



CHAPTER 5

**Land Use and  
Zoning Guidance**





*East Hampton Village, looking at the entrance to Air Line State Park Trail*

**The trails allows diverse groups of individuals to experience the outdoors, the towns and landscapes that are valued by all. The diversity of trail use ranges from health, exercise, socialization, solace, comfort, peace, rest, or renewal.**

The value of the multi-use trail in the Air Line State Park Trail (ALSPT) Region is profound, varied, and individual. The trails allows diverse groups of individuals to experience the outdoors, the towns and landscapes that are valued by all. The diversity of trail use ranges from health, exercise, socialization, solace, comfort, peace, rest, or renewal. The trail experience may be focused on going fast, slowing down, pushing personal limits, returning to something familiar, traveling to a destination, interacting with natural resources, observing wildlife or merely a meander on a path to no particular destination.

With so many options for trail experience that reflect the diversity of human needs of the people who use the ALSPT, careful consideration of the viewshed and adjacent land use is a significant component of trail planning. The ALSPT connects a community of trail users to their preferred modes of recreation, anticipating an experience that will bolster and revitalize them.

Land use adjacent to the trail has the potential to enhance or detract from that trail experience. This chapter provides guidance for land use officials in towns and regions to explore options for preserving the scenic viewshed, enhancing the gateway from the trail head to a village center, or working with businesses to connect with the trail and trail users in a visually positive way. The goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of existing zoning districts near the ALSPT in each town and examples of how land use planning in each town and for each zoning district can be modified to promote trail connections or buffers.

## Planning Lifecycle of a Trail Project and Land Use Coordination

Significant funding is invested in trail construction and maintenance of the ALSPT yearly. Overall, from 1997 to 2023, over \$9,500,000 in grant funding from state and federal agencies has been awarded and invested in ALSPT infrastructure improvements and connecting trails to town centers. This dollar figure doesn't factor in the time and dollar amount for the 20% or greater match (more than \$1,743,192) required for the grant funding; the ongoing time of trail committee volunteers monitoring or assisting with planning, events, construction & maintenance; the planning support from the towns & Councils of Governments; or the infrastructure work and monitoring performed by CT DEEP staff.

Each trail project has a lifecycle from beginning to completion that can take years to complete. Given

these dollars and time invested, attention to adjacent land use is a component of this plan that warrants careful analysis by each town, the Councils of Government and the ALSPT Region. Various land uses of adjacent private property have the potential to accentuate the positive aspects of the trail experience, providing services and amenities. Some neighboring land uses are more of a challenge, requiring balance and negotiation with property owners to encourage a positive experience for the property owner, the trail user and the economic wealth of the town and region.

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*Bicyclists enjoying the Air Line Trail have access to bike repairs and supplies at Air Line Cycles in East Hampton, Conn.*

1997

2023

**\$9,500,547**

received in federal and state funding for the Air Line State Park Trail for infrastructure improvements and connecting trails to town centers. This doesn't include the significant value of volunteers ensuring grant funding, planning and trail maintenance.





# LAND USE PLANNING AND ZONING NEAR THE ALSPT

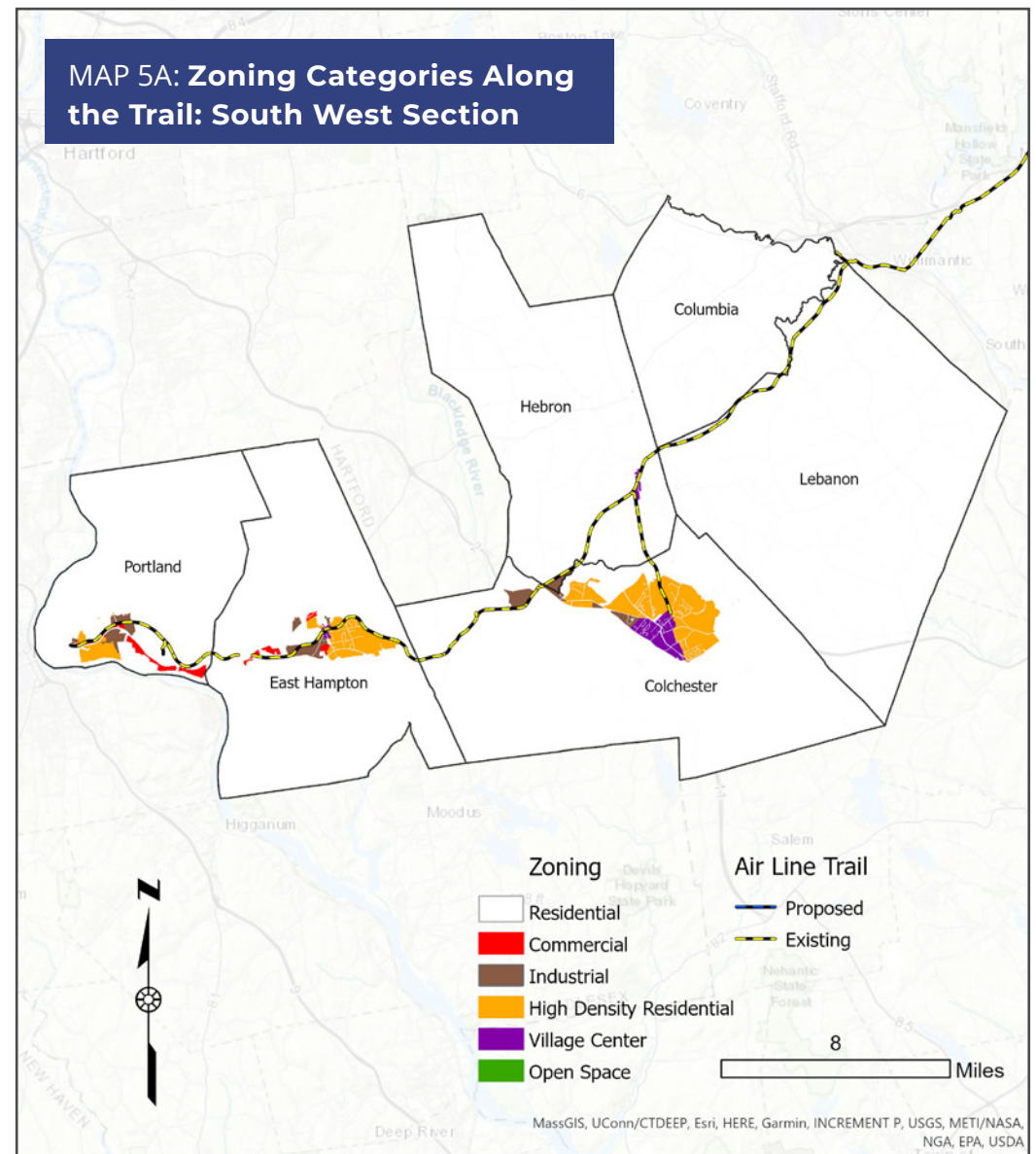
Each community along the trail has its own set of zoning regulations and maps. Here are general descriptions of the zoning districts and land uses along the trail from the western most town of Portland to the eastern most town of Thompson.

## Portland, CT

The trail runs for about 2 miles in the southeastern portion of this town along properties that are in the Rural Residential zoning district, including YMCA Camp Ingersoll, the Keegan Property (22 acres purchased by the Town in 2016 that is a parking lot and trail head), and the Palmer Taylor Preserve (90 acres owned by Middlesex Land Trust) and runs just north of properties that are zoned for Designed Business and include an event venue, Saint Clements Castle & Marina. The Town plans to extend the trail into its downtown, which includes properties that are zoned for commercial, industrial and higher density residential uses.

## East Hampton, CT

The trail runs east from a trailhead near the geographical center of town to the Salmon River State Forest property on the border with Colchester, along properties that are in rural residential and Village Center zoning districts. The trailhead is surrounded by many small businesses like Air Line Cycles and the Hair Corner as well as restaurants, a gas station and a bed & breakfast, and the trail runs by single family homes and protected open space properties like the Middlesex Land Trust's Sellew Preserve. The Town plans to extend the trail from its Village Center westward to Portland, an area that contains rural residential, commercial and industrial zoning districts and land uses.



## Colchester, CT

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The trail runs for 3 miles in the northern part of the Town along properties in the Rural Residential District and the Arterial Commercial District with a spur that runs for 3.5 miles from the trail intersection in Hebron along properties in the Rural Residential, Suburban, and Village zoning districts to Lebanon Avenue near downtown Colchester. The majority of the trail in Colchester runs along properties that are zoned for rural residential uses, suburban residential uses and agriculture, while a small portion runs along properties zoned for business, industrial, and mixed uses. In Colchester, the western portion of the trail runs along large tracts of land containing hundreds of acres in the Salmon River State Forest, the Town of Colchester and the Colchester Land Trust, and ends by North Westchester's Arterial Commercial Zoning District. In the spur that runs from the Raymond Brook Wildlife Management Area in Hebron, to Lebanon Avenue and near downtown, the trail runs along property owned by the Colchester Fish & Game Club, the Town of Colchester's Transfer Station and private homeowners.

## Hebron, CT

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The trail runs for 6-7 miles in the southern part of the Town along properties in rural residential districts, the Commercial Technology district and the Amston Village district. The majority of the trail runs along properties that are zoned for rural residential uses while a small portion of the trail runs along properties that are zoned for low-intensity technology & industrial uses, mixed uses and residential uses. A mixture of large and small tracts of land border the trail. The large tracts of land contain hundreds of acres of protected open space in the Salmon River State Forest and the Raymond Brook Wildlife Management Area, as well as public land owned by the Town of Hebron and the private recreation land owned by the Skungamaug Fish & Game Club. The smaller tracts tend to be those with single family homes.

## Columbia, CT

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The trail runs for a very short time along the southern border of town in two places. Both locations are in the Residential Agricultural zoning districts that primarily contain residential uses and single family homes.

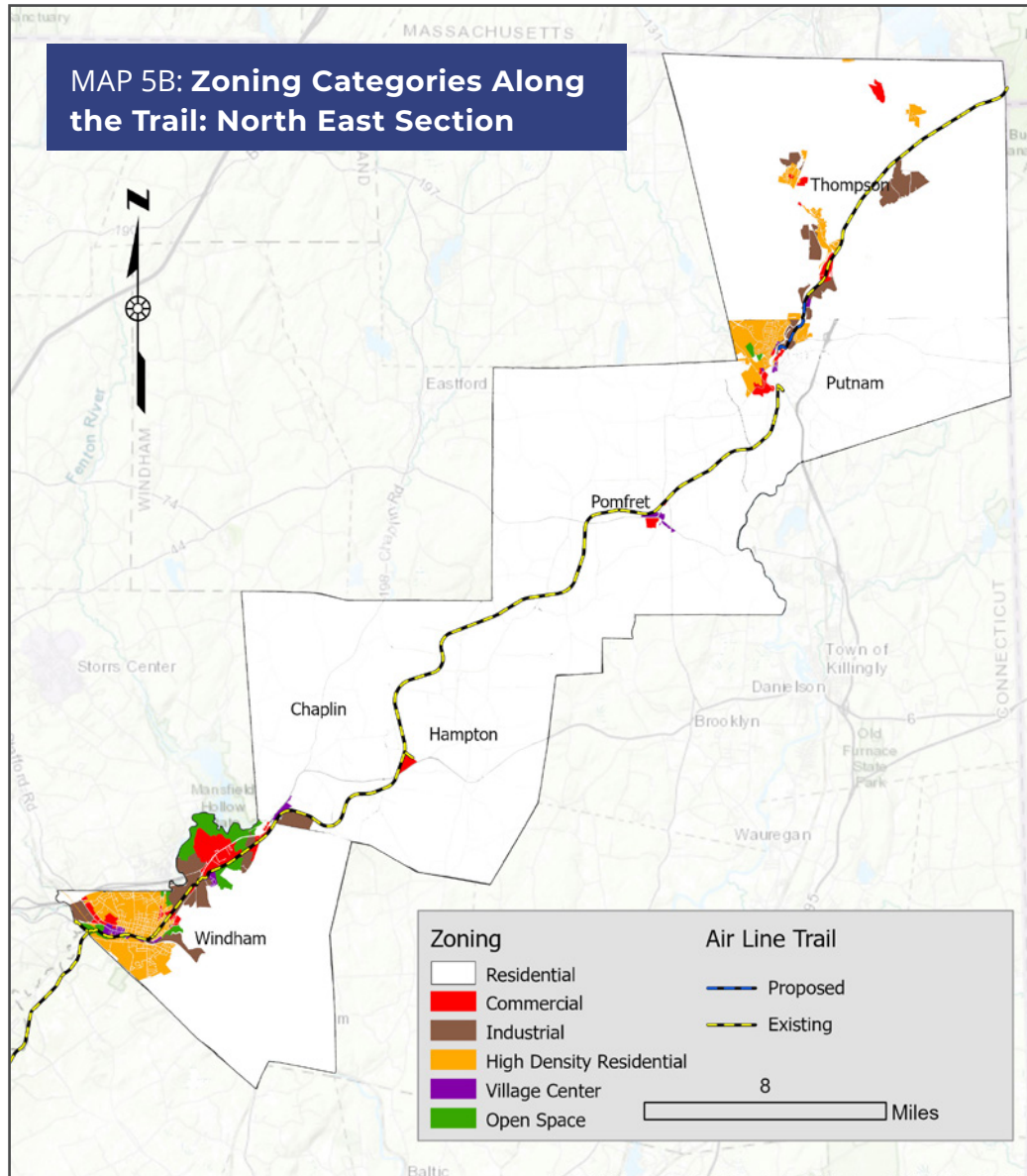
## Lebanon, CT

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The trail runs along the northern border of town along property in the Agriculture, Lake and Rural Agricultural Residence zoning districts. Land uses in the western part of the trail include vacant state land, forest land, Hebron Sportsman Club property, and Williams Pond, which has two campgrounds along its shores and 383 acres of vacant forest land that abuts the trail and runs along the western shore of the Pond. The eastern section of the trail runs along properties that contain vacant land or parcels that have single family homes on them. Just south of the trail, but not abutting it, is a 345-acre parcel of land that is owned by the Girl Scouts of Connecticut and is the site of the Girl Scout's Camp Laurel, which the Girl Scouts plan to sell in the future.



*Williams Pond is one of a number of land uses in the western part of the Air Line State Park Trail.*



## Windham, CT

The trail runs along the northern portion of this Town along property in almost every type of zoning district in town. The trail connects with the Hop River State Park trail near the town's borders with the Towns of Columbia and Lebanon and then closely follows the Willimantic River for a couple of miles and runs along properties that include 36.85-acre Burdick Park, vacant highway land, public utilities, neighborhood businesses, higher density residential developments, and a park managed by the Willimantic Whitewater Partnership, which is a nonprofit dedicated to the restoration of the Willimantic River. The middle portion of the trail runs on the road for about .6 miles and then along the Willimantic Veterans Greenway for about 2.4 miles until it reaches the United Abrasives property. Then, the remainder of the trail runs in the northeastern section of town along larger properties, many of which are vacant state land, privately owned industrial developed & undeveloped land, conservation land like that of Joshua's Trust.

## Chaplin, CT

The trail runs from the southwestern corner of town for a little over 3 miles to the southeastern portion of the Town along properties in every zoning district in Town (Corridor-Overlay (CO), Aquifer Protection (AZ), Business (B), Light Industry (L), and Rural Agricultural Residence (RAR)). About one-third of the trail runs along properties that are zoned for business, industrial, mixed uses and apartments and the remainder runs along properties that are zoned for rural residential uses and agriculture.



In Chaplin, the properties along the trail contain more dense development to the west and more rural development to the east. Many of the parcels south of the trail and in the Rural Agricultural Residence zoning district are vacant or currently classified as forest. Other parcels along the trail in town are protected open spaces like the Two Sisters Tract that features a trail and parking, and Beaver Brook State Park, which consists of 401 acres, most of which is in Windham, and privately owned recreation areas like the Fin, Fur & Feather Club, which has facilities for fishing, hunting, and shooting.

## Hampton, CT

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The trail runs for over 6 miles along the western portion of this town mostly through the RA-80 zoning district, but also close to the Business District on Route 6. The major land uses that the trail runs by are the Natchaug and Goodwin State forests. The trail also runs along the rear property lines of EASTCONN, which is a public, non-profit agency that serves local educational needs, the Hampton Mini-Mart, self-storage units, and some office space.

## Pomfret, CT

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The trail runs for about 6 miles from the southwestern corner to the northeastern corner of this town, mostly through the Rural Residential zoning district, but also by properties in the Business Village and Pomfret Street Residential zoning districts. The major land uses that the trail runs by are single family houses and hundreds of acres of protected open space owned by the Town of Pomfret, the Wyndham Land Trust and the Connecticut Audubon Society. The trail also runs alongside the Pomfret Town Hall, along the rear property line of a wholesale plant nursery and close by the Air Line Grill, a local restaurant.

## Putnam, CT

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There is currently a gap in the path of the trail in Putnam, between the Town of Putnam's River Trail and the Air Line Trailhead located on Riverside Drive in Thompson, CT. While no specific connecting route has been finalized yet, the general path of the connection options runs on the western side of town through downtown and near properties zoned for higher density residential uses, commercial, industrial, medical/office development like Day Kimball Hospital. On the western portion of the trail that is closer to the Pomfret town line, the trail runs along local roads and hundreds of acres of farmland and forest in the Agriculture Zoning District until it reaches the trailhead in Pomfret.

## Thompson, CT

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The trail runs diagonally from the southwestern corner of town to the northeastern corner of town, mostly through lower density residential and agricultural zoning districts. A more direct connection needs to be finalized between the trail in the southwestern corner of Thompson and the trail in Putnam, but people can connect to the trail head of Putnam's River Trail via local roads through low-density residential neighborhoods at this time. Short portions of the trail run by a cemetery, residential uses like single family homes and townhouses and commercially zoned property such, an aluminum windows manufacturer, a warehouse, a beauty salon, and a caterer.

# Typology of Uses and Impacts

To examine the land use and zoning along the entire Air Line State Park Trail, the zoning districts in the communities along the trail were condensed into the following categories and are shown earlier on Maps 5A and 5B.

LOWER DENSITY RESIDENTIAL	HIGHER DENSITY RESIDENTIAL	COMMERCIAL	INDUSTRIAL	VILLAGE CENTER	OPEN SPACE
					
<p>Single Family or Duplex near trail noted by large lot over 2 acres in size</p>	<p>Multi-family units adjacent to trail where site design encourages high density of more than 4 units per acre</p>	<p>Typical characteristics of rural and exurban commercial uses include plaza site design and strip zoning commercial with trail to rear of buildings and loading docks</p>	<p>Similar to commercial without the intensity of traffic impact, industrial properties tend to be larger complexes of single use buildings</p>	<p>Higher density (minimal or zero lot line zoning) trail travels through some of these zones and is adjacent to others, providing services and stop points for trail users</p>	<p>Rural private or publicly owned property ideally suited to provide viewshed and conservation experience for trail users and tourism marketing</p>
<p>Impacts on visual and management of trail: encroachment of buildings, non-permitted trail connections, erosion, agriculture run off, incompatible uses</p>	<p>Based on trail location, septic effluent, utilities, stormwater management, viewshed, screening, setback and unpermitted access to trail can impact trail without good site and architectural design</p>	<p>Coordination with owners for service opportunities to trail users and how to visually connect to the trail users. Site and architectural design can mitigate impacts for access, trail usage, safety and viewshed value</p>	<p>Communicating with owners can lead to sponsorships, visual connections, and site design compatible to trail viewshed. Site design at outset of permitting can provide options for mitigating stormwater, flooding, or erosion impacts.</p>	<p>Ideally constructed for ease of service and with marketing – tourism stop for trail users in region. Opportunities to grow small trail support businesses. Trail wayfinding and design to integrate into village center is critical</p>	<p>The defining land use for the trail and while private lands along the trail are mostly undeveloped along the trail, careful land use planning and zoning considerations can mitigate impacts from future development near or adjacent to the trail</p>
<p>High traffic, high use trails that are part of a multi-modal transportation network - ideal for urban settings</p>	<p>Urban settings or where bike racks can be used for connections to town centers or other ALSPT partner properties</p>	<p>Heavy use, helpful in areas prone to erosion for stabilization of slope</p>	<p>Minimal length applications for bridges and trail areas with sensitive resources or inability to lay pavement</p>	<p>Rails to trails for long distance rural travel and minimal grade- disclosure on tires required for safe passage - multi-use – horse friendly</p>	<p>Applicability for access paths to ALSPT Trail from neighboring partner properties (land trusts, towns, others)</p>



The majority of property along the trail is residentially zoned with most of it being in low density residential and agriculture zoning districts. In 10 of the 12 communities along the trail (Portland, East Hampton, Colchester, Hebron, Windham, Chaplin, Hampton, Pomfret, Putnam and Thompson), the trail runs along some commercial and industrial zoned property and/or through a downtown/village center. In the remaining 2 communities (Columbia and Lebanon), the trail does not run near property in commercial, industrial or village center zoning districts. Instead, it runs along the borders of these towns in low density residential and agriculture zoning districts.

Property along the trail is currently being used in all sorts of ways from single family homes to townhouses, forests to farms, municipal uses, as well as commercial and industrial businesses. There are also many properties, both large and small, along the trail that are currently vacant. The towns will need to plan for the future of the trail knowing that any property along the trail, except for the protected open space, may change its use in the future and become developed or redeveloped.



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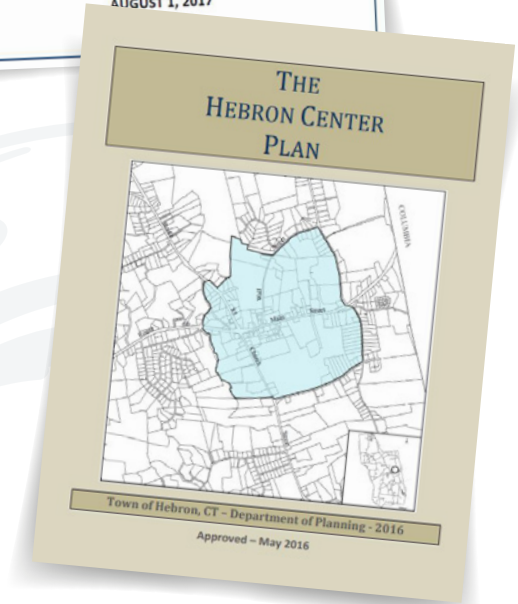
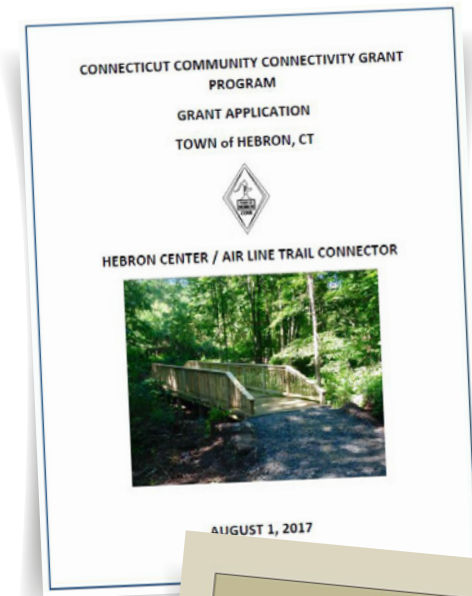
# CORRIDOR AND SCENIC PROTECTION

Maintaining and enhancing the trail and the property along it is paramount to the success of the trail and its positive impacts on the communities through which it runs. Additionally, maintaining and enhancing connections to the trail through linkages with other trails, sidewalks, bicycle lanes/paths, and protected open space will also serve to improve the value of the trail to the towns and the region. Many of the

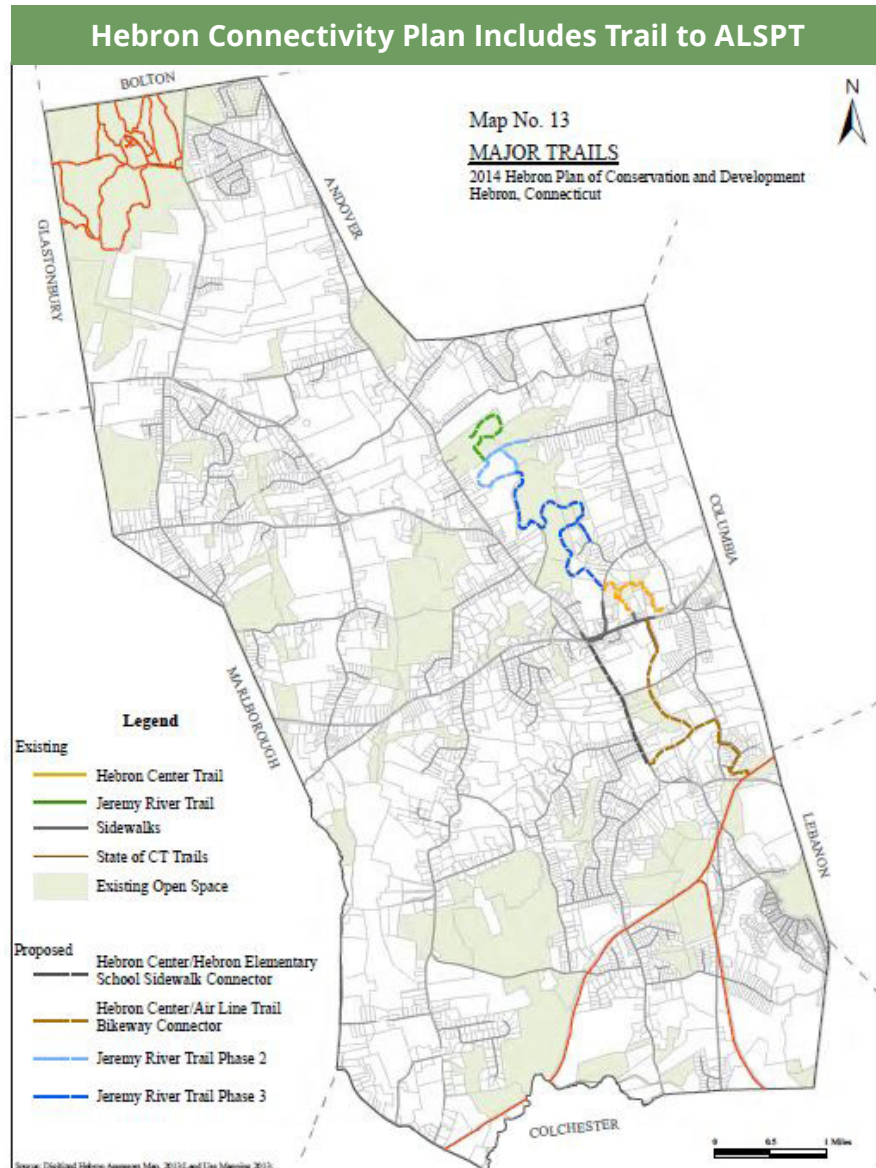
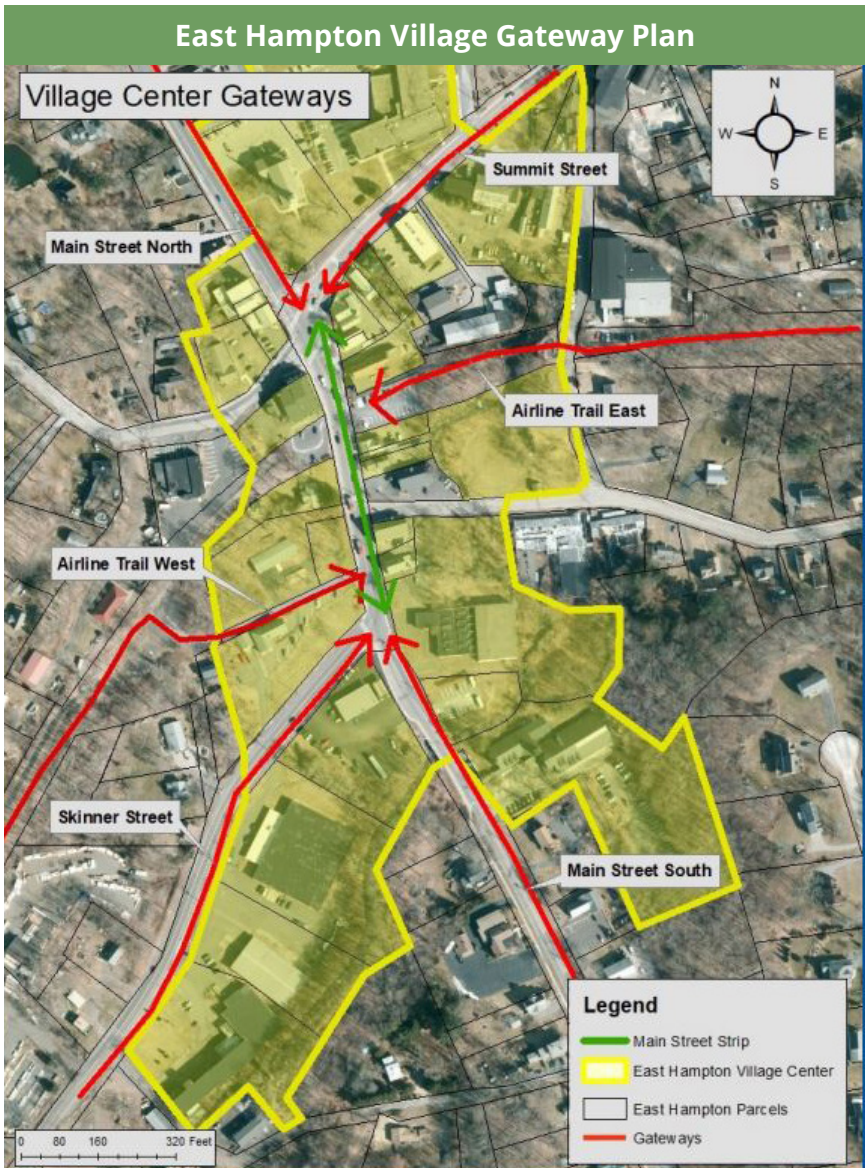
**Several towns have actively moved to include trail proximity to their recent village improvement plans.**

towns along the trail are already planning and encouraging future connections to the trail since they recognize it as a current and future asset. However, since so much of the property along the trail is currently vacant, it is hard to determine if the future use of those properties will have positive or negative impacts on the trail. As such, it would be useful for the towns to determine an appropriate level of management of the trail corridor to protect its scenic resources.

Additionally, incorporating the ALSPT into the design and land use planning for village districts or updates to each town's Plan of Conservation and Development can ensure the towns' and region's plans are consistent with state and regional planning goals. Several towns have actively moved to include trail proximity to their recent village improvement plans (see Figure 5C). The ALSPT Region Stakeholder Committee should continue to review, with support of the Councils of Government through their transportation funding, consistency regionwide for trail corridor and scenic viewshed protection.







**FIGURE 5C**

As part of the East Coast Greenway, the trail is a key part of the Village Center in East Hampton, CT and proves itself as a unique asset with the bike and pedestrian traffic it brings to town. The ALPST is centerpiece of this plan. The Hebron Center Plan approved in 2016 led to a Connectivity Grant to CTDOT and an award of \$399,033 to connect the ALSPT to the Town Center.

# COMPATIBLE AND INCOMPATIBLE LAND USE

While there are land uses that impact air or water quality and demonstrate clear incompatibility with trail use due to outdoor storage, industrial production or mining, there are numerous land uses ranging from residential to industrial that can be designed and managed to optimize their trail connections or promote the trail as a community asset. For instance, residential incompatibility is focused on encroachment on the trail with outbuildings and storage in the trail right of way. This conundrum is easily mitigated in new and future housing developments or subdivision approvals through buffer requirements and easements from the property owner to maintain a clear boundary between trail users and the neighboring property owners. To encourage existing residential property

owners to manage such encroachment, tax relief could incentivize adjustments in the boundary conditions that are presently in conflict.

For existing businesses, compatibility, vegetated buffers, and trail connections into their properties coordinated through CT DEEP could be encouraged through tax improvement districts via an overlay district. Similar to scenic byways, in which businesses support beautification, town elected officials, land use officials and economic development representatives could work together to develop a trail to business improvement plan. For future businesses, either retail or industrial, site design through special permits and an overlay trail district regionwide could provide the vision

to create synergy between the trail users and the businesses (see examples on the next page).

As will be noted in Chapter 9, Leadership and Implementation, an important recommendation suggests that the ALSPT Region Stakeholder Group obtain grant funding to support a planning-landscape architectural design study. This study would assist the twelve-town region by illustrating typology and methods to encourage property owners to build, design or re-design their sites with an eye toward beautification of the trail corridor and sustainably grow the economic wealth of the region. This would be a valuable study statewide and nationally as at the time of this planning study, there are no land use-trail planning studies evident through on-line research.

**Similar to scenic byways, in which businesses support beautification, town elected officials, land use officials and economic development representatives could work together to develop a trail to business improvement plan.**





Concept of Nearby Business Connection to ALSPT

BEFORE



AFTER



Route 85: Trailside Business Concept

BEFORE



AFTER





Potential concept for Trailside Accommodation

**BEFORE**



**AFTER**



Concept of ALSPT Adjacent Business Sponsorship and Scenic Improvement

**BEFORE**



**AFTER**





## RECOMMENDATIONS: Land Use and Zoning

In order to manage the development and redevelopment of property along the trail corridor to enhance the trail, the twelve towns along the trail, with support from the Councils of Government could aim to:

- 01** Review and update their Plans of Conservation & Development to ensure consistency toward ALSPT improvements for future funding opportunities and include trail synergy components within the Plans' economic business district, transportation, and open space sections.
- 02** Where applicable, increase awareness of open space planning within the towns and evaluate properties for open space acquisition near the trail in cooperation with land trusts and CT DEEP.
- 03** Encourage linkages to the trail, other public trails, sidewalks, and bicycle lanes/paths.
- 04** Encourage development that is scaled and designed to strengthen the connection to the trail in an environmentally sensitive manner.
- 05** Encourage the provision of sidewalks in land development or re-development proposals to promote connectivity.
- 06** Develop appropriate vegetative buffers and setbacks for future development and re-development from the property line that abuts the trail.
- 07** Encourage trail friendly uses, such as horse stables, bike sales and repair retail near the trail.
- 08** Develop a common set of trail management guidelines.
- 09** Consider an overlay zoning district along the entire length of the trail in all the ALSPT towns to maintain and promote consistency of the future development and re-development along the trail.
- 10** Encourage the use of properties near the trail for overnight accommodations, including ancillary use of private homeowner occupied for short term rentals for visitors, tourists, etc.
- 11** Encourage local business activities near the trail, such as working with local agricultural producers to develop farmers' market opportunities near the trail.
- 12** Ensure that sign regulations have a measurable exemption to promote trail connectivity, trail support and promotion of businesses who sponsor the trail.
- 13** Amend zoning regulations to allow for official wayfinding signage for connectivity to town centers and promotion of the region and safety for trail users.

