

The Town of Athol has taken the initiative in creating a comprehensive community development plan through a number of planning efforts, beginning with a plan to restructure the local Town government in 2000. Over the past twelve years, the Town adopted the Town Charter, (2000), the Town Manager position, (2001), the Planning and Community Development Office (OPD), (2002), the Capital Improvement Plan (2000), the Master Plan (2002), the Needs Assessment Committee, the Industrial Park Committee, reorganized in 2000 and voted at the 2002 Annual Meeting as an EDIC, a zoning change for support of industrial development, (2003 and 2005), participation in the E0418 planning initiative, (2003), and the Urban River Vision, (2002/2003). The Master Plan is in the process of being updated by the Board of Planning & Community Development. The CDS draws specifically on the Athol Master Plan (MP), the Community Action Statement (CAS), the Athol Community Development Plan (CD Plan), the Capital Improvement Plan, the Commonwealth Development Principles (CDP), and other public planning events. The CDS was most recently updated with input from public meetings in October, November and December 2013.

The Town of Athol has identified two Target Areas: Target Area A, which encompasses several neighborhoods with the high need and demand for housing rehabilitation services and infrastructure improvement projects; and Target Area B, composed of Downtown Athol, which mixes manufacturing, commercial, municipal, civic, and residential uses (See attached Target Areas Map).

**NATURAL RESOURCES AND OPEN SPACE:** 84% of Athol's land area consists of forest, farmland, wetlands or surface water, characterized by scenic rolling hills and the Millers River watershed.

*The goals in this category are consistent with the sustainable development principle #1. Concentrate Development and Mix Uses - through the improvement of facilities at existing parks, and through creating recreational opportunity within walking distance of downtown, #4. Protect Land and Ecosystems -through protection of resources and through educational activities, and #5. Use Natural Resources Wisely – through land management and protection efforts*

#### **GOALS:**

- To maintain, improve and protect Athol's natural resources and to preserve and enhance public access to these resources
- To concentrate development, restore and enhance the environment, and conserve natural resources

#### **OBJECTIVES:**

- Re-start the feasibility study of a recreational Greenway trail connecting Athol to Orange, adjacent to the Millers River – [Rec. Dept., OPD (“Office of Planning & Development”), BPCD, Open Space Committee; by 2016].
- Create funds for agricultural and open space protection, especially for Ch. 61 Right of First Refusal property, using public and private resources – [MA APR program, Open Space Committee, Mt. Grace Land Conservation Trust, 2014, \$1 million].
- Develop new and expand existing, multi-recreational use trails connecting Athol's open space, natural, historic & cultural resources to its residential areas, and create better directional signage – [DCR, Mass. Tourism, North Quabbin Regional Tourism Council, grants, \$50,000].
- Improve facilities in existing parks through town appropriations or by applying for grants – [\$200,000, Rec. Dept., 2013 and ongoing].
- Expand and enhance public access points to the Millers River for recreational activities through public-private partnerships - [DCR, 2014, \$100,000].
- Create a Flood Plain Management Plan – [OPD, Cap. Imp. Committee - \$35,000, 2014].

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, FACILITIES & SERVICES:** Athol is the largest (12,000 population) community in the North Quabbin Region, and may be viewed as a hub for the coordination and support of social service initiatives, especially for Towns in Worcester County..

*The goals in this category are consistent with the sustainable development principle #1. Concentrate Development and Mix Uses by promoting the expansion of the existing library, #2 Advance Equity by providing strategic support for inclusive community Planning, #10 Plan Regionally by incorporating the area Community Action Plans in developing Social Service Strategies and by adopting regional District Improvement Plans.*

**GOALS:**

- To raise the quality of services available to area residents, and children and the elderly, in particular
- To improve the quality of life for those most in need of public services, with a priority on providing those that provide either education or literacy services as they relate to economic self-sufficiency.
- To develop area wide strategies for identifying and meeting the needs of area residents and businesses.
- Promote business development within specific economic opportunity areas.
- To improve the energy efficiency of all public facilities, using green technology practices whenever possible

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Collaborate with local agencies to support sustainable self-sufficiency supporting projects which target pre-employment, job training, workforce development and employment skills development – [CDBG, in-kind contributions, OPD, \$25,000]
- Continue working with regional educational institutions to offer programs at a satellite facility in Athol – [OPD, NQ Community Coalition, ongoing].
- Support the District Improvement Plan for programming and facilities and fund the construction of a new elementary school building – [ARRSD, DOE, USDA, SBA, 2014].
- Upgrade Town Building and Facilities to improve energy efficiency and implement Green Technologies – [Green Communities Grants, USDA grants, and loans, ongoing].
- Support the continued development of the North Quabbin Business Park – [EDIC, DIF, TIF, MassWorks, 2015 and ongoing, \$3.68M].
- Support the final renovations and opening of the new Senior Center, with multiple space for activities and meals – [CDBG PI, foundation support and local fundraising, Town Funds, 2014]
- Expand recreational opportunities for youth, such as Skateboard Park – [Recreation, Skateboard Committee, OPD, 2015 and ongoing, \$80,000].
- Support creation of a Downtown Revitalization Plan – [OPD, BPCD, MRPC, Chamber of Commerce, MA Downtown Initiative, 2014, \$10,000].
- Prioritize vacant town-owned buildings for reuse, renovation, demolition, etc. – [Vacant & Underutilized Asset Committee, ongoing, no cost].

**HOUSING:** 70% of Athol's housing stock was built prior to 1960 with 47% built before 1940. The population in Athol is 59% LMI, per the 2006 US Census data, with over 20% 60 years of age or older.

*The goals in this category are consistent with the sustainable development principles #1. Concentrate Development and Mix Uses through fostering redevelopment opportunities in existing building or vacant land, through promoting a housing rehab program, and in-fill development, and redeveloping and upgrade of existing infrastructure – particularly in the High Street Neighborhood to enhance livable communities and viable neighborhoods; by encouraging housing opportunities near community services and the downtown area, focused improvements in High St. and School St. neighborhoods; Principle #4. Protect Land and Ecosystems, by encouraging septic system repair and lead paint removal; Improve existing infrastructure to improve safety and water quality, drainage, and sewer service; Principle #6 to Expand Housing Opportunities through participation in housing rehab programs, housing initiatives, and development of housing strategy and implementation plans and support of infrastructure repairs, especially to enhance housing choices and opportunities.*

**GOALS:**

- To balance residential development with preserving community character
- To provide a mix of diverse housing options and additional affordable housing opportunities
- To improve infrastructure in residential neighborhoods as a means of improving safety and quality of life, and enhance health and conserve the environment.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Provide financial assistance for housing rehabilitation - including lead paint mitigation – [CDBG (grants and PI), Mass Housing "Get the Lead Out" program, OPD, ongoing, \$500,000].
- Support and initiate grants or other funding, including private development, for rehabilitation of public and private surplus, vacant or underutilized buildings, including mixed-used development, particularly in the downtown area – [DHCD, RPF for developers, OPD, 2015, \$750,000].
- Institute a revolving fund for septic repairs – [BPH, Mass. DPH, \$200,000]
- Promote infill housing development in and near the Town center, and support such projects over new housing development in open space areas and development towards the Town's periphery, particularly in areas that could be incorporated into a regional greenway [OPD, Peer to Peer program with DHCD, DHCD, Downtown Redevelopment Plan, ongoing, no cost].
- Promote – and facilitate – energy, heating, and weatherization programs like MassSave for homeowners and tenants – [MassSave, Green Communities grants, Energy Committee, OPD, ongoing, no cost]
- Develop a Housing Plan for the Town to address not only subsidized housing but also promoting mixed age/income options [DHCD, \$20,000, 2015].

**HISTORIC & SCENIC RESOURCES:**

*The goals in this category are consistent with the sustainable development principle, #1. Concentrate Development and Mix Uses by supporting preservation of historic resources.*

**GOAL:**

- To identify, promote, and protect Athol's historic resources including its structures, sites, and landscapes

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Athol Historical Commission (AHC) Inventory is complete – take the next steps for Historic District designation – [Historical Society, Historical Commission, OPD, 2014, \$1,000].
- Create outreach programs and brochures to increase the public's awareness of Athol's history

and historic and scenic resources, and to help market these resources as part of an initiative to promote heritage and recreational tourism within the Town and the region. – [OPD, Historic Commission, \$2,500, ongoing 2014].

### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:**

*The goals in this category are consistent with the sustainable development principle #1 Concentrate Development and Mix Uses by supporting rehabilitation efforts of existing commercial/industrial buildings particularly in the downtown area; and #10 . Plan Regionally by working with other area towns to establish a regional resource for encouraging business development.*

### **GOALS:**

- To encourage economic development which is balanced with the preservation of natural resources and the cultural landscape in order to maintain and enhance Athol's economic environmental and cultural integrity
- To support and encourage new commercial and industrial enterprises that provide stable full-time jobs with living wages, and help diversify Athol's current economic strengths.
- Improve employment opportunities for Athol residents by supporting job training and educational opportunities that improve the job skills and educational achievement

### **OBJECTIVES:**

- Support creation of a Downtown Revitalization Plan – [OPD, BPCD, Chamber of Commerce, 2014].
- Support and initiate grants to rehabilitate vacant or underutilized buildings, particularly in the Town Center, for commercial, mixed use or industrial uses. – [Vacant & Abandoned Building Committee, OPD, ongoing].
- Continue to encourage the development, expansion or retention of small businesses in Athol by promoting the North Quabbin Revolving Loan Fund – [OPD, NQ Coalition, ongoing].
- Continue development of the North Quabbin Business Park – [EDIC, OPD, ongoing].
- Continue to develop strategies for encouraging heritage and recreational tourism-related businesses in Athol – [NQ Chamber of Commerce, OPD, ongoing].
- Support expansion of the Agricultural sector as an economic driver by encouraging CSA business, community gardens, wholesale food enterprises including storage and processing – [USDA, OPD, Agricultural Commission, ongoing].
- Support the installation of high-speed fiber optic network(s) in Town – [Mass Broadband, ongoing].

**INFRASTRUCTURE:** Athol's infrastructure is old and out-of-date with much of it in need of full replacement. Much of the center of Town is on sewer and water systems, while outlying areas are on septic systems. The roads systems throughout the Town are in fair or poor conditions because of local financial constraints. The Town has been investing local, CDBG, and other funding into upgrading some of the systems but efforts fall short of the needs for repairs. The Town uses all of its Chapter 90 funding for on-going maintenance and upgrading of existing systems, and needs assistance with engineering planning so that project costs are realistic. The Town undertook a major upgrade to its wastewater treatment plant; and plans to upgrade some of its school buildings. The priority neighborhoods for improvements are the Grove Street Neighborhoods and, within the Greater Downtown Target Area, the Marble St/Exchange St. area and the Lord Pond Plaza, all of which have been identified as most in need of upgrading, town wide, (Athol DPW).

*The goals in this category are consistent with the sustainable development principles #1. Concentrate Development and Mix Uses by supporting the redevelopment of existing infrastructure; priority to High Street Neighborhood; second priority area is Green St. area where the majority of residents are LMI; by encouraging concentration of development through the reuse and improvements to existing infrastructure in or near the downtown area; Principle #8 to Increase Job and Business Opportunities by the construction jobs created through infrastructure projects; and #10 to Plan Regionally by working with regional and local agencies including the North Quabbin Chamber, the MRPC, Franklin County Chamber, Franklin County Planning and Mass Highway District for infrastructure planning – required for funding for construction; continue participation in Northern Tier Project and its infrastructure and transportation components..*

**GOALS:**

- Maintain Town roads, curbs, water and sewer lines, drainage systems
- Develop plans for future infrastructure projects
- Improve infrastructure in priority neighborhoods where systems are in the worst shape and a real threat to health and safety
- Create and support both local, regional, and State planning initiatives for infrastructure improvements

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Improve infrastructure at Grove Street neighborhood and Marble St./Exchange Streets – [DPW, CDBG, OPD, \$2M, 2014-5].
- Lord Pond Plaza Repairs – This parking lot serves the new Senior Center as well as several downtown retail outlets. The underground canal beneath the parking lot must be repaired, the parking lot reconstructed, and the traffic pattern reconfigured to improve safety – [DPW, \$500,000, 2016]
- Seek funding from Capital Improvements Committee for planning and matching funds in 2014 Annual Budget – [annual appropriations approved by the CIP to support CDBG funded infrastructure improvements for each year since 2005].

**TRANSPORTATION:** Athol is geographically isolated at the northern end of the Quabbin Region and the northwest corner of Worcester County, creating a high need for personal vehicle transportation in a region characterized by a shrinking job market. There is an expanding regional bus service that is supplemented by a G-link, demand response service that has been successful with creating regional links. Rt. 2, which is noted for needed safety repairs, passes through Athol, as does a freight only rail system. Road repairs, additional downtown parking, bridge repairs are cited as needed improvements.

*The goals in this category are consistent with the sustainable development principle #1. Concentrate Development and Mix Uses by supporting upgrades to the existing regional transit.*

**GOAL:**

- Increase access to public transportation options

**OBJECTIVE:**

- Support the local bus transportation system as an economic development strategy - Support ongoing public service, new terminal and bus routes, including links to Westminster Train Station and Greenfield – [State assessment to Town, State & Federal re-construction funds, and ongoing].
- Make the downtown, more pedestrian and bicycle friendly through the construction and rehabilitation of sidewalks and bike racks and lanes, and incorporate current design standards for

ADA compliance – [OPD, DPW, ongoing]

**ZONING AND LAND USE:** Athol has a Zoning Bylaw that has been in place for 28 years, with occasional specific revisions, with land use characterized by a shortage of land available for commercial and industrial development.

*The goals in this category are consistent with the sustainable development principles #1. Concentrate Development and Mix Uses, by encouraging commercial and industrial uses in appropriate areas.*

**GOALS:**

- To encourage commercial and industrial uses in appropriate areas
- To protect the Town's natural resources

To upgrade the Zoning bylaw using Smart Growth planning, i.e., complementary strategies that incorporate land use, economic development, preservation of resources, and other planning strategies

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Re-evaluate zoning language for Central Commercial District (downtown), particularly in regards to signage and aesthetics – [Planning Board, OPD, ZBRC, 2014].
- Upgrade the Athol zoning bylaw - including rezoning to accommodate industrial and business growth, preservation of rural character and strengthening of the Town's tax base – [Planning Board, OPD, ZBRC, 2014].
- Limit the extension of water and sewer infrastructure to areas planned for growth and development – [Planning Board, OPD, 2015]
- Consider additional zoning and subdivision bylaws to strengthen existing bylaws like Open Space Residential Design – [Planning Board, OPD, ZBRC, 2014].



**SUMMARY:** The Town has adopted a progressive approach with respect to planning and overall economic development, as is evidenced by the number of active local committees, reports and strategies generated over the last five years, and an increase in local and regional planning involvement. The Town continues to increase its overall planning capacity by a higher level of coordination of activities, through the efforts of the Athol Board of Planning and Community Development.

The priority projects for the Town of Athol— [DRAFT]

1. Identify future uses of **vacant and surplus publicly and privately owned buildings** and facilitate reuse through public-private redevelopment initiatives.
2. Support development and implementation of a **Downtown Redevelopment Plan**.
3. Update **Master Plan** and support the development of a **Housing Plan**
4. Fund and construct a **new elementary school** and continue to support of the District Improvement Plan for ARRSD, program & facilities improvements
5. As a designated Green Community, continue to make **energy efficiency improvements** to public buildings and facilities.
6. Support **housing assistance** to residents, including housing rehabilitation, septic system repairs and lead paint mitigation, and improved home ownership capacity.
7. Support the continued development of the **North Quabbin Business Park**.
8. Support services to residents that provide them with **tools to promote economic self-sufficiency** and improve their standard of living, including locally based **education and job training programs**.
9. Support **infrastructure repairs** to Grove Street Neighborhood and to Marble and Exchange Streets.
10. Support **upgrading the Town zoning bylaws** to accommodate industrial and business growth, preservation of rural character and strength of the tax base.
11. Support **local transportation** initiatives, both bus and rail.
12. Support the development of the **open space adjacent** to the **Library**.
13. Support the design phase of the **Greenway** project (Athol to Orange, along Millers)
14. Support the improvement of **facilities in existing parks**, especially Silver Lake
15. Work with surrounding towns to **regionalize services** as appropriate.

ATHOL TARGET AREAS A and B

