

An aerial photograph of a suburban neighborhood. In the center, there is a large, white, rectangular building with a flat roof, identified as Northbridge Elementary School. To the left of the school is a large, paved parking lot filled with many cars. Surrounding the school and parking lot are various residential houses with different roof colors (gray, brown, white) and some commercial buildings. There are several streets with yellow and white lane markings. The area is interspersed with green trees and grass. The overall scene is a typical suburban school district environment.

*Prepared for Northbridge Building, Planning & Construction Committee (BPCC)*

# **REUSE FEASIBILITY STUDY NORTHBRIDGE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL REPORT**

*JULY 24, 2023*



## TOWN OF NORTHBRIDGE

Adam Gaudette ..... Town Administrator

## BPCC COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Michael Beaudoin ..... Chairperson

Paul Bedigian ..... Vice Chairman

John Gifford ..... Member

Steven Nye ..... Member

Shayne J. Picard ..... Member

Brian Paulhus ..... School Committee Rep

H. Warren Fairbanks ..... Member

## CONSULTANTS

Abacus Architects + Planners ..... Lead Consultant

Langan ..... Civil Engineers, Site Development

Stantec ..... Development Consultant

---

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|            |  |    |
|------------|--|----|
| <b>01.</b> | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....                                 | 3  |
| <b>02.</b> | STUDY BACKGROUND .....   | 6  |
| <b>03.</b> | SITE & BUILDING ASSESSMENT .....   | 15 |
| <b>04.</b> | MARKET STUDY .....   | 27 |
| <b>05.</b> | BUILDING REUTILIZATION OPTIONS .....                                       | 30 |
| <b>06.</b> | SITE REUTILIZATION OPTIONS MAINTAINING SCHOOL<br>ADMINISTRATION USES ..... | 39 |
| <b>07.</b> | EXPANDED SITE REUTILIZATION OPTIONS .....                                  | 50 |
| <b>08.</b> | COMMUNITY MEETING INPUT .....  | 58 |
| <b>09.</b> | NEXT STEPS .....   | 60 |
| <b>10.</b> | DESIGN GUIDELINES.....   | 61 |

---

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

# 1

Over the course of this study the goals of the investigation expanded beyond those in the original Request for Proposals as discussions between the Consultant, Town officials and the public revealed constraints and opportunities not envisioned when the future of the Northbridge School was first considered.

As envisioned originally, this study would explore adaptive reuse of the existing building so that ongoing investments in maintenance would result in benefits for the Northbridge community.

Additional investigations suggest that adaptive reuse is unlikely to be cost effective and that the best opportunities will be realized through demolition and new construction - although it is possible that a buyer who may want to reuse some or all of the existing construction may emerge.

The Consultant and Committee's recommendations to realize these opportunities are as follows:

## ***Consider redevelopment of the entire 118,137 square foot site***

The Northbridge School site includes the school building itself - a small original three story building facing Cross Street, and a large one story addition - and 19th century Victorian house facing Linwood Ave. with a parking lot. As originally envisioned the School Administration Offices would remain within the house and the redevelopment would include only the school and the area immediately around it.

It is recommended that the School Administration offices be moved to a new location, the Victorian house be retained, and the entire property considered for redevelopment. This will allow this critical part of the town center to better serve

the public, and with appropriate redevelopment, reinforce the character and quality of civic life.

## ***Consider development on adjacent site (the Church parking lot)***

Adjacent to the Northbridge School site is a parking lot and grassy area owned by the St. Patrick's Catholic Church. Until recently modular classrooms that expanded the Northbridge School occupied part of this site; they have since been removed. The parking lot creates an asphalt void in the middle of the town center that is under-utilized.

The parking lot and adjacent site appear to have ongoing utility for the Church; they have not responded to requests to consider redevelopment. However - the Town should consider ongoing engagement to determine if there are redevelopment options that would be beneficial to both the Church and the broader public.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

## ***Continue civic dialog***

Changes in Town Center Environments impact abutters in myriad ways, and proposals may be viewed differently by different people.

Some Northbridge residents may welcome substantive redevelopment plans that will put the school site to better use. Others, especially those who live and work in the immediate neighborhood, may be concerned about development that they see as out of scale with the surrounding context. Or they may be concerned about uses that alter the neighborhood.

At the recent community meeting most speakers were open to new ideas for the use of the site, but wanted to be involved in decision making.

The Town should continue to

work with abutting land owners to maximize opportunities to use site redevelopment to further Town goals and to avoid adverse impacts. This will set the stage for ongoing dialog should the land be sold to a developer.

## ***Consider reuse of the existing school building***

Although demolition will likely be more advantageous to any private or public entity pursuing redevelopment of the site, the existing buildings may have value to some potential users.

A school may be able to move in without major alterations to the building fabric, or another institutional use may be able to take advantage of the existing layout.

Partial reuse and partial redevelopment of the existing buildings may be possible. And

although major renovations or conversion to another use is unlikely to be cost-effective, this depends on a series of factors.

Reuse of existing buildings conserves energy embodied in the existing construction and is considered “sustainable”. Very significant upgrades to the building envelope and replacement of building systems would likely be required at significant expense.

## ***Pursue redevelopment by private entities through RFP process***

The Town has expressed a desire to sell the Northbridge School to a developer or another entity that can put the building and site to productive use.

A standard Request for Proposals can be issued, in line with Town policy and state regulations including Chapter 30B

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

The Town has no obligation to follow up on proposals, but the RFP responses will reveal whether there is interest, the type of redevelopment proposed, associated monetary offerings, and other terms and conditions.

## ***Consider retaining land with or without current buildings to meet current or future uses by the Town***

Many towns and cities throughout Massachusetts are looking for sites for new public safety buildings, senior centers, community centers, municipal offices, libraries or other public uses – and finding that there is very little land available to build on.

They may not have appropriate publicly owned sites, or find that private land is too expensive or unavailable for purchase. It may be advantageous for Northbridge to retain the Northbridge School for future use.

Given that the school building is underutilized and requires Town funds for maintenance, demolition of the buildings and the cost-effective creation of public open space may be worth considering, with the idea that the site could be redeveloped in the future.

Or there may be a Town need, a Senior Center for example, that should be considered given the availability of this site. Coordination between different entities in Northbridge would be useful so that the highest and best use can be pursued.

## ***Consider broader Town goals in considering redevelopment options***

The central location of the Northbridge School suggests that its redevelopment can reinforce a broad range of Town goals.

These might include:

- Reinforcing the character of the Town Center; the current school is very much out of character with the Linwood Avenue residential and the Church Street commercial that abuts it.

- Returning money to the Town – through sale and taxes coming out of redevelopment.

- Providing needed housing, commercial space, space for town facilities or other uses that are considered to be in the Town's interest.

- The publicly owned parking lot behind Church Street commercial uses is difficult to access. The redevelopment of the Northbridge School site could provide a second entry and exit off of Cross Street that might support the downtown function of this retail area.



The original Northbridge School, small and three stories, was built in 1952, and the addition, much larger and one floor, was built in 1978. It is located at 44 Cross Street.

In 2021 the new Northbridge School was opened and the current school was decommissioned. Small portions of the school are being rented for educational uses. The whole building is approximately 50,700 gross square feet.

The 1952 building has masonry exterior walls, with wood, steel and concrete block construction.

The one story addition has brick and block exterior walls, a steel frame wall roof construction, and concrete block partitions between classrooms and hallways. Most areas have a roof about 14 feet above grade; the gymnasium and cafeteria/auditorium pop up with a roof at about 22 feet.

The layouts and construction are typical of schools of their eras, although without some of the elegance that other schools have. The buildings have no historic value and are generally considered unattractive.

The Site (Plan Book 395 Plan 19) is 118,137 square feet total and is the site of the school and of a Victorian style house that was built in 1875. The house is part of a dignified streetscape of similar houses that give Linwood Avenue a distinct and memorable character.

The building and site continue to require maintenance while providing few benefits for Northbridge, which suggested that selling the property might be in the Town's interest. In anticipation of the issuance of a Request for Proposals from possible buyers Northbridge advertised for an

architecture and planning firm to study adaptive reuse options for the building. Several firms were interviewed and Abacus Architects + Planners was selected.

In initial conversations with the Town Administrator Adam Gaudette and the Committee Abacus Principal David Eisen suggested, that based on their extensive experience with the adaptive reuse of schools, it is usually not cost effective, and demolition and new construction may be advantageous.

The scope of the project was then expanded to consider a broader range of redevelopment options. These are illustrated and discussed in the pages that follow. Possible redevelopment benefits to Northbridge that have been discussed include:

- Eliminate maintenance costs of the existing building for the Town.

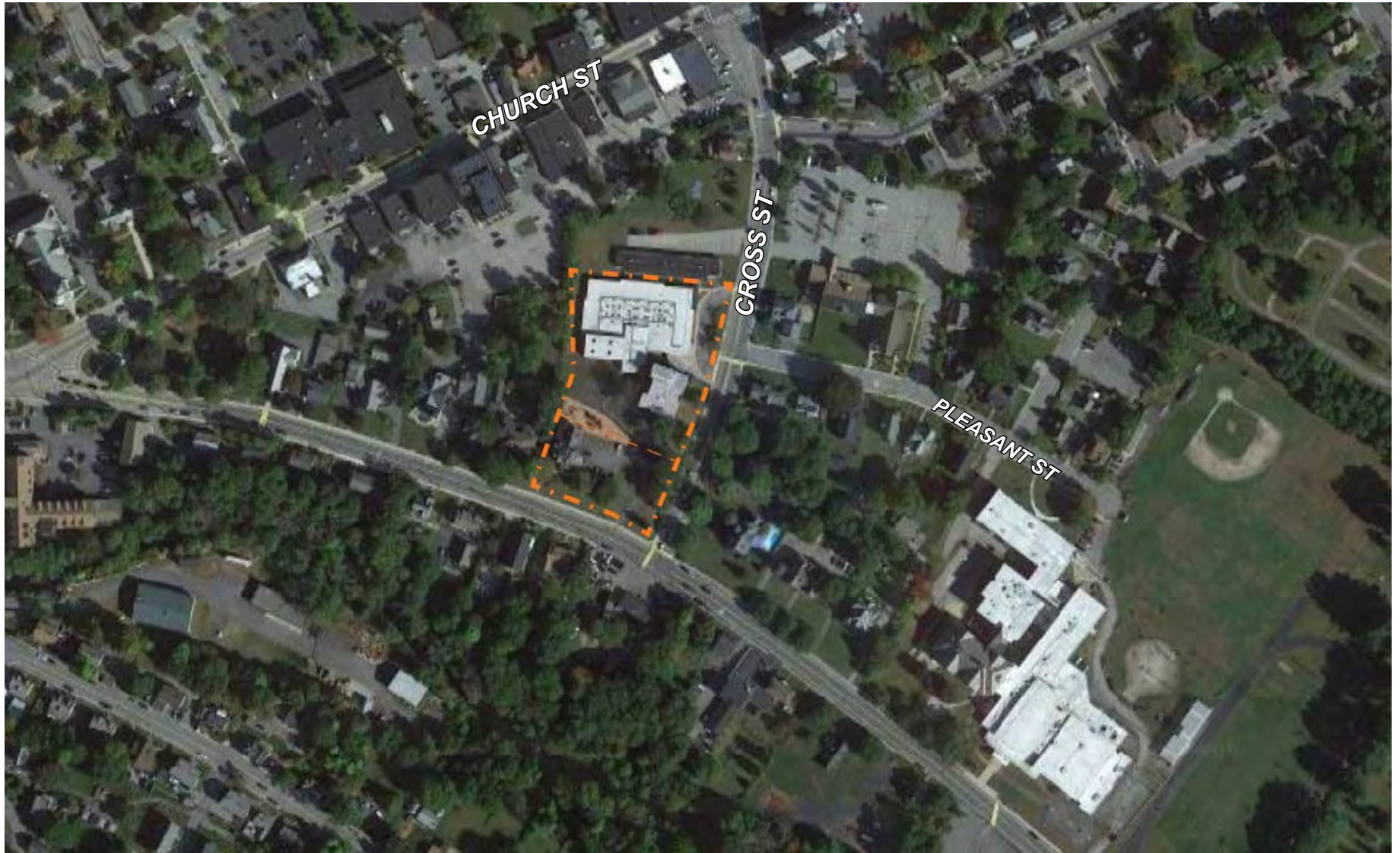
# STUDY BACKGROUND CONTINUED

- Realize money from the sale of the land, with or without the buildings
- Increase the tax base from taxes on increased land value and money making activities
- Support Town Center commercial rejuvenation from development that is adjacent to Church Street businesses.
- Reinforce the character of the Town Center with planning and design more compatible with that in the vicinity
- Provide market rate housing – if that is what is proposed and constructed.
- Provide affordable housing (“Friendly 40B” to get Northbridge closer to 10% affordable; currently at 7.6%) if that is what is proposed and constructed
- Provide commercial activities that reinforce the Town Center
- Provide public open space on some or all of the property.
- Provide public or non-profit services – such as a Senior Center, clinic or educational uses
- Create a connection from Cross Street to the town owned parking lot behind Church Street’s commercial buildings
- Utilize the slope of the land to create below grade parking off of Linwood Avenue if it is feasible



## STUDY AREA: SCHOOL SITE IN CONTEXT

The site is behind Church St. retail, the municipal parking lot, and near the middle school, mill building redevelopment, Town Hall, Common and primarily single family residential.





## STUDY AREA: FIRST FLOOR PLAN

The small school building from 1954 in the lower left is three floors, one partially below grade. The addition is large and low and is one story with two taller spaces.





## STUDY AREA: SCHOOL EXTERIOR

Exterior photos of the small three story school building built in 1954 and the large one story addition.





## STUDY AREA: BUILDING PHOTOGRAPHS, INTERIOR

Interiors photos of the small three story school building built in 1954 and the large one story addition.





## STUDY AREA: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION BUILDING

Exterior photos of School Administration Building, which is a historic home in a similar style, scale, and site setback to the other houses on Linwood Ave.





## STUDY AREA: DOWNTOWN CONTEXT

Church St. and houses along Linwood provide an attractive downtown context for the school and anything else that might happen on the site.





## STUDY AREA: SITE CONTEXT PHOTOS

Parking is critical to making downtown viable for civic, religious, commercial or residential use, but how it is located and designed should be carefully considered.





## ***Neighborhood Character***

The Northbridge School site is close to many of Northbridge's defining physical elements. Town Hall, the Town Common and the Mumford River lined with redeveloped mills are less than a quarter mile to the Southwest.

The stately old houses along Linwood Avenue are just around the corner. And Church St. – Northbridge's traditional commercial and civic center – is immediately to the North.

Although the site is not necessarily considered prominent, it is adjacent to so much of what gives the town its character. This makes the blocky and bland quality of the existing school and site – now underutilized - a lost opportunity for the site to contribute to the character of the town center.

## ***Site character constraints and opportunities***

The property has two primary uses. One is as the site of the decommissioned Northbridge School and its access drive – which takes up 2/3 of the land. The second is the site of the School Administration Offices, located in a grand Linwood Avenue home, along with a drive and parking area. Although there is not a fence between the two areas, they are distinct from one another. A playground sits between them.

This study was originally intended to consider only the area around the Northbridge School but has been expanded to consider the School Administration building and site as well.

The Administration building site is almost 10 feet above Linwood Avenue, with a lawn sloping down

and then a dignified old stone retaining wall along the sidewalk. Cross Street slopes up a number of feet so that the school building is close to the same level as the street.

These topographic changes give the old house a strong character, and need to be taken into account if the land is redeveloped so that all slopes are compatible with intended uses and ADA/ Mass. Architectural Access Board requirements. With proper planning they should not interfere with development.

## ***Engineering evaluation***

A preliminary evaluation by Langan, civil and site development engineers – suggests that the site is well positioned for reuse or redevelopment. Required site utilities are easily accessible, and provisions for storm water management can be managed

# SITE & BUILDING ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

with typical engineering solutions. There does not appear to be any ledge or other significant obstacles to development that would raise costs beyond what is typically anticipated.

## ***Hazardous Materials***

A series of tests performed by Universal Environmental Consultants (UEC) in 2017 indicated the presence of asbestos in some of the buildings assemblies – primarily flooring mastic and window caulking.

The asbestos containing materials will need to be removed or remediated if work is done in the building, or the buildings are demolished, in line with all local, state and federal guidelines. This should be taken into account as renovation or demolition plans are considered.

## ***Zoning evaluation***

Local zoning establishes setbacks from property lines, density of development, and the types of uses that are allowed as-of-right. The current school building extends over required setbacks and is not compliant.

The setbacks – 40' from streets, 10' from adjacent properties on the side – are not out of line with reasonable development standards that define the neighborhood, although relief might be applied for in specific cases.

Multi-family housing is not allowed – although the site may be suitable for appropriately designed apartment buildings, condominium developments or rowhouses that respect the neighborhood context, and relief could be pursued by a potential developer, or the Town could consider rezoning.

## ***Phase I Environmental Site Assessment***

A Phase 1 ESA was performed by Langan in 2022 and indicated that there could be an underground storage tank on site. Another tank in the basement was removed but there may have been contamination. A nearby dry cleaner may have contaminated the area.

It was recommended that these Recognized Environmental Conditions should be investigated further.

## ***Phase II Environmental Site Assessment***

Based on the Phase I recommendations the Town requested that Langan prepare a Phase II investigation. Their January 24, 2023 report concluded that “The analytical results for soil do not trigger a reporting condition”.

# SITE & BUILDING ASSESSMENT CONTINUED

## ***Building size and general character***

The current school building that occupies the site is out of character with the neighborhood and has few redeeming architectural features. The original school building, with one floor below grade and two above, and rooms lining a central corridor, has the rigid organizational structure and accessibility challenges of most old schools, with very few of the architectural attributes that prewar schools often have.

The newer structure, with its low sprawling character, is devoid of any charm whatsoever and was clearly built to provide classrooms as inexpensively as possible.

## ***Building construction constraint and opportunities***

Although the school has little or no architectural character both

the new and old sections are in relatively good condition. There has not been any significant degradation of the structure and envelope beyond what is anticipated for buildings over 50 years old.

A detailed report was prepared by Dore & Whittier Architects in 2017 that documents the condition of the building and is included in the Appendix. Conditions do not appear to have changed significantly since then.

Reuse of the buildings, however, will require significant upgrades – their extent depending on the extent of the changes anticipated and the projected uses. Building codes have changed significantly and energy codes are far more demanding.

All heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems will likely need to be replaced, along with

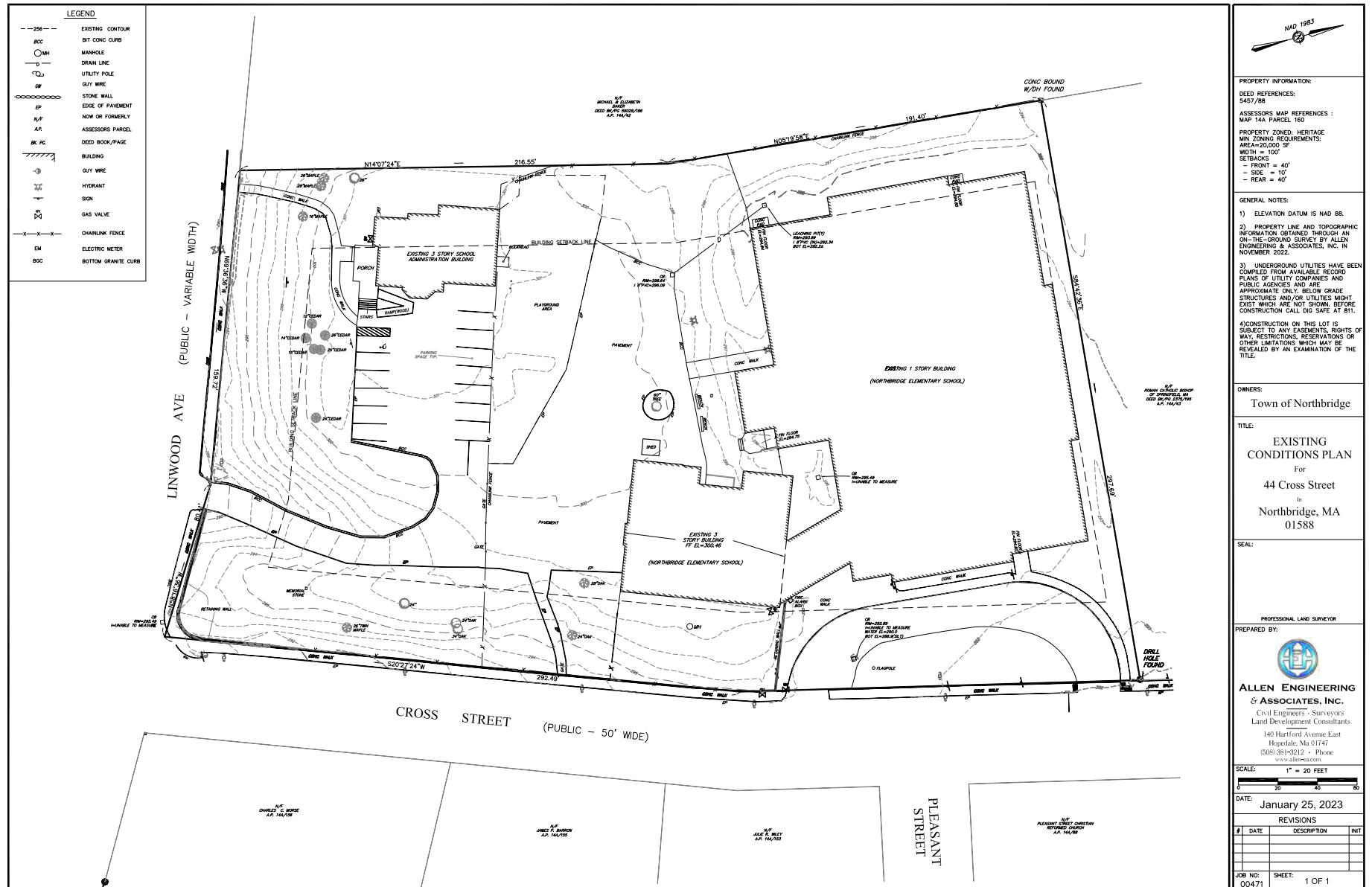
electrical systems glazing system and envelope thermal performance and air and water resistance improvements. This needs to be taken into account if adaptive reuse is considered.

The 3 story original building has a combination of masonry bearing walls, wood bearing walls, wood floor structure, and limited steel framing. The newer 1 story building has masonry bearing walls along the perimeter and a steel column and beam roof structure with steel bar joists. Interior concrete block walls are non-bearing.

These structural systems make the buildings somewhat flexible in terms of reuse. If reuse is considered a thorough structural engineering evaluation should be done to determine whether upgrades will be required to meet current building codes and new use requirements.

# STUDY AREA: SITE SURVEY

## Civil Engineer's Site Survey





## STUDY AREA: FIRST FLOOR PLAN

The initial study area, outlined in orange, doesn't extend out to Linwood Ave. and includes only the school and the land immediately around it. Topography is shown in 1' increments. Setback lines are shown dashed.





## STUDY AREA EXPANDED: FIRST FLOOR PLAN

The small school building from 1954 in the lower left is three floors, one partially below grade. The addition is large and low and is one story with two taller spaces.





## EXISTING BUILDING AND SITE

The site has a large impermeable area and the building is close to the property lines which is out of character with the neighborhood.





## ZONING AND SITE REQUIREMENTS SUMMARY

The Northbridge School site, 44 Cross Street, (outlined in orange) is located at the corner of Cross Street and Linwood Ave, and falls within **District H - The Heritage District**. Multi-family housing, planned townhouses, and senior living dwellings are not currently permitted uses within this district. A variance or zoning change would be required for multifamily housing.

Parking spaces are required to be 9x18 feet with a minimum drive aisle of 24 feet. 2 spaces per dwelling are required for any single, double, or multi-family housing. For professional/general commercial use, 1 space is required per every 250 feet of net floor space (nfs).

Many communities are reevaluating their parking requirements to support pedestrian oriented living, and Northbridge may decide that these requirements are excessive.

The parcel does not fall into the Open Space overlay district. There do not appear to be any specific open space



requirements for District H or for any residential districts zoned for multi-family use or planned townhouse developments. Senior dwelling use has an open space requirement that calls for 30% of the parcel to be contiguous open space excluding the setback areas per the senior living bylaw.

All redevelopment projects that disturb more than 5,000 SF or 25% of a property, or do not reduce impervious area by 40% will be subject to a storm-water

management permit. The total existing impervious surface is ~60,000 SF

Recommended storm-water management would include water quality treatment and groundwater recharge. It is not anticipated that additional detention would be required.

All anticipated redevelopment would include a detailed review with regulatory authorities and may require public hearings.

## ZONING AND SITE REQUIREMENTS SUMMARY

The NRCS soil type for the entire site is 245B: Hinckley Loamy Sand, 3 to 8 percent slopes. It is part of hydrologic soil group A. The runoff class is very low and the drainage class is excessively drained. The depth to the water table is more than 80 inches. Based on this information we don't anticipate issues with subsurface storm-water management features, but investigations are required to confirm soil conditions for design purposes.

The total grade change from the south to north side of the site is approximately 8 feet, with an approximate 2% average slope - although the site is significantly steeper in many areas.

It appears that all buildings could be constructed and site grading accomplished to meet existing grade within property lines without the use of retaining walls. Given its historic character and utility the existing stone retaining wall along Linwood should be maintained.

Discussions with the Department of Public Works indicate that the existing sanitary sewer connection ties directly into Cross Street (they believe it is an 8" line). The town is looking into records on existing storm drainage on Cross Street.

Utilities serving this site include the following:

***Electric:*** National Grid

***Gas:*** Eversource

***Telecom:*** Verizon

***Water:*** Whitinsville Water Co.

***Sewer:*** Northbridge Sewer Department



# SITE ASSESSMENTS

## ***Landscape Assessment:***

Northbridge Elementary is centrally located within the downtown area, and occupies an approximately 3 acre site that it shares with the School District offices building whose campus comprises approximately 1 acre.

Because much of the school consists of a 1 story addition, the school building itself occupies the majority of the site so outdoor space is limited.

The last major construction on site was done in 1983, and since that time the majority of the site has seen a significant amount of wear and is generally in fair to poor condition.

The exception to this is the playground which appears to have been built within the last 10 years and is in good condition.

## ***Architectural Assessment:***

Overall the building is in fair condition however it is starting to show its age. Surfaces and equipment are showing signs of damage and wear. The roof is at or beyond the end of it's warranty period and serviceable life, and is due for replacement. Exterior window and curtainwall assemblies are not energy efficient. The building envelope is likely not thermally efficient, given the era in which the building was constructed. There are many significant accessibility issues present; which are not compliant with the current accessibility code and the ADA guidelines, which expose the school and District to risk of civil action.

**Plumbing:** The majority of piping, fixtures, and equipment are original to the building and past their serviceable life, and are in poor

condition. It is recommended to replace all piping, fixtures, and equipment.

**HVAC Assessment:** In general, the HVAC systems of the original and 1983 buildings are far beyond their expected service lives and require updating. And all proposed renovation/new construction options will require the installation of new HVAC equipment dedicated to serve the new areas.

**Electrical Assessment:** There are two services to the building, one for the main structure and one for the modular classrooms that was later added. The power distribution system is in poor condition. The lighting is not in good condition. The fire alarm system is obsolete and in poor condition, and there is no emergency generator. Emergency lighting is accomplished with battery units.

# ENVIRONMENTAL SITE ASSESSMENT

## - PHASE I CONCLUSIONS & FINDINGS

### ***Abandoned Underground Storage Tank (UST)/Former UST:***

Langan observed evidence of a UST in the landscaped area to the east of Building 1. A concrete pad with a manhole cover that when uncovered, oily water and a fuel like odor was noted. According to Northbridge Public Works, the oil tank has been abandoned.

Additionally, Langan observed permits from July 1975 for a former 500-gallon fuel oil UST located in the basement of Building 2. There was no evidence of the UST in the basement of Building 2. UST removal documents or Closure Reports were not provided for review for either of the USTs and none are on file in public offices.

That status of the abandoned UST near Building 1 is unknown and it is unclear if the UST located in

the basement of Building 2 was properly removed, or if residual contamination was left in the subsurface. Potential releases of oil and/or hazardous materials may have impacted the subsurface conditions at the Subject Property.

### ***(REC-2) Historical Use of Surrounding Property:***

According to the EDR Report for the Subject Property, a dry cleaner was in operation approximately 400 feet north of the Subject Property in 1969 and 1970.

While no associated release or violations were identified during the review of historical records and no RCRA hazardous waste generator listings were identified at the facility, releases of chlorinated solvents potentially used at the facilities may have impacted soil,

groundwater, and/or soil gas at the Subject Property.

### ***De Minimis Condition-1: Interior Staining:***

De minimis staining was observed on the concrete floor in the boiler/mechanical room in the eastern portion of Building 1 and in the basement of Building 2. Areas of staining were not more than 5-square-feet and did not extend to floor drains. The concrete appeared to be in good condition with no visible cracks or pitting.



# ESA PHASE II FINDINGS & HAZARDOUS MATERIALS REPORT

## ***Environmental Site Assessment II:***

- No visual or olfactory evidence of environmental impacts were identified in the borings on Site.
- The stratigraphy underlying generally consists of a superficial layer of topsoil, a dark brown fine sand with trace amounts of fine gravel underlain by a layer of sand. Rock and cobble fragments were observed throughout the soil borings advanced at the Site.
- Groundwater was not encountered in the soil borings. Boreholes collapsed past 20 feet bgs during advancement, which terminated the boring.
- There were no detections of analytes above the minimum laboratory method detection limits in the soil samples. The analytical results for soil do not trigger a reporting condition.

## ***ACM (Abestos Containing***

***Materials):*** It is not necessary to remediate ACM because it is in good condition. But if the ACM is disturbed through renovation, demolition or other activity then it will be necessary to remediate.

***LBP (Lead Based Paint):*** It is amused painted surfaces in the 1952 building contain lead. All LBP activities performed, including waste disposal, should be in accordance with applicable Federal, State, or local laws, ordinances, codes or regulations governing evaluation and hazard reduction. In the event of discrepancies, the most protective requirements prevail.

***Airborne Mold:*** Based on comparisons with historical data from projects of similar type, building utilization, geographic location and season, the indoor airborne levels are considered low.

And no visible mold growth was observed during sampling.

***PCB's (Polychlorinated Biphenyls) and Mercury:*** Light fixtures, thermostats, exit signs and switches were inspected. Light fixture ballasts do not contain PCB (as noted on labels). However tubes in light fixtures, thermostats, signs, and switches are assumed to contain mercury. IT would be costly to test all these equipments so it is recommended to treat equipment as if it contains mercury and disposed in an EPA approved landfill as part of the demolition project. Caulking is also assume dot contain PCB's.

***Radon:*** The measured radon concentrations of the samples were found to be much lower than the EPA guidelines. No further action is required.

It has been the intention of the Town to issue a Request for Proposals to potential buyers who may be interested in purchasing the Northbridge School Property. Offers would depend on the market - what uses and what purchase price would offer a suitable return on investment. The Town would then evaluate which offer, if any, are in its interests.

This study is intended to suggest to Town officials, the public, and potential buyers, the kinds of uses that may be viable financially, and may be acceptable to the town. This reduces risks for proposers, and educates the public and the Town on the kinds of proposals that they may receive.

The study sections that follow illustrate some of the possible options that might be considered by developers. This section describes

the market in which these options would operate.

Drew Leff of Stantec, who has decades of experience in the preparation of market studies and development scenarios, explored a range of possible uses for the site and building and evaluated their feasibility.

His work included:

1. Northbridge and regional demographic profiles
2. Northbridge and regional economic profiles
3. Northbridge and regional real estate market profiles
4. Northbridge and regional housing development profiles
5. Interviews with local real estate professionals
6. Toured the site, immediate

context and visited nearby development to understand what has been recently built.

## 7. Recommended/anticipated development options

These investigations concluded that there is a strong demand for housing in the region and immediate area and that this site would be most appropriate for multi-family housing development.

Non residential uses were also an option, but with significantly less demand. All of the prototypical development scenarios described and laid out in the sections that follow are in line with market study findings.

The full Market Study report is included in the appendix to this document.



## MARKET STUDY: LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Local real estate professionals tend to have a clear understanding of market demand. Drew Leff had conversations with four very knowledgeable professionals regarding the Northbridge real estate market and the potential of the Northbridge School site for reuse:

1. Jeannie Hebert, President & CEO, Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce
2. Kevin Kuros, Regional Director, Mass Office of Business Development
3. Marty Green, Broker and owner of Marty Green Properties LLC
4. Sue VanderZicht, Broker, VanderZicht Real Estate

They indicated that:

- Northbridge has been very successful in filling its large stock of historic mill buildings with primarily industrial uses, particularly in Whitinsville. There has been significant industrial development in larger-scale new construction.
- It is unlikely that scale of the Northbridge School site is suitable for industrial uses, but it is possible that there are industrial uses for which a typical large floor plate mill building won't work.
- These might include uses that need their own stand alone facility with special loading or access requirements. This would be build-to-suit for a specific tenant. An RPF would be the best way to understand whether there is this kind of interests. Nearby property owners may object.
- Potential for maker space discussed. There is already one in Linwood Mill and it is unlikely that another one in the area is needed.
- There are significant state programs for commercial/industrial uses that might motivate a potential proposer.
- There is no current market for office space, especially in this kind of location although a co-working space might be possible.
- There is a need for more multi-family housing, particularly multi-family at a more affordable price point.
- There is a need/market for more senior and 55+ housing that might like location near Church Street retail and civic amenities.

## MARKET STUDY: LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

- Blanchard School in Uxbridge is a great example of a determined group finding programs and funding sources to make a mixed-income development work. Example of the affordable housing, mixed income or 55+
- The town needs more higher-quality dining. Mixed use with residential and some ground floor retail like a destination restaurant or pub would be desirable if it can have sufficient visibility - ideally connected to Church Street commercial activities. Lack of pedestrian and vehicular traffic will remain a challenge.
- A stand-alone property for entrepreneurs like a brewery/distillery might work. Northbridge is about the right size and may be a sufficient draw that not being on major street is not a detriment.
- A preliminary conversation with the owner of Purgatory Beer Company in the Linwood Mill redevelopment suggested that the Northbridge School might be appropriate for a similar kind of company - although Purgatory did not have an interest at this time.
- A preliminary conversation with Kelly Bol, Director of the Northbridge Senior Center, indicated that their current facility is inadequate and that the Northbridge School would be an excellent site for a new senior center. The cost of a new facility might be a hurdle that cannot be overcome. There are, she indicated, some towns that can access funding for new senior centers but have a difficult time finding appropriate parcels, suggesting the value or retaining this site for future town use.
- There are non-profit and for profit organizations that provide similar services to senior centers along with additional health care and support personnel. There may be interest on the part of this kind of entity.
- Reaching the broadest range of potentially interested parties with outreach and a Request for Proposals is the best way to maximize the benefit of this site. It is possible that an educational or community user may emerge.
- Town Houses, semi-attached homes or apartment buildings, especially 55+ may provide appropriate density for this location and buyers may see this setting as attractive - a urban village version of nearby Stone Hill condominiums. The site is too small and too dense for single family development.



**R**eutilization of existing school buildings is often not cost effective, depending on the scope of renovation work proposed for new uses. Despite that, some towns may choose to pursue adaptive reuse because the old buildings have historic value, are anchors in a community, and provide a density of development in residential areas that would not be allowed with demolition and new construction.

Given the awkward way in which the current building utilizes the site, and the bland appearance of the building, there does not appear to be a higher purpose served by re-utilizing the existing school.

The original building has a very small floor plates, making reuse difficult. The addition has the opposite challenge – the floor plate is so large there are significant

areas towards the center of the building that would not be served by windows bringing in light and views – which is a challenge for any kind of residential reuse.

The above notwithstanding, there may be potential developers who see opportunities for adaptive reuse and may find it to be cost effective.

The consultant has explored a number of options in the pages that follow to illustrate what may be possible.

### ***Partial building demolition and new construction option A***

The more recent single story portion of the Northbridge School has a steel frame, with a series of columns distributed throughout the floor area supporting steel beams, which then support steel bar joists, steel decking and the roof. The

overall plan utilizes non-bearing concrete block partitions to define classrooms, hallways, and other rooms.

The interior concrete block walls could be removed leaving a large open area typical of warehouses, industrial buildings and certain kinds of office and service uses. There may be building buyers that could utilize that kind of open space for their purposes. Significant upgrades to the structure might be needed, including adding shear walls or diagonal bracing, or leaving some of the concrete block walls in place.

If some or all of the existing partition walls were removed, housing, offices or other types of uses could be built out within the open floor plan offering more flexibility for redevelopment.

# BUILDING REUTILIZATION OPTIONS CONTINUED

This may be particularly advantageous for housing, where existing walls constrain the kinds of new layouts that may be more advantageous.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the value of the existing structure will compensate for the costs of demolition and new interior build out, so that demolition and new construction is likely to be a more cost effective way of accomplishing the same goals.

This is especially true given the large floor plate that leaves much of the floor area a very significant distance from windows, light and views.

## ***Partial building demolition and new construction option B***

The more particularized portions of the school – the original 3 story building and the gym and cafeteria

– could be demolished, leaving the classroom block with the central corridor. This could be utilized with the current layout, or some or all of the concrete block partitions could be removed. New construction could then reface the Cross Street frontage and the face of the area where demolition has taken place to improve the appearance of the building.

## ***Partial building demolition and new construction option C***

Demolition of the gym, cafeteria and adjoining spaces would leave building blocks with dimensions appropriate for housing and proximity to windows.

Apartments could be built out within the existing classrooms, or the classrooms demolished and new layouts built within the existing exterior walls.

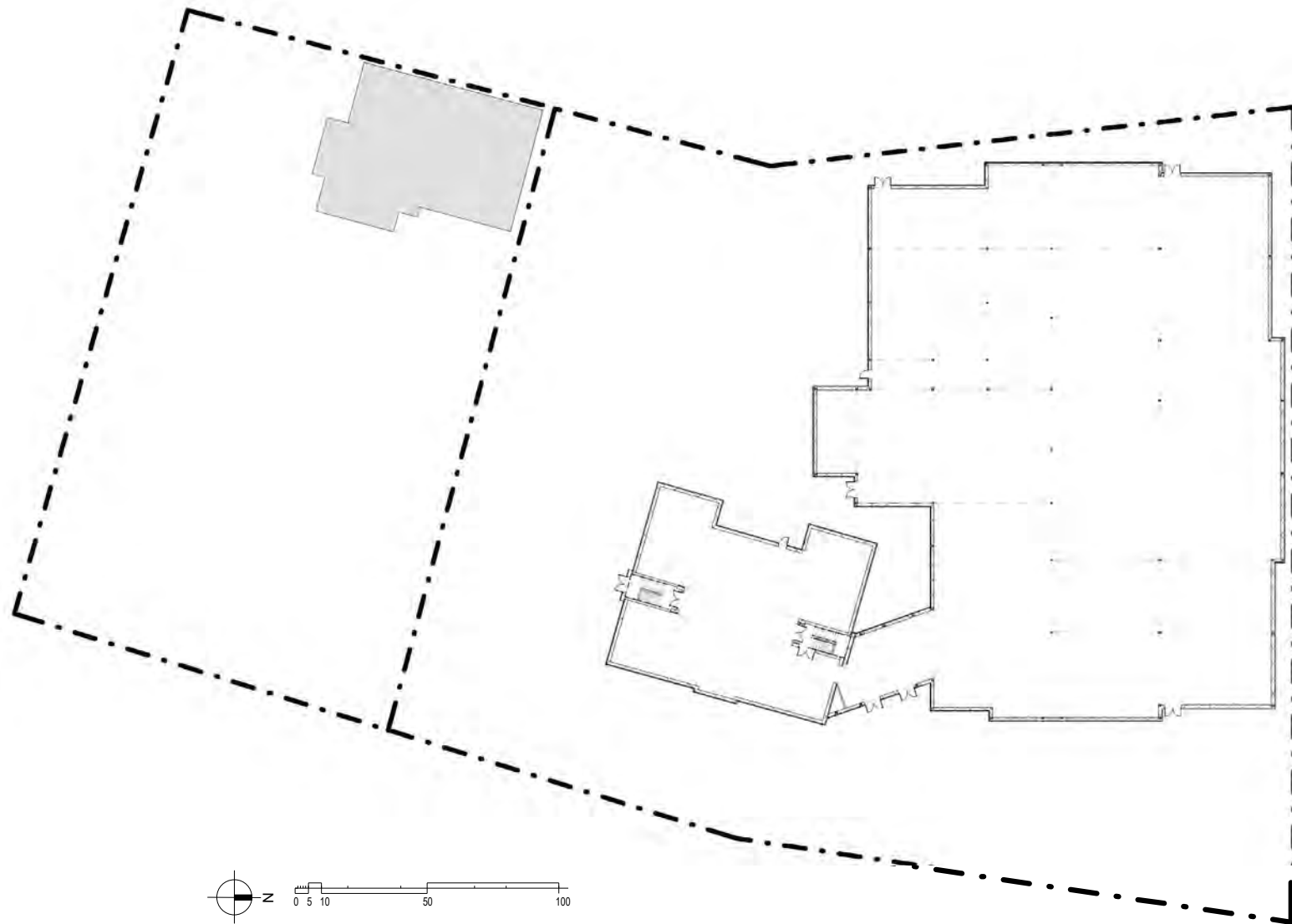
## ***Evaluation of reutilization options***

The Town has expressed an interest in adaptive reuse options for the existing buildings, and the approaches noted above lay out what may be possible. Given the disadvantages of these buildings, pursuing reuse is likely to not be in the interests of the town or building buyers unless their needs are very similar to those of the originals school. These include:

- Floor plate sizes that are difficult to re-utilize effectively
- Relatively low value of existing construction in relation to what adaptive reuse might cost, compared with demolition and new construction
- Awkward building design and siting that precludes more effective site utilization and buildings more compatible with the neighborhood.

## OPTION A - PARTIAL BUILDING DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION

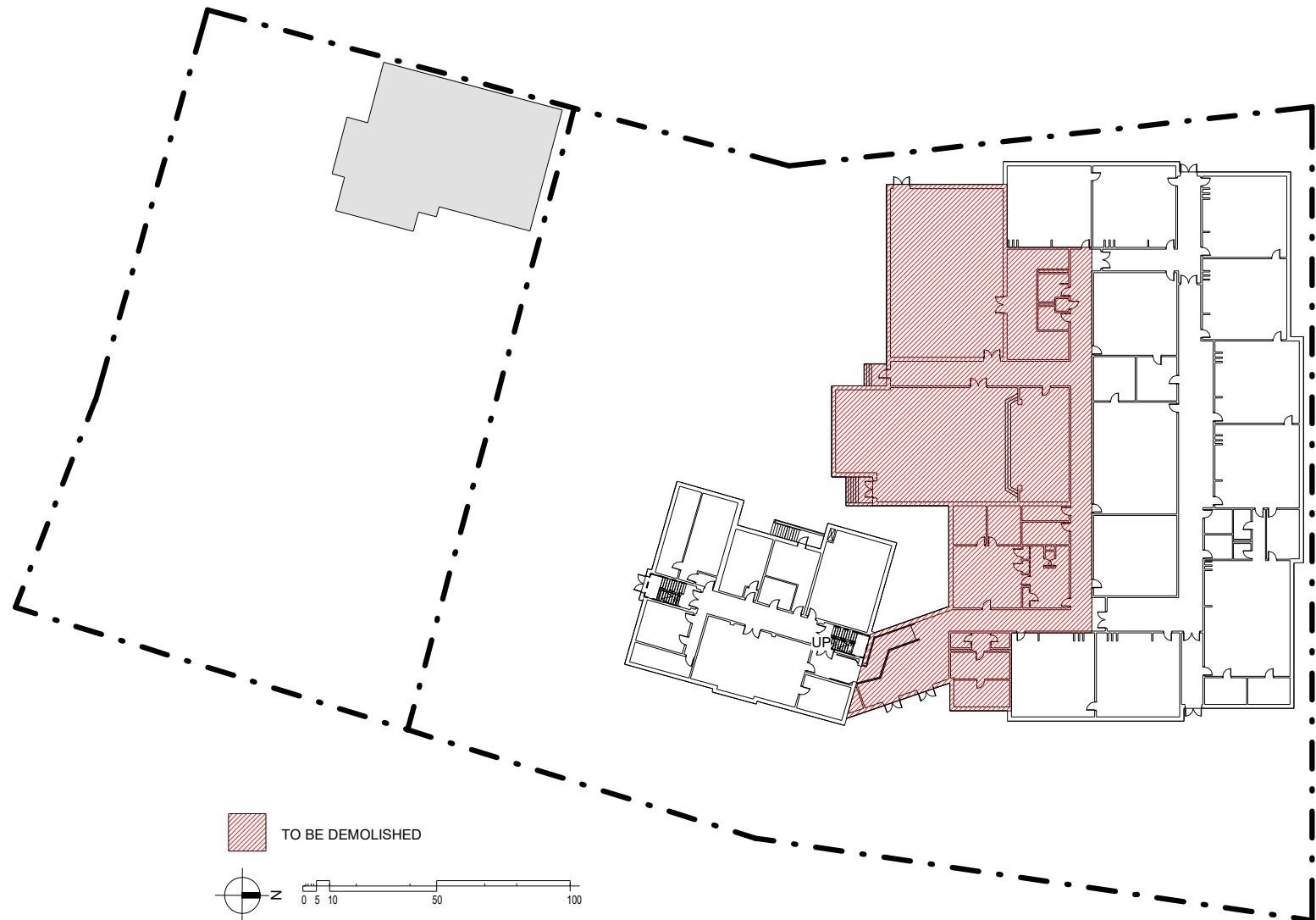
The roof is supported by a steel structure and all other walls are non-bearing concrete block. Non-bearing walls could be removed to provide space for commercial use or a residential build out.





## OPTION B - PARTIAL BUILDING DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION

Demolish parts of the building not well suited for residential, and use portions of the building whose rooms sizes and access to light are appropriate.



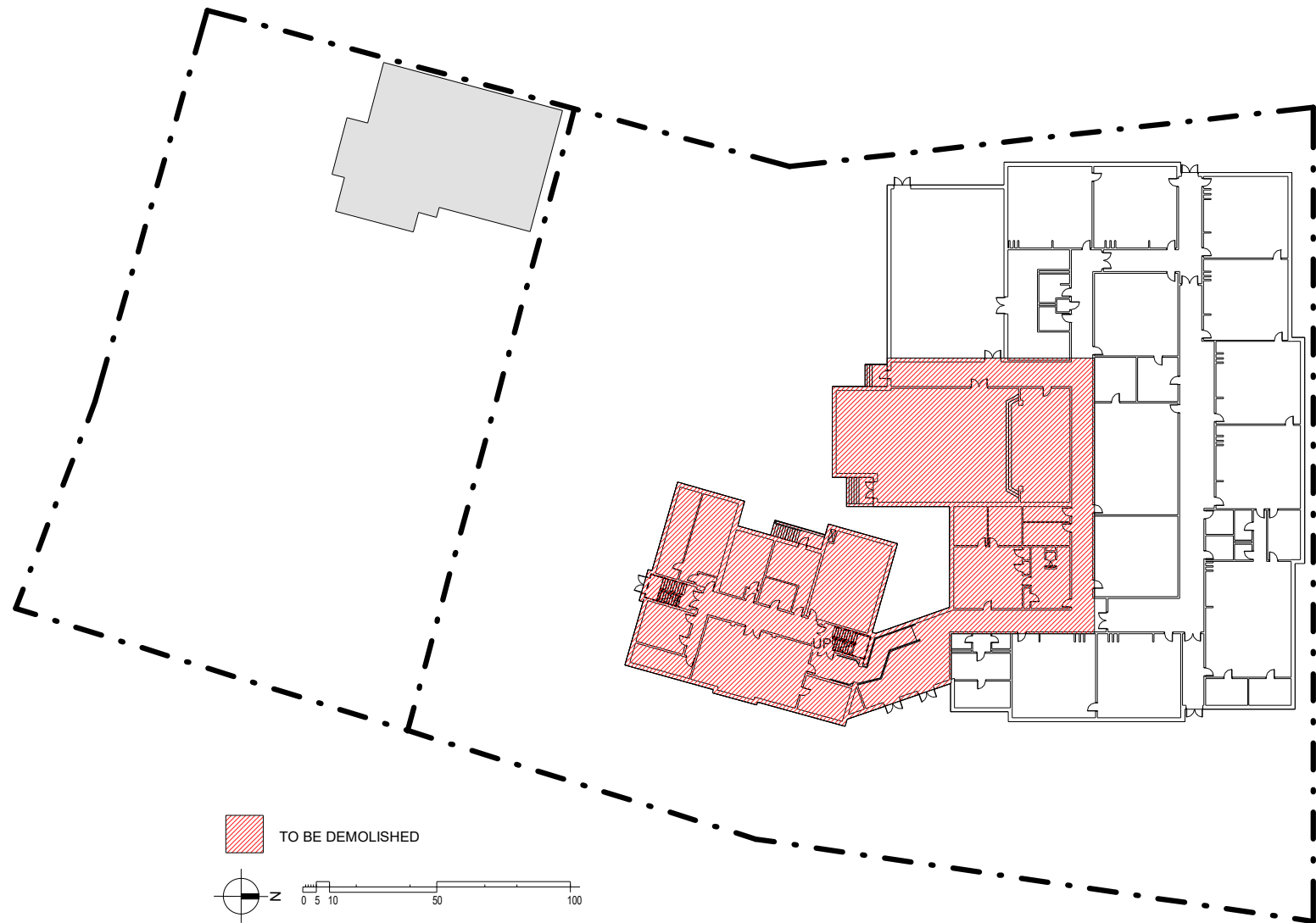
## OPTION B - PARTIAL BUILDING DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION

A combination of partial demolition and new construction could be appropriate for housing, although retaining the existing building may have very little value.



## OPTION C - PARTIAL BUILDING DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION

Another option is to demolish building areas not suited for non-residential uses and retain those that might be able to be opened up.





## OPTION C - PARTIAL BUILDING DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION

Demolishing many or most of the existing interior walls would allow reconstruction with wall types and locations more suitable for apartments and condominiums.





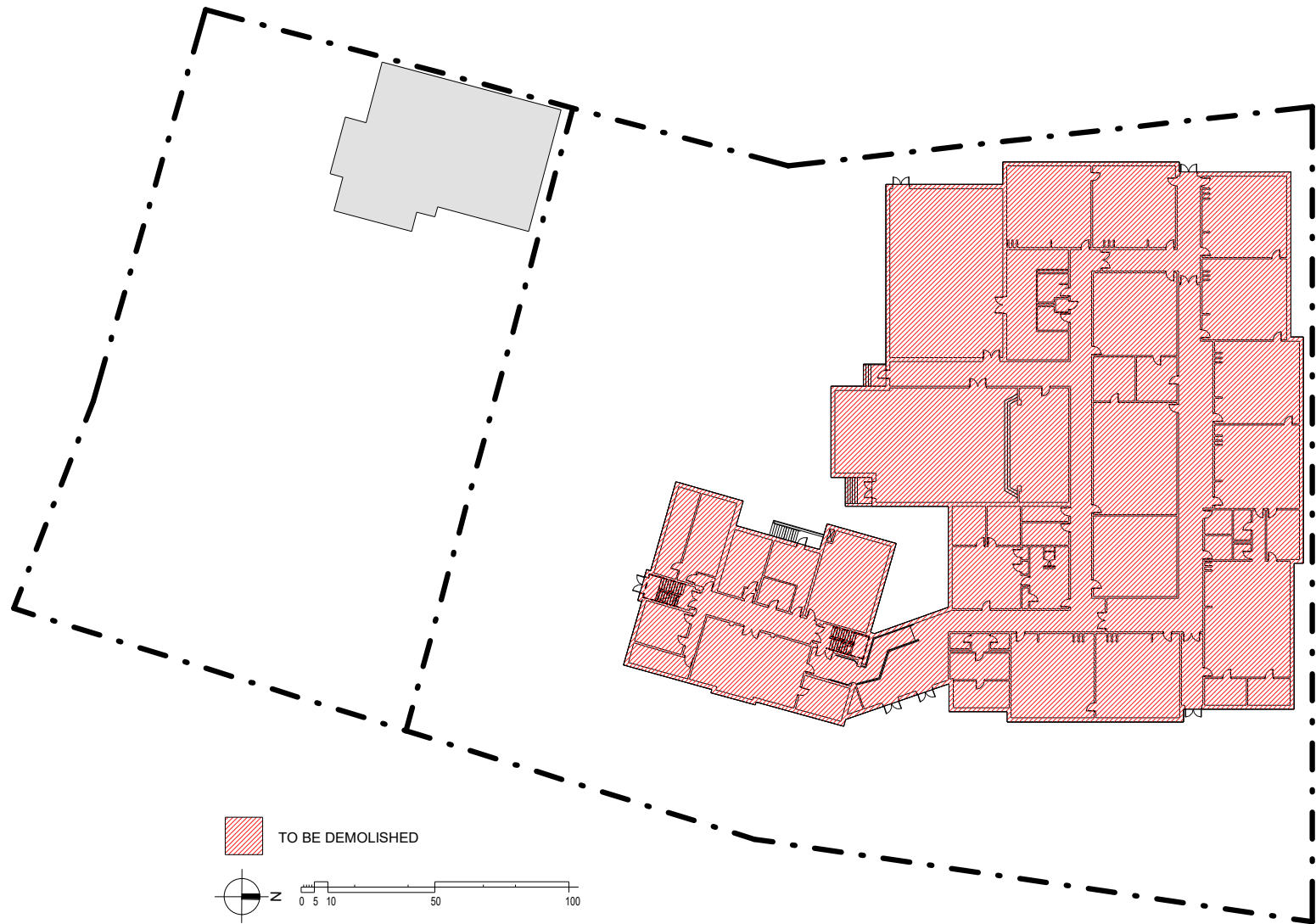
## OPTION C - PARTIAL BUILDING DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION

Alternatively, a brew pub, destination dining/food center or boutique manufacturing could occupy the retained part of the existing building with a new front face (shown in yellow).



## OPTION D - DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION

Demolition of the entire building opens up the most possibilities for reuse of the site – if the existing structure provides little value and rehab adds significant cost.





# SITE REUTILIZATION OPTIONS MAINTAINING SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION USES

# 6

**D**emolition of the existing school building offers redevelopment opportunities that are likely to be more advantageous than the reuse of these buildings.

As originally defined, the redevelopment site includes only the school and the site area immediately around it. The adjoining area of the site was assumed to be utilized by School Administration with offices in the existing Victorian house and parking adjoining it.

The pages that follow explore redevelopment options. They grow out of the market analysis that identifies housing as the primary “highest and best use” – in terms of meeting regional need and providing a return on investment to developers. From a design and planning perspective market rate

housing and affordable housing would be virtually identical so this report does not distinguish between the two. An RFP from the Town might require a certain percentage of affordable units, and a proposer would likely clarify the affordability levels in their proposal.

Various types of housing were considered, including duplex homes designed for the 55+ market, rowhouses and apartment buildings. The site is considered too small for single family homes given what is available in the area.

Also considered was non-residential use: boutique retail or restaurant that could complement Church Street offerings, or boutique manufacturing or services that could utilize the relatively small site and town center location.

## ***Housing types and design***

On the following page are illustrations of the kinds of housing that are appropriate for this neighborhood – with a density and unit count that takes advantage of the town center location, and a scale that is compatible with what is in the neighborhood.

These are, in general terms, the kinds of housing on which the planning proposals are based, although a lot of variety is possible in both site layouts and building form. Planning options are at a conceptual level of development.

## ***Duplex/Attached residential***

Duplex buildings, with two individual homes and a shared party wall, create significant additional value compared with single family homes in town center

# SITE REUTILIZATION OPTIONS MAINTAINING SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION USES CONTINUED

environments due to the added density. “Empty nesters” 55+ are the most likely buyers, and layouts are sized for a ground floor bedroom and a second bedroom upstairs. Each unit has a garage, driveway, a front yard and a backyard.

Buildings are arranged to shape shared green space while providing a turnaround off of the main entry drive from Cross Street. Duplexes are similar in scale to the houses along Linwood Avenue and are especially appropriate on that end of the site..

In the plan that follows these duplexes are then grouped to form larger blocks that raise the total unit count above what could be obtained with free standing duplexes - with staggered facades that maintain the smaller scale residential character

## ***Row houses***

Row houses provide more units per acre but have windows only on the front and back – except for those on the ends of the building. Ground floors have garages with two or more stories of living and bedroom space above. Both two and three bedroom rowhouses could be accommodated.

Rowhouse have a more urban quality than duplexes, with a form and density that is appropriate for land adjacent to Church Street, with its commercially scaled two and three story buildings.

The rowhouses are set back from the street and are oriented around a central green space that provides a Town amenity, and minimizes the buildings’ impact on the streetscape and the sloping topography of Cross Street.

## ***Apartment buildings***

Apartment buildings are denser still and could be 2 story or 3 story. The main limiting factor is likely to be on-site parking - currently 2 cars per unit are required by Town zoning. Reducing this would allow more homes to be built. The Northbridge market is unlikely to support apartments with underground parking; grade level parking is assumed.

Apartments line a central corridor with building blocks between 55 and 60 feet wide. The scale could be similar to the buildings along Church St. Apartments can be articulated with balconies and bays that act as scaling elements – not unlike the bays that animate the houses along Linwood Ave. Orienting buildings around green areas helps soften the impact on the surrounding neighborhood.



# SITE REUTILIZATION OPTIONS MAINTAINING SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION USES CONTINUED

## ***Commercial uses***

Non-residential uses could take many forms and are completely dependent on what a proposer might consider economically viable.

Given the small size of the site and location off of a major street, a “boutique” or “destination” use might be appropriate. An art gallery that sponsors art classes, a micro-brewer or coffee roaster and café, a maker-space that offers access to equipment and classes, a wellness center that sponsors exercise or dance programs – all might be options.

As noted in the Market Study, however, most of these uses are unlikely. These are generally uses that rent or buy existing buildings, so new construction is unlikely, and given the character of the existing building – they are also unlikely to occupy the school. Outreach to

realtors and broad distribution of the RPF maximizes the chances that potential buyers will be aware of Northbridge School opportunity.

## ***Public uses: senior center or other services***

Given the location in the town center the site might be appropriate for a senior center, an educational center, a branch library, a day care center, town offices – or other uses sponsored by the Town or other public agencies.

There may not be funding, or even a need that has been identified, but retaining the land for future use may be advantageous to Northbridge. Many town’s have pursued public projects like these only to find that there is no land available. The Town should consider whether selling the property is ultimately in the Town’s long term interests.

## ***Non-profit uses***

Non-profit organizations often provide services similar to, or augmenting, those provided by government agencies. Continued outreach to regional non-profits may be worthwhile as the future of the site, and the broader public interest - is considered. Their funding sources are generally different than those of public agencies.

PACE - Program of All-inclusive Care - is one possible organization that may need space locally or regionally. They are generally funded by Medicare or Medicaid.

## ***For-profit services***

For profit companies are increasingly providing services similar to non-profits and governmental agencies – especially in the health care sector. They may

# SITE REUTILIZATION OPTIONS MAINTAINING SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION USES CONTINUED

have the resources to build a new building to meet regional demands. They may also be interested in adaptive reuse of the existing buildings, but the character and quality of the decommissioned School is unlikely to be attractive.

## ***Open Space – long or short term***

The underutilized school building and site contribute very little to the town, and cost money for maintenance. Northbridge could choose to demolish the building, clear the site, and plant it with a minimal landscape that could be utilized for recreation and outfitted with a playground. This might reduce maintenance costs and add value to the public while keeping the land in municipal hands for reuse in the future as needs and funding emerge.

Because of Article 97 requirements

it should probably not be turned into a park – this regulation would make it a challenge to use the park for anything other than parkland in the future.

If the town decided that the use of the site as a park – long term – was desirable, it could be turned into a park in perpetuity.

## ***Summary of options***

Based on the market study and evaluation of the site and surrounding context the most likely uses for the Northbridge School site include:

- Duplex residential (55+)
- Row houses
- Apartment buildings
- Commercial uses
- Public uses such as senior center

- Non-profit uses
- For-profit services
- Open Space – long or short term

On the following pages many of these options are illustrated in conceptual plan layouts. Proposers will evaluate the uses that are most appropriate for them. The Town may want to develop its own priorities.



# EXAMPLES OF HOUSING TYPES

Townhouses



Apartment Buildings



Duplexes



Large Houses with Multiple Apts





## DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION: 55+ DUPLEXES

14 homes provide garages, primarily first floor living with partial second floors, and are aimed at the 55+ “empty nester” market.





## DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION: TOWNHOUSES

29 townhouses have garages and 2 or 3 bedrooms suitable for families, young adults or empty nesters.





## DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION: APARTMENT BUILDINGS

Apartment buildings provide 24 units per floor. Whether they are two floors/48 apartments or three floor/72 apartments may be determined by parking requirements.





## DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION: NON-RESIDENTIAL

New non-residential could include destination dining, with institutional or residential above. The connection to Town parking for Church St. might support these uses.





## DEMOLITION AND NEW CONSTRUCTION: SENIOR CENTER

Kelly Bol (Senior Center director) suggested this site for a 15,000 SF Council on Aging. PACE (Program of All-inclusive Care) may be a private sector alternative.





## DEMOLITION AND A NEW PUBLIC PARK

Community members expressed interest in the existing school being demolished and replaced with a public park for everyone in the neighborhood to enjoy.



# EXPANDED SITE REUTILIZATION OPTIONS

# 7

A significant question for the Town is whether redeveloping the site immediately around the school and maintaining the Linwood Avenue site for School Administration use – or another use separate from the school site – is in the Town’s long term interests.

Considering this as one site to be retained by the town for future use, or sold for development to a developer or other uses, may have benefits. A larger redevelopment area offers more opportunities to pursue the highest and best use for Northbridge.

Under any scenario we recommend preserving the Linwood Avenue house. It has very significant historic, urban and architectural value and is an important component of a very attractive streetscape. It is in reasonably good condition.

The surrounding land is used primarily for parking and could be redeveloped while preserving the house as a single family residence, multi-family residential or a non-residential use. This is especially useful if the school is demolished and new development can be distributed across the entire expanded site.

As has been noted, the expanded site slopes up from Linwood Avenue almost 10 feet. This could conceivably allow the construction of parking at the Linwood Avenue level, under housing or other uses above, reducing costs from what is normally associated with fully underground parking.

This would allow a developer to provide more housing while minimizing how much of the land is used for parking. This may not be economically viable but is worth

considering.

On the following pages options for the expanded site are illustrated. All preserve the existing house to anchor new development to the context.

A final option expands development onto the adjacent church-owned property. Although the church leadership has been contacted by the Town, as of this writing they have not shown any interest in pursuing this opportunity.



## ORIGINAL STUDY AREA

The study area per the RFQ included the area immediately around the school but did not include the Town owned land used by the School Committee.





## EXPANDED STUDY AREA

Expanding the site to Linwood Ave. while retaining the existing house could reinforce the character of the Cross St. & Linwood Ave. corner and add value for the Town.





## EXPANDED SITE: SENIOR CENTER & SENIOR HOUSING

If the site were expanded out to Linwood Ave. then there would be space for senior housing in addition to a senior center (15,000 SF COA)





## EXPANDED SITE: APARTMENTS, TOWNHOUSES AND BELOW GRADE PARKING

Apartment near the corner of Linwood and Cross could pick up the scale of the old houses with parking located below. Townhouses could occupy other parts of the site.





## EXPANDED SITE: TOWNHOUSES AND APARTMENTS

Apartment buildings could be 2, 3, or 4 stories depending on how much parking is needed.





## EXPANDED SITE: APARTMENTS AND FIRST FLOOR COMMERCIAL

The first floor of multistory buildings could be a commercial use - restaurant, brew pub, art gallery, or other small shops - shown in yellow below apartments.





## FURTHER EXPANSION OF THE STUDY AREA

Expanding the site further onto the privately owned church parking lot site would reinforce the kind of town fabric that gives Whitinsville its identity.



On January 18, 2023 a public meeting was held to solicit public input on the future of the Northbridge School and site, and to bring the community up to date on work done so far.

The following summarizes the opinions received:

- There was a general consensus that the existing buildings had little to offer the Town and demolition would not be opposed. This was partially due to the perception that the buildings were unattractive, and partially due to the fact that the buildings and site were not being utilized.
- As long as the buildings remain, their use for public purposes was supported – educational, recreational, social service, wellness, etc. Non-profits were especially noted as being desirable and needing affordable places to locate. This could be long term if demolition does not take place, or short term while redevelopment plans are taking shape.
- Replacement with development more in keeping with the neighborhood character was generally supported. There was significant abutter concern about the height of new development and that the overall massiveness could overwhelm adjoining properties or the streetscape.
- Design guidelines that protected the public from out-of-scale development were considered important. The design team noted that the Report that they are preparing will include guidelines for consideration.
- Demolition of the existing school building and retention of the site for future uses was also noted as a desirable option.
- Retention of the property by the Town was generally supported. Its use as a park, short or long term, was supported by many of those present.
- Ongoing public communications, including additional meetings concerning the future of the property as plans progress was requested.
- The issuance of a Request for Proposals by the Town was understood to be the next step in the process. It was noted that all proposals should be carefully evaluated in terms of the benefits to the Town and protection for abutters.



## PHOTOS OF COMMUNITY MEETING



This study is intended to help Northbridge consider alternative futures for the Northbridge School and site. Its uses include:

- Broadening the understanding of Town officials, committees and citizens of the range of options available - beyond the reutilization of the existing building originally considered.
- Building public and administrative support for thinking through alternative futures.
- Supporting outreach to developers, real estate brokers, non-profit organizations, service providers, educational institutions, entrepreneurs, affordable housing providers and others that this property will be available for purchase.
- Providing background information to the Town and

potential buyers on the condition of the buildings and property. This helps reduce risk and may raise the perceived value.

- Providing planning and design ideas on how the site and building can be utilized to potential buyers and developers. This may broaden the range of interest by obviating the need to hire a planner or architect to understand site potential, and may raise perceived value.
- Defining town goals - replacement of unattractive buildings, adding needed housing, providing a place for businesses or service providers, creating open space for recreation, supporting downtown revitalization, reinforcing the character of Linwood Avenue, and weaving the site into the surrounding neighborhood with

appropriately scale buildings.

- Providing design guidelines for the development and evaluation of proposals.
- Considering whether sale or retention of the property is in the Town's best interest.

State regulations - primarily the Chapter 30B Manual - define the process for soliciting and evaluating proposals for purchasing publicly owned properties. This process will likely begin fall of 2023.

The ultimate decision on whether to sell and to whom will be made at Town Meeting - so that the public can determine the future of this property.



These Design Guidelines are intended as a starting point for defining the character of what can or should be built on site if demolition and new construction is pursued.

(A) Buildings, structures and site layout shall reflect traditional neighborhood design, with pedestrian-friendly street design that is inviting and pleasant for walking, bicycling, and other non-vehicular means of getting around, and safe and convenient for individuals with disabilities; discernible edges, a mix of densities, and a mix of land uses. Buildings are encouraged to reflect both traditional and contemporary interpretations of vernacular coastal New England architecture for the purposes of promoting appropriate waterfront scale and character, including building materials, massing, density, scale, and roof lines.

(B) Large expanses of blank walls shall not be allowed. Facades

shall have frequent architectural articulation. Major such articulations shall be spaced no farther apart than 25% of the building length at street level (but in no case farther apart than 70 feet). Street levels lined with extensive windows and frequent well-designed entrances to street level uses are encouraged, permitting continuous public views and access in and out of buildings in order to create a lively street atmosphere. Window designs in a vertical orientation are encouraged.

(C) Screening of ground-floor parking from pedestrian view with appropriate doors, building elements and/or landscaping features is required for parking areas along public ways.

(D) All projects shall be designed to minimize the size and number of curb cuts. Full-width curb cuts will not be allowed. In keeping with the theme of screening parking from the public view, efficient traffic patterns are encouraged to support ingress and egress from lots. Curb cuts

may not exceed an aggregate of 24 feet for every 100 feet of frontage. Lots with less than 100 feet of frontage may have one curb cut, 14 feet in length.

(E) Underground utilities for new and redeveloped buildings are required unless physically restricted or blocked by existing underground obstructions.

(F) A straightforward use of natural, traditional or sustainable building materials is encouraged. Brick, stone, high-quality metals, cast concrete, wood, and cement fiberboard will achieve the greatest level of compatibility with the surrounding area and will best stand the test of time in terms of both changing community tastes and withstanding the historically vibrant commercial climate of the Salisbury oceanfront. Exterior material substitutions, in particular products and applications that are of higher quality than those described in these guidelines, are encouraged.

# DESIGN GUIDELINES CONTINUED

(G) Building facades shall include architecturally distinct styles promoting diverse design, particularly with rooftop appurtenances such as cupolas, turrets, spires, widow walks, etc.

(H) A diversity of roof heights, gable orientations, and volumes in new buildings is required.

(I) Traditional arrangement of facade components into base, middle, and top composition may be used to achieve compatibility and continuity within the surrounding architectural context. Additionally, projecting bays, recessed balconies, and roof shape variation shall be utilized to provide interest, individuality, and appropriate scale to new development.

(J) Sidewalk amenities such as street furniture, lighting and awnings that encourage year-round pedestrian use and sidewalk-cafe-style seating to enhance the public realm are encouraged.

(K) Rear vehicular access to ground floor parking is preferred to minimize curb cuts on principal streets. Use of streets other than Linwood Avenue and Cross Street for vehicle access is preferred. Use of shared access points is encouraged to minimize the number of curb cuts.

(L) Placing buildings oriented parallel with the front setback line is required to keep a consistent “street wall,” with primary entries oriented towards the street.

(M) Building setbacks may be varied and are encouraged to recognize the siting and scale of adjacent development.

(N) At the intersection of the building line with crossover streets, there may be variation to the building edges to allow for corner elements and circulation functions. The building edges may be articulated and organized in such a way to achieve an architecturally rich and contextually varied composition. Variation in the

building edge beyond the minimum setback is encouraged.

(O) The facade proportions used in new development shall incorporate compatible architectural details, storefront design, window openings, and roof shapes to balance the proportions of facades into pleasant and cohesive compositions.

(P) Building elevations are required to incorporate architecturally appropriate techniques to articulate the massing of the proposed building, such as projecting bay windows, different