

## Executive Summary/ Overview

The Town of Southbridge is on the threshold of an exciting initiative to continue its downtown's revitalization, and it is with great anticipation that the Southbridge Redevelopment Authority (SRA) adopts this Downtown Southbridge Urban Renewal Plan (URP). This plan is a continuation of the efforts that were started with the Town's Long Term Plan in 2003-2004, and the Open Space and Recreation Plan, completed in 2004. The Long Term Plan, prepared through an involved community process, identified the downtown area as highly underutilized, with partially occupied buildings, vacant land and large parking lots. It recommended a proactive approach to revitalizing downtown to make it an exciting destination to live, work, and play. The URP is an outcome of this recommendation. It aims at taking the Long Term Plan's vision to the next level by preparing this implementation strategy for downtown.

Historically, the Town of Southbridge had a thriving textile industry, which formed its economic core. The various industries attracted workers to live close to the downtown area, which, in turn, supported downtown's commercial and retail uses. The strength of these industries, particularly the American Optical Company, even stabilized the local economy through the downturn of the great depression. But with the migration of the manufacturing industry out of New England, the downtown underwent a slow decline, causing many commercial and retail businesses to relocate. This trend was also influenced by the growth of new retail centers in suburban areas and the improvements in roadway and transit access to these suburban areas.

After the decline of the major industries, the Town of Southbridge went through a period of downtown revitalization in the 1970's. This was based upon the recommendations of an Urban Renewal Plan that was never approved. Those efforts focused on preserving the Town's historical architecture and character and improving the Main street streetscape. While some of the buildings were preserved, there is still more that needs to be done. This current URP takes on the challenge of finding a solution for reusing and redeveloping key older industrial sites that have declined through the years of underutilization and neglect, as well as redeveloping underutilized parcels and buildings in the downtown area. The Plan also meets all the State requirements for designation as an 'urban renewal area', which provides the SRA with the authority to successfully implement the community's vision.

The proposed URP Project Area is located in the core of downtown Southbridge. Generally speaking, the Project Area extends from Main Street north to the Quinebaug River, with its eastern border along Foster Street and its western border roughly following Hamilton Street for a short distance before cutting north to the River. Existing conditions in the Project Area clearly illustrate its eligibility as an 'urban renewal area' and the need for the Town's involvement in revitalization efforts. Almost 45% of the land currently occupied by vacant lots or parking areas can be potentially redeveloped to higher and better uses. A large number of older buildings are only partially occupied, and require rehabilitation or redevelopment. Additionally, the existing infrastructure is not conducive to attract new development, with narrow disconnected roads, traffic congestion, poor pedestrian facilities, and inadequate parking.

The URP recommends resolving all the issues discussed above through a series of infrastructure improvements to support the redevelopment of key parcels that will position the Town to attract new growth and development. These recommendations are based on the goals defined by the community as part of the Long Term Plan planning process. The key goal that applies to the Project Area is to create a mixed-use, retail and commercial pedestrian friendly downtown, with new parks and open space that blends in new development while preserving the area's historic character.

Specific Plan recommendations for development, transportation and open space improvements are summarized below.



In terms of **land use and development**, the URP suggests replacing existing development along the west side of Central St. and along Larochelle Way with new mixed-use buildings. These buildings would be designed for ground level storefront retail, at feasible locations, along with residential and/or commercial uses on the higher floors. Such mixed-use development will maximize and diversify the potential use of the highly visible space, while integrating with surrounding improvements and development patterns.

This URP recommends that **parking** should be consolidated and expanded, with the redevelopment of the Central Street surface parking lot into a parking garage. This will open up additional land for development and improve the connections between the parking area and businesses. This parking garage will provide much needed and better organized spaces in the center of the retail area and will support the proposed new development along Larochelle Way and Central Street. In addition, to the extent possible, the garage design will attempt to provide connections directly onto the upper floors of adjacent underutilized buildings along and near Main street as well.

The existing abandoned industrial facilities along the Quinebaug River should be converted to **recreational open space**, connecting the downtown to its waterfront and expanding eco-tourism opportunities. The property adjacent to the Rail Trail on Central Street, which is currently a convenience store, is recommended for a Trailhead Park as a way of capitalizing on the Rail Trail, and maximizing the value of newly developed properties along Larochelle Way.

A series of **infrastructure improvements** will improve the flow of traffic, relieve congestion and improve the walkability of the Project Area.

- A realignment of Hamilton Street with a smooth connection onto Larochelle Way, thus reducing the curve at the Hook Street intersection. This new alignment will result in a more traditional intersection, which will greatly improve safe pedestrian flow in this area, particularly from the new parking garage to businesses on Hamilton Street.
- Replacing Larochelle Way with an expanded extension of Hamilton Street and extending it to meet Foster Street.
- The closing of Hook Street at the Central Street to eliminate this blind intersection and then reducing Hook Street in width to serve as an access drive to the businesses along it.
- Eliminating the portion of Foster Street between Central and North Streets to eliminate the acute intersection at Foster and Central Street. In return, Foster Street will be connected to Central Street along the alignment of the extended Larochelle Way.
- Widen Central Street along the sections where it abuts the new trailhead park and the new redevelopment parcels on Central Street. A widened Central Street in this area will improve traffic flow, still accommodate on-street parking and allow for wider sidewalks, thus improving the pedestrian environment.

These vehicular improvements will be complemented by **sidewalk and streetscape improvements** to Main Street and surrounding corridors creating a seamless network of pedestrian friendly streets within the downtown core.

The Action Plan for bringing this vision to fruition is detailed in the URP. The **Financial Plan** estimates that approximately \$20 million will be required to fully implement the recommendations of the URP. To support this financial plan, a variety of federal and state grant sources have been identified as potential funding sources.

As a result of this plan, the Southbridge Redevelopment Authority plans to meet its goal of creating a more vibrant downtown area through a series of public actions intended to stimulate private investment resulting in a revitalized central business district with a mix of opportunities for citizens to live, work, shop and play.

