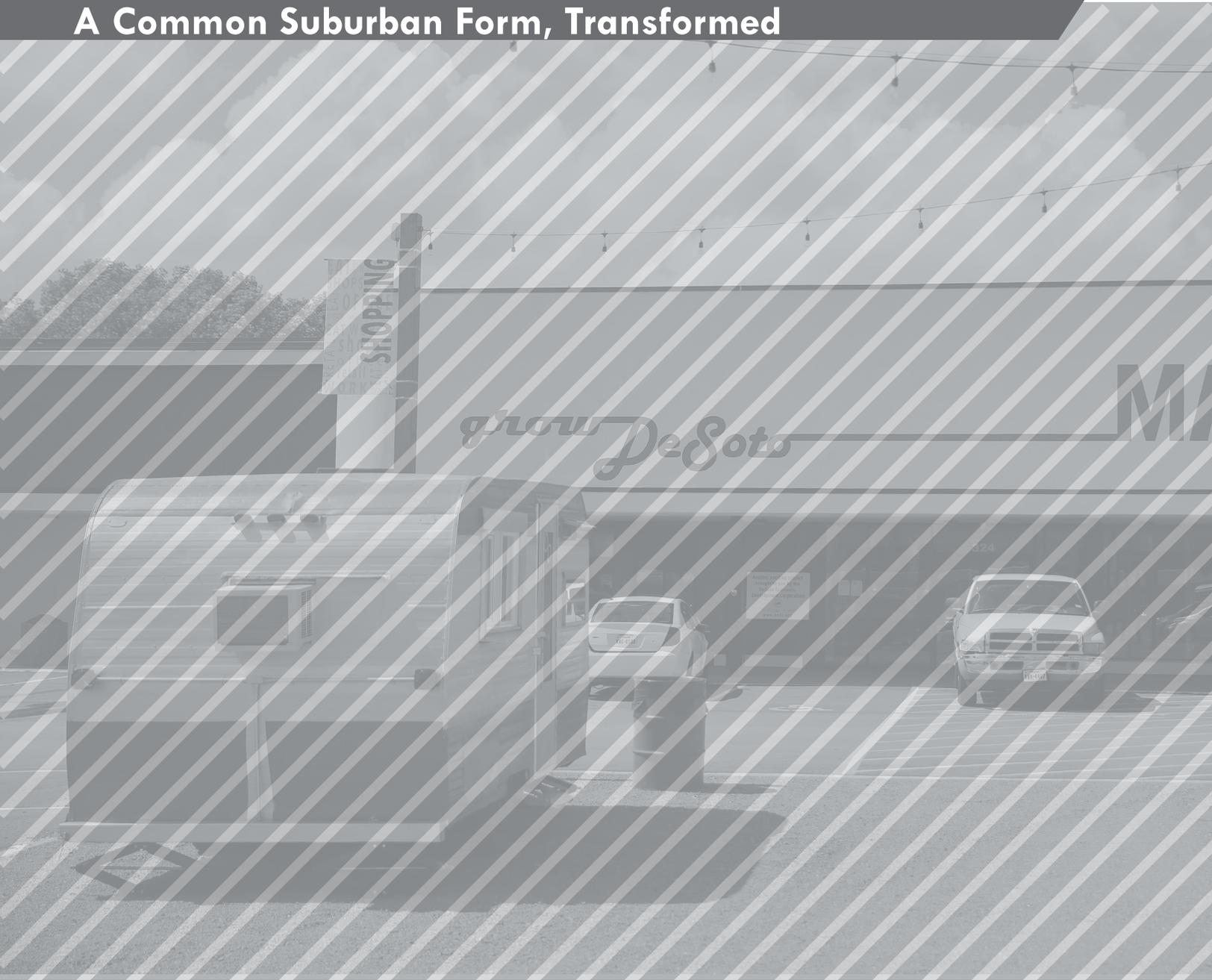


# RECLAIMING THE STRIP MALL: A Common Suburban Form, Transformed



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Additional thanks for their time and willingness to discuss their projects:

- Monte Anderson (Brookhollow Shopping Center);
- Chris Priore (Dior Dedham); and
- Russell Preston, Tom Feronti, and Buff Chace (Mashpee Commons).

## OVERVIEW

As the suburbs have aged in many places, unsightly strip malls are a frequent feature of the suburban landscape. They have taken their place within a larger pattern of unsustainable development, alongside underused shopping malls, monotonous residential areas, and out-of-the-way office parks, all “served” by unsafe and unwelcoming arterial roadways that disconnect neighborhoods and pose safety hazards to anyone who dares walk, bike, use a wheelchair, or take transit. In most of these places, a vehicle is necessary for every trip. Can these ubiquitous and unloved developments be reclaimed to create a vibrant public realm and foster transportation choices other than driving?

We now know that the development patterns that began with the rise of the automobile and incorporation of Euclidean zoning have led to a number of unintended consequences. The independence that originally came with owning a vehicle has become dependence, as it is often the only option for getting around. Separating uses that originally helped keep noxious factories away from people’s homes now means most people can’t walk to a café or store. The move to the suburbs that originally gave a connection to nature has resulted in the loss of countless trees and acres of open space. Income inequality and equity disparities have been compounded through phenomena such as “white flight” since the 1960s, now being succeeded by the growth of both diversity and poverty in the suburbs, which are not designed to make necessary services available to people struggling to make ends meet.

For these reasons and more, over the past couple decades work has begun to “retrofit” our suburbs. Books including [Retrofitting Suburbia](#) (Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 2009), [Sprawl Repair Manual](#) (Tachieva, 2010), and most recently, [Suburban Remix](#) (Beske and Dixon, 2018) have provided numerous examples of what this could look like and methods to achieve it. Whether a big box store or a strip mall, an office park or a residential cul-de-sac, planners, architects, and developers are working to reuse and redevelop these areas into more sustainable and human-focused development patterns.

### Purpose of these case studies

Despite the increased attention in many communities, change comes slowly, if at all. Indeed, auto-dependent, single-use development continues apace in many communities. Regulatory and financial hurdles, along with an inertia that preserves the status quo, hinder adoption of alternative ways to develop in our suburbs. These case studies seek to help overcome these barriers by providing examples of retrofits of one of the most common suburban development types, the strip mall, with observations on the associated keys to their success. The primary method of research was the participant interview, in each case examining the developer’s path to retrofit, challenges and opportunities along the way, and lessons learned.

## BROOKHOLLOW SHOPPING CENTER, Desoto TX



Source: The DeSoto Market. Photo by Andy Jacobsohn, used with permission from the Dallas Morning News.

## Key stats

**Parcel size:** 5 acres

**Former suburban form type:** strip mall

**Retrofit strategy:** Adaptive reuse supplemented by infill development

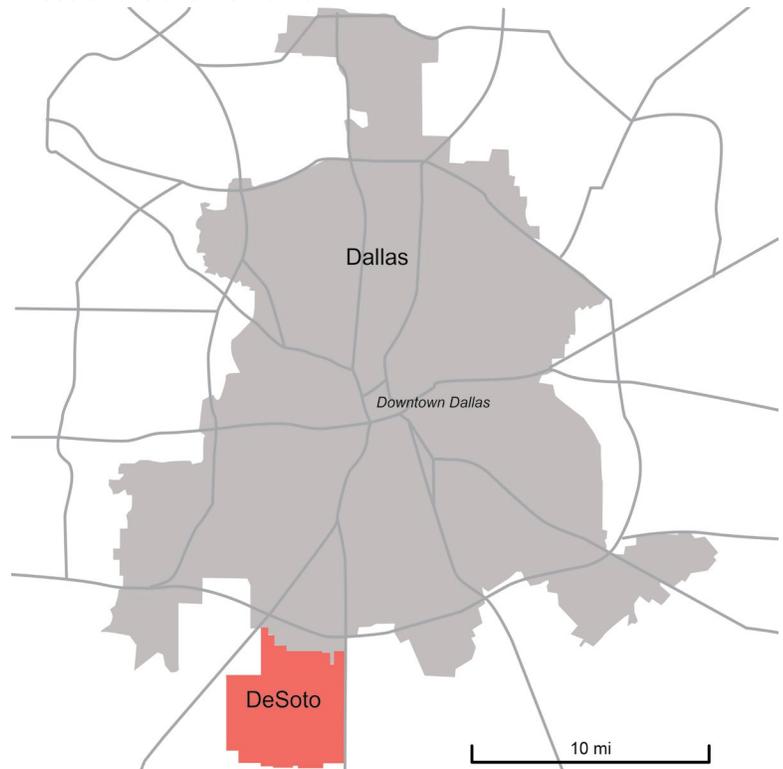
## Background on site

The City of Dallas and its environs in Dallas County contain both extreme wealth and extreme poverty. DeSoto is a first-ring suburb in Dallas County with a population of 50,000, approximately 16 miles from downtown Dallas. The community experienced strong growth in the 1970s and 1980s. It was then impacted by white flight, resulting in disinvestment and pockets of poverty in the otherwise middle class city. Approximately two-thirds of the population is now African American.

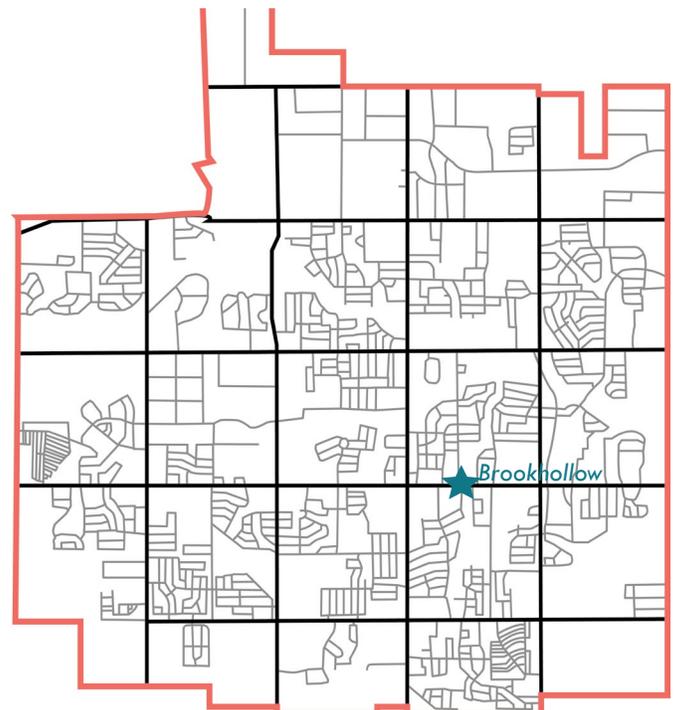
Centrally located within DeSoto is the Brookhollow Shopping Center, set along a five-lane arterial that bisects the city east-west. The roadway is one of several that run across the city, which is divided by an equal number of north-south arterials, forming a checkerboard network. Within this network is a finer-grained patchwork of roads, many of which are cul-de-sacs, containing primarily modest single-family homes.

Brookhollow was a standard strip mall, containing 50,000 square feet of retail space, including a 26,000-square-foot anchor space. It's adjacent to an auto-body shop and gas station, and across from another suburban shopping center that was converted into a school.

DeSoto in relation to Dallas.



Brookhollow Shopping Center's location within DeSoto in the context of DeSoto's roadway network.



In 2016, a local developer named Monte Anderson purchased the property. Anderson is among the minority of whites who remained in DeSoto during the period of white flight. As the owner of a 10-person real estate development company, Anderson approaches projects from a viewpoint of trying to build up wealth in struggling areas, in effect acting as a for-profit community development corporation.

After selling a hotel in Dallas, Anderson sought out an inexpensive site in which to invest, using tax-deferred money. Brookhollow Shopping Center, which had high vacancy, including the anchor space, met Anderson's criteria.

### Intent of the project

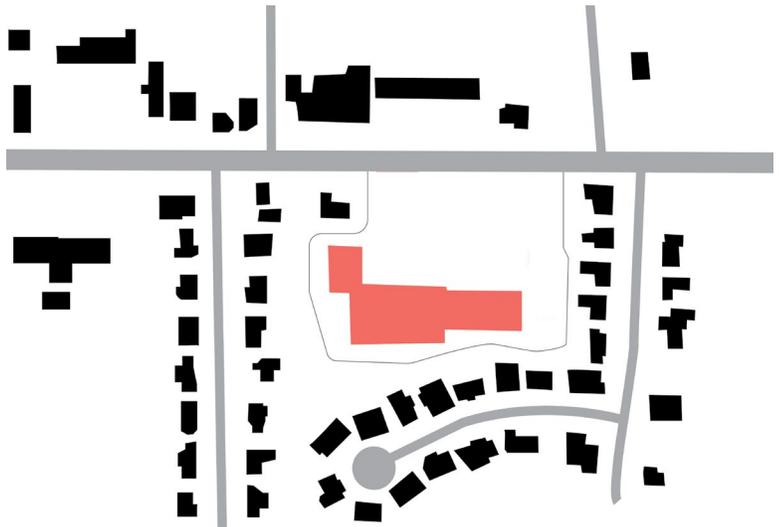
A key tenet of Anderson's development style is "incremental development," also known as "incremental urbanism." Incremental urbanism seeks to make positive change in a community, whereby local people invest in their own neighborhoods and create new value that benefits their community. Rather than focusing on out-of-town investors or large development firms, this work centers on small-scale projects done by smaller developers. At the local level, especially in a weak market area such as DeSoto, this helps spread the risks and rewards of development. Because smaller developers are limited by their size to a certain scope of project, they can stick with small, simple buildings in a fairly concentrated area. These projects, such as in the case of Brookhollow Shopping Center, often focus on adaptive reuse of existing buildings.

A small, for-profit developer is unable to wait years for "ideal" situations to be set up in a community, such as the multi-year effort often needed to adopt a form-based code. Instead,

Street view of West Belt Line Road, the arterial where Brookhollow Shopping Center is located.



Figure ground diagram of Brookhollow Shopping Center and surrounding context.



a developer needs to move quickly. Anderson assessed the property he owned through a lens of making incremental, positive change, given the existing situation. With its weak market and auto-centric nature, there was no way of making “real” urbanism on the site. There was, however, a way to develop that differed from the status quo. A conventional view of the site valued the property at approximately \$2.5 million. Anderson briefly considered maintaining the status quo, and could have brought in a Dollar Store or similar retailer for the anchor. But he instead envisioned a development, which, based on his estimates of future net operating income, would value the property closer to \$4 million.

Rather than knock the building down and start from

scratch, he worked from the inside out, adaptively reusing the building in a way that would provide uses to foster walkability and serve as a hub for the community to gather. In addition, he felt the site had far too much parking, and therefore reclaimed a portion of the parking lot for additional uses, such as food trucks and trailers. There was also the opportunity to add residential development along the edges. Although residential development in DeSoto is not the “money-maker” it is in places like Boston, Anderson felt that adding housing on-site would add to the vibrancy and “coolness” factor of the area. Additional residents would also help support the uses on-site, such as a health club and painting classes. The units were constructed with the idea that they would be affordable to employees working in the businesses.

Plan view of redevelopment, depicting locations of food trailers / pedestrian space, as well as additional housing.



## Redevelopment process

Because the property was run down from deferred maintenance, the first thing Anderson did was begin to fix it up, as any landlord should do. By 2017, the redevelopment began in earnest. Because industry behemoths Walmart and Amazon have taken over a large share of the retail market, Anderson felt that the opportunities at Brookhollow should focus on small, local businesses, providing local goods, services, and food. The process to find vendors began by holding a Shark Tank style “pitch day” where small businesses had the opportunity to pitch their businesses to a panel of five judges. In addition to Anderson, one of the judges was the mayor, who strongly supported the redevelopment effort. The businesses made their pitches, gave samples, and were rated by the judges. Among the “winners” to set up shop included a small bakery, a soul food shop, a vegan juice shop, two attorneys with a high-end shoe product, and an 11-year-old snow cone entrepreneur.

Anderson and his architect modified the interior floor plan dozens of times, based upon feedback and numerous conversations with the prospective tenants. Part of these discussions focused on what the tenants could afford and figuring out how to meet their needs within their financial constraints.

Zoning changes were required to allow for this development. The existing zoning was part of a commercial district, and amendments were made specific to the Brookhollow Shopping Center parcel through a mechanism specific to Dallas County. A simple two-page amendment included the following primary changes:

- Allowing for food trailers
- Allowing residential uses on-site
- Reducing parking requirements for both retail and the residential uses
- Adding additional allowable retail uses

The entire process took less than two years from purchase to opening. This included three to six months to study the market and site, and another three to six months on developing detailed plans. Construction was another several months.

### **Barriers encountered**

The redevelopment process went relatively smoothly, especially because the project had mayoral support from the start. Changes to the zoning ordinance, which can often hold up a project, happened quickly, and there was little to no community opposition, possibly because the changes to the existing site were modest and incremental. Anderson focused on the zoning early to create buy-in and address any issues early on in the process, although in this case it was less of an issue. The most challenging part of the redevelopment project was getting the plumbing right for the seven restaurants that were going in.

## The development

The revamped property opened in early 2018. Because the existing structure was retained, the parking remains in front of the building along the street frontage. Given the roadway context and surrounding building context, constructing a new building along the street frontage did not work as well on the site. Instead, Mr. Anderson created a “connection” from the building to the street through the use of a pedestrianized area of the parking lot. This area utilized crushed gravel instead of asphalt to be walkable and is lined with food trailers to activate the space.

Much of the exterior of the building is lined with counter-service eating establishments. The interior of the shopping center contains a variety of retail and office uses of varying sizes. On the east side of the lot are the residences. These weren’t placed along the roadway in front of the shopping center, so

that they would not block view lines from the road to the tenants. The residences consisted of five small four-plex buildings. All of the units are loft-style one bedrooms of 700-800 square feet.

***Equity considerations***

Anderson's stated mission is to make positive impacts in his community. At Brookhollow, he focused on economic development. Whereas he could have had chain retailers fill in the strip mall, he instead concentrated on bringing in local retailers, many of which are minority-owned. By creating public gathering spaces and a focus on food, what could have been a typical strip mall will instead, hopefully, create a virtuous cycle that positively impacts the community's well-being.

View of pedestrian / food trailer space under construction.



Chef Alex Goss is among the entrepreneurs setting up a business in the DeSoto Market. Photo by Andy Jacobsohn, used with permission from the Dallas Morning News.





## Keys to success

A number of elements were keys to the success for this project:

**Work locally.** By working locally, Anderson knew both the area and the market. He purchased an underutilized site with higher upside potential than others saw. He understood the area's culture, its needs, and what would work from both a social and financial standpoint. Because he knew the particulars of the site, Anderson was aware of a local ordinance that placed restrictions on developing in front of "view lines" from the street.

**Keep costs down.** In a non-affluent area, minimizing costs is part of the strategy to ensure a financially feasible project. This started from the site plan: realizing that it wasn't necessary to do a tear-down saved significant costs. There was then a focus on making inexpensive improvements, such as laying down sealed concrete floors.

**Active outdoor space.** In an auto-centric environment, sufficient parking remains vital to the health of retailers. But as noted above, there was an overcapacity of parking spaces. The surplus area was "activated" through the creation of a walkable area filled with food vendors and seating.

**Break up big box space.** Breaking down large retail space intended for big box stores allowed for smaller local businesses to occupy the space. In addition to allowing for more nimble space, it helps create a "micro" urbanism by concentrating a group of small retailers. It also has the benefit of allowing for a higher price per square foot than for one large space.

**Work closely with tenants.** Although working closely with tenants takes extra time, the result can be a more successful space. It was also designed in a way that allowed tenants to share common spaces and increase levels of interaction among otherwise independent businesses.

**THE DIOR DEDHAM, Dedham MA**



**2**

## Key stats

**Parcel size:** 0.8 acres

**Former suburban form type:** strip mall

**Retrofit strategy:** Small parcel redeveloped to create incremental change

## Background on site

Dedham is a suburb of 25,000 people, located southwest of Boston. It directly abuts some of Boston's outlying neighborhoods, although it is approximately 13 miles from downtown. The drive can take well over an hour during peak periods but is only a 30-minute ride to Boston's South Station by commuter rail, for which there are two stations in the town.

The Dior Dedham site is located along the Providence Highway, which bifurcates the town in an east-northeast direction. The six-lane road is lined with strip malls and light industrial development, characterized by numerous and wide curb cuts. Providence Highway meets an interchange with Interstate 95 to the south of the site.

The 0.8 acre property has been owned by one family since the 1970s. It contains a small strip mall with several retail establishments (e.g., a consignment shop) with a large building behind housing Dedham Cabinet Shop, a family-owned cabinetry shop. Now in its third generation, it is managed by proprietor Chris Priore, who owns the land for his business and an adjacent parcel with retail space that he leases.

Adjacent to the site on its southeast is Legacy Place, one of the largest retail lifestyle centers in the region. Legacy Place, built on a site that was once a drive-in movie theater, has a main

Dedham in relation to Boston.

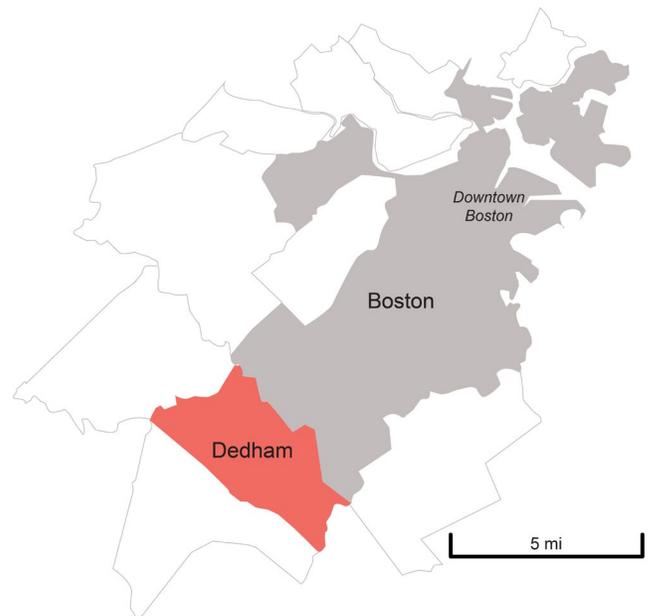
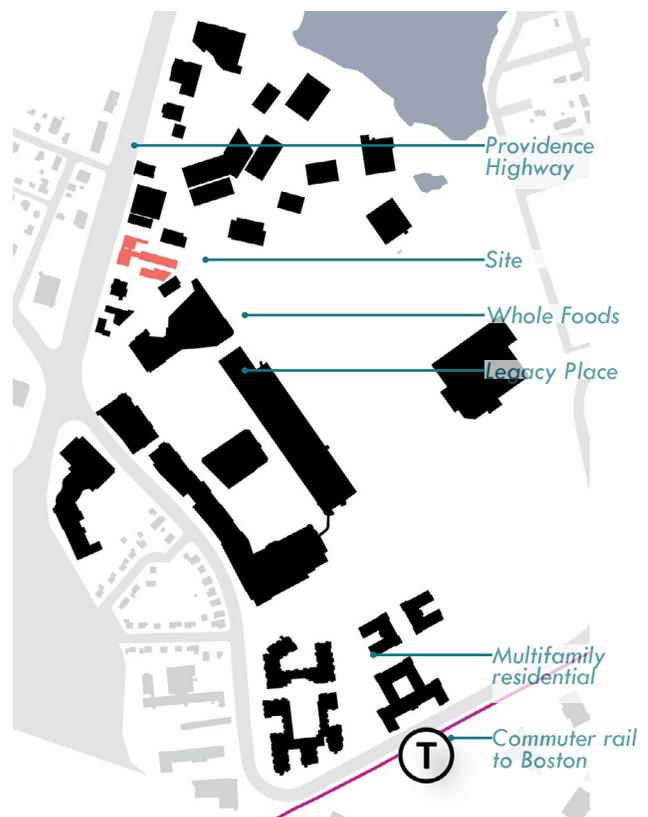


Figure ground plan of site and relationship to surrounding development.



access point on Providence Highway. It contains more than 80 chain retailers and restaurants, a 15-theater cineplex, a Whole Foods Market, a structured parking facility, and large swaths of surface parking.

On the southeast side of Legacy Place are two large residential apartment buildings, containing more than 600 units, many of which are deed-restricted as “affordable” to residents making 80 percent of the Area Median Income. Although the market-rate units cost less than comparable places in Boston, they still command relatively high rents (2-bedrooms lease for \$2,300 and up). On the southeast side of these apartments, across the street, is the Dedham Corporate Center commuter rail station.

An abundance of shops, a movie theater, everyday goods, multi-family residences, transit, and nearby open space: these sound like the ingredients for a vibrant, mixed-use neighborhood. Yet it’s immediately clear that the area does not operate as a cohesive, walkable neighborhood; furthermore, a number of parcels in the area are underdeveloped to take advantage of its transit-connected location. Given this context, the area was the subject of two studies. The first was completed by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), metropolitan Boston’s Regional Planning Agency (RPA), which conducted a study completed in summer 2017. The purpose of the study was to create a vision and assess the potential for suburban transit-oriented development.

Two issues immediately rose to the top to address the lack of neighborhood cohesion. The first was a lack of connectivity, especially

Existing conditions of the site.



Providence Highway, a six-lane arterial with a center median that divides the roadway in half.



for pedestrians. This was considered the greatest issue and the most immediate need. For example, many parts of the study area, including one of the main roadways into Legacy Place, lacked sidewalks, all but ensuring the shopping center would be visited only by drivers. The second issue was deficiencies in urban design. For example, the residential apartments were each surrounded by parking lots and cut off access from Legacy Place to the commuter rail station. Lack of pedestrian connectivity and poor urban design combined to make each use feel like an island.

At the same time, the study found there was great demand for additional residences to help meet the affordable housing crisis metropolitan Boston now faces, especially for multi-unit types. The study estimated potential demand for nearly 500 units in the study area.

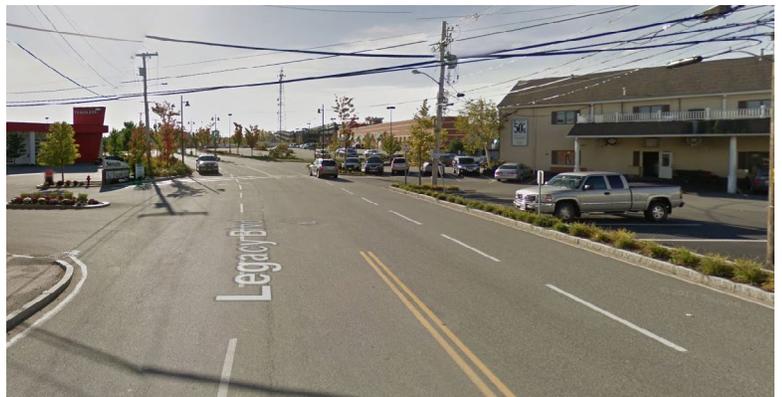
While the MAPC study was in process, the town also sponsored an Urban Land Institute Technical Assistance Panel (TAP). TAP brings together a group of ULI members with a range of professional expertise to provide a focused consultation to help communities make sound land use decisions. The panelists included experts in the fields of architecture, planning, design, law, and landscape architecture.

Although the two studies had slightly different study area boundaries and focuses, the recommendations largely support each other. Among the numerous recommendations was a suggestion to introduce additional residential and mixed-use development in a way that enhances walkability and contributes to creating a true neighborhood.

The study area is characterized by excessive pavement and parking with lack of pedestrian infrastructure. Here, the connection between the commuter rail station, multi-family buildings, and Legacy Place is through a parking lot.



Legacy Boulevard, which connects Providence Highway to Legacy Place, lacks pedestrian infrastructure.



## **Intent of project**

With the opening of Legacy Place in 2009, the surrounding property, including the Dior Dedham site, became far more attractive for redevelopment. It became apparent to Priore that there was a better use for the property than its one. In addition, as the owner's cabinetry business grew, there was a need to find an alternative location, which would free up a significant portion of the property.

Priore, who is not a developer by trade, officially acquired the properties in 2015 from his father, but had been considering the future of the property for several years. He spent a substantial amount of time brainstorming on what would work best. When his grandfather built the existing structures on the property, the surface area consisted of approximately 30 percent parking. Priore first looked into other retail opportunities, such as a bank or a Trader Joe's grocery store. But parking requirements, as dictated by the local bylaw for these uses in an auto-centric environment, have ballooned. Without a structured parking facility, surface parking would account for approximately 70 percent of the surface area. Either way would make the project financially infeasible.

Priore considered a number of plans and concepts. He felt a big box retailer would not be feasible because of the lack of necessary space for parking. He instead focused on creating space for smaller retailers that would allow for a greater diversity of tenants. He knew that Legacy Place was leasing space for between \$40-90 per square foot, whereas his property was leasing manufacturing space for only \$7 per square foot. After considering various plans and tenants, the owner was exposed to the concept of mixed-used development. He felt there would be strong demand for a mixed-use development, especially one proximate to Legacy Place and close to the commuter rail station (Within

the metropolitan Boston region's ongoing housing affordability crisis, there is especially huge demand for residential development in a walkable, mixed-use environment proximate to transit.)

## **Redevelopment process**

Priore attended the ULI TAP, which essentially confirmed what he was already thinking. He then began the redevelopment process. Once the land use program was determined, he worked with a local architect to determine site layout and architectural style. Given its location near Legacy Place and adjacent to Providence Highway, he wanted a contemporary building that would match the context, rather than constructing a traditional New England-style building that would be out of place (Dedham's town center, which dates to the colonial era and contains traditional architecture, is outside of walking distance).

In addition to working with a local architect, Priore also worked with a Dedham-based attorney to help facilitate the process. Permitting went relatively smoothly and took approximately 18 months. The property was located in the Highway Business District, which already allowed mixed-use development. There was sufficient space for parking, which was set at one space for every 200 square feet of retail, typical of suburban communities in the area. Residential parking was incorporated within the structure of the building on the first floor.

Both the town planner and, critically, the planning board were supportive of the vision. The Town of Dedham provided input that helped inform and strengthen the project, including ensuring sufficient open space and pedestrian connectivity. The entire process, including construction, took three years, with a summer 2019 opening.

### **Barriers encountered**

There was little community opposition to redeveloping the property other than a minor concern from one nearby property owner about a potential loss of view. Instead, the biggest hurdle was securing the financing necessary to undertake the redevelopment. Banks required Priore to have between 5 to 10 percent of the appraised project in liquid cash as collateral. Because he did not have sufficient liquid assets, he needed to find a partner with the funds available.

### **The development**

The development, known as Dior Dedham, contains 48 apartments and 8,500 square feet of retail space. The building is four stories facing Providence Highway and five in the rear due to slope change. The building mass is broken up into a series of smaller bays, incorporates high-quality materials, and contains abundant windows on the ground floor to activate the space.

The building is buffered from busy and congested Providence Highway by landscape bedding and trees, along with parking in the front. Because of the auto-centric nature of

Providence Highway, the development focuses the pedestrian connection on the other side toward Legacy Place. The residences are concentrated on the rear of the property, as furthest removed from noisy Providence Highway and connected to Whole Foods and Legacy Place with enhanced pedestrian connections.

### **Equity considerations**

As one small parcel in a large study area, Dior Dedham can only play an incremental role in developing the neighborhood and increasing equity. The development helps accomplish three goals set forth in the MAPC TOD plan: improving pedestrian connectivity, increasing the supply of multifamily housing, and creating well-designed spaces that enhance walkability.

While the development helps increase the supply of housing proximate to transit, all of the 48 units are market rate one- and two-bedroom apartments, starting at \$2,500. This helps meet demand for young professionals and empty nesters, but is not affordable to many residents, and the lack of three-bedroom units may hinder the ability of larger families to live in this transit-rich, mixed-use area.

Rendering and elevation drawing of the Dior Dedham.



*Proposed Mixed Use Development*  
918 Boston / Providence Turnpike - Dedham Mass.





## Keys to Success

A number of elements were keys to the success for this project:

**Use local help.** The biggest advantage to doing a project in Dedham is using the attorneys and architects who already know the town. They know what the town is expecting, have relationships with important stakeholders and decision makers, and can navigate local politics.

**Get access to cash.** Given the bank's requirements, it was critical to find a partner who had the liquid assets needed as collateral. In addition, Priore and his partner spent tens of thousands of dollars on various costs before even knowing if the project would move forward.

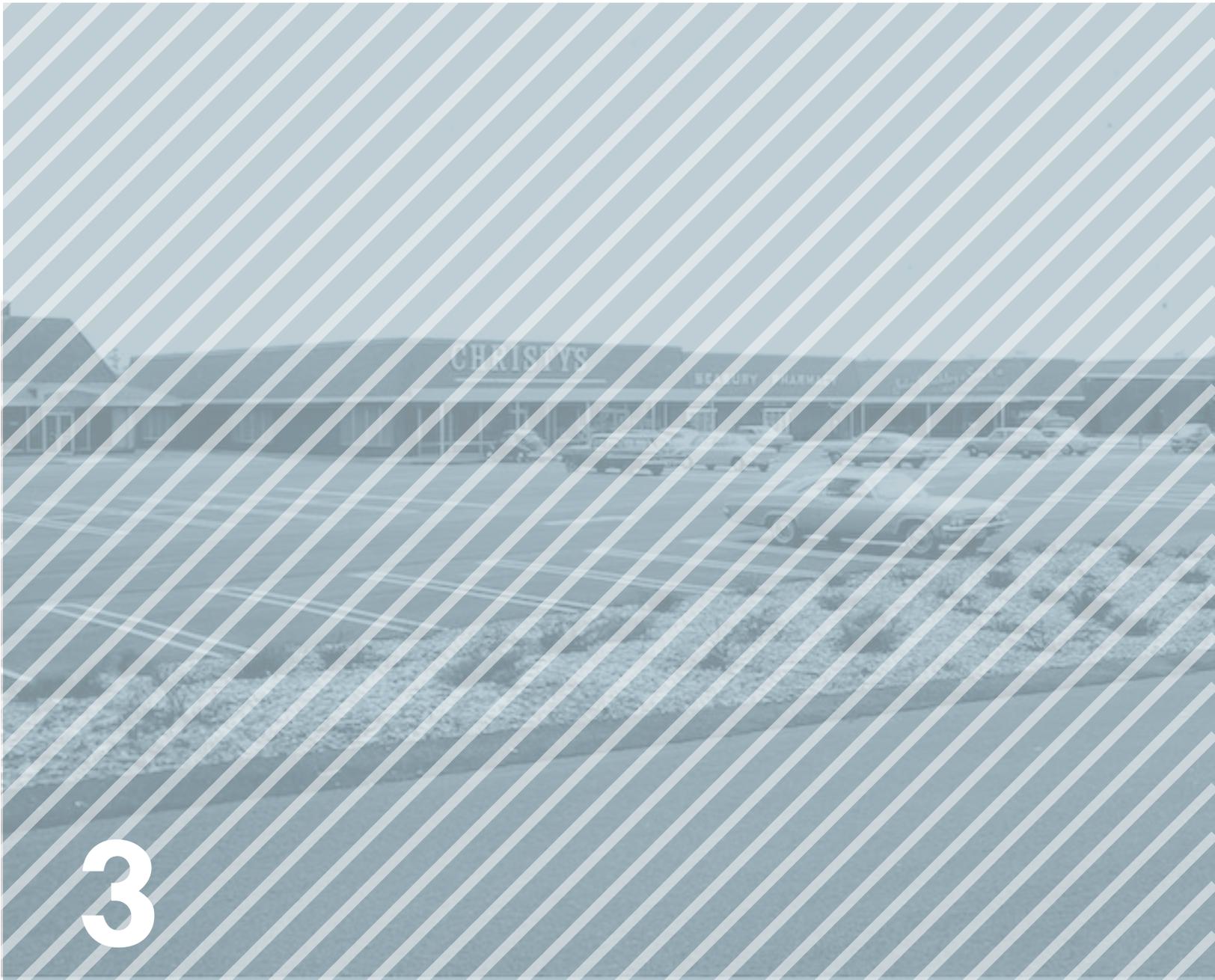
**Have patience.** Although the town was supportive of the project and there was little community opposition, there was red tape to overcome, daunting for a new developer.

**When possible, work within existing zoning.** By proposing a development that aligned with existing zoning, the owner was able to move the project much more quickly and avoid a potentially insurmountable roadblock.

**Learn, learn, learn.** Although Priore is not a developer by trade, he spent the time to understand the types of programs that are in high demand, the elements that make for a successful project, and the going rents for various uses.

**Leverage planning studies.** The two recent planning studies provided both a vision and market analysis for this area, allowing Priore to confirm his own analysis regarding the demand for a mixed-use development adjacent to Legacy Place and the commuter rail station.

MASHPEE COMMONS, Mashpee MA



## Key stats

**Parcel size:** 140 acres (56 acres developable)

**Former suburban form type:** strip mall

**Retrofit strategy:** Large-scale redevelopment over long term

## Background on site

With its quaint villages and beautiful beaches, Massachusetts' Cape Cod is an extremely popular summer destination, as well as home to a significant population of year-round residents. It can also be a particularly difficult place to construct large-scale new development. Mashpee (year-round population is 14,000, which balloons to 35,000 in summer) is one of the Cape's 15 towns, located on its south side. Inland within the town, Mashpee Commons is located at the intersection of three major roadways at a large rotary.

In 1968, a shopping strip center was built here, called the New Seabury Shopping Center. Given its location at the rotary, it was considered a good site for that development type. The 75,000 square foot strip mall had a supermarket, pharmacy, and other conveniences.

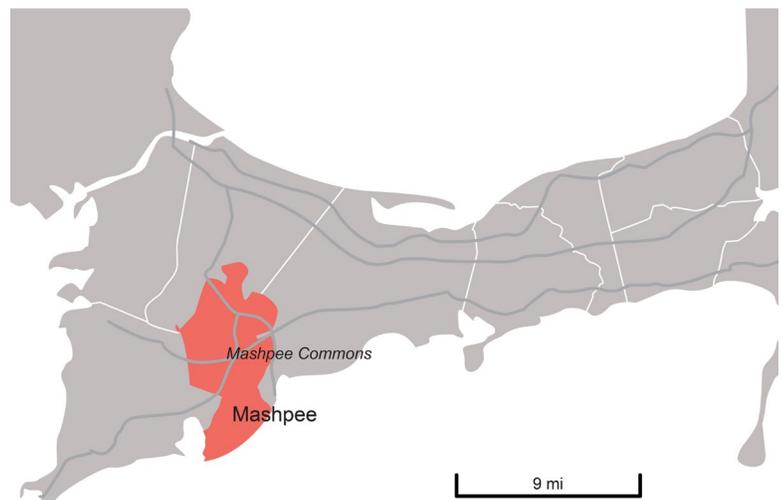
## Intent of project

In 1978, Arnold B. "Buff" Chace moved into a vacant office on the 140-acre property his family owned, and assumed responsibility for liquidating the bankrupt supermarket and figuring out what to do with the site. He was aware of Cape Cod's degradation of character via post-World War II development, which emphasized automobiles over walkable landscapes. He knew that for hundreds of years, development was generally positive, so

The original development, called the New Seabury Shopping Center.



Mashpee's location on the Cape and Mashpee Commons' location within the Town.



why not now? He felt that if he sold the property, it would be redeveloped poorly in a way that harmed both the character and ecology of the Cape. Working with Doug Storrs, whose background as an environmental planner informed his development mindset, Chace determined two key assets for why so many people loved the Cape: its character and its proximity to the ocean.

Chace and Storrs, therefore, decided that rather than sell the property, they could develop it in the tradition of Cape Cod downtowns. Chace immersed himself in what was happening around the country that was supportive of his vision. Seaside, Florida, introduced him to the nascent New Urbanism movement and the vocabulary of traditional planning principles.

### **Redevelopment process**

The redevelopment process began in 1986 with a design charrette. The charrette helped create community buy-in and led to Mashpee Commons' master plan. Many elements differed from what was expected based upon both the existing conditions and the zoning. For example, the charrette helped convince the community that walkability would be one of the most important features of the development. One of the ways to achieve this would be to orient building frontage along a gridded network of internal streets, rather than the main roadways, as was originally expected.

The developers needed to get creative in order to achieve the built form they wanted. For example, standards for streets required wide roadways and large setbacks. The developers found a work-around, however, by labeling as driveways and alleyways the new, internal roadway network they planned to build.

Zoning was not in place to implement the vision,

so the developers obtained a Special Permit through the Town of Mashpee's Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA). Implementation first focused on retail development. They were influenced by the 1970s-80s trend of festival marketplaces that featured spaces programmed with various community activities. This type of placemaking helped increase the early popularity of the site. A second Special Permit issued by the Planning Board in 1993 allowed for an addition phase of development, centered around North Market Street, began in 1993.

The developers did not want Mashpee Commons to simply be a revamped shopping center. Providing more than only a few dozen units of housing, they realized, was the missing link to creating a true neighborhood. In 2006, the developers received a comprehensive permit under Chapter 40B, a Massachusetts law that aims to promote production of affordable housing. Chapter 40B requires all communities in Massachusetts to have 10 percent of their housing included on a Subsidized Housing Inventory, which helps ensure housing is affordable to those making 80 percent of Area Median Income. Communities that do not meet this 10 percent requirement must allow developments that include at least 20-25 percent of affordable units to be permitted. The developers received a permit for 382 units, along with an additional 41,000 square feet of commercial space.

Rather than developing under Chapter 40B, the developers are now in the process of focusing on adding housing targeted to the lower end of the non-subsidized housing market, addressing the need for "missing middle" housing that caters to empty nesters, middle income workers, and young professionals who are feeding the greater demand for living in walkable areas. The developers hope that creating smaller units in places where living

doesn't always mean owning a car will diversify the choices and reduce pressure on the single-family detached homes that make up the majority of the housing stock on the Cape, thus attracting more families to the area. Adding housing also diversifies the developers' revenue streams. As in other parts of Massachusetts, there is strong demand for housing, and the macro trends of increased numbers of empty nesters and young professionals especially led to a greater demand for living in walkable areas. The developers hope that creating smaller units in places where living doesn't always mean owning a car will free up more of the limited single-family detached homes on the Cape, thus attracting more families to the area. Adding housing also diversifies the developers' revenue streams.

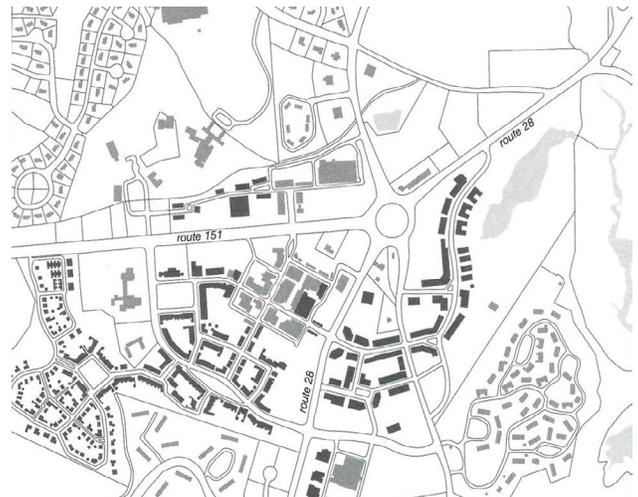
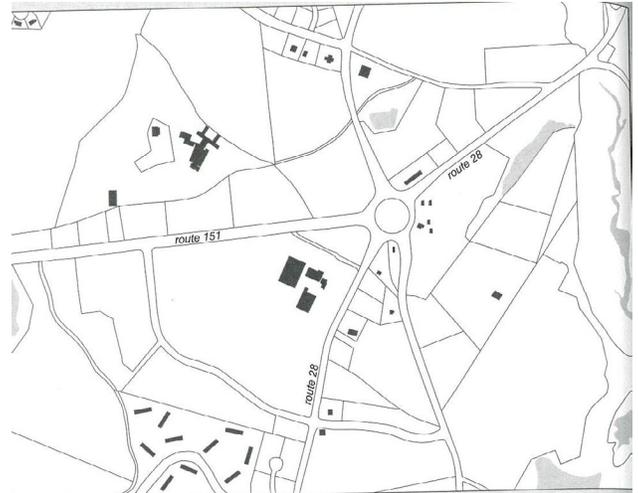
To create the plan for future residential areas, the developers are currently working with the community to understand its desires and find the best mechanism to implement the vision. After an almost year-long community engagement process the developers have proposed a change to local zoning regulations to add a chapter for a form-based code that would govern the development area.<sup>1</sup> If approved at Town Meeting (which requires a 2/3 affirmative vote) the Planning Board would administer the code.

The developers are also entertaining the idea of becoming a master developer to set up the conditions to allow other developers to carry out the vision. This could allow future development to occur more quickly than it has to date.

### **Barriers encountered**

In the more than 30 years since the original charrette, there have been numerous barriers to overcome. Back at the beginning, Mashpee didn't even have a town planner, and as noted

Figure-field diagrams of site in 1985 (top) and projected 2025 (bottom). Source: [Retrofitting Suburbia](#) (2009).



<sup>1</sup>A form-based code is a land development regulation that fosters predictable built results and a high-quality public realm by using physical form (rather than separation of uses) as the organizing principle for the code. A form-based code is a regulation, not a mere guideline, adopted into city, town, or county law.

above, the zoning does not allow for a traditional neighborhood development.

Another issue has been the increased density and concerns related to the residential development. A second charrette in 2002 made numerous changes to the street network and the way the residential areas knit in with the commercial portions.

### **Mitigation and required improvements**

The Cape Cod Commission, the regional planning agency for the Cape, has been visionary in supporting Mashpee Commons, according to Chace. Created in 1990, the commission has authority to plan and enforce the development of regional plans, policies, regulations, and infrastructure as a means to manage growth on Cape Cod. There have been a series of mitigations required for a development of this size, including traffic mitigation. To date, the commission and the developers have been able to strike a balance between mitigation and ensuring the project is financially feasible.

Wastewater treatment is a major issue in Mashpee. Many Cape Cod communities do not have municipal sewer systems and instead rely on individual septic systems. This has led to environmental issues related to the buildup of nitrogen in bays and estuaries. The developers agreed to install a large wastewater treatment plant. The wastewater facility has been expanded with each new phase of development and handles wastewater flow from municipal buildings, as well.

### **The development**

What was once a strip mall has now become one of the country's original and most famous suburban retrofit projects. Traditional architecture frames small streets to create a strong pedestrian

experience. The projected total buildout of Mashpee Commons of the existing plans is approximately 350,000 square feet of commercial space and 100 residential units. There are 45 residential units currently built in Mashpee Commons, all of which are rental units. The next phase of development will focus on additional residential units.

Approximately 75 percent of the square footage is first-floor space and 25 percent is second floor space. The developers didn't want to build all one-story buildings. Many buildings, therefore, contained a second story for office space. Originally, these spaces were considered "loss leaders," i.e., they were not profitable themselves but enhanced the value of the first floors. Over time, however, they filled up with various uses, such as doctor and dentist offices.

The developers created retail space with a variety of sizes. This has allowed for different types of shops and restaurants, helping to create a sense of place. They focus on attracting approximately one-third national chains, one-third regional chains, and one-third local businesses. Because of their success, Mashpee Commons now has sufficient clout that national chains will deviate from their standards in order to fit into Mashpee Commons' spaces.

Mashpee Commons today.





## Keys to success

A number of elements were keys to the success for this project:

**Follow the path of least resistance.** In situations where changing regulations can be extremely difficult, there are often alternative ways to get a project built. Rather than amend the existing zoning bylaws and other regulations, Mashpee Commons received special permits and utilized Massachusetts' Chapter 40B Comprehensive Permit. Even more innovative, they classified what were functionally local roadways as driveways to avoid overly stringent rules related to their design. The developers called this following the path of least resistance.

**Start with commercial uses, but include civic uses and a vision for expandability to residential.** Mashpee Commons began as a retail center which included civic uses such as a post office, church, and library. Because Mashpee lacked a traditional town center, creating one helped meet the original demand. As macro trends changed and demand for residential has exploded in Massachusetts, Mashpee Commons is now poised to create compact residential neighborhoods connected to the retail districts.

**When possible, focus on a single large landowner.** As a large landowner, Chace was able to effect transformative, large-scale change in a town that had no true downtown.

**Be in it for the long term.** A criticism of some large developments is a feeling of lack of authenticity. Although Mashpee Commons has one owner, the long-term nature of its development has allowed for the evolutionary creation of a town center, something that can respond as market demands and community desires change. Despite being owned by a single owner, this has led to development more akin to the way the original town centers throughout New England were developed.

## SUMMARY

Our suburbs are now experiencing population shifts that call for new forms and many more choices for how to live, work, and get around. Take these statistics from David Dixon, co-author of Suburban Remix: Creating the Next Generation of Urban Places (Island Press 2018):

- Before 2010, most of US population growth was among people aged 35 to 65. From now until well into the 21st century, people age 65 or older will account for more than half of population growth (US Census Bureau).
- Well into the 2030s, roughly 80 percent of net new households will be singles and couples, boosting urban housing markets (Harvard University Joint Center for Housing Studies).
- There is a shortage of knowledge workers—already 10 percent and growing. Knowledge jobs and investment are following educated workers, who generally prefer to live and work in urban places (McKinsey Global Institute). If the suburbs want to stay competitive for jobs, their design and development will be a major factor in their prospects.

Even as these changes affect the expectations for the suburbs, the suburban landscape often remains fixed in its old ways with its old forms. The examples in this study illustrate three distinct ways for redeveloping one of these forms, i.e., the suburban strip mall. Whether adaptive reuse of an existing structure or long-term, transformative change of a large area, all of these projects exemplify a commitment to making a positive impact on the community.

An important attribute of each of these projects was that they took advantage of unique assets—be they a nearby transit station, historic community character, or local talent waiting to be tapped. Furthermore, these projects gained community support and moved forward thanks to each developer's awareness of the context in which he was working.

Above all, each of these projects was tied to place, creating change that was consistent with the existing values and attributes of the community. These case studies can hold lessons for different ways to create more walkable, vibrant destinations from aging suburban strip malls.



### About the Metropolitan Area Planning Council

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) is the regional planning agency serving the people who live and work in the 101 cities and towns of Metropolitan Boston. Its mission is to promote smart growth and regional collaboration. The regional plan, MetroFuture, guides its work to engage the public in responsible stewardship of the region's future.

MAPC works toward sound municipal management, sustainable land use, protection of natural resources, efficient and affordable transportation, a diverse housing stock, public safety, economic development, clean energy, healthy communities, an informed public, and equity and opportunity among people of all backgrounds.



### About the Congress for New Urbanism

Members of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) help create vibrant and walkable cities, towns, and neighborhoods where people have diverse choices for how they live, work, shop, and get around. People want to live in well-designed places that are unique and authentic. CNU's mission is to help people build those places.

With nineteen local and state chapters, and headquarters in Washington, DC, CNU works to unite the New Urbanist movement. Our projects and campaigns serve to empower our members' efforts, identify policy opportunities, spread great ideas and innovative work to a national audience, and catalyze new strategies for implementing policy through design approaches.

### Build a Better Burb

The Online Journal of Suburban Design

### About Build a Better Burb

Build a Better Burb is an online publication dedicated to improving suburban design and planning. Through articles and insights, BBB helps suburban residents, developers, and officials explore solutions from across the country that can be applied to their communities.

Build a Better Burb showcases innovative ideas and practical tips for outstanding projects, seeking to inspire conversation about the importance of design and planning within suburban communities. The articles on the site highlight bold ideas for improving housing, promoting regional planning, addressing parking and creating transit-oriented development. Above all, BBB aims to focus on what it takes to create a sense of place within suburban downtowns and neighborhoods.