

CHARLESTOWN COMMERCIAL AND VILLAGE DESIGN STANDARDS PUBLIC OUTREACH



REPORT SUBMITTED BY LIBRA PLANNERS
DECEMBER 1, 2023

CHARLESTOWN COMMERCIAL AND VILLAGE DESIGN STANDARDS PUBLIC OUTREACH

Views of the public meeting November 27, 2023 at Charlestown Town Hall.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On November 8, 2023 the Charlestown Planning Commission held a public outreach event to solicit the views of residents regarding design standards for new commercial buildings in Charlestown. Town staff organized and publicized the meeting, which roughly 75 residents attended. Libra Planners produced a slide presentation, and a series of posters to inform the public on the nature of Design Standards and to facilitate discussion on residents' attitudes concerning new commercial development. In addition, Libra produced and made available an online survey. The Commercial and Village Design Standards Subcommittee Chairwoman and Town Staff contributed to the online survey content and development. Meeting attendees filled out the survey through a QR code and the survey remained open to the Charlestown community for another three weeks. 139 persons took the survey through November 27, 2023. In addition, informal written comments on various questions were collected during the meeting.

This report summarizes the survey results of the six posters presented at the outreach event and included in the survey materials, along with the other questions presented in the online survey. In addition, it summarizes the real time notes entered by the outreach attendees on noteboards in the venue. The complete results of the online survey are included in this report as an appendix.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Libra Planners prepared the survey and this summary with essential input from Commercial and Village Design Standards Subcommittee Chairwoman Frances Topping, Town Planner Jane Weidman, and Town staff. Jan Lombardo contributed greatly to the success of the event by organizing and encouraging community participation as well as providing pizza and refreshments.

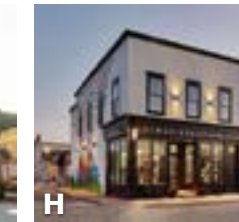
POSTERS

GENERALLY, THE ANSWERS ARE CHARACTERIZED BY WORDS LIKE “RURAL”, AND “VILLAGE”, INDICATING A CONSENSUS FOR MAINTAINING THE PRESENT RURAL CHARACTER OF THE TOWN.

POSTER 1 THE DISTRICTS

For the first set of pictures give your opinion on what areas, if any, would be appropriate for the building shown. Please refer to the map poster for the district locations. (Choose all that apply.)

- 1: Village Commercial
- 2: General Commercial
- 3: Traditional Village District (TVD)
- 4: Scenic Highway Commercial
- 5: Not in Charlestown



POSTER 2 BUILDING DESIGN

How appealing or appropriate for Charlestown are these commercial development designs?

- 1 = very unappealing, 2 = mostly bad, 3 = neither good or bad, 4 = mostly good, 5 = excellent design

With a sticky note or on the app please add any other or more specific comments on the buildings.



**POSTER 3
SITING**

Siting refers to how buildings are placed on a lot, and how they are accessed. Consider elements such as landscape buffers, walkways, and parking location.

Please rate how appealing or appropriate the siting of these buildings are for Charlestown.

1 = very unappealing, 2 = mostly bad, 3 = neither good or bad, 4 = mostly good, 5 = excellent design

With a sticky note or on the app you may add any other comments on the buildings.



**POSTER 4
BUILDING ELEMENTS**

How would you rate this building on the design elements listed below, from 1 (very unappealing) to 5 (excellent design). (This question is easier to answer on the survey app.)

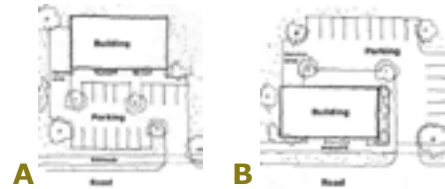
- 1 - Roof form
- 2 - Materials (color, type)
- 3 - Breakup of mass (setbacks, change of height, etc.)
- 4 - Window size & shape
- 5 - Porch, awnings, or overhangs
- 6 - Architectural features (dormers, trim, light fixtures, level of detail)
- 7 - Connection to exterior



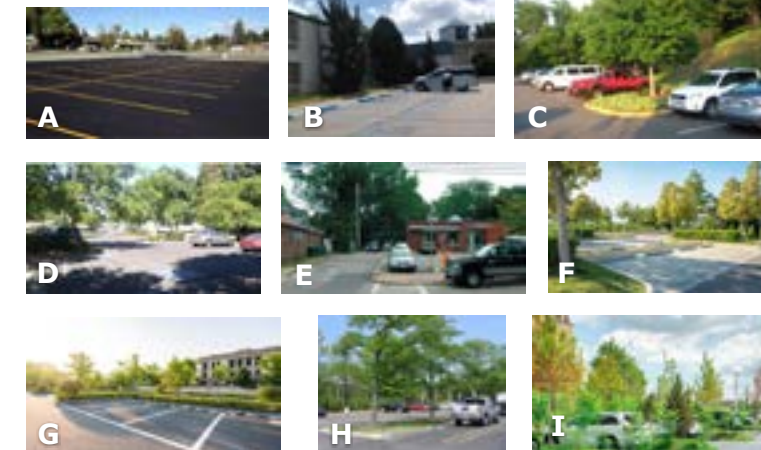
**POSTER 5
SITE DESIGN**

Which of the parking diagrams at right do you think is better?

A or B

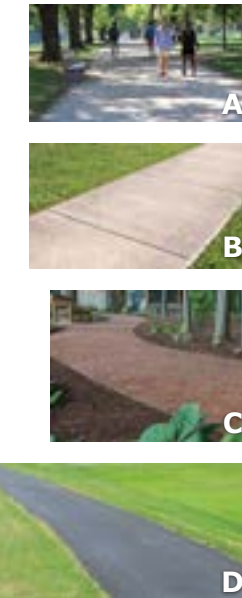


Please rate these parking lot designs from most to least desirable.
1 = very undesirable, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = excellent design



Please rank your preference for the sidewalk materials below for commercial areas in Charlestown.

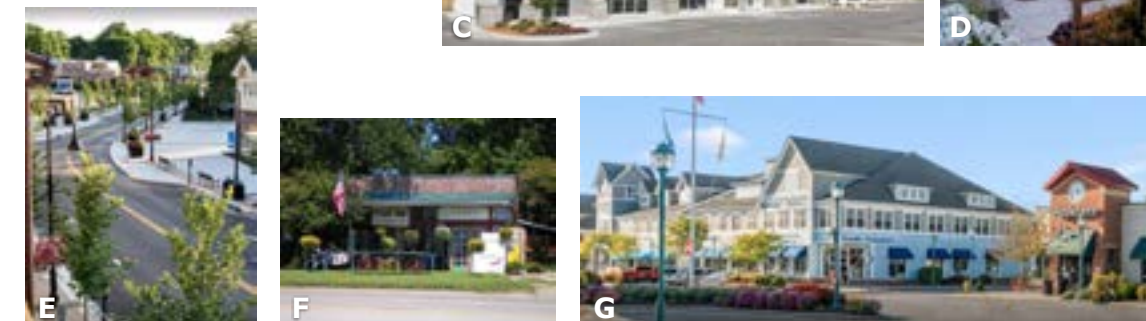
1 = very undesirable, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = most desirable



**POSTER 6
SITE LANDSCAPE**

Please rate these landscape pictures from 1 (Don't want to see in Charlestown) to 5 (Very much want to see in Charlestown)

What features cause you to rate a landscape highly? With a sticky note or on the survey app please write three words or phrases that describe a good landscape for commercial sites.



SURVEY RESULTS

APPROPRIATENESS FOR LOCATION

Poster 1 shows photos of various commercial buildings (not from Charlestown) and asks which of the commercial zoning districts, if any, those buildings might be appropriate (Appendix pgs. 2-5). The zones included are Village Commercial (Carolina, Shannock, and Cross Mills), General Commercial (various locations), Traditional Village District (eastern end of the Post Road), and Scenic Highway Commercial (Route 1). Respondents also had the choice of “Any commercial zone” or “Not in Charlestown”. The Figure 1 below shows the photos that had more positive responses.

These buildings are characterized by traditional pre-modern architectural styles. An exception is Building G, which while not particularly traditional, has a barn-like quality that may be perceived as appropriate to Charlestown’s rural character. Generally these buildings were rated appropriate to any commercial district.

The remaining five buildings pictured (Figure 2) had decidedly more negative ratings. 49-62% of respondents said Buildings B, D and F were not appropriate for Charlestown, with the “modern” Buildings D and F the least acceptable. Building B, while employing traditional architectural elements, scored poorly, perhaps because of the large-scale 3-story massing. Those respondents that assigned these buildings to districts considered them most appropriate for General Commercial or Scenic Highway Commercial.

The survey solicited other comments on these images (Appendix pgs. 5-7). The answers ranged from “None of the styles fit within Charlestown. Charlestown does not need commercial development”, to “All but one of these images would be a huge improvement to Charlestown architecture which is now very lacking,” or “Supportive of commercial businesses in properly zoned areas.” Generally, the answers are characterized by words like “rural”, and “village”, indicating a consensus for maintaining the present rural character of the town. A few respondents stated that the standards should not become cost prohibitive for future development

Positively rated examples of commercial architecture



BUILDING RATINGS

Poster 2 asks respondents to rate various buildings against each other (Appendix pg. 8). Again, traditional or barnlike styles scored highest, including Buildings C, F, and H. One very “modern” looking building, G, however, received a moderate rating, suggesting that if scaled properly, a more contemporary approach to design should not be ruled out for some areas of Charlestown.

The most important characteristics for a successful building (Appendix pg. 9) were deemed to be “Architectural features (windows, level of detail, trim, etc.), “Overall mass and height”, and “Colors and materials”, in that order. Less important were “Siting”, “Breakup of building mass”, and least important “Roof form”. These are all issues that can be addressed in the Design Standards.

BUILDING SITING

Poster 3 shows different approaches to building siting, or how buildings are placed on a lot, and their relationship to entry and parking (Appendix pg. 10). In the survey, the highest rated photo, Site C (in Tiverton Four Corners) shows a building set back from the road and nestled in trees. Site D, the second highest rated, shows small scale buildings flanking a brick paved pedestrian zone (Brick Market Place in Newport), similar to Site G, which is also rated highly. The lowest ratings go to Sites A, F, and H, where asphalt paving extends close to the building. These examples suggest that the Design Standards should promote a separation of parking and structures by landscaping, without sacrificing convenience for drivers.

DESIGN ELEMENTS

Poster 4 shows photos of buildings and asks respondents to rate the building based on a series of design parameters, such as roof form, materials, etc (Appendix pgs. 11-14). In the survey results, for these questions there was not a definitive parameter that stood out as most important. However, there were differences in the overall ratings of different buildings. The highest ratings for all categories were received by Q20 and Q22 (Appendix pgs. 13 & 14). These designs make the most use of traditional elements, such as dormers, and residential scale windows. The next highest score was received by the barn-like Q16 (Appendix pg. 11) characterized by large bracketed overhangs. Q17, Q18, and Q19 (Appendix pgs. 11-12) scored similarly, and make use of traditional building elements and detailing. The lowest scores were received for Q21 (Appendix pg. 13), a flat roofed rectilinear modern building with large expanses of glass, and Q23 (Appendix pg. 14) a strip mall building. While this building shows effective breakup of mass, and scale reducing elements like awnings, it may be perceived as too “generic” for Charlestown.

In the survey, Poster 4 was followed by an open-ended question: “Are there any building characteristics that are either very important to see in certain locations in town, or very important to exclude from certain locations? Other comments on these images?” Without trying to summarize all the responses (Appendix pgs. 15-18), the following are some of the more typical points of view. Some respondents do not see the need or desire for commercial development at all, such as “We do not want any commercial development in Charlestown. Are you listening?” or “Don’t need anymore commercial buildings in Charlestown.” There is a plurality against large buildings, and anything over 2 stories, if that. Traditional style is preferred by most. Natural traditional materials such as wood siding, shingles, or brick, and not vinyl, or metal, are noted several times.

These comments are echoed by the sticky notes attendees made responding to “What’s your favorite building material?” Those answers include wood, stone, cedar shingles, and post and beam. Another noteboard asked about vinyl siding, and allowed attendees to put stickers along a scale from Yes to No Way. 68% of the responses were at the No Way extreme, 12% at the Yes end, and 20% in between, suggesting a clear preference against vinyl siding.

The respondents were not universally opposed to any building deviating from traditional styles however. When asked “Should new construction maintain a similar style to older traditional buildings?” 54% answered “Yes”, but 45% entered “Not always” or “No” (Q40, Appendix pg. 46). The answers were more unequivocal about building height, with 82% of respondents favoring a maximum of two stories (Q43, Appendix pg. 47).

There is very little resistance to solar panels on commercial buildings, with 53% willing to allow them if not prominently visible, and 41% believe the town should permit them always. Only 6% would not allow them at all.

LANDSCAPE AND PARKING

Poster 5 asks questions about site design. The first figure (Appendix pg. 19) concerns parking location, with one scheme showing parking between the road and the building and another with parking behind and to the side. Parking behind was preferred by 77% of survey respondents.

The second figure, Q26, shows four sidewalk materials. Crushed stone and exposed earth tone aggregate are preferred over concrete or asphalt. As for whether sidewalks are needed in Charlestown, when given the opportunity at the public meeting to place stickers on a scale from Yes to Not Really, 54% chose Yes, 25% chose Not Really, and 21% chose Maybe.

The last figure in the survey has 9 photos of parking lots (Appendix pg. 20). The scores were positively related to the number of trees and other landscaping interspersed among the cars. Clearly the respondents preferred parking lots with islands of landscaping, visually breaking up the paving.

Poster 6 shows more general views depicting the relationship of buildings to landscape (Appendix pg. 21). Consistent with other responses, the highest rated images show buildings surrounded by extensive greenery. One exception that scored highly in the survey is Q28 Photo A, a view of Brick Market Place in Newport. Brick Market Place is characterized by one and two-story buildings flanking a pedestrian walkway paved in brick. The lower scoring images show more

typical suburban landscapes with extensive paving near the structures.

In the survey, these questions were followed by the open-ended “What features cause you to rate a landscape highly? Please write three words or phrases that describe a good landscape for commercial sites.” (Appendix pgs. 22-25) Typical answers were “Quaint, village, beachy” and “Low traditional buildings with green landscaping” (see word cloud below). Clearly, respondents desire an abundance of trees and other plantings, and an overall natural looking approach to landscaping.

A significant majority of respondents are in favor of providing shade trees, bushes and flowers around new commercial developments, along with sidewalks, benches, trash receptacles, and bicycle racks, in that order of preference (Q42, Appendix pg. 46).



WALKABILITY

The question of “walkability” has come up repeatedly in discussion with town residents. Q32 stated “I would like to be able to walk along Route 1A in Cross Mills and the TVD and shop.” 61% of respondents agreed with that statement, suggesting a significant majority would like to have sidewalks and other pedestrian amenities along the eastern end of Route 1A. (Appendix pg. 25) Along those lines, Q37 asked “Is a gathering space in a commercial area important to you, such as a small outside area to sit or chat?” 64% of respondents answered “Yes” to that question. (Appendix pg. 45)

Bicycle access might be considered along with walkability. Here the responses are less clear. Only 22% said that they often or sometimes biked to shops or other activities, while 47% said they never do. On the other hand 31% replied that they might bike if there were safe bike lanes (Appendix pg. 45).

FAVORITE BUILDINGS

Charlestown residents do have some favorite existing buildings in town, as evidenced by responses to Q33 (Appendix pgs. 26-30). Those that appear most often are: General Stanton Inn, Cross Mills Library, Charlestown Liquor, A. B. Hoxie building, Quonnie Farms, Mills Creek Gift Shop, Dave’s Coffee, and several others. Some of these are older buildings, some newer, but all share a traditional rural character, in keeping with the views expressed throughout the survey responses.

Q35 asked “What do you value about the look of Charlestown and its commercial zones?” These answers (Appendix pgs. 35-40) reiterate many of the points already summarized, namely an emphasis on rural character, small town feel, and traditional building style.

DEVELOPMENT TO AVOID

Q34 asked “What I do not want to see in Charlestown is:” and the answers are consistent with maintaining the rural character of the town and avoiding the suburban commercial development of the larger Rhode Island towns towards Providence. Particularly concerning are “Big Box” stores, fast food stores, chain stores, strip malls, and large commercial buildings (Appendix pgs. 30-35). At the public meeting, one noteboard asked about franchises, and the clear majority put stickers indicating their preference under “No way”.

Relatedly, Q36 asked “What do you not like about the look of Charlestown and its commercial zones?” (Appendix pgs. 40-44). Many of the answers regret new chain commercial buildings, such as Cumberland Farms. Another common complaint is the numerous run-down or abandoned buildings (although these existing structures may not be in the purview of the Design Standards). A few respondents would like to see more walkability, and more of a village center. This would suggest that planning concentrate on more pedestrian access along the TVD.

Q44 and Q45 are also related. 81% of respondents said “No” to whether “corporate-style” buildings should be allowed in Charlestown, and 48% said “No” to corporate chain stores even if they were housed in traditional style architecture.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

At the public meeting, a noteboard asked “What thoughts do you have that we haven’t asked about?” The answers were similar to many we’ve mentioned above, including “Quality and beauty of living in Charlestown,” “Culture of the people, homesteaders, rural, rustic, organic lifestyles.” One person wrote “Ask if folks feel Charlestown is already sufficiently developed.” Another wrote “Clustering businesses to create a walkable business district,” to which someone added “great idea, second this.”

The last question in the survey asks to “Please enter any final comments that you would like the design standards committee to receive.” We won’t attempt to summarize those here, but they will be carefully considered during the process of formulating the Commercial and Village Design Standards for Charlestown.

