



Methuen Walkability Assessment



Prepared by
Merrimack Valley Planning
Commission
for the
City of Methuen

July 2016



Program Overview

The Merrimack Valley Planning Commission (MVPC) received a grant from the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards to conduct a walkability assessment for the Downtown District of the City of Methuen.

The City is establishing a 40R Smart Growth Overlay District and has contracted with a firm to create design guidelines for new development. The purpose of the pedestrian infrastructure assessment project is to complement the larger Smart Growth District planning by providing additional recommendations designed to improve walking connections within the downtown area and to nearby neighborhoods of Methuen.

Program Goals

The goals for the project are simple:

- Involve residents in the planning process to both identify needs and gaps in the transportation network and assist with prioritization.
- Collect data on the conditions of sidewalks and ADA ramps, as well as pedestrian counts at key crossings to inform infrastructure need decisions.
- Develop concrete next steps that can be the foundation for building a more pedestrian-friendly downtown.
- Promote stakeholder partnerships that can sustain a long-term agenda leading to more foot traffic downtown and improved community health outcomes.

Elements of a walkable community.

- *Connectivity. A walking network that links places and has clear signage.*
- *Quality of the paths/network to encourage use by people of all ages and abilities. (condition & width of sidewalk, lighting, benches)*
- *Safety from traffic and crime*
- *Design and Destinations. Design that encourages pedestrian use with visual interest.*

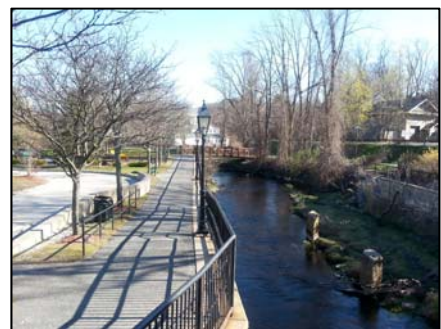


Photo Riverwalk Park



Photo: The Methuen Rail Trail will be a popular destination, however sidewalks are missing on adjacent streets.

Community Context

By taking steps to establish a central 40R Smart Growth District with density of housing and commercial uses that can sustain a more vibrant downtown, Methuen is reinventing itself for a new era. The 40R planning process is an opportunity not only to transform vacant, blighted lots but also to remake Methuen's car-oriented central business district into a pedestrian-friendly, commerce-supportive environment.

The design and condition of transportation infrastructure have impacts on how a community develops and on the health and well-being of people who live in the community. Land use and environmental conditions are critical factors influencing individual behaviors that

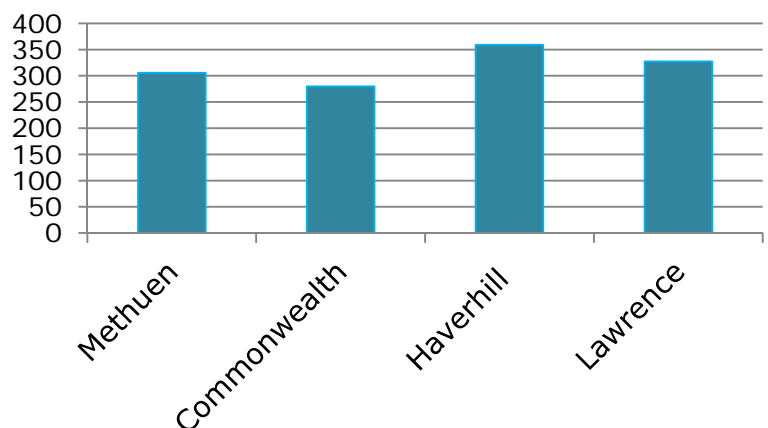
produce long-term public health outcomes.

What are those health outcomes today in Methuen?

According to the 2015 Massachusetts Department of Public Health *Results of Body Mass Index Screening in Public School Districts*, almost one-third of Methuen pupils meet category definitions for obese or overweight. And among adults, the numbers are similar. Holy Family Hospital indicates in its Community Health Needs Assessment (2015) incidence of obesity/overweight condition among all Methuen residents is 33.6%.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health tracks health indicators for all communities in the Commonwealth. Methuen residents have higher incidence of

Premature Mortality Rate

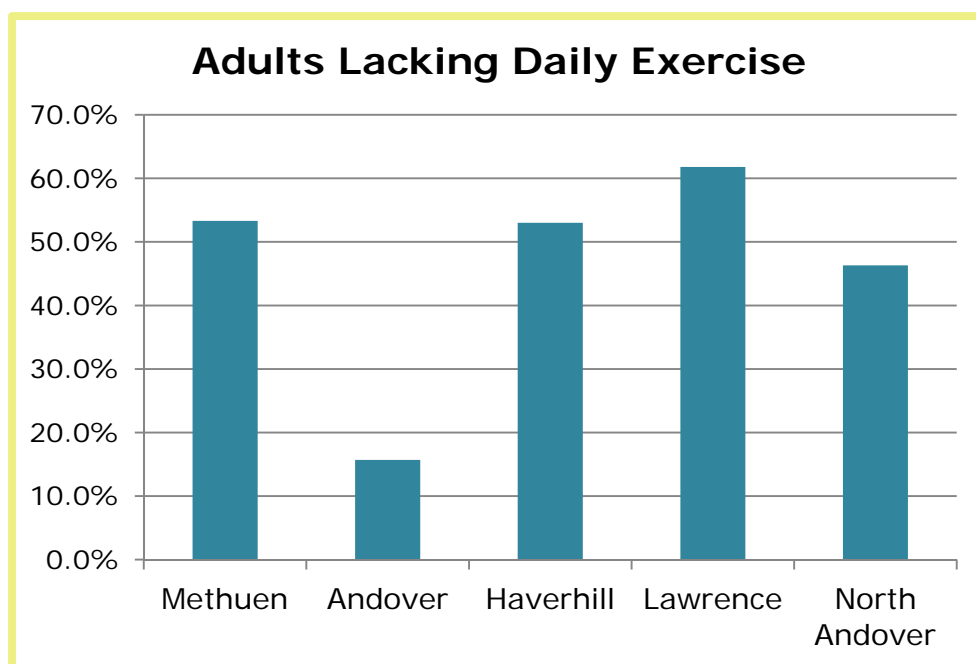


diabetes (9.1%), heart attack hospitalizations (31.5 per 10,000 people), substance use & abuse (17.8%) and premature mortality (305.5 per 100,000 population) than found state-wide.

Demographics and individual behaviors bear on these health outcomes. Consider that as noted in Lawrence General Hospital's Community Health Needs Assessment (2013), 53.3% of Methuen adults report lacking daily exercise. One reason may be residents spend a lot of time in their cars — 93% of households have at least one car; travel for work, school, shopping or errands in the city are overwhelmingly by

auto. Methuen has a city-wide Walkscore rating of 35 (car dependent). 94% of daily Methuen resident work commutes are by car; fewer than 3% walk, bike or take public transit.

Mobility alternatives to the auto are particularly important for seniors, youth, people with disabilities and the poor who may not have the economic or physical capacity to use autos. Seniors (age 65 and over) make up 13% of Methuen's population. Youth (under age 18) are 23.5% of the City's population. According to the 2010-14 American Community Survey, 11.3% of Methuen



Source: MAPC, Mass in Motion 2011 as cited in Lawrence General Hospital Community Health Needs Assessment, 2013.

residents have some form of disability. City-wide the poverty rate is 9.1% but within the central census tract (2523) that includes Methuen's downtown, the poverty rate is significantly higher at 15.3% and concentrated among youth and elders. According to the ACS, one in five seniors and youths from central Methuen live in poverty and 17% of the central Methuen (Tract 2523) households do not have access to a car.

Photo: Pedestrians walking in Hampshire Square in Methuen.



Community Input

MVPC and the City of Methuen invited residents to participate in the process during three outreach meetings.

Two very different outreach opportunities were held on April 27th, 2016. Elders were invited to participate in a midday discussion about walkability at the Senior Center. They were asked questions related to:

- Where do you walk downtown
- What do you like or dislike about where you walk.
- Do you feel safe? If not, why.
- How would you improve the walking environment so more elders want to walk?

In the afternoon, youth from the Methuen Arlington Neighborhood



Photo: Seniors participating in a discussion about how to make Methuen more walkable.



Photo: MAN, Inc. youth about to set off on the walkability assessment.

were invited to participate in the walkability survey.

Both groups had similar assessments:

'There's nothing to do in downtown' and 'there's nothing bringing the community together.'

A third public meeting was held May 18th, 2016 at the Nevins Library for the general public and included seniors, youth, city councilors, business owners and rail-trail committee members. At this meeting, participants were invited to provide their input into what the city should focus on and then prioritize from that list.

At all three events, several themes emerged from the discussions.

Historic District

The City of Methuen boasts a distinctive history and has an established local historic district defined by stone walls, landmark homes and structures and mill legacy centered around the Spicket River which bisects the downtown area. The City has created history trails and published a walking tour brochure. Unfortunately, some of the historic buildings need repair and while the various print materials provide information, the general public does not have easy access to them. Wayfinding, informational signage and apps are needed. Participants suggested the Freedom Trail type application that is convenient and clear to follow.

Beautification

All participants appreciate the parks that the City maintains. The parks are destinations that people visit over and over.

The City, its residents and businesses could all do more to enhance the beauty of the city. People want to see more flowers, more uplifting and cheerful landscaping. Some businesses landscape their properties, but minimally.

Vacant properties along Broadway and the disheveled appearance



Photo: (Top) Trees adds to the walkability of a street. The City needs to replace trees along Broadway and work with businesses and residents to plant more on other streets to create a welcoming environment. (Bottom) Flowers are few and far between in downtown Methuen. Landscaping by businesses is minimal.

along River Street are unattractive. Litter can be found throughout the downtown. Youth noted areas with graffiti.

Pedestrian Connections

Participants discussed the need for paths or wayfinding to help people navigate Methuen's complex downtown. While there are preferred, less hilly, routes, people may not know about them. Again, directional signage would help.



Photo: This alley is the primary, yet hidden, access to the Spicket River bridge.

The bridge over the Spicket Falls is an attractive, place-defining asset, but is not conveniently accessible to the Methuen community. The youth who participated in the walkability assessment did not even know it existed. The City and the businesses need to make better use of the alleyway from Hampshire Street to attract people to cafes as well as to access the bridge. Likewise, improvements and signage are needed on the southern edge of the bridge for access from Osgood Street across Mill Falls Apartment parking area. Participants advocated for extension of path walkway along the Spicket River.

In addition, participants are looking forward to the improvements underway at the rail-trail. Further placemaking at the railroad station is needed and wayfinding signage getting people there will be useful.

Participants noted that the City also needs to study bicycle access in the downtown, especially since more people will want to access the rail-trail.

Although MVPC analysis shows that 76% of the sidewalk infrastructure in the project study area are rated as good or very good condition, participant stakeholders commented on the need for some specific segment repairs. During the walkability assessment, youth noted missing sidewalks, crumbling sidewalks and areas where there may be sidewalks, but it still was not welcoming, such as the Five Corners intersection.

Wayfinding Signage

A common theme was the need for more signage for:

- Advertising businesses and business districts
- Directional for more accessible routes.
- Signage that tells you how long the walk will be to the next destination.
- Parking: people can't find parking.
- Walking routes that highlight history.
- Signage to get you to the rail trail and other destinations.

Priority Rating

Action Item



Wayfinding signage that tells people how long it takes to get to the destination. Historic trail signage (i.e. Freedom Trail). Use an app to help people navigate the downtown and accessible routes are.



Reinstitute clean up days. Need more trash barrels in downtown.



More destinations, markets and events are needed.



Remove graffiti. Make it easier to report it.



Fix sidewalks.



Improve parking.



Fix street lights.



Public Art. Literacy and historical placemaking.



Signage and enforcement of pet waste laws.



Make Hampshire Street a primary pedestrian way with one-way traffic and events. Would also allow for build out of sidewalks for outdoor dining.



Remove dilapidated building and provide more views of Spicket falls.



Make downtown pretty and appealing.



Make better use of the vacant lots in the downtown.



Make use of the Hampshire Street Alley. Signage so people know how to access the bridge over the falls.



Maintenance of rail-trail.



Better planning around flowers and use of banners on light posts.



Design for multi-modal transportation. Complete Streets.



Create a critical mass of businesses, residents (density).

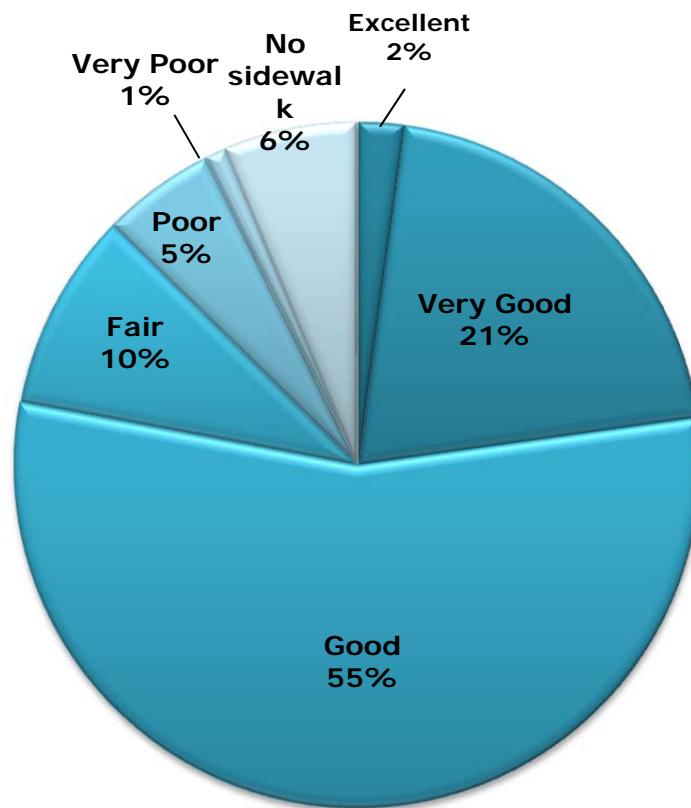
Infrastructure Evaluation

Sidewalks

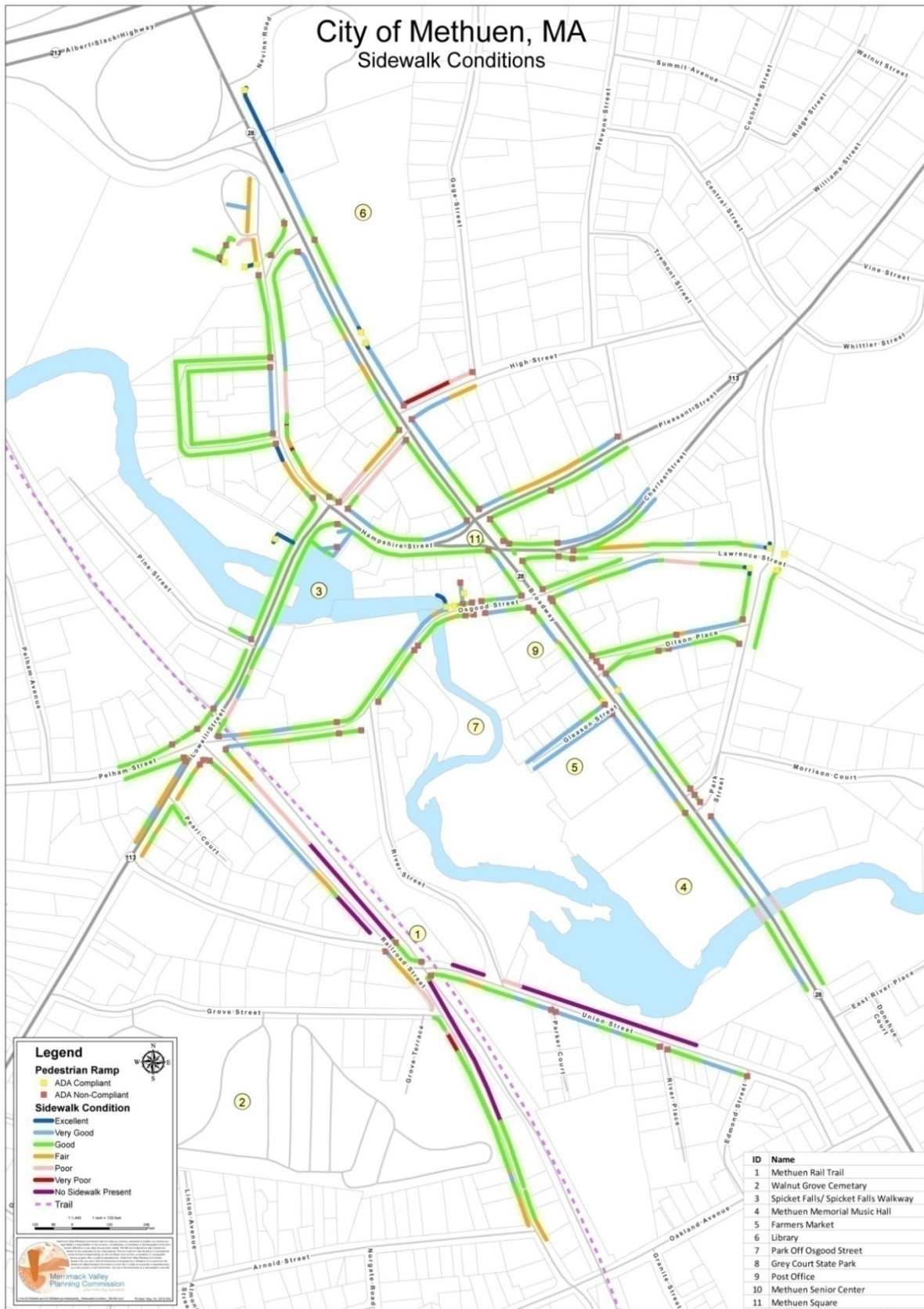
MVPC staff evaluated the conditions of sidewalks in the 40R district in order to assist the City in creating a sidewalk management plan. Overall, roughly 75% of the sidewalks either need no repair or minor repairs. Those sidewalks rated as “good” need spot repairing as opposed to whole reconstruction. Examples include cracked or missing brick in the edging detail,

or a crack in one panel, but not the entire section of sidewalk.

Roughly 25% of the sidewalks need significant repair, reconstruction or are missing. Missing sidewalks were identified along Railroad Ave. and Union St. Sidewalk segments along Hampshire St. were noted in poor condition. However, the City is currently undertaking sidewalk reconstruction work on the west side of Hampshire St. north of Lowell St., which will address some of these issues.



Sidewalk Conditions in Methuen Downtown



The sidewalks along the Searles Bridge are rated in poor condition as they were not reconstructed at the same time as the rest of the sidewalks downtown.

The map on the previous page shows the conditions of the sidewalks throughout the downtown 40R district.

ADA Ramps

ADA accessible curb cut ramps are an essential component to a walkable community. Parents pushing strollers, elderly, disabled and unhealthy people need them to get around. When ADA ramps are missing at a crosswalk location, people don't cross at the

crosswalk. Wheelchair users ride in the road.

32% of the ramps in the 40R district



Photo: An example of an ADA ramp with detectable warning tactile surface.

were in excellent or very good condition. Roughly 50% need minor repairs and the remaining 18% need to be constructed or reconstructed. However, the majority of the ADA ramps are not in compliance with current regulations. Most of them do not have the required detectable warning tactile surfaces.

ADA Ramps In Compliance

Complaint	16
Non-Compliant	89
Missing	8

ADA Ramp Conditions

Condition	# of Ramps
Excellent	11
Very Good	25
Good	56
Fair	9
Poor	4
Very Poor/Missing	8

Pedestrian Count

In order to get a snapshot of the type of pedestrian activity and popular crossings, MVPC did two counts of activity along Broadway. The first count (observing Broadway between the Square and Park St. (CVS)) took place on a Wednesday afternoon on June 15 between 3-5 PM in order to observe after school activity and early PM peak period activity. Here's what we found:

- Not many people were observed walking.
- 6 kids were counted skateboarding.
- 8 people bicycled on Broadway.
- 13 mid-block crossing occurred in front of the Post Office. The Post Office was the most popular destination in this stretch of Broadway.
- Between Ditson and Gleason Streets, a school bus stopped in this area dropping off two children.

The second count (observing Broadway from Osgood St. to Park St.) took place on Saturday, June 18 from 11:20 am-12:20 pm. During this period, pedestrian activity was also low. A summary of observations:

- Five bicyclists were observed riding South on Broadway



Photo: Pedestrians walking along Broadway.

- going the wrong way, though three were on the sidewalk.
- One person on a skateboard rode South on Broadway.
- The MVRTA bus stopped just south of Ditson (same general area as the school bus), letting off one passenger.
- Mid-block crossings occurred just north of Gleason St. One occurred at the Post Office.
- The majority of people were walking on the west side of Broadway.

Discussion

The count validated much of what we heard from the City and the public. Not many people are

walking around downtown. The Post Office is a popular destination. While some people cross mid-block to access the post office, it is not recommended that a mid-block crosswalk be painted in this area. The existing crosswalk is only 95 feet away. If Broadway is redesigned, then curb extensions could be integrated, which would both shorten the crossing distance and make it easier for cars to see pedestrians trying to cross.

Skateboarding and bicycling activity in this area indicates a general need to improve the bicycling infrastructure. Broadway (Rt 28) is not designed to attract any but the bravest of cyclists to the downtown. With the rail-trail being developed into a primary destination and a needed connection between Grey Court State Park, downtown and the rail-trail, it would be advantageous for the City to investigate design alternatives that increase opportunities for safe bicycling and skateboarding on both Rt. 28 and on connecting corridors.

The Urban Land Institute's study recommended a road diet on Broadway. Based on our observations, parking is unnecessary on both sides of the street. Most, if not all, businesses on this stretch of Broadway have

off-street parking. The width of the roadway could be reallocated to create safe bike lanes/protected lanes for cyclists and skateboarders. A bus stop could be created and used by the MVRTA and school system.

As mentioned earlier, signage would help direct people using all modes of transportation to destinations as well as to parking lots. If needed, the City could investigate shared parking opportunities.



Photo: The Post Office is a popular destination along Broadway.

Recommendations					
Topic	Goal	Short-Term (1 year)	Medium-term (2-3 years)	Long-Term (4+ years)	Partners
Wayfinding Signage /Marketing	Make it easier for people to find things to do downtown using routes that are more accessible.	Apply urban guerilla tactics. Examples: Lawrence painted a white line on sidewalks to help people follow the Spicket River Trail. walkyourcity.org provides an easy, less expensive service to create temporary wayfinding signage for pedestrians. Time-based signage (15 minute walk to....)	Hire a designer to create an attractive design for signage. Hire contractor to make the signs. Create banners to hang from light posts.	Entrance improvements to the alleyway from Osgood St.	City, Historic District Commission, Downtown Committee
		Update existing parking signage so people can easily identify where to park.			
Clean Downtown	Individuals and government need to work together to keep downtown clean and litter free.	Reinstitute community clean up day			City
		Eliminate Graffiti			City
		Place more trash barrells in downtown			City
Create Destinations/ Placemaking	Create more activities and destinations that draw people to the downtown. Engage the creative community to help. Enhance existing activities.	Work with landowners, youth groups and creative community to do temporary installations at vacant properties and lots. Enable community groups to host activities in the downtown.	Encourage business development that is welcoming to pedestrians.		City, art community, historic community, schools, Groundwork Lawrence, etc.

Topic	Goal	Short-Term (1 year)	Medium-term (2-3 years)	Long-Term (4+ years)	Partners
Sidewalk repair and construction	Ensure that the downtown is accessible for all users	Repair sidewalk sections. Request that MassDOT repair sidewalks on Searles Bridge.	Plan for construction of new sidewalks to create safe access to rail-trail. Improve ADA ramps.		City, MassDOT, MVPC
Parking Management and Maintenance Plan	Make it easier for people to easily identify where to park; create parking if needed	Reevaluate existing parking; Improve signage; Paint parking spaces.			City
Fix Street Lights	Ensure a safe environment in the downtown.	Repair and clean glass on lights.			DPW
Hampshire St. Improvements	Encourage more pedestrian traffic.	Business owners should experiment with creating outdoor seating, planters, etc.	Study traffic on Hampshire St. with option of one-way. Work with landowners on reuse of alleyway to encourage outdoor café seating and access Spicket Falls bridge.	Implement infrastructure options.	Business owners, alleyway landowners, City, arts community. MVPC for study.
Address vacant and deteriorating properties	Work with adjacent property owners to ensure that properties are maintained in active use free of code violations.	Inspect properties. Contact property owners to discuss options for maintenance and temporary use. 40R established	Vacant lot redeveloped.		

Topic	Goal	Short-Term (1 year)	Medium-term (2-3 years)	Long-Term (4+ years)	Partners
Beautification of the downtown.	Improve aesthetic appeal of downtown	Work with landowners, garden club, downtown committee, business owners to improve plantings in downtown. Create a long-term plan to improve flower/plantings in downtown.	Replace trees along streets. Remove invasive plants and improve views to river. Encourage landowners to plant additional trees.	Public Art. Fencing upgrades.	Garden Club, Library, Business owners, landowners, City, developers, residents
Development/ Maintenance of rail-trail	Develop a multi-use trail.	Build the trail (the City has already obtained funds)	Create a maintenance plan.		City, Methuen Rail Trail Alliance.
Make downtown multi-modal	Ensure that all users and modes can use right-of-way safely.	Adopt a Complete Streets policy.	Develop a bicycle plan for the City. Address immediate needs related to the rail-trail. Implement bike plan.	Continue implementing bicycle and pedestrian connections.	City, Methuen Rail Trail group, residents
			Study road diet options for Broadway.	Implement road diet on Broadway.	

Some Final Thoughts:

Methuen's central business district has a wealth of enviable physical assets—landmark architecture, natural beauty of the Spicket River and Falls, and conveniently accessible active recreation facilities and open space—all key elements of any placemaking strategy or downtown plan.

But the community's greatest core asset is its people.

Methuen has many organizations and groups taking on civic projects and activities to promote positive change and progress in remaking a vital, vibrant and walkable downtown — the Rail Trail Alliance, Methuen Garden Club, the City's Downtown Working Group, the Historic District Commission, Methuen Historical Society, Methuen Arlington Neighborhood Inc., Methuen Board of Trade — to name just a few.

The challenges in implementing a vision for a healthy, pedestrian-friendly downtown district can most effectively be overcome in building real partnerships among the individual stakeholder champions. The effort of community building requires persistence of all stakeholders in working toward a long-term vision while celebrating

collaborative early successes in taking on the “low hanging fruit” of signage improvements, beautification projects and litter clean-ups.

Effective partnerships involve commitment to the vision for downtown, joint advocacy in promoting policies, programs and public and private investments, and continuous communication and cooperation in implementing downtown improvement strategies.

Incremental pedestrian-oriented aesthetic improvements and short-term victories along with work in putting in place new development design guidelines and land use incentives can point the way toward the long-term goals in attracting more foot traffic and more economic activity in Methuen's center.



Photo: Mill Falls Apartments.