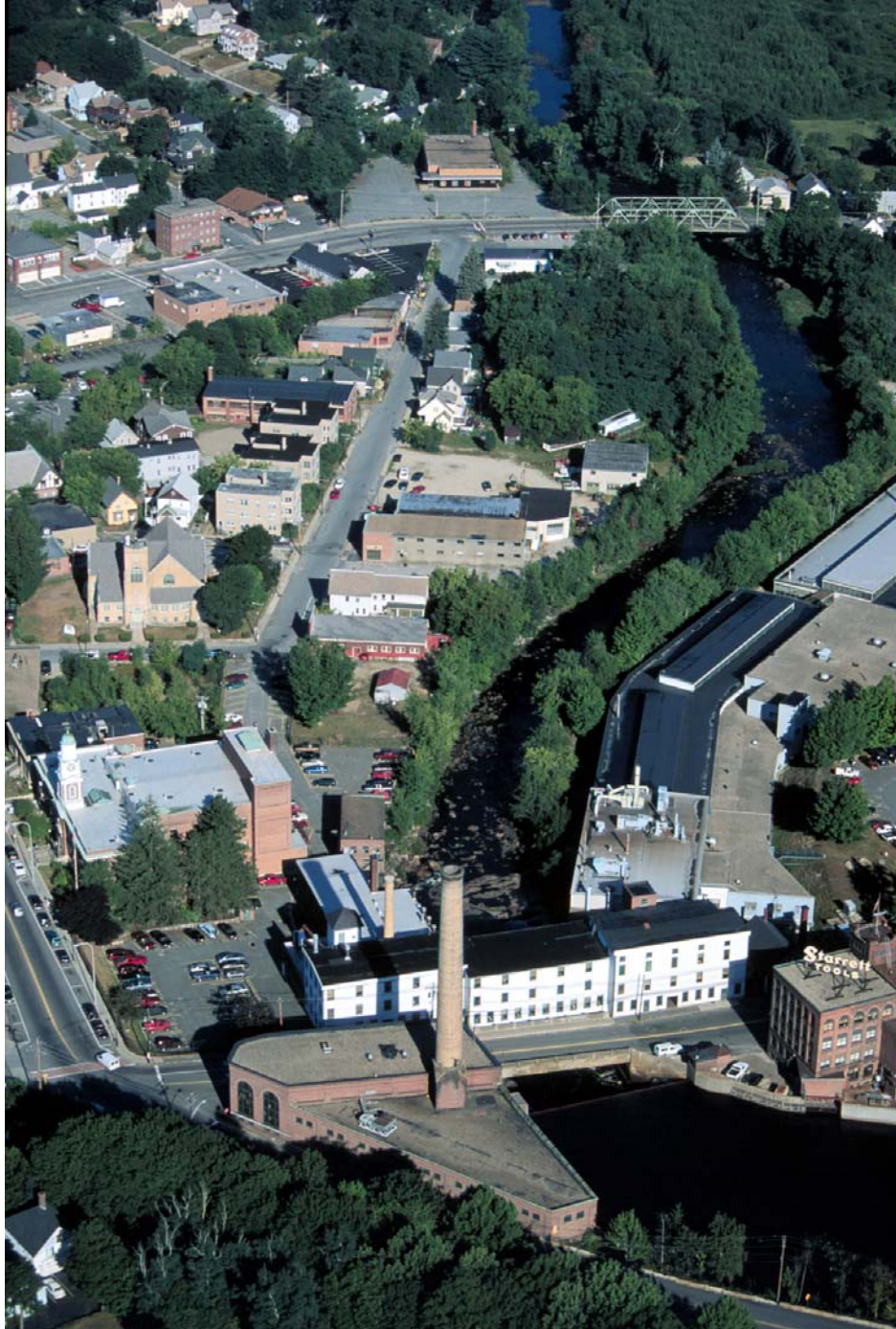




*An initiative of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs,
Bob Durand, Secretary*

Athol Charrette

September 28, 2002
Summary Report





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The Town of Athol from the air.

For more information, please visit www.UrbanRiverVisions.org



Athol Charrette

September 28, 2002

Summary Report

UrbanRiver Visions Athol EOEA/Consultant Team

Executive Office of Environmental Affairs

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Introduction

Downtown Athol and the environs of the Millers River were the focus of the *UrbanRiver Visions* charrette in Athol. The charrette, held at Town Hall on September 28, 2002, brought together more than 40 local leaders, activists, and community residents to discuss the future of the Millers River, the surrounding mill complexes, and potential connections to the town's neighborhoods.

The charrette was divided into a morning session and an afternoon session with slightly different discussion formats and goals. During the morning session, the charrette participants were sorted by expertise and interest into three thematic groups: Connections, River Use, and Economic Development. The principal goal of each group was to discuss the issues involved with each general theme, and to begin forging a vision of short-term and long-term improvements related to that theme. Each group was facilitated by members of the *UrbanRiver Visions* team with professional experience in the topics discussed. The product of each group's discussion was a set of notes that outlined specific goals and visions. Each group presented these goals to the entire audience at the conclusion of the morning session.

The primary goal of the afternoon session was the creation of graphic plans that embodied the ideas set forth in the morning session and other ideas that arose in the afternoon discussions. The morning groups were reassembled into mixed groups for the afternoon session, to increase the diversity of thought behind each of the three plans. Charrette participants fashioned the plans with help from the *UrbanRiver Visions* team members, including specific ideas mapped onto the plans as well as additional notes of a more general nature. At the end of the afternoon session, each group presented their plans and ideas back to all of the assembled participants.

The purpose of this document is to record the notes, plans, and supporting materials for each of the groups in both the morning and afternoon sessions of the Athol charrette. On the following pages, there are summaries of each group's discussion, including the goals and issues that got the greatest emphasis. Following that are the transcripts of the posted notes taken by the group's facilitators; the notes are transcribed almost verbatim, and anything specifically highlighted by the group is shown in bold letters. Any notes added after the charrette, to clarify what is seen in the literal notes, are set aside in brackets.



A group explores the Millers River environs the evening before the charrette.



Participants introduce themselves at the start of the charrette.



Daniel Lyons, the charrette coordinator, addresses the participants.

Morning Session:

Connections Group

David Spillane, *UrbanRiver Visions* Facilitator

The focus of the Connections Group was the creation and enhancement of connections between the Millers River, the downtown, the surrounding neighborhoods, and open spaces. The group discussed important goals including re-establishing historic connections to local residential neighborhoods, providing views of the river, creating a riverwalk and parks along the south shore of the river and preserving the natural character of the river valley. The following are notes recorded for the Connections Group during their discussion:



The Connections Group

CONNECTIONS

- Connections
 - How to turn focus of the downtown towards river?
 - Need to preserve river & its natural aspect – wilderness in downtown makes Athol unique
 - Use existing beautiful vistas from downtown to River
 - Views of downtown from river (Newburyport)
 - Beautify existing town & connect
 - Silver Lake – Connect
 - Cass Meadow
 - Possible loop (bike path) but need starting point
 - Preserve some wild space
 - Connect neighborhoods to businesses to river
 - What is center of gravity? Downtown offers possibilities
 - Change image of river to change image of Athol & enhance value of existing places (e.g. riverfront housing)
 - Reuse of space near train station as park? With visitor map?
 - If rail station restored, what first impression of Athol but now, most visitors use Route 2A connection to main roads
 - Focus on connecting existing residents to river first (before attracting visitors)
 - Canoeing not possible on this stretch of river
 - Different uses of river – what kind of access points needed
 - Think of river access as a system b/w river and downtown
 - Consider dynamics of riverflow in thinking about uses
 - Seawall offers possibilities, eg yearlong riverwalk with some access points down to the water
 - Different kinds of pedestrians (not everyone wants to get feet wet)
 - Potential of downtown: appeals to everyone (ADA)
 - Provide river access that attracts lots of different users
 - Riverwalk from town hall to Exchange Street with different access points
 - Diversity & improve parking
 - Use traffic patterns to channel people
 - Possibility of using north side of river? But it gets wet fast.
 - Ownership of riverside behind houses towards Laundromat is commercial – easier to deal with owners
 - Need for signs to Athol & Points of Interest – logo, theme?

- Downtown Athol: Gateway to the North Quabbin Region Need better words!
- “The Hub”
- Support of Landowners for riverwalk?
- Exchange Street bridge – great views but nowhere to stop
- Riverwalk to Exchange Street to Town Hall
- Possible expansion of library with access to river
- Signage and avenues of vision to greenspace and river
- Allow for rivervision
- Need to change zoning along river to enhance value
- Just need 2-3 access points – not necessarily on existing private property



Members of the Connections Group present their group's suggestions to all the charrette participants.

Morning Session:

River Use Group

Maria Van Dusen, *UrbanRiver Visions* Facilitator

The River Use Group focused on potential future uses of the Millers River. The group came up with a number of desired uses, including swimming, fishing, and boating. Potential barriers to these uses were also addressed including concerns about water quality and vegetation. The group also discussed the issue of ownership, asking whether the river and the land around it should remain in private ownership. The group suggested some sort of public ownership of the river and the riverbanks, with help from local community organizations for maintenance. The following are notes recorded for the River Use Group during their discussion:



The River Use Group

RIVER USE

- Multiple Goals
 - Access & protection education = flow (people + water + wildlife)
 - Economic stimulation
 - Active & passive recreation
 - Festivals including river
 - Views
 - Integrated (recreation, residence, & business)
 - Visitor, downtown and river
 - What's "do-able" now?
 - Park and connections
 - Bring water into downtown
 - Think about empoundment, Lord Pond
 - Millers River West Parkway

What roles should river play?

- Fishing platforms (little)
- Waterparks for kids in a common, less near river (bring water to town)
- Plumbing supply area (fishing)
- Keeping places wild
- Appropriate areas
- Handicap access near bridge
- Educational parks (schools)
- Can't elevate platforms from wall
- Trails w/identification of wildlife – stopping areas (benches)
- Greenway @ top of bank
- Path along retaining walls
- Walkways w/ 2 or 3 season access
- Restaurants along edge
- Looped trails between river & downtown
- Fishing park connection
- 210 Canal Street Downtown walk
- Views
 - Stonebridge (fish park) by LP Athol
 - Over meadow
 - Between 210 Canal Street

- Access from Main Street
 - By bridge (town entrance from west)
 - Behind townhall & library
 - Starrett's parking area
 - Exchange St. bridge from north
 - Shore Drive
 - Bridge design walking see through railings parking historic design
- Fishing
 - Catch and release
 - Advisory
 - Exchange Street access?
 - PCB's
 - Class b water quality
 - Getting species noting good water quality
 - Fish stocking by schools & businesses
 - Eel ways
 - Salmon
 - Monitoring species
 - Guide training
 - Exercise station
 - Police station (new) access to water
 - Take out Athol police station planned site
 - Canoe rental shuttle system between Athol & Orange
 - Royalston
 - Biking & hiking trails to downtown
 - Improve wild habitats
 - Multi- Functional mixing education and uses together
 - History, floods, ecology
- What are the barriers to safe use?
 - Ice breaking is dangerous
 - Spring (floods)
 - Fluctuating levels
 - Pollution
 - Easements
 - Legal
 - Re-establishing displaced businesses
 - Caution not to mix natural (animal corridors)
 - Larger loop for walkways (figure 8) downtown and uptown
 - Exercise
 - Mixed needs
 - Walking, running, benches, Paddle Boats, Starrett Pond
- Who owns the riverbed?
 - LP Athol parking lot empoundment
 - Starrett
 - Dams
 - Lord Pond and victory parking lot
 - Potential development down stream on downtown side
 - South side Main Street
 - Involve owners
- VIEWS
 - Hidden right now
 - Canal down Main Street (revive)
 - Rainfall, storm water run-off impervious surfaces
 - Natural sinks in YMCA Area
 - Day lighting streams
 - Starrett Pond Boats

- [illegible]

9

Morning Session: **Economic Development Group**

Wes Ewell, *UrbanRiver Visions* Facilitator

The Economic Development Group explored ways to revitalize the downtown, especially ways that take advantage of the Millers River. The group discussed the need for improvements to the streetscape and signage to make the downtown more attractive to businesses and potential visitors. Members of the group also suggested that the River Rat Race be moved closer to the downtown to bring people closer to the town center and that a community college be started to provide education and training beyond the high school level. Another topic of discussion was the reuse of the LP Athol mill complex which is largely vacant today. The group identified acceptable and preferable uses for the mills and obstacles to reuse and encourage the town to support redevelopment of the mill complex. The following are notes recorded for the Economic Development Group:



The Economic Development Group

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Relationship of “sense of place” and economic development?
 - Amenities attract people and businesses
- How to move forward without further dividing community?
- Improve for residents or for visitors?
 - Could be linked
- Factional fighting
 - Schools
 - Police department (station?) ... location
 - Ongoing for many years
- Absence of forethought and planning and strong leadership
- Balance the past with plans for the future
 - Need support and buy-in
- Immediate step
 - Locate police station
- “Build – they will come”
- **Get** the comfort level of community
- Re-use existing buildings
- Eco-tourism
- Downtown beautification
- Signage
- Places to eat and sleep
- Canoe rentals
- Encourage people to visit
 - What would help this community re: economic development?
- Housing
 - Rehab mill
 - Becoming an issue
 - Housing crisis
 - 2 BR apartents in demand
- Keene, NH – example
 - Hub of activity

- College
- College/training base
 - Missing a c.c. (community college)
 - Community college should fit industries already here
- “Centerpiece project”
 - prison / other institution
 - veteran’s park
 - good schools / education / comp. Training
 - security
- Draw from a wider area
- Diversify business
 - Incubators, small and large
- Veteran’s park resulted from cooperation
- Community will support if done properly
- Accessibility an issue
 - Trucks
- Old Athol manufacturing site – convert to river access area
 - Kayaks
 - Seasonal
 - 3 acres of land
 - at dam
 - fence off raceway
- What else around mill complex? Think 10-15y from now.
- Parking lot south of mill (3 acres)
- Schools!! (bottom of MCAS list)
- Yearning for community
- Downtown
 - Need higher paying jobs
 - Industrial park
 - Apartments
 - Park/visible improvements
- River Rat Race
 - Starting bridge
 - Only exposure to river
 - Move start to Exchange Street bridge
 - Better access
 - Closer to downtown
- Water taxi
 - Athol – Orange
- Quadathlon
 - Built on River Rat Race
 - Add canoeing
 - Costs \$1500 ...
- Highlight parks/lakes/river
- Orange airport = existing asset
- Economic development occurs in stages
 - Start with simpler (tasks)
 - Stage 1 – awareness ...
 - Stage 2 – Beautification / Access
 - Build consensus / trust
 - Stage 3 – longer term economic development
 - Schools, business, etc.
- Architecturally pleasing bridges
- Athol needs PR program

- “Athol on the move”
 - Self image of town
 - Logo or theme
 - “Hub of North Quabbin” – gateway
- Restrooms – for festivities

Afternoon Session:

Group 1

David Spillane, *UrbanRiver Visions* Facilitator

Group 1 generated supporting notes to accompany their graphic plan in the afternoon session. In both the notes and the plan, the group stressed the need for pedestrian connections to key destinations in and around the downtown. Important sites and paths would be marked with interpretive and wayfinding signage. Particular attention was given to exploring the potential for a new riverwalk along the river. The group also wanted to expand Veteran's Park, the small island of green space between Town Hall and the old Train Depot, to create a new "town common." Group 1's support notes are listed immediately below, followed by their graphic plan.



Group 1 working on its vision

GROUP 1

Key questions:

- 1) What are the TOP FIVE items that you would like to see happen here in your community? Prioritize. (It's ok if folks come up with more than 5 ... but try to get a minimum of 5).

Key Issues

- Connect downtown to river
- Riverwalk: Downtown, train station
- Different uses: wild/quiet, more intense, access points → map locations
- Identify first steps / actions



Group 1 Facilitator David Spillane works with the group on summarizing its discussion.

Access Points

- Main Street bridge
 - (N & S of bridge)
 - access for canoes on each side of river, one under discussion @ west near pumping station
 - issue of connecting access points
 - access point + bridge currently under design
- think about redeveloping area south of main street bridge, townside → wildlife/natural resources
- wading v boating sections of river. More boating near Main Street bridge. Wilder river downstream from exchange street
- exchange street → dam = more urban section
- little league field
- ponds
- access to royalston (8 miles) on east part of river (near power plant)
- development of pond area
- east: views from route 2 and ponds → potential
- emotional connections → heritage park?
- Blue collar / smokestacks
- Living tradition of Athol (heritage), link mills/factories/natural environment

- Native American history/culture was linked to river
- Riverwalk – idea to be pursued
 - (both sides? Which more important? South)
- Connections
 - Burned building site potential
 - Train station
 - Veteran's memorial
- South side of main street: open views to river. Improve parking
- Water park near Y?
 - Eg. Cambridge playground with water spouts
 - (Eg. Post office square and Columbus)
 - kids park should be near YMCA
- exchange street bridge: building is great opportunity
- police station: potential public space with view on river
- access points: island street, metropolitan, exchange street
- connecting fish park, environmental center to downtown
- create a commons that doesn't just focus on Main Street revitalization
- Silver Lake access
- Signage
- Maps: walking paths, connections, history, views
- Map starting point
 - Main Street?
 - Or cycle with different starting points
- **Footbridge between Fish Park and Pequig sides**
- Make clear what Athol culture is
 - Figure this out when designing commons and connections
- Amphitheatre
 - Place for Farmer's Market?
- Riverwalk
 - Pathway is "do-able" step
 - Nice resource for current residents that makes Athol more attractive
 - → economic development
 - what uses should be allowed on riverwalk?
 - → conversation to be continued, including the landowners?

West side of river

- South → connection to Environmental Center
- Access to Tully River and trails

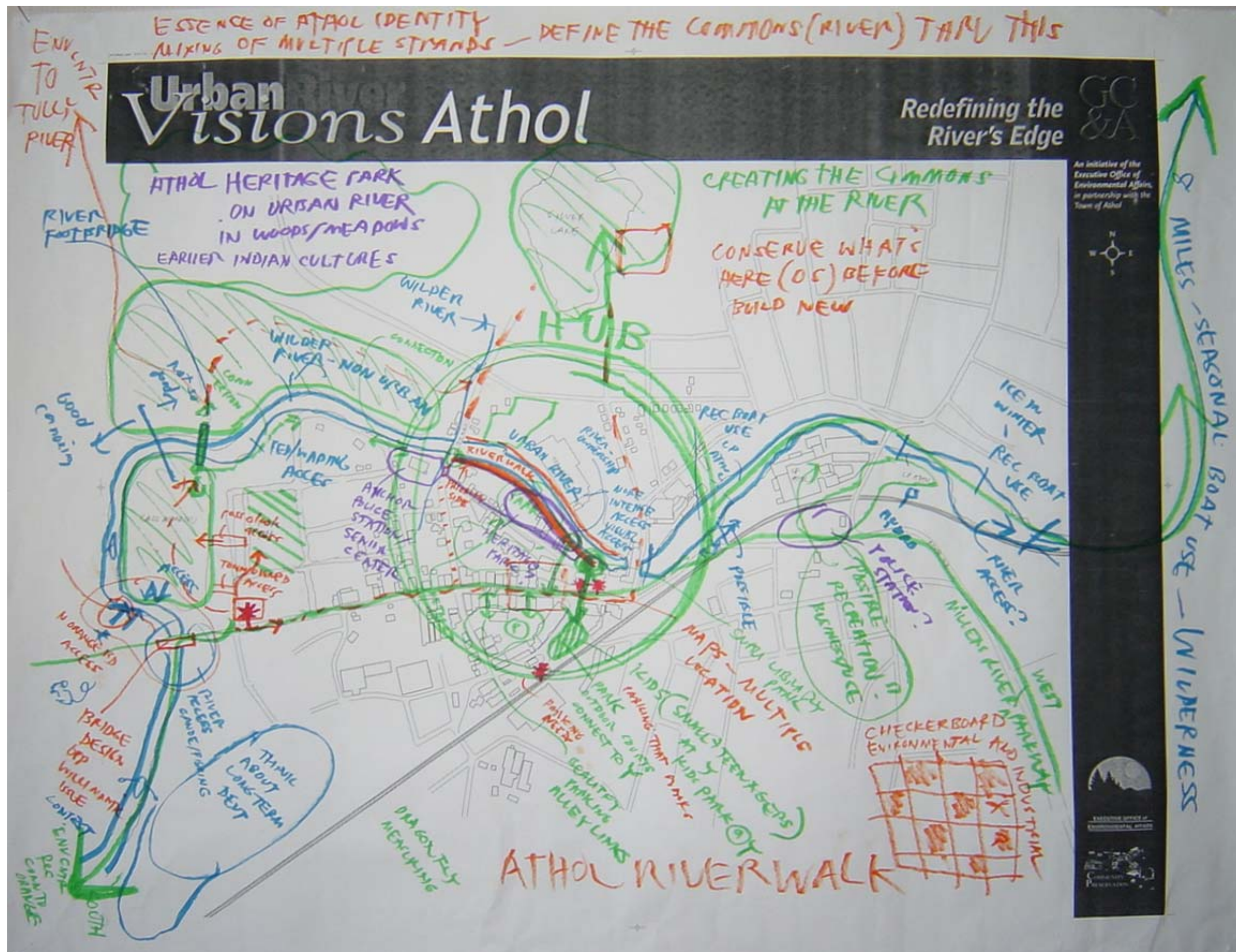
Next Steps – short-term

- **Map of downtown – trails, recreation**
- Determine **other** interested **parties** and bring them into conversation (landowners)
- Steering committee
- Do map first → "do-able" and shows success
 - Then build from the map success, get people to fill it in
- Do **signage**
- Need resources and staff for facilitation, education, capacity building
 - → continue working with state agencies
- how to form steering committee?
 - Public-private partnership
 - Non-profit effort



David Small of Group 1 emphasizes the essential components of his group's vision plan.

Group 1 Vision Plan



Afternoon Session: Group 2
Maria Van Dusen, *UrbanRiver Visions* Facilitator

Group 2 expressed a number of ideas and concerns similar to Group 1, including the importance of a riverwalk along the south shore of the Millers River. The group also would like to see views opened up to the river from the downtown and a network of trails along and around the Millers River. Access to the river for boating was also emphasized. The “town common” idea, discussed in Group 1, was assigned a lower priority. Group 2’s supporting notes and graphics are shown below.



Group 2

GROUP 2

Timeline:

1. Festivals
2. Acquiring land/access to river
3. Heritage park

Millers River Heritage Parkway
Restaurants
Fishing/overlook areas
Art Center
Views

Library addition (glassed-in reading room) overlooks river

Existing historical trail – extend

[bank location???

Keep “wild” but provide access
more urban (landscape) loop
more natural path (seasonal)
pedestrian bridge

[buildings??]

re-use (with vista)

fish park

meadows

museum

playground

“Nature’s Classroom”

learning facility
kids learn about nature
linked to Nature Center

Interpretive trails throughout – Educational/informational

Restrooms throughout

Winter activities:

Snowshoeing

Toboggan

Sliding

Cross-country skiing

Ice skating

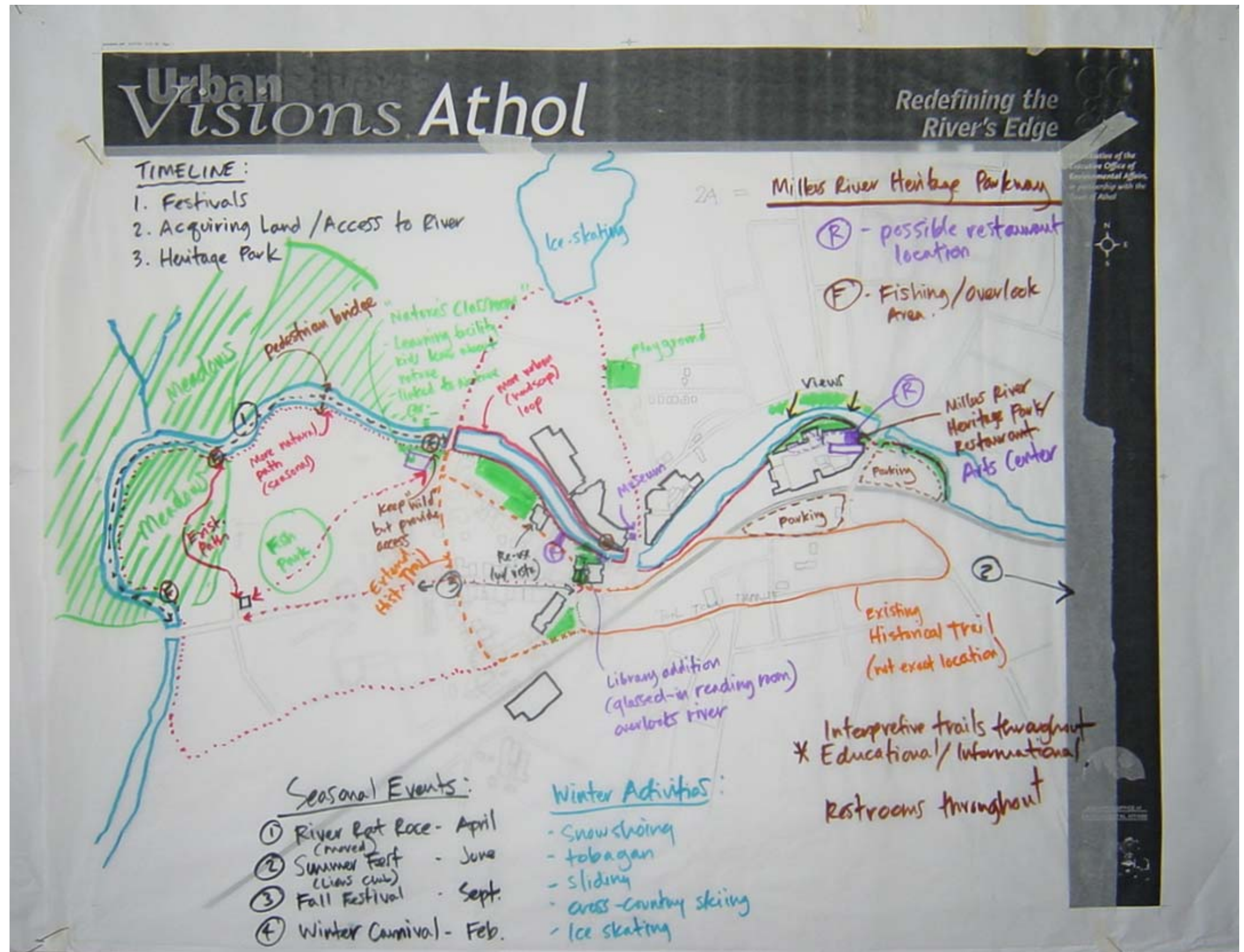
Seasonal Events:

1. River Rat Race (moved) – April
2. Summer Fest (Lions Club) – June
3. Fall Festival – Sept.
4. Winter Carnival – Feb.



Members of Group 2 explain their group's vision.

Group 2 Vision Plan





Members of Group 3 present their group's vision plan to the assembled charrette participants.

Afternoon Session: Group 3
Wes Ewell, *UrbanRiver Visions* Facilitator

Group 3 concentrated heavily on how the mill complexes could be transformed to benefit the overall character of the area, including pedestrian passages through and between the buildings, and removal of non-viable structures. A looped hiking trail all along the pond's shores and the selective removal of waterfront vegetation for improved views were also important suggestions. Below is Group 3's graphic plan with its accompanying notes.



Group 3

GROUP 3

Key questions:

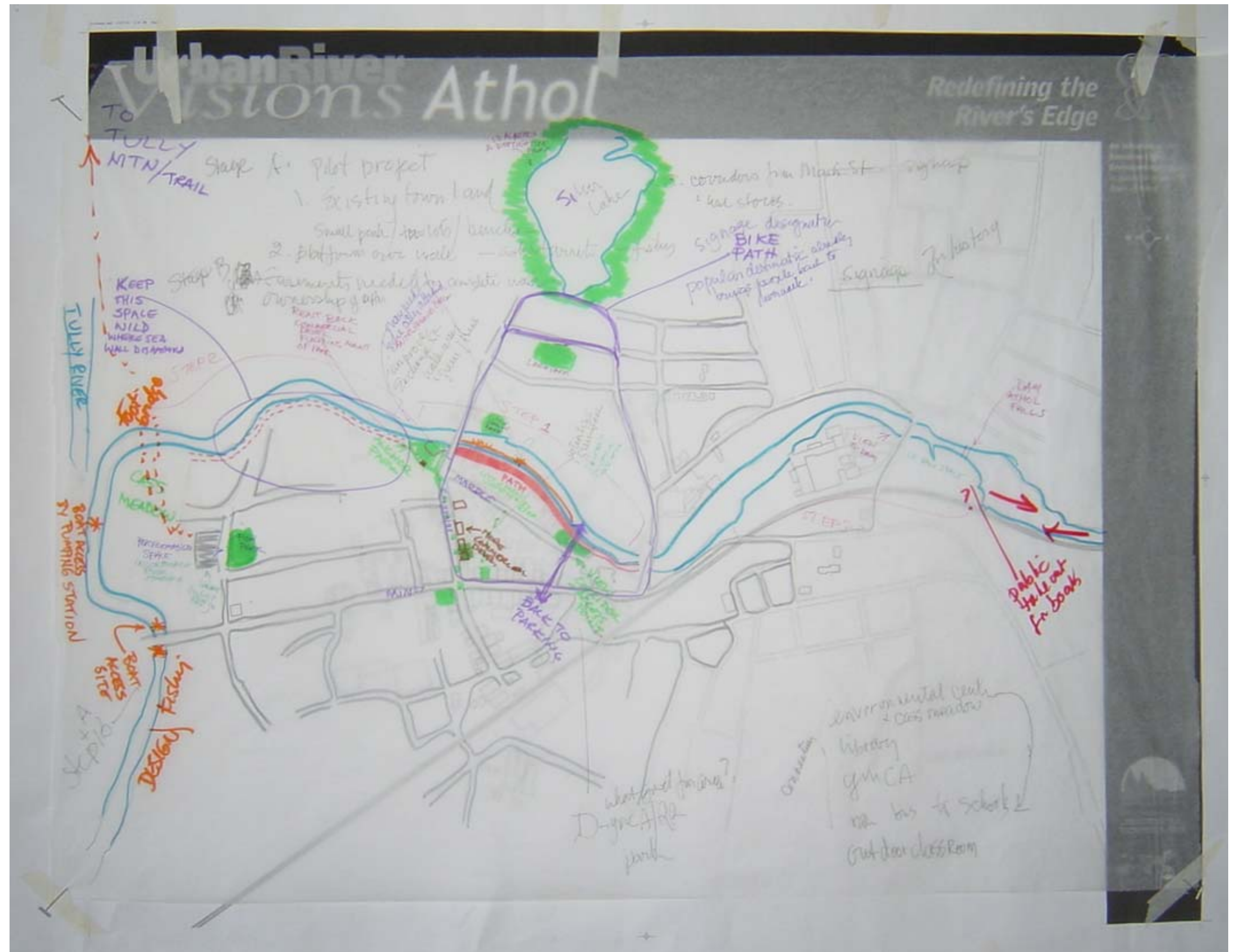
1) What are the TOP FIVE items that you would like to see happen here in your community? Prioritize. (It's ok if folks come up with more than 5 ... but try to get a minimum of 5).

- "3" Good Restaurant
 - (not expensive but attractive)
- "1" River Walkway
- "" Heritage Park
 - (Tools, RR, River ... Hub)
 - Museum Trail
- "3" Shops
 - (crafts, unique books, gifts, true outlets)
- "3" Lodging
- "1" Vistas – fishing piers
- "2" Sports
 - (access shops)

2) Millers River Heritage Park

- Parking
- Destination
- Children's
 - Water park
 - Rafting
 - Interactive museum
 - Swimming
 - Playground
 - Nature's classroom
 - Fishing
 - Interpretive trail
- Art center

Group 3 Vision Plan



Summary: Important Charrette Themes

The following is a list of the important themes discussed in both sessions and most of the groups at the Athol charrette. Although this is not an exhaustive list, it covers the topics that received the greatest attention and the most discussion during the course of the day.



Town Planner Phil Delorey makes closing remarks at the end of the charrette.

- Create a **trail network** that links community anchors and environmental resources
- Create a **Riverwalk Promenade** along the Millers River
- Strengthen **connections** between the **library** and the river
- Continue to improve the **health**, attractiveness, and recreational use of the Millers **River**
- **Expand** Veteran's **Park** to incorporate youth recreation activities
- Promote **reuse** of LP Athol **Mill** Complex with mixed uses and strengthened river connections
- Create a community **partnership** to build on the vision
- Create a downtown **Heritage Trail**
- **Redevelop** vacant riverfront **property** on Exchange Street
- **Strengthen** the **identity** of Main Street, **Exchange Street**, Island Street, and Marble Street

ATHOL CHARRETTE CREDITS

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PHIL DELOREY

TOWN WELCOME

PHIL DELOREY
BUILDING INSPECTOR

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SCOTT MASLANSKY
NEW ENGLAND FORESTRY
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THE HONORABLE WAYNE MILLER
SELECTMAN
TOWN HALL

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WWW.URBANRIVERVISIONS.ORG
OR THE EDEA'S COMMUNITY PRESERVATION WEB SITE AT:
[HTTP://COMMPRES.ENV.STATE.MA.US/CONTENT/URV.ASP](http://COMMPRES.ENV.STATE.MA.US/CONTENT/URV.ASP)