

NEEDHAM CENTER PLAN

A project to be undertaken and a Plan to be prepared for the Town of Needham, Massachusetts, acting through its Planning Board, by graduate students enrolled in the fall 2003, Community Growth and Land Use Planning course, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Scope of Work

Background, Goals, and Project Area

The Needham Center Plan will be prepared as a “guidance document” to encourage and promote planning efforts in Needham Center. The Plan is intended to engage the Town, including its municipal officials, citizens, business interests, property owners, and, where appropriate, federal and state transportation agencies, in a focused and prioritized planning effort to improve the downtown area.

As in many established towns, this is not an easy or necessarily straightforward process. In fact, downtown planning in Needham has been going on for many years. Those efforts have generated a number of successful projects. However, the Town’s downtown presents challenges that have made extensive improvements difficult. Not surprisingly, the positive improvements in the downtown resulted from a shared effort by the public and private sectors. Recognizing these realities, this planning effort will build on past planning for the downtown and will establish a program to help foster appropriate development and downtown revitalization, moving forward.

The purpose of this planning effort is to identify those strategies that will foster downtown revitalization, as well as to outline the process for that redevelopment to occur. Therefore, the Plan will focus on three topics: land use, development guidelines (such as height and bulk regulations), and design guidelines (such as appropriate built form and streetscape).

To accomplish this charge, the Plan will be divided into four sections. The first section will outline existing conditions pertinent to the plan. The second section will present a vision for the downtown; to be shaped and informed by the participation of Town residents, officials, and the Ad Hoc Committee. The third section will describe possible future alternatives and strategic plan issues in the study area. The final section will detail a development concept plan for the physical development and evolution of the Needham Center area. This physical plan must be an expression of Needham Center’s two functions: as a downtown center, and as a neighbor to the residential areas surrounding it. It must help facilitate a “sense of place,” and enhance and sharpen the area’s transit oriented development qualities.

For purposes of this effort, the area to be addressed by the Plan will include the Center Business District, the Chestnut Street Business District and bordering residential neighborhoods. (See attached locus map). The location of Chestnut Street, directly adjacent to the downtown area, necessitates its inclusion in the development of an area plan for Needham Center. As a major arterial road serving the commercial activity in Needham Center, Chestnut Street cannot be adequately studied without also looking at the downtown area, and vice versa. Land use and traffic in both districts is interrelated.

Needham Center is a typical town center, complete with a Town Hall, Town Common, Police and Fire Stations, an MBTA station, churches and a central business district bordered by residential neighborhoods. The area is undergoing change, as a result of new development and underlying redevelopment pressures in the downtown itself, as well as in the surrounding area. The Plan should help the Town ensure that future growth and change is positive, and reflects the needs of both the business and residential communities. Facilitating aesthetic and functional improvements, while balancing economic development and community character issues, will be both a key challenge and primary goal for the Plan.

Plan Scope and Products

The Plan will involve consideration and analysis of the existing land use pattern(s) and visual and economic characteristics of the defined area, and will result prioritized strategies and recommendations to improve and enhance the area. The following products are expected to result from the Plan:

- Development of realistic recommendations to enhance both the entire area and specific properties, including recommendations for land use, streetscape and landscape improvements and amenities to help unify the area, all geared toward promoting greater imageability and a “sense of place”;
- Identification of conceptual pedestrian and vehicular access and circulation improvements (along and across the area to be studied, with appropriate links to open space areas);
- Conceptual recommendations and reuse strategies for encouraging the inclusion of affordable housing either as a solitary use or in a mixed use context;
- Conceptual recommendations and reuse strategies for high visibility or key parcels that are likely to have major reuse or redevelopment potential;
- Specific recommendations for increasing the availability of parking to service anticipated redevelopment options including provision of structured parking facilities either above or below ground;
- Specific recommendations for strengthening, nurturing, and promoting connections to greenspace and to the adjoining neighborhood and commercial areas;

- Conceptual design guidelines and incentives that could be considered by the Town to foster planning objectives; and
- Suggested revisions to the Zoning Bylaw (both map and text amendments) to support plan objectives, including potential revisions to existing zoning requirements and zoning district boundaries.

The “Final Plan” document will include the inventory and analysis conducted, along with recommendations and other accompanying features and details, which are likely to include maps, illustrations, tables, and relevant data and information.

Two formal presentations related to the Plan will be made by student teams to the Town: a Preliminary Plan findings presentation, and a Final Plan presentation. It is anticipated that the Planning Department may invite members of the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Economic Development Advisory Committee, Comprehensive Affordable Housing Study Committee, residents, business owners, and other interested persons to attend these meetings.

An initial “project briefing” session with the Director of Planning will be held to acquaint students with the scope of the project. This briefing will be held on September 9th, 2003 during class time at MIT.

Start Date: September 9, 2003

Completion Date: December 12, 2003

Materials, Supervision

Project supervision: Terry Szold, Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT, course instructor, and a practicing planner, will supervise the Plan preparation process, assisted by an experienced graduate teaching assistant.

Project liaison: Lee Newman, Planning Director, will act as primary liaison and contact person in relation to plan/project coordination issues. She will interact with and address questions from the course instructor, teaching assistant, and student team representatives.