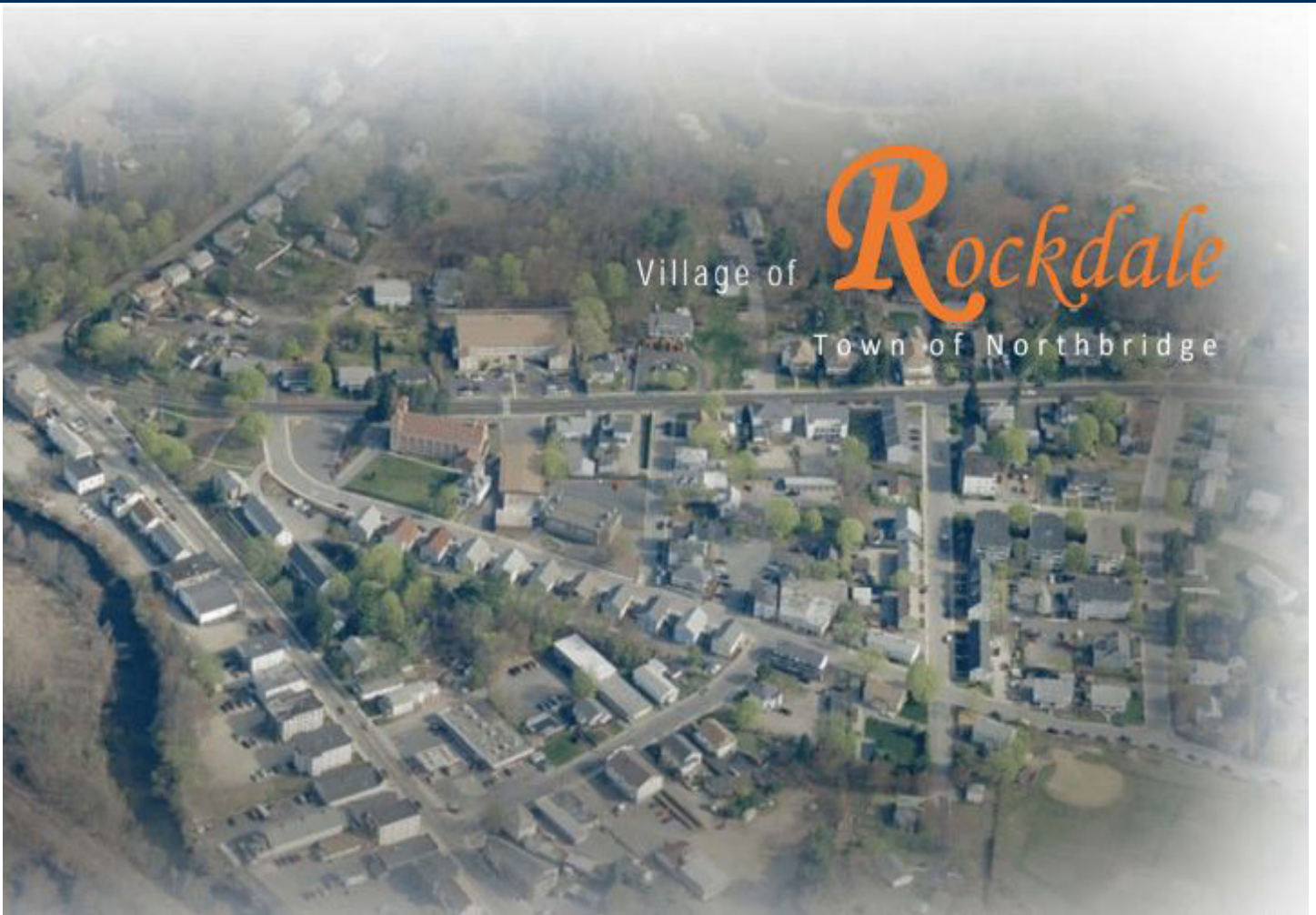


Town of Northbridge



A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

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Executive Summary

The Northbridge TAP convened on October 16, 2018 at the Northbridge Town Hall under the direction of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council. Over the course of the day, the TAP, consisting of eight professionals with expertise in real estate and land use, met with local business owners and residents from the Town as well as other key stakeholders. The purpose of the TAP was to devise a strategy that would help reinvigorate the Village of Rockdale in Northbridge, including addressing vacancies, flooding, and physical design.

Chapter 1: ULI and the TAP Process

Offers an overview of the Urban Land Institute's Boston/New England District Council and its Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs), while also providing a list of the panel members and stakeholders who took part in the exercise. The chapter also outlines the study area for the TAP and describes the process undertaken by the panelists and stakeholders to arrive at the recommendations presented at day's end during a public presentation at the Town Hall.

Chapter 2: Background and History

Gives a thumbnail sketch of the Town of Northbridge and Village of Rockdale, providing key population and demographic information. The Chapter also briefly details the Town's emergence as a manufacturing community and subsequent transition to a residential suburb. A thumbnail sketch of the study area is provided, including descriptions of a number of sites being considered for redevelopment. The chapter also includes a series of questions posed by the Town of Northbridge designed to provide insight into the challenges of improving the Village of Rockdale.

Chapter 3: Assets and Opportunities

Provides a brief description of the strengths of the Town, focusing on those assets that can be utilized to transform the Village of Rockdale. The chapter identifies available parcels, as well as intangibles such as business-friendly Town government, engaged landlords, and the historic and natural resources of the Village.

Chapter 4: Challenges

Identifies the obstacles that the Town must overcome in order to realize its vision for redevelopment, including zoning and parking issues; the challenges of developing in a flood zone; and a loss of identity for the neighborhood.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

Provides a number of suggestions to help the Town achieve its redevelopment goals. Among the recommendations suggested by panelists were to: create a buffer zone and reduce/limit the amount of impervious surface in the Village to mitigate the effects of flooding; engage neglectful landlords to improve subpar properties; create partnerships with key stakeholders, and implement placemaking measures for the Village.

Chapter 6: Funding Sources

This section lists a number of programs and financing tools available from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the federal government, and quasi-public agencies such as Mass Development to assist in the redevelopment efforts.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

ULI and the TAP Process

Urban Land Institute (ULI)

The Urban Land Institute is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. The mission of ULI is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and to help sustain and create thriving communities. Founded in 1936, the institute now has nearly 40,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines working in private enterprise and public service, and includes developers, architects, planners, lawyers, bankers, and economic development professionals as well as other practices.

The Boston/New England District Council of ULI serves the six New England states and has over 1,300 members. As a preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI Boston/ New England facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local and regional leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places.

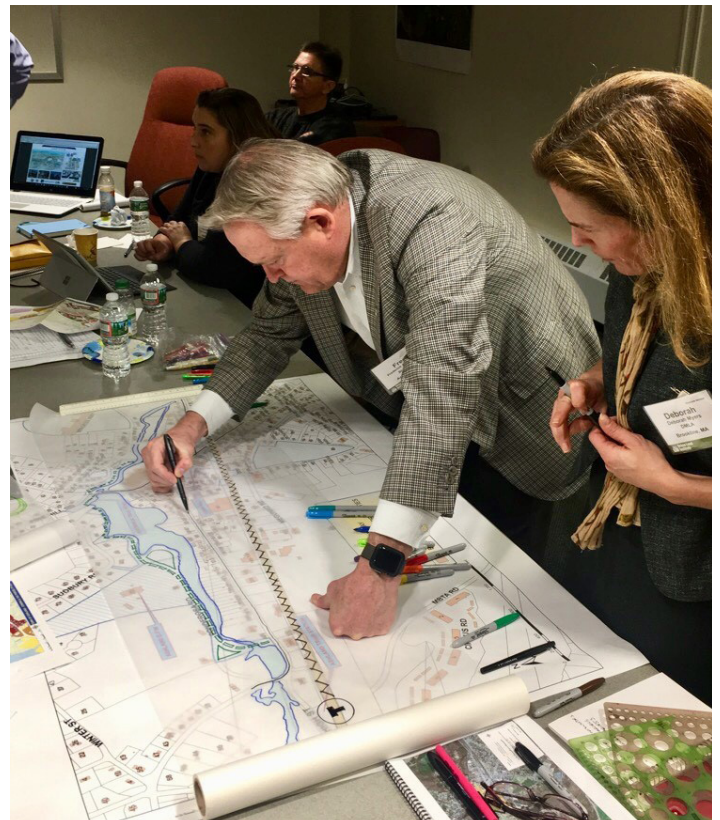
Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs)

The ULI Boston/New England Real Estate Advisory Committee convenes Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) at the request of public officials and local stakeholders of communities and nonprofit organizations facing complex land use challenges, who benefit from planning and development professionals providing pro bono recommendations.

At the TAP, a group of diverse professionals with expertise in the issues posed are specially assembled to spend one to two days visiting and analyzing existing conditions, identifying specific planning and development issues, and formulating realistic and actionable recommendations to move initiatives forward in a way consistent with the applicant's goals and objectives.

MassDevelopment

MassDevelopment is the state's economic development and finance authority. The quasi-public agency works closely with state, local and federal officials to boost housing and create jobs. With the power to act as both a lender and developer, MassDevelopment also works to fill in gaps in infrastructure, transportation, energy and other areas that may be holding back economic growth. MassDevelopment has worked with ULI since 2011 to help sponsor and support the TAP process in cities and towns across the Commonwealth.



ULI TAP panelists at work

Co-Chairs

ULI Boston/New England convened a volunteer panel of experts whose members represent the range of disciplines necessary to analyze the challenges and opportunities facing the Town of Northbridge in their efforts to revitalize the Village of Rockdale in Northbridge. Practice areas included developers, designers, planners, attorneys, and engineers. The following is a list of panelists:

Co-Chairs

Emily Keys Innes, AICP, LEED AP ND, associate and senior urban planner, Harriman

Edward F. O'Rourke, director of business development, Commodore Builders

Panel

Sarah Barnat, president, Barnat Development LLC

Susan Davis, commercial real estate attorney, Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP

Michael Flynn, geotechnical engineer, project manager, GEI Consultants

Jason Hellendrung, vice president of planning & design, Tetra Tech

Claire O'Neill, vice president of planning & development, MassDevelopment

Pawel Honc, studio director, Amenta Emma Architects

ULI Staff

Manikka Bowman, director, policy & outreach;

Sara Marsh, manager, Boston/New England District Council

TAP Writer

Mike Hoban, principal, Hoban Communications

TAP Associate

Spencer Grassie, bank advisory, The Roseview Group

Panelists have donated their time.



Panelists on walking tour of Rockdale Village

Stakeholders

The TAP benefited from the participation of the committed group of stakeholders – local business owners, residents, and representatives from nonprofits, the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce, and the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission. The following is a list of stakeholders:

Peter Bowker, Northbridge resident
Nicole Bumgarner, property manager, Gadoury Homes
Richard Chiras, owner, The Fishman
Robert Dziekiewicz, Northbridge resident
Heather S. Elster, executive director of the Whitin Community Center
Norman Gadoury, owner, Gadoury Homes
Jeannie Hebert, president & CEO of the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce
Doreen LeFort, property management/real estate agent, Brossi Realty
Andrew Loew, AICP, project manager, Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC)
Janet A. Pierce, executive director, Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC)
Robert Stockton, Northbridge resident

The TAP Process

The Northbridge TAP was held on October 16, 2018. Panelists from the ULI Boston/New England District Council were greeted at the Northbridge Town Hall by Town Planner Gary Bechtholdt, Town Manager Adam Gaudette and Town Planning Board member Harry Berkowitz. Following the meet and greet session, panelists were taken by van on a guided tour of Rockdale Village, narrated by Bechtholdt, with additional local color provided by Berkowitz.

The tour began with a stop at Cumberland Farms convenience store/gas station, which serves as the de facto retail anchor for Rockdale Village. Bechtholdt and Berkowitz then led the ULI panel on a one-hour walking tour along the .5 mile stretch along Providence Road which comprises the study area. The first stop is emblematic of the issues that the ULI panel was asked to assess. Directly across from the Cumberland Farms is a ground level pizza shop with apartment units above, while next door to the shop is a blighted single family home, located directly in front of a fully occupied six-unit apartment building (built in 1900).

The tour proceeded in the direction of the historic Rockville Mill, a 330,000 square-foot manufacturing and retail complex built in 1857. Along the way, panelists observed a mix of multifamily apartment buildings, mostly ranging from 2-12 units per building, the majority of which appear to be well-maintained. There were also a handful of empty storefronts, underutilized retail, and an occasional operational business on the western side of the main street, which runs along the Blackstone River. Approximately half the distance to the mill is the Fire Substation, which is used mostly for storage and is in need of some aesthetic improvements.

At the substation, the panelists were able to go behind the building to observe the river, as well as the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) water level measuring device (which indicated the level that day to be at 4.5 feet), to determine the feasibility of establishing a buffer zone and pedestrian greenway along the river. The panel was also able to assess the suitability of the substation for conversion to other uses. Diagonally across the street from the substation is the Rockdale Common, a public park that is also home to a World War I monument. The eastern side of the street is less dense, has more single family homes and a few businesses.

The tour proceeded to Sutton St., where the mill complex begins. This building is fully occupied by a manufacturer and two retail outlets. The tour headed back, past Cumberland Farms, and observed the site of the former Rockdale Youth Center (the building has been demolished) and the adjacent low-income, well-maintained housing operated by the South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC). The tour then proceeded to the Rosaire J. "Ross" Rajotte Memorial Bridge (replaced in 2013), and also viewed the site of the former Sammy's Restaurant, a long-time (but now closed) establishment located next to the bridge. Panelists also noted the fairly large National Grid-owned parcel, with substantial river front access, on the eastern side of the road, next to the bridge.

On the way back to the Town Hall, the van drove past the full length of the mill complex, and also viewed Ashton Place, a modern, 23-unit townhouse rental community, which is currently constructing 16 additional units.

Upon returning to the Town Hall, the ULI panel interviewed stakeholders, listed in the previous sub-section, in two separate panel discussions. The panelists then engaged in an intensive closed-door charrette to develop recommendations based on the input from the stakeholders as well as the research conducted prior to the discussions. Panelists then presented their observations and recommendations in an open public forum at the Town Hall that evening.

Background and History

The Town of Northbridge sought the help of the ULI TAP to devise a strategy to revitalize the Village of Rockdale, specifically a stretch along Route 122 and the Blackstone River that extends from the old Rockdale Mill to the Rajotte Memorial Bridge. The focus area is a mix of multifamily rental housing and businesses, including a number of empty or underperforming storefronts. The close proximity of the river has made the area prone to significant flooding in the past.

A) Questions for the ULI Panel

Marketing and Land Use

What role can the Town play in promoting private reinvestment within downtown Rockdale? Are there different zoning options (mixed-use, etc.) to consider that would encourage property owners and potential developers to invest in downtown Rockdale? Can the Town encourage redevelopment in the downtown while preserving its historic character, walkability, and pedestrian scale? What are the mix of uses that present the greatest potential for downtown redevelopment in the area? And what strategies should the town use to attract the right mix of uses? Are there any market challenges?

Environmental (Flooding)

What can be done to minimize the potential for flooding along the Blackstone River in downtown Rockdale? What options are available to channelize the river to reduce flood impacts, and to allow for a potential downtown Riverwalk with outdoor public spaces along the river? Are there any State/Federal environmental permitting challenges? Are there existing programs to assist in funding for these types of projects?

Slum and Blight

What role can the Town play to address the vacant, underutilized, deteriorated, and other marginal properties? With relatively low rental rates and the high cost of renovation, how can the Town help to offset expenses to promote redevelopment? What role can the town play in land assemblage strategies? strategies can the panel recommend to support transformative redevelopment on key parcels and throughout downtown?

B) Northbridge Today

Northbridge is a former mill town with a steadily growing population, comprised of five villages: Linwood, Northbridge, Whitinsville, Riverdale, and Rockdale. Located in Central Massachusetts, the Town is situated between Interstates 90 (Mass Pike), 146, 395, and 495, providing convenient highway access to and from employment centers such as Worcester, Providence, and Boston, making it an attractive community for a range of income levels.

Like many suburban mill towns, Northbridge is transitioning to a bedroom community, and consists primarily of low-density residential areas and open space, with greater residential density in its mill-anchored villages. Nearly half of Northbridge's residents commute a half-hour or more to their places of employment, as many of the jobs in the town (retail, healthcare, and manufacturing) are on the lower end of the wage spectrum. There is a lack of affordable housing for those of low-to-moderate income, with only 7.4 percent of the housing stock deemed affordable. The Town is currently underserved by amenities across the retail spectrum, including clothing, sporting goods, music, and bookstores, as well as food and beverage establishments, according to recent studies.

The town is a part of the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, and in 2014 was included in the newly designated Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park, which is headquartered in Northbridge.

C) A Brief History of Northbridge

Originally part of the Town of Mendon, Northbridge was incorporated as a separate town in 1772. The Town relied primarily on agriculture during the Colonial period, but an iron works and saw and grist mills appeared by the mid-1700s, signaling the transition to a manufacturing economy. By the mid-19th century, cotton mills (as well as housing for the workers) were constructed in the villages of Rockdale, Linwood, Riverdale, and Whitinsville. By the beginning of the 20th century, Northbridge was a thoroughly industrial town with 78 percent of the men in town employed in the factories, most of which thrived until the Great Depression. Whitin Machine Works in Whitinsville was one of the largest textile machinery companies in the world at its peak, employing over 5,600 workers in 1948 before declining and eventually closing its doors in 1976. With the waning of manufacturing in the Town, Northbridge has slowly transitioned into a bedroom community with a growing population.

D) Population/Demographics

Northbridge has seen its population increase steadily from 13,165 in 2000, to 15,726 in 2010, to 16,630 in 2017, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The Town is well-educated (43.5 percent of adults possess a college degree), and the 2015 median household income of \$72,550 was slightly higher than that of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (\$68,563). The percentage of households living below the poverty level (7.7 percent) was also below the state average. The average sale price of a home in August of 2018 was \$275,000, according to Zillow.

E) The Study Area

The ULI TAP focused solely on the area along Route 122 (Providence Road) in the Village of Rockdale, which extends approximately one-half mile from the Paul Whitin Rockdale Mill to the shuttered Sammy's Restaurante across from the Rajotte Memorial Bridge. The western side of Providence Road is in close proximity to the Blackstone River, and is prone to varying degrees of flooding.

The study area is comprised of a mix of commercial, municipal and multifamily properties, and includes Rockdale Common, a public park that is also home to a World War I monument.

The 330,000 square-foot Rockdale Mill is the commercial anchor to the Village, housing the Polyfoam Corporation, a manufacturer of expanded polystyrene (EPS) foam and injection molded plastic products. The mill also houses a pair of retail outlets, the Curtain Factory Outlet, which draws large numbers of consumers on weekends, and the Rockdale Rug and Braid Outlet. Additional businesses include the Cumberland Farms convenience store/gas station; an additional gas station; a package store; a pizzeria; a nail salon; and an antiques/used goods seller. The area includes several vacant or underperforming storefronts, including the former U.S. Post office. The study area also includes Town-owned properties, including the former Rockdale Youth Center site, scheduled to be repurposed as a pocket park; and the Rockdale Fire Substation, which is often unmanned and primarily used for storage of response vehicles and equipment.

There is a wide variety of multifamily housing stock in the study area, including higher-end market-rate new construction, some recently upgraded market-rate older stock, as well as some lower-end properties. There is little consistency among the housing design types, with some in need of significant reinvestment, and there is a prominently placed single family home that could be described as neighborhood blight.

Assets and Opportunities

The Village of Rockdale has a number of strengths that could serve as cornerstones of a potentially promising redevelopment plan.

A) Blackstone River - Where the river once served as an economic engine for powering the mills, it may now become an economic driver for the Village of Rockdale as a recreational/tourism draw. There may be opportunities to create connections to the river from the streetscape utilizing private or Town-owned parcels, with the potential to create a greenway along the river – if measures to create adequate buffers to mitigate flooding can be implemented.

B) Rockdale Mill - The mill still serves as a major employer and economic driver for Rockdale and the Town, with a thriving manufacturing business, Polyfoam Corporation, and two successful retail outlets. The original stone mill and brick factory complex also represents a potential redevelopment opportunity similar to other successful mill projects in Northbridge, such as Linwood Mill and the Shop at Whitinsville.

C) Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor/ National Historic Park - The National Heritage Corridor partners with communities to preserve and promote the Valley's historic, cultural, natural, and recreational resources for current and future generations. The designation of Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor as a National Park in 2014 created the potential for investment by private sources and government agencies.

D) Geographic Midpoint for Commuters - Northbridge has highway access to and from major cities and employment centers such as Worcester (13 miles from Sutton Street), Framingham (17 miles), Providence (34 miles) and Boston (43 Miles). There is a commuter rail station into Boston in nearby Grafton, approximately nine miles away. In addition, the town is located equidistantly (approximately 10–12 miles) between the Franklin/495/Forge Park and the Worcester Commuter Rail stations.

E) Rockdale Common - The park, which is home to a memorial which honors the Rockdale service personnel who served in World War I, provides open space that could be utilized for a number of outdoor activities.

F) Walkability - The study area extends approximately .5 mile from the Rockdale Mill/Sutton Street Bridge to the Rajotte Memorial Bridge/Sammy's Restaurante. The wide, well-maintained sidewalks along Providence Road make for a safe and accessible pedestrian experience necessary for any redevelopment plan for the Village. However, maintenance of the streetscape, including the replacement of dead or dying street trees, is necessary.

G) Mixed-income housing stock - Although availability appears to be somewhat limited for rental apartments in Rockdale (which averages \$1,050 for a one-bedroom and \$1,570 for a two-bedroom), there is demand for additional housing in the Village, as evidenced by the construction of an additional 16 units at Ashton Place.



Blackstone River

H) Business-friendly Town Government - Based on interviews with stakeholders (business owners and residents) there appears to be spirit of cooperation between town officials and business owners.

I) Engaged Landlords - Multifamily property owners were well-represented at the stakeholder interviews, indicating a strong level of landlord engagement, particularly from the owners of properties in the Village. There has also been significant investment in some of the apartment housing stock in recent years.

J) Cumberland Farms-The convenience store is walkable from all from all points in the study area, and provides basic food options. The site may also provide possibilities for shared parking or expanded retail offerings.

K) Development Sites- There are a number of sites available for potential redevelopment, both Town-owned and private parcels, including:

- **The former U.S. Post Office** – The vacant building is fairly modern, well-maintained and offers ready access to the river.
- **Rockdale Fire Substation** – This underutilized asset is a prime candidate for adaptive re-use, has parking, and provides access to the river.
- **Former Youth Center** - The former Rockdale Youth Center site is ideally suited for passive recreation use (park, community garden, etc.) and also offers access to the river.
- **Sammy's Restaurante** – Although privately owned, the restaurant is located in close proximity to the scenic views provided by the bridge, and may be available for purchase by the Town.



Identified development sites: Rockdale fire substation, former youth center site, and Sammy's Restaurante (from L to R).

Challenges

A) Risk of Flooding - The impact of flooding in the Village of Rockdale – both historic (such as the impactful floods of 2005 and 2010) and nuisance – presents a number of obstacles for redevelopment in the Village. First is the potential damage to existing storefronts and residences inherent with all flooding. The second issue is the high cost of flood insurance, as panelists indicated that the annual cost ranges upward from a \$6,000 minimum annual cost per building, which serves as a disincentive to new development. Finally, because the entirety of the properties west of Providence Road in the village are within the 100-year flood plain, there are significant challenges associated with redevelopment.

B) Vacant Retail Storefronts - There are a number of vacant storefronts and underperforming businesses along Providence Road, which serves as a deterrent to attracting other potential businesses and contributes to neighborhood blight.

C) Curb Appeal of Housing - While there has been investment by some landlords in the rental housing stock in Rockdale, there are also those who seem disinclined to make improvements (including the blighted property across from Cumberland Farms). While some of the disinterest may be due to absentee ownership, it may also be attributable to the cost of flood insurance or that the relatively inexpensive rents are not sufficient to justify renovations.

D) Limited Parking - Parking along Providence Road is limited to one side of the street, and there are limited options to develop a public parking lot, due to a lack of available space. There is also the need to minimize the amount of impervious surface in the Village to reduce the effects of flooding. The lack of parking limits the ability of the Village to attract additional businesses.

E) Lost Sense of Community - During the stakeholder interviews, longtime residents indicated that each village in Northbridge has its own distinct identity, and the feeling of community identity that Rockdale once experienced has been lost in recent years. There is also a lack of signage in Rockdale that identifies the Village as a distinct neighborhood. Currently, there are no banners or signs that distinguish Rockdale from the rest of the Town.

F) Lack of Retail Draws - The Fishman ceased supplying fish and aquarium supplies last year, and although the curtain and rug factory outlets draw consumers to Rockdale, particularly on the weekends, there are few other retail attractions in the Village. There are also few dining/drinking options; with the exception of Cumberland Farms, there is little reason for people to stop and stay in the Village.

G) Illicit Activity - Stakeholders reported that there are increasing safety concerns in Rockdale, centered on the possible presence of drug activity, which would serve as a disincentive to new businesses and residents.



Vacant storefront on Providence Rd.

Recommendations

Utilizing background information provided by the TAP sponsor, discussions with stakeholders, and an intensive five-hour charrette, the panelists came up with a number of recommendations that directly address the questions outlined in the TAP request. The findings were presented at the Selectmen's Meeting Room at Town Hall and additional recommendations were added following discussion with the TAP chairs.

A) Flooding

It is important to draw distinctions between the different types of flooding. The USGS has a river gage on the Blackstone River in the project reach (just downstream of Sutton Bridge) and the National Weather Service (NWS) tracks historic and predicted river levels in this area. For Northbridge, the marker for a 100-year flood (a flood that statistically has a 1-percent chance of occurring in any given year) is 16 feet (approximately El. 271 feet NGVD29). The NWS indicates minor, moderate, and major flood stages at 9, 12, and 14 feet, respectively.

Members of the community also indicated that historically the street begins to flood when water reaches the nine-foot mark. The maximum historic flood on record occurred on August 20, 1955 after Hurricane Diane at 16.7 feet.

Minor flooding has occurred with some regularity in Rockdale. Many members of the community have experienced and recall instances of flooding, and the gage has recorded 21 events over nine feet since 1940; thirteen of those events have occurred since 2000. It is also important to note that since 2013, when the Rajotte Memorial Bridge was completed and additional controls at the Riverdale Dam were installed, there has been a significant reduction in the number of flood issues, with only one occurrence above the nine-foot level. Nine occurrences above the nine-foot level had occurred in the 5 years prior to the bridge repairs beginning in 2011. (NOTE: On November 3, 2018, the river reached a peak

of 8.43 feet following multiple days of torrential rainstorms, and there was no reported flooding). However, precipitation events are expected to increase in frequency and intensity over the next few decades; so flooding may increase despite the recent infrastructure improvements.

The cost for many traditional methods of flood mitigation (barriers, channel improvements, increased storage capacity) will likely be too great or would present significant challenges with land acquisition and permitting relative to the protected area to mitigate against major flooding. However, some flood mitigation can be used to reduce impacts from minor flood events. Any development or improvements to the existing properties should incorporate measures to reduce the effects of flooding either through flood mitigation or resiliency. While little can be done in the event of a 100-year event, in order to mitigate the effects of periodic "nuisance" flooding, the panel recommends the following:

Create a Buffer Zone – The Town should create a 20-foot buffer zone along the Blackstone River, which can be accomplished in conjunction with the development of a pedestrian greenway. The creation of the greenway will also allow for the development of more pervious area, which will then increase the capacity for flood storage.

Reduce Impervious Paving – While the development of a pedestrian greenway would be built with pervious materials to encourage drainage, the Town should also consider finding ways to reduce the amount of existing impervious materials, replacing asphalt with more pervious materials in the Village where possible.

Stress Rehabilitation Over New Development – New development within a 100-year floodplain tends to be difficult and costly. FEMA has specific requirements for development within the 100-year floodplain, which the entirety of the west side of Providence Road is within. Additionally, Massachusetts has specific regulations associated with development within land subject to flooding and riverfront areas (310 CMR 10:57 and 10:58). The riverfront area includes the area within 100 and 200 feet of the mean high-water line (inner and outer riparian zones). These regulations and the threat of flood hazards will limit the viability of reasonable new development in the area. Rehabilitation of the existing structures will reduce the impact of regulatory requirements. Any rehabilitation should consider adding flood resiliency to limit damage liability in the event of flooding.

Access Funding – There is funding available to help with flood mitigation, including the Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) Program Action Grants, available through the Commonwealth. The program is designed to assist municipalities with completing vulnerability assessments and to develop action-oriented resiliency plans. There are also funds available through the FEMA Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program (FMA) which funds projects and planning that reduces or eliminates long-term risk of flood damage to structures insured under the NFIP; there is also the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) grant program, available through HUD.

Establish Local Flood Shelter – As Police and Fire facilities are not located in Rockdale, it is important to have resources available within the community in the event of catastrophic flooding.

B) Zoning

Given market conditions, rehabilitation of existing buildings is more likely than the development of new ones. An extensive overhaul of the existing zoning – such as adopting design guidelines – is not necessary at this time. Instead, the panel recommends these relatively minor zoning changes:

Expand Allowable Uses in B-2 – Allowing for ground floor uses other than retail would increase the ability of property owners to fill up vacant storefronts. Those changes could include allowing for professional offices or neighborhood services. Given the number of multifamily housing units in the Village, one use that would serve the local residents would be to allow for a daycare center, with provisions in parking regulations to accommodate short-term drop-off and pickup times.

Review Parking Regulations – Based on the observations from the tour and feedback from stakeholders during the interviews, it appears that the parking requirements for Providence Road may be overly stringent and not appropriate for current uses. Since these observations are based on limited data and observation, further study is suggested for area parking, but it is clear that current parking availability would be insufficient to accommodate new businesses, including restaurants. The panel also suggests investigating creative parking solutions with existing retail locations like Cumberland Farms, or shared daytime parking with some of the local multifamily complexes. In addition, any new parking should be designed with pervious materials to mitigate flooding issues.

Expand Allowable Uses for Rockdale Mill – Although the mill is currently home to a thriving manufacturing facility and two retail outlets, a historic mill overlay should be considered to allow for a variety of uses if the current users were to relocate or close operations.

C) Slum and Blight

Again, it is important to differentiate the common usage of “slum/blight” from the HUD definition. The slum/blight designation by HUD refers to the criteria by which an area qualifies for Community Development Block Grants and often involves the demolition of substandard properties as recommended by a municipality. For the purpose of the TAP, slum/blight refers to a renovation process to improve the aesthetic quality of the Village. While many of the landlords have made significant investment into upgrades and maintaining their properties, there are others who have been less mindful. In order to address the slum/blight issue, the panel makes the following suggestions:

PUBLIC SOLUTIONS

Short Term:

- Remove the dead trees from the front of Cumberland Farms.
- Establish an ongoing weed removal program for Town property.
- Repair, clean up, and institute a regular maintenance program for the Rockdale Fire Substation property.

Medium Term:

- Conduct a slum/blight inventory as a mandatory first step to apply for the Mass. Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) grants. These can be used towards façade improvements on commercial buildings as well as the more substantial rehabilitation of residential properties
- Consider leasing or selling the Fire Substation to a private developer, but retain an easement for the right of public access to the river.
- Approach SMOC with the idea of their leasing the former Rockdale Youth Center site adjacent to their housing for the purpose of creating a community garden. The garden would not only benefit their residents, but a partnership with the Youth Center and the general community could be explored that would include maintenance agreements.
- Identify opportunities to expand parking and public restroom facilities for retail customers and those traveling along the Blackstone River National Park.

Long Term:

- Following completion of the blight/slum inventory, apply to DHCD for funds for façade improvement for businesses.

- Develop a comprehensive program for addressing rehabilitation issues with landlords.
- If property owners are not able to invest in their properties, consider acquiring the properties (within the floodplain) and renovating the properties or disposing of them to a developer.
- If beyond repair, acquire and demolish substandard properties to create more open space to mitigate flooding issues and support neighborhood activities.

PRIVATE SOLUTIONS

Short Term:

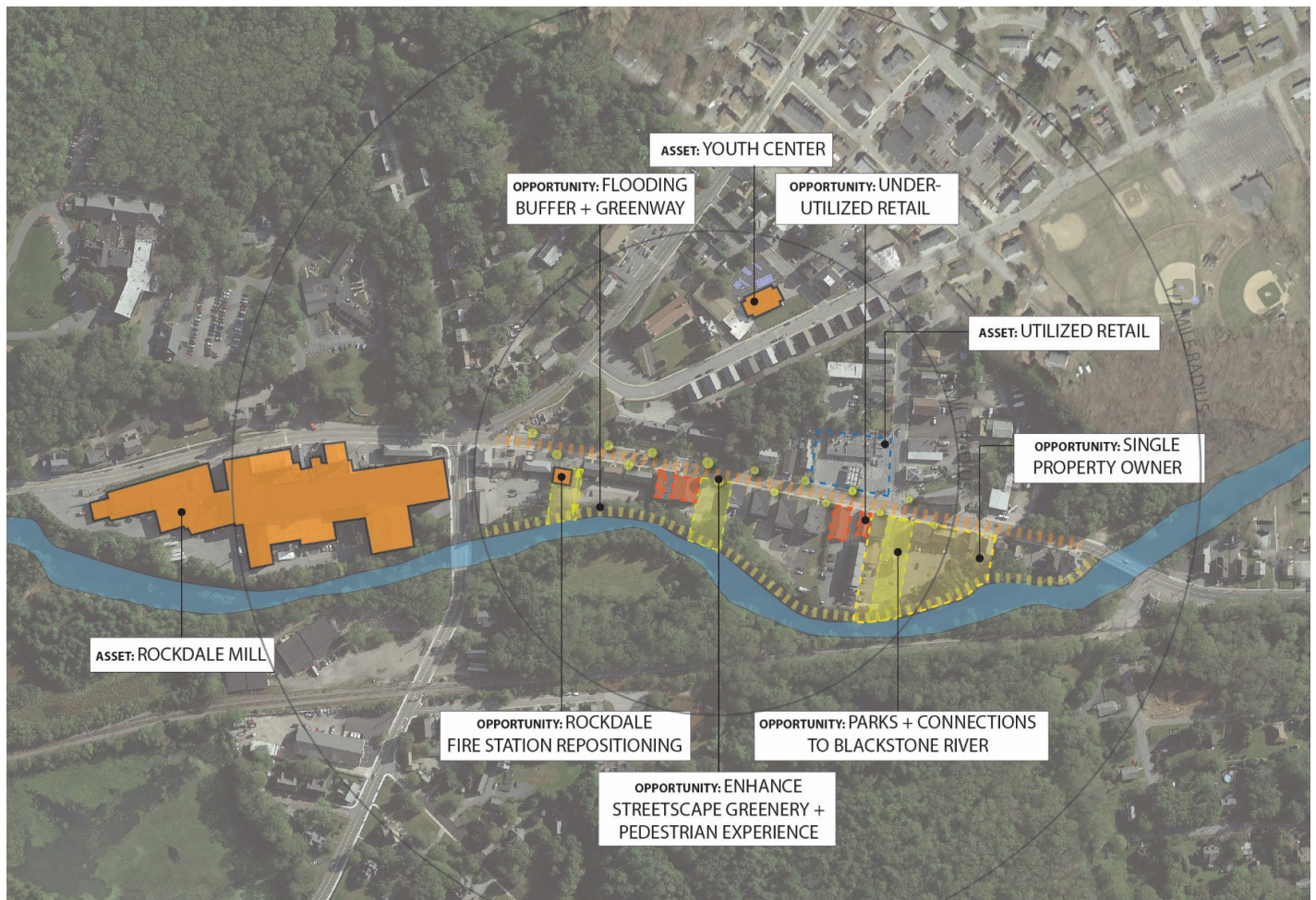
- Encourage property owners to address aesthetic issues (paint facades, make minor repairs, and remove weeds and excessive signage) to improve curb appeal.

Medium Term:

- Encourage business owners to clean up vacant or unsightly lots.
- Devise a program that offers tax breaks in exchange for conservation easements that would allow the Town to construct the 20-foot zone as part of the pedestrian greenway.

Long Term:

- Concentrate the development of any new retail on the east side of Providence Rd. adjacent to Cumberland Farms, rather than adding new retail to the western side (within the floodplain).



Identified study area, Village of Rockdale, labeled with assets and opportunities identified by the panel.

D) Placemaking

As was heard during the stakeholder interviews, longtime residents of Rockdale feel the village is in danger of losing its sense of community. The panelists recommend rebuilding that sense of community and re-establishing the identity of the Village through the following placemaking actions:

Signage – Currently there are no banners or signs to distinguish Rockdale from the rest of the Town and to create a sense of place. Installing “Welcome to Rockdale” signage at the gateways to the Village, and reinforcing that identity through the use of banners on streetscapes would help to rebuild the identity of the Village.

Creating a logo that represents the unique character of Rockdale, possibly with the help of the Youth Center, may help to build community as well.

Develop Draws for the Village – There needs to be a reason for the traffic that drives through Rockdale to stop, or a draw that makes people (including residents of Northbridge) want to make the trip to the Village. The factory outlets draw consumers, but there are few reasons to stay. Other mill village communities in the state have had success with events like Farmer’s Markets, food truck festivals, and seasonal beer gardens, and the Rockdale Common may be a prime location for such activities.

The Town should also consider activating the vacant storefronts using pop-up retail or art galleries that would serve as a draw to the Village and highlight the availability of the space to businesses.

Create Connections to the River – A longer-range strategy for bringing people into the Village is to highlight the area's greatest natural asset – the Blackstone River. The Town-owned parcels represent the best options for creating these connections, possibly through partnerships with private investment. The Firehouse Substation, for instance, could be converted to a new use such as a performance space, restaurant or café, with an outdoor patio or seating overlooking the river. As previously suggested, the site of the former Youth Center could be converted into a pocket park or community garden, creating a natural connection to the river. The site of Sammy's Restaurante, although privately owned, may represent a development opportunity, given its close proximity to the bridge, which offers picturesque views of the Blackstone.

The Town, as it creates a flood buffer zone/pedestrian greenway, should also consider developing (possibly with private investment) a kayak launch or a boat landing at one of the parcels.

B) Create Partnerships

One of the keys to revitalizing the Village of Rockdale will be to develop partnerships with public, private and nonprofit entities to create an interconnected foundation on which to rebuild. The panelists recommended the following:

Engage Rockdale Mill Ownership – As Rockdale's largest employer (as well as the landlord for the Curtain Factory and Rockdale Rug and Braid retail outlets), it is important to engage the owner, Rockdale Properties, to gain an

understanding of what the firm's long-term plans are for the mill, and to see if the firm may be interested in playing a role in revitalizing the Village.

Engage SMOC – Investigate the possibility of forming a strategic partnership with SMOC to develop a pocket park or community garden at the former Youth Center site adjacent to their housing.

Engage CMRPC, Blackstone River Valley National Historic Park, and the Blackstone Heritage Corridor – Work with these organizations to find what resources are available to not only move the Greenway project forward but to also help with flood mitigation.

Establish a Rockdale Community Business Association – Based on the enthusiasm of the multifamily and business owners at the stakeholder interview sessions, there appears to be a significant level of interest by the business community in improving the Village. By forming a business association, the engaged business owners and landlords may be able to cooperatively devise strategies to effectively deal with slum/blight and vacant storefront issues.



Firehouse 12 in New Haven, CT. Example of an existing parcel converted into a bar & recording studio.

Funding Sources

Commonwealth of MA

CPA – Community Preservation Act.

Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD)

- **Housing Choice** - The Housing Choice Initiative provides incentives, rewards, technical assistance and targeted legislative reform to encourage and empower municipalities to plan and build the diverse housing stock that the Commonwealth needs to continue to thrive. <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/housing-choice-initiative>
- **Massachusetts Downtown Initiative** – The primary mission of the MDI is to make downtown revitalization an integral part of community development. <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/massachusetts-downtown-initiative-mdi>

CDBG – The Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) may be a useful tool for façade or housing rehabilitation improvements. Due to Northbridge's population size, the federal program is managed by the Massachusetts DHCD.

MassWorks - The MassWorks Infrastructure Program is a competitive grant program that provides a robust and flexible source of capital funds for municipalities and other eligible public entities to complete public infrastructure projects that support and accelerate housing and job growth throughout the Commonwealth. <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/massworks-infrastructure-grants>

MVP – Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) Program Action Grants <https://www.mass.gov/municipal-vulnerability-preparedness-mvp-program>

District Improvement Financing (DIF) – Supports current infrastructure improvements with future development tax revenues

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) – Supports commercial/ industrial development

MassDevelopment

CommonWealth Places - A collaborative initiative from MassDevelopment and the civic crowdfunding platform Patronicity, Commonwealth Places provides a funding mechanism to advance community-driven placemaking projects in downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts throughout Massachusetts. The program seeks to engage and mobilize community members to make individual contributions through a crowdfunding platform with the incentive of a dollar-for-dollar funding match of up to \$50,000 from MassDevelopment if the crowdfunding goal is reached within 60 days.

<https://www.massdevelopment.com/what-we-offer/real-estate-services/commonwealth-places/>

Finance Programs - Developers may be eligible for various types of financing from MassDevelopment, subject to acceptable underwriting and required approvals. Capabilities are described at <https://www.massdevelopment.com/what-we-offer/financing/>. Includes loans for environmental site assessment and remediation; predevelopment financing; loans and loan guarantees for building acquisition and renovation; and low-interest rate tax-exempt bond financing for qualifying projects by manufacturers or rental housing developers.

Federal Funding

FEMA HMGP – The FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) supports cost-effective post-disaster projects. <https://www.fema.gov/hazard-mitigation-grant-program>

Conclusions

The Village of Rockdale has many assets, but is suffering from some long-term challenges, primarily due to past flooding and a lack of sufficient private investment. Small tweaks, such as minor modifications to the zoning regulations and the establishment of a regular maintenance program for town-owned properties, signal to private investors that the Town of Northbridge is serious about the revitalization of this area.

The key to this revitalization is the formation of partnerships between the Town of Northbridge and the property owners, including SMOC, the Rockdale Mill, the Youth Center, and regional agencies to explore ways of working together to address some of the recommended strategies.

Finally, a few further studies are necessary, with a parking demand study as the priority. Such a study, paired with a market assessment, could include a more precise calculation of the existing and future parking needs for the area. No such study should be done without including the implications of future flooding in the area.