



PLANNING PRIORITIES

Contents

Community Identity	3
Priority: Retain Core Community Values in The Face of Change	3
Priority: Rebrand The City.....	3
Economic Development.....	3
Priority: Address Conditions That Make Employer and Employee Recruitment and Retention Challenging.....	3
Priority: Facilitate Economic Growth and Transition	3
Priority: Comprehensive Update of Zoning Code	4
Agriculture and Local Food	4
Priority: Ensure Access to Local Healthy Food.....	4
Historic and Cultural Resources	5
Priority: Treat Historic Resources as Asset	5
Priority: Support Stable and Vibrant Arts Community.....	5
Open Space and Recreation.....	5
Priority: Maintain High Quality Recreation Options	5
Priority: Offer Recreation Options for All Ages.....	5
Priority: Leverage Presence of Open Space and Wild Lands	6
Health and Wellness	6
Priority: Address Gaps in Health Care Service	6
Priority: Support Healthy, Active Lifestyles	7
Housing and Neighborhoods	7
Priority: Address Widespread Neighborhood Blight.....	7
Priority: Foster Residential (re)Investment.....	7
Priority: Integrate Public Housing Developments With their Larger Neighborhoods and Community.....	7
Infrastructure and Services.....	7
Priority: Improve Mobility Through Viable Multi-Modal Options	7
Priority: Rectify Issues Resulting From Past Deferred Maintenance and Investment in Infrastructure and Services.....	8
Energy and Climate	8
Priority: Reduce Dependence on Energy from Non-Renewable Sources.....	8

COMMUNITY IDENTITY

PRIORITY: RETAIN CORE COMMUNITY VALUES IN THE FACE OF CHANGE

North Adams, like many Berkshire communities, has a long history of residents with strong ties to and pride in their city. While the pace of change in the county as a whole has been slow, the city has experienced a steady population decline over the past decades. This population decline, however, does not mean that the population hasn't seen new residents move to the area. Recent years have seen an influx of new residents from outside of the area with new ideas and perspectives on the city. This plan will need to ensure that old-timers and transplants each have a place at the table to successfully build a new future without losing the rich history and community character valued by residents. Achieving a balanced perspective and definition for the future direction of the city will be an important component of the visioning process.

PRIORITY: REBRAND THE CITY

The city is in a period of rebirth but faces an uphill battle against a decades-old image as a “run-down mill town”. The vision developed through the plan will serve as the basis for communicating this new identity. As the vision is a first step in the planning process, rebranding actions will be set out and be able to move towards implementation in the next several months.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

PRIORITY: ADDRESS CONDITIONS THAT MAKE EMPLOYER AND EMPLOYEE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION CHALLENGING

Major employers and attractions in the city, including MASS MoCA, North Adams Regional Hospital, and MCLA note that blighted conditions throughout the city are a major obstacle to student, visitor, and employee attraction and retention. The visual impact of blighted and condemned buildings upon entry to the city, concrete flood chutes and chain link blocking off the river, vacant storefronts in Downtown, and the lack of aesthetic and other pedestrian and bike amenities present marketing challenges. Housing conditions and school quality were also discussed as other conditions that influence prospective student, business, and employee decision-making.

PRIORITY: FACILITATE ECONOMIC GROWTH AND TRANSITION

The city has struggled to gain economic momentum since the loss of mills and Sprague Electric. In developing a comprehensive post-industrial New Economy strategy, a number of factors will need to be considered and addressed:

Factor1: Baby Boomer Retirements

The majority of senior level positions in local community organizations and are nearing retirement. Because of population loss in younger age segments, there is a lack of professionals with the training and capacity to step in to fill these roles as retirements occur. This is a national trend but one that is perhaps amplified by the region's “brain drain” and high median age, as kids who go off to college seldom return to work in the region.

While employee recruitment to the city from elsewhere in the region or outside of the region is challenged by these same conditions, employers note that home grown talent is often preferred because of the connection and understanding of the community locals have. Recruitment is therefore a partial solution that needs to be balanced with local training and advancement opportunities.

Factor 2: Training and Capturing Younger Workforce

MCLA and Williams bring new young adults to the northern Berkshire region each year. These students offer an incredible economic development resource to the city and region. Identifying and building economic clusters around the core programs of these institutions to retain a talented young workforce should be a priority for the plan. Any such strategy should include the city, schools, and private business interests.

Factor 3: Widening Gap Between Haves and Have-nots

The community faces one of the highest poverty rates in the state, and the gap between those living in poverty and those who are financially stable has grown. This divide is both within the city and between the city and some of its neighboring communities where educational attainment and income divides become more pronounced. There was deep concern raised throughout the interviews that the plan take an honest look at the reality of social, economic, and structural conditions in the city; social equity should be a central community value reflected in the plan. Any strategy for moving the city forward must ensure that it raises the quality of life and opportunity for all residents – not just those already in the “haves” category. The focus should be on transitioning away from intergenerational poverty conditions, raising aspirations and increasing opportunity, and reducing dependence on social entitlement programs.

PRIORITY: COMPREHENSIVE UPDATE OF ZONING CODE

The city’s zoning code was originally drafted and adopted in 1956. There has been no comprehensive rewrite of zoning ordinances since that time. Modifications to the zoning code have been reactionary in nature – targeted edits to respond to some project-specific need. Over time this has had the cumulative impact of creating internal inconsistencies within the code. It also means that the tools the city has to shape and direct development have not kept pace with changing market trends and best practices. There are many opportunities to improve the code to be more user-friendly for property-owners and developers, such as clear rules, guidance from city officials, and streamlined, clear approval procedures. The plan will identify new tools to be included in a revised zoning ordinance and set the basis for a comprehensive rewrite of the city’s zoning ordinances. In the meantime, development will proceed under the existing code and zoning amendments will continue to be made to address issues as they emerge, in order to ensure projects can continue to move forward.

AGRICULTURE AND LOCAL FOOD

PRIORITY: ENSURE ACCESS TO LOCAL HEALTHY FOOD

While data is limited, practitioner observations note that hunger is a large and growing issue in the community. Poverty rates are high in the city and hunger has increased because of the national economic crisis. Hunger particularly impacts those on limited or fixed incomes including the disabled, elderly, and low-income workers. Some initiatives have arisen to help address food insecurity – including community gardens, feeding sites, and fresh food subsidies – but more

information is needed to assess the extent of need and the potential creative solutions to address hunger in the community.

HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

PRIORITY: TREAT HISTORIC RESOURCES AS ASSET

There are numerous historic assets of the city which provide an enormous opportunity for a high-quality fabric of the city. These resources, however, have been and continue to be lost to disinvestment and demolition by neglect. Major urban renewal projects in the downtown mid-century eliminated entire blocks of historic commercial storefronts on either side of Main Street. Currently, numerous churches are vacant and for sale with an uncertain future. Residential demolitions have been conducted for over a decade as properties fall into severe states of disrepair. Programs and incentives can be explored in the plan to develop a strategy for identifying and protecting historic resources in the city. This will likely include tools and strategies for overcoming barriers to restoration and reuse of commercial and residential properties across the city as well as in historic landscapes.

PRIORITY: SUPPORT STABLE AND VIBRANT ARTS COMMUNITY

The city has begun to attract new residents in the form of artists from across the country. These individuals prize the low cost of living, presence of major art and culture venues – including MoCA – and the natural environment. There are opportunities to help solidify and support this shift as both an economic and community development endeavor. Ideas to explore include ways to support new business start-ups and diversification of arts courses offered at the college (e.g., graphic arts).

OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

PRIORITY: MAINTAIN HIGH QUALITY RECREATION OPTIONS

Community aesthetics was a recurring theme in stakeholder interviews, impacting residential areas, business success and tourism. The fact that the city has many park and open space offerings is an asset – but one whose value depends upon the city’s ability to maintain them as attractive and inviting public spaces. Success in this area has been hampered in the past through unclear roles and responsibilities for park maintenance across departments and bare bones budgets. While financial resources will continue to be a consideration for years as the impact of federal and state budget cuts ripples through to local governments, the plan can work to identify opportunities to maximize the impact of the parks and recreation budget. Creative partnerships could be considered to help bring volunteer “sweat equity” to make small aesthetic improvements, but the city should budget for larger parks improvements projects.

PRIORITY: OFFER RECREATION OPTIONS FOR ALL AGES

Long-term residents of the city are aware of the many and varied recreation amenities in and around North Adams. Many of these resources, however, are not well communicated to newer residents, visitors, and potential residents and businesses. The plan can work to identify and map these resources as the basis for developing a strategy for informing locals and visitors about recreation options and programming. The planning process will also provide the opportunity to step back and identify gaps in the parks and recreation system. For example, handicap accessible trail segments, trail grooming priorities, safety treatments, downtown recreation options like the river, and age-specific amenities or programs.

PRIORITY: LEVERAGE PRESENCE OF OPEN SPACE AND WILD LANDS

The terrain and sense of isolation that have been viewed as a challenge to city reinvestment for the past decades is emerging as a key underutilized asset as technology and economic activity patterns change. The high quality of life amenities offered in the city – livable scale, interesting historic architecture, nearby colleges, and traditional downtown – are all further enhanced by the fact that the city is surrounded by vast areas of open space with two significant long-distance trail routes running through. There is a great opportunity to further enhance and “package” these assets as a year-round draw for visitors and residents. Beyond marketing, this also entails structural ways of highlighting the city’s natural assets through river enhancements, trail connections, and maps and signage. The reroute of traffic from Mount Greylock into the downtown is a key opportunity that the downtown can start now to prepare for.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

PRIORITY: ADDRESS GAPS IN HEALTH CARE SERVICE

While the overall quality of medical care provided by North Adams Regional Hospital and related physicians is credited as a key asset of the city, a number of health care issues and service gaps merged in stakeholder discussions:

- **Future of Hospital:** The uncertain future of the hospital is an enormous variable for health care in the city and all of northern Berkshire County. While it is generally anticipated that the hospital will continue to operate in a modified form, the current climate of uncertainty raises concerns.
- **Primary Care Providers:** There are no primary care providers accepting new patients in the city. While this does not necessarily impact current residents, it does impact new residents and businesses who would choose to locate to the city. This shortage is part of a larger national trend for doctors who specialize and locate in urban areas, two variables which contribute to higher earnings. While there is a national shortage of primary care physicians, recruitment to rural areas which often offer lower salaries exacerbates the problem.
- **Urgent Care:** There is a lack of an urgent care clinic which results in higher demand at the Emergency Room, and inefficiency and expensive alternative for the hospital.
- **Growing Language Needs:** Growing population of Spanish language speakers have limited opportunities for bi-lingual service at the hospital, which can potentially impact diagnosis and treatment.
- **Lack of addiction and mental health treatment and services:** The biggest community health challenges – addiction and mental health – also have the fewest resources available to help combat them. Needs cannot be met locally and there is a stigma associated with the mental health ward where serious addiction cases are sent in Pittsfield (Jones Ward).

The plan will need to foster a dialogue around these issues to identify strategies that can help overcome barriers to community health and wellness.

PRIORITY: SUPPORT HEALTHY, ACTIVE LIFESTYLES

Obesity and obesity-related illnesses are a primary health challenge facing the community. The obesity epidemic is the result of the culmination of various factors including diet, lifestyle, socio-economic status, culture, and genetics. Between public, private, and non-profit actions, there is a broad range of opportunities and initiatives that can be undertaken to combat obesity. Schools can also play a key role in providing prevention programming on nutrition, alcohol, tobacco, and drug use. The plan can examine opportunities to improve walkability, access to healthy local food, and recreation options, and promote healthy lifestyle choices.

HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOODS

PRIORITY: ADDRESS WIDESPREAD NEIGHBORHOOD BLIGHT

There are few neighborhoods in the city not impacted to some degree by vacancies and blight. While the pervasiveness of blight appears on the surface to be a negative and daunting condition, in reality there are few areas where blight has completely taken over. What this means is that many neighborhoods can be stabilized with targeted actions to a small number of properties. This is much easier than addressing consolidated areas of blight. The plan will help inventory neighborhood conditions to develop a targeted strategy to stabilize and improve neighborhoods through a variety of actions.

PRIORITY: FOSTER RESIDENTIAL (RE)INVESTMENT

A major contributing factor to the decline of neighborhoods is the lack of investment in residential properties. This is particularly pronounced in rental properties throughout the city where absentee landlords and slumlords do not reinvest into their properties. Disinvestment is blamed on the relatively low rents. Blight and unsafe conditions in low-income rental units is a serious concern. While recent inspection and enforcement changes will help address some concerns, the city can consider additional tools and strategies to promote investment and upkeep of properties.

PRIORITY: INTEGRATE PUBLIC HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS WITH THEIR LARGER NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITY

The historical and current approach of affordable housing development in the city is to develop specific housing developments for affordable housing. Initially begun in the 1960 in the US, this approach has fallen out of favor as the detrimental outcomes of “projects” became clear. Current affordable housing redevelopment best practices have shifted now toward a mixed-income neighborhood approach where affordable units are interspersed among market rate housing. This eliminates challenges that can develop in segregated areas of poverty, such as blight, crime, and general disinvestment.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

PRIORITY: IMPROVE MOBILITY THROUGH VIABLE MULTI-MODAL OPTIONS

A rural development pattern regionally coupled with narrow roadways and rights-of-way have resulted in low levels of pedestrian connectivity or multi-modal ways within and between communities. Pedestrian connections within the downtown and between the downtown and city neighborhoods are a critical component to improving mobility both for those without a car

and those who would prefer to walk or bike. Simple amenities like bike racks, benches, signage, and safe sidewalks can go a long way in improving the pedestrian environment. This has the added benefits of increased exercise, reduced energy use and emissions, and making a more lively and interactive community setting. Regionally, bike path planning efforts and improved transit service can make non-auto travel a more viable and functional option.

PRIORITY: RECTIFY ISSUES RESULTING FROM PAST DEFERRED MAINTENANCE AND INVESTMENT IN INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

The city has not operated with a Capital Improvements Program (CIP) in the past. Rather, department heads would annually submit a detailed budget to the Mayor but decision-making was unilateral and project priorities were not typically provided to the departments. The result was a reactionary approach where departments patched problems as they arose but did not often have the resources or direction to proactively and strategically address facility or equipment needs. The city now faces a backlog of capital investment projects which will require significant resources to address. Recent audit findings have recommended a CIP, a recommendation the city is interested in pursuing to help clarify investment decision-making procedures and identify priorities. This will allow the city to pursue the most effective grant opportunities to continually improve infrastructure and services in the city.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE

PRIORITY: REDUCE DEPENDENCE ON ENERGY FROM NON-RENEWABLE SOURCES

The city has taken major strides in the last two years to improve its renewable energy portfolio. Solar PV projects are planned for a stimulus-funded array on the high school (38kW) and a power purchase agreement development on the landfill (2.1 MW) for the spring of 2011. This will provide immediate and long-term energy savings for the city and school district. In addition, the city is working towards its Green Communities designation which will enable the city to apply to a restricted grant pool to fund additional energy efficiency and renewable energy projects. While these are significant strides, the Plan will enable the city to look deeper into other modes of energy generation, such as wind, and ways to improve energy efficiency in non-municipal buildings in the city.