

Wrentham Local Rapid Recovery Plan: Transportation Implementation Memo

Date: December 31, 2021

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Introduction

The Massachusetts Local Rapid Recovery Plan (LRRP) Program, sponsored by the Commonwealth's Department of Housing and Community Development, was intended to provide every municipality in Massachusetts the opportunity to develop actionable, project-based recovery plans tailored to the unique economic challenges and COVID-19 related impacts to downtowns, town centers, and commercial areas across the Commonwealth.

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), which is the regional planning agency for the Greater Boston area, provided technical assistance to the Town of Wrentham from November - December 2021 to help implement two transportation recommendations from their LRRP, as follows:

- Develop a Complete Streets policy (recommendation #4)
- Conduct a pedestrian safety audit (recommendation #5)

These LRRP recommendations, MAPC's activities to advance these recommendations, and key findings and next steps from these activities are described in more detail in the memo sections that follow. MAPC is concurrently working with the Town of Wrentham to develop their Master Plan, which will guide the Town's investments, policies, and priorities for the next 10 years through 2030. Phase I of the Master Plan was completed in 2020 and Phase II will be completed in 2022. Information gleaned from MAPC's work on the LRRP transportation recommendations will also be included in the Phase II Master Plan.

Transportation Recommendations and MAPC Activities

Transportation is a critical issue for Wrentham residents. MAPC conducted a community survey as part of the Phase I Master Plan in Wrentham and found that improving walkability and bikeability throughout the Town was the top priority for respondents, with 14 percent of respondents listing it as the most important improvement to be made in the Town. Another 8 percent of respondents listed improving walkability and bikeability in downtown Wrentham Center as the most important improvement.

The LRRP recommendations to develop a Complete Streets policy and to conduct a pedestrian safety audit present near-term opportunities to respond to this community desire for increased walkability and bikeability. Simply put, Complete Streets are streets that accommodate all travel modes (walking, biking, transit, and driving), as well as all ages and abilities (including children,

seniors, and people with disabilities). The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) has developed a comprehensive Complete Streets program, under which municipalities that pass local Complete Streets policies become eligible for up to \$38,000 in planning funds and \$400,000 in infrastructure funds to advance related roadway projects.

A pedestrian safety audit (also known as a walk audit) is a tangible way for a community to advance its local Complete Streets and walkability goals. A walk audit brings together municipal stakeholders and residents to build a shared understanding of the elements that comprise a walkable community, to observe local pedestrian safety conditions through an on-site walk, and to recommend improvements to the built environment that improve pedestrian safety, accessibility, and comfort for all. The LRRP recommendation for a pedestrian safety audit focused on Wrentham Center will also advance the goals of the Village Center Overlay District passed by Town Meeting in 2018, which sought to create a more walkable and vibrant downtown.

To advance these LRRP recommendations, MAPC Transportation staff organized and participated in the following activities:

- Two Wrentham site visits with Town Planning staff (November 24) and members of the Town’s Master Plan Steering Committee (December 7)
- A “Complete Streets 101” virtual presentation to the Wrentham Board of Selectmen (December 7)
- Four virtual focus groups with Town of Wrentham staff, stakeholders, and residents representing the following constituencies:
 - Aging and disability community (December 10)
 - Public school administration (December 10)
 - Local businesses (December 15)
 - Town Public Works and Recreation staff (December 16)
- A Wrentham Center pedestrian safety audit virtual planning meeting (December 22)

All these activities gave MAPC Transportation staff valuable insights into existing conditions in Wrentham and potential transportation improvements, as well opportunities to build relationships with and hear from Town staff, stakeholders, residents, and elected officials. These activities as well as key findings and next steps are further described below.

While MAPC’s technical assistance was focused on the Complete Streets policy and downtown pedestrian safety audit recommendations from the LRRP, MAPC staff noted two additional LRRP recommendations related to walkability and transportation: creating an ADA self-evaluation and transition plan including pedestrian infrastructure, public rights-of-way, and Sweatt Park (recommendation #6) and conducting a feasibility study for a downtown walking loop that connects local businesses, schools, and recreation facilities (recommendation #7). These

recommendations should also be incorporated into future Complete Streets and transportation planning efforts in Wrentham.

Developing a Complete Streets Policy

On December 7, MAPC Transportation staff gave a virtual “Complete Streets 101” presentation to the Wrentham Board of Selectmen that described the benefits of a municipal Complete Streets policy. The presentation received a positive response from elected officials and Town staff. The biggest concern expressed by the Board was whether a policy would commit the town to implementing Complete Streets elements, such as sidewalks and bike lanes, on every street. MAPC shared that MassDOT’s Complete Streets program allows flexibility for cities and towns to determine what would work best for them based on their local context.

Town staff and partners moved quickly after the positive response from the Board. Environmental Partners, a consulting firm also working with the Town on transportation issues, provided sample municipal Complete Streets policies for the Board to consider as potential models for Wrentham. Environmental Partners also provided a draft letter of intent from the Town to MassDOT to indicate the Town’s commitment to passing a Complete Streets policy within one year. The Town executed the letter of intent in late December, which will enable Wrentham to apply for up to \$38,000 in Complete Streets planning funds concurrent with the local policy development.

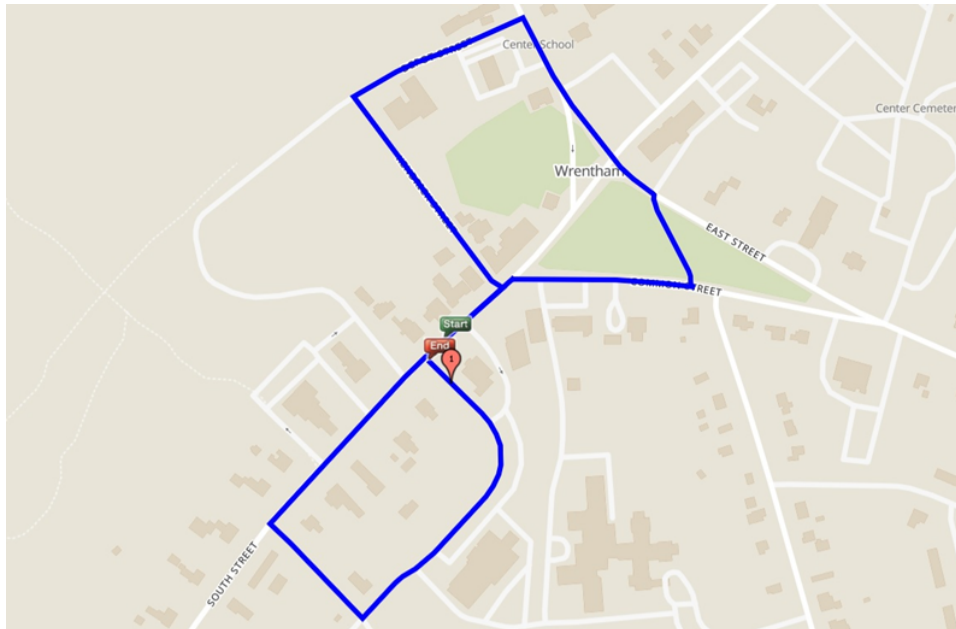
Conducting a Pedestrian Safety Audit

On November 24, MAPC Transportation staff met Wrentham Planning staff for a site visit to observe and learn about walkability and Complete Streets issues in and around downtown Wrentham Center. The opportunities observed included a high number of sidewalk connections and crosswalks, the proposed Metacomet Greenway multi-use trail corridor adjacent to the downtown, vibrant local businesses, attractive green spaces (including Sweatt Park and the Wrentham Common), and land sites along Depot and Kendrick Streets with mixed-use development potential. The challenges observed included crosswalk visibility and safety (especially near the angled parking on Route 1A/South Street), poor sidewalk and curb ramp condition, wide roadway expanses, management of on- and off-street parking, and poor signalization at the Route 140/Route 1A intersection.

The learnings from the November 24 site visit informed a subsequent pedestrian safety audit virtual planning meeting on December 22. Participants included representatives from Environmental Partners, MAPC, MassDOT’s Safe Routes to School program, the Wrentham Business Collaborative, the Wrentham Senior Center, and the Town’s Buildings, Fire, Planning, and Public Works Departments. MAPC staff introduced a proposed walk audit format: a presentation on the elements of a walkable community (30 minutes), followed by a group walk through Wrentham Center to observe local pedestrian conditions (60 minutes) and a discussion to prioritize recommended improvements (30 minutes). MAPC staff also proposed a downtown walking route to cover several points of interest, including the following:

- Wrentham Common

- The intersection of Common Street/David Brown Way/Taunton Street
- The intersection of Route 1A/Route 140
- Banks Street and Route 1A/South Street next to Sweatt Park and local small businesses
- Vacant sites with development potential along Depot and Kendrick Streets
- The intersection of Route 1A/Randall Road (many students access the nearby Roderick and Delaney Schools via this intersection, which is the focus area of a recent Town application to MassDOT's Safe Routes to School program to improve crossing safety)



The proposed walk audit route would start and end at Wrentham Town Hall and cover several points of interest in and around the downtown.

Meeting participants largely agreed with the proposed route, while also noting that nearby Creek Street and Garden Lane are important pedestrian connections for school children and seniors. MAPC staff noted that Complete Streets efforts in the Town can help address issues at these locations. The final deliverable for the walk audit (to be conducted in 2022) will be a report or memo summarizing the process and recommendations, which can also inform future Complete Streets projects. MAPC committed to working with Wrentham Planning staff to determine next steps for planning and scheduling the audit.

Transportation Focus Groups and Overall Findings

MAPC Transportation staff worked with Town staff to identify key stakeholders representing various constituency groups in town. MAPC then organized and facilitated four focus groups to discuss transportation challenges and opportunities (including walkability, pedestrian safety, and Complete Streets) in Wrentham's downtown as well as the Town more broadly. The four focus groups included Town staff, stakeholders, and residents representing the aging and disability community (December 10), public school administration (December 10), local businesses

(December 15), and Town Public Works and Recreation staff (December 16). The number of participants in each focus group (excluding MAPC staff) ranged from two to six. Findings from these focus groups, as well as the site visits (November 24 and December 7), the Complete Streets discussion with the Board of Selectmen (December 7), and the pedestrian safety audit planning meeting (December 22), are described below.

Pedestrian Safety, Access, and Connectivity

Walkability was a high priority for participants in all four focus groups. Focus group participants emphasized the need for better safety, access, and connectivity, especially for children, seniors, and people with disabilities. They also expressed interest in having sidewalks, walking paths at the Rice Recreation Complex, and a downtown walking loop (LRRP recommendation #7) connect to the proposed Metacomet Greenway multi-use trail corridor adjacent to the downtown.

Most focus group comments on walkability fell into two categories: the need for improvements to existing crosswalks within the downtown and the need for more and better sidewalks (especially those that connect adjacent residential areas to the downtown). Existing pedestrian crossings in the downtown area are unsafe and difficult to cross due to old signal technology, low visibility, long crossing distances, speeding vehicles, and heavy traffic, including truck traffic. The angled parking, for example, doesn't allow oncoming vehicles to see people trying to cross over to the town common. The intersection at Route 1A and 140 has very old technology that takes a long time to turn to a pedestrian signal, and the lights aren't easy to see. Updated pedestrian signals that provide more time to cross the street would be helpful, as well as audible signals for people who are visually impaired.

Many sidewalks in and around downtown are in poor condition and do not currently meet ADA standards, including proper width and curb cuts at intersections and crosswalks. Better maintenance of existing sidewalks is especially needed on Franklin Street (also known as Route 140), a major connector between King Philip Regional High School and the downtown and multiple residential areas. Obstacles such as old mailbox posts and overgrown vegetation were barriers to using some sidewalks, especially for seniors or people using mobility devices. Minimal lighting or no lighting at all was mentioned as a safety hazard, especially in the winter as the sun sets earlier.

More sidewalk access is needed on streets connecting to the downtown, as well as other points of interest. More students would be able to walk to school if sidewalks were added to Taunton Street, Creek Street, and East Street, as they connect to more dense residential areas. Focus group participants highlighted a similar need for sidewalks from the downtown and the King Philip High School areas to the Rice Recreation Complex to provide connections for student athletes, walkers, and bikers. New sidewalks are also needed in West Wrentham, especially Sheldonville as a new senior living development is proposed for the area.

Overall, additional lighting, paint, signage, pedestrian delineators and flex posts could be quick, short-term solutions to help alleviate some of the pressure points for pedestrian mobility in the downtown. Programmatic elements, such as adding crossing guards and police enforcement at busy times could also help until larger redesign projects can occur.

Public Transit Access

Although most people in Wrentham drive to and from their destinations, there are approximately 150 households without a vehicle, and many residents that can't or don't drive for a variety of reasons including income, disability, age, etc. School administration staff mentioned that there is a small but substantial number of students and parents in town who do not have access to cars and as a result face significant challenges accessing basic goods and services. In addition, there are many residents who either prefer not to drive or would like to rely less on their vehicles for shorter trips within the town, as well as connections to the commuter rail in nearby towns.

MAPC staff heard there is a greater need for bus and on-demand shuttle service in Wrentham, as well as more information that these services exist. An on-demand GO United service is provided by the Greater Attleboro and Taunton Regional Transit Authority (GATRA), which currently does not have fixed-route bus service in Wrentham. Signage indicating the locations where Wrentham residents can board the GO United service, as well as a broader outreach campaign to educate residents and transit-dependent populations about the service, can help increase utilization of GATRA's existing offering. In the longer term, the Town can work with GATRA to explore the potential for expanded public transit service in Wrentham.

Vulnerable Road Users

Seniors, children, and people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable road users in Wrentham. Not only are many members of these populations unable to drive, but they are also at higher risk of being hit by drivers while walking, biking, or using mobility devices. Many parents are reluctant to let their children walk or bike to school given the lack of sidewalks and crosswalk safety throughout the Town, and one focus group participant cited an example of a student who lives across the street from a school yet takes the bus due to the hazardous pedestrian conditions. The intersection of Route 1A/Randall Road in particular has a lot of students walking to and from the Roderick and Delaney Schools, but the crosswalk at this location is deficient and presents a safety hazard. The Town has applied to MassDOT's Safe Routes to School program to make improvements at this location.

School drop-off and pick-up presents additional safety challenges. Almost two-thirds of students at King Philip Regional High School drive to school and many of them are inexperienced drivers. Traffic backs up at the high school on Franklin Street, as well as at the Roderick School on Taunton Street and the Delaney School on Randall Road, creating congested and sometimes dangerous conditions all the way from the schools to Wrentham Center. Crossing guards are stationed outside the Roderick School during pick-up and drop-off, but a lack of sidewalk connections on Taunton Street precludes more students from walking to and from the school. To avoid the traffic congestion at the high school, some students park their cars at the parking lot at Route 1A/Route 140 and walk to and from the lot; others have their parents drop them off and pick them up at the corner of Depot Street. This creates a great deal of student foot traffic between the high school and Wrentham Center amidst an already crowded and difficult situation.

For people with disabilities, ADA access is almost non-existent as existing sidewalks and curb ramps are often narrow, in poor condition, or lack tactile warning panels at crosswalks and

intersections. The gravel paths on Wrentham Common and the gravel parking lot at Route 1A/Route 140 are challenging for people with mobility devices to navigate, and Sweatt Park is inaccessible from Banks Street for people in wheelchairs or others who are unable to utilize stairs. Addressing ADA issues throughout the Town (LRRP recommendation #6) will make a significant difference for these populations. Improving sidewalks, crosswalks, and curb ramps in Wrentham will benefit all road users, but children, seniors, and people with disabilities stand to benefit in particular. The Town of Wrentham should consider a comprehensive Age- and Disability-Friendly Walking approach where creating safe, accessible, and comfortable walking conditions for vulnerable road users results in safe, accessible, and comfortable walking conditions for everyone.

Location-specific Improvements

While many of the issues described above present challenges throughout Wrentham, focus group participants and walk audit planning stakeholders also mentioned specific locations where safety and infrastructure improvements are needed. Downtown intersections are a high priority, including the need to replace outdated traffic signal equipment at Route 1A/140. Adding a safe crossing with vegetated bump outs, flashing lights, and improved ADA access at this location is of high interest, but a major challenge to making any improvements is that 1A and 140 are both state roads where the Town doesn't have control.

For these roadways, the town can work in partnership with the state to determine a redesign that meets both local needs and state standards. MassDOT's Shared Streets and Spaces grant program, which supports quick-launch improvements to public health, safe mobility, and strengthened commerce in Massachusetts municipalities, can enable the Town to propose projects for state-owned roadways, subject to MassDOT permitting regulations.

Additional locations where safety and infrastructure improvements should be prioritized include the following:

- Creek Street – this street has multi-family housing, but no sidewalks to get to Route 1A and the downtown. Adding sidewalks would get more people safely walking, especially students coming to and from the King Philip, Roderick, and Delaney Schools.
- Randall Road/Route 1A – this is an important crossing for students coming and going from the Roderick and Delaney Schools, but the crosswalk at this location is deficient and there are no traffic signals or crossing guards stationed here.
- Taunton Street near Roderick School – a shortage of sidewalks at this location precludes students from safely walking to and from the school.

Downtown Parking

Parking improvements in Wrentham's downtown are a high priority for many Wrentham residents and town staff. However, there are mixed feelings about how parking should be managed to better serve the town. MAPC heard from many stakeholders that the angled parking in front of

the businesses on Route 1A, just south of the Route 140 intersection is problematic, dangerous, difficult to back out of, and blocks oncoming drivers from seeing pedestrians crossing the street and vice versa.

MAPC heard some comments on the need for more parking, especially if there is new development on the land behind the businesses on Route 1A. However, residents are opposed to a parking garage, and it is unclear if parking can be built underground, especially on the site of the undeveloped land. If mixed-use development were built at this site along with multi-unit housing, there may not be a high need for more parking if residents are able to walk into town and if additional public transit were provided in this area to connect residents to key destinations in town as well as nearby commuter rail stops. More parking will induce more traffic, and therefore other strategies should be considered when reviewing the proposed development.

Various tools to better manage existing parking were discussed with stakeholders. Signage, time limits (especially 2-hour parking), and moving longer-term parking to off-street spaces were all viewed favorably. It was observed during site visits as well as mentioned in focus groups that parking in public parking lots was underutilized and parking on-street was used frequently as long-term/all-day parking. Signage about nearby parking lots, such as the municipal lot behind Town Hall, may help better manage parking in the downtown area. Stakeholders were not in favor of metered on-street parking in front of the businesses but were open to metered parking at the gravel parking lot adjacent to the Route 1A/140 intersection, if intersection improvements were made to allow for a safer pedestrian crossing.

Next Steps

The Town of Wrentham's December execution of a letter of intent to pass a Complete Streets policy in the coming year is a positive development in the Town's efforts to promote safe and accessible transportation for all roadway users. The Town should leverage this letter of intent to pursue up to \$38,000 in planning funds from MassDOT's Complete Streets program. Regardless of whether this funding is secured, the Town should move forward with efforts to develop a local Complete Streets prioritization plan under the MassDOT program.

Once Wrentham passes a policy and completes a prioritization plan, the Town will become eligible for up to \$400,000 in state infrastructure funds to advance local roadway projects that address many of the issues mentioned in this memo. However, Complete Streets funds cannot be used for projects on state roadways, including Routes 1A and 140 through downtown Wrentham. While a Complete Streets policy will support Wrentham in developing a vision for these corridors, it will take close coordination with MassDOT through other projects and programs like Shared Streets and Spaces to implement future improvements along these roadways.

The downtown pedestrian safety audit (to be conducted in 2022) presents another opportunity for the Town to advance its walkability and Complete Streets goals. As noted earlier, pedestrian safety and accessibility efforts should incorporate other LRRP recommendations that were beyond the scope of MAPC's technical assistance, including creating an ADA self-evaluation and transition plan and conducting a feasibility study for a downtown walking loop. Further development of the



SMART GROWTH AND REGIONAL COLLABORATION

Metacomet Greenway multi-use trail corridor adjacent to downtown presents additional opportunities for walking and biking connections and comprehensive transportation planning in Wrentham.

MAPC's work on Phase II of Wrentham's Master Plan will continue in 2022. Many of the findings in this memo will inform the Master Plan development. Additional resources to support the Town's transportation efforts include the following:

- MassDOT's Shared Streets and Spaces grant program
- MassDOT's Safe Routes to Schools program
- Boston Metropolitan Organization's Community Connections program
- MassTrails program

Contact Information

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