

Boston/
New England

COMMERCIAL CORRIDOR REDEVELOPMENT

Auburn, Massachusetts

Technical Assistance Panel
June 8, 2026

About

Urban Land Institute

The Urban Land Institute is a global, member-driven organization comprising nearly 50,000 real estate and urban development professionals dedicated to advancing the mission of shaping the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide.

ULI's interdisciplinary membership represents all aspects of the industry, including developers, property owners, investors, architects, urban planners, public officials, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, and academics. Established in 1936, the Institute has a presence in the Americas, Europe, and the Asia Pacific regions, with members in 80 countries.

More information is available at uli.org.

ULI Boston/New England

The Boston/New England District Council of ULI serves the six New England states and has over 1,200 members. As a preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI Boston/New England facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local and regional leaders and policymakers dedicated to creating better places.

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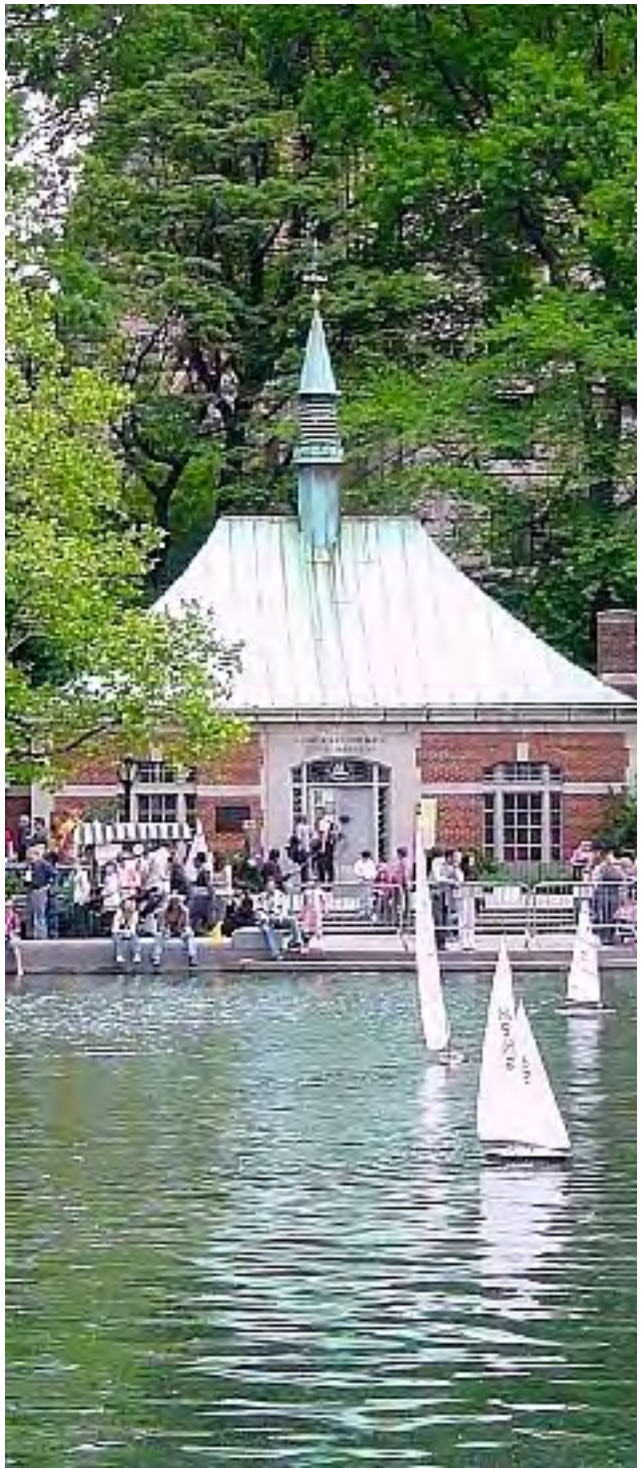
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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

ULI and the TAP Process

This section provides an overview of ULI's District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs), and includes a list of panel members and stakeholders who participated in the information-gathering charrettes.

Purpose of the TAP and Project Background

This section provides a brief synopsis of the TAP's purpose, including the questions posed by the sponsor to help identify solutions to the Town's issues. It also provides a snapshot of the Town of Auburn, an overview of the study area, and the step-by-step process by which the panelists arrived at their recommendations.

Stakeholder Input

This section provides insight into what stakeholders would like included in the redevelopment initiatives, including: a walkable downtown, a revitalized Drury Square, an increase in locally-owned restaurants and entertainment options, and suggestions for upgrading the Auburn Mall.

Assets & Opportunities

This section identifies factors that could contribute to a successful redevelopment of Drury Square and the study area, including an abundance of public assets (Goddard Park, the public library, Auburn Pond) within the study area, the Auburn Mall, a large daytime workforce, and convenient access to multiple highways.

Challenges

This section outlines potential problems with redevelopment, including the lack of a true town center, multiple owners of developable parcels in the commercial district, a car-centric Drury Square, potential redevelopment issues with the unoccupied portion of the mall, and rising development and construction costs.

Recommendations

Panelists answer the questions posed by the Town and present potential redevelopment scenarios for the study area, including investing in placemaking at Auburn Pond, Goddard Park, and the Public Library site to create a town amenity; relocating the firehouse to create an amenity featuring the Auburn Pond, and incentivizing parcel assemblage to make mixed-use development with diverse housing options more attractive to the private sector and promoting walkability and connectivity in the district through a new system of greenways.



ULI and the TAP Process

The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. Its mission 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, 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, economic development professionals, and other related fields.

The Boston/New England District Council of ULI serves the six New England states. It 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 policymakers 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 that 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 presented in the sponsor's application. The Panel spends one to two days visiting and analyzing existing conditions, identifying specific planning and development issues, and formulating realistic, actionable recommendations to advance initiatives consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.

An independent study by Rivera Consulting surveyed municipalities that received assistance from the TAP programs and reported a positive impact of 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. Learn more at: https://boston.uli.org

MassDevelopment

MassDevelopment is the Commonwealth's economic development and finance authority. The quasi-public agency works closely with state, local, and federal officials to increase 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 assembled a volunteer group of members with diverse skills and expertise to assist the Town of Auburn with this TAP.

Chairs

Michael Wang, Principal, Form + Place

Richard Lampman, Director, Berkeley Building Company

Panelists

Barry Abramson, President, Abramson & Associates

Ron Anderson, Senior VP of Business Development, MassDevelopment

Dick Galehouse, Principal Emeritus, Sasaki

Edd Hamzanlui, Founding Principal, MassCan Capital

Alejandro Lopez, VP of Planning and Predevelopment, MassDevelopment

Ravi Parmar, Principal, Historic Built

(Panelists donated their time)

ULI Boston/New England Staff

Michelle Landers, Executive Director

TAP Writer: Mike Hoban, Principal, Hoban Communications

Stakeholders

The TAP also benefited from the participation of multiple stakeholders, including representatives from the Town of Auburn, owners and representatives of local businesses and nonprofit organizations, and residents. (Simon Property's Tim Fox and WBDC's Craig Blais were interviewed by telephone).

Lindsay Baker, Economic Development Committee, Town of Auburn

Jim Black. Owner/Lead Agent, Jim Black Group

Craig Blais, President, Worcester Business Development Corporation

Jeff Borus, Commercial Appraiser and Broker, NAI Glickman Kovago & Jacobs

Steve Chambers. Select Board Member, Town of Auburn

Steve Coleman, Fire Chief/Assistant Town Manager, Town of Auburn

Sally D'Arcangelo, Executive Director, Auburn Youth and Family Services

Patrick Jones, Economic Development Committee, Town of Auburn

Tim Fox, Vice President of RE Development at Simon Property Group

Ryan O'Hearn, Market Manager, Webster Five Bank





Purpose of the TAP and Background

The Town of Auburn engaged ULI Boston/New England to provide an analysis of the Route 12 (Southbridge Street) commercial corridor, which extends from the southern end of the Auburn Mall property north to Drury Square. The Town is seeking guidance on strategies to reinvigorate the corridor and Drury Square, reinforcing the location as the commercial heart of Auburn and a walkable town center. The Town also sought guidance on potential redevelopment strategies for the southerly parcel of the Auburn Mall, which is owned by the Simon Property Group.

Panelists were asked to address the following questions:

Market Issues: What are the highest and best uses for both the vacant areas of the Auburn Mall site and infill and redevelopment opportunities in Drury Square?

Planning & Design: What are the infrastructure investments and branding needs to create a unified identity for the corridor and integrate commercial and municipal spaces at the pedestrian level, and adjust current regulations as needed?

Feasibility & Financing: What funding mechanisms, including grants and financial instruments, are needed to facilitate the redevelopment of these sites?

Town of Auburn Snapshot

The Town of Auburn is a suburban community located in Worcester County. Covering 16.4 square miles (including 1.0 square mile of water), the Town directly borders the city of Worcester to the north and northeast, Millbury to the east, Oxford to the south, Leicester to the west, and Charlton to the southwest. Accessible via major regional roadways including I-90 (the Mass Pike), I-290, and I-395, Auburn is historically notable as the site where Dr. Robert Goddard launched the world's first liquid-fueled rocket in 1926.

History and Background

At the time of European contact and settlement, the area had been inhabited by the Nipmuc Nation for thousands of years. The area was first settled in 1714 and consisted of parts of Worcester, Leicester, Sutton, and Oxford. These areas were incorporated as the Town of Ward in 1778, before the name of the Town was changed to Auburn in 1837. Like many towns in Central Massachusetts, Auburn's early economic driver was agriculture, but as Worcester's factory-based industries grew, the Town transformed into a bedroom community for the city.

Today, Auburn features a predominantly industrial and retail-based economy. The Town's diverse commercial and industrial base includes major warehousing and distribution operations such as Atlas Distributors and Polar Beverages, as well as specialized manufacturing firms like Worcester Envelope and the medical device maker KARL STORZ Endoscopy-America. Additionally, the Auburn retail sector is anchored by the Auburn Mall and the Shaw's-anchored shopping center within the study area, as well as healthcare employers Life Care Center of Auburn and the Reliant Medical Group. Auburn is a major regional employment center, which drives a substantial increase in the daytime population.

Demographic Data

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's July 1, 2025, estimates, the Town of Auburn's population is 17,566, up 4.1% from the 2020 census number of 16,869. The race and ethnicity breakdown is 85.8% White; 7.2% Two or More Races; 6.1% Hispanic; 3.1% Asian; and 1.9% Black. The median household income (MHI) for the Town is $116,711, with a per capita income of $53,413. The population living below the poverty line is 5.2%, roughly half of Massachusetts' poverty rate of 9.7%.

Approximately 80% of the housing units are owner-occupied. According to Zillow, the average home value as of June 1, 2026, is $473,273, an increase of nearly 29% from $367,079 in 2021. Apartments for rent average $2,284 per month for 1-Beds and $2,832 for 2-Beds.

The Study Area

The study area consists of the Route 12 (Southbridge Street) commercial corridor, which extends from the southern end of the Auburn Mall property north and includes Drury Square, at the intersection of Route 12 and Auburn Street. The study area also includes the southerly parcel of the Auburn Mall, for which the Town would like recommendations on redevelopment possibilities should it become available.

The Drury Square area is a key commercial crossroads in Auburn, comprising primarily local and some national service- and wellness-oriented retail, banks, as well as a pizza shop and diner. The commercial center has been the target of several planning efforts over the past several years, including a Drury Square Village District zoning bylaw approved in 2018 to promote mixed-use and pedestrian activity. The Goddard Park redesign, which includes a footbridge, a walking path, and a new monument commemorating Robert Goddard, was completed in the spring of 2026 to mark the 100th anniversary of Goddard's rocket launch. A wayfinding project was completed in 2021, and façade guidelines for the area were developed in 2017. In addition to being home to an array of commercial activity, including banks, auto services, eateries, and a mix of small businesses, Drury Square is also home to the Auburn Public Library, the current Auburn Fire/Rescue Headquarters, and Auburn Pond.



The Auburn Mall is an enclosed mall, presently anchored by Macy's, encompassing 140,356 SF with a large parking lot and two parking decks. It features a mix of approximately 60 national retailers, smaller specialty shops, and a modest food court. The mall is also home to the Reliant Medical Group, a primary and specialty care medical facility. The southerly portion of the mall was once co-anchored by Sears and includes a 33,110 SF former auto center, and a large parking lot.

The two former Sears buildings and the parking lot are still leased long-term to Transformco, the holding company that acquired Sears, despite the retail store and automotive center vacating the property in 2020. The terms are favorable to the tenant, so there is no urgency to vacate the lease. Additionally, the Simon Property Group has been trying to market a pad site on the northwestern corner of the mall property adjacent to Drury Square, which is currently a parking lot.

The Town has sought to attract diverse businesses to the area and has worked with the Auburn Mall ownership to maintain its vitality. Among the steps taken to attract business are several zoning changes, including the addition of new uses such as specialty markets, brewpubs, data storage, collaborative workspaces, and housing. Changes to the Mall Overlay District include zero setbacks, a provision for multiple buildings on a single lot, and the addition

of medical uses. The Town also approved increasing the allowable building height from 35 feet to 80-110 feet in the Local Business (LB) zoning district to increase density in the area and potentially attract more diverse businesses than the predominantly retail base.

The TAP Process

The Auburn TAP was held on June 8, 2026. Panelists from the ULI Boston/New England District Council convened at the Auburn Public Library, located within the study area. Panelists were greeted by the Town of Auburn's Assistant Town Manager and Director of Economic Development, Paul Dell'Aquila; DPW Director Joanna E. Paquin; Town Planner Rose Russell; Town Manager Dori Vecchio; and Director of Development and Inspectional Services (DDIS) Darlene Coyle. Following a briefing session, the Town representatives led the panelists on a driving tour of the study area.

The first stop was the shopping center located directly across from the library parking lot. Situated at a major signalized intersection, a Shaw's supermarket anchors the plaza alongside a recently opened 18,000 SF Planet Fitness, as well as a newly constructed Chase Bank branch and a Bank of America branch. The center is adjacent to the high school campus and sports fields.

The tour proceeded down Southbridge St., past Goddard Park, to the Drury Square commercial center, where it stopped at the rear of a Verizon service center. Panelists observed several wellness businesses (Auburn Sleepmed, an orthodontist, an optometrist, and a medical aesthetician practice, Forever Young), as well as a hair salon, a bank, and a pizza shop. Panelists were informed that the properties and sections of the parking lot are individually owned. The tour exited onto Auburn St. and drove past Auburn Pond, which was partially obscured by the fire station and overgrown brush.

The tour entered the mall parking lot and stopped at the one-acre parcel marketed as pad space near the mall parking deck. Panelists observed a row of Tesla charging stations at the rear of the lot. At the eastern end of the mall, panelists observed the Reliant Medical Group facility, constructed in 2017, which the mall owner, Simon Property Group, sold to Los Angeles property investment firm Kayne Anderson Capital Advisors in 2020 for $50 million. The tour then proceeded to the rear of the mall to the Sears property parking lot, where over a dozen parked semi-trailer trucks were noted. Panelists observed two separate buildings: the retail store and automotive repair building. Panelists were informed that the store closures occurred in 2020 as part of a nationwide closure of nearly 100 underperforming stores by Illinois holding company Transformco, which still maintains the lease despite the store closures. The parking lot is sometimes used as a site for an annual traveling carnival and also for motorcycle training. (Some panelists returned to the active portion of the mall following the tour and observed limited foot traffic but few empty storefronts.)

The tour returned to the Auburn Public Library, where panelists interviewed the stakeholders listed in the previous subsection in two separate panel discussions. The panelists then relocated to Camp Gleason, where they engaged in an intensive, closed-door charrette to develop recommendations based on stakeholder input and research conducted prior to the discussions. That evening, panelists presented their observations and recommendations to the Select Board in an open public forum at Camp Gleason, which was also televised on Auburn Community Television and is available here.

Stakeholder Input

During two separate sessions, stakeholders shared their observations and offered suggestions for potential redevelopment scenarios.

Walkable Town Center — Stakeholders emphasized the need for a pedestrian-friendly Drury Square that connects the area's commercial and recreational spaces. Redevelopment would include improving the Square's walkability/connectivity, continuity of active streetscapes, and strategic planning for public parking and other amenities.

Lack of Locally Owned Full-Service Restaurants/Cafes — Although the town is home to several chain restaurants, stakeholders expressed a desire for cafes and full-service restaurants that reflect a local identity. Currently, there is a lack of unique, privately owned, or destination restaurants that would encourage visitors or locals to spend time in Auburn.

Activate Goddard Park — Although the completed park provides greenspace in the town center, stakeholders would like to see further development to increase the park's appeal as a destination. Potential enhancements could include a community garden area and flexible/programmable space for uses such as a farmers market or larger events such as musical performances and holiday/seasonally-themed programming.

Lack of Nightlife — Although Auburn has a significant daytime workforce, there is little to do in the evenings, with few pubs, music venues, theaters, or other forms of entertainment.

Multifamily Housing Location — Stakeholders indicated that while more apartments are needed to accommodate the growing population, recent high-density developments under Chapter 40B have inappropriately targeted single-family neighborhoods. They strongly advocate for redirecting multifamily housing toward major commercial arteries such as Route 12 and Route 20, where infrastructure can support it.

Lack of Wayfinding and Signage — For those not familiar with the Town, the retail and recreational attractions in Drury Square can be difficult to locate.

Updating the Mall — Stakeholders indicated they would like to see the enclosed mall upgraded, possibly transforming the mall or the Sears footprint into an outdoor, pedestrian-oriented destination similar to area lifestyle-center malls.

Community Spaces — Stakeholders cited a lack of gathering spaces that could create a sense of community.

Drury Square Lacks Vitality — While Drury Square features several appealing assets, its commercial core is highly fragmented due to its vehicular-centric emphasis. The district is currently populated by standalone bank branches and disconnected parcels rather than a continuous, active block of pedestrian-friendly storefronts.



Assets & Opportunities

Town Setting — The bucolic Town of Auburn, with its ample greenspace, natural assets, and historic significance, offers charming rural character.

Public Assets — With Goddard Park, the Auburn Public Library, Auburn Pond, the current Auburn Fire/Rescue Headquarters, and the nearby Auburn High School sports field, the Town possesses a wealth of assets needed to create a quintessential New England town center.

Highway Access — Auburn is easily accessible via major roadways I-90 (Mass Pike), I-290, and I-395, which would be a key factor in redeveloping the town center as a destination.

Historical Significance — As the home of Goddard's rocket launch in 1926, there is an opportunity to expand recognition of the event beyond the new park and to create a tourist destination.

Retail Destination — The town already has an existing retail base with the mall, the Shaw's shopping center, and the Auburn Plaza, which could be augmented by a revitalized mixed-use downtown.

Auburn Mall — While the mall could benefit from a repositioning, it is nearly fully leased and generates tax revenue for the Town. The mall could also contribute to the district's placemaking goals and connections — especially if it had a less internalized focus.

Influx of Daytime Workers — Auburn serves as a suburban employment center that experiences a significant population increase during business hours. Introducing diverse housing options that create opportunities for people to live in the district would help support a range of dining and nightlife options and could also help the Town retain its daytime population beyond the workday.

Walk to School Policy — Auburn's policy requiring students within a 1.5-mile radius to walk to school creates a steady, daily pedestrian base that could naturally support a revitalized downtown.





Challenges

Absence of a Town Center — Unlike many New England towns, Auburn lacks a defined town center to serve as its commercial or social heart.

Lack of Walkability — Drury Square is auto-centric and not pedestrian-friendly.

Unappealing Development Patterns — The existing pattern along Route 12, with strip centers, parking in front, multiple curb cuts, etc., contributes to undefined streetscapes that are not aesthetically/visually pleasing and lack pedestrian scale compared with traditional New England town centers.

Unwelcoming Entrance to Drury Square — One of the primary gateways into Drury Square is the unattractive library parking lot.

Obstructed View of Pond — The picturesque Auburn Pond is a significant natural asset, but its visibility from the corridor is currently blocked by the fire station and overgrown vegetation.

Underutilized Anchor Property — The Auburn Mall occupies a highly visible location along Route 12 but would benefit from a reimagining to regain its former vibrancy.

Multiple Property Owners — Many of the parcels in Drury Square are owned directly by individual business owners rather than leased, creating a fragmented ownership pattern that currently makes parcel assembly for large-scale redevelopment challenging.

Lack of Social Space — Other than the library, there are few "third spaces" (places outside home or work, such as cafes, coffee shops, etc.) that foster a sense of community.

Limited Housing Options — Eighty percent of the homes in Auburn are owner-occupied, so there is a need for alternative housing options such as apartments, townhouses, and condominiums.

Current Economic Climate Stifling New Development — As is happening with many U.S. municipalities, elevated interest rates, escalating material and construction costs, and tight municipal finances are creating obstacles to new development.





Recommendations

Question 1

Market Issues: What are the highest and best uses for both the vacant areas of the Auburn Mall site and infill and redevelopment opportunities in Drury Square?

The panel recognizes that few parcels are available for large-scale ground-up development. Although the vacant Sears retail and automotive stores, along with their adjoining parking lots, present an opportunity for significant mixed-use development, complex ownership issues may deter any efforts, and the mall owner may be inclined to pursue retail or other commercial reuse. The approximately 1.0-acre pad site adjacent to the Reliant Medical Group facility, however, is potentially available for redevelopment, and ownership and stakeholders appear open to a restaurant being developed on the pad.

In contrast to the parcels associated with the Auburn Mall, Drury Square's existing retail footprint is highly fragmented, scattered across more than a dozen active sites held by multiple owners. To transform this area into a viable mixed-use district, zoning that incentivizes parcel consolidation and encourages denser mixed-use is needed to create a genuine town center for Auburn, with a focus on the Auburn Pond and Goddard Park. It should also be noted that many of the sites in the Drury Square area could be redeveloped with or without aggregation.

Infill development that increases the continuity of active streetscapes should be prioritized. Parcels with primary street frontage, especially those that occupy important intersections, should have buildings located at the sidewalk edge where possible. The tennis court site at the intersection of Route 12 and Auburn Street is a prime example of a missed development opportunity. Locating parking facilities behind buildings and consolidating vehicular access points would enhance pedestrian environments. Street trees, urban furniture, pocket parks, and opportunities for outdoor seating/dining could further contribute to activation. Opportunities for higher-quality retail with local roots — rather than "chain"-based businesses — will follow from an enhanced public realm activated by diverse housing options.

The panel also suggests incentivizing a move away from auto-centric uses such as car washes, auto repair shops, and drive-thru's. This could further enhance pedestrian connectivity by allowing for the consolidation of curb cuts (site access points), thereby reducing the number of interfaces between automobiles and pedestrians. Providing ample public parking would allow visitors to park once and experience the district on foot. Additionally, integrating diverse housing options could generate a critical mass of residents in the immediate area and likely increase the perception that the district is "walkable." There are many parcels on the northwest side of Route 12 (from the Shaw's shopping center to the Mass Pike) that could be repositioned for mixed-use. It should be noted that significant zoning changes would be needed to allow for a level of development intensity that might incentivize redevelopment.

Question 2

Planning & Design: What are the infrastructure investments and branding needed to create a unified identity for the corridor and integrate commercial and municipal spaces at the pedestrian level, and adjust current regulations as needed?

Creating a Town Center

Any redevelopment scenario for the study area needs to focus on the principles of placemaking — transforming developments into environments that foster social interaction and emotional connection. The pond is a natural amenity that currently lacks visibility, but with initial public investment — possibly augmented by private contributions — it could serve as a focal point for the town center, alongside Goddard Park and the library. Such public investment might also draw private capital into the surrounding parcels. Investment by the Town could take the form of walking trails, a boardwalk around the pond, and public amenities such as a café or patio (either associated with the

library, a redeveloped fire station site, or as a standalone amenity). These improvements would create vibrant "third spaces" — distinct from home or work environments — where residents can gather to experience a sense of community and engage with the park and pond. This transformation would also create opportunities for farmers' markets and community gardens, which stakeholders expressed interest in seeing as part of any town center redevelopment.

One possible impediment to redeveloping the park/pond area into a destination is that it may lack the appropriate scale without the fire station being relocated. While the panel recognizes that the current fire station is strategically located and meant to serve as a secondary support facility for the Town and the broader region, it recommends relocating it to a different site within the Town if feasible. Panelists feel very strongly that, in order to create a true town center that is purely a public-focused amenity, the fire station site needs to be part of any redevelopment strategy. The redeveloped park and pond would not only benefit Town residents but also increase the value of surrounding properties, spurring further redevelopment.

Panelists emphasize that if Goddard Park and the pond can truly become a "destination" due to their placemaking qualities, not only will adjacent parcels with visual connectivity be greatly enhanced, but a whole Drury Square district can be created that encourages walkability. As parcels redevelop into lively mixed-use developments, secondary usable public spaces that are active and seasonally programmable will emerge. In addition to on-street parking, public parking lots can be strategically located to further encourage the level of pedestrian activity needed to create thriving commercial streets.

In addition to drawing people from surrounding neighborhoods and communities, facilitating the integration of a variety of housing typologies — mixed-use, townhouses, quad homes, etc. — in the district will help promote an 18/7 vibe. Panelists noted that there is potential for mixed-use redevelopment of the parcels on the north side of Route 12 (from Shaw's to the west) in addition to the mall and Drury Square sites. There are also appropriately sized parcels along this stretch that would benefit from enhancements to the park/pond area if connectivity (visibility/walkability) were improved.

Infrastructure Improvements

The Town of Auburn has already invested in improving the pedestrian experience in Drury Square by widening the sidewalks and adding lighting, but further improvements could enhance its appeal. Owners of the private parcels could also be incentivized to participate in the activation of the streetscape through the existing façade improvement program. There is also a system of brooks in the area that are obstructed by overgrown landscape that could be exposed. The panel also recommends moving the sidewalk away from the busy street on Brotherton Way and adding tree cover to create greenways that connect to the pond, making the area more inviting while improving pedestrian safety. The Town should also consider additional improvements that promote pedestrian safety (such as traffic-calming measures, a road diet, and crosswalk connections to prioritize walkability) and traffic enhancements including a bus line and bike infrastructure.

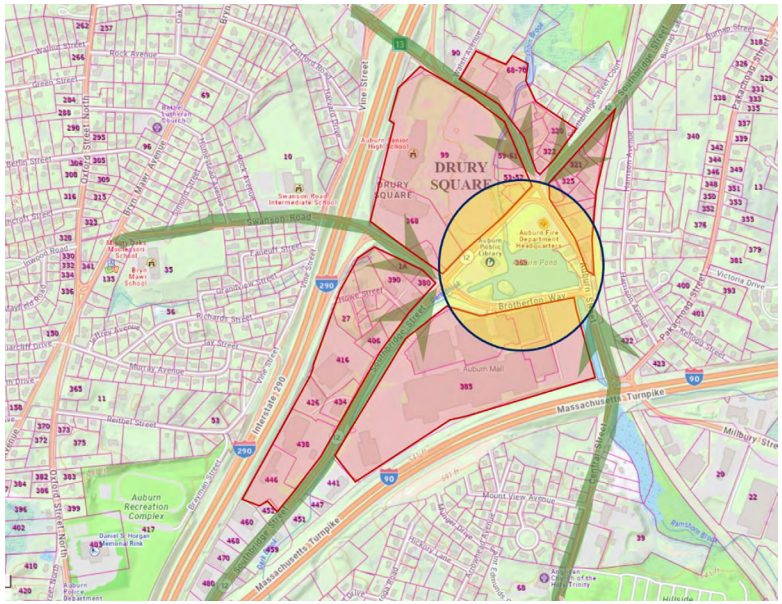
Zoning Improvements

The Town should approve as-of-right development and determine the appropriate scale for development in Drury Square. To encourage mixed-use development at scale, the Town should increase its height restrictions from 35' to four- to five-stories for mixed-use development with appropriate design guidelines that require setbacks, step-backs, and other building scaling/aesthetics devices. Additional measures could also include density and height bonuses as incentives.

Potential Redevelopment Scenarios

As shown in the image above, the study area is bounded by Interstate 290 to the west, the Massachusetts Turnpike (I-90) to the south, and Auburn Street to the east. It stretches from the local high school campus and athletic fields in the north, past Swanson Road and Brotherton Way, down to the mall complex in the south.

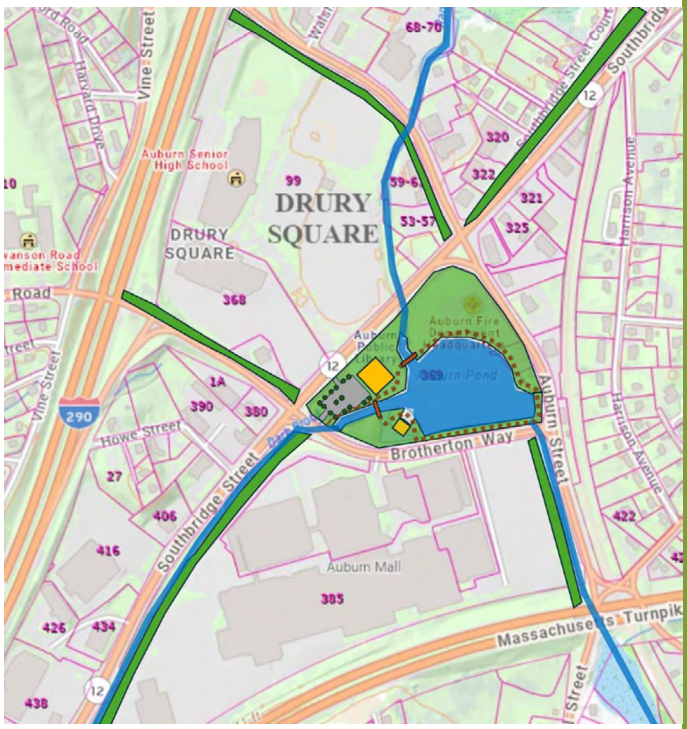


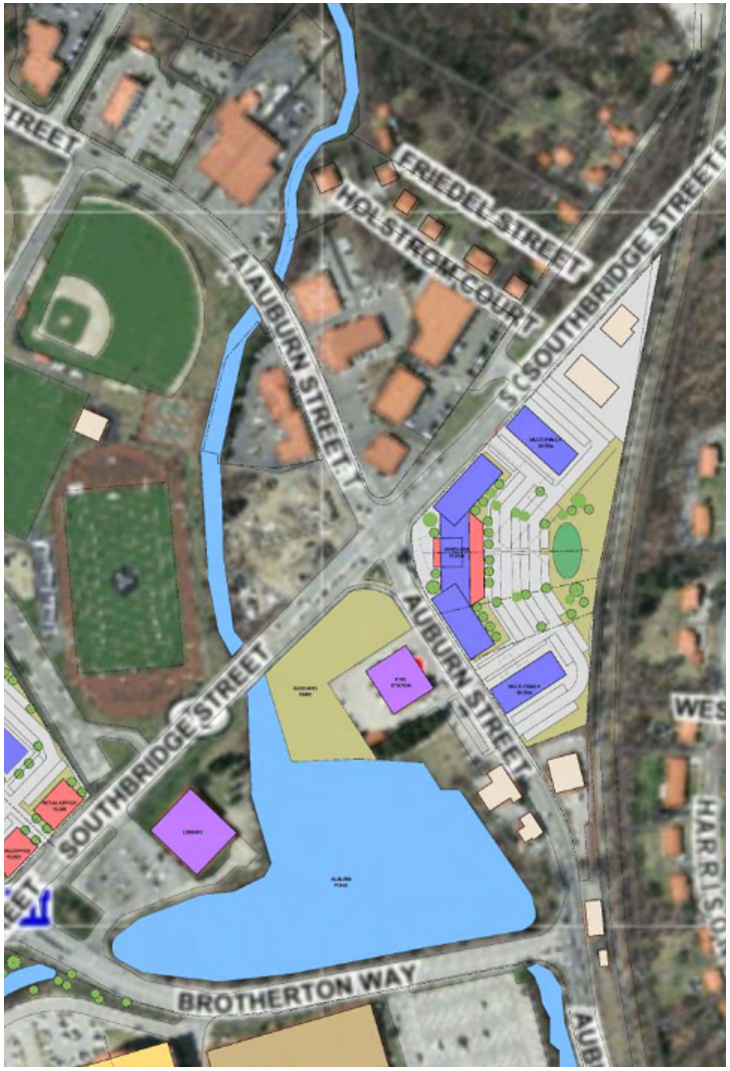


As shown in the image above, the study area is bounded by Interstate 290 to the west, the Massachusetts Turnpike (I-90) to the south, and Auburn Street to the east. It stretches from the local high school campus and athletic fields in the north, past Swanson Road and Brotherton Way, down to the mall complex in the south.

Using the graphic above, panelists emphasize that the key to creating the desired downtown is to further enhance the sidewalks and create greenways that connect the disjointed blocks to the central town amenity, the pond and park area.

This rendering depicts the triangular area with a relocated fire station, a library with added outdoor amenities, and the new bridge. The library parking lot currently faces the roadway, creating a less-than-welcoming sight for motorists exiting I-290, and would benefit from landscaping that would signal the landscaped amenity of the park beyond the library. If the area were further enhanced with a boardwalk, additional footbridges, a café, and outdoor amenities, it would create an active, usable focal point for the town. The Town could also consider a range of active and passive spaces that are programmable and flexible, such as trellises, a bandstand, natural amphitheater seating, and a splash park/rink. The design is similar to Post Office Square in Boston or any number of parks in New York City.





Panelists developed hypothetical scenarios to determine the appropriate scale of development within the study area if market forces, supported by zoning and possibly public financial incentives, were to engender parcel consolidation and redevelopment. Expanding on recommendations from the 2017 Harriman study, one scenario proposes a mixed-use building on the northeast side of Auburn Street, directly across from the fire station. The panel also proposes moving vehicle parking to the rear of the building and bringing the building edge forward (current zoning allows for a zero to 10-foot setback) to activate the sidewalks.

Possible building configurations for the location include a townhouse with first-floor retail below or a three- or four-story mixed-use building. With any configuration, the appropriate scale for this location is approximately 20 dwelling units per acre, assuming that includes space for surface parking.

Repositioning the Mall — Mixed-Use, Street Edge & Usable Open Space Models

While the mall presents challenges (enumerated earlier in the report), here are three models to consider that could enhance and complement the active, existing mall if the Sears parcels were to be redeveloped:

- **The Burlington Mall Approach (Retrofitting the Existing Box):** This strategy works within the existing structural box of the old anchor footprint, subdivides the space into smaller commercial tenant spaces, and turns the storefronts outward. One option for the 140,000 SF, two-story retail store would be a split-use redevelopment. The ground floor would remain dedicated to retail, while the upper level could be repositioned for office space or fitness uses. This model surrounds the building with green space and usable exterior areas.
- **The Smith Haven Mall Approach (The Open Courtyard Lifestyle Center):** Located on Long Island, this alternative model transforms the anchor footprint into an open-air lifestyle center with an internal courtyard feel. It utilizes smaller retail leases while maintaining a direct indoor connection back into the main mall gallery. This approach closely mirrors the existing conditions of the Auburn Mall. Again, the second floor could be repositioned either as office/fitness space or as a two-story junior anchor in the lifestyle area.
- **The Market Street (Lynnfield) & The Street (Chestnut Hill) Approach (The Walkable Green District):** This model integrates usable public open space and has the flexibility to accommodate events [seasonal or otherwise], but serves as a gathering place at all times. The panel prepared an illustration of this model, in which the Sears building is completely removed to build an open retail lifestyle

center extending from the end of the existing mall, and incorporating several key elements including:

- *Centralized Public Open Space:* A new green common area designed to gather the community and host local events.
- *Walkable Street:* Inspired by The Street in Chestnut Hill, which offers a pedestrian environment parallel to Route 9. This concept could also provide engaging storefronts along an outward-facing edge designed to activate the pedestrian environment along the neighboring brook on Southbridge Street.
- *Potential Multifamily Housing:* While the economics of vertically integrated mixed-use may require further exploration, there may be an opportunity to introduce adjacent multifamily residential housing further down the site toward the Mass Pike.

Transforming the former Sears sites is not without precedent. According to a July 2025 CoStar article, Transformco Properties controls "a couple of hundred" former Sears and Kmart stores across the U.S., half of which are non-owned leasehold interests. That leasehold interest gives Transformco the temporary, but long-term right to possess and use real property, once granted by a landlord through a lease agreement.

One example of how Transformco converted its leasehold interest into a more lucrative venture occurred in Pasadena, California, where they held a ground lease dating back to 1956 on a 15-acre site. Transformco closed the 211,000 SF Sears store at Hastings Ranch Plaza in 2021, then re-demised the two-level building as a 194,741 SF retail box and subleased it to HomeGoods and Hobby Lobby, where now Transformco collects annual revenue from the tenants of $4.6 million.

Closer to home, the Simon Property Group has transformed other vacant Sears properties — including the Burlington Mall and the NorthShore Mall — into thriving mixed-use assets. The Burlington Mall site was purchased from Transformco and accomplished in two phases. In Phase I, the existing Sears Auto Center was demolished, and a new 35,000 SF retail collection with 13 new tenants was developed. Phase II included leasing the upper floor of the 145,000 SF former Sears anchor store to Primark. The lower floor was then converted into 25 new inline retailers, including eight outward-facing restaurants with outdoor seating, two new entrances to the mall, an outdoor park area, as well as new vertical transportation, docks, and restrooms.

Other tenants include Golf Lounge18, an indoor golf simulator experience, Arhaus, L.L. Bean, and a planned Dick's House of Sport in late 2026. The transformation reorients the mall toward the community, shifting its identity from an inward-facing shopping center to an outward-looking lifestyle environment.

Question 3

What funding mechanisms, including grants and financial instruments, are needed to facilitate the redevelopment of these sites?

MassDevelopment and the Commonwealth offer a variety of financing options and can help Auburn navigate other state and federal programs to meet its development goals. There are programs available for specific target sites, as well as general financing tools that the town can utilize.

Town of Auburn-Specific Financing Tools

Develop Strategic Marketing & Incentives — The panel suggests identifying desired development projects and developing marketing and incentive structures for those projects. One example would be designing a marketing and incentive package for a restaurant on the one-acre parcel adjacent to Reliant Medical, which stakeholders and owners have expressed interest in.

Adopt the Community Preservation Act (CPA) — The CPA, which must be approved by a local ballot referendum, helps communities preserve open space and historic sites, create affordable housing, and develop outdoor recreational facilities. This funding tool could be used to finance the physical activation and cleanup of the central pond area.

Meals and Lodging Tax — Auburn adopted the tax in 2009. While local option taxes go directly into the general fund, the Select

Board can establish an internal policy to earmark a portion of these revenues specifically for Town Center development priorities.

Explore the PACE Community Designation — Becoming a Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) community is a financing mechanism that allows commercial, industrial, and multi-family property owners to fund energy-efficiency and renewable-energy ground-up projects or upgrades with long-term, low-cost loans through non-traditional financing options.

Embrace Tax Increment Financing (TIF) — This tool establishes a baseline valuation for a property and allows the municipality to capture projected growth in tax revenue from new investments. To incentivize developers, the local government can offer property tax abatements ranging from 5% to 100% for 5 to 20 years.

MassDevelopment Grant Programs

Site Readiness Program (SRP) — SRP aims to increase the Commonwealth's inventory of large, well-located, project-ready sites; to accelerate private-sector investment in industrial, commercial, and mixed-use projects. This unique funding tool is designed to assist municipalities, municipal agencies or authorities, or non-profit entities in supporting projects that fall under two categories:

- Site Predevelopment and Planning Efforts: Projects within this category utilize SRP to assist with Site Concept Plans, Market Studies, Site Acquisition and Related Tasks, Engineering Documents, Pre-permitting and Permitting tasks, Due Diligence activities, and Pro-Forma Development.
- Site Preparation Efforts: Projects within this category may utilize SRP funds to assist with Demolition and the Construction of Site-related Upgrades, such as roads and other infrastructure.

Projects designated for future municipal use, such as municipal offices, community centers, and parks, are not eligible for this program. However, if the future use is undetermined, then SRP may be eligible to advance projects.

Underutilized Properties Program — This grant program focuses on supporting projects that aim to rehabilitate, improve, or redevelop underutilized properties in the Commonwealth. Funds may support efforts to address building stabilization, code compliance, and necessary design improvements. Projects fall within one of two categories:

- Predevelopment Activities: Projects seeking to engage architectural, engineering, and other related professional services to assess building conditions and develop design and construction documents. A project example might help fund design work for the future conversion of a vacant second-floor space in an existing structure into new housing or retail units.
- Capital Improvements: Projects within the category assist capital improvement efforts that are essential to maintaining or increasing the occupancy of existing structures. Eligible uses include: roof repair, HVAC system improvements, fit-out expenses, tenant improvement tasks, and other building stabilization efforts.

Grant funds may not be used for sitework, landscaping, parking lots, new construction, legal fees, permit fees, procurement of tax credit studies for work outside of the building envelope, or administrative costs. Projects designated for future municipal use, such as municipal offices, community centers, and parks, are not eligible for this program.

Real Estate Services (RES) Technical Assistance — This program supports municipalities in advancing local economic development goals in Massachusetts. Successful projects explore the development potential of key properties, address streetscape and infrastructure needs, and plan for growth. Projects typically fall under two categories:

- Commercial District Redevelopment Efforts: Projects may focus on conducting district studies, corridor studies, and exploring District Improvement Financing (DIF) district feasibility.

- Municipal Surplus Property Disposition Efforts: Projects may focus on conducting site concept plans and market feasibility studies, and support municipalities in Request for Proposals/Qualifications (RFP/RFQ) efforts.

Projects designated for future municipal use, such as municipal offices, community centers, and parks, are not eligible for this program. However, if the future use is undetermined, then RES can explore reuse options through community engagement and other activities.

Mass Downtown Initiative Capital Program — Offered through the Executive Office of Economic Development, this targeted grant resource is recommended to fund the design, installation, and implementation of town wayfinding signage that considers residents and visitors to the community. The program strengthens the economic and cultural vitality of the Commonwealth's downtowns, village centers, and main streets by investing in vibrant, livable centers that attract residents, stimulate business activity, and promote equitable regional growth.