

Upton Center Visioning Project

Meeting Notes—Working Group Meeting #1, 2/11/19

Next Steps:

Dodson & Flinker will:

1. type up and share meeting notes;
2. send working group members a draft report including existing conditions material we unable to get to from the powerpoint for 2/11/19 meeting.
3. write a blurb explaining the project process for working group members to use in outreach.

Working Group members will:

1. review the meeting notes;
2. review the Draft report and come to meeting 2 prepared with: a sense of which information they believe in, questions about information they are unsure about, additional information they think they would need to make informed decisions, thoughts about the implications of various pieces of information;
3. Think about what needs should be fulfilled by improvements to Upton Center, what Town values Upton Center improvements should represent, what vision Upton Center should be aiming toward;
4. do outreach for Upton Center Visioning project: talk to friends, neighbors, colleagues about what Working Group is doing. Listen to what other people know about Upton Center, what other people want from the Center

Groups and/or Constituencies that Working Group Members Represent

- Economic Development Committee
- Open Space Committee
- Historical Commission
- Upton Historical Society
- Library Trustees
- Library Users
- Cable Committee
- PTO (Parent Teacher Organization)
- School Council
- Technology Committee
- Electronic Voting Committee
- Disability/Access

- Conservation Commission
- Council on Aging
- Community Preservation Committee
- Friends of Upton State Forest
- Park Users
- Sports-facilities users
- Sports Boosters
- Fire Department/Association/EMS
- Nipmuc Alumni
- Design/Construction Industry
- Business Owner
- VFW members
- Long-Time Residents
- New Residents
- Boomerang Residents (people who grew up in Upton, left, and have returned)
- Seniors
- Young People
- Families with school-aged children and younger children
- Town Center residents, abutters and neighbors
- Active Military

Groups and/or Constituencies that Working Group Members would like additional representation from:

- Older Seniors
- Police/Public Safety
- Educators
- Recreation Committee
- Planning Board/ZBA

Discussion of Past Planning Projects and Reports

Dillon presented an overview of past projects and what they said about Upton Center. These included the 2005 Upton Master Plan, the 2007 Open Space project, and the 2012 Housing Production Plan.

Some participants noted that there they didn't hear much about the recent complete streets project, and generally don't know much about what's in the TIP [According to the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission, the TIP, or Transportation Improvement Program, "is a federally-required planning document that lists all highway, bridge, transit and intermodal projects in the Central Massachusetts planning region that are programmed to receive federal-aid funding."] Others thought that publicity had in fact been adequate.

The Upton Economic Development Committee (EDC) is in the process of “trying to gather a bunch of loose balloons” – housing, open space, economic development, etc.- and pull together a coherent plan for revitalizing the center. They recognize the need to reach out to the whole community. “This process is a first.”

There have been three attempts to build a new library. The first was a joint project with Mendon. None of them went forward. The town is in the process of hiring a consultant to prepare a feasibility study for a new library and community center.

Has the 2005 Master Plan been implemented? Not entirely, but components of it have been. The 2011 Open Space and Recreation Plan includes a recreation master plan, and consultants from the BSC Group are currently working on an update to the Recreation Plan. There has been not community action on recommendations of the master plan in the areas of housing or mixed use.

We need to remember that Upton Center is part of a National Register Historic District. This does not require preservation of structures, but shines a spotlight on historic sites and provides incentives for preservation activities. The National Register submission includes a detailed inventory of historic resources. Does the town have a demolition delay bylaw? Yes, it provides for a six month delay in demolition of any building over 75 years old so that options for preservation can be considered.

Discussion of Working Group Members’ motivation for participating in Town Center Visioning process, the perspectives they bring, and their goals for the process

Summary of Key Perspectives:

- Need to bring the community together.
- Community Center first—invest in a community center to draw people to Upton Center, additional investments will build off of that. Need to make a place where people will want to gather.
- Preserve Historic Look and Feel of Upton Center—preserve key features/anchor buildings, and re-use abandoned buildings. New development should reflect historic vernacular. Aesthetics of New England village are valuable, something to capitalize on. The trolley was really cool, and the center had a hotel, boot factory, theater, etc. – “how can we start going back uphill?”
- Safety First—should be able to safely move through Upton Center, especially on foot. Need to be able to walk downtown with kids, to safely cross 140, to safely access the library.
- Redevelopment for Tax Base—increase tax base by encouraging redevelopment, especially commercial development, more industry and small businesses. “If you make it easier for developers you will attract more business.”
- Lots of previous attempts at business development in Upton Center have failed. Do we need two centers? A series of bakeries, auto shops, florists and other didn’t make it in the Center. What is going to make business growth possible now?

- Civic functions may remain primary attractor to Upton Center, but we can provide reasons for people to stay in area: something to do, venues to run into neighbors.
- If we have a great library people will come. We have the schools. This is a new time: if we invest people will follow.
- There's a lot of underutilized land. How do vacant/open space parcels connect?
- Need to explore a lot of options.
- Start slow and build momentum – beautify first, and don't repeat mistakes. Ideas like shutting off Warren Street are fairly simple to implement.
- Any change will require a toolbox – zoning that removes uncertainty and gets developers interested - that's why we're here.

Presentation of Main Street Trends & Development Examples

Peter presented a series of slides showing trends impacting Main Streets and examples of how development practices have changed in recent years including suburban Main Street Lifestyle Center (South County Commons, RI), new mixed-use town center (Wayland, South Hadley), incremental Main Street redevelopment (Avon, CT, West Concord), and alternative approaches to development via public/private partnerships and “closing the funding gap.”

Discussion of Value of Evidence of History in Upton Center

- Preserve the essence of history—key anchors: Town Common, the three churches, Town Hall, and Pizza Building
- Let's bring it back to what it was – but for a new generation.
- Architecture can take cues from the historic vernacular—different scales that accommodate a variety of uses; a focus on people instead of cars; an attractive and safe pedestrian realm. Doesn't have to be historic – can design contemporary buildings that fit the context – look at Norfolk.
- Evoke buildings that were there, or match what was there.
- Historic character is: identity, heritage, who we are, increases property values, nationally unique, home, sense of place, we have a fabulous architectural heritage.
- Upton Center is recognizable over time.
- Look beyond the ring of buildings around the main intersection. There are opportunities in adjacent areas for adaptive reuse and redevelopment of underutilized parcels (example, across from gas station).
- Upton has revitalized two old buildings, Town Hall and Mill House. Old buildings with new interiors give a unique sense of place... as long as there is a viable purpose for the rehabbed building.

- The downtown was once a true village – how can we return to that? Need to look at Hopkinton and other towns where they require historically-appropriate infill. “How to make it an 18th and 21st Century center at the same time?”

Upton’s Needs:

- affordable housing
- Assisted living
- Massachusetts is the most expensive state in the US for childcare, and there is a drought of childcare in town.
- Demographics are changing— Upton is a commuter community, but people want to keep their dollars local. Would like to be able spend money in Upton.
- Need to provide for and leverage the commuter community, the commuter economy.
- Developers are interested in doing projects in Upton Center, but Upton has a reputation as a difficult place to get zoning permits
- What do we have to offer – look at Chronicle piece on Upton.
- Are there local businesses that have expressed an interest in locating in Upton Center? Yes, a few, according to the EDC.

Precedents

- Saint Johnsbury, VT
- Littleton, NH
- European cities and towns
- Arlington, VA—lots of housing to enliven streets and businesses
- Woodstock, VT
- Grafton Center, MA
- Millis Center, MA
- Norfolk, MA
- Not Framingham, MA—lots of housing but empty ground floors
- Not Westborough
- Need examples of churches that have been reused.
- In the center itself, the building at 8 North Main Street is considered a successful historically-appropriate renovation.

Information Needs for this Planning Process:

- More info about economic development opportunities and strategies
- Business retention in places that have undergone similar efforts.

- Need a summary of this process and who's involved that can be shared with a wider audience as we publicize the public workshop on March 23rd.