# Route 138 Opportunity Study

for the Community of Somerset, MA



Prepared by the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District
December 2019

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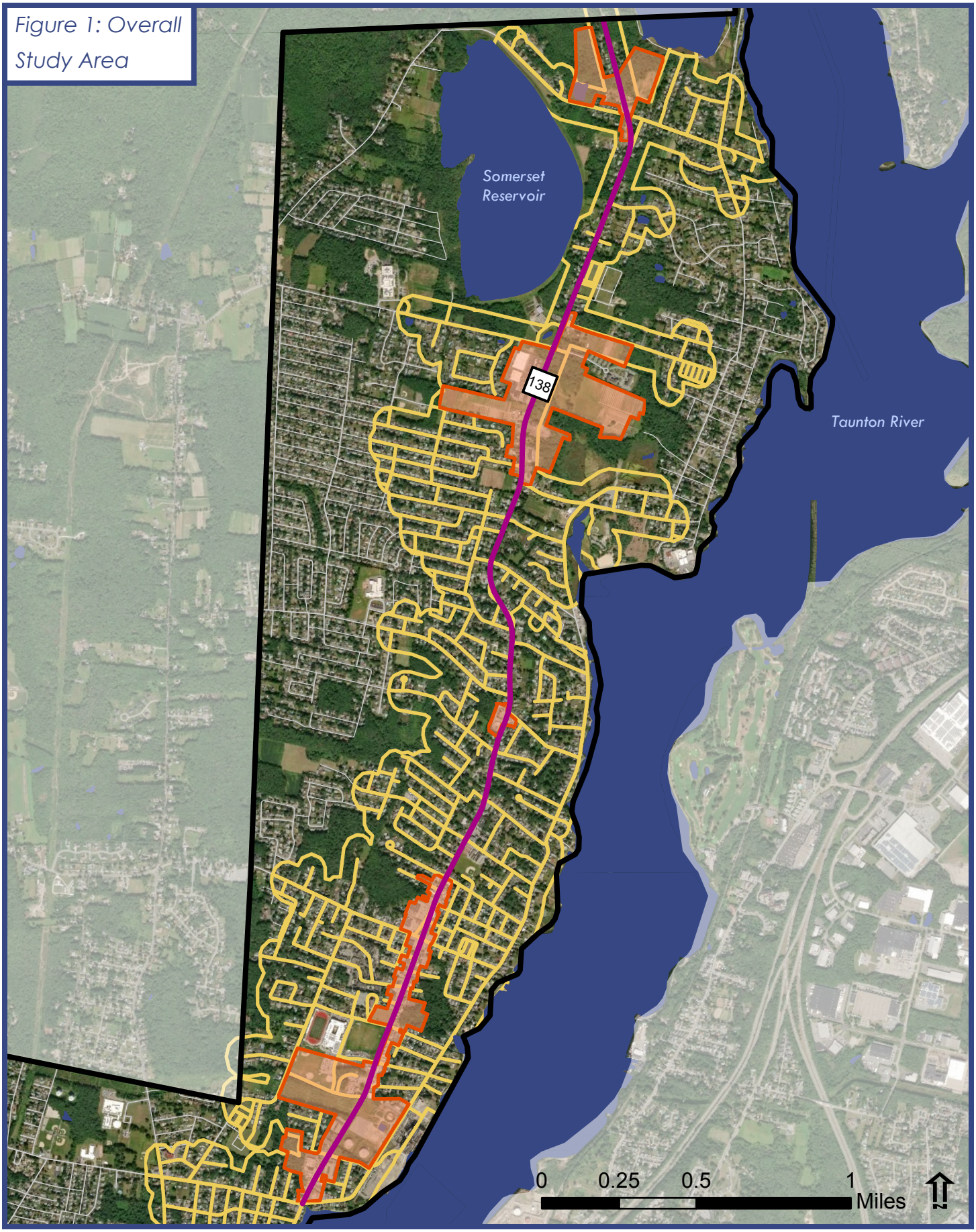



*Figure 1: Overall Study Area*

# INTRODUCTION

## STUDY PURPOSE

**The goal of this study is to re-imagine the Route 138 Corridor in Somerset, Massachusetts.**

Somerset is currently involved in the development of a new town Master Plan, a significant undertaking through which residents envision the future of the community and identify key strategies for bringing that vision to fruition. The Master Plan process has brought to light some concern over the vitality of the town's commercial districts, centered around the Route 138 Corridor. While there are many dedicated, hard-working and long-established businesses along Route 138, the overall cohesion of the corridor and the challenges presented by its existing configuration create a mismatch between the form and amenities that many residents and visitors have come to associate with a traditional town center commercial environment. In other words, residents' vision for Route 138 don't quite match with realities on the ground.

For example, when asked their opinion on "what is your greatest wish for Somerset in the next 15-20 years?" the answers from two local students were particularly illuminating with regard to Route 138:

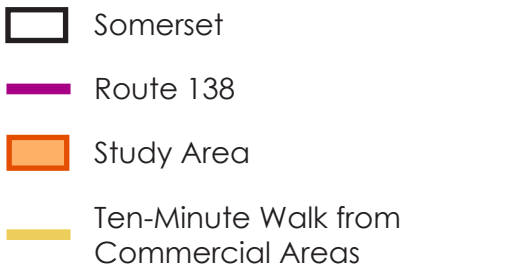
> *Many of the businesses in Somerset are very dated and look run down. There are too many ugly signs and the center of town is not very attractive. I wish to see our center of town look more like Bristol or Barrington [RI].*
> *- SBRHS Senior*

> *I wish to see a more picturesque center of town with quaint shops and restaurants. - SMS 8th Grader*

The good news is that in many ways, Route 138 is ideally situated to enable the evolution of the type of walkable, activated commercial center destinations envisioned by these students. Commercial properties sit in close proximity to the town's residential neighborhoods and recreational riverfront. In fact, our analysis shows that 3,047 households, estimated to contain 7,709 people or 42.4% of the town's population, are located within a ten-minute walk of the corridor's commercial properties. Given its proximity to these neighborhoods, the commercial district could support the daily shopping and dining needs of Somerset residents as well as visitors from surrounding towns.

Our current task is to understand how or why the existing conditions along the corridor has led to its under-utilization. The town has asked SRPEDD to perform an analysis of the existing corridor that will set the groundwork for its future transformation. To get a snapshot of the corridor today, we will consider a number of conditions related to economic development, including land use, zoning, infrastructure availability, and vacancy status. We will then go beyond an analysis of the commercial corridor itself to the explore its connections to the surrounding residential context, including barriers to pedestrian connectivity, high crash intersections, the presence or absence of pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure, and localized environmental considerations.

*Figure 1:*
*Overall Study Area Map*




Data Sources: MassGIS and MassDOT. Town of Somerset.

The final stage of this analysis will consider three sites that combine high potentials for site opportunity and neighborhood connectivity as key locations for enlivening the corridor. For these sites, we explore a future development design scenario that is reflective of viable, attractive, and pedestrian-friendly commercial development. In addition to specific site design, the report also provides examples of streetscape principles that can be implemented to achieve the desired downtown aesthetic, including the use of street trees, banners, signage, façade improvement, and lighting.

Somerset's commercial district is competing with neighboring communities to attract shoppers and visitors. It is our hope that this analysis assists the town in highlighting its existing assets in such a way that the Route 138 corridor becomes its own unique destination.

*Our analysis shows that 3,047 households, estimated to contain 7,709 people or 42.4% of the town's population, are located within a ten-minute walk of the corridor's commercial properties.*

## STUDY AREA DEFINITION

The Study Area, broken in to four distinctive contiguous areas along the corridor, consists of all commercially- and industrially-zoned parcels with frontage on the Route 138 corridor. There are 126 total parcels that fit these criteria: 10 parcels near the town's norther border with Dighton to the North Street intersection; 28 parcels between Palmer Street and South Street; 4 parcels at the Marble Street intersection; and 84 parcels from Washington Avenue to Read Street/Riverside Avenue (depicted on page 7 as "Town Center Core"). In total, these parcels cover approximately 206.2 acres of land along the corridor.[1]

While the data analysis includes all of the Study Area properties as described above, there is some additional emphasis placed on the heart of the commercial center in the one-mile stretch between Washington Avenue in the north and the intersection of Riverside Avenue, Route 138 and Read Street to the south, especially in the phase of the project that considers downtown streetscape design principles.

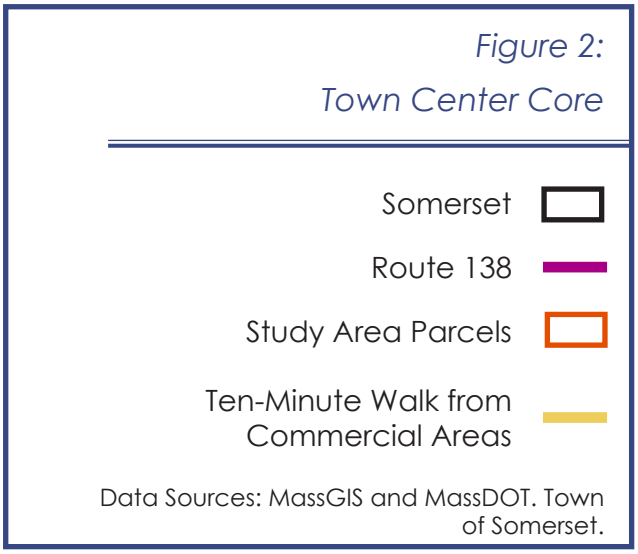
## GOALS FOR THE PROJECT

Through data analysis, site visits, and database construction, we will endeavor to accomplish the following tasks for the Route 138 Study Area:

1. Quantify and describe existing conditions;
2. Highlight areas of opportunity for enlivening the corridor; and
3. Present a vision for engaging downtown design elements.

It is our hope that this analysis leads to a re-invigorated corridor with greater economic development potential and draw, that is more active, vibrant, pedestrian-friendly, and aesthetically cohesive.

*Figure 2:*
*Town Center Core*




Data Sources: MassGIS and MassDOT. Town of Somerset.

1. *As calculated in a Geogrphic Information System*


Figure 2:
Town Center
Core
138
ROBERGE STREET
FINTON STREET
LINDEN DRIVE
WASHINGTON AVENUE
ORCHARD STREET
MARIGOLD AVENUE
SPRUCE STREET
PINE STREET
WEST COUNTY STREET
LINCOLN AVENUE
GRANT AVENUE
PRATT AVENUE
MADISON AVENUE
PHILIP DRIVE
WALNUT STREET
HEMLOCK STREET
CEDAR STREET
ROOSEVELT AVENUE
SHOVE STREET
PROSPECT STREET
BUXTON AVENUE
BIRCH STREET
COLONIAL DRIVE
JUDY LANE
HAWTHORNE STREET
BERUBE AVENUE
MERIBAH STREET
WORDELL ROAD
WILLIAMSON DRIVE
HATHAWAY ROAD
BOWKER TERRACE
GARDNER AVENUE
LUTHER AVENUE
RUSSELL AVENUE
HARRISON AVENUE
FORDHAM DRIVE
GRANDVIEW AVENUE
RIVERSIDE AVENUE
CLIFFORD M HOLLAND ROAD
JOHNSON STREET
ARRUDA AVENUE
KELLY DRIVE
MONTAUP STREET
STEVENS STREET
PERRY AVENUE
DESMOND AVENUE
READ STREET
Taunton River
0 0.05 0.1 0.2
Miles
N

# REGULATORY CONTEXT

## ROUTE 138 ZONING

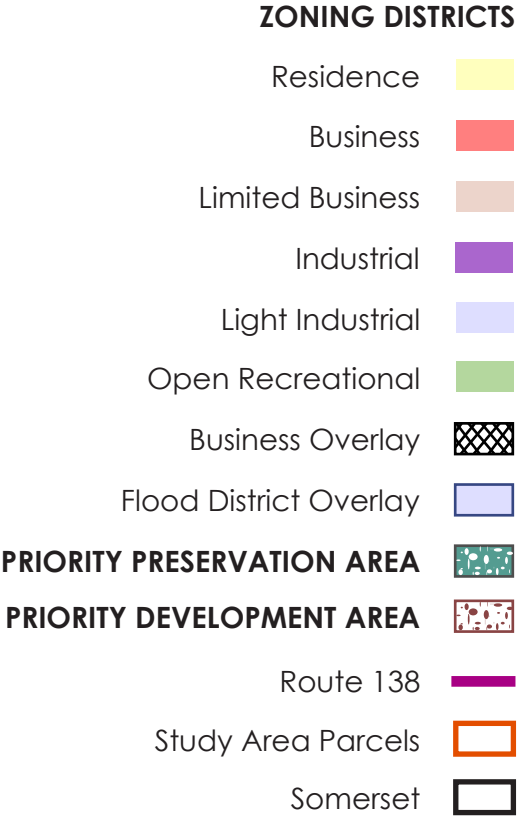
One basis for inclusion in the Route 138 Study Area was a commercial or industrial zoning designation covering at least a portion of a given property. There are thus three commercial or industrial zones and one business-industrial overlay present in the Study Area:

- Business District
- Light Industrial District
- Industrial District
- Business Industrial Overlay Zone

Somerset has also established a Floodplain District as an overlay that includes all Special Flood Hazard Areas within the township that are designated as Flood Zone AE or VE. Given its proximity to the banks of the Taunton River and the location of its tributaries (particularly the Labor-in-Vain Creek), some of the Route 138 Corridor Study Area parcels are located within the Floodplain District. In particular, the Business District that runs from Palmer Street to South Street is located in an AE zone with a Base Flood Elevation of 15 feet. Location in the Flood District does not affect the underlying permitted uses, but it does have implications for building construction and floodproofing. Buildings in the overlay have to meet the additional requirements in the Massachusetts State Building Code dealing with construction in flood plains.

There are three Priority Development Areas (PDA) and two Priority Preservation Areas (PPA) in or directly adjacent to the study area. PDAs and PPAs were designated at the community level in 2013 as part of the South Coast Rail planning initiative. PDAs are areas that are appropriate for increased development or redevelopment due to factors related to transit, infrastructure availability, and an absence of environmental constrains. PPAs are areas that are important to protect due to the presence of significant natural and cultural resources.

*Figure 3:*
*Study Area Zoning Map*




Data Sources: MassGIS and MassDOT. Town of Somerset (zoning map dated 3/19/2018).

*Figure 3: Study Area Zoning*

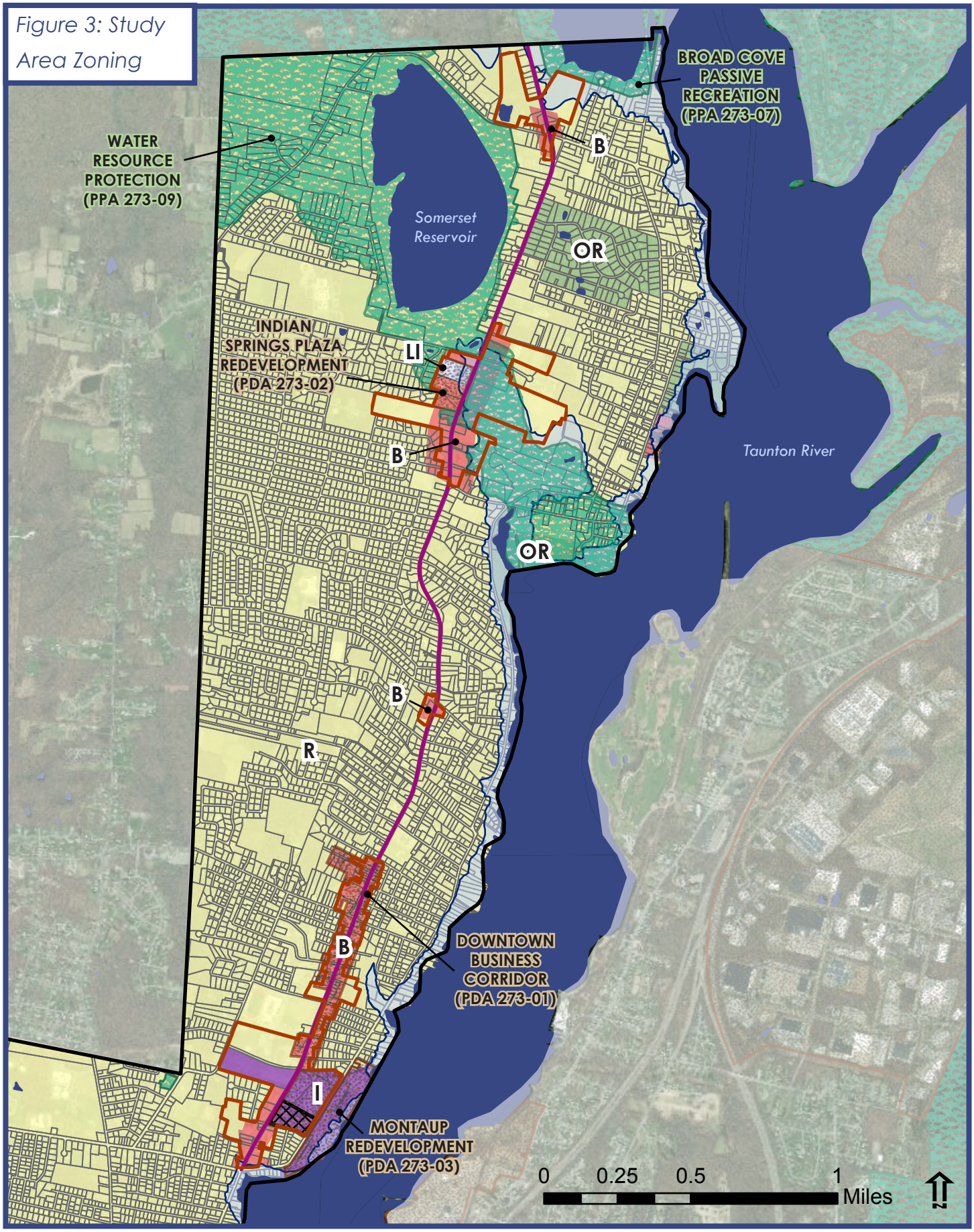


Table 1 shows uses permitted by right (x) and with a Special Permit (sp) in the three underlying districts. As can be seen in the table, the majority of permitted uses do not overlap between districts.

The Business District permits the types of establishments that cater to everyday needs such as retail shopping, personal services, and dining. Other permitted uses may be appropriate for a general business district, but do not necessarily promote a walkable, vibrant downtown destination, including vets and kennels, funeral homes, private education, or hospitals.

Similarly, in the uses that are permitted across two or three of the districts in question, some uses may be less conducive to an active downtown, including gas stations, telecommunications facilities, marinas, wholesale businesses, utility sub-stations, automotive repair, medical labs, and adult uses. Some consideration could be given to establishing a neighborhood commercial district that permits only those uses most desirable for a walkable pedestrian shopping, dining, and service experience in the downtown core portion of the Route 138 Study Area.

The Business Industrial Overlay District (BIOD) is included in the Study Area. Its purpose is to encourage a mix of commercial and industrial uses within the Industrial District. As such, it permits all uses in the Industrial District as well as those permitted in the Business District. Site 3's conceptual development plan is in line with the purposes and intent of the BIOD.

*Some consideration could be given to establishing a neighborhood commercial district that permits only those uses most desirable for a walkable pedestrian shopping, dining, and service experience in the downtown core portion of the Route 138 Study Area.*

## *Table 1: Permitted Uses*

| Use | B Zone | LI Zone | I Zone |
|---|---|---|---|
| Single-Family residence | x | | |
| Residence above commercial or accessory unit | sp | | |
| Accommodations | x | | |
| Retail | x | | |
| Service | x | | |
| Restaurant (including drive-in) | x | | |
| Theater and other indoor recreation | x | | |
| Club or lodge | x | | |
| Funeral home | x | | |
| Vet or kennel | x | | |
| Auto sales | x | | |
| Professional and medical offices | x | | |
| Banks and financial | x | | |
| Day cares | x | | |
| Private education | x | | |
| Commercial Greenhouse | x | | |
| Hospital / nursing home | x | | |
| Public land / municipal services | x | | |
| Place of worship | x | x | x |
| Gas Station | x | x | x |
| Commercial parking lot | x | x | x |
| Telecommunications facility (tower) | x (sp) | x (sp) | x (sp) |
| Printing shop and photography | x | x | x |
| Farming and produce sale | x | x | x |
| Marinas / related fabrication and docking | x | x | x |
| Wholesale business / storage indoor and outdoor | x | x | x |
| Utility transformer stations or sub-stations | x | x | x |
| Automobile repair | sp | sp | sp |
| Meidcal Labs | sp | sp | sp |
| Adult Uses | sp | sp | |
| Home occupations / offices | sp | sp | |
| Elderly Housing | sp | sp | |
| Outdoor Sports Facility | x | x | |
| Open-Air Entertainment (drive-in) | x | x | |
| Marijuana Establishment | | sp | sp |
| Printing or publishing | | x | x |
| Research and Development labs | | x | x |
| Manufacturing / processing / fabrication - light | | x | x |
| Manufacturing / processing / fabrication - heavy | | | x |
| Electric generating plant | | | x |

*Figure 4: Bulk Regulations Analysis*



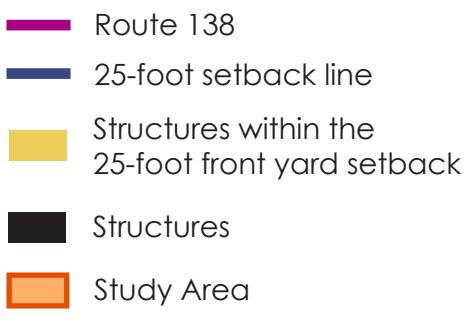
*Table 2: Bulk Requirements*

| Requirement | Single Family Uses (all zones) | Business Zone (all other than single-family residential use) | Light Industrial Zone | Industrial Zone |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Minimum Lot Area (sf) | 20,000 | - (any) | 20,000 | 20,000 |
| Minimum Frontage (ft) | 100 | - | - | - |
| Minimum Front Yard (ft) | 25 | 25 | 50 | 50 |
| Minimum Side Yard (ft) | 15 | None, except for next to a Residence District, then 20 | 25 | 25 |
| Minimum Rear Yard (ft) | 15 | 25 | 25 | 25 |
| Maximum Lot Coverage (%) | 25 | 30 | 35 | - |
| Maximum Building Height (ft) | 35 | 35 (45 for hotels) | 35 | - |
| Maximum Building Height (stories) | 2.5 | - | 2 | - |

Table 2 contains a selection of the bulk regulations that apply in the Business, Light Industrial, and Industrial Districts. We undertook an analysis of the locations on the corridor where existing bulk conditions do not meet bulk regulations. This data helps to determine how well the regulations match reality.

*A mandatory minimum setback of 25 feet, though appropriate for some business districts, may not be most conducive to a walkable, vibrant downtown.*

*Figure 4:*
*Bulk Regulations Analysis*




Data Sources: MassGIS and MassDOT. Town of Somerset.

Overall, we found approximately 29 parcels in the study area where existing development that does not meet the required front yard setback standard of 25 feet, with a cluster of existing non-conformities south of Washington Avenue. We will discuss in further detail why a mandatory minimum setback of 25 feet, though appropriate for some business districts, may not be most conducive to a walkable, vibrant downtown.

# LAND USE CONTEXT

## EXISTING LAND USE

As may be expected given the zoning districts described above, many of the Study Area parcels currently contain commercial uses. In terms of the number of parcels in each land use category, most parcels contain commercial, office, or single-family uses. The full breakdown of 126 parcels by land use category is as follows:

- 46 commercial properties, with the majority concentrated between Washington Avenue and Read Street (41.5 ac)
- 19 office properties (8.1 ac)
- 17 single-family dwelling units (5.6 ac)
- 9 mixed-use properties (3.5 ac)
- 8 vacant developable properties, largely in the north end of town near the Dighton border (52.4 ac)
- 6 two- or three-family dwelling units (3.3 ac)
- 6 publicly-owned properties, including the town hall and policy building (26.9 ac)
- 3 church / charitable properties (6.1 ac)
- 3 agricultural properties (38.5 ac) in the stretch between Palmer Street and South Street
- 3 vacant undevelopable properties (5.8 ac) near the Labor in Vain Creek
- 2 industrial properties (15.5 ac)
- 2 utility properties (4 ac)
- 1 recreation / open space property (0.3 ac) in the small triangle park near the intersection of Route 138 and Buffington Street.

When considered from the perspective of total land area (211.5 acres), however, the land uses that occupy the most space in the Study Area are vacant developable properties in the north, commercial land uses, agricultural uses, and publicly-owned uses.

*Figure 5:*
*Study Area Existing Land Use*




Data Sources: MassGIS and MassDOT. Town of Somerset (Assessment Data as of April 2019).

## COMMERCIAL LAND USE

Of the 76 commercial, office, industrial, and mixed-use categories,
25% are small retail and service stores, (under 10,000 sf), followed by auto-oriented establishments (repair, sales, fuel, parking, washing) at 22%, general office at 14%, eating and drinking establishments at 11%, medical office at 8%, banks at 6%, agricultural operations at 4%, shopping centers at 3%, funeral homes at 3%, and supermarkets, large scale retail, manufacturing, and storage/warehousing all at 1%.

*Figure 5: Study Area Existing Land Use*

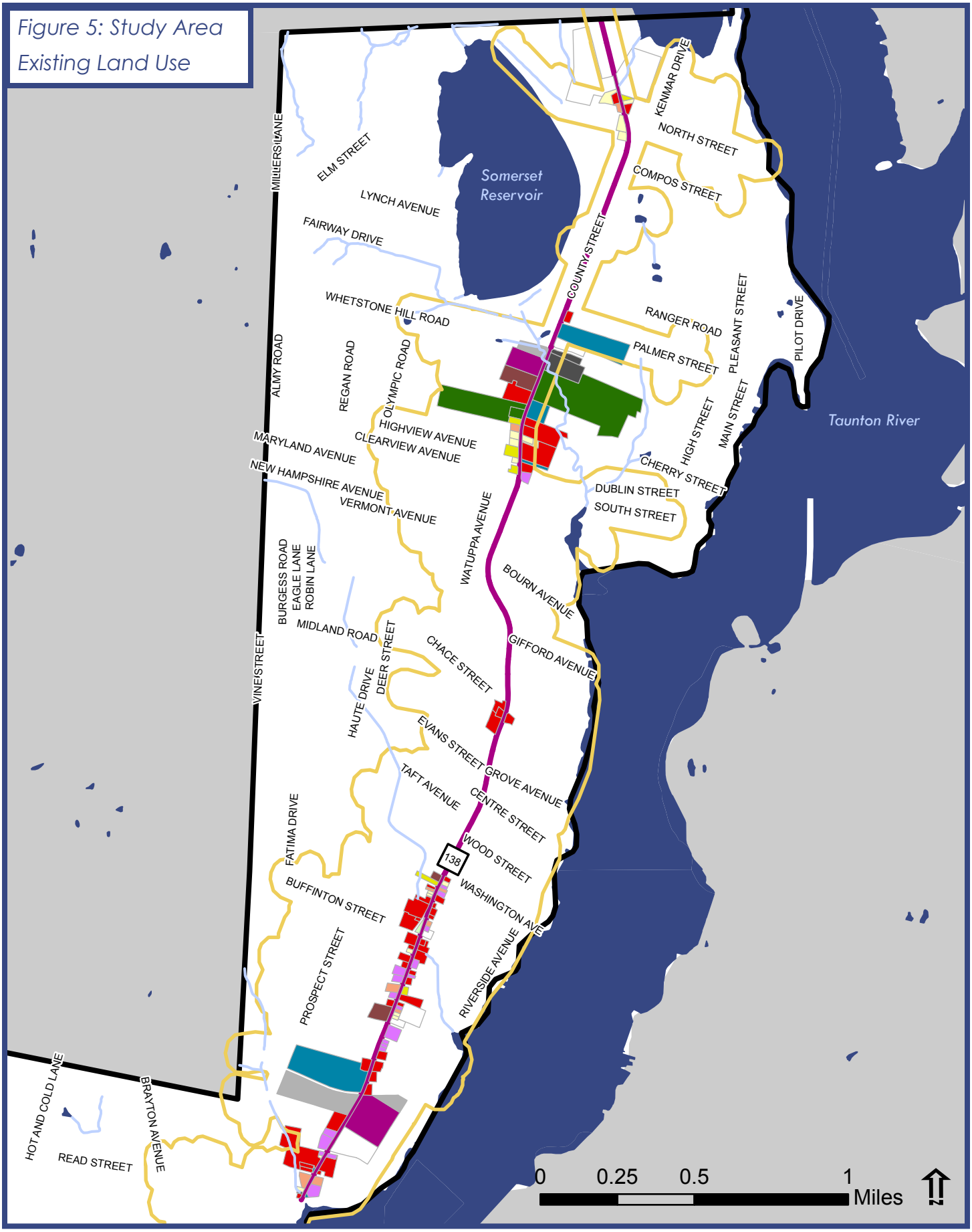
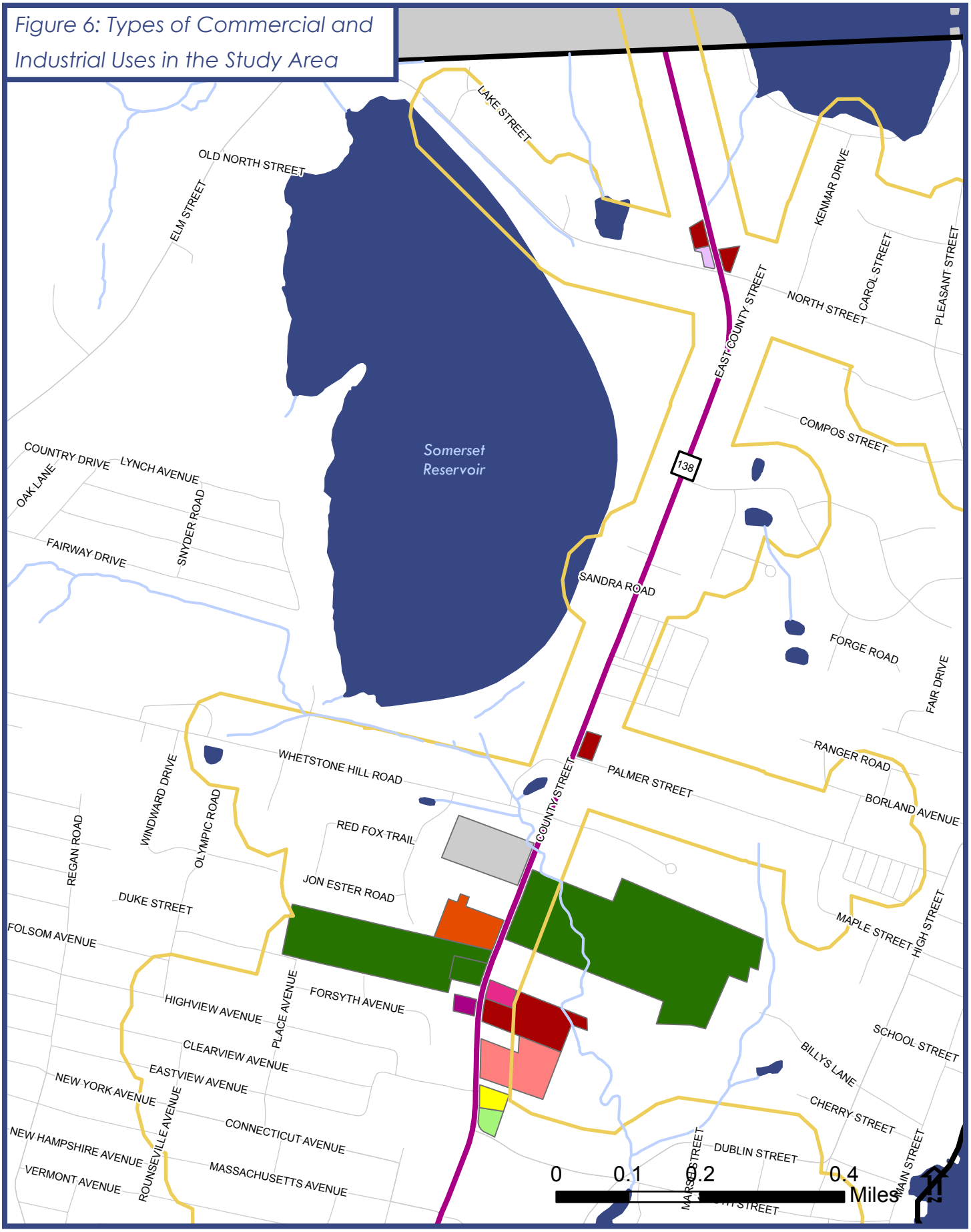


*Figure 6: Types of Commercial and Industrial Uses in the Study Area*



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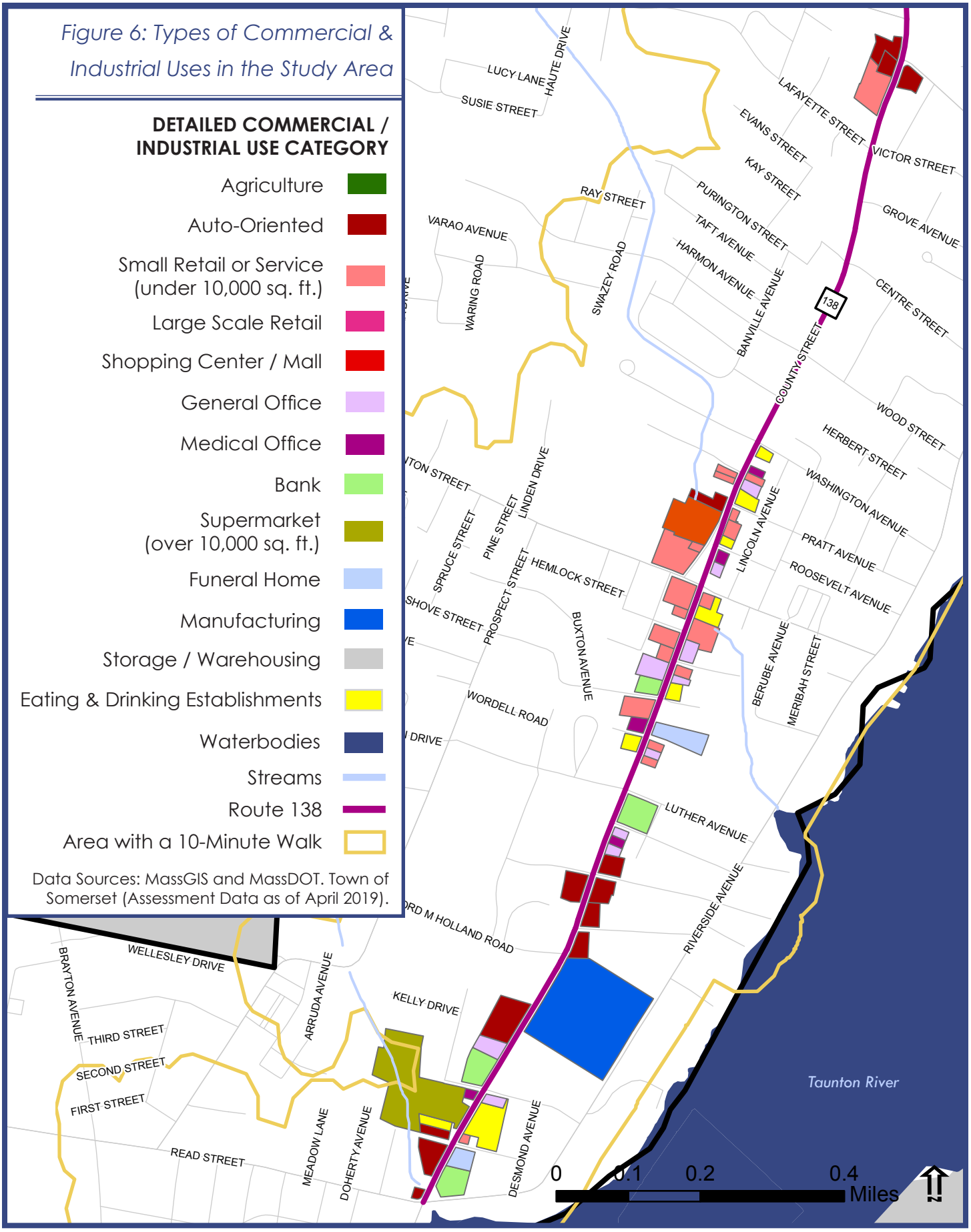


## EXISTING LAND USE CONTEXT

Looking outside the Study Area into the context in which it is situated, we analyzed the land uses with the proximity of a ten-minute walk. As can be seen in Figure 7, the vast majority of this area is occupied by approximately 3,043 residences. Specifically, there are 2,639 single-family homes, 166 two-family homes, 16 three-family homes, and 7 buildings with at least four dwelling units. Multiplying the total number of residences in this area (3,043) by the most recent average household size recorded in the 2010 Decennial Census (2.53), we estimate that there are 7,698 individuals that live within a ten-minute walk of at least one point within the Study Area. This number represents 42% of Somerset's total population.

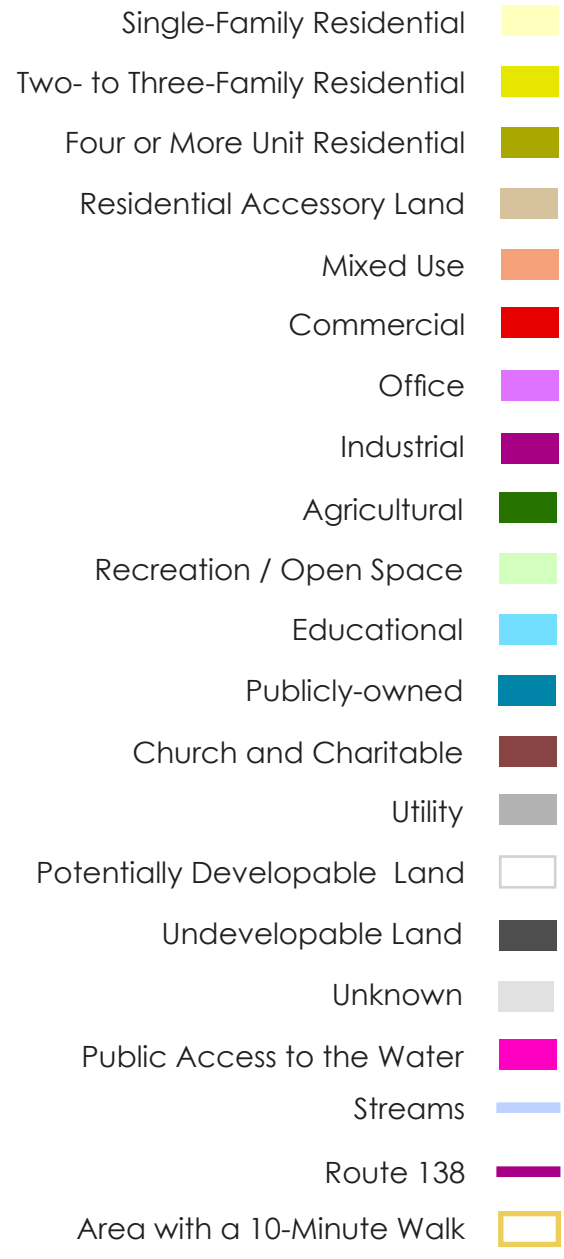
Four schools are located within this radius, including North Elementary, Chance Street Elementary, Somerset Berkley Regional High School, and South Elementary.

The corridor includes public uses, such as the Town Hall and the Police Department facility. In addition, there are several parks and large open space areas within the radius, including Ashton / Place Fields, marshland, Buffington Park, Chase Preserve, and the small triangle park near the intersection of Buffington Avenue and Route 138.

One of Somerset's most unique attributes is its location on the Taunton River, with gorgeous views and recreational opportunities tied to points of access to the water. Two of these access points, Pierce Park and Beach and Pratt Avenue Beach, are within a ten-minute walk of the northern portion of the Study Area. The Village Waterfront Park and Mallard Point are nearby, but not necessarily walkable from the Route 138 commercial corridor.

*The proximity of so many residents, recreational opportunities, and high-activity areas, such as schools and public offices, create a context that should be conducive to an active commercial corridor on Route 138. Existing environmental and transit conditions, however, may present additional challenges.*

*Figure 7: Existing Land Use within a Ten-Minute Walk*




Data Sources: MassGIS and MassDOT. Town of Somerset (Assessment Data as of April 2019).

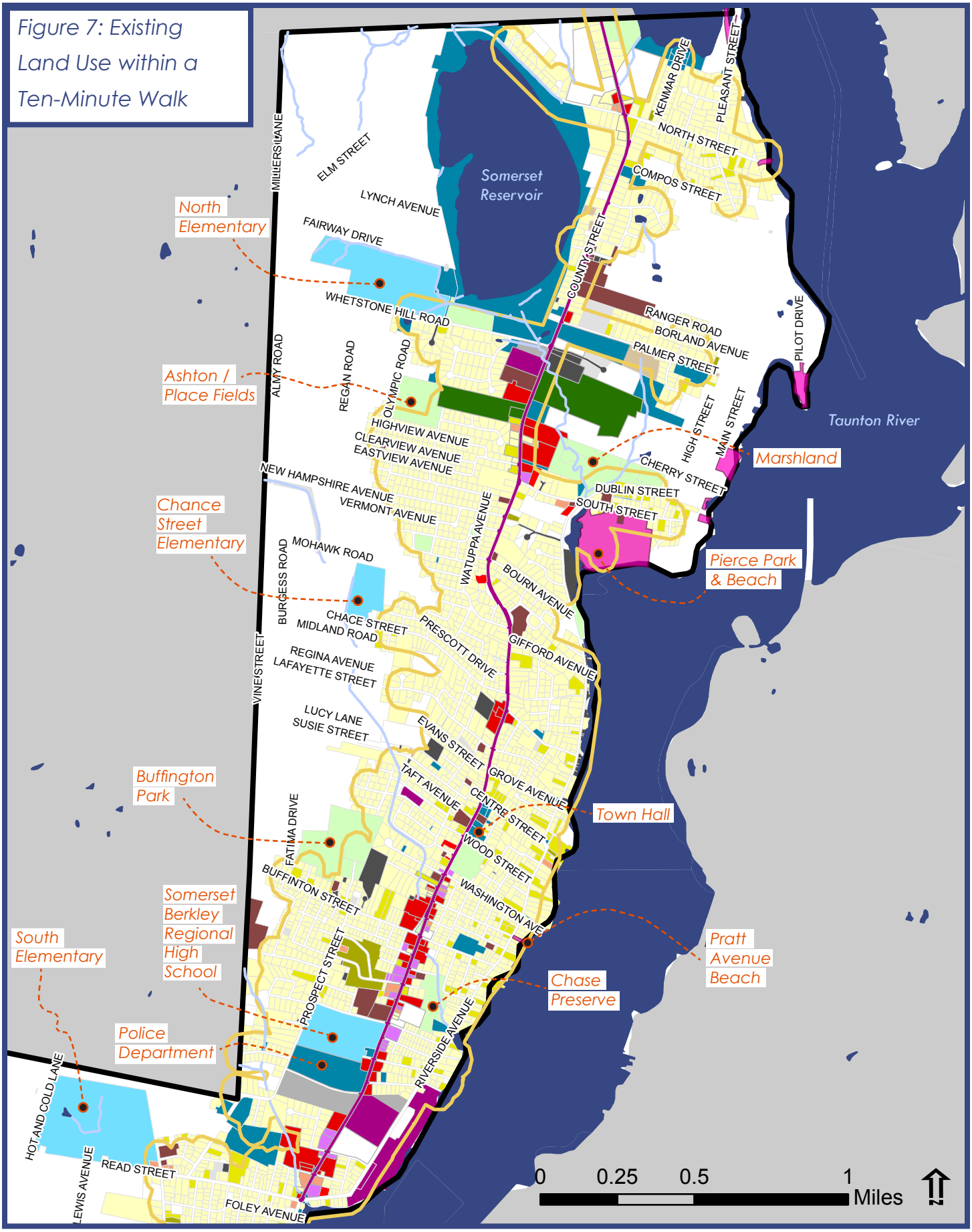



*Figure 7: Existing Land Use within a Ten-Minute Walk*

# ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

## SIGNIFICANT FEATURES

In many ways, the presence of the Taunton River is a tremendous asset to the Somerset community. The river itself has been designated a National Wild and Scenic River, flowing freely without dams or impoundments from its headwaters in Bridgewater to Mount Hope Bay. This U.S. National Park Service designation establishes that the Taunton River posses outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, and cultural values.

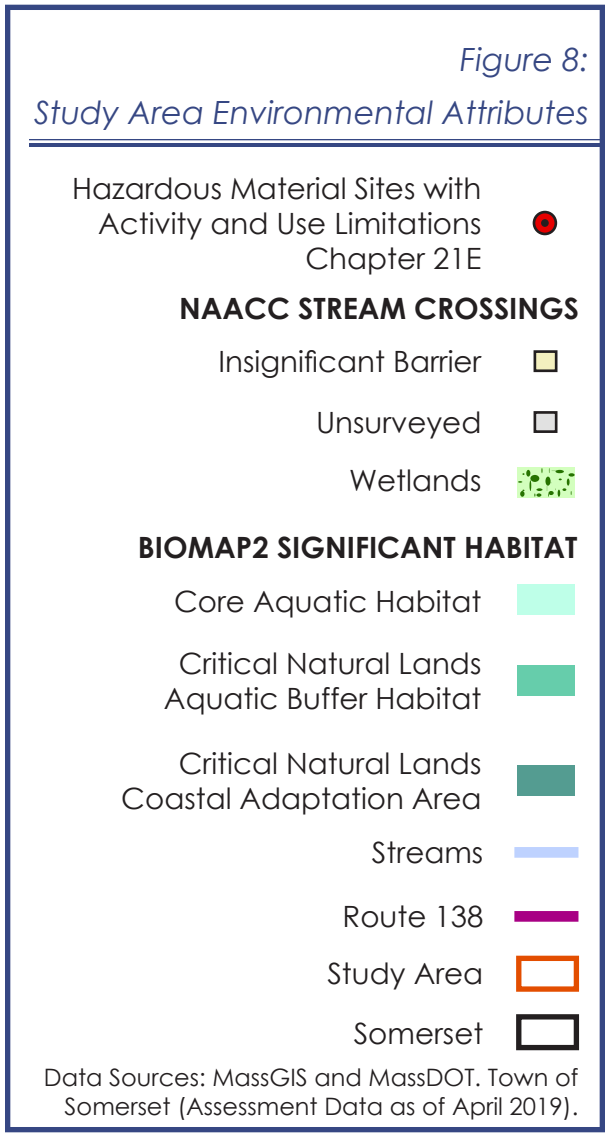
The Taunton River is also identified as a Core Aquatic Habitat in the state's BioMap2 dataset. Most of these areas fall outside of the Study Area, but there is a slight amount of Aquatic Buffer area that extends into the northern-most portion of the Study Area.

The only portion of the Study Area that is significantly affected by environmental constraints is the segment between Palmer Street and South Street, where the Labor in Vain Brook flows between the Somerset Reservoir and the Taunton River. The brook is surrounded by wetland areas, and has been identified as a promising area of potential inland migration for tidal habitat as the coast is affected by climate change and sea level rise. As can be seen in the zoning map, this is locale is also a FEMA-designated Special Flood Hazard Area. With first-floor Base Flood Elevation levels of 15 feet, this is an inappropriate location for development.

Another concern is the degree to which road and stream crossing structures (bridges and culverts) along the corridor may be undersized for moving water and over-top during heavy storm conditions, and how they may present barriers to the movement of aquatic wildlife. The North Atlantic Aquatic Connectivity Collaborative (NAACC) has established a methodology for surveying stream crossings that can be used at the local level. Results from their database indicate that no culverts in the study area have been examined with this methodology. Some crossings were evaluated during the SRPEDD / Mass Highway Department's Geographic Roadway Runoff Inventory Program (GRIPP), which identified several potential projects in Somerset, including the replacement of the culvert at the Labor in Vain Brook and Route 138, further study of the Riverside Avenue culvert, and further study of crossings along Buffington Brook (additional information available here).

There are several known contaminated sites in the vicinity of the corridor, and one within the Study Area itself at the former Gas Station Chapter 21E site.

*Figure 8:*
*Study Area Environmental Attributes*




Data Sources: MassGIS and MassDOT. Town of Somerset (Assessment Data as of April 2019).

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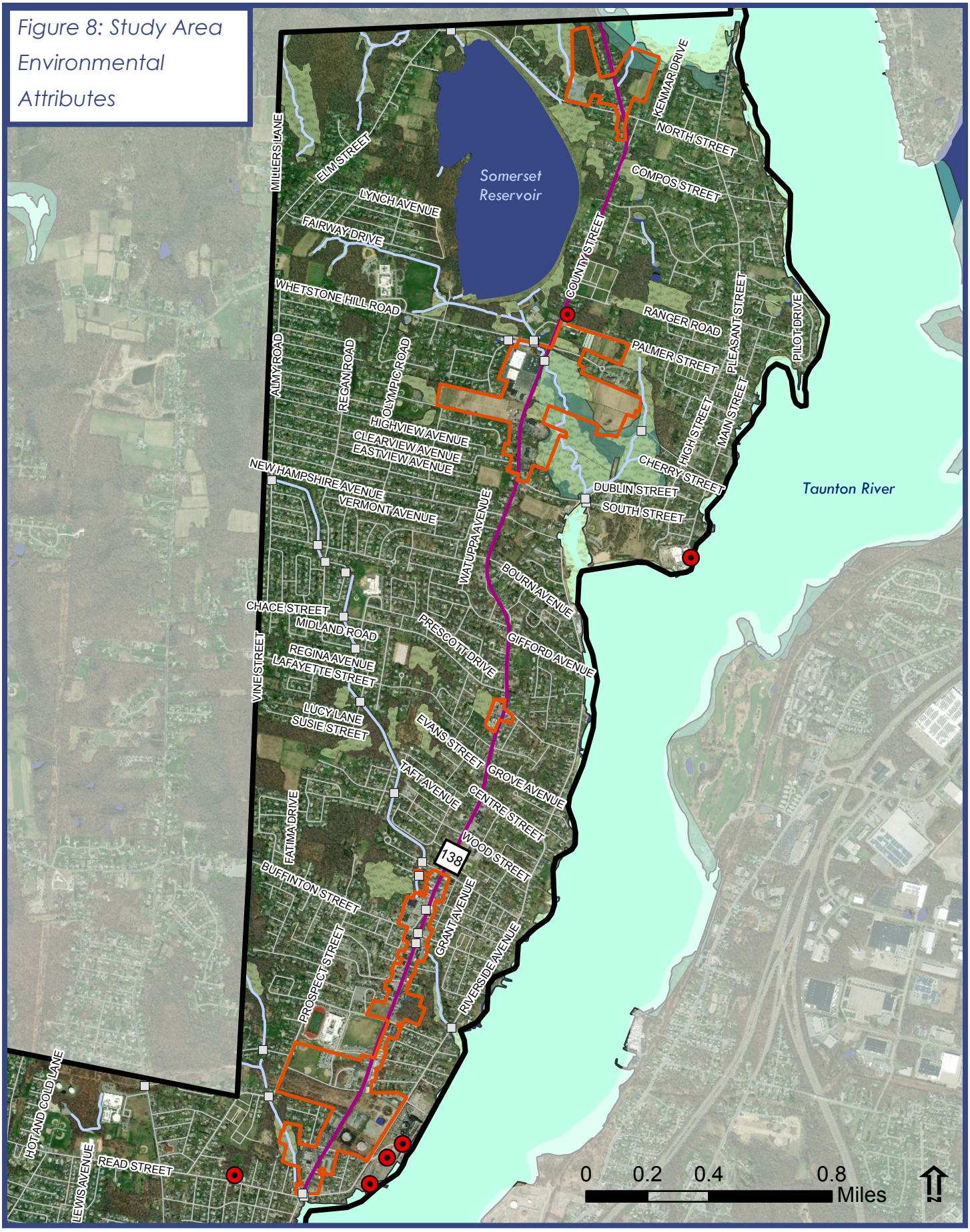


# TRANSPORTATION CONTEXT

## ROADWAY JURISDICTION

Route 138 itself is a state highway maintained by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT). It is the only state route in the Study Area. All other roads are local, maintained by the town. In general, roads can be categorized by functional classification, an order of magnitude marker of those roads that are the main thoroughfares within a given area. The arterial and collector streets that intersect with the Study Area and its immediate environs include North Street, Whetstone Hill Road, Connecticut Avenue, Dublin Street, High Street, Pleasant Street, Bourn Avenue, Chace Street, Buffington Street, Prospect Street, and Read Street / Riverside Avenue.

There are a number of "Unaccepted Roads" that are not claimed by any jurisdiction or level of government. Sometimes these roads are located within a private subdivision, or sometimes they are "paper streets" that were plotted in the design of a subdivision that has not come to be. But there are some interesting unaccepted streets in the Study Area, particularly the bypass road for right-hand turns from Route 138 southbound onto Buffington Street.

## PUBLIC TRANSIT

As can be observed in Figure 10, the Study Area is not part of any public transit route system. There is a bus line and a number of bus stops that runs south of the Study Area, connecting points west in Swansea to points east in Fall River via Read Street, Route 6, Wilbur Avenue, and Interstate 195 (across the Braga Bridge).

*Figure 9:*
*Roadway Jurisdiction*




Data Sources: MassGIS and MassDOT. Town of Somerset (Assessment Data as of April 2019).

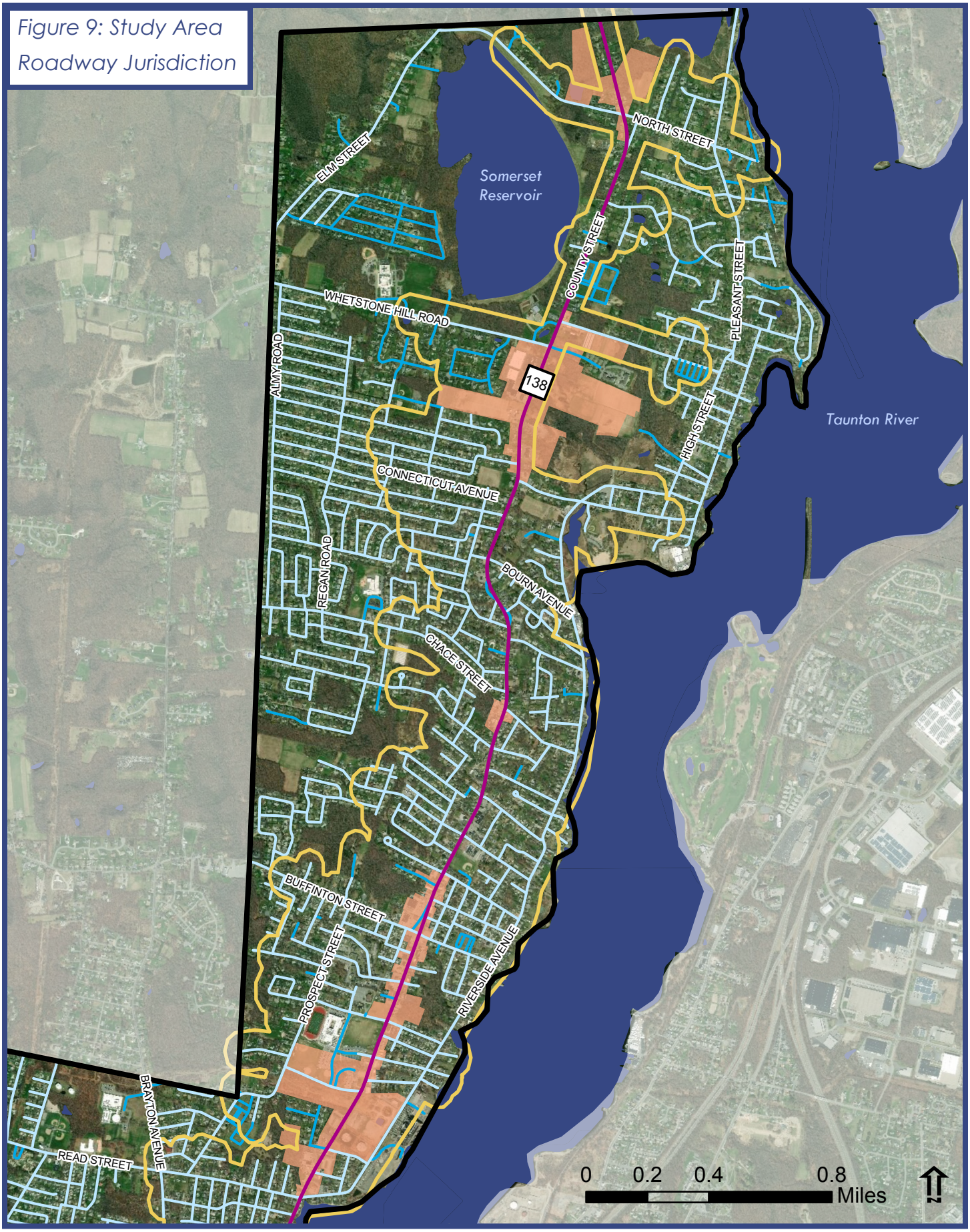



*Figure 9: Study Area Roadway Jurisdiction*

## SIKEWALKS AND BIKEWAYS

Some of the streets within the Study Area have sidewalks and bicycle infrastructure. Route 138 itself has sidewalks throughout almost the entirety of the Study Area north to Whetstone Hill Road. Sidewalks do not frequently extend along residential streets in proximity to the Study Area, a factor that may discourage use of the corridor for short trips on foot from the surrounding neighborhood. Main intersecting streets that do have sidewalks include Wood Street, as well as Buffington Street and Chace Street (both to the west only).

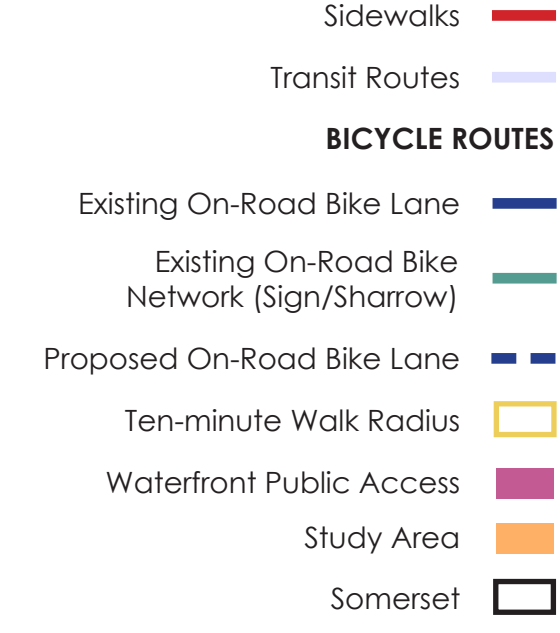
It is positive that there is a full sidewalk network surrounding the higher-denisty development off of Shawomet Avenue, as this provides residents with a choice of mobility options for accessing the corridor. In general, increased mobility options for all surrounding residential areas would expand options for accessing Route 138. Residents can choose to couple exercise with short trips for shopping, or before and after eating at a restaurant. This keeps cars at home and out of the competition for limited on-street parking. The few eastern sidewalk connections from Route 138 to Riverside Avenue and the waterfront are located at the Southern extent of the Study Area, on Washington Avenue, Wood Street, Pratt Avenue, and Johnson Street. The corridor and its environs are missing just a few crucial linkages of sidewalk that would enable pedestrians to walk a sizable loop from South Street in the north down Riverside Avenue to Johnson Street in the South, back up through Route 138.

The Study Area is lacking in routes for cyclists. This portion of town does not contain any dedicated bike lanes or off-road bike trails. There are some plans to extend a dedicated bike land along Elm Street from an existing lane in Swansea that would skim the northern portion of the Study Area, and a planned lane along Read Street. Whetstone Hill Road and Pleasant Street/ High Street/Riverside Avenue have signage that indicates the route as a shared path for both motorists and cyclists.

Route 138 may be too narrow or busy for bicycle riding to be encouraged along the highway itself, but connections for cyclists along intersecting east-west routes could again allow for greater mobility choice for residents or for visitors to town that cycle on Riverside Avenue. Conflicts between cars and other roadway users have resulted in crashes involving pedestrians or cyclists at Route 138 and Buffington Street, Doris Avenue, and in front of the Somerset Country Store within the Study Area.

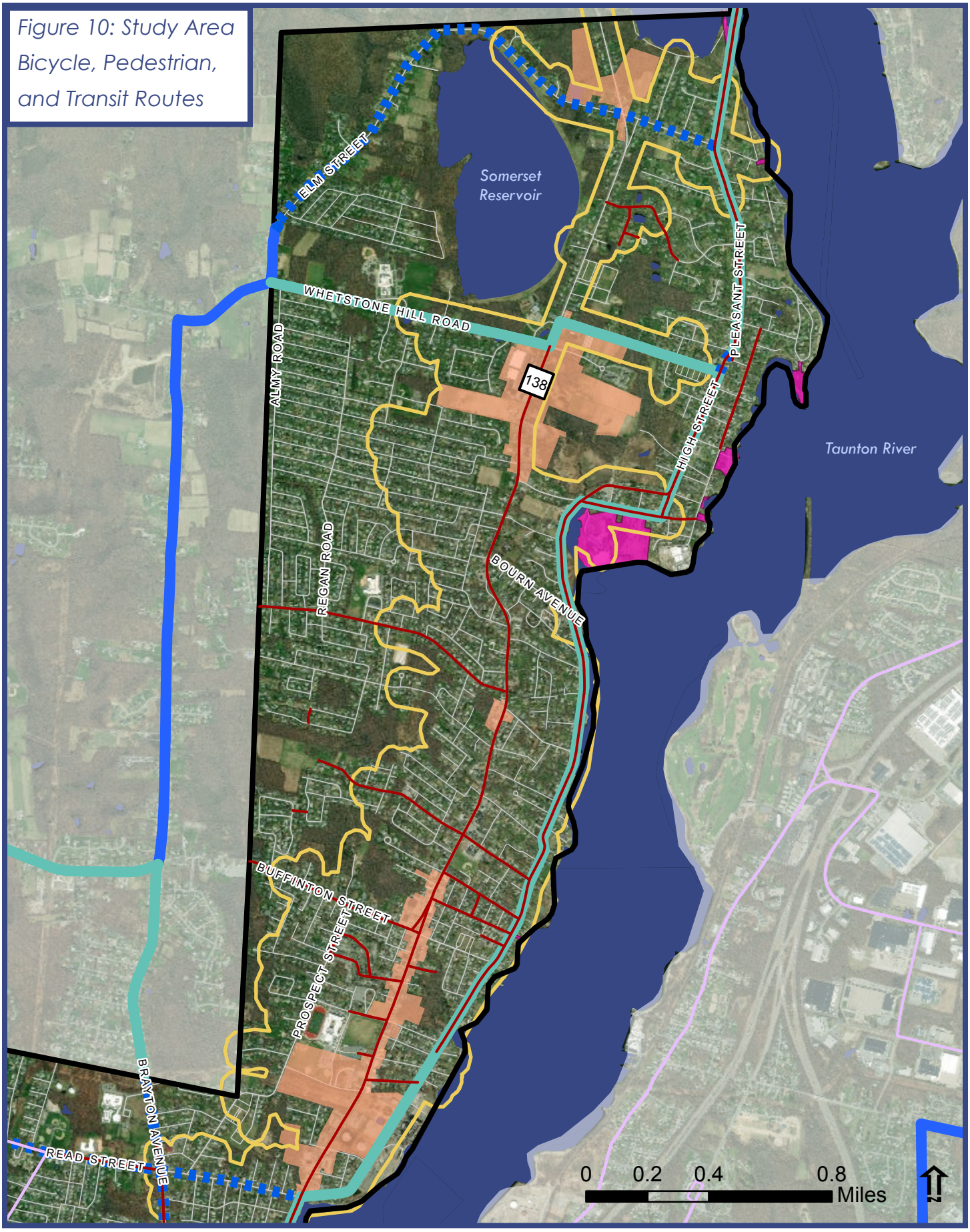
*The corridor and its environs are missing just a few crucial linkages of sidewalk that would enable pedestrians to walk a sizable loop from South Street in the north down Riverside Avenue to Johnson Street in the South, back up through Route 138.*

*Figure 10: Bicycle, Pedestrian and Transit Routes*




Data Sources: MassGIS and MassDOT. Town of Somerset (Assessment Data as of April 2019).

*Figure 10: Study Area Bicycle, Pedestrian, and Transit Routes*



## HIGH CRASH AREAS

Unfortunately, the Study Area does contain some of the highest crash concentrations in town (2014-2016 data), particularly at the South Street, Eastview Avenue, Marble Street, Wood Street, Washington Avenue, Pratt Avenue, Luther Avenue, Harrison Avenue, and Clifford M Holland Road intersections. The highest frequency of crashes occurs at the very southern point of the Study Area at Read Street. Levels are also particularly high at the intersections of Route 138 and Buffington Street, as well as at the cluster of driveway entrances for Rite Aid and Dunkin Donuts.

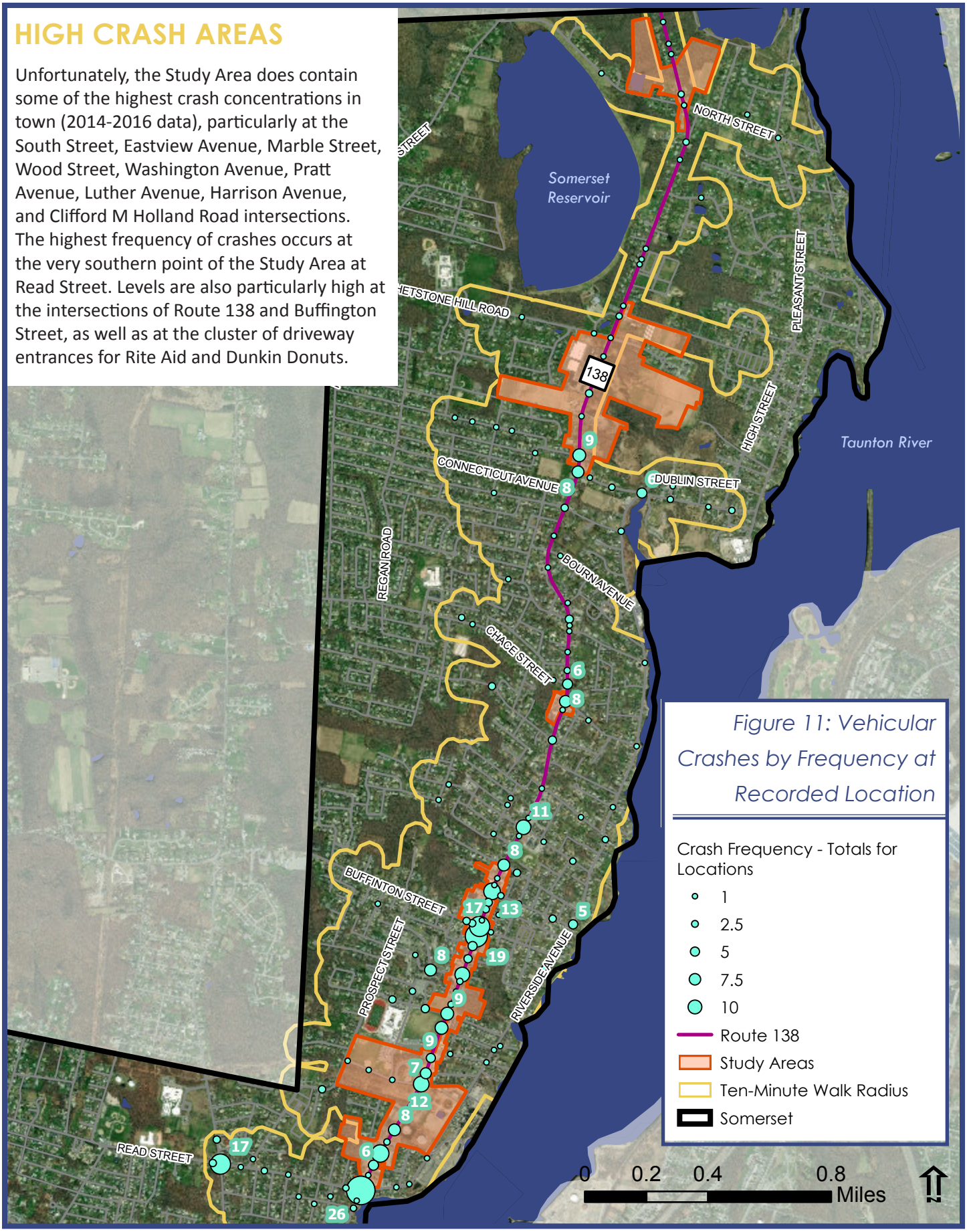



*Figure 11: Vehicular Crashes by Frequency at Recorded Location*

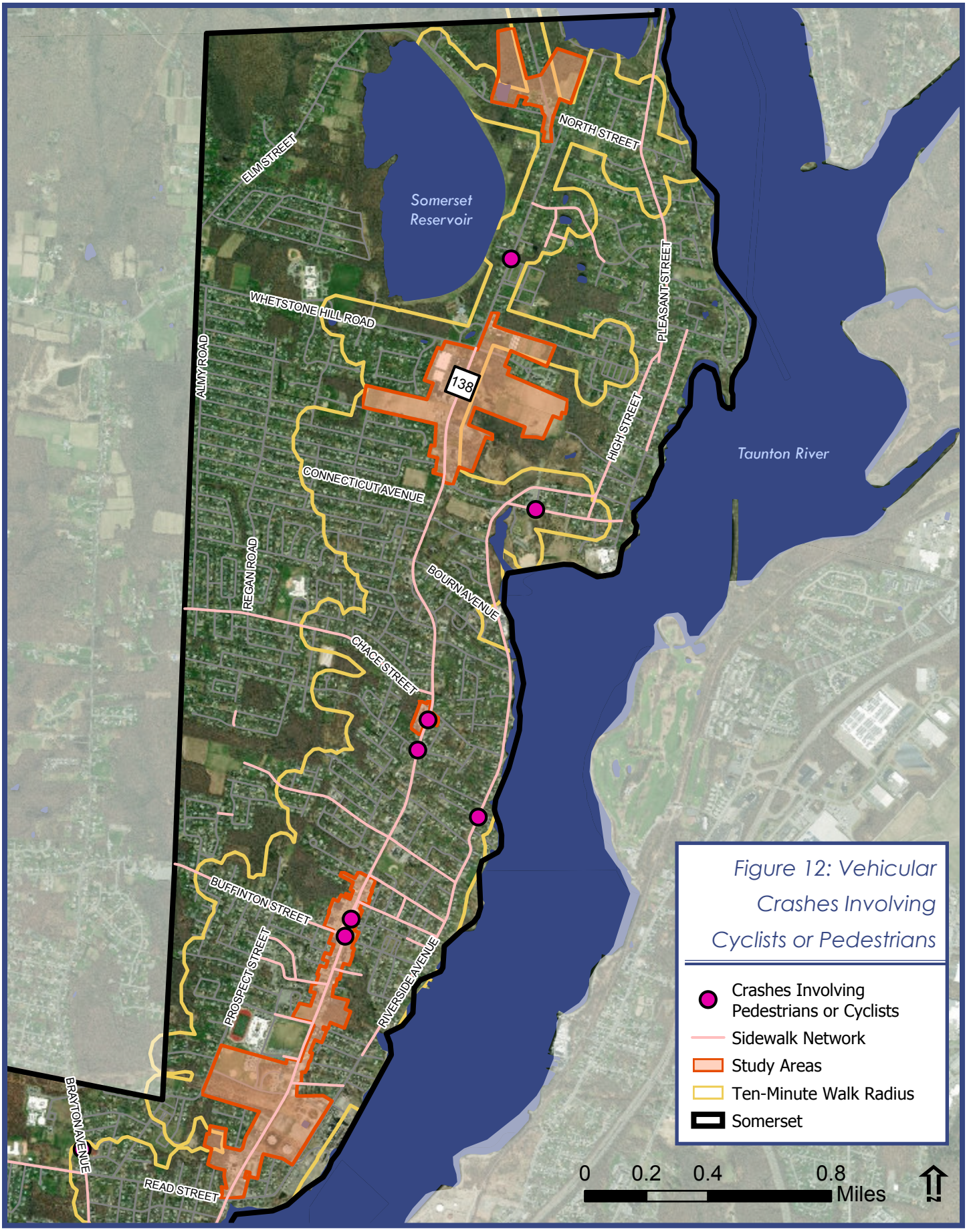



*Figure 12: Vehicular Crashes Involving Cyclists or Pedestrians*

# VACANCY STATUS

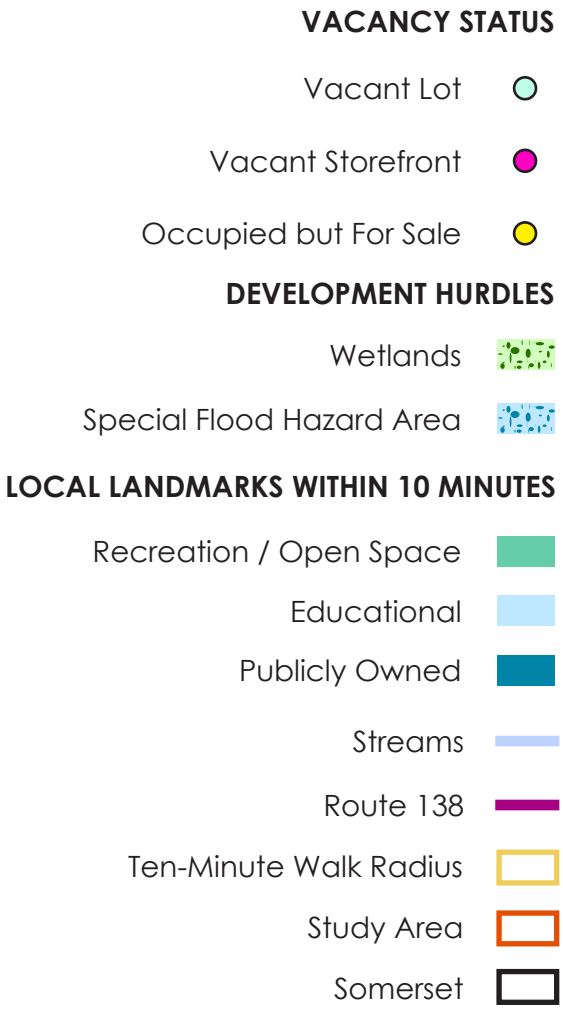
## PROPERTY SURVEY RESULTS

SRPEDD conducted a field survey of the Study Area on October 3rd and 4th, 2019, in order to have an up-to-date understanding of the occupancy of commercial spaces along the corridor. The data points of the survey included information on the number of apparent units in a building, number of apparent vacancies, site conditions, available parking, mixed-use status, and posted contact information for property managers or real estate brokers. In some cases, these are our best estimates of vacancy given the characteristics of the site visible from the street. These survey data points were combined with assessment data to create an interactive web map, Somerset Route 138 Vacant Property Survey, accessible here.

The interactive map, similar in form to the map in Figure 13, shows properties with vacancies (vacant buildings, lots, or units) and properties for sale in the context of nearby landmarks and potential hurdles to development. Wetland areas are often undevelopable with the exception of very few circumstances. Properties in the Special Flood Hazard Area must purchase flood insurance or elevate to a pre-determined base flood elevation (set by FEMA in their Federal Insurance Rate Maps). Development in the Special Flood Hazard Area may not be advisable, even with floodproofing accommodations. In other instances, there are community landmarks near many of the sites with vacancies, such as parks or schools, that naturally draw many people. Businesses located near these institutions may benefit from a customer base that frequents these locations.

In total, we observed nine lots that appeared to be vacant of any buildings or structures. At least one of these properties is being used for agricultural purposes in the interim. There are 12 properties with vacant buildings or vacant units within multi-tenant buildings. Five of these appear to be wholly vacant buildings, with the other seven representing commercial units ("commercial condos") within multi-tenant buildings. There are three properties that are advertised as "for sale" on the ground, but that have fully-occupied commercial tenant spaces or that contain existing structures.

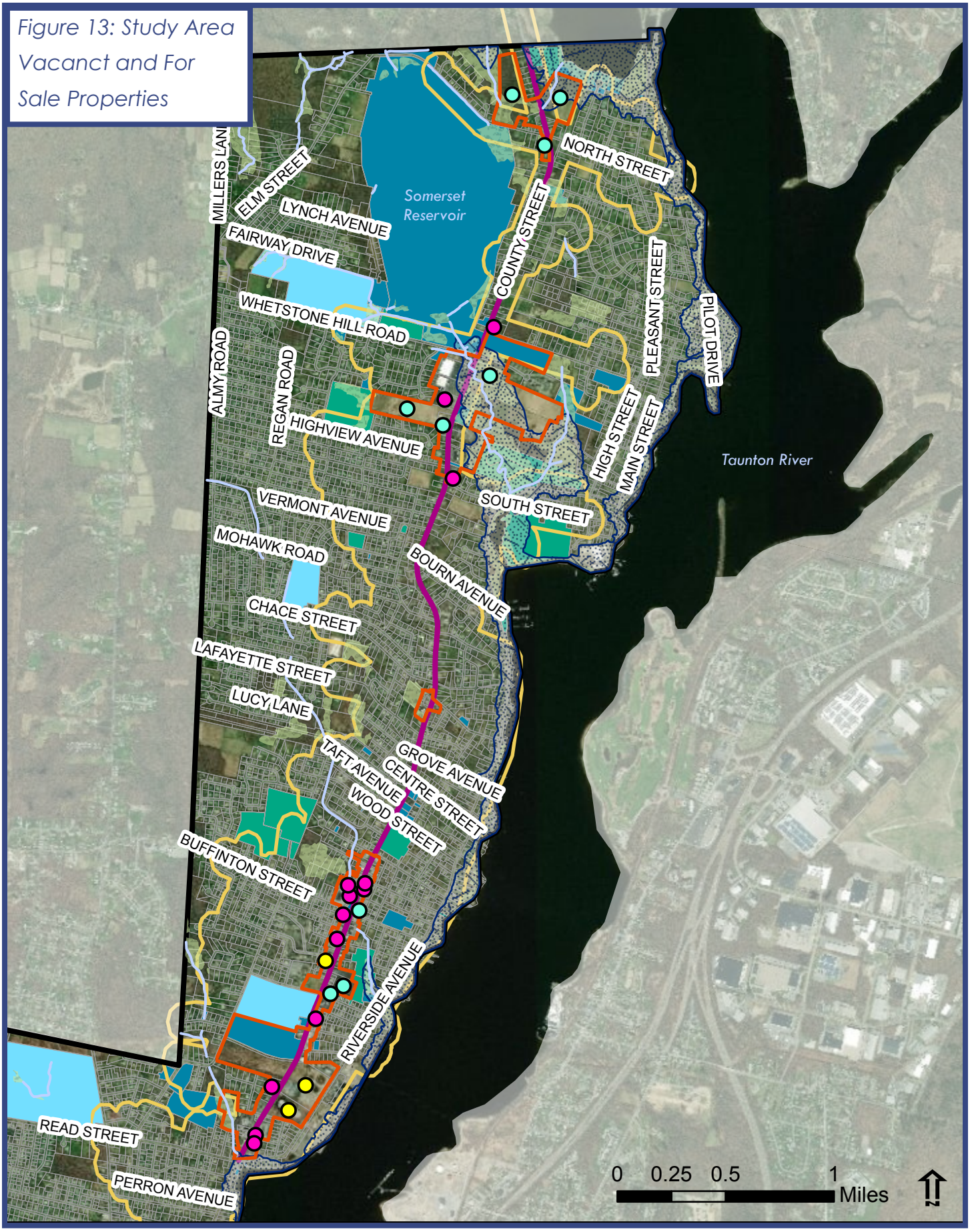
*Figure 13: Study Area*
*Vacant and For Sale Properties*




Data Sources: MassGIS and MassDOT. Town of Somerset (Assessment Data as of April 2019).

*There are community landmarks near many of the sites with vacancies, such as parks or schools, that naturally draw many people. Businesses located near these institutions may benefit from a customer base that frequents these locations.*

*Figure 13: Study Area Vacanct and For Sale Properties*



# RECOMMENDATIONS & DESIGN GUIDELINES

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis above, we have several general recommendations that would assist in enlivening Somerset's commercial corridor by making it more comfortable for pedestrians. The downtown core is currently poised at a moment of opportunity for positive redevelopment, with vacancies at two corners of the Buffington intersection. As the town contemplates the future of these properties, it may be beneficial to consider the following general recommendations.

1. **Create a new zoning district for the heart of the commercial core between Washington Avenue and Luther Avenue in the south. This area constitutes the existing commercial core that could be built upon to bring about a "downtown" destination for pedestrians.**

   **Adjustments in Permitted Uses**

   At present, the area is zoned Business, which allows for many large-scale commercial uses that are not associated with a traditional pedestrian-oriented downtown core. We suggest creating a new "neighborhood commercial" district that would incentivize the development of retail, service, and mixed-used uses by instituting a more selective set of uses permitted by right. Larger-scale enterprises that are currently permitted (funeral homes, gas stations, and hospitals, as examples) have a vital role to play in the local economy, but they can be accommodated in the large expanse of the corridor that would remain in the existing Business zoning district.

   **Adjustments in Bulk Requirements**

   Reducing setback requirements would greatly assist creating a more traditional, human-scale relationship between storefronts and pedestrians. It is this sense of proximity between pedestrians the their destinations, and the sense of enclosure that low setbacks provide, that create an ideal and comfortable pedestrian environment (see page 42 for an analysis of the commercial core in Bristol, RI as further evidence supporting lowered setback requirements). In the neighborhood business district, a ***maximum setback of 5 feet*** from the front lot line would be more appropriate and result in the desired effect and built environment as opposed to the existing **25-foot minimum setback** regulation, which is currently encouraging the opposite of pedestrian-scale development in the commercial core.

2. **Improve Bicycle and Pedestrian Infrastructure**

   The corridor and its environs are missing just a few crucial linkages of sidewalk that would enable pedestrians to walk a sizable loop from South Street in the north down Riverside Avenue to Johnson Street in the south, back up through Route 138. According to our street inventory data, there are just two sidewalk segments of this loop that are missing:

   - A 0.36-mile stretch on South Street from Route 138 east to Riverside Avenue. This segment would enable fully continuous pedestrian access from Route 138 to Pierce Beach and Playground.
   - A 0.12-mile stretch on Riverside Avenue from Durfee Court to Johnson Avenue. Alternatively and possibly more beneficial would be a stretch of sidewalk (0.19 miles) on Luther Avenue between Route 138 and Riverside Avenue, since this would complete a slightly smaller loop, but would include Luther Avenue, which leads directly from the waterfront to the High School.

   In concert with completing this loop, the town can invest in additional bike-related infrastructure, such as public bike racks. Partnering with local businesses who agree to host such a rack on their property may be one potential solution for adding in additional bike racks.

Finally, the town must take seriously the Buffington intersection, as two crashes involving cyclists or pedestrians have occurred here - one at the Buffington intersection and another just above at Route 138 and Doris Avenue. Some of the suggestions for this area that we put forth below on pages 40 and 42, including the conversion of Doris Avenue to a one-way street, the closure and repurposing of the West County Street Bypass Road, and the installation of a raised, colorful crosswalk would all assist in making traffic more predictable and giving pedestrians their own separate space through which to traverse portions of this intersection.

**3. Enliven the Public Sphere**

It's intuitive but bears repeating - people attract other people. Towns and cities that are able to generate enough initial interest and catalyze active downtown areas often see these efforts compound upon themselves, because people are drawn to active spaces - these places feel more comfortable, interesting, and joyful to be in. Getting there requires a concerted effort to create a safe, hospitable environment for both cars and people, where shops are at the street level and easily accessible from the sidewalk; where there are engaging elements of art, information, and interest to behold, and where people are able to relax within the streetscape and the public realm.

**4. Connect Downtown to the Taunton River Wherever Possible.**

The presence of the Taunton River is a tremendous scenic and recreational asset to the Somerset community, recognized by a Congressional Designation as a National Wild and Scenic River. Its location on the Taunton River is one of Somerset's most defining attributes and is a unique element of life in Somerset that could be celebrated more - and could be a point of destination to attract visitors from the region at large who would contribute to the local economy during their trips. Many waterfront communities, including Bristol, RI, which was cited as a positive example of commercial core development, have commercial areas that are oriented toward the waterfront, with restaurants, boardwalks, and shops that capitalize on the desire of people to visit these naturally beautiful, yet bustling and engaging places. Somerset is at a slight disadvantage in this regard due to its historical pattern of development. Much of the Taunton River waterfront is privatized, with few points of public access and even fewer that currently have the capacity to sustain companion commercial enterprises on the waterfront. There are still, however, ways that the town many be able to connect to the waterfront from downtown symbolically and visually, including:

- Public art on utility boxes or in a special crosswalk at the Buffington intersection that references river wildlife or water;
- Outdoor seating themes and colors that reference the river, along with bike racks in the shape of fish;
- Wayfinding signage that highlights paths of access from downtown to the waterfront (and maybe en route of some other community attractions, like a place to grab a burger or some ice cream!);
- Elevation of a couple of key buildings downtown, where the topography is such that it might be possible to see the river from the roof of a four- or five-story building. Such a building would not be out of proportion to what is around it and might enable the establishment of a rooftop restaurant with river views; and/or
- Organization of a festival themed around the river that also has events downtown.

Connecting with the river from downtown could be a challenge, but it is overcome with some creativity and investments in items for the public realm that in the short-term, are much more affordable than acquiring and creating an entire new waterfront park, for example.

# DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR CONSIDERATION

A streetscape that is comfortable, safe, and interesting will draw pedestrians to the shops and residences along Route 138 in Somerset. Building facades create and define the public streetscape, articulating the common culture and history of a place, reflective of how it is valued by and within the community at-large.

The following design standards are put forth as suggestions for the Route 138 corridor, particularly the heart of Somerset's commercial core between Washington Avenue to the north and Luther Avenue to the south. The elements of design included in these guidelines are important components of what makes a street interesting and comfortable. Exemplary existing elements from the Route 138 corridor are included as features that could be emulated elsewhere to great effect for creating a cohesive, interesting, and attractive corridor at-large.

## *General*

- New buildings should relate to public streets, both functionally and visually. The primary orientation of a building should be toward Route 138, as opposed to a front yard parking lot.
- All pedestrian entryways and/or lobbies should be prominent, well-lit, and separate from service entrances.

## *Building Materials and Architectural Elements*

- The exterior walls of buildings should not have large blank expanses. Street-facing facades should be articulated at a minimum interval of 25 feet, achieved through changes in the building plane, material, color, or with features such as pilasters or windows.
- A horizontal division shall define the ground floor from the upper floors on the street-facing facades of mixed-used buildings.
- EIFS (Exterior Insulation Finish Systems) and textured stucco are discouraged.

## *Storefronts*

- First floor non-residential uses should have at least 65% of their surface area glazed (transparent windows), with clear glazing.
- Less than 20% of the glass should be flocked with interior fixtures or temporary signs.
- The maximum height of the sill above the sidewalk should be 3 feet.




*This existing building on Route 138 (though in need of some general cosmetic updates) meets many of the suggested design guidelines. The building is at the sidewalk and is oriented toward Route 138. Facade expanses are broken up vertically with changes in materials and horizontally with pilasters. The sill height on these units is appropriate, as is the recessed entrance, the amount of transparency, and the limited use of temporary signs.*




*America's Cup in Asbury Park, New Jersey - a example of a building that meets all of the design guidelines on this page.*

## *Signage*

- Desirable signage includes:
  - Blade signs, wall signs, neon signs, individual backlit letters iconographic signage. [Note: a blade sign is defined as a vertically oriented wall sign, usually perpendicular to the facade.]
  - Wall signs consist of any sign attached to, painted on, or erected against the wall of a building or structure, with the exposed face of the sign in a plane approximately parallel to the plane of the wall.
- Less desirable signage includes:
  - Flashing signs, signs that vary in luminous intensity, and box signage.
  - Moving signs or signs that provide the illusion of movement.
  - Freestanding signs (though we acknowledge that many existing sites on the corridor are configured in such as way as to require these signs).
  - Billboards.
- Though it may seem counter-intuitive, the most eye-catching signs are often the simplest. People reach a visual saturation point quickly, after which they miss visuals that include too much clutter. Signage should strive for eye-catching simplicity.
- New buildings should be designed to include a signage zone above the doorways and display windows for retail use that is integrated into the overall design.
- Each use in a building is permitted no more than two signs, not to exceed 60 square feet in total. One sign should be a building-mounted sign and the second, a pedestrian-oriented blade sign.

*Examples of attractive, pedestrian-oriented blade signage that exists along the Route 138 corridor. The signs are simple, attractive, and effectively eye-catching.*







*A row of attractive blade signs in Rhinebeck, NY.*



## Landscaping

- Landscaping is an important component of the streetscape and site plan development. Certain types of landscaping can enhance the pedestrian experience along a commercial corridor, while also leaving space for circulation and visibility.
- Desirable landscaping includes:
    - Sidewalk tree pits (street trees - would be a town-sponsored initiative for plantings in the sidewalk right of way).
    - Planters.
    - Ample plantings at the base of freestanding signs.
    - Evergreen strips that can screen front-yard parking areas.

## Parking Areas

- Parking areas should be located in the rear of lots, behind buildings. Existing parking areas in front yards can be better screened with landscaping.
- Shared parking arrangements are encouraged.

*Examples of attractive signage base plantings that exists along the Route 138 corridor.*







*Plantings that screen the gas station activity at Sunoco.*



## Outdoor Dining

- Outdoor dining can contribute to a lively and active street environment.
- Public sidewalk dining should be permitted in front of all dining establishments as long as a minimum of four feet of unobstructed sidewalk space can be maintained where outdoor dining occurs.
- Restaurants should provide for the disposal of recyclables and garbage. Public receptacles should not be used.
- The placement of outdoor tables shall be limited to the area immediately in front of restaurants, cafes or eating establishments. Dining equipment should not be placed in a manner that blocks, impedes, or covers adjacent storefronts.

*Examples of outdoor dining that exists along the Route 138 corridor, which meet many of the suggested standards on this page.*









## Public Art

- Public art is encouraged along the corridor as it enlivens the public realm and, when coordinated with some town investment, can help to lend a sense of place and celebrate unique attributes of a town.
- Public art does not need to be large or intense in scope - it can be simple acts of beautification that celebrate the commercial enterprises already ongoing along the corridor.

*Eamples of public art on utility infrastructure from Bozeman, MT. The town would need to work with local utility companies.*




*Examples of public sculpture art that exist along the 138 Corridor.*







*Examples of public art in unique bicycle infrastructure, Yonkers, NY.*



# OPPORTUNITY SITE CONCEPT PLANS

## OPPORTUNITY SITE ATTRIBUTES

After initial analysis of existing conditions and vacancies along the Route 138 corridor in Somerset, three sites in particular presented themselves as being ripe with possibility for redevelopment in a way that would bring about a more pedestrian-oriented, active corridor and commercial core, while also bringing additional investment and tax base to the town. The sites selected all have some degree of vacancy and at least a portion of the area actively on the market for sale. In these areas, interventions similar to those we suggest below can occur in the near term. Coupled with additional investment from the town, these changes can compound the positive impact of new development within the Study Area.

The site reconfigurations we suggest are just that - concepts to draw from. While the ultimate outcome could take many shapes, we endeavour to explain the "why" behind each of these plans, so that the motivations for certain design elements can be carried through to possible future alternatives.

## THE THREE SELECTED SITES

The three site selected, from north to south, and the theme of their concept plan redesign are as follows:

1. **Agricultural Urbanism in North Somerset** at the current Silva Farms and Orchard site.
2. **Walkable Downtown Experience in Central Somerset** along Route 138 from Washington Avenue in the north to Ash Street in the south. Both short-term and long-term plans are presented given the complexity of the area.
3. **Offshore Wind Industry Development in South Somerset** at the site of two former decommissioned storage tanks north of Stevens Street.

# SITE ONE

## AGRICULTURAL URBANISM IN NORTH SOMERSET

### Existing Site Conditions

Opportunity Site One is located on the western side of Route 138, between Whetstone Hill Road to the north and Eastview Avenue to the south. The land is in active agricultural use and contains prime agricultural soils. The growing field sits behind a popular farm stand. The large field is currently for sale. The only development constraints on site are a sliver of possible wetlands in the southwest corner. The site sits at the nexus of a large residential neighborhood to the southwest, a public park, and the commercial amenities of the Indian springs plaza to the north.

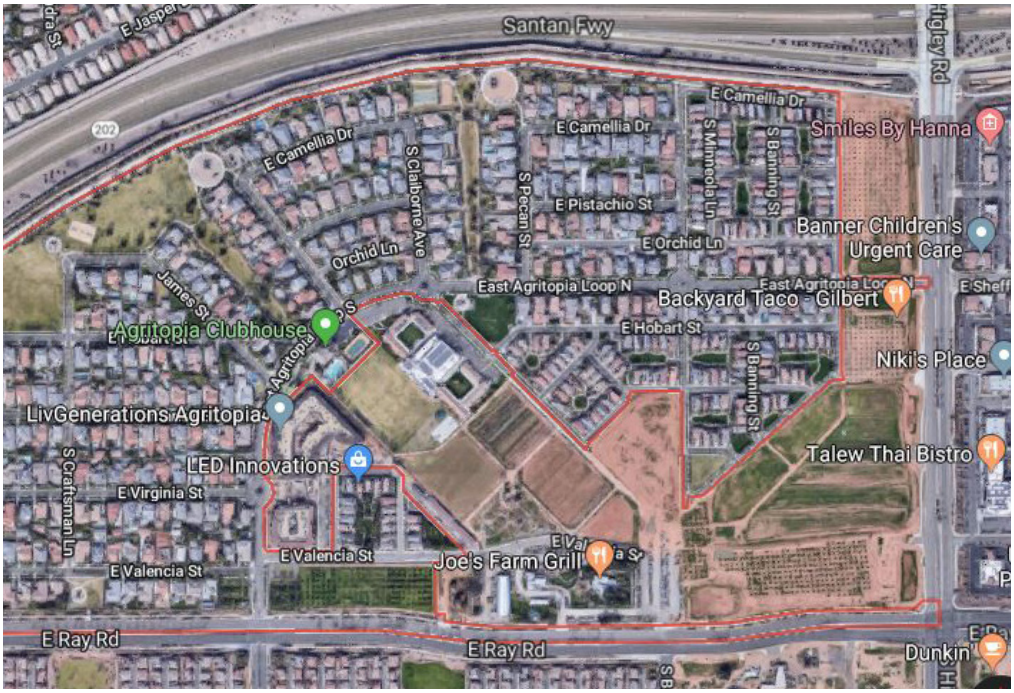
| | |
|---|---|
| **Site Size:** | **11.79 acres** |
| **Site Zoning:** | **Business District (400 ft from right-of-way) and Residence District** |
| **Site Constraints:** | **Small patch of wetlands** |
| **Near to:** | **Ashton Field Park, Indian Spring Plaza, large residential neighborhood to the sw** |
| **Special Attributes:** | **Covered by prime agricultural soils / soils of statewide importance; street connections at front and rear of site** |

### Proposed Development Scenario

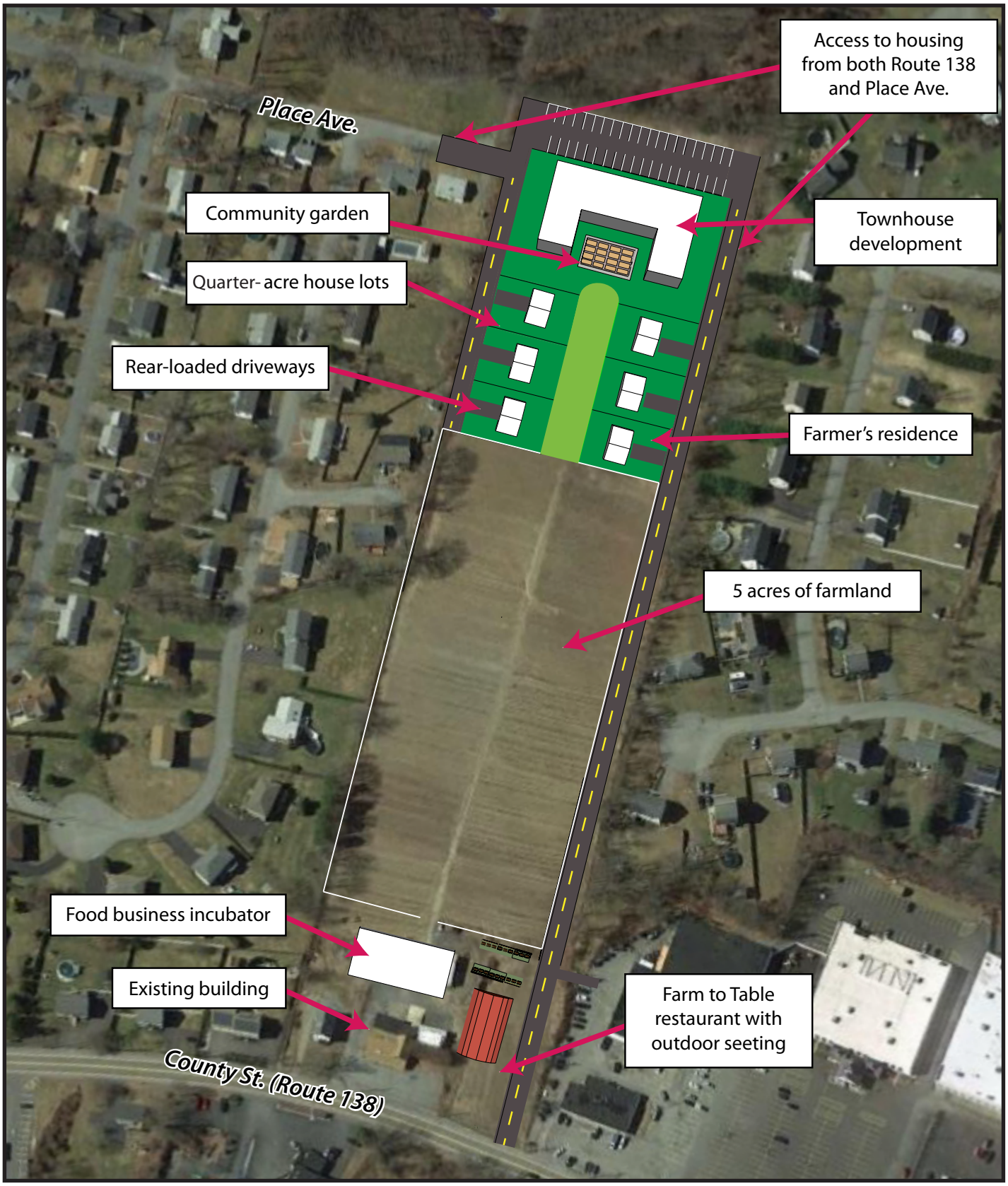
Active agriculture and prime agricultural lands are scarce in Somerset. At the same time, there has been growth in the local food movement and in backyard farming. To both preserve the unique agricultural use and within town and capitalize on the transitional nature of this property between adjacent land uses, a townhome-style agri-development could maximize the potential of this site. Higher density townhomes at the back of the lot are built around a working farm as a common thematic open space amenity (similar to developments based around golf courses built in previous decades), with the farmer occupying one of the dwellings on site. Residents can access growing space of their own in a community garden and participate in a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Program that supports the farm and provides access to fresh local food. The commercially-zoned portion at the front of the lot can continue this theme by hosting a farm-to-table restaurant and a food business incubator, similar to the model of Hope and Main in Warren, RI, that provides workspace for entrepreneurs launching food-based businesses.

### Case Studies

Agricultural Urbanist developments have been successful in Bucking Horse, CO; Harvest, TX; and Agritopia, AZ (pictured at right). In fact, the Harvest development recently won the Master-Planned Community of the Year for 2019 as awarded by the Dallas Builders Association.



## Concept Plan



# SITE TWO: SHORT-TERM OPTION

## WALKABLE DOWNTOWN EXPERIENCE IN CENTRAL SOMERSET

### Existing Site Conditions

Opporutnity Site Two consists of the properites on both sides of Route 138 from Washington Avenue in the north, through the Buffington Street intersection, to Ash Street in the south. This area is the town's neighborhood commercial core, containing retail, service, and dining establishments, as well as a triangular park at the Buffington intersection. The corridor vacancy survey showed that many of these properties contain vacancies and are presently underutilized. The old Rite Aid property is vacant and for sale, diagonal from a vacant lot that has been cleared.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Site Size:** | **About 12.5 acres combined** |
| **Site Zoning:** | **Business District** |
| **Site Constraints:** | **None** |
| **Near to:** | **Somerset Public Library, Town Offices, and School, Buffington Street Dog Park, Chace Preserve, large residential neighborhoods to the SW, NW, and East** |
| **Special Attributes:** | **Neighborhood Commercial Core of town with underutilized properties and public recreation areas** |

### Proposed Development Scenario

Site Two presents an opportunity to active the businesses and public spaces in the heart of Somerset's commercial core. The number of properties in play and the extent of potential trasportation infrastructure work that would be required to transform the area into a pedestrian-oriented destination complicate the redesign. We suggest a two-phase approach: a first phase that accomplishes more readily achievable outcomes in the short-term and a second, long-term phase for full reconfiguration. In the short term, the town can:

- Encourage redevelopment of the vacant Rite Aid building and diagonal vacant lot (two of the four corners of the Buffington intersection) with commercial or mixed-use buildings that have a small front yard setback, oriented toward the street. Buildings at the front of the lot create a comfortable sense of space for pedestrian activity. Automobiles are still accommodated in screened parking areas behind the buildings.
- Redesigned crosswalks at the Buffington intersection with color or other distinctive markers to signify the importance of this intersection and welcome pedestrian movement.
- Convert Doris Ave into a one-way street with spaces for additional shared parking.
- Construct a gateway structure at the top of the corridor (Washintgon Ave) to highlight entrace to the core.

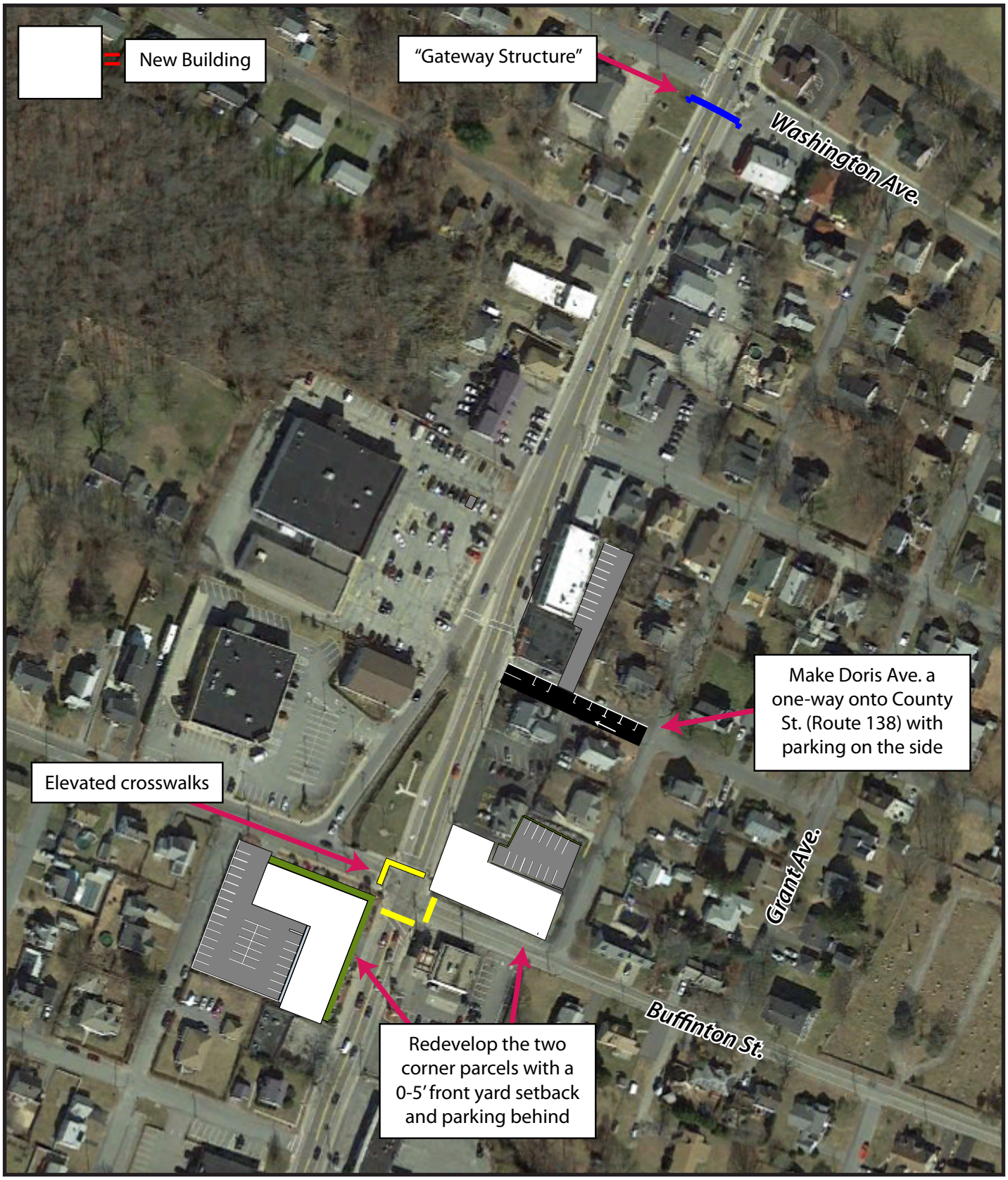
### Case Studies

Atwells Avenue in Providence is marked with a gateway structure that announces the entrance to part of the Federal Hill neighborhood. Cleveland's Playhouse Square has a similar gateway marker.

The "Octopus" intersection in New Bedford at Route 6 and Pleasant Street has been redone with brighter red crosswalks to enhance pedestrian safety.



## Concept Plan



# SITE TWO: LONG-TERM OPTION

## WALKABLE DOWNTOWN EXPERIENCE IN CENTRAL SOMERSET

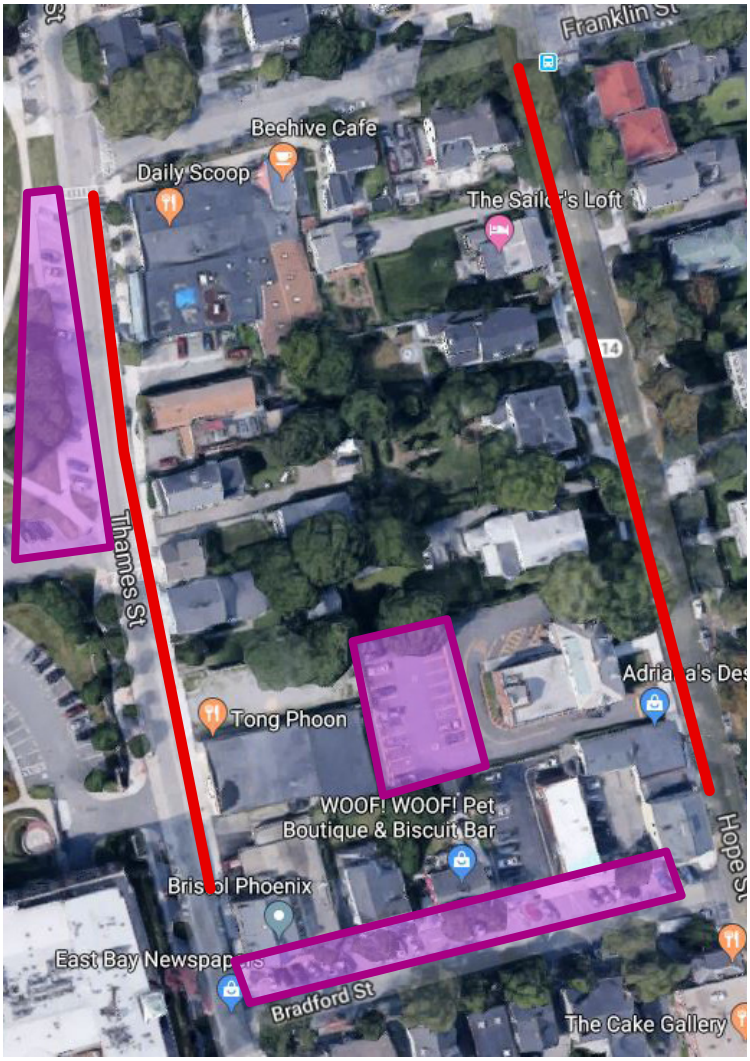
### Site Conditions

With the Buffington intersection redesign with the pedestrian's experience in mind in the Short Term Option described above, additional improvements can be made to active the core as a townwide and regional commercial destination.

### Proposed Development Scenario

Building on the achievements of phase one, in the long term, the town can:

- Close the one-way bypass road known as "West County Street." This one-way road is classified as an unaccepted roadway. While there are driveways to the Walgreens and the post office plaza along this road, these are not the only entrances to these sites. This area could instead be used as an extension of the existing park. Customers of the businesses along this road could utilize space in the park for outdoor dining or other recreational purposes.
- To support the new traffic pattern, a light could be installed to assist vehicles in exiting from the post office plaza with a left-turn signal.
- Also in support of the new traffic pattern, the Walgreens and post office plazas could be connected for additional vehicular circulation.
- A slight adjustment could be made to permit four-story buildings in the block east of 138 between Pratt Avenue and Doris Avenue. A rooftop restaurant or bar on the top of the existing Pottersville Pub building could be tall enough to provide a visual connection to the Taunton River from downtown!

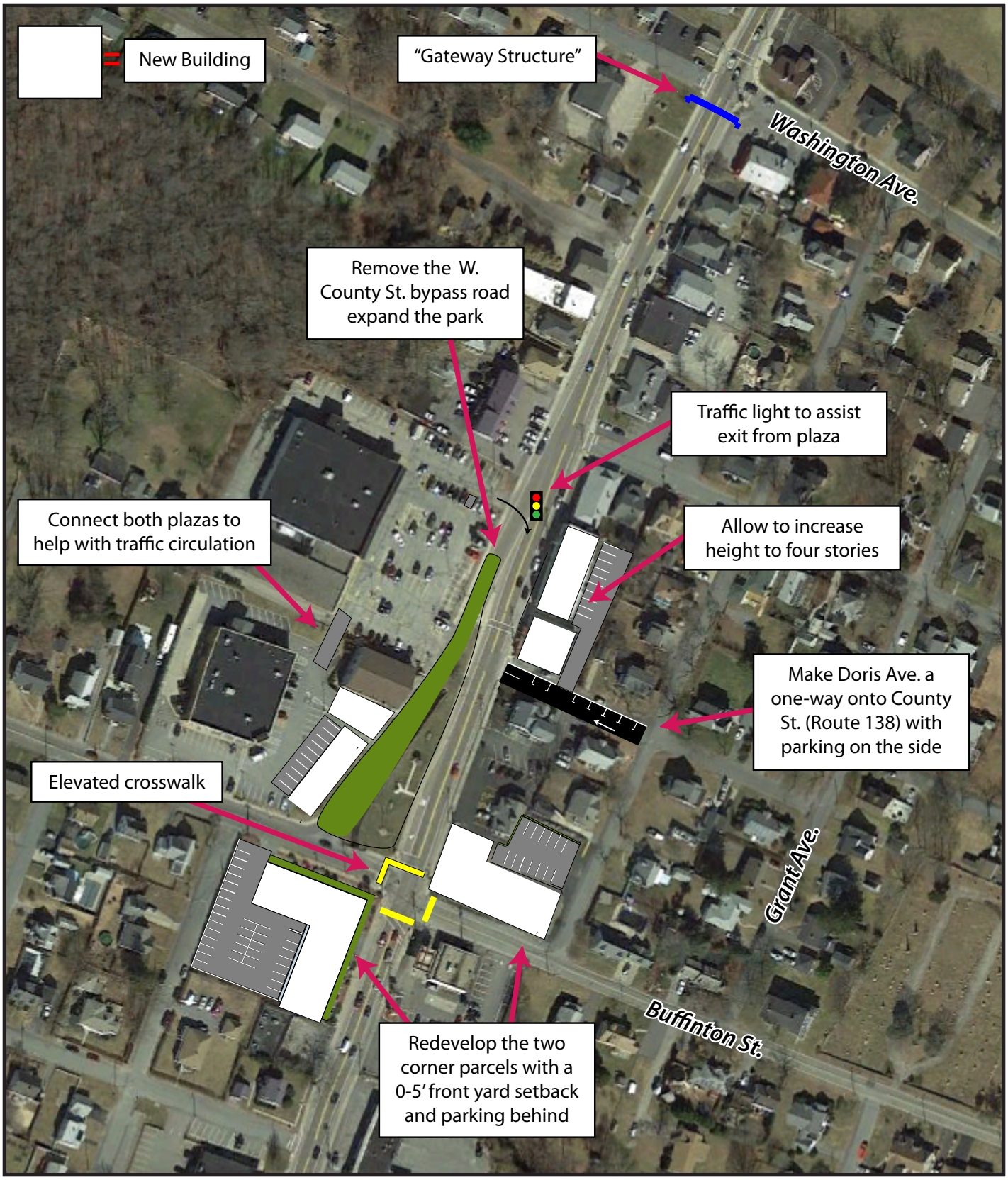



*Bristol, RI, Google Image*

### Case Studies

Bristol, RI was cited by students as an attractive town center that Somerset might emulate. Analyzing the downtown core, we find town center blocks that are oriented toward pedestrian use as much as vehicular convenience. **Buildings are located near the front lot line**, framed by a comfortable sidewalks. **Parking lot areas** are located to the rear of lots, along streets, and in common shared parking areas, as opposed to large-footprint front yard parking lots. The town core has a visual connection to its waterfront on the harbor.

## Concept Plan



# SITE THREE

## OFFSHORE WIND INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH SOMERSET

### Existing Site Conditions

Opportunity Site 3 is located between Riverside Avenue and Route 138. The site consists of one 6.1-acre that is currently for sale, containing two large decommissioned storage tanks. Both this site and the neighboring former Montaup Power Station (19.2 acres, commissioned in 1925, decommissioned in 2010)[1] are owned by the same entity. The new Pottersville Substation and National Grid electrical infrastructure are adjacent to the site to the north. Existing businesses and homes are located to the south across Stevens Street.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Site Size:** | **6.1 acres; 25.3 when considered along with Montaup** |
| **Site Zoning:** | **Industrial District (base zoning) and Business-Industrial Overlay** |
| **Site Constraints:** | **Two large decommissioned storage tanks; possible contamination** |
| **Near to:** | **Montaup Power Station, the "Grid," existing neighborhoods and businesses** |
| **Special Attributes:** | **Strategic proximity to the Montaup site, its deep water port, and National Grid's electric infrastructure** |

### Proposed Development Scenario

Somerset is actively working with multiple private and public sector partners to redevelop the sites of two coal-fired power plants. The larger of the two – Brayton Point – has seen significant work in recent years, including the well-publicized 2019 demolition of its cooling towers. Despite recent setbacks at both the local and national levels,[2] Brayton is positioned to become "a world-class logistics port, manufacturing hub, and support center for the offshore wind energy sector."[3] According to Commercial Development Company (CDC), Inc., a national development firm and Brayton Point's owner, one of the site's main assets is its deep water port.[4] Nearby Montaup also has a deep water port and the associated competitive advantages for participation in the offshore wind industry. Moreover, Montaup and Site 3 are well connected to the "Grid" and to the surrounding roadway and highway network. This plan envisions a connected future for the combined 25-acre Montaup and Site 3 properties, the future redevelopment of which can directly support the emerging Massachusetts off-shore wind industry, similar to activities at Brayton Point and scenarios detailed in the Massachusetts Clean Energy Center's 2017 *Massachusetts Offshore Wind Ports & Infrastructure Assessment*. Industry development can include aspects of light manufacturing, support infrastructure and facilities, workforce development sites, among others.

### Case Studies

Brayton Point, Somerset, MA

Marine Commerce Terminal, New Bedford, MA

Wind Technology Testing Center, Charlestown, MA

**Citations**

1. Massachusett's Clean Energy Center at https://files.masscec.com/MontaupHistoricalRecord.pdf and https://www.masscec.com/montaup-power-plant

2. https://www.southcoasttoday.com/news/20191029/verbal-agreement-over-brayton-point-work-prompts-questions; https://www.southcoasttoday.com/news/20191011/somerset-halts-brayton-point-demolition-after-fourth-fire-in-year; https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-09/u-s-is-said-to-extend-review-of-first-major-offshore-wind-farm

3. June 4, 2019, Commercial Development Company, Inc. press release https://www.cdcco.com/press-release/cdc-announces-expanded-port-operations-agreement-at-brayton-point/

4. "Commercial Development Company, Inc. (CDC) is a privately-held, diversified real estate acquisition and development firm whose principal competency lies within the repositioning and redevelopment of underutilized, distressed or environmentally challenged properties." https://www.cdcco.com/about-our-firm/

## Concept Plan




**Photos:** Sculpture - Renton Reporter, Kirk Seese; Montaup - MetroWest Daily News, Michael Holtzman; Brayton Point - BraytonPoint Commerce Center Media Gallery