks at the Civic Center parking lot and Galvin Middle School, as well as the intersection of Main St. and W. Water St. contributes to an inadequate and potentially unsafe pedestrian environment.



Intersection at Main St and Water St.

Limited Activation on South Main Street.

There are few draws for the downtown after the close of business hours other than restaurants, and no outdoor programming that would encourage pedestrian activity. Although the nearby Albion Cultural Exchange is upgrading their facility, offering limited programming which will expand post-COVID, stakeholders indicated that the lack of arts/culture/music/theater venues or a winery/brew pub has residents opting to fill those needs elsewhere, primarily to MarketStreet Lynnfield, just three miles away, a loss of potential significant revenue.

Uncertainty Over the State of Brick & Mortar Retail.

Although there were few retail business closures in downtown Wakefield during the pandemic, consumer behavior in a post-COVID world may be difficult to predict. Another concern for stakeholders was that, much like displacement in an urban neighborhood, a successful redevelopment of the retail spaces along South Main St. could potentially drive out existing small businesses as rents escalate to levels needed to support pro formas.

Inadequate Branding & Wayfinding. As visitors approach Main St., there is no signage

indicating that they are entering the retail/business district of the Town. There is also an absence of a wayfinding system to assist with parking, signage to call attention to places to shop and/or dine in the multiple retail/restaurant locations, or signage indicating that popular attractions Lake Quannapowitt are nearby.

Perceived lack of parking. While lack of sufficient parking was cited by stakeholders, it may be a case of inadequate signage to indicate where municipal lots are located (on W. Water St. and behind the Wakefield Cooperative Bank on Main St., as well as angled on-street parking after business hours). Envision Wakefield's website indicated that a study was to be conducted, but it is unclear as to whether it had been completed.

Middle School Pick-up/Drop-off Challenges.

The increased traffic during the morning and afternoon periods before and after the school day presents safety concerns for students. Also, the lack of peak time parking may be a lost opportunity in terms of capturing the student/parent market for future retail/recreational development.

Recommendations

Panelists broke their recommendations into short, medium and long-term categories, recognizing that meaningful transformation often begins with focused conversations and that short-term wins that can help proposed projects deliver immediate impact and tangible results, often at a low cost.

Short Term (One Year and Under)

Encourage Investment in Key Parcels.

Given that there are varying levels of interest in redeveloping or investing in the assets along South Main by the owners of the parcels, the Town should make a concerted effort to engage the owners to discuss a range of solutions that would align with the goals of the Town. These may include financial or tax incentives, assistance with finding development partners, land swaps, etc.

Centralize Economic Development Process.

Stakeholders indicated that there were multiple groups working on Town revitalization strategies in a somewhat fragmented fashion. In order to create a more cohesive and coordinated plan, the Town should consider bringing the various groups (Envision Wakefield, Wakefield Main Streets, MassDOT/ Rail Trail etc.) under one umbrella organization dedicated to the revitalization of the downtown as a whole to reduce duplication of efforts and share timely project updates. The process should also include creating clear lines of communication to inform the various stakeholders – investors, developers, business owners, and residents – of project updates in a timely fashion.

Improve Branding & Wayfinding. Consider adding signage that announces that visitors are entering the retail/business district of the Town and highlights some of the retail/

restaurant offerings. Also, create a wayfinding system to assist with finding municipal parking and retail/restaurant locations, as well as signage indicating that other attractions within the Town, such as Lake Quannapowitt, are nearby.

Conduct Surveys. The Town should consider conducting online surveys to engage residents to determine what types of retail development the community would like to see in the South Main district. It may also be helpful to find out what types of zoning changes residents would be willing to accept to allow for flexibility in redevelopment.

Create a Merchant's Association. Work in conjunction with the Wakefield Lynnfield Chamber of Commerce and Wakefield Main Streets to create a merchants association that specifically addresses the needs of the downtown Wakefield businesses. Currently, the downtown is experiencing significant retail leakage to MarketStreet Lynnfield. An association that encourages collaboration between retailers, restaurateurs and entertainment/recreational venues could share marketing resources and develop complementary business strategies.

Commission an Engineering Survey. After the panel presented their findings, it was noted that there might be an underground stream crossing beneath some of the parcels being studied. The location and extent of this stream and groundwater elevation might hinder the feasibility of any underground parking. The Town could commission a preliminary survey to determine the location of the stream and proactively explore culverting it underneath the pending Rail Trail or daylighting it along the Rail Trail as a part of that redevelopment.

Planning. While the adoption of the mixed-use overlay district on South Main is a positive step, the parameters of the use changes could be expanded to better support the economic feasibility of future redevelopment projects.

Placemaking. The greatest opportunities for realizing short-term wins for South Main may come from employing simple, low-investment placemaking strategies within the district.

Optimize the Dual Frontage. The focus of the TAP had primarily been on the vacant storefronts and the retail along South Main, but the future Rail Trail offers a unique development opportunity. The rear of the Main St. properties can potentially be redeveloped to create new businesses designed to support the Rail Trail, such as food and beverage operators or enterprises that cater to outdoor recreation. Although the timeline for the completion of the Rail Trail remains unclear, it is vitally important to begin laying the groundwork for this opportunity sooner rather than later. Any development proposals being considered should also be mindful of the importance of the placemaking aspects of interfacing with the Rail Trail and its pedestrian/bicycle constituency.

Leverage Surface Parking and Unused Outdoor Spaces. While there is reason to be optimistic regarding a return to some degree

of normalcy as the vaccine rollout continues, it may be premature to focus on planning for immediate indoor uses. With the arrival of warmer weather, there is considerable pent-up demand to get outdoors for socialization. Even prior to COVID, outdoor dining was increasingly being seen as a valuable tool for activating walkable downtowns. Unfortunately, businesses on South Main are not currently equipped to accommodate outdoor dining or other activities. In the short term, however, the Town can still promote outdoor activity by leveraging surface parking lots for programming such as popup events and food trucks, and installing movable tables and chairs where there is open space. Consider the non-playing field sections of the Galvin Middle School athletic fields, where residents could have lunch during workdays or enjoy the outdoors on weekends.

In addition, while there is currently a Farmers Market on Saturdays on North Ave. from June through October, the Town should explore expanding upon the concept to add Farmers/Makers Markets or other outdoor programming, possibly at the Richardson/ Main Street intersection park (see below) to create vibrancy within the district.

Install Temporary Crosswalks at Key Points Along Main St. Although the Envision Wakefield Downtown plan calls for an



overhaul of the sidewalks and streetscape of Main St., temporary crosswalks can be installed to improve pedestrian safety and increase walkability of the district in the interim. This can be accomplished by having the Department of Public Works (DPW) paint lines at the intersections of Richardson St., W. Water St. and in front of the Americal Civic Center (as well as other locations) and install portable pedestrian signal systems.

Convert Vacant Storefronts Into Art Projects. Consider enlisting the help of the Boys & Girls Club members or students at the Galvin Middle School to transform the “empty canvas” of the storefront windows at the former Ristorante Molise building into artworks to diminish the blight and enliven the streetscape.

Medium Term (One to Three Years)

Streamline Regulatory Process for Developments and Review Current Planning

Establish Aesthetic Code for Storefronts. The Town should establish a code that requires businesses to meet minimum standards regarding signage, upkeep of facades and the installation of awnings to create a consistent aesthetic.

Expand Staffing Capacity. In the past year, Wakefield added Erin Kokinda to the newly created position of Community and Economic Development Director and Alex Kania as the new head of Wakefield Main Streets. The Town should also add a full-time Town Planner and consider additional support staff to aid in the transformation of the downtown.

Increase Community Programming. Once street improvements are in place and redevelopment has occurred, build upon the existing roster of annual events (Festival by the Lake, Holiday Stroll, Galvin Middle School Carnival) to create foot traffic to minimize retail leakage to Lynnfield MarketPlace. It is important to recognize that creating a positive downtown experience for families has a long-lasting effect on those children and teenagers

who remain residents of the Town later in life, creating a long-term consumer base for retailers and restaurants.

Establish a Southern Gateway to Main Street. As motorists and other visitors enter the southern end of South Main, their attention is immediately drawn to the vacant building at 460-472 Main (the former Ristorante Molise). In addition to installing signage announcing Richardson & Main as the entranceway to the downtown, as suggested in the short term recommendations, the Town should strongly consider designing and building passive green space at the beginning of Rail Trail on Town land on Richardson & Main.

Incentivize Businesses to Create Frontage Along the Rail Trail. The Town should explore ways to develop tax or financial incentives for developers with dual frontage, as well as assurances to commit to amenities such as bike parking stations.

Evaluate Environmental Conditions and Gauge Remediation Costs. Estimating the scope of the environmental issues and associated cleanup costs would help to create a degree of certainty for owners or potential investors considering redevelopment projects. Additionally, the stream that runs parallel to the east side of the properties needs to be assessed further as a limiting factor in advance of site development.

Long Term (Three to Ten Years)

Although much of the focus of the TAP was on the east (retail) side of South Main, long-term development scenarios should encompass both sides of the street and be viewed as a wholesale redevelopment rather than a simple rehabilitation project. What follows is a “blue-sky” vision devised by the TAP panelists, representing one possible redevelopment scenario. This exercise assumes that the Town will be able to overcome the challenges associated with the parcels (ownership issues, environmental remediation, etc.) and is prepared to create that signature gateway from the south entrance to the Wakefield downtown center.



Possible Redevelopment Scenario.

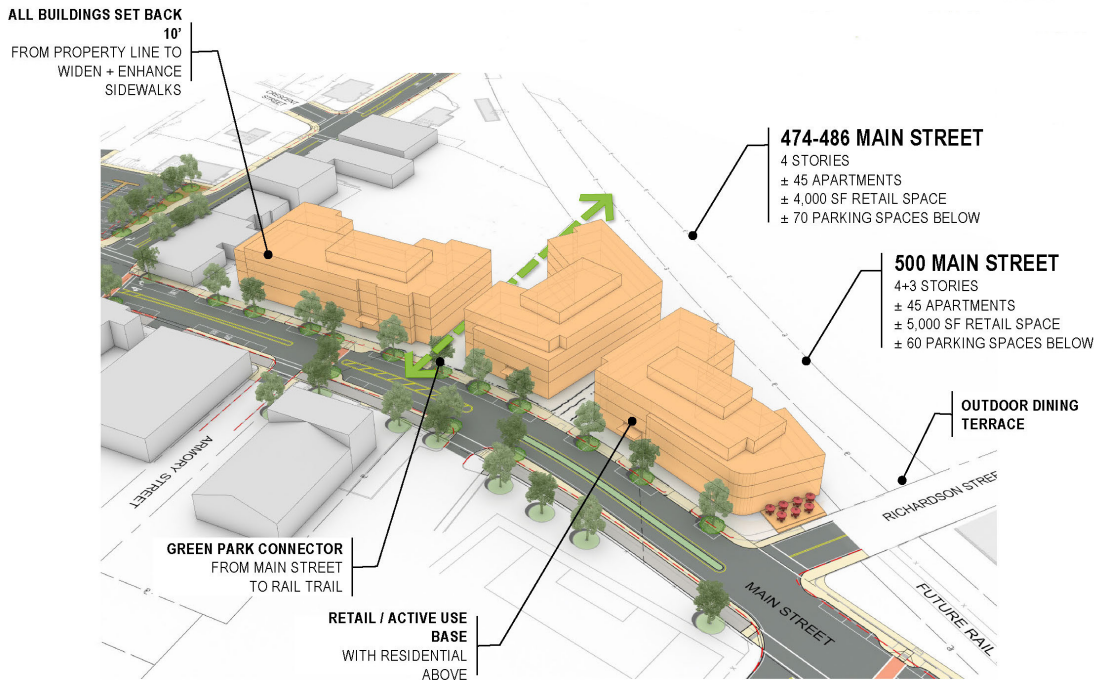
The Plan

Redeveloping the seven parcels in the study area, which total 600 linear feet of continuous frontage along Main St. (approximately 90,000 square feet), could have a transformative effect on the entire downtown. The parcels would be aggregated into three development sites: The former Ristorante Molise (460-472 Main St.) location, comprised of four parcels, the two parcels that make up 474-486 Main, and 500 Main, a large single parcel that was formerly home to the auto repair and sales businesses, which extends to Richardson St. Each of the aggregated parcels is large enough to support standalone projects, or the entirety of the seven parcels can be developed as one large entity.

The plan envisions developing ground floor retail spaces ranging from 750 to 3,000 square feet, with the larger space reserved for a signature food and beverage business, ideally at the corner of Richardson & Main. The restaurant would feature an outdoor dining terrace for the warmer months, and its location at the entrance to the Rail Trail, across from the public park (discussed previously) and the Galvin Middle School, would create an inviting gateway to the downtown.

The retail along South Main would total roughly 20,000 square feet, with 9,000 in the first building, 4,000 in the second building and 7,500 in the third as you proceed north along Main. It is important to note that the vision specifically calls for locally-based businesses. During the stakeholder discussions, participants indicated that MarketStreet Lynnfield is a huge draw for residents of Wakefield and the surrounding communities, as it offers access to large-scale entertainment and national chains. The redevelopment of downtown Wakefield presents an opportunity to create a unique retail environment, featuring local businesses and restaurants that deliver an authentic, small town New England Main Street experience.

Another vitally important element to the redevelopment is the inclusion of outdoor space throughout the district. In addition to the park at the entrance to the Rail Trail and the athletic fields across the street at the school, the proposed plan would include a “green connector” between 472 and 474 Main St. Located directly across from the Americal Civic Center, the connector would extend from Main St. to the Rail Trail and serve as a social gathering area. Not coincidentally, the area of this green connector is approximately



Possible Redevelopment Scenario, 3D View.

15% of the entire lot area, satisfying the 15% open space criteria for the Mixed-Use Overlay District. Benches and café tables could be set strategically along the connector, allowing restaurant patrons to convene after dinner, and residents and office workers could stroll or take lunch during the day. The connector would create an additional draw for the local retailers while adding an 18-hour vibrancy to the downtown.

The developments would consist of three- and four-story buildings (now allowable under the Town's mixed-use zoning overlay, with similar structures built recently in the Town center) with ground floor retail/restaurants, apartments above and underground parking at a 1:1 ratio, which most recognize as appropriate for a location in close proximity to a transit station. The three buildings would total approximately 140 apartment units, located within 1,500 feet of the commuter rail on North Ave. In light of the uncertainty of what a return to the office might look like (a hybrid office/work from home strategy appears likely), an important design consideration for the apartments may be to include space for a home office within the apartments or co-working space within the building.

While this proposed vision plan complies with the majority of the provisions of the Mixed-Use Overlay District (height, open space, commercial space, etc.), the 2,000 sf minimum lot size per dwelling unit would only allow approximately 45 apartments. Additionally, the MUOD provisions mandate a 1.5 space / unit parking ratio, whereas the proposed vision provides for a 1:1 ratio for residential units and a 2.5:1,000sf ratio for retail space. These two provisions would need to be modified by a variance with the current applicable zoning.

In addition, design guidelines should be established, mandating that the buildings will be set back 10-12 feet from the Main St. property line to allow retailers to enliven the store fronts with planters, sidewalk racks, creative sandwich boards, etc. as well as having the option to include outdoor seating. By taking a wholesale, ground-up redevelopment approach such as this, the Town will be able to create the walkable, vibrant downtown that it seeks, a true New England town center that offers restaurants, retail, green space, and services, all within easy access to the commuter rail and the highway.

Funding and Resources

State Grants

MassDevelopment – Helps to incentivize private investment by providing help with site readiness and technical assistance for a variety of projects.

MassWorks – Provides grants to prepare communities for success with a particular emphasis on projects that support the production of multi-family housing in appropriately located walkable mixed-use districts, resulting in direct and immediate job creation, and/or supporting economic development in weak or distressed areas.

Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD) – Offers a range of services and assistance to communities.

Financing

MassDevelopment also provides tax-exempt bonds, bridge financing, and loans.

City Funding Sources

Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP)

CPA (Community Preservation Act) – Helps communities preserve open space and historic sites, create affordable housing, and develop outdoor recreational facilities.

Housing Tax Credit Program (Federal & State) – Developers must apply through the Department of Community and Housing Development.

Property Owner/Developer Partnerships

Brownfield Tax Credit Programs (Federal & State)

Conclusion

As is the case with many of the Technical Assistance Panel programs, it is worth noting that many of the observations and recommendations in this report reflect the parallel thinking that Envision Wakefield, their partner VHB and previous studies have concluded, but it also serves as an affirmation from an outside team of real estate professionals.

Any assessment of South Main St. inevitably begins with the redevelopment difficulties presented by the problematic ownership issues of key parcels along South Main, particularly the site of the former Ristorante Molise. And although any meaningful transformation of the district must include a resolution of these issues, it is beyond the purview of this TAP. However, it is vitally important that the Town make it a priority to begin dialogue with the owners to examine the range of possibilities going forward and what actions can be taken on the part of the Town to resolve these issues.

In the meantime, there is much that can be done to begin the process of revitalizing this portion of downtown. From an administrative standpoint, beginning a search for a Town

Planner and initiating conversations about forming a merchant's association would be significant steps forward, as Envision Wakefield awaits the MassDOT 25 percent design review to move forward.

From an infrastructure standpoint, the Wakefield Department of Public Works can immediately improve the pedestrian safety of the district by painting temporary crosswalks at the intersections of Main and the Galvin Middle School, the Americal Civic Center and W. Water St., and install portable flashers as well. With the warm weather here, now would be an appropriate time to experiment with establishing outdoor seating and tables in green spaces such as the Galvin athletic fields or the unfinished pocket park at Richardson & Main. It may also be worth meeting with representatives of the Boys & Girls Club and the Galvin to determine if there would be interest in creating a team of youth artists who could transform the blighted white building into an art project.

While many of these suggestions may seem small and incremental, it is important for stakeholders to begin to see the possibilities of transformation as a project moves forward.



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