

Downtown **DRAFT**

Purpose

The South Berwick village is a key part of the community's identity. In many ways, it has been well preserved through decades of changing society and increasing population throughout York County. To continue preserving the building style, layout, and overall vitality of the downtown area of town, special attention must be paid to development, land use, transportation, and public activities in the village.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify current conditions and challenges in the downtown area of town, document other South Berwick studies and plans for the downtown, and identify areas of focus for continued future downtown revitalization.

Key Findings

- Challenges from big box retail stores in surrounding communities as well as retail in neighboring New Hampshire, without a sales tax, make the retail climate more difficult.
- Traffic, both through and local, frequently congests the downtown core, limiting accessibility and efficiency. Truck traffic poses additional safety challenges as well as it creates a less desirable environment for bicycles and pedestrians. Opportunities exist to enhance the qualities of public space infrastructure to encourage safe and enjoyable non-motorized movements through and around downtown.
- Parking management in most downtowns is often perceived as an issue. South Berwick's Parking study completed in 2015 resulted in additional parking areas at the village scale.
- Key public facilities, such as schools, municipal offices, and the post office are downtown anchors, generating activity in the area.
- Strong interest exists in preserving the building style and layout of downtown, which includes a historic district and several properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The aesthetics and building style of the downtown define the village character of South Berwick.
- Downtown is a traditional center of activity and public interaction. Events help to generate this level of activity and engagement of residents and visitors alike.
- Currently, high concentrations of residential uses are within walking distance of the village center. Maintaining and encouraging further residential growth in this area will strengthen the variety of downtown activities.

Community Engagement Results

PLACEHOLDER

Traffic and Transportation

Balancing different modes of transportation in downtown South Berwick presents several challenges. Issues of concern include traffic volume, including through truck traffic, pedestrian safety and comfort, bicycle access, and parking management.

Congestion caused by through traffic in downtown South Berwick increases travel delays during peak hours. Traffic in the village is not inherently negative, as it is needed to support economic activity downtown. Traffic congestion also pushes some users to identify alternate routes. Alternate routing, while reducing traffic flow along the principal corridors, also reduces exposure of businesses downtown and causes safety concerns on local roads.

Pedestrian safety and comfort is crucial in the downtown, and current traffic volumes and speed also cause pedestrian safety concerns in the village area.

A vibrant village center requires accommodations for all modes of transportation with an emphasis on walkability and access. Encouraging visitors, residents, and downtown workers to use transit, walk, bike, or park on the outskirts of downtown and walk in, can help to alleviate some of the congestion and safety issues currently experienced downtown. Implementing traffic calming measures can reduce the speed of traffic and provide buffers between moving vehicles and pedestrians. Crosswalk safety depends on appropriate placement, proximity to traffic calming devices and high visibility devices to alert passing motorists. Improving sidewalk connections from downtown into neighborhoods and around the village core can expand the distance that users will choose to remain on foot, rather than use their car. Amenities such as benches and trees provide break points for walkers as well as gathering places. Pedestrian activity on the sidewalk enlivens a downtown and encourages others to stop or plan a return visit as well as to consider exploring beyond their intended destination. Alternatively, sidewalk areas that feel exposed, barren, or empty are not as welcoming and encourage shorter visits.

Shorter trips from outlying neighborhoods and subdivisions can be made into the downtown on bicycle or other non-motorized transportation. However, no bicycle lanes exist currently. There is limited room along Main Street for non-motorized vehicles to travel along a heavily traffic road and parked cars. The absence of separate travel lanes for bicycles leads residents and visitors to rely more on walking and driving. In addition to providing provision for movement of bicycles to and through the downtown, provision of parking facilities, such as bicycle racks, is important.

Truck traffic through the village area generates noise, additional road wear and congestion. Finding alternate routes for through trucks and reducing the incentive for trucks to use Routes 236 and 4 rather than the Maine Turnpike and other through routes may simultaneously generate additional visits while reducing some degree of congestion.

Parking management is a critical issue for all downtowns. As consumers become used to large expanses of parking at out of town retail facilities, downtown's smaller lots and on-street parking can be a deterrent. Small satellite parking areas dotted through downtown can support village activities if they have safe, convenient, and comfortable connections to the downtown core and drivers are provided adequate and clear information about the location of such areas as they enter the downtown area.

Limited space makes strategic sharing of parking spaces vital. Commercial facilities that require parking during the day may be able to have parking spaces used in the evenings for residential uses.

Traffic and parking issues have been the topic of multiple studies and forums over the years in South Berwick. A range of concerns and recommended solutions have been brought forward with few being studied for practical implementation. Most recently a 2015 parking study resulted in the funding and construction of a parking lot on Railroad Ave as well as other additional parking arrangements downtown. The 2009 South Berwick Transportation Feasibility Study summarizes decades of existing conditions and concerns around the downtown area with a focus on the major intersections along Route 236. An update to that study is expected to be completed in early 2023 with the intent to identify clear short- and long-term safety and mobility improvements.

Built Environment & Land Use

Downtown South Berwick possesses a distinctive architectural style and scale. The unique character of the village area can be enhanced by reinforcing historic preservation activities, review of building requirements for new structures and developing strategies for revitalization and renovation of existing structures.

The historic nature of downtown South Berwick, containing a Historic District as well as several properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places, provides a template on which future development can be modeled. Further, these structures provide a means to explain the community's history and the role of downtown in that history. Walking tours, plaques and other explanatory methods can also serve to bring more visitors to the downtown and encourage visits of longer duration.

Scaling, massing, setbacks (including zero setbacks) and lot sizes derived from identified historic structures and others in the village area can be a baseline for future building requirements that coordinate with existing structures in the village area. Additionally, finding a balance between preservation of existing structures and using the influence of such structures to guide new construction can create a harmonious blend of structures downtown. Historic development patterns are also naturally built for walking and pedestrians. Uses that include drive-through services or large parking lots are often not implemented in a manner consistent with a walking village. Attention should also be paid to applicable building codes to ensure they do not discourage rehabilitation of existing structures.

Traditionally downtowns contain a blend of civic, residential, and commercial uses in proximity. The actual distribution of these uses changes over time, as some uses become more marginal and transient. Reinforcing traditional patterns of mixed use and retention of civic uses in the village all support downtown revitalization.

Downtown uses are also traditionally mixed, with the classic downtown block consisting of retail on the ground floor, office space above and residential units on the upper stories. This traditional format provides diversity as well as a ready source of activity and consumers throughout the day. Specific targeting of certain segments of downtown for live-work activities can contribute to building revitalization and renewed economic activity.

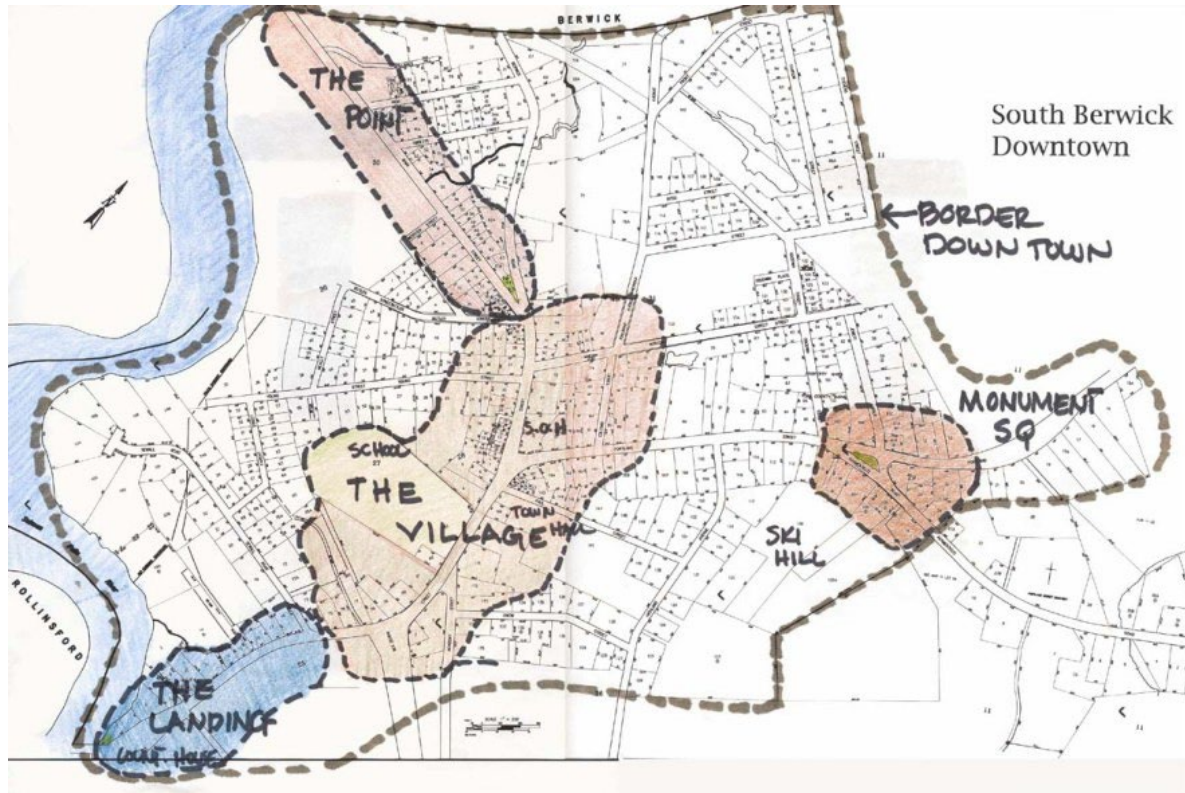
Civic uses such as Town Offices and the Post Office generate regular activity in the downtown, and both uses exist in South Berwick. **(What is the relationship to Berwick Academy? Many facilities downtown,**

all private?) Further civic uses in the downtown, where feasible and appropriate can generate additional regular activity.

The previous plan identified a downtown boundary and several smaller neighborhoods which make up the downtown. Concentrating mixed use activity in the village core as well as adjacent neighborhoods as shown on Map F.1 will maximize opportunities to encourage walking from residential sites to commercial and institutional uses.

Map F.1

Downtown neighborhoods



Public Activities

Downtown South Berwick is a common community event space, and contains locations for public activities, events, and recreation.

Public activities and events in the downtown generate additional usage of the village center and strengthen the identity of the location. Cultural activities such as concerts and the arts not only can generate additional visits to the village center, but also can provide opportunities for residents to meet. Space for events like festivals and performances, both indoor and outdoor, are key components of supporting the arts.

The proximity of the Salmon Falls River to downtown provides an opportunity for expanded recreational access. Recreational uses of parks and picnic areas bring additional visitors to the downtown area as

well as increasing the amenities value for residents and employees in the area. Providing recreational opportunities in close proximity to downtown also strengthens the market for commercial development.

The Counting House Park has open space, picnic areas and a boat launch close to the downtown. **(When was this created?)** The location adjacent to the historic museum and Quamphegan Landing historic site also adds to the identity of the space.

Business Development

Undertaking a market analysis of the South Berwick trade area can assist in determining what goods and services may be productively and profitably sold in the downtown environment. As consumer tastes and preferences have changed over time, certain retail niches have ceased to be competitive in a downtown environment.

The multiplier effect refers to the proportional amount of total increase in revenues that results from an injection of spending in an economy. According to the National Main Street Center, the multiplier effect of locally based businesses is estimated to be five times that of national chains. This is one of the many benefits to maintaining a viable downtown retail district. Any strategy of recruitment should be complemented with a retention plan. Working closely with existing businesses to ensure their continuing viability can be more cost effective and less time-consuming than an extensive recruitment effort.

Existing Measures Supporting the South Berwick Downtown

Anything we should add here? New policy? TIF district?

Future Organization & Implementation

Sustaining and encouraging downtown revitalization is an on-going and incremental task, and there are many existing frameworks and programs to help guide the process. The town may consider enrollment in a program or seek grant opportunities for downtown revitalization.

Some of the most successful models of downtown revitalization have used the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Approach. The Maine Downtown Center provides training and technical assistance to communities that demonstrate a willingness and ability to revitalize their downtowns, promotes and builds awareness about the importance of vital downtowns and serves as a clearinghouse/point of contact for information related to downtown development in Maine. This approach relies on a public-private partnership that moves beyond public improvement projects as a mechanism for downtown revitalization. The downtown development organization focuses on a four-point approach of organization, promotion, design and economic restructuring.

MaineDOT's Village Partnership Initiative (VPI) may be used in partnership with local officials to reinvest and revitalize Village Centers or Downtowns reflecting the community's future vision. The VPI is available to all communities that have or can agree upon a local vision for their village. Village projects can vary from small, spot improvements to large, once-in-a-lifetime investments if other funding sources are also leveraged. Investments must be made in a way that balances the use and safety of all village patrons, whether in automobile, walking or bicycling. To that end, improvements should result in speed limits and actual average speeds of 30 miles per hour or less and provide for vehicles, pedestrians, and bicyclists in a balanced approach.