Winchendon Village

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the Fall 2014 Planning Studio course in the Masters of Regional Planning program, students were assigned to one of three teams tasked with creating a revitalization vision plan for the communities of Athol, Chicopee, and Winchendon, Massachusetts. With six students, the Winchendon team, collectively known as Carousel Consulting, was asked by their client, the Town of Winchendon, to create a revitalization strategy to address declining investment and activity in the Central Street Corridor. As the “downtown” and commercial center of Winchendon, the consultants focused on creating a strategy for the corridor that suggested ways of generating reinvestment through the advancement of commercial development and diversity, infill development and cohesion, placemaking and place branding, open space and recreation amenities, and multi-modal circulation.

Throughout this process, Carousel Consulting adopted an approach to engage stakeholders that integrated their ideas, concerns, and needs into the revitalization recommendations. The ultimate goal was to not only rejuvenate the physical and commercial environment of the Central Street Corridor, but also to embrace the local character and to emphasize the local residents’ and stakeholders’ important role in the revitalization of the downtown—making Winchendon a great place to live, work, and play. Recommendations included zoning reform and enforcement, improved streetscapes, the integration of green infrastructure elements, increased business diversity, and improved social capital.

KEY FINDINGS

Traffic snarls
• Long wait times and traffic confusion
• Lack of pedestrian/bicycle amenities

Inconsistent development styles
• Setbacks, parking, facades vary throughout the downtown

Disinvestment in downtown
• High vacancy rate
• Buildings in poor repair

Need for identity and branding
• Downtown Winchendon lacks its own character and identity

Disconnection among local resources
• Bike path and waterfront are popular amenities, but not connected to downtown

METHODOLOGY

In order to solicit the opinions of Winchendon residents, a public workshop was held on September 29, 2014, at the Winchendon Senior Center. Twenty-two people were in attendance. Residents identified high vacancy rates, traffic issues, and a need for more business diversity downtown (or as one resident put it, “No more pizza places!”). In addition to the public workshop, Carousel Consulting also interviewed key stakeholders, met with experts, investigated precedent studies, performed spatial analysis, completed visual surveys, and reviewed scholarly research.

GEORGIC/HISTORIC CONTEXT

Winchendon, MA is located in north-central Massachusetts, on the border with New Hampshire. Nearby natural landmarks include Lake Winnisquam and Mount Monadnock. The Town was formerly a railroad hub, home to a robust mill industry that produced goods such as textiles, wood products, and even toys. However, as the railroads declined, so too did Winchendon’s manufacturing industries. The construction of the Quabbin Reservoir to the south resulted in the Town’s relative isolation from major highways such as Route 2 and Interstate 91. Nevertheless, Winchendon’s location at the junction of Routes 12 and 202 has made the Town a hub for commuters traveling to and from New Hampshire, Vermont, and Boston.

PROPOSED CHANGES

To make downtown Winchendon more of a destination than drives through, we propose adding pedestrian amenities such as bump outs, planters and parklets. As a traffic calming measure and to contribute to Winchendon’s future as an outdoor recreation destination, the Town should add bike lanes on Central Street. We also recommend infill development and zoning changes to promote a dense pattern of development as well as public-private partnerships to fill vacancies and support business needs.

Creating identity in Toy Town

Toytown has a great history and will continue to thrive. Nonetheless, the downtown is in need of a new branding strategy. Redoing Central Street and downtown Winchendon as “Winchendon Village” gives residents a chance to reclaim part of their heritage while moving into a new era of growth.

Winchendon should capitalize upon its natural and historic amenities and create an identity for Winchendon Village as a place where work and play come together.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Residents and town officials came together for a public workshop on September 29, 2014.