

Emerging Issues and Data Needs

Based on the inventory work and the input from the first workshop, some issues are emerging. For each issue, we need to think forward to what its implications are and to what potential actions could address it.

We also need to ask whether we have enough information to address each issue. Planning is the art of making good decisions based on imperfect information, so we shouldn't expect to have the answers to all our questions, just whether we know enough to make recommendations.

The inventory phase is intended to surface the issues (together with public input) and provide a broad base on information; additional data gathering and analysis should be strategically focused where the information is needed to address the issues.

At this point in the planning process, many of the issues lead to alternatives for action that need to be discussed and evaluated rather than to a single course of action.

Key issues

Are the existing schools going to be adequate for future needs?

What we know: the school projections indicate that enrollment is currently at its peak and will gradually decline. We also know (from interviewing J.D. Head) that the condition of the schools is good and what's needed is ongoing upkeep, envelope improvements, and energy conservation, but not expansion.

What else we need to know: Does the recent increase in kindergarten enrollments relative to projections indicate that something unforeseen is happening. We suggest using Avalon as a test case and getting data from the School department on the enrollments of students who live there. We can compare that with the bedroom mix in the development.

Are Acton's schools too expensive?

What we know: Acton is in line with and generally lower in cost per pupil and percent of property tax levy that in comparable communities. Acton schools are unquestionably good, based on reputation, Phase 1 survey results, and MCAS scores. So it appears that the town is getting its money's worth.

Also, Acton has a long history of investing in its schools and other facilities and services, resulting in a relatively high tax burden, but budget articles have not been rejected by Town Meeting, so this situation reflects the values of town residents.

What else do we need to know? In general, we have enough inventory information to address questions about potential actions regarding services and facilities.

Do people move to Acton for the schools and leave when their children graduate?

What we know: Clearly, some people do this, but cross-tabulation of the Phase I survey results indicates that 43% of respondents with children (58% after the “don’t know” responses are set aside) said that they planned to stay 11 years or more. We didn’t analyze the data further about the age of their children, but the responses indicate that a majority probably are not intending to leave when their children graduate.

What else do we need to know? It’s not clear what kind of action would result from knowing more than we know now. We wouldn’t propose lowering school quality to reduce the number of families who move in and out for the schools. Would we propose to discourage families with children from moving to Acton by discouraging housing types that may attract such families? This might be worth considering further, e.g., encourage age-restricted housing but discourage developments with many bedrooms; more information about children in different types of housing might be useful in considering this type of action. Also to be considered is the fact that the state is overbuilt for age-restricted housing and some communities are being asked by developers to lower the age limit for such housing; and that actions taken to reduce rental housing will work against the objective of achieving 10% affordable housing.

What’s the effect of soils on water quality and water supply?

What we know: There are two basic soil regimes in Acton, which are well described and mapped in the Comprehensive Water Resources Plan. (Approximately 10% of residences are on the sewer system, 10% on package treatment plants, and 80% individual on-site.) Some soils are poorly drained and require more expensive on-site systems to meet DEP standards. Other soils are excessively drained, and these are the areas that also recharge the aquifer that the Water District wells use to supply water to the town. There are technologies that can adequately treat wastewater from a single residence or a cluster of homes or other developments. Zoning can also be considered to provide sufficiently large lots to afford an opportunity to locate the on-site disposal system. Also, the existing sewer system can be extended to some areas, although at relatively high cost. Alternative actions might include encouraging development types that can use the appropriate technologies, discouraging development in sensitive locations, extending sewerage, and/or forming wastewater management districts that provide for more stringent inspection of on-site facilities.

What else do we need to know? In general, there’s enough inventory information to address this issue.

Is water supply adequate?

What we know: There’s a great deal of information from interviewing Chris Allen, the Water District reports, and the DEP withdrawal permit. The permit authorizes a total of 708 million gallons per year; actual water supplied has hovered around 600 MGY since 2003 (it was higher in earlier years, but conservation efforts and leak repair have brought it down). Chris thinks there is not an overall supply constraint, just the peak pumping constraint that leads to summertime outdoor watering limitations. An addition well site has been studied, and the district is looking into the source of nitrates in some of the wells.

What else do we need to know? We have enough information to address water supply issues.

What are the potential locations where development could occur?

What we know: The land use inventory is in progress and we will have a general understanding soon of where major areas of developable land are located and how much development could occur under the existing zoning. We also know – based on the Open Space and Recreation Plan - the areas of high priority for open space acquisition and/or protection (they include much of the developable land).

What else do we need to know? For potential actions that involve zoning change, encouraging development in existing villages vs. large lot subdivision, acquiring specific parcels for open space, etc., parcel-specific information is useful or necessary. This needs to be done in coordination with formulating the potential actions.

What about traffic congestion and speeds?

What we know: basic traffic information has been assembled. To address specific congestion issues and speed requires data collection that is beyond the scope of a comprehensive plan. Actions could include monitoring of speed, speed enforcement, traffic calming, and access limitation (i.e., curb cut permits and encouragement of shared access, e.g., on Great Road. There really isn't anything that can be done about traffic volumes on state highways, but traffic cut-throughs can be addressed and specific implementation-phase studies can be specified. Widening roads to increase capacity would be a non-starter.

What else do we need to know? Nothing until place-specific actions are considered, and as noted above, additional studies are generally needed to address traffic improvements.