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PUBLIC WORKSHOP ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Purpose: To hold a public workshop with the purpose of better understanding economic development in Acton by inviting “resource people” to contribute their experience and expertise to help the Acton 2020 Committee gain perspective and deeper understanding of the issues and ways of addressing them. The public was also invited to contribute to the discussion. The workshop was held on Thursday, March 3, 2011 at 7:00 p.m. at Acton’s Town Hall.

Process: In order to be more interesting and engaging, a hypothetical scenario was developed and purposely exaggerated, in order to better illuminate the issues and tradeoffs. Acton 2020 Committee members performed a role-play of the different points of view (derived from master planning goals) to help to dramatize these tradeoffs as well as think through mitigating factors. The attendees (comprised both of the general public and resource people) participated by asking and/or answering questions. The role-play resulted in a list of pros and cons as well as mitigating measures agreeable to most. This then led to a more general discussion of the issues.

Prior to the discussion, the Consultants presented a PowerPoint slide show summarizing some of the main findings of their research regarding existing conditions and future trends in Acton. A Highlights Handout was distributed in order to provide participants with relevant facts and figures to help inform the discussion.

The discussion was followed by smaller break out groups, where among other things, attendees were invited to participate in a mapping exercise to begin to try to locate desirable types of activities and facilities. They were then asked to suggest action items and to prioritize these.

Following the small group discussions the group reconvened to share priorities and to outline next steps. The forum was well attended and was characterized by a high energy level and productive dialogue. Approximately twenty-five (25) to thirty (30) people were in attendance.



Key Themes:

The following are some key themes that emerged from the discussion with the “large group” of participants as well as in the small group discussions (See appendices for detailed notes).

UNDERLYING THEME: There seemed to be consensus regarding the fact that what seemed both more desirable as well as most feasible in terms of future development was small-scale -- mostly in the form of restaurants and shops --in-fill development in the village centers and Kelley’s Corner. The discussion also focused on the importance of understanding how to attract and retain desirable businesses (e.g. providing incentives, investing in infrastructure, streamlining permitting, etc.). Participants also emphasized the importance of supporting small and home-based businesses.

- ❖ **Main motivators for wanting economic development** were a desire for more goods and services, especially retail and restaurants, followed by some desire (expressed as a lower priority) for job creation and increasing the tax base.
 - Additional thoughts include aging population (and changing needs), enhancing the school system (by connecting research and development to schools, internships, etc.)
 - Also commented on the desirability of a diverse economy (more robust), localizing economy (e.g. food), capitalizing on spin off effects and supporting home-based businesses
- ❖ **Creating walkable destinations by clustering retail and restaurants** seemed to be a clear priority above job creation for participants.
 - Interest in small-scale, clustered, walkable areas of retail and restaurants mostly as in-fill, mostly in and around villages and Kelley’s Corner; interest in clustering creating synergy. Each village should have its own identity
 - Need to attract young affluent families (walkable, good restaurants, movies, night life, places to gather)
- ❖ **Need to understand how to attract desired businesses.**
 - Streamline permitting
 - Understand what businesses need and how Acton can match those needs
 - Provide incentives
 - Access and services are important to consider
 - Lack of large amounts of developable land with easy access from interstate highway means that most future development will most likely be smaller scale, in-fill development of smaller parcels
- ❖ **Need to retain existing desirable businesses**
 - Create a business-friendly environment
 - Improve communication between town and business community
- ❖ **Interest in support of small and home-based businesses** in a number of ways including providing space, training and support centers for solo-preneurs, establishing a small business ombudsman to advocate for small businesses and incubator space for starting up small businesses.
- ❖ **Main concerns regarding additional economic development – impacts** on traffic, water, septic, and town character.

Priority Action Steps

If you could do one thing to address economic development issues in Acton what would it be?

Action	Comments	# of groups¹	# of dots²
Space for solo-preneurs	Destination creation	1	12
Village Infill	Incl. reuse of existing buildings	2	11
Create a land development corporation		1	10
Kelley's Corner		1	9
Recreation		1	7
Improve town interdepartmental communication regarding business interests	Incl. creating a one-stop permitting center	1	6
Retail/restaurants	Including children's stores	2	5
Improve connections		1	4
Establish a small business ombudsman	To advocate/negotiate for small business interests	1	4
Incubator Space	For small businesses	1	4
More commercial activity in S. Acton		1	4
Children's activities	Parks and play spaces	1	4
Use large parcels for job creation		1	3
Sewerage		1	2

Important ideas regarding implementation:

- **INFILL DEVELOPMENT (24)** includes:
 - Village infill (11)
 - Kelley's Corner (9)
 - More commercial activity in S. Acton (4)
- **SUPPORT OF SMALL AND HOME-BASED BUSINESSES (20)** includes:
 - Space for solo-preneurs, support center for training, shared services (12)
 - Establish a small business ombudsman to advocate for small businesses (4)
 - Incubator space for small businesses (4)
- **PROACTIVE APPROACH TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (20)** includes:
 - Create a land development corporation (10)
 - Improve interdepartmental communication including one-stop permitting (6)
 - Establish a small business ombudsman (4)
- **CONNECT RETAIL AND FOOD TO RECREATION (11)** includes:
 - Locate more recreational space (7)
 - Parks and playspace (4)
- **FOCUS ON CHILDREN (6)** includes:
 - Parks and play spaces (4)
 - Children's stores (2)

¹ Out of total of three (3).

² After all participants added their thoughts to a list, each was given five (5) dots with which to prioritize. They were instructed to use all five (5), but no more than three (3) on any one item.

Small Group Exercise: Summary

In addition to the action steps that participants were asked to suggest and prioritize (summarized on the previous page), participants were asked a couple of questions and invited to participate in a mapping exercise.

Questions

Place of employment. In terms of their place of employment, participants ranged from retired, work at home, work in town and work out of town.

Shopping and Dining. In terms of where participants shop and dine, they made the following comments:

Group 1: majority does most of their shopping in Acton, but most of their dining out of town.

Group 2: felt that shopping lacks diversity and is often expensive, but not enough stores for children's clothes and toys. Restaurants lack variety and affordability.

Group 3: mostly buy food, hardware and personal services in town and major appliances, clothing and shoes mostly out of town (including New Hampshire).



Mapping Participants were asked: ***“Where would the different kinds of economic development be best located?”*** They were instructed to use color-coded legos with which to indicate locations on the map. Post-it notes were available for making comments on the map. (Types of development/activities available on the key were: Restaurants/coffee shops/pub, Entertainment (movie theater, musical performance space), Small shops, Big box, Personal services (e.g. dry cleaners), Professional offices (e.g. doctor, dentist, lawyer), Industrial/manufacturing, High tech/R&D, Other ___)

- All three maps concentrate majority of development around existing villages and major roads (i.e. West Acton, South Acton, Kelley’s Corner, North Acton, and all of Great Rd.).
- Restaurants and shops are the most popular kind of development for around the villages.
- Services or other development (such as a hotel or movie theater) were also put in either West Acton or Kelley’s Corner by all three groups.
- The auto auction lot, Transfer Station site, and WR Grace space were each selected as possible spaces for job creation or R&D sites because of their existing space and relative remoteness. The auto auction space has access on Route 2 and one group locating development on the WR Grace site assumed that there would be a new access road).
- Closer to North Acton Village most groups put either recreation or community center spaces and one group even thought of locating some mixed use development to create walkable services for the nearby residential area and elderly housing.





APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: NOTES FROM LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

What do you want Acton to be – bucolic or everything you want?

- Neither extreme, walkable environment with stores (like Maynard), local businesses (not Bolton);
- develop its road system (says an engineer) for better biking and walking, and schools
- Independent villages with identifiable character and local boutiques and restaurants that fit the village
- How to attract young, affluent families? More affordable than Concord but need more walkable, good restaurants, movies, night life, place to gather
- Not only retail, development does not always have to be new stuff –redevelopment, and reuse and infill
- Climate change – relocate food production
- Boxborough shows movies at?? artist building; West Concord has artists work and exhibit in a warehouse; Acton could do similar to attract interesting young people
- Elderly people need to be able to get around easily without driving, especially to shops

Hypothetical Situation

Cons (as listed by participants):

- Wetland impacts
- Storm water runoff from pavement
- Add traffic to congested roads
- Overloaded infrastructure
- Impact on walking children to school
- People come to Acton for rural character – this would be a direct threat to that
- 1.5 million SF more than all town buildings put together
- Can we encourage developer to match jobs to local workforce skill level? Can encourage but can't discriminate against out of towners

Pros (as listed by participants):

- Tax base – reduce rate of residential taxes
- Community sense from people coming together – this will create dining and shopping opportunities
- Jobs in town reduce commuting to and from Town which in turn reduces traffic
- Jobs go to Acton people

Following Discussion:

- Deed restrict existing units to house the workers we want to attract
- Linkage
- Start with road improvements by developer to accommodate the added traffic. Also sidewalks for the schools.
- Also enhance train station and subsidize shuttle service
- Bring to compromise that leaves more open land, also incorporate retail/restaurants, place for playgrounds and public open space
- Underground parking
- Get developer to convert the barn to community gathering place
- Pervious pavement, rain gardens, green roof
- Parking garage to reduce amount of pavement
- Wastewater and stormwater needs to be handled and treated
- Do bylaws require all this parking? Yes but could discuss in future situations
- Does it meet current bylaws? Yes (but such a site does not exist)
- Water supply – is it adequate? Challenge to reduce water in zone 4 – opportunity for water re-use system. Developer could reuse water and wastewater, well if they can get enough in zone 4
- Multiple visions = trade-offs needed: multi-floor building, multi-level parking – easier to capture; stormwater; and screen garage with building; LEED certified design
- Can a direct connection from Rt. 2 be built? Yes if proven necessary and safe, but the challenge is left turns
- Town meeting decides taxes – development adds capacity but will town use it to reduce taxes? Can stabilize taxes but no instant benefit
- What if too much is demanded? Won't get development because too many restrictions and good locations elsewhere.
- From a developer's view – want good location and good workforce. Make it easy and lower risk if you want development

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- Spaulding wouldn't come here – not enough acres in close to the interstate (like Groton or Westford) – not if they get beaten up by the town
- Rt. 27 development illustrates impacts of a big development
- Encourage small scale development
- M Gould (small developer) – Acton is compatible with their vision – people need to go to the variety of stores in his plaza, on a weekday basis; also Acton is difficult to navigate for the development process
- Amenable to current ideas of planning? Would try to accommodate if it works for everyone: location is important – drive by traffic on 2A; level of income; intelligence; rural character
- Cart before the horse – understand business first and what the developer needs to be successful
- What's the right type of business to attract/ retain?
- If not a “player” (in the development process) the Town doesn't have much say in the outcome; it can mostly restrict, there are not too many incentives it can offer; can provide infrastructure as an incentive. Build it first, then attract businesses
- #1 attractor is the schools – Acton known for nice people, good schools, town character
- much of commercial environment already there – hardcore of many small home- or shared space businesses
- to retain: business friendly environment: avoid friction unless necessary; prepare to tell businesses how to solve their problems with the town and answer their questions
- auto-auction property – big box, office, R/D? is it developable?
- Vacancies ... leading up to that parcel; maybe relocate town offices to “soft” area like that parcel
- Need to encourage developer to come – what incentives could we offer?
- Recent purchases, parceled off Nagog Park to business for good price
- If there is a demand they will come and stay: Acton is the 1st affordable town on Rt 2 belt; why need to drive so far for shops and restaurants? Vacancies on 2A – try to fill them up
- What is the main motivator for econ dev? ...? More goods and services: retail, professional offices, restaurants, coffee, pubs, theater. Places to go, casual interaction, more job opportunities, work closer to home, increase tax base
- Demographic changing – aging population
- Single level, complexes of smaller units
- Enhance the school system – R&D expertise lent to schools – educational programs, internships
- Econ diversity will strengthen the town (not Maynard/digital) – also stronger in downturn

- Spin-off effects - growing web of businesses
- Localize economy – food production, basics of life
- People working from home – provide \$300 per month small offices, incubator
- Show positive results of other businesses to attract more
- Ways to address the budget trend out-stripping revenue growth – way to balance budget
- Roland Bartl – have a parcel for 1.9 msf: WR Grace – on the market, multiple access points

APPENDIX B: NOTES FROM SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Group 1 (Jim Purdy & Roland Bartl):

Intro: Themes

- o What can we do for young people;
- o Needs of senior population;
- o Hope Acton could identify a center;
- o Kelley's corner.

Shopping/Restaurants

Two people in the group are retired, two work in Acton and two work out of town.

Five people in the group mostly buy their groceries in Acton, and four do the rest of their shopping mostly in Acton as well. However, only two of six do most of their dining in Acton. It was mentioned that Scupperjack Restaurant (at Nagog Woods) is a restaurant that is missed since it closed.

Mapping Exercise

The group concentrated their development ideas around the existing villages in Acton. Kelley's Corner and West Acton Village were identified as good sites for small shops. Restaurants were put in Kelley's Corner, West Acton Village, Nagog and South Acton Village with the most in Kelley's Corner and West Acton Village. A movie theater at the K-Mart site was also a recommended addition to Kelley's Corner. A shopping mall with a Whole Foods was discussed for the Transfer site (but decided to put incubator space there).

Notes on Maps:

Location: Assabet wells and Independence Rd

Note: Needs water access

Location: above Great Rd near Azelea

Note: more usability in East Acton village with shops already in front and in back

Location: Acton/Whittier Forest area to Wompus Ave

Note: locate residences and senior center and/or community center

Location: Nagog Park and Northernmost corner of Acton border with Littleton

Note: small incubator/ office incubator

Priorities

In prioritizing their development ideas, the group identified Kelley's Corner as their main concern and focus. "Village infill" is the second focus, echoing the concentration ideas shown in the grouping of new development in the existing villages and centers of Acton. Finally, tied for third place were the ideas of improving connections (including safer sidewalks) and an "incubator" space where small startup companies could share office space and services. Other interventions included general sewerage infrastructure, and job creation on large parcels of land.

Votes:

Kelley's Corner = 9

Village Infill = 5

Improve Connections = 4

Incubator space for small businesses = 4

Large parcels – job creation = 3

Sewerage = 2

Group 2 (Brian Barber, Facilitator; Jim Snyder-Grant, Scribe)

People in Group = 9

Years lived in Acton: 2, ½, 18, 34, 31, 15, 15, 4, 7. Average =14

Items purchased primarily in-town: Food, Hardware, Personal Services

Items purchased primarily out-of-town including in New Hampshire: Major Appliances, Clothing, Shoes

Biggest need for additional businesses: More restaurants to broaden dining choices

Favored creating small business support centers to service home businesses, and bring some of them into offices and retail space in commercially zoned areas.

Voting for the one thing to support economic development

- Create a land development corporation: 10 votes
- Infill and reuse of existing buildings: 6 votes
- More commercial activities in South Acton: 4 votes
- Establish a small business ombudsman to advocate and negotiate for interests of small businesses: 4 votes
- Improve town interdepartmental communication regarding business interests: 4 votes

- As part of that create a one-stop permitting center in town government: 2 votes

Notes on Maps:

Location: Powdermill Rd, next to a restaurant/coffee shop/ pub
Note: Replace one store in mall

Location: intersection of Main St and Mass Ave
Note: Mixed use residential community center in Kelley's corner, hotel?

Location: near West Acton and Willow St
Note: small scale services and boutique shops in West Acton village

Location: between Strawberry Hill Rd and Great St
Note: some restaurant and stores on Great Rd

Location: Nonset Path, next to a restaurant/coffee shop/pub
Note: restaurant

Group 3 (Elizabeth Resor):

Shopping/Restaurants

Of the seven people in the group, 4 work at home, 2 in town and 1 out of town. The majority of the group shops and dines out of town (5 and 6 people, respectively, of seven).

The group agreed that the shopping options in Acton lacked diversity and were often more expensive than out of town options. For example, many go to Market Basket in Westford for their usual grocery needs, citing the variety of good and lower prices as reasons for preference over Acton groceries. Everyone in the group agreed that Idylwilde offered great produce in season but did not replace a regular grocery store. Some people noted that a 24-hour store could be helpful, though others pointed out that there are some 24-hour options in Acton (CVS) and that others would change the quality of the town. The same argument was made against big box stores such as Wal-Mart and Target. However, a minority in the group (two people) continually said that there were not enough stores that offered options for children's clothes and toys.

Comments about restaurants in Acton were similar to those about shopping – the lack of variety and affordability. Maynard was used as an example of a town with a better collection of restaurants that were “interesting, but not too expensive”. Many wanted better “environment” and “quality” in the offerings and some saw a particular need for family oriented restaurants.

Mapping Exercise

During the mapping exercise the group had difficulty coming to a decision, although much was discussed in the process. Increasing traffic was a constant concern that made people eager to concentrate development around existing main roads.

Despite all the discussion about the lack of restaurants and shopping options people seemed indecisive about where to put them. However, when the phrase “destination creation” was used by someone in the group everyone got behind the idea – essentially grouping development to make multi-stop destinations with shopping, dining, and work space all together. Under this banner the idea of converting existing buildings into a professional services center for “solo-preneurs” was also very popular. This idea centered on creating a space and service for existing

at-home workers of Acton (the so-called “solopreneurs”), a space where they could get together for career development opportunities (social media and marketing trainings were the example) or simply share the cost of simple services (internet, printing, etc).

Towards the end of the exercise the creation of recreation areas was introduced and almost immediately agreed upon. Specifics and location were not determined but everyone seemed to think that more recreation spaces would be a positive addition to Acton. Some wanted to include outdoor eating areas. Others were more interested in focusing on children’s play spaces (indoor or outdoor).

Notes on Maps:

Location: Between River St and Drummer Rd

Note: River St open space/Brookside walking paths

Location: Between Mass Ave and Barker Pond

Note: Office/commercial development access off Rt 2 to mitigate traffic

Location: Between Mass Ave and Oakwood Rd

Note: Next Generation

Location: Martin St and Jones Field

Note: Assabet river rail trail restaurants and coffee shops, bike rental, etc

Location: Between South Acton and Monson Land

Note: work with existing owners for re-development for South Acton village retail/boutique and restaurants/coffee shops

Location: Mass Ave and Flint Rd intersection

Note: outdoor/café dining area – shared by 4 restaurants

Location: Acton Center

Note: small offices in fire station after it moves

Location: Open space across from/ North of Post Office Sq.

Note: recreation

Location: Next to Nagog water site and Grassy Pond Area

Note: recreation/ playground area

Location: near North Acton

Note: locate office support, restaurants, places to do chores near offices, ideally within walking distance of new village CTV

Location: North Acton, just above NARA

Note: Professional offices, lots of residences across the street so this suits the space much better than industrial (worried about traffic increasing)

Location: North Acton, next to R&D and Professional Offices

Note: more opportunities for internships for high school students

Location: between Wills Hole Town Forest and Quarry Rd
Note: elderly recreation

Votes:

Destination Creation: Solo-preneurs = 12

Recreation = 7

Destination Creation: Retail/Restaurants = 3

Children's Locations: Play Spaces = 2

Children's Locations: Parks = 2

Children's Locations: stores = 2

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