



A Master Plan for

The Bidwell Site

January 2024

PREPARED FOR

The Town of Athol, Massachusetts





Acknowledgments

Town of Athol

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- Attachment B. Public Engagement Results – Community Conversation and Town-wide Survey
- Attachment C. Maps (11x17)
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Section 1. Introduction

Project Background

Located at 1595 South Athol Road, the Bidwell Site (Site) was formerly used for agricultural and logging purposes. Records from the Worcester District Registry of Deeds indicate that the Site originally consisted of 134 acres. Today, the Site comprises approximately 100 acres of undeveloped forestland, the Millers River, Rabbit Run Rail Trail, and an on-site agricultural barn that is in a state of disrepair.

The Town of Athol purchased the Site for \$550,000 in 2009 at a Special Town Meeting. In 2023, the Town received grant funding to explore, with community input, the most optimal use(s) for the Site. A community-wide planning process was employed to inform the recommendations identified in this plan.

Downtown Athol has historically been a center for commercial and industrial commerce. The Millers River has been a catalyst for economic development. In recent years, the Town has pursued development opportunities in the urban core of downtown Athol. The Town recently received federal designation as an Opportunity Zone which provides tax incentives to distressed communities.

A Community Visioning Session was hosted in partnership with *Crossroads: Change in Rural America*, part of Museum on Main Street, a collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution and Mass Humanities. Support for Museum on Main Street was provided by the United States Congress. The Bidwell Site Master Plan was made possible through a grant from the Executive Office of Administration and Finance, Community Compact Program.

THE BIDWELL PROPERTY - SOUTH ATHOL ROAD



Population and Demographics

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Athol has a total population of approximately 11,922. The town's population increased 3% between 2010 and 2020. Its population is largely comprised of those aged 55-64 (see Figure 1 - Population by Age). Over eleven percent (11%) of the population is approaching retirement age (ages 65-74) while 26% are under 25 years old. The median age in Athol is 45 years old.¹

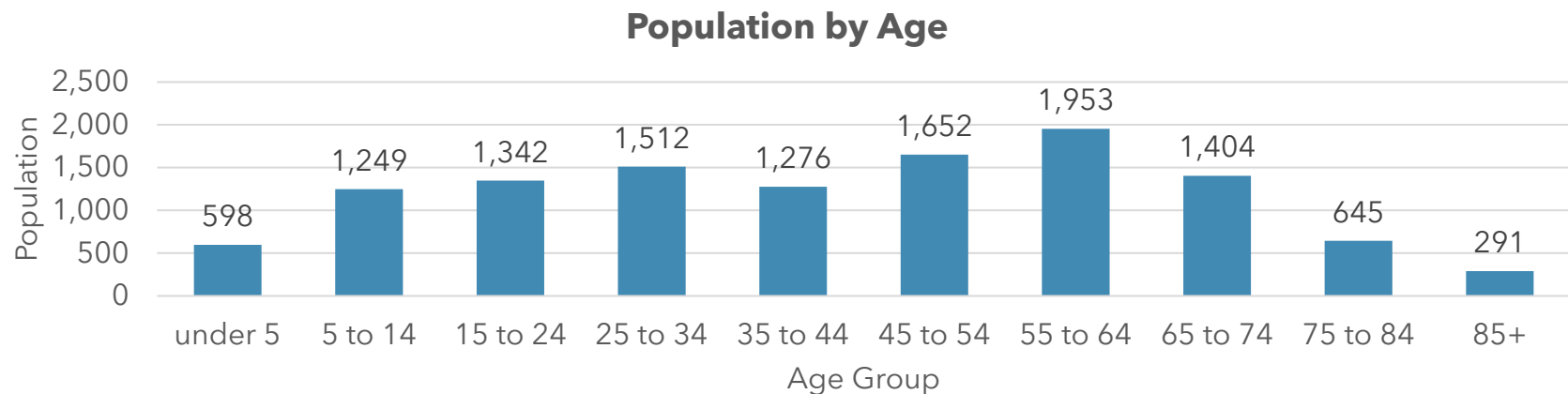


Figure 1. Population by Age

In 2021, 93.4% of ACS survey respondents reported their race and ethnicity as White alone, 1.1% as Black or African American alone, 0.1% as American Indian and Alaska Native alone, 0.7% as Asian alone, 0.8% as some other race, and 3.9% as two or more races. Approximately five percent (5.2%) of ACS survey respondents reported as persons of Hispanic or Latino origin. Persons of Latino and Hispanic origin make up Athol's largest minority group.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau 2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Athol has about 5,300 total housing units, and approximately 4,700 total households.² The median gross rent is \$889 per month. The homeownership rate in Athol is 70%. The median household income (MHI) in Athol is approximately \$58,275, which is \$30,751 less than the Commonwealth MHI (\$89,026). The rate of poverty in Athol is 11%, which is one percent higher than Worcester County (10%). Most homes in Athol are valued between \$150,000 to \$299,000, with about 3% of homes valued at over \$500,000.

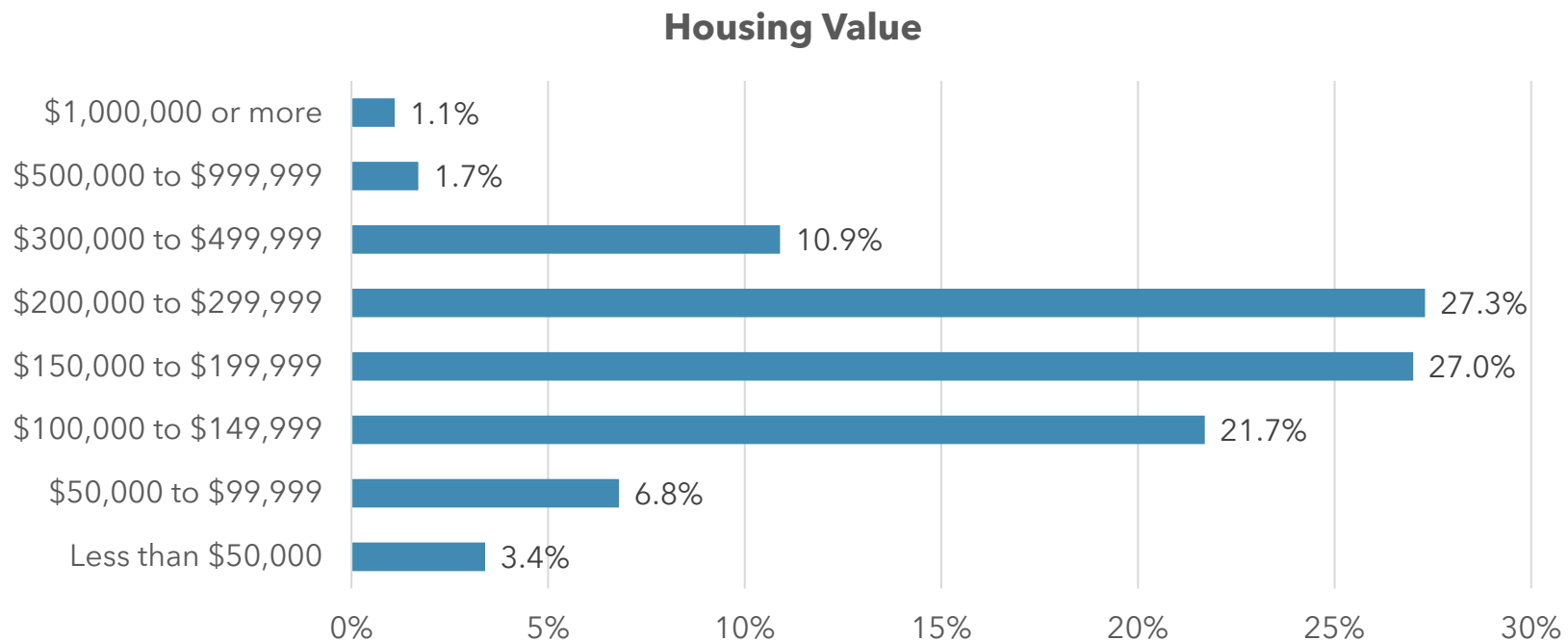


Figure 2. Housing Value

² U.S. Census Bureau 2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Other Notable Statistics³

- The total number of housing units in town is 5,291 and there are 4,734 total households.
- The median gross rent is \$889 per month.
- The homeownership rate in Athol is 70%.
- Of the total households in Town, 43% are married-couple family households, 13% are cohabiting couple households, and 44% are non-family households (no spouse/partner present). Of the 2,098 non-family households, 18% are male householders and 26% are female householders.
- The average household size in Athol is 2.49 persons.
- In Athol, over 19% of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher.
- In 2022, the town's unemployment rate averaged 4.6%.
- The average travel time to work for employed residents ages 16 and over is about 29 minutes, and 75% of residents drive alone to work while 12% report carpooling to work.
- The median annual household income is \$58,275.
- Most residents in town are employed in the fields of arts, entertainment, and health care or social assistance (27%). About 17% work in manufacturing, while 13% work in retail trade. Many residents are employed by private companies, followed by local, state, and federal government.

³ U.S. Census Bureau 2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

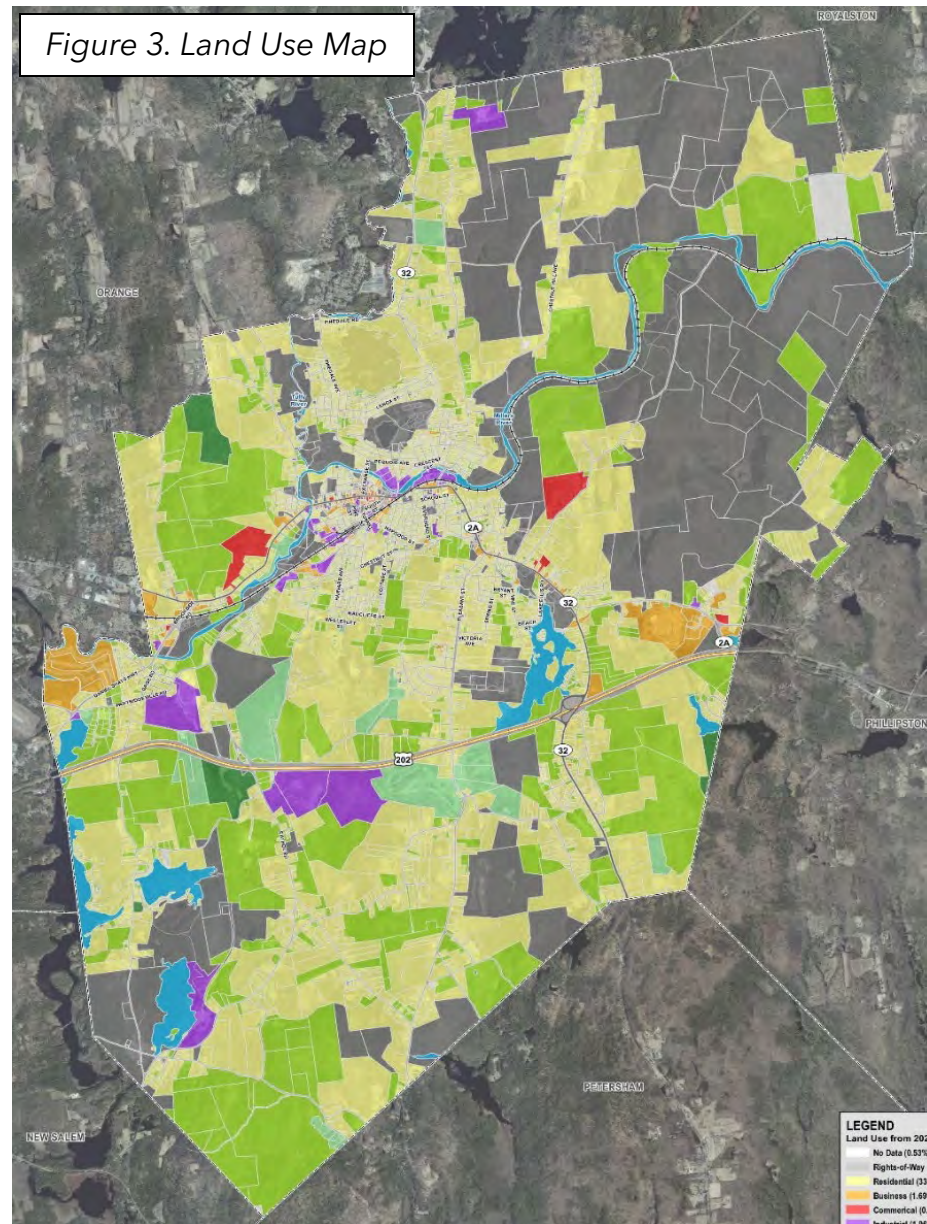
The Town of Athol consists primarily of residential parcels (33.5%) followed by municipal or tax-exempt land (29.5%). A significant portion of the town is open space and vacant land (22%) with a small number of recreational parcels (2%). Downtown Athol contains a majority of the town's industrial, commercial, and business parcels.⁴

The Bidwell Property is categorized as municipal land.

Community Planning Context

Town priorities identified through the 2002 Master Plan and Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) include enhancing recreational opportunities, prioritizing natural resources, and affording conservation opportunities. These plans play a crucial role in guiding the Town to make informed decisions regarding the development of the Bidwell Site in a way that is consistent with long-term planning goals.

⁴ See Attachment C for larger images of maps in the report.



2020 Open Space and Recreation Plan

The Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) recommends ways to attract business in downtown Athol, providing jobs and increasing the tax base, while simultaneously conserving undeveloped land outside of the downtown area. The OSRP action plan map identifies two main areas in Town to focus future conservation efforts. These areas, within North and South Athol, require greater protection to conserve biodiversity and NHESP endangered species. Northern areas include the Bearsden Forest, and the southern area focuses on four large, forested blocks.

While the Bidwell site is not included in the southern focus area, it is a large parcel that has the potential to provide additional open space and recreation opportunities.

Broad goals of the OSRP include:

- Clean, safe parks suitable for a wide range of recreational interests for children and adults. These parks will have nice walking areas, ballfields, beaches, fishing areas, and places to relax.
- Diverse, well-distributed, and connected open space areas for water protection, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation, and to protect the character of the rural parts of town.
- New and revitalized commercial and economic development areas where they are most efficient from a commercial perspective and have the least negative impact on the town's natural areas.

Important objectives applicable to the Bidwell Site include:

- Expand parks and open space areas to improve them and create new recreational opportunities.

- The historic rail bed of the “Rabbit Run” (Rail Trail) could be the nucleus of a path linking conservation areas in South Athol to the center of town.
- Investigate town funding sources for long-term dedicated funding of open space and recreation needs. Sources could include CPA, capital campaigns, sale of development rights for some conversation areas, and funds from forest harvests on town lands.

Athol’s landscape is characterized by a substantial amount of open space property, particularly in the northeast corner. This expansive area is under the stewardship of State Agencies, such as the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) and the Department of Fish and Game.

In south Athol, open space is predominantly held under a combination of municipal and private ownership.

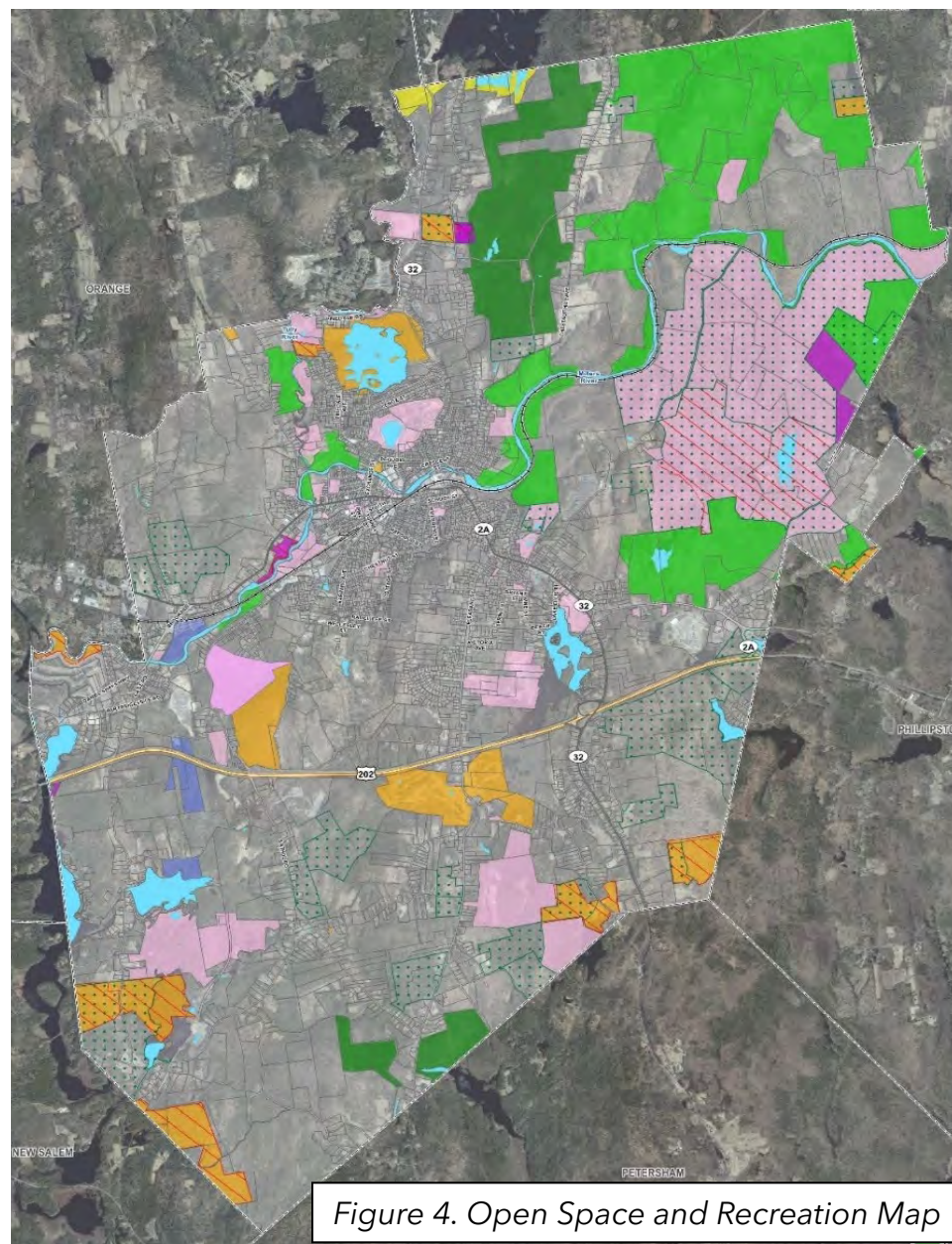


Figure 4. Open Space and Recreation Map

2002 Comprehensive Master Plan

While the Town is in the process of updating parts of its Comprehensive Master Plan, there are several master plan goals that were used as guidance during this Bidwell Site planning process. These include:

Natural Resource and Open Space

- Maintain, improve, and protect Athol's natural resources, including lakes, streams, wetlands, public water supplies, forest, farmland, and wildlife and their habitat areas.
- Preserve and enhance public access to significant natural resources and open space areas.
- Coordinate with regional conservation land trusts to permanently protect open space, forestland, and farmland parcels that have been identified as important to preserve from development.
- A focus on the conservation of land along the Millers River Greenway is identified for recreational activities and wildlife conservation.
- Identify potential future public water supplies and their recharge area. Delineate Zone II boundaries for these potential water sources and expand the Groundwater Protection Overlay District to encompass these areas.

Community Facilities and Services

- Improve the Town's existing recreational resources and plan for future recreational needs of all Athol residents.

- Develop new and expand existing multi-use recreational trails connecting Athol's open space, natural, historic, and cultural resources to its residential areas.
- Identify and acquire land parcels to improve public access to the Millers River for recreational activities.

Housing

- Encourage a mix of housing types, densities, ownership patterns, and prices to serve diverse households while maintaining the community's character.
- Balance residential development with the provision of municipal services and the protection of natural resources.
- Encourage small-scale rental housing and opportunities for residents of all ages and life stages.
- Consider cluster zoning in rural areas to protect open space and natural resources and to provide lower cost single-family housing.

Historic and Scenic Resources

- Identify, promote, and protect Athol's historic and scenic resources including buildings, sites, and landscapes.
- Determine which sites in town contain historic elements and character and have preservation opportunities.

Section 2. Existing Conditions Analysis

At a Special Town Meeting in 2009, on the motion of Robert Parks, it was voted that the Town purchase the parcel on South Athol Road (now called the Bidwell Site) contingent on the sale of the old middle school at 494 School Street.

The Town purchased the land in November 2009 for \$550,000 using the money from the school sale.⁵ See Attachment A for documentation of the Town Meeting vote.

The deed documentation states that the Southern New England Conference of Seventh Day Adventists, as Trustee of the Bidwell Nominee and Trust and Trustee of the Dewey W. Bidwell Charitable Remainder Unitrust of 2009, sold the land to the Town of Athol on November 12, 2009.⁶

Surrounding Area

Land use for parcels surrounding the Bidwell site include recreational, open space/vacant land, and residential. The southern parcel neighboring the site is the Pequig Bowmen Club, a 104.7-acre



⁵ Worcester District Registry of Deeds, Book 39958, Page 238

⁶ Worcester District Registry of Deeds, Book 45093, Page 376

archery range identified as recreational property. There is a subdivision neighborhood to the north that contains open space parcels. Nine of the subdivision properties border the northern boundary of the Bidwell site.

Right of Way and Utility Easements

The 100-acre parcel, outlined in red on the image to the right, is bordered by South Athol Road to the west, a large private property to the south, and a small residential subdivision neighborhood in the north. The Site is primarily evergreen and deciduous forest and contains an open field and small driveway accessed from South Athol Road. There is an agricultural barn on the Site. Another access point is from the eastern corner of the site that abuts Chase Road. However, wetlands are present in this part of the site, restricting access.

MassDEP delineated wetlands are identified in the southeastern corner of the parcel and comprise about 9% of the overall Site.

Wetlands identified in the eastern corner of the site abutting Chase Road are recognized as a habitat of

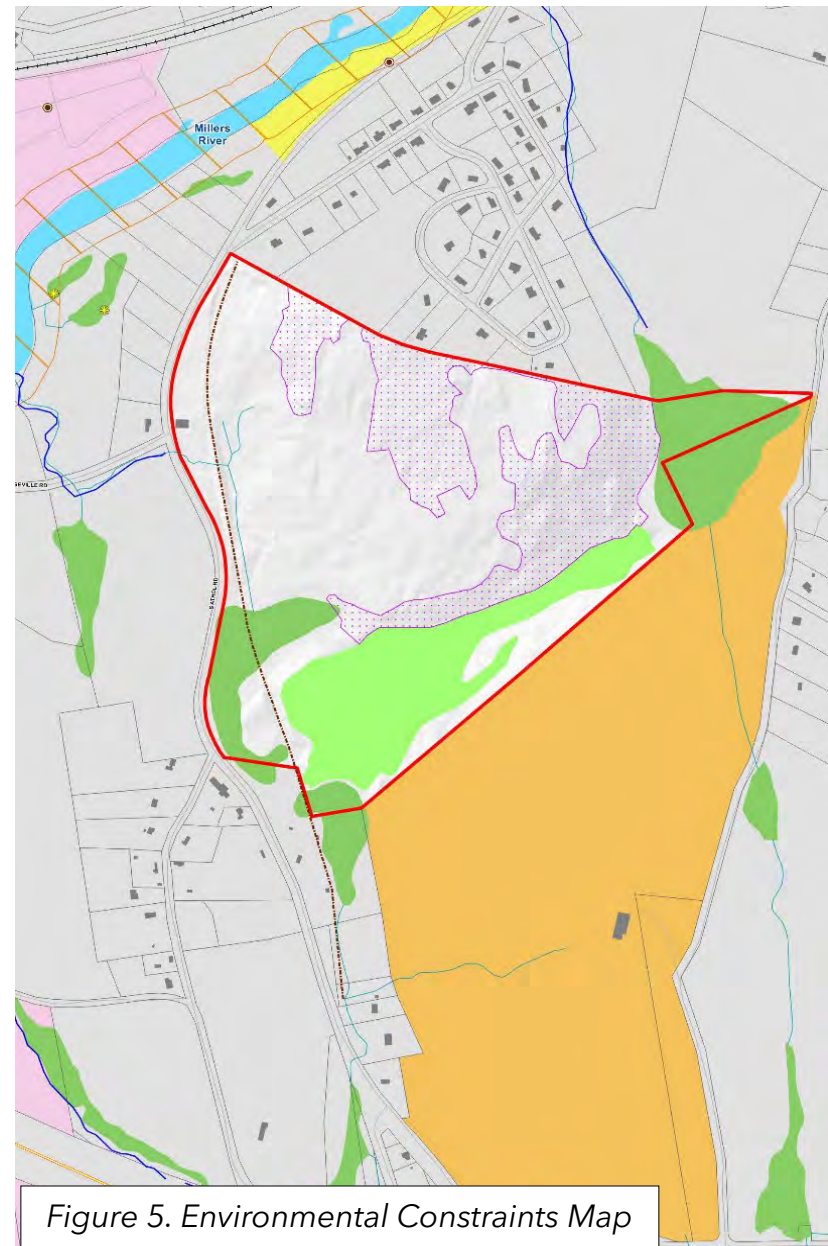


Figure 5. Environmental Constraints Map

potential regional or statewide importance through the UMass Conservation Assessment and Prioritization System.⁷ There are potential wetlands identified along the southern boundary of the Site, comprising 15% of the site. In total, almost 25% of the 100-acre Bidwell site is wetlands. There are no Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP) areas located within the Site. The closest NHESP areas are along the Millers River.

According to MassGIS data, the property contains “farmland of statewide importance” and “prime farmland.” The Site is also widely identified as prime forest land.

The classification of prime farmland soils is based upon the combination of physical and chemical characteristics for economically producing sustained high yields of food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops (MassGIS, 2021).

Farmland soils of statewide importance are those that, in addition to prime farmland, are of statewide importance to produce food, feed, fiber, forage, and oil seed crops, as determined by the appropriate state agency or agencies (MassGIS, 2021).

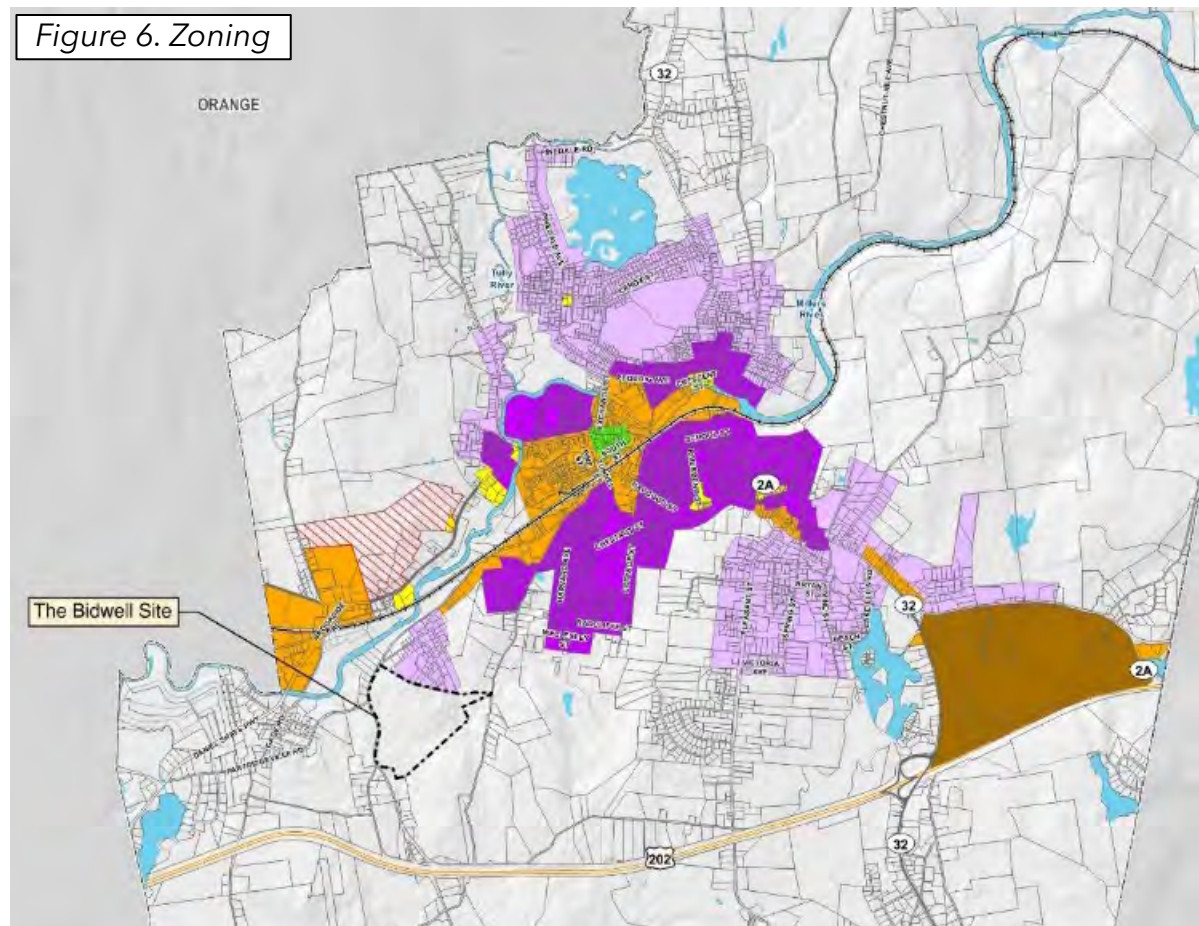


⁷ UMass Amherst Conservation Assessment and Prioritization System

Existing Zoning Regulations

The Bidwell site is within the Rural Single-Family Residential (RC) Zoning District. Per the Town's Zoning Bylaws, the RC District is intended to provide areas for single family homes, however, two family and multi-family homes are allowed with a Special Permit. Lot sizes in the RC District are required to be a minimum of 44,000 square feet with a frontage of at least 160 feet. Permitted uses by right in the RC District include all agricultural uses. Nursery or greenhouse uses with a retail sales component requires a special permit.

"Home Occupation" is the only commercial use permitted by right in the RC District. Commercial uses allowed with a special permit include animal kennel or hospitals, bed and breakfast, bookstores, business or professional offices, funeral homes, indoor marijuana cultivation, print shops, and retail business.



Industrial uses permitted by special permit (SP) are light industrial uses in existing buildings.

By right residential uses include single family dwellings, temporary single mobile homes, and private guest houses. Uses allowed with a special permit include two-family, multi-family up to four families and over four families, single family to multi-family conversions, boarding houses, commercial guest houses, assisted living residencies, nursing or rest homes, and accessory agriculture.

Section 3.16 Open Space Residential Design (OSRD)

Within the Town's Zoning, there is an Open Space Residential Design (OSRD) provision. The purpose of this bylaw is to allow for more flexibility and creativity in residential development designs, as well as to encourage the permanent preservation of open space, agricultural land, forestry land, wildlife habitat, vistas, and other natural resources including aquifers, water bodies and wetlands, and historical and archaeological resources. The intent of the bylaw is to also encourage a less sprawling and more efficient development, minimizing total land disturbance and furthering the goals and policies of planning efforts endorsed by the Town.

It is applicable to any "Major Residential Development"⁸ within the RC district and requires a special permit from the Planning Board. A minimum of fifty percent (50%) of the site must be dedicated to open space. Wetland areas may be included in the total open space; however, they may not exceed the overall percentage of wetland on the site under existing conditions. The open space shall be contiguous, but this requirement may be waived by the Planning Board. The open space shall be used for wildlife habitat and conservation and the following additional purposes: historic preservation, outdoor education, passive recreation, aquifer protection, agriculture, horticulture,

⁸ Major Residential Development - Any proposed residential subdivision that would create five or more lots.

forestry, a combination of these uses, and shall be served by suitable access for such purposes. The Planning Board may permit a small portion of the open space to be paved or built upon for structures accessory to the dedicated use or uses of such open space (i.e., pedestrian walks and bike paths) so long as it supports the primary and secondary purposes of the OSRD and is consistent with state and local level environmental protections. Overall, the OSRD allows for the reduction of Dimensional Requirements relative to frontage, minimum lot area, and setbacks.

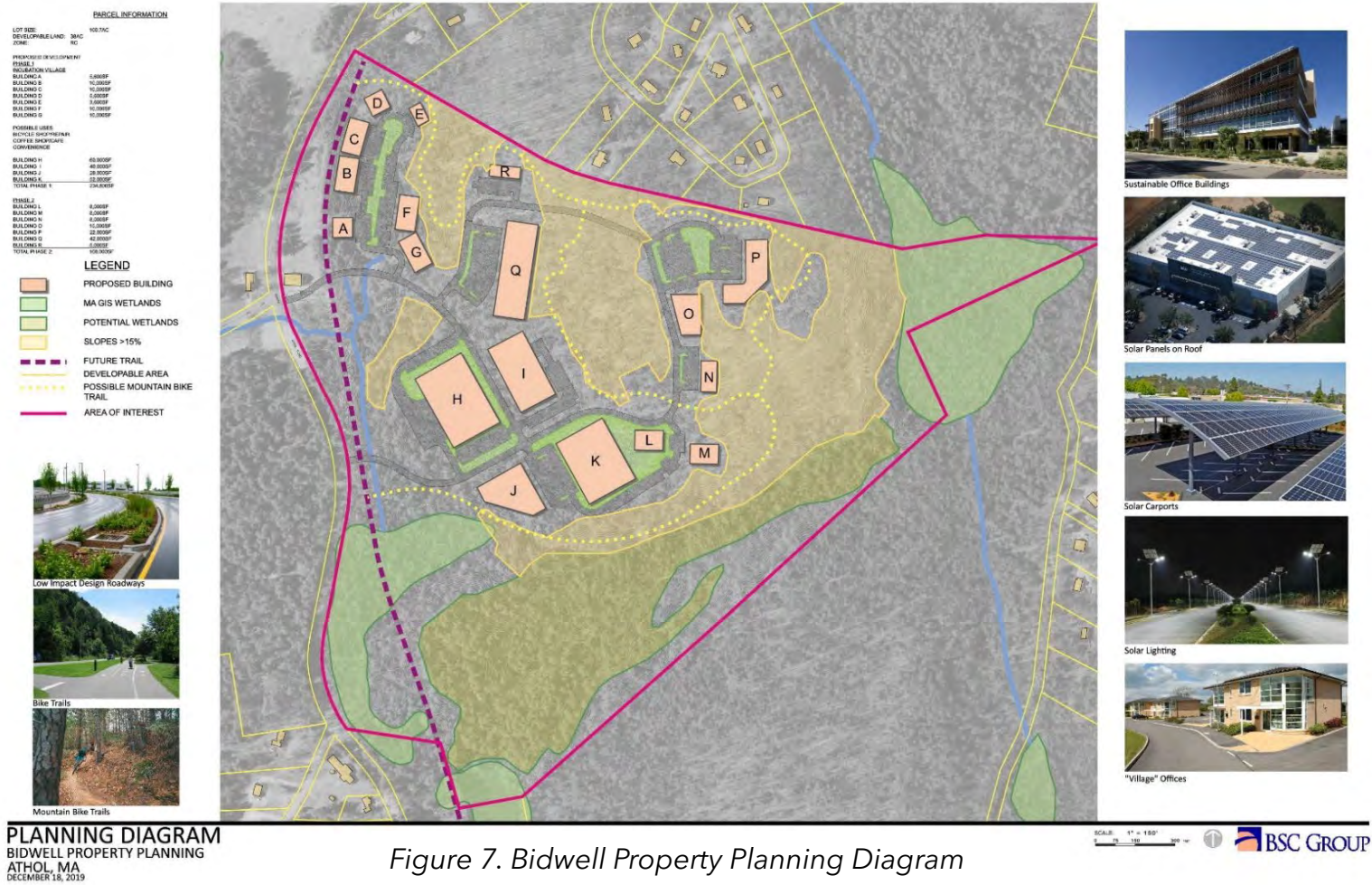
If the Town wishes to encourage a residential development at the Bidwell Site, the OSRD may provide the flexibility to preserve a significant portion of the Site for open space while also helping to further the Town's overall housing goal "to provide safe, comfortable, and affordable housing for current and future residents of Athol."⁹



⁹ Town of Athol Housing Production Plan, 2023

Previous Conceptual Development

In 2018, BSC completed a planning and feasibility study for the Bidwell Site to prepare a conceptual development plan for the property but with a lens for commercial development. The Planning Diagram below was the result of this effort.



Section 3. Community Engagement

On May 23, 2023, the Town of Athol held a “Community Conversation” in partnership with *Crossroads: Change in Rural America*, a collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution and Mass Humanities. A panel of local experts on conservation, open space, business, and real estate provided multiple perspectives on the future potential of the Bidwell Site from a local scale and within the greater context of the region. The panel included the following topics and speakers:

- Conservation and open space; Dave Small, Athol Planning Board and Open Space & Recreation Committee
- Cultural, historic, and recreation; Aaron Nelson, Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust
- Residential and housing trends/needs; Sara Lyman, LAER Realty Partners
- Commercial, institution, and mixed-use development; Keith McGuirk, Athol EDIC



Figure 8. Community Conversation
Photo Courtesy: Dave Small

Following the panel discussion BSC Group conducted an “open house” style public engagement session where attendees could move to various stations around the room, review maps and visual graphics, and interact with the consultants, town employees, and other attendees.

The public engagement portion of the event provided participants with the opportunity to comment on several topics that were discussed by the panel, including housing, future land use development at the Bidwell Site, thoughts on a potential Route 2 Interchange, as well as general thoughts/feelings about future development in Athol.

Attendees were asked, “Which housing type do you think best suits the town’s growth?” Overall, participants were in favor of cottage style housing. The second most selected option was for houses and accessory dwelling units and small lot houses. Participants had the option to select more than one choice.

Participants were also asked for their thoughts on how the Bidwell Site could be used in the future. Overall, participants felt that the best use of the Bidwell site was for open space and conservation land. For this exercise, open space included any active or passive use.

A summary of the full community engagement results can be found in Attachment B.

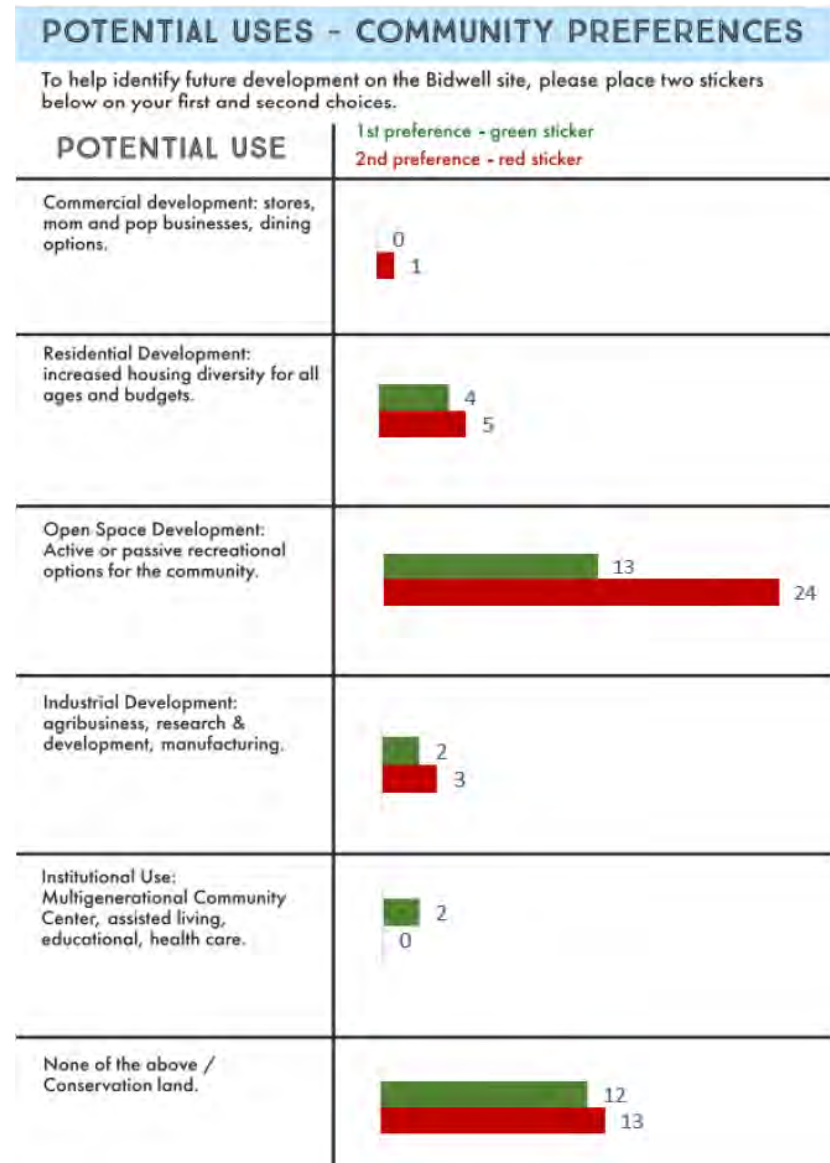


Figure 9. Bidwell Site Reuse Results; Community Conversation

Town-wide Survey

A town-wide survey was conducted to solicit additional feedback from the community on the preferred future use of the Bidwell Site. The survey was informed by feedback collected at the Community Conversation event, and the purpose was to expand the amount of feedback received.

The survey was available online and through paper copies. The survey was open from July 19, 2023 - August 11, 2023. A total of 427 responses were received. Those who completed the survey reported a preference for maintaining the site as conservation land or open space and recreation use, and supported restoration of the barn.

See Attachment B for a full summary of the survey results.

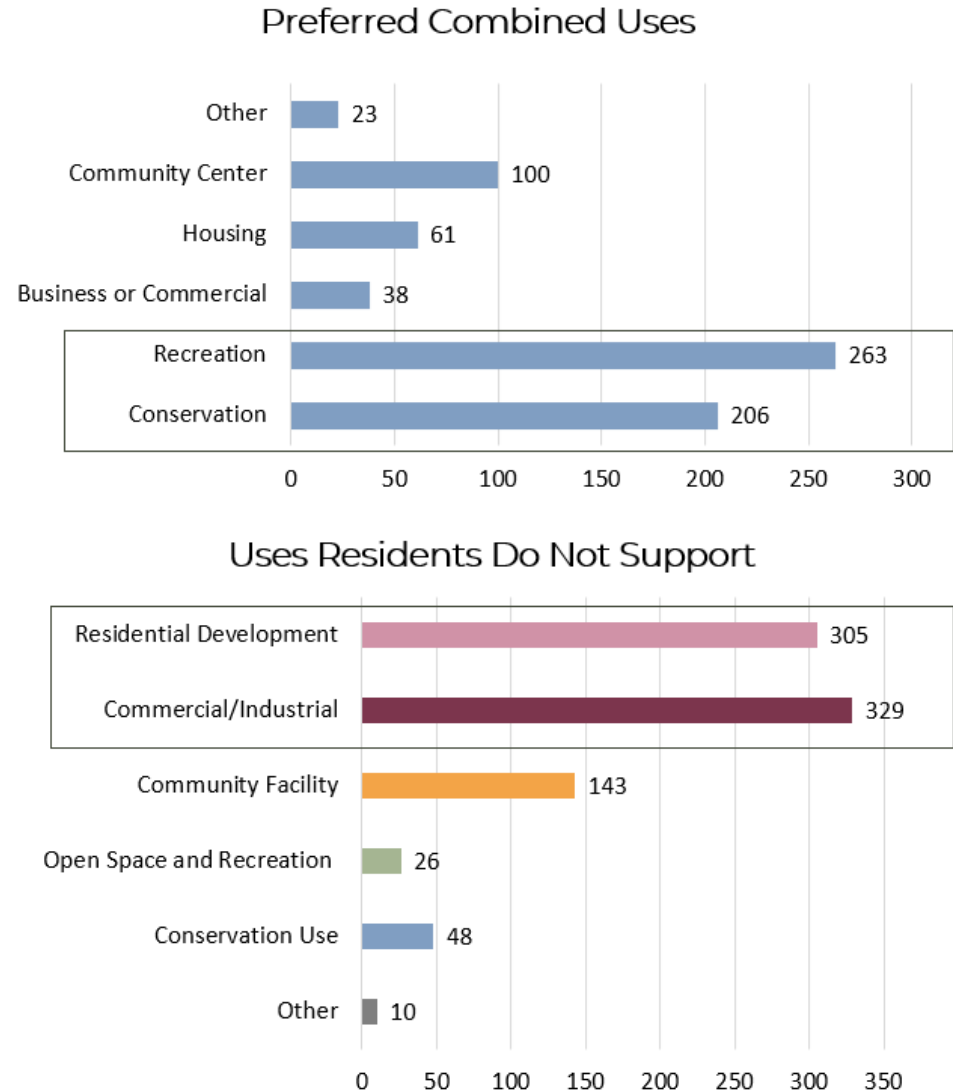


Figure 10. Bidwell Site Reuse; Survey Results

Section 4. Initial Concept

Based on the feedback received during the public engagement process, the project team prepared an initial design concept. This concept offered ideas for the potential redevelopment activities that could occur at the site.

This design on the following page shows a bubble diagram with 3 primary zones. The first ring (pink) features an active recreation area with a playground, restrooms, event pavilion and parking.

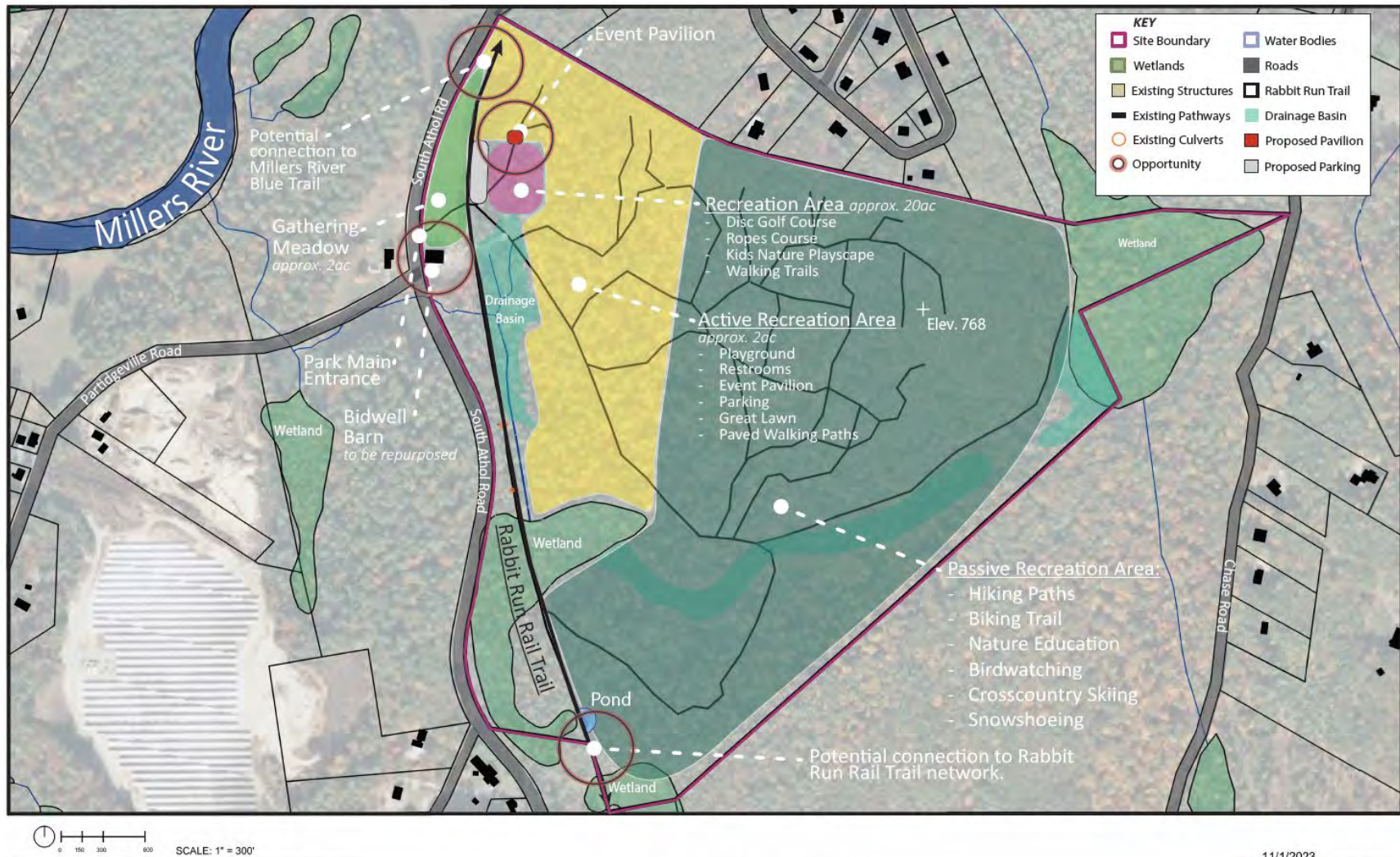
The second ring (yellow) highlights a potential area for low-impact recreation with a disc golf course, ropes course, and kids' nature playscape.

The third ring (dark green) contains most of the property and features hiking paths, bike trails, nature education, birding, and winter sports.

The fourth ring (light green) features a gathering lawn on the open grassy portion of the property right along South Athol Road.

Other features identified in the concept are the opportunity for additional access points from neighboring parcels, connecting neighborhoods to the site, and a potential connection to the Millers River.

Figure 11. Initial Concept Diagram



BIDWELL SITE- 1595 SOUTH ATHOL ROAD
ATHOL, MA

Recreation Concept

BSC GROUP

Section 5. Site Walk

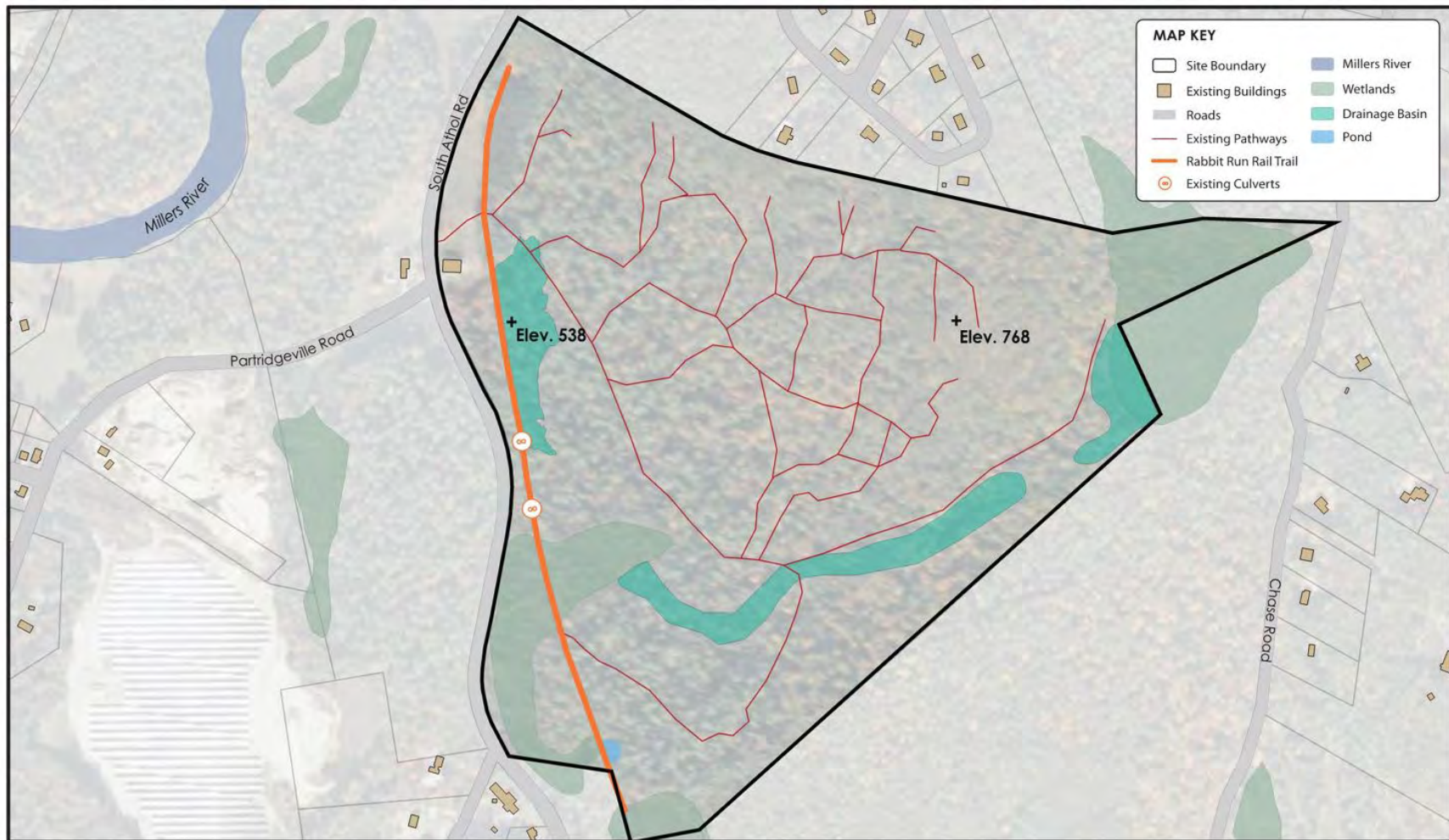
A site walk was completed to gain a thorough understanding of the property characteristics and document existing conditions. A history of logging activity can be seen on the site, and previous logging routes can provide the base for a future trail network on site.

There are a variety of pine trees, including a planted pine grove, on the Site. The Site contains a diverse range of biodiversity in vegetation and species, and is a habitat for local wildlife.

Notable characteristics of the site include expansive wetlands and steep slopes that make the portions of the site undevelopable. Images of the steep site topography where rock wall faces form a cliff-like feature, are found below.



Figure 12. Existing Site Conditions



0 150 300 600 SCALE: 1" = 300'

BIDWELL SITE- 1595 SOUTH ATHOL ROAD
ATHOL, MA

EXISTING CONDITIONS

11/6/2023

BSC GROUP

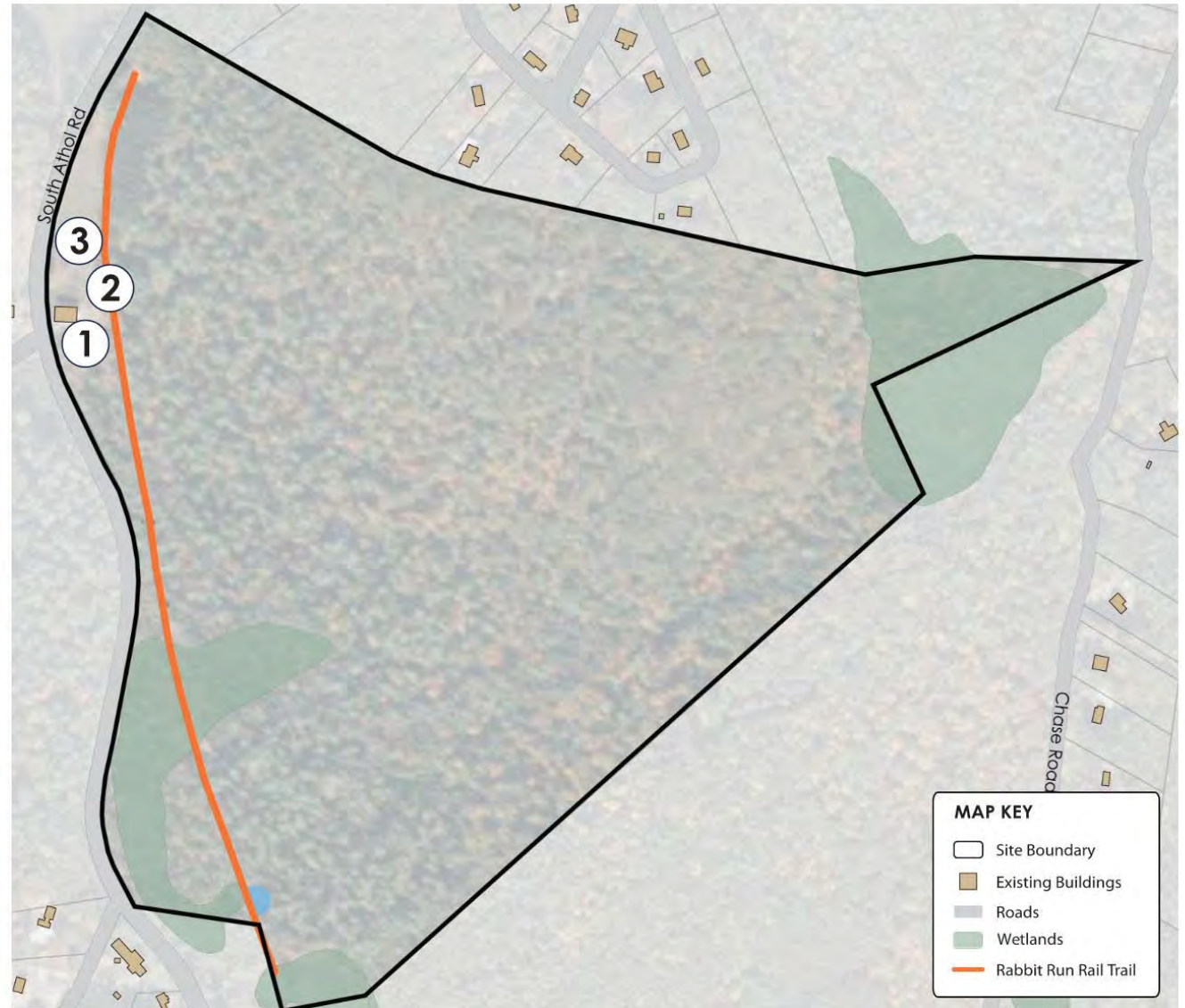
Other Site Features - Wetlands and Pine Groves



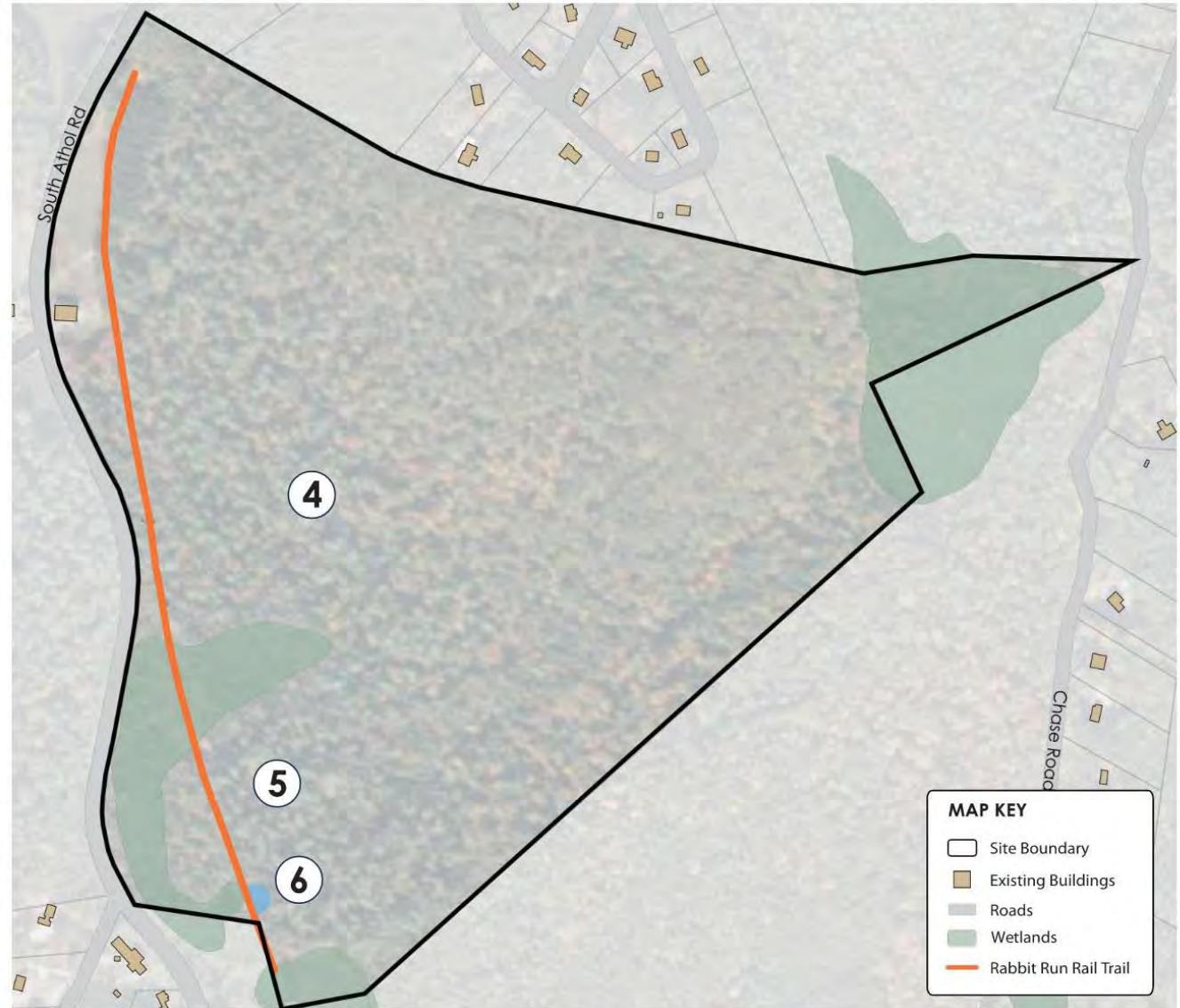
Other Site Features - Logging Trails and Biodiversity



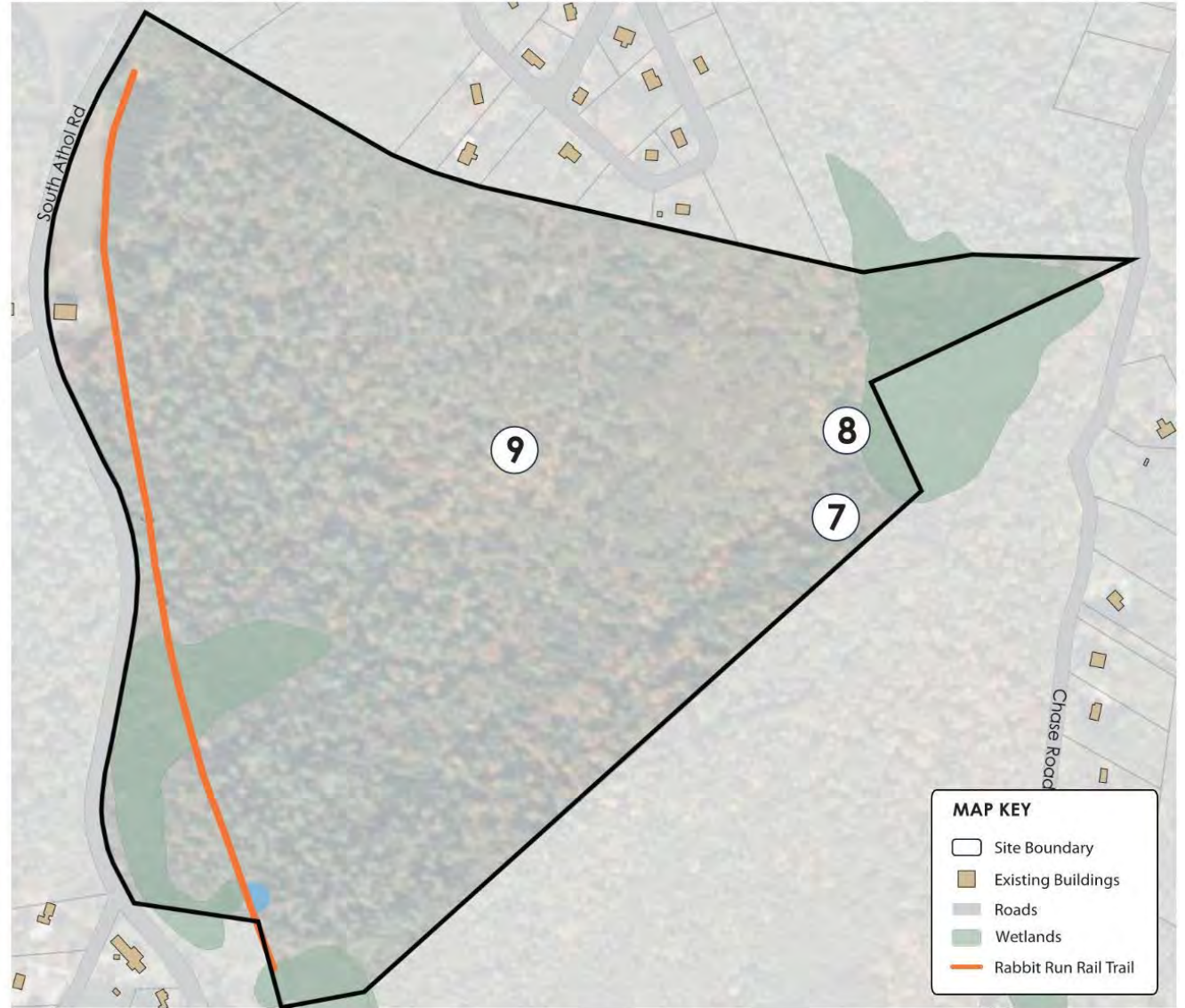
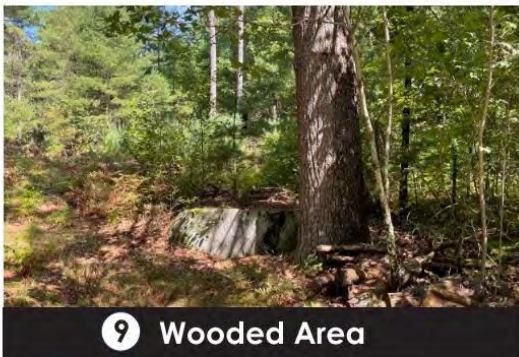
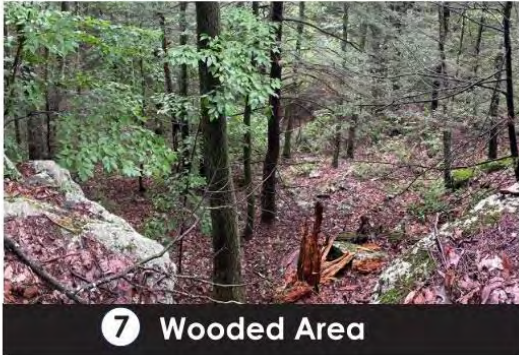
EXISTING FEATURES at **BIDWELL SITE** | 1595 SOUTH ATHOL ROAD



FOREST HARVESTING at BIDWELL SITE | 1595 SOUTH ATHOL ROAD



WOODED AREAS at BIDWELL SITE | 1595 SOUTH ATHOL ROAD



Section 6. Refined Concepts

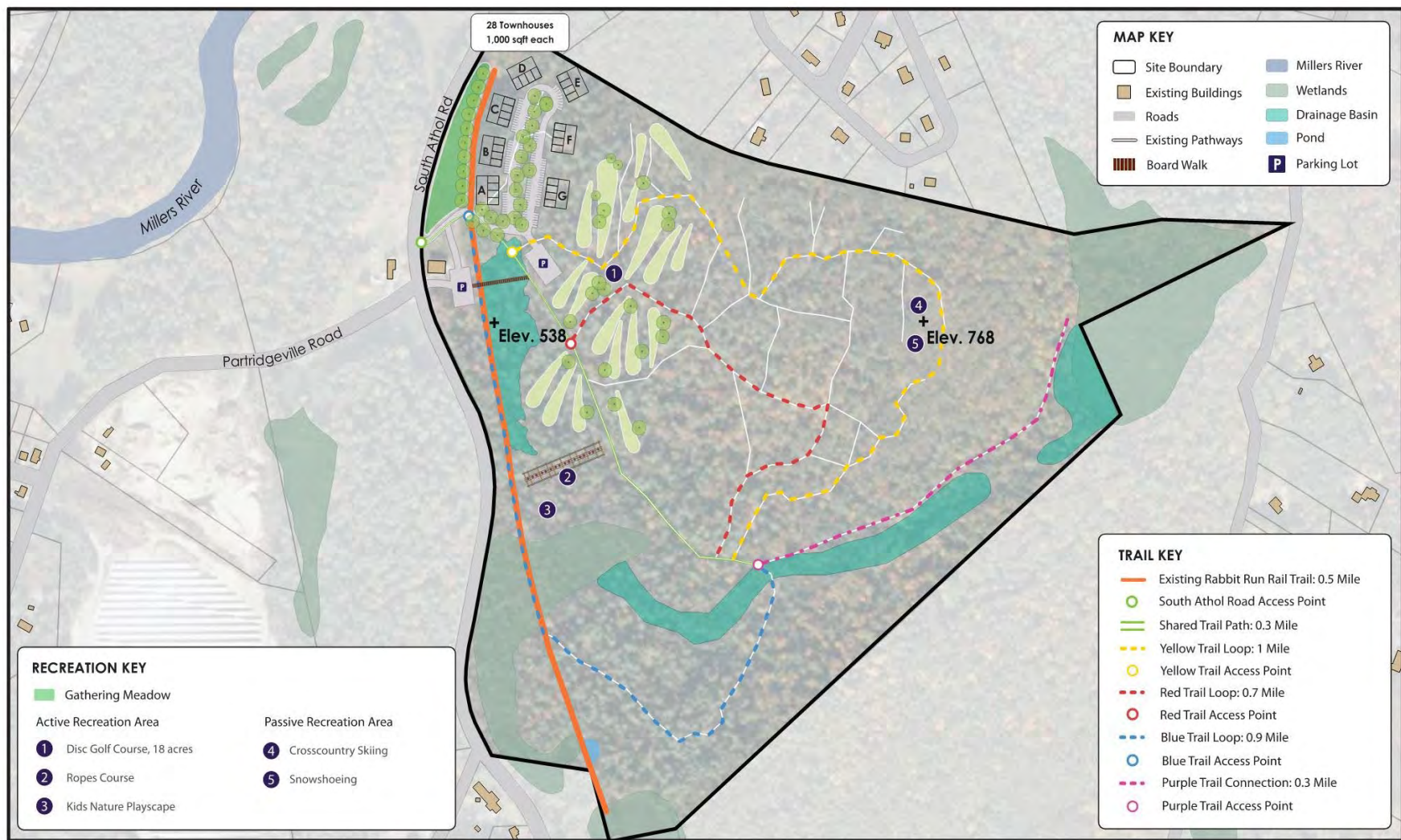
It is important to note that these refined concepts further the initial bubble diagram and offer ideas as to the potential reuse of the Site. The placement of certain use features (i.e., housing) offers an illustrated scenario to show a housing development could be placed at the Site. The concept is only based on the optimal location for housing at the Site and does not necessarily confirm to the Dimensional Requirements within the Town's Zoning Bylaws.

Housing and Recreation Concept:

A housing and recreation concept proposes an active recreation area that contains a community gathering meadow, an 18-acre disc golf course, a ropes course, and kids' nature playscape. The passive recreation area contains the trail network for hiking, biking, skiing, and snowshoeing. This concept incorporates a housing component to illustrate potential siting, with the optimal location identified in the northern corner of the Site. Twenty-eight (28) townhouses with 1,000 square feet each were drawn to create a dense residential area on the Site while preserving the remaining property for open space and recreation.

Proposed Trail Network Concept:

Four (4) trails and an additional shared trail path were identified to form a potential trail network on the Bidwell Site spanning a total of 3.2 miles. This was informed by the mapped existing logging routes and expansive wetlands on the Site. The trail network conceptual map identifies the existing Rabbit Run Rail Trail that passes through the Site, approximately 0.5 miles long. There is an opportunity to create a multi-modal transportation route on remnants of the railbed. A feasibility study was completed in 2022 and proposes connectivity to other local trail networks. A formalized trail has the potential to support connectivity with downtown Athol and conservation areas throughout the town.



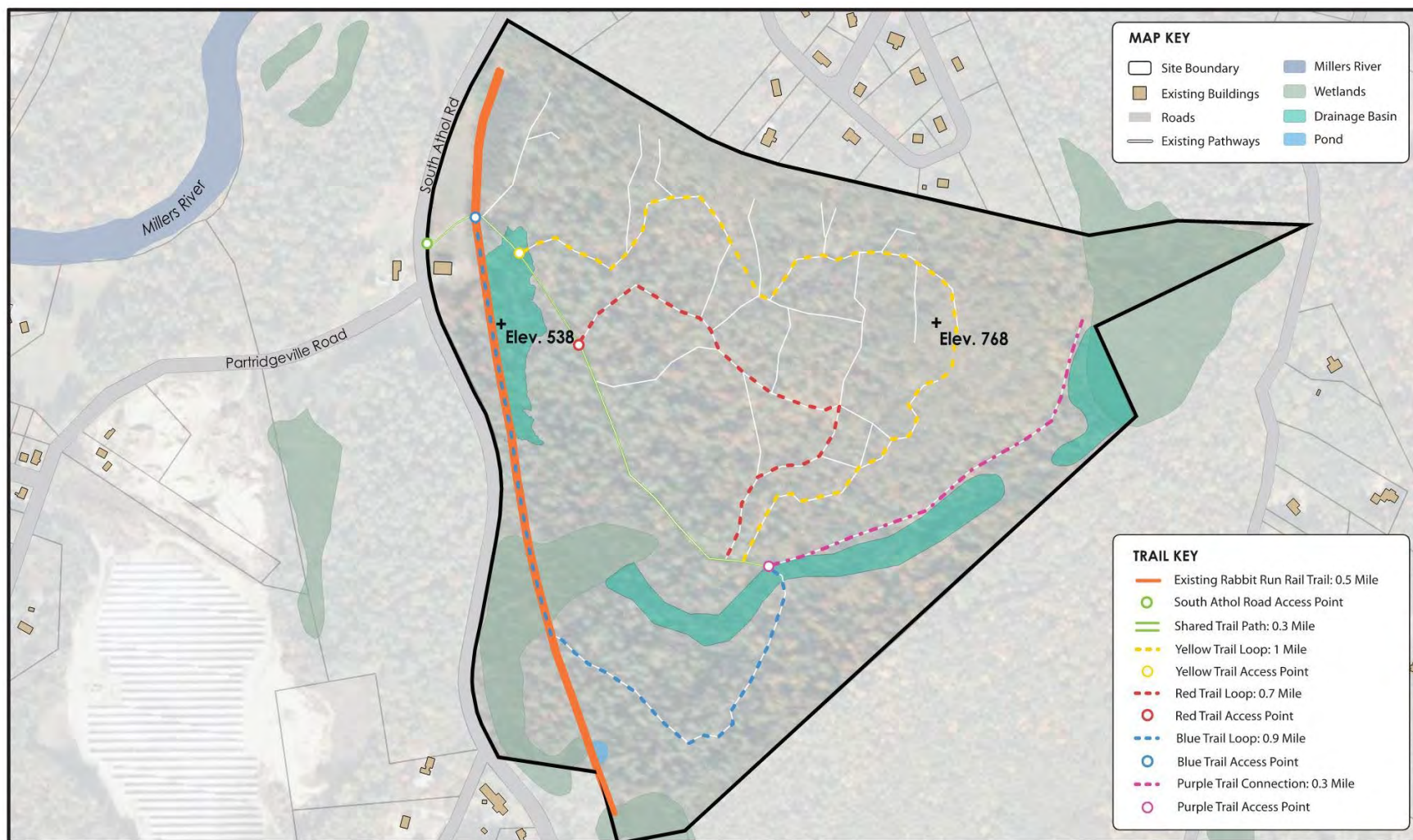
BIDWELL SITE- 1595 SOUTH ATHOL ROAD
ATHOL, MA

HOUSING AND RECREATION CONCEPT

11/6/2023

BSC GROUP

Figure 1. Housing and Recreation Concept



0 150 300 600 SCALE: 1" = 300'

BIDWELL SITE- 1595 SOUTH ATHOL ROAD
ATHOL, MA

PROPOSED TRAIL NETWORKS

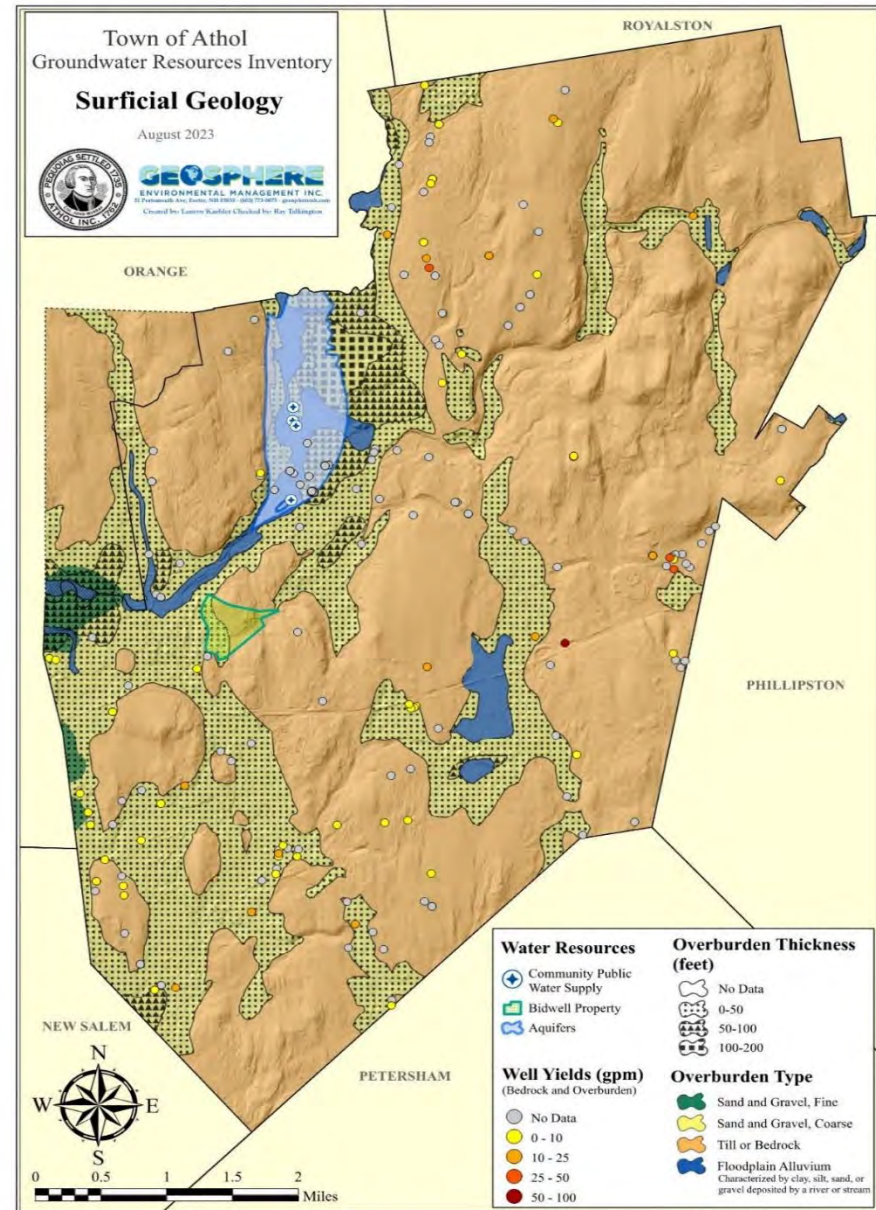
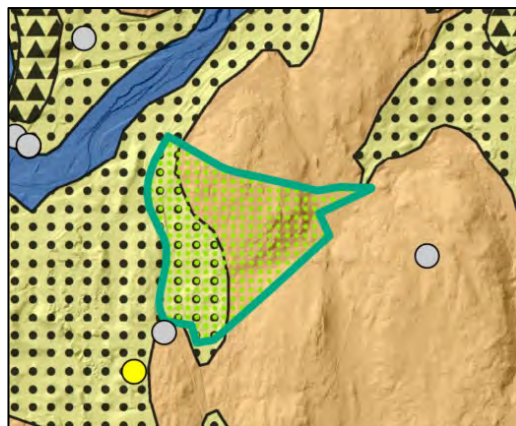
11/6/2023

BSC GROUP

Figure 14. Proposed Trail Networks

Figure 15. Groundwater Resources and Surficial Geology Map

A surficial geology study was completed by the Town to review community water resources. This study identified the Bidwell Site as a potential source for a future public water supply. The map to the right shows overburden thickness on the land to be between 0-50 feet. Overburden is the materials that are layered on top of bedrock in the ground. On the site there is a combination of coarse sand/gravel and till/bedrock material. Because of the sand and gravel deposit material, the Site has potential to be a location for future water supply purposes.



Section 7. Recommendations and Funding Opportunities

This Recommendations and Funding Opportunities section is provided as a resource for the Town as it considers its next steps for the future development of the Bidwell Site and ways to fund the advancement of site development actions.

1. Complete additional community engagement to further refine conceptual site plans.
2. Conduct a site survey delineation of the wetlands and trails throughout the property.
3. Draft trail design concepts.
4. Determine the best location for a parking lot based on desired use and conditions.
5. Work to achieve the goals identified in the Town's Open Space & Recreation Plan & Update by focusing on the open space opportunities that exist at the Site and pursuing funding.
6. Consider documenting the architectural significance of the Bidwell Barn to take advantage of historic preservation funding.
7. Conduct mechanical, electrical, plumbing study; and architectural engineering studies for the barn to inform restoration.
8. Conduct test well exploration and consider protecting the property for a future public water supply.

Funding Source	Purpose
MassTrails Grant	Plan, design, create and maintain trail networks.
Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity (LAND) Grant	For purchasing of a conservation restriction.
Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) Grant	Assists with developing land for park and outdoor recreation purposes.
MHC and Community Preservation Funding, Preservation Projects Fund	May be eligible for federal tax credit on cost of rehabilitation.
Underutilized Properties Program	Predevelopment funding and capital improvements to rehabilitate or redevelop blighted or underutilized properties.
Community Preservation Act	Fund recreational components of the site.
MA Preservation Projects Fund	Supports preservation of properties, landscapes, and sites listed in State Register of Historic Places.
EEA Drinking Water Supply Protection Grant	Provides financial assistance to public water systems and departments for the purchase of land for protection of existing or planned future public water supplies or groundwater recharge areas.
MassDevelopment Commonwealth Places	Provides funding to advance community-driven placemaking including parks, bike trails, and more that revitalize downtowns.
MassHousing Planning for Housing Production Grant	Provides cities and towns with technical capacity to implement local planning and transform priority development sites into new affordable homes.

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Town Clerk's Office
584 MAIN STREET SUITE 10
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Attachment A

Nancy E. Burnham, Town Clerk, CMMC
Email: townclerk@townofathol.org

Barbara A. Smith, Asst. Town Clerk
Email: townclerk2@townofathol.org

This is to certify that the 2009 Special Town Meeting which convened on May 4, 2009 and adjourned to June 8, 2009 was duly called, served and held pursuant to the warrant issued by the Board of Selectmen and in accordance with the town bylaws and town charter.

The following is a true record of the vote taken at the Special Town Meeting which convened on May 4, 2009 and adjourned to June 8, 2009.

Article 2 On the Motion of Robert Parks, it was **VOTED:** That the Town purchase contingent on sale of the old middle school located at 494 School Street and using Five Hundred and Fifty Thousand Dollars from those proceeds a parcel of land located on South Athol Road and further described by Assessor's Map 19, Lot 4 and as recorded at the Registry of Deeds as Book 27847 Page 056 and Book 39958 Page 238 for the purpose of Open Space and/or other uses. *Required 2/3rd's vote. The vote was 105 yes and 28 no on June 8, 2009.*

Attest:


Nancy E. Burnham
Town Clerk



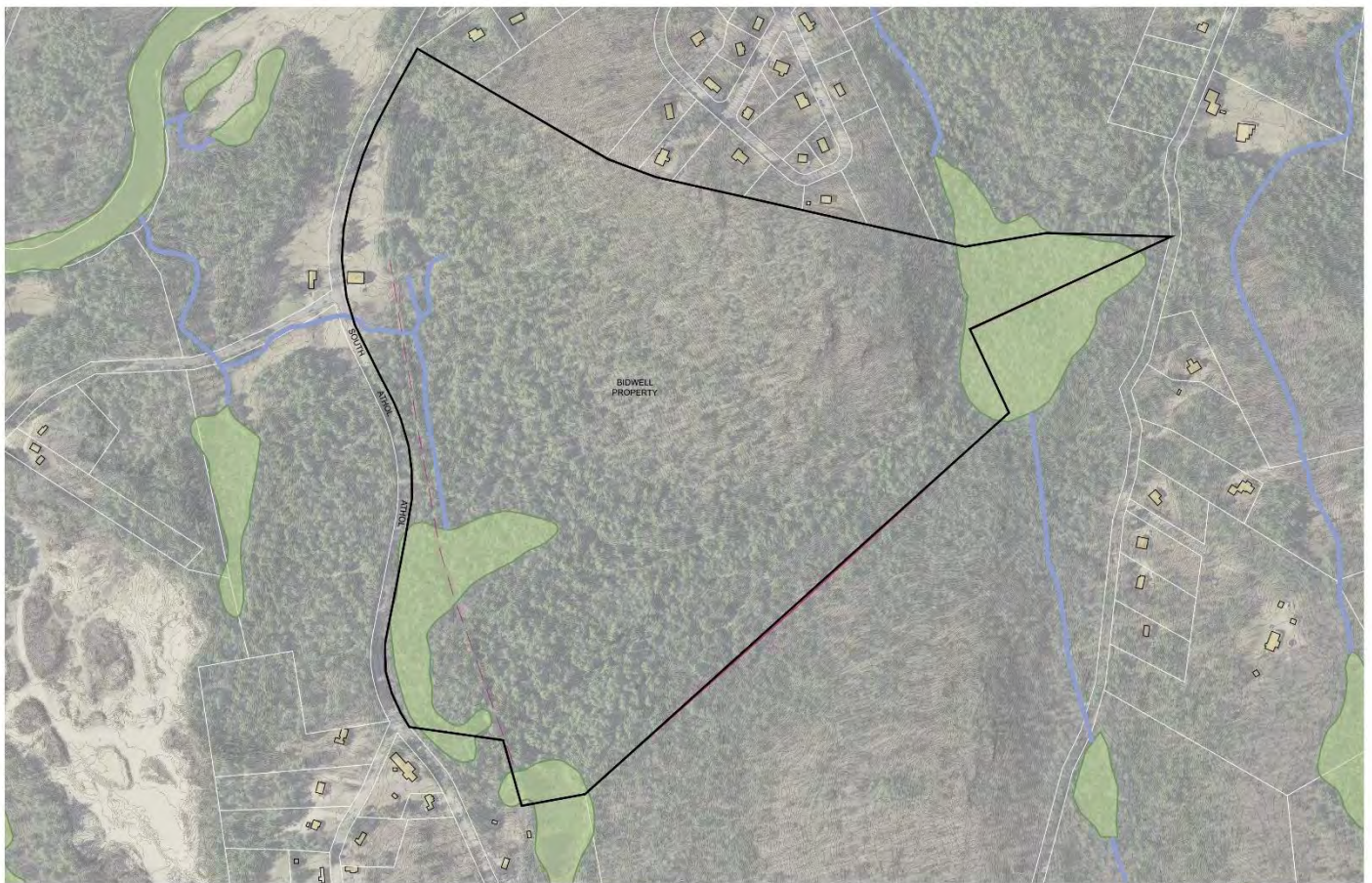
The Bidwell Site Community Survey Athol, Massachusetts

August 30, 2023

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

The survey was intended to solicit feedback from the community to assess the current development potential for the Bidwell Site. The Town purchased the 100-acre parcel located off South Athol Road in 2009 and wanted to engage in participatory planning before determining future use. On May 23, 2023, a Community Conversation was held in partnership with the Smithsonian's traveling museum, *Crossroads*, at the Athol Public Library. This survey was informed by feedback collected at the library event and was intended to expand upon the responses gathered. The survey was active from 7/19 to 8/11 and received a total of 427 responses.

Overwhelmingly, those surveyed reflect a preference for maintaining the site as conservation land or as open space and recreation land. Residents hope that the Bidwell Site becomes a place that they can participate in outdoor recreation like running, hiking, and biking via the Rabbit Run Rail Trail but also are in favor of a community gathering space. Residents do not support development of the site for commercial, industrial, or residential use. Overall, respondents would like to see the barn on the property be restored and repurposed and the current character of South Athol Road maintained.

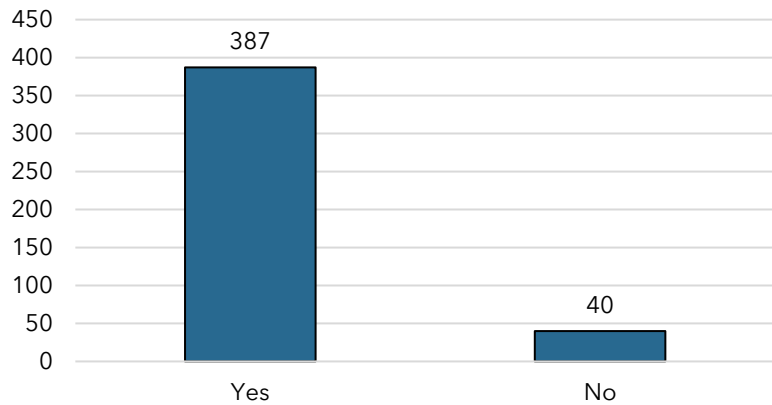


EXISTING CONDITIONS PLAN
DOWNTOWN PLANNING
ATHOL, MA

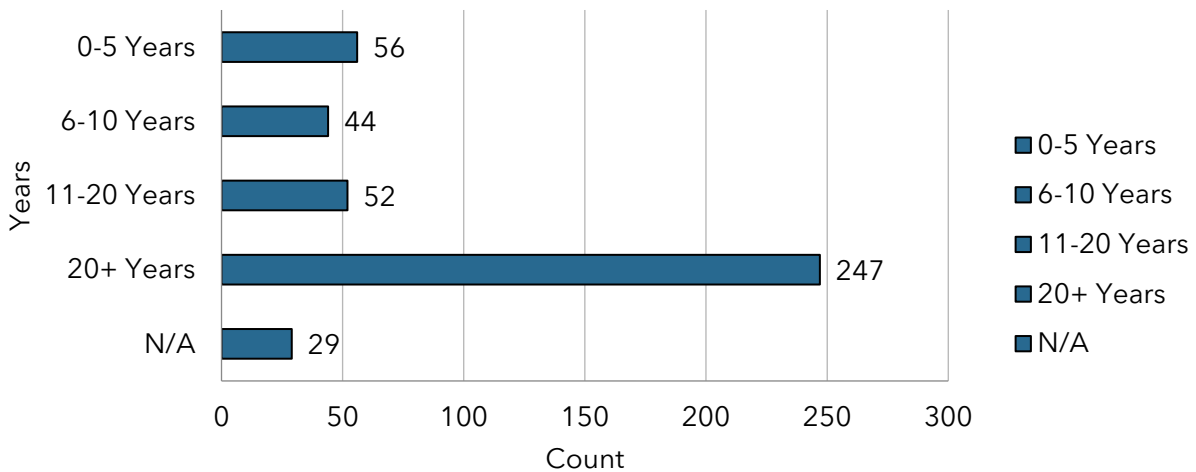
DEMOGRAPHICS

Of those surveyed the majority are residents of the Town of Athol. A diverse range of ages participated in the survey, the largest age groups being ages 35-44 and 65+. Many are long term residents of Athol, with 247 having lived in the town for over twenty years.

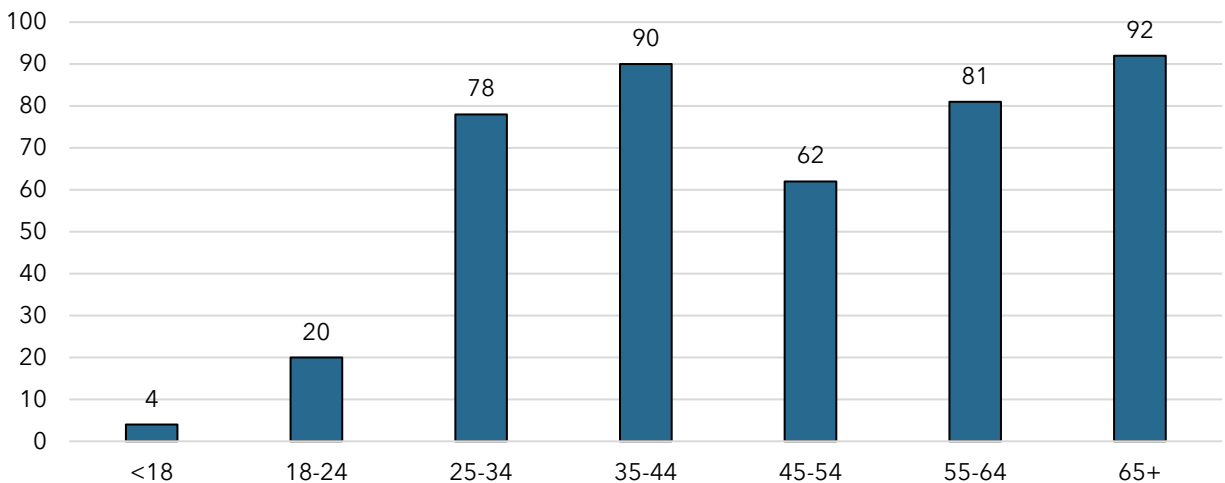
1. Do you live in Athol?



2. Years of Residency in Athol

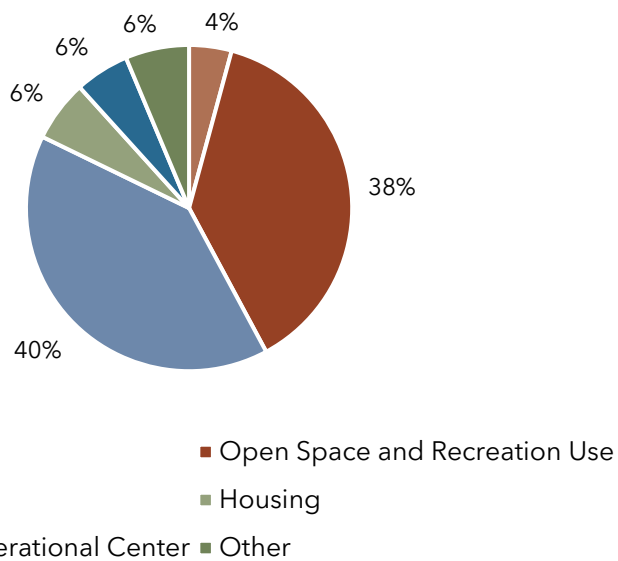


3. What is Your Age?

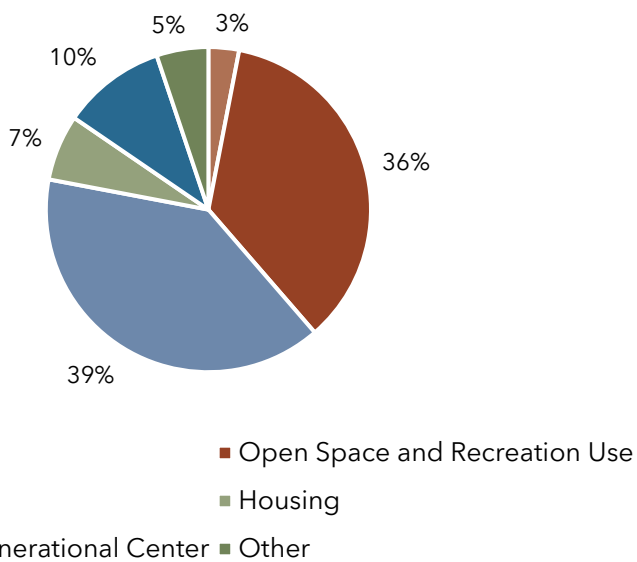


SITE PREFERENCES

4. First Preference Use

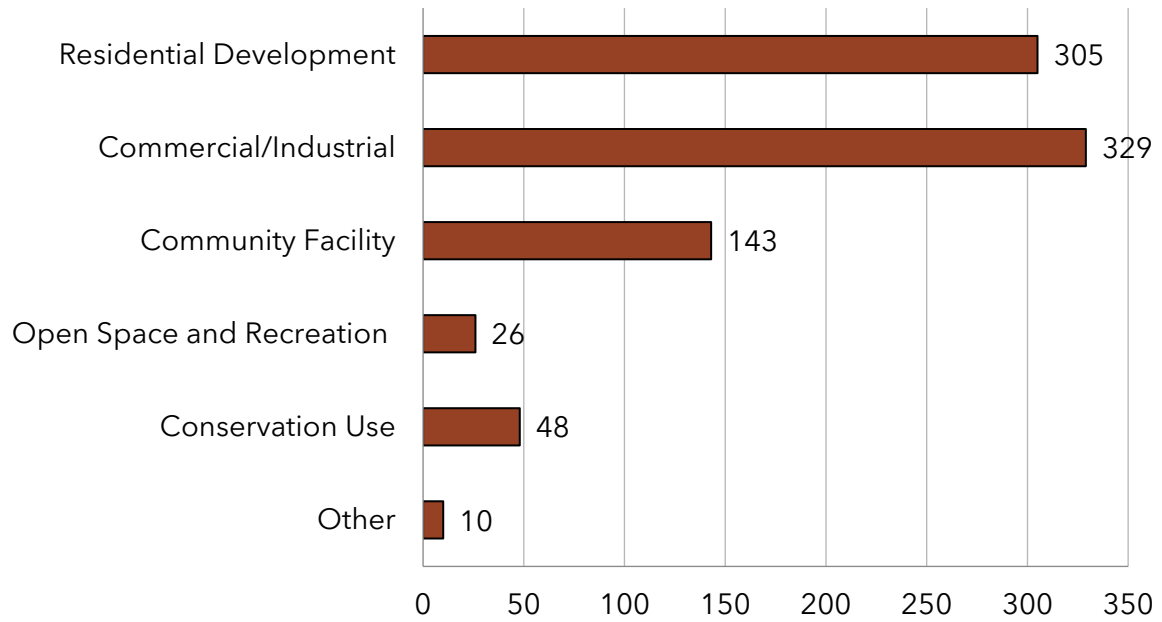


5. Second Preference Use

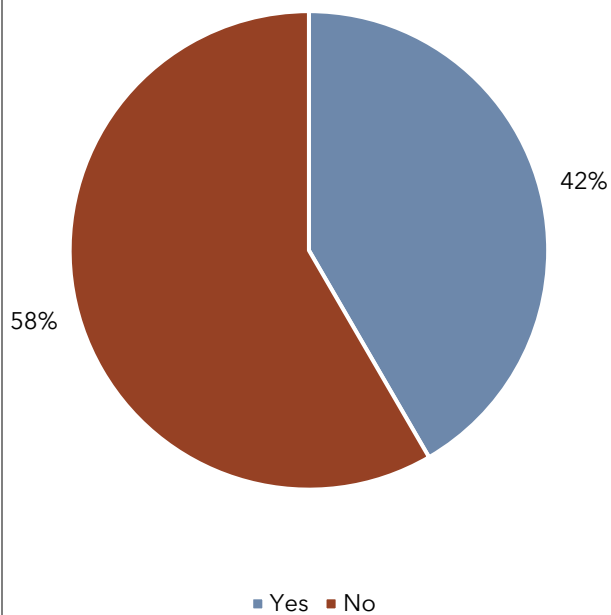


The majority of residents who participated in the survey reported their first-choice preference use for the Bidwell site as conservation land (40%) followed by open space or recreation use (38%). The second-choice preferences are consistent with the first-choice preferences, with more people in favor of a community center (10%). Uses that residents do not support are residential development, commercial and industrial development, followed by a community facility. These are uses that residents are consistently not in favor of.

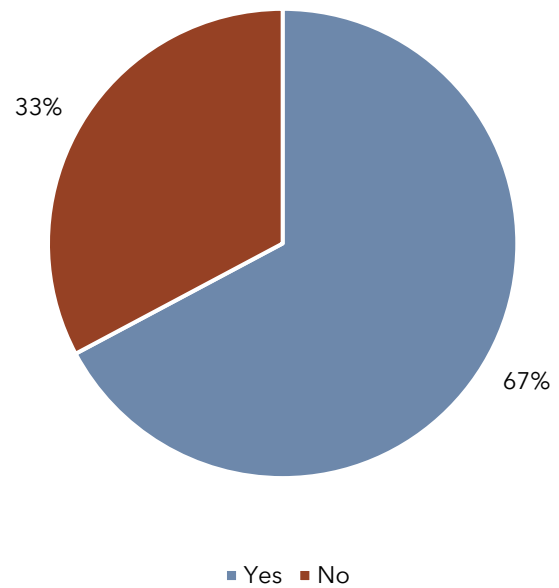
6. Uses That Residents Do Not Support

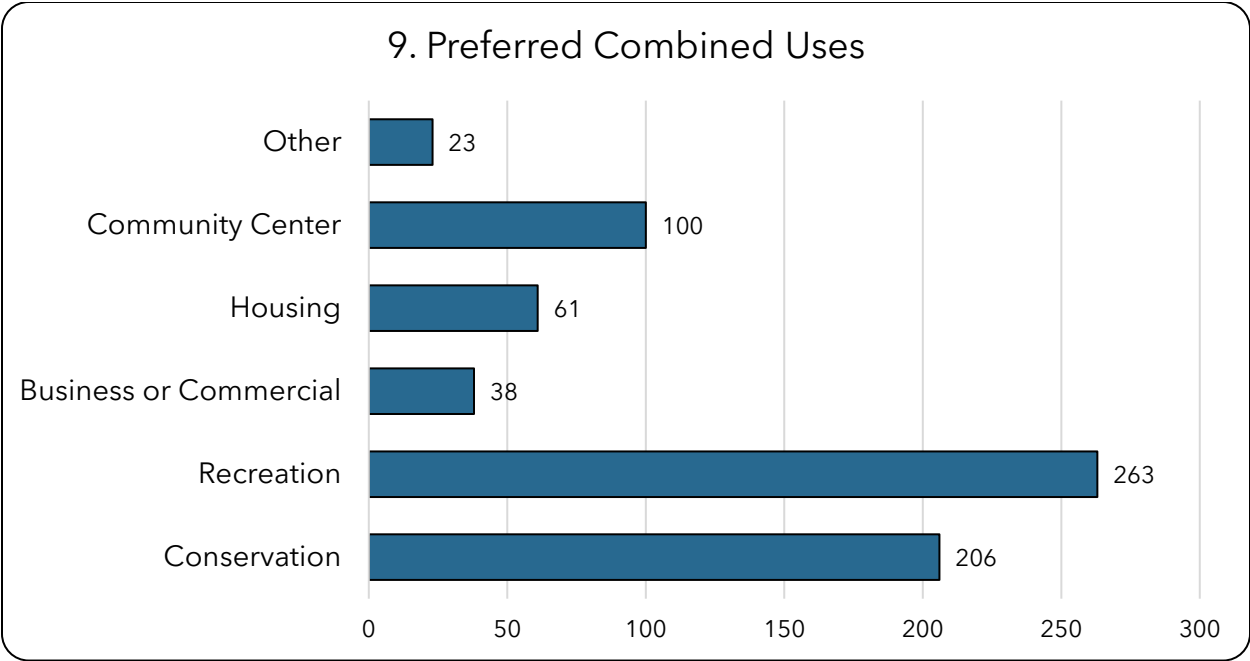


7. Route 2 Linkage Support

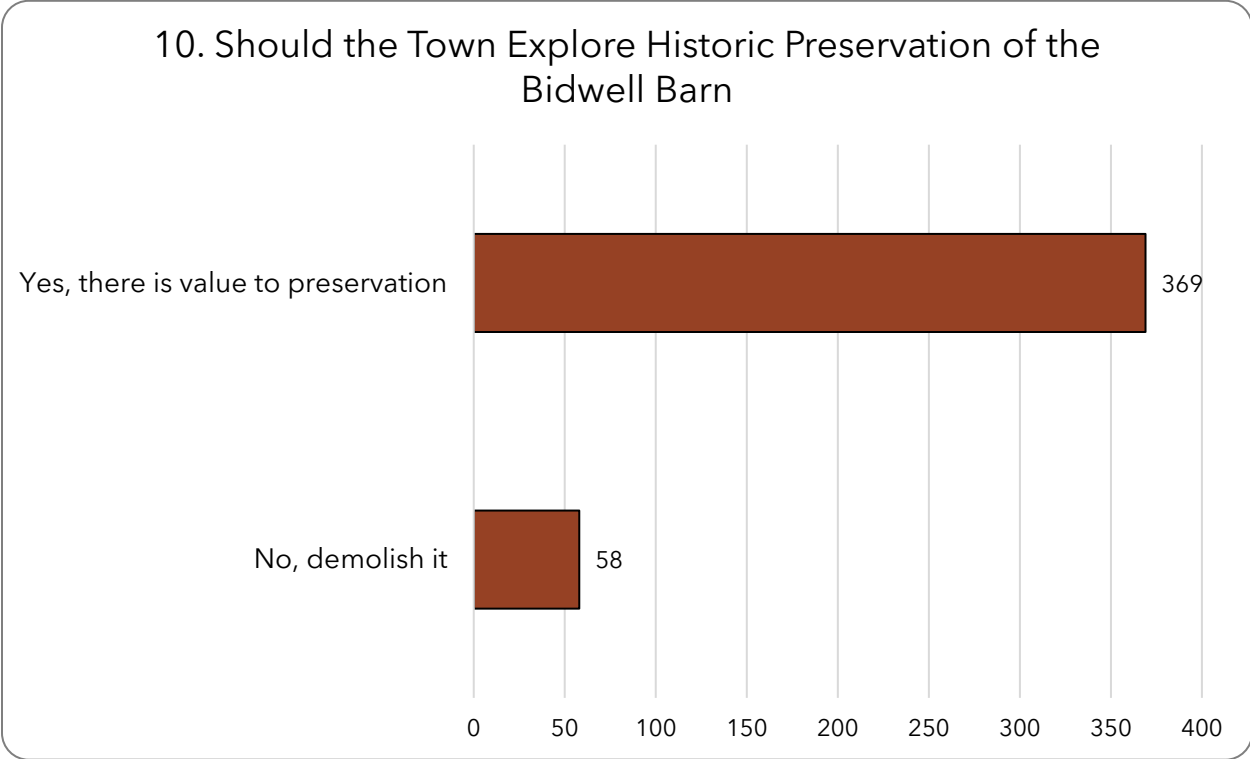


8. Support for Multiple Uses on Site

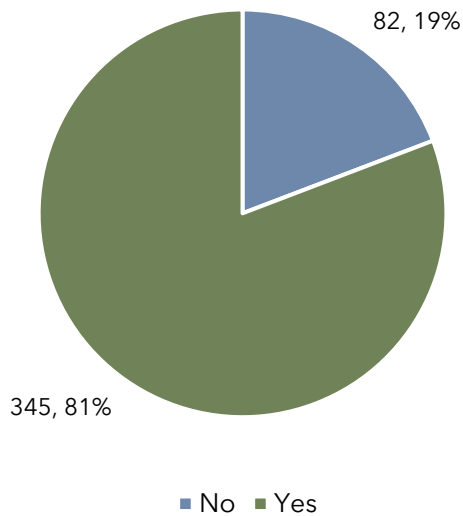




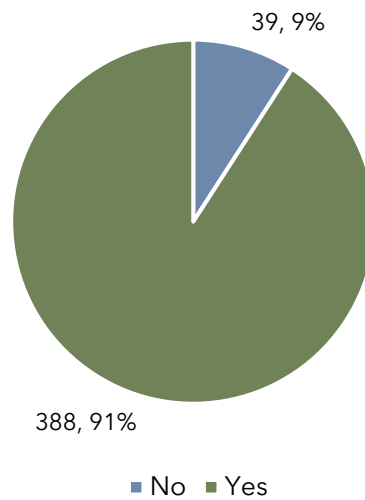
The majority of those surveyed are supportive of multiple uses existing in harmony on the site, with 67% in favor and 33% opposed. Those who responded yes to supporting multiple uses selected conservation, recreation, and community center as uses they could see together on site. Other uses were suggested including solar, skatepark, municipal building, cemetery, fire station, local museum, and concert venue.



11. Would You Support the Use of the Barn as a Visitor Center and Event Space?

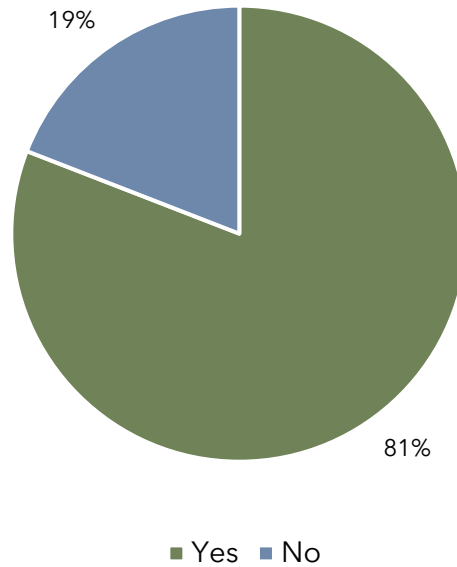


12. Would you support the continued use and development of the Rabbit Run Rail Trail?

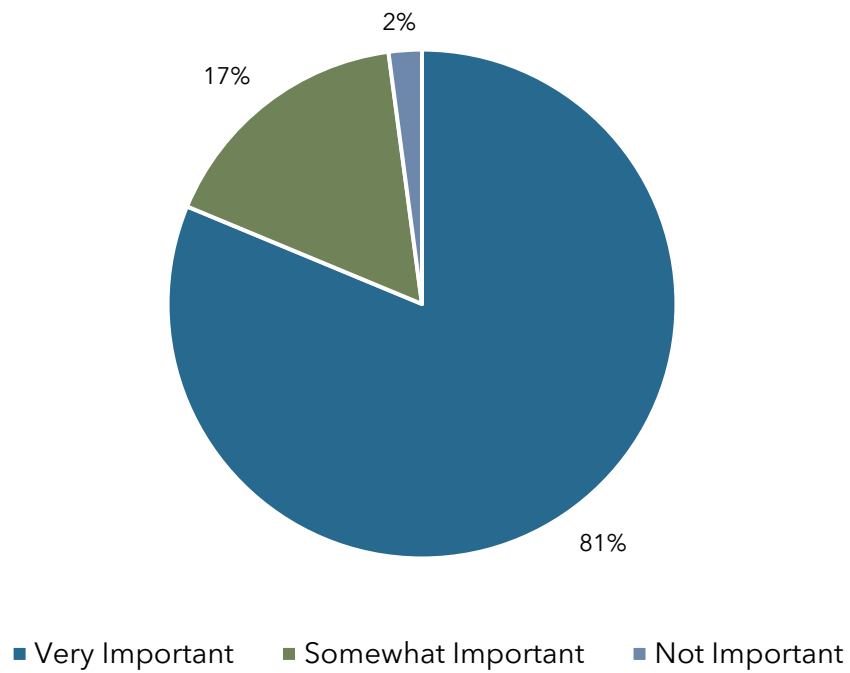


369 surveyed agree that the barn located on the property should be preserved. 81% of those surveyed also support the barn being used as a visitor center and event space. Other uses that were suggested for the barn include a farmers' market, museum, performance/music space, trail head or bike shop, café or general store, community craftsman center, rental space, conservation and nature educational space, rental space for community artists and entrepreneurs, and an Athol Historical Society extension location, among other suggestions. The majority of those surveyed, approximately 91%, are supportive of the continued use of the Rabbit Run Rail Trail that travels through the Bidwell site.

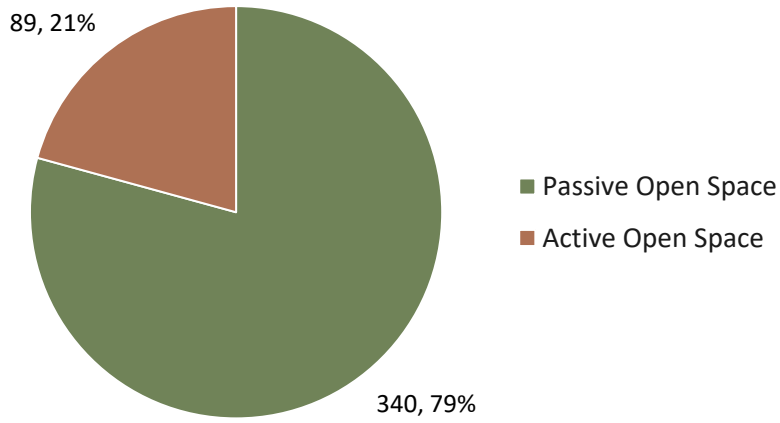
13. Support for Open Space, Recreation, or Conservation use ONLY



14. How Important are Parks, Open Spaces, Recreational Facilities, or Natural Areas to You?

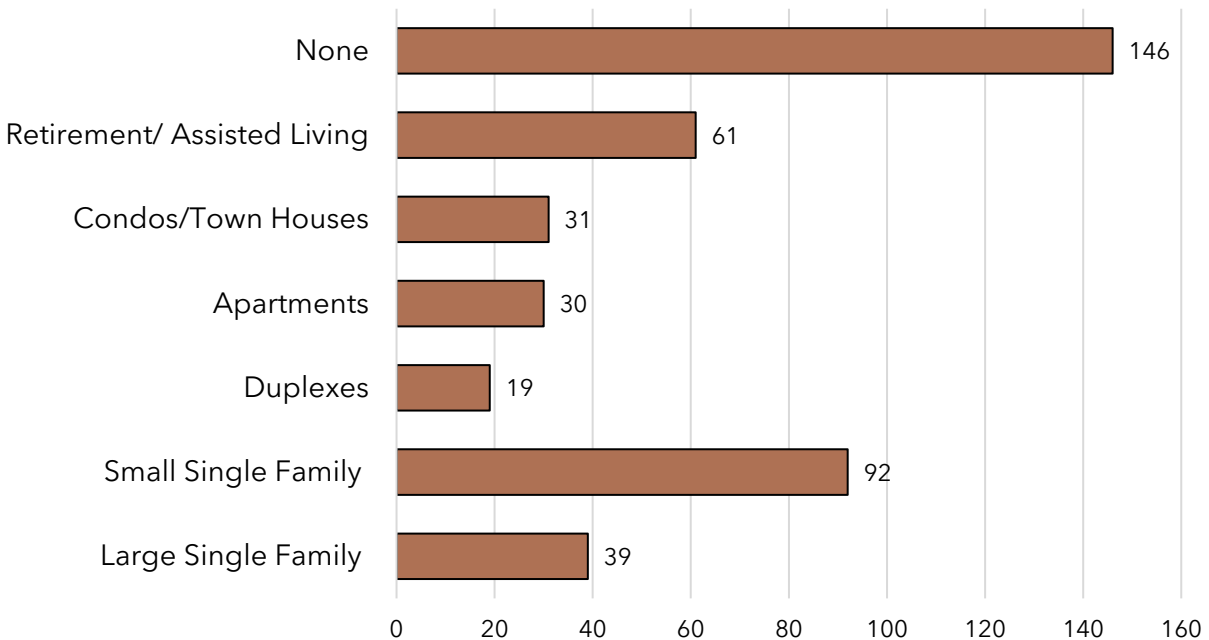


15. Recreation Preference



Outdoor recreation is something that is greatly valued in the Athol community and residents would prefer to see passive, less structured open space rather than active, developed open space with specific uses.

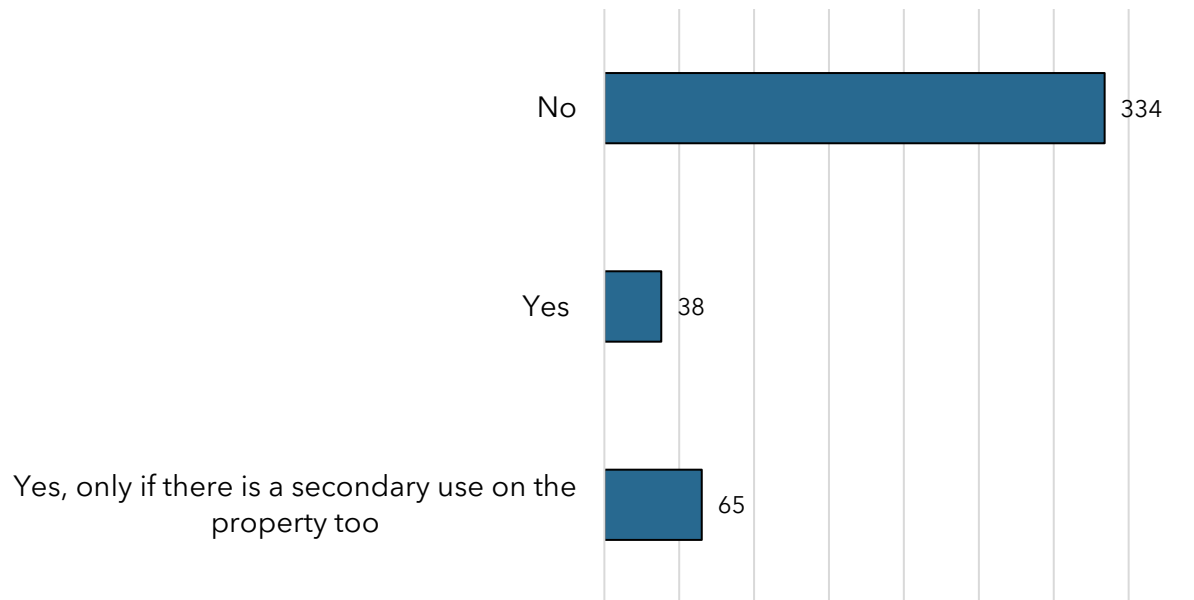
16. Housing Style Preference



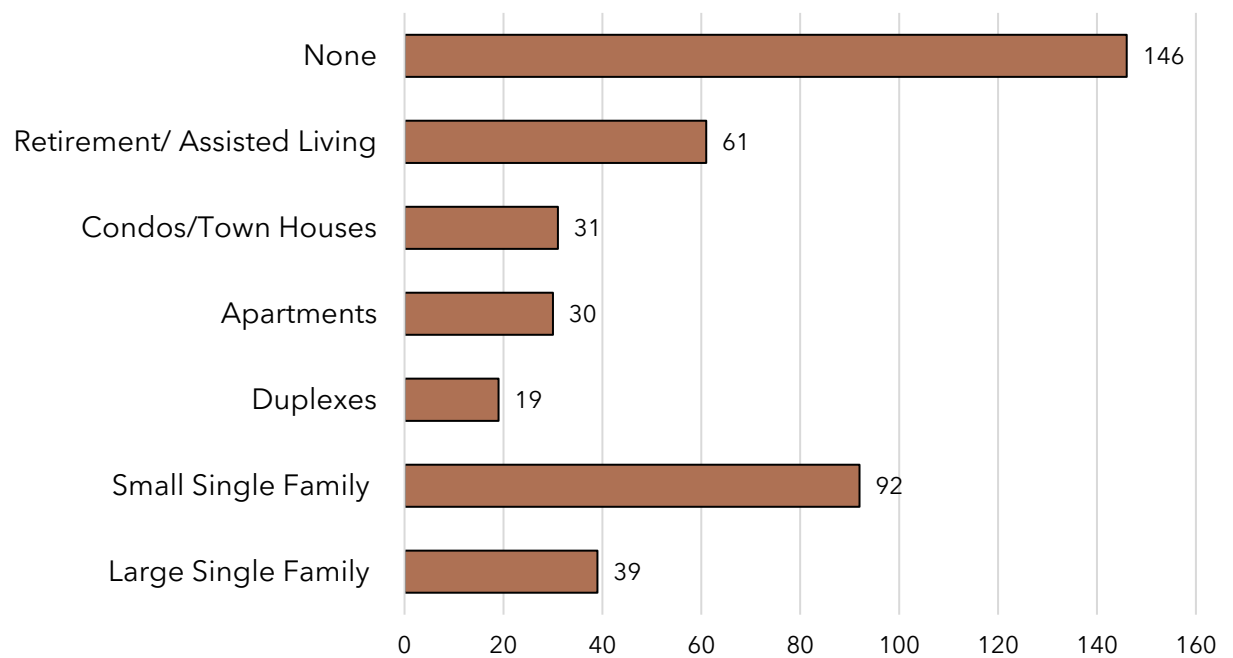
Other uses identified include a splash pad and family activities, exercise or fitness trails, wooded event space, tent camping, open space for dogs and kids. Many also advocated for leaving the land as it is because of the wildlife that have been observed inhabiting the area.

RESIDENTIAL PREFERENCES

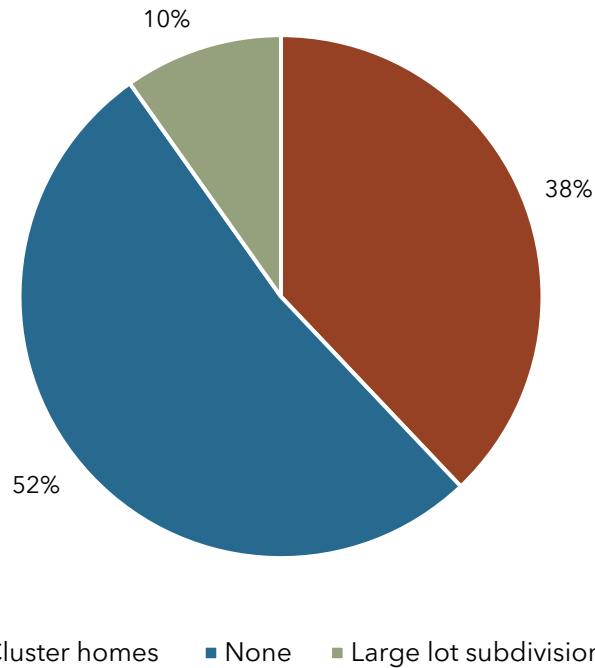
17. Residential Development Support



18. Housing Style Preference



19. Residential Development Preference



Of the top choices provided for residential development preference 52% of people selected none or wrote "none" in the text box provided and left individual comments expressing their feelings against housing development at this location and believe that it should not be introduced to the site. 38% are in favor of clustering homes closer together and preserving the remaining land, while 10% are in favor of large lot subdivisions.

ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK

Thoughtful mixed use; there's 100 acres and plenty of space.

The barn should be elevated to high priority restoration evaluation. It is unconscionable that the town has done no maintenance and preservation of the building over the 13 years it has been under town stewardship. Neglecting an asset that belongs to taxpayers is unacceptable. Including the neglect of the Old #1 Fire station.

I would like to see it sold to Mount Grace Land Trust or Mass Wildlife.

It would really be nice to have a skatepark again, but one that is kept up and usable (like Greenfield, Gardner, Fitchburg, Hubbardston).

South Athol Road is not a walkable road, too much traffic already. Definitely no more truck traffic i.e. gravel trucks, tractor trailer.

A community center isn't a good idea because it's a dangerous road with no sidewalks. Community centers should be accessible by all, including those without vehicles.

Having areas that are town property set aside for conservation/recreation is important for this area. Towns and municipalities that develop these types of areas benefit from the money that is brought in when people travel to a place like Athol to hike or mountain bike. This area is dealing with the continued decline of its past staple manufacturing jobs and apathy from many people who live here. I don't think developing areas like Bidwell, Bears Den, The Tully Trail, and other conservation pockets is going to solve anything overnight but hopefully with enough work put into linking them and pushing the North Quabbin region, and Athol in particular as a place worth stopping in, rather than just bypassing via Route 2, it would bring some much-needed money/business into this area.

Our infrastructure struggles to support the current populace. Building more homes on Bidwell, will destroy habitat, increase student population, increase traffic, and put a strain on roads and town services. Let's keep Athol rural, and affordable.

The land should be left as is for people to hike, hunt and enjoy nature. I also stand firmly against the addition of an exit/on-ramp for route 2 on South Athol Rd or pleasant street. Residence choose to live in south Athol to enjoy the quiet and wildlife while avoiding the hustle of uptown and downtown. Not only that, but the three crossroads between south Athol Road and pleasant street (Batchelder, Conant & Riceville) already see enough traffic for their respective sizes and layouts. People already drive reckless enough for such tight and windy roads with numerous blind driveways. The addition of access to route 2 in south Athol Road would only further this issue.

This area of land is well inhabited by many black bears, white tailed deer, fox, etc. I live very close to this area and drive by daily. The land should be kept as it is for nature to continue to thrive. It is beautiful seeing wildlife every morning, they shouldn't be pushed out for playgrounds or our own selfish purposes.

Preserve the land, clean up what's there, make more trails and bring out the history of the property! So much amazing history being lost !

I think this would be a great area for an Industrial Park along with an assisted living facility. This would create increased tax revenue for the town along with offering a variety of jobs.

No houses being built, leave the land we, the taxpayers have already purchased, to be used by all the people in town.

I am definitely against developing the land for residential use. I think the town would be better off have a playground and bike trail for a safe place for recreation.

Open lands are being depleted. Leave this land and open space alone to be enjoyed for nature. Allowing walking paths there is fine but nothing else.

I feel this area should be used to enjoy by the community and children who live here now. I don't feel like our community needs more housing. If we do, then why can't the old schools that are closed all over town be used for housing? Thank you for giving the Community the opportunity to share their votes and concerns.

The highway on and on ramp would cause a lot of extra traffic on south Athol Road. The current residents think the roads already busy as it is. We do not want that extra flow of traffic added leave it the way it is.

If there is access to this much land that can be used to make the community better it should be taken advantage of. I believe the best use for this land would be something that can better our community and benefit everyone. Some sort of recreational use space or community center would be amazing. It would also be nice to somehow work in businesses. Our downtown is so run down (a separate issue), therefore it would be nice to begin to restore the town. This could be a first step to driving business and restoring so many abandoned buildings in the town. While I do believe a recreational area would be the best use, if the town is in need of housing I can support that as well.

The town paid too much for this property. It should be sold to regain the money spent. Hopefully it could be developed for industry or privately owned housing and generate jobs and tax revenue. The barn has no value. The town should not spend money to renovate this relic. Sell it.

As a resident in the direct vicinity of the Bidwell property I am frustrated with continued development and destruction of wooded areas. This negatively impacts my living experience in a small residential area. Wooded areas around my property act as natural sound buffers. I believe there are many other vacant properties that should be utilized for these suggested purposes.

The barn and the land need to be conserved for future generations. There are other areas of town better suited for development for housing.

The natural spaces in Athol are what make this town special. There are roughly 25 housing plots at the end of Partridgeville road waited to be developed. More is not needed. Local builders own additional land that they can and are developing into housing developments. The town has very little protected natural recreation areas. This is a gift to the residents of Athol.

I would like to see this site remain part of the town's history, it should be marked as a historical site and an asset to the towns historical being. I would like to be able to walk into the barn and see pictures, video, and physical items that represent Athol's past and the way of life years ago. I would not under any circumstances like to see this site changed or developed. Athol has had enough of its history and pleased land ruined for housing, and developments If this was to continue I'm afraid Athol would have to more history to share with future generations.

This is a beautiful landscape - keep it that way. You cannot get land back once it is developed. Concentrate on eco-tourism, our natural spaces. Fix all the housing we do have instead of building more.

Please consider the impact to the Riverview Avenue/Woodland Drive and Chace Road neighborhoods. My family chose to move to Athol and chose the home we did due to the fact there is NO development on this property. While I can accept and would enjoy conservation and recreation here, my worry is that if you allow the building of homes it will just end up looking like the new set of homes that were built along South Athol Road, regardless of how hard you try to set up some kind of 'small home' neighborhood (greed always wins). In addition, any type of residential or commercial building will affect the water table at the higher elevation which WILL impact my home.

Community Conversation: Best Use for Bidwell Barn and Property



Hosted in partnership with Crossroads: Change in Rural America, part of Museum on Main Street, a collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution and Mass Humanities. Support for Museum on Main Street has been provided by the United States Congress.



MAY 23, 2023 ATHOL PUBLIC LIBRARY 6:00 PM

Come join us for a panel discussion and have the opportunity to let your thoughts be heard! Prior registration on the library calendar is appreciated.

www.athollibrary.org



The Town of Athol owns a 100-acre site on South Athol Road, near the Millers River and Rte. 2 and is seeking input from residents on what uses they would like to see at the site.



Program also received funding from the Executive Office of Administration and Finance, Community Compact program

EXPLORING HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

House and Accessory Dwelling Units



Small Lot House



Townhouse



Low-scale Housing

Mid-scale Housing



Cottage



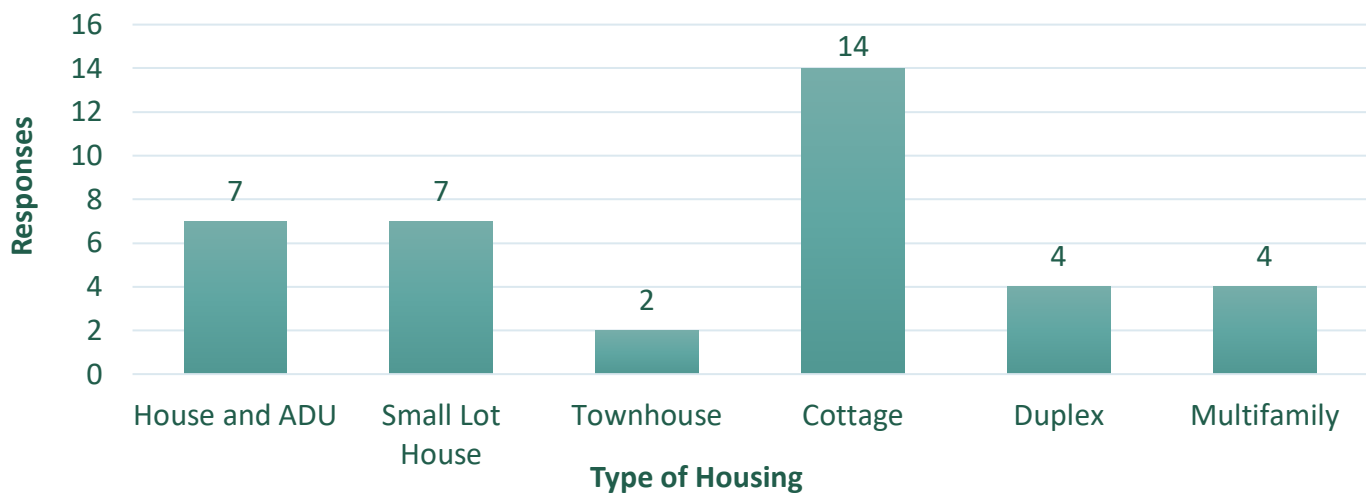
Duplex



Multifamily

Overall, participants felt that cottage style housing was the best housing type to suit the town's growth, followed by small lot houses and houses with accessory dwelling units (ADUs).

Which housing type do you think best suits the town's growth?



Total Votes: 38

Participants were asked to take one green sticker and one red sticker. They were then asked to place the green sticker on the use they deemed the best future potential use for the Bidwell site and the red sticker on the second best potential use.

Overall, participants felt that the best use of the Bidwell site was for open space – a total of 37 votes. For the purposes of this exercise, open space included any active use (ex. playground) or passive use (ex. wildlife observation).

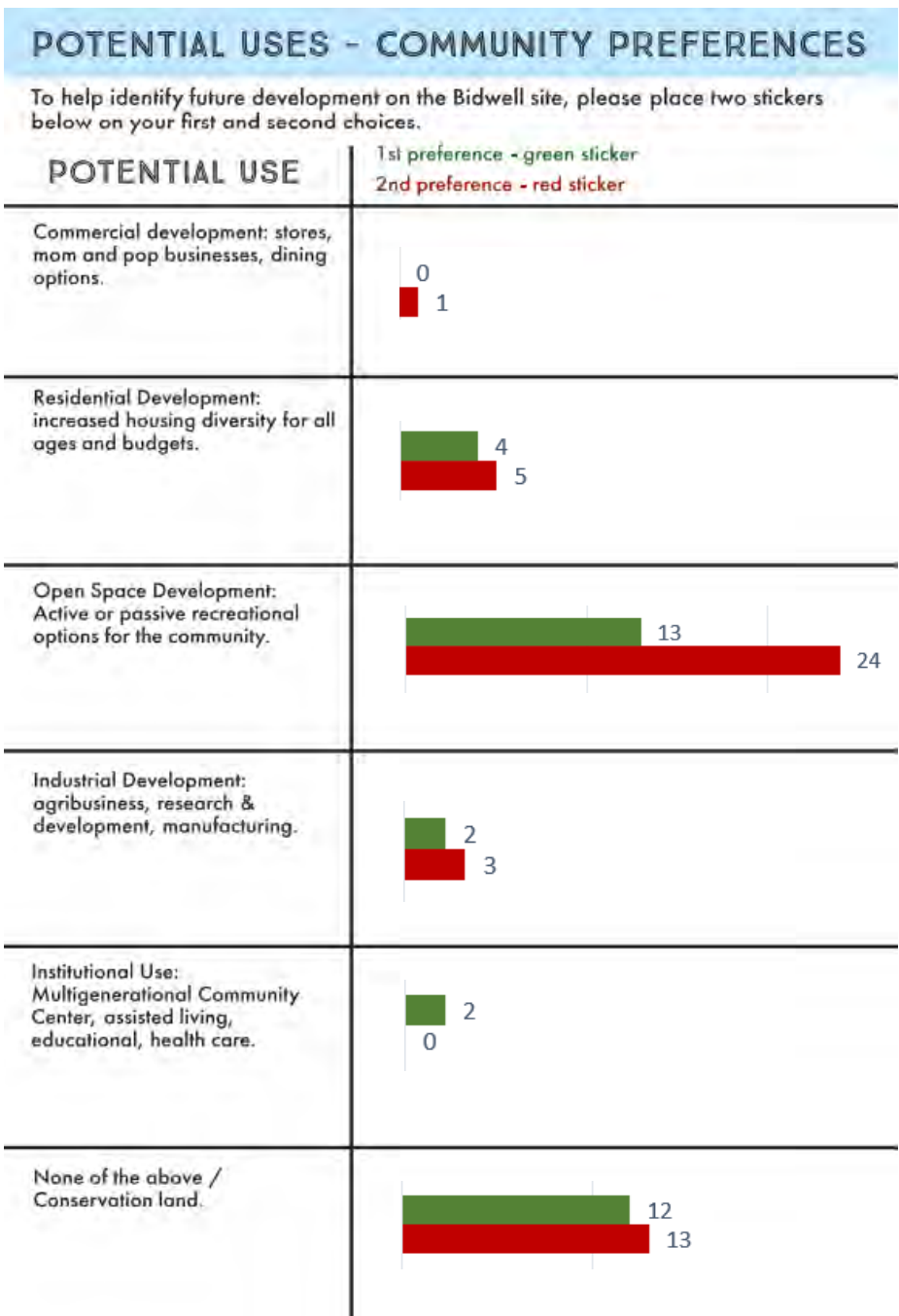
The second most popular answer was none of the above/conservation land with 25 total votes. Conservation land is when land is preserved in its natural state.

Residential development received a total of 9 votes.

Industrial development received 5 votes.

Institutional use received 2 votes.

Commercial development received 1 vote.



ROUTE 2 INTERCHANGE

The Bidwell Site is located less than 1 mile from Route 2. Would you support an access point or interchange to Route 2 from South Athol Road? Place a sticker below.

YES

43%

NO

57%

There were 42 responses to this question.

Yes: 18

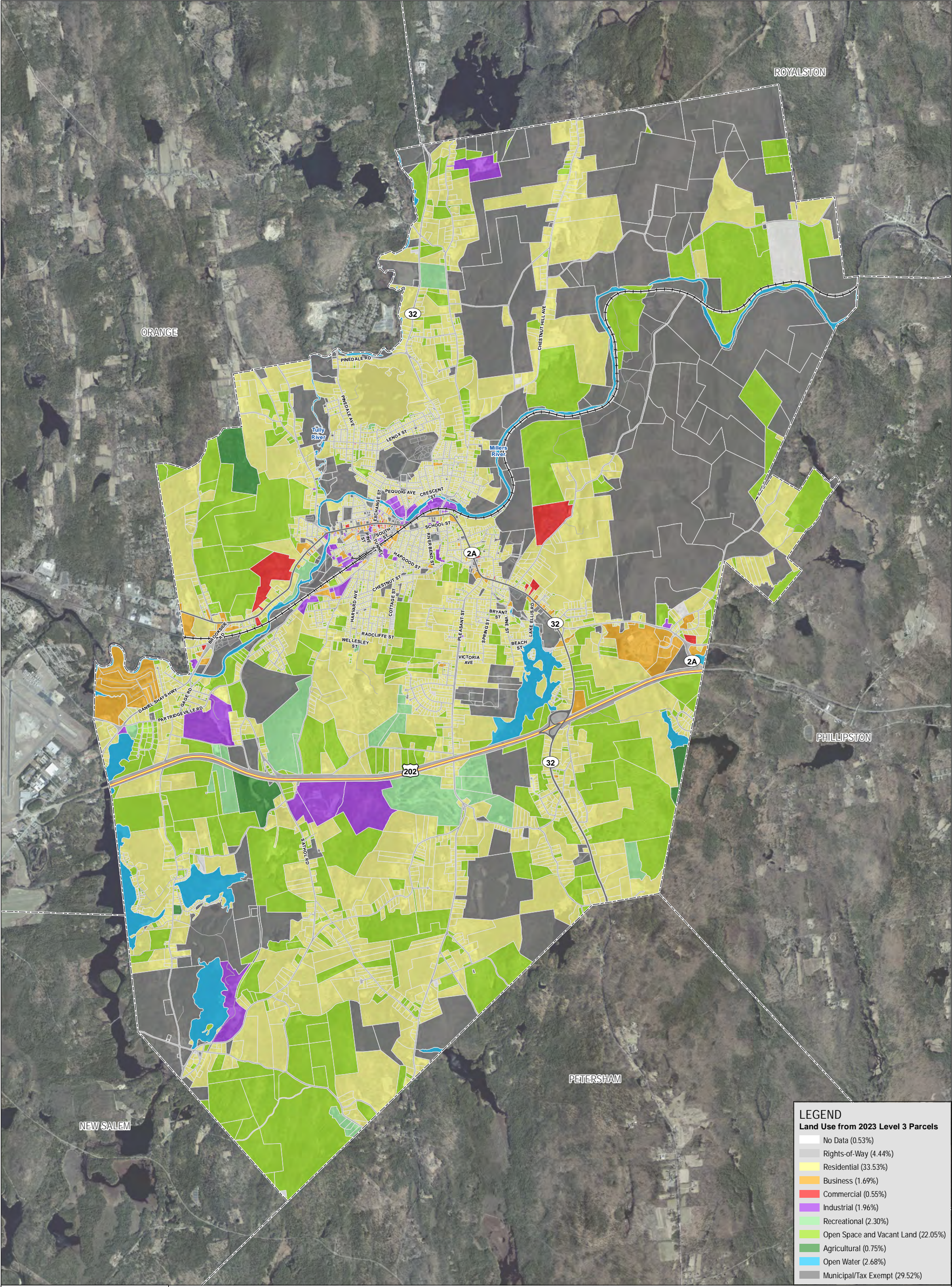
No: 24

WISHING WALL

Please write below any thoughts or feelings you have about the future development of the Bidwell site and Athol.

The final question was open ended. Responses included:

Restore the barn for historic fire museum
Keep rabbit run rail trail
Build small scale housing lots, up to 2 bedrooms only
Use money from sale for new fire station
Conservation land, save barn
Restore barn, keep rabbit run rail trail, conservation
Mixed use open space in the back, high density housing in front. Keep barn for rail trail or community center
Thoughtful mixed uses
Forestry plan logging
Cemetery
Parks and recreation
No more trucks on road and no factories
Youth park and sports complex, walking/biking trail
Should benefit the town and not be given to developers for short term profit and long-term issues; light passive use now and future options
No trucks, factories, or big houses.
We need continuous sidewalk from downtown Athol to Hannaford
Full trail from Cass Meadow to Boat Launch
Disc Golf
Restore barn, historic museum, keep rabbit run
Keep as open land
Leave Bidwell as is
Camping and family weekend trips to red apple farm
Preserve the barn now, find funding
Apply to MA Cultural Council to fund barn architectural survey (Buckland Barn Stevens Assoc. VT)
Restore barn for small group events and photos
Eco-tourism jobs
Save the property and barn for the future generations



LEGEND

Highway/Major Road

Secondary Road

Local Road

Railroad

Parcel Boundary

TOWN OF ATHOL LAND USE
BIDWELL SITE MASTER PLAN

N

1 INCH = 1,750 FEET

0 1,750 3,500 7,000

Feet

LEGEND

Land Use from 2023 Level 3 Parcels

No Data (0.53%)

Rights-of-Way (4.44%)

Residential (33.53%)

Business (1.69%)

Commercial (0.55%)

Industrial (1.96%)


Recreational (2.30%)


Open Space and Vacant Land (22.05%)

Agricultural (0.75%)

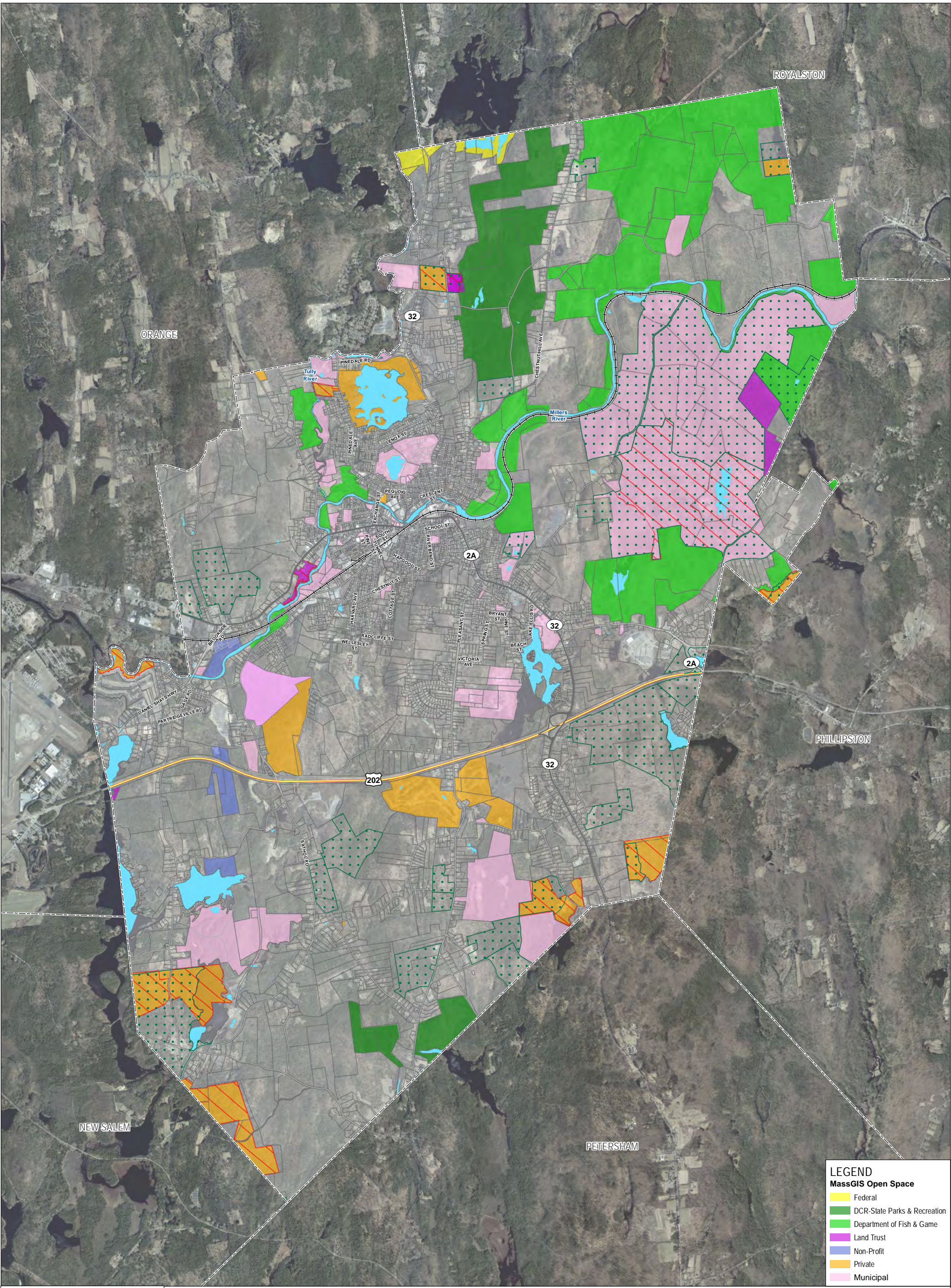
Open Water (2.68%)

Municipal/Tax Exempt (29.52%)





DATA SOURCE: MassGIS, Town of Athol, BSC Group, Inc.



LEGEND

- Highway/Major Road
- Secondary Road
- Local Road
- Railroad
- Parcel Boundary
- Town Boundary
- MADEP Open Water
- Forest Stewardship Program Land (2008)

OpenSpace: Interest Overlay

- Conservation Restriction

TOWN OF ATHOL OPEN SPACE

BIDWELL SITE MASTER PLAN

N

1 INCH = 1,750 FEET

0 1,750 3,500 7,000

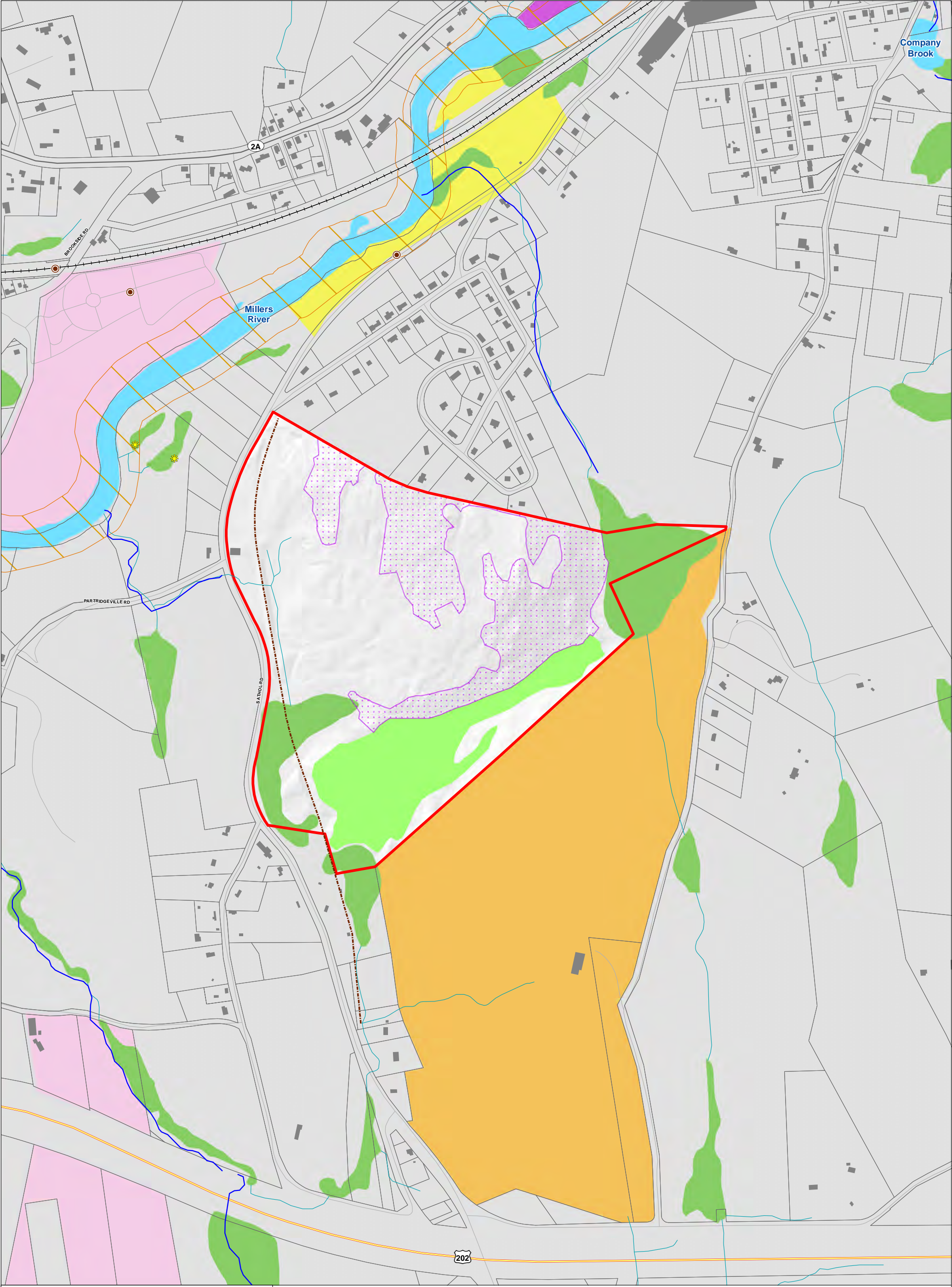
Feet

LEGEND

MassGIS Open Space

- Federal
- DCR-State Parks & Recreation
- Department of Fish & Game
- Land Trust
- Non-Profit
- Private
- Municipal

DATA SOURCE: MassGIS, Town of Athol, BSC Group, Inc.

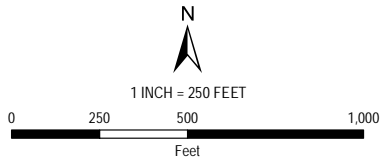


LEGEND

- Highway/Major Road
- Secondary Road
- Railroad
- Rabbit Run Railway
- Building Footprints
- Parcel Boundary
- Bidwell Site Location**
- Potential Vernal Pools
- MHC Historic Point
- MADEP Hydrologic Connections
- Perennial Stream

- MADEP Open Water
- MADEP Wetlands
- Potential Wetlands
- Slopes > 15%
- NHESP Priority & Estimated Habitats
- MassGIS Open Space**
- Department of Fish & Game
- Land Trust
- Non-Profit
- Private

BIDWELL PROPERTY PLANNING
ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS MAP





November 2023

Planning the Bidwell Site



OUTLINE

- I. Project Background
- II. Existing Conditions
- III. Site Characteristics
- IV. Community Visioning
- V. Initial Concept
- VI. Refined Concept
- VII. Housing Potential
- VIII. Recommendations





EXISTING CONDITIONS PLAN
DOWNTOWN PLANNING
ATHOL, MA



PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Town of Athol purchased the Bidwell parcel for \$550,000 at a Special Town Meeting in November 2009.

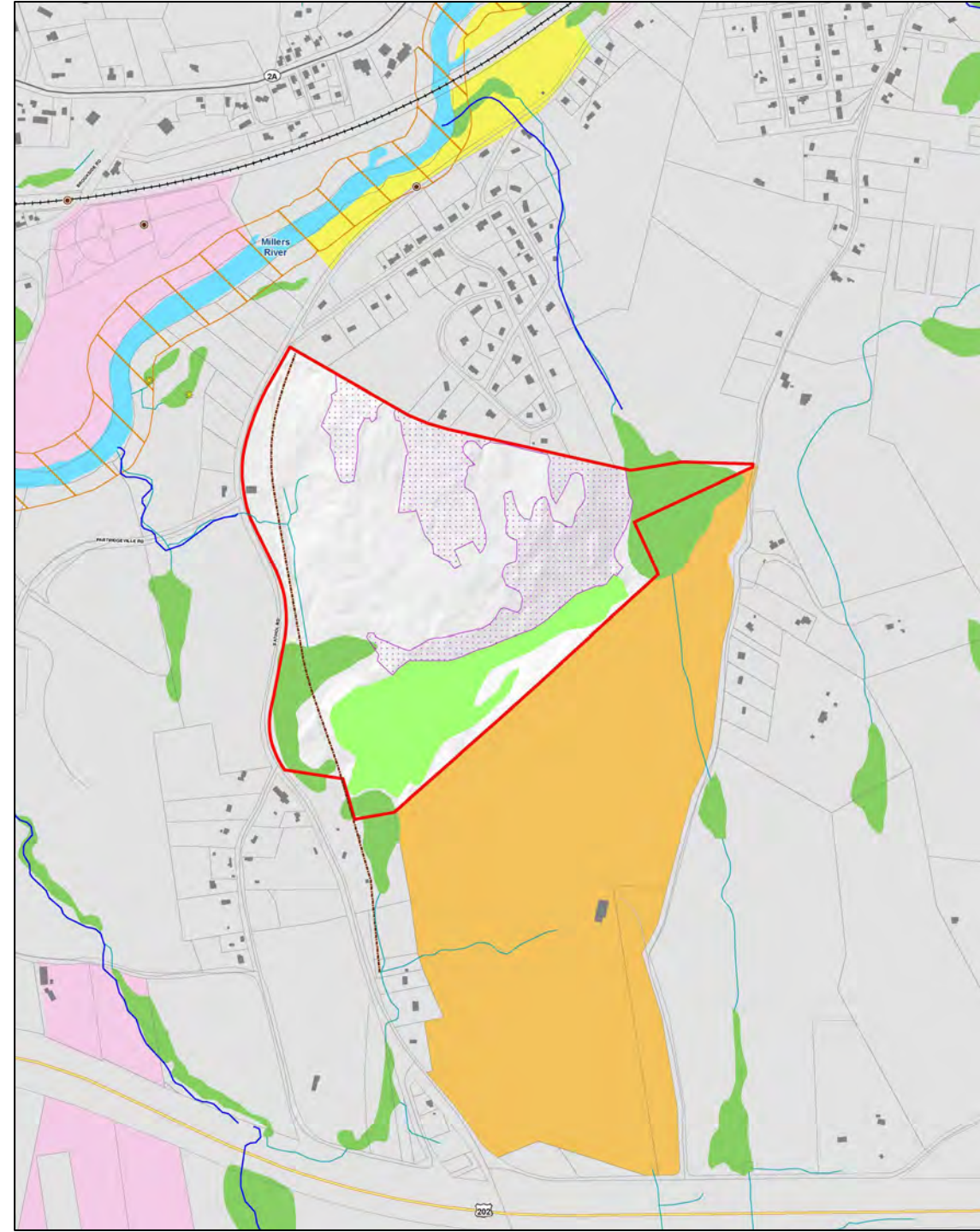
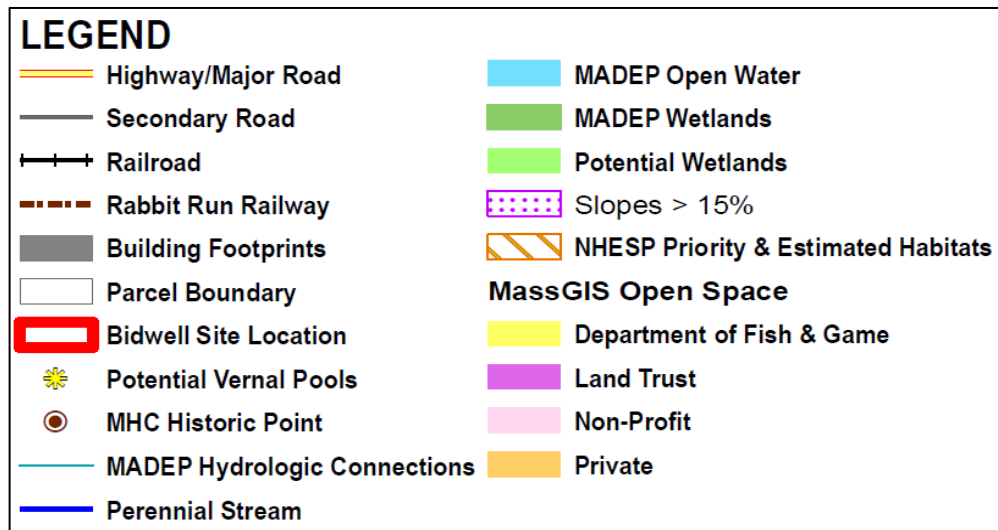
The site is approximately 100 acres, most of which is forest and wetlands.

Nearby resources include the Millers River, Bidwell Barn, and the Rabbit Run Rail Trail.

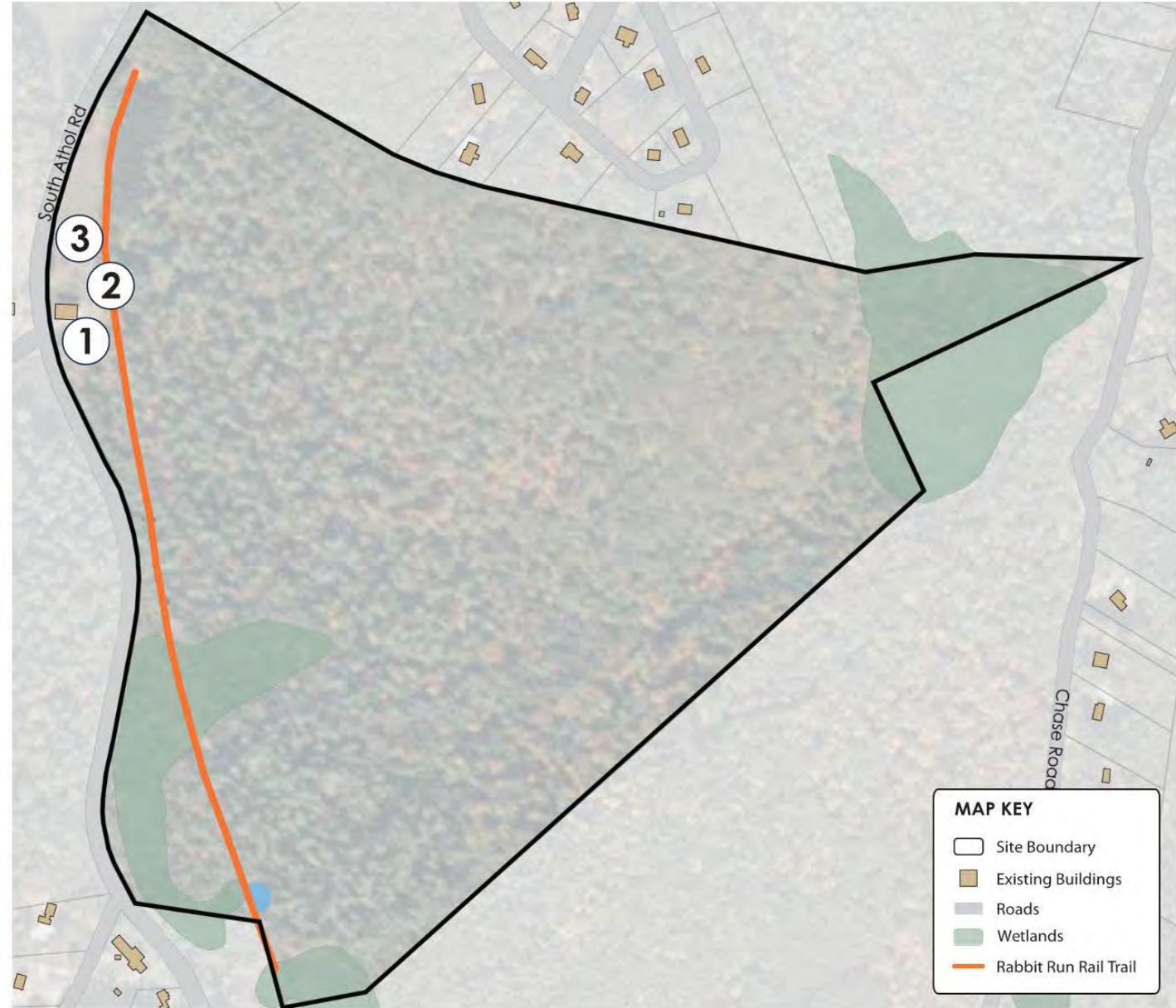
The Town received funding from the Executive Office of Administration and Finance, Community Compact Program for this Community Visioning and Site Planning Process.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

- Primarily Evergreen and Deciduous Forest
- Small Open Field, Barn Structure, and Driveway Access off South Athol Road
- Recognized as Farmland of Statewide Importance by the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service
- Wetlands comprise about 25% of the site
- Zoning - Rural Single-Family District (RC) and Adaptive Reuse Overlay District



EXISTING FEATURES at **BIDWELL SITE** | 1595 SOUTH ATHOL ROAD



FOREST HARVESTING at BIDWELL SITE | 1595 SOUTH ATHOL ROAD



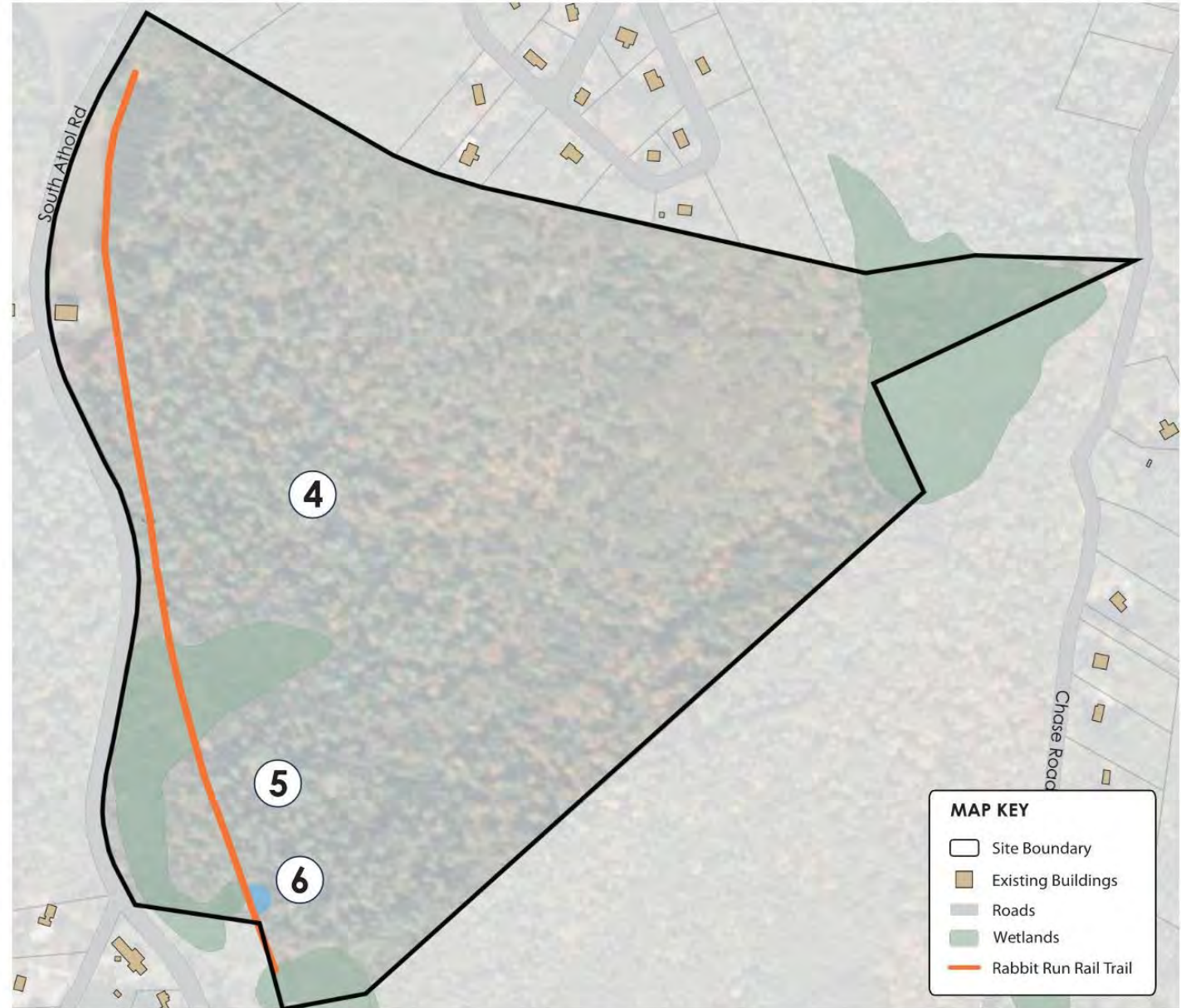
4 Forest Harvesting



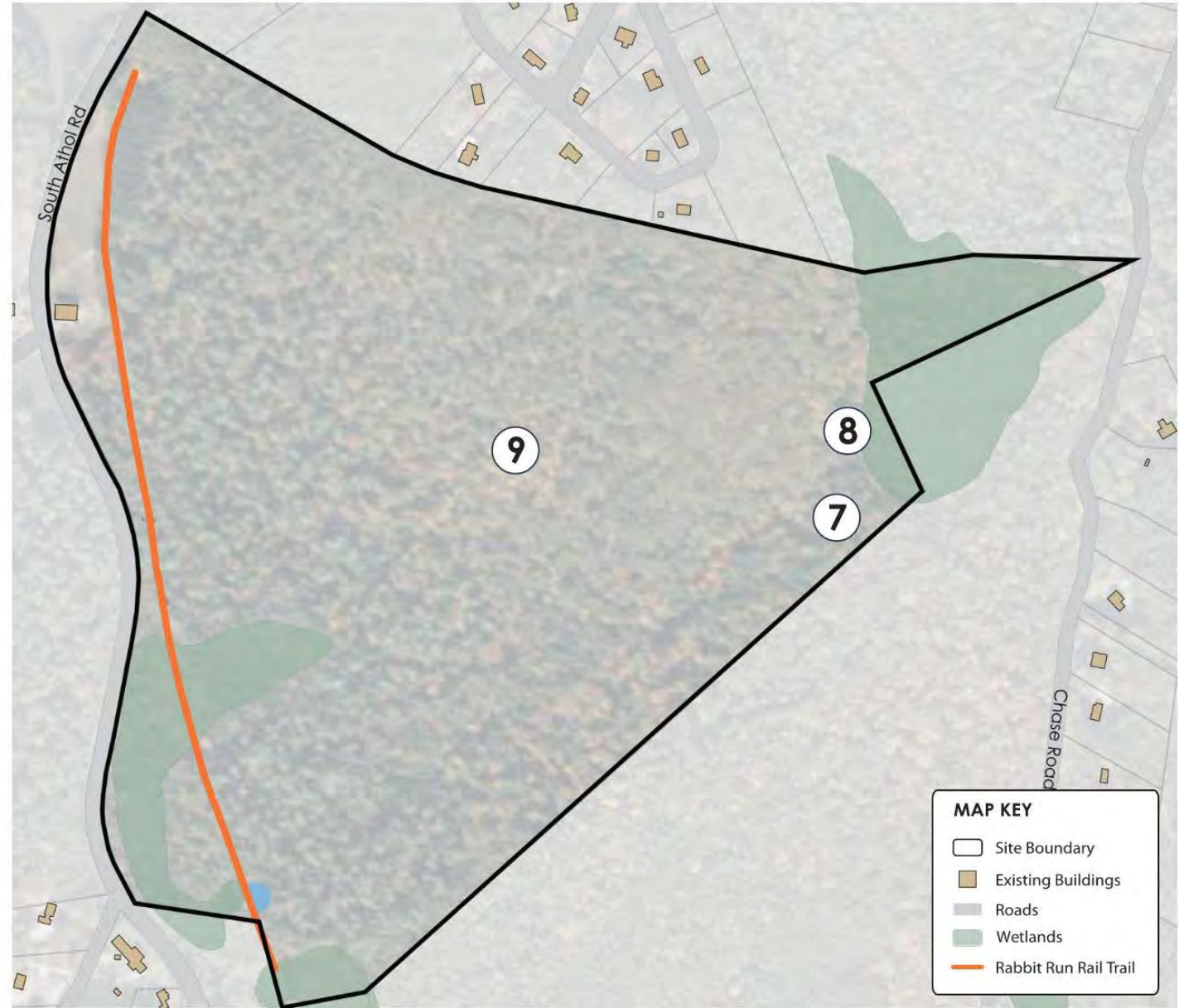
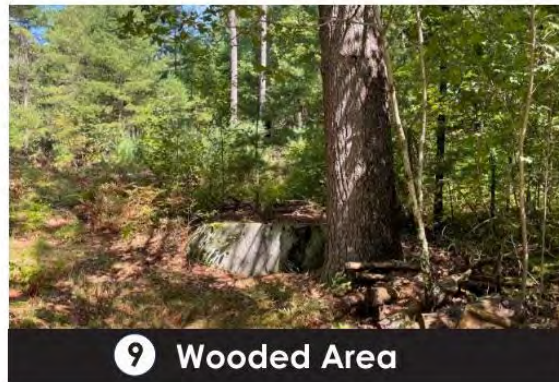
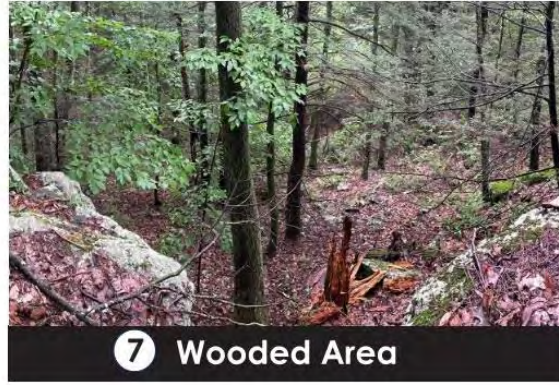
5 Forest Harvesting

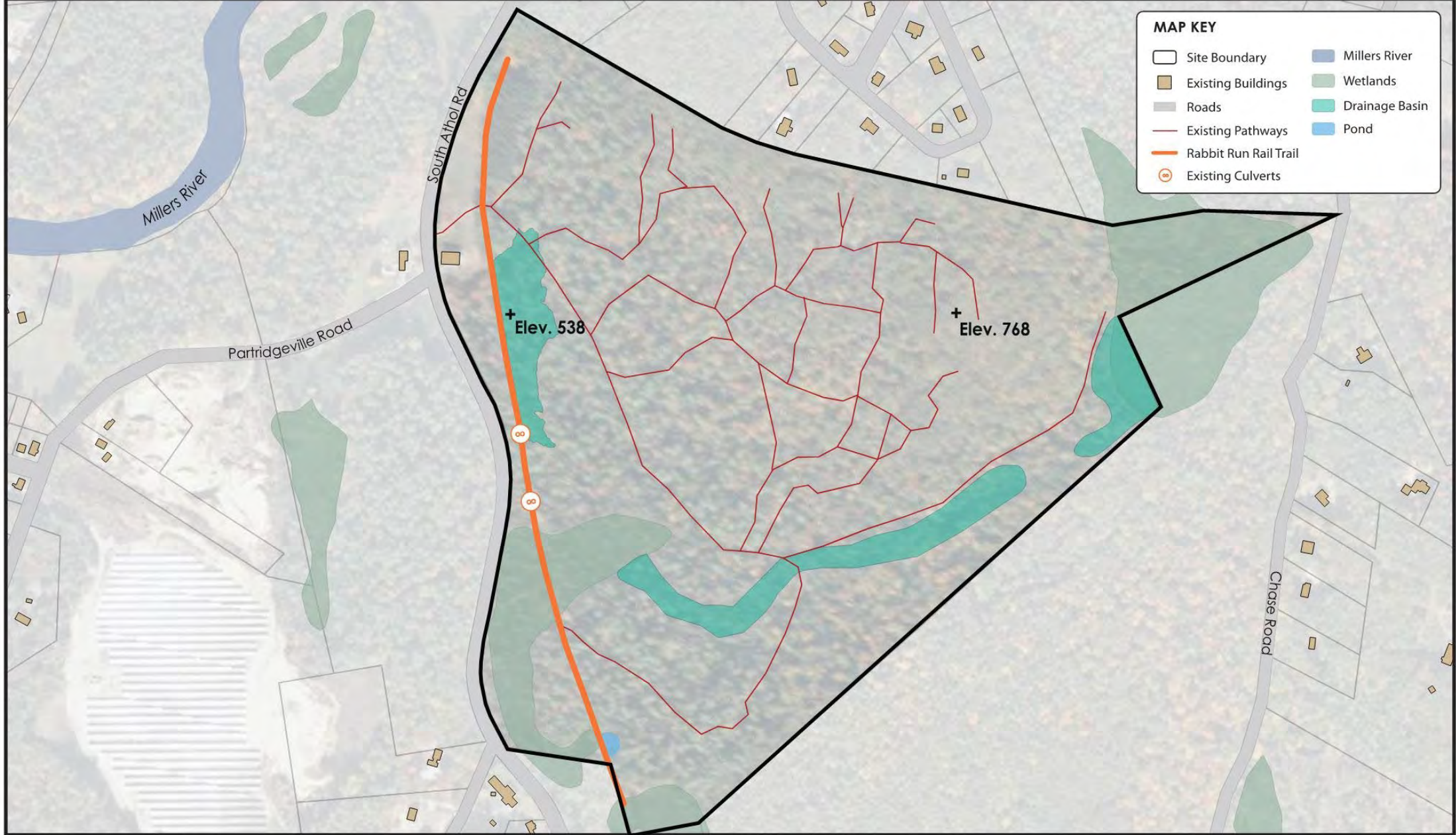


6 Forest Harvesting



WOODED AREAS at BIDWELL SITE | 1595 SOUTH ATHOL ROAD





SITE CHARACTERISTICS

Wetlands



Existing Trails



Logging Activities



Pine Grove



Ferns & Trails



Steep Slopes



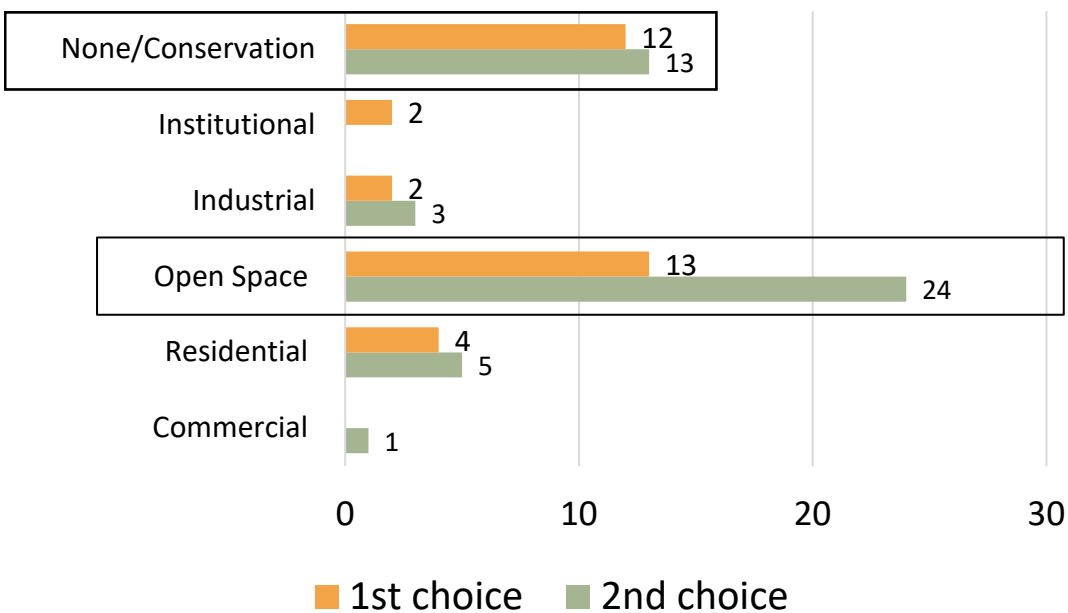


COMMUNITY VISIONING

A Community Conversation hosted in partnership with the Smithsonian *Crossroads* exhibit was held on May 23, 2023.

Presentations were made by representatives from the Mount Grace Land Trust, Athol EDIC, Athol Conservation Commission, local realtors, and the Planning Board, followed by an open house style workshop.

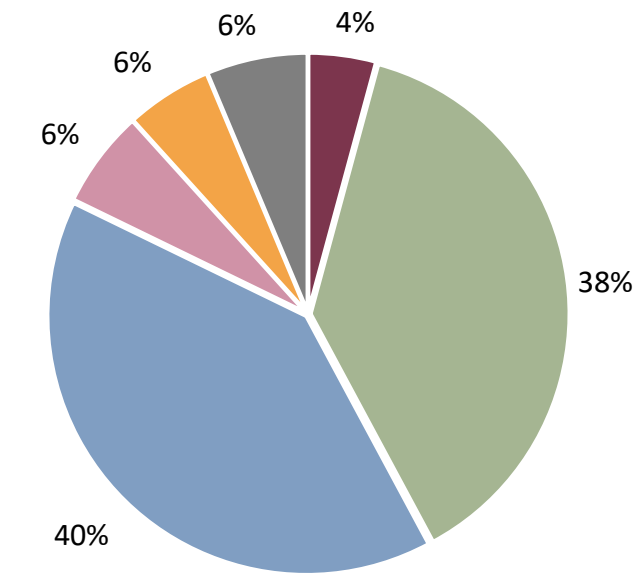
Potential Uses - Community Preferences



SURVEY RESULTS

July 19 – August 11, 2023
427 Total Responses

First Preference Use



- Business or Industry

■ Open Space and Recreation Use

■ Conservation Land

■ Housing

■ Community/ Multigenerational Center

■ Other
- Business or Industry

■ Open Space and Recreation Use

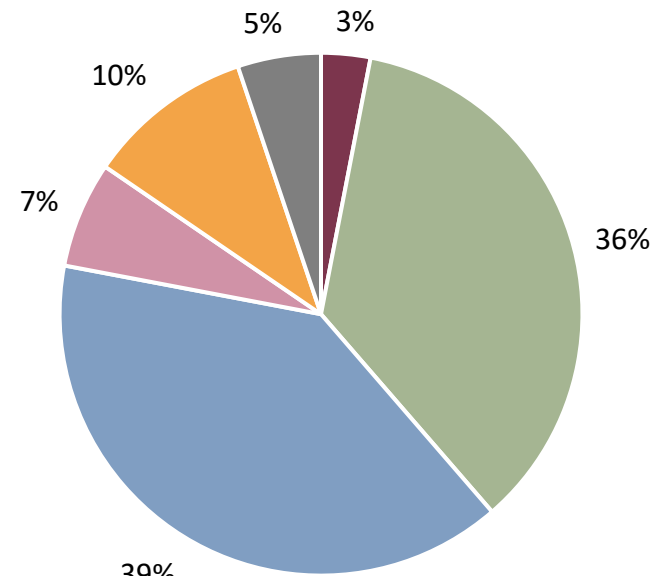
■ Conservation Land

■ Housing

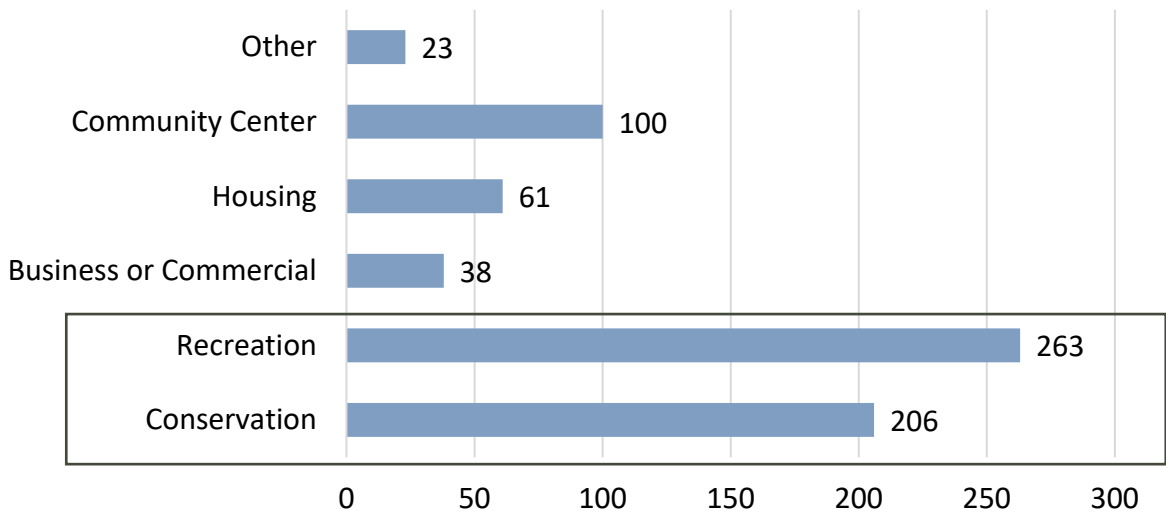
■ Community/ Multigenerational Center

■ Other

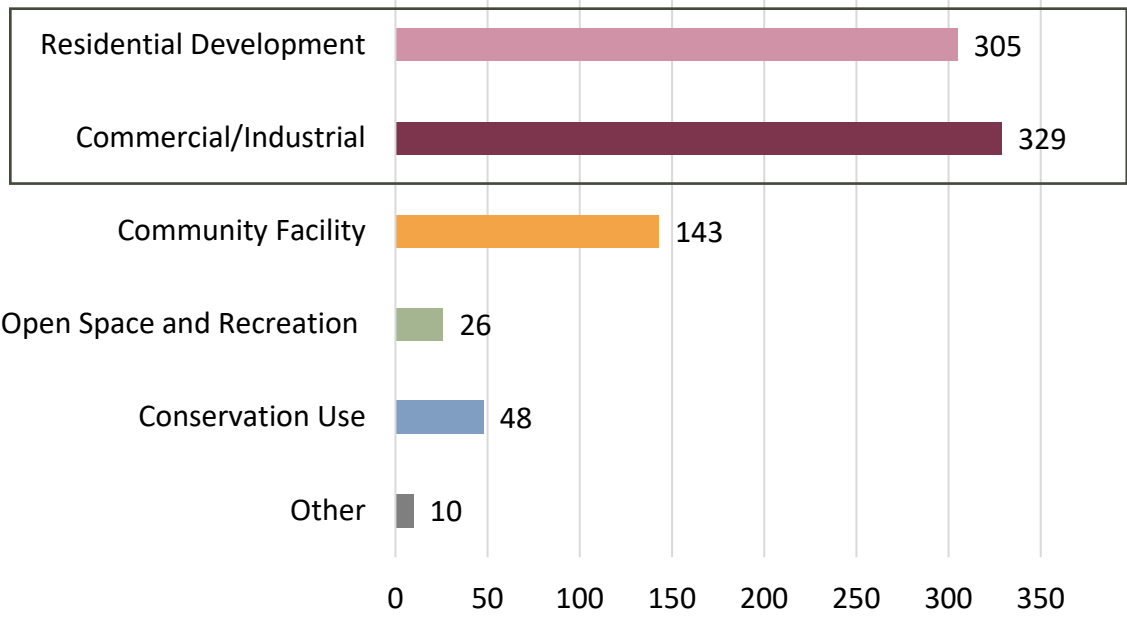
Second Preference Use



Preferred Combined Uses

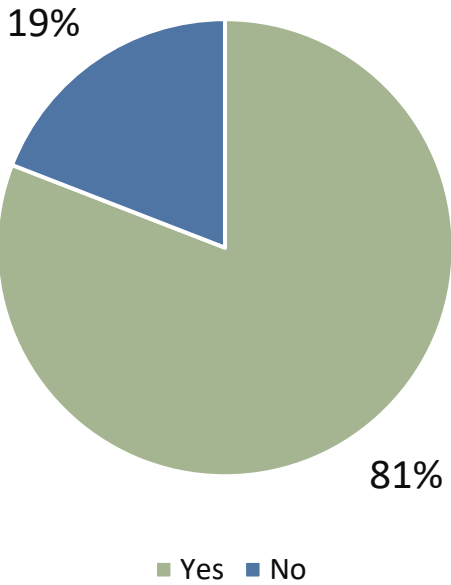


Uses Residents Do Not Support

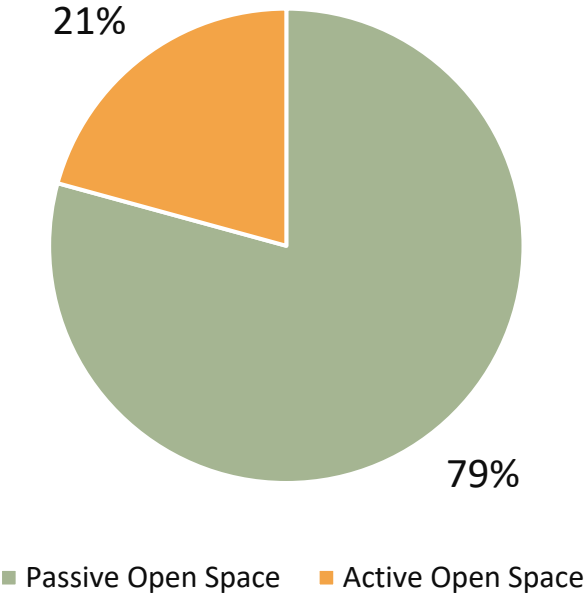


RECREATION POTENTIAL

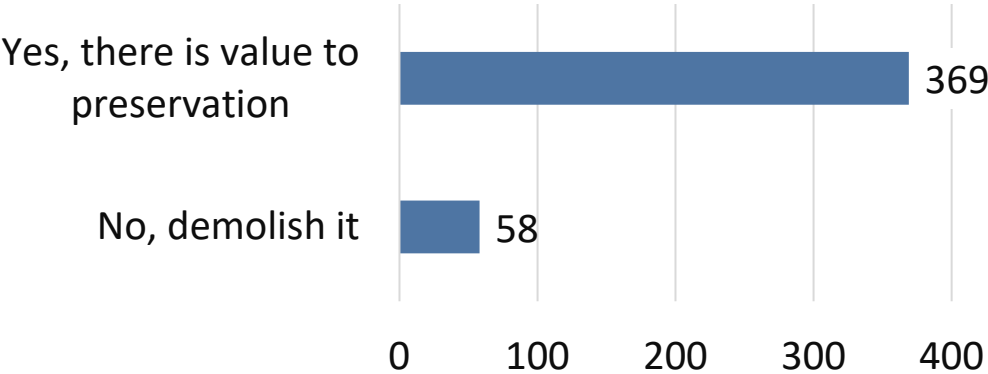
Support for Open Space, Recreation, or Conservation Use ONLY



Recreation Preference

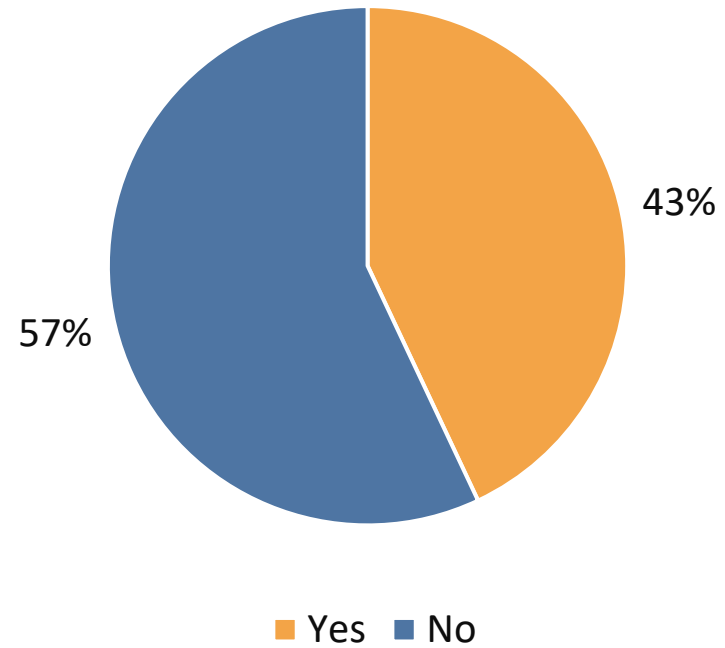


Historic Preservation of the Bidwell Barn

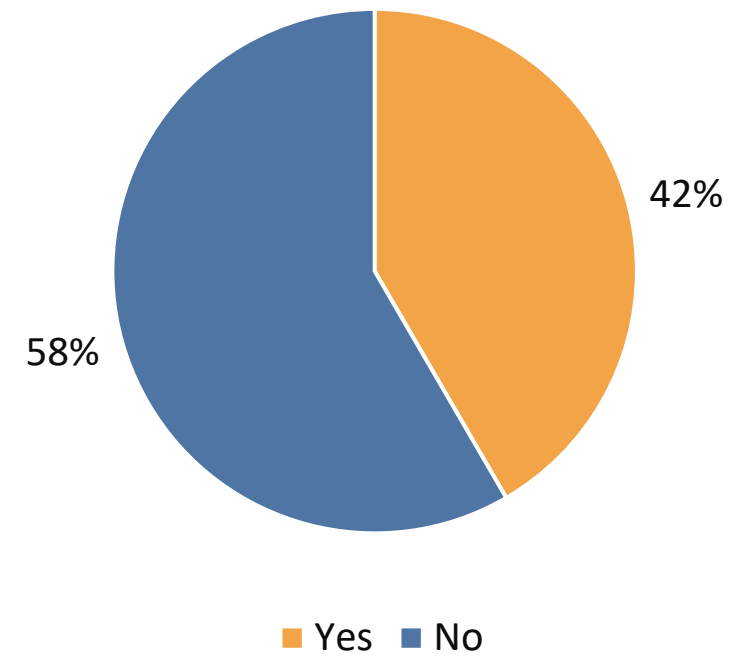


ROUTE 2 INTERCHANGE SUPPORT

Community Conversation



Online Survey



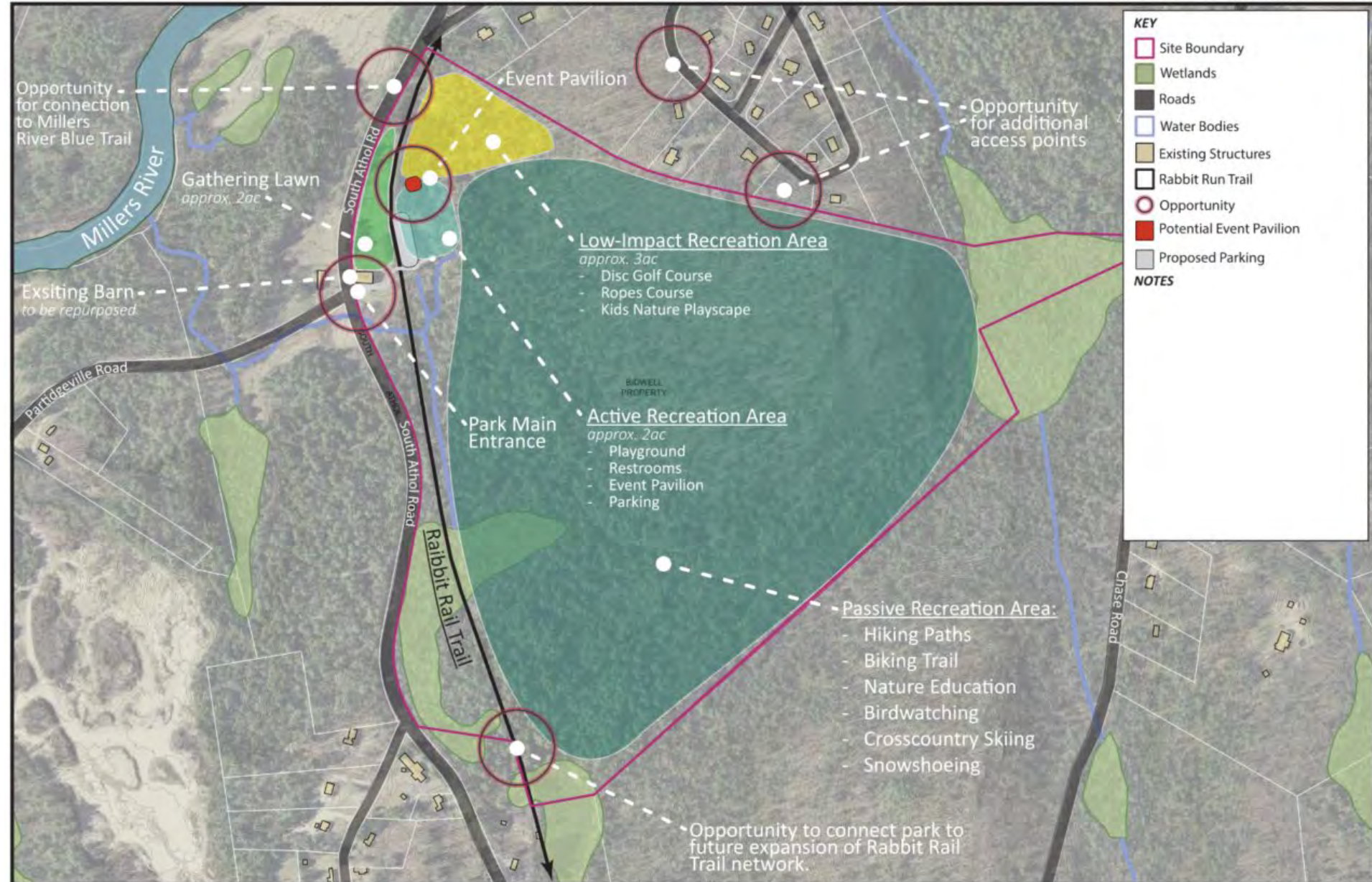
INITIAL OPEN SPACE CONCEPT

Design Criteria

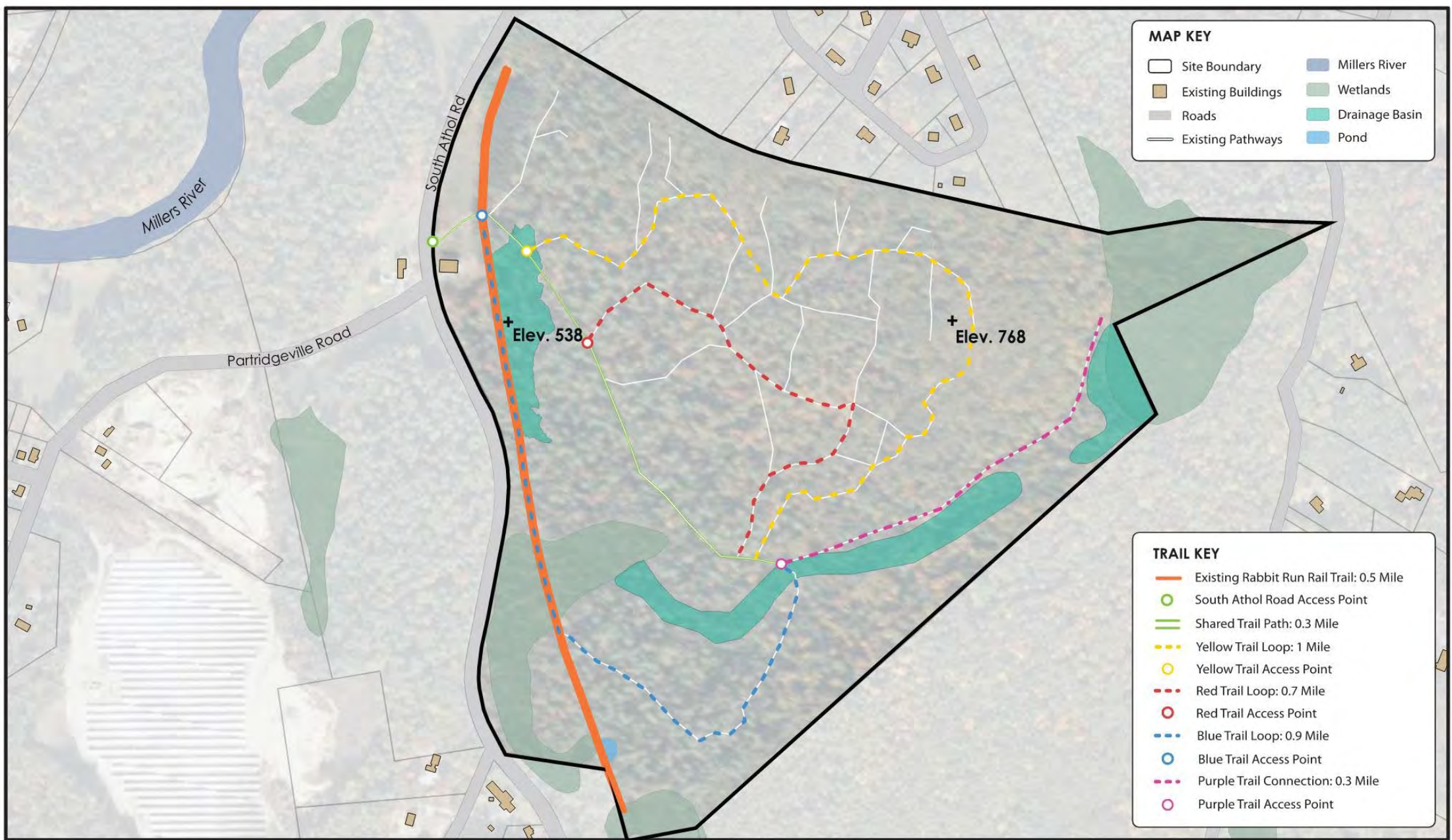
- Repurpose Bidwell Barn
- Incorporate Event Pavilion
- Gathering Meadow
- Rail Trail Focus
- Consistent with OSRP Goals
- Rail Trail to expand connectivity to other trail networks
- Educational overlay highlighting ecological value

Bubble Diagram

- Active Recreation Area within designated "first ring"
- Enhanced Recreation Area within designated "second ring"
- Passive Recreation Area within designated "third/outer ring"



CONCEPT DIAGRAM
BIDWELL SITE ATHOL, MA



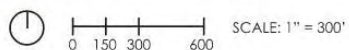
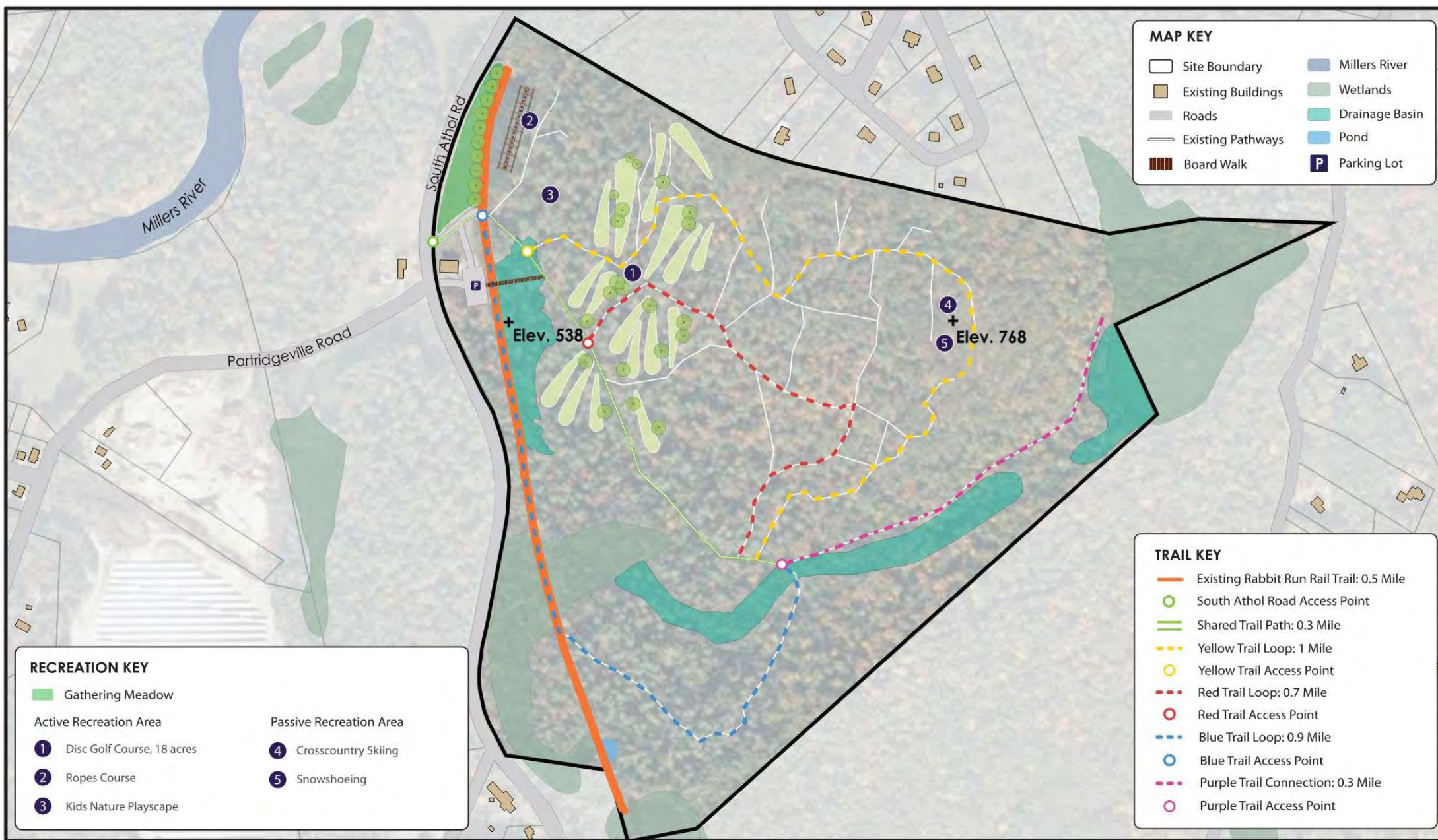
0 150 300 600 SCALE: 1" = 300'

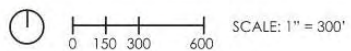
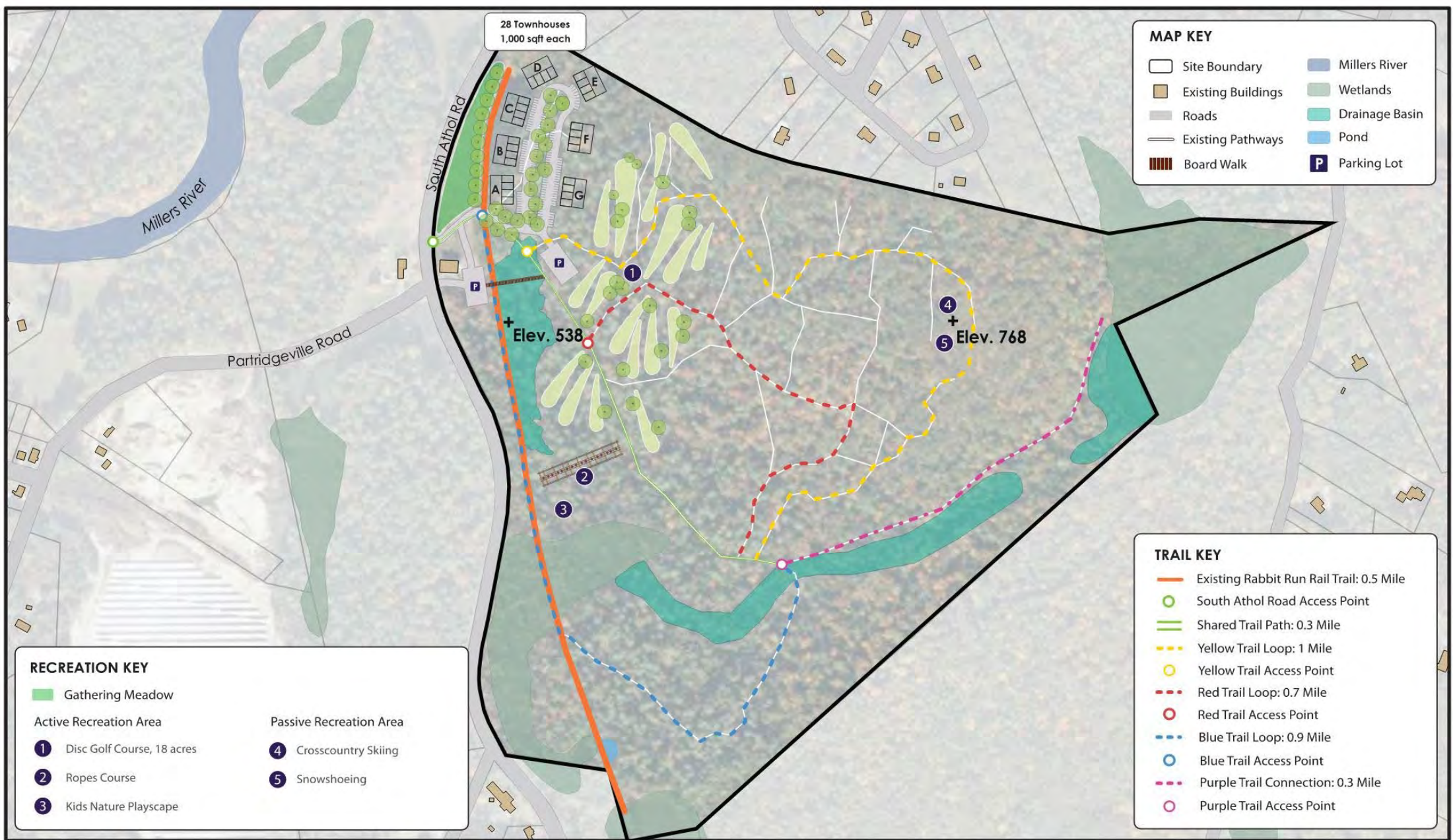
BIDWELL SITE- 1595 SOUTH ATHOL ROAD
ATHOL, MA

PROPOSED TRAIL NETWORKS

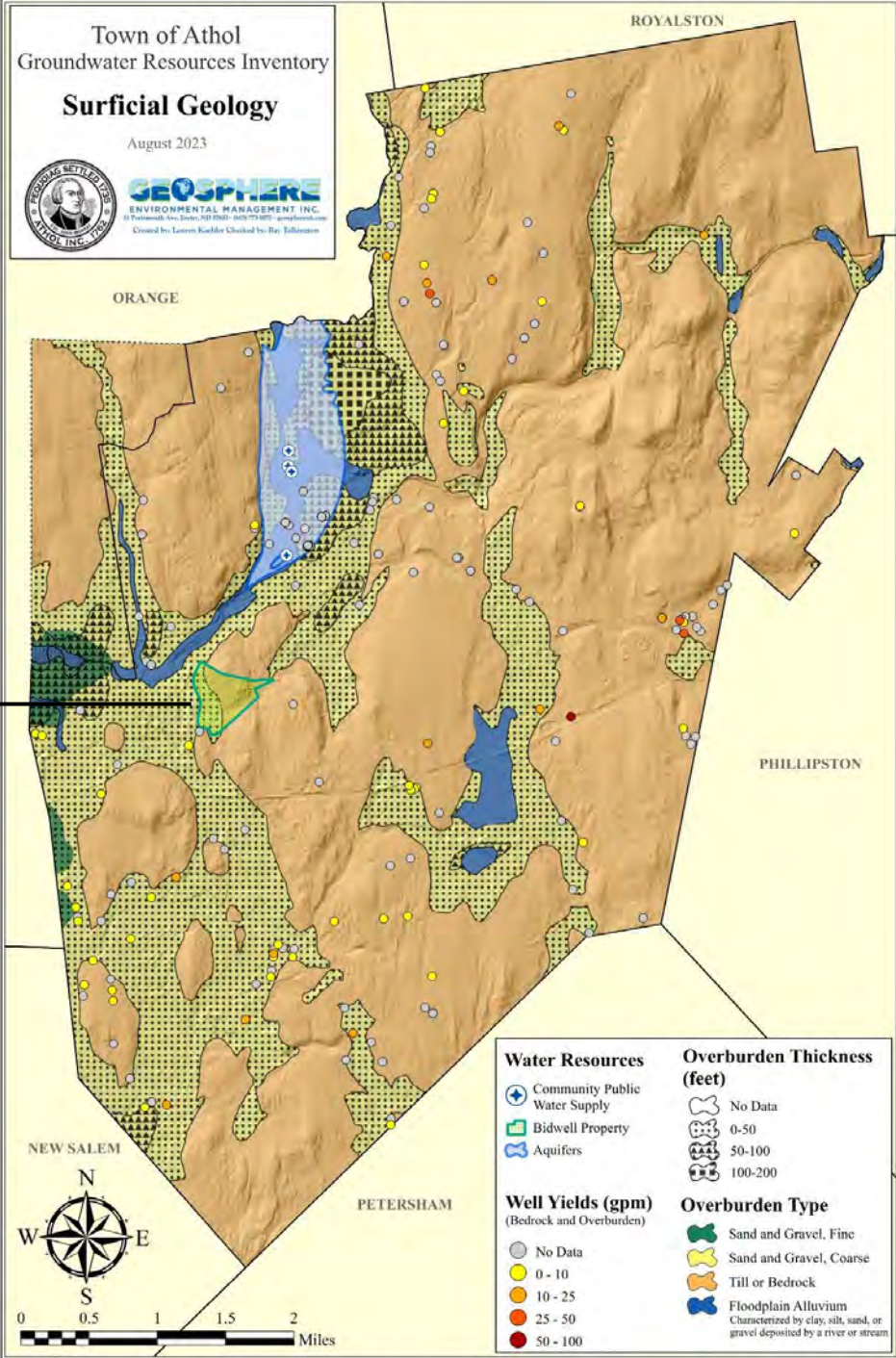
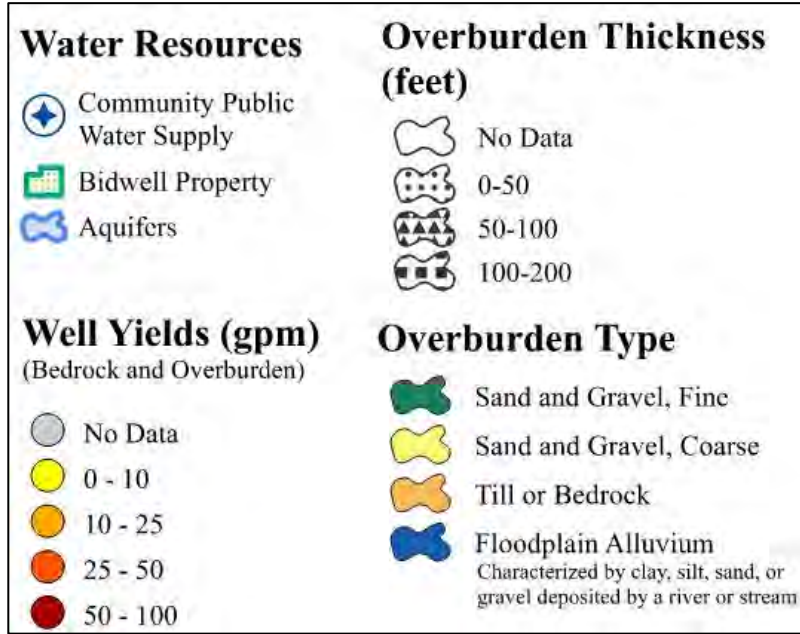
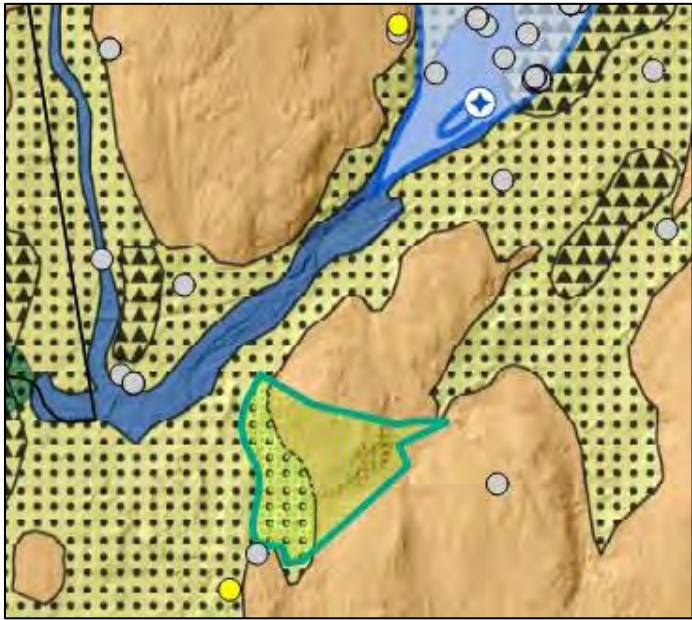
11/6/2023

BSC GROUP





WATER RESOURCES



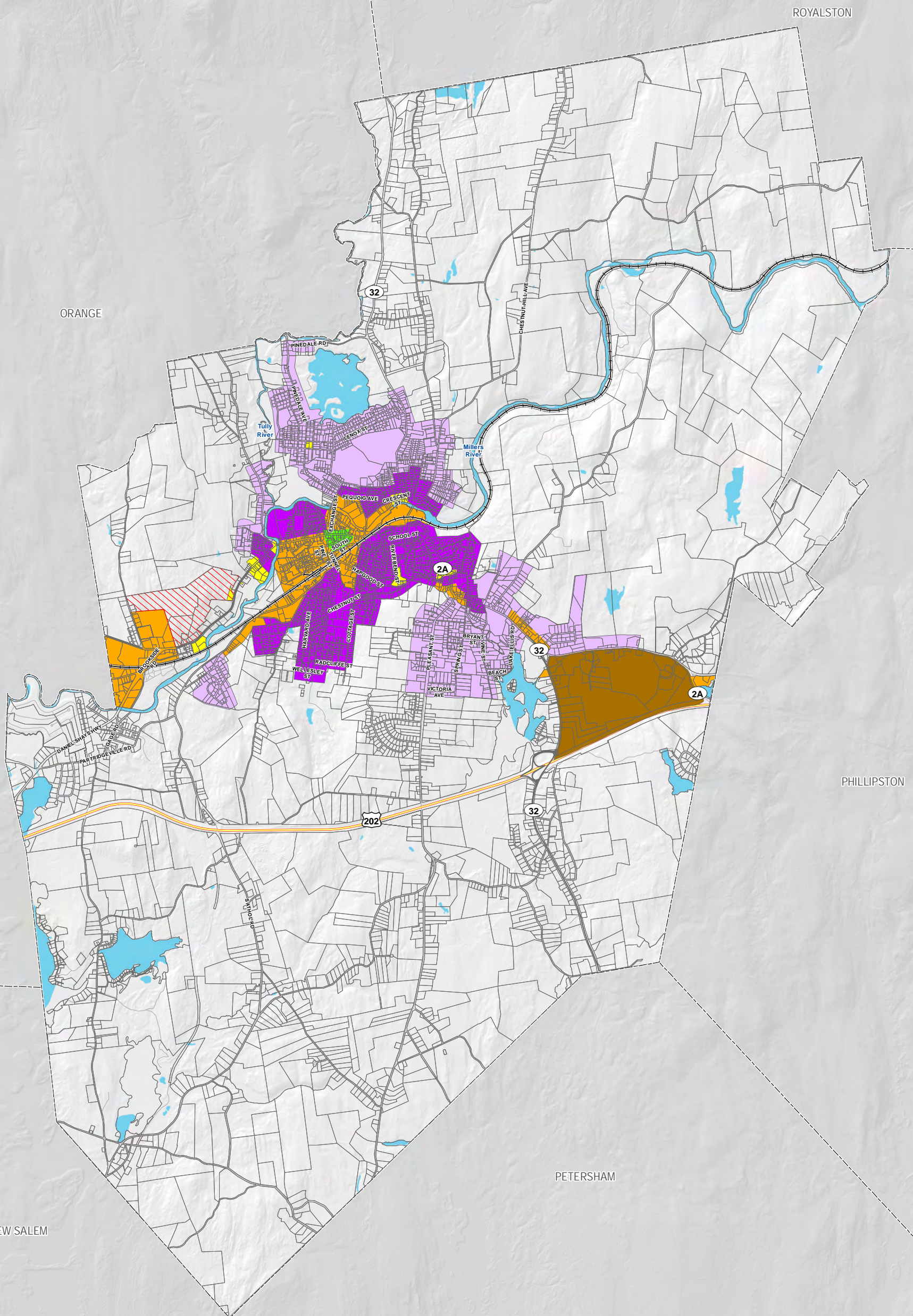
RECOMMENDATIONS

Potential Funding Opportunities:

- MassTrails Grant
 - Plan, design, create and maintain trail networks.
- Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity (LAND) Grant
 - For purchasing of a conservation restriction
- Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) Grant
 - Assists with developing land for park and outdoor recreation purposes.
- MHC and Community Preservation Funding, Preservation Projects Fund
 - May be eligible for federal tax credit on cost of rehabilitation.
- Underutilized Properties Program
 - Predevelopment funding and capital improvements
- Community Preservation Act
- MA Preservation Projects Fund
 - Supports preservation of properties, landscapes, and sites listed in State Register of Historic Places

Next Steps:

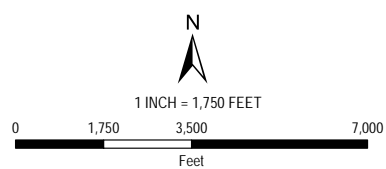
1. Site survey delineation (wetlands and trails)
2. Draft trail design concepts
3. Parking lot location
4. Additional visioning and community feedback on specific recreation features
5. Confirm Status of Town's Open Space & Recreation Plan & Update (to be eligible for certain funding)
6. Enroll barn in MACRIS state register of historic places
7. Conduct mechanical, electrical, plumbing study; and architectural engineering studies for the barn.



LEGEND

- LEGEND**
- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| — Local Road | Zoning |
| — Highway/Major Road | Central Commercial (CA) |
| — Secondary Road | General Commercial (G) |
| +++ Railroad | Industrial Commercial (I) |
| Parcel Boundary | Medium Single-Family Residential (RB) |
| MADEP Open Water | Multi-Family Residential (RA) |
| Areas for Proposed Rezoning to General Commercial | Neighborhood Commercial (CB) |
| | Rural Single-Family Residential (RC) |

TOWN OF ATHOL ZONING BIDWELL SITE MASTER PLAN



DATA SOURCE: MassGIS, Town of Athol, BSC Group, Inc.