BRANCH VILLAGE REVITALIZATION TASK FORCE  
NORTH SMITHFIELD, RHODE ISLAND

BRANCH VILLAGE REVITALIZATION  
FINAL REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents the process undertaken by the Branch Village Revitalization Task Force in developing a vision for Branch Village and describes the vision that will help guide future municipal and private sector efforts in the district. This report also contains deliverables that describe the vision that will help to guide future municipal and private sector efforts in revitalizing the district. Branch Village is located within the Town of North Smithfield, RI, and is best characterized as a small village center with a mix of residential, commercial, and manufacturing activities. The village exhibits significant cultural and natural resources, however concerns exist over current development patterns and the urban environment that is emerging. In an effort to define a new vision for Branch Village, the task force first allocated funds to hire an outside planning consultant. With consultant support, the project began with an evaluation of development opportunities and constraints, moved on to include a public charrette, and concluded with the refinement of the vision and development of final products. The final products for this project include this final report, a series of Visual Statements providing an illustrative guide to revitalization, and planning level cost estimates for public improvements. The Visual Statements and planning level cost estimates are included in the appendix of this report.
UNDERSTANDING AND APPROACH

Branch Village is a small, mill-based village that emerged in the 18th century as a satellite operation of the nearby Slatersville Mill complex (Figure 1). The settlement’s early development as a mill village established the foundation for its existing built environment. Branch Village’s mill complex lies in the region’s valley near the river, while the original housing was built in close proximity to the mills. As the village grew, housing began to concentrate along the major roadways such as Route 146A and Saint Paul Street. The boundaries and direction of growth in the settlement have been largely dictated by the region’s heavily sloped terrain. With steep slopes and wetland areas serving as natural building constraints, the village has developed in a relatively compact manner.

The current patterns of development in Branch Village represent a mix of residential, small-scale commercial, and selected reuse of existing mill buildings. The commercial uses consist of service-oriented operations that serve the surrounding neighborhoods as well as patrons traveling along Great Road (also Route 146A). Two unique re-use opportunities have taken place in this neighborhood at the ATP Manufacturing facility directly adjacent to the Branch River and the Branch Village Industrial Park further to the south.

Branch Village exhibits significant potential for new development in terms of increasing density and enhancing site design. Although the village core exhibits a balanced mix of residential and commercial activities, its auto-dependent nature indicates that a vibrant neighborhood-based economy is not quite achievable within the existing framework. Improvements in site design to increase pedestrian access and appeal along with regulating for a mixed-use village core are two potential strategies for creating a lively, walkable environment. The first step in preparing for a new development vision for Branch Village is to assess the current conditions for existing opportunities and constraints. The current opportunities and constraints analysis will guide an evaluation of the district in terms of development feasibility. A public charrette was held on June 28, 2007 to gather community feedback regarding the specific land uses, density, and urban form desired for Branch Village. The final step of the process was a series of workshop meetings by the Branch Village Revitalization Task Force to refine the vision and develop materials for guiding further planning and development efforts.
Legend

Branch Village District
Railroad Rights of Way
Electrical Transmission Lines

GIS Data: RIGIS, Rhode Island Geographic System

**Figure 1**

Existing Conditions
Branch Village District
North Smithfield, RI
OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

Opportunities:

Although this is far from a comprehensive list, the following elements make up the primary opportunities within Branch Village:

**Historical Culture:** The mill operations in Branch Village have formed the foundation for its economy and culture. Recognizing the cultural significance of the mill buildings is a critical first step to consider when determining redevelopment options. Additionally, as an off-shoot of the Slatersville Mill Village, the cultural connection between the two villages remains intact and can be used to help define a vision for Branch Village.

**Established Housing:** A small, well-maintained residential community still calls Branch Village “home” and represents a solid neighborhood foundation upon which to build a new vision for the future.

**Successful and Expanding Re-use:** Two large industrial buildings have experienced adaptive re-use along with successful remediation of hazardous wastes. The buildings will continue to serve as economic anchors in the community. Re-use efforts have continued with a third site that will offer tenancy to a medical office operation in the near future.

**Transportation Options:** Route 146 provides easy access to other communities including the economic centers of Providence and Worcester. Existing town-owned rail lines may provide opportunities to establish bike trails to connect the historic Slatersville Village to the existing and highly successful Blackstone Valley Bike Trail. Although plans to develop trails in the immediate area have been abandoned in the past, redevelopment of the Slatersville Mill will certainly create a renewed interest in this idea.

**Community Development Trends:** The redevelopment of Slatersville Mill occurring today is injecting approximately $40 million of private investment into the area and will include over 200 new units of housing. This showcase project can serve as an economic anchor for revitalization elsewhere within the Town.
Constraints:

Terrain: Branch Village experiences a change in elevation of approximately 180 feet over a very small area, with slopes sometimes exceeding grades of 40%. This difficult terrain has necessitated creative site development strategies in the past and will require careful attention to appropriate land use and design in the present.

Infrastructure: Centralized wastewater and water supply exist in the area but may require expansion to accommodate significant levels of new development. Power lines cut through one of the largest remaining tracts of undeveloped land in the study area that is not constrained by excessively steep slopes. Stormwater systems are outdated and discharge untreated runoff directly to the Branch River.

Resource Protection: Data from readily available Rhode Island Geographic Systems (RIGIS) sources suggests that several resource protection issues will require a high level of attention when developing a vision for the village (Figure 2). Aside from the obvious wetland and surface water protection issues, groundwater protection will be an important consideration as a large portion of the site lies within DEM-approved wellhead protection areas and a groundwater recharge area to a larger significant aquifer system. A small piece of land in the southerly portion of the study area also may contain habitat for rare species.

Traffic and Circulation: The existing roadway system in Branch Village has some limitations in terms of efficiency and access. The lack of turning lanes at the primary intersection of Great Road and Saint Paul Street can result in longer wait times and reduced level of service. Additionally, areas in the village that appear to exhibit potential for new development in terms of available land—such as the Branch Village Industrial Park site—may not be equipped with adequate roadway access to accommodate the additional traffic.
Summary of Opportunities and Constraints:

The variety of opportunities and constraints associated with Branch Village can easily create the perception that several priorities are competing within the vision or that the roadblocks toward implementation are simply too large to overcome. One goal of this project is to help residents and stakeholders navigate these issues in a way that is both balanced and well-informed. For example, the idea that economic development and environmental protection are mutually exclusive goals can be effectively addressed through the presentation of innovative land use techniques such as low impact development and integrated water management. Further, ideas surrounding what is often perceived to be the prohibitive costs associated with infrastructure improvements may also arise and can be addressed through discussion of innovative tax programs, impact fees and public-private partnerships. Also typical to these discussions is the idea that local regulations simply cannot provide the framework to allow for the density and mix of uses required for a self-contained village-scale economy. An objective of this project is to effectively outline different zoning and subdivision frameworks that answer to these concerns in a way that is informed and transparent.

To assist the community and stakeholders in understanding the concepts for a new vision, it is important to employ a strong visual element to presentations and final products. A series of Visual Statements—illustrative guidance documents that will guide future planning efforts—will be developed as a final deliverable of this project. Regardless of the scale at which discussions are taking place, well-designed visualizations can help community groups grasp the functional elements that connect the village as a whole, as well as the site-specific designs that depict the architectural character that is suitable for future redevelopment.

The diverse planning framework surrounding the future revitalization of Branch Village spans issues of market forces, environmental protection, engineering and site design, community character, local culture, housing and urban form. This project is intended to address the wide breadth of concerns that will arise during the visioning process through comprehension of site opportunities and constraints, and application of innovative planning techniques. The project’s approach included a public charrette as well as a series of internal work-sessions to develop consensus regarding the scale, form, function and land use profile desired for the village center. The vision for Branch Village that was developed was then used to identify Action Items that will clearly guide the community into concrete measures to realize this vision.
OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC CHARRETTE

Charrette Structure:

A public design charrette for the revitalization of Branch Village was held on June 28th, commencing at 6:30pm with attendance estimated at 43 individuals. The charrette began with a presentation by Nathan Kelly of Horsley Witten Group describing the current conditions in Branch Village and the redevelopment process, followed by a public feedback session facilitated by John Mullin of Mullin Associates. The feedback session was formatted such that individuals were divided into five separate groups of 7 - 10 participants. Each group was asked to address the following issues:

1. What land uses would you like to see in Branch Village?
2. At what density would you like to see these land uses?
3. At what scale and urban form would you like to see these land uses? (ie: village center, strip development, etc.)

The participants were asked to apply these three questions to five specific land areas identified by Horsley Witten Group as the areas most likely to be developed (Figure 3). The five identified “development pods” were:

1. The current village center focused around the intersection of Great Road and Saint Paul Street.
2. The area northwest of the intersection of Great Road and Saint Paul Street including the ATM manufacturing facility and the forested area north of it.
3. The industrial park south of Great Road.
4. The rail line and surrounding properties.
5. The forested area south of the rail line.
Public Feedback:

The community input regarding the desired outcome of these five “development pods” is summarized as follows:

1. Village Center:

The predominate vision expresses for the village center was to reinforce this area as the village’s core focal point through increased density, mixed uses, and improved site design. A goal discussed by the group was to increase housing and job opportunities within a compact, walkable district. The desired mix of uses includes commercial, residential, civic, and office space. In the typical “top-of-the-shop” fashion, commercial and office spaces would be located along the lower floors while upper floors could be delegated for residential units. The envisioned density was expressed principally as a measure of building height, and ranged from 2-3 story buildings. Three story buildings would be concentrated in the district’s core at intersection of Great Road and Saint Paul Street, with density levels tapering out to two and one story buildings towards the edge of the district.

Much of the discussion on the village center was focused on scale and site design issues. While commercial space is desirable, a clear signal was sent that big box retail would not be the preferred scale for new development. Ideally, the community would like to see a mix of small-scale businesses such as restaurants, coffee shops, bookstores, retail shops, and service industries. In terms of site design, public feedback encouraged the implementation of design guidelines that contribute to a lively, pedestrian friendly streetscape. It was repeatedly mentioned that the village center should not merely function as an activity center but should create an appealing, human-scaled environment that defines an identity for Branch Village and provides it with a sense of place. This should be accomplished through site design elements that follow Smart Growth principles such as improving pedestrian amenities, locating parking in the rear of buildings, and public gathering places. The district should also take advantage of its proximity to the Branch River by increasing access through pedestrian connections.

2. Northwest of Village Center:

The area northwest of the planned village center exhibits significant development potential due to its proximity to the village center and the Branch River. This development pod can be best categorized by two areas, the land abutting Great Road extending west from the village center, and the large swath of undeveloped land extending north from the ATP facility. The consensus for the land abutting Great Road was for this to serve as an extension of the village center in both use and design. To this end, the desired uses include residential, office, retail and services. The desired density was declared to be not quite as high as the core of the village center itself, and the prevailing thought was for the density to gradually decrease with distance from the village center. In terms of design, the concepts of bringing buildings to the edge of the street and placing parking in the back, along with improving streetscape conditions for
pedestrians are to be applied here similarly to the village center. In addition to the design and use of buildings, another major concept supported by the community was increasing access to the river from this particular portion of Great Road as the shoreline is already hardened and disturbed by historic development patterns.

The area north of the ATP and along the banks of the Branch River currently consists of undeveloped open space. There was a range of ideas expressed for the potential future of this area ranging from: conserved open space, planned recreational/park space, residential, and office uses. Although there was not complete consensus among the community members on desired uses, one key theme amongst all the participants was the importance of the river in this area. If development of structures should occur, it should be done with care to ensure the natural aesthetics and environmental quality of the river bed are not negatively effected. The importance of increasing access to the river was also noted, with the specific ideas such as a riverside park or linear green spaces connecting to the village center and Great Road being suggested.

3. Industrial Park:

The redeveloped mill building with the industrial park currently houses a light manufacturing company. Ideas for new uses ranged widely, but there was a strong desire to effectively reuse the existing building. While it is unclear the extent to which different uses may be feasible for the adaptive reuse of the existing mill, the community input regarding uses for the space included: large-scale offices, continued light manufacturing or clean industry, incubator space for businesses, retail, and perhaps residential or live/work artist lofts. It was generally noted that the development should seek to create a pleasant atmosphere that draws from the village center’s foundation of an attractive, human-scaled environment. The industrial park should not seek to utilize an identical urban form and streetscape treatment as the village center, because that approach would be a poor fit in an industrial park setting. However, the industrial park should take advantage of its close proximity to the village center by integrating pedestrian infrastructure to encourage walking between the two areas.

4. Rail Line:

Many questions were generated during the discussion of future of the rail line. It was clear that additional studies would be needed to determine the existing conditions and best use for this area. The primary discussion revolved around the community’s desire to either keep or remove the rail infrastructure. Given the current lack of accurate information about current conditions, much of the discussion involved a great deal of speculation. Options discussed include the possibility of rehabilitating the rail infrastructure to serve as a commuter line to Providence. Additionally, the rail line could provide freight transport and aid the economic development of the area if manufacturing or light industry uses continue in mill district.

Those in support of removing the rail line had a variety of concepts for possible new uses. The most common suggestion for a new use was to revitalize the rail line as a
recreational pathway connecting to the surrounding communities. This concept drew support from community members who felt the village needs more quality recreational options and accessible open space. A related notion that was well received by many community members was the thought of creating an easily accessible, direct connection between the recreational path and village center. Additional ideas for reusing the rail line included mixed uses for commercial and recreational space. Adding commercial uses to this area could build off of the potential new recreational amenity by taking advantage of the additional pedestrian activity.

5. South of Rail Line:

This large expanse of forested space is currently undeveloped. The area is partially constrained by the existence of wetlands that lie predominantly in the eastern portion of the land as well as moderate to steep slopes dispersed across the area. In addition to land’s natural constraints, there are also access constraints because there is currently only one roadway that reaches the area and there are limited opportunities to create new access points from outside the area. In terms of potential land use, the two primary suggestions from the community were to keep the land as open space, or reuse the area for office or light industrial uses. With the amount of space available, the redevelopment of this area into a job center has potential to significantly increase the Town’s tax base.

While each notion of keeping the land as open space or developing it for office or light industrial businesses was discussed, there was no definitive consensus as to what should be done in this area. Several participants commented they would like to see solid information on the development impacts of this area before making a decision on the desired outcome. Gathering information such as traffic impact studies and market analyses of the potential for office/light industry, would be useful to inform the decision making process before moving forward.
MAJOR FINDINGS

\textit{Development Potential within Regional Context}

In developing a vision for Branch Village, it is important to understand how successful village centers function in relation to the larger regions around them. Village centers are mixed-use compact communities that offer basic consumer services and activities for nearby residents. Villages can draw shoppers and employees from the surrounding area, but they are not the primary regional shopping or employment centers. In suburban areas, new village centers will be distinguished from surrounding development by a more cohesive development form and closer proximity between residential and non-residential uses.

Rhode Island Growth Centers:

There is significant potential for the Branch Village center to apply for status as a Rhode Island Growth Center. At this point, North Smithfield has identified the Branch Village area as a growth center within its comprehensive plan, however the Town has yet to apply for status with the applicable Rhode Island State agencies. Earning standing as a State sanctioned growth center would grant Branch Village higher priority in selection for funding, technical assistance, and other incentive programs. The incentives offered by the State are designed to encourage the identification of growth centers and to promote patterns of development that are consistent with smart growth. Focusing development into growth centers not only helps to draw pressure away from critical natural resources, it also creates the critical density needed to support walkable, mixed-use districts with alternative transportation options.

The concepts being proposed for the revitalization of Branch Village are comparable to the criteria for the establishment of a growth center. The State’s Growth Center Program provides guidelines for the establishment of growth centers, and within these guidelines they spell out eight specific criteria to be used in the evaluation of potential growth centers. They are as follows:

1. Strengthen and encourage growth in existing centers.
2. Scale new infrastructure to support compact growth.
3. Include mixed land uses.
4. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices.
5. Protect and enhance critical environmental resources.
6. Provide a variety of transportation choices.
7. Promote community design that contributes to a sense of place.
8. Encourage growth in appropriately scaled centers.

Each of the above eight criteria is consistent with the concepts guiding the current Branch Village revitalization plan making the village an likely candidate for approval by the State as a growth center.
Strategic Geographic Location:

The development concepts proposed for Branch Village entail a significant amount of growth in terms of its employment base. It is reasonable to question if the existing labor force in the area is large enough to meet the needs of Branch Village’s expansion. A basic geographical assessment of the area suggests that Branch Village’s close proximity to Worcester, MA and Providence, RI, will provide a nearby supply of potential labor force and help stimulate Branch Village’s economic growth. With populations ranging between 170,000 – 180,000, Worcester and Providence are the second and third largest cities in New England respectively. These cities simultaneously serve as job centers and sources of labor for the regions around them.

Branch Village’s strategic location along the Route 146 corridor between these two cities provides relatively easy transportation access to each. The standard used to determine an employment center’s typical commuter-shed is defined as a 30-minute travel time under normal driving conditions. This driving range places Providence well within Branch Village’s commuter-shed at 20 minutes away (15 miles), and Worchester lies just beyond the typical commuter-shed limit at 35 minutes (24 miles). These numbers are significant as they indicate that Branch Village is in the enviable position of having access to both these economic centers.

Slatersville Mill Redevelopment:

The nearby redevelopment of the Slatersville Mill provides additional support to the revitalization of Branch Village. Being that Branch Village was initially an off-shoot of the Slatersville Mill complex, these two areas have long been connected in terms of their economic upheavals and downfalls. Now, as the Slatersville Mill complex is being redeveloped into 228 units of new housing, a new standard is being set for the revitalization of these two areas. With an influx of $40 million of private investment in Slatersville, there is added incentive for developers to explore opportunities in surrounding areas to build on this economic momentum. Additionally, the increase of residents in close proximity to Branch Village will undoubtedly lead to an increase in demand for local jobs, services and goods.

Of particular significance to Branch Village is the potential precedent being established by Slatersville in the marketable reuse of aging industrial structures. Redeveloping mill buildings is often a complex and risky process, and a big portion of that risk comes from the uncertainty that the finished product will be marketable to the local public. With the Slatersville Mill breaking the ice in terms of gauging local demand for these types of units, developers in Branch Village will be able to observe the outcome of the Slatersville project before committing to action. This local market knowledge can be particularly useful when financing a project through local lending agencies.
**Development Concepts for Each Pod:**

Building from the input gathered during the public charrette, a series of development concepts began to take shape for each of the five development pods. After the public charrette, the Branch Village Revitalization Task Force set up two internal workshop meetings on August 14, 2007 and September 13, 2007 to incorporate the results of the charrette and refine the vision for Branch Village. The goal of these internal meetings was to establish clear development concepts for Branch Village and to develop corresponding Visual Statements. The Visual Statements are illustrative guidance documents that serve to guide future planning efforts in an area.

It should be clearly noted that the development concepts expressed here, as well as the concepts within the Visual Statement, are not intended to be a prescriptive redevelopment plan. These concepts are best understood as guidelines that illustrate potential development opportunities and should by no means be interpreted as a final plan for the redevelopment of the village. The elements depicted in the renderings accurately reflect the scale and density discussed at the charrette and also incorporate some specific design elements. The Visual Statements will serve as a valuable reference when revised zoning language is drafted to direct development toward patterns consistent with the vision.

**1. Village Center:**

The village center would serve as the focal point for the surrounding area. It would provide Branch Village with an identity and sense of place in the form of a traditional village model. The major shift in design would occur through the relocation of buildings to the street’s edge and the placement of parking facilities in the rear of buildings. This fundamental shift allows the street’s edge to be rediscovered for pedestrian use and contributes to an attractive, human-scaled environment. Buildings along the street would be 2-3 stories in height, with retail on the ground floor and professional offices, studios or residential units on the upper floors. Large shared parking lots on the interior of each block would provide parking for surrounding businesses, which would have entrances on both sides of the building for the convenience of customers.

The Visual Statements illustrate street and sidewalk improvements for the reconstruction of Great Road and the potential reconstruction of the Saint Paul Street intersection. Street improvements would be designed to improve traffic circulation and safety through added turning lanes. Additional space would be allocated for on-street parallel parking within the village core. Sidewalk improvements would be designed to enhance the pedestrian experience and include continuous sidewalks, shade trees and other landscaping, decorative lighting, signage and benches. The use of a consistent design framework for sidewalk elements and façade treatment would provide a varied but cohesive look for the entire village center.

In terms of recommendations for specific properties, the Fire Department site could be considered for redevelopment, including partial civic use such as a community center and adjacent park. A park in this area would provide visual access to the river, and physical
access to a potential boat launch site. The site of Kennedy’s Lunch could potentially be redeveloped as a larger mixed use building to anchor that corner of the intersection. In general, the area near the intersection of Great Road and Saint Paul Street should maximize opportunities for pedestrian access to the river due to its close proximity to the river banks and the village center. Similarly, the southern end of Branch Avenue should seek to connect to river through a planned network of park space and trail systems. This connection would also serve to provide a more direct walking route to Great Road businesses from the railroad bed and industrial park.

2. Northwest of Village Center:

The area along Great Road west of the village core would serve as extension of the village center. There would be consistency with village center design concepts in terms of use, street improvements and sidewalk improvements. The ATP facility would be redeveloped and/or replaced with new mixed-use structures. Large buildings in this area would be divided into smaller masses and stepped along the river bank to take advantage of views. Consolidation of building footprints, parking and driveways would help to limit site impacts to reduced impacted open space and allow for comprehensive stormwater treatment. Structures could step down the slope to create terraces for parking and pedestrian plazas overlooking the river.

In the area south of Great Road, similar to the village center, buildings would be relocated to the street’s edge and parking placed in the rear. Open space behind these buildings would be utilized for connections to a network of walking trails. A pedestrian bridge would connect to the south side of the river and to a scenic open space area with wetlands and ponds. The connection to this trail network would increase recreational opportunities, public access to the river, and connections to other areas of the Branch Village.

3. Industrial Park:

The Branch River Industrial Park would be expanded in phases, beginning with infill development to the north and west. Buildings would be clustered, campus-style, around shared open space amenities, with parking located to the side and rear of structures. A public square would be established in front of the existing clock tower, and new buildings would be lined up around and connected with sidewalks and landscaped areas. New mixed-use buildings at the west side of the industrial park would take advantage of the adjacent open space and views to cater to high-value office and residential tenants. Structures in the new “South Campus” would face onto a common park space that would also serve as a stormwater treatment area. The stormwater park would use natural processes to store and filter rain water, enhances wildlife habitat, and provide a beautiful view from the surrounding offices.

The existing roadway entrance would remain as the primary access point to the industrial park, with a second entrance further to the east created to provide direct access to the southeast side. Interior roadways would be separated from parking areas and defined by
planted islands and landscaped areas. This would help to extend the traditional village streetscape into the industrial park. Parking and loading areas for the existing mill building would be left largely intact. Coordination of deliveries and shipping schedules would help to reduce conflicts with tenants of adjoining mixed-use buildings.

Nearby wetlands, floodplains, ponds and the utility corridor would be utilized as community open space with walking trails, picnic areas and boat launches. Site planning for new roads, buildings and parking areas in the industrial park would take advantage of the public park by preserving view corridors, providing trail heads and path connections, and providing weekend parking for park users. Former mill settling ponds and surrounding open space would be managed for wildlife habitat. Invasive species would be removed and eroded areas would be stabilized and replanted. Mowing and maintenance program would be established to expand and maintain native grassland habitat.

4. Rail Line:

The rail line right of way would be redeveloped for use as a recreational rail trail. Selected paved or compacted surface trails would provide links to the industrial park and Great Road businesses. Public ownership of the rail way would preserve the possibility of use as a shared bike/transit corridor if needed at some time in the future. A potential rail line crossing could be considered near the existing industrial park for vehicles to access the areas south of the rail line should that land be developed.

5. South of Rail Line:

At this point, no definite development concepts exist for the area south of the rail line. Options were discussed, but it was decided that this section of Branch Village is currently best suited as open space with the potential to be developed as secondary phases of growth from the abutting the industrial park. A future road corridor and development sites should be reserved for the potential expansion of the industrial park site. In the interim, woodlands should be managed to enhance wildlife habitat and passive recreation potential.

Summary of Visual Statements:

The Visual Statements, located in Appendix A, were developed by consultants Dodson Associates with donated support from North Smithfield resident John O’Hearne from O’Hearne Associates. The Visual Statements are designed to be illustrative guidance documents that correspond to the development concepts listed above. The Visual Statements can be viewed as stand alone documents that parallel the development concepts described in this text, yet also expand on particular points to create a fuller vision for Branch Village. Whereas the development concepts illustrated here are expressed in a brief narrative format, the Visual Statements are graphic interpretations of these concepts that illustrate one possible rendition of the principles and design elements discussed at the charrette. It is important to note that the Visual Statements are not to be
interpreted as a prescriptive master plan. The Visual Statement documents are best understood as guidelines for potential development opportunities.
ACTION ITEMS

*Invite Public to View Visual Statements and Final Report:*

A major objective of the Branch Village revitalization process is to be transparent and receptive to public input. Through incorporating a public charrette early in the process, the project was able to integrate public feedback from the outset. As the charrette process nears its final submission stages, it is important to reinforce the transparency of the process by making the final products as accessible to the public as possible. In addition to access, there should be avenues for public feedback so potential changes can be considered. One suggestion is for task force members to continue to utilize the informative website—www.branchvillage.com—as a means for accomplishing public viewings and feedback.

*Conduct a Transportation Impact Analysis:*

A transportation impact analysis is a study which assesses the effects that a proposed development will have on the transportation network in a particular study area. These studies vary in their range of detail and complexity depending on the type, size and location of the development. With regard to Branch Village, the breadth of changes being considered will undoubtedly have some impact on the community’s existing roadways and possibly the existing rail right of way. It is imperative to gain a better understanding of the demands that will be placed on Branch Village’s transportation network so the feasibility of the development concepts can be assessed. Understanding transportation impacts has become increasingly important as budgets for public facility and infrastructure improvements have become increasingly strained.

Transportation impact studies help communities to:

- Forecast additional traffic associated with new development, based on accepted practices;
- Determine the improvements that are necessary to accommodate the new development;
- Assist communities in land use decision making;
- Assist in allocating scarce resources to areas which need improvements;
- Identify potential problems with the proposed development which may influence the developer’s decision to pursue it;
- Allow the community to assess the impacts that a proposed development may have;
- Help to ensure safe and reasonable traffic conditions on streets after the development is complete;
- Reduce the negative impacts created by developments by helping to ensure that the transportation network can accommodate the development;
- Provide direction to community decision makers and developers of expected impacts;
- Protect the substantial community investment in the street system; and
- Review and evaluate alternative transportation options such as rail, bike, bus, etc.

(Source: Community Guide to Development Impact Analysis)
Explore Funding from Rhode Island Department of Transportation:

The Rhode Island Department of Transportation’s (RIDOT) Transportation Enhancement Program is designed to provide funding projects that meet the program criteria. The program is design to encourage non-traditional transportation improvements with a link to the intermodal transportation system. Enhancements serve to integrate a transportation facility into the surrounding community and natural environment. The project must fall into one of twelve different categories. The categories that potentially apply to the Branch Village revitalization include:

- Rehabilitation and Operation of Historic Transportation Buildings, Structures, or Facilities (including historic railroad facilities and canals);
- Preservation of Abandoned Railway Corridors (including the conversion and use for pedestrian and bicycle trails);
- Landscaping and Scenic Beautification;
- Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities;
- Safety and Educational Activities for Pedestrians and Bicyclists; and
- Environmental Mitigation to Address Water Pollution due to Highway Runoff or to Reduce Vehicle Wildlife Mortality while maintaining Habitat Connectivity.

Applications for projects that fall within one or more of these 12 categories will be accepted from all 39 of Rhode Island’s cities and towns.

(Source: Rhode Island Department of Transportation)

Apply to Rhode Island KeepSpace Communities Program:

This ground-breaking initiative is designed to address Rhode Island’s current housing deficit while fostering a healthy economy, environment, infrastructure and culture. By design, it will create mutually beneficial partnerships between developers, municipalities, Realtors and funders. KeepSpace Communities will not only help address Rhode Island’s deficit of 13,000 affordable homes, but will also stimulate a new approach to neighborhood development and site design in every city and town throughout the state. These sustainable-design and site-development projects will be ecologically based and economically sound; promote alternative transportation; and conserve energy and water resources. This enlightened approach will facilitate government, business and civic partnerships that will result in replicable models of living and working space.

The founding partner of KeepSpace, Rhode Island Housing, has issued a request for proposals (RFP) to developers and is prepared to invest up to $10 million to support the development of the first 3-5 KeepSpace Communities. While the criteria for winning proposals is somewhat vague, the program has stated that KeepSpace Communities will incorporate the following elements:

- Mixed use and mixed income.
- Safe, attractive homes and apartments that work force can afford.
- Efficient and creative use of land, infrastructure and other development resources.
• Neighborhoods with schools, libraries, daycare, parks, open space, and other services within walking distance.
• Compliments the character of the area.
• Public transit is incorporated into planning.
• Environmentally sensitive practices and preserved open space.
• Conservation-minded practices directed toward developing existing communities (reuse first).
• Culturally and economically diverse communities.
• Healthy, green and energy efficient practices.
• Integrate smart planning practices.

(Source: KeepSpace RFP Workshop Presentation)

With Branch Village’s focus on revitalization through compact, infill development, as well as preserving open space, it is clear that the project would make for a very competitive proposal. Although the KeepSpace funding will be limited to just three to five winning proposals, the sizable funding that would be received makes the application process well worth the investment of time.

(Source: Rhode Island Housing)

Explore Use of Tax Increment Financing (TIF):

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is a financing tool available to all Rhode Island municipalities via state enabling legislation. TIF is a way for local governments to help finance needed infrastructure improvements or capital projects to jumpstart private investment within a targeted development or redevelopment district. It can be a particularly useful tool for overcoming obstacles that might otherwise stall or prevent the investment of private capital into a troubled district or site, such as contamination or lack of necessary infrastructure. A municipality may borrow the resources needed to fund infrastructure improvements and repay the loan with a portion of the incremental increase in property taxes generated as a result of the ensuing private investment.

(Source: Grow Smart Rhode Island)

Consider Zoning Approaches:

It is clear the current zoning of the Branch Village district is not adequate to meet the vision outlined through this project. Choosing an appropriate zoning approach for a redevelopment project can be challenging, as communities will need to balance the desire for control over certain site plan elements with the desire to attract better development through flexibility or incentives. An integral piece to understanding which techniques will best suit a community or a particular district is a well developed Comprehensive Plan. Branch Village is in the fortunate position of having both a Comprehensive Plan and the guidance documents resulting from this project to utilize on when moving forward to consider zoning options. These planning documents will specifically address the desired uses and urban form for the Branch Village district and will guide the decisions used in drafting zoning.
The key elements to address in any new zoning language will include:

- Allowing mixed-use in a by right context;
- Changing the orientation of buildings to activate the street edge;
- Providing innovative shared and off-site parking allowances;
- Modest site and building design standards to create a varied but coherent streetscape;
- Requiring alternative access and circulation routes for automobiles; and
- Making pedestrian mobility a focal point for site design.
SUMMARY STATEMENT

Branch Village exhibits tremendous potential for revitalization within the context of a village center development model. The village’s compact nature, as established through its historic development patterns, is an asset that can be built upon in establishing a dense, mixed-use core. In terms of its building stock, Branch Village has many structures with impressive cultural and historic qualities that can add to the character of the village as it moves forward with new development. Branch Village also contains many overlooked environmental assets such as the Branch River, several small ponds and wetlands, and acres of forested open space—all exhibiting potential for improved quality and access. As efforts to revitalize Branch Village move forward, it should not be lost that this is a place with many positive qualities that are providing a solid foundation for improvements in the future.

The development concepts established within this report, and the adjoining Visual Statements, respond to concerns over current development patterns by defining a new vision for Branch Village. This vision evolved through a comprehensive and inclusive process and represents a considerable amount of time, effort and creative energy from the Branch Village community and Town officials. The end products created through this process will provide critical guidance for determining future actions, plans, and land use regulations in the village. Due to its long-term vision, the fruits of this project may take time in coming to bear, however, the future planning efforts in Branch Village will be better off as a result of this important work.
APPENDIX A:

VISUAL STATEMENTS

Developed by consultant Dodson Associates, with donated support by North Smithfield resident John O’Hearne from O’Hearne Associates.
Branch Village Revitalization Plan: Overview

Streetscape improvements installed as part of rebuilding of Great Road and the potential reconstruction of the Saint Paul Street intersection. Include continuous sidewalks, shade trees and other landscaping, decorative lighting, signage and benches.

ATP facility redeveloped and/or replaced with new mixed-use structures. Large buildings divided into smaller masses and stepped along the river bank to take advantage of views. Consolidation of building footprints, parking and driveways helps to limit site impacts while allowing for comprehensive stormwater treatment.

Reconstruction of the core of the village follows a traditional village model, with attractive 2-3 story buildings lining the street, on-street parking, and additional parking behind the buildings in shared lots.

Existing mixed-use and residential structures further east along Great Road remain in present uses. To accommodate business expansion or mixed-use redevelopment, encourage expansion of existing structures rather than replacement, in order to retain residential character.

Branch River corridor preserved as a greenway. Wetlands, floodplains, ponds and the utility corridor redeveloped as a community park with walking trails, picnic areas and boat launches.

Branch River Industrial Park expanded in phases, beginning with infill development to the north and west. Buildings are clustered, campus-style, around shared open space amenities, with parking located to the side and rear of structures.

Town-owned rail right-of-way easement reclaimed for recreational rail trail and potential future public transit use.

Future road corridor and development sites on the slope to the south reserved for future development phases. In the interim, woodlands managed to enhance wildlife habitat and passive recreation potential.
Great Road Design Concepts

ATP facility redeveloped and/or replaced with new mixed use structures. Buildings divided into smaller masses that parallel the riverbank. Structures step down the slope to create terraces for parking and pedestrian plazas overlooking the river.

Fire Department property considered for redevelopment, including partial civic use such as a community center and adjacent park. A park could provide visual access to the river, and physical access to a potential boat launch site. Site of Kennedy’s Lunch potentially redeveloped as a larger mixed use building that helps to anchor the corner of the intersection.

New mixed-use structures along the south side of Great Road continue the residential scale of existing buildings. Shared parking behind the buildings steps down the slope, with shared driveways limiting the need for additional curb cuts onto Great Road.

New mixed-use structures allowed to replace existing single use structures in the core of the district, with a landmark building serving as the new home of the Li’l General Convenience Store. Buildings are 2-3 stories, with retail on the ground floor and professional offices, studios or residential units on the upper floors.

Great road reconfigured to provide two travel lanes and a third lane for turns onto Saint Paul Street. Making better use of existing pavement allows for parallel on-street parking in the proposed commercial core.

Broad sidewalks shaded by large trees provide a comfortable place for pedestrians and room for outdoor sales displays and cafe seating. Consistent design standards for street furnishings, signage, facade treatments, lighting and landscaping provide a unified look. Continuous sidewalks, safe cross walks with pedestrian-activated crossing signals, and high quality design get people out of their cars and walking around the district.

Large shared parking lots on the interior of each block provide parking for surrounding businesses, which can have entrances on both sides of the building for the convenience of customers. Shared parking allows for the most efficient use of space, leaving more room for trees and landscaping, and simplifying circulation for both cars and pedestrians. The parking areas can be conveniently accessed from a few points, improving the streetscape and reducing accidents.
Industrial Park Design Concepts

The existing entrance remains as the primary access point to the industrial park, with a second entrance further to the east providing direct access to the southeast side.

Interior roadways are separated from parking areas and defined by planted islands and landscaped areas. This helps to extend the traditional village streetscape into the industrial park.

A public square is established in front of the existing clock tower, and new buildings are lined up around and connected with sidewalks and landscaped areas. Parking is provided to the side and rear of buildings where possible.

New mixed-use buildings at the west side of the industrial park can take advantage of the adjacent open space and views to cater to high-value office and residential tenants.

Parking and loading areas for the existing mill building are left largely intact. Coordination of deliveries and shipping schedules helps to reduce conflicts with tenants of adjoining mixed-use buildings.

Structures in the new South Campus face onto a common park space that also serves as a stormwater treatment area. The “stormwater park” uses natural processes to store and filter rain water, enhances wildlife habitat, and provides a beautiful view from the surrounding offices.

Use of town-owned railroad right of way secured for recreational rail trail and potential future public transit use. Paved extensions link the rail trail to the industrial park’s pedestrian network.

Larger industrial or office uses can easily be accommodated in the South Campus, with parking lots on the east side.

A road stub provides for future extension of a roadway loop to serve the south part of the industrial park.
Park Planning Concepts

Existing cleared area under the electric transmission line improved as a picnic site overlooking the river bend. Stabilization of the riverbank allows for viewing and fishing access. Clearing of invasive species and selective pruning of native trees and shrubs opens up river views.

Walking trail network developed by improving surfaces and drainage of existing trails and establishing new loops and extensions as needed. Boardwalks provide access over wetlands and seasonal floodplains, while a pedestrian bridge connects to the north side of the river.

Trails curve to avoid wetland impacts and cross at the narrowest part of wetland and stream corridors.

Former mill settling ponds and surrounding open space managed for wildlife habitat. Invasive species removed. Eroded areas stabilized and replanted. Mowing and maintenance program established to expand and maintain native grassland habitat.

Boat launch established with access from rear of commercial parking lots behind the Great Road redevelopment area. Compacted stone dust ramp provides for boat-cart access from parking lot, with water access from stabilized bank or floating dock.

Pedestrian access to the park and trail system provided from several areas along Great Road, including the end of Branch Avenue. This also serves to provide a more direct walking route to Great Road businesses from the industrial park.

Site planning for new roads, buildings and parking areas in the industrial park takes advantage of the public park by preserving view corridors, providing trail heads and path connections, and providing weekend parking for park users.

Railroad right of way reclaimed for use as a recreational rail trail. Selected paved or compacted surface trails provide links to the industrial park and Great Road businesses. Public ownership preserves the possibility of use as a shared bike/transit corridor if needed at some time in the future.
If uses in the existing industrial park buildings require more parking, some of the proposed buildings shown on the masterplan could be built south of the rail trail, leaving more room for parking adjacent to existing structures.

Vehicular circulation follows a primary loop road that winds through the site to avoid wetlands and reduce grades in sloping areas.

This plan shows 11 buildings with a total floor area of 520,000 square feet south of the rail trail (two story buildings, total footprint would be 260,000 s.f.), with parking for 1440 cars. Buildings are arranged in three clusters to avoid wetlands and utility corridors and take advantage of the topography of the site.

Buildings are placed fairly close to the road with parking located to the side and rear. This reduces the length of access roads and creates an attractive campus effect.

Parking lots are constructed to serve more than one building, minimizing wasted space, simplifying circulation patterns, and allowing for efficiencies through sharing of parking spaces and balancing of demand between uses.

Building entrances and visitor parking is clustered close to the main road, allowing for landscaping around each building to contribute to a common park-like environment.

Fingers of open space separate each of the three main building clusters, reducing the overall visual impact of the development and encouraging a separate sense of identity for each “neighborhood.”

Most of the buildings shown are 100’ x 200’, totalling 40,000 s.f. on two floors. They can easily be laid out as larger or smaller structures. Largest shown totals 100,000 s.f.
APPENDIX B:

PLANNING LEVEL IMPROVEMENT COST ESTIMATES

Developed by consultant Horsley Witten Group, Inc.
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<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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**SUM OF ITEMS:** $2,803,931  
**OVERHEAD & PROFIT (15%)** $420,590  
**PERMITTING & ENGINEERING (20%)** $560,786  
**CONTINGENCY (25%)** $700,983  
**TOTAL** $4,500,000  

**ASSUMPTIONS:**  
1. For brick type walks in place of the concrete add $1,280,000 to the total cost. Estimated at $320/sq yard.  
2. Other costs may include costs for bonds and insurance, submittals.  
3. The contingency is provided for the variability and unforeseen conditions that will arise due to the conceptual nature of this project at this time.  
4. Police Detail is not included.  
5. Estimate does no include removal and disposing of any hazardous material found.  
6. Provisions for shoring, and unsuitable soils removal and replacement are not included.  
7. Utility estimates may vary with the utility company.