

Land Use

This chapter addresses the mix of land uses within Franklin - residential, commercial, industrial and open space. The amount and location of land zoned for various uses is important for several reasons. First, it is a major determinant of property tax revenues, as well as town expenditures for services. Second, it determines the opportunities residents have for employment, obtaining goods and services, and recreation. Third, it influences the physical character and appearance of the town. Finally, it influences transportation systems - how easily we can get where we need to go. This chapter establishes three land use goals that includes industrial and commercial zoning, reducing residential buildout, and maintaining Franklin's New England character.

Current Conditions and Trends

Franklin is 17,227 acres in size, of which 12,122 acres (70%) are developed. See Map 2. The most dramatic land use change to occur in the past decade has been the rapid growth in the residential category (Figure 8). Land permanently preserved as open space increased 342 acres since 1985, primarily as the result of new open space subdivisions. Residential land use more than doubled from 3,110 acres in 1985 to 6,850 acres by 1995, increasing from 18% to 40% of total land area. Residential uses are now the largest single land use category in the community. Franklin led the state in the issuance of single family building permits in 3 of the last 4 years.

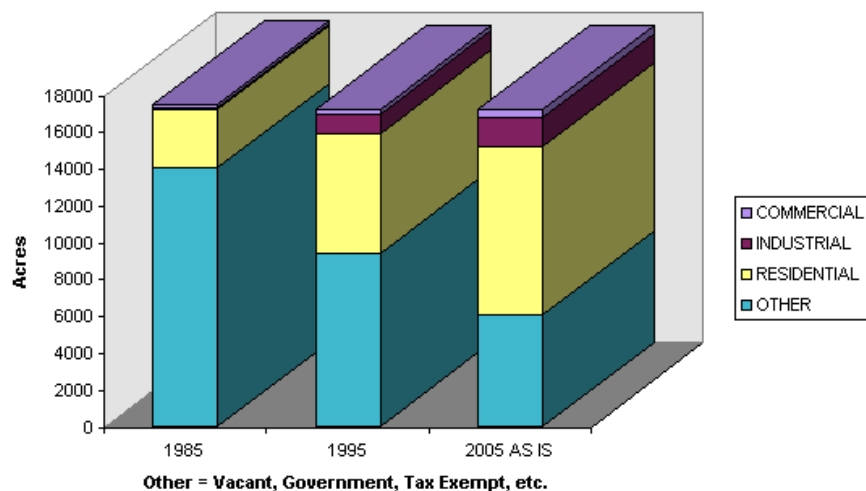


Figure 8: Franklin Land Use In Acres

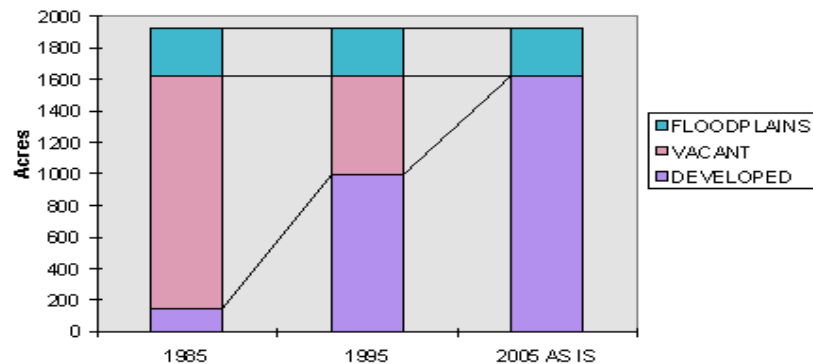
Commercial land uses almost doubled from 1985 to 1995, increasing from 130 acres to approximately 255 acres (Figure 8). If the current rate of commercial development [approximately 12.5 acres per year] remains constant, the remaining 113 acres of developable, commercial land will be exhausted by 2005. However, this is not expected to occur, for two reasons. First, much of the commercial space along Route 140 is unused or underused, and re-use will likely occur as the available land becomes more scarce. Second, significant new commercial centers are being developed at Route 495 Exit 18 in Bellingham (big box retailing) and Exit 15 in Wrentham (up-scale outlet mall). The principal commercial development needs in Franklin are to [1] improve the design and appearance of new development and redevelopment; [2] encourage new commercial development that is supportive of neighborhoods; [3] make some minor increases and adjustments to the commercial areas along Route 140; and [4] ensure that new commercial zoning is located where traffic capacity is adequate.

The amount of developed, industrial land has also increased significantly over the past decade, from 150 acres to 992 acres (Figure 9). However, in 1995 commercial and industrial land together only comprised 19% of the total assessed property value in town, well short of the goal of 30% desired for a balanced property tax base (Figure 10). Furthermore, only about 631 acres of 931 undeveloped acres currently zoned for industrial development may actually be developable because of floodplain and other environmental constraints. These remaining undeveloped lands can support 6 million additional square feet of industrial space. Without adding land to its industrial inventory, Franklin should experience a shortage of industrial land by 2005. This is of considerable concern, since the industrial tax base is needed to offset the costs of servicing homes. Generally, residences require a higher level of town services, e.g., schools, than industrial or commercial properties.

Goals and Objectives

GOAL 1 - Commercial and Industrial Rezoning: Amend the zoning By-Laws in anticipation of market demands for commercial and industrial sites to position the Town for further economic growth.

Figure 9: Industrial Zoning - Trends & Predictions



Goal 1, Objective 1 - Conflicts: Identify parcels which are no longer suitable for commercial or industrial uses because of conflict with environmental resources, existing uses, current traffic, or development patterns.

Goal 1, Objective 2 - Additional Industrial: Expand industrial zones adjacent to or in close proximity to Route 495.

Goal 1, Objective 3 - Exit 16 Commercial: Reserve land at Exit 16 for commercial uses.

Specific CAPC-recommended zoning changes to implement these objectives are described in the Land Use Appendix and titled "Examples of Implementing Actions For Commercial and Industrial Rezoning."

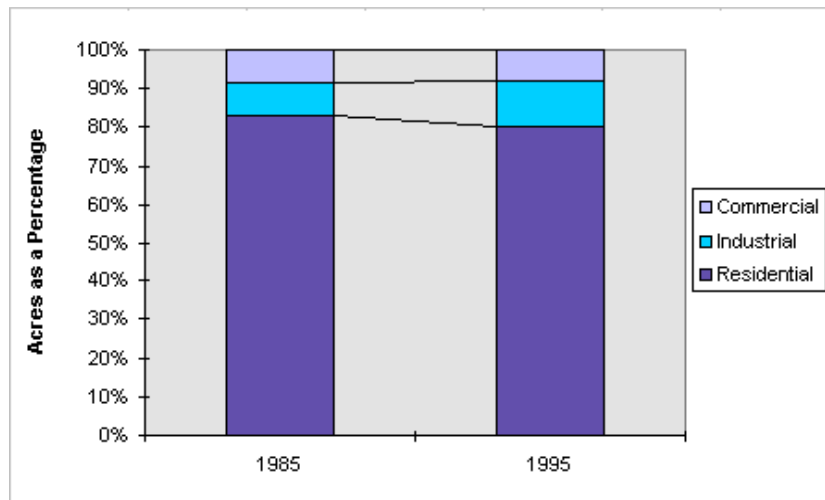


Figure 10: Land Use By Assessed Value

GOAL 2 - Reduce Residential Buildout: Adopt strategies having the effect of reducing the overall number of residential units expected at buildout.

Franklin's rapid rate of residential growth over the past decade has strained town services and changed the community's character in a way that is upsetting to many residents. Yet, a considerable amount of land remains available for development. A buildout analysis completed in 1995 indicated that current zoning would permit the construction of approximately 4,155 new housing units (Figure 11).

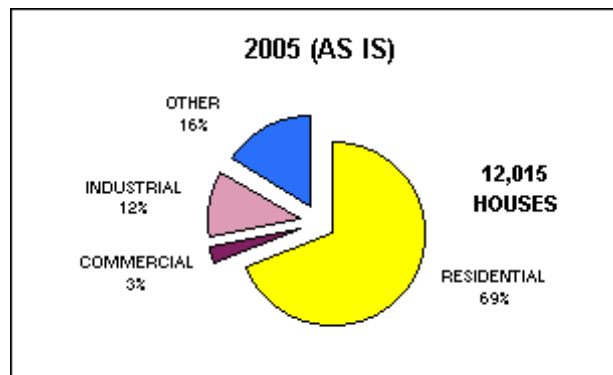


Figure 11: Existing And Potential Housing Units

Since the date of that analysis, the Town has seen 360 new single family homes constructed. Much of this new development would occur on residentially-zoned land currently enrolled in state tax abatement programs

(Chapter 61, 61A and 61B) designed to protect forest, agriculture and recreation values, respectively. Franklin should encourage the continuation of forest, farm and recreation land uses, not only to preserve the values those land uses provide but also to discourage conversion to residential uses which strain the capacity of town infrastructure and services.

GOAL 3: New England Character Strategies: Adopt zoning strategies and design standards supportive of a New England character, a vibrant downtown center, and a sense of neighborhood, including strategies to create transitional buffers between zones and to allow commercial and residential uses to co-locate where appropriate.

As demonstrated by the results of the visual preference survey conducted at the June, 1995 master plan vision session, residents clearly desire that Franklin retain the "feel" of a small, New England town characterized by distinct neighborhoods, a vibrant town center, and traditional architecture. Changes to the zoning bylaws can help meet this goal.

Goal 3, Objective 1 - Village Business Districts: Amend the Zoning Bylaw to create a village business zoning district category to allow a limited number of neighborhood-sized, New England village-styled businesses and services to be located within or close to primarily residential areas.

The town should permit the establishment of small "mom and pop" variety stores to serve residential neighborhoods and employment centers located in the rapidly growing north and south ends of town. Such establishments (Dacey's Market on Lincoln Street is an example) would reduce trips to business districts along the Route 140 corridor. These compact commercial centers should be limited as to number of sites, proximity to other sites, size of businesses, etc., as set forth in the appendix.

Goal 3, Objective 2 - Mixed Use Districts: Amend the Zoning Bylaw to allow commercial and residential uses to co-exist in the downtown area of Franklin, including on the same parcel, in order to expand the customer base for downtown businesses and to assure that the downtown thrives as a center of community life.

Franklin is fortunate to have a distinct town center. However, the town should take steps to ensure that downtown remains the center of community life. For example, the Zoning Bylaw should be amended to allow residential and commercial uses in the downtown to co-exist on the same site, providing a customer base for businesses and adding vitality to the center of town. The town should also take all possible steps to retain existing downtown civic institutions, especially the post office.

Goal 3, Objective 3 - Transitional Use Districts: Amend the Zoning Bylaw to create a transitional use zone to buffer residential uses from business uses by allowing non-residential uses, such as professional offices, in buildings which maintain a residential appearance.



To encourage businesses and provide a buffer zone between residential neighborhoods and adjacent commercial areas, a new professional office space zone should be created and applied to several areas, specifically Route 140 near Wrentham, Route 140 at Old West Central Street and Route 140 near the Beaver Street intersection. Structures in this zone would have a residential appearance and generate minimal traffic during the workday and little or no traffic at night and on weekends. Figure 12 illustrates examples in Franklin.

Figure 12: Examples Of Professional Office Space

Goal 3, Objective 4 - Commercial Design Standards: Establish architectural, signage and landscaping design standards for commercial development to support a New England character streetscape.

Franklin's streetscape appearance has suffered from the lack of architectural design standards for commercial development, especially the numerous strip malls along East and West Central Streets. The town should adopt design standards which, over time, will reestablish a streetscape characteristic of traditional New England villages. Such standards will enhance the visual appeal of the community as a whole, as well as the commercial appeal of individual establishments. Figure 13 illustrates the effect of architectural design standards, using recent examples from Franklin and Norfolk.



Figure 13: Application and Non-Application of Commercial Architectural Design Standards

Goal 3, Objective 5 - Size Restrictions: Place a cap on the size of single occupant commercial buildings to discourage the siting of big box, high traffic generating retailers in Franklin.

The national trend in commercial development is toward "big box" - 25,000 to 50,000 square feet - retail stores such as WalMart. Such establishments generate a high volume of traffic and can have a negative impact on customer traffic to existing businesses. Development occurring in Wrentham and Bellingham at I-495 Exits 15 and 18 respectively provide ample opportunity for Franklin residents to quickly access a full range of commercial outlets. There is no overriding community need to locate such retail establishments in Franklin.

Franklin should revise its zoning by-laws to discourage such development by limiting single occupant commercial buildings to a size not compatible to the building footprint requirements of big box retailers.

