

## 2. LAND USE

Most people do not use the term “land use” when they try to explain what a town looks like. Often, they refer to locally important landmarks and images that can be seen from the road. Describing Arlington Center as a linear district composed of five sub-districts, with an impressive civic block and low-rise commercial buildings, or its adjacent neighborhoods as moderately dense housing on tree-lined streets, is to characterize these areas by their land use patterns.

**Land use** refers to the location, amount, and intensity of a community’s residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional development, along with roads, open land, and water. Patterns of development vary by the land

and water resources that support them, the eras in which growth occurred, and the evolution of a town’s transportation infrastructure. The ages of buildings in each part of a town usually correlate with changes in land use patterns. Similarly, the placement of buildings in relation to the street and to each other tends to be inseparable from their age and whether they were constructed before or after the adoption of zoning. Furthermore, a town’s development pattern and shape sometimes hint at its annexation history, or exchanges of land with adjacent cities and towns.

Just about all of these traits can be found in Arlington. The boundaries of its small 5.2 sq. mi land area largely stem from changes that occurred as the colonial settlement of Cambridge grew, divided into precincts, and eventually spawned new towns. Arlington’s present shape is defined in part by water and in part by the political choices that gave birth to West Cambridge, Watertown, Somerville, and Belmont. Its development pattern hints at the seamless ties that Arlington once had with neighboring communities – ties reinforced by historic Massachusetts Avenue. Of course, Arlington and all of the surrounding towns have regulated land use through zoning for many decades now, and the imprint of zoning can be seen in some newer neighborhoods and commercial projects, too. Arlington’s land use pattern reflects both organic and regulated forms.

### A. Existing Land Uses

Arlington is a predominantly residential suburb of Cambridge and Boston, bounded by the towns of Belmont, Lexington, and Winchester and the cities of Medford, Somerville, and Cambridge. It is an urban community, with commercial centers along Massachusetts Avenue surrounded by densely developed, largely walkable neighborhoods. As shown on Map 2-1, the most obvious center of activity in Arlington lies between Massachusetts Avenue and Summer Street, an area that roughly corresponds with an east-west valley that crosses the town and once carried rail service

### Land Use Goals

- *Balance housing growth with other land uses that support residential services and amenities.*
- *Encourage development that enhances the quality of Arlington’s natural resources and built environment.*
- *Attract development that supports and expands the economic, cultural, and civic purposes of Arlington’s commercial areas.*

between Concord and Somerville until the late 1970s. The Mill Brook runs through this area, too. Together, the old railroad and the waterway help to explain the remnants of industrial land found in the vicinity of Arlington Heights. Today, the former rail bed serves as the Minuteman Bikeway. The future of industrial and commercial parcels in this part of town will have a substantial impact on Arlington's character, quality of life, and tax base.

Land uses can be quantified – that is, reported by the amounts of land used for various purposes – but a more enlightening approach involves analyzing a community's **land use patterns**. If anything can be said about the land use patterns in Arlington today, it is that the town is full of eclectic spaces: areas with a seemingly random mix of uses, variable lot sizes, building types and orientations, all combined in fairly tight quarters. In many cases, these mixed-use areas pre-date the adoption of zoning and they contribute to the “organic” feel of Arlington's neighborhoods. They also increase the risk of land use conflicts, for the surrounding neighborhoods have developed and filled in very close to commercial, industrial, and other uses.

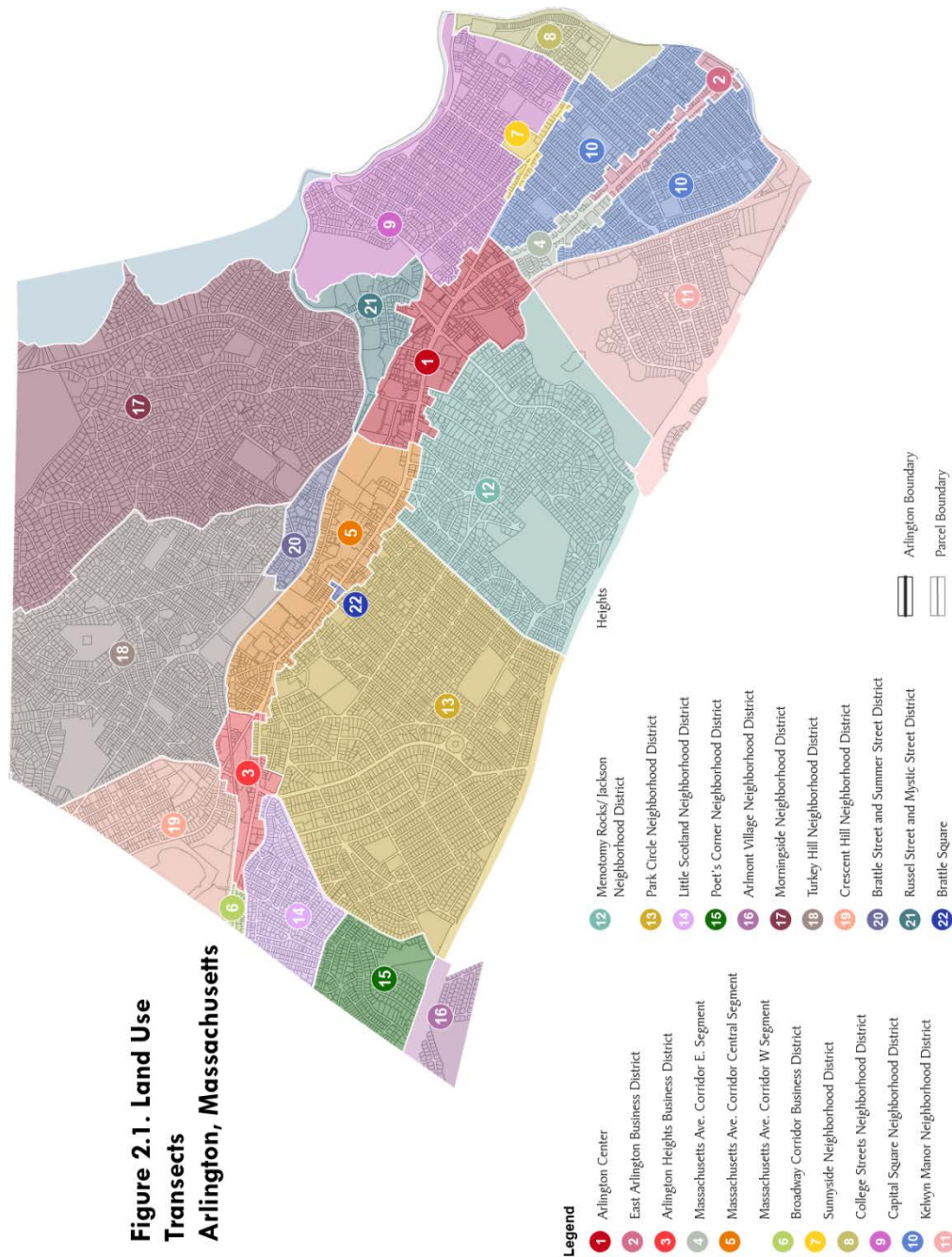
Another noteworthy feature is that Arlington's roads tell the story of its growth history (Map 2-2). Many of the earliest roads in Arlington were based on Native American travel routes. Since Arlington as we know it today did not exist in the 1700s and early 1800s, the main roads served as connections to distant parts of the same large jurisdiction, e.g., between Arlington and Charlestown, both being part of Cambridge long ago. These older routes also ran across upland locations. It makes sense that the greatest concentration of extant structures built prior to the Civil War can be found in and around Arlington Center along these early routes, in the vicinity of Massachusetts Avenue, Mystic Street, Pleasant Street, and Medford Street. Not surprisingly, development extended from the historic core south along Jason Street and Academy Street and north along Medford Street and Warren Avenue. There is also evidence of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century housing development in Arlington Heights and around Park Avenue, and East Arlington as well – some of it before West Cambridge changed its name to Arlington. Electric street cars along Massachusetts Avenue, Mystic and Medford Streets, and along Broadway no doubt contributed to the attractiveness of these areas for housing development.

The urban street grid that characterizes much of East Arlington coincides with a significant concentration of densely developed worker housing: two-, three-, and four-family buildings, sometimes larger, most likely responding to the industrial growth that occurred in Arlington after the mid-nineteenth century. Although many of the mills constructed during that era are gone, the housing units remain.

Map 2-2 suggests that Arlington grew dramatically during the interwar years and again during the “Baby Boom” era. Neighborhoods filled in throughout the south part of town (south of Massachusetts Avenue), with single-family home subdivisions around Park Circle and Menotomy Rocks and small-scale multifamily housing in East Arlington. Entire neighborhoods were created in Arlington Heights as household formation rates skyrocketed during the 1950s. These neighborhoods have the classic curved streets and road layouts designed to discourage through traffic, which typified suburban subdivisions at the time. One can see the twentieth century evolution of roadway design principles in just about all of Arlington's newer neighborhoods. In

these locations, the housing also tends to be lower density and composed primarily of detached single-family homes.

Together, roadway design, land uses, and the form and intensity of development indicate that Arlington actually consists of twenty-two distinctive areas, or planning units, as shown in Fig. 2-1. These are not zoning districts. Instead, they reflect physical patterns of development and the edges between them. It is little wonder that Arlington residents have such a strong sense of neighborhood affiliation, for there do seem to be clear transition zones from the outlying suburban neighborhoods toward the “core” of Massachusetts Avenue.



## B. Existing Zoning

### 1. Use Districts

An important component of any master plan is an assessment of local zoning requirements, especially for consistency or conflicts with the community’s goals and aspirations for the future. Zoning should express a community’s development blueprint: the “where, what, and how much” of land uses, intensity of uses, and the relationship between abutting land uses and how they relate to the roads that serve them. Ideally, one can open a community’s zoning ordinance or bylaw and understand what the city or town seeks to achieve. Unfortunately, this is not always the case in Massachusetts cities and towns, and Arlington is no exception.

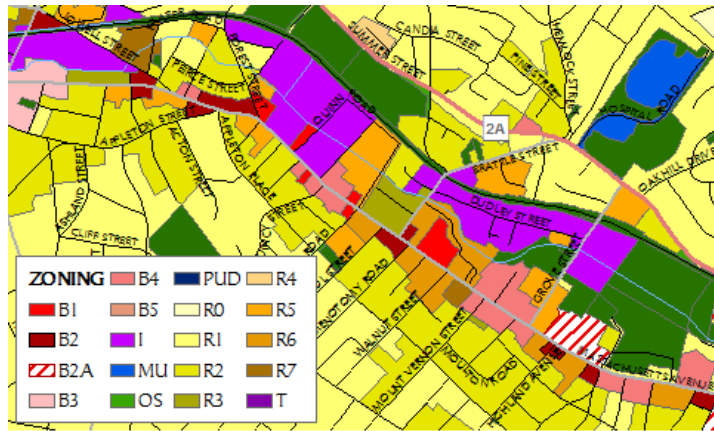


Figure 2.2.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case in Massachusetts cities and towns, and Arlington is no exception.

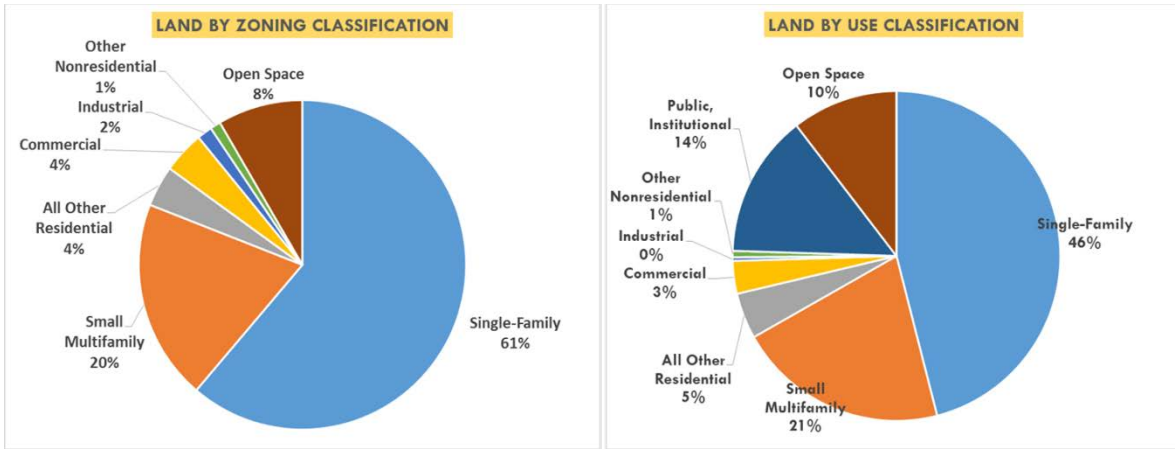
Arlington adopted its first Zoning Bylaw in 1924, but the version currently in use was adopted in 1975 and it has been amended many times since then. It divides the town into nineteen use districts (Map 2-3), or areas zoned for residential, commercial, industrial, or other purposes. There is nothing inherently wrong with a large number of zoning districts as long as the regulations make sense “on the ground.” In many cases, especially along Massachusetts Avenue, Arlington essentially zoned the land for whatever purpose existed at the time, which in turn makes for an odd arrangement of districts – and often results in very shallow, single-parcel districts, as shown in Fig. 2.2. Under existing conditions, the Zoning Map does not align well with the planning areas illustrated in Fig. 2.1. Districts are also divided by Massachusetts Avenue, i.e., different districts on opposite sides of the road.

Abbr.	District Name	Acres	Abbr.	District Name	Acres
R0	Large Lot Single Family	238.2	B1	Neighborhood Office	25.9
R1	Single Family	1,771.5	B2	Neighborhood Business	16.9
R2	Two Family	619.7	B2A	Major Business	22.2
R3	Three Family	8.3	B3	Village Business	30.2
R4	Town House	19.4	B4	Vehicular Oriented Business	30.0
R5	Apartments Low Density	63.7	B5	Central Business	10.3
R6	Apartments Med Density	49.0	I	Industrial	48.7
R7	Apartments High Density	18.7	MU	Multi-Use	18.0
OS	Open Space	275.9	T	Transportation	0.8
PUD	Planned Unit Development	16.2		Total	3,283.6

Source: Arlington GIS.

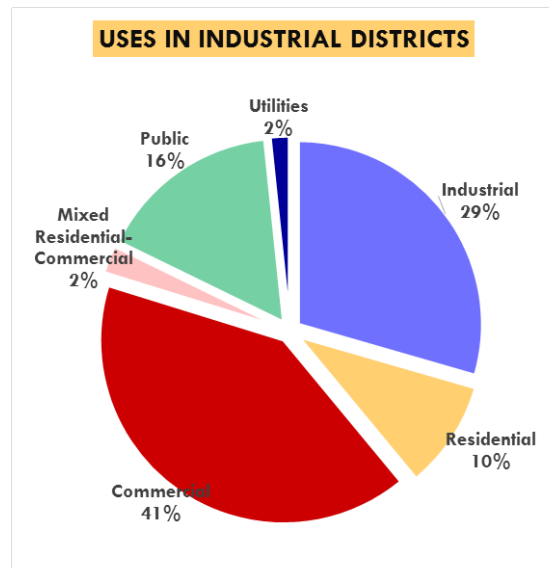
There is also a wetlands protection overlay district that appears only in part on the Zoning Map. Like many towns in Massachusetts, Arlington has an Inland Wetland District that pre-dates the

adoption of the state Wetlands Protection Act. The Zoning Bylaw relies on a text description for some covered wetlands that are not specifically mapped, e.g., 25 feet from the centerline of rivers, brooks, and streams, despite a state Zoning Act requirement that all districts be mapped.<sup>1</sup>



People usually think that the name of a zoning district indicates what the land can be used for, and to a point, this is true in Arlington. As suggested by the charts above, the amount of land zoned for various purposes aligns fairly well with the amount of land actually used for those purposes, but there are exceptions. For example, Arlington has less land devoted to single-family homes than the land zoned for single-family home development. This is partially because public service uses such as schools and parks often occupy land in residential neighborhoods. Curiously, the only district in which Arlington allows adult uses is the Central Business District (B5), the purpose of which is “to reinforce the Center’s role as the focus of activity in Arlington...” Moreover, the bylaw has no regulations to control the location or extent of adult uses within the B5 district.

Very little of Arlington’s industrially zoned land is used for industrial purposes today. While the town has zoned 48 acres of land for industrial use, the assessor’s records indicate that only thirteen acres (rounded) are actually occupied by industrial concerns: manufacturing, warehouse/distribution, storage, and related office facilities. One reason for these differences is that Arlington allows non-industrial uses in the industrial districts. For example, Arlington encourages single-family homes by allowing them by right in all districts, and two-family homes by right in most districts, even those ostensibly purposed for business and industrial uses. Some of the non-industrial uses may also be **grandfathered**, i.e., uses that already existed when the town adopted or amended its

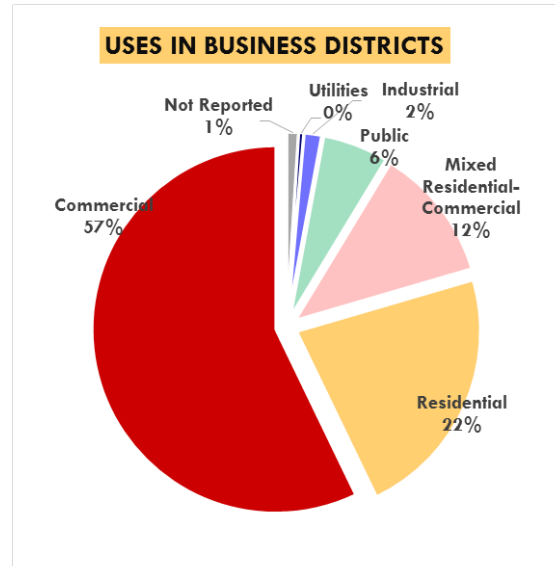


<sup>1</sup> G.L. c. 40A, § 4.



zoning. The largest individual users of industrial land in Arlington are municipal (e.g., the DPW compound on Grove Street), a warehouse/storage facility on Ryder Street, and one of several auto repair facilities that currently operates in Arlington.

Similarly, the Business districts have been developed for many uses in addition to the commercial uses for which they are principally intended. According to the assessor’s property database, over half of the land in the Business districts is used for some type of commercial use – retail, restaurants, offices, and so forth – but 22 percent is used for residential purposes, from scattered-site single-family homes to fairly dense apartments. Unlike the Industrial districts, Arlington allows multifamily housing by special permit in most of the Business districts, and some of the apartments and townhouses located on business-zoned land came about because of this provision in the Zoning Bylaw. It seems that Arlington residents do not realize their zoning provides for a change from nonresidential to residential uses by special permit. An oft-heard complaint at public meetings and in interviews was that Arlington should stop “rezoning” commercial land for residential development, but the zoning to allow these kinds of changes in use already exists in Arlington.



At the same time, some residents say mixed-use development should be explored along Massachusetts Avenue, citing factors such as sustainability, housing affordability, and sound economic development principles. Arlington does not specifically provide for (or prohibit) mixed-use buildings, i.e., with first-floor commercial space and upper-story residential space, yet mixed-use buildings occupy several grandfathered properties in the Industrial and Business districts. Past plans prepared for the commercial areas promote the inclusion of mixed-use buildings in the commercial centers,<sup>2</sup> and comments at the public meetings for this plan indicate that many residents would like to see mixed-use development as well. Still, as one commenter noted, “Everyone wants more great things, but no one wants them near their own house.”

## 2. Regulating Density and Design

Arlington has adopted a fairly prescriptive, traditional approach to regulating the amount of development that can occur on a lot (or adjoining lots in common ownership). The Town’s basic dimensional requirements cover several pages in the Zoning Bylaw, including some twenty footnotes that either explain or provide exceptions (or both) to the Table of Dimensional and Density regulations. In addition to minimum lot area requirements, Arlington regulates **floor area ratios**, lot coverage, front, side, and rear yards, building height, and minimum open space. In most districts, the maximum building height is 35 feet and 2 ½ stories – traditional height limits for single-family and two-family homes but challenging for commercial buildings – yet apartment

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Larry Koff Associates, *A Vision and Action Plan for Commercial Revitalization* (July 2010).

buildings in some of the business-zoned areas can be as tall as 60 or 75 feet, and possibly higher with an Environmental Design Review (EDR) special permit from the ARB (Section 11.06 of the bylaw). The bylaw lacks requirements such as building placement on a lot and building orientation, or tools that could help to regulate form in a coherent way, and in a way that comports with Arlington's historic development patterns. Due to the prevalence of one-parcel districts along Massachusetts Avenue, the Town essentially requires variable building setbacks from lot to lot, though most of these properties have some grandfathering protection for conditions that exist today. Still, a project involving parcel assembly and new construction would have to comply with Arlington's zoning, and it is not clear that the result would be harmonious with adjacent uses.

Arlington's EDR process blends an enhanced form of **site plan review** with authority for the ARB to grant special permits for almost all uses that require special permit approval in the Table of Uses. This includes a wide variety of use classes and types of activity. For example, the Town requires an EDR special permit for any construction or alteration of buildings regardless of use along Massachusetts Avenue, Pleasant Street, Mystic and Medford Streets, and Broadway – Arlington's historic main roadways – as well as residential development of six or more single-family or two-family units on one or more contiguous parcels, all multi-family housing, and all nonresidential uses that exceed specified floor area thresholds. The ARB conducts design review as part of the EDR process under Section 11.06, but the Town has not formally adopted design guidelines for the commercial areas. It would be difficult for property owners and developers to know what the Town actually wants and to plan their projects accordingly. Also, the core areas of Arlington Center fall within historic districts that Arlington established under state law Chapter 40C, so there are overlapping permitting requirements with the potential for conflicts about architectural design.

**Off-Street Parking.** Arlington requires all land uses to provide off-street parking. In many ways, the Town's off-street parking requirements are quite thoughtful. For example, requirements such as one space per 300 sq. ft. of retail development and one space per 500 sq. ft. of office development are fairly reasonable compared with the rules that apply in many towns. Arlington also provides for off-street parking on premises other than the lot served (i.e., off-site parking), if the permitting authority finds that it is impractical to construct the required parking on the same lot and the property owners have a long-term agreement to secure the parking. In addition, Arlington allows public parking spaces to "count" toward the required number of off-street spaces as long as the public parking lot is within 1,000 feet of the proposed use. Consistent with the purpose statement of Section 8.01 (Off-Street Parking and Loading Regulations), Arlington prohibits front yard parking in residential areas in order to promote aesthetically pleasing neighborhoods, preserve property values, and avoid undue congestion. Arlington has adopted bicycle parking requirements for lots with eight or more vehicular parking spaces, too.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the Town's generally reasonable parking standards, complaints about inadequate parking abound in Arlington. Property owners and merchants say the situation in East Arlington is most troublesome and that the area's development potential is capped by the lack of parking. Meanwhile, residents complain that the two-hour parking limits in East Arlington are enforced only in the business districts, not in the adjacent residential neighborhoods. Moreover, Arlington does not have an abundance of on-street or public parking, so the seemingly flexible

provisions of the Zoning Bylaw may not have much practical benefit. Even in districts where maximum height limits would not impede redevelopment, the off-street parking regulations could do just that – making parking regulations a form of dimensional and density control. Parking supply management is not a land use issue per se, but it has an undeniable impact on the public’s receptivity to more intensive development – which in turn has an impact on a special permit granting authority’s approach to development review and permitting.

### **3. Nonconforming Uses and Structures**

Arlington’s zoning makes a remarkably clear statement about **nonconforming uses and structures**: they cannot be extended (increased). While the Town gives the Board of Appeals some latitude to approve a change of one non-conforming use to another nonconforming use that is reasonably similar, the overall message of the Zoning Bylaw is that nonconformities should be eliminated over time. The exception is single-family and two-family homes, which may be altered and extended if a proposed project does not create new nonconformities and the Board of Appeals finds that the project will not be more detrimental to the neighborhood than the existing condition. (Substantial changes to nonconforming structures may also trigger Arlington’s demolition delay bylaw.)

Arlington’s zoning does not allow the Board of Appeals to grant use variances.

### **4. Potential Conflicts with State Law**

Arlington’s present zoning is sometimes inconsistent with the state Zoning Act (“Chapter 40A”) and case law. For example, the town requires a special permit for churches and other religious uses, day care and kindergarten programs, and public and private non-profit schools, yet Chapter 40A specifically exempts these uses from local control, other than “reasonable” dimensional regulations. Libraries, which typically qualify as an educational use, also require a special permit in Arlington. Ironically, non-exempt schools such as trade schools conducted as a private business are allowed as of right in Arlington’s business districts, yet public and non-profit schools require a special permit. “Rehabilitation residence,” which Arlington defines as a “group residence” licensed or operated by the state, also requires a special permit, but the Zoning Act forbids imposing special permit requirements on residential uses for people with disabilities.

In addition, the Town’s approach to regulating farms does not square with state law, which specifically protects farming in all of its varieties (including agriculture, horticulture, and permaculture) on five or more acres of land. As a practical matter, Arlington’s compliance or lack thereof with the state’s agricultural protections may be a moot point because the Town does not have five-acre parcels in agricultural use. Nevertheless, the bylaw’s attempt to block livestock or poultry even on larger parcels is incompatible with state law.

## **C. Arlington’s Land Use Future**

A significant investment in time and resources has been dedicated toward eliciting ideas from Arlington residents about what the future holds for their community. Over sixty stakeholder interviews and three major public meetings helped the consulting team learn more about Arlington’s opportunities and constraints. Many people spoke of Arlington’s high quality of life, picturesque open spaces, excellent schools, and robust community engagement. Comments were



also made about the desire to keep things as they are and resist change. In short, most people treasure their Town – as rightly they should. Arlington is a beautiful community.

Whether in Arlington or almost any other town, people do like to keep things “as is,” yet change will come. It will come either in a way that is directed and achieves the goals citizens have carefully cultivated, or it will happen in a reactionary way, emerging haphazardly as developers capitalize on opportunities as they occur in a piecemeal fashion. As the consulting team transitions from preparing brief “existing conditions” narratives to the more analytical working papers that will form the heart of the master plan elements, it will be important to “test” the viability for new development.

There is a general though misguided sense that Arlington is “built out.” A closer urban design examination reveals that this is not the case. Redevelopment in certain areas of Arlington can actually enhance characteristics the community most cherishes while at the same time contribute to a tax base that needs expansion and diversification. Such redevelopment need not occur at the expense of open space. On the contrary, creating incentives and establishing a favorable development climate for density in certain locations can offset pressures elsewhere in the town where open space and parks are in greatest need. The relationship between development and open space need not (and should not) be a zero-sum game.

While market demands and individual development decisions will continue to occur on a town-wide scale, the geography most advantageous to be redeveloped is that which is proximate to the town’s primary commercial corridor of Massachusetts Avenue. Arlington Heights, Arlington Center, and Capitol Square in East Arlington each benefit from their relationship to the town’s primary transit corridor, but each one maintains its own identity and characteristics. Indeed, like the Town as a whole, Arlington is made up of distinct sub-districts. For example, Arlington Heights is one of the last remaining industrial corridors left. It is also bounded by two major arteries. As the Minuteman Trail continues to emerge as a viable commuting and recreational corridor between Massachusetts Avenue and Summer Street, additional development pressures will place greater burdens on this underutilized swath of land. Arlington Center lies at the confluence of the town’s commerce and civic uses. It is the undeniable center of town. How can it grow in ways that do not burden an already taxed traffic pattern? East Arlington’s Capitol Square area continues to build a reputation for new restaurants. In what ways can this area grow and become more of a destination and not merely a place to pass through?

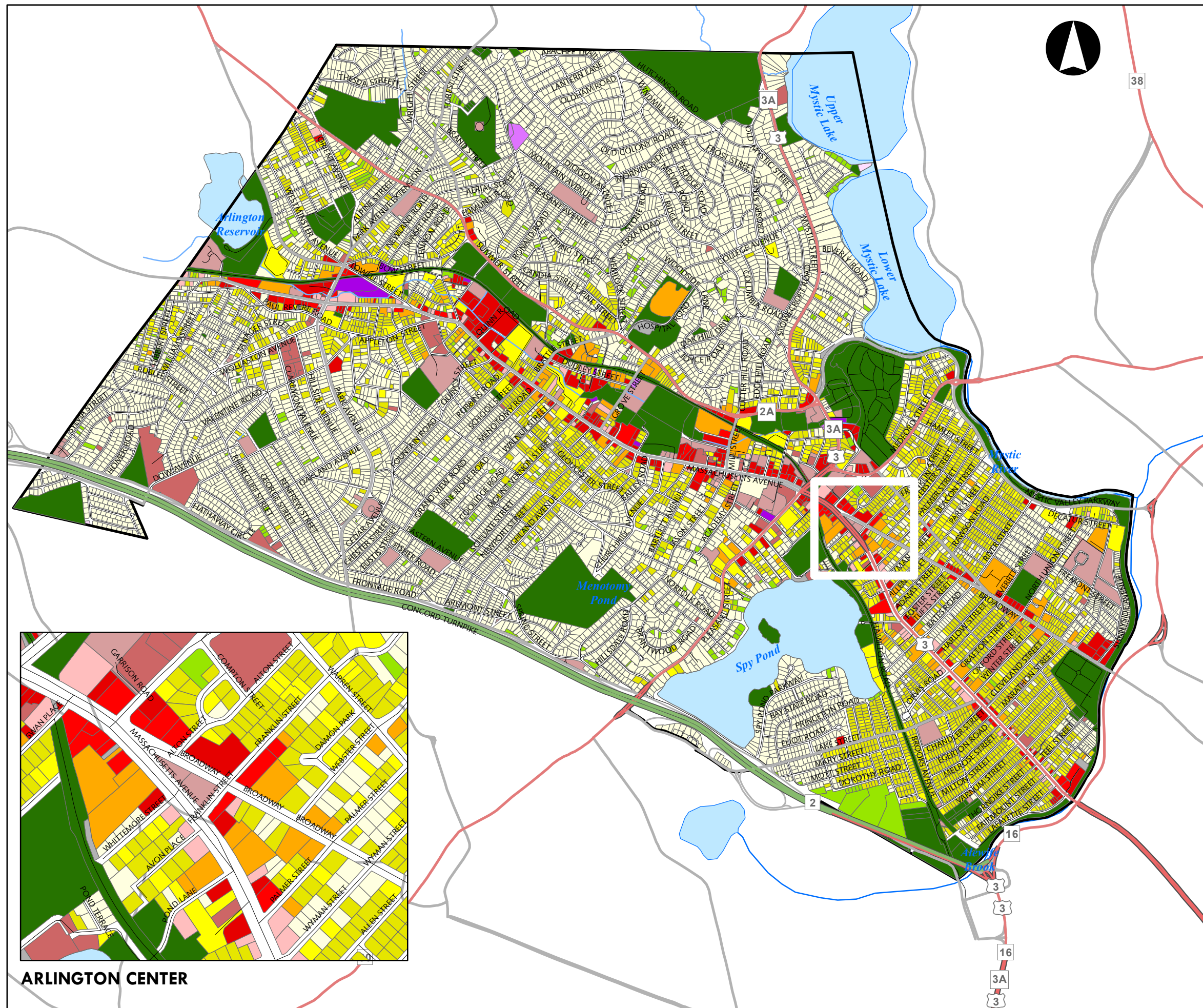
Though it is outside the scope of a town-wide master plan to “design” individual buildings, there are fundamental design principles that can mitigate the effects of increased height or greater lot coverage on adjoining properties. Density is not a bad word, and to a large degree the alignment, form, and massing of a project can make the difference between a development that ignores its context and one that contributes to the character of the town. Arlington, like any town, needs to evolve and grow in order to thrive. Development studies conducted for later phases of the master plan process will illuminate the inherent advantages of redevelopment along the corridor and demonstrate ways for Arlington to grow that is sustainable and enhances the qualities of the place.



# ARLINGTON MASTER PLAN

## Map 2.1. Existing Land Uses

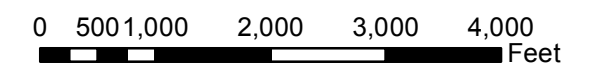
November 2013



### LEGEND

- Lakes and Ponds
- Rivers and Streams
- ROADWAYS**
- Limited Access Highway
- Multi-lane Hwy, not limited access
- Other Numbered Highway
- Major Road, Collector
- Ramp
- Local Roads
- LAND USES**
- Single Family
- Condominiums
- Small Multi-Family
- Apartments
- Mixed Uses
- Retail, Restaurant
- Other Commercial
- Manufacturing, Industrial
- Utilities
- Outdoor Recreation
- Vacant Land
- Government Buildings
- Educational, Religious, Charitable
- Not Reported
- Public Land (Protected/Semiprotected)

Data Sources: Arlington GIS, MassGIS, MassDOT.



# RKG

HOWARD/STEIN-HUDSON, INC.  
 GAMBLE ASSOCIATES  
 PPRI, INC.  
 COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES GROUP, INC.

### ARLINGTON CENTER

This map is for general planning purposes only. The data used to create the map are not adequate for making legal boundary determinations. Exercise caution when interpreting the information on this map.



# ARLINGTON MASTER PLAN

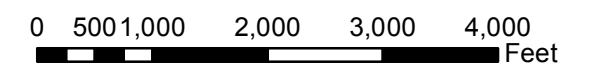
## Map 2.2. Age of Buildings

November 2013

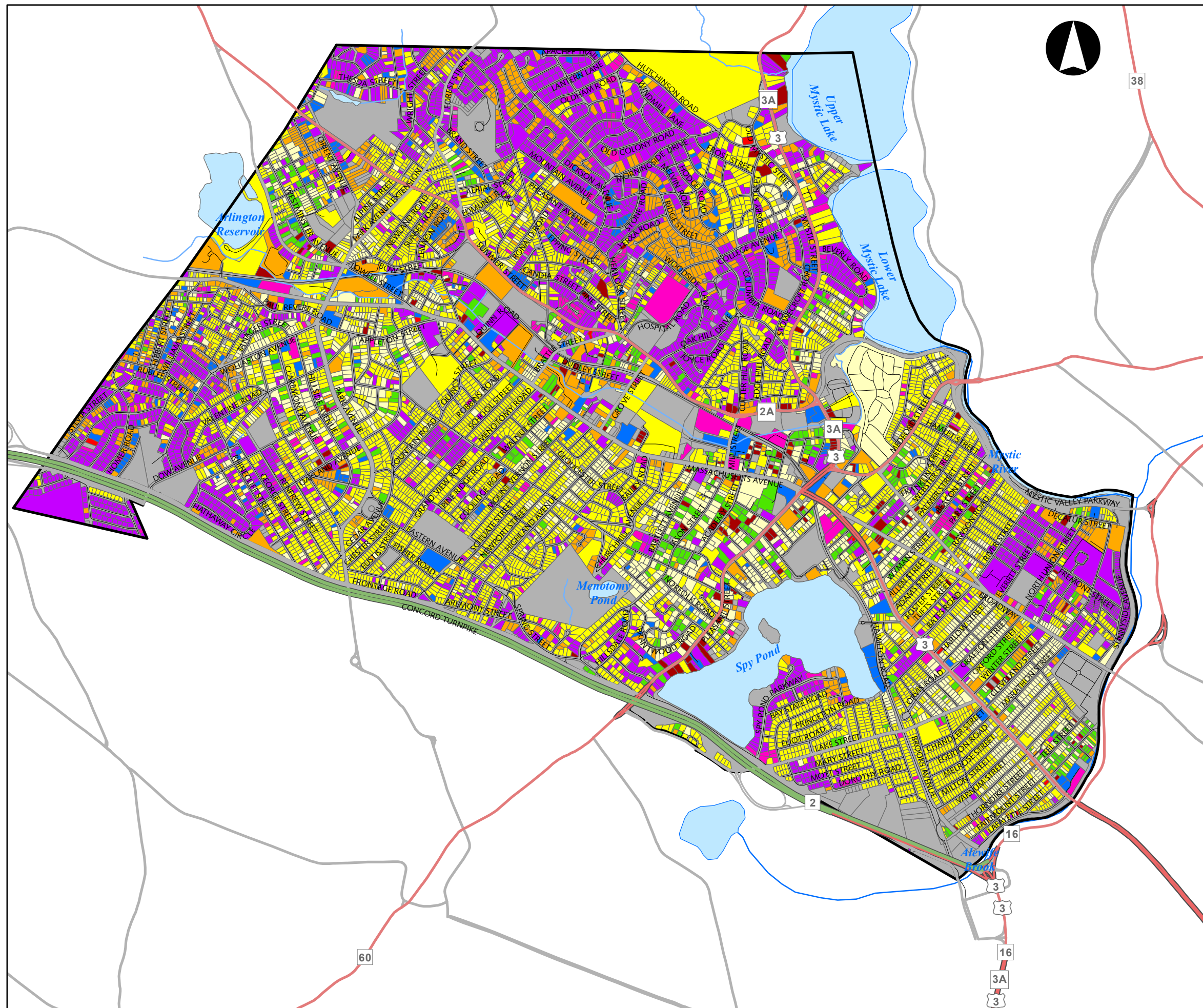
### LEGEND

- Lakes and Ponds
- Rivers and Streams
- ROADWAYS**
  - Limited Access Highway
  - Multi-lane Hwy, not limited access
  - Other Numbered Highway
  - Major Road, Collector
  - Ramp
  - Local Roads
- YEAR BUILT**
  - Pre-1800
  - 1800-1860
  - 1861-1899
  - 1900-1919
  - 1920-1945
  - 1946-1960
  - 1960-1979
  - 1980-1999
  - 2000-Present
  - Vacant Land or Not Reported

Data Sources: Arlington GIS, MassGIS, MassDOT.



HOWARD/STEIN-HUDSON, INC.  
GAMBLE ASSOCIATES  
PPRI, INC.  
COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES GROUP, INC.



This map is for general planning purposes only. The data used to create the map are not adequate for making legal boundary determinations. Exercise caution when interpreting the information on this map.