

# MEMORANDUM

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**To:** Elizabeth Hude  
Harwich Interim Town Planner

**From:** Phil Dascombe, Glenn Cannon                      **Date:** February 25, 2009

**Re:** Harwich Center Technical Assistance

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## **Introduction**

The Harwich Interim Town Planner has requested technical assistance from the Cape Cod Commission staff to help the Town of Harwich re-create community interest in revitalizing Harwich Center. The assistance requested includes an evaluation of transportation and land use issues in the area, and visualizations of how changes made in Harwich Center could further the town's efforts to make a more vibrant village center. This memorandum is intended to provide a summary of the Commission staff's findings and some suggested strategies that the town could consider as the community moves forward with the planning process for the area.

The Town of Harwich has initiated several efforts aimed at improving Harwich Center and achieving a more cohesive and attractive destination for the town. The town aims to draw upon the studies completed to date and bring together interested stakeholders to implement a vision for the area. Most notably, the Harwich Center Initiative Committee prepared a report with the assistance of the Cecil Group in February 2000 (*Final Report for The Harwich Center Initiative*), that identified opportunities and constraints and broad recommendations. The technical assistance provided by the Commission staff builds on and updates the information provided in this report, and attempts to prioritize steps to implement the plan.

For the purposes of this memorandum, Harwich Center is generally limited to the area bounded by the Cape Cod Rail Trail, Oak Street, Bank Street, Parallel Street, Forest Street and Pleasant Lake Avenue (Route 124). However, for context adjacent areas are discussed and illustrated in the attached figures where appropriate. Harwich Center is anchored at one end by the village "core" (which includes the area immediately surrounding the intersection of Route 39 and Route 124) and at the other end by several municipal uses (including Town Hall, Library and Brooks Park). In between these two "anchors" is a mix of commercial retail and offices, residential uses and the Verizon telephone exchange building.

## **Goals for Harwich Center**

The Town of Harwich wishes to create a plan that will stimulate the economic vitality of Harwich Center and improve the area visually and functionally that results in a walkable, sustainable, vibrant and cohesive village. To achieve this goal, the town seeks to build upon the existing fabric and road networks of Harwich Center in a way that attracts visitors and encourages walking, biking and activity in the area.

Typically, village centers are more densely developed parts of a community that are easily accessible from surrounding areas and generally have a cohesive development pattern that creates a strong identity and “sense of place”. Successful New England villages typically have a mix of uses that encourage interaction between residents, visitors and workers and establishes activity at different times of the day. Generally, town centers are pedestrian oriented, provide abundant street level interest and amenities and are locations where vehicles are travelling at slower speeds and where pedestrians and bicycles are prioritized over automobiles. Consequently, an important component for the success of any village is the existence of a safe and well connected pedestrian and bicycle network that facilitates non-automobile activity.

Harwich Center has many characteristics that lend themselves to re-establishing a strong village identity and which can provide continuity for revitalization efforts. Regional roadways (Route 39 and Route 124) provide excellent access to the area and the presence of the Cape Cod Rail Trail to the immediate north is an amenity and source of visitors to the area. However, for a variety of reasons, many vehicles pass through the center rather than stopping in the area as a destination. The designation of Route 124 as a truck route also brings large commercial delivery vehicles into the center that conflict with safe pedestrian and bicycle movements. The signage at the bicycle trail is also minimal to the extent that it is likely that passing cyclists are unaware of the village center destination and amenities immediately adjacent to the trail. In addition to the established civic and municipal uses in the area (i.e. town hall, library, community center, Brooks Academy), Harwich Center includes several historic buildings that have a unique local character and provide pedestrian oriented commercial space. However, Harwich Center also includes several auto-oriented uses that do not support pedestrian activity (gas stations in particular) and has a reasonably poorly defined streetscape. These factors tend to create “barriers” to safe and convenient pedestrian activity and a reduce visitor’s desire to linger and spend time within the area.

One primary reason for the town to revisit efforts to revitalize Harwich Center is the current need for both wastewater and roadway improvements in the area. The Harwich Public Works Department will need to make drainage repairs in the vicinity that will trigger road and sidewalk repairs. This provides an opportunity to replace the existing infrastructure and create a design more conducive to a successful village. In addition, the lack of wastewater infrastructure in the area serve as a limit on some existing uses and a disincentive for certain new businesses to locate in the center (particularly restaurants). The town is also in the process of evaluating wastewater infrastructure improvements in the area to address this need, which may require construction in the area. This would also provide an opportunity to further the Harwich Center vision.

## **Transportation**

### *Pedestrian/Bicycle circulation*

The viability and vibrancy of any village is dependent on its ability to attract people to the area and to provide a walk-able environment that encourages interaction and activity

at the street. A critical element to establishing this kind of physical environment is to move away from automobile dependence and to instead provide a safe and efficient means of getting around either on foot or by bicycle. It is therefore important to have a well connected and logical pedestrian and bicycle network. To evaluate the network in Harwich Center, the Commission staff conducted a survey of the existing sidewalks, crosswalks and bicycle pathways in and around the downtown area to update the information presented in the *Final Report for The Harwich Center Initiative*. The existing sidewalk/bicycle survey is shown below in **Figure 1**.

The analysis of the existing pedestrian/bicycle circulation identified several deficiencies in the current network that the Commission staff believe should be addressed by the town and is illustrated in **Figure 2**. These improvements include:

- Develop a Sidewalk Improvement Plan to enhance the downtown area. This plan should include:
  - Completing the sidewalk network in the village by providing new and upgraded sidewalks as shown in Figure 2. This includes re-aligning the sidewalks on the eastern side of Pleasant Lake Avenue, and providing a more formal pedestrian/bike connection through the town hall parking lot and between Parallel Street and Main Street.
  - Provide additional crosswalks at key locations to facilitate pedestrian circulation. This includes crosswalks at the intersection of Route 124 and Main Street. Crosswalks should be stamped concrete to more clearly define the pedestrian domain within the street and should also include sidewalk extensions (bulb-outs) at crossings on Route 124 and Route 39 to narrow the road width and slow traffic as well as provide safer refuge for pedestrians crossing major roads.
  - Help define Harwich Center's identity by providing consistent sidewalk treatments throughout the core of Harwich Center, such as continuing the brick sidewalk already present. It may be financially challenging to put brick sidewalks throughout the area, however, Commission staff believe that having a consistent sidewalk treatment within the core would support the area's identity.
- Develop a Bicycle Circulation Improvement Plan (could be combined with the Sidewalk Improvement Plan above). This plan could include:
  - Improve bike connections between the bike path and the village. The bike path/rail trail is an excellent recreational amenity for the area, but its economic value may not have been fully realized in Harwich Center. Signage and linkages to the village from the bikepath are poor and could be improved. Measures that the town should implement include:
    - provide a marked crosswalk from the bike path to the town hall parking lot and a more clearly defined path through the lot that would facilitate connections to Main Street.

- Improve sidewalks and provide crosswalks (with sidewalk extensions/bulb-outs) at the Pleasant Lake Avenue/Rail Trail intersection to slow traffic and facilitate bike and pedestrian movements.
- Improve signage along this portion of the bike path to inform users of their proximity to the village, particularly at the parking lot area on Pleasant Lake Avenue. Identifying that there are services, food establishments and points of interest nearby may persuade users to stop and explore.
- Provide additional bike racks in and around the village, making sure that they are located in areas that are easily monitored for safety and will provide security and convenience for anyone wishing to spend additional time in Harwich Center. The town could also explore the idea of a bicycle parking lot in nearby areas to further encourage bicycle access.
- Provide additional bike connections to points to the south of Harwich Center. The town has expressed an interest in creating a loop bicycle trail from Harwich Center, down Bank Street toward Harwichport and returning on Sisson Road that would provide additional access routes to Harwich Center.

#### *Automobile circulation*

The Sisson Road/Main Street (Route 39) and Main Street (Route 39)/Pleasant Lake Avenue (Route 124) intersections are shown in **Figure 1**. Due to the close proximity of these two intersections, the traffic operations at the intersections are interrelated. The Cape Cod Commission staff had some preliminary discussions about these intersections with Town Officials in the Summer of 2007. These discussions focused on roadway improvements to accommodate traffic congestion, such as traffic signals and a modern roundabout. Although Cape Cod Commission staff considers these concept plans viable, the roadway concept plans are automobile-oriented and do not address concerns relative to the sustainability of Harwich Center. In fact, conventional roadway designs at these intersections may have a negative effect on the sustainability of Harwich Center as a viable village.

With a focus on making Harwich Center a walk-able/sustainable village area, the Commission staff reevaluated the idea of auto-oriented intersection improvements at these locations. The *Final Report for The Harwich Center Initiative* by the Cecil Group, Inc. dated February 2000 recommends a solution to address the traffic congestion at the Sisson Road/Main Street (Route 39)/Pleasant Lake Avenue (Route 124) intersections. The report recommended closing off Sisson Road between Parallel Street and Main Street and improving Forest Road to accommodate north/south traffic. This concept separates the turning movements and would alleviate the congestion at the existing intersections.

In addition to this recommendation, Commission staff recommend that the town explore the feasibility of formalizing the existing private connection from Parallel Street to Main

Street. This private way provides a potential second means of access to any public parking lot pursued by the town (see parking recommendations below), and also provides an opportunity to visually break the long stretch of Main Street into two distinct segments.

Commission staff also recommend that installing a new stop sign at the intersection of Pleasant Lake Avenue and Main Street to stop west-bound traffic travelling along Main Street would provide for an opportunity for pedestrians/cyclists to cross Main Street more safely than is currently possible. In addition, a stop sign would facilitate left turn movements from Pleasant Lake Avenue onto Main Street.

These recommendations are generally illustrated in **Figure 3**.

### *Parking*

The *Final Report for The Harwich Center Initiative* discussed parking within the village at length and recommended a parking study to more specifically look at the issue. The Commission staff also reviewed the available parking and concluded that although there is probably an adequate amount of parking in the district as a whole, it is often poorly signposted and generally located further from village amenities than is convenient. On-street parking is limited in the core of the village and is often needed for delivery vehicles throughout the day. Furthermore, opportunities for additional on-street parking that would benefit the businesses are limited due to the number of curb-cuts on the road, especially at the western end of Main Street.

Commission staff recommend the town explore the following:

- Complete a parking study as described in the *Final Report for The Harwich Center Initiative*
- Provide on-street parking on both sides of the street in the core of the village, in combination with closing curb-cuts, providing sidewalk extensions and street trees.
- Explore feasibility of a shared public parking lot located in the partially cleared area to the south of Main Street to facilitate access to businesses (existing and future). The town has identified this as a potential area for wastewater infrastructure and so may provide an opportunity to achieve multiple planning goals in the area by placing parking over the buried wastewater infrastructure. Access could be provided both directly to Main Street and also via the currently private road that connects Main Street to Parallel Street.

### **Land Use**

Part of the Harwich Center initiative's goals are to develop a stronger identity for Harwich Center. Although the marketing of Harwich Center is beyond the scope of the Commission staff's technical assistance, one important physical land use strategy that is integral to the creation of an identity is providing a cohesive and common character. This includes the creation of a well defined streetscape and providing for an appropriate mix of uses to encourage vitality in the village.

### *Street Improvements*

The Commission staff support many of the recommendations of the *Final Report for The Harwich Center Initiative* and specifically recommend that the town consider implementing these street improvements in the near term immediately following the drainage improvements planned for the area. These improvements should include:

- Provide a street tree program, including creation of street planting strips. Historically, Harwich Center had a dense tree canopy that provided a sense of enclosure for the village. Although small portions of this canopy remain, particularly toward the edges of the area, the core part of the village has lost this character. Replanting street trees within a landscape strip will tie the area together, reinforce the village's identity and provide a safer pedestrian environment.
- As mentioned earlier, providing a consistent sidewalk treatment throughout the area will help reinforce the village identity. Brick sidewalks should be provided throughout, however, if financial considerations prevent brick sidewalks throughout, the town should augment the existing brick sidewalks within the village core so that the sidewalk treatment within the core is consistent.
- Provide recognizable/unique street furniture within Harwich Center. This should include lampposts, benches and trash receptacles for the safety and convenience of visitors.
- Provide signs or banners attached to lampposts within the area that identify the village and reinforce its identity. Seasonal or event specific banners could also be incorporated to promote civic events in the center.
- The town could explore developing a gateway program for the village to help announce that visitors have arrived in the village. This could include consistent landscaping and signage at key locations near the "entrances" to the village.

In order to provide an illustration of how these types of street improvements could alter the character of the village, the Commission staff prepared a photo-simulation of Harwich Center looking to the west along Main Street. **Figure 4** shows the existing setting, and **Figure 5** shows what the street might look like with the street improvements described above. Note the crosswalk treatment, sidewalk extensions, on-street parking and street trees all help to define the street edge and visually narrow the roadway in order to reduce traffic speeds within the district. Also note that even with these street improvements, the curbcuts, auto-oriented uses and highly visible utility lines detract from the cohesive village envisioned by the Harwich Center Initiative.

### *Zoning and utilities*

In the longer term, the town could look at potential zoning changes to encourage a better mix of uses and improve the form and pattern of development in the village. The town could consider the following changes:

- There are several locations within the village where buildings are set back from the sidewalk and relate poorly to the pedestrian environment. Villages generally have buildings that are closer to the street with display windows and active uses at the ground floor that encourage pedestrian interaction and activity. The town could re-examine the zoning to incorporate changes to setback requirements, height and coverage limits to encourage a more traditional form of development. In addition, the zoning use tables could be reviewed to ensure that the allowable uses in the village contribute to the village, including taking steps to limit the types of uses on the ground floor to those that create pedestrian interest and encourage residential uses above.
- Harwich Center has several historic resources that should be retained and highlighted for visitors. The town should also draw upon these resources to inform the development of design guidelines that address the scale, mass and form of future development within the area.
- The Commission staff recommend that the town develop a self guided walking tour route within Harwich Center as a means of attracting visitors to the area and encouraging movement around the village. Signage and an easily followed printed concrete or brick walkway throughout the village (similar to the Freedom Trail in Boston) would lead visitors to other points of interest in and around the village and help support the local businesses and create activity on the street. The tour could include local points of interest, attractions, and historic resources in the area. Local artists could be involved in the creation of a trail identity, with designs repeated on informational plaques at key locations.
- As can be seen in **Figures 4 and 5**, utility infrastructure increases the visual clutter in Harwich Center. Ideally, the town should explore the feasibility of placing these utilities underground or to the rear of the buildings to improve the aesthetics of the public street. However, it should be noted that at this time such steps are expensive, but in the future and in partnership with the utility companies, the town could pursue this goal.

As above, in order to provide an illustration of how these types of zoning and utility infrastructure changes could alter the character of the village, the Commission staff prepared a photo-simulation of Harwich Center looking to the west along Main Street. **Figure 6** shows what the street would look like with the street improvements described above (and shown in **Figure 5**), in combination with changes to zoning that require buildings at the street and removal of the utility lines. Note that **Figure 6** also shows the potential for a self-guided walking trail. Providing more pedestrian oriented uses allows the reduction in the number of curb-cuts and facilitates additional on-street parking. Also, the lengthening of the “core” of the village in this way helps to draw pedestrians and cyclists to other parts of the village where currently there is little activity and provides visitors with an incentive to move about the village on foot or by bike.

## **Recommended Approach**

The Commission staff have attempted to map out a potential strategy for tackling the many components needed to improve Harwich Center. We have grouped the suggestions made within this report into short, medium and long range goals. Many of the recommendations in the Final Report for the Harwich Initiative could be incorporated into the plans described below.

### **Short term approaches**

- Develop and Implement Sidewalk and Bikeways Improvement Plan
- Implement a street improvement plan to inform the replacement of sidewalks, etc following drainage work in the area.
- Explore feasibility of Street circulation changes (Forest Avenue, private mid-block street)
- Parking Study, including on-street parking spaces and feasibility of public parking lot

### **Medium term approaches**

- Zone changes to re-examine uses and dimensional requirements
- Design Guidelines
- Historic walking tour
- Implement public parking plan in concert with wastewater treatment improvements

### **Long term approaches**

- Plan for undergrounding Utility Lines
- Implement the roadway improvements shown in Figure 3

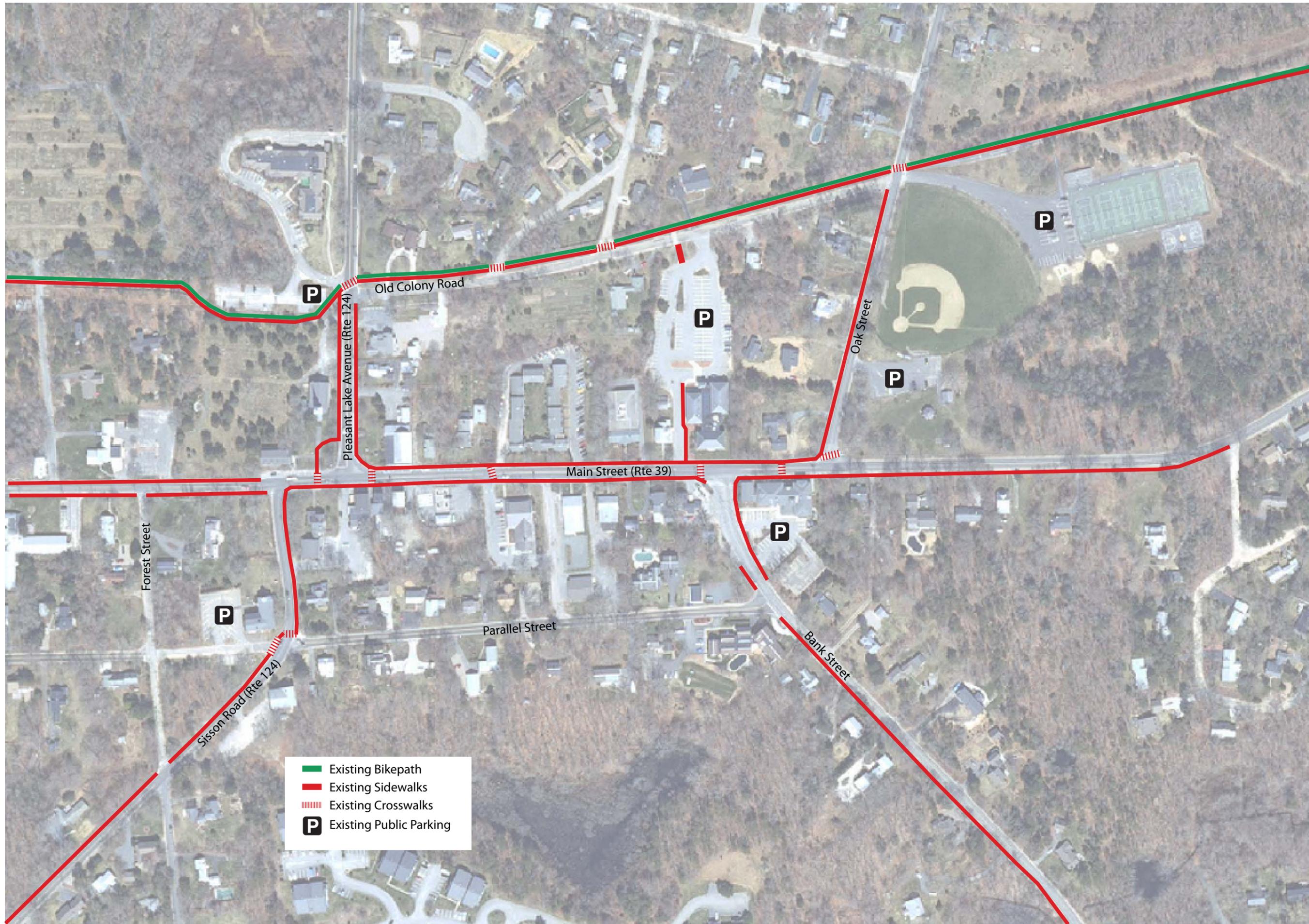


Figure 1: Existing Sidewalk and Bicycle Connections

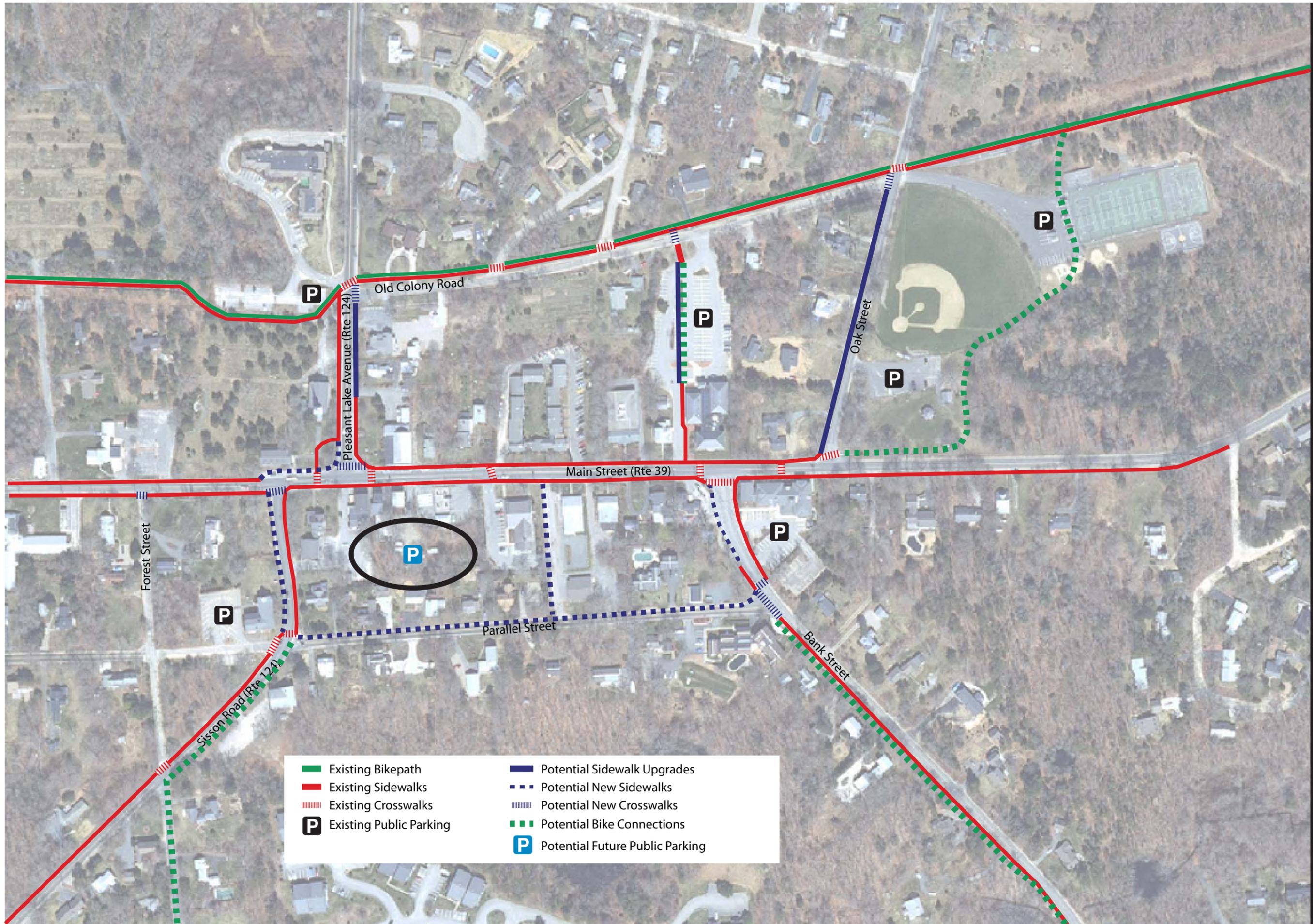
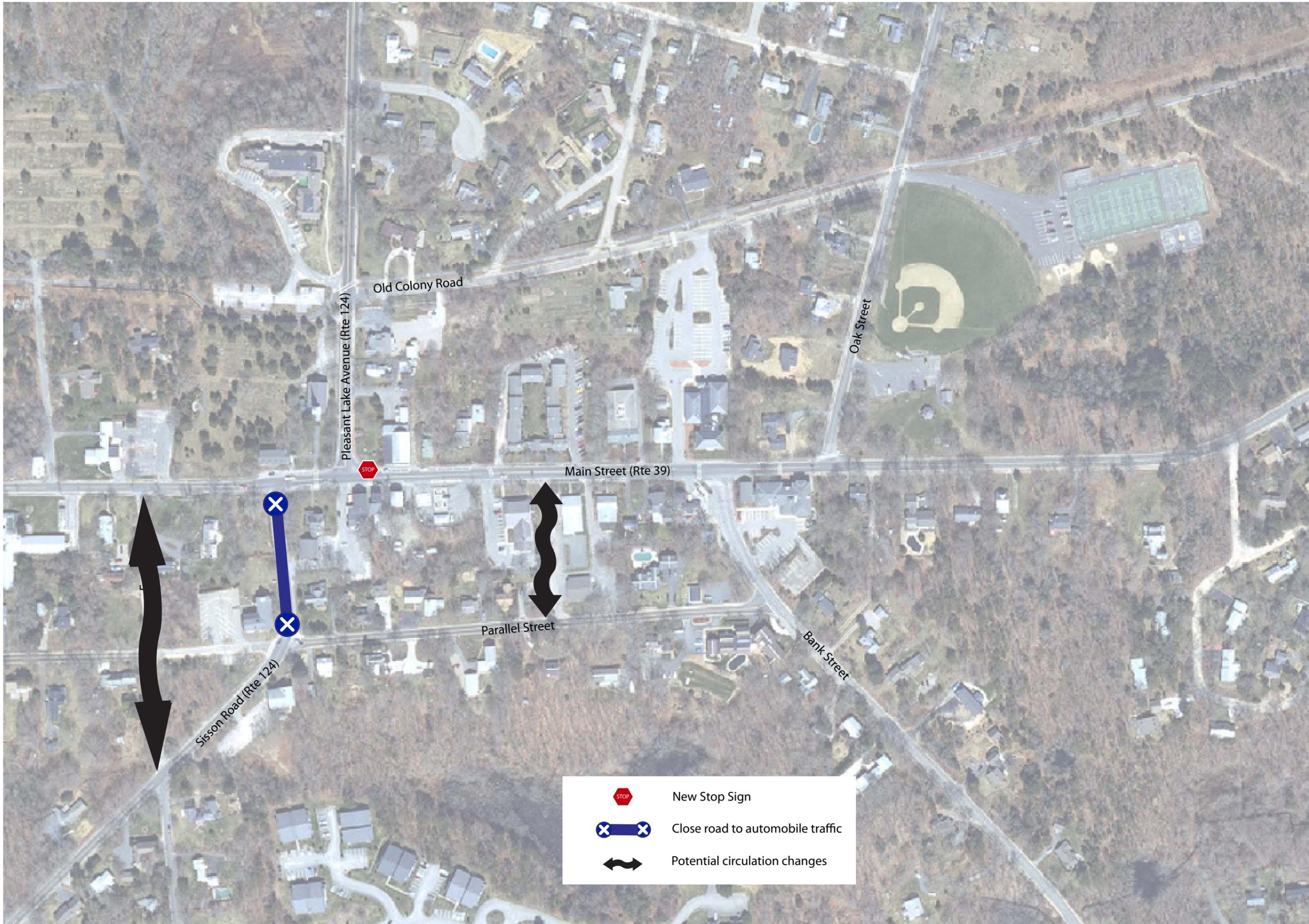


Figure 2: Existing and Proposed Sidewalk and Bicycle Connections



-  New Stop Sign
-  Close road to automobile traffic
-  Potential circulation changes

Figure 3: Potential Circulation Changes



Figure 4: Harwich Center - Existing setting



Figure 5: Harwich Center with street improvements



Figure 6: Harwich Center - future infill