

Charlton Center

Introduction

Charlton Center is the historic heart of the Town and exemplifies some of the characteristics of the traditional, compact New England village. Within close proximity to the center lie the Town's municipal offices, classic white churches, a beautiful Town Common, small-scale commercial uses, and distinctive homes. The area's historic significance has been recognized by its acceptance on the National Register of Historic Places as the Charlton Center Historic District. However, the commercial development in the Center has not been compatible with the unique qualities of the area. Several newer structures have been built without regard to historical or architectural context and have detracted from the New England village ambience that is still present to a large degree.

In 2005, the CMRPC undertook a project on Charlton Center. The project is discussed in detail in this chapter. That study inspired the town to explore in further detail the potential of Charlton Center to become a Village Center.

During interviews and research for the Town of Charlton Master Plan Update, it became apparent to the VHB team that the future of Charlton Center would play a prominent role in this Master Plan. As a result, two tools were developed to help derive a clearer vision for Charlton Center.

The first tool was to undertake a study of town centers in and around Charlton that might serve as models – both for what could be done and perhaps also what should not be done in Charlton. In addition to Charlton, the four other communities identified with the assistance of the Charlton Town Planner were: Grafton, Millbury, Shrewsbury and Sturbridge. The characteristics of each center were documented in aerial and site photographs, and commentary included in this chapter.

The second tool was the second public forum, which focused specifically on Charlton Center. On June 7, 2007, this forum was held and residents, business owners and government employees gathered to discuss their visions for Charlton Center. The participants were first asked to suggest reasonable boundaries for village. They were also asked to identify the goals – or a vision – for the villages. The chapter that follows is largely based on the CMRPC study and the public meeting.

CMRPC Study

The ultimate aim of the CMRPC project was to set standards for Charlton Center that promote a compact, pedestrian-scale environment, with a mix of residences, institutions, and commercial services that provide a pleasant alternative to large, single purpose, highway-oriented shopping plazas.

During the creation of Charlton’s Community Development Plan, the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Council (CMRPC) undertook a project on Charlton Center, photographed the positive and negative attributes of Charlton Center, and prepared a PowerPoint presentation for viewing at a public meeting. The session was well attended and helped to achieve consensus regarding how to prevent newer development from further harming the established village pattern. The CMRPC prepared a policy paper for discussion with the Planning Board that summarized the strategy for changing zoning requirements that had contributed to inappropriate development. CMRPC prepared a new Village zoning district to replace the Neighborhood Business district currently in place.

The proposed new district modifies the table of uses and dimensional requirements, and sets design standards for new development to achieve harmony with historic structures. In addition, CMRPC, the EDC and the Planning Board identified several locations that offer opportunities for new commercial development. The Planning Board reviewed several drafts of the Zoning Bylaw and Map amendments until achieving consensus, and a final draft should be ready for consideration at a future Town Meeting.



Zoning

The following is a description of the existing zoning for Charlton Center.

District Purpose

Neighborhood Business (NB): To provide sites for small scale business development for local and transient services compatible with low and medium density residential development within village settings which through landscaping and design or through preservation, enhance the natural landscaping and historic environs; at the same time protecting any existing views, minimizing the visibility of parked cars, avoiding the appearance of commercial strips as well as congestion in the abutting streets and ways, and retaining the character and the quality of life in the rural New England village.

Dimensional Standards

- Minimum Lot Size: 20,000 sq. ft.
- Minimum Frontage: 100’
- 2-Family Dwelling
 - Minimum Lot Size: 40,000 sq. ft.
 - Minimum Frontage: 150’
- Front Yard: 40’

- Side Yard: 15'
- Rear Yard: 15'
- Maximum Building Coverage: 30%

Storage and Disposal Areas

Outside bulk storage, contractor's yards, disposal areas or areas of open storage related to manufacturing, processing, warehousing, wholesale trade or a public utility facility shall be screened from an adjacent residential use, a residential district, or street by a solid stockade fence at least six (6) feet in height or densely planted trees or shrubs at least six (6) feet or more in height, or be equivalently obscured by natural vegetation on a year-round basis. No more than fifty percent (50%) of a lot may be used for outdoor storage.

Special Parking Regulations

No parking or loading area shall be located within ten (10) feet of a public right-of-way line. ... No parking area or garage containing more than two (2) spaces or loading area shall be located in a front yard in an NB District.

A parking area containing more than six (6) spaces or a required loading area shall be designed so that no vehicle need back onto or off a street or stand on a street while parking, loading, unloading or waiting to do so.

Minimum distance of 50' between access drives in NB.

Parking areas containing more than 25 spaces shall include or be bordered within 5' of the spaces by at least 1 tree of 2" in caliper for each 5 spaces. Trees within parking areas shall be in curb or berm protective plots of at least 60 square feet per tree.

No less than 25 percent of any lot area shall be retained as unoccupied space free of all buildings, parking, pavement including street access drives and walks or other conditions, precluding landscaping; such unoccupied area shall be landscaped or stabilized with plant material.

All commercial site plans shall show all proposed lighting on said site for exits and entrances and said lighting shall be erected and maintained by the owner of the property.

Comparable Village Study

The consultant to the Planning Board undertook a study of towns comparable and/or proximately located to Charlton to better understand the characteristics of a village center. The four comparison towns were selected because they were identified as having a town or village center that Charlton could emulate. As shown

in Table 9-1, the study looked at the fundamental dimensional construction of the town (e.g. population, land area, density).

Table 9-1
Comparison of Town Statistics

	Land Area (mi ²)	Population (people)	Population Density (people/mi ²)	Housing Units (units)	Housing Density (units/acre)
Charlton	42.53	12,300	290	4,008	0.15
Grafton	22.74	16,297	717	5,828	0.40
Millbury	15.73	13,376	850	5,109	0.51
Shrewsbury	20.73	31,658	1,525	12,704	0.96
Sturbridge	37.41	8,692	232	3,335	0.14

More importantly, the study qualitatively analyzed the characteristics of these town’s centers or villages. The findings of these results are listed below and accompanied by site photos from these villages. The results show there is an array of possible outcomes for a village center that would work in Charlton. The communities studied were noted as either a destination catering to tourists or outsiders or a working center that provides the goods and services desired by town residents. The results of the public forum discussed in the next section of this chapter indicate that the Town of Charlton leans toward the latter interpretation.

Charlton

- Charlton Center has some elements of a traditional New England village, but some buildings lack the design qualities associated with similar places.
- Charlton Center is not compactly developed.
- The only recognition that the Center is an historic area is the small sign noting Charlton is on the National Register.
- Numerous parking areas set at the street edge result in lots of asphalt fronting the road instead of buildings.
- There is generally a smooth transition from the village center to adjacent residential areas.

Grafton

- Has a “boutique” historic feel to it.
- There are many uses lining the common. They include: coffee shops, a wine store, a small boutique, an architect’s office, and a lawyer’s office.
- Grafton gives the impression of a “vacation destination.”
- The transition from village center to adjacent neighborhoods was abrupt.

Millbury

- Millbury feels like a working town center.
- Good signage exists in Millbury (e.g. the sign for the mansion and the presence of cohesive street signs).
- There appears to be no sense of order to the village center.
- Many of the facades and signs on the main street are inconsistent in design.
- The village center transitions naturally to adjacent neighborhoods.

Shrewsbury

- Shrewsbury has a suburban feel. The housing stock is a mix of historic buildings with newer structures that look like they were built within the last 25 years.
- A nice park exists adjacent to the shops on Main Street.
- There are examples of attractive design in the appearance of the buildings.
- There is also evidence of autocentric design.
- The transition from village center to residential was very natural.

Sturbridge

- The town center occurs along route 131 and as such has a very linear feel. Because of this, the village center seemed to blend with the rest of the town.
- The village center has a touristy feel to it.
- Most of the parking is situated around the back of buildings; there is minimal asphalt frontage.

Public Forum

As discussed above, the Charlton Center Village was deemed an integral part of this Master Plan. Thus, one of the two public forums held was dedicated to this issue.

During this June 2007 public forum, a Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats (“SWOT”) analysis of Charlton Center was conducted. As is stated in the title, this exercise serves to cull out the observations of participants—typically residents and employees with first hand knowledge of the town—in an unrestrained and open manner.

The following is a summary of the points raised by forum participants. Note that some observations can fit in more than category. For example, the Common can be seen as a strength as well as a weakness, depending on a person’s point of view and interests.

Strengths

- Nucleus of the town
- Attractive collection of buildings
- Restoration of historic houses
- Uniform development pattern
- Lack of blight
- Charlton Housing Authority property
- The Common
- Community-wide awareness that it is the Center and is high quality (represents the town)
- Small, compact and walkable
- The Masonic Home

Weaknesses

- Speeding
- Too much traffic
- Not enough sidewalks
- Common is not adequate for community events
- Traffic flow is rated a Level of Service (LOS) F at all times
- Parking along the Common (for residents; for aesthetics)
- Heavy vehicle traffic
- No control of junk
- Old-style zoning
- Houses not kept up
- Lack of parking / traffic lights (e.g. Burlingame Road)
- Skateboard park
- Water and sewer

Opportunities

- Moving of town barn – prime real estate becomes available
- Zoning bylaw revisions
- Dresser Hill Farm – senior center?
- Undeveloped land behind bank
- Foster sense of community
- Façade improvements – financial incentives
- Façade review – zoning bylaw
- Limits to commercial traffic in center
- Tree replacement over time / phased-in
- Expanding the boundary
- Miller property (50-70 acres along Stevens)

Threats

- Commercial development not compatible with historic character
- Impact of new residential development (e.g. congestion, schools, playing fields)
- Applying corridor zoning to center
- Resistance to zoning changes
- Defining the boundary
- Water and sewer issues

The general consensus that followed from this public forum was the desire for a village center that functioned for the Townspeople as a working town center. Although residents are interested in some boutiques and other shops to serve their needs, in addition to the operational services such as town hall, post office, etc., it is not the Town's ultimate goal to become a tourist destination or vacation hot spot.

Also of primary importance to the town is the aesthetics of the Charlton Center. The layout of Charlton Center – with the Common as the focal point framed by nodes of potential activity at both ends of the center – is ideally suited for a traditional New England village. Building on the existing well-designed and well-maintained buildings in Charlton Center, this plan will suggest instituting design guidelines to illustrate and frame future development or redevelopment of key parcels in Charlton Center.

Design Guidelines

Design guidelines address aesthetic issues in planning improvements or new development and are used to clarify the urban design objectives of the zoning bylaw. In general, they are intended to provide ideas, stimulate thinking and promote good design. Design guidelines are used by architects, professional planners and others in making more informed decisions related to the urban design framework; provide a context for coordination of development; and assist the municipality in evaluating development applications.

It is important to note that design guidelines are not regulatory or mandatory. Rather, they are written to assist in the permitting process described the zoning bylaw.

Design guidelines provide the framework to encourage the following public and private objectives:

- Provide a coordinated approach to design.
- Ensure a consistent and high level of design.
- Improve the quality of physical alterations and new construction.
- Enhance the quality of the pedestrian experience along a commercial corridor.
- Enhance the character and quality of public spaces such as streets, parks and open spaces.
- Enhance economic investment for business and property owners.
- Protect and conserve neighborhood architectural character.
- Promote community awareness of the physical environment.
- Encourage flexible and individual creativity rather than anonymous uniformity.
- Protect existing property values and the natural environment.

Goals and Objectives for Charlton Center

Goal

To establish development policies that result in a compact village setting with commercial and residential uses co-existing harmoniously as in a traditional New England town center. Zoning policies should promote a strong retail component, complemented with professional, financial, and personal services to meet neighborhood needs.

Objectives

- Revise use schedule to ensure new land uses are compatible with a small-scale, mixed-use village environment. Encourage business that generates continuous activity throughout the day. Eliminate uses that require large expanses of land or operate only sporadically.
- Revise dimensional requirements to ensure that new development maintains the scale and pacing of existing buildings.
- Encourage pedestrian connections to encourage walking within the village. Reinforce sidewalk connections to public uses on the Common, and develop a trail network to link adjacent residential areas to commercial, recreational, and institutional uses.
- Adjust zoning boundaries to promote commercial opportunities where most appropriate.
- Incorporate design standards to ensure that new development respects the district's village character and is compatible with residential uses. New construction should be compatible with the height, proportions, and exterior materials of significant buildings.

Recommendations for Charlton Center

The recommendations made by CMRPC in 2004 are still valid and should be implemented. Many of the specific zoning changes suggested by CMRPC are reiterated and elaborated upon below.

Note: these are included for discussion purposes. If agreed that they are still valid, they will be formally incorporated into the plan recommendations.

Uses and Dimensional Standards

Changes to Use Schedule

- General: Consider requiring site plan review (that includes design standards such as those described below) for all commercial development above a minimum threshold.
- Residential: Delete hotel, motel or motor court. Allow multi-family development on upper floors of commercial property. Allow mixed residential and commercial uses in a property. (Currently Section 3.2.3.4. include a limit of no more than 2 non-resident employees in a home occupation). Allowing and encouraging mixed uses is a key element to the success of any village center. The combination of residents and business help the area become more vibrant and not just an errand.
- Recreational: Delete standard golf and par-3 golf courses; golf driving ranges and miniature golf courses; and campgrounds.
- Business: Delete auction galleries and flea markets.
- Communications, Transportation and Public Utility Uses: delete electric distribution station or sub-station; natural gas distribution stations, and independent storage area or parking area (allow parking garage for 5 or more autos).

Changes to Dimensional Requirements

- Reduce front setback from 40' to 15' to be consistent with pattern of existing buildings.
- Reduce side and rear yard setbacks from 15' to 10'.

Changes to District Boundaries

- Re-align boundaries to follow property lines to avoid split lot situations.
- Consider extending the NB district north along North Main Street to expand opportunities for commercial development.
- Consider retracting the district along Old Worcester Road where the predominant land use pattern is residential.

Development Standards

Landscaping

- Require planting strips between the edge of pavement and buildable area of the lot. Allow for planters to be placed along the sidewalks.
- Require curbing and sidewalks to enhance safety of pedestrians. Install bike racks to encourage bicycle use.
- Require landscaped buffers along side and rear yards between residential and nonresidential uses.
- Require landscaped screening for dumpsters and exposed storage areas.

Parking

- Allow for a reduction of required parking spaces or shared parking arrangements by special permit if the Planning Board finds that sufficient parking is available to meet the needs of the business. For example, there may be public parking lots, on-street spaces, or legal arrangements between owners to share spaces when uses have different hours of operation.
- Allow common driveways for commercial properties to minimize individual curb cuts.

Signage

- Examine sign standards for the NB district with an eye to promoting signs architecturally compatible with building design and appropriate for slowly moving vehicles and a pedestrian environment.

Fenestration

- Require each structure to maintain a percentage of the front façade as window space to promote visual interest and pedestrian activity.

Lighting

- Adopt lighting provisions that require cutoffs to prevent light trespass into the night sky and specify illumination standards for safety and visibility.