

Executive Summary | Gleasondale School Lot Improvement Plan

Overview

The Gleasondale School Lot is a .28 acre Conservation Commissioned owned parcel on Gleasondale Road, along the Assabet River, formerly the site of a two room schoolhouse. During the UMASS Gleasondale Village Revitalization Planning process, the site was noted as a significant resource to the community. A staff working group of the Planning Department has been working with staff to determine potential upgrades at the site, providing input and taking part in a September 2016 Design Forum, which led to the creation of this plan for the parcel's improvement.

Design Forum

A Visual Preference Survey and Strengths/Threats/Opportunities/Weaknesses (STOW) Analysis was used to gain input on the issues and opportunities present at the School Lot. Participants identified several potential designs and uses, some of which require further analysis to determine the exact scale, location and timing of their implementation. Prominent design ideas included improved parking areas, historic/educational signage, upgraded streetscape and seating options.

- **Parking**
The possibility of formalizing the currently undeveloped parking space in the School Lot has been a major driver in the planning discussions due to the lack of parking in the neighborhood and the historic use of the property. Many ideas for designing a parking area that could delineate parking spaces from recreational uses is the primary planning consideration that will need to be further reviewed with any future designs.
- **Access to Site**
Vehicular and pedestrian access to the site is currently limited, with narrow shoulders and a lack of pedestrian infrastructure affecting the site. Plans for the School Lot should be integrated into the wider Gleasondale Traffic planning to take place during the Route 62 Bridge redesign.
- **Long Term Management**
Stewardship and management tasks will need to be discussed with the Town entity owning the property and nearby residents, who have expressed interest in a more formal stewardship role.

Implementation of Desired Uses

Participants at the design forum were split on the need for a comprehensive design upgrades versus an á-la-carte approach. Two options have been offered by Planning Staff.

- Comprehensive plans for the site, replete with design proposals for parking, aesthetic and recreational upgrades could be formalized and submitted to the required Boards. Funding through various means could be explored.
- An al-a-carte approach could be utilized to make incremental upgrades depending on the level of funding required and consensus between residents and the Town entity owning the land.

Recommendations

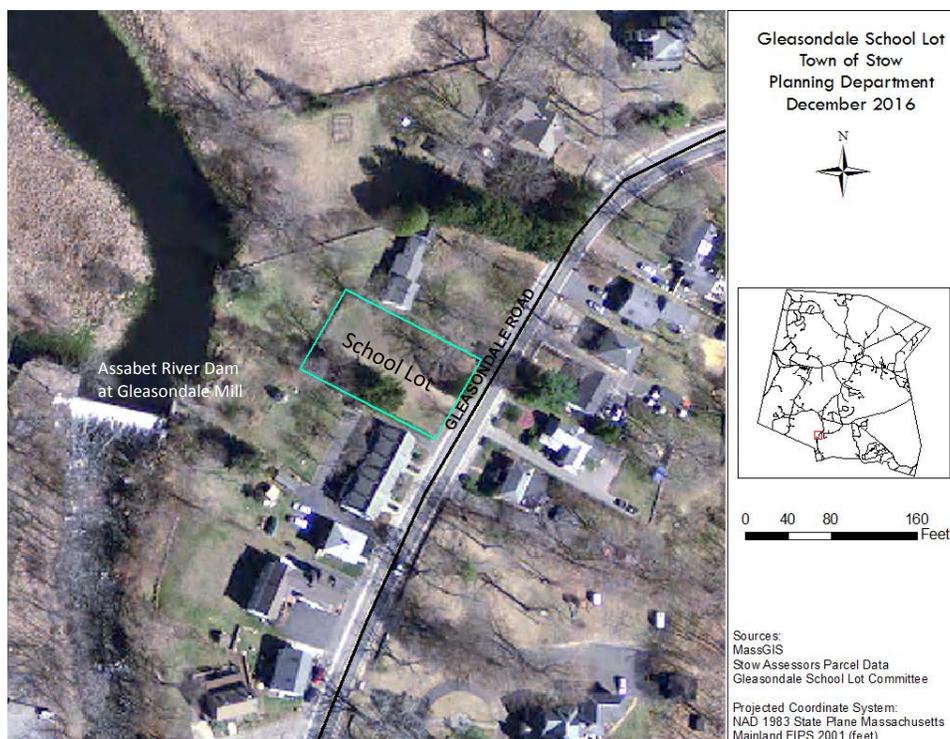
The primary short term recommendation is for the Town to determine the most appropriate future Town entity to care for the site. The School Lot is currently owned by the Conservation Commission, although they have suggested that the Board of Selectmen may be a more appropriate steward. The Planning Department has provided several short, medium and long term recommendations at the end of this document to ensure that future improvements can be efficiently implemented.

Background

In the spring of 2014, UMASS Amherst graduate students concluded the Gleasondale Village Revitalization Project, which focused on recommending improvements in the Village through planning investments in the historic mill and surrounding neighborhood. One recommendation of the planning process regarded improvements to the site known as the “School Lot,” to reimagine the lot as a neighborhood civic space. During the project’s Phase III Charrette, the School Lot was referenced by participants at the public meeting and through an exit questionnaire. The graduate students’ recommendation was that:

“the parcel be continually used to alleviate the village’s parking capacity issue. According to stakeholder input and our analysis, the conversion of a portion of the lot to a public park space would benefit the village. A playground, seating area, and playing lawns were referenced in the exit questionnaire.”

Figure 1
Gleasondale School Lot Location



The School Lot is a .28 acre lot located on the west side of Route 62 in Gleasondale Village. Currently it is used as an unimproved community gathering space for Gleasondale Village residents. The land is the vacant site of a former grade school and library building that served Gleasondale Village from 1850 until the late 1950s. In 1962, Annual Town Meeting voters approved the transfer of ownership of the land to the Conservation Commission to be used as a park until the Town voted for another purpose. At the same Town Meeting, residents voted to raze the former school building. In 1963, donations were provided for the “Gleasondale Park” to loam and seed the site, paint the chain link fence and install a swing. The Conservation Commission’s Annual Report of 1963 proclaimed – “Let’s make this first Park in Stow something to be proud of.”

Winter 2016

Gleasondale residents formed working groups to provide further planning support to Planning Department staff in regard to a handful of neighborhood planning projects which residents were interested in pursuing, including improvements to the “School Lot.” Residents identified the School Lot as an easily accessible vacant lot within a dense residential neighborhood that suffers from growing traffic pressures and little access to open space.

Summer 2016

The Gleasondale Working Group approached the Conservation Commission with concept plans for an improved park on the School Lot, including cleaning up the site and adding new plantings. The Highway Department removed an iron pole, the last remaining piece of the old swing. Residents held a work day at which participants collected trash and performed some light landscaping.

Through initial discussions with the Working Group, review of past planning documents and a series of site visits, a number of planning considerations were identified for further study, including access to the site, long term management, designing for desired uses, and parking safety. In September 2016, the Planning Department held a design forum for the School Lot to allow residents to further explore these considerations and possibilities of design and use.

Design Forum

Planning Department staff hosted a two part design forum on September 29, 2016 to further explore the various improvement concepts discussed by the School Lot Working Group. The advertised Design Forum began with a STOW (Strengths, Threat, Opportunities, Weaknesses) analysis, followed by an visual preference survey to challenge participants to reflect on their preferences and goals for the site.

STOW (Strengths, Threats, Opportunities, Weaknesses) Analysis

The design forum examined strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats at the site. Specifically, participants were asked to consider the site’s assets, factors that could negatively impact the site, how the site could best benefit the community, preferred uses, detractions from the site, and any aspects of the site that may need to be improved or changed. Figure 2 lists the comments received by category.

Figure 2

STOW Analysis of the School Lot site:

<u>Strengths</u>	<u>Threats</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ View of river (including dam) and farm ○ Proximity to river ○ Historic site with educational value ○ Safe from flooding (slopes uphill) ○ Social gathering space ○ Centrally located ○ Valuable open space ○ Chain link fencing provides safety ○ Parking- neighbors, guests, river users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If 62 were widened, lot size would shrink ○ Parking of non-passenger vehicles ○ Parking that becomes long-term, overnight ○ Too much parking, commercial parking ○ Teenagers (concern over volume, trash, late-night use) ○ Playground (heavy use, volume, etc.) ○ Poison ivy, invasive plants ○ Sightlines on approach

The highest number of participants showed preference for a parking area design that reflects an improved version of the current scenario. This includes a third of the lot dedicated to parking, with no barrier between the parking area and the landscaping of the park. Residents suggested that this design offers flexibility with the amount of parking space available, as a fence or other barrier would prohibit extra cars from parking when needed. However, other residents noted the need for restrictions on parking when there are events at the park. A third scenario discussed involved leaving the parking arrangement as is, with the addition of tree trimming along the frontage to help with sightlines, particularly with the red cedar to the northeast, and the addition of gravel to help with mud and better define the parking area. Generally, residents voiced preference for an improved parking surface that would curb mud problems while retaining or increasing landscaping around the parking area.

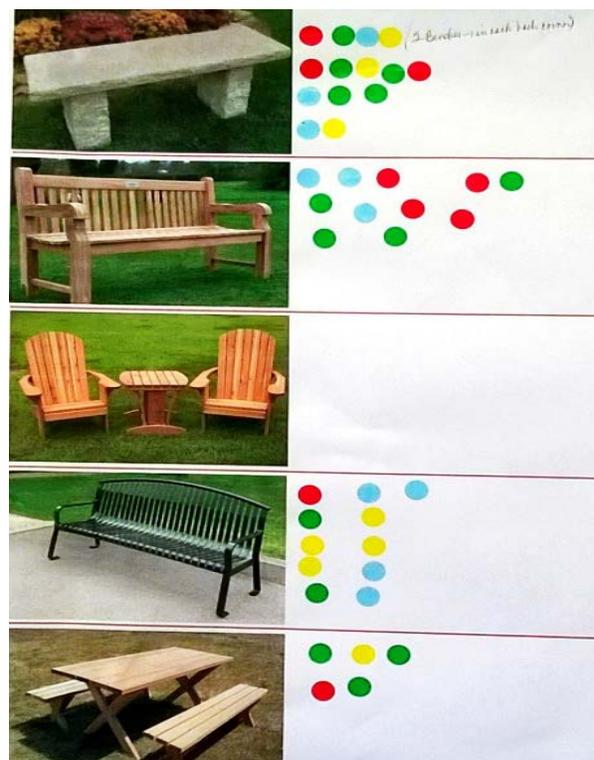
Signage

Participants preferred signage that could be educational, providing a history of the site. The prevailing idea was that a more rustic sign could be placed at the entrance of the park, to identify the lot as a public park, with another interpretive sign inside the lot providing more detail. Some noted preference for a sign similar to the Lower Village gateway sign, perhaps with an image of the former schoolhouse.



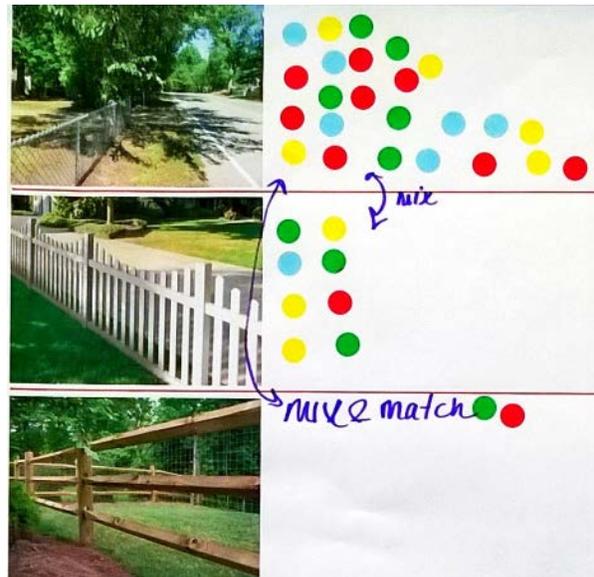
Seating

Though the image to the right shows difference of opinion, through conversation, it apparent that the logic behind the choices made was similar. Many participants vocalized appreciation for bench seating that is durable, washable, and allows for seating in either direction regardless of season. Some residents felt that wooden bench options look uncomfortable, and don't provide much support. One resident expressed interest in a rough cut bench. Participants cited theft as an issue and reasoning behind looking for heavier, more permanent seating options. Participants discussed having multiple types of seating. The option of a picnic table was seen as a threat to having a quiet park, as it could invite unsavory use.



Fencing

Participants vocalized overwhelming support for keeping the existing chain link fence, noting it as the original fence installed when the school was functional and that it provides safety for visitors and abutters. The main goal for a fence was expressed as safety for young children – keeping them and their wayward toys inside the lot and out of the road. The only suggestions that involved its alteration included planting shrubs or vining plants in front of it, to green it up, or to install a white picket fence in front of the chain link fence as a means of beautification. The split rail fence with chicken wire was seen as appearing too farm-like, and there were concerns with safety of children.



Other Ideas/ Additions

The small neighborhood library received the highest number of favorable responses in the survey. Participants revealed it was seen as a nod to the history of the lot. Raised garden beds also received a relatively high number of votes. Although, if considered, participants preferred that it would be limited to a couple of beds, and that they would be at the rear of the lot, perhaps providing space for climbing plants to mask the chain link fence and provide privacy to the abutting property owners.



Planning Considerations

The following section explores future options for the School Lot by combining data gained through the STOW analysis exercise with results from the Visual Preference Survey.

Parking

The possibility of formalizing parking space in the School Lot has been a major driver in the planning discussions. Gleasondale residents and abutters to the lot stated the need for parking when community events are held at the School Lot. Residents stated that around 8-10 cars park on the lot during events. Another need

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identified is safe residential overflow parking options, given that Route 62 has a limited shoulder. Safe bicycle and pedestrian access to the site is also concern among residents.

Residents discussed the site as split into thirds, with a general preference for 1/3 devoted to parking and 2/3 devoted active use of the site. However, there remains disagreement over whether the parking area should be physically contained, with the need for overflow parking and safety of site users to be balanced.

Primary Considerations

- Parking Safety
The School Lot is a publicly owned parcel, currently under the care and custody of the Conservation Commission. As it is customary for public parks and trail-heads throughout Stow to include defined parking areas, any future upgrades to the site will require adequate safety measures be in place to delineate parking areas from multi-use/recreation areas.
- Parking Design
Expansion or upgrade to parking at the site would need to be approved through the Zoning Board of Appeals. An updated parking area in the current location would violate front and side yard setbacks. However, given the small nature of the lot, the sloping grades in the rear and the pattern of current use, a variance from the Zoning Bylaw may be a possibility.

Access to the Site

A number of opportunities and weaknesses were noted in regard to site access, both short and long term.

Primary Considerations

- Vehicular Access
Residents noted that sight lines could be improved with some targeted cutting of cedar trees on the lot's frontage. Further, signage and landscaping can provide visual cues to drivers that the site is a recognized gathering space.
- Pedestrian Access
Due to its relative density as a village, many residents of Gleasondale frequently walk to and from their destination. Residents described unsafe pedestrian access to the School Lot, given Route 62 has no sidewalks or crosswalks, and minimal shoulders.
- Incorporation into Gleasondale Traffic Planning
The replacement of the Gleasondale bridge over Route 62 provides opportunities to reshape the pedestrian experience in Gleasondale Village. Residents agreed that a planned survey of the public right-of-way in Gleasondale could aid in implementing future upgrades.

Long Term Management

Management and care of the School Lot is tied to its ownership, which is yet to be determined, though staff with the Planning Department and the Conservation Commission continue to work to solve this question.

Primary Considerations

- Stewardship
Gleasondale residents have been granted approval from the Conservation Commission to provide new plantings to the site. The Highway Department has also helped in removing trash and digging out the

old swing to eliminate added hazards. Residents have expressed obtaining a more defined stewardship role at the site in the future.

Designing for Desired Uses

Part of the impetus for holding a design forum was to clarify the reasoning behind requested redesigns and ensure that the new School Lot design offers solutions to any current perceived problems. Participants at the design forum were split on the need for a comprehensive design upgrade versus an à-la-carte approach. The Planning Department recognizes the need for further planning and offers the following implementation recommendations:

1. Comprehensive Implementation

The Planning Staff Working Group could formalize a School Lot park proposal, submitting detailed plans for the gravel parking area, in addition to landscaping, seating, and other aesthetic improvements for review by the Planning Board. Various funding components could include Community Preservation Act funds, crowdsource campaigns, and requests for donations. Depending on the funding direction and extent of the upgrades, comprehensive plans could be submitted for later review by the lot owner, Zoning Board of Appeals, and Community Preservation Committee as applicable.

2. À-La-Carte Implementation

The Planning Staff Working Group could alternatively choose to make incremental improvements to the site. This option may allow the design ideas to evolve, and provide the Working Group with flexibility to fund smaller components individually. The Working Group would be able to determine a pace that feels most appropriate for the consensus of opinions. For example, in the next year, residents could coordinate landscaping and fundraise for a few benches, and in the following year research and purchase appropriate signage. The primary considerations of how best to handle the parking situation and fencing options could come at a later date depending on the use of the improved site.

Next Steps

Planning Department Recommendation	Stakeholders Involved	Priority Time Frame	Potential Implementation/Funding Source
Determine Town Ownership	<i>Conservation Commission; Board of Selectmen</i>	Short	N/A
Improve sight lines for site access by trimming trees along frontage	<i>Highway Department</i>	Short	N/A
Determine makeup/organization of long term land management	<i>Planning Staff Working Group; Lot Owner</i>	Short	N/A

Determine potential signage design and placement	<i>Historic Commission; Lot Owner; Highway Department</i>	Medium	Community Preservation Funds
Assess designs for additional desired uses, including raised bed gardens, seating, free library	<i>Planning Staff Working Group; Lot Owner; Abutters</i>	Medium	Community Preservation Funds, Crowdfunding, Donations
Incorporate Route 62 safety concerns into future site and traffic planning	<i>Planning Board; MassDOT; Lot Owner; Abutters; Mill Owner; OARS</i>	Medium & Long Term	Transportation Improvement Program; Planning Board; Complete Streets Priority Plan
Obtain feedback from Lot Owner on safety expectations in regard to parking upgrades	<i>Board of Selectmen; Conservation Commission; Zoning Board of Appeals; Planning Board; Abutters</i>	Medium	N/A
Develop parking plan proposal	<i>Board of Selectmen; Conservation Commission; Zoning Board of Appeals; Planning Board; Abutters</i>	Medium	N/A
Implement parking plan	<i>Board of Selectmen; Conservation Commission; Zoning Board of Appeals; Planning Board; Abutters</i>	Long Term	Community Preservation Funds