

Housatonic School Adaptive Reuse Design Charette

Overview

The Housatonic Improvement Committee seeks innovative design ideas for the adaptive reuse of the former Housatonic School Building in Housatonic, Massachusetts through a collaborative design charrette. This charette invites architects, architectural designers, and other related design professionals to brainstorm, collaborate, and document redevelopment options for the school building.

Participants are encouraged to consider mixed use schemes that will embrace the geographic location of the building as a village center and complement and support existing local business, town assets (such as the Community Center and Ramsdell Library), and the continued redevelopment of other under-utilized properties such as the former mill buildings flanking the Housatonic River.

About the Village of Housatonic

Housatonic is located along the northern edge of and within the town of Great Barrington. It is bordered to the north by the towns of Stockbridge and West Stockbridge. The Housatonic River runs through the center of the community. Massachusetts Route 183 enters the village from the south as Park Street following the east bank of the river, then crosses the river at the center of town and continues north on the west bank as Front Street.

As of the 2000 census, there were 1,335 people, 543 households, and 356 families residing in the village. Out of 543 households, 31.7% had children under the age of 18 living with them. The median income for a household in the village was \$35,625, and the median income for a family was \$35,324. About 9.9% of families and 10.9% of the population were below the poverty line, including 14.2% of those under age 18 and 2.6% of those age 65 or over.

About the Housatonic School Building

The Housatonic School, built in 1907, served as an elementary school until it was closed in 2003. The red brick façade is accented with a chiseled stone course and decorative brickwork. The interior rooms are trimmed in oak typical of the era. The building has three levels, is 28,677 square feet of gross floor area, and sits on a .65acre parcel located at 207 Pleasant Street.

For more than a decade, the Town of Great Barrington has explored various uses for the former school. Complete demolition of the building has also been considered. No conclusive decision has been made, although much work has been done, including a Phase 1 Environmental Study. The Town has issued multiple requests for proposals and several developers have responded. None of the proposals, however, moved beyond that initial stage.

The property has a strong community connection and links the present day to the history of the village. It has a central location within the village and potential as a center for its residents. The

building is on the BRTA bus service line, it is adjacent to the Housatonic Community Center (better known as the Housy Dome,) and is adjacent to a large, well-used playground and open space. The zoning allows for a wide variety of uses. The school, additionally, has close proximity to redeveloping mill buildings along the Housatonic River and other mill buildings that could be redeveloped.

The Housatonic Improvement Committee

In mid-2020, the Housatonic Improvement Committee (HIC) was appointed by the Selectboard to, "...foster the social and cultural well-being of Housatonic." and was given the charge of addressing the school building and determining a path forward. The Selectboard has given the committee a deadline of October 25, 2021 for making a recommendation for the school's reuse.

The HIC has been re-looking at potential uses for the building and has reviewed many documents to agree on some parameters for the building. We have spoken to neighbors, reviewed the town's Master Plan, reviewed the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for the county and its annual update produced by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, the Berkshire Blueprint 2.0 from 1Berkshire, the visioning report for Housatonic (2004), and various other documents, proposals, and studies.

Design Charrette

Before beginning to define potential uses, the committee voted unanimously to exclude two schemes from consideration: razing the building and converting it to solely market-rate housing. The HIC would like to see a mixed use for the iconic building that preserves the "small town feel" of Housatonic while serving the needs of the community -- a place for growing families and multiple generations. The HIC would like any use for the school to compliment the proposed capital program in place for the Ramsdell Library and meet ADA standards.

There are numerous businesses in place which can be strengthened and supported by a re-use of the school. These include Muse (Multi-Use Studio Experiment) in the Monument Mills building, Berkshire Pulse, local restaurants, Pilot Studio, Barbieri office space which also has a music studio/living space/artist space, and the shops and workshops within Kelly's Mill. A good example is Berkshire Pulse, a dance, world music and movement arts education center which offers over 300 classes per year drawing parents who have an hour of leisure while their child or children are taking a class. These families could be potential customers for something housed in the redeveloped school.

While the HIC would like to explore design ideas for the building that have been identified by the studies mentioned above, we also welcome new ideas and innovative re-use concepts.

Previously considered potential uses for the school building which are still valid today include:

- Affordable housing

- Makers' spaces and workshops
- Retail space
- Office space
- Childcare facility
- Flexible tenant space (potential programmatic uses could include exhibition space for artists, meeting space, gathering space for young adults, classroom (s) for continuing education and/or higher education, after school program)
- Suitable food service space for a small restaurant, classes, or food shop.

Limitations and Exclusions:

- Complete demolition of the school building is not being considered at this time
- A full conversion to market-rate housing is not being considered though a scheme could include a limited amount of market-rate housing
- The school building lot should be considered on its own and schemes should not include or modify adjacent lots
- While parking will need to be considered, this will be addressed in a separate study and need not be considered during the charrette
- The footprint of the building and the exterior envelope should not be substantively altered in any scheme