

Town of Amherst

2017 Community Development Strategy

Introduction

Amherst is both a college community and an agricultural town, and has a history of small-scale mercantile and industrial activity. It has been developed with a vibrant town center and distinct village centers. Because of the University of Massachusetts and colleges, Amherst has a highly transitory population, and is a regional center for employment, services, and educational resources. The benefits of the institutions also need to be balanced with the drawbacks—increased cost and demand for a limited supply of housing, overuse of facilities and a strain on services.

The Town has been aware of these pressures and has been actively engaged in community planning and conservation activities since the mid-20th century. However, it was only in 2009 that Amherst adopted a Master Plan that synthesized what the community had been doing for decades. The Community Development Strategy (CDS) most closely resembles the Master Plan as this multi-year effort was completed with significant community participation.

As part of an ongoing effort to implement the Master Plan, the town encourages citizen participation through its nearly 60 standing boards and committees, with meetings of the Select Board and Planning Board streamed to local TV and the internet. The Town has a months-long public input process for the CDBG application and for Community Preservation Act (CPA) proposals in order to prioritize and select projects that benefit residents of the community. The CDBG Advisory Committee held a public hearing on November 10, 2015 to review the draft community development strategy and preliminary activity list, and to review current activities.

Housing

The focus of many in the community is the extreme need for housing for the non-student population, in particular, low- and moderate-income households and permanent supportive housing, including enhanced single room occupancy (ESRO) units, for extremely-low income (ELI) and those transitioning out of homelessness. Amherst's Housing Production Plan (HPP) notes that there is an imbalance of demand and supply. Put simply, there is not enough housing to meet the various markets: students, families, elderly, individuals, renters, low and moderate income. The HPP establishes a goal of producing 48 units of affordable housing annually to meet the needs of the community. In addition to the HPP, the town hired RKG Consultants who completed a comprehensive housing market study that focused on market-rate units. This report, completed in fall 2014 concluded that there is housing demand in Amherst for different market segments, but it cannot be adequately met until the student demand is mitigated. Students can price out almost all renters because they pay per bedroom (not per unit) and investors purchase single-family homes around and below \$300,000 to convert to student rentals. RKG has emphasized the need for both affordable and market-rate housing if Amherst wants to maintain its diverse population.

This pressure on housing has had the adverse effect of creating a stratified market that produces expensive single-family homes and rental units for students, making it difficult for families and low/moderate income households to remain in Amherst. Although Amherst meets the State's 10 percent threshold for affordable housing, many of these units were built decades ago. Aware of this issue, since 2009, the Town has supported the development of 42 units of affordable rental housing at Olympia Oaks (now complete and occupied), the rehabilitation of 22 units on scattered sites and more recently the rehabilitation of 80 units at the Ann Whalen Apartments owned by the Amherst Housing Authority (AHA), and two units of affordable housing on the Hawthorne property. One of the highest community

priorities is the preservation of affordable housing, which was greatly bolstered when the Town, working with the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, was able to facilitate the acquisition of Rolling Green apartments to preserve 41 units with permanent affordability. The Town and Amherst Housing Authority continue to work with Presidential Apartments on the Affirmative Fair Marketing Plan and Regulatory Agreement for six affordable rental units that should be available in early 2017. The Town is also continuing to implement the Rental Registration Bylaw, which ensures baseline compliance with state and local life safety and sanitary codes, increases regulatory awareness by renters and landlords, and appropriately manages parking.

Community Services

For many years the Town has leased property and facilities to social service agencies providing childcare and emergency food and clothing. The development and success of these programs remains a priority for the community even though the Town faces challenges to continue its support. The long-term costs to maintain leased properties make it unfeasible for the Town to retain ownership of these facilities. Since the transition from a Mini-entitlement community in 2013 the Town has supported emergency services, which continues as a locally funded program. After holding a public hearing on October 25, 2016 to receive input on the 2017 Community Development Strategy and list of priorities, the CDBG Advisory Committee determined that the social service priorities for 2017 are: A balanced approach among family stabilization, individual stabilization, youth development, services that help develop economic self-sufficiency (adult education), food and nutrition programs, low-cost accessible comprehensive health services, and emergency and preventive services ranging from rental assistance, fuel assistance, to shelter services. It was also emphasized at the hearing that affordable, reliable public transportation is an integral component of these services and programs.

Even with limited resources, the Town's Health Department has started an outreach program with low- and moderate-income populations in the community to help understand their needs, and the Town has consolidated afterschool programs to increase enrollment and lower costs. The Health Department has focused its effort on the apartment complexes on East Hadley Road. Becoming a barrier-free community is also high a priority on which repeated planning and investment have produced good progress, particularly in public buildings (Bangs Community Center, Town Hall) and along the Town Center's sidewalk system. Integral to the accessibility of public facilities, including the schools, is updating the Town's 2006 ADA Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan. The Town continues to make improvements to its public facilities that are used by the community. This includes the Amherst Childcare Center and Bangs Community Center that could benefit from modernization projects and renovations.

Land Use

Recent land use initiatives—village center zoning, infill development, multi-modal transportation—have been in keeping with several decades of community planning that helped Amherst maintain its historic New England pattern of densely settled village centers separated by open farmland and woods. The town continues to focus land preservation in areas between the centers and in areas that are mostly preserved but missing critical properties in terms of priority habitat and ecological value. To reinforce the open space, and to allow for growth of housing and commerce, Amherst has focused on zoning changes that allow for denser development in the centers and encourage commercial and mixed-uses along the major transportation corridors. In 2014, Town Meeting adopted a new Supplemental Dwelling Unit bylaw to encourage infill development of small units, and changed the zoning of the Atkins Village Center to allow for mixed-use structures. Town Meeting has also adopted other zoning amendments (i.e. dimensional modifications) that allow for greater flexibility when developing mixed-use structures in the Town Center and village centers. Duplexes are now allowed by right in many residential areas if

one unit is affordable. The emphasis of these zoning changes is to integrate housing and economic development in centers where residents can walk or bike to goods and services.

The Town continues to advance zoning changes in the village centers that would allow mixed-use commercial and residential developments that would also provide more opportunities for compact, affordable housing. Efforts are still underway to expand the business and village center zoning districts in north and south Amherst, to help encourage more intense development. The Planning Board is considering zoning that incentivizes affordable housing in the centers, allows by right a much greater density of housing at existing apartment complexes, and expanding the definition of home occupations. The Town has sponsored a home rule petition that is being reviewed by the State Legislature that would provide tax relief if affordable units are constructed. This is a necessary tool to encourage the development of affordable housing in the downtown and village centers.

Economic Development

Amherst is the host community for three of the area's five colleges, and an employment center for the region. The University of Massachusetts alone employs over 5,000 local residents. Over the decades, community planning efforts have consistently stressed the need to increase and diversify non-academic business employment opportunities for Amherst area residents. To meet this objective, the Town believes it can encourage two seemingly divergent strategies: increase small businesses and support services in the village centers, while also attracting high level professional and research positions, gaming, and high technology incubator industries through the development of a business park or industries that could possibly partner with the local colleges and university. Included in this effort is a collaborative approach with abutting communities and the region to attract businesses that could utilize local resources.

In the Fall of 2013 UMass and the Town of Amherst convened a Town Gown Steering Committee to jointly develop a study to address shared areas of interest including housing and economic development issues. The committee hired U3 Advisors from Philadelphia, who completed their study in November 2014. U3 recommends a collaborative approach between the town, UMass and the area's colleges to develop spin-off spaces and places for entrepreneurial startups such as smaller spaces available in the town center and village centers, with a geographic emphasis on the area linking the Town Center and UMass. Two mixed-use developments in the downtown—Kendrick Place and the proposed One East Pleasant, will provide such spaces as well as bringing much needed housing in the center. These developments helped the Town receive a \$1.5million MassWorks grant for utility relocation as a catalyst for economic development of the North Downtown.

Since 2012 the Town has been a member of the Western Economic Development Partners, a public/private partnership that collaborates on providing high quality economic development in the Pioneer Valley. This partnership will help market the area, lead management and project delivery, and help retain and grow existing businesses. Town staff has been working with the Economic Development Partners to help Amherst remain a focal point for development and represented the Town at the first Regional Developers Conference at the Basketball Hall of Fame in June 2014. At that conference several of Amherst's recently approved development projects were displayed and a portion of the Town and UMass campus were highlighted during a bus tour of other communities including Greenfield, Hadley, Northampton and Easthampton.

The Business Improvement District (BID) in the Town Center, approved in 2011, has increased programming and events downtown, added amenities and general beautification, and have partnered with the community on grant applications, including wayfinding and a comprehensive sign system. In

North Amherst, in 2015, Atkins Market will locate a satellite store to complement two new commercial spaces that have the interest to restaurateurs. Amherst Office Park in the Pomeroy Village Center is adding 8,500 sq. ft. of commercial space along with 17 new housing units.

Natural and Cultural Resources

For decades, the community has consistently supported efforts to preserve and improve the natural and visual environment of the town. The Town adopted the Community Preservation Act (CPA) in the early 2000's and has been using this funding to complete various projects ranging from open space acquisition, restoration of the West Cemetery (an NHR property), and restoration of the libraries and local churches and the preservation of affordable housing. In the fall 2014 the Town approved a CPA surcharge increase from 1.5% to 3% (the maximum amount) that will leverage more state funding to help the community continue to pursue a number of projects—improved recreation facilities, construction of affordable housing, and conservation of open space.

In June 2014 the Town acquired the 19-acre property along the Fort River in East Amherst to preserve an important ecological resource and as an opportunity to development a new model of shared community farming and to lease small plots to new farmers. Another effort underway is a buy local campaign to encourage residents to visit restaurants and shops in town, with a 'grown locally' store opening in the town center. The Town has worked with local farmers and vendors to expand farmer's markets so that they are open year-round and include three summer and two winter markets. The larger market now accepts EBT and WIC to help the low- and moderate-income.

The Dickinson Local Historic District is active and has reviewed approximately six projects in the Town's first local historic district in and around the Dickinson Museum. The District is helping to preserve the historical integrity of the neighborhood and encourage cultural tourism. The success of this district has prompted two more neighborhoods—Lincoln-Sunset in the town center and North Amherst, to form study committees to investigate the feasibility of implementing a local historic district.

Working with the Department of Public Works and the Town's GIS Administrator, the Office of Conservation and Development is in the process updating the boundaries of the Flood Prone Conservancy (FPC) zoning district. The Town intends to work with professional consultants to update the flood boundaries to FEMA standards in order for their approval. The new flood maps would eliminate ambiguity between the FPC zoning district and FEMA's flood boundaries and reduce potential litigation over flood-boundary disputes as well as establish clear guidelines relative to development in riverfront areas.

Open Space and Recreation

Amherst has engaged in active planning for open space and recreation since the late 1960's and now owns over 2,000 acres of conservation land connected through a network of 80+ miles of local and regional trails. Although the Town continues to preserve land for the protection of natural resources and to maintain active agriculture, there has been little effort to expand recreational opportunities. The most recent acquisition and development of recreation land occurred in 1974. In recent years, Amherst has experienced an increase in large-lot residential development outside the traditional village centers; an intensified use of conservation lands by residents, students and regional populations; and a dwindling of resources to manage Town facilities ranging from conservation trails to sports fields to summer pools.

The Town is working to establish strategies and implementation methods to protect Amherst's valuable natural resources that are also coupled with projects that seek to accommodate the increasing need for more recreational facilities, affordable housing, and connect to other community amenities. One such

project is the UMass—North Amherst bike connector, a collaborative project with the University, private landowners, and Town to link the campus with the North Amherst Village Center along old service roads. A feasibility study for this transportation route is nearly complete. The Town Conservation Commission is also developing a land use policy for conservation areas, to clarify permitted activities ranging from farming, passive recreation to organized events.

Turning its attention to parks and recreational facilities, the Town has relied on grant funding to make improvements to facilities, and continues to apply for funding for capital improvements. It received grant funding to improve access along the trail connecting the Mill River Recreation Area-Puffer's Pond Greenway, a PARC grant for the rehabilitation of War Memorial Pool in the Town Center and the Mill River Pool in North Amherst, and other state and local grants for improvements to the Puffer's Pond area in north Amherst.

Transportation

It is possible to live and work in Amherst without a car, however there is still a need to increase the reliability and connectivity of public transit to help residents access retail outlets and services. The Town has built many of the parts necessary for a network of pedestrian and bicycle paths connecting and supporting the village centers and open spaces. As an active hub of the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVRTA) system and home of the University of Massachusetts Transit operation, Amherst has supported and invested in public transportation, especially to serve heavy-use arteries, such as routes between outlying apartment complexes and the University. The Town is working with regional partners to assess a bike-share program in Amherst that would help expand local transit options. The long term goal is to expand and improve the existing downtown sidewalk system to assure barrier-free pedestrian connections within the Town Center, adjacent neighborhoods, and nearby destinations and village centers.

The Town's Transportation Plan Task Force hired Nelson\Nygaard in 2014 to complete a Transportation Plan to guide policy choices and shape the future design of streets and transportation infrastructure in the town. With the study completed, various departments and citizen boards are beginning to implement its recommendations. With continued regional and local growth expected in an era of declining state aid and municipal budgets, it is essential that this effort take a comprehensive and smart look at the Town's transportation systems to determine the most optimal, cost-effective, and practical strategies and policies. Planning Department staff has also coordinated a series of parking forums sponsored by the Select Board and Planning Board to review and assess the current downtown parking system in order to develop a set of recommendations based on public input, the Transportation Plan, and comments from other stakeholders.

The Town has coupled public utility upgrades with transportation improvements in north and south Amherst. The Town is also investing in road paving and sidewalk repair in the East Amherst Village Center and the downtown to help residents walk to the retail and commercial areas, and to public transportation. In the Town Center and East Amherst, a number of streets—Shumway, Dickinson, Railroad, and Spring—need significant improvements to the public infrastructure and utilities. These projects are the basis for future development and zoning in these village centers. There has also been a coordinated effort between Town departments to redevelop the Pomeroy Village Intersection—a public process informed a set of streetscape improvement plans that have been used to apply for funding.

Sustainability

Incorporated into the Master Plan is the theme of a sustainable and responsible future, which can be achieved through innovative land use policies, efficient housing and transportation, preservation of open

space, encouraging economic development and the continuation of a strong network of community services. The Town’s Sustainability Coordinator identifies, develops, implements, and manages innovative and effective programs and policies to foster a high level of energy and resource sustainability for the community and the operations of the Town. The Coordinator helped to co-found Grow Food Amherst to provide information and education on topics such as the importance of local, fresh and healthy food, and coordinated the purchase of an all-electric vehicle and dual head charging station (\$17,500) through a MA DEP grant. The Coordinator oversees Amherst’s Green Community program including implementation of the Town’s Five Year Energy Reduction Plan. The community was accepted into the Solarize Mass Program, an opportunity for residents and small business owners to have access to low cost solar electricity via this state sponsored initiative. To date, Amherst has had the most successful Solarize campaign in the Commonwealth since the program’s inception in 2011.

Planning and Implementation

An integral component of Amherst’s Master Plan is the land use policy map, which shows where in the community many of the strategies and goals should be implemented. The map identifies the Town Center and seven outlying village centers as high priorities for housing and infrastructure improvements, as areas to concentrate services and economic development.

The CDBG Advisory Committee has determined that for the FY17 application process, there are three target areas:

Town Center—An area north of Route 9, west of University Drive, east of Shumway Street, and north along East Pleasant Street to Olympia Drive and then south of Strong Street.

East Amherst Village Center—An area bounded by Fort River School and Pelham Road to the East, to the south there is Colonial Village apartments, Stanley Street, as well as Echo Village and Rolling Green that are ¾ mile south along Route 9; Shumway Street to the West; and Spaulding Street, Salem Street, Hedgerow Lane and Arbor Way to the North.

Pomeroy Village Center/East Hadley Road—An area south of East Hadley Road, east of Route 116 and encompassing a 3/4mile radius around the Pomeroy/Route 116 intersection, including the Orchard Valley residential neighborhood.

FY2017 PRIORITY PROJECTS

Priority Ranking	Category from Master Plan	Project or Activity
1	Housing	Create affordable and fair housing options (rental and ownership) for the chronically homeless and extremely low income, low- and moderate-income families, individuals, seniors and the disabled that includes the purchase, renovation or construction of housing in and around village centers, including the Town Center and other housing developments, including appropriate in-fill development. This includes modernization of units on the Town’s Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI) and assistance to the Amherst Housing Authority for similar projects at Jean Elder, Ann Whalen and Watsons Farms, and transitional and supportive housing. Support social service programs including but not limited to family stabilization, individual stabilization, youth development, services that help develop economic self-sufficiency (adult education), food and nutrition programs, low cost health care services (Health Center), and emergency & preventive services ranging from rental/fuel assistance, to shelter services.
2	Community Services	Other programs include childcare and afterschool tuition assistance, employment counseling, drug abuse education, mental health counseling,

		financial literacy, and case management services.
3	Community Services	Continue to make modifications and improvements based on the <i>2006 Transition Plan Update</i> ensuring that all public facilities and programs are accessible to individuals of differing abilities. Also ensure that sidewalks, especially within Village Centers are accessible and located near residential uses, in particular Main Street, Southeast Street, Old Sunderland Road, and Pine Street. This includes public facilities as well, such as the Amherst Community Childcare Center, Bangs Community Center, North Amherst School and East Street School that need barrier removal and other projects to modernize the buildings and grounds.
4	Land Use	Continue to plan, design and implement public infrastructure improvements in the village centers and in areas identified by PVPC with the income surveys—Shumway Street being one of the highest priorities. Improvements include barrier removal, new or renovated sidewalks and streetscape amenities, water/sewer utilities, and roadway paving.
5	Land Use	Update and revise the Zoning Bylaw, subdivision regulations and other relevant rules and regulations to allow infill development and other alternative development scenarios to increase affordable housing options.
6	Sustainability	Develop financing strategies that will provide funding to maintain and upgrade the physical condition of existing residential structures, especially when housing is not in compliance with existing building code and or health codes, focusing on publicly owned apartment developments (including property owned by the Amherst Housing Authority) as well as single-family, two-family and three-family properties.
7	Open Space and Recreation	Seek small sites in various locations for the provision or improvement of playgrounds within walking distance of residential areas, as in the case of the East Street School playground, East Hadley Road, and low/moderate income areas.
8	Housing	Use best efforts to secure a mix of funding and [including Community Preservation Act and CDBG funds] to maintain and create a range of quality housing..
9	Economic Development	Enable and recruit appropriate retail and other businesses that enliven downtown and village centers, and serve the community.
10	Natural and Cultural Resources	Identify and preserve scenic, historic, and cultural landmarks.
11	Natural and Cultural Resources	Reflect the rich artistic/cultural heritage of the built environment through preserved historic buildings, well-lit facades, murals and sculpture gardens, and connecting greenways.
13	Community Services	Make available services known through affinity and neighborhood groups, electronic media, multi-lingual brochures and newsletters. [For example, job training for recent immigrants, additional ESL classes, health services, interpretation, transportation, child care.]
14	Open Space and Recreation	Continue to expand the local and regional system of trails and greenways through connections and extensions outlined in the 2009 <i>Open Space and Recreation Plan</i> . Also included in this priority is the expansion of alternative network of accessible paths and trails.
15	Economic Development	Strengthen partnerships between the Town of Amherst and UMass, Amherst & Hampshire Colleges as it relates to housing, economic development, student rentals and other Town/Gown relationships.
16	Open Space and Recreation	Add trails that connect Town elementary and secondary schools with residential areas and open spaces.
17	Open Space and Recreation	Over time acquire or dedicate parcels for the construction of outdoor recreation facilities, with an emphasis in areas that are low/moderate income.
18	Sustainability	Give special attention to diversity when addressing issues such as town growth and housing, social services and schools, arts, recreation, and teen or cultural center.

