



**REDEVELOPMENT
PLANNING AND
IMPLEMENTATION
TOOLKIT: VACANT
SCHOOLS | REV.9.18.26**

OUR MISSION

To partner with communities to revitalize properties and reimagine their potential for Maine's future.

OUR VISION

We are catalysts for transformation, working alongside communities to build a more vibrant and resilient future for generations to come.

PROGRAM CONTACT

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Vacant Schools Redevelopment & Planning Toolkit

Toolkit Overview:

A Shared Problem Statewide:

Maine communities are facing a growing challenge as school closures leave municipalities with costly, aging buildings and no clear reuse plans. Closures are increasing due to demographic shifts, declining enrollment, and rising costs, with more than 30 vacant schools identified statewide, including 15 since 2024. Once vital community hubs, these properties now create financial and logistical strain for towns that often lack the capacity and resources to respond effectively.

Reusing these buildings is complex and expensive due to specialized layouts, outdated systems, environmental hazards, and regulatory and financing barriers. A significant funding gap and lack of clear guidance further limit progress, even as public interest in reuse remains strong—especially in rural areas where capacity is most constrained.

To address this, Maine Redevelopment partnered with the Midcoast Council of Governments on a pilot project to guide the reuse of two recently closed schools. This effort led to the creation of a scalable School Reuse Toolkit, offering step-by-step guidance on assessment, planning, community engagement, and financing. Designed for adaptability, the toolkit helps communities transform vacant schools into productive assets and ensures they do not face these challenges unassisted.

Planning for Possibility:

Municipal assets that are or may soon be closed or vacated require assessment of their current state and conditions prior to consideration of potential future uses of the site. A current state to future state framework can be applied to evaluate and develop possibilities.

Current State and Future State:

- **Current State** is a baseline situational analysis of the asset (site + improvements) and current market interest for the same.
- **Future State** considers what-if scenarios, develops and validates options and implements the selected path forward.

This toolkit provides a staged guide to navigating the redevelopment life cycle of a school building; from school closure, through assessment, community involvement and feasibility, to implementation and reactivation.

School Reuse successes exist across Maine:

- *Caribou* – The former Hilltop School was converted into Hilltop Heights Senior Living. Aroostook Home Health Services and Valley Home Health Services are also collocated on site.
- *Hartland* – The former elementary school was converted into the Irving Tanning Community Center. KVCAP constructed new apartment buildings on the property for a new Hartland Senior Living facility
- *Augusta* – The former Cony High School was converted into the Cony Flatiron Senior Residence.
- *St. Albans* – The former elementary school was converted into the Bowman Center for Enrichment (a community center).

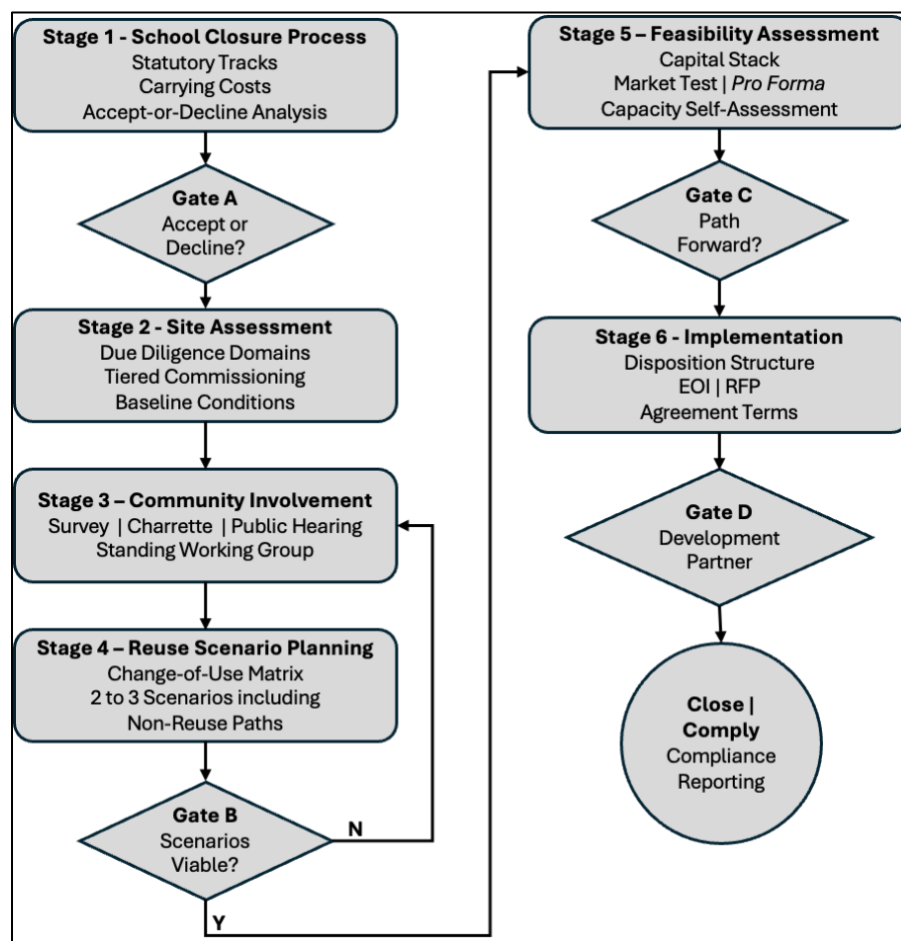
- *Thomaston/South Thomaston* – The former Gilford Butler School in South Thomaston was converted into a community center, while the former Lura Libby School in Thomaston became the town office and library.

Toolkit Process

A process for municipalities to evaluate the site and determine assets and liabilities can be applied to the Current and Future State framework. The 6-stage process is gated with decisions made within each stage and go/no-go/redo gates at critical points:

- Current State
 - School Closure Process, Site Assessment
- Future State
 - Community Involvement, Reuse Scenario Planning, Feasibility Assessment, Implementation

Sequencing Option: Each site and redevelopment project includes a unique set of challenges, restrictions, and opportunities that inform the planning process. Therefore, some situations may call for modification of the ordering in this process. Specifically, some users may find it a useful exercise (especially if a newly formed local committee is present) to complete the Capacity Self-Assessment (Stage 5) earlier on.



Stage 1 · School Closure Process

The closure process is statutory and runs on the School District's timetable. The Town's work is to capture information early and decide whether to accept the building or decline it.

The process is governed by [Title 20-A M.R.S. §4102](#). Schools may close when new buildings replace existing facilities, buildings are condemned, or, most commonly, due to lack of need. The lack-of-need track differs by the School District's structure, each with their own timeline.

	RSUs, SADs, and CSDs	Municipal School Units
Initiation	School Board vote (2/3 required)	School Board vote (2/3 required)
Reports	Cost analysis (added costs to keep the school open and what voters pay if they vote to keep it) plus lack-of-need report	Lack-of-need report
Public process	Reports sent to Towns; 10-day comment period; Commissioner compliance check and response to cost analysis	30-day petition window after the report
Decision	Referendum. Majority vote to keep; → school stays open, Town(s) pay added costs for one year, then process restarts or District absorbs costs Majority to close → School closes	Petition filed → special election. No petition → Commissioner notified and school closes
Town items	The referendum article states the estimated added costs of keeping the school open	The petition window is short; capture / share the dates

- **The Lack-of-need report includes the District's proposed disposition of the building.** This is the Town's earliest signal of intent. The District must send reports to the Town office; watch for them and request them proactively if not received.
- **Map the closure vote against the fiscal-year budget cycle.** The warrant deadline for any Town appropriation is always ahead of the vote on the warrant itself; missing the deadline means carrying the asset for a full year with no budget.

Ask the School Unit

Domain	Ask
Building	Are architectural plans available? Is there a systems-status report? Any asbestos or contaminant concerns, and the history of mitigation (what, when, how)? What regularly breaks or needs maintenance more than once a year?
Finances	What does the building cost to operate annually — heat, electricity, incidentals? Which systems are at end of life, and what deferred maintenance is due in the next 12–24 months?
Land	Any deed restrictions, easements, or unusual arrangements? Any unspoken or informal agreements a new owner should know about? How does the community currently use the property, and how will that change?

Carrying-Cost Worksheet

Generate the Total: Annual vacant building costs

Line item	Monthly (\$)	Annual (\$)
Freeze-protection heat (not comfort heat, the largest winter expenditure, often underestimated)		
Insurance at vacant-building rates (confirm the policy does not exclude vacancy)		
Electricity, water and sewer minimums, alarm monitoring		
Snow removal, plowing, roof clearing, grounds		
Security, boarding, walkthroughs, pest control		
Known 12–24-month deferred maintenance (from the Finances answers above)		
TOTAL		

GATE A — Accept or Decline the Transfer

Accept: The Town takes title with a known annual carrying cost, appropriate subject-to's for environmental assessment and proceeds to **Stage 2**.

Decline: the building follows the District's disposition path. The Town's process ends here; a legitimate outcome.

The vote should reference the completed carrying-cost worksheet by number.

Stage 2 · Site Assessment

Due Diligence answers the question: what constrains reuse, across five domains? Sequence the work by cost, because often there is no assessment budget, and much of the initial effort is no-cost.

Domain	Determination
Ownership history & title	Have land and structure always been held by the school? Was land acquired over time? Any covenants or clauses requiring educational use?
Environmental	Phase I Environmental Site Assessment (ESA); chain of ownership and liability; whether the site was ever an RCRA generator facility (labs, shops, fuel)
Key infrastructure	Public utilities (fiber, water, sewer vs. septic & well); power to site and 3-phase interconnect distance for commercial/industrial reuse; fire protection & life safety (sprinkler, alarms, elevator, egress); HVAC
Zoning / ordinance limitations	Existing barriers to common reuse scenarios (housing, mixed use, community center, light industrial, storage) that would need adjustments to not limit reuse
Other / special circumstances	Site covenants from prior uses; known environmental impacts; shoreland or Army Corps jurisdiction; federal funding restrictions an LWCF 6(f) boundary is very common at school sites

Action Items

Tier	Item	Typical Cost	Lead Time
1 · Free or already paid for	District's facilities condition assessment; assessor and registry records; local code book; RPO assistance	\$0	Days–weeks
2 · Low cost, commission next	Phase I ESA; title review; utility, septic and well capacity confirmations; appraisal	\$1,500–\$7,500 each	2–8 weeks
3 · Commission last, once scenarios narrow	Change-of-use / Code analysis (Stage 4); Structural or MEP engineering; Market Study	\$10,000+ each	8–16 weeks

- **Septic and well capacity is a named diligence item.** In rural areas, these can cap residential and food-service scenarios.
- **Life safety drives scenario costs more than any other item:** treatment is a Stage 4 item.
- **Volunteer effort may substitute for some Tier 1, but none of Tier 3.** The ESA, engineering, and code analysis must be professionally performed to be usable in financing and conveyance.

Domain	Contacts
Ownership & title	Municipal assessor's database; County registry of deeds; Municipal counsel; Outside counsel
Environmental	Regional Planning Organization (assessment funding); Maine Redevelopment; Maine DEP Brownfields (assess → clean up → revitalize)
Infrastructure	Municipal Engineer / Road Commissioner / Permit Records; Local water district; County / MDOT; Private engineers
Zoning / ordinance	Local code & policy book; Shoreland zoning; Regional Planning Organization; Maine Office of Community Affairs
Other / special	Maine DEP; Maine DACF (LWCF 6(f)); CMP / Versant / MPUC; Maine Redevelopment

- Examples:
 - Bild Architecture Change of Use Report for Liberty, Walker School (*Appendix*)
 - Bild Architecture Change of Use Brooks, Morse School (*Appendix*)

Stage 3 · Community Involvement

Complex reuse projects succeed at higher rates where strong local champions exist. Engagement produces the documented support that markets the project.

Concept	What it means
Build community consensus	Encourage creativity and blue-sky thinking from residents and business owners; establish both immediate needs and what can be added to support future growth
Planning drives process	A stated involvement framework with published timelines, adhered to with competence, creates constituent confidence and empowers local decision-makers
Development signaling	Documented local support for feasible outcomes markets the project more effectively and makes it more attractive to private and nonprofit partners

Engagement Steps

Step	Purpose	Duration
1 · Digital community survey	Capture broad population and demographics efficiently; early reuse directionality; generate interest in later sessions	6–8 weeks including analysis
2 · Community workshop & charrette	Refined development questions; reaction to 1–3 conceptual scenarios; targeted feedback on specifics (housing products, retail/recreation/public uses); maps showing where development should sit	1–2 sessions over 4–6 weeks
3 · Public hearing	Report out analysis, findings, recommendations; next steps; where any vote would occur	1 session, noticed per statute
Standing working group <i>(Optional to include public, some communities prefer keeping project management staff-only)</i>	Consistent meeting schedule; direct engagement with support partners (RPOs, Maine Redevelopment, state agencies); documentation, retention, and analysis of all public input	Continuous

Survey Design

Concepts	Why
Separate support from willingness to fund (scale distinguishing agreement with tax support from an agreement without)	The single most valuable design choice available — it is the difference between sentiment and a mandate
Offer a need-more-information option, then ask what information	Converts uncertainty into an action item instead of counting it as opposition
Capture respondent type (resident, business owner, parent, employee, seasonal, elder)	Results can be read by constituency rather than as one average
Ask the negative question: what uses would you NOT support	Surfaces any opposition early that otherwise appears at Town meeting, provides time to prepare an acknowledgement or response
Ask whether the respondent knows someone seeking space	Produces tenant leads, not just preferences. (Feeds Stages 5 and 6 directly)
Include sell and demolish as answer options	Their presence is what makes the instrument credible to skeptics

Findings and Results

- A split result is not failure: it points to one anchor use plus complements. A scenario that satisfies everyone slightly attracts no financing and stalls.
- Weight response rate honestly — below roughly 15% of households, treat results as directional and supplement with the charrette rather than re-surveying.
- Represent results when reporting by constituency; support from residents with abutter opposition is a different problem from the reverse.
- Examples of Community Engagement input content and discussion points
 - Community Survey June2025 Print Version Morse School.pdf (*Appendix*)
 - Walker Info Sessions.6.26.26.pdf (*Appendix*)
 - Walker Future slides.pdf

Stage 4 · Reuse Scenario Planning

When a building stops being a school, it loses grandfathered status; the occupancy classification of the proposed use determines the cost of everything downstream. Scenarios exist to inspire engagement and test what the local market may support. Complete the matrix before pricing any of them.

Change-of-Use Matrix

Rate each potential use as Minimal / Moderate / Major per column group. The completed rows below are for a typical mid-century masonry school:

Potential use	Code requirements (occupancy, egress, accessibility)	In-building systems (sprinkler, alarm, plumbing, HVAC)	Utilities to the building (water, sewer/septic, electric)
Community center / Town office / nonprofit	Minimal–Moderate	Moderate (alarm; sprinkler if assembly space)	Minimal
Childcare / daycare	Moderate (ground-floor strategy may avoid most triggers)	Moderate	Moderate (plumbing counts)
Business / commercial / mixed use	Moderate	Moderate	Minimal–Moderate
Housing (senior, affordable, workforce)	Major (egress, separation, accessibility)	Major (sprinkler near-certain; full plumbing)	Major (water/sewer or septic capacity)
Food service	Moderate	Major (hood, grease, plumbing)	Major (septic often the cap)
Others: _____			

Triggers

Trigger	When it applies	Of note
Sprinklers	Residential conversion and most assembly uses	Often the cheapest route to long-term flexibility — removes the need to fire-separate mixed uses
Alarm upgrades	Near-universal on any change of use	Low impact relative to everything else; budget for them
Fire separation	Mixing use groups without sprinklers	Existing masonry walls often qualify; wood-framed walls usually do not
Egress	Use- and floor-dependent	Several uses avoid triggers entirely if kept off upper levels, the ground-floor strategy

Decisions: Early, informal conversations with the State Fire Marshal or local code enforcement official can help identify requirements for potential new use. This step is free, and informs feasibility and cost considerations before design work begins.

Scenarios:

Suggest 2 to 3 to move to Stage 5, each with its tax-roll consequence named — the fact voters ask about first:

Scenario	Tax rolls / control	Notes
Community center, Town office, nonprofit anchor	Not back on tax rolls; maximum control	Permanent management obligation
Business / commercial / mixed use	On the rolls; less control over tenants once the occupancy permit is issued	Market-dependent
Housing (senior, affordable, workforce)	On the rolls (structure-dependent)	May pencil more for developers; most likely to trigger sprinklers, egress, plumbing
Phased or partial	Mixed	Occupy the easiest wing first, generate revenue, expand — often the realistic path for a Town with no capital
Mothball with a budget	Off the rolls; full control	A decision, not a default; funded from the Stage 1 carrying cost worksheet
Partial or full demolition, site reuse	Varies / site only	Legitimate when condition or cost forecloses reuse; Maine precedent exists

GATE B — Commit to scenarios

Commit: two or three scenarios, each with a completed matrix row and a named tax-roll consequence, proceed to **Stage 5**.

Do not commit: return to **Stage 3** with revised expectations. Work with local planning organization or Maine Redevelopment to identify new partners or experts to include. Returning is cheaper than carrying a scenario that cannot survive feasibility.

Stage 5 · Feasibility Assessment

Feasibility compiles the site assessment, any architectural or engineering work, and market analysis to establish which community-desired outcomes have a likelihood of success at this site. Scenarios are eliminated at this stage.

The Capital Stack

Eligibility follows the use, not the building; a Town-office-only reuse may qualify for little financial support, while adding childcare or workforce training unlocks additional federal and regional programs. Design the use with the stack in mind.

Source category (Maine examples)	Eligible applicant	Upfront or reimbursement	Typical role in stack
Federal/state grants: CDBG, Northern Border Regional Commission, USDA Rural Development, brownfields assessment/cleanup	Municipality (most); some open to nonprofits	Mostly reimbursement	Gap filler; predevelopment and infrastructure
Historic tax credits (federal 20% + Maine state credit)	Tax-paying owner, not a municipality	Realized after completion	Core equity for private/nonprofit-partnered rehabs of eligible buildings
New Markets Tax Credits	Via CDE; private/nonprofit sponsor	At closing	Larger projects in eligible census tracts
MaineHousing subsidy and rental loan programs; Rural Rental, LIHTC	Developer or housing authority	Structured at closing	The engine of most Maine school-to-housing conversions
Loans and credit enhancement: banks, CDFIs, brownfields revolving loan fund, credit enhancement agreements (TIF)	Varies; CEA requires municipal action	Upfront	Debt and local incentive layer
Local: appropriation, reserve, philanthropy	Town / local nonprofit	Upfront	Match and predevelopment

- **Ownership structure determines funding eligibility.** Several sources are closed to municipalities but open to a nonprofit or private partner.
- **Predevelopment money is the hardest to find but is needed at this stage.** Realistic sources: market assistance, brownfields assessment funding, and interim third-party ownership; Maine Redevelopment potentially taking title, running the assessment → clean up → revitalization process, and returning the building to the Town.
- **Environmental caution applies:** lead, asbestos, and underground storage tanks should be understood before taking ownership
- Example
 - Maine Office of Community Affairs' *Funding Finder* can provide information and key timing for each funding source. Maine Redevelopment can also assist with development of a tailored project capital stack. Knowledge of how and when funding is available enables process success.

Market Study

An RPO/COG-level overview market study can provide demographics, comparable rents and vacancies, the survey's tenant leads from Stage 3, and a call list of operators active in comparable Maine conversions. A more formal, third-party study supports a final selected scenario at Stage 6.

- Example
 - Demographics Study-Morse&Walker.doc This MCOG example is useful with limited data to provide a current snapshot. (*Appendix*)
- Example
 - Market Study-Morse&Walker.doc This MCOG study drew conclusions based on a light data review combined with Town community input data survey and examples statewide. (*Appendix*)

Five-Year Operating Pro Forma

Complete one per selected scenario, compared against the Stage 1 carrying cost.

Line	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Revenue: leases, fees, programming					
Operating expenses: utilities, staffing, insurance, maintenance					
Capital reserve (required line: minimum 5–10% of revenue)					
Debt service					
Net (compare to Stage 1 carrying cost)					

Municipal capacity self-assessment

Complete before Gate C. This also provides reference for prospective partners.

Capacity area	Fill in	Gap / mitigation
Government structure (select board / manager / administrator)		
Staff able to administer grants and contracts		
Land use authority (zoning, site plan review, code enforcement)		
Prior public-private partnership or development experience		
Legal counsel with real estate / municipal finance experience		
Volunteer committee depth and expected turnover (if present)		
Ability to front reimbursement-based grant spending		

GATE C — Choose the path

Go to implementation: at least one scenario shows a fundable stack and a pro forma the Town approves. Proceed to **Stage 6**.

Stop/Mothball: adopt a mothballing budget from the **Stage 1** worksheet and a review date.

Dispose as-is: sell or demolish. This is a valid outcome.

Stage 6 · Implementation

Ownership and management structure determines funding eligibility, control, and the volunteer burden for the future. Every model below is operating in Maine school conversions today.

The Disposition Decision

Disposition	Town control	Town burden	Considered when
Outright sale	Low	None after closing	Building is sound, a buyer exists, the Town needs the liability gone
Long-term lease	Moderate–High	Low–Moderate	Town wants continuing influence over use without operating
Nonprofit operator	Moderate	Moderate	Mission use is the goal and a capable operator exists; fiscal sponsorship works for a new organization
Housing authority	Moderate	Low	Residential conversion; a repeated, proven Maine path distinct from private development
Town-owned and -run	Full	High, permanent	Municipal use is the anchor and staff capacity exists (per the Stage 5 self-assessment)
Developer partnership	Negotiated	Low	The scenario needs tax-credit equity the Town cannot access
Interim third-party ownership (land bank)	Retained by agreement	Low	Environmental process must run before reuse; title returns to the Town after
Deliberate mothball	Full	Low, budgeted	Waiting is the decision, made with a budget shared with the public and approved by local governance
Demolition	Site only	One-time cost	Condition or cost forecloses reuse and the land has value

Going to market: Seek Interest to gauge market options, then Seek Implementors

A non-binding Expression Of Interest (EOI) before a binding Request for Proposal (RFP) tests real demand and shapes the future RFP. What a strong EOI does:

- **Short submission list — four items** listing the community-identified uses from the Stage 3 survey, so respondents know the process was real.
- **Plainly non-binding** - with the Town's stated right to modify, cancel, issue a later solicitation, or take no action.
- **Publishes the building evaluation and any architectural assessment transparently** rather than offering them on request.
- **States evaluation criteria and a rough decision timeline** and schedules an open house with a date and time plus tours by appointment.

Sequencing option: a Town may issue the EOI before it owns the building. Due before the Town meeting at which voters consider taking title, specifically to inform that vote. The condition is that the solicitation states plainly that the Town does not yet own the property.

Agreement terms

- Performance terms (closing conditions, construction start and completion, occupancy requirements) with remedies the Town would realistically exercise: reverter, repurchase option, liquidated damages.
- Retained public access to gym, fields, or meeting space — written into the conveyance, not a side letter.

- Who carries and insures the building between agreement and closing; grant compliance obligations, which routinely outlasts the committee that accepted them — name a successor
- Examples:
 - Request for Expression of Interest.pdf is a simple EOI example used for the for Morse School
 - Hawthorne RFP v1 Final_Amended 05.20.2026.pdf is an excellent example of an RFP and of the quality to be sought by Town statewide.

GATE D — Select, Re-issue, or Stop

Select a Development Partner: Negotiate the agreement terms above, close, and convey.

No viable response: re-issue with revised terms, or stop, returning to Gate C's options.

Timeline Template

The full process cycle runs 18–30 months from closure vote to conveyance, anchored by fixed municipal dates, warrant deadlines, and Town meeting votes.

Months	Stage / Gate	Key activities	Fixed dates to anchor
0–3	Stage 1	Obtain lack-of-need report; question sets; carrying-cost worksheet; accept-or-decline analysis	Warrant deadline for Gate A vote
3–4	Gate A	Town votes to accept or decline transfer	Town meeting
3–7	Stage 2	Tier 1 diligence immediately; commission Phase I ESA, title, utilities, appraisal	—
5–10	Stage 3	Survey (6–8 weeks); workshop & charrette; public hearing	Hearing notice per statute
9–12	Stage 4	Change-of-use matrix; code official conversation; construct 2–3 scenarios	—
12	Gate B	Committee commits to scenarios (select board endorsement)	Select board meeting
12–16	Stage 5	Capital stack per scenario; pro formas; capacity self-assessment; RPO market overview	Grant application windows
16–17	Gate C	Town or board chooses: market / mothball / dispose	Warrant deadline if appropriation needed
16–20	Stage 6a	Issue EOI (may precede title vote); open house; direct outreach; evaluate responses	EOI due date; Town meeting if title vote pending
20–24	Stage 6b	RFP to shortlist or negotiate directly; select partner	—
24	Gate D	Select partner, re-issue, or stop	Board vote
24–30	Close	Negotiate agreement; any required Town vote on conveyance; close, convey, monitor performance terms	Warrant deadline + Town meeting for conveyance

- **Grant cycles dictate project schedules** — map each target program’s application month against this timeline in Stage 5; a missed window adds a full year.
- **The fiscal-year appropriation window is the second anchor:** any Town money — match, predevelopment, mothballing budget — must be on a warrant months before it is spent.
- Fill in actual dates from the Town’s own charter and meeting calendar before adopting this template.