

Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

Draft
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I. Executive Summary

The Montachusett Region, settled as early as the 17th century, began as small settlements through an era of agrarianism into the age of industrialization and now into the era of information and communications. The physical landscape can be described as “typical New England”; our landscape differs from several urban centers with a strong presence of mixed-uses (commercial, housing and in some cases industry) with well-established neighborhoods to small, sparsely populated rural communities containing “town commons”. The population and workforce have weathered changes and have adjusted their work skills to conform to the needs of the business community that drives our regional economy.

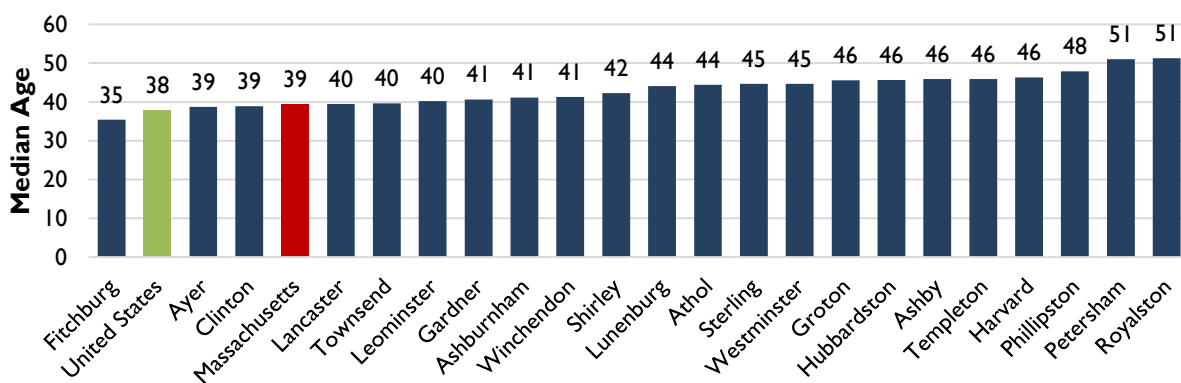
A. Key Trends

As a first step to completing the CEDS, data was collected and analyzed for the entire region to gain a better understanding of the socioeconomic conditions of the Montachusett Region and how we compare to other areas of the state and the nation. A few of the key findings discovered during this process are summarized below.

I. Aging population

Montachusett communities, on average, are older than the state and country as a whole (**Figure I**). The large proportion of residents nearing retirement age poses a number of planning challenges for the Region, including ensuring accessibility to health care services, public transportation, senior housing, as well as generational shifts in employment and succession in the workforce.

Figure I. Median age in Montachusett communities compared to Massachusetts and the US



Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates



2. Despite declines in the region and around the country, manufacturing remains critical to the Montachusett Region economy

The role of manufacturing-based employment in the Montachusett Region economy – despite declines in recent decades – continues to dwarf that of both the state and country. While efforts continue toward diversifying the regional economy into other growing sectors of the economy, including service sectors, the region’s comparative advantage of an experienced manufacturing workforce and legacy industrial space will ensure manufacturing is maintained as a cornerstone in the region’s economy (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Employment by industry

Industry (by 2-digit NAICS codes)	# of Businesses	% of Total Businesses	# of Employees	% of Total Employees
Manufacturing	450	5.3%	16,175	17.0%
Health Care & Social Assistance	635	7.4%	13,826	14.5%
Retail Trade	1,155	13.5%	12,577	13.2%
Educational Services	273	3.2%	9,688	10.2%
Accommodation & Food Services	510	6.0%	8,192	8.6%

Source: ESRI Business Analyst Online (BAO) 2019

3. Educational attainment continues to increase throughout the region among young professionals. In particular, young women are graduating both high school and college at higher rates than their male counterparts

Graduation rates among young residents in the Montachusett Region have continued to improve at both the high school and collegiate level. Most notably, women aged 25 to 34 years hold bachelor’s degrees at a 45% higher rate than they did in 2000 (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Highest level of educational attainment (aged 25 to 34 years)

Highest level of educational attainment	Male		Female	
	2000	2017	2000	2017
High school degree or higher	85.3%	88.1%	90.7%	92.7%
Bachelor's degree or higher	21.2%	26.3%	27.3%	39.6%

Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

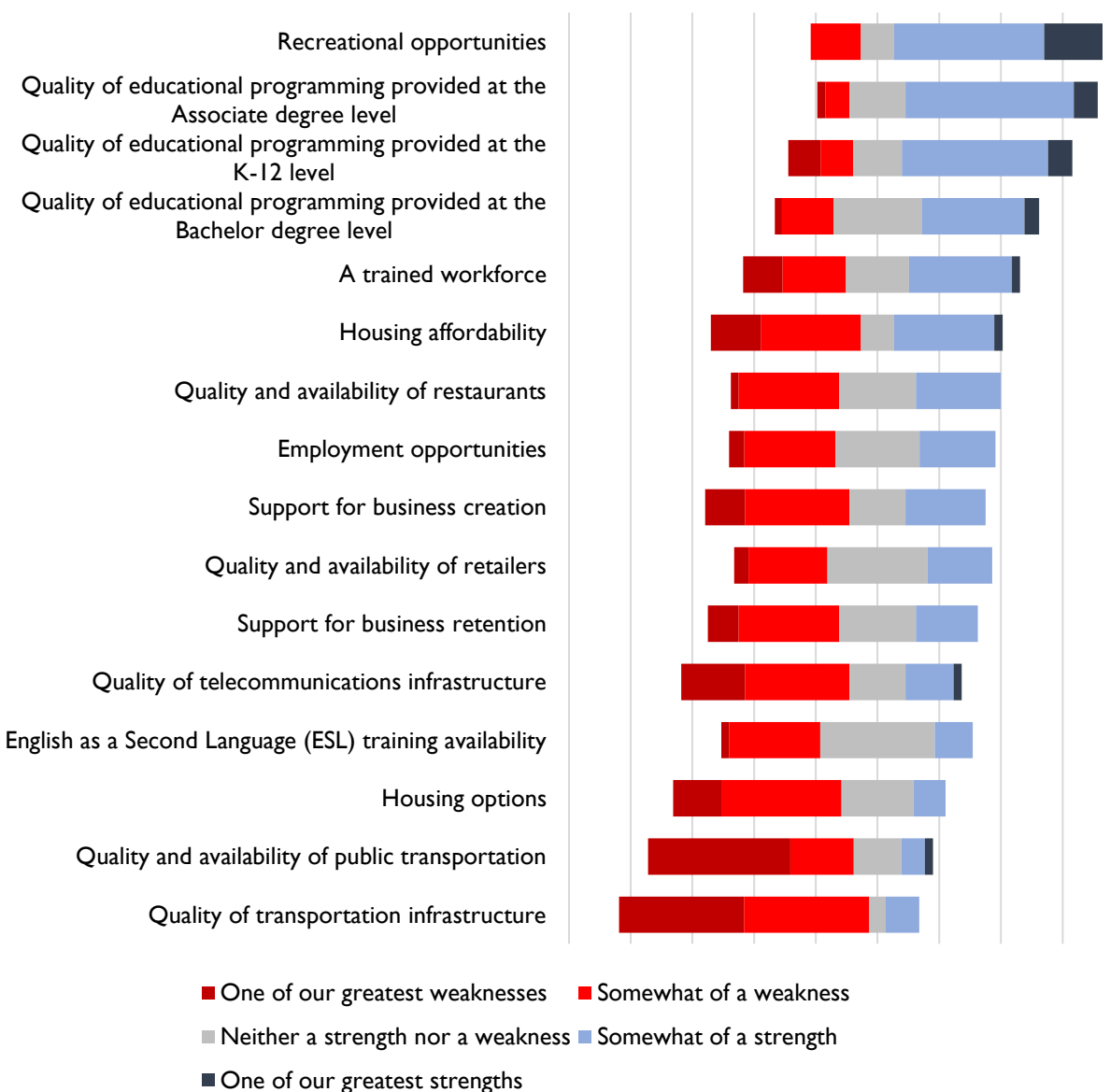
Still, educational attainment in the region remains lower than the state as a whole. In 2017, it was estimated that 92.1% of men and 94.4% of women aged 25 to 34 in Massachusetts received a high school degree or higher, while 46% and 55.8% received a bachelor’s degree or higher. The trend toward having a more educated population is valuable as the economic sustainability of the region depends on ensuring a robust workforce that includes young professionals and careers to support their success.



B. Regional Outlook and Position

On May 3rd 2019, MRPC distributed a brief online survey to local elected and appointed officials (including mayors, town managers, town administrators, selectboards, planning boards, etc.), economic development officials, educators, and members of the business community. The design of the survey was informed by discussions of regional strengths, needs and opportunities at the previous MRCEDS meeting in March 2019.

Figure 2. Responses to survey question, “How would you characterize each of the following as they relate to the economy of the Montachusett Region?”



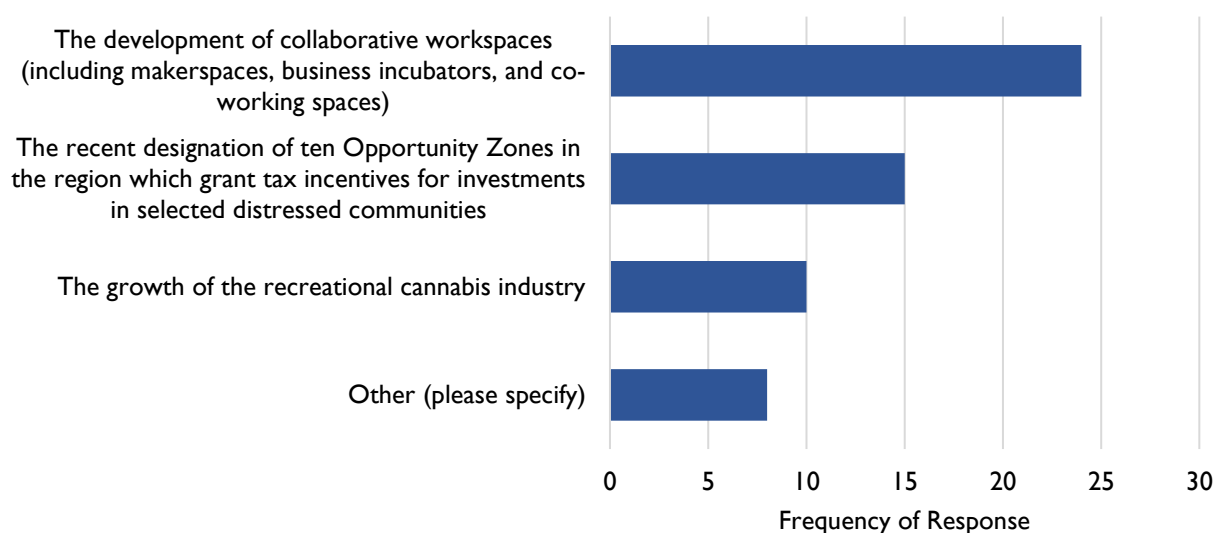


The three most commonly identified strengths in the region were recreational opportunities (71.4% of respondents agreed), the quality of educational programming provided at the Associate degree level (68.6%), and the quality of educational programming provided at the Bachelor degree level (44.5%).

The three most commonly identified weaknesses in the region were the quality of transportation infrastructure (83.4% of respondents agreed), the quality and availability of public transportation (72.2%), and housing options (58.8%).

To help MRPC and the MRCEDS Committee prioritize our efforts in the coming years, we asked survey respondents to select which types of economic opportunities be supported.

Figure 3. What do you see as the top economic development opportunities for the Montachusett Region to support?



The majority of respondents support the ongoing development of collaborative workspaces in the Montachusett Region. Makerspaces, along with co-working spaces and business incubators, have the mission of creating businesses and providing support for people to develop new employable skills and collaborate with others on business endeavors. Additionally, makerspaces in particular may help the Montachusett Region strengthen its greatest asset of recreational opportunities by providing fun classes and workshops indoors during the tough winter months. The presence of funding programs for collaborative workspaces (including MassDevelopment's Collaborative Workspace Programs) help provide necessary resources for starting and supporting these projects in the region.

The recent designation of ten Opportunity Zones also pose a potential economic opportunity according to almost half of all respondents. By providing tax incentives to invest in distressed communities, there may be many yet unrealized benefits of these zones. To date, five Montachusett communities (Athol, Clinton, Fitchburg, Gardner, and Leominster) received formal approval of two Census Tracts each (ten total) for designation as federal Opportunity Zones.



Already, local economic development officials in each community have fielded multiple inquiries by prospective investors and developers showing interest in utilizing this new economic development tool, but no funding has yet been committed.

C. Vision

Community and economic planning and development proponents within the Montachusett Region will advocate and support all economic development activities including, but not limited to:

- Education
- Workforce development
- Marketing
- Brownfields redevelopment
- Renewable energy development
- Commercial and industrial land development
- Transit programs and transportation improvements that support economic development initiatives
- Housing improvements and programs that provide a supply that is sufficient for the region's workforce

We strive to preserve and balance open spaces enhancing the quality of lives of residents, while making the area more attractive for business owners and employees considering business relocations and expansions.

D. High Priority Objectives

As part of this CEDS update, and in response to key trends and our regional outlook, goals and objectives for the region were developed under ten independent (but highly interrelated) categories:

1. Infrastructure Development
2. Regional Cooperation
3. Regional Promotion
4. Local Business Creation and Support
5. Workforce Attraction and Retention
6. Redevelopment and Reuse
7. Education
8. Housing
9. Public Health and Safety
10. Energy and Resources



E. 2019 CEDS Projects

As part of this CEDS update, we are nominating the following projects to be eligible for EDA funding:

1. Future Route 2 Interchange at South Athol Road – Athol, MA
2. Downtown Athol Infrastructure Improvements – Athol, MA
3. South Athol Road and 100-acre Bidwell Site Development Plan – Athol, MA
4. Millers River Greenway – Athol and Orange, MA
5. LaunchSpace, Inc. – Athol, MA
6. 200 Boulder Drive – Fitchburg, MA
7. Lagoon Site, West Fitchburg – Fitchburg, MA
8. Sandpits, 0 Airport Road – Fitchburg, MA
9. Wachusett Business Incubator – Gardner, MA
10. Rear Main Street Corridor Project – Gardner, MA
11. Nichols Street Upgrade – Gardner, MA
12. Spanish American Center – Leominster, MA
13. Revitalization of Downtown Leominster – Leominster, MA
14. Sholan Farms – Leominster, MA
15. Connection between Adams Street and Downtown – Leominster, MA
16. Downtown Parking Garage – Leominster, MA
17. Simplex Drive Industrial District – Westminster, MA
18. Westminster Business Park Industrial District – Westminster, MA



II. Methodology: “Building a Better Montachusett”

The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) program, administered by the Economic Development Administration (EDA), was established by Congress under the *Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965*, as amended. Through later legislation, the *Economic Development Administration Reform Act of 1998*, new federal regulations were enacted to establish the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy program, replacing the previous Overall Economic Development Program (OEDP). The EDA was reauthorized through the *Economic Development Administration Reauthorization Act of 2004*, to administer and regulate programs such as the CEDS through fiscal year 2008. The EDA is in the process of re-authorization; however, the regulation that governs how the EDA operates and makes investments has already been updated as of January, 2010. This final ruling of the EDA’s *Final Regulations* clarified and established the final regulations governing the EDA.

The CEDS program was established as an economic development planning tool to assist communities, regions and states to advance economic development activities, programs, and projects. The CEDS program is designed to:

“... bring together the public and private sectors in the creation of an economic roadmap to diversify and strengthen regional economies...serve as a guide for establishing regional goals and objectives, developing and implementing a regional plan of action, and identifying investment priorities and funding sources.”

- Economic Development Administration, CEDS Flyer

Through the CEDS program, a qualifying economic development organization works to identify a region’s flexibility to adapt to the everchanging global economy, persistent economic distresses and learn to utilize the region’s assets to maximize economic opportunity that fosters growth and job creation and retention for the region’s residents. Since the CEDS process is a pre-requisite to receive EDA grant funding, the completion of the CEDS will enable the region to access funding and assistance.

A. Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (MRCEDS) Update and Report

The MRPC updates the CEDS every five years and completes an Annual Update of the economic planning and development work accomplished in the Montachusett Region, in accordance with the Montachusett Region CEDS. This Update is combined with an Annual Report of the accomplishments of multiple economic development entities and adjusts the MRCEDS’ vision, goals, objectives and work plan as needed to reflect changing economic conditions. Every effort has been made to create a clear and concise CEDS for the Montachusett Region.



In recent years, updates of MRPC's "Building a Better Montachusett CEDS Update and Annual Report" have included CEDS Guidelines, promulgated by the EDA on June 1, 1999.

B. Community Participation in this Planning Effort

I) Public Meeting and Input

One meeting of the MRCEDS Committee was held on February 21st 2019 where MRPC staff presented on regional and local demographic data collected to update the CEDS. On March 27th 2019, draft goals and objectives were distributed and discussed with local economic development leaders and facilitators in the region. On June 4th 2019 a MRCEDS Committee meeting was held where participants had an opportunity to comment on this document. Members of the Montachusett Economic Development District (MEDD) were also invited to provide input into the revised document. Finally, the MRPC Planning Commissioners were asked to comment on the revised MRCEDS at its June 2019 meeting of the MRPC. The draft CEDS document was posted on MRPC's website for a 30-day comment period from May 31st 2019 to July 1st 2019.

2) Regional Surveys

In Spring 2019, the MRPC distributed a survey to local officials, Chambers of Commerce, and representatives of minority groups and low- and moderate-income groups, asking them to identify local and regional economic planning and development projects that should be accomplished in order to retain and create jobs. Summaries of project requests needed, by community, are provided in **Section VI** of this report.

On May 3rd 2019, the MRPC distributed an online survey to local officials, Chambers of Commerce, business representatives, and other economic development leaders to help identify the region's strengths and weaknesses, as well as opportunities to which the Montachusett Region should focus on in the coming years. We also asked respondents to comment generally on trends they are seeing related to the economic health of the region.



III. Overview and Analysis of the Region

A. *Background and History*

The Montachusett Region's earliest settlements were founded as trading outposts for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Lancaster and Groton were settled in the mid-1600's to ensure the flow of animal pelts from the interior to Boston. By the second half of the eighteenth century, most communities in the region were settled. Originally, local economies focused on agriculture but, since farming provided a poor return, manufacturing quickly became the dominant economic force in the region.

Montachusett communities harnessed swift-flowing streams and rivers for water-powered manufacturing. The first mills were allied with agricultural production, but the nineteenth century saw the establishment of other industries, including paper, textile and woodworking industries. By the mid-nineteenth century, the production of lumber and wood products became the region's largest industry, and the City of Gardner was known internationally as a major center for chair manufacturing.

The growth of the region was accelerated by railroad connections enabling the easy transport of raw materials, finished goods and people. Communities with an industrial base prospered and expanded with the influx of foreign-born and US-born migrants. Smaller towns, such as Ashby and Hubbardston, did not see widespread growth. However, their industrialized neighbors enjoyed their heyday during the late Victorian era.

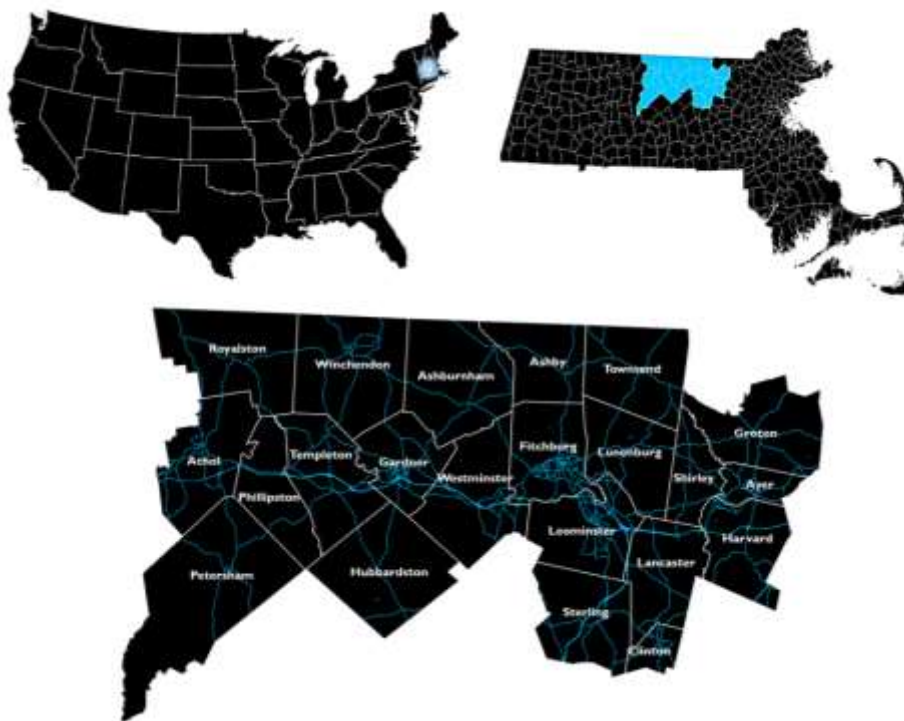
The 20th Century saw a period of economic decline that was caused by the migration of industries to southern states and exacerbated by the Great Depression. The smaller industrialized communities suffered most severely and revived most slowly. Today, the region's more urbanized communities are dominated by "mature" manufacturing industries, such as Gardner's surviving furniture mills and Leominster's surviving plastics companies. Local economies, recognizing the instability of the region's industrial base, are currently undergoing the transition away from specialization in manufacturing industries (Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, 1990). A foray into tourism in order to diversify the economy has proven successful with the creation of the Johnny Appleseed theme marketing and creation of the Johnny Appleseed Trail Association, Inc. (JATA) and the Johnny Appleseed Trail Visitors Center in Lancaster. The JATA offers higher visibility of the agritourism businesses such as Red Apple Farm in Phillipston and Sholan Farm in Leominster. This attempt at diversification has thus far proven to be successful providing additional jobs in the Region, adding entry-level jobs for many new workers and lessening the Region's dependence upon the manufacturing sector.



B. A Picture of the Region – An Overview

The Montachusett Region is a historically manufacturing-intensive region which today is home to 242,671 people across 22 communities in north-central Massachusetts. Even today the Region boasts the highest concentration of manufacturing in the Commonwealth. However, following national and state trends, the Region's manufacturing employment is declining and instead we are witnessing an ongoing "shift" in employment from the manufacturing sector to the services sector. Future, potential areas of job growth should be fully understood as communities plan to redevelop and create areas for business development (ex. industrial park construction and downtown redevelopment) in the future.

Figure 4. Montachusett Region in context



The Region's topography is dotted by high peaks such as Mount Wachusett and Mount Watatic and other rolling hills typical of the New England landscape. The landscape encompasses three major watersheds – the Chicopee River, Millers River and Nashua River – mountain paths, streams, rail-trails, urbanized downtowns and neighborhoods, historic village centers and new housing subdivisions all connected by a local, state and interstate road system and a commuter and freight rail system linking the Montachusett Region to major urban centers. This is the environment within which residents and visitors live, work and play. At the same time, the private and public sectors grapple with issues of growth and work tirelessly to improve upon the economic condition of the business community and families born within and relocating to the Montachusett Region.



C. Montachusett Region Analysis and Influences

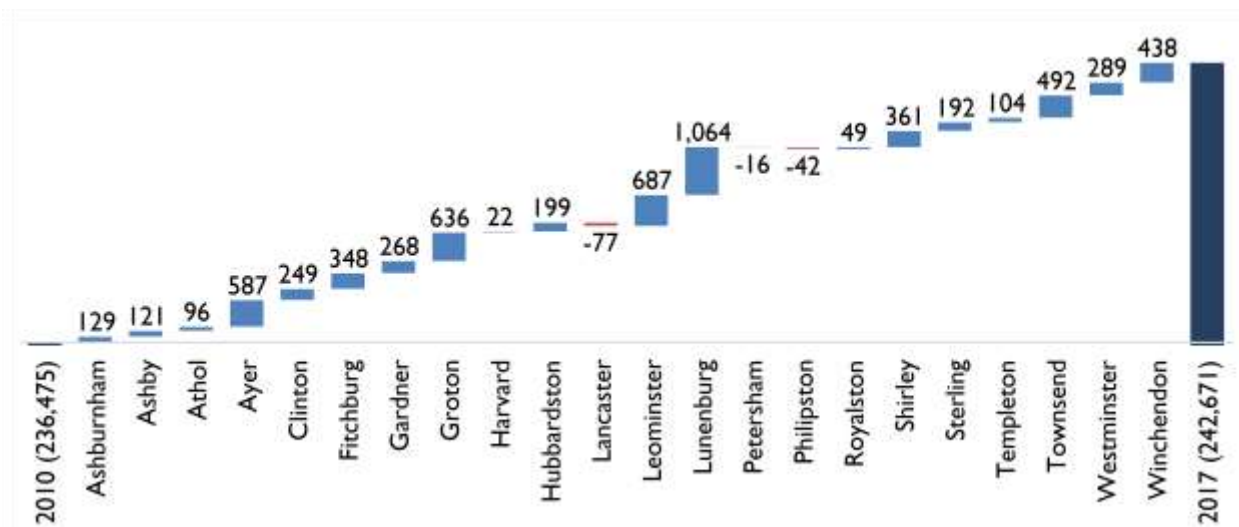
Since the publication of the 2014 CEDS update, new demographic and economic data for the region, state, and country has become available. The purpose of this section is to provide an update of the best available data, which generally is no more than one to two years old, depending on the source. The new data has been summarized in the following sections.

I) Demographic Characteristics

a) Population Change

The Montachusett Region witnessed a 2.6% increase in its population from 2010 to 2017, welcoming an estimated 6,196 new residents during this time (see **Figure 5**). As of 2017, the Region boasts a population of 242,671 residents across its 22 communities.

Figure 5. Population change in the Montachusett Region (2010 to 2017)

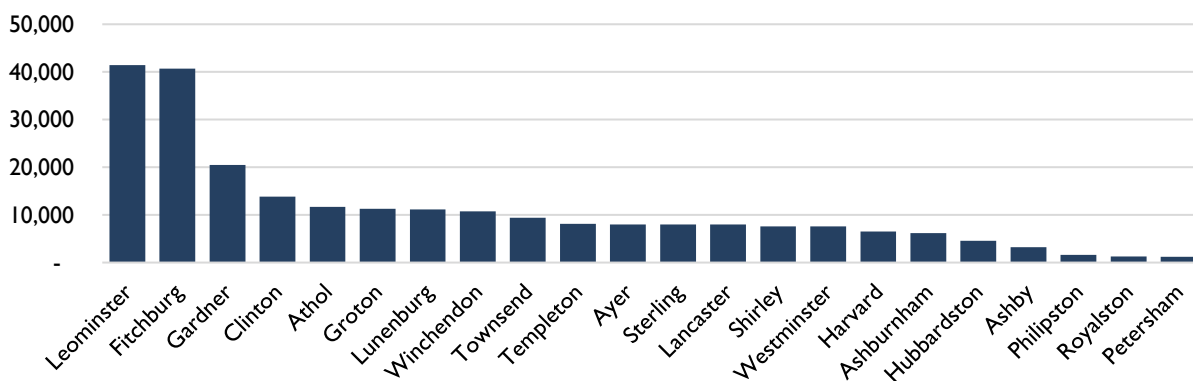


Source: US Census, American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

Lunenburg saw the largest population increase in recent years with approximately 1,064 new residents (a 10.6% increase from 2010). The majority of communities saw more modest population increases, while three communities – Lancaster, Petersham, and Phillipston – experienced a slight decline in population (-1%, -1.3%, and -2.5% respectively).



Figure 6. Population by community

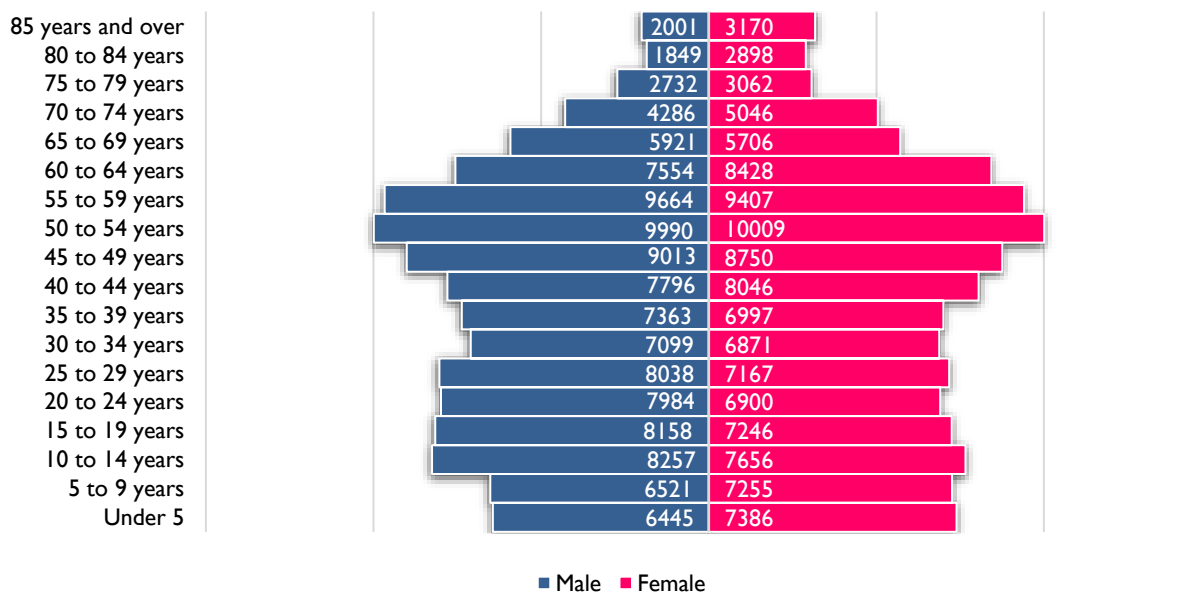


Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

b) Age Breakdown

The Montachusett Region is considerably older than the state or nation as a whole (see **Figure 7**), a trend that has been steadily rising in recent decades. In 2017, 19 of the Region's 22 communities had a higher median age than Massachusetts, up from just eight in 1990. According to the most recent data from the American Community Survey (ACS), nearly one-quarter (23.4%) of Montachusett residents are between the ages of 45 and 59 years old.

Figure 7. Age distribution by gender, Montachusett Region

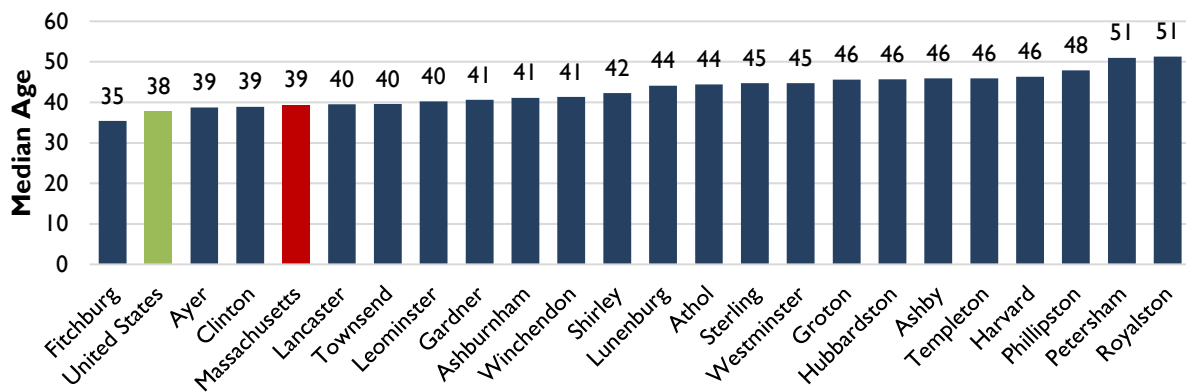


Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

The large proportion of residents nearing retirement age poses a number of planning challenges for the Region, including ensuring accessibility to health care services, public transportation, senior housing, as well as generational shifts in employment and succession in the workforce.



Figure 8. Median age in Montachusett communities compared to Massachusetts and the US

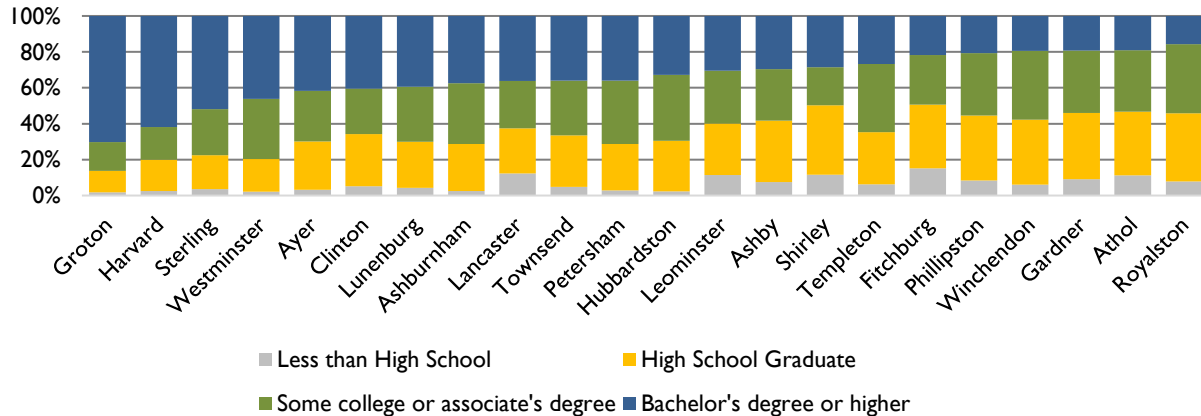


Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

c) Educational Attainment

Montachusett communities range considerably in terms of highest level of educational attainment (see **Figure 9**).

Figure 9. Highest level of educational attainment, Montachusett Region



Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

Groton boasts the highest percentage of residents with a Bachelor's degree or higher with 70.3% of Groton residents holding a Bachelor's or post-graduate degree (nearly 4.5 times that of Royalston).

In **Table 4**, we see increasing levels of educational attainment across the board for those aged 25 to 34 years old. Graduation rates between 2000 and 2017 grew for both males and females for both high school and bachelor's degrees and higher. Most significantly, we witnessed a 45% increase in the proportion of women aged 25 to 34 years old with a Bachelor's degree or higher.



Table 3. Highest level of educational attainment (aged 25 to 34 years)

Highest level of educational attainment	Male		Female	
	2000	2017	2000	2017
High school degree or higher	85.3%	88.1%	90.7%	92.7%
Bachelor's degree or higher	21.2%	26.3%	27.3%	39.6%

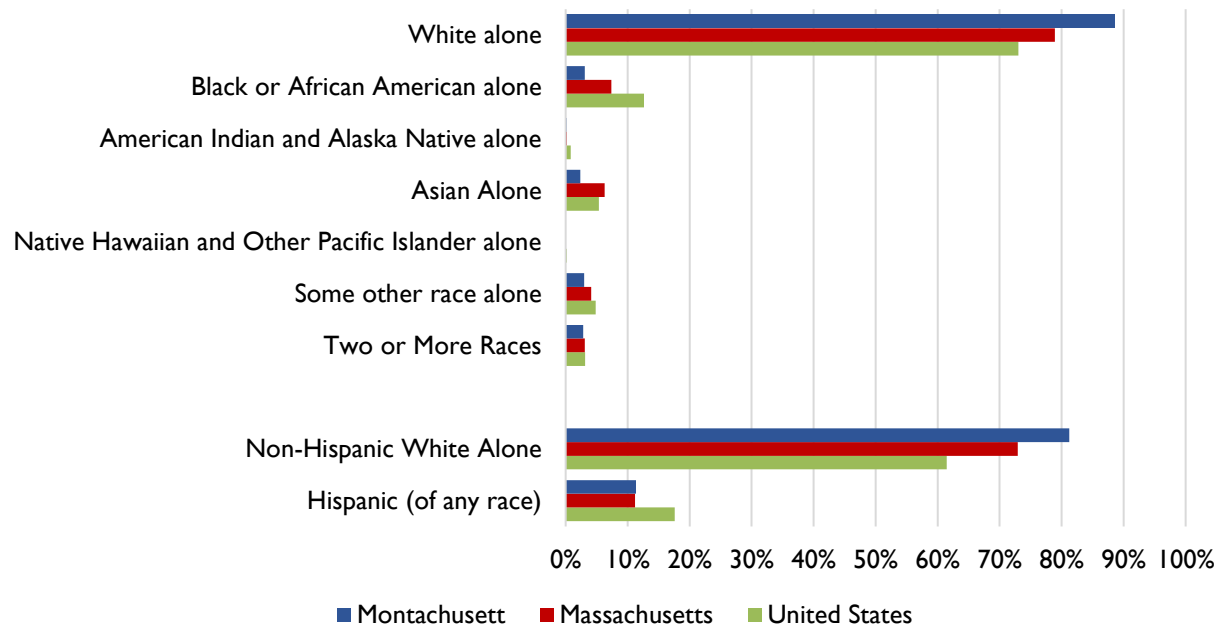
Source: US Census, American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

Still, educational attainment in the region remains lower than the state as a whole. In 2017, it was estimated that 92.1% of men and 94.4% of women aged 25 to 34 in Massachusetts received a high school degree or higher, while 46% and 55.8% received a bachelor's degree or higher. The trend toward having a more educated population is valuable as the economic sustainability of the region depends on ensuring a robust workforce that includes young professionals and careers to support their success.

d) Race

The Montachusett Region remains a predominantly white region but is trending toward increased diversity. The Region currently has a higher proportion of residents who identify as “white alone” when compared respectively to the state and nation as whole (see **Figure 10**).

Figure 10. Race in the Montachusett Region compared to Massachusetts and the United States



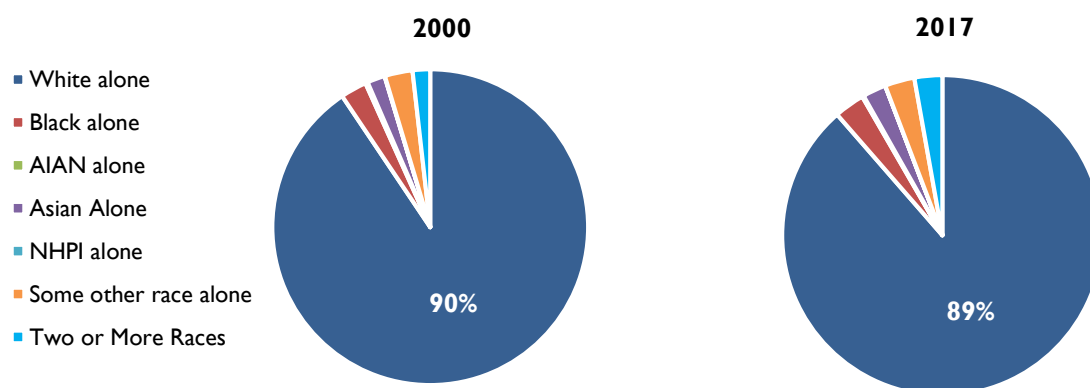
Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates



However, in the period between 2000 and 2017, we observed the following demographic changes as they pertain to race:

1. The number of Hispanic residents grew from 15,672 to 27,511 (+75.5%)
2. The number of residents who self-identified as Black or African American alone grew from 6,127 to 7,451 (+21.6%)
3. The number of Asian residents grew from 4,098 to 5,743 (+40.1%)
4. The number of residents who identified as two or more races increased from 4,127 to 6,828 (+65.4%)

Figure 11. Race in the Montachusett Region (2000 to 2017)



Source: US Census, American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

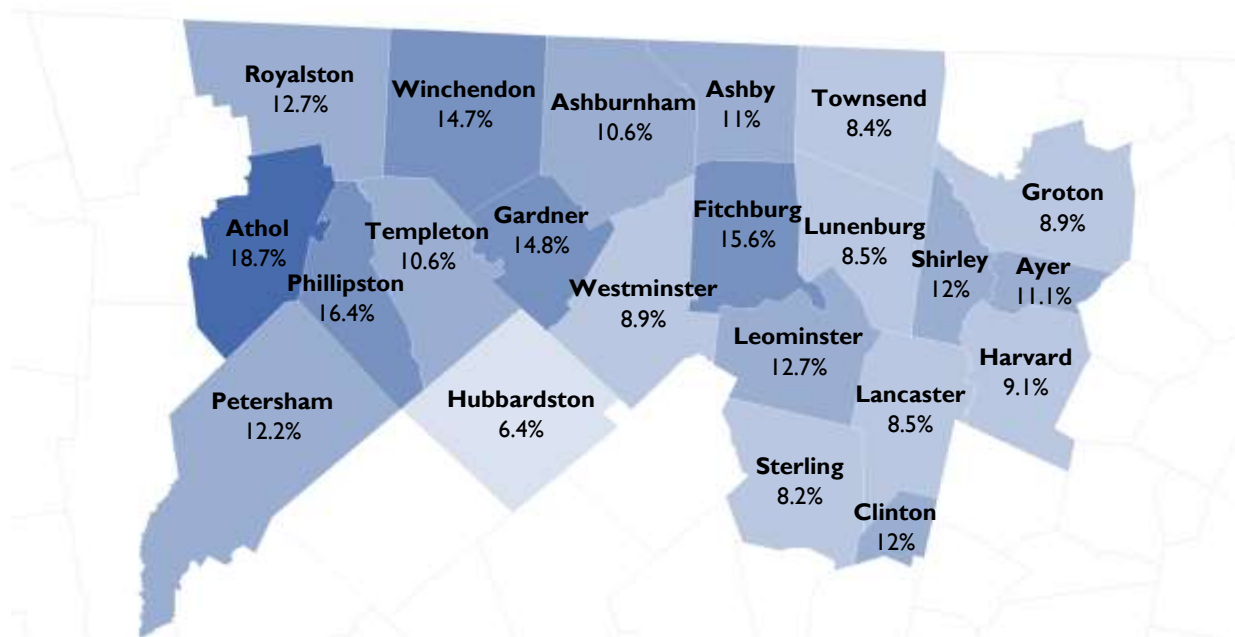
e) Disability

In Massachusetts, 11.6% of total individuals report having a disability (US Census, American Community Survey [2013-2017] 5-Year Estimates). A disability refers to difficulty hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, and/or living independently.

Ten Montachusett communities have a higher proportion of residents managing a disability than the state as a whole (**Figure 12**), with Athol, Phillipston, and Fitchburg topping the list. Among other important planning considerations, the comparatively high percentages of residents with disabilities, and a steadily aging population, emphasizes the importance of multimodal transportation access. Access to transportation services through the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART) offers a vital lifeline for many to ensure equitable access to employment, education, as well as social and healthcare services.



Figure 12. Individuals with a disability, Montachusett Region



Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

MART currently offers Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Eligible Paratransit Service to transportation-disabled individuals. Service is provided by lift-equipped vans and is available in the areas that MART provides fixed route bus service. Under the ADA regulations, there are three categories of persons who are eligible for ADA Paratransit Service:

1. Is unable as a result of physical or mental impairment, to get on, ride, or get off an accessible vehicle on the public transit system; or
2. Needs the assistance of a wheelchair lift or other boarding assistance device and is able, with such assistance to get on, ride and get off an accessible vehicle, but such vehicle is not available on the route when the individual wants to travel; or
3. Has specific impairment-related condition including vision, hearing or impairments causing disorientation which prevents travel to or from a station or stop on the system.

2) State of the Regional Economy

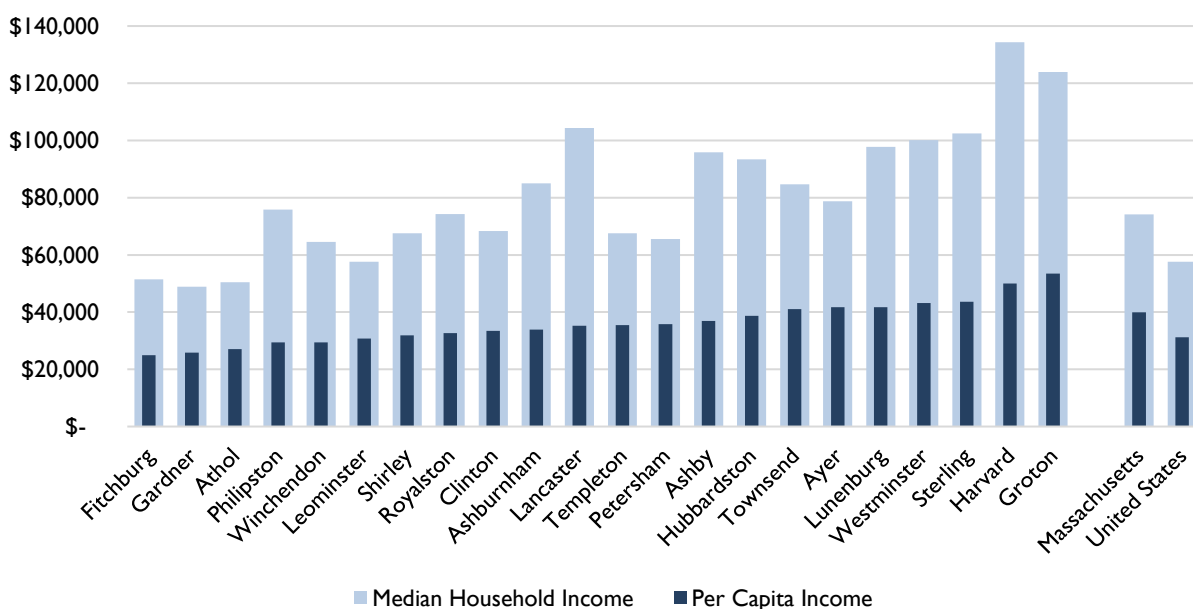
Despite overall declines in manufacturing, the Montachusett Region has seen positive economic recovery in the time following the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009. However – like many other regions in the country – economic prosperity has not been shared equally across communities. The following section outlines the current status of the Montachusett regional economy, including income, housing affordability, poverty, industry, employment projections, entrepreneurship, and a range of other factors that help us better understand the economic state of all 22 communities.



a) Income

The American Community Survey collects income and poverty data, and presents both across a range of different categories, including age, gender, race, family structure, occupation, etc. The ACS defines per capita income as the mean money income received in the past 12 months computed for every man, woman, and child in a geographic area. It is derived by dividing the total income of all people 15 years old and over in a geographic area by the total population in that area. (Note: income is not collected for people under 15 years old, even though those people are included in the denominator of per capita income. This measure is rounded to the nearest whole dollar.). In addition to per capita income, median household income is presented here in **Figure 13** for each Montachusett community, as well as the state and nation.

Figure 13. Per capita income and median household income



Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

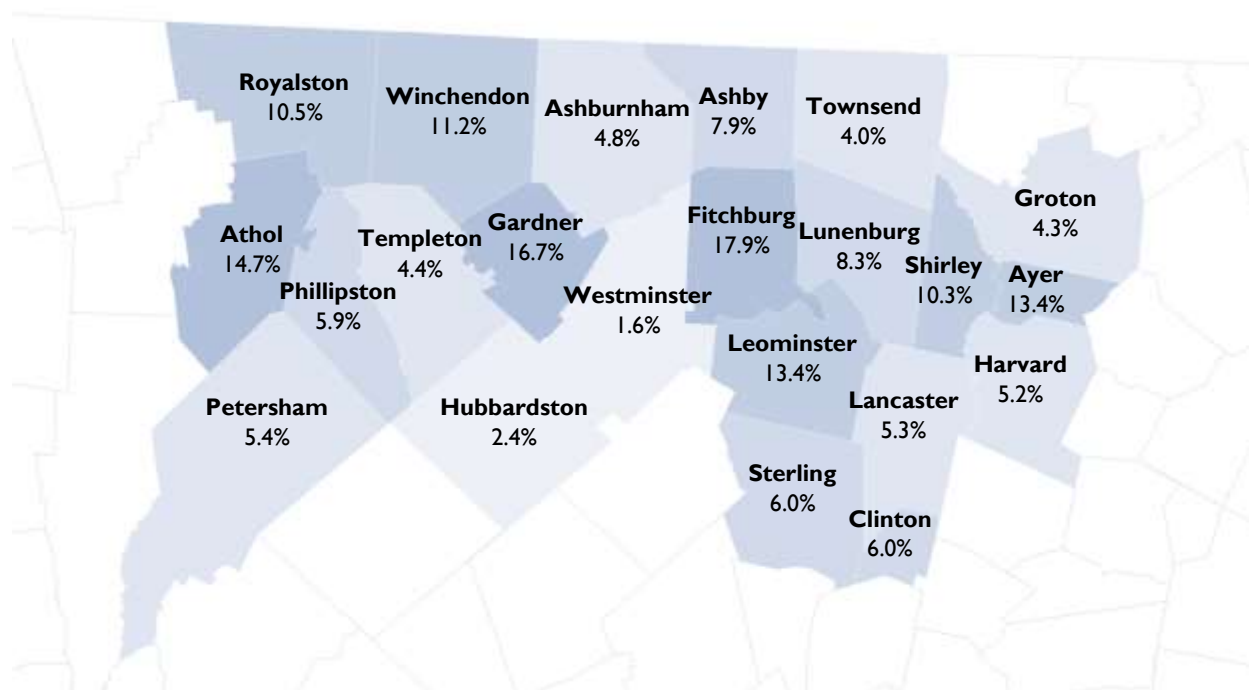
15 of the region's 22 communities have a lower per capita income than the state (\$39,913), while nine rank below the state when examining median household income.

b) Poverty

Poverty is calculated as a percentage of the population below the poverty threshold. The Census Bureau uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty. If a family's total income is less than the family's threshold, that family and every individual in it is considered to be in poverty. The official poverty thresholds do not vary geographically, but they are updated for inflation using the Consumer Price Index (CPI-U). The official poverty definition uses money income before taxes and does not include capital gains or noncash benefits (such as public housing, Medicaid, and food stamps).



Figure 14. Individuals living in poverty, Montachusett Region



Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

An estimated 11.1% of individuals are living in poverty within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Six Montachusett communities have a higher concentration of poverty than the state as a whole, with Fitchburg (17.9%), Gardner (16.7%), and Athol (14.7%) also exceeding the national poverty rate of 14.6% (**Figure 14**). Between 2016 and 2017, poverty rates declined in the region at a quicker pace than both the state and nation (**Table 5**).

Table 4. Poverty rates

Area	2016	2017	1-Year Change
Montachusett Region	11.9%	10.8%	-1.1%
Massachusetts	11.4%	11.1%	-0.3%
United States	15.1%	14.6%	-0.5%

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

c) Environmental Justice Populations

Environmental Justice (EJ) is based on the principle that all people have a right to be protected from environmental pollution, and to live in and enjoy a clean and healthful environment. Environmental justice is the equal protection and meaningful involvement of all people with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies and the equitable distribution of environmental benefits. Historically, the environmental justice movement has been one of grassroots activism focusing on the rights and liberties of people of color and low-income communities relative to the environment and



particularly, in response to the disproportionate burden of industrial pollution and lack of regulatory enforcement in these communities.

The Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) defines EJ neighborhoods as census block groups where at least one of the following is true:

1. Median annual household income is at or below 65% of the statewide median income;
2. 25% or more of the residents are a minority; or
3. 25% or more of the residents are not fluent in the English language.

EJ neighborhoods where more than one criterion is met may be at an even greater risk of exposure to environmental and health hazards.

There are 54 identified EJ areas within the Montachusett Region – identified through the 2010 Census – representing 72,624 residents (approximately 31% of total Montachusett residents in 2010). 32 of Montachusett EJ areas have low-income designation: 14 are EJ-designated due to income alone (I), 17 also have high minority populations (MI), and one EJ area is due to high numbers of minority, non-English speaking as well as low-income residents (MIE). The additional 22 areas received EJ designation due to a high proportion of minority residents (M); these are predominantly located in Fitchburg (10) and Leominster (7), along the Route 2 Corridor.

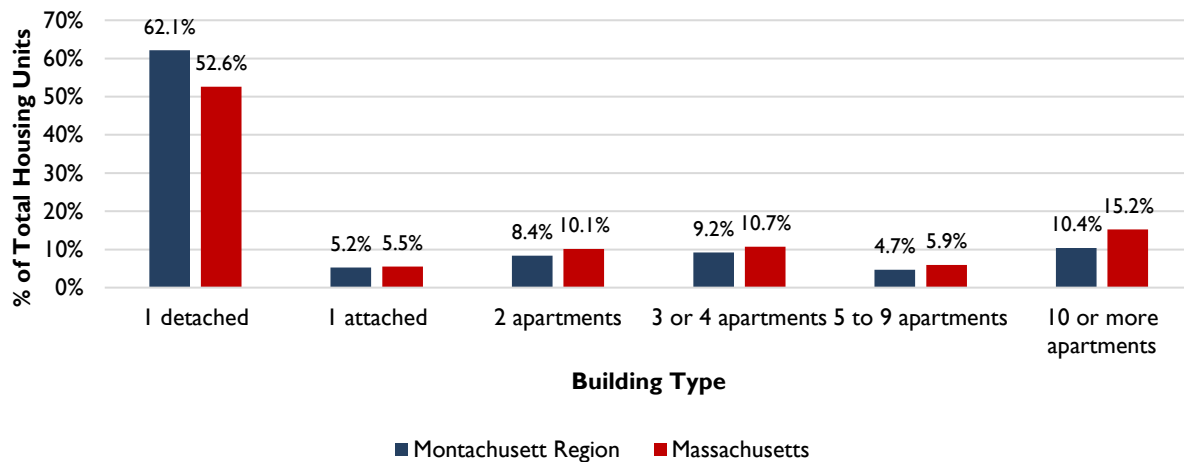
d) Housing Inventory

To serve their aging populations as well as attract young professionals and working families, Montachusett communities will need to offer a variety of housing options. For many individuals, housing needs changes over a lifetime as household size and income decreases. Ensuring available housing near important services (e.g. healthcare facilities, public transit, grocery stores) becomes more important as the ability and willingness to drive may decrease as well. Balancing the housing needs of seniors, students, and working families and individuals of all ages represents an ongoing challenge for each of our 22 communities.

Like the state as a whole – but to an even further degree – the majority of housing units in the Montachusett Region are single detached units (**Figure 15**).



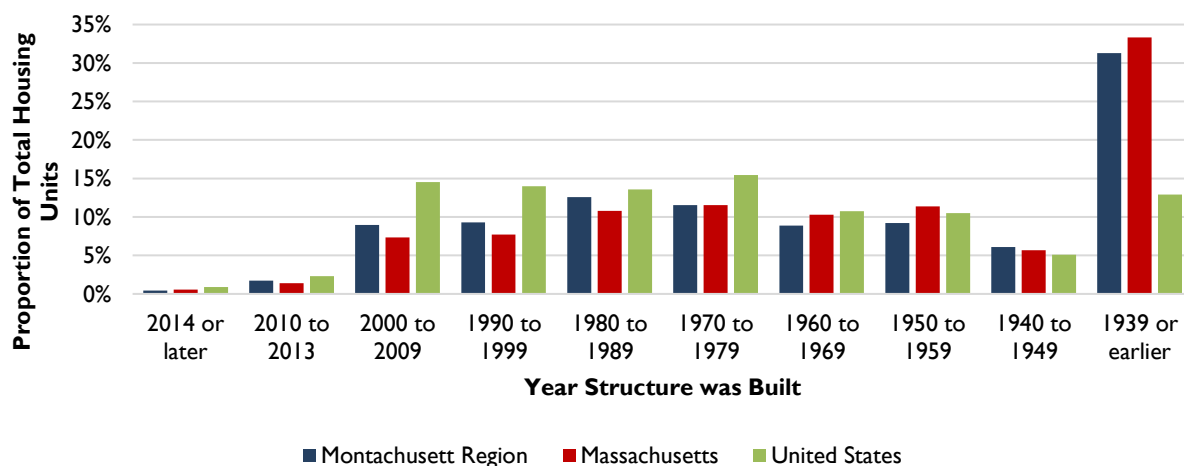
Figure 15. Housing units by building type



Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

The ages of homes in the Montachusett Region are akin to much of New England, with nearly a third of all homes having been built prior to the second World War (**Figure 16**). All homes built prior to 1978 (when lead-based house paint was discontinued in the United States) are likely to contain some levels of lead. Today, the Massachusetts Lead Law requires the removal or covering of lead paint hazards in homes built before 1978 where any children under six live, regardless of their blood lead level. MassHousing also offers a program, titled “Get the Lead Out”, which offers affordable abatement options dependent on income and housing occupancy status. The Montachusett Regional Planning Commission is a registered Get the Lead Out agency to help administer this program to residents throughout the region.

Figure 16. Proportion of total housing units by year structure was built

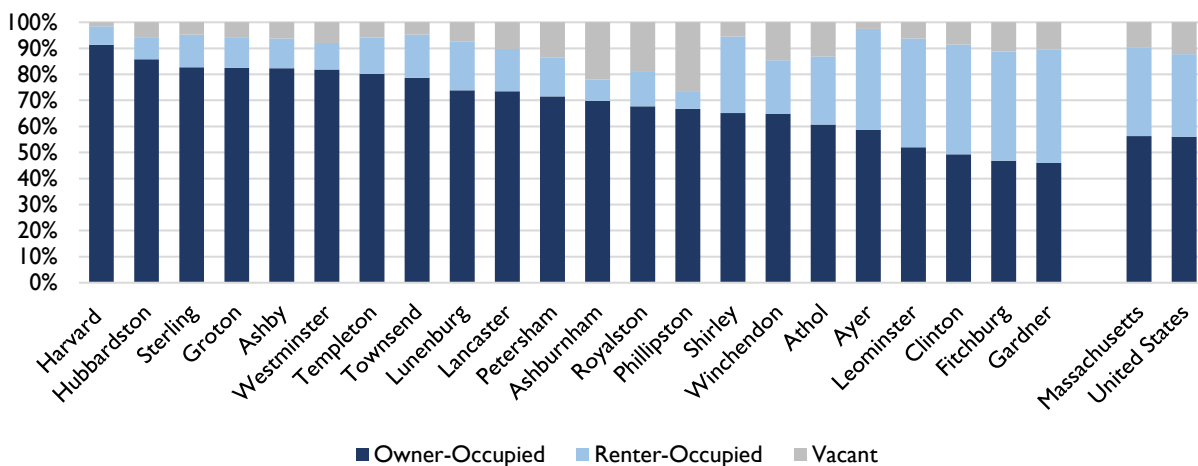


Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

Housing occupancy is highly variable between communities in the region (**Figure 17**), with homeowner occupancy ranging from as high as 91% in Harvard to as low as 46% in Gardner (compared to 56% in both the state and the nation).



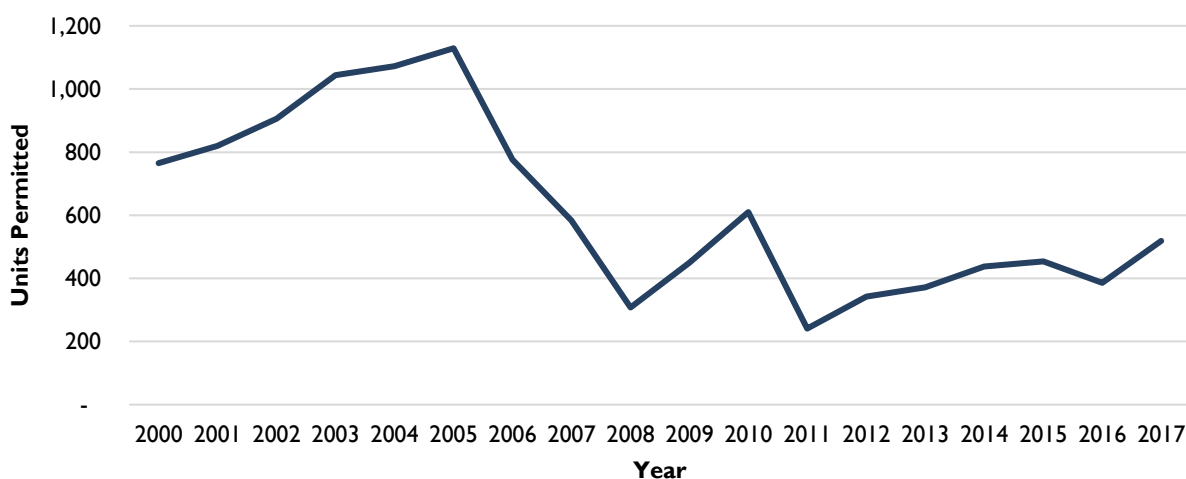
Figure 17. Housing occupancy status



Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

In 2010, the region witnessed a spike in housing production which helped break the trend of declining construction which began in 2005 (**Figure 18**).

Figure 18. Number of housing units permitted in the Montachusett Region (2000 to 2017)



Source: US Census Bureau – Annual Building Permit Survey

More than half of the building units permitted in 2010 were concentrated in the community of Lunenburg who supported the production of 308 units that year (of the total 610 in the entire region), including seven housing complexes with an estimated 186 total housing units.

e) Housing Affordability

It is generally accepted that a household can afford a home valued up to 30% of the household's annual income before becoming "cost burdened". Those households who pay a higher percentage of their income on housing may – according to the US Department of Housing and Urban



Development – “have difficulty affording necessities such as food, clothing, transportation, and medical care”. An estimated 19,464 owner-occupied households and 12,866 renter-occupied households are cost burdened throughout the Montachusett Region (**Table 6**).

Table 5. Cost burden severity by community and housing occupancy

Community	Number of owner-occupied households that are cost burdened	% of owner-occupied households that are cost burdened	Number of renter-occupied households that are cost burdened	% of renter-occupied households that are cost burdened
Ashburnham	762	38.3	32	26.2
Ashby	352	35.1	23	42.6
Athol	927	27.8	634	52.5
Ayer	621	33.6	689	51.2
Clinton	1,132	32.2	911	42.3
Fitchburg	3,016	35.8	3,433	56.4
Gardner	1,480	34.1	1,464	43.8
Groton	908	27.1	121	26.8
Harvard	499	28.5	65	55.6
Hubbardston	314	23.1	135	93.1
Lancaster	578	29.6	168	47.6
Leominster	2,945	31.8	3,466	48.9
Lunenburg	1,144	32.5	280	46.7
Petersham	121	30	25	54.4
Phillipston	151	25.9	5	100
Royalston	107	26.8	15	32.6
Shirley	636	42.2	275	41.9
Sterling	709	28.9	205	71.9
Templeton	602	25.6	173	41.1
Townsend	792	29.4	238	41.4
Westminster	775	31.9	114	33.8
Winchendon	893	30.2	395	42.1

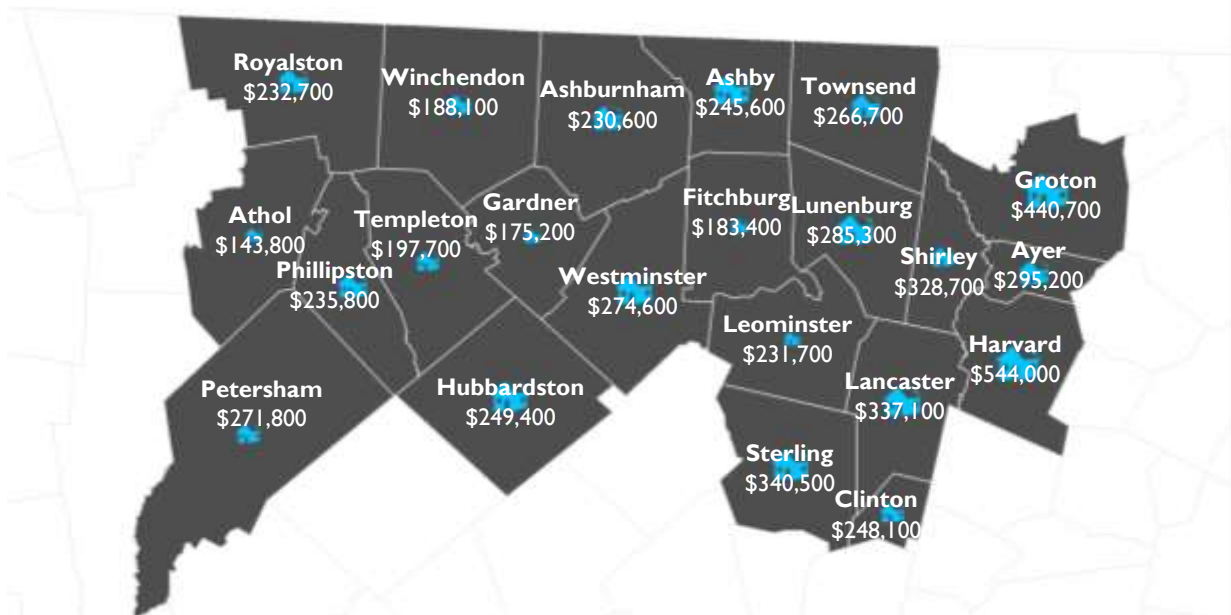
Source: Housing.MA

27.9% of owner-occupied households are considered cost-burdened throughout Massachusetts; all but six communities in the Montachusett region exceed this figure. Although fewer total renters experience being cost burdened when compared to homeowners, their rate of burden is significantly higher. Specifically, 47.4% of renter-occupied households spend more than 30% of their income on living expenses across the state, while 10 of 22 Montachusett communities exceed this rate.

Another indicator of housing affordability is the median home value of the region. As a general trend, housing values are highest along the eastern edge of the Montachusett Region in those communities with greatest accessibility to Boston and major employment centers (**Figure 19**).



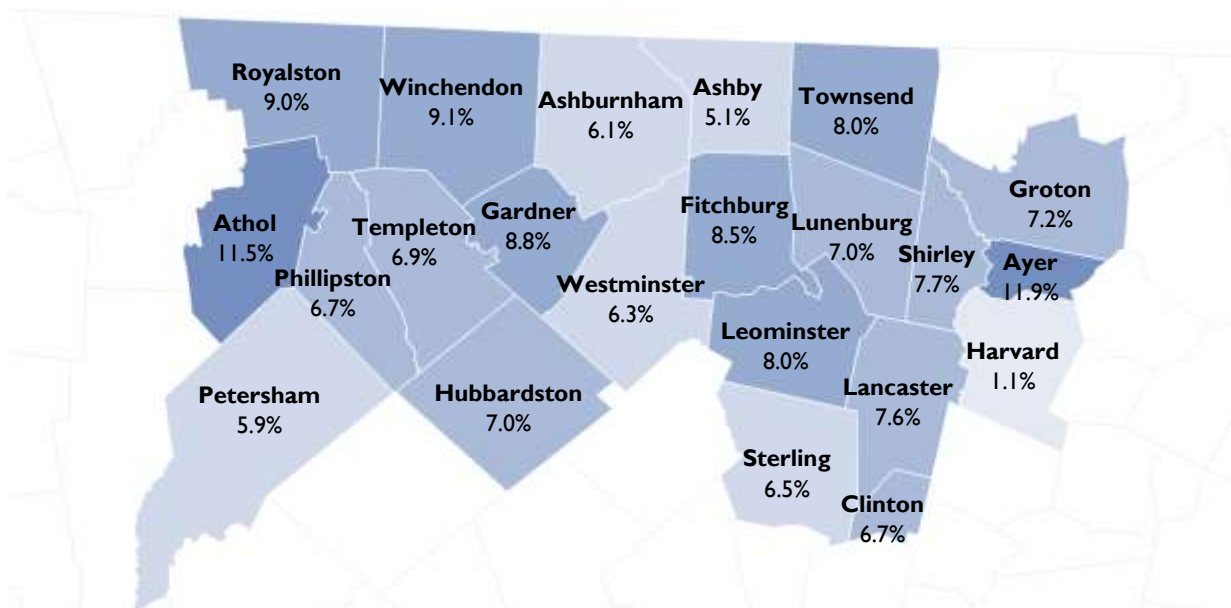
Figure 19. Median household value for owner-occupied households



Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

To project future household values, Zillow.com compiles the past six years of home sales data and forecasts ahead a single year (**Figure 20**). Housing values are projected to increase in every Montachusett community over the next year; in particular, Ayer (11.9%) and Athol (11.5%) are expected to see the highest increase in their housing markets in the near future.

Figure 20. One-year household value projections



Source: Zillow Research 2019



f) Labor Force and Employment

Labor force and employment data were collected and compared across multiple sources, including American Community Survey estimates, ESRI's Business Analyst Online (BAO), and Massachusetts Office of Labor and Workforce Development. Overall, despite significant disruptions since before 2000, manufacturing remains the largest (NAICS 2-digit) employment sector in the region (17% of total employees) and integral to the economic health of many communities.

Table 6. Businesses and Employment by Industry (ESRI BAO 2019)

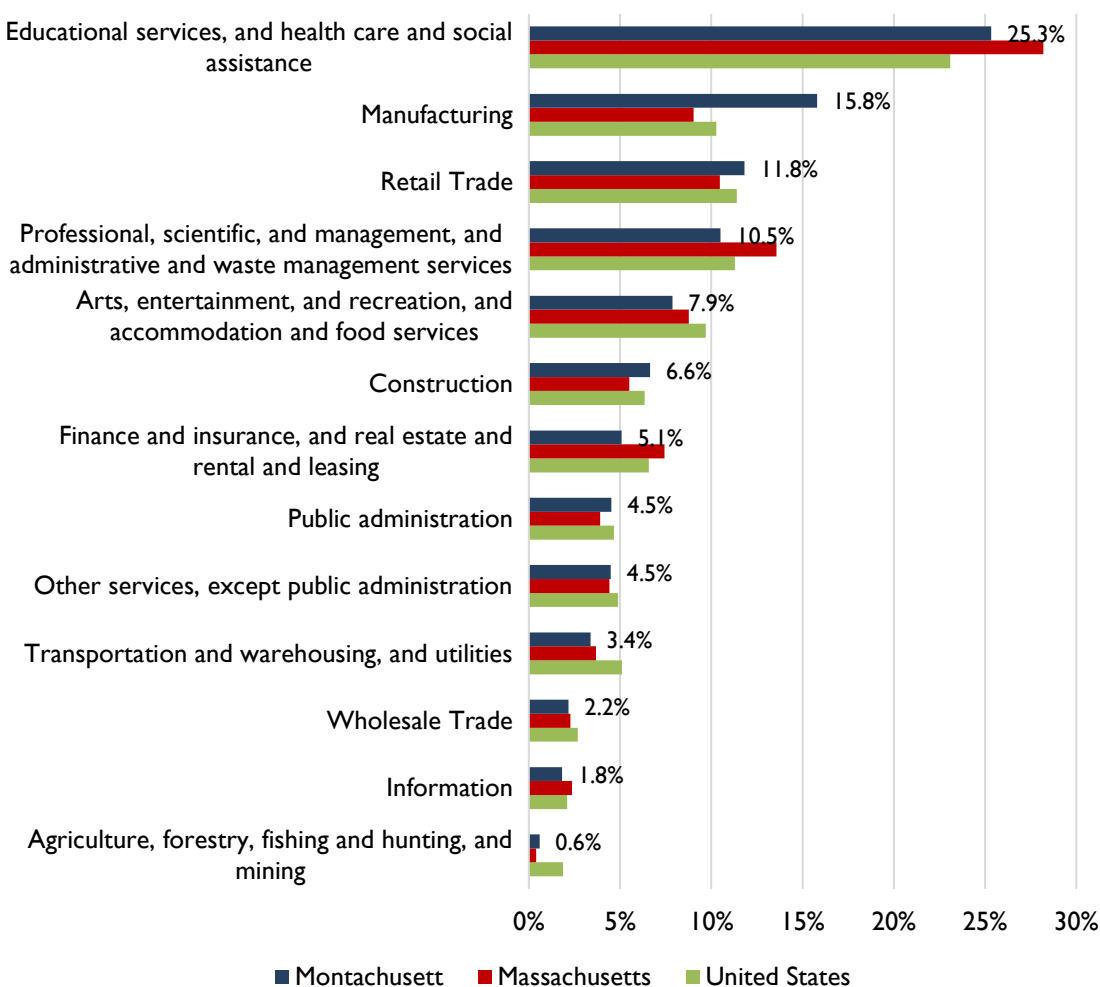
Industry By NAICS Codes	Businesses		Employees	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Manufacturing	450	5.3%	16,175	17.0%
Health Care & Social Assistance	635	7.4%	13,826	14.5%
Retail Trade	1,155	13.5%	12,577	13.2%
Educational Services	273	3.2%	9,688	10.2%
Accommodation & Food Services	510	6.0%	8,192	8.6%
Public Administration	533	6.2%	5,808	6.1%
Other Services (except Public Administration)	1,316	15.4%	5,240	5.5%
Wholesale Trade	342	4.0%	4,924	5.2%
Construction	797	9.3%	3,910	4.1%
Professional, Scientific & Tech Services	611	7.1%	3,167	3.3%
Finance & Insurance	274	3.2%	2,228	2.3%
Transportation & Warehousing	155	1.8%	1,931	2.0%
Administrative & Support & Waste Management & Remediation Services	309	3.6%	1,850	1.9%
Real Estate, Rental & Leasing	389	4.5%	1,806	1.9%
Information	181	2.1%	1,514	1.6%
Arts, Entertainment & Recreation	149	1.7%	1,237	1.3%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Hunting	60	0.7%	297	0.3%
Utilities	25	0.3%	287	0.3%
Management of Companies & Enterprises	9	0.1%	227	0.2%
Unclassified Establishments	369	4.3%	154	0.2%
Mining	9	0.1%	104	0.1%
Total	8,551	100.0%	95,142	100.0%

Source: ESRI Business Analyst Online (BAO) 2019



When aggregated (as is done for the American Community Survey estimates), educational services, and health care and social assistance together represent the largest employing industry in the Montachusett Region, as we see in the state and nation as a whole (**Figure 21**).

Figure 21. Employment by industry

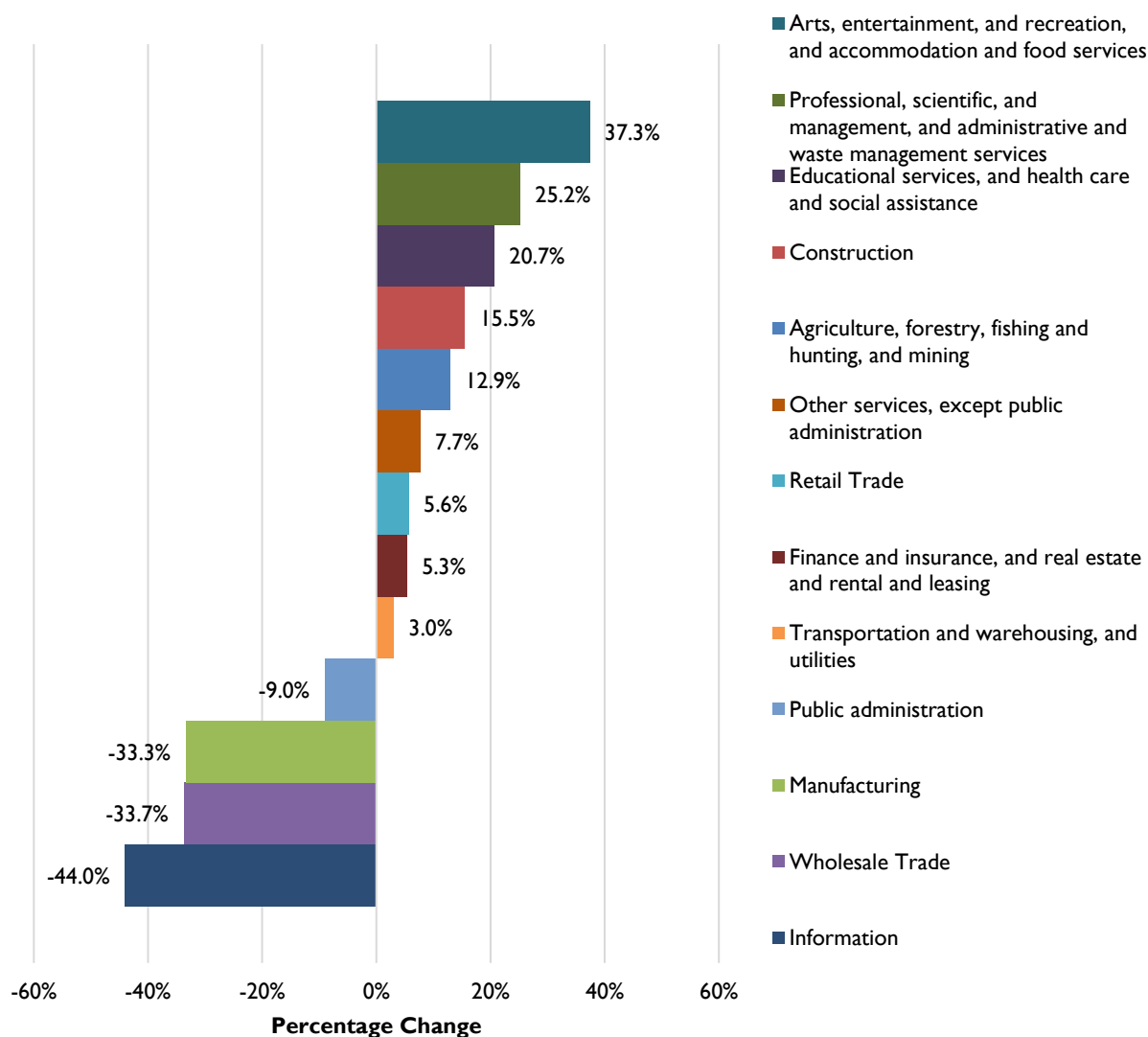


Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

The level of manufacturing-based employment – despite declines in recent decades – continues to dwarf that of both the state and country. While efforts continue toward diversifying the regional economy into other growing sectors of the economy, including service sectors, the region’s comparative advantage of an experienced manufacturing workforce and legacy industrial space will ensure manufacturing is maintained as a cornerstone in the region’s economy.



Figure 22. Shift in employment by industry as a share of the regional economy, Montachusett Region (2000 to 2017)



Source: US Census, American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

Between 2000 and 2017, the region witnessed some notable shifts in the total employment share by each industry. Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services – although still modest in its total employment, with 9,544 jobs in 2017 – has increased its share of total employment in the region by 37.3% since 2000. Other industries which witness such a boost included professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services (25.2%); educational services, and health care and social assistance (20.7%); and construction (15.5%).

While the greatest declines in total employment share occurred in the information (-44%) and wholesale trade (-33.7%) sectors, together these sectors are responsible for less than 4% of jobs



in the region in 2017. Manufacturing, on the other hand, accounts for an estimated 15.8% of the region's employment and is down from 23.7% in 2000 (and a net loss of 7,063 jobs during that time).

According to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, the fastest growing occupation in the Montachusett Region is heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration mechanics and installers (see **Table 7**). Home health and personal care aides are will also be needed in higher supply to help meet the care needs of the region's growing senior population.

Table 7. 15 fastest growing occupations in the Montachusett Region

Title	Employees 2016	Projected Employees 2026	Numeric Change	Percent Change	2017 Mean Annual OES Wage
Heating, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration Mechanics and Installers	122	156	34	27.9%	\$50,272
Home Health Aides	232	292	60	25.9%	\$30,609
Personal Care Aides	1,924	2,404	480	24.9%	\$28,198
Software Developers, Applications	210	252	42	20.0%	\$95,582
Nonfarm Animal Caretakers	210	252	42	20.0%	\$27,317
Market Research Analysts and Marketing Specialists	179	213	34	19.0%	\$62,777
Mental Health and Substance Abuse Social Workers	180	214	34	18.9%	\$36,639
Combined Food Preparation and Serving Workers, Including Fast Food	1,020	1,205	185	18.1%	\$25,361
Financial Managers	296	345	49	16.6%	\$93,419
Farmers, Ranchers, and Other Agricultural Managers	244	284	40	16.4%	–
Plumbers, Pipefitters, and Steamfitters	300	346	46	15.3%	\$63,347
Self-Enrichment Education Teachers	128	147	19	14.8%	\$39,451
Nurse Practitioners	161	184	23	14.3%	\$128,176
Residential Advisors	352	399	47	13.4%	\$31,980
Loan Officers	750	842	92	12.3%	\$84,574

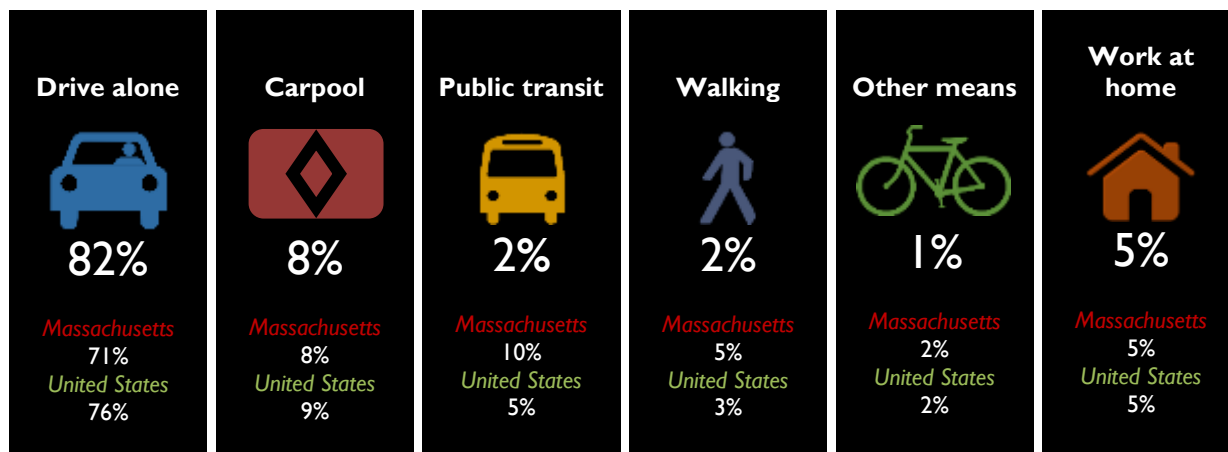
Source: Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development 2018



g) Transportation

This section provides commuting information for workers aged 16 and over. This data comes from the American Community Survey (ACS) from the US Census Bureau.

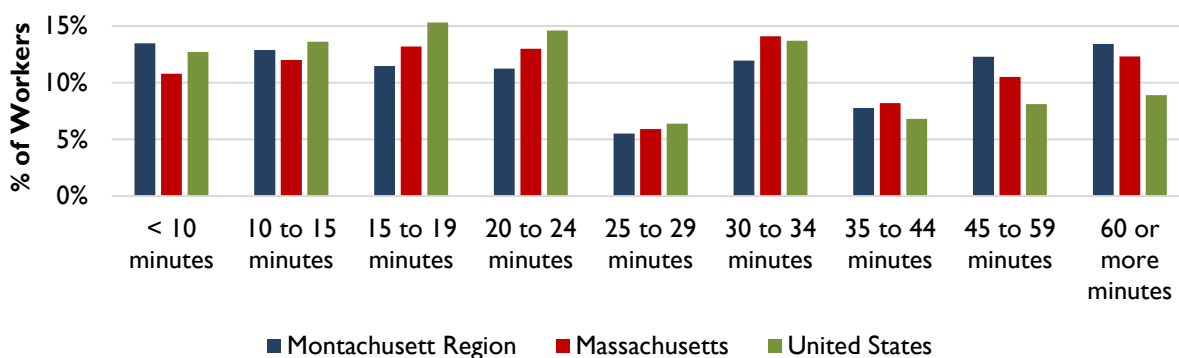
Figure 23. Means of travel to work, Montachusett Region



Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

Montachusett Region commuters are more auto-reliant than the state or nation, with 90% of workers either driving alone or carpooling to work (compared to 79% of workers in Massachusetts, and 85% of workers in the country). We also recognize Montachusett residents are significantly less reliant upon public transit and a few residents are able to walk to their place of employment.

Figure 24. Travel time to work

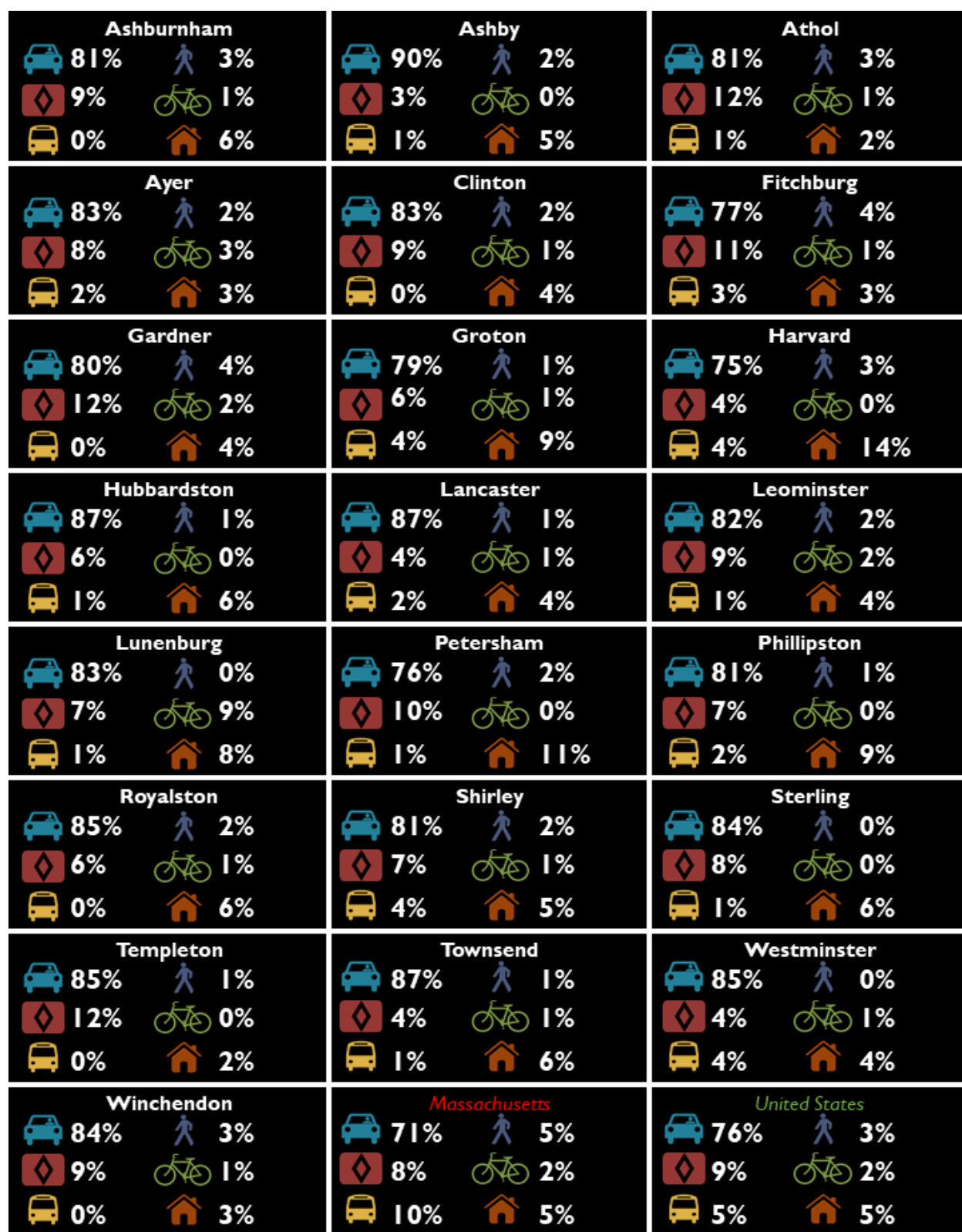


Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates

Interestingly, a higher proportion of Montachusett residents have *both* less than a 10-minute and more than a 45-minute commute to their place of employment when compared to Massachusetts and the US.



Figure 25. Means of travel to work by community



Source: American Community Survey (2013-2017) 5-Year Estimates



h) Opportunity Zones

In 2018, Massachusetts began administering a competitive process for communities to apply for Opportunity Zone designation, a new community investment tool created through Congress' Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. The program is intended to help address the issue of geographic inequality and assist those distressed communities who have not shared in the most recent economic recovery.

To attract investment to these distressed areas, Opportunity Zones grant tax incentives for investors to re-invest unrealized capital gains into dedicated Opportunity Funds. The U.S. Treasury designated a total of 138 census tracts in 79 Massachusetts communities as Opportunity Zones. 10 census tracts were approved within the Montachusett Region – two each in the communities of Athol, Clinton, Fitchburg, Gardner, and Leominster. All Massachusetts Opportunity Zone nominations were evaluated by the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development against three criteria:

1. Opportunities: sites and businesses that are opportunities for private investment and development
2. Planning: community describes the planning work done in the tract(s) identified in the application
3. Demographics: poverty rate, median family income, and unemployment rate in the tract(s) in the application, and in the wider communities

The Opportunity Zones program offers three tax incentives for investing in the region's 10 designated zones through a qualified Opportunity Fund¹:

1. A temporary deferral of inclusion in taxable income for capital gains reinvested into an Opportunity Fund. The deferred gain must be recognized on the earlier of the date on which the opportunity zone investment is disposed of or December 31, 2026.
2. A step-up in basis for capital gains reinvested in an Opportunity Fund. The basis is increased by 10% if the investment in the Opportunity Fund is held by the taxpayer for at least 5 years and by an additional 5% if held for at least 7 years, thereby excluding up to 15% of the original gain from taxation.
3. A permanent exclusion from taxable income of capital gains from the sale or exchange of an investment in an Opportunity Fund if the investment is held for at least 10 years. This exclusion only applies to gains accrued after an investment in an Opportunity Fund.

¹ A qualified Opportunity Fund is a privately managed investment vehicle organized as a corporation or a partnership for the purpose of investing in qualified opportunity zone property (the vehicle must hold at least 90 percent of its assets in such property). Qualified opportunity zone property includes any qualified opportunity zone business stock, any qualified opportunity zone partnership interest, and any qualified opportunity zone business property. Only taxpayers who roll over capital gains of non-zone assets before December 31, 2026, will be able to take advantage of the special treatment under the provision.



i) Collaborative Workspace Program

Over the past three years, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has been aggressively funding a wide array of collaborate workspaces (including business incubators, co-working spaces and makerspaces) as part of its efforts to promote local economic development. By providing high-level equipment and space at a low cost – resources which would be challenging for any individual to afford on their own – these grassroots community-based organizations can make starting a new business or learning a new skill more accessible than before. Therefore, it is unsurprising that these spaces are promoted and funded on the expectation of fostering entrepreneurship and contributing to a growing creative economy.

In 2016, the Massachusetts Development Finance Agency (more commonly referred to as MassDevelopment) initiated an economic development program designed to encourage and accelerate the development of collaborative-based community innovation spaces, including makerspaces and business incubators. To support these spaces, the Collaborative Workspace Program (CWP) offers two types of funding dependent on the project's current stage of development:

1. A Seed Grant which is intended for predevelopment and feasibility work, including the hiring of architects, marketing experts, and other consultation work; and
2. A Fit-Out Grant which can be used to support significant upgrades to the space as well as in procuring new equipment.

The maximum amount available for a Seed Grant is \$25,000, while a Fit-Out Grant can be as large as \$250,000. Both grants require a funding match of equal value; this match can come in the form of rent relief, direct financial contributions, or some combination thereof. To date, grants have been awarded for 2016, 2017, and 2018 with a fourth year of awards planned for 2019.

In the three years of grant awards, three organizations within the Montachusett Region have received funding through the CWP.

Award Winners within the Montachusett Region to Date:

1. Later creating the Wachusett Business Incubator, the Greater Gardner Business Institute (GGBI) received \$11,095 in 2016 from the Collaborative Workspace Program to help develop the region's first home to incubate early- and mid-stage technology development and creative collaboration. Disciplines include academia, financial services, nonprofit, technology, a variety of engineering disciplines, and health sciences. With a legacy of more than 150 years of furniture making and precision tooling, Gardner has a concentration of skilled, experienced craftsman and engineers with an interest in GGBI. Focus was on recently-incubated businesses that either cannot find space in the Boston market or choose to live and work in the greater Gardner area.
2. In 2017, with NewVue Communities as a sponsor, the Fitchburg Arts Community received \$25,000 to conduct a feasibility analysis to help shape amenities and programming



for a planned artist community and downtown arts campus. The Fitchburg Arts Community is a future 58-unit mixed-income artist-preference housing development and studio space located at the site of the former BF Brown School, the former City Stables, and the former high school annex building. Artist community cohesion will be reinforced with public art, gallery and studio space, and a landscape plan that knits the entire site together by creating an arts campus that connects to the Fitchburg Art Museum with downtown Fitchburg. In 2018, NewVue Communities, as sponsor of the Fitchburg Arts Community, received \$25,000 to provide the necessary site engineering needed to support 40R rezoning efforts for the project.

3. In 2018, LaunchSpace, Inc., received \$105,000 for facility upgrades in its second location, a former elementary school building in Athol. The new space will operate as a community kitchen, coworking space, and will provide opportunities for workforce education and development. The grant is being used to replace the building's outdated heating system.

3) Geographic Characteristics

a) Geography

As previously discussed, the Montachusett Region's landscape is mostly hilly terrain dominated by Mount Wachusett located in the Towns of Westminster and Princeton and containing the Nashua River, Millers River and Chicopee River watersheds.

b) Climatic

The area is fortunate to experience four distinct seasons each year (summer, fall, winter and spring). Businesses and residents in the region can take full advantage of mountain biking, camping, canoeing, hiking, angling and picnicking in the summer, promoting tourist-related activities such as leaf peeping and the sale of apples and pumpkins at local apple orchards in the fall, skiing, snowmobiling and ice-fishing in the winter and the re-start of outdoor activities in each succeeding spring.

c) Environment

Residents and visitors alike take advantage of the outdoor environment as described above. Some of the Region's communities can boast of public access to lakes and ponds for swimming, boating and fishing, while other towns are working proactively to improve public access to its bodies of water. The air is reasonably clear with limited airborne pollutants. However, recent housing development represents an increase in population and, correspondingly, increases in emissions from vehicles used for commuting from the Montachusett Region into the Metro-Boston Region for jobs. Air quality should be constantly monitored to identify any increases in pollutants. Lastly, within the 22 city and town region, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection



has identified over 1,100 sites where contamination of the ground has occurred. The vast majority of these locations are petroleum products that were cleaned from the location of the spill almost immediately. Some of these sites have been converted to “active reuse” (ex. Putnam Place in Fitchburg [commercial office space]; West Lynde Street in Gardner, once the home of the former Conant-Ball furniture manufacturing facility is now home to a new public library and municipal parking; and, Wasa Street in Gardner, formerly a welding shop is now the site of three new single-family homes that have been sold to families of moderate-income, increasing the supply of affordably-priced homes in the Montachusett Region). However, there remain a small number of former manufacturing sites on which are located high levels of contamination (ex. solvents, PCBs, asbestos). Some sites still lie dormant with no redevelopment plans in place (ex. former Temple-Stuart manufacturing facility in Templeton). Technical assistance must be provided to help both the public and private sectors create and implement redevelopment plans for these difficult-to-develop brownfield sites.

d) Natural Resources

The mountains, hills, water, forest lands and open spaces are among the greatest assets in the Montachusett Region. Mount Wachusett in Westminister, the highest peak in the Region, is used as a ski area in the winter and serves as a venue for outdoor festivals in the warmer months. Conversely, a former ski area on Mount Watatic, in Ashburnham and Ashby (second-highest peak in the Region), has been acquired and preserved as open space. Each community continues to deal with striking the balance between allowing the “correct” amount of development with the protection of natural resources. All Montachusett Region communities have completed Community Development Plans and/or Comprehensive Plans. Community Development Plans were completed in June 2004 for Ashburnham, Ashby, Athol, Ayer, Clinton, Fitchburg, Gardner, Groton, Harvard, Hubbardston, Lancaster, Leominster, Lunenburg, Phillipston, Royalston, Shirley, Sterling, Templeton, Townsend and Westminister while Petersham and Winchendon have completed Comprehensive Plans. Within these plans can be found the local goals, objectives and action steps needed to balance residential, commercial and industrial development with the preservation of natural resources.

e) Land Use Patterns

Multiple land uses exist within the Montachusett Region including residential, mixed use (ex. downtowns, central business districts and village centers), commercial, non-permanently and permanently protected open space. Municipalities are making concerted efforts to preserve natural resources and open spaces while still fostering residential, commercial and industrial developments, as evidenced by recently completed Community Development and Comprehensive Plans.



f) Hazardous Waste Contamination and Brownfields Reuse

The Montachusett Region has a rich history of manufacturing since the 19th Century. However, nineteen of the twenty-two communities in the Montachusett Region have “21E” or “brownfield” sites within their communities according to the Mass Department of Environmental Protection. The Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has indicated that, “Brownfields are real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant. The majority of these sites are residences and small businesses with minor cleanup requirements. Others, however, are faced with significant cleanup issues prior to redevelopment.

Serious contamination, or the possibility of serious contamination, often prevents underutilized or abandoned industrial and commercial properties from being returned to active use. Therefore, they continue to sit idle, contribute little to the tax base, threaten the health, safety and welfare of the community, and visually degrade the surrounding community. Cleaning up and reinvesting in these properties takes development pressures off of undeveloped land and both improves and protects the environment.”

The MRPC through the MRCEDS process and the utilization of Economic Development Administration (EDA) funds has aggressively and proactively sought out funding resources to draft successful grant applications to redevelop brownfields for active reuse. MRPC has successfully managed six federal EPA Assessments ('98, '01, '04, '07, '09, '15) – all completed, expending 100% of funds and one EPA Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) grant since 1998. Through expenditures of \$1,150,000 in EPA assessment funds, MRPC has completed 58 Phase I and II Environmental Site Assessments (ESAs) jumpstarting the redevelopment process. MRPC RLF grant, totaling \$480,000, provided for the successful redevelopment of the Amory Packaging Site in Clinton which is currently a commercial warehouse. Moreover, MRPC also gained national recognition by winning the “Best Community Redevelopment Project” award for a poster presentation at the National Brownfields Conference April 2011.

Significant accomplishments have been made throughout the Region on numerous properties assessed by MRPC’s Brownfields Program. Select redevelopments include:

- Assessment activities supported the construction of a public library and 60 parking spaces in Gardner.
- Assessment activities are supporting the design / construction of a solar project in Lancaster.
- Assessment activities supported the development of a rail trail to connect the Region’s population.
- Assessment activities supported the creation of Pond Street in downtown Gardner opening up new areas for redevelopment opportunities in the Central Business District.



- Assessment activities and RLF loans supported cleanup and redevelopment at an industrial site on Stone Street in Clinton creating more than a dozen jobs and renewed tax revenue.
- Assessment activities supported the creation of two single-family affordable housing units in Fitchburg leveraging no cost labor through the Montachusett Enterprise Center, Inc.
- Assessment activities supported the redevelopment of a school into senior housing in Athol;
- Assessment activities supported the construction of three single-family affordable housing units in Gardner. These units are fully occupied and generating tax revenue;
- Assessment activities supported the redevelopment of a former gas station into a public park in Athol;

4) Government Characteristics

a) State Law Influences

While some federal, state and local laws are considered “unfunded mandates”, others have been viewed as tools that should be utilized to facilitate improvements. To compile a complete list of statutory tools available to municipalities would be an exhaustive process and should be completed, at some future date, outside of the scope of the development of a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). However, in the interest of informing local and federal officials of some of the statutory tools available to municipalities to promote sound community and economic development projects, the MRPC identifies the following of Massachusetts’ statutes as “tools” available for municipalities within the Montachusett Region that can be exercised in order to improve local economic conditions.

- Economic Development Incentive Program (EDIP). In 1992, the State of Massachusetts enacted the EDIP in order to stimulate investment in the state-wide economy. Private enterprises that are expanding and creating jobs can apply for tax incentives through the municipality.
- Development Improvement Financing (DIF). This statute enables municipalities to fund infrastructure improvements to attract business and/or housing development.
- Local economic development organizations can be created by municipalities or residents wishing to affect positive economic change. Some of these organizations include Community Development Corporations, Industrial Development Commissions, Economic Development and Industrial Corporations, Redevelopment Authorities and Municipal Community Planning and Development Departments.
- Community Preservation Act. The Community Preservation Act (CPA) is a tool to help communities preserve open space and historic sites, and create affordable housing and recreational facilities. The CPA was signed by Governor Cellucci and Lieutenant Governor Swift on September 14, 2000. Robert Durand, Secretary of Environmental



Affairs, originally sponsored the legislation as a State Senator and championed the law's enactment.

- Chapter 43D. On August 2, 2006, Governor Romney signed a new law allowing communities to expedite permitting of commercial and industrial developments. Chapter 43D is for Designated Priority Development Sites only and a participating community must render permitting decisions on these sites within 180 days. Priority Development Sites are determined by the participating community and approved by the state. A Priority Development Site must be zoned for Commercial or Industrial Development, and the site must be eligible for the development or redevelopment of a building of at least 50,000 square feet. Advantages for a community to designate Priority Development Sites include eligibility for and priority consideration for MassWorks funding, brownfields remediation assistance, and enhanced online marketing through photos, a video of the community, and highlights within the community focusing on Priority Development Sites.
- Green Communities Act. On July 2, 2008, Governor Deval Patrick signed the Green Communities Act, which is a comprehensive piece of energy reform legislation promoting development of renewable energy, energy efficiency, “green communities,” and implementation of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (“RGGI”).
- District Local Technical Assistance. The District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) Program, funded by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, enables the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) to provide technical assistance to its 22 communities to encourage and enable municipalities to work together to achieve and/or enhance cost-effective service delivery, or to create and sustain ongoing collaboration and consultation on issues affecting municipalities, such as land use and planning for new economic and housing growth. MRPC’s DLTA program has been funded by the Commonwealth for 12 consecutive years. Examples of projects conducted by MRPC include:
 - Developing a Zoning Bylaw for the regulation and development of an overlay district for solar energy facilities and equipment within the Town of Ashburnham.
 - In the Town of Ashby, providing technical assistance with developing, installing, and initial municipal staff training on an electronic based unified permitting system that would coordinate and expedite permit applications before the Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Zoning Board of Appeals, Building Inspector, and Board of Health.
 - Identifying, assessing and mapping Priority Development Areas for the City of Fitchburg to create Cultural Districts that will serve as catalysts for cultural development in the Montachusett Region. MRPC also provided planning assistance to the Town of Clinton in support of its Cultural District Initiative.
 - Reviewing Priority Development Areas (PDA’s) and Priority Preservation Areas (PPA’s) within the Town of Lunenburg providing a solid foundation for any future master planning efforts.



- Working to promote economic development and help the Town of Lancaster to achieve its goals for sustainable development by combining commercial and industrial districts in North Lancaster into a single Enterprise District.

b) Municipal Law Influences

Local laws vary from community to community. However, consistent among virtually all of the cities and towns in the Montachusett Region are local zoning bylaws (in the nineteen towns) and ordinances (in the three cities). Zoning bylaws identify the areas in which commercial and industrial enterprises may locate and expand (use zoning). “Use zoning” can be interpreted as the municipally-adopted statement of where it wishes to allow and encourage local business growth. Zoning dimension requirements are also included within zoning bylaws and ordinances.

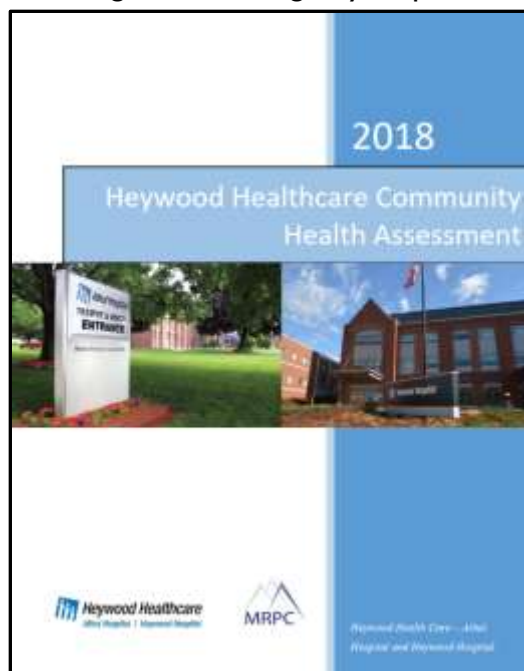
5) Social Services

a) Health Services

Health care is available at local hospitals, such as Nashoba Valley Medical Center in Ayer; UMass Memorial Health Alliance in Leominster, Fitchburg, and Clinton; and Heywood in Gardner and Athol. Athol Memorial Hospital is in the process of constructing a new Emergency Department & Medical Office Building. The new Emergency Department will double current capacity and transform the facility to meet leading industry standards providing: 13 exam rooms, with eight private acute care rooms and five dedicated behavioral health rooms; a new Main Lobby, covered entrance and a new Radiology Department; one floor of medical office space (Primary/Specialty Care); and one floor of Behavioral Health Services.

HMO Clinics are also available in the region; Fallon Health Care has such a facility in Leominster and Fitchburg. There are several community health and urgent care centers in the region.

In 2018, the MRPC worked in collaboration with Heywood Healthcare’s Heywood Hospital and Athol Hospital; UMASS Memorial Health Alliance Clinton Hospital; The CHNA 9 Group; and John Snow, Inc. to conduct a Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) of Heywood Healthcare’s Athol and Heywood Hospitals. The report presents issues related to the health, wellbeing and related factors that impact the health of those living in Heywood Healthcare’s





catchment area, which includes ten Montachusett communities (Ashburnham, Athol, Gardner, Hubbardston, Phillipston, Petersham, Royalston, Templeton, Westminster, and Winchendon) as well as five neighboring municipalities: Irving, New Salem, Orange, Warwick, and Wendell. Various other organizations and individuals also contributed to this effort, including community-based organizations and health service partners, as well as advocacy efforts from hospitals, health centers, rehabilitation centers, primary care physician and specialty networks, public health networks and local schools. Staff at the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) were responsible for conducting research and analysis efforts for this study.

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the health status, issues and concerns of residents, as well as assets that currently exist to provide services to locals in need. This study also explores relevant social issues affecting health and wellbeing that exist across the catchment area, and even cross over bordering communities. The writing of this report was intended to inform Athol Hospital and Heywood Hospital leadership and staff, local residents, government officials, businesses, community organizations and other relevant stakeholders of the health status of their communities using the most up-to-date and comprehensive quantitative and qualitative data.

b) Cultural and Recreational Facilities

Within the region can be found local and state-owned parks and museums. Samples of some of these include the:

- Fitchburg Art Museum, Gardner Heritage State Park, Gardner Museum, and the Fruitlands Museum and Shaker Village in Harvard.
- Historic societies and museums can be found in most of the communities. Local history museums can be found in Athol, Fitchburg, Gardner, Leominster, Templeton, Westminster and Winchendon.
- Mount Watatic in Ashburnham and Ashby; Oxbow Wildlife Reservation in Harvard and Lancaster; Bearsden Forest Conservation Area in Athol; Nashua River Trail in Groton and Ayer; Tully Mountain and Tully Lake Recreation Area and Dam in Orange and Royalston; Birch Hill Reservation in Templeton and Winchendon; Cogshall Park and Bird Sanctuary in Fitchburg; Pearl Hill State Park in Townsend; Doyle Community Park and Center in Leominster; Petersham Curling Club; and Mount Wachusett Reservation, Ski Area and Lodge are some examples of excellent outdoor conservation and recreation areas in the Montachusett Region.
- The Toy Town Aviation Museum in Fitchburg.

c) Historic Preservation

Statewide there exists the Massachusetts Historic Commission (MHC). The MHC provides technical assistance and planning and implementation grant funds to municipal “historic



commissions” and private “historic societies” in an effort to preserve and protect local, state and national historic assets in the Montachusett Region. Typically, “historic commissions” provide historic research and planning services to identify properties and potential districts having archaeological significance. “Historic societies” are quite active in the region promoting, coordinating and holding events to raise funds to continue preservation efforts.

6) Infrastructure

a) Water

Both municipally-owned and controlled water collection, storage and distribution systems and private wells can be found in the majority of cities and towns in the Montachusett Region. Municipally-owned systems are more prevalent in the more densely populated communities, such as Athol, Ayer, Clinton, Fitchburg, Gardner, Leominster, Templeton, and Winchendon. Other communities also have municipal water collection, storage and distribution systems.

b) Sewer

Both municipally-owned and controlled wastewater treatment facilities and private septic systems can be found in the majority of cities and towns in the Montachusett Region. Municipally-owned wastewater treatment plants are more prevalent in the more densely populated communities, such as Athol, Ayer, Clinton, Fitchburg, Gardner, Leominster, Templeton, and Winchendon. Other communities also have municipal wastewater treatment systems.

c) Public Safety

Every municipality in the Montachusett Region has a local police force. In addition, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts provides a state police force. Each community has volunteer and/or full-time paid fire-fighting forces. Rescue and ambulance services vary from community to community from municipally-funded to volunteer services.

d) Communications

The Massachusetts Technology Collaborative (MassTech) is a public economic development agency collaborating with industry, academia, and government to foster growth of the Massachusetts innovation economy. MassTech has three major divisions - The Innovation Institute, the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI), and the Massachusetts eHealth Institute (MeHI). The primary mission of the MBI is to extend affordable, robust, high-speed Internet access to homes, businesses, schools, libraries, medical facilities, government offices and other public places across Massachusetts, with a focus on the hard-to-serve areas of western and central



Massachusetts. In addition, MBI is working to promote statewide broadband adoption and digital inclusion particularly in low income and low adoption communities.

Broadband Infrastructure: The Massachusetts Broadband Institute completed construction of *MassBroadband 123*, a 1,200-mile fiber-optic middle mile network that brought high-speed internet access to over 1,200 community anchor institutions in more than 120 unserved and underserved communities in Western and Central Massachusetts. The project, funded through state and Federal funds, connected community facilities such as schools, town halls, public safety facilities, community colleges, libraries, and health care institutions to the open- access network.

Broadband Adoption, Technology Adoption, and Digital Inclusion: MassTech also supports broadband adoption, technology adoption, and digital inclusion across the Commonwealth through the following initiatives:

MassVetsAdvisor: Launched by the MBI in 2012, MassVetsAdvisor is a web-based resource portal which connects Veterans to Federal, state, and non-profit benefit programs.

The Small Business Technical Assistance Program: Pilot program launched by the MBI in collaboration with regional Community Development Corporations, this program provides small businesses in all regions of the Commonwealth with financial assistance to incorporate internet technology to support business growth.

Massachusetts eHealth Institute (MeHI): Works to drive adoption of critical health technologies, supporting the health care community to implement electronic health record and health information exchange technology. MeHI's major initiatives include the Medicaid Electronic Health Record (EHR) Incentive Operations program, the Regional Extension Center (REC) program, the Health Information Exchange (HIE) program, and the eHealth Economic and Workforce Development initiative. Broadband access and adoption is essential to successful implementation of the Health Information Exchange and Electronic Health Records.

Access to technology and digital education for all residents, businesses, and institutions is essential for success in a global economy and a digital world impacting every aspect of daily life including:

- Educational Success and Lifelong Learning
- Workforce Readiness/Employment
- Business Development
- Health Care Information and Delivery
- Access to Governmental and Essential Services
- Social and Civic Engagement



e) *Electricity*

Virtually all homes and businesses receive their electricity through a regional power grid. Private and municipally-owned electrical utility companies distribute the power to the Montachusett Region. These include National Grid, Unitil, Sterling Municipal Lighting Plant, Templeton Municipal Lighting Plant, Groton Municipal Lighting Plant, and Ashburnham Municipal Lighting Plant.

On December 11th, 2008 a winter storm brought significant sleet and a heavy layer of ice to the Montachusett Region resulting in downed trees and power lines, blocked roads, and large-scale power outages. Within the region, there were over 43,264 households and businesses without power. In fall 2009, the MRPC was awarded a one-year financial assistance award in the amount of \$125,360 from the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration's Philadelphia Office to conduct an Emergency Back-up Power Sources Evaluation for all the communities within the Montachusett Region. The project was completed in fall 2011 and consisted of a comprehensive Emergency Back-up Power Sources Evaluation throughout the Montachusett Region and a region wide analysis of the Electric Grid Structure. MRPC also completed an EDA funded Regional Energy Plan for the Montachusett Region and most recently the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) and the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOG) were awarded \$188,512 in grant funds in fall 2012 from the federal Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration to develop a plan for the Siting of Renewable Energy Facilities for the Montachusett Region and the Northern Middlesex Region. The project was completed in 2014.

The MRPC should make every effort to continue to provide technical assistance to local officials, businesses, and others with funding opportunities, and the review and possible adoption of zoning bylaws and ordinances concerning the installation of energy conversion systems.

f) *Transportation*

At the time of the writing of this CEDS update, the MRPC is preparing an update of the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) for the Montachusett Region. One of the seven major goals of the document is centered on the connection between transportation infrastructure and economic vitality. For the 2020 Montachusett Regional Transportation Plan, emphasis is placed on promoting economic advantages of the region across all modes of transportation. This is going to be achieved through four objectives: (1) establishing and prioritizing major trail connections for commuter and recreational purposes through the region and beyond; (2) promoting transit and commuter rail options; (3) improving railroad and other restricted bridges in order to enhance freight mobility; and (4) improving freight and general vehicle access and connection to Route 2 and other major highways across the region.



Bridges

Within the transportation system, the infrastructure that makes up and serves the roadway network is critical to its effectiveness and efficiency. Poorly maintained bridges and pavement impact all aspects of movement, from commuting and recreation to freight and emergency services. When considering bridges, *structurally deficient* bridges are the main concern in terms of repair priorities. A Structurally deficient bridge is not necessarily unsafe but is deteriorated to a point where it must be closely monitored and inspected or repaired.

The below tables are of the number of structurally deficient (SD) bridges within the region as a whole. Of particular note is that bridge inventories from 2006 report SD bridges being almost as high as 1 in 6 of the total bridges in the region. A major reason for the decrease in both number and percentage of SD bridges throughout the region is due to major investments made from the Accelerated Bridge Funding Program. As this funding program has ended, recent inventories show a plateau trend in which the number and percentage of bridges rated as SD are leveling off, or increasing. These percentages will be monitored in future inventories to determine where trends are heading.

Table 8. Structurally deficient bridges in the Montachusett Region

Year	Total # of Bridges	# of Structural Deficient Bridges	% of Total
2019	326	35	10.7%
2018	324	32	9.9%
2014	321	38	11.8%
2010	317	47	14.8%
2006	317	52	16.4%
13-Year Change	+9	-17	-5.7%

In order to maintain an efficient movement of goods and people, a responsive and adequately funded bridge maintenance system is essential. Bridge closings and weight restrictions alter traffic patterns by forcing vehicles to find alternate routes frequently leading through residential streets. The result is increased congestion and pollution, potential loss of business, the potential for more accidents and failure of the emergency planning process.

Roadways

Of the approximately 2,094 miles of roads in the Montachusett region, approximately 507 miles are Surface Transportation Program (STP) eligible roadways and 159 miles are National Highway System (NHS) eligible roadways. This represents 31% of the region's road miles. The remaining 1,425 miles (69%) are state and local aid eligible roads. They are defined as follows:

- National Highway System (NHS) – all interstate roadways and a systematic network of principal arterials spanning the state. In addition, roads connecting the NHS roadways to military bases (known as the Strategic Highway Network) are also considered part of the



NHS network. NHS passenger and freight terminals are connected by roadways called NHS connectors.

- Surface Transportation Program (STP) – comprised of any functionally classified roadway not part of the NHS network. STP funded roadways include all urban arterials, urban collectors and rural arterials. According to previous funding legislation, rural collectors are STP eligible, but have a limitation on the STP funding amount.
- State and Local Aid – includes Chapter 90 and other non-Federal Aid categories. Roadways that fall under this category are comprised of roads functionally classified as local roads.

As stated above, rural collectors are STP eligible but have a funding limitation.

The structural conditions of the majority of the Federal Aid eligible roads are determined by MassDOT and MRPC pavement surveys. The condition is expressed by assigning a Pavement Serviceability Index (PSI) number. PSI is an overall rating of the pavements condition. Conditions are rated as Excellent, Good, Fair and Poor. The following table shows a general correlation between PSI, condition and repair strategies.

Table 9. Pavement Serviceability Index, associated conditions and recommended repairs

PSI	Condition	Associated Repair
3.5 – 5	Excellent	Routine Maintenance
2.8 – 3.49	Good	Preventative Maintenance
2.3 – 2.79	Fair	Rehabilitation (Mill/Overlay)
0 – 2.29	Poor	Reconstruction

Utilizing this information, a general condition of the Montachusett Region's federal aid eligible roadway network can be developed. The following lists pavement condition on federal aid eligible roads in the region. This information should be viewed in general terms regarding needs and condition.

Table 10. Pavement conditions for federal aid eligible roads in the Montachusett Region

Condition	State			Local			Combined			
	Miles	%	% Change since 2015	Miles	%	% Change since 2015	Repair Category	Miles	%	% Change since 2015
Excellent	57.21	31%	-16%	102.06	22%	9%	Routine Maintenance	159.27	24%	-1%
Good	67.07	36%	10%	87.06	18%	-3%	Preventative Maintenance	154.13	23%	1%
Fair	38.91	21%	7%	117.21	25%	-14%	Rehabilitation	156.13	24%	-6%
Poor	22.83	12%	0%	167.07	35%	8%	Construction	189.90	29%	6%
Total	186.03			473.40			Total	659.43		



In comparing current network conditions to those from 2015, it would appear that the condition of the overall network of federal aid eligible roads to be similar to over the course of four years. The major difference in the combined condition percentage is the increase of roads rated as “Poor” by 6 percentage points of the total. These percentage comparisons, when taken in context, can be assumed to indicate a slight deterioration of road conditions over the four years from 2015 to 2019.

The difference in condition between local and state jurisdiction federal aid roads may mainly be a combination of two factors, the first being that federal aid roads that are state jurisdiction are typically a higher Functional Classification than those that are local jurisdiction, giving them higher importance when prioritizing projects for funding. The second factor being the State funding available to Municipalities for roadway maintenance (Chapter 90) lagging behind the rising price of such maintenance. Below is a chart showing the Chapter 90 allocations each community in the region received from 2016 to 2019 along with the roadway mileage that that money must maintain.

Chapter 90 has been level funded at \$200,000,000 Statewide since 2016. The State calculates how much funding communities receive in Chapter 90 through a formula which considers population within the community, employment within the community, and the number of community accepted roadway mileage within the community. The region as a whole has received less money in 2019 Chapter 90 funds than in 2016 (-0.15%). However, some communities such as Leominster (3.32%) have seen an increase in recent years. This increase is largely due not to increase in population or employment, but simply the reporting of City accepted roadways to MassDOT. If your community has not updated its accepted road information in a while, or has roads which have been recently accepted by the town but not submitted to MassDOT, it is probable that you are not receiving as much as you should in Ch.90 funds. Many communities in the region have not updated their accepted roads with MassDOT in years, or in some cases decades. MRPC is willing to assist communities in this process if requested.

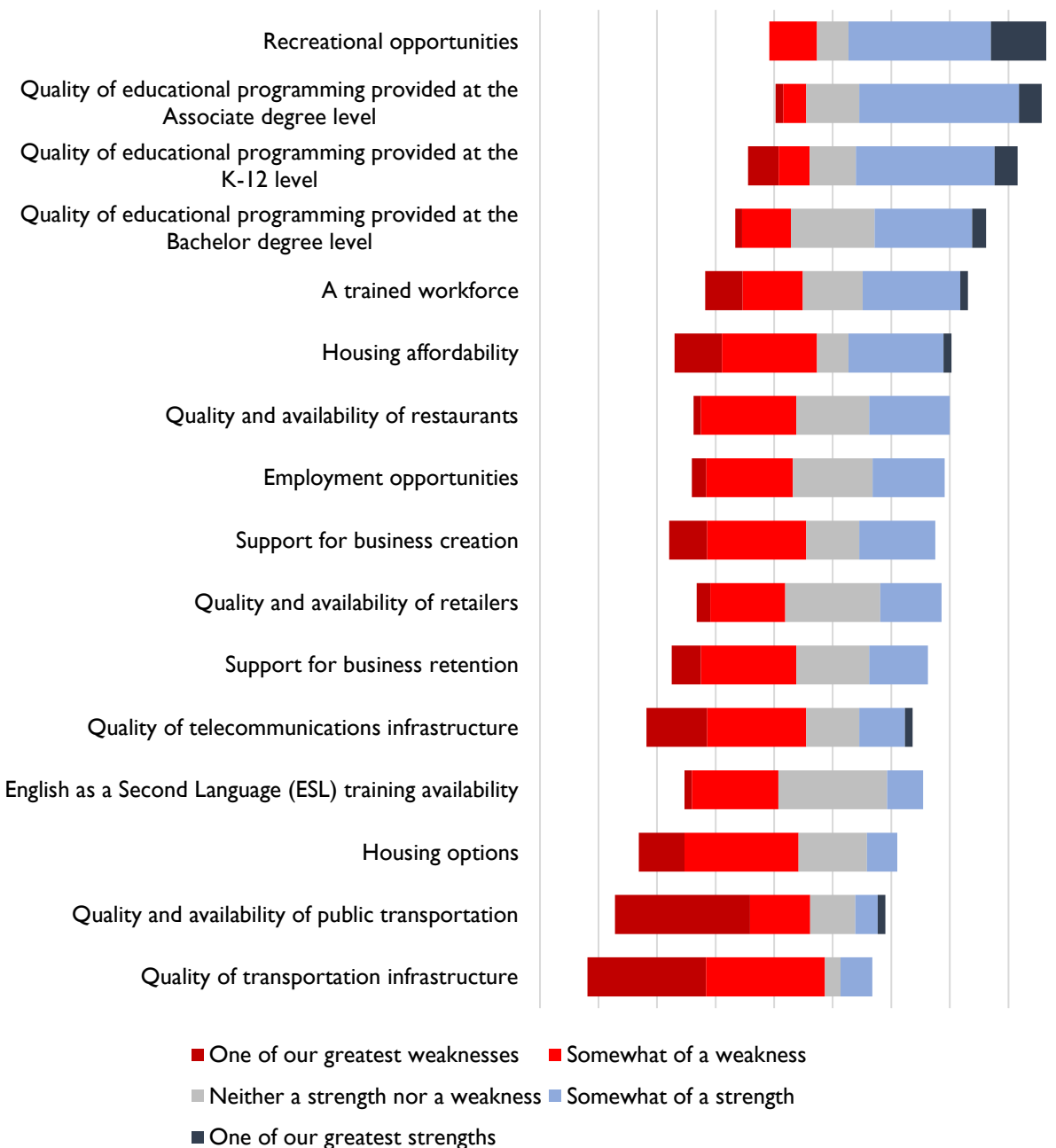
Pavements are often the single largest expense in any municipal road maintenance budget. Chapter 90 allocations often do not provide sufficient funding to maintain local roads at the current condition let alone make major improvements. Due to inadequate funding, it is recommended that communities routinely target funding for local jurisdiction federal aid eligible roadways through the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). It is also encouraged that a Pavement Management Plan be implemented by communities to keep track of maintenance needs and schedules to contribute to a cost-effective approach to maintaining roadways.



IV. Regional Outlook and Position

On May 3rd 2019, MRPC distributed a brief online survey to local elected and appointed officials (including mayors, town managers, town administrators, selectboards, planning boards, etc.), economic development officials, educators, and members of the business community. The design of the survey was informed by discussions of regional strengths, needs and opportunities at the previous MRCEDS meeting in March 2019.

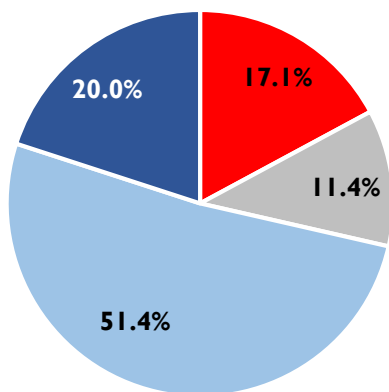
Figure 26. Responses to survey question, “How would you characterize each of the following as they relate to the economy of the Montachusett Region?”





A. Regional Strengths

1) Recreational opportunities



The most commonly identified strength in the Montachusett Region is our abundant recreational opportunities. 71.4% of respondents identified recreational opportunities as either “Somewhat of a strength” or “One of our greatest strengths” in the region.

2) Quality of educational programming provided at the Associate degree level

68.6% of survey respondents agreed that the quality of educational programming available at the Associate degree level is a strength of our region. The Montachusett Region has two postsecondary institutions which are driving the success of this programming: Fitchburg State University and Mount Wachusett Community College.

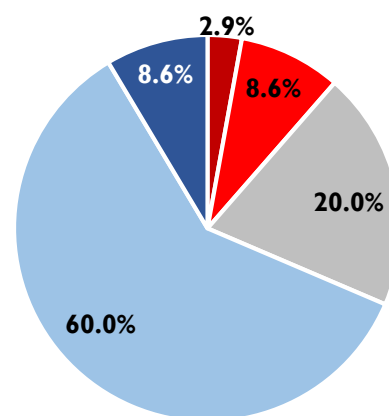
Fitchburg State University is a public university with an enrollment of over 5,200 students, including more than 3,500 undergraduate and 1,650 graduate and continuing education enrollees. With 56 undergraduate programs across 25 departments, Fitchburg State University offers very competitive programming with its Nursing, Communications Media, Education, Business Administration, and Industrial Technology programs being among the most competitive.



Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC), located in Gardner, offers more than 70 degree & certificate programs. For example, the college offers “Gateway to College”, a unique dual enrollment program for students who have been less successful in the traditional high school setting or are at risk of dropping out. Students enrolled in this program have the opportunity to earn a high school diploma while at the same time receiving free college credits toward an associate degree or certificate. MWCC also provides traditional dual enrollment, which allows students the chance to complete their high school requirements while being able to focus on courses which will be transferable to two- and four-year degrees. The college has also partnered with the Ralph C. Mahar Regional School District to offer selected students an opportunity to earn their high school diploma and an associate degree simultaneously.



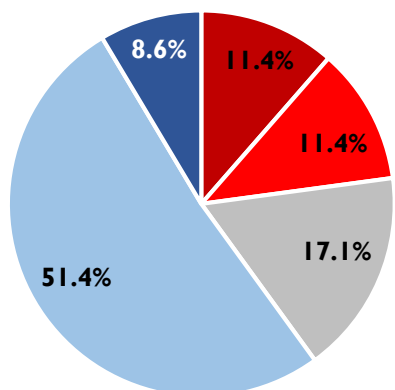
Mount Wachusett
Community College





In addition to early college programming, MWCC offers adult education courses, a wide range of workforce development training for local businesses, English as a Second Language (ESL) training at their campus in Leominster, as well as continuing education (i.e. noncredit) classes for personal enrichment on a year-round basis. The college also offers a number of support services to help facilitate student success including free tutoring, subsidized childcare, career planning assistance, disability services, food assistance, counseling, and veteran services.

3) Quality of educational programming provided at the K-12 level

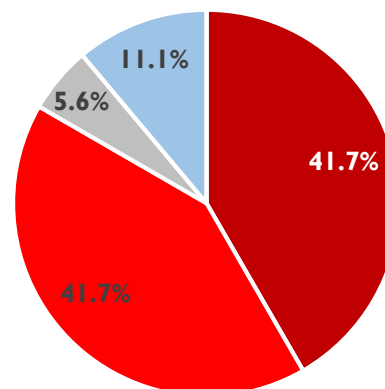


The third most identified strength of the Montachusett Region is the quality of educational programming at the elementary and high school levels. More than half (51.4%) of respondents identified K-12 education as somewhat of a strength, while 8.6% said it is one of the region's greatest strengths.

B. Regional Weaknesses

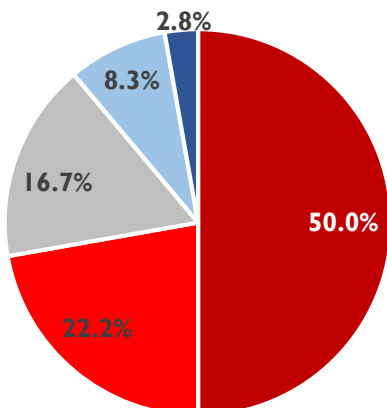
I) Quality of transportation infrastructure

The greatest weakness identified by leaders in the region by a wide margin is the quality of our transportation infrastructure. The challenges associated with maintenance and improvement region's transportation infrastructure are in many ways directly linked to challenges related to housing, business retention, and other elements of successful economic development. As previously mentioned, the 2020 Montachusett Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) is being developed concurrently with the 2019 CEDS update. The goals and objectives of the RTP will be core to the advancement of the economic health of the region.





2) Quality and availability of public transportation

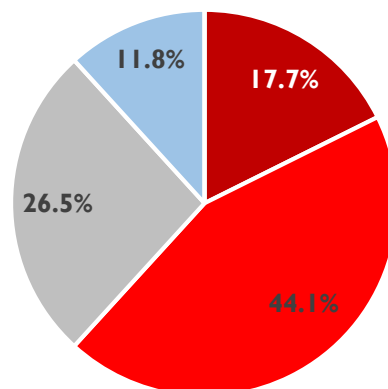


As mentioned above, promoting transit and commuter rail options is a major priority for the Montachusett Region. However, 50% of respondents agree that presently the quality and availability of public transportation is one of the region's greatest weaknesses, and an additional 22.2% say it is somewhat of a weakness. The Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART) is continually working to improve its services and meet the transportation needs of local residents.

In August and September of 2018, MART conducted a non-rider survey intended to assess perceptions toward public transportation in the Montachusett Region among residents who do not currently use any form of public transportation. The top complaint about public transportation identified was that current service does not go where residents would like to go (54% of all respondents) and that the bus is too far from where they live (40%). 54% of all those who took the survey said there was nothing that could be done to encourage them to ride a MART bus service. Among those 46% who could be encouraged to use public transit, geographic expansion was the most popular recommendation.

3) Housing options

A majority (61.8%) of respondents perceived housing options as either somewhat of a weakness (44.1%) or one of the region's greatest weaknesses (17.7%). The Montachusett Region is situated uniquely due to the competitive and comparatively expensive housing options in nearby Boston and Worcester. In order to attract those who may be priced out of these markets, as well as retain those residents who are already here, the Montachusett Region needs to ensure a robust and affordable housing stock. Many communities saw a significant decline in housing production at the beginning of the Great Recession. While housing permits are rising once again, much more can be done to strengthen the region's housing options.

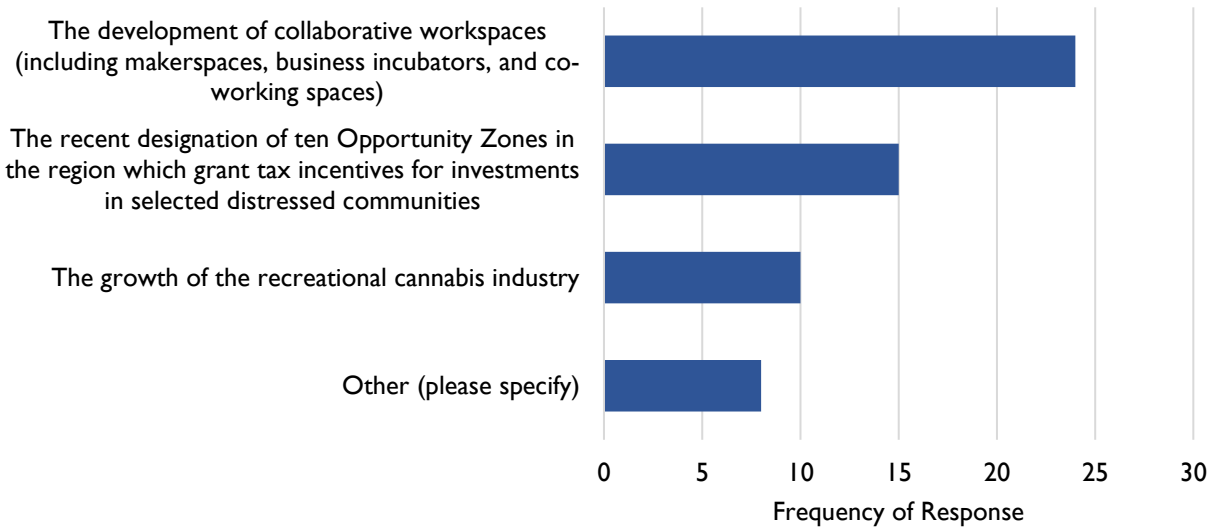




C. Possible Opportunities

To help MRPC and the MRCEDS Committee prioritize our efforts in the coming years, we asked survey respondents to select which types of economic opportunities be supported.

Figure 27. What do you see as the top economic development opportunities for the Montachusett Region to support? Please select all that apply



I) Collaborative Workspaces

The majority of respondents support the ongoing development of collaborative workspaces in the Montachusett Region. Makerspaces, along with co-working spaces and business incubators, have the mission of creating businesses and providing support for people to develop new employable skills and collaborate with others on business endeavors. Additionally, makerspaces in particular may help the Montachusett Region strengthen its greatest asset of recreational opportunities by providing fun classes and workshops indoors during the tough winter months.



Representatives of LaunchSpace, Inc. pose with former Secretary of Housing and Economic Development, Jay Ash, following their presentation at the state's 2018 annual Economic Development Summit in Worcester



Currently, there are a small number of collaborative workspaces being developed in the region, including the Wachusett Business Incubator in Gardner and LaunchSpace, Inc. in Athol. As these spaces become fully operational, they will hopefully be able to provide valuable guidance and lessons to others interested in collaborative- and community-based economic development.

2) Opportunity Zones

The recent designation of ten Opportunity Zones also poses a potential economic opportunity according to almost half of all respondents. By providing tax incentives to invest in distressed communities, there may be many yet unrealized benefits of these zones. However, as one respondent noted:

“Opportunity Zones may help but remains to be seen if they will actually be a useful tool locally. Many believe they will continue to draw investment in more lucrative census tracts (e.g. Boston, Somerville, Cambridge, etc.)”

To date, five Montachusett communities (Athol, Clinton, Fitchburg, Gardner, and Leominster) received formal approval of two Census Tracts each (ten total) for designation as federal Opportunity Zones. Already, local economic development officials in each community have fielded multiple inquiries by prospective investors and developers showing interest in utilizing this new economic development tool, but no funding has yet been committed.

3) Recreational cannabis industry

The current growth of the recreational cannabis industry was included due to its growing role in the region, including occupying and improving the infrastructure of very large commercial and industrial spaces for cultivating, processing, testing, and sales of recreational cannabis. However, this industry poses a number of risks as well, including its legal status at the federal level.

4) Other identified opportunities

a) Housing

Beyond the potential opportunities already listed, respondents identified other opportunities which should be support for the CEDS region. One person stated that the “greatest opportunities will spring from availability of affordable housing and decent quality of life for residents. If people come, their good ideas will follow”. Echoing this same sentiment, another person noted that support should be aimed at attracting people who are being priced out of high cost housing in nearby Boston, and help meet their desire to live close to employment. Similarly, another emphasized “supporting the development of our urban cores to support housing and job creation, as the Boston and Worcester-areas continue their spiral towards unaffordability”.



b) Life Sciences at Devens

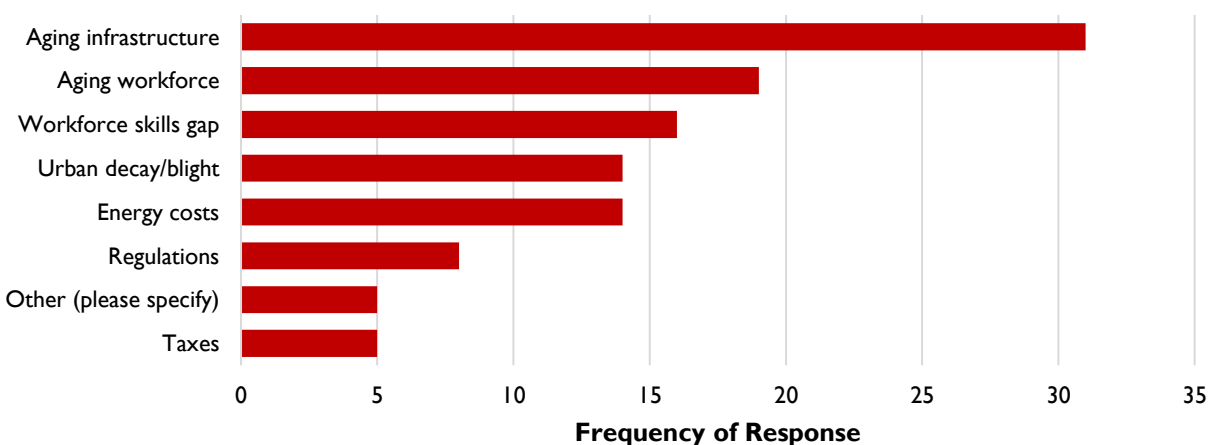
Finally, one very interesting comment was to highlight the blossoming life sciences sector occurring in Devens, the former military base (closed in 1996) that includes property conveyed by three Montachusett communities (Ayer, Harvard, and Shirley) to MassDevelopment, a quasi-public economic development and real estate agency which stimulates economic investment across Massachusetts. Devens has become a national model for converting former military bases into a planned community with recreation and economic development at the heart of its planning. In late 2016, a zoning change was approved through a Super Town Meeting (including representatives of the three communities) to create a 40-acre site in Devens eligible for biotechnology firms and manufacturers with ample office, industrial, and research and development spaces. At the time, MassDevelopment anticipated the rezoning would support hundreds of new permanent jobs in the region, with up 350 to 500 new skilled positions with the addition of a biomanufacturing facility.

Today, the Innovation Technology Business Zoning District contains BMS Corporate Campus which is the Biotech Center of Excellence for the pharma giant. In addition, Biotechnie, Johnson-Matthey, and a number of smaller life science firms are located within the district. In the Rail, Industrial and Trade related district we have a couple of large life science manufacturing plants which integrate drugs into plastic injection devices for pharma companies, SMC and Nypro. MWCC provides support for these life science firms through their training programs on-campus in Devens.

D. Potential Threats

To assist in identifying liabilities to the economic health of the region, survey respondents were asked to choose the top threats affecting our economic well-being.

Figure 28. What are the top threats that are affecting the economic well-being of the Montachusett Region? Please select all that apply



By a significant margin, the region's aging infrastructure was chosen as the greatest threat to our region's economic well-being. The connection between transportation infrastructure and



economic vitality is critical and is explained in greater detail in the forthcoming 2020 Montachusett Regional Transportation Plan. The following represent some of the most significant infrastructure improvements to be pursued in the coming years:

Table 11. Significant infrastructure improvements to be pursued in the region

Community	Location	Description
Athol	S. Athol Road Interchange	Access
Leominster/ Fitchburg	Merriam Ave./ South St. Corridor	Capacity, Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GHG)
Fitchburg	Route 2 at Mt. Elam Rd.	Safety, GHG
Fitchburg	Route 31 RR Bridge	Access
Leominster	Route 13 Interchange on Route 2	Safety, GHG
Sterling	Route 62 at Route 140	Safety
Fitchburg	Wachusett Station Improvements	Complete Streets, Access
Athol, Phillipston	Route 2 Lane Addition	Capacity
Fitchburg	John Fitch Highway Stormwater and Complete Streets upgrades.	Complete Streets, Stormwater, GHG
Westminster	Route 140 at Mile Hill Rd.	Stormwater Upgrades
Leominster	Route 190 at Route 2	Capacity, Safety
Lancaster	Route 117 at Bolton Flats	Drainage Upgrades

As previously mentioned, planning for the next generation of workforce is one of the most significant challenges ahead of the region. The combination of an aging workforce nearing retirement age, and insufficient numbers of skilled labor to fill these roles – as well as new jobs in emerging markets – make this a daunting undertaking for all of the region’s economic development partners.

Importantly, as one survey respondent noted, the economic development challenges of the region vary considerably depending on which community’s perspective you were using:

“The region is really 3 distinct regions; a sparsely populated, aging west; the cities; and an affluent east. Economic Development challenges vary.”

Finally, while there are some fundamental challenges facing the region, a lot of benefits may be gained through promoting the existing assets of the region, attracting new residents, businesses, and ideas. In his response, one educator emphasized the need for better marketing which emphasizes livability and proximity to urban centers to prospective incomers.

E. Possible disconnect between business representatives and local government officials

In order to better understand differences in perception between the business community and public sector officials, respondents were asked, “Which of the following best describes your role in the Montachusett Region? Select all that apply” and given the following options:

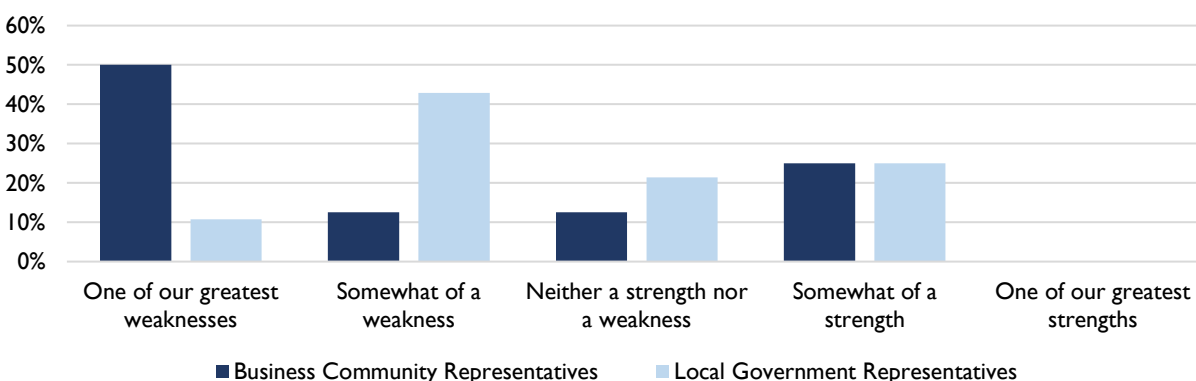


- Business community representative
- Local government representative
- Resident
- Other (please specify)

The purposes of this question were to better understand how local government representatives and business leaders might be differently perceiving boons and barriers to the Montachusett economy. Most significantly, the business community and local government representatives had very different perceptions about the relative strength of our region's workforce and business support infrastructure.

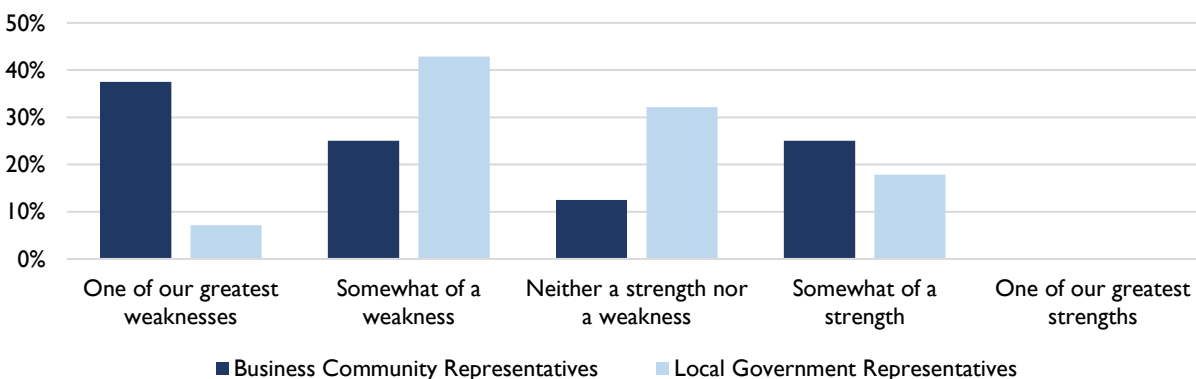
When asked to characterize the availability of support for business creation in the region, 50% of surveyed business community representatives identified this as one of our greatest weaknesses (compared to just 11% of local government officials).

Figure 29. Support for business creation



Both the business community and local government officials generally agree that support for business retention is deficient in the region. However, perceptions around the severity of the problem appear to differ between the two groups. 38% of business community representatives identified support for business retention as one of our greatest weaknesses (compared to 7% of government representatives).

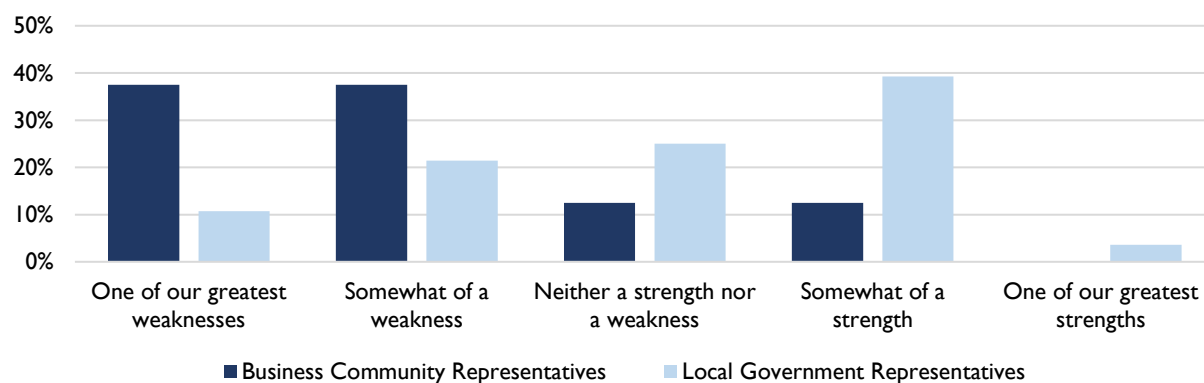
Figure 30. Support for business retention





Finally, another difference in perception was the relative strength of our region's workforce. When surveyed, 76% of the business representatives characterized "a trained workforce" as either one of our greatest weaknesses or somewhat of a weakness (compared to just 32% of government representatives).

Figure 31. A trained workforce



These differences in perceptions of the regional economy between the private and public sector may be significant. This CEDS update seeks to identify resources and objectives which will help promote communication and collaboration across these different sectors. As part of an ongoing dialogue, it could prove very beneficial for local government representatives to actively invite and listen to Chamber leaders and other representatives of the business community in order to better understand the identified lack of support for business creation and retention, as well as workforce training needs in the region.

F. Resources for Economic Development

There are multiple resources available for the future economic development of the Montachusett Region. For the purpose of this Strategy, we define the necessary resources as human, education, land and buildings, financial capital, physical infrastructure, laws and regulations and a supportive administrative infrastructure.

- **Human** – Sufficient human resources must exist and continue to be available to the business community so that labor can be supplied to produce the products and services that help to fuel the regional economy.
- **Education** – The continued education of the residents must be sustained to enable the work force to adapt to changing market conditions. The existing educational system must continuously be enhanced to help educate the work force in accordance with the needs of the business community.
- **Land and buildings** – Land and buildings for business use are available to facilitate the expansion of and relocation of existing businesses retaining and generating jobs in the Montachusett Region. Brownfields, tax title, and municipally-owned parcels should be examined for their potential benefit to the economy of the municipalities and region.
- **Natural Resources** – Many natural resources are used to support local economic activities (ex. wind, rivers and biomass for energy, forests for forestry, sand for mining



and rivers and streams for eco-tourism). A balanced use of our natural resources should be promoted so as to not squander the resources available.

- **Financial capital** – Businesses need financial capital to aid with growth opportunities. Programs exist both in the private and public sectors to aid commercial and industrial enterprises to finance new and ongoing operations generating and retaining jobs.
- **Physical infrastructure** – The physical infrastructure (ex. roads, bridges, water and wastewater systems, electricity and highspeed communications) must be constantly monitored and improved to aid the business community with its shipment of goods and services and workers to access places of employment.
- **Laws and regulations** – Some laws and regulations exist to aid businesses to expand, while others are viewed as hurdles to business growth. The public and private sectors should work together to create laws and regulations that fuel growth, and minimize the number of extraneous laws and regulations that inhibit improvements to local and regional economies.
- **Supportive administrative infrastructure** – Both the public and private sectors have staff resources available to assist businesses to expand (ex. staff from Chambers of Commerce, local municipal community and economic development entities and other non-profit organizations). Consistent marketing of the availability of services to the business community and use of these staff resources by the business community are needed to encourage growth.
- **Sustainable development** – Economic development initiatives should be in conformance with local, regional and state economic development plans and as many Massachusetts Sustainable Development Principles as possible.

G. Economic Development Partners

A significant number of key organizations exist to plan for and implement economic planning and development projects in the Montachusett Region. They are as follows:

Municipal Organizations

- **Ashburnham** – Economic Development Commission
- **Athol** – Community Development Office, Industrial Park Commission and Economic Development and Industrial Corporation
- **Ayer** – Office of Community and Economic Development
- **Clinton** – Office of Community and Economic Development
- **Devens** – Devens Enterprise Commission
- **Fitchburg** – Department of Community Development and Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority
- **Gardner** – Department of Community Development and Gardner Redevelopment Authority
- **Groton** – Economic Development Committee
- **Harvard** – Department of Economic Development
- **Hubbardston** – Economic Development Committee



- **Lancaster** – Community Development & Planning Office
- **Leominster** – Office of Planning & Development
- **Shirley** – Economic Development Committee
- **Sterling** – Economic Development Committee
- **Templeton** – Economic Development and Industrial Corporation
- **Westminster** – Economic Development Committee and Planning Department
- **Winchendon** – Community & Economic Development Steering Committee, Department of Planning and Development, and Winchendon Redevelopment Authority

Non-profits

- Greater Gardner Community Development Corporation, Inc.
- LaunchSpace, Inc.
- Montachusett Enterprise Center, Inc. (an affiliate of the MRPC)
- Montachusett Opportunity Council, Inc.
- North Central Massachusetts Community Reinvestment Act Coalition
- North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation
- North Quabbin Community Coalition, Inc.
- NewVue Communities
- United Way of North Central Massachusetts & Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts
- Wachusett Business Incubator

Downtown Organizations

- **Ayer** – Downtown Business Association
- **Clinton** – Uptown, Inc.
- **Gardner** – Square Two Association, Inc.
- **Groton** – Groton Business Association
- **Leominster** – Leominster Downtown Association
- **Lunenburg** – Lunenburg Business Association
- **Shirley** – Shirley Village Partnership, Inc.
- **Townsend** – Townsend Business Association

Chambers of Commerce

- Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce, based in Gardner
- Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce, based at Devens
- North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce, based in Leominster
- North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce, based in Athol
- Wachusett Area Chamber of Commerce, based in Holden



Education and Job Training Partners

- Cushing Academy (Ashburnham) and Groton School (Groton) (private schools)
- Fitchburg State University
- Mount Wachusett Community College
- Worcester State College
- Quinsigamond Community College
- Leominster Center for Technical Education, Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical High School, and Nashoba Valley Technical High School
- North Central Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board, Inc.
- Shriver Job Corps, Devens
- Pre-K, Elementary, Middle and High Schools in virtually all communities in the Montachusett Region
- MassHire North Central Career Center

Local businesspersons' associations also exist in many of the communities.

Montachusett Enterprise Center, Inc.

The Montachusett Enterprise Center, Inc. (MEC) was created in 2003 in order to plan for and implement projects leading to the creation of affordable housing and job opportunities for people in the Montachusett Region. MRPC planning services have been delivered to the MEC, an affiliate of the MRPC, in an effort to identify affordable housing development sites in the region. Accomplishments include being designated as an eligible receiver by the Attorney General's Office. As a receiver MEC can be authorized by the Housing Courts to take temporary possession of abandoned/foreclosed properties which pose a threat to public health and safety, make necessary repairs, and recover its costs through an expedited foreclosure auction process.

Montachusett Brownfields Group (MBG)

The Montachusett Brownfields Group is comprised of local lenders, lawyers, private and public sector funding entities, realtors, developers, community-based organizations, planners and community and economic developers. The Group plays a significant role in decisions concerning brownfield assessments and redevelopment and brownfields education. The Brownfields Group meets on an as needed basis.

MRPC has administered six Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Site Assessments Grants and one EPA Revolving Loan Fund grant. Utilizing funding from the Site Assessment grants, our member communities were able to complete 79 brownfield site assessments. The Revolving Loan Fund Grant provided for the successful cleanup and redevelopment of the Former Amory Packaging Site in Clinton. The site is currently a commercial and warehouse/distribution facility.



Local Hazard Mitigation Planning Teams

A Hazard Mitigation Plan Update was prepared and finalized in 2016 by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) with assistance and input from its 22 member communities and Devens and their local Hazard Mitigation Planning Teams. The plan update was funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) and the MRPC.

The Federal Disaster Mitigation of Act of 2000 requires all municipalities that wish to be eligible to receive FEMA hazard mitigation grants to adopt a local hazard mitigation plan and to update the plan every five years. A community plan identifies actions to help alleviate disaster conditions in the future. The Hazards Mitigation Plan will also allow communities to become eligible for federal grant programs, including the post-disaster Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) and the pre-disaster Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA). Communities can find detailed information on grant opportunities at the following link: <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-emergency-management-agency>.



V. Plan for Progress

A. Vision

Community and economic planning and development proponents within the Montachusett Region will advocate and support all economic development activities including but not limited to:

- Education
- Workforce development
- Marketing
- Brownfields redevelopment
- Renewable energy development
- Commercial and industrial land development
- Transit programs and transportation improvements that support economic development initiatives
- Housing improvements and programs that provide a supply that is sufficient for the region's workforce

We strive to preserve and balance open spaces enhancing the quality of lives of residents, while making the area more attractive for business owners and employees considering business relocations and expansions.

B. Goals and Objectives

As part of this CEDS update, and in response to key trends and our regional outlook, goals and objectives for the region were developed under ten independent (but highly interrelated) categories:

1. Infrastructure Development
2. Regional Cooperation
3. Regional Promotion
4. Local Business Creation and Support
5. Workforce Attraction and Retention
6. Redevelopment and Reuse
7. Education
8. Housing
9. Public Health and Safety
10. Energy and Resources



Infrastructure Development

1. Conduct an analysis of livability by municipality to identify strengths as well as areas for improvement within the region. Start by establishing a list of characteristics for communities where people are moving in and then do a regional assessment of municipalities to provide productive feedback on infrastructure, cultural, and civic improvements/changes; and
2. Advance high-quality infrastructure and community improvements to support development, redevelopment and revitalization of the built environment.

Regional Cooperation

1. Support a robust and diverse local economy that provides tax revenues for the greater Montachusett Region and living wage jobs for residents in a business-friendly environment;
2. Inventory business assets in all clusters including supply chain business, facilities, funding resources, and physical facilities. Create a detailed network map to show the regional strengths of the region and work to identify emerging clusters and opportunities;
3. Continue to prepare annual reports that outline the impact of the various economic development initiatives, including a dashboard that provides updates on the implementation of the various CEDS strategies and actions. Distribute this work widely and make it easily accessible on organization websites. Work to increase awareness and understanding of the various organizations, role in economic development, process for awarding funds, and impact of the work being done;
4. Define resources needed to adequately implement the CEDS;
5. Define the role of the CEDS committee and any potential task forces related to advocacy/legislative issues or other specific topics. Establish quarterly meetings of the CEDS Committee to review progress, make refinements to the strategy, and pursue new initiatives;
6. Work in coordination with five regional Chambers to further engage the local and state media related to economic development initiatives in the region;
7. Continue to establish relationships and partnerships with neighboring counties that are outside of the region to leverage the opportunities, assets, and workforce that exist; and
8. Research what other communities are doing to support those in addiction recovery and what services would help them enter the workforce successfully. Implement programs and policies as appropriate. Approach to include employer encouragement, training, and support at all levels to hire and retain employees in recovery. Address stigma and discrimination with co-workers and look to evidence-based approaches.



Regional Promotion

1. Continue to bring small and large events into the towns and village centers and do joint advertising and promotion. Support and widely disseminate a region-wide calendar of events that is up to date and helps avoid double scheduling;
2. Continue to use recreation and cultural amenities to market the area for both visitors and new residents. Maintain up-to-date inventories of available resources and assets and encourage collaboration between major tourism drivers and supporting assets. Ensure complete and up-to-date information is available on multiple, linked websites;
3. Continue to monitor the Opportunity Zone tax policy program and identify ways to leverage the program. Create informational material for potential investors and train staff on the topic; and
4. Work in concert with the five regional Chambers and other business organizations to formalize – where necessary – a regional business retention and expansion program and business visitation program. Set expectations on the number of businesses to visit each year, ranging from small to large to ensure regular communication with all critical sectors of the economy.

Local Business Creation and Support

1. Support the development and success of collaborative workspaces in the region, including makerspaces, business incubators, and co-working spaces;
2. Support capacity building for innovation leaders, including programming/training, networking opportunities, business plan competitions, and prizes. Continue to bring in experts on various topics such as digital marketing, customer attraction, human resources, and other programs that will support businesses. Use existing entrepreneurial assets (people) to create mentoring opportunities to support younger entrepreneurs; and
3. Facilitate collaboration between partners including health care, universities, and industry to identify unique regional knowledge assets that could be leveraged to address major challenges facing the Montachusett Region (substance use disorder, water quality, tick borne disease, obesity, different teaching/learning approaches) and pursue a strategy to become the center for research, training, practical experience, and collaboration in that topic.

Workforce Attraction and Retention

1. Support efforts to work with regional middle school, high school, and technical high school guidance counselors to identify and promote job opportunities in the area, as well as non-college related pathways for students. Support programs which increase residents' workforce readiness, including assistance in the areas of interview



preparation and resume review. Support programs which increase residents' workforce readiness, including assistance in the areas of interview preparation and resume review;

2. Foster digital literacy and technology education in schools, colleges, community-based education, business assistance and development, accessible technology, workforce training, and online learning and public education programs; and
3. Support career awareness and exploration programs for youth and expand work-based learning opportunities and education pathways that interact with, and prepare students for, regional opportunities. Connect students to viable and growing pipelines.

Redevelopment and Reuse

1. Educate and offer technical assistance to communities on the most appropriate uses of existing industrial properties;
2. Identify catalyst properties/parcels in the downtowns and village centers that are challenging and engage partners to find market and financially feasible redevelopment options; and
3. Create up-to-date information sheets related to financing available for redevelopment. Establish a consortium of banks and other funding sources to respond to unmet funding needs.

Education

1. Support dialogue between industry and technical education institutions on curriculum development and training programs that provide local individuals with the employable technical skills needed in the region and enhances the regional workforce;
2. Support curriculum appropriate to the needs of the local business community; and
3. Support life-long learning initiatives including adult and basic education programs, and participation in vocational, practical arts and retraining programs.

Housing

1. Focus resources and investments on helping existing residents, including students, young adults, and families to stay in the area. Support establishing creative tax policies to incentivize investment in existing and development of new high-quality housing stock, develop first time homebuyer assistance, create student loan repayment programs, and research other strategies designed to retain population;
2. Identify target properties, parcels, and areas for housing or mixed-use development. Prepare a financial feasibility analysis on each and create incentives to spur development of a variety of housing solutions in communities that are feeling the greatest pressure; and



3. Conduct a region wide housing needs and opportunities assessment, including utilizing existing work that has been done. Use this to establish a comprehensive understanding of the gaps in housing supply for current and future population. Establish an inventory of available funding and financial assistance programs for housing development and redevelopment work. Identify funding gaps and mechanisms for filling those gaps. Identify zoning or other regulations that hinder effective residential development needed to respond to current market needs.

Public Health and Safety

1. Work in collaboration with local health care providers and educational institutions to meet the growing need for trained healthcare professionals in the Montachusett Region;
2. Convene a discussion with major employers regarding the potential for a cooperative approach to child care/early childhood education programs and other community-based solutions;
3. Support, improve and promote locally-based community health systems and food systems; and
4. Support the expansion of recreation opportunities within the region.

Energy and Resources

1. Assist in the designation of every Montachusett municipality as a “Green Community”;
2. Encourage investment in environmentally sustainable development related to “green” products, processes, and buildings as part of the “green” economy; and
3. Support the establishment of electric vehicle (EV) charging stations throughout the region as well as signage along the Route 2 corridor to identify these stations.

C. Regional Resiliency

At the core of the region’s economic development strategy is an attempt to increase our capacity to adapt to a changing world, and successfully rebound and respond when there are shocks to the region’s economy. Trends and events, including those that are slow-moving (e.g. an aging workforce) and unexpected (e.g. a natural disaster), can disrupt positive growth and present significant planning challenges to overcome. Shocks to a community’s local economy (and together, the regional economy) can be the result of structural change, including economic trends at the national or global scale, change in consumer demands, or a decline in competitive advantage for certain products. There can also be shocks which are more acutely felt including the closure of a military base or the movement of a firm out of the area.



When we say that a place or an ecosystem is “resilient” we tend to refer to how it returns to normal rapidly in the face of shock or stress or at the very least does not get easily pushed into a new “normal” state. But sometimes adaptation and innovation in the face of these shocks is preferential to returning to business as usual. The complex decision-making and planning needed to be resilient in the coming years and decades will require collaboration and coordination across local governments, the business community, educational institutions, and non-profit organizations, all with significant input and help from Montachusett residents.

Natural Disasters

In 2016, MRPC updated its regional Hazard Mitigation Plan which outlines and creates an implementation plan for a number of actions to be taken immediately to reduce or prevent future disaster damages. In effect until 2021, this plan assists all Montachusett communities by developing policies and programs before a disaster occurs. If the actions identified in this plan continue to be implemented, the damage that is left in the aftermath of future events can be minimized, thereby easing recovery and reducing the cost of repairs and reconstruction. This plan also facilitates the receipt of post-disaster state and federal funding because the list of mitigation initiatives is already identified, reducing vulnerability to disasters by focusing limited financial resources to specifically identified needs, and connecting hazard mitigation planning to community and Regional planning where possible.

Economic Resiliency

The Montachusett Region has faced a number of economic hardships in recent years, including declines in manufacturing-based employment, a reduction in housing values and housing production in the wake of the Great Recession, and firms leaving the region. While some negative trends are slowing or even reversing – as in the case of housing sales – we need to be more prepared to absorb these shocks through planning and the development of a robust business ecosystem in the years to come. We want to ensure we are preparing the next generation of workers to be trained in skills with growing demand (including access to stackable training opportunities) and that there are resources and funding available for entrepreneurs at every stage of business development.

D. Action Plan

Below is a detailed description of the complete scope of work for the proposed EDA investment.

Task #1 MEC, Inc. Project Planning

Provide staff support to the Montachusett Enterprise Center, Inc., to:

- a) Support the planning and development of job retention and creation projects
- b) Create plans for the development of affordably priced housing to low-, moderate- or middle-income families in the Montachusett Region by identifying affordable



housing or “mixed-use” projects to be implemented by non-EDA planning funding within the next one year (short term), two to three years (moderate term) and more than three years (long term); and,

- c) Support, develop, coordinate and manage a variety of training programs that support the rehabilitation and construction of housing (i.e. foreclosure, credit, home improvement training programs) and retention and creation of jobs (i.e. improving interviewing skills, enhancing life skills, and business planning how to obtain financing for starting a business and expanding an existing enterprise).

Task #2 Provide Technical Assistance to Communities to Prepare Grant Applications for Community and Economic Development Funding

Provide assistance to at least one community with the pursuit of grant resources addressing local projects improving the economic vitality of the communities. Planning within the following disciplines will include, but not be limited to, community and economic development, food systems, energy systems and siting, sustainability, regionalize municipal services, housing related to the bolstering of the construction industry and workforce housing, transit and transportation planning and other related disciplines as they relate to the mobility of the workforce and the efficient movement of goods and services. The human resources, hardware and software within the MRPC's Geographic Information System and Information Technology Department (GIS&IT) will provide data collecting, warehousing, analyzing and 2D and 3D displaying of data supporting this and other tasks when appropriate.

Task #3 Continue to increase the level of public/private sector participation on the Montachusett Brownfields Group (MBG) Steering Committee and work to obtain additional Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) funds to further program benefits.

Since 1998, MRPC has had a successful Brownfields Site Assessment Program, which utilizes EPA grant funds (most recently awarded in August 2015). MRPC will work to increase the level of public/private sector participation in the MBG and complete one EPA Brownfields Grant Application for the reuse of brownfields sites within the Montachusett Region.

Task #4 Assist with the EDIP Tax Incentives Program

Assist communities and the private sector with the Economic Development (Tax) Incentive Program (EDIP) and the Northern Worcester County Economic Target Area (NWCETA) program. Provide information to all thirteen NWCETA communities concerning Tax Increment Financing (TIF), District Improvement Financing (DIF), and Special Assessments (SA).



Task #5 Update and then Maintain the Regional CEDS

The Montachusett Region will update and then maintain and implement its long-term Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy so as to create a strong and diversified economy. MRPC will provide economic development data at least annually to community and economic development professionals; provide ESRI Business Analyst Online (BAO) data to the public and private sectors; train student interns on a regular basis in fields directly or indirectly related to economic development; and complete other joint efforts that would foster job retention and creation in the Montachusett Region.

Other staff support tasks include the following:

- Continue to offer planning and economic development technical assistance to Montachusett communities without professional staff as needed.
- Provide staff support to the Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (MRCEDS) Committee, at the bi-annual meetings.
- Provide staff support to the Montachusett Economic Development District (MEDD), as needed.
- Jointly participate in multi-disciplined projects that promote economic development such as community development, housing, environmental, and transit and transportation planning to leverage resources available to MRPC.
- MRPC will enhance and create collaborative ventures with local, state and federal agency partners and non-profit organizations and education and job training institutions to improve the economic health of the region.



VI. 2019 CEDS Projects

A. Future Route 2 Interchange at South Athol Road

Athol, MA

Originally contemplated in a 1997 study of Route 2 safety improvements by Wilbur Smith Associates, the proposal to add an interchange to service the South Athol Road jobs corridor became the subject of a feasibility study by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission in 2017-2019 as a key component to Athol's long-term community and economic sustainability. South Athol Road is currently the home to several manufacturing businesses employing over 200 people and has hundreds of acres of developable land including the 100-acre Town-owned "Bidwell" site. Provision of a future interchange will open land for development opportunities including job creation, mitigate existing truck traffic concerns in the downtown area and create a future relief valve to the eastern exits which are experiencing increased traffic counts due to development.

B. Downtown Athol Infrastructure Improvements

Athol, MA

In 2019 the Town initiated pre-planning of proposed reinvestment in the urban core to include roads, sidewalks, streetscape, targeted demolition and parking improvements all designed to foster an environment for private investment. Towards this goal, the Town has received approval of a target area designation for federal Community Development Block Grant funds, has received approval as a federal Opportunity Zone, has initiated conceptual planning with the BSC Group and has received District Local Technical Assistance funds to engage the regional planning commission to advance the concept planning towards potential establishment of a formal Urban Renewal Plan.

C. South Athol Road and 100-acre Bidwell Site Development Plan

Athol, MA

The Town has engaged BSC Group, of Worcester, to initiate conceptual planning for potential development of the 100-acre Town-owned "Bidwell Site" on South Athol Road. With a preliminary report due in 2019, the Town envisions a mix of uses at the property that will benefit the community from both an economic and service perspective. Key to determining the vision and final development plan is the potential of a new interchange on Route 2 at South Athol Road, less than one-half mile from the Bidwell Site. The Town envisions improvements to South Athol Road to include extension of water and wastewater to the site and – in conjunction with future access to Route 2 – to provide access to jobs and markets while relieving traffic and truck congestion downtown.



D. Millers River Greenway

Athol and Orange, MA

The Town of Athol and neighboring town of Orange have re-engaged in discussions to advance the vision of a greenway linking the historic town centers. The so-called Millers River Greenway would build upon the existing “Blue Trail” between the two communities on the river itself with an ancillary greenway that would foster eco-tourism through pedestrian and bicycle links. An initial \$2 million on bonding authority exists within a state transportation bond bill which is anticipated to leverage further funding options to achieve this vision.

E. LaunchSpace, Inc.

Athol, MA

LaunchSpace, Inc. is a 501(c)3 nonprofit community makerspace offering classes and workshops in wide ranging topics including 3D printing, woodworking, pottery, metalworking, IT & robotics, and a variety of arts and crafts. In addition to being a member-based community workshop, LaunchSpace is partnering with local schools, community colleges, universities, and businesses to develop programming in workforce education and development as well as provide services in entrepreneurial support and business incubation. The organization hopes that with its three-tiered approach it will be able to create a replicable model for post-industrial revitalization in semi-rural communities. Currently, LaunchSpace operates two locations: one of which is a 24,000 square foot former elementary school in Athol – located inside the Montachusett Region Economic Development District (EDD) – while the other is located on the third floor of the Orange Innovation Center (OIC) in the neighboring town of Orange just beyond the EDD boundaries. To date, LaunchSpace has received \$380,000 in state funding through MassDevelopment’s Collaborative Workspace Program (CWP) to support its mission of local economic and community development. Future funds will be used to support facility upgrades as well as operations and program development.

F. 200 Boulder Drive

Fitchburg, MA

The Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority (FRA) currently owns a former mill building at 200 Boulder Drive comprising of 36,000 sf and has been laying vacant since 2004. The FRA would like to market the property, which has a great industrial vibe, in hopes that a commercial entity would move in within the year. Once rented, this property will be a source of revenue for the FRA and is estimated to create as many as 50 or more jobs depending on the nature of the business renting the space.



G. Lagoon Site, West Fitchburg

Fitchburg, MA

The Lagoons site, currently owned by the FRA is a vacant, large swatch of land, ripe for large-scale commercial or mixed-use development that will create jobs both during the planning and construction phase and for the long-term thereafter. It is the FRA's intention to develop and/or sell the property in accordance to the plan of use communicated by the City's Office of Community Development. The FRA is partnering with the City of Fitchburg's Community Development Office for various funding programs for the Lagoon Site including the Site Readiness Program and other MassDevelopment funding resources.

H. Sandpits, 0 Airport Road

Fitchburg, MA

The Sandpit, currently owned by the FRA, is a vacant, large swatch of land ripe for large-scale commercial or mixed-use development that will create jobs both during the planning and construction phase and for the long-term thereafter. It is the FRA's intention to develop and/or sell the property in accordance to the plan of use communicated by the City's Office of Community Development. The FRA is partnering with the City of Fitchburg's Community Development Office for various funding programs for the Sandpit including the Site Readiness Program, and other MassDevelopment funding resources.

I. Wachusett Business Incubator

Gardner, MA

The Wachusett Business Incubator (WBI) is located in newly renovated space at the New England Woodenware campus in Gardner. Developed by a consortium of local business leaders, the goal of the WBI is to foster economic growth in the North Central Massachusetts area by providing targeted assistance in a cooperative environment to innovative entrepreneurs. The WBI will guide them to cultivate their business skills, and provide the assistance necessary to take their startup companies along the path to commercial maturity.

J. Rear Main Street Corridor Project

Gardner, MA

The City of Gardner is currently partnering with the Gardner Redevelopment Authority (GRA) to implement its Downtown Urban Renewal Plan. A key component of this Plan is the Rear Main Street Corridor Redevelopment Project, which will redevelop an underutilized, blighted industrial corridor. Phase I of this project was completed in June of 2018 and included the construction of a new roadway and multi-use path connecting the public library to the new police station anchoring each end of the corridor.



Phase I included construction of additional parking to support existing businesses and housing units, community space, and additional business opportunities along the rear of the Main Street properties. This project also enhances a private sector development completed by Cumberland Farms, Inc. The project provides a secondary access to the site for emergency vehicles and customers, while alleviating traffic congestion on Main Street. Projected employment growth initially will be temporary construction jobs estimated at 30. The estimated total job creation for the industrial park is 880 (Phase I being estimated at 500 and Phase II estimated at 380 jobs created).

K. Nichols Street Upgrade

Gardner, MA

Nichols Street Veterans Apartments consist of 8 studio apartments and two 2-bedroom apartments that are reserved for veterans who intend to maintain sobriety and who have set goals for future achievement. Nichols Street Veterans Apartments provide an affordable permanent housing option for eligible individuals, single-parents, and small families. The building offers a familiar home-like environment in a residential neighborhood. Residents volunteer for various activities and events with the Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center and throughout the community, and carry-on with an independent lifestyle. The project includes replacing the slate roof of the building, repointing the chimney on the roof and repairing/replacing the front retaining wall. The upgrades will allow the veterans to remain in the residential building for many years.

L. Spanish American Center

Leominster, MA

The Spanish American Center, Inc. is a private, non-profit organization chartered in 1966 by members of the Catholic clergy to respond to the needs of the Hispanic community. The Center began as an outreach and information and referral network. In 1972 the Center was incorporated. Currently, the Center is the only agency in Leominster specifically oriented towards the Spanish-speaking community, estimated at over 15,000 residents. Today the Center offers multiple programs, has revenues in excess of \$500,000 and is State Office of Minority and Women Business Assistance (SOMWBA) certified. Funds are being sought to support the operations the on-site commercial kitchen which currently serves healthy meals to low-income students and residents throughout the community. The facility would also be able to support food preparation training and certification for members of the community, and help meet the growing need for food preparation workers throughout the region.



M. Revitalization of Downtown Leominster

Leominster, MA

With Leominster's growth, downtown has experienced significant traffic increases. The City needs to look at pedestrian crossings and traffic calming measures. Significant changes need to take place, particularly in front of City Hall and the Leominster Library. At this time, the City's general fund is the only source of funding for this project, which would include both design and construction work. Funds would be used to conduct a planning study and ultimately construction of new traffic measures. Retaining and creating jobs in the downtown relies on downtown safety and accessibility.

N. Sholan Farms

Leominster, MA

Sholan Farms is a City-owned apple orchard and the last pick-your-own orchard in the birthplace of Johnny Appleseed. The farm is home to 32 varieties of apples among other crops and helps drive Leominster's economy. The farm is unable to expand at this time due to lack of water and sewer infrastructure. Funds would be used to extend needed infrastructure from Pleasant Street at Hardy Drive to the farm.

O. Connection between Adams Street and Downtown

Leominster, MA

The City of Leominster and the private sector have together invested a significant amount of funds to bring infrastructure and housing to Adams Street, just a few streets away from Leominster's downtown center. It is critical to create a corridor between the two. The proposed project would include the purchase of a parcel of land and then creation of a physical corridor between the 200 housing units and commercial space on Adams Street with the downtown. Funds would be used to conduct a planning study and ultimately the construction of a new corridor.

P. Downtown Parking Garage

Leominster, MA

The City of Leominster is looking to build a downtown parking garage. There are currently 1,500 employees working downtown and parking is nearly at full capacity. The City is proposing to build a parking garage in the immediate downtown area in order to create and retain jobs. The City already owns the land in question; funds would be used for design and construction of the proposed parking garage.



Q. Simplex Drive Industrial District

Westminster, MA

The Simplex Drive industrial district is the Town of Westminster's largest industrial park. The park's infrastructure (roads and wastewater disposal system) are privately owned and are in need of upgrades. These upgrades will help attract new industries to the park, which still has a considerable amount of vacant developable land. The Town has worked closely with the State (MassDevelopment and MassEcon) to promote the park to potential tenants and evaluate its infrastructure needs. Given the amount of developable land, it is believed the Industrial District could support as many as 1,000 jobs.

R. Westminster Business Park Industrial District

Westminster, MA

The Westminster Business Park is the Town's second largest industrial park. The park is being built on an active gravel removal site. The park has been under construction for well over a decade and it will take another decade for the park to be fully complete. The park is being designed to accommodate as much as 1.5 million square feet of industrial floor space. The park's infrastructure will eventually be turned over to the Town of Westminster once complete. The Town and the park owner have been working together to secure funds for the park's infrastructure. In 2015, the Town secured a USDA Rural Development grant that enabled the Town to address a longstanding sewer capacity problem in the area where the park is located. However, more funding is needed to complete the park's infrastructure. The infrastructure, once in place, will help attract new industries to the business park.