

Weymouth Regulatory Assessment for Healthy Community Design

Prepared by Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, 2015
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Disclaimer:

The conclusions of this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of or endorsement by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Project Background & Description

Operationalizing the Massachusetts Healthy Community Design Toolkit: Regulatory Assessment of Bylaws, Policies, Plans, and Programs in Weymouth, MA

In 2015, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) launched a competitive round of funding to Mass in Motion communities for the purpose of assessing a community's regulations, plans, policies and programs with respect to facilitating residents access to healthy food and physical activity in their daily lives. The purpose of the program is to advance Mass in Motion communities policy and regulatory work to improve community health and well-being. In 2013 MDPH engaged staff from the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) to develop the Massachusetts Healthy Community Design Toolkit “to provide health advocates with a concrete path forward to improve community health.” The Toolkit identifies key “leverage points” in local community design, planning and development to facilitate the complicated process of making Massachusetts communities healthier. Because MDPH had engaged PVPC to facilitate development of the Toolkit, MDPH continued to engage PVPC to conduct the regulatory assessments. Staff from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) were included in all communications and meetings on the project.

You can access the toolkit at: http://www.pvpc.org/sites/default/files/HCDT_2ndEdition_140903.pdf

The Town of Weymouth was one of three communities across the Commonwealth selected for this project. The other communities selected are Greenfield and Belchertown.

This summary represents the findings of both the initial investigation of Weymouth's relevant documents and follow-up discussion with Weymouth staff, as well as research on priority issues selected by the Weymouth team: James Clarke-Planning Director, Nicholas Bulens-Grant Writer, and Val Sullivan-Healthy Wey. The accompanying Excel spreadsheet organizes strategies within different "Leverage Points" (that is, planning documents and regulatory and policy structures) highlighted in the Toolkit, the current status of "Leverage Points" in Weymouth, and analysis.



Courtesy of Flickr user: Michael Femia

Summary

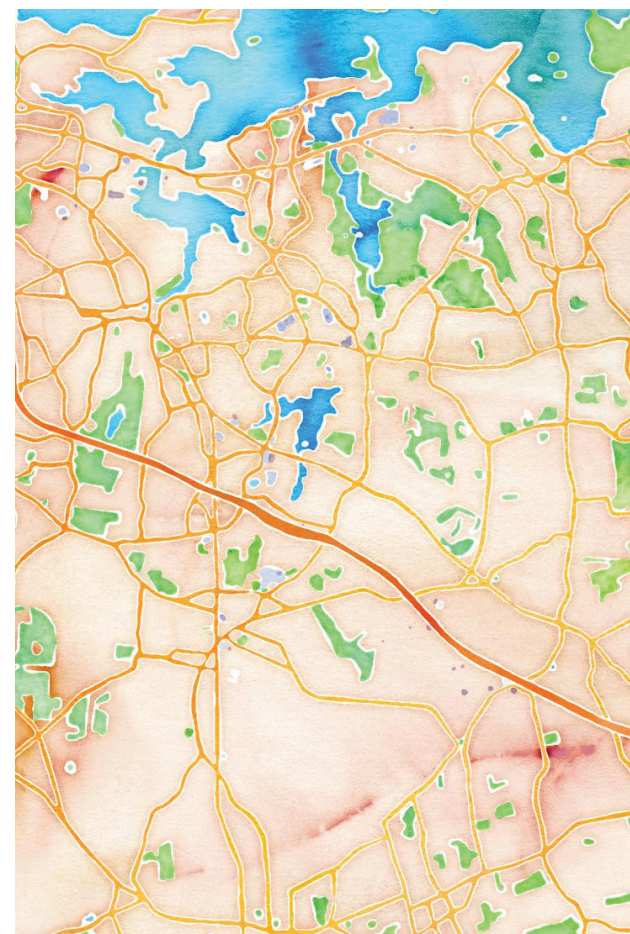


Weymouth has a solid foundation upon which to facilitate and advance a healthy lifestyle among its residents. Because many areas of town were developed before widespread use of the automobile, there are many residential areas that are walkable to community services, schools, and open space and recreation areas. Weymouth also has a relatively even distribution of open space areas to provide for outdoor recreation throughout town, an existing sidewalk network in many neighborhoods, and access to MBTA commuter rail and bus service. Its newest residential area, Southfield, is located on a former air base and incorporates most of the healthy design principles found in the Toolkit (note that this review did not include Southfield's zoning, as that area is under authority of the South Shore Tri-Town Development Corporation and not the Town of Weymouth). The Village Center Overlay, which is in place at Weymouth Landing, also aligns with the Toolkit strategies very closely. Areas that could better facilitate increased physical activity include reduced and more flexible off-street parking requirements (to allow for more closely placed development and more welcoming streetscapes), incorporation of pedestrian facilities into road maintenance (such as through a complete streets policy), more specific site plan review criteria (to better prioritize pedestrian accommodations), and facilitating the establishment of community gardens.

Areas of Success

Areas of Success:

- Safe Routes for Seniors Plan Design Guidelines & Planning Report identifies safety issues at intersections
- Village Center Overlay District and Neighborhood Center District (NCD) closely match best practices to achieve recommendation in Toolkit: “Establish zoning regulations that allow for a variety of housing types at densities that support walkable commercial services and transit.”
- Sidewalks are required in subdivisions on streets with more than four units (though Weymouth no longer experiences frequent applications for subdivisions)
- No fast food allowed without special permit
- R-2, R-3, R-4, provide opportunities for a mix of low-to mid-density housing types
- R-1 allows sale of produce/plants grown on premises
- Open space access is well distributed around town, and town recognizes importance of linking open space and cultural/historic interest
- Healthy Wey is active and has established important collaborations and elevated considerations of community health within the municipal government and community at large.



Areas for Improvement

Areas for Improvement and of Opportunity:

- Weymouth's community plan has a terrific statement of commitment to pedestrian and bicycle access, but does not address implementation of bicycle and pedestrian facilities as a town-wide system, rather it does so in isolated segments
 - » Adopt a Complete Streets policy to address this limitation, with identification of priority streets to create town-wide bike network with incorporation of major town destinations
- Off-street parking requirements are onerous and should take demand into account; also, shared parking lots are not allowed
 - » Reducing parking ratios in all zones will promote walkability and can enhance economic development by allowing more space for buildings instead of parking
 - » Allowing shared parking, particularly among uses with different peak times, can reduce parking lot sizes
 - » Allow utilization of on-street parking, particularly for residential units in mixed-use areas
 - » Give planning board flexibility to reduce parking requirements when reduced parking need can be demonstrated through peak-demand study
 - » Consider adopting an fee-in-lieu parking program to contribute to development of municipal parking lots
 - » Incentivize reduced and innovative parking solutions

Community Plan

Off-street Parking

- Site plan criteria could be further clarified and strengthened to address safety of pedestrian circulation and connectivity, and include mitigation standards such as TDM for traffic
 - » Include integration of pedestrian/bicycle accommodations into surrounding network and community as one of the criteria (enforced as applicable)
 - » Consider adding criteria for increasing vehicle efficiency and reducing the need to drive at the site (for larger developments)
 - » Note that strict off-street loading requirements in areas where density is desired can put negative and sometimes unnecessary constraints on the types of developments that can be built; consider allowing flexibility in off-street loading requirement
- Subdivision road standards could be reduced to accommodate lower speeds through design
 - » MassDOT Complete Streets eligibility requires application of a municipal Complete Streets policy to private development in the community
 - » Consider reducing ROW from 40' to 33-36'
- Existing wide roads provide opportunity to develop bicycle lanes and wider sidewalks
 - » Identify and prioritize streets for bike lanes as part of Complete streets policy and in CIP
- Road design standards and complete streets policy for major roads and road reconstruction projects are needed
 - » Develop as part of a Complete Streets policy
- CIP does not prioritize bike/pedestrian project; no full assessment of sidewalk needs (though inventory has been designed and initially started)
 - » Address through Complete Streets policy

Site Plan Review

Subdivision Regulations

Road Design

- A better connection between zoning and transit is needed
 - » Develop vision/goals in next community plan on how transit could be better utilized and connected to surrounding community (whether through increased density, more/better sidewalks and paths, bus shelters, etc.)
 - » Incorporate consideration of bus transit users in Complete Streets policy
 - » Update zoning (such as through an overlay) to better concentrate development around transit stations or in transit corridors when politically feasible

- Community gardens are generally not addressed
 - » Research and consider municipal policy to allow neighbors and/or community groups to use vacant or under-utilized municipally owned land for community gardens/urban agriculture
 - » Establish a Food Policy Council to coordinate food system planning

- Large setback requirements
 - » Simply reduce setback requirements in areas where the Town wishes to activate more walking/biking/street activity and expects to see significant new development
 - » Adopt averages, such as in the Village Center Overlay, in transition areas to bring new buildings closer to the street (ideally in areas with potential for future bike lanes/wider sidewalks)

Transit

Community Gardens

Front Setbacks

Prioritized Next Steps

Prioritized Next Steps

1

- **Adopt a Complete Streets Policy:** Assure eligibility for the MassDOT Complete Streets funding (projected to be available in late Summer 2015) by adopting a complete streets policy that actively and fully integrates bicycle and pedestrian accommodations into Weymouth's transportation network.

2

- **Revise Off-street Parking:** Reduce off-street parking requirements in all zones (or exempt single-family residential from this requirement if politically unpalatable) and create more flexibility and incentives to allow for parking solutions that do not require large amounts of new surface lots.

3

- **Update Site Plan Review Criteria:** Develop criteria that establish the importance of integrating developments into the pedestrian/bicycle network (and vice versa) and reduce the need to drive.

4

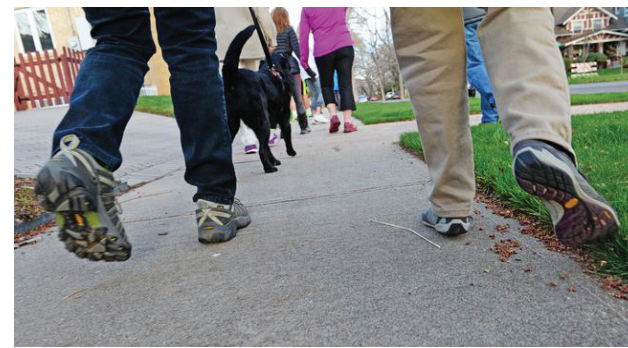
- **Update Setback Requirements:** Bring buildings closer to the street to facilitate a welcoming streetscape and reduce driving speeds in areas where walkability is most feasible and desired.

5

- **Facilitate the Establishment of Community Gardens:** Adopt a procedure/policy that facilitates the use of municipally-owned vacant or undeveloped lots for use by residents/community groups for urban agriculture/community gardens.

6

- **Establish a Food Policy Council:** In order to encourage and promote access to fresh healthy food throughout Weymouth, establish a food policy council that catalyzes and coordinates public and private efforts to enhance Weymouth's food system.



1: Complete Streets

MA Complete Streets Funding Eligibility, Program Description, and Guidelines

In 2014 the MA Legislature authorized \$50 million for a “Complete Streets Program,” which would be administered by the MassDOT. Funds are not yet allocated and MassDOT staff and various advocacy and advisory entities have been working for the last 10 months to launch a pilot version of the program.

Program Objectives

- a. Improve pedestrian, bicycle, and transit travel for all users by establishing Complete Streets (CS) guidelines for municipalities
- b. Provide targeted funding for municipalities to improve their pedestrian, bicycle and transit infrastructure
- c. Provide the framework to municipalities throughout the Commonwealth for adoption of a CS policy
- d. Encourage municipalities to promote a CS approach in construction and maintenance of transportation facilities
- e. Address the needs of environmental justice communities to improve accessibility and mobility
- f. Support smart growth objectives and increase the share of walking, bicycling, and transit consistent with the Commonwealth’s mode shift goals
- g. Assure underserved municipalities and municipalities that lack resources are served equitably by the program



Program Structure & Administration (two required stages):

1. Community becomes eligible by meeting criteria and completing application process
2. Community submits CS Project specific application process and scoring

Applicability of Funds:

Funding is for an approved list of eligible/ineligible project types:

- Tier 1 Projects--have the highest potential to increase long-term alternative mode use:
 - * New accommodation for bicycles, pedestrians, transit vehicles, or users
 - * Safety improvements or significantly improve network connectivity for non-auto modes
 - * ADA improvements
 - * Safe routes to transit projects
- Tier 2 Projects--will provide an increase in the utility of existing accommodations for alternative modes
 - * Smaller, incremental enhancements to the transportation network for alternative modes
 - * Context sensitive solution options to a transportation need
- Supporting Elements--other ancillary components of projects that encourage travel via alternative modes or enhance the experience of the users of alternative mode transportation facilities (only eligible as part of a Tier 1 or Tier 2 project)

Equity: The Legislation that created the program mandates that “not less than 33% of grants awarded shall be to cities and towns with a median household income below the average of the Commonwealth.”

Process, Eligibility Criteria and Scoring (as cited in MGL Ch90-I, Section 1 (c) (ii))

1. File an Application with MassDOT
2. Adopt a Complete Streets (CS) Policy--may be a by-law,

ordinance or administrative policy, in a manner which shall include at least 1 public hearing; provided, however, that the by-law, ordinance or administrative policy shall identify the body, individual or entity responsible for carrying out the CS program

3. Coordinate with MassDOT to confirm baseline inventory of pedestrian and bicycle accommodations to identify priority projects. MassDOT interprets this as, “demonstrate need for additional connections in municipal pedestrian and bicycle network ...via a number of options: visual representation-e.g. marked up maps showing missing connection or through study.”
4. Develop procedures to follow when conducting municipal road repairs, upgrades or expansion projects to incorporate CS elements
5. Incorporate CS into your existing municipal process for Private Development
6. Set a 5-year municipal mode shift goal, AND/OR (yet to be determined) a project specific mode shift goal
7. Submit annual progress reports

Review Process

- Interdisciplinary MassDOT membership
- Two Committees (Community Eligibility and Project Selection)

Communities must meet all the criteria in some fashion, but once basic eligibility has been affirmed, then each application will be scored and ranked accordingly. For example, a community that has adopted CS as an ordinance/by-law will receive more points than one that adopted CS as a resolution because an ordinance/by-law is agreed to be more powerful and stronger than a resolution.

“There must be a statement of commitment to CS that will be rated based on level of commitment, documented through policy, procedures and practices. This rating will have a bearing on a municipalities eligibility for funding of a project.”

Project Selection Criteria:

- demonstrated commitment to CS by municipality
- demonstrated project need
- project effectiveness in shifting modes to walk, bike, or transit

- anticipated benefits to hierarchy of vulnerable road users

Special Considerations:

- environmental justice areas
- geographic distribution
- community type (rural v. urban)
- No municipality may receive funding for a project in two consecutive years
- Project readiness

Dissemination of Funds

- Reimbursement-based
- NOT for design, policy, planning or reporting

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), Weymouth's regional planning agency, has assisted several member communities with Complete Street policy adoption and their model policy has been recognized by the National Complete Streets Council as the best in the nation.

MAPC staff are eager to assist Weymouth as necessary with adoption of a policy. See: <http://www.mapc.org/sites/default/files/MAPC%20Complete%20Streets%20summary.pdf>

2: Parking Reductions

How to Achieve Parking Reductions

To provide ample parking without creating an unfriendly environment for pedestrians, municipal parking ratios should be based on peak demand for the uses (refer to municipally-funded or existing studies to determine appropriate numbers), not just simple square footage and the like. Weymouth could add flexibility into their parking requirements and incentives and trade-offs. Providing more public parking areas would lessen the need for developers/businesses to provide off-street parking, and thus provide more room for other revenue-generating land uses. Reduce parking ratios to fit peak demand of uses, and incorporate more flexibility and incentives such as shared parking, utilization of street or municipal parking, TDM, demand studies, or other creative means. Adopt parking maximums or area-wide caps, either by site or perhaps by district, in areas near public transportation (bus routes or MBTA train stops). Incentivize parking reductions by offering other development options such as in-lieu fees. Try these first in areas where Weymouth is seeing most rapid growth, such as Weymouth Landing, which is in the Village Center Overlay (which very tightly corresponds with the Toolkit strategies, but could be more progressive on parking, as our research indicates it only allows 10% reductions sometimes).

One very useful resource on parking reductions: http://contextsensitivesolutions.org/content/reading/parking_md/resources/parking_paper_md/



3: Site Plan Review

Potential Modifications to Site Plan Review:

As this study focused on strategies that increase physical activity, one recommendation is to make site plan criteria more explicit about the Town's goals and intentions to increase opportunities to walk or bike throughout town. But site plan criteria should be revised to facilitate healthy community design as a whole through relevant consideration of building design, landscaping, and stormwater. Criteria should be tailored to a community's specific goals, but address all of these elements in some form or another - for that reason, there is no "shelf-ready" example to replicate exactly. Revised site plan criteria can list incentives and trade-offs available to developers to mitigate traffic impacts; expectations regarding provision and integration of bicycle/pedestrian facilities; and other features such as landscaping and streetscaping expectations in high-priority areas of town. Examples from two municipalities in Massachusetts and two from out-of-state are attached at the end of this document.



Derby Street Shoppes, Hingham, MA: The architectural design, sidewalk treatment, benches and plantings shown in this image create a pedestrian-friendly environment within an otherwise an auto-oriented development.

4: Front Setbacks

Where to Consider Reducing Front Yard Setbacks:

Reducing front-yard setbacks brings buildings closer to the street, creating a more inviting walking environment. A more enclosed-feeling street can also discourage drivers from speeding, thus creating a more safe environment for pedestrians. Reducing setbacks is probably most feasible and effective in transitional areas, but setbacks could be reduced in other zones where the Town wishes to create more pedestrian-friendly environments. In order to blend new development in with existing development, setbacks can be averaged as they are in the Village Center Overlay District. Setbacks for R-3, R-4, Mixed Residential, and NCD are setbacks to consider for reduction. Adding maximum front yard setbacks may also add more consistency to the streetscape.



5: Community Gardens

How to Facilitate the Establishment of Community Gardens:

Community garden projects encourage a community's food security and increase healthy, affordable food access, allowing residents who do not have their own space to have a garden, to grow their own food and/or make it available to others. This can reduce food costs, and improve nutrition and dietary habits. Gardening itself provides physical activity that has direct health benefits. Community gardens are also social centers, and can provide opportunities for seasonal employment and leadership development for both adults and youth, which in turn affect health outcomes. Because access to healthy and affordable food options is a key determinant of public health outcomes across the socio-economic spectrum, many cities and towns are taking it upon themselves to facilitate access to land for the development of community gardens.

Some municipalities choose to establish large community-wide gardens with hundreds of plots. Other municipalities establish numerous dispersed small gardens that serve individual neighborhoods. The former benefit from economy of scale and are best located in areas with existing high quality soil. The latter are more convenient for residents and can facilitate walking or biking to the garden for additional exercise. Many municipalities opt to site community gardens at schools so that the garden can be incorporated into school curriculum.

The first step toward facilitating community gardens is to explicitly add them as an allowed use in all zoning districts (unless there is a particular



reason that a community garden would be undesirable in a particular district).

Municipalities can proactively develop community gardens on their land—including, parks, senior centers, schools, and libraries. Municipalities can play a crucial role in supporting community groups that are attempting to develop community gardens on private land. Support can come in a wide range of forms including helping to map and document need, advocating on behalf of residents, site planning and design, providing a water hook up, providing meeting space, or grant application assistance. Municipal support for community-led projects is particularly beneficial when there is a socioeconomic power difference between the group that would use the garden and the owners of the desired land—for example in a large rental complex where the owners do not see an economic benefit for providing garden space.

In some communities there is vacant or underutilized land that is appropriate for community gardens. While it is generally understood that municipalities are eager to develop land to “its best and highest use” development takes time, which can leave empty lots vacant for years, creating space for dumping and other unpleasant, possibly illegal and most likely unsightly activity. Communities across the country have responded to this 21st century reality by adopting regulations which permit residents to temporarily use vacant land, with permission of the property owner, for community gardens. See the appendix for an example community garden ordinance, using the City of Springfield’s ordinance as a jumping off point.

The Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (MAPC), Weymouth’s Regional Planning Agency has developed a Food System toolkit, which includes information and assistance on Zoning for Local Food Production, available at: http://www.mapc.org/sites/default/files/Food_system_guide_3-18-14.pdf

A fact sheet on community gardens from PVPC's Sustainability Toolkit is included in the appendix folder.

In addition to the obvious health benefit of making fresh food more available, community gardens also build community among diverse groups of neighborhood residents and are a productive and beautifying use of vacant and/or underutilized land. Experience from communities that have established community gardens shows that neighborhoods with gardens experience less crime and vandalism and in some cases experience an increase in property values. Community gardens also connect people to the environment and educate community members about sustainable living practices.

6: Food Policy Council

How and Why to Establish a Food Policy Council:

Food Policy Councils broaden the discussion of food and agricultural issues to facilitate a more comprehensive examination of local and regional food systems. They serve as a forum in which people involved from many different parts of the food system and government can learn more about each other's roles and work together to improve the availability of adequate levels of culturally competent, nutritious, and affordable food to all residents in the community.

Some Massachusetts towns and cities have active Food Policy Councils; their structure and activities can be used as models for municipalities that are creating new FPCs. Examples include:

- Worcester Advisory Food Policy Council <http://www.worcesterfoodpolicy.org>
- Springfield Food Policy Council <http://www3.springfield-ma.gov/planning/466.0.html>

The Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (MAPC), Weymouth's Regional Planning Agency has developed a Food System toolkit, which includes information and assistance on how to create a local Food Policy Council. (The MAPC Municipal Food Systems Planning Toolkit is available at http://www.mapc.org/sites/default/files/Food_system_guide_3-18-14.pdf; an excerpt is included in the appendix.)



Image courtesy of MA Office of Tourism

Appendix Contents

Appendix:

The appendix is provided as a folder of digital files that includes the following resources:

Site Plan Review:

- Example Site Plan Review Sections from Northampton, MA, South Hadley, MA, Portsmouth, NH, and Milton, GA.
- PVPC model bylaw for Bike Parking (could be incorporated into SPR or elsewhere in zoning)
- PVPC model bylaw for Sidewalk Requirements (could be incorporated into SPR or elsewhere in zoning)

Community Gardens:

- PVPC fact sheet on Community Gardens from the Pioneer Valley Sustainability Toolkit



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