



Town of Northbridge

Economic Development Strategic Plan



Prepared By
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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Developed on behalf of the town of Northbridge, this Economic Development Strategic Plan (EDSP) is intended to help local stakeholders and town staff implement strategies that capitalize on the town's existing historical, cultural, and economic assets. This document establishes a baseline existing conditions that drive the Town's economy. It provides a five-year action plan to ensure the town's fiscal health and support economic growth in Northbridge.

At the request of Northbridge's Town Planner and Town Manager, the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) and Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) analyzed opportunities and constraints to economic development in Northbridge. Financed through Massachusetts Community Compact Cabinet program, the study builds on an existing body of work that includes the *Blackstone Valley Prioritization Project* (2012), *Northbridge Open Space and Recreation Plan* (1994), the *Northbridge Reconnaissance Report* (2007), and Priority Development Area (PDA) studies completed by CMRPC.

To establish a foundation for research, the Project Team met with municipal staff to review economic development priorities, interpret past economic development efforts, and study targeted areas and other economic development initiatives such as 43D Expedited Permitting. Characterizing priority sites and past projects was supplemented by an extensive public process that engaged community and business leaders in identifying issues and opportunities they viewed as being key to economic development in Northbridge. Similar interviews were conducted with elected and appointed officials, the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, and the Massachusetts Office of Business Development (MOBD). Existing conditions were further assessed by analyzing the business climate, zoning, workforce development and education, marketing and economic efforts, sites and infrastructure, and tourism. Collecting and analyzing these data sources, along with the Project Team's extensive knowledge of the Central Massachusetts Region, were key to relating current State, regional, and local economic trends to this project.

The Project Team next worked with the Town to identify opportunities and challenges for economic development in Northbridge. An analysis showing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) highlights areas that may have the most direct impact on future economic development in Northbridge. In culmination, the Project Team prepared an implementation framework for the proposed economic development strategy, which includes goals and objectives, focus areas, maps and illustrations, and a five-year action plan.

Ultimately, the Project Team determined that Northbridge is home to abundant assets that position it to thrive in the 21st century economy. Such assets include its natural and cultural resources, transportation connections, and a diverse commercial base. However, the Project Team also identified constraints in the form of zoning, permitting processes, parking requirements, and other areas that require redress. The Town must address these challenges to pave the way for private investment. The following report details these opportunities and challenges and presents strategies for facilitating economic growth.

HISTORY

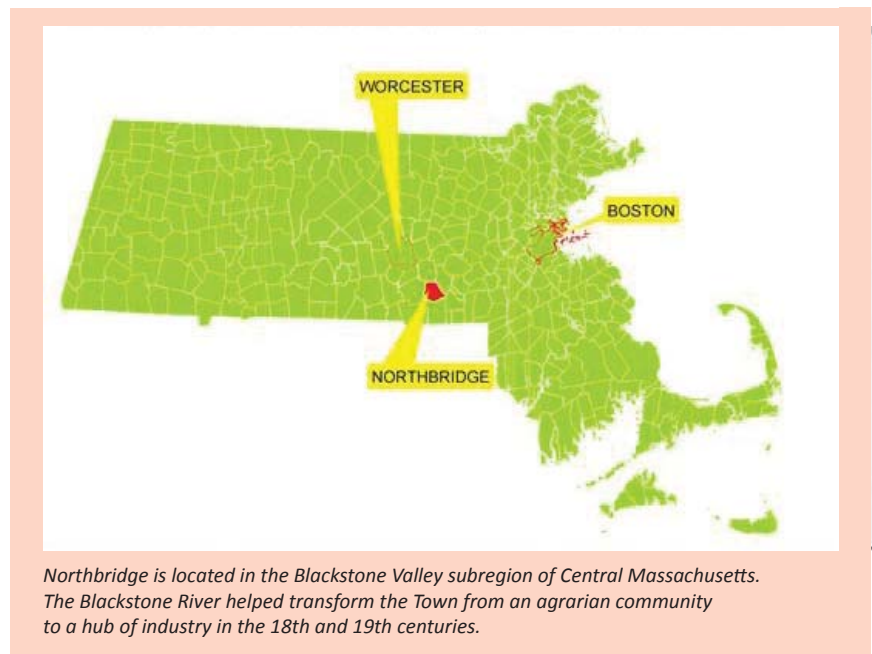
Northbridge has a rich manufacturing heritage. Located south of the City of Worcester and in close proximity to the confluence of The Blackstone and Mumford Rivers, Northbridge underwent a transition from a farming-based community to a hub of industry and transportation. Available hydro-power, connections provided by the Blackstone River canal, and regional railroads made Northbridge a key manufacturing center throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Town's manufacturing heritage dates to the early 18th century, when grist, saw, and iron mills were established in present-day Whitinsville and Riverdale. In the early 19th

century, a mill village emerged in present-day Rockdale. At approximately the same time, the Whitin family constructed a cotton mill and housing for its workers. Two additional cotton mills would be built over the next two (2) decades.¹ By the late 19th century, Rockdale, Riverdale, Linwood, and Whitinsville were established as stable mill villages to support the growing population of Northbridge mill workers and their families. Of the four (4) villages, Whitinsville experienced the greatest growth. In the mid-1800s, the Whitin family expanded their operation to include cotton yard goods and textile production. In addition to increasing their manufacturing facilities, the Whitin family continued to build housing for workers, civic institutions, and a variety of other assets. By engaging in this work, the Whitin family positioned Whitinsville to become a focal point of life and work in the local landscape. These industries thrived in Northbridge until the Great Depression, when several mills closed due to economic decline. This downward trend continued through the 20th century as manufacturing declined across the country. In recent years, Northbridge, like many mill towns, has struggled to reorient its economy to the new post-industrial era.

In the mid-20th century, many former industrial centers were repurposed as bedroom communities for larger cities. Easy access to Worcester and Providence via Route 146, and to Boston via Route 90, has allowed Northbridge to maintain a robust housing market and a comparatively high standard of living. Yet, at the same time, this pattern has had a damaging effect on the old village centers. Reorienting town life away from existing mills and village centers has limited pedestrian-scale development and stifled the potential for village centers to become modern cultural and economic destinations. Auto-oriented development, like that along Route 122, provides economic benefits, but draws focus away from the village centers. Such development also requires large amounts of otherwise productive land to be used for parking. As an additional challenge, economic activity in the old mill villages has given way to regional shopping centers located outside of Northbridge. However, the Town has taken steps to reimagine its village centers and reclaim them as destination sites. In 2014, the Blackstone River Valley National Park, which spans parts of Massachusetts and Rhode Island, was established to preserve and protect the historic legacy in the Blackstone River Valley. Northbridge and other prominent mill towns are included in the park. This national designation provides a unique opportunity to raise the profile of the Town's mill

Figure 1. Northbridge in a Statewide and Regional Context



¹ Northbridge Reconnaissance Report (2007).

villages and bring new vitality. Additionally, the Town has worked to encourage private investment, streamline plan review processes, and enhance aesthetics in key areas.

PRIOR EFFORTS

Northbridge has recently implemented many strategies to facilitate economic development. Funded through the Community Development Block Grant (CBDG) and Community Development Action Grant (CDAG) programs, the Town undertook streetscape, sign, and facade improvement projects in Rockdale and Whitinsville in the early 2000s. These improvements enhanced the villages' visual quality and improved pedestrian and vehicular circulation. In 2007, Northbridge partnered with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEA) on an Urban Rivers Vision 2 project for the Village of Rockdale. The project engaged residents in visioning the riverfront's future. Existing brownfields have been identified by previous studies. The 2040 Providence Road site, a brownfield at the gateway of the village, was identified as critical to Rockdale's revitalization. In 2011 and 2012, the Town completed Phase I and Phase II Environmental Site Assessments, as well as a reuse study.

Adopting a Historic Mill Adaptive reuse Bylaw in 2012 supported adaptive reuse in the Linwood and Whitin Mills. The Linwood Mill complex is now home to affordable senior housing, the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor offices, retail stores, a restaurant, and a brew pub. The Whitin Mill is home to several businesses as well as a successful business incubator. In 2010, the Town adopted an Agri-Tourism Farm zoning provision that permitted agricultural based recreation, entertainment and education by-right. In doing so, the Town supported expansion of the West End Creamery, which serves 15,000 visitors annually and (in addition to handcrafted ice-cream) offers amenities such as a corn maze, miniature golf, and barnyard jump. The Town also designated several sites as priority development areas. These sites include parcels in Rockdale, Linwood, and Whitinsville among others. The Town has also established a 43D expedited permitting process for six (6) sites on Main Street and Linwood Avenue. Northbridge has provided Tax Increment Financing (TIF) agreements for priority properties. In 2015, the Town provided Woonsocket Glass Manufacturing with a five-year TIF that enabled the business relocate from Rhode Island to facility in Whitinsville. The agreement funneled \$8.1 million in private investment into Northbridge and created an estimated fifty (50) local jobs.²

In addition to successful place-based projects, the Town has implemented best practices in municipal processes and procedures. The Town Planner hosts Technical Review meetings with applicants, engineers, and various department heads. These meetings help mitigate potential application issues, build consensus, and provide a single forum in which applicants can ask questions. In support, the Town published a *Town of Northbridge Best Development Practices Guidebook* in 2009 and a *Town of Northbridge Permitting Guidebook* in 2012. The Town's *Business Spotlight* gives additional support to local businesses by providing a monthly opportunity for businesses to promote themselves at meetings of the Board of Selectmen. Northbridge's Community Planning and Development Office and the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce host an Annual Business Breakfast. At these events, local officials and staff, State agencies and business partners field questions from local business owners and discuss how they can support local enterprise.

Northbridge has made great strides to improve its economic future. Additional actions such as those identified in this study will help the Town build upon and maximize such successes.

² <http://www.mass.gov/hed/press-releases/13-economic-development-projects-supporting-job-growth-.html>

PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

PROCESS OVERVIEW

This Strategic Plan leverages a variety of techniques and data sources to develop a holistic and customized economic development strategy for Northbridge. The development team began its work by reviewing local and regional data to identify trends and opportunities. In addition to publicly available data such as US Census Bureau and Department of Education statistics, the project team acquired proprietary data sets and specialized reports such as fiscal hot spot analysis, retail leakage reports, and industry cluster information. This data, combined with preexisting analysis, field work, and land use maps, provided a strong foundation for further analysis.

The Project Team focused extensively on the following nodes: Rt. 146/Main Street; Church Street (Whitinsville); Plummer's Corner; Providence Road (Rockdale); Providence Road (Linwood); Providence Road (Riverdale); Providence Road (undeveloped area) Osterman Commerce Park; Linwood Mill; Whitin Machine Works (the Shops); 2040 Providence Road; and Foppema's Farm and Castle Hill Farm. The team assessed natural and cultural resources, transportation, traffic, and connectivity, municipal processes and procedures, and zoning as well.

After identifying priorities and visions held by residents and stakeholders through various public input processes, and analyzing opportunities for pursuing these goals, the project team developed a framework for the implementation of the strategic plan. This framework includes goals and objectives, focus areas, maps/illustrations, a 5-year action plan, and recommendations.

Organized thematically, the plan addresses the following topics:

- Natural and cultural resources
- Transportation, traffic and connectivity
- Industry
- Village and commercial centers
- Municipal processes and procedures
- Zoning
- Parking

Each recommendation is accompanied by a time-frame for action and implementation. The action plan presents concrete steps for the strategies detailed in this plan.

PUBLIC INPUT PROCESSES

The Project Team sought public input to help develop a vision for the Town's future and to identify additional nodes. These efforts included meetings with municipal staff and the Planning Board, staff-oriented focus groups, business-oriented focus groups, and a public forum. From extensive public outreach, the consultant team became familiar with the issues Northbridge currently faces and gained a strong understanding of the Town's strengths and of residents' priorities. Ultimately, the Project Team found that residents, business owners, elected officials, and municipal staff who participated in these events had similar visions for future economic development in Northbridge.

Community/Stakeholder interviews

On March 29, 2017, the project team held two (2) community/stakeholder interviews. These interviews allowed the project team to collect a large amount of data on public opinion in a short period of time. Through this method, the project team looked to key stakeholders to help identify significant issues, voice their concerns, and make recommendations for Northbridge's future.

The first interview session was conducted with municipal personnel. This group was encouraged to discuss municipal processes, procedures, challenges, and strategies to make the town more "business friendly." Municipal personnel identified several unmet needs and strategies to improve current processes. These included:

- Clarifying regulations so that they can be easily interpreted by everyone regardless of professional specialty (i.e. applicants, the Board of Selectmen)
- Cultivating mixed-use village centers, especially in the downtown
- Ensuring parking and other infrastructure in the village centers are not over-burdened
- Reducing the number of staff with which applicants need to meet (i.e., streamlining processes)
- Encouraging more flexibility interpreting the building code to simplify the development process

The second stakeholder interview group included business owners, Realtors, and Chamber of Commerce personnel. Attendees were encouraged to discuss existing obstacles to business, desired changes to local regulations, processes, and procedures, and the completeness of municipal economic development tools. Participants identified several challenges and strategies, including:

- Reconsidering industrial zones along major highway corridors (e.g. Rte. 122) to be more flexible
- The role of small businesses in refilling the historic mills
- A the need for pad-ready sites to accommodate large, growing businesses
- Existing challenges with the school district, which impact the perception of quality of life in town
- A lack of coordination between towns in the region
- Increasing State support for sub-regional efforts (e.g. the Blackstone Valley)

On April 14, 2017, the project team conducted a final stakeholder group interview with owners of the Town's historic mills. Participants identified several challenges and strategies for economic development, including:

- Marketing available properties. Potential business interests are often unaware that Northbridge has available space.
- Clarifying zoning and development processes and changing the existing special permit authority
- Ensuring a potential Local Historic District does not over-burden mill owners with additional maintenance costs and limiting restrictions that could prevent modernization of the buildings

Public Forum

On April 11, the Town Planner convened a public forum on economic development. The public forum was designed as a collaborative session for participants to identify problems and brainstorm solutions. Following an overview of the Economic Development Strategic Plan's purpose and goals, participants divided into four (4) subgroups to identify and develop solutions. Members of the Project Team participated as facilitators and led subgroups through activities to identify resources and needs, opportunities and constraints, a vision for the community, and detailed development scenarios. After reconvening from breakout groups, participants identified their favorite solutions.

Participants highly favored economic strategies that preserve and capitalize on Northbridge's rural, small-town feel and history (a complete summary of proposed solutions and their rank by residents is located in Appendix A). They expressed overwhelming support for economic development that focuses on tourism in the historic district. Beyond historic tourism, the following strategies also received broad support:

- Promoting creative use of mill spaces
- Developing an outdoor recreational economy
- Promoting 43D Expedited Permitting sites
- Preserving or appropriately redeveloping Castle Hill Farm

The public input process revealed a common vision for the future of Northbridge- preserving, protecting, and leveraging the Town's unique assets to facilitate economic growth. The following goals synthesize the priorities and strategies favored by residents with best practices in economic development. They served as the basis for the project team's analysis, which identifies strategies to help the town make progress toward these goals.

GOALS

The following goals reflect desires held by residents, the business community, municipal staff and officials, and other stakeholders as expressed to the project team.

Goal 1: Northbridge will leverage its unique historical and cultural assets.

Public input suggests that past efforts to leverage Northbridge's robust historical legacy, such as establishing a Historic and Cultural Zoning district in Whitinsville, have been favored by residents. Many of public process participants suggested expanding the uses allowed in and around town mills, especially those mills located within the Blackstone Valley National Park. Participants voiced support for including a visitor's center, a conference center, and/or a hotel at or near existing mill sites.

Goal 2: Northbridge will make village centers genuine destinations for residents and visitors.

Like many New England communities, Northbridge was incorporated from several smaller villages. The Town's historic legacy is visible today and is represented in its village centers. These village centers serve as dominant cultural and economic focal points in town. Participants identified four (4) major village centers:

- Whitinsville (downtown)
- Rockdale Center
- Linwood
- Riverdale

Respondents voiced support for more retail, restaurants and bars in these locations. While not considered a village center, participants highlighted Plummer's Corner as being a key commercial center.

Goal 3: Northbridge will expand development opportunities along major transportation corridors.

Existing commercial and industrial areas, such as those around Route 122, were identified as attractive areas for future opportunity in the Town. Currently, large swaths of industrial land along the Route 122 corridor, especially around the southern portion, are zoned Industrial I and Industrial II. This zoning precludes many of the more commonly requested uses, including more office space, expanded restaurants, bars, and service industries. The sense, especially among business owners who attended the focus groups, was that more flexibility in by-right usage in those areas would improve their market viability.

Goal 4: Northbridge will make the process of developing a business in village centers as easy as possible.

Respondents at the public meeting and focus groups expressed a desire for increased economic activity concentrated around the town's village centers. Respondents pointed to Town regulatory processes such as limited by-right uses in the village centers, the Zoning Board of Appeals' Special Permit Granting Authority, and a lack of one-stop-shopping for permitting as constraints to development.

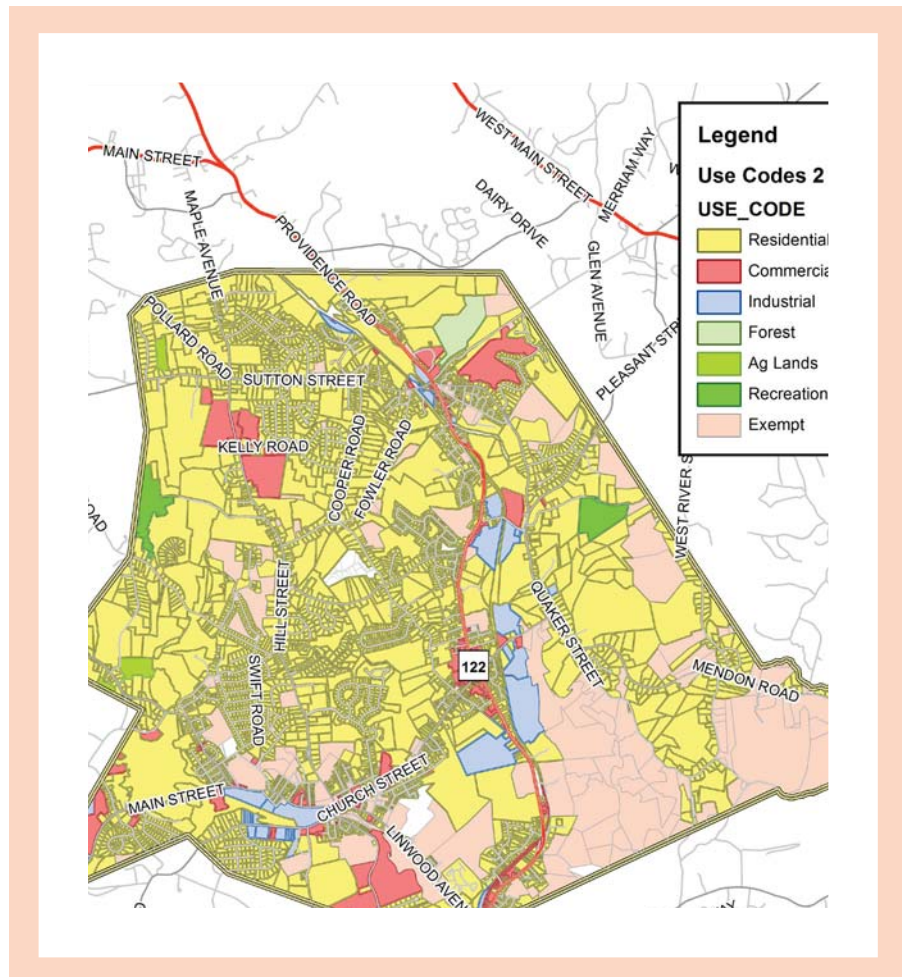
Pursuing these goals will allow the Town to take full advantage of economic opportunities and leverage its existing assets to sustainable economic growth consistent with the stakeholders' desires. The following section presents an overview of town-wide existing conditions in areas that relate to economic development. The section will orient the reader, provide a baseline from which to measure the success of future economic development strategies, and establish a context for analysis.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

LAND USE

Northbridge comprises 18.06 square miles and abuts Grafton on the north, Upton and Mendon on the east, Uxbridge on the south, and Sutton on the west. Northbridge is the most densely populated of these communities (870 people per square mile).³ The Town's village center land use is relatively dense which is typical of mill centers, providing excellent urban fabric for developing robust walkable centers. Outside of these centers, Northbridge is largely low-density residential, agricultural, and open space. The areas of open space provide excellent opportunities for recreational activities with the Blackstone River as an example of potential tourist-based economic assets.

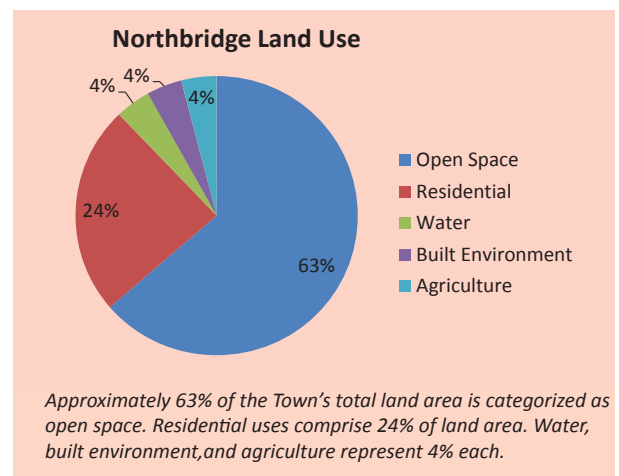
Figure 2. Northbridge Land Use Map



FISCAL HOT SPOTS

Geographic fiscal analysis is a common technique used to characterize “clusters” of development with similar assessment values. Hot Spot Analysis, a GIS tool, is used to conduct this operation. Through Hot Spot Analysis, economic development experts can determine whether features with high or low values tend to cluster spatially. To be considered a statistically significant hot spot, parcels must have high assessment values and be surrounded by other parcels with similar values. This concept, which is based on spatial autocorrelation or dependence, assumes that features located near one another are more likely to be similar than those that are not. This type of analysis shows geographically where a higher density or cluster of activity occurs. In short, Hot Spot Analysis is a method of describing the relationship a development pattern has on the assessed land value around it. This information

Figure 3. Northbridge Land Use by Percent



³ Draft Open Space & Recreation Plan (2015- 2022); CMRPC Community Snapshot- Northbridge (2008).

can help a community answer several questions including: 1) Is the community's tax base really driven by a few geographic spots within a jurisdiction, 2) How much of the tax base is concentrated there, and 3) Are these areas places the Town might want to consider for strategic investment and development.

This analysis shows that Northbridge contains two primary hotspots: Whitinsville and Rockdale. Linwood and Plummer's Corner are shown to be spatially dependent as well. However, the relationship found in these two areas is less significant than that calculated for Whitinsville and Rockdale. When combined, Whitinsville, Rockdale, Linwood, and Plummer's Corner account for only thirteen (13) percent of the Town's land. Despite making up only a relatively small land area, these areas represent thirty-two (32) percent of total parcel value in Northbridge. The two primary hotspots, Whitinsville and Rockdale, are caused by unique features. In Whitinsville, the high value per acre is largely due to moderately dense commercial development (as well as some civic uses). In Rockdale, the high value is largely attributable to its historic mill housing, which has greater housing density than anywhere else in town. Despite having different development patterns, the areas cited above are alike in that they have acreage values higher than elsewhere in town and contribute more to the tax base per square acre than any other area. Consequently, efforts to encourage private investment (such as development incentives and infrastructure investments) should be considered in these areas.

POPULATION

Northbridge is a growing community and is currently home to 15,707 people.⁴ Between 2000 and 2015, the population grew by more than twenty-three (23) percent. This growth outpaced that of all but one (1) municipality in the Southeast Central Massachusetts subregion.⁵ By 2030, Northbridge's population is expected to grow to nearly 19,000 residents.⁶

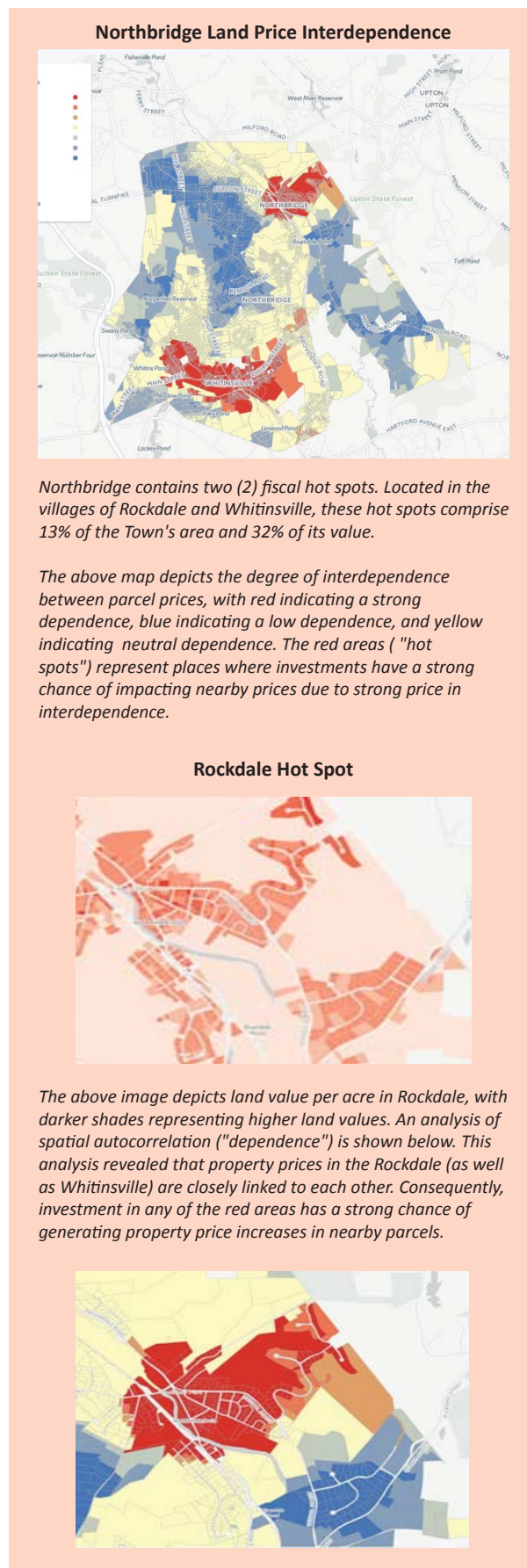
Locally, income is also on the rise. In 2010, per capita income among Northbridge residents averaged \$30,499. By 2015, the per capita income increased by nearly sixteen (16) percent to \$35,354. The Town's median household income also experienced moderate growth, increasing by approximately seven (7) percent over the same period. In 2015, the Town's median household income was

⁴ US Census Bureau 2010 Demographic Profile Data

⁵ The Southeast Central Subregion includes the towns of Blackstone, Douglas, Grafton, Hopedale, Mendon, Millbury, Millville, Northbridge, Uxbridge, Upton, and Sutton.

⁶ CMRPC Population Projects (2016).

Figure 4. Fiscal Hot Spots



slightly higher than elsewhere in Massachusetts - \$72,550 in Northbridge versus \$68,563 statewide.⁷ This growth reflects numerous factors, including significant improvements in educational achievement. In 2011, Northbridge's high school graduation rate was approximately seventy-eight (78) percent. By 2016, this rate reached ninety-one (91) percent, representing the greatest rate of improvement in a Central Massachusetts school district during this period.⁸ Figure 5 presents 2011 and 2016 graduation rates, as well as the rate of change, for all Central Massachusetts school districts. Overall, the Town's resident population tends to be well educated- 43.5 percent possess a college degree.⁹ For Northbridge to meet the needs of its future population and resist becoming a bedroom community, it must ensure that job growth occurs across income and education levels.

HOUSING

The affordable housing stock in Northbridge is currently insufficient to meet low-to-moderate income residents' needs.¹⁰ Of the 6,488 total housing units in town, only 455 (or 7.4 percent) qualify as affordable, while 7.7 percent of all Northbridge households are below the poverty level.¹¹ Consequently, many Northbridge households are housing cost burdened.¹² Because affordable housing comprises less than the (10) percent of Northbridge's total housing stock, the Town does not qualify for exemption from MGL 40B affordable housing projects that do not meet its standards for density, buffers, conservation, and other criteria.

Under Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40B (the Comprehensive Permitting Act), in communities with less than ten (10) percent affordable housing, developers can appeal unfavorable decisions by local Zoning Boards of Appeals to a State Housing Appeals Committee. Unless a proposed development presents serious health or safety concerns that cannot be mitigated, the State Housing Appeals Committee typically overrules local decisions to favor developers. Thus, Northbridge is not fully protected from developers pursuing projects inconsistent with local zoning regulations.¹³ Achieving a ten (10) percent affordable housing rate would provide the town with protection from undesirable 40B applications. Such goals could be pursued using Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds, developing and executing a local Housing Production Plan, or passing an affordable housing bylaw.

Table 1. Central MA Graduation Rates by District

| High School District | Graduation Rate 2011 | Graduation Rate 2016 | % Change |
|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| Massachusetts | 83.4 | 87.5 | 4.92% |
| CMRPC Region | 87.1 | 88.9 | 2.07% |
| Northbridge | 78.2 | 91.2 | 16.62% |
| Worcester | 72 | 81.9 | 13.75% |
| Oxford | 78.3 | 88.8 | 13.41% |
| Quaboag Regional | 81.9 | 89.2 | 8.91% |
| Grafton | 85.7 | 90.9 | 6.07% |
| Shrewsbury | 90.5 | 95.2 | 5.19% |
| Blackstone-Millville | 89.7 | 94.2 | 5.02% |
| Hopedale | 88.5 | 92.9 | 4.97% |
| Tantasqua Regional | 89.2 | 93.5 | 4.82% |
| North Brookfield | 88.9 | 92.3 | 3.82% |
| Southbridge | 69 | 71.2 | 3.19% |
| Auburn | 94.1 | 96.9 | 2.98% |
| Uxbridge | 79.8 | 82.1 | 2.88% |
| Wachusett Regional | 92.6 | 95.1 | 2.70% |
| Millbury | 94.3 | 96.2 | 2.01% |
| Algonquin Regional | 95 | 95.7 | 0.74% |
| Mendon-Upton | 93 | 93.5 | 0.54% |
| Charlton-Dudley Regional | 90.7 | 91.1 | 0.44% |
| Sutton | 94.3 | 94.7 | 0.42% |
| Berlin-Boylston | 91.8 | 91.7 | -0.11% |
| Westborough | 96.9 | 96.5 | -0.41% |
| West Boylston | 90.3 | 88.7 | -1.77% |
| Douglas | 90.4 | 87.3 | -3.43% |
| Quabbin Regional | 89.1 | 85.8 | -3.70% |
| Leicester | 90.4 | 85.3 | -5.64% |
| Webster | 73.9 | 65.2 | -11.77% |
| Spencer-East Brookfield | 83.3 | 73.2 | -12.12% |

7 US Census Bureau, Decennial 2010 Census; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

8 Massachusetts Department of Education, 2011-2016

9 U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate

10 The US Department of Housing and Urban Development defines "affordable" as accessible to incomes at or under the 80 percent area mean income level.

11 Massachusetts Department of Housing and Economic Development, May 12, 2014

12 Housing cost burdened is defined as spending thirty (30) percent or more of one's income on housing.

13 Fact Sheet on Chapter 40B. The State's Affordable Housing Zoning Law. Citizens' Housing and Planning Association. 2007.

Northbridge residents recently voted to advance a one (1) percent CPA surcharge to the 2018 annual town meeting ballot. Funded through a local option tax surcharge and a match from the state CPA Trust Fund (which comes from a surcharge on real estate transactions at the Registry of Deeds), CPA funds could support the creation of affordable housing or other municipal preservation priorities.

JOBS AND WORKFORCE

Northbridge's convenient highway access and proximity to Worcester, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island are fueling the Town's transition from a center of industry to a bedroom community. Approximately twenty-five (25) percent of Northbridge residents commute to another county, and five (5) percent commute to another state. Forty-six (46) percent of residents commute longer than half an hour.¹⁴ In part, these figures reflect a national pattern of working outside of one's community. However, they also reflect a limited amount of local job opportunities and a possible inconsistency between the types of jobs available and the education and skills of the local workforce.

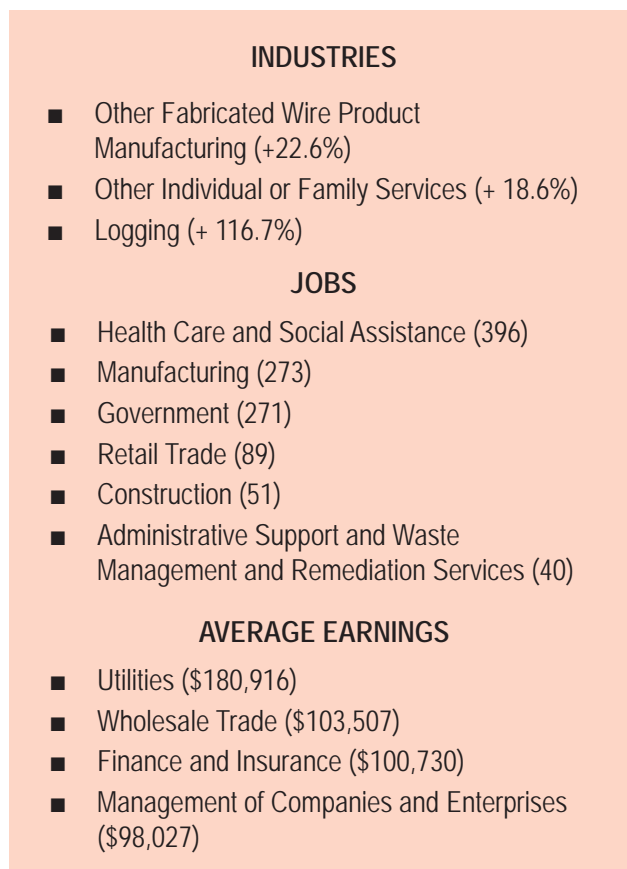
Between 2010 and 2016, Northbridge added 419 jobs for an increase of approximately 8.28 percent. However, this growth rate must be considered in the context of the Great Recession (late 2007 to the early 2010s). Between 2007 and 2010, Northbridge lost 169 jobs or 3.23 percent of its total labor market. The increase in jobs between the first quarter of 2007 and the first quarter of 2016 was just 4.78 percent.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the Town's population increased approximately 3.5 percent during the same period. Consequently, Northbridge's job growth rate, controlled

for population changes, was approximately 1.28 percent. Additionally, the sectors in which Northbridge experienced the greatest growth do not represent those with the highest earning or many workers. Mean salaries for Northbridge's employers by sector were available for three of the industries with the highest number of jobs: *Retail Trade* (\$23,793), *Health Care and Social Assistance* (\$31,080), and *Administrative and Support and Waste Management* (\$46,973). By contrast, the industries with the highest average earnings were *Utilities* (\$180,916), *Wholesale Trade* (\$103,507), *Finance and Insurance* (\$100,730), and *Management of Companies and Enterprises* (\$98,027).

TAX BASE

In 2017, Northbridge's tax rate was \$13.53 per \$1,000 of assessed value for all property types, which is the third lowest rate in Central Massachusetts. Figure 7 presents tax rates by property classification for all forty (40) municipalities in the region. This low rate is attractive to homeowners but limits tax local revenue and, given Northbridge's ratio of residential to commercial and industrial properties, requires homeowners to fund a large percentage of capital investments.

Figure 5. Highest Growth Areas (2016)



¹⁴ 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

¹⁵ Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD). Employment and Wage (ES-202). Q1 2007, 2010, and 2016.

In 2017, residential properties represented 89.5 percent of Northbridge's \$1.5 billion in assessed property values. While the Town contains 1,098 businesses, commercial and industrial properties contribute just 8.4 and 2.1 percent of total assessed value respectively. Of the forty (40) communities that comprise the Central Massachusetts region, Northbridge has the 15th highest percentage of residential assessments; the neighboring towns of Charlton, Hopedale, and Uxbridge rank 16th, 17th, and 13th, respectively (see Figure 7 for a complete inventory of Central Massachusetts tax ratios). Although consistent with that of its neighbors, Northbridge's tax ratio places the responsibility of financing local government, schools, and other services largely with homeowners. Since 2008, Northbridge residents have faced ten (10) capital outlay expenditure exclusions or tax rate cap overrides, eight (8) of which were approved.¹⁶ Expanding the commercial and industrial portions of the tax base presents an opportunity for residential tax relief.

Table 2. FY2017 Tax Rates by Property Classification

| Municipality | R | OS | C | I | PP |
|---------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Dudley | 11.94 | 0.00 | 11.94 | 11.94 | 11.94 |
| Shrewsbury | 12.83 | 0.00 | 12.83 | 12.83 | 12.83 |
| Northbridge | 13.53 | 0.00 | 13.53 | 13.53 | 13.53 |
| Spencer | 13.98 | 0.00 | 13.98 | 13.98 | 13.98 |
| Charlton | 14.10 | 0.00 | 14.10 | 14.10 | 14.10 |
| Oakham | 14.25 | 0.00 | 14.25 | 14.25 | 14.25 |
| Webster | 15.13 | 0.00 | 18.56 | 18.56 | 18.56 |
| Leicester | 15.48 | 0.00 | 15.48 | 15.48 | 15.48 |
| Berlin | 15.85 | 15.85 | 24.21 | 24.21 | 24.04 |
| Hardwick | 16.00 | 0.00 | 16.00 | 16.00 | 16.00 |
| W. Brookfield | 16.06 | 0.00 | 16.06 | 16.06 | 16.06 |
| Millville | 16.11 | 0.00 | 16.11 | 16.11 | 16.11 |
| Boylston | 16.12 | 0.00 | 16.12 | 16.12 | 16.12 |
| E. Brookfield | 16.28 | 0.00 | 16.28 | 16.28 | 16.28 |
| Grafton | 16.40 | 0.00 | 16.40 | 16.40 | 16.40 |
| Millbury | 16.43 | 0.00 | 16.43 | 16.43 | 16.43 |
| Sutton | 16.50 | 0.00 | 16.50 | 16.50 | 16.50 |
| N. Brookfield | 16.53 | 0.00 | 16.53 | 16.53 | 16.53 |
| Douglas | 16.72 | 0.00 | 16.72 | 16.72 | 16.72 |
| Oxford | 16.85 | 0.00 | 16.85 | 16.85 | 16.85 |
| Uxbridge | 16.96 | 0.00 | 16.96 | 16.96 | 16.96 |
| Hopedale | 17.29 | 0.00 | 27.87 | 27.87 | 27.87 |
| Northborough | 17.39 | 0.00 | 17.39 | 17.39 | 17.39 |
| Holden | 17.59 | 0.00 | 17.59 | 17.59 | 17.59 |
| Mendon | 17.75 | 0.00 | 17.75 | 17.75 | 17.75 |
| Princeton | 17.78 | 0.00 | 17.78 | 17.78 | 17.78 |
| Westborough | 17.80 | 0.00 | 17.80 | 17.80 | 17.80 |
| New Braintree | 18.06 | 0.00 | 18.06 | 18.06 | 18.06 |
| Upton | 18.16 | 0.00 | 18.16 | 18.16 | 18.16 |
| Rutland | 18.32 | 0.00 | 18.32 | 18.32 | 18.32 |
| Auburn | 18.34 | 0.00 | 24.16 | 24.16 | 24.06 |
| Warren | 18.56 | 0.00 | 18.56 | 18.56 | 18.56 |
| Barre | 18.70 | 0.00 | 18.70 | 18.70 | 18.70 |
| W. Boylston | 18.80 | 0.00 | 18.80 | 18.80 | 18.80 |
| Worcester | 19.22 | 0.00 | 32.93 | 32.93 | 32.93 |
| Blackstone | 19.26 | 0.00 | 19.26 | 19.26 | 19.26 |
| Sturbridge | 19.40 | 19.40 | 19.40 | 19.40 | 19.40 |
| Brookfield | 19.62 | 0.00 | 19.62 | 19.62 | 19.62 |
| Paxton | 20.39 | 0.00 | 20.39 | 20.39 | 20.39 |
| Southbridge | 20.57 | 0.00 | 20.57 | 20.57 | 20.57 |

R= Residential
 OS= Open Space
 C= Commercial
 I= Industrial

Table 3. FY2017 Tax Ratio by Municipality

| Municipality | R | C | I |
|------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Westborough | 71.89% | 17.36% | 10.76% |
| Auburn | 73.35% | 19.14% | 7.51% |
| Berlin | 75.97% | 21.94% | 2.09% |
| Worcester | 77.17% | 18.50% | 4.33% |
| Northborough | 77.31% | 12.39% | 10.29% |
| Southbridge | 80.92% | 13.54% | 5.54% |
| Oxford | 81.33% | 10.46% | 8.21% |
| Millbury | 84.53% | 11.51% | 3.97% |
| Sturbridge | 84.58% | 12.75% | 2.67% |
| West Boylston | 86.04% | 8.59% | 5.37% |
| Webster | 86.24% | 12.33% | 1.42% |
| Shrewsbury | 87.85% | 8.88% | 3.27% |
| Uxbridge | 88.00% | 5.70% | 6.30% |
| Spencer | 89.20% | 6.88% | 3.92% |
| Northbridge | 89.45% | 8.44% | 2.12% |
| Charlton | 90.04% | 5.74% | 4.22% |
| Hopedale | 90.26% | 5.54% | 4.20% |
| Sutton | 90.81% | 5.19% | 4.01% |
| Barre | 90.88% | 6.76% | 2.36% |
| Leicester | 91.38% | 6.44% | 2.17% |
| East Brookfield | 92.26% | 6.54% | 1.20% |
| Mendon | 92.56% | 7.00% | 0.44% |
| Grafton | 93.18% | 4.34% | 2.47% |
| Blackstone | 93.35% | 3.40% | 3.25% |
| Hardwick | 93.56% | 5.64% | 0.79% |
| Dudley | 93.83% | 3.65% | 2.52% |
| West Brookfield | 93.85% | 3.62% | 2.53% |
| North Brookfield | 93.86% | 3.77% | 2.36% |
| Warren | 94.24% | 2.97% | 2.79% |
| Holden | 95.22% | 3.41% | 1.36% |
| Brookfield | 95.29% | 3.78% | 0.93% |
| Douglas | 95.85% | 2.24% | 1.91% |
| New Braintree | 95.98% | 4.02% | 0.00% |
| Paxton | 96.78% | 2.11% | 1.11% |
| Oakham | 96.82% | 2.75% | 0.43% |
| Upton | 96.90% | 2.15% | 0.95% |
| Petersham | 96.98% | 2.92% | 0.11% |
| Rutland | 97.30% | 2.31% | 0.39% |
| Millville | 97.45% | 1.77% | 0.78% |
| Princeton | 98.35% | 1.31% | 0.34% |

¹⁶ Massachusetts Department of Revenue. Division of Local Services. Municipal Databank/Local Aid Section.

MANUFACTURING

In 2016, Northbridge industries exported more than \$264 million in goods and services to outside trade areas. Manufacturing represented the largest source of exports at \$67,932,312.¹⁷ According to the most recently available data (2010), Northbridge is home to eighteen (18) manufacturing business that employ a combined 342 employees.¹⁸ Income for these companies is unavailable; however, employee wages for these businesses totaled \$16,800,000. This figure exceeds those of all other sectors except retail and healthcare. As such, manufacturing remains an important component of the Northbridge's economy. Riverdale Mills Corporation and Polyfoam Corporation are the Town's 3rd and 5th largest employers. Because these businesses operate at such large scales, strategies to incorporate more local products into their operations could have a significant impact on the local economy. In 2016, Northbridge-based manufacturing businesses imported \$66,918,486 in services and products. Channeling a percentage of these purchases to local suppliers could have a significant impact. Opportunities for cluster development and business attraction may exist if the Town can identify one or more major, non-local suppliers of these businesses.

SERVICE INDUSTRIES

Northbridge's commercial sector is primarily based on service industries. According to the United States Economic Census, Northbridge-based service businesses employed 3,952 people in 2012. Retail trade comprised the greatest percentage of the service economy, with sales exceeding \$195,000,000. Administrative support and waste remediation (NAICS code 56) and health care and social assistance (NAICS code 62) are significant to the local economy, too. These sectors each provided approximately \$50,000,000 in services in 2012, placing them 2nd and 3rd behind retail trade (where receipts include those of Walmart). Several of the Town's largest employers are healthcare establishments and include Salmon Group (1st), Beaumont Rehabilitation (2nd), and St. Camillus Health Center (4th). Northbridge also contains many home-based businesses that may not be reflected in the US Census data.

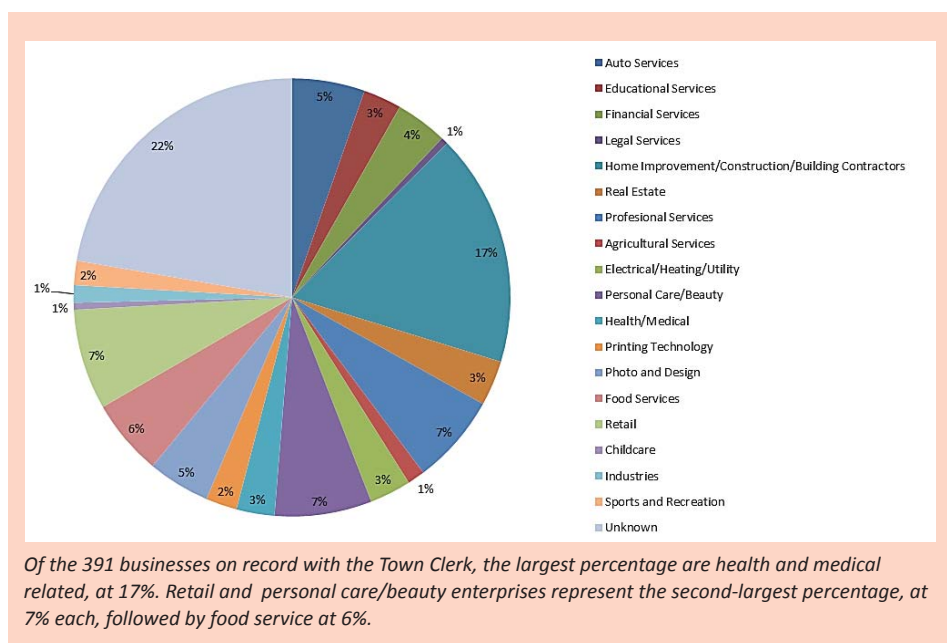
So far In 2017, 391 businesses filed certificates with the Northbridge Town Clerk. These certificates provide a community-scale snapshot that may not be reflected in the Economic

Census. For example, self-employed individuals or small business owners are reflected in the following data but not in the Economic Census. While most businesses registered with the Town Clerk are service providers, the greatest percentage of business activity are *home improvement, construction, and building contractor* businesses at seventeen (17) percent and *retail, childcare, and professional services* at seven (7) percent each. These small businesses are important to the small town character that Northbridge residents prize. Economic development strategies should include strategies to support existing and potential small business owners.

¹⁷ EMSI (2016).

¹⁸ Economic Census of the United States (2012).

Figure 6. Northbridge Business Certificates



RETAIL GAP

A strong retail sector is essential to attracting private investment, visitors, and residents. Today, baby boomers and millennials are flocking to mixed-use buildings in walkable communities and near downtowns. Community amenities are a key factor for site selectors looking to relocate or expand a business to a new community. The Project Team assessed Northbridge's retail sector for opportunities via a leakage analysis provided by Buxton Company, a national business analytics firm (see Appendix B for a complete report).

CMRPC and PVPC identified retail surplus and leakage areas within a 10-minute drive time from the geographic center of Town. Leakage areas indicate that demand for certain retail types outweighs supply, and residents are spending money outside of town that could instead be channeled to local businesses. By contrast, a surplus in retail supply indicates that businesses are drawing customers and spending from outside the trade area. The industries with the greatest leakage are 'Clothing & Clothing Accessories Stores' and 'Sporting Goods, Hobby, Book, & Music Stores', for which demand respectively exceeds sales by one-hundred (100) percent and ninety (90) percent respectively. The industry which has the least amount of retail leakage is 'Food & Beverage Stores', for which demand exceeds sales by twenty (20) percent. The Leakage/Surplus Factor of one-hundred (100) percent for Clothing & Clothing Accessories Stores reveals complete leakage of potential retail sales to other markets. There are no retailers in the market, but household demand exists. This reflects a possible opportunity for investment.

Northbridge retail subcategories with a surplus include Hardware Stores, for which sales exceed demand by four-hundred (400) percent. Similarly, sales in Beer, Wine, & Liquor Stores exceed demand by 160 percent. Department Stores sales exceed demand by 150 percent, a figure which largely reflects the presence of Walmart. Finally, sales in the Gift, Novelty, and Souvenir Stores category exceed demand by 170 percent.

IMPLICATIONS

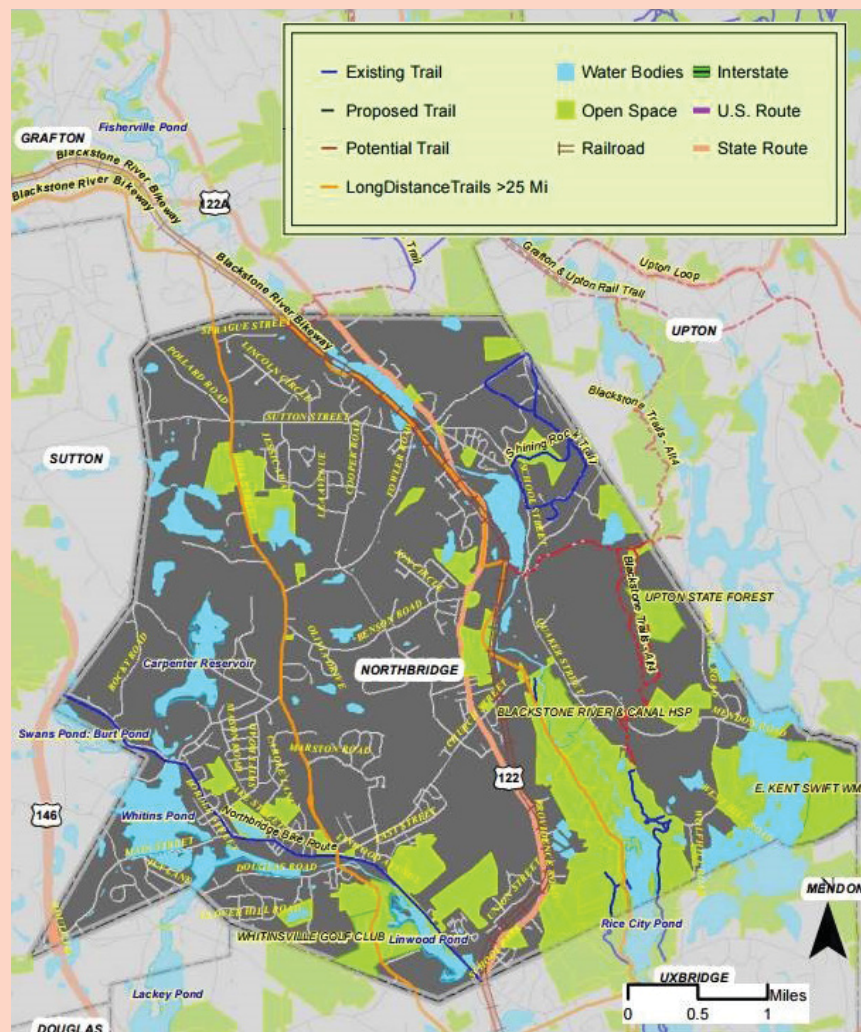
The Town of Northbridge is weathering the structural decline in manufacturing with noteworthy resilience. While the transition from an industrially-driven economy has left several sites vacant or underutilized, the Town's growing service sector, small business enterprises, and cultural and historic assets have allowed Northbridge to retain its vibrancy. Manufacturing continues to play a significant, though decreased, role in the local economy as well. Demographic trends are also favorable, with the level of education, income, and homeownership rising. Challenges, such as the percentage of taxes raised from residential assessments and a lack of retail amenities, remain. The following section examines how Northbridge can grow its economic base to address these and other challenges while retaining the quality of life and character that makes it so unique.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND THREATS

NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

Natural and cultural resources are among the Town's greatest assets. The Town of Northbridge is part of the John H. Chaffee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (now part of the National Park System) that extends from Worcester, Massachusetts to Providence, Rhode Island and memorializes New England's early industrial heritage. The region spawned the American Industrial Revolution in its textile mills and waterways. In this way, Northbridge shares a common history with its cohorts along the Blackstone River. The canals that fueled the region's growth led to the development of mills, mill housing, and waves of immigrants across the region. Yet, few towns in the region are as rich in natural beauty and ecotourism opportunities as Northbridge. The village of Whitinsville is one of just four (4) town centers highlighted in National Park Service walking tours of the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor. Historic downtown Whitinsville has also been designated as the Whitinsville Historic District and is on the National Register of Historic Places. Further, the state has established the Blackstone River and Canal Heritage State Park to include parts of Northbridge and neighboring Uxbridge.

Figure 7. Northbridge Trails and Open Space Map



In Northbridge, natural and cultural resources abound. From the Town's historic mills to its trails and outdoor recreation sites, the Town has many assets that can be leveraged to economic growth.

Strengths

Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park: The inclusion of the town's historical mills and waterways in the Blackstone River Valley National Park is a key strength that should be leveraged. The park designation has the potential to elevate Northbridge's profile to the national level. Visitors to the national park service spent an estimated eighteen billion dollars in 2016, with more than five hundred million spent in Massachusetts alone¹. The potential to capture even a modest share

¹ National Park Service, "Visitor Spending Effects- Economic Contributions of National Park Visitor Spending" <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/socialscience/vse.htm>

of this spending could be a powerful inducement to private investment in and around official park sites.

Trails: Northbridge is home to numerous trails, ponds, overlooks, and historic sites. Regionally, the Town is a destination for outdoor recreation. Northbridge is also home to the Northbridge Bike Route, which begins at Swans Pond in the west and ends at Linwood Pond in the south, Shining Rock Trail, which is located to the east of Rockdale, and the Rice City Pond trail. Informal trails also exist. Used by all-terrain vehicles, off-road bicyclists, and others, these pathways often require crossing private, yet undeveloped property. One such trail exists in the eastern portion of Northbridge near the Upton State Forest. Referred to as the Blackstone Trails, these informal trails could connect to the Blackstone River Bikeway and the Grafton & Upton Rail Trail in the Towns of Grafton and Upton. The Blackstone River Bikeway (a partially realized trail that will extend forty-eight [48] miles through fourteen [14] Towns from Worcester to Providence) will traverse Northbridge in its entirety if completed as proposed.

Water bodies: The Town also has numerous water bodies, including Whitin's Pond, Swans Pond/Burt Pond, Carpenter Reservoir, Linwood Pond, Rice City Pond, and the E. Kent Swift Wildlife Management Area (WMA), which abuts a separate WMA in Uxbridge.

Scenic Vistas: The Town's scenic vistas and hidden wonders are also numerous. Among them is Lookout Point, a rumored vantage of Wampanoag Chief King Phillip. The site boasts views of Goat Hill, "a great kayak access point at Plummer's Landing (the old Blackstone Canal stopover), and nearby River Bend Farm and its old arch bridge, canal and farmlands (the old Voss Farm)."² As demonstrated by the case of Lookout Point, Northbridge teems with publicly accessible, historic and natural assets.

Publicly owned land: One of the Town's few publicly-owned open spaces, the Elsa Whitin Land Trust consists of 21.5 acres. The property includes a community garden and older growth forests. Yet, this property includes no permanent conservation restrictions. Similarly, Northbridge is home to privately owned assets, including Castle Hill, Foppema's Farm, and the West End Creamery. Beloved by Northbridge residents, such landmarks are important to the character of the Town.

Weaknesses

Connectivity: While the Blackstone River Canal and Heritage State Park has numerous trails and opportunities for outdoor recreation, connections between outdoor destinations are limited. Most connections require driving, with options for cycling and walking extremely limited. This lack of internal connectivity could pose a limitation to the development, use, and promotion of the Town's natural assets. Similarly, as stated above, some of the trails within public lands are incomplete and cross through private lands.

Marketing: The National Park Service promotes the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor on its website and in its brochures. However, the characterization of Whitinsville as a company town with the tag line, "Making the Machines," is compelling to only a small segment of potential visitors and it does not reflect the architectural beauty and small-town atmosphere of the village. Once a visitor has decided to come to Whitinsville, the walking tour provided by the Park Service provides a more complete picture of Whitinsville's character. The Town and the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce could create additional marketing materials that better capture the village's many charm. Such materials should be linked to the Park Service website.

Complementary amenities: the historic and cultural centers of the Town are attractive destinations. However, many residents noted a lack of the kinds of complementary amenities that often characterize tourist destinations. Among these were cited restaurants, hotels, bed and breakfasts and a visitor center.

² Blackstone Daily

Opportunities

Castle Hill Farm: Castle Hill Farm is among the Town's most prized heritage landscapes. Privately owned, the hilltop farm includes ninety-eight (98) acres of rolling hills. The usage dates to the 1900s, when the Whittin family developed it as a dairy farm to meet the growing needs of mill workers. The property is not currently used for farming activities but in 2012, the Town and region identified the property as a Priority Preservation Area. Participants in the public forum stressed the importance of this site to the Town's identity and expressed strong support for its preservation or appropriate partial redevelopment. With its rich soils, scenic landscape, and interesting history, the site could potentially support a vineyard and winery, destination spa, conference center, or other agritourism businesses in addition to an area conserved for public access. This would provide financial benefit to the owner without the loss of a valuable scenic and cultural resource.

Foppema's Farm: A seventy-five (75) acre fruit and tree farm located in Northbridge's Upper Hill Street Area, Foppema's Farm is a local institution. The farm boasts Northbridge's only farm store and includes areas where visitors can pick their own berries and produce. In addition to a social media presence, the owners maintain also user-friendly website and provide visitors the option of receive email notifications with recipes and news. While the owners have done an excellent job of modernizing their operation to meet the demands and preferences of 21st century buyers, farming is a labor-intensive, low-return enterprise. Efforts to help the owners generate more income can help mitigate challenges that may arise and protect its long-term viability.

Preservation of Castle Hill Farm, Foppema's Farm, and other remaining farmland can be supported through zoning and strategies to help owners generate additional income. Zoning protections for farms include:

- Agricultural Preservation Overlay Districts, which preserve farmland by requiring clustering of residential properties on smaller lots
- Scenic Roads Bylaws and Scenic Overlay Districts, which promote and protect farm views
- Local Historic Districts, which can be used to help ensure that an agricultural area maintains its rural character
- Adaptive Reuse Bylaws that encourage adaptive reuse of barns if the structures are no longer in agricultural use.
- Open Space Residential Design that identifies conservation areas and then integrates residential units into the remaining landscape
- Transfer of Development Rights, which direct growth away from farmland that should be preserved to locations suited to higher density development

Tools that help farm owners generate additional income include:

- Agricultural Preservation Restrictions (APR), which pay farmers the difference between "fair market value" and the "agricultural value" of their farmland in exchange for a permanent deed restriction
- Chapter 61A, which provides farm owners with reduced local tax assessments while their land is kept in working agriculture
- Community Preservation Act funds, which can be used to purchase Agricultural Preservation Restrictions, document agricultural resources, repair barns, and acquire farmland.
- Historic preservation easements, which are voluntary legal agreements that permanently protect an historic property and offer tax benefits.
- Preservation/ Conservation Restrictions, which are permanent deed restrictions that can be donated to or acquired by a preservation organization which then monitors any future changes to the historic property for perpetuity.
- Leasing the land to one or more agricultural producers. Farm owners can issue RFPs to gauge interest from the local farming community or utilize New England Small Farm Institute's New England Land Link, which is an online clearinghouse for parties interested in leasing out or utilizing farm land.

Threats

Prior to the U.S. Industrial Revolution, Northbridge was an agrarian community. With the influx of industry and mill workers, farmland steadily decreased as a percentage of Northbridge property. Yet, the town retains many working landscapes. These historic farms (and view sheds) are important to the character of Northbridge and highly valued by its residents; however, many of them are insufficiently protected.

Castle Hill Farm is threatened by the possibility of residential development. Within the last decade, a seventy-five (75) lot subdivision has been considered by the property owners. In 2012, this site was designated a Regionally Significant Priority Preservation Area (PPA), along with Foppema's Farm and Kroll's Farm. Nevertheless, today, Kroll's Farm is the site of a sixty-two (62) lot subdivision. Given the importance Northbridge residents place on their historic working landscapes, efforts to preserve remaining agricultural properties should be pursued.

Summary of Action Items

- Build on existing branding and marketing of Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor and Blackstone River and Canal Heritage State Park
- Leverage designation as a National Park to draw more visitors to Whitinsville.
- Build on historic resources and outdoor recreation as a key draw for the region. Promoting these opportunities can bring more people into town and even into the village centers.
- Preserve remaining agricultural properties and historic working landscapes.
- Work with the owners of Castle Hill Farm and Foppema's Farm to identify strategies that will preserve these important assets while increasing the financial viability of the properties.
- Work to find opportunities to enhance local agricultural sector through work with organizations like Central Mass Grown

INDUSTRY

Industry represents a smaller component of the local economy than in decades past; however, it remains vital to Northbridge's identity and employs a significant number of workers. From the Riverdale Mills and Polyfoam Corporation to the Shops at Whiting Machine Works and Osterman Commerce Park, heavy and light industrial enterprises are finding a welcome, supportive home in Northbridge. The Town's low, single-payer tax rate, improving infrastructure, available space, and development incentives present a compelling case for private investment.

Figure 8. 2040 Providence Road



2040 Providence road is a brownfield located at the gateway of Rockdale. This site is among several prime Northbridge parcels suitable for development.

Strengths

Infill Space: Northbridge has an abundance of existing industrial spaces. While the demand for large scale manufacturing has been shrinking over the years, demand for smaller scale, entrepreneurial space has grown. The town's existing stock of available mill space could be leveraged to draw in new smaller startups, co-working or makerspaces, or mixed-use development.

Developable Land: Beyond opportunities for adaptive reuse, Northbridge also has several undeveloped or brownfield parcels well-suited to industry. A former auto salvage yard located at 2040 Providence Road is located within walking distance of Rockdale. “It is an important gateway site, especially approaching the Village from the South along Providence Road (Rt. 122).”³ The site abuts the river, is located along a WRTA bus route, and has water and sewer connections. The property is in a 100-year floodplain, has environmental issues, and is not zoned for residential uses; however, the property’s B-2 zoning allows for community uses and certain retail by right, and manufacturing and wholesale trade by special permit.

Transportation Connections: The Town’s position between two major arterials is potentially a major asset. Rt. 146 and Rt. 122 provide valuable connections to Worcester, Providence, and the greater Worcester County area. The industrial land along Rt.122 provides a great opportunity for connecting businesses to workers and markets.

Weaknesses

Weak Demand: Over the last few decades demand for industrial floor space has seen a precipitous decline. Many mills across the region have had to find new and inventive uses for available space or risk closing entirely. While many mills have seen an up-tick in smaller independent manufacturers, craftspeople and other uses, this demand has not increased so much that it has completely offset the loss of the former, more intensive uses. This has led to a corresponding drop in the price per square foot.

Development Constraints: Many of the existing, industrially-zoned properties suffer from development constraints such as location within a floodplain, geology challenges such as shallow soil covering ledge, or steep slopes. These factors severely limit the amount of developable greenfield space in Northbridge. Concerning infill opportunities or brownfields, modern manufacturers no longer favor multistory brick mill buildings due to changes in production processes.

Opportunities

Adaptive Reuse: As indicated above, the existing mills have adequate space to accommodate smaller scale manufacturing, co-working, makerspaces, and other uses.⁴ Food and beverage manufacturing, especially beer, cider and other alcoholic beverages have seen a marked increase in demand. Indeed, Northbridge is on track to open its first micro-brewery. While these types of businesses do not utilize the floor space to nearly the extent of previous industrial uses, finding creative, adaptive reuses for underutilized industrial spaces can provide a much-needed revenue stream to property owners.

The Whitin Machine Works Shops currently house businesses of varied size. This large-scale historic mill complex is partially occupied; the mill provides opportunities for business incubation and can support enterprises seeking to scale up operations. Located in the heart of Whitinsville, the Shops are an ideal location for mixed-use development and could be redeveloped to include housing that would help activate the downtown. Participants of the public forum expressed support for mixed-use development that included a combination of residences on the top story, a hotel and conference center on the second story, and commercial, retail, manufacturing, warehousing, office space, or other uses on the first and second floors.

Resilient development: Participants in the forums and the public meetings voiced support for expanding the potential uses within industrial zones. The sense from property owners and residents was that current use restrictions within industrial zones do not allow sufficient flexibility to reflect current market demand. Some of the zones along Rt. 122 may be suitable for uses beyond manufacturing. Expanding the possible uses within those zones without limiting their existing by-right uses could inject enough flexibility into development potential to allow for better responsiveness to market changes without

³ 2040 Providence Road Priority Development Area Study (2014)

⁴ Co-working spaces are shared office spaces in which inhabitants of the area are not employed by the same organizations. Makerspaces are creative, do-it-yourself spaces where people can gather to create, invent, and learn.

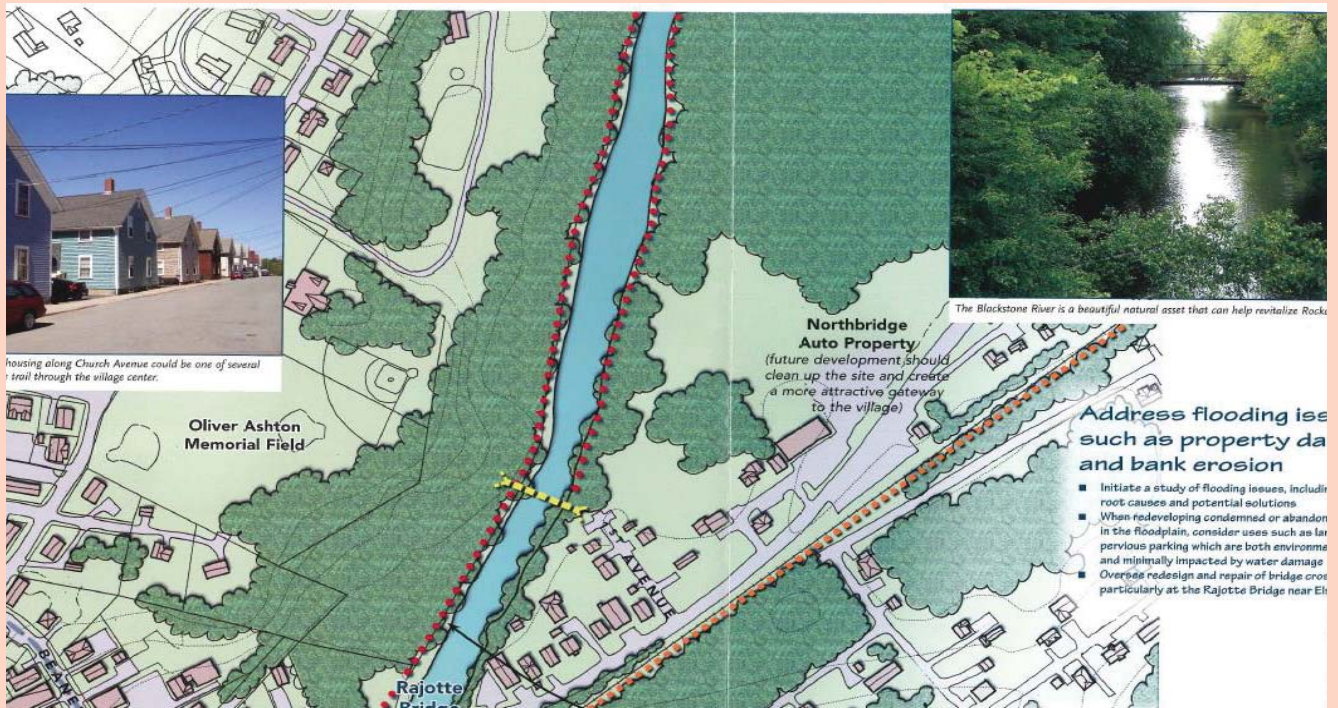
sacrificing space for potential future industrial uses.

Business Retention Program: Although the Town conducts activities (such as Business Breakfasts) that support existing businesses, additional strategies can help Northbridge retain its industrial assets. Many towns have had success with programs where town officials and municipal personnel conduct prearranged visits to local businesses/manufacturers. At these sessions, participants tour a facility and conduct a listening session on what that business needs and how the town could help. Such events can provide insight into business need, build stronger relationships, and break down some of the barriers between the business community and town government.

2040 Providence Road: In 2007, residents participated in a community visioning process for Rockdale that included 2040 Providence Road. Residents expressed support for cleaning up the site, and for mixed-use development in Rockdale generally. Rezoning to enable a mix of uses that leverage the site's waterfront location could facilitate cleanup and reuse of the parcel.

Rt. 146/ Main Street: Developable land also exists on Rt. 146/ Main Street adjacent to the Super Walmart facility and a National Grid distribution site. Proximate to the Rt. 146 interchange, the area is ideal for commercial businesses and light industry. The properties are served by the public water supply and sewer access is available through an extension from Sutton. The site consists of five (5) parcels totaling 4.3 acres and benefits from 180 day 43D expedited permitting. At full buildout, the site may yield up to two 50,000 +/- SF buildings and associated site requirements such as parking and landscaping (see Appendix C for a conceptual illustration). The site's proximity to the interchange makes it an ideal location for transportation and freight-based business. Yet, with over 8,000 vehicle trips made daily on Main Street, the site also benefits from high visibility that increases the viability of commercial uses.⁵

Figure 9. Urban Rivers Vision 2- 2040 Providence Road



In 2007, Northbridge residents participated in an UrbanRiver Visions 2 project funded by the MA Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. Through this project, residents defined a vision for the Blackstone riverfront. 2040 Providence Road sits at the gateway of Rockdale and was identified as critical to the area's revitalization.

Providence Road: Industrially-zoned parcels on Providence Road south of Church Street also present development opportunities. The area is not fully built out. A large property west of Providence Road with Church Street and Providence Road access is held by a single owner who (according to participants in the public form) is motivated for development. Adjacent parcels with frontage on Providence Road (across from the Town's sewer plant) are zoned B-3 and may present an opportunity for mixed-use development. At the public forum, residents expressed support for mixed-use (commercial, retail, and residential) development in this area.

Osterman Commerce Park: The Osterman Commerce Park is currently home to the 24,000 square foot Milford Regional Medical Center and Osterman Propane headquarters. The park was constructed in 2014 and exemplifies best development practices. Several additional pad-ready sites are currently available for buildout.

Summary of Action Items

- Breweries and similar industries, co-working space, and makerspaces can be attractive to entrepreneurs and act as a draw for visitors around the region.
- Broaden the by-right uses in I-1 and I-2 zones.
- Address flooding at 2040 Providence Road
- Explore opportunities to promote, sustain, and enable long-term preservation and restoration of Whitin Machine Works complex through zoning.
- Promote incubator space at the Shops and evaluate opportunities for live-work space
- Conduct a business retention and expansion program with on-site listening sessions

TRANSPORTATION, TRAFFIC, AND CONNECTIVITY

Traffic, transportation, and connectivity are important considerations in the 21st century. The ease (or challenge) with which businesses can transport goods, and workers can access places of employment, directly impact local economies. Northbridge is well-connected to major transportation infrastructure but challenges exist in its local roadways. Route 122 (Providence Road) serves as the Town's primary north/south thoroughfare.

Strengths

Location: The Town is thirteen (13) miles southeast from Worcester, thirty-eight (38) miles southwest of Boston, and thirty-four (34) miles northwest of Providence. Access to the Framingham commuter rail line, with end points in Worcester and Boston, is available in the neighboring Town of Grafton. The Grafton commuter rail stop is approximately 7.5 miles from the northern boundary of Northbridge and 11.5 miles from the Northbridge Town Hall. Excellent medical centers and colleges are also convenient to Northbridge residents. Milford Regional Medical Center is located just nine (9) miles from Town while Saint Vincent's Hospital and UMass Medical Center are located approximately fourteen (14) miles away. Additionally, Worcester is home to eleven (11) colleges and universities while nearby Grafton is home to the Tufts University Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine.

Interstate Access: The Town of Northbridge is bisected by US Route 122 and is proximate to the Massachusetts Turnpike, Interstate 495, and State Routes 146, 140, and 395. Route 146 (the Worcester Providence Turnpike) traverses the Town's southwestern-most corner, where an interchange joins with Main Street.

Transit: In addition to this infrastructure, Northbridge also benefits from inter-municipal transit access via the Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA) shuttle bus. Launched in 2013, two (2) fixed-route lines connect Whitinsville and Rockdale to the Shoppes at Blackstone valley in Millbury, the MBTA train Station in Grafton, Tufts University, and other

sites.⁶ This service connects residents with limited access to vehicles to diverse shopping, employment, and educational opportunities.

Scale: In many parts of Northbridge (e.g., downtown Whitinsville), local roadway and streetscape designs lend themselves to multi-modal transportation. The Town's narrow streets facilitate moderate driving speeds while pockets of well-maintained sidewalks encourage pedestrian use.

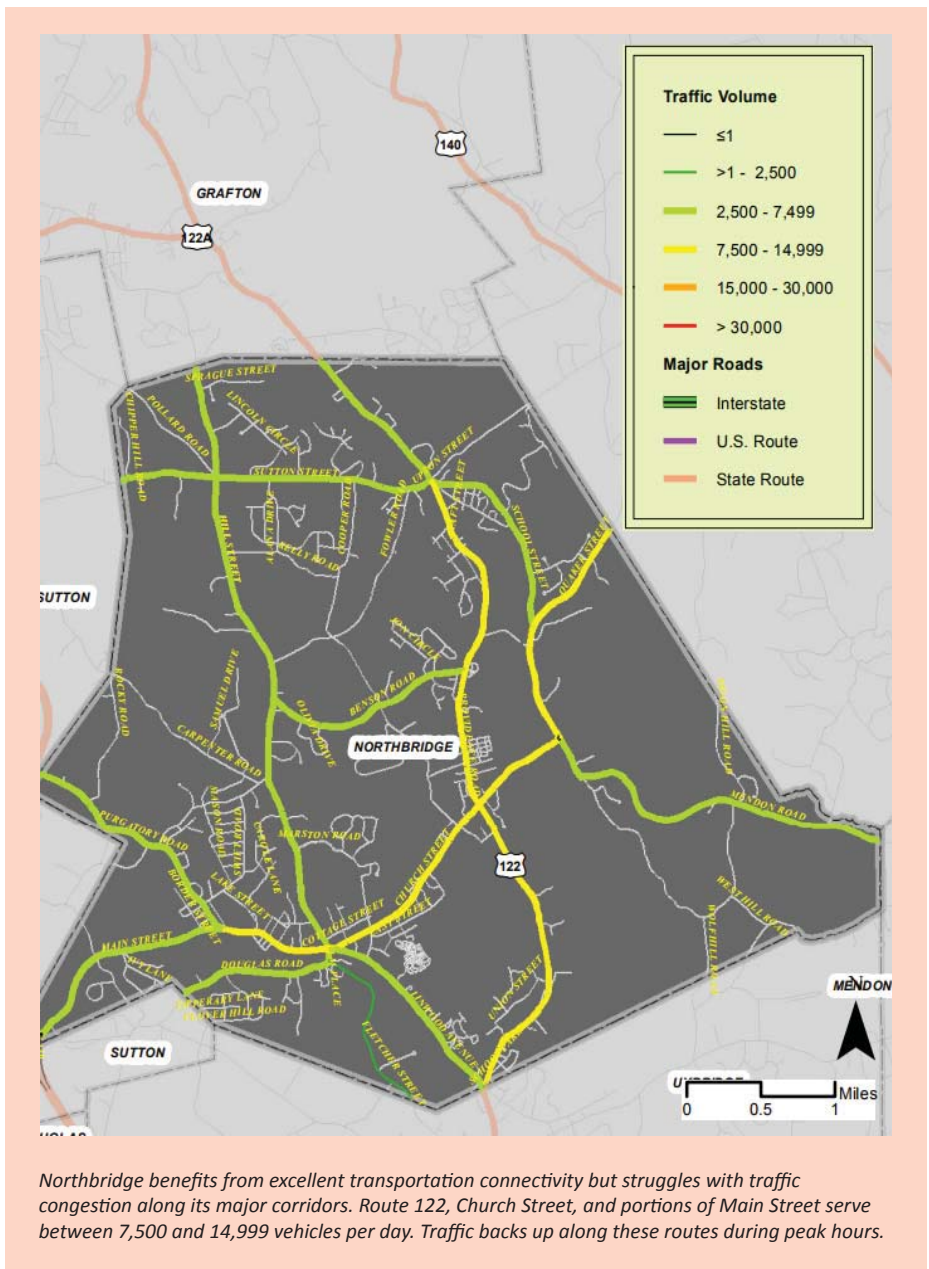
Weaknesses

Connectivity: Connectivity between neighborhoods and commercial districts could be improved in some areas, including at Memorial Square, the historic Whitinsville common located at the intersection of Hill Street and Main Street. Similarly, improving connectivity between trails, natural and cultural resources, and other amenities would highlight the Town's assets and support its marketability as a destination. As noted in the 2007 Northbridge Reconnaissance Report, "Areas such as the Mumford River Walk Land, the Mason Trust Land, the Town Beach on Meadow Pond and the Blackstone River through Rockdale and Riverdale need to be improved, linked, and made accessible for recreational use by residents."⁷ This strategy is discussed in greater detail in the Natural and Cultural Resources analysis section.

Church Street traffic: Traffic along Church Street was frequently cited as a constraint to business activity. Church Street represents two (2) of (3) Northbridge auto crash clusters. The most significant of these is at the intersection of Church Street and Providence Road.

Plummer's Corner traffic: The corridor's most heavily congested segment is a stretch from Plummer's Corner to Quaker Street. Traffic counts from 2011 indicate that between 9,500 and 12,600 cars pass through Plummer's Corner every day⁸. During the peak commute hours of 7-9 am and 4-6 pm, drivers wait at the signal an average of twenty (20) seconds and

Figure 10. Traffic Volume



⁶ Telegram & Gazette, 2014. Sue Spencer. Five

⁷ Northbridge Reconnaissance Report (2007).

⁸ Traffic counters were placed in four (4) locations: Rt. 122 just north of the intersection (9500 daily trips), east of intersection (9,500), Rt. 122 South of intersection (11,000), west of intersection (12,600).

thirty-seven (37) seconds, respectively⁹. The lengths of delay in peak morning hours earns a service grade of C. The delay during peak evening hours earns a service grade of D.

The road segment's narrow width likely contributes to such delays. Route 122 south of the intersection does not include a designated turning lane, the lack of which impedes the northbound flow of traffic. Although widening this road segment and adding a designated turning lane could reduce congestion, it is an unlikely solution because the properties with frontage along this road segment are privately owned.

East/West connections: East/West travelers follow routes that include portions of Sutton Street in the North, Main/Church Street in the South, and Benson Road (located near the Town's geographic center). Unlike North/South travel (which is facilitated by Rt. 122), local east/west road connections are less direct.

Transit: Although the Town's two bus routes represent a strength, they are also limited in terms of how often, how far, and how fast they serve customers. Route A runs between approximately 9:00 am to 3:30 pm and makes five (5) Northbridge stops:

- Northbridge Walmart
- New Village Whitinsville
- Shaw's/ Ocean State Job Lot
- Milford Regional Medical Center
- Linwood Apartments
- Riverdale and Rockdale Villages

Route A continues north to Grafton and Millbury's Shoppes at Blackstone Valley. Route B runs approximately eleven (11) times per day from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm making all Northbridge Route A stops except for Milford Regional Medical Center. Route B's final stop is the Grafton MBTA commuter rail station. It takes forty (40) minutes to travel from Northbridge Walmart to the train station by bus. Northbridge commuters who arrive at the MBTA station by rail after 6:00 pm are not served by bus connection. The lack of connectivity after 6 pm limits almost certainly limits commuter rail use by Northbridge residents.

Opportunities

Complete Streets: The Town currently lacks a Complete Streets policy or sidewalk inventory, which identifies areas in which ADA accessibility and bike and pedestrian needs can be better met. From an economic development perspective, Complete Streets are important in that they support retail, reduce parking needs, and help build destinations where people want to play, spend, and live. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) funds the development of Complete Streets policies as well as sidewalk analysis and components of findings resulting from these measures.

Improve traffic flow: If the intersection signal has not been optimized for timing, doing so could reduce some of the congestion at Plummer's Corner. Conversion of the stop sign located at the intersection of Main Street Extension and Quaker Street to a roundabout could potentially facilitate a steadier flow of traffic. Yet, slow moving, stacked traffic makes for captive window shoppers, which benefit the abutting businesses. Access management techniques such as reducing the number of curb cuts to better organize how vehicles enter and exit the roadway could also ease congestion and *travel* delays.

Pedestrian-friendly enhancements: While earlier streetscape improvements in downtown Whitinsville significantly improved its pedestrian appeal, enhancements at Memorial Square (on the western end of Church Street) would improve

⁹ CMRPC Turn Movement Counts, 2008-2014.

the downtown's connectivity to the Town Hall/ Whitin Machine Works Shops area. While street medians and a crossing signal at Memorial Square offer some security to pedestrians, the intersection is intimidating to navigate by foot. Stronger definition of pedestrian pathways presents an opportunity to improve walkability. The Town should also reinstall flower boxes and undertake measures to improve the Square's appeal.

Summary of Action Items:

- Pursue a Complete Streets study for commercial centers along Rt. 122, especially in village centers and Plummer's Corner. Increasing walkability and concentrating commercial development at village centers can create a focal point for the neighborhood while limiting the restrictions on the flow of commercial traffic along the rest of the arterial.
- Optimize Plummer's Corner traffic signal
- Review Plummer's Corner access management- assess the number and placement of curb cuts
- Evaluate possibility of replacing the stop sign at the intersection of Main Street Extension/ Quaker Street with a roundabout.
- Extend bus service hours to provide Northbridge commuters with return service from the Grafton train station.

PARKING

Parking can play a critical role in stimulating economic development by providing drivers an opportunity to exit their vehicles and explore an area on foot. Parking is also a key area of concern for residents. The amount of available parking can be a decisive factor in whether a project will be supported and approved. At the same time, too much surface parking can break up the streetscape creating an uninviting, often hostile atmosphere for pedestrians. Correctly balancing parking with amenities is critical to the success of commercial areas.

Strengths

Existing Public and Shared Surface Lots: Northbridge currently has two existing parking lots that can be a direct benefit to increased economic development in town. Unibank, located on Church Street in Whitinsville, has a shared parking lot that is available to non-Bank users and has potential to continue to serve as a community benefit. Parking also exists behind the Pythian building and can be expected to help encourage economic growth as well. Additionally, limited public parking is available across from Town Hall at the Community Center.

Weaknesses

Off-Street Parking: With the exception of the aforementioned public and shared parking options, the town's village centers have limited additional off-street parking. Historically dense development patterns have created a rich, walkable streetscape along areas like Church Street, yet have left off-street parking at a premium. Town by-laws encourage the addition of rear-lot, off-street parking but do not require it. It is suggested that regulations clearly state that locating parking in these areas is to be expected. As they are currently written, general parking and loading requirements demand that parking spaces linked to a particular intended use be located no more than 300 feet from the premises to which they are appurtenant.

On-Street Parking: There is some on-street parking which the town has improved with the addition of curb extensions in recent years. However, this is limited to the short commercial stretch of Church St. Other commercial centers tend to rely predominantly on privately held surface lots to support their businesses. This has the effect of fragmenting these centers and limiting their effectiveness as destinations.

Opportunities

“Gateway” Parking Options: In addition to the existing lots, several paved parking areas exist at the western edges of Whitinsville. These areas could be leveraged as “gateway” parking locations. Good village center design encourages visitors to leave their cars behind and explore the neighborhood on foot. One strategy to achieve this is to leverage “gateway” parking locations. These are lots located at the edges of a district in locations that are close enough to the commercial center to encourage visitors to park and walk, but far enough away that they limit impacts on the main downtown traffic flow. Whitinsville has three (3) surface lots that could be utilized for this purpose: on Main Street (between High Street and Forester) in addition to the lot at the Whitinsville Community Center; and three (3) on Douglas Rd. supporting the Red Brick Mill and performance center.

Shared Parking: Where gateway parking is not possible or practical, shared parking opportunities should be explored. By siting shared parking near multiple existing retail sites, those visiting Northbridge can be encouraged to park their cars in a central location and walk the remaining distance to their destination. To avoid potential conflict with private lots in various commercial developments, a shared parking bylaw could alleviate pressure from new development to increase the number of private lots. New site plan reviews can also be used to allow reduction in the number of parking spaces required. The Church Street corridor has several existing lots which could be used to supplement the limited parking options. Plummer’s Corner likewise has an abundance of privately owned parking lots which might benefit from a shared parking bylaw, though in many of those lots, some walkability improvements would likely need to be made. Formalizing parking regulations in town by strengthening existing language to require shared parking has the potential to improve current parking conditions in Town and to play a role in enhanced economic development in Northbridge. A model shared parking bylaw is included as Appendix F.

Summary of Action Items:

- Consider a shared parking by-law.
- Consider replacing parking minimums with parking maximums in certain districts, especially village centers.
- Review parking by-laws to ensure clarity of language, remove ambiguities.
- Examine strategies to establish a consortium of public/private sharing.
- Consider undertaking a comprehensive parking study.

ZONING

Zoning is a powerful land use regulatory tool that allows communities to exercise a level of control over how land is put to productive use within town borders. When used well, zoning can help guide development in a way that brings genuine vitality to a community. When used poorly, it can stifle growth, inhibit effective community design, deter streetscaping, and even damage the fabric of a community. It is thus vitally important that a zoning review be included in this EDSP.

Participants in the focus groups cited zoning as an area of concern. Northbridge’s last comprehensive zoning update was in 1994. The town has changed significantly since that time. Three (3) key take-aways from these conversations include:

- Zoning is too limiting and too many uses require a special permit
- The permitting process is too cumbersome and slow
- Industrial zones are too narrowly focus and need to allow more building types and uses to be genuinely productive.

Zoning in Northbridge

Current zoning provides for 12 base districts and six (6) Overlay districts:

- Residential One (R-1) through Residential Six (R-6)
- Business One (B-1) through Business Three (B-3)
- Industrial One (I-1) and Industrial Two (I-2)
- Heritage (H)
- Floodway (FW) Overlay
- Floodplain (FP) Overlay
- Forest Products Overlay (FPOD)
- Open Space Development Overlay (OSDOD)
- Route 146 Overlay and
- Historic Mill Adaptive Reuse Overlay (HMAROD).

This EDSP will primarily interested in the six base districts which directly govern commercial and industrial activity - the Business (B-1, B-2 and B-3), Industrial (I-1 and I-2), the Heritage (H) district, and the Route 146 and Historic Mill Adaptive Reuse overlays.

Business Districts

Business zoning districts predominate the village centers in Northbridge and are generally clustered around the traditional mill towns. This is reflective of both historic development patterns and the town's desire to promote those patterns. A secondary concentration of business zones is spread out along the major transit routes, particularly Rt. 122. One important note here is that some parcels in the business zone are nonconforming, meaning that the actual use is not permitted. A comparison of zone designation against reported use in the assessor's data showed that of 257 parcels zoned for business only thirty-three (33) percent reflected a business use while fifty-four (54) percent reflected a residential use. The highest concentrations of residential uses in a business zone were in the area around the Village of Rockdale, while the parcels along Rt. 122 showed the lowest concentration of residential. This may be read to imply greater demand for the kinds of auto oriented businesses that dominate this corridor. On the other hand, it may imply a greater demand for housing in the village centers, which, if properly coupled with business uses, might shift demand away from the Rt. 122 corridor.

Industrial Districts

Industrial districts provide space for uses not generally compatible with residential or business districts. While a working statement of purpose for these districts is not provided for in the bylaw, industrial districts are typically intended to isolate pollution or nuisance-generating land uses from the public. Industrial uses in these areas predate the advent of zoning (the districts reflect the historical introduction of hydro power, with districts established to match these uses) but generally achieve this best practice.

Focus group participants indicated that allowable uses in Industrial districts are still oriented toward attracting large scale manufacturing and extractive industries. While the placement of the largest industrial zones (clustered in the east along the rail line) is well aligned with quality shipping routes and well separated from residential areas, the general decline in demand for industrial space has left these parcels at a disadvantage. A review of the use tables included in the Northbridge zoning by-law showed that of the fifty-eight (58) defined uses, only eighteen (18) are allowed by-right in I-1 districts and twenty (20) in I-2 districts. Allowing more flexibility in development types within I-1 and I-2 zones could increase the marketability of those parcels without threatening the overall supply of zoned industrial land. Use types suggested

by focus group participants included office space and even residential/commercial mixed use in parcels located closest to the highway.

Heritage District

The Heritage District is a comparatively recent addition designed to add a level of protection to the Whitinsville center, while, at the same time, provide a certain level of flexibility in uses. While it limits the number of by-right uses which are allowable under this district, it offers a number of positive changes; first, special permit authority is largely vested in the planning board rather than the Zoning Board of Appeals (for a list of exceptions, see analysis of Municipal Processes and Procedures); second, the board is given fairly wide latitude in deciding what uses are permissible provided such uses “shall further preserve the historic character of the main structures, outbuildings and landscape within the subject property.”¹⁰ Discussion within the focus groups generated very little negative comment about this district. Indeed, some commented on the positive effect the district has had on the revitalization of the Whitin Machine Works in central Whitinsville.

Route 146 Overlay

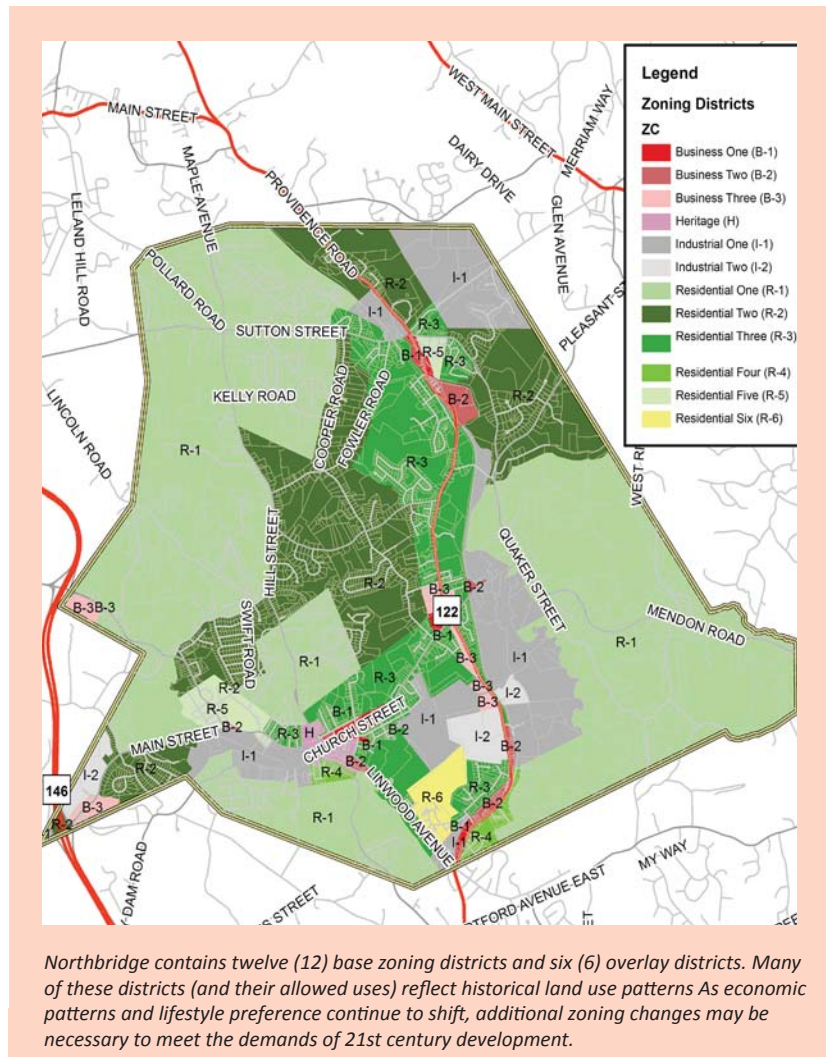
The Rt. 146 Overlay District was developed as part of a cooperative effort among towns along the Rt. 146 corridor. Its aim has been to “facilitate the long-term economic growth of the Corridor by coordinating development among the five communities and by promoting high quality development that preserves the scenic, natural, and cultural resources of the Blackstone Valley.”¹¹ Among other changes, the district:

- Grants special permitting authority to the planning board
- Provides basic design standards
- Requires an open space set aside of at least 35%
- Allows up to 25% reduction in parking minimums

Historic Mill Adaptive Reuse Overlay

Added in 2004, the HMAROD was intended to allow for the adaptive reuse of the many historic mills in Northbridge. Now, the only properties to be included in the district are the Linwood Mill, and the John Whitin Mill on Douglas Road. Even this limited sample size illustrates the benefits of this type of district. Under the rules of this district, Linwood has been remade

Figure 11. Northbridge Zoning Map (2014)



¹⁰ Town of Northbridge Zoning Bylaws- Heritage District

¹¹ Town of Northbridge Zoning Bylaws- Route 146 Overlay District

into a residential/commercial mixed-use development, which, as of this writing, is fully occupied. The John Whitin Mill has been remade into a multi-use building which including commercial and social service uses. The HMAROD is the only district in Northbridge that explicitly allows for mixed-use redevelopment.

Zoning Weaknesses

Statements of Purpose: Northbridge's zoning districts lack explicitly defined statements of purpose (the exception being the Heritage district). Identifying the purpose of each district will help users distinguish between them and identify the goals with which they were established. Clarifying the intention of each district will enable the Town to review the Use table and determine what should be permitted where and by-right or special permit.

Defined Uses in the By-Law: 58 uses are explicitly mentioned in the by-law. While no by-law contains an exhaustive list of uses, this list omits several common uses. Restaurants and other food vendors are grouped together in a way that may be causing unnecessary ambiguity. Doctors' offices, grocery stores and pharmacies have been omitted altogether.

Mixed-Use Development: currently the By-Law makes no provision for mixed-use development in any district except the Historic Mill Adaptive Reuse Overlay District. This overlay encourages mixed-use including but not limited to offices, retail, service establishments, community facilities, and multi-family housing. As housing is an important component of active downtowns- it provides pedestrian activity, supports retail sales, and supports private investment by activating second story units - a significant opportunity exists in zoning reform to allow residential uses in the Town's B1, B2, and possibly B3 districts.

Summary of Action Items:

- Develop a formal fast track permitting process
- Provide better definitions for business uses in the uses table
- Include more by-right uses in I-1 and I-2 zones
- Explore options for defining mixed use developments that may be compatible with the current distribution patterns of Industrial zones
- Explore options for creating a new zoning district that allows a mix of uses that include industrial enterprises
- Consider expanding the heritage district to include the Whitinsville Machine Works complex
- Consider expanding HMAROD to other mills, especially the Whitin Machine Works and the Rockdale Mill
- Create defined statements of purpose for all defined districts in the by-law
- Review by-law to refine uses and definitions; include omitted common use types in the uses table
- Explore strategies for expanding mixed-use in certain districts; such strategies include:
 - Expanding the HMAROD to all currently occupied mills in town
 - Create a new village center overlay district that explicitly allows for mixed use by-right in defined districts

MUNICIPAL PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

Municipal processes and internal policies can significantly affect economic development. The ease of obtaining permits and approvals, as well as transparency of processes, can facilitate or constrain private investment. Similarly, the capacity of municipal staff to track leads, provide resources, and coordinate reviews has bearing on whether development flourishes or falters. As indicated in the Prior Efforts section (see page 3) Northbridge has implemented a considerable number of best practices in municipal procedures. However, focus group participants indicated several areas where additional improvements could be made.

Strengths

Staffing: The Town employs a full-time Town Planner and Building Inspector as well as a part-time Conservation Agent who is shared with the Town of Upton. In recent years, Northbridge co-located officials charged with reviewing, approving, and permitting plans; the Town Planner, Planning Board, Conservation Agent, Board of Health, and Building Inspector all work from the Aldrich School Town Hall Annex. This setup helps to streamline permitting processes and allows staff to conduct informal interdepartmental coordination. For example, the Town Planner hosts Technical Review meetings for all projects as part of a formal submittal or pre-application, which helps to identify issues or concerns early in the process and alerts all involved parties to upcoming permitting needs. The Town also maintains a close relationship with the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, which moved its offices to the Linwood Mill following the building's renovation in 2007.

Access to Information: The Town of Northbridge maintains a user-friendly website, and the Community Development and Planning Office page is populated with tools and development guidance. The Town's Zoning Bylaws, Zoning Maps, Subdivision Rules and Regulations, Permitting Guidebook, and Best Development Practices Guidebook are all online and easy to locate. Some permits can also be applied for online.

Permitting Timeframes: Additionally, the Town's permitting timeframes are reasonable:

As-of-Right:

- Review and response by other boards to Planning Board: 21 days from Planning Board receipt of application
- Delivery of permitting decision to Building Inspector: 30 days from receipt of application

Special Permit:

- Review and response by other boards to Planning Board: 45 days from Planning Board receipt of application
- Public hearing: 65 days from Planning Board receipt of application
- Final action: 90 days from date of hearing

43D Expedited Permitting Sites

- Permit reviews and final decisions: 180 days from Planning Board receipt of application

Incentives: The Town offers development incentives in the form of Tax Increment Financing (TIF). Under the terms of a TIF agreement, the town may grant landowners tax exemptions of up to 100% of the tax increment for a maximum of 20 years. The *tax increment* is the difference between the pre-development (or redevelopment) assessed value and the post-development assessed value; in other words, the value added to a parcel by development. This additional tax value is waived for specified period of time, with the understanding that the assessment will rise incrementally over the life of the TIF.

Weaknesses

Although the Town employs many best practices, the consultant team received mixed feedback concerning whether the Town is "business friendly." In part, this is because of weaknesses in the Town's permitting and approval processes.

Permitting: In general, permitting occurs in a reasonable time frame and is coordinated via informal meetings of town personnel; however, the Town lacks a formal fast-track permitting process. This can result in longer waiting periods, and thus greater costs, for applicants. It can also prolong the process for abutters and interested citizens.

Additionally, the existing designation of the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) as the Town's Special Permit Granting Authority

(SPGA) is likely to cause confusion and delays. Under current procedures, the Planning Board conducts all Site Plan Reviews while the Zoning Board of Appeals issues most of the required Special Permits. Because of this, applicants must file two applications, pay two filing fees, and attend two public hearings before two different boards for the same project. Abutters are subject to a similar duplication of processes. Furthermore, the order in which applications are to be submitted is unclear. Finally, if the Planning Board has already approved a Site Plan, Special Permit review can be a duplicative and time-wasting process.

Enforcement: Interviewed stakeholders expressed the feeling that enforcement of local and state regulations is sometimes stricter than the actual requirement. This feeling strict was cited as a development constraint.

Business Lead Tracking: Currently, the Town employs no formal method of tracking development inquiries. This is largely because business leads flow to local Realtors, rather than municipal development staff. Unfortunately, real estate personnel are often unaware of local vacancies and frequently direct business developers to sites outside of Northbridge.

Economic Development Staffing: Northbridge's size and economic assets warrant an economic development position distinct from the role of Town Planner. Without a designated economic development staffer, the marketing, outreach, lead tracking, and other actions that support economic development cannot be fully realized.

Opportunities

Special Permit Granting Authority: Regarding Special Permits, best practices follow one of two paths: 1) consolidate the SPGA so that those responsible for issuing Special Permits also issue the Site Plan Reviews, or 2) have the Planning Board issue (at least) all Special Permits requiring Site Plan Review.

Currently, the Planning Board reviews site plans for by-right development and holds SPGA for the following districts and uses:

- 43D Expediting Permitting
- Aquifer Protection District
- Route 146 Overlay District
- Heritage District
- Industrial and Light Industrial Districts
- Senior living developments
- Infectious waste transfer and processing facilities

Combining the authority for Site Plan Review and Special Permits would simplify municipal procedures and facilitate economic development.

Fast Track Permitting: Opportunities to improve processes also exist in interdepartmental coordination. Although local personnel convene informal coordinating meetings, the Town lacks a formal fast track permitting process that would facilitate desired development proposals. Best practices indicate a process comprised of two (2) components: a regularly scheduled Round Table Review process and Zoning Combined Permitting. The Roundtable would enable prospective developers to communicate not just with staff from the Community Planning and Development department but also with fire, highway, and police officials, from the initial stages of a project through implementation. The Zoning Combined Permitting would allow the combination of multiple special permit and/or site plan approval applications into a single application and require a single public hearing. Together, these revisions have the potential to streamline approval processes, facilitate private investment, and mitigate project hurdles. A fast track permitting model is included as Appendix D of this document.

Business Lead Tracking: The Town can stem the loss of business leads by implementing a formal tracking system for inquiries it receives and by communicating opportunities to local real estate professionals. Such responsibilities could lie with a nonprofit such as a Northbridge Business Association. Such an association could facilitate economic development in a variety of ways, including promotion, branding, and programming. Best practices for establishing a business association are detailed in the Framework for Implementation section.

Summary of Action Items:

- Reassign Special Permit granting authority from the ZBA to the Planning Board
- Encourage development of a local business association
- Develop and implement a lead-tracking method
- Assess feasibility of establishing an economic development staff position distinct from the Town Planner
- Continue to hold regular, interdepartmental review meetings to allow one-stop-shopping for developers to get questions addressed by town departments early in the process. Assess whether any further efficiencies can be gained in this process.
- Wherever possible, seek consensus (and clarification as necessary) on state regulations to ensure compliance can be achieved with the minimal possible impact on development.

VILLAGE AND COMMERCIAL CENTERS

The mill villages in Northbridge are integral to the Town's character and highly valued by its residents. Historically, Northbridge's village centers were a focal point of commercial and civic life in the region. Today, much of the commercial activity is spread along the town's major transportation corridors. Most of the Town's commercial activity can be found on Rt. 122. While telling, this transition does not suggest that the town's traditional village centers are not still viable commercial centers.

This report focuses on a handful of specific village centers. These locations were chosen for several specific reasons which include their a) central position within the town's road network, b) clustering of existing commercial activity and/or buildings capable of being adapted for commercial activity, c) potential to be redefined as walkable destinations. These village centers, Whitinsville, Rockdale Center, and Linwood, are unique assets that display the Town's historical legacy in present day. When combined in scope, the Town's existing natural resources and villages present a unique path to economic development.

Downtown Whitinsville (Northbridge Center/Church Street)

Whitinsville is named for the Whitin Machine works, one of the most successful industrial ventures in Northbridge. The village is located at the intersection of several major roadways and serves as the town's municipal center. While there is limited commercial activity in the village center, there is significant commercial activity along Church Street. One of the largest functional mills in town is in Whitinsville. Despite this fact, Whitinsville is not currently a hub for industrial activity. Much of the floor space in the Whitin Machine Works complex is devoted either to small scale manufacturing or non-industrial uses.

Strengths

One of Whitinsville's major strengths is its history. The town can leverage Whitinsville's inclusion in the Blackstone River Valley National Historic Park to attract new visitors and businesses to the areas. In addition, the village is supported by a robust road network, which allows drivers coming from multiple directions to converge in Whitinsville. Despite these

roadways and the large amount of retail located along Church Street, traffic was not among the concerns mentioned by participants in the focus groups or forum.

Weaknesses

Retail Mix: According to participants in public outreach activities, the downtown's retail mix does not offer "much real draw." Most of businesses are closed by 6:00 pm on weekdays, and several storefronts are vacant. Residents envision a lively, mixed-use district with retail, restaurants, coffee shops, and antique stores. Northbridge should focus on supporting and attracting a mix of uses that are distinct and proven successful in town centers like those of Northbridge. The Town should not compete with typical car-oriented, chain-type businesses that will always have an advantage.

Rental Rates: Rental rates are viewed as a limiting factor for development, too. In Northbridge, rental rates are low as \$10 per square foot. As such, many commercial property owners are reluctant or unwilling to renovate and fit out spaces for tenants. Vacant storefronts can detract from an event or shopping experience.

Downtown Residential Opportunities: downtown Whitinsville is largely comprised on single-story buildings. Development of a 24/7 downtown partially depends on the presence of a residential population. The building stock in downtown Whitinsville limits opportunities for second-floor residential space.

Figure 12. Downtown Whitinsville



Part of the Blackstone River Valley National Historic Park, Whitinsville is among Northbridge's most important assets. The Village contains a critical mass of historic buildings, opportunities for nearby housing, and the physical infrastructure necessary to become a thriving, mixed-use neighborhood.

Parking: Participants cited parking in Whitinsville's village center as a concern. An estimate of available parking spaces indicates roughly ten (10) percent of the downtown area is currently devoted to parking. A large amount of available parking space is privately owned or otherwise limited, and many commercial buildings on Church Street offer limited parking opportunities to visitors. Based on field visits, only two large lots near the village center appeared to be accessible to the public. These lots are located near the Whitinsville Community center and the Whitin Mill on Douglas Road. More study is required to understand the potential impacts increased visitor traffic might have on this village center.

Opportunities

Historic Tourism: Designation of the Blackstone River Valley National Historic Park offers Northbridge the opportunity to capture a share of the \$18.4 billion spent in National Parks annually.¹² The town has already taken many steps to remake Whitinsville into a destination. Investments in streetscape improvements along Church Street and allowing for greater flexibility in redeveloping historic buildings has helped bring the district together cohesively. It is suggested that investments be made to improve walkability in parts of the village center (e.g. Douglas Road around the Red Brick Mill), as well as Improve wayfinding.

Whitin Machine Works Adaptive Reuse: Although a critical mass of downtown residential housing is unlikely (it would require razing the existing downtown to create density), the Whitin Machine Works is adjacent to downtown and presents an opportunity for housing walkable to the town center.

Investment Incentives: Attracting businesses to downtown areas typically requires a critical mass of residents; however, residents are often uninterested in living in downtowns that lack a critical mass of service and hospitality establishments. To overcome this challenge, the Town may need to incentive tenants and/or commercial investment. Continuation of the CDBG-funded facade improvement program with matching grants or via a revolving loan fund could spur investment. Passage of the Community Preservation Act (CPA) could provide another method to fund improvements within eligible historic buildings. State and Federal Historic Tax Credits are also available for some historic redevelopment projects, while Low-Income Housing Tax Credits are available in the case of certain residential or mix-use projects. The Town could also look into creating a tax abatement district. In this district, property owners who invest in their property could be eligible for tax abatements. This would encourage existing owners to rehabilitate properties regardless of whether current rental rates are sufficient to make investment cost effective.

Demolition Delay Bylaw: An effective tool for historic preservation, demolition delay bylaws establish a period in which owners of historic buildings must explore alternative options to demolition. According the 2007 Northbridge Reconnaissance Report, the Town has twice voted down such a regulation. Demolition Delay Bylaws can be an attractive alternative to Local Historic Districts, which also offer important protections to historic properties but can discourage potential investors and prevent current owners from investing in their properties. As noted in the Reconnaissance Report, "The most valuable aspect of this bylaw is that it creates space within which to have a conversation about how public and private needs can both be met in the service of preservation."¹³

Design Guidelines: Design Guidelines are intended to help inform developers, builders, owners, and building occupants about good architectural and site design practices. They serve as a resource for current and future housing rehabilitation projects in and they provide best practices on a range of building elements such as porches, siding, roofs, fencing, and landscaping. They also provide examples of discouraged practices that have become far too common, and diminish the appearance and historical qualities of our structures and neighborhoods. Establishment of design guidelines could help ensure infill projects and expansions are compatible with existing development and maintain the character of the existing commercial neighborhoods. Design guideline examples are included in Appendix E.

¹² Visitor spending in national parks in 2016, National Park Service website: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/socialscience/vse.htm>

¹³ Northbridge Reconnaissance Report (2007)

Threats

Retail Over-Saturation: Retail over-saturation is threatening many communities across the region. With the rise of auto-oriented development in the mid-part of the 20th century, retail shifted from being concentrated in town centers to being spread along major arterials. While this trend has been declining in recent years, walkable downtowns now compete with online retailers as well, which may limit increased walkability's intended impacts. Looking forward, towns may see a decline in the number of brick and mortar stores in their communities rather than stores redistributing geographically.

Formula Businesses: An over-saturation of formula businesses (enterprises in which the decor, products, and services are purposefully identical) can make a downtown feel like "Anywhere USA." While the presence of some formula businesses can be desirable, the establishment of one such business is very often followed by more. Many municipalities are limiting the number of formula businesses through zoning bylaws to ensure independent businesses are not displaced en masse and that their downtowns retain what makes them unique.

Infrastructure Impacts: As noted above, those who participated in public outreach events did not list infrastructure as a major concern. Participants did not discuss the potential impacts that rebranding Whitinsville (and increasing its appeal as a destination) might have on roadway infrastructure. While the topic is too broad to be included in this report, it is noted that the main roads servicing Whitinsville have a limited capacity. Any significant increase in the number of daily visitors will likely impact traffic flow, which will need to be addressed.

Village of Rockdale:

Rockdale Village is one of the oldest communities in Northbridge. Like most villages in Northbridge, Rockdale grew from a farming community into an industrial center in the 19th century. Today, the village hosts a handful of businesses along Rt. 122, a few industrial parcels, and residential lands. The logical center-point of the village is at Rockdale Park, situated just south of the historic Rockdale Mill complex. The area examined in this report focused on the parcels immediately surrounding Rockdale Park, stretching south along Providence Road (Rt. 122) to the area around Elston Avenue, a distance of about a quarter of a mile.

Strengths

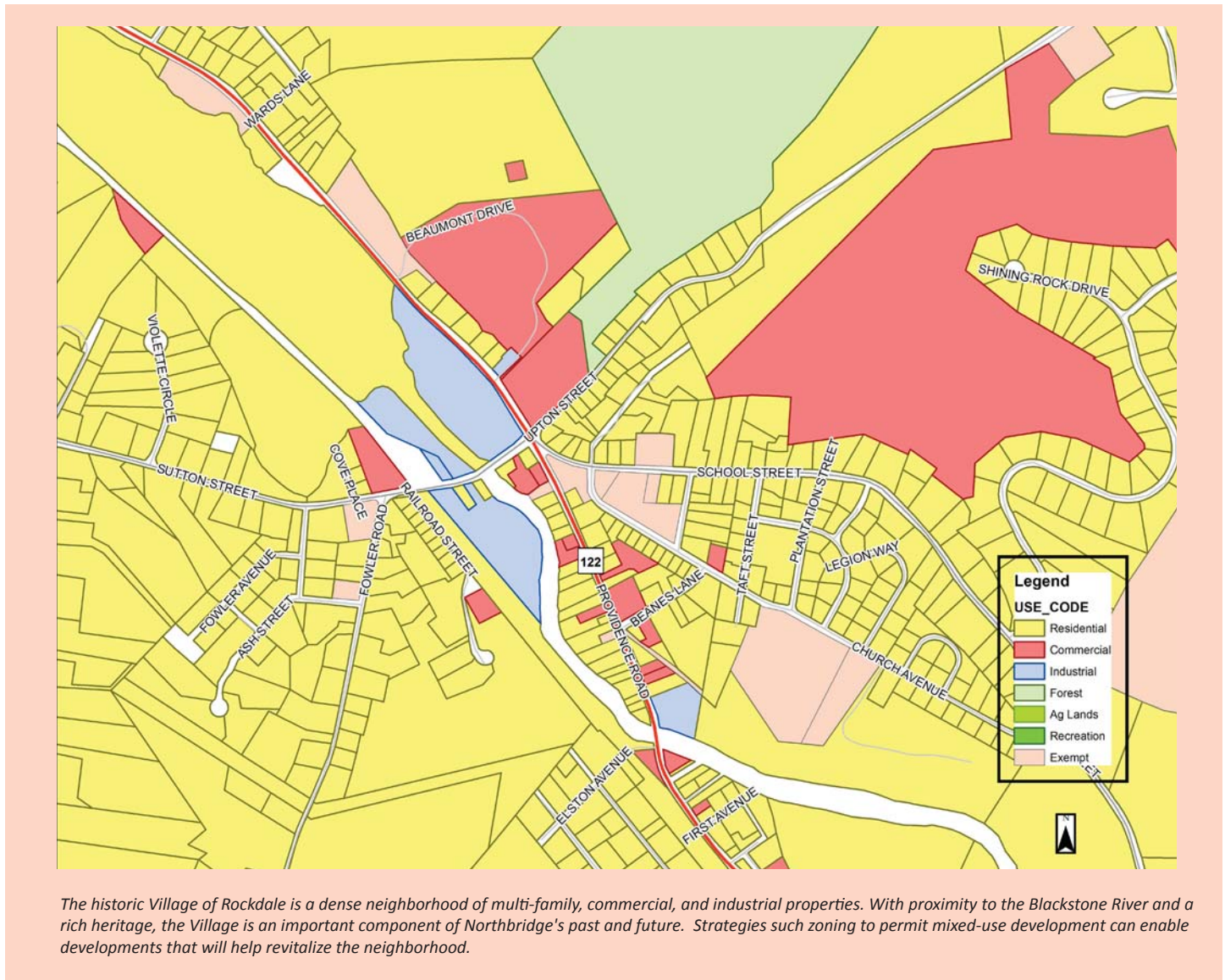
Rockdale Park forms a natural focal point for the village. The area around the park running along Rt. 122, is a mixture of commercial and multi-family housing, with the latter predominating the streetscape. The Rockdale Mill predominates the northwestern part of the village center and offers a mix of small scale manufacturing and retail services. Expanding potential uses at that site could be key to bringing more vitality to the district.

Rockdale also contains a secondary commercial center just to the south of the park. This commercial center is located near the intersection of Rt. 122 and Bean Lane. As with the area immediately around the park, this district hosts a few commercial establishments and many multi-family buildings. These uses could make this parcel a good candidate for increased mixed-use residential/commercial development.

Weaknesses

Despite the overwhelming number of residential parcels, the district is zoned B-2. Mixed Uses are not allowed in B-2 districts. As such, any attempt to encourage a new development pattern will likely require changes to the underlying zoning.

Although the area's proximity to the Blackstone River is an asset, it also presents a major obstacle to development. Erosion and riverbank destabilization, as well as a degraded retailing wall, contribute to the area's frequently flooding.

Figure 13. Village of Rockdale Land Use

Consequently, many homes and businesses along Rt. 122 are in poor condition.

Opportunities

Rockdale Mill represents the principal opportunity for the village. The mill dominates the area and provides a key historic anchor point to the village. Expanding uses in the mill could increase its market potential. However, the mill is currently zoned for industrial use. It is suggested that the town should consider either a) applying a similar overlay district to that which allowed the redevelopment of the Linwood Mill or b) altering the underlying I-1 zoning to allow for broader uses by right. This latter option would also benefit industrial parcels along Rt. 122 and other areas of the town.

Opportunities to improve access to the river also exist. In a participatory planning exercise facilitated by the EOE, residents identified many strategies for activating the riverfront. These include better connecting the river to the village through a Riverwalk, trails, canoe launches, and a waterfront park. Behind many of the waterfront properties, space exists to create a trail or other water access point.

Threats

Successful commercial development is dependent on demand. Commercial over-saturation could prevent any development plan from getting off the ground. The town might benefit from focusing early efforts on expanding uses within the Rockdale Mill, investing in minor streetscape improvements (e.g. sidewalks, street parking), and improving wayfinding to help pedestrians navigate the village.

Several participants in public outreach events viewed multi-family housing in Rockdale negatively. This perception raises the possibility that reorienting development patterns to include rental or other workforce housing will be viewed negatively by property owners in the town.

Plummer's Corner

Plummer's Corner is a commercial center at the intersection of Church Street and Route 122. It is named for the nearby Plummer's Landing historical site¹⁴. The landing was the site of one of four (4) locks in Northbridge which served the Blackstone Canal. Today, it is the center of a major thoroughfare. The area is characterized by commercial uses typical of a highway commercial area. Existing businesses include big box discount retailer, auto parts store, and fast food restaurants.

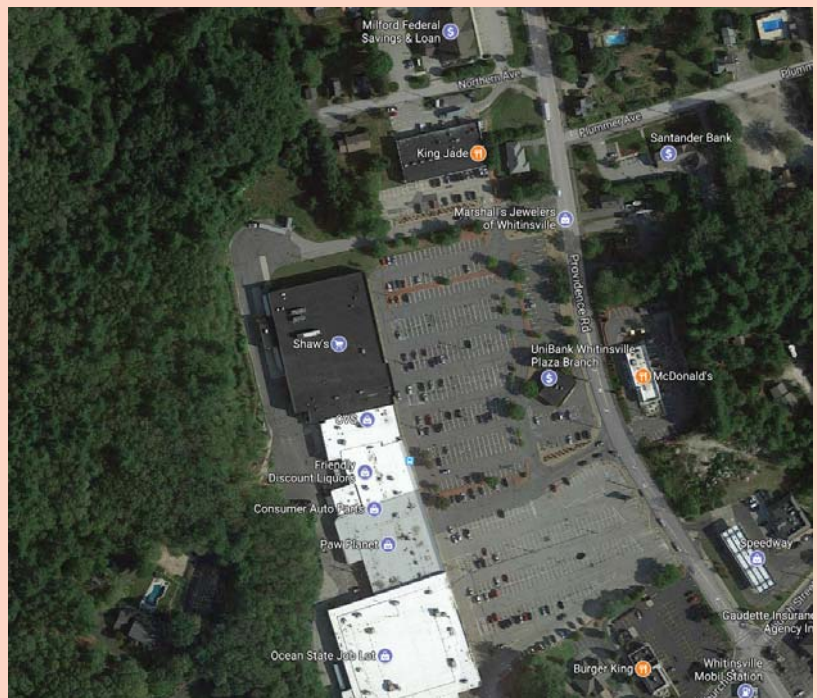
Strengths

Located at the intersection of Rt. 122 and Church Street, Plummer's Corner has some of the highest concentrations of commercial space in town. Resident focus groups indicated these sites were in generally good economic health. It should be noted, this report does not verify these claims or attempt to assess the health of individual developments. The site contains a mix of retail and other commercial uses. While the Corner is surrounded by low density residential, there is little in the way of multi-family units. The concentration of retail uses makes a strong case for the strength of this area as a commercial center.

Weaknesses

The development in Plummer's Corner is almost universally auto-oriented. Commercial development is set back from the road and surrounded by parking. As a rule, this tends to isolate the development from the surrounding community and detract from cohesiveness of the streetscape. Whitinsville Plaza, the largest single development in the commercial center, devotes an estimated forty (40) percent of available land to parking and is consistent with the area's development pattern.¹⁵

Figure 14. Whitinsville Plaza, Plummer's Corner



Plummer's Corner is a major commercial center at the intersection of Route 122 and Church Street. The area is auto-oriented, with large parking lots in front of many buildings. Outparcel development opportunities may exist at Whitinsville Plaza, where parking may be in excess of what is necessary.

¹⁴ http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMPEEQ_Plummers_Landing_Northbridge_MA

¹⁵ Based on preliminary GIS analysis of assessor's data against visual estimates of area devoted to parking. Parking estimate does not exclude travel lanes, landscaping

Opportunities

Sites with a large percentage of available parking, such as Whitinsville Plaza, may be over-supplied with parking. As such, these sites present an opportunity for outparcel development. Outparcels are Individual retail sites located within a shopping center, or a tract of land adjacent to a larger tract of which it was originally an integral part. The large parking areas around the UniBank building in the Whitinsville Plaza might be good candidates for street-oriented outparcel development and would help make the area feel less auto-oriented. However, it should be noted that a parking usage assessment in this or any area of Northbridge is not included in this report. Determining if an area in Plummer's Corner would be a good candidate for outparcel development could be a key aspect of a potential future parking study. Given the parking needs in other districts, it is highly recommended the Town conduct such a study in the future.

Threats

Changing the development conditions in Plummer's Corner, or any district in Northbridge, will likely require changes to current zoning. Implementing zoning changes will likely be met with challenges, and there is no guarantee that such policy changes will attract the kind of development the town is seeking. The town administration will need to continue its efforts to bring stakeholder voices to the table and secure the buy-in necessary to pursue regulatory reform.

Linwood Mill:

The Linwood Mill complex is situated in the Linwood Historic District. This district is shared by Northbridge and Uxbridge. The former site of an industrial cotton mill, Linwood is a great example of adaptive reuse – a redevelopment technique that retrofits structures for new uses without impacting its original design. The mill has recently been converted into a combination of residential and commercial uses. The surrounding district is very small, making up the most southerly point of Northbridge.

Strengths

Historic significance: the Linwood Mill is a key feature in the Blackstone River Valley National Historic Park. The mill is a prime example of early New England Industrial mill construction. The broader mill complex hosts a variety of uses, including a French restaurant, a liquor store, and a brewery. Redeveloping Linwood Mill has had a catalytic effect on the surrounding area. Its adaptive reuse sparked private investment by restaurateurs and other business interests. With the adaptive reuse of the Linwood Mill complex complete, an opportunity for placemaking exists in the surrounding neighborhood.

Weaknesses

Despite the strengths noted above the area immediately surrounding the Linwood Mill lacks a coherent aesthetic identity. The mill is immediately abutted by residential properties to the south and auto-oriented commercial properties to the east (across Linwood Ave). This surrounding development isolates the mill and diminishes its effectiveness as a village centerpiece. Further investment could be encouraged by investing in mixed-use development that is pedestrian friendly and streetscape improvements that visually connect the Linwood Avenue streetscape with the Mill complex.

Opportunities

Linwood Mill's recent development into a mixed-use affordable senior housing complex could be leveraged to encourage more pedestrian oriented development in the village center. The two parcels referenced above, currently hosting a car wash and a Chinese restaurant, could easily be reimagined as street-facing, pedestrian friendly developments. In addition to the constraints already mentioned, the above parcels are currently zoned I-1. This means any type of mixed use redevelopment would likely require rezoning or the addition of an overlay district.

Threats

As a village center, Linwood has limited investment opportunities. Only two parcels have easy potential for pedestrian oriented redevelopment. Those parcels, immediately across from the Mill on Linwood Ave, are currently housing active businesses, and it is unclear how feasible it would be for the town to actively encourage redevelopment at this time. Because the Village of Linwood is split between Northbridge and Uxbridge, any village oriented redevelopment efforts must be coordinated by the two towns. While such coordination is not outside the realm of possibility, it will complicate the planning process.

Figure 15. Linwood Mill and Adjacent Parcels



Redevelopment of the Linwood Mill preserved a historic asset and spurred subsequent investment. Yet, the mill village is partially characterized by residential and auto-oriented developments that lack an aesthetic identity. Through streetscaping and pedestrian enhancements the Town could establish a greater sense of place, enhancing the village's appeal to businesses and residents.

Summary of Action Items:

- Encourage smaller manufacturing and innovative uses in the Town's historic mills. More uses mean greater resilience; allowing business and commercial uses will allow land to retain much of its value even in a weak industrial market
- Leverage existing space in the Whitin Machine Works mill complex to capitalize on its central position in Historic Whitinsville. Participants voiced support for residences, a visitor's center, boutique hotel, or restaurant.
- Encourage rental housing within a mixed-use context to add vitality and purchasing power in town centers and bring in young workers.
- Address flooding in Rockdale and work to make the area a destination by reconnecting it to the river.
- Assess need for establishment of Design Guidelines.
- Consider establishment of a formula business bylaw to prevent over-saturation of standardized businesses.
- Assess whether areas of Plummer's Corner are over-parked. Identify sites suitable for outparcel development.

CONCLUSION

The Northbridge Economic Development Strategic Plan engaged government, residents, and the private sector in setting priorities for the future of the Town. The result is a set of priorities and action items that hold the potential to strengthen Northbridge's economy while preserving the quality of life and characteristics that its residents value most.

Participants appreciated the need to expand Northbridge's nonresidential tax base and offered excellent strategies for doing so without compromising the Town's unique identity. Specifically, residents, business owners, and officials all strongly favored economic strategies that leverage Northbridge's historic, natural, and cultural assets. These include tourism and promotional strategies that increase awareness of and preserve the Town's historic mills and mill villages, farmland, and natural wonders. Enhancing Northbridge's village centers through mixed-use, appropriately-scaled development, incentivizing industrial development in select locations, and streamlining municipal processes and procedures were among the supporting strategies recommended by local stakeholders. Together, these strategies can help Northbridge diversify its economy while allowing it to remain a truly special place where people love to live, work, and visit. Concrete steps for implementation are presented in a five-year action plan at the end of this document.

The project team will continue to help Northbridge advance the principles and priorities developed in the planning process. CMRPC can provide local technical assistance to augment local planning capacity and move development and preservation initiatives closer to implementation. It can help the Town adopt zoning changes and streamline permitting so as to create the right conditions for desirable development, balanced with preservation. It can do this in partnership with regional organizations like the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor.

FIVE-YEAR ACTION PLAN

The following 5-Year action plan represents concrete steps for the recommendations detailed in this plan. The plan is organized thematically into four major categories: Tourism and Recreation, Village Revitalization, Industrial Development, and Land Use and Regulations. Each recommendation is accompanied by action steps, a time-frame for action and recommendations for responsible parties and/or potential partners.

| Tourism And Recreation | Actions | Responsible Parties | Time Frame (Year) |
|---|--|---|-------------------|
| 1. Build On Existing Branding And Marketing Of Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor And Blackstone River And Canal Heritage State Park. | 1.1 Create/Adopt Local Historic District (Whitinsville) | Planning, Property Owners, Historical Commission, Local Historic District Study Committee | 1 |
| | 1.2 Form A Standing State Park Committee (Spc) To Coordinate Branding, Marketing And Cultural Event Activities | Planning, Conservation Commission, Historical Commission, Local Historic District Study Committee, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 1 |
| | 1.3 Create Linkages To Existing National Park Service And State Park Promotional Materials, Both Online And In Print | State Park Standing Committee, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 1 & 2 |
| | 1.4 Create Additional Informational And Educational Resources. | State Park Standing Committee | 2-5 |
| | 1.5 Create Locally-Themed Events And Festivals To Attract Town Residents And Visitors. | State Park Standing Committee, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 2 - 5 |
| 2. Leverage Designation As A National Park To Draw More Visitors To Whitinsville. | 2.1 Create Brochure And/Or Phone “App” With Trail Maps And Recreational Amenities. | State Park Standing Committee, National Park Service | 1 & 2 |
| | 2.2 Consider A Living History Exhibit Or Presentation. | Planning, Property Owners, National Park Service | 2 - 5 |
| 3. Build On Outdoor Recreation As A Key Draw For The Region. | 3.1 Update Open Space & Recreation Plan | Planning, Open Space Planning Committee | 1 |
| | 3.2 Establish A Canoeing “Trail” With Parking At Access Points. | Planning, Department Of Public Works, Open Space Planning Committee | 2 & 3 |
| | 3.3 Increase Biking, Hiking, And Cross Country Ski Trails | Conservation Commission | 1-5 |
| 4. Improve Wayfinding To And Throughout The Town | 4.1 Conduct A Wayfinding And Signage Plan Survey. | State Park Standing Committee, Department Of Public Works | 2 & 3 |
| | 4.2 Install Directional Signage On State Highways. | State Park Standing Committee, Department Of Public Works | 1 - 3 |

| Tourism And Recreation | Actions | Responsible Parties | Time Frame (Year) |
|--|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| 5. Preserve Remaining Agricultural Properties And Historic Working Landscapes. | 5.1 Pursue State And Federal Assistance Opportunities To Help Ensure That Farms Can Maintain Operations. | Planning, Conservation Commission | 1 - 5 |
| | 5.2 Preserve Castle Hill Farm Through Exploration Of Alternative Uses And Subsequent Zoning Changes. | Planning, Conservation Commission | 1 & 2 |
| | 5.3 Promote Foppema's Farm Stand On Hill Street | Planning, Conservation Commission | 1 - 5 |

| Village Revitalization | Actions | Responsible Party | Time Frame (Year) |
|---|--|---|-------------------|
| 6. Encourage Development Of Local Business Associations (Local Business Association). | 6.1 Engage Business Owners In Discussions And Provide Local Business Association Models | Planning, Local Business Owners, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 1 |
| 7. Improve Streetscapes In Village Centers. | 7.1 Conduct Streetscape Design Plan And Guidelines For Each Village Center To Assess Potential For Improvements In Façades, Signage, Sidewalks, Lighting, Trees/Landscaping, Benches, Public Art, Etc. | Planning | 3 |
| | 7.2 Pursue Complete Streets Plan For Improved Access And Safety. | Planning | 3 |
| | 7.3 Conduct Volunteer Clean-Up Days. | Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 2 - 5 |
| | 7.4 Create More Attractive Public Spaces, Including Flower Boxes, Appropriate Fencing, And Other Amenities (Such As Indicated By Streetscape Designs) | Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 2 - 5 |
| | 7.5 Repair/Replace Fencing Along Main Street (Arcade Pond) | Planning, Department Of Public Works, Local Business Association | 1 & 2 |
| | 7.6 Clean-Up Sidewalk (Remove Weeds, Etc.) Along Roadways Whitinsville Center & Rockdale | Planning, Department Of Public Works, Local Business Association | 1 & 2 |

| Village Revitalization | Actions | Responsible Party | Time Frame (Year) |
|--|---|--|-------------------|
| | 7.7 (Re)Install Flower Boxes At Memorial Square | Planning, Department Of Public Works, Local Business Association | 1 & 2 |
| | 7.8 Improve Grass/Lawn Area In Front Of Town Hall And Annex | Planning, Department Of Public Works | 1 & 2 |
| 8. Improve Wayfinding To And Within Village Centers. | 8.1 Install Wayfinding Markers To Businesses, And Historic Sites At Major Intersections And Public Parking Sites | Planning, Department Of Public Works | 1 - 3 |
| | 8.2 Install Clear Signage For Public Parking | Planning, Department Of Public Works | 2 |
| | 8.3 Conduct A Parking Study In Major Village Centers | Planning | 2 & 3 |
| 9. Preserve And Renovate Downtown Buildings. | 9.1 Work With State Representatives To Find Or Develop Programs To Help Fund The Costs Of Improving Vacant/ Underutilized Historic Buildings. | Planning, State Reps, Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 1 - 5 |
| | 9.2 Pursue Façade Improvements Programs. | Planning, Local Business Association | 2 - 5 |
| | 9.3 Consider Expanding Historic Mill Overlay District To Other Mills In Northbridge, Especially The Whitinsville Machine Works And The Rockdale Mill | Planning | 1 |
| 10. Revitalize Individual Village Centers In Keeping With Their Character. | 10.1 Create Conceptual Master Plan For Redevelopment Of Downtown Rockdale, Including Potential Channelization Of Riverbank Area. | Planning, Army Corps Of Engineers | 3 |
| | 10.2 Construct Channelization Of Riverbank Area | Planning, Army Corps Of Engineers | 5 |
| | 10.3 Adopt Zoning For Mixed-Use Development With Minimal Setbacks And Shared Parking. | Planning, Local Business Association | 3 |
| | 10.4 Explore Mixed Use Zoning For Whitin Machine Works, Including Possible Residential Uses, Boutique Hotel, Conference Center, Commercial, Manufacturing, Etc. | Planning, Local Business Association | 1 |
| | 10.5 Work With Existing Landlords And Tenants To Establish Viable Uses, Including Retail, Restaurants, And Services. | Planning, Local Business Association | 1 |

| Village Revitalization | Actions | Responsible Party | Time Frame (Year) |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|-------------------|
| | 10.6 Consider Adoption Of Model Traditional Neighborhood Development Ordinance To Encourage Infill Development In Appropriate Areas | Planning | 1 & 2 |
| | 10.7 Encourage Local, Area Business Associations To Develop Recruitment Priorities And Prospect Lists To Better Market The Villages To Businesses, Developers And Brokers | Planning, Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 1 & 2 |
| | 10.8 Engage Business Leaders In Downtown Programming And Other Revitalization Strategies. | Planning, Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 1 - 5 |
| | 10.9 Develop Downtown Activities And Events Such As Art Walks, Sidewalk Sales, Farmers' Markets, Restaurant Week, Etc. <i>(If There Is Sufficient Density Of Offerings).</i> | Planning, Local Business Association, State Park Standing Committee | 2 - 5 |
| | 10.10 Assess Need For Establishment Of Design Guidelines | Planning | 1 |
| 11. Preserve Existing Businesses. | 11.1 Inventory Existing Businesses And Vacancies In Village Centers To Determine Business Mix, Needs, And Opportunities. | Planning, Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 1 |
| | 11.2 Build Relationships With Local Business Owners. | Planning, Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 1 - 5 |
| | 11.3 Assess the need for formula business limitations in Whitinsville and other areas | Planning | 1-5 |
| | 11.4 Identify At-Risk Business Owners And Those Needing Succession Plans; Develop Intervention Strategies To Assist Them. | Planning, Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 2 - 5 |

| Industrial Development | Actions | Responsible Party | Time Frame (Year) |
|---|--|--|-------------------|
| 12. Revitalize Existing Historic Mill Buildings. | 12.1 Promote Use Of Mill Buildings As Business Incubators. | Planning, Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 2 - 5 |
| | 12.2 Amend Current Mill Zoning To Allow Live/Work Space In Mill Buildings To Promote Greater Utilization And To Encourage The “Creative Economy.” | Planning | 1 - 3 |
| | 12.3 Encourage Smaller Manufacturing And Innovative Uses In The Mill Buildings. | Planning, Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 2 - 5 |
| | 12.4 Conduct Outreach To Existing Mill Owners And Potential Entrepreneurs To Pursue A Variety Of Uses, Including Light Manufacturing, Breweries, Co-Work Space, And Makerspaces. | Planning, Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 2 - 5 |
| 13. Conduct A Business Retention Program. | 13.1 Conduct Proactive Outreach To Existing Industrial Businesses To Determine Needs And Future Plans. | Local Business Association, Blackstone Valley Chamber Of Commerce / Worcester Regional Chamber Of Commerce | 1 - 5 |
| 14. Encourage Development In Industrial Zones Along Major Transit Corridors | 14.1 Consider An Overlay District Or Changes To I-1 And I-2 Zones To Allow Wider Number Of Uses By-Right | Planning | 1 - 2 |

| Land Use and Regulations | Actions | Responsible Party | Time Frame (Year) |
|--|--|-------------------|-------------------|
| 15. Update Town’s Zoning Bylaw To Incorporate Modern Terms, Definitions, And Provisions. | 15.1 Reassign Permit Granting Authority From The ZBA To The Planning Board | Planning | 1 |
| | 15.2 Update Zoning Bylaw To Incorporate More Specific, Commonly Used Land Use Terms Rather Than How Uses Are Currently Defined In Our Zoning Bylaw | Planning | 1 |
| | 15.3 Ensure That All Defined Land-Use Terms Are Reflected In The Use-Tables | Planning | 1 |

| Land Use and Regulations | Actions | Responsible Party | Time Frame (Year) |
|---|--|--|-------------------|
| | 15.4 Review Zoning Bylaws To Better Define Their Scope And Purpose. | Planning | 1 & 2 |
| | 15.5 Expand By-Right Uses In Business, Industrial And Commercial Overlay Districts To Allow For Greatest Flexibility For Developers And Business Owners. | Planning | 2 & 3 |
| 16. Streamline Municipal Procedures To Facilitate Business Development. | 16.1 Continue Practice Of Holding Interdepartmental Review Meetings To Ensure All Parties Are Aware Of Opportunities And Potential Problems. | Planning, Business / Property Owners, Local Business Association | 1 |
| | 16.2 Develop A Fast-Track Permitting Process, Such As E-Permitting | Building Department | 1 |
| 17. Explore Innovative By-Laws And Guidelines For Commercial Centers | 17.1 Consider Village Center By-Law And Design Guidelines For Whitinsville, Rockdale And Plummer's Corner | Planning | 1 |
| | 17.2 Consider A Shared Parking Bylaw | Planning | 3 |

