



3. Land Use and Zoning

KEY FINDINGS

- + The total amount of land classified as Urban Development (residential, commercial, industrial, institutional, transportation) was between 50% and 60% of the total land area from 1971 to 1999. From 1999 until 2016 it increased by 1064 acres to 70%.
- + 18% of the existing buildings were built prior to 1940. 15% were built between 2000 and 2016.
- + 47% of Natick's total land area is in residential use. In 1999, multi-family residential represented 4.3% of all residential land use (by acreage). Today it represents 17%.
- + The 1970 population occupied approximately 0.13 acres per person (based on total acreage in residential use). That number increased to 0.15 acres per person in 2000 and today is less than 0.14 acres per person.

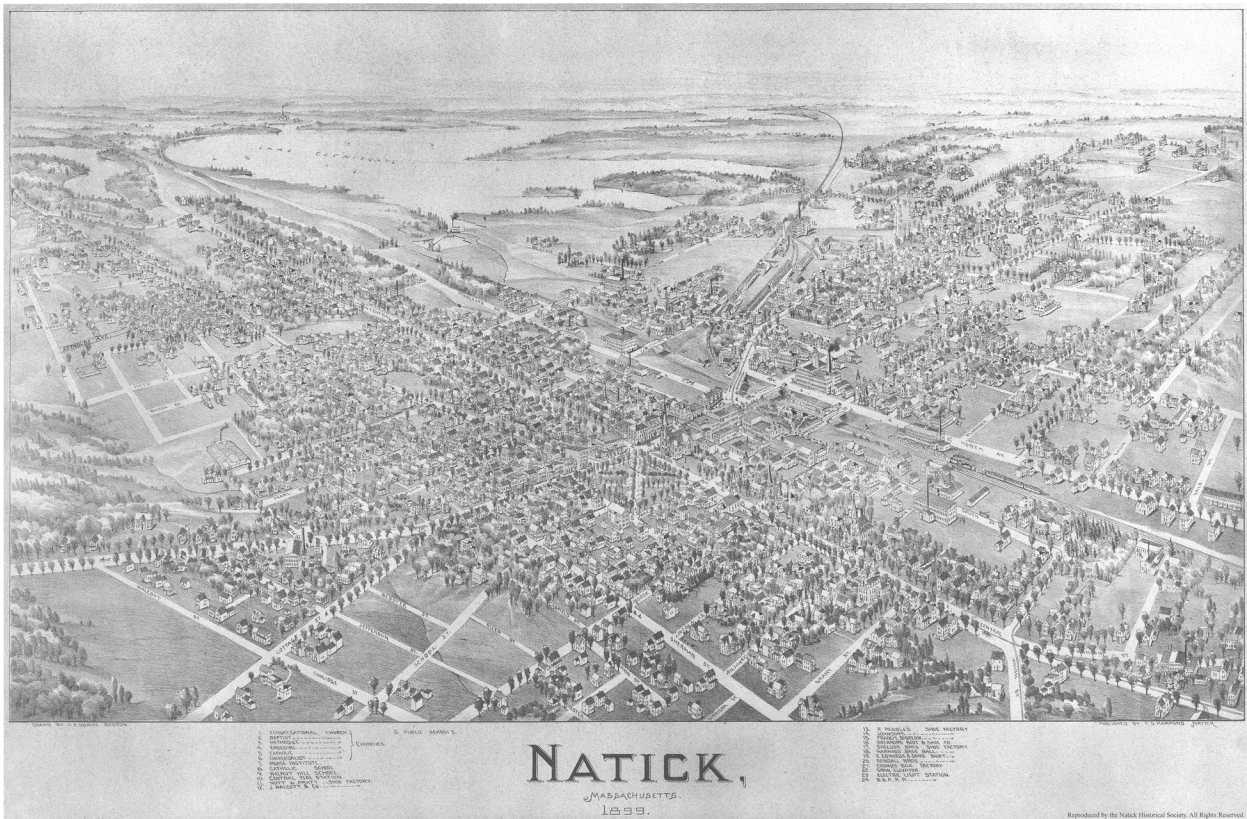
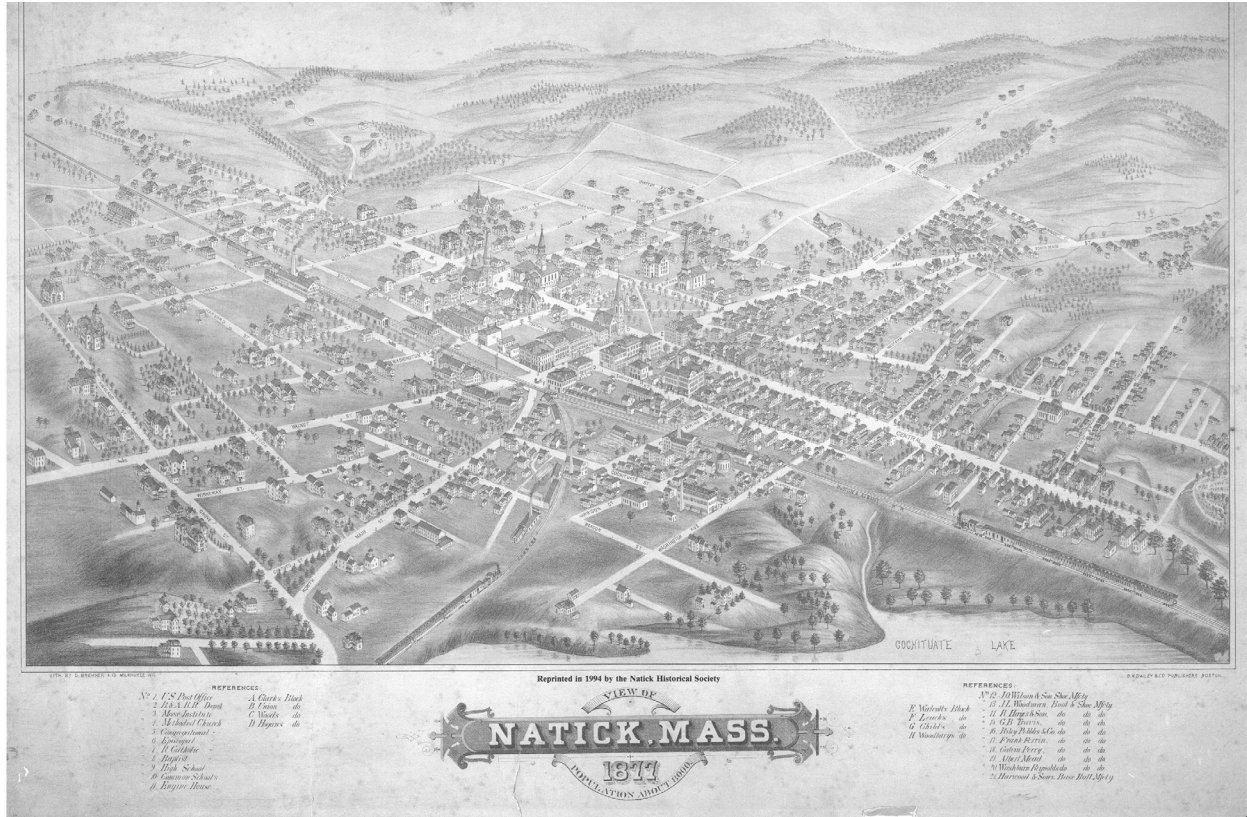
Introduction & Existing Conditions

A town's land use patterns provide a link to the town's history and the way in which it was developed over time. At the same time, the patterns very much impact the character and "feel" of a town and how people live their lives within the town:

- + Are houses close together so that residents can talk to their neighbors from front porches?
- + Are neighborhoods laid out on street grids that make connections easy between adjacent streets as well as between adjacent districts or on cul-de-sacs that create more of a sense of privacy and enclosure?
- + Are there residential areas clustered around commercial centers with good sidewalks to promote a walkable environment?
- + Are employment centers located near convenient roadway and transit access?
- + Are there neighborhoods with single family homes on large lots where residents can feel removed from the congestion and bustle of more densely developed areas?

Natick has all of these attributes and more in varying locations and degrees. And, to some extent, these characteristics are a function of when a particular area developed. Maps 3.1 and 3.2 graphically display these development patterns and the periods in which they were built. For example, in the residential districts around the Town Center, mostly built prior to 1950, homes have small lots on well-connected streets. Tract housing with very regular lot and house sizes on a curving street grid, such as in the Wethersfield neighborhood, was a popular development pattern in the 1950s, while multi-family cluster housing such as at Natick Village became more popular in the 1970s and 1980s. The cul-de-sac streets in South Natick were built mostly in the 1980s and 1990s. And finally, the larger multi-family buildings such as Avalon and Cloverleaf were built in the 2010s. These development patterns also reflect times when Natick experienced great changes (e.g., population, roadways, industry).

Natick still has a significant number of older historic buildings, with over 18 percent of the buildings having been constructed prior to 1940. Almost 15 percent were constructed since 2000; the remaining 67% were built between 1941 and 1999.



Historic maps from 1877 (facing south to the hills) and 1899 (facing north to Lake Cochituate) show a well developed Town Center with houses, commercial buildings, churches, factories and the Town Common.

History of Development Patterns

TIME PERIOD	POPULATION CHANGE: ACTUAL NUMBER / % CHANGE	DEVELOPMENT TRENDS
1940-1950	+5,987 persons / 43%	Tract-style single family homes
1950-1970	+11,219 persons / 57%	Tract-style single family homes, some on larger lots. Large scale retail mall and shopping center.
1970-1990	-547 / (-2%)	Cluster development and development around natural features. Large single-tenant commercial developments.
1990-2010	+2,496 / 8%	Cluster development and development around natural features. Single family homes. Retail expansion.
2010-2014	+1,224 / 4%	Large, multi-family developments

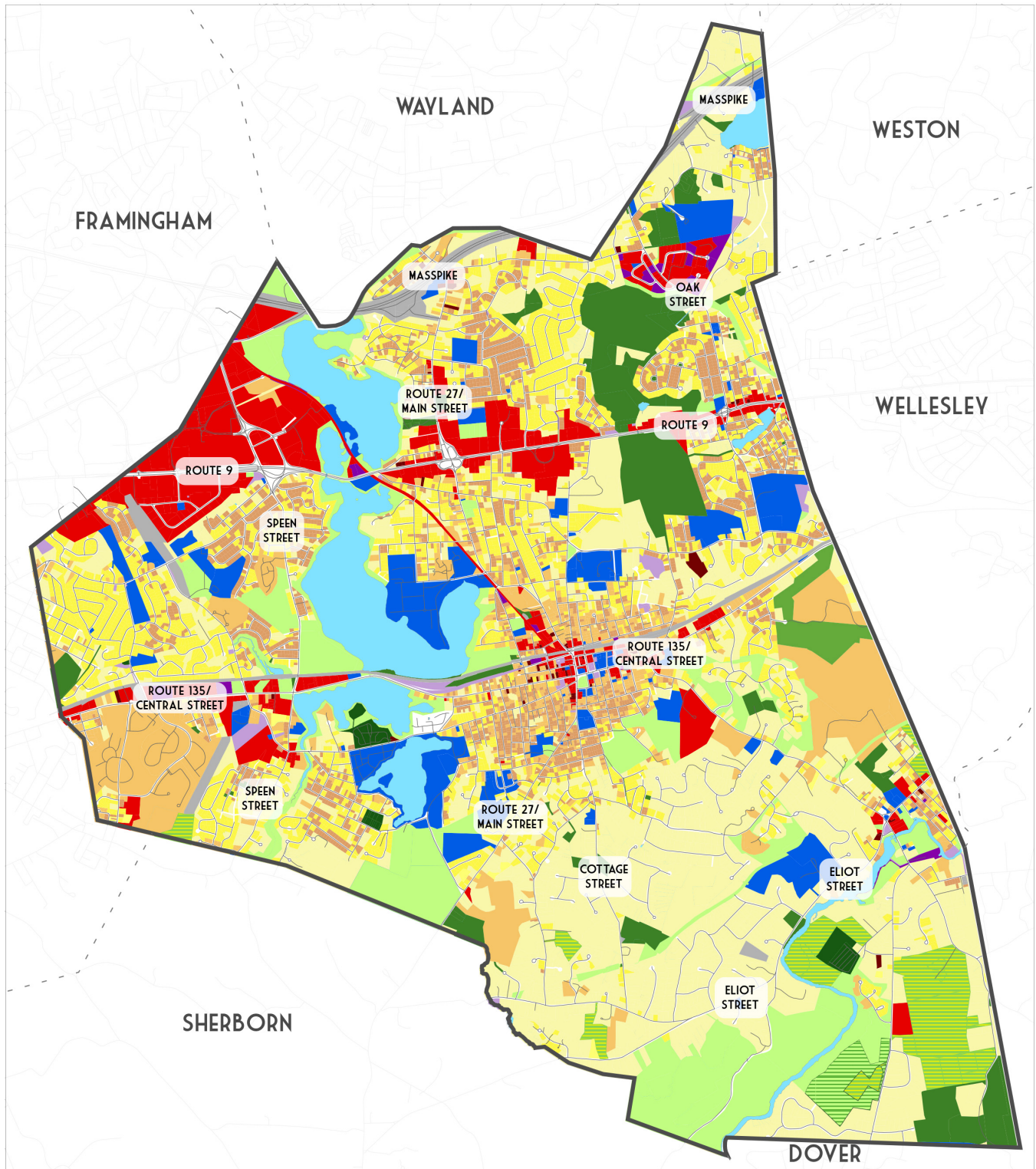
TABLE 3.1: DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

Source: U.S. Census and Natick Assessors Office Data

Like most towns in New England, Natick's early development patterns were guided by natural resources and transportation corridors. Natick, meaning "Place of Hills," was founded in South Natick on the Charles River in 1651 as one of several settlements for Native Americans who had been converted to Christianity. This settlement became the earliest commercial development, although the Town was predominately agricultural.

With the introduction of the Boston & Albany Railroad connecting Boston and Worcester in 1835, and the rise of industrialization, development moved north to what is today known as Natick Center. Natick's growing shoe industry became the third largest shoe production community in the country, with 23 shoe manufacturers by 1880. Worker housing was built nearby. In 1874, a great fire demolished 18 blocks in the Town Center, including two shoe factories, the Town Hall, the Fire Engine House, the Congregational Church and many homes. Natick rebuilt after the fire and many of today's buildings were constructed between 1874 and 1900. Historic maps from 1877 and 1899 show a well-established Town Center with a common, churches, and commercial, manufacturing and residential buildings; with hills and open land to the south. That dense land use pattern on small parcels continues today.

By the beginning of the 20th Century, the shoe industry was declining and the automobile was introduced. Route 9 was built as the first divided highway in the state. Commercial development moved north to Route 9. Natick slowly changed from a major manufacturing town to a commuter suburb of Boston. By 1950, two-thirds of Natick's full-time workers were employed outside of Natick.

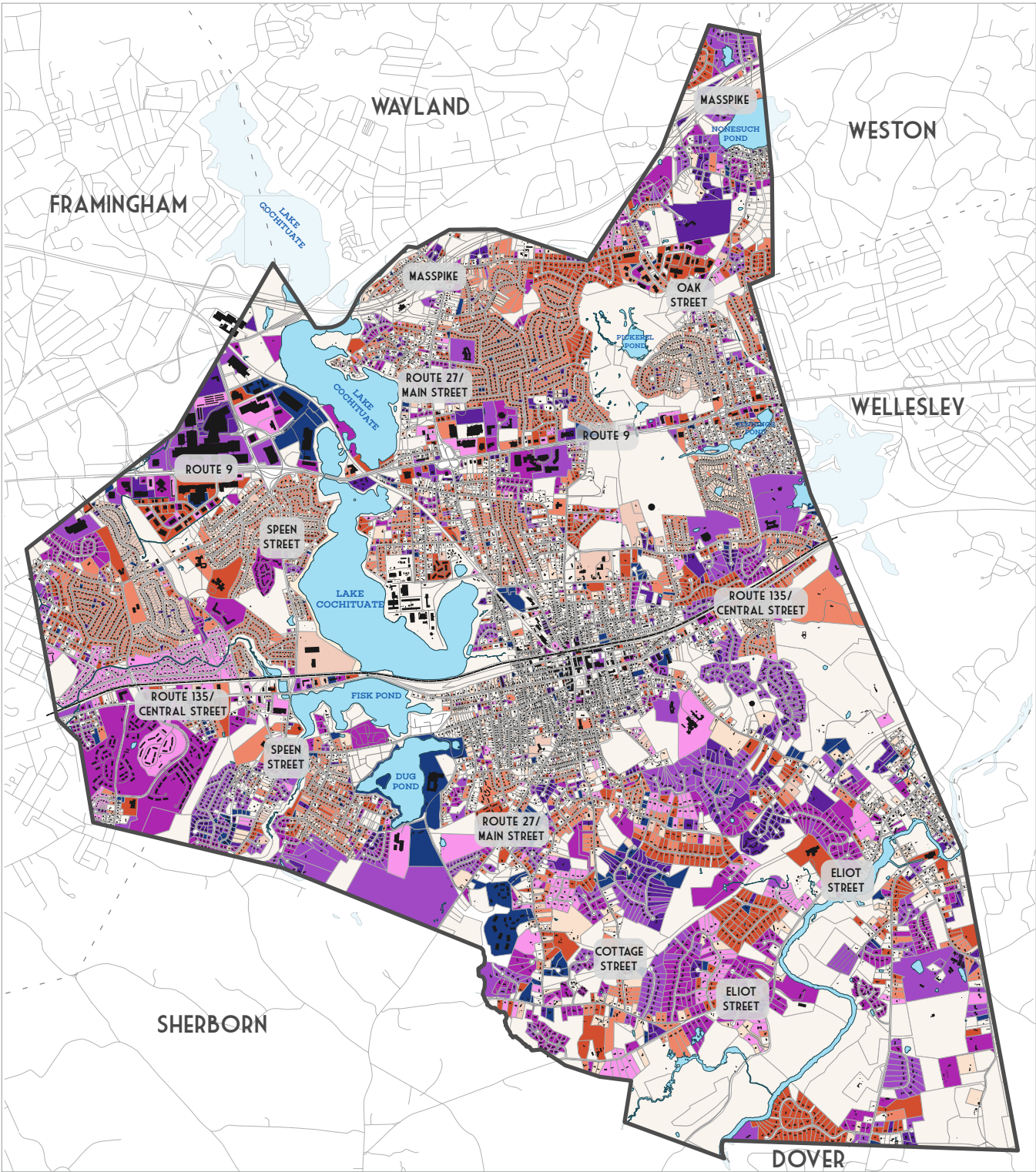


MAP 3.1: EXISTING LAND USE

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- Low Density Residential
- Medium Density Residential
- Multi-Family Residential
- High Density Residential
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Mixed Use
- Recreational
- Urban Public/Institutional
- Transportation/Powerline/Utility
- Agriculture
- Forest
- Conservation
- Cemetery
- Wetland
- Vacant
- Water



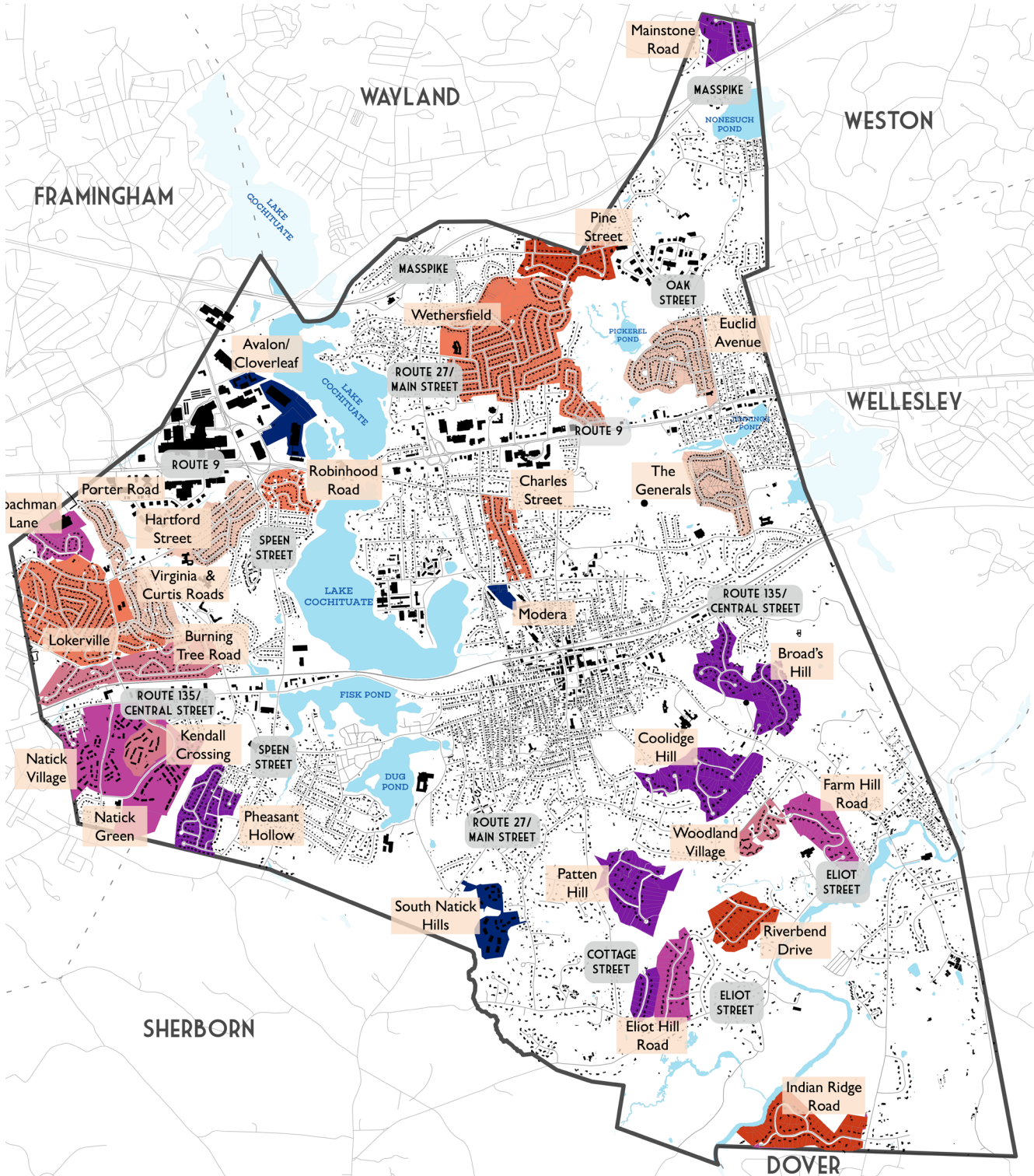


LEGEND

BUILDING CONSTRUCTION YEAR	
Light beige	Prior to 1940
Light orange	1940-1949
Orange	1950-1959
Dark orange	1960-1969
Pink	1970-1979
Light purple	1980-1989
Medium purple	1990-1999
Dark purple	2000-2009
Dark blue	2010-Present

MAP 3.2: DEVELOPMENT HISTORY





- LEGEND**
- | | |
|-------|------------|
| 1940s | 1990s-2010 |
| 1950s | 2010s |
| 1960s | |
| 1970s | |
| 1980s | |

MAP 3.3: NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT HISTORY





Historic map from 1750 highlights Natick's natural features, including hills, plains and water bodies.

Residential Development

While early residential development was clustered in South Natick and later around factories near Natick Center, Natick saw significant residential development after World War II. Housing for the returning soldiers and their families was built in East, North and West Natick, as shown on Map 3.3. In the 1940s, large developments of tract housing south of Route 9 included The Generals east of Hunnewell Town Forest in East Natick, as well as developments on the west side of Speen Street north and south of Hartford Street and around Virginia and Curtis Roads. North of Route 9, the area around Euclid Avenue between Oak Street and Pickerell Pond was developed.

New developments in the 1950s - including Wethersfield north of Route 9, Lokerville south of Route 9 and west of Route 27, Charles Street north of the Town Center and the Robinhood Road area west of Lake Cochituate - were similar in style to the 1940s developments, but with slightly larger parcels and houses. This trend of similar land use patterns with increasingly larger parcels continued in both north and south Natick through the 1960s and 1970s and, to some extent, into today.

1960s residential development included single family homes in South Natick along Riverbend Drive north of Eliot Street and Indian Ridge Way south of the Charles River on the Dover town line.

The area within walking distance of the West Natick train station experienced another building boom in the early 1970s and 1980s, when a large residential subdivision was built on the site of a former golf course on the north side of Route 135 along Burning Tree Road, and large condominium and apartment complexes such as Natick Green, Kendall Crossing and Natick Village (Natick's first experiment with cluster zoning) were built on the south side of Route 135.

The 1980s also saw an increase in residential development around natural features, particularly hills, including Coachman Lane at Drury Hill and in South Natick along Eliot Hill Road and Farm Hill Road.

TIME PERIOD	HOUSING UNITS CONSTRUCTED
Pre-1900	2,124
1901-1940	1,834
1941-1970	5,251
1971-1991	1,300
1992-2015	1,927

TABLE 3.2: HOUSING CONSTRUCTION
Source: Natick Assessors Office Data

Most of the residential development between 1990 and 2010 was single family housing, primarily south of Central Street. Many of these developments continued the pattern of building on sites with natural features such as hills and ponds, including the development around Broad's Hill east of Union Street; just south of Coolidge Hill and Coolidge Woods along Moccasin and Arrow Paths; around Patten Hill along Deer Path and Whispering Lane; the very northern tip of Natick around the Pond on Mainstone and Saddlebrook Roads; and Woodland Village just south of Woodland Street and north of the Sudbury Aqueduct. The Pheasant Hollow neighborhood was developed with a number of single family homes, south of Pond Street and west of Speen Street. Although the Pheasant Hollow homes are larger than those in the older southwest Natick neighborhood to the east, the lots are of a similar size. Eliot Hill Road in South Natick continued to develop with single family homes.

Between 2010 and 2017, residential development included a few large multi-family developments such as Avalon Natick and Cloverleaf across Speen Street from the Natick Mall, Modera (on the former Natick Paperboard site), just north of Natick Center, and South Natick Hills.



The Development History map (Map 3.3) also illustrates teardown and infill activity in older neighborhoods, particularly between 2000 and 2016. Neighborhoods which have seen the most teardown/infill activity include East Natick around Euclid Avenue; Wethersfield; Morse Pond Grove; the Curtis Road area and Lokerville west of Mill Street; and south of Sherman Street on the south side of Natick Center.

Smart Growth and Affordable Housing Regulations

Over the years, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the Town of Natick have adopted regulations to spur the development of affordable housing and smart growth projects that conserve natural resources and focus development near transit and commercial centers.

Cluster Zoning adopted by the Town was designed “To permit more economical and efficient use of residential land than may be accomplished through standard subdivision redevelopment by: protecting the existing character of the landscape, introducing some variety into residential development, and preserving for the Town more open space for water supply; flood protection; woodland, field and wetland habitat; conservation; and recreation.”

Chapter 40B was enacted by the State of Massachusetts in 1969 and enables local Zoning Boards of Appeals (ZBAs) to approve affordable housing developments under flexible rules if at least 20-25% of the units have long-term affordability restrictions. The standard is for communities to provide a minimum of 10% of their total housing inventory as affordable. If municipalities are below the 10% threshold, the state’s Housing Appeals Committee can overturn any local rejection of a 40B permit. The South Natick Hills development on South Main Street at the Sherborn town line, as well as the Cloverleaf and Avalon Natick apartment complexes across from the Natick Mall, were developed under 40B regulations.

In 2004, Natick adopted **Housing Overlay Option Plan (HOOP) Zoning Districts** around the Town Center. HOOP Districts are designed “to increase production of dwelling units affordable to persons and households of low and moderate income in a manner consistent with the character of the downtown area. Within any development under the HOOP regulations, at least 15% of the total number of dwelling units must meet the affordability requirements for households earning less than 80% of regional median income and households earning between 80 and 120% of regional median income.” Several multi-family developments have been built within the HOOP districts since the zoning was enacted.

The Massachusetts Smart Growth Zoning Overlay District Act, Chapter 149 of the Acts of 2004 (Chapter 40R), encourages communities to create dense residential or mixed-use smart growth zoning districts, including a high percentage of affordable housing units, to be located near transit stations, in areas of concentrated development such as existing city and town centers, and in other highly suitable locations. Upon state review and approval of a local overlay district, communities become eligible for payments from a Smart Growth Housing Trust Fund, as well as other financial incentives. The Modera development on the former Natick Paperboard site was developed as a 40R project.

Projects built under smart growth and affordable housing regulations include (from the top) Kendall Crossing, South Natick Hills, Cloverleaf Apartments, and HOOP projects on East Central Street (Castle Courtyard) and Dewey Street.



Projects built under smart growth and affordable housing regulations include (from the top) a HOOP project on South Avenue and the 40R Modera project.



MAP 3.4: 40R AND HOOP DISTRICT PROJECTS

Post World War II Commercial & Industrial Development

Natick has five main commercial/industrial districts:

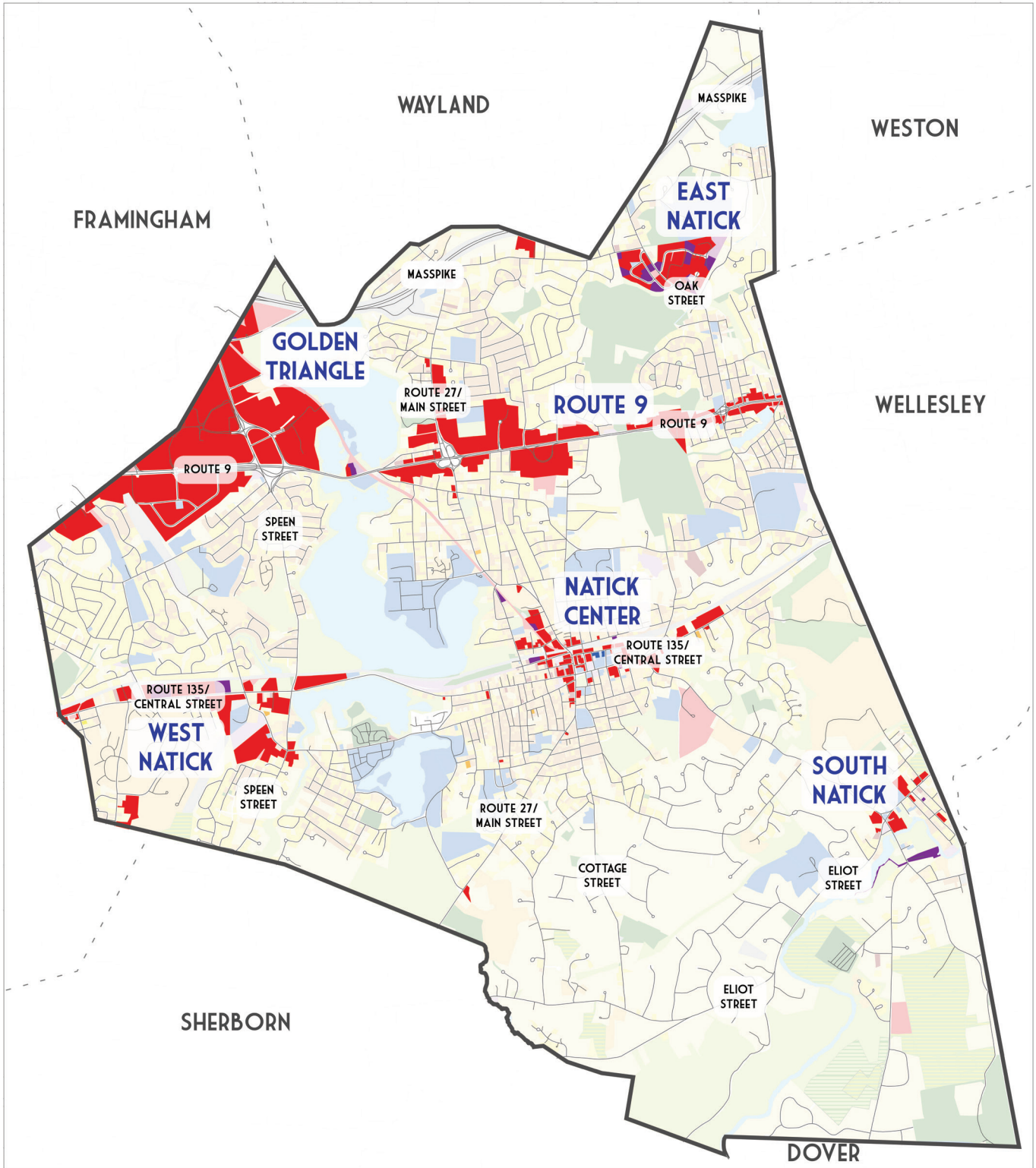
- + The Golden Triangle and Route 9
- + Natick Center
- + West Natick
- + South Natick
- + East Natick



The Natick Mall.

The Golden Triangle and Route 9

Shoppers World opened in 1951, just across the Framingham line, as New England’s first regional shopping center. That was followed by Sherwood Plaza in 1960 and the Natick Mall in 1966. Today, this area is known as “The Golden Triangle” - an area defined by Route 9, Route 30, and Speen Street, although the commercial activity extends considerably beyond these streets. The Golden Triangle is divided between Natick and Framingham. East of Speen Street is the Cloverleaf Marketplace Shopping Center with large tenants including Burlington (formerly the Burlington Coat Factory), Ethan Allen Furniture and Total Wine; the Cloverleaf and Avalon residential developments, Home Depot, Federal Express, Hampton Inn and the new MathWorks Lakeside campus (under construction).



LEGEND

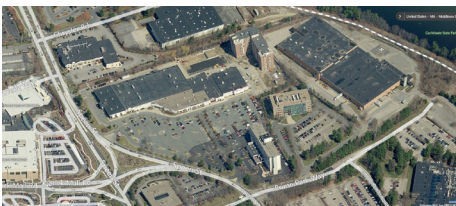
- | | |
|--|--|
| Low Density Residential | Agriculture |
| Medium Density Residential | Forest |
| Multi-Family Residential | Conservation |
| High Density Residential | Cemetery |
| Commercial | Wetland |
| Industrial | Vacant |
| Mixed Use | Water |
| Recreational | |
| Urban Public/Institutional | |
| Transportation/Powerline/Utility | |

MAP 3.5: COMMERCIAL/INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT CLUSTERS





The density of activity in The Golden Triangle continues to increase, as single-story structures and parking lots are replaced by retail and office buildings with associated parking garages. The Natick Mall expansion in 2008 included the new 215 unit Nouvelle condominium development. The Nouvelle, together with the 183 unit Cloverleaf and 407 unit Avalon apartment buildings on the east side of Speen Street, completed in 2008 and 2013, have begun to transform this area into a mixed-use district, although with the exception of the Nouvelle, residential uses are not fully integrated. The Cloverleaf and Avalon apartment complexes are tucked behind commercial plazas. Poor pedestrian access and connections makes these residential developments feel more like islands than a part of the larger district or Natick community. The Town is actively working to improve connectivity in the area, highlighted by the Cochituate Rail Trail which will connect the residential buildings to both Speen Street and Natick Center.



South of Route 9 and west of Speen Street is the Sherwood Plaza Shopping Center with large tenants including PETCO, the Christmas Tree Store and Dick's Sporting Goods. Behind Sherwood Plaza is an industrial district with a variety of uses including educational and day care facilities, a swim school, office space and the Museum of World War II, in addition to industrial uses and a new LA Fitness Center. Recent activity also has included the introduction of some creative uses such as biotech, life science and incubator space.



Additional commercial uses continue east along Route 9 to the Wellesley border. Route 9 is a prime location for a number of prominent and sizable commercial businesses including the MathWorks Apple Hill Campus, Cognex, auto dealers and home furnishings stores, as well as a number of businesses including Starbucks and other restaurants occupying smaller spaces. Many of the larger buildings were developed in the 1980s and 1990s. Parcels along the eastern part of Route 9 are relatively shallow and back up to residential properties, limiting opportunities for significant redevelopment/modernization.



From top: Nouvelle at the Natick Mall, aerial view of the Cloverleaf Shopping Center, Sherwood Village and an office building and the new LA Fitness Center behind Sherwood Plaza.

Clockwise from top left: Development along Route 9 includes the Home Town Center home furnishings strip mall, Cognex, the shopping center at the intersection of Routes 9 and 127, and smaller scale businesses near Route 9 and Oak Street.



Natick Center

Another prominent commercial area is Natick Center. Because of the rapid growth that occurred after the fire of 1874, there is a cohesive 19th Century character (High Victorian Gothic style). In 1977 the Town obtained a National Register Historic District designation for the Center, which includes 15 historically significant buildings.

Natick Center, served by the Natick Center Commuter Rail Station, is zoned as a "Downtown Mixed Use District." This zoning allows a mix of uses, including single and multi-unit residential, commercial and office. Additionally, on the north edge of downtown, are two small industrial zones. Two of the industrial buildings in this zone have been rehabilitated into the Natick Mills and Dean residential developments. The former Natick Paperboard site, now Modera, a 150-unit apartment complex, is just north of this district.



Natick Center contains a mix of land uses and building typologies. There are numerous small businesses, restaurants, stores, and artist studios. Civic uses, clustered along East Central Street east of the Town Common, include the Town Hall, Morse Institute Library and the Police and Fire Department Headquarters. Several large historic churches occupy prominent corner locations. The historic Natick Center Fire Station was repurposed for use as The Center for Arts in Natick (see Chapter 6).



There are also over 1,800 dwelling units, housing approximately 4,000 people within the ½ mile walkshed of Natick Center. The two main corridors include the predominately commercial Route 27 running north-south and the commercial/civic corridor running east-west along Route 135. The two corridors meet at the Town Common. Non-historic buildings in Natick Center vary in quality and size, especially in the periphery of the immediate core. One-story buildings and poor ground floor renovations mar some parts of the neighborhood. Auto-related uses and buildings set back behind parking lots have broken the street edge in certain areas.¹



From the top: The historic Main Street buildings are filled with ground floor storefronts and restaurants, while Central Street is lined with a number of public buildings and churches.

Clockwise from above: Restaurants, stores and personal services continue north on Washington Street; artist studios and public art on Adams Street; the north side of South Avenue has a number of auto repair businesses.

¹ Source: The 2016 Natick Center Plan, prepared by MAPC.





From the top: Retail and office space as well as a vacant building along Route 135 in West Natick.



Office and light industrial buildings in the East Natick Industrial Park.

West Natick

Commercial and industrial development continues in a third district along Route 135 in West Natick, near the West Natick Commuter Rail Station west of Town Center. Much of the development occurred in the 1950s through the 1980s. Current uses include the Roche Brothers grocery store, a Hess service station, a strip mall with one floor of office space above, several two- to three-story office buildings and one-story industrial buildings. There are a number of underutilized or vacant buildings and parcels. The MBTA parking lot has been discussed as a potential site for transit-oriented development.

A small cluster of commercial development around the intersection of Speen and Pond Streets includes professional office space and a small strip mall with convenience retail and services. The strip mall was built in the 1970s while most of the professional office space was built in the 1980s.

East Natick

The East Natick Industrial Park extends east and west of Oak Street to the north of Rathburn Road. The industrial park, built primarily in the 1960s, has some buildings dating back to the 1950s as well as buildings from the 1970s and 1980s. In addition to industrial uses, several commercial sports training facilities, a daycare, a private school, and a realty office are located in the industrial park.

South Natick

South Natick has a small commercial district clustered around the intersection of Union and Eliot Streets. Office space for professional services and realty firms, as well as several small food establishments, are located in historic buildings within the John Eliot National Register Historic District.



Commercial uses and vacant space in South Natick buildings.

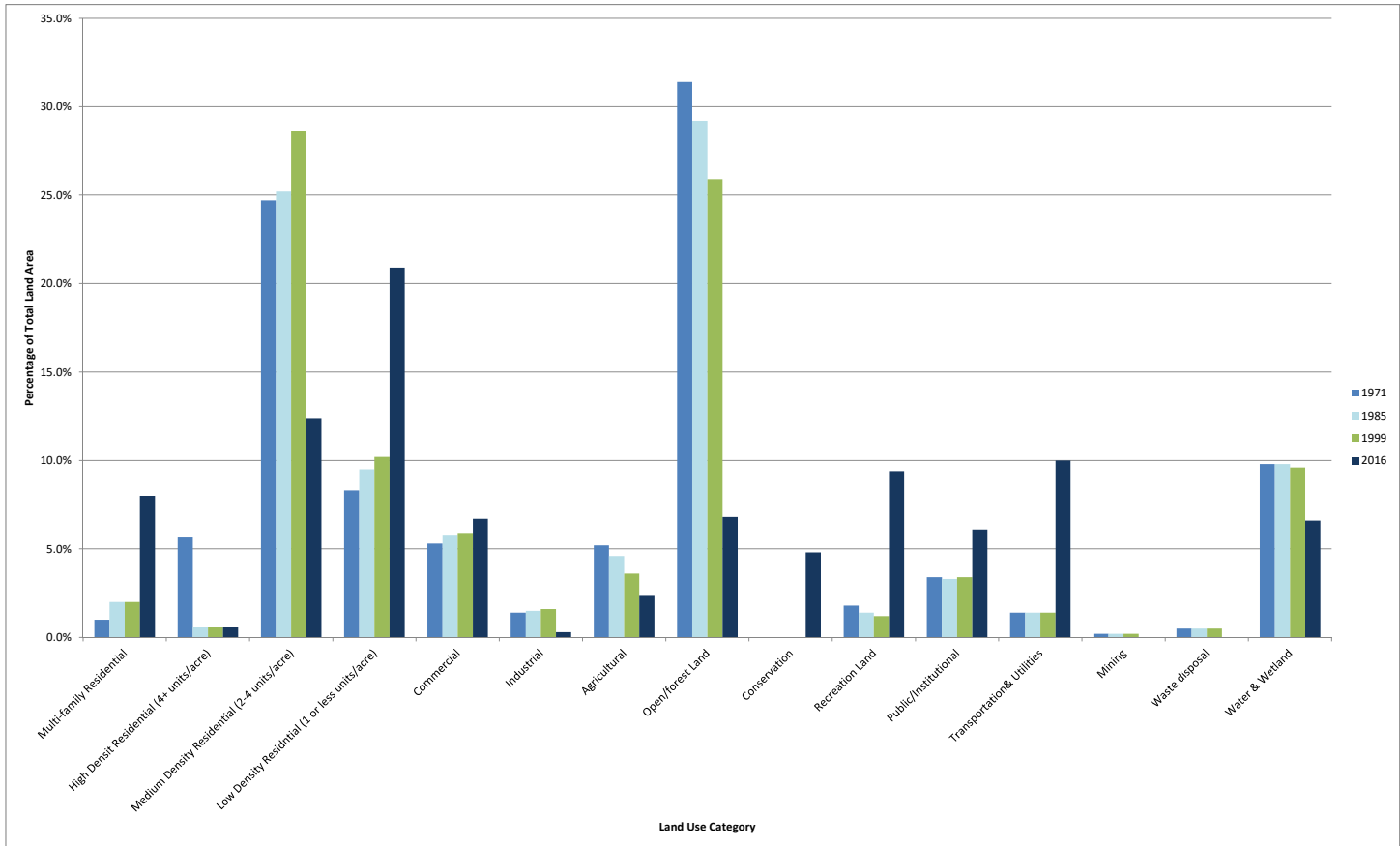


FIGURE 3.1: LAND USE CHANGES 1971 TO 2016

Changes in Land Use

The current breakdown in land use, based on 2016 Natick Assessing Department data and Natick GIS data, is shown in Table 3.3. Figure 3.1 illustrates land use changes from 1971 to 2016. Note: Exact comparisons are difficult to make because available land use classification information differs between years.

The numbers represent a snapshot in time and were based on the information available at the time they were assembled (2016). They do not reflect updates in information that may have occurred since that time. In addition, developing these breakdowns is not an exact science for several reasons:

- + Assessors data and GIS data are not always perfectly matched as they are not necessarily updated at exactly the same time.
- + Assessors data includes parcels of land, but does not include roadways.
- + Parcels which contain more than one use are frequently only classified by the Assessing Department and/or GIS as one use.

The general land use patterns and trends illustrated here provide valuable background information. Many regulatory and grant programs require that the numbers be categorized and compiled in very specific ways; new calculations would need to be developed to meet those specific requirements.

LAND USE	% OF TOTAL LAND AREA	TOTAL ACRES
Residential	46.9%	4,790
Open/Forest/Conservation	6.89%	69,106
Conservation	4.8%	495
Transportation (including roads, rail tracks and stations)	10.0%	1,023
Recreational	9.4%	961
Commercial	6.7%	687
Water and Wetland	6.6%	673
Institutional/Public	6.1%	656
Agricultural	2.4%	241
Industrial	0.3%	29
TOTAL	100%	10,216

TABLE 3.3: 2016 TOWN-WIDE LAND USE

Source: Natick Assessors Office Data

During the 1990s and into the new millennium, substantial subdivision development occurred wherever available land could be acquired, consuming a significant amount of woodland and open land, as well as reusing some former industrial land. Today, 4,790 acres (47%) of Natick's total land area is classified as residential; residential use represented 40% of total land use in 1971. Agricultural land declined by 162 acres (30%) between 1971 and 1999 and by an additional 128 acres (35%) between 2000 and 2016. Land classified as recreation increased by 773 acres (410%) between 1971 and 2016.

During the 1971-1999 period, land classified as urban development (residential, commercial, industrial, institutional, transportation) increased by 798 acres (15.1%). The largest increase was in land classified as residential, which increased by 708 acres. Between 1999 and 2016, land classified as urban development (residential, commercial, industrial, institutional and transportation uses) increased by 1,064 acres (17%). The amount of land classified as residential increased by only 1%, while the amount of land classified as commercial (includes both office and retail) increased by 13.5%. The largest increase was in land classified as public or institutional use which increased by 274 acres (78%).

The 1970 population occupied about 0.13 acres per person (dividing the total acreage classified as residential by the 1970 population of 31,057), but, as individual lot sizes grew, an additional 0.64 acres per person were developed to accommodate the additional 1113 persons added to the population between 1970 and 2000. Although there is still some development of single family homes on large lots, much of the recent residential development has been in multi-family developments, reducing the amount of land per person. The 2014 population of 34,230 (source: American Community Survey estimate) occupied approximately 0.14 acres per person. In 1971, multi-family residential represented 2.5% of all residential land use (by acreage). Today it represents 17%.

Assessor's data for 2016 shows approximately 32 acres of commercial land, 174 acres of residential land and 6 acres of industrial land as undeveloped but potentially developable. This land is spread out around town, and much of it is wetland. It is included in Open/Forest/Conservation category in Table 3.3.

Natick: Our Community Yesterday and Today, prepared in 2007 as part of Natick 360, reported several development patterns. "First, although there was little land left for commercial/industrial development, this type of development continued in Natick, using previously-developed lands in redevelopment projects. The largest of these was the 596,000 square foot Natick Mall expansion. Secondly, a substantial amount of the recently-approved or proposed residential development is either in the form of special permit developments associated with the HOOP District as part of town-planned downtown revitalization, or in the Chapter 40B developments being proposed for vacant lands that are zoned for single family residential developments." The South Natick Hills 40B development, a 268-unit complex built in 2013, added a significant residential cluster at the southern end of Main Street/Route 27 in South Natick. The neighborhood, not the site, had previously been exclusively single family homes. This residential development, along with development of the Cloverleaf, Avalon and Nouvelle in The Golden Triangle, added a substantial residential component to areas of Town which were previously non-residential in nature.



From the top: Construction underway at the former American Legion Building on West Central Street, the town-owned Middlesex Avenue parking lot and the Saint Patrick's property.



Aerial view of the former Sam's Club property.

Current Development Projects + Proposals

There is significant development interest and activity in Natick today. In the Town Center, several mixed-use redevelopment projects are underway. The site of the former one-story "Town Paint" building on Main Street facing the Common is being redeveloped into the Residences on the Common, a four to five floor mixed-use building with 4000 square feet of ground floor commercial/restaurant space and 32 housing units above. The historic former American Legion Building on West Central Street is currently being rehabilitated and expanded into a two and three floor mixed-use building with ground floor retail/restaurant space and 11 residential units on the upper floors.

MathWorks is constructing its new Lakeside campus in The Golden Triangle. There are also a number of current development plans and proposals, including:

In and around the Town Center:

- + Two of the town-owned parking lots in Natick Center (South Avenue and Middlesex Avenue) have been discussed as potential garage sites; conversations with developers indicated that a developer's interest in the parcels would be contingent upon being able to develop residential units above the garage. The Board of Selectmen have appropriated funding for a site-specific assessment of a town-funded garage on the Middlesex Avenue lot. The assessment is to include scale of the garage, potential programming for other uses (e.g., ground floor retail), environmental issues, cost and funding options, in addition to a conceptual design.
- + The Saint Patrick's property at the east end of the Town Center has been proposed for reuse as a mixed-use development with ground-floor retail and commercial space on Route 135 and residential use on the remainder of the property. The proposed project was rejected by Town Meeting.

In and around the Golden Triangle:

- + A planned development (currently under construction) for the former Sam's Club site at the northeast corner of Speen Street and Route 9 includes a 130 room hotel and a 165 unit age-restricted (over age 62 - not assisted living) residential building.
- + The Golden Triangle is the subject of a planning study that was conducted concurrently with this Master Plan and looked at potential development/redevelopment opportunities and associated impacts on transportation infrastructure. The planning study resulted in a development vision and implementation strategy for the area.

In and Around South Natick:

- + A developer is working on a proposed cluster housing project for the Wayside Farm property off of Rockland Street.



- + Several farms are slated to come on the market or have recently sold, including the Century Farms horse farm on South Street in South Natick, the Wynona Horse Farm on Union Street and the former WindyLo Nursery on Eliot Street.
- + A portion of both Lookout Farm and the Hunnewell Estate have been mentioned as potential development sites, although no specific plans have been put forward.



Other Commercial and Industrial Districts:

- + Some of the underutilized parcels and/or vacant buildings along Route 135 by the West Natick Station may also be potential redevelopment opportunities - one property owner has already explored a housing project there with the Planning Board. The West Natick Station parking lot is another potential development site in this area.
- + The East Natick Industrial Park and the Industrial Park south of Sherwood Plaza have underutilized buildings and/or parcels that could see some redevelopment activity.
- + The intersections of Route 9 with Main Street (Route 27) and with Oak Street provide some opportunity for redevelopment of older commercial uses, potentially for mixed-use. The 9/27 Plaza on the northeast corner of the Route 9/Route 27 Interchange has recently been updated with new retail space facing Route 27.



From the top: Aerial view of the Wayside Farm property, entrance sign for the Century Farm and the Windy Low Nursery.



Clockwise from above: Entrance to West Natick MBTA Station parking lot; property for lease in the East Natick Industrial Park and the intersection of Route 9 and Oak Street.



Zoning

The centerpiece of a comprehensive plan is the land use plan, which has to balance private property interests with the public's interests in environmental quality, services, facilities, infrastructure, transportation, and community economic development. The land use plan provides a policy framework for actions to promote the best possible future for a community. In Massachusetts, land use decisions lie almost entirely with local governments, although some exceptions exist. Under "home rule," cities and towns have quite a bit of latitude to regulate development. However, Massachusetts can be a challenging environment for local governments because the state zoning act is over forty years old and it does not fully reflect the principles of home rule. It also has not been brought in line with modern planning practices.

Communities can take steps to shape development through mechanisms like zoning and subdivision control, but regulation is not the only way to influence a future land use pattern. Infrastructure and utilities, open space acquisitions, and organizational tools such as local development corporations or special districts also have an impact on private investment decisions. Furthermore, while it is tempting to focus all major growth management policies on the fate of vacant land, it is a mistake to overlook the role that redevelopment plays in a community's economy and visual character. This is especially true in maturely developed suburbs like Natick, where "redevelopment" can mean anything from repurposing an old public school to the single-family teardowns and rebuild projects that can be seen in almost any neighborhood in town.

Natick's present Zoning Bylaw (ZBL), though amended many times over the years, is based on a comprehensive update and revision that Town Meeting approved in 1960. It provides for sixteen use districts and nine overlay districts as shown in Table 3.4 and Map 3.5. In some cases, the overlays in Natick cover all or substantial portions both of underlying use districts and other overlay districts. As a result, the zoning scheme in Natick is fairly complicated and sometimes seems to be in conflict. Today, approximately 85 percent of all land in Natick (including water and wetlands) is zoned for residential development.

Natick has clearly tried to stay current with new planning ideas and approaches to land use regulation. For example, the Town adopted a Subsidized Housing (SH) district in 1973, just four years after the legislature enacted G.L. c. 40B, the Comprehensive Permit Law. Similarly, Natick was one of the earliest towns to experiment with zoning techniques to create affordable housing that "counts" on the Chapter 40B Subsidized Housing Inventory without relying on comprehensive permits. The Housing Overlay Option Plan (HOOP) districts were established in 1991, shortly after the state inaugurated what is now known as the Local Initiative Program, and the regulations and incentives for these districts were updated a decade later. Furthermore, Natick and Framingham collaborated to establish Highway Overlay District (HOD) zoning on Route 9 in both towns. The good news is that Natick has experience with innovations in regulatory reform. Unfortunately, Natick's pursuit of many land use techniques and difficulty integrating them into a coherent framework has produced a complicated, hard-to-follow ZBL that paints an unclear picture of the kind of place Natick wants to be. Areas of town with land uses that bear no relationship to existing zoning, due to the issuance of variances or simply the persistence of old "grandfathered" uses, exacerbate the "disconnects" between Natick's zoning regulations and Natick on the ground.

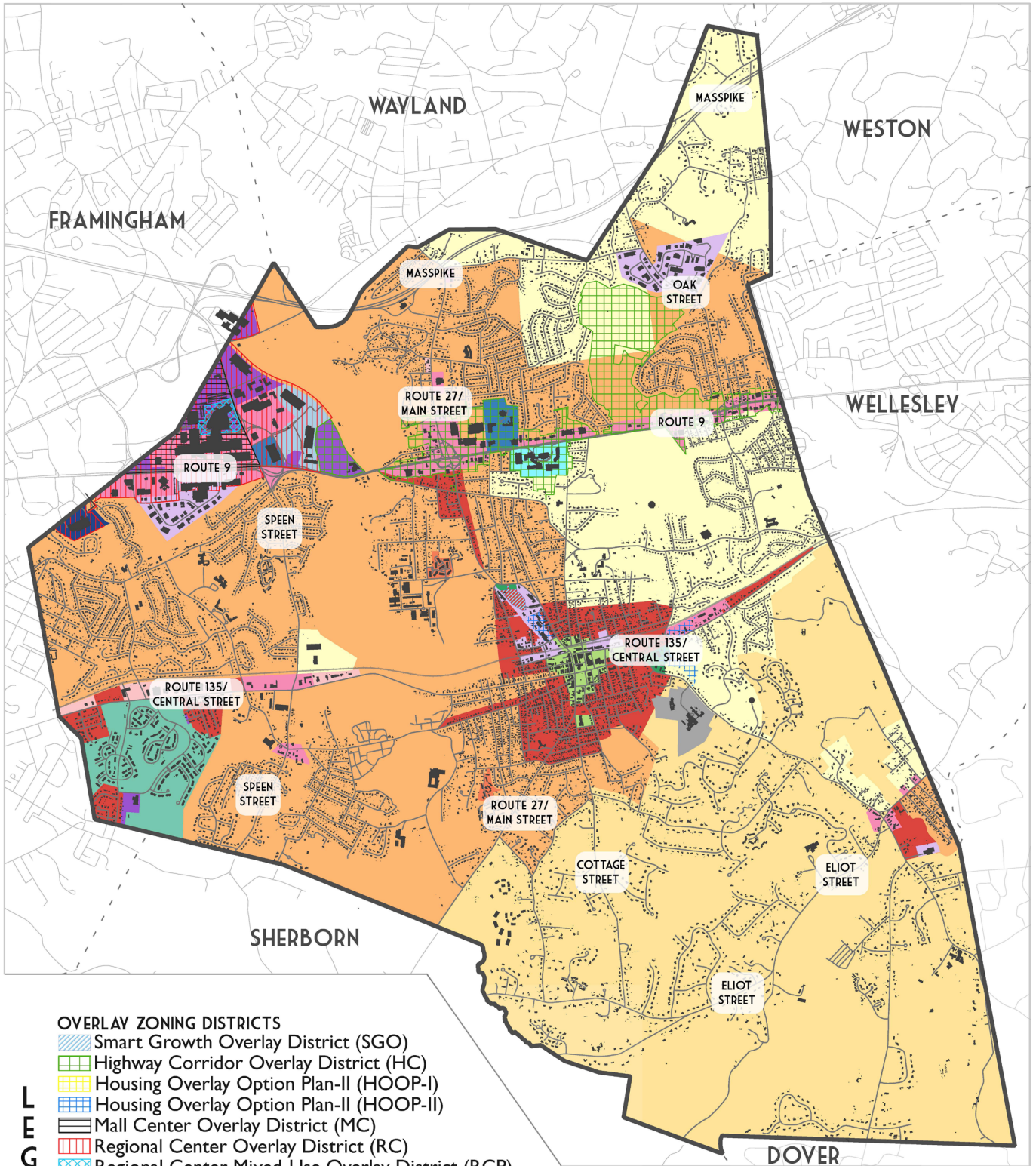
	USE DISTRICT	OVERLAY DISTRICT
1	Residential General (RG)	Floodplain (FP)
2	Residential Multiple (RM)	Regional Center Overlay (RC)
3	Residential Single (RS)	Highway Corridor Overlay (HC)
4	Planned Cluster Development (PCD)	Mall Center Overlay (MC)
5	Administrative & Professional (AP)	Housing Overlay Option Plan I (HOOP-I)
6	Subsidized Housing (SH)	Housing Overlay Option Plan II (HOOP-II)
7	Downtown Mixed Use (DM)	Regional Center Mixed-Use Overlay (RCP)
8	Commercial Two (CII)	Smart Growth Overlay (SGO)
9	Industrial One (InI)	Aquifer Protection District (APD)
10	Industrial Two (InII)	
11	Hospital (H)	
12	Highway Mixed Use I (HM-I)	
13	Highway Mixed Use II (HM-II)	
14	Highway Mixed Use III (HM-III)	
15	Limited Commercial (LC)	
16	Highway Planned Use (HPU)	

TABLE 3.4: NATICK ZONING DISTRICTS

Format, Structure, Organization

The more that zoning bylaws and ordinances conform to basic conventions – commonly used section titles, numbering, structure, and so forth – the easier it is for people to locate the information they need. The Natick ZBL can be hard to navigate because it is disorganized. Divided into six broad sections (Articles I through VI), the ZBL does not always have content where one would expect to find it – that is, the main section headings are not always indicative of where particular provisions can be found. A good example exists in the first section, Article I, Purpose and Authorization. Codes of all types usually begin with a title, legal citations (source of authority), scope, and procedures for adoption and amendment. Natick’s Article I has some of this content, but most of it consists of purpose statements for several (not all) of the Town’s zoning districts. However, the actual list of districts and references to the Zoning Map do not appear until Article II, which also has descriptions (in various formats) of the boundaries of each district.

The ZBL numbering system is inconsistent. For example, the sections in Article I are identified as Section 100, 200, etc., yet elsewhere, the ZBL adopts a convention such as III-A, III-H, only to revert to Section 320 and back to Roman numerals and letters again. Similarly, section titles often appear in all capital letters, but not always. In



OVERLAY ZONING DISTRICTS

- Smart Growth Overlay District (SGO)
- Highway Corridor Overlay District (HC)
- Housing Overlay Option Plan-II (HOOP-I)
- Housing Overlay Option Plan-II (HOOP-II)
- Mall Center Overlay District (MC)
- Regional Center Overlay District (RC)
- Regional Center Mixed-Use Overlay District (RCP)

LEGEND

ZONING DISTRICTS

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Residential General | Administrative & Professional |
| Residential Multiple | Planned Cluster Development |
| Residential-Single A | Downtown Mixed-Use |
| Residential-Single B | Industrial-I |
| Residential-Single C | Industrial-II |
| Commercial-I | Highway Mixed-I |
| Commercial-II | Highway Mixed-II |
| Limited Commercial | Highway Mixed-III |
| Hospital | Highway Planned Use |

MAP 3.5: EXISTING ZONING



some places, the headings are in sentence case. People familiar with the ZBL may be accustomed to these irregularities, but new users will not find the numbering system helpful, most likely finding it confusing. Errors and inconsistencies like these often surface in zoning bylaws and ordinances that have been amended, piece-meal, over a period of many years. This is exactly what has happened in Natick.

Sometimes information is placed in non-intuitive ways. In Section 200, Definitions, Natick provides definitions for “bonus” and “bonus project” (pertaining to The Golden Triangle), but several pages later, the term “nonbonus project” appears. Though listed in alphabetical order, “nonbonus project” actually makes little sense to the average reader because there is no context for it. Where several defined terms relate to a specific section or provision of the ZBL, it makes sense to keep them together even if doing so intrudes on the alphabetical listing of terms in the Definitions section. This can be accomplished in ways that will be obvious to readers, e.g., by applying a color overlay to a group of definitions so it is clear that they belong together.

One issue that surfaces in almost every zoning revision project is the placement of definitions. Some communities decide to put all definitions in a section so named, either near the beginning or at the end of the bylaw; other communities put all of the “umbrella” definitions in one section and define unique terms in the section in which they appear. Zoning practice has trended toward a single section for all definitions, and for good reason. In Natick and many towns with older zoning bylaws, the definitions are randomly scattered throughout the ZBL. For example, there are subsections of definitions under Signs, Outdoor Lighting, the Aquifer Protection District, and the “Smart Growth” Overlay in addition to the definitions in Section 200.

At 115 pages, Article III, Use Regulations, is unusually long. It combines a Table of Uses, special use regulations, and special district regulations into one long, largely undifferentiated chapter. While the intent of packaging the use regulations this way may be noble, Article III is actually quite confusing because some subsections provide details about a particular land use while others contain special rules for overlay districts. The absence of any helpful, visually recognizable transitions makes it easy to become lost in Article III.

Access and Ease of Use

The ZBL needs better navigation aids, such as:

- + An alphabetized index at the end of the ZBL.
- + Redesign of the Table of Uses and Table of Intensity Regulations by Zoning District to make them easier to read and interpret. For example, applying a color gradient in the Table of Intensity Regulations by Zoning District would provide a simple visual cue about the relative density or intensity of use in Natick’s zoning districts. Similarly, the Table of Uses can be color-coded to match the color scheme on the Zoning Map, thereby reinforcing the connection between uses and geography.
- + Graphics to illustrate key dimensional requirements.

- + The Table of Intensity Regulations by Zoning District could be replaced by a one-page layout for each zoning district, with the district’s dimensional requirements provided in text (outline) and graphic formats.
- + Better graphics to communicate the dimensional standards for off-street parking, with graphics placed on the same page as the corresponding text.
- + Permitting flowcharts showing the sequence of steps and timelines involved with various approval processes.
- + Hyperlinked cross-references that allow users of an online or PDF version to navigate efficiently to sections of interest to them.
- + Reorganized, consolidated sections that are designed for access and navigability by a variety of users, from professionals accustomed to working with municipal codes to homeowners wanting to know if they can create an accessory apartment on their property.

Language Clarity

A close reading of Natick’s zoning reveals many instances of unclear language. “Unclear language” means errors in diction, syntax, punctuation, or any combination of these that can reduce the readability of text. Omissions and duplications also affect readability, e.g., when a definition is unclear because of omitted words or phrases or because two terms have essentially the same meaning. For example, it is not clear how Natick differentiates “Apartment House” from “Dwelling, Multifamily,” since both are structures designed for occupancy by three or more households. The prevalence of “legalese” also makes the ZBL hard to understand. Proofreading and editing out words and phrases such as “said [district]”, “such case” or “such permits,” and the oft-repeated phrase, “in accordance with,” would help to improve readability – and, as a result, make the ZBL easier to understand.

Very long sentences with multiple, complex clauses could be condensed and made much easier to read. The purpose statement for the Subsidized Housing (SH) district exemplifies this problem:

The intent of this Bylaw relating to the SH District is to result in the availability of sufficient land to accommodate dwelling units for people of low and moderate income so as to increase the number of dwelling units of subsidized housing in the Town to a total which meets the requirements of Chapter 40B, Sections 20–23, General Laws.

Clarity, Consistency, or Legal Concerns

As written, Natick’s Site Plan Review (SPR) provision is actually a special permit procedure in its entirety. It should be called a special permit and consolidated with special permits, or revised into an actual SPR procedure, either as an administrative staff function (sometimes called “minor SPR”) or a public process before the Planning Board, with a public hearing and simple majority vote; or some combination of these two approaches based on classes of use.² Site plan review can be used only to shape a project. On the other hand, in the special permit process, the full range of discretion is available to the granting authority. *This issue was addressed by an amendment to the Zoning Bylaw at the 2017 Spring Annual Town Meeting.*

² In *Y.D. Dugout v. Board of Appeals of Canton*, 357 Mass. 25, 31 (1970), the Supreme Judicial Court defined its understanding of site plan review as: “regulation of a use rather than its prohibition . . . (guiding) us in interpreting the (by-law) . . . as contemplating primarily the imposition for the public protection of reasonable terms and conditions.” The Supreme Judicial Court has repeatedly focused on distinguishing site plan review from the special permit process. See *Prudential Ins. Co. of America v. Board of Appeals of Westwood*, 23 Mass. App. Ct. 278 (1986); *Auburn v. Planning Bd. of Dover*, 12 Mass. App. Ct. 998 (1981).

The remarkably brief section devoted to nonconforming uses and structures (Section V-A) has not kept pace with changes in case law. There have been a dozen decisions since 1990 that fundamentally changed the practice of handling nonconforming uses and structures. Notably, Section V-A is short of the standards imposed by *Blasco v. Board of Appeals of Winchendon*, 31 Mass. App. Ct. 32 (1991), in which the court required that all available changes to nonconformities be listed in the bylaw. In addition, Section V-A does not distinguish extensions or alterations of nonconforming single-family or two-family dwellings from alterations of other types of buildings.

Special permit procedures and special permit granting criteria appear in various places throughout the ZBL. In addition to the “umbrella” special permit criteria in Article VI (for special permits granted by the Board of Appeals or Planning Board), there are special permit criteria in many sections with special use regulations. There is nothing wrong with tailoring decision standards to particular uses or settings, but the relationship between the use-specific criteria and the general special permit criteria in Article XI needs to be clear.

Density and Dimensional Regulations; Site Design

Format

The format of Natick’s ZBL makes it hard to find a specific section. New sections sometimes start at the subsection level without any “parent” title as a guide. Article IV, Intensity Regulations, illustrates this problem because there is no title, Article IV – Intensity Regulations, in the body of the ZBL. The pages simply transition from the end of Article III (which is actually Section 320) to Section IV-A, General Requirements. All of the footnotes to the Table of Intensity Regulations by Zoning District appear before the Table, not after it. To further complicate matters, the Table has a heading error, so unless a reader is knowledgeable about zoning, the minimum setback requirements may not be obvious.

Lot Nonconformity

There are aspects of Natick’s dimensional requirements that seem inconsistent with established (largely pre-zoning) development patterns. This is noticeably true when it comes to minimum setbacks, and especially front yard setbacks. Some of the most attractive parts of Natick are the older neighborhoods that grew organically before zoning imposed fixed dimensions on house lots. Given the large number of nonconforming (small) lots in Natick (see Map 3.6), the Town will want to look at whether the minimum lot area and setbacks required in the smaller-lot districts should be modified. Today, about 63 percent of all lots in Natick do not meet the minimum area requirement of the districts in which they are located. The rate of lot nonconformity is conspicuously high – over 70 percent – in older, established areas such as DM, RG, and CII. More importantly, the dimensional regulations would be easier to interpret and understand if the ZBL included illustrations to accompany the table and text descriptions.

Off-Street Parking

While minimum off-street parking requirements are often excessive in suburbs, Natick's are fairly benign. The Town has wisely established flexibility for parking bylaw compliance by providing for a system of "fee in lieu" payments to an off-street parking fund. Still, the parking lot design standards are prescriptive and not sensitive to odd-shaped lots. Multifamily parking requirements of two spaces for one- or two-bedroom units in the D-M district, where residents have convenient access to commuter rail, should be revisited.

General practice today is to pull recommended site design standards and guidelines into a set of development guidelines cited in the ZBL. The issue is whether design-related content belongs in zoning or is best handled through some related means.

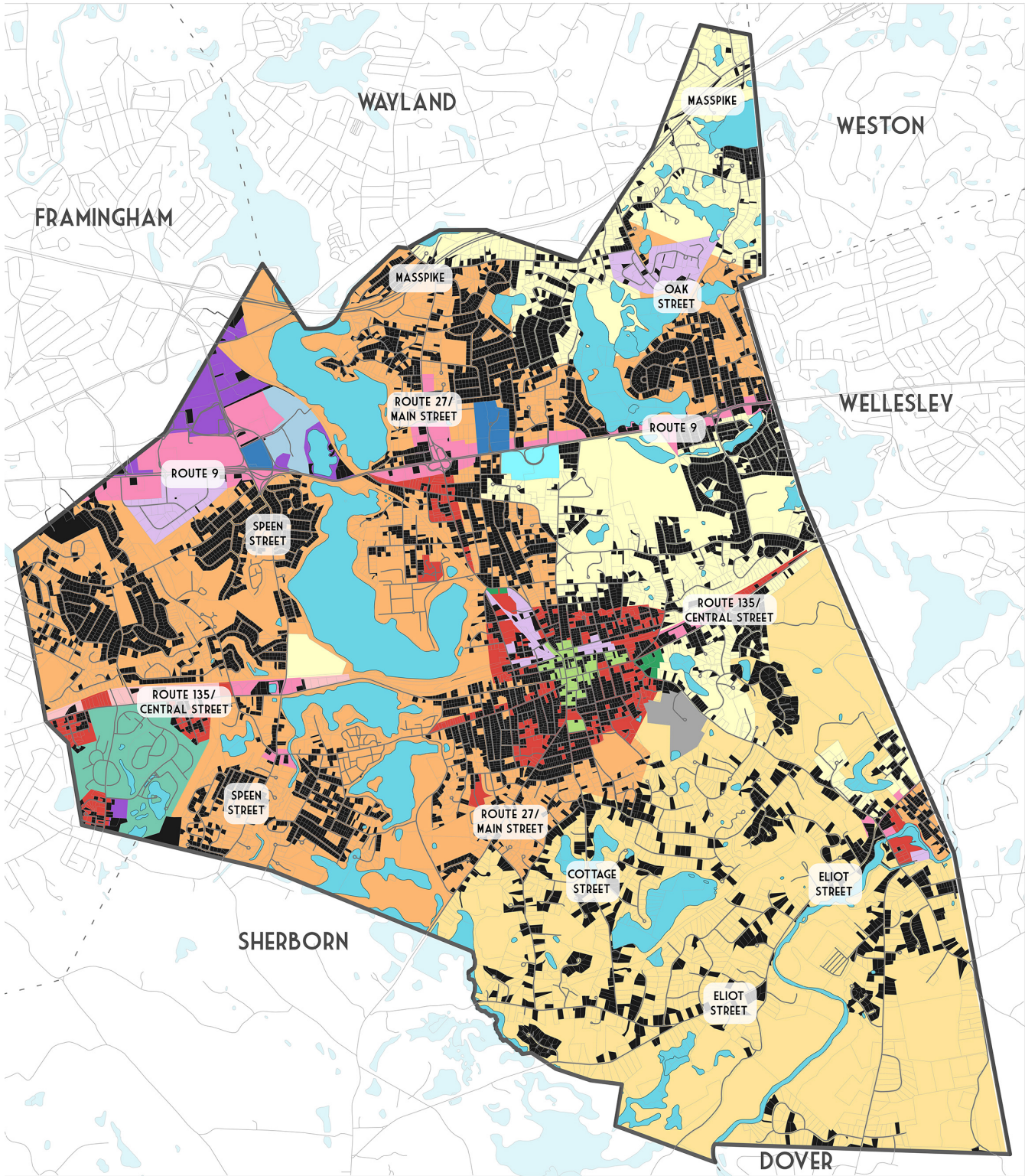
Signage

The sign bylaw (Section V-H) should be substantially revised by adding graphics and bringing it up-to-date with current constitutional law decisions, and current sign technology and design topics. Natick seems to prohibit blade signs, which is odd given the urban character of its downtown business district. Many of the merchants in Downtown Natick want to install blade signs precisely because they cater to pedestrians.

Open Space by Design

Natick has adopted many related/similar provisions that could be revisited in order to simplify the ZBL. For example, Cluster Development is allowed by special permit in the RS-A district on a tract of at least 40 acres. A Single-Family Townhouse Cluster Development can be permitted as of right, subject to site plan review (a special permit process), in the RS-B, -D, and -E districts on at least 1,000,000 sq. ft., or in the RS-C district on at least 40 acres. Further, cluster developments are allowed on smaller sites and at a higher density in the AP district, and there is another "comprehensive" cluster development option available in the RS-B district on sites with 1,000,000 sq. ft. or more of land. While it may be that each of these cluster options addresses some unique qualities of a district or part of town, it is very unusual to see multiple cluster development bylaws in one town. Moreover, in maturely developed communities like Natick, often the most-needed cluster design tools are actually intended to work with small sites, not large tracts of land.

If the Town wants to encourage cluster design, the "best practices" model in Massachusetts today is sometimes called "Natural Resource Protection Zoning" (NRPZ) and is part of the Commonwealth's "Smart Growth" toolkit. Instead of putting developers through a special permit process, the NRPZ approach requires cluster design in new residential developments and provides an opt-out by special permit. Alternatively, Natick could simply allow both cluster design and conventional subdivisions by right, and let the applicant choose. These provisions can be part of the development regulations for the residential districts. There really is no need for multiple cluster provisions.



LEGEND

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| BASE ZONING DISTRICTS | |
| Residential General | Downtown Mixed-Use |
| Residential Multiple | Industrial-I |
| Residential-Single A | Industrial-II |
| Residential-Single B | Highway Mixed-I |
| Residential-Single C | Highway Mixed-II |
| Commercial-I | Highway Mixed-III |
| Commercial-II | Highway Planned Use |
| Limited Commercial | |
| Hospital | Non-Conforming Lots |
| Administrative & Professional | |
| Planned Cluster Development | |

MAP 3.6: EXISTING LOT SIZE CONFORMITY



Missing Topics

Natick's ZBL does not include some topics found in many zoning ordinances and bylaws in Eastern Massachusetts. The omissions may be the result of policy decisions made by the Town or because the ZBL has not been updated in a long time. In no particular order, the missing topics include the following:

Definitions

During a review of the ZBL and interviews with local stakeholders, several terms that are not currently defined in Natick's ZBL were identified. To modernize the use regulations, the following should be defined and provided for as principal or accessory uses (or both):

- + Adult day care
- + Ambulatory care center
- + Bed and breakfast
- + Electric charging stations
- + Reconstruction
- + Short-term vehicle rental
- + Warehouse

Policy Framework

It is impossible to conduct a comprehensive zoning review without tackling important land use policy questions. For example, people may agree that home occupations should be allowed in all of Natick's zoning districts, but will they feel the same way about large family day care homes with as many as ten children enrolled, plus a day care assistant (an employee)? People may say they want to grow Natick's tax base and remove barriers to business development, but is the Town prepared to embrace new ways of zoning for commercial and industrial development? How willing is Natick to trade discretionary special permits for new zoning that can do a better job of guiding development in predictable ways? Under Natick's existing regulatory scheme, two boards with a different sense of purpose and different roles and responsibilities – the Planning Board and Board of Appeals – share the job of special permit granting authority. This arrangement, though common throughout Massachusetts, creates a risk of inconsistent special permit decisions and fragmented land use policies. And finally, what will the Town's policy be for changes to nonconforming business uses? Will they be allowed to change to other (less detrimental) nonconforming uses over time, or will any future change force them to become conforming uses?

Issues and Opportunities

Future development is a topic of great interest in community discussions. While many people support new development and the ability to create jobs, strengthen the tax base and provide increased housing options, a number of issues (both positive and negative) have been raised:

- + Development-related traffic and congestion and the need to review traffic plans during development.
- + The density and ratio of developed vs. open land needs to be balanced.
- + The balanced residential/commercial/industrial base (live/work balance) should be maintained.
- + New development should be sustainable smart development.
- + Natick is losing its character and new development needs to be more compatible with existing development character.
- + Development needs to happen in more thought out way; an active review of available land and property would allow for advance planning.
- + The development process should be more streamlined so that Natick remains competitive.
- + Land for cluster development should be publicly acquired to allow for more control over character and density.
- + The impact on town services of multi-use tenant development needs to be assessed.
- + Neighborhood mixed-use development and sidewalks will help to promote walkability.
- + The Town has a considerable amount of privately owned land with minimal protection – land that might not be protected in the future (e.g. Chapter 61, 61A and 61B parcels).
- + There is a lot of development/over-development occurring. It is important to keep existing trees.
- + Siting for a large scale renewable energy facility should be identified.
- + There are major parcels of land used by town, state or federal government (for example, the National Guard property) that might be declared surplus property at some point. These provide the Town of Natick with an opportunity to obtain the land before it is developed.
- + Zoning laws should be reviewed to ensure that growth is controlled.

Issues specifically related to the Town Center include:

- + The need for additional parking and potential structured parking.
- + The desire for more restaurants, social space, lighting, seating.
- + The desire for a broader mix of uses, and the Town's ability to influence that mix.
- + The revitalization of Natick Center should continue.
- + The desire for more Downtown housing options for ALL ages, including small affordable homes.
- + The desire for be maximum building height limits and cohesive transitions between adjacent uses and districts.
- + Building heights appropriate to preserve a critical mass of commercial space should be encouraged.
- + The lack of good-quality signage for public and private properties.
- + The desire for more child-friendly public spaces and infrastructure in the Center (playgrounds, picnic tables, water features, etc.), particularly around the Common.
- + There should be public restroom signage.
- + The Town doesn't control enough land to make changes.
- + Town Center activities and developments should embrace the area's history, culture and environmental heritage.
- + Office and service uses on upper floors are critical to support ground-floor shops and restaurants; it should not all be converted to residential use.
- + Change of uses in existing commercial properties should be encouraged.
- + The need for an improved pedestrian environment, including sidewalks, to encourage vitality.
- + The need to boost the Center's visibility to residents as well as other potential visitors.
- + The desire to change zoning to allow/encourage a boutique hotel.