



Branchville

Transit Oriented Development Plan Charrette and Survey Outcomes

10/30/15



About the Branchville TOD Plan

The Town of Ridgefield is currently working with the Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG, formerly Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials) to develop a Transit Oriented Development Plan for the Branchville Station Area.

Eighty percent of the project is funded by the Federal Surface Transportation Program with the balance provided by the Region (WestCOG) and the Town of Ridgefield. This project is aligned with the State's goal of encouraging development in station areas so as to maximize value of transit improvements and support local economic development. This plan will build upon previous planning for the area including the Route 7 Corridor Study and the Connecticut Department of Transportation's Danbury Branch Line Study.

The goal of this effort is to identify measures that the Town and Region can take to encourage pedestrian and transit friendly development in the Branchville Station area. The Town seeks to ensure that future development will provide an environment that is supportive of local residents, property owners, businesses, and commuters.

Fitzgerald & Halliday Inc., of Hartford is the lead consultant on this project and is working closely with local stakeholders, the Town, Region, and the Connecticut Department of Transportation.

The Branchville Study Area

The study area for this plan is within a half-mile radius of Branchville Station, with most of the efforts being focused within Ridgefield and areas in close proximity of the station.

What is TOD?

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) includes a mixture of housing, office, retail and/or other amenities integrated into a walkable neighborhood that is located within a half-mile of a transit station. Successful TOD provides people with convenient, affordable and active lifestyles.

Why TOD?

- Reduced household driving and thus lowered regional congestion, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions
- Walkable communities that accommodate more healthy and active lifestyles
- Increased transit ridership and fare revenue
- Improved property values within the TOD area
- Improved access to jobs and economic opportunities
- Expanded mobility choices that reduce dependence on the automobile and reduce transportation costs
- Greater housing choice

The TOD Planning Process

The TOD Plan is an eighteen month process that began in Summer of 2015 and is anticipated to be completed by December of 2016. The plan has many components including:

TOD Task Force: The task force acts as a steering committee that guides the process. The task force includes representatives from the Town of Ridgefield, Town of Redding, Western Connecticut Council of Governments, and the Connecticut Department of Transportation as well as Branchville residents, property owners, and business owners.

The Public Charrette and Survey: The public charrette and survey are key instruments for engaging the public and ensuring that the plan is sensitive to local concerns and interests.

Comprehensive Review of Existing Conditions

- Land use
- Zoning
- Environmental constraints
- Wastewater infrastructure
- Market analysis
- Historic resources inventory
- Parking analysis
- Transportation system analysis

Production of Development Scenarios: Areas within the station area will be considered for development or redevelopment. This will assist in guiding future development and establishing what type of zoning changes and infrastructure enhancements would be required to support that development.

An Integrated Mobility Plan: Transportation system improvements that serve all users (pedestrian, bicycle, transit, and auto) will be recommended.

Wastewater and Stormwater Management Plan: A strategy will be developed to accommodate wastewater and stormwater associated with future development.

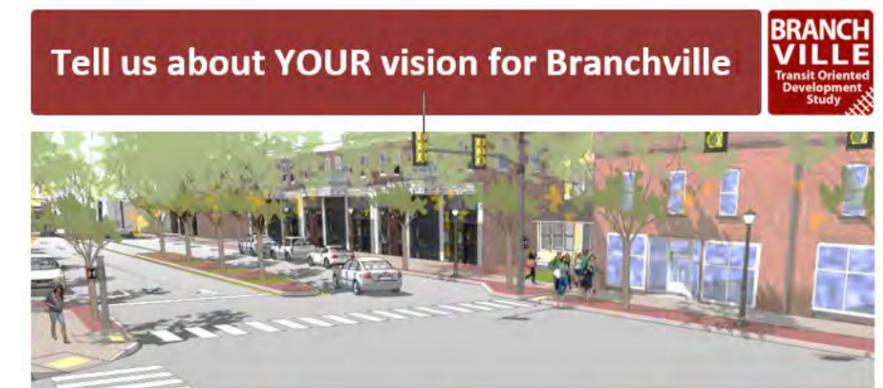
Zoning Recommendations and Design Guidelines: Zoning recommendations and design guidelines will be provided to the Town for consideration of adoption. These recommendations and guidelines are intended to foster the type of development preferred by the community.

Implementation Strategy: An implementation strategy will be provided to the Town that identifies a step by step process for implementing the improvements identified in the plan.

The TOD Charrette

Public involvement is a key component of the planning process. As such, a three-day "charrette" was held from Wednesday, September 16th to Friday, September 18th. The charrette featured an evening public workshop, focus group meetings, open house sessions, and a public presentation of the charrette findings. All charrette functions were held at the Ridgefield Library.

The charrette was promoted via direct mailings to all residents and property owners in Ridgefield, Redding, and Wilton within a half mile of Branchville Station. Additionally, press releases were sent to, and notices posted in, the Ridgefield Press, Hamlet Hub, and Ridgefield Patch. Flyers were also posted at the Ridgefield Library and at the train station. The charrette was also promoted by email invitation and distribution to various groups.



How? Go online and take a survey! The survey is available until September 18th at: www.surveymonkey.com/r/branchville

What else can I do? Attend the Workshop

When? Wednesday, September 16th at 6:30 pm

Where? Ridgefield Library, Main Function Room

Why? To share your thoughts for improvements needed in the Branchville area and what type of development the Town should consider for the future of Branchville.

Who? Fitzgerald and Halliday Inc. of Hartford, a transportation planning firm, will conduct the workshop in coordination with the Town of Ridgefield and the Western Connecticut Council of Governments.

The Workshop is part of a three-day "charrette" with the following schedule. All functions are located at the Ridgefield Library.

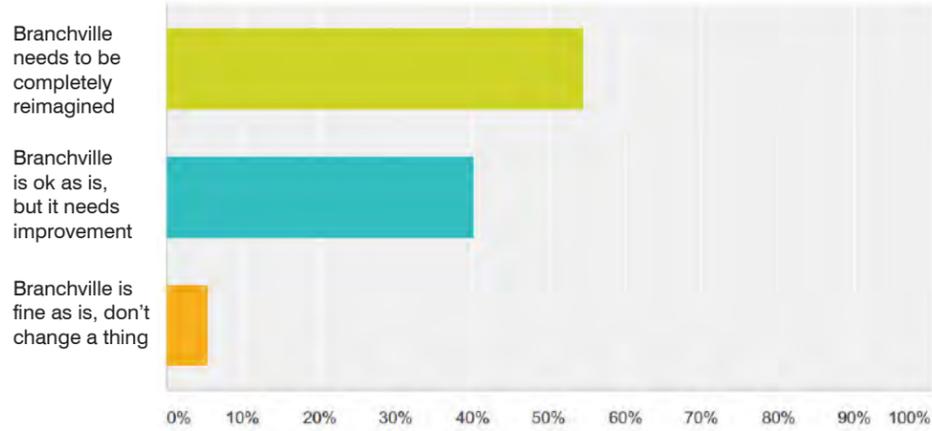


Flyer distributed promoting the charrette and online survey

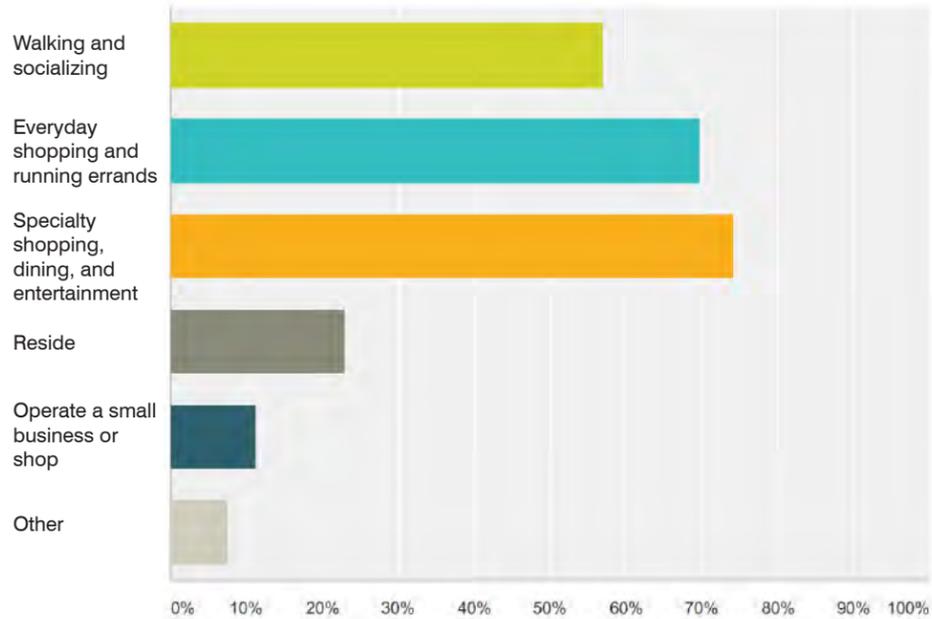
Online Survey Results

An online survey, conducted via Survey Monkey, was made available four weeks prior to the charrette and was held open throughout the duration of the charrette. Almost 300 responses were received from residents and stakeholders in the area. The most relevant survey results are presented here.

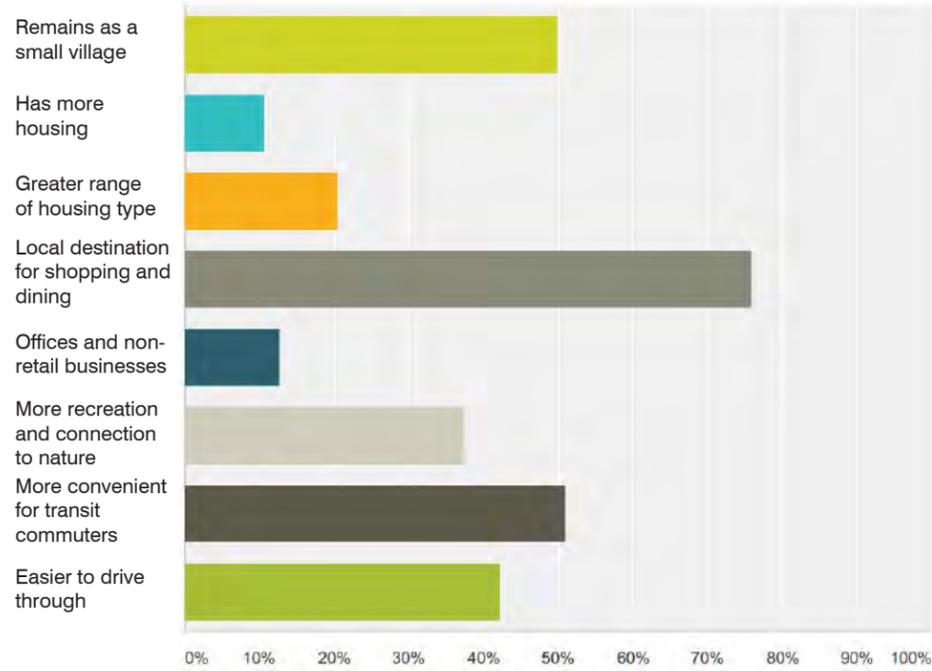
Please select the statement below that best corresponds to your thoughts about Branchville



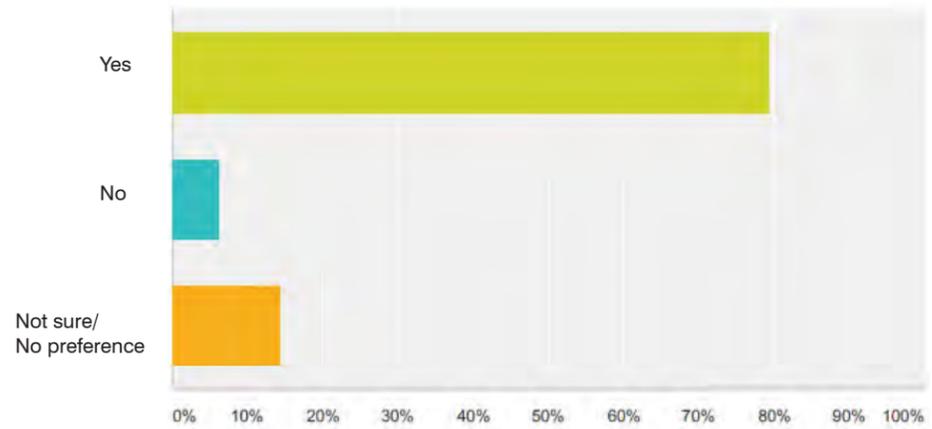
Which of the following best describes what you see yourself doing in Branchville?



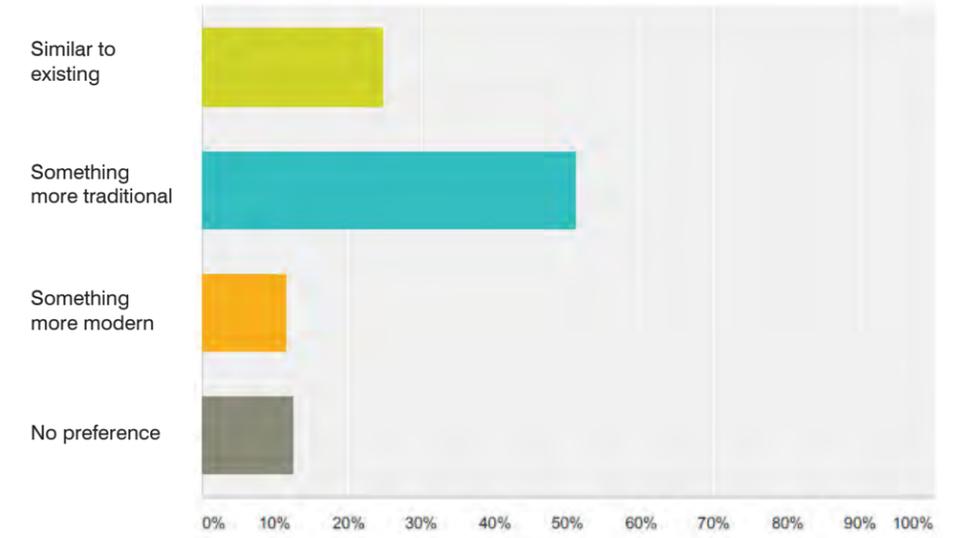
What is your vision for Branchville?



Would you like to see more bicycle and pedestrians amenities in Branchville?



What style of building do you think would be most appropriate?



Preferred Building Heights



Preferred Storefront Types



Sample Survey Comments

I would love to be able to walk safely to and from the Branchville train station. I live off of Branchville Road, at Cooper Hill, and tried to walk home once and was terrified walking on Branchville Road.

I would love to see Branchville morph into a smaller Ridgefield. As a young married couple, my husband and I want to have places to walk when we have children in the future.

Looking forward to what the future holds for that area. I hope it remains the charming, New England feel that belongs there!!

No Strip Malls!!!

Ridgefield and Branchville need better, more upscale shopping and dining. All of this is available in New Canaan and Westport and our residents should be able to spend those \$ in their own town.

Please do not overbuild and commercialize Branchville. Please keep it truly quaint. Street parking will add to congestion and traffic.

I don't think the taxpayers should be paying for these improvements. Shouldn't the real estate investors be doing all this?

Whatever the plan it should maintain a quaint New England look.

VERY EXCITED ABOUT WHAT BRANCHVILLE CAN BECOME!

I would hope you don't do anything that would harm the Norwalk River.

Please include a bike trail, more walking and apartments or condos near the train station and a lot more parking for the train

This area of Ridgefield is, in my opinion, and underutilized resource. With better train scheduling into NYC and more thoughtfully planned out pedestrian/commuter neighborhood surrounding it, this could bring vibrancy and revenue to our town.

I'm excited to see how Branchville can be shaped into a transit-oriented mixed-use neighborhood hamlet with a diversity of retail, office and residential development that complements Ridgefield's current development pattern. It is the perfect place for Ridgefield to grow and from a sustainability perspective, makes sense.

IT'S A HIDDEN GEM THAT NEEDS TO BE REVITALIZED.

We would love love love to have a easier to navigate and cohesive Branchville. It would be great if the new Branchville would reflect Ridgefield's beautiful wooded surrounding. We envision a low key location that isn't built up with Condos or apartments. So excited for this project!

Look towards Blueback Square in West Hartford and the new Town Center in Storrs for excellent examples of what is possible if you decide that breaking all the traditional zoning rules is possible. Density and diversity are the key ingredients, that and getting rid of the surface parking.

As a gateway to the town, Branchville should have a unifying vision that is welcoming and affords easy access to the train. We have a very successful restaurant at which it is impossible to park and often requires playing chicken with traffic to cross the road from available parking.

I envision a quaint walkable downtown area with cafes, small restaurants, and shops with outdoor seating/space. It would be nice if the train was more frequent/convenient. Cafes/Shops/things to do Near the train station would make it more appealing for commuters. No big chain restaurants or cooperations. we live within walking distance from the train station but we rarely walk down there because its not that easy/safe to navigate by foot. Crossing the street is terrifying.

I would like to see Branchville more accessible to bicycles. One way: Allow bicycles on the Ridgefield rail trail (the only rail trail in the WORLD that bans bicycles, I suspect). One also has to deal with the problem of crossing Route 7, and how many lanes it should be. There are also issues of cooperation among towns that make up Georgetown, and the utilities, like sewer, that Georgetown may be able to provide. But Branchville/Georgetown would be a nice, rail-commuter-oriented village.

Workshop

A public workshop was conducted on the evening of September 16th and was attended by more than sixty stakeholders including residents, property owners, business owners, and town officials. The workshop was a key feature of the three-day charrette and was held at the Ridgefield Library.



The workshop was comprised of a presentation about the project and study area and included an interactive visual preference survey. The survey was followed by a break-out session comprised of several groups of four to eight people. Each group conducted an exercise discussing and noting Strengths, Issues, and Ideas for Branchville. Each discussion was documented on study area maps and flip charts. Upon completion of the exercise, each group reported back on their discussion. An overwhelming proportion of participants were in favor of improvements in the Branchville area. The key findings are listed at right.

Note: A small contingency (3 to 4 individuals) was opposed to any changes in Branchville and rejected the concept of any improvements to the local infrastructure or station area. The ideas put forward by that group, which were generally limited to “don’t do anything” are not included in the list at right.

Strengths

- Mom and pop shops such as Whistle Stop Cafe
- Small and quaint
- Family oriented
- Nice variety of business, retail, residential
- Train station (service)
- Basic services
- Ball park (but not public)
- Branchville School
- Proximity to Georgetown
- Norwalk River

Issues

- No defined plan for Route 7 – risk to business
- Traffic congestion and speeds
- Traffic safety issues at Route 7/102
- Floodplain
- Reliability of train/bus schedule
- Potential to detract from Ridgefield Center
- Not pedestrian friendly – no sidewalks
- Residents like to support businesses –but is not neighborhood oriented
- Intersection and crossings dangerous
- Nothing to slow traffic or attract pedestrians
- Poor pedestrian access to station
- Dangerous parking at intersection
- No sidewalk or shoulder
- Pedestrian bridge to station is closed
- Difficult to walk to school
- Lack of services
- Properties that are eyesores
- No sewer
- Poor lighting
- Inadequate parking

Ideas

- Pedestrian walkways (sidewalks, crossings and ped bridge over river)
- Locate more businesses on Rt. 7
- Provide sewer infrastructure
- Roundabout
- Off-site parking for train
- Make more attractive to Weir Park visitors
- Beautify station; remove auto uses near station
- More mom and pop stores
- More mixed income and affordable housing
- Reimagine the station parking lot
- Parking in the rear, ped lighting and sidewalks on the front for retail
- Pedestrian and bike riverwalk along the river (Norwalk River Valley Trail)
- Housing for young people, teachers, etc.
- Housing along W. Branchville road; townhouses, duplexes, 2 story

- Connect to existing parks and school
- Reimagine ballpark for other recreational uses
- A walkable, village center
- Convert vacant car dealership to retail and parks
- Mixed-use development
- Street level retail and 1 – 2 levels of apartments above or behind street
- Redevelop CVS site
- Connect to rail trail
- Redevelop east side of tracks
- Connect to school
- Parking garage
- Pocket parks
- River access
- Village scale development



Workshop Visual Preference Survey

An interactive visual preference survey was conducted at the workshop. Each participant was given a “clicker” allowing them to vote on various images presented on-screen. The image selection was divided into two categories, architecture and site design. The key results are shown here.

Most Preferred Building and Architecture Images



Least Preferred Building and Architecture Images



Most Preferred Site Design and Landscaping Images



Least Preferred Site Design and Landscaping Image



Focus Group Summaries

Four separate focus group meetings were conducted during the three-day charrette. Attendees included Town staff, commission members, residents, property owners, business owners, and representatives from the Connecticut Department of Transportation and the Housatonic Area Regional Transit. The focus groups were conducted by topic and included the following topics: Transportation, Architecture and Environment, Economic Development, and Housing.



Transportation Focus Group

Key Themes

- There is a need for improved pedestrian access throughout the area.
- The service road option behind businesses was popular, access between businesses was also identified as a need. There is a desire to park once and make multiple trips. Today, you have to get back into your car and drive to get anywhere else in the area.
- The owners of the storage unit company were ok with closing Depot road if the intersection by Portland Ave was improved and the West Branchville curve was widened to allow large trucks to make the turn.
- The Parking Authority Chair expressed interest in maintaining access from Route 7 to the train station via Depot Road even if Depot Road access is closed off to West Branchville Road.
- Traffic calming elements should be considered.
- There is a desire for weekend HART bus service and improved connectivity between the bus and train.

General Discussion

- A representative from the Fire Department emphasized the need for emergency access to West Branchville Road, it is hard to get fire trucks up and down the road now and there are now fire hydrants on the road.
- The Town is actively working to improve the Depot Road intersection at this time, currently the left turn movement onto Depot Road backs up traffic for a mile and a half.
- The use of smartphone traffic apps has caused rerouting of traffic onto residential streets, local residents have been complaining to the town.
- Depot Road could be converted to pedestrian only- if the intersection of Portland Avenue and West Branchville Road is improved. The turning radius would have to be realigned so that the large trucks that access the self storage unit could then use Portland Avenue instead of Depot Road to access the storage units. Gene Nazzaro, owner of the self storage units is open to this type of modification.
- The bridge on Portland Avenue often floods, it is historic and in bad shape. The alignment of the roadway does not allow for the installation of rail crossing gate which is preferred for safety. Additionally, two large vehicles can't travel across the bridge at the same time.
- The relocation of Portland Avenue opposite of Old Town Road would allow for the installation of a traffic signal at that location.
- Metro North is not very dependable, more people would use the train if service was better and more frequent with more direct trains.
- Parking at the train station- there is currently sufficient parking at the station. The Parking Authority oversells permits for the spaces by about 30% and the lot is only about 80% full. There are 15 day parking spaces and 130 commuter permit spaces. In 2008 the lot was completely at capacity, once fees were imposed use dropped off. Commuters now go up to Wilton or Cannondale station when parking is not available at Branchville. Expansion of parking might only be necessary with improved rail service.

- Weir Farm's parking needs were discussed- they currently use the parking at the Branchville School during the weekends. The director of the park said that it would be great to have parking that provides access to Weir Farm while also benefiting Branchville. Branchville could benefit from the 20,000 visitors a year that Weir Farm gets.
- Representatives from HART spoke about their service. Currently, the HART bus operates Monday thru Friday from Danbury to Norwalk and is typically commuter only. The "sweetheart" bus is used for seniors and people with disabilities and also operates Monday- Friday. There is a desire for weekend bus service and better connectivity.
- HART was asked whether there are any considerations for expanding service between Branchville and Downtown Ridgefield. HART responded that density and roadway issues have prohibited this type of service.
- Sidewalks are desired in Branchville, but this is logistically challenging- there are no significant facilities for pedestrians.
- A service road concept was discussed for businesses fronting Route 7, this option might be a good solution for providing access to buildings.

Economic Development Focus Group

Key Themes

- Build residential units in Branchville so as to support local retail and commercial businesses.
- Look for redevelopment opportunities in the area, there are many underutilized properties.
- Collaboration between property owners will be critical to success.

General Discussion

- Development is largely constrained by the lack of sewer facilities in Branchville. The Georgetown facility had previously been discussed as an option, but the facility is currently fully allocated. The little league baseball field was discussed as a potential site for a small in-ground disposal facility.
- There is available frontage along Route 7 that could be redeveloped.
- It is unlikely that there would be the market to support a parking structure.
- Branchville has never been a significant hub into NYC and probably won't be until train service is improved and increased. The area might be more attractive to development if it attracted more commuters to NYC.
- There are many underutilized parcels in Branchville.
- There is an interest in developing a plan that proposes development for areas that are already zoned for commercial development.
- Redevelopment of existing building and businesses such as CVS, Tusk and Cup, and Little Pub, is probably more feasible than new development.
- Branchville has more business activity than it did 5 years ago.
- More collaboration between property owners would help all businesses.
- There is a desire to build residential development first and then develop additional retail and improve infrastructure.
- Development should occur in phases and will really grow organically over time and adapt as Branchville evolves.

- Branchville’s assets are not used to the fullest potential.
- There is a need to identify what can be implemented by the Town versus what would be done by the private sector or the DOT.
- The Town needs businesses and light manufacturing to increase the tax base.
- There is a need to address the flooding issue in Branchville as this is a barrier to development.
- The National Flood Insurance Policy is less stringent on commercial buildings; a mixed use development style with commercial below and residential above may be a good solution for flood prone areas.

Architecture and Environment Focus Group

Key Themes

- The TOD plan presents an opportunity to increase residential units in the area.
- Infrastructure improvements are needed in the station area.
- Preserve key buildings in the area and maintain the character of the place.

General Discussion

- Historic Resources that should be saved include (but are not limited to) the tenement station building along the train tracks, the station building, and the original Ancona’s Market building.
- The Precision Brake Works Building used to be the Grumman Tool Company, and was converted to a gas station in the 1950’s.
- There is a mining history (mica) in Branchville.
- Branchville had a public green, although small, but this was removed when the state realigned Route 7.
- The stone facade building that is home to Branchville Motor Works used to be a gas station.
- Weir Farm would like to encourage visitors from the train station, they are interested in acquiring more parking and getting a pedestrian access route or greenway trail.
- There is a desire to build structures that fit in with the community- modern architecture won’t be well received by the community.
- The current zoning allows for 40’ buildings in the commercial district -this was agreed to be a reasonable scale of building for Branchville.
- The Bissel building in Ridgefield Center was referenced as a good architectural and building use example.
- There is interest in increasing residential units in the study area.

Environmental Factors

- The lack of sewer and flood plains are limiting factors to development.
- There was discussion of construction a “flood bench” to allow water to spread out laterally when flooding events occur, so as to minimize impacts to properties in the flood plain.
- There was discussion of debris in the Norwalk River, State statute allows the Town to clean up the river and then charge the property owners.
- Some properties in the area have contamination issues and/or a history of contamination.

- The Branchville Oil Company property is likely contaminated- used to be a heavy manufacturing company.
- There is a need for various options for sewage treatment
- How feasible would it be to have a Riverwalk? There would be a lot of pushback from the Norwalk River Trust- they are very concerned with the riparian environment along the riverfront. The river presents a significant challenge to the site.

Housing Focus Group

Key Themes

- There is a shortage of moderately priced units, a need for affordable residential units for the elderly and people in their 20’s, town workers, teachers, etc.
- Residential units would help fuel economic development and improve retail business in the area.
- People want to live in an area where they can walk around, go to shops and have access to essential services.

General Discussion

- There is a two year wait-list for affordable 1-2 bedroom units; 3 bedroom units have a seven year wait-list.
- There is a shortage of moderate cost rental housing downtown.
- A surge in food stamps usage in the region is connected to high housing costs.
- 15% of Ridgefield residents fall into that “ALICE” low income level category.
- People with marginal incomes and the elderly who don’t want to drive would benefit from housing near the train station- police, town workers, teachers would all benefit from affordable housing.
- There is a growing population of retirees that want to downsize, but would still like to stay in Ridgefield and take the train into the city for shows and shopping, etc.
- 20 somethings could benefit from a TOD, this area could attract young families looking for rentals and starter homes.
- Condominium units in the area are very expensive- not affordable for most.
- Several property owners on West Branchville road have expressed interest in building residential units on West Branchville Road.
- Question came up about reality of people living so close to the train noise- DOT is working on a new whistle for the at grade crossings that directs noise to just at the crossing area- the noise issue in the future would not be as much of a constraint.
- There is a need for convenient retail in close proximity to the residents- there is a desire for mixed use development with retail below and residents above- no Toll Brothers type development.
- Branchville has a lot of pass-thru businesses that serve commuters- this should be promoted and maintained, the school also generates traffic in the area.

- Discussion of secondary dwelling units came up, there has been a trend of homeowners moving into small accessory units and renting out the larger main houses and ancillary units are permitted by zoning.
- There is no public open space in the area.
- The idea of a land trust was discussed, where people only buy the house, not the land itself.
- New residential housing units would need parking, but standards could be lower than the rest of the Town due to the area’s access to transit.
- There are political barriers to developing affordable housing due to the stigma associated with that housing type.
- Housing needs to be subsidized to truly be affordable.



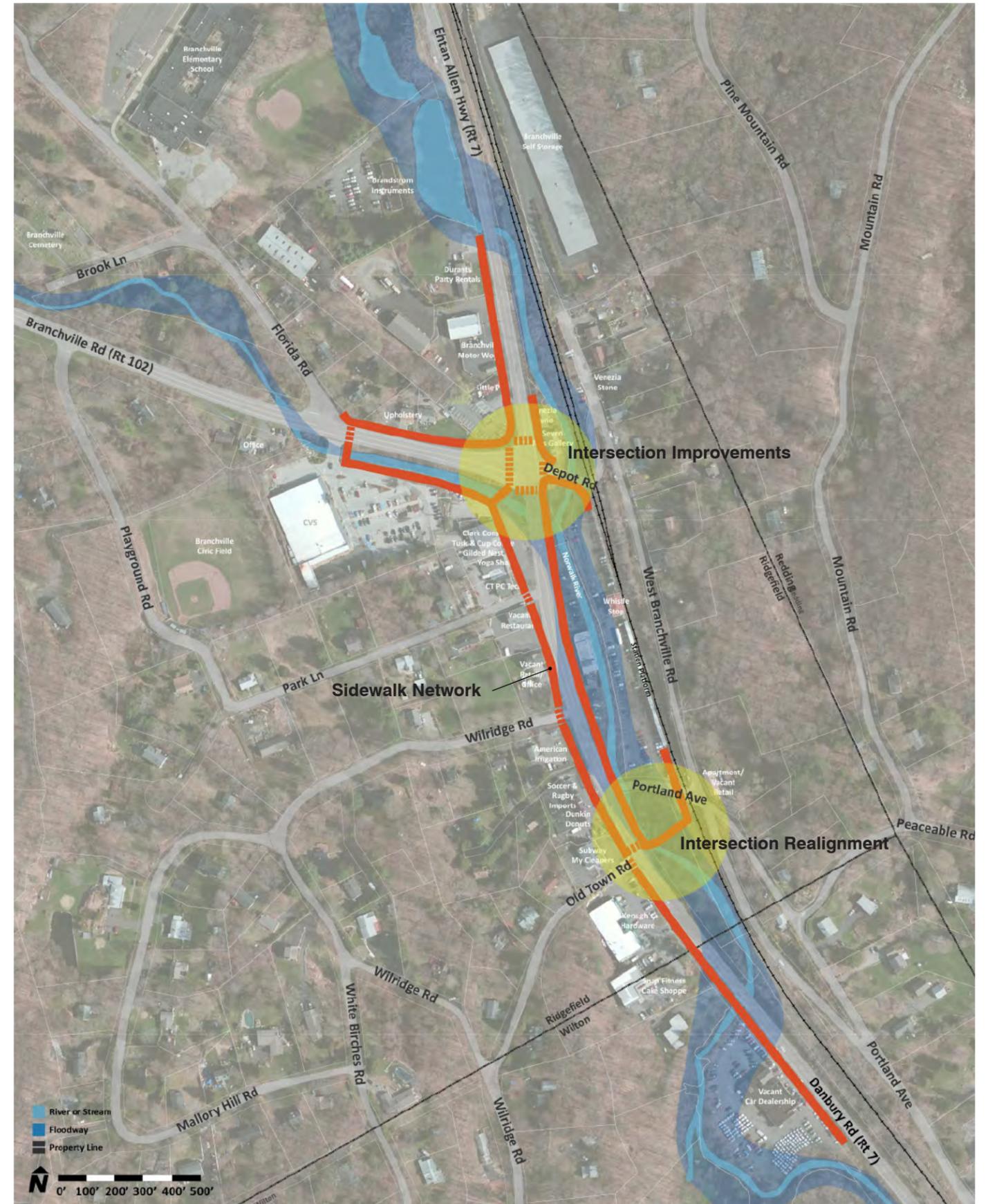
Development Concepts

The development concepts presented on the following pages were produced during the planning charrette and reflect the feedback received, and comments heard, throughout the charrette and survey process. These concepts are preliminary and will need to be tested for environmental, economic, and physical feasibility. All concepts that involve private property assume the willing engagement of property owners in future development.



Concept 1: Pedestrian Enhancements & Intersection Realignment

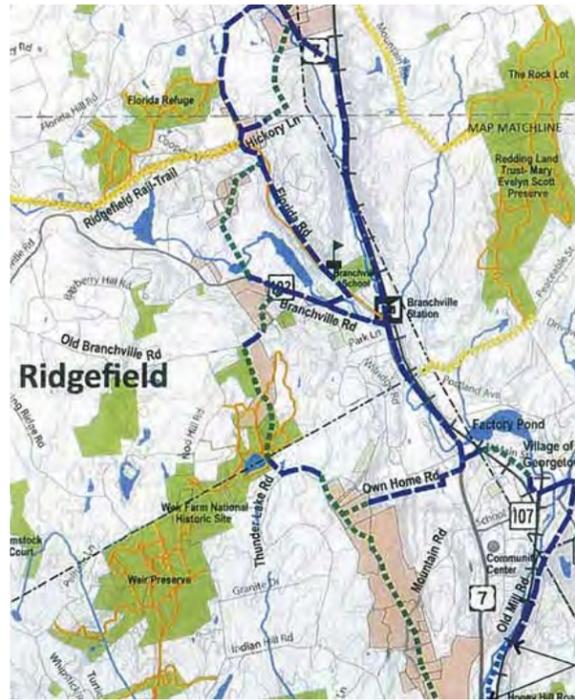
This concept seeks to establish a continuous pedestrian network on both side of Route 7, connecting the existing commercial and retail areas to the train station. This concept also incorporates the Connecticut Department of Transportation's plan for access modifications to the station site which include closing Depot Road, realigning Portland Avenue with Old Town Road, and providing a traffic signal at that location.



Concept 2: Greenway and Riverfront Enhancement

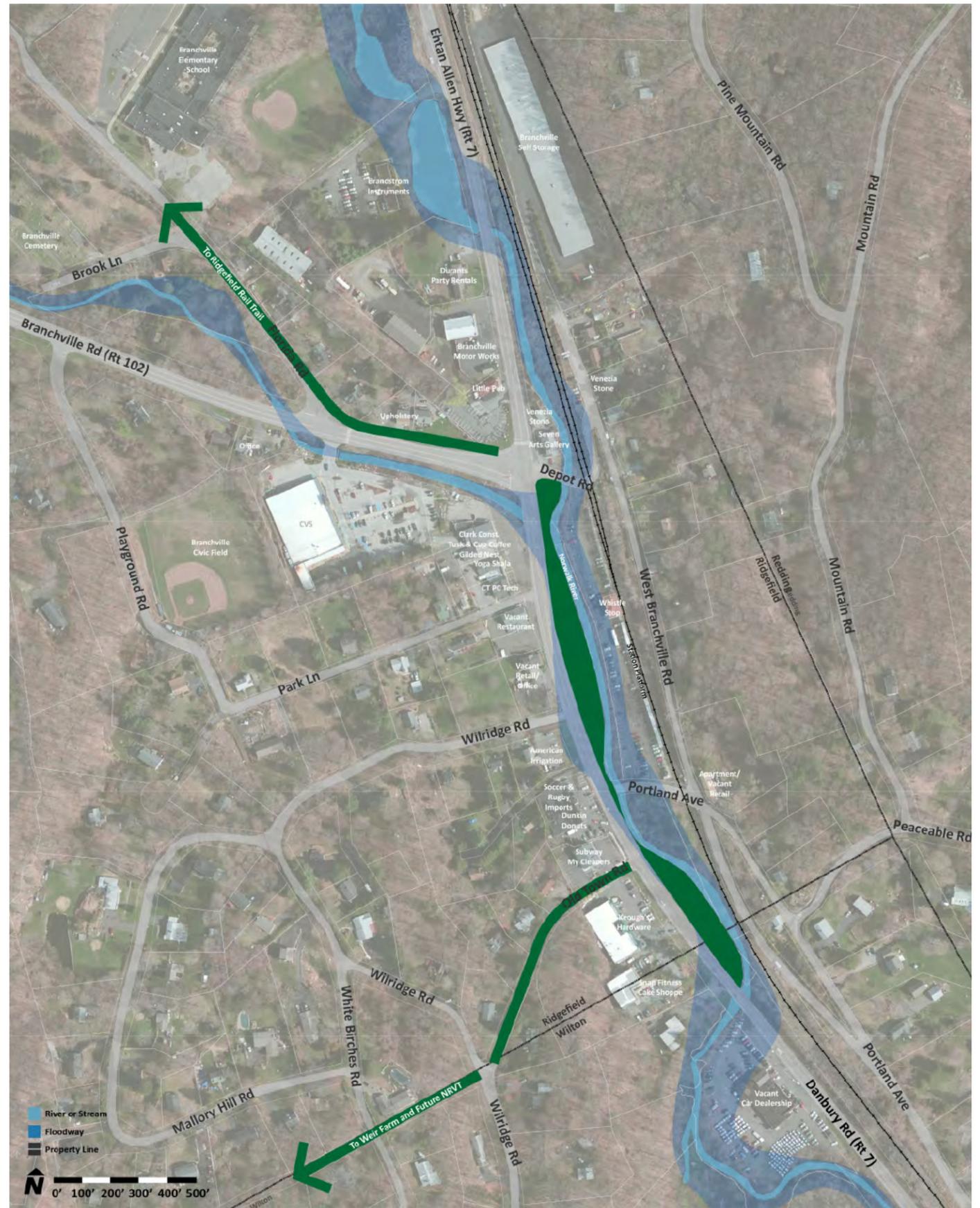
This concept seeks to connect Branchville and the station to Weir Farm, the planned Norwalk River Valley Trail, and the existing Ridgefield Rail Trail. As part of this concept, the Norwalk River riverfront area along Route 7 would be restored as open space, with pathways, landscaped seating areas, and new connections to the train station.

Pathways and/or sidewalks would extend to Florida Road so as to connect to the Ridgefield Rail Trail. A pathway would also extend from Old Town Road where an off-street pathway could potentially lead directly to Weir Farm.



Norwalk River Valley Trail Proposed Routing

Weir Farm (below)



Concept 3: Wastewater Infrastructure

One of the primary constraints to development in Branchville is the lack of sewer infrastructure. There are a number of options available for providing wastewater disposal in Branchville. These include:

- **Option A: Connect to existing facilities**
 1. Ridgefield Center
 2. Route 7/35
 3. The Georgetown facility in Redding (currently 100% allocated)
- **Option B: Dispose of wastewater locally via a community system (package plant)**

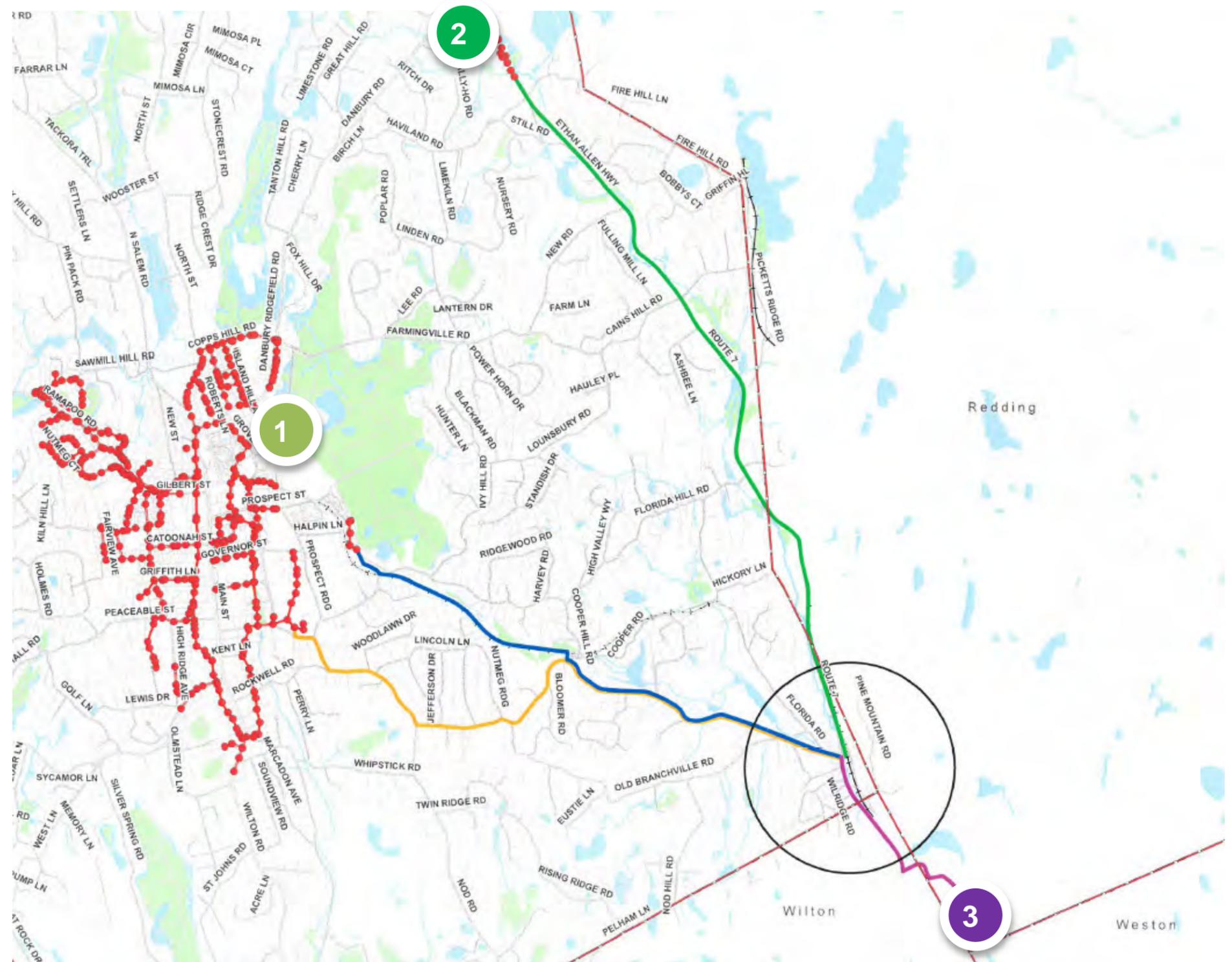
The connection to existing facilities is challenging for a number of reasons including the cost of installing sewer lines over a long distance, limited capacity at existing facilities, and in the case of Georgetown, the requirement for an inter-municipal agreement and the lack of available allocation at that facility.

The “package plant” option may be a promising alternative, but requires further investigation for feasibility and regulatory compliance.



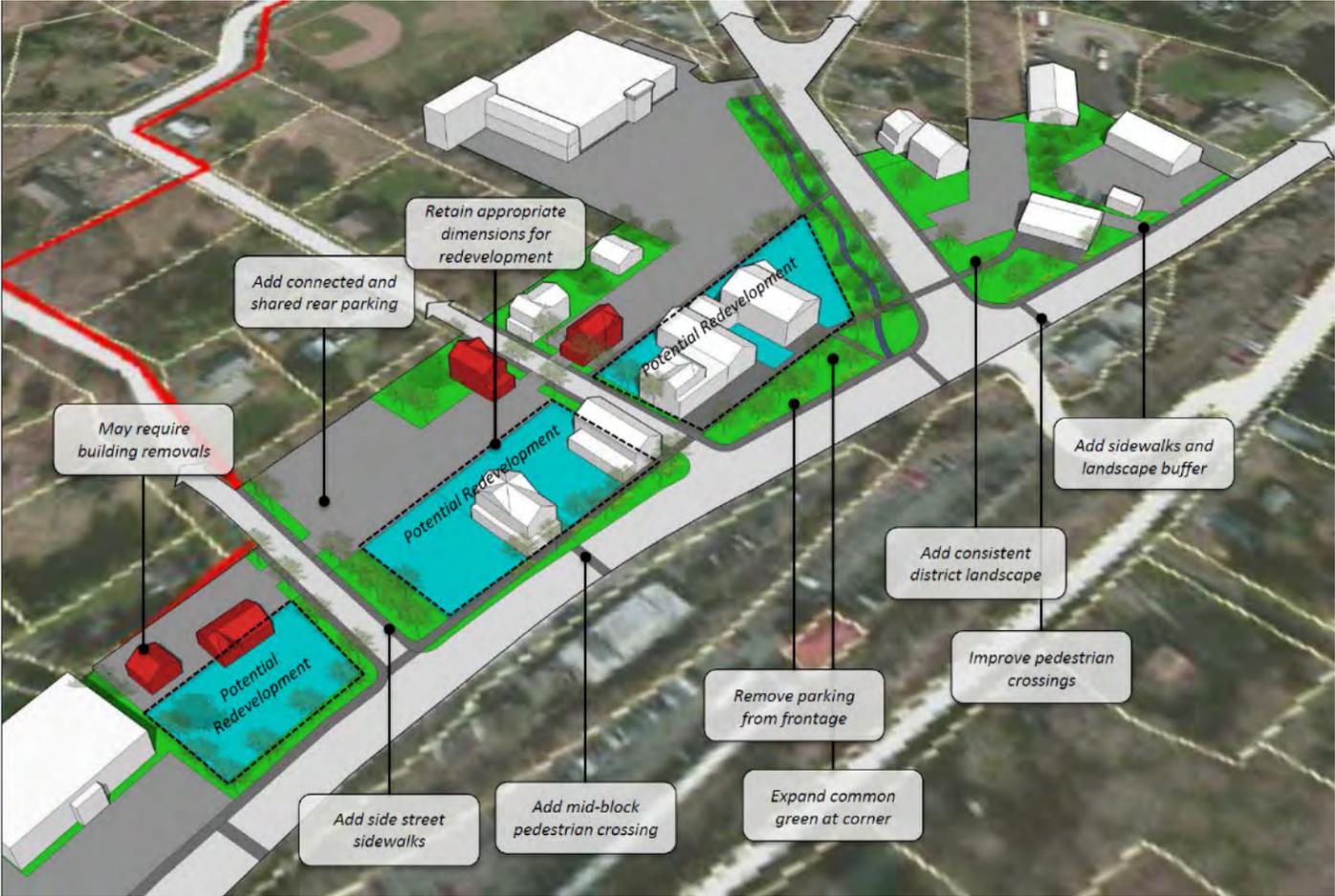
Package Plant Option

Sewer Connection Options



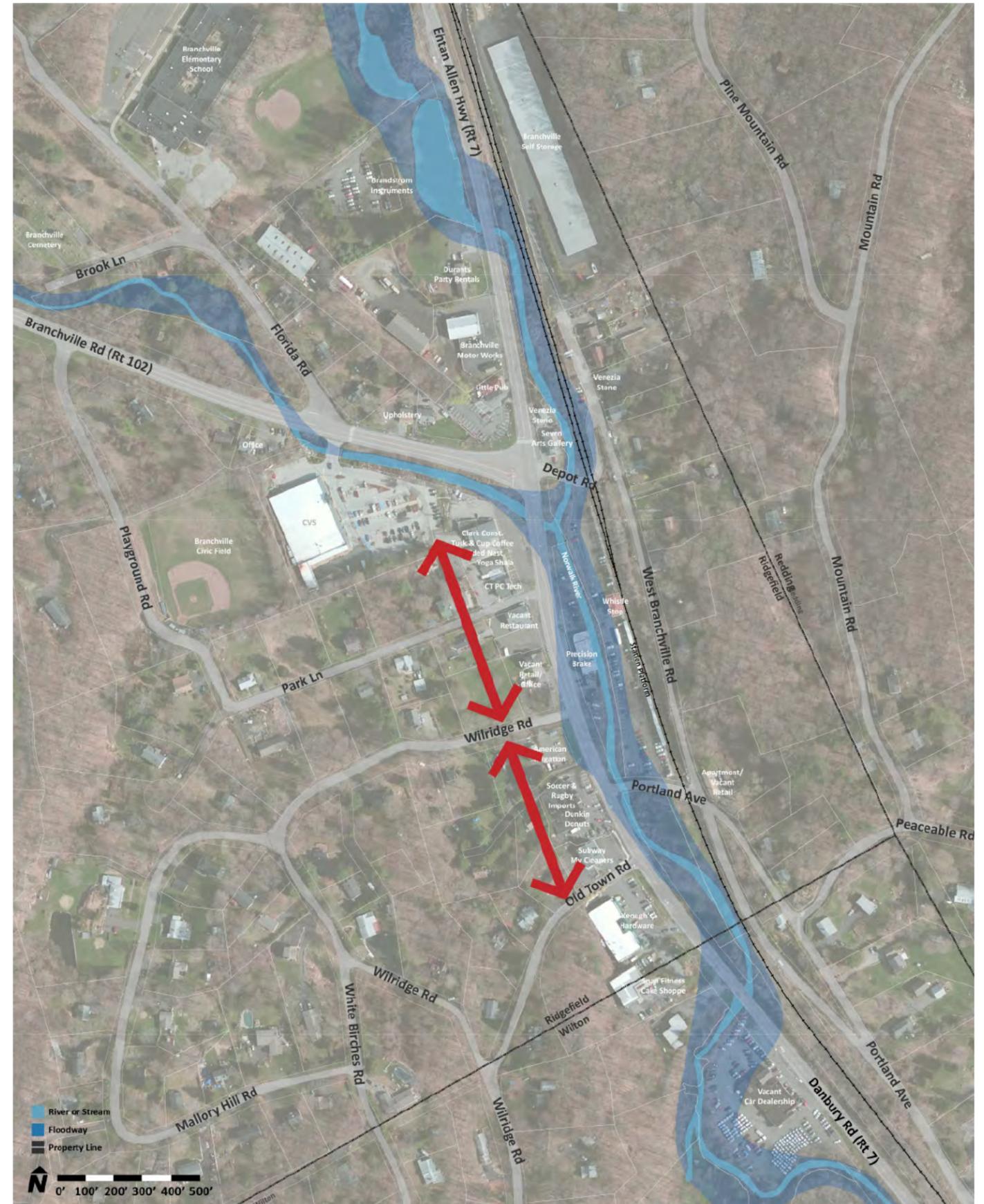
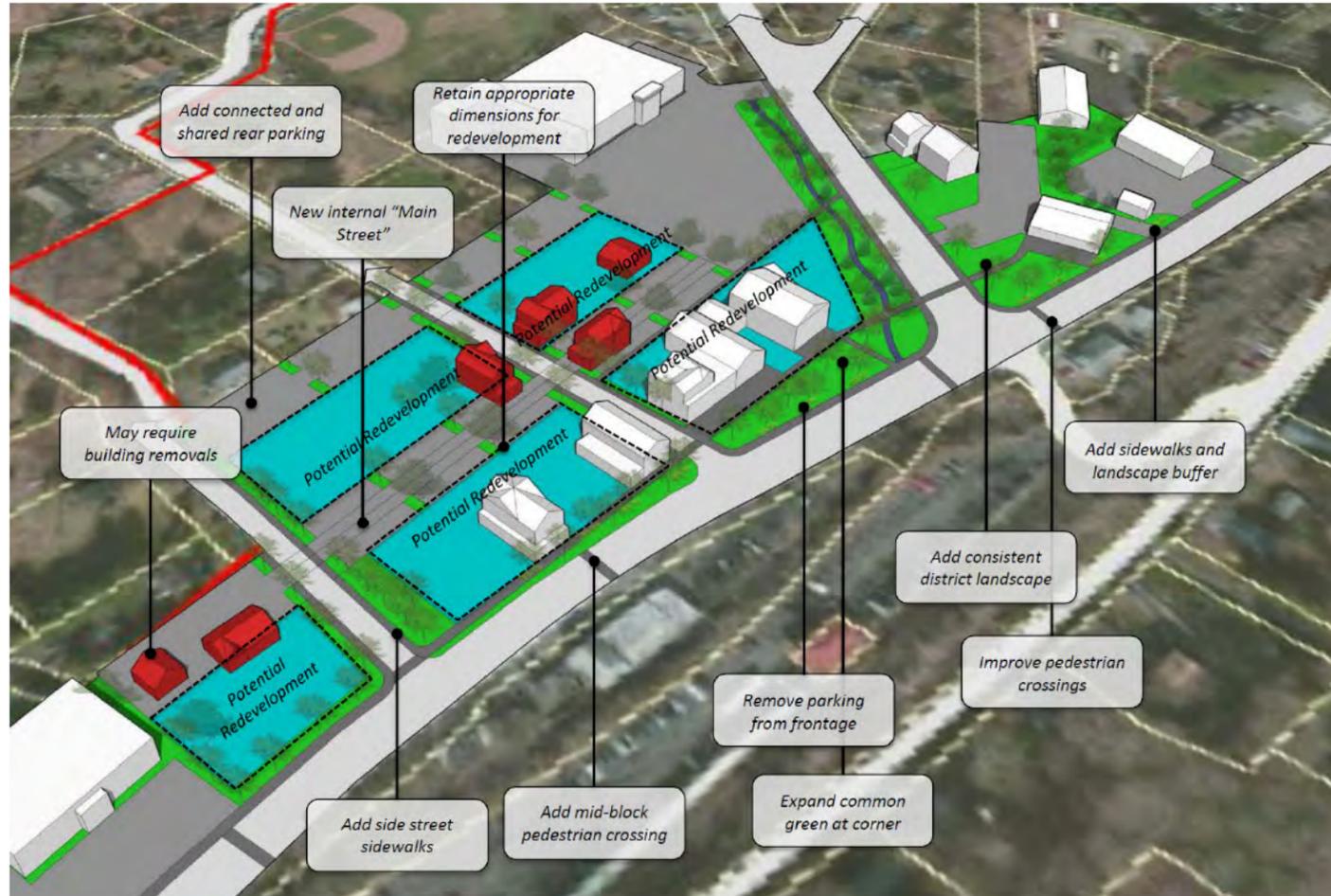
Concept 4: Infill Development & Redevelopment

The infill development and redevelopment option would work with the existing development on the west side of Route 7 to establish a more complete street front and consolidate parking to the rear of buildings. This concept would integrate the sidewalk network concept so as to establish good pedestrian circulation thereby allowing customers to park once and make trips by foot to more than one business. Infill development could be mixed-use in nature with lower level retail or office and upper level residential units.



Concept 5: New “Main Street”

The “Main Street” concept seeks to develop a new pedestrian friendly street west of Route 7. The street would connect the CVS/Ancona’s parking area to Wildridge Road, with the potential for expansion to Old Town Road. Development would occur on both sides of the street with parking provided on-street and in small lots. New development could be mixed-use in nature with lower level retail or office and upper level residential units.



Concept 6: Residential Redevelopment

West Branchville Road holds promise for residential redevelopment and infill development. The area has a low density of housing due to the existing wastewater disposal constraints. The provision of wastewater disposal infrastructure would allow greater housing densities in that area. While the topography is also a development constraint, there are multiple prototypes for hillside residential development that could be introduced to this area.



Example of hillside development

