

**Missed Opportunities for Town-Gown Planning in Amherst:
Evaluation of U3 Final Report to the TGSC**
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OVERVIEW

The Town-Gown planning process has been a very positive exercise, and the U3 consultants were regarded as ideally positioned to provide much needed new perspectives and data for planning in our college town. Many TGSC members agreed that, unfortunately, the final U3 report was disappointing in its format and lack of detail, and that many important opportunities for moving UMass and Amherst forward together were missed. We believe that the U3 report failed to provide new perspectives that could broaden future planning discussions, and lacked any clear evidence-based rationale for its prioritized recommendations. Our aim here is to highlight missed opportunities and provide an evaluation of the U3 final recommendations. The overall goal is to help broaden future Town-Gown planning discussions so they can better serve all members of the community and advance Amherst's future as a vibrant college town.

Amherst is not just another college town. With a total population of ~38,000 and an enrolled student population of ~30,000, Amherst has one of the highest student "impact factors" of any college town in the USA¹ (see data on last page of this report). An unusual Amherst feature is the continued existence of healthy family-friendly neighborhoods on the periphery of our large state University, an asset that has been lost in many other college towns due to the growth of large rental districts (e.g. State College, PA is now ~ 80% rentals).

As we move toward new **housing development** options for Amherst, an especially nuanced and multi-tiered planning approach is needed to preserve our year-round neighborhoods if we are to avoid transitioning into a predominantly rental community. The final U3 report failed in this regard, focusing instead on broad concepts while ignoring Amherst-specific data, potential impacts on existing neighborhoods, and best practices from other College towns. In the area of **economic development**, U3 put forth valid but overly conceptual ideas for enhancing the positive impact of UMass and UMass-based entrepreneurship on the Amherst economy, and did not provide insight targeted toward Amherst's unique location and size relative to this particular flagship state university. We support the TGSC efforts to expand economic planning beyond the issue of housing, and recommend a more coordinated (between UMass and Town) **future joint planning structure** for economic development than was presented in the U3 report. We endorse the idea of a new joint planning committee (UTAC), but urge a different structure that ensures inclusion of the key stake holders needed to ensure a process that receives broader support from Amherst's citizens (see below).

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES IN THE U3 REPORT (explained in more detail below)

The U3 final report failed to:

- 1) Define different types of mixed-use development and distinguish between undergraduate housing and non-undergraduate housing.
- 2) Explore private development options along University Drive for new student entertainment and activity venues.
- 3) Provide impetus for the Amherst campus to lead the UMass system in developing Public Private Partnerships (P3s) as a solution to student housing needs.
- 4) Consider the value of family-friendly periphery neighborhoods to town, UMass, and residents and provide information on successful approaches used by other college towns to prevent the conversion of year-round neighborhoods across town to student rental districts.
- 5) Ensure joint Town/Gown input on future economic planning and development options by establishing a mechanism for community input, including broad UMass expertise, as part of a new public economic development function.
- 6) Help Amherst move toward data-driven/evidence-based joint planning that considers the true impacts on neighbors, quality of life, a 12-month economy, etc.

¹ Student "Impact Factor" defined as the percentage of college/university students in urban areas.

Here we expand on these “missed opportunities” (pp. 2-4) and evaluate the U3 recommendations (pp. 4-5), expanding on alternate approaches needed to slow “family-flight” to adjacent communities and allow Amherst to continue as a college town that integrates non-student and student residents.

1. Define different types of mixed-use development and distinguish between undergraduate housing and non-undergraduate housing.

- I. Analysis of this important distinction is missing from the final report despite clear discussion during the TGSC process pointing to its importance. Recent legal precedent in Massachusetts supports a clear definition of student housing, allowing new planning options that were startlingly absent from the U3 report.
- II. Information on how ownership structure can affect the occupancy and management of undergraduate vs. non-undergraduate mixed use development was missing, as were data indicating the different impacts that these two types of mixed-use housing have on the college towns and neighborhoods.
- III. Even a recommendation to explore this important distinction and how it could impact Amherst would have provided an impetus for potentially transformative planning discussions.
- IV. Explore examples in other college towns bordered by large research Universities, in which undergraduate “mixed use” attracts the same, or different, commercial opportunities, when compared to professional, adult and family-based “mixed use”.

2. Explore private development options along University Drive for new student entertainment and activity venues.

UMass administrators, Amherst citizens, and perhaps most importantly UMass students, clearly described the need for new student entertainment venues. As part of the Student Village concept, University Drive (between Amity Street and Route 9) could be an ideal site for a student-centered retail and entertainment district. This area already contains a large number of businesses that benefit from the availability of land and proximity to UMass. Notably, the Amherst Brewing Company may have begun a trend in this direction by relocating from downtown to University Drive.

It is important to explore whether the “growth opportunities” for a student village along University Drive would open opportunities for businesses in the Amherst downtown to focus on clientele other than undergraduate students – and reciprocally, whether the development focus on undergraduates in the business downtown would preempt growth opportunities for a twelve-month, professional and family clientele.

3. Provide impetus for the Amherst campus to lead the UMass system in developing Public Private Partnerships (P3s) as a solution to student housing needs.

While publicly embracing the concept of Public Private Partnerships, the Amherst campus has been reluctant to push the idea of P3s due to considerations involving the 5-campus UMass system. The TGSC process provided a well-timed and unique opportunity to develop the P3 concept for Amherst and thus help propel this discussion. In evaluating the potential for P3s in Amherst, U3 instead chose to focus on general challenges to this approach rather than presenting new information that could help guide planning. As an example, the U3 August presentation referenced a mixed-use P3 development in Davis, CA, indicating that the involvement of a public institution in public-private partnerships 1) allows control of tenancy and 2) ensures proper management of residences over the long term. These two elements are critical for undergraduate mixed-use developments to succeed. This and other important information is missing from the final report.

Senator Stan Rosenberg has indicated that a “good” P3 plan could be implemented immediately if brought forward by the UMass Amherst campus. We urge that the Amherst campus take the initiative by preparing a clear P3 plan. We believe that the P3 idea can be fast-tracked through the five-campus University system if it is understood to be a “priority pilot” for the P3 concept statewide. Strong advocacy of a P3 solution by the U3 consultants could have helped bring this key option forward in the very near future.

4. Consider the value of family-friendly periphery neighborhoods to town, UMass, and residents and provide information on successful approaches used by other college towns to prevent the conversion of year-round neighborhoods across town to student rental districts.

All agree that family homes in college towns across the country are being converted to student rentals due to market pressures, a challenging issue that requires significant expertise to deal with. In their initial presentation to the TGSC, the U3 group (esp. the Corneil Group) described their expertise in “edge” issues, with an emphasis on neighborhoods on the periphery of universities. Once hired, however, U3 failed to present meaningful information on year-round residential periphery neighborhoods, whether and how these are beneficial to the town and university, whether they can realistically be preserved given current market conditions, how neighborhoods in other college towns have fared, and best-practices used by other towns to preserve neighborhoods.

Other college towns have embraced a variety of new approaches for stabilizing neighborhoods that the U3 consultants would be expected to share with Amherst. One example is a “minimum distance between student rentals in residential neighborhoods” zoning bylaw that has been effective in Newark, Delaware and other college towns. Neighborhood residents explained some of these approaches to U3 and emphasized the need for expert input on these and other opportunities, but any discussion was absent from the final report. Instead of providing a nuanced plan that incorporates good ideas that have worked in other college towns, U3’s final report reverted to a focus on the single most contentious development project that has led to major gridlock and distrust between town government and its citizens.

5. Ensure joint Town/Gown input on future economic planning and development options by establishing a mechanism for community input, including broad UMass expertise, as part of a new public economic development function recommended by TGSC.

Considerable expertise exists on the UMass campus (e.g. the Donahue Institute) that could be engaged to help Amherst evaluate development opportunities. U3 had a unique opportunity to help us define the key problems that face college towns, and to frame these questions in a way that would allow us to engage local expertise to help Amherst and UMass become national leaders in college town planning. For example, the value of focusing on 9- vs. 12- month economic models for downtown and University Drive could make a fascinating study that would have major impacts across the country. Another example is an analysis of the economic benefits and impacts of P3 approaches to development. The TGSC raised many important questions (e.g. tax implications of P3s) that were well within the expertise of U3 to answer. U3 missed the opportunity to help us define the key issues and suggest ways to gather the information needed to move forward in a rational/evidence-based way.

6. Help Amherst restore trust across disenfranchised constituents and move toward honest, data-driven/evidence-based joint planning that considers the true impacts of different development options on neighbors, the quality of life, a 12-month economy etc.

The Town/Gown planning initiative was met with considerable enthusiasm across a range of Amherst citizens, represented by 50% funding (\$30,000) by Amherst Town Meeting. Many saw the potential of bringing in outside experts on College Town planning for providing unbiased perspectives and clear evidenced-based recommendations that could be widely embraced. Central to this was a request in the RFP for “impact analyses” for different development options. Unfortunately, most of the U3

recommendations focused on pre-existing plans, including highly contentious development proposals that have failed to move forward in Amherst, while failing to provide any real impact analyses or a discussion of what these analyses should entail based on knowledge gained from other college towns. As a result many Amherst citizens and town meeting members have expressed misgivings about the contributions U3 has made to town planning.

A lack of public trust in the Amherst planning process was a major discussion among TGSC members early in the process. Buy-in from the community will be key to the success of the new University Town Advisory Committee (UTAC), yet the make-up of the UTAC proposed by U3 excludes key constituencies whose inclusion would be important if public trust in the process is to be established and maintained, including members who represent neighbors, renters, low income households, and town meeting representatives with alternate views on planning. While this can certainly be corrected moving forward, this is another case where the U3 report missed the opportunity to develop new strategies for helping UMass and Town work together toward common goals.

EVALUATION OF THE U3 REPORT WITH SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1) **Prioritize the University Drive student village option (Page 21 of U3 plan).** *Developing this UMass land as an undergraduate student village with some academic/flex research space is the most promising new idea in the report. By defining undergraduate mixed-use development, locating students on campus near existing residences and facilities, and allowing proper management and oversight, this option promises to reduce impacts on existing neighborhoods while helping meet critical demand for student housing. Overall, this location and additional locations on campus land are ideal for students and mitigates impacts on neighborhoods.*

We also recommend UTAC explore the development of University Drive between Amity and Rte 9 (University Drive Corridor) as a student-centered business district including entertainment venues, a key need expressed in the TGSC process.

- 2) **Explore Mass Ave Alternative 1 (Page 17): Mixed use with graduate and upper-classman housing, active first floor with blend of start-up / research space and retail.** *This recommendation closely follows the UMass master plan and could provide undergraduate and graduate student housing. By being located on UMass/State owned land this site allows proper management of residential housing and thus could be developed in a way that may be compatible with the adjacent historic neighborhoods. We strongly oppose the surprisingly detailed recommendation to open dead end streets presented in Alternative 2; no data are cited, and this would have significant negative impacts on periphery neighborhoods, outweighing the unspecified and likely minor benefits.*
- 3) **Form a University Town of Amherst Collaborative, UTAC (pages 63, 64).** *UTAC is a good idea and the makeup of this committee is critical to its success. The (surprisingly) detailed membership recommendations from U3 is imbalanced and lacks key stakeholders, including those representing renters, neighbors, and low-income households. To allow for this broader representation we suggest that the UTAC committee have 1 rather than 4 student representatives, and perhaps a slightly larger membership overall.*
- 4) **Hire an Amherst Director of Economic Development (page 66) and establish a Town economic development committee that will consult with UTAC.** *Coordinated Town-Gown planning in the area of economic development could greatly enhance Amherst's future. As part of the TGSC process, this function needs to be carefully structured to ensure input from UMass, duly constituted Town bodies, and the public at large. The new economic development **position in tandem with a new business development committee consisting of members of the public** (including UMass), would encourage and work with developers early in the development process to better allow the long-range public interests of the Town to be fully explored. A regular advisory relationship for UTAC would ensure accountability in a joint town-gown planning process. As important, the*

University should encourage its Schools, Colleges, academic departments and other academic units to explore ways to initiate the creation of job opportunities and startups for UMass graduates, perhaps as research projects in the senior year as well as post-graduate opportunities. The town economic development office could then provide a central resource for these initiatives.

- 5) We urge that the remaining U3 recommendations be taken off the table pending significant modification and cost-benefit analyses. As proposed by U3, these recommendations would likely accelerate the loss of our remaining family friendly periphery and downtown neighborhoods, negatively impacting year-round residents and the year-round economy:
- I. *Mass. Ave. Alternative 2 (page 18): “Neighborhood grid complete and made “public” to eliminate dead end streets”*: It is unclear from the presentation how the “neighborhood grid” would be completed. Periphery neighborhoods remain viable and family-friendly at the moment, but already bear a huge burden of traffic, as well documented by previous town traffic studies that were not referenced in the U3 report. Good planning recommendations cannot be generated when available data are ignored and obvious impacts/consequences are unaddressed. Continued degradation of quality of life in these neighborhoods might be acceptable only if the Town and UMass decide the periphery should be converted into a student rental district, something U3 has not suggested and we would strongly oppose.
 - II. *North Pleasant Corridor (page 24) • Infill housing at the Gateway site with active uses on North Pleasant for faculty and staff, residents, and students, • Mixed use commercial, retail, housing, office space, coworking space on commercial site at Kendrick Park*: This rehash of the unsuccessful Gateway proposal fails to address the major issues that made the project untenable both politically and practically. U3 provided no information on how different **types** of mixed-use housing developments are affecting other college towns, or best practices for occupancy and management. The one exception to this lack of analysis was a mention in the August presentation that careful management by UC Davis (as owners) was essential for the success of a similar development in Davis, CA. During the Amherst Gateway study we learned that proper ownership and management was critical to the success of a similar project in Dartmouth, NH. Citizens and neighbors would likely support development on this site if it were directed toward non-undergraduate mixed use housing managed by UMass (or through a P3 with clear tenancy guidelines) to serve University faculty and staff, town employees, families, etc. Without this element in the plan, the recommendation will garner the same vigorous opposition as the earlier Gateway proposal.
 - III. *North Amherst [sic] Housing (page 27)- Redevelopment of North Village Apartments for graduate / family housing*: Amherst citizens provided compelling information to U3 that the recommended development just north of campus (not in “North Amherst” as the report states) would disproportionately affect low income housing in Amherst. There is no indication that this important consideration was included as U3 made their recommendation; thus the recommendation needs to be re-examined in this context.

CONCLUSION

We hope that these comments can help the TGSC and future UTAC explore plans that are more representative and inclusive of current Amherst stakeholders, and help restore trust in Town-Gown planning to move Amherst toward a better future. An emphasis on evidence-based planning and impact analyses can help address housing needs without destabilizing existing twelve-month residential neighborhoods, thus allowing our town to continue to integrate both students and year round residents. Better coordination of economic development initiatives could help us realize the huge economic potential inherent in our large University and attractive college town.

Appendix: Proportion of College Students in Different College Towns (Student Impact Factor)

Amherst, MA* 77% (~29,000 students/37,819 residents)

Newark DE* 62% (~19,500 students/31,545 residents)

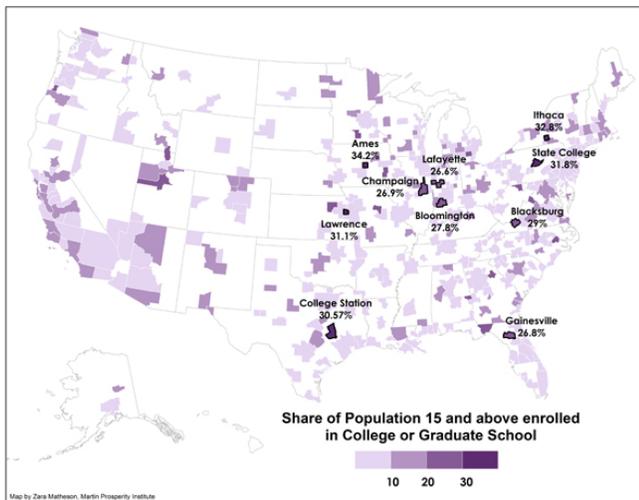
*From Amherst Safe and Healthy Neighborhood Working Group Documents

Comparison data: from “America’s Leading College Towns”

(Richard Florida, 2012, The Atlantic Citylab Magazine).

www.theatlanticcities.com/arts-and-lifestyle/2012/08/americas-leading-college-towns/3054/

City/Town	% Enrolled Students	City/Town	% Enrolled Students
Ames, IA	34.2%	College Station, TX	30.5%
Ithaca, NY	32.8%	Blacksburg, VA	29%
State College, PA	31.8%	Bloomington, IN	27.8%
Lawrence, Kansas	31.1%	Gainesville, FL	26.8%



Map showing percentage of undergraduate and graduate students in US cities, from the article cited above. "Kevin Stolarick, research director at the Martin Prosperity Institute, crunched U.S. Census Bureau figures on people age 15 and above enrolled in private college, public college or graduate school based on data from the 2010 American Community Survey. The MPI's Zara Matheson mapped these numbers."