

Downtown *Vision*

Ashland, Massachusetts

Executive Summary

February, 2006



SAS
DESIGN

Downtown Vision

Downtown is one of several village commercial centers in Ashland but is unique in that it is the historic center of the town. The scale of streets and buildings – in particular the landmark Town Hall, Federated Church, firehouse, and Post Office - are products of the 19th century and are prime ingredients of the small town flavor found there. Ashland takes pride in its small town character and the Downtown Vision focuses on strengthening the sense of place, history and community by building on the existing foot traffic to encourage everyday opportunities for casual encounters.

The vision for the historic town center is to create an enhanced, pedestrian-friendly environment for all the people of Ashland. The Vision focuses on enhancing a small-town character and increasing the vitality of the downtown by creating:

- improved sidewalks,
- space to encourage additional retail uses,
- more housing in the downtown,
- opportunities for cafes and other casual meeting places,
- encouraging architecture of a scale and character that enhances these uses, the pedestrian environment and the character of the Downtown, and,
- green open spaces that provide comfortable seating to encourage people to sit and talk, or just relax for a while.

Five key locations in the downtown were identified as opportunities to increase the amount of housing and retail use in the center in a way that would serve as a catalyst for further redevelopment. Additionally, streetscape improvements and connections to a larger open space network are incorporated as part of the Downtown Vision.



Illustrative plan showing five key locations



Perspective sketch, possible mill building improvements

Five Key Locations

1 Mill Complex

The mill complex presents an opportunity to strengthen the north end of Main Street and the visual terminus of Pleasant Street on an eastward approach with a landmark new development. The opportunity is envisioned as an active, mixed-use redevelopment including office space, ground floor retail uses, and residences overlooking the scenic Sudbury River. Featuring the water orientation of this site in a new development will create a thematic connection with Ashland’s industrial past, as well as ready access to walking paths along the river which are also elements of this Vision.

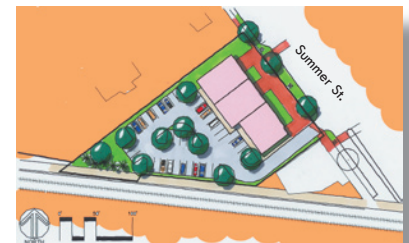
The mill complex is currently a combination of historic stone buildings (the northern most) and more recent additions which lack substantial character or opportunity to renovate for housing or office use. The stone buildings reflect the Town’s history and should be retained. The newer additions (the southern end) should be demolished and reconstructed. The plan calls for 7,600 square feet of ground floor retail space, 15,000 square feet of office space above the retail, and 39 one- and two-bedroom residential units. A shared parking concept requires 100 spaces for these uses.



Plan sketch, possible mill building improvements

2 Fire and Police Station

The current fire station on Main Street is inadequate for Ashland’s fire department’s needs, but the historic building is a lovely Downtown landmark and contributes to the scale and character of the center. This building has strong potential for reuse, either alone or as part of a larger development. The police station is also functionally inadequate for the town’s needs, and does not add to the overall character of the town. It should be replaced with another use, and there may be opportunities to do so in combination with the Fire Station.



Plan sketch, possible improvements at police and fire station site

The Downtown Vision calls for demolition of the existing police station and the relocation of the police headquarters and fire and rescue operations to another site. In a project to renovate the historic fire station and build an addition, 7,500 square feet of street level retail could be created with 14 residential units on the second and third floors and 41 parking spaces located in the rear.

3 Corner of Summer and Main streets

This corner is an important gateway into the Downtown from the northwest and northeast. The single story building on the corner and those immediately adjacent are set back from the street without creating a strong edge definition for the street. Building facades are not transparent and lack storefront displays which contribute to visual interest for passersby. Current parking

Plan sketch, possible improvements at Summer and Main site





Perspective sketch, possible improvements at corner of Summer and Main

between the sidewalk and the building give this area a suburban look and feel, one that is oriented toward cars rather than pedestrians. Overall, there is no strong aesthetic that fits with the other structures in Downtown; one that gives visitors and residents a sense they have arrived in a historic Downtown with a vibrant street life.

Goals in redeveloping these parcels include to:

- Create a landmark gateway for this end of the Downtown;
- Introduce residences or office space above ground floor retail space, increasing the number of people coming to the Downtown;
- Create a strong street edge with building facades;
- Incorporate ample glass into the ground floor of building facades to support retail displays and views into and out of the building; and,
- Concentrate parking behind the buildings in a shared manner to serve many Downtown businesses and conceal parking.

A new three-story building with roughly 8,000 square feet of retail space and 16 one- and two-bedroom residential units on the second and third floors could be created on-site. Forty six parking spaces may be provided in the rear and side.

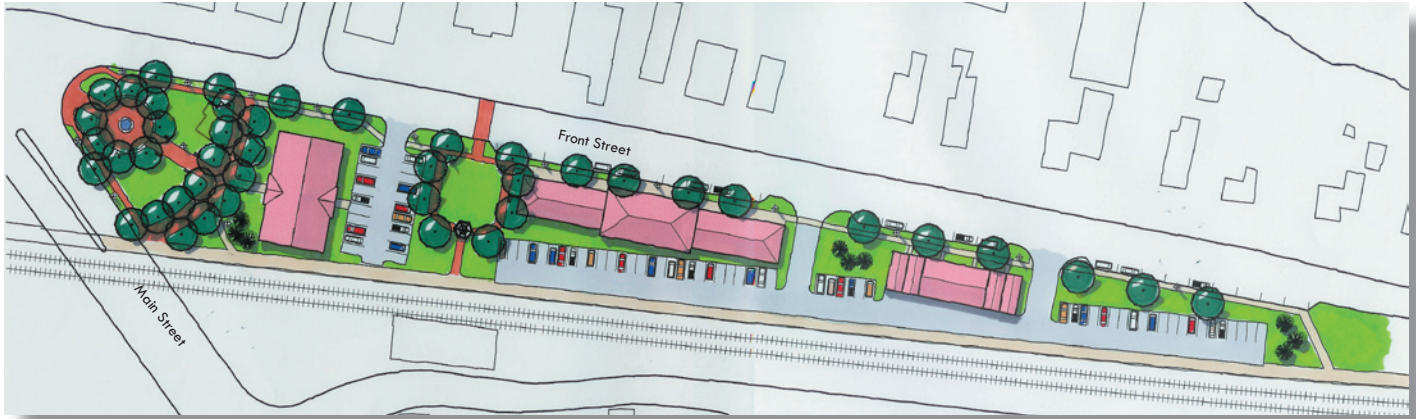
4 125 Front Street

This location is the greatest and most immediate opportunity for near-term redevelopment in Downtown Ashland. In parallel with this Downtown Vision process, the Ashland Redevelopment Authority conducted a feasibility study of these parcels it purchased from the MBTA. The sites include several opportunities to enhance the Downtown, by:

- redefining the Town Green at the intersection of Main and Front;
- coordinating the parking needs of the newly expanded Library;
- connecting the landmark buildings such as the former rail station and the library through open space and visual linkages; and,
- strengthening the edge of Front Street and extending the boundary of Downtown by introducing residential and ground-floor retail uses, together with new curb-side parking for convenience and an improved pedestrian environment along the sidewalk.

Perspective sketch, possible improvements at 125 Front Street

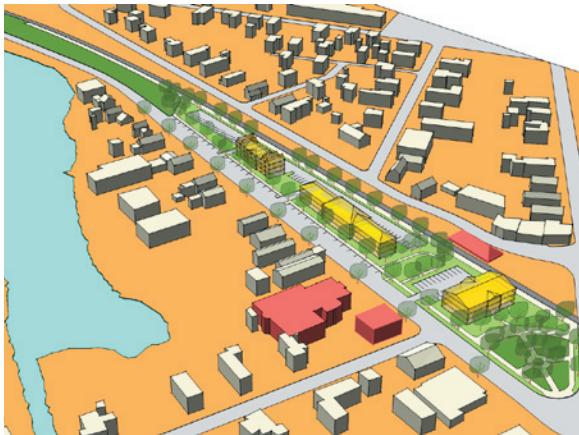




125 Front Street Plan components

A new Town Green provides an open space at the visual center of town, the intersection of Main and Front streets. It is a natural crossroads and gathering place. It will be a mix of pathways, planted areas, lawns, and have plenty of trees and seating. The design could incorporate a major piece of public art or perhaps a large electric clock, reflecting the town's

history. A building with ground floor commercial use will define the edge of the space, and a hard surface area next to the building allows for an outdoor café, outdoor art shows, or other temporary uses.



Computer model, possible improvements at 125 Front Street

A second public open space is proposed on the east side of this building and directly opposite the newly renovated library. It is located to maintain the view between two of the Town's most historic structures, the Public Library and the Richardson train station. This open space is envisioned as a civic space that supports the library functions with a place for readings, performances, or simply a sunny place to read.

Three buildings on this site could provide over 45,000 square feet of new development featuring ground floor retail and housing. The two larger buildings may include retail space on the first floor and one- and two-bedroom residences on the second and third floors. Further east a

row of eight townhouse units could round out the development on this site. Twenty-five percent of these residential units are expected to be affordable. All development on this parcel would incorporate provisions into the building design to maintain town character and reduce noise and vibration from passing trains. Parking will also be provided to support these buildings and other Front Street uses.

As part of the planned open space network is a multi-use path which could run all the way to the Commuter Rail Station to the west and connect to a "river walk" on the east side. A fifteen-foot-wide reservation has been created to accommodate this path along the back of the parcel, to link to a future path system connecting to the MBTA station and other town destinations.

Finally, this portion of Front Street will be widened approximately four feet to allow a parking lane on the south side of the street, bringing thirty additional parking spaces to the Town Center. The plan calls for a forty-foot cross section consisting of a nine foot parking lane, two eleven foot travel lanes, and an additional nine foot parking lane.

5 Riverfront Parcels on Front Street

This large set of properties between Front Street and the Sudbury River represents a significant opportunity for redevelopment to create waterfront residences in easy walking distance to all of Downtown and near the “river walk” paths envisioned as part of this plan. Existing uses on these parcels are more typically found outside of a Downtown district – warehouses, garage storage, building supply – and may find operational advantages such as better access and room for expansion if they relocated out of the Downtown (to Pleasant Street or another more appropriate location). Replacing them with residential buildings will expand a Downtown retail market to bring greater vitality – and less truck traffic – to the Downtown.



Plan sketch, possible improvements at Front Street parcels fronting on the Sudbury River

Other Important Locations

Rail Station Area

Publicly held, developable parcels around the Rail Station are constrained by parcel configuration, wetlands, steep grades, the station’s parking needs, and limited roadway access to areas on the south side of the rail. Any development at or around the Rail Station needs to be closely coordinated with planning for the Gayner property to the south, because their success will be interdependent. Connections to the area from the MBTA access road, Megunko Road, proposed paths connecting to Downtown adjacent to the rail right-of-way, Pleasant Street and pathways around the Sudbury River are all set to converge on this location.

Pleasant Street / Megunko Road

Pleasant Street: The restoration of the tree canopy over Pleasant Street, anticipated once soon-planted trees are established, will greatly contribute to creating a place along the road. In addition, the residential properties north of Pleasant and along the river are well-situated for more homes, taking advantage of water views and proximity to downtown. Rezoning the area to include additional housing units as of right will encourage reinvestment and densification in this neighborhood within easy walking distance of transit, but will do so based on gradual market forces.

Megunko Road: With public investment to extend Megunko Road and connect to the MBTA Road, improved access would facilitate redevelopment of this industrial area. Similar to Pleasant Street, rezoning for new and more valuable uses would also encourage a redevelopment of this district over time and based on market trends. While residential use is not suitable for this area, zoning for commercial or light industrial space at greater densities than allowed today would take advantage of ready rail access for employees.

Streetscape Improvements

A more pleasant pedestrian environment may be accomplished through installation of new lighting, paving, street trees, informational and directional signs, and occasional benches and coordinating trash urns along sidewalks. To most effectively use the sidewalk improvements to reinforce the sense of a “downtown”, and also in recognition of limited resources to implement such improvements, the Downtown Vision recommends that only the immediate Downtown area receive these improvements. A new sign program should include identity graphics for the Downtown, and should direct vehicles to parking resources as they approach their destinations.

Plan sketch, possible streetscape improvements in Downtown



Design Principles for Downtown

The Downtown Vision envisions forty-eight units of townhouse-style housing, some facing the river and some facing Front Street, on a consolidated parcel with 81 parking spaces.

Several design principles are important to maintain in any redevelopment in the Downtown:

- Active ground floor uses are encouraged;
- Buildings are placed to have small setbacks from the street creating a strong “street wall”;
- Off-street parking is located in the rear and
- On-street parking is encouraged to buffer pedestrians from moving traffic.

Vision Plan Action Items

- Develop Design Guidelines for new development in the Downtown
- Secure funding for design and implementation of streetscape improvements, starting with Main Street from Homer to Front as the first priority, and reconfiguration of Front Street as second priority.
- Pursue alternative sites for Police and Fire, and reuse of their existing facilities, through feasibility studies
- Pursue feasibility planning for the open space path/trail network
- Plan and fund year-round, coordinated programming in downtown open spaces
- Work to facilitate development in all key locations, perhaps most importantly adjacent to the MBTA station
- 125 Front Street
 - Solicit interest from developers
 - Understand what public investments/improvements are necessary to make the development feasible, and implement them
 - Work with the owner of 41 Front Street to become a project partner
- Rezoning:
 - Front Street, with provisions to encourage mixed-use, multi-family residential development, such as Planned Unit Development overlay, and address shared parking
 - Pleasant Street, to encourage more residential development
 - Megunko Road, to encourage more residential development

125 Front Street

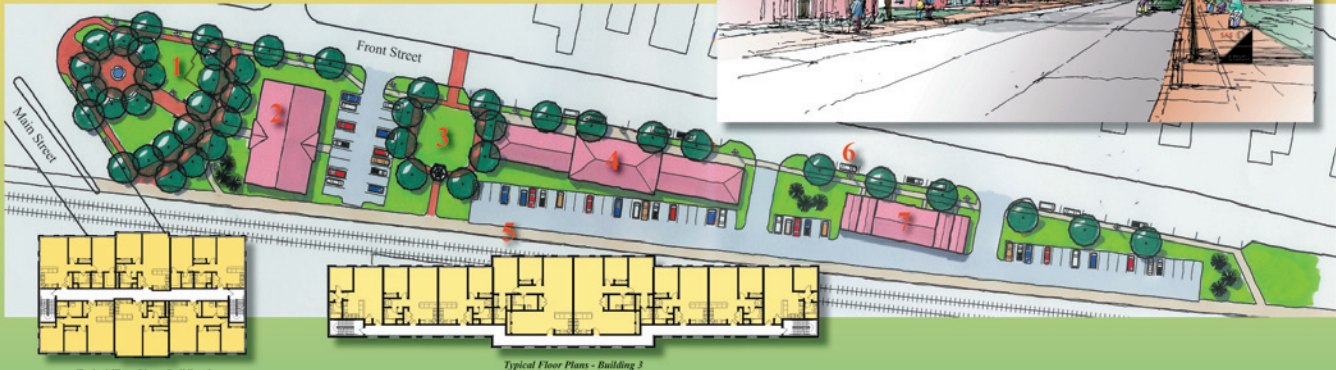
Ashland, Massachusetts

The development of 125 Front Street is a key component of the vision for downtown Ashland. This long underutilized property was acquired by the Town in 2004 from the MBTA. Ashland takes pride in its small town character and the Downtown Vision focuses on strengthening the sense of place, history and community by building on the existing foot traffic to encourage everyday opportunities for casual encounters.

The vision for the historic town center is to create an enhanced pedestrian friendly environment for all the people of Ashland. The Downtown Vision focuses on increasing the vitality of the downtown by creating:

- improved sidewalks,
- space to encourage additional retail uses,
- opportunities for cafes and other casual meeting places, and
- open spaces that provide comfortable seating to encourage people to sit and talk, or just relax for a while.

The 125 Front Street plan builds on the site's location at the heart of the downtown center. It establishes an active civic space – a Town Green – as a centerpiece supported by cafe uses along its edge and provides active ground floor retail space near Main Street and additional housing within the downtown.



Plan Components

1 The Town Green

The Town Green provides an open space at the intersections of Main and Front streets. It is a natural crossroads and gathering place. It will be a mix of pathways, planted areas and lawns, and have plenty of seating. The design could incorporate a major piece of public art or perhaps a large electric clock, reflecting the town's history. A hard surface area next to the building provides space for an outdoor cafe. It is also large enough to accommodate outdoor art shows, or other temporary uses.

2 New Housing and Retail

This three-story building will provide 6,000 square feet of retail space on the first floor and create an active edge to the Town Green. The upper two floors house ten one- or two-bedroom residential units. As in all development on this parcel, provisions will be incorporated into the building design to reduce noise and vibration from passing trains.

3 Library Green

This public open space is directly opposite the newly renovated library and is located to maintain the view between two of the Town's most historic structures, the Ashland Public Library and the Old Train Station. This open space is envisioned as a civic space that supports the library functions with a place for readings, performances, or simply a quiet place to read. It connects to a multi-use path that runs along the rail right-of-way and connects to a larger open space network.

4 More Housing and Retail

This building, with an 8,500 square foot footprint, is envisioned to have ground floor retail – creating a strong active edge along Front Street. It would also include two floors of residential uses above consisting of sixteen, one- and two-bedroom units.

5 Multi-Use Path

As part of the Downtown Vision, an open space network is planned. Part of this is a multi-use path which could run all the way to the Commuter Rail Station to the west and connect to a "river walk" on the east side. A fifteen foot wide reservation has been created to accommodate this path.

6 More On-Street Parking

This portion of Front Street will be widened approximately four feet to allow a parking lane on the south side of the street. This brings additional parking spaces closer to the Town Center. The plan calls for a forty-foot cross section consisting of a nine foot parking lane, two eleven foot travel lanes, and an additional nine foot parking lane.

7 Townhouse Development

On the eastern side of the parcel, a different style of building is planned to provide a variety of housing options to new downtown residents. The plan calls for eight side-by-side townhouses. A garage would be incorporated into the first floor of each unit and be accessed from the rear. Two floors of living space would be located above.

Prepared by Van Groenoum & Company for the Ashland Redevelopment Authority September 2005

Downtown Vision

Ashland, Massachusetts

Downtown is one of several village commercial centers in Ashland but is unique in that it is the historic center of the town. The scale of streets and buildings – in particular the landmark Town Hall, Federated Church, firehouse, and Post Office – are products of the 19th century and are prime ingredients of the small town flavor found there. Ashland takes pride in its small town character and the Downtown Vision focuses on strengthening the sense of place, history and community by building on the existing foot traffic to encourage everyday opportunities for casual encounters.

The vision for the historic town center is to create an enhanced pedestrian friendly environment for all the people of Ashland. The Vision focuses on enhancing a small-town character and increasing the vitality of the downtown by creating:

- improved sidewalks,
- space to encourage additional retail uses,
- more housing in the downtown,
- opportunities for cafes and other casual meeting places,
- encouraging architecture of a scale and character that enhances these uses, the pedestrian environment and the character of the Downtown, and,
- green open spaces that provide comfortable seating to encourage people to sit and talk, or just relax for a while.

Five parcels in the downtown were identified as opportunities to increase the amount of housing and retail use in the center. Additionally, streetscape improvements and connections to a larger open space network are incorporated as part of the Downtown Vision.



1 Mill Complex

The mill complex presents an opportunity to strengthen the north end of Main Street and the visual character of Pleasant Street as an activated approach with a landmark new development. The opportunity is envisioned as an active, vibrant redevelopment including office space, ground floor retail uses, and residential overlooking the street, Bayberry Street. Featuring the water retention of the site in a new development will create a thematic connection with Ashland's industrial past, as well as create access to walking paths along the river which are also elements of this Vision.

The mill complex is currently a combination of historic stone buildings (the northern most) and more recent additions which lack substantial character or opportunity to connect to housing or office use. The stone buildings reflect the town's history and should be retained. The newer additions (the southern most) should be demolished and reconstructed. The plan calls for 7500 square feet of ground floor retail space, 15,000 square feet of office space above the retail, and 70 car and two-bike residential units. A shared parking canopy requires 100 spaces for these uses.

2 Fire and Police Station

The current fire station on Main Street is inadequate for Ashland's fire department needs, but the historic building is a lovely Downtown landmark and contributes to the scale and character of the center. This building has long potential for reuse, either alone or as part of a larger development. The police station is also inadequate for the town's needs, however, the other building does not sit on the overall character of the town and should be replaced with another use in combination with the Fire Station.

The Downtown Vision calls for demolition of the existing police station and the relocation of the police headquarters and fire station operations to another site. The plan is to renovate the historic fire station and build an additional 1,500 square feet of street level retail space to be created with 14 residential units on the second and third floors and 41 parking spaces located in the rear.




3 Corner of Summer and Main Streets

This corner is an important gateway into the Downtown from the northwest and southeast. The single store buildings on the corner and two immediately adjacent are set back from the street without creating a strong edge definition for the street. Building footcure on east transportation and back street definition which contributes to visual interest for passersby. Corner parking between the sidewalk and the building gives the street a defined look and feel and that is consistent with the town's character. Overall, there is a strong potential for this lot with other structures in Downtown, over the green spaces and residential uses they have arrived in a historic Downtown with a vibrant street life.

Goals in redeveloping these parcels include:

- Create a building gateway for the end of the Downtown,
- Introduce residential or office space above ground floor retail space, increasing the number of people using the Downtown,
- Create a strong street edge with building footcure,
- Incorporate angled glass into the ground floor of building facades to support retail displays and support use of the building,
- Consistent parking behind the buildings is a shared resource to serve many Downtown businesses and general parking.



4 125 Front Street

This location is the greatest and most immediate opportunity for new town redevelopment in Downtown Ashland. It is parcelled with the Downtown Vision process, the Ashland Redevelopment Authority conducted a feasibility study of these parcels is produced from the MBTA. The site includes several opportunities to enhance the Downtown, by:

- redefining the parking and open space needs of the newly expanded Library with the redefinition of Downtown use,
- strengthening the edge of Front Street and extending the boundary of Downtown by introducing residential and ground-floor retail uses, together with east-side parking for convenience and an improved pedestrian environment along the sidewalk,

Site components

A new Town Green provides an open space at the visual center of town, the intersection of Main and Front Street. It is a natural overlook and gathering place. It will be a mix of pedestrian, planted areas, trees, and lawn areas of trees and seating. The design would incorporate a major plaza of public art or perhaps a large clock, reflecting the town's history. A building with ground floor commercial use will define the edge of the open, and a third floor use will be the building above for no outdoor cafe, outdoor art shows, or other temporary uses.

A second public open space is proposed on the east side of this building and directly opposite the newly expanded library. It is located to provide the view between two of the town's historic structures, the Public Library and the Richardson House. This open space is envisioned as a public space that supports the library functions with a place for meetings, performances, or simply a water plaza for town.

Three buildings on this site will provide over 45,000 square feet of new development including ground floor retail and housing. The two larger buildings include retail space on the first floor and one- and two-story residential on the second and third floors. Further east a row of eight townhouse units could be developed on this site. From the ground of these residential units are expected to be affordable. All development on this parcel will incorporate provisions into the building design to maximize view character and reduce noise and vibration from passing trains. Parking will also be provided to support these buildings and other Front Street uses.

As part of the planned open space network, a multi-use path which would run all the way to the Corner Green from the rear and connect to a "tree walk" on the east side. A 60-foot-wide pedestrian has been created to accommodate the path along the back of the parcel.

Finally, this portion of Front Street will be widened approximately four feet to allow a parking lane on the south side of the street, bringing three additional parking spaces to the Town Green. The plan calls for a tree-lined street consisting of a one-foot parking lane, two eleven-foot-wide trees, and an additional one-foot parking lane.




5 Riverfront Parcels on Front Street

The large set of properties between Front Street and the Bayberry Street presents a significant opportunity for redevelopment to create vibrant residential uses in close walking distance to all of Downtown and near the "tree walk" paths envisioned as part of the plan. Existing uses on these parcels are more specifically small-scale of Downtown character – warehouses, garage storage, building supply – and may find operational advantages such as better access and areas for expansion if they relocated out of the Downtown or Pleasant Street area more appropriate locations. Replacing these with residential buildings will expand a Downtown street market to bring greater vitality and new retail traffic – to the Downtown.

The Downtown Vision envisions eight single units of townhouse-style housing, some facing the street and some facing Front Street, on a consolidated parcel with 81 parking spaces.




Open Space Network

Ashland is a town of walkers and cyclists with a strong appreciation of the natural environment. The Vision recommends that the locally situated features of the town be made available as part of an integrated open space network, connecting Downtown parks to walkways along the Bayberry Street to the new town hall Pleasant Street and Main Street to anticipated east-west connections along Megunko Road and through the preserved open space of the site to Stone Park and back into the Downtown. Further, the Vision provides for a multi-lane transportation and entry street link between the MBTA Commuter Rail Station and the Downtown via proposed paths on each side of the rail right-of-way. Implementation of such an integrated network would greatly facilitate cycling, walking and biking in Ashland's Downtown, creating convenience, safety and appreciation of the natural resources of the town.



Streetscape Improvements

A more pleasant pedestrian environment can be accomplished through installation of new lighting, paving, street trees, informational and directional signs, and increased benches and crosswalks along sidewalks. To more effectively use the sidewalk improvements to maintain the sense of "downtown" and also to recognize of Downtown's historic character and its unique character, the Downtown Vision recommends that only the immediate Downtown area receive these improvements. A new sign program should include visibility graphics for the Downtown, and should direct visitors to parking locations as they approach their destination.




Several design principles are important to maintain in any redevelopment in the Downtown:

- Active ground floor uses are encouraged;
- Buildings are placed to have small setbacks from the street creating a strong "street wall";
- Off-street parking is located in the rear and
- On-street parking is encouraged to buffer pedestrians from moving traffic.



