

Westminster Community Development Strategy

Town of Westminster – February 2015

Adopted by the Board of Selectmen on February 9, 2015

The Town of Westminster can be characterized as a rural community located in the rolling hills of north/central Massachusetts. Westminster is fifty-three miles northwest of Boston and twenty-four miles north of Worcester. Town boundaries encompass about 37.3 square miles. Westminster is bounded by the cities of Fitchburg and Leominster to the east and Gardner to the west. To the south lie the towns of Hubbardston and Princeton. To the north lies the rural community of Ashburnham, with whom Westminster shares a regional school system, K-12. The center of Westminster, which has the character of a small New England village, is located along a ridge. Just over the town line to the south in Princeton, is Wachusett Mountain, the largest stand-alone mountain east of the Berkshires. Its northern slope covers considerable acreage within the Town of Westminster, and the base lodge for Wachusett Mountain Ski Area is located within the bounds of town.

As with much of the northeastern United States, this region has been identified by many as the ideal location to live, work and play. Westminster has the distinction of being able to suit all these needs and still retain the flavor of a small New England village. Many of the older homes and farms of Westminster are New England vernacular architecture that is rich in historic appeal. The attractive character that gives Westminster its charm also brings pressure for changes in land use that could disturb the pastoral landscape. As new homes and support services develop, measures need to be taken that will preserve this rustic appeal.

Planning and Public Participation

Westminster has a long history of planning, both locally and regionally. These efforts have been further supported when Westminster hired its first Town Planner in 2004, a position that has existed ever since. The Planning Board and other officials have undertaken several local Plans that have involved significant public participation. These plans include, but are not limited to: the 2014 Master Plan and the six public workshops and citizen survey held for this effort; the Open Space & Recreation Plan (2014); and the Town's Executive Order 418 Community Development Plan (2004). The Town has also completed a Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plan CWMP (July 2007), prepared by SEA Consultants. Regional plans include the Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (MRCEDS) updated in 2014; Wachusett Corridor Smart Growth Plan (2014); Nashua River Watershed Growth Plan (2003); as well as the Montachusett Region Unified Work Program and Transportation Improvement Program (both 2014).

The Town's Community Development Strategy concentrates on the following priorities: **A. Economic Development; B. Housing; C. Open Space & Resource Protection; C; and D. Transportation.** In addition to and complementing these priorities are a host of recommendations in the Town's Master Plan which are also to be considered a part of this Community Development Strategy. Being of utmost importance to the Town of Westminster, these recommendations are entirely consistent with and reflect the Sustainable Development Principles outlined by the Office for Commonwealth Development.

Target Area

Westminster has prioritized community development activities that address retention and creation of affordable housing as well as the protection of open space and natural resources. A Target Area for community development activities that helps to retain affordable housing by addressing substantial health and safety code violations (many which negatively impact the environment, such as failed septic systems, lead paint, or excessive energy use) for Westminster's citizens in need of assistance has been determined on the recommendations from the Board of Health, and Building Department as Census Block 708100-1.

Community Resources - Westminster strives to implement plans of action for priorities established by the Town through the subsequent community resources:

- Local Taxation i.e. Property, and motor vehicle excise tax
- Permit and fee income
- Volunteer assistance
- Community fundraising activities
- Local, State, and Federal aid
- Technical assistance and grants from regional organizations
- To provide social services to seniors

Like every town in Massachusetts with local needs, funding is raised through local taxation, permit and fee income, and state and federal aid. These revenue sources are insufficient to address all local needs.

The following goals and objectives are taken directly from the Town's 2014 Master Plan which was accepted by the voters at the November 2014 Special Town Meeting, and adopted by the Planning Board in December 2014.

Economic Development

The goals in this category are consistent with the sustainable development principles of #8, Increase Job and Business Opportunities, through the continued support of light commercial and industrial development and #3, Make Efficient Decisions, by adopting expedited permitting (43D Districts) for the Westminster Business Park, the Route 31 Industrial Park and Simplex/Tyco land.

Economic Development - Goal

Westminster desires a robust and diverse local economy that provides tax revenues for the town and living wage jobs for local residents in a business friendly environment, with a timely and predictable permitting system and a municipal infrastructure capable of supporting new and expanding businesses and industries.

Economic Development - Objectives

- Educate residents on the importance of economic development for its contribution to the local tax base and the creation of in-town jobs.
- Upgrade and expand the infrastructure necessary to encourage new economic development, particularly the Town's municipal sewer system.
- Develop a well-trained and educated workforce that is capable of fulfilling the regional economy's emerging employment needs.
- Design an economic development strategy that will retain existing businesses and attract new businesses that pay living wages, such as the manufacturing and biotechnology sectors.
- Utilize our existing economic zoning districts for their intended purposes: commercial operations in our existing commercial districts and industrial operations in our existing industrial districts.
- Create a vibrant New England-style village center that contains a diversity of services, restaurants and shopping opportunities.
- Commercial operations shall endeavor to seamlessly blend into Westminster's existing landscape and contribute to the character of the community.
- Encourage agriculture for a source of locally produced food and as a means of preserving the Town's rural character.
- Capitalize on our existing community resources (open space, recreation, history, agriculture and iconic businesses) to promote eco-tourism.
- Expand access to our outdoor natural landscapes as a means of encouraging recreation-related tourism.
- Take the initiative to promote ourselves while continuing to work with our state and regional partners to attract tourists and new economic development.

Housing

Housing goals are consistent with the Commonwealth's Sustainable Development Principles #1 Concentrate Development and Mix Uses, #3 Make Efficient Decisions, # 4 Protect Land and Ecosystems, # 6 Expand Housing Opportunities, and # 10 Plan Regionally, by increasing housing opportunities for disabled, low to moderate income, and senior citizens.

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.

Open Space and Recreation

The goals contained in this section are taken directly from the Town's State-approved 2014 Open Space & Recreation Plan and are consistent with the following Commonwealth Sustainable Development Principles: #4 Protect Land and Ecosystems, #5. Use Natural Resources Wisely; and #10 Plan Regionally.

Goal One: Protect, conserve and enhance Westminster's farmlands and forestlands as "working landscapes" which are vital to the Town's rural character.

Objectives:

- 1.a. Inform the public about the protection possibilities for their land such as land trusts, conservation restrictions or fee simple acquisition.
- 1.b. Inform the public about incentives for keeping their land as open space, especially through Chapter 61 (Recreation) Chapter 61A (Agriculture) and Chapter 61 B (Recreation).

- 1.c. Protect those properties the Town has identified for preservation through Agricultural Preservation Restrictions and Conservation Restrictions.
- 1.d. Review Town bylaws and regulations to ensure that they do not discourage open space land uses.
- 1.e. Educate landowners about economically viable open space uses.
- 1.f. Develop “working landscapes” (land used for agriculture, forestry or recreation) on town-owned lands.
- 1.g. Promote residential, commercial and industrial infill within existing developed areas to limit development in other areas thereby protecting rural character.

Goal Two: Protect and preserve the cultural resources that are vital to the Town’s rural character.

Objectives:

- 2.a. Identify and preserve culturally significant buildings and sites through public education and participation.
- 2.b. Investigate the Town’s options for protecting the scenic qualities of Westminster’s rural roads.
- 2.c. Develop a plan for the protection of the Westminster Village – Academy Hill Historic District.
- 2.d. Adopt New England village-style zoning for the Town Center, which would include design standards for building facades, signs, landscaping, lighting, as well as the placement of parking areas and new buildings, and curb-cuts.
- 2.e. Work with the Historical Commission to implement the recommendations contained within the “Town of Westminster, Historic Preservation Plan,” dated June 1998.

Goal Three: Provide a broad range of recreation opportunities for all age groups and abilities.

Objectives:

- 3.a. Identify opportunities to develop a multi-use trail that will link major open space parcels, neighborhoods and schools.
- 3.b. Assist in the development and rerouting of the Midstate Trail in Westminster.

- 3.c. Secure protective easements on those portions of the Midstate Trail that occur on private property.
- 3.d. Search out available properties that would be suitable for new athletic fields and toddler playgrounds.
- 3.e. Create recreation amenities (biking-hiking-equestrian trails, camping sites and picnic sites) on those conservation properties that are suitable for such uses.
- 3.f. Increase sidewalks within the Town Center to provide greater recreation opportunities for the elderly population.
- 3.g. Work with the City of Fitchburg to allow public access of waterbodies (Meetinghouse Pond, Mare Meadow Pond and Wachusett Reservoir) for passive recreation such as kayaking, canoeing and fishing.
- 3.h. Properly maintain our existing recreation facilities and secure additional parking for the ball-fields on South Street.
- 3.i. Investigate opportunities to create a trail network for snow-mobiles that could also be used for more passive recreation uses such as horseback riding and cross-country skiing.

Goal Four: Identify and prioritize lands for acquisition.

Objectives:

- 4.a. Support the Midstate Trail Open Space Committee in the identification of priority land acquisition parcels along or abutting the Midstate Trail.
- 4.b. Work toward a town-wide greenway that protects key wetlands, streams, and rivers.
- 4.c. Continue to annually allocate funds for the purchase of open space and recreation areas.
- 4.d. Acquire environmentally sensitive areas as outlined in Section 7 Resource Protection needs.

Goal Five: Increase public awareness of open space and recreation resources.

Objectives:

- 5.a. Develop a Town-wide signage program for open space and recreation areas.

- 5.b. Develop a brochure on Westminster's recreation opportunities and open space parcels. Put information on the Town's website.
- 5.c. Create maps and trail guides for those Town conservation areas that are suitable for public access.
- 5.d. Encourage volunteerism in developing and maintaining community open space and recreation resources.
- 5.e. Coordinate environmental education into the school district curriculum using local conservation resources.
- 5.f. Celebrate open space and recreation resources by having several Town events each year that foster awareness (i.e.: tournaments, races, fairs).

Goal Six: Increase communication and coordination among Town boards and with Town residents.

Objectives:

- 6.a. Continue to guide the implementation of the open space plan, and assist in coordinating the efforts of various Town boards and citizen groups.
- 6.b. Implement quarterly meetings where liaisons from those municipal entities with open space responsibilities (Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Committee, Historical Commission, Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee, Agricultural Commission, Hager Park Committee, Planning Board and Board of Selectmen) meet to discuss community issues.
- 6.c. Continue to support having a conservation agent on staff – possibly sharing the position with a neighboring town.
- 6.d. Institute an on-going publicity campaign to inform the public about the actions that affect open space and recreation.

Transportation

The goal and objective in this category are consistent with the sustainable development principles of #7, Provide Transportation Choice, by continuing to provide public transportation service through the MART, and #10 Plan Regionally, by improving the overall traffic and circulation system.

Goal:

- Construct and maintain a safe road system that is consistent with the desired small village and rural character.

Objective:

- Maintain a roadway management plan to achieve maintenance oriented roadway network condition and provide a basis for establishing priorities and level of budget allocation.

PROJECT PRIORITY LIST - Time line for such projects are within 2 to 10 year time frame.

1. Address the Sewer Capacity Issue: Simply put, the lack of capacity at the Whitman River Pump Station is **THE** single biggest impediment to economic development in Westminster. Without a substantial upgrade of the pump station, new buildings in the Town Center cannot tie into the municipal sewer system and existing buildings cannot expand if they will generate additional wastewater. Thus, the capacity issue hinders all types of development in Town Center (commercial *and* residential). Without an upgrade of the pump station or other means of increasing the capacity of the sewer system (such as the previously mentioned in-line sewer storage system), new development cannot take place in the Town Center and the heart of Westminster will be left to stagnate. Additionally, the sewer system cannot accommodate additional sewer flow from new or expanded industrial or commercial buildings in the Town's two largest 43D Priority Development sites. As mentioned previously, the Simplex Drive Priority Development site consists of 100 acres and enough vacant developable land remains at this location to accommodate well over one million square feet of new commercial/ industrial/ office floor space. The Westminster Business Park Priority Development site consists of plans for the eventual construction of 1.57 million square feet of new industrial floor space on 312 acres of land. While the Town is committed to hosting new economic development in the Town Center and its two largest Priority Development Sites, new development in at these locations is at a standstill the Town addresses its sewer capacity issue. The Town should choose its preferred option for addressing the sewer capacity issue, continue to search out grant/loan opportunities to fund the selected option (such as the MassWorks infrastructure grant program and the Rural Development infrastructure loan/grant program), and continue to press its case to our legislative delegation and State funding entities. Responsible Municipal Entities: The Public Works Commissioners, Board of Selectmen and Town Planner.

2. 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.

3. Upgrade and Expand the Town's Information Technology (IT): There are a number of IT resources the Town could and should pursue during the next decade: there are a variety of software programs that can help schedule permit decision due dates, hearing dates, permit sign-offs, and help with the schedule of meetings. While the Town does have Geographic Information System (GIS) software, this is used by only a few municipal departments (Building, Planning and DPW). There are a number of other departments that would benefit by having a more user-friendly mapping system. The Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) has been marketing a mapping and data service known as "Mr. Mapper" which can be customized to fit the needs of any municipal department, and its applications are limited only by what data exists or could exist digitally. The Town should invite MRPC personnel to attend a municipal

department head's meeting to present and discuss the Mr. Mapper service. Further, many municipalities have their tax maps available on-line and the Town should pursue this option as well. Lastly, it is likely the Town will need to hire a full-time IT person sometime during the next decade to cover its ever-expanding IT needs. Currently, the Town contracts with a part-time IT person; however, it is clear that the Town's IT needs are beginning to exceed the consultant's capabilities and available time. The Town might want to consider establishing an IT Committee to survey the various municipal departments regarding their IT needs. Responsible Municipal Entities: Board of Selectmen, Advisory Board, Capital Planning Committee and IT Consultant.

4. Develop a Plan for the Reuse of the Old Town Hall: Originally constructed in 1839, the Old Town Hall on Bacon Street has sat vacant since 2007 when the town government operations were moved to the New Town Hall on South Street. The Town needs to develop a plan for the disposition of the Old Town Hall, whether it's using the building for a new municipal purpose, selling the building to a private entity, or taking down the building and clearing the way for a new structure or use. The first two choices will entail expending the necessary funds to secure the building from further deterioration. Responsible Municipal Entity: The Board of Selectmen.

5. Encourage New Development to "Build Green": The following principles can help serve as a guide for improving the durability, quality and energy efficiency of projects of all uses and scales. These are a starting point for incorporation of green building into our land use regulations, as green building technology is constantly expanding and identifying new products, and methods.

- Strive to design and construct buildings to last 100 years.
- Develop programs to educate owners and occupants of buildings about weatherization, energy conservation, maintenance techniques, operation and maintenance of high-efficiency systems, and other topics, with the goal of improving and maximizing building performance.
- Building design should take into consideration Westminster's climate and natural systems, such as snow loads, stormwater management, etc.
- Residential projects should be encouraged to follow green building and energy efficiency guidelines established by the Town and State.
- Incorporate day lighting strategies to decrease reliance on electricity.
- Use low-toxicity paints, sealers, carpet, and other materials.

Responsible Municipal Entities: Energy Advisory Committee working in conjunction with the Planning Board, Zoning Board, Building Department and the MA Green Communities Program.

6. Village Zoning for 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. Our current Town Center 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. From the Master Plan citizen survey, it is clear that Westminster residents prefer the following uses for the Town Center: restaurants, small-scale retail stores, service establishments (tailors, dry-cleaners, financial services, etc.) and professional offices (doctors, dentists, lawyers, etc.). The Zoning Bylaw's table of uses for a new village center should be expanded to include more of these opportunities. Responsible Municipal Entities: The Planning Board in conjunction with the Board of Selectmen.

7. Modernize and Update Zoning Bylaw's Table of Uses: The current table of uses in the Zoning Bylaw was prepared in the early 1970s and, as such, is out of date and does not include many types of retail and service establishments that have come into existence within the last 40 years (biotechnology facilities as an industrial example and computer repair services as a commercial example). The Zoning Bylaw's table of uses should be revised to update and expand the types of commercial and industrial uses the Town wants to encourage. The Town already has a head-start on this effort with the 2010 report, Analysis of Table of Use Schedule and Dimensional Regulations in Industrial and Commercial Zones, prepared by Planning Consultant William Scanlan from funding made available through MRPC's Technical Assistance Program. This report should be revisited as a first step in revising the table of uses. Responsible Municipal Entities: The Planning Board in conjunction with the Economic Development Committee.

8. Revise the Dimensional Standards for the Industrial Districts: The 2010 Scanlan report also evaluated the Zoning Bylaw's dimensional standards as they relate to the Town's two types of industrial districts. The report found three flaws in the dimensional standards: 1) restricting industrial buildings to two stories is self-defeating. Increasing the limit to four stories will provide greater opportunity for first class office and research-development space. 2) The setbacks required for the industrial districts are very restrictive and provide little benefit. Reduced setbacks will enable more intensive use of valuable industrial land. 3) The Town should consider providing a density bonus to those industrial uses that will include pervious surfaces (porous pavement that allows for groundwater discharge) for a portion of their parking needs. One last flaw identified by the Town Planner and Building Commissioner is the 50-foot height restriction in the Zoning Bylaw as it relates to cell tower antennas that extend from principal and/or accessory structures. Currently, industrial property owners must obtain a height variance from the Zoning Board in order to construct such antennas. The Zoning Bylaw's dimensional standards for industrial uses should be revised to allow for greater use of the Town's industrial-zoned land. Again, revisiting the 2010 Scanlan report would be a wise first step for this endeavor. Responsible Municipal Entities: The Planning Board in conjunction with the Economic Development Committee.

9. Investigate Natural Resource Protection Zoning: In the 1990s, many Massachusetts municipalities adopted cluster housing bylaws that allowed for smaller lot sizes in exchange for protecting large swaths of open space. Westminster adopted a cluster housing provision as part of its Zoning Bylaw back in 2000, and it has been utilized for a handful of cluster housing projects during the past decade (Harrington Heights, Rebanna Road and the Village at Old Mill). However, many communities have found that their cluster housing bylaws have not delivered on their promise. Much of the lands protected under cluster development are inadequate to fulfill their resource protection purposes, whether to sustain farming or forestry or protect habitats, scenic views, or water supplies. Further, reliance on the underlying zoning for purposes of determining allowable lot counts often yields

too many housing units, an insufficient amount of protected open land, and layouts that destroy the natural resource and environmental value of the remaining land. In response, planners for rural communities have developed a successor to the cluster housing concept: “Natural Resource Protection Zoning” or NRPZ for short. NRPZ can take a number of forms, but the essence is to combine low underlying densities with compact patterns of development so that significant areas of land are left permanently undeveloped and available for agriculture, forestry, recreation, watershed, and wildlife habitat. The Town should investigate whether it makes sense to adopt NRPZ as a successor to the Zoning Bylaw’s cluster housing provision. Responsible Municipal Entities: The Planning Board working in conjunction with the Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Zoning Board and Building Commissioner.

10. Consider New Zoning Provisions to Encourage Affordable Housing: There are several zoning tools the Town could adopt to encourage new affordable housing. Westminster only has 3% of its housing stock deemed affordable by the State, which is considerably lower than the 10% threshold established under the State’s affordable housing law (MGL Chapter 40B). This makes the Town susceptible to large housing developments proposed under the State’s Comprehensive Permit process, which allows affordable housing to be built anywhere in a community regardless of zoning. In an effort to increase its stock of affordable housing, the Town needs to ensure that new large-scale residential developments include their fair share of affordable housing units. Adding an inclusionary housing provision to the Zoning Bylaw would be a first step. Inclusionary housing bylaws require new developments to include a percentage of the units as affordable, offer incentives for the creation of affordable units as part of new development, or a combination of the two approaches. Westminster already has an inclusionary housing provision in its Zoning Bylaw (Section 205-37); however, it only applies to apartments and not subdivisions. The Town should consider applying its inclusionary housing provision to subdivisions (not just apartment buildings), and revise this provision to offer additional incentives for developers that provide additional affordable units so that the Town can inch closer to the goal of having 10% of its housing stock qualifies as affordable. 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. Another zoning tool would be to add an affordability option for accessory apartments. Westminster already has an accessory apartment provision within its Zoning Bylaw (Section 205-37.1), but adding an affordable housing provision would allow accessory apartments to be counted towards the Town’s affordable housing stock if a rent restriction is put in place. Per State regulations, the accessory apartment would need to be rented at a price affordable to persons or families qualifying as low or moderate income for a period of not less than 15 years, but the affordable housing use restriction can also be in perpetuity. The rent for the accessory apartment will only increase in proportion to the growth in the area’s median household income as documented by the State. Be forewarned that implementing such a provision would require the Town to annually monitor such units to ensure that household incomes do not exceed the State’s affordable income limits for the area. Responsible Municipal Entity: The Planning Board.

10. Prioritized Roadway Improvement Program & Sidewalk Improvement Program: The Department of Public Works should develop a prioritized roadway improvement program based on its most recent Pavement Management Study. A similar plan is needed for the Town Center’s network of sidewalks. Further, the Department should annually post on the Town’s website a list of the roads and sidewalks it plans to work on during the upcoming calendar year. Annually advertising the Department’s road and sidewalk work program would help keep the public informed of DPW activities. Responsible Municipal Entity: The Public Works Commission.