

Town Office Planning Committee Report

September 8, 2021

Committee Members:

Mary Linehan (Chair), Arthur Hanchett, Bill Risso, Beth Preston, Rebecca Seibel, Morgan Smith

Background

Recognizing a long standing and increasingly urgent deterioration of the current Strafford Town Office physical structure, the Strafford Selectboard initiated a planning project in June 2021, and appointed a Town Office Planning Committee (Committee). Increased demand for town management services during the COVID pandemic highlighted the urgency of addressing the Town Office deficiencies, and the Selectboard anticipated that new funding opportunities might result from the pandemic response. The charge to the Committee follows.

1. Study, update and specify essential requirements and desirable features for the Town Office.
2. Identify and review any already existing plans/estimates dealing with renovation of the current TOS.
3. Review and evaluate potential sites for a new TOS, including town owned sites or sites that may be for sale.
4. Consistent with Open Meeting regulations, publicize all Committee activities. Conduct community meetings seeking high involvement from all interested parties.
5. Identify, explore and rank potential solutions, based on the requirements analysis, which may include renovation of the current TOS, adaptation or modification of another existing facility, or construction of an entirely new TOS. Recommend an option to the Board.

The Committee held meetings during the months of June and July to conduct the plan and undertake the assessment of sites. With the Town Office staff, the physical space in the current Town Office was assessed, to compare it with the space requirements that are needed. This exercise was informed by visits to several new Town Office sites (conducted by Selectboard members and the Town Clerk) and a review of the plans of four other towns undertaking efforts to update their Town Offices.

During July, a number of meetings and individual interviews were conducted to gather information from key informants, including the Listers, frequent users of Town Office facilities, Town Office staff, appointed Town Officers, and members of the community. On July 30, a meeting was held to obtain feedback from the Town's boards and committees. The presentation is included as Appendix D. Additional information from board and committee members was obtained by email and conversations during the month of August.

Committee members conducted site visits and research on 10 Town-owned sites to assess the appropriateness of each site based on agreed upon criteria. Committee members then scored each

site based on their personal knowledge and perspective, including their understanding of the needs and concerns of town residents, and submitted their scores. Scores were tabulated for all submissions, and Committee members discussed areas of disagreement to come closer to agreement on a final score for each site. The purpose of the process was to come to consensus on the ranking of each site, while incorporating the input and views of each individual scorer as well as input from town residents.

Initial Considerations

In early discussions the Committee identified a number of factors that were likely to be the subject of concern, debate or dispute among Strafford residents, which helped to inform the selection of assessment criteria: Specific considerations included:

1. Recognized need for a renovated or new Town Office;
2. Agreement on specific features (e.g., size and necessary functions) of a Town Office structure;
3. Cost to the taxpayers of Strafford, both initial and ongoing commitments and sources of funds;
4. Esthetics, appearance and design;
5. Impact on neighbors, parking, traffic;
6. Anticipated future development in digital records storage and capability for remote access to meetings and services;
7. Impact on, or coordination, with existing Strafford organizations and facilities;
8. Regulatory concerns;
9. Environmental/sustainability considerations;
10. Possible funding opportunities that might allow for inclusion of community center(s) and enhanced emergency response capability; and
11. Location in the Town (Upper vs. Lower Village).

The Committee did its best to consider all of these elements, and to solicit input from a wide range of community members, and incorporate all this information into a rational, neutral analysis of the sites currently owned by the Town that might be appropriate options for at Town Office. Results of the Committee's work is presented below.

Why is the current facility inadequate?

A December 2019 Report Titled “Community Building Restoration Project” presented several alternative plans to repair, renovate, and modernize the existing Town Office building, with an estimated budget of \$400,000. Less expensive and more expensive options had been considered. Significant renovation was planned, including modernization of the electrical infrastructure, insulation, windows and physical repair to major substructures such as the porches and exterior stairs. Repair to rot damage of some of the building was anticipated. But even if these badly needed repairs and maintenance are completed, the current structure is unlikely to serve the Town’s needs. A number of unmet needs have been identified.

Not enough workspace

Based on discussions with office staff, people who access town office services and the Committee’s own experience meeting in the Town Office, it was clear that individual workspaces, meeting rooms and facilities are inadequate. For example:

- During monthly audits, the Town Clerk gives up her desk for the auditor because there is no other available workspace.
- When the Tax collector is working, the Assistant Town Clerk gives up her desk, because there is no other available workspace.
- During annual audits (for 3 weeks) 4-6 people are required to work at the meeting table, which precludes access to a workspace for others who wish to research town records or conduct any other town business.
- When Listers hold meetings, the office must close early so that meetings can be held downstairs.
- When multiple researchers are present, there is not enough working space at the table, and no privacy or quiet space to focus is available.
- The vault, required by law to store town records, is over-crowded and cannot expand as needed.
- There is inadequate file storage for active files, which results in poor document management.
- The bathroom is inadequate and does not meet ADA requirements.
- Kitchen facilities are inadequate; there is no sink, no storage space, and no place to allow basic cleaning, make coffee or store lunches.
- The Lister’s office is overcrowded and does not allow for the Listers to work together in their preferred manner, especially during times of required social distancing.
- There is no storage space for cleaning materials, coat storage, or materials display.

No adequate meeting space for Selectboard to hold public meetings

The need for a reliable, well-equipped and permanent meeting room for the Selectboard and other committees and boards became especially clear during the COVID pandemic. The need to have access to a well-ventilated, heated room of adequate size for at least 12 people, with reliable internet services, permanent audiovisual equipment and access to town records, a printer and photocopier is essential for effective Selectboard meetings. While there are other meeting sites in the Town, none of them are owned by the Town and none of them are suitable for the Selectboard’s needs.

Feedback from individual interviews indicates that participation in public meetings is limited by the physical space and discomforts of the current Town Office.

No dedicated space for Emergency Management Unit

The need for a well-equipped, operational Emergency Management Unit that can start up quickly to meet State and Town requirements also became increasingly clear during the COVID pandemic. A dedicated workspace within the Town Office will be an important priority in the coming years.

Need for improved audio-visual technologies

Feedback from boards and committees primarily focused on the need for improved, reliable remote access meeting technologies. Several boards noted that they hold their meetings at the Morrill Education Center and find it a suitable site. However, it was noted that the limited size of the room does inherently limit public access (a priority for VT open meeting regulations) and that better audiovisual technology, including better access to zoom accounts and some training in use of platforms is needed.

A comparison of existing vs required workspace is presented in Table 1 below. The Committee worked with the Town Clerk to identify town-owned properties to conduct a Rapid Site Analysis. No suitable existing for sale properties were identified.

Sites Considered for Town Office

1. Town Office (Land and Building) *
2. Town Garage Site
3. Fire Station (Upper Village)*
4. Recycling Center *
5. Park & Ride
6. Red Barn
7. Murray Field *
8. Fire Station (Lower Village) *
9. Town-owned property at 442 Rt 132
10. Town-owned property on Blanchard Road

* This site is located in a FEMA designated flood zone or was documented to be flooded during Hurricane Irene.

Table 1. Comparison of Current vs. Required Workspace

Function	Current area Square ft	Proposed area Square ft	Notes
Front Office area	110	225	
Clerk and assistant	110	150	Current space houses files
Work and file area		75	
Back-office area	250	390	
Treasurer	150	120	Current workspace houses overflow files
Lister/zoning office	100	150	To accommodate 3 workspaces
Other (SB, auditors, EMC)		120	
Meeting area	440	468	
3-person meeting space	330	108	Current upstairs meeting room
Selectboard meeting room	110	360	Current space includes entry way & copier
Bathroom	30	60	ADA compliance required
Unisex public toilet	30	60	
Reception counter (workspace for 2)	60	140	Based on current work activities
Storage	100	175	
Enclosed supply storage	20	100	
Copier/mail area w/countertop		60	
Upstairs hall and storage	80		
Coat closet		15	
Draft Lobby at main entrance		54	Required by energy code
Kitchen area	30	80	
Net useable space without vault	1020	1592	
Vault	120	200	
Utilities		72	
TOTAL working space	1140.00	1864.00	

Rapid Site Analysis

Overview

The perfect site for a Town Office would be generally level, with public utilities installed or easily accessible, with stable, well drained soils, convenient year-round road and pedestrian access, protection from excessive weather patterns, with ample space to accommodate and conduct the Town's business. In Vermont's mountain and valley geography, protection from flooding is crucial; the site should be free of any natural or environmental hazards. It would be convenient to important public facilities. Access to, or development of, alternative energy sources are highly desirable. With so many important factors, this perfect site is difficult to find.

The committee adopted a methodology to conduct a very large and complicated analysis by breaking it into a series of more manageable criteria that could be explained, debated, and ranked. The purpose of this approach was to ensure that each criterion could be considered individually, and its importance discussed and adjusted in Committee discussion. For ease of comparison, each reviewer's ranking generated a raw numerical score which was compiled for summary scoring.

Analysis Criteria

The committee developed three groupings of criteria, to capture three phases of the site development: site characteristics; construction factors; and operation & maintenance. All three groups of criteria contribute to the desirability of a site. It is important to note that no member of the committee is a licensed Professional Engineer or an Architect. The assessment was conducted as a preliminary step to narrow down options with the expectation that a formal feasibility study would be conducted by an appropriate professional. The criteria used by the Committee are presented as Appendix A.

Weighting factors

For each criterion we assigned a measure of importance, with 1 being "not very important" and 5 being "essential". Then, multiplying the specific rank for every site by the weighting factor produces a score. The weighting factors appear with each criterion in Appendix A. A sample scoring matrix for two sites and selected criteria is presented as Appendix B.

Results of Scoring

A perfect score for an optimal site would be 715 points. The summary results for the 10 sites considered are presented in Table 2 below. Detailed scoring spreadsheets can be made available as Excel files.

Table 2. Results of Rapid Site Analysis for 10 Sites

Criteria Group	Current Town Office	Town Garage	Fire House Upper Village	Re-cycling Center	Park and Ride	Red Barn	Murray Field	Fire Station Lower Village	442 Rte 132	Blanchard Road
Site Characteristics	269	294	287	295	273	288	225	270	304	278
Construction Factors	113	149	112	137	138	124	116	119	134	118
Operations & Maintenance	53	98	95	57	85	87	49	58	94	94
TOTALS (optimal = 715)	435	541	494	489	496	499	420	447	532	490
Percent of Optimal Score	61%	76%	69%	68%	69%	70%	59%	63%	74%	69%

Discussion

The Committee recognizes that each element or score is open to discussion and that our opinions may not be unanimously shared by others. However, we feel that we have arrived at a satisfactory answer to the question: “Are there sites/facilities available to the Town where an improved Town Office Structure could be renovated or constructed?”

The answer is a guarded Yes, but with strong reservations. Certainly, no site stands out as optimal. All of the sites scored less than 80% of the optimal score and each would arguably earn a “C” grade in the classroom. The best answer is that while there several possibilities, none of them stood out as good options.

As the analysis process progressed, and as natural events occurred (including severe weather, heat and flooding in many parts of the US and the world) the Committee incorporated new information into their discussion. The absence of flooding danger emerged as an extremely important criterion. One observer to the committee work quipped, “Well, if flooding had been considered, most of the town would never have been built!” Given what we now know to be the anticipated impact of climate change on weather patterns and natural disaster risk, to plan a building site in a FEMA flood zone, or in a Vermont designated River Corridor seems a folly. Flooding will likely get worse in years to come, and indeed presents a significant threat to the many Vermont towns that were built along the rivers for the fine agricultural land. Five of the 10 sites reviewed (Current Town Office, Murray Field, Recycling Center, and the two fire houses) are all sites in identified flood zones or were documented during Hurricane Irene to have flooded or severely eroded the potential building site.

In addition to the flooding risk, other factors made these five sites poor choices. The current Town Office has too little land (only 5 feet to each side and 7 ft behind the building) to allow the necessary expansion indicated by the proposed space requirements. Obtaining additional land for the necessary expansion was investigated, however, documented flooding of the surrounding land (with

water nearly reaching the vault) during Irene ended that pursuit. The two Firehouse sites are not owned by the Town but were offered for consideration by the Strafford Village Fire Department. The Fire Department is interested in combining its two fire houses and offered to consider donating land if construction of an expanded fire house was possible as part of the plan. However, once the flooding risk at both sites became clear, these sites were considered unsuitable for the Town Office. Murray Field, in addition to being clearly at risk for frequent flooding, is a site that is in constant demand by the town for athletic events, dances, and school activities. The Committee felt that removing that important community resource from its current use was not a good idea.

Crowding and congestion of the South Strafford area around the school and gym (Red Barn, Park and Ride) were important factors. The Selectboard is aware of the heightened demand by many town organizations for access to the area around the gym. Newton School, the pre-school, the Recreation Board, and summer camps have all indicated a desire to increase their access to and use of this central open area, and during the COVID pandemic it has proved to be an important open and safe outdoor gathering place for children. The Committee feels that it is important to preserve this open area and was mindful of the need to avoid excessive traffic and congestion in the center of the Lower Village. Building on the Park and Ride, or renovating the Red Barn, would intensify congestion and reduce available parking. Additionally, the Park and Ride was found to be too small a site once workspace requirements were determined.

The three other sites (Town Garage, Blanchard Road and 442 Rte. 132) were scored lower because of their location outside the main villages, lack of accessibility by foot or bike, as well as the other challenges to building on the sites on Blanchard Road and Rte. 132. The Town Garage site, while scoring relatively higher, was considered less than ideal due to the need for extensive clearing of timber and excavation, the heavy truck and equipment traffic at the site, and the likelihood that a reconfiguration of the current town garage functions would be required.

Recommendations

It is worth repeating that the intent of this exercise was to find a more optimal solution to meet the needs of the Town Office. Given that none of the Town-owned properties were found to be optimal, the Committee does not recommend conducting a feasibility study on any of the 10 assessed sites.

The Committee recommends that the Selectboard instead look beyond existing Town-owned properties and seek to acquire through donation or purchase, a structure or land site that can be converted to, or on which to build, a Town Office. The optimal structure will have at least 2000 square feet of useable space located outside a flood risk area, have adequate parking, and located in one of the two villages, but not contribute to congestion around the Lower Village and the school.

Definitions and Notes

* Site is within a FEMA Flood Zone or a Vermont River Corridor or both.

River Corridor

A River Corridor includes the meander belt of a stream or river and a buffer of 50 feet. River Corridor as defined in Vermont statute:

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/chapter/10/032>

FEMA Flood Zone

Flood zones are geographic areas that the FEMA has defined according to varying levels of flood risk. These zones are depicted on a community's Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) or Flood Hazard Boundary Map.

Consult

<https://www.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?webmap=bf12e55b1dd6474e93003f8a26ffc36b&extent=-72.381,43.8246,-72.3268,43.8422>

Appendix A Scoring Criteria

1. Site characteristics and usage Factors	Weighting Factors (WF)
Adequate size of Site	5
Convenient Access	4
Parking	4
Class 1 / 2 Road	4
Proximity to Important Existing Facilities	3
Potential for Future Expansion	4
Year-round Accessibility	5
Site Topography	4
Low Flooding Potential	5
Located outside River Corridors	5
Aesthetic Value	3
Protection from Elements	2
Good Site Drainage	4
Absence of Natural Hazards	4
Low Potential for Hazardous Materials on Site	4
No Restrictions on Land Use	4
Accessible to Emergency Response	5
Access for Pedestrians and Bicycles	3
Existing Site Development	3
Low Noise at Site	4
No Wetlands on Site	3
2. Construction Factors	
Site Availability	5
Site Cost	4
Ease of access by Heavy Equipment	4
Ease of Transporting Construction Materials	4
Soils/Foundation Conditions	3
Availability of Utilities	3
Suitability for Septic facilities	5
Good Site Drainage	4
Low Potential for Site Erosion	3
3. Maintenance and Operating Cost Factors	
Low Flooding Potential	5
Good Site Drainage	4
Low Potential for Site Erosion	4
Sun Orientation Suited to Solar	2
Protection from Elements	2
Absence of Natural Hazards	4
Existing Alternative Energy Sources	5

Appendix B Scoring Matrix Example

Site characteristics	WF	Site #1		Site #2		Site #3	
		Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
Adequate Site Size	5	1	5	5	25	1	5
Convenient Access	4	5	20	5	20	5	20
Parking	4	1	4	4	16	1	4
Class 1/2 Road	5	5	25	5	25	5	25
Proximity to Important Existing Facilities	3	5	15	2	6	5	15
Potential for Future Expansion	4	0	0	3	12	1	4
Year-round Accessibility	5	5	25	5	25	5	25
Site Topography	3	5	15	3	9	1	3
Low Flood Potential	5	0	0	5	25	3	15
TOTALS			109		163		116

Note: Ranks range from 0 to 5, low to high. Weighting factors (WF) range 1 to 5, unimportant to essential. Score = (Rank) X (WF)

Appendix C

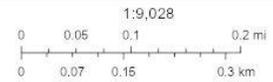
Aerial Maps of Considered Sites

442 VT 132 (2.94A)



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VT Parcels VCGI Color Imagery Service
Red: Band_1 Green: Band_2
Blue: Band_3



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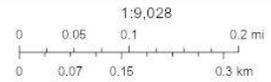
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Blanchard Road (.82A)



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- Blue: Band_3



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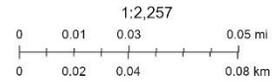
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Current Town Office (.5A)



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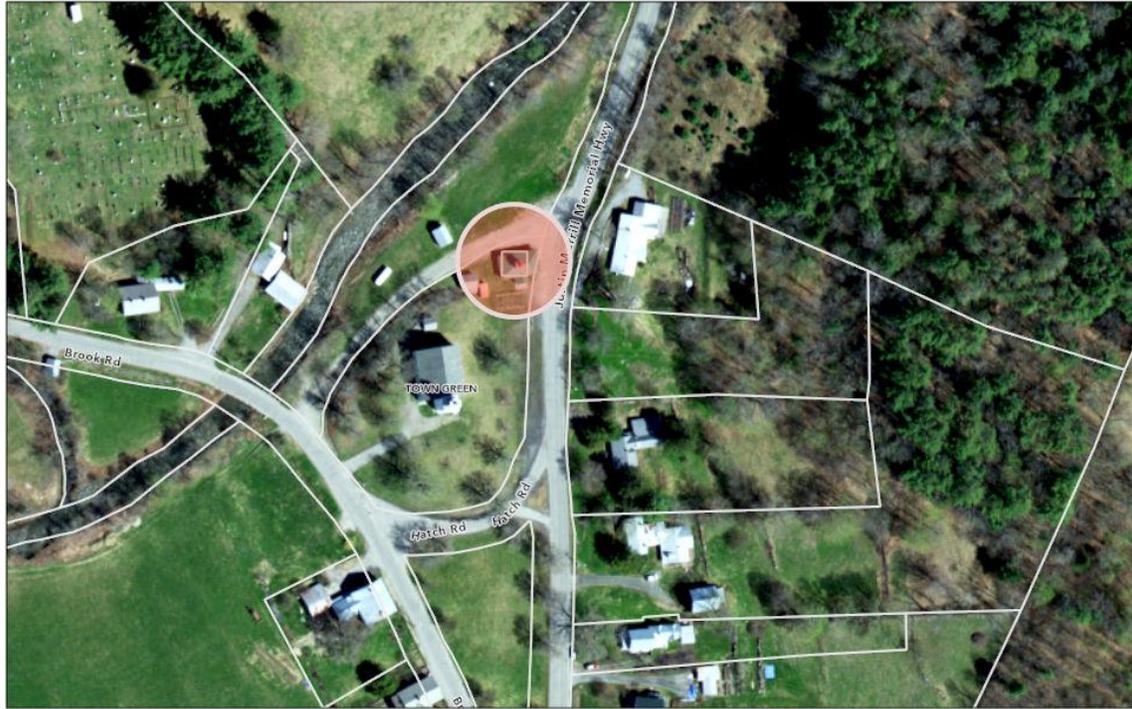


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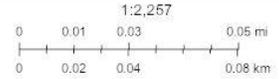
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Fire Station (UV) (.02A)



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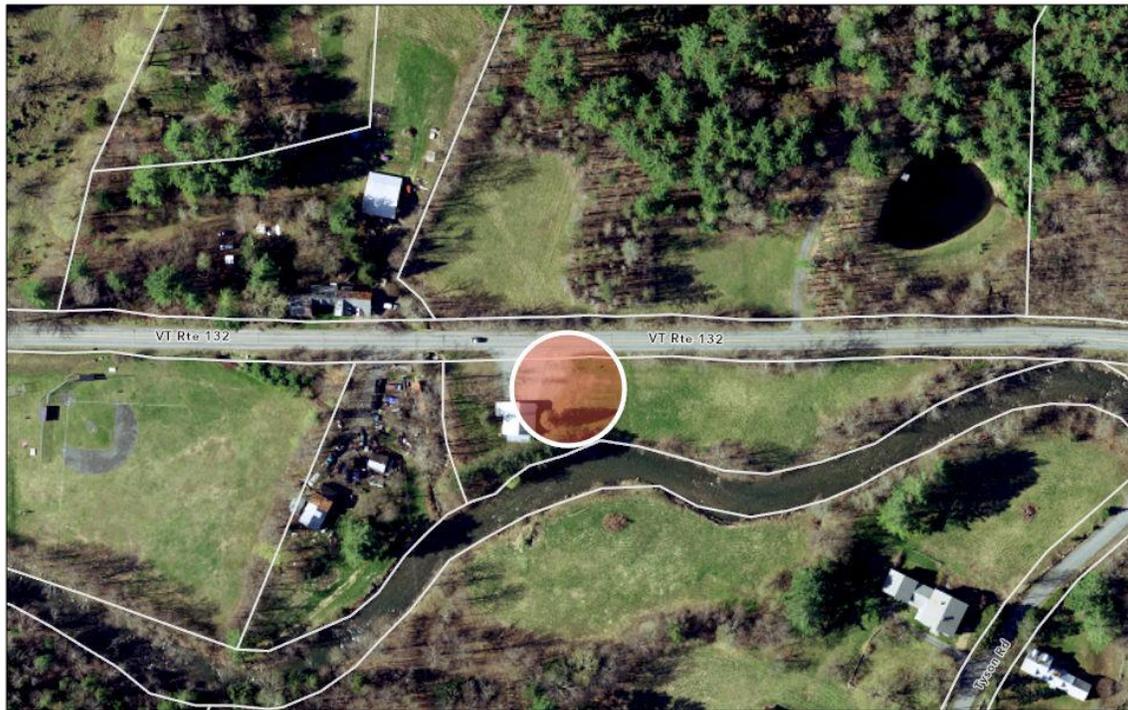


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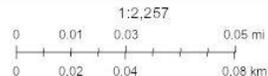
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Fire Station (Lower Village) (1.83A)



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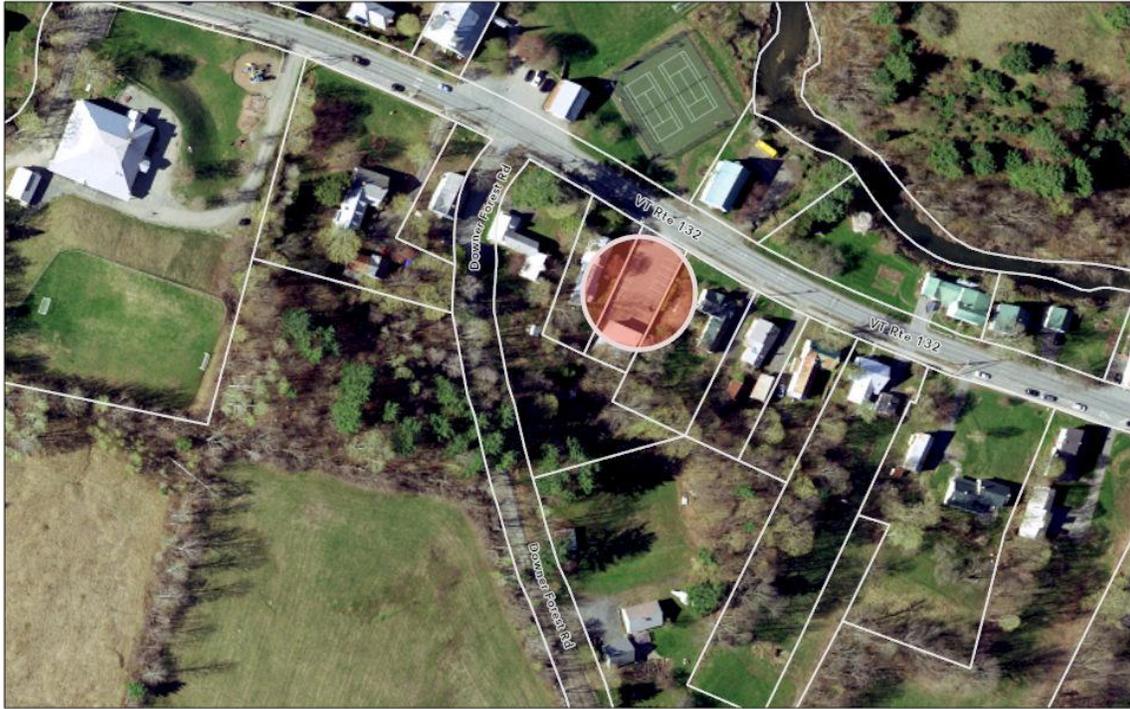


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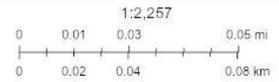
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Park and Ride (.22A)



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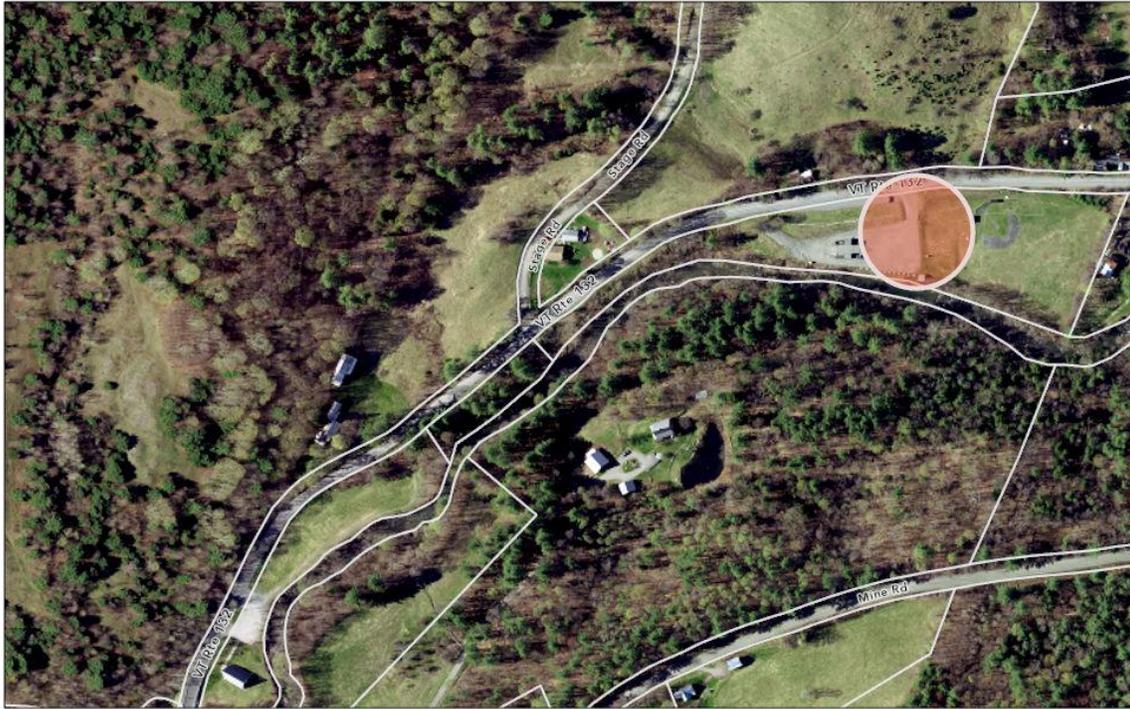


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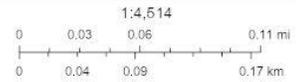
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Recycle Center (6.69A)



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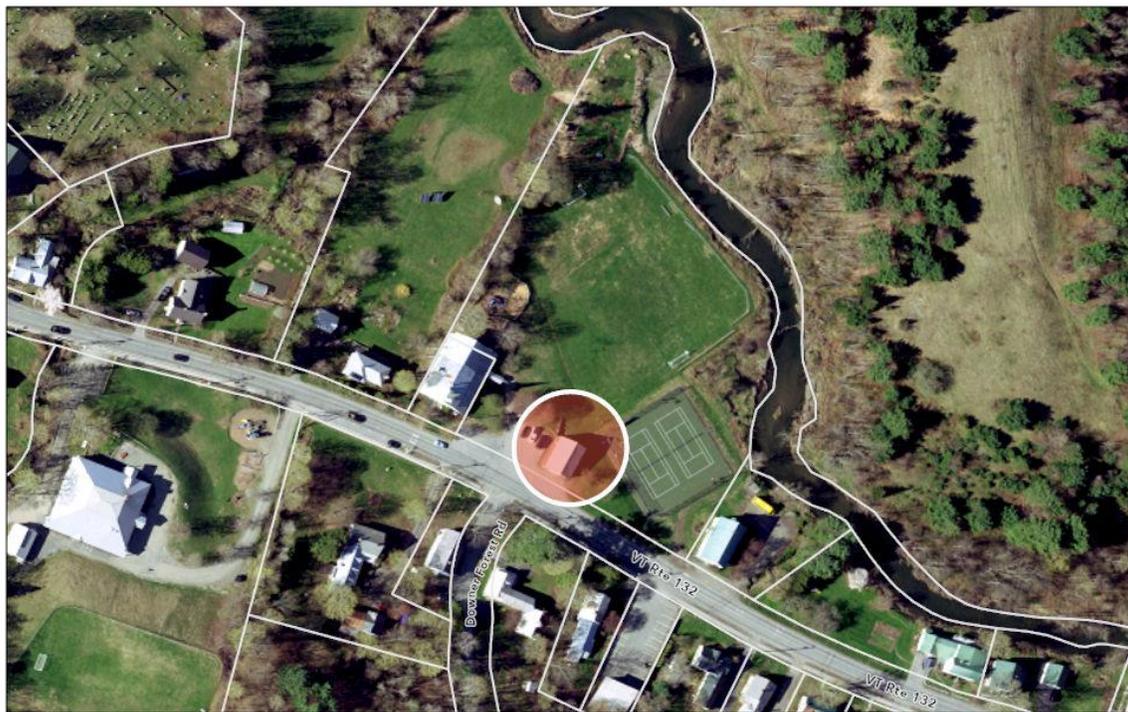


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Red Barn/Murray Field (2.9A)



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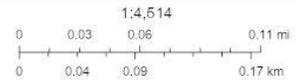
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Town Garage (7A)



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Appendix D
Presentation to Strafford Town Boards and Committees
July 30, 2021