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Shrewsbury Town Center Study

Shrewsbury, Massachusetts

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Town of Shrewsbury

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The hundreds of individuals who attended our public meetings and answered our online surveys.

Introduction

The Town of Shrewsbury received a predevelopment award from MassDevelopment to perform a study focusing on the Town Center. This study has two complementary components. The first looks at Shrewsbury Town Center as a whole and develops a series of strategies that would strengthen the district. This part of the study builds upon the policy direction and strategies set forth in the Community Master Plan, and builds on the work performed as part of Massachusetts' Complete Streets Program and a recent Town Center Parking Management Plan.¹ For the purposes of this study, the Town Center is roughly defined by the intersection of Prospect Street and Boylston Street to the north; St Mary's Church to the east; the Post Office to the south and west (Figure 1).

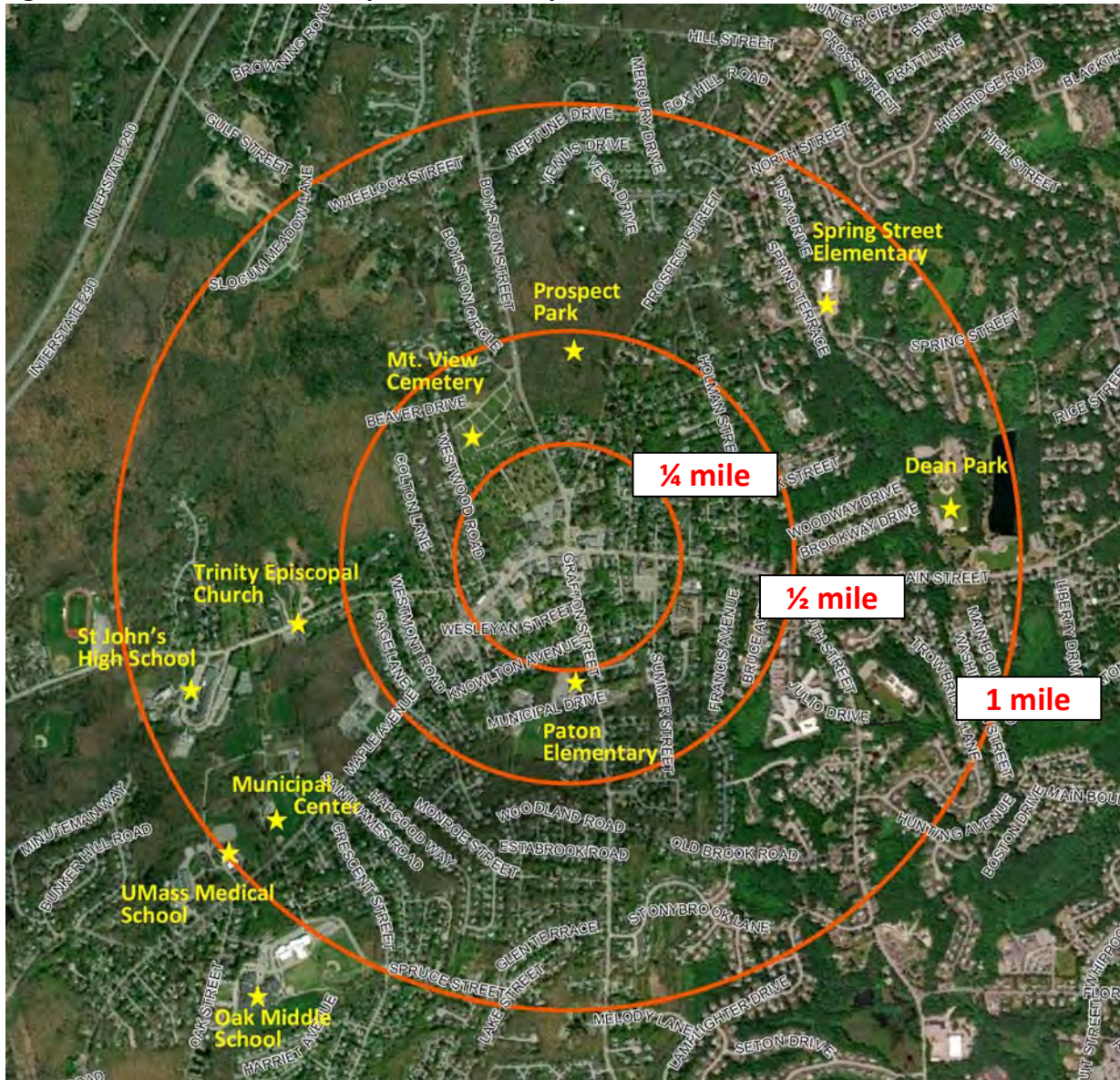
Figure 1. Approximate Extent of Shrewsbury Town Center (Study Area)



¹ Funded as part of the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative Technical Assistance Program competitive grant from the State Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD).

It is also important to note its location within the larger context of other important landmarks like Prospect Park (north); Dean Park (east); Oak Middle School (south); and St. John’s High School (west) (Figure 2). This broader perspective is particularly important when considering the ongoing challenges related to traffic and the opportunities to draw people from other important institutions. Lastly, as a third layer of focus, many of the recommendations that emerge from the report are focused on the zoning district that governs development in the Town Center’s core area (Figure 3).

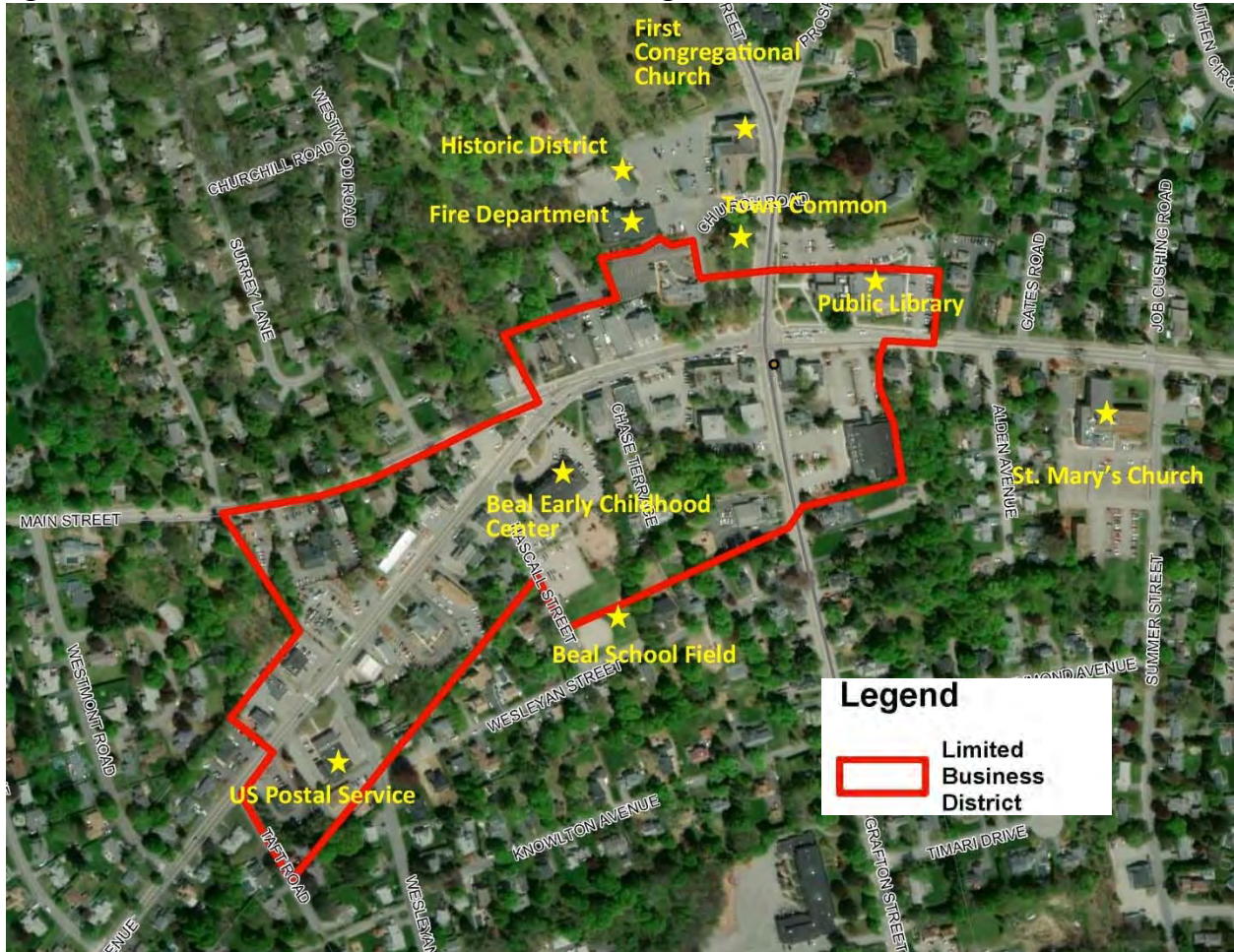
Figure 2. Town Center with Important Municipal Sites and Institutions



The second component of this study is a more specific assessment of the Beal School property. The town recently determined that a new elementary school building is needed and, as part of this investment, the town will need to decide what becomes of the existing facility and the site

upon which it sits. This study used a brief but intensive public process to solicit feedback on the potential future of the site.

Figure 3. Town Center with Limited Business Zoning District



Public Process

The town and its consultant team designed and delivered a community engagement process that solicited public feedback on issues related to the Town Center as a whole and also to the Beal School site. Elements of the process included:

Opening Discussion – Members of the Beal School Reuse Committee, the Planning Board, the Historic District Commission, and the Town Center Association met at the outset of the project. This meeting provided a platform for better understanding the challenges the Town Center faces from the perspectives of economic development, historic preservation, and general circulation patterns.

Opening Survey – An electronic survey was deployed in October of 2018 that continued the parallel focus on the larger Town Center and the more specific Beal School property issues. This survey combined traditional survey style questions with a map survey (see questions in Appendix A). Approximately 340 people responded to the survey. Results regarding the Town Center as a whole were not surprising, with respondents showing consensus on major challenges facing the Town Center related to traffic circulation and pedestrian safety. However, there was a diversity of opinion regarding the future of the Beal School site. While many participants felt it was important to preserve the original building, a greater number felt demolition was either necessary due to the condition of the building or acceptable if it leads to a high-quality project.

Public Forum – Subsequent to the survey, the town hosted a public event at which a project overview was provided, the results of the first survey were presented, and the town spent a significant amount of time answering questions and facilitating open discussion with attendees. After discussion, attendees were presented with a series of conceptual diagrams showing hypothetical development programming on the Beal School site. Attendees were able to review these concepts, vote on the ones they liked or did not like, and provide written commentary. The conceptual development schemes are located in Appendix A.

Post-Forum Survey – Immediately following the public forum, the consultants presented the same conceptual development sketches to the public in an online survey. Approximately 180 people responded to the survey, continuing to show a mix of opinions relative to the potential future of the Beal School site.

Beal School Reuse Committee Meeting – At the close of the engagement process, the Beal School Reuse Committee convened with the consultant team, municipal planning, MassDevelopment, and several members of the public to discuss the results of the community engagement process, several substantive issues related to the Town Center, and next steps for the study. In particular, the town's Department of Planning and Economic Development encouraged the committee to provide guidance on how this report would be most helpful to the eventual development of a request for proposals (RFP) to develop the Beal School site. The results of that discussion are presented later in the report.

Issues and Opportunities

Generally speaking, Shrewsbury's Town Center is considered a tremendous asset within the community, and residents and business owners talk about the Center with a sense of pride. They are quick to point out the historic Town Common, the newly expanded library, and a couple of restaurants they truly enjoy (see Figure 1). However, residents and business owners also share a sense that the Town Center is not living up to its potential and they are equally quick to point out the problems with traffic and a localized economy that is underperforming.

A closer look reveals that Shrewsbury's Town Center is indeed facing significant challenges and is in danger of evolving in a way that does not fit the vision held by most in the community. The issues that are pushing Shrewsbury's Town Center in an undesirable direction vary in scope and strength. Further, the amount of power the town has to alter or resist these influences also varies. While the Master Plan calls for the Town Center to become more of a destination with a strong sense of identity, market forces, the regional transportation network, and local regulations currently have the Town Center on a different trajectory.

“Many New England communities have a town center that is the focal point of civic life, and this is certainly the case in Shrewsbury. The Town Center has the look and feel of a traditional village; it is seen as an area that should be strengthened, so it becomes more of a destination. The center is generally walkable, buildings are multi-story and multi-use, and these structures are positioned close to the street and sidewalk. This traditional “main street” layout creates a comfortable environment for pedestrians and encourages people to visit more than one shop in a single visit.”

--Shrewsbury Master Plan

Circulation

The circulation of automobiles, bicycles, and pedestrians in Shrewsbury's Town Center is one of the biggest challenges the town faces when looking to create a safe, walkable center. The volume of traffic that moves through the center, especially at peak traffic hours, is very large and the speeds at which motorists travel are often dangerous to people looking to cross the street safely on foot. The traffic volumes enter the Town Center from all directions as this area serves as a major through-route for the region. Bicycle infrastructure in the form of dedicated bike lanes and similar features is non-existent both approaching and within the center. Pedestrian infrastructure is present throughout the center, but the design of these features is not commensurate with the traffic volumes and speeds currently experienced at every intersection (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Main Street Travelling West through the Town Center



The above view shows Main Street traveling west. While the pedestrian island creates a much needed resting point for pedestrians, it also creates the perception that the driver is on a one-way street. Coupled with the pavement width approaching 20 feet, this condition encourages drivers to speed up. The modest crosswalk is not enough to encourage drivers to slow down. Narrowing the lane, adding more pronounced signage, and installing a more dramatic crosswalk would make this a safer crossing.

To address these conditions, the Town and the state Department of Transportation (DOT) will need to work together to implement bold solutions. Some of this has already started with the improvements to Main Street on the western approach to the center, but considerable work is still required.

Regional/Local Markets

To plot a course toward a thriving Town Center, it is helpful to examine the regional economic and real estate market for context. The market in this area of Massachusetts is largely driven by the City of Worcester and large commercial centers that lie adjacent to major arterials and highways like Route 9 and Route 20. In recent years, Worcester and the regional commercial areas have experienced significant levels of investment, getting the attention of statewide media outlets and real estate professionals. While the increase in commerce is a net positive for the region, Shrewsbury's Town Center will have difficulty competing for uses like office space and retail.

Figure 5. Signs of Strength in the Local Market



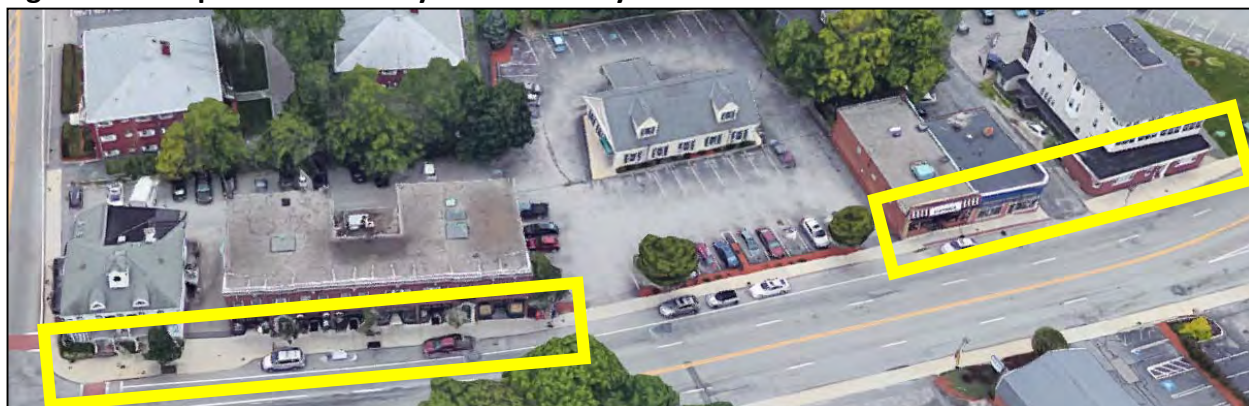
Left: Recent construction along Route 9 demonstrates this area will continue to be an important regional housing and commercial hub for many years to come. (source, Grossman RE)
Right: Downtown Worcester continues to see new investment with projects like the AC Hotel. (source, NE Public Radio)

Discussions with local real estate professionals support the observation that demand for office space and retail use in Shrewsbury’s Town Center is limited, in part because larger existing commercial centers will more efficiently absorb demand for those uses. Beyond the regional competition, even larger trends in remote office technology and Internet shopping are making it difficult for small markets like the Town Center to maintain “bricks and mortar” establishments for these uses. What the regional (and global) market trends reveal is that Shrewsbury Town Center should not try to compete with these larger commercial centers—a different approach is required.

Local Zoning Regulations

Zoning reform was identified as a primary focal point of this study at the outset. The current zoning designation for Shrewsbury’s Town Center is Limited Business (LB). This district exists in three other small areas in Shrewsbury, two of which sit directly on Route 9 and a third that sits directly on Route 20. The standards associated with the LB district create the type of development that is appropriate to these larger arterials, where commercial establishments are located in an environment purposefully designed to be dominated by the automobile. Parking requirements are high and generally create parking areas that require twice the amount of land occupied by the single-story building they serve. Site design requirements such as setbacks and buffers are designed to separate buildings from one another and do not envision the coordinated development of multiple buildings between which people can easily walk. It is important to note that the buildings along Main Street that most effectively engage the street and support a walkable environment do not comply with the standards set forth in the LB district.

Figure 6. Example of Walkability in Shrewsbury's Town Center



Above: Pedestrians walking this stretch of Main Street can easily access 10 different places of business directly from the sidewalk.

Left: Even with a fairly narrow sidewalk, business owners find ways to use flowers, flags, benches, and additional signage to create an inviting, comfortable environment for people passing by on foot.

Place Making and the Resilience of Town Centers

To address the challenges related to circulation, market trends, and zoning regulations, Shrewsbury must aggressively pursue a different form of economic development in the Town Center. The most successful initiatives that work at the district scale (like Shrewsbury's Town Center) use strategies that foster what is sometimes referred to as "economies of place." Instead of trying to compete for shares in the regional market place for similar retail and office uses, town centers and main streets across New England and beyond thrive when they carve out their own unique niche. Strategies that create a sense of local identity and an economy that provides an "experience," rather than just a collection of businesses, are used to draw sustained investment and commerce. Downtown areas can vary in scale dramatically, ranging from a "sleepy" Lenox center, a more substantial Shelburne Falls, or a bustling Northampton. Regardless of scale, from the residents' or visitors' perspective, there are a number of assets that are consistent from one place to another. These assets exist at varying levels of strength in Shrewsbury's Town Center. Taking a closer look at each of these elements can be useful toward developing a strategic plan for the Town moving forward.

1. A Strong Sense of History

Most well-known New England towns convey a strong connection to local history through their buildings, monuments, public spaces, and roadways. In Shrewsbury’s Town Center, the Town Common and Congregational Church (Figure 7, right) provide the most striking historic features and act as “visual anchors” within the District. These sites and several surrounding parcels comprise one of the two historic districts in Shrewsbury. The outline of the historic district is well-placed and strategically covers those sites that contribute high profile cultural assets, while leaving other parts of the district available for redevelopment (see Figure 8 next page).

The First Congregational Church was constructed in 1766 and sits as a natural focal point on the north end of the Town Common. Materials from the original town meetinghouse were used in its construction.

Figure 7. First Congregational Church



2. Something Old and Something New

While Shrewsbury does have a collection of historically significant buildings in the Town Center, there are a number of buildings that were more recently constructed. This kind of variation creates visual interest and a sense of vibrancy in a traditional town center or main street. A building like the library, for example, unites elements of the original historic structure with the contemporary design of recent additions. These architectural choices are made consciously and with great care in order to acknowledge both the value of preserving historic structures and embracing contemporary forms.

To effectively mix new development with older structures, the town must be aware of some important development challenges. Notably, most of the parcels in the primary study area (Figure 1) are fully occupied by existing structures. If new development is to occur, demolition of some of these structures will be necessary over time. Demolition and associated site preparation potentially makes development projects more complex in a town center district, and can add significant expense. Shrewsbury should be aware of these development issues and look to streamline development review to the extent appropriate.

Figure 8. Shrewsbury's Town Center Historic District



3. Buildings that Engage the Street

Having a mix of old and new buildings is an asset for a town center; however, it is important that the placement and design of new buildings reinforces the traditional patterns set by the older buildings. Walkable town center districts always include streets where the windows on the storefront allow passers-by to see inside, and entranceways open onto wide sidewalks. This active engagement between the public space on the street and the inside of stores and restaurants creates a sense of connection and community, and that people are welcome and invited into the variety of shops along the way. Shrewsbury's Town Center—along Main Street, Maple Avenue, and Grafton Street—has a mix of buildings with regard to location and design. For example, the block with Willy's Steakhouse and Sushi Bar, Amici's Trattoria, and Shrewsbury Pizzeria creates what is probably the strongest connection between buildings and sidewalks in the Town Center (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Historic Photograph of the Building Currently Occupied by Landmark Businesses in the Town Center.



This building was constructed in 1925 and this photo would have been taken around that time. The multi-unit structure still serves as both an architectural treasure and an anchor for the public realm. While variation in building style is important, many of the design features of this building could be used as a reference point for future design guidelines.

<https://historicshrewsburyma.weebly.com/old-photos.html>

By contrast, the commercial buildings along other stretches of Main Street further west do not hold this connection as well and some have included parking areas directly between the front façade and the sidewalk. Moving forward, the town will need to apply clear standards for infill development and projects that look to “raze and replace” existing buildings. While there are only a small number of sites where buildings would need to come forward to engage the street, the effect would fill large gaps in the current building line along Main Street. Along the north end of Maple Avenue, the effect would be more dramatic as the connection between buildings and the street is dominated by parking areas and numerous curb cuts that often span over 40 feet (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Commercial Development Along Maple Avenue



Development along Maple Avenue shows how the historic connection between buildings and the sidewalk has eroded over time. The numbers in the figure show date of construction. In 1930, the building was constructed to directly engage the sidewalk. This demonstrates that more customers were probably coming on foot than by car. The adjacent buildings demonstrate a later bias to the automobile, which was reflected in local regulations. Note that the historic structure across the street chose a larger setback from the road, but maintained that setback primarily for foot traffic. This was common with the design of civic buildings and is also reflected in the Beal School site.

4. Vibrant and Accessible Public Spaces

In just about every traditional New England town center, there is a centrally located public green space or park. These spaces were established in the European tradition of creating a civic space as the heart of the town center, ideally located for special events, political debates, harvest markets, holiday celebrations, and many other community-building activities. Shrewsbury's Town Common serves this role and is clearly valued by the community as perhaps the strongest asset within the Town Center.

The key to success with a town common like the one in Shrewsbury is to continually activate it with programmed activities. All too often, traditional picturesque town greens are surrounded by busy roads and fences that serve as barriers to usage, leaving an enormous opportunity wasted. Shrewsbury does use its Town Common for a variety of activities already, most notably as a centerpiece for the annual Spirit of Shrewsbury celebration. Further, the roadway configuration only makes access a challenge on two sides of the Common (Main Street and Boylston Street) since Church street lines the

interior portion of the Common and is relatively quiet. Moving forward, the town should look for opportunities to empower other groups like the Shrewsbury Town Center Association to help with programming.

5. Street Furnishings, Sidewalks, and Signage

Design details within the public realm play an important role in establishing the identity of a vibrant town center. Street furnishings are an important part of this discussion as they can create a strong sense of welcome and relaxation for people on the street or gathering in parks. Benches, small tables, trash receptacles, flower pots, bike racks, kiosks, sidewalk finishes, and other features like these provide convenience and demonstrate local investment in the area. Beyond the foundation of having good sidewalks and well-placed buildings, furnishings go to the “next level” of town center design, providing the type of amenities that create a comfortable experience (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Examples of Streetscapes with High-Quality Furnishings and Sidewalks



These photographs show how public investment in street furnishings and sidewalk materials creates a strong feeling of welcome and engagement with people in the public realm.

6. A Diverse Collection of Businesses

Business diversity is important to town centers. In theory, the more diversity you have in your collection of businesses, the more diversity you’ll have in your consumer base. This contributes to the overall viability of a town center by capturing the interest of a broad range of people providing opportunities for activity from the early morning well into the evening. From a municipal perspective, flexibility in local regulation plays the most important role in opening opportunities for a wide range of businesses. Further, it is important for Shrewsbury to recognize and consider recent trends in small business when looking at the uses that could be allowed in the Town Center. For example:

- Many of the uses that were once considered inappropriate for mixed-use centers have evolved into operations that are very different from several

decades ago. Many tattoo parlors, for example, have restyled themselves as upscale, high-end operations. Some uses that are often considered “industrial” have also scaled down to a level that makes them worth considering for traditional centers, such as craft brewers or distillers and artisan furniture making.

- Individual buildings are being occupied by more than one business and temporary users may have access to leasable space as small as an individual desk. Small business owners with brick and mortar space are trying to be very flexible and opportunistic in how they can generate revenue. The town will want to be sure that there are no zoning requirements that unintentionally act as a barrier to this type of activity.

7. Residential Use

In almost every successful town center in New England, there is active residential use complementary to the scale of buildings that helps to establish the character of the center. Unfortunately, smaller centers often have only a small amount of residential use that is “grandfathered” from many decades ago, with new residential uses not allowed by existing regulations. In these situations, communities often express reservations about officially allowing for residential use through a zoning change. Reasons for this concern can vary, but generally include an assumption that residential development represents a financial burden to the town, stresses services, and adds to traffic congestion.

With regard to Shrewsbury’s Town Center, it is important to note a few things relative to residential development. First, the market demand for residential development in this region (unlike office or retail) is extremely strong. A surge in housing demand across much of Massachusetts is being driven by two fundamental demographic shifts: 1) Baby boomers are aging and many seniors find that the current choices in “senior living” do not meet their needs; Some see retirement communities, early assisted living, or other stereotypical “senior developments” as too homogenous and want to remain active in a community with people of all ages; and 2) The surge of the so-called “millennials”; Young people are entering the housing market in force now and many are not interested in the single-family home in the suburbs. What is in fact happening is that the two largest demographic groups driving the housing market today are, in many cases, looking for a very similar product – small homes, in tightly developed neighborhoods, with access to arts, entertainment, and everyday conveniences.

In addition to these regional and national trends, Shrewsbury has documented strong local needs for smaller housing units that are affordable to seniors, renters, and first-time buyers². Therefore, it is not reasonable to assume that high-quality redevelopment in the Town Center can occur **without** including some residential use. Residential units will be required to make development financially feasible in many cases. Second, the

² Town of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts Housing Production Plan, community Opportunities Group, Nov 30, 2012.

type of residential units that would be built in this area (typically small units), have demonstrated to be “tax positive” in many fiscal assessments. Lower incidence of school children and a smaller “per capita” cost for services are driving factors in this equation. Finally, additional residential development located directly in the Town Center is one of the most efficient ways to provide customers for local goods and services, increasing the economic viability of local business.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Administration and Programming

Local Capacity

As a first recommendation, it is important to discuss local capacity for stewardship and promotion of the Town Center in Shrewsbury. Simply stated, without such capacity, implementation of other recommendations would not occur. Most town centers rely on municipal government to provide resources for maintenance, programming, infrastructure, public safety, etc. In Shrewsbury, the town relies in large part on its Department of Planning and Economic Development to support the development of policies and initiatives that will strengthen the Town Center. Examples of important efforts include the recent development of a Master Plan that speaks directly to the desire for a strong Town Center, as well as the continued procurement of funding for studies like the recent Complete Streets Prioritization Plan, the Town Center Parking Study, and the funds that produced this report.

However, it is also common for the business community to organize and step into a leadership role for a district like the Town Center. These groups can partner with the town and provide added capacity for organizing special events, prioritizing improvements, and managing assets like parking areas. Shrewsbury already has precedents for local business districts with the longstanding Lakeway Business District and the more recent establishment in 2018 of the Shrewsbury Town Center Association (STCA). The latter organization “...was formed by business owners and community members with a connection to the Town Center. Our mission is to improve, enhance, and foster economic and cultural development in the Town Center District of Shrewsbury.”

Figure 12. Lakeway Business District Signage



The Lakeway Business District has been instrumental in promoting business along Route 9 and advocating for improvements in the public realm.

While the organization is still very young, the STCA has a clear mission and strong leadership from business owners who have a long history in the town as well as business owners new to the community. The town's most important role with the STCA is providing support, and members of the Department of Planning and Economic Development have already established strong lines of communication with the STCA. Because the organization is new, it is difficult to get a sense of what the long-term role may be in shaping and supporting the Town Center. As with many new business associations, supporting special events, branding the Town Center, and helping the town to plan for physical improvements could be important focal points. As the organization continues to expand and mature, it may explore the formation of a formal Business Improvement District (BID)³. These groups function with greater capacity to assess membership fees, develop budgets, and provide project management. Regardless of the long-term outlook for STCA, the association provides an immediate resource for the Town Center. The town should continue its support of the group and maintain regular communication with STCA to ensure opportunities for collaboration are not lost.

Programming

As discussed earlier, Shrewsbury's Town Center receives a modest amount of programming over the course of the year and there are signs that this programming could expand in the near future with the recent formation of STCA. This is consistent with the policies of the Master Plan which calls for the town to "support the Town Center as a focal point for bringing the community together through social, economic, cultural and civic activities." *The Spirit of Shrewsbury* and *A Taste of Shrewsbury* receive a lot of excitement and high levels of attendance. As the STCA continues to grow and collaborate with the Town, the number of events may increase and diversify. Events that have had success in other communities include:

- Food truck events
- Corn hole tournaments (or other games)
- Regularly scheduled outdoor movies
- Outdoor "open mic" music events
- Seasonal/holiday events and craft fairs
- ...and many others.

It is worth noting that the Town Common is not the only open space resource in the Town Center. Programming of more urbanized centers like this should also consider any larger parking areas as a potential resource. Partnering with the church to program the parking areas north of the Town Common, for example, would potentially make an excellent location for a food truck event or any other idea that requires vehicles or staging.

Improvements in the Public Realm

The Town of Shrewsbury has already positioned itself for some important improvements in the public realm. The Complete Streets Prioritization Report shows a couple of projects that will

³ <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/business-improvement-districts-bid>

have a direct impact on the area moving forward. Perhaps most notable on the list is the restriping of Maple Avenue from the Town Center to Route 9, including two new five-foot-wide bicycle lanes along the shoulders of the road. This project will connect two important nodes within the community, but also a series of important sites along the way. The connection between the middle school and the Town Center, for example, is already an important route with students walking to the Center after school on a regular basis. The installation of a bike path will make the route more desirable to that group.

Another initiative already set to begin is the development of a wayfinding plan for the Town Center. Wayfinding, in the context of urban planning, denotes a system of information used to orient people to where they are, and provide direction on where they wish to go. While this may seem like a simple “common sense” strategy on the surface, developing a wayfinding system is a very technical process. A well-designed system uses a detailed assessment of sightlines and other elements to create an easy, intuitive set of “visual cues” that provide

Figure 13. Wayfinding Uses Signage and Streetscape Elements to Help People Find Their Way.



Wayfinding uses signage and streetscape elements to help people find their way through busier areas of town. The light posts and flags used in Shrewsbury set the foundation for a more robust system.

critical information. In a traditional town center, wayfinding mechanisms rely primarily on the use of signage to let visitors know how to reach important landmarks, shopping areas, restaurants, and parks. Importantly, the recent parking study completed for the town identifies wayfinding as a core component of the overall effort to improve access to existing parking areas in the center.

Beyond the obvious use of signage for wayfinding, other elements are used by pedestrians as visual cues. For example, street furnishings and lighting function as an important part of the wayfinding system. Benches, trash receptacles, and light fixtures that are designed to match a specific aesthetic will remind visitors that they are still in the Town Center even if there’s no signage specifically stating this. Shrewsbury’s Town Center has, for example, a cohesive street

lamp network that helps to define the core of the district as it is approached from each of the five entering streets. This network of furnishings should be used as part of the newly designed wayfinding system and as a reference point for the aesthetic that will help define the public realm. Any future investment in street furnishing and wayfinding should be consistent with these features.

Circulation

Speed Reduction at Town Center Gateways

Current conditions in Shrewsbury's Town Center are conducive to motorists traveling at high speeds. Legal speed limits are as high as 40 mph depending on roadways approaching the center, and these speed limits drop to 25 mph far too late to expect most motorists to slow down. Not only is the point at which the speed limit drops far too close to the core of the Town Center, a single small sign is almost exclusively the only alert to the driver. To help address this

Figure 14. Town Center Gateways



The intersections marked in red are potential locations for gateway traffic controls that can help reduce vehicle speeds on the approach to the Town Center.

issue, the town and (where appropriate) the state should install gateway features designed to announce the approach to “Historic Shrewsbury Town Center” and include traffic calming measures as part of these features. Bumpouts, decorative signs, speed tables, speed cameras (particularly on Maple Ave) are examples of features that could be used to help slow traffic well outside the Town Center core area. The figure below shows potential locations that could be used as “pinch points” to significantly slow traffic speeds *before* automobiles reach the core of the Town Center (Figure 14).

Speed Reduction within the Town Center

In addition to calming the speeds of motorists as they approach the Town Center, actions should also be taken to slow speeds within the core of the Town Center, especially where motorists and pedestrians will cross paths. Recommendations include:

1. Tighten curve radii in the center intersection. The two turning radii on the north side of the main intersection, especially the one in front of the library, are very large. These curbs allow for wider, faster turns from motorists and lengthen the crosswalk between the library and the Town Common. Pushing the edge of these curvatures out will slow motorists and shorten the distance to cross the street. One of the strengths of this particular strategy is that it can be tested with temporary installments. Traffic barriers can be placed along the line of an imaginary curb, forcing motorists to navigate the intersection as if the new curb is already in place (Figure 15). This allows the Town to test the change and see the potential improvements (or lack thereof) before making a commitment to a permanent installation.

Figure 15. Example of Temporary Curb Extension Used to Test Feasibility.



Temporary installments like the one shown above use traffic cones and paint to test alterations to roadway layouts.

2. Provide bolder crosswalks. The crosswalks currently used in the Town Center have a better design than just the typical white-striped model used for low-traffic pedestrian crossings. The crosswalks are multicolor and use a “stamped” brick finish. This design is meant to be more aesthetically appealing and more pronounced for both the motorist and the pedestrian. The design is commonly used and often effective. Unfortunately, the traffic conditions in the Town Center are such that a bolder design is recommended

(Figure 16). Other techniques that could be applied, especially at the intersection of Main Street and Route 140, include:

- Increasing the width of the crosswalks.
- Using brighter, bolder colors and designs.
- Applying color or an alternative surface to the “square space” between the four crosswalks at the primary intersection of Main Street and Route 140.

Figure 16. Examples of Bolder Crossing Designs

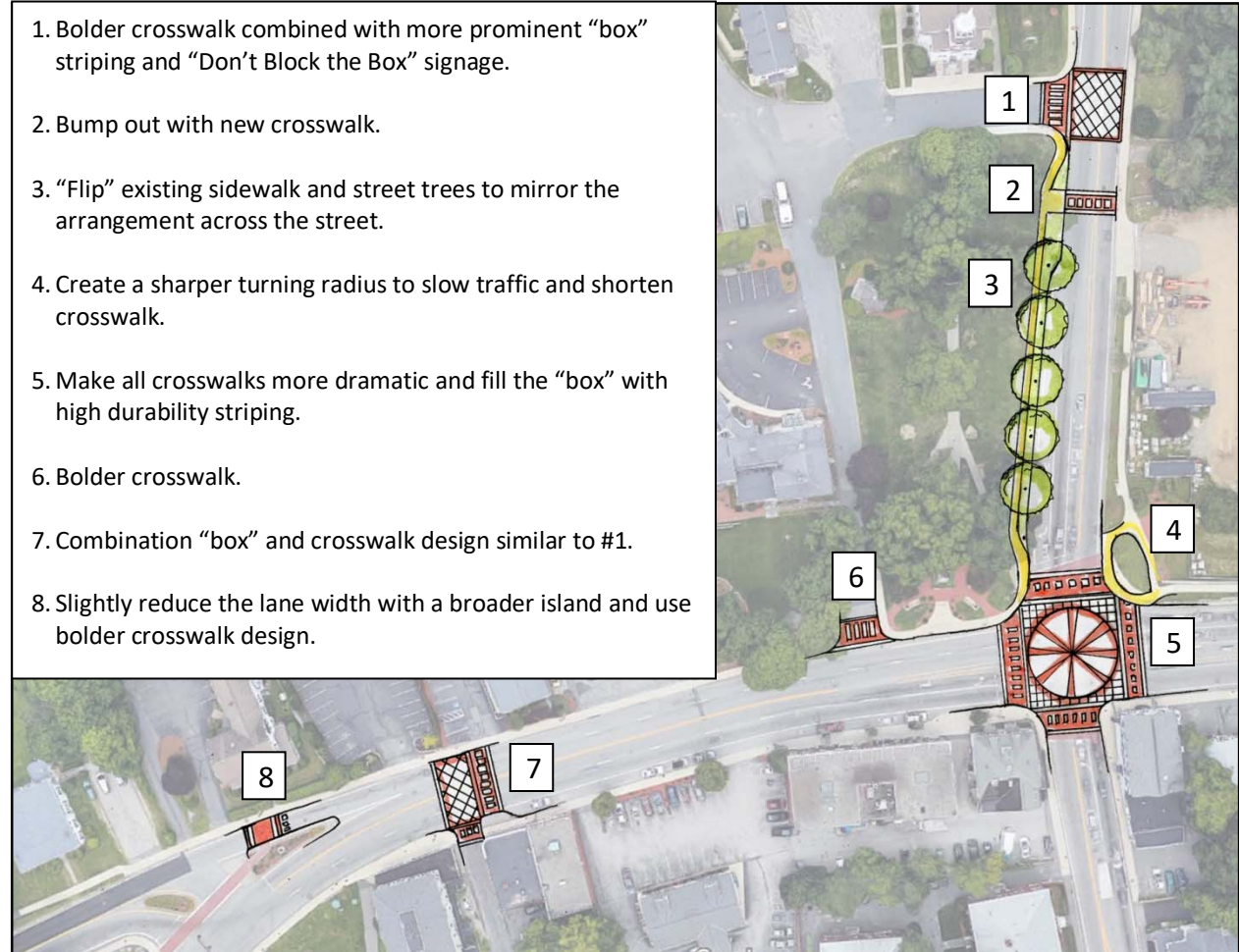


These images illustrate some potentially modest changes to crosswalk and intersection surfacing that can help to strengthen the perceived need to slow automobile speeds and yield to pedestrians. While a detailed discussion of crosswalk surfacing technology is not included in this report, it is worth noting that the paint, machinery, chemicals, and processes used to install crosswalks can be complex and, depending on the choice, more expensive.

3. Provide additional crossings farther back from core intersections. Formal street crossings in the Town Center are provided at a small handful of locations. The town should seriously consider adding crosswalks at locations farther back from the central intersections (i.e., Main and Maple; Main and 140). At the time this report was developed, plans were underway to install a new crosswalk across Boylston Street immediately south of Church Street. This will provide another option for connecting

people at the library with the Town Common, beyond just the crosswalk at the primary intersection. But again, this road is highly trafficked. Consequently, thoughtful design should be considered that integrates a bold crosswalk with “the box” feature meant to keep drivers from stopping in front of Church Street (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Conceptual design and Location of Additional and Improved Crossings.



Zoning Reform

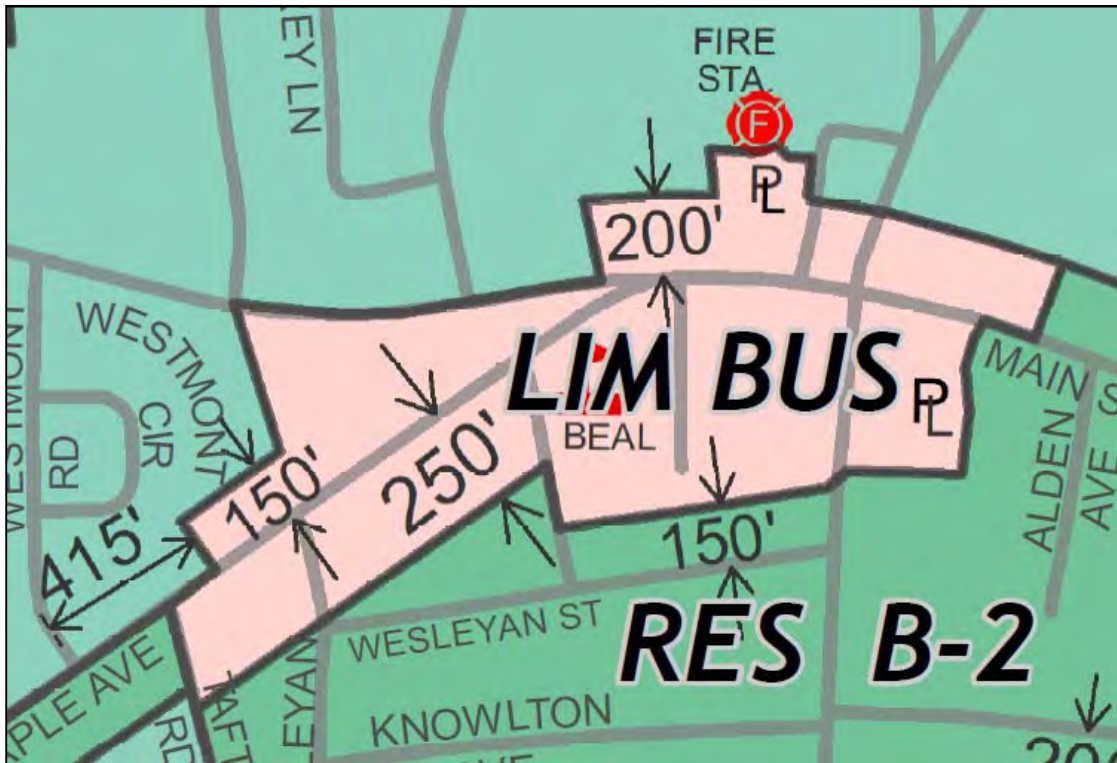
Amending the zoning in the Town Center should be the highest priority strategy to emerge from this report. Zoning reform can be done quickly when compared with other strategies, is very low-cost, and will have an enormously positive impact on the Town Center moving forward. A summary of the recommended strategy is provided here, with more detailed guidance on zoning provided in Appendix A.

The District

The Town Center has been delineated from a number of different perspectives including the Historic District and the Parking Study Area. From a zoning perspective, the most important

consideration is replacing the existing Limited Business District (see Figures 3 and 18). This replacement could be done using the same offset measurements shown on the zoning map today, or a district boundary that more closely matches actual property lines.

Figure 18. The Limited Business District as Depicted on the Official Zoning Map



This close-up of the official Zoning Map shows how the boundary is measured from the roadway. One way to make the zoning clearer would be to have the boundary follow property boundaries to the extent possible.

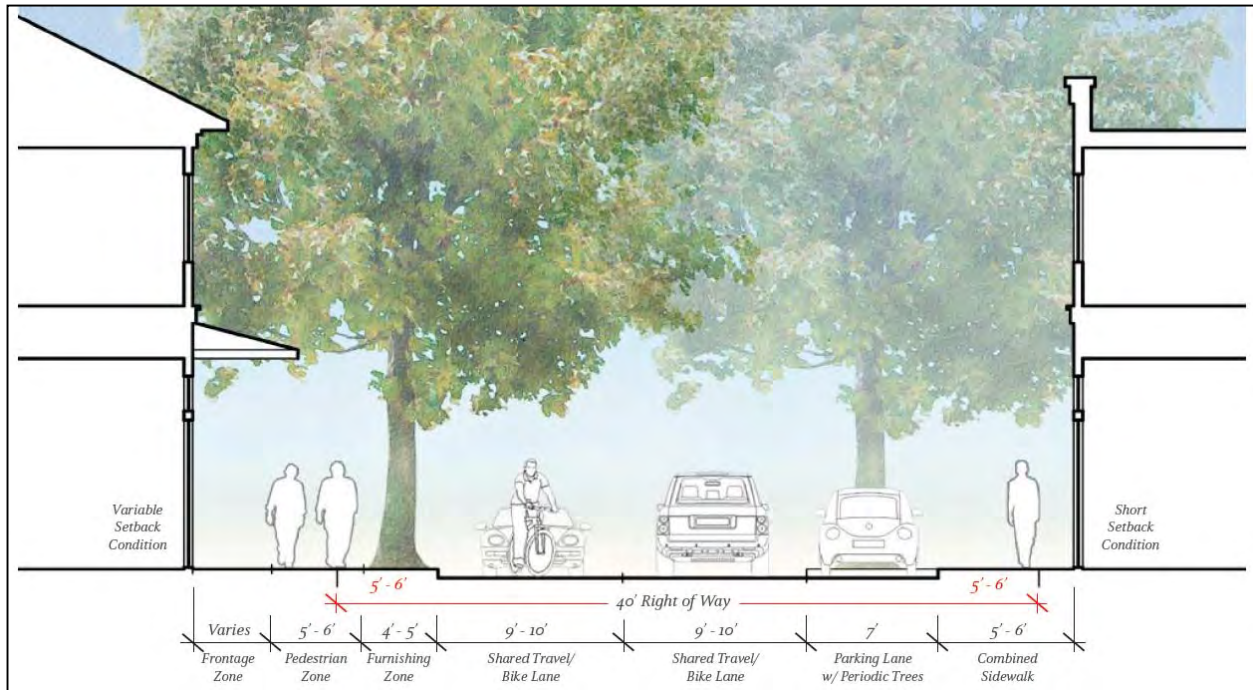
Allowable Uses

The vision for Shrewsbury’s Town Center is to have a mix of “human-scale” uses, which will need to be reflected in the allowable uses for the new Town Center district. Generally speaking, retail, office, service, and restaurant uses would be the focus for ground floors. Importantly, as discussed earlier in this report, the market for residential use is very strong in Shrewsbury and some level of residential development will likely be needed to support the viability of commercial use within the district. Some allowance for “top of the shop” housing will also be included in the zoning amendments.

Property Frontage and Dimensional Requirements

Zoning standards will be provided that prescribe a framework for designing the frontage space between the building façade and the edge of pavement on the street (Figure 19). This framework will need to be flexible to account for the variety of frontage designs “on the ground today,” but will push redevelopment toward creating buildings that engage the street.

Figure 19. Example Diagram for Frontage Area



Diagrams similar to the one shown above can be inserted into the Zoning Bylaw to illustrate the relationship between building facades and sidewalks. They can also help property owners prioritize how to use their sidewalk based on the width along their frontage.

With regard to other dimensional standards, the goal is to provide more flexibility than is found in typical business districts and to allow for more compact development patterns. The table below shows the dimensional standards associated with the Limited Business District (LB) and the proposed standards for the Town Center District (TCD).

Table 1. Comparison of Existing and Potential Dimensional Requirements

	Lot Area	Lot Frontage (feet)	Front Setback (feet)	Side Setback (feet)	Rear Setback (feet)	Add'l Area Per Unit	% Open Space (min)	% Coverage (max)	Height (feet)	Stories
LB (current)	12,500	100	15	15	15	--	15	50	35	2.5
TCD (proposed)	5,000	70	0 - 30	0	15	--	0	100	40	3

Required Parking Spaces

In many ways, parking in mixed-use town centers does not function as it would in most other areas in a given community. Commercial centers in places like Route 9, developments like Cen Tech, and residential neighborhoods generally provide parking on a “lot by lot” basis using a straightforward formula found in the Zoning Bylaw. In a district like the Town Center, the goal of creating compact walkable streets, combined with the abundance of lots that were developed before parking was needed, calls for a different approach. The use of on-street parking spaces, public lots, and shared agreements between private property owners are

common strategies used to create a system of parking that works for the district as a whole, rather than lot by lot.

From a zoning perspective, the keys to parking success are acknowledging the realities on the ground and providing property owners with options to meet their needs. As previously mentioned, because of historical development patterns, a number of buildings in the Town Center were developed at a time when automobile travel was not as pervasive as it is today. These sites simply do not have the space to provide the level of surface parking required by conventional zoning standards. For this reason, the recommendation is to remove the requirement for a minimum amount of parking associated with each use.

Removing the requirement for a minimum amount of parking does not mean property owners will not elect to provide parking. Most property owners, especially those whose properties have a residential element, will choose to include parking spaces to serve their needs. Further, while the town does not set forth a minimum number of spaces on each site, they can require an applicant to explain how parking needs will be satisfied. Formal shared parking agreements, access to on-street parking, and/or proximity to public parking lots are all viable options for an individual property owner to use as part of an application. Examples of zoning language that address these issues can be found in Appendix B.

Signage (Basic Requirements)

Ensuring the right types of allowable signage will be critical for the aesthetic appeal and overall character of the Town Center District. The base requirements for signage in zoning will specify which types of signage can be used (e.g., wall, window, free-standing, etc.); how much signage each building can have (e.g., number of signs, square footage); and basic design standards (e.g., no backlit signs, no signs above the roofline, etc.)

Design Guidelines

As part of the package for the new Town Center District, a set of design guidelines should be drafted. Guidelines are used to supplement the more rigid standards set in the Zoning Bylaw where compliance is mandatory. Those standards include setbacks, location of parking areas, and allowable activities in the frontage area (i.e., no parking). Additional “softer” guidelines can be inserted directly into the body of the Zoning Bylaw, be part of Planning Board rules and regulations, or be an appendix to the Zoning Bylaw. In terms of current practice, as an example, the Lakeway Overlay District has a set of design guidelines placed directly into the body of the Zoning Bylaw. This may therefore be the easiest approach.

In terms of content, design guidelines can cover a wide range of design issues. Most common for a place like Shrewsbury’s Town Center would be:

- Building Form – Basic standards that call for articulation between building stories and other basic issues related to form.
- Preferred Roof Types – A list of allowable rooftops including different configurations (e.g., jointed gables) and dormer types.

- Signage Details – Complementary to the basic signage standards, these guidelines address more detailed items like materials and lighting.
- Screening – Guidelines for screening dumpsters, utilities, and mechanical equipment.
- Fences and Walls – Guidelines regarding preferred materials and types.

Permit Review

The permit vehicle used to review and approve development applications in the Town Center can play an important role in attracting investment. Generally speaking, developers value certainty and predictability in the permit review process. If developers have strong confidence in the schedule and costs associated with permit review, they can organize other aspects of the project around that schedule (e.g., financing, mobilization, site work, etc.). Almost as important as a predictable permit process is a short timeline for approval. The town is committed to providing an efficient and predictable process for desirable development that meets applicable standards.

With regard to land development in the Town Center, perhaps the most influential permit process is zoning approval. Basic permit review possibilities include a “by right” approval through the Building Inspector, Site Plan Review (either through municipal planning staff or the Planning Board), or a Special Permit (usually through the Planning Board). The policy preference for the town is to limit the number of Special Permits needed in the Town Center because this process creates a higher level of uncertainty and risk for the developer.⁴ With that in mind, by right review and Site Plan Review through the Planning Board will likely be the preferred application review process for most development in the Town Center. The various sections of the Zoning Bylaw dealing with permit review will need to be carefully amended to make sure the appropriate review mechanism is matched with projects of varying scale and complexity.

15 Maple Avenue

15 Maple Avenue (the former Empire Cleaners Site, Figure 20) does not fit neatly into the different categories of recommendations above because of the unique issues associated with the site. Historically, chlorinated solvents associated with dry cleaning operations conducted at the site were released into the subsurface via a septic system and fuel oil was also released on-site from a failed feed line. These releases are documented in reports available on-line from the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) and sampling of soil, soil gas, indoor air, and groundwater was performed on and around the site. A Permanent Solution Statement with Conditions was prepared for the site by a Licensed Site Professional (LSP) who determined that, to maintain a level of No Significant Risk at the site, an Activity and Use Limitation (AUL) must be implemented. The AUL indicates uses of the site that are not consistent with maintaining a level of No Significant Risk such as residential, day care, or school uses without an LSP Opinion. The AUL further states that demolition of the building could be

⁴ Special Permits have other advantages and the Town does use this permit review process in other areas of the community.

allowed but, again, an LSP Opinion would be needed to ensure the process of demolition and site restoration maintains a level of No Significant Risk at the site.

Figure 20. Aerial and street levels views of 15 Maple Avenue.



Despite these limitations, redevelopment is feasible, and the location of the site makes the property very important to the future of the Town Center. Redevelopment at this location could help to transform the streetscape along this long frontage and activate uses

complementary to the future Beal School site redevelopment. Moving forward, the Town should continue to be cautious and closely monitor any changes on the site. With that said, it is unlikely that anything will occur on the site in the near future and the Town could consider ways to facilitate improvements within the restrictions set forth in the AUL. One potential helpful action is to push for an audit of the Permanent Solution Statement with Conditions. MassDEP sometimes performs these audits and, in fact, did audit earlier reporting on this site. Unfortunately, getting an audit from MassDEP is never guaranteed and can take years if it is pursued. The Town could independently audit the records for this site using a third party LSP. This LSP would determine if all the previous investigations were conducted consistent with the MCP and that the nature and extent of contamination at the site has been adequately delineated and defined. If the findings are positive, this could help provide assurance to any potential buyer that future uses could be allowed with the proper safety measures implemented.

Beal School Redevelopment

The Beal School site (Figure 21) was a significant focus of this study and a significant portion of the public engagement was used to solicit feedback on a series of important questions. Some of the core issues that were addressed include:

- How important is it to preserve all or a portion of the school building moving forward?
- What sorts of uses would be appropriate for the school site in the future?
- What opportunities does the site provide for the Town Center and other surrounding neighborhoods?

Figure 21. Beal School Site Locus



The actual questions used as part of the surveys and the results are located in Appendix A. Generally speaking, the majority of those who took the survey felt either that the building

needed to come down due to deficiencies or because removing the building might enable the most advantageous development project.

The next step for the Beal School Reuse Committee is to use this report as a platform for making formal recommendations to the Shrewsbury Board of Selectmen. These recommendations will center on the development of a request for proposals (RFP) soliciting proposals for developers to purchase and redevelop the property.

Sale of Municipal Property

During the Beal School Reuse Committee meeting that occurred as part of this study, committee members requested the study include an overview of state law related to the sale of municipal property. M.G.L. Chapter 30B §16 governs the disposition of municipal property and assumes that the property is valued at more than \$35,000. The following text summarizes what town is required to do the following related to the Beal School site. These requirements should be reviewed by legal counsel before the RFP is issued.

- **Authorization:** Assuming the school property is under the control of the School Committee for school purposes, then the School Committee must vote to determine that the property is no longer needed for school purposes and give notice of such determination to the Shrewsbury Board of Selectmen (M.G.L.c.40, §15A). There must then be a two-thirds vote of Town Meeting to transfer the property to the Board of Selectmen. It is important to check for restrictions in the original deed that might hinder this process. For example, the town may have received the property as a gift with a condition that it be used for school purposes. Once the transfer is approved, the sale may be authorized by a majority vote of Town Meeting pursuant to M.G.L. c. 40, §3 and a vote to authorize the selectmen to sell (simple majority).
- **Appraisal:** The town must determine the value of the property through ordinary appraisal methods. The appraiser should also be hired pursuant to Chapter 30B.
- **Establishment of Conditions of the Sale:** Responses can be evaluated based strictly on the highest price or the town may have other conditions, such as desired use on which to evaluate responses (see page 31 regarding establishing a framework).
- **Advertisement:** The town must advertise the request for proposals (RFP) in a local newspaper once per week for two consecutive weeks. The last newspaper publication must be eight days preceding the day for opening proposals. The advertisement must specify the geographical area, terms, and requirements of the proposed transaction, and the time and place for the submission of proposals. See Appendix C for RFPs issued by other Massachusetts communities.

In the case of the acquisition or disposition of more than 2,500 square feet of real property, the governmental body must also advertise at least 30 days before the opening of proposals, in the central register published by the secretary of state.

- **Receive and open proposals:** Proposals must be opened publicly at the time and place designated in the advertisement. The governmental body shall submit the name of the person selected as party to a real property transaction, and the amount of the transaction, to the secretary of state for publication in the central register. Note that it is possible to hold a public auction with or without a minimum reserve price in lieu of receiving sealed proposals as long as the appraiser is procured pursuant to Chapter 30B and advertisement complies with Chapter 30B.

If the town decides to dispose of property at a price less than the appraised value, the town must publish notice of its decision in the central register, explaining the reasons for its decision and disclosing the difference between such value and the price to be received.

- **Enter into Purchase and Sale Agreement (P&S):** The P&S should provide a detailed description of the parcel of land to be sold. In addition to standard terms, the P&S should include the following provisions: a certification of tax compliance by the seller, in accordance with M.G.L. c. 62C, §49A; a disclosure of beneficial interests pursuant to M.G.L. c. 7C, §38; any special conditions or restrictions that will be in the deed that are required by the town for future use mandatory terms required by the M.G.L. c. 30B, §16 solicitation; and a statement identifying the municipality's authority to enter into the agreement.
- **Payment in Lieu of Taxes:** Pursuant to M.G.L. c. 44, §63A, the town must collect from the buyer a payment in lieu of taxes as "a condition precedent to the power to deliver such deed."
- **Application of Sale Proceeds:** The town must apply the sale proceeds first to any outstanding indebtedness on the property. M.G.L.c.44, § 63. If no indebtedness is outstanding, §63 also authorizes the town to use sale proceeds for any purpose or purposes for which the town is permitted to borrow for five or more years; to pay indebtedness incurred in the purchase of land or interests in other land; or for the construction of new buildings or additions to existing buildings, including the cost of original equipment and furnishings. Note that it is possible that another Town Meeting vote may be needed to appropriate the funds for a certain purpose.

Using the RFP to Establish a Redevelopment Framework

The public survey results and discussions with both the Department of Planning and Economic Development and the Beal School Reuse Committee show a definite policy preference for how the RFP will be used. Importantly, however, a clear preference for whether the school is preserved or not did **not** emerge. Also, there was **not** a clear preference for which specific land use(s) would be included in future development. Furthermore, members of the committee acknowledged that potential developers will bring a valuable level of expertise and experience to the RFP. As such, the Committee and the Department of Planning and Economic

Development agree conceptually that the RFP should not be too restrictive on these issues. However, there were patterns in the discussion that can be used to communicate a policy framework to potential buyers/developers of the property:

- Development of the Beal School site should elevate the experience of the Town Center through the use of high-quality site and building design techniques. The final product should make a significant positive contribution to the aesthetic appeal and overall vibrancy of the Town Center district by including uses that will increase foot traffic and draw visitors from other parts of Shrewsbury and beyond.
- Developers may explore the possibility for adaptive reuse of the Beal School building, as the building is valued by the community and has been a fixture in the Town Center for decades. However, the town recognizes the challenges related to adaptive reuse and also recognizes that wholesale replacement could result in a more beneficial project overall.
- The building should engage the street and maintain access to the veteran's memorial. The preferred approach to the veteran's memorial is that it is preserved in its current location and condition. The idea of engaging the street means the space between the façade of the building and the street will be designed for pedestrians and bicyclists. This space could include park space, walkways, bikeways, bike racks, street furnishings, etc. Further, new buildings could be located along the primary sidewalk. Parking and interior travel lanes for automobiles should not be placed between the primary building façade and the street.
- Areas that are not designated for buildings or parking areas should be designed as easily accessible gathering places making the site a hub for activity in the Town Center. Café seating, picnic areas, playgrounds, and courtyards are examples of features that will help to achieve this vision.
- The site should include parking spaces that can be used as a shared resource for businesses in the Town Center. The developer may propose different ownership models for parking areas on-site (e.g., town-owned vs privately owned). Regardless of the ownership model, access to parking spaces that serve the Town Center must be guaranteed. The number of parking spaces reserved for the building shall be minimized.
- Ground-floor uses facing Maple Avenue shall be non-residential.
- Circulation on site shall consider the best ways for automobiles to enter and exit the site without exacerbating existing traffic problems. Circulation on site shall consider the best ways to connect pedestrians and bicyclists to the larger system of biking and walking in the Town Center.
- The southernmost portion of the site (i.e., the baseball field) should remain undeveloped or sparsely developed. Although not necessarily required, the developer may consider subdividing the property as part of the proposal and leaving the southern portion of the site in municipal ownership.
- Development plans must meet all applicable local, state, and federal regulations.

In addition to the narrative provided above, conceptual designs can be included in the RFP. Figures 22-27 on the following pages could be used in the RFP to help communicate some of the elements within the redevelopment framework. The conceptual designs show a variety of ways in which the site could be redeveloped within the framework presented above. These are provided for illustrative purposes and the town is not asking potential developers to choose one of these concepts. Rather, the town provides these as illustrative of the framework provided in the RFP and as examples of how one might redevelop the property in a manner that is consistent with the vision for Shrewsbury's Town Center.

All procedures required for sale of municipal property and any language or conceptual designs included in an RFP for the site should be reviewed by legal counsel before the RFP is issued.

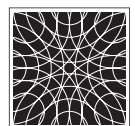


SHREWSBURY TOWN CENTER

FIGURE 22. CONCEPT - RENOVATE EXISTING BUILDING

MAY 15, 2019

SCALE: 1"=100'-0"



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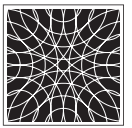


SHREWSBURY TOWN CENTER

FIGURE 23. CONCEPT - PARTIAL RENO WITH NEW ADDITION

MAY 15, 2019

SCALE: 1"=100'-0"



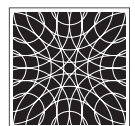


SHREWSBURY TOWN CENTER

FIGURE 24. CONCEPT - NEW BUILDING SET BACK

MAY 15, 2019

SCALE: 1"=100'-0"





SHREWSBURY TOWN CENTER

FIGURE 25. CONCEPT - NEW BUILDING PULLED FORWARD

MAY 15, 2019

SCALE: 1"=100'-0"





Existing Monument

Upper Parking Area:
65 Spaces +/-

MAPLE AVE.

CHASE TERRACE

Existing Building
Removed and Replaced
with New Construction

Lower Parking Area:
70 Spaces +/-

HASCALL ST.

Back Portion of Site
Kept as Open Space

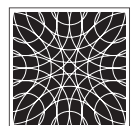
WESLEYAN ST.

SHREWSBURY TOWN CENTER

FIGURE 26. CONCEPT - NEW BUILDINGS ALONG MAPLE AVE.

MAY 15, 2019

SCALE: 1"=100'-0"



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CONCEPT A: Retain Existing Baseball Field

With the new parking area shown in the same location of the current parking lot, the existing little league baseball field could be kept as is.

CONCEPT B: Remove Baseball Field, Add Tot Lot

Concept B looks at the option of removing the existing baseball field and instead including a new tot lot and open lawn area. The size of the tot lot could grow or shrink depending on actual programming needs.

CONCEPT C: Remove Baseball Field, Add Community Gardens

Concept C looks at the option of removing the existing baseball field and instead including some community gardens and open lawn area. The size of the community gardens could grow or shrink depending on actual programming needs.



CONCEPT A: Retain Existing Baseball Field



CONCEPT B: Remove Baseball Field, Add Tot Lot



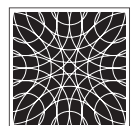
CONCEPT C: Remove Baseball Field, Add Community Gardens

SHREWSBURY TOWN CENTER

FIGURE 27. CONCEPTS FOR OPEN SPACE AREA

MAY 15, 2019

SCALE: 1"=100'-0"



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Summary of Recommendations

Category	Recommendation	Responsible Party
Local Administration and Programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain staffing levels in the Department of Planning and Economic Development. 	DPED; STCA
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to support the growth and development of the STCA. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish regular lines of communication to coordinate efforts between the town and STCA. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to encourage and plan for regular, diverse programming on the Town Common, in the adjacent parking areas, and in the district as a whole. 	
Improvements to the Public Realm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue strategic maintenance to sidewalks that require minor repairs. 	DPW
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify a larger suite of street furnishings that will match the existing network of street lamps. Coordinate effort with the upcoming wayfinding study. 	DPW; STCA
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete the recently funded wayfinding study and identify funding needed to install the system. 	DPED
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider and discuss the potential future role of STCA relative to installing and/or maintaining street furniture. 	DPED; DPW; STCA
Circulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and install gateway features specifically designed to reduce traffic speeds well before motorists reach the core of the Town Center. 	DPW; MassDOT
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study the possibility of tightening curve radii at the intersection of Main Street and Route 140. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replace existing crosswalks with new, bolder crosswalks. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paint or resurface roadway sections at the intersection of Church Street and Boylston Street. 	

Category	Recommendation	Responsible Party
Circulation (cont.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider constricting the travel lane immediately south of the intersection of Church Street and Boylston Street as part of the installation of a new crosswalk between the Town Common and the library. 	DPW; MassDOT
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Install additional crosswalks at strategic points along the roadways approaching the primary intersection. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider enlarging the island at the intersection of Maple Avenue and Main Street to slightly reduce the width of the westbound lane on Main Street and augment the existing crosswalk. 	
Zoning Reform	Develop a comprehensive zoning package that establishes a new Town Center District with the elements described herein. Zoning package includes design guidelines.	DPED; Targeted Zoning Committee
15 Maple Avenue	Continue working with DEP to monitor progress on the site. Consider hiring a third party LSP to audit the most recent reports and actions taken on site.	DPED
Beal School Property	Develop an RFP that establishes a framework for future development and clearly communicates the town's priorities.	Beal School Reuse Committee; DPED; Board of Selectmen