

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Downtown Study



Framingham, MA



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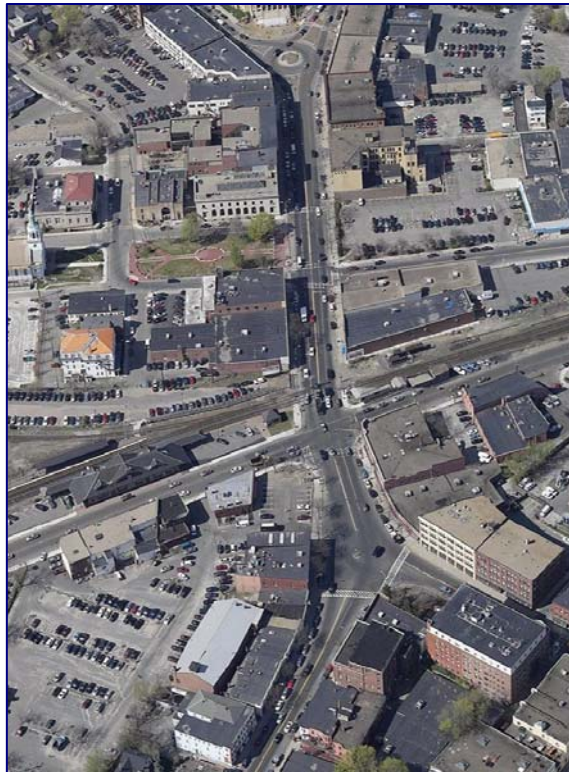
STUDY PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this study was to develop and assess a set of alternative transportation and urban design/economic development measures to address identified deficiencies in the Downtown. A study objective was to recommend a combination of strategies that would enable Framingham to take major steps towards providing a transportation network and an urban design plan that would be achievable and effectively serve the community and opportunities for growth.

The scope for study included the assessment of **four major transportation alternatives** selected by the Downtown Rail Committee (DRC). These were selected from a much larger list that had been predominantly developed by the DRC over the course of many prior years of discussion. The four alternatives were:

- **Route 126 Underpass of Route 135**
- **Route 135 Underpass of Route 126**
- **East Bypass – Loring Drive Alignment**
- **Far East Bypass – New Alignment**

The assessment process was conducted from the perspectives of transportation, urban design/land use, and economic potential with the intent of identifying build alternatives for further more detailed engineering, as well as environmental evaluations. In addition to the four major alternatives described above, several lesser improvements, such as intersection reconfiguration and/or signalization, were developed as complimentary measures.



THE PROCESS TO DATE

While interest to improve transportation in Downtown Framingham began over 100 years ago, the genesis for this study began with the formation of a Downtown Rail Committee (DRC) in 2001. The DRC is comprised of Town officials, professionals and knowledgeable citizens, who have expended considerable time and energy and formed a range of transportation concepts from bypass alignments to grade separations. As noted above, these concepts were ranked by the DRC and were condensed to four for the purpose of this study.



The conduct of the study was overseen by a Steering Committee consisting of Town professionals, who provided guidance and direct participation in both phases of this study.

Phase I of this study included the comprehensive assessment of existing conditions, with findings published in March of 2008 in a three volume report focused on transportation, market analysis and urban design/land use. At the conclusion of this phase, a Strategic Workshop was conducted with the Steering Committee during which three development themes were presented for assessment in Phase II.

Phase II, presented in this document, builds on the platform established by Phase I and the Strategic Workshop. The **transportation assessments** focused on the four alignments selected by the DRC, and the **urban design/land use/economic assessment** began with the three development themes which emerged from the Phase I Strategic Workshop.

TRANSPORTATION FINDINGS

The four transportation alternatives were subjected to a **conditional** two-tiered evaluation process; that is, the first tier must be satisfied to advance to the second tier. Under the first tier each alternative was screened for physical and environmental implications and overall feasibility of implementation. Those determined to be feasible were then advanced to the second tier and more rigorous transportation analysis impacts.

Review of Tier-one findings

The **Grade Separation of Route 126 under Route 135** (and the Rail Corridor) would facilitate north-south movements through the Downtown, but the required depressed roadway would limit vehicular and pedestrian mobility on both sides along Route 126, which in many ways is the “Main Street” of the Downtown. The Downtown would be physically divided by the depressed roadway structure and its presence would severely limit development opportunities, economic growth and efforts to achieve a more attractive Downtown atmosphere. **This alternative is not recommended for further consideration.**

The **two Bypass Alternatives** present challenges related to physical constraints, property acquisition, environmental impacts and residential disruption, without significantly improving traffic flow. Routes would still require a signalized crossing of Route 135, either at the already-congested Dennison Crossing area, or at Clarks Hill to Everett Street, along with an additional at-grade crossing of the CSX / MBTA rail corridor. Further, the Bypass Alternatives would connect north of Route 135 to a corridor with an existing truck exclusion, further limiting their effectiveness. **These Bypass alternatives are not recommended for further consideration.**



The **Grade Separation of Route 135 under Route 126** would improve north-south movements through the Downtown. The Route 135 Underpass would provide of freer movement of traffic flow along Route 135 and strengthen east-west mobility along Route 126 for vehicles and pedestrians. This alternative would also improve pedestrian connectivity between Downtown areas north and south of Route 135, while providing reserve roadway capacity, which could be used to stimulate economic growth via the development of undeveloped or under-utilized parcels in the downtown. Right-of-way takings would be predominantly limited to non-residential properties. **This alternative was advanced to a tier two evaluation.**

Review of Tier Two Findings

This tier consists of a traffic analysis of alternatives satisfying requirements of Tier One, which in this case was only the Route 135 Underpass of Route 126.

A perception by many is that the congestion in Downtown Framingham is solely a result of interference by at-grade train crossings. While train crossing is obviously a factor, many of the downtown intersections suffer significant delay even without the crossings. Route 135/126 intersection is currently interrupted by 61 crossings each day (41 MBTA, 18 CSX and 2 Amtrak), resulting in a total delay of approximately 2 ½ hours each day.



Intersection analysis was conducted at eleven existing study area intersections simulating conditions with and without train crossings. Year 2027 No-Build conditions indicate poor conditions even without a train crossing. The Route 135 Underpass improvements would significantly improve traffic operations under normal operations (e.g., no train crossings during the analysis period), while delays related to periods of train crossings would still occur. There is no single “magic bullet” for improving Downtown operations, but the Route 135 Underpass would represent a significant step in that direction.

Of eleven rail/roadway intersections that lie within the Town, only two are grade separated; these are at the Winter Street and Fountain Street Bridges to the west of the Downtown. The remaining nine crossings are at-grade, each resulting in significant delays. These delays take on added significance for the issue of emergency vehicle access. Development of a grade separated vehicular route east of Farm Pond would provide an additional benefit to transportation in Framingham.



URBAN PLANNING /URBAN DESIGN DIRECTIONS

Downtown Planning Goals and Objectives

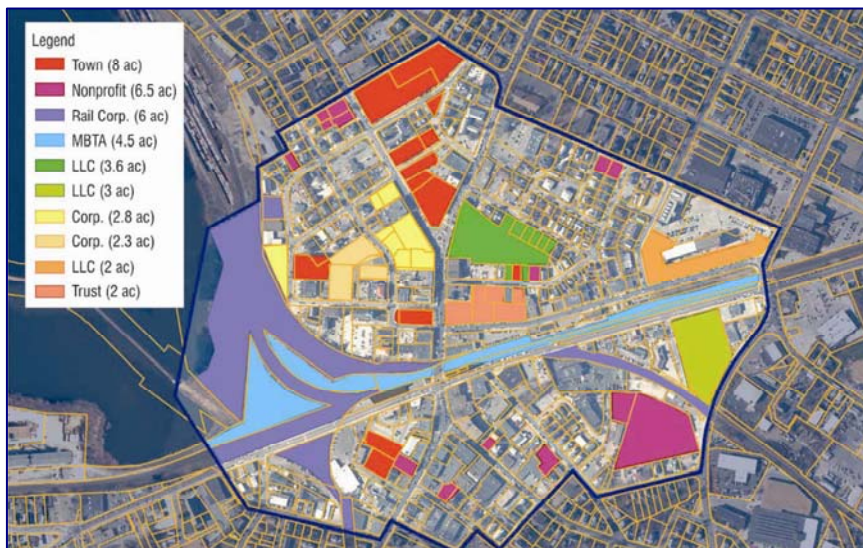
An important aspect of the study process has been the coordination of transportation and circulation alternatives and the planning potential for the future of Downtown Framingham. The urban planning and urban design effort focused on understanding how circulation and transportation changes associated with the rail crossing issues could either benefit or detract from the economic and civic potential of the downtown. This effort recognized that the existing circulation patterns constrain the Downtown because of the congestion and distribution of traffic that occurs. The town recognizes that their ability to substantially change and improve the Downtown must be properly linked to the strategy for circulation and street improvements. To that end, The Cecil Group advanced various scenarios that would achieve important revitalization goals to provide the context for both planning and evaluation of circulation alternatives.

The planning concepts for the Downtown have been built upon a series of goals and objectives that are drawn from previous plans, studies, and the many interactive discussions that engaged Town leadership and staff. Among the most prominent goals which have been taken into account are the following:

- Economic Development – The town should undertake initiatives and direct transit and infrastructure improvements to substantially expand the Downtown’s contribution to Framingham’s economy. The Downtown is an “underperforming asset” relative to its potential contribution to jobs, local sales, property values, and the tax base of Framingham.
- Mitigation of Rail Impacts – The Downtown is divided by an at-grade rail corridor serving freight and passenger traffic. With the prospect of growing rail traffic, circulation improvements should incorporate methods to mitigate these impacts.
- Transit Orientation – Downtown Framingham is strategically located to take broad advantage of its center transit station to support walkable types of transit oriented development (TOD).



- Civic and Cultural Center – Downtown Framingham should be enhanced as the civic and cultural center for the entire Framingham community, building upon the facilities and institutions already present.
- Downtown as a Neighborhood Center – In addition to serving the entire Framingham community, the Downtown should also serve as the center for the densely populated neighborhoods within the Downtown.
- Downtown as a Modal Hub– The Downtown should serve as a hub and provide connection and transfer points among many transportation modes – commuter rail, vehicles, bicycles, buses, and pedestrians.
- Downtown as a Mixed-Use Center – The Downtown should provide a balance of uses that include substantial components of retail, office, institutional, culture and education, and housing.
- Open Space in the Downtown – The Downtown should have a high quality network of improved streetscape and open-space amenities.
- Key Issues and Opportunities
As part of the planning process extensive evaluations of existing conditions and trends were taken into account. Categories of investigation included land use, parking, architecture and urban design character, demographics, economics, and ownership patterns. Key findings factored into the Downtown planning process include:
- Underutilization of the Downtown – Calculations suggest that the existing building stock and parking capacity are, in fact, currently substantially underutilized



- Development Opportunities and TOD – The presence of the commuter rail station will tend to promote substantial new residential, commercial or residential development, if it can be provided in concert with substantial improvements in the Downtown, as a whole.
- Historic Building Fabric – The Downtown is composed of a tight network of streets lined with high quality and historic structures that create a solid foundation for renovation and appropriate downtown image.
- Rail, Roads and Land Use – The physical upgrade and reorganization of the transportation network, could unlock substantial new development opportunities.

Summary of Downtown Planning Directions

The urban planning and urban design team considered various directions that could reasonable be taken to accomplish a revitalized downtown. The purpose of the planning directions, in the context of this study, was to investigate whether different land use/development choices would either be dependent upon or substantially affect various transportation and circulation alternatives developed in parallel by the Consultant Team's transportation professionals. The three different directions considered were:

- Cultural and Educational – This direction would build upon the collection of cultural facilities located within the Downtown, such as the Danforth Museum and the Town Library. Special redevelopment focus would be placed on supplemental uses like classrooms, housing, programs for State educational institutions, or expansion of medical-related uses. The Downtown could be the focus for new cinemas, entertainment venues, arts, and artist live/work space, as additional components.
- Residential – This direction recognizes the strong redevelopment potential that might be created through an emphasis on TOD redevelopment.
- Mixed-Use – This direction deliberately seeks a balanced Downtown that would find new opportunities for most segments of existing Downtown uses. This alternative would include a greater emphasis on commercial, retail and office development, along with the "other" uses which are the focus of the other two directions.

Relationship of Downtown Planning Directions to Transportation Alternatives

Planning directions were evaluated relative to the four transportation alternatives to establish whether the related transportation enhancements of these alternatives would significantly affect the ability of the Town to pursue the desired land uses.

In general, the Bypass alternatives would not have significant benefits or negative impacts relative to future planning options for the Downtown. As a result, consideration of these options relative to their transportation costs and benefits can be determined independently.

In regards to the depression of Route 125, the evaluation found that the resulting negative impact on the building and historic core of the traditional Town Center would be very severe and negative. The depression of Route 126 would substantially diminish the business viability for ground floor uses, diminish the value of upper uses because of the visual and access impact, and disrupt an existing acceptable pedestrian link between the north and south portions of Downtown Framingham.

The depression of Route 135 is compatible with any of the Downtown planning directions. The Concord Street overpass could serve to strengthen pedestrian connections between the portions of Downtown Framingham. In addition, the realignment of the streets linking Route 135 to Route 126 could be used to provide an opportunity to unlock parcel redevelopment in proximity to the MBTA commuter rail station. For these reasons, the Route 135 Underpass Alternative is considered as particularly beneficial for a mixed-use planning direction in the Downtown.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: PREFERRED DOWNTOWN PLANNING CONCEPT

The Downtown preferred planning concept is a composite of the positive features of each of the three land use and planning directions. The traditional core of historic buildings along Concord, Union, Hollis and Irving Streets should remain and be revitalized as the core of the downtown. The Downtown should be strengthened as a retail and restaurant destination serving both the neighborhood and the larger community. The upper floor levels are likely to become a focus for new residential uses, as well as modest proportions of commercial office use.

The reconfiguration of roadways related to depressing Route 135 would help facilitate mixed-use redevelopment on the blocks adjacent to and south of the commuter rail station. Relocation of a key rail access spur could unlock commercial mixed-use redevelopment just north of the commuter rail station. Areas to the east and west of Concord Street could be improved through a combination of new development and renovation to serve primarily as commercial areas.

Applying a greater horizon to the planning process for the Downtown suggests further opportunities could be captured in the future in the North Rail Yard land area if this land could be disengaged from its current rail use. The perspective redevelopment of this edge of the Downtown for primarily residential use would complement the overall redevelopment, outlined above, as well as enhance the area's natural resources.

NEXT STEPS/IMPLEMENTATION

The goal of this study was to assess conditions in Downtown Framingham and to evaluate the potential for alternatives to improve transportation, provide urban design/land use options, and develop opportunities for economic growth in the Downtown. While this document includes recommendations in these areas, it has to be considered as the beginning of a process if implementation is going to be achieved.

Initiatives of this scale will require an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Either effort will bring a new beginning to the process and will require a thorough review and a much more rigorous assessment of recommendations and alternatives.

Transportation alternatives will include the No-Build condition, defined as conditions if no improvements occur. The Route 135 Underpass would likely one of the Build Alternatives. Several other Build alternatives would likely be considered, either as stand-alone options, or as supplements to one another. While outside the scope of this current report, several other significant transportation improvements have been discussed already, including:

- A grade separation at the Bishop Street, either under or over Route 135.
- A grade separation from the currently inactive CP rail bed just west of Route 136, across Route 135 into the current North Rail Yard.

The following Planning Report includes description of implementation tools and actions that would be needed to coordinate the Downtown redevelopment with the transportation improvements described. Key implementation concepts include the opportunity to create advantageous new street alignments and parcelization. The implementation recommendations also suggest that the Town must create a special redevelopment entity and processes, if it is to successfully facilitate the type and scale of revitalization associated with the planning vision.