

FINAL REPORT

Downtown Study



Framingham, MA



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FRAMINGHAM DOWNTOWN STUDY
FINAL REPORT

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1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 Study Area Overview

The Framingham Downtown area is an important regional center for transportation services, commercial activities and government offices and services. The Study Area boundaries for Downtown Framingham are shown on **Figure 1-1**. The built environment reflects the historic nature of the Downtown through small parcels and two to four story brick commercial buildings with zero setbacks located along the main commercial corridor. Behind the main commercial corridor are residential neighborhoods and secondary commercial and civic spaces. These construction features create a dense building fabric that is consistent with traditional urban centers of that era.

The Downtown is located at the intersection of two regional vehicular transportation corridors, Route 126 and Route 135, with various secondary roads that connect Routes 126 and 135 to the surrounding neighborhoods. Additionally there are two rail services that run through the Downtown area, CSX and the MBTA. The Boston Mainline tracks which run parallel to Route 135 create a significant physical divide between the north and south areas of the Downtown. Downtown Framingham has an MBTA commuter rail station and there are three CSX rail yards located in close proximity to the Downtown. Traditionally, the rail lines were an economic resource that drove many of the local businesses and much of the regional economy. They now, however, provide less economic benefit to Downtown Framingham, while the several grade crossings compound the significant traffic congestion issues that persist in the study area.

Downtown Framingham has a high volume of pedestrian activity due to the presence of the MBTA commuter rail station on Waverly Street and the concentration of commercial and civic uses. The pedestrian environment is dominated by the character of the historic buildings that line the main commercial corridor. While the sidewalks and crosswalks throughout the planning area are in good overall condition, streetscape elements, such as decorative brick patterns and street trees, are inconsistently applied to the main streets throughout the Downtown. Also, there is little streetscape applied to the secondary streets in the Downtown area that run through residential neighborhoods and secondary commercial areas. Open space areas in the Downtown are limited to: Memorial Square, located in front of the Town Hall; the Downtown Common, located at the corner of Concord and Park Streets; and a "pocket park" at the southeast corner of Irving and Hollis Streets. While these open spaces are well designed with trees, benches, brick pavers and other streetscape elements for pedestrian enjoyment, they only account for a small amount of open/green space in an otherwise physically imposing urban environment.

Based on land use and urban design characteristics, Downtown Framingham has several subdistricts. These subdistricts include the Cultural Triangle, two historic districts, residential clusters and special character areas. The **Cultural Triangle** is the area north of Town Hall that includes such civic elements as the Town Hall, The Public Library, The Danforth Museum and the Police Department Headquarters. This area represents Framingham's center of municipal and civic activity. The **Concord Square and Irving Square Historic Districts** are



— Study area boundaries

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Figure 1-1
Study Area Boundaries

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located on either side of Route 135 and attest to the quality of the historical architecture that is present throughout much of Downtown Framingham. The residential clusters within the planning area are primarily located to the east of Concord Street and to the south of the Hollis and Irving Street intersection. These residential clusters reveal the traditional growth and development patterns of the area and directly contribute to the downtown’s vitality and success. Other subdistricts of special character include the **Dennison Triangle**, which features renovated industrial building converted to mixed-use, and the **Downtown Common area** which, with the combination of one of the only open green spaces in the Downtown and the Armenian Church of the Holy Translators, presents an important and distinct variation in the built environment.

According to the GIS Data received from the Assessor’s Office, the Downtown Framingham Study Area has a land area of 126.83 acres and a total of 2,355,372 square feet of finished building area. Based on this set of information, the planning area has a **Floor Area Ratio (F.A.R.)** of **0.43**, which is consistent with traditional urban town centers. The predominant land uses in Downtown Framingham are commercial, governmental and residential. Commercial uses account for 41% of the finished building area, while residential uses account for 26% and government and charity uses account for 23% of the finished building area in the downtown. **Table 1-1** shows building use data in greater detail. This breakdown indicates a strong and balanced existing mixed-use downtown and reflects the area’s commercial and civic traditions.

Table 1-1 - Existing Land Use Breakdown

Use Type	Finished Area	Land Area	Percentage
Mixed Use	215,063	8.19	9.13%
Residential	613,480	29.27	26.05%
Commercial	957,758	52.58	40.66%
Industrial	26,164	1.81	1.11%
Governmental/Charitable	542,907	34.25	23.05%
Other	0	0.73	0.00%
TOTAL	2,355,372	126.83	100%

1.2 Project History

The Route 126 (Concord Street) intersection with Route 135 (Waverley Street) has experienced significant delays for vehicles and pedestrians for decades. These delays cascade throughout much of the Downtown on a regular occurrence. While delays related directly to the intersection’s operations are excessive, matters are further exacerbated by service interruptions created by the adjacent at-grade railroad crossing of Route 126, just to the north of Route 135. This bothersome condition has existed for over 100 years. In fact, reviews of previous reports indicate that the first study to examine solutions to this congestion was conducted in the year 1898, followed by an additional 35 to 40 reports since.

The most immediate report, prior to this study, was the 1997 Route 126 Corridor Study, prepared by Rizzo Associates. The recommendation from this 1997 report

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was for a Route 126 underpass of Route 135 and the Rail Corridor. While this alternative has received some support in the past, many have since recognized that required depressed roadway sections on each side of Route 135 would create a physical barrier between the east and west sides of Concord Street, directly in the Downtown. This feature would likely result in negative impacts to the Downtown, both in terms of traffic movement, pedestrian mobility, as well as potential for redevelopment opportunities and economic growth.

The Town subsequently created a Downtown Rail Committee (DRC) in 2005, which was charged with assisting in the development of transportation improvements to address the Route 135/Route 126/at-grade rail crossing location. The DRC considered several alternatives and then selected four for further examination as part of this study (see the next section, DRC Alternatives).

The Phase 1 of this current study effort was a comprehensive evaluation of existing conditions. Findings were summarized in a three-volume report, dated March 2008. These volumes focused on transportation/traffic operations, urban design/land use conditions and market analysis, respectively. These Phase 1 reports served as the basis upon which findings and recommendations described in this report were developed.

The efforts of the Consultant Team were overseen by Steering Committee established by the Town and consisting of Town professionals, who provided guidance and direct participation in the process.

1.3 DRC Alternatives

The DRC is comprised of Town officials and interested residents and business owners who, through considerable time and energy, formed a range of transportation concepts for the Downtown. These ranged from bypass alignments to grade separations. These concepts were ranked by the DRC and were condensed to four to be assessed in this study. The total range of alternatives considered by the DRC is shown in **Figure 1-2**. The four selected for further assessment in this study are described below.

- Alternative 1: Grade Separation of Route 126 Under Route 135 and the Rail Tracks
- Alternative 2: Grade Separation of Route 135 Under Route 126
- Alternative 3: East Bypass – Loring Drive Alignment
- Alternative 4: Far East Bypass – New Alignment

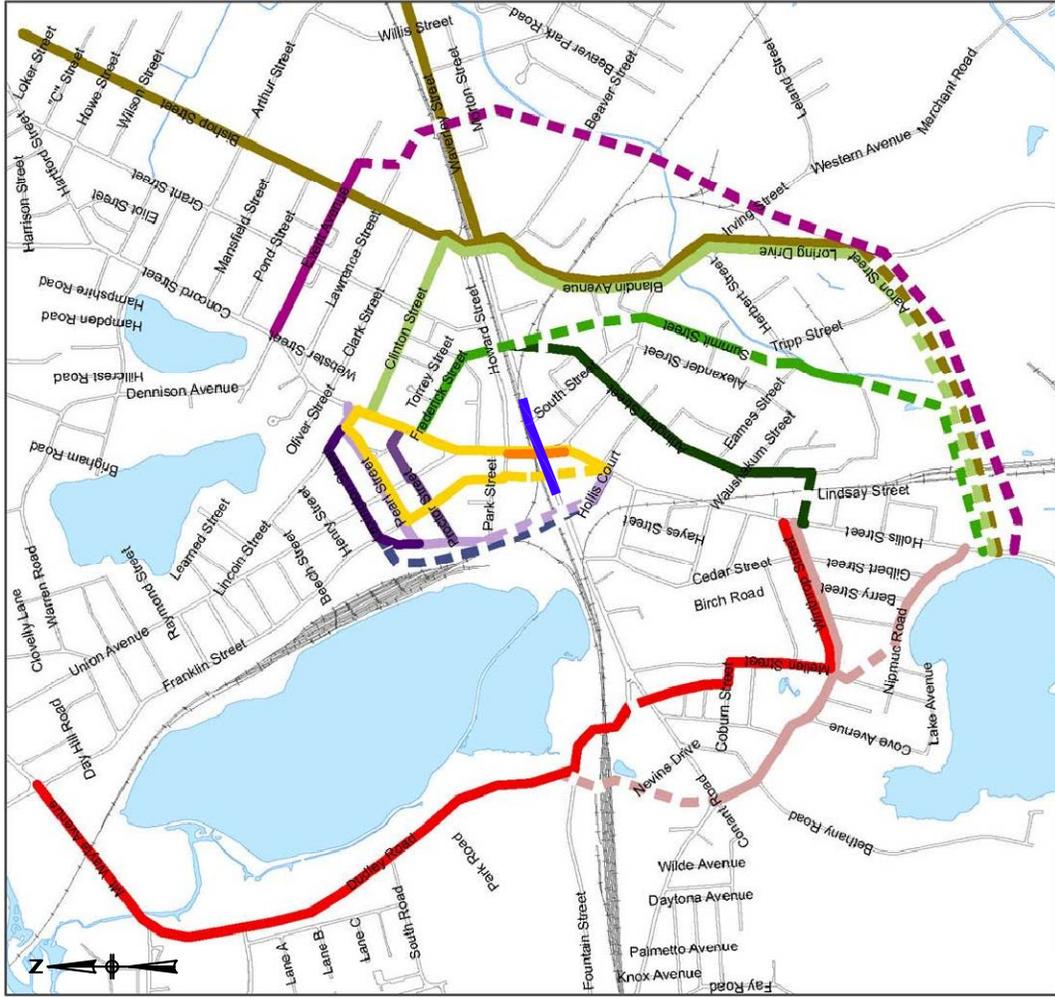


Figure 1-2
DRC Alternatives

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