



## Overview

Based on community input and discussion by the Planning and Zoning Commission, this section of the POCD focuses on the key issues and special areas.

### Strengthen The Town Center



### Redevelop Elmcrest



### Enhance The Riverfront



### Address Industrial Zones



### Establish The Air Line Trail



## A. Strengthen The Town Center

Portland's Town Center has been the focus of community life for over 300 years. Shops, schools, civic functions, churches, and a variety of other uses central to the daily life of the community are all located here.

It is a major goal of the Plan to ensure that the Town Center continues to be the focal point of the community in the future.

***Ensure that Portland's Town Center continues to be the focal point of the community.***

By creating and maintaining attractive and interesting places that people want to visit, the Town Center will continue to be the main focal point in the community and provide an important cornerstone to the local economy.

### Terminology

**Town Center** – a term referring to the commercial uses and higher density residential neighborhoods located on and around Main Street and Marlborough Street

**Village District** – a special type of zoning district allowing for design review

Enhancement efforts should be pursued in a cohesive, organized, and proactive fashion. By addressing the following elements, the Town can support the development of a vibrant and revitalized Town Center along Main Street, where people can work, live, shop, play and enjoy many of the Town's important and unique resources.

Elements that contribute to a successful Town Center include:

- Configuration (location, size, market support, traffic)
- Uses (critical mass, intensity, variety, complementary)
- Building design (scale, design, materials, details, variations)
- Streetscape design (pedestrianism, building location, building orientation, focal point, streetscape amenities)
- Vehicular configuration (interconnected streets, on-street parking, interconnected parking areas, parking standards)
- Infrastructure systems (utilities, transit linkages)
- Personality

Although Portland currently has some of these elements, they do not yet exist at an appropriate intensity to support a vibrant Town Center. The following strategic actions, once successfully implemented, will provide the basis for a revitalized Town Center and provide necessary support to the Town's existing businesses:

- Strengthen the Town Center
- Encourage / Require Good Building Design
- Humanize the Streetscape
- Improve Vehicular and Parking Amenities
- Organize Activities In The Town Center

**A.1. Strengthen the Town Center**

The Town Center is well configured for success. It is located at the junction of two main travel routes and at the foot of the Arrigoni Bridge connecting to Middletown. It is a reasonably-sized area with a variety of uses and activities.

There are strong traffic flows to and through the Town Center. Daily traffic volumes average about 30,000 vehicles at the foot of the Arrigoni Bridge with 20,000 vehicles travelling east-west on Route 17/66 and about 10,000 vehicles travelling north-south on Route 17A.

However, the Town Center may not have a critical mass of activities (number, type, size, etc.) to attract people to the Center, to entice motorists to stop, or to compete with other sites in the community and the region.

A successful Town Center needs a critical mass of uses to create activity and vitality.

Efforts should be made to increase the range and intensity of uses allowed within the Town Center. The goal should be to attract a variety of different uses to Main Street (since it has more potential to be the key organizing spine) and organize them in an inviting, attractive, and pedestrian friendly environment. This should include more small retail shops, more second story residential units, more restaurants with outdoor dining, art galleries, museums, municipal services, and other things to attract people to the Town Center and to keep them there longer.

The Planning and Zoning Commission should review the Zoning Regulations with an eye to making changes to increase the variety and density of activities within the Town Center.

It is important that first floor uses be seen as inviting to pedestrians and encourage walking and exploring. Passive uses or inactive uses detract from the very environment the Town seeks to create.

Prohibiting or limiting commercial uses that discourage pedestrian activity (such as big-box stores) or impose obstacles for pedestrians (such as drive-through facilities for banks and fast food establishments) should be considered for the entire Town Center area.

Finally, signage that identifies the Town Center as the main commercial center should be visible along Route 66 and other access routes in order to provide guidance and information for individuals traveling along those roadways.

<b>Policies</b>	
1.	Encourage appropriate development and re-development within the Town Center.
2.	Encourage the establishment of a critical mass of activity within the Town Center.
3.	Increase the density of the Town Center with “in-fill” development by increasing the allowable density of buildings in a manner consistent with the Town’s character.
4.	Encourage housing in and near the Town Center.
5.	Consider participating in the activities of the Connecticut Main Street Center.
<b>Action Items</b>	
6.	Review the Zoning Regulations in order to increase the variety and density of activities allowed within the Town Center
7.	Work with CT-DOT to improve the intersection of Routes 17, 17A and 66 to accommodate pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicles.
8.	Identify and establish gateways.

**A.2. Encourage / Require Good Building Design**

It is not enough to simply encourage more variety and density of activities within the Town Center. The buildings which are established within the Town Center must contribute to and enhance the overall ambience. It is not unreasonable to state that one inappropriate building or use can have a significant negative impact on the level of pedestrian interest and activity and have a negative impact on the Town Center.

The Town Center is an area of distinctive character and historic value and these characteristics should be maintained. Building scale and design of new development should continue to be appropriate to the scale of existing buildings. Buildings which are too short (i.e. – one-story buildings) or too tall detract from the streetscape in a village. Portland’s building stock provides a potentially rich palette of interesting and architecturally significant buildings, mostly in the two- to two-and-a-half-story range.

To help ensure that building design in the Town Center area is appropriate, the Commission should:

- Expand the “village district” as authorized by CGS Section 8-2j to include all areas within the B-3 zone and all business areas which front on Main Street
- Consider establishing a Design Review Board or Committee to review plans rather than charge applicants for the costs of review (or make other arrangements to reduce the costs to applicants)
- Have the Design Review Board or Committee update and maintain the manual of design guidelines (building designs to emulate and avoid) to provide guidance to applicants

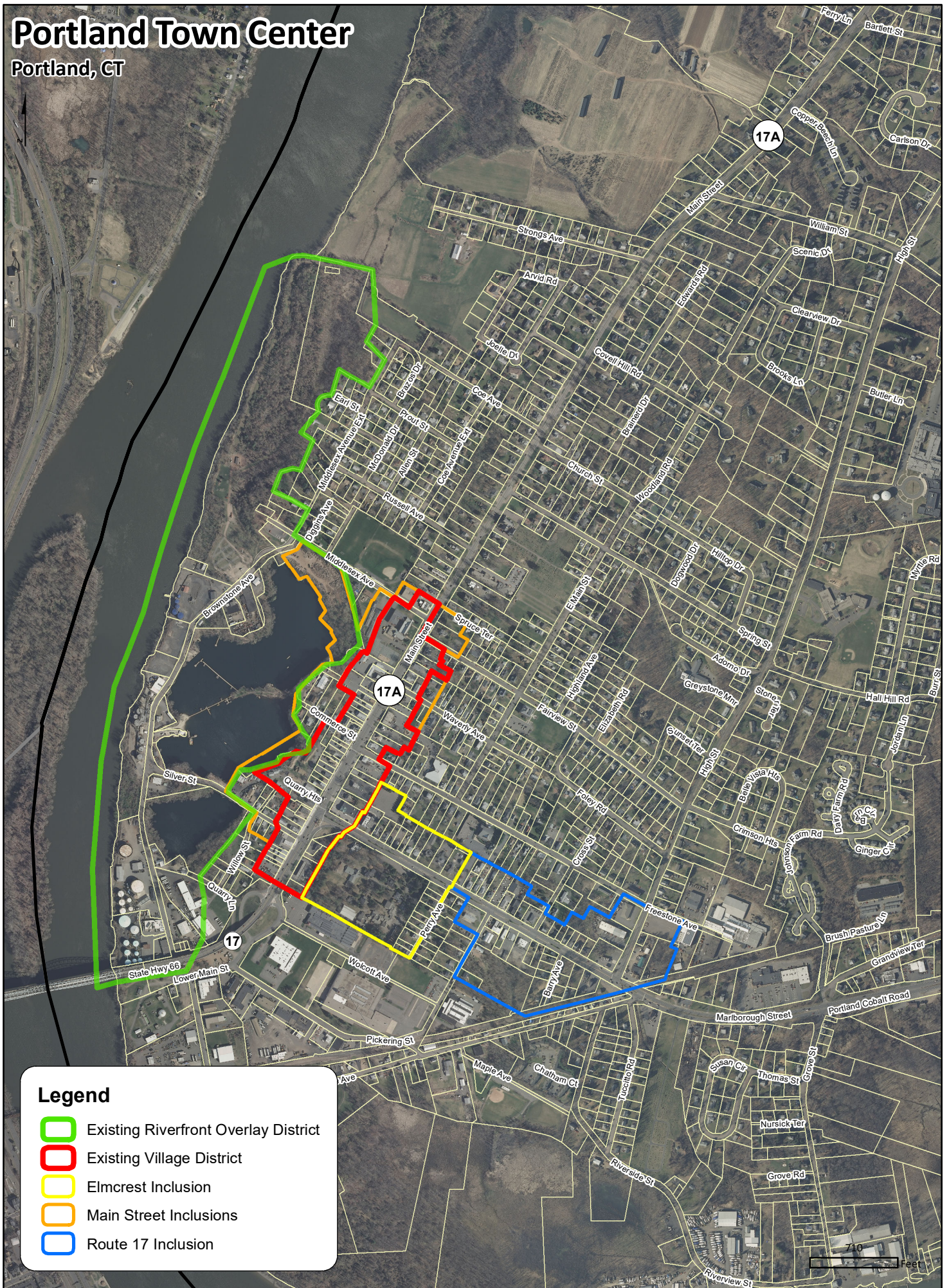
**Town Center Design Elements**








Policies
1. Encourage and/or require good building design in the Town Center area.
2. Encourage/require appropriate building scale.
3. Consider requiring that brownstone be used in development / redevelopment projects to the maximum extent practicable.
4. Maintain and enhance the manual of design guidelines (building designs to emulate and avoid) to provide guidance to applicants.
Action Items
5. Expand the “village district” to include all areas within the B-3 zone and more areas along Route 66 (or consider another approach) to ensure appropriate development patterns in the Town Center area.
6. Establish a Design Review Board or Committee to review proposals in the village district as opposed to a consultant.
7. Revisit the building heights in Section 5.5 of the Zoning Regulations and consider limiting to 35 feet unless the Commission grants a Special Permit.

# Portland Town Center

Portland, CT



**Legend**

-  Existing Riverfront Overlay District
-  Existing Village District
-  Elmcrest Inclusion
-  Main Street Inclusions
-  Route 17 Inclusion

710 Feet

**A.3. Humanize the Streetscape**

Attractive buildings with enticing uses are an important part of creating a successful Town Center but they are only part of the equation. What happens in the public areas of the Town Center (i.e. – the streetscape) is just as important.

For many years, communities like Portland have allowed streets to become vehicular-friendly areas and this has, in many cases, created a barren landscape that does not invite visitation or use and has resulted in uncomfortable places for pedestrians.

The entire Main Street corridor should be improved with the addition of landscaping, and other amenities such as, benches, lighting elements, and underground utilities. In addition, many of the sidewalks are in terrible condition and should be repaired and maintained as required by Town ordinance. Making the street an inviting place to be may require a public-private partnership to ensure that all the necessary components of a pedestrian friendly environment are included.

<b>Policies</b>
1. Encourage the creation and maintenance of a pedestrian friendly streetscape.
<b>Action Items</b>
2. Create a master streetscape vision for Main Street to guide public and private improvements to sidewalks, parking, lighting, etc.
3. Undertake improvements to the pedestrian environment along Main Street (sidewalks, street furniture, landscaping, etc.).
4. Invoke the sidewalk ordinance, if needed, to compel sidewalk improvements.

**CASE STUDY – Streetscape Principles**

- Appropriate ratio of building height to facade-to-facade width (such as a 1:3 ratio signifying 30 foot buildings across a 90-foot separation between building facades) to create a pedestrian-friendly feeling and sense of enclosure
- Wide sidewalks to invite pedestrian usage and enjoyment
- Active building facades (window displays, etc.) at street level to entertain pedestrians
- Street trees to provide shade
- Benches to serve pedestrians
- On-street parking where feasible to provide a sense of convenience and safety to pedestrians
- Restaurants with outdoor dining to animate the street and attract more people
- Outdoor activities and events (such as sidewalk sales) which attract people and entice motorists

**Inviting Streetscape**



See page 71 for recommendations related to walking, bicycling, and the creation of “complete streets.”

**A.4. Improve Vehicular and Parking Amenities**

Even though there is a desire to create a pedestrian-friendly area, provision must still be made for traffic and for parking.

At the present time, there is an inconsistent configuration on Main Street with sporadic parking, both on-street and off-street, lane configurations, crosswalks, etc. This is exacerbated by inadequate parking having been provided when some historic homes were converted to multi-family uses or commercial uses and now cars are parked in front yards and other areas. Islands around light poles and electrical poles interfere with driver’s sight lines. Informational signage to help people navigate the area and find parking are inadequate or non-existent. In addition to being unsightly and detracting from the overall appearance of the Town Center, several accidents each year have been directly attributable to these situations.

Since Main Street is part of the numbered State highway system, any solutions will need to be coordinated with the State. Having this section of Main Street be part of the Town road system should be explored.

Policies
1. Simplify and enhance the design and function of Main Street in terms of traffic and parking.
2. Maximize shared parking opportunities.
3. Improve parking amenities and signage, directing drivers to additional off-street parking.
Action Items
4. Review parking standards and revise accordingly.
5. Undertake a Town Center parking plan.
6. Consider Town ownership and/or maintenance of Main Street (or “un-number” the State highway).

**A.5. Organize Activities In The Town Center**

If the Town Center is to be a place where people are drawn into it, the community should make a concerted effort to encourage and schedule more events and activities in the Town Center to improve its overall function and personality.

This can include art shows, concerts, sidewalk sales, and other special events to bring people to the Town Center area. These activities will complement the variety of uses (shopping, services, restaurants, civic activities, and residential opportunities) along Main Street.

Policies
1. Encourage and schedule more events and activities in the Town Center to improve its overall function and personality.
Action Items
2. Implement actions to organize activities in the Town Center.

**Parades And Special Events**



**Outdoor Dining**



## B. Promote Appropriate Redevelopment of Elmcrest

Elmcrest is a former psychiatric hospital located at the most prominent intersection in Portland (Route 17 at Route 66). The facility has been closed since the mid-2000s and redevelopment of the site is likely to occur in the future. How this redevelopment occurs will be important to the overall future of the Town Center.

Following closure of the hospital facility, a developer proposed demolishing some of the buildings on the site (six of the buildings were subsequently listed on the National Register of Historic Places) and cutting down some of the significant trees that had been planted on the site. A site plan was approved at that time that included a shopping center anchored by a supermarket, several other commercial buildings, and some residential units. With changes in statutory timeframes, the approval is still valid but is slated to expire in 2018.

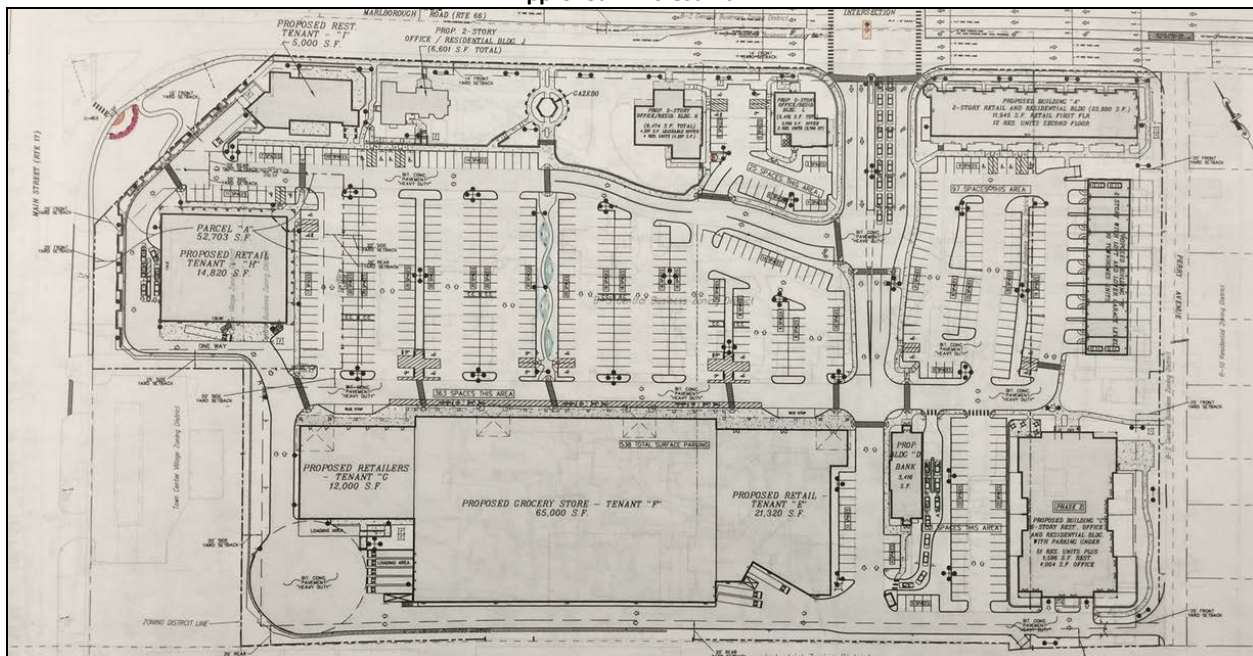
*Promote appropriate redevelopment of the Elmcrest site in ways that will enhance the overall community.*

A number of Portland residents have expressed displeasure with the “strip retail / big box retail” nature of the design. Portland received a grant in 2015 under the Vibrant Communities Initiative to explore possible alternative configurations.

The Plan recommends and supports appropriate redevelopment of the Elmcrest property in ways that will:

- Honor the history and heritage of the site and the community
- Retain historically important buildings
- Support and enhance the appropriate development of the Town Center area

Approved Elmcrest Plan





With the grant funding received from the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation as part of the Vibrant Communities Initiative (VCI), the Town retained a consulting team to look at alternative development concepts for the Elmcrest site. The consulting team included:

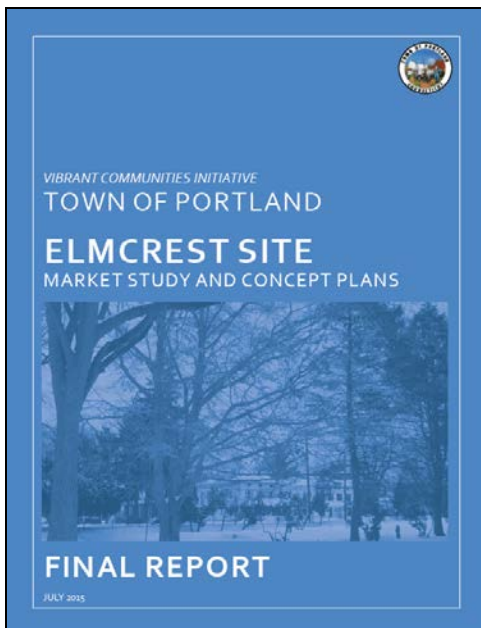
- The Cecil Group (community design)
- Tighe and Bond (engineering)
- Bartram and Cochran (market studies)

The objectives of the study were to:

- Define a shared community vision
- Provide a workable and beneficial redevelopment approach
- Advance pragmatic redevelopment concepts for the site

Community meetings were held in 2015 and several concepts were developed for further discussion and consideration.

The Plan recommends that development at the Elmcrest site follow the design concepts contained in the final VCI study report that was endorsed by Portland’s Board of Selectmen.



### CASE STUDY – Elmcrest Alternatives

Some of the scenarios evaluated are depicted below.

**Scenario A**  
Retail At NW Corner  
Residential to South and East  
Historic Buildings / Green In Center



**Scenario B**  
Retail on West side  
Residential on East side  
Historic Buildings / Green In Center



**Scenario C**  
Mixed Use Buildings At NW Corner  
Residential to South and East  
Historic Buildings In Center

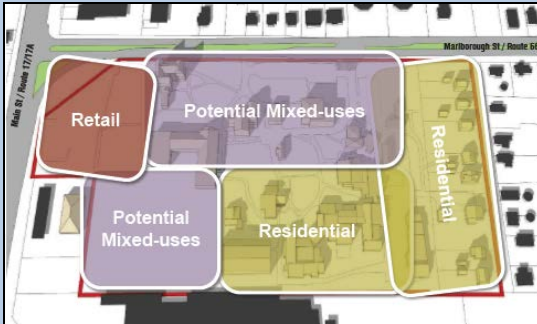


## ELMCREST – Preferred Approach

Schematic diagrams showing the preferred approach are presented in the report.

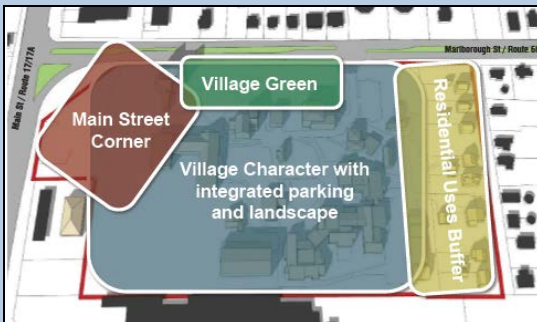
### Use Concept

Transition from retail to residential across the site



### Design Concept

“Main street” and “village” character with transition to residential



### Policies

1. Promote appropriate redevelopment of the Elmcrest site in ways that will contribute to and enhance the overall community.

### Action Items

2. Implement actions for redevelopment of the Elmcrest that follow the design concepts contained in the final VCI study report that was endorsed by Portland’s Board of Selectmen.

Elmcrest Aerial



Elmcrest Frontage



Elmcrest Building



## C. Continue To Enhance The Riverfront

Portland has extensive frontage along the Connecticut River and this riverfront area has long been central to the evolution of the community and the local economy. It is a key recommendation of this Plan to integrate this riverfront area into the overall fabric of the community and to enhance this area for residents and visitors.

The Town owns riverfront property that abuts both the Connecticut River and the Brownstone Quarries. With National Historic Landmark status for the Brownstone Quarries, it is acknowledged that this area is an important asset both locally and nationally. In order to successfully identify and develop marketable uses for this area, it will be important to develop links between the existing infrastructure and commercial development of the Town Center, with the inherent recreational and economic opportunities of the Riverfront and Quarries.

***It is a major goal of the Plan to continue efforts to integrate the Connecticut River into the overall fabric of the community.***

Strategic recommendations include:

- Promote Riverfront Redevelopment
- Enhance Connections To The Town Center
- Enhance the Riverfront

### C.1. Promote Riverfront Redevelopment

Enhancing the riverfront will likely also include development and redevelopment on public and private lands. A major strategy of this Plan is to encourage and support the redevelopment of the waterfront, particularly in the area adjacent to the Town Center, as a mixed use, pedestrian friendly environment with recreational amenities.

Balancing recreational, retail and other commercial activities will be critical to keeping this area active and vibrant. Any development proposals should include a commitment to preservation of the vistas of the river and the unique environmental considerations which exist.

As mentioned in the historic resources section of the POCD, a museum or preservation site to house artifacts, documents, and pictures of local quarries could be an important part of the overall vision for this area.

Policies	
1.	Promote redevelopment of the riverfront to create a pedestrian friendly environment with recreational amenities
2.	Work with private and public partners to promote redevelopment of the riverfront with recreational and limited mixed-uses.
Action Items	
3.	Implement actions to promote riverfront redevelopment.

**C.2. Enhance Connections To The Town Center**

In order for any of the projects related to the Riverfront Park to be successful, adequate parking and other amenities will need to be developed and maintained. Amenities include rest rooms, information kiosks, street furniture, landscaping, and a Welcome Center.

The overall goal is to focus traffic to the riverfront areas on Middlesex Avenue. This location provides direct access to many of the riverfront destinations and it also provides a good location to direct traffic through the downtown area.

There are accessible routes from the quarry area to Main Street but there are some inherent issues with some of the access routes. In addition, there is limited space to create significant parking opportunities along the River. As a result, it may be necessary to create a pedestrian network and provide pedestrian amenities so that visitors can park in the Town Center and walk to the Quarries along the River.

Policies
1. Maintain and enhance physical links between the Town Center and the Riverfront.
2. Continue to link parking areas, public access points, and visitor attractions via an overall network designed to accommodate pedestrians and bicycles.
3. Enhance the pedestrian environment through street furniture, fencing, street plantings, pedestrian scale lighting, crosswalks, signage, and sidewalk improvements.
4. Consider turning Silver Street into a cul-de-sac with access only from Main Street in order to simplify and organize traffic circulation in the Riverfront area.
Action Items
5. Implement actions to enhance connections to the Town Center.

**Brownstone Avenue Connection (looking northeast)**



**Brownstone Avenue Connection (looking southwest from Middlesex Avenue)**



**Quarry / Brownstone Avenue Area**



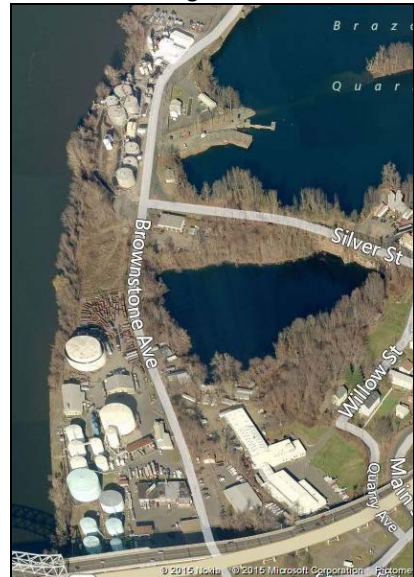
**Brownstone Exploration & Discovery Park**



**Riverfront Park**



**Oil Storage Businesses**



**C.3. Enhance the Riverfront**

Over many years, the Town has been working on ways to better integrate the riverfront into the overall fabric of the community. These efforts should continue.

The Town has acquired land along the river in order to preserve important resources and to provide for public access. This includes the Town acquisition of the historic brownstone quarries that have since been leased to a private operator and repurposed into the Brownstone Exploration and Discovery Park. The Town has also been working on potential boat launch improvements on the river itself.

Providing for publicly accessible open space and trails (the Portland Riverfront Park) is also an important component of enhancing the riverfront.

Policies
1. Continue efforts to better integrate the riverfront into the overall fabric of the community.
2. Continue to acquire riverfront open space as opportunities present themselves.
3. Encourage the preservation of land as open space in areas prone to flooding, such as the Wangunk Meadows.
Action Items
4. Implement actions to enhance the riverfront.

**Wangunk Meadows Area**



## D. Address Industrial Zoning

Economic development is important to Portland for a number of reasons. To ensure that the land use regulations are encouraging appropriate development (and not inhibiting desired development), the Commission should review the regulations for industrial zoning to ensure they are appropriate.

Another key issue is the availability of infrastructure (public water and public sewer) to encourage and support desired growth.

***Ensure that appropriate industrial development is allowed, encouraged, and supported.***

### Industrial Zone

Within Portland, the Industrial zoning district at the foot of the Arrigoni Bridge is an intensively utilized area which has proven to be attractive to a number of businesses.

The Planning and Zoning Commission should review the zoning provisions in this area in order to ensure that appropriate and compatible development is being promoted and encouraged in this area and in other Industrial-zoned areas in Portland.



### Planned Industrial (IP) District

In the 1960s, the Town zoned lands at the intersection of Routes 17 and 66 as a Planned Industrial District (IP) to allow for business development near the terminus of a new bridge across the Connecticut River. However, the new bridge was never built and the anticipated development never occurred.

The Commission should revisit the zoning in this area relative to the availability of water and sewer services and consider the following:

- Evaluate the cost/benefit of extending water and sewer services to this area (including possible state / federal loans or grants and/or the use of tax increment financing as recently authorized by the Legislature)
- Consider modifying the uses allowed in the Planned Industrial district depending on whether water / sewer service is available
- Consider modifying the zoning in this area to permit assisted living or similar developments if it might help make water / sewer service available

- Uses That Might Be Considered For the Revised IP District**
- **Drive-through Banks / Restaurants**
  - **Grocery and/or Specialty Food Store**
  - **Light Industrial**
  - **Recreational Fitness Clubs**

Policies
1. Ensure that appropriate industrial development is allowed, encouraged, and supported.
2. Evaluate the appropriate strategy for the Planned Industrial district.
Action Items
3. Review the zoning in the Industrial District.

## E. Establish The Air Line Trail

The Air Line Trail refers to a former rail corridor in eastern Connecticut which is being transformed into a recreational trail. The trail takes its name from a rail line established to create a direct route between New York and Boston, through the “air” so to speak. Widely known in the late 1800s, the Air Line service eventually fell out of use due to improvements on other rail lines and changes in rail equipment.

Since the 1960s, state agencies and communities along the rail corridor have been converting it to recreational use with the goal of creating a regional greenway. The corridor already extends from East Hampton Center east to Pomfret and Thompson and there are efforts underway to extend it west into Portland.

The Town has been working on this trail extension for some time and the Plan recommends that the trail be established and extended to the Town Center.

### ***Establish the Air Line Rail Trail.***

Additional recommendations related to trails in Portland are contained in the “Addressing Community Needs” section of the POCD.

<b>Policies</b>
1. Establish the Air Line Trail in Portland.
2. Establish connections from the Air Line Trail to the Town Center.
3. Establish connections from the Air Line Trail to Middletown and Glastonbury.
<b>Action Items</b>
4. Extend the Air Line Trail to the Town Center.

### **CASE STUDY – Air Line Trail**

The Air Line Trail is a former rail corridor in Eastern Connecticut being converted to a recreational trail. The trail has several sections:

- East Hampton to Windham (22 miles),
- Windham to Putnam (21 miles)
- A Thompson extension (6.6 miles)
- A Colchester spur (3.6 miles)

Portland is working to extend the trail from East Hampton into Portland. Some of the challenges include fractured ownership (parts of the trail ended up in private ownership after the rail service ceased) and grade/drainage issues.

**Air Line Trail**

