

*A brief comment made on behalf of Natick 360*

## **Re-gathering The Threads – Imagining A Renewed Natick**

**By Peter Golden – The Golden Group**

Natick enjoys special advantages, in part geographic, in part defined by its extraordinary past. Because of its unique history – it is among the oldest communities in the nation– and central location within the highway scheme of Eastern Massachusetts and New England – it is a geocentric shopping hub and home to a substantial high technology community – the town has become a highly desirable place to live and work.

But like many suburban towns surrounding Boston and across the nation Natick is challenged in all sorts of ways. While its townspeople enjoy an exceptional quality of life, housing prices are rapidly gentrifying a traditionally diverse community while the town’s historic connection with the land, thorough agriculture, woodland and natural habitat, is headed for extinguishment at the hands of developers.

Convenient highway and rail access combined with close proximity to Boston and Rt. 128 have resulted in an unprecedented level of commercial activity, with applications, exclusive of the Natick Mall, at the town’s department of community development recently characterized as “a land rush.”

Also, like other Massachusetts communities and most throughout the nation, Natick is challenged by ever-escalating costs for municipal services, limited transportation options and volatile energy costs that while variable in the near term in the long-term are headed straight up.

### **Managing the future**

How then can Natick manage its future while respecting the limitations of state and national policies that place an ever- growing burden on municipalities, exploiting the economic opportunities that support a high quality of life, and maintain a unique (and dynamic) identity?

One apparent way is to continue to increase the commercial tax base lies in incentivizing and permitting the build-out or re-development of such locations as the technology parks along Oak Street. Two, which lie near the Pine Street intersection, make only modest use of available space.

Another would be to accommodate redevelopment in the office park behind Sherwood Plaza, and/or to incentivize denser redevelopment of Sherwood itself. All these locations are based on a land use model featuring single story structures and open parking lots, making them readily available for “knock down and build anew” redevelopment.

Another strategy might be to build on the success of TCAN, creating an arts district along Summer Street and downtown that accommodates studios, craft shops, galleries, performance spaces and educational organizations.

A further accompaniment to such an initiative would be increased permitting of restaurants and specialty food stores downtown, an especially apt initiative in light of the proposed HOOP residential district now taking shape before our eyes.

Most multi-family condominium developments in urban/downtown areas are mixed use in character and for good reason. Urbanites require ready access to restaurants, specialty food stores and service vendors consistent with their lifestyle.

A sidebar and accompaniment to an arts district might be a “technology enterprise infill” policy on the part of the town. Consider the character of just a few of the “knowledge-based” enterprises that have emerged downtown in the last decade: a media research firm, an armaments trader, a television and new media studio, an Internet strategies company, a sound design and installation organization, various architectural and construction offices and so on.

A new town garage is on its face vital to all of what we have addressed above, while access to current (and one would hope soon to be enhanced rail service) would support the “reverse commuting” necessary to supply an enlarged community of knowledge workers more typically associated with Cambridge and Boston.

To think such enterprises are tertiary to the economic and cultural life of Natick or could not be further developed is to deny the economic utility of SoHo in New York, San Francisco or Los Angeles.

### **Other highlights**

Another highlight of the downtown area, and one that appears on the road to extinction is what we have called “The Natick Road Iron District.” This is a vibrant, high- value automotive services community clustered along Cochichuate Road, Summer Street and South Avenue.

An apparent artifact of the old General Motors assembly plant days in nearby Framingham and the local industrial economy of an earlier age, the District supplies a variety of sophisticated, high value automotive services such as mechanical work, body shop, storage and prep, race and rally preparation and so on for foreign, sports and racing cars.

One might move this community wholesale, or simply dismember it piece-by-piece as the HOOP district emerges in the years ahead. But to do so would be to do away with the last surviving vestige of Natick’s industrial past, a substantial resource to car enthusiasts and a unique and vibrant commercial community.

It would also expunge a substantial element of the local economy. A quick glance at the Foreign Motors West lot bounded by Mechanic Street (an apt name) and Cochichuate Road suggests ten to twenty million dollars in high-end cars flow through it every week in what is just one of upwards of two score of related businesses within the District.

We would suggest another way: Recognizing the Road Iron community and supporting its continued existence within the town through use-sensitive planning and development. Such an initiative is of also of special importance as a means to support occupational diversity, an espoused but often forgotten element of town policy in its support of Keefe Tech and the self-evident need to create employment opportunities in craft trades.

Another buried treasure within the downtown district is the Clark Block and its shuttered, second floor auditorium. Once a thriving vaudeville theater, it now lies shuttered and hidden in Natick’s most impressive and perhaps architecturally significant 19<sup>th</sup> century building. It cries out for use as a retail

emporium, but an apparent combination of owner disengagement and lack of civic initiative leaves it entered in the memories of Natick seniors.

### **The megalopolis**

With regard to the Natick Mall – Shopper’s World district itself – the “megalopolis” of all commercial areas west of Boston, inter-mall transportation initiatives (bus, walkway, monorail, etc.) will be one way of limiting automotive congestion and encouraging the continuity of patronage – all in the name of maintaining and enhancing town tax revenues as well and maintaining Natick as a retail hub.

As a footnote to such ideas one should note the existence of a fully operational demonstration monorail in East Cambridge in the 1880s. Clever development/transportation stratagems notwithstanding, what are the implications of ever-increasing density in Natick?

### **Unmanaged development**

As an indication of the rapidity of transformation in urban landscapes, one might note much of Coolidge Corner (the old Sewall Plantation and rural home of historian Francis Parkman well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century) in Brookline was rural into the later 1920s.

Lesson: unmanaged development, and managed development that is insensitive to environmental, historic and multiple use agendas will negatively impact the town’s underlying character (which in turn defines its inherent value) in ways that may not be immediately obvious.

Point of example: The section of Route 27 (North Main Street) from Route Nine south to the Town Center is essentially a promenade of historic structures (workers and artisans cottages), many of which have become degraded and shabby while others have been “improved” with vinyl siding and “modern” additions.

Were this area to be recognized for what it is – a precious remnant of 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s working person’s New England, it would add immeasurably to the character and value of the town.

While this seems unlikely, moneys currently available to the Historical Commission will finally identify, characterize and catalog the referenced properties and for that matter hundreds of others throughout the town.

### **Re-gathering the threads**

Given the lack of an historical district on Rt. 27, doubtless many of these properties will be knocked down or continuously degraded. Noting this, we would suggest a strategy for the area and many others throughout the town where current resources preclude more robust preservation.

These might include the New Englands, parts of Wethersfield (a unique architectural artifact of Post WW II New England rapidly being degraded architecturally by build-outs and add-ons), Jennings Pond, Walnut Hill, Coolidge Hill, and parts of West Natick. We note that downtown along West Central and much of South Natick already benefits from the presence of historical districts.

To begin to address these various issues in a way consistent with the spirit of Natick 360 we would advocate for the formation of a funded group of professional historians and planners directed toward “re-gathering and expanding the threads” of the town as a whole.

While almost all town histories suffer from limited research and a colloquial style, an expanded perspective directed toward documenting the places noted above as well as placing such characters as John Elliot, John Sassamon, Daniel Gookin, Henry Wilson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Horatio Alger and others within a larger context might prove both informative and enlightening.

Other investigations might focus on the ethnic history of the town through the lens of that remnant of the original Praying Indians and those Nipmucs who remained un-congregated, both who survive, if only in vestigial form (Still, a miracle!) to this day.

The transformation of the local farming population and the advent of an industrial proletariat in the shoe industry in the pre-Civil war period is another important but only casually examined element of the town’s history.

Similarly, the economic ascendancy of the town might be examined, including the transformation from woodlands to pastoral use and on to the arrival of the railway in 1838 followed by the rapid development of tanning and the previously mentioned shoe industry.

Following the thread of the shoe workers in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onto the Civil War and its draft leads to Henry Wilson's relationship with the working class of the town, then his larger place in the war and national politics.

Wilson's role, by the way, which was monumental, remains inexplicably almost entirely unexamined. Like his political colleague Horace Mann his influence upon the course of American history was incomparable and in his case places him in the pantheon of Civil War history (It was assumed he would follow Grant as president.). Yet in Natick, while his name is known, his role is a mystery.

In the later 20<sup>th</sup> century the ascendancy of the technology sector can be traced in the advent of Natick Labs, Prime Computer, Cognex, MathWorks and Boston Scientific.

While we have suggested in other comments that an interpretive signage program would serve well to highlight the various precincts of the town, we would now add to that the notion that specific areas where industry has played a role might be similarly identified.

### **Monuments**

Going another step forward, the establishment and funding of a monuments commission would allow for long-overdue recognition of those groups and individuals who's contribution to Natick life has in part been studiously ignored. Among them, some mentioned earlier, some not:

- John Elliot
- John Sassamon
- Daniel Gookin
- Crispus Attucks
- The "Natick 21" (Native American Revolutionary War veterans)
- The cobblers of Natick
- Civil war officers and soldiers
- Henry Wilson
- Natick's technology leaders

Such representations, either alone, in groups or friezes, or other appropriate means such as plaques, gardens and murals might serve to “anchor” mini-parks or more substantial open spaces.

Going another step, one might consider the creation of a “Virtual National or State Park” within the town (in fact or simile) which draws together the threads we have picked out along with the precious historical districts already established in Natick.

A “history room” within the Morse Institute or at a nearby facility might serve as a centerpiece to all we have mentioned above as well as in a previous submission to Natick 360 focused on the town’s environmental and historical resources. Media centers, display areas and guides available to residents, students and visitors alike would self-evidently make such a facility a valuable asset to the town’s cultural and economic life.

### **Transportation**

Another factor in Natick’s future is the need to introduce rapid transit into the MetroWest area. Certainly access to “bullet” or “maglev” (magnetic levitation) trains passing through Natick on a Boston-Worcester route would be advantageous to the town.

The Japanese and Chinese have long been users of such conveniences, having created them with significantly less resources available in the US.

Another useful transportation initiative might lead to the depression of Route 9 at Oak Street, which is currently flowing upwards of sixty thousand cars per weekday. Subsequent to the completion of the Natick Mall upwards of a total of seventy to eighty thousand cars a day (a hundred thousand during holiday peak periods) through an intersection featuring stop lights and a “jug handle” configuration that is at once both quaint and deadly.

One might note, by the way, that Storrow Drive, a major Boston thoroughfare, accommodates (if barely) similar traffic flows on normal days.

Also worth noting is the virtual abandonment by state and federal authorities of the obligation to develop intra-urban transportation options. More pedestrian and bicycle initiatives are always welcome for reasons of economy and health, but so would such solutions as “moving sidewalks” (already found in many airports) and “Personal Rapid Transit” in the form of

entrainable micro-cars with access to standard vehicular tunnels or simply traffic lanes reserved for bikes, segue-like transporters and similar vehicles.

Judging by the volume of 40b projects passing before town committees, the town, as we know it will soon disappear under an onslaught of multi-family and cluster housing. Noting this phenomenon will bring much intra-municipal car traffic to a virtual halt, especially in the downtown area, perhaps it is time to assess transportation alternatives.

Enhanced bus and van services already promise relief, but just as Natick and all America need relief from energy costs, Natick must find a solution for both energy supply as well as transportation.

We would suggest Natick ally with other municipalities in national organizations designed to answer its transportation and energy problems.

Richly textured, diverse, multi-modal transportation networks designed to overcome the inherent limitations of macadam highways and trains (both early 19<sup>th</sup> century inventions) should be a national priority led by municipalities like Natick and its like-minded brothers and sisters. Looking out across the American municipal landscape, the Massachusetts Municipal League should be the first step on the road to joint action.

To not do so is to risk the congestion and expense that most Natick people in the modern era came here to avoid in the first place.

### **A note in closing**

Natick will need to further evolve its own unique style if it is to go beyond a present that if satisfying still must bend to the future. Effectively, a multi-part question must be answered: does Natick possess a robust, well-defined and achievable future crafted to meet its own perceived needs?

Enterprise has its own, somewhat anarchic agenda, one driven by opportunity, expedience and profit. But if one believes that Natick, in the grand tradition of New England towns (and their forbearers in East Anglia) has the right, if not the obligation, to define its own destiny, then it will consider these words well.

### **Branding and positioning**

With that in mind we offer the following as a casual way of branding the overall process we have begun to describe above:

- Natick – The Right Place

Subsets

- Natick – The Right Place to raise a family
- Natick – The Right Place to do business
- Natick – The Right Place for 3 centuries and more

Or

- Natick – Right from the beginning

Such catchphrases are bold, even presumptive, and certainly competitive when used for purposes of community or commercial development. Consider them well, or find better.

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### **About The Golden Group**

We are marketing communicators who use public relations, advertising, design and related strategies to drive commercial and not for profit agendas on behalf of our clients. We have been based in Natick since 2001, having come here to live in 1995 and subsequently come to wonder why we would want to live and work anywhere else.

Since then we have found good reason for leaving, but are held captive by the hot dogs at Casey's, the grilled chicken subs at George's and convenient shopping.