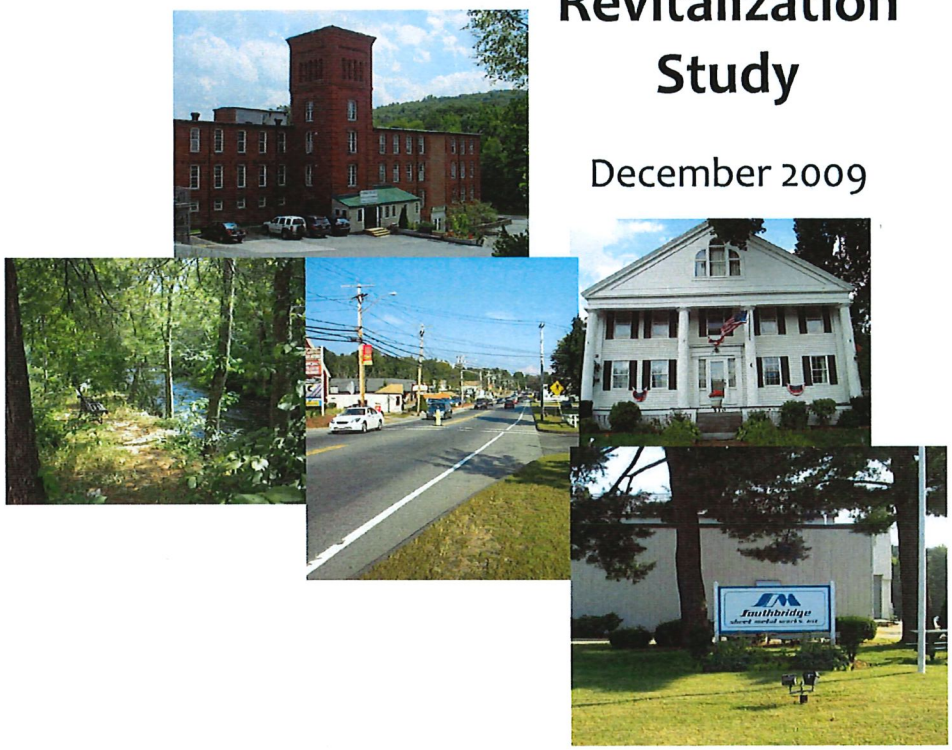
Commercial/Tourist District Revitalization Study

December 2009



Town of Sturbridge , MA

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Commercial Tourist District Revitalization Study

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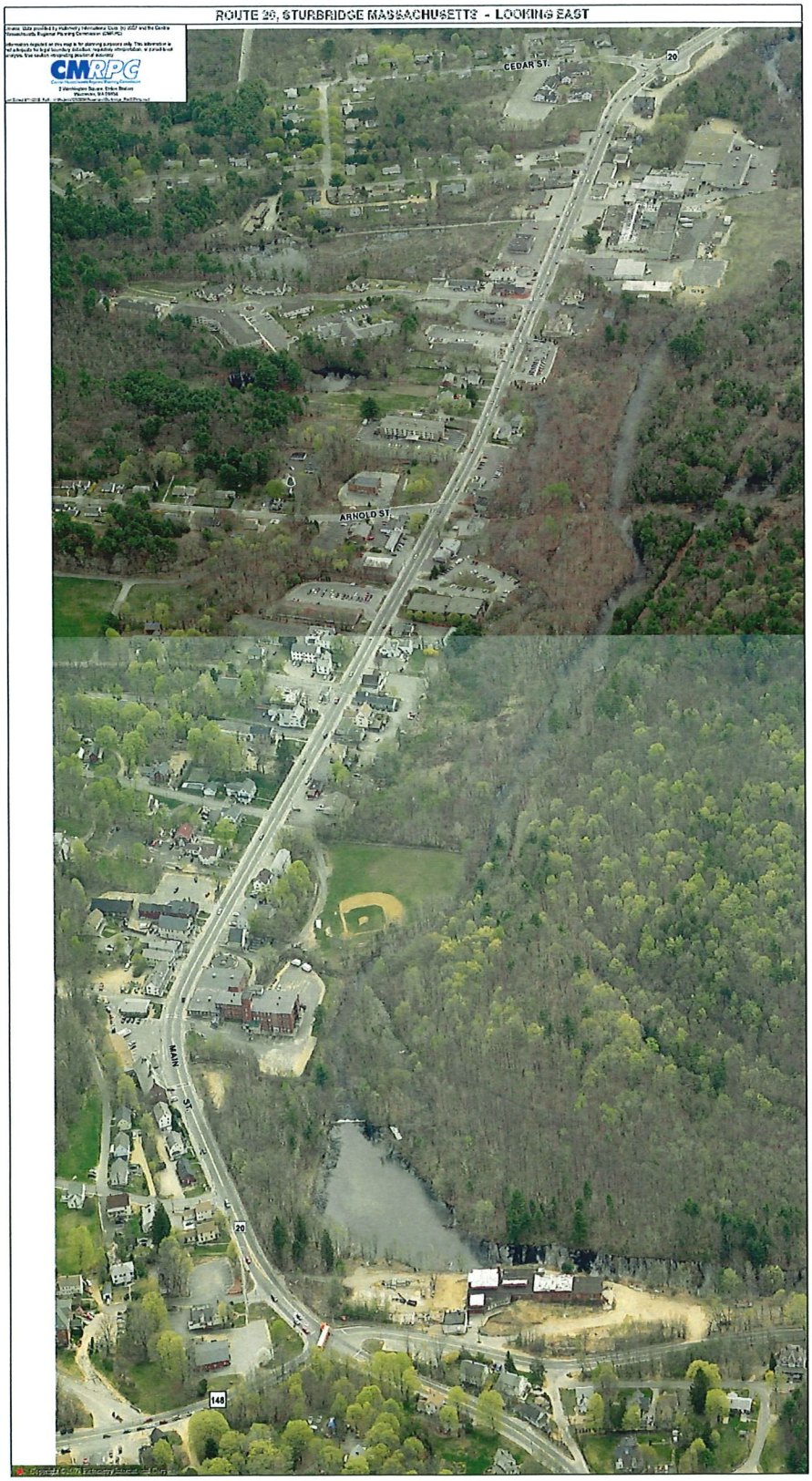
I
Introduction

Corridor Description

The Commercial Tourist District is a 1-mile long corridor along Route 20, extending approximately from the Brookfield Road intersection at its western boundary to Cedar Street on the east. Although the term refers to the zoning district for the area, the zoning map was amended in recent years to include additional properties outside the study area for this project.

In some situations, this would be a significant point of confusion. In Sturbridge, however, the "Commercial Tourist District" is widely recognized as this one-mile stretch of road. This western gateway to the Town has been developed over many decades and contains a mixture of small businesses (retail, professional offices, and services) interspersed with single- and multi-family housing.

The Commercial Tourist (CT) District has long enjoyed the reputation of providing unique shopping and dining experiences for residents and visitors alike. However, like so many commercial or downtown areas in recent years, the District has some vacant and/or underutilized spaces that are either For Sale or For Lease. These vacancies are cause for concern for many business owners, residents and officials who believe this is a vital area for the town that could help to capture Old Sturbridge Village (OSV) tourists and others and encourage them to eat shop and stay in the Town.


ROUTE 20, STURBRIDGE MASSACHUSETTS - LOOKING EAST
CMRPC
CEDAR ST.
ARNOLD ST.
MAIN ST.
20
148

Study Outline

The goal of this project was to study all of the facets of this District and formulate a realistic plan to revitalize it that would include specific strategies and action steps. This study and resulting report included the following elements:

- Identification of a shared vision through the input of as many stakeholders as possible using tools such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups.
- Discussion of the existing physical conditions of the CT District
- Review of existing land use regulations and community plans and studies to identify any hindrances to economic development in the CT District.
- Discussion of the commercial development opportunities in the CT District
- Discussion of the CT District's cultural, social and natural resources
- Identification of recommendations that will help to create and maintain an appealing and unique District, including provision for commercial uses that could be supported by residents and tourists, as well as ways to expand arts, social, and cultural destinations and activities and eco-responsible use of the Quinebaug River.

II
Vision

A "vision" is intended to be a short description of how we hope this area will appear and function. This description can and should then be used to guide all future decisions including development of zoning and regulatory provisions, and local planning board actions on a particular application.

Ideally, all regulations are closely related to the master plan or community vision. Then, a decision to issue a development permit would inherently advance the community vision. When a community's vision changes, then it is time to re-examine local bylaws, particularly zoning provisions.

Often, however, regulations are adopted in response to a given situation that may have elements that are perceived as being particularly desirable, or not desirable. It is easy to lose sight of the purpose the regulation sought to advance.

Based on extensive public input during this study, the following "Vision" emerged for the study area.

Vision for the Commercial Tourist District

To be an attractive neighborhood and commercial center that:

- is pedestrian-friendly;
- caters to tourists and local residents alike;
- offers a variety of shopping opportunities, restaurants, and inns, as well as establishments offering family entertainment during the day and night;
- contains natural water resources that can be passively or actively enjoyed; and
- provides adequate parking within a short walking distance to all of these facilities.

III
Existing Conditions

Introduction - Existing Land Uses

The Commercial Tourist District in Sturbridge is comprised of a 1-mile section of the western part of State Route 20 in Sturbridge, known locally as Main Street. It stretches from the Route 148 (Brookfield Road) intersection east to Cedar Street. The area is densely developed with a mix of commercial, industrial and residential uses, all interspersed along a busy two-lane roadway. Other than the I-90 Mass Turnpike, Route 20 is the major route for east-west traffic through Central Massachusetts.

The commercial uses in this stretch of Main Street include primarily restaurants, small retail uses including gift, antique, and hobby shops, larger retail uses such as furniture stores, and several motels and hotels. There are numerous professional offices including those for lawyers, doctors and real estate agents; and service-oriented businesses such as hairdressers, many of which are located in structures that were previously residential.

The industrial uses in this portion of Route 20 include three manufacturers of sheet metal, injection molding, and machined tools. Single and two-family homes are located throughout this district, as is an apartment complex containing approximately 25 units.

Several key properties in or adjacent to this District are significantly underutilized. They include the Blackington Building at 572 Main Street, the former Holland Mill at the corner of Route 20 and Holland Road (just outside of the District to the west), and the large Old Sturbridge Village (OSV) property, outside of the District to the east at 371 Main Street.

The Blackington Building was built in 1900 and is on a parcel just under 11,000 square feet in area. There are no parking spaces on the property, although there is a small unpaved lot across the street which is associated with this site. The building contains 8,600 square feet of space and is valued at only $65,500. It is mostly vacant and in need of extensive renovations, so any redevelopment of the structure will be costly. Alternatively, if the building was demolished, it could be replaced with a structure approximately 3500 square feet in size, and also include provisions for parking consistent with the requirements of the zoning bylaws.

The Holland Mill property includes a 22,000 square feet structure situated along the Quinebaug River on a lot that is approximately 8.5 acres in area. A small part of the building is being used for storage, but the structure is otherwise vacant. It is currently zoned for industrial use, but there has been interest in possibly redeveloping it for residential and retail uses. This property could play an important part in forming a western gateway to the Commercial Tourist district.

The sprawling property outside of the CT district to the east, at 371 Main Street, is a 35-acre site owned by OSV. There are seven single-story structures and one building, the former OSV Oliver Wight Tavern, is listed on the Massachusetts Historical Register. The stores are empty and the Town is leasing space temporarily in several of the former motel structures while the Town Hall undergoes extensive renovations. Although there was a recent proposal to redevelop the motel structures as a strip mall, this plan was not well-received and the property is now off the market.

In order to assess the current conditions, and have a context for a long-term vision for this critical and defining stretch of roadway, we have analyzed the characteristics related to the following key elements:

- Pedestrian friendliness. This includes a discussion of existing pedestrian facilities, streetscape amenities, and pedestrian-scale establishments
- Motor vehicle mobility. This includes a discussion of the existing circulation elements including the number of travel lanes and vehicle speeds.
- Architectural Elements. This includes a review of the existing structures in the study area, with a particular eye toward uniformity of style/design and condition
- Signage. This includes a review of street signage and business signs, particularly in terms of design consistency
- Parking. In addition to the adequacy of parking provisions, this includes a discussion of characteristics such as shared parking, connected parking, and the location of parking areas.

Evaluation of Key Elements

Pedestrian friendliness. Also described as "walkability," this term is used to describe the extent to which the built environment is friendly to the presence of people living, shopping, visiting, enjoying or spending time in an area. Some of the factors typically associated with influencing walkability include the presence or absence and quality of sidewalks or other pedestrian right-of-ways, traffic and road conditions, land use patterns, and building accessibility.

Sidewalks exist along the entire northern side of the roadway. Along the south side of the road in this stretch, sidewalks occur in only about one-third of the area, including a 100-foot length of brick walkway in front of the Sturbridge Marketplace, and a similar stretch in front of the Yankee Peddler.

There are approximately six crosswalks that exist in this district, however only one of them (at Cedar Street) has pedestrian signals. The design of the existing crosswalks is very basic, with only white painted lines that are fading. None of the existing crosswalks in this District has raised surfaces, or bright colors to catch motorists' eyes.

The condition of the crosswalks, together with a lack of sidewalks along much of the south side, discourages pedestrians from walking along that side of the corridor. See Figures 1, 2 and 3 below.

Figure 1 –

A long stretch of Route 20 (facing east) without a sidewalk on the south side of Route 20

Figure 2. Sidewalk on south side (facing west) in need of repair and cleaning

Figure 3. Typical crosswalk in this district

There are a number of areas where parking lots adjacent to the roadway have no curbing to define areas of entry or exit. This results in motor vehicles moving in an uncontrolled manner, and creates a safety hazard for pedestrians walking through these areas. Examples of this are shown in Figures 4 and 5.

Figure 4. Micknuck's Market, 570 Main Street no curbing to define entry/exit

Figure 5. 531 Main St – no curbing

As for streetscape amenities, a few properties have hanging flowers or other decorations, but not many. There are no benches along the street, with the exception of granite blocks in the small Quinebaug River pocket park next to Sturbridge Marketplace and the three benches just east of the Senior Center in the small pocket park there. There are many mature trees in this district, but no continuous pattern of trees lining the roadway and providing a canopy to give it a cozy feel. The streetlights are the standard, utilitarian type attached to utility poles that are used on many roadways, and the utility lines are prominent throughout the district. Bright red and yellow "Welcome to Sturbridge" banners are attached to many of the utility poles along this corridor, to catch motorists' and pedestrians' eyes (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 -- Utility lines and "Welcome" banner

About 90% of the establishments/properties have no storefront windows to lure customers and create pedestrian interest.

Building entrances provide another opportunity to attract a shopper's eye. The Boardwalk, and 538 Main Street Shoppes are two properties that contain a number of establishments, but the

entries to these establishments are not visible from the street. In both cases, the entry doors face parking lots located on the sides of these buildings (see Figures 7 and 8).

Entries facing parking lots located on the sides of the buildings

Figure 7. 538 Main Street Shoppes

Figure 8. The Boardwalk

Properties such as the Cumberland Farms, Dunkin Donuts, and a take-out pizza shop provide limited pedestrian appeal.

Interspersed with the retail sites, the District includes a number of non-retail properties, such as professional offices, the post office, American Legion, a large number of residences (single family and multi-family), and at least three moderately-sized industrial properties interspersed between the retail properties.

The setbacks vary from flush to the sidewalk to up to 30 ft with front or side parking. Figures 9 and 10 show properties with differing front setback distances.

Figure 9
Yankee Peddler no front setback

Figure 10
Southbridge Credit Union Shows a large setback

Figure 11
Antique Center Larger setback with parking in front

Through the length of the study area, there is little continuity of land use, inconsistent architectural style, and insufficient pedestrian resources and facilities.

Motor Vehicle Mobility

The roadway that provides the spine of this District is known locally as Main Street. It is a portion of State Route 20 and it is two lanes wide with no median. This portion of Route 20 is a State roadway, and therefore falls entirely under the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT). This portion of the roadway is classified as an urban principle arterial. The right-of-way is 60 feet wide, with a variable pavement width of 38 to 40 feet.

This District is bounded on the east by a signalized intersection at Cedar Street, where there is a turn-around to allow vehicles to change direction. East of this point, the road becomes four lanes wide as it makes its connection to the Massachusetts Turnpike (I-90) and continues east, ultimately to Boston. On the west, the District is bounded by a signalized intersection at Brookfield Road (Route 148).

On the north side of the road, there are seven other roads that enter Main Street along this stretch. There are no roadways intersecting this section of road from the south. There are no traffic signals located within the District, other than those at the study area's outer easterly and westerly boundaries.

The posted speed limit is 35 miles per hour, although traffic in this portion of Route 20 typically moves at an estimated average speed of 35-45 miles per hour. This one-mile corridor is part of a larger stretch of road, between Bates Hill Road and Route 131, which has been deemed as one of 32 "high crash corridors" in the Central Massachusetts region.

Because Route 20 is a high volume two-lane road, it is difficult for motorists to make left turns into or out of the many parking lots located along this stretch.

Architecture Elements

Condition and Uniformity of Structures

The architecture styles found along this portion of Main Street vary widely, from the Victorian-era brick Blackington Building with its multiple peaked roofs and a small tower, and the renovated brick mill building across the street (Sturbridge Marketplace), to the many wooden clapboard structures that house commercial entities, professional services, and residences. The style of many of the wooden structures is Early American or Victorian, but many others are non-descript, utilitarian structures, such as the generic-looking Quality Inn, the starkly designed Empire Chinese restaurant, and the plain industrial buildings. See Figures 12-17.

Examples of construction/architectural elements

Figure 12
Blackington Building
Victorian era

Figure 13
Sturbridge Marketplace
American Industry –
late 19th century

Figure 14
Sturbridge Country Inn
Colonial style

Figure 15
Empire Village
Restaurant

Brick facade

Figure 16
McCurdy Group
511 Main St

Victorian
reproduction

Figure 17
Southbridge Steel

Modern (late 20th Century) Industrial

The condition of the properties varies as well. There were several properties that are poorly maintained, such as the Blackington Building, which has broken, dirty front windows, tall weeds growing in the front of the building, and signs that are in disrepair. Other properties have ivy growing over large areas of the buildings; in some cases even growing over the building-mounted signs (see Figures 18 and 19). Several of the structures need new paint or other repairs.

Figure 18
Weeds and dirty windows in front of the Blackington building

Figure 19
Ivy growing over signs
Some call it charming,
others view it as requiring maintenance.

The architectural inconsistency detracts from the appearance and sense of continuity through the Corridor. Even where the buildings and design are favorable, however, individual property owners take different approaches to the site management. Where the exterior cosmetics are well kept, there is a sense of pride. Conversely, where the building and site appearance begin to deteriorate, it can be less appealing for a pedestrian to visit, or travel across the property.

Parking

On-street parking is not permitted in this portion of Route 20 and there are no municipal parking lots. The parking capacity appears to be currently inadequate for Rovezzi's Restaurant and for the Whistling Swan, and there are no parking spaces at the Blackington Building property. However, other sites have parking capacity that appears to be more than adequate, including the Home Fashions complex (which has a rear parking lot), and the 538 Main Street Shoppes. The Post Office and Dunkin Donuts generally have sufficient parking, except during specific time periods.

Signage

Signage style and size varies greatly in the District. Many of the signs are very attractive engraved wooden signs. A few large properties that house several establishments have one large sign with small wooden placards for each business. However, the design elements are inconsistent even on a single sign and, in some cases, the lettering is difficult to read in a moving vehicle (see Figures 20-21).

Figure 20
The Boardwalk

Figure 21
538 Main Street

Some properties that house only one business have a hodgepodge of signs of varied size and quality, as shown in Figure 22.

Figure 22
numerous signs of varied quality and style

Conclusions

The Commercial Tourist District is not particularly pedestrian-friendly due to the lack of continuous, pedestrian-scale establishments and facilities. There are multiple uses interspersed with the retail and service-oriented land uses. There are few store windows with attractive displays along the roadway. Streetscape amenities are also lacking, such as benches, specialized period street lights, street trees, and parks. The presence of relatively high volume, high speed traffic, and inadequate sidewalks and crosswalks add to the lack of appeal this District has for pedestrians.

Route 20 is a major east-west corridor in this area and there is a high volume of motor vehicle traffic passing through this District at any given time, including a fair amount of truck traffic. The relatively large width of this two-lane road, along with the absence of on-street parking, and the lack of traffic signals all contribute to relatively high vehicle speeds along this corridor. This high speed of pass-through traffic conflicts with the slower speed and frequent stopping and turning of motorists entering or exiting the many shops and restaurants in the District. It also inhibits pedestrians from attempting to cross this road to visit other establishments.

There is no unifying theme or style for the current structures in this District. It would benefit this District to have design standards that more specifically define a unifying theme for new structures or businesses. (In addition -- several properties have been allowed to deteriorate, which is no doubt a reflection of the fact that many of them are for sale or lease.)

Overall there appears to be an adequate number of parking spaces in this District, however the way they are distributed doesn't seem to provide enough spaces for many of the establishments. In addition, there is not enough parking in the central part of the District to allow visitors to walk to a majority of the establishments. Interconnecting lots, lot sharing, and on-street parking should be considered.

The signage bylaw needs to be revisited to determine whether changes are needed. Merchants have asked specifically for changes that would affect how multiple businesses housed in the same property can be adequately and attractively marketed with uniformly sized signs. Merchants should consider using colors and even symbols to ensure that the signage creates identity for the businesses, recognizable by passing motorists.

IV
Social & Cultural Resources

Town of Sturbridge benefits from the cultural and historical activities and events that occur on a regular basis at Old Sturbridge Village (OSV), located just outside of the Commercial Tourist District to the east. This facility opened its doors in 1946 and is described on its website as the largest outdoor history museum in the Northeast, providing a journey through time to a rural New England town of the 1830s. Visitors are invited to wander through more than 40 original buildings, each carefully researched, restored, and brought to the museum site from towns throughout New England. These include homes, meetinghouses, a district school, country store, bank, law office, printing office, carding mill, sawmill, gristmill, pottery, blacksmith shop, shoe shop, and cooper shop. Employees wearing authentic costumes provide historical interpretation of the daily activities of an early 19th-century community. Sturbridge residents attend for free, except during special events.

OSV is currently attracting approximately 250,000 visitors per year. This includes about 70,000 school children, with the remainder distributed equally between young families with children and senior citizens/day-trippers. Attendance had dropped off in recent years although preliminary numbers show about a 6% increase in attendance from 2008 to 2009.

Another important cultural resource in Sturbridge, albeit with a much smaller impact, is the Stageloft Repertory Theater. It has been located in Sturbridge for 13 years -- six at its current location at 450 Main Street in the Commercial Tourist District. With only 136 seats, this facility offers an intimate, affordable theater experience. There are 12 productions scheduled for 2010. Package deals are offered by the Publick House Historic Inn and The Sturbridge Host Hotel that include lodging, dinner and theater tickets.

The Sturbridge Host Hotel and Convention Center holds a variety of conferences, concerts and cultural events year round. Some of the events held there during the fall of 2009 included: a district bridge tournament, a martial arts competition, and a Country Folk Art Show.

V
Natural Resources

Introduction

Sturbridge is fortunate to have abundant water resources, including six Great Ponds, and the Quinebaug River. The Town also has a number of trails and a large expanse of open space. These resources have significant scenic, ecological, recreational, and socioeconomic values. The town includes more than 1200 acres of protected open space. Although none of that is located within the Commercial Tourist District, many are within a mile, and these spaces provide a destination for outdoor lovers to visit Sturbridge and perhaps shop, eat and stay in the Commercial Tourist District.

Quinebaug River

The Quinebaug River flows from west to east across Sturbridge as a moderate-flow river. It enters Sturbridge at the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) East Brimfield Reservoir/Long Pond flood control project, and flows through the steep valley of the western section of town along Route 20 in the village of Fiskdale and through the Commercial Tourist District. The river broadens and becomes marshy through the flatter area in the eastern section of the District and Old Sturbridge Village, before receiving an inflow from Cedar Pond, which provides enough speed to power a small mill site in OSV.

There are three access points in town, though only one in the CT District, at Turner's Field (just east of the Sturbridge Marketplace). None of the access areas are geared toward inexperienced boaters, as there are no boat ramps or otherwise safe ways to launch a canoe or kayak into the water. For those that do venture into this River, it offers Class 4-5 rapids in the spring from the Brimfield Dam to the area behind the Sturbridge Marketplace (located in the District). The fall is anther good time for boating on the River; however water levels are often too low in mid-summer.

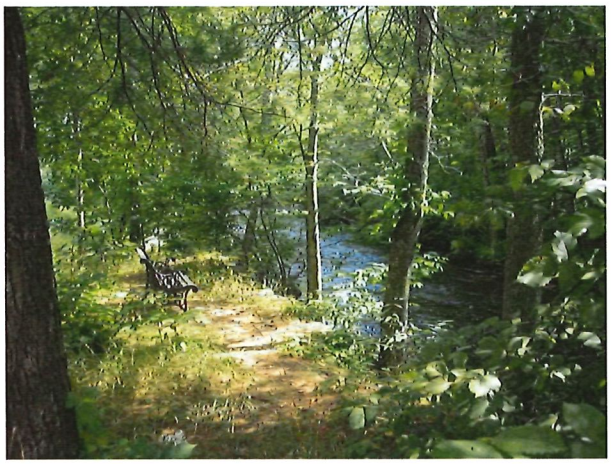
The Quinebaug River flows parallel to this corridor on the south side of Route 20, but it is not visible from any point due to the dense vegetation along the River. A dirt path along the River can be accessed by crossing a footbridge behind the Sturbridge Marketplace parking lot (see Figures 23 and 24). There is no signage directing people to this path, however, and it would not be readily apparent to passersby. Upon entering the path, a waterfall is visible to the west, and there are benches located along the path. This beautiful stretch of River has clear-flowing water, a thick line of trees and brush on both sides, and no trash visible.

Figure 23

View of footbridge to River from parking lot

Figure 24

Quinebaug River view – a few steps from parking lot.



Ponds

Great Ponds

Great Ponds are water bodies that are at least 10 acres in size in their natural state. Sturbridge has six Great Ponds. Generally public access to great ponds is required by the state except in cases when they are being used as a public water supply. Two Great Ponds are located in or adjacent to the District.

Long Pond is located just west of the District and encompasses an area that includes Sturbridge and Brimfield. The lake falls under the stewardship of the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, in partnership with the Massachusetts State Public Access Board. A one-lane concrete boat ramp that is open year round provides for easy access to East Brimfield Reservoir/ Long Pond. The public access is kept open in the winter, and its amenities include parking space for 15 trailers and 6 cars, a year-round portable toilet, and an informational kiosk. A boat ramp is located on the north side of U.S. Route 20 just east of the town line with Brimfield. In addition, there are two American Disabilities Act (ADA) fishing platforms that are open year round as well as a car top boat ramp with parking for 15 vehicles on Champeaux Road. Long Pond is 420 acres, fairly deep with an average depth of 22 feet, and is one of the cleanest lakes in Sturbridge.

Cedar Lake is located at the edge of the Commercial Tourist District, along the east side of Cedar Street. There are two access points, although the access off Burgess School Road is poor, parking is limited and there are no trash receptacles or sanitary provisions there. There is excellent access through the use of the Sturbridge Host Hotel's waterfront property, which is used extensively by town residents, hotel guests and tourists. On summer weekends, the lake may be quite congested with high speed boats.

Cedar Lake is 183 acres in size and at 15 feet deep is considered shallow. It is regarded as eutrophic due to the high level of nutrients it contains. Water clarity is not good and the water often has a tea color. Water quality concerns are being addressed by the promotion of good environmental stewardship practices such as riparian vegetation buffer zones, use of low or no phosphorus fertilizers, low or no-wake zones, etc.

Other Resources

There are a few fairly large green areas along the north side of Route 20, which offer a nice respite from the paved lots and dense development of this District. One of these areas is at the Senior Center, which offers a few benches (see Figure 24). Another location is a small pocket park located near the Sturbridge Marketplace. This location includes an interpretive sign, and several granite blocks could provide seating (see Figure 25). Unfortunately, there is no shade and no physical connection to the River, so it is not a particularly inviting spot. In fact, there is no indication that the River is even nearby.

Figure 24

Park in front of Senior Center

Figure 25

Pocket Park with Quinebaug River informational signage

Several trails are being created in Sturbridge including the Grand Trunk Trail, which will traverse the south side of the Quinebaug River. This offers an excellent opportunity to combine a hiking and biking trail with a kayaking/canoeing route. Building a footbridge over the River from the Grand Trunk Trail would connect it to the CT District, creating new outdoor activity resources and possibly economic benefits for this District.

Conclusion

Driving through the Corridor one might easily fail to notice the variety of natural resources in the area. These provide the opportunity for several other elements of activity in the District, including recreational activities, social activities, and resource-related economic development.

The US Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) owns significant sections of riverbank on both sides of the town, but there is no general understanding as to what agencies or individuals regulate activity on land that lies between the ACE areas. The Army Corps of Engineers has no direct ownership or control over the Quinebaug shores in the Fiskdale area of Sturbridge. This is significant in terms of both access and recreational use. Sturbridge currently owns Turners Field, a small parcel of riverfront land adjacent to the Fiskdale Mill. Its central location and easy water access are perfect for recreational use, but the waterfront is too small for public events such as the annual Run of the River.

The Town should work with the Fiskdale Mill (now the Sturbridge Marketplace) owners and other neighborhood landowners to explore possibilities for a public park/picnic area/boat ramp/parking in the vicinity of the mill dam where foot paths already exist, with preference given to an area adjacent to Turner's Field. Alternatively, the parcel immediately above the dam at the Route 20/148 intersection is presently undeveloped (partly owned by the Blackington Building owners).

The target market for Sturbridge should be family campers, pass-through visitors, and scenery viewers. Efforts should be made to enhance campground amenities, develop a marked scenic drive, coordinate events (especially during the autumn season) and expand merchandising.

VI
Existing Documents and Planning Materials

Introduction

Sturbridge has enjoyed a long history of planning for the community. The Town has supported a professional staff planner position, and has regularly engaged itself in specific and community-wide planning processes. Although the most recent comprehensive master plan is dated 1988, the other planning activities include data and recommendations that were appropriate for this Corridor study. The following documents were reviewed as part of this study:

- Town Zoning Bylaws
- Most current Master Plan (1988)
- Dialogue for the Future – Strategic Planning Survey (Fall 2002)
- Sturbridge Heritage & Preservation Partnership Regional Tourism Market Study (4/16/08)
- Sturbridge Reconnaissance Report, (June, 2007)
- Walkable Community Workshop (June 2009)

Current Zoning Provisions

Use Regulations

Current Zoning regulations allow a variety of uses in the Commercial Tourist District, including retail, restaurant, overnight lodging, professional offices and personal services. In addition, a variety of residential uses are permitted in the Corridor. The zoning bylaw restricts the sizes of the establishments (up to 7,500 square feet per unit/store/etc).

Site Plan Review is required for all uses except Single and 2-Family Housing.

A high proportion of the merchants and residents that were surveyed for this study indicated that they would like to see movie theaters and miniature golf courses in town, as well as other family activity-type establishments. These particular uses are currently permitted by Special Permit in the Commercial Tourist District.

The dimensional requirements in this District are the same as in the other commercial districts, and do not contribute to the atmosphere that the Town has expressed a desire for in this District. Currently, the minimum lot size is 1 acre, front setback areas must be at least 25 feet, and buildings are limited to 3-stories or 35 feet in height.

Although these apply primarily to new construction, altering the dimensional requirements may ultimately contribute to advancing the Vision of the Corridor as a pedestrian-friendly neighborhood commercial center.

Parking Regulations

The Town's parking regulations were last amended in 2007 and are fairly typical of standard commercial parking requirements. Generally speaking, a parking space is required for each 200 square feet of retail space, for every 3 seats of restaurant seating capacity, and for each employee. For specific requirements, be sure to consult the current zoning bylaws.

The zoning bylaws allow "sharing" of parking spaces between adjacent businesses located within 600 feet of each other in very limited cases. The opportunity to share parking should certainly be expanded.

To encourage a "village" type of atmosphere, the parking regulations both should be amended.

Signage Regulations

The signage regulations have been periodically revised, as recently as 2009.

In order to promote the village atmosphere, internally-lit signage is not permitted anywhere in Sturbridge. Other key signage provisions applying to the Commercial Tourist Zoning District include the following:

- Each commercial, professional, and industrial establishment within the town limits may have up to 2 signs on the property. Signs may be up to 18 feet in height (see zoning bylaw for specific requirements). One of these signs may be free-standing.
- For multiple-tenants sites, a multiple tenant sign up to 50 square feet is permitted. The multiple listing sign must be wooden-faced, and individual signs within a multiple listing sign must be uniform in size and color.
- No signage is allowed to be located within a 10 foot setback area from the street right of way/property line.
- Window signs are allowed up to 25% f the window size.

During this study, merchants were nearly unanimous in their desire to be allowed to have larger signs with fewer guidelines. Some merchants also indicated that the existing sign design requirements do not result in signs that are visible enough to passing motorists. Additional signage is sometimes sought, as well, particularly at multi-tenant sites.

Planning Goals

Even 20 years ago, the focus for this Corridor was on developing or advancing a village-scale, pedestrian-friendly, mixed use environment. Key objectives for development in this area as identified in 1988 and in numerous subsequent planning projects since then include the following:

- Develop more restrictive controls, including architectural controls, to govern the design and appearance of existing and proposed new structures and parcels.
- Promote a healthy and active community through providing safe walking trails and sidewalks.
- Modify allowed uses so that they are oriented to tourist traffic.
- Improve the appearance through the following measures:

- ✓ Expand street trees and landscaping (especially in off-street parking lots)
- ✓ Include expanded landscaping requirements
- ✓ Explore ways to place utilities underground.
- ✓ Explore reducing curb cuts by sharing curb cuts.
- ✓ Explore increased sidewalks to improve pedestrian safety and mobility.

These recommendations continue to factor into current discussions, and the recommendations contained in this plan.

Conclusions

Generally, streetscape improvements have been consistently identified as a desired project for this Corridor. This includes burying the utility lines in this portion of Route 20, expanding the sidewalk provisions, adding curbing including bump-outs, improving the crosswalk provisions, adding some pedestrian crossing signals, planting street trees and other landscape plantings, benches and other street furniture, adding architecturally sensitive street light poles and fixtures and even undertaking a sign and façade design and improvement program.

While the Town is interested in moving the utility lines underground, the extreme cost of doing so makes the project cost-prohibitive. Current estimates indicate a $7M cost to design the changes, get the necessary permits, and complete the construction. This price tag includes the cost of new, period street lighting, and involves a number of companies, including electric, cable and phone. It is possible that grant funds could be secured for a portion of the work, but it is most likely that the cost would well exceed such grant funding.

VII

Economic Development Potential

Introduction

There is a mix of commercial, residential and industrial uses in the Commercial Tourist District, as well as some exempt uses. There is also an Industrial zoning district located within the Commercial Tourist District. As shown, approximately 41% of the District's floor space is used for commercial purposes, the most of any use. The percentage of space used for residential is about the same as that used for industrial -- about 21% of the total floor space. Exempt uses account for about 17% of the existing space and this includes the Burgess Elementary School and the Senior Center.

Table 1
Uses in Commercial Tourist District

	Residential	Commercial	Industrial	Exempt
Square Feet	155,386	303,694	147,104	126,726
Percentage of Total	21%	41%	20%	17%

This mixture represents an appropriate balance for a mixed use Corridor.

According to a field investigation and a review of the Realtor's Multiple Listing Service, there is currently about 130,000 square feet of vacant commercial space for rent or sale in or adjacent to the District. This includes an estimate of the commercial space that would be available with the redevelopment of the Blackington Building at 572 Main Street, the former Holland Mill at the corner of Route 20 and Holland Road (just outside of the District to the west), and the large OSV property outside of the District, to the east.

Using GIS assessor's and parcel data it was determined that there are only about 2.5 acres of vacant developable land remaining in this District. Developable refers to the assessor's determination which is based on zoning regulations and the existence of land constraints (wetlands, floodplain, etc.)

Jobs by Sector in Sturbridge

Table 2 shows the total number of jobs in Sturbridge for different sectors for the years 2001 – 2008. The top three sectors in Sturbridge throughout these years have been Manufacturing, Retail, and Accommodation and Food Services. Mirroring the trend throughout Massachusetts and New England, the number of manufacturing jobs plummeted during this period by almost 60%. The number of retail jobs has stayed fairly constant with only a 10% fluctuation between the high of 1224 jobs in 2002 and a low of 1095 in 2007. The number of jobs in the Accommodation and Food Services rose to a peak of 1548 in 2002 but then dropped more than

15% between 2002 and 2005, holding relatively steady with about 1300 employed in this sector. It is important to note that in 2008 the average weekly salary for manufacturing jobs was $1163, while this figure was $397 and $302 respectively for the Retail sector and the Accommodation & Food Service sector.

Table 2
Average Employment in Sturbridge by Sector
2001-2008

	2001	**2002**	**2003**	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**
Total, All Industries, All Ownership	5,307	5,271	4,995	4,845	4,852	4,646	4,737	4,654
Total All industries, Private Ownership	4,715	4,666	4,400	4,273	4,278	4,060	4,124	n/a
Construction	94	83	82	89	113	109	99	91
Manufacturing	1093	804	598	479	482	465	467	450
Wholesale Trade	83	76	69	79	53	34	46	54
Retail Trade	1,149	1,224	1,194	1,196	1,194	1,160	1,095	1,097
Transportation & Warehousing	61	68	51	53	48	54	---	64
Finance & Insurance	87	84	105	115	119	124	146	144
Real Estate & Rental and Leasing	40	45	49	40	36	32	30	28
Professional & Technical Services	73	66	73	75	114	126	136	159
Administrative & Waste Services	---	21	22	20	---	143	---	106
Health Care & Social Assistance	198	199	209	218	205	204	247	245
Accommodation & Food Services	1,462	1,548	1,504	1,500	1,372	1,291	1,348	1,301
Other Services, ex. Public Admin	68	76	77	93	87	83	118	113
Total, All Industries, All Ownership, Average Weekly Wage	$537	$518	$518	$517	$523	$543	$569	$590

Recent Activity

Marketing

In the spring of 2009 a grassroots organization comprised of shop, tavern and inn-keepers, civic leaders, professionals and townspeople was formed called the Merchants of Sturbridge (MoS). This group has as its mission "To provide exciting promotions, friendly interactions, and memorable events to our local area residents and visitors so they will choose to shop, eat, stay and play in Sturbridge instead of going to other towns." The MoS has developed and implemented a number of marketing tools and programs since its inception, including Coupon booklets, Promotional flyers, signage, a website and a Facebook page.

Future promotional activities may include shopping events and a 4th of July parade, ending at Turners Field in the District. This group appears to have a large and active membership with many activities occurring on a regular basis.

Development

Basketville, a Sturbridge icon, closed its doors in 2007. This represents a fundamental shift for the community, so long associated with the basket-making company store. Recent activity has resulted in the reuse of this critical property by the Pioneer Brewing Company. Due to open along with a smokehouse and coffeehouse, this may represent a shift in the target market for the Commercial Tourist District, departing a bit from activities focusing on small children and instead focusing on a variety of activities to satisfy the shopping, eating and recreational activities of adults.

Conclusions

Sturbridge can be compared to another similarly-sized tourist town in New England, Plymouth MA, in that it is a destination location with elements of a pass-through market. It also has a similar restaurant mix and hotel price points. The hotels in Sturbridge have more meeting space than in Plymouth but there are fewer kid-oriented amenities. In addition, family attractions are lacking in Sturbridge. There are also more outdoor recreational activities in Sturbridge than in Plymouth, but they may not be challenging enough for hard-core enthusiasts.

VIII
Recommendations

VISION FOR THE COMMERCIAL TOURIST DISTRICT

To be an attractive neighborhood and commercial center that:

- is pedestrian-friendly;
- caters to tourists and local residents alike;
- offers a variety of shopping opportunities, restaurants, and inns, as well as establishments offering family entertainment during the day and night;
- contains natural water resources that can be passively or actively enjoyed; and
- provides adequate parking within a short walking distance to all of these facilities.

Goals and Recommendations

Generally, the Town wishes to make this Corridor more sustainable, viable and walkable, encouraging pedestrian activity and links to existing and potential retail, food and recreational opportunities.

There are several ways to make a community more walkable. Sidewalks should be implemented where there are "sidewalk gaps." Obstructions like sign posts and utility poles can decrease the walkable width of the sidewalk, so alternative locations for these obstructions, especially sign posts, should be used. Quality maintenance and proper lighting of sidewalks should be sustained to reduce obstructions, improve safety, and generally encourage walking. Another way to make sidewalks safer is to implement buffers, which are areas of grass between the street and the sidewalk. An additional benefit of buffers is that the vegetation absorbs the carbon dioxide from automobile emissions and assists with water drainage.

Making crosswalks safer is also a key to walkability. Curb extensions decrease the radii of the corners of the curb at intersections. Curb extensions calm traffic and decrease the distance pedestrians have to cross. On streets with parking, curb extensions allow pedestrians see oncoming traffic better where they would be forced to walk into the street to see past parked cars otherwise. Striped crosswalks, or zebra crossings, also provide safer crossings because they provide better visibility for both drivers and pedestrians.

There is no unifying theme or style for the current structures in this District. It would benefit this District to have design standards that more specifically define a unifying theme for new structures or businesses. In addition, several properties have become a bit deteriorated.

1. **<u>Goal</u>: Facilitate walkability. Expand and improve sidewalks on both sides of Route 20 along the entire Commercial Tourist District Corridor**

   A. Develop a program to construct ADA compliant sidewalks along the entire southern side of this corridor, and fill in sidewalks where they are missing along parking lots on the north side. Sidewalks are required to be at least 5 feet wide but wider walks, perhaps 8 feet, would increase the comfort of the pedestrian experience. Sidewalk elevations should be maintained across curb openings to help create definition for pedestrians, and also to help slow the traffic as it enters or exits properties.

   B. Upgrade crosswalks. Upgrades may be accomplished with textured or raised crosswalks, stamped concrete, alternative materials, and high visibility markings, especially in strategic locations along this corridor.

   C. Consider installing center grassy median "islands" along the center of the roadway to provide shorter crossing distances (which would also add more green space to this District).

   D. Consider adding pedestrian signalization at Brookfield Road and at least one other crosswalk location in the Corridor.

2. **<u>Goal</u>: Implement traffic calming measures to reduce travel speeds and increase predictability with regard to turning movements.**

   A. Narrow the width of the travel lanes in the CT District Route 20 road surface to 12 feet per travel lane, in accordance with Federal Highway Administration guidelines.

   B. Plant street trees along this corridor.

   C. Consider establishing parallel parking on one side of this corridor.

   D. Consider installing curb extensions at the Arnold and Cedar Street intersections and at selected crosswalks.

3. **<u>Goal</u>: Enhance the pedestrian experience along the CT District Corridor by adding attractive, consistent streetscape elements.**

   A. Develop a streetscape improvement program, including high quality, architectural street lighting, fencing and plantings, street benches and other street furniture.

   B. Investigate the possibility of moving power and communications utility lines underground.

4. **<u>Goal</u>: Develop public parking spaces in this District to encourage walking between various areas of shops and restaurants.**

   A. Collaborate with existing large property owners, particularly industrial property that may be currently underutilized, to utilize under-used parking areas.

   B. Identify properties within or adjacent to the Commercial Tourist District Corridor that might be purchased by the Town in order to establish public parking areas.

C. Consider working with MassDOT to establish parallel parking on one side of the roadway in this Corridor.

D. Reduce the number of parking spaces required by the Zoning Bylaw in this District.

5. **<u>Goal</u>: Establish small "pocket parks" in front setback areas to make this section more appealing to pedestrians.**

A. Offer tax incentives to the industrial property owners for allowing the use of some of their front lawn areas to be used as small simple "pocket parks" for pedestrians.

6. **<u>Goal</u>: Facilitate the development/redevelopment of vacant or underutilized properties to enhance this District's draw as a commercial center.**

A. Continue to provide tax increment financing and other economic development incentives to developers interested in investing in any of the properties mentioned above.

B. Consider rezoning property on the edges of the Corridor, particularly such critical sites as the former Holland Mill site, to ensure the allowed uses complement and support the District objectives.

C. Develop zoning bylaws that promote redevelopment and reuse of existing structures. Such "infill" approaches would, in particular, waive the required parking requirements when a property is proposed for redevelopment. Maintaining an active and vibrant property contributes significantly to the vitality of the District and the economic sustainability of the community.

7. **<u>Goal</u>: Encourage attractive, effective signage throughout the CT District that is consistent with a unifying New England village theme in design and size, and that is readable by passing motorists.**

Specifics on sign design will be contained in the recommendations developed by the consultant team working on the new design guidelines for the town. The current dimensional regulations may be adequate if the town is successful in slowing traffic speed in this District, and if property owners and merchants apply the guidelines in an effective manner.

8. **<u>Goal</u>: Facilitate development and redevelopment that is consistent with a unifying design theme for architecture/building facades of new or expanded structures and site design.**

The Town is currently working with a firm to develop updated approaches, elements and unifying design themes. The Design Guidelines and zoning bylaws should be modified to reflect the goal of creating a unifying traditional New England village design for this District. This type of design calls for a densely developed neighborhood with very small front and side setbacks, smaller minimum lot sizes, and front entries oriented to the roadway and pedestrian routes.

The following are general recommendations associated with the development design guidelines and zoning dimensional regulations, however specifics on form, materials, and

dimensional requirements will be contained in the recommendations developed by the consultant team working on the new design guidelines for the town.

A. Consider reducing the dimensional requirements in the CT District, particularly with regard to minimum lot size and front setback areas, and increasing the maximum lot coverage.

B. The design of new structures should, to the extent practical for the proposed use, reflect a form and materials reflective of the traditional New England village character.

C. New structures should have building facades with a scale and appearance of a traditional New England village, with well-defined front entrances that are oriented towards the roadway, public spaces and pedestrian access routes, including sidewalks and private walkways.

D. Develop infill or redevelopment/reuse provisions in the zoning bylaws that facilitate reuse of existing structures by exempting those activities from certain current requirements, notably parking provisions.

Specifics on sign design will be contained in the recommendations developed by the consultant team working on the new design guidelines for the town.

9. Goal: Create a physical and conceptual connection between the Commercial Tourist District and the Quinebaug River, nearby ponds and trails.

A. Develop a riverwalk along the north side of the Quinebaug River through the District, and a footbridge over the River to connect it with the proposed Grand Trunk Trail along the south side of the River, as well as the open space recently purchased by the Town adjacent to that trail.

B. Encourage property owners in the District to develop trails/pathways creating physical connections from their properties to the riverwalk.

C. Create signage in the District directing visitors to the River/riverwalk, Long Pond, Cedar Lake, and the open space properties in town that are available for public use.

D. Create colorful and creative tourist brochures that promote the town's natural resources. Broadly distribute the brochures to all businesses in the District and throughout the town, the Chamber of Commerce, MoS, OSV, and to other entities outside of the town to bring outdoor enthusiasts into Sturbridge.

Summary

Even without changing the existing pavement lines of Route 20, there are a number of streetscape elements that could be employed to affect traffic calming and walkability.

- Several previous studies have advocated installing a traffic signal at Arnold Road. This report did not investigate the data that would support this effort. However, signalization here would provide an opportunity to address a number of elements that are addressed here. Specifically, a traffic signal at Arnold Road should include pedestrian crossing signals. This would provide an opportunity for safe and controlled passage across Route 20.

- There are three suggestions above that result in narrowing the existing travel lanes.
  - Allowing parking on one side of the street would provide some much-needed public parking opportunity in the District. However, it should be done only in concert with bump-out curbing that is strategically located in order to facilitate clear pedestrian movement.
  - Using a center turn lane would provide an opportunity for turning traffic to get out of the flow of through-traffic, reducing turning conflicts but not necessarily reducing vehicles speed in the area.
  - Using a center grassy median would likely reduce speed by narrowing and separating the travel lanes, and would provide a pedestrian "half-way" point to wait until the next safe opportunity to complete the street crossing. However, it would not remove turning traffic from the flow.

- Using a center turn lane in some portions of the road and a grassy median in other stretches could provide the visual characteristics that help slow traffic and improve appearance while periodically giving turning traffic the opportunity to be channeled out of the travel lane. This could provide an added benefit of significantly reduce many minor crash situations.

- Vegetation and street trees should be incorporated into any center median/grassy island plan in order to provide visual points of interest and shade. The landscaping activity should be carried to the outer portions of the right of way, between the edge of pavement and the property lines, in order to continue to establish the preferred atmosphere.

- Developing a wider, continuous sidewalk on both sides of the road is essential. Where the walkway passes industrial activities, the Town, business development associations and the local property owner should consider placement of benches, wayfinding signage, and attractive landscaping in order to support their presence in the pedestrian-oriented CT District. Where such actions are not available, vegetation should be used as screening.

- Of course, replacing overhead utilities with underground services, replacing the existing street lighting with architectural fixtures, and adding benches and other appropriate street furniture would contribute significantly to the desired vision.

- A sign and façade program to help address individual properties would complement this ambitious streetscape initiative. The current sign regulations include a number of design criteria in order to ensure that the appearance of the District is consistent with the Vision that has been consistently articulated in planning and citizen projects over multiple decades. The independent effort to update the Town's design guidelines for this District must be attentive to the objectives of the Town's CT District Vision.

A typical streetscape improvement project focuses on walkway connections, separating pedestrians from vehicular traffic, providing vegetation, shade, and benches, and also ensuring adequate lighting, decorative light posts, and coordinated signage and facades.

- Local businesses and business organizations have been working to improve the District's presence. Their efforts are essential to success. Coordinated events, expanded merchandising and enhanced amenities at campgrounds, hotels and other lodging establishments will help establish a critical mass for activity in the area.

- Efforts to integrate the Quinebaug River with the CT District will provide recreation opportunities and broaden the availability of activities for visitors. In addition, the River's water quality may benefit through increased attention and stewardship.

Overall, the success of this as any Plan, requires diligent pursuit. Most often, an implementation committee is successful in keeping the objectives of the Plan in play, coordinating efforts to realize the objectives of the Plan, and seizing upon opportunities as they occur.

Potential Funding Sources:

In some cases, recommendations can be achieved through staff and consultants, to review existing bylaws and develop amendments that would bring them into consistency with the guidelines recommended. But many of these recommendations are brick/mortar recommendations, requiring dollars for design and construction costs. Potential funding sources for these are identified below:

- Work with MassDOT to consider elements of this program that could be programmed on the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). Since this Corridor is included in a list of high-crash corridors compiled by CMRPC for the years 2004-2006, Surface Transportation Program funds could potentially be used.
- Explore accessing funds under the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Transportation Enhancement Program. This program funds community-based projects that expand travel choices and enhance the transportation experience by improving the cultural, historic, aesthetic and environmental aspects of our transportation infrastructure. Included in the list of 12 eligible activities are the creation of bicycle and pedestrian facilities and streetscape improvements. This federal program is administered through MassDOT and CMRPC for Central Massachusetts projects.
- Work with MassDOT to explore the possibility of applying for Public Works Economic Development (PWED) funds for some of the suggested roadway and sidewalk improvements in the event of a larger, job-creating redevelopment opportunity.
- Utilize local Chapter 90 funds, in cooperation with MassDOT.
- Consider using funds overseen by the existing Betterment Committee to fund a program for sidewalk maintenance or improvements.
- Work with the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development to identify various funding sources, particularly the programs that support Streetscape programs, including various programs in the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG).
- The Department of Conservation and Recreation's (DCR) Recreational Trails Grants Program.
- Tourism programs, through DHCD, Mass Office of Travel and Tourism, US Economic Development Administration.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Analysis of Stakeholder Input

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS

The following is a an analysis of the information gleaned from interviews with over 20 district merchants, town department heads, prior town planners, large business owners, local land developers, and others.

- There are approximately 35 commercial vacancies in this district.
- An equal number of the merchants interviewed own or rent the properties where their businesses are located.
- A majority of businesses were either sole proprietors or had up to five employees. What does this mean?
- These businesses have existed in Town an average of 16 years. They ranged from 2 to 30 years.
- A majority of business owners reported that business is poor. A very small minority of those interviewed reported that their business is doing okay or good
- The businesses that reported to be doing well are those that appeal to niche interests or hobbies.
- The types of businesses that have done more poorly in recent years are gift shops and antique shops.
- Most of the businesses reported a slow downturn that started several years ago (8-11 yrs), and then a steep downturn that started in 2008, which mirrors the national economic downturn.
- Top reasons given for slumping business and a large number of vacancies in the district (in no particular order):
    - The district is unfriendly/unsafe for pedestrians
    - Signage regulations are too restrictive (don't allow signs that are large or visible enough to be seen by passing motorists). Parking issues - not enough parking spots or regulations are too stringent/inflexible and should allow more sharing of spaces between businesses.
    - Anti-business attitude of townspeople/town officials
    - Town hasn't been marketed enough.
    - OSV visitors dwindled in recent years.
    - Lack of nighttime activities and other family activities outside of OSV to keep visitors in town.
- Top actions suggested to help revitalize business in this district:
    - Enhance streetscape and unity of design: add park benches, period lampposts, repair/upgrade facades and landscaping in front of properties
    - Add more sidewalks and crosswalks to improve pedestrian safety and appeal.
    - Change signage bylaw to be less restrictive (size and number of signs) to improve the ability of businesses to market themselves, but retain the aesthetic requirements and apply the bylaw consistently.

- Apply more flexibility to permitting regulations and the enforcement of those regulations, especially when dealing with small businesses.
- Create a centralized municipal parking lot or create interconnected parking lots behind the businesses, and reduce the number of parking spaces required for each property owner.
- Encourage more unique, upscale shops and outdoor cafes in this district.
- Encourage new businesses in town that provide entertainment (mini-golf, kayak rentals, movie theaters, etc.) to keep OSV tourists in town longer.
- Highlight the presence of the Quinebaug River, by making it more physically visible and creating a river walk/park along it and from the roadway.
- Greatly increase marketing of the town's outdoor attractions – hiking/walking trails, state parks, campgrounds, boating on the Quinebaug River and the nearby lakes. This will help bring more visitors to this district, especially the restaurants.

SUMMARY OF RESIDENT SURVEY

A residential survey was conducted for those living in this district through an online survey advertised in 2 local papers (Sturbridge Villager and Southbridge Evening News) and flyers posted at the local Laundromat and St Anne's Parish Center. Hard copies of the survey were also deployed at several locations in the district –the 1767 apartment complex at Main St, the Autumn Ridge Over 55 Senior condominium development off of Main St., and the Sturbridge coffee house. The following is a summary of the results from this survey:

- The majority of residents that responded had either lived in the neighborhood between 2 and 5 years, or over 10 years (38.5 % for each group).
- Restaurants and grocery stores were reported as the establishment types that were frequented the most in the district.
- Movie theaters were mentioned the most as the type of establishment the respondents wanted in the district that wasn't currently located there.
- The convenience and close proximity to stores were mentioned the most as what residents liked best about living in this district.
- Traffic problems were by far the top answer to the question of what the residents liked least about this district.
- The top suggestion for improving the district was to repair and extend the sidewalks.

The common elements captured in the interviews and the survey responses were the need to upgrade sidewalks and crosswalks to improve pedestrian safety and appeal, and the desire for more night-time activities, such as movie theaters.

FOCUS GROUP

A focus group was formed with 5 merchants to provide input into the development of a vision for the district. A summary of this group's input in the first meeting is shown below.

Uses:

- Encourage a greater mix of clustered retail shops, restaurants, and inns, and less industrial and residential uses.
- Retail use should include outlet stores, a general store, sporting goods/outdoor wear stores, shops with artisan/craftsman wares (possibly produced on site in live/work properties).
- More family-style restaurants
- Residential should be encouraged on upper floors of buildings, with commercial use on first floor.

Parking:
Add additional parking on the street and behind the buildings in this corridor.

Unifying theme/style:
Traditional New England town center with continuous Colonial-style clapboard buildings that are close together with minimal breaks in between. Buildings should be close to sidewalks, with 2 – 3 stories and with storefront displays. The town centers in Shelburne Falls, Lenox, and Stockbridge were provided as examples.

Appendix B

SWOT Analysis comments

The vision was crafted for the Commercial Tourist District based on all of the public outreach conducted for this study, which included a residential survey, property and business owner interviews, a public forum, and input from a focus group formed specifically for this study. This focus group provided a number of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with this vision and those are delineated below.

Strengths

- Increases business activity for existing businesses and encourages new commercial growth, generating new jobs.
- Increases length of stay for tourists
- Draws a different type of tourist, those interested in natural resources, which could also increase commercial activity.
- Improves quality of life for residents

Weaknesses

- Route 20 (Main Street in this district) is a state-owned road, therefore the town has less control over any modifications to it than it does on locally-controlled roads.
- Long length of district hampers pedestrians from accessing or knowing what is offered within the entire stretch
- Existing controversy in town between those that wish to see economic development expansion and those who do not.
- Past history of low level of support from town officials toward businesses to help them succeed and grow.
- The existence of industrial properties in and adjacent to this district detracts from pedestrian-friendly feel and beauty of the area adjacent to the Quinebaug River.
- Poor access to Quinebaug River and future public access is complicated by existence of many owners of land adjacent to River.
- Ugliness of utility poles and lines.
- Inconsistency of style, uses and upkeep of structures in the district.

Opportunities

- Long length of district is conducive to use of "trolleys" for shoppers and tourists.
- Use of large, attractive directories at both ends of district and in between to inform visitors about what's there.
- Existence of fairly large amount of vacant land, set back along north of Main Street (where now-defunct motel is located) that could potentially be used for municipal parking
- Riverfront Holland Mill property just west of the district is for sale
- Blackington building, which is for sale, could be redeveloped as a unique mixed-use facility
- Town could explore taking over ownership of Route 20 in this district and possibly create on-street parking, add bicycle lanes, and widen sidewalks.

- Creation of a riverwalk/bikeway along the north side of the Quinebaug River with a footbridge to connect to the planned Grand Trunk Trail, and walkways connecting to the sidewalk along Route 20.
- Create park-like greenspace at either end of the district to make attractive gateways.
- Collaborate with industrial property owners to utilize under-used parking areas.
- Use existing Betterment Committee funds for snow removal, sidewalk and streetscape improvements in the district
- Incentives to owners to encourage property improvement/beautification

Threats

- Current zoning may not be in sync with vision
- Lack of leadership with town employees or boards
- Current state of economy
- Lack of funding
- Old Sturbridge Village losing visitors or closing
- Inability to gain public access to property along the Quinebaug River
- Competition of commercial area along Route 131 if zoning changes are made to allow similar size and types of businesses/uses as this district.
- More service-oriented businesses replace retail, restaurants and other pedestrian or tourist oriented businesses that leave.
- Lack of town support for new businesses or success and expansion of existing businesses.
- Dividing Route 20 westward throughout the district would hurt businesses there.

Appendix C

Planning Documents

The following documents were reviewed as part of this study:

- Town Zoning Bylaws
- Most current Master Plan (1988)
- Dialog for the Future – Strategic Planning Survey (Fall 2002)
- Sturbridge Heritage & Preservation Partnership Regional Tourism Market Study (4/16/08)
- Sturbridge Reconnaissance Report, (June, 2007)
- Walkable Community Workshop (June 2009)

Pertinent elements of each of these documents are summarized below.

TOWN ZONING BYLAWS

Allowed (by right) uses in this district include:

- Large variety of retail establishments, professional and business services
- Restaurants and bakeries serving food for consumption on premises.
- Hotels, motels and inns
- Beauty salons and barber shops
- Dry cleaning and laundromats
- Residential use limited to single family dwellings, up to 2 accessory apartments in each commercial building, and residential units located above the first story of a structure, primarily used for a permitted use

Dry-cleaners and laundromats cannot exceed 4,000 square feet, and all other structures (except the hotels, motels and inns which have no limit) cannot exceed 7,500 square feet. These maximum floor space limits are higher than the limits for the Historic District (6,000 square feet), however the two other commercial districts do not have limits.

Allowed uses by Special Permit

- Lodging houses
- Dramatic or motion picture theaters
- Bed and breakfasts
- Miniature or par 3 golf courses
- Youth Center

A Site Plan Review is required for all uses except Single and 2-Family Housing. Public Hearings are required as part of this process. This has been described as an onerous process by several merchants interviewed for this study.

A high proportion of the merchants and residents that were surveyed for this study stated that they would like to see movie theaters and miniature golf courses in town, as well as other family activity-type establishments

Dimensional requirements

The dimensional requirements in this district (shown below) are the same as in the other commercial districts:

- minimum lot size of 1 acre
- minimum setback of 25 feet and minimum frontage of 150 feet
- maximum number of 3 building stories and maximum height of 35 feet

Parking Regulations

The Town's parking regulations were last amended in 2007 and are shown below.

- Off-street spaces must be at least 10 x 20 ft, handicapped spaces 12 x 20 ft, trucks 12 x 72 ft.
- 2 spaces required per dwelling unit
- For retail stores: 1 space for each 200 square feet of gross floor space, plus 1 space for each employee working on the largest shift.
- For hotels, motels and inns: 1 space for each guest room plus one space for each employee working on the largest shift.
- For restaurants and taverns: 1 space for every 3 seats of seating capacity plus one for each employee working on the largest shift.
- For professional offices: 1 space for every 500 square feet of floor space plus one space for each employee.
- For industrial use: 1 space for every 2 employees.
- Loading for hotels, retail stores, office buildings, or industrial buildings: at least 1 loading space that is 10 feet wide, 30 feet long and with 14 feet vertical clearance.
- Sharing of parking spaces may be allowed between adjacent businesses that are located within 600 feet of each other. Sharing of spaces is allowed by right for property owners that have more than 120% of the required spaces. For property owners with more than 100% but less than 120%, sharing may be requested based on certain conditions, including the timing of peak parking needs for each establishment.

Many of the merchants have expressed opinions during the CT/ study that the parking regulations should be more flexible to allow the sharing of parking spaces by adjacent establishments, especially those with hours that do not overlap. This flexibility could potentially allow a business to expand, even if there were no additional parking spaces that could be added onsite. It could also allow some of the existing houses in this district to be converted for commercial use, even if there were minimal parking spaces on-site.

Signage Regulations

The signage regulations are shown below. The Multiple Tenant section was amended in 2007 and the temporary signs section was amended in 2009.

- Each commercial, professional, and industrial establishment within the town limits may have up to 4 signs, including 2 on the property (excluding entrance, exit and parking signs).
- No signage is allowed to be located within a setback area.
- Signs may be up to 18 feet in height, or up to the ridge line of the lowest bldg on the property.
- For multiple tenants one sign is allowed adjacent to the business and one multiple listing sign with names of all tenants, not to exceed 50 square feet. The multiple listing sign must be wooden-faced. Individual signs within a multiple listing sign must be uniform in size and color.
- Window signs are allowed up to 25% f the window size.
- Internally-illuminated signs are not allowed.
- Temporary signs are allowed approximately 3 times a year for a continuous 14-day period. (Need to confirm with Town.)

A large number of merchants have commented during the CT study that the signage-regulations are too restrictive, not allowing signs large enough to promote businesses adequately. Some merchants feel that the design requirements, while generating attractive signs, do not generate signs that are visible enough to passing motorists. There have also been comments about the need for more signs allowed on premises for individual businesses – especially those that are ensconced inside multi-tenant buildings and are more difficult to find by customers.

The limitation on temporary signs is seen as a hindrance by several merchants who feel that it doesn't allow them to adequately advertise special sales. This section of the signage bylaw was amended in 2009 to be more permissive, allowing business owners to display temporary signs 3 times a year for 14 continuous days.

EXISTING MASTER PLAN (1988)

Objectives for non-residential development are show below:

- Develop more restrictive controls in commercial and industrial zoning district, including architectural controls in both districts (Route 131 and Route 20).
- Modify uses in commercial and industrial zones, and provide for two commercial zones, one along Route 20, oriented to tourist traffic, and one along Route 131 for general commercial.
- Improve the appearance of Route 20 (plus other commercial areas) through the following measures:
    - Expand street trees and landscaping (especially in off-street parking lots)
    - Include expanded landscaping requirements

- Explore ways to place utilities underground.
- Explore reducing curb cuts by sharing curb cuts.
- Explore increased sidewalks to improve pedestrian safety and mobility.

DIALOG FOR THE FUTURE – STRATEGIC PLANNING SURVEY (FALL 2002)

Relevant Survey results

Residents indicated that most (88%) were opposed to spending $7M to remove the overhead wires on Route 20 & Route 131 and place them underground and installing period style street lamps. However, this number (58%) changed significantly if 50% were funded through grants.

Most residents felt that the town should have consistent commercial design and landscape requirements (87%) and that commercial signage should be upgraded and improved to a consistent design standard (75%).

Most residents indicated favoring the following five (in order) types of development: Light industry; small in-town shops; technology based industries; museums cultural and educational developments; and artisans and craftsmen

Most residents stated they had used the sidewalks on Route 20 (63%) and would like to see more sidewalks on major streets (71%) but not in their neighborhood. Most residents 52% indicated a willingness to pay for the construction of new sidewalks through town-wide assessments.

Relevant Survey goals:

- To upgrade new construction and redeveloped buildings with new design standards for commercial and industrial uses to improve the overall "look" of Main Street (Routes 20 and 131).
- To improve the Main Street business area to make it more attractive to businesses, residents, visitors and tourists.
- To promote a healthy and active community through providing safe walking trails and sidewalks.

Related recommendation/action item:

That the Board of Selectmen, Town Administrator and DPW Director and Police Chief should determine if there are other streets (other than Route 131) that warrant construction of sidewalks (2005) and provide a recommendation to Town Meeting for funding sidewalks (2006) and if funded, to begin the process of obtaining any necessary rights-of-way, design and construction of new sidewalks (2006-09).

Several of the issues identified in the CT study were also identified in the Town's last Master Plan, completed in 1988, and in the strategic planning survey conducted in 2002. The need for sidewalks on Route 20 to improve pedestrian safety and mobility was mentioned in both documents, as was the recommendation to place utility lines underground and purchase period-street lamps. In 2002, a slight majority of citizens (52%) were willing to fund the sidewalks, but 71% were opposed to funding the burying of the utility lines and the installation of period street lamps, unless half of the estimated cost at the time ($7 million), was funded through grants. The need for upgraded and additional sidewalks was a prominent finding in this study, thought the utility lines were not mentioned more than once or twice.

STURBRIDGE HERITAGE & PRESERVATION PARTNERSHIP REGIONAL TOURISM MARKET STUDY (4/2008)

The Sturbridge Heritage & Preservation Partnership, which is comprised of the communities of Sturbridge, Southbridge, Charlton, North Brookfield, Brookfield, West Brookfield, East Brookfield, Brimfield, Holland, Wales and Spencer. It was formed to develop and market a unified tourist message and identity for the region. The partnership conducted a tourism marketing study in 2007 and 2008 through state funding. Results of the study are highlighted below:

- The percentage of Leisure & Hospitality employment is much greater in this region than in the State overall (26% vs. 9%), but it is shrinking – it decreased 4.6% since 2001.
- Sturbridge has the vast majority of Leisure & Hospitality jobs in the immediate region.
- Variability in Old Sturbridge attendance does not impact restaurant revenues
- 76% of visits are a single overnight or day visit
- 64% traveled to the region with a spouse and/or children/grandchildren.
- Antiquers and pass-through visitors spend the most money in this region.

Sturbridge was compared to other similarly –sized tourist towns in New England, such as North Conway, new Hampshire and Plymouth, Massachusetts. It was found to be most similar to Plymouth in that it is a destination location, with elements of a "pass-through" market and it has a similar restaurant mix and hotel price points. The hotels have more meeting space than in Plymouth but there are fewer kid-oriented amenities. In addition, family attractions are lacking in Sturbridge. In terms of outdoor recreational activities, there are more in Sturbridge, but they may not be challenging enough for hard core enthusiasts.

The study concluded that the target market should be family campers, pass-through visitors, and scenery viewers, and it suggested a number of recommendations. These included: enhancing campground amenities, developing a marked scenic drive, coordinating events (especially during the Fall) and merchandising.

STURBRIDGE RECONNAISSANCE REPORT

Excerpt about the Quinebaug River:
The Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) owns significant sections of riverbank on both sides of the town, but there is no such general understanding as to what agencies or individuals control what goes on between the ACE areas. The Army Corps of Engineers has no direct ownership or control over the Quinebaug shores in the Fiskdale area of Sturbridge. This is significant in terms of both access and recreational use. Sturbridge currently owns Turners Field, a small parcel of riverfront land adjacent to the Fiskdale mill. Its central location and easy water access are perfect for recreational use, but the waterfront is too small for public events such as the annual Run of the River.

The Town should work with the Fiskdale Mill (now the Sturbridge Marketplace) owners and other neighborhood landowners to explore possibilities for a public park/picnic area/boat ramp/parking in the vicinity of the mill dam where foot paths already exist, with preference given to an area adjacent to Turner's Field. Alternatively, the parcel immediately above the dam

at the Route 20/148 intersection is presently undeveloped (partly owned by the Blackington Building owners).

Excerpt about Fiskdale – (encompasses most of the CT district – from Arnold Road to Brookfield Rd)

Numerous examples of individual building improvements, adaptive reuse, and historically sensitive updating are seen throughout Fiskdale, including the Fiskdale Mill, the Blackington Building, and at smaller historic properties being used for commercial purposes such as the Ginger Jar and the Sturbridge Marketplace building. Needed now is a coordinated effort by municipal authorities and business owners to unify the village with an attractive, consistent, pedestrian-friendly streetscape, as well as encouragement to other property owners to participate in this community effort.

Recommendations:

- Investigate possibility of funding streetscape improvements by a Community Development Action Grant through the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development. Such a grant might allow the Town to study and then put in place enhancements including consistent, attractive, historically appropriate signage, street lighting, sidewalk rehabilitation and fencing.
- Coordinate planning and public relations efforts between local businesses, Town of Sturbridge, and Old Sturbridge Village to develop history- or eco-tourism opportunities in and around the Fiskdale section of town

The project team that worked on this report suggested that the following recommendations should be the top three priorities for Sturbridge as the town works to protect the character of its community:

1. Acquire and protect the River Lands.
2. Develop a streetscape improvement plan for Main Street/Route 20.
3. Establish a permanent working committee with OSV and the ACE to develop and implement public relations and tourism projects

WALKABLE COMMUNITY WORKSHOP

A walking audit was conducted by a transportation planner from the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission on a Saturday in June of 2009. It was coordinated by the Sturbridge Town Planner and it encompassed the section of Main Street (U.S. 20) between the Senior Center (Arnold Road) and the access road at 450 Main Street to the Stageloft Repertory Theatre. The 14 participants included town officials and staff members, residents, business owners, local police, Chamber of Commerce staff, and the press.

Before the audit started, a presentation was provided that stated the goals of this workshop, and the health and economic benefits of a walkable community. Also highlighted were various engineering and design techniques that can improve the aesthetics and pedestrian safety of roadways.

The walking audit included Main Street (U.S. 20) from the Senior Center to the intersection of the access road at 450 Main Street. During the audit, a number of potential improvements were discussed, including improved crosswalks, sidewalk width and curb extensions. Afterwards, participants separated into two groups and identified their recommendations for improvements along this section of roadway.

Recommendations:

- Construct a new sidewalk on the southern side of Main Street (U.S. 20) from Cedar Street to Arnold Road
- Widen sidewalks on the northern side of Main Street
- Incorporate driveway aprons that maintain sidewalk height
- Install curb extensions at street intersections and crosswalks
- Install new crosswalks at the Chinese restaurant and post office
- Re-stripe or construct textured crosswalks in existing locations
- Install a traffic signal at Main Street and Arnold Road
- Construct a bike trail from the Grand Trunk Trail to the river
- Create a municipal parking lot near Cedar Street to encourage multiple hour parking and walking between shops on Main Street
- Install cast iron street lights to improve visibility for pedestrians at night
- Install benches and other street furniture at strategic locations
- Examine the possibility of incorporating parallel parking on one side of Main Street
- Narrow lane widths on Main Street and possibly lower speed limit
- Construct a bridge/walkway from Village Road to the Tourist District (behind TJ's)
- Examine possibility of installing utilities underground
- Install street trees where possible to enhance pedestrian experience
- Examine the possibility of installing center "islands" to provide shorter crossing distances and enhance green space on Main Street