

Towards a Community Vision for Ashfield Village Center

Ashfield, MA

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS
DEPARTMENT OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE &
REGIONAL PLANNING

Yaser Abun-Nasr • Israel Monsanto •
Frank Varro • Amy Verel

December 13th, 2006



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Acknowledgements

The 14-week studio has been an informative and rewarding experience for the Team. Working with the VCVC and residents of Ashfield to plan for the future of their Village Center has elevated our learning experience by pushing us to generate creative approaches to initiating important discussions. This rich experience was the result of the efforts of our professors, the Center for Rural Massachusetts, and the Town of Ashfield. We would like to name and thank the following people for making this an informative and enjoyable experience.

- All of the Ashfield residents and business people who participated in the public workshops
- The Village Center Visioning Committee: Molly Babize, Nina Coler, Lynn Doyle, Michael Fitzgerald, Mary Fitzgibbon, Karen Kaplan, Ann Yuryan, Nan Parotti, and Betty Stewart
- Glenn Garber with Center of Rural Massachusetts for his guidance and unlimited energy
- Wendy Sweetser with the Highland Communities Initiative for her assistance with our research in neighboring communities
- Professors Rick Taupier and Robert Ryan for their insightful advise and feedback throughout the studio
- Our fellow graduate students in Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning in the studio for their support and suggestions.

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the research and findings of the Ashfield Village Center Visioning project, which was performed by The University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass) Landscape Planning Studio for the Town of Ashfield Village Center Visioning Committee and the Center for Rural Massachusetts (CRM). A group of four graduate students (the Team) from the Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning program at UMass worked with the Town and CRM in the Fall of 2006 to begin the Visioning process in Ashfield and initiate a public dialogue about planning for future growth in the Village Center. This report describes the research approach, the framework and findings of the public process, recommendations for the continuing process, and planning options that will help the residents of Ashfield preserve the unique character of their vibrant, intimate Village Center for future generations.

The report begins with the extensive background research crafted by the team to foster a greater awareness of the geographic, social, and built character of Ashfield and its Village Center. The research and mapping analyses informed the Fall 2006 public process and are intended to serve as reference tools for the ongoing Visioning Process as well as other future planning initiatives.

Early in the project, the UMass Team established an iterative approach aimed at responding directly to the residents of Ashfield and creating an opportunity for the public to have a meaningful impact on the format and direction of the Visioning Process. The Team established the following objectives to conduct the project within this approach:

Analyze the physical, environmental, and historical characteristics of the Village Center;

Creatively integrate stakeholder concerns and requirements, physical and environmental issues and economic criteria to develop applicable development scenarios; and

Conduct three workshops for the purpose of incorporating stakeholder input into scenarios illustrating future growth.

The principle focus of this report is a detailed description of the approach and techniques used by the UMass team to conduct the public process and initiate a community-wide dialogue about future growth in the Village Center. The highlights of the Fall 2006 public process were the following events, which were informed by established models of public participation but adapted to meet Ashfield's needs:

- **Fall Festival – Open Forum**
- **Workshop 1 – Informational Meeting and Workshop**
- **Workshop 2 – Advisory Meeting**
- **Workshop 3 – Problem Solving/Advisory Meeting**

The final portion of this report presents the Team's assessment of the public process and a range of planning options for consideration in the ongoing Visioning Process. The findings and lessons from the Fall 2006 Public Process build upon Ashfield's rich legacy of public participation in Town government. The planning options, which include a potential Village Center Zoning By-law, regulatory amendments to existing by-laws, and non-regulatory financial approaches, will help Ashfield in achieving the goal of preserving the historic integrity and rural, New England character of the Town and Village Center.

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Introduction

1. Introduction

1.1. Context

The Town of Ashfield, in collaboration with the Center for Rural Massachusetts (CRM) and The Highland Communities Initiative (HCI), is examining Village Center Zoning as an option for preserving the character of the town and the Village Center. A team of four graduate students (the “Team”) in Regional Planning and Landscape Architecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass) worked with the town through CRM in the Fall of 2006 to initiate a Village Center Visioning process aimed at bringing residents together to discuss planning approaches to dealing with future growth in the town.

1.1.1. State Context

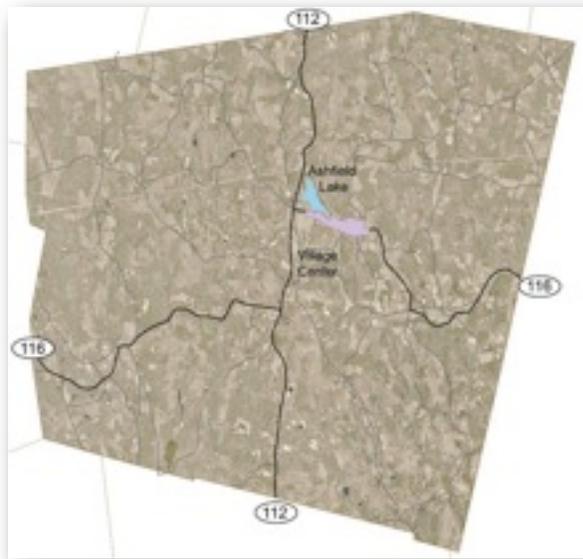
Massachusetts is the third most densely populated state in the nation. According to the Center for Rural Massachusetts, the rate of land consumption for residential development is steadily increasing far out of proportion to population growth, and not surprisingly, the state ranks among the lowest in terms of housing affordability. Haphazard growth has impacted water resources, natural resource-based enterprises, open space, wildlife habitat, and community character. Inadequate land management has had negative impacts on the natural and man-made environment, on long term sustainability, and on public capital investment. In many Massachusetts communities, this has brought about the attendant loss of natural, cultural, forestry, and agricultural resources.



Although improving the quality of protected land continues to be a priority, the rate of land protection has not been able to keep pace with development. Land use planning tools and practices applied toward future development are critically important, given the conflicting pressures between maintaining viable ecosystems, protecting natural resources as a basis for economic development and quality of life, and providing affordable housing.

1.1.2. Town Context

Located west of Conway in southern Franklin County, Ashfield has not experienced the growth pressures felt in many other parts of Western Massachusetts in the last 60 years. Just south of the intersection of State Routes 112 and 116, the town's Village Center is relatively remote in its location. Commercial activity is limited to several small concerns – a hardware store, Elmer's Market, a pizza shop; Neighbors, a local chain gas station and convenience store; in-home cottage industries operating primarily through the Internet and mail order; and a few small professional offices. Recent changes within the Village Center include the revitalization of Elmer's Market and extensive rehabilitation of The Ashfield House, a



historic, Victorian-era hotel, into 18 apartment units.

Population growth and housing prices have remained relatively stable, and new construction in the town has been largely limited to single-family, detached homes on Approval-Not-Required (ANR) frontage lots outside of the Village Center. Changes in neighboring communities, however, signal that the area is becoming less remote for people able to telecommute via high-speed Internet connections or willing to commute longer distances to jobs in employment hubs such as Northampton, Greenfield, Springfield and Amherst. Conway, for example, is struggling to accommodate a proposal for a substantial residential subdivision in the absence of an established Subdivision Bylaw. Ashfield is still in a position to plan for the day when growth pressures become manifest in the form of residential subdivisions and the chain businesses eager to serve increased populations. The Village Center Visioning process has offered a start by engaging town residents and stakeholders in a discussion about future growth, and has been pursued by Ashfield planning officials to achieve this goal.

1.1.3. Town Wastewater Management and Future Growth in the Village Center

Due to the difficult history of the original solar aquatic technology in Ashfield's wastewater treatment plant, and to its modified technologies and high capital investment demands on the taxpayers over the years, Selectman Bill Perlman (who has 14 years of hands-on involvement in the plant's evolution) feels that there is effectively no available capacity in the plant. For this reason, small-scale, incremental growth in the Village Center will likely require shared and on-site wastewater treatment options.

The Innovative and Alternative Division at the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection has been assessing and permitting various technologies for some years now, involving such systems as Bioclere, ReCip, Nitrex, MicroFast, SeptiTech and others. These shared, small-scale systems have variously involved recirculating media filters (most often the technology of choice), activated sludge, integrated fixed film, and single pass filter technologies. Composting toilets, recharge of gray water, and other methods have also been employed to good advantage by controlling flow.

In some cases, wastewater treatment plans have been prepared for entire village centers without public wastewater plants, such as those in Hamilton and Harvard, MA. In other cases, these approaches have been designed for newly constructed mixed-use developments. Wastewater management presents a growth constraint that requires creative design to avoid the necessity of major capital improvements to the existing plant.

1.1.4. The 5-Town Action Initiative

The 5-Town Action Initiative is a project of the Center for Rural Massachusetts (CRM) in partnership with the Highland Communities Initiative, a private, non-profit, locally-based organization underwritten by the Trustees of Reservations, a nationally respected land trust and conservation organization. CRM is a collaboration of UMass Extension and the Department of Landscape Architecture & Regional Planning at UMass Amherst. The process, however, is strongly citizen-driven and involves the towns of Ashfield, Chesterfield, Conway, Goshen, and Williamsburg.

The 5-Town Action Initiative has developed two priority areas: Open Space Protection Initiatives and Village Center Zoning as a multi-purpose planning and preservation tool. Since beginning the effort in August of 2005, the 5-Town Action Initiative has achieved the following goals:

The five towns are considering planning and development challenges on a regional basis and are sharing insight and guidance for moving initiatives forward.

Town officials set priorities, create strategies and actions, and expand the idea base through steering committee discussions with other local officials.

Town officials better understand their Community Development Plans, and now have monographs on key issues such as natural resources, working lands businesses (including forestry and other rural economic development strategies), town center planning, and housing.

1.1.5. Purpose: Understanding the Village Center & Consideration of Future Regulatory Options

Ashfield's Village Center's historic evolution from its agricultural, commercial and industrial past occurred primarily as a result of market forces, but with some regulatory stewardship as well. As a result, the Village Center is a delightful, uncrowded center that remains remarkably intact in its scale and character. The interconnectedness of commercial, institutional and residential buildings with private and public open space and landscaping constitutes a unique townscape that must be stringently protected on a long-term basis. There is near-unanimous agreement amongst Ashfield residents on this point. The lively discussions in the participatory meetings of the Visioning process have centered on the best way to use regulatory authority to achieve that end.

The town's current zoning, consisting of a single, low-density residential-agricultural district that applies everywhere in town, including in the spatial area that loosely defines the Village Center, has long been administered with a system of special permits (SP). With this practice, every business or mixed-use must obtain a discretionary SP on a case basis. This benign and wise stewardship has functioned well for many years under conditions of minimal development pressure. The present debate focuses on the long-range future and whether or not this system will be sufficiently protective in coming years and decades. The existing dimensional requirements in the Zoning Bylaw occupy an important place in this discussion. Specifically, the minimum requirements for 2-acre lots and 200-foot road frontages are both substantially larger than those found

within the actual historic development pattern of the Village Center.

1.1.6. Visioning Process Working Partners

1.1.6.1. CRM and the UMass Team

In the 5-Town Action Initiative implementation phase of the Ashfield Village Center Visioning project, CRM is working with a stakeholder group appointed by the Ashfield Board of Selectmen. Between September and December 2006, a graduate, interdisciplinary studio team in the Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning Department at UMass worked with CRM to begin the Village Center Visioning process. The Team produced this report under the guidance of professors Robert Ryan and Richard Taupier and in close coordination with Glenn Garber of CRM. Early in the project, the Team joined the VCVC for a walking tour of the Village Center. Shortly thereafter, the Team conducted an interactive exhibit at the town's Fall Festival and three structured, public workshops to initiate a dialogue about the future of the Village Center. The involvement of the graduate student Team ended in December, however they and CRM hope that a scaled-down version of the public process continues in the spring of 2007, with the VCVC working with the Planning Board to set the agenda.

In the fall of 2006, a second, graduate, UMass Landscape Architecture studio focused on Ashfield's Village Center. This studio, led by Professor Annaliese Bischoff, focused on understanding and documenting the various elements that constitute the special townscape of the Village Center, and on contemplating guidelines for maintaining that irreplaceable character. Although it was conducted outside of the public process associated with the work of the Team in the

Ryan-Taupier studio, the work of its students can be made available to facilitate and inform further discussion.

The Team engaged in the Ryan-Taupier studio undertook a range of work components:

- 3-dimensional visualization of future development scenarios in the Village Center

- Compilation and analysis of nearly two dozen existing Massachusetts village center bylaws

- Preparation and execution of an array of workshop exercises designed to facilitate discussion of key issues

- An assessment of non-zoning regulatory tools that might be useful in village preservation and enhancement

In the summer of 2006, CRM staff compiled a comprehensive database of property information in Ashfield's Village Center. This database includes an analysis of lot sizes, building living area, land use mix, residential use mix, frontage, and other important data defining the scale and character of the Village Center. The Team drew extensively on this information in planning the Village Center Visioning process; the database functions as an important resource for Ashfield in future endeavors, and can be found in Appendices 1 to 6 of this report.

1.1.6.2. Village Center Visioning Committee and Workshop Participants

The VCVC presently includes the following Ashfield residents: Molly Babize, Nina Coler, Lynn Doyle, Michael Fitzgerald, Mary Fitzgibbon, Karen Kaplan, Ann Yuryan, Nan Parotti, and Betty Stewart. These members collec-

tively represent the Board of Selectmen, the Planning Board, Village Center businesses, Village Center residents, the Sewer Commission, the Water District, the Historical Commission, the Park and Recreation Commission, residents, and taxpayers. A group of other citizens has attended some or all of the workshops and actively participated in the process; a complete record of the workshop attendees can be found in Appendices 3 to 5.

The Visioning process achieved a number of public policy objectives. The fundamental goals entailed focusing a spotlight on the current assets and future needs of the Village Center and beginning a structured public dialogue on the issue surround future growth. The events and meetings of the Visioning process received a considerable amount of press coverage, which helped to increase general awareness of the process. The work of the UMass Team has established a major information resource for the town, including the graphic, photographic, written and statistical analysis and research presented in this report. This report summarizes the results of the Visioning process and relevant research undertaken by the Team. It provides a wealth of useful information necessary to keep public dialogue moving toward a planning strategy for the Village Center. The Ashfield Village Center Visioning process has, in a very short time, placed the issues and possible action alternatives squarely in the public spotlight and has generated a healthy and intense debate in the community.

1.2. Goals & Objectives

The original scope prepared by the Team evolved as the public participation process progressed. At the beginning of its involvement with the Visioning process, the Team set out to conduct a participatory public process centered around 3-dimensional visualizations illustrating various potential growth scenarios. The Team planned to create the visualizations as a tool to assist Ashfield residents in reaching consensus on a unified vision for the Village Center. However, some workshop participants expressed concern that public education and debate about potential growth were needed, and were reluctant to move too quickly in the initial stage of the Visioning process. Also, some participants expressed the view that the existing zoning system is the best approach for the future and questioned the need for any changes to the regulatory system. In light of these considerations, the Team adjusted the process to emphasize its educational aspects and to create a forum for debate on the various strategic alternatives and actions that the stakeholders can consider in future planning discussions.

The amended and approved scope of the Team still falls within the general goal set by CRM to help the town of Ashfield develop a Village Center Bylaw. The purpose of a new bylaw would be to help Ashfield define and achieve its goals for the Village Center with respect to small-scale economic expansion and housing opportunity while stringently protecting the scale and historic character of the Village Center and the interests of residents. To achieve this goal, the Team carried out the following objectives:

Analyze the physical, environmental, and historical characteristics of the landscape and account for the significance of each;

Creatively integrate stakeholder concerns and requirements, physical and environmental issues and economic criteria to develop applicable development scenarios; and

Conduct three workshops for the purpose of incorporating stakeholder input into scenarios illustrating future growth.

In performing this work, the Team focused on facilitating dialogue between the workshop participants, guiding the process, and providing useful information and research. The information prepared during the course of the workshops and other discussions led to the development of a matrix identifying concerns, responsive strategies and examples applicable to Ashfield. This matrix, which was distributed during Workshop 3 and can be viewed in Appendix ____, was developed into a series of practical suggestions that the town can incorporate in any Village Center Bylaw they might choose to adopt in the future.

1.2.1. Project Methodology

The methodology of work entailed assessing and analyzing information from two main sources: available data on the physical, demographic and economic characteristics of the Village Center, and information obtained during the public process. After collecting and mapping this data, the Team developed 3-dimensional visualizations illustrating potential growth scenarios. Concurrently, CRM conducted research regarding bylaw alternatives and examples from other Massachusetts towns. The focus of the workshops was placed heavily on obtaining site-specific information about the Village Center. The overall process was iterative rather than linear; in this respect, the conclusions of each phase informed the next step based on feedback from workshop par-

ticipants, Team reflection, and CRM input and recommendations.

1.2.2. Data Gathering and Analysis

The Team began its work with a site visit to the Village Center and an extensive photographic survey of the existing conditions. The Team then mapped all geographic data (at both town and Village Center scales), and analyzed the demographic, economic, and physical data gathered by CRM over the previous summer. This information was refined into synthesis maps defining the main town features, uses, stakeholder concerns, physical constraints, environmental concerns, historic significance, and town character. This initial data-gathering was presented during Workshop 1 on October 12, where the Team solicited feedback from participants.

1.2.3. Public Process and Visualization

Incorporating the findings of Workshop 1, the Team prepared bird's-eye visualizations representing future development scenarios for Workshop 2, on October 26. This workshop included a discussion of potential uses and possible tools for defining a Village Center Bylaw. The conclusion discussions from Workshop 2 defined the agenda for Workshop 3, when further 3-dimensional visualizations, shown at a streetscape view and representing more generic scenarios, were presented and discussed. A matrix of growth issues, strategies, and examples was also discussed. During this process, the Team focused on initiating discussion between town residents (rather than between residents and the Team) in order to establish a structure within which the dialogue could continue after the conclusion of the Team's involvement.

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1.3. Report Structure

This report is organized in the following sections, as summarized below, with appendices including all visual and support material prepared during the course of the Team's involvement with the project.

1.3.1. Introduction

The introductory section begins with a description of the larger context of the project, the 5-Town Action Initiative. This is followed by a general description of Village Center Zoning and an in-depth discussion of the Team's goals, objectives, and methodology.

1.3.2. Data Gathering and Analysis

This section begins with a brief profile summarizing the historical, contemporary, and physical characteristics of Ashfield. To initiate the Visioning process with the town, the Team gathered data and researched the physical aspect of the town in order to generate a database of information to inform the public process. The data-gathering and analysis phase covered both mapping analyses of natural and built resources, and statistical analyses of demographics, economics, land and building uses.

1.3.3. Public Process and Visualization

This section begins with the Team's research into the methods and tools of public participation, efforts to gather public input on the project prior to the workshops, and the development of the Team's approach and methodology. Each of the three work-

shops are then discussed and summarized to include agenda, objectives and expectations, summary of discussions, and conclusions.

1.3.4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The final section of the report brings the preceding discussions into conclusion by discussing the overall public process results and answering the following questions:

What are the emerging ideas, thoughts and interpretations with respect to the physical features of the town?

Did the Team meet its goals and objectives?

What are the suggestions and regulatory options that might inform a Village Center Bylaw?

Data Gathering & Analysis

2.Data Gathering & Analysis

2.1. The Place: Historic Background

Ashfield was first settled around 1743 and was officially incorporated in 1765. Richard Ellis of Easton, a native of Dublin, Ireland, was the first permanent settler in 1745. Others gradually settled in Ashfield and by 1754 up to



o 15 families and 100 people had made permanent homes in Ashfield. Agricultural endeavors such as dairy farms, sawmills, apple orchards and maple sugar houses have long been staples of the economy. The Ashfield House in the Village Center and The Lake House on Ashfield Lake were popular tourist attractions throughout the Victorian era, and function today as multi-family housing and a seasonal restaurant, respectively.

The town was officially incorporated in 1765. It is not certain why the town was named Ashfield; one theory is that the town had many ash trees. Another is that Governor Francis Bernard, who named 28 towns in Massachusetts during his tenure, named the town for a Lord Thuslow, a friend in Ashfield, England.

2.1.1. Town Architectural and Landscape Character

The natural landscape and architecture are significant features that define the rural, New England character of Ashfield. Residents identify these features as important to the historic and landscape heritage. Although most buildings in the Village Center are private homes, there are several home-based businesses and farms that strengthen the agricultural and rural identity of the Village Center and town. Ashfield



Lake is among the prominent natural amenities that are essential features contributing to the landscape character of the Village

Center. Other important landscape elements in the Village Center are the walking trails used for recreation, the Town Common, Belding Memorial Park, playing fields at the site of the former Sanderson Academy, the golf course, and local farms.

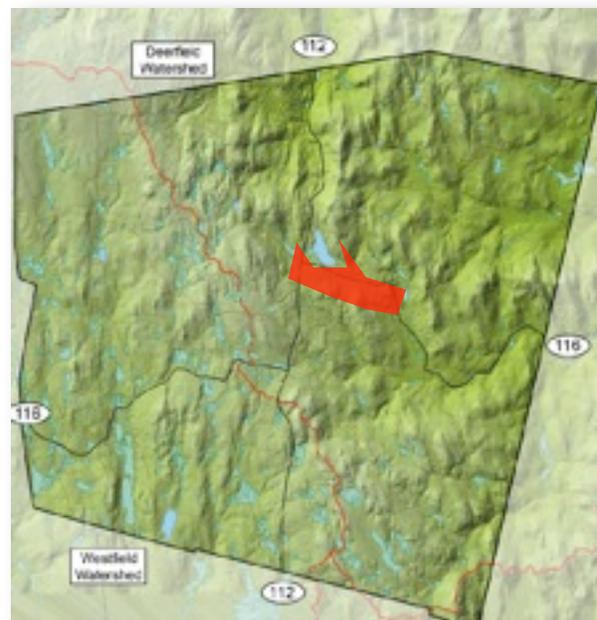
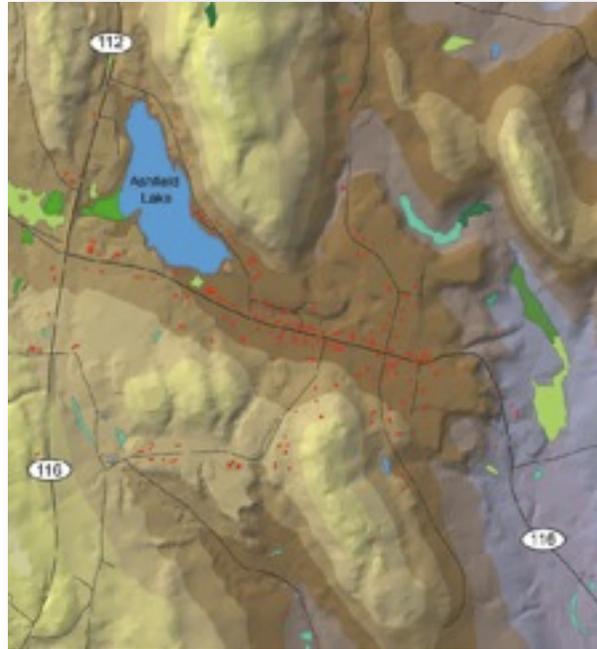
2.2. Natural and Built Resources Mapping and Assessment

Understanding that educating themselves about the area was key to working successfully with town residents, the Team began gathering data on the town-wide and Village Center scales soon after the project began. This data-gathering took place in five areas: natural features and resources, built resources, statistical data, available literature on public process techniques, and visits with town residents and the VCVC to gain their perspective on potential growth.

The Team created a series of maps to analyze the physical opportunities and constraints in the town and Village Center. The maps cover both natural and built features, and both town and Village Center scale. These mapping exercises provided the Team with a valuable basis for understanding and assessing the development patterns and rich, rural character of the town.

2.2.1. Topography and Wetlands

A map of the topography and wetlands at the town scale allowed the Team to make several important observations about the town. It is split by a large ridgeline that runs from the northwest to the southeast. This ridgeline is the breaking point between the Westfield Watershed to the southwest and the Deerfield Watershed to the northeast;



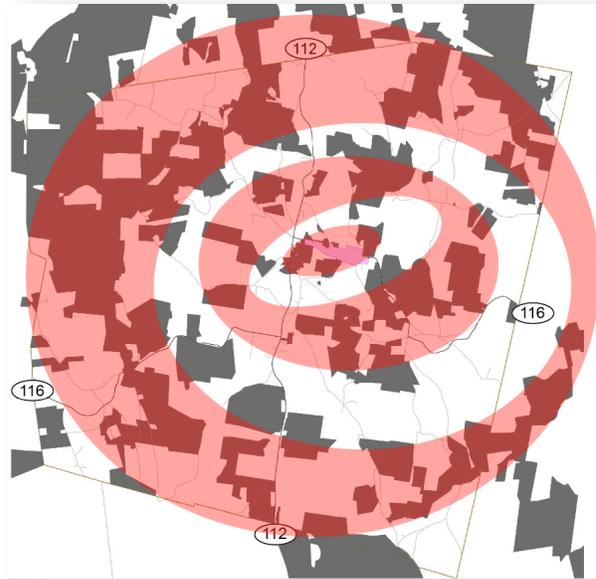
the Village Center is located in the Deerfield Watershed near the border to the Westfield Watershed. Ashfield Lake is the only large water body in the Deerfield Watershed, and is accompanied by a few small, scattered streams and wetlands. By contrast, there are many large wetlands spread throughout the Westfield Watershed side of the town. As such, the health of Ashfield Lake is crucial to the health of the Deerfield Water-

shed; maintaining the ecological integrity of the land surrounding the lake through planning strategies is an important consideration for the town.

The Team observed several key factors at the Village Center scale as well. The Village Center sits on a plateau surrounded by hills to the north, south, and west, and a drop off to the east. To some degree, this geographic setting limits the area over which the Village Center can spread out, and the hills contribute significantly to the rural character. There are a few wetlands in the area of the Village Center, located primarily near the lake and in the surrounding lowlands. These features also serve to limit the potential spatial growth of the Village Center.

2.2.2. Open Space and Protected Land

Maps illustrating significant open space and protected land were prepared at both town and Village Center scales. At the Village Center scale, there is a clear core of commercial uses and smaller residential lots surrounded primarily by forested areas. There are a few small protected open spaces in the Village Center and large protected areas at the eastern and western ends of the Village Center. The occurrence of protected spaces increases outside the Village Center. The Team also noted that the amount of developable open space in the Village Center that could possibly be used for future building is relatively small. The large plot of protected land on the eastern end is protected under Chapter 61, a temporary protection of the state tax code, and therefore somewhat vulnerable to future growth pressure. The pasture land on the western edge of the Village Center, across Route 116, is protected under an Agricultural Protection Restriction (APR), which en



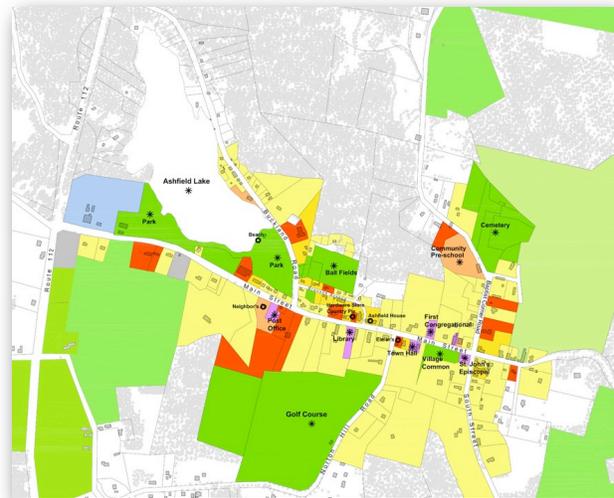
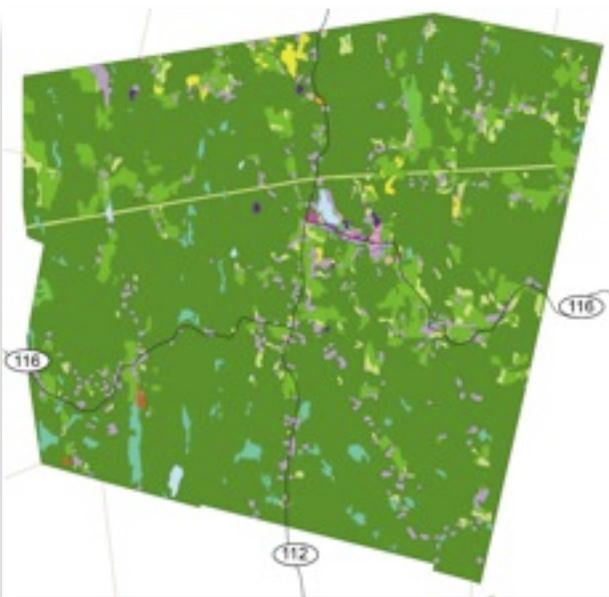
tails a more secure level of protection. From this, the Team concluded that development pressures will be more likely to occur as infill development within the Village Center and/or on the Chapter 61-protected land.

In analyzing open space and land use at the town scale, the overall open space pattern in the town seemed to form a bulls-eye, with the Village Center squarely in the middle. The open space connected to the Village Center is separated from the ring of open space outside of it. That inner ring is then separated from a larger outer ring that comprises most of the open space in the town. This led the Team to several conclusions. First, without acquiring more open space outside of the Village Center to connect the rings, the Village Center cannot effectively establish a large-scale open space corridor. Second, there appears to be room for growth directly around the center, as well as outside the inner ring of open space.

2.2.3. Land Use

The town-scale land use map revealed a few areas other than the Village Center that could also be developed in the future. First, the land along the portion of Route 116 that runs concurrent with Route 112 is presently farmed in some areas and shows some residential concentration in others. The farmland indicates good geographic suitability for future development, and the other residences indicate potential development pressures. The southern three-quarters of the stretch are also unencumbered by land protections.

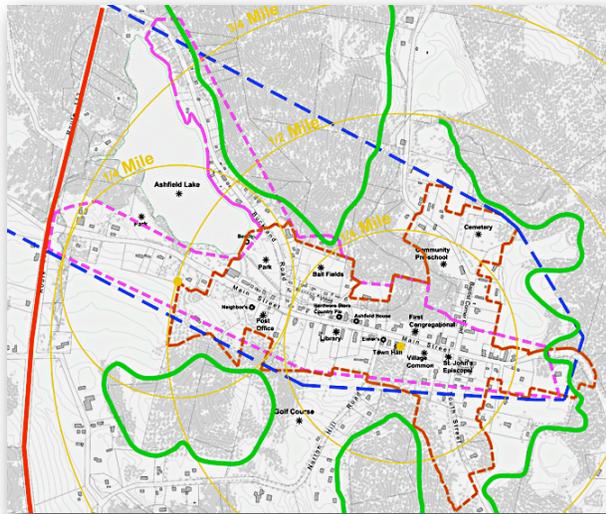
The other area where future growth might occur is the land along the southern-most section of Route 116, where it dips south to the east of the Village Center. This area also has a large amount of farmland and existing residential development. Potential growth would face more constraints from preserved open space, but it is also closest to the border with Conway, which is experiencing significant development pressures. The



gap in protected land that falls between the inner ring and outer ring appeared to be less vulnerable to development. Much of the gap is filled with forested, undeveloped land that is likely to be constrained by difficult topographic conditions. The implications of this are increasing development pressures on the Village Center and the other two areas discussed.

2.2.4. Infrastructural Edges and Boundaries

The areas of Ashfield most likely to face development pressures in the future become even clearer with an analysis of the physical edges and regulatory boundaries (primarily lot sizes) of the Village Center. The eastern edge of the Village Center is relatively dense and is tightly hemmed in by the surrounding topography. The one exception is along Baptist Corner Road past the cemetery, where the lot sizes become significantly larger than in the Village Center. The other area of the Village Center with possible growth pressure is along the western edge. At the lake, two possible areas of growth appeared evident to the Team. The current configuration of lots suggests room for infill development along the northern shore, and the amenity of Ashfield Lake would likely provide an incentive for new residential construction.

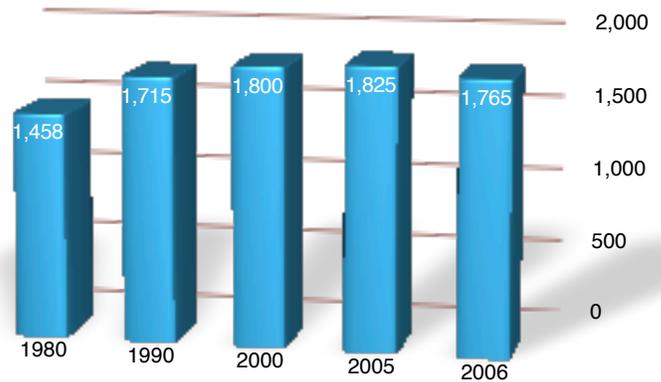


The other area with possibilities for growth is along Route 116 towards the intersection with Route 112. The lots here increase in size heading west from the Village Center and there are some areas with unprotected open space. Development here would also create a connection to the possible development corridor along Routes 116 and 112 mentioned previously. The Team concluded that future development pressures are very likely along these areas.

2.3. Statistical Analysis - Ashfield Today

2.3.1. Demographic Trends

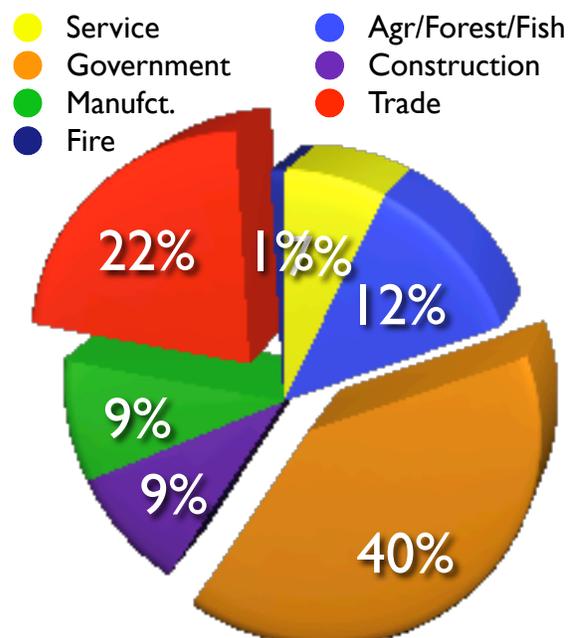
Ashfield's population growth has slowed over the past quarter century. It grew by 17 percent between 1980 and 1990, but by only 5 percent between 1990 and 2000. The 2005 population estimate indicates a slight decrease by 2 percent. The trend reveals that population fluctuations are generally gradual and modest. As of the 2000 U.S. Census, there are 1,800 Ashfield residents residing within 741 households and 500 families. The population is predominantly [97 percent] Caucasian.



Source: U.S. Census

2.3.2. Distribution of Employment: 2001

The distribution of employment shows government jobs, at 40 percent, to be the most common among Ashfield residents, and trade occupations being the second at 22 percent. The influence of the trade sector is a reflection of the various cottage industries located in and around the Village Center and produce products ranging from cheese,



Source: Ashfield Community Development Plan, 2004

maple syrup, honey, candles, and art glass, among others.

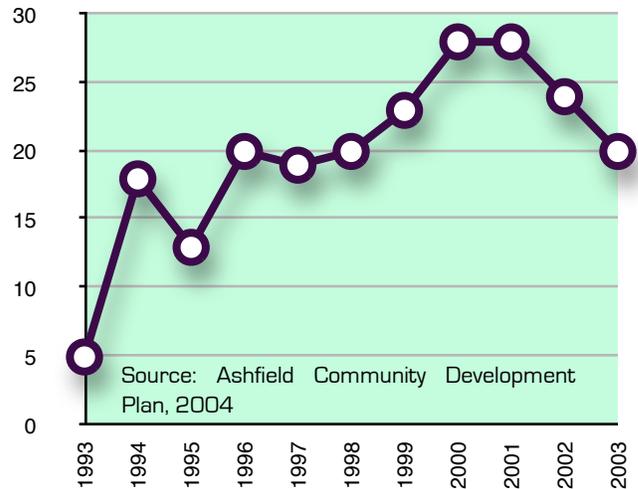
2.3.3. Household Income Distribution: 1999

A majority (72.9%) of Ashfield households have incomes of \$35,000 or higher, as shown in Table 1. Households earning less than \$35,000 are classified by the Census as low and moderate income and represent 27.1 percent of Ashfield households. The 2000 Census indicated that, at \$52,875, Ashfield's median household income is substantially higher than the median for Franklin County. As noted in the Ashfield Community Development Plan, this data is likely to be accurate for 2006, since the local economy growth and housing market are relatively slow.

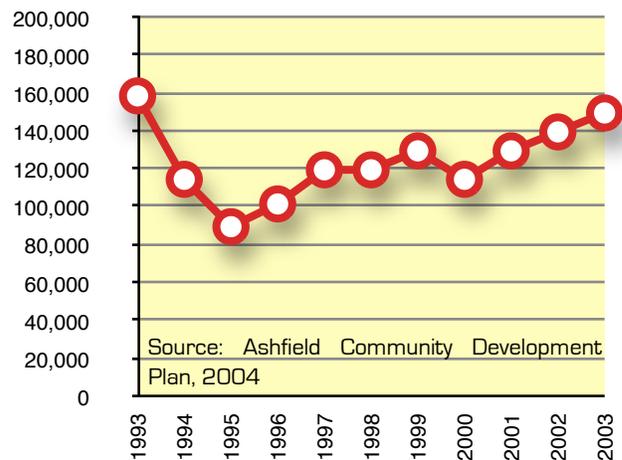
Median Household Income	\$52,875
Median County Household Income	\$40,768

Income Range	Household Income	# Households	% of Total
Low Income	\$10,000 to \$19,999	97	13.2%
Moderate Income	\$20,000 to \$34,999	103	13.9%
Middle Income	\$35,000 to \$74,999	236	32.1%
Upper Income	\$75,000 to \$200,000+	300	40.8%
TOTAL		735	100.0%

Source: U.S. Census



Single Family House Sales 1993-2003

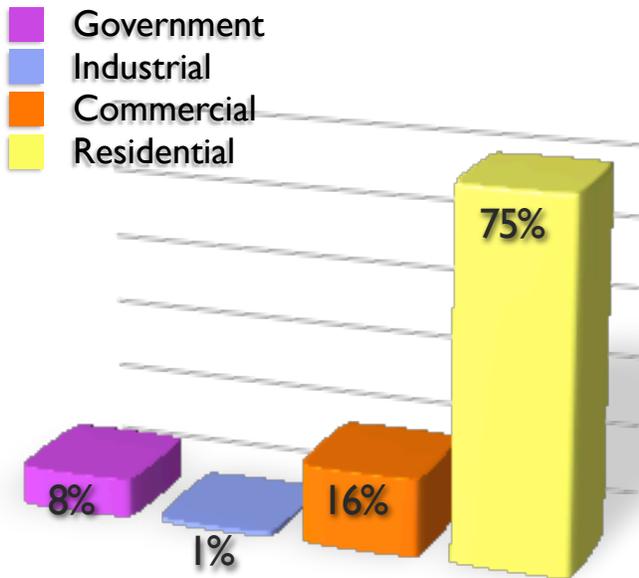


Single Family Median Residential Sales Price 1993-2003

The tables above show the decreasing housing demand in Ashfield since 2000. The Ashfield Community Plan notes that this limited demand makes it difficult for developers to build a significant number of affordable units. The average sale price increased during the same period that demand slowed, which could be an indicator of the slow growth in population.

2.3.4. Land Use Patterns

The most common use in the Village Center is residential. The residential category includes both single and multi-family structures, and mixed-use structures are included in the commercial category. The



Ashfield Zoning Bylaw allows single and 2-family residential uses by right; all others uses require a special permit. There are several home-based businesses and cottage industries within the Village Center that are included in the mixed-use category.

2.3.5. Current Conditions: Ashfield Village Center

The average length of road frontage of the lots in the Village Center is 113 feet. The town bylaw requires a minimum of 200 ft of road frontage for new lots and a minimum two-acre lot size. At just under an acre (43,062 S.F.), the average lot within the Village Center is significantly smaller than the modern minimums and is non-comforming with the current bylaw. This makes new development within the Village Center difficult without the prospect of parcel consolidation and demolition of existing structures.

	Average	Allowed
Lot Frontage	113 f	200 f
Residential Lot Sizes	0.97 acres	2 acres
Non-Residential Lot Sizes	1.67 acres	2 acres

Public Process & Visualization

3. Public Process & Visualization

3.1. Public Process Research and Development of Team Approach

In order to effectively guide the public workshops, the Team sought out relevant literature on the methods and tools of public participation. As discussed in the Goals and Objectives section of this report, the Team sought an approach that would allow the process to be driven by the participants while maintaining the overarching objectives and specific goals for each meeting. The Team agreed to adopt an iterative approach in which each step informed the next; for example, the results and findings from Workshop 1 informed the scope and agenda for Workshop 2. Again, a primary objective of the Team was to get the stakeholders discussing the future of their Village Center with each other while directing the dialogue towards constructive implementation strategies for future planning.

3.1.1. Categories of Participation

According to Burns (1979) a successful public process follows a “ladder of citizen participation.” The Team sought to incorporate the following four principles into the Ashfield Village Center Visioning process:

Awareness: The experience involves discovering or rediscovering the realities of a certain situation so that everyone who takes part in the process speaks the same language.

Perception: This entails going from the awareness of the situation to understanding

it and its physical, social, and economic ramifications so that the goals and expectations of all participants become resources for planning and design.

Decision-Making: This experience concentrates on progressing from awareness and perception to a plan for the situation under consideration. Participants propose plans according to their priorities for professionals to use as resources to synthesize alternative and final plans.

Implementation: Many community-based initiatives falter at the decision-making stage, especially when the questions arise about who will be responsible for implementation and how they will accomplish it. It is imperative that public participation be carried through to implementation. People must stay involved throughout the process and take responsibility with their professionals to see that there are results (Horwitz 1975).

3.1.2. Indicators of the Value of Participation

Lach and Hixson (1998) have established a list of indicators to assess the value and success of a participatory process. The Team aspired to maximize the following indicators during the course of the Visioning process:

- Opening the process to stakeholders
- Diversity of Viewpoints
- Meaningful Participation
- Integrating Stakeholder Concerns
- Information Exchange
- Saving Time

- Saving and Avoiding Costs
- Enhanced Project Acceptability
- Mutual Learning
- Mutual Respect

The Team's primary objective of initiating a structured dialogue through an open process focused on Visioning for the Village Center is encompassed in the first indicator. In the Team's view, progress was made towards all of the above indicators. As the Visioning process continues, these indicators provide a useful framework for guiding participation and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of individual project stages and activities.

3.1.3. Team Approach

The Team's use of an iterative process meant that the specific activities of each workshop would change based on the activities and findings of the previous workshop. This approach allowed the Team to move with the flow of the conversation between Ashfield residents and allowed room for timely discussions that met the needs and curiosities of the workshop participants. The approach that best met these requirements and the working preferences of the Team ascribed the following stages to the public process:

- Open Forum - Fall Festival
- Informational Meeting - Workshop 1
- Advisory Meeting - Workshop 2
- Problem Solving Meeting - Workshop 3

The Team felt that it was important to emphasize their role as facilitators of the discussion but to ensure that it took place

amongst the participants and not between the participants and the Team. To this end, the Team and CRM answered technical questions as they arose and provided questions to provoke discussion, but encouraged the workshop participants to address each other directly.

While each of the workshops was planned to be different, common elements were incorporated into all three in order to achieve the overriding goals of the Visioning process. All three workshops were designed to be interactive for participants. While this may be considered a basic part of the public process, the Team felt it was important to emphasize it to ensure the community understood the importance of their involvement.

Lastly, the Team provided visualization materials at all three workshops. These visualizations were used to demonstrate ideas, foster awareness of possible future scenarios, and provide a starting point for dialogue about growth. The form of these visualizations varied as the workshops progressed, however all were successful in helping to initiate discussions about the form of future growth and the techniques that might be employed to direct and plan for it.

3.2. Preliminary Public Input

3.2.1. Village Center Walking Tour

From the beginning, the Team approached the public process and the incorporation of public input as the lynchpin of the Village Center Visioning process. In September, the Team was invited by the Village Center Visioning Committee (VCVC) to accompany them on a walking tour of the Village Center. Prior to the walking tour, the Team made an initial site visit to explore and become familiar with the town. A few days later, the

Team approached the walking tour as an opportunity to meet the Committee and listen to their concerns about growth in the Village Center.

3.2.2. Fall Festival - Open Forum

In discussing the workshops with the VCVC, the Team became aware of the upcoming Fall Festival, a yearly tradition on the Town Common. After discussing the idea with the VCVC, the Team decided to set up a booth at the Fall Festival as a way to accomplish several early goals:



- Increase awareness of the VCVC and the Village Center Visioning process
- Introduce the Team to residents of the town
- Advertise and inspire enthusiasm for the three upcoming workshops
- Gathering information and public input in a fun, relaxed, open forum
- Reach out to and engage a wide variety of residents, especially those unlikely or unable to attend evening public meetings

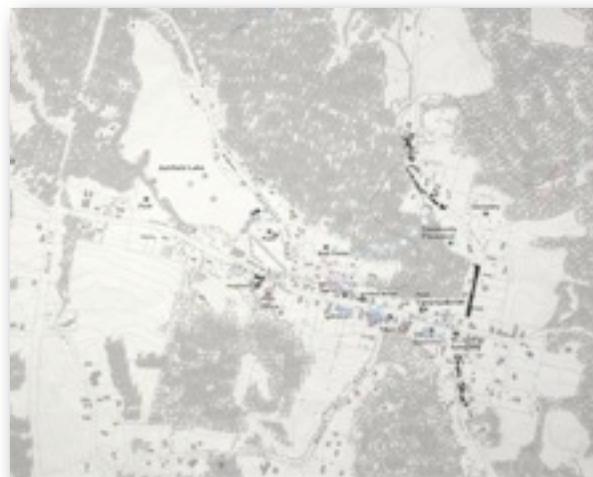
There was a good deal of interest at the booth at Fall Festival; Team members met and spoke with a wide array of residents and heard many diverse opinions about future growth in the town and the idea of a Visioning process. Four activities were planned to

engage residents and gather useful data in preparing for the first workshop:

- Mental Maps - Residents were given a blank sheet of paper and asked to draw the town as they see it, including places of special interest and major routes of circulation. Participants, who also completed a brief survey indicating age, gender, and location of residence, drew more than 40 maps, providing opinions of the edges of the Village Center, important elements of visual character, and structures of historic importance.



- Special Places Map - A large map of the Village Center was posted and participants placed star stickers to indicate special places in and around the Village Center. In addition to the expected places, such as the Town Hall, churches, library and Ashfield Lake, the Team was able to observe less obvious highlights, such as informal walking trails and the function of the small stores in the Village Center as hubs of social activity.

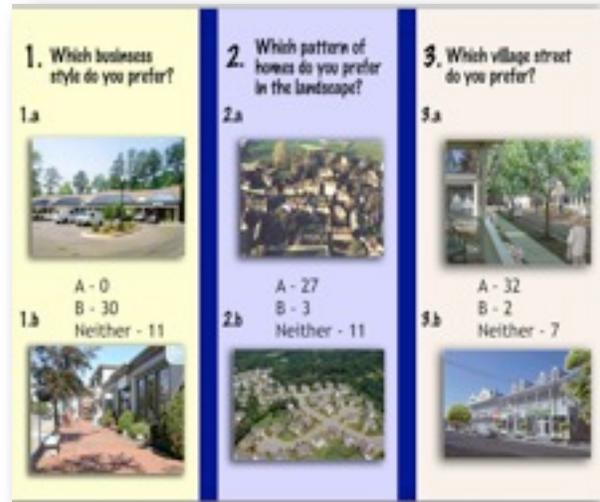


- **Comment Boards** – Two large posters were pinned up asking residents what types of new activity they would most like to see in the Village Center and what qualities of the Village Center they would like to see preserved in the coming 25 years. The wide variety of responses included suggestions ranging from new commercial uses and activities on the Common to no change or growth under any circumstances.



- **Visual Preference Survey** – A poster with three pairs of sample photographic images showing various village growth patterns was posted and participants were asked to choose the image they preferred. Both spread-out suburban and denser, traditional village patterns were displayed. The participants overwhelmingly preferred the images depicting traditional village growth, however a significant number indicated that they disliked both images and didn't see either as appropriate for the future of Ashfield.

The Team regarded the Fall Festival as a success, especially given the wide demographic of age and gender represented by the participants (see Appendix 2). The overall impression the Team gained was that the rural, historic character of the town as a whole and the Village Center in particular is of paramount importance to Ashfield resi-



dents. There is a sense of strong affection for the Village Center and a desire to protect it from degradation. A wide diversity of opinions exists regarding the understanding of growth pressures on the Village Center, how to manage them, and whether or not the Visioning Process is a worthwhile endeavor towards this end.

3.3. Workshop 1: Informational Meeting and Workshop

3.3.1. Workshop Objectives and Expectations

The first workshop was envisioned as an introductory session that encompassed (1) the challenges to reach consensus towards a Village Center bylaw, (2) discussion of the preliminary findings of the Fall Festival and the positive results achieved, (3) present the physical maps of the town created by the Team, and (4) data gathering through a participatory mapping exercise that covered Edges and Boundaries, Access, Circulation, and Parking, and Village Character.

3.3.2. Workshop Description

The agenda for the meeting included an introduction by CRM about the importance of village center zoning, followed by a nine-question survey to garner the opinions of the participants regarding potential uses, extent of use mixes, and dimensional preferences. A Team member presented the Fall Festival activity results and the physical maps that included, at town scale, information about context, natural features, habitat, open space, land-use, natural areas and protected land and at Village Center scale, a base map, lot-specific land use, and town character (For drawings refer to Appendix 1).



The participants were then divided into two breakout groups to participate in the mapping exercise, each at a table with a base plan of the Village Center. With Team members facilitating, participants were asked to identify (1) landmarks, buildings, businesses, and natural features that contribute to the character of the Village Center; (2) parking areas and walking, driving or bicycling routes taken to and within the Village Center; and (3) perceived boundaries – existing or potential – of the Village Center. Responses were drawn on trace paper over the base maps and reported by a group representative to all workshop participants.

The Team drew the following conclusions from the final group discussions.

3.3.3. Mapping Exercise - Edges and Boundaries

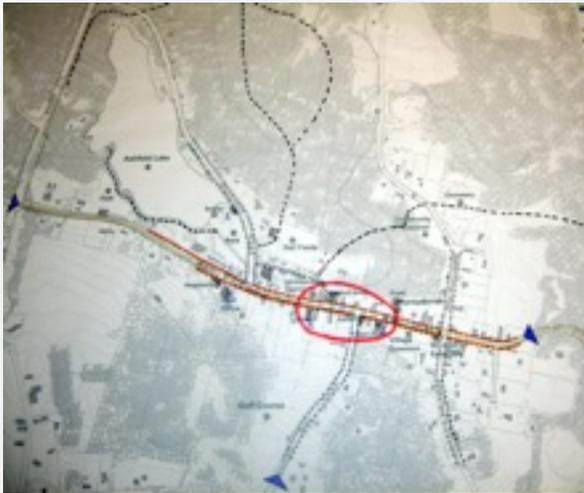
The responses ranged from seeing the entire Town as the boundary, to the ridgeline seen from Main Street being the definition of the center, to a much more limited sense of a 'Village Center Proper.' Opinions of the latter ranged from Main Street alone, including only the densest cluster of buildings, to an oval encompassing side streets out to where the elevation changes. Criteria included elevation (the Ashfield Plain), density of buildings, amenities, identifiable neighborhoods, commercial uses, and geology.



3.3.4. Mapping Exercise - Access, Circulation, and Parking

One group focused a great deal on the walking trails within and extending out from the Village Center. These trails, though largely on private lands, enjoy a good deal of public use. Parking is generally sufficient, both groups agreed; only rarely is it difficult to find parking within a convenient distance from a destination. Winter can be difficult, since

sidewalks are not plowed, and finding convenient, barrier-free parking can be difficult those with impaired mobility. Four handicapped parking places were identified: one each at the Town Hall, the U.S Post Office, the Town Beach, and the library. Only some of the many parking areas cited are town-owned; many are private but available for public use, such as the Congregational Church. Speed of vehicles along Main Street (Route 116) was also mentioned, and participants indicated on one map the points at which cars tend to speed up as they leave town – a possible indication of the edge of the Village Center.



3.3.5. Mapping Exercise - Village Character

The presence of significant open spaces immediately adjacent to the denser development in the Village Center was seen as a great asset. One VCVC member termed it 'a village with a landscape.' Others identified the larger historic buildings that establish a town identity; Ashfield House, the churches, and Town Hall establish a Village 'district' that provides a strong sense of place. For many, community gathering places – Elmer's, Ashfield Hardware, the library – are the focus for introducing visitors to the Town, and are greatly valued. Another VCVC

member stressed the remarkable resources housed at the Historical Society. Areas and events perceived to detract from the village character include the more suburban, late 20th century residential lots on the western edge of the Village Center, and the demolition of old Sanderson Academy building.



3.3.6. Reflections and Conclusions

The meeting was successful at beginning to engage the citizens of Ashfield in a dialogue between each other on the future of the Village Center. The Team received constructive feedback and input from the citizens regarding the physical maps and the activities of the Fall Festival. The data-gathering objectives of the Team were met and exceeded by the enthusiastic participation in the survey and mapping exercises.

The Committee requested additional mapping showing other ways of describing the Village Center, including the extent of sewer and water lines, the historic district, topographic changes, and soil types. During the mapping exercises, one group took on the additional task of suggesting possible future

locations for elderly housing within walking distance of Main Street businesses and churches. The Team received a detailed minutes of meeting (Document TT, Appendix SS) taken by a VCVC member and summarizing the workshop. In addition, the Team indicated that some initial scenarios would be presented with 3-dimensional visualizations during Workshop 2.

Graphics: Photographs, Charts indicating Survey Results, group and composite maps for Village Character, Traffic & Circulation, and Boundaries

3.4. Workshop II : Advisory Meeting

3.4.1. Workshop Objectives and Expectations

The second workshop was structured around three main objectives: (1) presenting the Team's conclusions of the Mapping and Survey exercises from Workshop 1, (2) engaging participants in a Village Center Use Preferences exercise, and (3) a Visualization exercise using the first two development scenarios prepared by the Team.



3.4.2. Workshop Description

The primary goal of the second workshop was to shift the conversation from occurring between the Team and the Workshop participants to occurring within the group of residents and VCVC members. The Team communicated to the residents that the information-gathering and educational accomplishments of the first workshop had successfully created a platform onto which the dialogue about growth in the Village Center could be held within the group. The Team emphasized their role as facilitators of the dialogue, and that because the final product of the Visioning process will be a creation of the VCVC and the Town residents, this transition of the dialogue is a crucial step in the process towards a consensus for the future of the Village Center.

3.4.3. Summarizing Workshop 1 - Mapping Exercises

The workshop opened with a summary by a member of the Team of the Mapping and Survey exercises from Workshop 1. For the Mapping exercise, the Team created composite maps for each category by merging the conclusions of both breakout groups. The significant findings of the Village Character; Access, Circulation, and Parking; and Edges and Boundaries Maps created by participants during Workshop 1 were presented by the Team and opened for group discussion. The Team also prepared and discussed the map illustrating existing boundaries that was requested by the participants in the first workshop. This map showed infrastructure boundaries, delineation of the historic, water, and sewer districts, natural and geological features, and walking distances from key areas in the Village Center.

The Team also prepared and discussed a Lot Size Analysis Map, which identified Village Center parcels by size of less than 1 acre, 1-3 acres, and 4 acres. It was noted that the smallest lots, which are non-conforming under the current 2-acre zoning, are predominantly clustered in the Village Center Core and that the scale of these lots contributes significantly to the strong architectural character.

3.4.4. Summarizing Workshop 1 - Survey

A brief, 9-question survey was conducted at the first workshop and the results were presented and discussed by a member of the Team. The full survey results can be viewed in Appendix 4.

The primary findings were as follows:

A plurality of residents would like to see 3-4 new retail or service storefront businesses in the Village Center

New businesses should be located within existing buildings, and the most preferred uses are light industrial/artisan, craft shop or art gallery, office space, and storefront retail

Second floor office space above residential or storefront retail should be allowed by special permit

New businesses, mixed-use, and residences in the Village Center should reflect their neighbors in massing and dimension, and should not be forced to conform with the dimensions required in the Zoning Bylaw

Accessory apartments and second floor apartments above first floor businesses are the most desirable housing options for the Village Center; single family homes are the least.

3.4.5. Village Center Use Preferences Exercise

As an activity for the entire group, participants were asked to respond to the Village Center Use Preference Table, which outlined a number of situations in the Village Center that could be Allowed as-of-Right, by Special Permit, or Prohibited. Most participants agreed that many of the items under the General and Exempt Uses Section should be regulated by Special Permit. It was noted that, with regard to private outdoor recreation, noise could be a significant issue. The group also discussed the differences between Cottage Industry (work in an accessory building / limit to number of employees) and Home Occupation (no outward manifestation except for a small identifying sign) and situations that require a Special Permit (those of which may have more impact on a neighborhood). The group discussed whether the Special Permit Process for the Village Center should be different from the rest of Ashfield. Some participants agreed that the goal of concentrating growth within a walkable Village Center could be benefited by this approach; others disagreed that the Village Center should be treated differently.

Questions and concerns were raised about architectural regulations in town's Zoning Bylaw, and the discussion shifted to the various tools and techniques that might be employed to plan for growth in the Village Center. Site Plan Review and Form Based Code were discussed as alternatives to Special Permits and other traditional regulations. This exercise was particularly effective at eliciting a variety of well-articulated opinions and thoughts from the participants.

3.4.6. Visualization Exercise

The visualization exercise used hand-drawn, bird's eye perspectives of the Village Center to present two different possible scenarios illustrating growth. The first demonstrated the impact of a potential development under existing zoning, in which new growth occurs around the perimeter of the Village Center and around the intersection of Routes 112 and 116.



The other demonstrated reasonable growth occurring within the constraints of a potential Village Center bylaw, in which new development occurs both within and around the Village Center and in a form consistent with the current walkable, historic character. The exercise raised questions whether there is a threat for the Village Center historical and landscape character, and if there is, how the town can sort out these risks through new strategies and regulations. The participants raised their concerns and expressed a wide variety of views about potential growth in the Village Center and how the Town should plan for it.



3.4.7 Reflections and Conclusions

Both exercises stimulated productive discussion among the VCVC Committee members and citizen participants about the potential for new developments and business pressure in the town. The Team felt that the emergence of this dialogue and the recognition of growth pressures were particularly significant accomplishments of the second workshop. Several participants and VCVC members expressed appreciation for the depth of analysis and listening that the Team had done during the Fall Festival and the first workshop. With this relationship established, the participants moved comfortably into a discussion about how and when growth pressures will manifest themselves and the impact of unplanned growth on the scale and character of the Village Center.

The Team facilitated the dialogue, answering questions and clarifying technical points where necessary; otherwise a very constructive, respectful dialogue of opinions and thoughts occurred between the participants. In this respect, the goal of shifting the dialogue to the residents was achieved. The participant group's ability to direct the con-

versation towards what types of growth they would like to see and what regulatory techniques might be most appropriate to meet the needs of the Town indicated a significant breakthrough for the group as a whole. One participant vocalized the general feeling of concern and stewardship over the Village Center particularly effectively as “Not what [use], but how,” indicating an appreciation for addressing the scale, character and impact of new growth. Concerns about such impacts on traffic, scale and character, continued affordability, possible unwanted gentrification, and changing the Special Permit Process were raised. The issues and concerns raised fed directly into the Team’s planning process for Workshop 3, during which examples and scenarios were used to further illustrate growth and strategies.

3.5 Workshop III: Problem Solving Meeting/Advisory Meeting

3.5.1 Workshop Objectives and Expectations

The third workshop was conceived as a problem-solving meeting during which participants would be presented with tools and strategies for dealing with the concerns raised in the previous two workshops about planning for growth in the Village Center. Example bylaws and photographic images from easily relatable Western Massachusetts towns accompanied the various issues and strategies discussed to demonstrate their practical implications. Additional 3-dimensional visualizations were used to approximate how various approaches would

look on the ground in Ashfield’s Village Center.



3.5.2 Workshop Description

Throughout the Visioning process and in Workshop 2 in particular, the Team noted that several key issues and concerns were articulated repeatedly by residents about the form of potential growth and regulatory approaches to planning for it. In planning the third workshop, the Team decided to respond directly to these concerns by identifying each issue, clearly defining them with regard to Ashfield’s Village Center, and laying out a number of planning strategies for each issue. Working closely with CRM, the Team developed a matrix identifying the major issues mentioned by the workshop participants. The full matrix can be found in Appendix 5. Six issues were established:

- Gentrification
- Maintaining Scale and Character
- Changing the Regulatory System
- Traffic, Noise, and other Impacts
- Fiscal & Economic Impacts

- Increasing the Mix of Uses in the Village Center

3.5.3 Issues and Strategies Exercise

The purpose of the matrix was to introduce planning techniques appropriate for Ashfield. For each issue, the matrix presented strategies that can be employed towards either encouraging goals and discouraging unwanted impacts. As an example, the issue of gentrification was addressed with the following strategies: (1) encourage upscale and/or tourism-oriented uses (which could potentially lead to gentrification), or (2) ensure uses that are not tourist-based or commonly upscale (which would help to avoid gentrification). Strategies were presented within a neutral framework so that as the Visualization process continues, various strategic approaches can be discussed and debated by residents with a full awareness of their implications.

Along with the issues-strategies matrix, the Team displayed photographic images from towns around Western Massachusetts exemplifying several of the issues and strategies discussed. These images exemplified practical planning policies where different solutions were applied to specific issues, and can be viewed in full in Appendix____. Some of the issues depicted were increased mixed use, gentrification, and impacts of new uses on scale and character.

As a reference tool, participants also received a selection of Village Center bylaws that have been implemented by Massachusetts towns. The example bylaws supplemented the photographs by demonstrating the range of regulatory strategies towns have employed to respond to issues presented in the matrix. The example photographs were a successful form of visualization for participants because they represent

tangible scenarios in comparable towns already familiar to Ashfield resident. Some participants observed that those towns were once rural villages but have changed considerably as a result of development pressure, and recognized the similar potential threats to Ashfield's Village Center.

3.5.4 Visualization Exercise

To further demonstrate the issues and strategies detailed in the matrix, the Team developed three different 3-dimensional renderings illustrating hypothetical future growth within the Village Center. All three illustrated potential growth while maintaining the existing Village Center architectural scale, an aspect that would require either changes to the dimensional requirements in the Zoning Bylaw or extensive Special Permitting. The scenarios included

- (1) increased density and mixed-use and little gentrification,



(2) upscale and gentrified uses, increased parking and mixed uses,



(3) upscale and increased mixed uses and limited tourist amenities.



3.5.5 Reflections and Conclusions

Workshop participants were responsive to the discussion of issues and strategies, and this generated a lengthy, constructive discussion among participants. The Team observed a greater diversity of views and opinions than in previous workshops, especially from new participants who had not attended the previous two. Concerns were raised about the decision to focus the Visioning effort on the Village Center rather than the town as a whole, and it became evident to the Team that the initial 'Problem-Solving' focus of the workshop needed to be adjusted in order to address the new concerns raised by participants. A 'Problem-Solving' meeting would require greater consensus on the definition of the problem and agreement on the need to address it. In this sense, the goal of the workshop shifted to providing another 'Advisory' framework for participants to continue refining what, if any, problems exist with the current methods for preserving the character of the Village Center and planning to accommodate future growth.

Conclusions and Recommendations

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. Assessment of Project Goals and Objectives

At the beginning of its involvement with the Visioning process, the Team set out to conduct a participatory public process centered around 3-dimensional visualizations illustrating various potential growth scenarios. However, some workshop participants expressed concern that public education and debate about potential growth were needed, and were reluctant to move too quickly in the initial stage of the Visioning process. Also, some participants expressed the view that the existing zoning system is the best approach for the future and questioned the need for any changes to the regulatory system.

In light of these considerations, the Team adjusted the process to emphasize its educational aspects and to create a forum for debate on the various strategic alternatives and actions that the stakeholders can consider in future planning discussions. The Team was successfully able to initiate and prompt a course of action that resulted in a critical planning dialogue between its many participants to think about future growth and development issues. This process created an opportunity open to stakeholders to express their diverse of points of view. This provided the opportunity of information exchange between the Team and Ashfield residents to a level where a respectful mutual learning process that will enhance the chances of project acceptability whenever a consensus proposal is reached.

In the continued Visioning process, the Team believes that certain criteria need to be met to make this process a continued success. The Team has concluded that, if the following observations are considered, the task of creating a new zoning bylaw will be an easier and agreeable process for the town.

Begin the public participation process with facilitation meetings to generate a clear set of goals and objectives that are representative of residents' aspirations.

Arrive at and articulate a well-defined scope and goals for future planning initiatives.

Work towards a the most representative constituency possible for the public meetings to ensure that a reasonable sample of opinions are heard and discussed.

Allow for an adequate period of time (recommend 3-4 weeks) between each meeting to allow for distribution of minutes, clarifications, and further development of thoughts and ideas.

The technical information, mapping and statistical analyses found in this report can support the overall process. The detailed analyses and assessment of the physical, environmental, and historical characteristics of the Village Center and the results of the participatory mapping exercises compiled into this report can serve as informative tools for use in future planning initiatives.

4.2. Future Options for Consideration

Although the public participation process did not result in consensus to suggest a rigorous set of recommendations, a number of regulatory options emerged during the discussions that the Town might explore in working toward the common goal of preserving the unique character of the Village Center. These options can be undertaken alone or in any combination or sequence that suits the Town, and may proceed at a pace that suits local political realities. It is important to emphasize that these options do not constitute a set of recommendations; they are presented as potentially helpful recommendations to consider, based on the conclusions drawn from the Visioning process for future discussion, research, and debate by Ashfield residents. Each of the five options is accompanied by the main goal it would likely accomplish, and then by a brief discussion explaining the alternative. Each one should be read only as a jumping-off point for further research, examination, and appropriate potential implementation within the context of Ashfield Village Center.

4.2.1. Dimensional changes to zoning bylaw

The Ashfield Zoning Bylaw currently requires compliance with dimensions that are considerably larger than those existing in the built form of the Village Center. For example, new residential lots are required to occupy a minimum of two acres, and have 200 feet of street frontage, as well as front and side/rear setbacks of 25 and 20 feet, respectively. By contrast, the average lot in the Village Center is slightly less than one acre and occupies 113 feet of frontage. As such, under the existing zoning bylaw, new construction could not legally (without a

variance) be permitted to be built in a manner that conforms to the physical characteristics of existing buildings. New construction complying with the existing dimensional requirements would depart significantly in layout and scale from that of the traditional village form.

In order to preserve the character of the Village Center, which is reliant upon the consistency of the architectural massing, the dimensional requirements in the Zoning Bylaw should be scaled down to reflect those of the existing buildings. In addition to decreasing the minimum setback to a figure closer to that which currently exists, a maximum front setback should also be considered. This would ensure that new buildings are not placed significantly farther back from the road than their neighbors, which interrupts the continuity of the streetscape of building facades. Modern, freestanding chain businesses and small strip malls tend to be the most visually disruptive to streetscape continuity.

Implementing this option will not impact the type of architecture that may be constructed, but it will ensure that any new construction reflects its neighbors in its scale, massing, and presentation to the street. In the absence of a comprehensive Village Center Zone, the Team recommends this option as an effective means of preserving the scale of development in, and immediately adjacent to, the Village Center.

4.2.2. Additional as-of-right use(s) in the Village Center

Under the current bylaw, the entire town is zoned for Rural Residential, under which only single and two-family residences are permitted as-of-right. Any and all other uses are subject to the Special Permit process, which falls under the discretion of the Planning

Board. This case-by-case approach has traditionally offered a high comfort level to townspeople and has acted in benign stewardship of village development, but has done so under a minimum of growth pressure. The potential problem is that looking 5, 10 and 20 years or more into the future, when the area's population has increased and demand for goods and services has broadened, the system might be strained with a larger scale business use or a corporate or franchise store wanting to locate in Ashfield, all of which are better able to stand firm in the face of local opposition and, if necessary, may appeal contrary decisions.

Growth and development are gradually going to occur as more people move to the area, so the question becomes one of identifying the best way to accommodate a modest degree of development in a way that stringently protects the scale and character of the Village Center and town. The issue is further complicated by the *Scit v. Braintree* doctrine from the MA Appeals Court in 1984, in which a business district subjecting all uses to special permit regulation—without benefit of a single as-of-right commercial use, was stricken down on constitutional grounds. With no non-residential uses allowed, the Ashfield bylaw might be on less-than-firm ground in this regard, so it might be advisable to consider designating at least one fully permitted non-residential use, while leaving all others as special permit uses.

Ashfield might consider proactively addressing this potential liability within the Special Permit process, and it may do so within a set of very restrictive guidelines that allow undesirable uses and site development patterns to be discouraged. Establishing one or more new as-of-right uses in Village Center with specific limits on characteristics like floor area, parking allowances, and drive-through facilities will allow Ashfield to dis-

courage new growth occurring in the form of larger, free-standing buildings that depart from the Village Center character. By legally allowing some amount of limited commercial growth to occur, Ashfield can buffet potential legal challenges from commercial developers while encouraging the type and scale of business appreciated by residents, such as Elmer's Market and the Ashfield Hardware Store.

4.2.3. Performance standards for growth in the Village Center

As stated in the above discussion of permitted uses, Ashfield's Special Permit review process is required for all uses except single and two-family residential. The Special Permit process in Ashfield is vulnerable to appeal principally because it sets forth no uniform standards against which a proposed project must be held for approval, approval with modifications, or disapproval. In considering the event of a potential future challenge from a developer, the judgement of Planning Board members in deciding on a Special Permit is considerably more defensible if it falls within a general set of predetermined considerations set forth by the town. This does not mean that special conditions unique to the application cannot be applied as readily as ever; specific conditions can and should be imposed without hesitation, as needed.

Establishing a set of uniform standards to be considered during the Special Permit process will allow the town to protect itself from challenge by developers. Framing such standards around the performance IMPACTS of new growth, such as site or building coverage, maximum impervious surface ratio, parking lot location, design and other criteria, will create a positive framework within which a variety of suitably controlled

and appropriate growth can occur over time.

4.2.4. Demolition Delay Bylaw & Other Historic Preservation Mechanisms

The Village Center is characterized by a cluster of unique and historic buildings, such as the Town Hall and several historic homes, which contribute significantly to the Village Center character. The Village Center is delineated as a National Historic District, but this designation offers no substantive protection from a private owner's intent to demolish a structure. A demolition delay bylaw is a relatively simple preservation option that has been adopted by more than 100 communities in Massachusetts. This type of bylaw typically delays demolition of buildings by six to eighteen months, so that alternatives to razing the structure may be explored. During that time, the owner is expected to evaluate the viability of alternatives to demolition, such as building restoration with adaptive reuse, finding another buyer willing to repair or preserve the property, or a person or group willing to move the building to another location. If an alternative is not found during the six months that is reasonably economical and feasible, then demolition might eventually be allowed, by the local historical commission or other designated body.

Ashfield's Village Center has many buildings that may not be individually eligible for the National Historic Register but are nonetheless important to the character of the Center and the Town due to their contribution to the district and/or to a local architectural vernacular. Strict preservation for the entire district by means of establishing a local historic district under Massachusetts law might not be a desirable option to some residents and businesses because of the

intensive restrictions placed on owners of eligible structures with regard to even minor alterations or repairs. A demolition delay ordinance is a worthwhile consideration for Ashfield because it simply creates a window during which alternatives for a building can be publicly discussed and opportunities to preserve the character of the Village Center will not be lost to the unregulated demolition plans of a private owner.

4.2.5. Establish a Neighborhood Conservation District

Another option which Ashfield might consider towards achieving the goal of preserving the scale and character of the Village Center is the creation of a Neighborhood Conservation District. This type of zoning district is particularly useful in mixed use areas such as town centers, where some buffering is needed between residential areas business and mixed uses, because it can be fine-tuned to the specific physical aspects of the particular zone. It is often created as an overlay to existing zoning for neighborhoods. It can also offer a less onerous alternative (a kind of "historic district light") where protections might not be warranted or desired in the form of a full-scale historic district commission jurisdiction, but the preservation of scale and character is nevertheless important. It gives the residents an opportunity to see what is proposed for properties in the district with respect to demolition, new construction, additions, alterations, and renovations, before anything is built. As with a demolition delay bylaw, this regulatory option tries to minimize over burdening property owners, by predetermining what is and is not permitted. Somewhat analogous to the Special Permit process, it creates a forum and window for public review and comment on a project and puts the

community in a more informed position to make decisions about future growth.

4.2.6. Non-Regulatory Options

In addition to these regulatory approaches, several non-regulatory strategies might be helpful to think about in the future. While these are outside of the scope of this project, they are mentioned here as suggestions for future examination and discussion. These might include: tax increment financing for new private projects, and, in the more distant future, district increment financing for public capital investment, or even a business improvement district (BID) further still in the future.