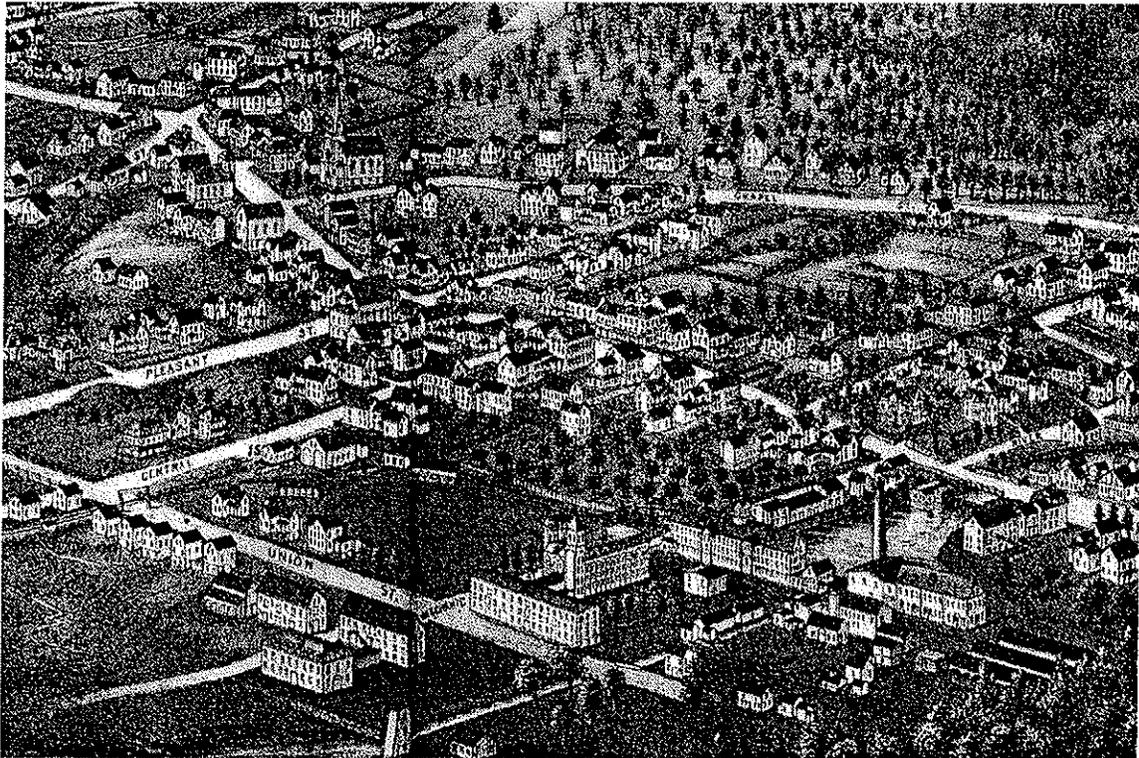


# Ashburnham Highway Barn Site Charrette

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## Report and Recommendations

Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance – Central Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance  
Town of Ashburnham Focus Committee



September 2007

## Table of Contents

I.	Origins of the Charrette Project	1
II.	Preparation for the Charrette	3
III.	Site History and Characteristics	4
IV.	Smart Growth and Ashburnham	8
V.	Town Center Building Types	11
VI.	Affordable Housing	14
VII.	The Charrette Process	17
VIII.	Two Scenarios	20
IX.	Recommendations and Design Guidelines	23

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### Town of Ashburnham

Focus Committee: Bob Fichtel  
Ashburnham Town Planner: Eric R. Smith, AICP

*Special thanks to Cushing Academy for hosting the charrette at the Curry Academic Center.*

## **I. Origins of the Charrette Project**

The Town of Ashburnham has been considering relocation of highway and utility departments for several years, led by a volunteer Focus Committee appointed by the Board of Selectmen. Relocation would free this town-owned land, commonly known as the Highway Barn Site, which is located in the town center, for new uses and redevelopment. The Town has also been looking for opportunities to create affordable housing aimed at seniors and to enhance its commercial tax base. The Town's 2006 Affordable Housing Action Plan identifies this site as an opportunity to create affordable housing and the Focus Committee has met with RCAP Solutions, a regional nonprofit affordable housing developer about partnering for the development of the senior housing units. In addition, the Focus Committee sent a letter of invitation to a regional bank known to be interested in Ashburnham about locating a branch office on the site.

As part of this Highway Barn Site redevelopment project, the Ashburnham Town Planner, Eric Smith proposed to the Central Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance (CMSGA) that this project be selected as a pilot program to receive technical assistance from the CMSGA. The CMSGA is one of several regional alliances created in coordination with regional planning commissions by the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance (MSGGA), a statewide coalition of housing, environmental and planning groups that promotes more efficient land use and development patterns that will provide more choices in housing, transportation, and open space conservation throughout the Commonwealth.

The CMSGA and the MSGGA accepted this proposal because the project provides an excellent opportunity to work with a more rural community and showcase the potential for smart growth approaches to development outside the more urban parts of the state. The Town and the Alliance agreed that the Alliance would provide technical assistance in the form of a group of planners and urban designers who would lead a charrette or workshop to engage residents in a discussion about uses, density, site design, and planning issues. The goal of the project is to arrive at a general consensus about these issues, provide some alternatives, and make some recommendations.

At the January 2006 Special Town Meeting, Town Meeting Voters approved a Highway Barn Relocation Feasibility Study and the following March, the Focus Committee engaged a consultant for this study. It is expected that the consultant's report will identify the most suitable site or sites.

This charrette report includes a description of the charrette process, an analysis of the site and its context, the three alternative scenarios that resulted from interactive small-group discussions, and a set of recommendations and design guidelines for redevelopment of the Highway Barn Site.

## MASSACHUSETTS SMART GROWTH ALLIANCE

### Who We Are

Seven leading nonprofit organizations representing diverse interests joined to promote smart growth in Massachusetts. By working together we exemplify the collaborative partnerships that are essential to creating a future Massachusetts that offers all its citizens choice, prosperity, opportunity and environmental health in well-designed communities. We are working to create a wider network of partnerships with other organizations to strengthen the statewide voice for smart growth

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Boston Society of  
Architects — Civic Initiative  
for Smart Growth

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Citizens' Housing and Planning  
Association

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Conservation Law Foundation

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Environmental League  
of Massachusetts

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Fair Housing Center  
of Greater Boston

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Massachusetts Association  
of Community Development  
Corporations

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Metropolitan Area Planning  
Council

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### What is Smart Growth?

Smart Growth is about answering three questions: *Where do we want to grow? How do we want to grow? How much do we want to grow?* It is about preserving our environment, enhancing our quality of life, supporting our economic competitiveness, and distributing the benefits and burdens of development more fairly. The members of the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance share a common vision of Massachusetts: *healthy, diverse and prosperous communities; working landscapes and critical environmental resources protected from development; urban reinvestment and community development; transportation and housing choice and affordability; and regional equity and opportunity.*

### Why and Why Now

Massachusetts's population has been growing very slowly, but we are consuming land seven times faster than our population growth rate. Sprawl is overwhelming our traditional Massachusetts landscape of historic cities, lively, compact villages, and bucolic towns. Low density, haphazard development of houses, office buildings, and stores has dire consequences: dwindling water supplies, urban disinvestment, loss of open space and biodiversity, lack of housing choice and affordability, hours wasted in traffic, loss of economic competitiveness with declining quality of life.

- **Our High-Priced Housing.** Between 1980 and 2003, housing prices have grown at a faster rate than any other state in the US, and median home prices in the Metro Boston area are the third highest in the nation at \$400,000.
- **Our Social Dividers.** By 1990, nearly 80 percent of the impoverished 143,000 school-aged children lived in older cities and towns. In 2000, only 8 percent of homes were owned by families of color.
- **Our Vanishing Landscapes.** Development consumes two acres of open space each hour in Massachusetts. About 88 percent of this land is going to new housing, and of this, 65 percent is for low-density residential.
- **Our Limited Access to Jobs and Services.** Massive investments have been recently made in transportation infrastructure, but communities of color and low-income residents often have poorer access to services, education and jobs. For example, a short transit trip from Roxbury to downtown Boston can take up to one hour – the same time it takes a commuter to travel from the outer suburbs.

Experience from around the country has shown that state leadership is critical to taming sprawl. Our state's approach to development and land use has devolved into a collection of isolated programs, incentives and disincentives that often work at cross-purposes. The Romney Administration's explicit commitment to a smart growth agenda, along with growing support for smart growth reforms in the legislature and in local communities, offers an unprecedented opportunity to make significant achievements in advancing smart growth policies and approaches

### The Alliance Program

The Alliance is working on an ambitious shared agenda:

- Policy and advocacy efforts for administrative and legislative reforms and capital investment decisions that will achieve Smart Growth outcomes.
- Education, outreach and organizing for a diverse, broad-based constituency for Smart Growth throughout the Commonwealth.
- Research and analysis for the tools and information needed to build the case for Smart Growth reforms, policies, and investments.

## II. Preparation for the Charrette

A series of meetings and telephone consultations were held to prepare for the charrette. Kristina Egan, then Director of the MSGA, and Don Bianchi, the MSGA representative from the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations and coordinator of the CMSGA, met with Town Planner Eric Smith and town officials in September 2006 to discuss the site and the Town's objectives. Kristina turned to a MSGA member from the Boston Society of Architects to serve as organizer and facilitator of the charrette, Larissa Brown, AICP, chief planner of Goody Clancy, a Boston planning and architecture firm. A second meeting in Ashburnham with Kristina and Don took place in January 2007 and included the following Ashburnham board and committee members, staff, and others:

- Bob Fichtel, chair, Focus Committee
- John MacMillan, chair, Planning Board
- Christina Sargent, chair, Historical Commission and member of the Focus Committee
- Joe Kalagher, member, Planning Board
- Eric Smith, Town Planner
- Sallie Thoma, member, Focus Committee
- Nancy Fiske, co-chair, Affordable Housing Committee
- Gil Carriero, owner, adjacent 1+ acre property
- Andrew Gast-Bray, CMSGA member and Winchendon Planning Director

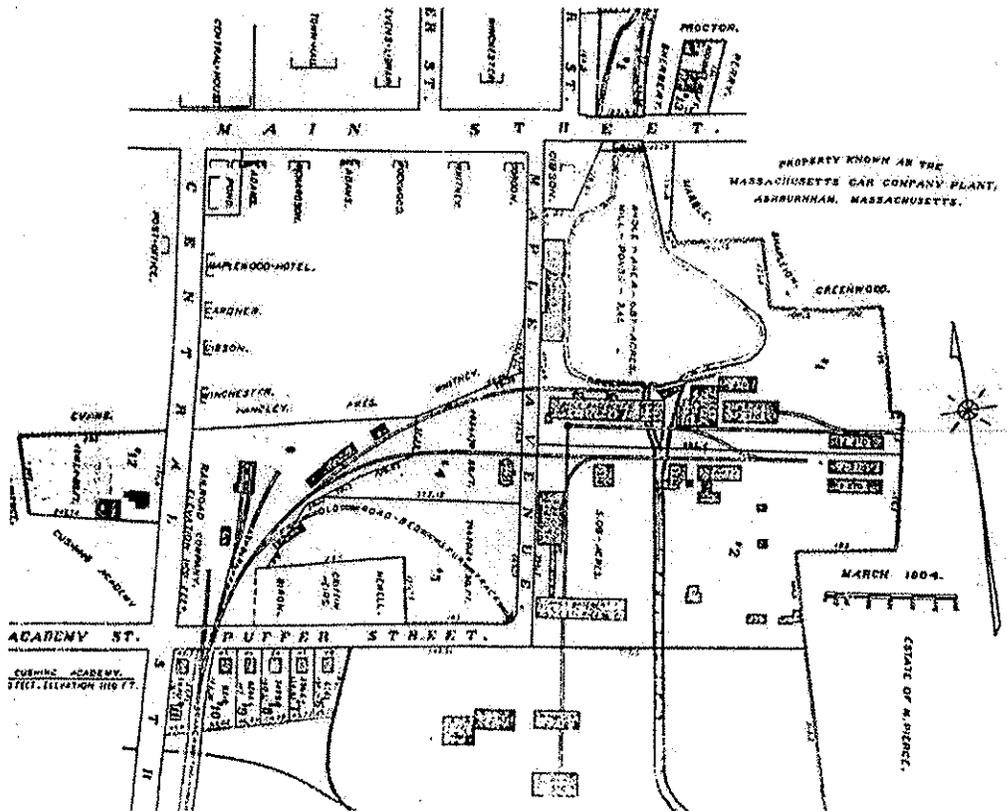
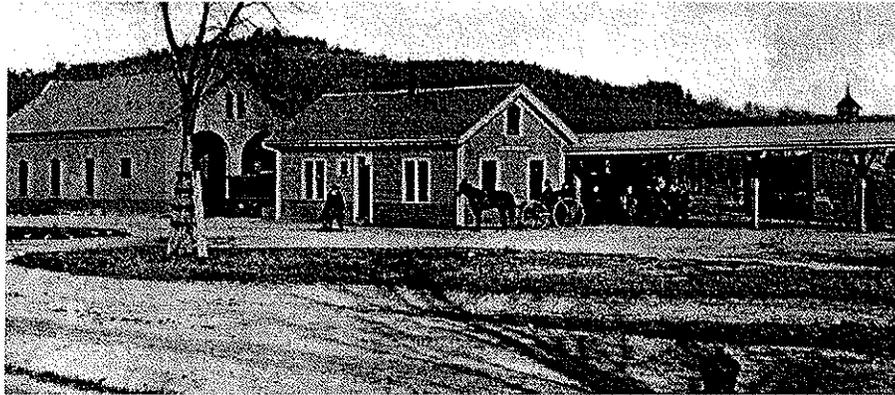
Participants at this meeting discussed the many possibilities that have been suggested for the site, potential issues and opportunities, and organizational logistics. The charrette was originally scheduled for March 17, 2007. Because of a snowstorm, the charrette had to be postponed until June 9, 2007. The group agreed that the charrette would provide a vision for the site, including several alternative scenarios through interactive small-group activities as well as broader discussion with the group as a whole. It was agreed that some kind of mixed use of the site, designed to be visually and functionally compatible with the town center, and providing adequate parking would be desirable. Several issues were discussed that could affect potential development:

- Need for elderly housing
- Previous discussion by some in town of a possible Route 101 "bypass" that would go through the site
- Shortage of rental apartments in town
- Shortage of commercial sites evidenced by unsuccessful attempts by a bank to find a place for an Ashburnham office in the town center
- Interest in a family-friendly sit-down restaurant/pub
- Cushing Academy student population can help support commercial uses

After this meeting, Eric worked with the Focus Committee and Cushing Academy to organize the charrette. He also consulted with Larissa Brown and David Grissino, the charrette leaders, by telephone and on a site visit.

### III. Site History and Characteristics

Now known as the Highway Barn site, this 4.2-acre property served for half a century as Ashburnham's train station. The depot was erected in 1875 and then dismantled in 1925, two years after passenger rail service was discontinued. The Town purchased the site in 1938 and moved the Highway Department there.

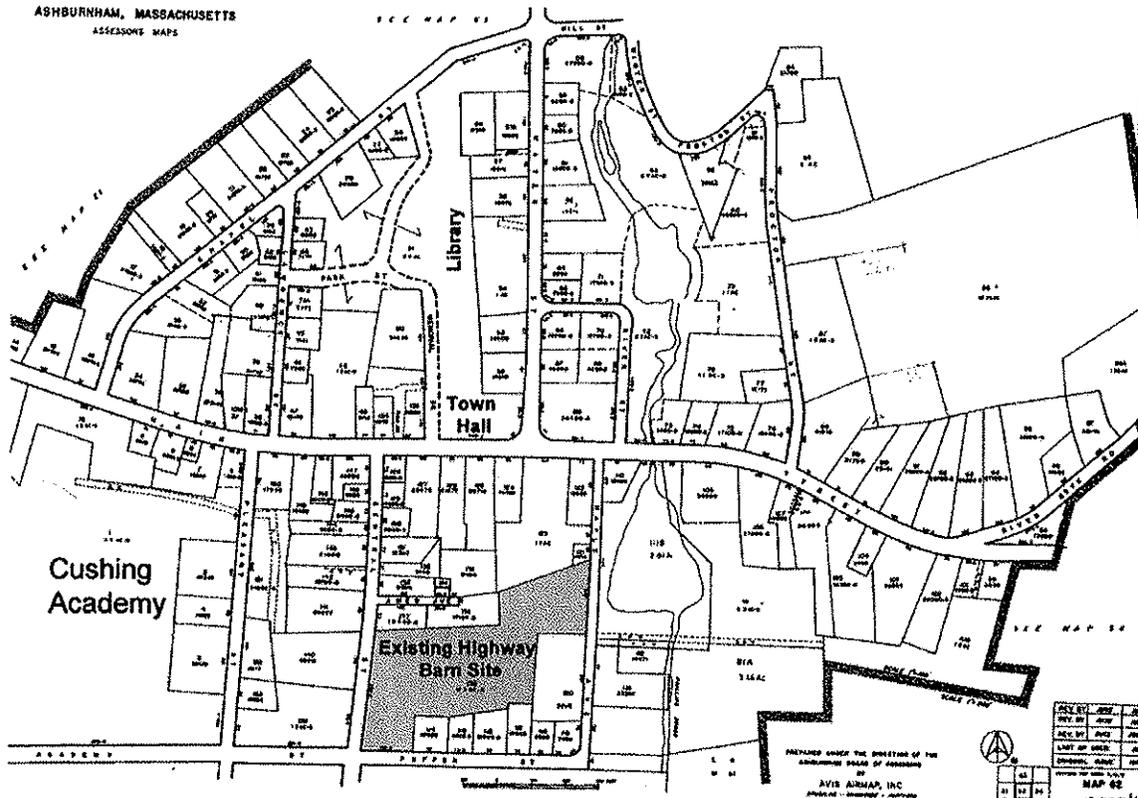


*A 1904 map of the site shows the depot and rail lines extending to the mill.*

## Ashburnham Highway Barn Site Charrette

The largest available site in the Village Center Zoning District, the 4.2-acre Highway Barn Site is within walking distance of all the amenities of Ashburnham Town Center – shops, town hall, the library, the museum, the old mill pond, and the trailhead for the Ashburnham Rail Trail, which is planned to be part of a regional rail trail system. In addition, Cushing Academy is nearby to the west. Directly north of the site is an approximately 1-acre parcel with frontage on Main Street owned by Gil Carriero that may become available as part of this redevelopment project.

### Location of Existing Highway Barn Site – Context within Village Center



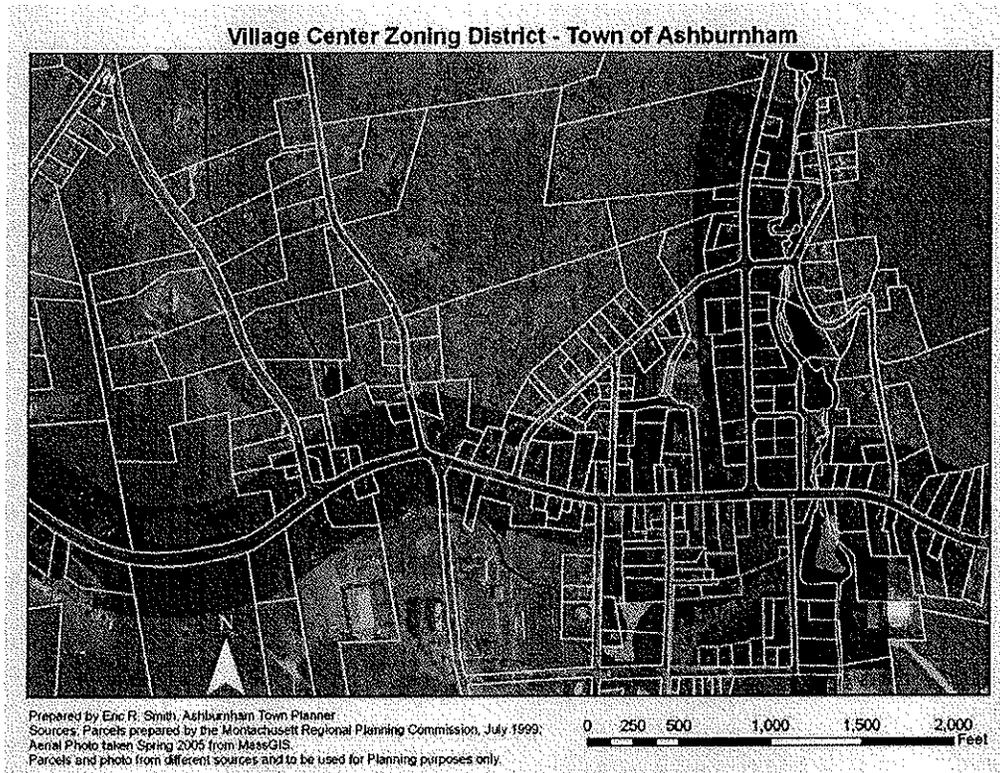
Located at the intersection of Central and Puffer Streets with frontage on Maple Avenue, the site today has several garages and a large parking area in addition to a large sand pile



that is most distinctive characteristic of this gateway location. The lot is level and served by municipal water and sewer. More than 4,100 vehicles per day pass by the site on Central Street.

### **Village Center zoning promotes compatible design**

The Highway Barn Site is part of the Village Center Zoning District. This district is intended to ensure that new development is generally compatible with the compact and historic character of the town center. A set of design review principles for this district focuses on the following characteristics:



- Preservation of distinguishing historic architectural features in existing buildings while encouraging contemporary design that reflects its own time but is sensitive to its historic context
- General consistency with street setbacks and heights, with proportions of existing buildings in terms of relationships of architectural elements such as windows and doors, with shapes of roofs and other design elements, and with the direction of the building facade
- Landscape elements to provide continuity and definition to streets, pedestrian areas, and surrounding landscape

### **No environmental contamination issues at the site**

An environmental assessment of the site has been completed. The Focus Committee helped coordinate the preparation of two Phase I 21E Site Assessment reports. The second report, a Supplemental Phase I report prepared for Mass. DEP involved some soil test borings. The Mass. DEP has reviewed both Phase I Reports and indicated that there are no reporting obligations or release notification requirements that require further

Ashburnham Highway Barn Site Charrette

action, thus the Town of Ashburnham is not pursuing a Phase II 21E Assessment at this time.



#### IV. Smart Growth and Ashburnham

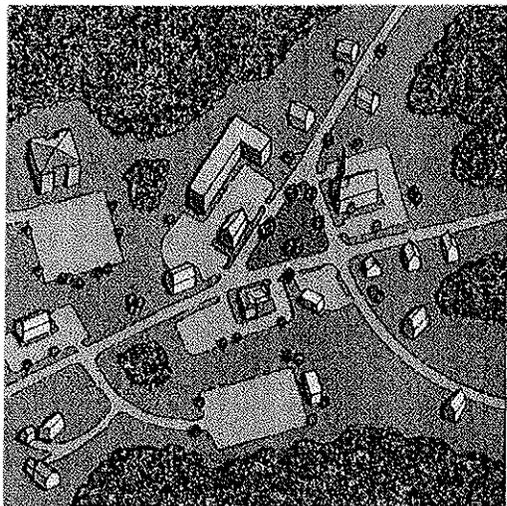
What is “smart growth?” Is it only for urban or built-up suburban communities where there are train stations? Although much of the focus has been on what is known as

“transit-oriented development,” in fact, smart growth also has much to offer smaller, more rural communities. Smart growth is about creating development patterns that can accommodate growth while preserving open space and providing more choices of how to live, work and play. Smart growth promotes development that:

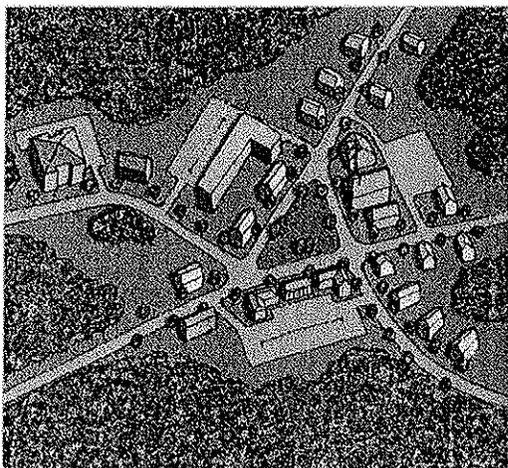
##### **Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance Principles for Growth**

- Protect and preserve *environmental resources*, open space, working landscapes and unique natural environments, and reduce air and water pollution.
  - Promote *diverse housing types* in all communities to enable households from a wide range of economic levels, cultures and age groups to live and work within their boundaries.
  - Foster economic and social equity and provide *choice and opportunity* for all Massachusetts residents.
  - Reinforce our tradition of compact, walkable cities, towns and villages by encouraging lively, mixed-use development near existing infrastructure and *promoting efficient land use* that minimizes sprawl.
  - Invest in *transportation choices*, including high quality public transit services, which provide alternatives to automobile use.
  - Encourage fiscal policies that allow all communities within a region to *share in the benefits and responsibilities of growth*.
  - *Promote local, regional and state planning and investment* to promote smart growth.
  - Promote *sustainable, shared prosperity* through economic investment and development policies that provide jobs and opportunity, strengthen communities, and streamline development processes that avoid sprawl.
  - *Encourage development that conserves resources, minimizes waste, utilizes good design, promotes health and enhances the community in which it is located.*
- Is located in or adjacent to existing urbanized areas or town centers
  - Uses land efficiently: compact and higher-density
  - Creates walkable places
  - Incorporates a mixture of uses
  - Incorporates a mixture of housing types and affordability
  - Uses a connected street pattern rather than cul-de-sacs
  - Provides appropriate open space amenities
  - And, if possible, if located near public transportation (1/4 mile walking radius)

Traditional rural communities in New England were built with a compact town center focused on a church, school and a common and surrounded by a few streets of houses on relatively small lots. When small industrial operations emerged in some towns in the nineteenth century, small villages of mill housing grew up around the mills. In general, the development pattern was characterized by these small centers of settlement within a larger context of farms and forests.



*Typical New Development:* Gray parking lots dominate the street frontage in this diagram of typical new rural development, with low density housing spreading along the roads and eliminating open space.



*Rural Smart Growth Development.* Buildings are located at the street, creating a pedestrian-friendly environment, parking is at the rear and side of buildings, houses arrayed more compactly near the town center, and open space preserved closer to the center and along roads.

*Today, typical new development in rural areas follows conventional suburban models.*

Nonresidential development gives priority to vehicles rather than people, which means that asphalt parking lots increasingly occupy road frontage in town centers and on road corridors. Housing development expands along the road frontages on large lots or, in some cases, in isolated, unconnected subdivisions with culs-de-sac that empty onto the main road. Often, there is only one type of new housing – single family homes that tend to serve only one kind of household or family type with a relatively narrow range of incomes. The result of this type of development is that towns begin to lose their rural character as town centers start to look like mini-suburban strips, the connected open space so important for wildlife corridors becomes fragmented, and the landscape along country roads also turns into a version of suburban housing.

*Rural smart growth promotes a return to more traditional development patterns that focus on town and village centers, while still accommodating cars.* It focuses on locating new development, both commercial and residential, in town and village centers with buildings at the street, parking at the rear, and open space around the center.

*Design makes the difference.* The design of communities and the design of individual sites is one of the most important ways to incorporate new development so it fits with traditional elements and contributes to preserving rural character.

Smart growth design...

- is primarily for *people*, (while accommodating cars).
- promotes *connection* rather than isolation from adjacent areas.
- provides *visual interest* and *variety*.
- balances *higher densities* with *open space amenities*.
- includes a *diversity of housing types*.
- *mixes uses* where feasible.

How does the Highway Barn site fit smart growth criteria? Its location makes it an excellent candidate to contribute to town character through smart growth development.

- ✓ It is in the town center.
- ✓ It can provide walkability to town amenities and activities.
- ✓ It is within a connected street pattern, a grid rather than an isolated cul-de-sac.

However, the extent to which it can really fulfill its potential as a smart growth site will depend on how the site is designed and what kinds of uses are located there. Will this redevelopment:

- Use land efficiently with compact and higher-density development?
- Provide a mixture of uses?
- Provide a mixture of housing types?
- Provide appropriate open space to balance the higher-density design?

### **Parking is a key consideration**

The number of housing units and the amount of commercial space that can be accommodated on this site is constrained by the need to provide sufficient parking. The development on this site by itself would not be able to support the high cost of providing garage or underground parking, particularly if affordable housing is part of the program. However, first floor parking lined with townhouses might be possible with some designs. In any case, a portion of the site will have to be dedicated to surface parking. If the town were to require 1.5 parking spaces and associated circulation area for each residential unit (approximately 325 sf), parking would take up the following space at different residential densities:

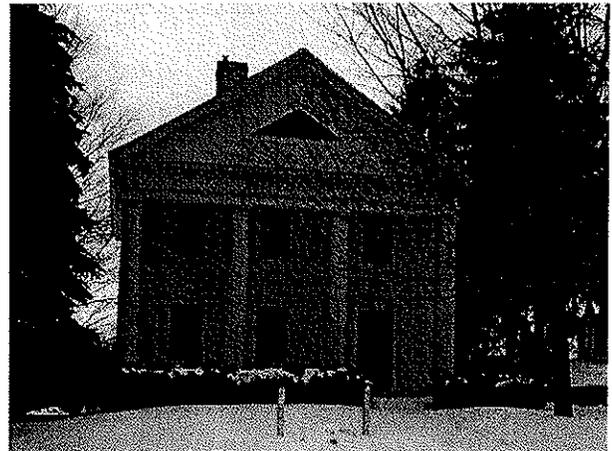
• 20 units:	30 spaces	9,750sf	0.25 acre
• 30 units:	45 spaces	14,625sf	0.33 acre
• 40 units:	60 spaces	19,500sf	0.45 acre
• 50 units:	75 spaces	24,375sf	0.55 acre
• 60 units:	90 spaces	29,250sf	0.70 acre

Thus, if 40 to 50 units of housing were to be built on this site, nearly one-half acre, or one-eighth of the site, would be assigned to surface parking.

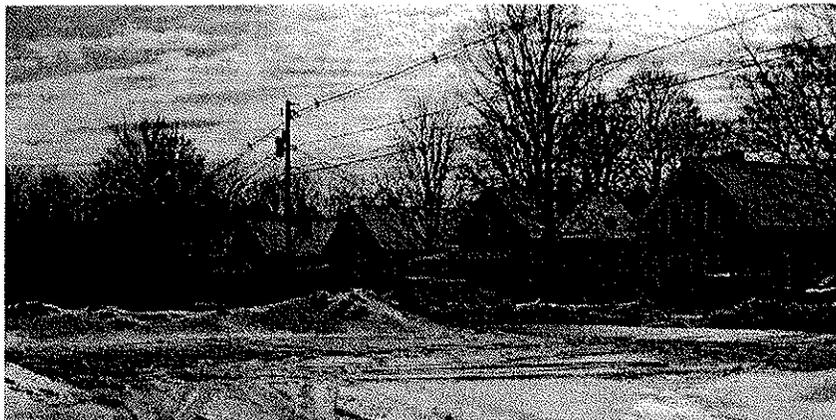
## V. Town Center Building Types

Ashburnham Center has retained many attractive characteristics of a traditional town center. A small commercial center is located primarily along Main Street at the intersections of Central Street and Pleasant Street. Traditional stores built to the street and houses with a small front setback convey the historic character of the town. However, some of that character has been lost in new development with parking in the front yard and the large parking area in front of the grocery store.

*Residential building types.* Even in this small community, there are a variety of building types, ranging from the traditional New England vernacular styles found on Main Street, to the Victorians built on Pleasant Street and other streets a block or two from Main Street, and the millworker housing on Puffer Street.

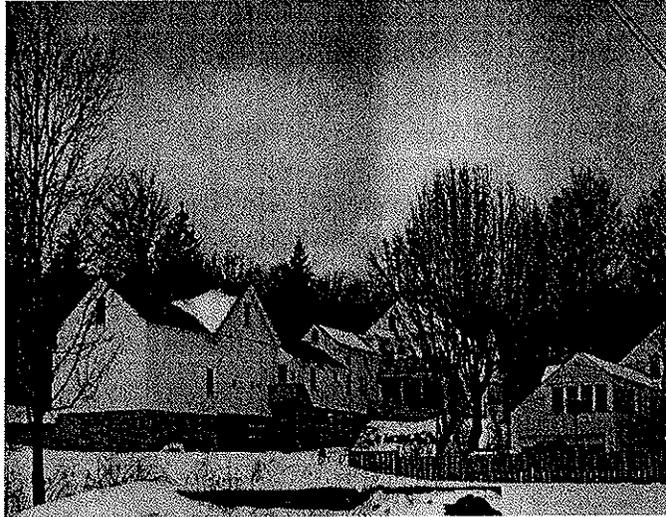


*Greek revival and other 19th century homes in traditional New England styles are located close to the center.*

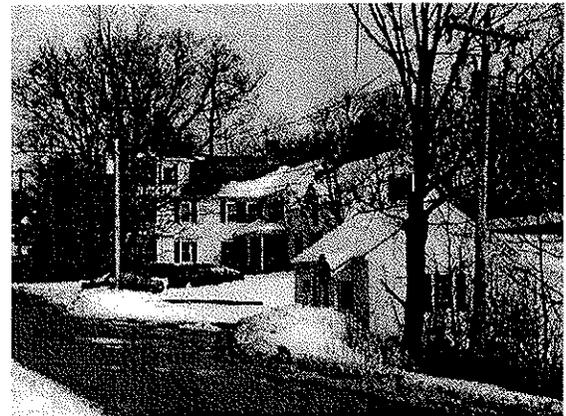


*Along Puffer Street, south of the Highway Barn Site, small houses with peaked roofs were built for workers in the nearby mill.*

## Ashburnham Highway Barn Site Charrette



*"Big house, little house, back house, barn" is a traditional New England form in which houses grew over the generations with a series of additions. This example fronts on Main Street with the Highway Barn Site to the rear.*



*Victorian houses can be found on a block or two from Main Street, especially near Cushing Academy.*

*Town center buildings.* The town center retains many aspects of its historic character, but newer development is inconsistent with the historic street edge and density of the center.

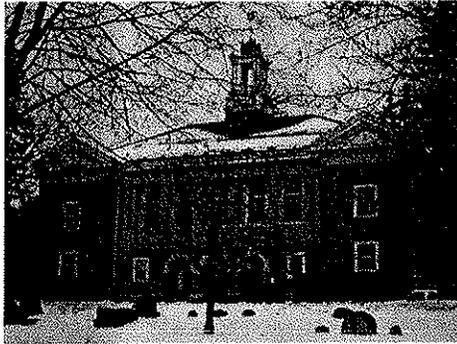


*This old picture shows the traditional town center with two- and three-story buildings located at the street edge.*

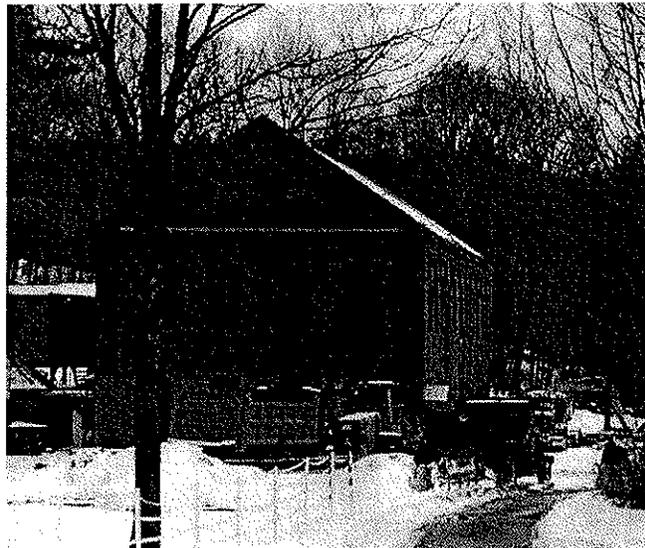
## Ashburnham Highway Barn Site Charrette



*The building on the left, with its peaked roof, two stories, and location at the sidewalk retains traditional town center character. The one-story, shed-like building on the right, set back from the street with its parking lot in front, is a suburban strip commercial building type.*



*Civic buildings like town hall to the left and the piano museum (former library) to the right have distinctive design and materials that give them special character.*



*The old mill building, built of brick with a peaked roof, combines several traditional building characteristics.*

## VI. Affordable Housing

Median housing prices in Ashburnham nearly doubled between 2000 and 2006. As the Greater Boston housing market was becoming more expensive, towns like Ashburnham, once thought too remote to be affected by that market, began to attract more interest from developers, including developers of Chapter 40B projects. The Town became more conscious of the need for affordable housing and created an Affordable Housing Committee. The Committee identified a series of goals:

- Increase affordable housing opportunities in a sustainable and fiscally responsible manner for a broad range of income levels and needs.
- Preserve Ashburnham's rural and historic character as the town continues to grow.
- Preserve natural resources in the context of managed growth.
- Increase the supply of affordable rental units and subsidized units.
- Improve the condition of Ashburnham's present housing stock.
- Promote homeownership.
- Promote development that meets smart growth principles.

In 2006, the Board of Selectmen approved an Affordable Housing Plan that found a need for senior housing and first time homebuyer units for younger families. Redevelopment of the Highway Barn Site is included as an action step in this plan.

The Affordable Housing Plan also includes design criteria that emphasize combining affordable units with market rate units and ensuring that they are indistinguishable:

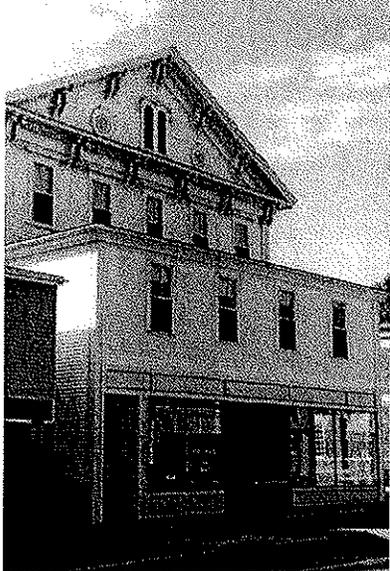
“Affordable units should be designed to be harmonious in appearance, construction, and quality of materials with the other units in the development and with the surrounding neighborhood. It is important that new development contribute to the historic, small town character of Ashburnham. Affordable units should be integrated and dispersed throughout the development and subsidized and market rate units should not be distinguishable from the exterior. Appropriate recreational facilities should be provided, pedestrian access and bike path required, and vegetation buffers required for projects of more than 30 units.”  
(Page 135).

These design criteria reflect new approaches to affordable housing that are now widespread in Massachusetts. Although many people may envision old-style urban apartment buildings when the term “affordable housing” is mentioned, in fact, much of today's affordable housing fits in unobtrusively and harmoniously with its surroundings. The pictures on the following pages show the variety of affordable housing and mixed-income projects in Massachusetts towns and cities.

Ashburnham Highway Barn Site Charrette



Ashburnham Highway Barn Site Charrette



## VII. The Charrette Process: Priorities and Alternatives

On June 9, 2007, approximately 30 people came to the Cushing Center to participate in the Charrette from 9:30 to noon. After a brief welcome from Bob Fichtel of the Focus Committee and a review of the charrette's purpose and process by Larissa Brown, of the charrette team, the participants divided into three groups to identify their initial priorities for the site and then locate uses on the site working with maps, markers trace paper, and blocks representing different amounts of square feet or numbers of residential units.

When the small groups finished their discussions, the entire group came together so that each group could present its results to the whole for discussion. After this process, the group identified priorities for redevelopment of the site again.

### Site priorities

Each group had a poster-sized list of potential priorities for redevelopment of the site that was created based on information from the pre-charrette meetings. The participants were asked to "vote" with adhesive dots for the two goals that represented the top priorities for redevelopment site.

The items that attracted the most votes are:

#### *Top Tier:*

- Commercial development
- Ground floor retail with housing above

#### *Second Tier:*

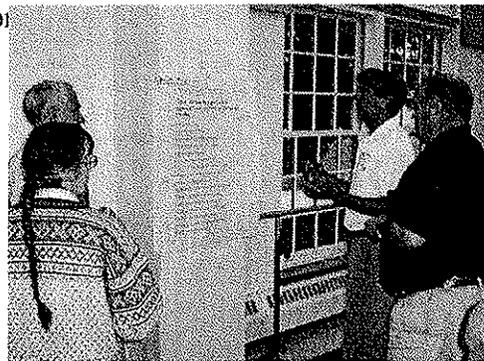
- Rental housing
- Design compatible with town
- Good connections to the town center
- Affordable housing
- Good pedestrian environment
- Public park/recreational space
- Connections to recreational trails

Town of Ashburnham Focus Committee - Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance  
Highway Barn Site Charrette - June 9, 2007

***"Vote" for the two goals that represent your highest priorities for this site:***

- Rental housing
- Senior/elderly housing
- Housing for disabled persons
- Ownership housing (condos)
- Affordable housing
- Commercial development
- Ground floor retail with housing above
- Public park/recreational space
- Design compatible with town
- Good connections to the town center
- Good pedestrian environment
- Adequate parking for site users
- Connections to recreational trails
- Buffers for neighboring uses
- Integration with neighboring uses

OTHER (you write it here....):



*A group discusses site priorities.*

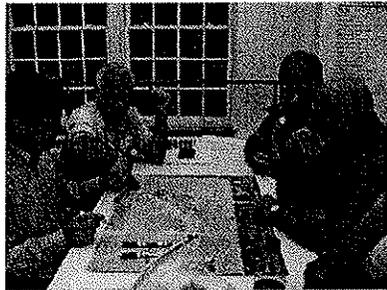
## Ashburnham Highway Barn Site Charrette

- Buffers for neighboring uses
- Integration with neighboring uses

Charrette participants were clearly interested in seeing a mixed-use approach and emphasized the need for and benefits of commercial development. Types of housing in short supply in Ashburnham – rental housing and affordable housing – received some attention, as did walkability, connectivity and park space.

### Site Design Discussions

Each of the groups worked with the map, markers and Styrofoam blocks to understand potential configurations of housing, commercial space, open space, parking and circulation. Then group members explained their group's discussion to the other charrette participants before the full group gathered to identify general principles that they agreed on as a foundation for design of the site.



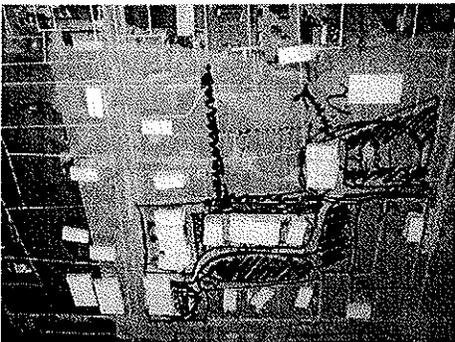
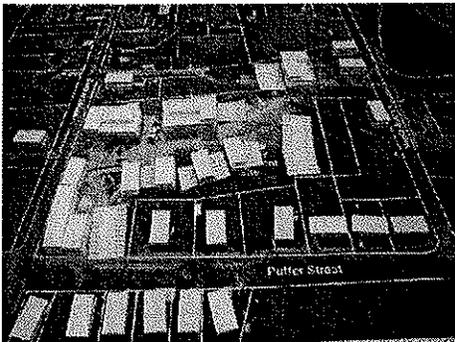
*Charrette participants discussing ideas for the site.*

## Consensus Planning and Design Directions

After discussing the alternative scenarios, the charrette participants agreed on a series of planning and design directions that should shape the redevelopment of this site:

- Commercial development should front on Central Street.
- Existing adjacent development should be well-buffered from new development with landscaping or other elements.
- Pedestrian connections to Main Street are critical, whether by sidewalk along the street or by other pedestrian pathways.
- A connection to the Ashburnham Rail Trail, planned to be part of a regional rail trail, should be created with a small trailhead parking area.
- The site should contain a mixture of uses, including some buildings that have ground floor retail and housing above.
- A mix of housing types should be incorporated, including housing for seniors and affordable housing.
- The site should include green spaces.
- Parking should be as inconspicuous as possible.
- The town should work to incorporate a cultural attraction on the site, such as an art gallery or train museum.
- Building design should be compatible with historic New England vernacular design.
- Taller buildings should be located at the northern edge of the site, which is lower than the adjacent properties.
- The town should consider keeping title to the land through a 99-year lease.
- The town should work with Cushing Academy to use the site to meet mutually beneficial goals.
- Utilities should be buried underground.

## VIII. Two Scenarios



The three group site design results. Puffer Street is at the bottom in all three photos.

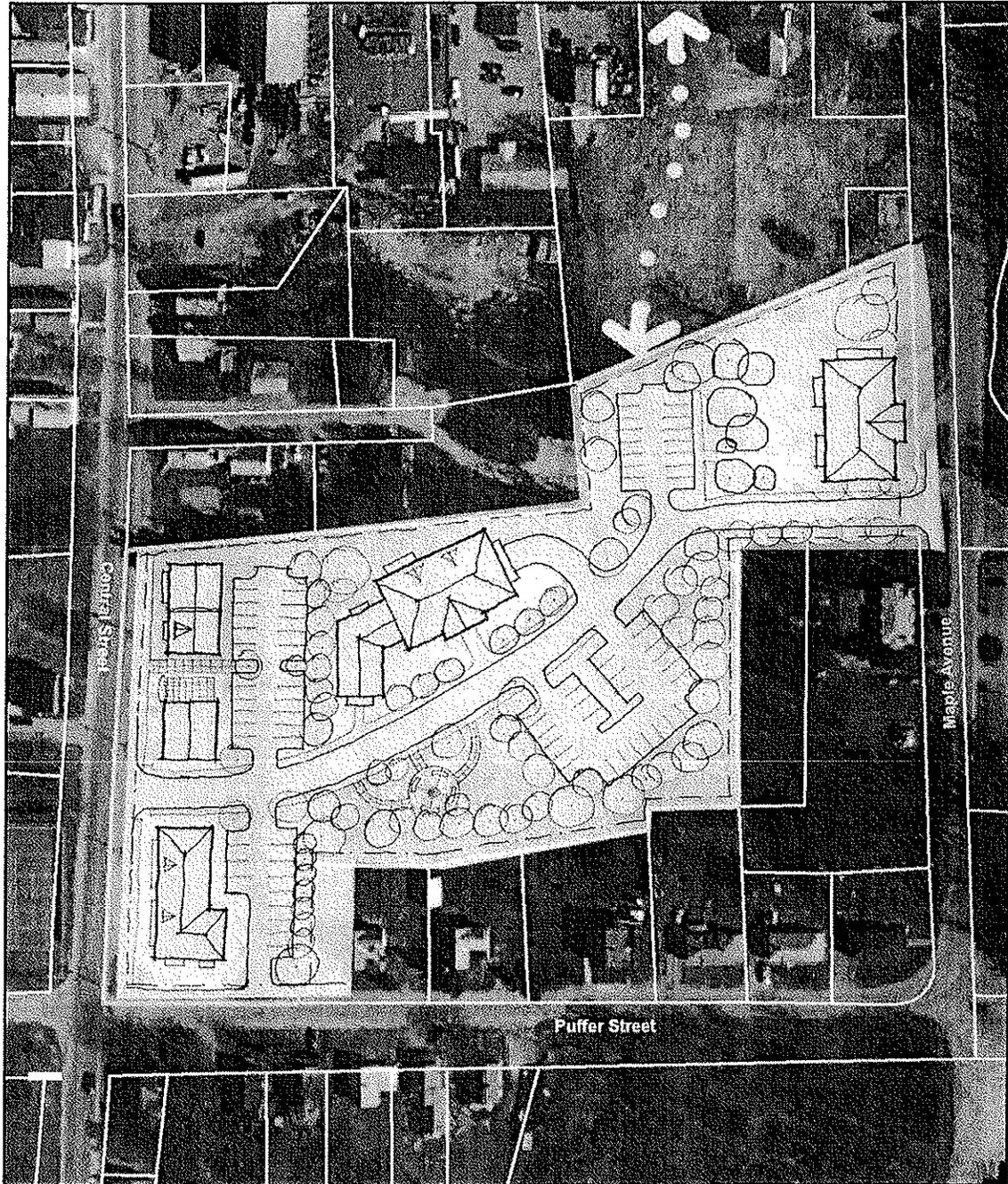
During the charrette, there were several site scenarios developed to address a wide range of concerns and interests. As might be expected, many of these scenarios had similarities relating to the potential location of retail, housing, roads, landscape buffer zones, and relationship to the existing housing near the site. The two development approaches that follow are meant to summarize the many thoughts participants had throughout the event. The translation of the sketches produced at the workshop into scaled drawings also shed light on many design issues and the challenges they present for the site's redevelopment:

- *Parking.* While many of the schemes generated at the charrette had considered larger buildings with higher densities, the area required for parking generated by those units could have a significant impact on the quality of the open space and character of the site. The two scenarios presented here show a range from 45 – 55 units on the site with an average of 1200 square feet per unit. Beyond this threshold, the redevelopment of the site would likely need to consider more expensive approaches - perhaps involving structured parking.
- *Site access and roadways.* There was some discussion of whether a road should extend through the entire site with access from both Maple Ave. and Central Street. Some alternatives investigated the possibility of treating the site as sub-lots, with pedestrian

pathways linking the east and west halves but restricting vehicular traffic from passing between them. While this concept could help create a valuable green open space in the center of the site, the need for increased circulation roads in each independent half severely impacted the capacity and quality of the site design.

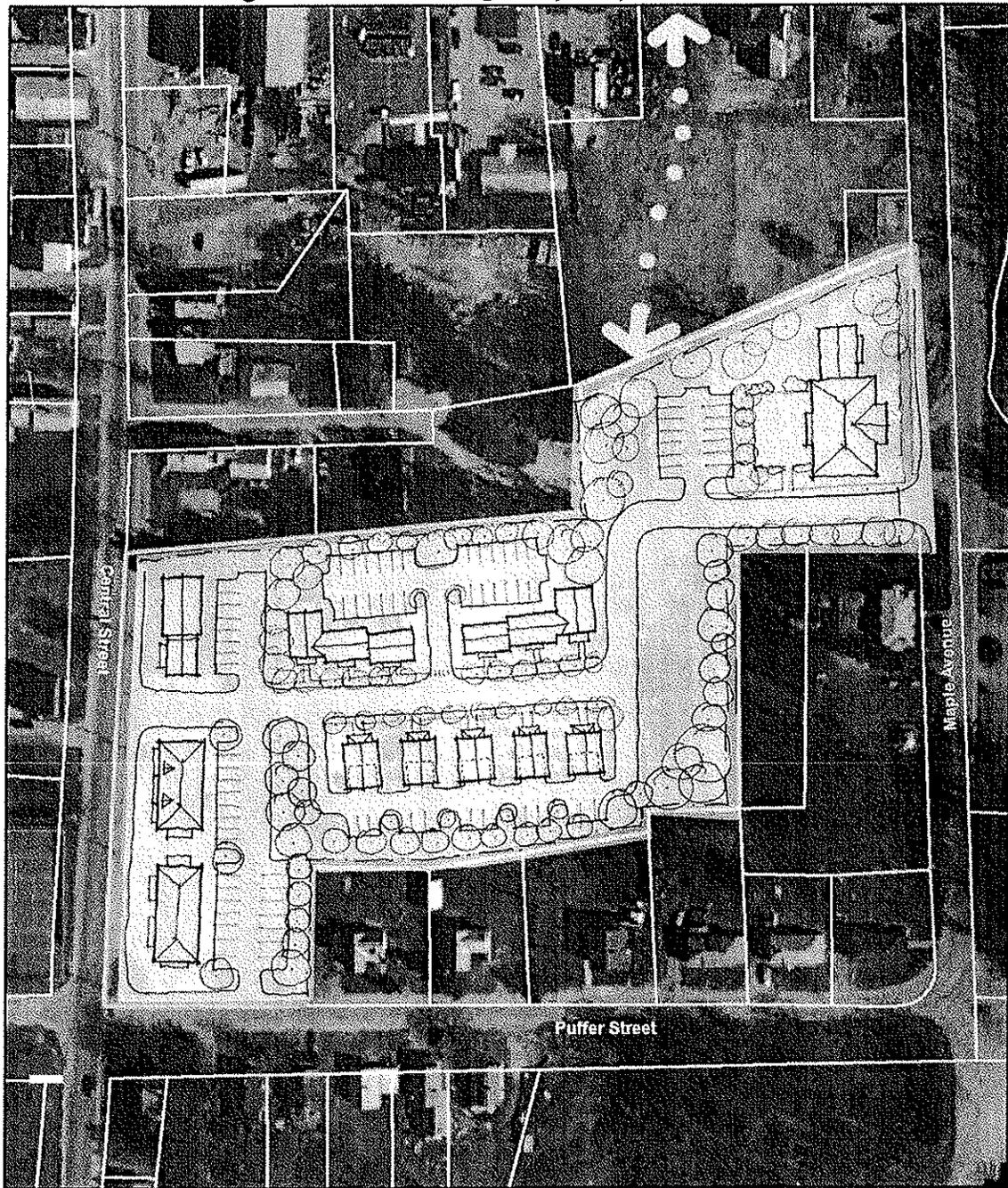
- *Nature of building types and town character.* While the desire to take full advantage of the Highway Barn Site for increasing housing and retail in Ashburnham should be fulfilled, approaches which employ a range of building types and scales will help the redevelopment relate more closely with the village character and enable the visual impact of parking of cars to be minimized.

### Option A – Consolidated Housing and Park



This approach locates a majority of new housing in two multi-unit buildings and condenses the parking associated with them into two lots. These two lots would be screened from view using landscape elements and would allow for a portion of the site to be considered for a centrally located park or open space. Retail buildings line Central Street with apartments in the second and third floors. The total number of units in this scheme is approximately 45 and there is 3500 gross square feet of retail/service space.

## Option B – Village Style and Park



This approach distributes the housing into many building types, including row houses, multi-unit “farmhouses”, an apartment building, and apartments above retail. This allows for the rhythms of the mill worker housing along Puffer Street and the “Big house, little house, back house, barn” types found in the area to be used in creative new ways. The total number of units in this scheme is approximately 55 and there is 3000 gross square feet of retail/service space.

## IX. Recommendations and Design Guidelines

Both site design options meet many of the goals expressed for the site by charrette participants:

- Mixed use buildings on Central Street with ground floor commercial space and second and third floor apartments. The amount of non-residential space could be adjusted according to market interest or potential collaboration with Cushing Academy.
- Buffering of existing residential buildings around the site with landscape elements
- Space for a park
- A significant number of housing units in multiple buildings, with potential for a mixed-income project combining affordable and market rate units and for a mixture of rental and ownership units.
- Sufficient parking to accommodate modest amounts of trailhead parking.

The charrette team believes that, on balance, the Village Style (Option B) alternative could be the basis for an attractive and functional design that would meet, providing creative opportunities for new buildings to refer to the historic vernacular in the town center. The advantages of Option B compared to Option A include:

- *More flexibility for compatible building design.* The Village Center design guidelines make a point of emphasizing that a design approach that seeks to copy a historic style is not desired, because all buildings should be of their own type. However, the diversity of buildings, some smaller and some with massing broken up like historic precedents, offers more opportunities for a project that will fit harmoniously into the town center
- *Better site circulation in relation to the overall Town Center context.* The road connection between Central and Maple Streets in Option B requires a ninety-degree turn near the Maple Street access point. In contrast, Option A provides a curved, more direct alignment. The advantage of Option B is that it would control the use of the site as a rapid cut-through street because motorists would need to slow down to negotiate the turn.



*Battle Farm in Lexington is well known for its use of a vernacular New England building type in an affordable housing project.*

### **Carriero Property Potential**

The Carriero property, which abuts the site at the northeast boundary, has frontage on Main Street, access from Maple Street and comprises somewhat more than one acre of land. The addition of this property to the development program would open additional possibilities:

## Ashburnham Highway Barn Site Charrette

- Mixed use building on Main Street with commercial uses on the ground floor and apartments above
- Pedestrian connection from Main Street directly into the site
- Additional recreation space
- Reorganization of site circulation and building location because of additional options.

It is not recommended that a street be opened up into the Carriero property for access from Water Street. It would not be beneficial to the economic health of the town center to create ways to avoid Main Street. In addition, although it is important that the interior layout of the site create street environments, as mentioned earlier, creating a cut-through route for fast traffic would make the village feel of the site less appealing.

### **Cushing Academy Partnership Potential**

Cushing Academy students and staff can help support this project in number of ways, from patronizing any new retail establishments to partnerships with the Town that could bring a number of opportunities for additional flexibility on this site:

- *Art gallery in the commercial space on Central Street.* At the charrette, a representative of the Academy discussed potential interest in an art gallery that would be managed by students in the school's excellent arts program but be open to showing art created by artists throughout the region, not just students and alumni. This could be the cultural activity on the site that many charrette participants wanted to see.
- *Need for rental faculty and staff housing.* Because Ashburnham has few rental housing units, Academy staff sometimes find it difficult to secure housing. This project, within walking distance of the Academy, could help alleviate that problem and help in the financing of the project. Potential areas for discussion could be joint development with the Academy of all or some of the project; purchase by the Academy of a building or specific units for rental to staff; agreement to reserve a certain number of rental units for staff, and so on.
- *Need for additional Academy parking.* According to charrette participants, the Academy has a need for additional parking. Development of a parking structure on the Highway Barn Site that was suitably lined with commercial or residential buildings could include a shared parking component, in which residents on the site would use the garage primarily at night and on weekends and Academy staff would use it primarily during the day. This could free up land for additional housing, retail space, or open space. There was also some discussion that the Academy could consider for a parking structure the land it owns across Central Street from the site which is now tennis courts. Because this is an important gateway to the Town Center, the Town should ensure that any project of this type requires commercial space, town houses or other suitable uses lining the frontage to camouflage the parking garage. A garage on this site could also be subject to a shared parking agreement, releasing even more land for alternative uses on the Highway Barn Site itself.

## **Other cultural opportunities**

Charrette participants discussed the potential to bring other cultural activities to this site. Some were interested in creating a replica of the train depot for a train museum. The charrette team agrees with the Village Center Design Guidelines that warn against direct copies of historic buildings. Ashburnham has authentic historic buildings and new buildings should be compatible in character but not copies. Moreover, creation of a new museum is very challenging because of the need not only for initial financing, but for ongoing funding, management of collections and the building, programming to attract visitors, and so on. Ashburnham already has a unique museum in the Piano Museum. Charrette participants also talked about exploring this museum as a source of increased cultural opportunities for the town. This could result connecting the Highway Barn Site development to the museum through pedestrian paths, signage, or performance space.

## **Design Guidelines**

This site should be designed as much as possible to create a feeling of being part of a neighborhood within the town center, not a self-contained subdivision, strip retail center, or apartment complex.

### *Walkability and connections*

- The site design should emphasize walkability and connections to the town center and other destinations.
- All streets and parking areas should have sidewalks.
- Pedestrian crossings should be marked with crosswalks at a minimum and consideration should be given to using raised crosswalks or distinctive paving at key locations.
- Continuous pedestrian facilities should be available from every building to Central Street and Maple Street, and by extension, to Main Street, and from every building and parking near Puffer Street to the Ashburnham Rail Trail.
- Lighting should be pedestrian scale rather than highway scale.
- If feasible, a pedestrian connection should be created through the Carriero property to Main Street.

### *Trees, landscaping and private outdoor space*

- Site planning should include a landscape plan that provides trees, shrubs and groundcover, with a preference for native species, for every building and for common open space.
- Deciduous trees should be planted along pedestrian ways to provide shade in the summer.
- Landscape elements should be located to buffer adjacent uses.
- If the site plan permits, for example in the case of townhouse units, small areas of private outdoor space should be created, with a clear distinction between what is public outdoor space, common outdoor space belonging to a multi-unit building, and private outdoor space for the use of residents of a particular unit or units.

*Utilities*

- Utilities should be buried when and wherever possible.

*Green space*

- A significant part of the site should be devoted to green space.
- The green space should be big enough to support a small park or town green. This park should be retained as town property, with public access and maintenance. The Town could seek an agreement with any potential property managers on the site to maintain the park.
- The green space should be concentrated and not be completely fragmented and distributed around the site.
- A pedestrian right-of-way should connect the green space to other on and off-site amenities like the Ashburnham Rail Trail and the nearby stream.
- Parking and a pedestrian connection to the Ashburnham Rail Trail nearby trailhead should be made available at the southwest corner of the site, near the intersection of Central Street and Puffer Street, and a bulletin board with trail maps. The connection to the trail should be identified by distinctive signage.

*Mixed-use buildings*

- Buildings located on Center Street should be at least two stories, with ground floor commercial space and residential or office space on upper floors.
- Mixed-use buildings should be built to the lot line or set back no more than 5 feet, as long as the setback is used for outdoor seating, planters, or similar amenities.
- Preferred ground floor uses should be active, such as retail or service uses that are occupied during the day and attract customers who come in and out.
- Ground floor facades should be at least 50% glass, to provide a view of activity within.
- Each individual ground floor retail or service use should have an individual entrance from the sidewalk.
- Desirable new commercial uses may include a bank, pub, bookstore, ice cream parlor, or art gallery.

*Buildings*

- Buildings should be designed and constructed in a style similar to the New England historic and vernacular buildings around the site and throughout town.
- Where appropriate, upper floors may be set back to minimize their visual impact at street level.
- Buildings in the interior of the site may be taller and larger, particularly at the northern edge of the site where adjacent lots are at a higher elevation, in effect mitigating the impact of higher buildings.
- Building heights and massing along Puffer Street will be compatible with the scale of the millworker housing along the street.
- Buildings along Maple Street may be larger and taller to be compatible with the Victorian House and other larger, nearby buildings.
- Residential buildings should be oriented to the sidewalk and street (including internal streets), with doors and windows facing the street.

- Residential buildings should have as many individual entrances to housing units as is feasible
- In general, a small landscaped setback of 5 to 10 feet is preferred for residential buildings. However, if a multi-unit building is constructed in the style of a large single family building, it should be sited to be compatible with similar housing types found in the Town Center.

*Parking*

- Parking should preferably be located to the side or in back of all buildings. Ideally, no parking will be located on Center Street or Maple Avenue.
- Ideally parking should be provided in smaller rather than larger lots that are located near the buildings for which they are designated.
- Structured or underground parking, if financially feasible, should be explored to avoid the need for surface parking.
- Parking lots should include marked, safe and comfortable pedestrian routes.
- Parking lots should include canopy trees at the edges or in islands sufficient at maturity to shade at least 50% of the lot.

*Buffers to adjacent properties*

- Existing greenery and tree stands should be preserved or new tree, shrub and groundcover plantings made to screen the development on the site from abutting properties. Landscape buffers should include a mix of evergreen and deciduous trees and other plantings.

*Affordable Housing*

- The need for affordable housing for town employees, the elderly and young families will be met by including a percentage (to be determined) of the new housing which will be designated for affordability to households earning 80% or below the Area Median Income as determined by the federal government. .
- The affordable housing will be designed to be indistinguishable from other housing units and preferably scattered throughout the project rather than concentrated in one area, building or buildings.