

PLANNING DEPARTMENT MEMORANDUM

TO: Coventry Planning Commission
FROM: Doug McLean, Director of Planning and Development
DATE: June 18, 2026
SUBJECT: Flat River Reservoir / Johnson's Pond Redevelopment Area Plan

This matter comes before the Planning Commission for a recommendation to the Town Council regarding the Flat River Reservoir / Johnson's Pond Redevelopment Area Plan. This Plan was developed by the Coventry Redevelopment Agency (RDA) with consulting support from GZA GeoEnvironmental, Inc.

GZA has submitted a summary memorandum (attached) that provides background on the Redevelopment Plan, which provides for the transition of the Pond into a public recreational resource and offers conceptual designs for the Francis Sherman Park and the Dam. GZA also conducted a land use analysis to identify future enhancement opportunities. This Plan outlines:

- near-term and long-term actions to promote public health and safety,
- an area-wide framework, multi-source capital financing, and governance/enforcement programs to address obstacles to private redevelopment,
- coordination of regulatory controls and redevelopment measures to address blighted conditions while preserving existing land uses and respecting property rights,

As part of the local adoption process, the Planning Commission is required to prepare a recommendation for the Town Council on the conformance of the Redevelopment Plan with the 2026 Comprehensive Community Plan.

RIGL § 45-32-7, which governs the submission of redevelopment plans, stipulates that:
"Every redevelopment plan shall conform to the master or general community plan insofar as the latter applies to the redevelopment area ... Whenever a redevelopment plan is submitted to the legislative body, a copy of the plan shall be submitted to the planning commission, which shall report to the legislative body within thirty (30) days on the redevelopment plan and its conformity to the master or general plan of the community."

GZA's memorandum provides the sections and goals of the Comprehensive Plan with which the proposed Redevelopment Plan is consistent (see pages 5-6 for reference). The Comprehensive Plan specifically calls for an environmental management plan for Johnson's Pond, and both the Natural Resources and Open Space elements address this issue.

Planning Department Recommendation

Staff finds proposed Flat River Reservoir / Johnson's Pond Redevelopment Area Plan to be in conformance with the 2026 Comprehensive Community Plan and thus consistent with the Redevelopment Act as set forth in RIGL § 45-32-7. Staff therefore recommends that the Planning Commission forward a **positive recommendation** to the Town Council.



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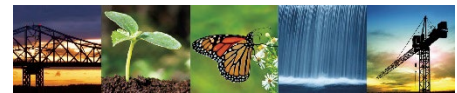
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June 17, 2026

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JOHNSON'S POND REDEVELOPMENT PLAN SUMMARY MEMORANDUM

INTRODUCTION

The Town of Coventry Redevelopment Agency (RDA) in coordination with GZA GeoEnvironmental, Inc. (GZA) prepared a Redevelopment Plan for Johnson's Pond (also known as Flat River Reservoir) through a formal redevelopment process in response to long-standing operational, environmental, and public safety concerns associated with the Johnson's Pond Dam and reservoir system. This memorandum provides a summary of the Johnson's Pond Redevelopment Plan (the Plan) and redevelopment process and is intended to give the Town of Coventry Planning Commission and Town of Coventry Town Council a concise overview of the Plan prior to the Planning Commission's June 22, 2026 meeting and the Town Council's June 23, 2026 public hearing and anticipated adoption.

The Redevelopment Plan establishes a comprehensive, transparent, and community-informed framework to guide investment, long-term maintenance, and improvement of Johnson's Pond, now under public ownership for the first time in its history.

PURPOSE

Johnson's Pond is an approximately 647-acre artificial reservoir created in 1878 by damming the South Branch of the Pawtuxet River. Originally built to supply waterpower for downstream textile mills, the Pond gradually transitioned into a recreational resource over the course of the twentieth century. The Pond was owned and managed by the Quidnick Reservoir Company (Quidnick) through this transition. Beginning in 1974, the Town of Coventry and Quidnick entered into a series of agreements governing dam maintenance and seasonal water levels. In 2009, the Town entered into a lease for public recreational use through March 2024.

In March 2020, Soscia Holdings, LLC (Soscia) acquired the Pond and its Dam. Disputes over dam maintenance, water-level management, and compliance with Rhode Island dam safety regulations followed, culminating in the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) issuing a Cease and Desist Order, Notices of Violation, and an Immediate Compliance Order between 2022 and 2024.

The Redevelopment Plan was prepared to address deteriorated conditions at the Dam and associated impacts to Johnson's Pond, including lowered water levels, environmental and



ecological impacts, reduced recreational use, and effects on adjacent residential properties. These conditions prompted Town Council to adopt a series of legislative actions in 2024 to acquire, maintain, and redevelop Johnson's Pond as a public benefit, culminating in the Town's acquisition of the Pond and Dam through condemnation in June 2024. In conjunction with this acquisition, the Town reactivated the RDA in November 2024 and charged the Agency with overseeing preparation of a formal Redevelopment Plan.

The Redevelopment Plan positions Johnson's Pond as a sustainable, well-managed public resource by improving area conditions, protecting public health and safety, restoring environmental function, and expanding public recreational access.

REDEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The redevelopment process was formally initiated with a project kickoff meeting on April 3, 2025, involving GZA, the Town Council, and the RDA. Following the kick-off meeting, the beginning stages of the redevelopment process focused on establishing a defensible redevelopment boundary encompassing Johnson's Pond, its Dam and spillway, and surrounding lands directly influenced by the reservoir's physical, operational, environmental, and access-related conditions.

Community engagement was conducted as an integral component of the redevelopment process. A public-facing project website was launched in July 2025 to share background materials, maps, meeting notices, and provide public comment opportunities. Two public workshops were conducted:

- First Public Workshop — September 25, 2025 at Coventry High School. Focused on introducing the project, soliciting feedback on the draft Redevelopment Study Area Boundary, and gathering community input on a vision for the Pond over the next 10 to 20 years.
- Second Public Workshop — March 11, 2026 at Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School. Presented conceptual designs for the Dam Property and Francis Sherman Park, a land use analysis identifying long-range recreational access opportunities, and cost estimates.

Additional stakeholder meetings were held with Town departments, RIDEM, the Pawtuxet River Authority, a member of the State Legislature, and the Johnson's Pond Civic Association (JPCA). Surveys were distributed to JPCA and Wood Estates Residents Association members, and a Town-wide survey was posted to the project website following the second public meeting.

Following community feedback at the first public workshop, the Redevelopment Study Area Boundary was expanded to include Coventry Reservoir/Stump Pond, Maple Root Pond, and the commercial areas along the north side of Flat River Road, as well as the Flat River Reservoir sub-watershed.

Once the Redevelopment Boundary was completed, GZA prepared conceptual designs with cost estimates for Francis Sherman Park and the Dam property, the two most viable Town owned properties to be redeveloped. As required by Town ordinances and resolutions, the Dam Property and Francis Sherman Park concept designs provide parking areas, boat launches and recreational facilities to expand public access in the Redevelopment Boundary. A comprehensive desktop Land Use Analysis was also conducted by GZA to assist the Town and RDA in proactively identifying feasible future access enhancement opportunities in the Redevelopment Boundary. The conceptual plans and Land Use Analysis were presented to the community at the second public workshop. Public



feedback on opportunities for long-range recreational access was also gathered during this workshop, helping to inform the near-, mid-, and long-term recommendations.

GZA prepared and transmitted a draft Redevelopment Plan to the RDA for review on April 14, 2026. The RDA reviewed the draft Plan and provided written comments prior to, and verbal feedback during, its April 29, 2026 meeting. During the April 29, 2026 meeting, the RDA voted to authorize the submission of the draft Redevelopment Plan to the Town Council for consideration.

RATIONALE FOR THE REDEVELOPMENT PLAN

Under Rhode Island General Laws (R.I.G.L.) §45-31-8, a "blighted area" is defined as an area where conditions detrimental to public health, safety, morals, or welfare impair the sound growth of the community. Based on a comprehensive review of documented site conditions, regulatory records, and environmental and land use data, Johnson's Pond satisfies the definitions of both an arrested blighted area (§45-31-8(2)) and a deteriorated blighted area (§45-31-8(6)) by:

ENVIRONMENTAL CONTAMINATION

Johnson's Pond has been classified as an impaired waterbody under the Federal Clean Water Act since 2012, listed as a Category 5 waterbody due to mercury in fish tissue. The Pond has also experienced recurrent cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) blooms since 2021, including RIDEM advisories in 2022 and 2025, that restricted contact recreation and posed health risks. Invasive aquatic species and nutrient loading from aging septic systems and residential fertilizer use have further degraded water quality.

DETERIORATION OF CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

RIDEM determined that the Dam no longer met safety standards under prior private ownership due to a compromised spillway, stone loss, vortex conditions, and structural deterioration, resulting in the April 2024 Immediate Compliance Order. Although interim repairs were completed by the Town and GZA in late 2024, long-term maintenance and capital improvements are required to ensure the Dam remains in a state of good repair as a high-hazard dam.

IMPEDIMENTS TO PUBLIC ACCESS AND RECREATION

The Redevelopment Boundary has limited formalized public access points, aging and informal access infrastructure, erosion-prone shorelines, and fragmented ownership. Unsafe dam conditions, fluctuating water levels, water quality advisories, and unmanaged shoreline conditions rendered recreation unreliable and unsafe at times, constituting inadequate provision for recreational facilities under R.I.G.L. §45-31-8(6)(ii).

DIVERSITY OF OWNERSHIP

Johnson's Pond is characterized by a highly fragmented ownership pattern, with numerous individually owned residential parcels along the shoreline and the Dam and reservoir functioning as shared infrastructure. This fragmentation constrains publicly owned land, limits general public waterfront access, and presents substantial barriers to coordinated planning, financing, and implementation of improvements, consistent with the blight factor expressly identified under R.I.G.L. §45-31-8(2).



These conditions cannot be effectively addressed through ordinary private market mechanisms and require a coordinated, area-wide public approach.

CONFORMANCE WITH THE REDEVELOPMENT ACT

The Redevelopment Plan has been prepared pursuant to Chapters 31 through 33 of Title 45 of the Rhode Island General Laws (the Redevelopment Act). Consistent with R.I.G.L. §45-32-8, the Plan contains all required elements, including:

- A description of the boundaries and location of the project area
- A description of existing blighted and substandard conditions
- A plan describing proposed land uses (*not applicable as the Plan does not propose changes to existing land use designations; any future improvements contemplated under the Plan are intended to be consistent with current land use classifications and compatible with established neighborhood character and community expectations*)
- Proposed standards of population densities, land coverage, and building intensities (*the Plan does not propose changes to population density standards or building intensity regulations at this time*)
- A description of proposed changes in streets and utilities (*aside from the Dam Property and Francis Sherman Park concept designs, the Plan does not propose any additional modifications to existing streets, road alignments, or public utility systems at this time*)
- A description of proposed zoning changes, exceptions, variances, or modifications (*the Plan does not propose amendments to zoning classifications, overlay districts, dimensional standards, or use regulations are proposed at this time*)
- A general statement showing conformance with the Draft 2026 Town of Coventry Community Comprehensive Plan
- A statement identifying lands to be acquired and structures to be demolished (*the Plan does not identify specific parcels for acquisition, nor does it propose the demolition or removal of buildings or structures within the project area at this time*)
- General conditions, covenants, and restrictions on disposal and future land use (*the Plan does not include disposal of publicly owned land is proposed at this time*)
- A general statement of relocation extent and proposed rehousing methods (*the Plan does not anticipate or propose the relocation of residents, businesses, or other occupants within the Redevelopment Boundary*)
- An estimated cost of carrying out the Plan and a financing description
- A general statement of how the purposes of Chapters 31–33 would be attained

The Plan also advances the purposes of Chapters 31 through 33 of Title 45 of the Rhode Island General Laws through the following:

- Elimination of Blighted and Substandard Conditions (§45-31-2; §45-31-8(14)): the Redevelopment Boundary contains conditions that satisfy the definitions of deteriorated blight and arrested blight under R.I.G.L. §45-31-8(2) and (6), including environmental contamination of an impaired waterbody,



deterioration of critical dam infrastructure deemed unsafe by RIDEM, impediments to public access and recreation, and diversity of ownership that prevents coordinated improvement.

- Protection of Public Health, Safety, and Welfare (§45-31-2; §45-31-3): the Plan provides near-term actions including dam safety compliance programs, emergency action plan updates, on-call engineering support, cyanobacteria response protocols, and coordinated water quality monitoring. Medium- and long-term actions including dam capital rehabilitation, watershed-based stormwater management and a comprehensive Lake Management Study will ensure that public health and safety protections are sustained over the life of the Plan.
- Promotion of Sound Growth and Community Benefit (§45-31-7): the Plan promotes sound growth by transitioning Johnson's Pond from a historically private asset with inconsistent management into a well-managed public resource that delivers lasting community benefits.
- Addressing Obstacles to Private Redevelopment (§45-31-4; §45-31-8(2)): the Plan establishes a coordinated, area-wide framework, multi-source capital financing, and sustained governance and enforcement programs that overcome these obstacles and enable improvements that would otherwise be infeasible for private enterprise to undertake independently.
- Coordinated Application of Regulatory Controls and Redevelopment Measures (§45-31-5): rather than proposing large-scale acquisition, displacement, or demolition, the Plan relies on a combination of regulatory actions (such as boating safety regulations and speed limits), capital investments (such as dam repairs and public access facilities), and management programs (such as water quality monitoring and invasive species treatment) to address blighted conditions incrementally and sustainably. This approach preserves existing land uses, respects private property rights, and advances redevelopment objectives through targeted, phased improvements consistent with community priorities and available funding.
- Public Use and Public Purpose (§45-31-6; §45-32-1): the Plan serves a clear and defined public purpose: the long-term stewardship, environmental protection, and public recreational use of a 647-acre reservoir and its surrounding lands that have been brought into public ownership for the first time in the Pond's history. Every recommendation in the Plan (from dam safety compliance and water quality restoration to public access improvements and enforcement programs) is directed toward delivering sustained public benefit for the residents of Coventry and advancing the statutory objectives of the Redevelopment Act.

Overall, the Plan addresses statutory purposes by improving conditions within the designated area, protecting public health and safety, restoring environmental functionality, enhancing recreational access, and repositioning Johnson's Pond as a sustainable, well-managed public asset.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Draft 2026 Town of Coventry Community Comprehensive Plan underwent updates concurrent with the redevelopment process. GZA and the RDA submitted requested comprehensive plan revisions to the Coventry Department of Planning and Development on January 13, 2026, incorporating references to the Redevelopment Boundary and existing substandard conditions as required by R.I.G.L. §45-32-3 and §45-32-8(7). The Johnson's Pond Redevelopment Plan aligns strongly with the Draft 2026 Town of Coventry Community Comprehensive Plan by supporting natural resource protection, expanding recreational access, improving public infrastructure, and



implementing coordinated, community-driven planning efforts. The Redevelopment Plan advances many of the Comprehensive Plan's goals specific to Johnson's Pond such as:

- **Natural Resources and Water Quality:** The Redevelopment Plan advances the Comprehensive Plan's environmental protection and restoration goals by recommending an environmental management plan to improve water quality and ecological health and by supporting collaboration with RIDEM and local organizations to address environmental issues.
- **Open Space and Recreational Access:** The Redevelopment Plan advances the Comprehensive Plan's open space and recreation goals by promoting equitable access, supporting improvements to recreational facilities and expanding diverse recreation opportunities.
- **Land Use and Public Ownership:** The Redevelopment Plan supports the Comprehensive Plan's land use framework by expanding public access to key natural assets and increasing publicly owned open space.
- **Infrastructure and Facility Improvements:** The Redevelopment Plan supports infrastructure-related goals by advancing targeted improvements at Johnson's Pond such as expanded recreational facilities, upgrades to dam and water management systems, and the incorporation of green infrastructure to enhance environmental performance.

More broadly, the Redevelopment Plan reflects the Comprehensive Plan's emphasis on meaningful public participation and the responsible balance of community investment with environmental sustainability.

NEXT STEPS

In accordance with Rhode Island General Laws, the redevelopment process includes a formal public hearing by the Town Council prior to adoption. This hearing provides opportunities for the public to comment on the content of the Redevelopment Plan. The Town Council and RDA will consider public input received at this hearing and incorporate revisions into the Redevelopment Plan, as appropriate. Following the public hearing (and any revisions), the Town Council may adopt both the Redevelopment Boundary and the Redevelopment Plan. It should be noted that Town Council must designate a Redevelopment Boundary in order to adopt the Redevelopment Plan by ordinance.

After adoption by the Town Council, the Redevelopment Plan will be transmitted to the Rhode Island Department of Administration for review and approval in accordance with the Urban Renewal Act and related provisions of state law. State review ensures that the Redevelopment Plan meets statutory requirements, serves a valid public purpose, and has been adopted through a lawful, transparent, and inclusive process. Upon approval by the Department of Administration, the Johnson's Pond Redevelopment Plan will become the official guiding document for coordinated public actions and future implementation within the Redevelopment Study Area Boundary.