

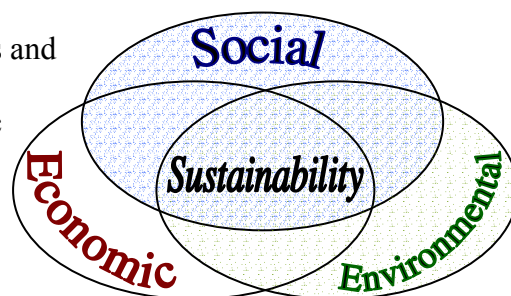
A Vision for Belmont: Mapping a Sustainable Future
Comprehensive Plan Phase III
Draft Executive Summary

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION:

Belmont's Comprehensive Plan establishes a framework for making decisions and setting policies concerning key land use issues and zoning. In Phase I of the planning process, it became evident that while the town treasures its historic land use pattern of neighborhoods, village centers, and quality municipal facilities, change is needed to address key issues undermining this quality of life. In Phase II which began this past September, Working Committees were established for 6 key topics which reflected these concerns: Commercial Development, Housing, Historic Preservation, Open Space and Greenbelt Connections, Transportation and Energy, and Public Facilities and Finance. Residents, business owners and community leaders have provided input and feedback identifying specific issues, goals, and recommendations pertaining to each subject. Public workshops discussed the overlapping concerns and strategies and sought ways to bridge conflicting interests. Further public response to the draft plan will be obtained through a survey and a final public meeting before the Comprehensive Plan is presented to the Board of Selectmen and the Planning Board for adoption for the town.

Section 2 of this Summary highlights the intersection of goals and concerns from each of the six plan Elements. Policies and opportunities that simultaneously meet the needs of economic and fiscal vitality, environmental consciousness, and social balance and equity, will ensure the town's long term sustainability. Section 3 provides a summary of specific recommendations identified in the Working Committee Reports.



Working Group reports, public workshop presentations, and other materials prepared by the consulting team in Phases I and II are accessible at the project website:

www.lkoffassociates.com/belmont.html

Priority Issues

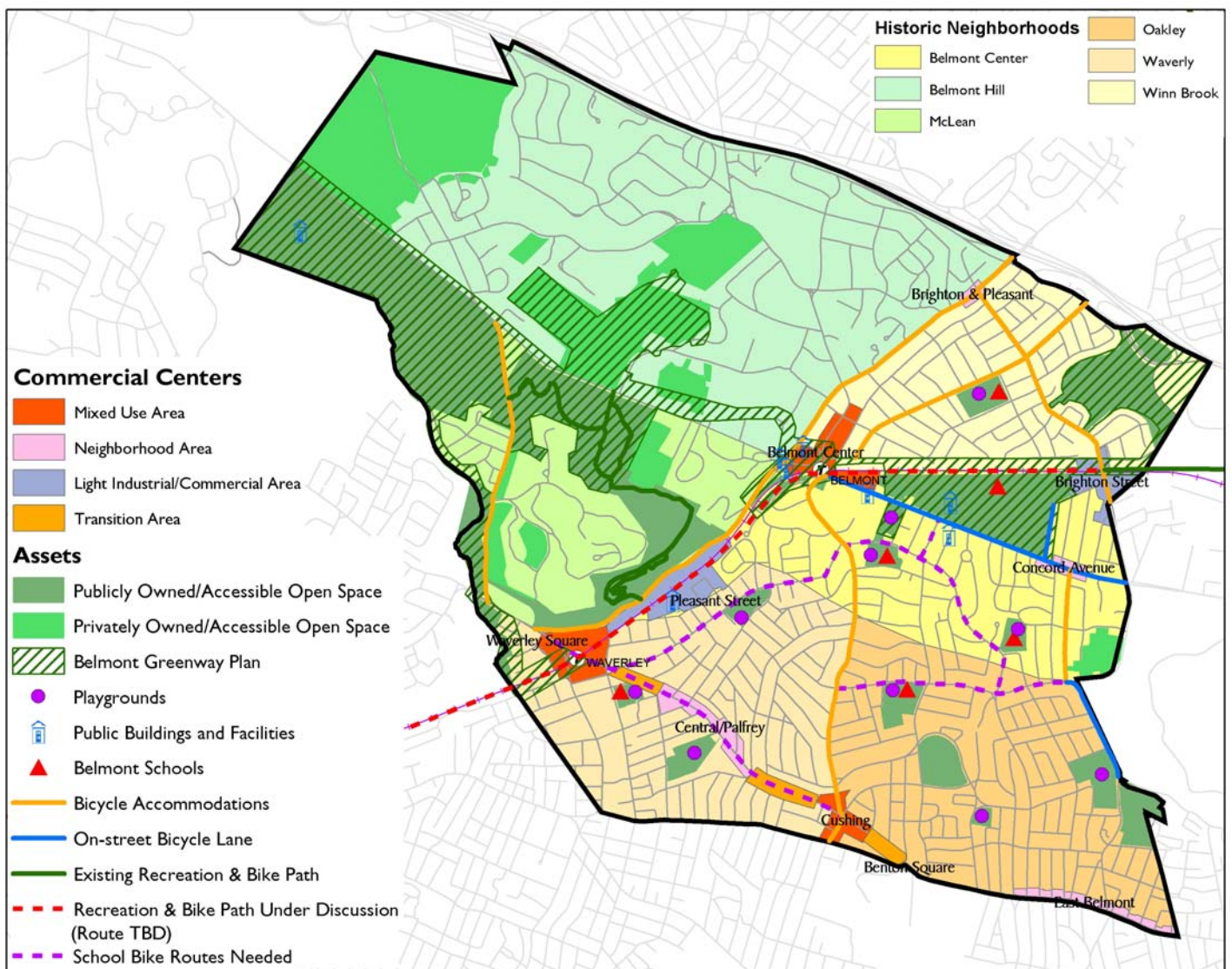
- The quality of the town's commercial areas is at risk due to regional competition, competing visions for accommodating change, and a lack of incentives for investment. Redevelopment of key parcels can potentially anchor the commercial areas and define their future character; however zoning restrictions and lack of consensus inhibit new development that could bring new vitality to the commercial areas.
- The character of Belmont's neighborhoods and commercial areas are being undermined by changes in land use and development necessary to better accommodate the needs of 21st Century residents and businesses.
- The town faces a budget crisis, constraining its capacity to sustain the existing level of services, maintain its assets, and invest in capital improvements. Yet resources are needed in order to provide the planning and infrastructure needed to sustain Belmont's quality of life.

LAND USE VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The Vision for the future which has emerged from this planning process seeks to enhance the sustainability of Belmont's neighborhoods and community character:

Neighborhoods, village centers, parks and playgrounds are inter-connected through a network of roads, public transit, sidewalks and open space pathways. Improved pedestrian and bicycle paths provide access to commercial centers, schools and other public amenities and regional transit, reducing reliance on the automobile. Open spaces and vistas provide connections to the beauty of the natural world, preserve a sense of light and space and offer places for community gathering and interaction. The unique character of each neighborhood, both residences and the smaller business areas that serve them, is recognized and enhanced. Property values are improved through renovations and appropriately scaled improvements providing more energy efficiency and a broader range of housing to meet the needs of 21st Century households. Tree lined streets, yards and small open spaces provide breathing room and beauty in neighborhoods. Commercial centers are revitalized through public improvements and redevelopment of underutilized properties. New developments support vibrant businesses and lively streetscapes, and also offer smaller housing options with easy walking access to goods, services and transit. Historic properties and aspects of the town are preserved and are complemented by new buildings and growth which sustain the town's character while serving the needs of new generations.

Land Use Vision for the Future



SECTION 2 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCERNS, AND STRATEGIES

Nine primary recommendations have been identified to enable the town to achieve its land use vision.

- 1) Refocus control of future development through design guidelines and review process.
- 2) Allow economically viable development which complements the town's historic character.
- 3) Clarify land use vision for each commercial area.
- 4) Revitalize commercial centers through public and private improvements.
- 5) Enhance connections through open space, pedestrian and bike infrastructure.
- 6) Link public facilities and financial planning to land use priorities.
- 7) Improve and promote public transit.
- 8) Expand housing choices.
- 9) Reinforce Belmont's residential neighborhoods through historic and natural resource protection.

Following is an expansion of each of these recommendations, noting concerns and challenges to the community and outlining strategies to act on the recommendations.

1. Refocus control of future development on design guidelines and review process.

Concern: The town's current zoning regulations and approval process focus primarily on height, density, and use. These regulations do not ensure compatibility of new development with the historic character and development patterns in the commercial areas and neighborhoods. Design review processes need more significant input from design and development professionals.

Strategies:

- A. Establish design guidelines specific to each commercial area and residential neighborhood that reflect the unique character of each neighborhood, as it is and as it may want to be, addressing features such as setbacks, massing, roofline, façade and entryway details, landscaping, and site organization.
- B. Establish stronger design review process under the leadership of the Planning Board which balances input from historic preservation, transportation planning, architecture, and developer perspectives, along with neighborhood representatives.
- C. Allow flexibility regarding dimensions, use, and parking for development which meets design criteria in order to facilitate preservation of historic or open space features.
- D. Consider incentives (through density or approval requirements) for development which provides underground parking, streetscape, historic preservation, or other public improvements.

2. Allow economically viable development which complements the town's historic character.

Concern: Disinvestment in the town's commercial areas occurs where zoning inhibits economically feasible development or property improvement. Many landmark buildings in the commercial centers exceed the density that is allowed under current zoning, yet new development

is bound by restrictions on height, dimension and parking that make it unfeasible to improve or redevelop underutilized properties. The cost of planning, building, and navigating the approval process exceeds the value of the commercial space that can occupy small one or two story buildings with required on-site parking. Without allowing for higher value commercial development, the town misses opportunities for improvements that could enhance and complement the historic character of the districts and to attract businesses providing goods and services that Belmont residents want.

Strategies:

- A. Modify underlying height and building dimension requirements in commercial areas to allow economically feasible development subject to a revised design review process that will enhance the character of the district.
- B. Substitute reliance on special permits or town meeting approval to control use and dimension by identifying a design review process which is based on sub-area goals and an approval process which is more comprehensive as well as predictable. The process should incorporate greater reliance on design criteria and comprehensive impact analysis and design review to control development.
- C. Reduce on-site parking requirements, credit off-site and shared parking, and establish in-lieu fees to pay for future municipal supply.
- D. Consider incentives (through density or approval requirements) for development which provides underground parking, air rights development, historic preservation, streetscape, open space, or other off site public improvements.

3. Clarify land use vision for each commercial district

Concern: Belmont's commercial areas are incorporated into four zoning districts, Local Business I, II, III, and General Business, which do not reflect their current development patterns, function, and unique character. Redevelopment of a limited number of deteriorating properties could significantly enhance the character of the commercial centers if there was consensus as to what kind of development should occur.

Strategies:

- A. Clarify the vision for future land use, and design.
- B. Develop new commercial zoning districts that reflect the distinct vision hierarchy of commercial areas uses and design.
- C. Define use, dimensional and parking regulations, and approval requirements that are sufficiently flexible to make new investment economical.
- D. Provide zoning incentives through density or approval process to encourage historic preservation, streetscape and open space improvements, underground parking, and use of air rights.
- E. Identify design criteria to ensure that new development complements the town's historic character.

4. Revitalize commercial centers through public and private improvements

Concern: Belmont Center, Waverley and Cushing Squares, and other commercial areas are in need of better traffic flow, pedestrian and transit accessibility, and enhanced public spaces and sidewalks. Parking impacts the vitality of existing businesses, the feasibility of new development, accessibility to public transit, as well as the quality of life for residents. The town does not wish to expand the area dedicated to surface parking, yet needs to resolve parking conflicts and shortages.

Strategies:

A. Physical Improvements

- Undertake planning and design for physical improvements to roadway and sidewalks on Leonard St./Concord Ave./Royal Rd. Potential improvements include routing one-way traffic on Leonard St. and side streets, widening the sidewalks, creating reverse-angle parking, improving pedestrian access to the Clafin St. Lot and the train station, and enlarging and enhancing the “green”.
- Undertake study of open space, pedestrian and transit improvements to further enhance the commercial areas along Trapelo Rd. and Belmont St. and complement the design of the Trapelo Corridor reconstruction project.
- Plan streetscape and pedestrian improvements in the Concord Ave./Bright Rd. area enhancing its position as a “gateway” to the town

B. Public/Private Partnership

- Identify opportunities for partnership with private sector to accomplish physical improvements.
- Provide zoning incentives (density bonus, approval requirements) for development projects that provide streetscape and open space improvements.
- Encourage establishment of a business association to undertake common marketing promotions and events.
- Organize private/public coordination to address issues that would improve appearance, conditions and experience of each district
- Establish funding sources such as creating a business improvement district, and/or dedicating surplus parking revenues to improvements and services in commercial areas

C. Parking Management

- Prepare a parking management plan to free up “front door” spaces for patrons: install meters to discourage all-day curbside employee parking, increase time-limits to avoid ticketing, provide free parking in more remote spaces, and identify dedicated employee and commuter spaces.
- Lease private spaces from property owners (cost covered by parking revenues) to create new shared municipal parking

5. Enhance connections through open space pedestrian and bike infrastructure

Concern: Being a “walkable” community is a valued asset in Belmont. Investment and maintenance of transportation infrastructure should reflect this priority, expanding accommodations for pedestrians and cyclists, and providing adequate funding for their maintenance.

Strategies:

- A. Continue discussions to identify routes and develop plans for off-street pedestrian connections through the Western Greenbelt and proposed in-town Greenway Corridor.
- B. Create additional pedestrian crossings and/or improvements to existing crossings over or under the railroad tracks at Alexander Ave, Belmont Center, White Street, and/or Clark Street
- C. Provide bicycle parking/storage at transit stations, recreational fields and parks, trailheads, village centers, and other public destinations.
- D. Develop trail marker and park signage systems, providing both historical neighborhood information and directional information.
- E. Incorporate pedestrian and bicycle safety in roadway maintenance and improvement projects.
- F. Adopt “Safe Routes to School” policies and promote walking and biking to school.
- G. Fund the maintenance and reconstruction of sidewalks as part of pavement management program.
- H. Identify opportunities to partner with private sector developers and organizations to fund and/or construct pedestrian infrastructure improvements.

6. Link public facilities and financial planning to land use priorities.

Concern: A number of public buildings are in need of replacement in the near to mid term. The planning and timing of a sequence of public capital projects requires building consensus around over-lapping issues of land use, finance, building preservation and reuse, and municipal services. Decisions about capital facilities should consider the vision for the impacted neighborhoods, including land use, design, economic development, housing, open space, historic resources, and transportation goals. Without addressing the funding needed to preserve the town’s existing assets and services, it will be difficult to implement improvements in public facilities, infrastructure and services to support a land use plan.

Strategies:

- A. Following on the work of the CPOC, planning for the next phase of public building projects needs to be undertaken. Planning for capital projects should consider the land use context and vision for the neighborhoods in which opportunity parcels are located, financial/fiscal benefit to the town, optimal reuse strategy for historic buildings in terms of land use goals and economic feasibility.
- B. A financial management plan is needed that will provide a sustainable level of funding for asset management and services.
- C. The town needs to establish priorities for funding for capital improvements, infrastructure and planning necessary to implement goals outlined in the Comprehensive Plan.
- D. Awareness and understanding of a plan for financial sustainability should be fostered among residents and public officials in order to generate support for policy and funding decisions in accordance with the plan

7. Improve and promote public transit

Concern: The MBTA is considering options to reduce the travel time along the commuter rail line, and has suggested elimination or consolidation of Belmont’s two train stations, in part because of low ridership at both of Belmont’s stations. Belmont needs to demonstrate a commitment to supporting its transit infrastructure and encouraging use of transit. There is not a

specific target for ridership, but the town can strengthen its position through consistency with State ‘Smart Growth’ objectives promoting the land use concept of greater density and mixed uses near train stations to reduce auto dependency.

Strategies:

- A. Change zoning to allow/encourage concentrated housing in Waverley and Belmont Center and along the Trapelo Road Corridor
- B. Consider adaptive reuse of public buildings that create housing opportunities within walking distance of Belmont Center
- C. Study alternatives for providing additional on- and off-street commuter parking.
- D. Advocate for bus connectivity to Alewife Station and between the town’s commercial areas via MBTA or local or private shuttle service.
- E. Improve pedestrian connections and amenities at train stations and bus stops, including pathways, signage, shelters, furniture, and information.
- F. Provide incentives, such as dedicated parking revenues for streetscape improvement and maintenance, to residential areas that allow on-street commuter and employee parking.

8. Expand Housing Choices

Concern: There is a shortage of housing options in Belmont, especially for seniors, empty nesters, young adults, and households with average or lower income; key demographic groups which Belmont is losing in population, as many must look outside of town to find housing that meets their needs. The town can accommodate additional housing to serve the needs of 21st Century households while protecting and enhancing the character of existing neighborhoods.

Strategies:

- A. Modify zoning to promote residential uses such as condominiums, townhouses, mixed use structures with ground floor retail, and adaptive reuse of historic buildings, especially in areas accessible to public transportation. Potential locations to consider include Trapelo Rd., Brighton St., Belmont Center vicinity, and Concord Ave./Bright Rd.
- B. Allow accessory housing units in existing buildings to accommodate multigenerational households and families with multiple working adults.
- C. Refine dimensional regulations, design, and site plan criteria to provide flexibility to facilitate reasonable changes while protecting the character and vistas of historic neighborhoods.
 - allow townhouses/attached single family
 - allow/encourage modification of dimensional standards to protect scenic vistas, yards, open spaces, and historic character
- D. Adopt energy efficiency building code standards and incentives.

9. Reinforce Belmont’s neighborhoods through natural and historic resource protection.

Concern: Historic buildings and open spaces are distinctive features that define Belmont’s small town character and quality of life, but many of these are threatened by redevelopment and building expansions. Open space resources contribute to storm water management, habitat protection, and public health. Yet these resources, many privately owned, are largely unprotected. Education, guidelines, and in some cases public investment is needed to ensure their continued public benefit. In addition to

identifying protection strategies, further tools are needed for enhancing the historic and open space features of neighborhoods.

Strategies:

- A. Create action plans for feasible re-use of Police Station and Light Building, Rock Meadow Barn, and other town-owned buildings and historic assets
- B. Inventory historic and open space assets in order to target and prioritize historic preservation efforts
- C. Adopt a town policy/criteria for acquiring open space and for obtaining or approving conservation easements for the preservation of *private* open spaces
- D. Identify opportunities to provide storm water management and habitat protection through the Western Greenway and Greenbelt Corridor initiatives.
- E. Develop guidelines for streetscape improvements, street trees, and plantings on municipal-owned properties
- F. Establish a wetlands bylaw
- G. Consider a demolition delay bylaw
- H. Consider a bylaw to protect specimen trees
- I. Modify zoning to protect front, side, and rear yard lawns, wooded areas and native vegetation
- J. Consider adoption of Community Preservation Act (CPA) to provide funding for historic preservation and open space projects

SECTION 3

WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

The following summary highlights some of the recommendations and strategies identified by each of the Working Groups. Many of these have been incorporated into the Key Recommendations and Actions listed in the preceding section, and are repeated in the context of specific strategies for each element.

Economic Development

- Develop a parking management plan for each commercial area.
- Improve signage for parking areas
- Dedicate surplus parking revenues to local improvements as decided by local business community.
- Dedicate surplus revenues to residential neighborhoods that allow on street parking.
- Change zoning to reduce minimum parking requirements and credit off-site parking
- Widen sidewalks and enhance public spaces in commercial centers.
- Develop a palette of recommended street furnishings.
- Develop signage guidelines, including desired suggestions and examples for new signage
- Explore public and private funding options to encourage property owners to update their properties (low interest construction loan rates, real estate tax credits)
- Amend permitting process to facilitate new investment
- Delegate to a private/public organization authority to address issues that would improve appearance, conditions and experience of the district.
- Develop common marketing promotions and events.
- Explore feasibility of creating a Business Improvement District
- Revise zoning in commercial districts to reflect vision for each area with more flexible dimensional standards and appropriate design criteria
- Increase number of liquor licenses and reduce minimum seating requirements

Housing

- Allow accessory apartments
- Allow townhouse development and attached single-family
- Allow “cluster” development on small lots with open space preservation criteria
- Strengthen design criteria specific to each residential neighborhood
- Adopt energy efficiency building code standards and incentives
- Allow increased housing density within walking distance of commercial centers and “corridors”

Historic Resources

- Create action plans for preservation of Police Station and Light Building, Rock Meadow Barn, and other town-owned buildings and historic assets
- Inventory historic assets including buildings, structures, open spaces, and views, in order to target and prioritize historic preservation efforts
- Establish design criteria for new development that complements scale and design of historic buildings
- Increase public access to information about historic resources and neighborhood characteristics
- Adopt Community Preservation Act (CPA) to provide funding for historic preservation projects
- Adopt demolition delay bylaw
- Establish new historic districts
- Adopt bylaw to protect specimen trees
- Include historic preservation perspective in development approval process
- Enact density bonus in zoning for historic preservation
- Encourage underground placement of utilities
- Develop guidelines for public/private care of street trees and streetscapes

Open Space

- Adopt a town policy for acquiring open space and for obtaining or approving conservation easements for the preservation of *private* open spaces.
- Identify and promote opportunities to “daylight” existing underground culverted streams to provide greater natural amenities, control floods and establish better drainage.
- Pass the Community Preservation Act to provide a funding source for open space acquisitions.
- Pass a Wetlands By-Law
- Initiate an “Adopt a Stream” program
- Develop an invasive species action plan.
- Convene an inter-departmental, public/private working group to identify opportunities for coordinating the improvement and maintenance of recreational facilities
- Identify potential locations and requirements for dog parks and skate park
- Establish a gateway to Pequossette Park, linking it to Trapelo Rd
- Offer tax abatements for the donation of scenic vista easements
- Modify zoning to protect front, side, and rear yard lawns, wooded areas and native vegetation
- Redesign intersection of Leonard Street and Concord Avenue to improve safety, and narrow pedestrian street crossing.
- Widen sidewalks and expand public parks in commercial squares
- Develop guidelines for streetscape improvements, street trees, and plantings on municipal-

owned properties

- Determine route and identify missing links needed to establish a trail through Belmont connecting the Mass Central Rail Trail in Waltham to the Alewife Reservation Trail in Cambridge.
- Develop trail marker and park signage systems, providing both historical neighborhood information and directional information.
- Fund the construction and maintenance of sidewalks and pedestrian/bicycle crossings.
- Consider designation of additional streets as scenic by-ways
- Establish public/private partnership with business organizations in each commercial square to help maintain the squares.

Transportation and Energy

- Investigate possibility of private shuttle to serve commercial, residential, Belmont transit stations and to Alewife Station.
- Provide on- and off-street commuter parking.
- Improve access to stations, including signage, lighting, pathways, shelters, and furnishings
- Reduce parking requirements for new development, providing incentives for encouraging alternative modes of transportation
- Encourage higher density, mixed use development where accessible to public transit
- Provide transit service information at stations, waiting areas, and online.
- Adopt “Safe Routes to School” policies and promote walking and biking to school
- Fund the maintenance and reconstruction of sidewalks as part of pavement management program
- Improve pedestrian and bicycle connections across the rail right-of-way, including Alexander Ave, Belmont Center, White Street, and Clark Street
- Provide interpretive trail signage on local history along walking routes through various parts of town
- Redesign streets to be shared as safely as possible by autos, cyclists, parked cars and pedestrians
- Provide bike parking accommodations at transit stations, recreational fields and parks, trailheads, village centers, and other public destinations.
- Investigate participation in the “Green Communities” program to fund energy efficiency and energy production initiatives
- Promote energy efficiency best practices in construction and renovation

Public Facilities

- Reconvene the CPOC to formulate the next steps in the town's capital improvement plan.
- Develop a Capital Asset Management Plan to catch up on deferred maintenance and provide a sustainable level of funding
- Pursue opportunities for public/private partnership to fund public improvements and asset management
- Develop a Plan for Fiscal Sustainability that documents financial management efforts, principles, benchmarks, and strategies for capital facility investment, asset management, and tax base growth
- Promote awareness and understanding of the Plan for Fiscal Sustainability by residents and public officials in order to generate support for policy and funding decisions in accordance with the plan.