

FINAL REPORT
GRANDLIST TASK FORCE
TOWN OF SPRINGFIELD

AUGUST 2019

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With Assistance of

Town of Springfield: Lister's Office

FOR SUBMISSION TO:

Town of Springfield
Town Manager
Board of Selectman
Planning Commission

REPORT OF
SPRINGFIELD TEMPORARY GRANDLIST TASK FORCE
2019

INTRODUCTION

The Temporary Grandlist Task Force was created in the Spring of 2019 and charged with identifying and investigating areas of chronically suppressed land values in the Town of Springfield, and making suggestions as to what remedies the Town might be able to apply. The Task Force limited its study with the following factors which it took as part of its charge:

- While the Task Force looked at issues in general, it was specifically interested in neighborhoods, so discussion about smaller pockets of blight in the Town was limited.¹
- The focus limited itself to a relatively few areas, although there may well be additional areas in the Town which have suppressed land values (rural areas not served by municipal water and sewer were also not discussed in detail).
- The focus was on remedies which the Town Government had control over, even though the problem may ultimately involve general socio/cultural issues, State or Federal policies² which are adversely impacting the situation. By Town Government the Task Force means the Selectboard, Town Manager and Administration and not the School District.³
- Because of the large residential component of the grandlist, and the attention that has already been given the commercial and industrial sectors, the Task Force concentrated on the residential sector.⁴

In prioritizing the areas and the remedies, the Task Force selected three areas with three slightly differing issues, although all three have been adversely affected by the opioid crisis. They are the Greater Freedom Park Neighborhood, The Valley Street Corridor, and the Union Park Neighborhood. Although all three will be discussed, *the Task Force believes that Greater Freedom Park Neighborhood should be the first area which the Town should concentrate on and prioritize resources to revitalize.* With regards to remedies, various remedies will be discussed – but *it is believed that the most important and the one which should be emphasized and enhanced is enforcement.*

GENERAL CONCEPTS

In general what is depressing residential land values is blight. Blight is driven by a variety of factors and tends to be contagious⁵ in neighborhoods. While blight is by definition the degeneration of an area evidenced by vacant or severe lack of maintenance, drug activity, and a downward shift in market status, its cause is normally economic.⁶ The lack of well paying jobs is of course impacting the grandlist and the school district. Specifically, the distressed economic status of a portion of the residents in an area can have an adverse impact.⁷ The adverse impact reduces the overall land values in the neighborhood and attracts do-it-yourself speculators, problematic landlords, and entities seeking to establish housing for people with addictions, the homeless, or criminal behaviors because of the low cost of the initial acquisition. Because of the lack of capital for the do-it-yourself speculators⁸ and general economic decline of the inhabitants, foreclosures become common frequently leading to prolonged vacancies of houses or apartment buildings which were often already suffering from neglected maintenance.⁹ Maintenance or remediation does not occur during this foreclosure period or after the bank takes possession. Resales of the properties then often go to problematic landlords or entities seeking to establish housing for those having the issues described above. This results in a high concentration of poorly maintained properties and also housing for people with the issues noted above within a neighborhood.¹⁰ The impact of this is a downward spiral of grandlist values.

Springfield is particularly susceptible to this type of grandlist devaluation because of the number of amenities which it provides to a certain portion of the demographic spectrum. It is the location of the largest State contractor for services for rehabilitation, it houses the probation and parole offices, the Division of Child and Family services offices, and the welfare services offices.¹¹

While Springfield continues to be the employment hub of Southern Windsor County, surrounding rural towns have become the residential suburbs or bedroom communities for the Town. As a result, *employment alone does not necessarily address the problem of blight*, although it is a factor affecting the presence or absence of after-work activities which do have the

potential for assisting in addressing blight. In other words, there needs to be something to do after work.¹²

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. *Enhanced Code Enforcement***
 - a. *Town needs to move from a part-time code enforcement officer to a full-time code enforcement officer with specific concentration on vacant building and blight ordinance violations, and nuisance ordinance violations.***
 - b. *Actions should include actions beyond citations to prosecutions, injunctions, and judgment foreclosures.***
- 2. *Continued enforcement of Rooming House Regulations by the Zoning Administrator.***
- 3. *Regular written reports of the Code Enforcement Proceedings to the Selectboard.***

GREATER FREEDOM PARK NEIGHBORHOOD

This area is generally described in the attached map, and includes Furnace, Merrill, Olive, Bacon and some streets connecting with them. This area was immediately and independently identified by all of the Task Force members and the Listers' Office as a distressed area with suppressed land values. It has all of the identifiers indicated by the majority of survey responders of such an area:

- Banks, absentee owners, or problematic landlords holding dilapidated homes or poorly maintained property ;
- Streets and sidewalks needing repair (although the Town is already addressing this problem and may have made substantial improvement by the time this report becomes public)¹³
- Owners unable to afford or unwilling to do property maintenance or repair
- Concentration of housing for addicts, the homeless, and people with criminal behaviors.
- Visible drug trafficking or evidence of addicts or problematic behavior in neighborhood
- Multiple foreclosures in area

The Task Force recommends the following possible actions by the Town Government:

1. *Amendment of the Blight Ordinance to include public parks with child playground equipment.*
 - a. *This would include Freedom Park and much of the identified area.*
2. *Consideration of increased visible police patrolling.*

VALLEY STREET CORRIDOR

This is the portion of Valley Street which leads into the Downtown. This area is adversely affected by trash filled properties, properties which have been burned out and have been in supposed extended repair, and in severe dilapidation. It is also a known drug activity hotspot. It suffers from the following:

- Dilapidated homes/poor property maintenance
- Trash accumulation
- Owners unable to afford or unwilling to diligently complete maintenance or repair
- Visible drug trafficking or evidence of addicts or problematic behavior in the area.

The Task Force recommends the following possible actions by the Town Government:

1. *Commencement of Dilapidated/Unsafe Building proceedings*
 - a. *Town needs to commence specific new actions against several buildings¹⁴*
 - b. *Town need to request Town Attorney to press for foreclosure of judgment liens against properties where demolition has already occurred and the Town has not been reimbursed*
 - c. *Selectboard needs to request monthly progress reports on litigation*
2. *Consideration of increased visible police patrolling.*

GREATER UNION/PARK NEIGHBORHOOD

While this neighborhood was automatically indicated by all the members of the Task Force and the Listers' Office, there was prolonged discussion as to whether to include it amongst the areas

identified. The reason for the discussion was the fact that there is evidence that the grandlist values in the area are in the process of improving and there has been significant improvement to the neighborhood generally and specifically in the area surrounding the Union Street Elementary School. It was eventually decided to list it among the three areas noted in order to keep the momentum in the area going. It continues to suffer or is starting to suffer from the following:

- Absentee or problematic landlords
- Owners unable to afford, or unwilling to do, property maintenance or repair
- Concentration of housing for people with addictions
- Visible drug trafficking or evidence of addicts or problematic behavior in neighborhood
- Undeserved adverse reputation

The Task Force recommends the following possible actions by the Town Government

1. *Town support for neighborhood beautification efforts.*
2. *Consideration of increased visible police patrolling.*

NOTES

¹ Portions of Wall and Litchfield Streets were noted but not included, similarly portions of North Springfield were discussed but not included.

² An example of a Federal Policy having an adverse impact on local neighborhoods is the so-called Section 8 housing subsidy program. In theory, the program pays the landlord a percentage of the rent and the tenant is supposed to pay the remaining portion of the rent. The apparent reality in Springfield is that the landlord is often willing to merely accept the portion the Federal Government pays every month and do that attempt to collect the amount the tenant is supposed to pay. The negative impact is that this keeps the “sticker price” rent high which discourages persons who are not eligible for Section 8 because their income is too high from renting the property and the landlord from renting to them for a lower rent for fear of jeopardizing the Section 8 receipts. The result is fairly high rental rates, but decreasing land values. The Federal Government could reverse this by amping up its audits, but the Town has little or no control of the situation. A similar problem was presented by State legislation where demolition liens were given a lower priority than mortgage liens, which results in banks holding off foreclosures in hopes the Town will demolish the building saving the bank the cost and trouble. This happened with the building directly across the street from Union Street School.

³ Although this report does not discuss school district issues, it should be noted that a majority of the survey responders indicated that the reputation of the school district was having a definite adverse impact on whether young middle-class families with children who work in Springfield decide to buy homes in Springfield. There is a discerned tendency for such families to prefer Weathersfield or other surrounding rural Towns. This appears to be being aggravated by the perceived percentage of problematic children in the schools, poor test scores, and various reported rankings. There was some discussion amongst the Task Force as to whether this had something to do with the District eliminating its separated alternative

education programs. According to the school district, “The Vermont school rankings haven’t been available/updated since 2017 because the Agency of Education has not released to the field school –level data for the last two years” Student growth appears, according to new data, which the public does not have yet, to indicate there has been improvement in language arts and math.

⁴ It was noted, however, that the lack of well-paying jobs was listed in the majority of survey responses as a cause of land value depression. The surveys also encouraged the Town to continue with its improvement of the downtown and to upgrade Clinton Street. It was noted that when the Selectboard takes an active public part in economic development planning and projects that action tends to be greatly accelerated and the Selectboard’s continued public engagement in economic development planning is encouraged.

⁵ One of the reasons why blight is contagious is that it destroys the built up equity in neighboring houses with the result that the homeowner no longer has sufficient equity to obtain home improvement loans, or worse yet, may result in the value of the home declining to a point less than the existing mortgage on the property making it impossible for the homeowners to sell and downsize or sell to someone who can afford to upgrade the home.

⁶ This report does not discuss economic development to any great extent. It is noted, however, that when the Selectboard gets publicly involved in economic planning those plans tend to be implemented more quickly than when this planning is delegated.

⁷ Obviously, the local economy was frequently mentioned as part of the cause for the depression of land values. Specifically mentioned was the lack of jobs paying a sufficient wage to allow homeownership and the proper maintenance of the home. This was a matter of discussion amongst the Taskforce, however, it is a generalized problem for the Town, not one specific to any one neighborhood – although it could be argued that the problem tends to concentrate in certain areas which start a blight spiral. Or possibly, is the virus which triggers the blight spiral.

⁸ “Do-it-yourself speculators” are persons or entities which acquire burned out or severely dilapidated buildings with the intent of remediating, repairing, and renovating the properties themselves. The Town administration has been overly indulgent of such under the reasoning that it is less expensive for the Town to have them rebuild the properties than for the Town to wind up owning them. The problem with this reasoning is that such often results in 5 or 6 year attempts at fixing the problem with a low success rate, and meanwhile the properties are basically a mess and often are eventually abandoned. The adverse impact on the neighborhood is immense.

⁹ This has become an increased problem with mortgages now commonly held by out of town banks or “funds” which secure bonds with the consequence of little or no concern for the impact of their other real estate owned properties on the local neighborhoods.

¹⁰ Housing for the physically disabled or mentally impaired does not appear to have a negative impact on land values, however, housing for those with substance abuse issues frequently does have a negative impact. The problem is exacerbated by the State’s unwillingness to resolve the funding issues necessary to properly supervise and monitor such facilities, and its heavy reliance upon medicated therapies with an extremely high recidivism rate. HUD has started to recognize that the over concentration of facilities of this type even if supervised properly fail to achieve the therapeutic goals which were the aim and have referred to this as institutionalizing neighborhoods. Springfield does not necessarily have the institutionalized problem because the concentration that developed were of rooming houses which were nearly completely unsupervised or monitored and not uncommonly devolved into known drug activity hotspots. Employment opportunity at a living wage does not guarantee revival of residential areas

directly, but it is likely to spark improvement in the supply of after work activities which in turn may aid in revival of neighborhoods.

¹¹ While the decline of the community is often attributed to the presence of the prison, the Task Force believes it is more accurately attributed to the rise and location of local amenities for the economically distressed without a concurrent rise in economic opportunity.

¹² Lack of after work activity is something that keeps reappearing in surveys. The concern here is whether we are losing young upwardly mobile middle-class families to surrounding Towns, and the perceived need to start competing for the this younger 20/30 crowd with facilities which attract them and keep them in Springfield besides work.

¹³ It should be noted that in general throughout the Town there is a problem with failing to eliminate weeds which grow in the crevices between the street and the curb, the curb and the sidewalk, and in cracks in the sidewalks which sends a message of the Town having seen better days and hurts property values overall.

¹⁴ This area is particularly plagued with "do it yourself" speculators who have not finished repair of burned out or severely dilapidated structures which have become eyesores to the area, and general health and safety problems.

APPENDIX

Interview Responses

Neighborhood Maps
(with the assistance of the Springfield Lister's Office)

Crime Map
(with the assistance of the Springfield Police Department)

Residents' Opinions about Springfield's Grand List - June 2019 Report

I. Overview

Twelve people were interviewed for this report. The following areas were represented: Summer Street, Union Street, Cottage Street, Pine Street, Herrick Street, Spring Street, Olive Street, North Springfield (in town), and rural Springfield.

Five of the twelve people believe their home is worth less than the same home in a different neighborhood within Springfield, three of them believe their home is worth the same as a home in a different neighborhood within Springfield, and four of them are not sure. Three of the twelve people consider their neighborhood to be at risk for decreasing property values, four of them believe that is not the case for them, and five of them are not sure. The majority of responders rated the town services as appropriate.

The following themes repeatedly arose in almost all of the interviews: eyesore properties of all types; poor performance stats of the school district; financial issues as outlined under headings below. Details and more themes follow, with opinions listed from highest to lowest frequency.

II. Factors Influencing Number of Renters Versus Home Owners

- Too few jobs that are nearby pay enough to support a family. (all but one responder cited this one)
- Dilapidated homes/poor property maintenance. (significant majority of responders)
- Poor visual appeal of downtown. (significant majority of responders).
- Poor school performance statistics are readily available (significant majority of responders)
- Streets needing repair. (majority of responders)
- High proportion of transient or low income people for unspecified reasons. (majority of responders).
- High number of troubled, transient, or lower income folks needing to live here to be near their social service providers. (majority of responders)
- Local taxes and water/sewer costs too high. (many responders)
- State taxes too high. (many responders)
- Not enough things to do.
- Visibility of troubled folks instill fear or distrust in potential buyers. (e.g., visible drug exchanges)
- Poor reputation of Springfield. People don't want to invest in it.
- Poor reputation of Springfield. People from nearby towns think it is worse than it is and don't want to even be associated with it (negative buzz rather than positive buzz).
- Bad impression due to poorly maintained buildings on Clinton Street, empty store fronts and a thrift shop on Main Street.
- Inconsistent cell phone and internet service eliminates young people from considering purchasing
- Vacant houses.
- We're a prison town now.
- When specifically asked if the availability of non-profit services was a negative or positive factor, half of the responders said it was a positive factor and half said it was a negative factor. (The question was inadvertently omitted for 2 responders.)
- We're a bedroom community for blue collar employees from surrounding economic areas. Our real estate is tied to this and therefore more volatile with ebbs and flows of more intensity.

III. Factors Influencing Values of Properties Owned:

- Dilapidated and poorly maintained properties bring down values of other properties (significant majority of responders).
- Streets in disrepair. (significant majority of responders).
- Absentee or slum landlords. (significant majority of responders).
- People want to fix up their properties but don't have the money to do so and their income exceeds the guidelines for help from low income resources. (majority of responders).

- School District performance stats are low, so people may not want to pay much for a house here.
- Supply exceeds demand - too many houses for sale.

IV. Along with the factors listed above, the following additional ones were noted for distressed neighborhoods:

- An even higher proportion of visibly troubled people.
- Outside mess caused by overflow of belongings due to inadequate storage space inside.
- An even higher number of people who don't make enough money to fix up their properties but earn too much money to qualify for subsidies.
- Negative buzz within Springfield (residents thinking a neighborhood is worse than it is).
- We are attracting marginal people from other states; e.g., people in NH are cut off from benefits, then they come here for affordable housing and benefits. This is a state-wide issue that has hit Springfield more than most towns, perhaps because we are a hub, and has hit distressed neighborhoods even more than other neighborhoods.

V. Additional Comments on transitional housing/rooming houses:

- A significant majority thought such housing is a negative influence on the grand list because too often they are poorly maintained properties, violate ordinances (e.g., visible trash), or draw downtrodden or troubled people who might otherwise not live in Springfield.
- All responders thought these types of specialty housing are a necessary accommodation for some folks.
- All responders except one thought transitional housing should be officially regulated by the town unless it is regulated by another official entity.
- Three reasons were given for the need for town regulation:
 - Safety of residents
 - Housing standards
 - To ensure they are not all concentrated in one or two neighborhoods.
- A majority thought specialized housing like this should be possible in all neighborhoods. Three did not, or the question had been inadvertently omitted. Those who did not think it should be possible in any neighborhood noted that they did not believe it should be confined to too few neighborhoods either.
- Keep the rooming houses and other specialty housing at a consistently below a saturation point in all neighborhoods.

VI. Additional comments on the schools:

- Many potential buyers will not consider buying in a town where the performance standards are low. Springfield is eliminated right away for these buyers.
- The school district's focus needs to change from the emphasis on merely getting students through high school to fostering academic achievement and innovation.
- The schools are teaching our students to be beggars, rather than innovators or entrepreneurs.
- High functioning students are not getting what they need. Cutting back on programs is a mistake.
- Cutting Advanced Placement classes is a mistake, as they are essential for the students who want to attend a private college.
- The good teachers are not getting adequate support.
- Leadership problems need to be addressed.
- A negative attitude about passing the school budget suggests people do not value the schools.
- The schools should be pushing tech, not the arts.
- When we lose students, the per-student costs increase, which in turn impacts property taxes.

VII. Possible steps the town government could take to improve the Grand List:

- Continue to work toward the downtown vision. (significant majority of responders)
- Continue improving the looks of neighborhoods. (majority of responders)
- Take a more active role in getting businesses here and helping to sustain them. (majority of responders)
- Work with Montpelier to amend the laws that make it more difficult for businesses to settle in Vermont. (many responders)
- Make it a priority to enforce high standards through regulations and ordinances to maintain properties and dispose of trash. (many responders)
- Develop cash incentives to help local working people to fix up their properties. (e.g., a donation fund)
- Repave roads and sidewalks that are unsightly.
- To fight public apathy:
 - Set term limits on BOS and School Board members
 - Encourage or insist town employees to be active in the community
 - Talk informally with people on a regular basis to let them know what's going on. Get out into the neighborhoods. Find out why people aren't more interested.
 - Provide opportunities for residents to learn about town committees and how they can get involved.
 - Offer an info session on how to get involved.
 - Always respond to residents' emails.
- Develop state and town incentives for business to come here (e.g., tech support, economic development grants, whatever you can think of).
- Don't start new projects until the current ones are completed.
- Create a sense of community.
- Raise the property tax rate on vacant buildings.
- All town officials, as well as any other entities being paid with property tax dollars, need to be both more approachable and more transparent. People don't know what's going on which builds further apathy.
- Promote pride in efforts to reduce climate change.
- Promote pride in taking care of our citizens.
- Encourage retail on Clinton Street.
- Advocate with the state to have the fire safety inspections to maintain safety/health standards for tenants in slum conditions or rooming houses, or else make it something we enforce. Landlords need to be in compliance with FP211
- Find solutions for the vacant spaces and bring them up to date.
- Find ways to reward people for fixing up their property (e.g., the Curb Appeal Challenge).
- The backs of the downtown buildings need to be painted in the back

VIII: Specific suggestions regarding "marketing" Springfield:

- Interview blue collar and semi-professional workers in order to find out what they would like to see in a school system and town. And then make it happen.
- Make a real estate brochure about Springfield and get it out there.
- Use a simple visual to explain to them that even with high property taxes, they will pay much less for their home in Springfield. Their mortgage will be lower than it will be in just about any other Vermont town.
- Marketing niche: find the "real" Vermont town that is central to everything with "real" people who work and live and value the Vermont life. Don't try to be a small town or quaint village.
- We're a hub and always have been. It worked for us in the past. Reframe the fact of being a treatment hub as an extension of that history.
- Change the marketing strategy emphasis from gentrification to bringing business here.
- Just making the downtown look more attractive won't work.

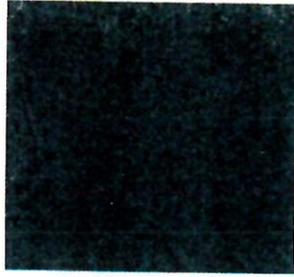
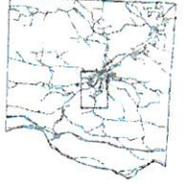
IX. Steps individual residents can take to improve the Grand List numbers:

- Maintain your property and improve its curb appeal. (significant majority)
- Be more involved in your community. (significant majority)
- Volunteer. (majority)
- Get involved in town activities/issues. (majority)
- Get involved in school activities/issues. (many)
- Stay positive and talk positive. (many)
- Support or donate to the nonprofits that are helping people.
- Stop posting negative remarks about Springfield on Facebook as it breeds the negativity we are trying to combat.
- Do small projects in your neighborhood.
- Do projects along the lines of Neighborhood Watch.
- Shop in Springfield
- Stop criticizing your neighbors. Help them 1 on 1.

X. Other comments:

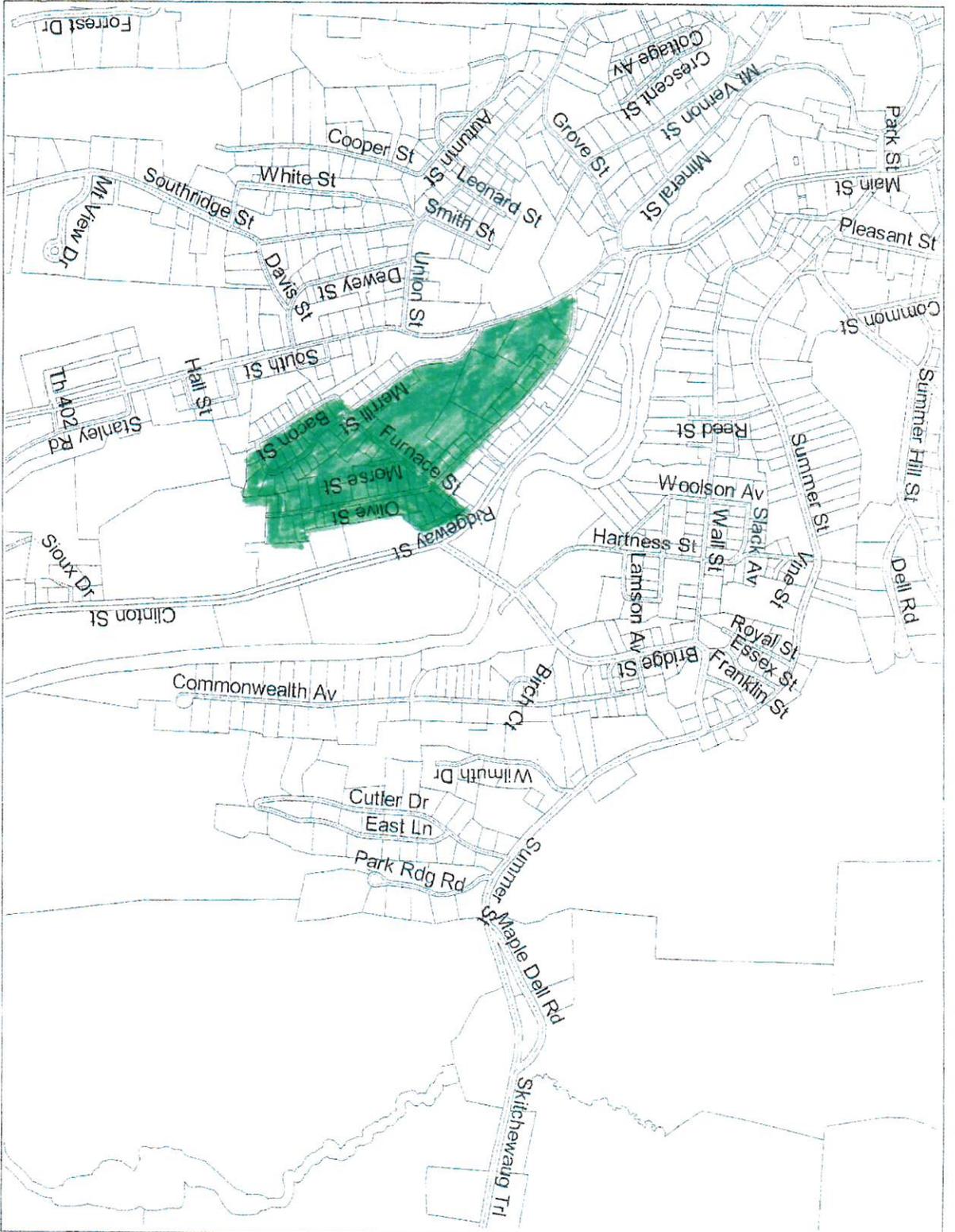
- The second home real estate market in towns near Springfield have been hurt by slope side development and Air BnB's. In contrast, our real estate market is tied to the economic fortunes of businesses in other areas.
- There are lots of good things happening – dilapidated buildings are being torn down, businesses are sponsoring events, green spaces are appearing downtown. (Two people expressed disdain for the bump-outs though.)
- A mistake has been made in not supporting a full hospital here.
- Before settling for a medical clinic and emergency room, the hospital should be marketed to a private company.
- School taxes are high due to high number of students with disabilities.
- There are jobs: people just don't choose to buy here.
- We lost more machine tool business than we had to – one went to Claremont and is successful and employs people.
- A depressed area leads to drug use: drug use does not lead to depressed areas.
- The downtown being actively worked on is obvious, which promotes a feeling of competence.
- Various kinds of substance abuse have been in this town for decades. People in factories often took alcohol or drugs to ease their physical pain.
- Kudos to the Fire Department and Parks & Recreation Department.
- Kudos to BRIC and the SDRC.
- Indoor and outdoor recreational opportunities were noted as a positive factor on home sales and values.
- We need the right people in the statehouse or we don't have a chance
- Reasons offered for why low income or troubled people do not buy homes:
 - It's less complicated to rent.
 - They do not have the financial resources to obtain a mortgage
 - They do not understand it can be cheaper to own than rent.

Property Location

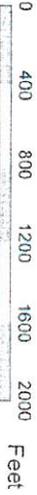


Furnace Street

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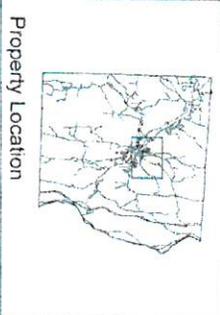


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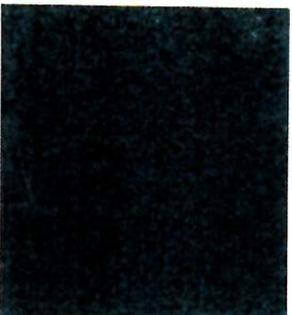


Printed on July 12, 2019



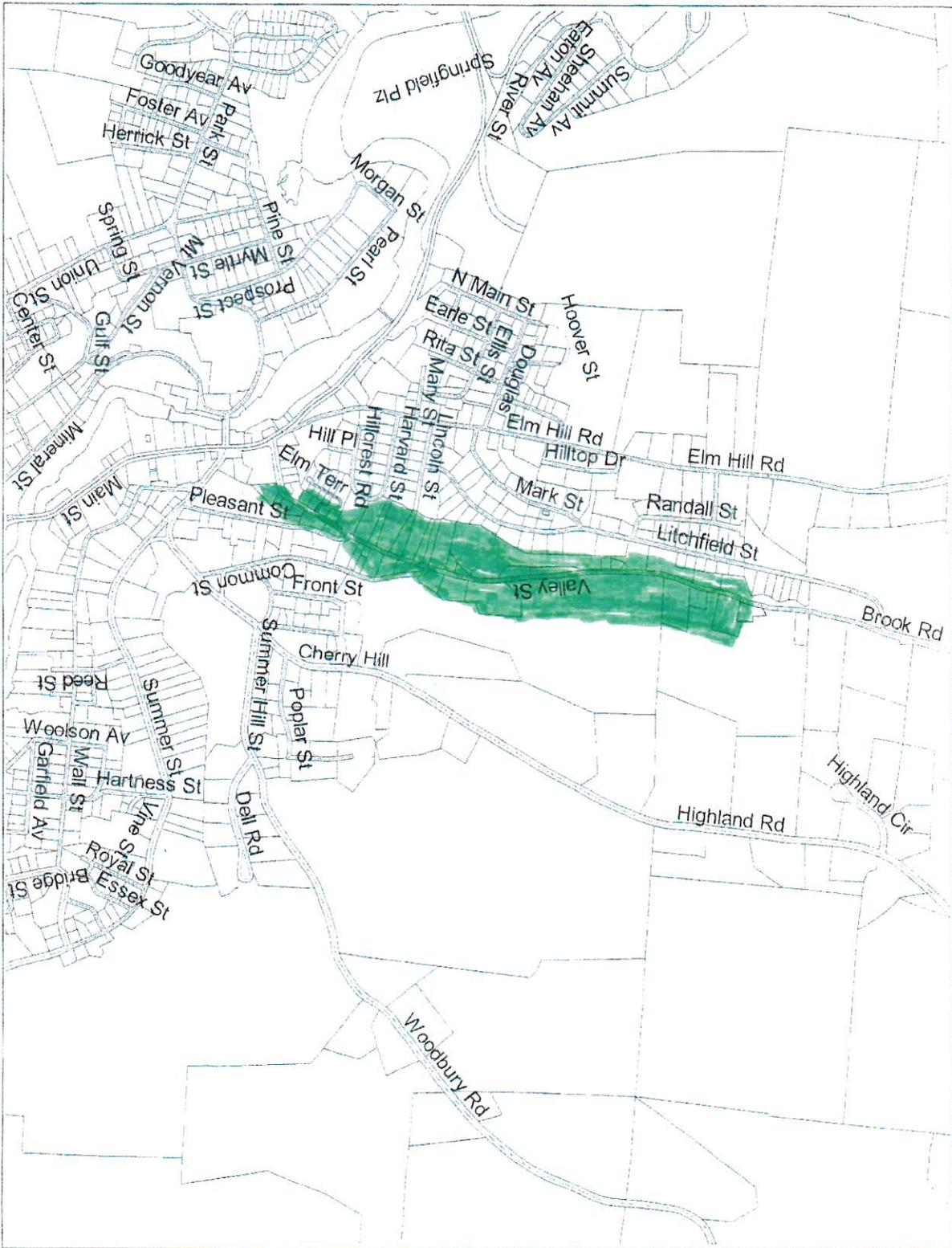


Property Location



Valley Street

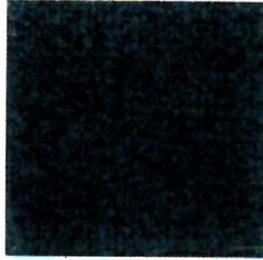
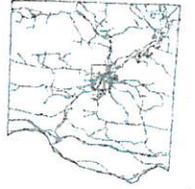
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Scale 1:11,440
1 inch = 953 feet



Property Location



Union Street

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Scale 1:6,820
1 inch = 568 feet



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McNaughton Crime Mapping

Center St Area - Assault.csv

★ All items

Center St Area - Domestic

★ All items

Center St Area - Drugs

★ All items

Valley St Area - Assaults

★ All items

Valley St Area - Domestic

★ All items

Valley St Area - Drugs

★ All items

Olive St Area - Assaults

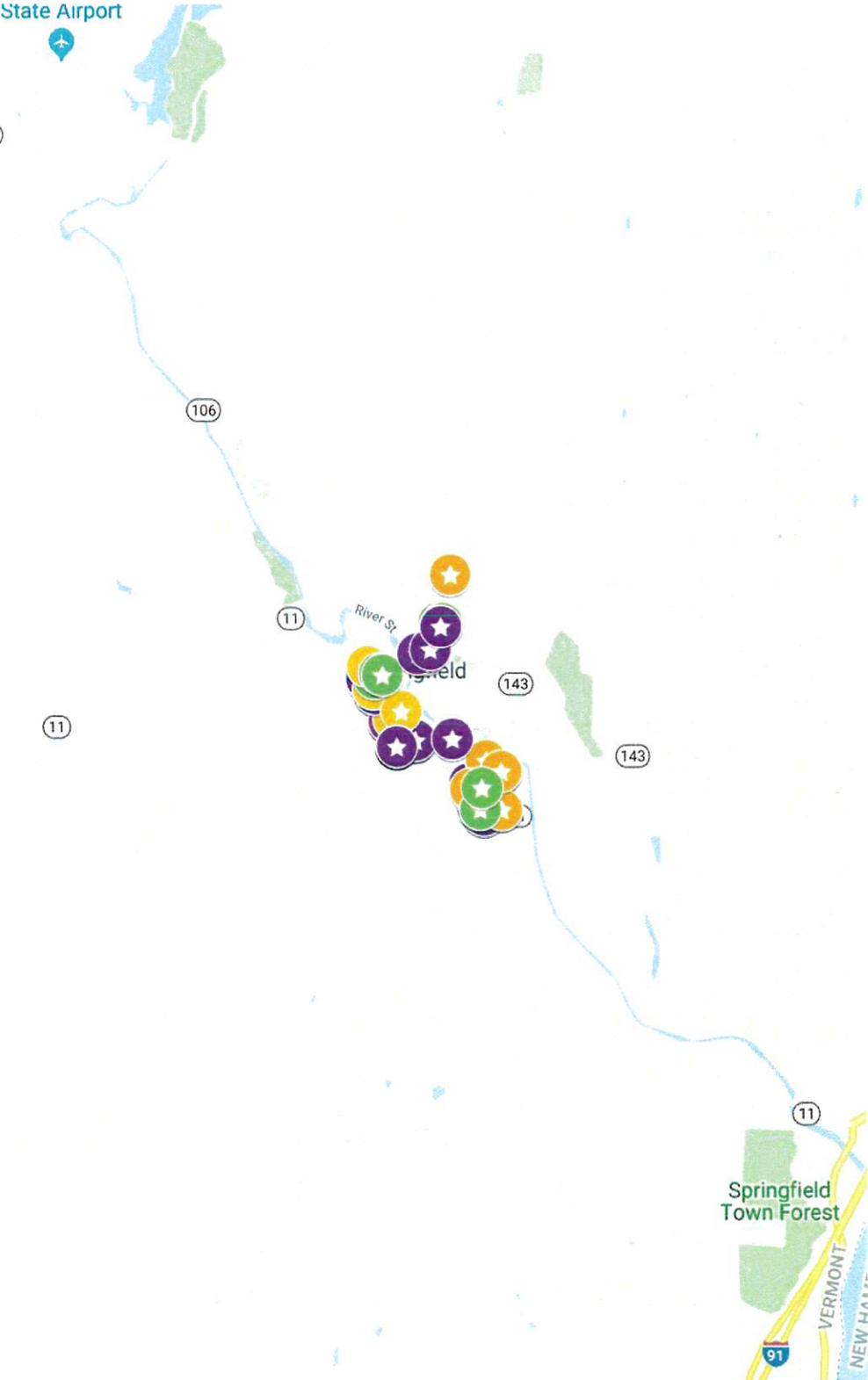
★ All items

Olive St Area - Domestic

★ All items

Olive St Area - Drugs

★ All items



McNaughton Crime Ma... Q

Center St Area - Domestic

All items

Center St Area - Drugs

All items

Valley St Area - Assaults

All items

Valley St Area - Domestic

All items

Valley St Area - Drugs

All items

Olive St Area - Assaults

All items

Olive St Area - Domestic

All items

Olive St Area - Drugs

All items

