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## Land Use and Community Design

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### Introduction

Land use within a community is the pattern of residential, commercial, industrial and public development, interspersed with what is generally considered as open space, such as forests and natural features, undeveloped land, agriculture and parks and recreational areas. The evolution of land use within a community is the product of local economic conditions and community preferences; growth and development is based on such factors as access to jobs, employment, and the availability of affordable land for new housing or commercial development. Community preferences, expressed as land use plans and regulations, dictate the use, form, location, and sometimes the pace, of new development.

Land use forms the basis for master planning and determines, to a large extent, a Town's need to provide public facilities and infrastructure, transportation networks and services, and protection of environmental resources. As communities plan for their future, determining how and where growth and development should occur will provide the basis for planning where investments for municipal services will be needed, as well as determining what controls will be necessary to protect areas of the Town from unwanted development. Communities have the ability to control land use and development patterns through a variety of mechanisms, including zoning and subdivision regulations, provision of public utilities and infrastructure, and protection of open space lands through direct acquisition and the acquisition or acceptance of conservation restrictions/easements.

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### Land Use and Community Design Goals

- Encourage the proper balance between residential, commercial and industrial development to ensure the Town continues to prosper while protecting the historic, environmental and rural character of the community.

- Improve the architectural quality and streetscape of the Main Street (Routes 20 and 131) business areas to make it more attractive to businesses, residents, visitors and tourists.
- Promote growth that is environmentally sustainable and capable of withstanding economic downturns.
- Identify design values the Town considers important in preserving the historic character of its corridors.

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## Sturbridge Corridors



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### Land Use and Community Design Issues and Opportunities

The issues associated with the Town's major transportation corridors represent the difficult balance Sturbridge faces between achieving economic development goals that allow the community to meet revenue needs with those values expressed time and again by citizens who choose to live in Sturbridge for its "small town, family oriented, rural character." Perhaps no other issue the Town faces is as tenuous. This is in evidence most poignantly on Route 20 which must respond to these often diverging goals.



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### Route 20

From the I-84 exit ramp to the intersection with Cedar Street, the character of the roadway and its adjacent land uses is tailored to tourism, a vital part of the town's economic health. Not surprisingly, the scale of this portion of the corridor is automobile oriented – a wider road width with two lanes in each direction, large traffic islands, broader setbacks with buildings set behind parking and tourist focused uses such as hotels and restaurants. The overall character, in response to the location, does not convey a small town/rural feel and in many ways does not differentiate itself from any other similar location at an interstate exit ramp other than signage directing visitors to the Old Sturbridge Village.

From Cedar Street west to Route 148, a second character begins to emerge: the road narrows to two lanes, many buildings are closer to the road, there are a variety of building types and uses, and one gets a better feel of a small town scale. There is a better sense of history as well with architecture that reflects the evolving life of the corridor. Buildings, such as the Holland Road Mill, Blackington Building, and Yankee Peddler to name a few, are an essential part of conveying this history and it should not be forgotten that it is history that brings tourists to the area.

But diverging goals and functions are at odds in this portion of the corridor as well. Route 20 is a major east-west state roadway designated to move traffic safely and efficiently. As the Sturbridge Commercial/Tourist Revitalization Study points out, the corridor is not pedestrian friendly, with discontinuous walkways and little in the way of pedestrian comfort. In addition, the corridor is long and linear with many curb cuts which result in more vehicle trips, thus more congestion and more safety conflicts.

Typical recommendations to address the goal of creating a more walkable area such as on-street parking, wide, continuous walkways with seating, special paving and lighting, articulated cross-walks, and necked-down corners are all at odds with the Route 20 transportation mandate as a state road. This is made more difficult by the lack of right-of-way and the presence of overhead utilities which dominate the visual character and take away from pedestrian space and the potential for planting street trees.

Route 20 must serve the needs of the local community, but also those of tourists and the region to some degree. It must also meet its responsibility as a major east-west link. The challenge for the future of Route 20 will be to implement the appropriate mechanism that allows it to respond to its multi-purposed charge while supporting a visual character that is aligned with the Town's expressed image of itself as a rural community with a strong sense of its' history. Given the disparate nature of the corridor and its multi-functional charge – the public realm, the roadway, and right-of-way – it is the logical place to establish a consistent and unifying character that can create the appropriate image, mitigate the variety of land use expressions, and establish a coherent landscape. This task is made more difficult given its location at an exit from the interstate and the dual personalities of its corridor.

The nature of any corridor is a linear assemblage of individual properties and interests, each with the same objective of maximizing value, relying on its adjoining roadway to provide access and visibility. This linear configuration makes it difficult to create a sense of place. Linearity is reinforced by commercial zoning which typically creates shallow lot depths that are insufficient in their dimension to allow groupings of buildings with similar uses and objectives that might begin to mitigate the corridor's length.

The corridor today has three main framework elements: the eastern gateway and hospitality zone extending from the exit ramp at I-84 to Cedar Street; the western gateway at Route 148; and the more linear commercial-tourist zone from Route 148 to Cedar Street. The key to "taming" this corridor including addressing issues of walkability, identity, and overall character, will be a combination of appropriately scaled gateway landscape treatments and the creation/reinforcement of pedestrian scaled "places" within the remainder of the corridor, the Commercial-Tourist zone.



## Opportunities: Gateways and Places

### Eastern Gateway

This is where most tourists first enter the Sturbridge area – the Town’s first chance to make a first impression, so to speak. There are several opportunities in this area to develop a much stronger entry experience including the large grassed islands and the center median.



Gateway near Visitors Information Center

If the Route 20 corridor is to become an appropriate gateway to an historic “village,” then the scale of the area from the east, from the exit ramp to Cedar Street, needs to be reduced by manipulating the landscape to the extent possible. Recognizing that this entry is oriented to tourist/visitor land uses and thus more scaled to the automobile, future efforts should focus on areas where an investment in the landscape can have the greatest benefits. Currently the large traffic islands at this gateway are minimally planted but represent an opportunity for a much more dramatic landscape statement. While this area may be within the state right-of-way, it should be possible to develop a themed planting scheme that meets with the state’s approval and which can provide a more appropriate welcoming gesture to visitors as well as residents. This landscape should utilize materials that are consistent with the historic nature of the village such as stone, rail fencing, fruit trees, and seasonal flowers, and should be planted in a manner that reduces the flat, open traffic islands. In fact, the 1996 “Beautification Plan – Proposed Route 20 Design” suggested a similar theme and included a specific tree list and plans for period lighting and fencing, shrub and flower plantings, and other improvements.

The paved center median could present another opportunity to tame the automobile scale of this area. Currently a granite paver median separates the travel lanes and controls the location of left turn movements. Replacing this with a raised median planted with street trees would provide a themed accent as well as a way to mitigate the visual width of the corridor within this section which, due to the land uses and larger setbacks, lacks a sense of intimacy associated with a historic village.

As described in Chapter 4 – Economic Conditions, this plan recommends that the eastern gateway section of the corridor be designated as Entertainment and Recreation district.

### Western Gateway: Route 20 and Route 148

Entry to the Commercial-Tourist Zone from the west engages the potential visitor more favorably into the character of the corridor. The Holland Mill and Blackington Building are particularly important to this experience. Opportunities at this location should build on the intersection’s adjacency with the Quinebaug River, reinforcing views to that resource perhaps by providing a scenic overlook linked to the Holland

Road Mill by a pedestrian walkway. In addition, some landscape treatment, such as a low stone wall with signage that announces arrival to the district, could be added.

### The Commercial Tourist Zone – Creating Places

Due to the long, linear nature of the remainder of the corridor from Cedar Street to Route 148, combined with the limitations placed on the roadway by virtue of its transportation role (i.e., limited right-of-way and overhead utilities) the goal of creating a more walkable, pedestrian friendly environment can best be met by exploring opportunities to reinforce special places along this portion of the corridor such as nodes supported by common parking, landscaping, and signage. Creating nodes or places would break the corridor down into more coherent pieces in scale with pedestrian needs.



Sturbridge Marketplace

Such an approach would also address the goals associated with reducing congestion and improving access to some of the corridor's natural resources. In concept, the nodes would be reinforced by adding linked public parking at the rear of buildings in areas where existing conditions are favorable. Utilizing existing intersection points with roadways on the north side, potentially at Bates Court, Bates Hill Road, and Arnold Road, access could be extended south towards the river via designated walking paths, reinforcing natural crossing points for pedestrians and logical points for left turns. Such an extension at Bates Hill Road for example would provide better access and parking to support Turner's Field as well as to provide a public point of access to the river and a potential river walk/ bikeway.



Blackington Building

Public access at the above mentioned locations would be connected with a bay of public parking behind the businesses and a wide pedestrian walk extended between, which would address the issue of the perception and reality of sufficient parking while supporting businesses within the nodes. Such a public parking area between Bates Hill Road and Bates Court would provide stronger linkage with the Holland Mill and adjacent retail, an area which currently has a minimal pedestrian walk along the front side of the buildings.



Route 20 looking west

A concept plan has been prepared for illustrative purposes to demonstrate some of the opportunities that can yield improvements to the current layout of the corridor (see Figure 2-1). This includes the creation of additional parking to the rear of the existing buildings on the south side of Route 20. By moving the parking from the front of the buildings to the rear, streetscape improvements can be implemented and some on-street parking can be provided. Additionally, there are several sites that could accommodate infill development of new commercial space.

Similarly, on the north side of the corridor, opportunities could be explored to achieve the same cohesiveness. This is particularly true at the Blackington Building which is a vital piece of the historic fabric of this corridor, but which suffers from a lack of parking. The latter severely limits potential redevelopment options. If public parking were provided at the rear of the building, accessed from Bates Court and extended using High Street, business interests in this potential node would be greatly enhanced and the building could provide an interesting mixed-use opportunity.



## Route 131: Issues and Opportunities

This two-lane road links Route 20 and the hospitality/entertainment zone with the historic Town Hall, Town Common, and then Southbridge center and the Harrington Hospital medical district to the south. While it once may have been a road that expressed the rural character of the town with small scale buildings close to the street and long expanses of natural or agricultural areas, commercial zoning for much of its length has resulted in a character that is more disparate and suburban in nature. The corridor can essentially be divided into three zones: the gateway area from Route 20 to the I-84 overpass, the Town Common area, and the remainder of the corridor to the Southbridge line.



Publick House

### Route 131 Gateway

The Town should explore opportunities to create a much stronger sense of identity and entry, particularly since this gateway provides the introduction to one of the more coherent historic resources – the restored Town Hall and Center Office Building, the Common, and the Publick House. This could be achieved with a combination of planting within the large traffic islands as well as street trees leading up to the overpass. The overpass bridge allows light to penetrate below which could support additional gateway



Route 131 gateway





Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc.

Figure 2-1

Route 20 Concept Plan

Sturbridge Master Plan  
03/22/2011

planting along the grassed banks of the abutment.

The pedestrian zone in this portion of the corridor could be more clearly articulated with a consistent walk and common paving treatment all the way from the hospitality/entertainment zone to the Town Common. This could be further enhanced with pedestrian scaled lighting.

### **Town Hall, Center Office Building and Town Common**

Now that the renovations are complete, these buildings will provide an excellent anchor to this area as well as an important visual terminus to Route 15.

### **Remaining Corridor**

Again, objectives for preserving and enhancing the Town's rural nature are compromised by economic realities and this corridor's overall character has been altered to an extent, given its commercial zoning, which makes it hard to read the rural references. The spacing between uses that typifies a rural road such as an occasional house or business with large expanses of wooded areas and then open views to farmed land has been minimized or lost by suburban development prototypes. There are a few areas where extensive natural landscape still exists (across from Hall Road along a portion of the west side of the road and an area to the south across from the Main Street/Old Sturbridge Road couplet) which the Town should try and preserve. For the most part the corridor is dominated by commercial development, related signage, and multiple curb cuts.

As was seen in the Historic Commercial zone of Route 20, the depth of the commercially zoned land along Route 131 only reinforces the linearity of the corridor by establishing the shallow pattern of road edge parking lots that predominates. Any opportunity to mitigate this pattern would have to reconsider the depth of the commercial zoning, extending the depth to a degree sufficient to support grouped patterns of buildings. This approach would be most effective if the overall zoning strategy for the corridor was to create pockets of mixed-use, returning the areas between to single family residential and preserved open space. Allowing higher densities of development within the pockets could compensate for lost development potential of individual lots.



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## **Route 15**

Running north/south and parallel to I-84, this two-lane roadway provides access to a number of the Town's natural resource areas as well as the Jellystone Park campground area. The portion of the corridor from its intersection with Route 131 to the campground is zoned for historic commercial though it is unclear how any new uses would be "historic."



The majority of the corridor is undeveloped due to the absence of town water and sewer. The issue of whether to extend these services has been an ongoing topic of discussion. A recent study of the corridor resulted in a finding that any extension of public wastewater infrastructure is at least three to four years away.

If the Town pursues this issue in relation to some of its economic development objectives, such as lengthening tourist overnight stays by expanding recreational opportunities, interesting opportunities could arise. Expanded activities could typically include such things as miniature golf, a golf driving range, batting cages, and a water park just to name a few. Adding such uses could compromise the existing hospitality/entertainment zone particularly if the Town wants to reinforce its historic character.

Utilizing the Route 15 corridor for these uses would allow for these long range economic goals to be addressed without undermining goals related to preserving a sense of place and a respect for the history of the Route 20 and portions of Route 131 corridors.



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## Creating Visual Order

Visual consistency in any of these corridors is an issue. At the same time it would be a mistake to so rigidly control this that the authenticity of the Town is compromised as a real place, not a theme park. Finding a mid-point requires that the Town identify elements of an aesthetic that it values and considers appropriate to emulate in future buildings as well as the general landscape. This can be accomplished without compromising individual design freedom and expression if this design ethic is communicated effectively, either through a specific set of guidelines, a “pattern book,” or a part of a form-based code.

This is particularly relevant when the goal is to respect and preserve a sense of historic, rural character. There are specific architectural features, such as gabled roof lines, and building materials, such as shingles or multi-paned windows, that convey a sense of history but allow room for contemporary interpretation. There are building to roadway relationships more typical of a rural landscape that are important in conveying a scale that promotes walking. There are landscape materials that allow visitors to read the history of a place.

This would provide the Town with an opportunity to identify design values that it considers important in preserving the historic character of its corridors before the last vestiges of its rich history can only be found in books and old town records.

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## Land Use Patterns



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### Historic Land Use

Sturbridge is a small community located in south central Massachusetts. Roughly 45 miles southwest of Boston, it is bordered by Brookfield and East Brookfield on the north; Charlton and Southbridge on the east; Union, Connecticut on the south; and Holland and Brimfield on the west. The town is easily accessed by major highways, as it lies at the junction of Interstate 84, Interstate 90 and US Route 20.

Roughly 39 square miles in size, Sturbridge was incorporated in 1728 as a small farming community. Many mills once operated in the town, situated near the Quinebaug River in Fiskdale Village. Most of the mills have since been redevelopment into homes and businesses.

These and other changes relating to historical land use trends in Sturbridge are shown in Table 2.1. According to that table, roughly 83 percent of the town's land was agriculture, open undeveloped land, forest or wooded perennial in 1971. This total decreased to 76 percent in 1999.

On the other hand, the amount of land dedicated to housing has steadily increased from just 6 percent in 1971 to 10 percent in 1999. Low density housing, defined by MassGIS as homes with lots larger than a ¼ acre, has continued to be the dominant type of residential use in Sturbridge. Less than half a percent of the land was occupied by multi-family housing in 1999.

**Table 2.1 Land Use: 1971, 1985 and 1999**

Land Use	1971		1985		1999	
	Size (acres)	Percent of Total	Size (acres)	Percent of Total	Size (acres)	Percent of Total
Agriculture	899	4%	800	3%	653	3%
Open Undeveloped Land	524	2%	522	2%	418	2%
Commercial	117	0%	154	1%	239	1%
Industrial/Transportation/Mining	828	3%	876	4%	882	4%
Higher Density Residential*	123	0%	187	1%	232	1%
Medium Density Residential	590	2%	701	3%	729	3%
Low Density Residential	679	3%	1,128	5%	1,632	7%
Recreation/Urban Open	339	1%	373	1%	433	2%
Forest/Wooded Perennial	19,360	78%	18,649	75%	17,980	72%
Waste Disposal	49	0%	19	0%	49	0%
Wetland	445	2%	511	2%	702	3%
Water	970	4%	973	4%	973	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24,923</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>24,923</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>24,923</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Higher Density Residential includes multi-family housing and housing with lots smaller than 1/4 acre. Medium Density is quarter to half-acre lots. Low Density is lots larger than one-half acre.

Source: MassGIS

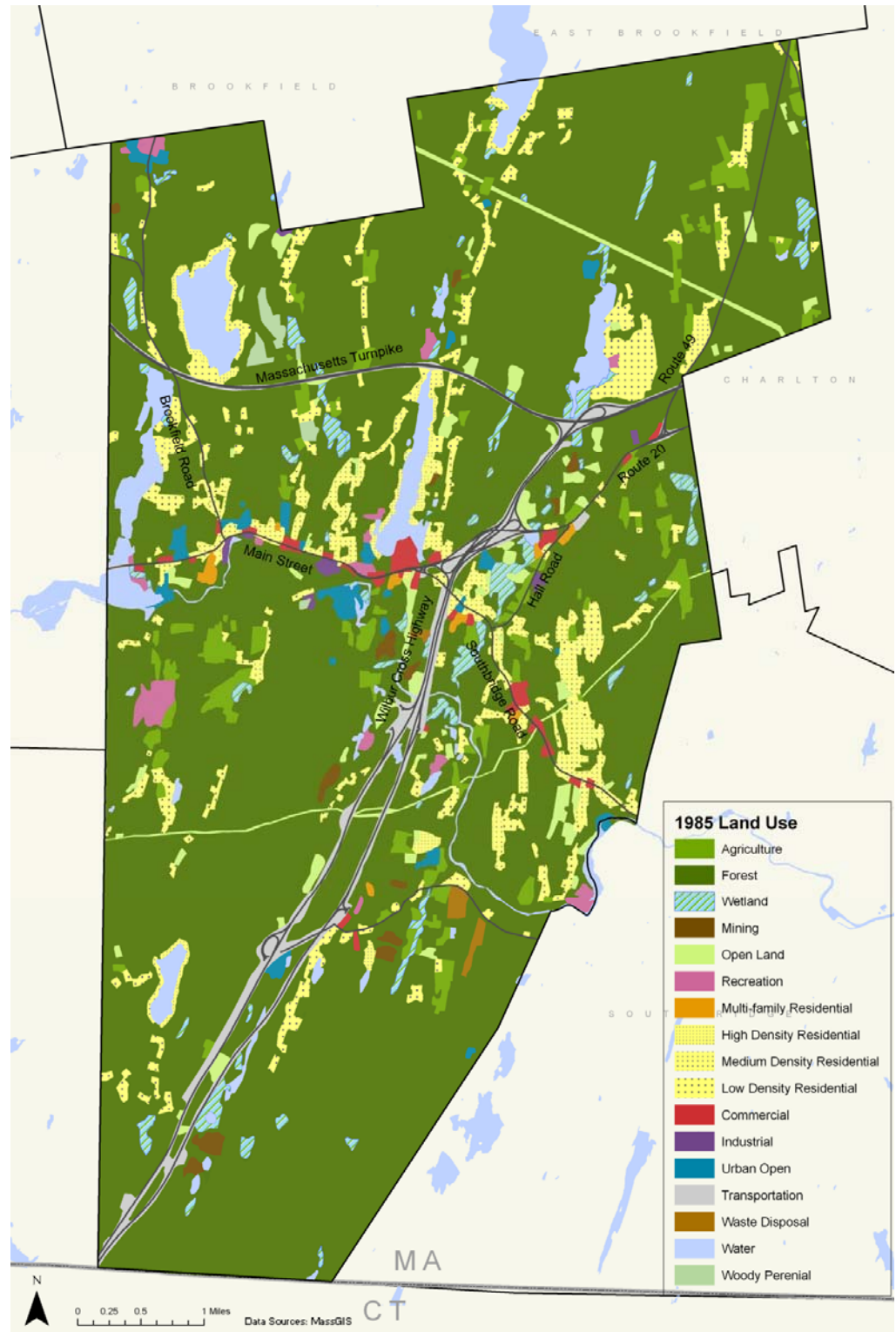
Table 2.2 shows that the most significant changes in land use between 1971 and 1999 have been in Low Density Residential (+140 percent) and Commercial (+104 percent). Despite these land use changes over the years, the vast majority of land in Sturbridge remains forests or wooded perennials; these uses have consisted of more than 70 percent of the land between 1971 and 1999. In addition, there has been an increase in the amount of recreation and urban open land, which includes parks and public green space. These two trends reflect the community's ongoing desire to protect open space and undeveloped land in Sturbridge. (See Natural, Historic and Cultural Resources and Open Space chapters for more details on the Town's efforts to buy and preserve open space.)

See Figure 2.2, which illustrates land use in Sturbridge in 1985.

**Table 2.2 Land Use Changes: 1971, 1985, and 1999**

Land Use	Percent Change		
	1971-1985	1985-1999	1971-1999
Agriculture	-11%	-18%	-27%
Open Undeveloped Land	0%	-20%	-20%
Commercial	32%	55%	104%
Industrial/Transportation/Mining	6%	1%	7%
Higher Density Residential*	52%	24%	89%
Medium Density Residential	19%	4%	24%
Low Density Residential	66%	45%	140%
Recreation/Urban Open	10%	16%	28%
Forest/Wooded Perennial	-4%	-4%	-7%
Waste Disposal	-61%	158%	0%
Wetland	15%	37%	58%
Water	0%	0%	0%

Source: MassGIS

**Figure 2.2 1985 Land Use**





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## Current Land Use

Sturbridge covers roughly 24,923 acres. The town's land use, shown in Figure 2.3, reflects its historical roots as a rural residential community. It also exemplifies the value the community places on the town's rural character. As discussed in the Natural, Historic and Cultural Resources chapter, the Town has worked to protect, preserve and acquire undeveloped land in Sturbridge.

Despite development over the years, the vast majority of the town is still undeveloped as shown in Figure 2.4. Currently, roughly 75 percent of the town's land is agricultural or wooded perennial. While this appears to be an increase from 72 percent in 1999, the change is actually due to the greater degree of accuracy and detail in the 2005 MassGIS land use data compared to data from previous years.

An additional 2 percent of land (464 acres) is agricultural, which is down from 3 percent (653 acres) in 1999. This decrease is a continuation of the steady decline in agricultural land that has occurred in the last several decades (see Table 2.2) as farmers get out of the business, and land is sold for development. Between 1971 and 2005, Sturbridge has seen its agricultural land nearly cut in half.

Similarly, the amount of open undeveloped land in town has significantly decreased, particularly since 1999. In that year, there was roughly 418 acres of open land, which represented 2 percent of all land in Sturbridge. In 2005, this number shrank to 306 acres.

Despite these losses in agricultural and undeveloped land, the town maintains its rural feel, largely due to the amount of land that has been conserved and protected from development as well as the low-density nature of most residential development. Roughly 8 percent of the land in town is residential, and most of that is housing on lots that are more than a half acre (5 percent).

The amount of commercial land uses in Sturbridge remains low, representing only 1 percent of land in 2005. There has been, however, a continual increase since 1971. For example, there were roughly 300 acres of commercial land in 2005, which was a 26 percent increase from 1999. Much of the newer commercial uses have come along Main Street, Route 20 and Southbridge Road.

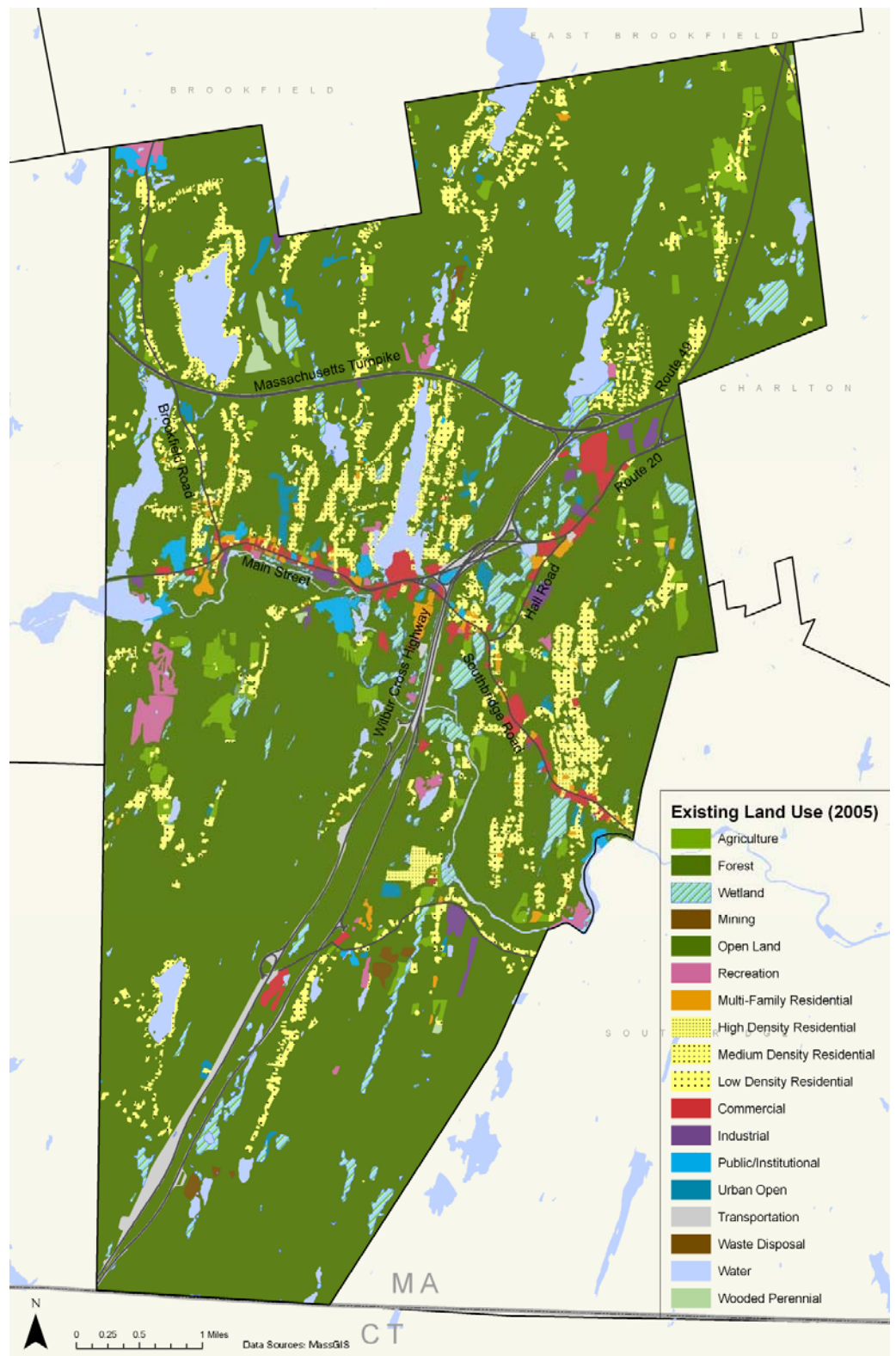
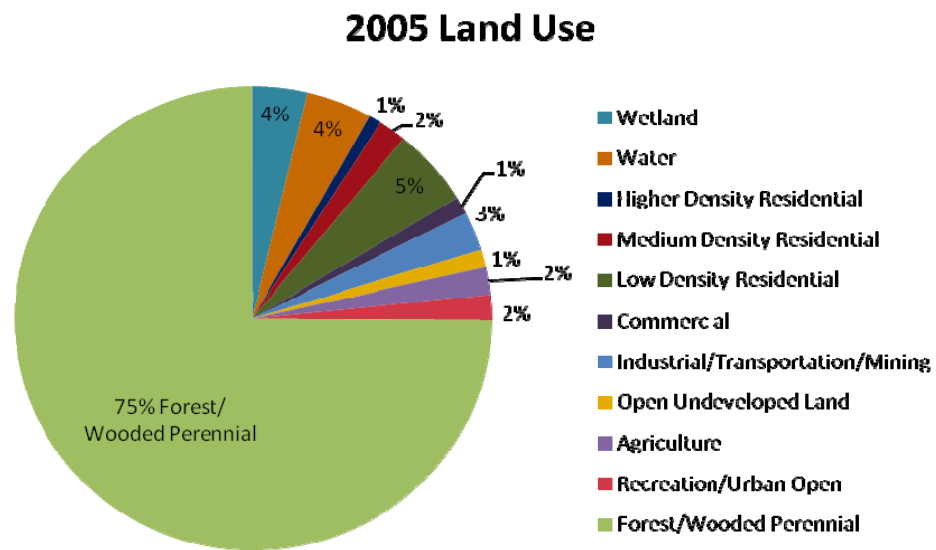
**Figure 2.3 Existing Land Use**

Figure 2.4

## Existing Land Use



Source: MassGIS

## Land Development Regulations

This section discusses the important role zoning plays in guiding future land use decisions and thereby shaping the community. It analyzes the Town's Zoning Bylaws, providing descriptions of each of the districts in Sturbridge. Recommendations for amending the bylaw have also been included. The goal is to help ensure that the Zoning Bylaws are consistent with the goals and objectives of this Master Plan.



## Overview of the Sturbridge Zoning Districts

The Town of Sturbridge Zoning Bylaws were first adopted by Annual Town Meeting in 1965. Numerous additions and amendments have been made over the years, with the latest revisions having occurred at the 2010 Annual Town Meeting.

The Zoning Bylaws establish nine districts and three overlay districts. See Figure 2.5 for a map of the zoning districts. District boundaries have not been changed since 2008.

### Rural Residential (RR)

Most land in Sturbridge lies within this district. The district primarily allows single-family dwellings and accessory uses, though nurseries, farms, micro-breweries and adult day care facilities are also permitted. Other uses such as senior housing and hospitals are allowed by special permit.

## What is zoning?

Modern zoning began in the early 1900's in response to the location of potentially incompatible and noxious land uses next to commercial and residential areas. The zoning bylaw has evolved over the years as a means to limit the types of land uses that could locate in a particular area of the municipality, resulting in a separation of uses. Ideally, the Master Plan is the blueprint for the Town and the zoning bylaw is the regulation that implements the plan. Typically, a zoning bylaw regulates land use by:

- Specifying and distinguishing different land use types;
- Creating development standards for the size and shape of lots and the buildings erected on those lots;
- Addressing lots, buildings and uses that pre-dated the adoption of the zoning ordinance (non-conformities);
- Establishing criteria for the evaluation of permit applications for new buildings;
- Establishing procedures for permitting uses not specifically allowed by right;
- Defining terms that have specific meanings under the ordinance; and,
- Creating a map that displays the geographic extent of each zoning district.

### Suburban Residential (SR)

This district is similar to the RR District, but it is more densely developed. Specifically, the minimum lot size in this district is three quarters of an acre (or half an acre if serviced by Town water and sewer) compared to one acre in the RR District.

### Commercial (C)

This district allows a variety of commercial uses – such as restaurants, offices and retail stores – in addition to single-family homes and apartments accessory to commercial buildings. It is mainly located east of Wilbur Cross Highway (Interstate 84), near Route 20 and Southbridge Road.

### Commercial II (C2)

This district is nearly identical to the C District, with the exception of allowing a truck stop as a permitted use. Only a few properties are zoned this district, including New England Truck Stop on Route 20. The dimensional requirements for the C2 District are the same as the C District.

### Commercial/Tourist (CT)

This district lies along Main Street (Route 20), between Brookfield Road and Burgess School Road. Allowed in this district is a mix of commercial and tourist-related uses, including gift shops and travel industry offices. Mixed-use buildings are also permitted. Miniature golf, movie theaters, lodging houses and bed and breakfasts are allowed by special permit.

### Historic Commercial (HC)

Located along Haynes Street south of Main Street, this district allows for limited retail and service uses. The goals of the district are to “protect and preserve the important historic features of the nearby Sturbridge Common,” ensure future development respects the character of the Common, and protect the town’s visual character.<sup>1</sup>

### General Industrial (GI)

This district allows a range of uses, including hotels, storage facilities, manufacturing uses, automotive uses, and printing establishments. It is largely located along Main Street west of Brookfield Road.

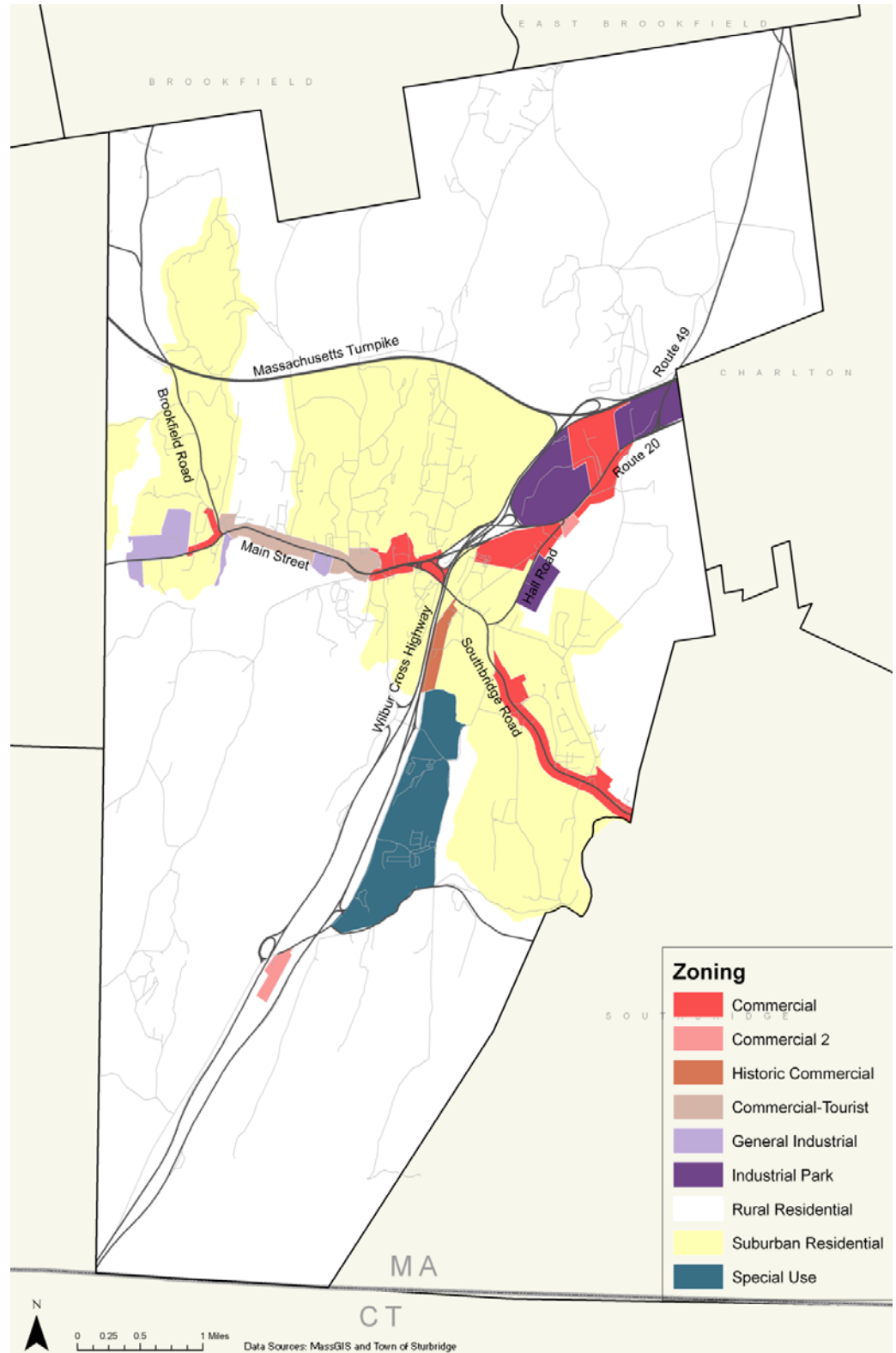
### Industrial Park (IP)

In addition to most of the uses allowed in the GI District, this district allows fuel oil distribution and storage facilities as well as telecommunications facilities like radio broadcasting studios. It is mostly located west of Wilbur Cross Highway (Interstate 84), between the Massachusetts Turnpike (Interstate 90) and Route 20.



<sup>1</sup> Sturbridge Zoning Bylaws, [http://www.town.sturbridge.ma.us/Public\\_Documents/SturbridgeMA\\_PlanningDocuments/Zoning%20Bylaw%202010?FCItemID=S02B54AC5](http://www.town.sturbridge.ma.us/Public_Documents/SturbridgeMA_PlanningDocuments/Zoning%20Bylaw%202010?FCItemID=S02B54AC5)



**Figure 2.5      Zoning Map**

### **Special Use (SU)**

Adopted in 1998, this district is located north of Mashapaug Road, between Haynes Street and River Road. There are a limited number of permitted uses in this district, including single-family dwellings and farms. It is the only district where planned unit business developments (PUBD) – these are primarily non-residential uses – are allowed by special permit. Other uses allowed by special permit include mobile retirement communities, hospitals and commercial recreational facilities.

### **Wireless Communication Overlay (WC)**

This is an overlay district that regulates where and how wireless communication facilities can be installed. In general these facilities are allowed in the C, C2, CT, GI and IP districts.

### **Flood Plain District**

This overlay district is largely designed to protect land from flooding. Development cannot occur in this district without a special permit from the Planning Board.

### **Groundwater Protection District**

Adopted in 2002 and amended in 2008 to cover the protection zone for Well #4, this overlay district limits the types of uses allowed in delineated aquifers or recharge areas. Certain activities – like those that create impervious surfaces over a certain amount – require a special permit.



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## **Zoning Regulations**

Both the Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) act as the special permit granting authority (SPGA) for different types of uses, though in most cases, the ZBA is the SPGA. The ZBA also has the authority to grant variances.

The Planning Board administers site plan review in Sturbridge. Site plan approval is required for most uses. The exceptions include single-family or two-family dwellings, horticultural nurseries, farms, tree farms, and professional offices when the office and residence are in the same building in a residential zone. In reviewing site plan applications, the Planning Board considers a number of issues, including vehicular and pedestrian circulation, lighting and impacts on Town resources. The Zoning Bylaw also has detailed landscaping and buffering requirements. The intent is to reduce environmental degradation, enhance the community's visual character, stabilize soils, and retain existing vegetation, among other goals.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Sturbridge Zoning Bylaws, [http://www.town.sturbridge.ma.us/Public\\_Documents/SturbridgeMA\\_PlanningDocuments/Zoning%20Bylaw%202010?FCItemID=S02B54AC5](http://www.town.sturbridge.ma.us/Public_Documents/SturbridgeMA_PlanningDocuments/Zoning%20Bylaw%202010?FCItemID=S02B54AC5)

In 2009, the Town adopted an Open Space Residential Development (OSRD) bylaw intended to preserve open space, encourage flexibility in the design of residential developments, promote less sprawling and help maintain Sturbridge's traditional New England character.<sup>3</sup> A special permit may be obtained in the Rural Residential, Suburban Residential or Special Use Districts provided that the total land area for the project encompasses at least ten acres. It requires a minimum of 50 percent of a parcel be provided as open space and incorporates design standards for the developed and the natural portions of the project site. Density bonuses can be awarded for protecting additional open space, providing recreational facilities, preserving agricultural soils or active farmland, preserving historical structures, utilizing alternative energy sources, or setting aside dwelling units for affordable housing.

In 2010, the Town adopted an Expedited Permitting bylaw, which streamlines the approval process of projects on priority development sites. Incorporating language from Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 43D, the bylaw generally requires that these projects be reviewed and permitted within 180 days.




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## Projects in the Pipeline

The following information about projects has been provided by the Town Planning Department.

### Residential Projects

A property owned by Plimpton Meadows Trust located off of New Boston, Allen and Gay Roads in the towns of Sturbridge and East Brookfield has been in the conceptual proposal stage for the past couple of years. The 329-acre property has had an Abbreviated Notice of Resource Area Delineation (ANRAD) approved and has had conceptual layout plans prepared by an engineering firm. The conceptual plans show the potential development of 126 lots for construction of single-family homes. A formal application has not been submitted to the Planning Board.

The owner of land at 271 Cedar Street submitted a preliminary plan showing a potential 48 lots last year. There were several engineering problems with the plan, and therefore the owner requested to withdraw the application to correct the issues. The plan has not been re-submitted, but as the economy starts to improve, efforts on this project could likely be renewed. The Town Planner met with the engineering firm in 2010 to review issues that came up during the preliminary plan phase.

Blue & Gold Development received approval from all Land Use Boards for a 71-unit active adult community (market-rate) to be built off of Hall Road, but construction has not began. The developer has cited economic conditions as the reason for the delay, and the permits have expired. The scope of the project could change in the future with further approvals from the Boards if the 55+ market does not rebound.




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3 Ibid.

There has been discussion about a possible Chapter 40B project on 30 Main Street. (Chapter 40B allows developers to circumvent local zoning regulations if a certain amount of affordable housing units are included.) The proposal for Fiske Hill Commons calls for 200 townhouse condominium units on roughly 42.5 acres of land. The owner has received a written determination of Project Eligibility – site approval – from MassHousing. However, the developer is undecided as to whether to pursue the proposed 40B or a smaller-scale, market-rate proposal. The same tract of land is part of a larger proposal for a four-lot, mixed-use subdivision that will likely contain retail space, professional offices and a potential assisted living facility. The Conservation Commission has approved an application for the subdivision roadway, and the Planning Board has approved a preliminary subdivision plan. An application for Definitive Subdivision approval is expected to be filed with the Planning Board in the near future. Once the subdivision has been approved and the road can be constructed, separate approvals will be required for each parcel to be developed.

### **Recreational Facility**

A developer has proposed to construct an indoor sports arena, outdoor fields, disc golf course and an adjacent building to contain concessions, retail and restrooms near Interstate 84. Called The Sturbridge Arena, the project would be built on 28.4 acres of land at 17 Kelly Road and 90 River Road and is expected to cost roughly \$2.1 million.<sup>4</sup> According to initial plans, the indoor sports arena would be used for an array of indoor sports, including lacrosse, field hockey, soccer, flag football, baseball and softball. The Sturbridge Zoning Board has approved variances for height, and an application to the Planning Board for Site Plan Approval and Special Permit is expected.

## **Recommendations**

As land use and zoning are intimately tied to a community's growth and development, many land use recommendations have been made throughout this Master Plan. See the Housing, Economic Development, and Transportation chapters for additional detailed recommendations.

### **Land Use and Community Design Recommendations for the Corridors**

In order to respect and preserve a sense of the historic, rural character of the town and in particular the main corridors, establish design guidelines or a form-based code to encourage better building layout and design.

- Consider establishing zoning incentives to encourage reinvestment and redevelopment of existing properties. Such incentives could include density bonuses to allow vertical expansion and new infill development.



<sup>4</sup> The Sturbridge Arena Priority Project Nomination Form



- Use appropriately scaled gateway landscape treatments, pocket parks, and the creation/reinforcement of pedestrian scaled “places” within the Commercial Tourist District to augment the identity and character of the area while enhancing its walkability. This can be achieved in part by implementing the design plans found in the 1996 Beautification Plan.
- Encourage the creation of a parking area behind the businesses to create extra capacity and enable streetscape improvements and some on-street parking along Main Street. This should help to reduce short vehicle trips between businesses not otherwise connected by a safe pedestrian pathway.
- Establish walking paths to provide pedestrian access between Main Street and the Quinebaug River and Turner Field.
- Consider allowing mixed-use projects in the Commercial district. Such uses are currently allowed in the Commercial Tourist District.
- Develop design guidelines to be incorporated into the zoning bylaw for new development along the corridor with an emphasis on creating a safe and friendly pedestrian environment. These guidelines could include provisions for building massing; building placement; window, door and façade treatments; signage; lighting; streetscape and landscape improvements; and pedestrian amenities.
- Consider consolidation of future development along Routes 20 and 131 into nodes at key locations, preserving natural areas between these nodes using tools such as transfer of development rights (TDR). Essentially, TDR transfers the growth from areas where protection is desired (open spaces, environmental resources) to areas where development is appropriate because of proximity to infrastructure and services.
- Encourage streetscape improvements that create gateways to Sturbridge along Route 131 near the Town Common.
- Since the actual intent of this zoning district is unclear, consider revising the use regulations for the Historic Commercial zone along Route 15 to reflect the existing hospitality-oriented businesses. Incorporate the Publick House property boundaries into the district. Given the lack of undeveloped land in the district, revise the zoning provisions to encourage suitable redevelopment opportunities.

### **General Zoning Recommendations**

- Create a table of uses to replace the existing narrative listing of uses allowed by right or special permit in each zoning district. This would make the zoning bylaw easier to read and comprehend.
- Consolidate all of the definitions in the bylaw into one section, Chapter 2 Definitions. Currently, definitions are included in several sections of the bylaw.
- Create a separate section for parking and consider putting the parking regulations – specifically Section 20.22 (a) through (i) – into a table. Update the standards and include both minimum and maximum parking standards to avoid

areas that are over-parked and to establish a mechanism for reducing impervious coverage for new development.

- As described in the Economic Development chapter, review, update and expand the lists of permitted uses in non-residential districts. In many of these districts, the lists seem outdated and restrictive as unlisted uses are excluded.
- As is the case in most municipalities, many of the lots within the Town of Sturbridge are non-conforming. Changes to the structures on these lots generally cannot be made without the specific approval of the Zoning Board of Appeals. However, property owners frequently seek to improve the homes and businesses with little or no impact to the character of the surrounding neighborhood. The bylaw should be revised to allow for certain by right improvements to structures on non-conforming lots based upon a finding of no impact.
- Update sign bylaw (Chapter 22 of the Zoning Bylaw) to incorporate standards relating to the size, design and location of signs, as well as the types of signs currently being used by businesses.

## Preservation of Rural Character

- Educate agricultural landowners about the state's voluntary Agriculture Preservation Restriction Program, which provides an alternative to selling or developing their land. The program pays farmland owners the difference between the fair market value and agricultural value of their land, and in return, a deed restriction is placed on the land that prohibits uses that would negatively impact the property's agricultural viability.<sup>5</sup>
- Encourage local agriculture through the development of farmers' markets. The state Department of Agricultural Resources provides technical assistance to people interested in starting farmers' markets.<sup>6</sup> The Town should also consider establishing community gardens on town-owned land. This could be done on a seasonal basis.
- Consider amending the OSRD to allow them by right and reduce or eliminate the minimum threshold of ten acres. OSRD can be an effective tool for open space preservation for smaller project sites and its use would be encouraged by streamlining the permitting process for developers. This is more effective than increasing lot size as a means to reduce the overall impacts of development while preserving more contiguous tracts of land for open space.
- Hillside and steep slope alteration presents a number of health, safety, and environmental challenges such as increased erosion, landslides, and sedimentation. Septic systems on steep slopes are highly unreliable due to the slope and shallow soils. Hilltop development may result in additional expenses



5 Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, Agriculture Preservation Restriction Program, <http://www.mass.gov/agr/landuse/APR/index.htm>

6 Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, Farmers' Markets, <http://www.mass.gov/agr/markets/farmersmarkets/index.htm>

and difficulties in extending and maintaining infrastructure (roads, sewer, water systems, and power lines). Conversely, protecting hillsides and steep slopes preserves the natural scenic beauty of the native landscape, adds value to property, and provides educational and recreational opportunities. The Town should consider a hillside protection bylaw that would establish appropriate density and development standards for land that exceeds an established elevation or slope.

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