

# Northfield Placemaking

## Celebrating Downtown Northfield

Prepared by the Center for Resilient Metro-Regions

February 18, 2024



**NORTHFIELD**  
Massachusetts



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## Executive Summary

Northfield, Franklin County, Massachusetts is a beautiful small rural community with approximately 2,900 residents. Its rich history, historic buildings, heritage landscapes, rolling hills, presence on the Connecticut River, and diverse open space create a setting with a distinct character. Outside of the downtown center there are a wide variety of walking, hiking, boating, skiing, hunting, rock climbing, and fishing recreation opportunities and a brewery and winery that draw visitors.

It has a small attractive downtown, with two Village Center districts. Those districts host commercial tenants including two small grocery stores, an ice cream shop, a bank, a hardware store, an art gallery, a bed and breakfast, and other commercial tenants. It has a range of institutions and especially houses of worship and a faith-based college and center.

Downtown Northfield, especially the southern Village Center that is the subject of this report, has the opportunity to improve its sense of place through placemaking actions.

Downtown, in both the Village Center districts, already has a strong identity and a unique historic presence. It has many destinations in and near downtown that it can capitalize on.

Placemaking can take advantage of these opportunities. Placemaking actions should and will primarily serve Northfield's residents, but in doing so these actions can drive traffic to support existing and potentially new businesses and, hopefully, reduce Main Street's high commercial vacancy rate.

Northfield's southerly Village District's most unique feature is the wide Main Street right-of-way, with its wide tree belt from the roadway to the sidewalk, and many historical churches and residences set back behind the sidewalk. Although Northfield does not have a formal town common, this wide right-of-way serves that function, strengthens Northfield's sense of identity, and can provide a gather place.

That defining right-of-way/town common is most often seen from vehicles traveling by roadway and from the properties along the road. Sidewalk usage is steady but at a low volume, with 42% of survey respondents reporting that they walk downtown sidewalks at least weekly. Creating a stronger sense of place can make it more attractive for dawdling, exploring and supporting businesses.



## Bring People Downtown

**Placemaking is creating and honoring spaces where people want to live, work, and play.** A

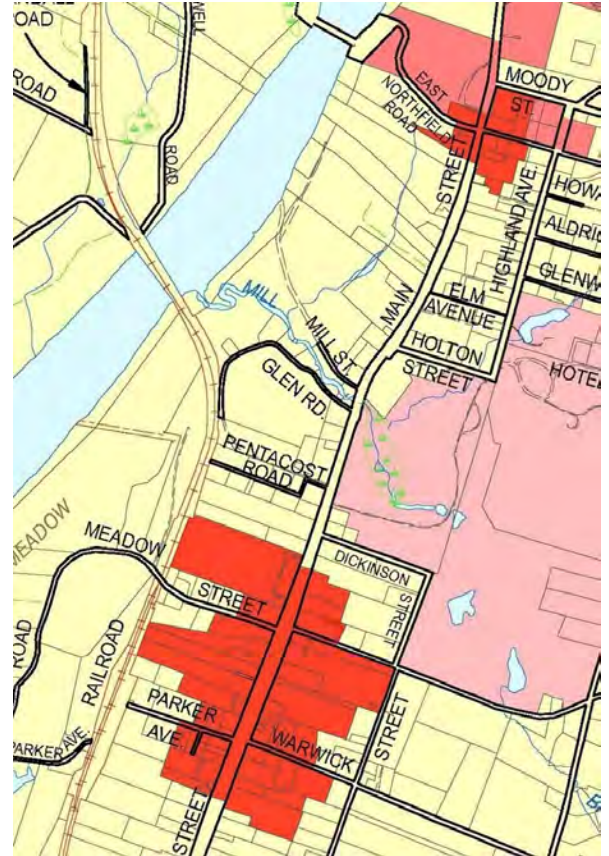
sense of place defines a community and its uniqueness. Downtown placemaking improves the quality of life and sparks economic activity.

Downtowns need people to allow businesses to thrive. Northfield already has many features that bring people downtown.

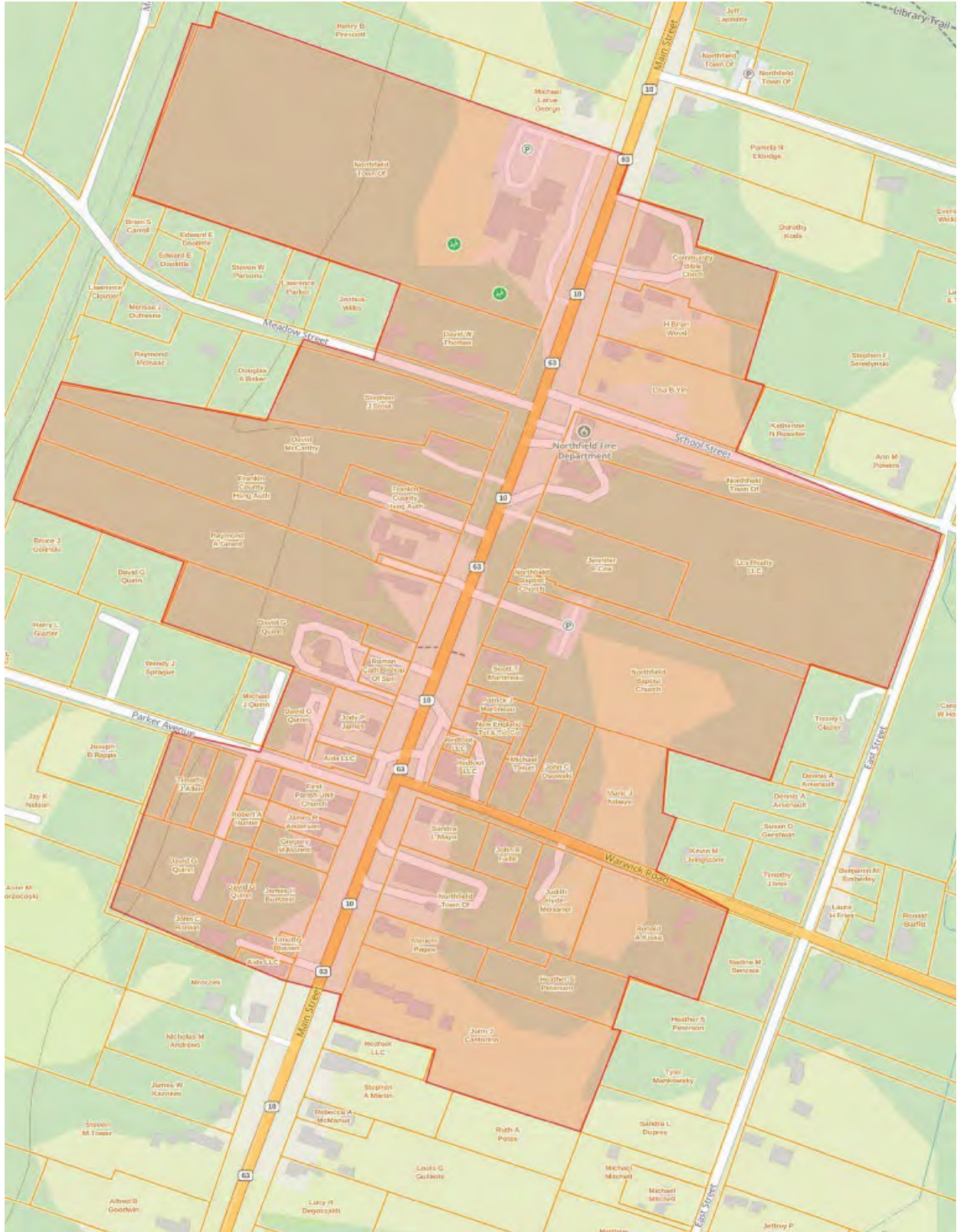
- Route 10 (Main Street) receives 7,000 to 8,000 Annual Average Daily Traffic trips (AADT), which is significant for a small rural village not abutting an interstate. Once past Thomas Aquinas College, this drops to 4,000 daily trips.
- Those trips, the majority of which are simply traveling through town, provide an opportunity to entice drivers to stop. Existing and new downtown and other Northfield businesses can capitalize on those passing through town.
- Northfield is fortunate to still have two small grocery stores and other shops, in an era when many villages have lost many of these businesses. Creating a stronger sense of place is critical to maintain this business and attract new ones.
- The critical mass of two grocery stores, the Creamie, hardware store, flower shop, art gallery, and, nearby, the bank, post office, food truck, Golf Club, many houses of worship, the Dickinson Memorial Library, Town Hall, the Senior Center, Northfield Elementary School, and bed and breakfast provide great opportunities. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts when building a sense of place.

The five primary recommendations for placemaking are:

- 1. Revise zoning regulations** to encourage more downtown vibrancy. This includes:
  - o Building setbacks from the road right-of-way
  - o Signage (public and private)
  - o Allowed uses (e.g., housing and reuse of houses of worship)
  - o Lighting
- 2. Make Main Street safer** by lowering traffic speeds and improving crosswalk markings. An added benefit is that at slower speeds drivers can see more of downtown and are more likely to stop at sights along the way.
- 3. Implement a wayfinding signage program** to create a sense of place, make it easier to discover downtown's offerings, and tie regional attractions together to downtown.
- 4. Activate downtown with public amenities**, such as pocket parks, benches, and art installations, expanding third places or social gathering places available to residents.
- 5. Continue storefront and facility partnerships.**
- 6. Improve connections between the south and north village centers**, to provide improved pedestrian and bicycle connections and, most importantly, to build on the synergy of two commercial areas, their connections to the Schell Bridge and Thomas Aquinas College, and the potential for new investments.



*Downtown Northfield consists of two Village Center districts (in red). The southerly Village Center is the primary downtown and our focus.*



The southerly Village Center is Northfield's primary downtown and the placemaking study area



Northfield’s placemaking project builds on:

- Public forums and community engagement (see following section for details)
- Northfield’s existing character defining features (see Exhibit A for representative photos).
- Past relevant planning studies (see Exhibit B for some of their recommendations):
  - [The Master Plan](#) (2014) which set townwide goals
  - [Rapid Recovery Plan](#) (2021) which set the stage. This **Northfield Placemaking Plan** builds on the recommendations in the *Rapid Recovery Plan* but is focused on downtown and is designed to advance the work started with the Rapid Recovery Plan to allow Northfield to move to grant writing and implementation.
  - [Business Park Feasibility Plan](#) (current process), which can provide complementary businesses
  - *Rural Downtown District Management Study* which recommends, with the first year pilot funding identified, a pilot program for a multi-town shared downtown management program.
  - [Zoning](#) which creates, and limits, opportunities
  - *Northfield Parking Study*
  - [Economic Development Community Survey](#) which identified residents’ aspirations, especially working to reduce Main Street commercial property vacancies.
  - [Schell Bridge Economic Impact Study](#)
  - [FRCOG Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy and economic development survey](#)
  - FRCOG aid for façade improvement program, fire station reuse vision, and downtown visitor center research



This plan creates a menu of proposed improvements for downtown Northfield, based on feedback gathered from residents during a series of workshops held in the fall of 2024. These recommendations, which focus on enhancing Northfield's historic, cultural, and natural resources, are organized by category, and prioritized accordingly. Additionally, the plan includes guidance for the implementation of these initiatives.



## Placemaking Opportunities

During the in-person events, participants identified numerous opportunities:

- Main Street roadway
  - Slow traffic speeds with traffic calming
  - Narrow travel lane, slowing traffic
  - Widen shoulder into formal bicycle lane
  - New crosswalk at Creamie
  - Main St./Warwick Rd./Parker Ave/IGA entrance RRFB crosswalk signal and approach realignment
  - Improved crosswalk markings at Warwick Road
  - Narrow driveway curb cuts at Mim's Market
- Tree belt/town common (roadway to sidewalk)
  - Central gathering and sharing spaces
  - Flower gardens and winter firepits
  - Public art displays
  - Benches adjacent to sidewalk
  - Widen Mim's Market parking
- Wayfinding and gateway installations
  - Routes 10 and 63 (arrival and directions)
  - Route 10/Main St. at Maple St. or at Creamie
  - Route 10/Main St. near library (southbound)
  - Main St/Parker Ave/Warwick Rd
- Public art and installations (in addition to tree belt)
  - Town land in front of elementary school
  - Sculptures, statute and/or mural for Main St.
- Pocket parks and tot lots (playgrounds for very young children)
  - Accessible to the Library
  - At fire station
  - In tree belts when wide enough



*Placemaking Walking Audit*





- Public use of school tot lot when school not in session
- Commercial storefronts/private owner partnerships
  - Better commercial and public event signage
  - Façade improvements
  - Empty space south side of IGA as coffee shop
  - Opportunities at 75 to 81 Main Street commercial area
  - Work with property owner owning multiple commercial properties
  - Focus on gas station/food truck site at Main St. and Maple St.
  - Thomas Aquinas College- remove no trespassing signs and add benches
- Community space and events
  - Space for music (local bands, youth music)
  - Events that bridge youth with adults
  - Senior Center Pavilion as a Saturday Farmers Market
  - EV charging station
  - Skate park, pump track, or BMX track in or near downtown (e.g., like Keene’s)
  - More options for youth after school other than the library
  - Open space geared for youth, whether bicycle, shared use path, or walking related
  - Community gardens
  - Miniature golf
  - Arcade

### Survey Findings

Northfield circulated a survey in November 2024 to further engage the community. 185 people responded, although many people did not answer all the questions. For example, while all 185 people answered the question on where benches are needed while only 82 suggested improvements to the north village. The survey was widely available with a good response rate, but respondents overrepresented older community members (61% were over age 55) and underrepresented younger members (only 9% were under age 34). The placemaking kickoff forum, however, was more representative and included some younger families. The public-school focus group (albeit with a small sample size) also brought in some younger voices.

Survey respondents clarified a few key points. The [Placemaking Survey \(2024\) section of this report](#) provides more details on the specific questions and responses.

**There is support for all of the suggested placemaking improvements downtown, with the highest support for activating vacant or underutilized properties, especially for restaurants or coffee shops, and more gathering places or small parks within the Main Street right-of-way.**

- 60% of respondents walk on Main Street daily, weekly, or monthly. These are the people who would most likely benefit from placemaking improvements. The 40% who rarely if ever walk on Main Street are the universe of residents who potentially could be drawn downtown with good placemaking.

- The Dickinson Memorial Library, Mim’s Market, the Creamie, and the IGA market downtown are the most cited favorite places, with the Brewery, Golf, Northfield Mountain, and the Connecticut River being the next most favorite places.
- There was generally support for more benches at all locations along Main Street, with the highest priority at the Dickinson Memorial Library, Town Hall, Mim’s Market/Creamie, and the Northfield Elementary School.
- Overall, there is interest in an information kiosk, although with limited resources that is a lower priority than for other placemaking investments. The highest priority for an information kiosk is at Town Hall, followed by Mim’s Market/Creamie.
- The events that most excited respondents is a block party with food trucks, music, and activities for kids, followed by a summer long concert series or week-long porch fest with live music.

## Recommendation 1. Zoning Reform

Several of the opportunities that community members suggested or discussed would require zoning revisions. This is probably the most easily implemented recommendation. It requires assistance from Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) or a consultant, for a relatively small project, community dialogue, and Town Meeting actions. Implementation costs would be very low.

The recommendations below are specifically focused on the southerly of Northfield's two Village Center Districts. If the community wanted to proceed, it could consider:

1. Should changes apply to both Village Center Districts, which probably makes sense.
2. If changes are desired for only the southerly district, then Village Center should be broken into two districts (e.g., Village Center south and Village Center north).
3. Whether any of these recommendations should apply townwide (e.g., reuse of historic houses of worship).



*Several important buildings do not meet zoning front setback requirements*

### **Setbacks (Zoning Section 7.1. Table 2. Table of Dimensional and Density Regulations)**

In the Village Center, buildings are required to be setback 25' from the front property boundary.

Because the Main Street right-of-way is so wide, generally extending up to the outer edge of the sidewalks, several buildings have less than that setback. This includes IGA, Mim's Market, the Unitarian Church, Adria Lowry Floral Design at 75 Main Street, and several residential properties.

Residents indicated that they liked the location of the buildings and, if they were ever lost, would not want to require new buildings be further back.

Specifically, implement one of the following recommendations

- Reduce the Village Center front setback for commercial uses to 0'.
- Reduce the setback for all properties built prior to 2024 to 0'. This would reduce existing non-conformities which can make building expansion more cumbersome, but it would not reduce the problem if a building were lost.
- Create a Village Center Core district on Main Street within a certain distance from Warwick Road with less restrictive setbacks. This is the most cumbersome but could be tailor-made to the needs.

### **Signs and Event Signs (Zoning Section 8.2 Signs)**



Community participants expressed an interest in allowing more signage to improve the visibility of commercial and community uses and events.

Residents and town officials expressed interest in increasing the visibility of the town event message board. Zoning 8.2.2 (A)(4) specifically bans “flashing, moving, or animated signs” and “signs containing electronic streaming messages.” There is an exemption in Section 8.2.2(D)(8) for “legal notices, identification information, or direction signs erected by governmental bodies.” Depending on how this is interpreted, however, this could prevent changeable or dynamic government message boards.



*A changeable message sign improves awareness*

**Residents also expressed interest in increasing the visibility of commercial spaces, without creating excessive signage. This can be a factor in supporting existing businesses and helping reduce commercial vacancies.**

Currently, zoning allows small ground signs and allows surface mounted signs not to exceed 10 percent of the building façade, a standard signage provision. That code, however, does not allow signs to extend more than 18 inches from a building. This allows horizontal signs on the building that can be difficult to read at Route 10 speeds.

Because of the wide right-of-way, ground signs on private property that can be read from the roadway are not practical in most of the Village Center District. Getting permission from MassDOT for privately installed ground signs could be unwise since free speech rights (Reed et al. v. Town of Gilbert, Arizona et al., US Supreme Court, 2014) would prevent the town from being able to limit any political message.

Instead, as discussed in the Wayfinding section, the Town should obtain MassDOT approval for Northfield to implement a comprehensive wayfinding program.



*Kidder & Co. is an anchor downtown business, but it easy to miss due to regulations requiring small signage.*

Specific recommendations include

- Amend 8.2.2(D)(8) exemptions for “Legal notices, identification information, or direction signs erected by governmental bodies” to specifically allow “dynamic, electronic streaming, and changeable message signs.”
- Amend 8.2.2(E) sign standards to allow a new paragraph 4 allowing limited projection signs in the Village Center that extend out 24” or 36” perpendicular to a commercial building.

- Amend 8.2.2(D)(8) government exemptions to specifically allow “wayfinding for private uses.”
- Undertake a comprehensive signage diagnostic to ensure that signage is not violating free speech rights set forth in Reed et al. v. Town of Gilbert (US Supreme Court, 2014) and Federal court decisions.

**Uses (Section 5.4 Schedule of Uses)**

Participants expressed the desire to make it easier for businesses to locate and expand in downtown Northfield. One of the largest challenges for any new or expanding business is the cost and uncertainty in obtaining a permit.

In particular, if a special permit is required from either the Planning Board or Zoning Board, many businesses will not pursue development, so Northfield will never know what projects it is not getting. Like many communities, Northfield’s review for special permits is most likely about how a project fits into the context of a site. Site plan approval, which allows a community to condition a use to ensure it fits the context but not prohibit a use is far more desirable to businesses and rarely if ever scares them away from applying for permits but can provide the same protection to the community.

Likewise, downtown housing and housing within walking distance of businesses is one of the most cost-effective strategies for increasing the critical mass of customers for businesses and activating streets. There are many obstacles to housing, but zoning is a key one.

Northfield is fortunate, and has been for much of its history, to have multiple houses of worship that provide opportunities for its residents and help define Northfield and its rich history. Unfortunately, like in many other communities, some of these houses of worship are closing, leaving empty buildings that are difficult to reuse. When the Northfield campus of Northfield Mount Hermon closed, Northfield experienced the challenges of the difficulty in reuse of large institutions because of limited market demand. The campus remained mostly vacant and underutilized between official closure in 2005 and acquisition by the Northfield Mount Hermon Foundation in 2011.

Specific recommendations are

Amend Section 5.4 Schedule of Uses to:

- Allow retail of up to 5,000 square feet (up from the current 1,500 square feet) with site plan approval instead of by special permit.

### Downtown Housing

Housing downtown and within walking distance is one of the effective ways to strengthen a downtown, for the smallest rural village to larger towns. Residents who live in or near downtown are more likely to shop in the local food market, buy coffee, go to the hardware store, and spend money. Once a resident gets in their car, they are more likely to drive to nearby areas (Hinsdale, Winchester, Bernardston) or further afield. Simply having more of a critical mass, strolling on the streets, sitting on the benches, visiting activated parks, that attracts other people and encourages people to get out of their cars. Some of the most exciting success stories of village revitalization come from more village center housing.



- Allow public recreation, (which is currently not allowed) with site plan approval.
- Allow non-profit membership organizations with site plan approval instead of by special permit.

Amend Section 5.4 Schedule of Uses to allow the shared use of houses of worship (e.g., with a community event space) by right and more expansive reuse of houses of worship, if they place a historic preservation restriction on their property, with site plan approval only:

- Public recreation (currently not allowed at all)
- Retail of any size (currently under 1,500 square feet by right and over 1,500 square feet by special permit)
- Community event space and non-profit clubs (currently allowed with special permit only)
- Multifamily housing over four dwelling units (currently allowed with special permit only)
- Retirement community (currently not allowed)
- Assisted living (currently not allowed)
- Skilled nursing care (currently not allowed)

### **Lighting (Zoning Section 8.1.3. Outdoor Lighting)**

In the walking site audit one participant raised the concern about the potential for excessive lighting levels and glare, although there does not seem to be significant current problems. Dark skies are part of Northfield’s rural character. They can be threatened by excessive lighting. In addition, as drivers age, the pupils in their eyes dilate and contract more slowly, creating momentary blind spots when entering and exiting very brightly lighted areas.

Northfield’s lighting ordinance provides a fair amount of detail and was probably once a state-of-art ordinance, but it is out of date and does not reflect current approaches. Revising the Lighting Ordinance is important to maintain Northfield’s character, but probably has relatively small effect on placemaking, so it might be a lower-priority initiative for the Town.

Specific recommendations are:

- Be specific about types of new allowed lighting:
  - Allow LEDs and compact fluorescent
  - For environmental reasons, do not allow mercury vapor, metal halide or high pressure sodium except for outdoor event venues (e.g., sports fields, fairs, and other temporary outdoor events) that require very high lighting levels.
- Shield all lights or lights above 600 lumens to prevent:
  - Up lighting (lighting above a horizontal plane), as is currently done for lights above 2,000 lumens.
  - Glare, or light trespass off the property.
- Create allowed lighting levels for all new lighting fixtures:
  - Peak lighting levels (e.g., 2,500 lumens at the fixture and 5 foot candles below the fixture)
  - Light temperatures of between 0° and 2,700° Kelvin
  - Require business lighting be dimmed an hour after the business closes, allowing motion sensors at any time.
- More generally, consider a larger lighting bylaw rewrite.

## Recommendation 2. Make Main Street Safer

In the recent past (since 2018), Main Street has had some traffic safety improvements:

- Narrowing the travel lanes by pavement striping a wider shoulder
- Improved crosswalks and sidewalk wheelchair ramps up and down Main Street
- Installation of Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons (RRFB) at the Elementary School and the Library within the study area
- Installation of RRFB outside the study area, at Maple, Holton, and Moody Streets, all of which can sometimes slow the speed of traffic generally.

A recent Municipal Road Safety grant in summer 2024 allowed the Northfield Police Department to install speed radar signs at six different locations, allowing for the collection of traffic speed data. Speed studies do not generally show, however, the avoided pedestrian trips because travelers feel unsafe.

Slower Main Street speeds and safer pedestrian crossings on Main Street will improve safety, increase the desirability of walking and bicycling. This will increase the proportion of through traffic that stops downtown to shop and experience Northfield.

Although gathering places and activating vacant and underutilized properties were the top placemaking priorities from the community survey, survey respondents identified slowing traffic speeds and crosswalk safety as priorities; these priorities were emphasized even more by participants at the public forum and walking audit of the study area.

In multiple breakout groups at the public forum, and via discussion at the walking audit, residents identified three priorities regarding pedestrian safety:

1. The complex **Main Street, Parker Avenue, Warwick Road, IGA** entrances
2. **Mim's Market/Creamie** area
3. **Main Street** in general

First, the Main Street/Parker/Warwick/IGA compound intersection is not functioning safely, even given its relatively low volume of traffic turning movements compared to other state highway major intersections (e.g., while there are 7,432 vehicles daily on Main Street there are only 598 vehicles daily on Warwick and most likely less than 100 on Parker in 2023).



*Speed kills. Hattaway & Carver. 2023. CNU. Leaf & Preusser. 1999. Literature Review on Vehicle Travel Speeds and Pedestrian Injuries...*

### Slow Speeds and Safe Pedestrians

Perceiving that a place is safe to walk and drive is one of the most important criteria to encourage people to get out of their cars and explore and spend money in Northfield center. If crosswalks feel unsafe and vehicles are whizzing by, Main Street is not just a highway but a moat separating the two sides of the roads.

Higher speeds, even if it was safe, reduce a driver's likelihood of stopping at a local business. At higher speeds drivers can absorb less information about their surroundings and are more likely to miss appealing destinations.

- It is marked with three flashing yellow lights. It does not have, however, the more visible RRFB that can improve visibility for pedestrian movements.
- The view of the flashing light and the Main Street intersection from Warwick Road is partially blocked by a utility pole in the middle of the traffic island on Warwick Road.
- The Warwick Road and Parker Avenue/IGA southern entrance are offset, making the geometry difficult.
- The Main Street southern approach to IGA is not clear. Should a motorist turn onto Parker Avenue to enter IGA on the north side of the Main Street traffic island, or even try to enter the opposing traffic lane and turn left on the south side of the Main Street traffic island?
- The Warwick Road approach to Main Street does not include advance signage of the Warwick Road crosswalk.
- Pavement markings on Warwick Road and Parker Avenue have not been especially well maintained.



*Unsafe road geometry and markings at Main/Parker/Warwick/IGA intersection (MassDOT Pictometry, Eagle View, 2017)*

Second, the entrance to Mim’s Market has three challenges. First, the entrance itself is excessively wide creating allowing higher speed entrances and exits than ideal. Second, there is insufficient parking creating spillover and illegal parking in the Main Street shoulder. Finally, there is a desire path for pedestrians to cross Main Street at Mim’s without a safe crosswalk or slow vehicle speeds.

#### Specific recommendations

- Complete speed studies with Northfield’s radar and radar signs. Review the data with an eye to understanding that perception of pedestrians and vehicles as being as important as crash histories when it comes to driving business to local stores, and there is a perception that it is an unsafe intersection. Undertaking a traffic safety audit with wide community participation and business owner participation would help address all of the issues.



- In the long run, encourage MassDOT to explore an intersection realignment, potentially moving the westerly end of Warwick a few feet to the west, moving the offending utility pole, realigning traffic island, and realigning the IGA entrances. This is a major undertaking for a low volume road, so shorter term measures are important.
- Install Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons (RRFBs) on the Main Street crosswalk, install advance crosswalk notice on Warwick Road, and improve pedestrian markings on all crosswalks.
- Explore shoulder/bicycle lane-passable curb extensions and [REDACTED]



*Narrow the entrance to the parking lot in front of Mim's Market and the Creamie, via curb cuts, to slow the speed of vehicles entering/exiting.*

Main Street crosswalks.

- Explore a new crosswalk by Mim's Market, which has a clear pedestrian desire path.
- Narrow the Main Street Mim's Market driveway curb cuts to slow entrance and exit speeds.
- Allow a small expansion of the Mim's Market parking area into the tree belt to reduce cars parking on the shoulder.

## Recommendation 3. Implement Wayfinding

Northfield has some signs that help define historic downtown and other unique features. It does not, however, have any kind of comprehensive wayfinding program or a clear sense of arrival to its downtown.



Northfield wayfinding signs are hard to read from a passing car

For some of the travelers on Main Street, downtown Northfield is simply the route that they pass through on the way to and from New Hampshire, Thomas Aquinas College, the New England Scenic Trail, or other destinations. Other travelers in Northfield and Gill, perhaps traveling to or from Northfield Mountain, Northfield Mount Hermon, or other designations, do not even experience downtown Northfield.

Even for travelers going through downtown Northfield who are open to exploring, there is not a clear sense of arrival, of messaging that this is a place to explore, or of directions for different destinations.



Northfield celebrates, very quietly

Some of the participants in placemaking events shared that they want to some kind of wayfinding program to create a sense of arrival and a sense of place, and

## Connections

Northfield and the neighboring areas are rich in attractions for residents and visitors alike. A comprehensive wayfinding program can help connect them, driving traffic downtown and to other destinations.

- Two village centers and the town common
- Thomas Aquinas College
- Moody Center and the gravesite
- Northfield Golf Club
- Dickinson Memorial Library
- Pauchaug Boat Ramp
- Ct. River Cruise, 144 Pine Meadow Road
- Northfield Mountain Recreation & Environmental Center
- Schell Bridge (potential future restoration)
- Cameron's Winery
- The Brewery at Four Stars Farms
- New England National Scenic Trail (NET)
- Open space (Satan's Kingdom, Northfield State Forest, Bennett Meadow, Pauchaug Bush Mtn, Northfield Town Forest, trails, etc.)
- Munns Ferry Campground (by boat)
- Louisiana Brook campground, Pierson Rd (being developed)
- Northfield Mount Hermon (Gill)
- Northfield Drive-In (Hinsdale line)
- Franklin County Bikeway
- Connecticut River Scenic Byway
- Agricultural Tourism
- Events (Great River Triathlon, Franklin County Cider Days, farmers markets)

to help guide local and visiting traffic alike. Participants in the public forum prioritized gateway signage southbound at the Post Office or Dickinson Memorial Library, north and westbound at the Route 10/Route 63 intersection south of town, and in the center of town by Warwick Road, Mim's Market, and Town Hall. Survey respondents prioritized Mim's/Creamie and Town Hall.

#### Wayfinding program recommendations

- Apply for a state grant for a downtown wayfinding signage program.
- Work with MassDOT to obtain a MassDOT Access Permit for the Town of Northfield (not private parties) to create a comprehensive wayfinding program. All signs should be Town installed to avoid both traffic confusion and free speech issues of opening up signage on public property to private parties.
- Create a clear sense of arrival at the intersection of Routes 10 and 63, with a gateway sign that mostly celebrates Northfield, with directional information.
- Create additional wayfinding at the gateways to downtown (e.g., opposite Mim's Market for northbound traffic and at the Post Office or north of the library).
- Install a dynamic changeable message sign in front of Town Hall to inform the public of upcoming events.
- If wayfinding were to serve both north and south villages, southbound could be placed closer to Holton Street for southbound traffic with a second entrance to the northerly village at the Library for northbound traffic.
- Create wayfinding, including commercial destinations, in the center of downtown, at Town Hall or the approaches to the Main Street/Warwick Road.
- Create smaller wayfinding for specific higher volume stops (library, Town Hall, Mim's Market/Creamie, IGA).



Concept gateway wayfinding signage

- Continue to work with Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) to explore the opportunities for an unstaffed downtown village center (kiosk, smart kiosk, or other systems) to capitalize on the wide variety of events and destinations in the Northfield area. This could complement and replace the role of the private information kiosks at the IGA and the Creamie.
- Explore mapping and information programs, on-line and as part of a visitor center, to provide connections to regional destinations (see sidebar at start of this section).
- Develop a unique Town seal that represents the unique character could help build a stronger Northfield brand.



Private posting kiosks help inform the public of events. These signs can be complemented by a public visitor center kiosk.

## Recommendation 4. Activate Downtown with Public Amenities

Participants identified a wide range of opportunities (see public forums section, above) that could be done within the roadway right-way, on the MassDOT owned tree belt, and adjacent to the right-of-way on other public property.

Activating downtown with public amenities, most of which can be done at relatively low cost, will make downtown livelier and serve residents of all ages. In doing so, downtown will become more attractive to residents and visitors alike, encouraging more trips downtown, more lingering downtown, and more spending that supports existing and new downtown businesses.

MassDOT owns the tree belt between Main Street and the outside edge of Main Street's sidewalks. Their approval is required for investments in the tree belt. Northfield can, however, obtain a MassDOT Access Permit for such improvements, provided it will not add Commonwealth maintenance costs or interfere with any transportation needs.

Survey respondents wanted many placemaking improvements, with public gathering spaces/small parks in the street right-of-way the top priority. Activating private vacant and underutilized spaces, while not a placemaking project per se, was probably the most important goal for community members, whether as a benefit of placemaking or through direct intervention.

[Specific recommendations on Northfield and Franklin Co. Housing Authority properties](#)

### Activate Private Spaces

In the public forum, waking audit, and survey, the community stressed the need to activate private vacant and underutilized space. Bringing a coffee shop to the space adjacent to the IGA was mentioned most frequently, but other spaces were also prioritized. The bricks and mortar placemaking recommendations in this report strengthen the market for businesses. The regulatory recommendations can remove impediments. In many cases, however, the costs of improving obsolete spaces to serve new needs spaces is too high to be supported by investors. In those cases, state and federal grants, impact investors, and other funding is needed.

- **Dickinson Memorial Library** grounds activities that can attract more and longer visits.
  - Create a tot lot near the parking lot.
  - Create better signage and connections to the trail system adjacent to the library.
  - Move the bench (currently the only Main Street bench) closer to the sidewalk so that it is accessible without requiring people to step over a curb and cross some grass.
  - Create an art installation or sculpture in the front lawn of the library that engages the community and promotes the sense of place and history.



*The library provides opportunity for improved accessible seating and an art installation*

- **Town Hall/Senior Center** grounds activities to support downtown.
  - Encourage with directional signs public parking behind Town Hall. This would be especially beneficial for any downtown employees who are parking in parking lots that can best serve patrons.
  - Better sign and offer the Senior Center Pavilion for public uses, including a potential Saturday farmers market.
  - Consider how to restore the spender of the Belcher Memorial Fountain even without restoring water. Cleaning it and its benches as it sits at the Town Hall would be relatively simple. Its original home was on a Warwick Road island by Main Street. Restoring the 27.5 ton fountain close to its original home, perhaps in the tree belt in front of the United Parish Unitarian Church with a historic plaque would add more dramatically to downtown placemaking.
  - Consider a tot lot adjacent to the Senior Center Pavilion.



*Belcher Memorial Fountain*

- **Northfield Fire Department** grounds activities to enliven downtown.
  - Consider an art installation at the Main Street/School Street southeast corner on the Fire Department property.
- **Northfield Elementary School** grounds activities to enliven downtown.
  - Encourage more formal access to the playground at times when the school is not in session. A break in the fence allows current access, but it is not formally blessed or signed for public use.
  - Encourage elementary school or other public school art installations in the lawn/tree belt between the sidewalk and the bus loop.
- **Squakheag Village Housing Authority** grounds adjacent to the sidewalk to serve residents and the community
  - Encourage an art installation to enliven the property, serve residents, and better tie the village into the fabric of downtown.

Specific recommendations within the MassDOT owned Main Street right-of-way/tree belt

- **See recommendation or Belcher Memorial Fountain at the Town Hall** (above).

- **See recommendation to allow a small expansion of Mim’s Market parking under the Make Main Street safer section.**
- Explore pocket parks at various sections where the tree belt is especially wide, engaging abutting property owners, MassDOT, and other stakeholders.
  - The best and potentially most used locations are on the west side of Main Street between the Creamie and Parker Ave; immediately north of IGA; and/or on the east side immediately north of the Verizon building, where the tree belt is especially wide, where users might also visit commercial establishments, and where Town Hall parking can serve visitors.
  - The west side in front of Squakheag Village is another option, but only if such facilities would be used by village residents and couldn’t be served by facilities on the housing authority’s property.
- Pocket parks could include several components
  - Tot lots, if the preferred locations at the Library, the existing Elementary School playground, and Town Hall were not feasible.
  - Art installations, if more were needed after the recommendation for installations on Town property.
  - Other park uses.
- Install accessible park benches that abut the sidewalk the entire length of the southern Village Center study area, at an average of 250’ or so apart from each other.



*Benches every 250' will serve diverse users and activate the street*

### Ongoing efforts

The Town has secured a \$15,000 art grant that will be used to train municipal staff throughout 2025, supporting them in putting out a call for public art in summer 2026. Additionally, the Town has applied for a Recreation Economy for Rural Communities (RERC) grant which would provide technical assistance to Northfield in implementing links between existing open space/recreational resources and the Main Street corridor. These efforts highlight imitative by the Town to secure funds/assistance to develop the Town’s recreational assets.

## Recommendation 5. Expand Storefront and Facility Partnerships

Northfield used \$93,920 in ARPA funds for a Northfield Storefront Renovation Program for a series of commercial façade improvements, including several iconic commercial properties in Northfield. It has sought Commonwealth Underutilized Property funding for larger downtown building renovations at 77 Main Street (a former diner). The façade improvement efforts require property owners provide a match, which both helps allow the funds to go further and ensures that property owners have “skin in the game” and are working to get properties back into commercial use.

### Specific recommendations

- Continuing these efforts with grants is a great way to get downtown investments and new property tax growth without costs to Northfield taxpayers other than very limited staff time.
- Consider applying, perhaps in cooperation with other communities, for a Massachusetts Community Development Block Grant for commercial façade and signage improvements for businesses owned by or employing low and moderate income workers.
- The Rural Downtown District Management Study (ongoing, managed by FRCOG) will help explore the feasibility of creating a downtown business improvement district or some other downtown management entity (perhaps an administrative position) that is shared among the four towns in the study (Buckland, Shelburne, and Montague are also a part of the study). The most aggressive approach would be a downtown business improvement district, if approved by the majority of property owners in the district, to fund façade and streetscape improvements from a property tax surcharge. The appeal for property owners is that improving the district adds value to all property owners.



*Storefront renovation program*



## Recommendation 6. Improve South and North Village Connections

Northfield's two villages are close together (15 minute walking distance) with the opportunity for better connections. While most visitors arriving by car drive between the two villages, residents who live between them and students at Thomas Aquinas College regularly walk and occasionally bicycle between the college, the northerly village, and or the southerly village, using Main Street/Route 10 or a combination of Highland Avenue and Main Street/Route 10.

Northfield would benefit if the south village, north village, Thomas Aquinas College, the Schell Bridge, and other destinations along the way felt less like distinct areas and instead felt more connected.

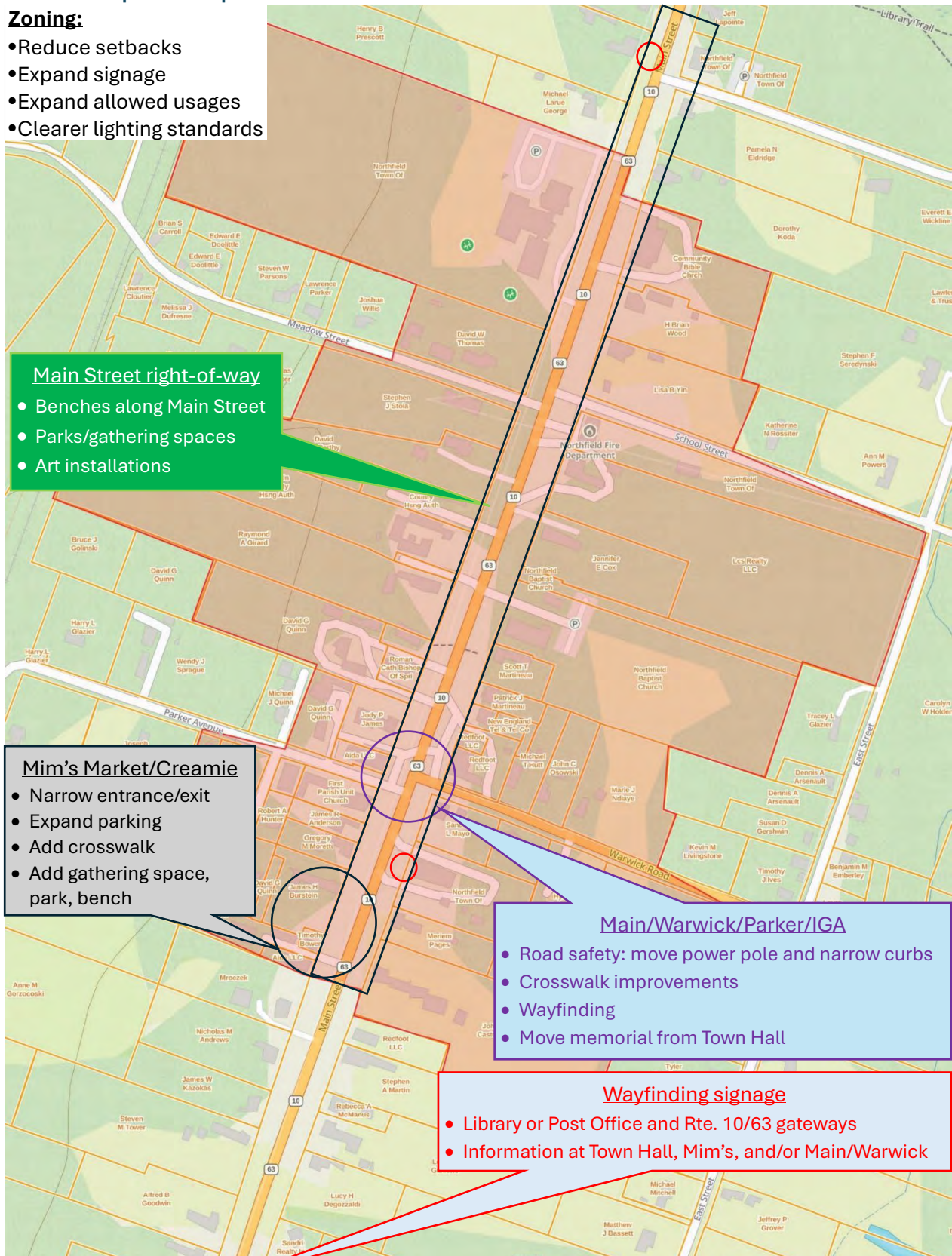
### Specific recommendations

- Engage Thomas Aquinas College with the Northfield Events Coalition to have more shared celebrations
- As part of the wayfinding recommendations discussed above (Recommendation 3) explore how wayfinding can help connect these areas, with simple maps showing all of those destinations and better directional signage between the sites.
- Consider bicycle route signage or sharrows on Highland Avenue to message about the desirability of bicycling that route. Traffic is low enough that this is not needed for traffic safety, but it does message opportunities.
- Explore with Thomas Aquinas College opportunities for benches on the public side of the campus (e.g., along Moody Street and Winchester Road) as a way to encourage exploration without impinging on the campus.
- Explore with Thomas Aquinas College whether there are any areas where their no trespassing edge of the campus can be moved further back onto campus, allowing some limited opportunities for the college to connect without taking away privacy.
- Explore how a marked bicycle and walking route from the Schell Bridge to the southerly village (Pine Street, Highland Ave, Holton Street, Main Street Route 10/63) can highlight connectivity.
- Continue to explore encouraging the development of key opportunity sites in the southerly village (see recommendation 4, above) and outside of the southerly village (e.g., Pizza Bobs) to anchor connections between the villages.

## Next Steps – Map of Recommendations

### Zoning:

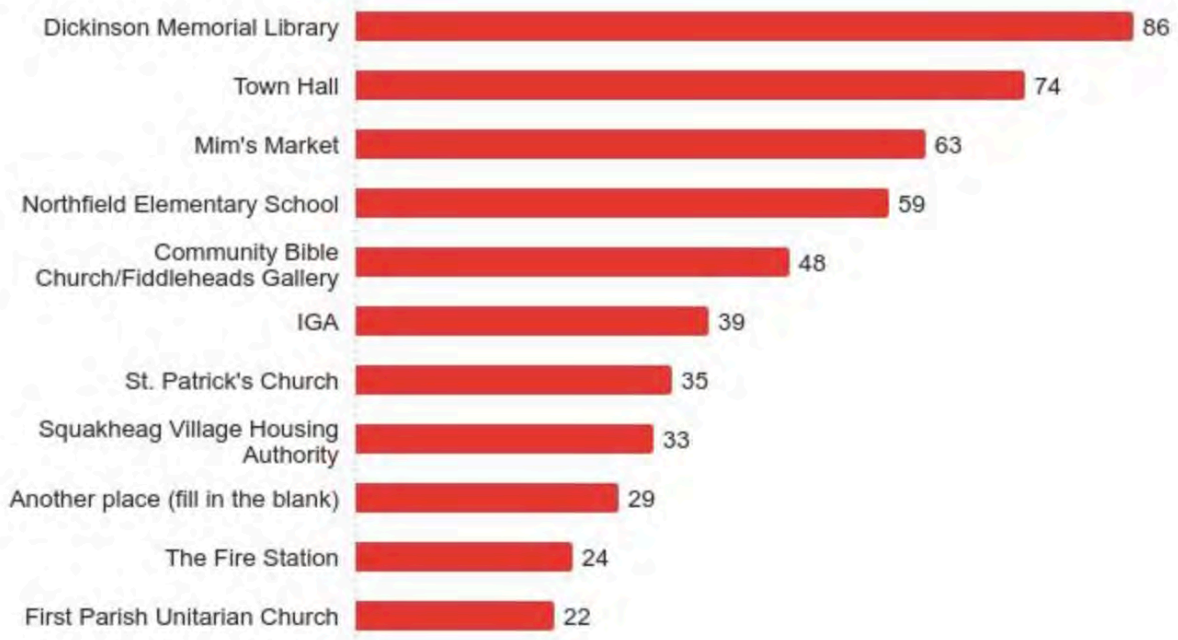
- Reduce setbacks
- Expand signage
- Expand allowed usages
- Clearer lighting standards



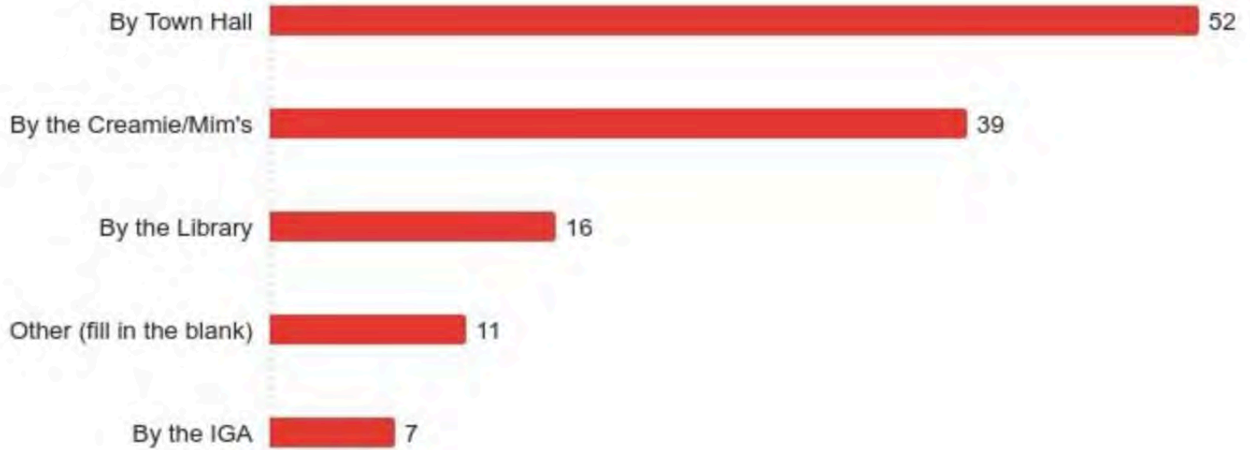




Q6. Where would you most like to five new Main Street benches installed?



Q7. What would be the best location for a new information kiosk to guide visitors to important locations and provide a place where residents can share information on town events?



Q8. Which one event or annual event would you most like to experience in Northfield?



Q9. Placemaking is the process of creating quality places that people want to live, work, play, and learn in. Do you have any other comments about placemaking in Northfield or other places in town that deserve more attention and/or updates?

“More river access, like if you could make a pleasant spot down by the river with picnic tables where families could eat or you could walk your dog, that would be awesome. The river is so beautiful, but there's not really places that invite you linger there.”

“The place where the Mexican Food Truck is, should be converted into a Farmers Market/Coffee Shop, where people can come buy some local goodies, sit down for a coffee, maybe eat a sandwich or some ice cream, and relax. Northfield is such a lovely town, that I feel it needs a place big enough where people can come and sit a while and enjoy some Northfield history.”

“West Northfield needs as much love as the North side of Main Street”

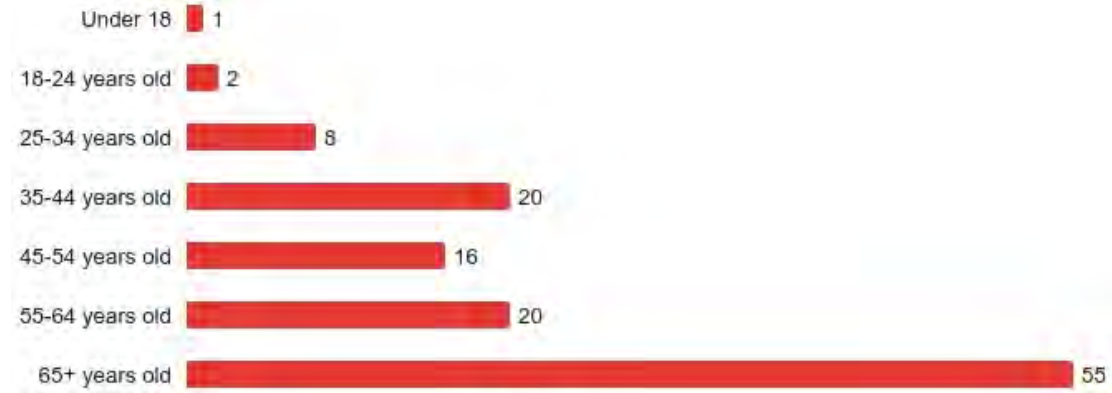
“Kiosk showing all trails and eco-tourism hotspots to attract that demographic. Business to support that industry would serve us as well!!!”

“Really could use a playground for young children walkable from the library, available any time, not just when school is not in session. Great place for adults to gather, too, and could include amenities like drinking fountains, picnic tables, restrooms for all.”

“The Library and Elementary School are the primary indoor event spaces and are over booked. Would be nice to have an additional venue for things like exercise classes and information sessions. Especially for larger groups.”

“The lot that El Chapincito is on -- it would be great if we could have some kind of community space on this empty lot. Whether a park, a Town Common, or a community center one day.”

Q10. How old are you?



Q11. How do you identify (check all that apply to you)?





## Survey results based on age

In addition to looking at the total survey results, above, we broke down the results by the age of the person completing the survey (crosstabulations). The results are not dramatically different.

		Q10 of 12: How often in year?							
		Total	Under 18	18-24 years old	25-34 years old	35-44 years old	45-54 years old	55-64 years old	65+ years old
Q1. Walking: Please rate the following in terms of how much you agree or disagree with each statement.	<b>Total Count (Answering)</b>	122.0	3.0	2.0	8.0	20.0	36.0	20.0	55.0
	Daily	16.4%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%	20.0%	32.5%	25.0%	32.7%
	Weekly	26.2%	100.0%	100.0%	37.5%	40.0%	25.0%	25.0%	36.4%
	Monthly	18.0%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%	30.0%	18.8%	5.0%	38.2%
	Rarely	22.1%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	10.0%	25.0%	25.0%	27.3%
Never	17.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	18.8%	20.0%	25.5%	
Q4 forced choice: Q4 of 12. Which one of those improvements is most important? - Selected choice	<b>Total Count (Answering)</b>	123.0	3.0	2.0	8.0	20.0	36.0	20.0	54.0
	Slower traffic speeds	13.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%	0.0%	15.0%	16.7%
	More crosswalk flashing beacons	3.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.0%	5.6%
	Public art displays	3.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%
	More benches	5.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	15.0%	3.3%
	More gathering spaces (small parks or a Town Common)	18.2%	0.0%	50.0%	12.5%	20.0%	43.8%	30.0%	33.0%
	More crosswalks	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Signs pointing to local destinations	2.5%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.0%	0.0%
	Activate vacant or underutilized properties	18.0%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	45.0%	25.0%	40.0%	37.0%
	Communal fire pit(s)	3.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%
Other	17.4%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	20.0%	18.8%	10.0%	20.4%	
Q6. Q6 of 12. If you could put five new benches on either side of Main Street, where would you put them? - Selected choice	<b>Total Count (Answering)</b>	137.0	3.0	2.0	8.0	20.0	35.0	18.0	53.0
	Town Hall	62.4%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%	80.0%	66.7%	44.4%	69.8%
	Men's Market	53.0%	100.0%	50.0%	62.5%	65.0%	73.3%	55.6%	59.6%
	First Parish Unitarian Church	18.0%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	15.0%	13.3%	27.8%	20.2%
	KGA	12.5%	100.0%	50.0%	50.0%	35.0%	40.0%	27.8%	26.4%
	St. Patrick's Church	29.9%	0.0%	100.0%	37.5%	30.0%	33.3%	27.8%	26.4%
	Squakheag Village Housing Authority	28.2%	100.0%	0.0%	12.5%	30.0%	13.3%	22.2%	35.8%
	The Fire Station	20.5%	100.0%	50.0%	12.5%	15.0%	13.3%	22.2%	22.6%
	Northfield Elementary School	49.6%	0.0%	50.0%	87.5%	55.0%	66.7%	50.0%	37.7%
	Community Bible Church/Neighborhood Gallery	40.2%	100.0%	50.0%	25.0%	40.0%	20.0%	38.9%	47.2%
	Dickerson Memorial Library	72.6%	0.0%	100.0%	62.5%	75.0%	80.0%	72.2%	71.7%
Another place (fill in the blank)	22.2%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	20.0%	6.7%	16.7%	24.5%	
Q7 of 12. What would be the best location for one new informational kiosk to guide visitors to important locations and provide a place residents can share information on town events? - Selected choice	<b>Total Count (Answering)</b>	120.0	3.0	2.0	8.0	19.0	36.0	19.0	55.0
	By the Crommie/Min's	82.5%	0.0%	100.0%	75.0%	47.4%	33.3%	42.1%	36.4%
	By the KGA	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.3%	0.0%	5.3%	7.3%
	By Town Hall	43.3%	100.0%	0.0%	25.0%	31.6%	50.0%	42.1%	49.1%
	By the library	13.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.3%	12.5%	10.5%	16.4%
Other (fill in the blank)	7.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	10.5%	0.0%	0.0%	10.9%	
Q8 of 12. Which one event or annual event would you most like to experience in Northfield?	<b>Total Count (Answering)</b>	136.0	3.0	2.0	8.0	19.0	36.0	19.0	51.0
	A summer-long concert series or a weekend-long "pitch fest" with live	33.6%	0.0%	50.0%	57.5%	31.6%	33.3%	36.8%	33.3%
	A community-wide race or parade down the Connecticut River	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	10.5%	3.9%
	Expanded Halloween weekend events (e.g., hayrides, hay bale mazes)	1.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.3%	0.0%	0.0%	2.0%
	Winter solstice Lantern Parade	6.9%	100.0%	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	11.8%
	Town-wide scavenger hunt	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Town block party with food trucks, music, activities for kids	53.4%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	57.9%	68.8%	52.6%	49.0%	

## Exhibit A: Character Defining Features of Downtown Northfield

Northfield has a distinctive and unique downtown. Its character defining features, instantly apparent to a visitor, include its:

- Rich history represented in its landscape
- Charming and historic buildings
- Very wide tree belt serving effectively as a town common
- Sidewalks widely separated from the roadway with views of the rich building stock behind them
- Commercial, community and civic life

### Rich history represented in its landscape



Historic Photos courtesy of the Northfield Historical Society

**Charming and historic buildings**



*Clockwise from upper left: 84 Main Street, Fire Department, First Parish Unitarian Church, Centennial House*



Very wide tree belt serving effectively as a town common with sidewalks far from the roadway and room to play on the lawn



**Commercial, community and civic life**



Above: The Creamie and El Chapincito 5 food truck.  
Below: Dickinson Memorial Library, Super IGA Market, and 75 Main Street.



## Exhibit B: Extracts from Past Plans



# Rapid Recovery Plan

2021

Route 63 Main Street Revitalization  
Northfield, MA

### 1. Engage Property Owners to Improve Façades and Structures & Fill Vacancies

**Observations:**

- There is existing historic building stock in need of façade and structural improvements

**Recommendations:**

- Engage building owners & identify buildings in need of improvements
- Identify Town Staff responsible for leading the coordination effort
- Develop cost estimates for improvements
- Review ARPA grant funding requirements.



### 2. Engage in a Regional Marketing Campaign

**Observations:**

- Northfield businesses rely on tourism dollars for their success – so bringing in more tourists is critical.
- NATABA has coordinated with other towns in the region and Franklin County Chamber of Commerce
- Northfield has numerous attractions: First Light / Northfield Mountain, Schell Bridge, Pottery Trail, Great River Challenge Triathlon, Deerfield Valley Art Association

**Recommendations:**

- Provide NATABA with additional resources to continue regional marketing strategies
- Wayfinding signage
- Review ARPA and other grant opportunities

#### EXPLORE! A WINE & SPIRITS TRAIL

Sample original recipe adult beverages made on premises using locally-sourced fruits and grains, or pick up your favorite traditional brands on our Wine & Spirits Trail. Spend the day tasting the many flavors of the Connecticut River Valley of Western Mass and Southern New Hampshire.



### 3. Consider a Visitor Center

**Observations:**

- There is an opportunity to create a one-stop-shop for all things tourist related in and around Northfield

**Recommendations:**

- Conduct a study to measure the impact that a traditional visitor center would have on the region
- Identify possible venues, including the fire department building that may be vacant when new public safety center is built
- Consider the opportunity of a public-private partnership which may include a museum, coffee shop, or similar uses to accommodate visitors
- Provide a public restroom



The existing fire department building

### 4. Host More Events in Town

**Observations:**

- There is an opportunity to host arts and cultural events and bring foot traffic into the Village Center

**Recommendations:**

- Identify potential areas for events
- Work with local businesses to provide food, beverages, and entertainment for events
- Work with organizers to promote the Triathlon, Schell Bridge, 300<sup>th</sup> Tricentennial, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and others

#24 Main Street is a potential location for events



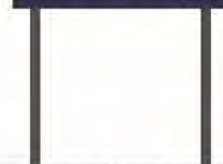
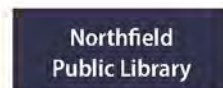
The example signs below are for illustrative purposes only and don't reflect the final design for Northfield's proposed wayfinding signage program



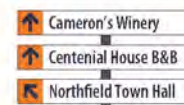
Large Vehicular Wayfinding Sign



Small Vehicular / Gateway

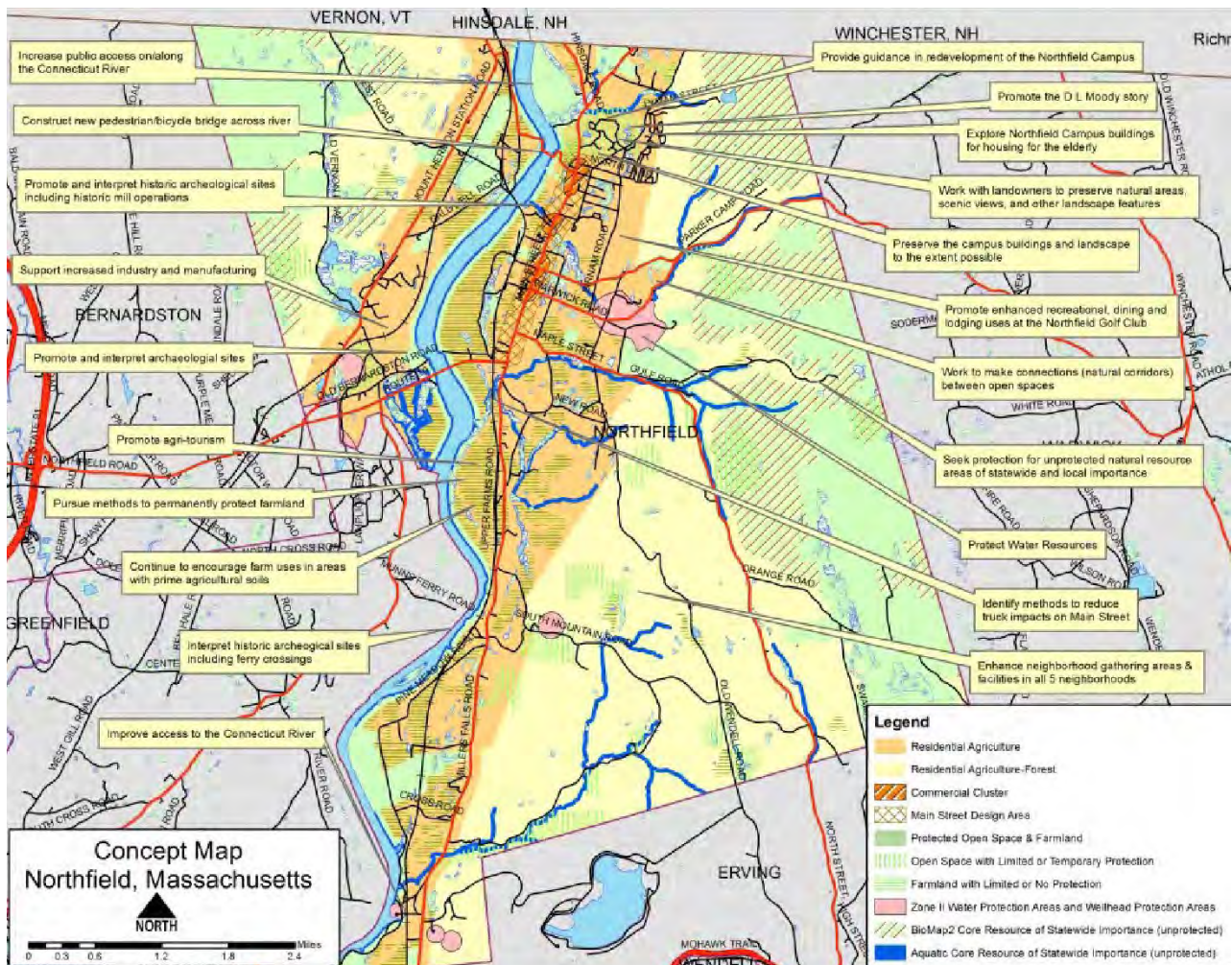


Destination Identification



Trail Blazer Sign





# NORTHFIELD OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN

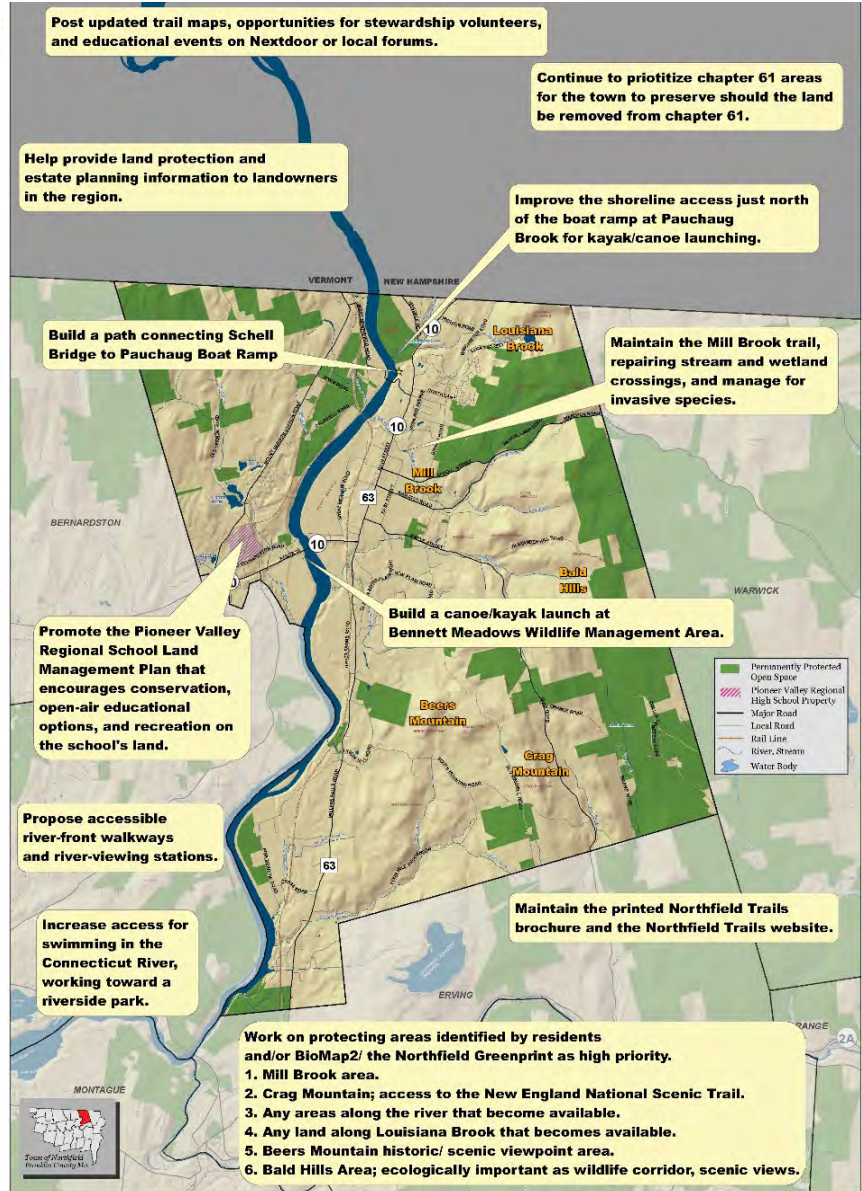
2021 – 2028



Approved May 3, 2021

Prepared by the Northfield Open Space Committee  
with assistance from the  
Franklin Regional Council of Governments

This project was funded by a District Local Technical Assistance Grant administered by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development and by the Town of Northfield



Town of Northfield  
Open Space &  
Recreation Plan 2019-2020

## Action Plan Map

0 0.5 1 Miles



**frcog** Franklin Regional Council of Governments







# TOWN OF NORTHFIELD

www.northfieldma.gov  
69 MAIN STREET

NORTHFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS 01360-1017

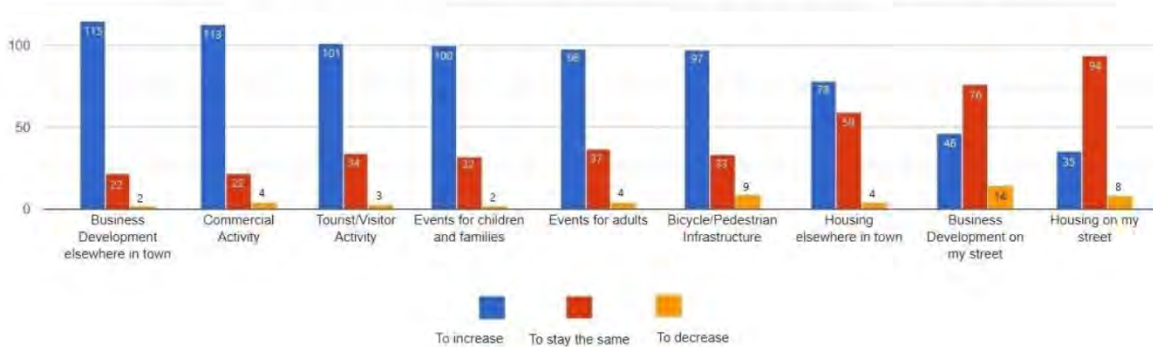
Leslie Roberts  
Grant Development  
Director

grantdevelopmentdirector@northfieldma.gov  
413.498.2901 x 111

## Economic Development Community Survey

Responses Presented April 2024

- Respondents do want to see business development, commercial activity, and tourist/visitor activity **increase in Northfield** – however, most would like this activity to occur in defined locations **away from their homes**
  - *“I would support the development of a business park within the town, but would want to keep shopping centered on the main streets of Northfield and West Northfield, not on the periphery.”*
  - *“Tourism should be concentrated on the main thoroughfare because it contains its biggest selling point. Other shopping and industrial areas can be maximized in areas away from the town center”*



- The vast majority (92%) of survey respondents feel that **renovation and redevelopment of existing buildings** is the best strategy for accommodating new businesses in Northfield.
- **Imagine Northfield 5 years from now.** What would you like to be different from today? What would you like to be the same as today?
  - I used a qualitative data analysis software called QDA Miner Lite to code all 134 responses. This led to many different codes, which could be sorted into three broad themes:

