



LAND USE ELEMENT TECHNICAL PAPER

Land use is the hub of a master plan, with the other elements acting as critical spokes. The land use element of a master plan provides a framework for growth management and an understanding of the kinds of development the community wants balanced with the existing physical and regulatory environment. A community's land use pattern is the physical arrangement and intensity of residential, commercial, industrial and institutional development, open land, natural resources and roadways. All are important, and land use is the element that ties them all together.

Additionally, land use is often equated with zoning because a master plan's future land use map forms the basis for the town's key zoning policies. Land is divided into zones for specific uses and is managed and administered by the municipal land use regulations, policies and procedures.

Defining Blandford's Landscape

Blandford is a rural community of 53.5 square miles located in the Berkshire Hills of western Hampden County. Made up of rolling hills, elevations throughout town range widely as it overlooks the Connecticut River Valley. The town is bordered by Chester and Huntington to the north, Tolland and Granville to the south, Russell to the east, and Beckett and Otis, of Berkshire County, to the west. There are three zoning districts, Agricultural, Residential and Business Districts, which govern the development throughout the town. Additionally, there are two overlay districts, known as the Floodplain and Long Pond Watershed Protection Overlay Districts, which encompasses floodplain areas within the town designated as Zone A or AE on the Hampden County Flood Insurance Rate Map, and lands lying adjacent to Long Pond, respectively. The town has recently approved at least six solar projects as many communities in Western Massachusetts have had to contend with solar development; however, other growth pressure is minimal due to the hardships of development on land in Blandford. It is important to Blandford to explore ways and regulations to protect the rural character of the community from inappropriate development.

Route 23 is the spine of Blandford, but also provides the node where the town center is established. The town center envelops a cluster of well-preserved and refined examples of historic architectural styles, including colonial structures and a notable Greek Revivalist church. The newer development is primarily suburban-style homes, which have peppered the landscape, providing the juxtaposition for a town navigating new development. However, outside of the business and residential zoning districts, the land is sparsely settled, with agricultural operations and undisturbed, forested open space creating a traditional rural New England environment. The town's agricultural industry, tourism and recreational assets are well-defined throughout the town.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an inventory of existing land use patterns, an analysis of zoning, regulations, as well as a summary of projected and future development trends; it will draw on other plan elements and identify opportunities to address growth and preservation. The conclusion of this section lays out recommendations for zoning changes, conservation efforts, management tools and other implementation techniques designed to assist Blandford in implementing its vision for future land use.

INVENTORY AND EXISTING CONDITIONS

Figure 1 is the most recent data for land use type prepared by MassGIS and mapped in Map 1 represented by the Property Type Classification Code associated with “use codes” from the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, along with custom use codes that the Assessors’ Office includes in their parcel data when submitted to the state. It is important to note from this data will continue to be collected and presented in this way to determine land use.

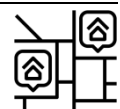
According to Figure 2-1, and making the determination that residential development, commercial and industrial land make up of 5,083.64 total acres, with an additional 2,564.76 acres under *Mixed Use, primarily residential*, along with acreage from right-of-way to cover roadways and the interstate, suggest that the remaining lands are made up of the forest, recreational, agricultural, water lands – the lands that the town prizes and wants to preserve. These remaining lands are equivalent to three-quarters of Blandford that provides the town with opportunities to preserve and maximize for purposes of natural and recreational enjoyment.

While the town maintains a quiet, rural atmosphere, there has been lost acreage to development over time, such as solar development. With Blandford’s population being essentially stagnant over the past few decades, from 1,038 people in 1980 to the 2020 projection of 1,205 residents and with a projection out to 2040 of 1,252 residents, it will be important for Blandford to utilize its regulatory tools and efforts to acquire private land to preserve the land for the functioning farmland and forests.

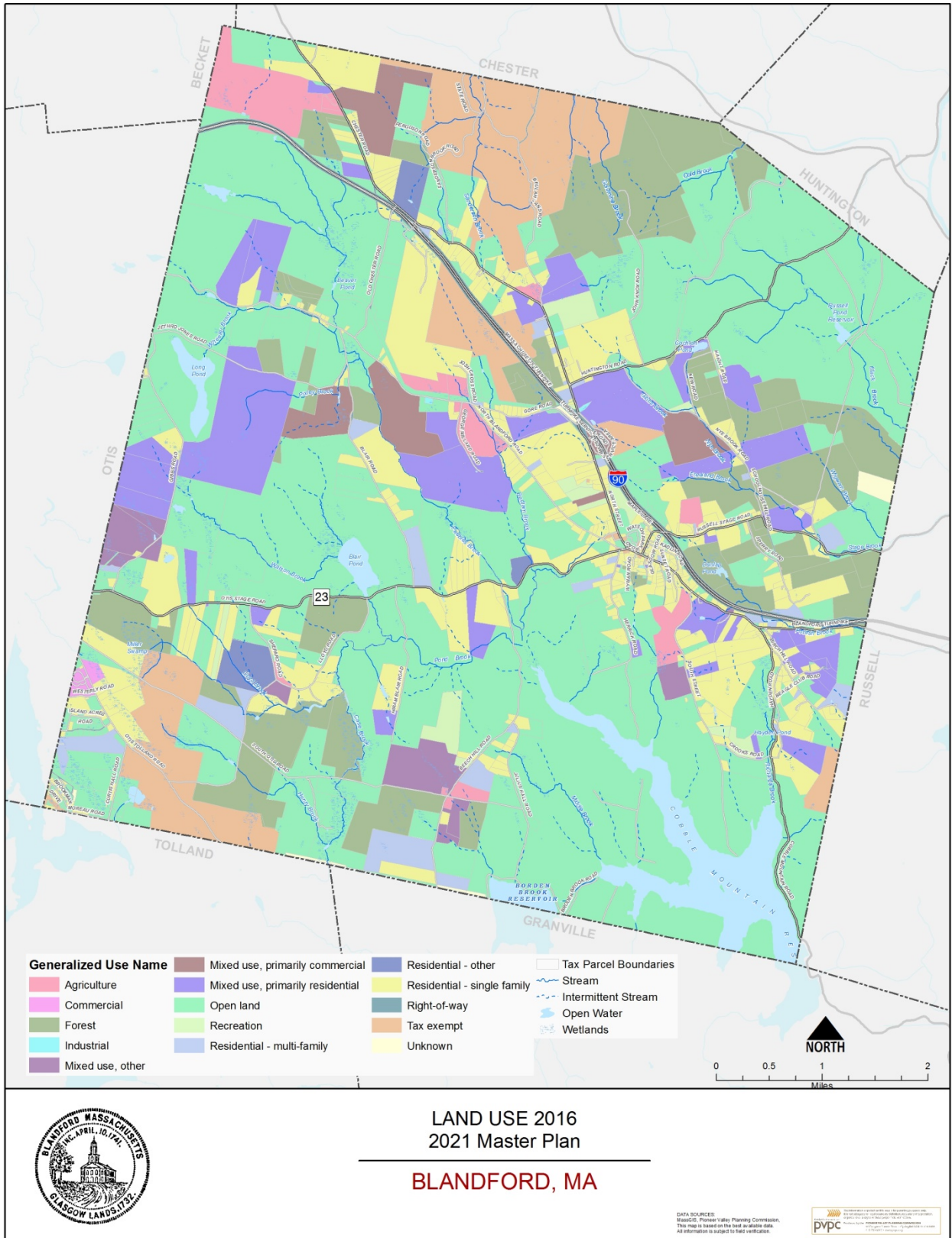
Figure 1 Blandford Land Use

Land Use Type	Acres	Percent of Total (%)
Agriculture	696.28	2.04
Commercial	46.95	0.14
Forest	4,013.41	11.73
Industrial	9.00	0.03
Mixed use (other, primarily commercial + residential)	3,761.38	10.92
Open land	17,044.51	49.83
Recreation	308.55	0.90
Residential (other, multi-family + single family)	5,027.69	14.70
Right-of-way	771.88	2.26
Tax exempt	2,459.61	7.19
Unknown	64.91	0.19
TOTAL	34,204.15	100

Source: Mass GIS



Map 1 Blandford Land Use Map



The patterns of land use formation, as well as how they are interrelated, are a record of centuries of human activity laid over the natural resources and landscape of the town. In 1735, Blandford was purchased by Scotch-Irish settlers from Hopkinton and divided into lots known as the New Glasgow plantation, with the community beginning as an agricultural and grazing-based economy. Route 23 which traverses east-west through Blandford was known as the General Knox – Otis Stage Road, where General Knox and his troops on their journey from Fort Ticonderoga to Boston to deliver cannons to General Washington. Houses and taverns were built along this road, and today, this road sees a great amount of home building.

Any future land use change is limited to what is prescribed by the town zoning bylaw, as there is no state requirement for a comprehensive plan requiring a future land use map. By understanding the current conditions and future development trends, the town will be in a better position to plan for future land use changes and can work to shape what it wants preserved and what can be developed to enhance the opportunities for residents and business owners alike.

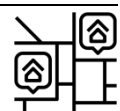
Zoning

Zoning regulations and other land use laws constitute a town’s “blueprint” for its future. Land use patterns over time will continue to look more and more like the town’s zoning map until the town is “built out” – that is, there is no more developable land left. In looking forward, it is important that the town focus not on the current use and physical build-out of today, but on its potential future uses, on appropriate land for development, and build-out allowed under the town’s zoning map and bylaws. Zoning regulations and districts are the primary land use tools that are used to manage development and direct growth to suitable and desired areas while also protecting critical resources and ensuring that development is in keeping with the town’s character.

Blandford’s current zoning bylaw was first adopted in 1962, with amendments listed through 2021 to bring alignment with best practices and numberings, most recently. For the purposes of the Master Plan, the zoning assessment addresses pertinent zoning regulations and permitting procedures as they may relate to potential obstacles to achieving goals as outlined throughout this Master Plan. The zoning code can affect development and redevelopment potential based on where the town allows housing types and commercial and industrial activities throughout town. Blandford has three zoning use districts and two overlay districts. The use districts are Agricultural, Business and Residential Districts. The town currently has approximately 484 acres of residentially-zone land and five acres of land used for commercial and industrial purposes, with the rest of the land being agriculture, open space, waterbodies, or highway. See Map 2 for Blandford’s current zoning map.

The Agricultural District

The district principally provides for as-of-right development of agricultural, single family dwellings, and some municipal uses and places of worship. A minimum of two acres is required to develop any use with minimal 30 foot requirements from the right of way and 15 feet from abutting properties. Some uses are allowed by Special Permit from the Planning Board such as more intense facilities like convalescent homes, solar or marijuana establishments. All solar development is relegated to this zone and may be allowed with a Special Permit by the Planning Board.

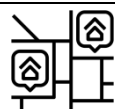


The Residential District

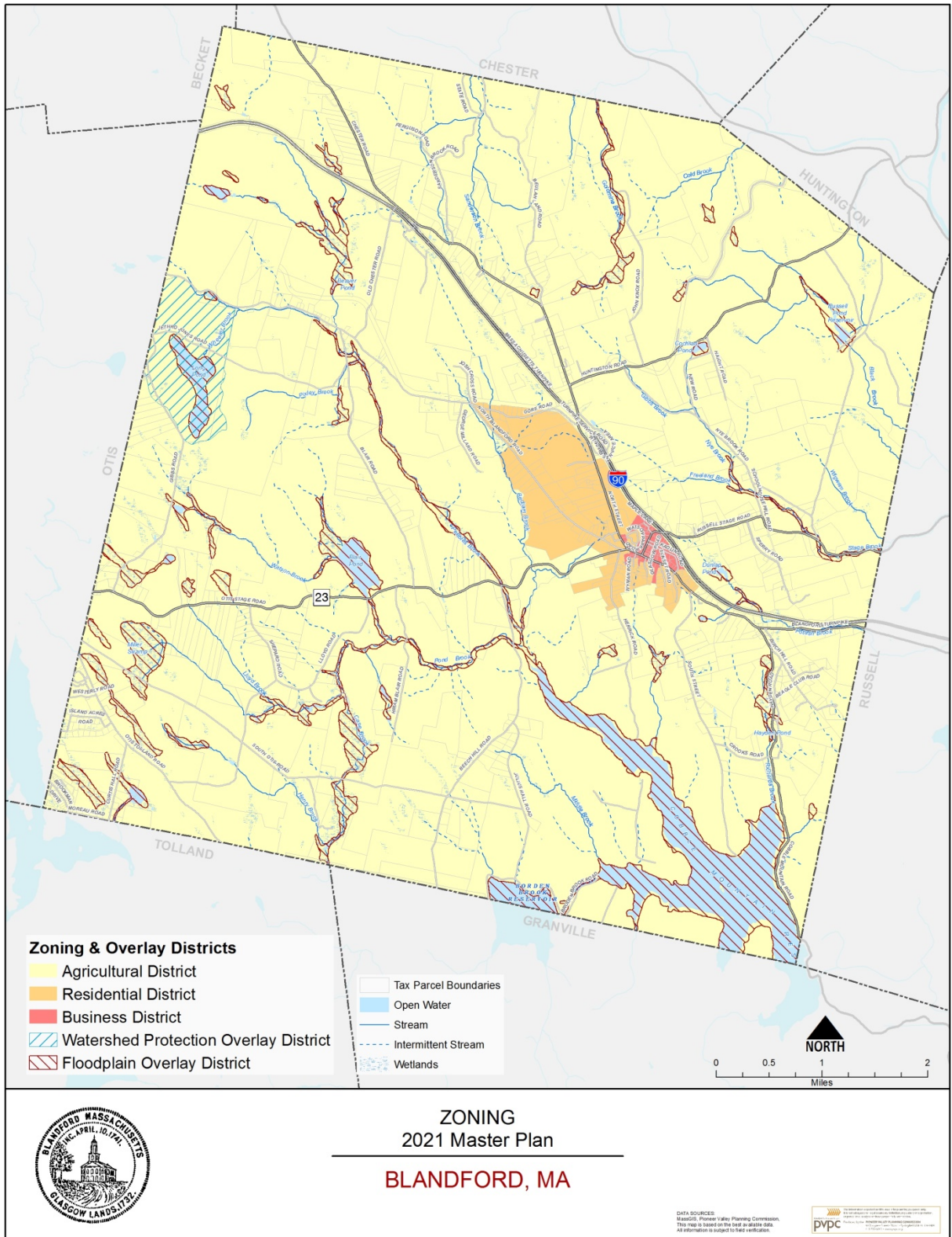
This district provides for and is currently made of mostly single-family residences, however, there are some additional uses that are permitted like home occupations with a Special Permit, recreational facilities, municipal uses and places of worship. A minimum of 30,000 square feet with a frontage of 150 contiguous feet is necessary for development, with similar setbacks of 30 feet to the front and 15 on the side and rear.

The Business District

The business district allows uses that are permitted in the residential district, but also uses pertaining to offices, retail, entertainment and industry are permissible. Special permits are required for some uses like marijuana establishments, or as suggested in the bylaw, “any additional use, which is not specifically prohibited or already requires a Special Permit from another Board” (Section 4.2.1.9, Blandford Zoning Bylaw). Physical dimensional requirements that govern the district include a minimum frontage of 100 feet and a minimum setback of 30 feet, or aligned with adjacent properties if they are setback further.



Map 2 Blandford Zoning Map



ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Master Plan process has provided the opportunity for residents to present comment and concerns about growth in Blandford and the 170 survey respondents, along with committee members and focus group members, have affirmed the importance of the Town's "rural character." A majority of the survey takers (71%) found that preserving Blandford's rural character was very important to them. Comments from the public also affirm this perspective. The intention of this plan is to help Blandford achieve its vision which has been articulated as balancing planning for manageable evolution of the town with protecting all that is treasured about the community. This requires supporting maximizing opportunities to preserve open space, where appropriate, and addressing development thoughtfully. The town could maintain the potential benefits of this balance by becoming more proactive in planning for growth and conservation, exploring targeted plans for key nodes and corridors, and subsequently implementing the recommended policies and regulations.

As with many other rural towns where there are large tracts of open land, solar developers are seeking to site large scale developments taking 20-30 acres of land per parcel, and that is no different in Blandford, where within the past few years, six solar developers have received permits to construct solar arrays. In creating consistency with the Open Space and Recreation Plan, the town's documents will show where land should be preserved, like farmland and forestland. With limited financial resources, the Town must be strategic about which parcels provide the most benefit as protected open space and area of where the town can develop. The town can be more proactive about supporting the other economic development opportunities and its viabilities.

Encouraging Redevelopment

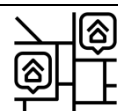
Sixty-two percent of survey respondents like the way the town center has been developed. However, the town center also provides the opportunities for walkability and access to services like the post office, town offices and the general store.

A Town Center can attract small businesses to support the local economy and offer a continuation of the types of structures and character the town seeks. A Town Center bylaw could help the town advance the maintenance of appropriate development in the center. The bylaw can offer standards of which future development could be allowed, such as requiring any new or redeveloped buildings needing to demonstrate similar architectural features as the surrounding buildings, with an allowance for a smaller setback or frontage requirement, etc, where appropriate within a boundary. The developer would need to demonstrate that the development can fit within the context of the neighborhood it is in. The town can even explore identifying more than one area where they could foresee this type of development.

Rural Features

From an economic perspective, being "rural" means places where people use land to make their living farming or producing timber, etc. These resources are grown (or extracted), processed, stored, and shipped to places where buyers and users need them. One can determine the routes that these types of businesses relied on by the existing roads, both private and public, which in the past have played an important role in the economic activities of the town.

To some extent we can maintain the remnants of Blandford's past by preserving roads, overarching



trees, barns and other artifacts of the earlier times, as the town still has its visual character of a New England town. More significant, however, could be the opportunity to revitalize the type of rural economic activities that help support even a more town-adopted value-based rural character:

- Preserving and supporting the expansion of the remaining working farms, including on public land, if appropriate;
- Providing an opportunity for those to assist with taking care of roadside trees, and planning new ones to replace those that have died;
- Centralizing activity with working greenbelts of gardens, farms and forest;
- Building more support for the strong values of recreation in town.

The approach to rural economic development requires new demands and innovations, ending a “one-size-fits-all” approach. However, as this landscape continues to change and evolve, the town can take control and have its character preserved with a similar sense of predictability and beauty.

Restrictions on (Re)Development

Exploring any future development or redevelopment of the town center for small businesses, like general retail or restaurants, could prove difficult without additional discussion of wastewater infrastructure. The lack of public water or sanitary sewer would need to be addressed if additional density and intensity of development is to be imagined. Exploring a mixed-use bylaw to establish the town center district with additional density and intensity in that area could be the opportunity to redevelop in a more structured way. A housing component could help support those future commercial uses.

Affordable Housing

Blandford could support additional affordable housing in town by way of a senior housing development zoning bylaw, as the town through its visioning session and survey suggested that the town explore this type of development. As described, new housing constructed under this zoning provision limits who can reside in these units – those ages 55 and above. If the Town wants to expand affordable housing to non-seniors, other tools are available.

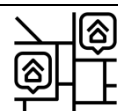
Many towns strive to achieve a 10 percent subsidized housing inventory (SHI) threshold so they are not subject to development regulated under the State’s Chapter 40B laws. A Comprehensive Permit proceeding, as governed by Chapter 40B, bypasses many local review processes. As of September 2017, the State’s records show the town’s SHI at 0.4 percent, making the Town subject to Chapter 40B and housing development being permitted through the Zoning Board of Appeals.

Community Resilience

The Town’s ability to utilize its available resources (communication, transportation for seniors, food, etc.) to withstand and recover from adverse situations is known as its community resilience. Blandford’s resilience will rely on a proactive and planned approach to protect its resources and direct where development and redevelopment can occur.

The recommendations of the land use element meet these objectives in a number of ways including:

- Promoting the development of a town center that facilitates walkability and the efficient use of existing buildings and infrastructure. It also facilitates community building by formalizing



a civic space and community programming, utilizing the town offices, the library, or Watson Park.

- Working to expand affordable housing opportunities would provide housing for those who want to remain in town and contribute to the success of Blandford, while also offering opportunities for new residents who can contribute to the growth of Blandford.
- Preserving the Town's rural character will help protect some of the natural resources and open spaces, which is a benefit to the existing ecosystem.

