



## Downtown Athol: A Revitalization Plan (Athol, MA)

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# ADAPTING ATHOL

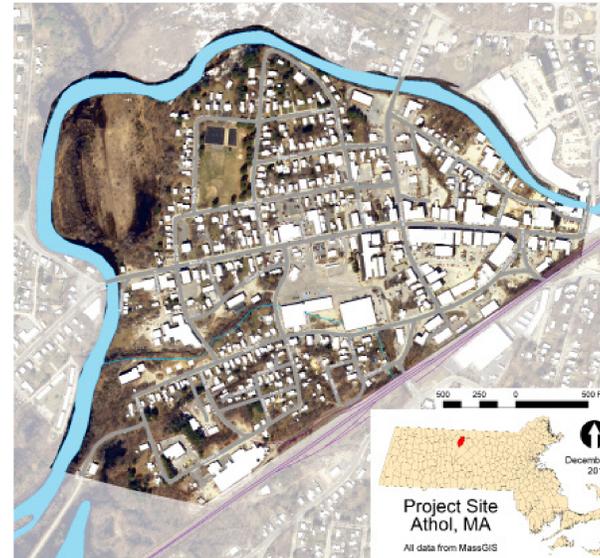
# THE FUTURE OF AN INDUSTRIAL LEGACY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Situated in the picturesque rolling hills north of the Quabbin Reservoir, Athol Massachusetts is the prototypical New England mill town. The regional identity has been shaped by an agrarian and industrial past which provide incomparable educational and recreational opportunities today. Like other New England mill towns however, Athol has been subject to the economic shocks of the last half century which has seen major industries relocate out of state or off-shore. The loss of major industry can be seen throughout the town with boarded up factory buildings, buildings and a Main Street struggling to maintain its identity.

Our Studio Team has been tasked with delivering creative, out-of-the-box suggestions to help revitalize the downtown Athol. Since the closing of Athol's mills, the study area currently contains empty storefronts, vacant mill spaces, and large areas of impervious surfaces in the form of parking lots. Economic leakage from the downtown area characterizes existing market trends. Development of the North Quabbin Business Park is currently underway northeast of the study area near the junction with Route 2 and includes an 80,000-square-foot Market Basket, 100,000-square-foot in hotel, restaurant, and retail spaces,

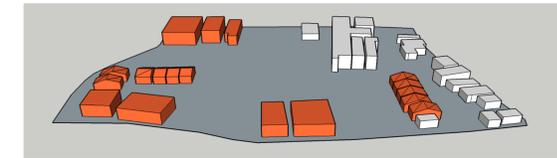
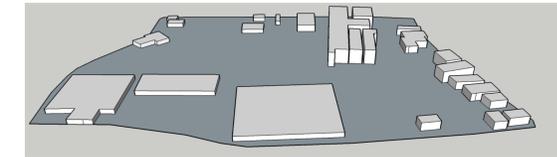
While the development of the North Quabbin Business Park is undoubtedly an economic boon for Athol, the impact that this development will have on the revitalization of downtown Athol remains unclear. Businesses in downtown Athol are already struggling to remain financially solvent. Alternatively, this potential economic threat presents downtown Athol with an opportunity to focus its redevelopment on creative ventures and niche businesses that fill needs in town and the region that are currently unmet. Identifying these opportunities has been our primary task.



## SCOPE OF WORK

The Town of Athol asked Millers River Consulting to look at six different aspects of the downtown study area. The six elements were Land Use & Zoning, Commercial Development, Vacant Parcels, Aesthetics, Traffic and Pedestrian Flow, and Market Trends.

Millers River Consulting was also tasked with reading current and past documents that were relevant to the issues that addressed in the scope of work and final recommendations. The study area includes Main Street, Exchange Street, Canal Street, Freedom Street, South Street, Traverse Street, and Marble Street, as well as residential side streets.



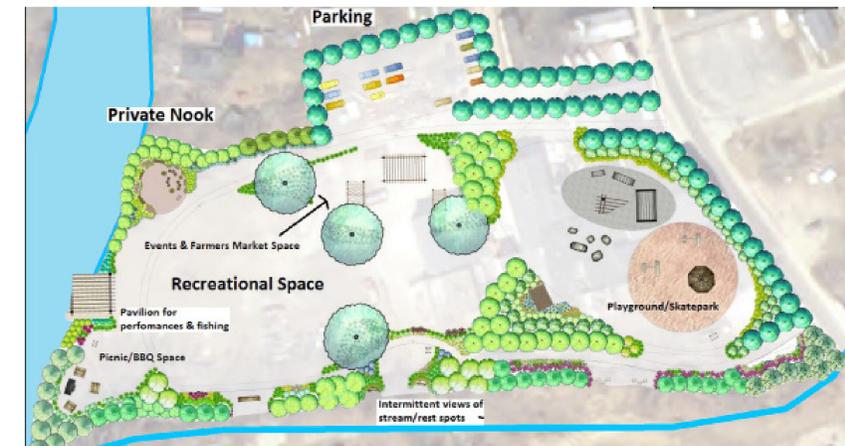
At the heart of the downtown study area lies the Ocean State Job Lot. At present this area is a juxtaposition of 3-4 floor historic residential and commercial buildings with sprawling 1 floor industrial and commercial structures. In the proposed long term redesign, the channelized Mill Brook will be daylight, parking lot largely depaved, and recreational paths constructed along the waterway. The revegetated area will act as a public space.

This proposal also includes the construction of several 2-3 story mixed use and 3-4 story retail and office buildings. Apartments and cottage housing will be filled into the former parking lot. The increased density will provide additional tax revenue for Athol.

## LOCATION

Athol is located in the North Quabbin Region and the northwest corner of Worcester County. Situated between the picturesque Tully Mountain to the north and the Quabbin Reservoir to its south, the town's landscape can best be described as a series of rolling hills, forests and meadows, streams, ponds and wetlands.

Athol's main transportation routes are three state highways: Route 2 and 2A, Route 32, and Route 202. These roads provide access to the larger cities of Fitchburg (25 miles), Worcester (40 miles), and Boston (70 miles). Montachusett Regional Transit Authority operates the G-Link bus line between Orange and Gardiner with 4 stops in Athol.



The Cass Toy Factory manufactured toys for over 100 years until burning down in 2012. Here Millers River Consulting saw an opportunity to propose a park. The park design features a bike and a pedestrian path with views of the Mill Brook. There is also a playground and skatepark, an area for farmer's markets and events as well as sports, and a pavilion overlooking the water. Lastly, barbecue areas and an intimate nook to provide a space for family activities and conversation are included.

## WORKSHOPS

Over the course of the semester, Millers River Consulting held two public workshops. There was an impressive turnout at our initial workshop where we executed several mapping exercises where the public identified downtown Athol's strengths and weaknesses. However, our first workshop was held on a weekday morning, so many members of the community were not able to attend due to work and various other obligations.

Since our main goal was to gather the opinions of every sector of the town's population, we held another workshop in the evening. For this workshop, we shared the inferences we gathered from our initial assembly and gave a presentation to the citizens. We then went table to table to speak about various sections of our downtown revitalization plan. Millers River's main priority was to incorporate the public's feedback into our redevelopment strategy.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Millers River Consulting has come up with a number of interventions for Athol based on the planning areas identified in the scope of work.

**Aesthetics (6 mo-1 yr):** Encourage public art that celebrates Athol's identity and capitalizes on its resources.

**Vacant Parcels (6 mo-1 yr):** Initiate tactical urban projects with community groups/members like pop-up stores or guerilla gardens.

**Market Trends (6 mo-1 yr):** Undertake a detailed market analysis based on MRC's final report. Identify supply/demand gaps and explore the potential for niche businesses and ecotourism in Athol.

**Land Use & Zoning (2-3 yrs):** Implement adaptive reuse programs by creating a scoring system for eligible buildings and developing incentives to attract developers.

**Transportation (2-3 yrs):** Reallocate Main Street and Exchange Street right-of-way space to better accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians while slowing vehicles and creating a sense of place.

**Commercial Developments (5+ yrs):** Establish downtown satellite campus for a nearby community college. Create apprenticeship programs to connect with local and regional employers.



## CLOSING + ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over the course of the Fall 2014 semester Millers River Consulting has explored the themes of land use and zoning, commercial developments, vacant parcels, traffic flow and pedestrian access, aesthetics, and market trends in order to develop recommendations to revitalize downtown Athol. Our key recommendations focus on the so called 'low hanging fruit' that we feel can best be achieved in the short and long term to help spur economic development and job growth, cultural and eco-tourism, aesthetic improvements, and increased transportation options. Based upon precedent studies consulted, we are confident that the types of recommendations which have been laid out in the preceding sections are replicable in Athol. Moving forward, it is important that the town of Athol continue to build upon its already strong relationship with public and nonprofit entities. In order for the town to become the hub of the North Quabbin it is also important that Athol build relationships with surrounding communities like Orange to take advantage of the natural amenities which will continue to draw visitors with purchasing power.

We would like to thank our amazing client, visionary Professor, and tireless TA:

**Andrea Buglioni, Director of Community  
& Economic Development for the Town of Athol, MA**

**Professor Darrel Ramsey-Musolf**

**Teaching Assistant Gregory Lewis**