



Final Report

Wilbur Avenue Parcel Study
Town of Somerset, MA
June 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 illustrate two potential development scenarios for the Town-owned parcel located at the northeast corner of Wilbur Avenue and Brayton Point Road, and to provide a preliminary sense of relative fiscal impacts to the Town of such development. These scenarios are informed by the previously completed existing conditions and constraints analysis.



Fig.1 – Town parcel context

NEED

The Town of Somerset acquired a 120-acre parcel of undeveloped land between I-195 and Route 6 for \$6.9 million in 2003. It is one of the largest undeveloped land parcels in the Town today and presents an important economic and community development opportunity. Somerset has seen the closure of two power plants which were major tax revenue sources for the Town. The impact of these losses has been temporarily mitigated by payments from the Commonwealth but there is a need for new tax base growth to replace these sources and support current and future spending.

Given this context, the Town is beginning to explore potential development opportunities that would provide a net positive fiscal benefit to the Town while meeting other needs such as publicly accessible open space, different types of housing for a changing population, and more local jobs.

This study is an early step in the process of determining the future of the Town parcel and no decisions about it have been made yet. It is part of a due diligence process to understand the opportunities and constraints of this site as a responsible steward of the Town's long-term finances.

POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS

After considering the needs of the Town as articulated by staff and other stakeholders, several important conclusions were reached about how this site could respond to some of those:

- The site is large enough to accommodate a complementary mix of uses while providing new community access and open space. This approach will require changes from the current zoning districts: Residence (R) on most of the site and Business (B) at the corner of Wilbur Avenue and Brayton Point Road. It would also help any potential future development respond to market demands and absorption potential at the time and build in phases over time.
- The wetlands on-site should be preserved and treated as a natural open space amenity. This includes land at the corner of Wilbur Avenue and Brayton Point Road, the only B-zoned land on the parcel currently but which often has standing water. Adding a trail network around these areas would open the site for the community to enjoy while providing pedestrian and bicycle connections to nearby neighborhoods. These trails could also provide important links to regional bicycle networks such as the South Coast Bikeway and Taunton River Trail.
- Somerset needs to grow its tax base to offset the loss of revenue from the now-closed power plants. Commercial uses generate more revenue for the Town than residential uses and can help minimize tax increases for residents. A variety of commercial uses could be appropriate for this site, with its proximity to I-195 and Route 6 for access and to the established commercial area along Route 6. The type, scale, and location of commercial uses on the site should be carefully considered to respond to market demands and minimize impacts on the nearby residential neighborhoods.
- The Town would benefit from a more diverse range of housing types and price points that appeal to a broad range of people such as older residents looking to downsize, young adults just getting started and looking to stay in town, and others. Multifamily, townhouse, small-lot single-family, and/or age-restricted senior housing would diversify the options available in Somerset and could be an appropriate use of significant portions of the site. The site is near shopping on Route 6, has good regional access, and enjoys views of the Taunton River and Fall River skyline, all of which contribute to making it an attractive housing location. In addition, multifamily housing designed for an emerging labor market typically generates fewer school-age children per dwelling unit and thus lower annual municipal cost per dwelling unit for the Town. Senior housing would not add any education cost impacts for the Town since there would be no school-age children.
- The Town's existing housing stock is predominantly single-family. A typical single-family subdivision, which is the primary use allowed under the site's current zoning, would not be an appropriate use of this site since adding more of the same would not respond to the needs of a changing population. In addition, single-family housing typically attracts households with school-age children which can increase annual costs to the Town without providing sufficient offsetting revenue.

Two site plan scenarios were developed to illustrate different approaches to potential future development. Each depicts different types and mixes of uses on-site. Both scenarios include the same protection of wetlands and community access through inclusion of a trail system. New development is set back from Wilbur Avenue and Brayton Point Road to retain a wooded and/or landscaped edge. A one-acre public space is reserved as a swap to free up needed land at Slade's Ferry for potential future development there.

Wilbur Avenue Parcel Study

These scenarios are only intended to illustrate possible ways the site could be developed. They are representative and do not depict any type of “final plan” or expectation for future development. If the Town decides to solicit development proposals for the site at some point in the future, these scenarios may inform proposals but will not dictate either site design or the types of uses and amount of development.

Scenario A

This potential development scenario (shown in Figure 2 below) is a mix of commercial and residential uses including medical office, senior housing/Continuing Care Retirement Community (CCRC), multifamily, townhouses, and small-lot single family. These uses are connected by an internal street network and an off-street network of trails along the perimeter of the wetlands. Two primary vehicular site access points are provided, one on Route 103/Wilbur Avenue and one on Brayton Point Road. Additional pedestrian and bicycle access points are provided by the trail network. A separate one-acre public space could be used as a park, playground, or similar community-oriented use.

Program

Medical Office: 135,000 sq. ft.

- 3 45,000 sq. ft. buildings | 3-floor buildings (~36-45' height)

Senior Housing / Continuing Care Retirement Community (CCRC): 300 units

- 60 independent living units | 1-2 floor duplexes and triplexes
- 60 age-restricted apartments | 3-floor building (~35' height)
- 100 assisted living beds | 3-floor building (~35' height)
- 80 skilled nursing beds | 3-floor building (~35' height)

Open Space Community (OSC): 255 units on 85 acres

- 150 multifamily units (sale or rental) | 1- and 2-BR units | 2-3 floor buildings (~24'-35' height)
- 55 townhomes | 2-2.5 floor buildings (~24' height)
- 50 small-lot single family | 8,000 sq. ft typical lot size
- Preserved open space: 43.5 acres (51% of OSC)

Total site open space: 43.5 acres (36% total site area)

Trail network: ~3.5+ miles of multi-use off-street trails

Internal roadway: ~7,000 linear feet



Fig.2 – Scenario A Conceptual Site Plan

Zoning Changes

An Open Space Community (OSC) and shared housing for the elderly are both allowed by Special Permit within the parcel's existing Residence zoning district. The land along Brayton Point Road would need to be rezoned from Residence to the Business zoning district (which currently exists at the corner of Brayton Point Road and Wilbur Avenue) to allow medical offices by-right. A height variance would be needed for these buildings to exceed 35' in height.

Scenario B

This potential development scenario (shown in Figure 3 below) is predominantly commercial uses including medical office, back office, and a solar farm. A range of senior housing types is also part of the mix. Similar to Scenario A, a network of off-street trails around the wetlands provides pedestrian and bicycle connections and a one-acre public space could be used for community-serving uses. Two primary site access points are provided, one on Route 103/Wilbur Avenue and one on Brayton Point Road.

Program

Medical Office: 135,000 sq. ft.

- 3 45,000 sq. ft. buildings | 3-floor buildings (~36-45' height)

Back Office: 100,000 sq. ft.

- 25,000 sq. ft. floorplate | 4-floor building (~48-60' height)

Solar Farm: 13.25 acres

Senior Housing / Continuing Care Retirement Community (CCRC): 300 units

- 60 independent living units | 1-2 floor duplexes and triplexes
- 60 age-restricted apartments | 3-floor building (~35 height')
- 100 assisted living beds | 3-floor building (~35' height)
- 80 skilled nursing beds | 3-floor building (~35' height)

Total site open space: 43.5 acres (36% total site area)

Trail network: ~3 miles of multi-use off-street trails

Internal roadway: ~3,900 linear feet

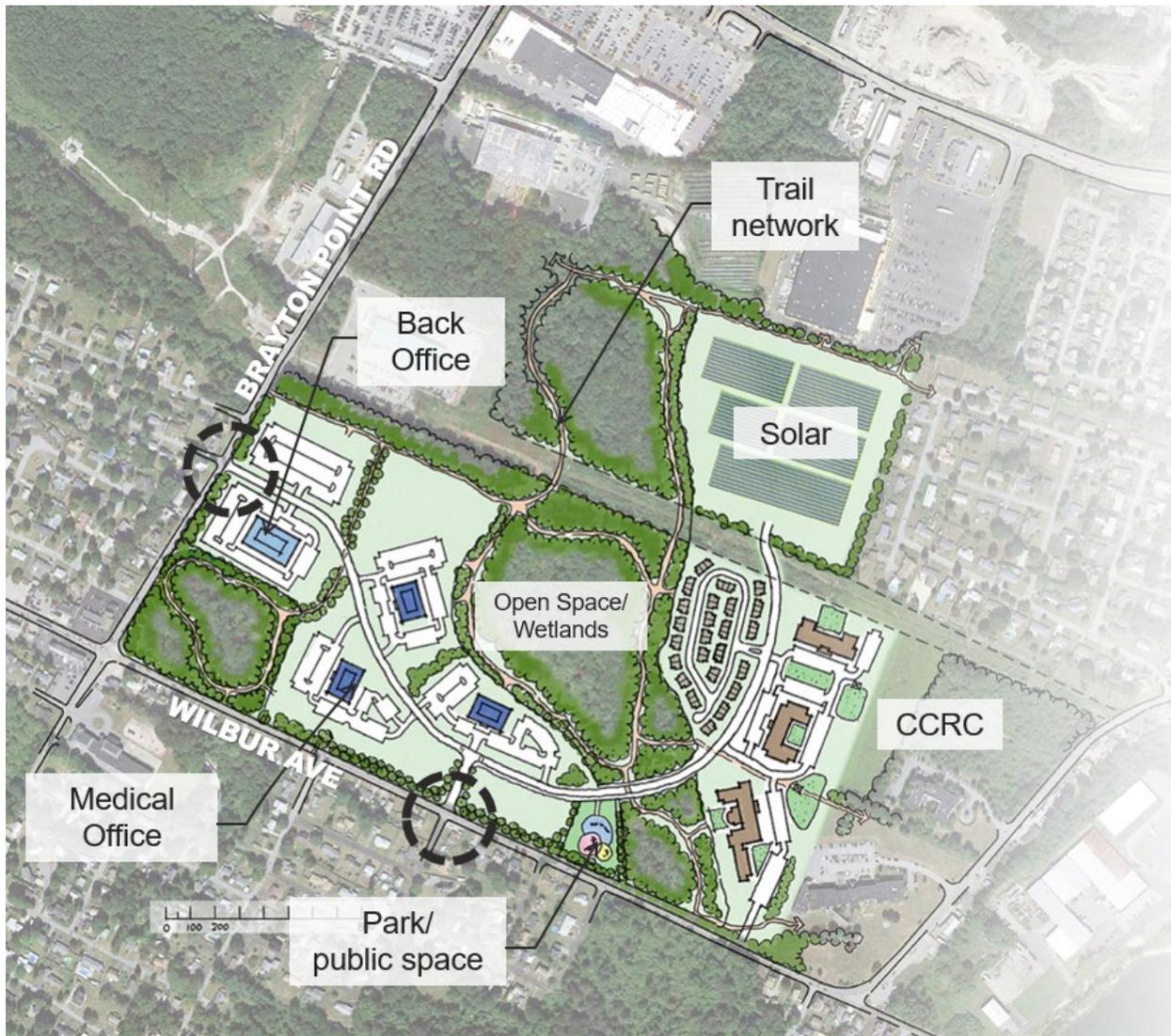


Fig.3 – Scenario B Conceptual Site Plan

Zoning Changes

Shared housing for the elderly is allowed by Special Permit in the Residence zoning district. The solar farm would be subject to Site Plan Review according to the Large-Scale Ground-Mounted Solar Photovoltaic Installation Overlay District. The land along Brayton Point Road and Wilbur Avenue would need to be rezoned to the Business zoning district (which currently exists at the corner of Brayton Point Road and Wilbur Avenue) to allow for offices and medical offices by-right. A height variance would be needed for the office buildings to exceed 35' in height.

PRELIMINARY FISCAL IMPACT ANALYSIS

A preliminary fiscal impact analysis was completed for the two potential development scenarios to better understand order-of-magnitude impacts on the Town’s fiscal condition. It is a high-level assessment meant to provide a relative comparison to inform future discussions. Information for this analysis was gathered from the Town Assessor and other local sources. Annual per pupil school costs net of State reimbursement typically have the greatest impact on municipal budgets, by far, in comparison to other elements in the budget. Thus, residential development tends to have greater negative fiscal impact than commercial development or senior housing. We do not believe that there will be large differences in impact on the non-school portion of the annual municipal budget due to differences in program for the two scenarios

The fiscal analysis shown in the summary comparison table below, and in greater detail in the appendix, shows that Scenario B with a greater commercial focus provides approximately twice the annual fiscal benefit in comparison to Scenario A which includes a substantial residential mix. Scenario A is estimated to generate an annual fiscal benefit of \$1,605,555, in comparison to Scenario B which is estimated at \$3,252,320. The single family and townhome elements in Scenario A have a substantial negative impact on the annual fiscal benefit. Together with the multifamily housing which has a slightly positive impact, these residential uses would have an overall negative impact of approximately \$920,000. The commercial uses that replace them in Scenario B (back office and solar farm) would have an estimated positive impact of approximately \$725,000.

One of the next steps would be to undertake a market study to better estimate the potential for the uses outlined, likely absorption of these uses and potential rents and sales prices for finished product. Further refinement of the analyses might be undertaken as the uses are better determined.

Wilbur Avenue Parcel Summary--Annual Fiscal Impact Analysis									
Concept A--Residential / Commercial Mix		Annual Fiscal Impacts (2021 \$)*			Concept B--Commercial Focus		Annual Fiscal Impacts (2021 \$)*		
		Revenue / Annum	Fiscal Expense / Annum	Net Revenue / Annum			Revenue / Annum	Fiscal Expense / Annum	Net Revenue / Annum
		Total Revenue	Total Fiscal Expense**	Net Revenue			Total Revenue	Total Fiscal Expense**	Net Revenue
Individual Use Type	Units				Individual Use Type	Units			
Continuing Care Retirement Community (CCRC):					Continuing Care Retirement Community (CCRC):				
Independent Living Homes	60 du				Independent Living Homes	60 du			
Senior Apartments	60 du				Senior Apartments	60 du			
Assisted Living	100 beds				Assisted Living	100 beds			
Skilled Nursing Facility	80 beds				Skilled Nursing Facility	80 beds			
Total CCRC		\$ 1,376,120	-	\$ 1,376,120	Total CCRC		\$ 1,376,120	-	\$ 1,376,120
Multifamily Housing	150 du	586,500	\$ 375,000	211,500	Multifamily Housing	- du	-	-	-
Single Family	50 lots	308,600	800,000	(491,400)	Single Family	- lots	-	-	-
Townhome	55 lots	238,535	880,000	(641,465)	Townhome	- lots	-	-	-
Medical/Professional Office	135,000 sf	1,150,800	-	1,150,800	Medical/Professional Office	135,000 sf	1,150,800	-	1,150,800
Back Office	- sf	-	-	-	Back Office	100,000 sf	569,000	-	569,000
Industrial	- sf	-	-	-	Industrial	- sf	-	-	-
Solar Farm	- facility	-	-	-	Solar Farm	1 facility	156,400	-	156,400
Total		\$ 3,660,555	\$ 2,055,000	\$ 1,605,555	Total		\$ 3,252,320	\$ -	\$ 3,252,320

Notes

- * Does not include potential spinoff development and multiplier impact.
- **Would include incremental annual Fire, Police and Ambulance costs under "Public Safety" and incremental Public Works and other municipal costs under "Misc.". At this level of analysis, we do not presently anticipate large significant differences between the two concepts.

Fig.4 – Preliminary Fiscal Impact Comparison

SUMMARY

A comprehensive approach to the future of this parcel is needed. It presents an important opportunity to address a variety of needs including tax base growth, economic and community development, diverse housing types, and open space. Careful management of any development process can allow this property to serve as a site for economic growth while maintaining a natural buffer to adjoining residential properties.

Community engagement, real estate market analysis, and developer input are some of the potential next steps to refine and advance this work. These will be particularly important as the need and potential for commercial uses such as office or retail are considered, particularly in light of the rapid changes and uncertainty in the retail industry and office market.

A set of principles would help encourage the desired types of development should the Town choose to seek developer interest in this site. Preserving open space and integrating public access throughout the site would benefit neighbors and all Town residents. A complementary mix of uses would help address multiple needs, such as growing the tax base and providing more diverse types of housing for residents, while being responsive to current market conditions. Maintaining a natural buffer along the edge of the property would mitigate any visual impact of new development on the surrounding neighborhoods. High-quality building and site design paired with a walkable and bikeable street network would help growth here become a valued part of the community.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Existing Conditions and Constraints

Appendix B –Preliminary Fiscal Impact Analysis