

6. Natural and Cultural Resources



Master Plan

A. GOAL

Preserve the Town's historic fabric and agrarian and academic heritage, and protect the quality of our natural resources, to ensure a vibrant, diverse, sustainable community.

B. Overview

The Amherst community takes great pride in and identity from its natural and cultural resources. The town's character is defined by a rural landscape with high aesthetic value that accommodates natural, wildlife, and recreational areas as well as agricultural activities. The community is actively engaged in efforts to preserve these areas and protect them from development. The Town is also home to a rich cultural environment, with three institutions of higher learning, as well as numerous historically significant structures. A number of key themes surface throughout this chapter, including: the desire to enhance cultural activities and events for residents and visitors alike; the potential to explore more Town-Gown collaborations; the importance of strategic land conservation; the need to protect historic resources; and the desire to promote an ethic of sustainability throughout the Amherst community.

C. Existing Conditions

An assessment of the Town's existing conditions has been drawn by the consulting team based on technical research, as well as discussions with the CPC and Town Staff. The complete Existing Conditions and Trends report can be found in Appendix A. This section summarizes the report's key points related to natural and cultural resources:

- **Natural features:** Amherst's undulating glacial topography adds to the aesthetic value of the Town and offers areas of hiking and recreation, as well as wildlife habitat. The widely varied soil composition in Amherst is a product of its recent geological history, including glacial Lake Hitchcock, which covered a majority of the Connecticut River Basin. Soils suitable for prime farmland uses are also highly suitable for urbanized development, so clear growth management policies are necessary to retain natural and agricultural landscapes. Other areas are rocky or marshy, and the town is drained by several small rivers and major streams that are an important part of the industrial history of Amherst.
- **Farmland preservation:** Of Amherst's 2,566 acres of farmland, 1,841 acres are protected under Agricultural Preservation

Restrictions (APR). Farmland acreage not currently under APR is considered vulnerable to potential land development.

- **Conservation areas:** According to the Town’s Land Use Map, 2,573 acres of Amherst’s land are protected for conservation purposes due to efforts by the Amherst Conservation Commission, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, and Amherst citizens.
- **Water resources:** The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection identifies approximately 53 acres of water bodies covering the Town, including the Mill and Fort Rivers, which are major tributaries of the Connecticut River. Lawrence Swamp is a significant wetland in Amherst and a habitat for rare species. All of the Town public water supply wells are located in the Lawrence Swamp Aquifer. Implementation of Best Management Practices is essential to protecting the quality of the Town’s water supply.
- **Historic resources:** Amherst has participated in the National Register of Historic Places since 1966. Nine districts and nine other individual properties are listed on the National Register. The community is interested in developing a complete inventory of its historic resources and pursuing additional historic and archeological preservation activities under the provisions of the 2005 Amherst Preservation Plan.
- **Town/Gown cultural resources:** Amherst College, Hampshire College, and the University of Massachusetts have museums, galleries, and performance spaces that significantly contribute to the menu of cultural activities in the Town. The community is interested in pursuing opportunities to further enhance cultural collaborations throughout the local arts community.

The Objectives and Strategies discussed in the remainder of this chapter provide a coherent framework for preserving and enhancing Amherst’s natural and cultural resources in a manner that will help the community retain its natural character and celebrate its cultural assets for years to come.

D. Objectives and Strategies

This section describes the objectives and strategies that will support the Natural and Cultural Resources goal for the Town of Amherst.

OBJECTIVE NC.1 - Promote the preservation, appreciation, and sustainable use of our historical and cultural resources for residents and visitors.

Historic and cultural resources foster a connection to the Amherst community, generate a sense of pride among its residents, and attract visitors to the Town. Appropriate protection and celebration of these resources will ensure that the community's heritage and unique character are preserved and passed on to future generations. Implementation of the 2005 Amherst Preservation Plan and the following strategies will preserve important community character for Amherst's future while acting as a crucial form of local economic development.

STRATEGIES

NC.1.A Regularly update the inventory and map of Amherst's historic resources and ensure that they are available to the Inspections Services Department and other permitting staff when reviewing permit applications. Using the Town's computerized permit-tracking system, link demolition permit requests with the historic resource information available for that property.

The Town of Amherst and local preservation organizations should collaborate to update the Town's inventory and GIS mapping of historic resources and make the map accessible to the public. Checking the historic status of a building or property should be made an automatic administrative step in any permit process.

NC.1.B Increase historic preservation protections in Amherst's zoning regulations, in order to encourage preservation, restoration, and rehabilitation of historic and archeological resources.

A special historic overlay district is one example of a measure that could provide specific development and design regulations above and beyond regular zoning in order to protect areas of historic and architectural significance in the Amherst community. Such measures could allow certain land uses by right or offer incentives if the proposed use met minimum historic standards. An overlay district or other measures could be applied to existing National Historic Register districts, areas that have been proposed to receive National Historic Register designation, and other historic resources indicated by the Amherst Preservation Plan or deemed significant by the Amherst Historical Commission.

NC.1.C Establish new local historic districts to provide enhanced protections for our most significant concentrations of historic resources.

Amherst has several National Historic Register Districts, but no local historic districts—a specialized regulatory district enabled under state law (MGL. Ch. 40C). The National Historic Register Districts only provide

protections if federal or state funds are involved in any development proposal or project that will affect the historic property. Currently, the Town zoning regulations include a Demolition Delay Bylaw that allows the Historic Commission to delay by up to 12 months the demolition of an historic property. The Town should develop separate local historic districts that contain regulatory language capable of protecting historic resources in ways that zoning cannot.

NC.1.D Preserve historic properties through direct acquisition and the use of historic preservation restrictions.

Amherst has long used outright purchase or the acquisition of interests in property—easements, deed restrictions, etc.—to preserve important conservation lands and, more recently, affordable housing. Purchase of interests in the most critical historic properties in Amherst should follow this model.

NC.1.E Encourage preservation, restoration and rehabilitation/ adaptive reuse of historic buildings and outbuildings through a variety of financial and other initiatives

The Amherst community should make use of appropriate incentives to promote the restoration and reuse of its historic buildings. A variety of tools should be used to encourage the preservation, reuse, and rehabilitation of historic buildings. These could include, among others:

- Tax incentives and abatements
- Federal funding assistance or tax credits
- A low-interest revolving loan program for rehabilitating historic buildings
- Shortened project review time, and
- Permitting of additional uses in certain designated historic structures, among others.

A non-profit organization such as the private non-profit Amherst Historical Society could take the lead on instituting a revolving loan or historic trust program that will provide owners of historic properties with additional financing opportunities to support historic renovations and rehabilitations.

NC.1.F Complete, expand, and improve the existing wayfinding sign system, to mark historic districts and village centers, and to encourage tourism.

An improved system of wayfinding and historic site signs is needed for tourists and visitors, and can also be essential for increasing overall public awareness about—and thereby protecting—Amherst’s historic resources. The Historical Commission, Design Review Board, Department of Public Works, Chamber of Commerce, and the Town/Commercial Relations

Committee, among others, should engage in a collaborative initiative to update, enhance, and fund the wayfinding sign system in Amherst.

NC.1.G Develop outreach tools (tours, print publications, web sites, etc.) to disseminate knowledge of Amherst’s history among the public.

Building public awareness of the unique historic resources of Amherst and the benefits of protecting them in terms of quality of life, community character, and economic benefits is a critical step to securing the support of the general public, property owners, and elected officials in the pursuit of historic preservation initiatives. The Amherst community should develop outreach tools such as bus and walking tours, brochures, websites, and workshops in order to build public awareness about Town history.

NC.1.H Work with the Chamber of Commerce to encourage sustainable cultural tourism.

Thoughtful development of cultural tourism can help preserve Amherst’s unique character while strengthening and diversifying the local economy. The Amherst Area Chamber of Commerce publicizes a Visitor’s Guide that provides a variety of information about local historic and cultural attractions. The community should continue to work with the Chamber to expand its efforts to promote cultural tourism in the community.

NC.1.I Develop a street tree inventory and shade tree replacement plan to ensure that this important element of Amherst’s historical landscape will be sustained over time.

A tree inventory should be undertaken to gather accurate information on the health and diversity of Amherst’s community forest, including its street trees and shade trees. This inventory, which can be conducted through collaboration among the Department of Public Works, Tree Warden, the Public Shade Tree Commission, and community volunteers will help the community develop and prioritize its tree maintenance and replacement activities, and will form the basis of a community forestry management plan.

OBJECTIVE NC.2 - Provide support for a rich variety of cultural opportunities, and activities for all groups and individuals in the community.

Amherst has been a community unusually rich in the arts throughout its history. This represents not only a source of community culture and character, but an important opportunity to promote the creative economy as an element of Amherst's economic development. In developing community support systems for the arts, the Town should work closely with the colleges and University, which represent a significant source of venues, artists, and other resources. In addition to better supporting cultural activities for the community at large, such collaboration could help improve town-gown relations and expand cultural interactions.

STRATEGIES

NC.2.A Create an inventory of local organizations and resources in all fields of the arts and arts-related cultural endeavors.

An inventory of arts-related organizations and resources in Amherst and on the campuses should be developed and made available to the community at large. This can serve as a first step to better use of these resources and fostering additional town-gown collaborations among local artists and arts and cultural organizations. Amherst College, for instance, has already established young artists programs in collaboration with the high school.

NC.2.B. Inventory and assess performance, assembly, and exhibit venues within the community (including open air spaces, meeting rooms, etc.).

The community should undertake a complete inventory of performance, assembly, and exhibit spaces available in the community and on the campuses. The inventory would assess issues such as space size, capacity, location, and availability for bookings from outside organizations. By synthesizing this information the Amherst community can encourage full use of its existing cultural facilities.

NC.2.C Work with Five Colleges Inc. to organize opportunities for joint programming and promotion of cultural events between the community, the colleges and University.

A cultural event committee with representation from the University, Colleges, Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Committee, and Cultural Commission, among others, should be established to identify and encourage joint programming opportunities that will enhance town-gown interactions and take full advantage of the community's cultural resources.

NC.2.D Create a clearinghouse to compile and disseminate information on cultural resources and events through a variety of

outlets (e.g., web site, brochures, broadcast media, Internet kiosks, etc.).

A single clearinghouse should be established through a public, non-profit or private entity (Chamber of Commerce?) to facilitate cultural publicity efforts, reduce overlaps in community and campus event scheduling, and help community members, campus residents, and visitors access complete and up-to-date information about cultural activities. This clearinghouse can be translated into a calendar of events that is appropriate for publication and distribution through websites, brochures, newspapers, magazines, etc.

NC.2.E Develop a Visitors' Center in the Town center that provides information and amenities such as public restrooms, publicity materials, and a calendar of events.

In collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce, a Visitors' Center should be created to serve as a first stop for visitors to Amherst. The Visitor Center should be located in an easily accessible, clearly designated location. It can offer maps and a variety of 24 hr./day visitor information regarding community and campus cultural events, attractions, shopping, restaurants, lodging, etc. The need for such a center has long been discussed, but its complexities have made it difficult to achieve. Amherst's ability to welcome visitors and to sustain successful levels of historical/cultural tourism depend on the community's ability to overcome past obstacles and make this center a reality.

NC.2.F Increase the amount of civic and/or public space in the Town center through incentives and zoning.

Attractive public streetscapes and civic spaces are important to the quality of life in Amherst. As larger developments occur downtown, developers should be required to provide attractive, publicly accessible gathering spaces and civic facilities. Both incentives and zoning updates can be implemented to achieve this result.

NC.2.G Provide incentives to building owners to increase space for locally-produced public art and performances (e.g., public acknowledgement, density bonuses, opening-hour extensions).

Providing public art can be an effective way to develop community identity, feature the work of local artists, and convey a unique sense of place. As public improvements are funded and constructed, public art should be incorporated. In addition, a variety of incentives can be devised to engage private property owners in the development and enhancement of public art and public performance spaces.

NC.2.H Establish a revolving loan/trust fund to support public art and resident artists.

Many communities, cultural institutions, and colleges throughout the country develop resident artist programs as a way to enhance community culture, support working artists, and educate the public about the arts. The Amherst community should consider ways to establish a revolving loan/trust fund to support additional public art and bring resident artists into the community. The fund and associated programs can be developed in collaboration with local arts organizations and the University and colleges.

NC.2.I Sponsor design competitions for streetscape fixtures (bus stops, furniture, recycling bins, etc.)

Streetscape design is of central importance to creating a quality public realm. Well designed amenities such as street lights, bus stops, benches, garbage and recycling bins, etc., can be used to enhance community character and create a distinct sense of place. The Amherst community should sponsor design competitions in order to generate new ideas for creating attractive, unified streetscapes in Amherst. This initiative can be targeted to local architects, artists, landscape architects, planners, industrial designers, etc., as well as students in affiliated departments at the University and colleges. The competition could also be extended outside of the community as appropriate.

OBJECTIVE NC.3 - Conserve land in sufficient quantity and quality to meet agricultural, recreational, and wildlife needs.

Open land does a lot of work for Amherst. Keeping critical tracts of land undeveloped is important for maintaining and protecting wildlife, water resources, recreation opportunities, local farm production, and the region's unique rural character. A range of land conservation tools can be used to protect such areas and corridors, including transfers of development rights, donated conservation easements, and land acquisition by public or not-for-profit agencies.

STRATEGIES

NC.3.A Identify and permanently protect highest-quality habitats in coordination with state agencies.

In conjunction with the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, and the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, the Town should identify its most significant wildlife habitats and undertake measures to permanently protect and appropriately manage these lands.

NC.3.B Identify and permanently protect lands buffering Amherst water supply wells and reservoirs from development. Apply appropriate conservation mechanisms to protect Amherst's water supply lands.

In order to protect water quality in Amherst, the community should identify and protect lands that buffer significant water resources such as surface reservoirs, wells, and aquifers. Several conservation tools can be used to protect such areas, including transfers of development rights, donated conservation easements, and land acquisition by public or not-for-profit agencies. One example is the Water Enterprise Fund, which takes in fees from an annual water bill received by all users/property owners, and pays for upkeep and expansion of the water supply system, including purchase of watershed lands.

NC.3.C Identify and permanently protect lands containing priority soil types for agricultural and other resource-based activities (e.g., farming, forestry).

Healthy soil is important to maintaining a healthy community. Quality soils control water runoff, filter pollutants, sustain plant and animal life, and cycle nutrients. Amherst should identify its priority soil areas and institute land protection initiatives to ensure that these soils remain healthy and safe from erosion. Information on soil quality and conservation is available from the National Resources Conservation Service at <http://soils.usda.gov/sqi/>.

NC.3.D Identify and permanently protect important wildlife corridors from development in order to connect fragmented habitats and facilitate local and regional wildlife movement.

The Town should seek to identify and permanently protect its most significant wildlife corridors. Major wildlife crossings along roadways should be clearly marked in order to protect humans and animals alike.

NC.3.E Revise the Open Space and Recreation Plan to prioritize areas most suitable for land protection and/or development.

The community should ensure that the next update of the Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) accounts for all of Amherst's major green infrastructure resources, including open space, natural resource areas, wildlife habitats, agricultural lands, recreational lands, and greenways and trails. In addition to recommending key lands for future protection and conservation, the OSRP can also help identify areas that are more appropriate for future development.

NC.3.F Create additional incentives in the permit process for development projects that preserve meaningful areas of viable open space/habitat contiguous to undeveloped or protected portions of land on adjacent properties.

The Town should establish method(s) for evaluating development projects under any revised zoning regulations to provide incentives for projects that demonstrate good development practices furthering the community's goals (affordable housing, protecting farmland, etc.) and that

provide disincentives for projects that do not further the community's goals or which result in undesirable development.

NC.3.G Actively manage Town-owned conservation land as wildlife habitat.

Develop programs which ensure that Town-owned conservation lands are actively managed in order to restore and enhance wildlife habitats for both game and non-game species. A variety of information related to habitat management can be found through the Wildlife Habitat Council (www.wildlifehc.org).

OBJECTIVE NC.4 - Apply principles of environmental sustainability town-wide.

Sustainable environmental practices should be shared with the public and actively promoted to foster a sense of stewardship in the community. The following strategies suggest approaches for how everyone – including residents, businesses, Town government, the University and colleges, and the development community, among others – can get involved in creating a more sustainable community.

STRATEGIES

NC.4.A Establish an incentive program for green building design standards for new and renovated municipal, commercial, and residential development.

The US Green Buildings Council has developed the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) green building rating system to serve as a national benchmark for green building design. There are other emerging new energy and environmental standards which may also be appropriate for consideration. The Town should research these standards, and then adopt appropriate building and site development regulations tied to incentives (density bonuses, etc.) to help ensure that new development, redevelopment, and renovations are aligned with sustainable energy and environmental practices. More information is available at <http://www.usgbc.org/>.

NC.4.B Create zoning regulations and local tax incentives to encourage or, where possible, mandate cluster subdivision design, construction of energy-efficient buildings, green/sustainable site design, and use of renewable energy sources (solar, wind, thermal, photo-voltaic, etc.).

Tax abatements, accelerated permitting processes, and other incentives such as technical assistance grants should be used to encourage more environmentally-friendly development in Amherst. Initiatives should promote green building design, the use of renewable energy sources, and

more sustainable project design (such as well-connected, mixed-use, higher density cluster subdivisions, traditional neighborhood developments, and/or infill projects).

NC.4.C Implement a program of education and incentives to promote green lifestyles among Amherst citizens.

Public outreach efforts and incentive programs can be used to present clear messages and persuade residents to take steps towards creating a greener community. Residents should be encouraged to adopt energy-efficient technologies in their homes, and incorporate environmentally-friendly practices into their everyday lifestyles (such as choosing alternative transportation methods in order to reduce personal automobile travel).

NC.4.D Place dedicated recycling receptacles in public spaces in the downtown and village centers to facilitate and encourage recycling.

Recycling receptacles should be designed to be attractive and easily visible, and should be strategically placed in public spaces in the downtown and village centers. This will help residents and visitors recycle even when they are away from home.

NC.4.E “Green” the schools as a means of both implementing and teaching sustainability.

Where feasible, the Amherst community should encourage:

- Green building design standards for school renovation projects and furnishings.
- Use of organic/local produce and fresh foods in the school cafeterias.
- Student use of buses and other alternatives to the personal auto.
- Collective transportation for private schools.
- Increased recycling efforts.
- Educating students about sustainable choices in areas ranging from nutrition to the environment.

By pursuing some of the initiatives recommended in this strategy, Amherst’s schools can reduce their environmental impact, enhance environmental curriculums, and help to cultivate a culture of sustainability throughout the community. Students, parents, and ultimately all community members will benefit from greater attention to green building, responsible transportation options, sustainable food choices, and recycling efforts.

NC.4.F Develop and promote a green motto for Amherst (“Amherst goes green” or the like). Under this initiative, give out rewards/awards/plaques for lifestyle choices.

The Amherst community should develop a “green identity” that incorporates a green motto, communications strategy, and programming initiative. This approach can be used to educate the public and galvanize

community support for and engagement in environmental initiatives. Celebratory events and awards can be used to spur widespread community involvement.