

Changes in Wakefield and the region have created challenges that the town must meet to remain economically strong and physically attractive. This section describes these challenges so that clear goals and objectives can be articulated and appropriate solutions devised.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

During the master planning process, town officials, economic development committee members and active citizens expressed their concerns about Wakefield's economic development needs and preferences. A number of issues emerged that define the existing and desired context for growth. These issues are explored in some detail in this section of the Master Plan, and then distilled into goals and objectives in the following section

1. PROTECT AND ENHANCE WAKEFIELD'S CHARACTER

Wakefield conveys a strong sense of New England charm, natural beauty and rich history. Main Street and North Avenue wrap around the shores of Lake Quannapowitt, leading to the Common and the town's civic center. The historic houses of the Lakeside and West Side neighborhoods flank Main Street with its traditional town center feeling. Greenwood's forested hillsides, finely scaled residential areas and retail center have a wonderful village-like quality. This rich sense of character establishes the strong foundation on which this Economic Development Plan is built.

While older commercial and residential buildings and neighborhoods have a coherent character, new developments, particularly some of the more recent residential projects, do not always reinforce the town's urban fabric, or fit into its natural landscape. Buildings are set back from the street behind asphalt parking lots that do not define attractive pedestrian environments. Houses are blasted into hillsides instead of sitting gently on wooded slopes. New development, instrumental to building and supporting the town's fiscal health, should be designed to protect and reinforce Wakefield's unique character.



Wakefield's physical setting is critical to its identity, both locally and in the region. Lakes, hills, woods and wetlands are woven into the neighborhood fabric. An historic home near Yale and Avon Streets is nestled into a hillside.



Many of Wakefield's distinguished buildings have been lost over the years; new development should reinforce the Town's finely scaled core and civic character. In 1955 the 4th of July parade passes Main and Water St.

Recent office developments on Salem St. in Lynnfield are integrated into the rural landscape with planted setbacks and stone walls. These design elements provide an appropriate model for Wakefield.



2. INCREASE TAX REVENUES THROUGH DEVELOPMENT

Massachusetts's Proposition 2 ½ limits the town's ability to raise additional revenues to meet the rising costs of municipal services. New development or redevelopment that increases the value of properties will be required to increase tax revenues beyond the Proposition 2 ½ limits.

Some developers and property owners have expressed the concern that the development process in Wakefield can be cumbersome and appear to be “anti-development” as a result of the town's efforts to protect its interests. Wakefield should work with developers and guide development to create win-win situations, rather than either being the passive recipient of development projects or assuming a defensive position toward proposals. In order to capitalize on Wakefield's unique assets and opportunities, the town should streamline the approvals process and eliminate unreasonable barriers in order to promote responsible new development.

Wakefield's past success with commercial development combined with the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission's growth projections for new jobs in the service industry sector suggest that the town should establish strategies to take advantage of the next office development cycle. Wakefield should identify appropriate parcels and work with property owners to create commercial development opportunities. Wakefield can also rezone and actively market sites to prospective developers. This Master Plan highlights some sites that meet its economic development criteria and are ripe for redevelopment. The town also needs to undertake a more comprehensive planning process specifically aimed at consolidating the parcels illustrated in this study as well

as targeting parcels in other potential development areas. By taking a proactive approach toward development, the town can achieve its economic development goals: appropriate physical development, job creation, and an increased tax base.

Economic development is typically defined as the process of building local assets and improving the local economy so that local businesses can grow and residents' incomes increase. Because Wakefield is primarily a bedroom community of the greater Boston and Metro North regional economy, most residents' incomes will not be directly affected by economic development within the town. Associated increases in the tax base, however, create very significant benefits for residents through the increased services the town is able to provide.

3. CREATE VIBRANT COMMERCIAL CENTERS

Since the 1970's Wakefield has tried to reverse the decline of its neighborhood retail centers, particularly the downtown. These efforts have included physical changes, such as the installation of period streetlights and streets trees, and a short-lived "Main Streets" program to organize merchants. Established in the 1980's, the Main Streets program achieved some positive results. The manager was successful in her effort to recruit and attract new businesses to downtown. However, the program eventually lapsed due to a lack of participation.

Although downtown is certainly surviving, in part due to these earlier investments of time and money, it is not as vibrant as it could be. No entity presently exists to represent the interests of the small retailer in Wakefield.



Melrose, like many town's in the region, has invested in downtown improvements to offer an attractive alternative to regional shopping malls.

Downtown Wakefield has seen energetic new businesses move in, but owners do not always feel supported by the town or fellow merchants.



Although considerable frustration has been expressed concerning the difficulties facing local retailers, the town, its merchants, and its civic organizations have not made the capital or personal investments, or provided the financial and institutional support necessary to help local merchants prosper, and to provide a viable alternative to the shopping malls. A long term commitment is required to make necessary organizational and physical improvements on a sustained basis. Leadership positions must be established and backed up with required financial and political support.

Many merchants located downtown and in Greenwood expressed the need for an organization that could assist the retail community by improving business recruitment, district marketing and promotion. The Wakefield Chamber of Commerce is an active organization and serves its constituents well. The kind of time-intensive focus on improving retail districts that is contemplated here is beyond the Chamber's current capacity. Later sections of this Master Plan discuss downtown organizational options specifically designed to support Wakefield's retail centers, including Business Improvement Districts and the hiring of a Main Street Coordinator working under the Town Planner.

4. ADDRESS PARKING AND TRAFFIC PROBLEMS

Traffic and parking are frequently mentioned as the problems that interfere the most with the quality of life and the potential for economic development in Wakefield. Most of Wakefield was developed before automobiles were the ubiquitous presence they are today. Unfortunately, mass transportation only exacerbates Wakefield's parking problem: out of town commuters park in Wakefield to take advantage of the commuter rail line and the regional bus service.



Haphazard parking in small lots behind downtown Main Street retail (shown here in the lot behind CVS) is inefficient and unattractive. By working together Wakefield merchants can create a better situation for owners and for shoppers.

Melrose has aggregated its parking lots behind Main St. businesses to create an easy to navigate, spacious municipal parking lot.



Increasing the amount of parking that is available will not, by itself, turn retail areas around. At certain times of day parking is readily available. Nevertheless, countering the impression that parking is lacking is an important component of a commercial revival in Wakefield. Unlike shopping malls or downtown Boston, where a significant walk from the car may be expected, local retail districts are assumed to have spaces near stores. As the retail mix and downtown character improve, people may be more willing to walk to a favorite store or cafe.

The town must implement a comprehensive and coordinated parking program that includes some combination of time limit enforcement, parking meters, remote parking for store employees, and the creation of new or more efficient lots. Clearly marking public parking is another key to changing the perception that spaces are hard to find. Parking garages should only be consid-

A downtown between two lakes, easy access to town by rail and road, and a series of well defined neighborhoods create a strong base for economic development.



ered after other, less expensive options have been implemented and enforced. Recommendations for parking downtown, on North Avenue and in Greenwood follow in their respective sections of this Master Plan.

A commuter rail stop at Route 128, with a large regional parking facility, is another potential long term solution to many of Wakefield's parking problems and merits consideration.

Traffic has become a part of urban life, and Wakefield's streets were not designed to carry the number of cars and trucks that use them today. Both local traffic and commuters using Wakefield as a short cut or alternative to I-93 and Route 128 clog the town's main streets such as Water, Albion, Vernon, Main and North Avenue.

The traffic problem takes two forms. Traffic congestion, especially at rush hour, slows cars to a crawl and leads to back-ups at major intersections. At other times and places traffic is too fast, making it difficult for pedestrians to cross the street. Both of these problems need to be addressed with a comprehensive series of solutions. "Solutions" such as street widening often make marginal improvements for drivers while creating other unanticipated problems.

Traffic calming measures – activated street edges, signals and signage, and clearly marked pedestrian crossings should be considered at many locations in Wakefield to improve the pedestrian environment. Specific locations are proposed in the sections that follow.

A comprehensive traffic and parking study should be undertaken to evaluate in more detail the nature of the problems and possible solutions.

5. IMPLEMENT MASTER PLAN PROPOSALS

Citizen awareness and acceptance of the Master Plan, and the implementation of Master Plan recommendations, are critical steps in addressing the economic development challenges Wakefield faces. The open town meeting form of government, however, is a difficult context in which to make necessary changes in zoning by-laws or to raise monies for organizational and infrastructure improvements.

While design guidelines and development models will help define the type of development Wakefield wants, the town must make a concerted effort to put plans into action by organizing both the public and private sector. Town officials, a new Main Street Coordinator, the Chamber of Commerce, property owners and the business community must all work together to implement recommended changes.

6. BALANCE REGIONAL AND LOCAL CONCERNS

Wakefield, as part of the regional economy, must remain competitive by defining, enhancing, and marketing its identity, and knowing where it can and cannot compete. On the one hand, the town is a bedroom community for Boston and will never be a re-

gional center. On the other hand, it has a well-defined downtown and Common with a strong local flavor that attracts people from other towns.

Wakefield can work to increase its share of the commercial development and growth that will occur in the region by implementing policies that put it at a competitive advantage. Wakefield can also capture a larger share of retail purchases by its residents and others by attracting businesses that are responding to a changing marketplace and meeting current consumer demands.

Regional competition is a reality for every town and city; regional cooperation should be an issue as well. The development of the commuter rail line, roads and highways should be coordinated so that all towns in the area benefit, rather than passing their problems on to the town next door. The current Governor has made regional planning and transit oriented development a top priority. At the time of this writing his office has not released their key initiatives. Incentives for certain types of development and a framework for regional cooperation are anticipated. Wakefield should be prepared to take advantage of these opportunities and work within the framework of a broader planning effort

7. PURSUE ZONING CHANGES AND DESIGN GUIDELINES

Zoning and design guidelines are the primary tools municipalities use to balance public and private benefits. They establish the uses that are permitted on a given site, the size and location of buildings in relation to property lines, parking requirements,