

Commercial District Citizen-Based Vision Plan

Description of Project Funding Request for Annual Town Meeting (ATM)

Spring 2021

ATM Request – The Planning Board requests **\$300,000** from Capital Funds to produce legislation to develop and execute a plan for the Ayer Road corridor that aligns with the rural character of Harvard. These funds support a community-led process to define a vision for the corridor in the 3-phase plan described below.

Current Situation

- Harvard has a structural budget flaw overly reliant on a residential tax base
- The Town currently lacks a plan for the smart growth of its commercial district
- The Town's restrictive zoning and limited connectivity between parcels dissuades businesses from locating in our community
- Pressure from outward expansion of Boston exacerbated by COVID-19 may overwhelm this deterrent and lead to rapid advancement of suburban sprawl lacking a cohesive vision
- Town residents need and want to be involved in developing a plan that reflects Harvard's rural character



The Harvard Solution – A community-led process to establish a unique vision for the corridor and produce zoning legislation to present at Town Meeting. This effort follows a three-phase “smart-growth” initiative as follows:

- **Phase 1 Market Analysis and Fiscal Impact (~\$45,000, 4-6 months)** – An initial market study will determine possible uses and scale of development that the district can support. A fiscal impact analysis will provide an estimate of tax and other revenues matched to each corresponding development level. Phase 2 will commence if a positive fiscal outcome is determined.



What **can** be done?

- **Phase 2: Vision Plan (~\$155,000, 12-14 months)** – The citizens of Harvard are passionate about their rural community and will play a key role in defining the vision of the corridor based on the possibilities established in Phase 1. Outside consultants will guide a public process for the community to develop a clear direction for the corridor including protection of open space, traffic solutions for enhanced safety, infrastructure considerations for water and sewer, and clear definition uses and scales of uses.



What **should** be done?

- **Phase 3: Transforming Vision to a Bylaw (~\$100,000, 8-15 months)**– The Phase 2 plan will be transformed into the formal legal language of zoning to establish the citizens' vision. As opposed to the defensive character of conventional zoning, Harvard is looking closely at the [form-based code](#) model which prescribes the character of the area up front.



How is it **implemented**?

Return on Investment (ROI) – This request represents an internal investment in Harvard that offers to establish a sustained income stream in the form of revitalized commercial tax revenues. Additional dividends in the form of permit fees and higher tax values partners with the recirculation of local dollars within the community to reduce economic leakage that occurs now.



Smart Growth Approach – The “smart growth” strategy protects valuable open spaces and natural areas, increases traffic safety, and creates a connected district for pedestrians and cyclists with greater social interaction. It introduces a variety of housing types for seniors and other underserved sectors, creates jobs, and enhances local shopping and service uses for our citizens. Above all, it will be a beautiful and functional part of our community.



See the Frequently Asked Questions on the rear of this sheet and visit our webpage for more information:

<https://www.harvard.ma.us/economic-development/pages/ayer-road-planning-framework-project>

Ayer Road Vision Plan

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Q: Why should we spend any more money on another plan? We keep funding plans and nothing happens.

A: This plan is different and the first time Planning Board has connected feasibility with citizen desires and zoning in a single effort. Past attempts have faced fits and starts as a direct consequence of the demands on a single volunteer board to execute in isolation. For this project, the Planning Board seeks to embrace the citizenry to articulate the vision for the Ayer Road commercial corridor and produce zoning based on that vision. Phase 3 will produce zoning legislation for ATM.

Q: Why not just fund Phase 1 and revisit Phases 2 and 3 next year?

A: The Planning Board presented Phase 1 at ATM in Spring 2020. It was not funded because it was isolated from the larger vision and could “sit on a shelf” like all past studies if the next phase of funding was not awarded in a timely manner. At this time, the Planning Board would greatly prefer to fund all three phases to maintain project continuity and to eliminate additional costs associated with project stops and restarts. The Board is sensitive to the current budget challenges.



Q: Why does the Town have to fund this? Aren't there grants for these kinds of projects?

A: The Planning Board has requested funds for this project from state and regional agencies such as MassDevelopment as well as other sources. Past reviews have been favorable; however, reviewers respond more favorably when building on initial community investment. In addition, Harvard is a small community with relatively high income, and grants are often prioritized for larger communities with fewer resources and greater need. This request independently defines our own future while increasing the chances of supplemental funding at later stages of the project.

Q: Isn't reincorporation of Devens the real solution to a commercial base and the way to establish tax revenues?

A: There is no certainty to taking back Devens lands, and no guarantee that if we do, it will be revenue positive. It may take 12 years or more for such a solution to be forthcoming.

Q: What about traffic, noise, and other quality of life issues? Won't the development of the Ayer Road corridor result in traffic jams, pollution, excess noise, and the destruction of our wetlands and other natural areas?

A: These are key reasons why this specific plan was developed. Harvard is unique and should have its own unique mixed-use district that nestles into the rural landscape. The vision plan will identify important natural areas to protect in perpetuity, introduce traffic calming measures, and enable more pedestrian and bike-friendly environments to serve as a welcome destination for residents and visitors alike.

Q: This will change the very character of Harvard and turn us into an Acton or Westford. Why would we want to do that?

A: The Planning Board proposes this plan so as not to alter our character. In fact, the goal is to enhance our character with the kind of businesses and architecture that Harvard residents will take great pride in.

Q: Why can't the Director of Community and Economic Development execute this project? Isn't that why we created this position?

A: The Director helped identify and define this kind of project in recognition of the challenges past boards have faced and the uniqueness of the rural landscape. Management of this project extends beyond a single individual and requires time and attention beyond the capacity of current staff who have numerous other responsibilities. However, staff provides the interface between the highly skilled consultants and our residents to guarantee the project team provides the level of service that is needed to carry out the work.

Q: Why can't we just leave well enough alone and do nothing?

A: There are a number of sites along Ayer Road right now that do not reflect the rural character of Harvard. Currently, the area is attractive to developers interested in self-storage warehouses, large apartment complexes, and industrial and automotive-related uses. For Harvard to ensure that the area is developed based on a positive vision will require proactive planning on the part of all of us.