



# MAIN STREET/WINTER STREET STUDY, NORTH READING, MA

Planning and Design Consultants:  
Abacus Architects + Planners



## STUDY HISTORY

Unlike many or most communities, North Reading does not have a real downtown. The historic town center provides walkability, open space, civic amenities and a connection to history, but environmental and historic limitation make the creation of a vibrant mixed use district with retail, housing and public uses – a downtown - difficult or impossible to achieve. The Main Street / Route 28 corridor currently offers retail, but doesn't have the pedestrian friendly environment that many residents want. The Town has long seen Main Street near the intersection with Winter Street as an area where a downtown could emerge, and this study is intended to explore this possibility.

The Main Street / Winter Street intersection has relatively large parcels that appear to be underutilized, providing the opportunity for redevelopment that could result in the downtown environment many North Reading residents long for. This redevelopment has been limited by the absence of a municipal sewer system, and the lack of a vision for how the seven privately owned parcels that form the core of this area could be transformed into a civic and commercial center. In September of 2019 the Community Planning Commission issued a Request for Proposals to architects and planners to prepare such a vision, addressing the sewer system as part of their charge.

## STUDY GOALS:

In February, 2020 Abacus Architects + Planners was contracted as Consultant to prepare the Main Street / Winter Street Conceptual Design Plan & Wastewater Feasibility Study with these goals:

1. Provide a redevelopment vision around which private development can cluster. Both public and private entities could contribute to this redevelopment, and it can include both buildings and open spaces. Preliminary outreach to property owners by the Town suggested that there was interest.
2. Attract and retain businesses that provide resident amenities and strengthen the Town's tax base.
3. Contribute to Main Street and North Reading's vibrancy by creating a walkable downtown atmosphere. This may entail a rethinking of the character and physical attribute of the Route 28 thoroughfare.
4. Address the costs and benefits associated with a package treatment plant should municipal sewer not be available in the near future. Note that as this study nears completion a decision regarding the installation of a municipal system appears imminent.

## PREVIOUS STUDIES:

The Consultant began by reviewing previous studies of the area. These included:

- Market Study and Short Term Economic Development Strategy completed in 2015 by the Metropolitan Area Council (MAPC)
- Draft Environmental Impact Report complete by Wright-Pierce in 2016 looking at alternatives for the provision of water and wastewater systems.
- Route 28 Streetscape Study, completed in 2015, with recommendations for a more pedestrian friendly environment.
- Housing Production Plan (2018) with recommendations for providing more housing and affordable housing
- North Reading Master Plan

The MAPC study provided information on the current and anticipated market and potential buildout that formed the basis for initial projections of package treatment system size.



## STUDY PROCESS:

The Consultant worked directly with the Town Planner, Danielle McKnight, and with the Community Planning Commission through their monthly meetings. Virtually the entire study was executed during the Covid 19 pandemic, limiting the public outreach that might otherwise have accompanied this kind of study. A presentation of the process and recommendations to the Select Board can form the basis for further public engagement that can continue the work of this project.

## CURRENT ZONING:

Zoning limits the kind of development that can take place to preserve what is understood to be the character of a neighborhood and forms the regulatory background for the work of this project. The properties within the study area are all within the Highway Business (HB) Zoning District and the Main Street Mixed Use Overlay District – except for the large property on the south side of the study area occupied by the former Stop & Shop building.

The overlay allows mixed use development, including multi-family housing and senior/55+ housing with residential uses, not to exceed 80% of the total that are not allowed in the underlying zoning. This is intended to insure that uses open to the public are an integral part of what is built. Maximum height is 60'.

This zoning facilitates denser development that could support the creation of a downtown, but also allows as-of-right development with minimal civic impact at a height that may not be in line with public preferences.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

As the study that follows indicates, the Main Street / Winter Street area offers the opportunity to create a real downtown that is the center of civic life for North Reading residents, but there are also significant challenges. The primary challenge is that all properties are privately owned, and the Town has limited leverage in inducing property owners to be part of a larger effort that will provide civic dividends. A second challenge is that it will likely take public resources to create or improve public spaces to create the perception of this area as an attractive place for the public.

This study provides a series of alternative visions that address the ideals of civic life, and the realities of for-profit development that are critical for the emergence of a downtown. A continuing dialog between the public and private sectors is critical for success.

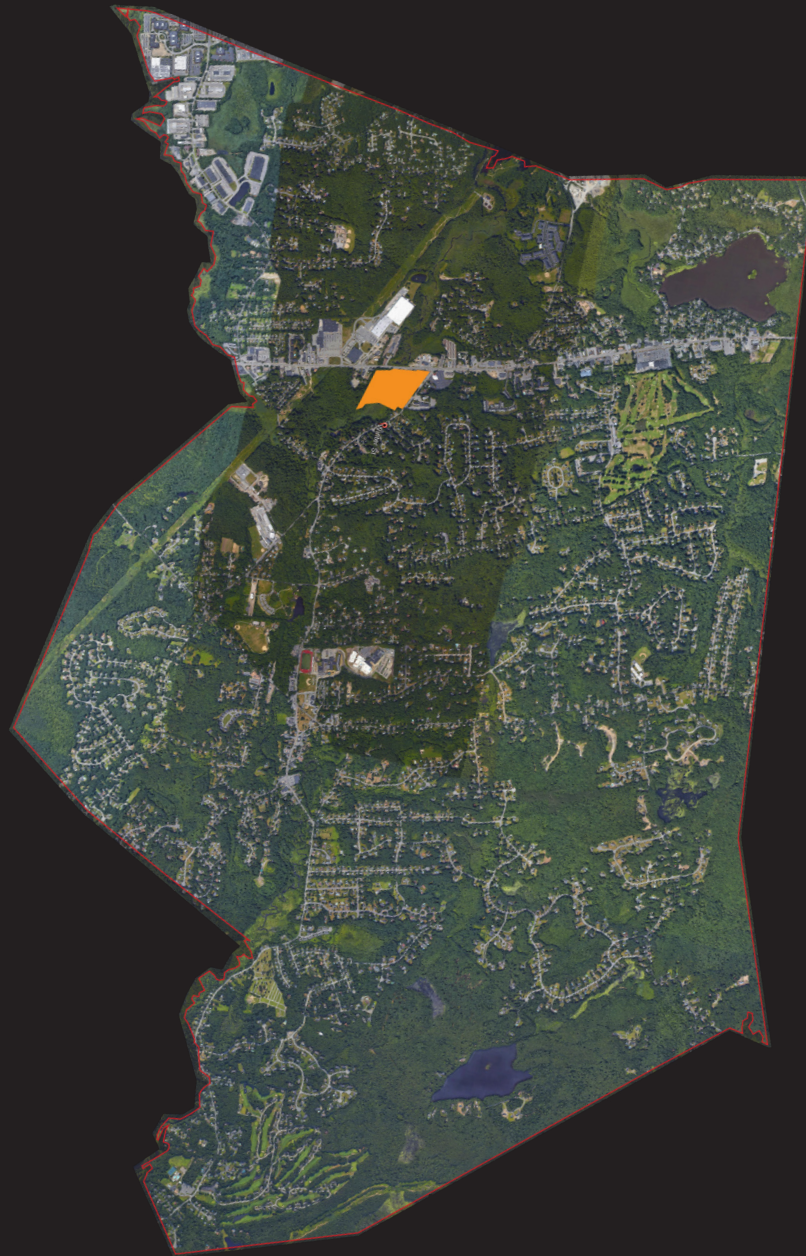
It will require a consensus on the part of the Town's decision making entities and private property owners if any of the public benefits suggested by this study are going to come to fruition. Leadership could come from:

- The Community Planning Commission, the Select Board or another component of town government.
- A Town board or committee that sees this area as a potential site for a community center or Town Offices.

- Environmental organizations who see Martin's Brook and adjacent open space as an amenity for the Town and a place for ecological renewal.
- Private property owners with a commitment to civic service along with a desire to maximize the return on their property.
- A citizens group that has a strong desire for a walkable downtown.
- A business organization that sees a downtown as improving property values and the commercial climate in the area.
- A private developer who can see the potential for this area, despite the associated challenges.



The study area occupies an important crossroads in town, but it is a significant distance from the Common, the historic center, schools and Town Hall.



This Planning Study investigated ways of overcoming challenges to take advantage of the area's opportunities.

- Examined feasibility of package sewage treatment
- Reviewed previous market and planning studies
- Developed conceptual planning options
- Resolved optimal plan for initial development assessment
- Reached out to possible developers with conceptual vision
- Reached out to landowners with the conceptual vision
- Prepared recommendations for implementation

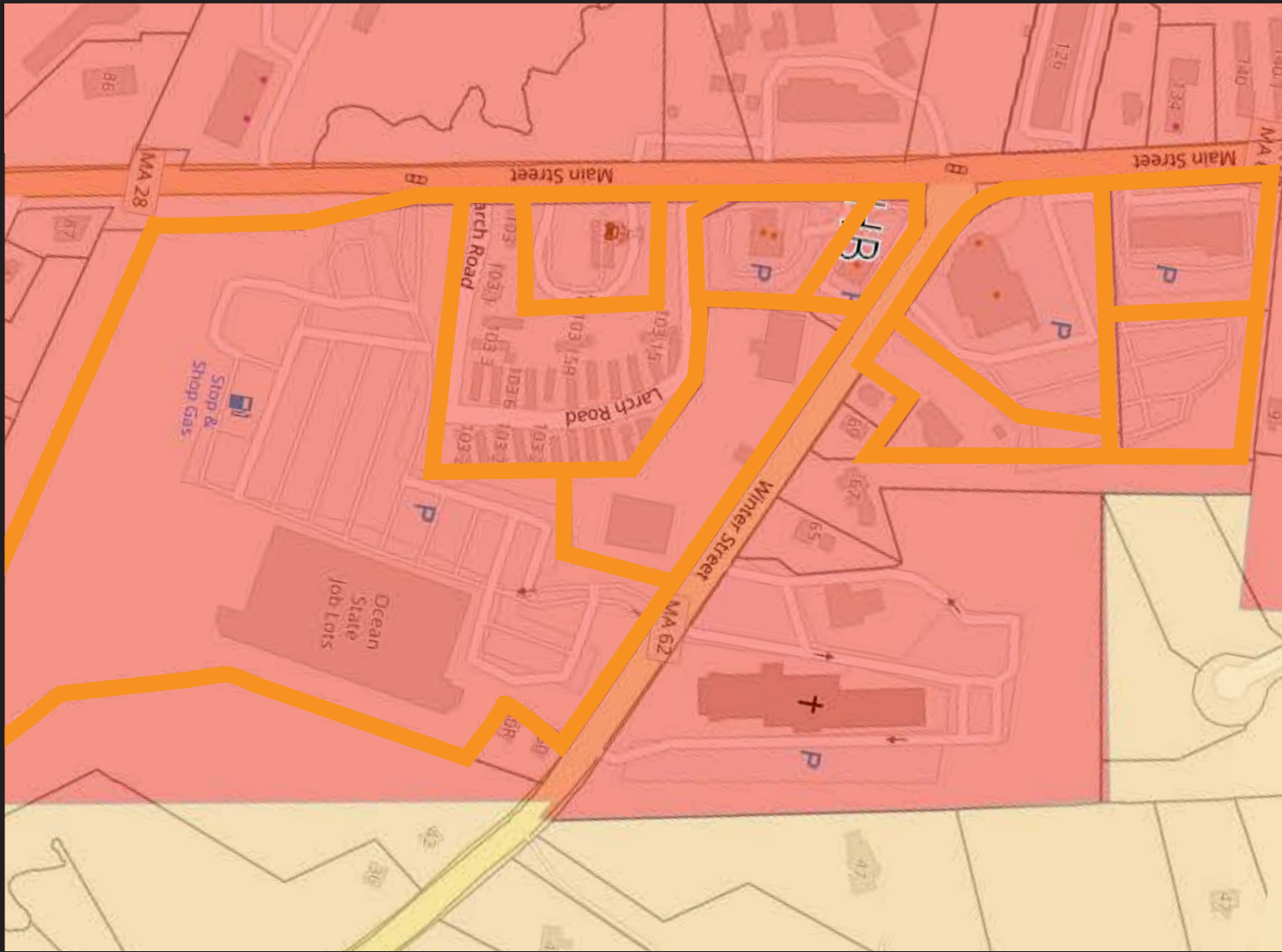


Current uses may once have been appropriate - when this was a peripheral site. Recent development makes this a population center with new needs and possibilities.





The parcels included in the study area (outlined in yellow) are part of an overlay district (in red) intended to encourage multi-use development off Winter and Main Streets - and the creation of a real downtown. Originally the Kitty's site on the east side of Winter was part of the study but was not included in later work.





The properties within the defined study area at Main and Winter Streets offer the opportunity for an active downtown. Wetlands, flood plains, topography and adjacent streets and uses require careful consideration and design integration.



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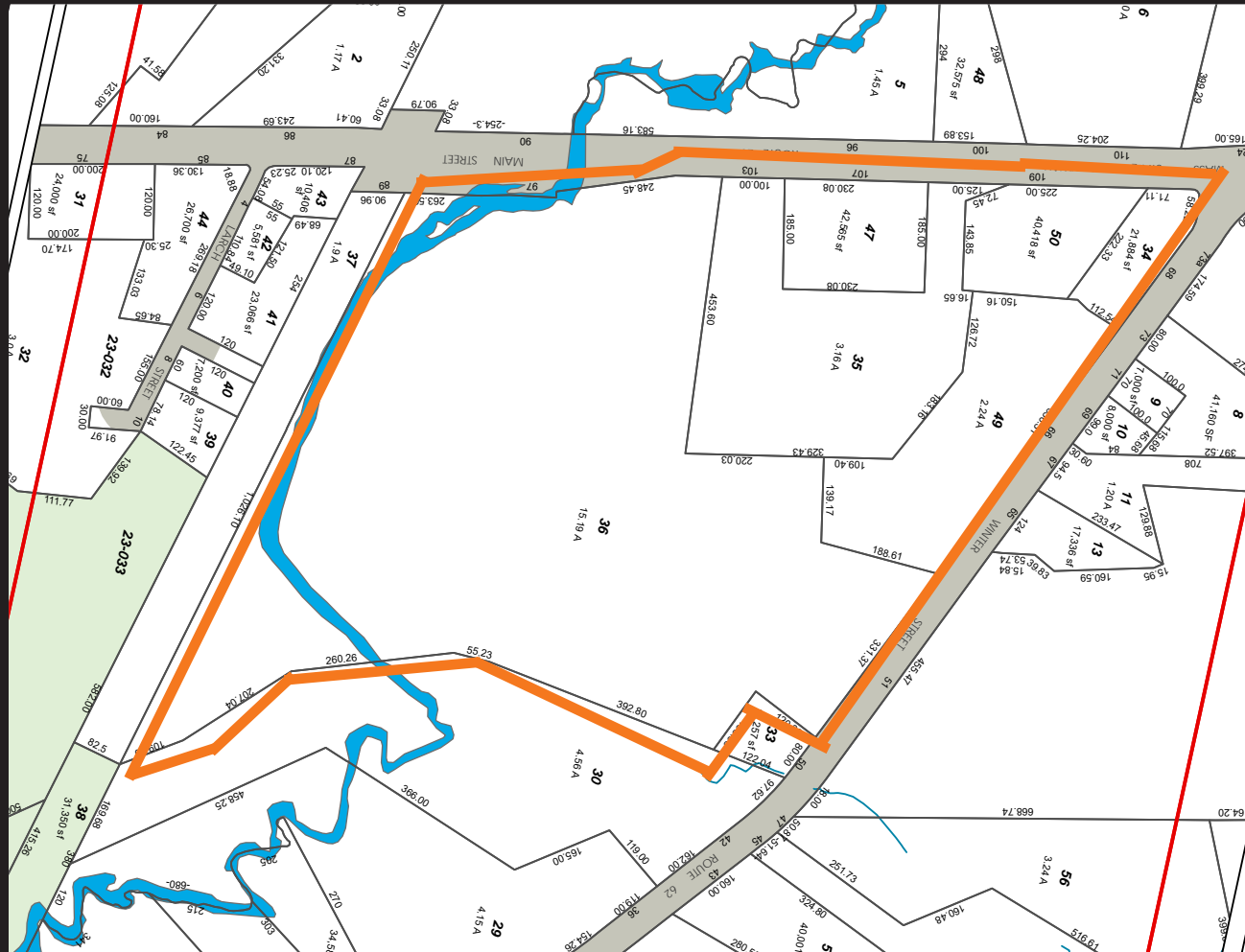
EXISTING CONDITIONS

MARCH 2020

0' 30' 60' 120' 180'



Nearly half the total study area is under one ownership. A vision for the future is not contingent on buy-in from all of the owners.





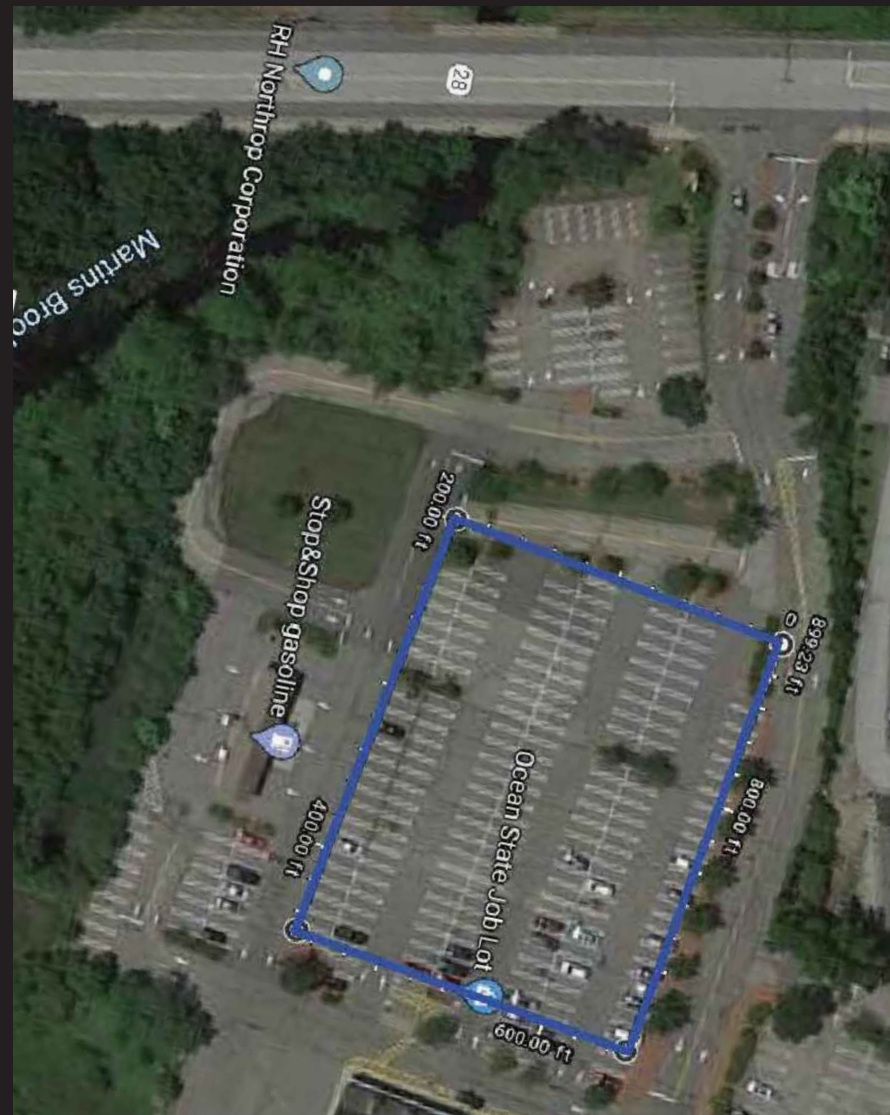
The intersection of Main & Winter offers the opportunity to create a traditional downtown meeting 21st century needs, which this study is intended to support. It is:

- A prominent thoroughfare that supports retail uses
- Accessible to major highways and retail for area residents
- Surrounded by existing neighborhoods for vitality
- Visible site appropriate for public open space and buildings
- Adjacent to Martin's Brook – a potential recreation area
- Large developable area whose highest and best use is not being realized

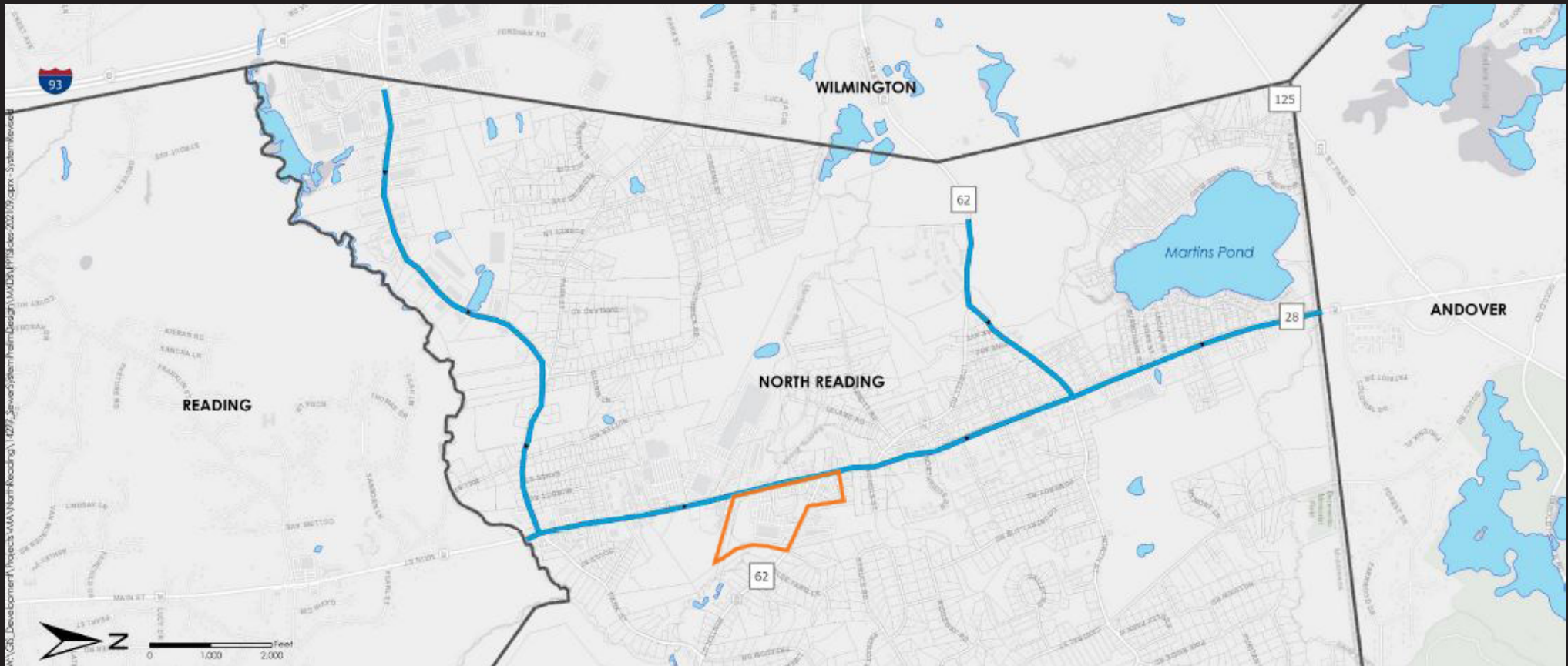
There are also challenges to creating a downtown at Main and Winter utilizing private sector development initiatives:

- High speed traffic and pedestrian unfriendly environment
- No sewer service available to properties - at the present
- The study area is owned by 7 separate entities
- No public transportation available
- It is divided up and paved over – doesn't feel like a "place"
- Martin's Brook is behind chain link; its natural character is hard to appreciate.

Onsite Engineering Inc. prepared a preliminary review of a package sewage treatment plant and concluded that it could be built for approx. \$3,000,000 and integrated into a range of planning configurations - needed for substantial development if a sewer system were not available.



Planning is in progress for a regional wastewater system, with the design funding approved at the October 4, 2021 Town Meeting. A request for construction funding is anticipated for a Special Town Meeting vote in the Spring of 2023. If approved this will eliminate the need for a package treatment plant and support development in the area.





North Reading has a Common, but it is isolated from the shops, restaurants, offices and higher density residential that bring people together in a functioning center for civic life. It does not offer the downtown experience that many North Reading residents would also like to see nearby.



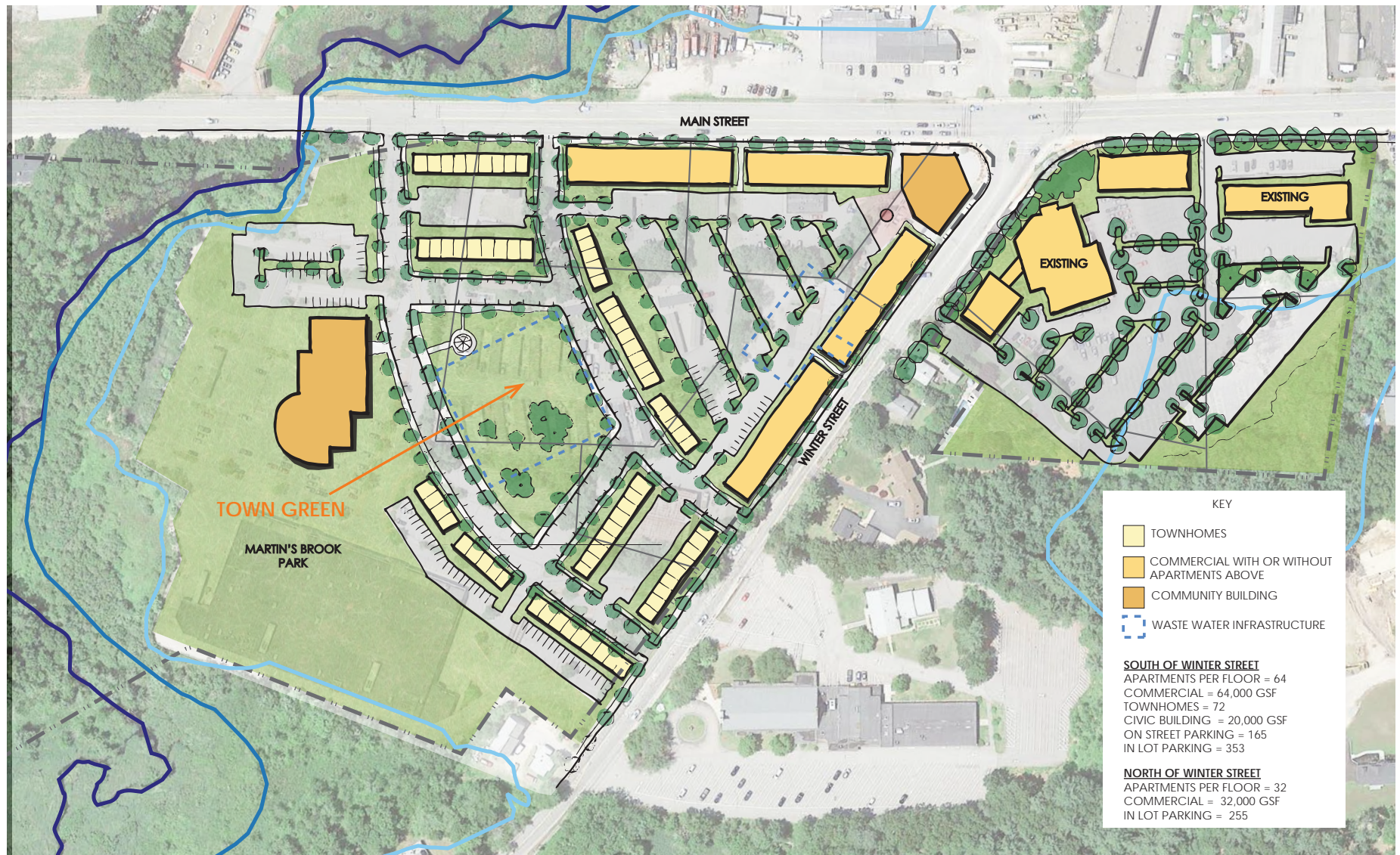
# DOWNTOWN CIVIC SPACES

This study explored the kinds of civic spaces that can be used to organize a downtown while providing commercial, residential and public buildings. They often take one of these familiar forms:

- Town greens
- Pedestrian streets
- Market squares



A Town Green for North Reading could be surrounded by homes with a community building anchoring the center connecting to park land. Commercial development (with apartments above) lines Main and Winter with parking behind.



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TOWN GREEN A

MARCH 2020

0' 30' 60' 120' 180'





A Town Green could also open to Main Street surrounded by shops, restaurants, and the community building. More commercial buildings line Main Street. Infrastructure for waste water treatment easily fits on site and is dotted in blue.



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## TOWN GREEN B

MARCH 2020

0' 30' 60' 120' 180'





Town greens, like this one in Clayton, NC, provide a place for concerts, civic activities and passive recreation that add vitality to the surrounding commercial and residential districts.



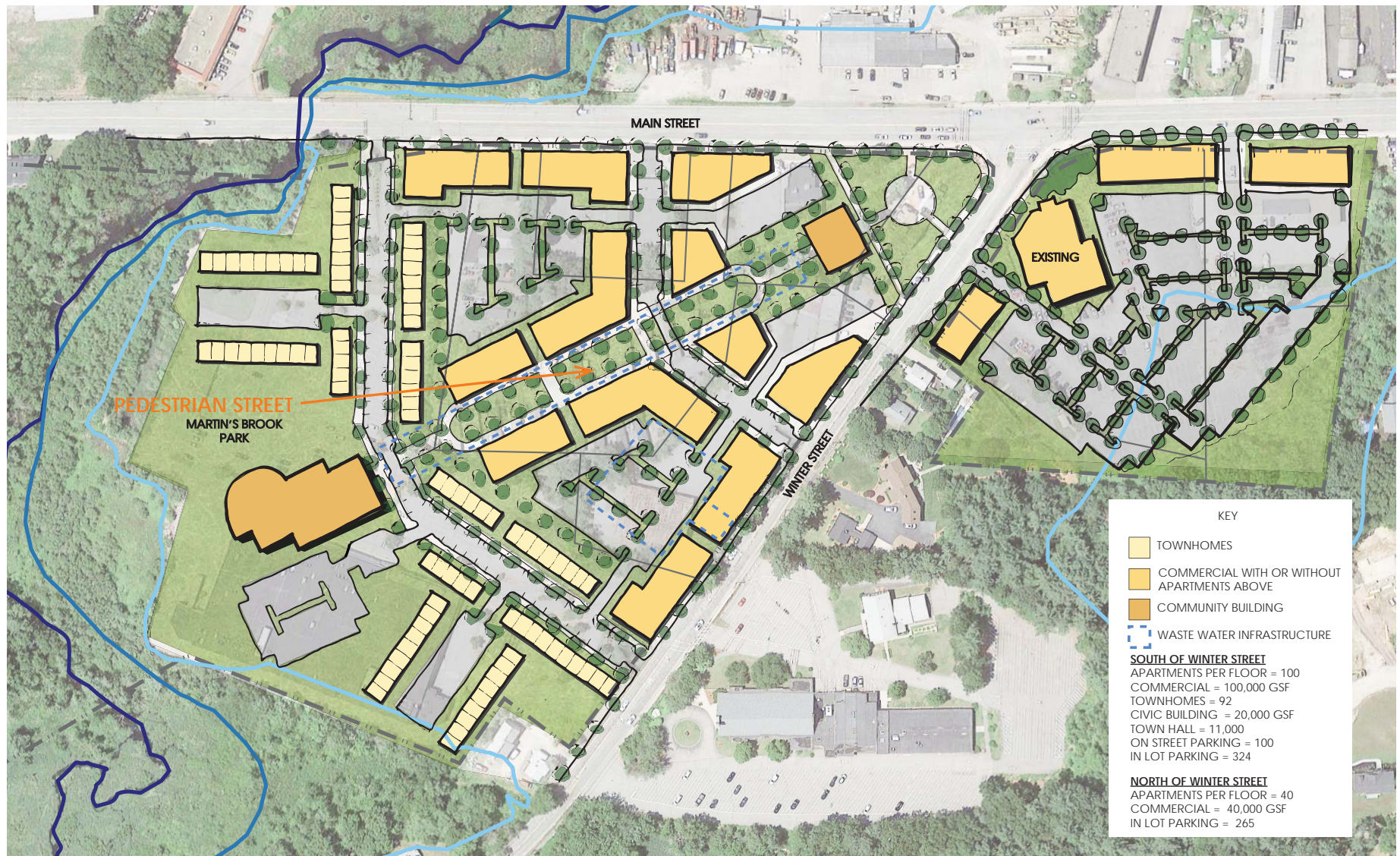


Play areas, street entertainers, information kiosks, and other site features are activated by – and help to activate – community and commercial activities.





A pedestrian street lined with apartments over shops can run down the center of the site. Here community buildings sit at each end, and parking is located behind buildings throughout. A residential street crosses the site near Martins Brook.



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## PEDESTRIAN STREET A

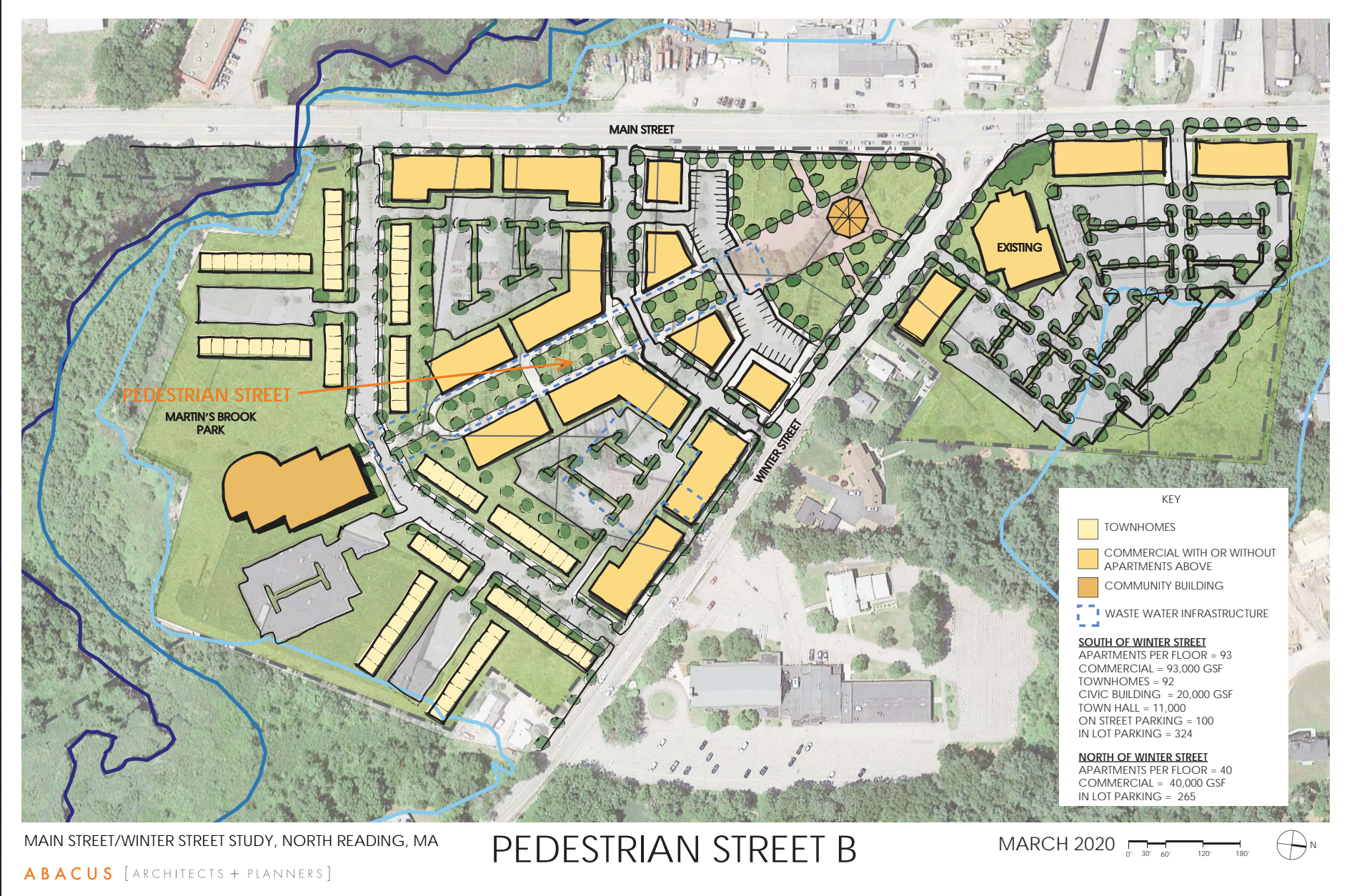
MARCH 2020

0' 30' 60' 120' 180'





Pedestrian Street Option B features a market square, pavilion, and green at the corner of Main and Winter - opening up views and inviting engagement.





Pedestrian streets lined by housing over shops and restaurants, activated by a wide range of outdoor uses including lots of green, can be a focus for North Reading's civic life - and are like a long and thin town green.



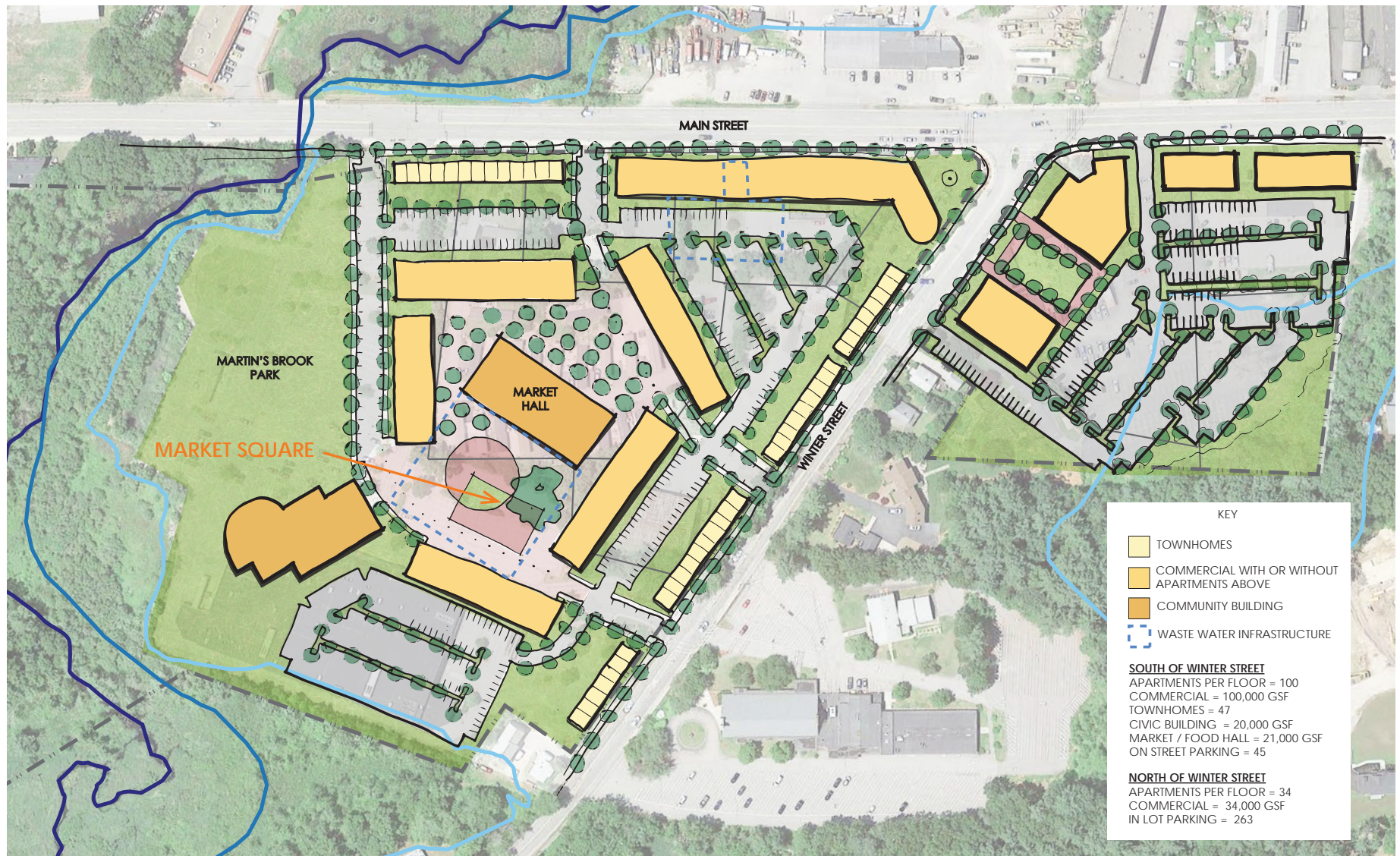


Outdoor dining can be accommodated throughout, providing an alternative to restaurants focused on vehicular streets or parking lots.





A Market Square could have apartments over shops and a community building surrounding a market hall. This large space invites public events while outdoor dining and other activities occur throughout.

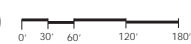


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## MARKET SQUARE

MARCH 2020





Market/civic squares like in Fort Collins, CO invite a wide range of day and night-time activities and are another alternative for North Reading.



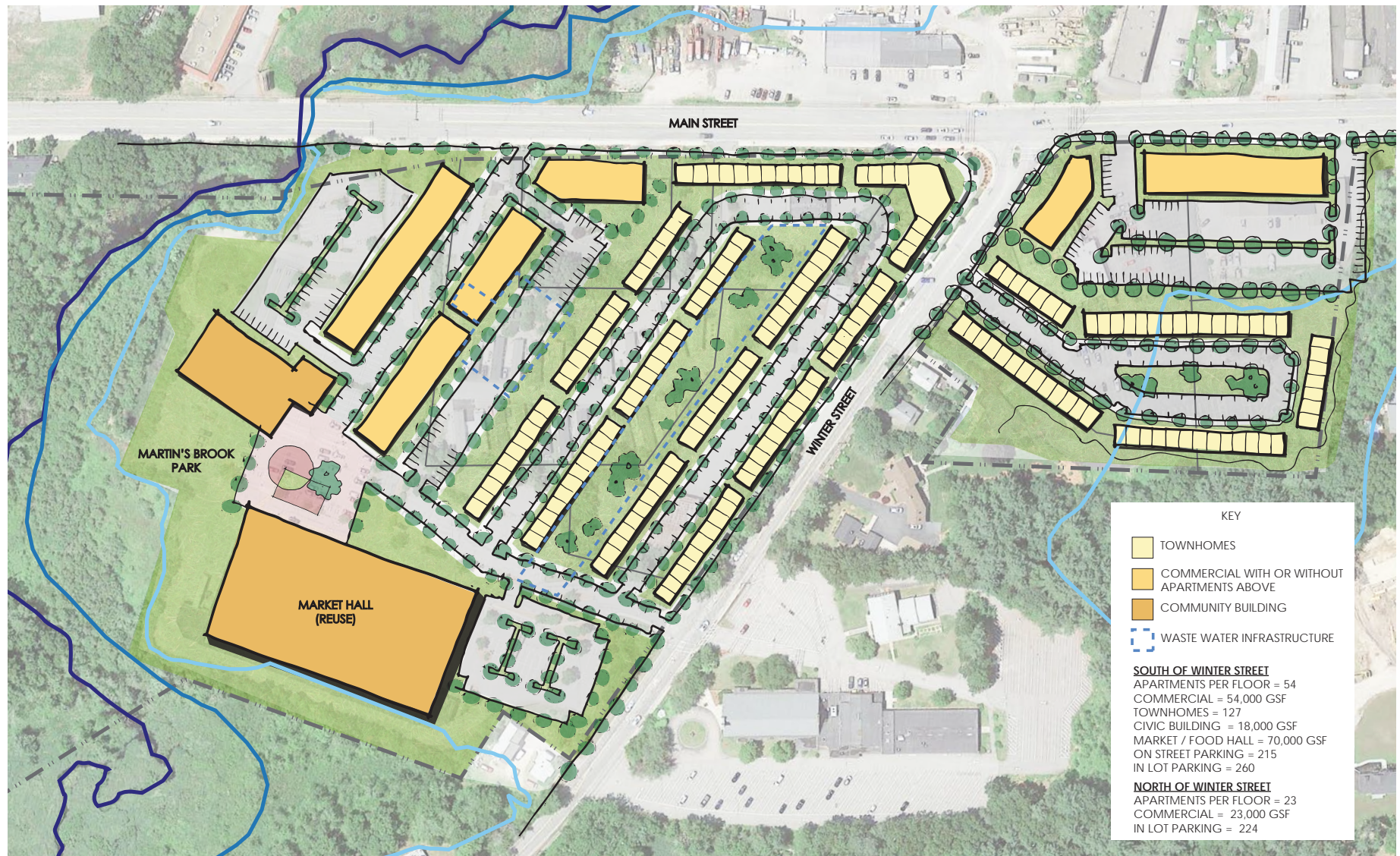


Market squares come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes like the intimate triangular Bow Market in Somerville.





The Ocean State Job Lot (formerly Stop and Shop) building offers the opportunity for this kind of transformation. A market/civic square connects the market hall, community building and adjacent park land.



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MARKET HALL

MARCH 2020 0' 30' 60' 120' 180' N



Market halls can reutilize existing buildings, like Stanley Marketplace in Aurora, CO – even buildings that don't look promising at first glance.





The former ejector seat factory is successful as a destination marketplace, surrounded by park land, residences, and low density industrial uses.





A mezzanine level was added within the high-bay interior and the entire building was filled with small shops, cafes, community uses including a music school and a rental hall, and space for casual dining and meet-ups.





Denver Central Market bustles with activity at all hours, full of take-out, eat-in, and specialty grocery (bakery, butcher) food options.



A review with a series of development professionals provided useful feedback on these kinds of ideas, and suggests what will be required if the private sector will be fronting most of the redevelopment money:

- There is a high demand for housing
- Demand for retail and commercial is much more limited
- In the current market, the value of the land for development will return \$40,000 - \$50,000 to the owners per unit. The number of units will affect willingness to sell
- 3 story development will not provide return on investment needed. 4, 5 and perhaps 6 stories will be necessary.
- Open space may be subsidized by development, but there is a limit to public benefits that will be paid for by private development entities.



## Additional development professional feedback suggested:

- To accommodate cars, ground floor parking under buildings will be necessary in addition to surface lots and on-street parking.
- 1.5 parking spaces per unit rather than 2.0 will help keep unit count high enough, without running up parking expenses. Work-from-home and Uber are changing expectations
- Underground parking and parking garages are likely too expensive for the North Reading market



Development professionals suggested that the Town of North Reading will have to invest resources to build developer interest in this site:

- Install the package treatment plant – or a preferred alternative – install a new sewer system connected to area infrastructure
- Build support among landowners to consolidate properties for development. Not all properties need to be included, but enough to create a downtown and civic character
- Rezone the area for the kind of development that can create both private and public benefits



Improvements to the area will make it more attractive for North Reading and regional residents and create the kind of environment where development will be worthwhile

Consider providing amenities and activities that will attract the public, potential residents and shoppers to the site:

- o Local/regional bus service, bikes and charging stations
- o Walking trails along an improved Martin's Brook bank
- o Improvements to Route 28 to create a better pedestrian environment
- o Organize activities on site - such as a flea market, holiday market, food trucks or performances on the Ocean State Job Lot parking lot – to change the perception of the area.

Review of conceptual options with the Community Planning Committee led to a preferred plan that arranges buildings along new streets between Main & Winter, and a pedestrian walk connecting them. Numbers are keyed to the Building Program at the end of this presentation.





Paved and green open spaces face the intersection and a community building backs up to Martin's Brook. Retail faces Main St., the intersection, and a new retail street. Parking lots are "hidden" behind buildings.



Typical buildings have residential above, and retail, residential or parking on the ground floor, subject to market demand. In the preliminary study buildings were limited to 3 stories to maintain a small-town scale.





The open space at the intersection can accommodate recreation, seasonal markets, food stalls and trucks, community celebrations and everyday meet-ups – adjacent to retail and restaurants.



A central pedestrian spine is lined by retail and residential and ties the whole site together in a way that will attract the public. The mix of uses will be determined by the real estate market.





## Recommended next steps:

- Increase heights of buildings from what is currently shown
- Assume first floor parking for some of the buildings shown
- Reach out to landowners with the development vision
- Reach out to North Reading residents to build support
- Advocate for improvements for the area
- Advocate for a public uses on this site
- Engage one or more developers who may be interested
- Hire development consultants to pursue market studies

Examples of 4 story and 5 story buildings suggest the impact that these buildings will have on the character of the area. These heights are not untypical of historic and contemporary downtowns. The program that follows is based on 3 story buildings maximum.





## BUILDING PROGRAM AND PARKING STUDY

Based on the 12-07-20 North Reading Downtown Master Plan drawings

	Commercial	Residential-Flats	Townhouses	Community
Building 1	12,000 SF			
Building 2	11,250 SF			
Building 3	9,600 SF	16 (floors 2-3)		
Building 4	13,200 SF	22 (floors 2-3)		
Building 5	14,400 SF	18 (floors 2-3)		
Building 6	14,400 SF	18 (floors 2-3)		
Building 7	3,600 SF	27 (floors 1-3)		
Building 8		30 (floors 1-3)		
Building 9		30 (floors 1-3)		
Building 10			10	
Building 11			10	
Building 12			10	
Building 13			9	
Building 14			11	
Building 15			10	
Building 16			12	
Building 17				18,000 SF
<b>Totals</b>	<b>78,450 SF</b>	<b>161 units</b> (ave. 2 bedrm)	<b>72</b>	<b>18,000 SF</b>
Parking in lots:		622 spaces		
Below townhouses:		44		
<b>Total Parking</b>		<b>666 spaces</b> (not including 68 on street as shown)		