



ULI TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

NORTH BROOKFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

JUNE 4 & 7, 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 nearly 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. The Panel spends one to two days visiting and analyzing existing conditions, identifying specific planning and development issues, and formulating realistic and actionable recommendations to move initiatives forward in a way consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.

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 of participating municipalities 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 North Brookfield Technical Assistance Panel (TAP), under the direction of the Boston/New England District Council of the Urban Land Institute (ULI), was conducted on June 4 and 7, 2021. The TAP was mostly held virtually due to the lingering effects of the pandemic. Following the June 4th in-person guided site tour of the downtown North Brookfield study area, the remainder of the working sessions and the subsequent public presentation took place over Zoom. The purpose of the TAP was to provide guidance to the Town of North Brookfield on the redevelopment possibilities of the historic Town House as well as the surrounding downtown.

During the site walk on June 4th, ULI members met with local business owners, residents and members of the Friends of the North Brookfield Town House and Downtown Development Committee to gain insight into the redevelopment possibilities for the Town House as well as the strengths and challenges of the study area as a whole. After the site walk, Panelists interviewed two sets of stakeholders via Zoom during the afternoon of the 4th.

Panelists then reconvened via Zoom on the 7th to assess the information and to develop recommendations for the revitalization of the downtown. The TAP presented their findings virtually to Town officials and the general public later that evening via the Town of North Brookfield Zoom presentation.

ULI and the TAP Process

Provides an overview of ULI Boston/New England and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) as well as the role of Mass-Development in the TAP and includes a list of the panel members and stakeholders who took part. The chapter also highlights key elements of the tour of the study area for

the TAP, and describes the process undertaken by the panelists and stakeholders to arrive at their recommendations.

Purpose of the TAP and Background

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 a brief history of the Town, a more detailed overview of the Town House, a list of studies relating to the redevelopment, and key population and demographic information.

Assets and Opportunities

Identifies the strengths of the North Brookfield downtown study area that will help the Town to achieve its revitalization goals. These include the historic Town House and the Great Hall; strong relationships with government and quasi-governmental agencies; a large-scale employer that is committed to the Town; and a dedicated corps of volunteers.

Challenges

Examines the obstacles the Town may face in meeting the goal of a creating a revitalized downtown. These challenges include the following: a lack of a Town Manager or Planner to oversee the downtown development; land uses that do not conform with a historic downtown or the Master Plan; ADA compliance issues with the Town House; and the cost of renovations for the Town House.

Recommendations

Proposes a number of actions that North Brookfield can take to begin the transformation

of the Town House and the downtown, including the following: hiring a Town Manager or Planner; concentrating resources and energy on the development of the Town House and North Main Street; developing a plan for marketing the Town House as a regional cultural center; and converting the Town-owned parcels into public parking lots.

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.

Action Steps

Offers a final assessment of what needs to be done to accelerate the redevelopment possibilities of the Town House and downtown district, as well as some immediate actions that can be taken.



North Brookfield Main Street. Source ULI Boston.

ULI and the TAP Process

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Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

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organizations facing complex land use challenges, who benefit from the pro bono recommendations provided by the TAP members.

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MassDevelopment

MassDevelopment is the Commonwealth'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.

Panel Members

ULI Boston/New England convened a volunteer panel of experts whose members represent the range of disciplines necessary to analyze the challenges and opportunities and present recommendations that could help the Town of North Brookfield to revitalize its downtown by leveraging the commercial and cultural potential of the historic Town House. Practice areas included architects, developers, planners, and a historic preservation consultant. The following is a list of panelists:

Co-Chairs

Susan Connelly, coo, Housing Opportunities Unlimited

Emily Keys Innes, principal, Innes Associates Ltd.

Panel

Francisco Feliz, principal, Bennett Hill Partners

Joseph Karanja, student, University of Buffalo, NY
(Masters of RE Development)

Shyla Matthews, vice president of Community
Development, MassDevelopment

Gerald Sullivan, principal, Spencer Sullivan and Vogt
Architecture/Preservation

Panelists have donated their time.

ULI Staff

Michelle Landers, executive director

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 Friends of the Town House and other non-profits, and North Brookfield residents.

The following is a list of stakeholders:

Deb Arnold, church secretary, First Congregational
Church of North Brookfield

Marco Bernasconi, president, North Brookfield Savings Bank

Marilynn Borst, Friends of the Town House

Donna Boulanger, former president and ceo, North
Brookfield Savings Bank

Eva Brown, grant writer and ROAR advisor, Friends of the
Town House

Troy Brown, business owner, Brown Electric, 215 North
Main Street

Jim Buzzell, president, Friends of the Town House

Nader Djafari, owner, MaxMia Properties, (including
167-181 North Main Street and other downtown North
Brookfield properties

Richard “Pit” Caron, resident, vice president, Vibram
Corporation

Mike Doe, Playground Committee, resident

Peter Dupell, resident

Harbour Hodder, Haston Library trustee

Sue Lewandowski, resident

Ethan Melad, resident, owner of Melad StudioWorks



TAP Panelists touring the study area with civic and elected leaders. Source: ULI Boston.

Jim Metcalf, resident

Patricia “Trish” Miller, Friends of the Town House

Bonnie Milner, business owner, Long View Entertainment

Eric Nash, business owner, Nash Contracting, 209 North Main Street

Meg Steere, project manager, Architectural Heritage Foundation

Maria Tucker, chairperson, North Brookfield School Committee

Maureen Wesolaski, Friends of the Town House

Dani Whitestone, business owner, Women's Small Business & Leadership Network

Shawn Whitney, business owner, Quan Fa Martial Arts, 193 North Main Street

Study Area Tour

Following an initial briefing with Town officials and members of the Friends of the Town House on June 1, the North Brookfield TAP was held over the course of two days, June 4 and June 7, 2021. On the morning of June 4, panelists from the ULI Boston/New England District Council were greeted at the North Brookfield Police Station by Sheila Orsi, chairperson of the Downtown Development Committee (DDC), as well as a host of volunteers and Town officials, including Dale Kiley, chairman of the Board of Selectmen.

After introductions and a briefing, Orsi, Kiley, Historical Society member Brandon Avery, chairman of the Planning Board Bill King, Ian McElwee of the Central Mass

Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC), Friends of the Town House members Jim Buzzell, Trish Miller and Eva Brown, as well as Jamie Flamand of the North Brookfield Water Department, led panelists on a tour of the study area. The first item of interest was a large parcel of land located adjacent to the Police Station, a brownfield site with low levels of contamination that was used as a drive-in theater for “Movie Nights” when restrictions of public gatherings were put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. A few hundred yards east down School Street is the historic (1875) North Brookfield Rail Station. The station marks the entrance to the Rail Trail, which extends approximately four miles from the downtown to Mud Pond on Route 9 in Brookfield. While not officially completed at the time of the tour, the trail sees extensive use, according to tour guides.

Directly across School Street from the Police Station is the North Brookfield Highway Department and Fire Station. The Highway Department is scheduled for re-location and the existing facility will be renovated (at a cost of \$4-\$6 million) to accommodate an expansion of the Fire Department, which currently is housed in a historic building (1878) deemed inadequate for its needs. Across Grove Street from the Police Station is the manufacturing facility of Vibram, which produces shoe soles for commercial uses and the military. The largest employer in North Brookfield with approximately 250 employees, Vibram acquired the Quabaug Corporation



North Brookfield Highway Department and Fire Station. Source: ULI Boston.



Vibram manufacturing plant. Source: ULI Boston.

– which had operated in North Brookfield for over a century – in 2015 and has invested approximately \$6-8 million in the facility since the acquisition, according to Vibram officials.

Directly across School Street, and next to the Fire station is the Vibram North American corporate headquarters, a 34,000 square foot building built in 1980 which may be available for acquisition as Vibram prepares to move its administrative functions to the manufacturing building across the street. Vibram has been a good corporate citizen and paid for the playground on the property adjacent to the headquarters, the campus of the First Congregational Church of North Brookfield. Anchored by the historic 1823 church building (chapel added in 1854), the campus is home to many community activities, including providing space for the town's annual May Festival, which was originally agriculturally themed, but now features music, crafts, etc. The festival has been canceled in the past two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Panelists crossed North Main Street (Routes 67/148) to the historic Haston Free Public Library, a magnificent 13,000 square foot stone structure that was completed in 1894, renovated in 2007, and was host to a myriad of community events prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Next to the library is another historic structure, the Union Star building, a former church constructed in 1853 that was converted into an iconic 600 seat movie theater in the 1920's, and later served as a furniture store. At some point in the 1970's, an addition was constructed in front of the principal façade to

house retail suites, which tour guides noted is a source of consternation to those wishing to preserve the historic character of the downtown. Next to the Union Star is the Adams Block, an historic (1854) three-story building with first floor retail and a mix of businesses and market-rate apartment units above. The retail portion lost a major tenant in the Bush Mountain Stitchery & Framing Gallery & Gift Shop in the spring (which relocated within North Brookfield), but tour guides pointed out that despite some vacancies in the downtown, there have been few business closures since the pandemic began.

Panelists noted that the sidewalks along North Main Street are in poor condition, not ADA compliant, and insufficient for the walkable village center that the Town envisions. At the time of the tour, North Brookfield had submitted an initial application to Complete Streets to improve the sidewalks and streetscape, which is expected to be undertaken in three phases.

Panelists next crossed Summer Street to the Town House (built in 1864 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places), which had once served as the center for business (tin and meat shops, general store, etc.), civic, political and social activities, and later as administrative offices for the Town. The Great Hall on the second floor hosted debates, balls, and was a thriving performing arts center. The Town House was closed for repairs in 2002 and to date has never reopened. Panelists first observed the exterior of the building and



Haston Free Public Library. Source: ULI Boston.



Town House. Source: ULI Boston.

noted that the side facing Summer Street had been scraped but not painted, but the North Main Street side had been fully painted. The Bell Tower of the Town House suffered extensive damage during hurricane Irene in August 2011 and was removed, repaired and returned to its home on the top southeast corner of the building in 2014.

Inside the building on the first floor, panelists observed that many of the rooms were being used as storage, with items including historic moldings, Christmas decorations, original floor plans, and law books from the 1800's in the various rooms. Ceilings in many of the rooms had been torn down, exposing the beams. The attic space is mostly empty and clearly shows the significant investment made to create a structurally sound bell tower. The basement contains boxes and some other detritus that should be sorted through. The foundation is stone and the soundness of the structure is easily observed. The tour continued up a wide and winding wooden staircase to the Great Hall performance space, which includes a raised stage and a two-story ceiling, with several portions of the walls and ceiling open to show the significant structural repairs made to the building. Panelists were informed that the Town does not want municipal offices to be located there in any redevelopment scenario and is only encouraging income-generating uses in line with maintaining eligibility for historic tax credits.

Directly across from the Town House is a pocket park with benches and sparse greenery, which features a programable LED message board at the intersection of North Main Street and School Street that broadcasts Town information and announcements. Adjacent to the pocket park was a historic brick building and two wooden buildings (torn down after the tour) that will be replaced with a gas station/convenience store. The town once had eight gas stations, but at the time of the tour, there were none remaining. The construction of a gas station required a special permit approval from the Town Planning Board, which panelists were informed was granted over the objections of the DDC and FOTH.

Next to the Town House heading north is a block of retail/residential buildings, including

a liquor store and a convenience store, Gillette's Used Restaurant Equipment and a recently constructed building that is home to a pizza shop. The block also includes historic structures, including the Walker Block (1870) which houses the Historic Museum, and the Duncan Building (1896), a residential building with first floor retail. There is also a modern building adjacent to the Town House that is inconsistent with the downtown historic character. Panelists were told that some of the residential units on the block are reserved for low-income residents.

The tour then proceeded up North Main Street, past a historic cemetery, and down Central Street, a residential street that bisects Grove Street. The building housing the barber shop on Central Street also contains a vacant two-lane bowling alley. Panelists observed the Grove Street School Apartments, reserved for low-income residents, as well as the North Brookfield Common, which features basketball courts and athletic fields. The tour proceeded south on Grove Street, past a 120,000 square foot parcel of land situated across from the Vibram manufacturing plant and adjacent to the Police Station. Panelists were informed that both lots bordering the Police Station were brownfield sites. Panelists were later informed that one site had been through the process of environmental mitigation; the other has not yet gone through that process. The tour concluded with a return to the Police Station.

During the afternoon of June 4th, panelists remotely interviewed stakeholders, listed in the previous sub-section, in virtual breakout rooms. On the 7th, the panelists reconvened 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 the Town of North Brookfield Zoom presentation. Because this TAP spanned a weekend, some panelists were able to work on maps and sketches over the weekend and between the charrette in the morning and the evening presentation.

Purpose of the TAP and Background



Haston Free Public Library. Source: ULI Boston.

The Town of North Brookfield sought the help of the ULI TAP to provide guidance on ways to create a walkable historic New England village downtown, leveraging the proposed transformation of the Town House into a mixed-use performing arts/cultural center.

The panelists were asked to address the following questions:

1. Planning

How can the Town House current space configuration meet the programming of the Friends of the Town House and their plans to turn the building into an anchor

institution that will shape arts and cultural programming and attract people to North Main Street?

2. Community Design

How can the Town establish more control over design of new construction and preservation of Town character that is responsive to a shared downtown vision?

3. Town Governance and Capacity

How can the Town work towards building capacity to advance economic development initiatives along North Main Street?

Town of North Brookfield History and Background

The Town of North Brookfield is a historic rural community located in Worcester County, approximately 18 miles west of Worcester. The Town has a total land area of approximately 22 square miles and is bounded on the east by Spencer, to the south by East Brookfield and Brookfield, to the west by West Brookfield, and on the north by New Braintree. Once a part of Brookfield, the Town was incorporated in 1812. At that time, the population was approximately 1,100 and the primary industry was agriculture.

In 1824, a shoe factory opened in the Town, and by the mid-1800's, North Brookfield was the largest manufacturer of shoes in the country – providing a large percentage of the footwear to the Union Army during the Civil War – although agriculture still played a large role in the economy. In 1876 the North Brookfield Railroad, which connected to the Boston & Albany Railroad, began service and the population quadrupled to nearly 4,600 by the year 1900. The shoe mills closed in 1900 following a long strike, however, and the population declined with the loss of jobs, at one point reaching a low of 2,600.

Manufacturing returned to the Town in 1916 when the remaining shoe factories were acquired by the Quabaug Corporation, which began producing a variety of rubber products and soling for footwear. The company was purchased in 2015 by longtime partner Vibram Corporation, which made significant investments into the manufacturing facility and remains the Town's largest employer with approximately 250 employees. Agriculture has declined steadily since the mid-20th century. In 1972 North Brookfield had twenty working farms and orchards, and by 2007 there were eight, with Brookfield Orchards the largest remaining agricultural operation.

Population/Demographics

The population of the Town of North Brookfield was most recently estimated at 4,774 (based on U.S. Census Bureau projections), up slightly from 4,680 in 2010,

and is predominantly (96%) white. The average household income is \$78,750 with a poverty rate of 3.4%. The typical home value of homes in North Brookfield through May 2021 is \$297,795 according to Zillow. North Brookfield home values have gone up 18.9% over the past year, with owner-occupied units making up approximately 75% of households. Although MLS Data was not available for rental units, one owner of multifamily properties stated that one-bedrooms range from \$800 to \$1000; two-bedrooms from \$1100 to \$1250; and three-bedrooms from \$1200 to \$1500 per month. Estimates for commercial retail space in the downtown range from \$5-\$9 per square foot.

Town House

The Town House, which is envisioned as the cornerstone of the revitalization of the downtown, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Located in the village center of the town at the corner of North Main and Summer streets, the three-and-a-half-story wood building is stylistically a mixture of the French Second Empire and Italianate styles and features a sixty-foot tower. Fronting North Main Street are four entrances to unoccupied spaces facing the street. Much of the first floor had been used for Town administrative offices before closing in 2002 but the space is now primarily used for storage of Town records and other documents, as well as odds and end such as Christmas decorations. There is also a basement with an exposed stone foundation on one of the walls that is also being used for storage. Two additional entrances are located along Summer Street, taking advantage of the change in grade from North Main Street.

The front of the Town House includes a wide, curving staircase that leads to the second floor. The Great Hall occupies almost the entire second floor and features a proscenium stage and a second-floor balcony at the rear of the hall. The meeting hall floor measures about 48'6" x 48'6" (not including the stage and balcony) and was planned for a capacity of about five hundred. The Great Hall once hosted a performance of "Ah, Wilderness,"

with the original New York cast, directed by Broadway legend George M. Cohan, who was a frequent visitor to town when he came to stay with his grandparents. A well-preserved stairway curves upward from the second-story level to the third-floor level just opposite the doorway into the Great Hall balcony. At the balcony's east end is another curved stairway leading up to the unfinished attic on the next level.

In 2006, the Friends of the Town House was established for the purpose of raising funds and promoting public support for the restoration of the historic Town House. The Friends' mission is "to preserve the structural integrity of the Town House while retaining the historic character and structural design of the building in order to reestablish it as the center of civic, political, social and cultural activities of the Central Massachusetts Rural Region." The Friends have implemented a program inspired by the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices, ROAR (Rural Opportunity through Art and Restoration) designed to harness the power of the arts to drive prosperity using existing assets, and have also partnered with Long View Entertainment to create programming for the Town House after it is restored.

Previous Studies/Funding

The Town, FOTH, the DDC, and other volunteer groups had engaged in a significant amount of preliminary work prior to soliciting the TAP, including multiple studies since the turn of the century. Among others, these include the 2007 North Brookfield Master Plan; the 2008 North Brookfield Open Space and Recreation Plan; the 2015 North Brookfield PDA Analysis; a North Brookfield Zoning Assessment, also in 2015; and the 2019 Downtown North Brookfield Strategic Plan done in conjunction with the CMRPC.

The Town has been aggressively pursuing funding for infrastructure and programming, and wins included securing a Commonwealth Grant, which allowed the Town to provide a pop-up movie theatre in the lot adjacent to the Police Station; a Cultural Grant for virtual programming, as well as two local cultural grants that have been awarded for future Town House activities.

The DDC also recently submitted a Complete Streets grant application for Phase 1 of the downtown revitalization; an application to the Community One Stop for Growth; and a CDBG grant that will restructure the streets and water/sewer located at the Batchelor Drive and Maple Street areas.

Assets and Opportunities

As North Brookfield continues to move forward with plans to restore the historic Town House and revitalize the downtown, it is worth noting the many components already in place to help make this a reality. Panelists were impressed by the amount of site specific due diligence that had been accomplished as well as planning and zoning for North Main Street. It was even more impressive learning that most of this work has been done by community volunteers given the limited Town Hall staff.

A Classic Main Street – North Brookfield possesses the quintessential picturesque New England downtown Main Street. Anchored by historic 19th century structures like the Town House, the Haston Library, and the First Congregational Church, North Main Street has the core elements of a historic walkable downtown. The central location of the Haston Free Public Library and the Hannaford Supermarket anchoring the southern end of the downtown enhance the walkability and attractiveness of the downtown to the adjacent residential neighborhoods.

Town House – The exterior of the building appears to be good shape, and the interior has been structurally reinforced, but the building has been unoccupied for nearly two decades. The Great Hall has the potential to be re-imagined as a multi-purpose performance and cultural space capable of generating revenue.

Recent Grants

- 6/2021 – ULI TAP Sponsored by MassDevelopment
- 9/4/2020 – Commonwealth Places grant award to Friends of North Brookfield Townhouse \$9,450

- 2/14/2020 – Mass Cultural Council Facilities Fund (Feasibility and Technical Assistance for the Town House Great Hall) \$10,000

Supporting Retail – As noted above, the Hannaford Supermarket anchors the edge of the downtown. North Main Street and Summer Street have some current retail; and vacancies in both the Town House and other buildings offer possibilities for future uses that would enhance the downtown.

Quality of Life – North Brookfield is situated in a beautiful country setting with access to the North Brookfield Rail Trail in close proximity to its downtown. The Town has relatively low housing costs in relation to the rest of the state while providing ample town services and community programming.

Vibram Corporation – North Brookfield's largest employer, located in the heart of the downtown, appears to be committed to remaining in the Town, given its significant investment in the physical plant in recent years.

Dedicated Corps of Volunteers – The energy and enthusiasm of the volunteers from the Friends of the Town House and the Downtown Development Committee and their genuine love for the Town was evident throughout the planning stages, tour, stakeholder meetings and Q&A of the TAP presentation.

Well-placed Public Properties – One of the terms often heard in community planning is “walkable communities”. For a rural community, North Brookfield is uniquely situated to improve its economic picture. The condensed downtown area with the Town's major employer, municipal resources, public Rail Trail entrance and destination

spots (i.e. work, church, major food store) provides the community with more well-placed consumer infrastructure than many other rural communities. Add to this the location of the town's vacant lots and the unique and architecturally significant Town House and other structures, and panelists see the potential for a vibrant destination downtown.

Public Investment – The remediation of the larger of the two parcels (adjacent to the police station), and the Complete Streets design, funded with a grant, as well as the TAP sponsored by MassDevelopment, are evidence that the Town is committed to their vision. To date, the amount of state resources leveraged by a mostly volunteer effort has helped move the Town House project forward through the assessment and feasibility stages.

Relationships with Government Partners – The Town has partnered with MassDevelopment, CMRPC, the Mass Arts Council, the Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation, and other state and federal agencies that provide guidance and resources.



Top: School Apartments. Bottom: The Union Star Building. Left: Haston Free Public Library. Source: ULI Boston.

Challenges

Absence of Professional Leadership for Downtown Redevelopment

– North Brookfield does not have a Town Manager or Planner that would typically coordinate long-term planning for the revitalization of the downtown. The void in this position leaves potential partnerships, coordination, funding and leveraging of efforts unrealized. It also makes it nearly impossible to drive a public building redevelopment over the finish line.

Land Uses Not Consistent with Master Plan

– There are several newer (and permitted) buildings that have been integrated into the streetscape over time that are not compatible with the historic 19th century character or highest and best uses that are consistent with creating a walkable downtown district, or the Town's planning objectives and community engagement as spelled out in the 2019 North Brookfield Strategic Plan.

ADA Accessibility – The Town House requires extensive upgrades to become ADA compliant. The FOTH already has plans (which included adding an elevator) that panelists agreed were well done. The sidewalks along Main St. are also not ADA accessible at this point in time, but the issue was/will be addressed in one of the phases of the Complete Streets grant.

Cost of Town House Renovations

– Although the Friends of the Town House have been raising funds from public and private sources, there is still a major shortfall. Also, there is no solid credit anchor tenant signed on that would allow the Town House to secure financing.

Insufficient Public Parking – There is a perception that parking is limited in the downtown, according to stakeholders. Parking is further limited by commercial deliveries (see below). Because of the rural nature of the town, the downtown has the potential to be a walkable area, but additional public parking

will definitely be needed if and when the Town House is restored to active use for events.

No Delivery System for Downtown Businesses

– There are no designated times or areas for business deliveries, and delivery vehicles often take up available public parking spaces in front of the businesses. There is also a problem of larger delivery vehicles taking up several diagonal spaces while parking parallel to the curb.

No Fully Articulated Vision for the Performing Arts Center

– There are questions that still need to be answered regarding what steps the FOTH need to take so the Town House can become a viable, income-producing performance space/cultural center that can become a regional draw. Although a performance venue management entity has been identified, they do not have the level of funding required to take the risk of signing a long-term lease that would pay the majority of monthly debt payments necessary to support the approximately \$5 million in necessary renovation costs.

Few Employers Downtown – Besides Vibram, there is a lack of employment opportunities within the Town, other than those offered by the small businesses and retail operators in the downtown. But there is also an opportunity for businesses to capture commuters who use North Main Street (Rte. 67) to commute to work.

Over-Reliance on Volunteers – The enthusiasm and dedication of the residents in working to improve their town cannot be overstated. However, there are limitations to all-volunteer workforces in terms of availability and the power to drive a coordinated process that stays on track through changes in political cycles, funding opportunities, and other development and activity that directly or indirectly may impact the success of North Main Street.

Recommendations

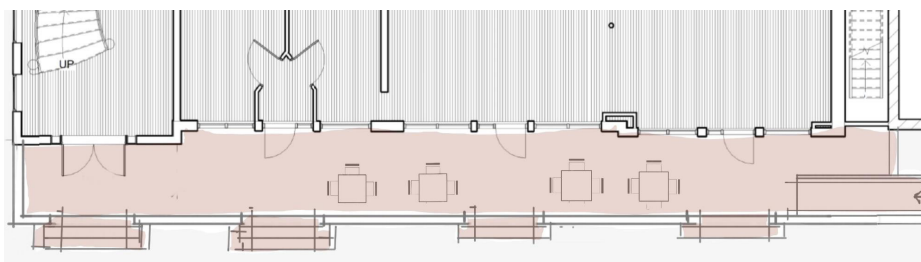
Panelists were impressed with the work that the FOTH, the DDC and their volunteers have done to prepare the Town House restoration and downtown revitalization for the next steps – particularly in terms of due diligence and the pursuit of funding through grants and donations. The panelists suggest taking these next steps in order for the Town to realize its goals.

Recommendations: Town House

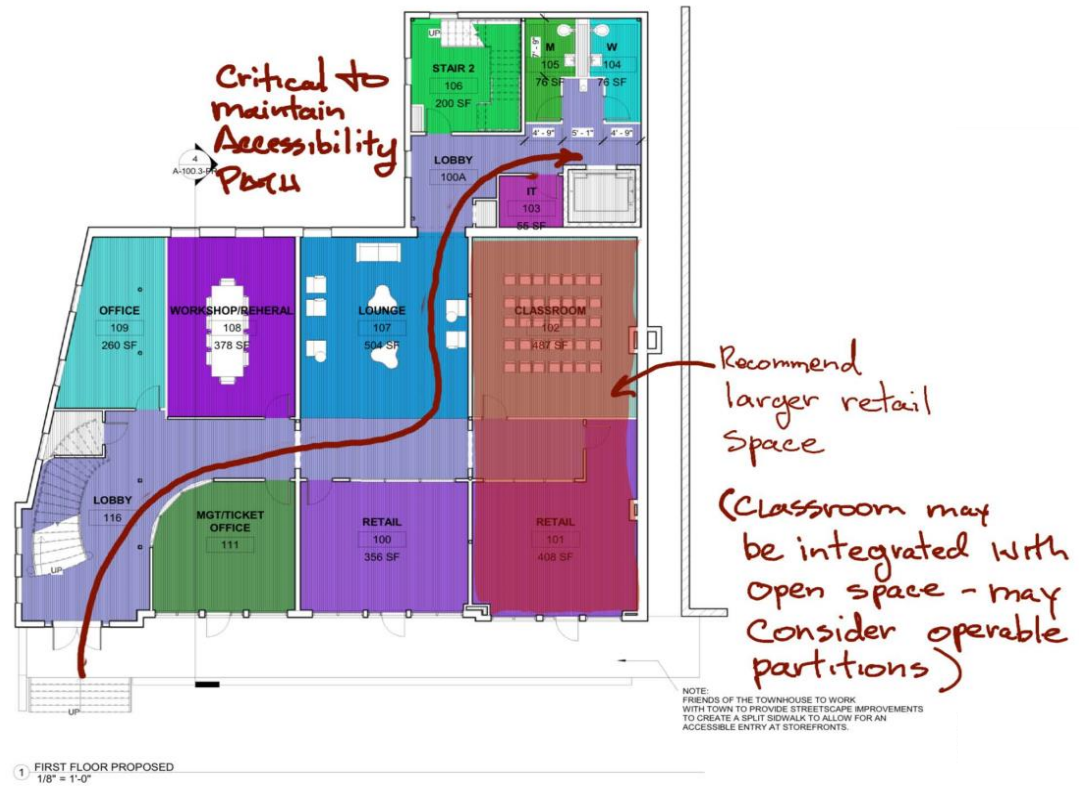
Focus Complete Streets Funds on Town House Side on North Main Street – In an ideal scenario, funds would be available to fully execute the entire scope of plans for the revitalization of the Town House and downtown as set forth in the 2019 Feasibility Study. Due to financial and other constraints, however, the panel suggests focusing the initial efforts on what should be the highest priority, building accessibility. Addressing the sidewalk accessibility is foundational to any feasible Town House progress, and once the accessibility issue is addressed, other aspects of the project can move forward.

When the renovation is underway and the building reaches 30% of its appraised value, it must meet the requirements of the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (AAB – similar to the ADA). With the Town

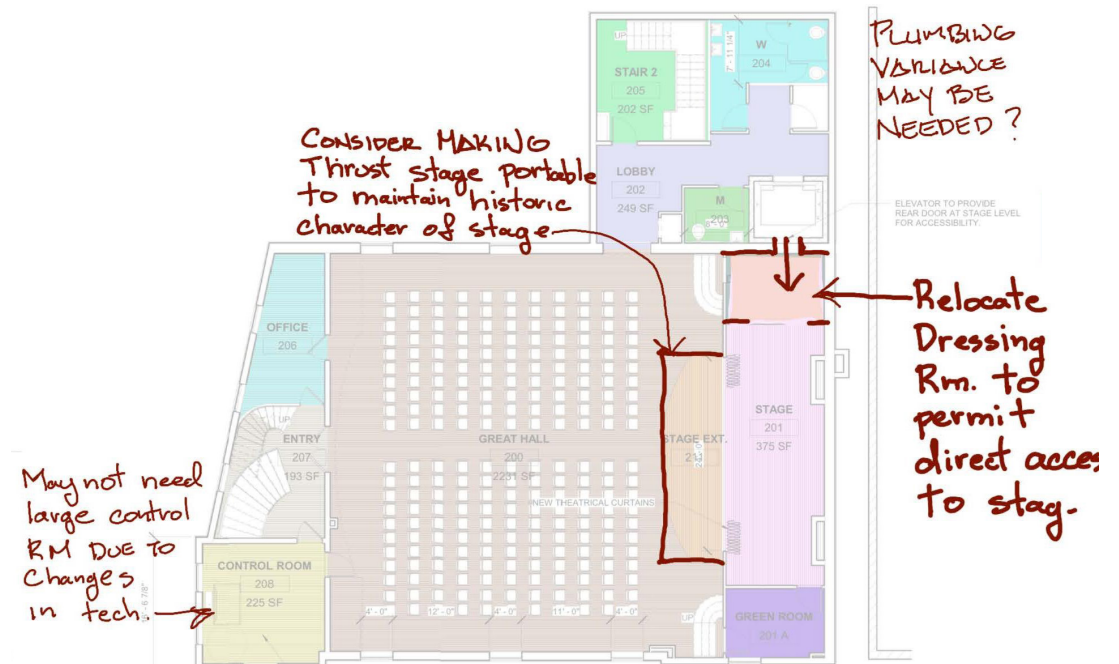
House, there are four entrances at the street level on North Main Street, none of which is currently accessible. The panel proposes constructing a raised small plaza (see renderings below) that extends from the front of the Town House, retaining the original steps but adding a ramp for accessibility. Not only would the building be accessible, but the raised mini-plaza (less than 30 inches above the sidewalk) creates an opportunity to add outdoor seating on the raised structure (see renderings below), a trend which is becoming increasingly popular in walkable downtowns.



Top and Left: Rendering of potential raised plaza extending from the Town House entrance. Source: TAP Panel.



Rendering of potential first floor flexible space in the Town House. Source: TAP Panel.



Rendering of possible design changes to the Town House Grand Hall. Source: TAP Panel.

Keep First Floor Spaces Flexible – Panelists determined that the proposed retail space outlined in the 2019 Feasibility Study could be expanded on the first floor to attract a wider range of tenants. Until tenants are secured, the layout of the space should be designed to be flexible or kept essentially as shell space (see rendering, page 18). The space could provide “pop-up” retail space for area artisans and food/drink purveyors for the holidays, or provide a “pop up” intimate performance space as part of the May Day events. Again, the importance of AAB compliance must be top of mind, with a clear path from the main entrance to the elevator in the rear a design priority.

Delay Installation of Commercial Kitchen – Until a credit-worthy restaurant tenant is identified, some of the first floor/street facing space should be considered for a cafe space that could spill onto the raised (AAB) sidewalk. The types of kitchens necessary to run a cafe can be simple.

Provide an Alcohol Serving License – The Town's Local Licensing Authority should work closely with the FOTH to provide the building serving license(s) for both events and any potential cafe and/or restaurant. The sale of alcohol will be key for restaurants and for income for performances.

Retain Historic Character of Great Hall – The Great Hall shows enormous promise as a performance/event space, but the importance of preserving the historic character of the space needs to be emphasized. Not only will adhering to the original design be one of the great selling points as the space transitions into a first-class performance venue, but it is also a requirement for obtaining historic tax credits. One suggestion is to consider using a portable stage rather than building out a permanent thrust stage (one that extends into the audience) as the previous study suggested. This allows for more flexibility of use of the space.

The planned elevator will have to stop at the level of the stage area to meet AAB requirements. There are other design changes to the Great Hall that should be considered (see rendering page 18), including moving the dressing room, reducing the size of the control room to reflect technological advances, and reexamining plumbing configurations to assure that they are up to code.

Integrate North Brookfield Historic Museum – There is an opportunity to use the foyer area and some additional space in the Town House to house and display North Brookfield's Historic Museum collection as an integrated



Town House auditorium and stage. Source: ULI Boston.



Town House library. Source: ULI Boston.



Town House auditorium balcony. Source: ULI Boston.



Town House staircase. Source: ULI Boston.



Vibram corporate headquarters. Source: ULI Boston.

Approximate Cost to Rehabilitate Town House, AAB compliant:	\$5,000,000
Estimated Historic Tax Credit Equity	(\$1,900,000)
Funding Gap	@\$3,000,000
Monthly Carrying Costs for \$3,000,000:	\$12,300
+ Estimated Building Operating Costs	\$5,700
Estimated Total Monthly Costs	\$18,000

part of the Town House decor. This would expose more people to North Brookfield's history and provide an appropriate setting for many visually engaging pieces. And given what is currently being stored in the Town House, the museum's collection may grow.

Recognize the Fiscal Viability of Town House Renovation

– Panelists devised current cost estimates to determine what it would take to finance the renovation of the Town House. Using initial cost estimates from Architectural Heritage Foundation (adjusted to reflect 2021 pricing), these are the estimated figures:

FOTH would need to secure an anchor tenant or tenants that were credit worthy (i.e. they have a track record of a successful business so a bank would use their lease as proof they could pay their monthly rent). In order to borrow \$3 million, creditworthy tenants would have to sign leases (triple net) for 5 or more years that totaled \$18,000 per month.

The obvious challenge for the Town and its concerned and committed citizens is that the reality of this happening before there is obvious activity and opportunity on North Main Street, is small. So it supports FOTH's plans to increase grant funding for the rehabilitation to offset the monthly rent required for debt service. One possibility would be to identify a financing partner such as the USDA's Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant, which provides affordable funding in the form of low interest direct loans and grants to develop essential community facilities in rural areas.

Bring Public Partners Together – FOTH and DDC have done an exceptional job of tapping the assistance of public agencies like CMRPC, MassDevelopment, the Mass Cultural Council, AHF, etc. Bringing these agencies together on a regular basis to brainstorm and evaluate progress could keep momentum for the project moving in a positive direction.

Develop and Market the Town House as a Regional Cultural Center

– There appears to be significant demand for entertainment and cultural offerings in the region, from music and theater performances to lectures and children's programming. The space could also be potentially used by dance and theater training schools or as rehearsal space during the day. The

potential for commercial sponsorship from area brewers, wineries, artisan cheese makers, etc. should also be explored. This effort could help drive a more regional approach (and support) for the project.

Recognize the Town House as a Potential Economic Driver for the Town

– The renovation of the Town House can be used as a springboard to the revitalization of the downtown as a whole, creating a ripple effect for existing and future businesses and a long-term and predictable tax revenue stream for North Brookfield. The Town must also recognize that decisions made on individual parcels must be made with the Master Plan for the downtown in mind – not as standalone decisions. In addition, understanding not only impact, but economic leveraging of downtown land uses need to be explored. For example, the special permit granted for a gas station and convenience store will generate new tax income for the Town. To leverage this new development and help ease some of the concerns about the appropriateness of its location, a portion of this new tax revenue could be identified to support the Town House renovation.

Use Design Elements to Maintain Historic Character

– There are several buildings that have been integrated into the streetscape over time that are not compatible with the historic 19th century character of the district. Panelists also became aware that the structures directly across the street from the Town House have been demolished to make

way for the gas station/convenience store that is not ideally suited to the New England village center envisioned in the 2019 study. The panel recognizes the need for the gas station (there are currently none in North Brookfield) and suggests that maintaining the street level historic character of North Main Street could be accomplished through the construction of a “canopy” for the gas station (see rendering below) that includes a slate roof, a stone wall fronting the street, and tree and shrubbery cover. The Town should also consider the removal of the street-level addition to the historic Union Star (which houses the Subway and other retail space) as it clearly diminishes the character of the historic North Main Street streetscape.

Recommendations: Community Design

Convert Town-owned Parcels into Parking

– Once the Town House is completed and operating as an events venue, there will be a greater need for parking in a downtown that may already be parking constrained. There are two town-owned parcels adjacent to the Police Station that may be ideal not only for the level of public parking needed to support a venue expected to become a regional draw, but for the businesses in the walkable downtown. The square footage of the first of the parcels (page 22 rendering, dark charcoal shading) is approximately 120,000 square feet, which translates into a maximum of 369 parking spaces. The second parcel (light charcoal) is 61,000 square feet,



Rendering of potential gas station canopy. Source: TAP Panel.




Proposed Parking Lot

Estimated maximum number of spaces based on 325 sf per parking space (includes circulation).

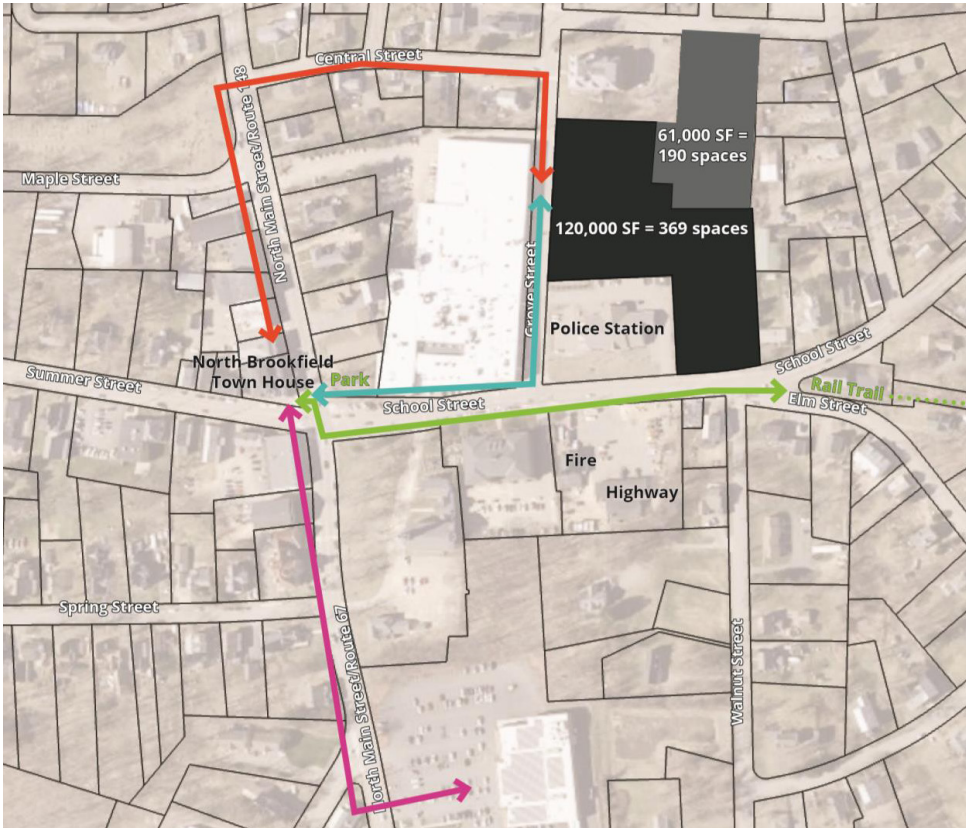
Both lots are owned by the Town.

Remediation is complete on the larger lot.

Remediation of the smaller lot could cost less if used for parking.

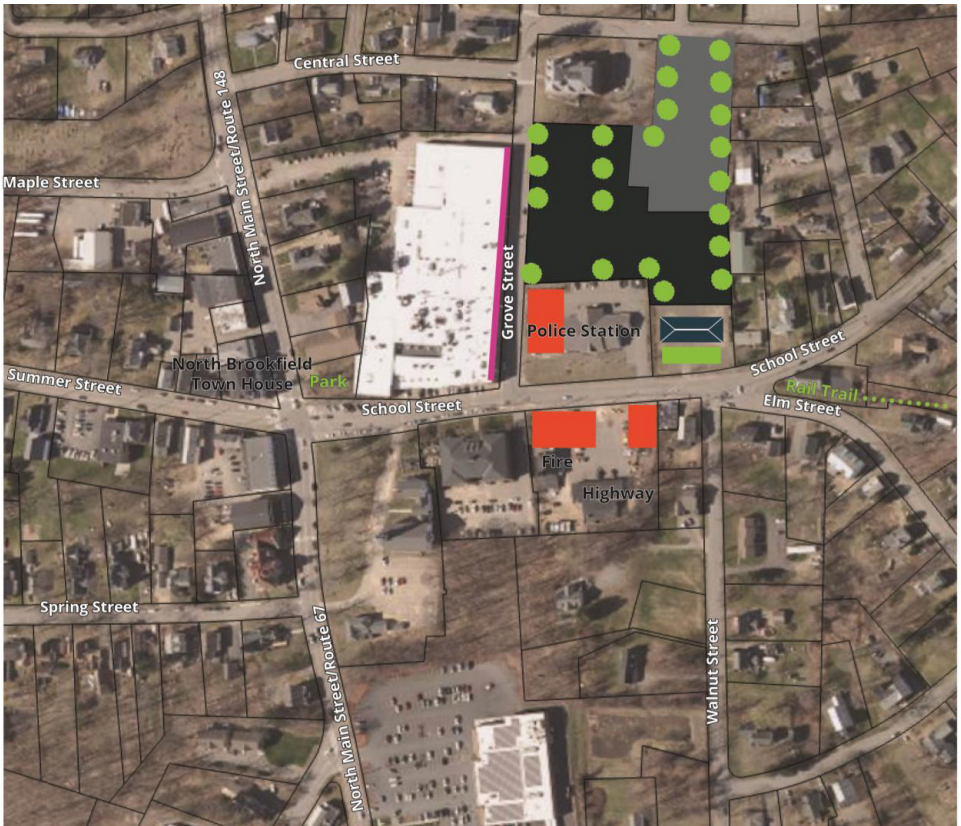


Rail Trail to Town House	5 min	1,210 ft	545 steps
Parking lot to Town House via School Street	5 min	1,220 ft	554 steps
Parking lot to Town House via Central Street	6 min	1,500 ft	682 steps
Hannaford to Town House	4 min	1,100 ft	500 steps



Proposed Parking Lot: Options

-  Funding to create parking lot unlikely for single-purpose use.
-  School Street frontage offers opportunity for development to draw people from the Rail Trail to the Downtown.
-  Outdoor plaza activates the new building.
-  Low-impact stormwater management techniques will mitigate heat island effect and support identity of sustainability for both Town and Vibram.
-  Vibram could activate its wall along Grove Street to support Town's revitalization efforts and its own branding.
-  Parking lot offers opportunity for temporary/seasonal activation. Additional parking to support temporary activities could be provided at the Police Station and the reorganized Fire/Highway site.



which translates into 190 spaces. And while downtown businesses and their customers may have concerns about the lack of parking directly in front of the businesses, the reality is that it is a 4-5 minute walk from the proposed parking lots to the Town Hall and the Rail Trail.

While maximizing parking spaces is one strategy, it should be noted that having that much asphalt, coupled with the presence of the black roofs of Vibram and the Police Station, will contribute to the heat island effect, which effectively raises the neighborhood temperature during prolonged heat events – seen with more frequency in New England in recent years. To counteract the heat island effect and to add more greenery to the downtown area, the Town should consider a design that reduces the number of spaces but incorporates more trees and vegetation (see rendering, page 22).

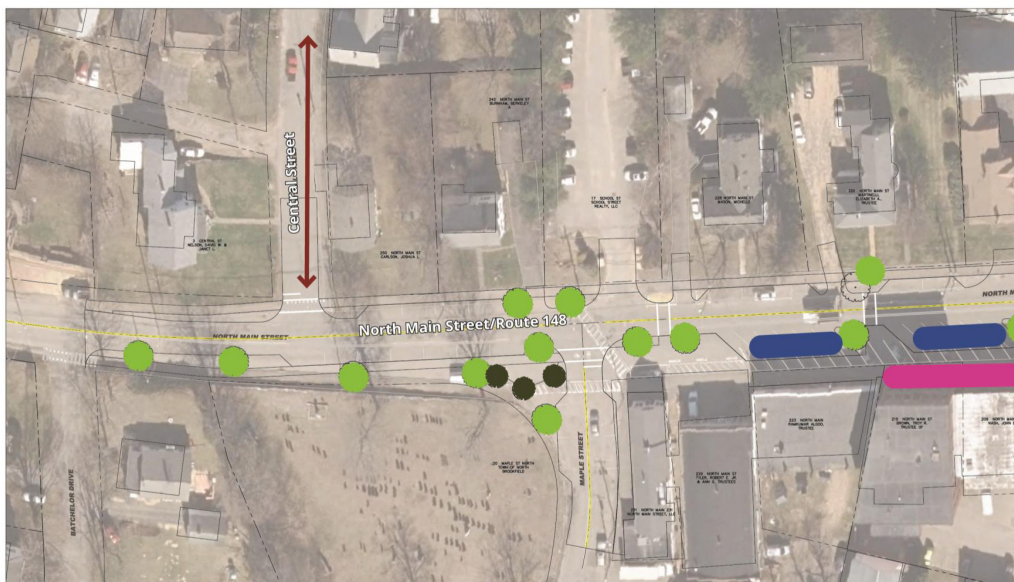
The conversion of the parcels into public parking is a medium-term goal, however, contingent on the renovation of the Town House and identifying additional funding sources to continue remediation of the smaller of the two lots. In the short-term, the lots should continue to be used for seasonal/pop-up programming, such as a continuation

of the outdoor movie nights or a food truck festival, etc. In order to address short-term parking needs, the Town should consider using some of the property of new Fire Station (once the Highway Department is relocated) to provide some temporary parking (page 22 rendering, orange rectangles indicate parking sites) for the downtown and the popup events. Identifying the public lot(s) as available for parking for use of the Rail Trail and access to public bathrooms at the Police Station for cyclists could be a good marketing tool to bring people through downtown.

The Town may also want to consider selling a portion of the lot along School Street (closest to the Rail Trail) to a developer who shares the vision of the Strategic Plan. The funds raised could then be directed to other projects.

Recommendations: Streetscape Improvements





The Complete Streets application applies primarily to improvements to be made along North Main and portions of School and Central Streets. With the addition of the public parking lots, those streetscape improvements would need to be extended to include additional pathways from Grove Street to the Town



SITE CONCEPT
DOWNTOWN COMPLETE STREETS PROJECT

SCALE: 1" = 50'
BSC GROUP

Streetscape 1

-  Consider creating dedicated delivery (8am-12pm) and drop-off/pick-up zones to support local businesses.
-  Check position of proposed trees relative to entrances to ground floor retail.
-  Extend new sidewalk to connect to proposed Grove Street parking lot.
-  Address accessibility to ground floor entrances. Consider elevated plaza with seating/dining.

House and the downtown. The panel also recommends the following changes:

Streetscape 1 and 2 – Delivery Zone/Tree Placement

Placement – The Town should consider creating a dedicated delivery zone (see blue ovals in rendering, page 23 and below) that could be used for deliveries to businesses from 8AM-12PM, then used as limited parking (10 minutes) for pickup at local businesses and restaurants in the evenings. In addition, the position of the trees in the 2019 Strategic Plan should also be re-evaluated to ensure that the trees will not block the view of the Town House from School Street, as it will be the principal pathway from the new public parking lots. The Town should also consider constructing a second raised small plaza (see rendering, pink shading, below) across Summer Street from the Town House to increase accessibility and include additional outdoor seating along North Main Street.

Placemaking – When adding wayfinding signage that directs people from the parking areas to points of interest (the Town House, Rail Trail, new and existing businesses), the Town should also consider incorporating elements of the Town's history (like North Brookfield's legacy of shoemaking) on kiosk-

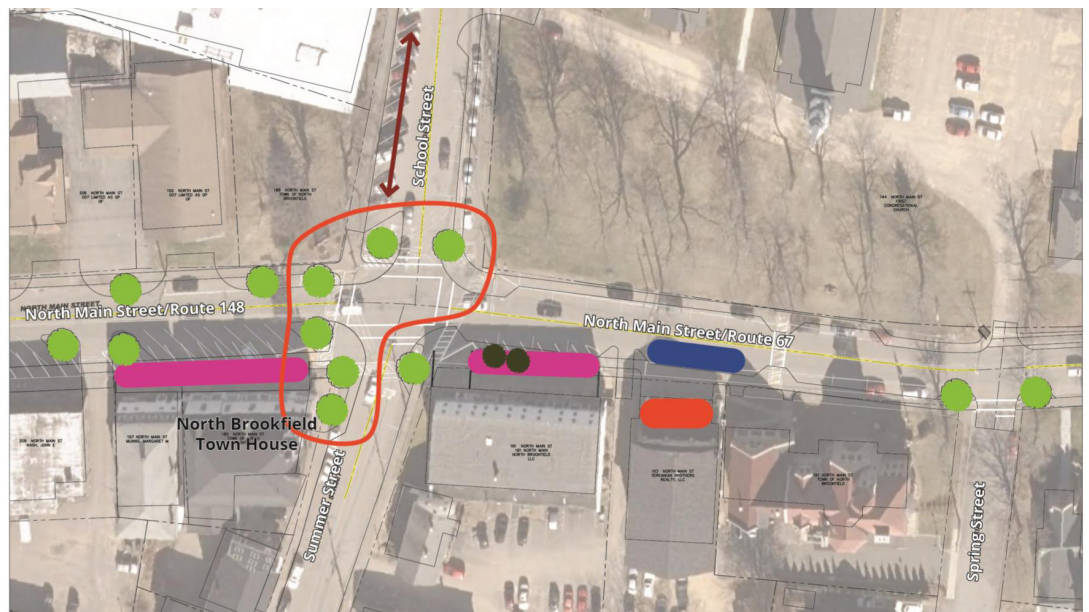
like structures to provide a local flavor to the Town branding. Those kiosks could also include information about events in the Town as well as information about the attractions at the Town House and downtown. The Town may also consider engaging longtime employer Vibram to have a mural (rotating or permanent) painted on the Grove Street side of their manufacturing facility, possibly one that reflects the Town's history as one of the nation's leading shoe manufacturers. A mural of any kind would greatly improve the pedestrian experience when the public parking lots are completed.

Recommendations: Town Governance and Capacity

Hire a Town Manager – This was first suggested in the 2007 North Brookfield Master Plan and subsequent studies, and the position remains unfilled today. Adding a Town Manager would streamline the decision-making process and create a consistency of vision, and solicitation of public and private resources that would not be affected by election cycles. It would also provide the necessary paid staff time to see individual land use decisions as part of something

Streetscape 2

-  Consider creating dedicated delivery (8am-12pm) and drop-off/pick-up zones to support local businesses.
-  Check position of proposed trees relative to entrances to ground floor retail.
-  Extend new sidewalk to connect to proposed Grove Street parking lot.
-  Address accessibility to ground floor entrances. Consider elevated plaza with seating/dining.
-  Remove addition to ground floor façade of Union Star Building.
-  Evaluate impact of proposed trees on historic view of Town House.



SITE CONCEPT
DOWNTOWN COMPLETE STREETS PROJECT
NORTH BROOKFIELD, MA
APRIL 15, 2022

SCALE: 1" = 50'
BSC GROUP

greater, and identify the opportunity to leverage and connect these in a way that brings the revisioning of the Town House and North Main Street to life. This will lead to more commercial taxes to support appropriate town staffing.

Solidify and Implement a Vision for the Town House – The Town House has enormous potential as a performance space/cultural & arts center, and so many pieces of the necessary pre-development due diligence have been completed. To solidify the vision and plan that is necessary to realize the site's potential, key public partners need to be brought together regularly to focus on finding funding (via grants, viable debt scenario, or a combination of both) to rehabilitate the Town House. Seeking regional support from commercial entities that are producing products that could be sold at the Town House (via cafe/restaurant, retail space, performance space, etc.) may create more support and energy for the necessary effort.

Assess Revenue Potential and Risk of Town House – Panelists came up with estimates for the cost of renovation and as

well as what would be required to service the debt, but a detailed analysis of potential revenue streams generated by the Town House also needs to be conducted. This would include rents from retail space; expected revenue from the performance space and other uses of the Great Hall; a cost/benefit analysis of opening and operating a commercial kitchen/café; and a study of potential revenue from a beer and wine or liquor license. The Town should also consider revenue that may be generated by the new public parking facilities and the potential sale of a portion of one of the parcels adjacent to the Police Station. The sale of that portion of the lot would allow for a small building to better connect the Rail Trail to the Downtown; for example, a small café or ice cream shop.

Finalize and Enforce Zoning for the Downtown – Recent permitting decisions have not been consistent with the goals laid out in the Master Plan for respecting and enhancing the historic character and walkability of the downtown. Permitting approvals should reflect stated community goals and recommendations.

Action Steps

The TAP panelists acknowledge that as the economy emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting business slowdowns, many municipalities, including North Brookfield, have limited resources. The panelists strongly support the leveraging of the Town House in large part because as described previously, so many other pieces of a vibrant, rural, downtown are already in place. The panelists believe the Town House could be a solid revenue generator for the Town – and it is worth reiterating that these are the next steps that need to be taken:

- 1. Prioritize Complete Streets Design to the Town House Area** – The Town House is the centerpiece of downtown development, so energy and resources should be focused on completing the design and moving forward with the Town House renovation.
- 2. Create a Business Plan for the Town House** – This would include hiring a brokerage firm to gauge the level of interest from the various types of tenants that could fill the retail spaces and vetting those tenants in terms of credit worthiness and suitability for the overall goals of the plan. An experienced broker would also serve as an advisor that could help curate the types of tenants that are consistent with the goals of the Town House and downtown revitalization.
- 3. Hire a Qualified Professional Town Manager** – While the panelists recognize the fiscal restraints of adding additional staff, filling this position is vital to the success of the project, as was first suggested in the 2007 Master Plan and in subsequent studies.
- 4. Create Municipal Parking Lots and Wayfinding** – The Town should move

forward to determine what would be most appropriate for the short and long-term parking needs of the downtown, using a combination of the parcels adjacent to the Police Station and available space from the planned Fire Station expansion at the site of the current Highway Department.

Final Notes

Implement Plans – There has been a significant amount of strategic planning work done over the years, and it is time to begin implementing those plans.

Strengthen Existing Connections – The FOTH and DDC should nurture, support and identify businesses, anchor institutions, outdoor enthusiasts, and arts and culture groups within the community and the wider region that are willing to support and contribute to seeing this project come to fruition. There should be a comprehensive plan to optimize existing partnerships and local resources to nurture local support for the arts using social media tools, local events and regional collaboration efforts with key partners like the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the National Endowment for the Arts. There should also be a concerted effort to find ways to identify and connect with potential patrons and local arts and performance groups who will ultimately be the users of this space and to develop a community.

Regionalize – Regional identity and cooperation is essential for growth of both visitation, business, and municipal finances. There is a demand for arts and culture throughout the region and the case must be made that North Brookfield is “The place where you want to go.”

Funding and Resources

Panelists identified a number of government agencies that can provide funding and guidance as the project moves forward. (Some are noted previously in the report).

Massachusetts Community One Stop for Growth – Town has applied for the FY22 Round and utilized the Rural & Small Town option for funding resources

Massachusetts Division of Local Services – Provides training, guidance, and best practices

MassDevelopment Brownfields Redevelopment Fund – To provide a hazardous materials assessment survey/ remediation of School St. parcels

Massachusetts Downtown Initiative – Provides technical assistance and education workshops

MassDevelopment Collaborative Workspace Program – Accelerates the pace of new business formation, job creation, and entrepreneurial activity in communities by supporting infrastructure that fuels community-based innovation

Massachusetts DOR Efficiency & Regionalization Grant Program – Provides financial support for entities interested in implementing regionalization and other efficiency initiatives

USDA Rural Development Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program – Provides affordable funding to develop essential community facilities in rural areas

Partnerships with Anchor Institutions and Quaboag Hills Chamber of Commerce



Town House building under restoration. Source: ULI Boston.



**Boston/
New England**

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