

COMMONWEALTH
OF MASSACHUSETTS



TOWN OF BROOKFIELD



CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS
REGIONAL PLANNING
COMMISSION



Town of Brookfield Master Plan

ADDENDUM
2024

Adopted September 2024



Town of Brookfield



A comprehensive Master Plan prepared with technical assistance from the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC), and funding from the Town of Brookfield, Massachusetts and the CMRPC District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) program.

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Brookfield residents would like to recognize and thank the local families whose generous donations contributed to the completion of improvements across town, including the basketball court, the flag pole at Lewis Field, signage, and more.



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Glossary

Policy

A statement of principles that underlies a plan's overall strategy and directs decision-making.¹

Vision Statement

A statement that describes a community's long-term aspirations based on shared purpose and values. Expresses uniqueness and standards of excellence, focusing on people and quality of life. Provides a framework or hook upon which to hang ideas or information. The foundation that supports more specific goals and objectives.²

Goal

A general statement about desirable future conditions the community seeks to achieve to realize its vision for the future.

Objective

A statement of specific and measurable outcomes in furtherance of a certain goal; a condition that must be attained to accomplish a goal.

Action Item

A task carried out within a specific time frame as part of the strategy to achieve an outcome; a directive intended to guide the implementation of objectives.

¹ For a discussion on developing policies, goals, objectives, and action items, see, Rouse, David, and Rocky Piro. *The comprehensive plan: Sustainable, resilient, and equitable communities for the 21st century*. Routledge, 2021, 41.

² Haines, Anna. "Using Visioning in a comprehensive planning process." University of Wisconsin Extension (2001).



Vision Statement

Twenty years into the future...

We envision our town as a vibrant community where rural character incorporates modern amenities and services.

We imagine a thriving economic landscape where new businesses flourish alongside local establishments. A walkable center and common will continue to serve as the heart of our community, where families gather to shop, dine, and connect, fostering a sense of belonging that has defined our town for generations.

Brookfield continues to be a place where our history, natural beauty, and agriculture remain integral to our identity. Our town balances sustainable economic growth with preserving open space and farmland.

As our population ages gracefully, we prioritize inclusivity, healthy aging, and ensuring that every resident feels valued and supported in their golden years.

Our commitment to improving the quality of life² for all Brookfield residents ensures that we have access to abundant green spaces, recreational facilities, and comprehensive healthcare services.

Brookfield will be a place where families can thrive, offering a range of affordable housing options to accommodate diverse needs and income levels.

Safety is paramount, as robust infrastructure and emergency services foster a sense of security for all residents.

In Brookfield, agriculture remains a cornerstone of our heritage, with local farms and farmers' markets preserving our agrarian roots and providing access to fresh, locally sourced produce.

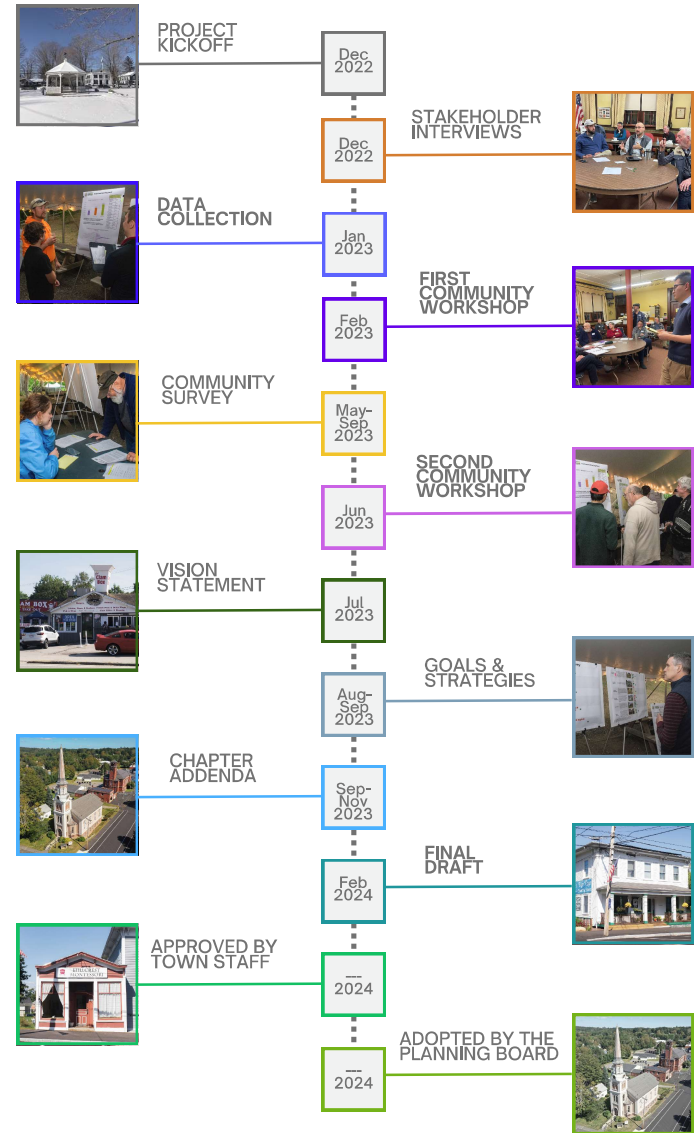
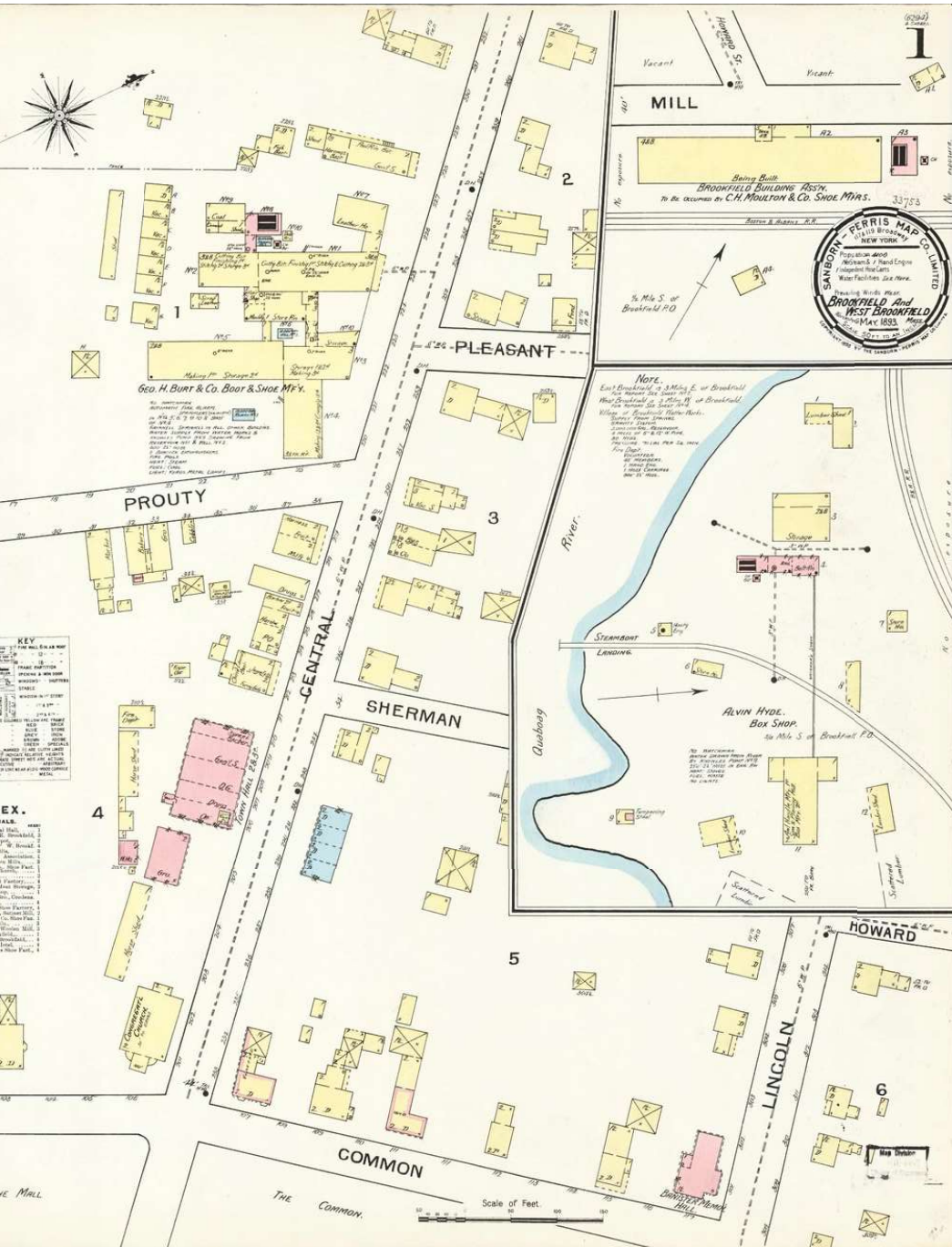
Our commitment to education continues to shape our top-tier schools and offer lifelong learning opportunities that empower our youth to reach their fullest potential.

Above all, Brookfield is a place where history is honored, and community thrives, where the past, present, and future converge to create our collective vision.

1

2

Plan Timeline





02

Overview



OVERVIEW

Walk around the Brookfield Common Historic District, and it is immediately apparent why the town is a draw for those looking for a quiet, rural lifestyle in a historic New England setting. Home to some of Massachusetts' oldest landmarks and scenic rural landscapes, Brookfield is a residential community with a workforce focused on commuting to job opportunities. Brookfield's population has continued to grow since the 2010 Census, though

growth has slowed significantly since its peak in the 1990s. Despite this, home values continue to increase (Fig. 26, Appendix), reflecting the high demand for housing in town and elsewhere in Massachusetts, where prices are driven not by population growth, but by a constrained supply.

In recent years, Brookfield has seen moderate, but steady growth in residential development, primarily south of the Quaboag River. Across Worcester County, the influx of population leaving cities for rural and suburban areas in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to an increase in median rents and

housing values. Brookfield stands to capitalize from this shift, especially as many continue to work remotely and spur local demand for goods and services.

Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued decline in manufacturing have also brought challenges to Brookfield and the entire region. Major employers have relocated out of Brookfield, and beloved food establishments have closed, leaving Brookfield with fewer dining options and with an increasing burden on residential taxpayers. At the same time, newcomers, such as the popular Oakholm Brewing Company,

have opened the door to new possibilities for turning Brookfield into an ecotourism destination.

Brookfield has a small commercial sector. In 2022, only 16 business certificates were issued, indicating a limited commercial base. Brookfield has small pockets of commercial development, located in Business districts A and B. Several businesses line Route 9, but many of Brookfield's businesses are located on Central and Mill Street. This location is disadvantaged compared to Route 9, where convenience shopping and light manufacturing benefit from visibility and high traffic volumes.

A robust community engagement process has revealed that one of the main priorities for residents is to maintain Brookfield's small-town character and encourage the type of commercial growth that would meet

residents' daily needs. As Brookfield's population is projected to grow in the next two decades, this master plan examines ways to accommodate this growth within the Town's current infrastructure capacity while also building a strong economic base and preserving the town's character. By translating these competing priorities into actionable planning, this plan aims to chart a path for economic and physical development that aligns with the community's needs and regional trends.

Several prior plans have diagnosed Brookfield's challenges and identified its opportunities. As a result, Brookfield is better positioned to anticipate changes and disruptions. But as residents have made clear in our community conversations, "It's time to implement!" Residents want an actionable master plan that leads to accountability, action, and

ultimately, to shovel-ready projects.

With this call to action guiding the process, this plan seeks to prepare Brookfield to access funding, investments, and grants more effectively by laying the groundwork for a pipeline of fundable projects over the next 10-20 years.

The Town has put in a tremendous amount of work to develop multiple plans.

BROOKFIELD IS READY FOR WORK!





03

Key
Priorities



PLANNING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Public input significantly shaped this plan and served as a guiding framework. In addition to incorporating U.S. Census data analysis, the plan directly addresses the insights provided by Brookfield's residents and stakeholders. Their invaluable contributions were gathered through various activities, including two public workshops and a community survey where they shared their thoughts and perspectives.

During the community engagement process, Brookfield residents voiced

Residents want a revitalized community while seeking to preserve their way of life.

their desire for this plan to become a catalyst for revitalizing their community while preserving their way of life. To advance this vision, this plan seeks to strike a balance between charting a new direction for development and preserving the community's social and physical environment.

This means achieving stakeholder consensus on how Brookfield can remove barriers to economic development and attract investments. At the same time, it involves planning for deliberate growth management that directs development toward select areas.



**FEBRUARY 2023
VISIONING
WORKSHOP**



**MAY-SEP 2023
COMMUNITY
MASTER PLAN
SURVEY**



**JUNE 2023
COMMUNITY
WORKSHOP**



KEY PRIORITIES

Several recurring topics voiced by Brookfield residents guided our planning work from the start of the community engagement process to the plan development phase. These themes resonated with the key takeaways from our data research and conversations with stakeholders.

1. Build capacity for a more connected community, where involved residents and a responsive government work together.

Volunteer participation:
Residents recognize that the Town

government operates with limited resources and capacity, and they are looking for ways to fill this capacity gap through volunteer recruitment and participation. Building on the momentum that already exists in the community, residents have voiced ideas about ways to mobilize volunteers for participation on committees and in community events.

Engagement with Town departments:

Residents would like an open dialogue with the Town departments and more updates on the state of Town activities and projects.

Regionalization:

Residents have voiced their support for regionalizing services

BROOKFIELD RESIDENTS, IN THEIR OWN WORDS *

“Everybody has to volunteer here. Not enough people working in town to make things happen.”

“We could save a lot of money by regionalizing services.”
(Community Workshop, February 2023)

* Comments edited for clarity.

to save resources while expanding access. Drawing on the success of Brookfield’s regional school district, residents have suggested partnering and sharing resources with surrounding towns.

Our recommendations:

Drawing on precedents from neighboring communities, such as the Leicester Regional Public Health Coalition, Brookfield could form local partnerships to share select services for improved efficiency and cost savings.

2. Become investment-ready.

For a town that has infrastructure limitations and relies heavily on state funding to avert deficits, becoming investment-ready is a complex task. It involves identifying potential development sites and providing zoning incentives to attract investment. It entails actively pursuing and incentivizing developers and businesses to locate their operations to Brookfield, while retaining its existing businesses. As several business owners noted at the June 2023 community forum, Brookfield’s small businesses need individualized support, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our recommendations

Expand infrastructure to potential development sites.

Re-activate the Economic Development Committee.

BROOKFIELD RESIDENTS, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

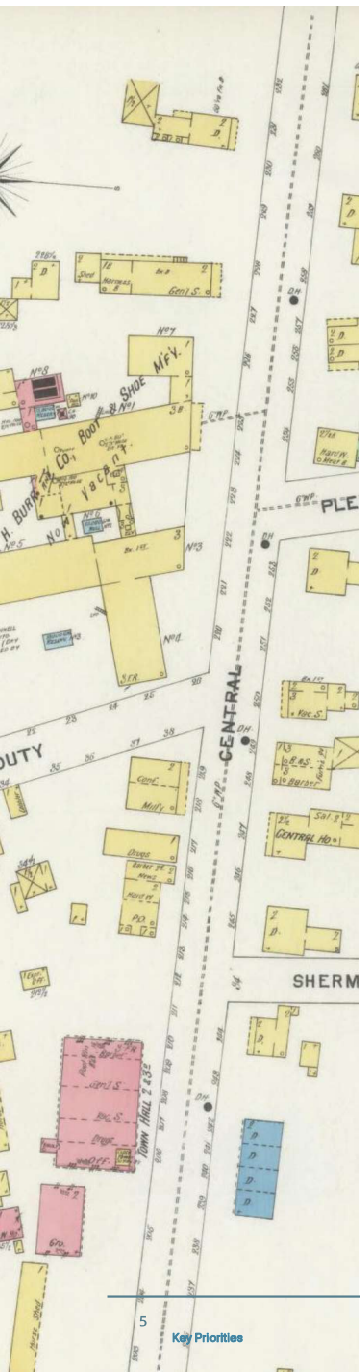
“Growth is not quite a threat right now [...] We need more business in town. We want people to invest in a town like Brookfield.”

“Former shoe factory building south of the town center has potential for development.”
(Community Workshop, June 2023)

3. Develop a pipeline of fundable projects.

To absorb state and federal funds more effectively, Brookfield would benefit from a set of well-thought-out plans in sectors ranging from housing and downtown revitalization to brownfield redevelopment and infrastructure. Yet, a persistent challenge facing small communities like Brookfield is a lack of capacity that prevents them from coming up with fundable projects that align with funding criteria.





Our recommendations:

As noted in the goals laid out in this plan, bringing these projects in alignment with a long-range capital improvements plan would be a key step toward unlocking more funding opportunities.

4. Bring Brookfield's built environment and land use in closer alignment with the community's vision and economic development goals.

Is the zoning in Business Districts A and B conducive to commercial activities? Is the town "business-friendly"? There was consensus among residents that the Village District, as well as Business Districts A and B, are underutilized and in need of revitalization. These districts have benefitted from Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) infrastructure upgrades, and should continue to be key focus areas for planning, programming, and new development.

At the same time, community input highlighted that most of the new development in the past decade has occurred south of the Quaboag River. Though growth has been moderate, it has continued the trend of gradual encroachment on the town's diminishing farmland and open space.

Our recommendations:

Business A district, zoned primarily for retail and service establishments, would benefit from targeted zoning updates that encourage more

BROOKFIELD RESIDENTS, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"Need downtown revitalization. Fill Central Street with businesses. Make it walkable and shoppable." (Community Survey, 2023)

"Don't have industrial areas available. Have to go out of town, because there's nowhere (in town) to manufacture." (Community Workshop, June 2023)

"Retail is starting to make a comeback on Route 9." (Community Workshop, June 2023)

"I think we should keep our town small. I moved here to be in a rural country setting." (Community Survey, 2023)

compact development. The Land Use chapter recommends rezoning and neighborhood planning that reduce dimensional requirements and encourage "infill" development in the town center.

Physical improvements should be implemented in areas of the town center that have potential to support commercial activity. Improvements, such as a walking loop, would facilitate walkability and access to shopping, public amenities (Town Common), recreational uses (Lewis Field), and transit (bus stop on Route 9).

The plan also recommends strategies for compact development in the residential areas located south of the Quaboag River in order to preserve open space.

5. Repurpose Brookfield's vacant and underutilized properties to ensure their highest and best use.

One of the more pressing issues residents invoked was the need to address the increasing number of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties throughout the town center. "I live across the street from a house on the verge of collapse," noted a resident, adding that the Town should address the persistent blight and encourage people to take better care of their houses. Brought on by the gradual decline of manufacturing, and precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Brookfield's blighted properties could have a negative impact on public health,

BROOKFIELD RESIDENTS, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"There are 30 new homes currently being built. Would like to see people restoring buildings before building new housing."

"We need housing for the elderly." (Community Survey, 2023)

property values, and the taxpayers. It is demolition by neglect, rather than new development, that presents the biggest threat to Brookfield's built legacy.

Yet, intervention can pose a challenge for town officials and residents alike. Brookfield's town center includes many independent property and business owners, and properties in various conditions. While the Town may influence their decisions, through levers such as a vacant property registry, or tax title enforcement, they have no control over how owners choose to use their properties. An article intended to address this problem was voted down in recent years.

Our recommendations:

The Economic Development chapter looks into programs such as the the Attorney General's Neighborhood

Renewal Division to recommend approaches ranging from enforcing the Sanitary Code, to instituting a vacant properties bylaw.

More broadly, this plan looks at precedents from neighboring communities to recommend that the Town inventory vacant properties, and encourage the adaptive reuse, rehabilitation, and resale of properties with development potential for affordable and senior housing.

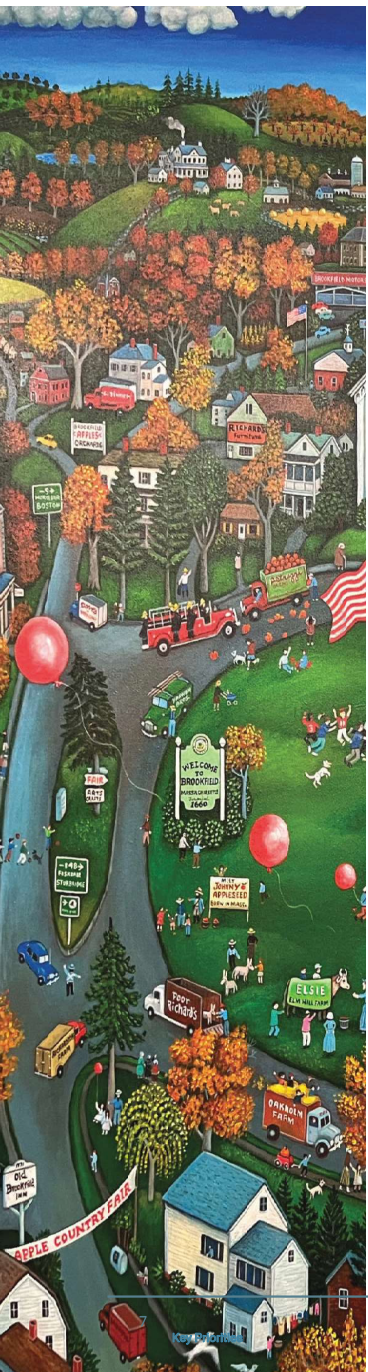
6. A Town that leverages its natural and historic assets to improve the economy and quality of life.

With 26% of its land occupied by open water/wetlands and abundant open space, Brookfield is a natural asset-rich town. Yet, as the residents suggested during our community

BROOKFIELD RESIDENTS, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"Oakholm is bringing tourists into town."

"We would like more walking trails and bike paths. Need more access to nature." (Community Workshop, June 2023)



dialogues, Brookfield is poor in amenities. “We have a lot of open space with no access,” noted one workshop participant, adding that, “historic sites under MassWildlife management aren’t being maintained or have any walking trails or bike paths.” Similarly, Brookfield’s ponds are underutilized. Multiple workshop participants voiced the need for sidewalks and a beach at North Pond, in addition to kayaking activities and fishing tournaments. To ensure that Brookfield can take advantage of its natural assets for generations to come, the town needs zoning and programming that make these amenities available to residents.

Our recommendations:

The Land Use and Open Space, Recreation, Natural, and Cultural Resources chapters identify both protection strategies for the town’s natural historical assets, and infrastructure improvements that would expand public access.

With a rich history and scenic open space areas, and new businesses such as the Oakholm Brewing Company that have become a regional draw, Brookfield is well positioned to capitalize from a pivot to ecotourism and agritourism. A long-range economic development strategy should leverage this momentum to chart a new course and market Brookfield as an ecotourism destination.



26%
of Brookfield is
unbuildable due to
wetland constraints.

10.5%
of Brookfield is open
water

11.1%
wetlands

4.2%
forested areas



**Leveraging
natural and
historic assets:
Brookfield
could become
an ecotourism
destination.**





04

Economic
Development



Quality of life is a key consideration for economic development.

OVERVIEW

One of Brookfield's more contentious topics is whether growth is desirable, how to pay for it, and where it should be located. Residents have expressed concern with the pressure growth may put on infrastructure

such as schools, water, roads, and emergency services. In many ways, this is a debate familiar to rural communities in Central Massachusetts faced with the need to diversify their tax base: how to achieve the benefits of growth while maintaining the essence of their community's character.

Community input underscored that quality of life is a key consideration shaping residents' economic development priorities. There is a strong interest in focusing resources on public amenities, such as improving the aesthetics of the

town center, enhancing amenities around the town's natural areas, and providing cultural programming and events that bring the community together. These shared priorities can provide a more effective framework for targeting economic development measures the residents will support.

Incorporating quality of life elements into a long-range economic development plan can give residents and staff a better idea of how the town can leverage its cultural and natural assets for revenue generating opportunities. In

Ecotourism is a promising economic development framework that could enable Brookfield to use its historic resources and natural assets productively and become a destination for recreational activities.

particular, ecotourism is a promising economic development framework that could enable Brookfield to use its historic resources and natural assets productively and become a destination for recreational activities.

Brookfield's businesses, in particular those dependent on foot traffic, have been impacted in recent years by the continued decline of retail and the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the publication of the 2011 Master Plan, one of Brookfield's largest employers, Gavitt Wire & Cable



Leverage cultural and natural assets for revenue generating opportunities.

Company, has moved its operations to West Brookfield, leaving behind a vacant industrial building located on Central Street. Carmella's Kitchen, a restaurant that once employed between 25 and 50 people, has closed, further reducing dining options in town. Gables, a restaurant that once operated in the "Gables" building on Post Road, has met a similar fate. Long-term residents recall that the town center used to be a "happening" place, with four restaurants, a newsstand/candy store, and more. Today, the Clam Box on Rout 9 remains the only restaurant in Brookfield and is a destination for out-of-town patrons.

The town's geography poses a

challenge to its ability to retain and attract businesses. Many of its retail businesses are located off Route 9, which hinders their visibility. Brookfield residents drive to towns such as Spencer and Sturbridge to shop for groceries since the town's commercial center is unable to meet this demand. Tip-Top Country Store, however, is the exception. It has weathered the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to thrive on Central Street, where it remains a destination for shoppers from neighboring towns. Furthermore, the town lacks easy highway access, and thus is not an attractive location for industrial development.

This challenge, however, may be



Residents support reducing the burden on the residential taxpayers, who make up 95% of the town's tax levy.

an advantage when it comes to attracting residential development. Many long-term and new residents have noted that Brookfield's quiet, rural way of life was the determining factor in their decision to move to Brookfield. The moderate but steady population growth is evidence of that appeal, as is the ongoing construction of the Molasses Hill subdivision south of the Quaboag River.

At community engagement events, and in the responses to the 2023 community survey, Brookfield residents have expressed the need to reduce the burden on the residential taxpayers, who make up 95% of the town's tax levy. Thus, this chapter is focused on identifying ways to attract more businesses in order to diversify the town's commercial and industrial tax base, while preserving Brookfield's small town character.

KEY FINDINGS

Opportunities for Ecotourism

Brookfield's economy has roots in its agricultural traditions and farms. The Agricultural Commission is actively promoting local agriculture, while also working on regulatory initiatives, such as the passage of a Right-to-Farm Bylaw. But the agricultural business community in Brookfield, much like the rest of the region, faces physical and economic barriers. These barriers have called into question the future of farming in Brookfield and beyond, particularly as chapter lands are removed from classification and solar fields replace agriculture practices.

Ecotourism and historic tourism are a potential avenue and an established economic driver in the region, with orchards, bike trails, and camp sites being the main draws. To capitalize on this economic opportunity, the Town could work through its Agricultural and Historical Commissions to promote main ecotourism attractions in town (Figure 1). Sites such as the Quaboag River, Elm Hill Farm Historic District, and Oakholm Farm and Brewing Company present great opportunities for marketing the town as a destination. Oakholm Brewing in particular has become in recent years a regional destination for events, dining, and other family-friendly activities.

BROOKFIELD RESIDENTS, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“Brookfield should become an ATV-friendly place to ride. Imagine how much money that would bring to the town, restaurants, and stores.” (Social media, 2024)

“Stop spending thousands to fight the dirt bike track. It brings people into town that will spend money.” (Community Survey, 2023)

“We should promote kayaking on Quaboag River.” (Community Workshop, February 2023)

“Fishing tournaments should come back.” (Community Workshop, February 2023)

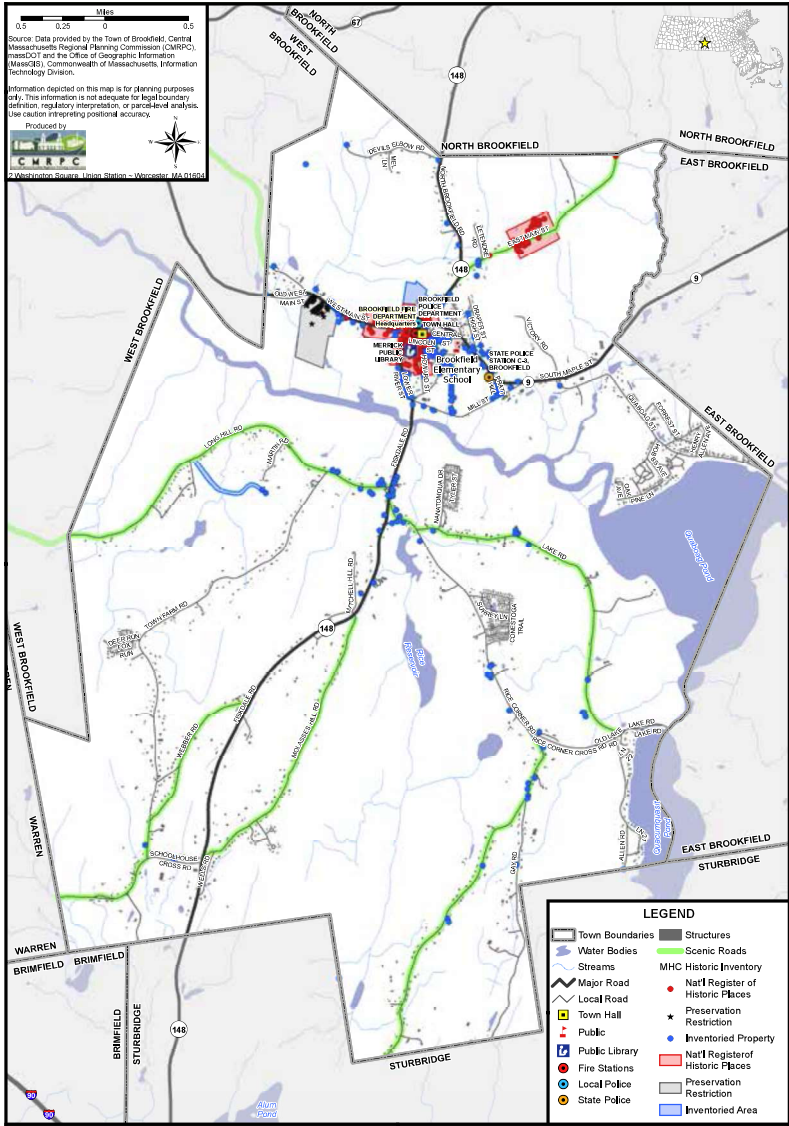


Figure 1. Unique features map of Brookfield. Source: CMRPC, Open Space and Recreation Plan, 2019.



BROOKFIELD RESIDENTS, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“We need more transportation options. It can attract jobs and young people into town.” (Community Workshop, February, 2023)

“We need to consider sewage treatment.” (Community Survey, 2023)

“Town water is limited to too few households.” (Community Survey, 2023)

The Lack of Infrastructure is a Barrier to Economic Development

One of the primary barriers to the growth of the commercial and industrial sectors in Brookfield is the limited infrastructure. The lack of water infrastructure south of the Quaboag River and the lack of sewer infrastructure in town pose a challenge to business attraction and retention. This problem is

compounded by the lack of town-controlled industrial land. Brookfield’s location relative to Route 9, 148, and I 90, could make it a feasible location for an industrial park. However, the cost of infrastructure would have to be borne by developers, since providing infrastructure is not within the Town’s current capacity. Businesses that locate their operations to Brookfield have to navigate the permitting process with no assistance, and do not benefit from incentives such as infrastructure provision or relocation bonuses. For this reason, Brookfield faces significant competition from neighboring towns, such as Charlton or Sturbridge. These communities have a better location relative to the Mass Pike, or have the resources to offer a better package of incentives.

Vacant and Underutilized Sites

At community engagement events, Brookfield residents have expressed concern with the growing number of vacant properties in town. The Town has taken steps to advance the tax title process, yet, many of these properties are current on taxes and may simply have absentee owners. Understanding the causes of vacancy, be it distressed or absentee ownership, is the first step toward devising a strategy. The cost of doing nothing is significant. Studies indicate that vacant and abandoned properties contribute to a decline in the taxable worth of neighboring

BROOKFIELD RESIDENTS, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

““People need to take better care of their abandoned houses. The blight is everywhere. I live across the street from a house on the verge of collapse.” (Social media, 2024)

“Too many vacant and derelict properties and lots.” (Community Survey, 2023)

properties and heighten the risk of mortgage and tax foreclosures nearby, thus having ripple effects that present revenue hurdles for local administrations.

Need for a Revitalized Town Center and Support for Small Businesses

Brookfield residents see their town center as essential to their quality

of life. While the commercial sector makes only 3.05% of Brookfield’s revenue, a vibrant town center would positively impact its entire economy. Beyond having an indirect economic impact, a revitalized town center would improve consumers’ perceptions, which are a key determinant of economic success. Thus, a strategy to revitalize the town center should have a dual focus: providing the quality of life elements that residents desire, and creating a cluster of small business that cater to resident demand for goods and services. Interventions could range from support for small businesses to physical improvements.

78 vacant units in Brookfield



A revitalized town center would improve consumers’ perceptions, which are a key determinant of economic success.

BROOKFIELD RESIDENTS, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“I would love to see another family restaurant in town. We used to go to the Gables and Carmellas all the time. Also, if there were more cute shops on Central Street area people would come out from Sturbridge to walk the street to shop and it would bring customers into the stores that already exist there.” (Social media, 2024)

“Need downtown revitalization. Fill Central Street with businesses. Make it walkable and shoppable.” (Community Survey, 2023)



GOALS AND STRATEGIES

SUMMARY

Goal 1: Create a long-range economic development strategy.

Objective: Become investment-ready.

Action Item 1.1: Attract and retain businesses that contribute to diversifying Brookfield's tax base and increasing employment opportunities.

Action Item 1.2: Improve and extend municipal infrastructure to enable the town to attract new businesses.

Action item 1.3: Establish an Economic Development Committee and a business association.

Action item 1.4: Explore the possibility of creating a TIF and a UCH-TIF-program.

Objective: Develop a pipeline of fundable projects, and strengthen local policies and practices, that will help the Town absorb available funding and grants.

Action Item 1.5: Continue to pursue opportunities for grant funding for capital improvements.

Action item 1.6: Address Town capacity and staffing needs to assist with applying for funding and technical assistance.

Goal 2: Revitalize the Town Center and Support Small Businesses.

Objective: Encourage commercial activity in the town center to support services that meet the daily needs of Brookfield's residents.

Action Item 2.1: Bring business opportunities to existing commercial and mixed-use buildings.

Objective: Enhance the aesthetic qualities of the town center by completing physical improvements.

Action Item 2.2: Implement placemaking strategies to improve/activate commercial areas. Draw foot traffic to the town center by encouraging and organizing events in outdoor gathering areas.

Action Item 2.3: Create a vacant properties action plan help return underutilized properties to productive use.

Action Item 2.4: Create a vacant property inventory to more accurately understand the causes and extent of vacancy in Brookfield.

Goal 3: Encourage the development of a robust Ecotourism industry.

Objective: Capitalize on Brookfield's recreation and nature areas, such as trails and ponds.

Action item 3.1: Incorporate ecotourism strategies in the agenda of the Agricultural Commission.

Action Item 3.2: Attract and encourage hospitality industry establishments.

GOAL 1

Create a long-range economic development strategy.

A realistic economic development strategy for Brookfield would start with a development attraction policy that takes into account some of the town's challenges—a lack of easy highway access and infrastructure—and focuses on specific sectors that take advantage of the town's assets.

Brookfield has a several key assets, such as a high quality education system, its workforce composition, and available space appropriate for commercial and residential development. However, there are also significant barriers to economic growth. The town's population density is not sufficient to sustain a robust commercial corridor. Brookfield does not have sufficient capacity for growth in water supply. The town's lack of public sewer poses a more significant challenge to commercial and multifamily housing development, because it makes the town less competitive regionally in the race to attract businesses.

Objective: Become investment-ready.

Some of these challenges could be mitigated through targeted incentives for businesses, such as density bonuses, business support services, and the creation of a UCH-TIF and a TIF program. Moreover, as outlined in the Government Services and Facilities chapter addendum,

a more predictable permitting process, and marketing/outreach could help match interested parties with commercial and residential available sites. The Town can also pursue state programs to assist in attracting and retaining businesses. As business owners noted at the June 2023 community workshop, many businesses need individualized attention and would have benefitted from support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Action Item 1.1: Attract and retain businesses that contribute to diversifying Brookfield's tax base and increasing employment opportunities.

Brookfield has a few "magnet businesses" that attract local and regional customers. Examples, include the Oakholm Brewing Company, TipTop Country Store, Willow Brook Academy, and the Clam



Figure 2. Inflow/Outflow of Workers, 2022. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OnTheMap.

Box restaurant. However, community input underscored that Brookfield's capacity to create employment, economic opportunities, and attract more businesses remains limited by the lack of infrastructure and the lack of predictability in the development process.

Brookfield is predominantly residential, with most residents commuting for work. Out of a total of 1,913 residents living in Brookfield, 1,814 were employed but worked outside this zone. That is 94.8% of the total population. Conversely, 99 residents were both living and employed in Brookfield, constituting approximately 5.2% of the residents. The largest share of Brookfield workers are employed in Worcester (14%).

The town's commercial sector contributes less than 5% to its total tax revenue, placing the primary tax burden on homeowners. In 2022, only 16 business certificates were issued, indicating a limited commercial sector. With the intention of attracting more businesses, the Brookfield Select Board has consistently voted to tax businesses at the residential rate. Continuing this approach, along with select incentives, such as TIFs, would make Brookfield more attractive to businesses.

An effective tool to attract businesses is creating and maintaining an inventory of available spaces for lease, which the Town can share



with interested businesses. The City of Lowell has successfully implemented this approach through its Site Finder services. Brookfield could adopt this approach and share this database—containing listings of available commercial and industrial properties—with companies looking for suitable spaces. Additionally, this service benefits property owners looking to market their properties.

While Brookfield’s commercial land is underutilized, its lower valuations present an opportunity. Brookfield’s home values, as well as commercial and residential rents, are lower than the county and state, or neighboring employment centers. Brookfield

could position its commercial spaces as an affordable alternative for smaller companies with limited resources that are priced out of central locations. Brookfield could be a viable alternative for startups that cannot pay higher rents in the core of the region and/or do not need a central location for their primary operations.

Action item 1.2: Improve and extend municipal infrastructure to enable the town to attract new businesses. With water infrastructure available only North of the Quaboag River, and no sewer infrastructure, Brookfield has had difficulty retaining and attracting new businesses. Securing

99 (5%)
Brookfield residents work in Brookfield

14%
Brookfield residents work in Worcester

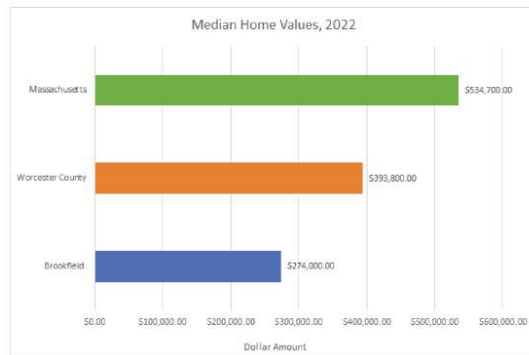


Figure 3. Median home values in Brookfield, Worcester County, and Massachusetts. Source: ACS 5-year Estimate, 2022.

grants to expand this infrastructure would allow Brookfield to identify and market specific development sites and incentivize businesses to come to Brookfield.

Action item 1.3: Establish an Economic Development Committee and a business association.

Although Brookfield lacks its own dedicated business association, it participates in broader regional chambers like the Quaboag Hills Chamber of Commerce and the Central Mass South Chamber of Commerce. The creation of an Economic Development Committee would enable outreach to businesses and access to funding. While a Committee would not have a regulatory role, it could foster economic development by advocating for initiatives and conducting outreach to local businesses and developers. The Committee could support and build on the efforts of Browse the Brookfields, an organization that has for several years served as a promotional platform for local businesses. A similar effort, Discover Rutland, built an ongoing social media campaign and was funded with the assistance of the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission.

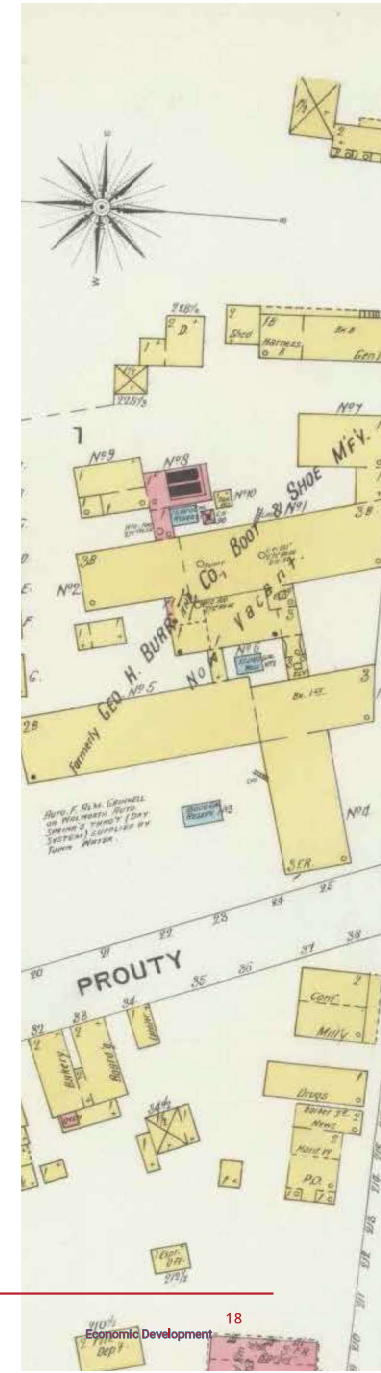
Establishing a committee would play a crucial role in creating a long-range economic development strategy and implementing initiatives to stimulate economic activity, attract investment,

and create job opportunities. By bringing together stakeholders from various sectors including business owners, local government officials, community leaders, and residents, the committee can serve as a platform for fostering networking, and resource mobilization, thereby maximizing the town’s potential for diversifying its tax base.

Action item 1.4: Explore the possibility of creating a TIF and a UCH-TIF-program.

Unlike larger communities in the region, the Town has limited means to incentivize and attract businesses in town. In lieu of a wider package of incentives, such as relocation bonuses or rebates offered to all businesses, the Town could use a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program to selectively attract businesses that align with the community’s economic development priorities. A TIF program could bring hospitality businesses, such as restaurants or cafes, that are most likely to reactivate the town center. A TIF program could also help target ecotourism opportunities. Lodging is limited in Brookfield and it hinders visitors’ ability to take overnight trips. The Town could use a TIF program to strategically create lodging options (i.e., Airbnb or bed and breakfast options). A UCH-TIF-program could be used for housing developments, if certain criteria are met.

Objective: Develop a pipeline of fundable projects.





Small, rural communities such as Brookfield commonly lack project development plans, given the limited capacity of local government. Planning the Town's upcoming investment priorities and developing a pipeline of projects takes resources, time, and skilled staff to develop. But such development plans are critical to obtain state and federal funds. Strengthening project planning and resource development practices will help Brookfield absorb available funding and grants.

Action Item 1.5: Continue to pursue opportunities for grant funding for capital improvements.

Developing a clear and realistic pipeline of projects would help Brookfield align sources of funding with crucial community priorities such as senior housing, public facilities upgrades, senior center development, and more. Establishing a list of fundable projects with clear timelines and funding needs would not only help unlock state and federal funding, but it would also help mobilize community development and community finance organizations, including Community Foundations, local developers, and housing providers. Organizations such as the Center for Community Investment have published a guide on developing a pipeline of projects. Such a tool could help the Town identify timelines, sources of funding, and funding gaps, and determine whether a project is investment-

ready.

To increase opportunities for accessing federal and state aid, Brookfield would benefit from developing a comprehensive capital improvement plan that aligns with the community priorities outlined in the Master Plan. As a starting point, a committee can evaluate existing capital assets, determine project priority, and establish a method to finance each priority. This would increase opportunities for obtaining federal and state aid, such as CDBG, the Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC), Green Communities, and MassWorks Infrastructure Program.

Action item 1.6: Address Town capacity and staffing needs to assist the with applying for funding and technical assistance.

Brookfield could take advantage of the services offered by the Regional Planning Commission, whose role in the region is to create economic opportunities through technical assistance, grant writing, and grant administration. This type of assistance is particularly helpful for communities such as Brookfield, who do not have sufficient capacity internally to pursue and administer grants. Pre-development, budgeting, public bid and procurement, design and construction administration, scheduling, and reporting are time-intensive tasks for which technical assistance would be particularly useful.

GOAL 2

Revitalize the Town Center and Support Small Businesses.

Interventions to revitalize the town center should have a dual focus: providing business support and continuing to make physical improvements. A walking loop that ties the history-rich Town Common with Central Street, where most institutional buildings and shopping establishments are located, would improve access to public amenities. Activating vacant storefronts by allowing temporary uses and launching a branding campaign to highlight the downtown's businesses and amenities can bring people to the area.

A challenge to getting residents to come to the town center is the geographical barrier posed by the Quaboag River that separates the south part of town from the center. Moreover, the population density is low and does not effectively support retail establishments. Creating an online business directory would help connect residents to their town's businesses.

Objective: Encourage commercial activity in the town center to support services that meet the daily needs of Brookfield's residents.

The economic impact of COVID-19 is still felt among Brookfield's community and business

environment, much like the rest of Central Massachusetts. Filling vacancies in commercial districts continues to pose a challenge for property owners and Town government alike. Recovery efforts are further limited by the fact that Brookfield does not have much available town-controlled developable land, and control over leasing and retail attraction decisions, or housing development, rests primarily with the various property owners (Figure 4).

Yet, municipalities can successfully activate and incentivize investments through interventions in the built/public realm, regulatory environment, and business outreach efforts. The Town can put together a business retention and attraction effort that seeks to incentivize investment through active business outreach and promotion efforts.

Action Item 2.1: Bring business opportunities to existing commercial and mixed-use buildings.

With a median income significantly lower than the state and county, Brookfield's consumers are primarily value shoppers (Figure 5 & 6). Convenience and price may take precedence over quality for Brookfield consumers. As one of the workshop participants noted, the "busiest place in town is the Dollar General."

Residents' biggest discretionary spending categories are entertainment, dining out, household furnishing and equipment, and more



(Figure 6). This data gives us insight on the type of demand that the town center commercial corridor can support.

Convenience shopping and dining continue to be the uses most appropriate for the town center area. As the 2023 Community Survey indicates, there is high demand for restaurants, brewpubs, and other food establishments, with 70% expressing support for this category. The next two categories are grocery stores (59%), and agriculture-based businesses (48%).

Objective: Enhance the aesthetic qualities of the town center by completing physical improvements.

The town center would benefit from comprehensive physical improvements. Community members have noted the need for improving the aesthetic features of the commercial areas near the intersection of Post Road with Central Street.

Action Item 2.3: Implement placemaking strategies to improve/activate commercial areas.

The Town could create a pedestrian walking loop to increase access to recreation amenities such as Lewis Field, public spaces such as the Town Common, retail, such as the Tip Top Country Store, and public transportation, such as the bus route in front of Cumberland Farms on Route 9. Encouraging and organizing events in outdoor gathering areas is

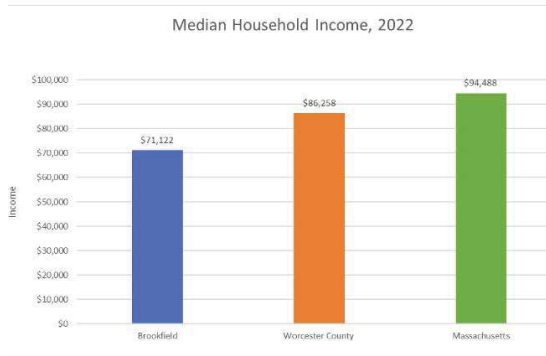


Figure 5. Median Household Income. Source: ACS 5-year Estimate, 2022.



Figure 6. 2023 Consumer Spending in Brookfield. Source: Esri Business Analyst, Market Profile report.

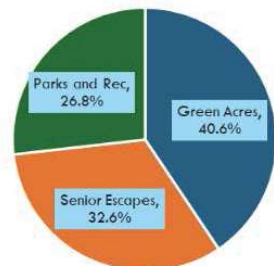


Figure 4. Brookfield's Tapestry Segmentation, 2023. Source: Esri Business Analyst, Tapestry Segmentation Area Profile report.

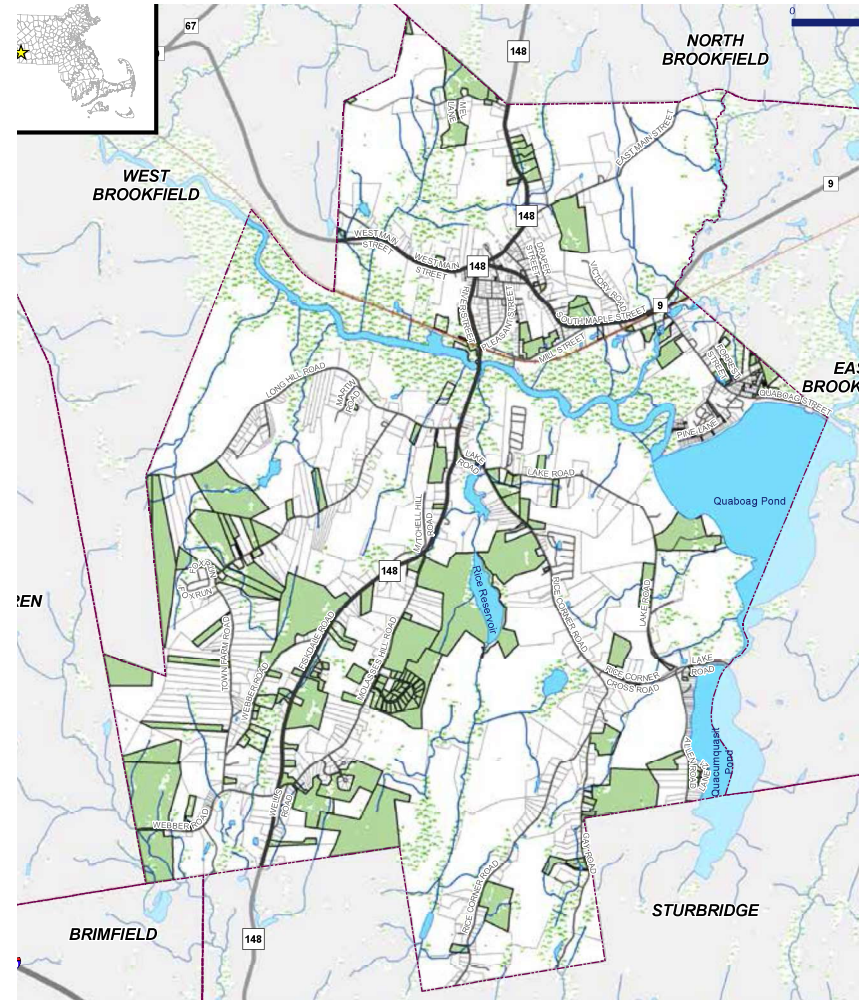


Figure 7. Vacant Land Map. Source: Town of Brookfield, CMRPC and the Office of Geographic Information (MassGIS).



another way to draw foot traffic to the town center.

Participants in the community workshops noted that Brookfield needs branding and signage to help market the town. A wayfinding plan could introduce a historical signage system and historic maps celebrating and highlighting Brookfield's history for residents, visitors, and tourists. The walking loop has the potential to improve connectivity, encourage active travel, provide predictability for pedestrians, and expand accessibility. Moreover, signage would increase the visibility of businesses located off Route 9.

Action Item 2.4: Create a Vacant Properties Action plan to help manage vacant properties and return them to productive use.

During the community engagement process, Brookfield residents have expressed a concern with the growing number of vacant structures in town, and its effect on the surrounding areas. More than 65% of survey respondents expressed support for working with property owners to resolve the overabundance of vacant properties.

The impact of abandoned houses and vacant properties goes well beyond the ability of the town to collect tax revenue. The consequences are both fiscal and social, as vacant properties have a negative effect on surrounding neighborhoods by depressing property values and rents,

increasing distress, and the likelihood of mortgage and tax foreclosures.

Initiatives, such as the Attorney General's Neighborhood Renewal Division, has provided assistance to municipalities seeking to use receivership to return vacant properties to productive use. The program helps interested municipalities use the enforcement authority of the State Sanitary Code to communicate with the owner and bring the properties back to code compliance. Creating a dialogue with property owners, and identifying distressed property owners is crucial for spearheading this initiative.

Brookfield could work with its grant writer to continue to access opportunities for grant funding for building rehabilitation, such as the CDBG Housing Rehabilitation Program.

Action Item: Create a vacant property inventory to ensure that underutilized properties are put back into productive use.

In the 2023 community survey, 63% of residents expressed support for implementing a Vacant Property Registry initiative to protect Brookfield from the effects of blight caused by vacant and unmaintained properties. Vacant property inventories are tools localities develop to understand the extent of vacancy more accurately and help manage vacant properties until they are returned to productive use. The Town Administrator has

responded to the need to address Brookfield's vacant property problem by implementing a tax title initiative, however the Town is not yet enforcing this program.

Several municipalities in Massachusetts have adopted bylaws addressing abandoned properties. Plainville has adopted a bylaw mandating the registration and maintenance of vacant buildings. In addition to maintenance requirements, the bylaw stipulates that owners of vacant buildings must pay an annual registration fee. Brookfield could draw on these precedents to draft a similar bylaw.

Through an informal volunteer initiative, Brookfield residents have taken action and identified vacant properties throughout town (Figure 8). The Town should capitalize on this momentum and formalize their initiative by creating a task force, such as an Abandoned Buildings Committee. Precedents, such as the Athol Vacant and Abandoned Buildings Committee, show that investing volunteer time in stabilizing some of the vacant properties in town can lead to more positive outcomes and lower the public safety and maintenance costs to the town.

63%
of residents support implementing a Vacant Property Registry

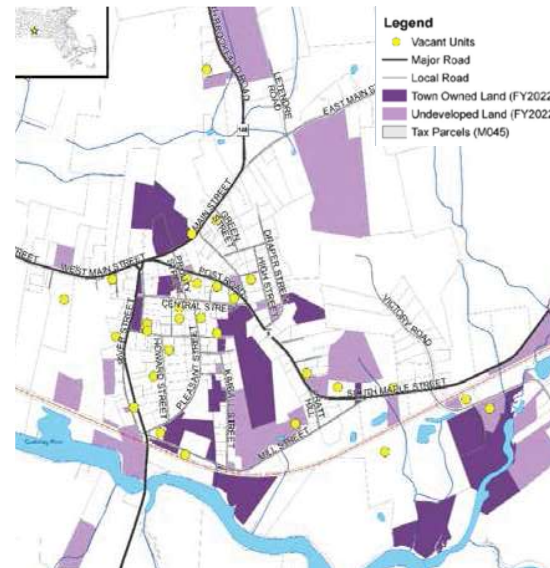


Figure 8. Vacant units identified by residents. Brookfield town center. Source: list of vacant units created by a volunteer resident group and shared with CMRPC at the February 2023 workshop.



\$5.7 M
consumer spending
on entertainment/
recreation

\$5.3 M
consumer spending
on dining outside the
home

\$71k
median
income



Athol is a particularly relevant case study for Brookfield. Faced with a significant stock of vacant housing, and little pressure to conform with the requirements of Chapter 40B, Athol chose an approach tailored to its circumstances. Instead of a Housing Production Plan, Athol put together a plan focused on its existing housing stock. Specifically, it devised a plan to support the preservation, rehabilitation, and expansion of the Town's existing housing stock. The plan sought to address both affordability and the rehabilitation of vacant properties, and thus provided a framework to address blight and at the same time attract new residents.

GOAL 3

Encourage the development of a robust Ecotourism industry.

Objective: Capitalize on Brookfield's recreation and nature areas, such as trails and ponds.

Action item 3.1: Incorporate ecotourism strategies in the agenda of the Agricultural Commission.

To capitalize on economic opportunities such as ecotourism or historical tourism, Brookfield could develop an asset-driven ecotourism strategy as part of a broader, comprehensive economic development strategy. Brookfield should work through its Agricultural and Historical Commissions to promote main eco-tourism

attractions in town. The Agricultural Commission can start by identifying assets and attractions and their potential value to ecotourism. Sites such as the Quaboag River, Elm Hill Farm Historic District, and Oakholm Farm and Brewing Company present great opportunities for marketing the town as a destination for historic tourism.

The Commission should also work to facilitate communication between stakeholders such as farmers, hospitality industry, and other businesses that share a common interest in promoting ecotourism and agriculture. Central Mass Grown and Worcester Regional Food Hub are two examples of organizations that have developed through such efforts and have helped promote local agriculture.

The Commission and other Town boards should identify Brookfield businesses and nonprofits engaged in agritourism and ecotourism and actively promote them. Oakholm Brewing Company in particular has become in recent years a regional destination. Set on a 115-acre farm and in a renovated hay barn, the brewery represents a successful example of a pivot from agriculture to eco-tourism. A Christmas tree and blueberry farm, Oakholm is also a thriving venue that hosts outdoor events in the summer and draws patrons from around the region.

The Commission could also promote

local events that are already popular, such as the Apple Country Fair, and use these events as a marketing platform for the town and its businesses.

Action Item 3.2: Attract and encourage hospitality industry establishments.

Encouraging hospitality establishments would enable Brookfield to integrate ecotourism into its future economic development plans, as well as align the goals of ecotourism with the values of a community. Encouraging overnight accommodations, farm stays, or camping sites could help turn Brookfield into a weekend destination and encourage visitors to lengthen their stay.

