

Town of Ashland, Massachusetts

ECONOMIC POLICY PLAN



August 2010

Revised
November 2010

COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES GROUP, INC.
Boston, Massachusetts

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ECONOMIC POLICY PLAN

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Prepared for:
Town of Ashland

Prepared by:
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Boston, Massachusetts

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1. Introduction

Ashland is a MetroWest suburb with approximately 16,000 residents. Bounded by the towns of Framingham, Sherborn, Holliston, Hopkinton, and Southborough, Ashland is a relatively young community, incorporated in 1846 from land that previously belonged to three of its neighbors. It has the angular boundaries and small geographic area typical of towns formed during and after the mid-nineteenth century, and because Ashland is both small and rapidly gaining population, its population density is higher than that of most of the surrounding communities.

In 2002, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) opened a commuter rail station on Pleasant Street, roughly two-thirds of a mile west of downtown Ashland, as part of an effort to improve transportation options between Boston and Worcester and reduce traffic congestion on regional highways. The Ashland station is one of 134 commuter rail stations MBTA-wide and fifteen on the Framingham-Worcester Line west of Back Bay Station. On average, thirteen inbound and eleven outbound commuter trains stop in Ashland each day. The number of stops is expected to increase because state government plans to increase service on the Framingham-Worcester line. CSX operates freight service and Amtrak operates passenger rail service over the same tracks. Although the actual number of CSX freight trains varies somewhat, as many as forty-five trains per day pass through Downtown Ashland:¹ a small, linear, low-density business district with a mix of commercial, residential, institutional, and municipal uses along Main Street.



For Ashland, expanding train service presents a compelling challenge because the railroad tracks cross both Main Street and Cherry Street at grade, roughly 900 feet apart, in a very busy area. While Ashland overall is not densely developed, the land within one-half mile of the Main Street grade crossing contains more small parcels, a more diverse mix of land uses, and more public services than any other section of town. There is considerable activity here, for Ashland's birth as a mid-nineteenth-century industrial town can be seen most clearly in the general vicinity of Main Street between Pleasant Street and Union Street. Judging from the age of the buildings and the land use pattern around Main Street, along with the course of the Sudbury River, it is not surprising that a railroad runs through Ashland's historic center. However, the railroad - much like the main roadways - pre-dates the car and the convenient mobility it offers.

The state recently provided a \$500,000 grant to Ashland so the town could evaluate alternatives to the existing grade crossings, analyze the positive and negative impacts of those alternatives, and plan for

¹ Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. (VHB), *Ashland Grade Crossing Study* (April 2010), Appendix A, Meeting Notes, K. Hughes to R. Carey, October 20, 2009.

mitigation. Toward these ends, Ashland has operated under a state-approved scope of work that reflects three local priorities:

- Improving public safety;
- Enhancing the quality of life; and
- Identifying and enhancing economic development opportunities.

In 2009, the Town hired two consulting firms to complete the planning components of the grant. Community Opportunities Group, Inc., was retained to provide general project support to the Town Manager, to evaluate the impacts of grade crossing alternatives on Ashland's economy, public safety services, and town finances, and to examine options for improving the local economy through development and redevelopment, focusing primarily on downtown. Ashland also awarded a contract to Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) to study the grade crossings, identify alternatives, and provide short- and longer-term recommendations. VHB completed its work in April 2009. This report concludes the planning phases of the state grant.

Economic Development Planning and Policies

This is not the first time that Ashland has assessed its challenges and opportunities for economic development. Since the early 1960s, Ashland has prepared four comprehensive plans, the most recent one in 2003, and together, they document the evolution of Ashland's thinking about economic growth. In 2004, Ashland obtained a planning grant from the state under a three-year program and devoted most of the funding to an economic development strategic plan. A year later, Ashland commissioned a downtown vision plan that focuses on urban design and the public realm, and identifies some sites with reuse possibilities. Since its inception several years ago, the Ashland Redevelopment Authority (ARA) has made economic development its mission. It is currently focusing on improving the business environment along Route 126 and developing an urban renewal plan for Downtown Ashland.

More recently, Ashland joined seventy-five other Massachusetts communities that have designated sites for business development under the Chapter 43D Expedited Permitting Program. The decision to designate two Chapter 43D Priority Development Sites made Ashland eligible for a new planning grant, this time to evaluate the development potential of several other properties. The Chapter 43D site studies by Larry Koff & Associates have been underway concurrent with the completion of this plan. In addition, the Town Manager recently reorganized some municipal departments and created a new position, director of community development and health, to coordinate and spearhead economic development activities on behalf of town government.

Ashland has taken steps to spur economic development, yet it is not always clear that Ashland officials and residents have a shared understanding of what economic development means or the best ways to go about building the local economy. In community meetings conducted for this plan, some residents expressed ambivalence about inviting more development of any kind to Ashland, yet others spoke enthusiastically about the town's neighborhood and commercial development possibilities and the commuter rail as a potential catalyst for change. Local businesses surveyed by the consultants described Ashland as a convenient location for the owners and a town with excellent municipal services, but many said Ashland should be more "business friendly," especially when it comes to development review,

permitting, and licensing procedures. Others questioned whether they would stay in Ashland over the long term because they think there may be better opportunities for growth in nearby towns.

During a community meeting conversation about Ashland's strengths, a resident characterized the town as a "blank canvas" on which to build a vision. However, this is not really the case. Ashland is a maturely developed suburb. Most of its usable commercial and industrial land has been developed, and while there are some vacant parcels in the commercial and industrial zoning districts, they tend to be partially or substantially constrained. Ashland does have new development opportunities - including some important ones - but



the transformative power of community investment lies primarily in sites that already have structures, whether occupied or vacant. Nowhere is this more obvious than Downtown Ashland, which has both enormous potential and significant obstacles: the trains, relatively low rents, a number of non-resident property owners, a business mix that does little to attract and keep customers for more than a single-purpose visit, a tired public realm, a place that has sidewalks yet is not really walkable, and some redevelopment needs that will probably require more than ordinary operations of the market. The town center has much to offer, but its needs are more complicated than may be apparent at first glance. Some businesses are doing quite well, but others - in fact many - are struggling. A healthy, prosperous downtown says a great deal about a community's self-esteem, values and priorities, and commitment to the vitality of its business areas. Unfortunately, Downtown Ashland sends a mixed message on all counts.

To complicate matters, Ashland has adopted a number of well-intentioned but dubious land use policies that need to be revisited. Over time, Ashland has created several zoning districts that purport to encourage vertically mixed uses: multi-story buildings with different uses on each floor. However, the size and configuration of the districts are not conducive to compact, higher-density mixed-use development, and the zoning regulations are so prescriptive and disconnected from market reality that they are very unlikely to work. Meanwhile, fundamental problems with the zoning code remain unaddressed. Ashland's zoning does not do enough to encourage high-quality, visually coherent, and efficient business developments. The zoning bylaw has already been recodified, but it needs a comprehensive revision and land use policy review.

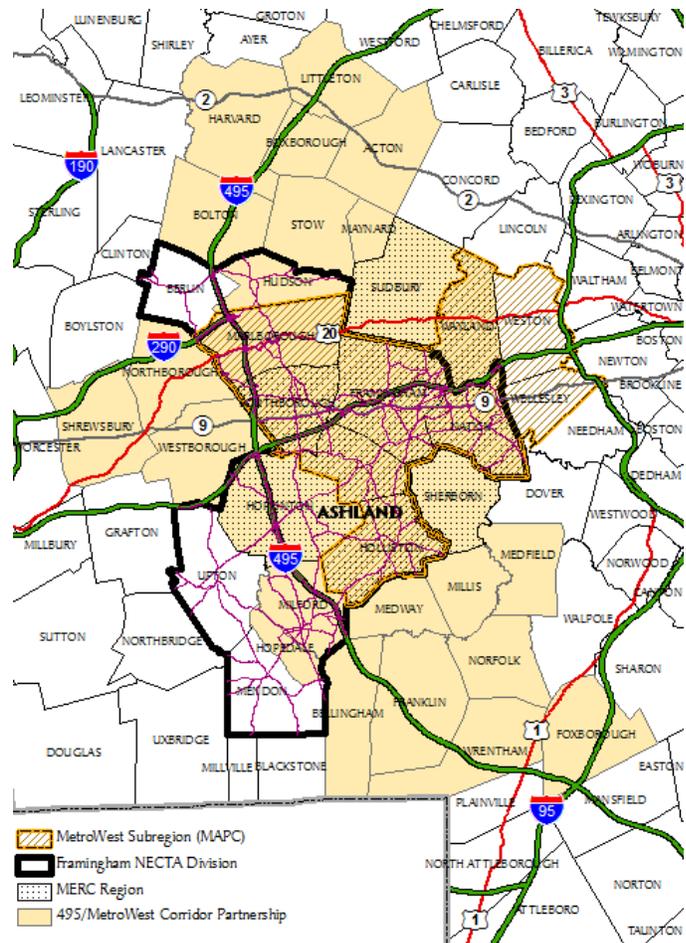
MetroWest Region

This report contains numerous references to the MetroWest region. As Ashland already knows, "MetroWest" does not have uniformly recognized boundaries. For example:

- The **Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC)**, which serves 101 cities and towns in the Boston area, defines MetroWest as a subregion of nine towns: Holliston, Ashland, Southborough, Marlborough, Framingham, Natick, Wayland, Weston, and Wellesley.
- The **MetroWest Economic Research Center (MERC)** at Framingham State College covers a somewhat different MetroWest configuration in its work: Ashland, Framingham, Holliston, Hopkinton, Natick, Sherborn, Southborough, Sudbury, and Wayland (known as the MetroWest Cohesive Commercial Statistical Area, or CCSA).
- The **I-495/MetroWest Partnership** includes all of the communities covered by MERC and excludes two of the communities in MAPC's MetroWest subregion.
- **Industry sources** of office and industrial market data usually report "MetroWest" as a combination of the CCSA and eight to ten additional communities north and west of I-495.

These ideas about the meaning of MetroWest are partially reflected in the smallest federally defined economic statistical region that includes Ashland - the **Framingham New England City and Town Area (NECTA) Division** - which also contains some communities west of I-495 that fall within Framingham's labor market area. Unless otherwise noted, MetroWest in this plan means the Framingham NECTA Division. It is useful for at least two reasons: first, it includes most of the suburbs where Ashland residents work and where most employees of Ashland businesses live, and second, economic comparison data are readily available for NECTA and NECTA Division geographies. In addition, the NECTA Division boundaries capture the primary highways that support regional economic activity and, in most cases, the water bodies and waterways that historically shaped the economy of these communities and their relations with each other. Further, the NECTA Division includes two of the communities that MERC's research captures in the definition of the Greater Marlborough Region (Marlborough, Hudson).

In the interest of controlling the size of tables and charts and managing page layouts, we have limited most tables and graphics in this report to data for Ashland or for Ashland and its immediate neighbors. Where it made sense to do so, we have placed corresponding tables for the larger MetroWest area in the appendix. In some cases, the same tables include four non-contiguous communities with demographic, economic, and fiscal characteristics similar to Ashland (Grafton, Northborough, Medway, and Bellingham).



Sources of Information

This plan draws on several sources of information, including both publicly available and proprietary sources. Wherever possible, we have sought and relied upon data more recent than Census 2000. In some instances, however, the federal census is the only available source of data collected in a consistent way and reported in formats that support inter-local and regional comparisons. Community participation, though not extensive, has also been considered in the development of this plan. The town hosted two community meetings in June 2010. To avoid duplication of effort and coordinate studies that were underway at the same time, Community Opportunities Group and Larry Koff & Associates worked collaboratively to present information and consult with residents at both meetings. In addition, businesses in Downtown Ashland were interviewed in July-August 2009, and a subset of downtown businesses, along with businesses on Pond Street/Route 126 and Union Street/Route 135, were interviewed again in April-May 2010. Though not a systematic survey, the business interviews provided invaluable information for this plan.

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2. Economic Profile

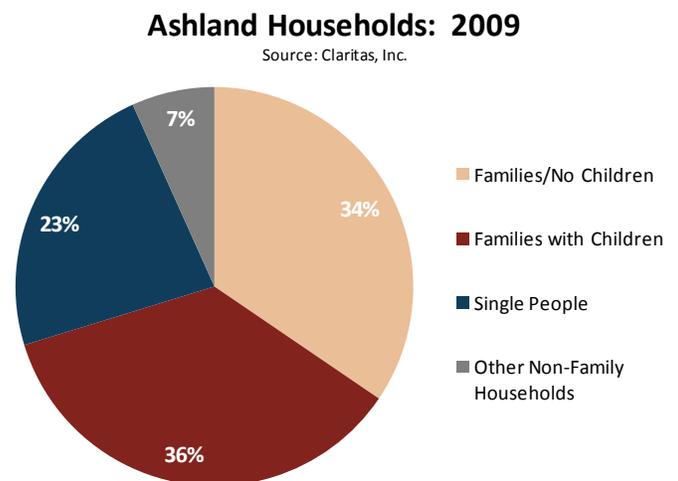
Ashland is a small, middle-class suburb surrounded by affluent towns and a major regional employment center. Its property values and the economic position of its households are high, but not exceedingly high, and this has an impact on the composition of its retail base. Ashland's economy is shaped by conditions in Framingham, the Boston metropolitan area, and eastern Worcester County. Although its own residents work primarily in Framingham, Ashland, Boston, and inside Route 128, many employees of local establishments commute from towns to the west and south, where housing is less expensive. Further, it is clear that while Ashland residents have to travel outside of town for some goods and services, many of the town's retail stores serve non-local customers.

Many people think "economic development" is about bringing more businesses into a community and increasing the tax base. However, businesses are only one component of a community's economy, and tax revenue is only one benefit of a strong economy. Economic development involves improving the quality of life in a community through betterments in education, health, social infrastructure, transportation, the environment, and the provision of employment and housing choices.

POPULATION & LABOR FORCE

Population Characteristics

Ashland's current population of 15,899 consists almost exclusively of people in **households**, and 70 percent of its 6,225 households are **families**: two or more related people living in the same housing unit.² Its families tend to be relatively young, married couples with both husband and wife employed, and families with children under eighteen make up about 36 percent of all households in the town. Although Ashland clearly prides itself on being a family-oriented community, it has many **non-family households**, too, such as single people living alone and unrelated people sharing an apartment or a



² Claritas, Inc., Demographic Snapshot Report, Ashland, Massachusetts (2009). Note: just prior to completion of this report, the U.S. Bureau of the Census released its official population estimates for all cities and towns as of July 1, 2009. According to those estimates, Ashland's 2009 population is 15,383. Since Claritas provides a wide range of intercensal demographic estimates while the Bureau of the Census reports only total population estimates, this report relies upon data from Claritas. In December 2010, however, the Bureau of the Census will release the first intercensal demographic estimates for geographies with populations under 20,000, including Ashland, from the new American Community Survey (ACS).

condominium.³ Among MetroWest suburbs, Ashland has a relatively large share of non-family households and this is because Ashland has a more diverse housing stock than most of the surrounding towns.

Ashland's demographic profile has more in common with that of the MetroWest area as a whole than with any of the surrounding towns. The economic position of its households is higher than that of Framingham, but conspicuously lower than that of Sherborn and Southborough, the wealthiest towns nearby. There is more economic homogeneity in Ashland than one finds in neighboring communities, for Ashland does not have large percentages of affluent or poor households; rather, its households tend to concentrate around the middle. This is further illustrated in Ashland's regionally low poverty rate (Table 2.1). In addition, Ashland closely approximates regional averages for population density per square mile (sq. mi.), road miles per sq. mi., and housing units per acre, all of which shed light on the relative development maturity of a city or town. The overall impression of Ashland, viewed in relation to its neighbors and the larger MetroWest area, is that of a moderately comfortable middle-class suburb.

Ashland Household Incomes (2009)

Source: Claritas, Inc.

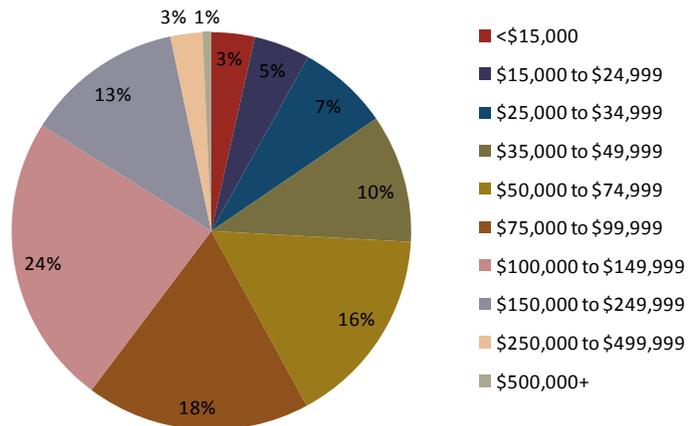


Table 2.1
Comparison Demographic Indicators, Ashland Region (Estimated 2009)*

Geography	Current Population Estimate	Median Household Income	Per Capita Income	EQV Per Capita	Family Poverty Rate	Population Density/Sq. Mi.†	Road Miles/Sq. Mi.†	Housing Units/Acre†
ASHLAND	15,899	\$85,903	\$39,769	\$166,797	1.0%	1,277.5	6.4	0.80
Framingham	64,476	\$63,000	\$32,506	\$148,075	6.7%	2,566.8	9.7	1.61
Holliston	13,973	\$99,464	\$42,299	\$160,594	3.0%	746.9	4.9	0.42
Hopkinton	14,390	\$125,156	\$53,693	\$228,706	1.9%	541.8	4.7	0.29
Sherborn	4,162	\$144,869	\$68,194	\$313,659	2.1%	260.7	3.5	0.14
Southborough	9,547	\$141,023	\$60,791	\$255,841	1.0%	674.8	6.0	0.35
MetroWest‡	260,925	\$77,658	\$38,646	\$169,504	4.6%	1,119.8	6.1	0.69
Massachusetts	6,459,022	\$63,381	\$32,738	\$167,488	6.9%	824.1	4.6	0.54

Sources: Claritas, Inc., Demographic Snapshot Reports, Ashland, Framingham, Holliston, Hopkinton, Sherborn, Framingham New England City and Town Area (NECTA) Division, and Commonwealth of Massachusetts; Community Opportunities Group, Inc.; Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR), Division of Local Services, "Equalized Valuations Through 2008" and "Centerline Road Mile Details 2004-2009," *Municipal Data Bank*; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, "2009 Population Estimates of Incorporated Places and Minor Civil Divisions."

Notes:

*All data reported in Table 2.1 are based on 2009 estimates except EQV Per Capita, which is based on 2008 equalized valuations.

†Area calculations include land area only, not total area.

‡MetroWest means the Framingham NECTA Division. See Chapter 1.

³ Ibid.

Population Age

Ashland - like the nation as a whole - is changing and will continue to change in response to the aging of its population. As the "Baby Boom" generation (b. 1945-1964) enters retirement age, the percentage of households with an employed family member will decline. The implications for service delivery by for-profit, non-profit, and public entities are enormous, for the aging of "Boomers" will trigger both growth and change in demands for health care, housing, transportation, communications, recreation, and entertainment, and shifts in consumer spending patterns. Moreover, the transition of Boomers from working age to retirement age coincides with the progression of the "Echo Boomers" (b. 1982-2000) through school and college, placing demands on all levels of government for adequate education spending in an era that will see an increase in the percentage of households with reduced financial flexibility.

Ashland's current population is already a little older than the populations of other MetroWest towns. The estimated median age of all people living in Ashland in 2009, 40.1 years, exceeds the MetroWest-wide median, 39.4, and is less than the median age in only one neighboring town: Sherborn, 42.1. The younger populations found in communities such as Hopkinton and Southborough reflect the attractiveness of those communities to affluent families with school-age children, which has a significant impact on the size of the working-age and school-age cohorts. Though Ashland has a well-respected school system, the diversity and greater affordability of its housing makes the town attractive to many types of households, including non-family households and families without children.

Age Cohort	Census 2000	Pct. Total	Estimated 2009	Pct. Total	Projected 2014	Pct. Total	Est. Change 2000-2014
Age 0 - 4	1,152	7.9%	1,079	6.8%	1,082	6.5%	-6.1%
Age 5 - 17	2,549	17.4%	2,925	18.4%	2,990	18.1%	17.3%
Age 18 - 24	733	5.0%	1,141	7.2%	1,315	7.9%	79.4%
Age 25 - 34	2,144	14.6%	1,382	8.7%	1,430	8.6%	-33.3%
Age 35 - 44	3,056	20.9%	2,692	16.9%	2,152	13.0%	-29.6%
Age 45 - 49	1,274	8.7%	1,529	9.6%	1,500	9.1%	17.7%
Age 50 - 54	1,094	7.5%	1,390	8.7%	1,463	8.8%	33.7%
Age 55 - 59	729	5.0%	1,173	7.4%	1,356	8.2%	86.0%
Age 60 - 64	495	3.4%	874	5.5%	1,129	6.8%	128.1%
Age 65 - 74	855	5.8%	1,012	6.4%	1,365	8.2%	59.6%
Age 75 and over	<u>574</u>	3.9%	<u>702</u>	4.4%	<u>772</u>	4.7%	34.5%
Total	14,655		15,899		16,554		13.0%
Under Age 18	11,295	22.5%	12,367	22.5%	12,995	24.5%	15.1%
Age 65 and over	1,429	9.8%	1,714	10.8%	2,137	12.9%	49.5%
Median Age	37.5		40.3		41.8		

Source: Claritas, Inc., Demographic Trends Report (2009).

Race, Ethnicity, and Language

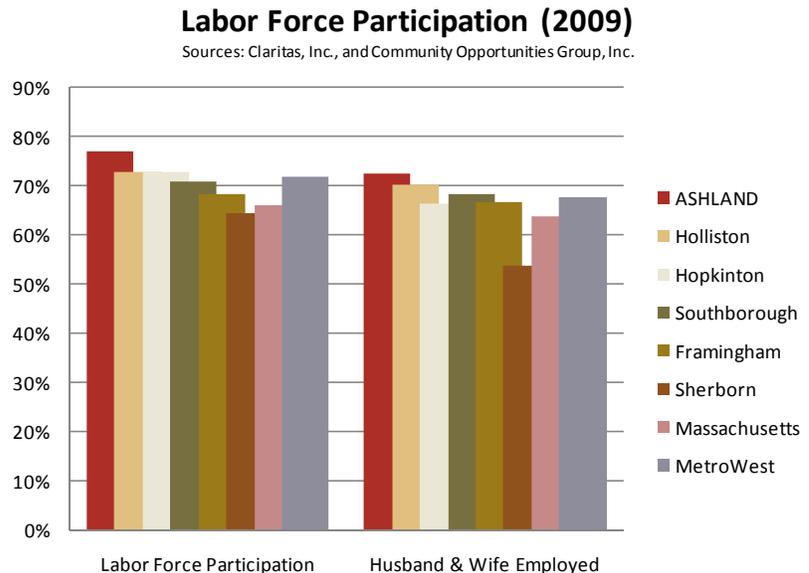
Ashland's population is predominantly white, non-Hispanic, but the percentage of minorities has increased from 9.9 percent in 2000 to 11.9 percent (estimated) today. Hispanic or Latino persons, African Americans, and Asians are the largest minority groups in Ashland, and the same applies throughout the

MetroWest area and the state.⁴ While not as diverse as the MetroWest region as a whole, Ashland has more cultural diversity than most of the adjacent towns. The exception is Framingham, which is home to many racial and ethnic minorities and a large immigrant population.

In 2000, 10 percent of Ashland's population was foreign-born (1,433 persons). More recent immigrant population statistics are not available, but other data such as ancestry and languages spoken at home are periodically updated between census years. MetroWest is one of three Massachusetts regions with a large Brazilian population.⁵ The Brazilian residents of Framingham, Marlborough, and Milford have a significant impact on statistics for the entire region, but the east side of Ashland and the west side of Natick have many Brazilian residents, too. In Ashland, 11 percent of the population over 5 speaks a language other than English at home, and it appears that most speak either Portuguese or Russian.⁶ The presence of a Brazilian store in the downtown area suggests that Ashland's Brazilian population may be growing. Ashland currently ranks fifth behind Framingham, Marlborough, Milford, and Hudson for percentage of students whose first language is not English (8.1 percent).⁷

Labor Force and Unemployment

A community's **labor force** includes its civilian, non-institutionalized population 16 years of age and older with a job or unemployed and looking for work. Ashland has an unusually high **labor force participation rate** of 77 percent: the percentage of the population 16+ years in the labor force.⁸ Most of Ashland's employed residents hold white-collar jobs in management, professional services, and sales, and roughly half work within a thirty-minute commute from home. The local labor force makes up slightly more than 6 percent of the



⁴ Claritas, Inc., Population by Race and Sex, Ashland, Massachusetts (2009).

⁵ Alviro Lima and Eduardo Siqueira, *Brazilians in the U.S. and Massachusetts: A Demographic and Economic Profile* (November 2007), 7.

⁶ Excluding ancestral groups usually cited by New Englanders (e.g., English, Irish, Italian, French, and German), the ancestries most often claimed by Ashland residents in 2000 were Russian, Brazilian, Greek, Polish, Chinese, and Asian Indian. The non-English language groups most often claimed were neither Spanish nor Asian languages, but "Other Indo-European," including Portuguese and Russian. See Census 2000, Summary File 3, Tables PCT10, "Age by Language Spoken at Home for the Population 5 Years and Over," PCT12, "Nativity by Language Spoken at Home by Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over," and PCT16, "Ancestry (First Ancestry Reported)."

⁷ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, School Profile Series: Public School Districts.

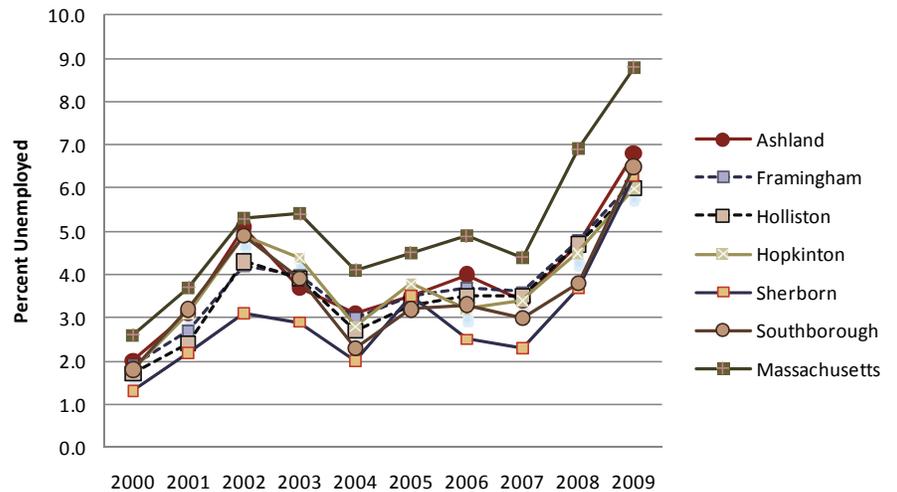
⁸ Ibid.

region-wide labor force in the MetroWest-Marlborough area.⁹

Ashland tends to have a higher **unemployment rate** than most MetroWest towns. "Unemployment" includes people 16+ years and over without a job and actively looking for one. Over the past decade, unemployment in Ashland has ranged from 2 percent in 2000 to 6.8 percent last year, with a temporary spike in 2002 (5.1 percent).¹⁰ Though the unemployment rate in Ashland and the MetroWest region typically falls below that of the state, Ashland's rate has exceeded that of the region. The difference is not dramatic, but it suggests that many Ashland residents work in industries with somewhat more vulnerability to a downturn in the economy.

Unemployment Trends, 2000-2009

Source: Massachusetts Department of Revenue



Where Ashland Residents Work

The most recent journey-to-work statistics reflect data collected for Census 2000. It is difficult to determine whether the commute destinations or transportation modes of Ashland workers have changed significantly since then, but at least two conditions have changed the choices available to residents: the opening of the MBTA station and the increasing popularity of telecommuting. According to data recently released by the Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization (BMPO), at least 320 Ashland residents use commuter rail service to travel to work each day.¹¹

Journey to Work Census 2000

Source: Census 2000 Summary File 3, Tables P29, P30



⁹ MetroWest Economic Research Center, *Road to Recovery?* (May 2010), 7.

¹⁰ Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Division of Local Services, "Labor Force and Unemployment Rates, 1990 to the Present," *Municipal Data Bank*, citing Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, Labor Force and Unemployment Data.

¹¹ Central Transportation Planning Staff, "Origin Locations and Activities, Entry Station: Framingham," *MBTA Systemwide Passenger Survey: South Side 2008-2009 Station-by-Station Tables* (June 2010).

In 2000, Ashland retained only 15.5 percent of its own labor force in local employment. By contrast, 31 percent of all employed people in Massachusetts lived and worked in the same community (Table 2.3). Southborough is the only town in the immediate area that had a smaller share of locally employed residents, 15.1 percent. Moreover, despite the number of businesses in Ashland's town center and their proximity to surrounding neighborhoods, Ashland had the smallest percentage of local residents who walked to work. A poor fit between the town's employment base and the occupations of its labor force, coupled with the relatively low wages paid by many Ashland businesses, did not bode well for preserving a large daytime population in Ashland. This, in turn, siphoned consumer spending on goods and services away from local businesses. Table 2.3 reports the work destinations of Ashland residents.

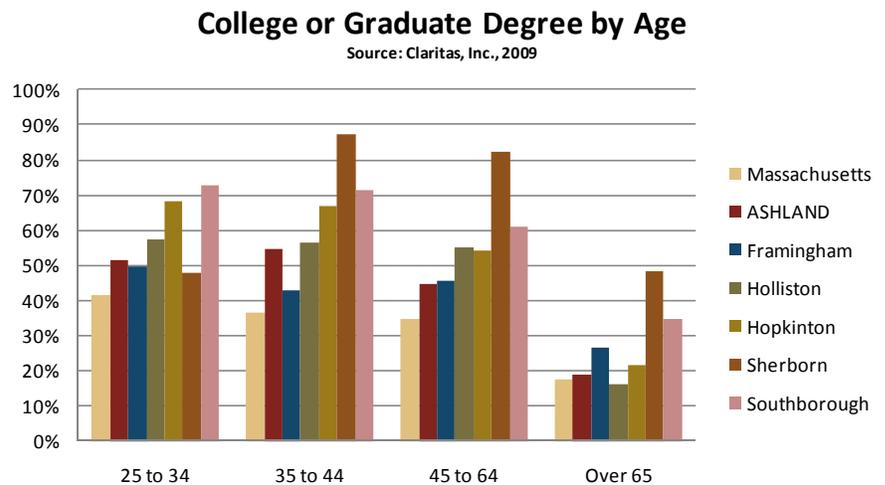
Table 2.3
Commute Destinations of Ashland Residents (2000)

Community	Number of Workers	Percent Total	Community	Number of Workers	Percent Total	Community	Number of Workers	Percent Total
Framingham	1,570	19.0%	Newton	235	2.9%	Worcester	120	1.5%
Ashland	1,276	15.5%	Holliston	197	2.4%	Milford	116	1.4%
Boston	1,037	12.6%	Wellesley	170	2.1%	Westborough	114	1.4%
Natick	533	6.5%	Waltham	145	1.8%	Sudbury	110	1.3%
Cambridge	264	3.2%	Needham	123	1.5%	Burlington	106	1.3%
Marlborough	243	2.9%	Hopkinton	121	1.5%	All Others	1,764	21.4%

Source: Census 2000, MCD/County to MCD/County Worker Flow Files, Summary File 3 Special Tabulation Series.

Education

A community's economy is influenced by the educational attainment of its labor force and the quality and reputation of its public schools. While these factors play different roles in local economic development, both matter. *Labor force education* correlates with the types of industries and employment that a labor market area can support, the types of jobs for which workers can compete, and the wages that workers can expect to earn. The *reputation of a public school district* has an impact on a community's desirability, as perceived by prospective homebuyers and often by businesses in a relocation or expansion mode. Whether fair or even remotely accurate, school district prestige tends to be measured by factors such as test scores, per pupil spending, drop-out rates, and the college plans of graduating seniors.



Ashland residents are relatively well educated. Nearly half of the town's adult population (25 years and over) has finished college or graduate school, placing Ashland on par with the MetroWest region as a whole and substantially ahead of the state. However, there are some differences between Ashland's educational profile and that of other MetroWest communities. For example, Ashland has a larger

percentage of adults with less than a high school education, and its residents are somewhat more likely to have started but not completed college. Education differences also exist by age group, for Ashland's younger residents have higher levels of educational attainment than its older residents. While this is true just about everywhere, the education gap between older and younger members of the labor force is greater in Ashland than in most towns nearby.

Public Schools

Ashland residents take pride in the **Ashland Public Schools**, a full-service K-12 school district that serves about 2,700 children in five school buildings. The town has a kindergarten facility on Central Street (Pittaway), an early primary school for first and second graders on Fruit Street (Warren), an elementary school for grades 3-5 on Concord Street (Mindness), Ashland Middle School on West Union Street, and the new Ashland High School on East Union Street. The Ashland Pre-School, a non-profit, fee-based program for pre-kindergarteners, is based at the Warren School. In public meetings for this plan, participants rated Ashland's schools as a major asset of the town.

Ashland is not affluent, and its schools have challenges that wealthier MetroWest neighbors do not face, as suggested by the statistical comparisons in Table 2.4. Regardless, tenth graders at Ashland High School perform substantially ahead of state averages on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests in language arts, math, and science and technology, making it one of the state's top-scoring high schools.¹² The school department has instituted several programs to strengthen student performance on the MCAS in the lower grades at Mindness and in science at the Ashland Middle School.

Approximately 92 percent of the school-age children in Ashland attend public school.¹³ While most graduates of Ashland High School typically plan to attend a four-year college, they are less likely than their peers in many MetroWest communities to attend a *private* four-year college.¹⁴ The barrier is not educational quality but rather, household wealth. Ashland also has a somewhat higher four-year dropout rate than several of the surrounding towns. According to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the four-year dropout rate at Ashland High School was 4.2 percent in 2009, compared with less than 2 percent in Holliston, Hopkinton, or the Northborough-Southborough Regional School District.¹⁵ In economic development terms, this has implications for workforce development needs at the local level.

¹² Ann Dargon, et al., "Ashland Public Schools: 2009 MCAS Presentation to the School Committee" (October 22, 2009).

¹³ Census 2000, Summary File 3, Table P36, "Sex by School Enrollment by Level of School by Type of School for the Population 3 Years and Over."

¹⁴ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), "Plans of High School Graduates," School/District Profiles. Note: DESE data for 2009 are substantially consistent with federal census data from 2000.

¹⁵ DESE, "Cohort 2009 Four-Year Graduation Rates – State Results," undated. A four-year dropout rate measures the percentage of students who did not graduate from high school within four years because they left school at some point prior to graduation. It is one component of the Cohort Graduation Rate that school districts are required to report under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. A four-year dropout rate is not the same as an annual dropout rate, which measures the percentage of students who left school during a single academic year.

Table 2.4
Selected Education Comparison Statistics, Ashland Region (2009)

School District	PK-12 Enrollment	Pct. Special Education Students	Pct. Low-Moderate Income Students	4-Year Graduation Rate*	Pct. Minority Students	Actual Net School Spending Per Student†	Graduates Attending 4-Year College
Ashland	2,640	13.7%	9.9%	92.7%	17.5%	\$10,563	80.0%
Framingham	8,153	21.6%	32.6%	83.4%	35.4%	\$13,296	59.0%
Holliston	2,864	16.2%	3.2%	95.3%	7.6%	\$10,635	85.0%
Hopkinton	3,453	13.0%	1.7%	95.8%	6.8%	\$10,815	91.0%
Northborough-Southborough‡	1,409	10.0%	4.3%	95.9%	10.1%	\$11,211	87.0%
Dover-Sherborn‡	1,150	13.9%	1.7%	100.0%	8.2%	\$14,930	95.0%
Massachusetts	957,053	17.0%	32.9%	81.5%	30.9%	\$10,672	57.0%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, School Profiles; Graduation Rates, Statewide Statistical Reports Series; and Chapter 70 Profiles.

Notes:

*Graduation rate refers to the percentage of students graduating within four years of entering ninth grade.

†FY 2010 Actual NSS.

‡Sherborn and Southborough belong to regional school districts. Data presented in Table 2.4 apply to the regional schools only and do not include any public schools under local jurisdiction, e.g., local elementary schools.

Ashland provides other educational opportunities for its children in addition to K-12 public schools. The town is a member of the five-town South Middlesex Regional Vocational-Technical School District and ACCEPT Special Education Collaborative, which serves eleven MetroWest communities as well as the vocational-technical school. There are also two private schools in Ashland: the MetroWest Christian Academy on Pleasant Street, for grades preK-8, and Pincushion Hill Montessori School on Green Street, serving children in grades preK-3.

Employment Training Resources

Ashland residents have access to some employment resources from the MetroSouth Regional Employment Board (REB) in Framingham, which sponsors programs to address labor shortages in science and technology and health care, and to train non-college bound youth for jobs in health care, finance, technology, and the construction trades. The REB oversees the regional Career Center in Marlborough, a "one-stop" resource for job search and unemployment assistance.

The Joseph P. Keefe Vocational School in Framingham (South Middlesex Regional Vocational-Technical School District) provides both an academic and vocational education to high school students from the five-town region, including Ashland, and opportunities for post-graduate training to adults with a high school diploma or GED. According to DESE, forty-six students from Ashland are enrolled at South Middlesex.¹⁶ The school also offers continuing education programs that prepare tuition-paying students for certification in a variety of health care and technology fields.

¹⁶ DESE, "FY10 Chapter 70 Aid and Net School Spending Requirements."

Higher Education

Ashland has convenient access to a vast range of higher education options: colleges and universities in Boston, Cambridge, and Worcester, Framingham State College, and associate degree programs offered by Massachusetts Bay Community College both at the main campus in Wellesley and locally on Eliot Street. Within a fifteen-mile radius from the Ashland center, there are at least eighteen private colleges, universities, and professional schools, and three public colleges.¹⁷

While less than half of Ashland's college students attend a private college or university, the opposite is true for the overwhelming majority of residents in graduate or professional degree programs. In 2000, 5.5 percent of the total population 15 years and over in Ashland was enrolled in a higher education program - somewhat low for the MetroWest area as a whole, but within range for suburban communities without a college campus.¹⁸

EMPLOYMENT AND WAGES

Ashland is home to approximately 450 public and private employer establishments that provide a combined total of more than 5,000 jobs. An **employer establishment** is a business, private non-profit organization, or public agency with paid employees, so it excludes self-employed individuals and some other types of workers.¹⁹ From 2004 to 2008, the most recent year for which complete annual employment statistics are available, total employment in Ashland increased on net by approximately 350 jobs, or 7.9 percent, while total establishments decreased by twenty-eight, or -5.9 percent.²⁰ Ashland's employment base has experienced several episodes of expansion and contraction in the past five years, and while the same is true for the MetroWest area as a whole, the local economy has followed a different pattern of realignment than that of the region. However, changes in the size of the employment base do not tell a complete story about Ashland's economy.

Employment Base

The composition of Ashland's employment base differs from that of the Commonwealth and, to some extent, the MetroWest region. In general, the differences have to do with the larger proportion of non-agricultural goods-producing jobs in Ashland, i.e., in the manufacturing and construction industries, yet

¹⁷ MassGIS, Colleges and Universities (July 2007).

¹⁸ Census 2000, Summary File 3, "PCT24: Sex by College or Graduate School Enrollment by Age for the Population 15 Years and Over."

¹⁹ Employer establishment does not include self-employed individuals, independent insurance and real estate agents working solely on commission, students in work-study jobs, most railroad workers, unpaid volunteers or family workers, members of the military, services performed for religious organizations, and employees of a farm or non-farm employer with a total payroll or employee count that falls below the minimum thresholds required for unemployment insurance coverage under state law

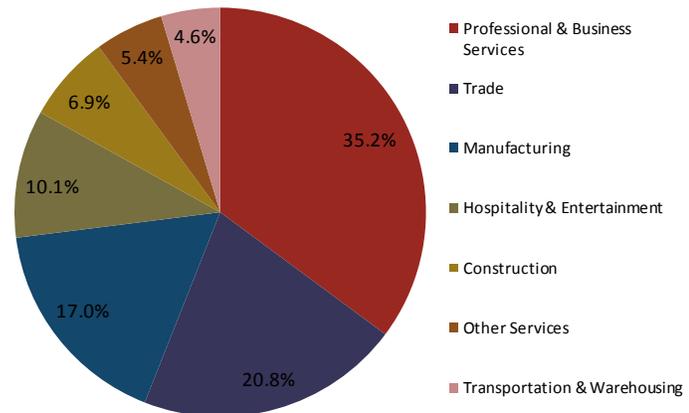
²⁰ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD), Employment and Wages ES-202, Town of Ashland, 2003-2008 Annual Data, www.detma.org. The ES-202 only covers establishments with payroll employees. Even for covered employers, however, the ES-202 often reports data for very small employer units as "confidential," so the employment counts understate the actual number of jobs in a community.

even in the services sector Ashland has noteworthy qualities. It has strengths in a few industries and conspicuous weaknesses in others, but among the industries with a relatively large share of local employment, the jobs tend to pay low wages. Furthermore, **basic employment** in Ashland - that is, employment in industries that export goods and services and depend on non-local factors to thrive - makes up a fairly small percentage of the town's total employment.

A standard method for analyzing employment base strengths and weaknesses is the **location quotient**, which compares the size and structure of the local economy to a reference economy, such as a county, a defined economic region such as MetroWest, or the state. In this type of study, location quotients are calculated for all of a community's industries in order to see whether the local economy has a greater share of each industry (measured in jobs) than expected when compared with a reference economy. For an industry with a greater-than-expected share of local employment, the location quotient is > 1.0. The higher the location quotient, the more the industry differs from the structure of the reference economy. By definition, the "extra" employment is basic employment because it exceeds what the local economy would have if it served only local needs.

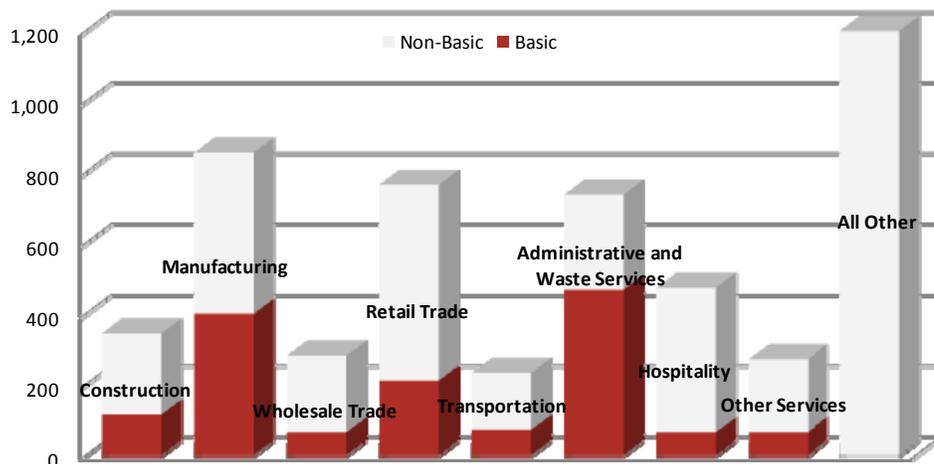
Employment Base Composition

Source: ES-202, Community Opportunities Group, Inc.



Basic & Non-Basic Employment in Ashland (2008)

Sources: ES-202, Community Opportunities Group, Inc.



The industries in Ashland that generate basic employment are manufacturing, the construction trades, wholesale and retail trade, transportation, recreation, some types of personal services, and a cluster of industries classified as administrative and waste services, which consists of a very wide range of business

services - from employment agencies to telemarketing companies, credit bureaus, travel agencies, janitorial and security services, and waste collection, treatment, remediation, and management. All of these industries combined account for about 79 percent of total employment in Ashland. It is important to note that many of the same industries also drive the MetroWest regional economy, but they are even more pronounced in Ashland. Still, the basic employment these industries support in Ashland represents less than 30 percent of the town's entire jobs base.

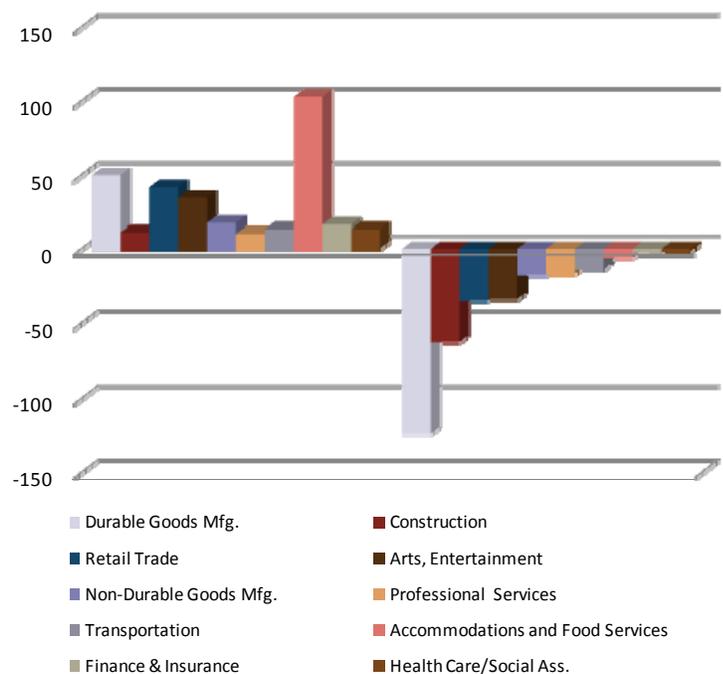
Job Churning. Most of Ashland's recent employment gains have occurred in wholesale and retail trade, information services, finance and insurance, health care, accommodations and food services, and administrative and waste services. Ashland has several companies in the latter category and overall, they have experienced significant employment growth in the past five years. By contrast, other industries that gained jobs also lost (or destroyed) some jobs in the same period. The sum of the jobs created and destroyed suggests that in many cases, these industries have been fairly volatile. Further, several industries destroyed more jobs than they created.

The total number of jobs created and destroyed - known as **job churning** - reveals potentially useful information about changes in the structure and size of the economy. Ashland's five-year net employment growth of 325 jobs masks the underlying increase of 721 jobs and loss of 396 jobs. The industries with a noticeably high incidence of job churning include durable goods manufacturing (which lost nearly four jobs for every one created), construction, transportation, and professional services - all industries that pay above the average wage for the town as a whole - as well as arts and entertainment and the hospitality sectors, which pay below the town-wide average, both having experienced employment growth.

Ashland's employment base has changed in ways that are quite different from the experience of the MetroWest area as a whole. Although the region's five-year employment growth rate (6.9 percent) is slightly lower than Ashland's (7.9 percent), MetroWest employment increased in many higher-wage industries, from 8 percent in manufacturing to 11 percent in wholesale trade and more than 15 percent in professional services. Even where job growth has happened in Ashland, many of the new jobs involve lower-wage employment than the jobs they replaced. Furthermore, while wages have increased, they

Job Gains & Losses by Industry 2004-2008

Source: ES-202, Community Opportunities Group, Inc.



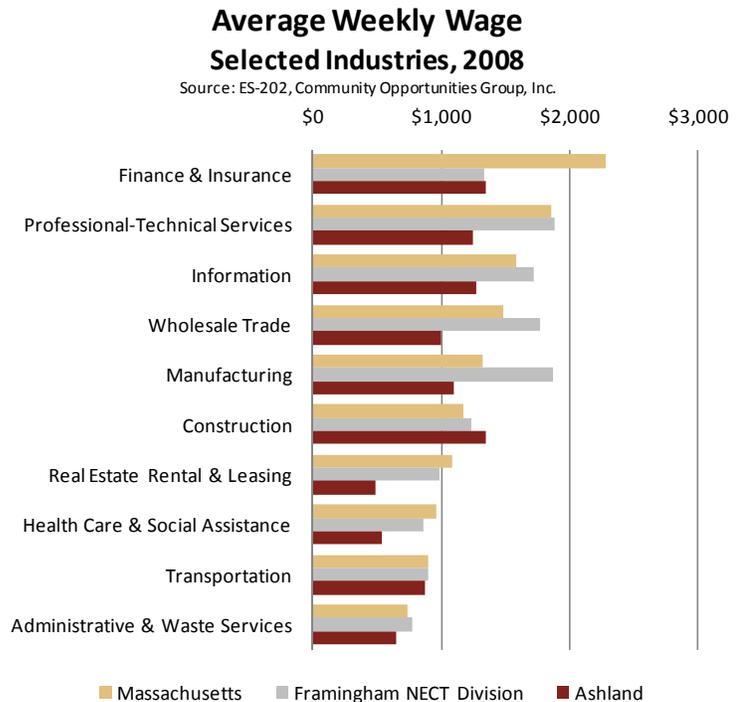
have not kept pace with inflation. This problem is true throughout the region, but it seems more pronounced in Ashland.²¹

Wages

In 2008, the average weekly wage for all industries in Ashland was \$781: just 72 percent of the statewide average and only 63 percent of the MetroWest average. It is important to note that in most cases, average wages in the MetroWest area run much higher than wages throughout Massachusetts, so Ashland is quite different from its own region. The town-wide wage is low primarily because Ashland's employment base consists of a disproportionately large share of lower-wage jobs, but even among customarily higher-wage industries, wages in Ashland tend to be depressed. The construction trades and "other services" - a variety of automotive services, personal services, non-profit organizations, and private household services - are the only industries with wages in Ashland that exceed the state

average. Compared with MetroWest averages, Ashland establishments in construction, finance and insurance, and the arts and entertainment industries pay higher wages. It is little wonder that so many Ashland residents work for non-local establishments; there are not enough local jobs that can support the cost to live in Ashland, even in two-worker households.²²

The highest-wage industries in Ashland include construction, finance and insurance, and information services and the lowest, arts and entertainment, food services, and retail. In nominal dollars (2008), the average wage overall rose by 7.9 percent in Ashland, but when adjusted for inflation, the town-wide average fell -5.4 percent. In several industries, wages rose at a rate that kept pace with or exceeded the rate of inflation: durable goods manufacturing, retail, finance and insurance, real estate, health care, arts and entertainment, and food services. Still, workers in some industries with relatively high-wage employment saw their earnings decline in real terms, notably construction, wholesale trade, and information.



²¹ Ibid., and Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

²² Claritas, Inc., and Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

Where Ashland Workers Live

For the same reason it is difficult to track the commute destinations of Ashland residents today, it also is difficult to confirm current commuting patterns for people who work in Ashland. According to Census 2000, just over one-fourth of all local workers a decade ago were residents of Ashland. Another fourth of the employees came from five communities: Framingham, Milford, Holliston, Hopkinton, and Boston. The remaining 2,400 workers traveled to Ashland from 124 communities, mainly located to the west or south. Since the composition of the employment base has changed somewhat, the origins of commuters to Ashland have probably changed somewhat, too. However, the overall wage structure in Ashland has become increasingly dominated by lower-wage employment, so the prevalence of commuters from more affordable towns most likely remains true in 2010.

Table 2.5
Place of Residence for Ashland Workers (2000)

Community	Number of Workers	Percent Total	Community	Number of Workers	Percent Total	Community	Number of Workers	Percent Total
Ashland	1,276	26.1%	Natick	126	2.6%	Blackstone	61	1.2%
Framingham	516	10.5%	Marlborough	121	2.5%	Worcester	59	1.2%
Milford	235	4.8%	Bellingham	92	1.9%	Grafton	53	1.1%
Holliston	227	4.6%	Franklin	71	1.5%	Northborough	52	1.1%
Hopkinton	141	2.9%	Medway	66	1.3%	Westborough	52	1.1%
Boston	139	2.8%	Uxbridge	66	1.3%	All Others	1,540	31.5%

Source: Census 2000, MCD/County to MCD/County Worker Flow Files, Summary File 3 Special Tabulation Series.

INVENTORY OF EXISTING BUSINESSES

Employer Establishments

Ashland's 450± employer establishments have a combined annual payroll of approximately \$210 million. The industries with the largest number of employers include other services (60), professional and technical services (58), and construction (57), and they tend to be **microenterprises**: small firms with five or fewer paid employees, including the owner. Ashland does not have many large companies. Durable goods manufacturers in Ashland employ an average of fifty people per business, and the average for transportation and administrative and waste management companies is twenty per business, but most of the town's other businesses have four to eight employees. There are also many microenterprises with only two or three employees, including the owner, especially in professional and technical services. By contrast, the average number of workers per durable goods manufacturer in the MetroWest region is seventy-five, and for professional and technical service firms, eleven.

The five-year decline of twenty-eight establishments in Ashland primarily involved two industries: professional and technical services, and retail. By the end of 2008, Ashland had lost 23 percent of the retail establishments and 22 percent of the professional and technical services establishments that operated locally in 2004. Durable goods manufacturing also lost three establishments, which may seem insignificant, but Ashland has only fourteen employers in this sector. There was a slight increase in the number of establishments in the information, finance and insurance, real estate, rental and leasing, and accommodation and food service industries. As the number of establishments changed, some businesses

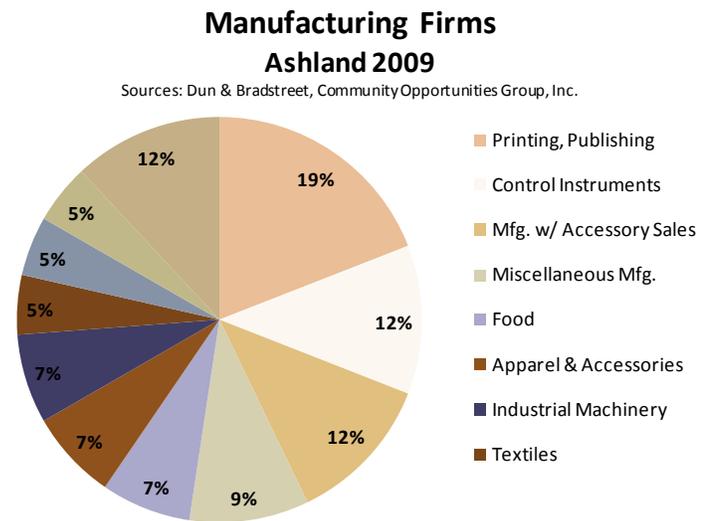
grew and others contracted. For example, the average number of jobs per business in durable goods manufacturing fluctuated from 45.3 in 2004 to a high of 52.5 in 2006 and fell thereafter to 49.7 in 2008. While the 2008 average was higher than in 2004, this industry's employment pattern is one of decline. In addition, the industry average is distorted by the presence of a few large establishments because in most cases, Ashland's durable goods manufacturers are fairly small enterprises (see below).²³ In retail, however, the average number of jobs per establishment increased steadily from 14.6 to 19.1 between 2003 and 2008 despite the loss of twelve establishments in the same period.

All Business Establishments

The 450 employer establishments in Ashland generate a substantial portion of the business activity that exists within the town, but they are not the only source of jobs. Including tax-exempt organizations and very small businesses omitted in federal employment reports as well as **nonemployer establishments** - that is, self-employed individuals without paid employees - Ashland has at least 900 establishments providing wage, salary, or self-employment income to a combined total of 6,500 people.²⁴ There are many differences between employer and nonemployer establishments, between large and small employer establishments, and clearly between establishments of any kind based on class of industry. These differences need to be recognized and addressed in any economic development plan.

Manufacturing

When both employer and nonemployer establishments are accounted for, Ashland has at least 45 businesses engaged in some type of manufacturing, often in conjunction with wholesale or retail sale of products manufactured on the same premises. The businesses are remarkably diverse in type, age, size, and relationship to the local and regional economy, but a noticeable aspect of Ashland's manufacturing base is the industrial legacy of the Warren Clock Co. (Telechron), which patented the first synchronous electric clock. Telechron gave Ashland an industrial niche, requiring skilled labor for the manufacture of rotors used by American clock and watch makers for more than thirty years. Although the



²³ According to quarterly economic data published by the state, durable goods manufacturing employment in Ashland appears to have dropped further, from 696 jobs in 2008 to 650 in the third quarter of 2009. Source: EOLWD, ES-202, Town of Ashland, 2009 3rd Qtr. However, it is difficult (and generally inadvisable) to compare quarterly and annual reports because employment in some industries fluctuates seasonally.

²⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all statistics in this section are based on data supplied by Dun & Bradstreet, Inc., for year ending December 31, 2008. The Town of Ashland maintains a d/b/a list and as of May 2010, the list included 919 businesses. However, the town's list does not contain enough information for a business development analysis.

Telechron era ended decades ago, the spillover effects on the local economy can still be seen in the presence of related industries, for Ashland has several companies that employ workers in precision metal trades, instrumentation, electronics, optical mechanics, and similar occupations.

Two examples of these related industries involve relatively large manufacturers. Proprietary sources report Ashland's largest manufacturing company as Kidde-Fenwal at 400 Main Street, a fire detection and protection manufacturer and a subsidiary of United Technologies Corporation. Another large manufacturing employer, Terumo Cardiovascular Systems, Inc., on Howe Road, makes surgical instruments and electromedical equipment. It is a subsidiary of Terumo Medical Corporation, owned by Terumo Cardiovascular Systems, Inc. (Terumo CVS). The size of these two companies, measured by total employment, has a significant impact on Ashland's durable goods manufacturing statistics because in a majority of cases, the local businesses in this sector are quite small.

Many people associate "manufacturing" with companies like Kidde-Fenwal or Terumo, but in economic development, "manufacturing" has a much broader meaning. It includes any type of business that creates a product for sale from some type of raw material. Viewed this way, "manufacturing" encompasses everything from bakeries and t-shirt makers to print shops, custom crafts, and the makers of industrial chemicals, machinery, instruments, and yes, clocks. In Ashland, the manufacturing enterprises that employ more than five people include makers of surgical and medical instruments, industrial machinery, industrial chemicals, concrete and asphalt blocks, business forms, rope and twine, fiber cables, hydraulic fluid power pumps, office partitions, wood fences, screw machine products, commercial print products, and baked goods. Though located throughout town, these companies tend to be concentrated in and around Downtown Ashland and along Pond Street, in areas zoned for industrial uses. In nearly all cases, Ashland's manufacturing employers are male-owned or male-operated businesses.

Microenterprises comprise more than half of the manufacturing businesses in Ashland, and in some ways they are quite different from the larger establishments. The micros with employees range from makers of industrial machines, screw machine products, electrical equipment, and paper boxes to surgical and medical instruments, ophthalmic products, and jewelry. Many of these are clearly related industries, much like Kidde-Fenwal and Terumo. Most operate in commercial and industrial areas, usually as tenants in a larger facility. However, Ashland also has many residents with a home-based manufacturing enterprise: makers of clothing, toys, handbags, custom wood products, home furnishings, signs, bird feeders, small electronic devices and instruments, and recorded tapes and CDs. While not "counted" as manufacturing employment by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), these sole proprietors - many of them women - derive income from their work, according to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). From the town's point of view, the smallest micros working out of an office or shop at home may not look like businesses, but they are.

Construction

The construction trades are a mainstay of Ashland's economy, offering the highest-wage jobs in town. Ashland has far more construction contractors (116) than the number reported as employer establishments (57), however, and this is because so many local trades workers are self-employed individuals. In fact, nearly 40 percent of the construction businesses in Ashland are one-person operations (46), and 70 percent have no more than two employees (including the owner). Thirty-four percent have been in business for twenty or more years.

The construction industry's sub-sectors are well-represented in Ashland. Single-family home builders and remodelers, operative builders, nonresidential construction, heavy construction, and plumbing, electrical, painting, landscaping, masonry, site preparation, and various special trade contractors work in Ashland, and many also live in Ashland. Information reported in the last federal census is dated, but it is important to note that in 1980, 1990, and 2000, Ashland consistently exceeded regional and state averages for resident employment in the construction trades.²⁵

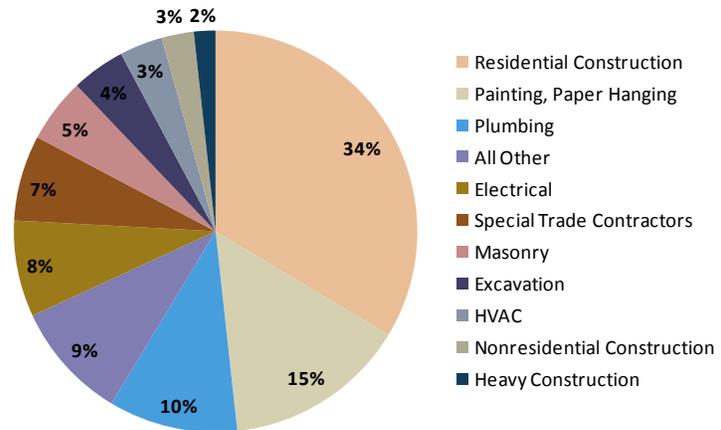
According to available data, the largest construction businesses in Ashland are the Worcester Air Conditioning Co. on Pleasant St., the Bruin Corporation on Pond St. (drywall and insulation), GGC Company on Pond St. (nonresidential construction), the Ned Trainor Construction Co. on Columbus Ave. (nonresidential construction), Crystal Sprinkler Systems on Indian Spring Rd., United Home Experts on Butterfield Drive (painting and paper hanging), U.S. Electric and Telecom on Main St. (electrical contractor), Ohara and Co. on Cordaville Rd. (masonry), and Pandolfi Plastering Co. on Clark Street (drywall and insulation). As of 2009, each of these companies reportedly employed ten or more people. Not surprisingly, while the nonresidential construction companies are generally larger and located in established industrial areas, many of the single-family home contractors are very small operations - often self-employed individuals - and they are found throughout Ashland, both in commercial or industrial districts and in home-based offices and workshops.

Wholesale Trade

Ashland's forty-seven wholesalers make up nearly 6 percent of all local businesses. They tend to be small companies, for 76 percent are microenterprises and approximately 20 percent are self-employed individuals. About half are incorporated businesses. Several wholesale companies have operated in Ashland for more than

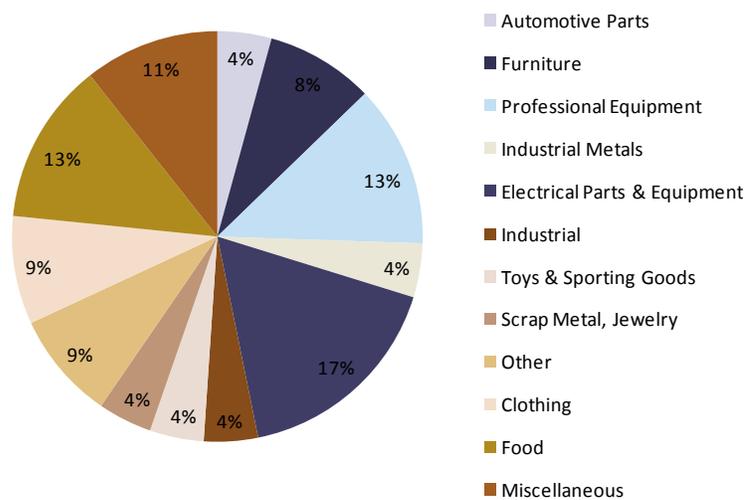
Construction Firms Ashland 2009

Sources: Dun & Bradstreet, Community Opportunities Group, Inc.



Wholesale Firms Ashland 2009

Source: Dun & Bradstreet, Community Opportunities Group, Inc.



²⁵ Geolytics, Inc.

twenty years: Trademark Equipment on Waverly Street (bakery equipment), Health Care Technology at Butterfield Drive (medical equipment), J.M. Kirk Co. on East Union Street (steel manufacturer's representative), Tek-Rep, Inc. on Butterfield Drive (electronic parts and equipment), Polytek Associates on Cordaville Road (electronic parts and equipment), Voorhees Communication on Myrtle St. (two-way communications equipment), Chemineer Agitator on Butterfield Drive (industrial equipment), Playtime Ventures on Myrtle Street (toys and hobby supplies), J.B. Dask Company on Independence Lane (trade parts for luggage and garment industries), Davis & Legg Associates on Ramblewood Drive (food brokers), and L&S Food Sales, Inc., on West Union Street (poultry products). Although it is generally true that Ashland's longer-term wholesalers are established companies with employees, only two employ more than ten people: Tek Rep, Inc., and Detection Systems, a wholesaler of fire extinguishers and an accessory business located at Kidde-Fenwal.

Many of the smallest wholesalers (one- or two-person operations) are recently established businesses, and some are home-based firms. Some of the companies deal in imports, such as home furnishings, toys and children's furniture, industrial metals, electronic parts, recreation equipment, beer and ale, and yarns. Unlike most businesses in Ashland (excluding manufacturing), the wholesalers rely almost entirely on non-local customers, drawing variously from the New York-New England and U.S.-Canadian markets. Five wholesale businesses each generate more than \$2 million in gross annual sales: in durable goods, commercial equipment, electronic parts, sporting and recreation supplies, and fire protection equipment, and in non-durable goods, footwear.

Retail

As with construction companies, Ashland has more retail businesses than the number classified as retail employer establishments. In 2009, there were 109 retail stores and restaurants in Ashland with a combined total of 894 workers. Overall, the distribution of retailers by type is close to national norms, but there are opportunities for additional retail development in Ashland because 35 percent of local consumer spending is leaked to non-local stores and eating establishments.²⁶ To some extent, this goes hand-in-hand with the large percentage of Ashland residents who commute to non-local places of employment. However, it may also suggest that Ashland's own population could do more to support local retailers and that local retailers need to assess their merchandising and marketing strategies. Currently about 12 percent of all retail sales in Ashland involve local businesses, i.e., retail stores and restaurants that are not part of a regional or national chain or owned by a non-local parent corporation.



²⁶ Claritas, Inc., Retail Opportunity Gap, Ashland Massachusetts, 2009 Estimates.

Furthermore, Ashland's proximity to Framingham and Natick gives residents convenient access to regional and national chain stores at Shoppers World and the Natick Connection.

The names of Ashland's largest retail establishments are well-known regionally and in a few cases, throughout the United States. Shaw's Market and Market Basket on Pond Street employ 180 and eighty people respectively. They are branch stores of corporations based in West Bridgewater and Tewksbury, both serving New England markets. Nello's Cafe on Eliot St. employs more than thirty people, followed by MacDonal'd's, CVS (on Union St.) and Papa Gino's, with twenty to twenty-five employees per business. These are relatively large establishments for Ashland because 88 percent of the town's retailers employ fewer than fifteen people and 64 percent, fewer than five. Of the seventy-five retail businesses for which the form of organization is known, 44 percent are unincorporated businesses and the vast majority are stores.

Ashland has a few stores that have operated locally for more than thirty years, but a majority of today's retailers opened at some point after 1990. The businesses with longer-term staying power tend to be restaurants and taverns, such as Burnam's Supper House, the Town House of Pizza, or Nicholas Pizza, but there are long-term stores as well, such as Main St. Wine & Spirits and the Ashland Lumber Company. The median year established for Ashland's retail businesses is 1996. Nineteen retailers, or 16 percent of all retail businesses in Ashland, have opened since 2003.

Services

Financial, Insurance, and Real Estate

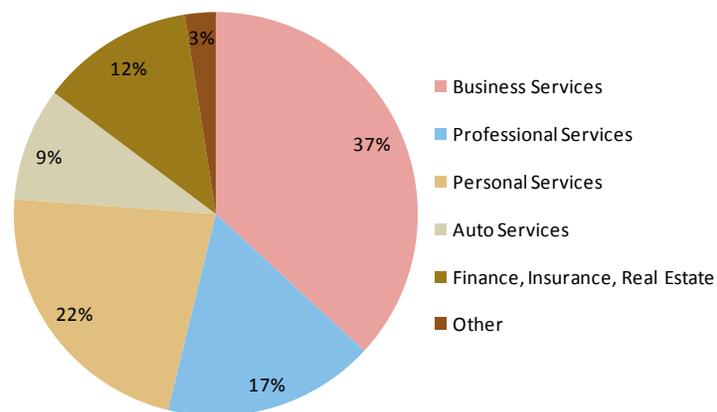
Services. There are four branch banks in Ashland with a combined total of approximately forty employees. They include two national banks - Bank of America on Eliot St. and T.D. BankNorth at Shaw's Plaza on Pond St. - along with Middlesex Savings Bank on W. Union St., a state-chartered bank, and Sovereign Bank on Eliot St., a federal savings bank. The other financial services operating in Ashland include a few non-depository credit organizations, financial planners, and investment advisors. Some of the latter are home-based businesses.

Ashland has several small firms and individuals working as insurance advisors and agents, in real estate sales, leasing, and property management, and in related fields. There are at least six insurance agencies and just as many real estate agencies in town, as well as small companies specializing in building operations, property management, and land development. Together, the insurance and real estate businesses in Ashland employ about 120 people. Horne Realty on Pond St. is the largest and oldest of these companies.

Business Services. Nearly all of the 150 companies that provide business services are small, one- to three-person operations. Many of them are self-employed individuals, and at least 35 percent are people with

**Service Establishments
Ashland 2009**

Sources: Dun & Bradstreet, Community Opportunities Group, Inc.



home occupations. The businesses range from advertising and direct mail services and graphics arts designers to photocopying and blueprinting services, temporary help and secretarial services, commercial building maintenance and cleaning, photo laboratories, computer system and information technology services, translators, and interior designers specializing in office environments. Together, they employ about 350 people (including the owners) in Ashland. The largest business services companies are Step Direct, Vericode, and Onprocess Technology.

Professional Services. Ashland has seventeen health care practices, mostly located in the vicinity of downtown. The town is served by four medical practices, several dentists, and a few chiropractors, physical therapists, and psychologists. There is also a small state-licensed rest home just outside the downtown area with capacity for twenty-seven patients. About eighty people (including the owners) work for these establishments. In addition, Ashland has twelve law offices and about ten engineering, architectural, and accounting firms. There are several small firms engaged in biological, biotechnical, physical, and other scientific research, too, and they employ approximately fifty people. Three veterinarians practice in Ashland, including at least one with an animal hospital that includes a clinical/diagnostic testing laboratory.

Personal Services. The personal services available in Ashland include most types of businesses found elsewhere, but the total number of hairdressers, nail salons, and barber shops - eighteen - is fairly large for a small town. Several of the beauty shops are operated in private homes. The town also has several laundry and dry cleaning services, upholsterers, photographers, makers of custom crafts, and instructors in dance, music, personal safety, and fitness. Many of these are self-employed individuals. In addition, Ashland has a commercial fitness establishment (Gold's Gym on Homer Ave.), and two more fitness establishments are preparing to locate in the town. These types of businesses typically employ about forty people. . Further, there are at least a dozen child care providers in Ashland, including four day care centers.

Auto Services. Ashland seems to have a large number of auto-related business, including auto sales, leasing, maintenance and repair, and gas stations. There are twenty-seven in all, including eight auto body shops. These businesses are scattered along the periphery of the downtown area and in pockets along the southern half of Pond Street. Most are local operations, but there are a few chain establishments, too, such as U-Haul and Munro Muffler & Brake.

Other. Several religious organizations provide full- or part-time employment in Ashland. The town has a Roman Catholic Church, St. Cecilia's, on Esty Street; the Federated Church (American Baptist, United Methodist, and United Church of Christ) on Main Street; the Congregation Sha'arei Shalom, which holds services and events at the Federated Church; the Sri Lakshmi (Hindu) Temple on Waverly Street; Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses on Union Street; and the MetroWest Worship Center on Pleasant Street near the MBTA station. There are also several non-profit charitable, trade, and professional organizations in Ashland, but very few have employees and reliable employment information is not available.

Government

Town government is Ashland's largest employer, with approximately 450 full- and part-time people on payroll, including 117 municipal (non-school) employees.²⁷ Ashland provides a traditional complement of community services: a K-12 public school district; full-time fire, emergency medical, police, and animal control services; water, sewer, highway maintenance, cemetery and parks, and curbside pickup and recycling services; recreation, leisure, and social service programs for residents of all ages; a public library; and planning, regulatory, permitting, and inspectional services. These functions are supported by administrative and finance personnel.

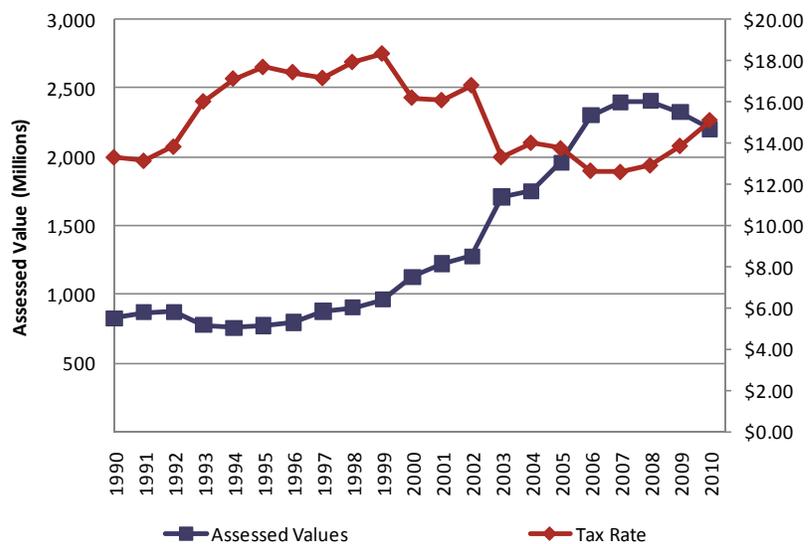
Several of the public buildings that house government services are located in or within a short distance of Downtown Ashland: Town Hall, the police station, and one of two fire stations (Central) on Main Street, and the Ashland Public Library on Front Street. Two public schools, the Mindness and Pittaway elementary schools, are within a half-mile of the downtown area, on Concord and Central Streets, respectively. All public works operations - highway, water, sewer, and cemetery - are based on Ponderosa Road between Pleasant Street and Winter Street, northwest of downtown. Other facilities owned and operated by the Town of Ashland include the Fire Department's headquarters on Cedar Street, a community center/senior center on West Union Street (Route 135), and three other public schools on Waverly Street, West Union Street, and Fruit Street.

TAX BASE

The Town of Ashland is a \$56 million organization with an open town meeting-board of selectmen-town manager form of government. Under its home rule charter, however, Ashland has retained many elected offices.²⁸ As a result, its government is fairly decentralized, steered not only by eight elected boards but also numerous appointed committees. While most town services are delivered administratively, i.e., by paid staff, policy direction is resident-driven and in some cases, volunteers have directly responsibility for carrying out public programs and services.

**Assessed Valuation and Tax Rates
FY 1990-2010**

Source: Department of Revenue



²⁷ Town of Ashland, "Notice of Sale, Bond Anticipation Notes" (September 26, 2006), 32; and John Petrin, Town Manager, "Town of Ashland - FY10 Employees" (July 24, 2009).

²⁸ Currently elected boards include the Board of Selectmen, School Committee, Board of Assessors, Board of Health, Planning Board, Library Trustees, Ashland Redevelopment Authority, and Ashland Housing Authority.

A community's tax base is the combined value of all taxable real and personal property within its corporate limits and subject to local taxation authority. Massachusetts communities rely heavily on the property tax to finance local government services, and Ashland is no exception. Although the property tax generates just over half of all local government revenues statewide, it typically represents about 60 percent of Ashland's annual operating revenue. The remaining 40 percent comes from three sources: state aid, local receipts (such as license and permit fees), and other available funds such as free cash.²⁹ State aid accounts for 12 percent of all local government revenue, and about 83 percent of the state aid that Ashland receives is education aid (Chapter 70).³⁰

In FY 2010, 91 percent of Ashland's \$2.2 billion assessed valuation was based on the value of residential property. The situation was different twenty-five years ago, when residential properties made up about 82 percent of the Town's total assessed valuation and commercial, industrial, and personal property, 18 percent.³¹ As in virtually every town in the Commonwealth, Ashland experienced significant growth in housing values after the market recovered from the recession of the early 1990s. Since FY 2000, the total value of residential property in Ashland has more than doubled due to the combined effects of new construction and substantial renovation of single-family homes, new condominiums, and housing price acceleration throughout the Boston metro area. Moreover, until two years ago, Ashland consistently outpaced the state as a whole for the percentage of each year's tax levy coming from new growth that occurred during the previous fiscal year. The vast majority of that new growth was residential.³²

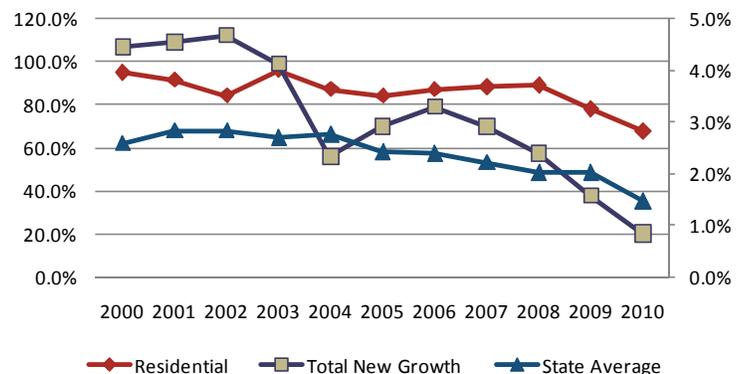
According to state data, the number of single-family homes in Ashland increased just 13.5 percent between 2000 and 2010, but the total value of its single-family home inventory increased 99.6 percent, unadjusted for inflation. The value of all residential properties combined rose by 102 percent, with condominiums driving much of the increase because Ashland's condominium inventory grew significantly (40 percent) in the past decade. By contrast, the total assessed value of commercial real estate in Ashland increased 80 percent.

Furthermore, the total value of industrial properties dropped 4 percent; in fact, Ashland's total industrial value has declined for two successive decades. Over time, Ashland has gradually lost industrial properties and aggregate industrial value, and the composition of its tax base has changed. In the mid-1980s, for example, the ratio of total commercial values to total industrial values was 0.87; by 2010, the

New Growth Revenue Trends

FY2000-2010

Source: Mass. DOR



²⁹ DOR, "Revenues by Source," FY1986-2010, and Massachusetts Association of Finance Committees, *Finance Committee Handbook* (undated).

³⁰ DOR, "Revenues by Source," FY 1986-2010.

³¹ DOR, "Assessed Values by Class," FY 1986-2010, and Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

³² DOR, "New Growth Applied to the Levy Limit," FY 1992-2010, and Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

ratio had shifted considerably, to 2.65. The total number of commercial and industrial properties has dropped by about 8 percent, though some of this is attributable to parcel assembly.³³

Since FY 2003, Ashland has taxed real and personal property at the same (uniform) rate.³⁴ The recent fall in market values, triggered by the foreclosure crisis and the ensuing recession, spawned noticeable increases in the tax rate as Ashland tried to maintain basic services and preserve reasonably stable growth in the tax levy. The average single-family tax bill has increased 64 percent in the past ten years, well ahead of the statewide rate (40 percent).³⁵

³³DOR, "Assessed Values by Class" and "Parcel Counts by Class and Usage Code," FY 1986-2010, and Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

³⁴ DOR, "Tax Rates by Class," FY1987-2010.

³⁵ DOR, "Average Single-Family Tax Bill," FY 1986-2010.

3. Community Development

LAND USE PATTERN

A community's land use pattern is defined by the location, arrangement, and intensity of its residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional uses, along with transportation features, open land, and water resources. Land use patterns vary by the land and water resources that support them, the eras in which development occurred, and whether it occurred before or after the adoption of zoning. The ages of buildings in various parts of a town usually correlate with changes in land use patterns. This can be seen in Ashland, for the size and shape of the lots and the architectural styles and placements of residential and commercial buildings differ significantly between downtown, Pond Street/Route 126, and neighborhood in the north and south sides of town.

Water, landscape, and transportation features have played an indelible role in Ashland's development (Map 3.1).³⁶ The town is framed by a limited number of through roads that pre-date its incorporation, having once supported travel between Hopkinton, Framingham, Holliston, and Southborough. They include Route 135, Route 126, and the local roads that bend from Holliston to Framingham and Southborough: Prospect and Main Streets, Myrtle Street, Pleasant Street, Winter Street, and Howe Street. Overall, the roadway network is oriented away from Ashland, not toward it, and this seems to reflect the historical development of the region's communities. Ashland was incorporated later than the surrounding towns, and it is the only one with an economic center - downtown - that is not crossed by a state-numbered road.

The town is physically divided by the river and the railroad tracks running parallel to it. Between the roadways and the railroad tracks, Ashland's landscape rolls from several named hills to the Sudbury River, ponds, reservoirs, floodplains, and forested wetlands. A historic properties survey recently completed for the Ashland Historical Commission notes that in the petition leading to Ashland's incorporation, the inhabitants of then-Unionville described their community as "...mostly a plain, surrounded by hills, and the inhabitants are so separated by these natural barriers, from the centre of their several towns, as to make arduous and difficult the intercourse between them."³⁷ Their words captured well the essential characteristics of Ashland's topography and landscape, for the center of Ashland is indeed a lowland flanked by hills on all sides. The land is quite pretty, and some of it is difficult to develop. Though most of Ashland is composed of till and shallow bedrock, a continuous band of well-drained soils extends across the town's geographic center and around the Sudbury River's tributaries, largely corresponding to the settings of Ashland's early industrial development.

Ashland is largely developed today, with numerous subdivisions and condominium developments served by an intricate and largely unconnected pattern of "loop and lollipop" (loop and cul-de-sac) streets all over town (Map 2). The downtown area contains a delightful but underutilized collection of

³⁶ All maps referenced in this chapter may be found at the end of the report.

³⁷ Kathleen Kelly Broomer, *Communitywide Historic Properties Survey: Final Report* (prepared for Ashland Historical Commission, June 2010), 16.

nineteenth century buildings, which memorialize the burst of activity that must have occurred here when the Boston and Worcester Railroad opened 170 years ago. Situated along Main Street and around the intersections of Main Street, Front Street, Homer Avenue, and Summer Street, Downtown Ashland is not as vibrant as it could be, but it has many more opportunities than deficits. Although its greatest challenge seems to be growth in rail traffic, downtown's over-arching challenge is Ashland's transformation from an industrial employment center to a bedroom community.

Commercial development mixed with industrial uses and some housing extends the full length of Pond Street/Route 126, a roadway largely separate from the rest of Ashland, and there is also a cluster of commercial and retail uses just outside the downtown area on Union Street/Route 135, heading west toward Hopkinton. Most of the goods and services establishments in Ashland today can be found in Downtown Ashland, in pockets on Pleasant Street, along Pond Street, and at the intersection of Summer Street, Cherry Street, and Union Street. There is also industrial development - some new, and some vintage - on the outskirts of downtown and Pleasant Street. The rest of Ashland is peppered with small neighborhoods and some very large tracts of open space in between, notably two state parks, the town forest, and Warren Woods.

TRANSPORTATION

Roadways

Ashland is served by approximately 80 miles of public roads (Table 3.1). The town's roadway system is somewhat unusual because Ashland has a myriad of unconnected subdivision streets and private access ways to condominium or apartment developments. It is easier to drive through Ashland than navigate within it, and since Ashland was carved out of land formerly associated with three towns, the external orientation of its older, primary roads makes some sense. Except for the downtown area, there is little about the town's roads that creates a sense of arrival in Ashland. These qualities, coupled with Ashland's circuitous access to the region's major highways - Route 9, Interstate Route 495, and Interstate Route 90 - make it challenging to attract new businesses to Ashland and could make it difficult to keep some of the existing businesses that serve a non-local clientele.

Table 3.1

Ashland Roads

Roadway Function	Centerline Miles	Examples
Interstate	0.92	I-90
Arterial	4.89	Route 126, Route 135
Minor Arterial	8.62	Main, Prospect, Pleasant, Chestnut, Oak, Cherry Streets; Cordaville Road
Collector	8.45	Myrtle, Fountain, Cherry, Eliot, Fruit Streets; Oregon Road, Homer Avenue
Local/Neighborhood	<u>56.52</u>	All Other Accepted or Named Streets
Total	79.40	Total Public Roads
Private Ways, Access Roads	28.57	

Source: Massachusetts Department of Transportation, 2009 Road Inventory Database.

Downtown. Ashland's post-contact evolution from a colonial settlement at Magunko Hill to a mid-nineteenth century industrial village on the Sudbury River to a twentieth century suburb can be seen in

the center of town. The convergence of Main Street with Union Street, Summer Street, Homer Avenue, Front Street, and Pleasant Street, flanked by the Sudbury River, serves as a frame for the downtown area and provides a window to Ashland's industrial past. It is one of the busiest parts of town, due not only to the amount of traffic moving through Ashland along Main Street but also the presence of several interconnecting side streets lined with commercial and residential uses. In the heart of Downtown Ashland, Main Street carries between 15,000 and 16,000 vehicles per day.³⁸

Arterials. The most prominent roadway features include two principal arterials: Route 126, a historic state road that extends from Concord south to Bellingham, crossing Ashland's east side between Framingham and Holliston, and Route 135, which generally runs in an east-west direction from Dedham to Northborough and crosses Ashland between Framingham and Hopkinton. Eliot Street and Fruit Street provide the only direct connection between Pond Street/Route 126 and the rest of Ashland, both intersecting Prospect Street less than a mile from the Holliston town line. The limited access to Pond Street/Route 126 from within Ashland largely explains its significantly different land use and traffic patterns, and also reinforces Ashland's history as a section of neighboring towns. In nearly all other communities it serves, Route 126 runs through the center of town; in Ashland, it is a leg between the centers of Framingham and Holliston, carrying between 20,000 and 22,000 vehicles per day.³⁹

Route 135 skirts the southeast side of Downtown Ashland, changing names from Waverly Street to Union Street and West Union Street as it crosses from Framingham to Hopkinton. In Ashland, Route 135 carries 12,000 to more than 15,000 vehicles per day, with the higher volumes occurring west of downtown.⁴⁰ It also offers access to the Ashland MBTA station west of Cherry Street. Route 135 serves both local traffic and commuter traffic between I-495 and regional employment centers, providing connections to Route 30 and Route 9 via Route 126 in Framingham, and Route 27 in Natick. Route 9 is also accessible from two minor collector streets in Ashland: Myrtle Street, which runs north-south from the downtown area and becomes Badger Road in Framingham, and Oregon Road in the northwest part of town, which becomes Parker Road in Framingham. Ashland has indirect access to I-90 via Route 30 or Route 9 in Framingham and I-495 at the Hopkinton/Westborough town line.

Minor Arterials and Collector Roads. Chestnut Street, Prospect Street, Main Street, Pleasant Street, Cherry Street, Cordaville Road, and Oak Street carry both local and through traffic in Ashland, providing connections to the two principal arterials that serve the town. Chestnut Street is a two-lane road that extends approximately two miles from the Ashland/Holliston line to Union Street/Route 135, east of downtown. Prospect Street extends northward for about one mile from the Holliston line and becomes Main Street at its intersection with Chestnut Street. Pleasant Street runs in an east-west direction between the north end of Main Street and Cordaville Road, and provides access to the Ashland MBTA station less than a mile from the downtown area. It becomes Cordaville Road about three-fourths of a mile from the Southborough town line, where it intersects with Oak Street, a collector that provides access to Route 9 approximately two miles north in Southborough. Cordaville Road in Ashland leads to the Southborough

³⁸ VHB, *Town of Ashland Grade Crossing Study* (2010), 22, and Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization (BMPO), Central Transportation Planning Staff (CTPS), Traffic Counts Database, www.ctps.org/bostonmpo/.

³⁹ Massachusetts Department of Transportation, Traffic Volume Counts Database, www.mhd.state.ma.us/. Traffic volumes are general estimates, based on limited data collected at varying intervals at the Framingham and Holliston traffic stations closest to Ashland.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* The most recent counts reported for Route 135 in Ashland reflect data collected in 2005.

MBTA station at Route 85 and Southville Road, just over the Southborough/Ashland and Southborough/Hopkinton town lines.

Ten less prominent roads function as collectors that carry traffic between the town's neighborhoods and minor arterials in Ashland or adjacent towns: East Union, Eliot, Fountain, Front, Fruit, Myrtle, and Summer Streets, Higley and Oregon Roads, and Homer Avenue. Excluding Summer Street and Homer Avenue, all of these roads cross directly or indirectly into an adjacent town. Eliot Street is Ashland's only direct access into Sherborn.

Local Streets. The local or neighborhood-level road system in Ashland is noteworthy for its near-lack of through streets. Most Ashland neighborhoods are located on culs-de-sac and short loop roads off the major streets, with little connectivity between them. This pattern is particularly common on the east side of town between Route 135 and Route 126. On the northern end of town, generally bordered by Winter Street, Myrtle Street, and Green Street, and to the south between Howe Street and High Street, there are some intertwined, curvilinear subdivision roads that are quite different in character from neighborhood streets closer to Route 126. Overall, however, Ashland can be a difficult town to navigate due to the limited number of minor street connections and signage that is either missing or obscured by roadside vegetation.

Public Transportation

Ashland has direct access to MBTA commuter rail service and interlocal bus service provided by the MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA), based in Framingham. The MBTA's Framingham-Worcester rail line delivers daily commuter service, with thirteen inbound stops and eleven outbound stops at the Ashland commuter rail station on Pleasant Street. The Ashland station has a large commuter parking facility with 678 vehicular parking spaces and parking for bicycles as well.⁴¹ A recently survey published by the Central Transportation Planning Staff (CPTS) indicates that at least 427 people typically board commuter rail trains from the Ashland station on weekdays, including 182 or more from Ashland. The station also serves residents of Hopkinton, Holliston, Milford, Marlborough, and six other communities. Only 11 non-residents commute to Ashland on the MBTA trains.⁴²



⁴¹ Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), *Ridership and Service Statistics*, 12th ed. (2009), "South Side Commuter Rail Parking Inventory, August 2008," 8:4-6.

⁴² Central Transportation Planning Staff, "Origin Locations and Activities, Entry Station: Ashland," *MBTA Systemwide Passenger Survey: South Side 2008-2009 Station-by-Station Tables* (June 2010).

The railroad infrastructure in Ashland supports commuter rail, freight rail, and Amtrak. Though close to the downtown area, the Ashland MBTA station is not really a downtown train station or a generator of downtown business activity. Periodically stalled traffic on Main Street is the most noticeable impact of the railroad, having less to do with commuter rail service than the long, slow-moving freight trains operated by CSX. Amtrak runs one train through town on daily basis.

The MWRTA provides daily fixed route service to eleven communities in the MetroWest area. Route 5 runs between Framingham and I-495 in Hopkinton, with seven outbound and six inbound A.M. stops and six inbound and seven outbound P.M. stops in Downtown Ashland and at the Ashland Middle School. Route 6, which runs between Framingham and Milford, provides four outbound and three inbound A.M. stops and three inbound and four P.M. stops on Pond Street/Route 126. For the elderly and people with disabilities, the MWRTA offers Dial-a-Ride and ADA paratransit service in lift-equipped vehicles.

Ashland commuters can transfer from the commuter rail to the MBTA's subway system and buses at Boston's South Station, or from MWRTA bus service to the Green Line shuttle, which runs to the Woodland MBTA station off Route 128.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Accommodation

Ashland has sidewalks in the downtown area, on most of the nearby residential streets, and along Pleasant Street between downtown and the MBTA station. A continuous sidewalk system does not exist in other commercial areas, but most residential neighborhoods have sidewalks and Ashland residents tend to think of the town as a walkable community. There are also a number of trail systems for passive recreational use in Town Forest, around the Ashland Reservoir, and at the Warren Conference Center. The town recognizes that pedestrian and bicycle facilities are needed, for the Open Space and Recreation Plan identifies several proposed actions to improve non-vehicular mobility and access, notably continued efforts to plan trail connections with the ay Circuit and to construct the Upper Charles Rail Trail.

Air Travel

Boston's Logan Airport, owned and operated by the Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport), is the closest passenger transport aviation facility providing scheduled flights for national and international travel. The Worcester Regional Airport in northwest Worcester, a regional transport aviation facility operated by Massport, provides scheduled passenger flights to a limited number of East Coast locations as well as general aviation services. There is a small, privately owned, limited-use general aviation facility in Marlborough and a small basic utility airport in the Hopedale industrial park, neither of which provides passenger service.

UTILITIES

Ashland provides water and sewer service to most of the town. The drinking water supply is municipally owned and operated, with five groundwater wells and a filtration plant located next to the Hopkinton

Reservoir.⁴³ The Ashland Public Works Department reportedly has effective systems in place to manage overall water use, for the town currently falls below the two critical water consumption standards that the state tracks closely under the Massachusetts Water Management Act.⁴⁴ While Ashland owns and maintains its public sewer infrastructure, the town purchases wastewater disposal service from the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA). NSTAR provides electricity throughout most of the MetroWest region, and telephone and high-speed internet services are available from Verizon and Comcast. There are no known utility service issues that would compromise Ashland's ability to meet the needs of commercial, industrial, or residential uses.

BUSINESS DISTRICTS

Ashland provides for business development in five areas: Downtown, Pleasant Street, Pond Street/Route 126, Waverly Street and Union Street/Route 135, and portions of West Union Street/Route 135. There are also pockets of commercial and industrial zoning in other parts of Ashland, notably on Spring Street, Chestnut Street, the vicinity of Howe Street and Cordaville Road, and in the northwest corner between the Massachusetts Turnpike and the Southborough and Framingham town lines. A few years ago, Ashland created a Rail Transit District south of Pleasant Street around MBTA commuter rail station. Mixed residential and commercial uses are allowed in the Rail Transit District, but no development has occurred there.

The areas traditionally used and currently zoned for commercial and industrial development in Ashland are not at all alike. They differ historically and in physical form, access, aesthetics, and land uses. The value of property in these areas is also different. This chapter provides an inventory and analysis of Ashland's principal business areas, focusing on six characteristics: land use pattern, the public realm, business development, vacant or underutilized land, and housing.

Downtown & Pleasant Street

Downtown

Located in the geographic center of town, Downtown Ashland is a small, moderately dense commercial area with business, residential, and institutional uses, and most of Ashland's key municipal facilities: Town Hall, the Ashland Public Library, and the police and fire stations. Railroad tracks serving both freight rail and the MBTA's Framingham-Worcester line bisect the downtown area, crossing Main Street between Summer Street and Front Street.

Land Use Pattern. Downtown Ashland generally includes the Main Street corridor from Summer Street and Homer Avenue to the vicinity of Front Street and the adjacent, contributing sub-areas. The sub-areas include the mill complex at the northern gateway into the downtown area; a linear arrangement of low-rise buildings north of Town Hall, in the vicinity of the Main Street and Pleasant Street intersection; a

⁴³ Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), *Source Water Assessment Program (SWAP) Report for Ashland Water Department* (November 2001), and

⁴⁴ DEP, "Accepted Performance Standard Values: Residential Gallons per Capita Day (RGPCD) and Unaccounted for Water (UAW), 2008 Public Water Supply Annual Statistical Report" (data file, undated).

collection of irregular lots with buildings set back erratically from the road, and sometimes with multiple buildings on one lot, situated to the east; and to the south, a fourth area, generally around Summer Street and Homer Avenue, where small lots of a more consistent shape and size have been developed with relatively small structures and transitional land uses. The distances between these sub-areas contribute to their lack visual connectivity. However, the more challenging impediments are physical barriers, notably the railroad tracks and surface parking lots, and to a lesser extent, vegetation. The existing land use pattern relates, but only in part, to the sub-area boundaries of the downtown zoning district that Ashland established in 2006.

Together, the central corridor and its associated sub-areas include about seventy acres of land: fifty-two acres in land parcels and the rest in roads and the railroad right-of-way. The average lot is less than a half-acre. Table 3.2 summarizes Downtown Ashland's land uses based on classes of use determined by the town assessor.

Table 3.2 Downtown Ashland Land Use Inventory (2010)					
Use Class	Number of Parcels	Acres	Commercial Gross Floor Area (Est.)	Assessed Value, Buildings	Total Assessed Value
Nonresidential Uses					
Mixed Use	11	3.81	74,469	\$2,465,900	\$4,751,900
Retail	11	2.30	59,499	\$1,741,700	\$4,037,900
Personal or Business Services	7	3.16	19,031	\$584,500	\$1,925,800
Offices, Banks	4	1.53	30,497	\$1,977,600	\$2,956,300
Industrial	2	7.38	182,203	\$2,344,300	\$3,561,800
Residential Uses					
Single-Family	19	5.15		\$1,811,700	\$5,095,000
Multi-Family	39	11.03		\$6,436,600	\$14,104,100
Apartments	4	3.25		\$4,214,000	\$6,570,700
Vacant or Accessory Land*	6	3.99		\$6,000	\$511,900
Unclassified†	3	1.28			\$0
Subtotal Taxable Land	106	42.88	365,699	\$21,582,300	\$43,515,400
Public	10	6.59			
Nonprofit	3	2.62			
Downtown Area Total	119	52.09	365,699	\$21,582,300	\$43,515,400
<i>Source: Town of Ashland, Assessor's Parcel Database (FY 2010), supplied by Conservation Department.</i>					
<i>Notes:</i>					
*The town assessor classifies most of the vacant land as undevelopable.					
†Incomplete data.					

The physical form of Downtown Ashland is somewhat dense by suburban standards, but for the most part composed of low-rise structures separated by modest yards and interspersed with surface parking. There is a mix of new and older buildings, and many of the older buildings are both historically significant and aesthetically pleasing, such as Ashland's Town Hall and the Federated Church. Some of the nonresidential lots are intensively used, as evidenced by the range of floor-to-lot-area ratios (FAR) on downtown parcels. A few lots with offices, retail, and eating establishments have more floor area than the size of the lots, with FARs exceeding 1.00, but FARs of 0.50 or more are not uncommon in Downtown

Ashland - as is the case in other historic business districts where so many buildings pre-date the adoption of zoning.⁴⁵ By contrast, some of the one-story structures compromise downtown's visual quality by detracting from the vertical design of other buildings nearby, and in these cases the land tends to be underutilized. In general, the built environment of Downtown Ashland is a bit jumbled, with breaks between buildings and little visual cohesion.

Public Realm. Successful downtowns are the civic, social, cultural, and business centers of the communities they serve. More than any other type of commercial setting, downtowns are destinations: places that people go *to* rather than *through*. They have qualities that attract and keep people for more than a quick stop at a convenience store or corner gas station. Chief among those qualities - aside from a variety of goods and services and eating establishments - is the public realm, or civic spaces that create visual definition, provide access,

encourage mobility and social interaction, and reinforce a shared sense of community. The public realm consists of streets, sidewalks and paths, parks and open space, pedestrian facilities, lighting, views, landmarks, civic art, and spaces visible to the public around government and private buildings. Buildings generally define the edge and the shape of the public realm, so the relationship between buildings and the street and between abutting buildings is critically important.

The public realm of Downtown Ashland does little to define the area as a destination. The streets are wide, and crossing them is unpleasant. At times, the roadway width acts as a barrier between each side of the street. The small public green in the center of downtown has some beautiful mature trees, but the lack of street trees emphasizes the open and exposed nature of the roadway. In the center of downtown is a public parking lot surrounding a small commercial building with a barbershop and some offices. Overhead utilities further detract from the streetscape, but their impact is magnified by the near-absence of vegetation. In addition, there is very little wayfinding signage, so moving about Downtown Ashland, whether by car or on foot, can be a discouraging proposition for anyone unfamiliar with the area.

While sidewalks line Downtown Ashland's streets, they lack the width necessary for groups of walkers and their stark concrete and granite construction make them unappealing. Ashland's downtown is technically walkable, but the streetscape does not communicate a pedestrian-friendly, safe, and attractive environment. Walkable areas have more than concrete sidewalks. They offer places for people to rest, explore, and interact, and to see and experience a place through means other than the windshield of their car. The sidewalks and pathways not only interconnect, but also lead to activity centers: stores, restaurants, plazas, public parks, local institutions, and public buildings. This kind of physically and

The public realm of Downtown Ashland does little to define the area as a destination. The streets are wide, and crossing them is unpleasant. At times, the roadway width acts as a barrier between each side of the street.

⁴⁵ For a frame of reference, newer suburban retail and office developments typically have FARs of 0.30 to 0.33, i.e., total gross floor area equal to about one-third of the area of the lot. Some examples in Ashland include Ashland Plaza on Pond Street and the retail area around Summer and Union Streets. Central business district FARs are almost always (and should be) higher, with more built space per lot and parking located in public or shared facilities.

visually integrated setting creates reasons for people to stay for a while and, ideally, to support local businesses.

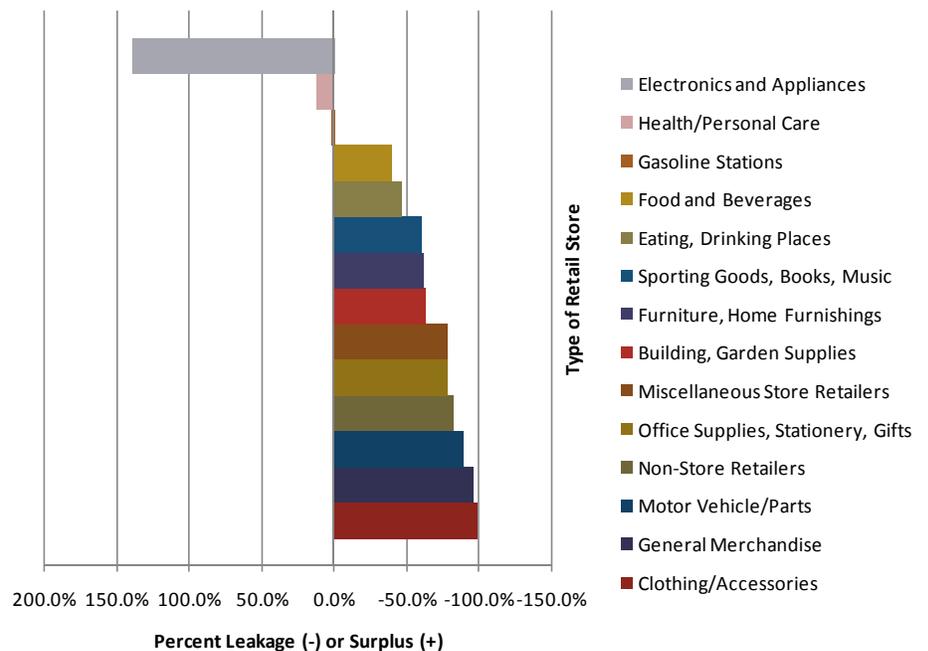
Downtown Ashland has basic pedestrian infrastructure, but it does not have the qualities of a pedestrian-oriented place. A downtown without such qualities usually has trouble attracting and keeping enough stores to support a viable retail base, and to some extent that can be seen in Ashland because most opportunities to purchase goods and services locally exist in the auto-oriented commercial areas along Route 135 and Route 126. Since downtowns do not have the perception of convenient parking found in suburban shopping areas, they have to offer a different mix of stores and other businesses and a different experience for the consumer. They have to facilitate vehicular circulation without being subordinate to it. There is an inextricable relationship between the quality and character of the public realm and the kinds of businesses that can survive in an older downtown area. For the most part, the quality and character of the public realm is local government's responsibility.

Business Development.

Downtown Ashland is home to municipal services, institutions such as a church and post office, membership organizations, and approximately seventy-five businesses:⁴⁶ banks, restaurants and take-out food service establishments, beauty salons and other personal services, some retail stores, business services, a few small manufacturing firms, and business, professional, and medical offices. There are other offices within walking distance of downtown, too. In general, Downtown Ashland is an employment and services center more than a retail center. The businesses tend to be specialized, and there are not many businesses that generate or cater to pedestrian traffic. People seem to go to the downtown area for a specific, and likely single, purpose. Although many downtown businesses seem to prosper in their present locations, there is little about the mix of businesses that would entice residents to linger, browse, and spend their money locally.

Downtown Sales Leakage (2009)

Sources: Claritas, Inc., Community Opportunities Group, Inc.



Due to its limited number of retail businesses, Downtown Ashland "leaks" a considerable amount of resident spending on goods and services. Under current conditions, approximately 54 percent of

⁴⁶ Dun and Bradstreet, Ashland Business List (2009, 2010).

consumer spending by households within a mile of the downtown area occurs in other parts of Ashland and in other communities. Although some types of retail clearly serve both local and non-local customers, such as electronics and appliances, beer and wine, gasoline stations, and health care products, there is considerable leakage in clothing, sporting goods, furniture, groceries, food services, and general merchandise. The demand for goods such as office supplies and home furnishings is more than twice the total sales volume for these products within a one-mile radius of downtown, and the demand for clothing and accessories is a staggering 98 times total downtown sales.⁴⁷

Vacant or Underutilized Land. The most obvious example of underutilized land in Downtown Ashland is also one of its most visible locations: the parcels extending from the corner of Main Street and Front Street easterly along Front Street (125 Front Street). This area currently consists of a small town green, the barbershop building and the parking lot surrounding it, and vacant land that the Ashland Redevelopment Authority purchased from the MBTA in 2005. Ashland already recognizes the potential benefits of redeveloping this area, having commissioned a downtown vision plan in 2005 and follow-up studies in 2008. On the north side of Front Street there are several abutting nonresidential parcels with redevelopment potential as well. In general, the downtown properties composed of one-story buildings could be candidates for vertical redevelopment under the right market conditions, provided that Ashland's zoning offers enough flexibility and density to support small-scale projects.

Housing. There are very few housing units in the core of Downtown Ashland, but moderately dense residential neighborhoods exist along downtown's side streets and the major corridors leading to the downtown area. Although many of the properties are single-family homes, Downtown Ashland also has two-family and small multi-family homes, and apartments, including elderly housing adjacent to the railroad tracks. A few mixed-use buildings also include residential space. Together, these properties contain 270 to 290 housing units.⁴⁸

Pleasant Street

Pleasant Street, a major gateway to the downtown area, runs parallel to the Sudbury River and eventually becomes Cordaville Road, which crosses into Southborough. Though primarily residential, Pleasant Street also has light industrial and commercial uses along with the MBTA commuter rail station roughly three-quarters of a mile from the heart of downtown. Despite the presence of sidewalks, there is no obvious connection between Downtown Ashland and the train station. Distance, the lack of complementary uses along Pleasant Street, and visual incoherence interfere with unifying these two areas.

Land Use Pattern. Pleasant Street runs in a straight line for approximately two-thirds of a mile between Main Street and the Ashland MBTA station. The corridor is bounded by the Sudbury River to the north and the railroad tracks to the south. The north side of Pleasant Street is occupied almost exclusively by mixed residential uses: single-family dwellings, two-family dwellings, and small multi-family buildings, all on small, narrow lots. By contrast, the south side includes light industrial, residential uses, religious and educational uses, and limited commercial development near the train station. In general, the

⁴⁷ Claritas, Inc., and Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

⁴⁸ Estimate based on three sources: FY 2010 Assessor's Parcel Database supplied by the Conservation Department; Claritas, Inc., user-defined area; and the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, Chapter 40B Subsidized Housing Inventory (June 2009).

residential lots south of Pleasant Street are not as deep as those to the north, and due to the presence both of nonresidential uses and a few side streets between Pleasant Street and the railroad, the corridor's south side has somewhat more activity. However, it is a more haphazard development pattern due to the irregular placement of buildings on lots.

In general, the existing business uses south of Pleasant Street disturb the residential nature of the road. Since the nonresidential buildings are set back many feet from the roadway, they disrupt the physical space as well. Although much of the existing development on Pleasant Street pre-dates the adoption of zoning in Ashland, the town's present zoning would seemingly contribute to the divided character of this road because the north and south sides of the street fall within different - and potentially incompatible - districts. Relative to other parts of Ashland, the Pleasant Street corridor is fairly dense, with an average lot area of just under one-half of an acre. It has the look and feel of an older industrial neighborhood, with mixed uses co-existing on separate lots more than vertically mixed-use buildings.

Table 3.3 Pleasant Street Land Use Inventory (2010)					
Use Class	Number of Parcels	Acres	Commercial Gross Floor Area (Est.)	Assessed Value, Buildings	Total Assessed Value
Nonresidential Uses					
Mixed Uses	4	3.2	23,849	\$940,500	\$1,759,400
Commercial	1	0.4		\$77,700	\$293,400
Industrial	4	8.4	121,562	\$3,295,600	\$4,708,400
Residential Uses					
Single Family	35	10.8		\$3,477,300	\$9,663,500
Multi-Family	36	11.5		\$5,762,500	\$12,264,100
Vacant or Accessory Land	<u>5</u>	<u>2.7</u>			<u>\$657,200</u>
Subtotal Taxable Land	85	37.1	145,411	\$13,553,600	\$29,346,000
Public	3	2.1			
Nonprofit	6	6.9			
Pleasant Street Total	94	46.0	145,411	\$13,553,600	\$29,346,000
<i>Source: Town of Ashland, Assessor's Parcel Database (FY 2010), supplied by Conservation Department.</i>					

Public Realm. Pleasant Street carries traffic between Downtown Ashland and the MBTA Station, and indirectly, Southborough and Route 9. Though adjacent to the downtown area, it does not offer a visually coherent entry to downtown or a strong sense of identity for a downtown neighborhood. There are asphalt sidewalks with a grass strip along both sides of Pleasant Street, but the area lacks an attractive, effective separation between the sidewalks and the street. While several mature trees on private property add green to the streetscape, they do not add definition to the neighborhood. Utility lines run on one side of the road.

Business Development. Approximately fourteen businesses operate on Pleasant Street, including light industry, and most of the businesses occupy stand-alone buildings.⁴⁹ The Town recently designated an industrial property on Pleasant Street as a Priority Development Site under M.G.L. c. 43D. Also on

⁴⁹ Dun and Bradstreet, Ashland Business List.

Pleasant Street is the MetroWest Worship Center, located close to the train station. In most cases, the nonresidential uses are not complementary uses to the neighborhood, except perhaps the Veterans of Foreign Wars property, which provides a local gathering spot for club members.

Vacant or Underutilized Land.

There are some small tracts of undeveloped land as well as vacant properties on Pleasant Street, generally along the railroad tracks on the south side of the street. The town has designated one of the underutilized properties, Gamewell at 60 Pleasant Street, as a Chapter 43D Priority Development Site.



Housing. Pleasant Street is predominantly residential, with about 150 dwelling units in single-family homes, two-family homes, and small multi-family buildings lining the street and the side streets. The housing is modest and

developed at a fairly high density by Ashland standards. In nearly all cases, the value of the dwellings on Pleasant Street exceeds the value of the lots they occupy. Among single-family homes, the average ratio of building to land value is only 0.51, and for the corridor's two-family homes, the ratio is 0.73.⁵⁰ There appear to be redevelopment opportunities along Pleasant Street, but the existing lot sizes and configurations are a constraint.

Route 135 Corridor

Route 135 crosses Ashland between Framingham and Hopkinton in an east-west direction, changing from Waverly Street to Union Street (at East Union) and West Union Street (at Cherry Street) on its three-mile course through town. Due to the length of Route 135 and the changes in land use that occur along the road, the corridor consists of multiple segments. Approximately 200 parcels have frontage on or obtain access from Route 135.

Land Use Pattern. The character of Route 135 changes significantly as it bends through Ashland. Commercial development is concentrated around two intersections: Homer, Chestnut, and Union Streets, and Summer and Union Streets. Other commercial uses exist along the length of the roadway, too, but in most cases they are stand-alone businesses. In the vicinity of Homer, Chestnut, and Union Streets, the land supports a mix of office, industrial, retail, and institutional uses, and surface parking. By contrast, the corner of Summer and Union Streets is dominated by suburban retail development. Between these two commercial areas, Route 135 is predominantly residential, and the housing includes a relatively

⁵⁰ FY 2010 Assessor's Parcel Database, supplied by Ashland Conservation Department; and Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

dense mix of single-family, two-family, and small multi-family homes. One of Ashland's few mixed-income apartment developments, Ashland Commons (Presidents Row), lies just south of the Summer-Union commercial area, with access on West Union Street and Metropolitan Avenue.

Outside of these two commercial nodes, Route 135 is quite different. Toward Framingham, the land northwest of Waverly Street tends to be constrained by close proximity to the railroad and the reservoir, so the lots are wide and not very deep. On the opposite side of the road, the land use pattern consists of single-family neighborhoods, public and institutional uses, pockets of commercial development, and some privately owned vacant land. From the Summer-Union intersection to the Hopkinton town line, nearly all of the land along Route 135 is in residential use. The land use pattern is dominated by single-family homes on conventional lots with frontage on West Union Street, but there are a few single-family subdivisions and townhouse developments as well. The Ashland Middle School occupies land north of West Union Street, and the Ashland Community Center and the 470-acre Ashland State Park are located south of West Union Street less than a mile from the town line. There is very little commercial space in this part of town, though a vacant property zoned for business development near Hopkinton has been approved for commercial uses and an assisted living facility.

Table 3.4
Route 135 Land Use Inventory (2010)

Use Class	Number of Parcels	Acres	Commercial Gross Floor Area (Est.)	Assessed Value, Buildings	Total Assessed Value
Nonresidential Uses					
Mixed Uses	4	3.1	15,030	\$823,800	\$1,780,900
Retail	14	28.9	115,566	\$7,258,000	\$11,866,200
Offices	4	3.2	28,165	\$2,109,800	\$3,121,900
Other Commercial	10	11.2	86,575	\$3,760,000	\$6,274,700
Industrial	2	5.4	341,464	\$7,447,400	\$8,361,500
Residential Uses					
Single Family	102	118.7		\$12,396,300	\$33,320,700
Multi-Family	32	45.8		\$3,252,800	\$7,621,200
Apartments	1	19.9		\$4,505,300	\$6,796,400
Vacant or Accessory Land	<u>20</u>	<u>47.8</u>			<u>\$3,277,500</u>
Subtotal Taxable Land	189	283.9	586,800	\$41,553,400	\$82,421,000
Public	7	26.8		\$4,084,900	\$5,194,700
Nonprofit	4	17.1		\$1,438,700	\$2,763,000
Route 135 Total	200	327.9	586,800	\$47,077,000	\$90,378,700

Source: Town of Ashland, Assessor's Parcel Database (FY 2010), supplied by Conservation Department.

Public Realm. The Route 135 streetscape varies as the road passes through downtown village neighborhoods to outlying suburban areas. The more densely populated neighborhoods have sidewalks and mature trees along the road, so while the road itself is wide, the street is fairly conducive to pedestrian movement, such as between Homer Avenue and Esty Street. Beyond the downtown area in either direction, the sidewalks end, the streetscape loses definition, and the residential development pattern becomes more suburban. There is little sense of public space beyond the downtown neighborhoods except for the grounds of public facilities, notably the Ashland Middle School and the

Community Center. While the commercial properties around Summer Street and Union Street form an activity center, the prevalence of buildings subordinated to parking lots makes the area somewhat seamless and auto-oriented. Utility lines hover above ground for the entire length of Route 135. In all areas, the existing signage is designed for drivers.

Business Development. The commercial areas on Route 135 support a variety of businesses, ranging from national chain stores to small “mom and pop” businesses. Approximately 115 business establishments exist corridor-wide.⁵¹ The largest concentration of retail and service establishments exists at the intersection of Summer and Union Streets, with restaurants, convenience and liquor stores, cleaners, hair salons, a bank, and two pharmacies (CVS and RiteAid). The Ashland Technology Center at Homer Avenue and Union Street, originally the home of Telechron clocks, is a large multi-use facility offering office and flex space to



tenants. Located on the periphery of downtown, it has a few restaurants, convenience stores, liquor stores, and indoor recreation, as well as professional and business offices, light manufacturing, and wholesalers. Other services found in this part of town include a car wash, gasoline station, and automobile repair shop. There are also small businesses in the vicinity of Union Street and the lower end of Main Street, mainly personal and business service establishments. In general, Route 135 from Homer Avenue to Summer Street functions as an ex-downtown retail and services area catering to vehicular traffic.

The businesses operating elsewhere on Route 135 include a seemingly random mix of professional office space, hair salons, commercial storage, garden centers, and business offices for the construction trades. Some are home-based businesses, especially on West Union Street.

Vacant or Underutilized Land. Route 135 is mostly developed, but it does have some vacant parcels. A majority of the corridor's open space and potentially developable land lies on the western end, toward Hopkinton. Ashland is currently analyzing development possibilities for two parcels along this section of Route 135: 250 West Union Street, which has a vacant building and about eleven acres of land, and a tract known as Ashland Woods, a 48-unit Chapter 40B development that appears to be stalled. Both of these properties are zoned for commercial development. The town is also looking at options for the use of

⁵¹ Dun and Bradstreet, Ashland Business List.

vacant parcels on Waverly Street, including one that has been considered for a new public safety (combined police and fire) building.⁵²

Housing. As noted above, residential development exists along most of Route 135, with a total of about four hundred housing units. The neighborhoods between Homer Avenue and Summer Street are particularly dense, with small lots, modest housing, and a mix of single-family, two-family, and multi-family homes. As on Pleasant Street, many of the single-family homes along and just off Union Street are small - some with less than one thousand square feet of floor area - and their value lies more in land than the buildings themselves. On average, the value of the older one- and one-and-a-half story capes and ranch-style houses is less than half the value of their lots. These homes are interspersed with somewhat larger, more valuable housing stock: larger residences with more height, floor area, bedrooms, and amenities. Not surprisingly, the newer townhouse and apartment developments differ significantly from the small multi-family buildings peppered throughout the neighborhoods between Union Street, Summer Street, and Homer Avenue. The apartment buildings at Presidents Row are longer and taller, with no historical precedents nearby, and the condominiums clustered in a wooded area around Voyager's Lane are fairly large - in many cases larger than the single-family homes a few streets away.

Outside the downtown neighborhoods, the housing along Route 135 is less dense, with larger lots and deeper setbacks, and composed primarily of detached single-family dwellings. There is also a condominium development on Olive Street, just off West Union, with fifty-five units of age-restricted housing adjacent to the Ashland Community Center and Ashland State Park. The homes closest to Hopkinton tend to be more expensive than their counterparts closer to the center of town.

Route 126 Corridor

Route 126 crosses Ashland in a north-south direction between the Framingham and Holliston along the eastern edge of town. Known in Ashland as Pond Street, Route 126 is a heavily traveled road with a posted speed limit of 35 mph. Constant traffic, high travel speeds, lack of sidewalks, and the limited shoulder width along most of the road make walking on Route 126 unpleasant and dangerous. In addition to the numerous businesses that line the roadway, there are several heavily wooded wetland areas. Route 126 is unique in Ashland for its nearly complete lack of connection with other major roads. The only link to Pond Street from the rest of Ashland is Eliot Street in the southern part of town. Between Route 135, Main and Prospect Street, and Pond Street - Ashland's east side - there are scores of single-family subdivisions and condominium developments with constrained access to the Pond Street corridor despite their proximity to it. The exception is a large condominium development at Captain Eames Circle and Algonquin Trail, which has direct access to Route 126. Unlike many businesses on Route 135 and most businesses in Downtown Ashland, the commercial and industrial development that exists on Pond Street is oriented primarily toward non-local markets.

Land Use Pattern. Most of the development along Route 126 consists of commercial, retail, and light industrial uses. However, several neighborhoods and condominium developments lie just off Route 126, and a few residences line the roadway as well. Overall, the land use pattern on Route 126 is a random and irregular mix of large and small industrial parcels with varying degrees of built space and surface parking, contractor's yards, auto maintenance and repair shops, large and small multi-family properties,

⁵² Larry Koff and Associates, 2010.

auto-oriented retail centers, and densely developed single-family and two-family homes. The differences in land utilization for commercial and industrial properties are fairly significant. For example, the FAR on lots used for retail, eating establishments, and consumer services ranges from a low of 0.16 to a high of 0.68, and for the shopping center properties, 0.26 to 0.33. These differences are not purely statistical; they are evident on the ground, and they contribute to the haphazard appearance of many commercial developments along Pond Street. Similarly, the industrial sites vary from 0.12 to 0.42, but most fall below 0.20 - reflecting the nature of the industrial uses found in this part of Ashland.

Table 3.5
Route 126 Land Use Inventory (2010)

Use Class	Number of Parcels	Acres	Commercial Gross Floor Area (Est.)	Assessed Value, Buildings	Total Assessed Value
Nonresidential Uses					
Mixed Uses	8	7.8	40,553	\$1,168,900	\$2,981,300
Retail	22	67.8	711,025	\$35,344,900	\$44,804,100
Offices	2	5.2	2,159	\$98,700	\$348,600
Commercial Storage, Warehouses	12	23.5	217,021	\$5,279,500	\$8,883,800
Other Commercial	12	35.2	52,764	\$2,505,000	\$5,634,600
Industrial	8	15.4	121,087	\$3,110,600	\$5,426,000
Utilities	4	39.8	0	\$463,300	\$1,422,600
Residential Uses					
Single Family	57	50.8	0	\$4,783,000	\$15,000,900
Multi-Family	26	248.8	0	\$1,198,200	\$2,960,300
Vacant or Accessory Land*	<u>32</u>	<u>79.7</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>\$7,400</u>	<u>\$3,207,200</u>
Route 126 Total†	183	574.0	1,144,609	\$53,959,500	\$90,669,400

Source: Town of Ashland, Assessor's Parcel Database (FY 2010), supplied by Conservation Department.

Notes:

*Vacant land inventory excludes some large parcels assessed as vacant undevelopable industrial land, located east of but with no direct or indirect access to Route 126. The parcels are predominantly wetlands.

†This table omits the public and non-profit land classes reported in previous tables because there are no tax-exempt parcels fronting on Route 126. However, there is a large tract of town-owned land behind Butterfield Drive.

More than any other roadway in Ashland, Route 126 has numerous land use conflicts and the potential for still more. The conflicts stem primarily from the proximity of residential uses to commercial and industrial uses. This applies both to residential properties with frontage on Route 126 and, to some extent, the neighborhoods located off Route 126. The noise, high traffic volumes, and unsightly uses such as storage of automobiles and staging areas do not bode well for harmony between homes and businesses. The scattered nature of housing directly on Route 126 further creates an impression of disjointedness and isolation. In addition, the close proximity of housing to commercial and industrial uses could constrain the development options available to nonresidential property owners. The potential also exists for conflicts between some commercial and industrial uses, too, given the wide range of uses allowed in the Route 126 zoning districts and the different types of traffic they generate. On one level, Route 126 has evolved in a manner consistent, in part, with the goals and policies of Ashland's comprehensive plan and

zoning. On another level, Route 126 still needs the attention alluded to in plans and studies previously commissioned by the Town: capital improvements, and higher-quality development.⁵³

Public Realm. The Route 126 corridor is poorly defined and visually confusing. The only sense of public space is the road itself: a road designed, intended, and maintained for vehicular traffic. Most of Route 126 is lined with businesses, but the presence of business development per se is not the problem. In fact, a corridor that supports economic growth is exactly what Ashland's town plans and long-term zoning policies have prescribed. Rather, the character of the road suffers from numerous curb cuts, free-standing business signs, the apparent lack of design standards, limited or poorly maintained landscape treatments, and a chaotic pattern of building placements on lots. Many of the businesses on Route 126 occupy single-user buildings, each served by an individual curb cut and access drive. As a result, Route 126 lacks an "edge," for many of the curb cuts are not well defined, and the prevalence of access and egress points creates hazardous traffic conditions. The abundance of free-standing pole signs is visually distracting and further blurs any sense of a relationship between the buildings and the street. There are no sidewalks, and the shoulder width is narrow. Utility wires hover above ground.

*More than any other roadway
in Ashland, Route 126 has
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*Route 126 still needs the
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capital improvements, and
higher-quality development*

Route 126 is subject to a myriad of user demands: a regional arterial, a commercial highway, an efficient route to work for the estimated 1,300 people employed by the corridor's businesses, and a residential street. While not meant to function as a downtown area, Route 126 could be more cohesive, operationally safe and efficient, attractive, and accommodating of pedestrians and bicyclists. It would benefit from redevelopment and intensification of use in selected areas in order to create a few logical, organized focal points. In addition, the existing development pattern on Route 126 does little to convey a sense of arrival in Ashland, yet Route 126 is a gateway into the community despite its isolation from the center of town. As the "face" of Ashland for non-local users traveling Route 126 each day, it does not present the town as a high-quality community valued by its residents and public officials.

Business Development. There are approximately 160 businesses operating on Route 126 and the access drives that serve rear parcels. Several automobile-related businesses including repair, bodywork, and sales, can be seen on Route 126 and side streets such as Nickerson Road, as well as gas stations. Self-storage, fast-food establishments, offices and storage yards for construction and landscaping contractors, and a host of personal and business services exist throughout the corridor.

Route 126 has two fairly large strip malls: Market Basket Plaza and Shaw's Plaza. Market Basket and Shaw's are among Ashland's largest employers, with a combined total of about 390 full- and part-time employees.⁵⁴ Located on the northern end of Route 126 near the Framingham line, Market Basket Plaza is

⁵³ Town of Ashland, *2002 Comprehensive Plan*, 2.1.1, 3.2.4, and 4.5.1.

⁵⁴ Town of Ashland Bond Prospectus, 32.

an L-shaped strip mall with a supermarket, clothing stores, and personal services such as a laundromat and hair salon. It appears underutilized, for several stores are vacant. A smaller strip mall with similar services occupies the parcel next to Market Basket Plaza, and it appears fully occupied. Shaw's Plaza is one of several retail developments clustered around the intersection of Eliot Street and Route 126. In addition to Shaw's supermarket, the plaza has a pharmacy (Ashland's second CVS store), banks, restaurants, and specialty stores. The other retail facilities in the same area include Ledgemere Plaza, a retail-office mix, and Sears Appliance & Hardware. Adjacent to Sears is a Radio Shack and Domino's Pizza shop.

Two areas off Route 126 have developed specifically for office and light industrial uses: Butterfield Drive and Nickerson Road. The Butterfield Corporate Center at the end of Butterfield Drive offers flex space to a variety of tenants including healthcare, sales, contracting, and media companies. United Parcel Service (UPS) is also located on Butterfield Drive. Nickerson Road has evolved as a commercial and industrial park (Nickerson Commons) with small manufacturing businesses, a self-storage facility, auto repair and landscaping services, and other light industrial uses, all on lots under separate ownership, along with several residences. Though some of Nickerson Road's properties are not very attractive, the businesses seem profitable. The town has hired a consultant to evaluate development and redevelopment opportunities for both of these locations.



Vacant or Underutilized Land. There are several stretches of vacant land along Route 126. While some may have development potential, much of the vacant land is wet. The largest parcels of vacant land exist at the northern end of the corridor. On the southern end, around Route 126 and Eliot Street, there is virtually no vacant land, but the Sears Plaza property has potential to support more development. There is also a substantially vacant parcel near the Ashland/Holliston town line. In general, the prospects for enhancing and redefining Route 126 have less to do with vacant parcels than with opportunities to redevelop and intensify the use of existing properties. Though it may be tempting to concentrate the town's economic development efforts on vacant sites, there is not enough vacant land on Route 126 to alter the character of the road with new development.

Housing. Three types of housing exist along or directly accessed from Route 126: homes on lots with frontage on Route 126, established neighborhoods just off Route 126, and large-scale condominium developments. Many of the single-family homes are situated between commercial and industrial uses. Moreover, many of the today's businesses are located in former residences. The established neighborhoods include Tri Street and Day Road, a subdivision that bends between Route 126 and Eliot Street, and a densely settled area at the Framingham town line, composed of Waushakum and Washington Avenues, Lakeside Drive, and Rodman, Walcott, Greenhalge, and Douglas Roads. Most of the homes on these streets date to the interwar and postwar periods, and the streets appear to be part of a

subdivision that extends into Framingham. Many of these are intact residential areas, and while they abut commercial or industrial uses, the neighborhoods are clearly defined. Finally, there are two major condominium developments with a combined total of about 900 housing units situated off Route 126, both buffered by wooded areas from surrounding land uses.

HOUSING

The health of a community's economy hinges on access to housing choices: a range of housing types, a continuum of price bands, opportunities to purchase or rent, and neighborhood settings that support different lifestyles and different stages in the life cycle. For Ashland, housing is an especially important part of the local economy because so many of its residents work in the construction trades. In addition, Ashland's housing, population, and socioeconomic characteristics are inextricably related, which underscores the role that housing plays in shaping household wealth, the employment options available to a community's labor force, and consumer spending patterns. Finally, residential development generates more than 90 percent of Ashland's tax revenue each year and most of the demand for municipal and school services.

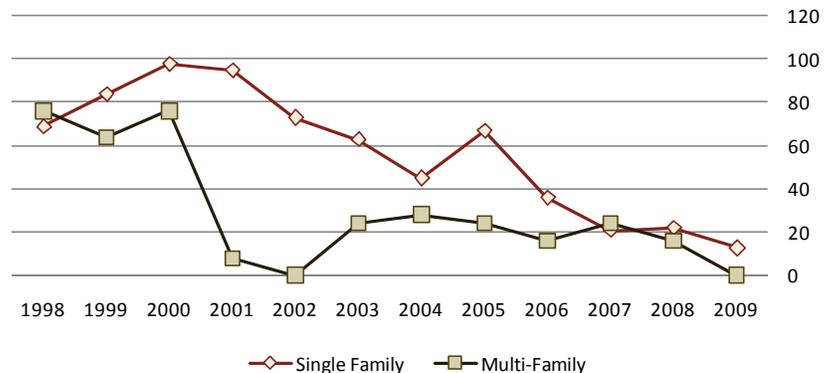
New Construction

Available data show that over the past ten years (2000-2009), Ashland issued building permits for approximately 750 new housing units.⁵⁵ Production peaked at the turn of the decade and declined in response to the 2001 recession. While construction of new single-family homes remained sluggish except for a one-year spurt in 2005, multi-family construction entered a slow recovery period that lasted roughly from 2002

until the present recession began in December 2007. The town's recent building permit history is generally consistent with the pattern of new-growth revenue described above. As of 2009, Ashland's total housing inventory included approximately 6,340 units.⁵⁶

Residential Building Permits 1998-2009

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census



⁵⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, New Residential Building Permits, Ashland, Massachusetts, 1996-2009 (Annual), CenStats Database, user-defined query, censtats.census.gov/bldg/bldgprmt.shtml.

⁵⁶ Claritas, Inc., Demographic Snapshot Report.

Market

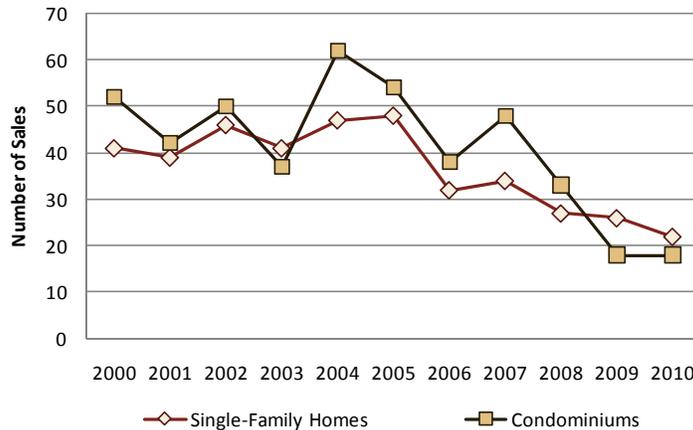
Ashland offers a wider range of housing choices than any of the neighboring small towns. Although it does not have a large number of apartments like Framingham, Ashland's condominium stock is substantial: nearly 1,800 units, or about 28 percent of all dwelling units and 31 percent of all residential properties in the town. The condominium inventory is so large that Ashland's state rank for condominiums as a percentage of all residential properties is 40 out of 295 communities, and the vast majority of those forty communities are cities.⁵⁷

In Ashland, most condominiums are townhouses: single-family dwellings attached by a common wall, with each unit having a separate entrance at grade, typically in clusters of two to four units per building. The prevalence of condominiums in Ashland has a great deal to do with the make-up of local households and the presence of many newcomers in town. At the height of the housing market toward the end of the 1990s and again between 2003 and 2005, annual condominium sales represented 14 to 17 percent of Ashland's total condominium inventory. By contrast, 4 to 6 percent of Ashland's single-family home inventory was sold each year.⁵⁸

Relative to the MetroWest area as a whole, Ashland is a mid-market community. Its median housing sale price, though high relative to many parts of the state, falls well below that of Sherborn, Southborough, and Hopkinton, and exceeds that of Framingham and some of the towns along the MetroWest periphery. Between 2007 and 2009 - a period that captures the near-collapse of the mortgage lending industry -

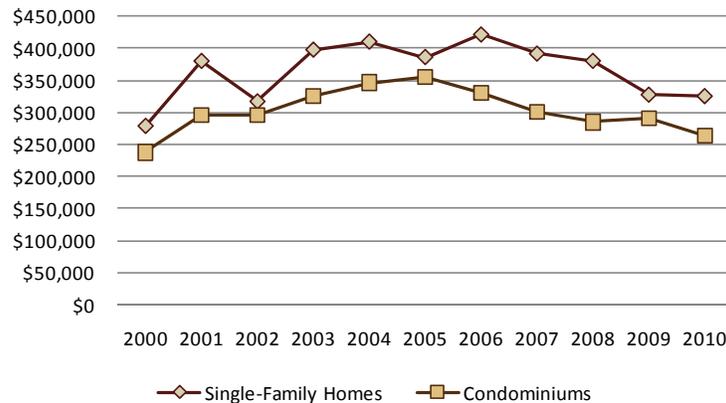
Housing Sales
YTD 2000-2010

Source: The Warren Group



Median Housing Sale Prices
YTD 2000-2010

Source: The Warren Group



⁵⁷ Claritas, Inc., Demographic Snapshot Report, and DOR, "Parcel Counts by Class and Usage Code," FY 2010. Rankings by author. Note: 56 communities in Massachusetts have no condominium properties.

⁵⁸ The Warren Group, Town Stats, Ashland, Massachusetts, user-defined query, and Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

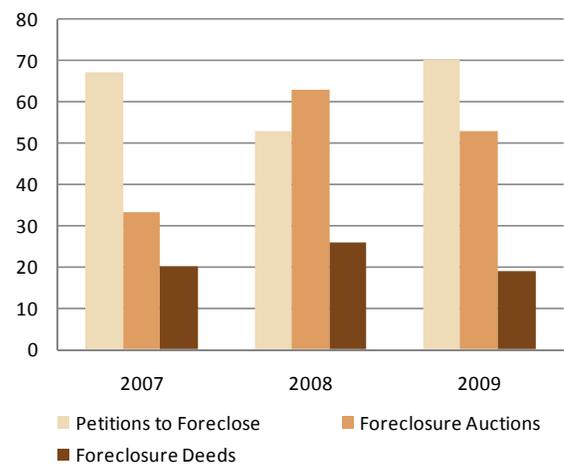
Ashland's median sale price dropped 16 percent, but the same applies to several other MetroWest communities, too. Regional differences exist, but they have more to do with timing than the degree to which sale prices and sales volume have decreased since 2007. In Ashland, for example, the 16 percent decline over three years is largely based on market activity in 2009, yet communities farther from Framingham saw a dramatic drop in sale prices the previous year. What seems universally true is that sales volumes spiraled downward in 2008. In Ashland and nearly all of the surrounding towns, the total number of single-family home sales in 2008 was strikingly similar to conditions during the height of the recession in the early 1990s.⁵⁹

Foreclosures

Ashland has not been immune to the effects of the mortgage foreclosure crisis. Over the past three years (2007-2009), 190 foreclosure petitions were filed against Ashland property owners, and nearly 70 percent of the petitions involved single-family homes. One hundred forty-nine foreclosure auctions occurred in the same period, and sixty-five property owners avoided an inevitable foreclosure by giving the deed to their home or condominium to the mortgage lender (deed in lieu of foreclosure). The incidence of foreclosure appears to have dropped slightly in 2010 because on a year-to-date basis, the number of foreclosure petitions filed decreased. However, the number of foreclosure auctions has increased, particularly among condominiums.⁶⁰

Mortgage Foreclosures 2007-2009

Source: The Warren Group



ZONING

Like most towns, Ashland relies on several tools to regulate development, such as zoning, subdivision control, wetlands protection, and demolition delay. The town also influences the location and intensity of development through utility policies, i.e., access to water and sewer service, and capital improvements such as schools, parks, and sidewalks. While all of these activities collectively determine what can be done – and how much can be done – on a parcel of land, land use is squarely the province of zoning. The prevalence of townhouse developments, the location and form of highway-oriented shopping areas, and single-family homes that extend along most of Ashland's outlying roads are, to a large extent, the product of its past and present zoning requirements.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ The Warren Group, Foreclosures Database, 2007-2009.

Zoning Districts

For a small town, Ashland has an unusually large number of zoning districts, with a total of nine use districts and several layers of special districts and overlay districts. The districts are shown on Map 3.3, though accurate boundary files for some of the districts were not available for this report.⁶¹

Residential Districts

Ashland's three residential districts anticipate a hierarchy of uses and density of development. In some cases, they share the same use regulations. For example, single-family homes are permitted, and residential cluster developments, non-exempt (small) farms,⁶² kennels, golf courses, and accessory apartments are allowed by special permit, in all three districts.

Residence A (RA), Ashland's largest zoning district, covers 76 percent of the town's land area. It is a conventional district for single-family home development, though Ashland also allows assisted living facilities and senior housing by right,⁶³ along with home occupations. The Planning Board has authority to grant special permits for cluster developments, and the Board of Appeals can issue special permits for a limited number of uses such as kennels, outdoor recreation facilities, wireless communications facilities (allowed by special permit in all districts), and accessory apartments. A conforming lot in this district requires at least 30,000 sq. ft. of land (90 percent upland) and 150 feet of frontage. In addition, lot shape regulations apply in RA and all other zoning districts (Section 4.1.4). The RA district's front setback requirements imply a preference for relatively large suburban yards, for dwellings must be set back at least forty feet from the front lot line.

Residence B (RB) includes slightly more than 3 percent of the town, and it is largely confined to neighborhoods that pre-date zoning around Downtown Ashland and the north side of Pond Street/Route 126. The RB district has slightly more permissive use regulations than the RA district, presumably due to the character of the older neighborhoods it includes, for it allows both single-family and two-family dwellings (new or by conversion) by right. In all other respects, the RA and RB use regulations are the same. A conforming lot in the RB district has 20,000 sq. ft. of land and 125 feet of frontage, but a two-family home requires 30,000 sq. ft. Further, Ashland imposes a maximum floor area cap of 4,500 sq. ft. on single-family and two-family dwellings in the RB (and other) districts for lots with less than 30,000 sq. ft. in area. The size limit applies unless the Board of Appeals grants a waiver. Finally, due to the 30 ft. minimum front yard requirement in RB district, it is likely that many dwellings do not conform even if located on 20,000 sq. ft. lots.

Residence Multifamily (RM) is at its name suggests - a district designated for multi-family housing - except that multi-family dwellings are allowed only by special permit from the Board of Appeals and

⁶¹ There are zoning boundary discrepancies between the GIS databases provided to the consultants and the Town's official Zoning Map.

⁶² Until August 2010, non-exempt farm meant an agricultural use on less than five acres of land. Under the new economic development bill signed by Governor Patrick, a farm enjoys the protections of G.L. c. 40A, § 3 (and is therefore exempt from zoning) if it contains at least two acres and produces at least \$1,000 per acre in gross farm sales per year.

⁶³ The Table of Principal Use Regulations identifies Senior Residential Community as a use permitted by right, but according to Section 7.2, the use requires a special permit from the Planning Board. See § 7.2.5.

only on parcels of five or more acres with at least 300 feet of frontage. Except for multi-family special permits, the RM and RB districts share the same use regulations. Ashland has fairly prescriptive multi-family development requirements, including a density limit of one unit per 5,000 sq. ft. of lot area *and* 2,500 sq. ft. per bedroom. The design standards clearly favor townhouses over garden-style units (and by default, homeownership developments over rental housing) for Ashland prohibits building entrances that provide access to more than two units and also limits building heights to two stories and twenty-eight feet. By contrast, the maximum height for single-family and two-family homes in all zoning districts is 2 1/2 stories and thirty-five feet.

Commercial Districts

Ashland has five districts intended primarily for commercial uses such as offices, retail stores, banks, and personal services. The districts have some common use regulations: single-family homes, professional offices, and computer software and hardware development allowed as of right, and adult uses by special permit. New construction, substantial alterations, and parking lot expansions in the commercial districts require site plan review by the Planning Board, and some require both site plan review and a special permit. Since the Zoning Bylaw divides special permit granting authority between the Planning Board and Board of Appeals, it is conceivable that an applicant would have to satisfy the expectations of both boards in order to obtain a building permit.

Highway Commerce (CH) includes slightly more than 3 percent of the town, covering most of the land on both sides of Pond Street/Route 126, Waverly Street/Route 135, and portions of West Union Street/Route 135. In these locations, Ashland allows a wide range of uses - a range wide enough to create the potential for land use conflicts. Single-family dwellings, assisted living facilities, and senior housing developments are permitted as of right, along with kennels, non-exempt farms, hotels and motels, retail stores, offices, restaurants, catering businesses, and mini-storage facilities. The Board of Appeals has authority to grant special permits for two-family homes, "planned" multi-family developments (a term undefined in the Zoning Bylaw), fast-food restaurants, drive-through facilities, cell towers, adult uses, and auto sales, maintenance, and repair. Although not shown in the Table of Principal Use Regulations, mixed uses with residential units are allowed by special permit in the CH district, up to five units per acre (Section 7.7).

A conforming lot in the CH district has at least 30,000 sq. ft. of land and 150 feet of frontage, except that dwellings without public sewer service require a minimum lot of 45,000 sq. ft. The town imposes modest setbacks on highway commercial development: thirty feet in the front and rear, and ten on the side. For nonresidential buildings, the maximum building height is five stories and for dwellings, three stories and thirty-five feet.

Downtown Commerce (CD) applies in a limited number of areas that together contain about four acres of land: north of the railroad tracks on Front Street, the opposite side of the tracks, and a parcel on Central Street. Despite its name, "Downtown Commerce" is not Ashland's downtown district, though it appears to include remnants of an older zoning district that has been divided up into other districts. In terms of permitted uses, CD is nearly identical to CH, except that two-family homes are allowed by right and mini-storage facilities are prohibited. Nonresidential lots must have at least 10,000 sq. ft. of land, but there are no minimum frontage or setback requirements. However, dwellings have to comply with the same dimensional regulations that apply in the RB district. For nonresidential buildings, the maximum building height is five stories and for dwellings, three stories and thirty-five feet.

Village Commerce (CV) includes approximately fourteen acres east of Route 126 in the vicinity of Sewell, Yale, and Tri Streets, opposite Algonquin Trail. The permitted uses are nearly identical to CH and CD, except that two-family homes and mini-storage facilities require a special permit and access to fast-food service is prohibited from Pond Street. The minimum lot requirement is 15,000 sq. ft., with at least 100 feet of frontage; the minimum front setback, twenty feet; and the maximum height, four stories. This district imposes some additional requirements on nonresidential uses, presumably to promote "village-style" development. For example, Ashland has adopted commercial floor area limits per business and an overall cap of 8,000 sq. ft. per building. Moreover, the town provides some incentives for shared access to adjoining uses, such as side or rear yard waivers and flexible placement of parking.⁶⁴ The Board of Appeals also has authority to waive most or all of the required off-street parking if enough parking exists nearby to support a proposed use.

Neighborhood Commerce (CN) calls for small-scale commercial uses that serve nearby residential neighborhoods. The district includes about forty small parcels fronting on Union Street, Main Street, and Metropolitan Avenue, together containing just over twelve acres. The CN district is the only area in Ashland where the town allows accessory apartments by right and the Board of Appeals can grant a special permit to convert a single-family or two-family home to multi-family units (up to four). Many uses prohibited in the other commercial districts - such as funeral homes, non-profit clubs, and general personal service establishments - are allowed by special permit in the CN district, and sometimes uses permitted in other commercial districts require a special permit in the CN district or they are simply prohibited. A restrictive floor area cap of 2,000 sq. ft. applies to stores, restaurants, and offices.

Consistent with the implied purposes of this district, Ashland has established a very small minimum lot area requirement of 5,000 sq. ft., with fifty feet of frontage, a modest front setback of fifteen feet, and a maximum building height of thirty feet. In addition, the CN district has a maximum lot coverage rule of 15 percent and a limit on driveway width. The town allows flexibility in the placement of off-street parking and a modest increase in maximum lot coverage in exchange for shared access to two or more abutting lots. Finally, development in this district is subject to outdoor lighting and design review standards.

Office Commerce (CO) exists in a single location on Chestnut Street between Lartridge Lane and Eliot Street. Ashland allows a limited number of uses in the CO district, including single-family dwellings, professional or business offices, and three types of industrial uses: research and development, computer software development, and computer hardware development. The CO district is the only commercial district that prohibits two-family dwellings, but a mixed-use building with upper-story housing units is allowed by special permit.⁶⁵ The CH district's dimensional regulations apply to lots in the CO district, but there are some additional requirements. For example, development in the CO district is subject to a 100-ft. buffer restriction along the north side, presumably to protect abutting homes on Mount View Drive, and

⁶⁴ Although the CV district's special regulations also provide for an increase in building coverage in exchange for shared access to abutting properties, the Zoning Bylaw seems to be missing the maximum lot coverage requirement for this district.

⁶⁵ The Table of Principal Use Regulations also denotes "cluster development" as permitted in the CO district, but the "Y" designation should be verified. According to Section 7.3 of the Zoning Bylaw, cluster developments require a special permit from the Planning Board and they are allowed only on tracts of five or more acres in the residential districts.

there is a maximum lot coverage limit of 30 percent as well. By special permit from the Planning Board, off-street parking spaces can be waived entirely or held in reserve for future construction.

Industrial District

Ashland's single industrial district is noteworthy because for historical reasons, the physical form and development pattern of the industrially zoned areas differ quite a bit. The **Industrial (I)** district is the only district in which Ashland categorically prohibits residential uses. This is very important because under Ashland's Wireless Communication Services Overlay District bylaw, wireless communication facilities (WCF) are allowed on private land *only* in districts where residential uses are not allowed by right. The I district is also the only district that provides for a municipal sanitary waste disposal facility. In general, the use regulations in Ashland's I district are fairly permissive. The town allows traditional industrial uses by right - manufacturing, wholesale trade and distribution, packaging, research laboratories, food processing and bottling facilities, construction yards, and computer technology development - and requires a special permit for printing and transportation terminals. However, a number of non-industrial uses are also permitted by right or by special permit, such as retail, restaurants, fast-food establishments, indoor and outdoor recreation facilities, and gasoline stations.

The I and CH districts share the same lot regulations except for the I district's deeper front and side setbacks. Site plan review also applies to uses in the I district in the same manner as in the commercial districts.

Special Districts and Overlay Districts

Ashland's zoning provides for "special districts" and overlay districts, but their application is very similar. In both cases, a district lays over one or more use districts and either imposes more restrictive requirements (e.g., Flood Plain and Groundwater Protection) or creates additional development opportunities, depending on the district's purposes and intent. The districts described below provide additional ways to develop land above and beyond the provisions of the underlying zoning.⁶⁶

Ashland Downtown District (ADD). The ADD is intended to operate as Ashland's downtown zoning.⁶⁷ It consists of three sub-areas, each with different use and dimensional requirements. This district has some unique features relative to Ashland's other commercial districts. First, it imposes a *maximum* front setback of fifteen feet and a minimum rear setback of twelve feet in all three sub-areas; and second, use intensity is regulated with a gross floor area ratio (FAR) that slides from 2.0 in Sub-Area A to 1.5 in Sub-Areas B and C. In addition, significantly reduced off-street parking requirements apply in the ADD: 75 percent of requirements that customarily apply in other districts, and further reductions for mixed uses on one lot.

⁶⁶ Ashland has a Groundwater Protection Overlay District that covers two areas: a substantial portion the Hopkinton Reservoir and the southern end of the Ashland Reservoir. The GPOD is very similar to the model aquifer protection district bylaw published by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). There is also a Quarry Remediation District that regulates stone extraction in a quarry at the southern end of town, and a Flood Plain Overlay District (FPOD) that applies to mapped flood plains.

⁶⁷ According to Section 8.5.4 of the Zoning Bylaw, the ADD operates as an overlay district and the regulations of the underlying zones still apply. However, neither the Zoning Bylaw nor the official Zoning Map (rev. May 6, 2009) identifies the underlying districts.

- **Sub-Area A** provides for the highest intensity of use and attempts to promote compact development in a fairly large area. It includes the large mill buildings on the north end of Main Street, the north side of Front Street to the river, the west side of Main Street between Town Hall and the railroad tracks, the south side of Pleasant Street, and a portion of the land north of Megunko Road to the railroad tracks. Within Sub-Area A, multi-family dwellings, mixed uses in separate buildings [horizontal mixed-use development], and upper-story residential uses [vertical mixed-use development] are permitted by right, together with retail stores, bakeries, ice cream shops, restaurants, theatres, indoor recreation, light industrial uses, veterinary clinics, and nursing homes. Uses such as bowling alleys, bed and breakfast establishments, senior residence and cluster developments, drive-up service at banks or fast-food restaurants, and mixed uses or offices in buildings exceeding 20,000 sq. ft. are allowed by Planning Board special permit. Lower-density land-consumptive uses such as single-family and two-family homes are prohibited.

Mixed-use and multi-family development under the regulations for Sub-Area A require a lot of at least 35,000 sq. ft. with 100 feet of frontage, and multi-family density cannot exceed ten units per acre. There is no minimum front setback for mixed-use buildings. Permissible building heights vary by class of use.

- **Sub-Area B** seems to contemplate somewhat smaller-scale development in a transitional land use pattern between Sub-Area A and Sub-Area B. It has much in common with Sub-Area A in terms of use regulations, but there are some important differences. For example, the Planning Board can grant special permits for single-family dwellings, and special permits are required for a few uses allowed by right in Sub-Area A, e.g., restaurants with outdoor seating, catering services, retail in buildings exceeding 10,000 sq. ft. of floor area, and light manufacturing. The minimum lot area for Sub-Area B is 20,000 sq. ft., and the minimum frontage, seventy-five feet.
- **Sub-Area C** seems to encourage a more residentially oriented mix of uses. Here, the town allows single-family homes by right and limits multi-family dwellings to a special permit requirement. Although mixed-use buildings are still permitted, some commercial and industrial uses allowed in the other sub-areas are either controlled by a special permit or simply prohibited, such as banks with drive-up windows, fast-food restaurants, and retail in buildings with more than 10,000 sq. ft. of floor area. Sub-Area C requires a minimum lot area of 8,000 sq. ft. and minimum frontage, fifty feet, with buildings limited to three stories regardless of use.

Ashland has placed many expectations on development in the ADD, and some of those expectations imply a desire for larger-scale projects. For example, the town requires construction of sidewalks in front of buildings in the ADD, pedestrian areas and amenities for buildings exceeding 30,000 sq. ft., and connecting walkways with adjacent neighborhoods. These standards would not be difficult for a large-scale project, but for existing properties seeking to evolve toward the goals of the ADD, the cost to provide pedestrian infrastructure could be problematic and may discourage small redevelopment projects.

Pond Street Mixed-Use Overlay District (PSMUOD). The PSMUOD is a very large overlay district that covers about 450 acres on Pond Street/Route 126, including the CH and CV districts and most of the I district except Nickerson Road. Adopted by Town Meeting in May 2009, it authorizes the Planning Board to grant a special permit for horizontal and vertical mixed uses, retail development, light industrial uses, and research and development, if a proposed project satisfies eight criteria and five review standards. In

order to develop under the regulations of the PSMUOD, the applicant must have a lot with at least 30,000 sq. ft. of land and 150 feet of frontage.⁶⁸ Although the maximum building height is five stories, the Planning Board can approve a height increase. This district has modest side and rear setbacks, but no minimum or maximum front setback. An alternative schedule of off-street parking requirements also applies, and parking spaces can be located on an abutting parcels.

The PSMUOD contemplates fairly high-density development, for the district allows multi-family units up to one per 2,000 sq. ft. of lot area. Any development with ten or more dwelling units is required to set aside at least 10 percent of the units as housing affordable to low- and moderate-income households. Finally, the PSMUOD regulations require projects to meet EnergyStar standards and to undergo design review as part of the special permit process. The bylaw contains generic design standards as a guide to applicants and the Planning Board.

Wildwood Mixed Use Special District (WMUSD) consists of five sub-areas with a combined total of about 150 acres at the convergence of Waverly Street, East Union Street, and Union Street. Viewed in its entirety, the WMUSD is a planned development district. The sub-areas have similar use regulations, but Wildwood "A" off Chestnut Street provides for more residential uses and a variety of housing by right, whereas Wildwood "B," "D," and "E" around the intersection of Waverly, East Union, and Union Streets provide for industrial and office uses, restaurants, banks, and nursing homes by right, and hotels by special permit. Wildwood "C" has the most limiting use regulations and appears to be the preferred location for a sewage treatment plant. Other uses allowed in sub-area C include health clubs, day care facilities, and accessory uses.

Development in the WMUSD requires a minimum tract of fifty acres. For projects with individual lots, the minimum lot area is 40,000 sq. ft., except 30,000 sq. ft. for single-family dwellings. The maximum residential density permitted in the district varies by sub-area and class of use. For example, senior housing requires a minimum of 4,000 sq. ft. per unit plus 1,050 feet for two bedrooms, but multi-family units without age restrictions require a minimum of 5,000 sq. ft. per unit and 1,000 sq. ft. per bedroom. The bylaw also imposes limits on the percentage of developable land that can be devoted to multi-family dwellings in Wildwood "A," and when proposed in Wildwood "D," multi-family projects have to include a reservation of land for commercial development. As in the PSMUOD, affordable housing is required in Wildwood "A" and "D." Different setback requirements apply in the sub-areas, and Wildwood "B" in particular appears to promote a uniform building line.

This district has remarkably prescriptive site planning requirements and performance standards, and specific application procedures (in addition to Ashland's customary site plan application requirements) that are intended to document a project's consistency with the WMUSD bylaw.

The **Rail Transit District (RTD)** includes nearly 200 acres in the vicinity of the Ashland MBTA station and the Nyanza Superfund site. It consists of six sub-areas, including three that encourage many types of residential uses and one sub-area (A) limited to age-restricted housing. Rental housing is specifically listed as a permitted use in only one sub-area (D). The RTD concept calls for a mix of industrial, commercial, and residential uses in a planned arrangement that takes advantage of access to commuter

⁶⁸ The regulations for this district refer to "buildable lot area," but the term is not defined in the Zoning Bylaw. Presumably "buildable" means upland.

rail, both for residents commuting to non-local jobs and workers commuting to jobs at businesses located within the RTD.

A development site within the RTD must have at least 150 acres, and for individual lots within a project, the minimum lot area and frontage requirements are consistent with other districts in Ashland (30,000 sq. ft. and 150 feet of frontage), but the bylaw allows the Planning Board to approve smaller lots by special permit. The maximum allowable density for the RTD as a whole depends on the unit type, with rental housing at a maximum of twenty units per buildable acre (in sub-area E) and ten units per buildable acre for age-restricted units. A Transit Village Community (TVC) composed of "luxury" housing units and accessory services is allowed by right with significantly reduced off-street parking requirements, subject to site plan review by the Planning Board, in two of the RTD's sub-areas. There are no particular dimensional requirements for nonresidential uses except for a maximum building height of thirty feet, which can be increased to fifty feet by special permit from the Planning Board. Aggregate use intensity within the RTD as a whole is regulated by a maximum lot coverage limit of 30 percent. The bylaw also removes some of the district's land from active use by requiring a 50-ft. buffer along the side and rear boundaries.

Site Development Regulations

Like most towns, Ashland has adopted regulations for off-street parking, signs, lighting, and landscaping. These types of requirements are typically enforced through site plan review, which Ashland applies to new construction of any building except single-family homes and accessory structures, substantial alterations to commercial and industrial buildings, and expansion of existing parking areas.⁶⁹ Site development regulations are very important because they have a direct impact on public safety and aesthetics, and they often affect the total amount of development that can occur on a site.

Off-Street Parking. Ashland has generic off-street parking regulations (Section 5.1). The requirements apply throughout town except in the CD district, but some waivers are possible with a special permit from the Board of Appeals.⁷⁰ The minimum number of parking spaces for some land uses is quite high. For example, Ashland requires a minimum of one space per 180 sq. ft. of floor area for retail stores and office space, which is extraordinarily high, and one space per 200 sq. ft. for banks, which is well above average. (By contrast, the minimum parking requirement for offices in the CO district is based on a minimum of three spaces per 1,000 sq. ft. of floor area - a standard much closer to industry norms for office uses.) In addition, the minimum requirement for dwellings, regardless of type, is two spaces per unit. Excessive parking requirements can be problematic for environmental, aesthetic, and economic reasons. Some of the town's special districts provide for parking reductions as a development incentive, such as the ADD and PSMUOD.

⁶⁹ Under Section 9.4, Site Plan Review, the Zoning Bylaw appears to contain either erroneous or obsolete district names, e.g., "Commercial A" and "Commercial B," which are not listed in Section 2, Districts, or shown on the official Zoning Map, rev. date May 6, 2009.

⁷⁰ Under Section 5.1.1, the Board of Appeals has authority to approve a reduction in off-street parking requirements, but Section 5.1.7 conveys the same authority to the Planning Board. It is not clear whether each board has jurisdiction in particular districts or if both boards can grant special permits for parking waivers regardless of the district.

The town's parking regulations include some basic public safety standards, such as curb cut limits and stacking requirements to prevent vehicles in queue at drive-through establishments from interfering with traffic on the street. Ashland also provides the option of locating off-street parking on the site served by the parking or on another site within 300 feet. In addition, the town controls the placement of parking areas in relation to the street, with more qualitative requirements in the CV and CN districts. The bylaw does not specify minimum dimensions for parking spaces or aisles.

Landscaping. Much like the off-street parking regulations, Ashland's landscaping requirements are generic. They also are prescriptive, yet remarkably silent on qualitative outcomes, context sensitivity, maintenance requirements, minimum environmental standards, irrigation and water conservation, stormwater management, or the basis for planting standards. The Zoning Bylaw contains detailed specifications for minimum number of trees per linear foot of street frontage or buffer area, vegetation types and minimum height, the size and configuration of landscaped islands in parking lots. Viewed in their entirety, the specifications focus on quantity of landscaping, not the quality of the outcome. However, some of the district-level landscaping requirements do contain qualitative provisions, notably the requirements that apply in the CO district.

Site Alteration. Ashland regulates the clearing and grading of land with a site alteration submission process that appears to culminate in a special permit from the Planning Board. The bylaw (Section 5.8) exempts some types of clearing and grading activities, such as residentially zoned land included in another application before the Planning Board, agricultural uses, routine maintenance of public ways and roadside vegetation, and the removal of hazardous trees. Unless covered by one of these exemptions, any clearing of more than 5,000 sq. ft. of land or removal of more than one hundred cubic yards of earth is subject to the site alteration bylaw.

The bylaw outlines the information an applicant must submit in order to obtain a permit, but it does not specify the review standards the Planning Board will use to evaluate a site alteration request. It also describes a sixty-day review process that includes a public information meeting, but under G.L. c. 40A, § 9, special permits require an advertised public hearing with notification to abutters and other interested parties. As a result, it is not clear whether the bylaw actually requires a special permit from the Planning Board or an approval decision similar to site plan review.

Planning, Zoning, and Permitting

Ashland's home rule charter provides for an open town meeting-board of selectmen-town manager form of government, but most of the town officials traditionally elected under state law are still elected in Ashland and they are relatively autonomous, operating under the authority of various statutes and the Town Code. Since the town government remains fairly decentralized, the tasks of development review and permitting involve multiple authorities, sometimes working on parallel tracks and other times independently. Many small towns favor this approach because it offers the perceived benefits of accountability and opportunities for public participation. Other communities opt for appointed over elected boards and still other communities delegate a considerable authority to professional staff, in both cases operating under charters that do more to integrate government operations than the framework Ashland established. In addition, a handful of communities have adopted an "optional" administrative system that consolidates the planning board, redevelopment board, and industrial development commission (if any) as a single entity appointed by the chief administrative officer of the city or town.

In short, Massachusetts has a variety of permitting arrangements, even in towns with a fairly traditional structure, like Ashland, because the state Zoning Act allows some functions to be assigned to more than one board or official.

- A full-time Building Inspector, supported by part-time code inspectors, whose powers and duties are prescribed by statute.
- An elected five-member Planning Board organized under G.L. c. 41, § 81A, with statutory responsibility for Subdivision Control (§§ 81K-81GG) and for preparing and updating the town's master plan (§ 81D). Under the Zoning Bylaw (and in accordance with the state Zoning Act), the Planning Board may have an alternate member to serve on special permit cases. The Planning Board has authority to grant special permits for residential cluster developments, planned multi-family developments, contractor's yards, special permits to waive landscaping requirements, site alteration special permits, senior residential communities (but see previous footnote), assisted living facilities, mixed-use buildings in the CH district, special permits in the Flood Plain Overlay District (FPOD), Groundwater Protection Overlay District (GPOD), ADD, WMUSD, and PSMUOD. The Planning Board has a full-time town planner.
- An appointed three-member Zoning Board of Appeals and four alternates, with statutory responsibility for hearing appeals of actions by the building inspector/zoning enforcement officer, for acting on dimensional variances and comprehensive permits, and for issuing special permits under the Zoning Bylaw. Ashland designates the Board of Appeals as the "default" special permit granting authority, meaning that any special permit not otherwise assigned to a different board or official falls under the Board's jurisdiction.
- An appointed seven-member Conservation Commission, with statutory responsibility for the Wetlands Protection Act, and locally assigned authority for the Ashland Wetlands Bylaw and Ashland Stormwater Bylaw. The Conservation Commission has a full-time conservation agent.
- An elected five-member Board of Health, with authority to approve the design and installation of septic systems in unsewered areas. The Board of Health also has responsibility for investigating housing code complaints and making annual (or more frequent) public health inspections, such as food service businesses. The Board has a full-time health agent.
- An appointed seven-member Historical Commission, responsible for administering Ashland's demolition delay bylaw. Ashland does not have local historic districts.

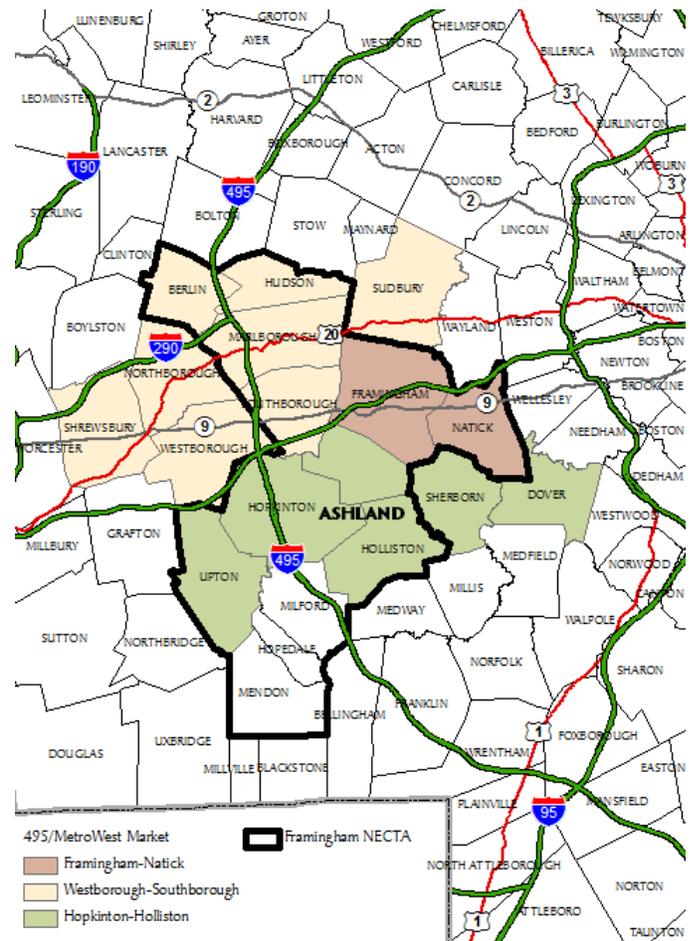
Other town officials in Ashland play a role in the development process, too, but not as permitting authorities. For example, Ashland recently created a new town manager-appointed position, Director of Community Development and Health, responsible for implementing economic development policies and initiating economic development projects. Authority over economic development policy lies with the Board of Selectmen, for Ashland does not have an economic development commission. However, the town does have a five-member **Ashland Redevelopment Authority** organized under G.L. c. 121B and Chapter 340 of the Town Code. The ARA can identify and prepare and carry out plans for "decadent, substandard, or blighted areas." Its powers include eminent domain. Under the Ashland Town Code, no urban renewal plan prepared by the ARA can proceed without agreement from the Planning Board, which would help to ensure that urban renewal plans do not conflict with the town's master plan.

4. Regional Market Trends

OVERVIEW

The MetroWest area is an economic crossroads between the Boston and Worcester real estate markets. One of seven suburban submarkets around Boston, MetroWest differs from the close-in suburbs along Route 128, Boston and Cambridge, and Worcester, as can be seen in home prices, the size and make-up of the employment base and the commercial property inventory, asking rents, and vacancies. In addition, "MetroWest" itself is hardly a homogenous suburban submarket, for it contains at least three distinct areas: Framingham-Natick, Westborough-Southborough, and Hopkinton-Holliston, which includes Ashland. The differences between them range from total population and the size, composition, and skills of the labor force to transportation access and physical features that influence the development capacity and cost of land. Together, these characteristics affect not only what is built, but how much and at what pace, and the quality and value of real estate investments.

On one level, Ashland has a modest market presence in the Hopkinton-Holliston area. It is neither a Class A office destination nor a magnet for high-end research and development companies, and its retail base remains dominated by service establishments and convenience goods. On another level, Ashland seems to have relatively vital businesses, for compared with the MetroWest area as a whole, the town has fewer vacancies.⁷¹ In addition, many business owners say Ashland offers a number of advantages for business activity, including relatively affordable rents, adequate utilities, fairness in property taxes, and excellent municipal services. Nevertheless, Ashland's capacity to compete for a share of the region's economic growth is constrained by its circuitous access to the regional highway network, its seeming invisibility to



⁷¹ There is no verifiable source of vacancy data for Ashland. In this chapter, statements made about local vacancies are based on direct interviews with downtown property owners and business tenants in July-August 2009 and May 2010, and a windshield survey of commercial and industrial properties on Route 135 and Route 126 in April 2010.

the commercial and industrial real estate community (which some businesses characterize as an asset more than a liability) and its moderate property values.

Since most of Ashland's non-residentially zoned land is already developed, a company seeking to build in Ashland today would most likely acquire and redevelop existing built assets. Commercial reinvestment happens when the post-redevelopment value of property will be high enough to deliver a reasonable return. A useful (though general) benchmark is that a post-redevelopment value at least three times that of the existing asset needs to be obtained or the investment is unlikely to make economic sense. It is questionable whether Ashland's market position is strong enough to lure significant reinvestment, at least in the near future.

OFFICE MARKET

The MetroWest office market includes about 24 million sq. ft. of leasable floor area, which is about 7 percent of the total office inventory in the Boston region.⁷² It bears some similarity to the Route 128/West submarket, but there are important differences, notably asking rents, and conditions on the east side of the MetroWest submarket are quite different from those on the far west side, near Worcester. Not surprisingly, the asking rents in Boston, Cambridge, and Route 128/West are the region's highest, with MetroWest rents hovering at about the regional midpoint. More than 40 percent of the MetroWest office inventory consists of Class A office space, compared with 55 percent in Boston and 40 percent in Route 128/West.

According to published sources, 26.2 percent of the MetroWest office inventory is vacant...Class B spaces makes up over half of all vacant office space within this submarket.

Absorption, Vacancy, and Availability. According to published sources, 26.2 percent of the MetroWest office inventory is vacant or actively being marketed as available for rent, with a much lower vacancy rate in Framingham and Natick and (10 to 11 percent) and a large amount of vacant and readily available space in Marlborough: nearly 38 percent of the city's total office inventory.⁷³ The 26.2 percent vacancy estimate for the MetroWest submarket represents a slight decrease since 2009, but still exceeds Boston's other suburban submarkets. It is not surprising that rents have fallen in this area and the market is soft. Vacancies in the MetroWest submarket as a whole stem from a relatively large percentage of vacant Class B office space. In fact, Class B space makes up just over half of all vacant office space within the

⁷² Market data reported in this chapter are from Jones LaSalle, *On-Point* and *Pulse* for the Greater Boston office, research and development, and industrial markets (First, Second Quarters 2010), and the CoStar Group, *The CoStar Office Report: Boston Office Market* and its counterpart, *The CoStar Industrial Report: Boston Industrial Market*, (Third Quarter 2009). Jones LaSalle and CoStar data have been supplemented with information from other primary and secondary sources, where available, as identified in footnotes. It is important to note that Jones Lang LaSalle and CoStar do not define the boundaries of the 495/MassPike (MetroWest) area the same way, and these sources also differ in their approach to classifying and reporting office and research and development space. Every effort has been made to adjust the data in order to make appropriate use of both sources.

⁷³ Jones LaSalle Lange, *Pulse: 495/MassPike Office Quarterly* (Second Quarter 2010), 1.

submarket. Cumulative net absorption of approximately 300,000 sq. ft. has occurred since January 2010, but this net positive absorption followed a net negative of about -450,000 sq. ft. in 2009. Nearly all of the MetroWest office market's net positive absorption has occurred in the Framingham-Natick area and in Class A office buildings. The Holliston-Hopkinton area has the smallest office inventory in the MetroWest submarket and also the largest percentage of vacant space.

Elsewhere in the Boston region, suburban office vacancies range from 22 percent northwest of Boston to 26 percent in the northern I-495 area (extending north from Hudson to Haverhill). For Class A office space, the region's highest suburban vacancy rates exist in Southeastern Massachusetts (I-495 South), where a large amount of new office space has been constructed, little of it pre-leased. For Class B space, vacancies are highest in the I-495/Route 2 area. As for Class C office space, however, vacancy rates are relatively low throughout the Boston region except in the Worcester office market and Route 128 North, i.e., the vicinity of Burlington, Woburn, and Peabody. Although market analysts predict modest employment growth and a decline in vacancies between now and 2010, they also estimate that in the vicinity of I-495 west, vacancies will remain at about 20 percent for at least the next two years.⁷⁴

New Construction and Completions. Among projects under construction and recently completed, there are noteworthy differences between the Boston market as a whole and its suburban markets and submarkets. Considering year-to-date construction activity and all classes of office space, new multi-tenant office buildings constructed in Boston, Cambridge, and along Route 128 North have ranged from a low of 120,000 sq. ft. to a high of nearly 278,000 sq. ft. By contrast, recently built offices in the MetroWest area tend to be smaller, ranging from 25,000 sq. ft. to 90,000 sq. ft., though some larger Class A projects have also been constructed in the Framingham-Natick area, Marlborough, and Westborough. The vast majority of new buildings constructed in the MetroWest submarket, along Route 128, and the Boston-Cambridge area qualify as Class A offices, but new offices in outlying suburban locations and the Worcester area include a mix of building types, sizes, and price bands. Less than three percent of all floor area in projects completed in 2008 and one percent of all floor area in projects under construction in 2009 were designed for single users. In Boston's suburban markets, approximately 3.2 million sq. ft. of new office space was expected to enter the market between mid-2008 and the end of 2010.⁷⁵

Region-wide, the highest rates of growth in office space have occurred in communities along the northern stretch of Route 128 from Burlington to Gloucester, Boston, Cambridge, the Route 128 West and MetroWest suburbs, and the I-495/South area, which generally includes the southern end of Norfolk County, Southeastern Massachusetts (Attleboro-Taunton to New Bedford) and Plymouth.

Rents. Quoted asking rents are higher in the Framingham-Natick area than in other parts of the MetroWest submarket. For Class A office space, the average asking rent in the Framingham-Natick area is \$24.72 per sq. ft. compared with \$19.41 per sq. ft. in the Westborough area. For Class B space, the average Framingham-Natick asking rent is \$20.60; in the Hopkinton-Holliston area, \$19.78 per sq. ft., and in the Westborough area, \$17.59. Asking rents for Class C office space range from \$15.93 in the Westborough area to \$16.33 per sq. ft. in Framingham and Natick. Considering the Framingham-Natick submarket as a whole, the average Class A asking rent of \$20.24 per sq. ft. is less than half that of Boston and Cambridge,

⁷⁴ Colliers Meredith and Grew, *Greater Boston Market Viewpoint* (Second Quarter 2010), 6-7, and C.B. Ellis, *Market View: Suburban Boston Office* (First Quarter 2010).

⁷⁵ Jones Lang LaSalle, *The Credit Crisis' Impact on Greater Boston* (October 2008), 5.

and about 64 percent of the Class A asking rents in the close-in suburbs along Route 128/West. While the average asking rents for Class B and C office space in the MetroWest submarket are closer to those of Route 128/West, they nevertheless fall substantially below the Boston-Cambridge submarkets. Region-wide, rents have trended downward since the end of 2008, following a period of steady increases in 2007, when rents throughout the Boston metro area spiked.⁷⁶ From July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010, the average overall MetroWest rent declined 8 percent, but modest growth is expected to occur by the end of this year.⁷⁷

Building Characteristics. The MetroWest office product is somewhat different from that of the Boston, Cambridge, or Route 128/West submarket. The Class A office buildings tend to be smaller, with an inventory-wide average of about 120,000 sq. ft. per building compared with more than 175,000 sq. ft. in Boston and the adjacent suburbs along Route 128, especially Waltham, Weston, Lexington, and Needham. By contrast, the MetroWest submarket's Class B office buildings are relatively large for the Boston metro area. At an average of 44,000 sq. ft., the MetroWest facilities - mainly those in the Westborough area - are much closer in size to Class B buildings in the Route 128/West and Cambridge submarkets. On average, the MetroWest Class C office buildings are about 9,300 sq. ft. and typified by facilities found in the Hopkinton-Holliston area.

Leased Space and Lease Expirations. A plurality of the region's office tenants are small operations occupying less than 5,000 sq. ft., with an average of about 315 sq. ft. per employee. However, floor area per employee figures vary significantly depending on the type of business. Nearly one-fourth of the Boston market's occupied space is leased to tenants in the finance, insurance, and real estate industries, while manufacturing and business services firms hold leases on another 33 percent. The most obvious concentrations of large tenants, i.e., tenants occupying more than 75,000 sq. ft., exist within Boston, Cambridge, Waltham, and the suburban markets west and north of Boston along Route 128. The same locations marshaled a majority of the region's recent large leases and are being sought by several tenants needing 200,000+ sq. ft. of office and research and development space.⁷⁸ By the end of this year (2010), existing leases will expire for about 15 percent of the Boston region's office space, and the total inventory is expected to grow by some 750,000 sq. ft. Industry sources report that 156 commercial tenants are currently seeking a combined total of 5.2 million sq. ft. in the Boston submarkets, over half looking for office spaces of than 15,000 sq. ft.⁷⁹

Office-Related Employment. Since employment growth is a key determinant of demand for any type of commercial space, employment trends in Boston and each of its submarkets provide a useful perspective on the locations that have tended to attract new office space and absorb existing and new product. Three industries generate a majority of office-related employment: information, financial services, and professional and business services.⁸⁰ While the number of office-related jobs increased in and around

⁷⁶ Denise Magnell, "Burb rents rise as Hub vacancy rates hang tight," *Boston Business Journal*, 5 May 2008.

⁷⁷ 495/*MassPike Office Quarterly*, 1.

⁷⁸ *Greater Boston Market Viewpoint*, 3.

⁷⁹ Jones Lang LaSalle, *Pulse: Boston Office Highlights* (Second Quarter 2010), 2.

⁸⁰ The health care, social assistance, and education industries generate some office employment, too, but mainly they generate demand for institutional space, e.g., hospitals and educational buildings. Due to the way employment data are reported by state and federal agencies, it is difficult to divide employment in these industries in a way that would support useful estimates of office space demand. However, the health care and social assistance industries

Boston over the past five years, the annual rate of office employment growth did not keep pace with national trends and, since 2007, the growth rate has declined – though not as sharply as the decline in the same period for the country as a whole. The major sources of office-related job creation in the Greater Boston area are the professional and business services, education, and health services industries.

In the MetroWest submarket, employment in the information industry decreased by 358 jobs between 2004 and 2008. However, the financial, professional and technical services industries experienced a net gain of nearly 2,800 jobs, or roughly 13 percent. Office-related jobs make up a small part of Ashland's employment base even under strong economic conditions. Its net gain of less than ten jobs in the information and finance industries and loss of sixteen professional services jobs between 2004 and 2008 did not represent a significant three-year change in any of these industries,⁸¹ yet the changes did play a part in a much larger pattern of job “destruction” or job dislocation within the local economy.

Outlook. Some analysts estimate that the Boston office market (including the suburban submarkets) has “bottomed out,” as both commercial real estate leasing and sales activity have begun to increase.⁸² As would be expected, however, the benefits of the office market's gradual recovery have been and will continue to be felt in Boston, Cambridge, and the Route 128/West suburbs before the outlying suburban submarkets see relief. Except for activity underway in Boston, there is virtually no new office space in the suburban submarket construction pipeline, and while this will change, the recovery process will absorb vacant and available space first as investment property owners seek to lure prospective tenants.

Current leasing conditions are far more tenant-favorable than owner-favorable, and as a result, business tenants formerly priced out of the Class A market and striking deals they could not have leveraged four years ago. The effects of this can already be seen in MetroWest office market statistics because the year-to-date Class A net absorption rate is about 4 percent (virtually the same as the Route 128/West absorption rate) or nearly 400,000 sq. ft. While this bodes well for Framingham and Natick and to a lesser extent, Westborough, which collectively have most of the MetroWest submarket's Class A office space, the communities that traditionally serve Class B and Class C markets - mainly the Hopkinton-Holliston area, including Ashland - will experience slower recovery and may actually see some growth in vacancies for the balance of 2010 and 2011. In fact, since the beginning of 2010, the Class B office market has experienced a net negative absorption of -109,000 sq. ft.⁸³

Professional and business services, education, and health services are the major sources of office-related job creation in the Greater Boston area. Office-related jobs make up a small part of Ashland's employment base even under strong economic conditions.

generated more net job growth in the Worcester market area, the City of Worcester, and Shrewsbury than any other industry between 2005 and 2007.

⁸¹ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Department of Labor and Workforce Development, ES-202: Worcester NECTA, City of Worcester, and Town of Shrewsbury, Annual Data, 2005-2007.

⁸² Jones LaSalle Lang, *On Point: Boston Office Outlook* (Second Quarter 2010), 3.

⁸³ *Ibid*, Appendix, Boston Suburban Tables.

INDUSTRIAL MARKET

The MetroWest industrial market includes 33 million sq. ft. of leasable floor area, or approximately 7 percent of the total industrial inventory in the Boston metro area. Of the submarket's 33 million sq. ft., R&D/flex space accounts for 32 percent and general industrial and warehouse space, 68 percent.⁸⁴

Absorption and Vacancies. Since January 2010, industrial vacancies in the MetroWest submarket have moderately decreased from 17.5 percent to 16.7 percent.⁸⁵ Vacant R&D/flex space currently stands at 24.7 percent, and vacant and available space combined represents 31.1 percent of the total flex space inventory. The MetroWest submarket reportedly has the second largest percentage of vacant R&D/flex space in the Boston region. During the first half of this year (2010), this submarket witnessed a negative net absorption of about -111,000 sq. ft. of R&D/flex space and -540,000 sq. ft. of general industrial/warehouse space.⁸⁶ The MetroWest submarket's experience overall is fairly consistent with that of the larger Boston region, where aggregate industrial vacancies have dropped slightly, from 22.4 to 22.1 percent, over the last six months, following a year with a net negative absorption of more than three million sq. ft. of R&D/flex, industrial, and warehouse space.⁸⁷ Only ten years ago, both R&D/flex and warehouse vacancy rates ranged from 6 percent to 8 percent in the Boston area. However, flex market vacancies increased dramatically thereafter, peaking at nearly 30 percent at the beginning of 2004 after a year with net negative absorption of well over 2 million sq. ft., and have been declining at a rate of less than 1 percent per year.



New Construction and Completions. As with new office space, differences can be seen in the characteristics of industrial space recently built or under construction in the Boston market and its suburban submarkets. Including both flex and warehouse space, the region's largest new industrial projects are in the I-495/Route 2 West and Route 128/West markets: areas that include Devens and Fitchburg-Leominster on one hand, and Lexington, Waltham, Needham, and Newton on the other hand. In addition, there have been recent R&D and general industrial deliveries in the MetroWest and

⁸⁴ CoStar Industrial Report: Boston Industrial Market (Third Quarter 2009), 11.

⁸⁵ Jones LaSalle Lang, Pulse: Boston Industrial Outlook (First and Second Quarters, 2010).

⁸⁶ Colliers Meredith & Grew, Inc., Boston Industrial Viewpoint (Spring/Summer 2010), 5

⁸⁷ Ibid, 2, and Grubb & Ellis, Industrial Trends Report: Fourth Quarter 2009, Boston, MA (2010), 1.

Southeastern Massachusetts submarkets, with a combined total of approximately 900 sq. ft. of leasable floor area. About 30 percent of the space was pre-leased.⁸⁸ Although Southeastern Massachusetts and the MetroWest submarkets have experienced high rates of R&D and industrial growth in the past five years, there is very little new industrial product under construction anywhere in the Boston industrial market today. About 400,000 sq. ft. of new space, primarily R&D in the MetroWest submarket, will be added to the region's inventory this year.⁸⁹

Rents. Average asking rents for industrial space in the MetroWest submarket are currently \$10.05 per sq. ft. for R&D/flex space and \$6.29 per sq. ft. for general industrial and warehouse space. These rents represent submarket-wide averages, but asking rents along and directly adjacent to Route 9 are higher. For both classes of industrial property, rents have increased somewhat over one year ago, when the R&D/flex average asking rent was \$9.83 per sq. ft., and warehouse space, \$6.08 per sq. ft. Hopkinton-Holliston area listings of industrial space currently for rent include four properties in Ashland: vacant warehouse space in two locations, with rents ranging from \$6.95 to \$10.05 per sq. ft., and older Class B flex space at \$5.25 per sq. ft.

Building Characteristics. The typical size of industrial buildings in the MetroWest submarket varies by location. Although the Framingham-Natick area is home to several large companies, the average R&D/flex building is relatively small - about 32,000 sq. ft. - compared with the Westborough area, where the average R&D/flex building is about 55,000 sq. ft. By contrast, the general industrial and warehouse properties in the Framingham-Natick area are much larger, at an average of 76,000 sq. ft., and about 56,000 sq. ft., on average, in the Westborough-Northborough area. In Ashland's corner of the submarket, both R&D/flex and general industrial buildings have an average of 44,000 to 46,000 sq. ft. of floor space, with the largest facilities in Hopkinton. On balance, the Hopkinton-Holliston area average is similar to Worcester, where the average industrial leasable floor area is approximately 50,000 sq. ft., with flex buildings of about 40,000 sq. ft. and warehouse and distribution facilities of 52,000 sq. ft. In general, building sizes tend to be larger in markets that have attracted most of the region's new industrial growth, and in Ashland's area this means Framingham, Westborough, and Hopkinton.

Leased Space and Lease Expirations. In addition to currently vacant space, a substantial amount of occupied R&D/flex and industrial floor area is subject to lease agreements that expire in the next two years. In the MetroWest submarket, more than 5.8 million sq. ft. of space is available for rent, including direct and sublease space, both vacant and under expiring lease agreements.⁹⁰ The market will have to absorb a considerable amount of this space before lenders will finance new projects, and due to ongoing concerns about the condition of the economy, it is expected that most tenants will renew their present leases instead of looking elsewhere in the region. Moreover, it is expected that they will renew on very favorable terms because investor-owners have been willing to offer bargain leases in order to keep the tenants they already have. Still, the amount of occupied space with expiring leases pales in comparison to the amount of vacant space waiting to be filled.

Approximately one-fourth of the region's current R&D/flex space and warehouse tenants occupy 10,000 to 24,999 sq. ft. of floor area, and the average suburban lease is under 20,000 sq. ft. Flex space tenants are

⁸⁸ Cushman and Wakefield, *Marketbeat: Boston Industrial Market* (Third Quarter 2008), 7.

⁸⁹ C.B. Ellis, *Market View: Suburban Boston Industrial* (First Quarter 2010).

⁹⁰ *Boston Industrial Viewpoint*, 8.

more likely to lease smaller amounts of floor area, for nearly 60 percent occupy under 10,000 sq. ft. and 22 percent occupy under 2,499 sq. ft. By contrast, 42 percent of warehouse tenants lease under 10,000 sq. ft., and 32 percent lease more than 25,000 sq. ft. All of the industrial space recently added to the Boston region's inventory is designed for multi-tenant occupancy, though about 12 percent of the floor area consists of build-to-suit projects for single-user tenants.⁹¹

Industrial Employment. Compared with the nation as a whole, some parts of the Boston metropolitan area have managed to retain a larger share of employment in the industries that create demand for industrial space, despite the recession and the state's fragile economy. These industries include manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, and utilities. Between 2004 and 2008, the Boston region experienced a moderate decrease in transportation and manufacturing jobs and a moderate increase in utilities employment, but employment in all of these industries has been in a general state of decline statewide.⁹² The closure of facilities at Devens, in communities along the northwestern arc of I-495, and in Boston have exacerbated the challenges of trying to fill vacancies that already existed by mid-decade.⁹³

For a while, it seemed that the MetroWest area's experience was different because overall industrial employment increased by 2,400 jobs, or 5.6 percent, between 2004 and 2008. By the third quarter of 2009, however, communities in the MetroWest submarket had lost nearly 9 percent of the industrial employment base that existed less than a year before. Manufacturing employment alone decreased by 2,500 jobs, wholesale trade by 750 jobs, and transportation and warehousing, 129 jobs.⁹⁴ In light of these statistics, it is not surprising that the MetroWest industrial vacancy rate is so high.

Outlook. As of mid-year 2010, the Boston region overall had 16 million sq. ft. of available industrial floor space and 11.8 million available R&D/flex space. Published forecasts indicate that demand for R&D/flex, warehouse, and general industrial space will be flat for at least another year, and industrial vacancies are likely to be volatile.⁹⁵ The volatility will be particularly challenging in the MetroWest, Route 128/West and Boston-Cambridge industrial markets due to the greater presence of large tenants in these locations.

RETAIL MARKET

The MetroWest retail market includes more than 16 million sq. ft. of leasable floor area in 585 buildings. Measured on the basis of leasable floor area, retail space in the MetroWest submarket represents 6.1 percent of the total retail inventory in the Boston region. About 46 percent of the submarket's retail inventory is composed of general retail space, a catch-all term used in the industry to describe single-tenant buildings that do not fit into any other retail category. Seventeen percent of the market's retail space includes mall retail, and 31 percent, shopping centers. Nearly all of the remaining floor area is in "power centers," or shopping centers dominated by large anchor stores, including discount department

⁹¹ CoStar Industrial Report: *Boston Industrial Market*, 7-8.

⁹² MassBudget and Policy Center, *The State of Working Massachusetts 2008: Entering a Recession After a Recovery that Missed Many* (January 2009), 13-16.

⁹³ Grubbs and Ellis, *Industrial Market Trends: Boston*, Third Quarter 2008 [Electronic Version].

⁹⁴ ES-202: Framingham NECTA Division, Annual Data, 2004-2008.

⁹⁵ Jones Lang LaSalle, *Marketscape Monthly: Boston, MA* (October 2008).

stores. Overall, the distribution of retail floor area by category in the MetroWest market is similar to that of the Boston region as a whole.

Absorption and Vacancies. The vacancy rate in the MetroWest retail market, 7.1 percent, is slightly lower than that of the Boston region (7.8 percent), with more vacancies in the Hopkinton-Holliston area (7.7 percent) than the Framingham-Natick area (7.0 percent).⁹⁶ The MetroWest submarket has a relatively large amount of vacant space in shopping centers, but in general, vacancy rates for all types of retail space are similar to the Boston market as a whole, except for power centers, where the MetroWest vacancy rate of 20.9 percent submarket far exceeds the regional average of 8.2 percent (mainly due to vacancy in one project). Over the past three years, there has been a nearly consistent net negative absorption of retail space in the MetroWest submarket, excluding Westborough-Marlborough, and a gradual rise in vacancy rates. Even in the Westborough-Marlborough portion of the submarket, however, some classes of retail have fared better than others, such as shopping center retail, yet these gains were partially offset by negative absorption in other classes of retail, notably power centers.

Over the past three years, there has been a nearly consistent pattern of net negative absorption of retail space in the MetroWest submarket.

In other markets around Boston, retail vacancies range from a low of 1 percent in Cambridge (Kendall Square) to a high of 8.2 percent in the Wilmington-Reading area, but the vacancy rates for specific retail classes vary even more. For mall space, for example, the region's highest suburban vacancy rates exist in the Worcester non-metro market area (9.9 percent) and Waltham-Watertown (7.1 percent), yet several markets with major regional retail malls report 0 to 1 percent vacancy rates, such as Peabody, Newton-Brookline, the Route 24-Route 128 area, and southern New Hampshire. Power center vacancies range from 0 percent in Danvers and Peabody to 55 percent in the Westborough-Marlborough area. Shopping centers are struggling in most submarkets throughout the Boston region, with vacancies over 10 percent in Burlington, Chelsea-Revere, Lexington-Arlington, the I-95 South corridor, Saugus-Lynn, the southernmost sections of Boston near Dedham and Milton, and the Worcester metro submarket.

New Construction and Completions. A total of 1.3 million sq. ft. of new retail floor area has been added to the Boston regional inventory in the last three years. More than 70 percent of the new retail space is in the Route 128 South market, along Route 3 on the South Shore and Route 1 South, which has a new 675,000 sq. ft. lifestyle center with entertainment and office space (Legacy Place, Dedham). The vast majority of new-construction retail buildings region-wide are fairly small general retail facilities with 13,000 to 15,000 sq. ft. – buildings designed to house chain retail stores such as CVS or Walgreens. Although some variety clearly exists in the regional retail market, the general picture for retail is weak. The retail inventory is essentially flat, vacancies are up, and new construction and completions are down.

Rents. Retail asking rents are expected to decrease 1.1 percent throughout the Boston region this year (2010), following a 2.3 percent drop in 2009.⁹⁷ Quoted rents in the MetroWest submarket have dropped to

⁹⁶ CoStar Retail Report: Boston Retail Market, 6-7, and Marcus & Millichap, "Boston – 2010 Q2 Local Retail Report," www.special-assets.com.

⁹⁷ Marcus & Millichap, "Boston – 2010 Q2 Local Retail Report."

about \$18.00 per sq. ft. Currently the average Framingham-Natick rent for all classes of retail is \$18.24 per sq. ft. and in the Westborough-Marlborough area, \$17.24 per sq. ft. The highest retail rents involve mall market space at \$32 per sq. ft. in the Westborough-Marlborough area and nearly \$59 per sq. ft. in the Framingham-Natick area. A recent survey of vacant retail space in Ashland revealed a range of asking rents from \$10.00 to \$12.00 per sq. ft., and one as high as \$17.00 per sq. ft., for small retail units with under 2,000 sq. ft. of floor area. The only above-market offering for new (but not yet built) retail space, the Plaza of the Americas, listed at \$30.00 per sq. ft. for retail units between 4,500 and 75,000 sq ft.⁹⁸

Building Characteristics. Retail facilities in MetroWest submarket are generally similar to those found in urban commercial areas. The average general retail building, 16,100 sq. ft., exceeds the Boston regional average, but the regional inventory is heavily influenced by urban stores and they tend to be small. Nevertheless, the general retail facilities in the Framingham-Natick area, with an average of 18,800 sq. ft. of leasable floor space, are larger than their counterparts in nearly all suburban submarkets around Boston. The two MetroWest mall facilities - the Natick Collection and The Solomon Pond Mall - include 1.7 million sq. ft. and about 900,000 sq. ft., respectively. They are fairly representative of the Eastern Massachusetts mall inventory, though larger malls exist north and south of Boston. Shoppers World, a power center retail development, includes approximately 780,000 sq. ft. of floor area. Among shopping centers, the largest facilities are in the Westborough-Marlborough area, where the average of 62,500 sq. ft. of leasable floor tops most suburban markets in Massachusetts except Worcester. By contrast, shopping center developments in the Hopkinton-Holliston area tend to be fairly small, with an average of 38,200 sq. ft., well below both the MetroWest average (52,400 sq. ft.) and the Boston region overall (55,900 sq. ft.).

Retail Employment. Retail employment has decreased throughout the Boston area, including within the MetroWest submarket, which has lost about 40 retail businesses and 1,200 retail jobs since 2004. The vast majority of MetroWest's retail employment contraction has occurred within the past year. In Ashland, the number of retail stores dropped from 52 in 2004 to 38 in the third quarter of 2009.⁹⁹

Outlook. Available market research indicates that retail activity throughout the Boston metro area will continue to fare poorly throughout 2010. The state's high unemployment rate, low consumer confidence, and restricted capital markets do not bode well for uptake of vacant retail space or construction of new space that has already been permitted.¹⁰⁰ Some analysts predict that the Boston retail vacancy rate could climb as high as 20 percent by the end of the year, mainly in Boston and the region's other cities.

⁹⁸ Boston Commercial Real Estate, Retail Space (user-defined query), www.cityfeet.com/.

⁹⁹ ES-202: Framingham NECTA Division, Town of Ashland, Annual Data, 2004-2008, and Third-Quarter 2009 (user-defined query).

¹⁰⁰ Cushman and Wakefield, Inc., *Market Beat: Greater Boston Retail Report* (Year-End 2009), and Colliers International, *Retail Trends and Opportunities 2010* (2010), 2.

5. Analysis of Needs

ADDRESSING THE IMPACT OF RAIL SERVICE

The rail infrastructure that crosses Ashland plays a crucial role in the regional economy, both for the freight rail and commuter rail services it supports and Amtrak's inter-city passenger service between Boston, Albany, and Chicago. The re-establishment of commuter rail between Framingham and Worcester in the mid-1990s, an increase in number of commuter trains since 2008, and growth in freight rail activity on the same tracks have placed considerable pressure on the railroads and strain on many of the host communities, especially those with highway-rail grade crossings. Ashland has benefited from the restoration of commuter rail service west of Framingham because in 2002, the town gained a train station on Pleasant Street and a plurality of the commuters boarding there are also Ashland residents.¹⁰¹ Under the right market conditions, the train station could eventually spur development of the surrounding land and thereby increase the town's tax base.

The situation in Ashland is somewhat unusual because the two grade crossings exist so close together, frequently exposing nearby residents and businesses to noise and traffic delays. In addition, the Main Street grade crossing is physically and operationally complicated due to its proximity to Front Street and Homer Avenue, public facilities, and elderly housing. From the Town's perspective, however, the most critical issue is the disruption of public safety service every time a train runs through Downtown Ashland. Since the police and fire stations lie just north of the Main Street grade crossing, moving trains hamper the ability of public safety officials to respond to emergencies in the south and southwest parts of town. Sometimes the gates at the grade crossing are down for less than a minute (usually for commuter trains), but to accommodate a longer freight train, they can be down for more than three minutes.¹⁰² As a result, a considerable amount of traffic backs up on both sides of Main Street and delivery of emergency services is delayed for one-third of the town. The only way to circumvent the Main Street grade crossing is by traveling down Front Street some two-thirds of a mile and taking the Fountain Street bridge over the tracks to Union Street/Route 135. While these conditions posed a challenge fifteen years ago when fewer trains ran through Ashland each day, the growth in train activity has turned a challenge into a serious public safety risk. The potential for more commuter service between Boston and Worcester in the future is likely to make the constraints on emergency services unsustainable.

The same delays that impede public safety personnel also create an inconvenience for existing downtown businesses. Moreover, the frequency of these delays compromises downtown's attractiveness for some types of business activity, notably retail, which has a fairly limited presence in Downtown Ashland and

¹⁰¹ According to survey data published by the Central Transportation Planning Staff (CTPS), on average, 182 of the 427 commuter rail riders boarding in Ashland each day live in Ashland. Hopkinton generates the next largest number of boarders at the Ashland MBTA station (85), followed by Holliston (45), and ten other communities each generating less than forty riders per day. Source: CPTS, *MBTA Systemwide Passenger Survey, South Side Station by Station Tables, Commuter Rail*, "MBTA Surveys 2008-2009, Origin and Location Activities, Entry Station: Ashland."

¹⁰² VHB, Inc., and Community Opportunities Group, Inc., "Ashland Train Event Times," December 2-3, 2009. See Appendix B, *Grade Crossing Study*.

exists in far greater concentrations along Route 135 and Route 126. Strengthening the economy of Downtown Ashland will require more than an efficient circulation system, but a roadway with cars habitually stopped on either side of the railroad is a deterrent to economic development. It would be different if the MBTA station were located within or immediately adjacent to downtown because the presence of many commuters would provide a captive market for businesses such as convenience retail, food service establishments, and a variety of personal services. This can be seen in many towns that contend with highway-rail crossings but also enjoy the economic benefits of a downtown train station. In Ashland, the train station is just far enough from the downtown area to provide little more than a *de minimis* benefit to local businesses, yet every train moving through Ashland effectively blocks downtown circulation - often to the detriment of the establishments located there.

While Ashland recognizes the importance of rail service to the regional economy, the town needs to reduce the negative effects of downtown rail traffic. Toward this end, Ashland chose to evaluate several structural and non-structural options with three goals in mind:

- Improve public safety;
- Enhance the quality of life; and
- Identify and enhance economic development opportunities.

Grade Separation

The report prepared by Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) in April 2010 examines both grade separation and other mitigation options, some of which have been vetted by local officials. The six grade separation alternatives that VHB was asked to review fall into three categories: separating the railroad tracks from grade, separating Main Street from grade, and separating both Main Street and the railroad tracks from grade. Briefly, the options are as follows:¹⁰³

- 1) Elevating the railroad tracks over Main Street, beginning east of the Ashland MBTA station, rising over Cherry Street and Main Street, and descending to the existing grade in the vicinity of the Fountain Street Bridge. This option would eliminate both grade crossings and remove impediments to public safety response. The estimated cost of this project is \$107 million.
- 2) Depressing the railroad tracks under Main Street and Cherry Street between the Ashland MBTA station and the Sudbury River, and thereby eliminate both grade crossings. The estimated cost of this project is \$143 million.
- 3) Elevating Main Street over the railroad tracks, a \$15 million grade separation project that would run Main Street over a bridge above the tracks. While this option retains the existing grade crossings at Main and Cherry Streets, it reduces the number of vehicles crossing the tracks by carrying through traffic on the elevated section of Main Street. New one-way frontage roads would provide access to properties facing Main Street and connections to Front Street, Homer Avenue, and Summer Street.

¹⁰³ *Grade Crossing Study*, 30-37 passim, and Appendix G for cost estimates.

- 4) Depressing Main Street under the railroad tracks via a tunnel some thirty feet below grade. Estimated at \$21 million, this project also would divert through traffic from the Main Street grade crossing, retain the Main Street and Cherry Street grade crossings, and provide local service on new frontage roads.
- 5) Partially elevating Main Street over partially depressed tracks, at an estimated cost of \$139 million.
- 6) Partially depressing Main Street under partially elevated tracks, at an estimated cost of \$106 million.

From a public safety perspective, any option that eliminates both grade crossings and preserves or improves access to downtown properties will provide the greatest overall benefit for emergency response, which is Ashland's highest priority. At issue is the degree to which gains for public safety outweigh other valid planning considerations, such as cost, environmental impact, and the impact on community services, private property, downtown businesses and non-profit institutions, downtown's historic character, and the quality of the built environment. As shown in Table 5.1, the most advantageous measures for public safety are not always advantageous for other interests.

Table 5.1
Grade Separation Options: Comparative Impacts

Grade Separation Option	Capital Cost	Emergency Response	Safety, Mobility*	Environmental Impact†	Private Property (Takings, Demolition, Access/Parking)	Downtown Businesses and Institutions	Built Environment, Downtown Character
Tracks over Main St.	⊗	■	■	⊙	⊗	⊗	⊗
Tracks under Main St.	⊗	■	■	⊗	⊗	■	✱
Main St. overpass	⊗	⊙	⊙	■	⊗	⊗	⊗
Main St. underpass	⊗	⊙	⊙	⊗	⊗	⊗	✱
Elevate Main St., depress tracks	⊗	⊗	⊙	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗
Elevate tracks, depress Main St.	⊗	⊗	⊙	⊙	⊗	⊗	⊗

Sources: Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc., Town of Ashland Grade Crossing Study (2010), and Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

Key to Impact Symbols:

- Favorable or likely favorable
- ⊙ Moderately favorable
- ⊗ Neutral; no discernible impact

⊗ Moderately unfavorable

⊗ Unfavorable or likely unfavorable

✱ Insufficient information; needs further study

Notes:

*Includes vehicular & pedestrian traffic

†Refers primarily to Nyanza

Issues

Aside from high capital costs, grade separation could have a significant - and potentially damaging - impact on the built environment of Downtown Ashland and its surrounding neighborhoods. Elevating the railroad tracks for 6,600 feet across the center of town, with retaining walls extending from Cherry Street to the Ashland Technology Center and bridges rising nearly fifteen feet above Cherry Street and Main Street, is a major project by any standard. It would fundamentally alter the town's visual character and most likely have adverse effects on private property in the vicinity of the railroad. Similarly, elevating Main Street more than twenty feet over the tracks, with retaining walls on either side, would not only detract from downtown's historic fabric but also disrupt the urban relationship between buildings and the street and siphon traffic from local businesses while still leaving the grade crossings

intact. While any of the six grade separation options would improve conditions for public safety personnel, most would either place imposing structures in the middle of a nineteenth-century downtown or submerge its Main Street out of view. The most crucial element of any downtown plan is the core, and in Ashland the core is Main Street.

RAILROAD UNDER MAIN STREET

Depressing the railroad tracks under Main Street offers the best possible outcome both for emergency response, downtown business development, and overall mobility within the downtown area, but in terms of construction cost, it is the most expensive grade separation option in VHB's analysis. From a funding perspective, the project's need and public benefit will most likely be judged on factors such as the allowable housing density in the project area, existing and future population served, environmental impacts, readiness to proceed, the degree to which the project will improve mobility and public safety, and whether the project's benefits outweigh the benefits of some other option, including mitigation.

Since the public benefits would be localized, a cost-benefit justification would center primarily on the economic impact within Ashland. It is conceivable that Ashland would have to show that relocating the tracks below grade will trigger enough new development to offset the debt service of approximately \$11 million per year (which could be higher or lower based on the structure, pricing, and repayment period for an infrastructure bond). The non-local revenue needed to support annual payments of \$11 million translates into 1.1 to 1.3 million sq. ft. of commercial floor area, or between three and four times the floor area of the Ashland Technology Center, depending on the land uses and business mix, the number of new jobs created, and the cost-benefit ratios used to evaluate the project.

Considering the criteria that make infrastructure projects fundable, depressing the railroad tracks in Downtown Ashland could be a very difficult sell. On one hand, the project would provide long-term development opportunities, a better climate for downtown businesses, and numerous prospects for enhancing the public realm. On the other hand, it could be quite damaging to the local business community during construction and effectively displace some existing businesses that are already struggling. In addition, this option involves high environmental stakes due to soil disturbance and groundwater removal in areas affected by Nyanza. Further, the Town would need to develop a comprehensive plan for the entire downtown area. While Downtown Ashland is more intensively developed than other parts of town, it is neither a high-density nor a high-end business district. The possibilities created by relocating the train tracks will require choices about growth, change, the kind of downtown that residents and commercial property owners want, and how far town government should go to effectuate those wishes. Finally, the \$143 million estimate to design, permit, and build a depressed track system does not include the cost of acquiring properties adjacent to the railroad tracks or providing relocation assistance to businesses that may be affected by those acquisitions.

Need and public benefits will also be evaluated for factors such as the allowable housing density in the project area, existing and future population served, environmental impacts, readiness to proceed, and the degree to which the project will improve mobility and public safety.

MAIN STREET UNDER THE RAILROAD

Though less advantageous for Downtown Ashland than lowering the railroad tracks, reconstructing Main Street as an underpass for through traffic may offer some benefits. As conceived in VHB's report, the design calls for separating Main Street from grade for approximately 1,300 feet between the vicinity of Town Hall and just south of the Homer Avenue/Main Street/Summer Street intersection. One-way frontage roads would service local traffic on each side of Main Street and provide access to Front Street, Homer Avenue and Summer Street, perhaps leaving some land above the tunnel and outside the railroad right-of-way for urban open space. Separating Main Street does not eliminate the grade crossing, but the existing safety hazards would decrease due to the reduction in traffic along Main Street. Furthermore, it may enable some public realm improvements that would make downtown more accessible and inviting to pedestrians and local traffic. Due to the topography of Downtown Ashland and the land along the rail corridor, a Main Street underpass is far preferable to an overpass. Still, the loss of through traffic could make it much harder to market downtown properties to commercial tenants and thereby discourage the retail and services businesses that Downtown Ashland needs.

Other Options

VHB has identified several opportunities for improving downtown public safety and mobility without a grade separation project at Main Street and Cherry Street. Some of these opportunities would help Ashland achieve other planning goals, too, such as providing a better environment for downtown businesses and improving the quality of life for downtown-area residents. In summary, the alternatives to grade separation in Downtown Ashland include:¹⁰⁴

- 1) Bypassing Main Street with a bridge spanning the railroad tracks between Front Street and Homer Avenue, at an estimated cost of \$15 million;
- 2) Bypassing Main Street with a bridge spanning the railroad tracks from Cordaville Road to the MBTA Access Road, with intersection realignments at Cordaville Road, Pleasant Street, Ponderosa Road, and High Street, at an estimated cost of \$25 million;
- 3) Opening the MBTA Access Road to general public use, at an estimated cost of \$1.5 million;
- 4) Improving traffic flows on Main Street by:
 - a) Bringing pedestrian crossing times closer to industry standards by adjusting signal timing changes, at an approximate cost of \$5,000;
 - b) Upgrading traffic signals and vehicle detection equipment, and hard-wire connecting the traffic signals at Pleasant Street, Front Street, and the Homer Avenue/Summer Street intersections, at an estimated cost of \$300,000;
 - c) Widening the southbound side of Main Street to accommodate two full travel lanes, at an estimated cost of \$180,000;

¹⁰⁴ *Grade Crossing Study*, 55-66 passim, and Appendix G for cost estimates.

- d) Restriping the southbound side of Main Street in order to designate a left-turn-only lane at Homer Avenue and a shared through-lane and right-turn-only lane at Summer Street, at an estimated cost of \$175,000;
- e) Restricting left turns at Homer Avenue, thereby diverting traffic turning left from southbound Main Street to Front Street north of the tracks or Union Street/Route 135 or Central Street south of the tracks, at an estimated cost of \$150,000;
- 5) Adjusting or augmenting the existing rail signals to reduce unnecessary traffic delays;
- 6) Instituting additional safety measures at the grade crossings, primarily on Main Street; and
- 7) Establishing a Quiet Zone at the Main Street and Cherry Street grade crossings.

In addition, the Town is exploring the possibility of moving its police and fire personnel to a combined public safety building in a new location outside the downtown area. Each of these alternatives to the Main Street grade separation options has advantages and potential disadvantages, as shown in Table 5.2.

Mitigation Option	Capital Cost	Emergency Response	Safety, Mobility	Environmental Impact†	Private Property (Takings, Demolition, Access/Parking)	Downtown Businesses and Institutions	Built Environment, Downtown Character
Front-Homer bridge	⊗	⊙	⊙	*	⊗	⊗	⊗
Cordaville bridge	⊗	⊙	⊙	*	⊗	⊗	⊗
MBTA Road as bypass	⊗	*	⊙	★	⊙	⊗	★
Traffic signal upgrades	⊗	⊙	■	⊙	★	⊙	★
Pedestrian Xing	■	★	■	⊙	★	⊙	★
Main St. two lanes southbound	⊗	⊙	⊙	⊗	⊗	⊙	*
Restripe Main St. southbound	⊗	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊗	⊙	*
No left turn at Homer Ave.	⊙	⊙	⊗	⊙	⊗	⊙	★
Train signals	⊙	⊙	■	★	★	⊙	★
Safety measures at grade crossings	⊙	★	■	★	★	★	★
Quiet zone	⊗	★	⊗	■	★	★	★
Relocate police, fire stations	⊗	■	★	★	★	⊙	⊙

Sources: Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc., Town of Ashland Grade Crossing Study (2010), and Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

Key to Impact Symbols: ⊗ Moderately unfavorable Notes:
 ■ Favorable or likely favorable ⊗ Unfavorable or likely unfavorable †Refers primarily to air quality, water quality, noise impacts
 ⊙ Moderately favorable * Insufficient information; needs further study
 ★ Neutral; no discernible impact

Issues

Regardless of whether Ashland secures funding for a grade separation project in the downtown area, the Town can take steps to reduce the unwanted impacts of train crossings and increase public safety. Local officials already know this and have begun to pursue some of the options described in VHB's report. While strategies to mitigate the impact of highway-rail crossings are unlikely to improve public safety to the degree offered by grade separation, many of them are low-cost, easy-to-implement measures that would reduce safety hazards, alleviate traffic problems in Downtown Ashland, and enhance the quality of life for nearby residents. Nevertheless, there are land use, economic development, and community character issues that warrant some discussion.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Routing traffic around Downtown Ashland would make sense if preventing delays for emergency services were the only consideration. However, bypass roads can have the unintended consequence of drawing traffic away from downtown even without train events, creating problems not only for downtown businesses but also the affected neighborhoods. Although existing backups on Main Street do not help the business community, strategies with the effect of reducing Main Street's visibility should be considered only as measures of last resort. Motor vehicle mobility is only one of Downtown Ashland's needs, and while important, it involves trade-offs that have to be considered comprehensively. For the same reasons, depressing Main Street under the railroad tracks would most likely have more drawbacks than benefits.

Inadequate parking surfaced as a frequent complaint in recent surveys of downtown-area businesses.¹⁰⁵ While planners often find that downtowns have more parking than people realize, the parking that exists is not always conveniently located, visible, or available for general public use. Suburban downtowns find it difficult to compete with strip malls located literally around the corner, and the perception of parking shortages contributes to this problem. On-street parking is an essential feature of most downtowns. More often than not, existing downtown properties do not have enough land to provide all of the off-street parking needed by business tenants - and if they did, the business district's physical form and visual character would bear no resemblance to a downtown area. (This would be exacerbated in Ashland, which has exceptionally large parking requirements for commercial uses.) The Town needs to move cautiously with any plan that would eliminate on-street parking. Commercial property owners and their tenants should be consulted, along with residents, and changes to the supply or location of off-street parking should be part of a larger parking management plan that includes a district-wide inventory, a utilization analysis, projections, and a cost-benefit analysis of downtown parking options.

QUIET ZONES

Ironically, a 1994 federal law requiring locomotives to sound horns at highway-rail grade crossings also opened the door to "quiet zones," or grade crossings eligible for a waiver if they comply with regulations of the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). The Federal Railroad Safety Authorization Act of 1994 (Pub. L. 103-440), also known as the Swift Act, came at the heels of locally instituted bans on nighttime train whistles in Florida, where FRA authorities found that grade crossing accidents more than tripled

¹⁰⁵ Community Opportunities Group, Inc., August 2009, April-May 2010.

after the bans went into effect.¹⁰⁶ Congress responded by enacting preemptive legislation, mandating the use of train-borne whistles or horns at all grade crossings nationwide and directing the FRA to establish standards and procedures for communities to create quiet zones. By 1994, so-called whistle bans were not confined to Florida, for some twenty other states had adopted similar permissive legislation. Within a year of the Swift Act, the FRA reported in a national study that grade crossings subject to whistle ban ordinances had 84 percent more accidents than crossings without a ban.¹⁰⁷ Despite FRA's findings, however, Congress decided in 1996 that communities with existing whistle bans should have some flexibility to retain them until the FRA adopted quiet zone regulations (Pub. L. 104-264). Like any other complicated regulatory initiative, the adoption of quiet zone regulations took several years, with multiple publications in the *Federal Register*, studies, challenges to those studies, and negotiations with state and local officials and the railroad industry.

At issue for any community with a pre-existing or new quiet zone is liability for accidents involving trains and cars or pedestrians at a highway-rail grade crossing.

The FRA prepared a "programmatic" environmental impact study (EIS) as part of the process for developing the uniform standards and procedures required under the Swift Act. In May 1998, the agency solicited public comments about the scope of the EIS and the issues it should address. Officials from cities and towns in Massachusetts - including Ashland - and a number of private organizations objected to the train horn requirement, citing adverse impacts on public health, the environment, the local economy, and property values.¹⁰⁸ Of the twenty-nine quiet zones in Massachusetts today, all but four qualify as "pre-rule" quiet zones, or those in effect in October 1996 *and still in effect* in December 2003 - that is, operative prior to the 1996 amendments to the Swift Act and not abandoned before publication of the FRA's Interim Final Rule. A majority of the pre-rule quiet zones exist in communities on the MBTA's Newburyport-Rockport line. According to data published by the FRA, Lincoln, Concord, Rowley, and Hingham are the only communities with "new" quiet zones established pursuant to the Interim Final Rule (the precursor to the FRA's Final Rule, effective June 24, 2005). There are reportedly no quiet zone communities on the Framingham-Worcester Line.¹⁰⁹

Ashland is hardly alone in its desire to protect downtown residents from excessive train noise, especially the elderly living close to the grade crossings. Massachusetts has one of the largest number of quiet zones in the country, following Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin, New York, Texas, and Kentucky. At issue for any community with a pre-existing or new quiet zone is liability for accidents involving trains and cars or pedestrians at a highway-rail grade crossing. The Swift Act effectively establishes a presumption that the sounding of train horns at highway-rail grade crossings is essential for public safety. Although the FRA

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Federal Railroad Administration, *Florida's Train Whistle Ban*, 2nd edition, September 1992.

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Federal Railroad Administration, *Nationwide Study of Train Whistle Bans* (April 1995).

¹⁰⁸ U.S. Federal Railroad Administration, *Draft Environmental Impact Statement: Proposed Rule for the Use of Locomotive Horns at Highway-Rail Grade Crossings*, Appendix G (December 1999).

¹⁰⁹ U.S. Federal Railroad Administration, "Quiet Zone Locations" (July 16, 2010). The database currently logs 410 quiet zones throughout the country, but it reflects only those communities that have filed quiet zone notifications with the FRA.

has authority to set minimum safety standards for quiet zone eligibility, the power to designate a quiet zone (subject to FRA requirements) lies with the public entity having jurisdiction over the highway: in nearly all cases, a city or town. Fearful of indemnification demands from railroad companies and lawsuits arising from grade crossing casualties, many state and local officials pressed the FRA to clarify matters of liability after the Interim Rule was published in 2003. However, the FRA declined, asserting instead that states "...have the ability to assert sovereign immunity on behalf of local units of government within their borders."¹¹⁰ It remains unclear whether communities complying with the federal standard of care - all of the public safety requirements that a quiet zone must meet - would be immune in the event of a quiet zone collision. Ashland officials will need to weigh the documented safety risks of quiet zones against the adverse impacts of noise on residents, and consult with Town Counsel. In addition, Ashland should seek an opinion from the Massachusetts Interlocal Insurance Association (MIIA) about the limits (if any) of indemnification or a potential change in the Town's insurance costs arising from the operation of quiet zones.

PUBLIC SAFETY BUILDING

The Main Street and Cherry Street grade crossings increase the risk of hazards for drivers and pedestrians, but Ashland's greatest public safety challenge is the interference with emergency services caused by trains approaching and crossing through Downtown Ashland. In 2008, MMA Consulting Group completed a study of the Town's police and fire station needs and recommended construction of a combined public safety building outside the downtown area.¹¹¹ The consultants found that the existing police and fire facilities are inadequate for a number of reasons, including the Main Street grade crossing and the increasing volume of train traffic - a condition that will be exacerbated if the MBTA follows through with planned increases service on the Framingham-Worcester line.

There is a growing trend toward consolidated public safety facilities in Massachusetts, i.e., buildings designed to accommodate police, fire, and emergency communications services. Not surprisingly, MMA Consulting Group recommended this approach in Ashland due to the town's small land area, the efficiencies gained by co-locating public safety personnel in a shared facility, and the problems involved with finding land for any type of new facility given the local road network and the fact that Ashland is a maturely developed suburb. According to the consultants, Ashland needs a site of about five acres for a combined public safety building with 40,000 to 55,000 square feet of floor area: enough space for the personnel and equipment associated with all three public safety functions. Moreover, a properly sized facility on a site with unimpeded access to all parts of town could make it possible for Ashland to close the fire station on Cedar Street, thereby conserving operating resources that could be used to increase Fire Department staffing - as also recommended in MMA Consulting Group's analysis.

In current (2010) dollars, the cost to design and construct a 55,000 sq. ft. combined public safety building could be as high as \$17.3 million.¹¹² This does not include site acquisition, furnishings, or equipment.

¹¹⁰ U.S. Federal Railroad Administration, 49 CFR Parts 222 and 229, Use of Locomotive Horns at Highway-Rail Grade Crossings; Final Rule, *Federal Register* 70 (April 2005): 21846.

¹¹¹ MMA Consulting Group, *Ashland, Massachusetts: Fire and Police Station Space Needs Assessment and Location Study* (April 2008).

¹¹² In April 2008, MMA Consulting Group reported a cost estimate of \$16.5 million, excluding land and fixtures and furnishings. See *Fire and Police Station Space Needs Assessment*, 61. The above estimate is inflation-adjusted to 2010.

Assuming bond anticipation notes (BAN) to cover the design and construction phase of the project followed by a twenty-year bond at 5 percent interest, the Town's total debt service to build a new facility would be \$26.2 million to \$27.6 million, with annual principal and interest payments of \$1.3 million to \$1.4 million depending on the type of debt service. This is approximately 34 percent of Ashland's projected spending per year on General Fund debt service over the next five years.¹¹³

Unlike some states, Massachusetts does not have a designated local aid program for municipal facilities. The Commonwealth provides a partial match for public school construction, but the only dedicated public works funding distributed annually to cities and towns, Chapter 90, is restricted for roadway maintenance. All other recurring sources of local aid, restricted and unrestricted, consist of those sources reported on the cherry sheet: mainly Chapter 70 for schools, general government aid (Lottery), and public library aid. Collectively, these and other sources of local aid have supplied between 13 and 16 percent of Ashland's total general fund revenues per year in the past ten years. Excluding Chapter 70 aid, however, local aid available for non-school operations decreased 34 percent (net of charges, in constant dollars) between FY 2006 and FY 2010.¹¹⁴ The gap left by declining general government aid has been offset by only modest growth in the tax levy and spending reductions, largely reflecting housing market conditions and the recession. From FY 2007 to FY 2010, Ashland reduced municipal employment by approximately ten full-time equivalent (FTE) positions due to the growing gap between available funds and the cost to provide local services.¹¹⁵

A well-known report from the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (FRBB) shows that in Massachusetts, the gap between non-school service costs and revenue capacity is far more pronounced in some communities than others, and the differences between municipalities are not always intuitive. Moreover, the state's local aid formulas do not capture these differences very effectively. The FRBB analysis found that while Ashland falls in the lower quintile for the state as a whole for non-school spending per capita, it also ranks in the lower quintile for non-school *revenue capacity* per capita, i.e., the amount reasonably available to Ashland for non-school services. Revenue capacity reflects the size and strength of the tax base, the amount of tax-exempt property, access to other own-source revenues to support local government operations (such as hotel taxes), and the tax levy constraints of Proposition 2 1/2. As a result, Ashland's *non-school revenue gap per capita* is somewhat above the state mid-point: a gap not as large as Framingham's, but larger than that of Southborough or Hopkinton.¹¹⁶ This means that relative to many of its neighbors, Ashland does not have the revenue capacity it needs to fund basic non-school services, as

The MMA estimate appears reasonable because in 2003, another Eastern Massachusetts community spent \$6.5 million to build a partially combined police-fire station half of the size of the proposed building in Ashland, but without bays for fire apparatus, and still another community built a very similar, partially combined station in 2005, also half the size of the Ashland facility, for \$8 million.

¹¹³ John D. Petrin, Town Manager, "Town of Ashland Omnibus Budget - Fiscal Year 2011," (data file, email to Community Opportunities Group, Inc., June 16, 2010).

¹¹⁴ Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR), Division of Local Services, "Revenues by Source" and "Net State Aid, FY1981-2010" (data file, www.dls.state.ma.us/mdm.htm), and Community Opportunities Group, Inc. Inflation adjusted with core CPI, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

¹¹⁵ John D. Petrin, "Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Town Manager's Budget Submittal & Message" (June 2, 2009), 11.

¹¹⁶ Katherine Bradbury and Bo Zhao, "Measuring Disparities in Non-School Costs and Revenue Capacity among Massachusetts Cities and Towns" (Working Paper, FRBB New England Public Policy Center 06-03, May 4, 2007), 30 and Figs. 1-3.

evidenced by the municipal workforce reductions made in the past few fiscal years. Ashland also has no reserve levy capacity that it can tap to restore these jobs. Residents have rejected Proposition 2 1/2 override requests at least twice in the last five years, and the Town's annual tax levy is already at the maximum permitted without an override.¹¹⁷

There is no question that over the past decade, the number of trains traversing Ashland each day has increased. Grade crossing inventory records from the FRA show that in the 1980s, CSX reported fifteen to seventeen trains per day moving through Downtown Ashland, yet the most recent inventory submission (June 2009) reports twenty-six trains per day - a substantial underestimate, based on actual train movements tallied by consultants in July 2009.¹¹⁸ For the Boston region and the Commonwealth as a whole, growth in commuter and freight rail activity benefits the economy and promotes sustainability, but for Ashland, it means an ever-increasing risk of delayed response to emergencies - and particularly medical emergencies - by public safety personnel. Table 5.3 includes a recent sample of Ashland ambulance calls for which response was delayed due to train activity at the grade crossings in Ashland and Framingham.

Under National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Standard 1710, the 90 percent benchmark for first-responder arrival at a medical emergency is a maximum of four minutes and for an advanced life support (ALS) unit, a maximum of eight minutes. A fire doubles in size for every minute that it grows, and a flashover typically occurs within eight minutes. Accordingly, the critical response periods for medical emergencies also apply to fire suppression: four minutes for the first engine to arrive and eight minutes for the first full alarm assignment.¹¹⁹ In Ashland today, the four-minute service area from the Main Street fire station includes only 40 percent of the Town's street miles, and the eight-minute service area, 95 percent of street miles and 90 percent of the population. However, these estimates do not account for delays triggered by train crossings, which can prevent emergency vehicles from responding to an incident for as much as four minutes.¹²⁰

Of all near-term mitigation options that Ashland could pursue with state officials, relocating the police and fire stations outside Downtown Ashland needs to be the highest priority. Even if the Town implements all of the relatively low-cost, easy-to-implement measures outlined in VHB's report, such as traffic signal upgrades, the ability of public safety personnel to respond to incidents in the south side of town will remain vulnerable to train movements at the Main Street grade crossing. Since Massachusetts does not have a municipal facilities construction fund through a local aid account or a discretionary grant

Of all mitigation options that Ashland could pursue with state officials, relocating the police and fire stations outside Downtown Ashland needs to be the highest priority.

¹¹⁷ DOR, "Excess Levy Capacity" (data file).

¹¹⁸ U.S. Federal Railroad Administration, "U.S. DOT Crossing Inventory," Ashland, Massachusetts (user-defined database query, Community Opportunities Group, Inc., June 29, 2010), and *Grade Crossing Study*, Appendix A, (memorandum, K. Hughes to R. Carey, October 20, 2009), and Appendix B, Site Visits and Field Notes.

¹¹⁹ National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), "1710: Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, and Special Operations to the Public by Career Fire Departments."

¹²⁰ *Grade Crossing Study*, 25, citing Ashland Fire Department.

program, it will most likely be necessary for the Town's state representative or senator to help Ashland secure financial assistance from the Commonwealth.

Table 5.3 Delayed Ambulance Response					
Incident #	Grade Crossing			Detoured Response	Time Stopped
	Cherry	Main	Concord St.		
09-1553			X		1 min.
09-1599		X		X	Not reported
09-1615			X		2 min.
10-0028			X		< 1 min.
10-0102		X		X	Not reported
10-0196			X		1 min.
10-0217			X		1 min.
10-0245			X		3 min.
10-0519	X			X	< 1 min.
Not reported		X			2 min.
10-0605		X			1 min.
10-0647		X			< 1 min.
10-0659			X		1 min.
10-0728			X		< 1 min.
10-0944			X		<2 min.
10-1059			X		2 min.
10-1114			X		3 min.
10-1185			X		1 min.
10-		X		X	< 1 min.
10-1360			X		1 min.
10-1379			X		3 min.

Source: Ashland Fire Department, November 2010.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Since local governments depend on property taxes for their operating revenue, they tend to pay closer attention to the size of their tax base than the make-up and well-being of their employment base. There is an undeniable relationship between the number and types of industries in a community, the amount of revenue available to finance town services, and how much residents have to pay for the services they receive. As a result, communities often think of “economic development” as zoning for commercial and industrial uses, yet building a local economy involves more than zoning, and successful economic development is not simply measured by nonresidential tax revenue. Tax-exempt land uses also prime the economy of cities and towns, regions, and the state as a whole. In addition, opportunities to work at home have not only become popular among workers, but also recognized as essential to the meaning of a sustainable community.

Ashland wants attractive, prosperous commercial areas in order to improve the quality of life for residents and provide revenue for municipal services. It wants to be seen as a business-friendly town that supports local businesses, and it does not want to lose the businesses it already has to other communities nearby. Its economy is affected by several conditions, not all of which are under the town's control. Since Ashland does not have large amounts of vacant developable land, securing, keeping, and enhancing a strong employment base will depend on reuse and intensification of use in existing commercial and industrial areas. Local governments cannot dictate the make-up of the economy, but the manner in which a community deploys public resources can have a significant impact on the quality and staying power of its businesses. Zoning, efficient permitting systems, public safety and public works services, capital improvements, special financing mechanisms, and government-business partnerships are standard tools that local governments use to grow their local economy.



Zoning

Ashland's Zoning Bylaw contains policies that should be revisited, many technical errors that produce needless confusion, and a permitting structure that should be clarified and streamlined. The zoning scheme is unusually complex and prescriptive, and in some cases the regulations may be unworkable. Moreover, the Zoning Bylaw is difficult to navigate. For example, use regulations appear in more than one section, and the bylaw lacks a coherent cross-referencing system. In addition, the structure of the bylaw is inconsistent, with some sections traditionally formatted and logically arranged and other sections formatted quite differently. It seems that over time, Ashland has added new provisions to the Zoning Bylaw without taking care to preserve a predictable structure and appearance.

Districts, Uses, and Dimensional Requirements

The following issues pertaining to zoning districts and use and dimensional requirements could interfere with Ashland's economic development goals, make the town less attractive for business development, and reduce the quality of life for residents.

ASHLAND DOWNTOWN DISTRICT

As currently conceived and written, the ADD raises many development policy and technical concerns:

- **Relationship to Underlying Zoning.** According to the Zoning Bylaw § 8.5.4, all zoning regulations in effect on May 10, 2006 continue to apply within the Downtown District, "...so that the uses permitted in this Section 8.5 shall be in addition to the uses permitted in the underlying district," except for a few now-prohibited uses. However, the Zoning Map does not identify the underlying districts, so it is not clear how property owners could determine the full range of development privileges available to

them. Complicating the operation of the ADD is that § 8.5.4 specifically describes Sub-Area A as an overlay, but contains no similar language concerning the status of Sub-Areas B and C. There appears to be an important drafting error in this section, and it should be corrected for at least two reasons: to make the Bylaw clear, and to ensure that in the future, local officials do not unwittingly treat a proposed project an extension or alteration of a non-conforming use or structure simply because the existing condition does not conform to ADD requirements.

If the ADD is intended to work as an overlay that does not disturb the underlying zoning, the Zoning Map should symbolize the district in the manner similar to that of the Pond Street Mixed Use Development Overlay District (PSMUOD), i.e., with diagonal lines or hatch marks that identify the limits of Sub-Areas A, B, and C while still illustrating the color codes for the underlying districts. However, if the ADD is intended to operate as a new use district that replaced other zoning in existence in May 2010, Ashland has most likely adopted downtown zoning that will not work because the ADD is so prescriptive and limiting.

- **Sub-Area A.** It appears that Town Meeting recently voted to extend Sub-Area A - the most intensive of the three sub-areas - along the entirety of Pleasant Street's south side between Tilton Avenue and the MBTA Station. (Sub-Area C covers the vicinity of the Pleasant Street/Main Street intersection and most of Cherry Street.) Presumably the town hoped to promote some sort of land use connection between the MBTA station and Downtown Ashland. However, the regulations for Sub-Area A envision compact development with first-floor retail uses and prohibit both first-floor residential uses and single-family or two-family homes. Sub-Area A needs to be concentrated, ideally around intersections where the height and bulk regulations for this district would work best. It is zoning intended for *nodes* and *focal points*, not for an extended linear configuration of land.

In addition, it is generally best to avoid setting a district boundary at the centerline of a road, with one side of the street in one zoning district and the opposite side in a different district, except in relatively seamless situations. Sometimes roads can serve comfortably as a zoning boundary, depending on topography, the existing conditions on each side of the street, the parcel sizes and land uses, and the ability of two (or more) districts, working together, to promote logical transitions and prevent land use conflicts. These conditions do not exist on Pleasant Street.

- **Applicability of Dimensional Regulations.** The "Table of Dimensional Requirements in the Ashland Downtown District," § 8.5.7, provides density and dimensional regulations for mixed uses and dwellings only, yet many other uses are allowed or permitted by right in the ADD. It is not clear what dimensional regulations would have to be met for, say, a free-standing retail store, restaurant, or industrial use.
- **Building and Site Design Guidelines.** Aside from coherent use and dimensional regulations, the most important aspect of zoning for downtown development is design: mainly buildings, signage, landscaping and parking, and pedestrian facilities. The ADD is noteworthy for its conspicuous omission of basic architectural and site design standards and its lack of attention to landscaping treatments. The bylaw simply refers to Ashland's generic landscaping regulations (§ 5.4), which contain no guidance about special landscaping standards for the downtown area, and to the sign regulations in § 5.3 for the "commercial B zones," which do not exist.

- **Regulatory Inconsistency.** In some cases, ADD use and dimensional regulations seem to work at odds or make very little sense in relation to the district's purposes. For example, Ashland allows a maximum floor-area ratio (FAR) of 2.0 for mixed-use buildings (§ 8.5.7) in Sub-Area A. On a conforming 35,000 sq. ft. lot, this means up to 70,000 sq. ft. of floor area. Under the ADD use regulations, however, mixed-use buildings exceeding 20,000 sq. ft. require a special permit. Assuming a conforming lot, a 20,000 sq. ft. building reflects an FAR of only 0.57. On a related note, the town regulates retail uses differently depending on the size of the building. It is not clear whether the intent of the regulation is *building scale* or *type of business*. Typically floor area caps (if any) in a downtown business district apply to tenant spaces, which is an indirect way of influencing the types of businesses in downtown locations. As currently written, the Zoning Bylaw would allow a 70,000 sq. ft. retail store or a 70,000 sq. ft. indoor recreation facility, industrial building, or catering service on a lot that meets the sub-areas minimum dimensional requirements, but only a 20,000 sq. ft. building occupied by mixed uses unless the Planning Board grants a discretionary special permit. This seems to contradict the intent of the ADD.

Similarly, Ashland allows a Residential Cluster development by special permit in ADD-A, but not in ADD-B or -C, yet single-family and two-family homes are prohibited in the ADD-A and allowed as of right in ADD-C. Since a Residential Cluster development requires at least five acres of land in order to qualify for a special permit, it is not clear why the town would even allow a cluster project in the sub-area that purports to promote compact, intensive development or prohibit a cluster in the sub-areas that allow single-family and two-family homes.

- **Housing Policy.** The ADD provides for quite a bit of housing development, both in mixed-use and free-standing multi-family buildings. Conspicuously absent is any provision - requirement or incentive - to include affordable units in ADD projects. Although the town encourages affordable units in two other overlay districts, it is noteworthy that no affordable housing provisions exist in the ADD or the Rail Transit District: the zoning districts offering the closest proximity to public transportation in Ashland.
- **Zoning for Evolutionary Change.** In countless ways, the requirements for development in the ADD seem to favor large-scale redevelopment. For example, the design principles (§ 8.5.10) call for pedestrian access and the "additional standards" in § 8.5.11 require projects to provide sidewalks along the street frontage and pedestrian ways to neighborhoods. These concepts make sense for a downtown business district, but it is very unlikely that small-scale projects such as renovations and modest expansion of an existing building could absorb the cost of providing significant public improvements. The bylaw should give more attention to separating requirements that apply to new construction (including demolition and new construction) from logical requirements for smaller-scale expansion or reuse. Ashland's downtown does not have a strong market presence, and much could be done to improve downtown's appearance - gradually - before there is enough market upturn to make larger projects feasible. The town also needs to give serious consideration to how much large-scale redevelopment it wants to encourage in Downtown Ashland, especially redevelopment that involves demolition.
- **Off-Street Parking.** Ashland has appropriately chosen to reduce off-street parking requirements in the downtown area. For any given use, the number of parking spaces is 75 percent of the requirements ordinarily imposed in other districts (under § 5.1) and for mixed uses, the number of spaces is reduced further. Although Ashland needs to update all of its off-street parking

requirements, an across-the-board reduction in Downtown Ashland may not have the desired effect unless it is well informed by a district parking inventory and parking plan. Many communities with successful downtown revitalization programs have taken different approaches: eliminating off-street parking requirements in their entirety and making parking a public responsibility; providing building height or FAR incentives (or both) for sub-grade or ground-floor parking, or for shared parking areas; allowing payments to an off-street parking fund for projects that lack enough land to comply with minimum parking requirements;¹²¹ reducing parking requirements for upper-story offices very small first-floor business uses; and specifically allowing on-street parking to satisfy a portion of a project's minimum parking requirements. Moreover, most downtown zoning bylaws include provisions for bicycle parking, but Ashland's ADD stops short of addressing mobility and access in a comprehensive way. Further, it is also important to remember that regardless of how far a community goes to waive or reduce off-street parking, in many cases commercial lenders require projects - especially retail - to provide a large amount of parking as a condition of financing approval.

POND STREET MIXED USE OVERLAY DISTRICT

The PSMUOD appears to be Ashland's most recently created overlay district (ATM 2009). It, too, contains a number of development policy and technical problems:

- **District Size and Purposes.** The PSMUOD is very large: nearly 500 acres, including nearly all non-residentially zoned land and some residentially zoned parcels along Pond Street/Route 126. Due to its size and configuration, the district encompasses a large, contiguous wetland area crossed by Pond Street near the Framingham line (Guinea Meadow Swamp). The PSMUOD's stated purposes are to promote economic development, encourage more efficient use of infrastructure, revitalize the corridor, and create better access to employment by encouraging high-density residential and commercial uses in the same building. However, a 500-acre mixed-use district is dubious both for land use and economic reasons. Pond Street's greatest need is a few key focal points to organize development along the corridor and break up the image of a continuous commercial strip in a coherent way. A bylaw somewhat like the PSMUOD could help to achieve these ends if placed strategically on land in one or two places along Pond Street. As currently conceived, however, the PSMUOD will produce few if any benefits. If anything, it is the underlying zoning on Pond Street that most needs Ashland's attention.
- **Clarity.** The PSMUOD is the only district in Ashland that uses the term "buildable lot area," yet nowhere in § 8.5 (PSMUOD) is "buildable lot area" defined, nor is it defined in § 10, Definitions. Presumably it means upland, but the term should be defined clearly because under Ashland's ordinary dimensional regulations, "lot area" means that the area required for zoning compliance must be 90 percent upland. Use of the term "buildable lot area" is made even more confusing because it always appears in quotation marks, which implies a unique meaning.
- **Regulatory Intent.** Since Pond Street/Route 126 corridor is substantially developed, the types of projects promoted in the PSMUOD's purpose statement will involve redevelopment of existing

¹²¹ A special revenue fund for in-lieu-of payments for off-street parking requires authorization from the General Court. This is typically done through a home rule petition. Setting an appropriate fee per space requires a plan for designing and constructing off-street parking facilities and for leasing surplus spaces on private property.

properties. Redevelopment zoning almost always embraces different dimensional requirements than those of an underlying district in order to encourage (if not require) parcel assembly and curb cut consolidation - both of which are needed along portions of Pond Street. However, the PSMUOD's basic lot regulations are virtually the same as those of the underlying zoning (CH, I): 30,000 sq. ft. of lot area and 150 feet of frontage.

The PSMUOD appears to be a "barrier-free" zoning district in that many provisions are either unregulated or eligible for generous waivers by special permit. For example, there is neither a minimum nor maximum front setback requirement in this district, which could be very problematic because a building can be located almost anywhere on a lot, without regard for its relationship to the street or adjacent uses. As a result, incremental development under the PSMUOD could result in a formless, chaotic pattern along most of Pond Street. Further, the district has a maximum height limit of five stories, but the Planning Board can authorize an increase in height without making any specific findings, and there is no trade-off for a height increase. Section 8.6.6(6) allows the Planning Board to grant a height increase if it "is in keeping with the purpose of the bylaw," but such vague language rarely works as an incentive for developers and it does not offer surrounding property owners a reasonable basis for understanding what could be built next door.

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- **Open Space.** The PSMUOD "encourages" the provision of common land for a public park or usable public open space. The only incentive is additional dwellings - one unit per 2,000 sq. ft. of common land - which assumes that a market exists for mixed residential and commercial uses on Pond Street. The common open space provision seems to address needs for more public parks and recreation facilities in the Pond Street area, which on one level is consistent with Ashland's *Comprehensive Plan* and *Open Space and Recreation Plan*.¹²² On another level, though, it would take a parcel larger than 30,000 sq. ft. to create enough common open space for the provision to be worthwhile to a developer or the town. Even without *public* open space, Pond Street would benefit immeasurably if the dimensional requirements for lots included a minimum open space ratio and basic standards for the placement of open space on lots. A dense build-out of this area without careful regard for the impact of green space on views from the road could generate more tax revenue for Ashland at the expense of corridor aesthetics.
- **Affordable Housing.** Ashland requires PSMUOD projects with ten or more dwelling units to provide affordable housing that qualifies for the Chapter 40B Subsidized Housing Inventory. In § 8.8.7, the town lays out in detail the minimum requirements for affordable units, yet in some cases the wording is out of date or noticeably inconsistent with zoning for affordable housing commonly found in other

¹²² Town of Ashland, *Comprehensive Plan* (2002), 2.1.6, and *Open Space and Recreation Plan* (March 2007), 64.

communities. For example, the 99-year affordability restriction is passé. Most communities today - along with DHCD - call for affordability restrictions "in perpetuity or for the maximum period allowed by law," which fits well with the statutory authority for affordable housing restrictions at G.L. c. 184, §§ 31-32. In addition, § 8.8.7(4) requires a deed rider, but deed riders are used to secure the ongoing affordability of *homeownership* units; they are not designed or appropriate for rental housing. In general, this section of the bylaw would be much easier to read and understand if it were condensed, current, and clearly written.

- **Off-Street Parking.** Ashland seems to be of two minds when it comes to off-street parking. On one hand, the PSMUOD's parking regulations are unusually generous for residential uses, but on the other hand, they remain very high for commercial uses. In this district, Ashland requires one space per one-bedroom unit and one-and-one-half spaces per two-bedroom unit, and while the former makes sense, the latter could be problematic for dwellings with limited access to public transportation. Pond Street/Route 126 is a suburban highway corridor served by two bus routes - MetroWest Transit Authority Routes 4 and 6 - and not many Ashland residents use the closest MBTA station, which in this case is the Framingham station.¹²³ Due to Boston area's widespread discrepancies between what renters can typically afford and the market rents charged by for-profit housing developers, the practice of doubling up, with two people sharing a two-bedroom apartment, is very common in the suburbs. As a result, it is far more likely that PSMUOD developments would need to provide two parking spaces per two-bedroom unit. By contrast, requiring one parking space per 250 sq. ft. of commercial space is excessive. It is also noteworthy that § 8.8.8, PSMUOD Off-Street Parking Requirements, calls for parking and access layouts that ensure "the safety and convenience of persons traveling within or through the parking area, and between the parking facility and the street," and cites § 5.1, Ashland's Off-Street Parking Regulations, as a guide. However, § 5.1 contains no standards for parking and access design except in the CN, CV, and CO districts.
- **Design Standards.** Like other provisions of the Ashland Zoning Bylaw, the PSMUOD design standards are fairly generic. The review standards in § 8.8.9.1 (curiously named "Administrative Procedures) appear to be a collection of design guidelines from other zoning bylaws or ordinances, without any contextual relationship to Pond Street.

WILDWOOD MIXED-USE SPECIAL DISTRICT

The Wildwood Mixed-Use Special District (WMUSD) is a very complicated, prescriptive district with provisions that are sometimes unclear and difficult to follow. It appears to be zoning that Ashland created for planned development of industrial, commercial, residential, and municipal uses,¹²⁴ but judging from the appearance of the area and the uses presently located there, the WMUSD has not brought about the results envisioned in the district's statement of purposes and intent (§ 8.6.1).

- **Relationship to Other Zoning.** The WMUSD appears to operate as an overlay district due to its division into multiple sub-areas (A through E) and because the district requires a minimum tract size of fifty acres for development. However, it is not clear in the Zoning Bylaw or on the Zoning Map

¹²³ Central Transportation Planning Staff, "Origin Locations and Activities, Entry Station: Framingham," *MBTA Systemwide Passenger Survey: South Side 2008-2009 Station-by-Station Tables* (June 2010).

¹²⁴ See, for example, *Ashland Comprehensive Plan* (2002), 3.2.9.

whether other zoning rights apply in the 150± acres contained in the WMUSD. Further, the zoning text refers to a "Use Plan" with "...three (3) areas for development (hereinafter such areas are referred to as "Area A," "Area B," "Area C, and "Area D"...), but the district has use regulations for five sub-areas, and those areas are also symbolized on the Zoning Map. Possibly the WMUSD was amended at some point and clarifying changes were inadvertently omitted, but the zoning text, tables, and map should be consistent.

- **Clarity and Consistency.** The WMUSD calls for affordable housing in Area A, but "affordable housing" is not defined in this district other than a general reference to "as defined by the Commonwealth." This is a problematic way to explain an "affordable housing" requirement. If the bylaw intends to require units eligible for the Subsidized Housing Inventory, it is important to note that "affordable housing" is neither defined nor referred to in Chapter 40B. Depending on the housing program and the policies of each administration, "affordable housing" can mean - and it has meant in the recent past - housing affordable at levels above the low- and moderate-income limits that apply under Chapter 40B. In addition, the WMUSD use and dimensional regulations are sometimes inconsistent. For example, § 8.6.6(1) provides for single-family dwelling lots of at least 30,000 sq. ft. (similar to Residence A) in Areas D and E, but the Wildwood Use Table, § 8.6.4, indicates that single-family dwellings are allowed only in Sub-Area E. Further, the dimensional regulations cap residential building heights in Area D and Area E at "three stories unless allowed under the Special Permit conditions of this section," but there is no subsection devoted to special permit conditions. As a result, the bylaw is unclear about the requirements that a multi-family building would have to meet in order to exceed three stories.
- **Regulatory Complexity.** The WMUSD has unusually complicated dimensional regulations - so complicated and limiting that they seem to have been written for a single project. For example, the residential density regulations limit senior housing to one unit per 4,000 sq. ft. per unit plus 1,050 sq. ft. per bedroom for a two-bedroom unit, i.e., one unit per 6,100 sq. ft. per two-bedroom senior dwelling, which is a highly unusual density regulation. Moreover, non-senior units in Area A call for a density calculation that is exceptionally confusing:

...non-senior residential dwellings will require a minimum lot area not less than 5,000 square feet per dwelling unit, plus one thousand square feet per bedroom for a maximum of two (2) bedrooms under the following percentages of development area of that which is buildable in "Area "A" only: maximum of 75% "multifamily dwelling" uses (just residential) and or [*sic*] open space and minimum of 25% mixed uses with commercial (non-residential use on first floor of the mixed use buildings) and/or commercial. Computations for additional housing units in mixed use structures on the second floor or higher shall be calculated at 600 sq. ft. per unit with a maximum of two bedrooms. § 8.6.6(2).

It would be much simpler to say that in Area A, up to 75 percent of the buildable land may be used for non-senior multi-family dwellings at a density not to exceed one unit per 6,000 sq. ft. for a one-bedroom unit and one unit per 7,000 sq. ft. for a two-bedroom unit. A minimum of 25 percent of the buildable land in Area A shall be used for open space, mixed uses, or commercial uses. In a mixed-use building, dwelling units shall be permitted above the ground floor at a maximum density of one unit per 600 sq. ft., and no such unit shall have more than two bedrooms.

- **Permits and Procedures.** In several places, the WMUSD refers to "the permit granting authority," which presumably means the Planning Board as site plan approval authority or, where appropriate, the special permit granting authority. Ashland's Zoning Bylaw does not define "permit granting authority," in fact the term is not defined in most zoning bylaws and ordinances in Massachusetts because it has a unique meaning in the state Zoning Act. In Massachusetts, the "permit granting authority" is singularly the Board of Appeals (or the Zoning Administrator, in communities that have one) acting on variances and appeals of decisions made by the Building Inspector/Zoning Enforcement Officer.

RAIL TRANSIT DISTRICT

The Rail Transit District (RTD) was born out of the opening of Ashland's MBTA station in 2002. It promotes higher-density housing and business development close to public transportation, and under conducive market conditions the RTD may eventually produce the outcomes intended by the town. This type of zoning offers the potential for many environmental benefits. In Ashland, it also creates the potential for further siphoning business activity from the downtown area, though well-planned physical and transit connections between the train station and Downtown Ashland would help to mitigate a negative economic impact on downtown businesses, if any.

- **Relationship to Other Zoning.** According to Ashland's most recent *Comprehensive Plan*, the RTD is an overlay district.¹²⁵ However, the text of the Zoning Bylaw does not describe the relationship between the RTD and the underlying zoning, if underlying industrial (and other) zoning still exists. This should be clarified.
- **Dimensional Requirements.** Although the RTD anticipates compact development near the train station, it nonetheless relies upon Ashland's conventional lot requirements: minimum lot area of 30,000 sq. ft. and minimum frontage of 150 feet. The bylaw allows the Planning Board to grant a special permit for "under-sized lot areas" if the lots meet "all other dimensional regulations of this section" (§ 8.4.7), which suggests that smaller lots would still have to provide at least 150 feet of frontage. It would be very unusual to allow under-sized lots without making some adjustment for lot frontage - the lot regulation that is typically responsible for excessive road lengths - in a district that ostensibly promotes compact form. The omission of a sliding frontage regulation may reflect a desire to reduce curb cuts, but the same outcome can be achieved by requiring shared access to adjoining lots as a condition of granting an under-sized lot special permit.
- **Housing Policy.** The RTD's Transit Village Community provision in § 8.4.15 calls for "for-profit, luxury (market driven) apartment-type residences...and age-restricted residences...supplemented by accessory service structures and amenities." While no community in Massachusetts has a legal obligation to zone for affordable housing, it is noteworthy that the RTD is silent on affordable units despite the district's proximity to public transportation. In addition, the district's dimensional regulations discourage family housing. For example, the bylaw allows age-restricted units at ten units per acre, but while it provides for multi-family rental units at twenty units per acre, it also prohibits apartments with more than two bedrooms. This type of provision sometimes reflects a misreading of the market for transit-oriented and transit-adjacent communities because elsewhere in the United

¹²⁵ *Comprehensive Plan (2002)*, 2.2.

States, bedroom restrictions are far less common than in Massachusetts - and working families do live near train stations. Overall, the RTD regulations favor upper-income, childless households and retirees. If the Transit Village Community concept is to succeed as truly market-driven development, Ashland may need to revisit the housing policies embedded in the district's requirements.

- **Off-Street Parking.** The RTD sensibly requires just 0.80 parking spaces per dwelling unit, which is appropriate for transit-adjacent development. However, its reference to parking space dimensional requirements in § 5.1 is problematic because the town's Off-Street Parking regulations omit minimum dimensions and minimum area for parking spaces.

COMMERCIAL DISTRICTS

- **Potential for Use Conflicts.** One of the most effective ways to discourage high-quality business development is to allow single-family dwellings in a highway commercial district. Over time, homeowners do not make congenial abutters to convenience stores, restaurants, medical offices, and other high traffic-generating land uses, and for good reason: location on heavily traveled roads tends to reduce the value of a dwelling and erode the quality of life for its occupants. In addition, single-family homeowners want individual driveways, which makes it very difficult to institute an effective access management plan as commercial corridors grow and change. Furthermore, the physical form of business districts with single-family homes peppered between commercial buildings is usually chaotic, with uneven front setbacks, distracting variations in scale, and incompatible architecture.

Ashland allows single-family homes by right in every commercial zoning district, and the potential for negative consequences can be seen in several areas. It makes sense to allow single-family and two-family homes in a neighborhood-oriented business zone, but encouraging them in areas designated for economic growth will compromise the town's economic development goals. Although it may spawn political conflict, Ashland should consider prohibiting single-family homes in the CH district.

One of the most effective ways to discourage high-quality business development is to allow single-family dwellings in a highway commercial district.

- **Mixed-Use Development.** Fewer land use conflicts tend to occur between multi-family developments and business uses, yet even they are not as compatible as some might imagine, especially in the suburbs. Many communities with flexible mixed-use zoning have discovered, to their dismay, that commercial developers often show no interest in upper-story housing and residential developers rarely warm to the idea of first-floor retail. It seems that the market for mixed uses in suburban communities is not as robust as the principles of mixed-use development would suggest. Ashland needs to consider whether it has placed too much emphasis on encouraging mixed-use development at the expense of providing meaningful, effective incentives for business and industrial development.
- **Adult Uses.** According to the Table of Principal Use Regulations in § 3.0, Ashland allows adult entertainment uses by special permit in all commercial districts. This unusually permissive policy seems odd until it is read along with Ashland's Adult Use regulations in § 6.1, which further limit the

location of adult business establishments to at least 500 feet from schools, churches, public libraries, playgrounds, and the boundary of any zoning district "serving residentially zoned parcels."¹²⁶ The ambiguous phrase "serving residentially zoned parcels" raises questions about the Zoning Bylaw's intent, i.e., whether Ashland effectively limits adult uses to remote industrial areas because all of the commercial districts allow housing. After all other distance thresholds in § 6.1 have been met, it appears that Ashland's only compliant location is in the vicinity of the Guinea Meadow Swamp behind Butterfield Drive (off Pond Street). The adult use zoning in Ashland embraces a *proviso* approach, with layers of seemingly closed loopholes - unless a church relocates or the town closes a school or playground.

The prevailing view among planners today is that communities should focus on setting maximum - not minimum - off-street parking requirements.

It is questionable whether Ashland actually provides reasonable options for adult uses. If the town prohibits adult uses by design, it could be exposed to a valid special permit application to locate an adult business establishment in a commercial district that allows retail uses by right and adult uses by special permit. The Table of Principal Use Regulations does not present a clear picture of the permitted and conditionally permitted uses in the commercial districts, and it should be modified. At the very least, Ashland should specifically prohibit adult uses in the CN and CV districts and replace the existing reference to "residentially zoned parcels" with the more common and easily understood phrase, "the boundary of any residential zoning district."

- **Open Space on Commercial Lots.** Ashland's approach to regulating intensity of use on commercial lots is indirect at best and prone to unwanted impacts at worst. The town imposes minimum setback and maximum height requirements (and in Downtown Ashland, maximum front setbacks as well), but there is no maximum lot coverage requirement in the CH district and regrettably, no minimum open space requirement in any commercial district. An open space ratio not only helps to manage intensity of use, but also influences the design of commercial projects at the site planning stage. Requiring a modest amount of open space at the front and sides (but especially the front) of lots in a commercial district ensures that suitable green space will be situated where it should be: accessible to pedestrians and visible from the road. Where appropriate, open space regulations should be flexible and include sidewalks, landscaped pedestrian plazas, bicycle racks, and similar amenities that encourage interaction, especially in settings such as Downtown Ashland.
- **Off-Street Parking.** Ashland's existing off-street parking regulations do more to influence intensity of use than any other requirement in the Zoning Bylaw, and they do so at the expense of good design and value. Requiring a minimum of one parking space per 180 sq. ft. of leasable floor area for retail and office uses far exceeds reasonable planning standards. It encourages over-sized parking lots, increases run-off, and wastes land. One space per 200 sq. ft. of gross floor area for banks is also excessive. To put Ashland's current requirements in perspective, the prevailing view among planners today is that communities should focus on setting *maximum* - not minimum - off-street parking

¹²⁶ A similar provision can be found in most zoning regulations for adult uses, but it is usually expressed as *N* feet from the boundary of a *residential zoning district*.

requirements, and the maximum for retail is typically one space per 200 sq. ft. of leasable floor space. Ashland has wisely reduced the minimum off-street parking requirements that apply in the ADD, RTD, and CO districts, but reductions should be instituted in all districts without requiring applicants to seek a special permit.

Ashland's off-street parking regulations are also noteworthy for the omission of basic dimensional requirements and design standards found in most zoning bylaws and ordinances. For example, the town does not specify minimum parking stall dimensions by angle of parking space, which is very unusual. While Ashland sets limits on the number of entrance and egress drives per 200 feet of lot frontage, there are no standards for access drive width, so a lot with 200 feet of frontage could have two access points, each with a wide curb cut. In § 5.4.4, there are minimal landscaping standards for parking lots, but the standards are quantitative, not qualitative, and the parking bylaw has no incentives to encourage low-impact development techniques. In general, the entire section of the Zoning Bylaw needs to be updated.

INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT

Ashland currently has one Industrial District that allows a wide range of industrial uses on relatively small lots. Unfortunately, it is the type of "one-size-fits-all" zoning that can unwittingly discourage higher-end office and industrial uses. Ashland's economic development interests would be served better with a refined, targeted approach to zoning for industrial growth. In addition, the industrial uses listed in the Zoning Bylaw are in some cases very broad and in others, obsolete. The industrial zoning in general needs to be updated. For example, the industrial use regulations do not address green industries such as renewable or alternative energy manufacturing, or bioscience uses, which often include development incentives and almost always include performance measures and public safety standards.¹²⁷ Sometimes broad industrial use definitions bring about unintended consequences, and because industrial operations change, zoning regulations should be conscious of the needs and expectations of industries on one hand, and appropriate controls to protect public health, safety, and welfare on the other hand.

Under the present zoning scheme, Ashland allows warehouses, contractor's yards, and food processing facilities by right in the same locations zoned for research and development and computer technology businesses. While the bylaw seems to remove barriers to industrial development, it does more to remove barriers for some types of businesses than others. Companies that plan to make a substantial investment in new facilities base their siting decisions on many factors, and the character, appearance, and operation of abutting land uses are among them. Another noteworthy feature of Ashland's industrial zoning is that it establishes uniform dimensional regulations for all industrially zoned areas, yet the areas themselves are strikingly different: historic mill structures, a large manufacturing compound, small industrial parks, and vacant land.

The town should consider a modest approach to separating industrial uses so that some areas favor research and development, office, technology firms, manufacturing directly related to these uses, and flex space, while other areas favor a wider range of manufacturing, storage and distribution facilities, contractor yards, and the like. The issue is not to prohibit industrial uses that Ashland currently allows, but rather to recognize that even in industrial districts, overly broad use regulations can create a high risk

¹²⁷ See also, State Incentives and Special Financing/Green Communities Act, this chapter.

of land use conflicts. The risk is great enough in Ashland to create disincentives for businesses that provide more tax revenue per sq. ft. and higher-paying jobs. Since Ashland already contends with some competitive disadvantages that are beyond its control, it makes sense to ensure that matters the town *can* control - zoning, capital improvement policies, financial incentives, and internal capacity to engage in economic development - are intelligently aligned with the needs of many types of industries.

Municipal Services for Economic Development

Due to the cost of building and operating schools and their impact on a community's families and property values, residents tend to have strong feelings about public education. People are often far less willing to reduce school spending than spending on municipal services, so in periods of very slow revenue growth, town halls find it increasingly difficult to meet demands for services, maintain employee morale in the face of budget cuts, and provide the basic resources that municipal workers need to do their job. Like other Massachusetts towns, Ashland has had to absorb some municipal staff reductions in order to live within the operating budget approved by town meeting. Despite having to do as much (if not more) with less, Ashland's police, fire, and public works departments and the town manager seem to win high marks from businesses, commercial property owners, and residents.¹²⁸ On a day-to-day basis, Ashland operates as a well-managed community that uses resources efficiently and meets the essential service needs of residents and businesses.

Municipal service delivery matters as much to businesses as schools matter to residents. To business owners, however, municipal services are not limited to public safety and public works. They also need permits and licenses, and some types of businesses are subject to statutory requirements for annual or biannual inspections. In small towns with a decentralized government and barely adequate staffing, businesses yearn for a "point person" who understands their needs as well as the needs of local government. At the most basic level, any plan to strengthen the local economy will falter unless *someone* is in charge of coordinating economic development services. Unfortunately, many communities think "economic development" means bringing in more businesses, but towns that forget to take care of the businesses they already have will find it harder to attract new companies. This is particularly true for towns with market challenges, including Ashland.

Until recently, Ashland has not been organized to engage in economic development. Earlier this year, however, the Town Manager created a new position, Director of Community Development and Health, to provide support for economic policy and development initiatives. The new position, coupled with the Ashland Redevelopment Authority's advocacy for economic growth, should help Ashland work toward building a well-rounded economic development program. Ashland has other resources at its disposal, too. For example:

- **Economic Target Area.** The Framingham-Marlborough Economic Target Area (ETA), which includes Framingham, Marlborough, Ashland, and five other MetroWest communities. An ETA designation qualifies participating communities to create Economic Opportunity Areas (EOA) and seek Certified Project status for economic development projects that create and retain jobs.

¹²⁸ Community Opportunities Group, Inc., and Ashland Community Meeting, June 2-June 9, 2010.

- **Regional Partnership.** The Westborough-based 495/MetroWest Partnership, a collaborative of thirty-two municipalities and MetroWest-area businesses. Ashland is a voting member of the Partnership's Board of Directors.¹²⁹
- **Expedited Permitting.** Ashland Town Meeting recently adopted the provisions of G.L. c. 43D, the Expedited Permitting Law, and designated two locations as Chapter 43D Priority Development Sites. Taking this step qualified Ashland for a state grant to evaluate development opportunities on the Priority Development Sites as well as several other commercially or industrially zoned properties. To comply with the law, Ashland was required to adopt expedited permitting regulations that guarantee a streamlined review and decision process for any site designated under Chapter 43D.

Issues

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Ashland needs to decide what its economic development priorities should be, who should address those priorities, and how best to coordinate the efforts of various town officials. Under the present structure of Ashland's government, several boards and personnel have some degree of involvement with economic development. Sometimes it is unclear whether they have a shared view of the town's goals and priorities or a well-understood framework for policy and implementation. At minimum, those with a direct role to play in economic development include the Board of Selectmen, the Town Manager, the Director of Community Development and Health, the Planning Board, the Town Planner, and the Ashland Redevelopment Authority: three separately elected boards and three professional staff, two organizationally associated with the Board of Selectmen and one with the Planning Board. It is easy to see that but for a cooperative spirit and timely, effective communication, Ashland could unwittingly find itself with well-meaning leaders moving in different (and potentially conflicting) directions. Furthermore, there are only so many initiatives that staff can carry out at the same time, and Ashland has more economic development needs than the staff resources required to support them.

DOWNTOWN ASHLAND

Downtowns are - or should be - the business, social, cultural, and governmental centers of the communities they serve. A prosperous, healthy downtown supports a town's well-being and makes it attractive for more business development. Of the many steps that Ashland can take to strengthen its economy and build a better sense of community, investing in Downtown Ashland will be the most influential and durable.

During public meetings for this plan, residents spoke of their desire for more types of businesses in Ashland and more places for people to congregate and socialize, particularly in Downtown Ashland. However, local businesses sometimes report frustration with the limited support they see from residents, and town officials have mentioned a similar concern. The downtown area could use more retail stores and a wider assortment of small food service establishments, but none of these businesses can survive without considerable support from the community. A Business Improvement District (BID) could provide the organizational structure that downtown needs in order to diversify tenants and focus on

¹²⁹ The 495/MetroWest Partnership, www.495partnership.org/.

merchandising, collaborative marketing, and physical improvements, but until or unless a BID or BID-like structure is established, Ashland has other options if it chooses to use them.

Some communities have assigned planning and economic development staff to work with downtown businesses on strategies to improve the environment for business development. There are examples of "shop local" and "stay local" campaigns in Massachusetts and other states, often spearheaded but invariably supported by local government, to promote downtowns as destinations for the resident population.¹³⁰ For downtown programs, communities have also tapped the National Main Street Center's extensive resources in addition to obtaining technical assistance from the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (MDI). In other communities, planning and economic development staff have hands-on roles in everything from special events planning to managing facility and infrastructure projects that support economic growth, beautification projects, and working alongside the business community on special assignments such as updating sign ordinances and designing thematic (or "branding") wayfinding signage. Every successful venture in downtown revitalization has at least three common features: a clear sense of direction from the community's elected officials, a sustained commitment of local resources, and the presence of a working partnership between the business community and local government.

BUSINESS RETENTION, EXPANSION, AND RECRUITMENT

Due to the desire for tax base growth, communities often put more emphasis on business recruitment than business retention, yet nothing could be more damaging to a recruitment program than failure to attend to the needs of existing businesses. These needs vary significantly, and sometimes they go beyond the expertise and resources of most local governments. Still, it is crucial to understand the kinds of needs that business owners face so that even in communities without in-house expertise, officials and staff will be able to conduct triage and make competent referrals.

There is no "standard" model for local government's role in business retention and expansion or recruitment. Small towns do not have the same resources as cities, so they need to align their approach to economic development with the human and financial resources they have and focus on realistic strategies. In cities and large suburbs with adequate staffing, it is fairly common to have a designated point person (usually an economic development director) who functions as an ombudsman, advocate, and liaison between businesses and local officials. A trusted economic development director with the business community's support has the means to engage in strategic planning for business retention and expansion. However, most economic development directors do not operate as a one-person operation. Usually they have a working business retention team with bankers, marketing professionals, small business consultants, and others. The team, not the staff person, steers the retention and expansion program and often functions as the primary face-to-face contact with local businesses.

Without good information, a business retention program is very unlikely to succeed. At a most basic level, Ashland needs an accurate business inventory that can be mapped.

¹³⁰ See Appendix A.

Without good information, a business retention program is very unlikely to succeed. Ashland has the potential to build the base of information needed for an effective retention effort, but the information has to be organized for spatial analysis. At a most basic level, the town needs an accurate business inventory that can be mapped, and an accurate business inventory cannot be developed without cooperation from the business community and commercial property owners. Ashland has an evolving Geographic Information System (GIS), but the only business-related data that can be illustrated in map form today are real property records from the assessor. While the parcel records contain land use codes, these codes are not a substitute for business data. For example, four contiguous parcels may be assessed as retail properties, but "retail" is a wide-ranging industry, and a building designed for retail occupancy may have vacant space that is not obvious from the information in an assessor's database. To document and quantify the retail business mix, compare and analyze retail trade areas, understand existing business clusters, track vacancies, identify tenant units with leasable floor area that could meet the needs of a start-up or expanding business, and track and report rents, employment, hours of operation, and off-street parking, there should be a business database that can be "joined" to the assessor's parcel database in the town's GIS system.

The process of developing an accurate business inventory usually doubles as a process for evaluating local business needs. It involves surveys and interviews, ideally conducted by a business retention team, and close collaboration with business owners to ensure the accuracy of the information recorded about their businesses. Unless *someone* in local government communicates actively and frequently with the business community, it will not be possible to determine how many businesses need expansion space vs. technical assistance with business management, merchandising, and marketing - and without that information, it is not possible to design a relevant business retention program. Ashland may not have any interest in becoming a technical assistance provider (most small towns do not), but like many local governments, it could serve as a source of data that businesses need and use in making basic business development decisions. Moreover, most of the data that businesses want are the same data sets that governments need for planning and setting policy. A systematically maintained business inventory and a structure for communicating actively and frequently with businesses would help Ashland anticipate changes in the local economy before they happen and enable the town to make informed decisions about how to respond.

TECHNOLOGY

Ashland could make far more effective use of its municipal website as a repository of information for existing local businesses, prospective businesses, commercial and residential developers, and the general public. As currently organized, the website is functional and it contains a fair amount of information, but it could be "friendlier" to a wider audience, including business users. A web page specifically devoted to economic development would be an efficient way to make documents, data, and maps available, provide referrals, enable public access to permit tracking systems, inform the community about the status of economic development plans and initiatives, and promote the town as a good place to do business. Using Chapter 43D funds, the City of Leominster has created a particularly well-organized web page on economic development; <http://leominster43d.info/index.htm>.¹³¹

¹³¹ See Appendix B.

DEVELOPMENT REVIEW & PERMITTING

The business survey conducted for this plan indicates what can best be described as above-average discontent with development review and permitting procedures at Town Hall. The issues may stem from a lack of knowledge among developers and business owners about the state and local requirements that must be met to obtain permits, or they may reflect an excessive workload or understaffed conditions for the Planning Board. While no town board or official should minimize or ignore basic requirements, both permit applicants and abutters need to have confidence that everyone involved with development review is reading and interpreting those requirements in a consistent way. Applicants may not understand what is expected of them if the requirements are unclear or subject to change, depending on the make-up of a board. A basic permitting guide that does more than simply recite what is already in the Zoning Bylaw or a board's administrative regulations sometimes helps to resolve these kinds of problems.

Ashland may also be at the point that it needs to examine the entire organization of development review and permitting: staffing, the size and makeup of town boards and the manner of selecting board members, regulatory consistency, use of peer review consultants, legal services, and the practice of shared or overlapping permitting powers between the Planning Board and Board of Appeals. Some communities have delegated all or substantial portions of site plan review authority to staff as well, recognizing that site plan review is largely a technical review. As a basic aid to economic development, Ashland may also want to build upon its newly created Chapter 43D permitting framework to make permitting decisions more predictable for all applicants, not only those seeking to improve Priority Development Sites.

PLANNING

Ashland's most recent Comprehensive Plan was prepared eight years ago. The version available on the town's website appears to be a draft, but it is sufficiently developed to show the goals and policies that Ashland officials expected to pursue at the time. Many changes have occurred in Ashland since 2002, including the town's advanced Geographic Information System (GIS) capacity, which did not exist when the comprehensive plan was prepared. Today, the town has eight years of experience in hand with a commuter rail station and the attendant growth in rail traffic, and it is grappling with the concept of "structural deficit," a term unfamiliar to officials in most communities when Ashland's Comprehensive Plan Committee began to update the 1988 Master Plan. Ashland is also changing demographically, as evidenced by some of the data in this report. Further, the town has prepared or commissioned other plans since 2002, such as the *Community Development Plan* (2004) an *Open Space and Recreation Plan* (2007), and the Ashland Historical Commission has just completed an extensive historic resources inventory and town history that ought to inform the town's physical and economic planning (not to mention its zoning). In light of these and other issues, Ashland should consider updating the Comprehensive Plan as soon as possible.

Capital Improvements

Ashland has a capital plan, but like most Massachusetts communities and *unlike* communities in many other states, Ashland's capital planning process is driven primarily by departmental needs, with little if any direct relationship with the town's master plan. In states that grant authority for impact fees to cities and towns, the capital plan and master plan are nearly inseparable and both fall within the scope of a planning department's duties. This is because impact fees have to relate rationally to planned public

improvements and they, in turn, are a product of master plan implementation and overall growth planning at the local level. A handful of Massachusetts cities and maturely developed suburbs place capital planning responsibility with the planning department, but for the vast majority of cities and towns, the capital plan is largely a fiscal policy exercise.

Although the legislature did not act on the proposed Comprehensive Land Use Reform and Partnerships Act (CLURPA) this year, it is critical for communities to understand that for the first time since zoning reform efforts began in earnest eleven years ago, the bill finally gained favor with the Joint Municipalities and Regional Government Committee in June 2010. The possibility exists that the CLURPA, in some form, will be enacted next year. Among its provisions is the power to impose development impact fees, subject to a study of the community's long-term facilities and infrastructure needs and corresponding growth projections. Ashland should begin to consider how it will establish defensible impact fees and work toward the closest possible fit between capital plan priorities and the master plan's goals and implementation element.

Even without the lure of impact fees, communities should always bear in mind that in addition to zoning, capital improvements - and the lack thereof - play a significant role in economic development and growth policy. The municipal capital improvements plan is key to ensuring that public investments in facilities and infrastructure support community planning objectives. Furthermore, a capital improvements plan should account not only for projects to be financed with own-source revenues, but also projects that a community expects to fund with non-local sources. In some cases, grant applications for state or federal infrastructure funding will be more competitive if the planning rationale and need for a proposed project are documented in a local capital improvements plan.

State Incentives and Special Financing

The Commonwealth offers several financial and technical assistance resources for economic development, and some of these resources require local government participation.

- **Green Communities Act.** The Green Communities Act of 2008 is comprehensive energy reform legislation with incentives for cities and towns to reduce energy consumption and facilitate permitting for renewable and alternative energy manufacturing and research and development. To date, thirty-five Massachusetts communities have met the requirements for "Green Communities" certification, making them eligible to compete for \$8.1 million in state grants to institute energy efficiency programs and promote renewable energy development.¹³² To achieve Green Communities status, Ashland would need to amend its zoning to specify that renewable or alternative energy facilities are permitted as of right, establish an energy use baseline inventory for municipal buildings, vehicles, and street and traffic lighting, commit to purchasing only fuel-efficient vehicles for municipal use, and require new residential, commercial, and industrial buildings to minimize life-cycle costs by adopting the new Stretch Code or a state-accepted alternative. Ashland already meets

¹³² The current list of designated "Green Communities" includes Acton, Arlington, Athol, Andover, Becket, Belchertown, Cambridge, Chelmsford, Easthampton, Greenfield, Hamilton, Hanover, Holyoke, Hopkinton, Kingston, Lancaster, Lenox, Lexington, Lincoln, Lowell, Mashpee, Medford, Melrose, Montague, Natick, Newton, Northampton, Palmer, Pittsfield, Salem, Springfield, Sudbury, Tyngsborough, Wenham, and Worcester. All thirty-five communities received a Green Communities grant in July 2010.

at least one of the requirements for Green Communities designation because it has adopted Chapter 43D. The opportunity to gain designation by the Green Communities program is currently under discussion in Ashland.

- **Economic Development Incentive Program (EDIP).** As a member of the Framingham-Marlborough ETA, Ashland can facilitate access to state tax credits in order to attract new businesses and promote job creation.¹³³ If the Town designates an Economic Opportunity Area (EOA) that is subsequently approved by the state Economic Assistance Coordinating Council (EACC), a non-manufacturing business locating within the EOA could become eligible for a 3 percent state Investment Tax Credit (ITC) for up to \$10,000 per job created within five years, and a manufacturing business could obtain approval for a 6 percent ITC for up to \$20,000 per job created for five years. The ITC and cost-per-job thresholds are higher for larger companies that create at least 100 new jobs within the first two years of locating or expanding in an EOA. For projects involving a vacant or abandoned building in an EOA, qualifying businesses can apply for a corporate excise deduction or personal income tax deduction equal to 10 percent of the cost of renovations. Finally, Ashland could offer property tax relief by entering into a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) agreement, which also requires EACC approval. As a condition of the TIF agreement, the town could require a company to make local hiring a priority. Some communities simultaneously enter into development agreements in order to obtain additional public benefits.
- **District Improvement Financing (DIF).** In 2003, the legislature enacted G.L. c. 40Q so that cities and towns could spur economic development in designated areas by issuing bonds for public improvements and repaying the debt with the incremental tax revenue generated by new growth. (Chapter 40Q in Massachusetts is what all other states call Tax Increment Financing, but in Massachusetts, Tax Increment Financing is a system of tax credits). Known as District Improvement Financing (DIF), the funding mechanism under Chapter 40Q would require Ashland to designate a development district, prepare a development and financing plan, and obtain prior approval from the EACC. Eligible bonds can be issued for up to thirty years, and the debt is exempt from the calculation of a community's debt ceiling under G.L. c. 44. The rationale for state oversight is that DIF involves a number of risks, notably that the expected development may not materialize - in which case the municipality would have to pay the debt service without the benefit of the additional tax revenue.
- **Massachusetts Downtown Initiative.** Though often thought of as the state's housing agency, the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) administers programs that support community economic development. A potentially beneficial program for Ashland could be the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (MDI), which offers technical assistance and training to communities with downtown revitalization needs. Ashland has already benefited from some of MDI's resources, such as a presentation on Business Improvement Districts in May. MID sponsors workshops and conferences throughout the year and also makes a limited number of grants available for downtown-related planning needs.

¹³³ In 2009-2001, the EDIP was substantially overhauled in part due to published concerns about the program's effectiveness and the types of jobs created by businesses with ITCs. The program benefits described here are based on the EDIP's new regulations and approval standards. Since Ashland does not meet the EDIP criteria for a "gateway" or an "underperforming" community, the ITC amounts are lower than in economically distressed communities.

- **Business Improvement District (BID).** A Business Improvement District (BID) can be created under the provisions of G.L. c. 40O. A BID is a special assessment district composed of a contiguous area, designated by a city or town at the request of property owners, in which at least 75 percent of the land is zoned or used for commercial, industrial, or mixed uses. Its purpose is to provide a dedicated revenue stream for programs, services, and capital improvements that benefit properties in the district. Property owners within the BID pay for these services with revenue from a special assessment they agree to pay above and beyond their property tax bill, somewhat like a Community Preservation Act (CPA) surcharge. All of the special revenue goes to the BID, and the managing entity for the BID (a board of directors) has authority to invest the revenue as determined by the property owners. BIDs have elected to invest in collaborative marketing and promotions, beautification projects, streetscape improvements, additional security (above and beyond ordinary police patrols), and private property improvements such as sign and façade grants or loans.

In order to establish a BID, the owners of at least 60 percent of all properties and 51 percent of the total assessed value of properties in the district have to petition the Board of Selectmen, which in turn is required to hold a public hearing before making a decision. The Massachusetts BID model includes an opt-out provision that allows property owners within the proposed district to exempt themselves from the special assessment, but property owners with exempt status can elect to join the BID at a later time.

UNDERSTANDING THE FISCAL IMPACT OF LAND USE POLICIES

Ashland's development pattern and the composition of its tax base are unusual for an Eastern Massachusetts suburb. Since Ashland has such a large townhouse inventory, single-family homes make up a comparatively small share of the residential tax base: only 63 percent. On one hand, the diversity of Ashland's housing makes the town somewhat more affordable than other MetroWest suburbs simply because it has opted for non-exclusionary land use policies. On the other hand, the same housing diversity has kept Ashland's school enrollment growth in check because by zoning for small housing units, Ashland has attracted many small households. Communities control the make-up of their population by the steps they take to control housing growth, and Ashland is no exception. When a town chooses to allow a large number of townhouse and multi-family housing units instead of taking the "default" position of most suburbs - that is, policies favoring detached single-family dwellings and discouraging or simply prohibiting any other housing type - it makes a choice that has both social and fiscal implications.

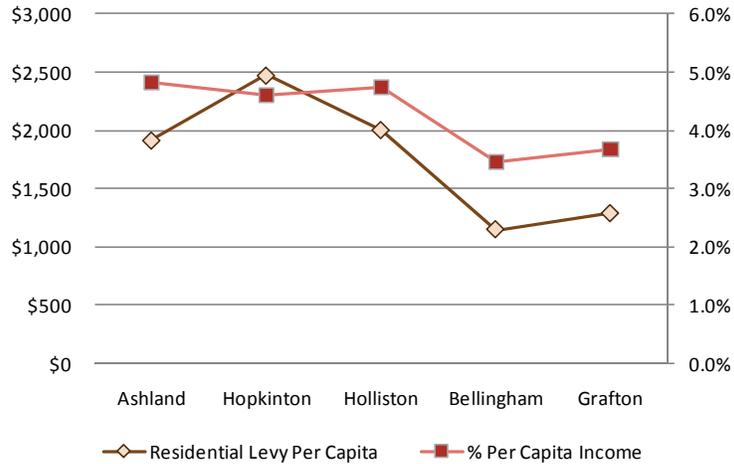
Issues

Relative to its neighbors and demographically similar communities, Ashland has a low ratio of nonresidential tax revenue. In fact, the ratio of total levy per capita to residential levy per capita (1.09) is lower in Ashland than in all other comparison towns, yet as a percentage of per capita income, the residential tax levy per capita in Ashland is higher. These ratios are striking because on first glance, Ashland's land use pattern would suggest that nonresidential development generates a larger share of the tax levy. On second glance, however, the land use pattern and the ratio begin to make more sense.

■ **Tired Assets.** Ashland has some high-value industrial and commercial sites, but for the most part, the existing industrially and commercially developed properties are older, "tired" assets that generate modest income and therefore have modest capitalized value. There does not appear to be much incentive to redevelop, for Ashland's commercial rents tend to be low compared with other towns in the region.

**Residential Tax Levy Per Capita:
% Per Capita Income (2009)**

Sources: DOR, Claritas, Inc. and Community Opportunities Group, Inc.



■ **Low Intensity of Use.** With the exception of several properties in and adjacent to Downtown Ashland, most of Ashland's commercial and industrial development reflects a fairly inefficient, low intensity of use. When land is consumed by low-rise buildings and large amounts of parking, its tax revenue potential is effectively curtailed.

■ **Anything Goes.** There seems to be a perception in Ashland that the town's financial survival hinges on business development. Accordingly, many town officials and residents say Ashland needs commercial and industrial growth, yet "more" is not always "better." Ashland allows a very wide range of businesses in most of its nonresidential zoning districts, ostensibly to encourage commercial and industrial growth, yet the town has not reserved any areas for high-value development and it apparently has chosen to place few if any quality expectations on the development that has occurred. The town's very liberal use regulations, coupled with lack of design review (or the presence of an ineffective design review process), have gradually cultivated a chaotic and unattractive development pattern in some of the business areas, and this further depresses property values.

■ **Child-Proof Housing.** Whether conscious or accidental, Ashland's land use policies do more to control growth in community service costs than provide for growth in tax revenue. Much of the housing diversity that exists in Ashland today represents decisions that town meetings have made to zone for moderate-density developments with size-limited or age-restricted housing units. Due to Ashland's social policies, the average number of school-age children per household is smaller than in all of the surrounding communities. In Ashland, the residential tax levy exceeds total general fund expenditures for schools. None of the other towns nearby can make the same claim.

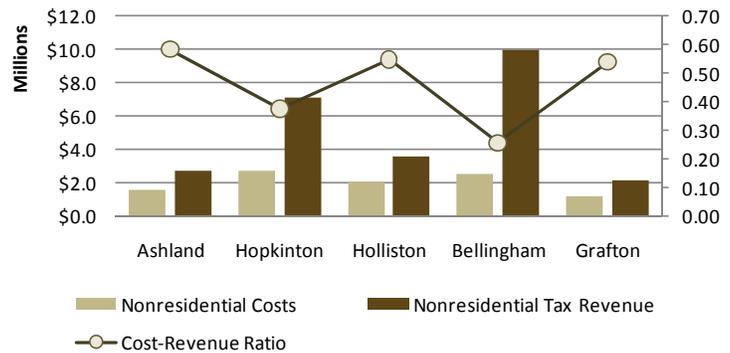
■ **Image.** Although Ashland is changing demographically and the town has more higher-income households today than, say, twenty-five or thirty years ago, it still does not have the household wealth or property values of most neighboring communities. These conditions do not make Ashland an undesirable place for business, but they do mean the town has to work harder to attract and keep its share of the region's economic growth. Upscale businesses and companies that make siting decisions based in part of community demographics are more likely to choose other MetroWest locations unless Ashland makes a concerted effort to change its image, and to date that has not

happened. Investing wisely in public improvements can build private property values, which in turn broadens the tax base.

Under existing conditions, about 11 percent of Ashland's municipal (non-school) expenditures pay for services used by commercial and industrial development: primarily police, fire, and public works. For every dollar of tax revenue that Ashland receives from nonresidential taxpayers, the town spends about 59 cents on nonresidential municipal services, i.e., the cost-revenue ratio (net fiscal impact) of commercial and industrial land uses is 0.59, *on average*. Though favorable to Ashland, the cost-revenue ratio for commercial and industrial uses is lower in all of the surrounding towns, i.e., the amount of *net revenue* from commercial and industrial development is greater and in two cases, much greater.¹³⁴ The underlying causes are complicated and debatable, but some general findings can be gleaned from other communities in the Commonwealth.¹³⁵

Comparative Fiscal Impact: Existing Nonresidential Development

Source: Community Opportunities Group, Inc.



- **Flex Space.** Higher-value R&D/flex space, high-tech manufacturing, and professional (non-medical) offices usually place very few demands on municipal services, and the services they depend on the most are typically operated as a municipal enterprise: water and sewer. Industrial uses are primarily utility-intensive land uses. To be sure, they generate other demands as well, such as timely road maintenance by public works departments and traffic control and enforcement by public safety personnel. Relative to the amount of tax revenue they generate, however, these land uses almost always produce a highly favorable fiscal impact, expressed in a low cost-revenue ratio that ranges from 0.21 to 0.29.
- **Light Manufacturing.** While light manufacturing, packaging and assembly operations also require little in the way of municipal services, they generate far less revenue per sq. ft. and as a result, the cost-revenue ratio is not as beneficial to the community. A cost-revenue ratio of 0.32 to 0.41 is fairly typical for these land uses.
- **Retail.** Compared with R&D or light industrial development, retail uses demand more municipal service delivery, but they also generate more tax revenue per sq. ft. Due to the variety that exists within the retail industry, however, it is not possible to characterize all types of retail with one range

¹³⁴ Ashland, Hopkinton, Holliston, and Grafton tax real and personal property at a uniform rate; Bellingham has a split tax rate.

¹³⁵ Community Opportunities Group, Inc., drawn from fiscal impact studies prepared in Hopkinton, Southborough, Framingham, Bellingham, Grafton, Northborough, Shrewsbury, Marlborough, Acton, Wayland, Franklin, North Reading, and Natick, 2007-2010.

of cost-revenue ratios. Furthermore, the location of retail development plays a major part in determining a community's actual cost of services. For example, downtowns and town centers usually have a mixed-use development pattern that includes institutional uses and housing, and since they are compact, high-activity areas, they tend to constitute a single police patrol zone. Accurately assigning the cost of police services to each land use requires data that most communities do not have, but in towns that have the data to support a mixed-use analysis, the cost-revenue ratio for retail and service uses ranges from 0.29 to 0.37. By contrast, suburban shopping centers generally range from 0.40 to 0.55, and low-intensity big-box developments in highway-oriented areas can range anywhere from 0.57 to 0.72, depending on the mix of stores.

- **Tax Rate Policy.** Though some communities subsidize the cost of residential services by imposing a higher tax rate on commercial and industrial property, a split tax rate is not a "cure-all" for high residential property taxes. Moreover, it can work against a community's economic development goals. This is especially true when the employment base is dominated by small, local businesses. In some Massachusetts communities, the cost-to-revenue ratio for nonresidential development is very low - meaning the net tax revenue is very favorable - without any artificial adjustment to the tax rate, e.g., Boxborough, Wellesley, Hingham, Concord, and Natick.

Challenges

Promoting a community's fiscal well-being is a valid town planning objective, but it should never be the driving force behind land use and zoning decisions. Other factors are important, too, which means that communities need to be open to trade-offs.

- **Competing Public Benefits.** Some land uses provide social or environmental benefits that matter more than municipal revenues.
- **Chapter 40B.** Zoning large amounts of land for nonresidential development does not always guarantee nonresidential tax revenue or job creation. Under the right market conditions, land zoned for industrial uses has been very attractive to affordable housing developers - far more attractive than residentially zoned land. Sometimes the land is not well suited for industrial use, but in addition, it is less likely to have a large number of abutters.
- **Long-Term Variables.** Changes in the economy, technology, state aid policies, and federalism play a significant role in the long-term fiscal impact of development. Fiscal zoning does not guarantee the durability of a revenue stream.
- **Causal Fallacies.** In all communities, operating costs increase even without population and household growth. The best example is the rapid acceleration in fixed costs such as employee health insurance since the late 1990s. Adjusted for inflation, Ashland's total general fund operating expenditures increased at an average rate of three percent per capita per year from FY 2000 to FY2009, but fixed costs increased at an average annual rate of about nine percent per capita. Housing development has not caused Ashland's revenue shortages.
- **Common Vision.** From public meetings and surveys conducted for this plan, it is very clear that Ashland residents do not have a shared vision of the town, its needs, or its future. Ashland has many boards and committees, a business association, and numerous community organizations, but it seems

to lack effective mechanisms for enlisting informed public participation and reaching consensus. As currently organized, its government has some of the qualities of a "counter-bureaucracy" - a structure that has advantages, but it also can interfere with building unity. Ashland needs to devote some thought to the kind of community it wants to be, the kind of economy it wants to have, and how its physical evolution can achieve those ends, and then plan, zone, and invest its resources accordingly.

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6. Recommendations

GRADE CROSSING MITIGATION

- 1) Secure a site suitable for a new public safety building and relocate the Police and Fire Departments out of Downtown Ashland, substantially as recommended in the *Fire and Police Station Space Needs Assessment and Location Study* (2006).
- 2) Work with State Senator Karen Spilka and the Massachusetts Department of Transportation to obtain state financial assistance for design and construction of a new public safety building and public realm enhancements on Main Street between Pleasant Street to Union Street and along Pleasant Street between the commuter rail station and Main Street.
- 3) Prioritize the non-grade separation options outlined in the Ashland Grade Crossing Study (2010), focusing on the following measures:
 - a) Eliminate user conflicts at the Main Street grade crossing, e.g., by installing safety barriers and relocating the existing school bus stop;
 - b) Replace traffic signal equipment;
 - c) Improve rail signals;
 - d) Reduce pedestrian walk time;
 - e) Restrict left-turn movements from southbound Main Street to Homer Avenue and consider restricting left turns to Central Street during school start and closing times during the morning and afternoon;
 - f) Consult with downtown business owners about Main Street modifications that would reduce existing on-street parking; and
 - g) Work with the MBTA to open the MBTA access road as an alternative public route during train crossing events and to construct another means of pedestrian access between the train station and Downtown Ashland.
- 4) In the interests of attracting a high-quality mixed-use redevelopment plan for the fire station, consider allowing the property to be conveyed through a public benefit disposition process under G.L. c. 30B (i.e., at below-market value) in exchange for a project that includes affordable housing and provides for a perpetual historic preservation restriction; and invest the proceeds in capital improvements that benefit the downtown area. Alternatively, dispose of the property at market value but allow flexible payment terms in order to reduce the developer's up-front risk, e.g., graduated acquisition cost payments based on a percentage of unit sales or tenant occupancy.
- 5) Continue to explore the feasibility of a longer-term plan to depress the railroad tracks under Cherry Street and Main Street.

ZONING, DEVELOPMENT REVIEW, AND PERMITTING

- 1) Conduct a comprehensive (policy) revision of the Ashland Zoning Bylaw and correct, as necessary, the Zoning Map. At minimum, consider the following revisions:
 - a) Revisit the size and boundaries of the existing mixed-use overlay districts and "special" districts, clarify their intent and operation with respect to underlying zoning, and focus on logical nodes of activity and form-based regulations;
 - b) Revisit the lot regulations in the overlay and special districts, focusing on strategies to encourage parcel assembly and shared access;
 - c) Eliminate the potential for land use conflicts in the Commercial Highway district, including any overlay districts superimposed upon it;
 - d) Update the existing off-street parking regulations and provide parking lot design standards with incentives for low-impact development techniques;
 - e) Update the existing landscaping regulations by replacing the existing quantitative approach with qualitative standards;
 - f) Provide incentives for transportation demand management (TDM) in larger office and industrial developments, especially on Pond Street/Route 126; and
 - g) Institute design review for all multi-family, mixed-use, and commercial and industrial projects, and consult with the Ashland Historical Commission about appropriate design standards for alterations to documented historic buildings.
- 2) Evaluate the town's existing development review and permitting procedures and institute a streamlined decision process wherever possible, including but not limited to delegating some Site Plan Review authority to professional staff.
- 3) Explore the costs and benefits of establishing a consolidated Community Development Department by amending the town charter or adopting the provisions of G.L. c. 43C, § 12.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- 1) Form an Economic Development Advisory Council with business leaders, developers, commercial property owners, local attorneys, and representatives of local banks, to advise the Board of Selectmen and provide economic development implementation support to the Director of Community Development and Health, focusing on a comprehensive business inventory, business retention and expansion, and business recruitment.
- 2) Review data management systems and reorganize town databases so that all property-based records include an assessor's parcel identification number (PID). Instituting a consistent database structure will help to integrate municipal databases with the proposed business inventory, improve planning, and support economic development program evaluation. Databases that should be reviewed include inspectional services, licensing and permits, water and sewer, police department, fire department, DPW road maintenance, and tax liens.

- 3) Evaluate the costs and benefits of establishing a Business Improvement District (BID) in Downtown Ashland and on Pond Street/Route 126.
- 4) Reorganize the town website and create a web page specifically devoted to economic development. For a list of communities with economic development web pages, see Appendix X.
- 5) Make optimal use of existing regional resources for economic development, e.g., the 495/MetroWest Partnership.

PLANNING & IMPLEMENTATION

- 1) Update the Ashland Comprehensive Plan.
- 2) Review the existing Capital Improvements Plan (CIP) process to ensure consistency of CIP with the town's Comprehensive Plan.

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The 495/MetroWest Partnership. www.495partnership.org/.

MetroWest Regional Transit Authority. www.mbta.com/

Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. www.mwrta.com/

8. Appendix

Appendix A: Sample of "Buy Local" Initiatives

Portland, Maine. *Portland Buy Local: Keep Portland Independent*. www.portlandbuylocal.org/

Turners Falls, Massachusetts. *Shop Western Mass*. www.shopwesternmass.com/

Northampton, Massachusetts, and others. *Pioneer Valley Local First*. www.pvlocalfirst.org/

Orlando, Florida. *Buy Local Orlando*. <http://www.buylocalorlando.net/>

Raleigh, North Carolina. *Shop Local Raleigh*. <http://shoplocalraleigh.org/>

Belleville, Michigan. *Buy It in Belleville*. www.belleville.mi.us/

Chapin, South Carolina. *I'm Looking LOCAL First*. www.chapin-explorer.com/

Sanders County, Montana. *ShopMeLocal*. <http://shopmelocal.com/>

Holton, Kansas. *Holton Main Street Shop Local Campaign*. <http://holtonmainstreet.org/>

Hillsdale, Michigan. *Try Us First (TUF)*. www.buildhillsdale.org/

Wise, Virginia. *Shop Local Campaign*. www.townofwise.net/

Appendix B: Community Economic Development Websites (Sample)

City of Leominster, Massachusetts. *Chapter 43D Online Handbook*. <http://leominster43d.info/index.htm>

City of Lynn, Massachusetts. *EDIC/Lynn*. www.ediclynn.org/

City of Salem, Massachusetts. *Business and Economic Development*. www.salem.com/Pages/SalemMA_EcDev/index

City of Taunton, Massachusetts. *Department of Economic and Community Development*. www.taunton-ma.gov/Pages/TauntonMA_CommDev/index

Peterborough, New Hampshire. *Monadnock Economic Development Corporation*. <http://monadnock-development.org/index.html> (Note: this is comparable to an EDIC in Massachusetts)

Town of Littleton, Massachusetts. *Economic Development*. <http://www.littletonma.org/>

Town of Orange, Massachusetts. *Chapter 43D Priority Development Sites*. www.townoforange.org/

Town of Plymouth, Massachusetts. *Plymouth Regional Economic Development Foundation*. www.plymouthbusiness.org/ (Note: this is a multi-town EDIC initiated by the Town of Plymouth.)

Town of Westwood, Massachusetts. *Economic Development Commission*. www.townhall.westwood.ma.us/

