



# NORWELL MASTER PLAN

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PLANNING BOARD  
NORWELL, MASSACHUSETTS

2005 - 2025

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Many thanks to all of the board and commission members, town staff and Norwell citizens who participated in creating this Master Plan. To view a copy of the complete plan go to: [www.norwellmasterplan.org](http://www.norwellmasterplan.org)

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Norwell's Vision Statement... emphasizes protecting the town's natural environment and its green and semi-rural character, while enhancing the town's small-town and family-oriented community life, and its overall livability.*



The Town of Norwell is a semi-rural suburban community that offers its residents a very good quality of life. From its roots as a shipbuilding and farming community, Norwell grew into a low-density residential suburb after 1950 with a mix of historic homes and middle-class, modest housing. Over the next generation, the town's calm beauty and excellent school system attracted new residents to the houses that sprang up steadily along country roads and in subdivisions.

Since the 1990s, Norwell has become a more affluent and mature suburb. Housing is becoming more expensive, new homes are getting bigger, traffic seems more pervasive and intense, and the demand for school and other town services continues to increase. Almost everyone in Norwell talks about the town's "rural character" and wants to enhance or save it. Some residents are not sure they like the changes they have seen in recent years. Others are more comfortable with the transformations, but still worry about ensuring that the changes are appropriate to the town's sense of its own identity. In this context of development pressures that threatened to bring irrevocable change, the town in 2000 decided to develop a community master plan.

The purpose of a master plan is to provide a community with the opportunity to articulate and review its values and goals through public discussion, agree on what kind of town it wants to be in the future, and identify the key areas where it must act both to preserve enduring character and to seize opportunities to shape change. A master plan sets forth a set of strategies, tools and specific actions to make the plan a reality. Norwell is facing strategic choices to preserve and enhance its quality of life and community character. The Norwell Master Plan is a guide to making those strategic choices.

The premise of this Master Plan is that Norwell must innovate - both to protect the essential elements of its identity as a community and to take advantage of opportunities for improving life for town residents. In the past, change could be managed with a relatively simple regulatory framework and a reactive approach to unusual challenges. But continuing the same way of doing business will not resolve the issues that increasingly concern residents - because these concerns arise from a changed context. Although in many ways Norwell seems much like it was decades ago, the cumulative effect of development has brought the town to a much more mature suburban identity. As a result, the town faces more constrained choices and more constrained opportunities. In this context, Norwell must adopt some new ideas and ways of doing things in order to have a better chance of retaining its cherished community character.

## NORWELL'S VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Norwell's Vision Statement crystallizes residents' ideal vision of what the town will be like twenty years from now. Based on the results of resident views expressed in a survey and community meetings, it emphasizes protecting the town's natural environment and its green and semi-rural character, while enhancing the town's small-town and family-oriented community life, and its overall livability. The Vision serves as a statement of values and a source of inspiration to guide decision-making and implementation of the Master Plan.



## COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE MASTER PLAN PROCESS

In 2000, the Planning Board recommended to Town Meeting that Norwell complete a community master plan. Town Meeting approved, and in the spring of 2001, the Planning Board and its subcommittee, the Master Plan Steering Committee (MPSC), selected a team of consultants to assist Norwell in crafting a master plan. Norwell citizens had multiple opportunities to participate in guiding and crafting the plan:

- A survey was distributed to all town households and businesses.
- Three town-wide workshops and forums took place.
- Six precinct workshops focused on neighborhood-level concerns.
- Two business community meetings focused on development in business areas.
- Four thematic working group meetings discussed open space, housing, economic development, and transportation and facilities.
- Meetings of the MPSC were open to the public.

**Norwell in 2024 is a predominantly residential town with a strong sense of community identity and semi-rural visual character:**

- *Planning for the future and maintaining a fiscally strong town government*
- *Maintaining a small town, family-oriented residential character*
- *Shaping development to be in harmony with town character and environmental constraints*
- *Providing a sufficient variety of economic and housing opportunities to support excellent services and community diversity*
- *Protecting the town's natural beauty, water resources, and environmental health through a network of "green infrastructure"*
- *Preserving historic buildings and landscapes*

**Norwell is known in the South Shore for its livability, services, and community cohesion:**

- *Norwell is financially sound and maintains excellent infrastructure and services through efficient, cost-effective and forward-thinking management.*
- *Norwell is centered on its village community, a mixed-use, lively but low-key Norwell Center.*
- *Norwell is walkable with a network of trails and sidewalks linking residents with each other, civic buildings, open space, and shopping areas.*
- *Norwell is welcoming, with sufficient housing affordability to accommodate senior citizens, town employees, and young families.*
- *Norwell has the most attractive stretch of Route 53 in the region characterized by pedestrian-friendly nodes of commercial development.*
- *Norwell is green, with a network of protected open space and regulations that promote environmentally sound, appropriate development.*

In addition to the survey, the MPSC mailed all residents a summary of the proposed vision statement, goals, policies and potential implementation actions before the second town-wide forum. Newspaper articles and occasional columns reported on the progress of the Master Plan. The MPSC visited town boards and commissions to discuss Master Plan issues. Accompanying this process, the consultants prepared three detailed interim reports that functioned as the working documents of the planning process and that were made available for public review in the Library and on the [www.norwellmasterplan.org](http://www.norwellmasterplan.org) web site: 1) Existing Conditions, Trends and Challenges; 2) Vision - Goals - Policies; and 3) Implementation and Action Plan. These documents, as well as this final Master Plan document, large maps and a Technical Appendix binder containing model bylaws and other materials to assist in implementation, are also available in the Planning Department office.

## SURVEY RESULTS

Survey respondents were asked what they think are the best and worst things about Norwell and about the top issues facing the town in the next twenty years. They were also polled on their major concerns in the areas of community facilities and services; transportation and traffic; natural resources, open space, and cultural resources; economic development; and land use and growth management. Almost 500 respondents returned the survey - representing over 15% of Norwell households and more people than typically vote at Town Meeting. The top five issues facing the town identified by respondents were, in order, the tax burden, protection of drinking water, protection of open space, preservation of educational quality, and traffic control and improvements. The tax burden and protection of drinking water were given almost identical importance. There was great agreement on the best things about Norwell: rural, small town character, open space, and natural features. Other positive aspects of the town identified by survey respondents included the school system, the people in the community and the high level of civic participation. Most respondents thought that traffic and congestion issues were the worst thing about Norwell: congestion at Queen Anne's Corner; Route 53 traffic; lack of safe pedestrian and bike routes; and speeding. The other main area of dissatisfaction focused on development issues, such as too much or inappropriate development, oversized homes, and loss of open space to development.

## SHAPING AND MANAGING GROWTH TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

This Master Plan provides the elements of an integrated growth management approach that will help Norwell achieve the goals enshrined in the Vision Statement. Norwell needs to pursue a balanced combination of strategies that support the town's environmental and historic character while accommodating changes. Focusing just on protection of water resources, or on open space protection, or on building up the nonresidential tax base, or on zoning changes alone will not meet the community's multi-faceted needs. The elements of an integrated growth management strategy that emerged through the planning process are threaded throughout the Master Plan:

- **Identification of a Green Network connecting natural, cultural and recreational resources.** The Green Network is the foundation of an environmental and open space preservation and management system functioning as the "green infrastructure" that

supports a healthy environment for people and wildlife. The Green Network concept should be used not only by boards and commissions charged with resource protection or open space planning, but also to guide development, so that it complements the assets that make Norwell such an attractive place to live. Master Plan maps identify the high priority areas for protection and enhancement.

- **Tools for shaping development to conserve open space and complement community character.** Norwell will still see additional development. There are close to 3,200 acres of land on 645 parcels, some with an existing house, that could be subdivided under current zoning. The town needs to establish new ways to accommodate growth



*The North River*

and redevelopment in order to preserve the character established by older settlement patterns. Conservation Subdivision development, which clusters homes in order to preserve larger blocks of open space, is much more likely to help Norwell retain its remaining semi-rural character than allowing conventional large-lot development patterns to continue.

- **Tools for meeting affordable housing goals in ways compatible with town character.** By establishing a proactive affordable housing policy, Norwell can shape affordable housing to fit its own needs for more diversity in housing types and affordability, while still complementing the town's traditional development patterns and meeting state goals. The existing housing stock and neighborhood patterns mean that housing in Norwell will continue to be overwhelmingly characterized by substantial, single-family homes on their own lots. Including some diversity of housing types and permanent affordability will not change Norwell's fundamental residential character.

- **Economic development strategies to increase the tax base.** Norwell is lucky to have the industrial and commercial parks located at the northern end of Route 3 and Route 53 that add to the tax base with insignificant impacts on most residential neighborhoods. If the town is to increase non-residential tax revenues to mitigate the high residential tax burden, this is where opportunity lies. As a long-term strategy, the town can allow additional density in these parks, contingent on sewer or other wastewater improvements, in order to attract higher value development.
- **Economic development strategies to enhance quality of life.** Route 53 commercial areas and Norwell Center can better serve Norwell residents if more attention is paid to site design, traffic and parking management, pedestrian needs, and creating a climate that attracts mixed-use development and desired businesses.
- **Strategies to enhance mobility town-wide.** Although management of traffic congestion, enhanced enforcement, and installation of traffic calming measures are all important, creation of a town-wide network that allows residents of all ages to move around town safely on foot and by bicycle will improve everyone's quality of life and offer alternatives to vehicle travel for some trips.
- **Strategies to use town property to achieve new goals.** The town needs a comprehensive evaluation of all its land and buildings, to meet goals ranging from consolidation of the public works department and creation of a community center, to donation of land or buildings for affordable housing.

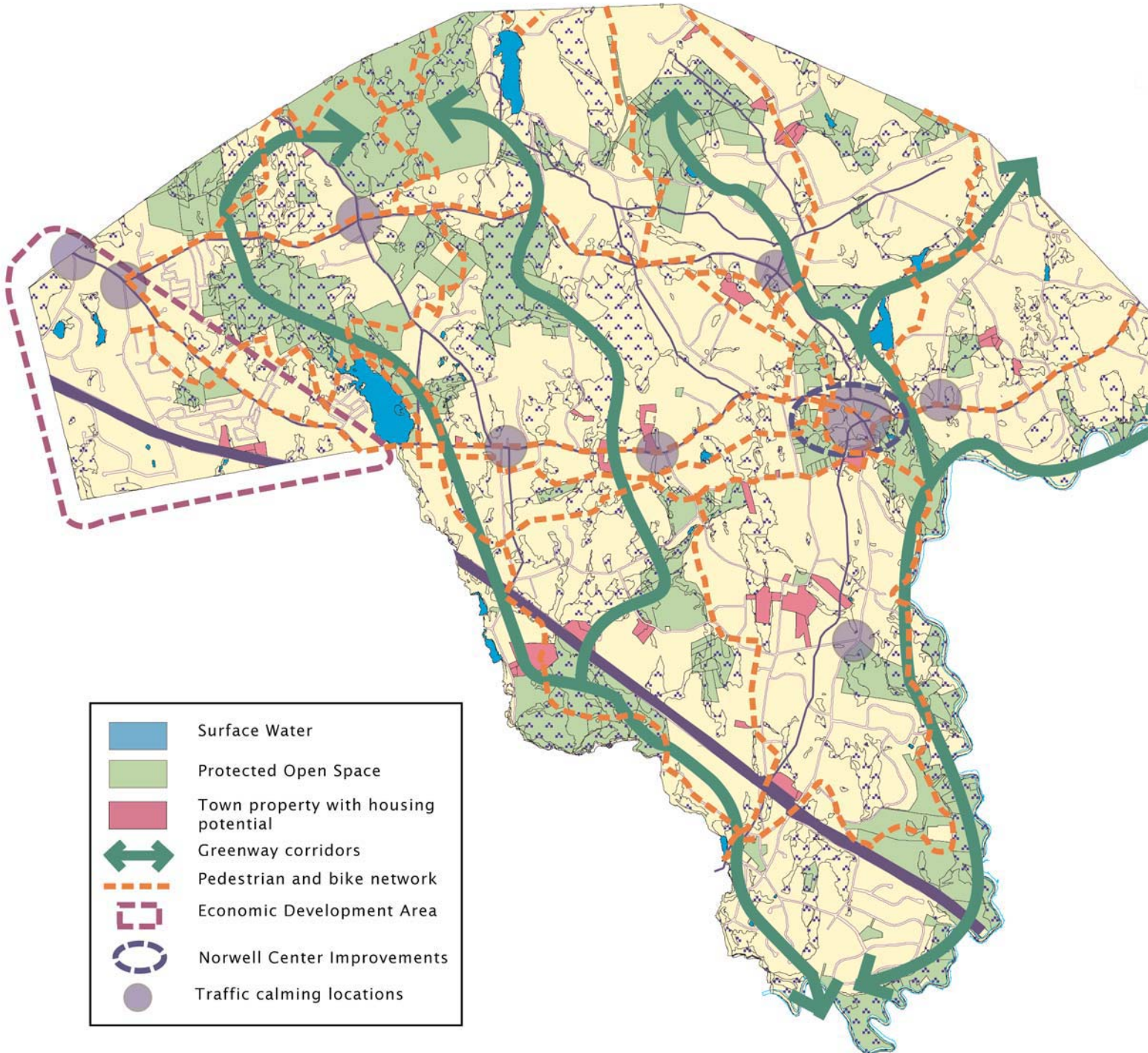
## CRITICAL ARENAS FOR ACTION

Through the survey, public meetings, and committee discussion, the MPSC identified key arenas for town action in the future. Within these four arenas, the town can deploy a variety of policy approaches, regulatory tools, management programs and voluntary initiatives to achieve its goals.

### PROTECTING AND MANAGING NATURAL SYSTEMS

Protecting Norwell's drinking water supply and its rivers and streams are among residents' highest priorities. These goals require continuing the town's careful attention to water issues by implementing conservation measures and developing new drinking water sources. Land use strategies complement water supply management efforts, ranging from preservation of open space in water supply zones to reduction of impervious surfaces in new development. Protection of surface water and wetlands from nonpoint source pollution requires controlling stormwater runoff from impervious surfaces like roads, driveways, parking lots and roofs; limiting how upland buffers to wetlands are used; and clustered site design through Conservation Subdivisions to allow greater infiltration of water and reduction of impervious surfaces than do conventional large-lot subdivisions. In some cases, new regulations and management programs are needed. In others, increased public awareness and voluntary actions on private property are more appropriate approaches. The Plan identifies areas that should be the focus of conservation efforts and suggests that private property owners sharing environmentally sensitive lands such as wetlands develop guidelines for a joint approach to management of these areas.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY MAP



## NINE KEY MASTER PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS TO SHAPE NORWELL'S FUTURE:

### 1 Create a Green Network of natural and cultural resources, open space and recreational opportunities:

- Preserve open space to protect water.
- Protect continuous open space greenways along water corridors through private stewardship agreements among neighbors, conservation restrictions, and if needed, land purchase.
  - Third Herring Brook from Church Hill to Wompatuck State Park.
  - North River and Second Herring Brook from Stetson Meadows to Black Pond.
- Promote public awareness of historic areas and consider landmark status for key historic sites.

### 2 Manage residential development to preserve Norwell's remaining open space character:

- Establish Conservation Subdivision Zoning for all residential parcels over 5 acres.
- Establish buffer zones along roads to preserve trees and views.

### 3 Support creation of affordable housing compatible with town character:

- Revive the Norwell Housing Partnership to lead affordable housing planning including use of town-owned property, mixed-use zoning and other strategies.

### 4 Pursue a strategy to increase non-residential tax revenues:

- Ease zoning constraints and establish performance standards to allow higher density in industrial and commercial areas while preserving environmental health.

### 5 Improve the appearance and function of Route 53:

- Establish common design and development standards with neighboring towns to create more walkable areas and cluster businesses to reduce curb cuts and traffic congestion and improve livability.

### 6 Make Norwell Center a more vital focus of community life:

- Permit small-scale shops by right.
- Create village design guidelines and special permit incentives for a mixture of small-scale shops and apartments.

### 7 Implement enforcement and traffic calming strategies on high traffic, cross-town roads.

### 8 Create a network of safe pedestrian and bicycle routes throughout town by planning sidewalks in selected areas, maintaining trails in open space, and providing marked bicycle routes.

### 9 Prepare a comprehensive study of town facilities needs and alternative uses of town properties.

*Conservation Subdivision*



### **PROTECTING AND ENJOYING COMMUNITY CHARACTER**

Concerns about community character focus on three issues: preservation of the open space character of roadside views and remaining large parcels; encouraging new development and redevelopment to be in harmony with the surrounding neighborhood; and protection of historic resources. New regulatory and management tools can help Norwell shape development to protect the town's traditional semi-rural character and historic resources. The approaches recommended in this Plan, such as Conservation Subdivision development for parcels of 5 acres or more, are intended to make sure that if remaining land is developed, the new development must maximize the retention and integrity of open space. Although Norwell has a very active Historical Commission and a demolition delay bylaw, the town should consider providing stronger protection to Norwell's most important historic sites.

### **MEETING AFFORDABLE HOUSING GOALS IN WAYS COMPATIBLE WITH COMMUNITY CHARACTER**

The median price of Norwell single-family homes was \$474,000 in 2003, reflecting the rise in housing prices throughout Massachusetts in recent years. The town offers limited diversity in housing type or price, constraining housing choices for town employees, elderly people who want to downsize but stay in town, and young adults who would like to stay in their home town. Norwell does not meet the state goal of 10% permanently affordable housing under the Chapter 40B law. By developing and implementing an active plan with a variety of strategies to meet the state goal, Norwell can provide more housing options without damaging its fundamental neighborhood and community character. A strong plan should be implemented to guide the town in the development of projects appropriate to the town's character.

### **PROMOTING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TO ENHANCE THE TAX BASE AND IMPROVE QUALITY OF LIFE**

High residential tax bills are a burden for many Norwell residents. They result from the fact that residential property values have been increasing faster than commercial and industrial values. Norwell residents do not want to see more land area assigned to business uses, but they are interested in moderating the tax burden while retaining high quality town services. This requires a long-term strategy to bring higher value development to the industrial and office parks, such as zoning for higher density in commercial and industrial areas contingent on sewer connections to Rockland or other new wastewater management options. Norwell residents would also like the commercial districts on Route 53 and in Norwell Center to provide more retail variety and to be more attractive and functional as community centers. New standards for design and development, along with improvements to traffic function, clustering of business uses, pedestrian amenities, and in the case of Norwell Center, limited amounts of small-scale rental housing, will help attract more diverse retailers and service providers.

## **MASTER PLAN GOALS AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES**

### **GOAL:**

#### **Protect the Natural and Cultural Heritage of Norwell in a Connected Green Network**

- **Create a Green Network of natural and cultural resources, open space, and recreational opportunities** by protecting continuous open space greenways through private stewardship agreements among neighbors, conservation restrictions, and, if needed, purchase.

- o Protect critical environmental systems, especially the quality and quantity of groundwater and surface water in ponds and streams.
- o Preserve open space in interconnected natural resources systems to protect water resources and wildlife habitat.
- o Preserve the cultural resources of Norwell in the form of historic buildings and sites, and the working landscapes of farms, nurseries, and woodlots.
- o Provide recreational access to open space for both passive and active recreation.

**STRATEGIES:**

- **Focus first on two priority greenway systems:** (1) along Third Herring Brook from



*Assinippi Industrial Park*

Church Hill to Wompatuck State Park, and (2) along the North River and Second Herring Brook from Stetson Meadows to Black Pond. Each of these potential greenway systems contains diverse natural resources, historic sites and landscapes, and opportunities for interpretive recreational trails.

- **Protect water flows in streams and groundwater recharge.** Minimize the creation of new impervious surfaces through a variety of strategies including open space preservation, Conservation Subdivision zoning, and promoting water conservation.
- **Seek comprehensive management of septic systems.** Create a master plan for trouble spots, use GIS mapping and record keeping, and seek funding for mitigation projects.
- **Implement enhanced stormwater management programs** to reduce nonpoint source pollution of streams, ponds, and wetlands. Promote environmentally-sensitive landscaping, smaller lawn size and limited use of fertilizers and pesticides, and improve maintenance of the drainage system.

- **Promote public education on the neighborhood level about natural resources, wildlife habitat and stormwater flows.** Encourage neighborhood voluntary efforts to monitor the health of local streams and other natural resources.
- **Explore options for protection of historic resources.** Consider tools such as local historic districts, neighborhood conservation districts, and a local landmarks bylaw.
- **Enhance access to open space and recreational sites.** Add parking spaces where needed and improving signage, maps and other outreach materials.
- **Revive the pathways committee.** Seek funding and oversee the creation of a detailed bicycle and pedestrian path system linking neighborhoods, open spaces, recreational areas, schools, and other town destinations.



#### GOAL:

##### Shape Residential Development to Preserve Community Character

- Plan, manage and shape development to accommodate change while ensuring harmony with Norwell's community character and environmental constraints.
- Provide for housing options available across a range of incomes.

#### STRATEGIES:

- **Manage residential development to preserve Norwell's remaining open space character** by establishing Conservation Subdivision zoning for all residential parcels of 5 acres or more. This will ensure preservation of more unfragmented open space and creation of a smaller expanse of impervious surfaces. Consider making this a mandatory, by-right zoning regulation with a strong site plan review process to ensure town oversight for high design and development standards.
- **Consider implementing Large Home Site Plan Review** to influence the siting of very large houses on their lots and their impact on public views.
- **Establish overlay buffer zones along roads to preserve trees and views.** A scenic corridor overlay could require that, within 25 feet of the pavement, property developers must retain specified sizes or types of vegetation (with provision for a driveway).
- **Establish coordinated review of all new residential development** by all relevant boards, commissions and staff.
- **Support creation of affordable housing compatible with town character** by reviving the Norwell Affordable Housing Partnership and pursuing the use of town-owned properties for affordable housing.
- **Establish a variety of regulatory and programmatic options to promote creation of affordable housing** such as scattered-site affordable accessory units and small units on nonconforming lots. Through the Affordable Housing Partnership, explore contacts with nonprofit housing developers, the potential for a "friendly 40B" on town-owned

property, and creation of an Affordable Housing Trust. Appropriately sited and designed rental projects, small-scale scattered-site affordable housing, deed restrictions on existing moderately priced houses, as well as a range of other approaches, can help the town integrate affordable housing harmoniously into the community.

**GOAL:**

**Promote Higher Value Economic Development in Existing Business Areas**

- Maximize non-residential tax revenue from existing industrial and commercial areas while protecting town character and quality of life.
- Improve the Town Center with more pedestrian-friendly design and retail variety.
- Improve Route 53 with more pedestrian-friendly design and higher value development.

**STRATEGIES:**

- **Pursue a strategy to increase non-residential tax revenues** by allowing higher density development in the office and industrial parks contingent on sewer connections or other wastewater capacity improvements.
- **Improve the appearance and function of Route 53** by concentrating development in village-like centers, reviewing parking ratios and allowing shared parking, and developing a streetscape plan with pedestrian amenities.
- **Collaborate with neighboring towns on Route 53 standards** for new development to create more walkable areas, cluster businesses, and reduce curb cuts to improve traffic function.
- **Make Norwell Center a more vital focus of community life** by allowing small-scale shops and offices by right. Residents in public meetings envisioned additional family-oriented businesses, such as an ice cream store, in the Center. Eliminating the special permit requirement for small shops and offices may encourage new business entries.
- **Upgrade the streetscape and make improvements to reduce speeding and enhance pedestrian safety in Norwell Center.** Wide intersections and few pedestrian amenities currently signal drivers that they do not need to slow down in the Center.
- **Develop design guidelines and an overlay district with special permit incentives for small-scale multi-family and mixed-use development.** People living in apartments above shops or in small multifamily buildings would create more activity in Norwell Center and help attract new retail options. Some of the apartments could also be designated as permanently affordable. If necessary, communal septic systems should be explored to make it possible for more people to live in the Town Center.
- **Revise the home occupations section of the zoning by-law** to require a special permit for those occupations that require clients to come to the business and for exterior building or site alterations that result from the business activities. This change would protect neighbors from impacts of home businesses while continuing to allow home businesses that do not have a significant impact on abutters and the neighborhood as a whole.

**GOAL:**

**Transportation and Circulation**

- Work towards a multi-faceted transportation system including:
  - o Access to regional public transportation
  - o Well-maintained roads for safe and efficient access to local roads and regional routes
  - o A system of pedestrian and bicycle routes throughout town that connect to regional non-motorized transportation routes
- Create an enhanced public assets management system to efficiently maintain public infrastructure.

**STRATEGIES:**

- **Preserve the character of Route 123** by participating in MassHighway's Community Roads Program.
- **Mitigate traffic congestion on Route 53** through rezoning and promoting common regulatory strategies throughout the corridor.
- **Implement enforcement and traffic calming** strategies on high traffic, cross-town roads.
- **Create a network of safe pedestrian and bicycle routes** throughout town by planning for sidewalks in selected areas and safe roadside pedestrian paths on more rural roads, maintaining trails in open space, and providing marked bicycle routes.



*Intersection of Route 53 and 228*

- **Establish a public works asset management system** to support a program of regular road maintenance and improvements. Efficient asset management over time results in lower road repair costs.
- **Participate in regional transportation planning** to enhance access to public transportation.

**GOAL:****Community Facilities and Services**

- Provide residents with high-quality and cost-effective government facilities and services.

**STRATEGIES:**

- **Implement the recommendations of the Water Master Plan.** Water conservation measures, distribution system improvements, and identification of new supplies are among the recommendations.
- **Consider consolidating responsibility for maintenance of all town property and infrastructure in one Public Works department.** Evaluate the current division into several departments to see if consolidated management would increase efficiency and decrease costs.
- **Prepare a comprehensive study of town facilities needs and alternative uses of town properties:**
  - o Inventory and evaluate all town-owned property for appropriate use. All build-

- ings and land owned by the town should be evaluated for future use.
- o Consider buildable town-owned parcels for new uses such as affordable housing, recreational use or town facilities.
- o Plan for a new police station and technology.
- o Study potential uses for the Osborne Building and site, including affordable housing and a community center.
- **Provide administrative support for the Town Planner.** Because more proactive policies and regulations require more professional guidance, allowing the Planner to spend more time on complex issues while assigning routine administrative work to a staff person would benefit the town and enhance implementation of the Master Plan.

The Master Plan covers all of the elements listed in MGL Chapter 41, sec. 81D, which governs the content of municipal master plans: goals and policies, land use, housing, economic development, natural and cultural resources, open space and recreation, services and facilities, circulation, and implementation.

## IMPLEMENTATION AND STEWARDSHIP OF THE MASTER PLAN

The everyday demands of town government and turnover in town staff and officials can sometimes make it difficult to seek guidance from the Master Plan in decision-making. Effective implementation of a master plan requires stewardship: someone has to be responsible for monitoring progress and bringing changes to the attention of the community. The Planning Board should seek volunteers for appointment to a Master Plan Implementation Committee to take on that role and the Board should direct the Town Planner to provide staff support to the committee. The Committee should work with town officials, boards and commissions, and departments to incorporate Master Plan policies and strategies into the decision-making process and to make Master Plan implementation actions part of the capital improvement plan and departmental work plans. In addition, the committee should make annual reports to the Planning Board, Board of Selectmen and Town Meeting on the progress of implementation, discussing unforeseen opportunities and barriers, as well as changing conditions. Every five years, public meetings should be organized to review, modify or confirm the principles and priorities of the Master Plan, so that it remains a useful guide for town decision-making. By bringing the Master Plan vision, goals and implementation program before the community at regular intervals, the Master Plan Implementation Committee will make the Plan a living document and an effective road map for managing and shaping change in Norwell.

# NORWELL MASTER PLAN

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