

Athol Master Plan Goals and Objectives (DRAFT #3 - May 1, 2024)

The Town of Athol is seeking to update its goals and objectives of the Master Plan. Based on input from the Master Plan Committee, existing conditions, existing plans, studies, community survey, and community meeting, the following is a list of the draft goals and objectives:

Open Space and Recreation

1. Adopt CPA whereby funds can be used as matching funds for grants such as PARC, LAND, and LWCF all of which can be used to acquire land, build trails, and upgrade existing facilities.
 - a. Create an educational campaign on the cost and benefits of adopting CPA; use members of existing groups or committees such as the Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, and/or Planning Board.
 - b. Work with the Community Preservation Act Coalition for technical support to creation of campaign materials, ballot language, and formulate a volunteer group who will seek adoption by Town Meeting.
2. Support the growth of local businesses, including sustainable natural resource-based businesses including but not limited to agriculture, forestry, clean energy technologies and fisheries.
 - a. Pursue the establishment of Athol as a Right to Farm community.
 - b. Provide resources, information, and/or support for farms and businesses to get grants for sustainability and resilience improvements such as energy, erosion control, gravel pit restoration upon completion, land acquisition or equipment sharing, or addressing climate change impacts such as crop conversion and expansion, adopting regenerative agriculture techniques, drought and flooding mitigation, etc.
 - c. Identify opportunities for food production on publicly controlled land.
 - d. Use the Town's right of first refusal to acquire agricultural land that is coming out of the Chapter 61A program.
3. Promote agritourism and other agricultural-based businesses.
 - a. Create clear zoning requirements for home agricultural uses such as apiary and keeping of poultry are streamlined and by-right.
 - b. Ensure that zoning definitions for agricultural uses are broadened to reflect new agricultural economy and diversity.
 - c. Ensure that regulations allow farms to have a diversity of accessory uses and retail sale by right.
 - d. Integrate food goals and policies into future municipal planning documents reinforces the connections of food system in conventionally addressed topics such as land use, transportation, housing, economic development, and environmental and human health elements.

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4. Consider adoption of Transfer of Development Rights to concentrate development growth in the downtown area while permanently preserving existing open space.
 - a. Apply for grant funding for technical assistance for evaluation of areas within the town suitable for TDR and to provide case studies and sample bylaw language.
5. Restore and maintain existing recreational areas and facilities.
 - a. Increase the number of employees in the DPW.
 - b. Seek long term, sustainable financing for maintaining and upgrading public parks.
 - c. Encourage existing Friends groups and establish new ones to adopt parks and recreational areas.
 - d. Pursue the implementation of actions listed in the Silver Lake Conway School Plan
6. Enhance, protect and promote Athol's unique attributes through promotion of their importance and availability.
 - a. Update trail maps for each conservation area and make them available online.
 - b. Create a series of signs at each area and wayfinding.
7. Expand parks and open space areas to improve them and create new recreational opportunities; Utilize Action Map in OSRP for defined areas suitable for development of organized sport (baseball, soccer, etc.) facilities.
 - a. Evaluate specific needs of distinct user groups and prioritize access to parks in EJ communities and areas without access to parks.
 - b. Consider applying for funding from the Massachusetts Office of Disability for ADA improvements throughout the park system.
8. Link scattered conservation and recreation areas through the establishment of a continuous greenway network.
 - a. Implement actions identified in the 2022 Rabbit Run Feasibility Study which seeks to connect the downtown to New Salem (and Quabbin Reservoir)
 - b. Continue to seek funding for design development and ultimately construction of the Millers River Greenway and the associated improvements to Alan E. Rich Park.
9. Continue to pursue the creation of the Millers River Greenway.
 - a. Implement actions identified in the June 2022 Millers River Greenway Trail Key Points Feasibility Study.
 - b. Create a public information campaign to demonstrate the value of the property and increase awareness and support.

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10. Pursue the recommendations of the Bidwell Master Plan.
 - a. Determine the best location for a parking lot based on desired use and conditions, delineate wetlands, create trail concept plans, conduct due diligence on the barn, and complete additional community engagement to further refine conceptual plans.

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Natural and Cultural Resources

1. Encourage and promote developments that conserve natural resources and reduce waste and pollution through site design.
 - a. Work with and support the Energy Committee to implement the goals of the Town's Municipal Decarbonization Plan.
 - b. Create and implement sustainable design and energy-efficient design and development practices in larger new construction or renovation projects.
 - c. Seek adoption of the Town's participation in the PACE program to help provide financial assistance for solar installations on business and commercial projects.
 - d. Pursue LEED certification for Town projects.
 - e. Consider requirements for new commercial projects to include EV Charging Stations.
 - f. Pursue the adoption of the Stretch Energy Code.
2. Support efforts to protect working forests and prime forestland soils.
 - a. Promote sustainable forestry techniques.
 - b. Provide political and financial support for putting farms into Agricultural Protection Restrictions (APR).
3. Preserve land for future water supply.
 - a. Prioritize protection of riparian corridors, lakes, and ponds that support water supply protection.
 - b. Identify key areas for protection of water supply.
 - c. Create a committee to educate about the wide range of projects that can be funded through CPA, including protection of open space for water supply.
 - d. Adopt the Community Preservation Act in Athol.
4. To identify, promote, and protect Athol's historic resources including its structures, sites, and landscapes.
 - a. Apply to the MHC for a Planning Survey Grant to complete, update, and expand the AHC's historic resources inventory, and to complete additional MHC inventory forms.
 - b. Continue efforts create National Historic Districts for Uptown Common and Downtown Commercial District area.
 - c. Provide support for projects that may utilize Historic Tax Credits; educate property owners about the program.
 - d. Create outreach programs and brochures to increase the public's awareness of Athol's history and historic and scenic resources, and to help market these resources as part of an initiative to promote heritage and recreational tourism within the Town and the region.

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5. Increase access to the Millers River, embrace it as a key cultural resource of the community, conduct vista pruning, and create access connections within the downtown and from other conservation land.
 - a. Conduct vista pruning along areas with public views and/or public access.
 - b. Create access connections within the downtown and from other conservation land.
 - c. Promote the cultural history of the river through continued partnership with the Library and Millers River Environmental Center.
 - d. Promote existing fishing and boat access points.
6. Support existing town-wide events such as Community Night Out, Downtown Fourth Friday events, and the River Rat canoe race; work to create new cultural events for residents and visitors.
 - a. Create a Cultural District through the Massachusetts Cultural Council to be eligible for grant money for arts and cultural activity, supporting local artists, and hosting community events.
 - b. Create additional promotion for all community events to demonstrate consistency and continuous nature of community events.
7. Support existing Friends of groups to demonstrate the social value of natural resources, such as Silver Lake and Lake Ellis and educate about nature-based solutions, outdoor recreation, and green infrastructure.
 - a. Continue to build partnerships with existing organizations such as the Farm School, YMCA Camp Selah, and New England Equestrian Center which promote and embrace Athol's natural resources.

Public Health

1. Integrate the principals of Athol Helping Athol in public health considerations such as Youth Development & Substance Abuse.
 - a. Assess potential health impacts of proposed projects and policies by including health and equity considerations in the decision-making process.
 - b. Continue and enhance outreach and engagement with environmental justice (EJ) communities and other groups of people (i.e. socially vulnerable populations) that may be disproportionately vulnerable to impacts related to public health, climate change, natural hazards.
2. Draw upon the existing network of social support and municipal support services and identify funding to expand or create new partnerships.
 - a. Continue to support and participate in the Montachusett Public Health Network; Increase access to affordable healthcare and reduce homelessness.
 - b. Investigate the need for a shared regional social worker with focus on elderly services.
 - c. Continue to support and partner with the North Quabbin Community Coalition and other local service providers and their programs and initiatives to provide quality local health care for children, families, youth veterans, and elders.
3. Explore resources and opportunities to reduce food insecurity, expand access to locally produced and healthy foods in town.
 - a. Integrate food goals and policies into future municipal planning documents reinforces the connections of food system in conventionally addressed topics such as land use, transportation, housing, economic development, and environmental and human health elements.
 - b. Support the creation of one or more community gardens in Athol.
 - c. Create and expand partnerships with existing organizations such as The Farm School.
4. Enhance domestic and sexual violence prevention, outreach and education.
 - a. Consider a proclamation for Domestic Violence Awareness Month to be adopted by the Board of Selectmen.
 - b. Form a local Athol Domestic Violence Task Force and/or participate in a regional community-wide domestic violence task force for purposes of information and outreach.
 - c. Partner with NELCWIT and North Quabbin Community Coalition for expanded outreach and information relative to domestic violence assistance for victims.

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- d. Create awareness of domestic violence in the community by participating in and creating awareness of White Ribbon Pledge Day, Domestic Violence Awareness Month, National Crime Victims Week and at National Night Out.
- e. Pursue grant opportunities funded through CDBG grants or other sources related to domestic and intimate partner violence.

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Community Facilities and Services

1. Continue to pursue green infrastructure improvements in/around the Downtown including but not limited to Lord Pond Plaza.
 - a. Pursue additional Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) grants for implementation of the project and continue to explore additional projects.
 - b. Continue to use CDBG funds for design and construction of water, sewer, pedestrian and roadway improvements in the downtown area; combine CDBG projects with MVP funds for green infrastructure and nature-based solutions where possible.
2. Plan for and enhance important community facilities and programs:
 - a. Continue to support, implement, and update the Athol Royalston Regional School District strategic plan including potential new High School.
 - b. Continue to support, implement, and expand the services of the Senior Center.
 - c. Continue to support, implement, and update the Strategic Plan for the Athol Public Library.
 - d. Determine the feasibility and pros/cons of establishing a residential trash collection service.
 - e. Develop a long-term climate resilience and adaptation plan for municipal projects and identify dedicated funding to support implementation.
3. Improve public safety, emergency preparedness, and communication
 - a. Increase coordination, planning, education, and capital improvements; integrate the principals of Athol Helping Athol.
4. Take a proactive approach to upgrading wastewater and water services.
 - a. Continue to participate in, evaluate, and embrace regional efforts to make the wastewater system costs more efficient.
 - b. Continue to seek ways to support regional efforts to ensure adequate staffing for wastewater operations.
 - c. Continue to evaluate and prioritize areas for infrastructure upgrades, repairs, and replacement.

Housing

1. Utilize the 2023 Housing Production Plan as the basis for decisions regarding the creation of new affordable units and preservation of Athol's existing housing stock.
 - a. Continue to identify and evaluate sites that may be appropriate for affordable housing development; conduct additional feasibility studies for potential housing locations listed in the 2023 HPP.
 - b. Continue to make suitable public property available for affordable housing by redeveloping surplus municipal property.
 - c. Evaluate the potential reuse of the Fire Department building on Exchange Street versus the demolition and extension of the Walnut Street roadway.
2. Continue to work cooperatively with private developers (non-profit and for-profit) to make progress in implementing the creation of new housing units, especially downtown.
 - a. Allow multifamily housing by-right and reduce parking requirements in the General Commercial District.
 - b. Allow higher density to increase financial feasibility and increase or eliminate Floor Area Ratio requirements.
 - c. Create or support incentives or requirements to upgrade buildings in the downtown to meet building and life safety requirements.
3. Explore, provide, support opportunities for senior housing, Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU's).
 - a. Review ADU permitting and design criteria for ways to increase the number of new units created, such as reduced permit requirements for detached units.
4. Support opportunities for new housing in already developed areas in and around downtown.
 - a. Create a 40R Smart Growth Overlay District to promote and incentivize mixed use and infill development in the downtown area.
 - b. Encourage Adaptive Reuse Programs by reducing/eliminating permit requirements for building reuses.

Economic Development

1. Promote new small businesses, including restaurants and breweries into the downtown area.
 - a. Build partnerships with owners of vacant buildings downtown
 - b. Support owners through funding and/or incentives to evaluate, remediate and demolish or renovate key properties downtown.
2. Promote and support existing and new businesses in the downtown area and beyond.
 - a. Pursue additional wayfinding for the downtown area and key points of interest, such as conservation areas and historic resources.
 - b. Pursue and implement the findings of the 2024 Downtown Design guidelines.
 - c. Work collaboratively with the business community to help attract and retain businesses and to ensure the employment base is sufficiently diverse.
3. Support additional public and private events, festivals and concerts.
 - a. Offer free use of Town public spaces for events; create a supportive internal review committee to support larger events.
 - b. Seek design and construction funds to enhance/renovate Memorial Park to incorporate greenspace and public art.
4. Pursue streetscape improvements along Exchange Street.
 - a. Including but not limited to, a reduction in the width of vehicle travel lanes, additional on-street parking, crosswalks, wider sidewalks, and street trees
 - b. Extend riverwalk trail running from the parking lot adjacent to the Library to Exchange Street, as a potential open space opportunity in the heart of the downtown.
 - c. Explore the feasibility of implementing a District Improvement Financing (DIF) program to capture funding for public improvements within the downtown.

Transportation

1. Provide support and generate community engagement for the inclusion of Athol as a stop along the Northern Tier Rail project as a transformational project.
 - a. Create an informational guide on the Town's website including MassDOT and Board of Selectman information.
 - b. Determine level of responsibility for Athol in considering a potential station location.
2. Improve roadway and pedestrian infrastructure.
 - a. Continue to use and update the Complete Streets Prioritization Plan to pursue projects that combine road and pedestrian infrastructure and traffic calming improvements.
 - b. To continue to oversee, fund, and support MassDOT projects which increase safety improvements along the Route 2 corridor, Route 2A, or other MassDOT controlled roadways.
 - c. Maintain a roadway management plan to achieve maintenance-oriented roadway network condition and provide a basis for establishing priorities and budget allocation.
 - d. Continue to participate and align Town projects with projects and funding sources identified in the Regional Transportation Plan.
3. Seek funding for a comprehensive bridge assessment.
 - a. After assessments are completed, pursue available state and federal funds for bridge repairs.
4. Develop infrastructure necessary to support greater density and mix of uses, including access to transit.
 - a. Leverage future private development projects with state grants such as MassWorks & HousingWorks to fund pedestrian infrastructure projects.

Land Use & Zoning

1. Encourage commercial and industrial uses in appropriate areas.
 - a. Amend the zoning bylaw so that commercial and industrial uses are allowed by-right in the appropriate zoning districts.
 - b. Amend the zoning bylaw to reduce parking requirements for certain new developments or significant renovations.
 - c. Reduce/eliminate zoning approvals for uses occupying existing buildings in the downtown area.
2. Promote and support existing and new businesses in the downtown area and beyond.
 - a. Continue to implement and promote the Vacant Storefront Improvement Program and promote and issue Business Assistant and Rent Rebate grants.
 - b. Work with Massachusetts Office of Business Development to support Tax Increment Financing for new larger commercial or industrial businesses looking to locate in Athol.
3. Encourage the creation of all types of new housing, including rehabilitation of existing homes and vacant buildings downtown, new senior housing, and Affordable Housing.
 - a. Amend the zoning bylaw to reduce barriers to new housing development in suitable areas, such as creation of a 40R Smart Growth Overlay District to promote and incentivize mixed use and infill development in the downtown area.
 - b. Amend the zoning bylaw to reduce barriers to the creation of new housing at the sites identified in the HPP.