

5.0 THE NEXT STEPS/IMPLEMENTATION

5.1 Transportation

The goal of this study was to assess conditions in the Downtown and to evaluate the potential for four pre-selected alternatives to improve transportation, provide urban design/land use options, and develop opportunities for economic growth in the Downtown. While this document includes recommendations in these areas, this is the beginning of the process.

A project of this significance will require an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Either document will bring a new beginning to the process and will require a thorough review and a much more rigorous assessment of these recommendations, as well as to a new set of alternatives.

Transportation alternatives will include a No-Build condition, or an assessment of what can be expected if no significant improvements occur. The Route 135 Underpass is also a likely Build alternative. Several additional Build alternatives will also be considered, either as a stand-alone option, or as a supplement to another. Several other transportation improvements have nonetheless been discussed already, including:

- A rail grade separation East of Route 126, either under or over Route 135.
- A rail grade separation just west of Route 126, across Route 135 into the current North Rail Yard.

Either of these could provide a supplemental benefit to provide a much-needed direct, uninterrupted north-south link that is currently lacking in Framingham, and would build upon improvements at the Winter Street and Fountain Street bridges currently under MassHighway design.

5.2 Development and Urban Design

5.2.1 Leveraging Transportation Investments to Improve the Downtown

This planning process has been founded on the understanding that the future of the Downtown is directly linked to transportation and the improvements that must be made to reduce congestion, aid circulation, and overcome the negative impacts of the rail activity through and along the edges of the district. This section of the Report focuses on several particular methods that may be used to implement the redevelopment and urban design recommendations of the Downtown in a manner that will leverage the investment in the transportation infrastructure and create substantial economic and civic benefits.

Implementation methods would need to be consistent with the characteristics of the preferred transportation alternative - the grade separation of Route 135 below Concord Street. These methods would also need to be applicable to refinements in this alternative, other alternatives that may emerge, or additional circulation and roadway changes. The methods are intended to amplify the benefits of transportation infrastructure investment to create new opportunities for:

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- Transit-oriented development
- Revitalization of existing properties
- Enhanced retail, restaurant and services district
- Amenities to create a more attractive and valuable Downtown
- Enhanced pedestrian and bicycle connectivity as an alternative to motor vehicle use
- Enhanced use of transit through increased commuter parking

In keeping with the scope and purposes of this study, however, the following discussion is not intended to be a complete description of all of the implementation tools and actions that will be required to accomplish the Town's vision for the Downtown. Many parallel actions will need to be undertaken to advance the Downtown improvement agendas, marshaled by the Town's leadership, staff and organizations. A complete list would include many other measures that are certainly necessary, but which are not directly related to the transportation network. These could include tools and programs such as marketing, code enforcement, housing rehabilitation, home ownership incentives, re-organization or relocation of some social programs, event programming, business support programs, and many others.

5.2.2 Using Publicly-Owned Land and Land Acquisition to Create Transit-Oriented Development

Downtown Framingham is currently subject to significant congestion due to the constrained roadway network that channels traffic through relatively narrow streets and compresses traffic at intersections adjacent to limited rail crossings. The roadway network skirts Farm Pond and discourages "cut through" traffic in nearby neighborhoods due to the configuration of the streets and the character of the uses that line them. In this context, substantial improvements, such as the Route 135 Underpass concept will require a combination of road widening and reconfiguration that will entail acquisition of additional right-of-way.

These actions would result in re-organized land parcels that should be used as an opportunity to create redevelopment opportunities, if careful consideration is placed on the relationship between the roadway improvements and the location, configuration and disposition of the properties that are affected. The following methods should be applied to the future detailed planning and evaluations of the roadway improvement proposals to generate additional economic and community benefits:

This land should be planned to create sites for consolidated commuter parking, new development that can augment the revitalization of the downtown. The new development patterns should be consistent with retaining the historic fabric and structures in the area to the greatest extent practical. This includes reinforcing a pattern of buildings that line the surface streets and create a valuable, traditional pattern of pedestrian-friendly sidewalks and retail environment. The parcelization patterns should also allow for the creation of new public open spaces and pedestrian networks that provide effective routes through the Downtown, across the rail alignment, and as a complement to new development.

- Parcelization – The roadway alignments and right-of-way acquisitions should be undertaken in a manner that results in parcelization of adjacent land areas that are well-proportioned and sized to support the physical requirements of efficient land use and redevelopment. For example, the land adjacent to the re-organized roadway associated with the Route 135 Alternative should not result in small, difficult to use parcels that cannot be easily adapted to new uses. To the contrary, this area of the Downtown is adjacent to the MBTA commuter rail station and should be considered as priority sites for transit-oriented development.
- Ownership and Disposition – The roadway improvements and property acquisition program should anticipate the implementation of transit-oriented development, parking and public open space improvements through methods that will result in a disposition process that will lead to productive ownership. For example, fractured ownership of small parcels of land that are remnants of roadway improvement projects can result in substantial difficulties in re-assembling land and allowing productive reinvestment through the sale or long term lease of assembled parcels. In contrast, the roadway planning should specify the methods that will be employed to ensure that land can be reassembled and brought to market, or made available for appropriate public use.

5.2.3 Establishing a Redevelopment Entity to Sponsor Transit-Oriented Redevelopment

The Town should consider establishing a special redevelopment entity responsible for initiating and conducting the redevelopment of land that is made available or re-organized as a result of roadway improvements such as those recommended in this report. The purpose of this entity would be to manage the redevelopment process such as: undertaking the site

preparation and directing the ultimate disposition; seeking and applying public funding, grants and special financing; assisting in the entitlement process and, marketing; and, operating public facilities and amenities that might be associated with redevelopment.

Various organizational and governance models have been successfully applied by other communities to accomplish similar redevelopment purposes. These include Redevelopment Authorities organized under M.G.L. Chapter 121B and community development corporations. The Town could undertake an evaluation of other communities and the methods that they have employed.

5.2.4 Undertaking Joint Development - CSX and MBTA Lands

There are several related redevelopment opportunities that could compliment and expand upon the transit-oriented redevelopment that could lead from the suggested roadway and circulation improvements. The existing configuration and operations of both CSX and the MBTA might be reorganized in the future to allow for productive redevelopment of land adjacent to and near the existing commuter rail station. Two separate opportunities that will require proactive consideration as part of the implementation process.

The CSX “triangle” is currently underutilized and is immediately adjacent to the MBTA rail station. This land is effectively inaccessible today because of the configuration of the connecting rail lines that link the CSX North Yard facility to the main east/west line. If the rail connections could be limited to the westernmost connecting line, then an area composed of MBTA and CSX ownership could become easily accessible and available for joint redevelopment.

The Town should engage relevant entities, agencies, and jurisdiction to establish the feasibility for this reorganization of land. There are useful precedents for implementation within the region that may be used as models.

Another major opportunity, depicted in the concept as transit-oriented development, is if the North Yard operations can successfully be relocated to another location and this area used for development. Although this land is largely outside of the Downtown study area, the redevelopment would significantly expand the existing Downtown boundaries and create opportunities for transit-oriented development that could be linked by pedestrian paths to the MBTA commuter station. Here again, the Town should initiate and pursue the discussions with relevant parties to establish feasibility and the specific mechanisms that would be associated with implementing this opportunity.

5.2.5 Establishing District Improvement Financing Mechanism

The Commonwealth has established an important new tool to provide infrastructure financing associated with desirable redevelopment. District Improvement Financing (DIF) relies upon the tax increment associated with private sector redevelopment and allocates a portion of that

increment towards funding of necessary infrastructure associated with that development. For example, the Town could create a DIF district engaging those areas of the Downtown that will be redeveloped. Tax revenue proceeds could be used to help finance shared parking facilities, street and roadway improvements, public open space, or other key elements associated with transit-oriented development.

5.2.6 Creating Additional Commuter Parking

A direct benefit of the reorganization of land near the existing commuter rail station would be the opportunity to create one or two efficient and convenient parking structures to contain commuter parking that is now scattered among surface lots. Associated with this concept should be the provision of a pedestrian bridge and/or pedestrian deck linking any parking structures south of Route 135 to the MBTA station.

5.2.7 Creating Additional Downtown Parking

Additional Downtown parking would be required to support both the revitalization of existing building and the development of new buildings on land made available and assembled as a result of circulation improvements. In order to create downtown density, this additional Downtown parking should be concentrated within parking structures. The implementation strategy for commuter parking should be physically combined with additional downtown parking spaces to promote efficient and cost effective construction, and to promote shared parking.

It is likely that the cost of structured parking will be greater than the market may be able to support. As a result, the funding and financing mechanisms will need to partially rely on public subsidy. These subsidies should be provided through federal or State grant sources, or District Improvement Financing (DIF) bonds.

5.2.8 Refining Zoning to Encourage Appropriate Development

The Town should reconsider the existing framework of zoning and project approval process for redevelopment sites in the Downtown, including those sites that may be unlocked through transportation and circulation changes. The Town should consider specific advantages that may be associated with adopting zoning that complies with the State enabling legislation under M.G.L. Chapter 40R. By adopting zoning that meets the public purposes in this legal framework, the Town would advance both its own interest and the interests of the Commonwealth in promoting transit oriented development. Chapter 40R zoning is designed to provide incentives for dense development consistent with the scale and character of Downtown Framingham as envisioned in the Preferred Urban Design and Development Alternative as described in this Report.

If the Town adopts a 40R zoning provision tailored to its specific needs and circumstances, future developers would be provided the clear and appropriate "as-of-right" guide for uses, bulk requirements, parking requirements, and other typical zoning provisions. The Town should also

adopt compulsory design standards to accompany 40R zoning, so that it has appropriate control over the urban design and architectural quality of the new development. Adoption of a 40R zoning district can also bring direct financial benefits to the Town in the form of grants and State funding.

5.2.9 Expanding Public Open Space and Open Space Connections

Framingham Downtown requires additional public open space and landscape amenities to make it more attractive for all of the uses that are planned for the future. The design of transportation improvements and redevelopment that is unlocked by these improvements should include new public open space and landscape amenities as an integral part of the mitigation program and as primary design elements. The open space and landscape improvements should be coordinated to extend connections to and from the transit station and open new routes to Farm Pond in the prospect of a waterfront park that could emerge over time.

5.2.10 Pedestrian/Bicycle Connection-Wayfinding Signage

The signage program associated with roadway changes should directly incorporate wayfinding signage that promotes orientation and the most convenient travel to and from the Downtown. This should include clear directions regarding major Downtown destinations (such as a shopping district, the Town Hall, the Danforth Museum) and parking facilities.

5.2.11 Creating Pedestrian and Streetscape Improvements

Circulation and roadway improvements should be designed to create high quality landscape and pedestrian connections. Funding for these improvements should be incorporated into the funding sources for the vehicular and roadway improvements projects.

5.2.12 Encouraging Bicycling

The Downtown should be a safe and convenient destination for bicyclists, particularly in light of the potential to provide bicycle connections to commuter rail service. Bicycle routes to and from the MBTA rail station should be provided from both the north and south approaches in conjunction with vehicular roadway and sidewalk improvements. Designated bicycle parking spaces should be created in visible and convenient locations on both the north and south sides of the existing rail alignment in conjunction with parking improvements. Funding for these improvements should be incorporated into the funding for the vehicular and roadway projects.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Of the four transportation alternatives selected for consideration by the DRC for this study effort, **Alternative 2 – Route 135 Under Route 126** appears to be the most practical and beneficial. This alternative provides significant improvements:

- To traffic operations at the Route 135 intersection with Route 126, and along the Route 126 Corridor in the Downtown.
- To north-south pedestrian/bicyclist connectivity between the north and south sectors of the Downtown by maintaining the existing 10 foot sidewalks, and creating relatively conflict free walkways, and by maintaining east-west access by not introducing a physical barrier.
- To potential for Downtown urban design/economic expansion, again by not introducing a physical barrier.
- To accommodate additional development by increasing capacity on the Route 126 Corridor.
- By eliminating the portion of Route 126 delay attributed to intersection operations at the Route 135 intersection.

Alternative 1 – Route 126 Underpass also improves traffic flow and provides a rail grade separation. Sidewalks in the north-south direction, however, would be reduced to minimal width. In addition, a required depressed roadway section would create a physical barrier for east-west pedestrian/bicyclist mobility for a considerable distance along Route 126 north and south of Route 135, and would have severe negative impacts on the potential for urban design/economic expansion.

Alternative 3 - East Bypass/Loring Drive Alignment would not significantly improve operations in the Route 135/Route 126 corridors for vehicles, pedestrians or bicyclists. This alternative would result in significant environmental impacts, including wetlands encroachment, increased traffic at the existing Blandin Avenue and Bishop Street crossings, disruption to existing land uses, and potential neighborhood disruption. This alternative would generally not preclude the Preferred Urban Design and Development Direction (Mix-Use Strategy). It would, however, limit the overall success of this strategy by not providing the reorganized roadway improvements that could result in significant enhancements to the Downtown.

Alternative 4 - Far East Bypass/New Alignment also would not significantly improve operations in the Route 135/Route 126 corridors for vehicles, pedestrians or bicyclists. This alternative would also result in significant environmental impacts, including wetlands encroachment, two new grade crossings at the Framingham Secondary and the Boston Mainline. This alignment would also result in disruption to existing land uses, including neighborhood disruption and an existing park. As with Alternative 3, this alternative would generally not preclude the Preferred Urban Design and Development Direction (Mix-Use Strategy). It would, however, limit the overall success of this strategy

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by not providing the reorganized roadway improvements that could result in significant enhancements to the Downtown.

The Implementation Strategies, discussed in Section 5, will be critical to the overall success in Downtown Framingham. These strategies include an environmental process, in which the preferred transportation alignment will be further tested, along with additional alternatives that either have already been mentioned or entirely new alternatives (some with recognition that an additional rail grade separation to provide uninterrupted north-south flow over the existing rail service would benefit the Town).

Several Development and Urban Design Implementation strategies are noted, including:

- Leveraging Transportation Investments to Improve the Downtown
- Opportunities and Methods to use Public land/Acquisitions for TOD
- Establishment of a Redevelopment Entity to Sponsor TOD
- CSX and MBTA Joint Development
- Establishment of a District Improvement Financing (DIF) Mechanism
- Additional Commuter Parking
- Refined Zoning
- Expanded Open Space
- Pedestrian/Bicycle Connections

Financing strategies for design and construction from State and Federal sources should begin now to maintain the momentum that has been created through efforts of the Town and supported by the State.

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In 2005 the Framingham Board of Selectman created the Downtown Railroad Crossing Task Force (DRC) to address traffic congestion in the downtown area. DRC Task Force members together with Town leaders and staff have been instrumental in bringing this report forward and we are grateful for their dedication and perseverance and commitment to improving Framingham's downtown.

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