



MASTER PLAN

CHAPTER 2

LAND USE SECTION

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Ashburnham Land Use

SECTION 1 – OVERVIEW

Communities have recognizable arrangements of residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional development, transportation features, open space, and water. We refer to these activities humans carry out on the land, and the buildings and alterations they construct on the land, by the term land use. These arrangements make up land use patterns that can be grouped into categories with common attributes. The presence of distinctive land use patterns contributes to that hard-to-define virtue known as “community character”. Communities’ land use patterns strongly influence its character, economy, and civic life.

Most decisions about land use are made by private-sector landowners, builders, and occupants. The most important way communities regulate their land use policies is through zoning: the practice of dividing land into mapped districts, each with prescribed uses, density, and intensity regulations. Since zoning involves a multitude of policy choices and adoption by town meeting, it is inherently political. Land use policies strongly influence, and thus must be informed by, the economic development, transportation, housing, and civic needs of the community. Development that predates zoning tends to be organic, whereas development that follows the adoption of zoning tends toward a more uniform appearance because the lots and structures must meet specific dimensional requirements.



Ashburnham Town Center

Ashburnham’s Town Center consists of many historic buildings, churches, businesses professional uses, and municipal buildings such as the library and town hall, cultural uses such as the Piano Museum, and residential uses at a greater density than the rest of town.

QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT

Land use in Ashburnham is defined by large areas of open space, along with numerous lakes and streams. Because of its distance from the state’s major employment centers and a lack of highway access, it retains the traditional character of historic small town New England. A large majority of Ashburnham’s land is undeveloped forests and fields, amounting to 19,752.5 acres, or 90.1% of the town’s dry-land acreage of 21,920. This is an unusually high amount of undeveloped land, even for the rural communities in the region. Another 4,267.6 acres are water bodies or undevelopable wetlands, leaving 91.7% of Ashburnham’s total area undeveloped. A significant portion of this open space has been protected from future development owing to its exceptional conservation or recreation value. Agriculture constitutes another 435.2 acres. Combining this figure with forest, water bodies and wetlands yields 20,187.7 acres, or 92.1% of Ashburnham’s existing land, that can be characterized as contributing to its rural, open space character.

Ashburnham’s built environment occupies a small percentage of the town’s area. Residential uses constitute the greatest share, at 349.7 acres of the town’s total acreage. Commercial and industrial uses combined constitute just over 36 acres, slightly over one tenth of 1% of the town’s area. This is an extremely low total that has major implications for the town’s economy, leaving the town highly dependent on residential taxes and limiting the economic opportunities for residents. Educational and religious uses (included below under Other) constitute approximately 560 acres.

Forests and Open Space Define Ashburnham’s Landscape

Ashburnham has large amounts of undeveloped forest, wetlands, and water which can be observed from just about any road in town or in aerial photographs.

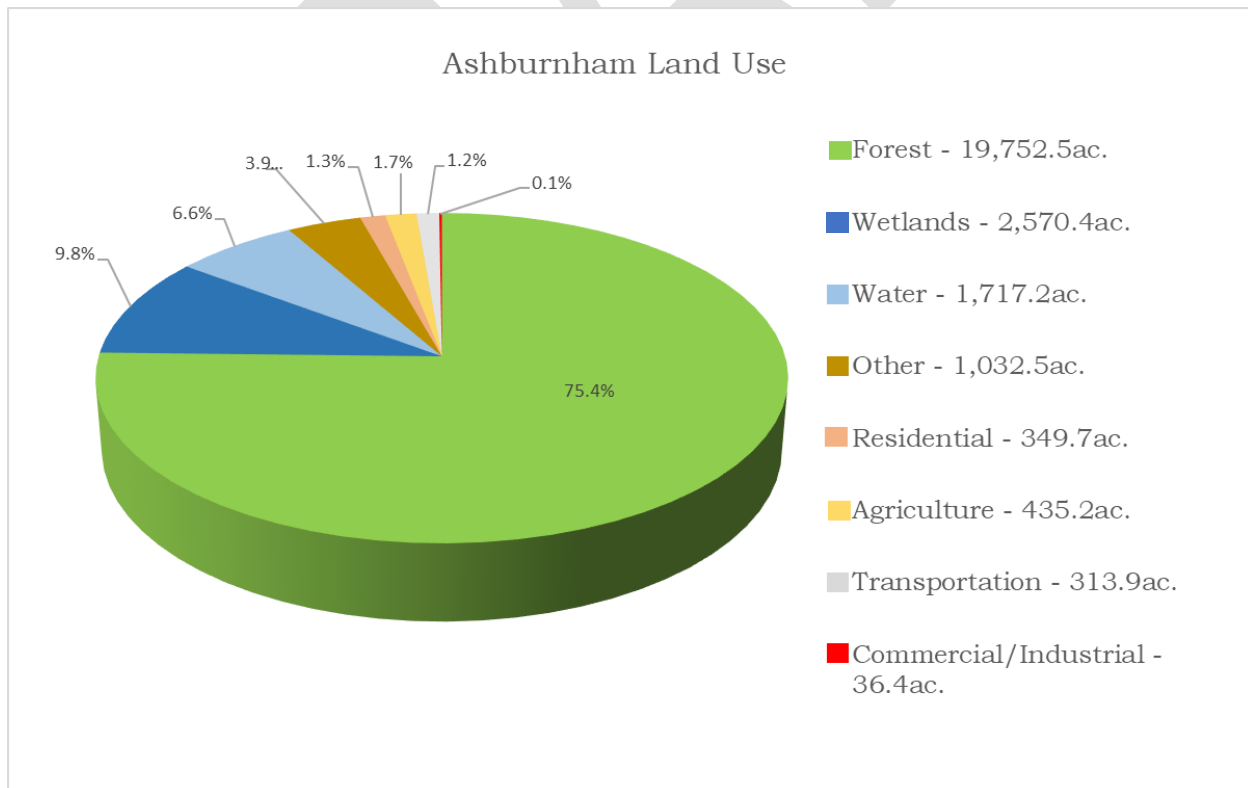


Figure LU-1

Map LUM-1 in Appendix C illustrates the land use categorized in Figure LU-1. Here it is possible to see the prevalence of forest dedicated lands, wetland, water, and agriculture uses and residential uses, as well as other land use categories.

SECTION 2 – CONDITIONS AND DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

Ashburnham has retained its traditional town design, in which much of the town’s business activity is concentrated into the community’s downtown and neighborhood centers, while most of its outlying areas remain largely undeveloped. Owing to low rates of residential and commercial growth driven by in the mid-to-late 20th century, as well the absence of a direct highway connection, Ashburnham in the 2020s is not defined by the sprawling land use pattern common to many American towns that saw significant growth during the period of suburbanization. Sometimes referred to as suburban sprawl, the development that took place during this era featured an infrastructure-intensive pattern of large-lot single family homes segregated from automobile-oriented commercial corridors. The developed land in Ashburnham, by contrast, is centered on a traditional mixed-use downtown, and its residential neighborhoods are still defined by their historic layouts. South Ashburnham is centered on a business district at a major crossroads, and the lakeshore neighborhoods cluster on the buildable lakefront land. Scattered site residential and commercial properties are found throughout the extensive wooded areas throughout the rest of town. This pattern is approximated by the town’s zoning, shown in Map LUM-3 in Appendix C.

RESIDENTIAL

Map LUM-2 in Appendix C depicts residential properties in Ashburnham by lot size. Most of Ashburnham’s residential development consists of single family homes on large lots (from slightly under an acre to multi-acre parcels) in rural settings. These large lot sizes are a reflection of Ashburnham’s zoning, in which large lot sizes were required in order to allow for adequate on-site septic systems in the absence of public sewer service. Recent housing construction in Ashburnham has mainly taken the form of large ANR lots along existing rural roads. With development pressure increasing in recent years, Ashburnham must act swiftly and plan accordingly if it wishes to influence future residential construction in a different direction before it loses the opportunity.

There are two major exceptions to this pattern. On the shores of many of the town’s lakes, small residential neighborhoods originally built as vacation camps grew into year-round enclaves of single-family homes. These homes were constructed on lots laid out prior to modern zoning and septic-system regulations, and are generally smaller than acre or multi-acre lots common in the rural areas of town. Since these homes were built to take advantage of the waterfront, this scale of development is concentrated in a limited number of defined areas, rather than extending throughout rural Ashburnham. The presence of numerous homes on lots not properly sized for the year-round use of septic systems has caused algae growth in the adjacent lakes as these septic systems fail. Though they predate the post-war era, these areas mostly lack the small retail (e.g. corner stores) sometimes found in older neighborhoods. Ashburnham’s only condominium development is in a lakeshore neighborhood on the south shore of Lower Naukeag Lake. A number of lakeshores are also home to summer camps.

The other areas of town in which smaller lots are common are Ashburnham's two historic centers: Downtown Ashburnham, and South Ashburnham. Built to be walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods, these districts contain the town's greatest residential densities. These areas are described in greater detail in the following section on mixed-use districts.

Because of the relative absence of sprawling residential development in its rural areas, Ashburnham has an opportunity which other towns to its east have missed: the opportunity to grow in a manner that preserves the traditional, rural character of the community by steering new residential construction to locations and building patterns that enhance rather than degrade the characteristics that define the community.

TOOL KIT

Although Ashburnham has large lot zoning requirements, it does have zoning tools in place that cluster development while preserving open space such as the Open Space Residential Development (OSRD).

To learn more about other Sustainable Development Principles [click here](#)

COMMERCIAL, INDUSTRIAL, AND MIXED-USE

Much of Ashburnham's commercial and industrial development is concentrated in two historic mixed-use districts: Downtown Ashburnham and South Ashburnham. The traditional, pre-automobile land use pattern that defined Ashburnham's built environment for most of its history is most visible in these districts, which feature residential, commercial, industrial, and other uses in close proximity. Maps LUM-7 and LUM-8 in Appendix C show the zoning of these districts. These two districts, and the area between them, are also notable for being the only areas of town served by municipal sewer. Like the presence of large amounts of undeveloped land, these established community centers represent an opportunity for Ashburnham to develop in a manner that preserves and reinforces its historic character.

Like most communities in the region, and like the Commonwealth as a whole, Ashburnham saw a reduction in the number of commercial and industrial parcels between 2012 and 2022. As with the limited residential development in Ashburnham's rural areas, the town's limited access and infrastructure limited its industrial and commercial growth during the era of suburban development. There are no industrial or office parks in Ashburnham.

Downtown Ashburnham

Downtown Ashburnham is a historic mixed commercial/residential/institutional town center centered on Main Street, extending from Cushing Academy on the southwest to the brook on the east, with retail, institutional, and service uses concentrated in the center, with residential predominating towards the district's edges. This district is built at a pedestrian scale, with buildings at or near the sidewalk, small or absent side yards, and few surface parking lots. This commercial and community core contains most of

the businesses and other operations that draw from a town-wide user base. This combination of a significant number of homes and employers within walking distance, and a broader town-wide customer base, is essential for the success of a central business district.

Bordering the Main Street commercial core on the north is an area of moderately dense residential blocks of approximately 3-4 units per acre. The south end of downtown along Maple Avenue and Puffer Street is a mixed residential/industrial district; downtown Ashburnham's last two industrial uses are located in this area. Other important features in this area of downtown include This area also includes two baseball fields, located east of Maple Ave. adjacent to the industrial uses, and the Ashburnham DPW yard. The town has long identified this low-density, high-impact operation as a burden on the town center, and the land it covers as a major development opportunity upon the DPWs relocation.

TOOL KIT

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has adopted a number of zoning reforms to encourage pedestrian-scale development in selected locations by providing incentives for their adoption at the municipal level. As Ashburnham reconsiders how its zoning can best support the revitalization of downtown, meeting the requirements of these programs can bring additional resources to town. Below is a sampling of possible tools:

- Smart Growth District 40R / 40S
- Mixed Use / Village Zoning
- MBTA Zoning
- Form Based Codes
- Design Guidelines
- Transfer of Development Rights (TDR)

South Ashburnham

Around the intersection of Rt. 101 and South Main Street is South Ashburnham, a neighborhood featuring residential uses adjacent to a mixed commercial/industrial business district. This district is in the geographic center of the neighborhood, at its major intersection, and was once a neighborhood commercial center. At the time of this master plan, however, the district consists mostly of industrial businesses and automobile-oriented retail, with few neighborhood businesses. Most of this business district is zoned Industrial (I), with a Light Industrial A (LI-A) overlay district covering the southern half. There is a small area along the south side of South Main Street at the intersection zoned Business (B), with the zoning boundary drawn along the right-of-way of South Main Street.

Much of the undeveloped industrial zoned land in this district is not available for development, due to it being protected open space, inaccessible due to railroad tracks or wetlands, accessible only from unbuilt roadways, or is itself wetlands. The location of this district on Rt. 101 close to the Gardner border is significant in two ways: it has sewer and water infrastructure, and it is the area of town with the best highway access, via Rt. 140 in Gardner. Much of the industrial-zoned land in this district is encumbered

by significant development limitations which prevent it being buildable (see the Buildout Potential section below). Efforts to promote economic development in South Ashburnham will need to focus on redevelopment that intensifies land use within the existing developed area. The development of a neighborhood business district at a denser scale could serve to both provide more opportunities for neighborhood residents and generate considerably higher tax revenues per acre than the low-density business uses that predominate today. At the same time, this is one of Ashburnham's most successful industrial districts.

OTHER BUSINESS DISTRICTS

Route 12 in West Ashburnham is a rural road along which several properties are being used for vehicular uses and outdoor storage businesses. The Town has zoned large areas of this corridor Light Industrial B (LI-B). This area's industrial development potential is even more limited than the industrial-zoned districts in South Ashburnham, owing to the absence of sewer service and the presence of open-space protections or wetlands on much of the land.

The Route 119 corridor, featuring the Mt. Watatic Trailhead, is not currently developed for business, since the closing of the Ashburnham Country Store. This area has been identified as a focus for the town's future economic development efforts. The Town has created a Green Business District located 2,000 feet on either side of Route 119 intended to foster businesses that will support tourism and passive outdoor recreation while preserving the natural beauty and ecological significance of the area. A small area at the junction of Routes 101 and 119, the former site of the Ashburnham Country Store, is zoned Business. Other industrial, commercial, and vehicular businesses are located on scattered sites throughout town, mainly on the numbered routes. One location of note is the intersection of Sherbert Road and Dunn Road, between Sunset and Lower Naukeag Lake. This crossroads features an existing restaurant/retail use, in an area of town generally lacking in neighborhood retail for its residents.

EDUCATIONAL USES

Ashburnham is part of the Ashburnham-Westminster Regional School District. Three of the district's five schools are located within the boundaries of Ashburnham: John J. Briggs Elementary School at 96 Williams Road, Overlook Middle School at 10 Oakmont Drive, and Oakmont Regional High School, at 9 Oakmont Drive. Each of these schools is located on a large parcel at the edge of the South Ashburnham neighborhood, where they are accessed almost entirely by bus.

In addition to the public schools, Ashburnham is home to Cushing Academy, an elite private preparatory high school with an enrollment of 385 students, divided between boarding and day students. Its campus is located on several parcels totaling 162 acres, centered on School and Academy Streets in the southwest quadrant of downtown, with undeveloped land extending further south and west to Old County Road.

CONSERVATION, RECREATION, AND AGRICULTURE

Ashburnham's character is defined by its extensive, high-quality Open Space resources. Protected Open space is mainly concentrated in the town's north, but a large contiguous area has been protected near South Ashburnham as well, with scattered-site parcels found throughout town. Protected Open Space accounts for 13,500.4 acres or 51.5 percent of total land in Ashburnham. Map LUM-4 in Appendix C depicts the areas of protected open space in Ashburnham. In addition to location and ownership, this map also depicts the type and level of protection of each open space parcel. This includes lands that are owned and protected by the town, those owned and protected by other government agencies, land owned by conservation organizations, and privately-owned land with various levels of protection. Of this total, approximately 8,324 acres of open space land protected in perpetuity, including privately owned lands protected under a Conservation Restriction (CR) or Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR). Another 5,175 acres have a limited level of protection, mainly under Chapter 61 tax programs. Ashburnham has identified the preservation of open space assets, and the improvement of connections between them and the downtown and neighborhoods, as essential for achieving the goals and objectives of this master plan. See the Open Space and Recreation chapter of this master plan, and the Open Space and Recreation Plan (2023) for more information about open space protection policies.

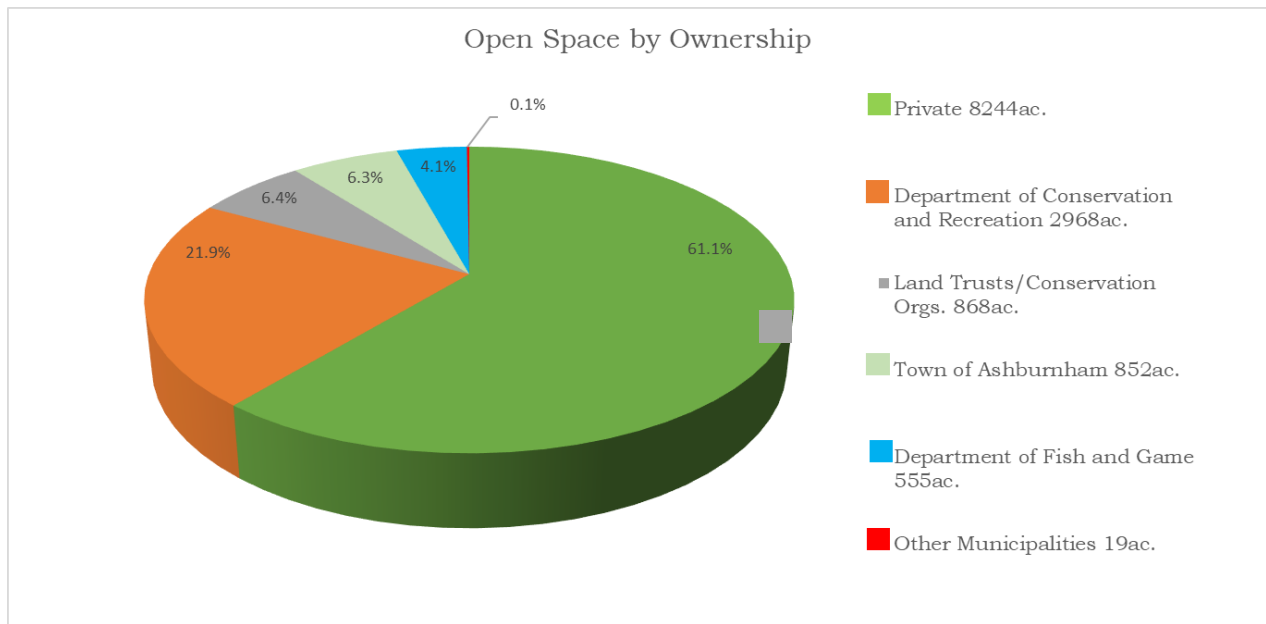


Figure LU-2

Most of Ashburnham's protected open space is privately owned, and protected either by conservation easements or enrollment in conservation programs. Approximately 3,597 acres of protected open space are owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' agencies, including the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), and MA Department of Fish and Game (DFG). Most of the state-owned land is located in the Ashburnham State Forest and is dedicated to conservation and recreation uses. The Mt. Watatic trailhead, a recreational resource of statewide significance, is located on DCR land

in the northeastern corner of town. Permanently protected (protected in perpetuity by deed, easement, and/or Town meeting vote) Town-owned conservation land totals approximately 900 acres. About 1,000 acres of open space lands have been protected in Ashburnham since 2019. See the Ashburnham 2023 Open Space and Recreation Plan for detailed information about open space and agricultural properties.

TOOL KIT

It will be important to continue to work with various public and private agencies, as well as private landowners, to protect adjacent lands of conservation interest that are not yet permanently protected.

For most of Ashburnham's history, agriculture was the mainstay of the economy. Today, agricultural lands constitute just 435 acres, just over 1.5% of the town's land area. Nonetheless, farms and farm stands play a notable role in establishing Ashburnham's character as a historic rural community, and their preservation is of value to the community. Few of the town's agricultural parcels are protected under a Chapter 61 program.

WATER SUPPLY, AQUIFERS, RECHARGE AREAS AND WATER RESOURCES

LUM-5 in Appendix C depicts Ashburnham's water supply, aquifers, and recharge areas. This map includes streams, rivers, lakes, ponds, and reservoirs; DEP public water supplies, community, and non-community ground water sources; well protection areas; aquifers; and FEMA flood zones. The northern portion of Ashburnham features multiple lakes large enough for boating, which attracted waterfront neighborhoods. Upper Naukeag Lake serves as Ashburnham's water supply. This abundant surface water source is an important asset for the community, and protecting its watershed is an important priority. Water supply protection zones exist around this lake, as well as around streams near the town's eastern boundary, which drain into the Fitchburg Reservoir in Ashby, a drinking water source for Fitchburg. Map LUM-6 in Appendix C depicts Ashburnham's water resources, watershed boundaries, drainage sub basins, and state certified vernal pools. Ashburnham contains land within three separate watersheds: the Nashua River, the Millers River, and the Souhegan River. These two maps show its rivers, streams, and aquifers that connect Ashburnham to neighboring towns.

SECTION 3 – EXISTING LAND USE REGULATIONS

ZONING DISTRICTS AND ANALYSIS

Ashburnham, like most communities, regulates its building and land use via a zoning code, which provides use and dimensional regulations. Ideally, zoning is a tool that is used to promote other public purposes, and must be reviewed and reformed as the circumstances and vision of the community changes over time. Map LU-3 in Appendix C depicts the existing zoning districts under Ashburnham’s zoning bylaw. Currently, the town has three residential districts, two industrial districts plus an overlay, two commercial districts, and a mixed-use district. In addition, overlay districts have been created for wind energy uses, solar installations, watershed protection, planned unit developments, and floodplains. These districts and their dimensions regulations are shown on the Schedule of Dimension Regulations, Section 4.1.2 of the zoning code:

Zoning

Communities regulate their land use policies through zoning: the practice of dividing land into mapped districts, each with prescribed uses, density, and intensity regulations.

4.1.2 Schedule of Dimensional Regulations.								
Minimum Lot Dimension			Minimum Yard Dimensions (1) (feet)			Maximum Building Height		Maximum Lot Coverage (2)
District	Area (square feet)	Frontage (feet)	Front	Side	Rear	(stories)	(feet)	(%)
*R-A	*45,000	*150	20	10	10	2 1/2	35	25
**R-B	**60,000	*200	40	25	25	2 1/2	35	20
G-B	60,000	200	40	25	25	2 1/2	40	20
LI-A	60,000	150	40	25	25	3	40	40
LI-B	60,000	150	40	25	25	3	40	40
*B	*25,000	*125	20	10	10	3	40	40
VC-C	0	20	0 (3)	0	0	3	40	50
VC-R	10,000	75	20	10	10	2 1/2	35	50
I	60,000	150	40	25	25	3	40	30
**WSP	**90,000							

- (1) The yards defined herein shall, except for customary walks and driveways, be kept open and/or landscaped and shall not be used for the parking or storage of automobiles, trucks, recreational vehicles, trailers and boats.
- (2) Includes accessory buildings.
- (3) In the Village Center Commercial District (VC-C), the following additional front yard provisions shall apply:
- The maximum front yard setback permitted shall be 20 feet.
 - The Planning Board may, by special permit, increase the required size of a front yard setback in the Village Center Commercial (VC-C) and Village Center Residential (VC-R) Districts.

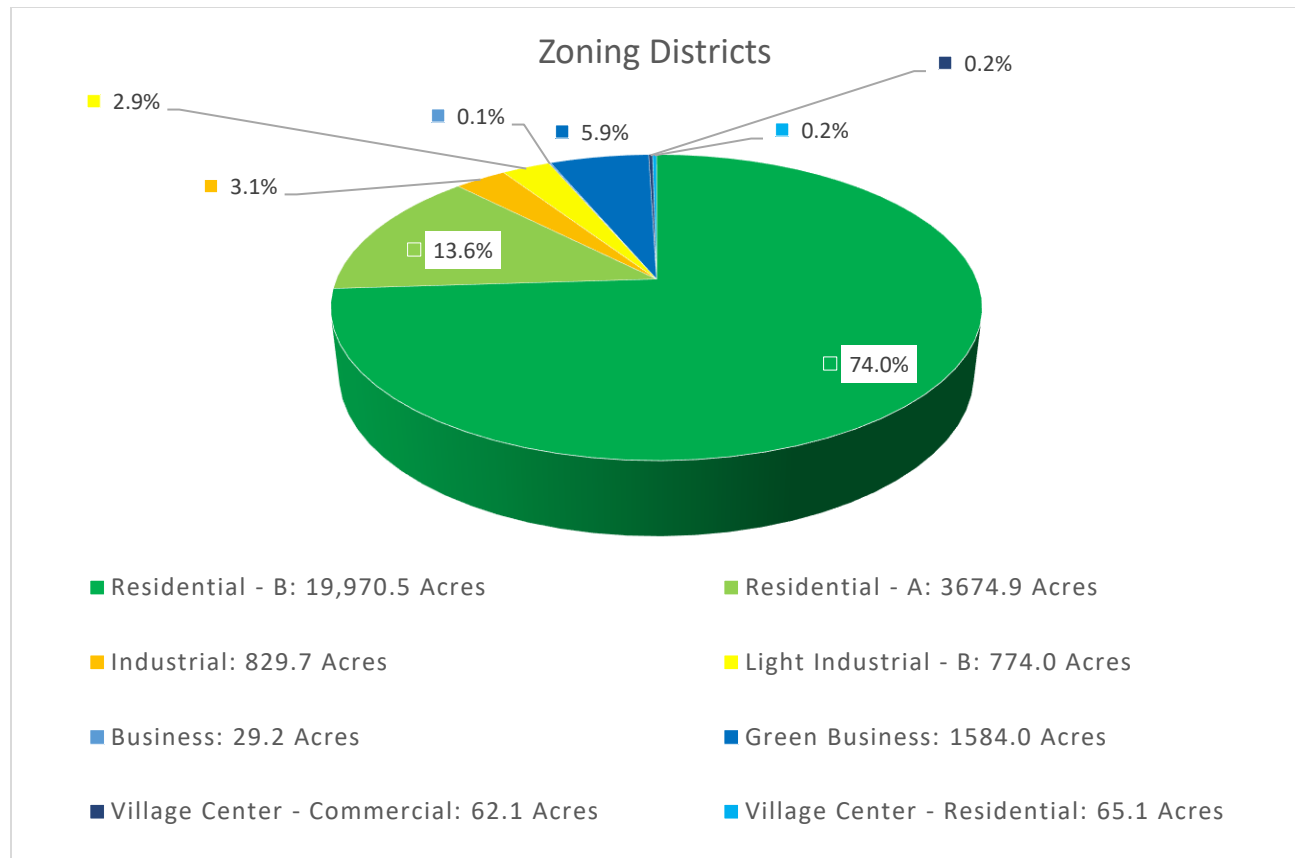


Figure LU-3

Residential Districts

Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of Ashburnham's land is zoned for large-lot homes in the R-A and R-B districts. Residence B covers most of Ashburnham, and has a minimum lot size of 60,000 square feet. This lot size was developed to take into account the necessity of septic systems in most of Ashburnham, where municipal sewer service is not available. The Residence A district encompasses the residential areas around Downtown and South Ashburnham, and has a minimum lot size of 45,000 square feet. The Residence A area approximates the area of town in which public sewer is available. The Village Center Residential district immediate adjacent to downtown features 10,000 square foot lots. These lot size figures fairly accurately reflect the existing residential development patterns of the areas they cover, with two notable exceptions. The lakefront neighborhoods are zoned Residential B, leaving most of the homes in these communities which were converted for year-round occupation nonconforming under current zoning. In addition, the older residential neighborhoods in the Residence A district contain significant numbers of homes on nonconforming lots.

Communities seeking to preserve their rural character often adopt large-lot zoning in the hopes of limiting residential sprawl. In practice, building out the developable residential parcels in a town at this scale has proven to be ineffective at preserving rural character, and results instead in suburban landscapes dominated by large lawns and highly visible collections of houses. To address this threat, the

town has adopted an Open Space Residential Development bylaw (Section 5.10), allowing developments to cluster their housing on a portion of the development parcel, in order to preserve a large portion of the land and maintain the wooded appearance of the lot from the street.

Ashburnham's zoning bylaw allows only single-family homes by right in all residential districts; building any type of residential with two or more units requires a Special Permit. In the residential districts VC-R, R-A and R-B, accessory dwelling units (ADU) and two-family homes are formally allowed by Special Permit, though few such permits are sought or granted. Only in an Open Space Residential Development (discussed below) can multifamily housing be built within Ashburnham's residential zoning districts. Restrictions on the development of rental housing in zoning codes adopted during the middle of the 20th century have served to drive the statewide housing affordability crisis.

Another policy the town has adopted is a Development Rate Limitation (Section 5.8 of the zoning). This regulation limits the total number of building permits for residential units in town to 36 per year, with additional limits limiting them to only 4-5 units per development per year. Because subdivision construction requires the installation of public roads and other infrastructure, the cost of which is shared between the units of the project, limiting the number of residential units that can be built in a year means that the cost of the initial construction of the subdivision road cannot be recouped for several years, ruling out most such projects. The effect of this regulation has been to discourage the development of subdivision projects, including OSRDs, in favor of ANR lots, a form of development the town has found to be inconsistent with its efforts to preserve the community's rural character, and other development goals.

Business Districts

Approximately 5.5% of Ashburnham's area is zoned for industry. The zoning bylaw features two Light Industrial zones (LI-A and LI-B) which are very similar, and a general industrial zone (I). The primary difference between the LI and I zones consists of the Light Industrial zones allowing more non-industrial businesses. Much of the land zoned for industry in Ashburnham is not developable, due to wetlands and open space protection, poor access, and a lack of infrastructure.

The town's general industrial district (I) is located mainly in South Ashburnham along Rt. 101 (Map LUM-7 in Appendix C). Development under this zoning has produced the predictable land use pattern, industrial and commercial businesses on very large lots with low levels of lot coverage, in an area that once was a neighborhood commercial district. In addition, a small Industrial district is located at the far southeastern end of Downtown Ashburnham, to encompass the last two remaining industrial properties in Downtown.

Another 5.5% of Ashburnham is zoned for commercial development. Two very small locations – the former Ashburnham Country Store site on Rt. 119, and a strip in the middle of the South Ashburnham business district – adding up to just 31 acres are zoned Business (B). The Business district is intended to allow for retail, office, and other commercial uses. This zone features a minimum lot size of 25,000 square feet, well over half an acre; a minimum frontage of 125 feet; and a minimum front yard setback of 20 feet. While appropriate for commercial strip development or office parks, or for locations that lack municipal sewer, these dimensional minimums are excessive for neighborhood-scale commercial

development in areas where public utilities are available. Ashburnham should consider adopting new zoning for commercial areas where a more intensive development pattern is desirable.

Most of the commercial-zoned land in Ashburnham is found in the Green Business Zone along Rt. 119 near the Mt. Watatic trailhead. The Green Business is intended to foster businesses that will support tourism and passive outdoor recreation while preserving the natural beauty and ecological significance of the area. This district features an even larger minimum lot size than the B district, at 60,000 square feet, as this district is located far from available sewer connections. One notable feature of the Green Business zoning is its allowance of single family homes by right. Ashburnham's other business districts designate single family homes as not allowed, or allowed by Special Permit, in order to avoid conflicts between residential and business uses, and protect the development potential of the areas zoned for business.

Village Center Districts

Downtown Ashburnham is covered by custom zoning districts created specifically for the district (Map LUM-8). A mixed-use zoning district called Village Center Commercial (VC-C) has been created for the core commercial center along Main Street to encourage the commercial and residential revitalization of downtown in harmony with its traditional town center character and dense development pattern. This district features no minimum lot size or front setback, and a maximum front yard setback, in order to allow for the density of development necessary to allow for a walkable district. Notably, almost no multifamily residential is allowed by right in this district, which is intended to produce a dense and walkable district. New two-family homes are not allowed in the district, while conversions to two-family use and all multifamily residential requires a Special Permit. Only mixed-used development with 3 or more units above commercial space are allowed by right in the VC-C district, including in the streets off Main Street. Ashburnham should allow by-right multifamily housing downtown.

In addition, a Village Center Residential (VC-R) district was created adjacent to the downtown, covering the area of moderate-density housing north of Main Street, as well as a small residential enclave at the corner of Puffer and Central Streets in the south end. The use and dimensional regulations in this district favor single-family homes on 10,000 square foot lots; even two-family homes require a Special Permit, just as in the R-A and R-B districts. This density of residential use, while significantly greater than that in the other residential areas, may not be sufficient to support the town's goals for the commercial revitalization of Main Street.

The zoning boundaries of the VC districts were generally drawn, like the rest of the town's zoning, down the middle of various streets. This practice is appropriate for suburban and rural areas, but is not recommended for walkable districts like urban neighborhoods or town centers. Pedestrians experience walkable places in terms of blocks, which consist of the public way and the buildings and land uses facing it on both sides. While a residential subdivision and a business park on either side of a rural route are two distinct places and are unlikely to interfere with each other's character, buildings across the street from each other in a walkable district interact with each other to create the character of the block. Zoning lines in the downtown should be drawn along the rear of the district's properties, to create districts in which both sides of downtown streets are subject to VC zoning.

One important aspect of the VC zoning scheme is its relevance to the recently-adopted MBTA zoning law (Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 40A, Section 3A). As a community adjacent to Fitchburg, where two commuter rail stations link the region to Greater Boston, Ashburnham is required to adopt a zoning district that allows multi-family residential development by right at a density of 15 units per acre. The requirements were recently amended to allow buildings with residential units above first-floor commercial space to qualify as meeting the law’s requirements. Amending the zoning to allow this density of residential development by right in Downtown Ashburnham would not only satisfy the mandate imposed by the state, but would also help promote the town’s efforts to promote business growth downtown by increasing local foot traffic.

The off-street parking requirements of Ashburnham’s zoning code establish parking minimums based on the land use. These requirements do not vary by zoning district. In the case of residential uses, they do not vary by the size or number of bedrooms of the units. Minimum parking requirements have in many cases proven to be impediments to desired revitalization efforts in area envisioned for walkable, mixed-use development. Features like surface lots and prominent garage doors can undermine the creation of a continuous pedestrian-oriented streetscape, while multiple curb cuts can cost as many on-street spaces as they create off-street. Under the MBTA zoning, the desired density of housing cannot be made

TOOL KIT

INVENTORY OF INNOVATIVE PLANNING AND ZONING TOOL

Although Ashburnham already has many best practices in place, the town can still implement the use of other planning and zoning tools or amend or enhance existing ones.

The table below shows what Ashburnham has in place and what can be done to achieve an optimal level of land use planning and can serve as a “road map” for compliance with the best practices guide.

Planning Tool	In Place
Accessory Apartments	Yes
Agricultural Protection – Right to Farm	Yes
Community Preservation Act (CPA)	Yes
Design Guidelines	No
Earth Removal	Yes
Form Based Codes	No
43D	No
Green Communities Designation	Yes
Inclusionary Zoning	OSRD only
LID (Low Impact Development)	Yes
Mixed Use	Yes
Multifamily Housing By Right	No
Open Space Residential Development	Yes
Renewable Energy Bylaw	No
Scenic Roads Bylaw	Yes
Sign Bylaw	Yes
Site Plan Review	Yes
Solar Bylaw	Yes
Town / Village Center Zoning	Yes
Transfer of Development rights (TDR)	No
Water Supply / Wetland Protection	Yes
Wind Energy	Yes
Wireless Bylaw	Yes

SECTION 4 – BUILDOUT POTENTIAL

As part of a 2016 study of the Economic Impact of Devens, MRPC performed a development potential analysis on each community in the Montachusett Region, including Ashburnham. This analysis involved two phases: mapping, followed by quantifying development. In order to reach accurate results, it was crucial to have the necessary geographical data as well as skillful GIS staff to perform the initial phase of the analysis. Categorizing land use is not straightforward. For example, analyses based on individual lot records may vary from analyses based on aerial photography in categorizing a large property partially developed with buildings, which remains half wooded, with a field in between. Owing to such limitations, a development analysis which relies on such land use data may miss site-specific conditions that affect a specific property's development potential. Nonetheless, quantitative analysis of such data can provide important insights on a town-wide level. Current parcel data from the Town of Ashburnham was utilized as well as current zoning coverage. Additionally, environmental and land use data was provided by the state Geographic Information Systems (GIS) agency, MassGIS.

Environmental data is a key component to the development potential analysis. Certain environmental elements are considered inappropriate for development and can be either defined as "Absolute Constraints" or "Partial Constraints" for the purposes of the development potential analysis. Absolute constraints are defined as open water, 100- and 200-foot Wetlands Protection and River Protection Acts buffers, slopes >26%, and permanently protected open space. Partial Constraints are defined as FEMA 100- and 500-year flood zones as well as Department of Environmental Protection Wetlands. Absolute constraints are completely unsuitable for development, while partial constraints could be developed if pursued in an appropriate manner.

Once the constraints have been determined and defined, the next step is to identify lands that have already been developed. Based on MassGIS Land Use data the categories that are included in "Developed Lands" are participation, spectator, and water recreation; residential, commercial, industrial, transportation, waste disposal, power lines, cemeteries, and urban public/institutional. The final category that is determined is "Future Developable Lands". In order to determine what has potential for development, GIS tools are utilized and involve combining all of the constraints and currently developed lands. The result produced is a new coverage indicating lands that are developable based on land use and environmental categories that do not have any development or constraint. Maps LUM – 9 and LUM - 10 in Appendix C depict all of these data categories (Absolute Constraints, Partial Constraints, Developed Lands, and Future Developable Lands) and provides information to identify the location and current zoning of future developable lands.

According to this analysis, only 37% of the town's commercial land and 44% of its industrial land are classified as developable in the future. In practice, even these figures overstate the development potential of the town's industrial land, as additional site-specific conditions further limit development. Of particular note are the industrial districts. None of the land inside the railroad switchback in South Ashburnham is accessible for development. The large industrially-zoned parcel west of Rt. 101 in South this neighborhood is shown as partially developable, including a sizeable area west of the brook shown as unconstrained, but may not have any remaining developable land due to unbuilt roads and the presence of wetlands blocking access. The industrial parcels along Rt. 12 near the town's western boundary may also be more constrained than the analysis depicts; this area lacks public utilities.

Most of the commercially zoned land in Ashburnham is found within the Green Business District along Rt. 119. The majority of this land is constrained by steep slope, protected open space, and wetlands, but sizeable areas with few or new constraints are present. The Business district embedded in the GBD, and the B zone in the center of South Ashburnham, are both unconstrained.

Ashburnham is already highly reliant on its residents to fund the town's annual budget owing to a shortage of industrial and commercial development. This problem is compounded by a shortage of developable land zoned for industry and business. The development of its remaining industrially and commercially zone land, the identification of new development opportunities, and the intensification of business uses in village center areas should all be pursued as strategies to increase economic development in Ashburnham.

SECTION 5 – GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Vision Statement: *Ashburnham will foster patterns of growth, development, and land use that will promote sustainable development, protect natural resources, improve and enhance land utilization and services, and advance the goals of this master plan.*

Goal 1: A beautiful, walkable, fun, successful Downtown Ashburnham, its businesses buoyed by a growing downtown residential community and patronage from across town, serves as the center of the community's public and commercial life.

Action 1: Adopt a mixed-use overlay district for redevelopment of the downtown area that allows for multifamily residential uses by right, at a density of at least 15 units per acre, to allow for residential densities supportive of a walkable business district and promote housing options that are attractive and affordable to a wide range of ages and incomes.

Action 2: The downtown overlay district should include a requirement for first-floor commercial space on for properties fronting on Main Street and Central Street.

Action 3: Relocate the DPW facilities (in accordance with the Services and Facilities chapter goals) to make space for additional economic development and housing opportunities on municipal property in the south end of downtown. Investigate the provision of public parking on a portion of this land.

Action 4: Address the inconsistent zoning on Water Street by relocating the zoning boundary from the center of the right to way to the rear lot lines of the properties across from the VC-R zone.

Action 5: Protect the existing industrial district at the southeast corner of downtown. Maintain the industrial zoning of the district.

Action 5: Include the industrially-zoned land between Maple Avenue and Mill Brook within the downtown overlay district, and work with industrial property owners to encourage downtown-scale residential development fronting on Maple Avenue at this location.

Action 6: Reduce dimensional requirements in the VC-R district, allow two-family homes by right, and allow multifamily development at an appropriate scale by special permit, in order to increase downtown foot traffic.

Action 7: Produce a development guide and formed-based zoning code for the downtown area.

Action 8: Redraw the zoning boundaries along Maple Avenue and Puffer Street to promote consistent development on both of these streets.

Action 9: Adopt reduced off-street parking requirements in the downtown overlay district.

Goal 2: The South Ashburnham neighborhood boasts a high quality of life for residents; a walkable, desirable, successful neighborhood business district that is convenient and enjoyable for residents; and a growing industrial/commercial sector providing more employment and revenue.

Action 1: Produce a South Ashburnham Neighborhood Plan in coordination with regional partners, local stakeholders, area landowners, businesses, and residents.

Action 2: Improve pedestrian and bicycle connections between Downtown and South Ashburnham.

Action 3: Carefully review the development potential of the area's industrially-zoned parcels, including opportunities to make more land available for business development through strategic investments in infrastructure.

Action 4: Review the zoning in the South Ashburnham commercial district. Consider rezoning the neighborhood center to VC-C, or developing a new mixed-use business district with smaller dimensional requirements for commercial areas with available sewer service, and where walkable densities are desired.

Goal 3: The neighborhoods around Ashburnham's lakes provide each area's residents with a high quality of life while protecting natural resources, enhanced by the development of complete neighborhoods that include appropriate commercial development and amenities consistent with the district's established character and landscape.

Action 1: Taking the successful Tweedo's Pizza and Variety as a model, work with lakeshore residents to develop a new zoning district that allows business uses consistent with, and which would enhance, the established character of the neighborhoods.

Action 2: Rezone the junction of Depot, Sherman, and Dunn Roads to legalize the existing business and allow for additional village-style development at that location to promote a more complete, livable, walkable, neighborhood.

Action 3: Work with neighborhood residents to identify other locations withing walking distance of lakeshore residential districts where commercial development and complete-neighborhood amenities would be desirable.

Goal 4: Ashburnham retains its historic, rustic character through the preservation of extensive open space resources and the fostering of sustainable development in a manner that preserves the aesthetic landscape of the tree-lined, fieldstone-walled appearance of its scenic and forested roads.

Action 1: Revise the Open Space Residential Development bylaw to make it a more attractive option for developing sizeable lots in the RB district, including the production of a development guide to assist applicants in designing projects in accordance with the bylaw's purpose.

Action 2: Continue to pursue the protection of important open space resources.

Action 3: Adopt a Transfer of Development Rights bylaw to protect parcels in the RB and Watershed Protection districts, and channel residential growth into areas that have existing sewer and water infrastructure (the RA and VC districts).

Action 4: Repeal the Development Rate Limitation bylaw alongside the adoption of OSRD revisions.

Goal 5: A thriving Green Business District is home to businesses that create jobs and revenue for Ashburnham, and improves residents' and visitors' enjoyment of the town's open space resources.

Action 1: Eliminate by-right single family residential in the GB district on the Schedule of Uses.

Action 2: Continue to pursue the development of businesses focusing on conservation and outdoor recreation in the Green Business District corridor, and develop pedestrian connections from the Mt. Watatic Trailhead to the developable areas of the district.

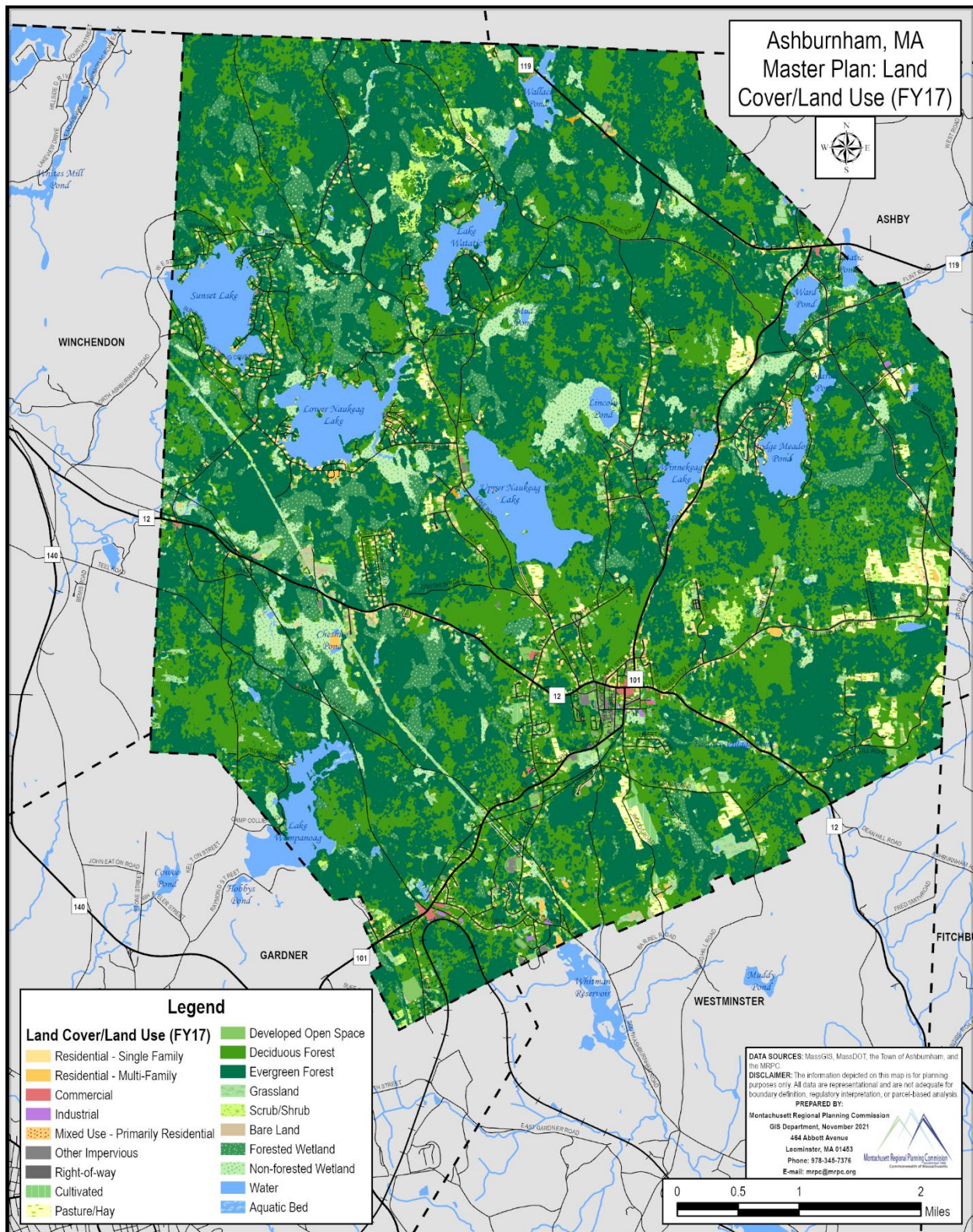
Goal 6: The development of industrial and commercial business districts provides more jobs and revenue for the community.

Action 1: Review the zoning of the businesses and properties on Winchendon Road for appropriateness, their potential to attract industrial growth, and the possibility of improving their development potential through the provision of municipal infrastructure.

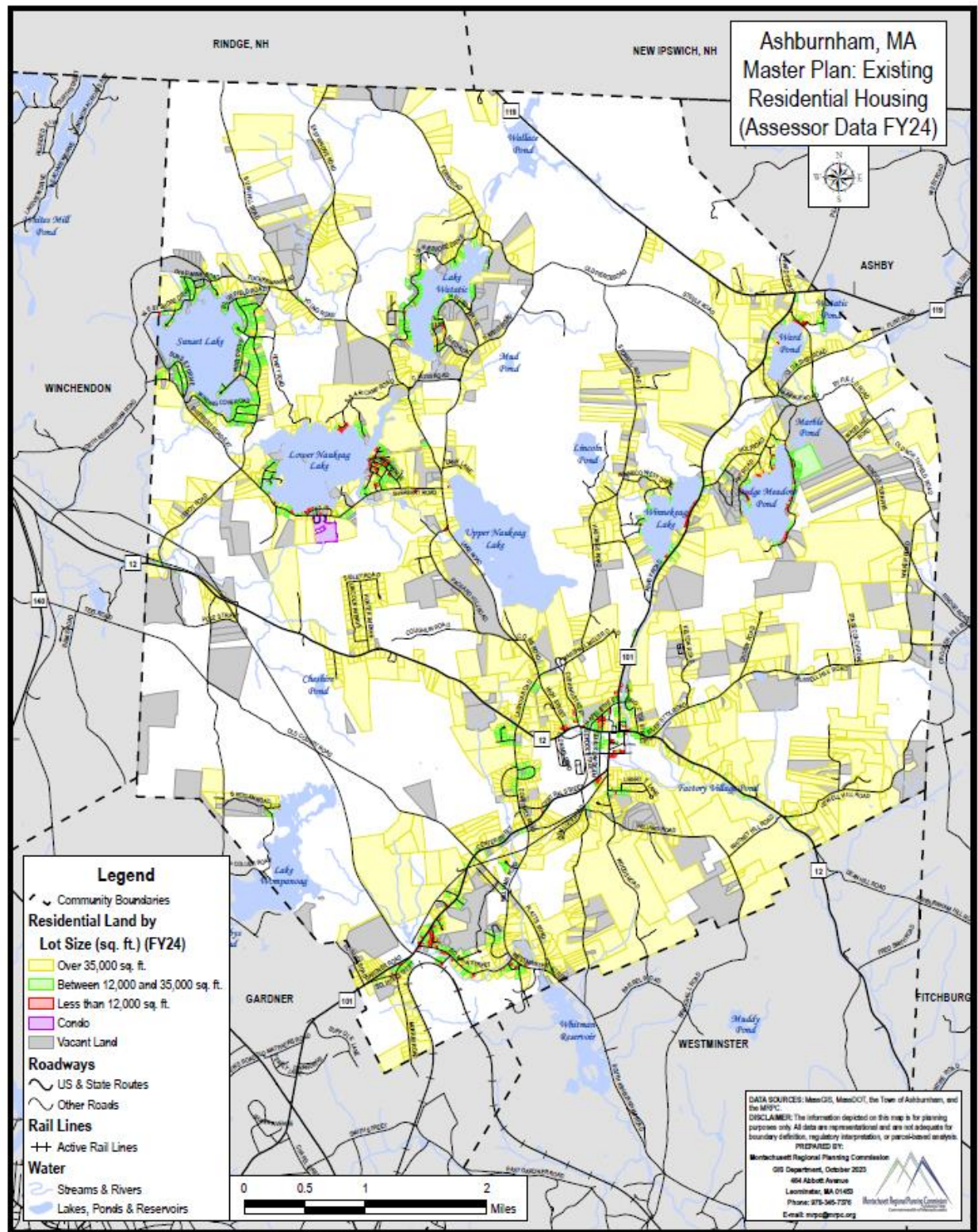
Action 2: Work to identify additional opportunities for industrial zoning in areas served by municipal sewer and water.

APPENDIX C: ASHBURNHAM LAND USE MAPS

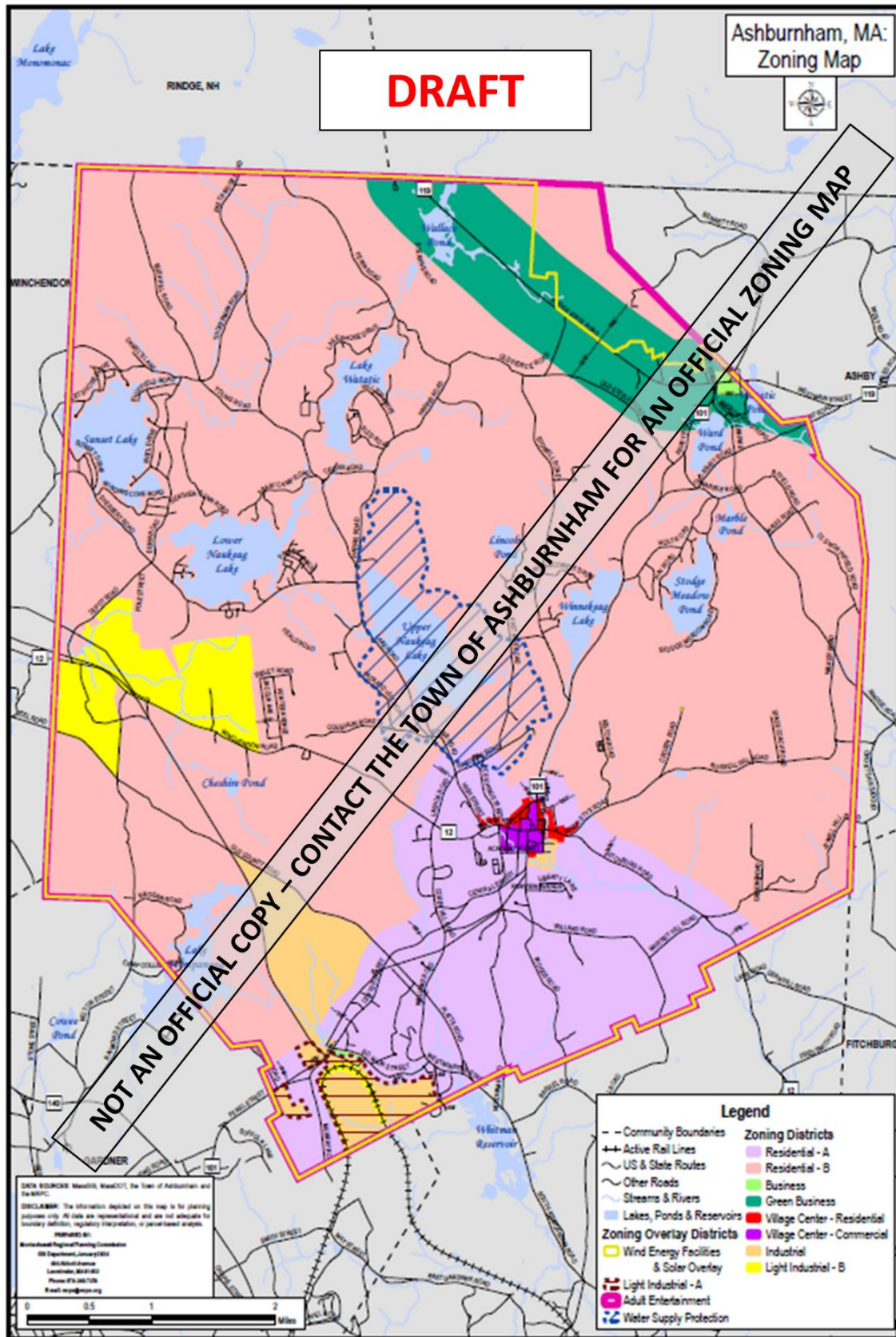
LUM 1 - LAND COVER / LAND USE



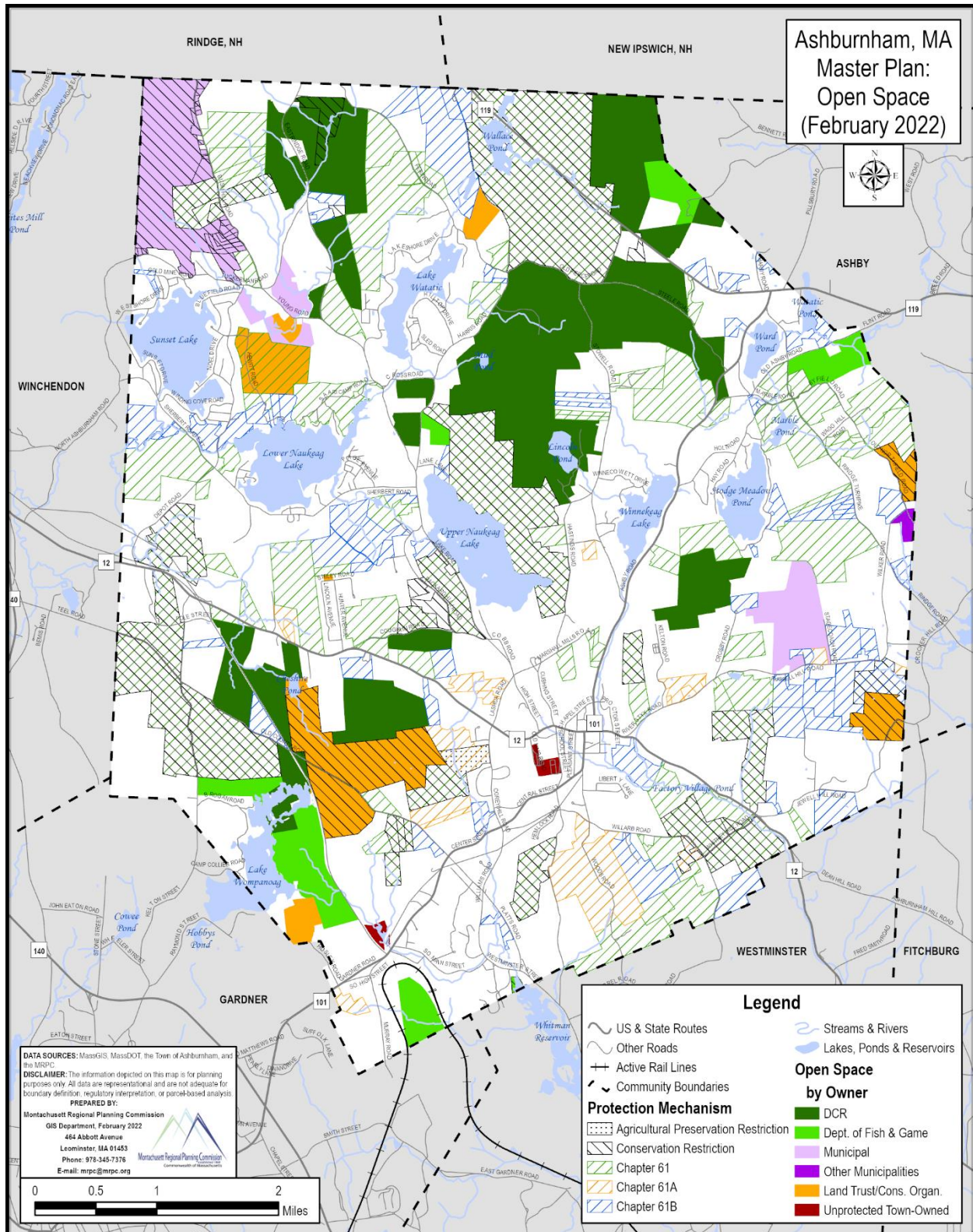
LUM 2 – RESIDENTIAL USES BY LOT SIZE



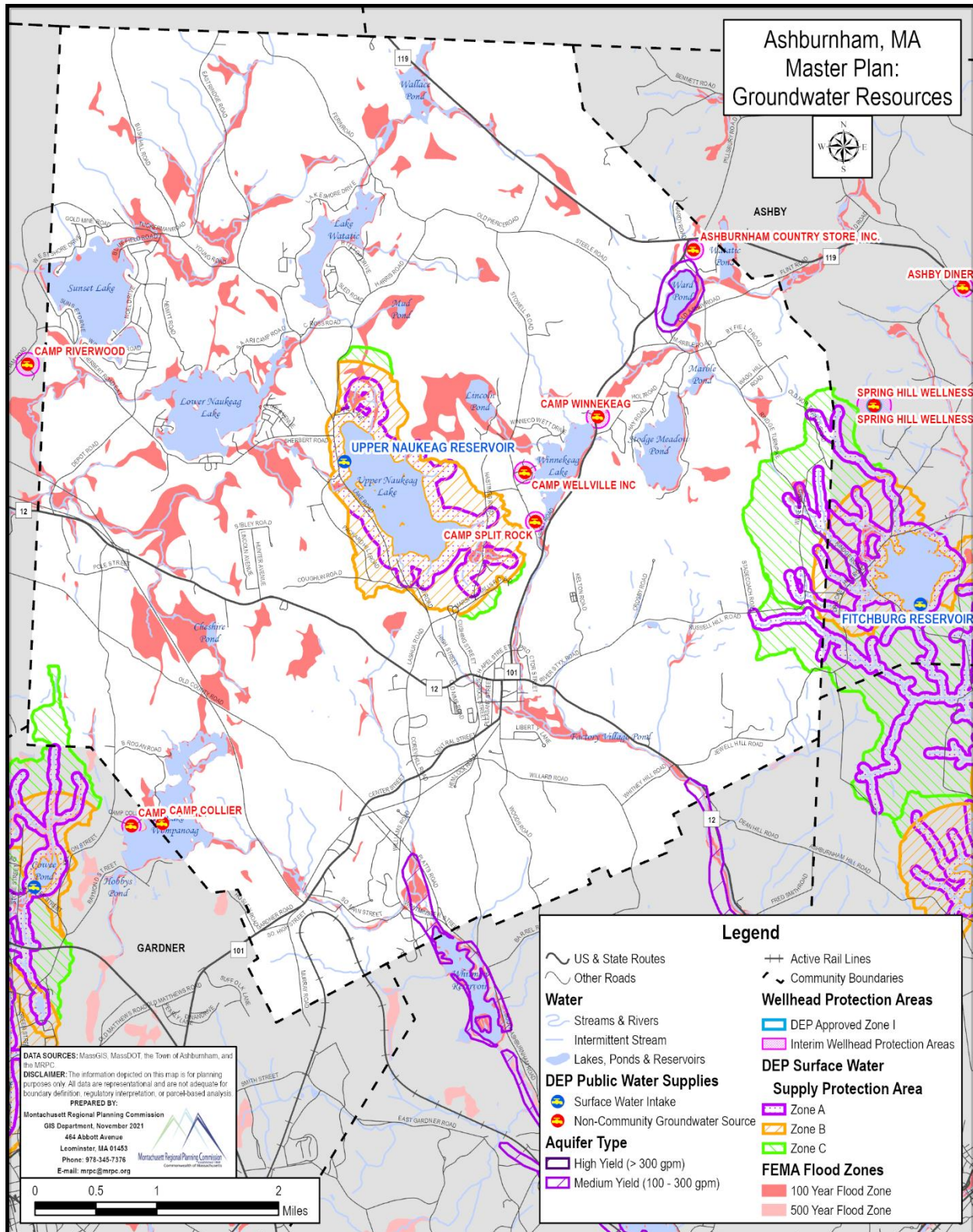
LUM 3 – ZONING MAP



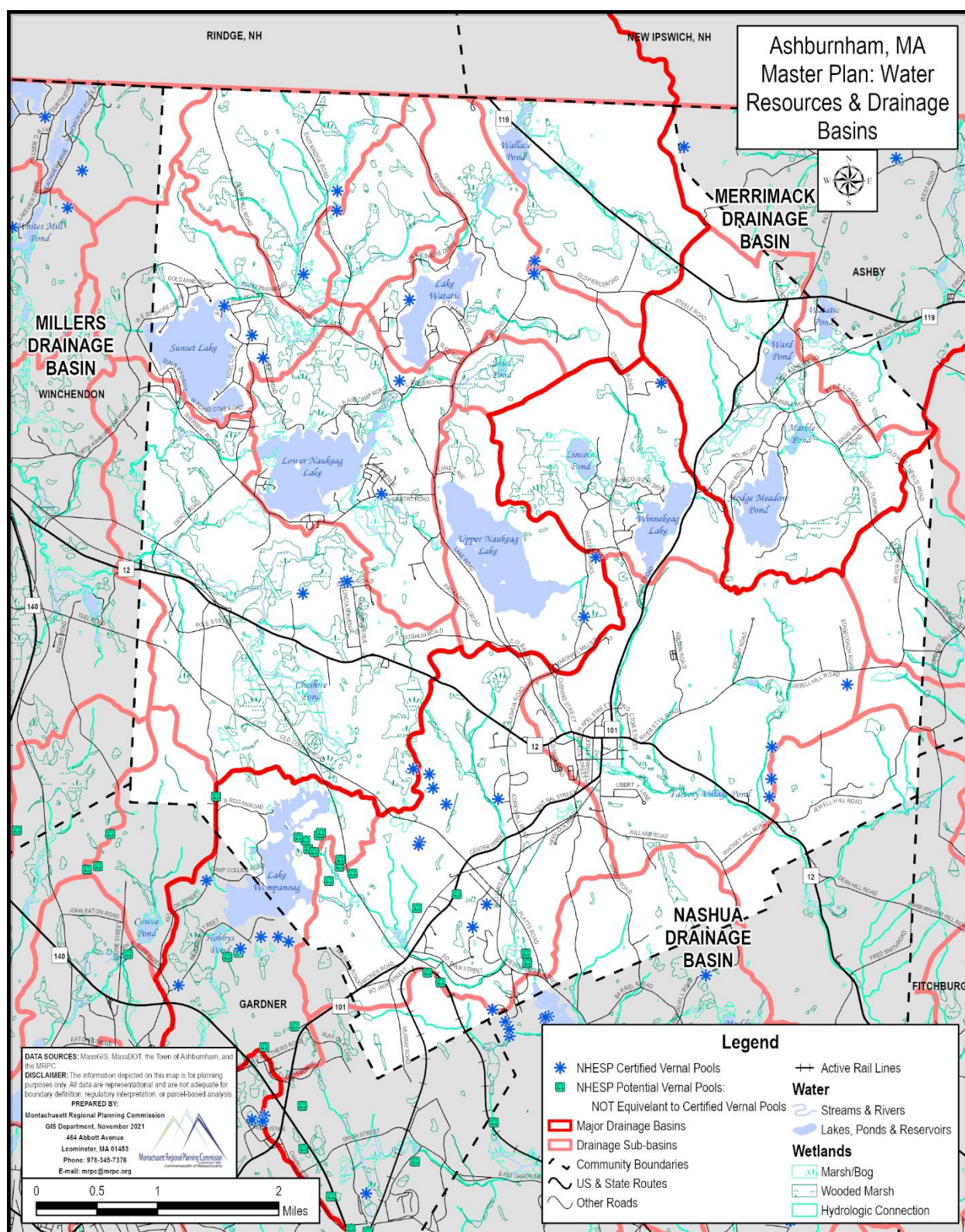
LUM 4 - OPEN SPACE



LUM 5 - WATER SUPPLY, AQUIFERS AND RECHARGE AREAS

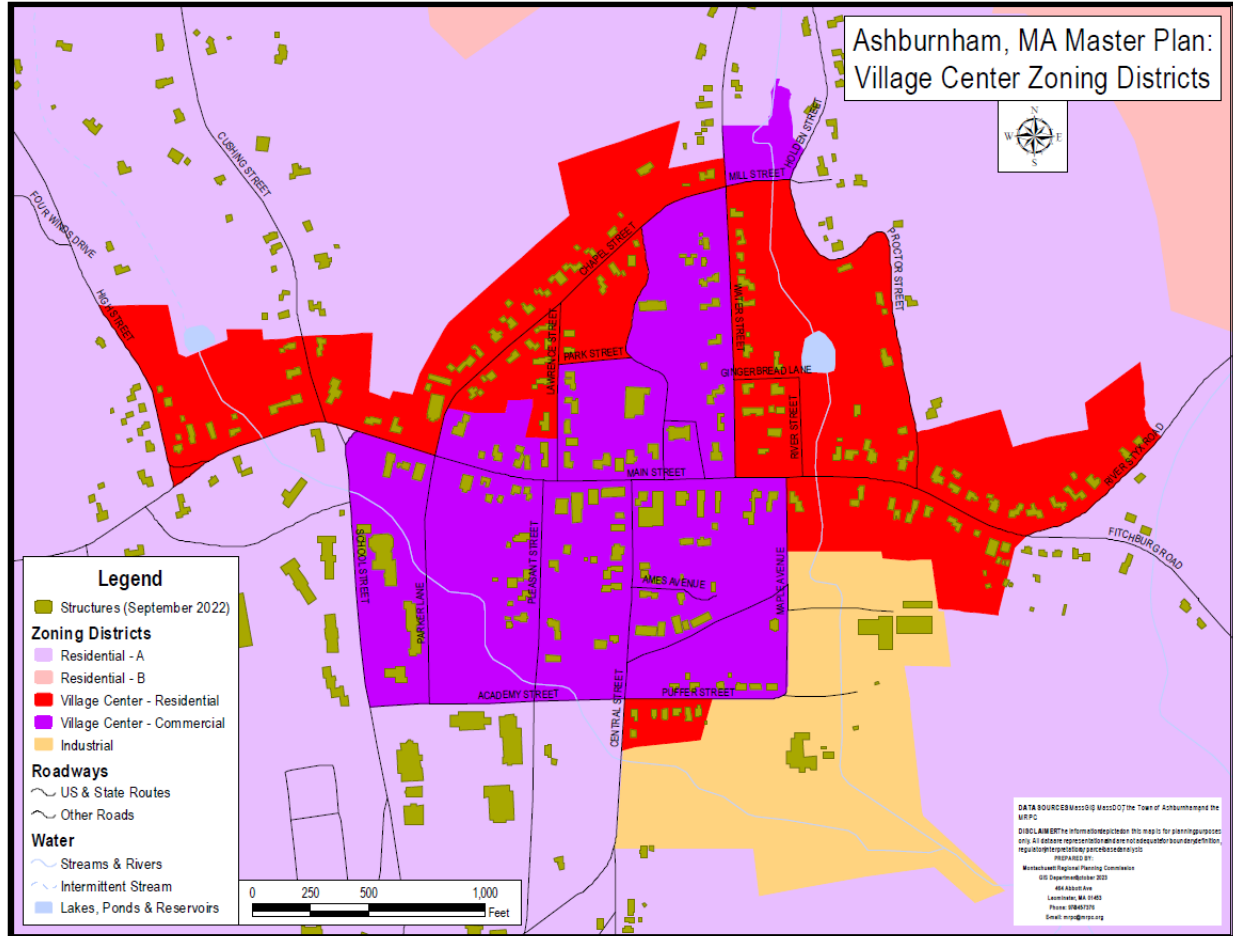


LUM 6 – WATER RESOURCES & MAJOR DRAINAGE BASINS

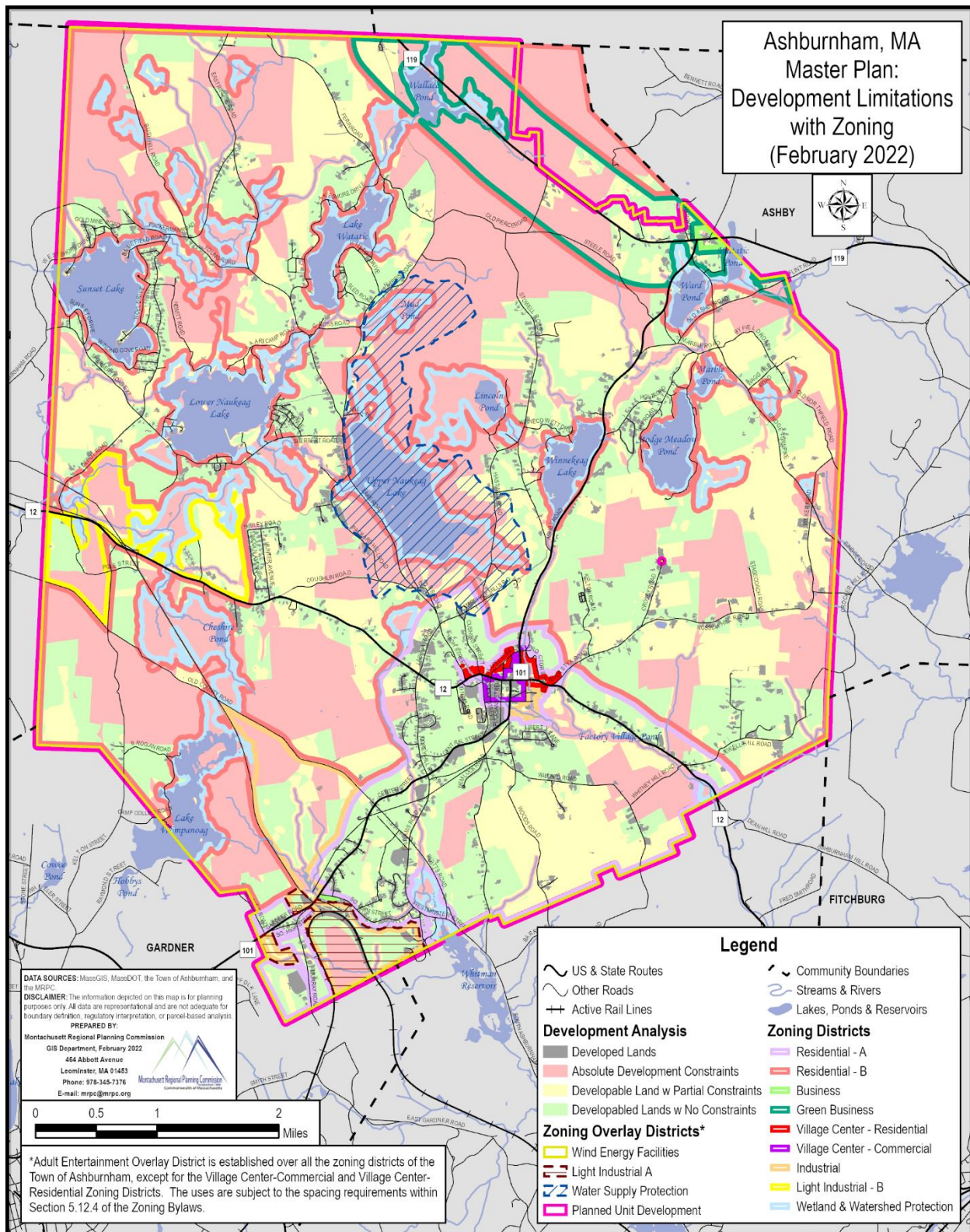




LUM 8 – VILLAGE CENTER ZONING



LUM 9 – DEVELOPMENT LIMITATIONS WITH ZONING



LUM 10 – DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL

