

Town of Northborough

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PLAN



Executive Summary

Community Opportunities Group, Inc.
Boston, Massachusetts

This project was funded by an E.O. 418 grant from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Interagency Work Group: Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, Department of Housing and Community Development, Department of Economic Development, Executive Office of Transportation and Construction. Grant administration supplied by Central Massachusetts Planning Commission.

About This Plan

In 2003, the Northborough Planning Department retained Community Opportunities Group, Inc. (COG) to assist with a growth policy plan for housing and economic development. The project included the following tasks:

HOUSING

- Existing conditions inventory
- Analysis of needs
- Gap analysis
- Housing goals
- Housing suitability map

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Assessment of Northborough's current economic base
- Projections for future economic base
- Economic development goals
- Identification and analysis of development opportunities for industrially zoned land
- Zoning diagnostic of existing commercial districts and development regulations

GROWTH POLICY PLAN

- Housing
- Economic Development
- Zoning & Other Regulatory Recommendations
- Organizational/Capacity Recommendations

This report is informed primarily by the consulting team's field observations of local neighborhoods and commercial areas, two community meetings that the Planning Board sponsored in January-February 2004, and several work sessions with the Planning Board and Town Planner in May-June 2004.

I. Housing

ISSUES & CHALLENGES

CHAPTER 40B. The state's comprehensive permit law, Chapter 40B, establishes a "statutory minimum" for the provision of low- and moderate-income housing in every city or town. A Board of Appeals may deny a comprehensive permit if: (a) at least 10% of the community's year-round housing stock is subject to long-term restrictions to keep sale prices or rents affordable to low- and moderate-income people, (b) at least 1.5% of all land zoned for residential, commercial or industrial uses is already developed for affordable housing, or (c) in the same calendar year that the Board denies a comprehensive permit, construction of new affordable housing has begun on land equal to at least .3 of 1% of the community's land area. For most cities and towns, however, the statutory minimum means affordable housing units equal to or greater than 10% of their year-round housing inventory.



Chapter 40B housing in Northborough.

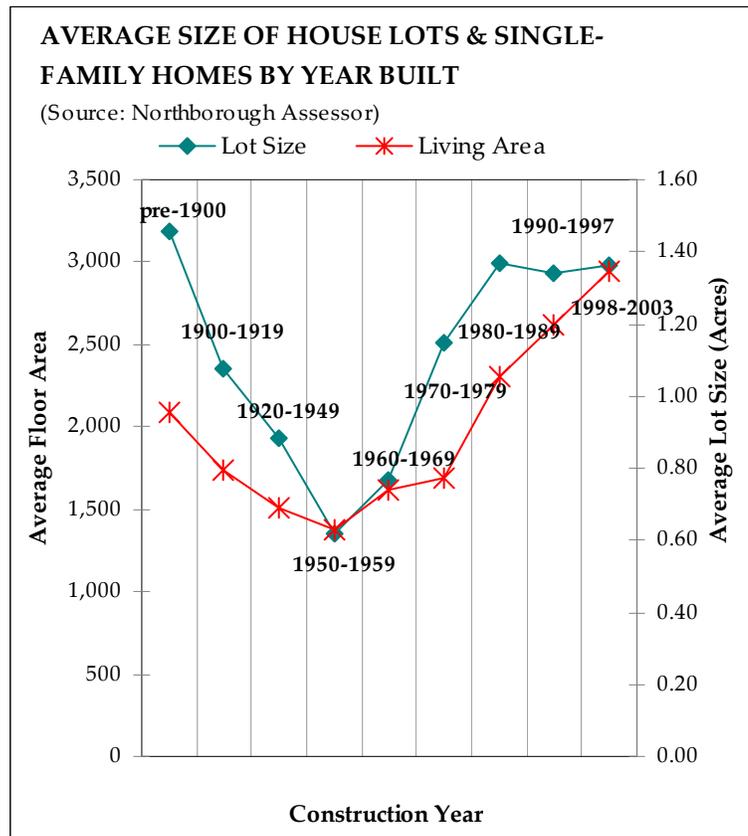
However:

- Reaching 10% does not mean a community's housing needs have been met.
- Decent, suitable and affordable housing needs exist at the low end of the market and below-market levels: households with too much income for Chapter 40B units and not enough income to buy or rent market-price housing.
- HUD estimates that 43.9% of the Commonwealth's households have incomes in the low- or moderate-income range, i.e., at or below 80% of the applicable area median income (AMI) for each city or town, adjusted for household size.
- Providing enough low- or moderate-income housing to reach 10% of all homes in the Commonwealth would require about 262,200 units, but since Chapter 40B excludes seasonal and vacation homes from the state's housing base, 10% is effectively reduced to 252,696 units.
- Even if 10% of all year-round homes in Massachusetts were Chapter 40B units, there would still be low- and moderate-income 819,008 families without an affordable place to live.
- In Northborough, reaching 10% requires about 338 Chapter 40B units in addition to the existing 173-unit inventory, yet technical compliance with Chapter 40B would leave 748 resident families without an affordable home.

HOUSING CHOICE. It is tempting to define housing needs on the basis of a community's own low-income households, or its rate of growth in housing sale prices, lack of housing affordability to young citizens priced out of their home towns, and loss of affordability for long-time residents. In many communities, people are less resistant to affordable housing if they think someone they know will actually benefit from it. The state also encourages communities to recognize local needs by allowing 70% of the units in Chapter 40B developments to be offered first to "local preference" homebuyers or renters. This policy was instituted primarily to reduce suburban resistance to affordable housing.

However:

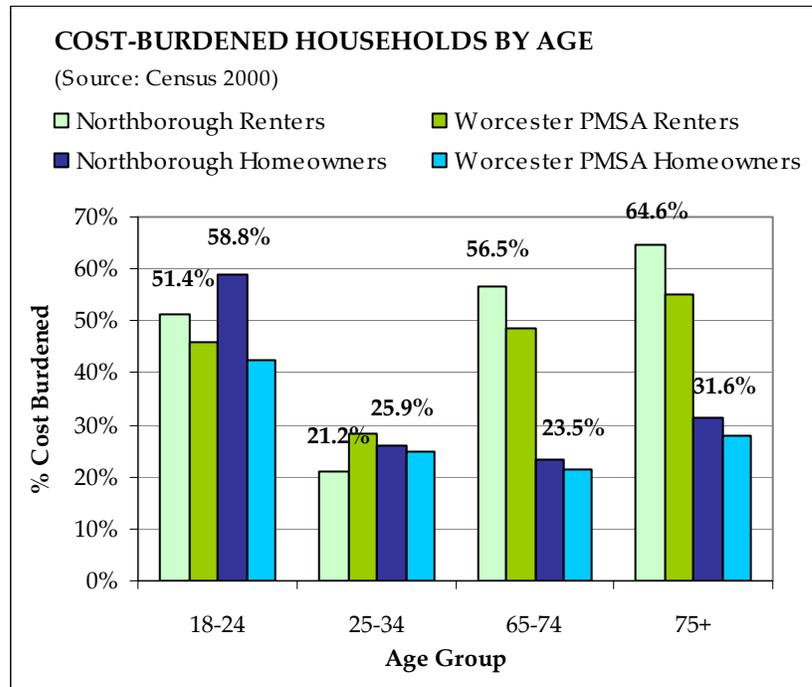
- While focusing on local needs can make affordable housing more acceptable, it also reinforces insular ideas about community development and ignores the role of housing in the vitality of a region's economy.
- In Worcester County, 43% of all households qualify as low or moderate income and 57% of them live in non-urban communities, including Northborough.
- Local officials everywhere worry about the social and fiscal impacts of affordable housing developments, but many households can choose to move from one town to another because they have economic mobility. In fact, about 62% of Worcester County's population moved from one Central Massachusetts home to another after 1995. For low- or moderate-income households, the shortage of affordable housing is effectively a shortage of choices.
- Under current zoning, Northborough has enough vacant, residentially zoned land to support about 2,300 homes. The issue is not only how much future growth Northborough will absorb, but also whether the growth provides lasting community benefits – including affordable housing. Given that Northborough's development is characterized by increasingly large house lots and very large homes, it is unlikely that the town will be able to provide more housing choices without adjusting its land use policies. Chapter 40B alone will not bring about a balanced housing inventory.



OTHER HOUSING NEEDS. Communities place considerable emphasis on Chapter 40B because until they reach the 10% statutory minimum, they remain vulnerable to large, unwanted comprehensive permits. Through administrative policies such as Executive Order 418, the state encourages local governments to look beyond low-income housing and think broadly about housing that meets a wide variety of needs. While recognized by local officials in most towns, needs for accessible housing, low-cost homes for empty nesters, and modestly priced rental units for young citizens entering the workforce receive little attention. In many cases, communities do not see much benefit in producing more housing than their zoning already allows unless the additional units will qualify for listing on the Subsidized Housing Inventory.

However:

- Housing needs are not limited to low- or moderate-income households.
- Approximately 9% of Northborough's working-age (21-64) adults have a disability, yet except for elderly public housing units, there is no obvious indication that any barrier-free housing has been developed in Northborough.
- Northborough's region has attracted many "over-55" housing developments, but they are mainly high-end projects with condominium or "cottage" sale prices that far exceed the means of many senior citizens, especially householders over 75. Although some "over-55" Chapter 40B developments have been built, the income and asset tests for eligibility to buy a Chapter 40B homeownership unit create significant marketing and sales challenges for these projects.
- The Central Massachusetts inventory of public housing for very-low-income elders has not changed in more than a decade, and very few housing units for seniors of modest means have been built anywhere in the region.
- Median-income families are hard-pressed to find a home they can afford in Northborough unless they are "buy up" homeowners with equity to invest.
- There is a poor fit between the make-up of Northborough's employment base and the cost of housing for sale or rent.



NORTHBOROUGH'S HOUSING NEEDS

- **Rental housing for individuals:** developments of studio, one- and two-bedroom apartments, marketed primarily to young adults and young couples with annual incomes of \$20,000-\$40,000, or monthly rents of \$500-\$950. At least 5%-10% of the units should be accessible to persons with disabilities or designed for accessibility retrofits.

Northborough's region has 1,015 under-25 households. Sixty-six percent are non-family households, 87% live in rental units, 54% have annual incomes below \$35,000 and 45% are housing cost burdened.

- **Rental housing for families:** developments of two-, three- and four-bedroom apartments, marketed primarily to young families with annual incomes of \$30,000-\$65,000, or monthly rents of \$750-\$1,725. Some provision should be made for accessible units, but data to estimate the disability housing needs of families are unavailable.

Northborough's region includes 7,435 households headed by persons 25-34 years of age, 66.7% of which are family households. Nearly half of all households in the 25-34 age group have incomes of \$30,000-\$65,000. Fifty-three percent live in rental housing and 24% of the renters are housing cost burdened. Of the 12,000 households headed by persons 35-44, 80% are families, 27% are renters and 33% of the renters are housing cost burdened.

Many of the renter families in these age groups earn too much to qualify for subsidized housing but they cannot afford the market rents in new developments, and because they are predominantly families they need rental units with two or more bedrooms. Significantly, while 27% of the region's renter households consist of three or more people, only 15.2% of all rental units have more than two bedrooms. The shortage of rental units sized for family occupancy increases by household size, for households of four or more people constitute 14.2% of the region's renters, yet only 3% of all rental units have more than three bedrooms and a majority of them are renter-occupied single-family homes.

- **Rental housing for very-low-income seniors:** developments with a mix of one- and two-bedroom units for elderly households with annual incomes below \$15,000, or monthly rents of \$250-\$375. At least 10% of the units should be fully accessible to persons with disabilities.



RENTAL HOUSING

- For young citizens with incomes of \$20,000-\$40,000.
- For families with incomes of \$30,000-\$65,000.
- For very-low-income, low- and moderate-income senior citizens.

HOMEOWNERSHIP UNITS

- For individuals, primarily young citizens in the workforce, with incomes of \$30,000-\$75,000.
- For families with incomes of \$60,000-\$90,000.
- For empty-nester and over-55 households at all market levels.

- **Rental housing for low- or moderate-income seniors:** developments with a mix of one- and two-bedroom units for elderly households with annual incomes of \$15,000-\$35,000, or monthly rents of \$375-\$500 and some as high as \$750. At least 10% of the units should be fully accessible to persons with disabilities.

Regionally, there are 8,272 households headed by persons over 65. They differ by economic position, the types of homes they occupy and the amounts they spend on housing. In general, the incomes of elderly households drop significantly after age 75, and both the incidence of disability and the percentage of renter occupancies increase with age. About 36% of the over-75 elderly households in Northborough's area are tenants, and the percentage swells to more than half of over-85 households. Fifty-three percent of all over-75 households have incomes below \$25,000.

Although elderly rental housing is traditionally associated with over-65 households, in Northborough's area the greatest needs exist among over-75 households and it is for this group that affordable rental units should be designed, priced and marketed. Nearly 60% of the region's over-75 households are one-person, non-family households and for them, one-bedroom units are generally considered suitable. However, there needs to be a mix with two-bedroom apartments to accommodate special circumstances and live-in aides for frail or disabled elders.

- **Homeownership units for individuals:** developments of one- and two-bedroom condominiums, marketed to persons between 22-34 years of age with annual incomes of \$30,000-\$75,000, or sale prices of \$85,000-\$205,000. At least 5% of the units should be accessible to persons with disabilities or designed for accessibility retrofits.

About 15% of the households in Northborough's area are one-person households, excluding seniors over 65. Despite the growth in one-person households statewide, there is a striking lack of suitable housing units designed for young workers. In most cases, young, unmarried college graduates and recent recipients of graduate degrees have earnings that exceed the income limits for Chapter 40B units yet they do not earn enough to afford prevailing market rents or purchase prices. It is not particularly surprising to find that in Northborough's area, over half of the households in this age group are renters; the homeownership market offers them few choices in terms of size or price, for new residential development in all towns around Northborough is comprised almost exclusively of single-family homes.

Higher-density housing developments of one- and two-bedroom units, priced at the lower end of the market, would provide opportunities for young workers to achieve homeownership and possibly reduce pressure on the region's rental market. "Higher density" is not synonymous with "large scale."

- **Homeownership units for families:** developments with a mix of two-, three- and four-bedroom townhouses and single-family homes, marketed to families with annual incomes of \$60,000-\$95,000, or sale prices of \$140,000-\$225,000.

About 31% of the region's households headed by persons 25-44 years of age have incomes of \$40,000-\$75,000. Most are families, and the homeownership market offers them very few choices. Some of these families may be eligible to purchase Chapter 40B housing, but many are ineligible because their incomes are too high. In fact, Chapter 40B is not a particularly good way

to address their needs because many households in this income group earn too little to purchase the unrestricted (market-rate) homes and too much to purchase the affordable homes. Small to moderate-scale developments that achieve feasibility with a mix of housing types and higher density would help to meet the needs of family homebuyers at the lower end of the market.

- **Homeownership units for empty-nesters and seniors:** developments of one-, two- and some three-bedroom condominiums or cottage units, restricted to over-55 households and priced at all market levels (without regard to assets), with an emphasis on sale prices of \$90,000-\$190,000. At least 10% of the units should be accessible to persons with disabilities or designed for accessibility retrofits. Communities in Northborough's area have attracted several over-55 housing developments, primarily at the higher end of the market. More modestly priced alternatives to conventional single-family homes would serve the market of over-55 households seeking to downsize from their existing residence to a townhouse or cottage unit they can afford. Developments that offer a continuum of units – some in the Chapter 40B price range, others at roughly the middle of the over-55 market – could fill an obvious gap that exists in the over-55 housing industry, but producing these kinds of homes requires a permitting tool other than Chapter 40B.

II. Economic Development

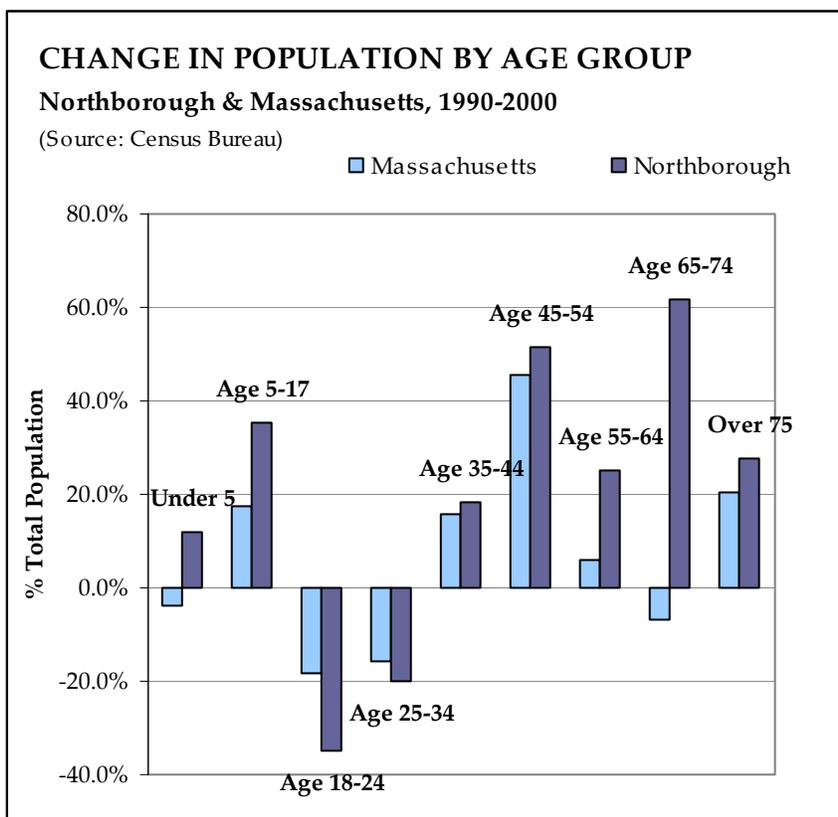
ISSUES & CHALLENGES

THE LOCAL ECONOMY. Northborough has at least four competitive advantages for economic development: its people are highly educated, its households are relatively affluent, there is available land for commercial and industrial growth, and the town offers convenient highway access.

However:

- Northborough also has some formidable disadvantages. For example, the town gained family households during the 1990s, but the population percent of young adults declined faster in Northborough than elsewhere in Worcester County or across the Commonwealth. As of Census 2000, 18-29 year olds make up only 10% of Northborough's total population.

- When companies choose new or expansion sites, the supply and price range of available housing are among the factors they consider. Housing sale prices have risen dramatically in Northborough and homeownership is increasingly unaffordable, particularly to young workers. The town's housing conditions create barriers to labor force growth and consequently, to economic growth.

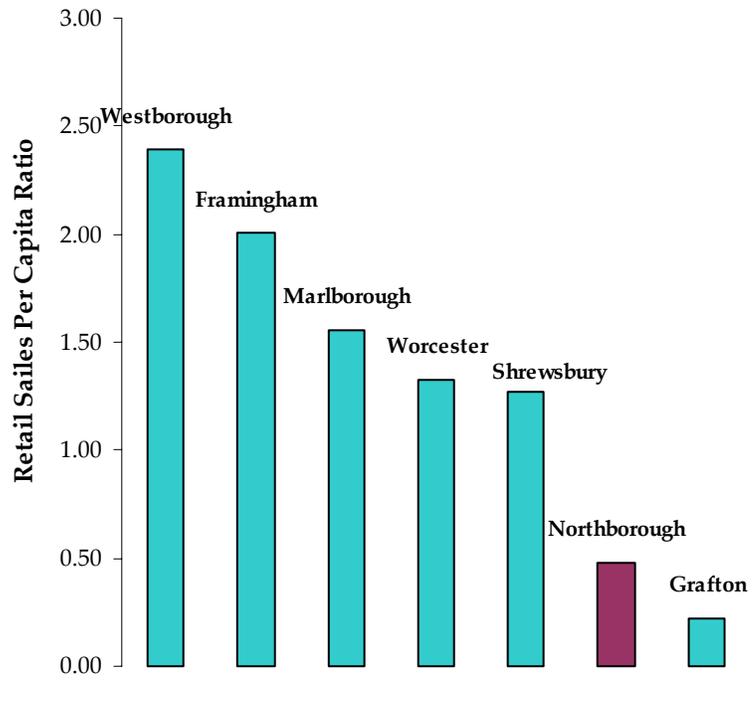


- The state's shrinking labor pool stems from a decline in young people entering the job market at a time when the population overall has aged. These trends are even more pronounced in Northborough, where the number of persons 18-21 dropped by 40%. In contrast, the number of persons 55-64 increased more dramatically in Northborough than statewide, and persons 65-74 increased in Northborough even though the state experienced a decline in persons in the same age group.

- Residents say they want more stores and services, but Northborough's small population may not be enough to attract additional businesses, especially when there is strong competition from established retail centers nearby. Northborough is already leaking sales to other cities and towns in the region, as suggested by its very low retail sales per capita compared to communities such as Westborough, Framingham and Marlborough.

RETAIL PULL FACTORS

(Data Sources: 1997 Economic Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis)



- Northborough's commercial and industrial land lies along the few roads that go through town and connect to regional highways. Recent traffic counts show that average daily traffic volumes on Route 20 are highest between Lincoln Street and East Main Street, with more than 20,000 cars moving through the intersection of Route 20-Brigham Street.
- Despite the town's proximity to highways, potential employers may be deterred from locating in Northborough unless local, regional and state authorities can produce a realistic plan for alternative routes. A recent traffic study recommends alternate route signage along Route 20 and better public education. While important, these steps will be even more effective if coupled with traffic calming measures such as raised crosswalks in the downtown area.

FISCAL & ECONOMIC POLICIES. Like most towns, Northborough is very conscious of tax revenue and the fiscal implications of new growth. Many years ago, the town decided to zone a considerable amount of land for commercial and industrial development – in part to discourage rapid conversion of outlying areas to homes, and in part to assure that as Northborough grew in the future, it would have an adequate tax base.

However:

- While Northborough has vacant and underdeveloped commercial and industrial land, the location and capacity of municipal water, sewer, and storm drainage systems, and proximity to wetlands will constrain the development potential of some sites.

- Existing and future residential development also affects Northborough’s potential for commercial and industrial space. Fifty-five and older communities pose a particular threat because Northborough allows “over-55” or senior residence communities on industrial land – primarily for fiscal reasons. By encouraging homes for childless households on land reserved for industry, Northborough may be trading short-term fiscal relief for the long-term strength of its economy. (Chapter 40B also threatens Northborough’s supply of non-residentially zoned land because comprehensive permits override local zoning.)
- As developable industrial land is converted to residential uses, it becomes politically difficult to locate an industrial use next to or close to residential uses. Residents demand buffers from non-residential uses, making the actual land available for commercial and industrial space even smaller.

ZONING POLICIES. Northborough provides for three commercial districts (BA, BB, BC) with a combined total of about 414 acres of land, and two industrial districts (IA, IB) with nearly 2,930 acres. Together, the business and industrial zones cover nearly one-fourth of Northborough’s total land area. The economic development goal of Northborough’s Master Plan is to “maintain and enhance the local economy with an emphasis on serving the shopping, service, tax base and employment needs of the community.”

However:

- Northborough as it is today and the land use plan represented on its zoning map are not at all the same. Northborough is a predominantly residential community: the kind of town residents say they want to preserve. The Master Plan echoes their sentiments by calling for “economic development that contributes to the existing character of the Town,” meaning small-scale, high-value, pedestrian-oriented business growth that focuses primarily on local trade. Unfortunately, Northborough’s zoning policies do not foster these outcomes.
- The business districts – downtown and along Route 20 – face strong competition from shopping areas in neighboring towns. Northborough needs ways to make its commercial areas more appealing to businesses and customers. Adopting recognizable names for commercial areas, increasing foot traffic by providing for some higher-density housing in and between commercial areas, implementing commercial building design and signage guidelines, and providing safe places for people to walk would help to create a sense of place in the business districts.



Traffic and lack of safe, attractive pedestrian facilities limit downtown’s attractiveness for new economic development.

- Zoning alone does not create a vibrant local economy. Working relationships with economic development organizations, a business retention and recruitment strategy, and public investment in utilities and services are really essential to a strong business base and therefore, a strong tax base. An Economic Development and Industrial Corporation (EDIC) may be critical to Northborough's capacity to control future development in its industrial zones.
- Zoning does have a significant impact on commercial investment decisions and the quality of commercial areas. Making logical connections between allowed and special permitted commercial uses, dimensional and design controls, and the kinds of businesses that Northborough wants to attract will help to shape the character of each district and promote clusters of compatible business uses.
- The business districts on Main Street and West Main Street have enough vacant and underused land to support a considerable amount of business growth. Northborough could obtain more valuable commercial development by making better use of available land. The dimensional and density regulations that apply to the BB and BC Districts, together with site plan review and design standards, need to be revisited.
- Northborough has an unusually large amount of land zoned for industrial development. The Master Plan recommends a strategy of "staying the course" by retaining these areas for existing and future industrial uses. In support of that end, the Master Plan suggested changes in Northborough's industrial zoning regulations. After 1997, Northborough amended its industrial zoning, site plan and parking regulations in response to some of the Master Plan's recommendations. Still, Northborough's vacant industrial land is not secure from conversion to residential uses. Under current zoning, it is possible to apply the Senior Residential Community Overlay District to industrial land, but more significantly, Chapter 40B developments can be built on non-residential land.

III. Recommendations

HOUSING

INCLUSIONARY ZONING. Replace the existing Affordable Housing/Conditional Density Bonus Bylaw with an Inclusionary Housing Bylaw that requires affordable units in all residential developments of five or more homes and does not obligate the developer to seek a special permit.

- Offer developers a menu of compliance options, subject to approval by the Planning Board:
 - Include units in the development.
 - Provide equivalent units in another location in Northborough.
 - Pay a fee in lieu of creating new units, the fee to be equal to the difference between an affordable purchase price as defined by DHCD's Local Initiative Program (LIP) and the median single-family home or condominium sale price for the most recent fiscal year, as determined by the Board of Assessors.
 - Donate to the town a parcel of land with equivalent development capacity, restricted for affordable housing use.
- Provide a density or floor area ratio bonus by special permit to encourage additional affordable units in the following zoning districts:
 - General Residence
 - BB-East
 - Transitional Use Overlay District
 - BA

AFFORDABLE HOUSING TRUST FUND. Establish an Affordable Housing Trust by special act of the legislature for all revenue generated by the bylaw and any other funding sources as determined by the town, such as "windfall" profit from the resale of currently affordable homes to market homebuyers, and profit distributions to the town under Chapter 40B rental housing regulatory agreements.

ACCESSORY DWELLINGS & CONVERSIONS. Amend the Zoning Bylaw to provide for one accessory dwelling unit in a single-family home or detached structure on the same lot (such as a barn or carriage house) in any zoning district, as follows:

- Allow an affordable accessory dwelling unit by right, subject to adequate area for parking as determined by the Building Inspector, and adequate provisions for wastewater disposal as determined by the Board of Health.

- Set a maximum gross floor area threshold for eligible units, e.g., 900 square feet.
- Condition the release of an occupancy permit on receipt of affordable housing documentation.
- Create a standard application package for homeowners to apply for an affordable accessory dwelling permit, including a LIP-approved deed rider, rent limits and a checklist of submission requirements.
- Allow by special permit an accessory dwelling with no affordability restriction, or an affordable unit that exceeds the size threshold for a unit by right.
- Amend the Zoning Bylaw to provide for single-family to multi-family conversions, up to four units per conversion project, as follows:
 - Allow single-family to multi-family conversions by right, subject to administrative site plan review, in the General Residence and Transitional Use Districts provided that a conversion project includes at least one affordable dwelling unit.
 - Allow single-family to multi-family conversions by special permit in the General Residence and Transitional Use Districts for projects that do not include affordable units.
 - Allow single-family to multi-family conversions by special permit, subject to site plan review and the inclusion of at least one affordable unit, in the Residence C District.

MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING. Amend the Zoning Bylaw to allow multi-family housing in the General Residence and Transitional Use Districts, as follows:

- By right, subject to site plan review:
 - At a maximum gross density of 6 units per acre, subject to adequate provisions for wastewater disposal as determined by the Board of Health.
 - Require 25% of the units to be affordable and eligible for listing on the Chapter 40B Subsidized Housing Inventory as LIP units.
 - Establish a maximum of 24 units per multi-family development.
- By special permit:
 - At a maximum density of 10 units per acre, subject to adequate provisions for wastewater disposal as determined by the Board of Health.
 - Set a sliding scale of 15-25% of the units to be affordable and eligible for listing on the Chapter 40B Subsidized Housing Inventory as LIP units, the actual percentage to be based on the degree to which a project's density exceeds the 6-unit standard for multi-family housing by right.
 - Establish a maximum of 50 units per multi-family development.

- Establish a limit on aggregate residential gross floor area that may be devoted to multi-family uses in the General Residence and Transitional Use Districts.
- Amend the Zoning Bylaw to allow multi-family housing as part of a mixed-use development in the BB-East and BB-West Districts.
 - Allow dwelling units above the ground floor of a commercial building by right, subject to inclusion of affordable units (vertical mixed-use).
 - Allow multi-family units in separate buildings on the same lot as a permitted commercial use, subject to 25% affordable units (horizontal mixed-use).
 - Establish a maximum percentage of gross floor area that may be devoted to residential uses, e.g., 60%.

INFILL DEVELOPMENT OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING. Amend the Zoning Bylaw to provide for modest frontage waivers in the General Residence, BA and Transitional Use Districts, subject to the following requirements:

- An infill lot created with a frontage waiver must comply with the minimum lot area for the district.
- Its use must be limited to an affordable single-family or two-family dwelling.
- Establish a maximum number of infill development lots that may be created in each zoning district.

SENIOR RESIDENCE DEVELOPMENT. Amend the Zoning Bylaw by deleting the existing Senior Residential Community Overlay District and replacing it with a Senior Residence Development Bylaw that has the following features:

- Allow Senior Residence Development by special permit in the Residence A and Residence B Districts, using the tract size, density and other regulations that presently apply in the overlay district.
- Consider a sliding scale of affordability for over-55 developments so they offer options to households with incomes up to 110% AMFI. While the Town should not exclude SRC developments from an inclusionary housing requirement, the standard could be adjusted to reflect the needs of elderly households on a continuum of “below-market” affordability levels.
- Consider a cap on aggregate SRC Units that may be built town-wide, e.g., expressed as a percentage of the Town’s total housing inventory. For example, if Northborough were to impose a 10% ceiling on SRC development, the maximum number of SRC units that the Planning Board could approve would be 501 units based on the most recent decennial census.

ECHO UNITS. Amend the Zoning Bylaw by adding a new use definition for Elderly Cottage Housing Opportunity or “ECHO dwelling,” and establish ECHO units as a permitted accessory use in any residential zoning district.

- Establish an administrative site plan review process for ECHO units.

- Establish minimum design standards and additional land area requirements (if any) for ECHO units.

ASSISTED LIVING. Amend the Zoning Bylaw by adding a new use definition for Assisted Living Facility, and allow the use in all residential districts, the BA and BB Districts, and the Transitional Use Overlay District:

- By right, up to 10 units per facility, subject to site plan and design review.
- By special permit, more than 10 units per facility.

MANAGING COMPREHENSIVE PERMITS. Northborough should take several steps to strengthen its capacity to manage the Chapter 40B comprehensive permit process:

- Re-establish the Housing Partnership Committee.
- The Board of Selectmen and Planning Board should jointly adopt a comprehensive permit policy that includes the following provisions:
 - Invite developers to use the Local Initiative Program ((LIP) comprehensive permit process instead of applying directly to MassHousing or MassDevelopment for a project eligibility letter.
 - Be open with developers about areas that are most suitable for higher-density housing:
 - Describe the zoning waivers that Northborough is willing to consider, such as a realistic range of additional units per acre or a higher floor area ratio to accommodate affordable homeownership units.
 - Identify trade-offs the town is willing to consider to encourage comprehensive permits in preferred locations, such as more density in exchange for design elements that are compatible with surrounding buildings, green building certification, or inclusion of units affordable to very-low-income households.
 - Identify housing needs that Northborough wants comprehensive permit developers to meet.
 - Create a fast-track local review process for small comprehensive permit developments, e.g., 10 or fewer units. Prepare a “Small Project Application Package” and work with the Board of Appeals to create an expedited review and decision-making process for small-scale projects. If Northborough prefers small, scattered-site projects, it needs to make the permitting process faster and easier for them. Having a standardized application package will provide technical assistance to applicants who may not be seasoned developers, and the expedited process will result in a more desirable and useful comprehensive permit process.
 - Designate an individual officer of the town – such as the Town Planner or Town Administrator – to negotiate with comprehensive permit applicants during the permit process or, subject to Town Counsel’s approval, retain an outside special counsel to assist with negotiations.

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT. Northborough needs to be pro-active with owners of existing homes to create a base of scattered-site affordable housing units. Toward that end, the town should work with the Northborough Housing Authority and Northborough Affordable Housing Corporation on the following local initiatives:

- Develop a priority list of single-family and two-family homes for acquisition/rehabilitation in exchange for permanently affordable housing units.
- Approach property owners about the possibility of acquiring a right of first refusal to purchase their home when they decide to sell.
- Request an allocation of Inclusionary Housing revenue for a small fund to pay for refusal rights or option agreements between annual town meetings.
- Apply for predevelopment funds from the Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP) or MassDevelopment to plan small new-construction projects for very-low-income families on land donated by developers under the Inclusionary Housing bylaw.
- Using revenue generated by the Inclusionary Housing bylaw or the Community Preservation Act, if adopted in Northborough, to create a special set-aside fund to purchase Chapter 40B homeownership units upon resale if a qualifying low- or moderate-income homebuyer cannot be found within the period specified in the deed restriction.

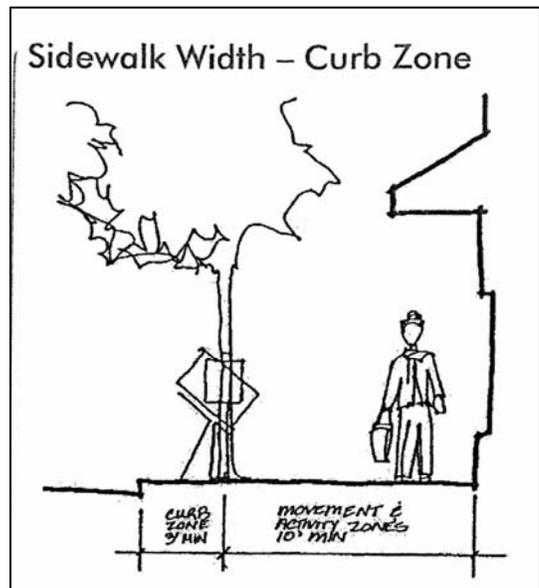
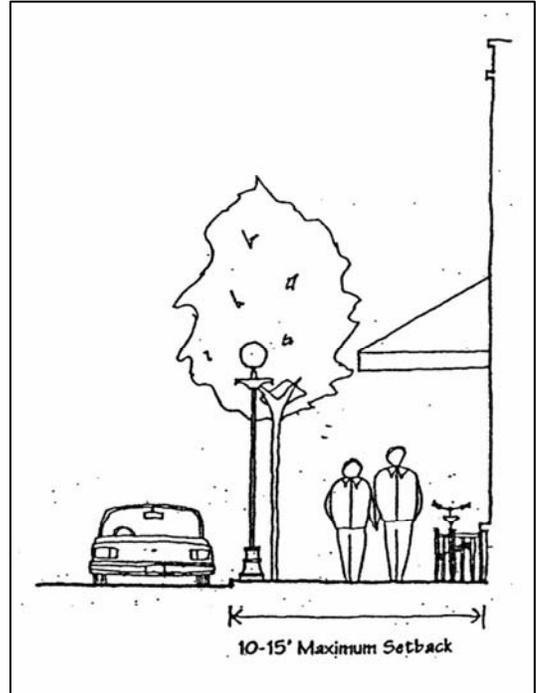
Economic Development

PEDESTRIAN-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT. Pedestrian-oriented development is in vogue both within and outside of the planning field, but the concept has been around for centuries. In fact, some of the best examples of pedestrian-oriented development can be seen in the state's older, well-established downtown areas such as Andover and Winchester. Pedestrian-oriented development is simply development that gives priority to the needs and interests of the pedestrian and gives careful attention to how a pedestrian, as opposed to automobiles, can use space.

Guidelines. There are generally accepted guidelines for creating pedestrian-oriented commercial development and guidelines for reactivating traditional suburban commercial districts by adopting pedestrian-oriented design principles. These guidelines tend to focus on making the space interesting to pedestrians, attracting shoppers, protecting pedestrians from automobile traffic, and creating development that is sensitive to human scale. The general guidelines that Northborough should adopt and implement are summarized below.

- Ensure that there is a dedicated space for pedestrians in the district. Currently, there are few sidewalks in Northborough's commercial districts; they are discontinuous, and wide enough for only one person. In some sections, the sidewalks are interrupted by curb cuts and gas stations. The following are design guidelines for sidewalks in pedestrian-oriented commercial areas:
 - The "movement zone" or area in which pedestrians walk should be a minimum 8 feet wide, preferably 10-12 feet wide

- The “curb zone” or area in between the street and movement zone where street trees, street lighting, street furniture, parking meters, waste receptacles should be located should be a minimum of 3 feet wide
- Sidewalks should begin no more than 10 feet from the street and the buildings should have a maximum setback of 25 feet.
- Extend public space to the building by filling the space between the sidewalk and building with a walkway, plantings, and street furniture
- Minimize the number of curb cuts into the sidewalk
- If there is a curb cut for a driveway or parking lot, there should be a clearly marked pedestrian pathway through the driveway/apron
- Main entrances to buildings should be off the sidewalk
- Enclose the street to make the pedestrian space created by sidewalks feel welcoming, comfortable, and safe to pedestrians. Regardless of the height of the buildings, the techniques listed below create a space that has human scale and is sensitive to pedestrians’ needs. They provide pedestrians places to rest, lighting so that they can see, and a sense of protection from automobile traffic and weather. Use several techniques to enclose the street:
 - Create a “street wall” with 2-3 story, adjacent buildings at the property line
 - Plant a row of trees or place planters on the sidewalk in the “curb zone”
 - Place street furniture in the curb zone along the sidewalk to give pedestrians a place to rest, wait, or enjoy the environment
 - Stores should have awnings to protect pedestrians from the elements and to help create an enclosed walkway



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- Balconies, bay windows, or roof decks on upper stories of the building not only help enclose the street but make the space more visually interesting, vibrant, and safe.
- Well designed signage can also help enclose the street.
- The structures should be designed to make the commercial districts visually interesting and attractive to draw shoppers out of their cars and encourage them to walk up and down the street. Design guidelines for keeping commercial districts visually interesting from a pedestrian point of view:
 - Buildings should have relatively large windows on the ground floor, especially ones for displays.
 - Avoid blank walls.
 - Side or back walls that are visible to pedestrians or motorists passing-by should have windows, displays, murals, secondary entrances, or even false windows or architectural features to create a more interesting and welcoming “face” to potential customers.
 - Avoid off-street parking between the street and the building and prohibit parking in-front of the building.
- Building facades should not be uniform. Some variations in building height (vertical modulation), use and type of awnings, light fixtures, and architectural details create interesting and non-uniform building facades.
- Adopt signage guidelines that are pedestrian-oriented.
 - Signage should have unifying design characteristics, but the regulations should provide enough flexibility for individual businesses to creatively express themselves.
 - Pedestrian oriented signs should be smaller and designed to be read by people closer to the building.
 - Sculptural signs, signs that incorporate artwork, or signs with high quality graphics should be encouraged. Neon signs are permitted if they are incorporated into the design of the building.
 - Avoid or prohibit internally lit signs. Front lighting or down lighting on signs is preferred.
 - Signs should have uniform design elements but regulations should also encourage creativity and businesses to express their own character
 - Prohibit off-premise signs except for directional signs
 - Only one parking lot sign per entrance, and it should not extend more than 12’ off the ground

- Good design guidelines for lighting can significantly change the character of commercial districts, making them more inviting and attractive:
 - Lighting of sidewalks should be from storefronts, canopies, awnings
 - Building entries should be well lit
 - Back-lit and translucent awnings should be discouraged or prohibited
 - Variety in use of light fixtures on the building façade from one building to another should be encouraged
- Off-street parking lots should be pedestrian-friendly. The guidelines for pedestrian-oriented parking are:
 - Prohibit off-street parking between the street and the building
 - Avoid off-street parking between buildings (a gap between buildings creates a “no-man’s land” and lacks visual interest)
 - Encourage shared parking lots through shared parking agreements
 - Main orientation of buildings should be off the street, not the parking lot
 - Require the minimum number of curb cuts
 - If off-street parking is provided between buildings make sure sidewalks continue through the entrance to the parking lot, and the driveway should be as narrow as possible
 - Provide landscaping and street furniture to improve lot’s appearance
 - Provide a clearly visible pedestrian connection between the parking area and the street/sidewalk
- Developers of commercial projects that include at least 40,000 square feet of commercial space should be required to show pedestrian access from adjacent residential neighborhoods on one of the plans submitted for site plan review. If providing direct pedestrian access from adjacent neighborhoods is not feasible, the applicant should satisfactorily demonstrate to the Planning Board that no feasible alternative exists.

Public Investment. In addition to implementing pedestrian-oriented design guidelines that developers must follow, the town needs to commit public resources to its commercial districts. Northborough’s commercial areas cannot fully transform into pedestrian-oriented districts without considerable public investment and commitment. While the town can reasonably require developers of new commercial buildings to follow pedestrian-oriented design principles and pay for pedestrian-oriented streetscape improvements such as sidewalks, street furniture or street lighting, the same cannot be expected of owners of existing businesses or buildings.

DISTINCTIVE SENSE OF PLACE.

Northborough's business districts lack a distinctive sense of place and they do not have a visually identifiable edge. To provide business districts that make a positive contribution to Northborough's image and increase their competitiveness with business districts in neighboring towns, Northborough should take the following actions.

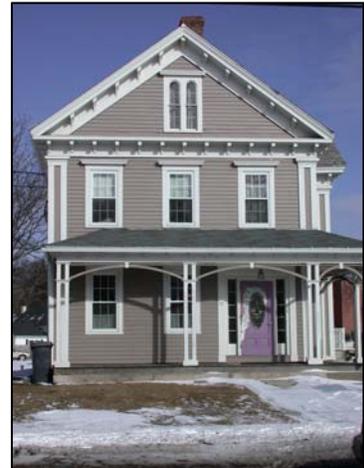
- Adopt strong design guidelines for the BA, BB-West, and BB-East Districts that are clear and enforceable. The design guidelines should:
 - Encourage the preservation and rehabilitation of buildings with historical features by providing design guidelines that are appropriate for existing structures. Guidelines for preserving older buildings need to consider financial feasibility, preservation priorities and the practical needs of the proposed use.
 - Provide enough detail so developers and their design teams will be able to understand the town's design objectives while leaving room for creativity and innovation.
 - Be consistent with preferences expressed by local residents and the Planning Board, e.g., colonial revival and related architectural styles. The desired characteristics of colonial revival and related architecture should be stated clearly so developers can anticipate what the town's review boards want to see in building designs.

**NORTHBOROUGH'S ARCHITECTURAL TRADITIONS**

64 Main Street (top)

4 Church Street (center)

Shopping area off Church Street (bottom)



- Recognize that the design guidelines will apply mainly to commercial buildings. If there is a conflict between pedestrian-oriented design for commercial buildings and colonial revival architectural, the priority should be pedestrian-oriented design and the needs of businesses that will occupy these buildings.
- Create distinctive names for the BB-West and BB-East Districts so people have some way of identifying or referring to each business area. The names should be based on historical background or character.
- Encourage development that unifies each commercial district, both physically and visually, such as signage regulations, sidewalks, landscaping, and architecture.

B-DISTRICT USE & DIMENSIONAL REGULATIONS. Most of Northborough's businesses are small and relatively young. They would benefit from more pedestrian traffic. To create such an environment, Northborough needs to attract more businesses and pedestrians to its commercial areas. Toward this end, the town should adopt zoning regulations that create a variety of opportunities for planned, coherent economic growth.

- In all business districts, prohibit uses that conflict with commercial uses, or are low-density uses, or make it difficult to develop these areas into pedestrian-oriented business districts.



Northborough business area west of downtown.

- Differentiate the commercial districts by refining the types of uses allowed in the BA, BB (East and West), and BC districts. Although there are very few differences in the use and dimensional regulations for the BB and BC Districts, the BC District and the two BB Districts – BB-East, or east of the downtown area, and BB-West, west of downtown – have developed quite differently. For example, the BB-East District tends to have smaller commercial buildings that are closer to the street, with relatively small parking lots in front of the buildings. However, BB-West has a number of large commercial developments set back on the site, with large parking lots in front of the stores. The Zoning Bylaw should be modified to recognize these differences and use them to the town's advantage.
- Change the zoning regulations to allow and encourage greater intensity of land use.
- Allow some residential uses mixed with commercial uses, particularly east of the downtown area.

- Encourage shared parking and provide partial relief from parking requirements if peak-parking demands for some of the proposed uses occur at different times of the day, or if the development includes complementary uses.

INDUSTRIAL LAND. Northborough has a considerable amount of industrially zoned land that is vulnerable to Chapter 40B and senior residence developments. At present, the land produces very little economic benefit to the town. The current economic climate and the distance of a significant portion of the IA District from I-495 make it unlikely that most of Northborough's IA-zoned land will be developed for industrial uses in the near future. To protect the land from encroachment by Chapter 40B or senior residence developments and increase Northborough's tax base, the town should provide landowners more options for viable and profitable commercial uses in the IA District.

- Establish a Northborough Economic Development and Industrial Corporation (EDIC) by special act of the legislature so that Northborough has the capacity to acquire and control the disposition of industrially zoned land.
- Encourage some differentiation in the industrial zones through the use of overlay districts in areas zoned for industrial development.