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## M E M O R A N D U M

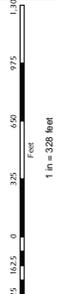
**To:** Worcester Road Project Advisory Committee (PAC)  
**From:** Vera Koliass, AICP, Principal Planner  
**Date:** April 27, 2012  
**Re:** Summary – April 11<sup>th</sup> Workshop, Findings and Next Steps

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The Town of Princeton asked CMRPC to facilitate a deliberate visioning process with the town for a new village district in the Worcester Road area, based upon the existing Business zoning district, which contains Princeton's largest concentration of businesses.

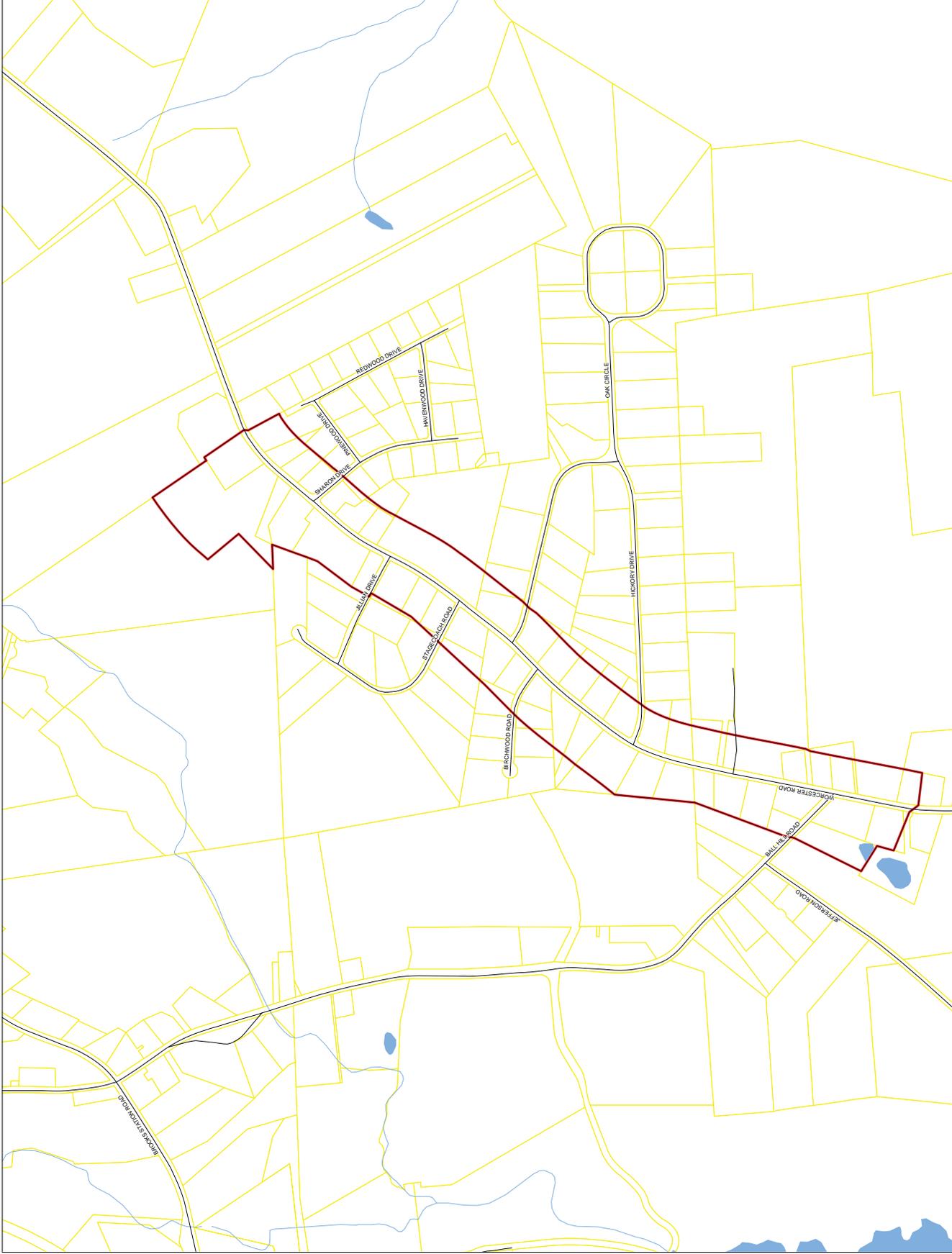
See map below of the existing zoning district.

**TOWN OF PRINCETON  
MASS.  
Worcester Road Village District  
Winter 2012**



**NOTE**  
This map is not the official street map for the town. For more information on zoning and other town services, contact the Town Clerk's office.

- Legend**
- Town Boundary
  - Lakes, Ponds & Rivers
  - Streams
  - Rural Preservation Overlay District (RPOD)
  - Zoning Districts
  - Residential - Agricultural
  - Business
  - Business - Industrial



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In order to accomplish this work, the Town appointed a Project Advisory Committee (PAC). Working with the PAC and the Town's Planning Board, CMRPC facilitated two public stakeholder forums in order to help the community articulate a preferred vision for the project area. Additionally, the Planning Board, PAC and CMRPC relied heavily on the guidance provided in the 2007 Town Plan. Goals and considerations identified in the Town Plan were incorporated into our work, and are articulated throughout this technical memorandum.

The purpose of this technical memorandum is to provide an overview of the project process, findings, and a description of potential next steps for the Town as it considers moving forward with a Worcester Road Village District.

This Village District Visioning effort was supported largely by two public forums, held March 7 and April 11, 2012. In the first stakeholder forum, there were 3 key goals accomplished:

1. A Visual Preference Survey was used to identify the physical design elements that are appropriate for the Worcester Road area
2. A Break-out Group Exercise was used to identify the particular uses that are appropriate for the Worcester Road area, and
3. A Break-out Group Exercise was used to determine the appropriate boundaries of the District.

The findings and discussions from that first stakeholder forum, on March 7, identified areas of commonality and also differences of opinion. These were the basis for discussion at the second forum, on April 11<sup>th</sup>. Specifically, the second forum had six key goals:

1. Compare and align the earlier discussions and public input with the goals and recommendations of the Town Plan, which was adopted by Town Meeting
2. Address perceived conflicts between desired uses in the District, and uses authorized by the current zoning bylaw
3. Identify perceived preferences relative to the use of structures containing more than one dwelling unit.
4. Identify perceived preferences relative to structures containing more than one use
5. Consider the impacts of adjusting the boundaries of the Business district to allow for an expansion of commercial and/or mixed use activity to the north of the existing District.
6. Consider the impacts of rezoning a portion of the Business district to Residential or Mixed-use

This second workshop was broken into four parts or activities:

1. Review findings of the Visioning workshop held in March
2. Group discussion regarding the Worcester Road area as a neighbourhood or village and identification of what makes it unique and special
3. Group discussion regarding appropriate uses in the village district
4. Group discussion regarding the geographic boundaries of the village district

Phil Mighdoll, a member of the PAC, reviewed the Committee's goals for this project, and reviewed the Town Plan, its overall process, and some of the key recommendations that informed this visioning project. The Town Plan acknowledges that there is a "mismatch" between Princeton's commercial districts and the

vision of the Town's future. The Town Plan expressly noted a need for additional work by the Town to envision and plan in the Worcester Road area to create a Worcester Road Village District. It was important that residents and business-owners understand the impetus for this project and how it furthers the goals and objectives of the Town's master plan.

According to the workshop sign-in sheet, there were 28 participants in attendance at the second forum on April 11<sup>th</sup>, including many who attended the first workshop on March 7<sup>th</sup>. Within the group of participants who had not attended the earlier workshop were both residential and commercial property owners in the area, including the owners of Post Office Place and Photopanel of New England. The participation of these property owners was critical given the location, size, and/or function of the property they own within this study area.

### **Discussion Highlights – What is a Village?**

The Princeton Town Plan identifies key goals for the entire community and for this area in particular. The Worcester Road study area is unique in Princeton due to its designation as a Business zoning district, and given its unusual mix of both commercial and residential land uses. Additionally, it is critical to the Town's goal of encouraging appropriate economic activity. The Town Plan also notes that, "...the existing use and dimensional regulations and the district boundaries are not conducive to small village nodes that relate well to their surrounding rural-residential context." Thus, the challenge is to balance the various goals of the town: encourage quality commercial activity that is realistic while at the same time maintaining those rural qualities that make Princeton so distinctive.

A number of participants in the stakeholder forums indicated that they think of themselves "living or working in a 'village'." Participants then expressed a number of ideas to provide greater information on why they consider this area to be a village, and to describe the atmosphere of the Worcester Road area. The ideas and themes expressed included the following:

- The area is a mix of both businesses and single family homes. It is possible to walk to many oft-used destinations, such as the post office, retail, and key eating/drinking establishments including the town's only pub and the region's only five-star restaurant. This was described as a major benefit to the area.
- While this mix of uses was lauded, participants in the forums recognized that there are large tracts of agricultural or undeveloped land contributing to a relatively rural and quiet environment. Even several of the existing commercial uses are fairly "low impact" helping to maintain this environment. This atmosphere is something that Princeton residents have indicated they value and hope to preserve and which could be enhanced by the design of the street line, with a particular focus on street trees, fencing, and other elements designed to affect the way in which those travelling on Worcester Road perceive the development and uses of the land.
- In the Worcester Road area where so many residential properties are in close proximity to the commercial-use area, walkability is a desired goal. However, due to the relatively high rate of speed of vehicles on the roadway and the lack of sidewalks connecting with the consumer-oriented uses in the area, this portion of Worcester Road is not currently considered "walkable." In order to

encourage more pedestrian activity, a combination of sidewalks and connecting walking paths should be considered when moving forward. Additionally, design elements mentioned above can also help establish or encourage walkability.

### Uses in the Village

A village can be described as a collection of various uses and types of buildings, at a human scale, that serves those living and working nearby. As noted above, connecting all of these elements in a way that is walkable and displays a sensitive interaction between the street, the properties, and their uses are key features in a village context. Workshop participants uniformly agreed that maintaining, and even expanding, the mix of uses in the Worcester Road village is of great importance. In fact, allowing for a greater variety of both commercial (retail, office, and personal service) and residential uses was supported by most participants (see “Boundary” discussion for details on the district).

Mixed-use buildings with both commercial and residential uses were supported, provided that they are designed in a way that is sensitive to the surrounding area. The following examples of mixed-use buildings were shown for illustrative purposes, and participants generally agreed that this sort of design would fit nicely into the area.



Mixed retail and housing developments.



Mixed use development currently under construction in Gloucester, MA

Multi-family housing was seen as appropriate in the village, provided there are adequate design provisions. Participants acknowledged the need for a variety of housing types in Princeton, and saw a benefit to having housing other than single family homes in the village area. The notion of some increase in residential density was met with approval by the attendees. However, in keeping with the scale of the neighbourhood, large-scale apartment-style developments were not, in general, seen as appropriate.

The following examples of multi-family residential buildings were shown for illustrative purposes, and participants generally agreed that this sort of design would fit nicely into the area.



Multi-family housing in Sherborn, MA



A two-family home in Northborough, MA

Home occupations form a small but important portion of the town's economic base, and several are located in the Worcester Road area. As stated in the Town Plan, growth in home occupations can greatly benefit Princeton because they provide a source of livelihood for residents and have minimal if any impacts on traffic or community character. It is important, however, that the business activity does not become too large or disruptive for residential areas. Current zoning regulations place limits on the scale of home occupations which help ensure the appropriate scale for these activities.

Virtually all participants in the two workshops support appropriate home-based businesses and encouraged their continuation within the village area.

## **Design**

The Worcester Road area was described as one of the “gateways” into Princeton, and thus the Town should “get it right,” as stated by one participant, when it comes to the appearance and experience of this village. The design details of how properties are developed are considered very important, and include both the building itself and the site. Processes such as design review, site plan review, and special permits are viewed as important regulatory tools for many of the identified uses in the district.

Maintaining a rural streetscape along Worcester Road is a critical element of the Vision for the Worcester Road village district. Accordingly, site plans should include attractive landscaping and fencing, and maintain an adequate setback between the road and the building. Forum participants agreed that undesirable fencing, signage and landscaping designs can easily detract from a building’s otherwise attractive design and appearance.

Workshop participants characterize Worcester Road as having a rural feel. Consequently, they agreed that locating buildings close to Worcester Road should be discouraged. However, participants also noted existing commercial properties that are set back from the road have a view from the road defined by asphalt. In those cases, participants agreed that site improvements should be encouraged in order to soften the impact of the property as seen from the street.

Even more important than site design, the architectural design of buildings is critical and ought to complement the surrounding context. Architecture that relates a development to the neighbourhood around it should be encouraged, such as roof lines that are similar to other buildings in the area.

Building size and scale are considered very important to achieving this consistency. During this visioning process there was consistent, clear support for buildings that had the "New England" feel, in a residential scale – that is, with pitched or gable (not flat) roofs, traditional colonial design, even "barn" style buildings, and modestly-sized. Buildings that were constructed of masonry block, had flat roofs, and/or were very large and typical of a business chain’s standard design, were viewed unfavorably during the Visioning process. Articulated design standards could help steer potential developers to design buildings better in keeping with the vision of the district as an entrance into Princeton.

Maintaining some open space areas within the village is important to the overall atmosphere as well, such as wooded or open natural areas and a quiet spot for a bench.

## **Village District Boundary**

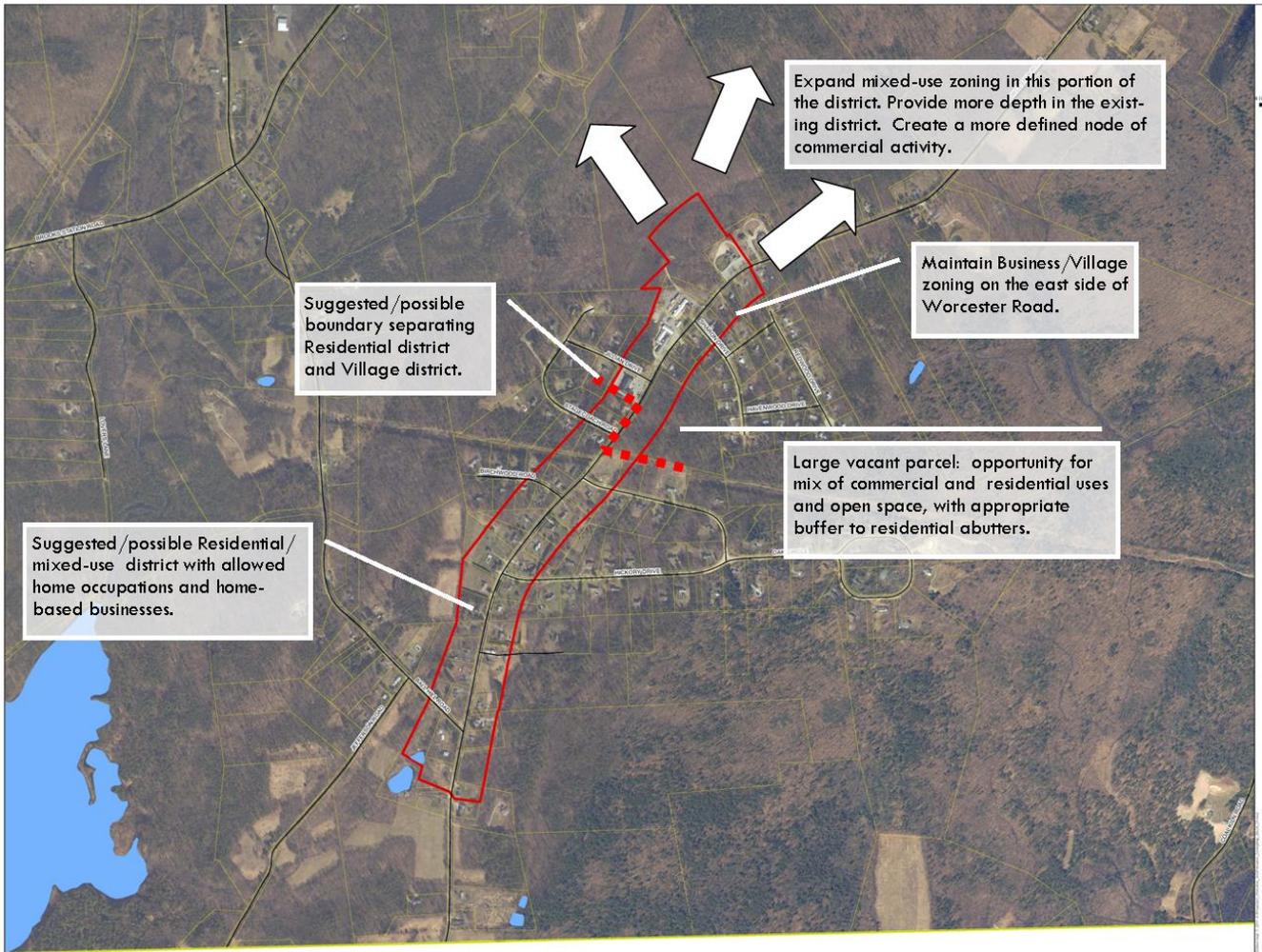
There are two distinct issues relative to the boundary of the proposed village district: 1) the current boundaries of the Worcester Road Business District create a narrow, linear district that offers few opportunities, if any, for commercial use or expansion; and 2) a large portion of the Business District contains single-family homes and abuts newer single family residential subdivisions.

The current zoning bylaw essentially prescribes strip commercial development. There is already a concentration of retail, service, and light manufacturing businesses in this district, but little room for expansion within the existing boundaries. Adjusting the boundaries of the district with the goal of providing more depth along Worcester Road will create an opportunity for more economic development within an established node of commercial activity. This in turn is more responsive to local needs, protects Princeton's interest in rural character and supports the goals of the Town Plan. Some forum participants expressed the value in not "spreading out" the commercial districts in a linear fashion and, rather, advocated for concentrating these economic development areas in a more focused node.

Providing more depth within the district creates the opportunity for "off the road" development. This would provide more land to devote to mixed-use development while still maintaining the character of Worcester Road in siting the development further back from the road. In general, providing more area zoned for mixed use was supported in the northern portion of Worcester Road. Precise boundary lines were not fully investigated, and some concerns relative to existing residential abutters were raised during the visioning process. Therefore, this is an issue that must continue to be discussed before any zoning map changes are proposed.

Similarly, while many participants seemed to agree that the residential-use portion of Worcester Road (the area to the south of Post Office Place) ought to be changed to a residential district, there was not universal agreement. South of Post Office Place, most of the properties are residential. During the visioning process, there was extensive discussion about the idea of rezoning this portion as Residential, rather than the current "Business" zoning designation. Although many of the residences include business activity which would qualify under the Town's home-based business provisions, some property owners expressed concerns that there could be a negative economic impact of such a zoning change. Any suggestion to rezone a portion of this area should be fully debated to balance the interests of those property owners in the predominantly residential-use portion of the district.

The map below summarizes the discussion regarding the boundaries of the Worcester Road Village District.



Worcester Road Business District – summary of workshop comments

## Summary and Next Steps

This Visioning process for the Worcester Road Village District was successful in building on the goals of the Town Plan and identifying key areas of general agreement:

- The Worcester Road area is seen by many as a village, and provides many advantages for residents living near, and working in, a commercial activity center. However, it would benefit from more provisions to encourage walkability.
- Expanding and concentrating economic activity in this node of existing commercial development is an opportunity for additional non-residential development which will benefit the town by providing employment opportunity and adding to the municipal revenues.
- Dividing the current Business zone into a Commercial-mixed use zone and a Residential mixed-use zone should be considered.

- Many uses not currently found in this area, including some higher-density residential development, are appropriate in a village setting, provided that site and architectural design are sensitive to the established rural character of the neighbourhood.
- Site and architectural design elements are seen as key aspects that should be considered through the local permitting process.
- Home occupations are important and should continue to be encouraged in the Town.

Thus, the Vision for the Worcester Road Village District could be described as a district that is mixed-use, provides opportunity for additional commercial establishments and housing types, in a more concentrated area, is walkable, and whose overall design reflects the surrounding rural-residential character.

The next steps to achieving the Vision can be categorized into three areas, each of which relies on the others to be successful: Zoning bylaw changes, zoning map changes, and adoption of appropriate design guidelines. The details of each of these provisions require additional research, analysis and public input, but all reflect support heard from the public as well as recommendations made in the Town Plan.

### *Zoning Map Amendments*

As previously described, the existing Worcester Road Business District is a long, narrow area whose dimensions essentially require strip development. Adjusting the boundaries to create a concentrated Village district will support a small village node that is both conducive to strategic economic development and relates well to the surrounding rural-residential context. Walkable villages, an aspect that was supported in the workshop, tend to be compact and relatively dense. Changing the village boundaries to promote more compact, concentrated development will help to achieve these goals. Expansion of the northern section of the current Business district, to create more depth and thus more development opportunity off the street, should be explored.

It appears that there is some, but not universal, support for the southern, predominantly residential, portion of the Business district to change to a residential-mixed use district. This rezoning would allow for the focus of economic development energy in the already established commercially-used area of the district, and allow for some limited commercial activity in the residential area as well. This is important because there are many residents in this part of the district that have existing commercial activities occurring on their properties. Therefore, any proposal to rezone this southern portion of the district must carefully consider the potential impacts on these residential properties. It will be important for the Town to recognize the benefits of home occupations and ensure that this trend continues. The Town Plan includes several recommendations of ways the Town could consider a different approach to regulating home occupations and small-business activity conducted from a home office or shop. These should be thoughtfully deliberated in order to provide adequate controls while simultaneously providing flexibility and reasonable standards to at-home entrepreneurs. The Town Plan also includes suggestions for technical assistance that the Town could provide to help support home-based business owners, including networking and joint marketing.

Again, additional discussion and flexibility on everyone's part will benefit all involved, and help move the vision forward.

### *Zoning Bylaw Amendments*

As expressed by workshop attendees, creating two different mixed-use village districts in the Worcester Road area will see support. Based upon the comments heard at the workshops, it appears that expanding the list of allowed uses in the village to include mixed-use buildings and some higher density residential uses should be discussed. The opportunity for adaptive re-use of existing buildings and properties to include new uses and/or combination of uses should be considered.

Appropriate dimensional controls in this village district will be important to the success of the district. Lot size and setbacks, for example, are currently identical for both residential and non-residential uses in Princeton. This may be a constraint on effective economic development in such a limited activity area, and may also be an impediment to improving older business uses and structures.

Similarly, successful zoning bylaw provisions for this area will include development standards, such as requirements for off-street parking, landscaping, lighting, location of the parking lot on the site, buffers between the parking and adjacent homes, etc. In the case of parking, the absence of standards in the current bylaw may result in a site that could be excessively under- or over-parked. These issues will best be addressed in concert with the other bylaw amendments. However, the Town Plan recommends making these kinds of changes even if the Town does not move forward with a new village zoning district. The Town has consistently indicated that appropriate site development standards are critical to ensuring that proposed developments result in a quality site that comports with Princeton's character and design traditions.

### *Development of Design Guidelines*

Participants in both workshops have clearly supported additional development and types of development in this area, provided that the design reflected the surrounding context. While development standards can be regulated within the zoning bylaw, architectural design and the overall village vision are typically articulated in Design Guidelines.

Design Guidelines are a set of recommendations intended to guide development toward a desired level of quality through the design of the physical environment. They are separate from the zoning bylaw, and are intended to inform the process for both the developer and the permitting authority. Guidelines should work in concert with other regulatory tools to clarify Princeton's vision and facilitate and expedite development that is consistent with that vision. Articulating what the Town wishes to see in development proposals assists both the reviewing authority and the project proponent because everyone starts the process knowing what the Town is looking for. Providing a more predictable permitting process will allow the Town and the proponent to work cooperatively on the critical issues surrounding a site's development.

There are many different ways to design a small retail complex, such as Post Office Place, for example. But, if the Town has articulated the general architectural style, being careful not to be too prescriptive, then the likelihood of success is much higher. By clarifying development regulations, expectations are clear and developers have the opportunity to plan projects that advance the vision for the Worcester Road Village District. This approach holds true even for sometimes less popular development types, such as multi-family housing. When the site and buildings are consistent with the preferred design elements, they can serve to reinforce the Town's commitment to the vision, and provide a dynamic economic base. In the end,

Princeton will realize the benefit of additional revenue from development, more easily provide for their employment, housing and development priorities, and also enjoy the social advantages realized by clear and cooperative approaches to permitting reviews.

The Town's continued work to confirm a vision for the Worcester Road area has verified the goals and objectives of the Town Plan, and has resulted in identifying specific topics that will help achieve the vision. Thus, Princeton is well on its way to making some key changes that will both advance a stated economic development goal and maintain the distinctive aspects that make this area so unique and cherished by those who live and work there.