

DAVID C FOSTER

PRESERVING OUR PAST AND ENHANCING OUR FUTURE

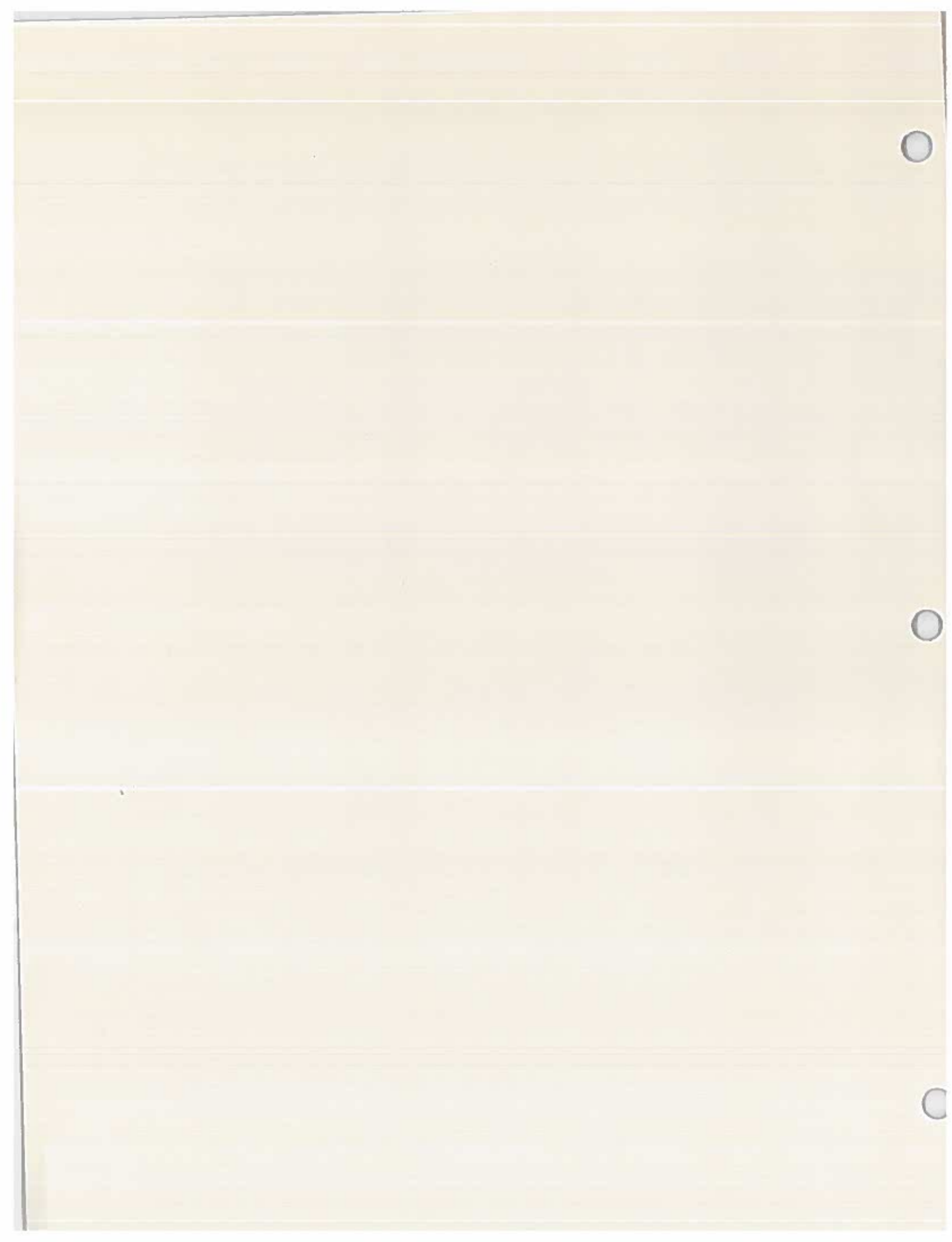
The Executive Summary to
THE 1988 ASHLAND COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

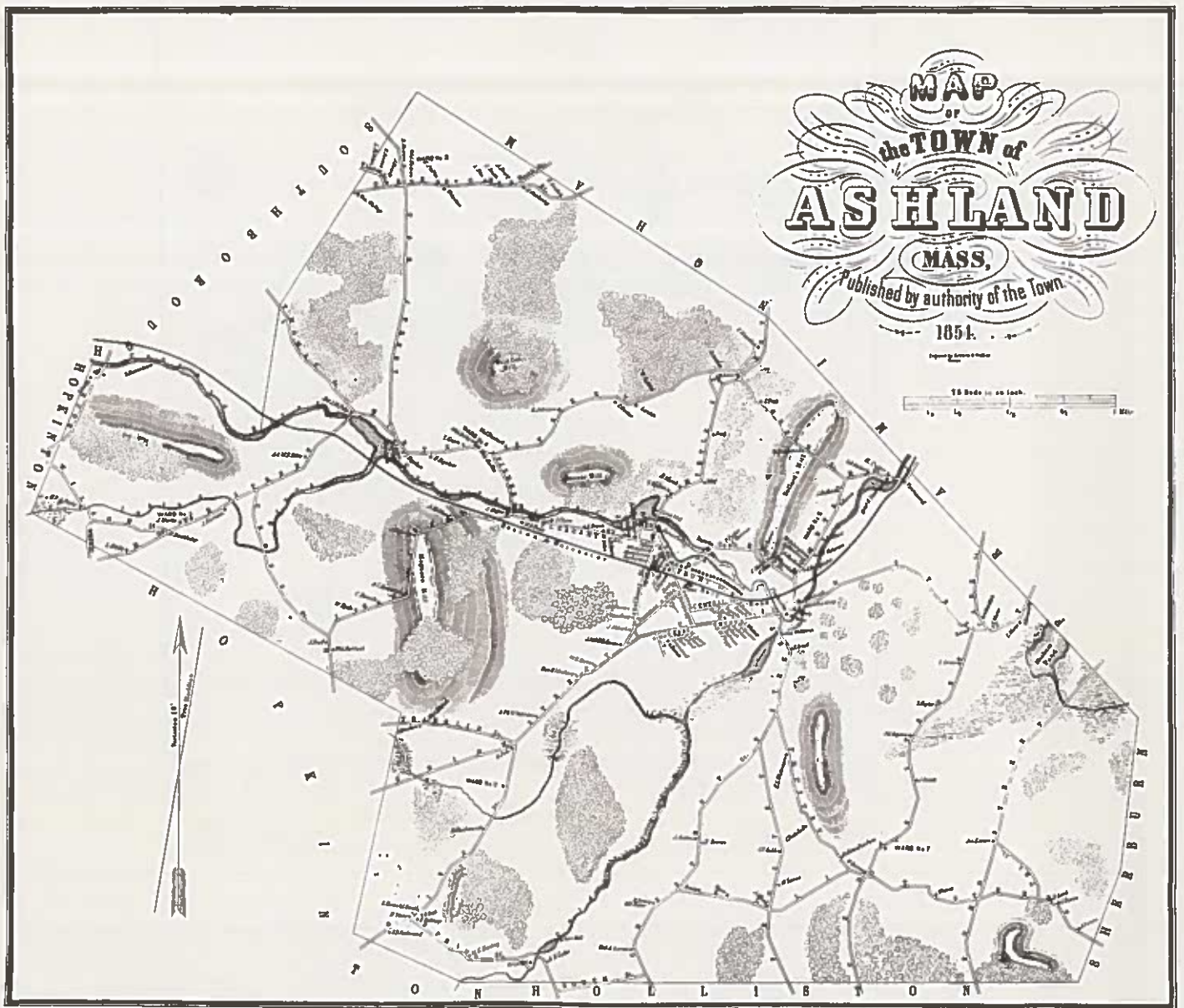
Prepared by
Ashland Comprehensive Plan Committee
for
The Ashland Planning Board

Project Consultant:
LandUse, Incorporated

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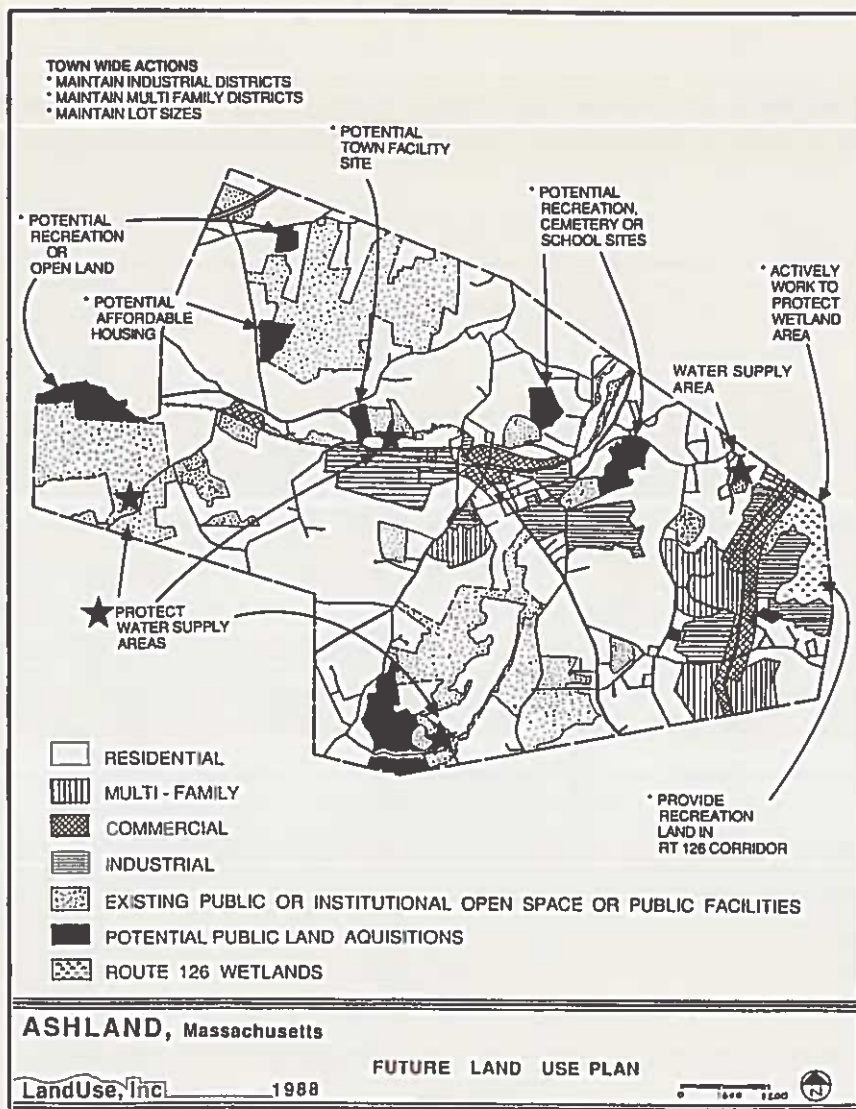




*Historical Map of the Town of Ashland, 1854.
from ASHLAND'S ONE HUNDREDTH BIRTHDAY, 1946*

The Ashland Comprehensive Plan is a guidebook to the future of Ashland. It expresses both what Ashland should preserve of its past, as well as the work that is needed to enhance the town and guide its future physical and social development. It is a tool to be used by the officials, residents and builders of Ashland to shape our community from the present through the years to come. Ashland, as all communities, faces a choice: it can either plan for itself, or be planned upon by others.

Ashland is a great town; there are some areas of open space, a healthy downtown, an excellent school system and neighborhoods that provide residents with safety and a sense of community. The town has a small but strong industrial base. For a place with a small town atmosphere, Ashland also has the best mixture of housing options in all the MetroWest region. All of these things make the town a good place to live, work and raise a family.



There is an urgency behind this scenario, however, both for the present and the future. For instance, although we have open land in Ashland, there are neighborhoods that have no public land on playgrounds. As each new house is built and each acre of land is developed, our town character changes and land is lost that may be needed for a future public use. Once land is developed it is difficult to use it for a public purpose such as a school or park. And each piece of land that is developed is less land for wildlife. And with each new house and store, more traffic will be on our streets.

Granted, development and change will occur, but only by acting now, on a variety of fronts, can the town guide this development process and ensure that Ashland will continue to be a good place to live in the next century.

This plan is designed to sort out the questions that Ashland must answer if the

town is to have adequate recreation land, water resources, school sites, adequate town services and an efficient street network.

This Executive Summary gives an overview of the Ashland Comprehensive Plan. It highlights the critical problems and the major recommendations stemming from the plan. For a more detailed understanding of the plan, refer to the full reports produced for the Comprehensive Plan.

"Planning" does not mean controlling what happens on every parcel of land. It does mean considering what kind of coordinated effort between local government and private property owners is needed for the long-term benefit of the town as a whole. Perhaps most importantly, planning means that the town should think today about its future needs. It is in the Town's best interest to plan now for the future.

We see several problems facing us today and in the future:

1. No coordinated, overall direction for day-to-day decisions. Without a common direction, boards and departments act in isolation.

2. A lack of housing that is affordable. Housing will continue to be out of the reach of many Ashland residents. Young people will move away. Older people will not be able to find smaller, affordable units. The people who work in local industry will live in other towns (assuming that affordable housing can be found anywhere).

3. Loss of industry and the taxes it pays due to labor and affordable housing shortages. Many Ashlanders take for granted the industrial base, its taxes and its local jobs. There is no guarantee that these businesses will stay in town if there is inadequate labor and housing beyond the reach of those employees.

4. A division will continue between Route 126 and the rest of town. Businesses and residents in the Route 126 corridor need to be involved in town affairs for the town needs them.

5. Scattered business development in the downtown and a loss of rental housing. Business development will move to what are now residential streets in the downtown. There will be businesses around Stone Park that will result in problems in traffic flow and safety. Rental housing will be lost.

6. Gradual dribbling of businesses along Route 135 toward Hopkinton, Framingham. Commercial development will gradually move its way toward the Hopkinton line along Route 135. The market will encourage this "creeping commercialism" due to the amount of traffic flow and the lack of a clear policy on the extent and type of commercial land should be along Route 135.

7. Increasing land prices and decreasing amounts of open land will make it harder to purchase public land in the future if the need arises. The amount of open land in Ashland is disappearing rapidly (over 300 acres of woodland were developed from 1981 to 1985). As the town continues to expand, there will be a need for additional town land for conservation areas, parks, fields, schools and buildings. If the town waits to act, its options will become more and more limited and costs will continue to rise. The remaining open land, that people take for granted, will be built on.

8. Traffic congestion will worsen if the number of curb cuts and businesses increases without coordinated plans. Efforts to improve traffic flow must be balanced, however, with avoiding solutions that turn Ashland into a "thruway", a place that people just pass through on their way to somewhere else. Without government leadership and responsiveness, public transportation will continue to be a last resort means of travel for most people. An MBTA rail station could be sited in Ashland without the town having a clear policy of either support or opposition.

9. Inadequate long-term protection of the town's water supplies. Currently the town owns a buffer of 400 feet around the town wells. Beyond that there is no protection from contamination.

10. No vision of what we want our community to be in the future. Without a vision of where we are headed, boards will continue to act on their own, there will be no coordination. We will find ourselves in the year 2000 with a community that evolved due to market forces, rather than a community that is what we wanted it to be.

This Comprehensive Plan attempts to pull all of these concerns together into a coordinated set of goals, policies and actions for the future. The Town of Ashland has the opportunity to guide critical land use decisions in a manner that will ensure solid property values, safe traffic flow, a mixture of places to live and do business and an environment that is clean and accessible to all residents. The opportunity is there to improve on what Ashland is today. Complacency will allow that opportunity to slip away.

We need goals to direct our day-to-day decisions:

1. To define Ashland and promote this image to both residents and the outside world.
2. To unite the town for common purposes and put aside past differences and attitudes.
3. To commit the resources to make Ashland a better community tomorrow.
4. To coordinate expansion of town services and investments with the planned growth of the town.
5. To provide a range of options for safe and affordable housing and to encourage that all housing be planned in ways that will create neighborhoods which are good places for people to live and which will enhance the long-term social, environmental, economic and political health of the community. To work for the creation of housing that spans the spectrum from low/moderate to expensive and from rental to ownership.
6. To provide, within adequate proximity to all residents of Ashland, a built and natural environment where passive, active and visual recreation and appreciation of nature can take place.
7. To encourage a healthy local economy that provides jobs, tax revenues and business opportunities while protecting the town's residential neighborhoods.
8. To protect and enhance a high quality environment which can accommodate an attractively built community with minimal impact on air, land, water quality and natural habitats and to restore those parts of our environment that have been damaged in the past.
9. To encourage the efficient and safe flow of traffic within the town, the provision of public transportation and the management of transportation in a manner that benefits both business and residences.

The Comprehensive Plan provides a vision of the future that we are trying to create...

Downtown:

The downtown should be a place for people to gather, to shop, to walk, to recreate and to participate in town affairs. The businesses in the downtown should serve local, rather than regional needs. The downtown should be kept at a small scale level to encourage the continuation of both housing and business occurring in the same area. The downtown must search for its own style and architectural character since it is not a typical 19th-century area; it developed later than its neighboring towns.

Route 126:

The Route 126 corridor is an area that needs attention. It should serve as an attractive, business-oriented street and as a neighborhood business area for the housing that lies along the corridor. This important road should help serve the needs of the town's new population areas on the east side of town, while at the same time providing sensible areas for new businesses to open. Its current condition in some areas is blighted and rundown, while in other areas there has been recent investment. This entire corridor needs a specific plan of action to encourage it to become Ashland's newest neighborhood.

Route 135:

Route 135 has developed commercially as much as it should. The town should carefully control new business expansion along the corridor and primarily contain commercial activity to the areas currently zoned for business. The one exception to this could be the area lying between Summer Street and Homer Street. Increased traffic may have impacted the desirability of the area for residential use and therefore this area may be well served by a limited business district (i.e., professional offices). The new developments that will be occurring on roads that join Route 135 will bring additional traffic. Additional commercial development will only worsen the problem.

Outlying Areas:

Ashland should nurture its rural/suburban atmosphere. The town's primarily residential character should be encouraged. When possible, remaining open spaces should be protected and linked together. Future generations who live in Ashland should be able to appreciate the rural quality that brought each of us to this town. At the same time, it must be recognized that the town has changed significantly in the last 10 years. In many ways, the town is more suburban now than it is rural.

This plan is based on action...

The specific goals, policies and actions for this Plan are presented in the full report. The following points summarize the major concepts of the plan, as well as the actions needed to reach the objectives.

1. Route 126 Upgrade

A deliberate effort is needed on the part of the Town of Ashland to include the Route 126 corridor in its policy level and day-to-day decision making.

Focused effort and investment on the part of the Town will be needed to upgrade the Route 126 corridor and to encourage the development of a more cohesive neighborhood in that area of town. The goal is to link the higher density residential areas, the single-family areas and the developing commercial areas together more closely.

Specific actions should include creating a Route 126 redevelopment authority to bring together public and private money in order to upgrade landscaping and invest in sidewalks.

Roadway improvements, such as turning lanes, are also needed to improve traffic safety and overall flow.

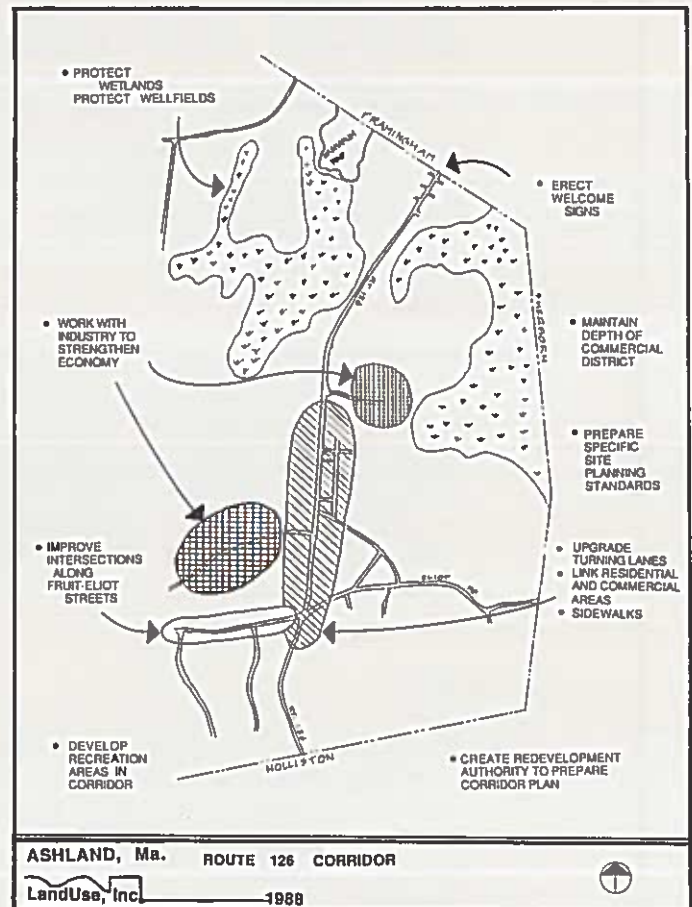
Special attention must also be paid to the support and maintenance of the town's industrial base along the corridor. The major need here is for ongoing improvements to town streets and sewer and water mains. Improving the traffic flow will also help local industry.

The largest wetland and wildlife area in Ashland lies along Route 126. It should be protected. The recent amount of growth along Route 126 has shifted the center of population in Ashland from the downtown area toward the east, and so the current lack of recreation land and recreation amenities on the eastern side of town is a clear need. It is recommended that land be purchased for a recreation area.

2. Affordable Housing

Ashland faces a problem that is common to communities throughout New England: a lack of housing that is affordable to those without high incomes. Whether it is apartments, condominiums or single-family houses, the cost of housing has increased four to five times faster than the average family income.

This plan recommends that Ashland continue its efforts to have a range of housing types in town, that it protect the existing rental housing in the downtown, and that it



create policies and programs to encourage the private sector to produce affordable housing.

Recommendations include preventing commercial use of residential areas in the downtown; purchasing land for future school or recreation needs and developing housing on a part of the site; and changing the zoning bylaw to allow affordable housing to be built at higher densities if a significant part of the property is set aside as open space forever.

3. Improve East to West Movement

Access from the downtown / Route 135 corridor to the Route 126 corridor must be improved. Improvements to the Main / Prospect / Fruit / Eliot streets corridor are recommended within the Plan, as well as the need for a residential access street from the Chestnut area to the Cedar Street area. Improvements will also be required along the Cedar Street corridor due to increased use of this street by those travelling from the south of Ashland to Framingham.

4. Route 135 Management

The Route 135 corridor is quite balanced at the present but will require careful management and clear planning policies in the future. Increasing commuter traffic between Hopkinton and Framingham is causing greater delays. Increased residential development in the Megunko Hill area will also feed onto this road. A major recommendation of the 1988 Plan is that the limits of the Route 135 commercial boundaries not be extended in either direction, that is, commercial development should not "dribble" down Route 135 toward Hopkinton, nor should it be expanded toward Framingham. This containment is necessary to protect the primarily residential character of the Route 135 corridor as well as to minimize additional traffic problems.

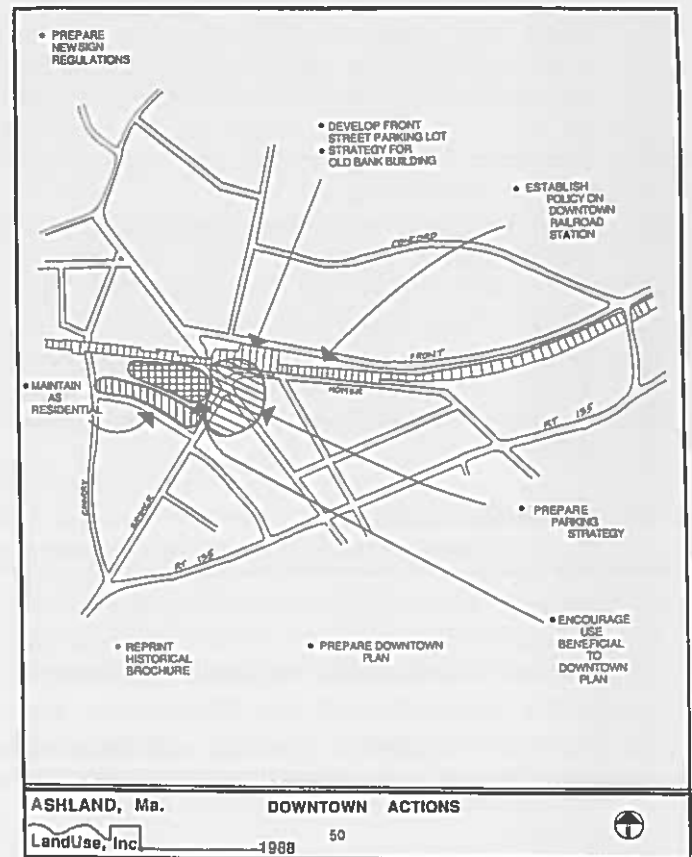
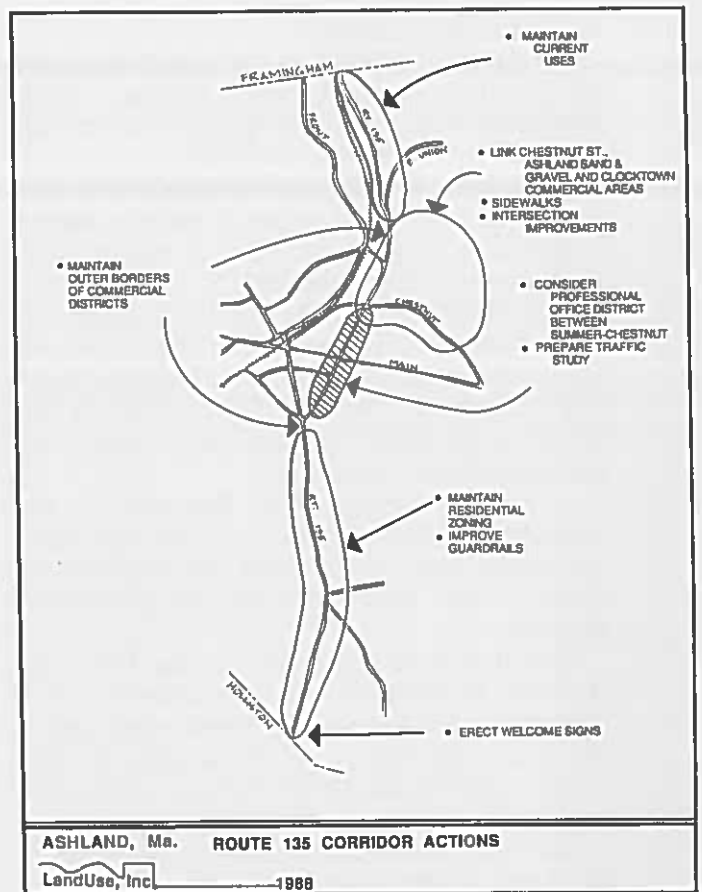
The Plan does recommend closer examination of the use of a professional office district in the area lying between Homer Avenue and Summer Street. Increasing traffic is causing deterioration in the residential neighborhoods in this area and the shift towards a mixed professional office and rental housing is advisable.

5. Protect the Downtown

Careful attention is recommended for the downtown area. The downtown faces several barriers to having a cohesive, pedestrian environment: the presence of a railroad, the lack of on-street parking, the lack of off-street parking in the vicinity of the post office, and the conflict in the downtown between it acting as a conduit for traffic moving east to west and acting as center for government and local shopping.

A variety of recommendations are made within the Plan, perhaps the most important is the need for a detailed plan of action concerning public parking and the reuse of public buildings. In addition, the pros and cons of a commuter rail station must be carefully evaluated by the Town.

A set of sign and architectural guidelines should also be developed to give the downtown more continuity in design.



6. Open Space Actions

Ashland is fortunate to have large amounts of publicly owned open space. The distribution of that open space, however, is not uniform throughout the town.

This plan strongly recommends that the Town move ahead with a public lands acquisition program in order to ensure that the town will have the land it needs in the future. As shown on the public land plan, a variety of parcels have been identified as having potential for public use. The plan does not recommend that all of these parcels be acquired, but rather that these lands should be examined more closely.

Another objective of the plan is to encourage Ashland residents to put a priority on natural land, that is, land that can remain forever wild. This is an important gift to our children.

It will also be important for the Town of Ashland to monitor and work closely with managers of institutionally owned open space that have the option of developing in the future (Northeastern University and 4-H property).

The town also needs to prepare a plan for the future of the Town Forest.

7. Protection of Remaining Rural Character

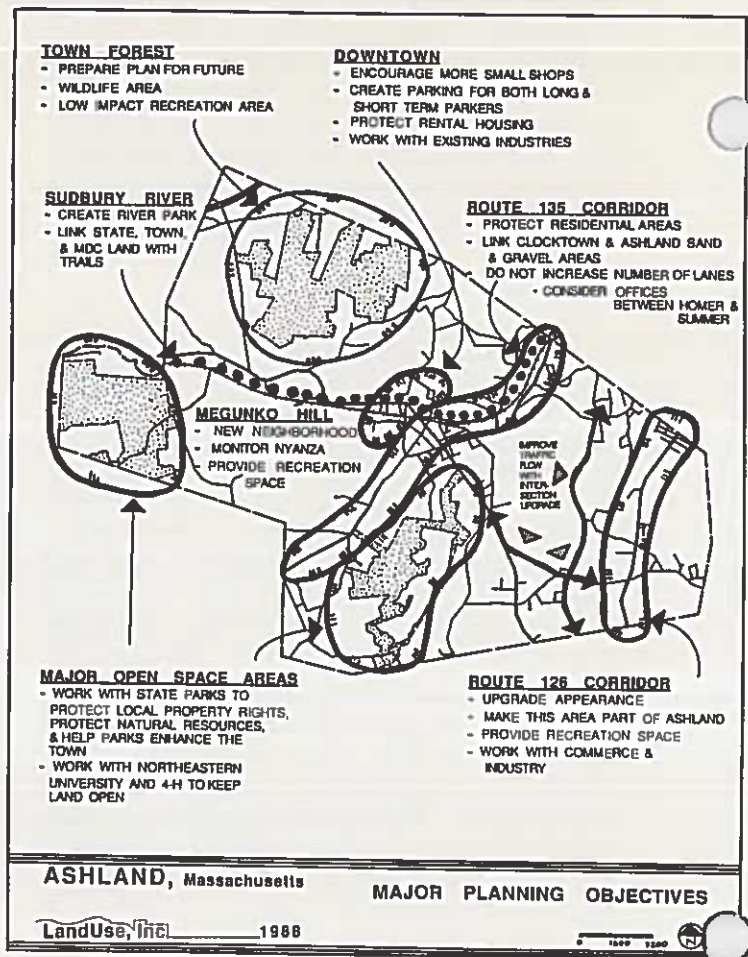
The policies recommended for the remaining areas of Ashland focus on the protection of the existing and emerging residential neighborhoods and the provision of open space and recreation land in the Megunko Hill area and in the southeastern corner of the town.

Emphasis is also placed on careful road improvement planning. The majority of Ashland's residences lie along collector streets that connect with abutting towns. If road improvements seek only to improve safety and efficiency, they will have significant negative impacts on the residential character of these streets.

8. Keep on Planning

A theme that runs throughout this plan is the need to continue the town's planning efforts. In order to reach these objectives, the town will continue to need a professional planner as well as the continued involvement of the Comprehensive Plan Committee. The town must place a large element of responsibility for implementation with the various boards and departments targeted by this plan.

There are many good directions and ideas in this plan, but they will mean nothing if no one completes the work.



What's Next?

How can you help bring this plan to completion? First, join a town board or committee. Give your name to the Town Manager for the type of work you are interested in. All Ashland committees are made up of volunteers with busy lives. The more people who participate, the more we can accomplish.

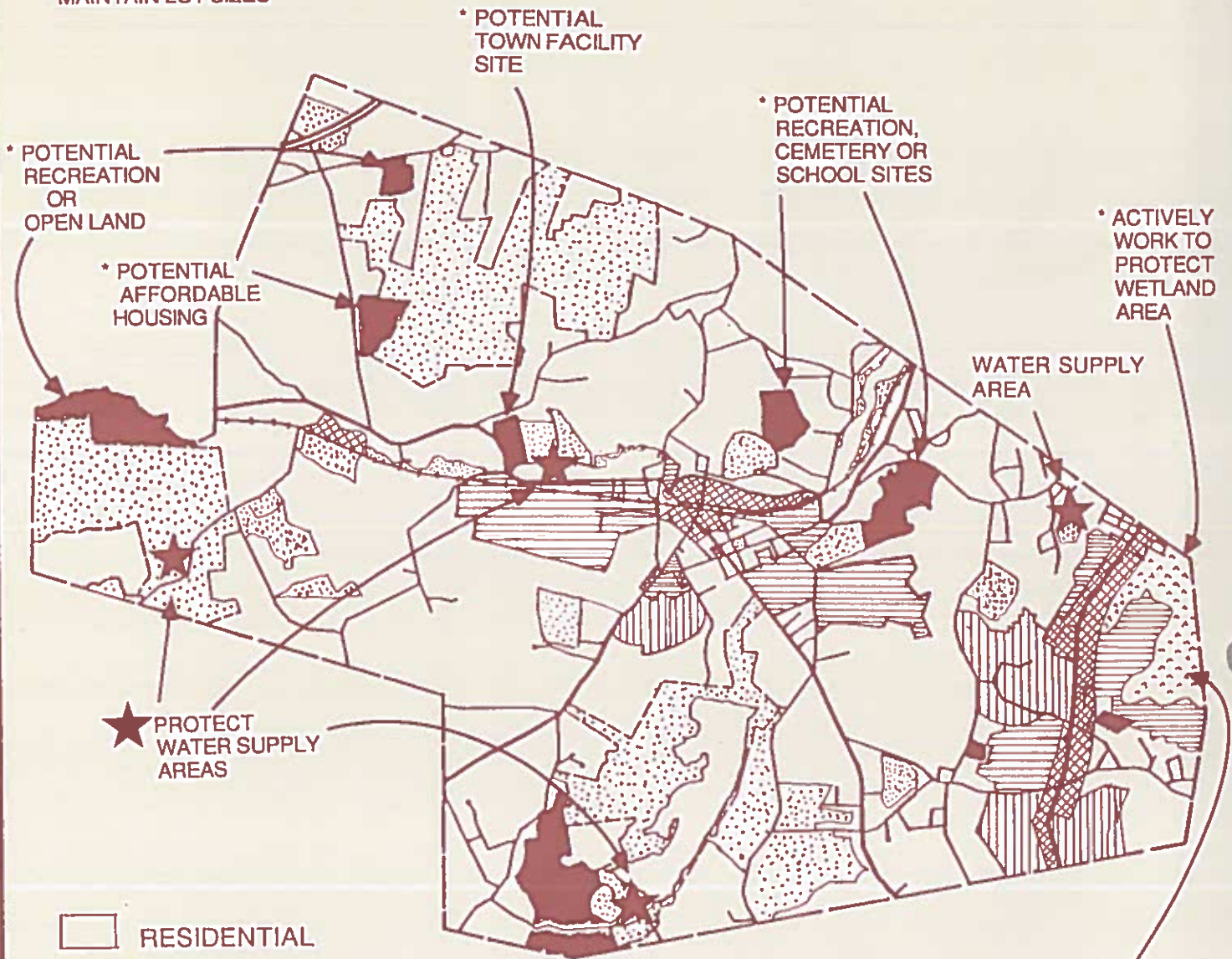
Second, make sure that local officials are working with the Plan. Plans can be revised, but they should not be ignored. Are local boards using the plan's guidelines to direct their day-to-day decisions? Go to some meetings. Watch the local cable T.V. shows. Read the paper.

If you agree with the vision of this Plan, help make it happen.



TOWN WIDE ACTIONS

- * MAINTAIN INDUSTRIAL DISTRICTS
- * MAINTAIN MULTI FAMILY DISTRICTS
- * MAINTAIN LOT SIZES



-  RESIDENTIAL
-  MULTI - FAMILY
-  COMMERCIAL
-  INDUSTRIAL
-  EXISTING PUBLIC OR INSTITUTIONAL OPEN SPACE OR PUBLIC FACILITIES
-  POTENTIAL PUBLIC LAND ACQUISITIONS
-  ROUTE 126 WETLANDS

* PROVIDE RECREATION LAND IN RT 126 CORRIDOR

ASHLAND, Massachusetts

FUTURE LAND USE PLAN

LandUse, Inc 1988

