

---

## **APPENDIX D – PLANNING CONTEXT**

---

---

## **APPENDIX A – PLANNING CONTEXT**

Webster's approach to preservation planning seeks to engage with broader community planning initiatives and identify preservation strategies that not only coordinate with those initiatives but that place historic resources and preservation concepts at the center of their successful implementation.

This chapter of Webster's Historic Preservation Plan reviews the Town's previous planning documents, highlights how they relate to historic resources, and identifies aspects of the planning that historic preservation concepts and strategies reinforce.

The review focuses primarily on current plans under implementation. While background and context are provided, the emphasis is on immediate and ongoing action through which the preservation, adaptive reuse, and appropriate treatment of historic buildings and landscapes can contribute to the economic vitality and quality of life in Webster. The preservation plan seeks to leverage ongoing initiatives and demonstrate how preservation strategies are central to community revitalization.

## **REGIONAL PLANNING CONTEXT**

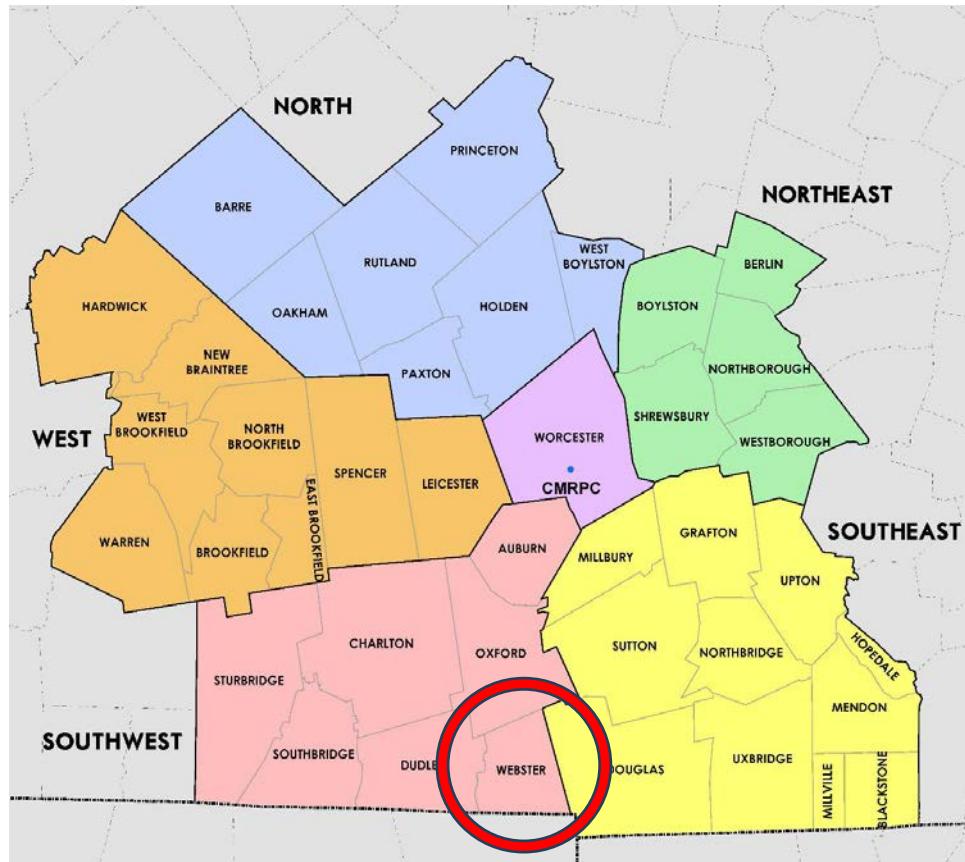
Webster is located the Central Massachusetts Planning District comprised of the southern two-thirds of Worcester County. With the City of Worcester at its core, the landscape is one of a complex of rolling hills of glacial origins with many small brooks, wetlands, and ponds and without a single overriding regional physiographic orientation. Brooks, streams, and rivers flow north to south, winding their ways through the hilly landscape.

As the central regional economic hub, the City of Worcester developed at the head of the Blackstone River and Canal in the 1820s and 1830s and became a regional transportation hub through the multiple railroad lines constructed in competition with the canal in the 1830s, 40s, and 50s, connecting Worcester east to Boston, south to Providence, and north and west to other emerging centers.

Webster is located directly south of Worcester on the French River and at the Massachusetts—Connecticut border. While the Blackstone River flows southeast from Worcester to Providence, Rhode Island and Narragansett Bay, the French River flows from the western side of Worcester due south into Connecticut, joining the Quinebaug River near Thompson and which itself

becomes the Thames River, entering the eastern end of Long Island Sound at New London.

The Central Massachusetts Planning Region is served by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC). Founded by the Massachusetts legislature in 1963 as one of 13 regional planning agencies across the Commonwealth, the CMRPC provides a variety of planning services to its 40 municipalities. CMRPC's planning programs include Transportation, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and Regional Collaboration and Community Planning.



**Central Massachusetts Planning Region with Webster located at the south center (CMRPC)**

CMRPC's Regional Collaboration and Community Planning team works with partners to develop and implement a regional approach to planning and economic development. With the City of Worcester as its hub and leading economic engine, much of the regional approach is focused on the city's strengths and opportunities.

Additionally, the CMRPC provides technical planning assistance to each of the 40 municipalities through community master plans, open space and recreation plans, economic development plans, village strategic plans, housing production plans, and other planning documents. These community plans focus on the specific character and identities of each community while coordinating with neighboring communities and the region as a whole.

The CMRPC is leading regional stakeholders in development of a regional comprehensive plan called *Imagine 2050* which is projected to be completed by the end of 2024. The plan is currently in the visioning phases and cannot be used in the preparation of this preservation plan. However, a regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy completed in 2023 provides strategies underpinning ongoing comprehensive planning and includes goals, objectives, and actions from which Webster can draw.

## **Southern Worcester County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy 2023-2028**

The CMRPC manages the Southern Worcester County Economic Development District in coordination with the Southern Worcester County Economic Development Organization (SWC EDO) with board members from throughout the region. The Southern Worcester County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) was prepared by the CMRPC under the guidance of the SWC EDO and with support from the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA).

As required by the EDA, the regional CEDS is a living document that is updated every five years. The CEDS analyzes the region's economic conditions, including regional economic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges, and outlines strategies for economic development and vitality. The CMRPC furthers regional economic development activities through coordination of longer term planning activities, collaboration and partnerships, and the implementation of the region's CEDS.

The following key economic strategies provide the foundation for regional economic development as expressed in the CED.

- **Workforce/Education:** Our region will work towards providing more equitable and impactful access to life-long educational opportunities.
- **Business Support:** We will have a vibrant, diverse and resilient business ecosystem by collectively fostering a robust support system.
- **Quality of Life:** We will continue to identify and invest in ways to improve the overall quality of life.
- **Marketing Central Massachusetts:** We will continue to focus on promoting our unique and diverse economy.
- **Municipal Capacity/Regional Collaboration:** We will collaborate with community partners to increase civic engagement and awareness in support of a strong economy.
- **Responsible Development:** We will capitalize on existing resources to implement thoughtful development.

Several goals, objectives, and actions can be related directly to Webster's character, conditions, and opportunities. One of the primary advantages Webster has is its location on Interstate 395 which connects Worcester and Interstate 90 (Mass Turnpike) twelve miles to the north of Webster with

Interstate 95 in Connecticut to the south. I-395 has three interchanges within the Town of Webster with the interchange at East Main Street in Webster's East Village being the primary connection.

I-395 provides Webster with a regional connection that enhances the potential for economic development in the historic town. In the immediate vicinity of the interchange, economic development has already occurred, demolishing the historic East Village mill and related residential areas and replacing them with commercial development serving both the interstate and the town. While not good for historic preservation, new commercial development at the interchange was probably inevitable and can perhaps provide an anchor that will benefit economic transformation of the core of the historic town.

The regional goal for Webster should be for its historic core to become a regional attraction for small business, services, and residential living, serving as a traditional main street village and downtown. Historic character, livability, and quality of life amenities are central to its appeal.

The 2023-2028 CEDS for Southern Worcester County includes a number of goals, objectives, and actions supporting Webster's potential role as a regional historic downtown center:

**Goal 2: Our region will have a vibrant, diverse, and resilient business ecosystem by collectively fostering a robust support system.**

**Objective 2.4: Support historically significant sectors and sites.**

**Action Item 2.4.2: Support and provide funding for the adaptive reuse of historic mill buildings to enable mill towns to meet their community needs and development goals.**

**Action Item 2.4.3: Raise awareness of our historic mill towns' significant resources and development potential.**

**Goal 3: Our region will continue to invest in ways to improve quality of life to engage more meaningfully with the economy.**

**Objective 3.2: Develop new, high quality, and affordable housing that supports the work force.**

**Action Item 3.2.1: Promote mixed use, vibrant, and denser village center zoning and developments.**

**Goal 4: Our region will continue to focus on promoting our unique identity and diverse economy while celebrating the cultural contributions of our communities.**

**Objective 4.1: Promote unique assets to drive tourism and community pride.**

**Action Item 4.1.2: Encourage municipalities to create strong brand identities.**

**Objective 4.3: Support marketing economic and cultural opportunities.**

**Action Item 4.3.1: Identify cultural tourism opportunities.**

**Action Item 4.3.3: Collaborate with local businesses and partners to implement eco-tourism, agri-tourism, and cultural tourism.**

## The Last Green Valley

### Vision 2020, The Next Ten Years (2010)

The Last Green Valley is the popular name given to the Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor which was designated by Congress in 1994 and reauthorized in 2009. It is also the name of the non-profit organization (TLGV) that manages the National Heritage Corridor. The Last Green Valley receives funding from federal, state, and local governments and a variety of private sector partners to implement its preservation, conservation, and outreach programs.

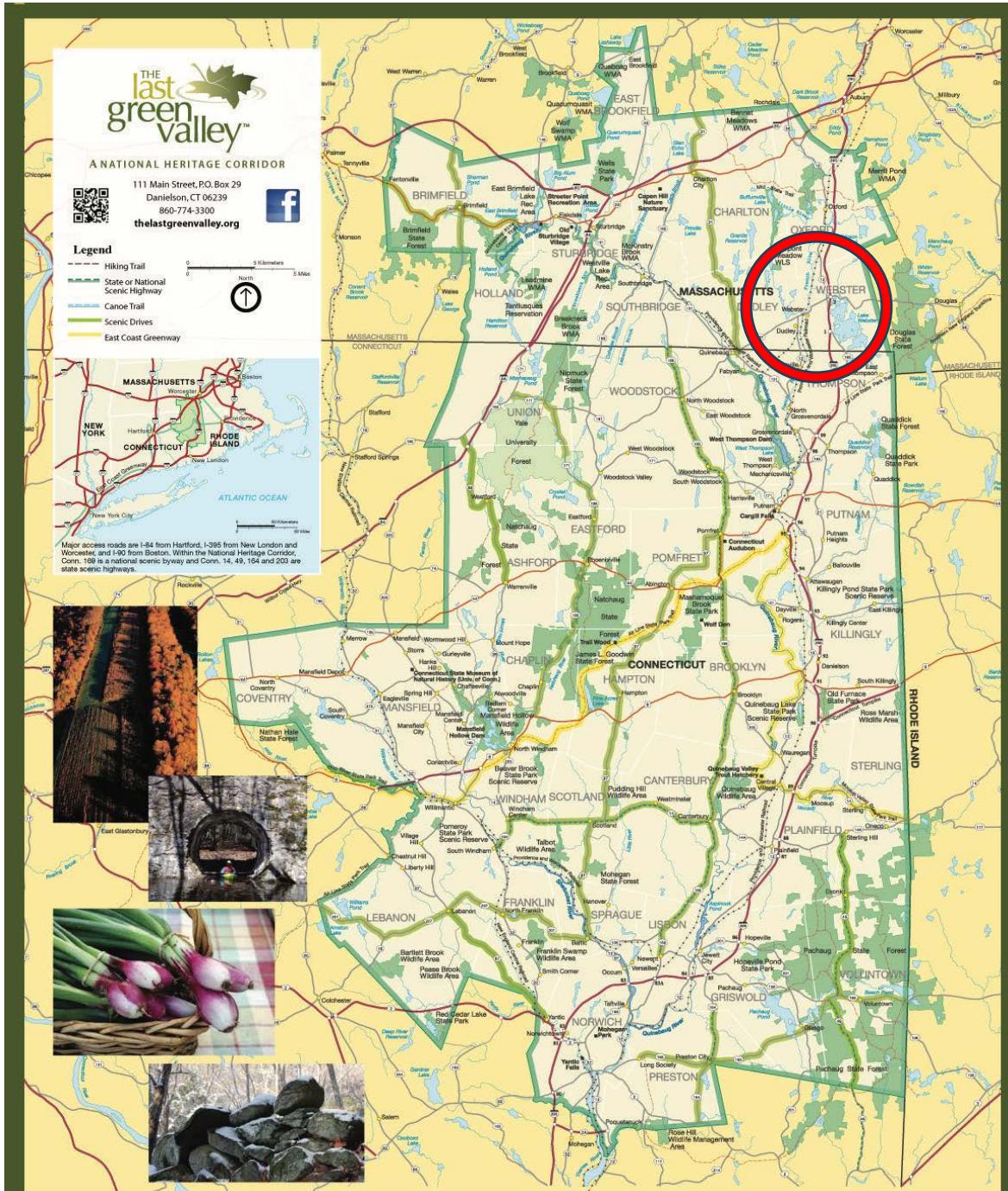
The Last Green Valley is significant for its relatively undeveloped character amid the sprawling coastal metropolitan Boston-to-Washington corridor—the most urbanized region in the nation. The corridor encompasses 35 towns within the Quinebaug and Shetucket River watersheds in Connecticut and Massachusetts, including Webster. The French River is a tributary of the Quinebaug River.

In 2010, The Last Green Valley prepared its *Vision 2020, The Next Ten Years*, to guide the National Heritage Corridor's initiatives over the past decade. While past its end date, the vision document remains a touchstone for the corridor's ongoing work.

A vision and strategies were developed for a range of activity interests, including stewardship, economic development and community revitalization, cultural resources, land use, agriculture, and natural resources. Particularly relevant to Webster, its economic development and community revitalization strategies include:

- Encourage **economic development** that will provide jobs, income and financial incentives, focuses attention on **local products and talents**, and is compatible with The Last Green Valley's natural and cultural resources.
- Enhance The Last Green Valley's **tourism potential**, capitalizing on its proximity to population centers by marketing the region's strongest assets – nature-based recreation, agriculture and small town New England experiences.
- Enhance the **visual appearance of communities** through Main Street and other programs.
- **Revitalize riverfronts** to invigorate downtowns and encourage economic development and recreational opportunities.
- Promote the repurposing, as feasible, of **old industrial structures** that retain a dominant visual and psychological impact within communities. Support municipalities and property owners cleaning up contaminants without compromising The Last Green Valley's natural and cultural resources.
- Develop and improve **tourism attractions**, events, itineraries, websites with interactive maps, blueways, greenways, accommodations, and campgrounds consistent with the character of The Last Green Valley, and forge linkages between regional attractions.

- Enhance and expand **tourism infrastructure**, including visitor services, signage, and staffed visitor centers at the gateways to The Last Green Valley.
- Assist **museums and historic sites/areas** to improve public awareness of their sites, to improve their role in telling the stories of The Last Green Valley, to increase public access to their sites, and to forge cooperative partnerships.



Heritage area map for The Last Green Valley National Heritage Corridor with Webster circled.

## MUNICIPAL PLANNING DOCUMENTS

Webster has undertaken a series of planning initiatives that have provided the basis for community development over the past three decades. Projects such as the rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of the Sitkowski School in 2010, construction of the new Gladys E. Kelly Public Library in 2018, phased implementation of the Webster Riverwalk and French River Park beginning in 2010, and construction of Downtown streetscape improvements in XXXX, can be traced through Webster's municipal planning documents. The Town's significant past redevelopment efforts lay the groundwork for next steps for further revitalization using historic preservation concepts.

### Town of Webster Master Plan (1989)

Webster undertook a comprehensive master planning effort in 1989 led by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC). The plan assembled detailed background information on Webster's physical conditions, including natural and environmental conditions, public infrastructure, transportation, economy, and housing. The plan outlines how development has occurred in the decade of the 1980s, the level of future development that was anticipated, and how public infrastructure is expected to expand in response to development. The 1989 Master Plan does not directly address historic preservation.

Most impressive about the 1989 plan is the thoroughness with which it introduces Webster to a wide range of potential growth management techniques which the Town might use to address growth and change. These include:

- Wetland protection bylaws
- Erosion and sedimentation bylaws
- Hazardous materials and underground storage tank controls
- Watershed protection zoning districts
- River and Lake protection zoning districts
- Cluster zoning
- Planned unit development
- Special permits in site planning review
- Inclusionary zoning
- Project phasing
- Strengthening of allowances for home occupations
- Sign and billboard controls

Consideration of these potential growth management tools gave the Town a full plate of topics to consider in the following years under the leadership and guidance of the CMRPC. In short, the 1989 Master Plan introduced Webster to the world of contemporary planning and growth management.

The 1989 Master Plan recommended hiring of full-time professionals to assist the various municipal boards and departments, particularly with respect to planning and building inspection. It recommended that the Town target future growth in areas where infrastructure improvements are possible and controls

requiring developers to pay associated infrastructure improvement costs. It recommended that the Town evaluate and amend its Zoning Bylaw and Subdivision Rules and Regulations to give the Town greater leverage in achieving the best possible design and construction of new development.

The 1989 Master Plan also initiated revitalization planning for Downtown Webster, defined as Main Street and South Main Street between the French River on the west and the intersection with North and East Main Street on the east. A number of parking and traffic studies had been undertaken for Downtown in the 1970s and early-1980s, which are reviewed. The 1989 Master Plan focused on zoning and land use, identifying impediments to revitalization and creating a “mini-plan” for Webster’s central business district.

The Master Plan divides Downtown into individual blocks and analyzes each block in detail in terms of character, land use, building type, and aesthetics. It provides analysis and general recommendations block by block for use, zoning, renovation, circulation, parking, green space, and signage.

The 1989 Master Plan recommends focus on regaining the prominence of Webster’s Downtown as a center for retail establishments, offices, institutional activities, and high quality but affordable housing. Its detailed assessment of Downtown appears to have been the first step in planning for the comprehensive revitalization of the area, leading to additional planning and subsequent implementation steps in the years following.

The 1989 Master Plan does not, however, address building renovation and adaptive reuse, and it does not document or assess the degree to which existing commercial buildings were occupied or vacant or types of desirable uses which should be sought.

### **Town of Webster Master Plan (2014)**

Webster updated its Master Plan in 2014 in a document prepared by the consulting firm Vanasse Hangen Brustein, Inc. The 2014 Master Plan is thorough and organized in a straightforward format that is easy to comprehend. Each chapter of the Master Plan (a) presents the chapter’s goals, (b) briefly reviews previous planning documents, (c) reviews existing conditions, and (d) presents recommendations. The Master Plan remains relevant today though updating is necessary to adjust for next steps that take into account the recommended actions that have been completed over the past ten years.

Primary topics addressed in the 2014 Master Plan include:

- Land Use
- Housing
- Economic Development
- Transportation
- Open Space and Recreation
- Natural, Historic, and Cultural Resources
- Public Facilities and Services
- Community Development

Historic resources play a role in most of these topics, especially Land Use, Housing, Economic Development, Open Space and Recreation, and Community Development. Overlapping themes involving historic resources include downtown revitalization, open space connections, and housing in historic neighborhoods. The condition, preservation, and reuse of Webster's historic mill sites was not a primary focus.

Background information provided in the 2014 Master Plan noted several documents and initiatives that had been driving recent planning. First, while most of the recommendations from the 1989 Master Plan were not implemented, the 2014 Master Plan notes the establishment of a **Redevelopment Overlay District** in Webster's Zoning Bylaw to encourage the redevelopment of vacant and underutilized buildings downtown.

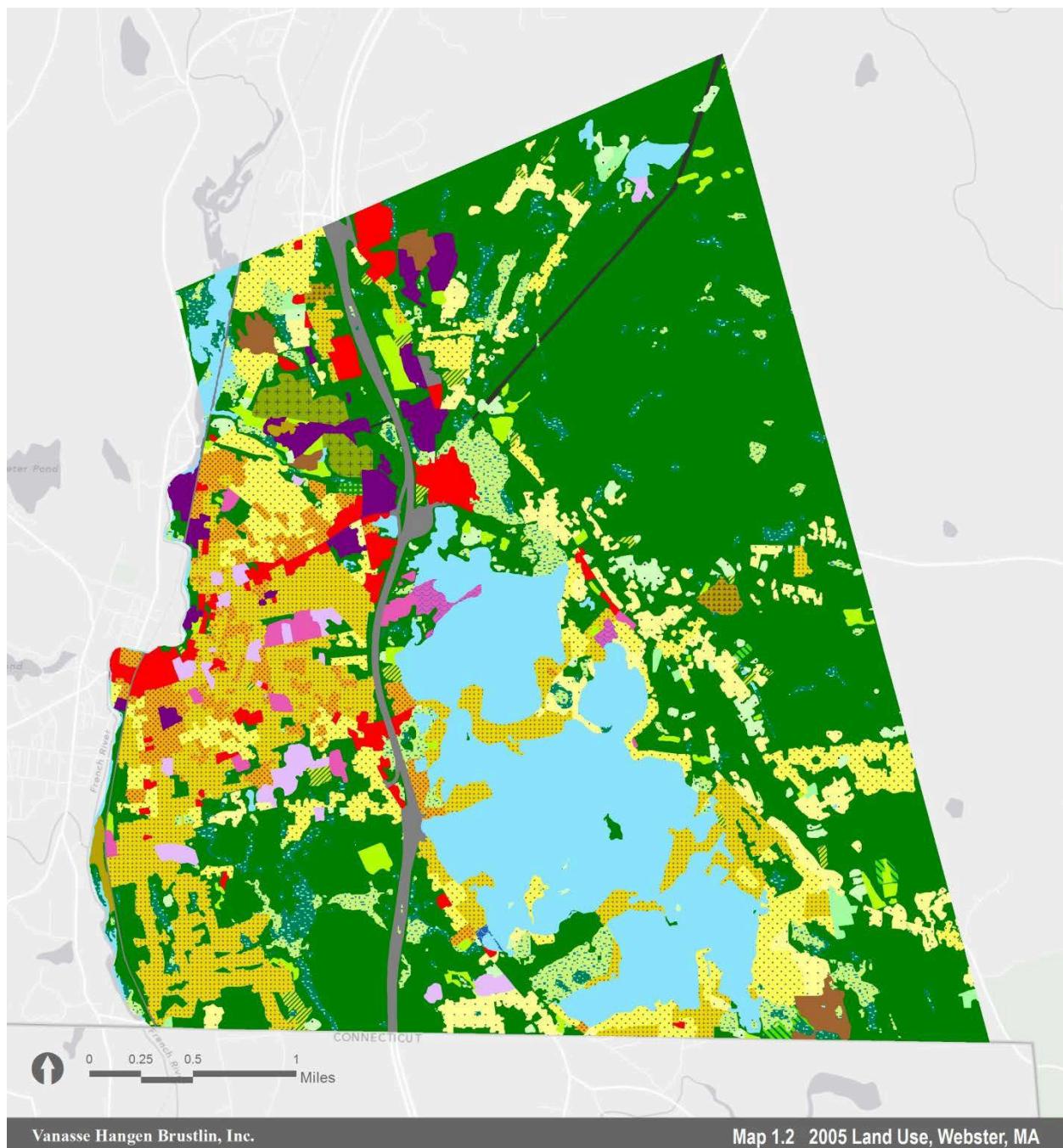
Second, **French River Park** was completed downtown in 2011 and at the time of the Master Plan preparation, Phase 1 implementation of the **French Riverwalk** was underway.

Third, the **Webster Community Development Strategy** prepared in 2010 and updated in 2013 listed six priority actions for downtown revitalization, several of which have been realized, including rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of the Sitkowski School as senior housing, expansion of the Corbin Library, implementation of the French Riverwalk as noted above, revitalization of the downtown business district, and improving housing stock within and adjacent to the central business district. Additionally, the Community Development Strategy supported redevelopment of the Cranston Print Works (the historic East Village mill site), which was underway in 2014, and it sought investment in downtown commercial and mixed-use properties. The 2014 Master Plan built on these significant priorities.

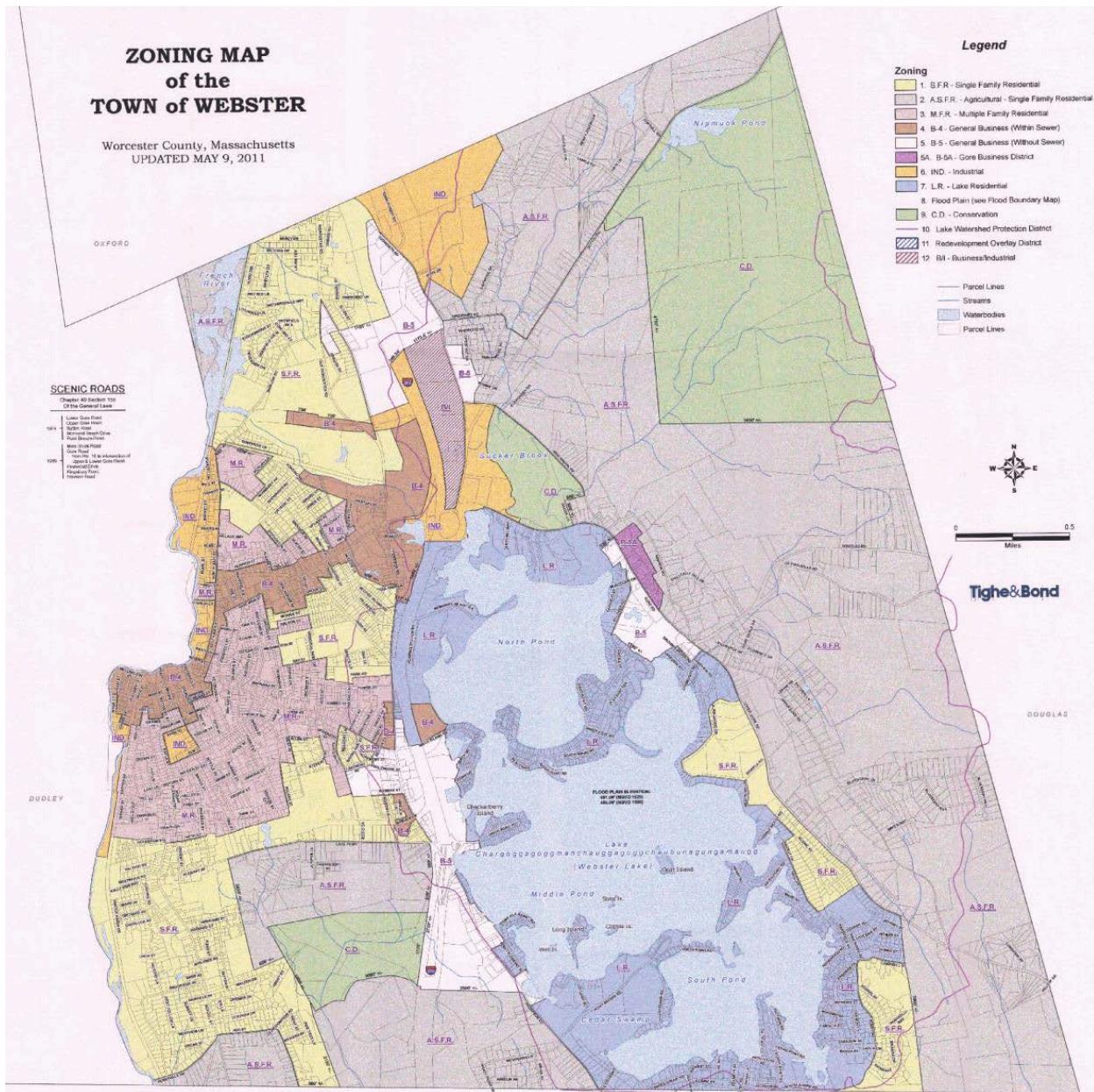
The Land Use, Economic Development, and Community Development recommendations in the 2014 Master Plan overlap and include several coordinated strategies focusing on the downtown core. Consideration of **design guidelines** for new construction, redevelopment, and adaptive use downtown are noted in each section. Separate guidelines were recommended for the downtown area (which has an urban development pattern) and East Main Street (which has a suburban development pattern).

Continuation of downtown **infrastructure improvements** were supported along with re-establishment of the Town's storefront and facade improvement program, which was initiated in **XXXX** using CDBG and other funding (**correct?**) but has since lapsed (Downtown Webster Commercial Property Improvement Program). Zoning revisions to encourage investment in mixed-use adaptive reuse and new projects downtown were recommended.

## APPENDIX D



Land use in Webster in 2005 as depicted in the 2014 Master Plan



Webster's zoning map as depicted in the 2014 Master Plan

The Master Plan notes that Webster's **Redevelopment Overlay District** was formed to encourage the redevelopment and reuse of existing nonresidential buildings, to preserve the character and historic built form of Webster's central business district, to protect the value of property, and to create opportunities for housing within walking distance of goods and services. To qualify for placement in the Redevelopment Overlay District, properties must be located in a B-4 business district that has access to public water and sewer service. Parcels must be at least 5,000 square feet in size (although there is no minimum lot size for the redevelopment of a parcel) and existing nonresidential buildings should be at least 50 years old. There are a variety of uses allowed in the Redevelopment Overlay District by right or by special permit, including offices,

financial institution, multi-family housing, assisted living facility, etc. the height of any building may be increased by one story with the issuance of a special permit.

The Master Plan's chapter on **Natural, Historic, and Cultural Resources** is well-conceived and thorough. The chapter provides an overview of inventoried and designated historic resources, lists key cultural resources, and outlines state and federal preservation programs that are currently being used in the Town, such as the National Register, MACRIS inventories, Section 106 and other federal and state compliance programs, and federal and state historic tax credits.

Importantly, the chapter lists preservation programs that are not being utilized in Webster, including:

- Local Historic Districts,
- Demolition Delay Ordinance
- Demolition by Neglect Ordinance
- Design Guidelines, and
- Community Preservation Act.

The Master Plan recommended:

- Establishment of a **Historical Commission** to lead preservation activities in Webster,
- Budgeting for the maintenance and renovation of **Town-owned historic buildings**,
- **Tax incentives and credits** for appropriate re-use and restoration of historic buildings,
- **Design guidelines** and reinstitution of Webster's **facade improvement** program,
- Adoption of a **Demolition by Neglect** ordinance,
- **Educational and interpretive initiatives** highlighting historic and cultural resources, including support for the Webster-Dudley Historical Society.

The Master Plan recommended strengthening **tourism** as a potential economic driver focusing on the French River, downtown revitalization and events, and interpretation.



Webster Riverwalk being implemented as the 2014 Master Plan was being prepared

## Open Space and Recreation Plan (2018)

Webster's Open Space and Recreation Plan was prepared in 2018 by the Town's engineering consultant, CME Associates, Inc. of Hartford, CT. The plan was a continuation and expansion of the goals and objectives outlined in Webster's previous 2009 Open Space and Recreation Plan, and it was prepared consistent with the Town's 2014 Master Plan.

While the 2018 Open Space and Recreation Plan focuses on protection of the large areas of undeveloped land in Webster and the preservation of natural resources, it also cites preservation and enhancement of the historic character of downtown Webster among its goals.

Conceptually, the Town of Webster is divided into east and west landscape areas by Interstate 395, with the eastern portion of the Town largely undeveloped open space and the western portion largely urbanized around the historic mill villages. Lake Webster is the central natural feature of Webster's open space and recreational character. The historic mill villages are oriented to the French River and the waterpower it provided. The river forms the western border of the Town, which it shares with the Town of Dudley.

Enhancement of the French River has been a primary focus for the revitalization of downtown Webster and has been a focus of local and regional planning efforts for many years. A number of earlier planning studies have laid the groundwork for transformation of the French River from an industrial resource into an open space and recreational resource.

**French River Greenway Plan** prepared in 1990 by a citizens advisory group provided a resources inventory of natural and cultural resources, envisioned protection of the riverine ecosystem with a riverwalk and park system, and outlined suggestions for making the river a community resource.

**The French-Quinebaug Watershed Plan** prepared in 1999 by the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of

Massachusetts, Amherst, provided comprehensive background about the watershed, including its landscape character, hydrology, biodiversity, and settlement patterns, and it provided a preliminary vision for future growth scenarios.

**French River Revitalization Concepts** prepared in 2006 by French River Connection with the Green Valley Institute and landscape architecture students from the University of Connecticut laid out conceptual plans for trail systems along the French River in Webster, Dudley, and Oxford. The 2006 plan presented conceptual plans for open space, trails, and river access for Collins Cove, the North Village, Downtown Webster, Stevens and Ethan Allen Mills (Dudley), and Perryville Step Dam.

**The French River Blueway Study** prepared in 2006 by graduate students of the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, studied the potential for river access in Oxford, Webster, and Dudley, assessing sites included in the Revitalization Concepts document above as well as others.

**French River Greenway** prepared in 2011 by French River Connection and partners further developed planning for the regional trail and park system and its connections to other regional trails. The document lists ongoing projects, including opening of the Perryville Trace and construction of French River park, and lists steps leading to phased implementation of the trail system.

**Open Space and Recreation Plans** for Webster (1997, 2009) and Oxford (2006) and **Community Development Plan** for Dudley (2004) officially designating the greenway and laying the groundwork for federal and state funding for implementation projects.

Webster's 2018 Open Space and Recreation Plan was well prepared and easy to follow. Its overviews of Community Setting and Environmental Inventory and Analysis are succinct yet thorough and may be used as the basis for a wide range of coordinated planning initiatives going forward. Webster's 2014 Master Plan and 2018 Open Space and Recreation Plan are the principal planning documents for the Town. They do not need to be reinvented but should continue to be updated as implementation steps are completed and new opportunities emerge.

As of 2018, Webster had approximately 1,250 acres of land under permanent protection (or 13% of the Town's total land area), and 717 acres of land having limited protection status (or 7.7% of the Town's total land area). All told, Webster has approximately 1,750 acres of land (or roughly 21% of the Town's total land area) having some degree of protection. Most of Webster's protected lands are located in the eastern portion of the Town.

The Open Space Plan states that Webster's primary resource protection needs continue to be two-fold: (1) finding a way to protect and preserve the water quality of the French River and Webster Lake and (2) finding a way to protect as much land as possible within the contiguous Supporting Natural Landscapes and

Core Habitats in the eastern portion of Town within the Webster Lake watershed.

The Open Space Plan states that approximately half of Webster's population (49%) have a lower median household income than other communities across the state, indicative of a community with many low-income households and a low-wage workforce. This has implications for the amount of tax dollars that can be raised from residential property taxes, the ability of Webster homeowners to afford them, and the amount of tax dollars that can be used for open space and recreation.

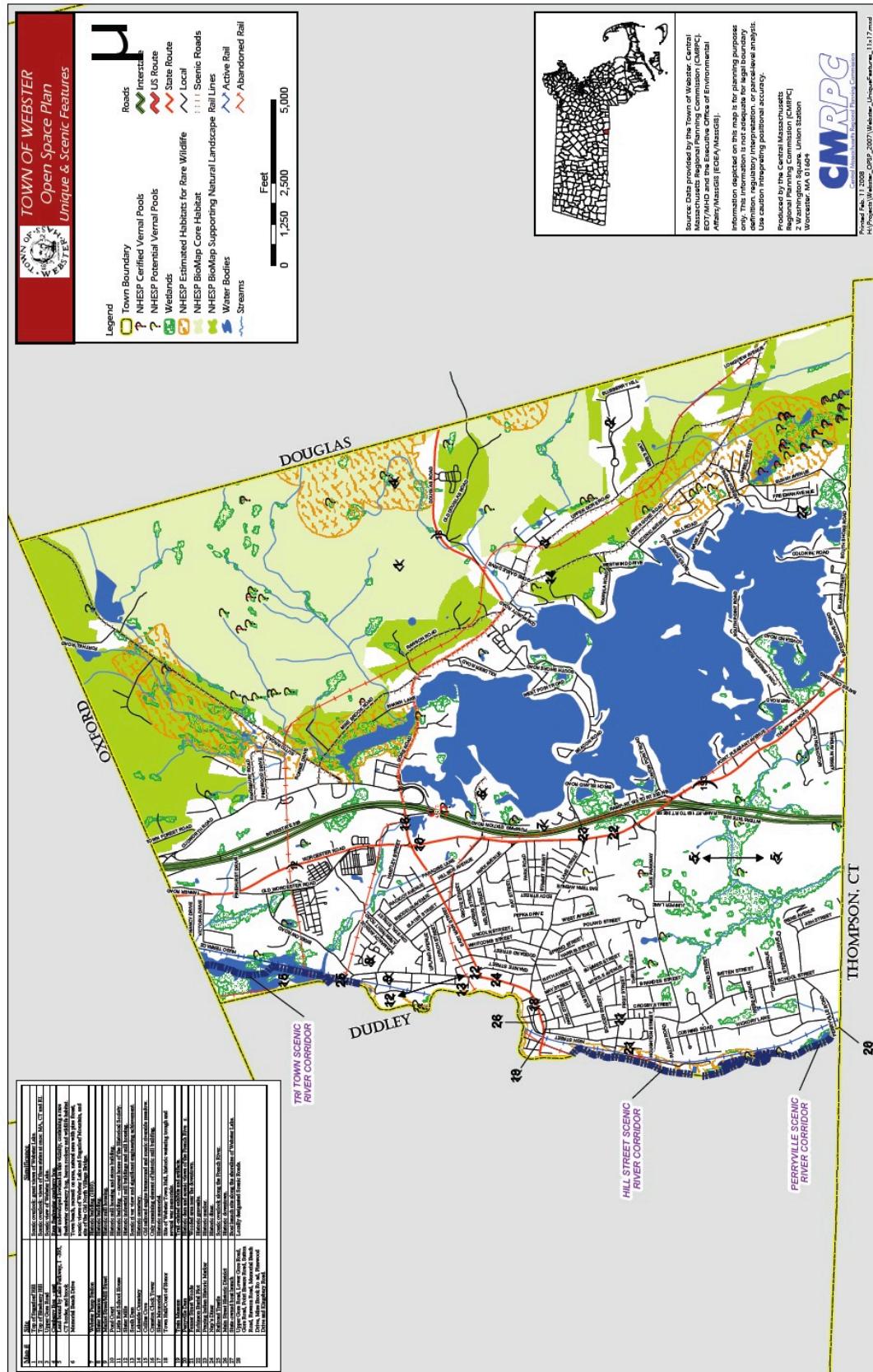
With limited tax funding available and inflated real estate prices in key areas, the Town may find it difficult to protect the entirety of identified priority landscape areas. Consequently, ongoing land protection will be challenging, but every effort should be made to protect as much land as possible.

To this end, the Open Space Plan states that it is imperative that Town officials, staff, members of Webster's boards and commissions, and partners across the community work together to manage the resources that currently exist and to identify, prioritize, and implement new initiatives. If partnering entities can continue to coordinate resources and actions, progress can continue to be made in accomplishing the goals of the Open Space Plan.

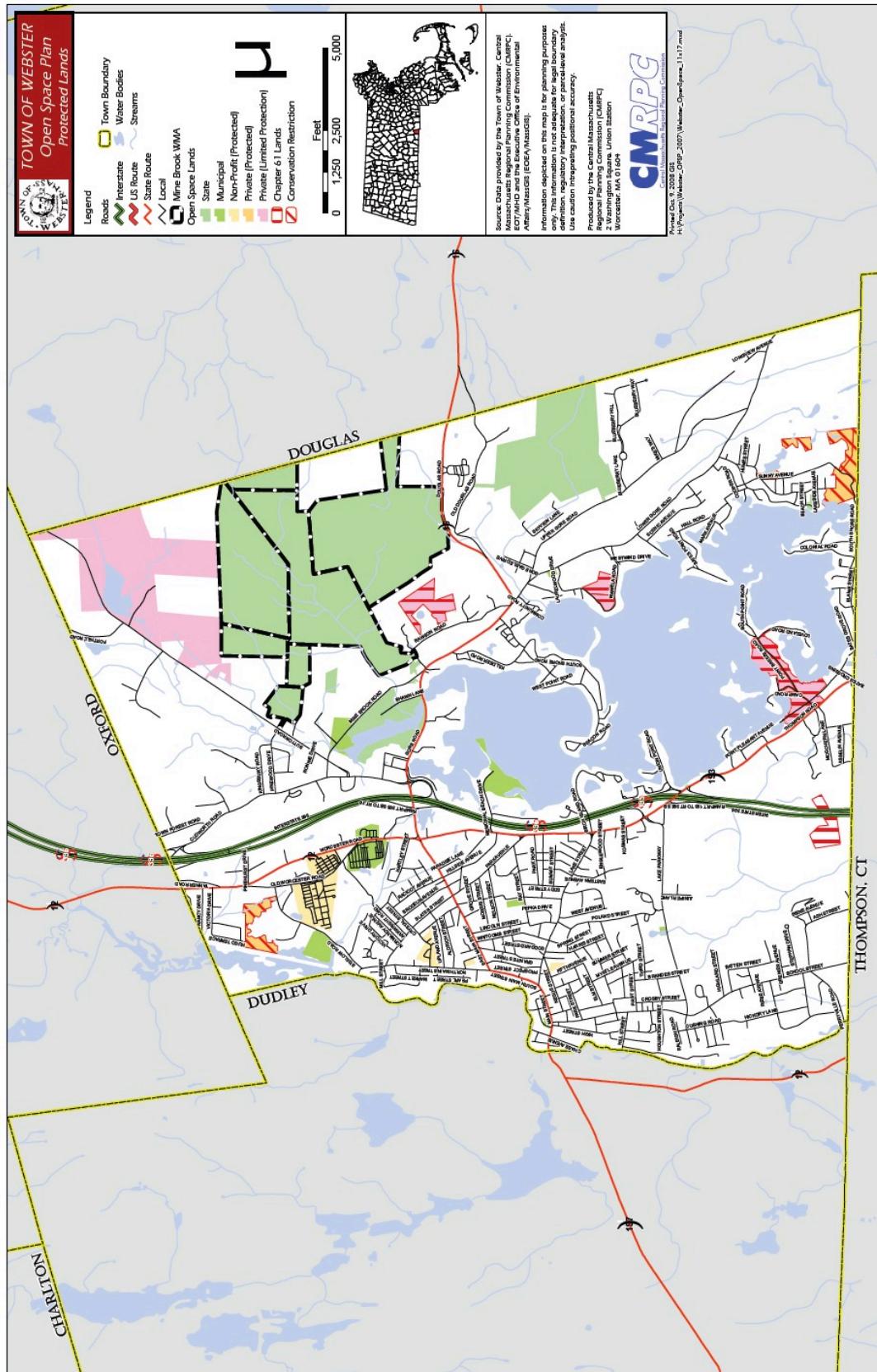
The Open Space and Recreation Plan identifies six goals:

- A. Protect large areas of undeveloped space in the Town of Webster.
- B. Preserve Webster's natural resources, especially its remaining open space, wetland and wildlife communities, and scenic views.
- C. Preserve the quality and character of Webster Lake for all residents to enjoy.
- D. Improve and expand the Town's open space and recreation facilities for the enjoyment of all residents of Webster.
- E. Link active and passive recreation areas.
- F. Preserve and enhance the historic character of downtown Webster.**

While much of the critical lands focus for open space and environmental protection is for lands in the eastern portion of the Town and around Webster Lake, the including of the **historic character of downtown Webster** in Goal F is of importance to the Historic Preservation Plan and its coordination with conservation and open space partners. Actions associated with this and other goals center on continued implementation and expansion of the French River Greenway and the integration of the Webster Riverwalk with the downtown core and adjacent residential neighborhoods. A primary recommendation of the plan is adoption of the **Community Preservation Act** by Webster to provide matching grant funding for protection of open space.



Unique and Scenic Features Map from Webster's Open Space and Recreation Plan



Protected Lands Map from Webster's Open Space and Recreation Plan

The two **objectives associated with Goal F** are central to the Historic Preservation Plan:

1. Work with property owners to **preserve buildings** that contribute to the historic look and character of the area.
2. Encourage the **adaptive reuse** of existing vacant and underutilized buildings.

Potential actions included:

- Establishment of a **historical commission** to lead preservation efforts (completed);
- Identify buildings for renovation and undertaking a **pilot renovation program**;
- **Public engagement** through signage and walking tours;
- **Beautification** enhancements in association with downtown merchants;
- Creation of a **local historic district** and/or **zoning overlay district** to encourage rehabilitation;
- Appropriate budget for the maintenance and renovation of **public buildings**;
- Potential for **tax incentives** to encourage private sector rehabilitation.

Webster's Historic Preservation Plan should build upon these potential actions in concert with implementation of the Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan.

## **Webster-Dudley Corridor Study (2020)**

In 2020, the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) completed a corridor study of the shared commercial district between the towns of Webster and Dudley through a grant provided by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA).

A corridor study is a planning project that defines the relationships between a roadway and its adjacent land. Corridor studies are used to: define acceptable levels of access and mobility, determine transportation system needs to support surrounding land uses, and promote redevelopment. Through the study the CMRPC provided economic development recommendations bringing municipal policies in line with smart growth strategies and improving cohesion and sense of place for Webster and Dudley residents.

The Corridor Study undertook an analysis of Main Street through Webster and Dudley looking at the character of the streetscape as well as adjacent building uses in order to make recommendations for their improvement.

Recommendations for Webster included:

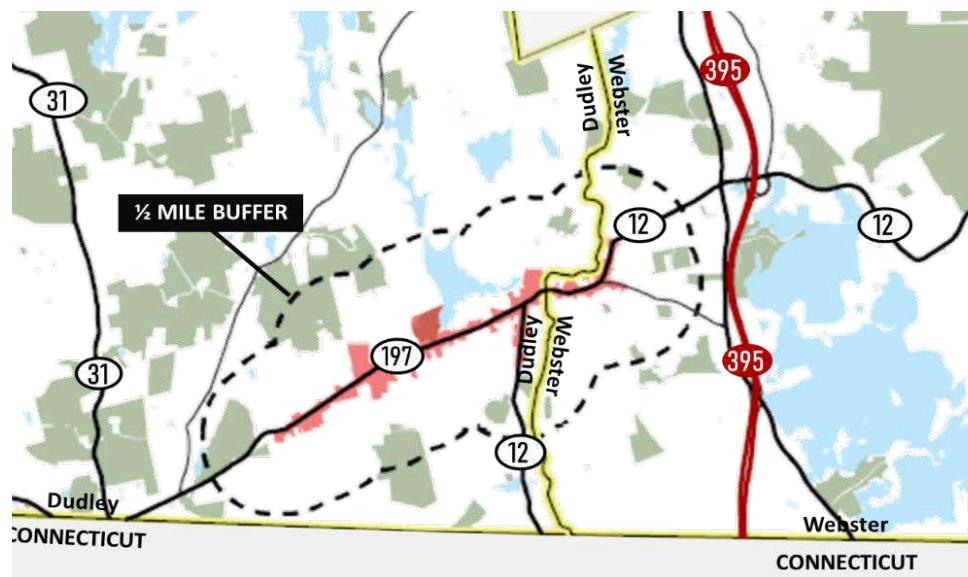
- Amend the Webster **zoning bylaw** to specifically allow mixed-use within the downtown business district.

- Join the **Main Street America** program to be implemented jointly by both communities.
- Focus on **redevelopment of Stephens Mill** on the French River in Dudley and adjacent to Webster's downtown core.
- Coordinate business organizations and **solicit new businesses** or industries that align with the majors offered at **Nichols College**, creating a stronger connection between the businesses and the college.
- **Market the corridor** collectively locally, regionally, and statewide.
- Market completed trails to **encourage tourism** and trails in the making to show the big picture trail system once funded and built out.

As advocated for in the study, smart growth is an approach to development that encourages a mix of building types and uses, diverse housing and transportation options, development within existing neighborhoods, and community engagement. The variety of uses in mixed-use developments allows for people to live, work, play and shop in one place, which then becomes a destination for people from other neighborhoods. Mixed-use developments also create relative density within existing downtown areas, promoting conservation of greenspace.

Most of the historic storefronts in Webster are mixed-use, which was popular on main streets in Massachusetts through the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Mixed-use developments, have the dual advantage of being cohesive within the existing physical and historic appearance of the corridor, as well as promoting walkability, economic development, and conservation.

Zoning along Main Street in Webster allows for multi-family housing within the General Business District (B-4) by allowing all the uses allowed in the Multi-Family Residential District (MFR), including the same minimum lot size. This allows for a mix of uses near each other within the same district, even though the bylaws do not expressly address the question of two or more uses existing on the same lot or within the same structure, either in the affirmative or the negative. The Corridor Study recommends that Webster amend its B-4 zoning language to specifically allow mixed-use downtown.



Study area for the Webster-Dudley Corridor Study shown in black dashed lines



Existing land uses within downtown Webster as presented by the Corridor Study

## Webster-Dudley French River District Urban Center Housing TIF Plan (2021)

A plan for establishment of an Urban Center Housing Tax Increment Financing District (UCH-TIF) along the French River was proposed by the towns of Webster and Dudley in 2021 and presented to the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, now known as the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities. The Towns' proposal was prepared by the consulting firm Vanasse Hangen Brustein, Inc., who prepared Webster's 2014 Master Plan.

The vision for the Webster-Dudley French River UCH-TIF District emerged from years of collaborative planning between the two towns, including the Webster-Dudley Commercial Corridor Study (2020) coordinated by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission.

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is a method for financing new development projects using anticipated taxes on future gains in real estate values to pay for the necessary public improvements such as streets, sidewalks, sewer and water, and similar improvements that make private sector development projects possible. The towns borrow the needed funds for the project by issuing bonds, which are then paid back to the bond holders using a portion of the higher taxes generated by the project. TIFs are authorized by state law and begin with designation of a geographic area as a TIF district.

The French River UCH-TIF District runs along both sides of the French River between Webster and Dudley encapsulating a commercial and residential mixed-used district that has suffered in recent decades from disinvestment and decline. The shores of the river are neglected, overgrown, and inaccessible. Many properties located throughout the district are vacant and/or underutilized. The neighborhood suffers from low employment, low income, and blighted conditions.

Despite these challenges, the district has great potential for revitalization. Most significant is the proposed redevelopment of the historic Stevens Mill on the Dudley side of the river, which will be rehabilitated into 156 units of rental housing, along with event space and a new restaurant.

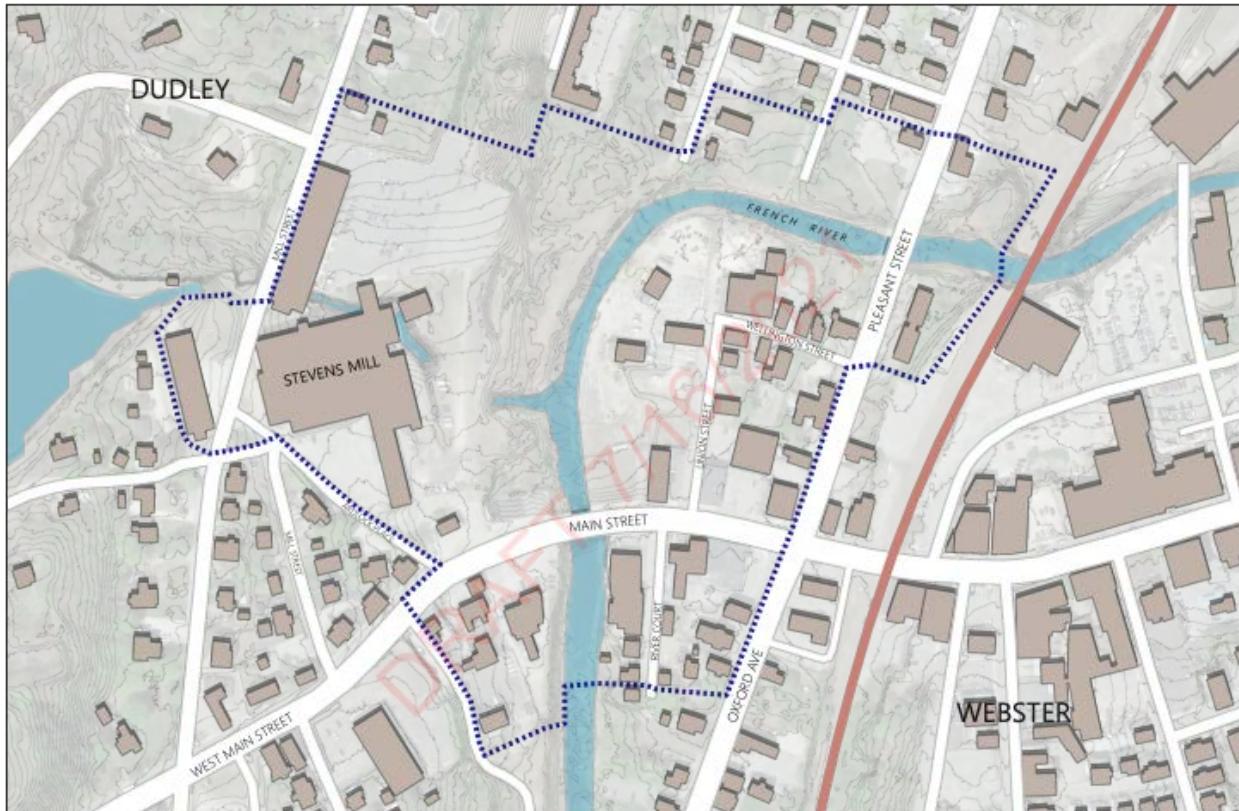
In addition to salvaging this significant historic asset, the private sector owners will complete site work and landscaping to reconnect the community to the French River via a new recreational path. The Stevens Mill rehabilitation project will be the neighborhood's largest development and will have a profoundly positive impact on the local economy.

In all, the proposed UCH-TIF District contains sixty-one properties, including residences, offices, restaurants, and retail operations. Per the Zoning By-Laws of both towns, commercial and multifamily residential development is allowed on all of these properties either as-of-right or via special permit. The proposed district will:

- Increase the area's supply of modern, affordable housing,
- Promote the development of multifamily housing with smaller units (including studios, one bedroom, and two bedroom),

- Revitalize existing businesses along the Webster-Dudley Main Street corridor,
- Encourage infill development to fill in vacant parcels,
- Promote mixed-use development on underutilized properties, including waterfront industrial sites, and
- Introduce a new pedestrian path network to restore community access to the French River.

Rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of the Stevens Mill and associated improvements within the French River UCH-TIF District are in the organizational stages, as the towns work on assembling investor group for the project. Construction activities are expected to begin in a couple of years.



The Webster-Dudley French River UCH-TIF District



Rendering of the proposed rehabilitated Stevens Mill

### Webster Center Slum and Blight Inventory (2021)

In 2021, an inventory of Downtown Webster (Webster Center) was undertaken determining that the area qualifies as blighted under state and federal criteria allowing the area to be eligible for continued access to federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding which has been instrumental in its revitalization. The inventory was completed by Community Opportunities Group, Inc. for the Office of Community Development on behalf of the Webster Redevelopment Authority. The inventory culminated in a certification by the Board of Selectmen that the area qualified as blighted, which as of early 2024 was under review by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC).

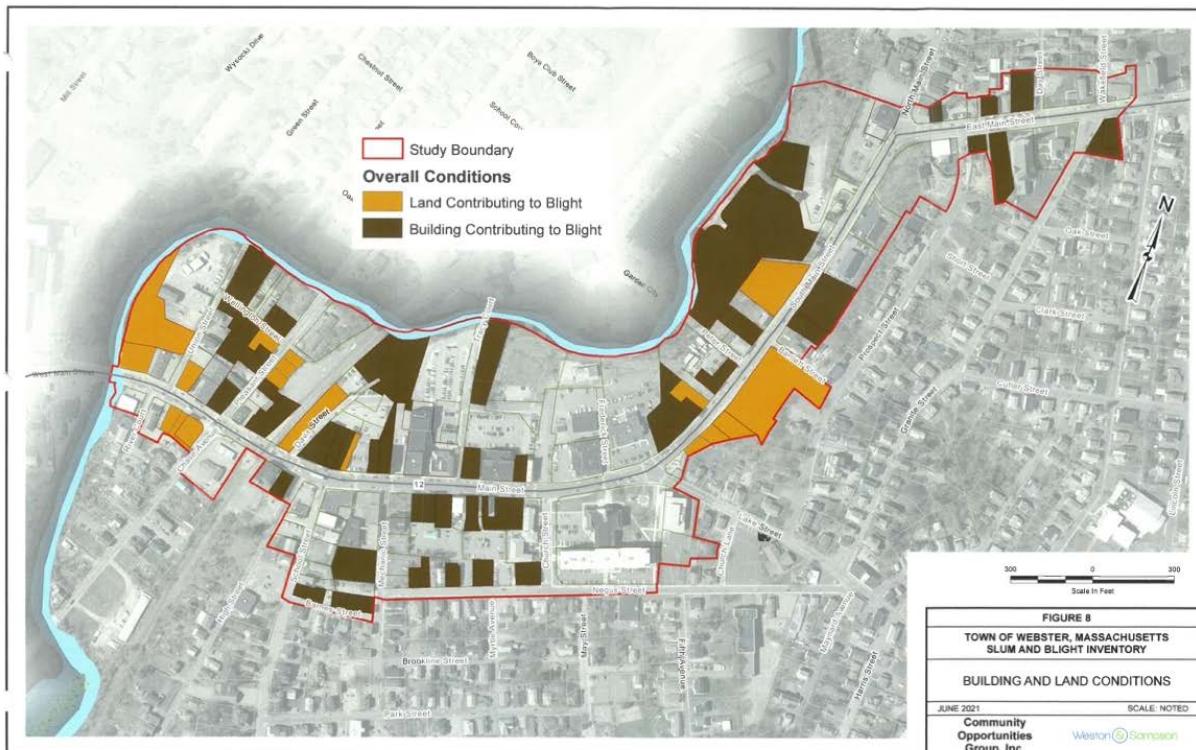
The terms “slum and blight” are outdated, value laden language that do not really apply to conditions in downtown Webster but are used as part of the CDBG program. Webster Center was first certified as eligible for CDBG funding in 2010, allowing CDBG funding to be accessed for a number of important downtown revitalization projects. The renewed certification extends this access to funding for another ten years, which is critical to the Town’s revitalization program.

In undertaking this inventory, the consultant prepared a street-by-street assessment of buildings and properties within the target area, Main Street, South Main Street, and a portion of East Main Street.

Results showed that the area met the definitions and criteria to be certified as a “Slums and Blight” area. More than 25% of the properties (51%) within the area have experienced one or more of the criterion to be considered a blight-

contributing property. Most often, the conditions present were (a) physical deterioration, (b) abnormally low property values, (c) chronic vacancy or turnover, or a combination of these. In addition, well over 25% of the public improvements within the area were determined to be in a general state of deterioration.

In addition to providing continued access to CDBG funding, the certification strengthens the Town's applications for funding from other state and federal resources and, in some circumstances, advantage private developers and businesses who seek financing for housing and/or development projects.



Land and buildings contributing to downtown Webster's blight certification

## Town of Webster Business Improvement District Study (2023)

A Business Improvement District (BID) Feasibility Study was prepared for the Town of Webster by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) in 2023 to explore the applicability of the BID model to downtown Webster. The study provides a snapshot of what a BID could look like in the community and offers alternative models for downtown revitalization that the Town may consider.

BIDs are special assessment districts in which property owners vote to initiate, manage, and finance supplemental services or enhancements above and beyond those municipal services already provided. BIDs use funds raised from assessments on participating property owners to provide a range of services to the district, such as economic development, maintenance and beautification, marketing and events, landscape and streetscape enhancements, and security.

BIDs are nonprofit entities managed by a Board of Directors comprised of property owners or their representatives. The local municipality collects the established property assessments on behalf of the BID and disburses the funds to the BID's management entity.

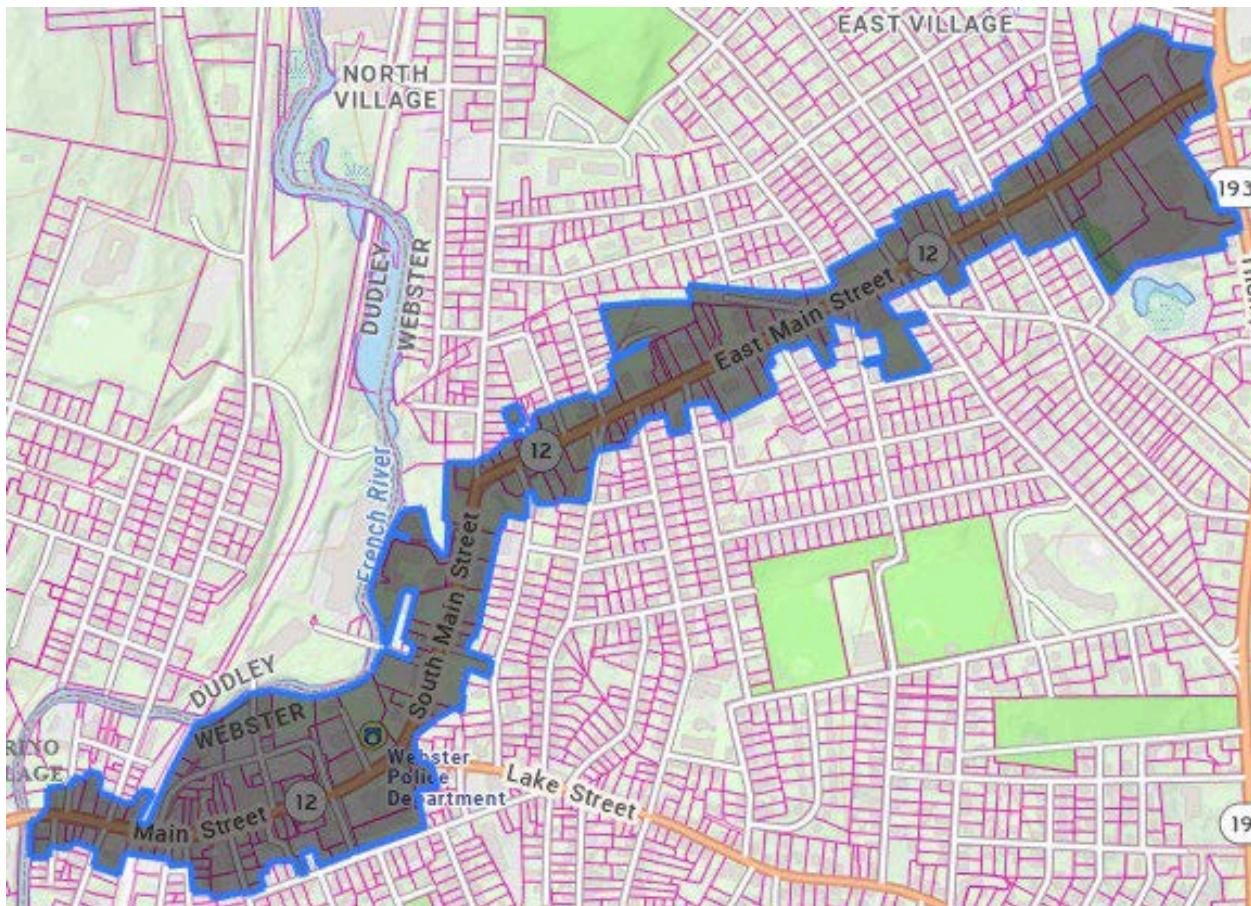
Webster's BID study analyzed the feasibility of two potential BID districts, the first limited to Webster's downtown core (Main Street and South Main Street) and the second extending the entire length of Main, South Main, and East Main Streets from the French River to the I-395 interchange.

As analyzed, the first district option above would raise \$162,154 a year based on an assessment fee of .0035 of assessed value per property, which would be enough to cover proposed program costs. The second district option would raise \$318,868 using an assessment fee of .002 of assessed value, which would be enough to cover proposed program costs.

Results of the BID study are under consideration by the Town.



Option 1 – a BID encompassing Webster's downtown core



Option 2 – a BID encompassing the entirety of Main, South Main, and East Main Streets

## Webster Community Development Strategy (2024)

Webster's Community Development Strategy (CDS) synthesizes the Town's planning documents and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts's Sustainable Development Principles with local, ongoing discussions on development-related issues. The CDS also builds on the one first developed in 2003 and updated periodically, the last substantial update being made in 2018.

The CDS builds on Webster's 2014 Master Plan, updated 2018 Open Space & Recreation Plan, 2021 Slums and Blight Inventory, and other planning documents. Together, these documents form the basis for a comprehensive and integrated approach to planning and implementation.

The CDS was divided into four areas of activity: (a) Housing, (b) Economic Development and Downtown Revitalization, (c) Social Services, and (d) Public Infrastructure, Community Facilities, and Municipal Service Capacity. Webster's broad community development goal is to revitalize the town's core area, largely the target area west of I-395, with its high concentration of older, deteriorated infrastructure, housing stock, and commercial/industrial areas.

High priorities include:

- Revitalization of the downtown business district;
- Upgraded infrastructure in established neighborhood areas; and
- Planning/design/development for public access/riverwalk to French River.

Medium-high priorities include:

- Improving condition of housing stock in target area and townwide;
- Improvement/expansion of recreation facilities; and
- Expanded programs and services to seniors.

Implementation strategies directly related to historic preservation include:

- **Rehabilitating and preserving housing stock** affordable to lower income persons and creating new units by pursuing redevelopment, substantial rehabilitation and the reuse of existing buildings. Encouraging **infill development** whenever possible
- Supporting **adaptive reuse** of buildings suitable for conversion to housing including the renovation and rehabilitation of public buildings or promoting the creation of upper story residential units above first floor retail units in the **central business district**.
- **Improving the housing stock in the neighborhoods** within and adjacent to the **central business district** by utilizing private funds, tax incentives and credits; and public and quasi-public resources such CDBG, HIF, HOME, MHIC.
- Promoting **investment in downtown commercial and mixed use properties** by leveraging private funds through syndication, tax incentives and credits, and public and quasi-public resources such as CDBG and MassDevelopment.
- Improving public infrastructure, gateways, amenities and parking facilities, using private and local public funds and public grants such as CDBG, MassWorks and similar resources.
- **Redeveloping vacant or underutilized municipal, industrial or commercial properties and vacant sites** and parcels along the **South Main Street Gateway** to downtown, utilizing private investment, tax incentives and credits, and public and quasi-public resources such as CDBG, MassDevelopment, EDA, 108, Brownfields grants and local funds.
- Supporting efforts to foster the stewardship of and improvement of **public access to the French River**, and encouraging environmentally appropriate development adjacent to it, especially where the river runs through downtown, using private, local town and available state and federal grant funds.
- **Selective demolition** of severely deteriorated buildings, where the deterioration is so great that rehabilitation is economically infeasible, especially in view of Webster's still weak real estate market. Demolition

indirectly supports economic development by removing blight, which discourages reinvestment and community renewal.

- Improving intra- and inter-departmental capacity, planning, and cooperation; improving and **implementing adequate planning and regulatory capacity and tools** (revising zoning, improving site plan review standards, etc.); developing and implementing a capital improvements plan by establishing a permanent capital planning committee.
- Identifying and **improving or reconstructing infrastructure** components (such as roadways, sidewalks, parking areas, storm drainage, and water and sewer facilities) needing upgrading or replacement by utilizing local and enterprise account funds, Chapter 90 funds, CDBG, MassWorks, DEP, and TIP grants and loans. Roads currently prioritized for reconstruction include Barnes, Brookline, Maple and Park streets.