

WESTMINSTER MASTER PLAN 2014

HOUSING CHAPTER



The Master Plan Committee completed this chapter in the fall of 2012.

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HOUSING

Population:

The 2010 US Census counted 7,277 residents in Westminster, a modest increase of 5.4% from the 2000 Census count of 6,907 residents. Westminster's growth rate over the decade was higher than that of the Montachusett Planning Region (growth rate of 3.6%) and the State of Massachusetts as a whole (3.0%). Only Hubbardston (12.1%) and Ashburnham (9.6%) had higher growth rates during the previous decade.

With a total landmass of 37.3 square miles, Westminster has a population density of approximately 195 people per square mile. The table below presents Westminster's growth in population over the years, as well as its projected population for the years 2020 and 2030.

Table H-1
Westminster Population Growth

<u>Year</u>	<u># of People</u>	<u>Numerical Change</u>	<u>% Change</u>
1960	4,022	----	-----
1970	4,273	251	6.2%
1980	5,139	866	21.2%
1990	6,191	1,052	20.5%
2000	6,907	716	11.6%
2010	7,277	370	5.4%
2020*	7,630	353	5.0%
2030*	7,880	250	3.5%

Sources: US Census Bureau. * = 2020 and 2030 forecasts provided by the MRPC Transportation Department.

The table above shows that Westminster experienced a significant growth in population between 1980 and 2000, adding 1,768 new residents over the course of these two decades. Since then, the rate of development has slowed down for Westminster, with the Town adding only 370 new residents during the last decade. According to the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission's (MRPC) regional growth forecast, Westminster's population will grow at a moderate pace between now and the year 2030.

Table H-2
Population Growth – Neighboring Communities

<u>Year</u>	<u>Westminster</u>	<u>Ashburnham</u>	<u>Hubbardston</u>	<u>Princeton</u>	<u>Gardner</u>	<u>Leominster</u>	<u>Fitchburg</u>
1980	5,139	4,075	1,797	2,425	17,900	34,508	39,580
1990	6,191 (20.5%)	5,433 (33.3%)	2,797 (55.6%)	3,189 (31.5%)	20,125 (12.4%)	38,145 (10.5%)	41,194 (4.1%)
2000	6,907 (11.6%)	5,546 (2.1%)	3,909 (40.0%)	3,353 (5.1%)	20,770 (3.2%)	41,303 (8.3%)	39,102 (-0.5%)
2010	7,277 (5.4%)	6,081 (9.7%)	4,382 (12.1%)	3,413 (1.8%)	20,228 (-2.6%)	40,759 (-1.3%)	40,318 (3.1%)

Sources: US Census Bureau.

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Not surprisingly, Westminster and its small town neighbors had higher rates of population growth than the neighboring cities during the last 30 years, mostly because these small towns were small to begin with, plus the availability of large tracts of vacant developable land.

Housing Growth:

The table below shows how Westminster's housing stock has grown over the last 30 years and allows for a comparison against its growth in population. As one would expect, the rise in housing units closely paralleled the Town's rise in population. The slowdown that occurred during the last twenty years is due to a number of factors including a moratorium on new sewer connections, the Rate of Development Bylaw which limits the number of residential building permits that can be issued annually, and the subdivision of the properties most suitable for residential development, leaving mostly properties having marginal development potential due to environmental constraints (wetlands, ledge, high water table, etc.).

The national recession that began in 2007 has only exacerbated the local slowdown in housing growth, and the Town's Building Permit data reflects this: during the four year period that encompasses 2002 through 2005, the Building Department issued an average of 40 Building Permits per year for single family homes. For the four full years since the start of the Great Recession (2008 through 2011), the Department issued an average of 9.25 Building Permits per year for single family homes. Clearly, the drop off in building activity since the start of the recession has been substantial. The recession has also taken its toll on fully permitted affordable housing projects. In the early 2000s, the Zoning Board of Appeals granted Comprehensive Permits to three affordable housing projects: Deer Run, Kingsbury Arms and Mountainview Estates. Taken together, these three projects would have created 225 new housing units; however none of them have been built or show any signs of getting underway in the foreseeable future.

Table H-3
Westminster Housing Unit Growth

<u>Year</u>	<u># of Housing Units</u>	<u>Numerical Change</u>	<u>% Change</u>
1980	1,982	----	----
1990	2,405	423	21.3%
2000	2,694	289	12.0%
2010	2,960	266	9.9%

Sources: = US Census Bureau.

Table H-4
Housing Unit Growth – Neighboring Communities

<u>Year</u>	<u>Westminster</u>	<u>Ashburnham</u>	<u>Hubbardston</u>	<u>Princeton</u>	<u>Gardner</u>	<u>Leominster</u>	<u>Fitchburg</u>
1980	1,982	1,849	623	NA	7,477	12,988	15,347
1990	2,405 (21.3%)	2,279 (23.2%)	1,025 (64.5%)	1,103	8,654 (15.7%)	15,533 (19.6%)	16,665 (8.6%)
2000	2,694 (12.0%)	2,204 (-3.3%)	1,360 (32.7%)	1,196 (8.4%)	8,838 (2.1%)	16,976 (9.3%)	16,002 (-0.4%)
2010	2,960 (9.9%)	2,599 (17.9%)	1,662 (22.2%)	1,339 (11.9%)	9,126 (3.2%)	17,873 (5.3%)	17,117 (7.0%)

Sources: US Census Bureau.

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The previous table indicates that only Hubbardston's housing stock grew at a faster rate than Westminster's during the last 30 years, while Leominster added the most housing units of the compared communities (4,885 units since 1980, compared to 978 units in Westminster). Between 2000 and 2010, Westminster's housing stock grew at a slower pace than its rural neighbors Ashburnham, Hubbardston and Princeton.

Housing Unit Inventory:

Detailed housing data from the 2010 US Census is not yet available as of the writing of this chapter. However, the American Fact Finder program has prepared five-year estimates for certain housing characteristics that cover the period between 2008 and 2010. This program is a data collection efforts sponsored by the US Census Bureau.

Table H-5
Type of Housing Units: Year 2008 – 2010 Estimate

Type of Unit	# of Units	Percentage of Total
One Unit (detached):	2,251	84.4%
One Unit (attached):	29	1.1%
Two Units:	150	5.6%
Three to Four Units:	132	5.0%
Five or More Units:	104	3.9%
Mobile Homes:	0	0.0%
TOTAL:	2,666	100%

Source: American Fact Finder (US Census).

The table above indicates that single family homes make up the vast majority (85.5%) of the Town's housing stock. In terms of multi-family units (defined as housing containing three or more units), the Town has only 236 such units, with most being located in the vicinity of Town Center. However, the next table compares the Town's housing stock with abutting communities, and Westminster has the most multi-family units when compared to its three rural neighbors: Ashburnham (99 multi-family units), Hubbardston (125 units) and Princeton (60 units).

Table H-6
Type of Housing Units in Neighboring Communities: Year 2008 – 2010 Estimate

Town	One Unit	Two Units	3-4 Units	5+ Units	Mobile Homes
Westminster	2,280	150	132	104	0
Ashburnham	2,416	0	83	16	77
Hubbardston	1,296	68	22	103	8
Princeton	1,190	50	39	21	9
Gardner	4,553	1,233	1,917	1,746	129
Leominster	9,117	1,487	1,894	4,488	226
Fitchburg	8,070	2,800	2,868	3,415	94

Source: American Fact Finder (US Census).

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Westminster's housing mix has been fairly stable over the past thirty years, although the percentage of single-family homes has grown at a faster rate than multi-family housing units during this period.

Age of Housing Stock:

Table H-7
Age of Housing Stock

<u>Year Structure Built</u>	<u>Number of Units</u>	<u>% of Housing Stock</u>
2000-2009	205	7.8%
1990-1999	357	13.6%
1980-1989	216	8.2%
1970-1979	491	18.7%
1960-1969	225	8.5%
1950-1959	415	15.8%
1940-1949	227	8.6%
1939 or earlier	496	18.8%
TOTAL:	2,632	100%

Source: US Census.



The table above indicates that approximately 19% of Westminster's housing stock was built before World War II. This is fairly unusual for a rural Massachusetts community where the pre-WWII housing stock often makes up one third to half of a community's housing stock. It is indicative of a relatively new community where the majority of its growth has occurred in the last fifty years. Still, it's worth pointing out that 43% of the housing stock is over 50 years old and many of these units may be in need of rehabilitation. Towards that end, the Town has attempted to secure housing

rehabilitation funds from the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, operated through the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The Town applied for such funds in 2010 (without success) and again in 2012 (funding decision pending).

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Housing Occupancy:

Table H-8
Type of Occupancy in Neighboring Communities 2010

	<u>Westminster</u>	<u>Ashburnham</u>	<u>Hubbardston</u>	<u>Princeton</u>	<u>Gardner</u>	<u>Leominster</u>	<u>Fitchburg</u>
Ownership:	2,342 (86%)	1,928 (90%)	1,417 (90%)	1,279 (92%)	4,518 (55%)	9,830 (59%)	8,191 (54%)
Rental:	374 (14%)	220 (10%)	149 (10%)	107 (8%)	3,706 (45%)	6,937 (41%)	6,974 (46%)

Source: American Fact Finder (US Census).

The previous table indicates that approximately 86% of Westminster's housing stock is owner-occupied, which is right in line with the figures for its rural neighbors and much higher than the abutting cities. While only 14% of the Town's housing stock consists of rental units, this is still a higher percentage than neighboring Ashburnham and Princeton.

Housing Vacancy Rates:

Table H-9
Vacancy Rates for Westminster and Surrounding Communities 2000 & 2010

Community	2000 Housing Units			2010 Housing Units					
	Occupied	Vacant	Total	2000 Vacancy %	Occupied	Vacant	Total	2010 Vacancy %	% change 2000/2010
Westminster	2,529	165	2,694	6.12%	2,716	244	2,960	8.24%	9.87%
Ashburnham	1,929	275	2,204	12.48%	2,148	451	2,599	17.35%	17.92%
Fitchburg	14,943	1,059	16,002	6.62%	15,165	1,952	17,117	11.40%	6.97%
Gardner	8,282	556	8,838	6.29%	8,224	902	9,126	9.88%	3.26%
Leominster	16,491	485	16,976	2.86%	16,767	1,106	17,873	6.19%	5.28%
Hubbardston	1,308	52	1,360	3.82%	1,566	96	1,662	5.78%	22.21%
Princeton	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1,279	60	1,339	4.48%	n/a

Source: U.S. Census 2000 and 2010.

A comparison of the 2000 and 2010 vacancy rates indicates that the vacancy rate has increased across the Region in recent years, a product of the national recession and the collapse of the housing market. The Town of Westminster's vacancy rate jumped from 6.12% to 8.24% over this ten-year timeframe, adding over 80 units to the Town's inventory of vacant housing units.

Types of Households:

The table on the following page indicates that slightly less than three quarters of Westminster's households consist of family-oriented households. This represents an increase in the percentage of family-oriented households (70% of Westminster households consisted of families in 1990), and bucks the national trend that has seen a steady drop in the number of family-oriented households since the 1960s.

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The large and growing portion of family-oriented households is indicative of a stable community. However, it is important to note that the number of female-headed households has also risen steadily during the last twenty years: there were 159 such households in 1990 and 269 in 2010.

Table H-10
Households by Type: Neighboring Communities 2010

	<u>Westminster</u>	<u>Ashburnham</u>	<u>Hubbardston</u>	<u>Princeton</u>	<u>Gardner</u>	<u>Leominster</u>	<u>Fitchburg</u>
Family Households:	2,047 (75%)	1,661 (77%)	1,229 (78%)	1,103 (80%)	5,011 (61%)	10,559 (63%)	9,362 (62%)
Non-Family Households:	669 (25%)	487 (23%)	337 (22%)	266 (20%)	3,213 (39%)	6,208 (37%)	5,803 (38%)

Source: American Fact Finder (US Census).

Another segment of Westminster's population that has increased in numbers during the past twenty years is the Town's senior population, which grew a much greater rate than the general population. The Westminster Council of Aging (COA) has provided figures of senior population levels (COA defines a senior resident who is 60 years old or older) within the Town from a period of 2006 to 2011 (see Table H-11 below). Between 2006 and 2011, the growth of senior population was 17.6%, which is over three times the growth rate of the Town's entire population from 2000 to 2010.

Table H-11 Town of Westminster Senior Population Trends							
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	'06-'11 %Change
60+ years	1,293	1,366	1,461	1,523	1,578	1,521	17.63%

Source: Westminster Council of Aging.

A more detailed breakdown of the Town of Westminster's 2010 population by age is provided in Table H-12 below. A comparison of 2000 and 2010 Census data reveals some findings consistent with the Westminster Council of Aging figures. The population of residents 65 years and over increased by 10.9% since 2000. But for the population between 55 to 64 years of age (the "soon to be" seniors), more than doubled (In 2000 this age group had only 580 persons, which more than doubled to 1,170 in 2010).

Table 12
Population Characteristic by Age

Age Group	2000 Count	2010 Count	% Increase
Total Population	6,907	7,277	5.3%
Under 5 years	415	319	-23.1%
5 to 19 years	1,601	1,583	-0.1%
20 to 34 years	958	962	0.04%
35 to 54 years	2,600	2,206	-15.2%
55 to 64 years	580	1,170	102.0%
65 to 79 years	561	601	7.1%
80 years and over	192	234	21.9%

Source: U.S. Census.

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The increase in seniors and “soon to be” seniors has implications for the Town’s housing policies. When the Master Plan Citizen Survey asked what types of housing citizens would support, the top two responses were elderly housing and assisted living facilities. Many survey respondents indicated a desire to downsize their housing situation (meaning sell their current home and move to a smaller housing unit), but could not find suitable housing options in Westminster.



The Town’s only elderly housing complex is the Wellington on South Street. There are 30 units in the Wellington and the current waiting list is 3 to 5 years. The survey results and the Wellington waiting list indicate a strong demand for more senior housing units. It should be noted that the Town’s plans for the new Senior Center at 68 West Main Street also includes a senior housing component. There is enough developable land in the rear of this property to support up to 72 new senior housing units. A private developer is also

working on plans to build a few senior housing units off of Adams Street in the Town Center.

Average Household Size:

Westminster has seen the size of its average household decline during the past fifty years. This is not surprising when one considers the national trend towards smaller household sizes. Couples are having fewer children today and single parent households have been on the rise.

Westminster’s US Census data confirms this trend. In 1960, the typical Westminster household contained 3.35 people. By 1980, the persons per household figure had declined to 2.93 and by 2000, to 2.59 persons per household.

Median Age of Residents:

Another factor contributing to smaller household sizes is “the graying of America”, that is, our nation’s elderly population is expanding. The Census data clearly demonstrates that this national trend is taking place in Westminster. Overall, the Town’s Median Age increased from 38.6 to 42.8 since 2000. The Town of Westminster’s population is a bit older when compared to the State’s median age (39.1 years) and Worcester County’s median age (40.1 years).

Income Levels:

The Town’s household income characteristics are presented in Table H-13 on the following page and are based on 2010 estimates provided by ESRI (Environmental Systems Research Institute, Inc.). Please note that income data for the US 2010 Census was not yet available as of the writing of this chapter. The 2010 median household income for Westminster was estimated at \$71,712. Two thirds of Westminster households (67%) earned between \$50,000 and \$150,000 annually, an indicator of a fairly affluent community. Less than 5% of Westminster households earned under \$15,000 per year in 2010.

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Table H-13
Household Income Levels: 2010 Estimates

Households	Number	Percent
<% 15,000	132	4.8%
\$15,000- \$24,999	135	4.9%
\$25,000 - \$49,999	449	16.4.%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	723	26.4%
\$75,000 - \$99,999	429	15.7%
\$100,000 - \$149,999	680	24.8%
\$150,000 - \$199,999	118	4.3%
\$200,000 +	70	2.6%
Total Households	2736	100%
Median Household Income	\$71,712	

Source: ESRI estimates for 2010.

The Town of Westminster's 2010 Median Household Income is compared with the surrounding communities in Table H-14 below. Only Hubbardston and Princeton had higher median household incomes, another indication that Westminster is a fairly affluent community.

Table H-14
2010 Median Household Income – Westminster and Surrounding Communities

<u>Community</u>	<u>2010 Median Household Income</u>
Westminster	\$71,712
Ashburnham	\$70,813
Fitchburg	\$50,776
Gardner	\$51,098
Hubbardston	\$83,671
Leominster	\$59,410
Princeton	\$100,499

Source: ESRI estimates for 2010.

Affordable Housing:

The State statute concerning affordable housing development (MGL Chapter 40B) cites that affordably-produced and priced homes must be available to households where their incomes do not exceed 80% of the median household income for the region where the community is located. According to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Westminster is located in the Fitchburg-Leominster PMSA (Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area).

In 2011, Westminster's PMSA had a median household income figure of \$72,000 for the average household, and this figure increased to \$82,100 for a family of four. Using income figures for a family of four, HUD estimated that a low-income household would have an income figure of \$41,050 (50% of the area median household income figure), and a moderate-income household would have an income figure of \$64,200 (approximately 80% of the area median). Table 15 on the following page presents the 2011 median household incomes for family sizes ranging from 1 to 8 persons for Westminster's PMSA.

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Table H-15
Moderate-Income Limits by Household Size (June 2011)

HOUSEHOLD SIZE	80% OF MEDIAN INCOME
1	\$44,950
2	\$51,400
3	\$57,800
4	\$64,200
5	\$69,350
6	\$74,500
7	\$79,650
8	\$84,750

Source: US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

For the purposes of Chapter 40B, affordable housing is generally defined as housing units that meet all of the following conditions:

1. Subsidized by an eligible State or Federal program.
2. Subject to a long-term deed restriction limiting occupancy to income eligible households for a specified period of time (at least 30 years or longer for newly created affordable units, and at least 15 years for rehabilitated units).
3. Subject to an Affirmative Fair Marketing Plan.

For municipalities that do not meet the 10% threshold, the practical consequences are as follows: any developer proposing low and/or moderate-income housing can have the project exempted from local zoning and subdivision requirements through what is known as the Comprehensive Permit process, meaning the development could be built in any zoning district, regardless of density or suitability. In reality, low and moderate-income housing developments are usually built in areas that have suitable infrastructure and convenience amenities (water, sewer, proximity to public transportation, etc.).

In an effort to assist local communities with their planning to achieve the 10% affordable housing threshold, the State's Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has developed the Housing Production Plan (HPP) Program, which provides incentives for non-compliant communities to prepare a plan of action to meet the standards of 40B. The HPP gives non-compliant communities a chance to demonstrate that they are making steady progress in producing affordable housing on an annual basis, granting them a one or two-year reprieve from Comprehensive Permit applications, depending on the amount of progress they've made.

The Town of Westminster has been participating in the HPP since 2005 and its most recent Housing Production Plan was approved by DHCD in early 2012. You can find Westminster's 2012 Housing Production Plan here:

[http://www.westminsterma.gov/pages/WestminsterMA_Planning/studies/Final%20Westminster%20Housing%20Production%20Plan%20\(HPP\)%202011%20Update.pdf](http://www.westminsterma.gov/pages/WestminsterMA_Planning/studies/Final%20Westminster%20Housing%20Production%20Plan%20(HPP)%202011%20Update.pdf)

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According to the most recent iteration of the State's Subsidized Housing Inventory (May 2012), only 40 communities in Massachusetts have met the 10% affordable housing threshold, with the City of Gardner (14.5%) being the only municipality in the 22-town MRPC region to achieve the 10% affordable housing threshold.

The table below shows how Westminster compares to its neighbors in regard to affordable housing, both in terms of the actual number of affordable housing units that are counted towards the State's Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI) and the percentage of the total housing stock that is considered affordable.

Table H-16
Low/Moderate Income Housing Units – Community Comparison

	Westminster	Ashburnham	Hubbardston	Princeton	Gardner	Leominster	Fitchburg
# of Affordable Units	86	32	52	20	1,315	1,419	1,659
% of affordable units	3.0%	1.4%	3.2%	1.5%	14.5%	8.0%	9.7%

Source: MA Department of Housing and Community Development Subsidized Housing Inventory (May 10, 2012).

Comparatively speaking, Westminster has a larger number of affordable housing units than its rural neighbors, but still falls far short of meeting the 10% threshold specified in 40B. For Westminster to reach the goal of having 10% of its housing stock deemed affordable under 40B, the Town would need to have a total of 283 housing units qualify as "affordable".

At present, Westminster currently has only housing 86 units that the State has deemed "affordable". Thus, the Town is presently short by 197 affordable housing units. Table H-17 provides a summary of the Town's existing affordable units.

Table H-17
Subsidized Housing in Westminster

Project Name	Address	Type	Total SHI Units	Expire Date	Comp Permit?	Subsidizing Agency
Meadows at West Hill		Ownership	45	Perpetuity	No	DHCD
Wellington Elderly Housing	South Street	Rental	30	2020	Yes	Rural Housing Service (RHS)
DMR Group Homes	Confidential	Rental	11	N/A	No	DMR
Westminster Totals			86			
Census 2010 Year Round Housing Units			2,826			
Percent Subsidized			3.04%			

Source: MA Department of Housing and Community Development, May 2012.

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Home Values:

Table H-18 below presents the number of single family homes and condominiums sold from the period between 2000 and 2010, as well as the median sales price of each housing unit type. From 2000 to 2005, the average sales price rose 86%. However, the housing market crash, which began in 2007, has returned the average sales price closer to the 2001 levels. It is an interesting correlation that 2005 was also the high point in recent years for the number of annual new building permits issued.

Table H-18
Single Family and Condominium Units Sold and Median Sales Price

1-Family			Condos	
Year	Number	Price	Number	Price
2010	67	\$210,000	4	\$159,500
2009	61	\$218,000	4	\$154,950
2008	54	\$224,500	6	\$180,000
2007	69	\$285,000	9	\$163,000
2006	73	\$285,000	8	\$170,000
2005	95	\$298,000	11	\$188,000
2004	97	\$280,000	3	\$175,000
2003	96	\$248,500	10	\$165,500
2002	84	\$214,500	6	\$144,000
2001	67	\$208,500	8	\$130,250
2000	92	\$159,950	10	\$117,400

Source: The Warren Group, 2011.

HOUSING ISSUES IN WESTMINSTER: DISCUSSION

- 1. Senior Housing:** Westminster's Zoning Bylaw does not contain any provisions that directly address the need for senior housing. The Town's senior and soon-to-be senior populations have grown substantially during the last twenty years; thus, Westminster will be dealing with the issue of elderly housing for some time to come. The Wellington on South Street is the only senior housing development in Town at present, but the demand for such housing is clearly evident. The Wellington has a current waiting list of three to five years, and all of the neighboring communities with subsidized senior housing developments have waiting lists of similar length. As the Town's senior and soon-to-be senior populations continue to grow, the demand for senior housing will become even more pronounced. Many communities have adopted senior housing bylaws within their zoning framework. Such bylaws can take the form of senior residential communities, retirement communities, as well as assisted living and residential care facilities (both are governed by State regulations). While the Town does have plans to build 72 new senior housing units in back of the planned Senior Center on West Main Street, it could be at least a decade before these units are actually built.

- 2. Starter Housing:** During the preparation of the Town's 2011 Housing Production Plan (HPP), MRPC Staff obtained and analyzed Westminster's MLS (Multiple Listing Service) data to evaluate housing costs and affordability. MRPC's analysis indicates that of the 45 single-family homes sold between May 2010 and May 2011, only 18 of these homes were available at a price that a median income household could afford, let alone a moderate income household (80% of the area median household income figure) or a low income household (50% of the area median). This has resulted in a situation where children who grew up in Westminster cannot afford to stay in Town and raise their families here. Many households comprised of young couples do not yet earn enough to qualify as making the area median household income or even 80% of the area median (which would put them in the moderate income housing category). There is a need for new starter housing that is affordable to young couples wanting to buy a home and raise a family right here in Westminster.
- 3. Empty-Nester Housing:** 2010 Data from the US Census American Fact Finder program indicates that 72% of Westminster's housing units have three bedrooms or more. The data further indicates that 69% of Westminster housing units having a mortgage have monthly housing costs of \$1,500 or more, and 38.3 of these households with mortgages have their housing costs exceed 30% of their total household income. Once a household has their housing costs exceed 30% of their total household income, they are pushing the boundaries of what is considered an affordable housing situation. Reviewing these statistics in conjunction with Westminster's population demographics and the following situation emerges: many the Town's senior and soon-to-be senior populations have homes that are larger than they need once their children move out on their own and, further, these homes are becoming increasingly more expensive to maintain, eating up an ever larger portion of their household income. Through the Master Plan Citizen Survey, there is antidotal evidence that many such households would welcome the opportunity to move into smaller and more affordable housing units, if only such units existed in Westminster.
- 4. Inclusionary and Incentive-Based Zoning:** Many Massachusetts communities have proactively tried to secure affordable housing through the use of either inclusionary zoning or incentive-based zoning. The general concept behind both inclusionary zoning and incentive-based zoning is to increase a community's affordable housing stock. Inclusionary zoning can be seen as the "stick" approach while incentive-based zoning is the "carrot" approach. An inclusionary zoning bylaw is one that requires new subdivisions to set aside a certain percentage of new housing units as below-market units, i.e., units that can be counted towards the town's Subsidized Housing Inventory under 40B. Typically, inclusionary bylaws require anywhere from 10% to 25% of new subdivision housing units to consist of below-market units. The Massachusetts Zoning Act does not explicitly authorize inclusionary zoning; however, many Commonwealth communities have inclusionary zoning bylaws on the books and have made the case that such bylaws are legally valid under the State's "Home Rule" approach to zoning. Courts in Massachusetts have generally approved of inclusionary zoning; however, they have frowned on assessing fees in lieu of providing actual affordable housing units.

Incentive-based zoning attempts to increase the affordable housing stock by offering incentives to developers to create below-market units as part of their developments. Such incentives can include higher densities, reduced frontage, reduced setback requirements, a reduction in the required roadway width, reduced infrastructure connection fees, and other incentives that can improve a developer's bottom line. Incentive-based zoning is an example of giving something to get something. Incentive-based zoning is explicitly authorized within the Massachusetts Zoning Act. Several Massachusetts communities have a mixture of inclusionary and incentive-based provisions, where a certain percentage of affordable housing is required, but the town offers incentives to provide additional affordable units.

Westminster's Zoning Bylaw does contain an Inclusionary Zoning provision (Section 205.37, Item C) that requires apartment buildings to set aside 25% of their units for affordable housing. However, the Town's Inclusionary Zoning provision does not apply to subdivisions or cluster housing developments. The Zoning Bylaw does not contain any incentives for the provision of affordable housing.

5. **Subsidized/Affordable Housing:** With only 3% of its housing stock deemed "affordable", Westminster falls well below having 10% of its housing stock qualify as affordable under MGL 40B. While the Town does have an Affordable Housing Committee, this entity rarely meets and is not actively pursuing any affordable housing initiatives. Several appendices of the Town's recently completed Housing Production Plan (HPP) provide information on the State and Federal affordable housing programs that the Town could avail itself to. Further, the Town's affordable housing requirement in the Zoning Bylaw only applies to apartment buildings and not new subdivisions, and the Bylaw contains no incentives for developers to provide new affordable units as part of building new housing developments.
6. **Older Homes in Need of Rehabilitation:** As indicated in Table H-7, roughly 43% of Westminster's housing stock is over 50 years old. Although no comprehensive inventory has been compiled, it is quite possible that many of these older residences would not meet today's various housing codes (plumbing, electricity, weather-proofing, building code, etc.). Our federal government offers numerous grant opportunities for building rehabilitation projects, especially when they benefit low and moderate-income families. A brief description of available federal housing rehab grants is provided below.
 - **Community Development Block Grant Program:** This is a federal program under the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The program is implemented at the State level by DHCD. Offered annually, the Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG) presently has two pots of money available to Massachusetts municipalities: Community Development Fund I (CDF-I) and Community Development Fund II (CDF-II). A community is eligible to apply for one or the other program. In Westminster's case, the Town is eligible to apply for CDF-II Program. Eligible activities include: economic development projects that create and/or retain local/regional jobs, housing rehabilitation and infrastructure improvements. A CDF project must either benefit low and moderate-income people, aid in the prevention and/or elimination of slums and/or blight, or meet an urgent condition posing a serious threat to the health and welfare of the community.

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- The Housing Development Support Program (HDSP): The Housing Development Support Program is a component of the federal CDBG program administered by DHCD. The program is designed to assist with project-specific affordable housing initiatives with an emphasis on small-scale projects that might otherwise go unfunded, usually mixed use projects in town centers. Typical eligible projects include rehabilitation, new construction, reclamation of abandoned properties, elderly and special needs housing, and conversion of under-utilized buildings for housing. Funds can be used for acquisition, rehabilitation, site work and related infrastructure. Projects are limited to a maximum of seven housing units, 51% of which must be affordable to and occupied by low and moderate-income households.
- The HOME Program and the Housing Stabilization Fund: These programs are offered by HUD (managed by DHCD) and are designed to support the acquisition and/or rehabilitation of existing rental units. Acquisition funds are only available to low-income families. Eligible projects include: property acquisition; rental unit construction and/or rehabilitation; connecting to public utilities; and making essential improvements such as structural improvements, plumbing improvements and energy-related improvements. These programs are offered every two years.
- The 'Get the Lead Out' Program: This HUD-sponsored program is managed at the regional level by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC). This program is available on a limited basis to residences that are home to a lead-poisoned child under case worker oversight.
- Home Improvement Loan Program: A HUD program managed by the Massachusetts Housing Finance Authority (MHFA), this program offers funds to eligible owners of one-to-four unit residential properties for necessary repairs to their residential structures. Eligible improvements include: sewage disposal systems and plumbing needs, safety-related alterations and renovations, energy-related improvements and repairs designed to bring the structure up to local building codes. Offered on an annual basis, these funds generally have an easier application process than the above referenced CDBG funds.
- Community Septic Management Program: This program is administered at the State level by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The program makes available to homeowners loan money for repairing failing septic systems.
- Weatherization Assistance: HUD provides funding assistance to regional non-profit organizations for fuel assistance and weatherization programs. The Montachusett Opportunity Council is the regional agency that provides such services for Northern Worcester County communities. In order to be eligible for the weatherization program, the applicant must receive some form of federal fuel assistance benefits.

7. Environmental Constraints: A considerable portion of Westminster's land cannot be built on today because of environmental constraints, whether they are wetlands, floodplains, steep slopes, or poor soil conditions. Many of the Town's upland ridges contain significant amounts of ledge (bedrock outcrops). The presence of ledge and the thin rocky soils scattered throughout

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Town have made it difficult to site septic systems that meet the percolation standards of the State's Title V septic regulations. Much of the Town's prime developable land has already been built on, leaving land of marginal value for development. This situation will have an impact on where new housing is built in Westminster and how many new housing units the land can accommodate.

HOUSING GOAL

Westminster desires to ensure that housing opportunities are available that meet the needs of a diverse population having a broad range of income levels, with new housing provided in a measured, deliberate and planned manner that is proportional to the Town's ability to provide municipal services while maintaining the Town's rural character.

HOUSING OBJECTIVES

- Create more opportunities for senior housing in Town.
- Continue to promote cluster housing as a means to providing new housing opportunities while preserving meaningful and usable open space.
- Strive to achieve having 10% of the Town's housing stock qualify as affordable in order to meet the requirements of MGL Chapter 40B.
- Provide affordable housing opportunities so that young people who grew up in Westminster can continue to live in Town (starter home opportunities).
- Provide affordable housing options to Westminster residents who no longer have a need for a large home and wish to downsize to a smaller home and stay in Town.
- Revise the Zoning Bylaw to ensure that all new large-scale housing developments set aside a portion of housing units that will qualify as affordable under MGL Chapter 40B.

HOUSING RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Senior Housing: The Town should increase its options for senior housing within its Zoning Bylaw. To do this, the Town would need to give serious consideration as to which types of senior housing alternatives would best suit its elderly population, whether they are congregate care facilities, independent living facilities, restorative care/skilled nursing facilities, senior housing communities, or a mixture of these options. Responsible Municipal Entities: The Planning Board in conjunction with the Board of Selectmen. Exploring additional senior housing opportunities could also be another project for the local Affordable Housing Committee.

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2. Housing in the Town Center: The Town should consider consolidating the various zoning districts that comprise the Town Center into a single mixed-use district with development standards that would encourage a more traditional New England village center development pattern. The current town center area is divided into residential and commercial zoning districts (including some commercial districts that would qualify as “spot zoning”), each with its own set of dimensional standards and allowable uses. The Town would benefit economically from having more people and businesses in the Town Center. Development standards to consider for this district could include: zero front yard setbacks, minimum side setbacks, discouraging stand-alone commercial operations that require large amounts of parking, locating buildings in front of the lot with parking in the rear, façade design standards, signage and lighting standards, shared parking, mixed use buildings (shops on first floor, apartments above). When considering what design standards to adopt for a newly created village center district, the Town would benefit from having a design workshop that would utilize the talents of landscape architects to help citizens visualize their preferred aesthetics for the Town Center. Responsible Municipal Entities: The Planning Board in conjunction with the Board of Selectmen.

3. Cluster Housing Bylaw: The Town’s Zoning Bylaw already contains a section that allows for cluster developments by Special Permit from the Planning Board (Section 205.38). However, the Town should consider allowing cluster housing By Right in the very rural areas outside of the Town Center, particularly the Residential-II and Residential-III zoning districts. Responsible Municipal Entity: The Planning Board.

4. Inclusionary & Incentive-Based Zoning: As mentioned previously, Westminster already has an inclusionary housing provision in its Zoning Bylaw; however, it only applies to apartments and not subdivisions. With Westminster having only 3% of its housing stock deemed affordable by State standards, the Town needs to ensure that new large-scale residential developments include their fair share of affordable housing units. Further, the Town should incentivize developers to provide additional affordable units so that the Town can inch closer to the goal of having 10% of its housing stock qualifies as affordable. Thus, the Town should adopt an inclusionary housing bylaw that both requires new developments to set aside a certain percentage of units as affordable and incentivizes the developer to provide additional affordable units above and beyond the base requirement. Responsible Municipal Entity: The Planning Board.

5. Revitalize the Affordable Housing Committee: Westminster created an Affordable Housing Committee back in 2005; however, this committee has only occasionally pulled together when there has been a specific project to work on (the Town’s Housing Production Plan, for example). The Committee rarely meets or takes on new initiatives. If the Town is serious about creating affordable housing for its citizens, then the Town needs to revitalize this Committee and give them a program of work to pursue. Dealing with affordable housing issues is a fairly broad mandate, but the Committee could undertake a number of projects, such as:

- Inventory all town-owned buildings that may be suitable for affordable housing adaptive reuse, as well as town-owned properties that may have excess land that could be developed for affordable housing.
- Prepare and update the Town’s housing strategy and planning documents.

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- Serve as the Town's official advocate for affordable housing.
- Evaluate tax title properties that may be suitable for affordable housing.
- Apply for the various State and federal affordable housing grant opportunities.
- Respond to citizen requests regarding affordable housing opportunities in Town.
- Manage the lottery system for those affordable housing units created through the Local Initiative Program (LIP) or through a Chapter 40B Comprehensive Permit.
- Provide outreach and education to the community regarding affordable housing.

Potential candidates for inclusion on a revitalized Affordable Housing Committee could include the Town Planner, Council on Aging Director, representatives from the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board and Veteran's Council, a citizen with real estate experience, and other citizens with an interest in affordable housing. Responsible Municipal Entities: The Board of Selectmen and the Affordable Housing Committee.

6. Chapter 40-B Housing Proposals: The Zoning Board of Appeals should continue to receive training on how to deal with Comprehensive Permits as they relate to low and moderate income housing projects as defined by MGL Chapter 40B. The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) periodically modifies the 40B regulations, and the Zoning Board should keep abreast of these changes. The UMass Extension's Citizen Planner Training Collaborative (CPTC) offers classes on this subject on an annual basis and will even provide customized training sessions to individual communities. In addition, DHCD has prepared a procedural "how to" booklet for local communities. Responsible Municipal Entity: The Zoning Board of Appeals.

7. Promote Homebuyer Counseling, Education. Homebuyer counseling and education are valuable marketing and outreach tools that can help Westminster residents bridge the information gap and prepare them for a successful homeownership experience. The Town could either plan a first-time homeownership initiative by partnering with an agency or institution that provides homebuyer counseling or simply make it known to Westminster residents that such educational organizations exist. There are many nonprofit agencies that offer this service and most have informational brochures that could be displayed at the Town Hall. These agencies are well trained, monitored and certified by the Massachusetts Homeownership Collaborative, which is coordinated by the Citizens Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA). This organization provides "soup to nuts" information about the home-buying process, from how to budget or repair damaged credit to the many types of mortgage products and down payment assistance programs. Many also sponsor, or participate in, homebuyer fairs. The CHAPA website (www.chapa.org) maintains a list of counseling agencies and their current and planned activities. Many conventional lenders offer similar programs. At the regional level, several non-profit community development organizations have joined together to sponsor the Homeownership Center of North-Central Massachusetts. The Center is a collaborative effort between RCAP Solutions, Twin Cities CDC, Greater Gardner CDC, and MRPC. For more information on the Homeownership Center, visit www.twincitiescdc.org. Responsible Municipal Entities: Town Planner and Affordable Housing Committee.

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8. Soft Second Loan Program. For first-time homebuyers having low and moderate-incomes, the Town can refer them to those lending institutions that offer soft second mortgage loans. A soft second mortgage combines a subsidized second mortgage with a traditional first mortgage to make housing more affordable for low and middle-income homebuyers. There are income specifications limiting who is eligible for this program. For a list of participating lenders in the north-central region of Massachusetts, please go to the website of the Massachusetts Housing Partnership (www.mhp.net) and click on the “homeownership” link. Responsible Municipal Entities: Town Planner and Affordable Housing Committee.
9. Establish a local Affordable Housing Trust Fund: In January of 2005, the Governor signed into law an amendment to Chapter 44 MGL that enables municipalities to establish a trust fund for the creation and preservation of affordable housing. Such a fund would need to be established locally through Town Meeting action. Previous to this amendment, towns needed to get approval from the State Legislature through a home rule petition in order to set up such a fund. The new law allows towns to collect funds for housing, segregate them out of the general budget into an affordable housing trust fund, and use these funds without having to go back to Town Meeting for approval. The law also allows the trust to own and manage real estate. Such a fund would need to be governed by a five-member board of trustees, most typically appointed by a Town Manager or Board of Selectmen. Investigating the feasibility of such a trust fund for Westminster would be an ideal project for the Affordable Housing Committee. The Town should give strong consideration to establishing such a trust fund, with the Affordable Housing Committee as its manager. Responsible Municipal Entities: The Board of Selectmen and the Affordable Housing Committee.
10. Substandard Housing: The Town should proactively examine its housing stock and work with property owners to identify needed improvements. Once this is done, the Town should further investigate the various State grant opportunities to see if they make sense for Westminster and its distressed property owners. Responsible Municipal Entities: The Board of Selectmen in conjunction with the Building Commissioner and Health Department.
11. Continue Working with Habitat for Humanity: The Town of Westminster has tried for two years (2010 and 2011) to find a suitable piece of Town-owned property it could donate to Habitat for Humanity for the purpose of building affordable housing. Unfortunately, none of the Town-owned properties were deemed suitable for this purpose, mainly due to environmental constraints and title problems. However, as the Town continues to take properties through tax title for the non-payment of taxes, it should evaluate the taken properties to see if they might be suitable for affordable housing construction, and donate them to Habitat for Humanity if they are. Many communities have donated building lots to Habitat for Humanity to construct affordable single housing units. Under the Habitat for Humanity program, homebuyers contribute between 300 and 500 hours of sweat equity while working with volunteers from the community to construct the home. The homeowner finances the home with a 20-year loan at 0% interest. As funds are paid back to Habitat for Humanity, they are used to fund future projects. Responsible Municipal Entities: Town Planner in conjunction with the Board of Selectmen and the Assessor’s office.