

Town of Northborough Master Plan – Final Vision, Goals, and Recommendations

Vision Statement

Northborough, a New England town incorporated in 1766, envisions a future where residents and visitors of all ages and backgrounds are drawn to a thriving town that provides walkability and connectivity between open spaces, gathering places, commercial activity, and neighborhoods; where Northborough's natural and cultural spaces, recreational amenities, and historic sites are preserved and integrated into the community to welcome, educate, and inspire; where a well-balanced housing stock supports long standing residents and new arrivals alike; where education is valued and fostered; where economic activity is given an appropriate place to grow and support our community and residents; and where future environmental and fiscal changes are given consideration in planning for a more sustainable and resilient community.

Land Use

LU1: Prioritize the preservation of valuable natural resources and open spaces, while still accommodating the social and economic needs of the community.

- LU1-1. Conduct a Cost of Community Services Study to prove the economic value of open space and natural lands.
- LU1-2. Build off the 495/MetroWest Development Compact Plan to inventory local priority development areas (PDAs) and priority preservation areas (PPAs) to guide future development activities in Town, as necessary.
- LU1-3. Review the existing Zoning Bylaw and conservation commission regulations for needed revisions to strengthen the protection of natural resources.
- LU1-4. Identify flood hazards (e.g., stormwater inundation, riverine flooding), and develop updates to land use planning tools such as zoning and subdivision regulations to better define objectives in these areas. Conserve, through purchase or restriction, properties that would expand and improve flood control/hazard mitigation.
- LU1-5. Where feasible, seek actions that contribute to the quality and diversity of wildlife habitat, such as preventing habitat fragmentation and preserving wildlife corridors when large tracts of land are developed, as well as the protection of water quality.
- LU1-6. Develop a stormwater management bylaw to require stormwater management and erosion control permitting. Monitor stormwater maintenance plans created for the operations and maintenance phase of real estate developments.

LU1-7. Maintain the Town's conservation fund to ensure resources are available to protect open spaces as opportunities arise.

LU2: Enhance Downtown by promoting a pleasing and welcoming appearance – one that promotes a sense of place - enabling it to become the community's proud central gathering area for residents and visitors alike.

LU2-1. Conduct a design study of the Downtown to help focus ideas and develop a clear vision for the area.

LU2-2. Conduct a visual preference survey with the community to determine what kinds of developments it prefers in Downtown and update the Town's Zoning Bylaw to accommodate these preferred development types.

LU2-3. Update the Town's Zoning Bylaw to better plan for mixed-uses in Downtown that can promote and support walkability.

LU2-4. Investigate density bonuses and/or density transfer credits in the Town's Zoning Bylaw that promote reasonably higher densities in the Downtown in exchange for public benefits.

LU2-5. Develop a program to promote the planting and sustained growth of street trees, landscaping, and other green infrastructure in Downtown in concert with the development and fostering of partnerships, including with the Northborough Garden Club. As part of the program, undertake a tree inventory along the major corridors in Town.

LU2-6. Explore opportunities to create walking paths/routes along brooks/river and connecting historic properties to enhance the beauty of historic Downtown.

LU2-7. Take advantage of the Department of Housing and Community Development's Massachusetts Downtown Initiative that provides services and technical assistance to communities on revitalizing their downtowns.

LU2-8. Evaluate how Community Preservation Act funding and other funding sources can be used to support Downtown enhancement.

LU3: Ensure Northborough's future land uses support its Vision and established community character.

LU3-1. Perform periodic review of existing design guidelines to ensure a balance between the existing community character with new development and redevelopment, as well as consistency with the findings of the visual preference survey.

LU3-2. Build greater awareness of Chapter 61 programs that provide tax breaks to owners of forest, agricultural, and recreational land, and grow local participation in the program.

LU3-3. Perform periodic review of the Town-wide guidelines for commercial and industrial development.

LU3-4. Consider developing regulations for hazardous waste facilities to protect the Town.

LU4: Continue to support and manage commercial development outside of the Downtown, particularly along Route 20 (Southwest Cutoff) and Route 9, considering adjacent land use compatibility and the Town’s preservation priorities.

LU4-1. Coordinate land use planning with regional transportation investments.

LU4-2. Consider updating and expanding the existing Major Commercial Overlay District for Route 20 (Southwest Cutoff) and Route 9.

LU4-3. Consider increasing water/sewer capacity, particularly along Route 20 (Southwest Cutoff) and Route 9, to enhance development potential.

Housing

H1: Continue to maintain and encourage a diversity of housing options to increase housing affordability and choice for all ages and to ensure that at least 10 percent of the Town’s housing inventory continues to be deemed affordable under state guidelines.

H1-1. Explore residential uses, including affordable housing and affordable senior housing, as a potential future use for previously developed parcels that have the opportunity for redevelopment as they become available.

H1-2. Explore an inclusionary housing bylaw, which would require a portion of housing units be set aside for low- and moderate-income households.

H1-3. Work with local housing partners to identify opportunities for them to develop and own affordable housing, which will allow the Town to proactively guide affordable housing locations.

H2: Promote housing types that accommodate future growth in the community while maintaining and enhancing the existing character of residential neighborhoods.

H2-1. Undertake a study to understand housing price points for homeownership and rentals that would reduce the cost burden experienced by Town residents. Determine the types of housing that would meet these price points. Work collaboratively with developers to enable these housing types in targeted areas.

H2-2. Review the Town’s Zoning Bylaw to ensure consistency with the housing study in H2-1.

- H2-3. Identify appropriate areas for “missing middle” housing.
- H2-4. Build awareness around accessory dwelling units.
- H2-5. Guided by zoning and design standards, incorporate housing into Downtown to attract a sufficient number of residents that can supplement and support the area’s economic viability.
- H2-6. Update the Town’s existing Housing Production Plan.

H3: Pursue a housing development strategy that balances demand with the Town’s capacity to provide services and infrastructure.

- H3-1. In coordination with the Public Facilities and Services recommendations, identify the Town’s capacity to service increased housing demands with expanded infrastructure. Refer to the Cost of Community Services Study referenced in LU1-1.
- H3-2. Revive the Housing Partnership to monitor Northborough’s housing needs, recommend policies and actions to meet housing needs, and evaluate funding sources available to create housing.

Economic Development

ED1: Define Downtown in terms of its geography (e.g., Downtown Business District), appearance, branding, and function.

- ED1-1. Create a Downtown planning/revitalization committee made up of Downtown business owners, representatives from Town boards, and other stakeholders that will recommend the boundaries of Downtown, support the Town’s Planning office, assist in proposing and overseeing plans to enhance the Downtown, and pursue Community Preservation Act funding and other funding sources to enable this enhancement.
- ED1-2. Explore potential acquisitions or land deals to appropriately scale the Downtown.
- ED1-3. Explore options for creating a fresh and cohesive identity or brand for the new Downtown area such as unified signage and facades, including wayfinding and marketing materials. Use signage to clarify the boundaries of the new Downtown.
- ED1-4. Conduct a parking study to assess and address parking activity and pedestrian issues in Downtown, and to plan for future needs.
- ED1-5. Explore the potential for repurposing 4 West Main Street (the Old Town Hall) as an anchor for the Downtown. Conduct a feasibility study to identify options and recommendations.

ED1-6. Undertake a study to explore the potential of designating Downtown as a Business Improvement District, which would create a special assessment district where property owners would agree to organize and finance services above and beyond those already provided by the Town.

ED1-7. Look for opportunities to incorporate other public gathering places, such as the Town Common and Library, into the Downtown framework. Advance efforts to connect gathering places and businesses for improved walkability and accessibility.

ED2: Promote (re)development opportunities for vacant or underutilized commercial and industrial properties.

ED2-1. Evaluate the need for, and ability to sustain, a dedicated economic development staff to actively engage the Town's business community, promote the Town's economic attractiveness, and coordinate the Town's economic development efforts.

ED2-2. Consider engaging a real estate advisory firm to create a redevelopment strategy for the Town's business districts. The strategy should incorporate analysis of appropriate uses, scale/dimension/design, as well as the infrastructure and services needed to support these redevelopments.

ED2-3. Explore the potential for District Improvement Financing, Tax Increment Financing, and/or grants to attract private investment in the Town's business districts.

ED2-4. Engage more proactively with land owners in the Town's industrial districts, taking advantage of the aggregation of the property interests and working collaboratively to both market and develop industrial-zoned sites.

ED2-5. Explore the idea of fiscal impact assessments or mitigation funding from new developments that account for the development's added traffic, utility loads, etc. and utilize these funds for upgrades that are required to support the development or that benefit the community.

ED3: Grow and connect the local business community and position it to be resilient in the face of changing economic conditions.

ED3-1. Identify and encourage opportunities to incorporate office or incubator like-concepts into under-occupied spaces.

ED3-2. Use events and programming to feature local businesses. This can include markets, pop-up retail, and rotating restaurant programs.

ED3-3. Work with existing community and business organizations to collectively increase visibility of the business community, and advocate for improvements in the business environment.

ED4: Position the Town to attract more visitors and commercial tax revenue.

- ED4-1. Explore the possibility of attracting hospitality uses to the Route 9 commercial node through market analysis and discussions with local operators.
- ED4-2. Encourage mixed-use development for appropriately positioned private land assets. Develop a strategy for the provision of public utilities, as necessary.
- ED4-3. For publicly-controlled sites such as the Westborough State Hospital in Northborough and the Boundary Street property, develop a master plan to address key needs to include economic development, housing, recreation, and other possibilities as appropriate.

Natural, Cultural, and Historic Resources

NCH1: Preserve and enhance the natural landscapes of the community, including farmlands.

- NCH1-1. Continue to explore adding permanent protections to all Town-owned open spaces.
- NCH1-2. Continue supporting existing local farmlands and promote Conservation Restrictions and Agricultural Preservation Restrictions as a means to protect the Town's agricultural resources.
- NCH1-3. Evaluate the removal of obsolete dams in order to facilitate habitat restoration and waterfront access.
- NCH1-4. Improve accessibility to information regarding resource protection efforts, successes, and community benefits.
- NCH1-5. Evaluate the potential to increase protection of local floodplains, wetlands, and water resources in order to preserve natural resources and provide hazard mitigation.

NCH2: Maintain and expand the protection of Northborough's historic resources including: buildings, structures, landscapes, and documents.

- NCH2-1. Prepare a Historic Preservation Plan for the Town of Northborough.
- NCH2-2. Continue to promote an awareness of Northborough's history by publishing and facilitating the publication of articles in local community papers and social media, installing history related signage, and collaborating with other town organizations and agencies.
- NCH2-3. Promote the protection of antique properties, which include buildings, structures, documents, artifacts, landscapes, and agricultural lands.

NCH2-4. Expand the Historic Assets Inventory to include additional resource types, time periods, and geographical locations. Utilize the expanded inventory to identify additional assets for protection.

NCH2-5. Explore ways to incentivize restoration, rehabilitation, and beautification efforts for historic properties throughout Town.

NCH3: Repurpose surplus Town-owned buildings and facilities for community needs.

NCH3-1. Identify short- and long-term planning goals for properties such as White Cliffs, Westborough State Hospital, 13 Church Street, Boundary Street, and 4 West Main Street (the Old Town Hall).

NCH3-2. Where appropriate, utilize surplus municipally-owned properties as community spaces while reuse studies are in progress.

NCH3-3. Identify and support reuse efforts for Town-owned historic properties, prioritizing future use by the Town, community groups, and cultural organizations.

NCH4: Coordinate efforts among cultural, historical, and environmental organizations.

NCH4-1. Continue cooperating with local organizations and committees for the education and preservation of our historical heritage. These groups include: the Northborough Historical Society, Northborough Free Library, Northborough Trails Committee, Northborough Open Space Committee, Housing Partnership Committee, as well as schools, religious organizations, and local businesses.

NCH4-2. Evaluate the potential of becoming a Certified Local Government, which will allow Northborough to participate directly in the review and approval of National Register nominations, as well as provide additional access to preservation funding and technical services, improve coordination with the planning and building departments regarding notifications of potential antique demolitions, and prompt investigation of zoning changes to promote antique property restorations.

NCH4-3. Work with the Downtown planning/revitalization committee to avoid and mitigate potentially adverse impacts on historic homes along Main Street and neighboring streets.

NCH4-4. Investigate opportunities to hire interns who have an interest in natural, historic, and cultural resources to support our local preservation projects, which will include seeking possible funding sources.

Open Space and Recreation

OSR1: Maintain and expand opportunities for active recreation to residents of all ages and abilities. Active recreation activities such as baseball, soccer, and pickleball demand considerable exertion and often require significant infrastructure.

OSR1-1. Add more active recreational facilities outside of school grounds and provide lighting and other improvements for facilities where feasible to meet increasing teen and adult recreation needs. Evaluate the Boundary Street property as a possible location for the expansion of such facilities.

OSR1-2. Consider the development of a Town Dog Park.

OSR1-3. Develop plans to improve facility maintenance.

OSR1-4. Conduct feasibility analyses and capital planning for adding a turf field(s) in Town for active recreation use.

OSR2: Continue to create and maintain passive recreation opportunities throughout Town. Passive activities such as walking and hiking demand less exertion and resources.

OSR2-1. Strengthen trail connections among various trail networks as well as to key open space areas and community centers.

OSR2-2. Increase public access to riverfront and water-based recreation opportunities.

OSR2-3. Where possible, incorporate passive recreation opportunities into active recreation facilities.

OSR3: Promote public awareness and increased use of the recreational opportunities within the community.

OSR3-1. Centralize information on recreation resources and opportunities for public access.

OSR3-2. Promote one main community calendar that includes all events in Town (e.g., political, arts, recreation, other), not just recreation related events.

OSR3-3. Increase awareness of the Community Preservation Committee and other very important efforts to preserve the character of the Town.

OSR4: Better link existing open spaces and use these linkages to connect community assets and create a more walkable community.

OSR4-1. Identify acquisition opportunities for parcels that provide/can provide key linkages among open spaces.

- OSR4-2. Integrate enhanced signage, visibility, and walkability at the Town's recreation facilities and trail heads into overall open space and recreation network improvements.
- OSR4-3. Identify opportunities to repurpose old infrastructure for trails development, such as the old trolley line, aqueduct, etc.
- OSR4-4. Ensure adequate preservation funding is available for open space acquisition as opportunity arises.

Public Facilities and Services

PFS1: Develop plans to improve key public facilities and infrastructure to support the Town's operations and to meet the community's current and future needs.

- PFS1-1. Identify the need and potential grants for expanding water/sewer infrastructure.
- PFS1-2. Gauge the quality of municipal services and identify opportunities for improvement.
- PFS1-3. Participate in the State's Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) program to begin the process of improving the Town's key infrastructure for climate change resiliency.
- PFS1-4. Include future growth projections into updates of existing Town plans.
- PFS1-5. Develop specific plans to reuse, repurpose, or share space at municipal buildings.
- PFS1-6. Expand and continue to improve the timeliness of content on the Town's website and enhance its ease of use.

PFS2: Ensure Town departments have the capital assets and staffing necessary to meet the needs of the community today and tomorrow.

- PFS2-1. Maintain and publicize emergency response plans to prepare the Town and its residents for a range of disasters, man-made and natural.
- PFS2-2. Consider improving the Town-wide communication network over time, as needed.
- PFS2-3. Periodically reevaluate staffing and facilities to ensure adequate levels to support the Town's administration and services.

PFS3: Incorporate sustainable development and renewable energy into municipal buildings and amenities.

PFS3-1. Leverage the Town's Green Community Designation to obtain financial and technical support from the State to perform additional energy-related initiatives, and consider the creation of a sustainability committee.

PFS3-2. Install solar photovoltaic panels at municipal facilities, where and when possible. Update the solar feasibility study for the Town's school buildings.

PFS3-3. Inventory the Town's greenhouse gas emissions to identify and quantify the sources of such emissions and to begin the process of reducing them.

PFS4: Continue to support an excellent educational system.

PFS4-1. In conjunction with the School Department, and in line with other Public Facilities and Services and Housing goals, compile and analyze enrollment projections from the New England School Development Council, U.S. Census data, other sources, etc.

PFS4-2. Conduct a feasibility study of usage and grade span configuration to identify an educational model that supports teaching and learning and aligns with projected enrollments and strategic planning goals for the schools and Town.

PFS4-3. Continue to support effective and positive collaboration between the School Department and Town to identify future needs, plan for and fund projects related to the school district's capital improvement plan, strategic plan, and operating budget.

PFS4-4. In conjunction with PFS3-2, continue to explore the feasibility of incorporating energy conservation and efficiencies at school buildings and sites.

PFS4-5. Continue to lobby the State for adequate funding from the Special Education Circuit Breaker and regional school transportation funding programs.

Transportation

T1: Become a bicycle and pedestrian-friendly community by expanding existing bicycle and pedestrian facilities and improving connectivity.

T1-1. Develop signed bike routes throughout Town.

T1-2. Participate in the State's Complete Street Program to improve the bikeability and walkability of local streets.

- T1-3. Examine and identify key locations in Town for additional sidewalk improvements, focusing on pedestrian-oriented destinations (i.e., schools, parks, trails, etc.).
- T1-4. Replace existing pedestrian crosswalks with high visibility crossings to help facilitate pedestrian connectivity.
- T1-5. Develop a plan to upgrade all existing pedestrian facilities as appropriate to meet current accessibility standards.

T2: Improve Town-wide traffic flow and safety.

- T2-1. Work with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation to conduct Road Safety Audits (RSAs) at problematic intersections in Town.
- T2-2. Identify the need for and implement traffic calming measures in compliance with federal and state laws and regulations.
- T2-3. Evaluate opportunities for routes alternate to Main Street to help reduce congestion in the Downtown and foster development opportunities.
- T2-4. Where feasible, when improving roadways, work with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation or Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife to improve culverts to allow for wildlife passage and reduce wildlife-related traffic incidents.

T3: Work with the Worcester Regional Transit Authority, neighboring communities, and the Senior Center to explore ways to enhance public transit within Town.

- T3-1. Investigate/evaluate the potential for the senior and special needs shuttle service to run on a regular schedule, including during evening hours and weekends.
- T3-2. Investigate/evaluate the feasibility of providing a shuttle between the town center and/or Northborough Crossing and the Westborough Commuter Rail Station.

T4: Plan for the future of transportation and how potential changes may impact Northborough's transportation network.

- T4-1. Evaluate the feasibility of implementing an adaptive signal system on Main Street to minimize congestion.
- T4-2. Provide electric charging stations in public parking areas.
- T4-3. Evaluate the feasibility of implementing a private/public partnership to develop a community-driven rideshare program.
- T4-4. Look for opportunities to coordinate with neighboring communities to provide a commuting shuttle to Metro-Boston employment destinations.

- T4-5. Support training for Town staff and the Department of Public Works to understand how to plan for autonomous vehicles and advancements in traffic systems.