

Introduction and Vision

The rich natural, historic and recreational resources along the Blackstone River in Grafton have provided economic and cultural benefits to the community for generations. The mill villages of Saundersville, Fisherville and Farnumsville developed as a result of the harnessing of the River's power for industrial uses and brought diverse populations and cultures to the region. Over time these villages have experienced many changes and, most significantly, lost their primary economic focus, namely the mills.



Aerial View of the Blackstone River in South Grafton

After decades of decline, towns in the Blackstone Valley are experiencing extraordinary residential growth. Yet most of this development pressure falls on undeveloped farms and woodlands, while the old river villages continue to deteriorate. This is due to many complex factors, including availability of large developable parcels, zoning and regulatory constraints, and perceived market value. What change has occurred in the villages has often come at the expense of historic structures, either after a fire, or when buildings are torn down to make room for parking lots and strip mall development. The result is an accelerating erosion of

the historic character of the villages, together with the loss of the natural and cultural setting that surrounds them.

However, there remains an opportunity -- if action is taken quickly -- to reverse these trends. Indeed, by taking advantage of the unique natural, cultural and recreational resources surrounding the villages, the power of the marketplace can be brought to bear to drive the redevelopment of Main Street. By preserving and reusing historic structures, opening up the river for recreation, and creating a network of recreational trails, while at the same time changing zoning requirements to provide incentives for redevelopment, private investment can be attracted that will take advantage of the value of these resources to create a great place to live and work. The purpose of this Master Plan for the South Grafton Villages is to show how this is possible by providing a comprehensive vision for revitalization of the area, supported with detailed action strategies that the town and its partners can use to implement the plan.

The South Grafton Mill Villages Master Plan has been developed through extensive resource inventory and analysis and an inclusive public participation process. A vision and set of goals were identified that balance the need for the protection of significant resources with vital economic stimulation. The Master Plan additionally provides recommendations and action steps that address issues such as streetscape connections, greenway linkages and stormwater management.

The successful implementation of the Master Plan will need strong public/private partnerships and the dedication of local residents and Town and other public officials to achieve the vision. The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (BRVNH) has long been dedicated to this process at a regional level. They continue to educate and inform valley residents regarding the unique economic, natural and cultural resources that they share. Ultimately, through the preservation and enhancement of the cultural, natural and economic opportunities within the three mill village corridor, South Grafton can reclaim its former character and vitality.