2014

FRANKLIN REGIONAL COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

SLUM AND BLIGHT INVENTORY FOR THE TURNERS FALLS HISTORICAL-INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT

Franklin Regional Council of Governments

Funded by the Massachusetts Department of Housing & Community Development through the Community Development Block Grant Program

Table of Contents

Introduction 2

Background 2

Results of the Slum & Blight Inventory 4

Methodology of the Slum & Blight Inventory 7

Appendix A: Certification of Disinvestment by Chief Elected Officer of Town of Montague

Appendix B: Baseline Information Form for CDBG Activities to Prevent or Eliminate Conditions of Slums or Blight: Area Basis

Appendix C: CDBG Property Inventory and Ratings & CDBG Public Inventory and Ratings

Appendix D: Maps

Appendix E: Weston & Sampson Assessment of Public Improvements

Slum and Blight Inventory for the Turners Falls Historic-Industrial District

Introduction

The Town of Montague, with the assistance of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG), has completed an inventory of the Turners Falls Historic-Industrial district located in a section of Turners Falls to determine if the area qualifies as "Slum and Blighted." The designation "Slum and Blighted" will allow the Town to apply for funding critical to the revitalization of the area. This designation will allow the Town to begin elimination of the current conditions of blight on an area basis and will also prevent further blight by addressing marginal properties that could, if left unassisted, deteriorate further. Specifically, the designation will allow Montague to proceed with a façade and signage improvement program, infrastructure improvements, housing rehabilitation and other activities that support neighborhood revitalization.

Results of the inventory show that the **Historic-Industrial District meets the definitions and criteria to be considered a Slum and Blighted area.** The specific study area is the Historic-Industrial (HI) district, which is located along the Power Canal in downtown Turners Falls and contains at least five former or current mills. More than 25% of the properties within the HI district have experienced physical deterioration of buildings, high vacancy rates, abnormally low property values, and have known or suspected environmental contamination. In addition, more than 25% of the public infrastructure is in poor or fair condition and is in a general state of deterioration based on an engineering assessment conducted by Weston & Sampson.

Background

The Turners Falls Historic-Industrial district encompasses the area along the Turners Falls Power Canal in downtown Turners Falls and is approximately 25 acres in size. It consists of 24 buildings and 26 parcels with an estimated 4,700 linear feet of roads and 2,250 linear feet of sidewalks and 6 bridges spanning the canal. The Slum and Blight study area is located in Census Tracts 407, Block Groups 1 and 2. Turners Falls is a planned industrial community and was very prosperous beginning in the mid to late 1800's and continued to grow and prosper well into the 20th century. Turners Falls is characterized by a wide and grand Avenue A with many historic commercial buildings and dense residential, mixed use

buildings mostly dating to the late 19th century. The entire study area is located in the Turner Falls Historic District. The Turners Falls Power Canal is a distinctive feature of Turners Falls. This canal provided the hydroelectric power for many mills that came to the community in the late 1800's. Many of these mill buildings along the Power Canal are either completely vacant, in ruins, or are underutilized and suffer from a deferral of maintenance and disinvestment by private owners. The Former Griswold Cotton Mill/Railroad Salvage Building was a prominent building located in the HI district on the Power Canal, but has been vacant for over a decade and is now in a state of advanced ruin. The Strathmore Mill has also been vacant for at least a decade and continues to deteriorate. Without significant investment and reuse of these structures, they will become increasingly susceptible to vandalism and arson. In 2007, Building #10 of the Strathmore Mill complex was destroyed by arson. These properties and other similar ones contribute to the feeling of disinvestment in the area.

Photo left: View looking into excavated building debris area of Strathmore Mill Building #10, which was destroyed by fire due to arson in 2007.

Photo above: Former Griswold Cotton Mill / Railroad Salvage Store

Results of the Slum & Blight Inventory

The Town of Montague hired the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) as a consultant to complete the Slum and Blight Inventory according to the guidelines established by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). The FRCOG hired Weston & Sampson to conduct the public infrastructure assessment component of the Slum and Blight Inventory. The results of the completed inventory demonstrate that the Historic-Industrial district located in Turner Falls, Montague meets the definition and criteria of a "Slum and Blighted" area. The FRCOG staff conducted the building inventory primarily in August of 2014 and Weston & Sampson conducted the public infrastructure inventory in October of 2014. In order to be considered as "Slum and Blighted," a target area must meet the following criteria:

1) The area must meet the Massachusetts's definition of substandard, blighted, or decadent areas as stated in MGL Ch. 121B.
2) The area must also have at least 25% of its properties experience one or more of the following conditions:
    - Physical deterioration of buildings or improvements;
    - Abandonment of properties;
    - Chronic high occupancy turnover rates or chronic high vacancy rates in commercial or industrial buildings;
    - Significant declines in property values or abnormally low property values relative to other areas in the community; or
    - Known or suspected environmental contamination;

    Or
    - The public improvements throughout the area are in a general state of deterioration.

Both of the above criteria have been met in the Historic-Industrial district in Turners Falls. The General Laws of Massachusetts Chapter 121B defines a substandard, blighted, decadent area as an:

"area which is detrimental to safety, health, morals, welfare, or sound growth of a community because of the existence of buildings which are out of repair, physically deteriorated, unfit for human habitation, or obsolete, or in need of major maintenance or repair…"

The Historic-Industrial (HI) district is consistent with this MGL Ch. 121B definition since there are many buildings (at least 17 buildings or 70%) in the target area that are in physical

deterioration and in need of major maintenance or repair. At least seven of these buildings are unfit for human habitation.

Further, the HI district meets all of the Slum and Blighted criteria by having at least 25% of the properties meeting each of the conditions outlined above (see Table 1 below). There are 24 buildings and 26 properties (parcels) in the Historic-Industrial district. Information has been summarized for both the number of buildings *and* properties in order to provide a more detailed picture of the conditions of the study area.

Table 1. Summary Table of Slum & Blight Inventory

	Met Criteria?*	Criteria for Slum and Blight Designation	# of Buildings	% of Buildings	# of Properties	% of Properties
1)	✓	Physical deterioration of buildings or properties	17	70%	13	50%
2)	✓	Abandonment of Property	6	25%	1	3%
3)		Chronic high occupancy turnover rates, OR	–	–	–	–
	✓	Chronic high vacancy rates	10	41%	6	23%
4)		Significant decline in property values, OR	–	–	–	–
	✓	Abnormally low property values	12	50%	15	57%
5)	✓	Known or suspected environmental contamination	8	33%	10	38%
			# of Public Improvements		% of Public Improvements	
6)	✓	Public improvements throughout the Area are in a general state of deterioration	7**		87%	

*To meet the required minimum 25%, at least 6 buildings OR 7 properties are needed within the HI district. There are total of 24 buildings and 26 properties within the HI district.
**There were 8 types of public improvements assessed as outlined in Table 2. Seven of the 8 types had well over 25% of the systems in either poor or fair condition.

In a study of commercial vacancy rates in Franklin County employment centers conducted by K. Levitch Associates for the years 2010-2014, vacancy rates for the county as a whole were

stable. However, a few centers showed high rates. The vacancy rate in the downtown commercial area of Turners Falls was 7% in 2014. While this rate matches the region's average rate, the study only examined spaces that were market-ready and excluded spaces in existing buildings that cannot be occupied currently due to physical or legal reasons, or because of owner intent. This exclusion leads to a very large underestimation of the current vacant space in the Turners Falls HI district, much of which is located in the former mill buildings. These mill buildings are not market-ready and would require a significant amount of investment to make them even habitable. When including all vacant buildings in the study area, this Slum & Blight inventory shows that the vacancy rate is much higher at 26%. In fact, approximately 53% of the total square footage in the HI district is vacant and has been for more than 24 months.

The consultant, Weston & Sampson, found that the public improvements throughout the Historic-Industrial district are in a general state of deterioration. Weston & Sampson found that of the eight types of public improvements that they assessed, seven of them were in fair or poor condition. The improvements that they assessed are shown in Table 2 below along with a summary of their conditions.

Table 2. Summary of Public Improvement Inventory

Met Criteria?*	Public Improvement	Amount in Fair/Poor Condition	% in Fair/Poor Condition
✓	Roadway	4,700 lineal feet	99%
	Parking	10 spaces	11%
✓	Sidewalks	2,255 lineal feet	81%
✓	Curbing	1,550 lineal feet	86%
✓	Street Lighting	14 lights	100%
✓	Water	2,847 lineal feet	76%
✓	Sanitary Sewer	2,417 lineal feet	100%
✓	Storm Drainage	2,007 lineal feet	100%

The attached Appendix B provides a more detailed summary of the overall conditions in the Historic-Industrial district. For specific information on each property within the HI district, please see attached Appendix C. The Appendix E provides a summary as well as detailed information on the assessment of the public improvements conducted by Weston &

Sampson. The accompanying maps illustrate the location of parcels and public improvements in the HI district that meet the conditions of a slum and blighted area.

Methodology of the Slum & Blight Inventory

To determine the level of physical deterioration of the buildings in the target area, FRCOG staff performed field surveys of all the properties in August of 2014. Slum and Blight Inventory guidelines require that several components of each building be assessed. They include: roofing, windows and doors, exterior walls, porch/stairs/deck, foundation, storefront and signage, and parking lots. During the field surveys, staff evaluated each of these building components separately and assigned a rating of either: excellent, good, fair, or poor according to DHCD guidelines. Staff then examined the building comprehensively to determine an overall rating for each building and documented the buildings' conditions with notes and photographs. To augment the field surveys, staff also examined tax assessor cards for each property.

FRCOG staff completed an assessment of property values within the HI district by comparing its properties with a neighboring zoning district that has comparable land uses. Specifically, the Town's Central Business (CB) zoning district was chosen as a comparison because it directly adjoins the HI district and also allows commercial, industrial, and residential uses. The assessed value of each property was divided by the building's finished square footage in order to determine the assessed value per square foot. The average value/square foot in the CB was $55.30, which is higher than the average value of the HI district at $32.95. DHCD guidelines for a Slum and Blight Inventory define properties as having abnormally low property values if a building or lot's value within the target area is 25% less than the average value of a similar district within the community. According to this definition, properties within the HI district must be less than $41.47/square feet (which is 25% less than the average value of the CB) in order to qualify as having abnormally low property values. More than half (57%) of the properties within the HI district fall below this benchmark.

Chronic high turnover rates and chronic high vacancy rates were determined through a variety of methods. Unfortunately, the tax assessor card information for each property does not record the vacancy status or current occupancy of the buildings. In order to determine turnover and vacancy rates, staff compiled local knowledge of the area and walked the study area. There is currently one known abandoned property within the HI zoning district, Parcel 02-0-01, the former Strathmore Mill, which the Town of Montague took possession of in 2010.

Part of the possible criteria required for a "Slum and Blighted" designation is that at least 25% of the properties have known or suspected environmental contamination. The FRCOG has a Regional Brownfield Program for known or suspected properties contaminated by hazardous materials or petroleum. Based on the experience from this program with properties located directly within the study area and in the wider region, FRCOG staff assumed that all current industrial buildings and commercial buildings that historically have been used for industry contained suspected environmental contaminants. The history of the industrial buildings in the target area contain a long record of manufacturing, utilized hazardous substances, pollutants, contaminants. The FRCOG Staff also used the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection's online "Waste Site / Reportable Releases Look Up" to determine the number and type of pollutants released on Montague properties. Between this database and information from the Brownfield Program, FRCOG staff identified twelve properties in the study area that have had known or suspected releases of hazardous materials.

The assessment of the public infrastructure within the target area was completed by the consultant, Weston & Sampson. Weston & Sampson conducted surveys of each public infrastructure component separately and evaluated them based on the DHCD guidance. This included visual observation of the infrastructure as well as research through the Town of Montague's Department of Public Works. For more detail on the methodology used to assess the public infrastructure and their findings, see Appendix E.

Photo: One of the vacant buildings that are part of the Strathmore Mill complex.

Appendix A: Certification of Disinvestment by Chief Elected Officer of Town of Montague

Appendix B: Baseline Information Form for CDBG Activities to Prevent or Eliminate Conditions of Slums or Blight: Area Basis

Appendix B - Base-line Information Form

Documentation Category	Specific Item	Numerical Response (# or %)	Identify on Target Area Map?
Total Acreage of target area:		25	
Land uses as % total land area: *estimate the percentage of the total target area by listed item.*	Commercial	16%	
	Industrial	55%	
	Residential	15%	
	Transportation (roads)	1%	
	Open Space	8%	
	Public/Institutional & Other	7%	
Distribution of buildings: *indicate how many of the buildings are commercial, industrial, residential, or public in the target area.*	Estimate # Commercial buildings	2	
	# Industrial buildings	11	
	# Residential buildings	9	
	# Other buildings (public/institutional & other)	2	
Building Condition Determination:	# Total buildings in target area	24	yes
	# Total buildings Fair and Poor	17	
	% Total buildings Fair and Poor	70%	
Rank the # of ***Commercial*** *buildings by condition*	# in Excellent Condition	0	
	# in Good Condition	0	
	# in Fair Condition	0	
	# in Poor Condition	2	
Rank the # of ***Industrial*** *buildings by condition*	# in Excellent Condition	0	
	# in Good Condition	3	
	# in Fair Condition	0	
	# in Poor Condition	8	
Rank the # of ***Residential*** *buildings by condition*	# in Excellent Condition	0	
	# in Good Condition	4	
	# in Fair Condition	4	
	# in Poor Condition	1	
Rank the # of ***Public/Institutional*** *buildings by condition*	# in Excellent Condition	0	
	# in Good Condition	0	
	# in Fair Condition	1	
	# in Poor Condition	1	
Historic Resources	Buildings on or eligible for listing in National Register	24	yes
Roads	Total linear feet of roads	4,750	yes
	Total linear feet in deteroriation	4,700	
Sidewalks	Total linear feet of sidewalks	2,775	yes
	Total linear feet of sidewalks in deteroriation	2,255	

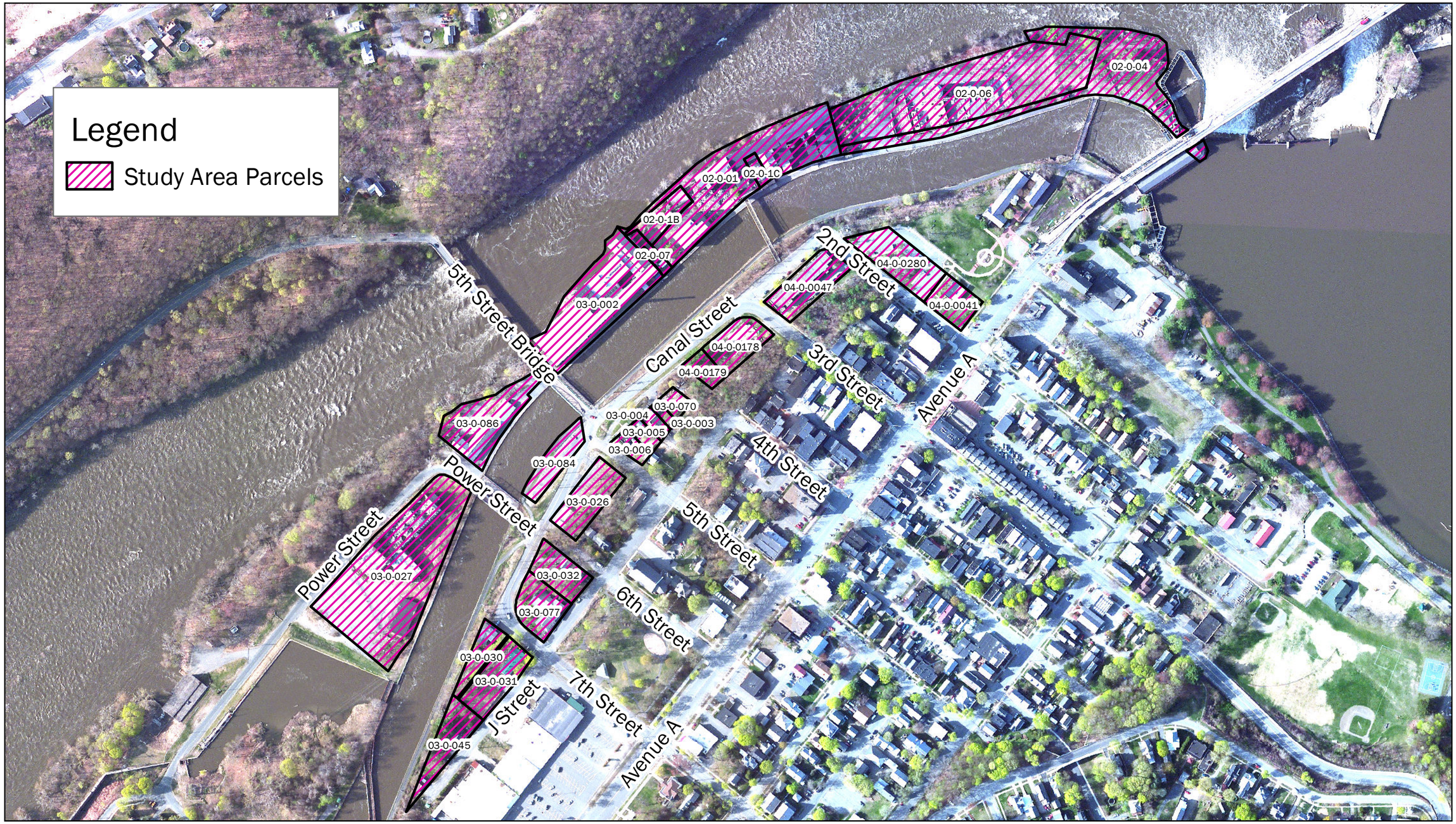
Documentation Category	Specific Item	Numerical Response (# or %)	Identify on Target Area Map?
Parking: Public or Private	# parking areas, public or private	6	
	# parking areas in deterioration	1	
Parks, Playgrounds or vacant, open space areas	# parks, playgrounds, open spaces	1	
	# parks, playgrounds, open spaces in deterioration	0	
Other public improvements: *examples: sewer lines, lighting, landscape. List total amount; Estimate # or % in deterioration*	Total #	8*	yes
	Total #/% in deterioration	8 / 87%*	
Vacancy and indicators of disinvestment	% vacant commercial units	1%	
	% vacant industrial units	1.4%	
	# of vacant residential units	6	
Abandonment of Properties	# of abandoned buildings and lots	6	
	Commerical	0	
	Industrial	6	
	Residential	0	
Chronic high occupancy turnover rates or high vacancy rates	Estimated # of commercial or industrial buildings with high occupancy turnover rates	0	
	Estimated # of commercial or industrial buildings with high vacancy rates	9	yes
Significant decline in property values or abnormally low property values	Estimated # of commercial or industrial buildings with significant decline in property value	--	
	Residential # of buildings	--	
	Estimated # of commercial or industrial buildings with abnormally low property values	10	yes
	Residential # of buildings	2	yes
Known or suspected environmental contamination	# of properties which have known or suspected environmental contamination	10	yes
Basic Business Data:	Estimate # of businesses operating in the target area	3	
	Estimate # of businesses that have left target area in the last 24 months	0	
	Estimate # of businesses that have come into the target area in the last 24 months	0	

* There were 8 types of public improvements assessed (includes sewer, water, storm sewer, lighting, curbing, lighting, and parking).

Appendix C: CDBG Property Inventory and Ratings & CDBG Public Inventory and Ratings

Appendix D: Maps

Turners Falls Historic-Industrial District Slum & Blight Study Area



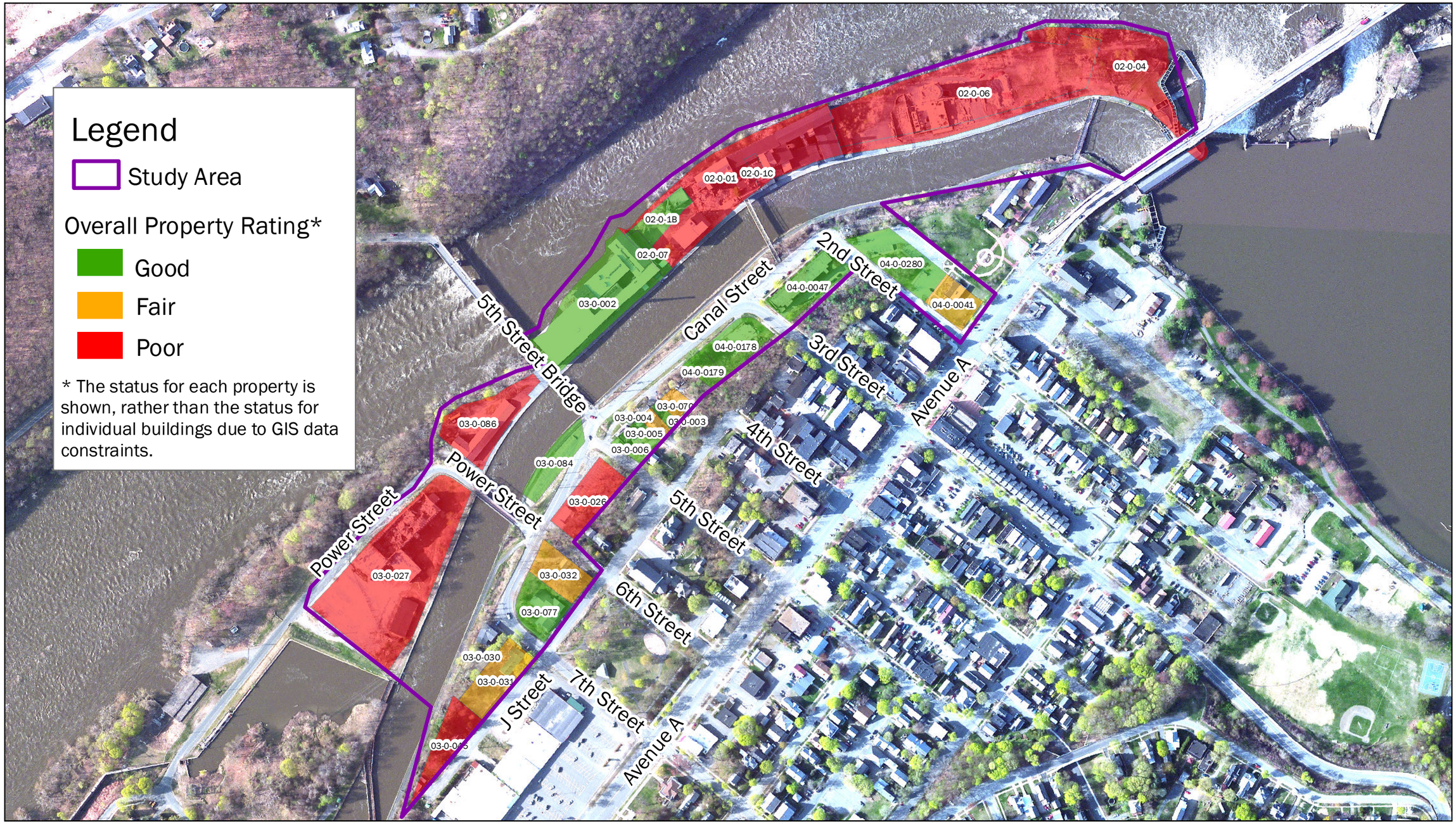
Map produced by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments for the Town of Montague, December 2014. Funded by MA DHCD through the CDBG program, FY 2014.

GIS Data from MassGIS. Field work conducted by FRCOG staff in August 2014.

0 87.5 175 350 525 700 Feet

N

Turners Falls Historic-Industrial District Map 1: Rating of Physical Deterioration of Buildings



Map produced by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments for the Town of Montague, December 2014. Funded by MA DHCD through the CDBG program, FY 2014.

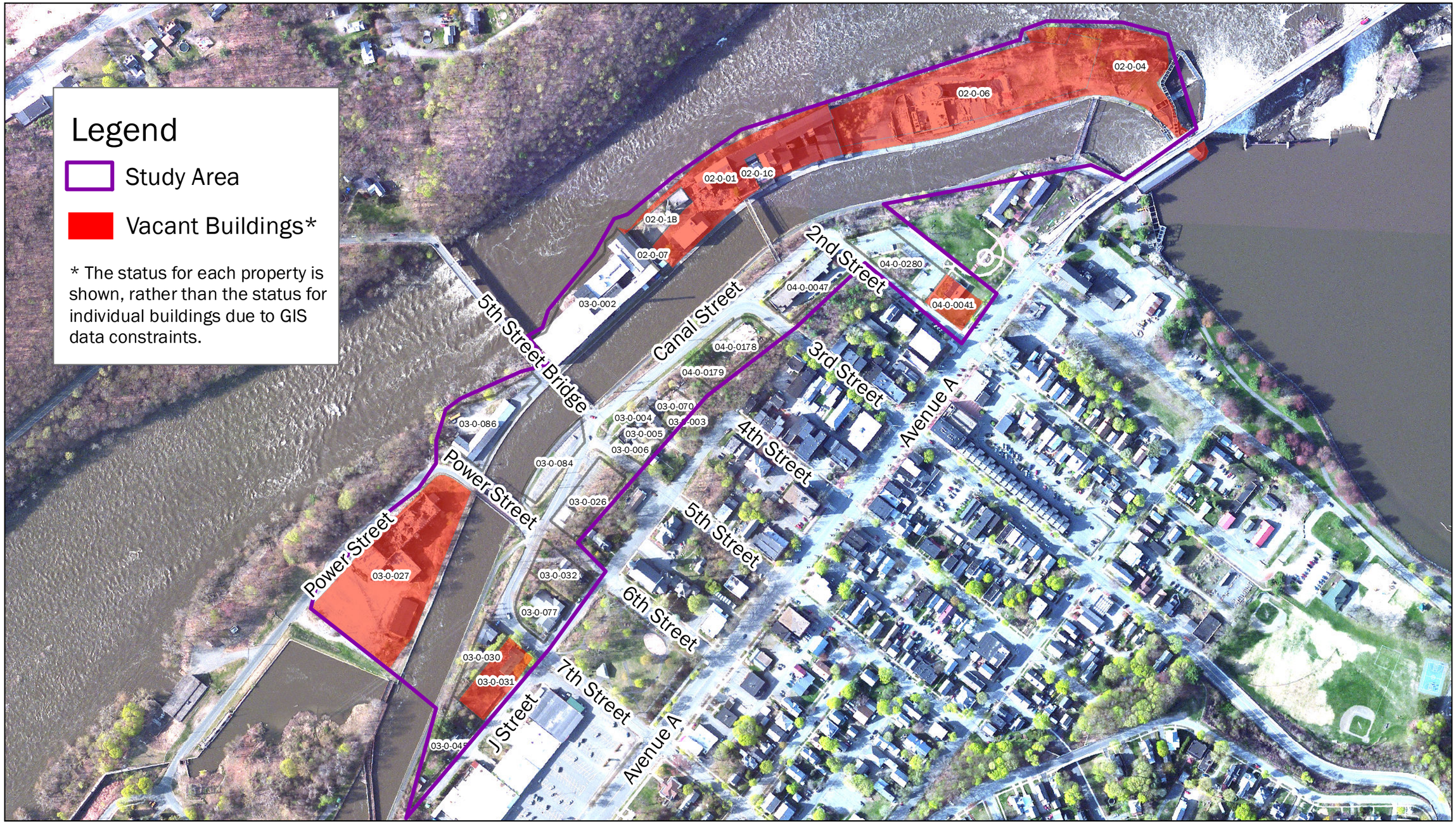
GIS Data from MassGIS. Field work conducted by FRCOG staff in August 2014.

0 87.5 175 350 525 700 Feet

N

Turners Falls Historic-Industrial District

Map 2: Vacancy Status of Buildings



Map produced by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments for the Town of Montague, December 2014. Funded by MA DHCD through the CDBG program, FY 2014.

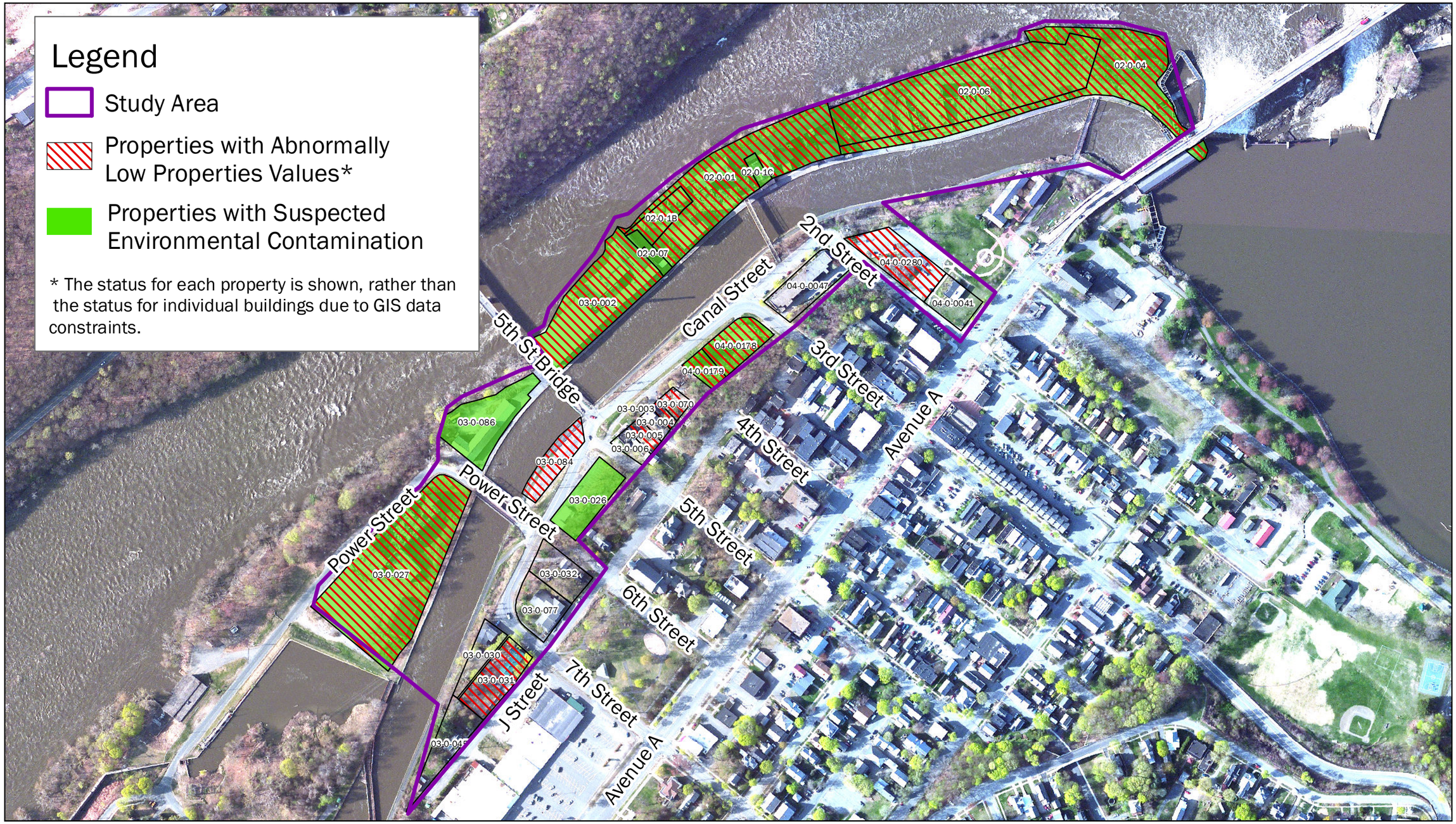
GIS Data from MassGIS. Field work conducted by FRCOG staff in August 2014.

0 87.5 175 350 525 700 Feet

N

Turners Falls Historic-Industrial District

Map 3: Abnormally Low Property Values & Properties with Suspected Environmental Contamination



Map produced by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments for the Town of Montague, December 2014. Funded by MA DHCD through the CDBG program, FY 2014.

GIS Data from MassGIS. Field work conducted by FRCOG staff in August 2014.

0 87.5 175 350 525 700 Feet

N

Appendix E: Weston & Sampson Assessment of Public Improvements

See the Weston & Sampson "Slum & Blight Inventory for the Turners Falls Historic-Industrial District, Town of Montague, Massachusetts."