



The City of Pittsfield, Massachusetts

Department of Community Development

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Director

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Master Plan Advisory Committee
FROM: Department of Community Development
DATE: October 12, 2011
SUBJECT: Master Plan Review

The City of Pittsfield Master Plan, adopted in April 2009, has provided valuable guidance to a wide range of city activities over the past three years. As a result, the City has made considerable progress in furthering many of the Master Plan strategies. This memorandum provides a summary of the progress made to date and is accompanied by a table which provides an in-depth analysis of actions to date as well as outlining potential future actions. This matrix is organized around the five elements of the plan: Land Use and Development Patterns; Housing Quality & Affordability and Neighborhood Development; Economic & Cultural Development and Historic & Cultural Resources; Transportation & Circulation and Public Facilities & Services; and Open Space & Recreation and Natural Resources Protection.

Some of the highlights of the accomplishments to date include:

Economic Development

- Designated William Stanley Business Park as a “Priority Development Site” under Chapter 43B and worked with Pittsfield Economic Development Agency (PEDA) to successfully permit development of two parcels at the Park.
- Participated in the development of the regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission including successfully advocating for recognition of the regional importance of several Pittsfield economic development initiatives.
- Developed a corridor plan for the southern gateway into the City along Rte 7/20 in partnership with the Town of Lenox with some of the recommendations of this plan reflected in the permitting of the new Price Chopper.
- Prepared a permitting guide, which is available on the City’s website, to help developers and businesses through the local permitting process(es) and created a full time Permitting Coordinator position within the Community Development Department who assists property owners and developers and coordinates activities with the various city departments, from the Building Commissioner to the Conservation Agent, involved in permitting development.
- Permitted the expansion of businesses such as O. W. Landergren and the redevelopment of industrially zoned land on West Housatonic Street and Federico Drive.
- Implemented \$9 million in downtown streetscape improvements, including improving downtown gateway directional signage.
- Consolidated the Tourism Commission with the Cultural Development Office, which is collaborating with Downtown Pittsfield Inc. to develop new community marketing materials and expand outreach activities.

- Developed new downtown historic walking tour brochure and historical medallions being installed throughout downtown as part of the streetscape and Common projects.

Housing

- Developed a detailed housing needs analysis for the West Side and Morningside neighborhoods (2009) which led to the City securing \$1.3 million in HUD Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds through the MA Department of Housing and Community Development for the redevelopment of four foreclosed properties in partnerships with Habitat for Humanity and Berkshire Housing Development Corporation. Three will be sold to first time home buyers and the fourth is being redeveloped as two affordable rental housing units.
- Continued funding and administration by the Department of Community Development of a housing rehabilitation program and the demolition of blighted structures, particularly in the City's urban center.
- Continued enhancement of code enforcement activities through the implementation of a city-wide shared software for permitting and code enforcement tracking; adoption of 40U, streamlining enforcement; establishment of a registry for non-owner occupied and vacant properties; and the use of CDBG funding for code enforcement in the West Side and Morningside Neighborhoods.
- Adopted an Urban Housing Tax Incremental Financing program and Smart Growth Overlay District (40R) which fostered the redevelopment of property on Bradford St, North Street and, currently, the redevelopment of the historic Silk Mill on Spring Street into 45 dwelling units.

Parks and Open Space

- Utilized CDBG funding in support of redeveloping Tucker Park, Carrie Bak Park, Springside Park and Westside Riverway.
- Acquired three strategic parcels on Dewey Avenue and installed a canoe launch at Waconah Park to further the creation of the Westside Riverway connecting Clapp Park and Waconah Park.
- Finalized plans for acquiring 74 acres off Barker Road, along the west branch of the Housatonic, as conservation land furthering the goal of preserving open space between Wild Acres and Clapp Park (acquisition should be completed before the end of 2011). Funding for this project is provided through the Natural Resources Damages Fund, which was a part of the settlement between General Electric, the US Environmental Protection Agency and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.
- Developed a community based vision for The Common and secured \$1.6 million in grant funds for the first phase of redevelopment.
- Developed a new skate park (to be completed before the end of 2011) including securing state grant funds for this project.
- Secured Metropolitan Planning Organization support for funding the acquisition, design and permitting of the northern section of the southerly extension of the Ashuwillticook Trail into Pittsfield and have received written confirmation from Housatonic Railroad of their willingness to sell the section of the railroad north of Crane Avenue.

Transportation & public services/facilities

- BRTA implemented a system wide modification of its routes in 2010, including enhanced use of smaller buses on targeted routes.
- Established a Green Commission and committed to and achieved a 20% reduction in the City's carbon foot print.

Development regulations and procedures

- Enhanced review of architectural style and pedestrian connectivity as part of Community Development Board site plan review process.
- Standardized procedures for historical reviews under the City's demolition delay ordinance.

While much has been accomplished and a wide range of activities have been guided by and/or validate the vision and strategies set forth in the Master Plan, it is important to institutionalize the vision set forth in the Master Plan in City regulations, thus ensuring that this vision shapes future development trends. As a result, we anticipate investing significant time over the next couple of years focusing on modernizing the City's development regulations. This includes:

- Recodification – while staff and boards have struggled with the magnitude of this effort, it is critical to address inconsistencies and obsolete provisions within the City's zoning ordinance. In addition, while the Community Development Board has informally strengthened its site plan review authority over the past several years, the site plan review criteria and procedures can become even more effective tools for the City in guiding development when formalized as a part of the recodification of the City's Zoning Ordinance. A revised draft of the Zoning Ordinance is currently being prepared for Community Development Board review in early 2012;
- Unification of Downtown Zoning Districts – The Downtown Arts Overlay District has provided the City with a tool to encourage and simplify the development of a mixed-use environment in the City's downtown. However, several underlying zoning districts still exist “under” the Overlay District. To further streamline and clarify the intent for the City's downtown, the underlying districts should be dissolved and a new downtown district be created that incorporates the provisions of the Downtown Arts Overlay District and requires a special permit for any allowed uses other than retail at street level;
- Design Guide – The City's development boards have used broad latitude over the past several years to influence the design of projects including applying architectural reviews and strengthening the buffering between uses. It is proposed that staff prepare a guidance paper that will assist developers in understanding what type of development the city is seeking and the value the city places on preserving community and neighborhood character while also supporting new development;
- Update the City's sign ordinance - The Zoning Board of Appeals has asked that the sign ordinance be revamped. A working committee made significant progress on this effort a couple of years ago, only to stall over the issue of grandfathering. The Department of Community Development proposes that the work of this committee be reviewed with the Zoning Board of Appeals with the objective of making recommendations to the Mayor and City Council in mid to late 2012; and
- Updating the Subdivision Ordinance – This is the regulatory procedure that guides most residential development. This document needs to be updated to reflect the objectives of the Master Plan of preserving existing community and neighborhood character while also encouraging new development.

There are a variety of reasons why strategies and actions related to land use development regulations and procedures have moved slower than other areas of the Master Plan, not the least of which is the amount of work required, the unglamorous nature of this work, and the hard decisions that will likely need to be made during these processes. In spite of these challenges, these are important actions to accomplish and critical to our ability to thrive as a community.

Finally, experience has shown that the Master Plan provides a solid foundation for evaluating opportunities (even when unforeseen) and taking actions that help us achieve our vision of being “a city in the country that retains and enhances livability. By encouraging appropriate growth and development, we will become economically stronger as well as a more attractive place to live, work, and visit.”