



Reuse and Redevelopment Plan
350 NORTON AVENUE
Taunton, Massachusetts

June 2023

Prepared For
MassDevelopment
City of Taunton, Massachusetts

madden.
PLANNING
GROUP

D/R/E/A/M COLLABORATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

The six-acre property at 350 Norton Avenue is the site of the former municipal nursing home, but is also part of a much larger 107-acre complex of public lands. For almost 200 years, the City of Taunton has stewarded this property to serve the social needs of the community, taking care of orphans and the poor in its earliest days as a work farm, the infirm and the elderly over the last 100 years, and more recently the recreational and educational needs of a growing suburban population (Figure 1.1).

The sturdy structure on the site was built in 1876 as the Alms House - a major improvement at the time - and later designated on the National Register of Historic Places (Figure 1.2). An addition was added in 1989 to create a skilled nursing facility with a total floor area of 36,000 square feet (sf). Today, the nursing home has closed, and the building is used for storage, awaiting a decision on its future. Except for an active community garden on the site, the open fields are slowly reverting to shrubs and woodlands.

The current study provides early due diligence related to the development potential on this underutilized property, with a particular focus on housing production to help meet the needs of present and future growth in the City. Conceptual site plans illustrate different scenarios for reusing the building, improving site access and open spaces, adding new housing on the property, and accommodating parking. Even with different



Figure 1.1 The community garden is a reminder of the farmland that once surrounded the Alms House.

configurations, the suggested development program totals about 60 to 65 units, including 25 units in the existing building.

While much higher densities could be achieved, the design team responded to community input and ultimately explored relatively low density duplexes and four-unit structures that were closer in character to the suburban context, or in one alternative, adding a structure to complement the existing building. In all scenarios, the existing building was retained for adaptive reuse given its historic status, good condition, and the adverse environmental consequences of demolition. One recommendation of this study is to redefine the parcel boundaries to create a more regular shape adding roughly one acre on the northern side.

This study is a first step to inform the City's decision regarding either disposition of the property to the private for-profit or non-profit sector through a development Request for Proposal (RFP) or redevelopment of the site for public uses using local funding. In either case, immediate next steps include the field flagging and site survey of wetlands and a site survey and condition analysis of all utility lines on site. City-wide policies on housing production, zoning, and underutilized city-owned property would

help inform the decision about the future of 350 Norton Avenue. Depending on the development approach, the City may find that real estate financial feasibility analysis would help inform a disposition process or may find it useful to carry out engineering, cost, and site design studies to inform decisions about public development of the site.

In the report that follows are a description of the project goals, the community engagement process, the site context and building information, the development scenarios, and the outline of an implementation strategy.



Figure 1.2 Built in 1876, the Alms House is designated on the National Register of Historic Places and was later operated as a municipal nursing home

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GOALS/PROCESS

The current study provides an opportunity for the City to consider the future of the former nursing home building and site at 350 Norton Avenue. The goals for this particular study were based on MassDevelopment funding and the City's application for this economic development funding. Engagement with City elected officials, City staff, and the community during the course of the project also shaped the findings and recommendations (Figure 2.1)

Project Goals

In Spring 2022, the City of Taunton applied to MassDevelopment for funding to study the redevelopment opportunities of this surplus public building and was awarded a Real Estate Technical Assistance Grant (Figure 2.2). In the application, the City's economic development goals are to reuse this surplus public property for private development of medium to high density housing to accommodate future growth. This aligns with the 2018 Comprehensive Plan, which sets goals for the City to diversify its housing stock to be more "inclusive for individuals and families across a broad range of age, income, and need" and for the City to work "to achieve and then maintain the 10 percent State affordable housing goal under Chapter 40b".¹ The Comprehensive Plan includes action steps related to zoning for cottage communities, reclaiming and reusing abandoned properties, updating the cluster zoning provisions, and integrating affordable housing into the City's economic development strategy.²

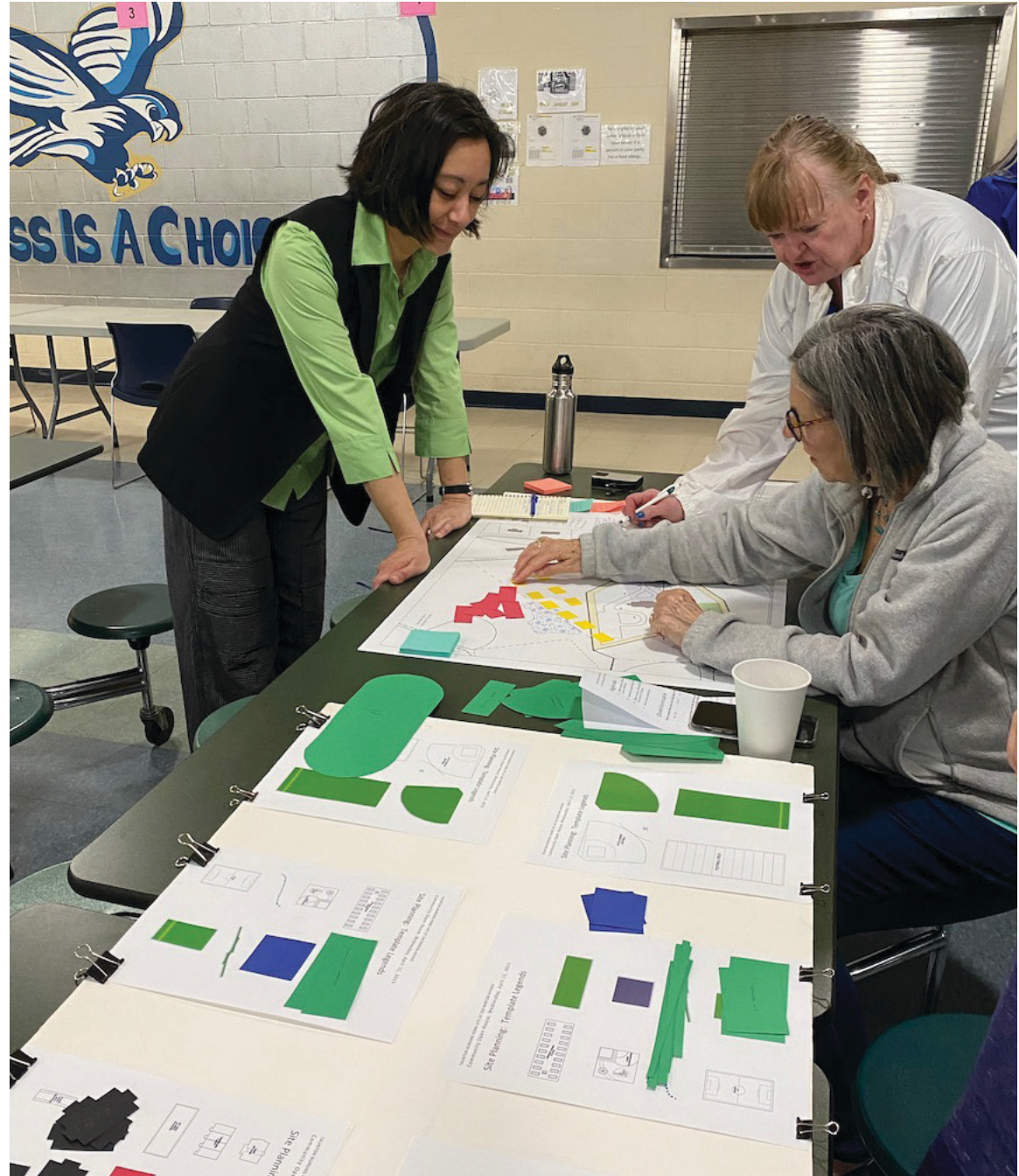


Figure 2.1. The size and configuration of the site and the possible uses inform ideas for future use of the site.



Figure 2.2. The property includes the historic structure plus an addition, sitting on six acres of land on Norton Avenue.

Based on the City’s application and MassDevelopment funding, the primary goals for this study are as follows:

1. Enhance economic development by unlocking housing and/or creating jobs.
2. Evaluate the highest and best use of the property
3. Inform City decisions about the potential for reuse and disposition.

Community Engagement

The study was prepared through a collaborative effort by Madden Planning Group (project coordination, community engagement, planning and implementation strategy) and DREAM

Collaborative (existing building analysis and site planning and design). This team worked closely with the City Office of Economic and Community Development (OECD) and MassDevelopment throughout the process. Taking advantage of technology, coordination meetings tended to be via zoom, and community engagement and site visits were conducted in person.

An initial kick-off meeting with OECD staff was held in mid-February 2023, followed shortly thereafter with an in-person meeting with the Mayor and a site tour of the building facility and grounds. During March and early April, the project team was able to follow community ideas and concerns through Facebook posts in response to a Taunton Gazette article, “Ball Fields?

Assisted Living? Got any creative ideas for Old Taunton Nursing Home site?”³ and a question posted on the City’s Facebook page announcing the upcoming Community Meeting, “Interested in giving your opinion about the repurposing and reuse of the Taunton Nursing Home site?”⁴.

On April 12, 2023, the consultant team led a community open house at the Friedman Middle School (Figure 2.3). This interactive event included a brief overview of the site and building analysis. After this presentation, the community was encouraged to visit four different stations around the school cafeteria and engage with the following topics: Regional Context, Norton Avenue Area, Visual Preference, and Site Planning. City and consultant staff were present at each station to encourage discussion and input. Fifty people signed in at the meeting. A little over half of these community members live within one mile of the site, and almost everyone who attended the meeting lives within three miles. Thirty-eight participants responded to a questionnaire that asked about current use of the site, aspirations for the future, and important factors to consider (Appendix A).

The Council Committee on Public Property held a public meeting on March 31, 2023, which focused on the recreational needs of the Taunton Pop Warner football, Taunton Western Little League, and Taunton Girls Softball organizations as it relates to the reuse of the former nursing home site. While the consultant team was not in attendance, the meeting was recorded. At

the May 9, 2023, public meeting of the Council Committee on Public Property, the consultant team presented the draft findings of the site and building analysis and a series of redevelopment scenarios to the City Council subcommittee members and other Councilors in attendance.

Each source of engagement revealed different positions, and all together there is a wide range of ideas and concerns about the future of the nursing home site (Appendix A). Many commented on the desperate need for more housing, particularly veterans, elderly, and affordable housing. Others are against housing on this site and would prefer to see an expansion of the recreation fields including a Pop Warner field. Smaller subsets voiced other needs, such as a homeless shelter, artist studios, community center, dog park, or a full recreational complex. The ideas that garnered the greatest consensus were increased walking trails and the retention of the community garden, no matter what the other reuse components were. Some of the local residents valued the suburban character of this part of Taunton, and were fearful of change that would hurt their property values. As the project progressed, all of the online and in person community input shaped the recommendations for housing density, housing types, ways to better connect all the uses with a system of walking trails, and the potential to incorporate recreational fields in the public lands surrounding the nursing home site.

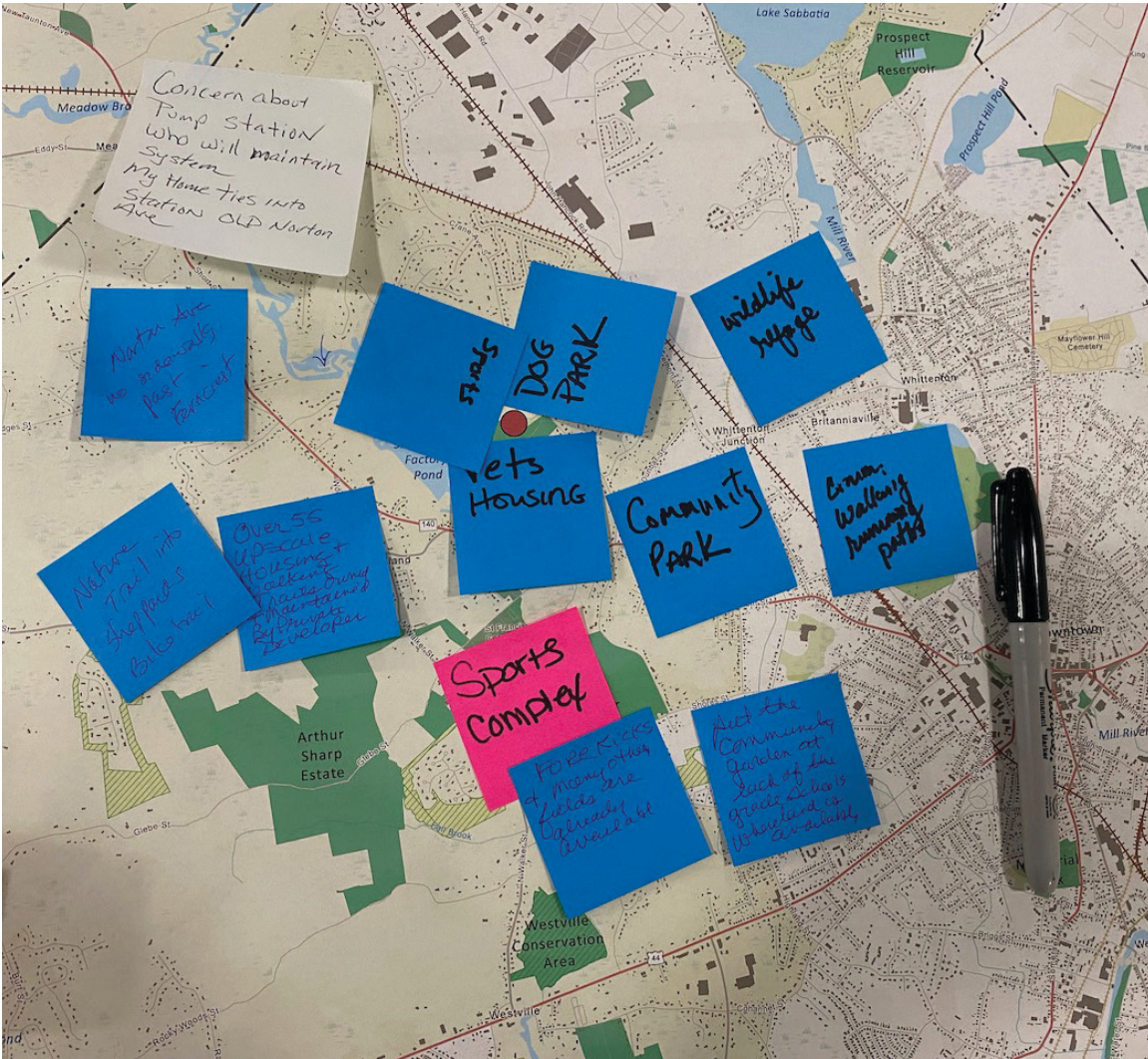


Figure 2.3. The community engagement process identified a wide range of aspirations for the site.

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CONTEXT

Decisions about the future are informed by the attributes of this particular location and property, including the regional setting, site ownership and history, surrounding development, access, building information, and the policy framework.

Regional Setting

Taunton lies in the heart of southeastern Massachusetts with easy access to Providence, Fall River, and New Bedford. Boston and Cape Cod are each about an hour away. The nearest interstate interchange to the project site is at I-495, approximately a 10-to-15-minute drive away. Within Taunton, the 350 Norton Avenue site is on the edge of the Oakland neighborhood, northwest of downtown (Figure 3.1). The Myles Standish Industrial Park lies to the north and includes 1.3 million square feet of development and an estimated 1,400 jobs⁵.

Taunton has significant open space resources, but these resources are not always well connected (Figure 3.2). The site itself is part of a 107-acre public land area with schools, recreational fields, and the former nursing home, which are described below in Site History and Ownership. Nearest to the site are the Arthur Sharp Estate, the Parker Memorial Golf Course, and the former Taunton State Hospital grounds on the Mill River. ForeKicks, an indoor and outdoor recreational complex, is about five minutes from the site and has four outdoor grass fields and a 175,000 sf sports megaplex building with 11 indoor fields,



Figure 3.1. 350 Norton Avenue lies close to downtown Taunton and the Myles Standish Industrial Park (looking south).

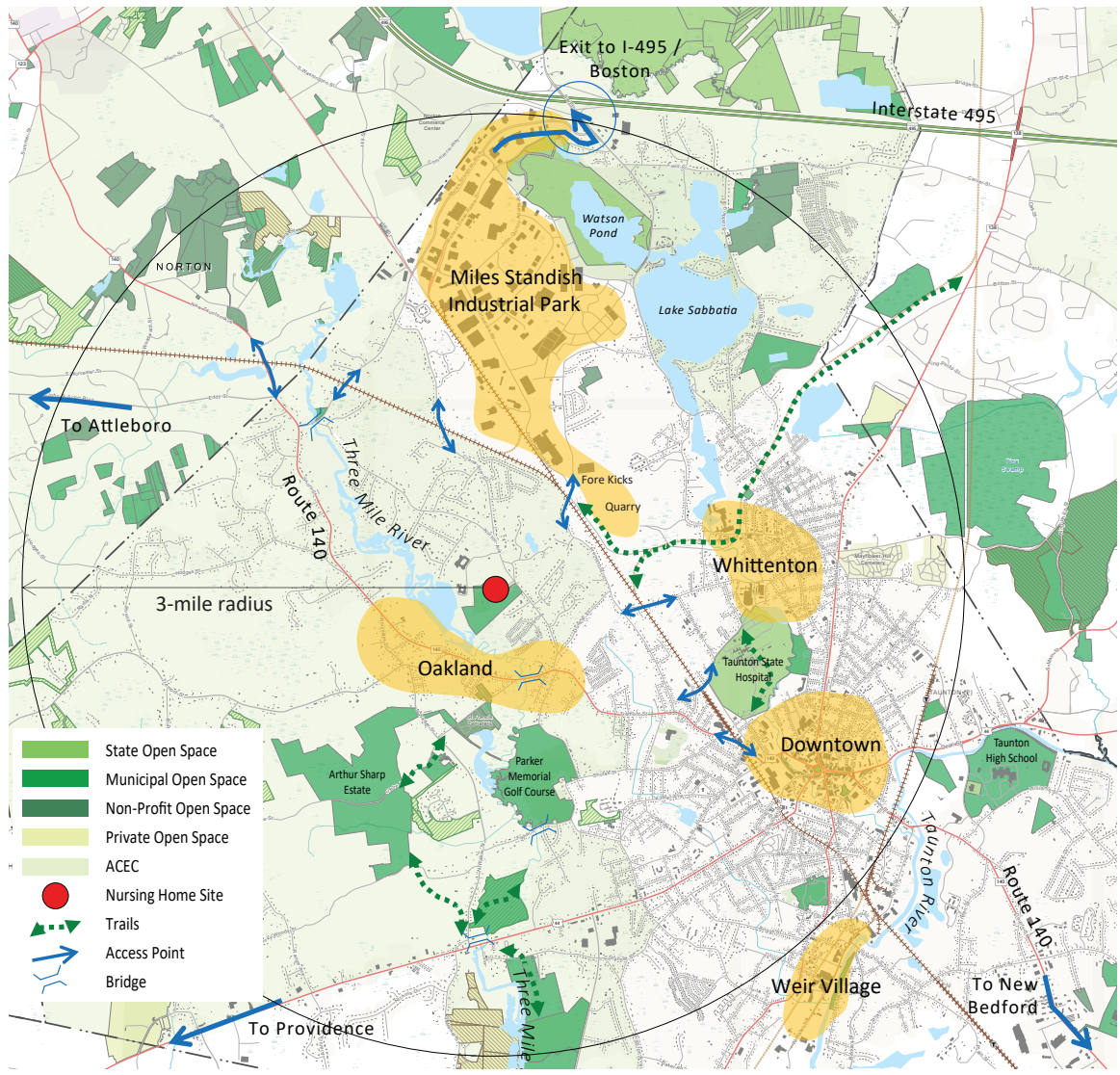


Figure 3.2. 350 Norton Avenue lies close to downtown Taunton and the Myles Standish Industrial Park (looking south).

multiple courts, and a golf driving range, among other activities.

In the vicinity of the site, Route 140 parallels the Three Mile River along its western bank, and Norton Avenue runs along its eastern bank. Nearby bridges cross the river on Tremont Street and on Harvey Street, but the river itself is difficult to access. The watershed of the Three Mile River is the basis for a designated Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), which encompasses about two thirds of the City of Taunton and one third of the Town of Norton.⁶ The City of Taunton Open Space and Recreation Plan captures community input conducted as part of that study, including calls for more connected walking trails in the City, with a goal to link key open space parcels, City properties, schools, and recreational facilities with pedestrian and bicycle paths.⁷

Taunton has historically been well-served by rail lines, with several lines bisecting the city and addressing both commuter and industry needs. The first phase of the South Coast Commuter Rail project is just now being completed and includes the new Cotley Junction MBTA station in East Taunton, which will connect Taunton to Boston and the South Shore. Phase 2 of the South Coast Rail, which is currently in the design phase, will include the Taunton Station on Arlington Street close to downtown.⁸ The four-mile rail segment that extends near the site between downtown and the Myles Standish Industrial Park continues to provide active freight service. This rail corridor



Figure 3.3. The Alms House has been part of the Oakland area since 1826 (shown here in 1895 map of Taunton)

has multiple at grade road crossings but does create a separation between the neighborhoods of Oakland on the west and the downtown, Whittenton, and Myles Standish Industrial Park to the east.

Site History and Ownership

Over the last 200 years, the City-owned property on Norton Avenue has served public social service programs (Figure 3.3). The City purchased over 100 acres along Norton Avenue for a poor farm in

1826. At that time, the City built a 12-bedroom structure attached to the original farmhouse. By 1876, a national recession and local demand for services resulted in the construction of a new larger structure with about 60 beds⁹. At this time, the alms house largely served as an orphanage. In subsequent years, it was known as the City Home (1920s), City Infirmary (1930s), and Rest Home (1940s – 1960s). The historic building was renovated in the 1930s and again in 1989, when an addition was added. After this investment, the property served as a 101-bed nursing home.

When it closed in 2019, it was one of the last municipally operated nursing homes in the state.¹⁰

In 1996, the City subdivided the public land on Norton Avenue into three parcels (Figure 3.4). The southern portion is designated as Parcel A and encompasses 34.95 acres. Within this parcel are the lands leased to Taunton Western Little League (TWLL). The City first granted seven acres to TWLL in 1973, including the right to construct and maintain an access road from Norton Avenue. The term of this lease is for so long as the property is devoted exclusively to little league baseball or other fields.¹¹ A lease for another 6.35 acres was granted in 1999, extending the TWLL area to the north and south. The term for this lease is 99 years with the consideration that it be used for TWLL programs benefiting the children of Taunton.¹² Six little league fields are arrayed across this leased land, complemented by a parking lot and a small building with a concession stand and restrooms on the ground floor and office space on a second floor (Figure 3.5). Outside the lease area, the property includes some wetlands, a stream, and low lying land in the flood plain of the Three Mile River.

Parcel B is a 66.24-acre property with a continuous 100-foot wide conservation buffer along its western edge, abutting a residential neighborhood and Sheppard's Factory Pond. Along this high ground on the western edge of the property are the Chamberlain Elementary School, which opened in 2000, and the Benjamin A. Friedman Middle School, which opened in 2001

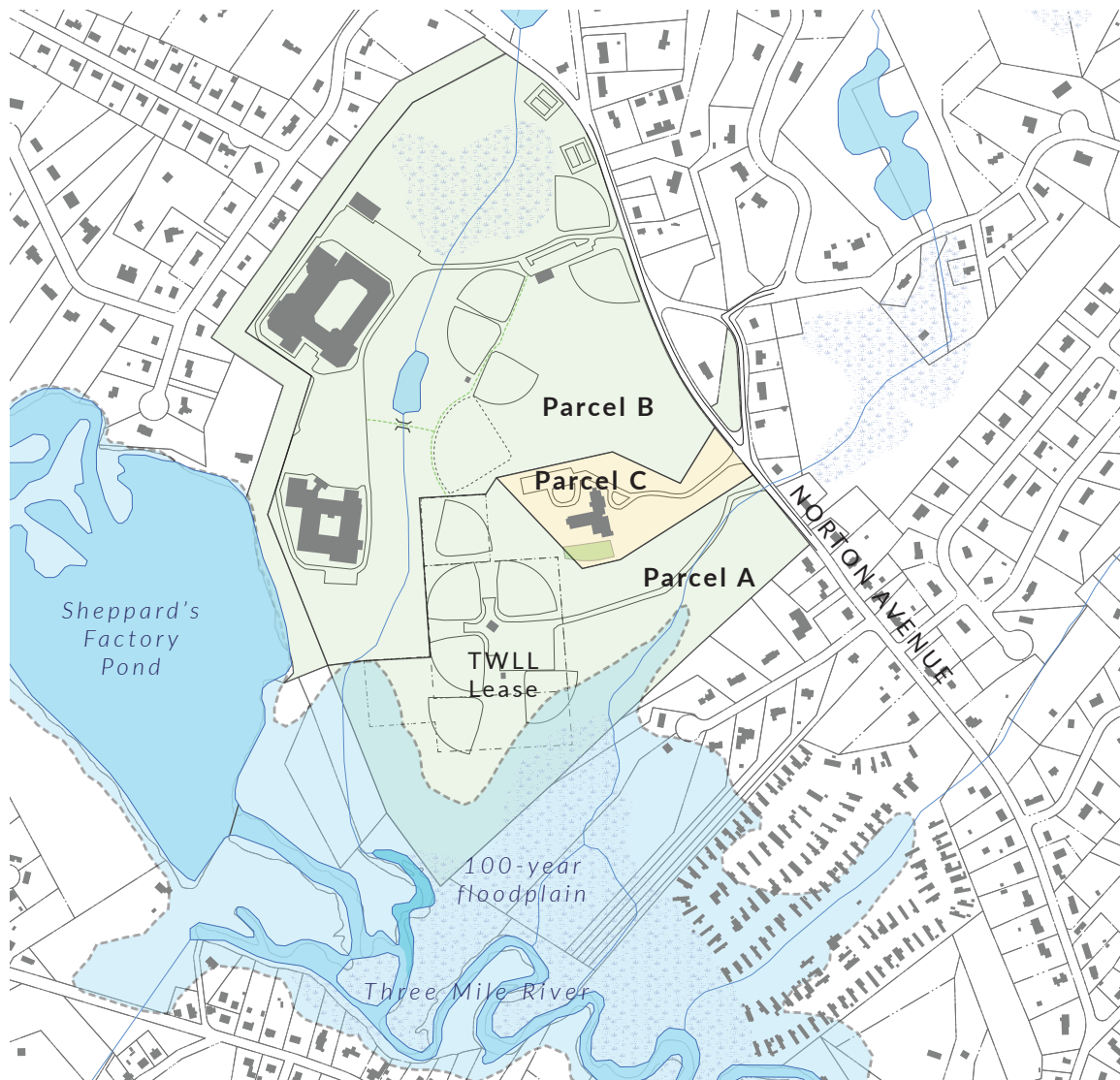


Figure 3.4. The City subdivided the public properties on Norton Avenue into three parcels in 1996.

(Figure 3.6). Parcel B also includes the Taunton Girls Softball Fields, four tennis courts, and a concession stand with restrooms, all clustered near the school entry drive. In the center of all the property is a large baseball field that was built to regulation size of the American Legion Baseball League for the Friedman boys baseball team. The middle school baseball league no longer exists, and the orientation of this “Legion” field to the sun makes it unsafe, so it is little used.

A stream flows north to south through the middle of Parcel B to the Three Mile River, with crossings possible only at the entry road and a single wooden pedestrian bridge. The waterway, small pond, and adjacent wetlands are home to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Spotted Turtle Sanctuary and provide educational opportunities, but also divide the schools from the recreational fields (Figure 3.7). The rest of Parcel B is former farmland that is no longer maintained and is slowly reverting to shrub and forest vegetation. The natural hydrology of the area may have been disturbed over the years by farming and subsequent construction of recreation fields.

Parcel C is the 6.35-acre site of the former nursing home at 350 Norton Avenue. This parcel is on high ground well above the floodplain and apparently without wetlands, based on available maps (a site survey is recommended to confirm wetland locations). The site is relatively flat with the historic building sitting on a gently sloping rise. Any regrading or other site work is not expected to be a challenge, given the loamy



Figure 3.5. Taunton Western Little League Fields



Figure 3.6. Benjamin Friedman Middle School



Figure 3.7. Marjorie Stoneman Douglas Sanctuary

sand soils over glacial outwash, although proper drainage and hydrology should be carefully considered. The site includes the 36,000 sf former nursing home building, a community garden, access road, drop-off area, and small parking lot. The community garden was launched around 2011 and is a popular activity for many in the area. The front of the nursing home property is open fields with some encroaching shrubs (Figures 3.8 and 3.9).

Surrounding Development and Access

The site is surrounded by suburban development, with homes built along the Norton Avenue frontage and in cul-de-sacs and subdivisions off of Norton Avenue and Crane Avenue South. Lot sizes generally range from about 1/3 acre to 1 ½ acres and up. Two manufactured housing communities lie south of the site: Radante Estates with 122 resident-owner site for the 55+ age group, and Rocky Knoll Estates with 144 lots for all ages, both with ¼ acre lots.

The former nursing home fronts onto Norton Avenue, which is a two lane arterial road that connects to Route 140/Tremont Street on the south leading to Oakland and Downtown. To the north, Norton Avenue follows the river alignment. Crane Avenue South branches off to the Myles Standish Industrial Park and Interstate 495 beyond. Norton Avenue has a continuous sidewalk on the eastern side of the road, from Tremont Street to Ferncrest Drive. There are no

sidewalks beyond this point, and there are no sidewalks on Crane Avenue South.

The Greater Attleboro and Taunton Regional Transit Authority (GATRA) operates bus service between Attleboro and the Bloom Bus Terminal near downtown Taunton. This route (#18) follows Route 140 from Taunton to Norton and then west to Attleboro. The nearest bus stop to the site is at Tremont Street and Norton Avenue, which is a 15 minute walk away. From this stop, the Bloom Bus Terminal is a 10 minute-ride to the south and the Attleboro MBTA commuter rail is about 20 minutes in the other direction. Eleven to twelve bus operate in either direction from early morning to early evening. The GATRA bus system does not yet extend to the new East Taunton MBTA Station.¹³

Pathways in and around all three parcels of public land are limited. The school areas have sidewalks adjacent to the main entry drive. The footbridge connects the schools to the Taunton Girls Softball fields and concession stand (Figure 3.10).. A path skirts the Legion Field and heads toward the Taunton Western Little League, but does not actually connect other than across open fields. Sheppard's Factory Pond is a historic impoundment of the Three Mile River and abuts the western edge of the City's property. The water rights of the pond and this portion of the Three Mile River are privately held, making these resource areas inaccessible (Figure 3.11).



Figure 3.8. The front of the site is fairly level meadowlands with some encroaching shrubs.



Figure 3.9. The community garden is an active use.



Figure 3.10. The footbridge connects to the schools.



Figure 3.11. Sheppard's Factory Pond is a visual amenity.

Building Information

The historic Alms House structure was built in 1876 and was designated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1984. The building was designed by E.C. Chandler in the Italianate style and reflects the social reform movements of its day.¹⁴ The historic structure is 2 ½ stories with approximately 16,000 sf, including some usable floor area in the lower level, which is partially exposed. The high gabled roof has third floor windows in the central entry pavilion and on the northern facade, but this attic level does not currently have usable floor area (Appendix B).

The historic building features brick walls with staggered granite blocks on the corners. The windows have granite lintels and sills¹⁵ (Figure 3.12). The central pavilion projects out from the face of the building, an architectural arrangement that signals the main entrance.¹⁶ The original columned portico was removed at some point and has been replaced with a more recent entry structure.¹⁷ The structure is load-bearing masonry with heavy timber roof trusses that are visible inside the attic level (Figure 3.13).

The L-shaped addition, built in 1989, is two stories and includes approximately 20,000 sf of floor area, including a partial basement level with windows at the front. The two buildings are joined to form a T-shape with a total of 36,000 sf (Figure 3.14). Elevators are centrally located in the addition, providing access to the lower level, ground floor, and second floor in both buildings.



Figure 3.12. Granite details on historic building

On the addition, the exterior concrete block walls and interior corridor walls are load bearing and support steel and concrete decking and a wood truss gabled roof.

Based on visual reconnaissance, the historic building and the addition are structurally sound, and the exterior walls are in good condition. The roof should be inspected further to determine a schedule for replacement, an investment that is



Figure 3.13. Roof trusses in the attic level

particularly important to protect the interior of a building in a low use or mothball status or if solar panels were to be installed.

The buildings are well suited for residential reuse, with narrow widths and relatively wide corridors (7 to 8 feet), reflecting the prior use as a nursing home. Any renovation would likely involve the replacement of building systems and upgrades to meet energy and accessibility standards in

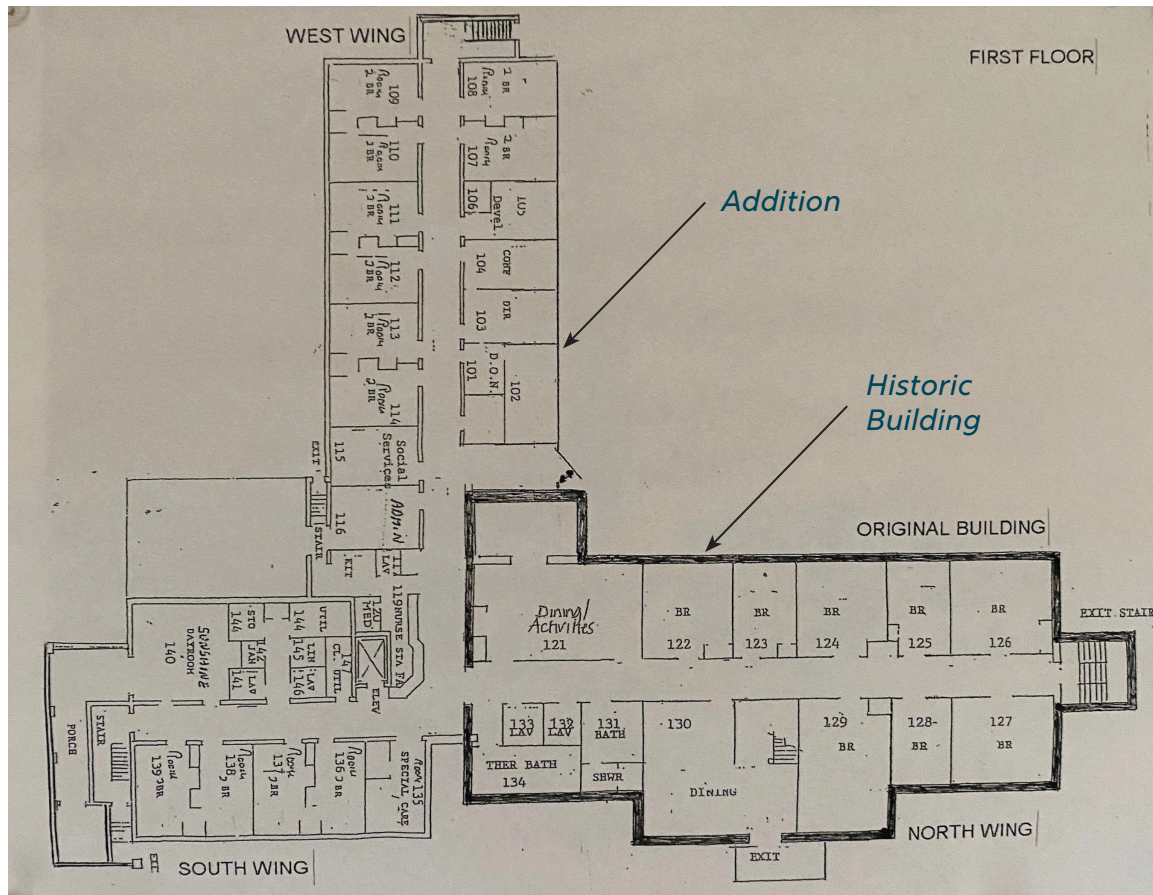


Figure 3.14. The historic structure, which has about 16,000 sf of floor area, was built in 1876 and renovated in 1989. The addition was built in 1989, adding another 20,000 sf. Most of the floor area is on the first and second levels, although both buildings have a partial basement level as well.

the building code. As a Historic Property on the National Register, the main building is eligible for State and Federal Tax Credits, which can be a significant source of funding for redevelopment.

Adaptive reuse of the buildings is recommended because of the historic status of the main building, the good condition of both buildings, and the cost and adverse environmental consequences of demolition. Demolition generates masonry, steel, wood, drywall, plaster, concrete, and asphalt shingle debris, which would need to be sent to a landfill or otherwise processed, and new construction would demand replacement materials.

The building is served by City water and sewer (Figure 3.15). The sewer connection was made at the time of the addition in 1989, while the water pipes are evident in older plans (Sanborn, 1937). Available site plans generated over many years show multiple sewer line alignments, leading to manholes in Norton Avenue, and ultimately to the municipal pumping station at the corner of Norton Avenue and Willis Pond Road. The sewer connections replaced an earlier septic field on the south side of the building. The exact number and location of the sewer lines could not be determined from available plans, and an on-site survey is recommended to confirm all utility layouts. Taunton Municipal Light Plant provides electric service, and Eversource Energy provides gas service to the building.

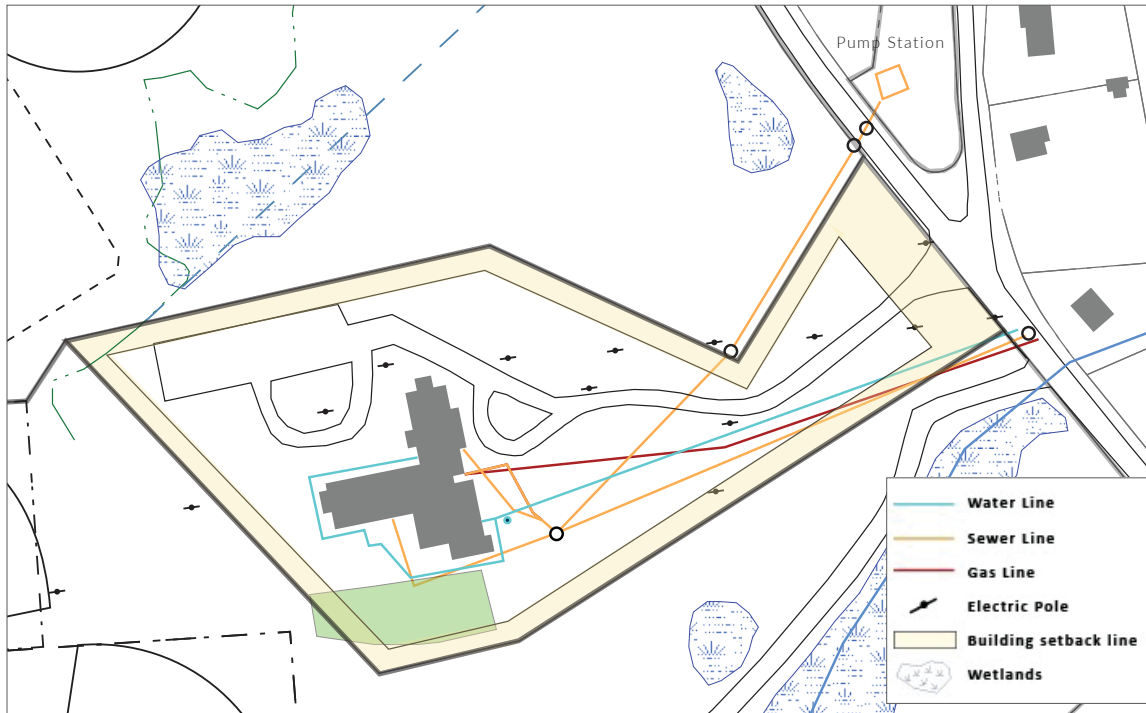


Figure 3.15. Most of the site utilities run along the southern edge of the property, although one sewer line may connect directly to the nearby pump station. The site itself does not appear to have wetlands, but this should be confirmed.

Policy Framework

Regulatory factors that should be considered in the redevelopment strategy are the historic status of the main building, wetlands, the Three Mile River Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), zoning, and local and state housing policy. A summary of these factors is provided below, and more detailed information is found in Appendix

C. The Implementation Strategy in Section 5 also discusses how these regulations will affect the next steps for this project.

National Register of Historic Places: The Taunton Alms House is designated as an Individual Property on the National Register of Historic

Places, and is automatically also listed in the State Register of Historic Places. This designation does not prohibit alterations or even demolition, but Federal or State funding will trigger review by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. As a listed property on the National Register, a private developer is eligible for Federal and State Historic Tax Credits, a significant source of funding for rehabilitation projects. The public sector and non-income producing properties cannot take advantage of this benefit.

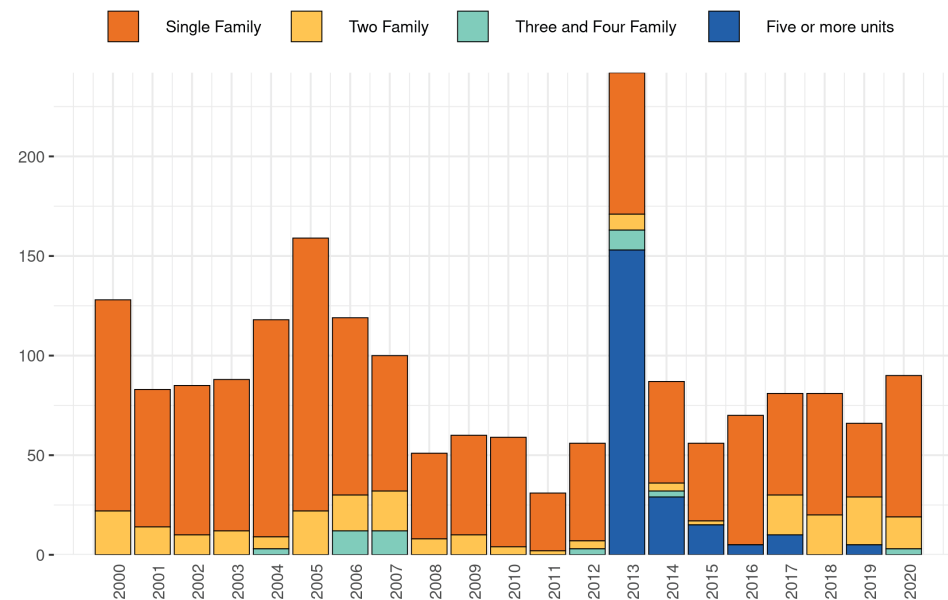
Area of Critical Environmental Concern: Much of the western part of the City lies within the Three Mile River ACEC. This designation does not prohibit development. It is intended to encourage State agencies, such as the Department of Environmental Protection and the Department of Conservation and Recreation, to provide greater environmental oversight in their permitting processes as a means of protecting public water supplies, habitats, historic resources, and other resources.

Wetlands: The six-acre nursing home site and the notch of land to the north appear to be upland areas without wetlands, but this should be confirmed through field flagging and a site survey. State law and regulations, as administered by the local Conservation Commission, generally prohibit development within wetlands and limit disturbances of the 100-foot buffer around wetlands.¹⁸ Provisions are made for necessary road and pedestrian crossings.

Zoning: The site is currently located in a Rural Residential Zone, which only allows single family housing on large lots.¹⁹ Two family and multifamily housing are prohibited. The adaptive reuse of the existing building for anything other than a nursing home is not currently a permitted use (assisted living is also prohibited). If there is local support for increasing the supply of housing on this site, the City could consider a “Friendly Chapter 40B” project, rezoning a corridor of Urban Residential to include the nursing home site, or exploring the legal ramifications of an exemption as part of a ground lease. Other uses such as biotechnology, industry, and commercial office and retail are eligible for a use variance but seem less suited for this site. A recreation or community center can be allowed subject to a special permit from the Planning Board.

Housing Production and Chapter 40B: The City of Taunton has only 7% of its housing stock designated as subsidized housing, well below the 10% threshold established by the State in M.G.L., Chapter 40B²⁰ (Table 3.1; Figure 3.16). In the current situation, private developers can appeal local zoning decisions to the State to get approval for multi-family affordable housing under Chapter 40B. The State encourages and provides incentives to municipalities to create Housing Production Plans to demonstrate how they will reach the 10% threshold. With local support, this property could be developed as multi-family housing “friendly” Chapter 40B project, which would help the City meet its affordable housing goals.

Annual Housing Units Permitted by Building Type in Taunton



Source: U.S. Census Bureau - Annual Building Permit Survey (Reported and Imputed)



Figure 3.16. Housing production in Taunton has been relatively over the last twenty years, especially for multi-family housing (Mass Housing Partnership, DataTown). One exception is the two HOPE VI projects completed in 2013.

Table 3.1. Subsidized Housing in the City of Taunton

Housing Units	Subsidized Units	%
23,844	1,683	7.1%

Source: Mass Exec. Office of Housing and Livable Communities, 2020

4

DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS

The goals, context, site analysis, and community input described above create a story line for what is possible on the site. These considerations become the basis for a program that explores the types of uses, buildings, open spaces, and parking that could be on the site. A site plan emerges from the arrangement of the program on the site, informed by all the other available information. Typically, there is more than one way to arrange the program, and it is these alternatives that create the basis for discussion about possible futures in response to the City of Taunton's goals.

The redevelopment process for this site is in the earliest stage, as the City considers its priorities and fiscal realities for different outcomes, ranging from a disposition of public land for private development or publicly funded improvements. Since this study is charged with looking at housing and economic development, the three scenarios presented below consider a range of possibilities for private redevelopment, including open space amenities on-site and an indication for how other recreational needs could be met on the larger 107-acre public property parcel that surrounds the former Taunton nursing home site (Figure 4.1).

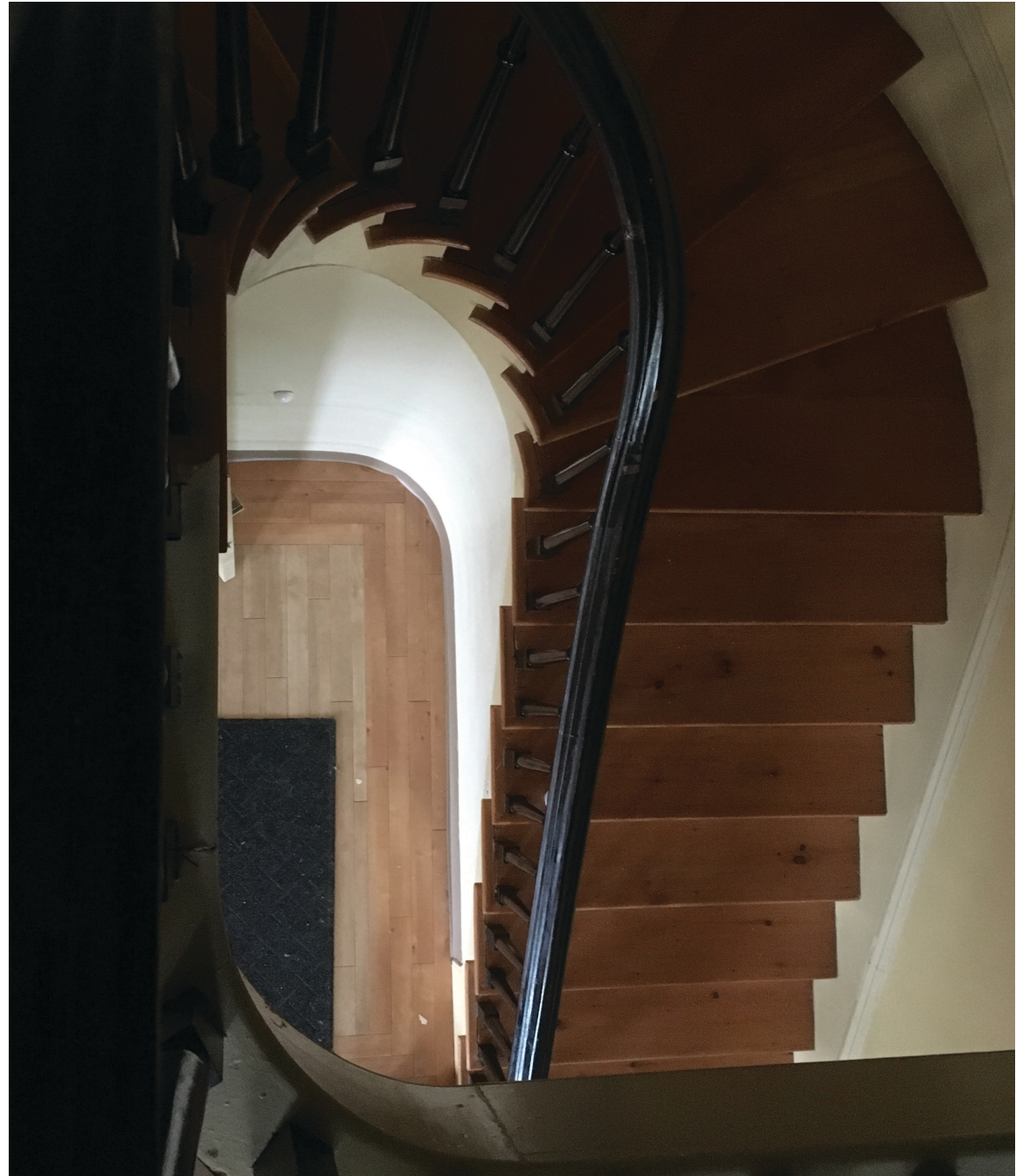


Figure 4.1. The main staircase within the historic Alms House.

Program Considerations

Building Types

Redevelopment of the former nursing home site calls to mind several precedents but few situations are identical. Many of the now closed Massachusetts State Hospitals are similar in that they feature public structures located in semi-rural areas and have had initiatives to redevelop them to meet housing and economic development goals (Figure 4.2). Most of the State Hospitals, however, are large tracts of land and vast building complexes compared to the relatively small six-acre site on Norton Avenue.

Adaptive reuse of former school buildings have similar size buildings and are often on even smaller sites (Figure 4.3). Many of these projects take advantage of historic architectural details, provide new housing opportunities, and may include additional new units on the site (Figure 4.4).

New housing development in rural and semi-rural Massachusetts settings ranges from apartment buildings that pick up on agricultural themes (Figure 4.5) to low rise, wood frame houses with porches or duplexes that evoke single family homes (Figure 4.6). In Oakland and other parts of Taunton, single family homes have been transformed into two family units, maintaining the overall character of the community while increasing access to housing (Figure 4.7).



Figure 4.2. Redevelopment at a former State Hospital, Northampton, MA

CEDAC and © Damianos Photography



Figure 4.3. Renovation of former school building, Walker School, Taunton, MA

Peabody Properties



Figure 4.4. Renovation to create new housing opportunities, Wells School, Southbridge, MA

Affordable Housing Finance



Figure 4.5. New senior housing in rural Sunderland, MA

Rural Development, Inc.



Figure 4.6. Duplex within a single family neighborhood, Belmont, MA



Figure 4.7. Duplexes can be indistinguishable from single family homes, Taunton, MA

The existing building can accommodate approximately 25 units: 12 units in the historic building and 13 units in the addition. These unit layouts account for some inefficiencies based on the wide hallways and the narrow building widths. In many ways, the existing buildings would be well suited for senior housing or assisted housing, which could take advantage of the corridors for social space and typically has smaller unit layouts and less parking demand.

Given the site location in a suburban setting, low rise duplexes are a housing type that would relate to the character and scale of surrounding houses. Oakland is notable for its historic double brick cottages, built in the 1800s to meet housing needs at the time and still standing.²¹ Small quads (four units per structure in a free standing house) or perhaps small sets of townhouses are other suitable housing types for this site and could complement the scale of the existing building away from the street.

A new apartment or assisted living building similar in scale to the existing building could also be considered. This building type would be most suitable at the back of the site in an arrangement that complements the existing building, creating new courtyards that could be enjoyed by residents and visitors. A new structure would be approximately 60 to 65 feet wide and 2 to 2 ½ stories high to match the existing building.



Discover Central Massachusetts

Figure 4.8. Many people expressed an interest in more and better connected walkways in the area (Douglas State Forest, Douglas, MA).

Parking and Access

Parking is assumed to be two spaces per unit for residential uses and one space per unit for senior housing or assisted living. This corresponds to the existing zoning ordinance and reflects the current suburban setting, with limited access to public transportation. For this study, parking was assumed to be surface parking. Single unit garages and driveways could be incorporated into the new housing provided the garages do not dominate the facades of the buildings on the ground floor.

The site access road will need to be improved, offering an opportunity to reconfigure the Norton Avenue intersection and better align the new roadway with Willis Pond Road. A new roadway should incorporate sidewalks and street trees making the site more accessible for residents and visitors and tying it into the surrounding public amenities. New sewer, water, and other utilities will need to be extended under the new street to serve the proposed housing units. This may involve relocating the sewer line that extends directly to the pump station, depending on site surveys that confirm this alignment.

Open Space Elements

Open space has been an important discussion throughout this process. These amenities can be incorporated into improvements at the former nursing home site as well as in the larger 107-acre tract of public land on Norton Avenue. With careful programming and improved connections, a variety of activities can be multi-purpose and meet the multi-generational needs of the community.

The need for more and better connected walking trails was a major point of agreement among many of the participants and was also a goal established in the 2018 Comprehensive Plan (Figure 4.9). Many people also suggested playgrounds and some suggested dog parks. The existing community garden is deeply valued by the current users and the wider community and is well established in its present location. Pedestrian access from and shared parking on both the nursing home site and on Parcel A to the south are important considerations for the garden's long-term future, and direct vehicular access should be maintained from the southern side.

Recreational fields were also much discussed in community forums, especially the need for a Pop Warner field in this part of the City (Figure 4.10). The TWLL also expressed the need for additional parking to serve their constituents. Since these parking areas are only used for part of the year,



Figure 4.10. Some people expressed an interest in additional recreational fields, particularly for Pop Warner (West Boylston, MA).

they could be designed to be visually green and low impact to minimize impact to the sensitive habitats and wetlands along the Three Mile River and in the ACEC.

A set of conceptual development scenarios are discussed below, followed by concepts for open space improvements on the larger 107-acre public lands on Norton Avenue.

Conceptual Development Scenarios

All of the following scenarios retain the existing building given its solid construction and condition, the sustainability benefits of reuse, and its potential to house as many as 25 apartments. Given the expressed need and desirability for senior housing, all of the scenarios assign this use to the existing building, thereby reducing the parking from two spaces per unit to one space per unit. In testing a wide range of alternatives, no particular advantage was found for demolishing just the addition because of the challenge of extending driveways to reach this back corner and the disruption to the community garden.

The existing site is oddly defined with a significant notch cut out of the northern edge, a factor the limits reuse potential on the long narrow lot. Scenario One retains the existing property line, while Scenarios Two and Three contemplate “squaring off” of the site. This property line redefinition would take just under one acre from the public land in Parcel B and add it to Parcel C to create a 7.32 acre site for redevelopment with a more regular shape. This additional acre does not appear to have any wetlands, but this should be confirmed with field flagging and a site survey.

The different scenarios explore various ways to deal with the access road and the existing utilities, most of which run along the southern edge of the site, except for the possible alignment of a sewer line that extends from the former nursing home directly to the pump station.

Open space amenities are incorporated in all of the scenarios with a mix of the community garden, more formal open space lawn areas, and natural forest and meadow landscapes. Depending on the site configuration and the layout, the open space ranges from about two to three acres. The landscape character of Norton Avenue as it passes by these public lands has historically been farmland and is now more and more forested, with glimpses of the Alms House set on a hill far back from the street. All of the scenarios take into account the view from the road, working to preserve a view corridor to the historic building where possible and maintaining a generous front setback of 80 to 100 feet from Norton Avenue. This generous front setback is consistent with many of the existing residential properties along Norton Street.

The community garden is retained in the current location in all three scenarios presented below, given that there was no particular advantage (and likely significant cost increase) to extending the roads necessary to provide frontage for this back corner of the lot. Retaining the current location has the advantage of preserving the established soils, plants, and plots. The current community garden does not have any designated vehicular access, and likely is most accessible from the south. Any new improvements for TWLL parking in this area should consider vehicular access to the community garden. Pedestrian access from the redeveloped nursing home site should also be maintained.

Scenario One

Scenario One tests the possibility of redeveloping the site using the existing property line configuration (Figure 4.11, Table 4.1). The existing building is renovated to provide new senior housing (25 units) and a new building, similar in scale and character, is juxtaposed at the back of the site, adding another 35 units of senior housing. The meadow and forest landscape at the front of the building is preserved, allowing sweeping view up to the historic building. The access drive is improved along its current alignment, with a new sidewalk and access to surface parking areas serving both buildings.

At one space per unit, 60 parking spaces are provided for 60 units. Both the road and the parking lot should be designed with street trees and a landscape buffer that benefits the quality of life of future residents and visitors to the site.

The massing of the new building next to the old opens up the opportunity to create a courtyard or quadrangle that could become a social space for residents and visitors (Figure 4.12). The community garden remains in its current location with new pathways connecting it to the access road, the parking areas (assuming some shared use), and Norton Avenue. The existing utilities, which extend across the front of the property,



Figure 4.11. Scenario One illustrates a new building and courtyard behind the renovated existing building, sitting on the site as currently configured.

could be retained although new connections would be needed to the new building. This plan features over three acres of open space, including the courtyard, community garden, front and rear lawns, and meadow lands at the front of the building.

Table 4.1. Scenario One Program Summary

Site Area	6.35 acres
Open Space, Usable Area	3.10 acres
Total Units	60 units
Existing Building	25 units
New Building	35 units
Parking Spaces	60 spaces
Density	9.5 units/acre



Figure 4.12. In Scenario One, the open meadow lands in front of the historic Alms house are preserved, as is the community garden.

Scenario Two

Scenario Two contemplates the more regular site configuration that would be possible if the northern property boundary were a straight line, adding about one acre to the site area (Figure 4.13, Table 4.2). In this scenario, the existing building is renovated to provide senior housing with parking located in approximately the same area that it is today, allowing one space per unit. The access road is realigned to create a new entry with sidewalks, street trees, and surface parking. A series of smaller duplexes front onto this

roadway toward the front of the site, and a few larger quad homes face the roadway toward the back of the site (a series of townhouses could be an alternative housing typology).

The clustering of the new development along the northern edge preserves much of the natural meadow and forested land between the existing building and Norton Avenue, allowing long views towards the historic Alms House. A landscaped lawn and drop-off provides a foreground for the historic building. The open space arrangement also protects the existing utility corridors on the

southern edge of the site, and the 1.0+ acres of meadow lands compensates for the land added to the site on the north. A new roadway extends straight into the site, providing frontage for the new housing. In this scenario, the northern sewer line would be replaced by new utilities in the site roadway. The alignment of the street could be aligned with Willis Pond Road in a more direct 90-degree intersection to improve visibility at Norton Road. The community garden remains in its current location and is accessible across the open spaces on site, as well as from the south.



Figure 4.13. Scenario Two illustrates the renovated building complemented by new duplex and four-family houses along a new drive, taking advantage of a reconfigured parcel. The community garden and meadowlands along the southern property line are preserved

Table 4.2. Scenario Two Program Summary

Site Area	7.32 acres
Open Space, Usable Area	2.30 acres
Total Units	61 units
Existing Building	25 units
New Building	36 units
Parking Spaces	97 spaces
Density	8.3 units/acre

Scenario Three

Scenario Three is distinctive because of the central courtyard defined by the historic building on a small rise and new housing lining a loop road along the northern and southern edges (Figure 4.14, Table 4.3). The existing building is rehabilitated for senior or other residential use, and new duplexes and quads on the site contribute to a total of 63 units.

This scenario is based on the reconfigured parcel boundary to create a more regular 7.32 acre site

but recognizes that the utility connections on site will likely need to be upgraded and replaced in new site roadways that serve the existing and proposed new development. With these conditions, the main entry drive enters the site aligned with the northern edge, similar to Scenario Two, and then loops around to provide frontage to homes along the southern edge of the site. These duplexes face the street and look across to a large central open space. Views of the historic Alms House from Norton Avenue are possible across the central lawn. The larger quad houses line the street at the back of the site. The

streets accommodate surface parking along with street trees, sidewalks, and new utilities. The community garden remains in its current location with easy access from the central courtyard. This site plan illustrates parking for senior housing in approximately the same location as today (at one space per unit), with two spaces per unit provided for the other housing on site.

Table 4.3. Scenario Three Program Summary

Site Area	7.32 acres
Open Space, Usable Area	2.30 acres
Total Units	63 units
Existing Building	25 units
New Building	38 units
Parking Spaces	101 spaces
Density	8.6 units/acre

Other Possibilities

Many other possibilities were tested, with some showing as much as 70 to 85 units on the existing 6.35 acre parcel. These relied on a denser housing type (stacked flats with garages and/or townhouses), and several of the layouts compromised the setting of the historic building. Early tests for an expanded parcel showed as many as 100 units with similar design challenges. Alternatives that explored the demolition of the existing addition were highly inefficient given the length of the roadway required to

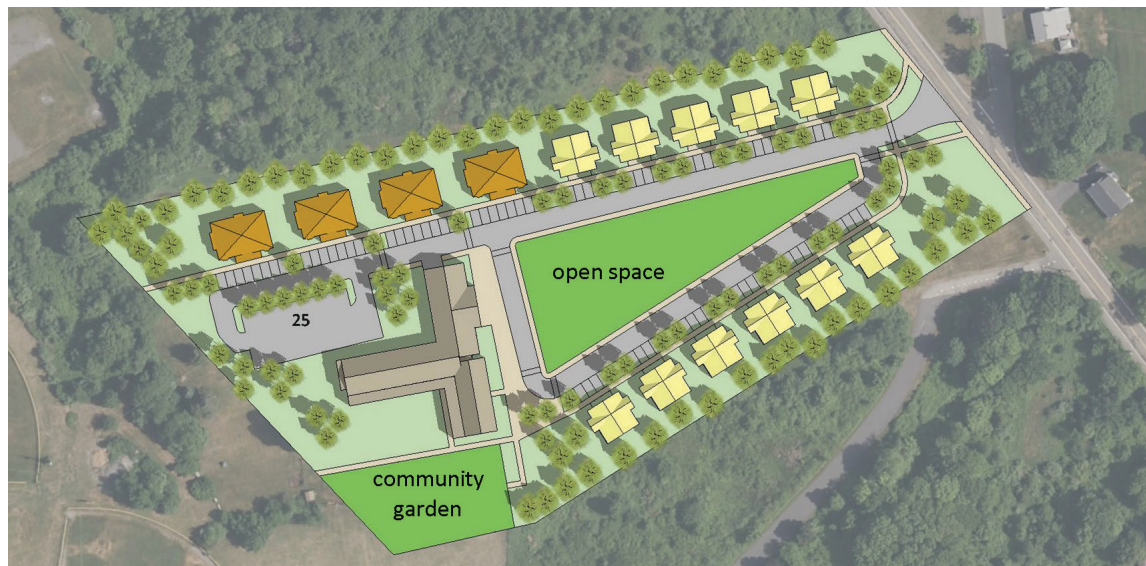


Figure 4.14. Scenario Three illustrates the renovated building complemented by new duplex and four-family houses clustered around a central open space and taking advantage of a reconfigured parcel. The community garden is preserved in its current location.



Figure 4.15. In Scenario Three, a central green is framed by new housing on the sides and the historic Alms house at the back. Pathways connect to the community garden and other new trails nearby.

provide frontage to the back of the site. These alternatives also were not pursued because the densities (around 14 units per acre) were considerably more intense than the surrounding suburban communities. Townhouses could work on this site if they were grouped in small sets and staggered with porches and other articulated details to break up the length of the facades.

Another alternative that is not shown is to simply rehabilitate the existing building providing 25 new units of housing, along with 25 parking spaces for senior housing or 50 parking spaces for any other residential use. This is a variation of Scenario 1, although the cost of providing a new roadway, improving open spaces, updating utilities, and other site costs may be less financially feasible with half as many units on the site.

Open Space Potential

Community members suggested the opportunity to connect the TWLL fields more directly to the schools by creating another crossing of the wetlands (Figure 4.16). This roadway could serve as an emergency exit for the schools as well as for pedestrian access and a connection to overflow parking for the TWLL fields on the weekends, evenings, and summertime when the schools are not in session. At a minimum, a new boardwalk crossing the wetlands for pedestrian use could improve access while adding new educational opportunities. The distance between the TWLL

fields and the schools is only about 400 feet across fairly level land, but today is impenetrable because of the thick vegetation and wetlands.

The existing path at the Girls Softball Field could be extended south past the “Legion” field to connect more directly to the TWLL fields, making this route more universally accessible and better connecting the little league fields to the schools via the existing footbridge. One community member suggested a walking trail around the entire perimeter of the City-owned property, following the conservation buffer, and skirting the little league fields to trace the small brook upstream to Norton Avenue. A fence between Sheppard’s Pond and the trail may be necessary given the private water rights, a situation similar to many reservoir trails that allow visual access but not physical access. This trail would create a 1.5 mile loop including the existing sidewalk on Norton Avenue.

While more detailed study is necessary, a Pop Warner field (160 feet by 360 feet) could potentially fit on the site of the underutilized Legion field and/or in the area near the Girls Softball Fields depending on wetland locations. The City may want to consider an overall natural resource plan for the area to study the relationship of the recreational fields and the natural drainage of the area, with improvements that restore and enhance environmental systems in the area, while addressing recreational needs for the community.

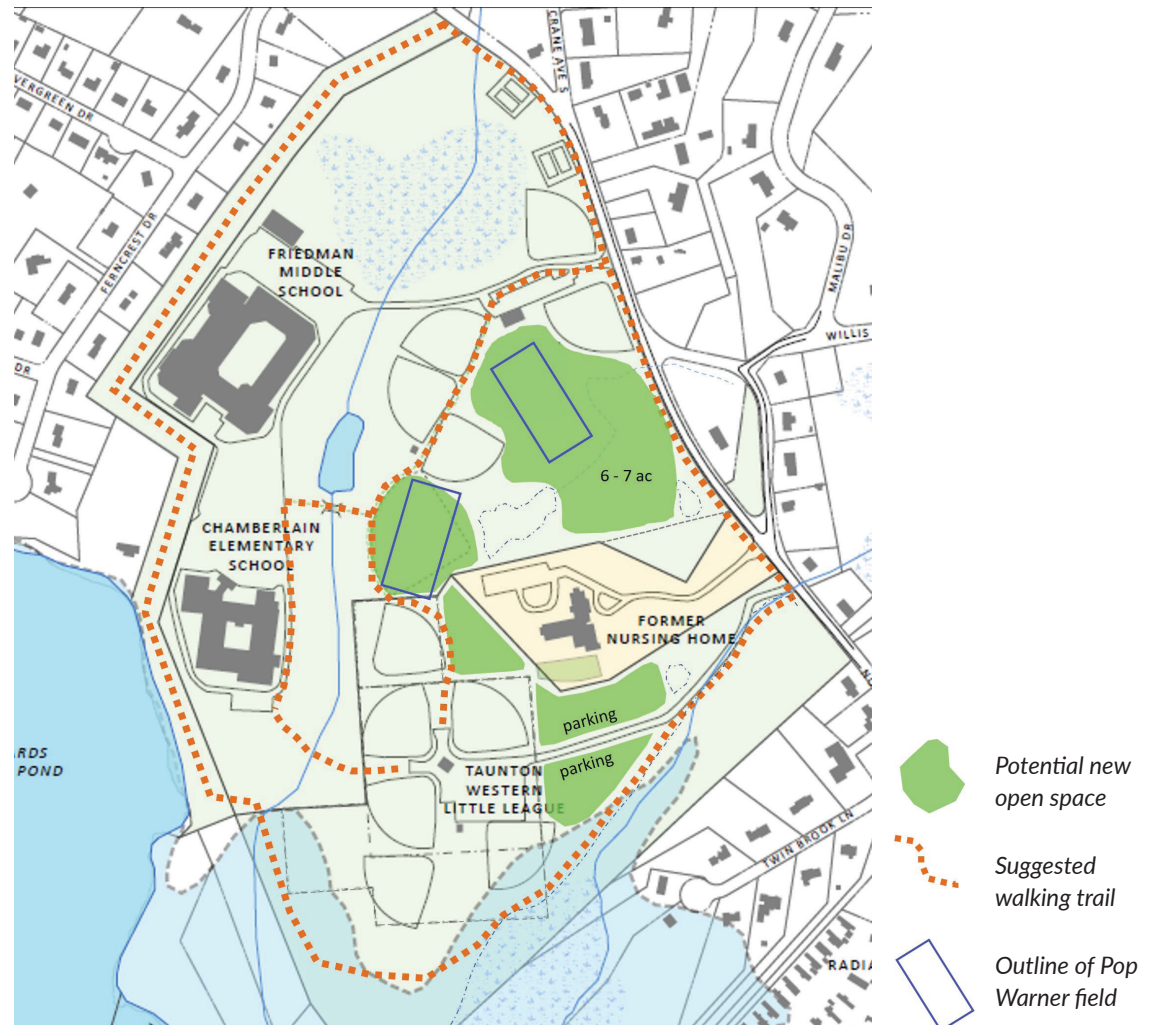


Figure 4.16. New trails and recreational facilities on the larger set of public properties on Norton Avenue would complement existing recreational fields and housing redevelopment.

All wetlands are approximate and should be field flagged and surveyed

5

ACTION STEPS

This study is a first step in informing the City's decisions about the future of the nursing home site. A detailed implementation study can only be done once pivotal decisions are made about whether to pursue private development or contemplate public development of the property. A set of short-term next steps are recommended to gain further information necessary to proceed in either direction. Information on the development approach and zoning and regulatory considerations is also outlined below to help inform the City's decision-making.

Short-term Next Steps

This study provides a first round of due diligence on the former nursing home site. From this initial effort, the following actions have been identified to help inform the City's decision on the future of the property.

- **Site Survey:** Prepare a site survey of the 107-acre public lands on Norton Avenue, flagging wetlands and locating waterways, identifying two-foot contours, and updating any previous surveys that define parcel boundaries, access roads, and site features. This survey will be necessary for redevelopment of the former nursing home site for public or private use, including the possibility of a more regular parcel boundary on the northern edge, but could also become the basis for a number of public improvements on the larger property



Image MassGIS, Commonwealth of Massachusetts EOE

Figure 5.1. This aerial photo from 2001 shows how much the landscape has changed in the meadows surrounding the nursing home site.

including walking trails, footbridges, wetland crossings, improved drainage, and natural resource protection, among other. At a minimum, a detailed site survey is needed for the six-acre nursing home site and the surrounding land within about 250 feet.

- **Utility Survey:** As a part of the site survey, the alignment of all the existing utilities should be established, including the size and condition of each of these lines. While many plans exist, the exact location of the sewer line or lines was inconsistently mapped and difficult to establish.
- **Housing Production Plan:** A Housing Production Plan is recommended by the State for municipalities such as Taunton that are below the 10% threshold for subsidized housing. As it turns out, the City prepared a detailed Housing Production Plan in 2018, which was never approved by the City or the State. Since it's now five years old, this plan needs to be updated but provides a good foundation for moving forward. A Housing Production Plan will allow the City and its elected officials to take stock of the existing housing situation and develop an overall strategy for how to increase affordable housing throughout the City.
- **City Owned Property Data:** A report on all city-owned property will help the City make decisions about the best use of these properties, identifying opportunities for

reuse, liabilities of vacant and underutilized properties and opportunities for public use or disposition to the private sector, especially for housing production.

- **Financial Feasibility Analysis of Private Development:** If the City envisions disposing of the former nursing home to the private sector (for-profit or non-profit), it may be worth having a financial feasibility study to define the housing market, development costs, and residual land value analysis, which can be helpful in developer negotiations.
- **Recreation Field Feasibility:** If the City envisions developing additional sports or other community facilities on the former nursing home property, then more detailed studies might be warranted for design and the cost of building demolition, abatement, and construction, as well as long-term operations.

Development Approach

Based on the community engagement process for this study, the City needs to decide whether to dispose of the property to the private sector for redevelopment or retain the property and redevelop it for a public use. At this point, the City of Taunton municipal nursing home has been closed for four years. Since that time the building has been used for storage, and the City has been gradually disposing of the equipment and

furniture according to State and local laws.²² A vacant building is ultimately a liability for the city. Maintaining the building incurs operating costs to cover heat and other utilities, insurance, security, repairs, and upkeep. Over time additional protection may be needed to mothball or further decommission the building while deciding on the fate of the property.

Disposing of the property to the private sector has the financial benefits of land sale proceeds and annual tax revenues, recognizing that City services would have a marginal increase as well. Land sale proceeds depend on many factors including the number of housing units allowed, premium site costs (roadways, utility relocations and extensions, open space areas, abatement), any required community benefits, duration of the public disposition process, and overall financial feasibility at the time of construction. The City can establish development guidelines and requirements as a part of a Request for Proposal (RFP). In a fee simple sale, the private developer would be responsible for all site improvements, building renovation (or demolition if called for), abatement, and long-term management and operation of the property (or sale to another entity). The private developer would also lead the charge for any third party funding, such as federal and state historic tax credits or available public economic development or housing funding. Tax revenues depend on the development guidelines and the final design of the project but could be in the range of \$375,000 to \$425,000

per year for the type of housing development illustrated in the scenarios in Section 4.0.

Redevelopment of the project for a public use depends on the type of program and activities envisioned, which was not part of the scope of this study. The City has estimated that building demolition, removal and abatement costs would be approximately \$2 million. The total project costs for development of a sports facility with concessions stand, turf and track, stadium lights would be approximately \$7.3 million, based on similar types of facilities (City of Taunton, April 2023). A publicly operated facility would have long term operating costs in addition to the initial capital cost.

Zoning and Regulatory Factors

The zoning strategy will depend on the development approach that the City decides to pursue. In terms of private development, this study has explored the adaptive reuse of the building for senior housing, assisted living, or other multi-family housing, and the development of new multi-family housing in a variety of housing types, with an overall site density of about 8 to 10 units per acre depending on the property boundaries. Multi-family housing can only be built on this site as a “Friendly Chapter 40B” project or with a zoning change from the City Council (a nursing home is the only allowed use).

The exact location of the wetlands needs to be defined by field flagging and a site survey prior to proceeding further as this will influence any private or public development of the land. The designation of the Alms House on the National Register of Historic Places is a considerable benefit if the site is redeveloped by the private sector, but does not prohibit demolition unless there is Federal or State funding involved. Given the ACEC designation, all site improvements should be designed to minimize adverse impacts to environmental and historical resources.

The Norton Avenue site, with its historic Alms House, is deeply embedded in the history of Taunton and has long been used to fulfill the social goals and needs of the community. The City has before it an important opportunity to write the next chapter and ensure that the property is used wisely to realize the most important goals and needs today and into the future.

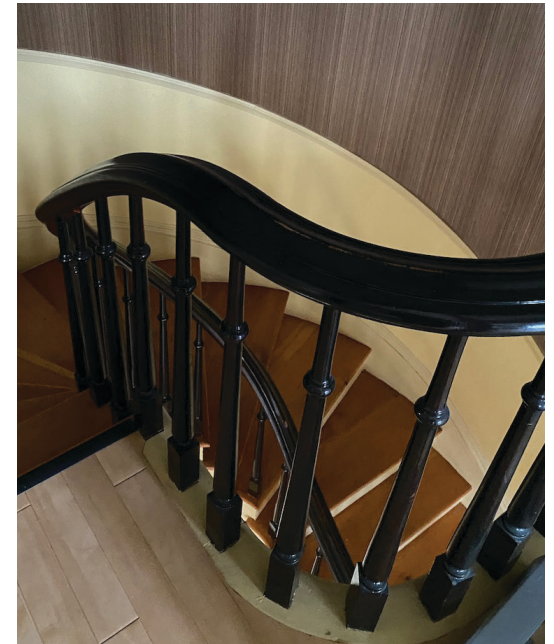


Figure 5.2. Staircase and banister in historic Alms House.

Endnotes

- 1 City of Taunton, Taunton Tomorrow, p. 78
- 2 City of Taunton, Taunton Tomorrow, pp. 84-90
- 3 Taunton Gazette, March 13, 2023
- 4 City of Taunton Facebook, posting on April 1, 2023
- 5 MassDevelopment, Myles Standish
- 6 Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation
- 7 City of Taunton Open Space Plan, 2023, p. 100; p. 110
- 8 Massachusetts Department of Transportation
- 9 Meltsner, p. 171
- 10 Meltsner, p. 172
- 11 Northern Bristol County, Book 1629, pg.335
- 12 Northern Bristol County 8549, pg. 212
- 13 GATRA
- 14 MACRIS, TAU.519
- 15 MACRIS, TAU.519
- 16 Meltsner, p. 93
- 17 Meltsner, p. 172
- 18 M.G.L. c. 131, s.40 and 310 CMR 10.00
- 19 City of Taunton Zoning Ordinance
- 20 EOHLC, Subsidized Housing Inventory
- 21 MHC, Reconnaissance Survey Town Report, Taunton, p. 9
- 22 MGL Chapter 30b; Municipal Code Chapter 118, Article 1

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