

BERKSHIRE PLANNING TOOLS



One in a series of “toolbox” items to accompany the Regional Plan for the Berkshires

June 2001

Preserving and Reusing Surplus Municipal Facilities

As Time Marches On

Throughout the Commonwealth, cities and towns grapple with remedies to reuse and preserve historically significant publicly owned vacant or underused structures in their community. Whether it is a former school building, fire station, town hall or town community center, cities and towns face difficult choices on how best to retain the structure’s historic integrity and neighborhood’s composition while staying within budget allocations.

In nearly all communities these municipal buildings play a vital role in the past, present and future of cities and towns. These landmarks provide a sense of stability and pride for residents. However, as time marches on it may no longer be feasible to use some of these buildings. Unfortunately, these structures are often the victims of deferred maintenance or seen as white elephants that cannot find a new use.

First Steps

The spectrum of options for a vacant facility includes maintaining or mothballing, demolition and clearing, or reuse. In the case of a public facility, the town must make the decision as to the future of the building based on its regulatory authority related to health, safety and welfare of the community.

Although a building need not be a landmark, not every building can or should be saved. They all have potential costs and benefits which must be considered.



The complete removal or demolition of an old building often leads to the need for new construction. It has been proven that new construction either is not as attractive or in synch with the community character or occurs at a new site, which contributes to sprawl. This can be a waste of money and community resources.

The key to a reuse project is to determine what use is the most appropriate for the site and your community. Each facility and site will present different circumstances and considerations. For example, historic structures may require special considerations particularly in preserving their exterior architectural features and interior design.

Preparatory Steps to Reusing Facilities and Sites

1. Consult with planning board, building inspector, historic commission, selectboard, board of health, etc.
Others: board of assessors, finance committee, conservation commission
2. Determine what the regulatory process allows and determine if the framework needs to be addressed in order to make the project doable and in the best interest of the community.
3. Inventory, investigate and research condition of facility
4. Review options and narrow strategies
5. Determine acceptable and feasible alternatives

Finding Common Reuse Options

Old buildings often allow for multiple uses including public and private, commercial and residential. The texture of older buildings can often be appealing to new occupants as a working and/or living space. Historic buildings can be adapted as office space for service firms that have employees or customers that value a unique setting.

Schools have provided the most common opportunities for reuse in residential centers. If it is not feasible to maintain the original school in an existing building, an alternate educational program is a natural next-best use. Special schools, including private schools, community colleges or adult education programs are frequent users of recycled buildings.

The town of Commack in Suffolk County, New York, was able to sell its Carol High School to the New York Institute of Technology for use as a new campus. The transition included an agreement to award scholarships to Commack students.

In another example, Salt Lake City found that a major utility, the Mountain Bell Telephone Company, was able to use an elementary school for its training center. The fact that a private entity could support the renovation of a community building rather than building new supports the argument that older buildings can still have a useful purpose.

Surplus school buildings often are successfully converted into housing for the elderly. The residential location of school buildings, many times in close proximity to developed areas, makes them particularly well suited for this type of adaptation.

Popular Transitions:

School to Live/work situations
School to Assisted living for seniors
Institutional to Residential
Institutional to Private Offices or
Conference/meeting center

Popular New Uses Include:

Assisted living or senior housing
Apartments or condominiums
Senior center
Community center
Conference center or meeting rooms
Office space for municipal departments
Administrative offices
Day-care center
Recreation center
Special educational or institutional use
Church use
Dance school

Moving the Project Forward

For surplus public properties an asset is often offered first to public, quasi-public and institutional sector. Donation to non-profit organizations is common – often with the approval of the neighborhood and dedicated to its well-being. A community must follow proper

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bidding laws when divesting or leasing municipal facilities.

If a historical property is to be turned over, sale with deed restrictions should be employed to protect it from demolition and commonly to protect the exterior from architectural changes. Historical structures in historic districts require scrutiny from the local Historic Commission. Detailed information on options can be obtained from the Nation Trust for Historic Preservation.

Depending on the project, a community may either use public and/or private funds to renovate a site and then lease or sell the site or sell the site outright with a deed restriction. Public subsidies such as block grants or project financing from the Massachusetts Housing Finance Authority have often been utilized contingent upon serving at least a segment of special needs populations such as senior or low and moderate income. In some ways these sources are often the best as they bring more state resources to bear than the market would. Tax incentives can also serve the private developer when renovating a historic structure.

Issues to Deal With

According to the Secretary of the Interior, historic rehabilitation is “the act or process of returning a property to a state of utility through repair or alteration which makes possible an efficient contemporary use while preserving those portions or features of the property which are significant to its historical, architectural, and cultural values.”

As such there are many issues to be aware of in considering the reuse, renovation, or rehabilitation of older buildings. A primary task is to consider which reuse possibilities are appropriate for the structure and the location.

A reuse implies a change of use. Many communities choose to address basic issues dealing with public safety, health, and the environment related to changing uses through

their site plan review process. Generally factors considered in a reuse review process may include:

- ❖ Adequacy of access to the site
- ❖ Provision for access into and out of the site
- ❖ Layout of parking
- ❖ Stormwater management
- ❖ Handicapped accessibility
- ❖ The protection of historic and archaeological resources
- ❖ Other environmental and infrastructure service factors



Pomeroy School reuse project Pittsfield, MA

It is clear that a community should have provisions in their zoning to allow for reuse and a guarantee that the community retain some control and guidance over reuse to safeguard the neighborhood, the environment and the community.

“Zoning and building code(s) can help or hinder the feasibility of a potential adaptive use project. In other situations, local bylaws can provide a tremendous advantage for adapting an existing building rather than constructing a new one.”

The regulatory process of reviewing and approving a positive reuse should probably not be all that different from that for a completely new use – except that many new uses are simply not allowed in the same area that an existing facility will need to be kept productive. While

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an existing building that has been “grandfathered” can generally use existing setback standards, a reuse can be strongly conditioned.

If prevailing zoning allows a new use “by right,” reusing the existing building is almost always quicker and cheaper than new construction and avoids the risks inherent in obtaining public approval.

In addition to the above factors, communities often wish to assure that a proposed nonresidential development will be a “good neighbor” and will minimize its impact on neighboring properties. This may involve consideration of the following factors:

- ❖ Buffering and screening
- ❖ Noise levels
- ❖ Odors
- ❖ Vibrations
- ❖ Exterior lighting

If the scale of an existing building and its ancillary development is out of proportion with the site or otherwise lacking, it is certainly within the realm of a regulatory body to require a softening of objectionable impacts as would be required of a new development.

Some communities choose to review how a proposed development fits into the environment and the character of the surrounding neighborhood by considering the following:

- ❖ Landscape design
- ❖ Site utilization and scenic impact
- ❖ Compatibility with neighboring properties
- ❖ Architectural features
- ❖ Relationship of buildings to the street and/or adjacent structures

A public review process can help to determine what factors are of concern to the neighborhood and the community.

Building Reuse Projects

Dalton

Nessacus High School	Assisted Living Facility
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Lenox

Cameron School	Assisted Living Facility
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Lexington

Hancock School	18 Condos
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Newburyport

Currier Elementary	Medical Offices
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Northampton

Vernon Street School	Day Care Center
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Westfield

Asley Street School	Town Offices
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Pittsfield

Park Place	Condominiums
Dartmouth Square	Market rental housing
Hibbard	Alternative School and School Supply Warehouse

This publication is one in a series of “toolbox” items to support the Regional Plan for the Berkshires. If you would like to receive additional copies of this or other toolbox items, please contact the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, 33 Dunham Mall, Pittsfield, MA 01201 or call (413) 442-1521. Copies of the toolbox items are also available on the web. Visit www.berkshireplanning.org

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