

# Athol Master Plan - Public Engagement Summary

April 15, 2024



The Town of Athol is in the process of updating its Master Plan, a long-range planning document that will create a community vision and guide future growth and development. Athol's previous plan was completed in 2002, although sections of the document have been updated since. This effort has been made possible through a \$49,000 Planning Assistance Grant distributed by the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs.

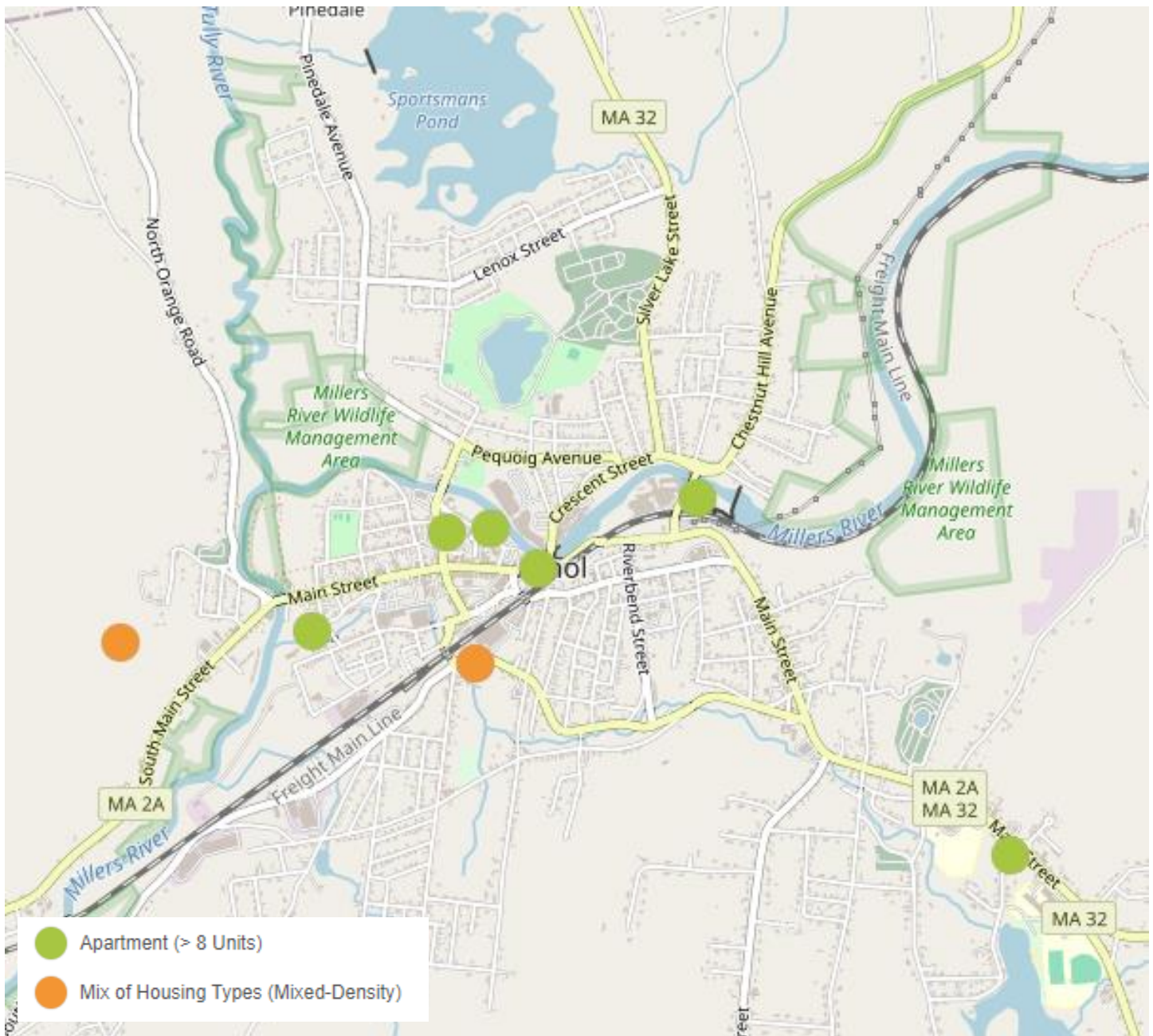
A Master Plan is important because it outlines a community's vision for the next ten to twenty years and establishes goals and priorities for a wide range of topics. To launch the Master Plan update, the town created a community survey to identify goals for the following topics: Housing, Transportation, Economic Development, Community Facilities and Services, Open Space and Recreation, Natural and Cultural Resources, Land Use and Zoning, and Public Health.

A public survey was conducted from March 12, 2024, to March 25, 2024, and received 242 responses. The survey was advertised across various town platforms, including the Athol Daily Time. Hard copies were available at the Town Hall, Senior Center, and Library. In tandem to the survey a Crowdscore Map was also launched, allowing residents to pinpoint location specific concerns or priorities throughout the community.

On April 8, BSC Group gave a presentation at the Public Library to kick off the public engagement process for the Master Plan. This meeting covered the survey results and presented initial findings and potential goals and objectives for each Master Plan topic, informed by the input provided from residents.

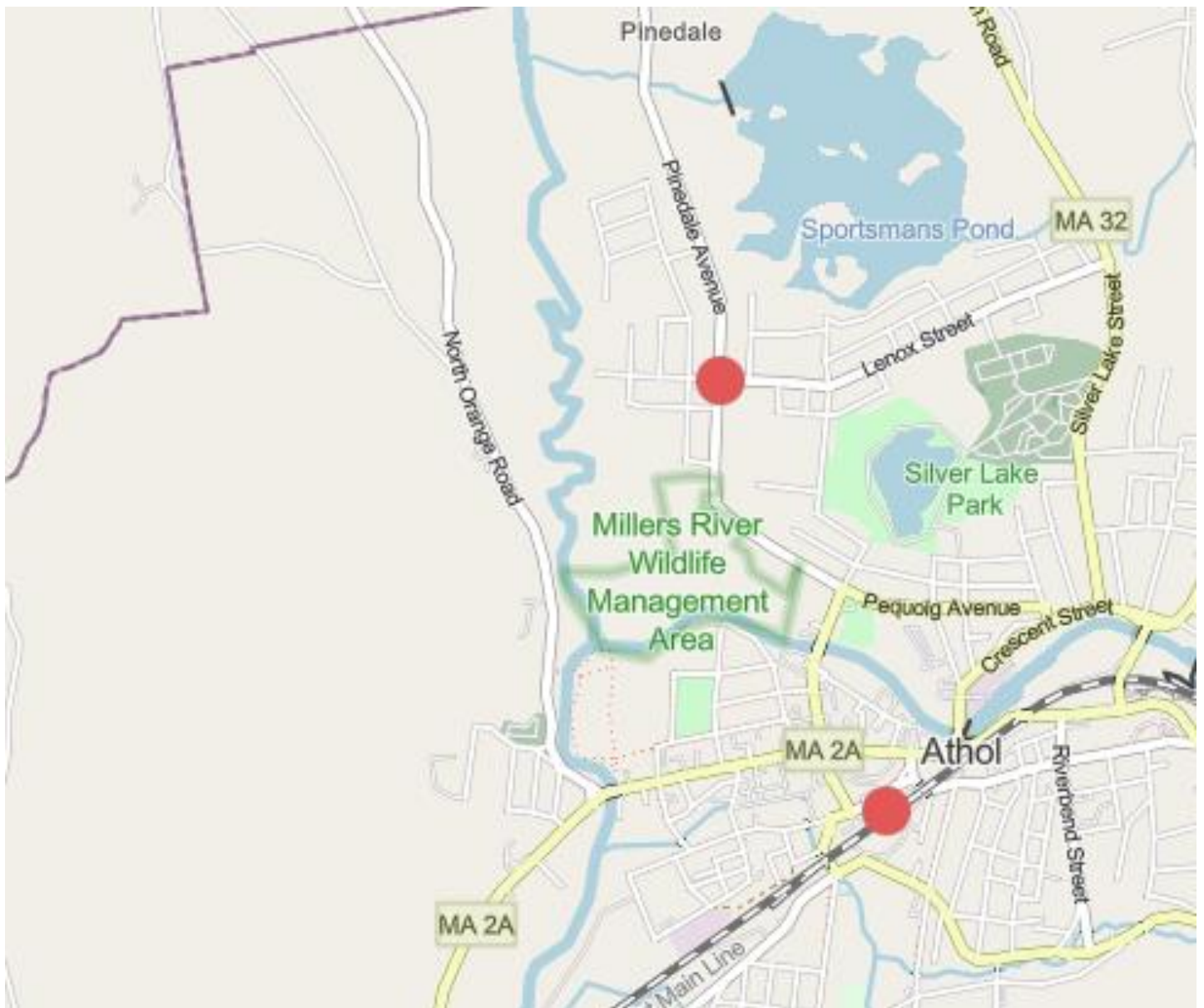
## Crowdsourced Map

Figure 1. Preferred Locations and Density for New Housing



Several locations were identified by residents as potential locations for new housing. Responses are primarily in support of apartment style housing, with two locations proposed for mixed density housing.

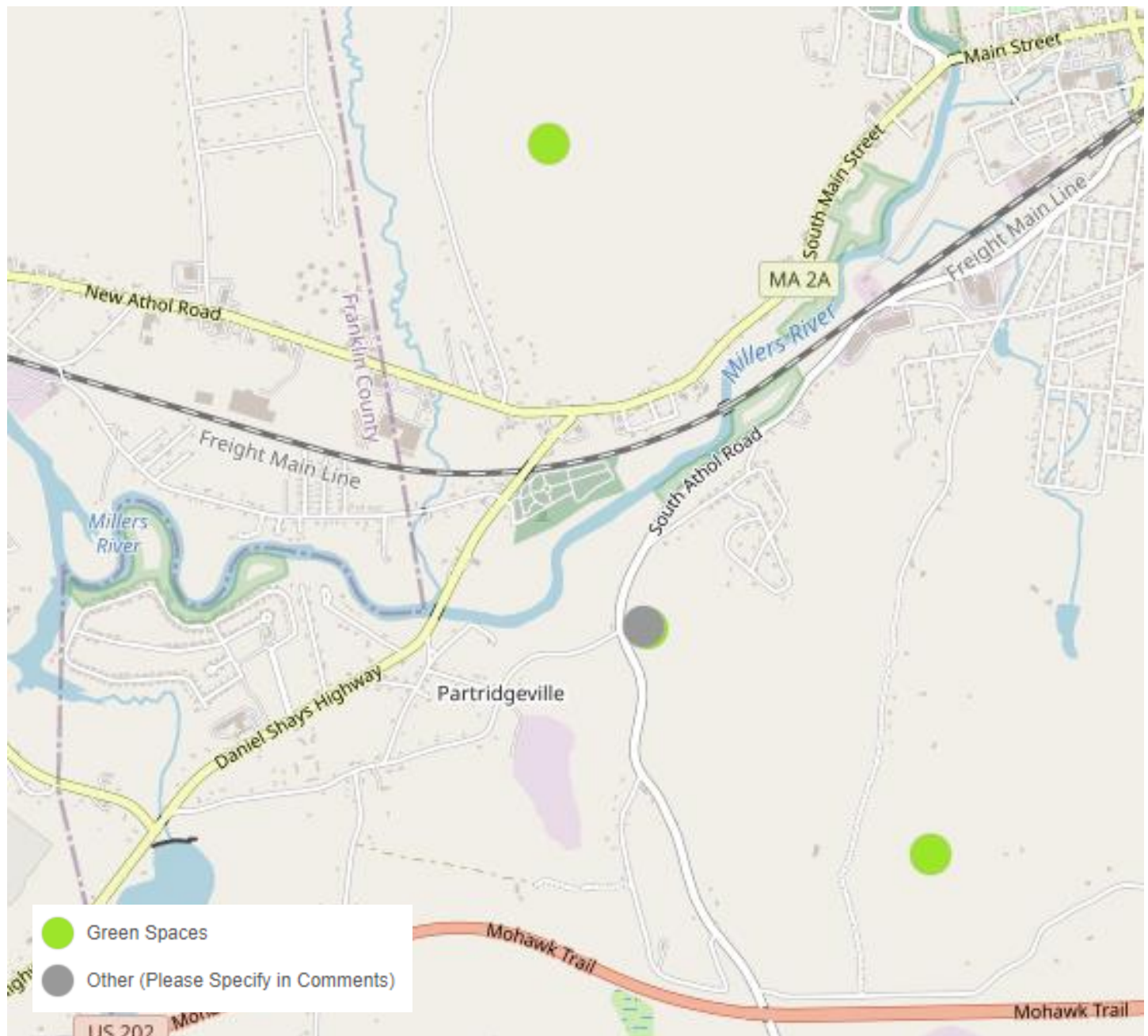
Figure 2. Preferred Locations for Public Transit



Two areas were identified as ideal locations for public transportation. The location in downtown Athol indicates potential for a restored train line service.

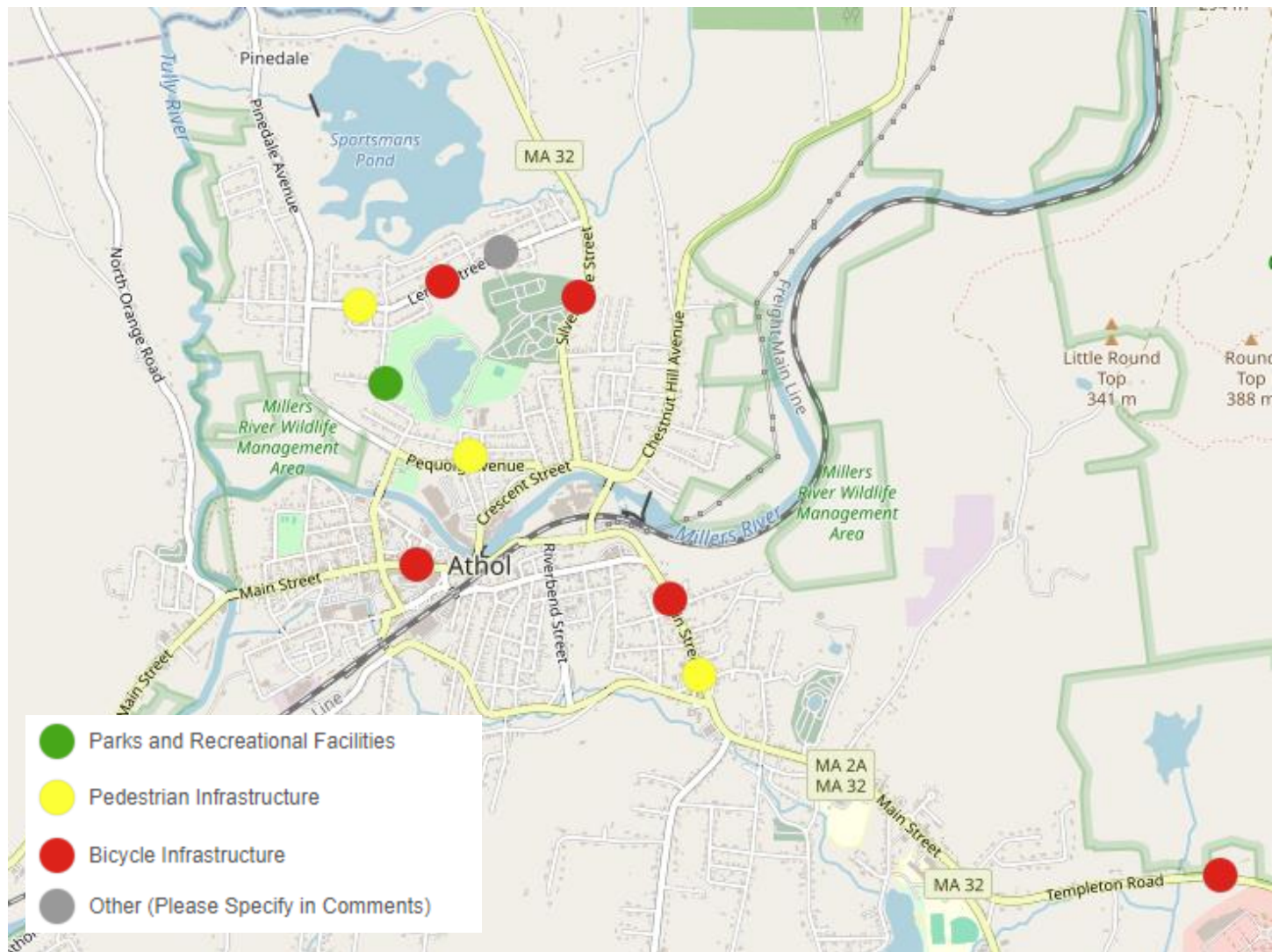


Figure 3. Preferred Locations for Protection and/or Conservation



Two dots were placed on the Bidwell property, indicating a preference for the property to potentially become conservation land. Two other locations in town were identified as preferred locations for protection. The Town of Athol recently conducted a Site Planning exercise for the Bidwell Property, hearing a general consensus to maintain the property as open space or conservation land.

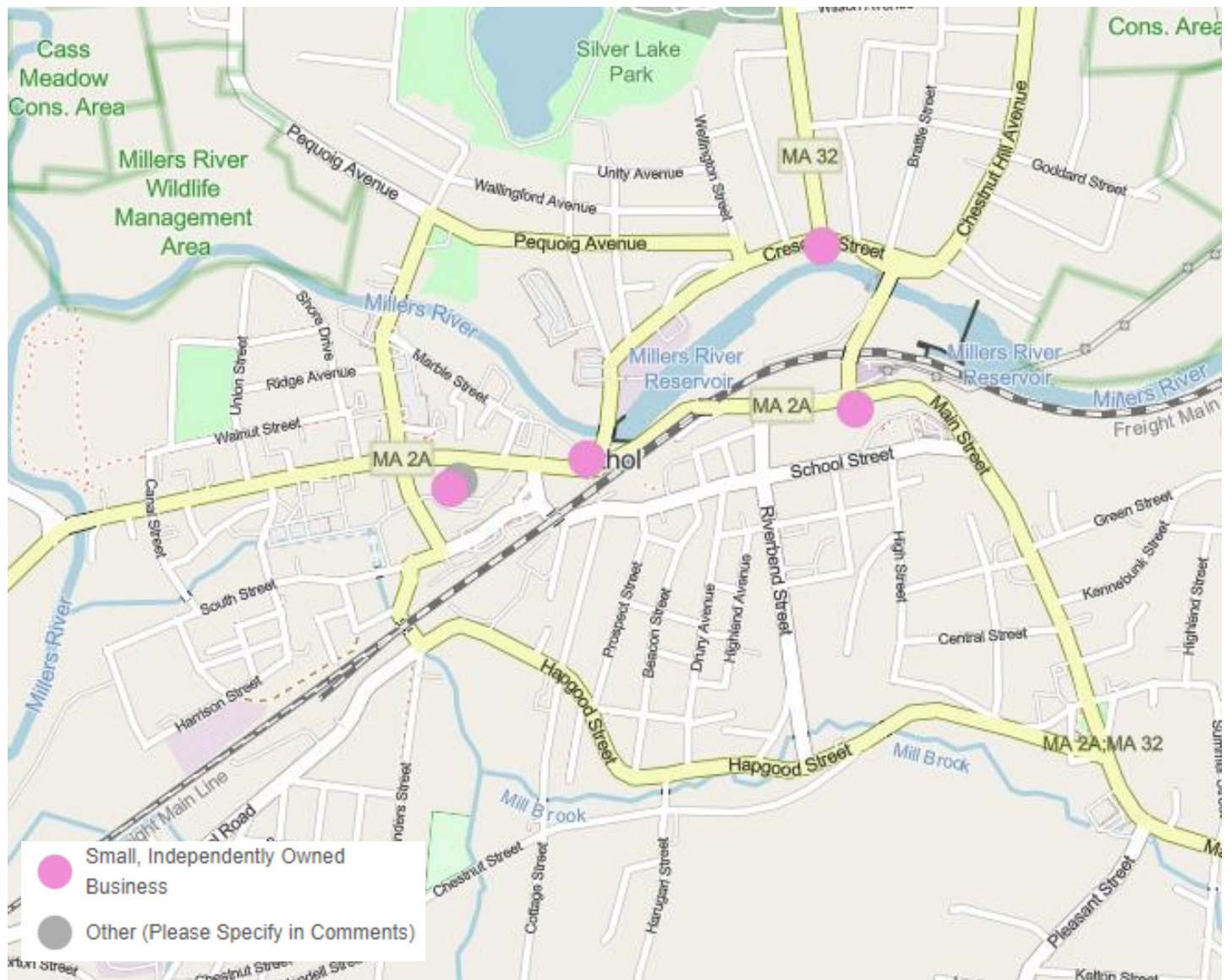
Figure 4. Preferred Locations for Infrastructure Upgrades and Repairs



Several locations in town were identified as preferred locations for infrastructure upgrades and repairs. One parks and recreation facility was identified because of future potential and a current lack of use. Additional locations were marked indicating needed pedestrian improvements to implement safety precautions. Traffic calming and bicycle facilities were also mapped, citing dangerous roadways and unsafe conditions for cyclists.



Figure 5. Preferred Locations for Additional Commercial Amenities



Several locations in the downtown area were identified as preferred locations for additional commercial amenities, with a consensus for small, independently owned businesses.

### Athol Master Plan - Vision Statement



**Open Space** - The Millers River Greenway from Athol to Orange bike path is complete and is a hub of activity for families, friends walking, people jogging and visitors.



**Transportation** - Athol's historic train station is revived and serves as a key asset for residents, business owners, and visitors.



**Housing** - The downtown's vacant buildings are occupied, and several new buildings provide housing for longtime residents and new people who have chosen to live in Athol.



**Cultural** - The Lord Pond Plaza Farmer's Market is a regional draw and visitors gather to watch a musician perform at the renovated Memorial Park.



**Economic Development** - Two new restaurants on Main Street are resident favorites and a brewery on Exchange Street is popular amongst residents and visitors.



**Community Services** - The Library, Town Hall, YMCA, and Elementary School provide popular programs for residents and are well connected by safe sidewalks.



**Land Use & Zoning** - The zoning protects outlying areas while promoting infill development in the downtown and commercial areas.



**Public Health** - The Town is an integral partner in regional efforts to reduce food insecurity, domestic violence, and increase access to affordable housing and affordable healthcare.

In total, the survey received 242 responses. Of those who participated in the survey approximately half report being residents of the town for 30 years or more. About 61% identify as women and most of the survey participants are over the age of 35, with the greatest portion of participants 65 and older. Open space and recreation received the most interest as a master plan topic, followed by land use and zoning, natural and cultural resources, economic development, and public health.



For more details and specific survey results, please see Appendix A.

During the public visioning session that occurred on April 8, 2024 attendees had the opportunity to review goals and indicate support with a green sticker dot. Images of the boards are included in the summary below.

To view all of the boards from the public meeting, please see Appendix B.

## Vision Statement

As part of the process to create a Vision Statement, participants were asked to complete a series of questions about Athol.

**Athol Master Plan - Vision Statement**  

I would **describe** Athol as HAVING POTENTIAL visionary in planning VERY WORKING CLASS TOWN Welcoming many positives Library Millers River YMCA Bird & Nature Club

One of my **favorite places** in Athol is Downtown Bearsden Market Bearsden Central area Silver Lake All the beautiful places to hike, walk, see wildlife. + Market Basket + Library

One of my **favorite things to do** in Athol is Downtown events, 4th Friday Fest, River Rat Carnival hiking volunteering enjoying nature familiarity Most people are nice, people know each other, are helpful.

One of my **favorite reasons for living** in Athol is Great people and town employees; access to open space; familiarity; affordability; nice people who know each other.

I would like to see Athol **become** more bed & breakfast/eco-tourism; bustling & thriving downtown Thriving downtown Thriving downtown downtown improvements

I think Athol **would be better** if it had Farmers Market busy downtown Downtown small businesses and restaurants; rural residential farm lot zoning Cleaner - teach people to pick up + not litter. Updated parks trails more trees along the downtown

I would describe Athol as: Having potential; visionary in planning; very working class; welcoming with many positives.

One of my favorite places in Athol is: Downtown; library; Market Basket; Bearsden; Silver Lake; Millers River; YMCA; Bird & Nature Club; areas to walk/hike.

One of my favorite things to do in Athol is: Downtown events; 4th Friday Fest; River Rat Carnival; hiking; volunteering; enjoying nature.

One of my favorite reasons for living in Athol is: Great people and town employees; access to open space; familiarity; affordability; nice people who know each other.

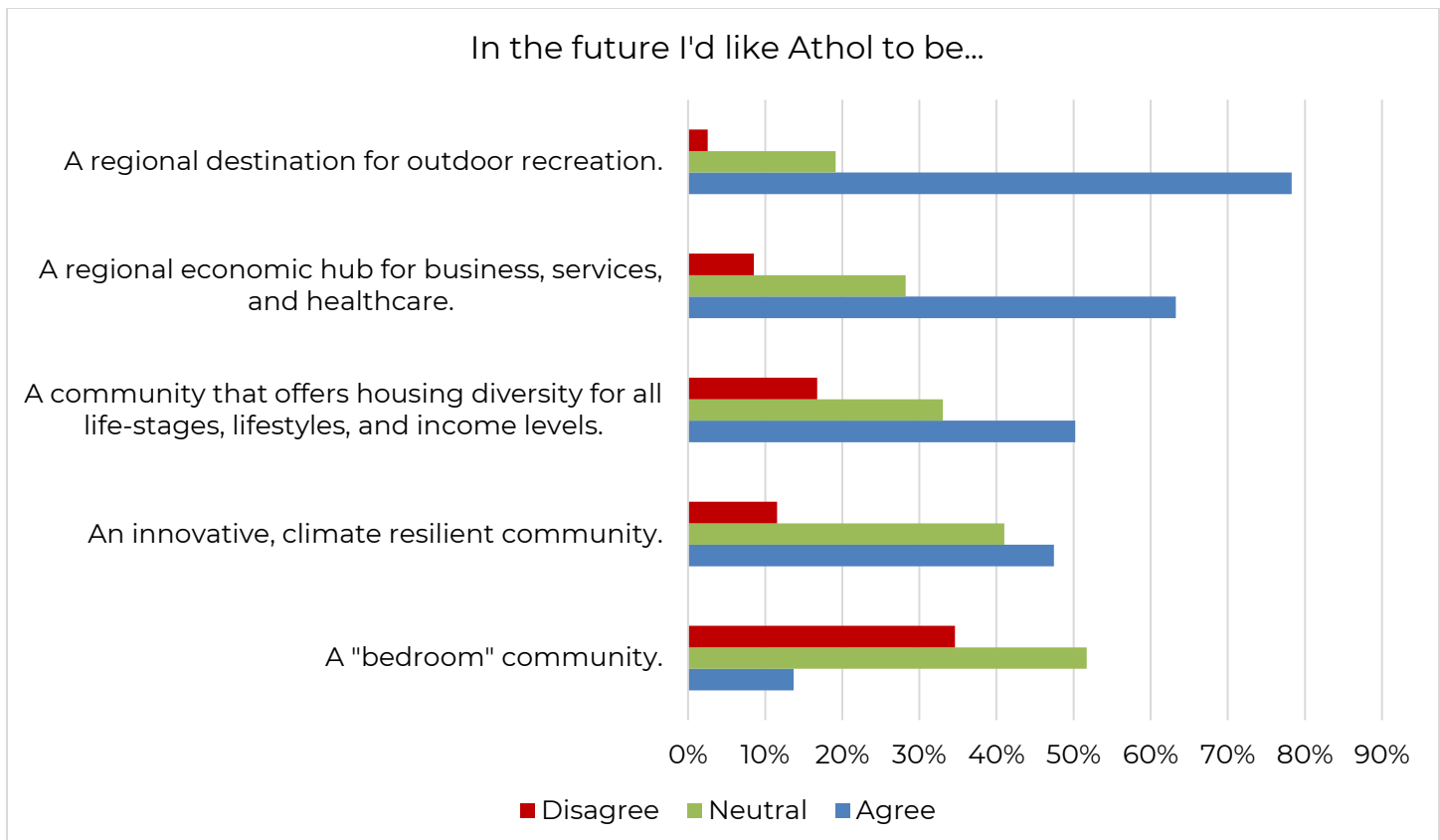
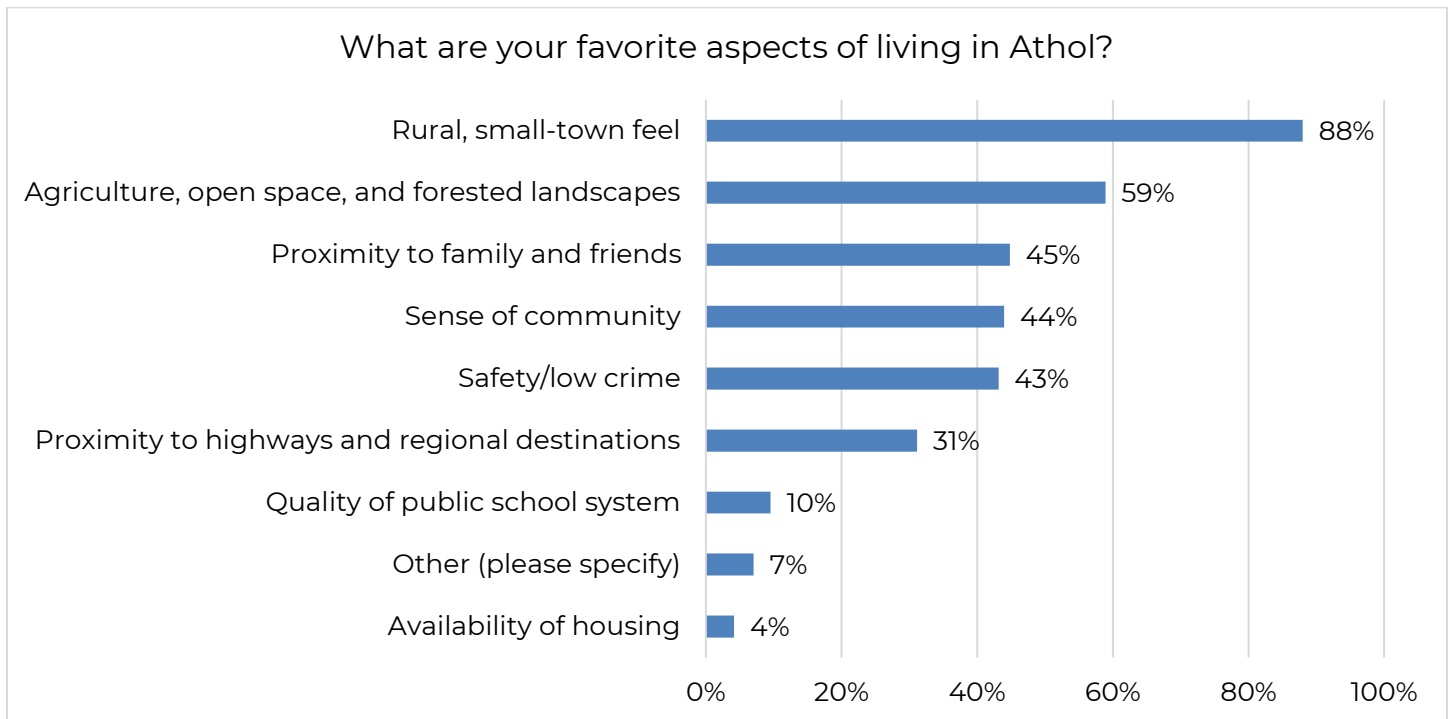
I would like to see Athol become more: Bed & breakfast/eco-tourism; bustling & thriving downtown.

I think Athol would be better if it had: a Farmers market; busy downtown with small businesses and restaurants; rural residential farm lot zoning; cleaner; updated parks & trails; more trees downtown.



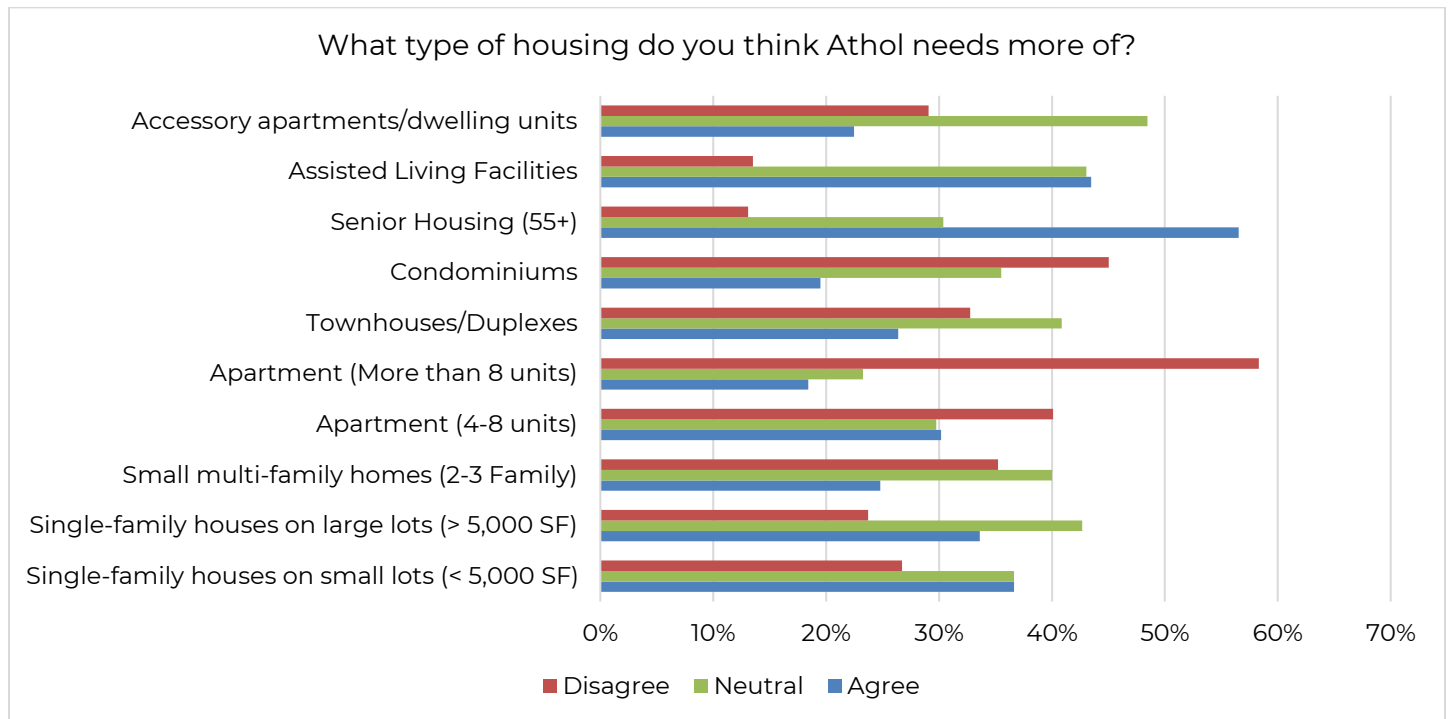
## Quality of Life

Those surveyed identify Athol's rural small town feel as their favorite aspect of living in Athol, followed by the agriculture and open space in town. Residents report a desire for increased safety and cleanliness, better schools, and more employment opportunities. Residents also report a need for high-speed internet capability and more cultural and entertainment opportunities.



## Housing

Residents were polled about where they think new housing should be built. 32% report that housing should be constructed in areas that are already developed, such as downtown or on lots that have frontages with existing roadways. Residents agree that senior housing is needed, as well increased housing diversity, including single family houses and apartment style dwelling units.



# Athol Master Plan Update - *Housing*

Key Planning Study or Resource: **TOWN OF ATHOL, MA**

Top Goals and Objectives:

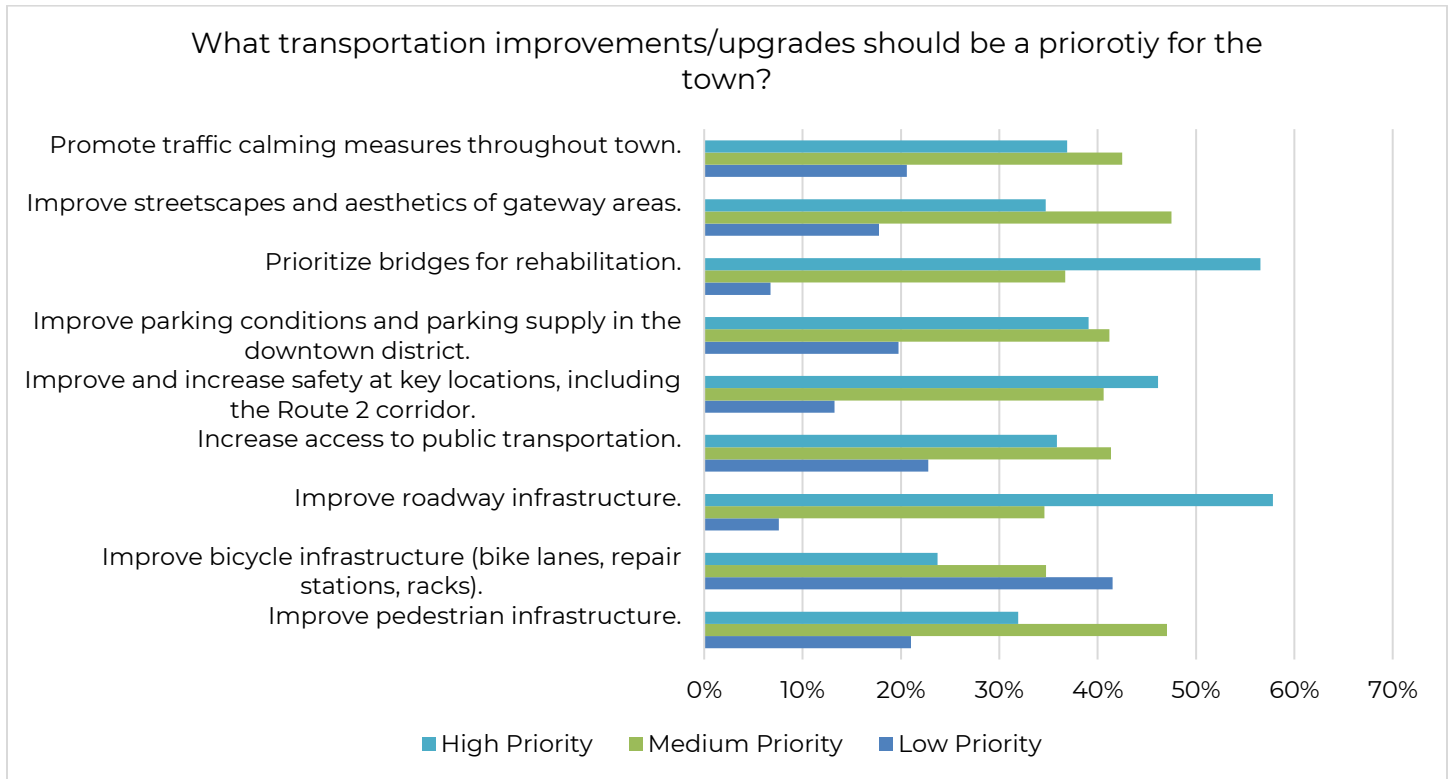
**2019 - Master Plan for key downtown parcels** - This project was undertaken to support the Town's overall goal to foster and enhance a vibrant, downtown mixed-use district. The project created a schematic conceptual design plan that incorporated proposed new building footprints on key parcels, traffic and pedestrian circulation and access, infrastructure improvements, parking, and open space.

**2023 - Housing Production Plan** - This plan is intended to help the Town of Athol better understand the current housing dynamic, identify priority housing needs, and develop a roadmap for addressing these needs over the next five years. The work builds on prior planning efforts including the Town's 2002 Master Plan, Housing Action Plan in 2014 and more recent Downtown Housing Study.

- Continue to work cooperatively with private developers (non-profit and for-profit) to make progress in implementing the creation of new housing units.
- Explore, provide, support opportunities for senior housing, Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU's).
- Support opportunities for new housing in already developed areas in an around the downtown.
- Encourage Adaptive Reuse Programs by reducing/eliminating permit requirements for building reuses.
- Create a 40R Smart Growth Overlay District to promote and incentivize mixed use and infill development in the downtown area.
- Continue to identify and evaluate sites that may be appropriate for affordable housing development.
- Evaluate the potential reuse of the Fire Department building on Exchange Street versus the demolition and extension of the Walnut Street roadway.

## Transportation

Those surveyed identify bridge repairs and roadway infrastructure improvements as high priority actions for the future. Medium priority actions include pedestrian infrastructure and streetscape Improvements, gateway area aesthetic improvements, and traffic calming measures around town.



### Athol Master Plan Update - Transportation

Aspire! Athol | BSC GROUP

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**Key Planning Study or Resource**

2023 - The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) is conducting a study to examine the benefits, costs, and investments necessary to implement passenger rail service from North Adams to Greenfield and Boston, with the speed, frequency, and reliability necessary to be a competitive option for travel along this corridor. Phase 2 alternatives include a new station and stop in Athol.

2024 - The Regional Transportation Plan serves as a long-term blueprint of the Region's transportation system. The current network is compared to the past and envisioned 25 years into the future. Needs are identified and a framework of projects and priorities are set across all modes, i.e. highway, transit, bicycle and pedestrian, freight, etc. The RTP also serves to provide a basis for any federally financed transportation and transit project, program or study.

**Top Goals and Objectives**

- Improve roadway and pedestrian infrastructure.
- Continue to use and update the Complete Streets Prioritization Plan to pursue projects that combine road and pedestrian infrastructure and traffic calming improvements.
- Seek funding for a comprehensive bridge assessment.
- Develop infrastructure necessary to support greater density and mix of uses, including access to transit.
- Leverage future private development projects with state grants such as MassWorks & HousingWorks to fund some infrastructure projects.
- To continue to oversee and support safety improvements along the Route 2 corridor.
- Maintain a roadway management plan to achieve maintenance-oriented roadway network condition and provide a basis for establishing priorities and budget allocation.
- Continue to participate and align Town projects with projects and funding sources identified in the Regional Transportation Plan.
- Provide support and generate community engagement for the inclusion of Athol as a stop along the Northern Tier Rail project as a transformational project.

**Notes:**

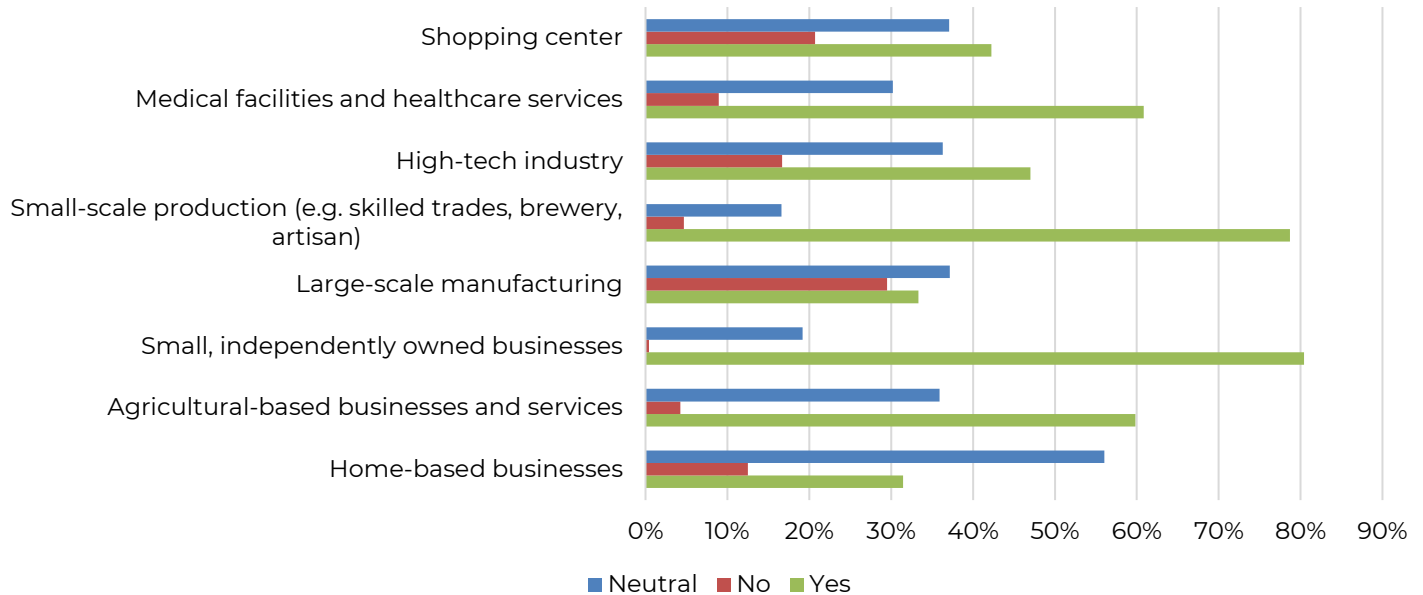
Athol should identify and align with the RTP and the Northern Tier Rail project as a transformational project.



## Economic Development

The survey results indicate that residents would like to see more small and independently owned businesses in town and small-scale skilled production. Residents also agree that more medical facilities and healthcare as well as agriculturally based businesses are desired in town.

What kind of economic development would you like to see more of in Athol?



# Athol Master Plan Update - *Economic Development*

Key Planning Study or Resource | Top Goals and Objectives | **Aspire! Athol** | **BSC GROUP**

**TOWN OF ATHOL, MA**

2019 - Master Plan for key downtown parcels - This project was undertaken to support the Town's overall goal to foster and enhance a vibrant, downtown mixed-use district. The project created a schematic conceptual design plan that incorporated proposed new building footprints on key parcels, traffic and pedestrian circulation and access, infrastructure improvements, parking, and open space.

- Promote new small businesses, including restaurants and breweries into the downtown area.
- Build partnerships with owners of vacant buildings downtown and seek funding to evaluate, remediate and demolish or renovate.
- Promote agritourism and other agricultural-based businesses and reducing permit requirements.
- Support additional public and private events, festivals and concerts.
- Offer free use of Town public spaces for events; create a supportive internal review committee to support larger events.
- Seek design and construction funds to enhance/renovate Memorial Park to incorporate greenspace and public art.
- Explore the feasibility of implementing a District Improvement Financing (DIF) program to capture funding for public improvements within the downtown.

**Town of Athol DOWNTOWN ATHOL PARKING PLAN**

2020 - Parking Plan - The Athol Downtown Vitality Committee comprised of residents, business owners, and community leaders who support the town mission of revitalizing the downtown for both residents and visitors. They sought a study of parking use to determine how downtown might see increased activity without burdening the parking system.

- Pursue streetscape improvements along Exchange Street, including but not limited to, a reduction in the width of vehicle travel lanes, additional on-street parking, crosswalks, wider sidewalks, and street trees; and an extended 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.

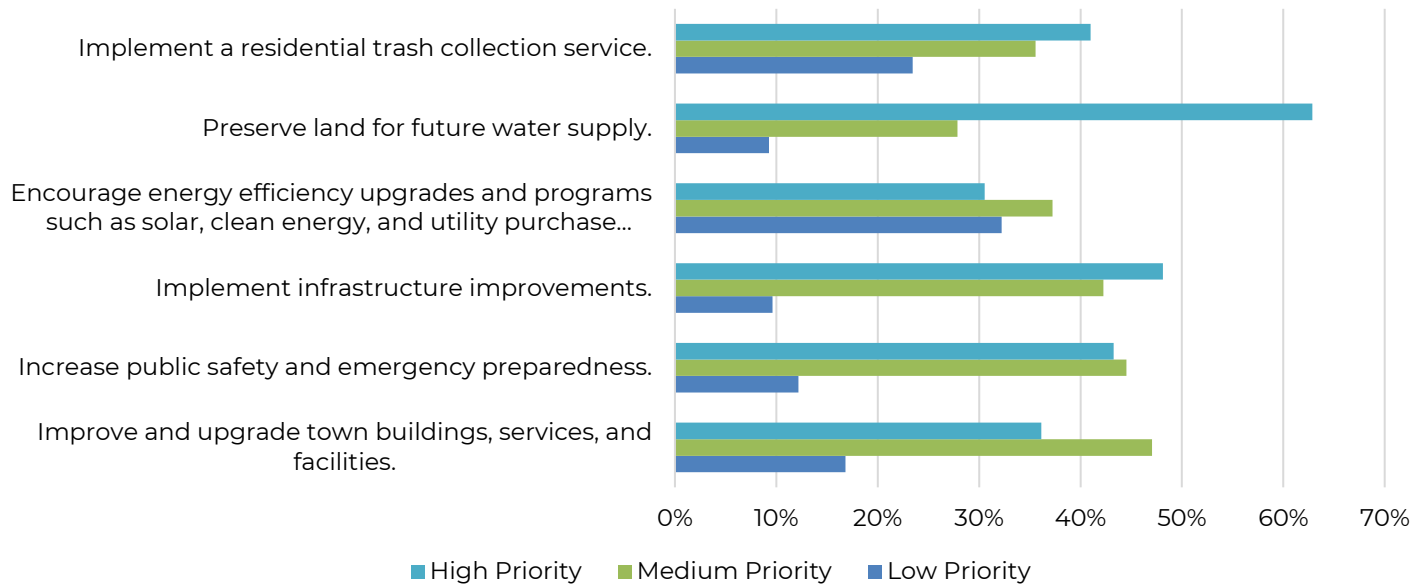
**Rapid Recovery Plan**

2021 - Rapid Recovery Plan - This plan takes consideration of quantitative and qualitative data after the pandemic to help Athol focus and prioritize a series of projects. Three sub-goals emerge: 1) Create an inviting and cohesive pedestrian environment, 2) Support existing businesses and attract new businesses, and 3) Preserve and re-invest in Athol's building stock.

## Community Facilities and Services

Residents identified the following actions as high priority items the Town should focus on: preserving land for a future water supply, implementing infrastructure improvements, and implementing a residential trash collection service. Medium priority actions include upgrading town facilities and increasing public safety/emergency preparedness.

### What community services and facilities should Athol focus on?



## Athol Master Plan Update- *Facilities and Services*



### Key Planning Study or Resource

### Top Goals and Objectives



2020 - Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) and Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP) - This plan is based on a community-driven workshop process to identify climate-related hazards, community strengths and vulnerabilities, and develop solutions to address these considerations.



2020 - Athol Helping Athol - This plan frames local vulnerability and solutions through a lens of social justice. It establishes a framework of "Recognition", "Empower", and "Implementation" to ensure the interests of socially vulnerable groups in Athol remain a central feature of the MVP and other planning processes.



2024 - The Town is actively pursuing design and construction funds through the Federal US Dept. of Housing and Urban Development through the CDBG program. This is a competitive grant program with projects selected from the Community Development Strategy.

Continue to pursue green infrastructure improvements in/around the Downtown including but not limited to Lord Pond Plaza.

- Determine the feasibility and pros/cons of establishing a residential trash collection service.

- Improve public safety, emergency preparedness, and communication through increased coordination, planning, education and capital improvements; integrate the principals of Athol Helping Athol.

- Continue to use CDBG funds for design and construction of water, sewer, pedestrian and roadway improvements in the downtown area, and MVP funds for green infrastructure and nature-based solutions.

- Take a proactive approach to upgrading wastewater and water services

- Continue to support, implement, and update the Athol Royalston Regional School District strategic plan including potential new High School.

- Continue to support, implement and expand the services of the Senior Center.

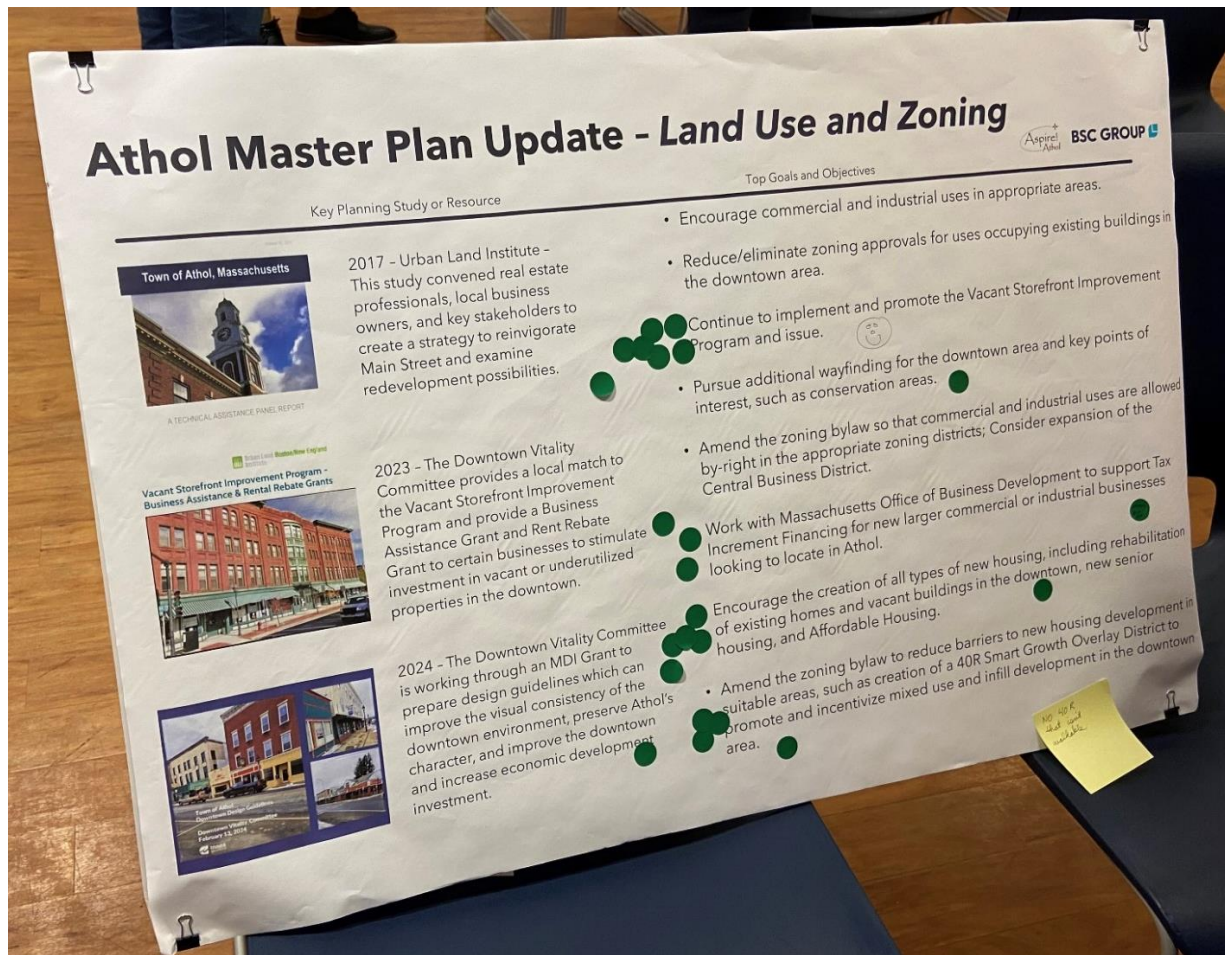
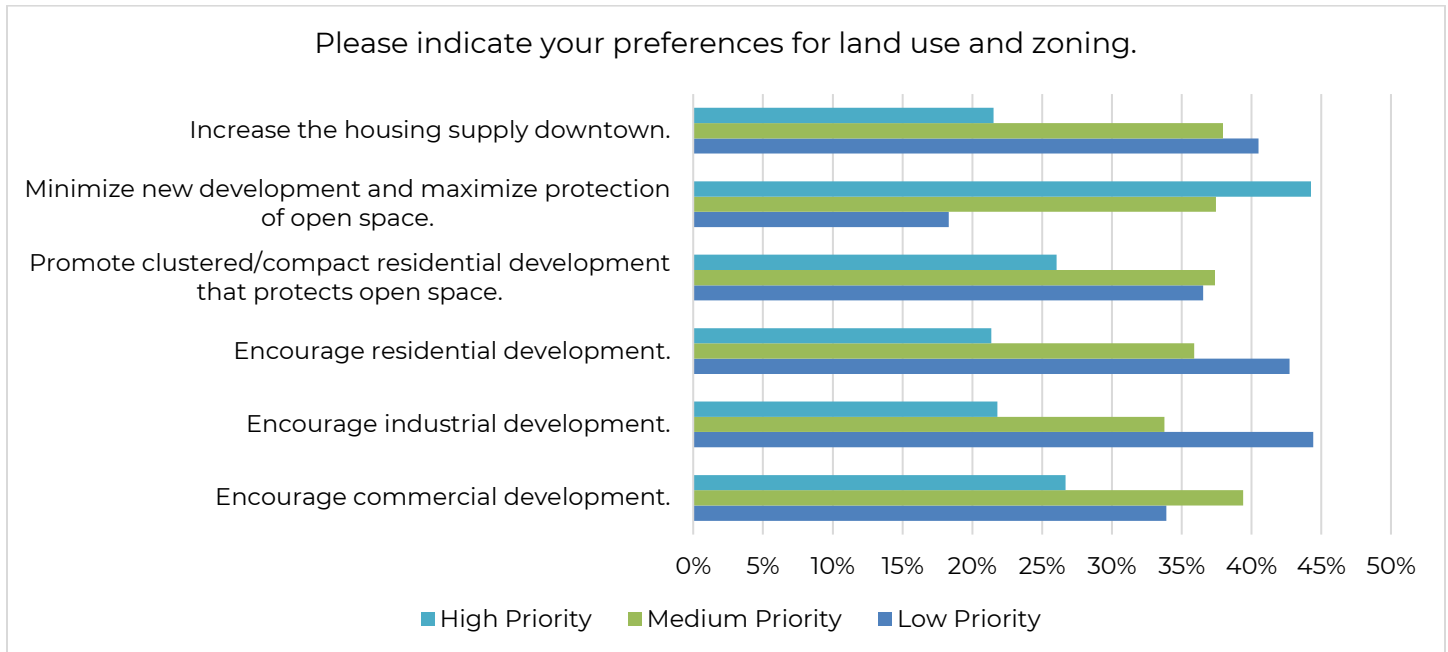
- Continue to support, implement, and update the Strategic Plan for the Athol Public Library.

- Develop a long-term climate resilience and adaptation plan and identify dedicated funding to support implementation.



## Land Use and Zoning

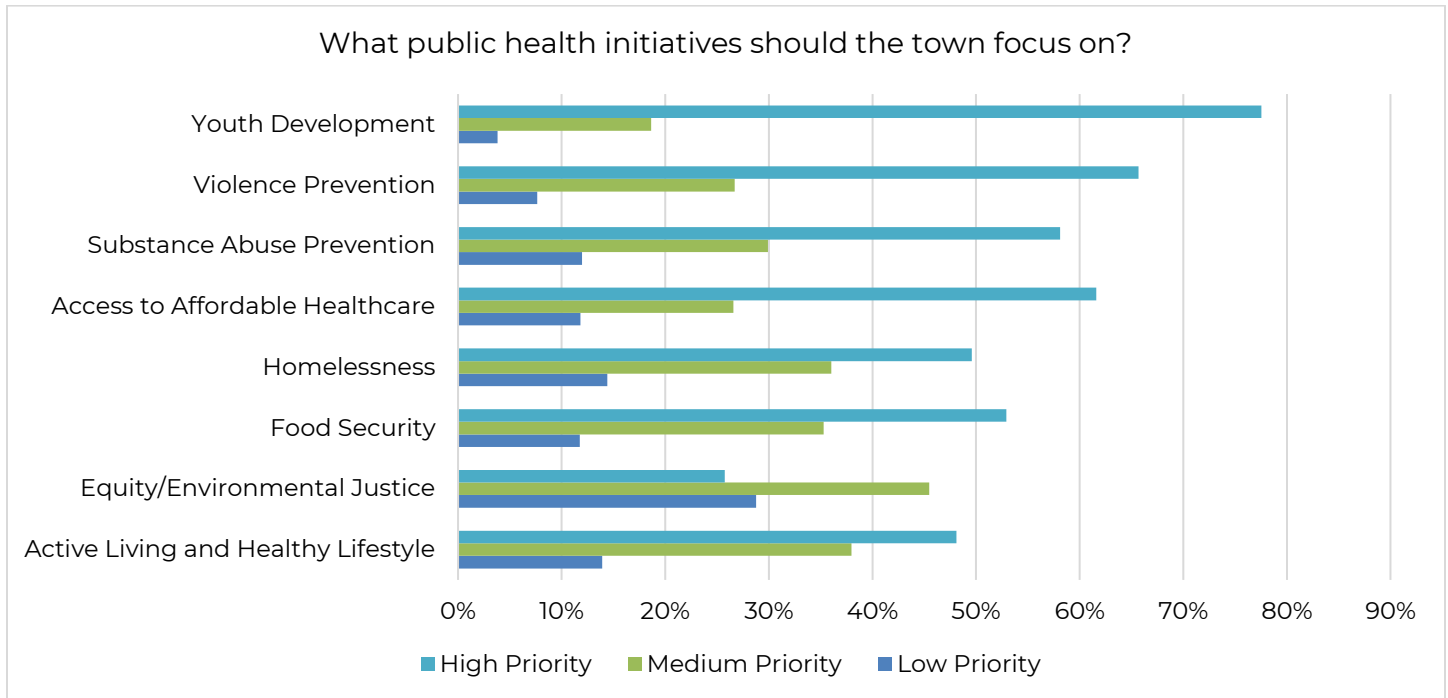
Related to land use, those who participated in the survey indicate that development should occur on vacant or underutilized parcels near the downtown (70%). Uses supported by residents include open space, with less support for residential and industrial uses.





## Public Health

The survey asked, "What initiatives should the Town focus on?" Results for high priorities indicate youth development, violence prevention, substance abuse prevention, and access to affordable healthcare.



# Athol Master Plan Update - Public Health

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Key Planning Study or Resource Top Goals and Objectives

**2020 - Athol Helping Athol - This plan frames local vulnerability and solutions through a lens of social justice. It establishes a framework of "Recognition", "Empower", and "Implementation" to ensure the interests of socially vulnerable groups in Athol remain a central feature of the MVP and other planning processes.**

**2021 - Community Health Improvement Plan - This plan establishes a network to identify health needs and disparities, identify current resources, reduce gaps and duplication of services, and increase the ability to secure resources to improve health in the Franklin County/North Quabbin region.**

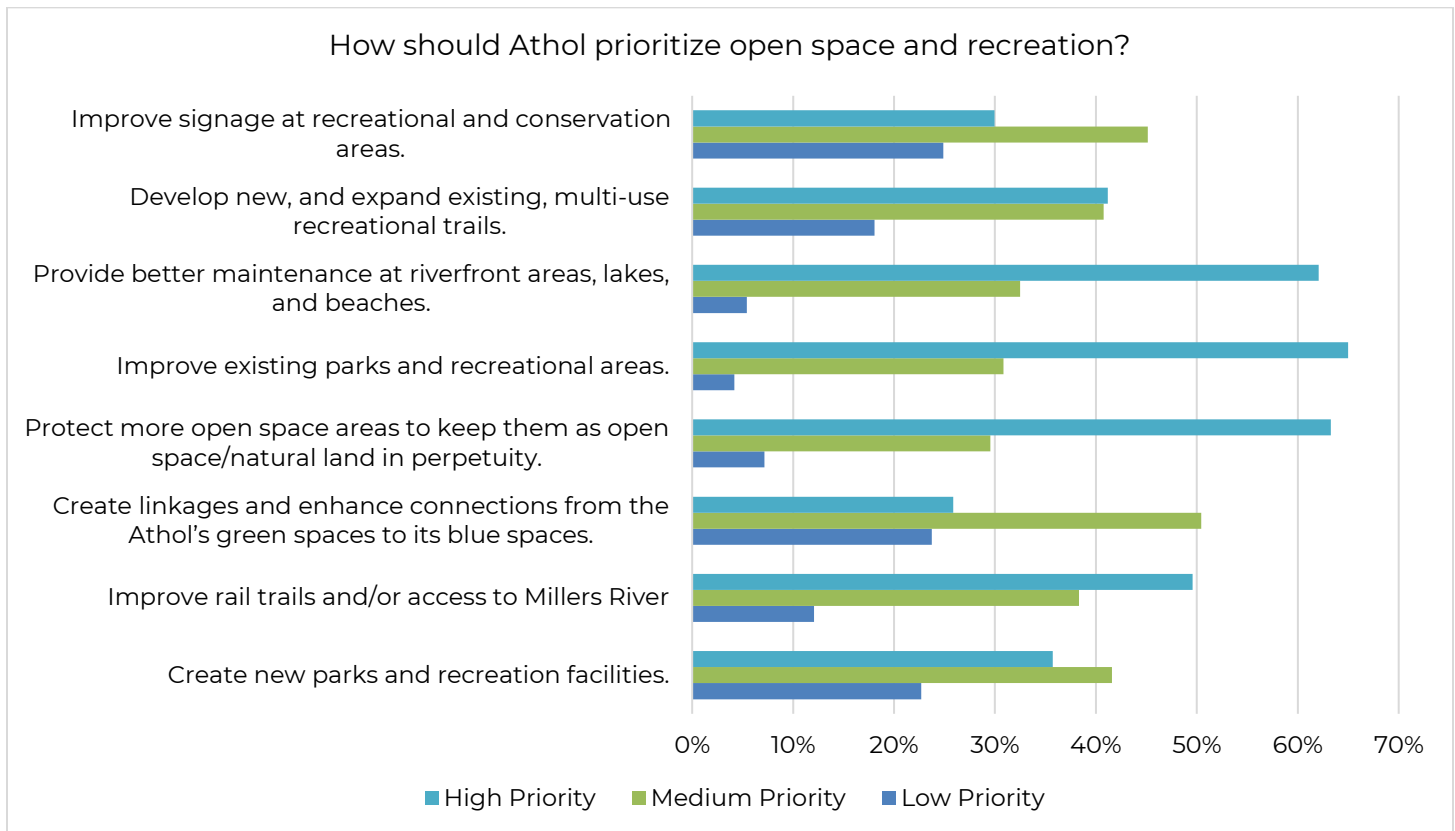
- Integrate the principals of Athol Helping Athol in public health considerations such as Youth Development & Substance Abuse.
- Assess potential health impacts of proposed projects and policies by including health and equity considerations into the decision-making process.
- Continue to support and 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.
- 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.
- Continue to support and participate in the Montachusett Public Health Improvement Plan.
- Increase access to affordable healthcare, and reduce homelessness.
- Draw upon the existing network of social support and municipal support to identify funding to expand or create new partnerships.
- Explore resources and opportunities to reduce food insecurity, expand access to locally produced and healthy foods in town.
- Enhance domestic and sexual violence prevention.

**CHIP NETWORK**  
Franklin County/North Quabbin Community Health Improvement Plan  
2021-23  
February 3, 2021

*Because the Athol Master Plan is the only one of its kind, it is a unique opportunity to address the needs of the community.*

## Open Space and Recreation

The survey polled support for the Community Preservation Act (CPA), receiving 75% in support and 25% against adopting CPA. High priority open space actions include protecting more open space areas, improving existing parks and recreational areas, and providing better maintenance at riverfront areas, lakes, and beaches. For more information about the CPA, see Appendix C.



### Athol Master Plan Update - Open Space and Recreation

Key Planning Study or Resource | Top Goals and Objectives

**2020 - Open Space and Recreation Plan**  
The Town of Athol provides a comprehensive inventory and assessment of the Town's open space land and active and passive recreation areas. It sets numerous specific goals and objectives for the next 7 years.

**2022 - Millers River Greenway**  
The Towns of Athol and Orange received a Mass Trails grant to perform a feasibility evaluation and conceptual design of key sections of the 5.2-mile greenway that will connect the downtown areas of Orange and Athol.

**2024 - Bidwell Site Master Plan**  
The Town of Athol purchased the Site for \$550,000 in 2009 at a Special Town Meeting. In 2023, the Town received grant funding to explore, with community input, the most optimal use(s) for the Site. A community-wide planning process was employed to inform the recommendations.

**Top Goals and Objectives:**

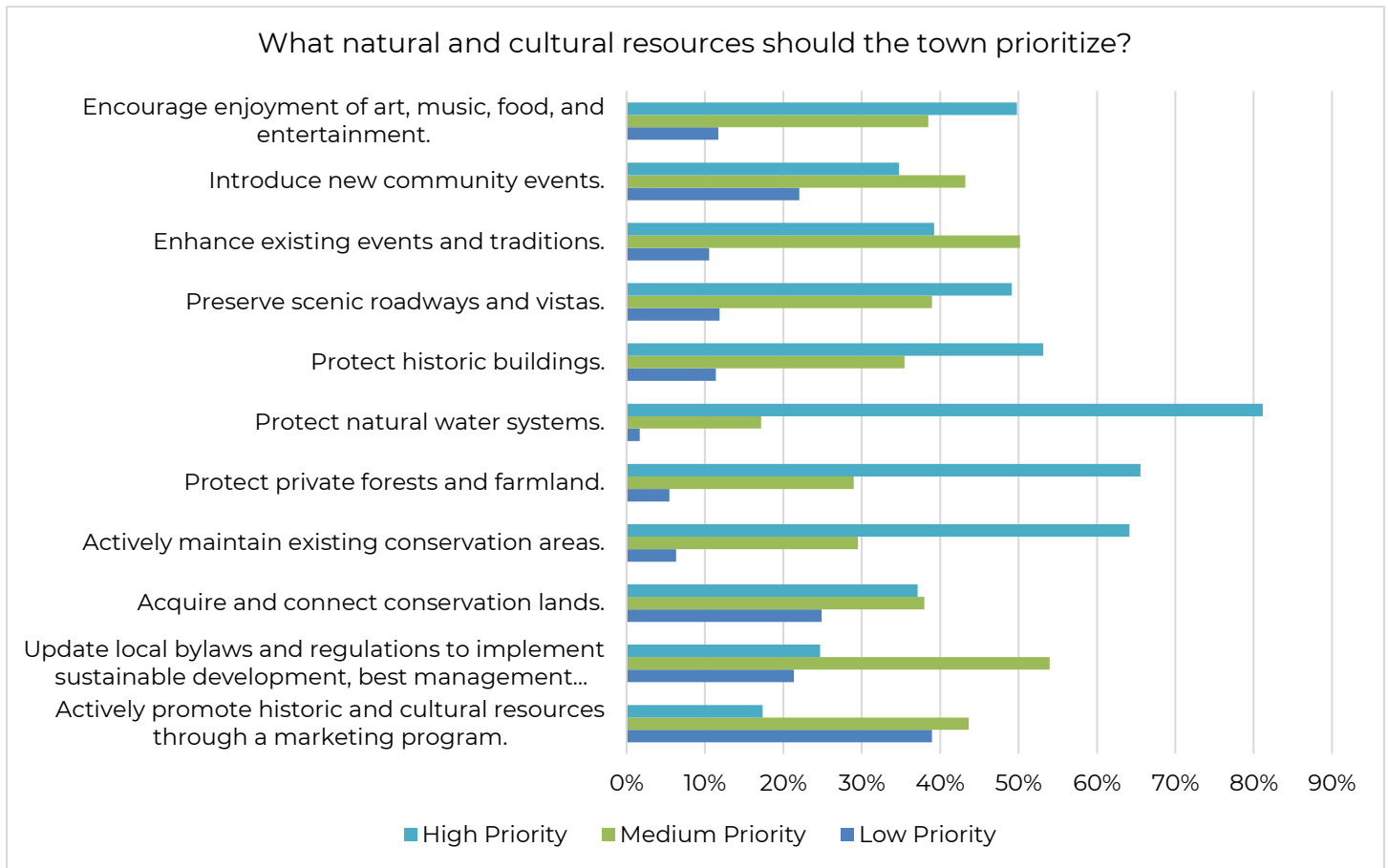
- Restore and maintain existing areas through long term, sustainable financing for maintaining and upgrading public parks.
- Enhance, protect and promote Athol's unique attributes through promotion of their importance and availability (such as signs and maps).
- Expand parks and open space areas to improve them and create new recreational opportunities; define areas suitable for development of organized sport (baseball, soccer, etc.) facilities.
- Link scattered conservation and recreation areas through the establishment of a continuous greenway network; the historic rail bed of the "Rabbit Run" could be a moderate-length path linking conservation areas.
- Continue to seek funding for design development and ultimately construction of the Millers River Greenway and the associated improvements to Alan E. Rich Park.
- 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.
- Bidwell property: Determine the best location for a park and 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.

*Note: The Bidwell property is a key focus area for the Master Plan update.*



## Natural and Cultural Resources

High priority actions identified include maintaining existing conservation areas, protecting private forests and farmland, and protecting natural water systems, and protecting historic buildings.



### Athol Master Plan Update - Public Health

Key Planning Study or Resource: Athol Helping Athol - Community Plan for Social Resilience (2020)

Top Goals and Objectives:

- Integrate the principals of Athol Helping Athol in public health considerations such as Youth Development & Substance Abuse.
- Assess potential health impacts of proposed projects and policies by including health and equity considerations into the decision-making process.
- 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.
- 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.
- Continue to support and participate in the Montachusett Public Health Network.
- Increase access to affordable healthcare, and reduce homelessness.
- Draw upon the existing network of social support and municipal support and identify funding to expand or create new partnerships.
- Explore resources and opportunities to reduce food insecurity, expand access to locally produced and healthy foods in town.
- Enhance domestic and sexual violence prevention.

2020 - Athol Helping Athol - This plan frames local vulnerability and solutions through a lens of social justice. It establishes a framework of "Recognition", "Empower", and "Implementation" to ensure the interests of socially vulnerable groups in Athol remain a central feature of the MVP and other planning processes.

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Franklin County/North Quabbin Community Health Improvement Plan 2021-23  
February 3, 2021

CHIP NETWORK

Aspire! Athol BSC GROUP



## Public Notices and Press

Two news publications were posted by the Athol Daily News, advertising the Master Plan Update Effort and release of the survey. The Athol Selectmen also made several Facebook Posts about the surveys and public meeting, providing advanced notice to residents.

### Updates underway to Athol master plan



Athol Town Hall and Main Street. File Photo/Paul Franz

By [GREG VINE](#)

[For the Athol Daily News](#)

Published: 02-29-2024 5:00 PM

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**ATHOL** Massachusetts  
*Come grow with us!*

**Your Feedback is Essential!**  
The Town of Athol is in the process of updating its Master Plan, a long-range planning document, that will create a community vision and guide future growth and development in a holistic and sustainable way.  
  
The results from the visioning session will be used to identify top goals and objectives for a variety of topic areas including housing, transportation, economic development, community facilities and services, open space and recreation, natural and cultural resources, land use and zoning, and public health.

**COMMUNITY VISIONING SESSION  
for ATHOL'S MASTER PLAN**

**Monday  
April 8, 2024  
6PM** | **Athol Public Library  
568 Main Street, Athol MA  
Program Room**

If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to Heidi Murphy, Assistant Town Planner at [hmurphy@townofathol.org](mailto:hmurphy@townofathol.org)

## Prior Community Planning Efforts

- 2024 – Downtown Design Standards
- 2024 - Bidwell Master Plan
- 2024 - CDBG – South & Freedom St public infrastructure
- 2024 – Regional Transportation Plan (RTP)
- 2023 - Open Space and Recreation Plan
- 2023 - Greening Lord Pond Plaza (MVP)
- 2023 - Housing Production Plan – 2023
- 2023- MassDOT Northern Tier Rail Study
- 2022- Athol/Orange Millers River Greenway Trail Feasibility Report
- 2021 – Rapid Recovery Plan
- 2021 – Regional Community Health Improvement Plan
- 2020 - Integrated MVP and Hazard Mitigation Plan
- 2020 - Athol Helping Athol
- 2020- Downtown Parking Plan
- 2019 – Downtown Key Development Parcels
- 2019 – Complete Streets Prioritization Plan
- 2017 – Urban Land Institute Main Street Study