



Existing Conditions Report

Wilbur Avenue Parcel Study
Town of Somerset, MA
May 2021



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BACKGROUND

This report is provided to the Town of Somerset as part of a Technical Assistance grant from MassDevelopment. The purpose is to summarize the relevant existing conditions and site constraints for the undeveloped Town-owned parcel located at the northeast corner of Wilbur Avenue and Brayton Point Road, near Exit 4 of I-195. These findings will inform conceptual site development alternatives to better understand the economic development potential of this site.

PARCEL INFORMATION

The Town of Somerset acquired the undeveloped 120-acre parcel from New England Power Company in 2003 for \$6.9 million. The parcel, shown in Figure 1, is identified as Assessor Map A-9, Lot 229. It is mostly wooded today with two open field areas and some wetland soils. Stone walls run along a portion of the Brayton Road and Wilbur Avenue frontages. Single family residential neighborhoods are located to the northeast, south, and west of the parcel. A rehabilitative nursing center and assisted living community abut the parcel to the southeast. Commercial or industrial uses, including Home Depot, a solar farm, medical marijuana dispensary, and National Grid site abut the parcel to the north.



Fig.1 – Town parcel context

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- The Town parcel is well-located, with convenient vehicular access to I-195 and Route 6 as well as attractive views to the Taunton River. It is a unique opportunity for the Town to generate new economic activity and address other needs like housing and access to open space.
- The Town parcel is identified in several recent plans as an important economic development opportunity for the Town. The Town Master Plan recommends enabling mixed-use development and/or allowing more dense residential development to meet local housing needs. The Town's Economic Development Plan recommends several potential commercial uses to generate economic activity while minimizing impacts on the adjacent neighborhoods. The regional South Coast Rail study identifies the Town parcel as a combined Priority Development Area and Priority Protection Area.
- Development of the site to generate positive economic impact for the Town will likely require a zoning change from the current single-use, low-density residential. Allowable uses, building height, density and parking requirements will need to be calibrated to allow for financially feasible development that responds to the market and benefits the Town's fiscal standing while being sensitive to surrounding residential neighborhoods.
- Coordination with MassDOT District 5 will be necessary in the future, both to consider potential impacts if a roundabout would be constructed at Route 103 and Brayton Point Road (which may require taking land within the Town parcel) and to evaluate and approve new access points to the parcel from Route 103/Wilbur Avenue.
- Approximately 94 acres of the 120-acre site (78%) is potentially developable after subtracting the commercial easement corridor and wetland areas (but not accounting for required yards or wetland buffers). The unbuildable wetland areas and required buffers could be integrated as natural open spaces within the overall site design for any future development.

RELATED STUDIES AND PLANS

Economic Development Plan (2019)

The Town parcel is identified as one of nine opportunity sites in this plan. It lists potential uses for the site including industrial or business park, data center, or back offices, which would generate economic activity while having lower impact on the surrounding neighborhoods. The plan recognizes that the site is near both the Maritime Development District and the Slade's Ferry Mixed-Use Area, both of which offer potential synergies to explore.

Town of Somerset Master Plan (2020)

Recommendations for the site include:

- **Land Use Recommendation LU2-6:** Consider opting into the Massachusetts Chapter 43D Expedited Local Permitting program to facilitate economic development for the Wilbur Avenue parcel and take advantage of state funding and technical assistance resources.
- **Economic Development Recommendation ED4-1:** Conduct market/feasibility analysis and advance a development concept plan for the Town-owned Wilbur Avenue parcel. Consider zoning amendment as appropriate to enable desired mix of uses and building form and massing for this site.

- **Housing recommendation H1-1:** Enable mixed-use residential development in key commercial areas in town, such as [...] Route 103/Wilbur Ave area, to promote smaller, non-single family, more affordable market rate housing units for working professionals and starting families.

I-195 Interchange #4 Transportation Study (2020)

This study evaluates existing conditions and conceptual options for future reconfiguration of the I-195 interchange and adjacent roadways near the Town parcel. In projecting future conditions in the area, the study made a conservative assumption about potential development on the Town parcel, assuming a 320,000 sq ft shopping center similar to Mashpee Commons. See the “Transportation” section below for more information on existing conditions.

The study proposes two alternatives for the intersection of Route 103/Wilbur Avenue and Brayton Point Road, located at the southwest corner of the site, to improve performance. Since the study’s completion, the preferred option being advanced is to reconstruct the intersection as a roundabout with pedestrian and bicycle accommodations to help manage traffic flow and truck turning movements from the Brayton Point Commerce Center. The initial conceptual design requires taking of a portion of the parcel to accommodate the wider intersection. The study also recommends adding 5’ buffered bike lanes in both directions along Route 103 to provide alternative east-west mobility to Route 6. Such an improvement would require coordination with MassDOT.

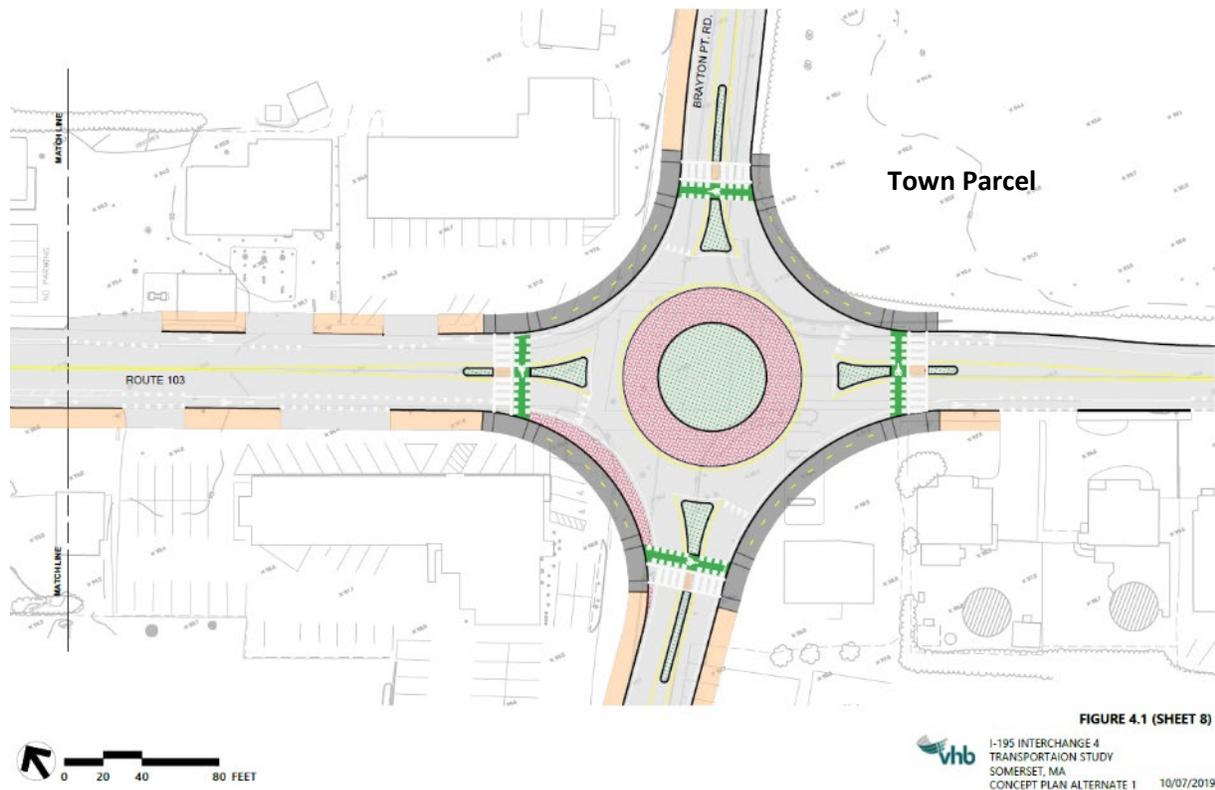


Fig.2 – Preferred concept plan to emerge from I-195 Interchange 4 Transportation Study

Route 103 Access Management Study (2021)

The Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD) is conducting an access management study along the Route 103/Wilbur Avenue corridor from the Swansea Town line past the I-195 interchange to Francis Street, east of the Brayton Point Road intersection. This study is evaluating existing intersections, driveways and other access points to Route 103 to identify conflict points and congestion areas, and to recommend changes to improve safety and traffic flow along this important corridor.

The recommendations from the SRPEDD study will not be available prior to completion of this analysis. Those recommendations may influence the number and/or location of future access points for the Town parcel. The redevelopment scenarios from this analysis will be taken into account by SRPEDD as potential future conditions.

ZONING

The Town is currently conducting a zoning recodification process to modernize the Zoning By-Law. No major text or map changes are anticipated however.

The site is mostly within the Residence zoning district. An approximately 200' x 200' area at the corner of Wilbur Avenue and Brayton Point Road is within the Business zoning district. There are two Water Resources Protection Overlay Districts within the site that roughly correspond to wetland areas.

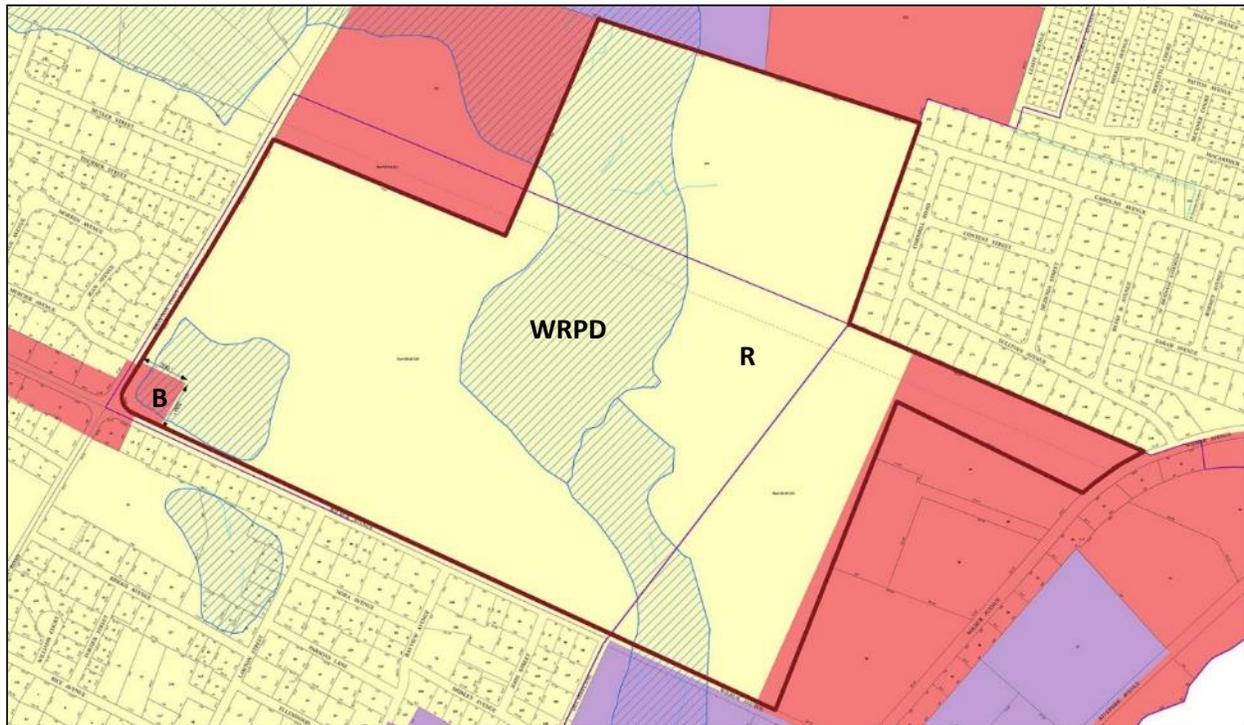


Fig. 3 – Existing zoning



Wilbur Avenue Parcel Study

Table of Uses

	R Residence District	B Business District
By Right	Detached dwelling Place of worship and assembly Public building Essential municipal services Farm or gardening Sale place for agricultural produce (>50% grown on premises) Storage of boats (rear yard only).	Variety of business uses, such as offices, retail, consumer services, restaurant, medical offices, bank, car lot, or gas station Hotel or motel Place of worship and assembly Hospital or nursing home Private non-profit club or lodge Public building Essential municipal services Farm or gardening Sale place for agricultural produce (>50% grown on premises)
Special Permit	Open Space Community, Single Family Dwelling Shared housing for elderly Telecommunications facilities Electric substation	Vertical mixed-use (SP through Planning Board) Shared housing for elderly Medical labs and clinics Auto repair garage Adult entertainment establishments

Dimensional Requirements

District/ Use	Min. Lot Area	Min. Lot Frontage	Min. Front Yard	Min. Side Yard	Min. Rear Yard	Distance between Buildings	Max. Lot Cover	Max. Building Height
Single family, any district	20,000 sf	100 ft	25 ft	15 ft	15 ft	12 ft	25%	35 ft/ 2.5 stories
Other permitted uses in R District	20,000 sf	100 ft	25 ft	15 ft	15 ft	15 ft	25%	35 ft/ 3 stories
Other permitted uses in B District	Any	Any	25 ft	None, except 20 ft next to R District	25 ft	10 ft	30%	35 ft

Residence District

The Residence district is a low-density, single use district. Single family dwellings on 20,000 sq ft minimum lots with 25' front yard setbacks and 35' maximum heights are allowed by-right. An Open Space Community (see more below) is allowed by special permit from the Planning Board.

Business District

The Business district is a commercial district allowing a variety of business-type uses. There is no minimum lot size for commercial uses and a maximum building height of 35'. Vertical mixed-use is allowed by special permit from the Planning Board.

Water Resources Protection Overlay District

Approximately 13.3 acres of the site are within Water Resources Protection Overlay Districts. Permitted uses in the overlay district are farming, forestry, essential municipal uses, open space and recreational uses. All uses and buildings allowed in the underlying zoning district are allowed only by special permit issued by the Planning Board, which requires a site plan submittal and stormwater runoff calculations.

Off-street parking requirements

Class of Allowed Use	Minimum off-street parking spaces required
Residence having fewer than 2 bedrooms	1 space
Residence having 2 or more bedrooms	2 spaces
Retail business or office	1 space per 300 SF gross floor area
Restaurant, bar	1 space per 3 seats; + 5 spaces for each take-out station. 4 stacking spaces per drive-up window.
Hotel or motel	1 space per rentable room, plus 1 space per 150 SF public meeting area
Light Industrial	1 space per 1.3 employees, but not less than 1 space per 300 SF gross floor area
Industry, wholesale business	1 space per 1,000 SF gross floor area
Mixed Use Development	As determined by the Planning Board, but no fewer than 2 spaces per dwelling unit

Parking

Parking requirements are provided in the zoning bylaw. Section 6.7 notes that “parking requirements are cumulative for mixed uses.” It also states that parking for commercial uses in mixed use developments is determined by the Planning Board, and that residential uses in mixed use developments require no fewer

than 2 spaces per unit. These requirements inhibit shared parking between complimentary uses which can help reduce the amount of land needed for parking areas and reduce costs to the developer.

Other Zoning Districts

Planned Development

Section 6.10 of the Zoning By-Law establishes Planned Development to allow commercial and industrial uses in zoning districts other than Light Industrial or Limited Business. A site plan must be filed with and approved by the Board of Appeals, which must refer the request to the Planning Board for review prior to approval.

Mixed Use Overlay District

Section 9.4 of the Zoning By-Law establishes the Mixed Use Development Overlay District to encourage a mix of commercial and residential uses in Business Districts and approved by Special Permit. Permitted uses include single family, townhouse, and multi-family with a maximum of 3 units per acre and a variety of commercial uses including retail, dining, office, personal services, and artist studios. At least two parking spaces per dwelling unit is required.

Open Space Community

Section 8.0 of the Zoning By-Law allows an Open Space Community to be approved by Special Permit of the Planning Board in Residence and Open Recreation zoning districts. The purpose is to provide permanent open space and to protect natural features from development. It requires at least five acres of contiguous land and 300' frontage on a public street. At least 30% of the Base Site Area must be reserved as Common Open Space, inclusive of wetlands and utility rights-of-way.

An Open Space Community allows for single family, multi-family, and townhouses up to three units per acre. Two off-street parking spaces per unit are required. Dimensional requirements for these uses are:

- Single family dwelling: 8,000 SF minimum lot area, 75' minimum street frontage 30% maximum lot coverage
- Townhouses and multi-family: 4,000 SF net buildable site area per dwelling unit, 20' minimum street frontage, 35% maximum lot coverage, 1,200 SF minimum living area per unit.

Large-Scale Ground Mounted Solar Photovoltaic Installations

Section 11.0 of the Zoning By-Law establishes the Large-Scale Ground-Mounted Solar Photovoltaic Installation Overlay District (SPOD). It requires at least five acres of land and proposals are subject to Site Plan Review for approval. It applies to Business, Residence and other zoning districts in the Town.

CONSTRAINTS: EASEMENT AND WETLANDS

The parcel is encumbered by a commercial easement held by New England Power Company containing a high-tension electrical transmission corridor. The approximately 260' wide easement contains 14.8 acres and includes five pairs of electrical transmission towers. According to the property deed, the easement allows access by the utility company for maintenance of underground and overhead transmission facilities. The deed grants that the easement may be crossed by two access roads substantially perpendicular to the easement for the purpose of connecting the portions of the parcel north and south of the easement. The location of these roads must be approved by New England Power Company.

Wilbur Avenue Parcel Study

GIS data indicates that there are approximately 12.3 acres of wetlands on the site, including 1.25 acres within the easement. The wetlands roughly correspond to the Water Resources Protection District on the zoning map. The easement effectively divides the parcel in two, a smaller northern portion of approximately 22.5 acres after subtracting the wetland areas and a larger southern portion of approximately 73 acres after subtracting the wetland areas. Within the southern area, the wetlands further divide the buildable area into a larger western area and a smaller eastern area.

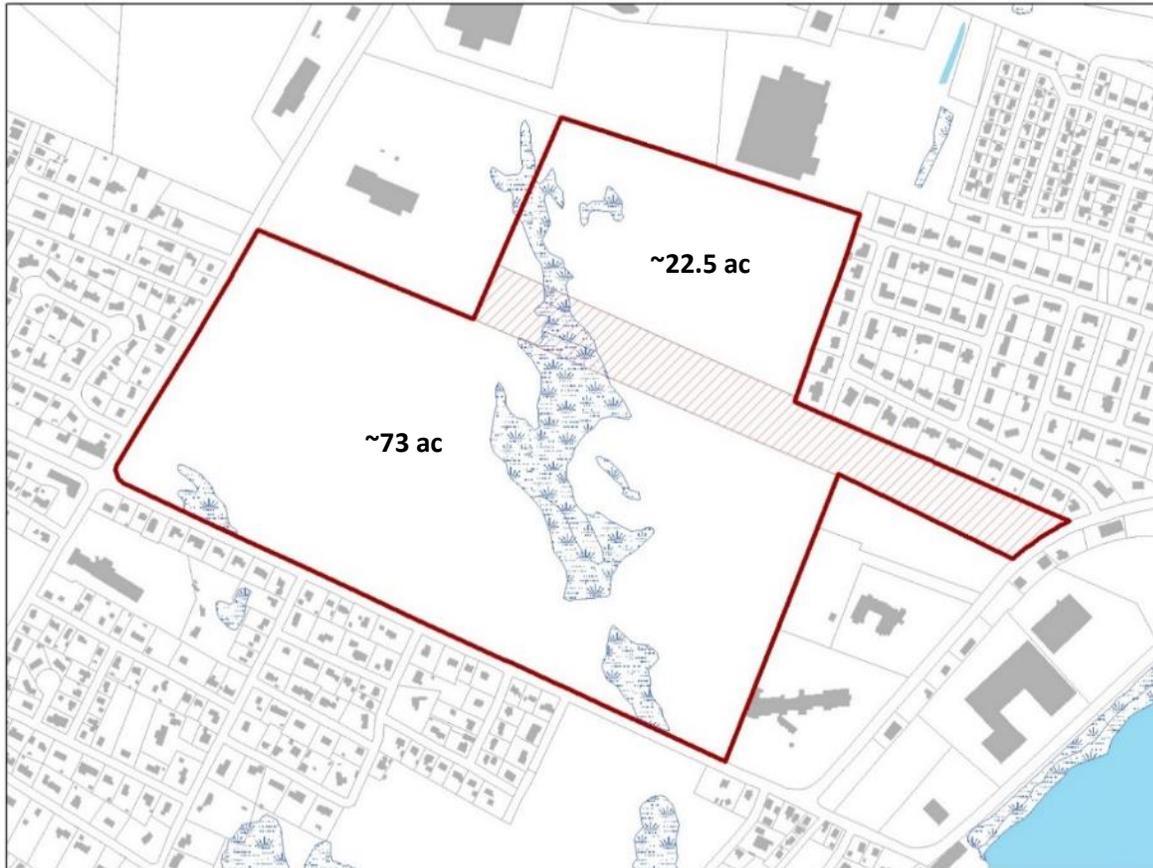


Fig.4 – Wetland areas and the commercial easement reduce the buildable area of the parcel

TRANSPORTATION

The Town parcel is bounded by State Route 103, also known as Wilbur Avenue, along the southern and eastern sides and by Brayton Point Road on the western side. There is no road frontage along the northern side of the parcel.

Findings from I-195 Interchange #4 Transportation Study

Route 103/Wilbur Avenue is a MassDOT roadway and carries 17,000 vehicles per day. Brayton Point Road is a Town roadway that carries 4,800 vehicles per day north of Wilbur Avenue. The intersection of these two roads operates within acceptable capacity and operational standards (Level of Service C) during both the AM and PM peak hour as observed in 2018.

Wilbur Avenue Parcel Study

Location	Weekday ADT	Weekday AM		Weekday PM	
		Volume	Directional Distribution	Volume	Directional Distribution
Wilbur Avenue (Route 103) at the Somerset Town Line	17,100	1,130	67% EB	1,420	62% WB
Brayton Point Road north of Wilbur Avenue (Route 103)	4,800	500	53% SB	550	59% NB
Brayton Point Road south of Wilbur Avenue (Route 103)	1,600	115	70% NB	145	52% SB

Between 2012-2016, there were 47 reported crashes (average 9.4 annually) and 10 injuries at the Wilbur Avenue/Brayton Point Road intersection, the most at any of the 14 intersections within the study area. Frequent red-light running and through vehicles maneuvering around left-turn queues with limited visibility may be some of the contributing factors. Truck traffic through the intersection causes operational issues as turning radii cause centerline crossovers and sidewalk encroachments.

SITE ACCESS

Site access points from Route 103/Wilbur Avenue may be limited since it is a MassDOT roadway. Any new access will need to follow MassDOT's Project Development & Design Guide and coordinate with District 5 on appropriate driveway separation from the Rt 103/Brayton Point Road intersection. The Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD) is currently conducting a Route 103 access management study, one of the recommendations from the I-195 Transportation Study, that will provide further guidance which will impact access options for future development on the Town-owned parcel.

Brayton Point Road along the parcel's western boundary is a Town-owned roadway. There are two existing unused curb cuts along it, one located north of Mercier Avenue (approx. 400' north of Rt 103) and one just south of Thurber Avenue. Neither aligns with existing curb cuts on the opposite side of the street.

The narrow eastern leg of the site that reaches Wilbur Avenue just south of Sullivan Avenue is completely within the restricted easement area so no roadway access is likely there.

UTILITIES

Water Service

- There are no known existing water utilities on-site. An 8" cast iron water main is located in the eastbound lane of Wilbur Avenue, toward the south shoulder of the road. Installation of a new branch line to the Town parcel would have to cross Wilbur Avenue, requiring MassDOT approval and methods.

Sewer Service

- There are no known existing sewer utilities on-site. A gravity sewer line is located in Wilbur Avenue, with service at Del Tom Lane. There is a 14" gravity sewer line in Brayton Point Road as well. The Sewer Department reports that there should be capacity for development on the Town parcel, but no independent assessment was made of this claim.

Electric Service

- There are no existing electric utilities serving the site but adjacent power lines indicate service could be provided. Overhead power lines run along the south side of Wilbur Avenue and the west side of Brayton Point Road. The easement through the site carries high-tension electric transmission wires.

COST ANALYSIS

The Town of Somerset purchased this parcel in 2003 for \$6,900,000, or \$57,500 per acre for the 120-acre parcel. Accounting for inflation since then and comparing it to the assessed value of the unimproved parcel today illustrates the current fiscal position of the site relative to the Town's initial investment:

- Inflation-adjusted purchase price: approx. \$9,932,900 in 2021 dollars = \$82,750 per acre
- 2021 assessed value: \$2,773,400 (land) = \$23,100 per acre (no change since 2012)
- Difference between inflation-adjusted purchase price and 2021 assessed value for unimproved land = \$7,159,500

STAKEHOLDER INPUT

An online meeting was held on May 4 with an invited small group of Town staff, nearby property/business owners, and community representatives. The purpose of this initial meeting was to gather input and ideas about the Town-owned site, especially any relevant existing condition or previous planning information and feedback on potential future uses to help identify two that will be explored in the next phase of work. Key themes and takeaways from this meeting include:

- The Town-owned parcel is large enough to accommodate multiple uses while also preserving open space such as the wetland areas.
- The wetlands areas can be treated as an amenity such as a publicly-accessible open space while also buffering different uses on the site from one another.
- Potential development should focus on adding tax-generating uses for the Town.
- Development considerations should include how much traffic would be added to the already busy Wilbur Avenue/Brayton Point Road intersection. Daily commuters from the wider community use it to get to I-195 but it's also a critical detour when the Braga Bridge is closed for maintenance or emergencies.
- Pedestrian and bicycle connections should be made to and through the site from adjacent neighborhoods, Slades Ferry, and the Route 6 commercial area to benefit nearby residents and those living and working in future development on the Town-owned parcel.
- The northern portion of the site, north of the power line easement, might be a good place for any slightly taller buildings or for light industrial uses given its relative isolation.
- Access to Route 6 via the Home Depot parking lot could be explored but would require their cooperation. Walking paths to Stop & Shop and Fairfield Commons retail would attract residents.

Wilbur Avenue Parcel Study

- Regarding potential future uses:
 - The site provides an opportunity for different types of housing instead of typical single family. Ideas include condos, townhouses, 'missing middle' housing types for young professionals and seniors.
 - Medical office or back office could be desirable commercial uses.
 - Any light industrial use would need to consider impacts on surrounding areas such as site lighting, noise, odor, and traffic generated by shift changes.
 - Consider whether an institution would be interested in expansion – a satellite building(s) or campus, training facility, etc.
 - Consider a zoning approach that identifies a limit of intensity such as traffic, density, or other impacts without specifying a list of uses – let the market propose viable uses within those limits and accommodate emerging industries.
- Regarding existing conditions:
 - High-speed internet runs from the Wilbur/Riverside rotary up to Route 6 and then west. A data farm might want to be closer to that than the Town-owned parcel.
 - Traffic signal timing changes at Wilbur/Brayton Point may help congestion (longer green for Wilbur Avenue).
 - The curve of Wilbur Avenue at Alden Place makes it hard to see oncoming traffic, so any new site access should be far enough away from that for visibility.
 - The part of the site near Wilbur/Brayton Point is often wet so may not be suitable for development (only part of the site currently zoned B – Business).

SITE PHOTOS



View of southwest corner of parcel, on Brayton Point Road looking north across Wilbur Avenue



View of transmission towers in utility easement

Wilbur Avenue Parcel Study



View across site to southwest toward Fall River and Taunton River



Existing stone walls and unused curb cut along Brayton Point Road.