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Memorandum

To: Curt Bellevance, AICP
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Date: June 22, 2007

Project No.: 10121

From: Ralph Willmer, AICP

Re: North Andover Downtown Existing
Conditions

Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) conducted a field reconnaissance of downtown North Andover on April 5 and May 10, 2007. The area observed included Main Street from Stevens Memorial Library to Sutton Street; Water Street from Clarendon Street to Main Street; Waverly Road from Union Street to Main Street; Maple Avenue from First Street to Third Street; streets connected to those listed here; Machine Shop Village; and the Sutton Pond condominium complex.

Existing Conditions

North Andover's downtown area is characterized by a mix of land uses and a variety of building types and styles. The age of the building stock ranges from the nineteenth century mill buildings found at Machine Shop Village (which is on the National Register of Historic Places) to a number of modern buildings found in the heart of the downtown area.

The current zoning in this area is predominantly General Business (GB) along with some Residence 3 and 4 (R3 and R4). It was noted that there is a varied mix of business uses throughout the downtown (primarily along Main Street) that include many of the good and services residents are likely to need. However, a void was created with the recent departure of Lembo's grocery store in the Messina's Shopping Center directly across Main Street from Town Hall. The list of currently available goods and services include the following:

- Eating establishments (Baystate Chowder, Dunkin' Donuts, China Wok, Emporio Gourmet Pizza and others)
- Drug store (CVS, which is relocating and expanding)
- Banks (TD Banknorth, Bank of America, Sovereign Bank)
- Rolf's Pub
- Insurance agency
- Real estate offices
- Flower shop
- Craft shop
- Sporting goods store
- Hardware store

- Convenience store
- Gas station
- Fitness facility
- Eyeglasses/optometry
- Personal care salons (e.g barber shop, spa, nail salon)
- Pet care/grooming

Civic or institutional uses include the Town Hall, Fire Station, Senior Center, a number of churches, and the post office.

Much of the parking is located along the street. Messina's Shopping Center has a large parking area that serves the stores within the plaza. The banks tend to provide on-site parking as well. A municipal lot exists behind Town Hall, but mostly functions to provide parking for Town employees and the adjacent Senior Center.

Historically, people have always lived on Main Street. Downtown was never dominated by retail stores and offices. Today, the area has limited activity after 5:00 pm or 6:00 pm, indicating that it caters more toward the retail and office culture than its residents. According to discussion in the public visioning meeting, today's residents are primarily renters.

Residential uses are scattered throughout the downtown area. Some sections are predominantly residential, particularly along Water Street heading southeast from the intersection with Main Street. While many of the residential units are single-family homes, there are some duplexes and multi-family dwelling units. There appears to be a good mix of housing types; however, the level of affordability and tenure (ownership versus rental) has not been determined. Some of this housing is located above offices or retail/business uses as is typically seen in mixed-use development in downtown areas. One such example is the units located above Fitness Together and Eyes on Main.

Several potential redevelopment sites can be found within the study area. Messina's Shopping Center is currently undergoing significant change with the departure of Lembo's grocery store. The CVS located in the plaza is expanding and moving from one store front to another; therefore, there is still a vacancy to fill. Additionally, there will be some upgrades to the façade of the plaza, the parking lot, and the degree of landscaping along the frontage at Main Street.

The other major site for redevelopment is the old Bradstreet School. This site has been the subject of a great deal of speculation and discussion. Among the potential uses mentioned has been housing (including some affordable units), school administration offices, and a new police station.

However, even under the current zoning, some of the existing structures have potential for redevelopment and expansion, especially by adding a floor or two. This is true for the sections of the downtown study area currently zoned for residential (R3 or R4) as well as those areas zoned General Business.

Buildings are generally not taller than three stories in height, and many are only two stories. Several single story buildings can be found interspersed among taller structures.

The age of the housing and business stock varies, but with few exceptions, nothing is particularly old. Conditions vary as well – some of the structures appear to be well-maintained whereas others give the appearance of being "run down." Some new structures have been added to the area, such as

the Sutton Pond condominiums. A few buildings are currently under renovation such as 83 Main Street, which is being offered as a commercial condo for sale.

There are few streetscape features along Main Street. Several benches can be found, although some are in fair condition, having not been painted recently. No planters can be found, although a few buildings have flower boxes along the front of the structure. Newsboxes are present sporadically down Main Street, are inconsistently maintained and some appear to be no longer in active use. Some newsboxes are freestanding while others are attached to signposts. For the most part, landscaping is either non-existent or poorly maintained. Aside from the streetlamps around Town Hall, most are standard utility poles and lamps.

Findings

During the public forum, VHB conducted a short, self-designed Visual Preference Survey. In addition to other methods of analysis, findings from this survey informed this existing conditions report. The community's clear preferences will be reflected in the writing of the zoning overlay district and the design guidelines recommended as a result of this process. The preferences listed below are based on both the numerical "winners" during the survey and the discussion following.

Category	Preference
Building Form and Character	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Traditional building forms and low- to mid-scale buildings.▪ Moderate height and massing.▪ Consistent store fronts (a theme), but not too much uniformity that it looks inauthentic.▪ Civic buildings are important for downtown.
Streets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Interest in angled parking and more tree coverage.▪ Cleaner/smooth paved surfaces preferred
Public Realm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Buffer between parking and sidewalk.▪ Use of awnings, projecting signs and outdoor seating.▪ Quality is as important as quantity.▪ Underground the utilities
Street Furniture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Furniture, outdoor seating and landscaping, (although benches alone and benches with landscaping received the same numerical rank).
Signage and Lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ High quality elements, resembling traditional features.▪ Projecting signs.▪ Consistent sign formats.
Parking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Discreet parking structure (if used).▪ Every downtown should have a slight parking problem.▪ Is not impossible

Gateway

Downtown North Andover lacks a gateway that people can identify as the entrance to the downtown area. At the northwestern end of the downtown area at Sutton and Main Streets, there is a Richdale convenience store. While the corner in front of Richdale is well landscaped, there are no streetscape features or signs indicating that one has just entered downtown North Andover. A gateway feature here would be an excellent opportunity to provide some identity for the downtown area.

The same is true for the other end of Main Street at the intersection with Water Street. Although the St. Gregory church and the historic homes on Water Street provide more character than a convenience store, there is nothing that welcomes anyone to the downtown area except a large swath of pavement. Given the convergence of two roadways at this gateway, an in-road treatment such as a small landscaped island with signage, could be an appropriate welcome to downtown North Andover. Although Stevens Memorial Library could be recognized as a good gateway given its prominence and civic function, it was deemed to be too far away from the main commercial activity of the downtown area.

Architecture

The architecture in the downtown area is not consistent and does not adhere to any particular period or style. A wide variety of building materials are used including brick, wood, vinyl siding, shingles, etc. There are also a wide range of roof types that include; gable, hip, and mansard. A number of buildings have flat roofs, which could be concealed or adorned to increase their attractiveness. Many of the buildings are one to two stories tall. In many cases the multi-level buildings contain multiple uses with retail uses and storefronts on the ground floor, particularly on Main Street.

Signage

There is no underlying theme to the signage in the downtown area. Existing signage on commercial buildings varies, even on the same building. Differing materials are used. Some storefronts have window signs or lettering, which are less desirable because they obstruct views into the building. Some stores have freestanding signs in front of them; others have projecting signs. Some buildings have awnings, which can be good design elements when used appropriately and maintained; however, the condition of the awnings fluctuates. Although many of the storefronts have windows that allow one to see into the store, some stores have obscured their windows with signage. Only a few storefronts appear to use internally lit neon signs, which are typically discouraged in a downtown like North Andover.

Recommendations

The primary recommendations for North Andover's downtown are to revise the zoning bylaw to include a Downtown Overlay District and to adopt design guidelines to supplement the new zoning. The purpose is to create new options for property owners and developers to enhance the downtown area by providing more flexibility in terms of potential redevelopment opportunities, such as allowing a greater variety of uses and making it easier for projects to move forward by right rather than special permit.

The design guidelines give the Town some control over the aesthetics of downtown development, which will improve the appearance and make the downtown area more attractive. By adding elements that are designed to accommodate pedestrians and improve the non-automobile environment, residents and visitors are more likely to make North Andover a destination where they will spend more time.

However, in order to achieve that goal, it is important that the Town attract the types of uses that will make North Andover more of a destination. Some business needs were identified that would help to bring more business to the downtown area. These include:

- Higher-end sit down restaurant
- Theater or other entertainment venue
- Small lodging facility such as a bed and breakfast
- Craft and artisan shops

Additionally, the Town should encourage streetscape improvements, such as consistent lighting, signage and landscaping, and the establishment of some form of gateway to the downtown area. While the proposed zoning and design guidelines address that issue for new development, existing property owners should be encouraged to provide similar improvements. Local festivals, cultural fairs, or similar events can help to bring people into the downtown area as well.

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