

# UrbanRiver Visions



An initiative of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, Secretary Bob Durand, in partnership with the Town of Athol

Dear Friend of Community Preservation:

UrbanRiver Visions is the Community Preservation Initiative's newest project. The initiative provides community leaders with the tools, information, and technical assistance necessary to help them plan for future growth. This new project represents an important next step because it helps facilitate the community's vision and planning to explore ways in which the downtown can be revitalized using the river as a focal point. All of the initiative's efforts have the same goal, to empower communities to make balanced and forward thinking growth decisions that preserve and enhance the quality of life in our communities and throughout the Commonwealth.

Rivers have long defined the core of many of the Commonwealth's urban areas. The harnessing of these rivers for power and manufacturing characterized the Commonwealth's growth in the nineteenth century as a center for commerce and prosperity. The legacy of this era is reflected in the mill buildings that define the heart of many cities and towns and represent a celebrated element of our built environment. Recently, our communities suffered with several decades of decline in the industries these mills once housed. The legacy of land and water pollution that accompanied earlier industrial development has been a burden to our communities.

Now, many communities are poised to reexamine the role of their rivers as a source of urban vitality, as an amenity, and as an attractor of new enterprises and jobs. UrbanRiver Visions is designed to take these efforts a step further by working with individual communities to help shape their future and reconnect them to the river, making it once again a focal point for commerce and community.

This project defines and provides the framework for reclaiming these rivers as environmental and economic assets, integrating them back into our civic lives. It is a celebration of rivers, communities, and creativity.

I hope that you find the accompanying information useful. Electronic versions of these documents are available on the UrbanRiver Visions web site at [www.urbanrivervisions.org](http://www.urbanrivervisions.org). I wish you the best of luck and I look forward to continuing our partnership as we work to make these dreams a reality.

Very truly yours,  
  
 Bob Durand



## UrbanRiver Visions Athol Charrette: Millers River

The communities of Athol, Chicopee, Easthampton, Hudson, Fall River, Lawrence, and Worcester held charrettes in the fall of 2002 as part of EOEA's UrbanRiver Visions project. After the charrettes, all the communities came together in Hudson on December 19, 2002 to share their visions. Each of the UrbanRiver Visions communities seized this opportunity to define its vision for the future. The visions reflect an overall community consensus about the relationship between the community and its riverfront. These visions represent important starting points that can continue to be refined and modified over time in response to new information, opportunities, changed circumstances, or unforeseen difficulties.

This poster summarizes the findings of the Athol UrbanRiver Visions Charrette that was held on September 28, 2002 at Athol Town Hall. The charrette resulted in a vision plan and action plan that are summarized here. This side of the poster documents community goals, issues, and possible next steps. The reverse side includes a Vision Plan and describes actions needed to achieve this vision.

Additional charrette information is on file at the Athol Planning Department in a project binder that contains verbatim notes from the charrette, copies of powerpoint presentations, base maps, and other technical information.

For additional information, please visit [www.urbanrivervisions.org](http://www.urbanrivervisions.org)

UrbanRiver Visions Consultant Team:  
 EOEA selected Goody, Clancy & Associates and its team of consultants to provide professional assistance to each of the communities in the program. Athol consultant team members also included Maria Van Dusen and FXM Associates.

# Athol Charrette

## The Place

The study area for Athol's UrbanRiver Vision extends along the Millers River between the LP Athol mill complex to the east and the Main Street bridge to the west. This area comprises the heart of downtown Athol, including large industrial mill complexes on either side of the river, the principal shopping district on Main Street, the town hall, the library, YMCA, and post office. On September 28, 2002, charrette participants developed strategies to improve access to the river, to link downtown and the river, and to use changes to the riverfront to enhance the vitality of the downtown area.

## A Shared Vision

Downtown Athol combines a rich industrial heritage and remarkable natural resources and open spaces. Through linking the downtown to the river and by creating walking trails that connect the town's built heritage and natural resources, the community's special character can be highlighted. Capturing this potential will require a patient dialogue and step-by-step approach that engages the entire community.

## Next Steps

- The following steps will advance the vision:
- Create a partnership that brings together diverse constituencies in support of riverfront renewal; form a committee of local experts and volunteers to map and survey the area's assets and resources
  - Research land ownership and initiate discussions with landowners abutting the river and the proposed riverwalk
  - Improve water quality in the Millers River watershed
  - Improve boat access to the river
  - Sponsor public events to celebrate the role of the Millers River in Athol's culture and economy, past and future; encourage participation of local artists and young people

## The Charrette

In meetings preceding the charrette, community leaders identified a number of themes that would be addressed during the event itself. These themes helped to guide the work of more than 40 individuals who took part in the charrette held on September 28, 2002 at the Athol Town Hall. The day-long program included morning discussion groups and afternoon visioning groups. The night before the charrette, many citizens gathered together for a walking tour of the study area and a presentation at the Millers River Environmental Center.



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## Morning Sessions

Small group discussions focused on three core topics:

- (1) connections;
- (2) river use;
- (3) economic opportunities.

Key recommendations are listed below.

## Connections Group

- Create local connections between the river and the downtown by developing a riverwalk between Island Street and Exchange Street
- Open up views of the river from downtown along Island Street, Exchange Street, and other streets
- Create connections to Fish Park, Cass Meadow, and the Environmental Center to the west, Silver Lake and the Tully Mountains to the north, Veteran's Park and the old train depot to the south
- Develop wayfinding signage
- Design the addition to the public library so that it embraces the river behind it and allows patrons to access the river
- Form a local constituency around the ownership and maintenance of a riverwalk and associated recreational amenities
- Map and survey the area's assets and resources
- Encourage restoration of commuter rail between Athol and Boston as well as other public transit improvements that facilitate travel around Athol and along the Millers River corridor
- Change zoning to guide appropriate development of properties along the river

## River Use Group

- Keep the river wild; leave it in its natural aspect wherever possible
- Improve water quality, specifically addressing residual industrial pollution and storm water management
- Enhance the character of the riverbank by increasing vegetation in some areas and opening views in other areas
- Protect and open up views to the river from the downtown, including views of the waterfalls from the Starrett Company parking lot behind the town hall
- Design bridges over the Millers River to reflect the historic character of the area and to provide pedestrian access
- Bring water into the downtown by providing water features such as fountains in parks

- Provide "outdoor classrooms" in open spaces along the river including a future Library Park; coordinate programming with the Millers River Environmental Center, local schools, the library, and the YMCA
- Promote recreational uses of the riverbank and river in identified locations for youth activities, fishing, and swimming
- Support boating by providing access points for canoes and kayaks
- Create festivals to celebrate the river; sponsor other events at a future Library Park on the river

## Economic Opportunity Group

- Promote rehabilitation and reuse of the LP Athol mill complex
- Incorporate new development in existing structures where possible; avoid sprawl and unnecessary development of greenfields
- Support places to eat and sleep since they are necessary to attract visitors to stay in town
- Promote infill development along the length of Exchange Street
- Construct street and landscape improvements to beautify the downtown and make it more attractive for business
- Design any bridge improvements over the Millers River to be aesthetically pleasing
- Support canoe rentals as a new business that will attract visitors to the river
- Explore the feasibility of a water tax between Athol and Orange
- Consider moving the start of the annual River Rat Race to the Exchange Street bridge to bring the race and the fans closer to the downtown
- Promote ecotourism that takes advantage of the natural resources in and around the town
- Start a community college program in the downtown to provide educational resources beyond the high school level and to provide skills needed by local industries
- Change zoning to reflect desired uses in the urban river corridor between the downtown and the river; avoid uses that might be detrimental to water quality or to neighborhood character such as repair shops in floodplains
- Promote the community's strengths by marketing downtown Athol as a "Hub" or gateway to the North Quabbin region

## Afternoon Sessions

In the afternoon discussions, three groups of charrette participants created an annotated plan that outlined their vision. Each of these visions were presented to all charrette participants at the end of the day. The visions contained many shared themes and elements that are listed below. These plans provided the basis for development of the vision plan.

### Group 1

Group 1 focused on the desire to create a riverwalk along the south shore of the Millers River in the downtown. The riverwalk would be bounded on either side by anchor parks. On the other side of the Town Hall, a new "town common" would be created by expanding and renovating Veteran's Park. The group envisioned new restaurants, housing, and industrial uses at the LP Athol mill complex. Marketing and publicity for the area, including signage and a map of resources, were considered important first steps toward realizing the vision plan.

### Group 2

Group 2 agreed that the creation of a riverwalk should be a top priority of the town. This vision also included anchor parks on either side of the riverwalk but did not include a new town common at the site of Veteran's Park. Although the group thought it would be desirable to create a common, it saw this idea as a low priority.

### Group 3

Group 3 concurred with the other planning groups about the need for a riverwalk, a wide green buffer along the river for trails and other recreational use. The group attached great importance to the need for vistas making the river visible from the downtown. Like Group 1, Group 3 suggested that a new "town common" be located at Veteran's Park. In this vision, the space would be used for active recreation. The group also supported the development of restaurants, shops, and lodging in downtown Athol to attract community residents and visitors. The group also discussed ways of celebrating the area's heritage through the creation of trails linking historic places and landscapes.



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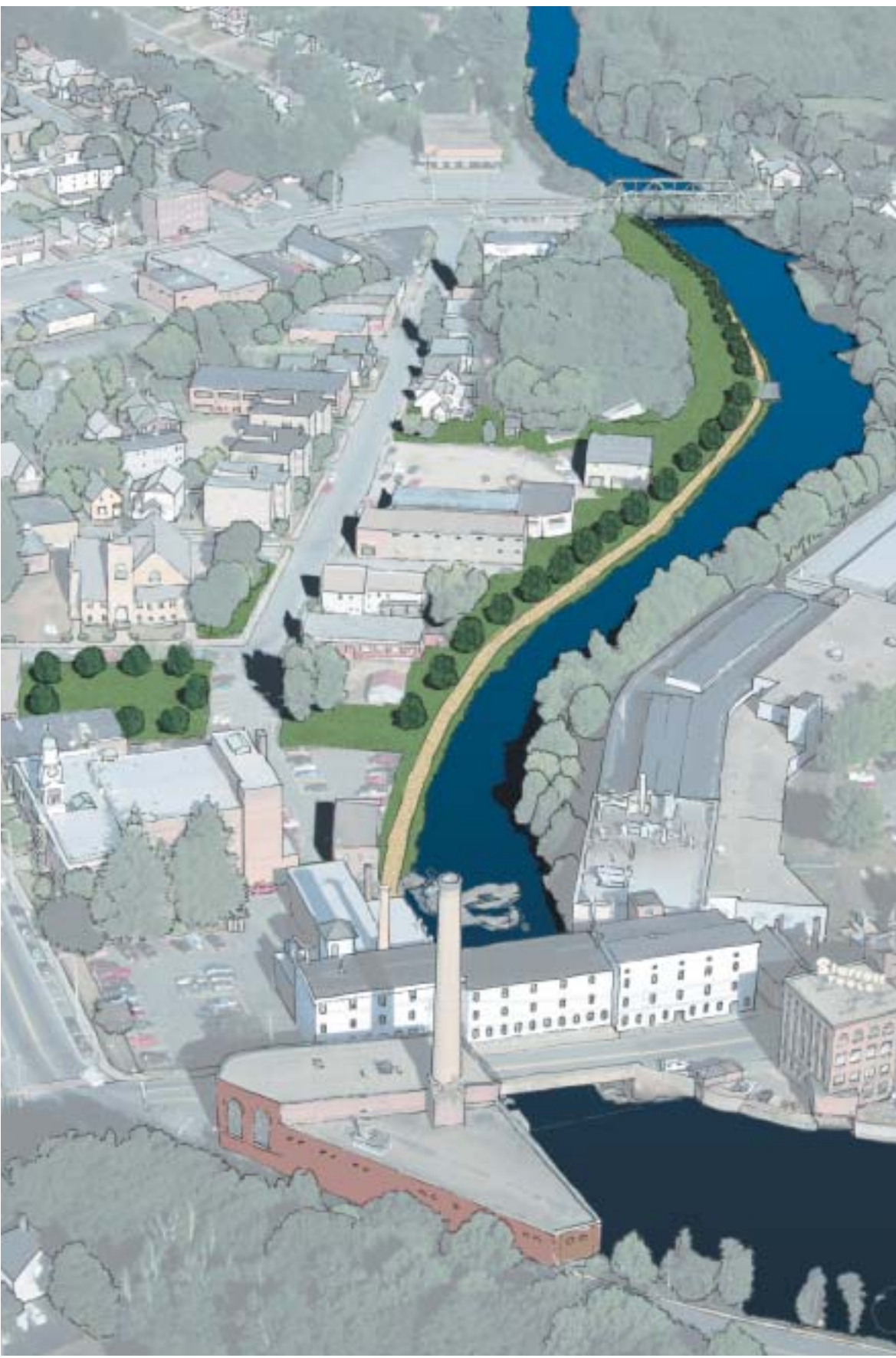


The Millers River is downtown Athol's hidden asset. Currently hidden behind downtown properties, the river links the historic mill structures, public buildings, and unique natural resources that together define Athol's rich heritage and continuing traditions. Strengthening downtown's connection to the river, creating a trail that links historic structures and natural resources, and building new community partnerships that bring together environmental education, tourism, and industry are key elements of the community's vision.



## Create a network of trails and walks that link existing community facilities and environmental resources

Link the Millers River Environmental Center, Cass Meadow, Silver Lake, historic mill complexes, downtown, and the river. Create connections between these places through walking paths, bike trails, and new pedestrian bridges. Prepare a downtown map that highlights these resources.



Open the river to the downtown - create a riverwalk promenade between Town Hall and the Exchange Street Bridge.

# Renewing Downtown Athol: Linking industrial and natural heritage along the Millers River

## Celebrate the renewal of the Millers River

Once polluted, neglected, and sometimes ignored, the Millers River is now being rediscovered as a beautiful community resource. The vision for the river involves preserving its "wild" natural character while significantly enhancing views and access to the urban riverfront within the downtown. Expanded recreational use of the river is also encouraged. Important steps in creating a healthier and more attractive river include:

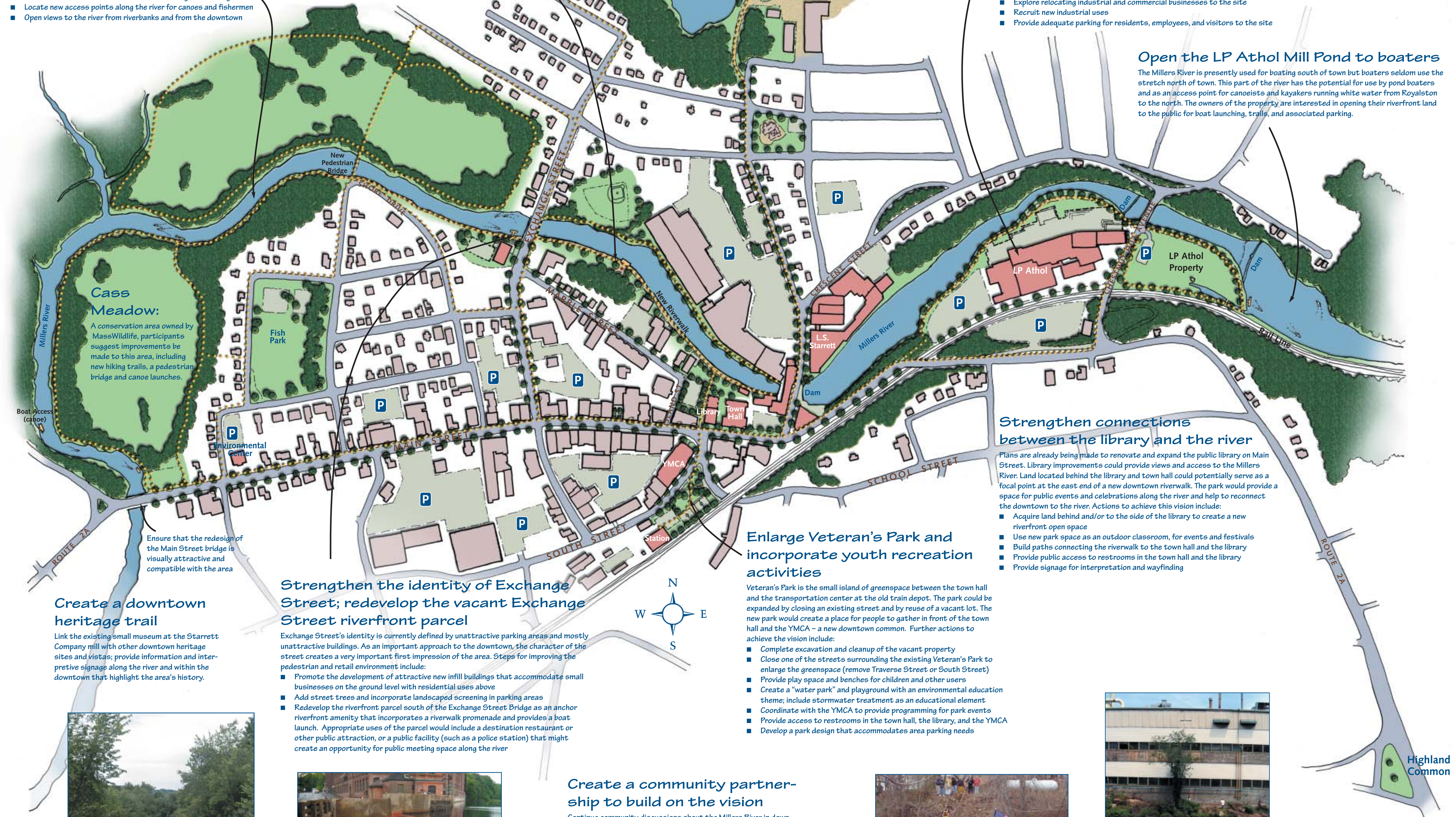
- Improve water quality (long-term goal)
- Preserve existing shoreline vegetation and habitat
- Create trails along both riverbanks where possible
- Install benches and constructed overlooks along the trails
- Increase recreational use of the river for fishing and boating
- Locate new access points along the river for canoes and fishermen
- Open views to the river from riverbanks and from the downtown

## Open the river to the downtown - create a riverwalk promenade

Provide pedestrian access along the riverbank between Island Street and Exchange Street on the south side of the river. A riverwalk will provide a wonderful amenity in the heart of the downtown. Fulfilling this vision will entail several steps:

- Initiate discussions with downtown property owners to discuss the concept and benefits of a riverwalk to individual owners and the town
- Create a Riverwalk Design Committee to advance the plan on the south bank of the river
- Incorporate benches and constructed overlooks in the riverwalk design
- Provide signage for interpretation and wayfinding along the riverwalk
- Dedicate space nearby for parking
- Open views to the river and riverwalk from Main Street in the downtown

Proposed trail connection between the Millers River and Silver Lake



## Promote reuse of the LP Athol Mill complex for a broad mix of uses; strengthen river connections

This property once housed the Union Twist Drill Company which, along with the Starrett Company, formed the engine that drove the area's economy. Union Twist folded and today, the property has a high vacancy level. With frontage on the river, the LP Athol site has great untapped potential to support new economic activity and job creation within Athol. Reuse of these structures represents an attractive alternative to the development of new industrial land outside of town and merits strong public support. The following steps and mix of new uses will help to realize the vision of diverse development at the site:

- Renovate and reuse the mill buildings; identify potential public funds that could support reuse
- Explore developing a destination and theme restaurant on the water
- Undertake selective demolition of unviable buildings to open up the waterfront and use new space for parking and landscape improvements
- Develop new affordable housing
- Explore relocating industrial and commercial businesses to the site
- Recruit new industrial uses
- Provide adequate parking for residents, employees, and visitors to the site

## Open the LP Athol Mill Pond to boaters

The Millers River is presently used for boating south of town but boaters seldom use the stretch north of town. This part of the river has the potential for use by pond boaters and as an access point for canoeists and kayakers running white water from Royalston to the north. The owners of the property are interested in opening their riverfront land to the public for boat launching, trails, and associated parking.

## Strengthen connections between the library and the river

Plans are already being made to renovate and expand the public library on Main Street. Library improvements could provide views and access to the Millers River. Land located behind the library and town hall could potentially serve as a focal point at the east end of a new downtown riverwalk. The park would provide a space for public events and celebrations along the river and help to reconnect the downtown to the river. Actions to achieve this vision include:

- Acquire land behind and/or to the side of the library to create a new riverfront open space
- Use new park space as an outdoor classroom, for events and festivals
- Build paths connecting the riverwalk to the town hall and the library
- Provide public access to restrooms in the town hall and the library
- Provide signage for interpretation and wayfinding

## Enlarge Veteran's Park and incorporate youth recreation activities

Veteran's Park is the small island of greenspace between the town hall and the transportation center at the old train depot. The park could be expanded by closing an existing street and by reuse of a vacant lot. The new park would create a place for people to gather in front of the town hall and the YMCA - a new downtown common. Further actions to achieve the vision include:

- Complete excavation and cleanup of the vacant property
- Close one of the streets surrounding the existing Veteran's Park to enlarge the greenspace (remove Traverse Street or South Street)
- Provide play space and benches for children and other users
- Create a "water park" and playground with an environmental education theme; include stormwater treatment as an educational element
- Coordinate with the YMCA to provide programming for park events
- Provide access to restrooms in the town hall, the library, and the YMCA
- Develop a park design that accommodates area parking needs

## Create a downtown heritage trail

Link the existing small museum at the Starrett Company mill with other downtown heritage sites and vistas; provide information and interpretive signage along the river and within the downtown that highlight the area's history.

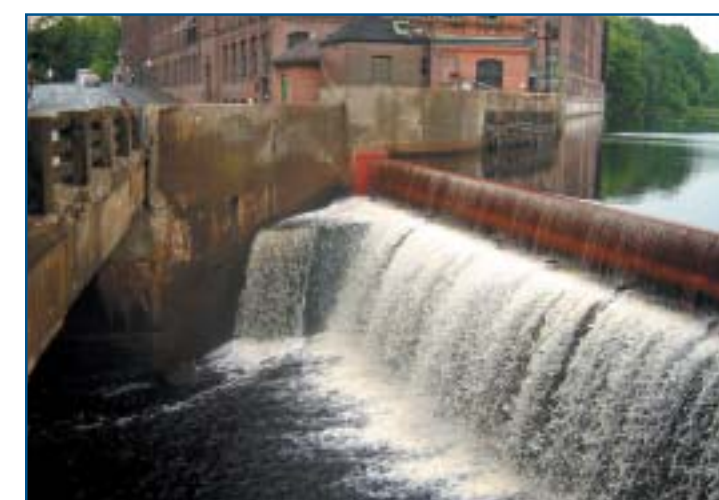


The Millers River looking north from the Exchange Street Bridge.

## Strengthen the identity of Exchange Street; redevelop the vacant Exchange Street riverfront parcel

Exchange Street's identity is currently defined by unattractive parking areas and mostly unattractive buildings. As an important approach to the downtown, the character of the street creates a very important first impression of the area. Steps for improving the pedestrian and retail environment include:

- Promote the development of attractive new infill buildings that accommodate small businesses on the ground level with residential uses above
- Add street trees and incorporate landscaped screening in parking areas
- Redevelop the riverfront parcel south of the Exchange Street Bridge as an anchor riverfront amenity that incorporates a riverwalk promenade and provides a boat launch. Appropriate uses of the parcel would include a destination restaurant or other public attraction, or a public facility (such as a police station) that might create an opportunity for public meeting space along the river



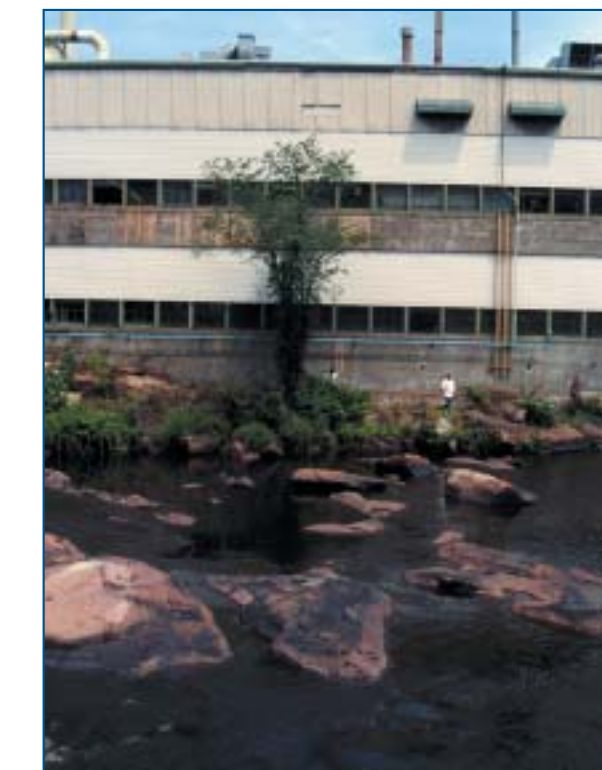
The Millers River runs over the Starrett Dam.

## Create a community partnership to build on the vision

Continue community discussions about the Millers River in downtown Athol. Create a broad-based partnership among environmental groups, town leaders and officials, residents, businesses, and other community stakeholders. Establish a schedule for moving forward with elements of the vision.



Build on the reputation of the annual River Rat Race to expand recreational use of the Millers River.



A family walks to the water's edge to fish the Millers River.