

Town of Amherst
2022 Community Development Strategy

Introduction: As part of an ongoing effort to implement the Master Plan, the town encourages citizen participation through its nearly 40 standing boards and committees, through interaction with 3 Community Participation Officers, and through meetings of the Town Council and Planning Board, which are accessible through remote meetings and streamed to local TV and the internet. The months-long CDBG process is overseen by the CDBG Advisory Committee, a standing committee of 7 resident volunteers who help staff with by reviewing and evaluating project applications, holding hearings to establish community priorities and target areas, and to review ongoing activities. The CDBG Advisory Committee is holding a public hearing on August 31, 2022 to review the draft strategy and activity list.

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) people 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, in 2015 RKG Associates completed a comprehensive housing market that focused on market-rate units. This report concluded that there is housing demand in Amherst for different market segments, but it cannot be adequately met until the student demand is mitigated. RKG emphasized the need for both affordable and market-rate housing if Amherst wants to maintain its diverse population. Addressing the housing shortage in Amherst is both a short-term and long-term goal and will require CDBG funds and non-CDBG funds, such as CPA and other state/federal grant programs.

Community Services: For many years the Town has supported local social service agencies that provide emergency food and clothing, adult education and literacy, mentorships, and general support services, particularly to homeless individuals and families. The development and success of these programs remains a priority for the community even though the Town faces challenges to continue its support. Community priorities for social services are to maintain a balanced approach among family stabilization, individual stabilization, support services for the homeless and homelessness prevention programs, youth development, services that help develop economic self-sufficiency (adult education & job training), food and nutrition programs, low-cost accessible comprehensive health services, and emergency and preventive services ranging from rental assistance, fuel assistance, to shelter services. Access to these services is very important, and includes reliable public transportation and accessibility improvements on public infrastructure—streets and sidewalks. Supporting community services is an ongoing priority for the Town and CDBG funds are one of the only local sources of funding available for these agencies besides their own fundraising efforts.

Land Use: 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 village centers and encourage commercial and mixed uses along the major transportation corridors. The Planning Board and community members are constantly seeking changes to local regulations to allow Amherst to grow and adapt to the 21st Century without losing its character and architectural aesthetic. The Town realizes it needs to be more strategic with open space purchases, finding properties that can also be used for housing or have another dual purpose. The Town can use non-CDBG funding sources, such as CPA and capital funds, to purchase and preserve land and has already made zoning changes to focus development in downtown and village centers. This is an ongoing priority for the Town.

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 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 is working on two strategies: increasing small businesses and cultural offerings in the downtown and village centers, while also attracting high-level professional and research positions in 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. The Town works closely with the Business Improvement District and the Chamber of Commerce to support these goals and in July 2022, the first Economic Empowerment Analyst was hired to lead research and industry analysis regarding the Amherst economy including commercial district market profiles.

The Town has committed CDBG funds for micro-enterprise assistance in the past and will continue to explore the development of similar programs to support small businesses and other economic development goals overall.

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 2000s and has been using this funding to complete various projects. There are two local historic districts, a Cultural District in and around the downtown, and the Town is strategizing how the arts and culture can be an economic driver for small businesses or a means to attract "high-level professionals" to Amherst. The Town's 2017 update to the Open Space and Recreation Plan outlines clear objectives and actions for enhancing Amherst's natural amenities through 2023 using local funds, such as CPA, and state/federal grants like Federal Land & Water Conservation Fund and the state's PARC and LAND programs.

Open Space and Recreation: Amherst has engaged in active planning for open space and recreation since the late 1960s and now owns and manages over 2,500 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 is now more of a focus on stewardship of existing lands and expansion of recreational opportunities. 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. The provision of open space and recreation opportunities is an ongoing priority for the Town and possible funding sources include CDBG funds for recreation areas that serve low/moderate income residents, local funds, such as CPA, and state/federal grants like Federal Land & Water Conservation Fund and the state's PARC and LAND programs.

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 and to continue to expand sidewalk and bicycle lane infrastructure. The Town completed a Bicycle and Pedestrian Network Plan in 2018 which has helped guide the Town's investment in new cycling routes and pedestrian safety improvements. While the Town has built many of the parts necessary for a network of pedestrian and bicycle paths, there is still need for sidewalks and bicycle lanes on key arteries, such as East Pleasant St, South East St, and West Pomeroy Lane. As an active hub of the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA) 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 also a lead community in the Valley Bike share program with over a dozen stations within the Town, including the two most heavily used stations, both at UMass. Valley Bike helps expand local transit options by connecting to local bus and train stations for more regional transportation. The build-out of the pedestrian and bicycle path network is an ongoing priority for the Town and can be funded through CDBG when a low/moderate income population is benefitting directly, using state grant programs, such as Safe Routes to School and Chapter 90 funds, and federal transportation funds

Sustainability: Amherst has engaged in active planning for sustainability over the last few decades and recently completed a Climate Action, Adaptation, and Resiliency Plan (CAARP) in 2021. The Town's sustainability efforts are led by the Sustainability Director and supported by the Energy and Climate Action Committee. The Town was named a Green Community in 2012, adopted the Stretch Energy Code, and is developing a community choice aggregation plan to offer clean electricity at a competitive rate. The CAARP outlines goals for 2025, which includes prioritizing energy retrofits for affordable and multi-family housing complexes, encouraging responsible, local solar development, expanding local food access and production, and a rapid transition to zero-emission vehicles.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: The Town of Amherst is committed to ending structural racism and repairing past injustices to minority residents in the community. Through the work of Boards and Committees, the Town Council, new Town staff, and the Town Manager, the Town is actively developing and implementing plans and programs to address diversity, equity, and inclusion in all facets of government. The Community Safety Working Group was formed in 2020 in response to concerns about equity in policing the BIPOC community. The CSWG was instrumental in the creation of a new Town Department – Community Responders for Equity, Safety, and Service (CRESS) – which provides community safety services in situations that don't involve violence or a serious crime. The CSWG dissolved and was replaced with the Community Safety & Social Justice Committee in June 2022 which is committed to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion and community safety in Amherst. In 2022, the Town also formed a new DEI Department and hired a DEI Director to advance DEI goals in Town government and within the community. Other important goals from the CSSJ Committee and DEI Department include the development of a Youth Empowerment Center and/or BIPOC multi-cultural center and the implementation of translation services for Town's communication with residents.

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, and as areas to concentrate services and economic development. The CDBG Advisory Committee has determined three target areas within these centers:

1. 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.
2. 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 ¼ mile south along Route 9; Shumway Street to the West; and Spaulding Street, Salem Street, Hedgerow Lane and Arbor Way to the North.
3. Pomeroy Village Center/East Hadley Road—An area south of East Hadley Road, east of Route 116 and encompassing a ¾ mile radius around the Pomeroy/Route 116 intersection, including the Orchard Valley residential neighborhood.

FY2022 PRIORITY PROJECTS

Priority Ranking	Category from Master Plan	Time frame	Funding Sources	Project or Activity
1	Housing/Land Use	Ongoing; high priority	CDBG, CPA, Tax Credits	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 and associated infrastructure.
2	Community Services	Ongoing	CDBG	Support social service programs including but not limited to homelessness prevention, food security & nutrition programs, individual and family stabilization, youth development, economic self-sufficiency (adult education), low-cost health care services, and emergency & preventive services ranging from rental/fuel assistance, to shelter services.
3	Transportation	Ongoing; 1-3 year goal to build out	CDBG, Chapter 90, State/Fed Grants	Develop a continuous, safe, and accessible network of pedestrians, bicycle, and multi-use pathways in and between village centers and residential areas. This includes East Pleasant Street, North Pleasant Street, West Pomeroy Lane, and East Amherst.
4	Open Space and Recreation	Ongoing; 3-5 year goal	CDBG, CPA, PARC Grant	Seek small sites for the provision or improvement of playgrounds within walking distance of residential areas, such as East Street School and East Hadley Road.
5	Economic Development	Ongoing; COVID recovery	CDBG, State/Fed grants	Enable, support, and recruit appropriate small businesses and microenterprises that enliven downtown and village centers.
6	Natural and Cultural Resources	Ongoing	CPA, local funds	Identify and preserve scenic, historic, and cultural landmarks through the preservation of historic buildings, well-lit facades, murals, and sculpture gardens.
7	Open Space and Recreation	Ongoing	CPA, local funds, State/Fed grants	Continue to expand the local and regional system of trails and greenways to connect to schools and destinations
8	Economic Development	Ongoing	Local funds	Strengthen partnerships between the Town of Amherst and UMass, Amherst & Hampshire Colleges as they relate to housing, economic development, student rentals and other Town/Gown relationships.