

FRAMINGHAM VILLAGE COMMERCIAL CENTERS
STRATEGIC ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Executive Summary

The North Framingham commercial centers of Nobscot and Saxonville have essential characteristics that provide differentiation relative to surrounding residential communities and provide a competitive advantage in terms of both livability and economic development. While the future of both neighborhood commercial centers is not dramatically different from the present, it has high potential to be better and to leverage the essential characteristics that make Nobscot and Saxonville special.

Leveraging the assets of the commercial centers falls into several important categories of actions: transformation of underperforming properties, aggressive expansion of walkability, connection of recreational resources, and alignment of uses and services with the surrounding residential market. These focused actions coupled with a district-wide approach to improvements and reinvestment strengthen the future potential of the commercial centers to serve the surrounding neighborhoods well into the future. The specific categories of actions and district-wide approaches are described in more detail below.

Key Actions

Transformation of Underperforming Properties

Given the small geographic areas of Saxonville and Nobscot, a single underperforming property can have a very large impact on the perception and economic performance of the entire district. The impact of a single property is amplified if it is large and at a prominent gateway location. Saxonville has two underperforming properties that are large and at prominent district gateway locations – the State Lumber site and the

Pinefield Plaza. Alternative scenarios for new mixed-use development have been explored that would enable the properties to better contribute to the district. These studies are both a tool to provide the property owners with a potential new direction and are used to inform zoning recommendations for the district. Nobscot has one very prominent property, the Nobscot Shopping Plaza that has been underperforming for many years and is the community’s highest priority. Similarly, a redevelopment scenario that explores the potential for mixed-use development with housing provides an opportunity for a new direction for property ownership, appears to be an acceptable outcome for the community, and identifies zoning modifications that would enable this reinvestment.

Aggressive Expansion of Walkability

Nobscot and Saxonville are commercial centers that provide a center point for the surrounding residential communities. Access to the centers by pedestrians should be a primary focus of public realm investments and improvements. Enabling and attracting pedestrian activity has many benefits for the commercial centers, business and retail activity and the surrounding residential districts. Relatively simple improvements to the pedestrian network – completing missing segments of sidewalk, adding marked mid-block crossings where appropriate, reducing curb cuts, adding street trees and landscape features – all expand the walkability of the districts and leverage the fundamental value of the mixed-use neighborhood center. Historically, both centers were “walking villages” and it is a major economic advantage

for North Framingham to reinforce walkable nodes where they already exist.

Expansion of walkability can be combined with other improvements to improve circulation and convenience for all types of transportation. Intersection improvements that optimize signal timing, turning lanes and intersection geometry, at Edmands, Edgell and Water streets may help to alleviate congestion there. Increasing the supply of centrally located parking in Saxonville will help to improve the convenience and attractiveness of the district and can be combined with roadway improvements to enhance vehicular safety and circulation.

Connection of Recreational Resources

A viable secondary network for pedestrian and bicycle recreation trails exists and is expanding in North Framingham connecting the commercial centers and surrounding communities. The number of trails and potential connections is a distinction of the commercial centers that many other suburban communities do not have. Leveraging the many opportunities for recreational activity is a major advantage for the districts and differentiates them from other places around New England. In Nobscot, the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail and Bay Circuit Trail provide regional recreation connections. In Saxonville, the Cochituate Rail Trail and Carol Getchell Trail provide similar opportunities. The Hultman Aqueduct (long term potential) connects the two districts' trail networks and should be reinforced as a viable recreational link that connects across North Framingham.

Alignment of Uses and Services

The Nobscot and Saxonville communities and the market analysis have indicated a gap between the types of goods and services provided and the needs of the surrounding residents. The commercial centers are local-serving centers that must be supported by the surrounding residents and regular commuters and visitors in the area. The retail gap analysis and community have both indicated that new full service restaurants are needed to better align district uses with the community needs. The identification of existing or potential for new spaces along with the identification of interested restaurant groups would advance this opportunity to align current district businesses with resident needs. Over time the calibration of businesses, services and resident needs should be assessed to further enhance this alignment to encourage local spending.



District-wide Approaches - Nobscot

The Strategic Economic Development Plan is broken into four topics with strategies and actions categorized within each topic. The four topics include Redevelopment and Urban Design, Marketing and Reinvestment, Public Realm Improvement, Regulatory Strategy. The collection of District-wide Approaches for Nobscot are briefly summarized below.



Redevelopment and Urban Design

Nobscot is a four-corner intersection commercial district and as-such includes a limited number of parcels with frontage at the center of the district. The character of the district is directly impacted by the quality and maintenance of the limited amount of properties that define the district. In this context, a district-wide maintenance and improvement program for building facades, signage and landscaping would have a dramatic impact on the overall character of district.

Several prominent properties at the southeast corner of the main intersection have the potential to transform the character of Nobscot. The Nobscot Shopping Plaza is the most prominent feature of the district and has had a negative impact on the impression of the district and the sense of well-being in the community for decades. Strategies for unlocking this critical site are fundamental to the future of Nobscot. The Town-owned Chapel at this corner of the intersection is a historic building that the community values and it should play an important role in unlocking a new future for the district.



Marketing and Reinvestment

In a small commercial district, any vacant space is a burden on the overall perception and sense of vitality within the area. Nobscot currently has several vacant retail spaces that should be the focus of positive activity. In the short term, vacant spaces and properties should be maintained and considered for temporary uses that would have a positive community benefit – a meeting space, a local business incubator or some other use that

would benefit from low or no cost space and that has the ability to end use of the space flexibly. In the long term, active matching between the retail gap identified in the market analysis and the needs identified by the community should be pursued to actively fill vacant spaces.



Public Realm Improvement

In Nobscot, the focus of public realm improvements should be on the principal intersection of the district at Water, Edmands and Edgell. Intersection improvements to optimize vehicular circulation through signal timing and intersection and turn-lane configurations should be combined with pedestrian safety improvements. Missing links in the sidewalk network should be added, along with new marked mid-block pedestrian crossings to enhance walkability. Landscape features could contribute to an overall sense of place at the principal district intersection. Secondary circulation routes and internal vehicular connections between properties should be enhanced wherever possible to add connectivity that can bypass the main intersection. Open space improvements at the Nobscot Park and the McAuliffe Library should be used to anchor these community assets and connect them to the broader network of recreational paths.



Regulatory Strategy

The center of Nobscot is within a single zoning district (B-2). A new zoning district to modify the B-2 characteristics for Nobscot would be appropriate. Specifically, modifying the allowable uses to encourage mixed-use with residential and increasing the maximum building height and density would open new investment opportunities in the district. A simple set of design guidelines for the district would also encourage new investment to be arranged to enhance walkability, a sense of place and connectivity. A district-wide approach to parking that shares parking across properties and provides a framework for shared parking agreements would enhance site efficiencies and maximize active uses.



District-wide Approaches - Saxonville

The Strategic Economic Development Plan is broken into four topics with strategies and actions categorized within each topic. The four topics include Redevelopment and Urban Design, Marketing and Reinvestment, Public Realm Improvement, Regulatory Strategy. The collection of District-wide Approaches for Saxonville are briefly summarized below.



Redevelopment and Urban Design

Saxonville is rich with iconic and historic buildings and natural features. Simple district-wide signage and wayfinding can be employed to reinforce the historic assets, natural resources, hidden views and recreational trails. A district-wide maintenance and improvement program for building facades, signage and landscaping should be used to incrementally improve existing assets to keep pace with other new investments. A grant program or revolving loan fund to encourage this type of renewal can have a dramatic impact on the level of stewardship and reinvestment that occurs while building community and a positive perception of the district.

Where opportunities for positive change exist, close attention and stewardship should be applied to leverage new investments to further enhance the overall character and quality of the district. Such opportunities for positive investment exist at the Pinefield Shopping Plaza, the State Lumber Site, the Saxonville Mill, the Athenaeum, and the old McAuliffe Library. Of those opportunities, the Athenaeum and old McAuliffe Library, which will soon be vacated, are Town-owned and potential assets to the community.



Marketing and Reinvestment

The historic center of Saxonville is the Saxonville Mill complex. It is both geographically and visually the most prominent feature of the district and is home to many small businesses, entrepreneurs and innovative activities. Opening the door for new opportunities at the Mill through zoning and public realm improvements allows

for continued reinvestment and marketing of the Mill as an asset of the district. The wayfinding for the Mill and improved street frontages can reinforce the connections between the district and this asset.



Public Realm Improvement

A district-wide focus on walkability should be used to strengthen connections to surrounding neighborhoods and the new Planned Unit Development northeast of the center. Reducing travel lane widths in the district center will both calm traffic and provide space for expanded sidewalks, streetscape amenities and strategically placed on-street parking. Public realm improvements to reinforce connections to district trails and trailheads are equally important to reinforce a strong secondary network of bicycle and pedestrian trails. Connecting the head of the Cochituate Rail Trail north to the Carol Getchell Trail or the Hultman Aqueduct provides new links in the network. The Hultman Aqueduct can provide a long term secondary route west to Nobscot.



Regulatory Strategy

Several important regulatory modifications will enable new opportunities and long-term investment in Saxonville. A district-wide Village Zoning District would provide a more cohesive and tailored approach to zoning in the village center. Currently, five zoning districts (M, B-1, B-2, R-1 and G) exist at the center of Saxonville. The creation of a single Village Zoning District would create a more consistent application of allowable and desirable uses, potential for mixed-uses, tailoring of dimensional requirements and design guidelines regarding building placement and other aspects to reinforce the village center and examination of parking requirements. In regard to parking, other regulatory options to encourage the shared use of parking and to develop an overall district parking strategy would greatly enhance the efficiency and active use of all district properties.