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Maggie Jones

Richard Barringer

New England Environmental Finance Center

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Amherst MA: A New Village Plan for Atkins Corner¹



A case from the library of “smart growth” leadership case studies prepared by the New England Environmental Finance Center, available at

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Abstract. The case study describes a successful smart growth initiative in the town of Amherst, Massachusetts, at an intersection known as Atkins Corner. The initiative grew from two motivating factors: the necessity of realigning Route 116, a major north-to-south artery through the town, to decrease traffic accidents at the intersection and improve pedestrian safety; and a desire on the part of Hampshire College and the Town to create a village center at the intersection. Through a consensus-building process involving key town officials, Hampshire College, neighbors, and the design firm of Dodson Associates, agreement on the project was reached with local stakeholders and

¹ Prepared by Maggie Jones for the New England Environmental Finance Center’s “Next Communities Initiative,” Richard Barringer, ed., Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine, Portland, May 2006. Copyright © 2006 Muskie School of Public Service.

residents. The first phase of the project, involving realignment of Route 116, is now underway.

Atkins Corner. Atkins Corner is a cluster of parcels in the southwest corner of Amherst. To the south are the Holyoke Range, a group of low, picturesque mountains and, beyond, the towns of South Hadley and Holyoke. To the north is the town center of Amherst, a typical New England village with a green flanked on either side by the Greek-revival buildings of Amherst College. To the west are the towns of Hadley and, beyond, Northampton, the largest town in the area and home to Smith College. To the east are Belchertown and an area of small settlements and farmland between Amherst and the giant Quabbin Reservoir.

Atkins Corner is the common name for the intersection of Route 116 and Bay Road, where the Atkins Farm Market sits. In character, the area appears to be rural farmland, with apple orchards, fields, and stands of trees visible from all approaches. Much of the area contains wetlands, including streams and grass channels that enter the Sweet Alice Brook system. Most local residents think of the area as rural and undeveloped; in reality, it is developing quickly, in typical suburban fashion. Many different uses have sprung up, unrelated to one another and separated by pieces of open space. There are a few single dwellings on large parcels. Applewood, a retirement/assisted living complex to the west, is a monolithic, multi-unit building. Without serious planning by the citizens and the Town, this pattern of random development is likely to continue.

For years the intersection of Route 116 and Bay Road has been a source of concern to the residents and town officials of Amherst. Niels LaCour, Amherst's senior town planner, considers the intersection the key to change in the area. Route 116 and Bay Road meet in a double-Y that has been the scene of many traffic accidents due to a combination of poor sightlines, high speeds, and traffic into and out of the Atkins Farm Market. Route 116 is the busier road, an important corridor from the south into the area that contains Hampshire College, Amherst College, and the University of Massachusetts. Bay Road incurs heavier use as more people move into Belchertown to the southeast. Toward the west, Bay Road becomes access to Interstate 91 and the city of Northampton.

A study performed by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission in 1997 concluded that traffic flow at the intersection met the criteria for installation of a traffic signal. This came not as happy news to residents of the area, who did not wish to see the rural character of their neighborhood disrupted. Since that study, the strategy for the intersection has been to realign Route 116 in a way that would address existing problems and calm traffic.



Atkins Corner, looking southwest: Atkins Farm market, center, Hampshire College, lower right

Two Landowners. Much of the land around Atkins Corner is owned by Hampshire College. It includes land under visual easement to the Yiddish Book Center and surrounding the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art. The parcel studied for village development in Atkins Corner is one owned by Hampshire College, lying between the Atkins Farm Market and Applewood.

Hampshire College's main campus lies to the north and northeast of the corner. The college is the most-recently incorporated of the three institutions of higher learning in Amherst, having admitted its first students in 1970. The concept of the college was

developed in the 1950s and 60s by the presidents of the other colleges in the area, to provide a hands-on, alternative learning environment for students who wanted a different experience from traditional higher education. The college's mission statement includes the following: "Education at Hampshire College prepares students to understand and participate responsibly in a complex world. Through its actions and policies, the College sets an example of the responsible and creative behavior it expects of its students."

Hampshire College's commitment to responsible use of its land was a critical factor in the development of the Atkins Corner plan, according to Larry Archey, director of campus planning and support services. Amherst planner LaCour observes that Hampshire College is "land rich, endowment poor," requiring the college occasionally to generate income from its land holdings. The college has shown a willingness to spin off some of its land for uses compatible with its philosophy.

Atkins Farm Market owns a second parcel that would be affected by the realignment of Route 116. The market has been in existence in one form or another since the late 1960s. At present, it may see 10,000 to 12,000 customers on a given day, creating a heavy burden of turning traffic at the intersection. A major incentive for the market to cooperate on road realignment is the fact that Route 116 separates its land into two parcels, so that any further expansion of the market under current conditions would require customers to cross Route 116, a possibly dangerous undertaking.



Atkins Farm Market, showing the exit onto Rte. 116

Amherst. Amherst continues in the New England tradition of town meeting governance, a board of selectmen, and a variety of committees and boards. The permanent residents of the town are highly educated and progressive, according to long-term resident and retired college professor, Robert Grose. They are also extremely vocal in town government; Grose describes the typical Town Meeting as “going on for days.”

Amherst has some 35,000 residents, of whom 26,400 are students who may or may not live in the town year-round. While a large part of the student population lives on the UMass campus, there is an ongoing need for off-campus rental housing for students. Moreover, as in other parts of New England, Amherst has experienced a dramatic increase in housing costs and the need for new housing. This has led local people to look to the nearby towns of Belchertown, Holyoke, and Hadley for housing, and created traffic issues such as that at the Atkins Corner intersection. The housing problem is expected soon to become even more critical, with the lifting a hiring freeze at UMass that had been in effect since the 1990s.

For the most part, Amherst is also extremely pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly, and has an excellent public transportation system. The town center provides easy walking access to amenities such as grocery stores, movie theaters, and restaurants. Hampshire College, on the other hand, is more isolated, with the nearest amenities both limited and more than a mile away. Even with the bus system, there is desire among the staff of Hampshire College to offer their students a place within walking distance for food and entertainment.

Since the 1970s, the town of Amherst, in its comprehensive plan, has described Atkins Corner as a “village center,” even though there has been nothing on the corner that could reasonably be described as a village. Moreover, the current zoning of the area is incompatible with the development of a village center.

Most of the area under study for the village development is zoned as a business district or as low-density residential. If development were to occur under current zoning, it would by default lead to strip development and sprawl. Amherst has experienced such

development in a similarly zoned area in the northwest of town, along University Drive from the University of Massachusetts to Hadley. The area has become unrecognizable in the last 10 years or so, having developed rapidly into strip malls, fast-food restaurants, and gas stations.

First Steps. The initial impetus for developing a village center at Atkins Corner came from Hampshire College's campus planner, Larry Archey. The college began discussions with the Town and Atkins Farm Market in 1997. Following these discussions, senior town planner La Cour set up a working group of representatives from the college, the market, the Town's planning board, and key residents to look at the site and come up with ideas for its development. In fall 1997, the working group met at Applewood, inviting its members and nearby residents to participate. The working group presented some of its ideas, and the community's reaction surprised LaCour. "It was pretty hostile. I was wishing I had a flak jacket on. Problem was, we didn't have any plans for them to *look* at. So the response was, 'Oh no! It's going to change. We don't want it to change!'"

A second meeting took place at which the working group offered more design ideas, particularly focused on road safety. At this meeting, however, they invited the community to participate in a more hands-on fashion. "We said, if we were going to do this, what would you like to see?" according to LaCour. "We had a lot of people working in small groups saying things like, 'I would like a drug store,' and so forth. And while that meeting was still somewhat hostile to change, residents were comforted by the fact that the working group was willing to listen."

At this time, the Town, the college, and the market contracted with the Conway School of Landscape Design for a site assessment of the area and a build-out showing what the area would look like if it were developed under existing zoning. (The contract was partially funded by a grant from the regional planning agency, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission.) The 1998 report gave residents a way to visualize the dramatic, low-density, sprawl-style change that would result at Atkins Corner. In LaCour's opinion, the build-out was a turning point for many people. He began to hear more positive

reaction to planned development after people faced the reality of what could happen at the corner.

In 2001, the Town hired Dodson Associates, Inc., a landscape architecture and planning firm of Ashfield, Mass., to create a development plan for Atkins Corner, with funding from the Livable Communities Grant Program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Dodson Associates saw the project as a possible blueprint for development that could be applied not only at Atkins Corner, but elsewhere in Amherst. In its final report, Dodson Associates states a main objective, “to reach a community consensus around a specific plan, so that the community could visualize the choices and work with the developers and designers to produce a superior and more sustainable result.”

According to Brock Cutting of Dodson Associates, the intent was to keep the community in the planning process at *all* stages. In their experience, there were “a zillion” points of view on how the area should be developed and what uses were acceptable. By the time the Dodson team began work, there was no longer much resistance to development of the area in general, although there were still a few people firmly against it. Most knew development would happen – *how much* would happen, and what *kinds* of uses would be permitted became sources of intense discussion.

The limitations of the site, itself, “pushed the envelope of people’s comfort” with respect to density, according to Cutting. For the area to be attractive to a developer, it would *have* to provide enough building opportunity to afford a fair return on investment. The Town and Dodson Associates had a vision of the site as a southern “gateway” into Amherst, which presumed a certain level of density. According to Cutting, “We wanted something where you knew when you went by, that you had arrived somewhere.”

Community Process. To bring the community into the decision-making process as soon as possible, Dodson Associates set up a series of three public “workshops,” over the course of five months. For these meetings, LaCour made certain specifically to invite the persons who had participated most vocally at earlier meetings.

The first workshop included presentations by the Dodson team on site analysis and various approaches to developing it. Fully a third of the four hour-long meeting was devoted to questions and concerns from community members and stakeholders. The team outlined issues of stormwater management, traffic calming, and building styles that might be acceptable. They asked the public to comment on what places in the region they liked and didn’t like. Amherst’s town center was a high favorite, as were two other areas with a traditional town common. Low on the list was the relatively new Pomeroy section, a sprawling development a mile and a half north of Atkins Corner.

Desired uses for Atkins Corner were identified, including cafés, a bike shop, art studios, a movie theater, bookstores, and a hardware store. Undesired uses were bars, pizza shops, gas stations, fast-food restaurants, and “boutiques.” There was general agreement that fake vernacular buildings were unacceptable, as were buildings higher than three stories. Participants were also vocal in their desire for the inclusion of bike lanes and pedestrian-friendly design elements along the redesigned roads, and for continued and improved bus service.

Two voices of protest continued to sound at this time, one from residents of Applewood and single-family homeowners in the neighborhood. Applewood residents were specifically concerned about their views of the Holyoke range; all were concerned about the nature of the area changing. Some of the working group later took it upon themselves to meet with concerned neighbors separately, to listen to and try to assuage their fears. Robert Grose, a working-group member, held several meetings with the Applewood residents separately.

A second voice of protest came from those concerned about the environmental impact of development. Considering the large amount of conserved wetlands in the area, the Town’s conservation department worried about the impact of stormwater runoff, the impermeable surfacing that would occur on the site, and the impact on protected species

such as the wood turtle. According to Dodson's Cutting, environmental impacts continue to be a concern, and the design team did their best to address these issues in the final design.

The Second Meeting. A month later, Dodson Associates held a day-long design “charette” with members of the public, the working group, and professional consultants who volunteered to provide guidance. The team presented “a wide range of design alternatives for the study parcels . . . Each was accompanied by land-use diagrams, build-out figures with square footage and parking spaces, and an illustrative plan inserted into the GIS photo base of the surrounding area.” Dodson Associates used tracings to overlay the different options and give people excellent visuals of these. Several options for road realignment were included, each affording dense development near Atkins Farm Market with permanent open spaces on parcels of visual or environmental concern.

The second half of the meeting was devoted to small group break-out sessions, with members of the public randomly assigned to teams. Working group members and volunteer professionals were then assigned to answer questions and guide discussion. According to Cutting, assigning people randomly was a key consensus-building strategy. “It keeps people of the same mindset from grouping up, where they can become entrenched. It forces people of different opinions to get to know each other; you’re more likely to work things out with people that way.”

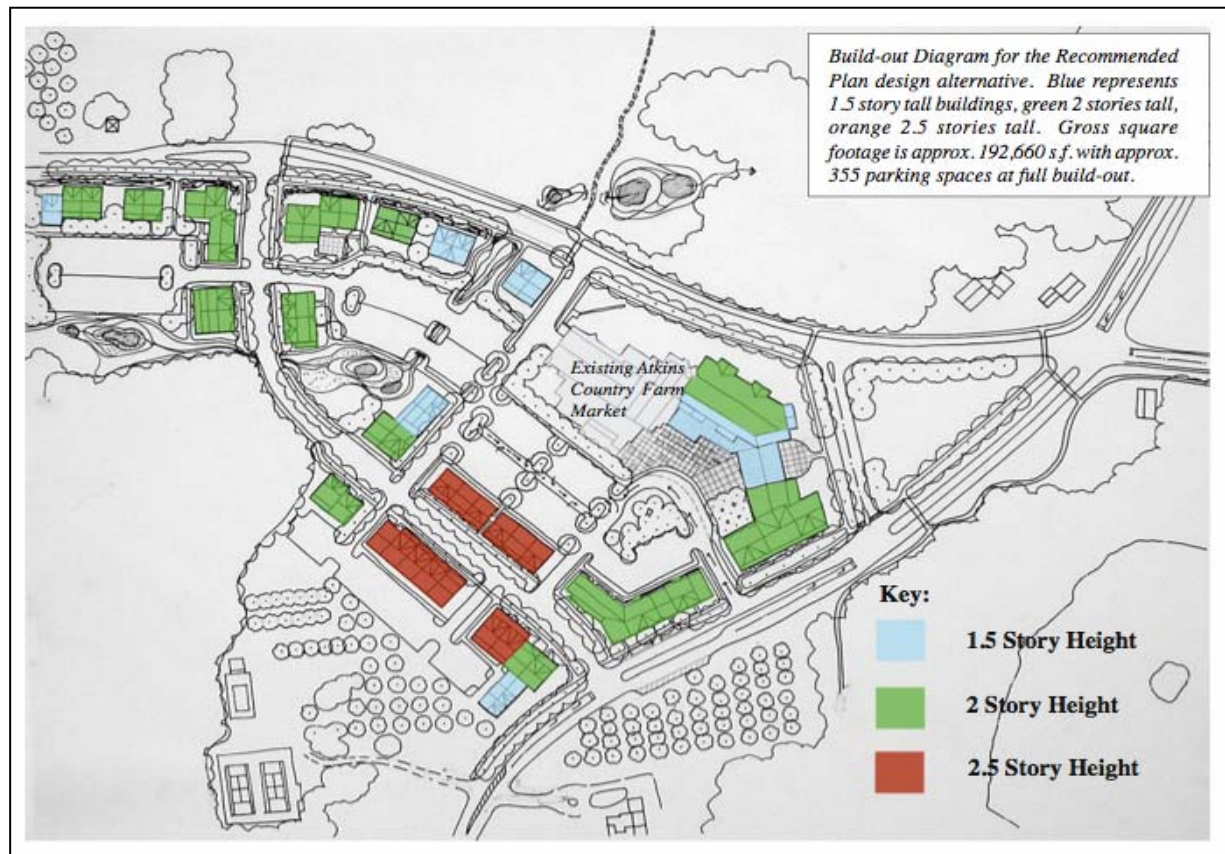
The teams worked on the road realignment options and a “visual preference survey,” in which they examined photographs of building types, neighborhoods, and road features, indicating what they liked and didn’t like. Throughout, Dodson provided aerial photographs and perspective renderings of the site under current conditions and under implementation of a number of design concepts. This, combined with the GIS visuals, build-outs, and tracings, gave people a firm understanding of what change would look like. “Giving people visuals takes them from saying, ‘No! No change!’ to saying, ‘I don’t like this feature, can we change it to this?’ It gets people invested in the work,” according to LaCour.

The Final Meeting and Plan. A last public meeting was held in December 2002, at which the entire team of consultants, led by Dodson Associates, submitted the final plan to the public. Some discussion took place, and, as Cutting and LaCour fondly recall, one of the most firm holdouts against development at the corner stood up to announce, “Initially I was against this, but these guys really *listened* to what we had to say, and I think they’ve come up with a really nice plan. I’d really like to support this, and I’d like to see how many other people support this.” An overwhelming majority raised their hands. “He did something spontaneously that we were dying to do—he took a straw poll, and it was great,” says LaCour.

Dodson Associates prepared a formal report that was available on the Town web site and at the Town Hall for citizen review and input. The final plan created a “compact, pedestrian-friendly development core constructed on traditional building principles.” The design team realigned Route 116 to the east to create a single offset-T intersection with Bay Road, and put a narrow road connecting Route 116 and Bay Road just to the west of the main intersection, to calm traffic and ease access to the market’s parking area. The resulting triangular green at the intersection would give the neighborhood a traditional New England look and a welcoming entrance.

To the west of the intersection, the designers planned a new road from Route 116 to Bay Road, the main street for the new village. One- to three-story buildings would line the street, with parking areas behind the buildings. Interpreting the visual preference survey, the designers indicated in their plan the preferred “look” of the street, with a recommended block length of 50 to 60 feet, heavy tree use, and desired building styles.

The parcel directly to the east of the newly aligned Route 116, including Epstein Pond and some sensitive wetlands, would be permanently protected. As motorists drive along Route 116 from the south, the village would be to their left and the open space surrounding Epstein Pond to their right; the designers felt that this would preserve a bit of the rural feel of the area. With the existing conserved land and visual easements in the area, a significant portion of land will remain permanent open space.



Dodson Associates' recommended plan for Atkins Corner Village (northerly orientation)

The final plan offers many features recognized as smart, sustainable development practices, including:

- climate-friendly design with buildings laid out to block winter wind and take advantage of sunlight, and heavy tree planting to provide shade and cleaner air;
- traffic calming devices such as islands and narrower pavement at strategic points;
- low-impact stormwater runoff strategies such as bio-swales; and
- vernacular architecture with many outdoor spaces such as balconies and porches.

.Events Since the Final Plan of 2002. Because the first step in implementing the Atkins Corner plan was to realign the road, the Town sought money from the Massachusetts Department of Transportation for the road change. In consultation with transportation engineers, the working group changed the plan of the road slightly so that, instead of a triangular green, Route 116 will meet Bay Road in a pair of “roundabouts.” The Town expects to have work begin on relocating utilities by fall 2006.

Meanwhile, the Town hired land-use attorney Joel Russell to develop zoning for the plan at Atkins Corner. In a report, “Action Steps for a Better Amherst,” Russell suggests a new zoning district for the corner, pointing out that zoning is now in use that covers nearly all the desired features of the development plan – namely, the zoning in place for the town center of Amherst. According to La Cour, Russell’s proposed zoning changes have gotten mixed in with the Town’s comprehensive plan, which is still being worked on by the Town’s planning commission. La Cour expects the Town to work on getting the necessary zoning changes in place “over the next couple of years.” But the real issue as La Cour sees it is, “What are Hampshire and Atkins really going to do?” Zoning and planning does what it can within reason; but since sustainable development comes down to what landowners and developers are willing to build, the ball is truly in their court.

Larry Archey, Hampshire College’s director of campus planning and support services, is convinced that the Atkins Corner plan will become a reality, and will look much like the Dodson Associates’ plan. In his opinion, the progressive nature of the town, the environmental orientation of Hampshire College, and the strong foundation of support developed over the previous eight years will bring the Atkins Corner plan to fruition.

Teaching Note:

Important ideas illustrated in the Amherst case include:

1. Be prepared when a window of opportunity opens for system change: the necessity for road realignment and the presence of just two landowners created a unique opportunity;
2. Engage the community throughout the planning and implementation process, including *all* stakeholders;
3. Be resourceful in the search for support for good planning tools and analysis, *as well as* for good planning process;
4. Approach public discourse on planning in the understanding that most people learn visually, not in the abstract but in the concrete: people here specifically responded to the excellent visuals;
5. Have a strategy for dealing with the opponents of change: La Cour specifically invited key nay-sayers to public meetings, and randomly assigned people to discussion groups at public meetings to avoid entrenchment;
6. Cultivate transparency and trust, and practice genuine asking and active listening skills to overcome fear;
7. Leadership matters: only vision, skill, dedication, and persistence on the part of both the Town planning office and a self-interested local institution and private landowner made change possible;
8. Significant change on the landscape takes time: as we say in Maine, “If you’re a mile into the woods and you find yourself lost, you’re probably going to be at least a mile getting out.”