



# **Making Montachusett More Resilient**

## **Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy**

**Spring 2022 through Spring 2027**

**DRAFT PLANNING DOCUMENT  
FEBRUARY 7, 2022**



## Contents

<b>I. Executive Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
A. Key Trends	6
B. Regional Outlook and Position	12
C. Vision	17
D. High Priority Objectives	17
E. 2019 CEDS Projects	18
<b>II. Methodology: Making Montachusett More Resilient (MMMR)</b>	<b>20</b>
A. Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (MRCEDS) Update and Report	21
B. Community Participation in this Planning Effort	21
<b>III. Overview and Analysis of the Region</b>	<b>24</b>
A. <i>Background and History</i>	24
B. <i>A Picture of the Region – An Overview</i>	27
C. <i>Montachusett Region Analysis and Influences</i>	29
<b>IV. Regional Outlook and Position</b>	<b>73</b>
A. The Pandemic's Impact	76
B. Regional Strengths	77
C. Regional Weaknesses	79
D. Possible Opportunities	81
E. Potential Threats	87
F. Possible disconnect between business representatives and local government officials	90
G. Resources for Economic Development	95
H. Economic Development Partners	97
<b>V. Plan for Progress</b>	<b>100</b>
A. Vision	100
B. Goals and Objectives	100
C. Regional Resiliency	106
D. Action Plan	109
<b>VI. 2021 – 2026 MRCEDS Projects</b>	<b>113</b>
A. Future Route 2 Interchange at South Athol Road	113
B. Downtown Athol Infrastructure Improvements	113
C. South Athol Road and 100-acre Bidwell Site Development Plan	113



D. Millers River Greenway .....	114
E. LaunchSpace, Inc. ....	114
F. West Ayer Village Project .....	115
G. Rockbestos-Suprenant Site.....	116
H. Bigelow Spinning Mills .....	116
I. 285 West Boylston Street-37 South Meadow Road .....	116
J. Clinton STEM Center .....	116
K. Counterpane Brook Basic Drainage Improvements.....	116
L. Downtown Revitalization.....	117
M. Clinton Collaborative Workspace.....	117
N. Salerno Circle .....	118
O. 111 Hospital Road .....	118
P. Red Tail Heights .....	118
Q. 200 Boulder Drive .....	119
R. Lagoons Site, West Fitchburg .....	119
S. Sandpits, 0 Airport Road.....	119
T. Fitchburg State University Theater Block Project .....	119
U. Wachusett Business Incubator .....	121
V. Rear Main Street Corridor Project .....	121
W. The Mill Street Corridor.....	121
X. Gardner Industrial Park Study .....	122
Y. Downtown Street Scape Improvements.....	122
Z. Bike & Pedestrian Bridge over Route 140 .....	123
AA. Ayer Road Corridor .....	124
BB. Spanish American Center .....	125
CC. Revitalization of Downtown Leominster .....	125
DD. Sholan Farms .....	125
EE. Connection between Adams Street and Downtown.....	125
FF. Downtown Parking Garage .....	126
GG. Revitalization of Downtown Townsend.....	127
HH. Simplex Drive Industrial District.....	128
II. Westminster Business Park Industrial District.....	128
JJ. Commercial Drive Extension.....	129
KK. Enteral Street (Winchendon Village Downtown Area).....	129



LL. Lincoln Ave Ext. Revitalization (Toy Industrial Park Area).....	129
MM. Blair Square Redesign.....	129
NN. Poland / Streeter Schools.....	129

**This Strategy is being released for public comment. The public comment period will end at midnight on March 23, 2022. Please email all public comments to [mrpc@mrpc.org](mailto:mrpc@mrpc.org). Parties wishing to submit oral comments will be able to do so at an online public meeting to be held at 1:00 PM on March 24, 2022. The public meeting notice and meeting registration instructions will be posted on the MRPC’s website at [mrpc.org](http://mrpc.org) no later than 48 hours in advance of the public meeting.**

**Blank spaces in this document, such as this one, are intentionally left blank and may be used for imagery, such as photos or graphs, in the final version of this document.**



## I. Executive Summary

The Montachusett Region, settled as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> 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.

This section will be completed in March 2022 after the receipt of all public comments within the 30-day public comment period.



## 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.

From the US Census, American Community Survey 2019 data was obtained for this Strategy. Additional, valid data sources were also used. All sources are cited throughout the Strategy.

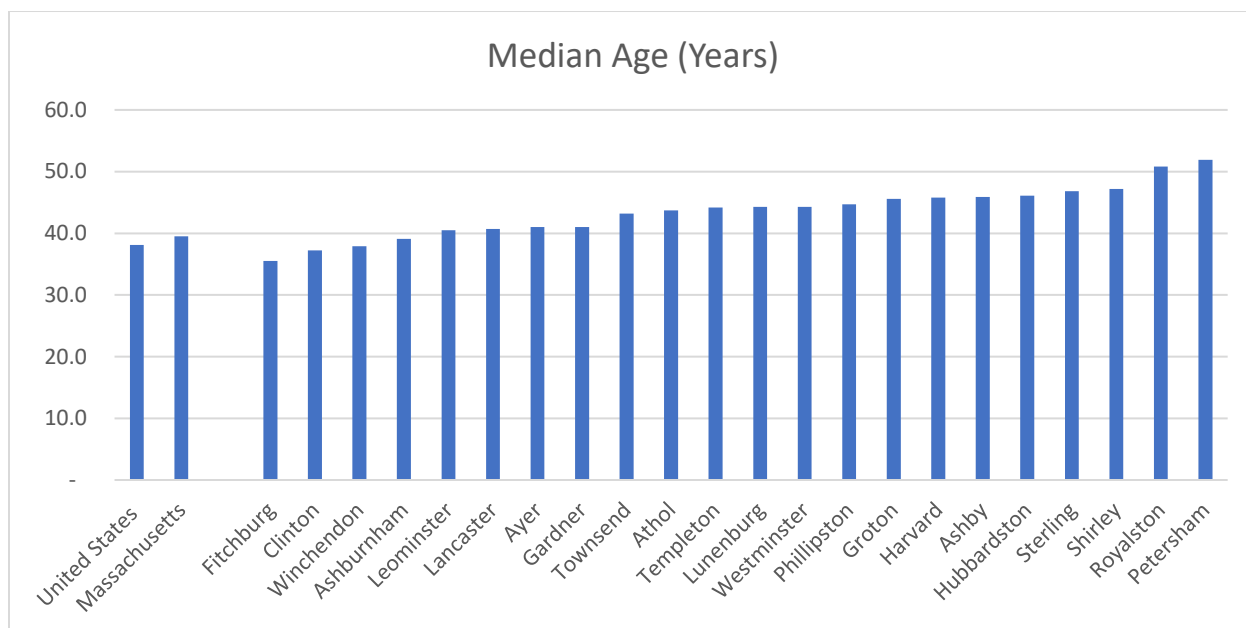
The 2020 Decennial Census “*City and town (incorporated place and minor civil division) population*” data will be published in May 2022 (Source, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/about/schedule.html>). Presumably, all other data sets will be published by the US Census after May 2022. Approximately one year after the Census’s publication of all of the data required by the MRPC to bring all demographic data in this MRCEDS up to date, MRPC will update all of the data tables in this Strategy with Decennial Census data.



## I. Aging population

Montachusett's communities, boast a higher median age than the state or nation 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 (2015-2019) 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 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, including service sectors, the region's experienced manufacturing workforce, accounting for 13.5% of all regional employment, and legacy industrial space represent comparative advantages that will ensure industry remains an economic cornerstone in the foreseeable future. (**Table I**).

Table I. Employment by industry

Industry (by 2-digit NAICS codes)	# of Businesses	% of Total Businesses	# of Employees	% of Total Employees
Manufacturing	412	3.87%	15,790	13.51%
Health Care/Social Assistance	629	5.90%	13,576	11.62%
Retail Trade	1,149	10.79%	11,820	10.11%
Educational Services	253	2.38%	9,550	8.17%
Accommodation/Food Services	510	4.79%	8,227	7.04%

*Source: ESRI Business Analyst Online (BAO) 2020*

The 2009, 2014, and 2019 Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (MRCEDS) made several observations about the decline in manufacturing jobs in our region, the shift of jobs into the services sector, and increases and decreases on other areas. In each MRCEDS, consistent declines in manufacturing employment were noted and offset by the fact that our employment in manufacturing remains higher than in the State and Nation, while they also declined. Key excerpts from the 2009 and 2014 MRCEDS documents, follow.





## 2009 MRCEDS

From 1990 to 2000:

- The number of manufacturers and the corresponding number of jobs in this sector has been on the decline since 1990, if not before
- At least 2,015 new jobs were created in the Montachusett Region. However, new job growth of 1.9% did not keep pace with population growth in the region at 6.1 %.
- A significant job gain occurred in the Services & Public Administration sector. This sector increased by 12,844 new jobs 35.5%).
- The construction trade gained 574 new jobs increasing 9.9% over the 1990 level.
- Less people were employed in the Wholesale & Retail Trade sector in 2000 than in 1990. This sector decreased by 5,186 jobs (24.3%).
- The number of manufacturing jobs declined by 4,709 (15.2%). However, it should be noted that the percentage of jobs in the region in Manufacturing remains slightly higher than both the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (12.8%) and the Nation (14.1%).

## 2014 CEDS

- In the 2014 MRCEDS, it was documented that “manufacturing jobs in the (Montachusett) region decreased by 7,777 (-29.7%) since the year 2000. But the percentage of jobs in the region in manufacturing remains higher (16.1%) than both the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (9.7%) and the Nation (10.8%).”
- There was a much higher percentage of the population employed in manufacturing in 2009 than in 2014; 24.4% of the inhabitants were employed in widget-making. The following has been excerpted form the 2009 MRCEDS. “Within the Montachusett Region, the highest concentrations of employment by industry are in the Services & Public Administration (45.7%), Manufacturing (24.4%), Wholesale & Retail Trade (15.0%), Construction (5.9%) and Finance, Insurance & Real Estate (FIRE) (5.0%) sectors.”



While 13.5% of employees working in the region work in manufacturing now, this percentage exceeded 20% in the late 1990's. In only 25 years the region has experienced both a precipitous drop in manufacturing employment to 13.5% in 2019. In addition, there has been a shift of employment into the retail and service industries where many of the new jobs in these sectors compensate individuals at a lower rate; these jobs do not command higher wage positions paid by the manufacturing industry.

As stated above, manufacturing employment has declined greatly. How much more of a decline will our region experience? This CEDS has analyzed and produced recommendations for how to improve the economic resiliency of the region in the wake of a major event; the economic decline that has impacted the world, our Nation, and Region because of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Prior to implementing actions to make this Region more resilient, all regional economic development partners must first address the matter of the significant loss of manufacturing employment, understand the shifts in employment into other employment sector (i.e. services and retail), and then determine which segment of employment should be supported/augmented over others, or decide if all segments be supported, equally. Recommendations concerning improving economic resiliency are included in this planning document.

While the manufacturing sector of the regional economy is a significant contributor to employment in our region, it is "not the only game in town." Over the past 30+/- years efforts have been made by many parties to promote the region's tourism assets (i.e. hiking at Mount Tully in Athol, boating the Millers River from Athol to Orange, farm tours and pick your own fruit farms, in addition to the larger facilities such as Wachusett Mountain for skiing and Great Wolf Lodge. Lodging facilities, our hotels and BnB's, enable visitors to stay overnight which was something that was virtually unheard-of prior to 1990. Visitors to the region can eat at any one of the hundreds of restaurants in the region. All, four regional chambers of commerce, the Johnny Appleseed Trail Association, Inc., and others promote the region as a great place to visit and live.



### 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 13% 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	2019	2000	2019
High school degree or higher	85.3%	88.8%	90.7%	94.6%
Bachelor's degree or higher	21.2%	26.7%	27.3%	40.8%

*Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates*

Educational attainment in the region remains lower than the state as a whole. In 2019, it was estimated that 92.7% of men and 94.9% of women aged 25 to 34 in Massachusetts received a high school degree or higher, while 48.19% and 57.37% respectively 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.

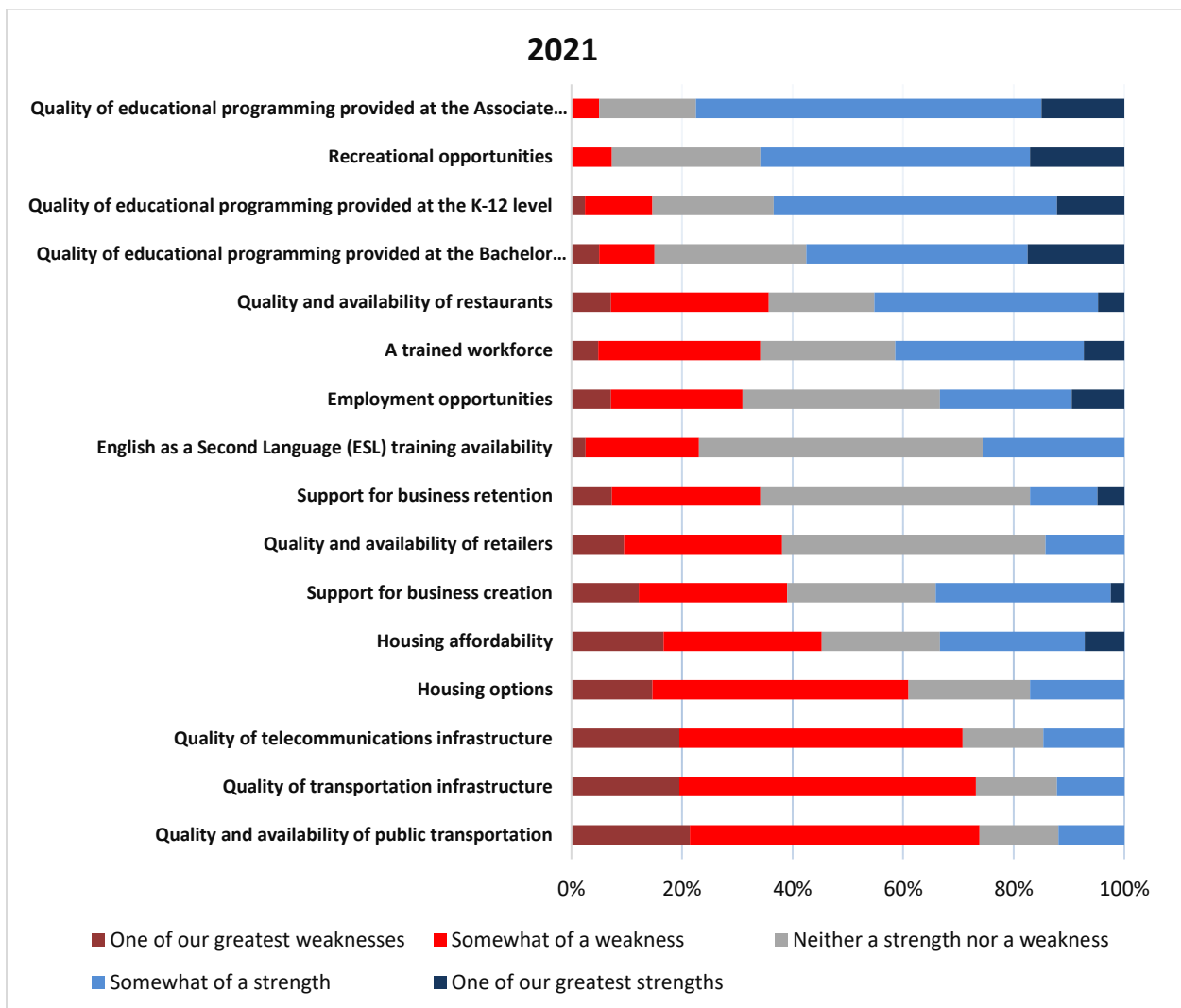


## B. Regional Outlook and Position

Between May and June of 2021, MRPC distributed a brief online survey to local elected and appointed officials, chambers of commerce, and community leaders seeking their input on the region's economic health. This survey was nearly identical to one distributed in May of 2019, the design of which had been informed by discussions of regional strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities with the MRCEDS Committee.

Not only did this second survey provide invaluable information regarding the state of Montachusett's post-COVID-19 economy, it also furnished a clear measure of how local perceptions had shifted over the past two years. These findings are discussed further in **Chapter V. Regional Outlook and Position.**

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



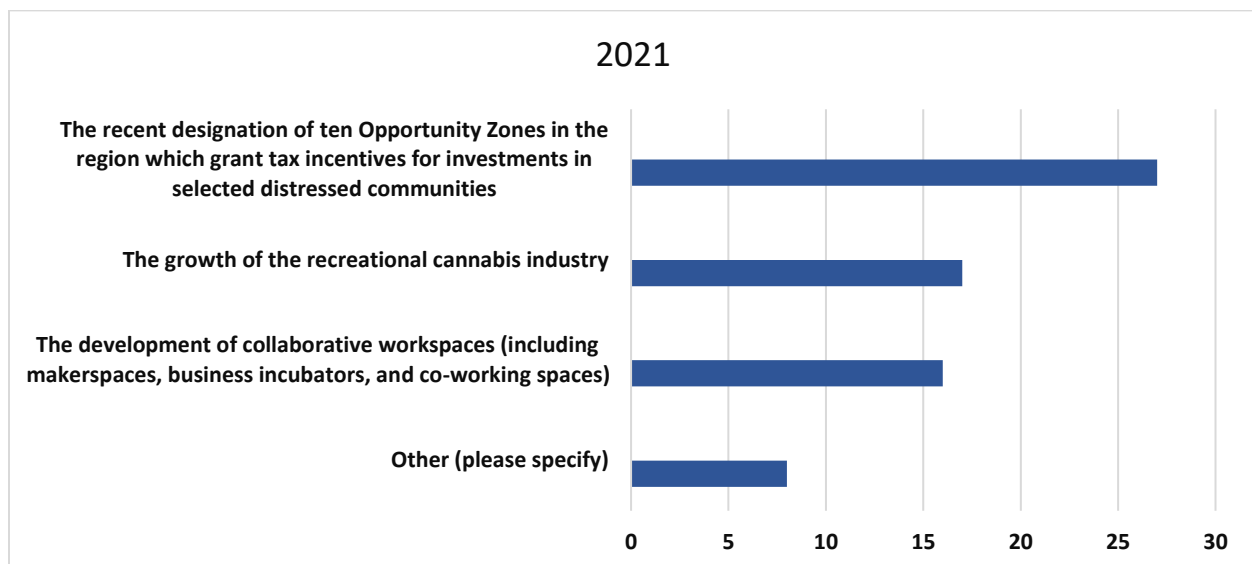


The three most commonly identified strengths, identified by summing the percentage of respondents who rated an option “Somewhat of a strength” or “One of our greatest strengths,” in the region were quality of educational programming at the associate degree level (as identified by 77.5% of respondents), recreational opportunities (65.9%), and the quality of educational programming provided at the bachelor’s degree level (63.4%).

The three most identified weaknesses in the region, utilizing the same method in relation to those who identified items as “Somewhat of a weakness” and “One of our greatest weaknesses,” were the quality and availability of public transportation (73.8%), the quality and availability of transportation infrastructure (73.2%), and housing options (70.7%).

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 should be supported.

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



The designation of ten opportunity zones across the Region was the most commonly identified priority. Launched in 2017 under the previous administration, this federal program provides tax incentives for development within specially designated, economically distressed neighborhoods (Source, <https://eig.org/opportunityzones/history#:~:text=The%20bill%20was%20first%20introduced,the%20respective%20states%20and%20territories.>). 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. 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.



Growth within the cannabis industry was closely followed by the development of collaborative workplaces or “makerspaces,” representing the second and third priorities respectively identified. A number of cannabis producers have located within the region, often making use of dormant 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century manufacturing space. Until recently, the high ceilings common to these buildings rendered them impractical for modern manufacturing and difficult to repurpose. However, this problem is easily overcome by growers who can hang heat lamps for cultivation at varying heights and adjust their production to fit the space available. This labor-intensive industry has reactivated properties that have often laid dormant for years, creating new jobs in traditional urban centers in the process.

Collaborative workspaces enable businesses with a very affordable space for the creation of their respective enterprises by providing support entrepreneurs need to develop new employable skills and collaborate with others on business endeavors. According to LawInsider.com, “Collaborative workspace means coworking, shared working environments that promote collaboration, interaction, socialization and coordination among tenants through the clustering of multiple businesses or individuals within the shared work environment” (Source, <https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/collaborative-workspace>).

These collaborative workplaces, or “makerspaces,” have the potential to develop the facilities and programming capacity to assist inhabitants in the region to strengthen their collective work skills outside of traditional education and training facilities. Makerspaces have the potential to supplement traditional educational and job training organizations (i.e. K-12 and secondary education schools and other job training facilities supported by the North Central Workforce Board) and respond more quickly to the needs of local employers in their workforce training needs (especially manufacturers).

Multiple CWP’s/makerspaces will be needed throughout the entire region especially in the population and employment centers such as, but not limited to, Ayer, Athol, Clinton, Fitchburg, Gardner, Leominster, Shirley, Sterling, and Winchendon. Regardless of the aforementioned recommendation, CWP’s/makerspaces should be located in all communities in the Montachusett region. They should exist in all schools in addition to those that are currently in operation or in the formative stages in Athol/Orange (LaunchSpace, Inc), Gardner (Chair City Legacy Makerspace and Wachusett Business Incubator [WBI]), and in Winchendon (the local, grassroots group has not yet chosen a name by this nascent organization is being supported by Winchendon HEAL (Source <https://healwinchendon.org/>)). This will improve access to the centers by those inhabitants that depend on low-cost transit services to access all services in a community. They will need a combination of support from members of the users of the facilities, private, local, state, and federal support to help set up and operate these job training centers. The existence of funding programs for collaborative workspaces (such as the EDA operational support program and MassDevelopment’s Collaborative Workspace Program [CWP]) will also help provide necessary resources for starting and supporting these places that will be scattered throughout the region.



Equally important to the provision of low-cost spaces for starting-up and scaling-up businesses at regional “makerspaces” is the opportunity for the “makerspaces” to serve the function as job training facilities. One of the functions of “makerspaces” is to provide intensive training in the uses of tools and equipment in a very short amount of time and at affordable prices. Learning how to use a 3D printer in a college environment (such as Mount Wachusett Community College) will take a student two semesters; students must take CADI and CADII for two, successive semesters and the students are not allowed to operate a 3D printer until the second semester. In this scenario, students invest more than 48 hours learning CAD (Computer Aided Design) in the fall semester and then take another 48-hour, three-credit course in the spring. A practical example of this, follows.

One of the MRPC staff and contributing authors of this MRCEDS took a two-hour 3D printing course at the *WorcShop* makerspace in Worcester; his cost was \$60.00 and he was operating the 3D printer in the second half of the two-hour session. In another example, a 3D printing tutor taught five students how to make a 3D-printed name badge at LaunchSpace, Inc. in Orange, MA.

There are many advantages of improving jobs skills of inhabitants at an academic institution; credits toward a certificate or diploma and earning these are obvious. However, academia can only react to the needs of the workforce at a certain pace. Steps involve identifying a gap in the skills of the inhabitants of a region, developing a curriculum, to address the need, obtaining funding, marketing the coursework, and casting a net for trainees. “Makerspaces” do not have these impediments. Their coursework is created by the makers involved in the organization and a formal curriculum is not necessary. Obtaining students is up to the trainers and training sessions are offered at costs that are much lower than the price per course of an academic institution. However, “makerspaces” do not provide the credentials provided by community and four-year colleges. In conclusion, MRPC asserts that all forms of educational training facilities are needed; academic, “makerspaces,” and those courses provided by the North Central Massachusetts Workforce Board (NCMWB). In our region there exists Fitchburg State University (FSU), MWC, and the NCMWB, but the number of fully functioning “makerspaces” is very low.

The status of each, known makerspace in the Montachusett Region, follows.

- LaunchSpace, Inc. started in Orange and is not in the process of setting up its second campus in Athol. At the Orange campus classes in 3D design and printing, wood working, pottery, photography, sewing, and electronics are provided. With a membership of 25 this organization is growing and is poised to become the only job training center in the North Quabbin Region;
- Chair City Legacy Makerspace (CCLM) has emerged as an organization whose mission is to see that legacy woodworking skills of retired inhabitants of the Greater Gardner Region are transferred to future generations and, in doing so, CCLM’s leadership will address adverse mental health conditions of skilled wood workers, mostly retired, that



feel that their skills are all for not as the furniture industry in this subregion died more than a decade ago. This organization of interested persons may move toward created a non-profit organization;

- A group of cottage industry producers of food products is emerging in Winchendon and they need to set up a “makerspace” for the production and packaging of their foodstuffs (so far the food makers are producing beef jerky, jellies and jams, confectionaries, and other local concoctions). Their objective is to create a small commercial kitchen “makerspace” where food products and some crafts will be made and sold. Technical assistance is being provided to this group by Winchendon HEAL ([website here](#)) and MRPC staff (as MRPC has created a market and feasibility study of a “makerspace” and has amassed some knowledge in this area. This loose organization of inhabitants may move toward created a non-profit organization; and,
- A high tech “makerspace” is in the formative stage of development in downtown Gardner. The Greater Gardner Business Incubator Network, Inc. dba Wachusett Business Incubator (WBI) is opening its new office at 31 Lake Street, Gardner (in a commercial office space that is in a complex of buildings that comprised the former Heywood-Wakefield furniture Manufacturing Co, Inc. that closed in the 1980’s and put 3,000 people out of work). Unfortunately, WBI lost funding, its Executive Director, and its former office late in 2020. Currently in rebuilding mode, WBI has opened its new office on February 1, 2022. The WBI’s main purpose is to provide business planning technical assistance (BPTA) services to entrepreneurs starting- and scaling-up businesses. WBI is most interested in working with inhabitants creating new intellectual property; “inventors.” WBI had 15 clients prior to the pandemic. Most of the inventors had already completed the design work related to their new IP, but not all. Some of them had designs and had also created a prototype of their new widget, but not all. WBI needs to create a small, in-house, design and rapid prototyping capability for future clients creating IP. To this end, this 501(C)3 non-profit organization is in the process of implementing a fundraising campaign by pursuing public and private sector (foundation) grants to fund the purchase of machinery and equipment (M&E), continuation of BPTA services, and operations. From February through June 2022, WBI is in the process of preparing grant proposals to be submitted to MassDevelopment’s Collaborative Workspace Program (CWP), a private foundation located in Gardner, and other sources to purchase the M&E that will enable the organization to purchase computers, laptops, design software (i.e. CAD apps), 2D and 3D printers, and supporting equipment with which it will be able to provide design and small-scale rapid prototyping equipment in order to assist inhabitants creating new IP to move into production quickly thus creating new manufacturing job opportunities for inhabitant throughout the entire region.





### **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:

1. Education provided to all inhabitants of the region and at all levels (K-12, postsecondary, and adult training and retraining) that matches the needs of all employers;
2. Workforce development and training to the region's inhabitants regardless of their household income;
3. Marketing and cross-marketing efforts that complement the efforts of all parties for the primary benefit of the region's inhabitants;
4. Brownfields and non-brownfield sites redevelopment;
5. Renewable energy development through the adoption of local permitting that expedites the processing or permitting while balancing the local character of communities as determined by local planning documents (i.e. comprehensive [master], open space and recreation, and other relevant plans);
6. Commercial and industrial land development located in areas with sufficient transportation and infrastructure assets (i.e. appropriate roadways, rail, airports, water, wastewater, drainage, electricity, and high speed Internet and other amenities as may be needed) that are appropriate identified in local and regional planning documents and in keeping with local zoning districts (i.e. comprehensive [master] plans, regional Priority Development Area and Priority Preservation Plan (PDA/PPA), and a Future Industrial Lands for Long Term Economic Recovery [FILLTER] plan;
7. Transit programs and transportation improvements that will provide opportunities for the workforce, of all incomes, to travel seamlessly and efficiently from homes to places of employment);
8. Equitable growth and development that address the needs of all Montachusett inhabitants, workers, and employers; and,
9. Housing development, improvements, and programs that provide a supply that is affordable and sufficient for the region's workforce;

We strive to preserve and balance the need for new developments to enable local and regional growth with the need for the preservation open spaces, enhancing the quality of lives life for residents, while making the area more attractive for business owners and employees considering starting new businesses, expanding existing operations, and relocating ventures into our region.

### **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 of Existing Sites and Development of New Sites Where and When Appropriate
7. Fostering the Creation of New Businesses, Supporting the Expansions of Existing Enterprises, and Business Attraction of Existing Ventures that will Call the Montachusett Region, “Home;”
8. Education;
9. Housing;
10. Public Health and Safety; and,
11. 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:

- A. Town of Athol
  - a. Future Route 2 Interchange at South Athol Road
  - b. Downtown Athol Infrastructure Improvements – Athol, MA
  - c. South Athol Road and 100-acre Bidwell Site Development Plan – Athol, MA
  - d. Millers River Greenway – Athol and Orange, MA
  - e. LaunchSpace, Inc. – Athol, MA
- B. Town of Ayer
  - a. West Ayer Village Project- Ayer, MA
- C. Town of Clinton
  - a. Rockbestos-Suprenant Site – Clinton, MA
  - b. Bigelow Spinning Mills – Clinton, MA
  - c. 285 West Boylston Street-37 South Meadow Road – Clinton, MA
  - d. Clinton STEM Center – Clinton, MA
  - e. Counterpane Brook Basic Drainage Improvements – Clinton, MA
  - f. Downtown Revitalization – Clinton, MA
  - g. Clinton Collaborative Workspace – Clinton, MA
- D. Devens
  - a. Salerno Circle – Devens, MA
  - b. I I I Hospital Road – Devens, MA
  - c. Red Tail Heights – Devens, MA
- E. City of Fitchburg



- a. 200 Boulder Drive – Fitchburg, MA
  - b. Lagoon Site, West Fitchburg – Fitchburg, MA
  - c. Sandpits, 0 Airport Road – Fitchburg, MA
  - d. Fitchburg State University Theater Block Project- Fitchburg, MA
- F. City of Gardner
  - a. Wachusett Business Incubator – Gardner, MA
  - b. Rear Main Street Corridor Project – Gardner, MA
  - c. The Mill Street Corridor – Gardner, MA
  - d. Gardner Industrial Park Study – Gardner, MA
  - e. Downtown Street Scape Improvements – Gardner, MA
  - f. Bike & Pedestrian Bridge over Route 140 – Gardner, MA
- G. Town of Harvard
  - a. Ayer Road Corridor – Harvard, MA
- H. City of Leominster
  - a. Spanish American Center – Leominster, MA
  - b. Revitalization of Downtown Leominster – Leominster, MA
  - c. Sholan Farms – Leominster, MA
  - d. Connection between Adams Street and Downtown – Leominster, MA
  - e. Downtown Parking Garage – Leominster, MA
- I. Town of Townsend
  - a. Revitalization of Downtown Townsend – Townsend, MA
- J. Town of Westminster
  - a. Simplex Drive Industrial District – Westminster, MA
  - b. Westminster Business Park Industrial District – Westminster, MA
- K. Town of Winchendon
  - a. Commercial Drive Extension – Winchendon, MA
  - b. Central Street Revitalization (Winchendon Village) – Winchendon, MA
  - c. Lincoln Ave Ext. Revitalization (Toy Town Industrial Park Area) – Winchendon, MA
  - d. Blair Square Redesign – Winchendon, MA
  - e. Poland & Streeter Schools – Winchendon, MA



## II. Methodology: Making Montachusett More Resilient (MMMR)

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. (Relevant information may be found at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/senate-bill/1134?r=21>.)

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*

(Further information regarding CEDS documents can be found at <https://www.eda.gov/ceds/>.)

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 prerequisite 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***

In accordance with CEDS Guidelines, promulgated by the EDA on June 1, 1999<sup>1</sup>, 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. 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. By coordinating this update with other local and regional plans, including community Master Plans, Open Space & Recreation Plans, Housing Production Plans, and the 2020 Montachusett Region Transportation Plan among others, the CEDS will serve as a vehicle that promotes the integration of economic development with other planning efforts and activities across the Region.

While the most recent five-year update was conducted in 2019, the COVID-19 Pandemic and successive economic downturn that began in March 2020 threw those findings and priorities into question. In July of 2020, MRPC was awarded a grant by the EDA to review this document and update it to account for COVID-19's impact on the Region and its economy. In doing so, every effort has been made to create a clear and concise CEDS for communities and stakeholders to utilize for economic development planning throughout the Region. MRPC will continue to collaborate with the EDA and other EDA-funded entities and non-EDA funded organizations (all partners regardless of funding source[s]) on the development and implementation of this strategy's priorities.

## ***B. Community Participation in this Planning Effort***

### ***1) Public Meeting and Input***

Public outreach surrounding the 2019 CEDS redraft began with a public meeting of the MRCEDS Committee on February 21, 2019 where MRPC staff presented regional and local demographic data they had recently collected in relation to that update. On March 27, 2019, draft goals and objectives were distributed, discussed and prioritized with local economic development leaders and facilitators in the region. On June 4, 2019 a MRCEDS Committee meeting was held where participants had an opportunity to comment on this document. At the same meeting, the MRCEDS Committee voted to recommend to the MRPC Commissioners to adopt this CEDS

---

<sup>1</sup> The four most recent MRCEDS updates were completed in 2008, 2009, 2014, and 2019. MRPC's Executive Director required the Planning and Development Department to update the MRCED on the same four-year cycle as the Montachusett Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) for two reasons. First, the goals and objectives of the MRCEDS and the RTP should coincide with one another and complement future projects listed in both planning documents. Also, to ensure that the data collecting activities of all MRPC employees conducted by "Department A" in year "201X" were not then duplicated in a succeeding year by "Department B."



document conditionally subject to the incorporation of any relevant comments received up until July 1, 2019.

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 6, 2019 meeting of the MRPC. At this June 6<sup>th</sup> meeting, MRPC Commissioners voted to adopt the CEDS document conditionally, subject to the incorporation of any relevant comments received up until July 1, 2019. The draft CEDS document was posted on MRPC's website for a 30-day comment period from May 31, 2019 to July 1, 2019 and emailed to regional stakeholders.

After joining the MRPC in September of 2020, McDermott undertook a concerted outreach effort as one of his tasks. The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce (NCMCC), which covers many of the same communities as the MRPC and had previously employed McDermott, had recently conducted a "business impact survey" related to the Pandemic with the help of the MRPC and other assorted nonprofits. This work culminated with a public presentation on November 13, 2020 that attracted roughly twenty-five participants and included McDermott among its presenters (See Attachment \_ for the Business Impact Survey). Throughout the project, McDermott utilized the opportunity to introduce himself to regional stakeholders in his new capacity and highlight how the NCMCC's efforts complemented the work he would undertake in relation to the CEDS.

In the year that followed, three meetings of the MRCEDS Committee would be held in relation to the strategy's revision. Like the CEDS update process in 2019, a meeting was held on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, to review recently updated demographic information that was to be incorporated into the plan. A second meeting was held on June 30, 2021, during which the committee discussed a recently completed survey detailed below.

On January 11 and March 24, 2022, MRPC held two, final public review meetings on the latest incarnation of the MRCEDS. The MRCEDS was posted online at [mrpc.org](http://mrpc.org) for the obligatory 30-day comment period while hard-copies of the document were sent to 22 city and town clerks and all of the libraries in the Montachusett Region. A press release was issued on February 8, 2022 to draw attention to the availability of the MRCEDS in the city and town halls throughout the Montachusett Region. Comments received for this final comment period have been appended in Attachment \_ to the MRCEDS.



## 2) Regional Surveys

In Spring 2019, the MRPC distributed a pair of surveys to local officials, chambers of commerce, social services organizations, and representatives of minority groups. The first gauged their impressions of the region's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats ("SWOT Analysis") while the latter asked them to identify local and regional economic planning and development projects. This second survey focused to identify projects that would prove critical to retaining and creating jobs over the coming years.

As noted above, this process was repeated in 2021, with both redistributed in May and June of that year. Summaries of these project requests, listed by community, are provided in **Sections IV and VI** of this report.



### 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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).

There are four regional chambers of commerce in the Montachusett Region: Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce; Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce; North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce; and, the North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce. They each promote their respective regions, or beyond. Statements concerning the amenities within each subregion of the Montachusett Region are highlighted, , below.





## Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce

From its website, the Greater Gardner Chamber promotes recreation and other assets in its region.

- With true local New England flavor, the Greater Gardner area boasts a wealth of community, cultural, educational, and recreational opportunities for fun, enrichment, and friendly involvement with neighbors and residents. Choices range from such passive pursuits, such as enjoying the historic atmosphere and beautiful New England landscape, to more strenuous endeavors, such as contra dancing or an outing in the great outdoors, a favorite for many.
- Our seven-community region contains 25 lakes, two alpine ski areas, a state forest, state park, two enclosed ice-skating rinks, and five 18-hole golf courses. A day visit to Dunn State Park, for example, will provide a great variety of activities year-round including swimming, fishing, kayaking, skating, hiking, and many enriching educational activities for children of all ages. Plenty of other locations in our region offer similar outdoor opportunities as well as places to ski, snowmobile, play golf or tennis, ride bicycles, and more.

(Source, <https://gardnerma.com/our-communities/>.)

## Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce

- The Nashoba Valley Chamber promotes the \_\_\_ communities in its service area, especially promoting historic sites and other assets for historic and other tourism efforts. (Source, <https://www.nvcoc.com/our-communities/>.)

## North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce

The North Central Chamber has a regional tourism council and promotes North Central Massachusetts through its website.

- An effort to diversify the economy by expanding the regional tourism and hospitality industry has proven increasingly successful in recent. *Visit North Central Massachusetts*, the area's regional tourism council (RTC), has made concerted efforts to attract visitors who reside within a day's drive, roughly 50 miles, of the Region (<https://www.visitnorthcentral.com/>). These efforts include familiarization tours with influencers, selective advertising, maintenance of the Johnny Appleseed (Trail Association, Inc. and) Visitor Information Center on Route 2 in Lancaster, and publication of a quarterly magazine. This organization places a particular focus on agritourism businesses



such as Red Apple Farm in Phillipston and Sholan Farms in Leominster and assisted in convincing Great Wolf Lodge to develop a New England location in Fitchburg.

### North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce

Rich in history, recreational, and cultural amenities, the North Quabbin Chamber proudly promotes its region through its Visitor Center website (Source, <https://www.northquabbinchamber.com/visitors-center>.) Excerpts from its website follow.

- When you visit the North Quabbin...
  - You are visiting the quintessential New England destination amazingly preserved and filled with breathtaking scenery, historic villages, farms and orchards.
  - Hike, bike, paddle, fish, ski, snowshoe, climb, or bird the 100,000 acres of public conservation land. Discover one of our dozens of festivals that occur in every season, our rich artisan culture, enjoy a concert, go apple picking, stay in a charming bed and breakfast, sample incredible produce, cheese, wine and ale.
- Our Mission
  - The North Quabbin Visitor Bureau's mission is to develop the North Quabbin Region of Central Massachusetts as a travel destination by promoting and supporting the travel and hospitality industries of the region.
  - A Division of the North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce located in Athol Massachusetts

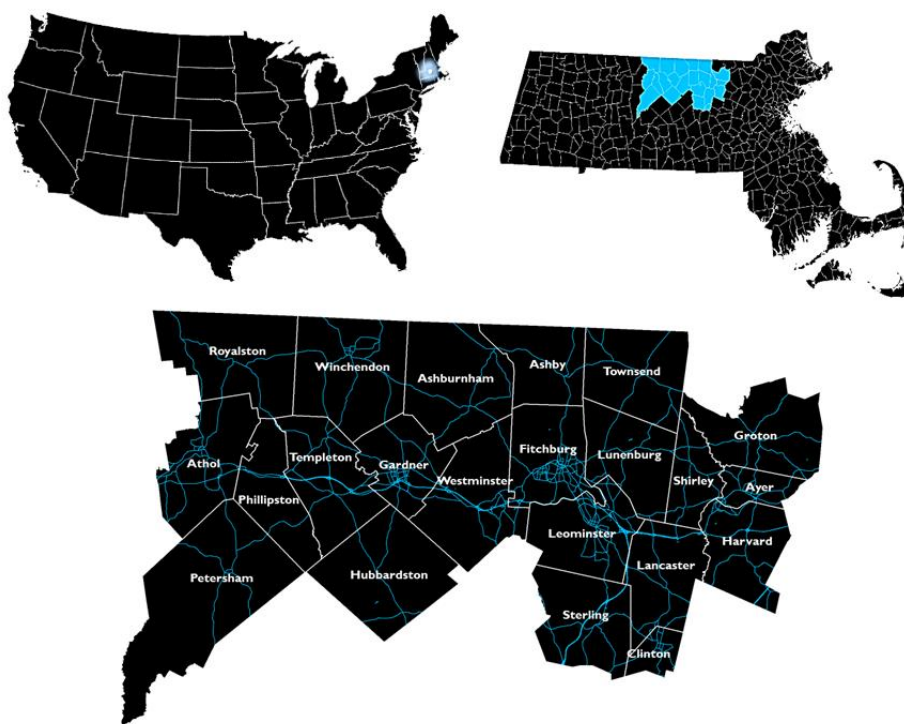
This attempt at diversification has thus far proven to be successful providing additional jobs in the Region, adding entry-level jobs for many new workers and lessening the Region's dependence upon the manufacturing sector. Despite the Pandemic's disproportionate impact on this industry, "Recreational opportunities" and "Quality and availability of restaurants" were both identified as regional strengths in the 2021 SWOT analysis. As the economy reopens, ensuring this sector's recovery and continued growth in coming years will remain a priority for the MRPC and its partners.



## B. A Picture of the Region – An Overview

Montachusett is historically a manufacturing-intensive region which today is home to 244,481 people across 22 communities in north-central Massachusetts. Even today the Region boasts the highest concentration of manufacturing in the Commonwealth. However, following state and national trends, manufacturing's share of regional employment has declined as growing shares of the workforce shift towards 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), and supporting coworking spaces, collaborative workspaces or “makerspaces,” and support zoning changes that allow more people to create “home occupations” and work-at-home in the wake o the COVID-19 Pandemic, 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 (Wachusett Station, Fitchburg) to major urban centers (Cambridge home of Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT] and



Boston, our State Capitol). 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

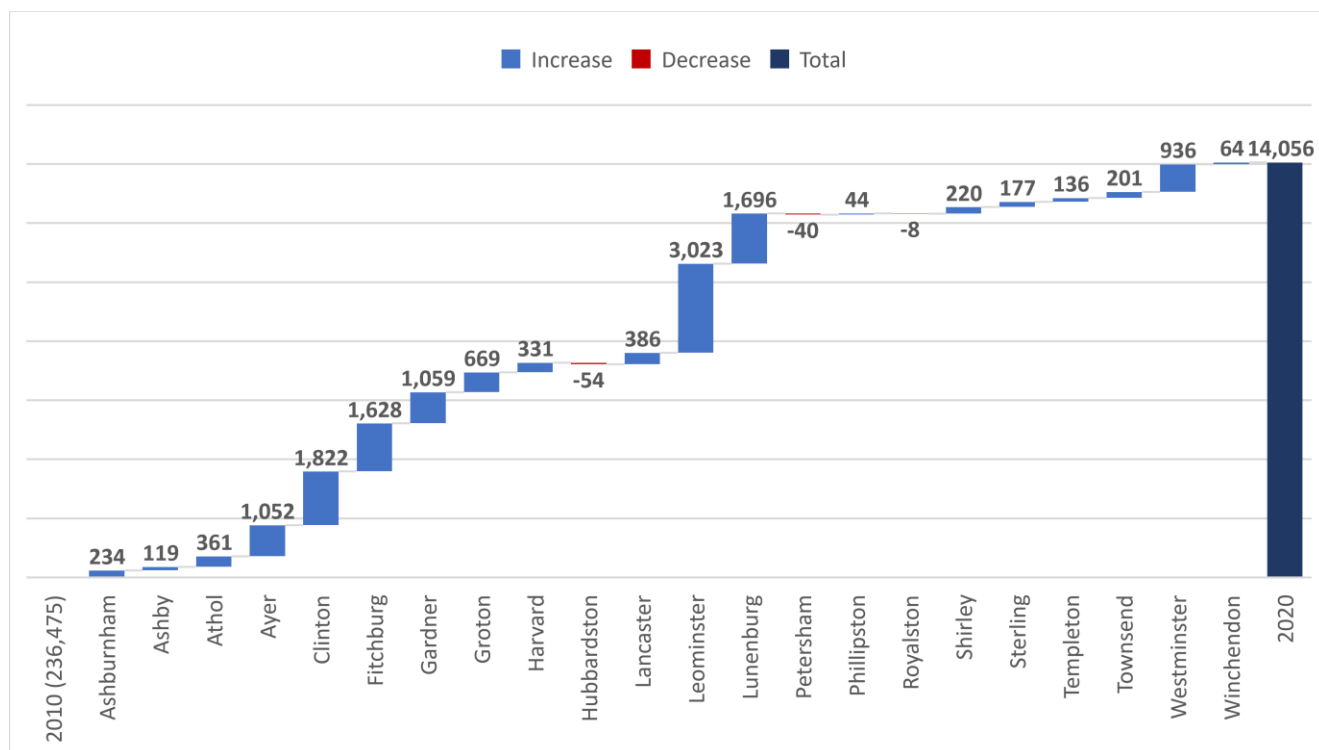
Since the publication of the 2014 CEDS update, new demographic and economic data for the region, state, and country has become available. The purpose of this section is to provide an update of the best available data, which generally is no more than one to two years old, depending on the source. The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

### I) Demographic Characteristics

#### a) Population Change

The Montachusett Region witnessed a 5.94% increase in its population from 2010 to 2020, welcoming 14,056 new residents during this time (see **Figure 5**). As of 2020, the Region boasts a population of 250,531 residents across its 22 communities.

**Figure 5. Population change in the Montachusett Region (2010 to 2020)**



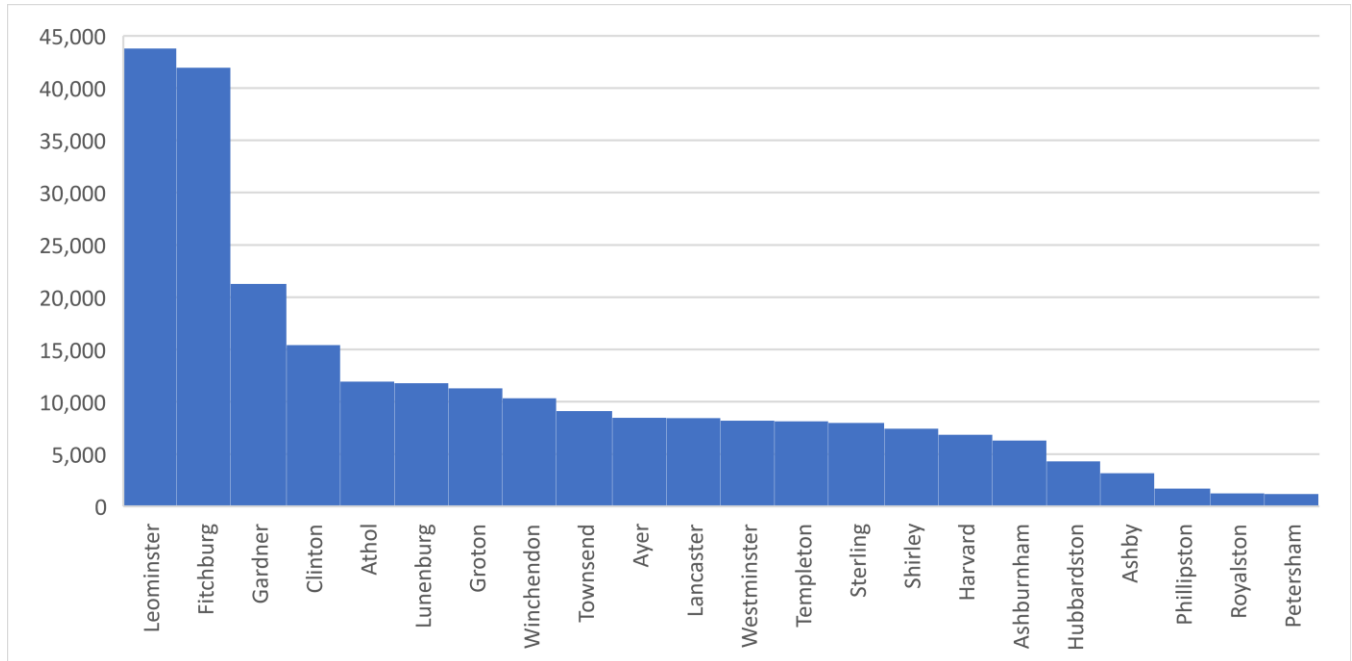
Source: US Census, QuickFacts; [Map: See how each Mass. town has changed according to new census data](#), Fujiwara, *Boston Globe*, 8/12/2021

Leominster saw the largest rise in population between censuses with approximately 3,023 new residents, or a 7.42% increase from 2010. At the same time, Lunenburg witnessed the steepest percentile growth with a 16.82% increase over the same period. However, most communities



saw more modest population increases, averaging to an addition of 639 residents or 4.92% growth each. Three Towns even experienced decreases. The populations of Royston, Hubbardston, and Petersham each receding by between 0.64%, and 3.24%.

**Figure 6. Population by community**



Source: US Census, QuickFacts; [Map: See how each Mass. town has changed according to new census data](#), Fujiwara, *Boston Globe*, 8/12/2021

Fitchburg and Leominster remain the largest communities by far, with over forty thousand individuals calling each home. These are followed by Gardner, with slightly over twenty thousand residents. The remaining nineteen surrounding communities range in population from just above a thousand residents to over fifteen thousand. This is indicative of Montachusett's historic landscape, with business interests and the accompanying workforce concentrated in the three dense, heavily developed cities, surrounded by lightly populated, rural communities.

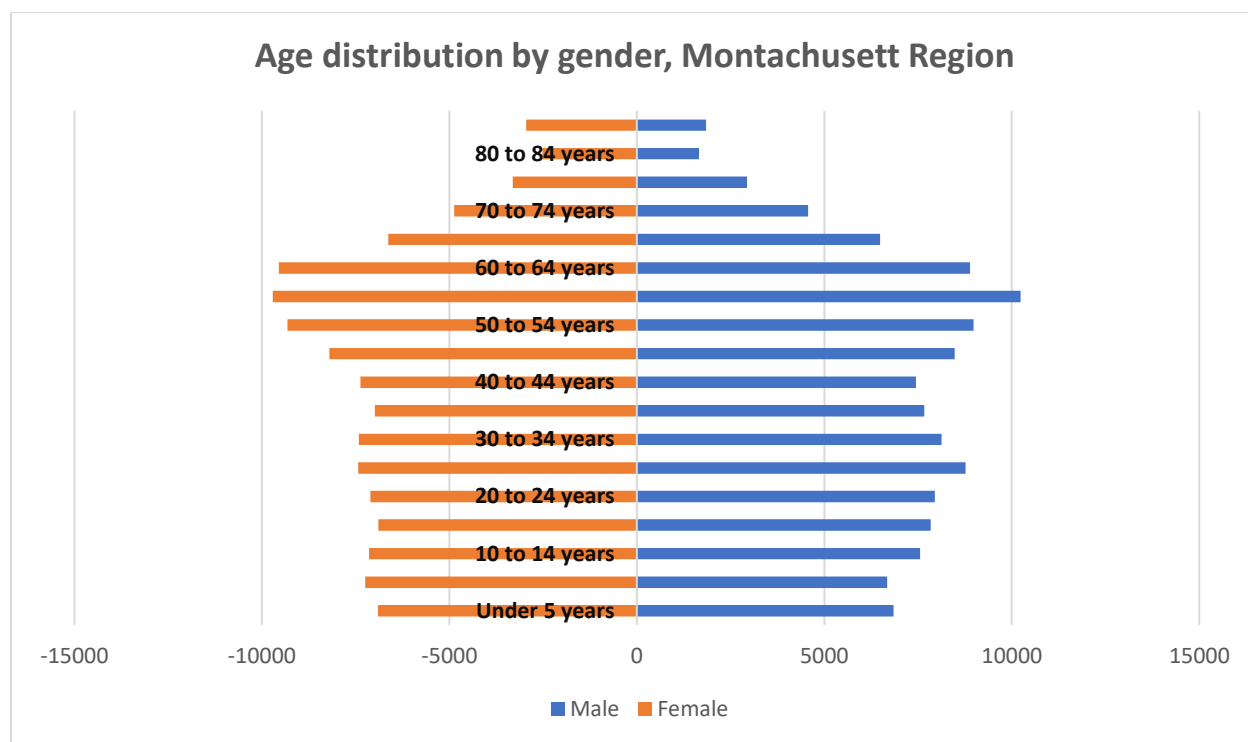
#### *b) Age Breakdown*

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 2019, 18 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 (22.5%) of Montachusett residents are between the ages of 45 and 59 years old.

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



**Figure 7. Age distribution by gender, Montachusett Region**



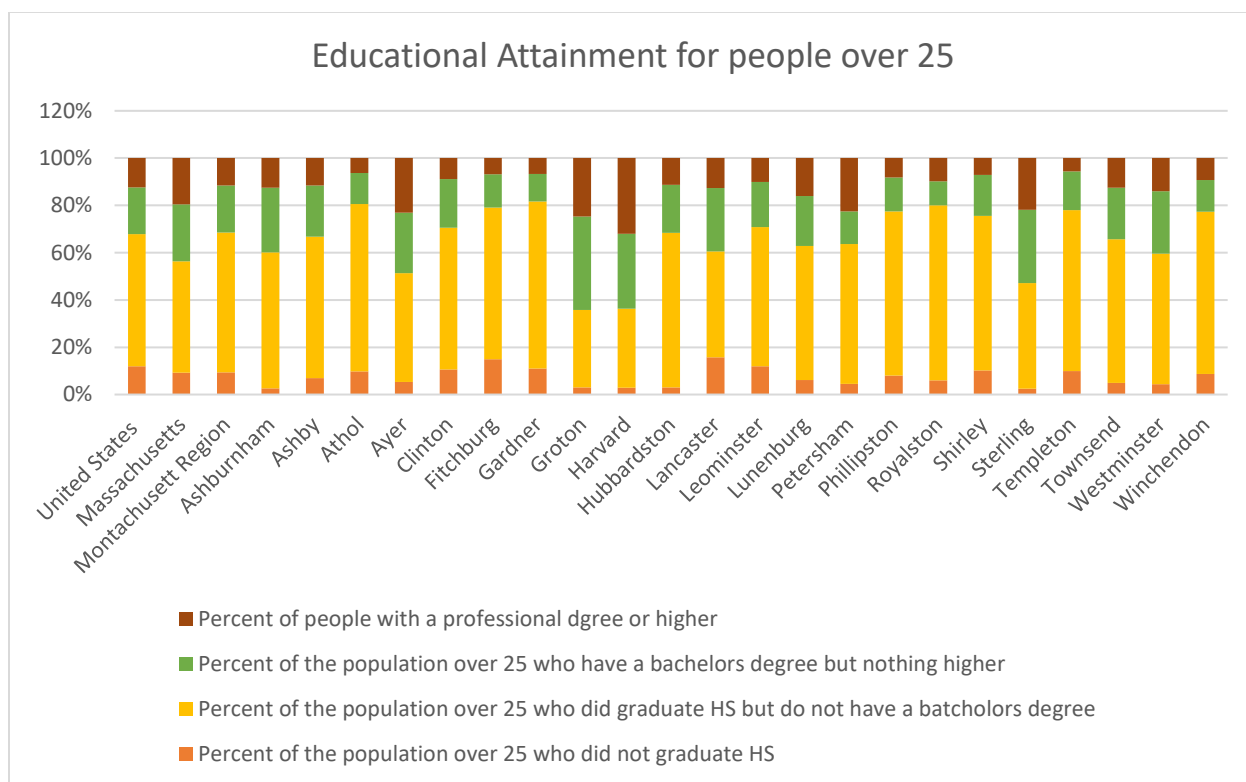
Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates

*c) Educational Attainment*

Montachusett communities range considerably in terms of educational attainment (see Figure 7, above). This can be seen in the share of residents by community with a bachelor's degree or greater. This figure grows to as much as 64% in Groton and Harvard while dipping below 20% in some other communities. On average, the Region's communities are nearly in lock step with the nation regarding educational attainment. Still, the disparities in achievement between communities coupled with heightened educational attainment throughout the Commonwealth demonstrate that gains must still be made.



**Figure 7. Highest level of educational attainment, Montachusett Region**



Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates

Table 3 illustrates that the level of educational attainment is apparent across the board for those aged 25 to 34 years old. Graduation rates between 2000 and 2019 grew for both males and females for both high school and bachelor's degrees and higher. Most significantly, the Region witnessed a 13.5% increase in the proportion of women aged 25 to 34 years old with a bachelor's degree or higher.

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

Highest level of educational attainment	Male		Female	
	2000	2019	2000	2019
High school degree or higher	85.3%	88.7%	90.7%	94.6%
Bachelor's degree or higher	21.2%	26.7%	27.3%	40.8%

Source: US Census, American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates

As noted earlier, educational attainment in the region remains lower than the state. In 2019, it was estimated that 92.7% of men and 94.9% of women aged 25 to 34 in Massachusetts received a high school degree or higher, while 48.19% and 57.37% respectively received a bachelor's degree or higher. This increased educational attainment is indicative of how workforce demands have shifted in recent decades.



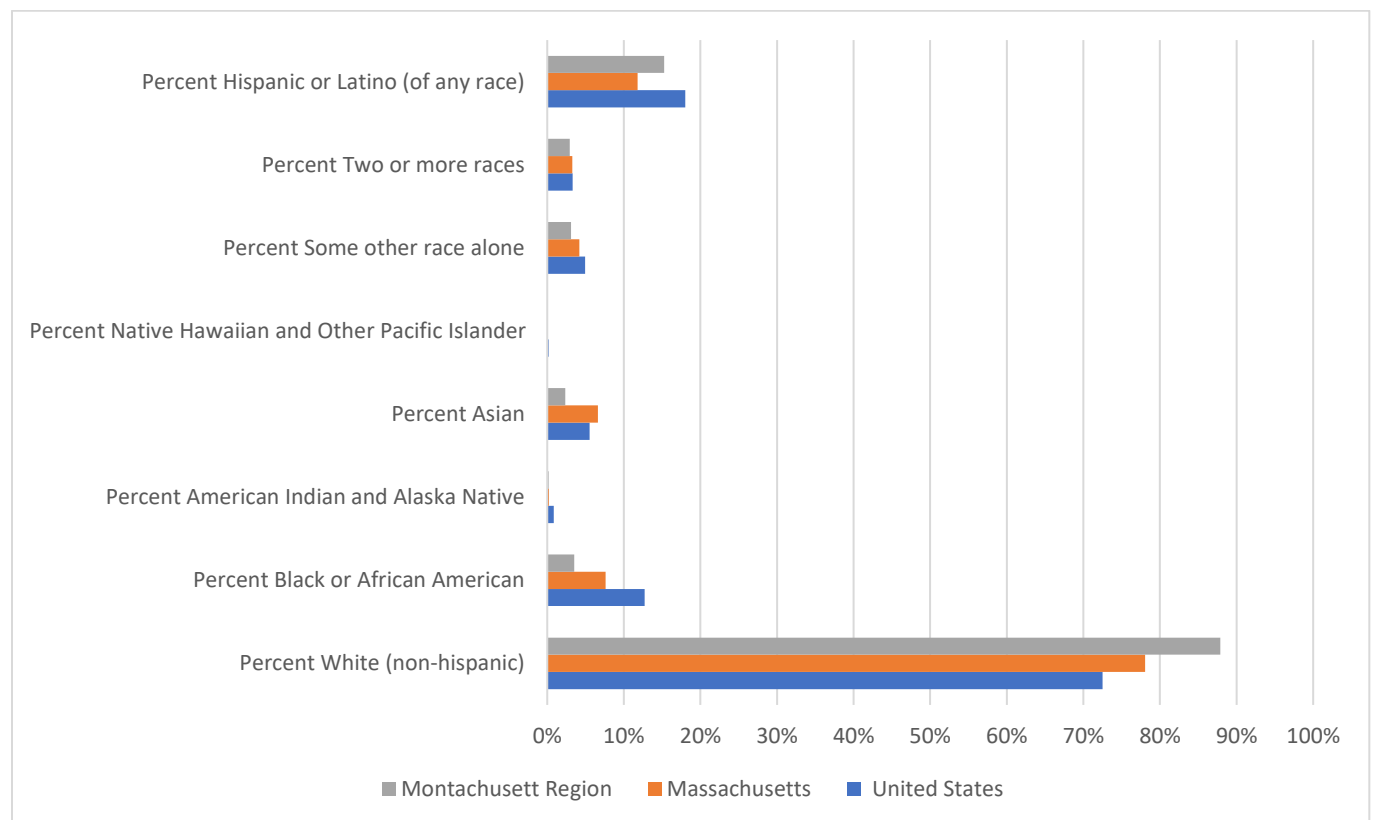


For that reason, it is critical that the Region continues its efforts relative to workforce development. These steps include promoting continuing education or training among young residents who are about to or have recently graduated high school. They should also involve attracting the type of young, educated professionals and tradespeople employers are actively seeking out. Doing so would assist in attracting such employers, ensuring those presently here choose to stay, and improving the diversity and resiliency of Montachusett's economy.

#### d) Race

The inhabitants in the Montachusett Region are predominantly white reflecting the National trend of the majority of white people are located in rural regions. However, the Montachusett Region's racial makeup 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 8**), alongside a higher proportion of residents who identify as "Hispanic or Latino (of any race)" than the Commonwealth.

**Figure 8. Race in the Montachusett Region compared to Massachusetts and the United States**



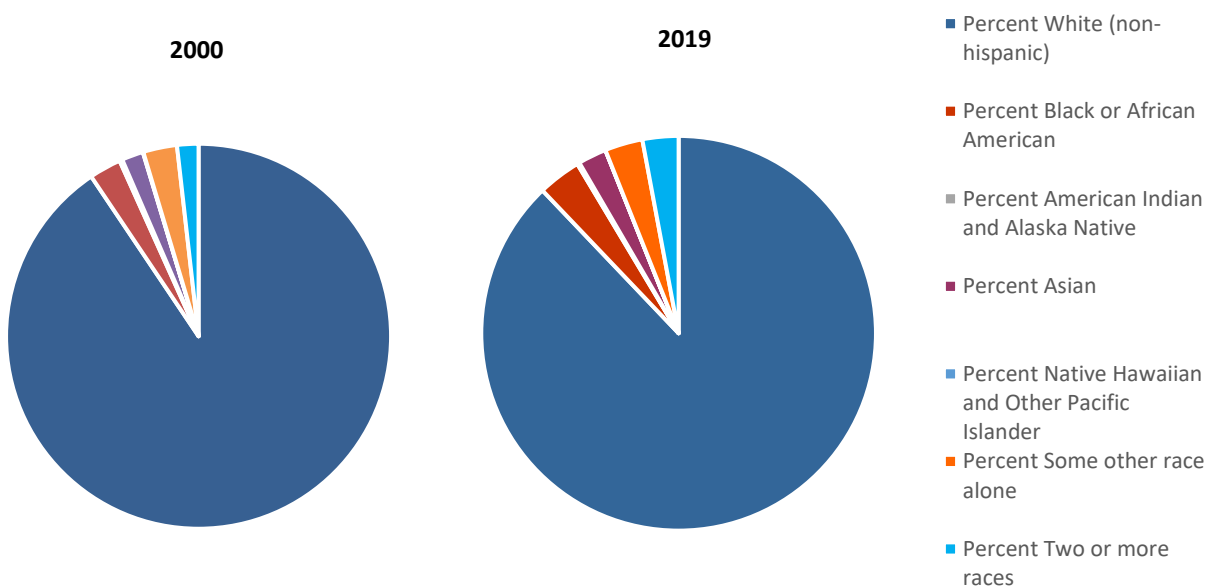
Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates



However, the Region has grown increasingly diverse since the turn of the Century. The American Community Survey's (ACS) estimates for 2019 reflect this, with the following demographic changes as they pertain to race:

1. The number of Hispanic residents more than doubled- growing by an estimated 21,675 to 37,347 (+138.3%);
2. The number of residents who self-identified as Black or African American alone grew from 6,127 to an estimated 8,642 (+41.1%);
3. The number of Asian residents is estimated to have grown from 4,098 to 5,704 (+38.2%); and,
4. The number of residents who identified as two or more races likely increased from 4,127 to 7,207 (+75.9%).

**Figure 9. Race in the Montachusett Region (2000 to 2019)**



Source: US Census, American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates



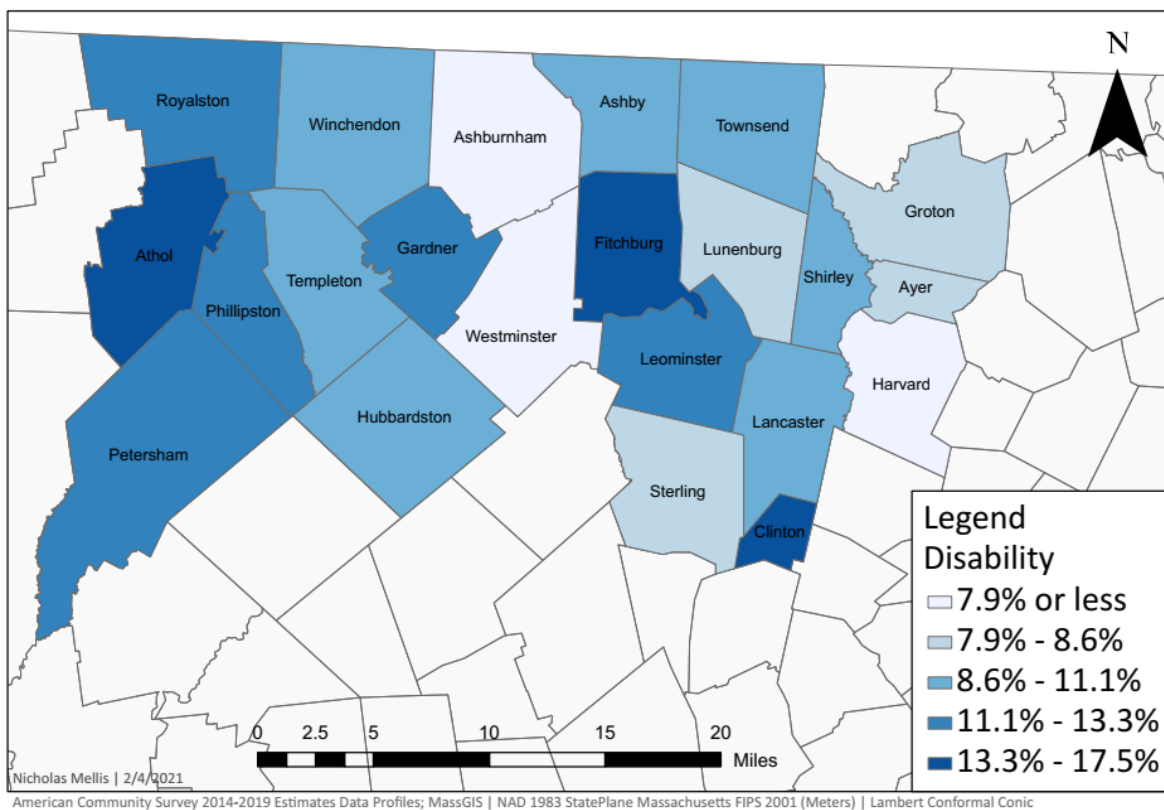
### e) Disability

In Massachusetts, 11.5% of total individuals report having a disability (US Census, American Community Survey [2015-2019] 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 (**Figure 10**), with Athol, Clinton, 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 Area 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 10. Individuals with a disability, Montachusett Region**

Percent of people with disabilities  
Montachusett Regional Planning Commission



Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 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

Prior to the Pandemic, the Montachusett Region had undergone a slow but steady recovery from the Great Recession. Despite overall declines in manufacturing, Montachusett's regional economy had recovered from the Great Recession that marked the close of 2000's. However, like many other regions in the country, economic prosperity had not been shared equally across communities. Unsurprisingly, the Pandemic has only exacerbated these disparities.

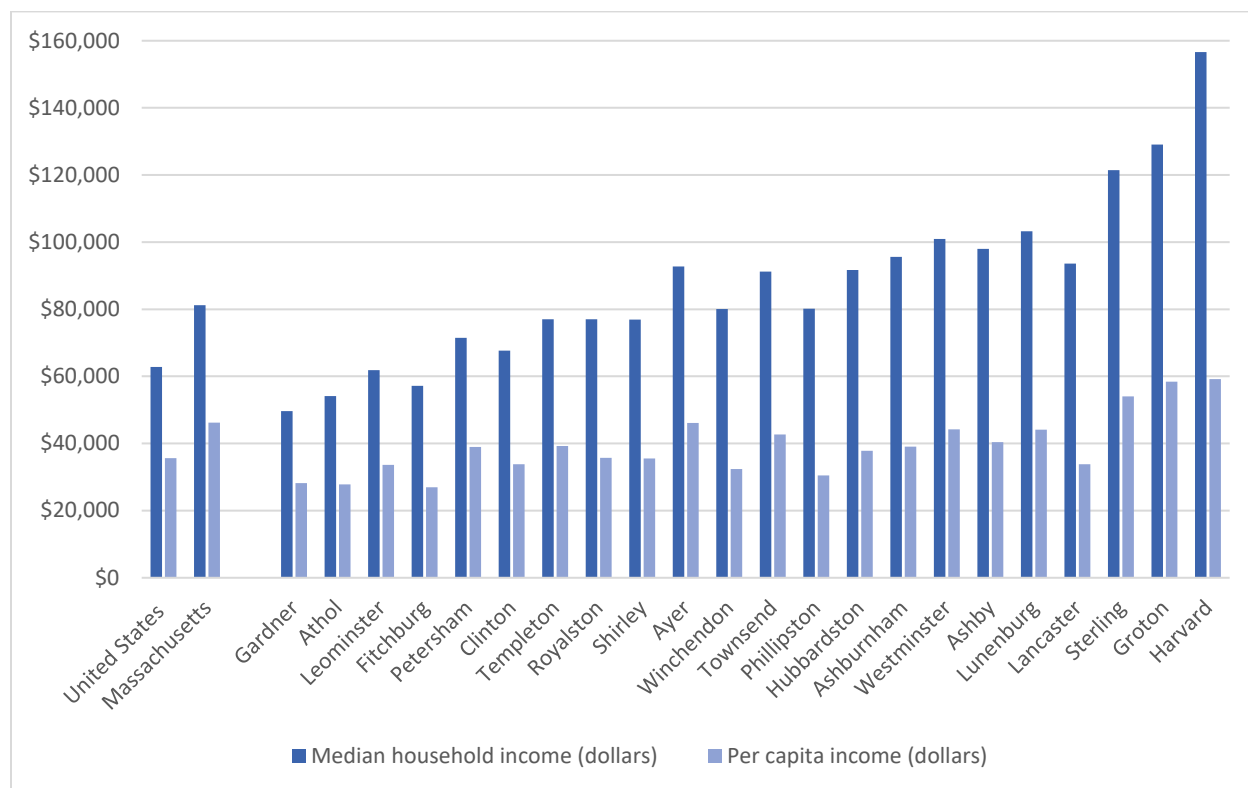
The following section outlines the status of the Montachusett regional economy, including income, housing affordability, poverty, industry, employment projections, entrepreneurship, and a range of other factors that help us better understand the economic state of all 22 communities.

### *a) Income*

The American Community Survey (ACS) collects income and poverty data, presenting both across a range of different categories- such as age, gender, race, family structure, and occupation. 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 on the following page in **Figure 11** for each Montachusett community, as well as the state and nation.



**Figure 11. Per capita income and median household income**



Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates

Sixteen of the region's 22 communities have a lower per capita income than the state (\$46,241), while eleven rank below the state when examining median household income (\$81,215). Significant disparities between median and per capita incomes are also concerning. With thirteen communities boasting a median income more than twice their per capita measure, there is evidence of significant income disparities within individual communities and across the region. While poverty across the region remains comparable to the state and the nation, these disparities may produce challenges in the years to come.

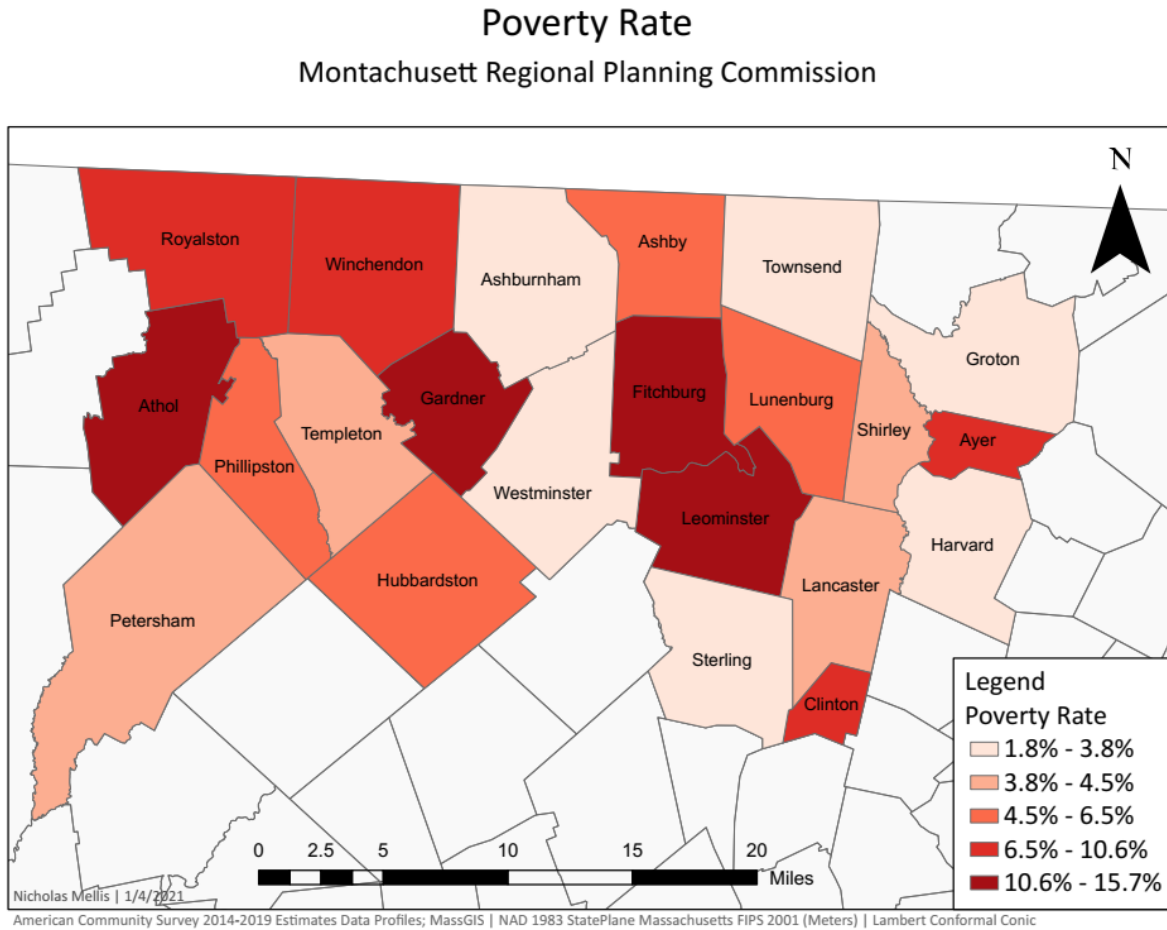


### *b) Poverty*

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).

An estimated 9.4% of individuals are living in poverty within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Five Montachusett communities have a higher concentration of poverty than the state as a whole, with Fitchburg (15.7%), Gardner (13.9%), and Athol (14.0%) also exceeding the national poverty rate of 12.3% (**Figure 12**). Overall, the Region's poverty was higher than the State's at 10.3%. This represents a regionwide decline in poverty prior to the Pandemic of 0.8%, less than declines throughout the Commonwealth or the United States. (**Table 4**).

**Figure 12. Individuals living in poverty, Montachusett Region**



Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates

**Table 4. Poverty rates**

Area	2017	2019	2-Year Change
Montachusett Region	11.1%	10.3%	-0.8%
Massachusetts	11.1%	9.4%	-1.7%
United States	14.6%	12.3%	-2.3%

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.

According to the 2010 Census, there are 54 identified EJ areas within the Montachusett Region representing 72,624 residents (approximately 31% of total Montachusett residents in 2010). Thirty-two of Montachusett's 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.

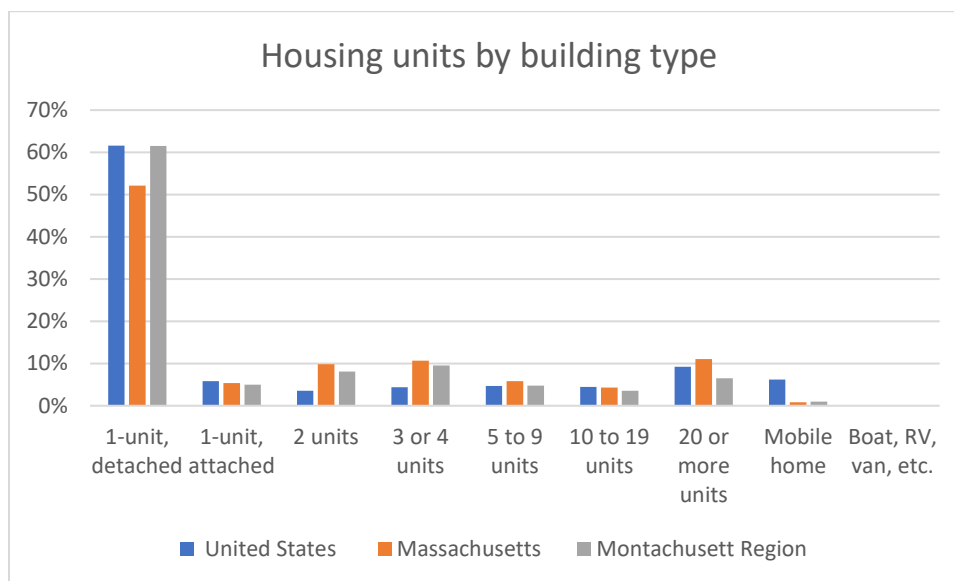


#### d) Housing Inventory

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 change over a lifetime as their household size and income fluctuate. 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, working families, and individuals of all ages represents an ongoing challenge for each of our 22 communities.

Like Massachusetts and the Nation as a whole, most housing units in the Montachusett Region are single detached units. Still, the Region outstrips the Commonwealth in this regard by nearly 10%, suggesting there may be unmet demand for multifamily housing. It is notable that the state's share of homes within developments of 20 or more units is nearly twice that of the region. (Figure 13)

**Figure 13. Housing units by building type**

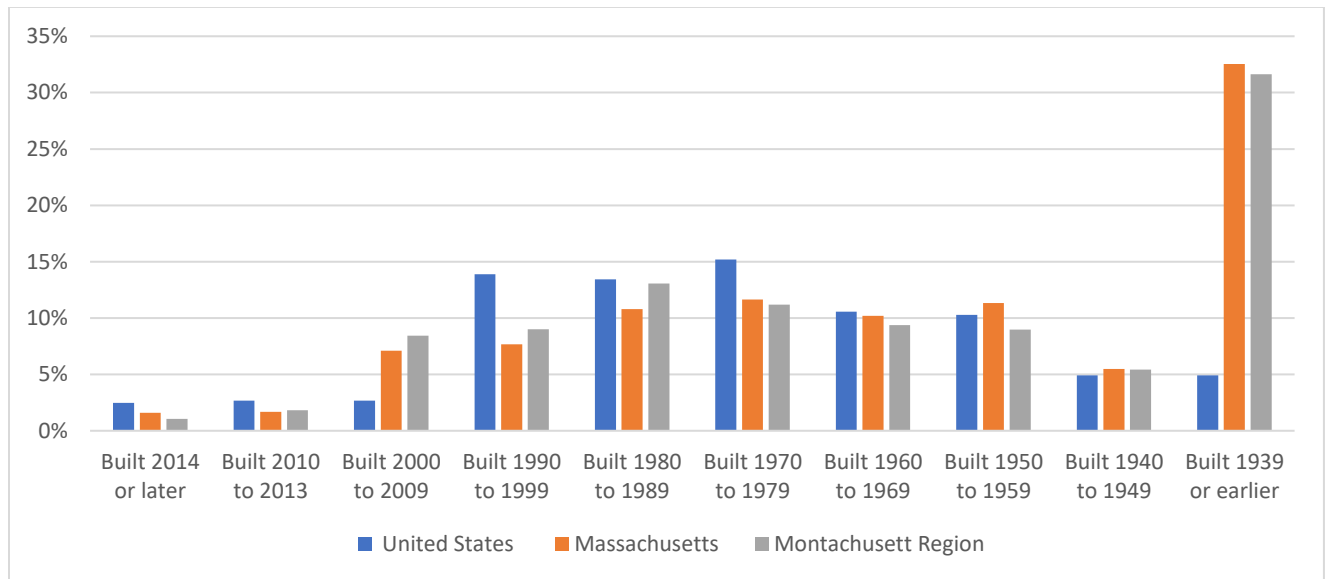


Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates

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 14**). 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.



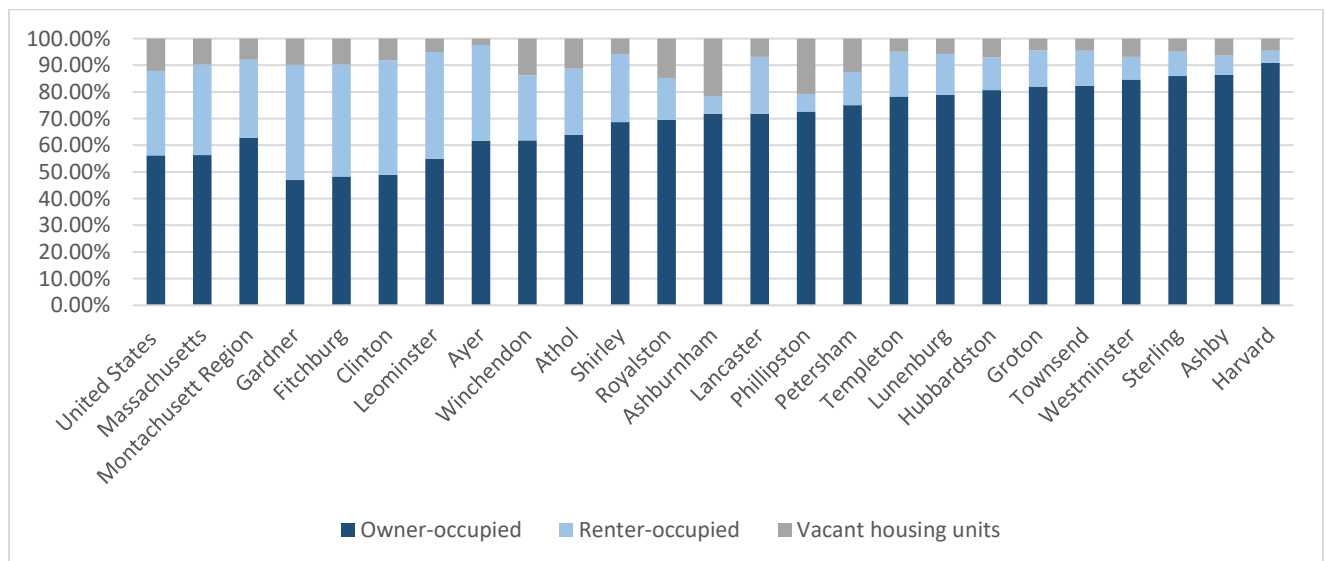
**Figure 14. Proportion of total housing units by year structure was built**



Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 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 47% in Gardner—compared to 56% in both the state and the nation.

**Figure 15. Housing occupancy status**

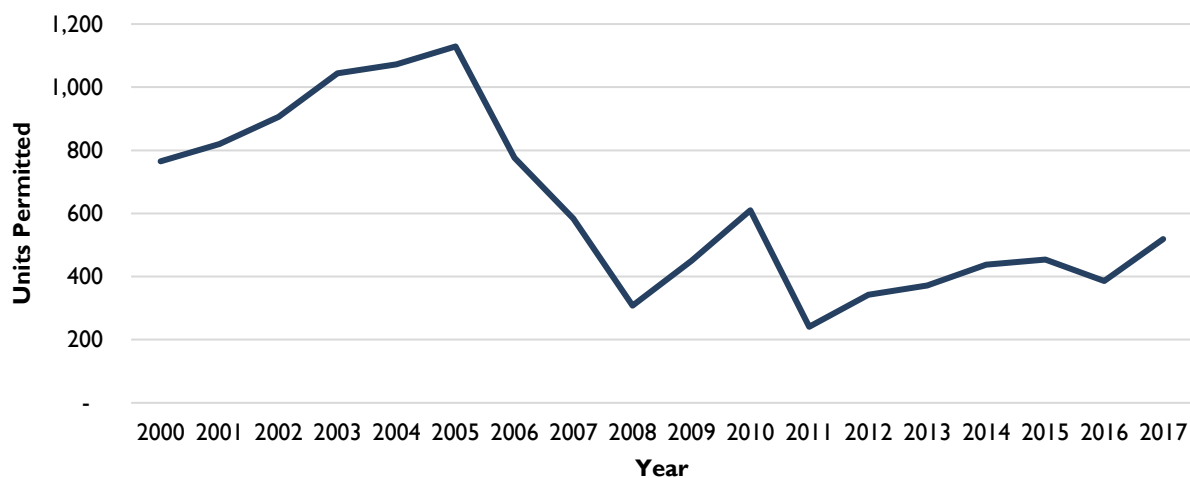


Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates



In 2010, the region witnessed a spike in housing production which helped break the trend of declining construction which began in 2005 (**Figure 16**).

**Figure 16. 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, which supported the production of 308 units that year (of the total 610 in the entire region), including seven housing complexes consisting of an estimated 186 total housing units.



### e) Housing Affordability

It is generally accepted that a household can afford housing costs of 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 (HUD), "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 5**).

**Table 5. Cost burden severity by community and housing occupancy**

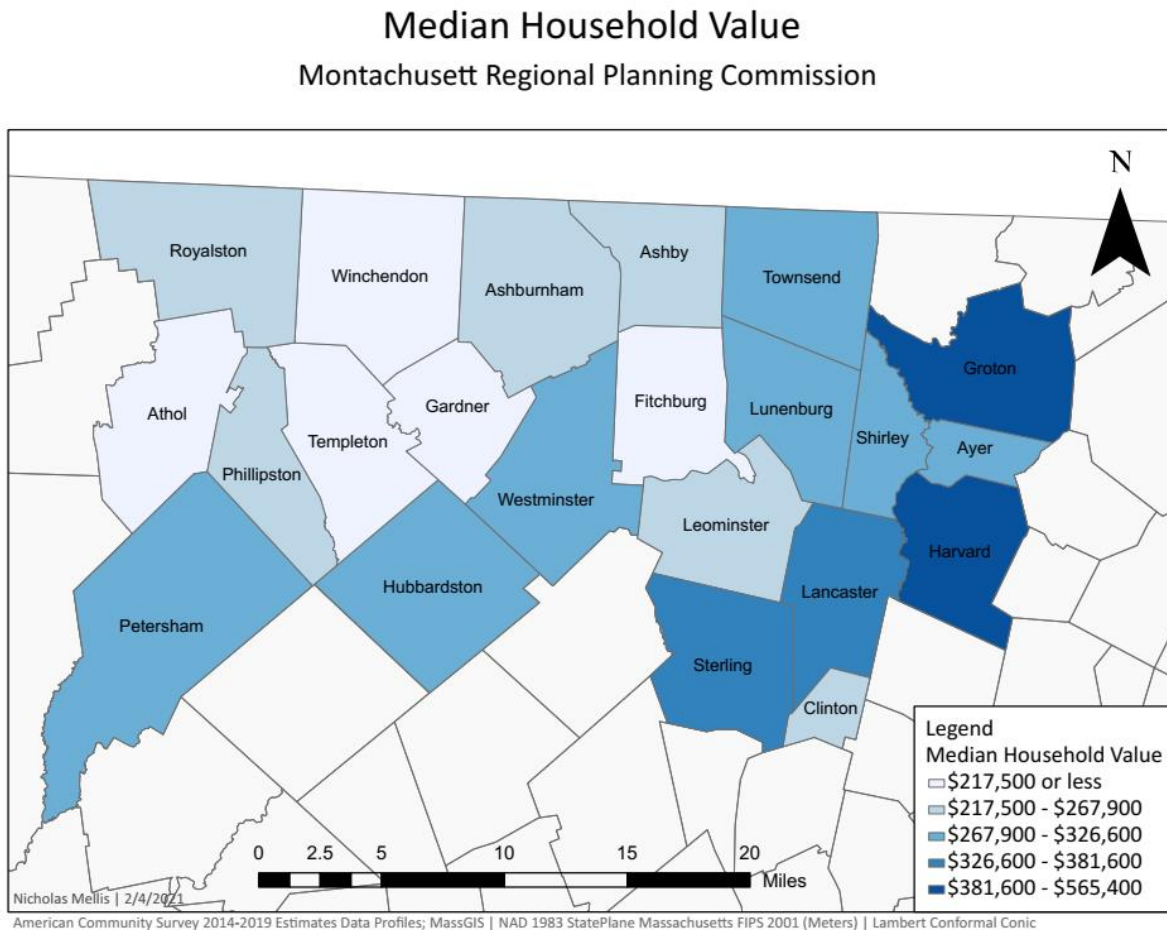
Community	Number of owner-occupied households that are cost burdened	% of owner-occupied households that are cost burdened	Number of renter-occupied households that are cost burdened	% of renter-occupied households that are cost burdened
Ashburnham	762	38.3	32	26.2
Ashby	352	35.1	23	42.6
Athol	927	27.8	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

Twenty-eight percent 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 Region, in those communities with greatest accessibility to Boston and major employment centers (**Figure 17**).

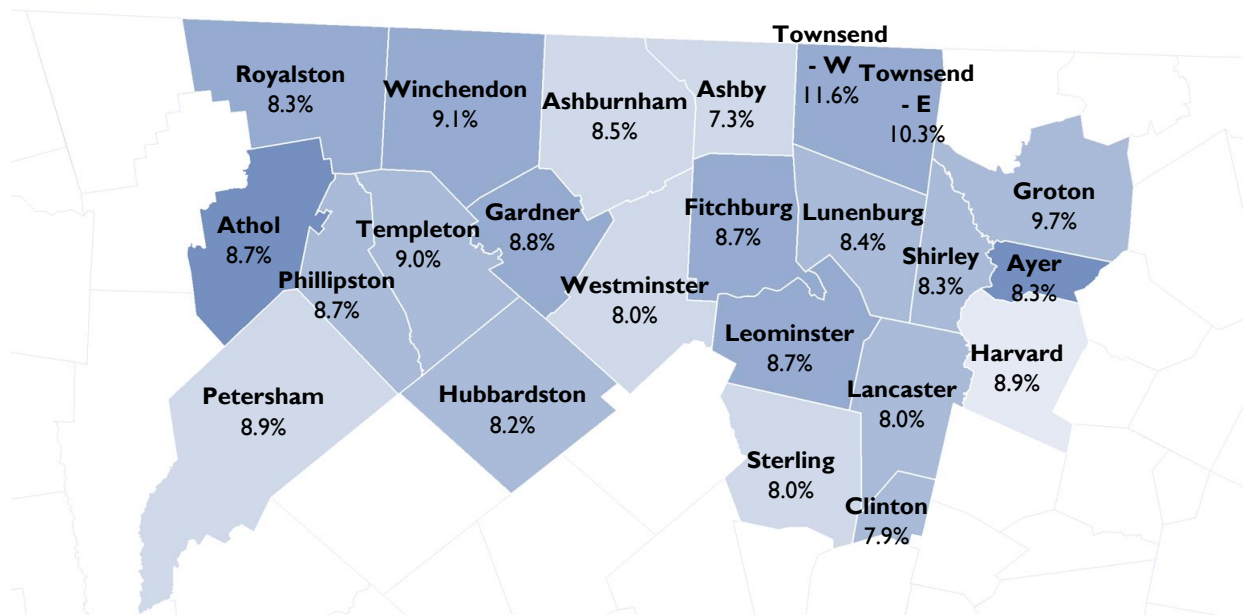
**Figure 17. Median household value for owner-occupied households**



Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 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 18**). Housing values are projected to increase in every Montachusett community over the next year; in particular, Townsend's western (11.6%) and eastern (10.3%) zip codes are expected to see the highest increase in their housing markets soon. Prices have risen substantially during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Also, the Montachusett Region experienced an influx of new inhabitants that moved into our mostly rural region, as was experienced throughout the rest of the Nation.

**Figure 18. One-year household value projections**



Source: Zillow Home Value Forecast (ZHVF) 7/31/2022

#### 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 over the last three decades, manufacturing remains the largest (NAICS 2-digit) employment sector in the region, accounting for 13.5% of all individuals employed in Montachusett. This is particularly impressive when one considers that manufacturers only account for 3.9% of all businesses located in the Region, demonstrating the workforce needs of these employers and why they remain integral to the economic health of many communities.

Manufacturing was followed by "health care and social assistance", which accounted for 11.6% of regional employment, despite including only 5.9% of Montachusett's businesses. This is unsurprising, given the Region's aging population, and the sector will likely continue to grow as Baby Boomers and Generation X move towards retirement.



**Table 6. Businesses and Employment by Industry**

<b>Industry by NAICS Code</b>	<b>Number of Montachusett Businesses</b>	<b>Percent of Montachusett Businesses</b>	<b>Number of Montachusett Employees</b>	<b>Percent of Montachusett Employees</b>
Mining	5	0.05%	34	0.03%
Mgmt of Companies/Enterprises	10	0.09%	112	0.10%
Utilities	23	0.22%	208	0.18%
Nonstore Retailers	98	0.92%	222	0.19%
Furniture/Home Furnishings	49	0.46%	295	0.25%
Gas Stations	63	0.59%	309	0.26%
Securities/Commodity Contracts	59	0.55%	309	0.26%
Electronics/Appliances	41	0.38%	320	0.27%
Agric/Forestry/Fish/Hunting	62	0.58%	324	0.28%
Legal Services	110	1.03%	396	0.34%
Sports/Hobby/Book/Music	59	0.55%	436	0.37%
Insur/Funds/Trusts/Other	75	0.70%	459	0.39%
Clothing/Accessories	90	0.84%	519	0.44%
Unclassified Establishments	477	4.48%	530	0.45%
Health/Personal Care	87	0.82%	736	0.63%
Automotive Repair & Maint	243	2.28%	955	0.82%
Misc Store Retailers	171	1.61%	987	0.84%
Information	159	1.49%	1,187	1.02%
Arts/Entertainment/Recreation	155	1.46%	1,290	1.10%
Central Bank/Crdt Intermediatn	107	1.00%	1,416	1.21%
Motor Vehicle/Parts Dealers	147	1.38%	1,433	1.23%
Real Estate/Rental/Leasing	361	3.39%	1,517	1.30%
General Merchandise Stores	65	0.61%	1,666	1.43%
Transportation/Warehouse	158	1.48%	1,721	1.47%
Accommodation	49	0.46%	1,731	1.48%
Bldg Material/Garden Equip & Supp	113	1.06%	1,737	1.49%
Admin/Support/Waste Mgmt & Remediation	292	2.74%	1,887	1.61%
Finance & Insurance	241	2.26%	2,184	1.87%
Food & Beverage Stores	166	1.56%	3,160	2.70%
Prof/Scientific/Tech Srv	619	5.81%	3,291	2.82%
Construction	782	7.34%	4,180	3.58%
Wholesale Trade	319	2.99%	4,723	4.04%
Public Administration	470	4.41%	5,219	4.47%
Other Srv excl Public Admin	1,313	12.33%	5,909	5.06%
Food Srv & Drinking Places	461	4.33%	6,496	5.56%



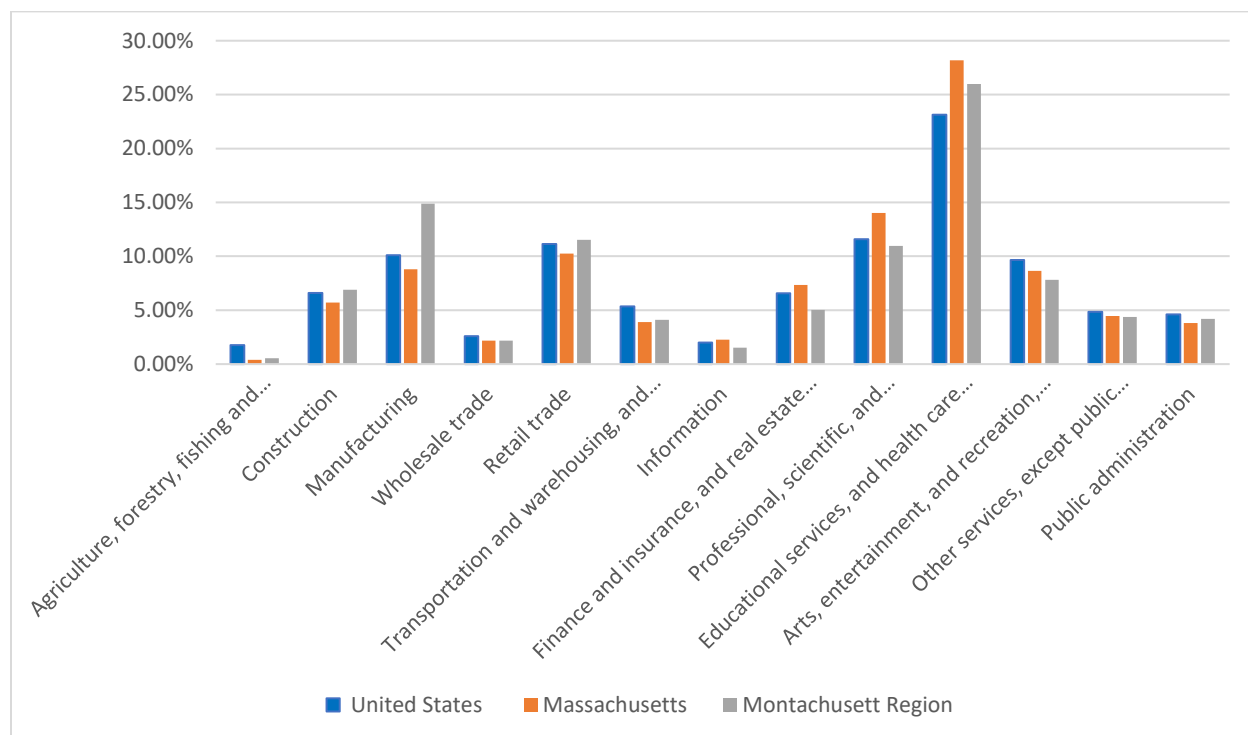


Accommodation/Food Services	510	4.79%	8,227	7.04%
Educational Services	253	2.38%	9,550	8.17%
Retail Trade	1,149	10.79%	11,820	10.11%
Health Care/Social Assistance	629	5.90%	13,576	11.62%
Manufacturing	412	3.87%	15,790	13.51%
Total	10,652	100.00%	116,861	100.00%

Source: ESRI Business Analyst Online (BAO) 2020

However, when this industry is combined with “educational services” (8.2%) as is done for ACS estimates, it is clearly seen to be the largest employer in Montachusett. This is in line with similar findings for Massachusetts and the United States (see **Figure 19**).

**Figure 19. Employment by industry**

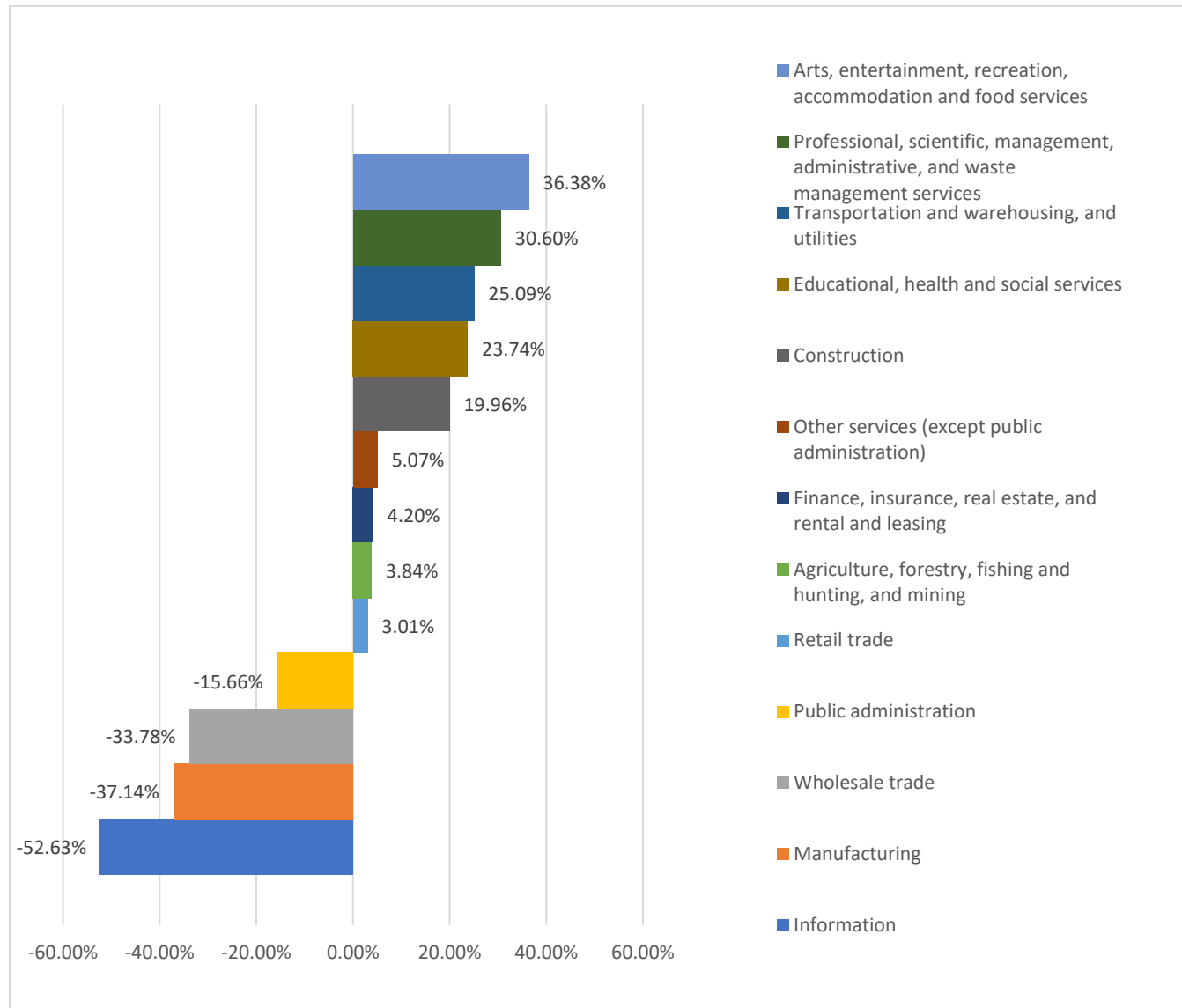


Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates

Once again however, manufacturing stands out. The level of manufacturing-based employment within the region, despite declines in recent decades, continues to dwarf that of both the state and country. While efforts diversifying the regional economy into other growing sectors, including the service sectors, the region’s comparative advantage of an experienced manufacturing workforce and legacy industrial space will ensure that manufacturing remains a cornerstone in the region’s economy.



**Figure 20. Shift in employment by industry as a share of the regional economy, Montachusett Region (2000 to 2019)**



Source: US Census, American Community Survey (2014-2019) 5-Year Estimates

Between 2000 and 2019, the region witnessed some notable shifts in total employment share by industry. “Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services,” although still modest in its total employment with 9,726 jobs in 2019, has increased its share of total employment in the region by 36.4% since 2000. Other industries which witnessed significant growth in workforce share included “professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services” (30.6%); “educational services, and health care and social assistance” (23.7%); “transportation” (25.1%); and “construction” (20%).



Interestingly, the greatest decline in total employment share occurred in the “information”, which saw its workforce share more than halved (52.6%). “Wholesale trade” also fell by slightly more than a third (-33.8%). Thankfully, these sectors were responsible for less than 4% of jobs in the region in 2019. Manufacturing, on the other hand, accounted for an estimated 14.9% of regional employment in 2019 and was down from 23.7% in 2000. This represents a net loss of 7,689 jobs to the sector and 37.1% decline in workforce share from the turn of the century.

According to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, the fastest growing occupation in Montachusett is home health aide (see **Table 7**). The number of personal care aides is also predicted to grow by over 21%, far outstripping the home health aide field in absolute terms. Again, this further demonstrates the demand for care within the Region’s growing senior population.

**Table 7. 15 fastest growing occupations in the North Central WDA**

Occupation Title	Employment 2018	Employment 2028	Numeric Change	Percent Change	2020 Mean Annual OES Wage
Home Health Aides	239	301	62	25.94%	***
Personal Care Aides	1,789	2,167	378	21.12%	***
Electrical, Electronic, and Electromechanical Assemblers, Ex...	183	217	34	18.57%	\$42,916
Cooks, Restaurant	647	745	98	15.14%	\$35,910
Machinists	437	500	63	14.41%	\$49,244
Market Research Analysts and Marketing Specialists	199	227	28	14.07%	\$66,749
Medical Assistants	429	487	58	13.51%	\$40,576
Combined Food Preparation and Serving Workers, Including Fast Food...	1,660	1,872	212	12.77%	***
Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing, Technical...	290	320	30	10.34%	\$112,437
Financial Managers	516	566	50	9.68%	\$104,904
Medical and Health Services Managers	370	404	34	9.18%	\$117,967
Industrial Engineers	343	374	31	9.03%	\$94,513
Medical Secretaries	666	726	60	9.00%	\$39,362
Registered Nurses	1,878	2,041	163	8.67%	\$89,039
Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing, Except T...	806	871	65	8.06%	\$85,680

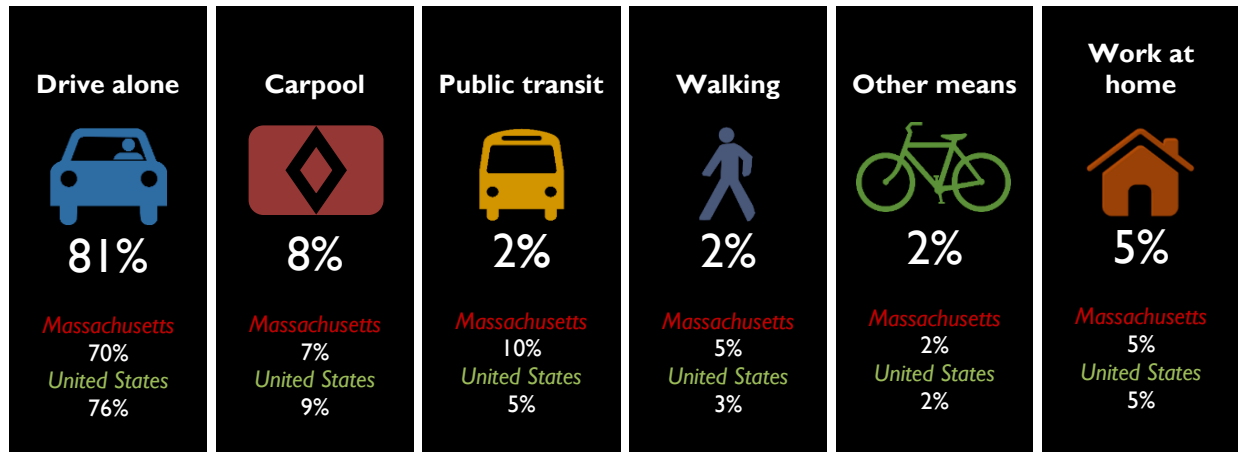
Source: Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development 2021, Long Term Occupational Projections, Most Job Openings, North Central WDA

<https://lmi.dua.eol.mass.gov/LMI/LongTermOccupationProjections/LTOPResult?A=15&GA=000004&Cmd=Go&Type=long&Dopt=TEXT#>

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 21. Means of travel to work, Montachusett Region



Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates

Montachusett commuters are more auto reliant than the state or nation, with 89% of workers either driving alone or carpooling to work (compared to 77% of workers in Massachusetts and 85% of workers in the country). More employees in the region work from home than walk, bike, or utilize mass transit (see detailed data in Table 22 on the following page). This suggests that, even prior to the Pandemic when this data was generated, a significant portion of the Region's residents worked remotely. While it is almost certain this category of employee grew following COVID-19, it remains to be seen whether these gains will be maintained. If so, such workers could present a new opportunity for regional growth as professionals escape expensive, congested cities in search of more spacious, affordable housing options.



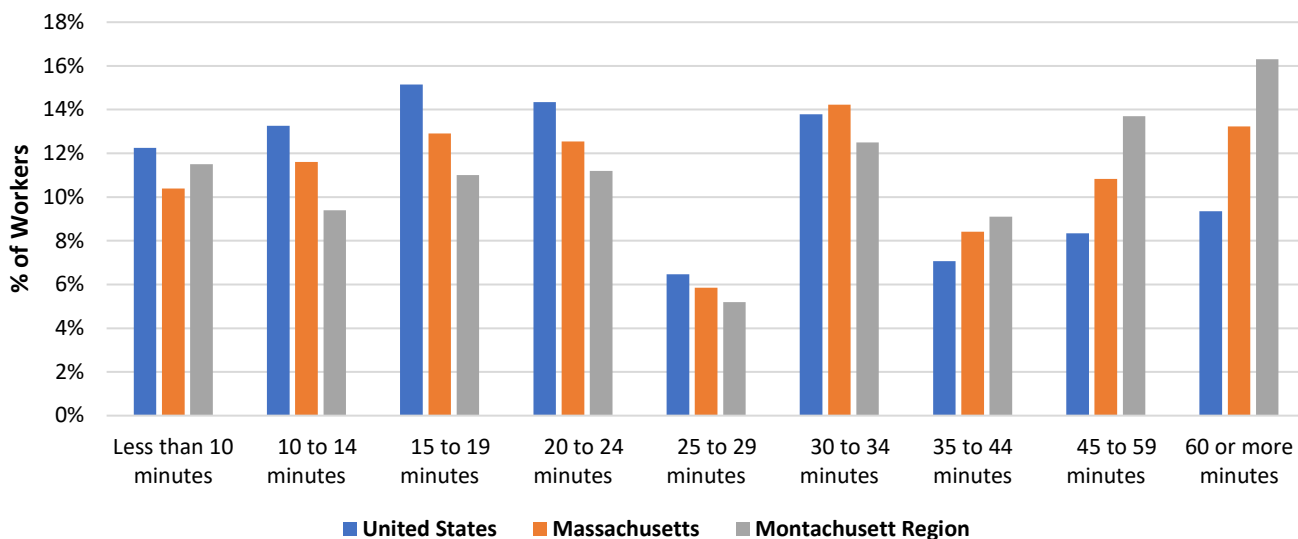
**Table 8. Means of travel to work by community**

<b>City/Town</b>	<b>Car, truck, or van -- drove alone</b>	<b>Car, truck, or van -- carpooled</b>	<b>Public transportation (excluding taxicab)</b>	<b>Walked</b>	<b>Other means</b>	<b>Worked from home</b>
<b>United States</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Massachusetts</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Montachusett Region</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Ashburnham</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>Ashby</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Athol</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>3%</b>
<b>Ayer</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>2%</b>
<b>Clinton</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Fitchburg</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Gardner</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Groton</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Harvard</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>13%</b>
<b>Hubbardston</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Lancaster</b>	<b>86%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Leominster</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Lunenburg</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Petersham</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Phillipston</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Royalston</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>3%</b>
<b>Shirley</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Sterling</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Templeton</b>	<b>87%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>Townsend</b>	<b>87%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Westminster</b>	<b>87%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Winchendon</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>5%</b>

Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates



**Figure 22. Travel time to work**



*Source: American Community Survey (2015-2019) 5-Year Estimates*

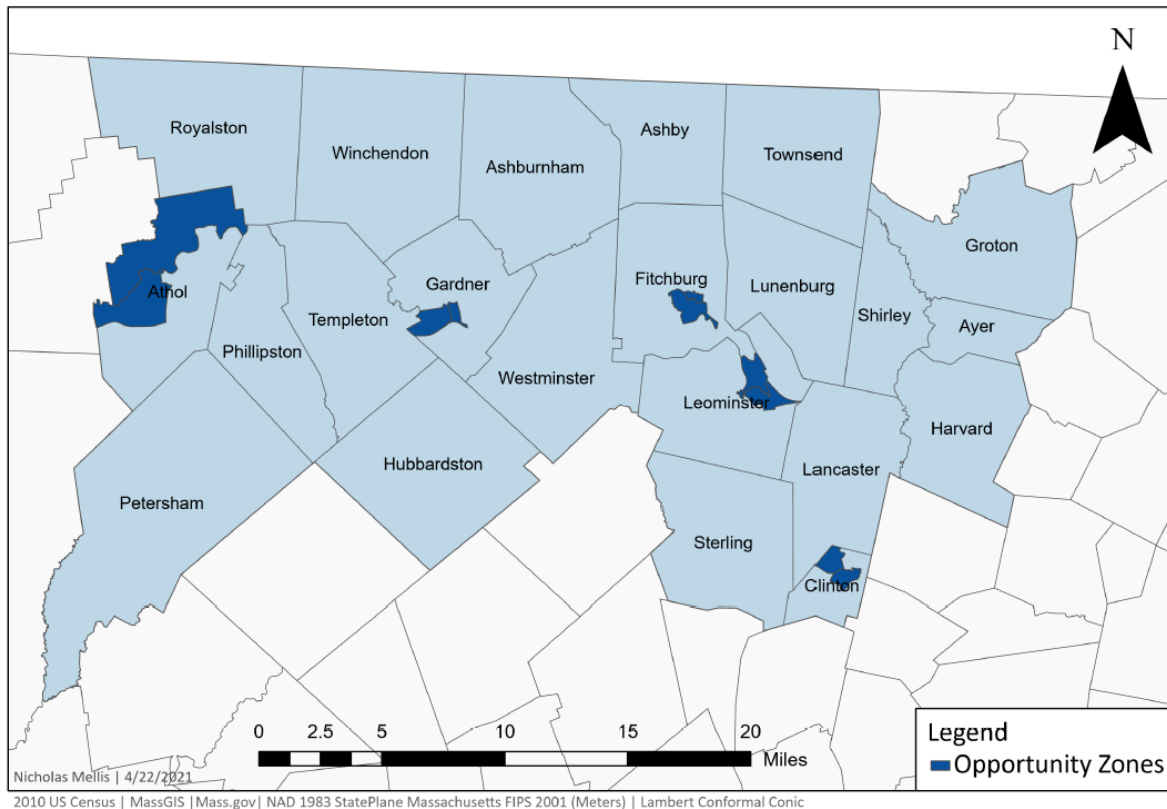
As can be seen in the data above (Table 8), Montachusett residents tend to undergo longer commute times than their national or state counterparts as well. Nearly 40% of the Region's residents travel 35 minutes or more to their place of work. By comparison, only a third of Massachusetts residents (32.5%) and a quarter of those residing within the United States (24.7%) travel this far daily. The Region has a particularly high percentage (16.3%) of individuals traveling an hour or more while just over a half (51.6%) commute at least 30 minutes each day. This is concerning as it creates challenges related to congestion, carbon emissions, childcare, and workforce training- to say nothing of recreation and quality of life.

Interestingly, a significant proportion of Montachusett residents (11.5%) have less than a ten-minute commute, perhaps due to the Region's three urban centers.



## h) Opportunity Zones

### Opportunity Zones Montachusett Regional Planning Commission



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. Ten 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:

- I. 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; and,
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 ten designated zones through a qualified Opportunity Fund<sup>2</sup>:

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; and,
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 ten years. This exclusion only applies to gains accrued after an investment in an Opportunity Fund.

---

<sup>2</sup> 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 from 2016 through 2021.

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 Incubator Network, Inc. (hereinafter the WBI) 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, together with \$35,000 allocated as a match from the Town of Athol, was used to replace the building's outdated heating system and complete other improvements.



### 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 farm produce and baked goods 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 (DEP) has identified over 1,100 sites where contamination of the ground has occurred. Most 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," including:

- Putnam Place in Fitchburg, now 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, which previously served as 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 DEP. 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 79 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 (CBD);
- 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 (from Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical High School or “Monty Tech”) 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; and,
- 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 to improve local economic conditions.

- Economic Development Incentive Program (EDIP). In 1992, the State of Massachusetts enacted the EDIP 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”); and,
- 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 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 15 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 future master planning efforts; and,
  - 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 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.





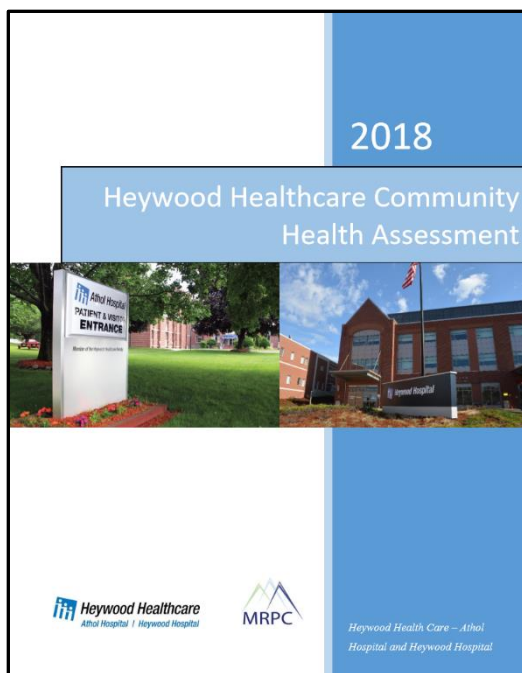
## 5) Social Services

### 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 Hospital in Gardner and Athol. A new Emergency Department & Medical Office building has been constructed at Athol Memorial Hospital doubling the size of the original hospital on Main Street. The new Emergency Department (ED) has doubled the capacity of the old ED and transformed 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 and 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. Urgent care centers are located in Athol, Gardner, and Leominster.

In 2018, the MRPC worked in collaboration with the CHNA 9 Group, and John Snow, Inc. to complete a Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) of Heywood Healthcare's Athol and Heywood Hospitals. MRPC also completed CHNA's for Heywood and UMASS Memorial Health Alliance Clinton Hospital in 2021. The CHNA 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 in Franklin County: 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, such as the North Quabbin Community Coalition (NQCC), 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.

A CHNA provides a comprehensive overview of the health status, issues, and concerns of inhabitants, 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 CHNA is intended to inform hospital leadership and staff, inhabitants, government officials, businesses, community organizations, and other relevant stakeholders of the health status of the inhabitants in their respective 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. Some of these include the:

- Fitchburg Art Museum, 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.

#### *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” to preserve and protect local, state, and national historic assets in the Montachusett Region. “Historic commissions,” typically private, non-profit organizations, 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 most 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 the utilization of private sector ambulance services, to municipally funded, and/or 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 which are 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 (MBI) 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 (CAIs) in more than 120 unserved and underserved communities in Western and Central Massachusetts. The project,



funded through state and Federal funds, connected CAI's 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; and,
- **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 are 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; and,
- 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 the evening of December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008 and well into the following morning, 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 (up to one inch in ice coated powers lines and tree limbs throughout most of central Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire). Within the region, there were over 43,264 households and businesses without power; power was provided to some customers in under one week while a significant percentage of the homes and businesses had no power for two to four weeks. In fall 2009, MRPC was awarded a one-year financial assistance award in the amount of \$125,360 from the U.S. Department of Commerce's (DOC) Economic Development Administration's (EDA) 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. The Plan consisted of a comprehensive Emergency Back-up Power Sources Evaluation throughout the Montachusett Region and a regionwide 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. This 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

MRPC completed its most recent Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) in 2019; the Plan will expire in 2023. 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, which are: (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. Of note is that bridge inventories from 2006 report SD bridges being almost as high as one in six 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<sup>3</sup>**

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%
<b>13-Year Change</b>	<b>+9</b>	<b>-17</b>	<b>-5.7%</b>

<sup>3</sup> Montachusett Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), 2020



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. Federal aid eligible roads represent 32% of the region's road miles. The remaining 1,425 miles (68%) 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; and,
- 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<sup>4</sup>**

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

<sup>4</sup> Montachusett Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), 2023



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<sup>5</sup>**

	State			Local			Combined			
Condition	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%
<b>Total</b>	<b>186.03</b>			<b>473.40</b>			<b>Total</b>	<b>659.43</b>		

Comparing 2019 network conditions to those from 2015, it would appear that state roads are deteriorating at a faster rate than local roadways, despite the fact that the state's roadways were generally in better condition. Altogether, the condition of the overall network of federal aid eligible roads fell almost evenly into the four general repair categories- though those under construction were the most significant grouping at 29%. The major difference in the combined condition percentage is the increase of roads rated as "Poor" by six 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 has received less money

<sup>5</sup> Montachusett Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), 2023



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 a community has not updated its accepted road information or has roads which have been recently accepted by the municipality but not submitted the new information to MassDOT, it is probable that the city or town is not receiving its maximum allowable Chapter 90 funds. Many communities in the region have not updated their accepted roads with MassDOT in years, or in some cases decades. MRPC is able to assist communities in this process if requested.

Pavement improvements 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 (PMT) 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) at the previous MRCEDS meeting in March 2019.

Updating this survey in the wake of COVID-19 was identified as a priority for a number of reasons. To begin, much of the demographic data available at the time of this document's writing dated from 2019. For that reason, compiling information that reflected conditions subsequent to the Pandemic was critical. Moreover, gauging how perceptions and priorities among regional decision makers had shifted in the wake of an unprecedented crisis was also necessary to ensure the CEDS' recommendations were relevant.

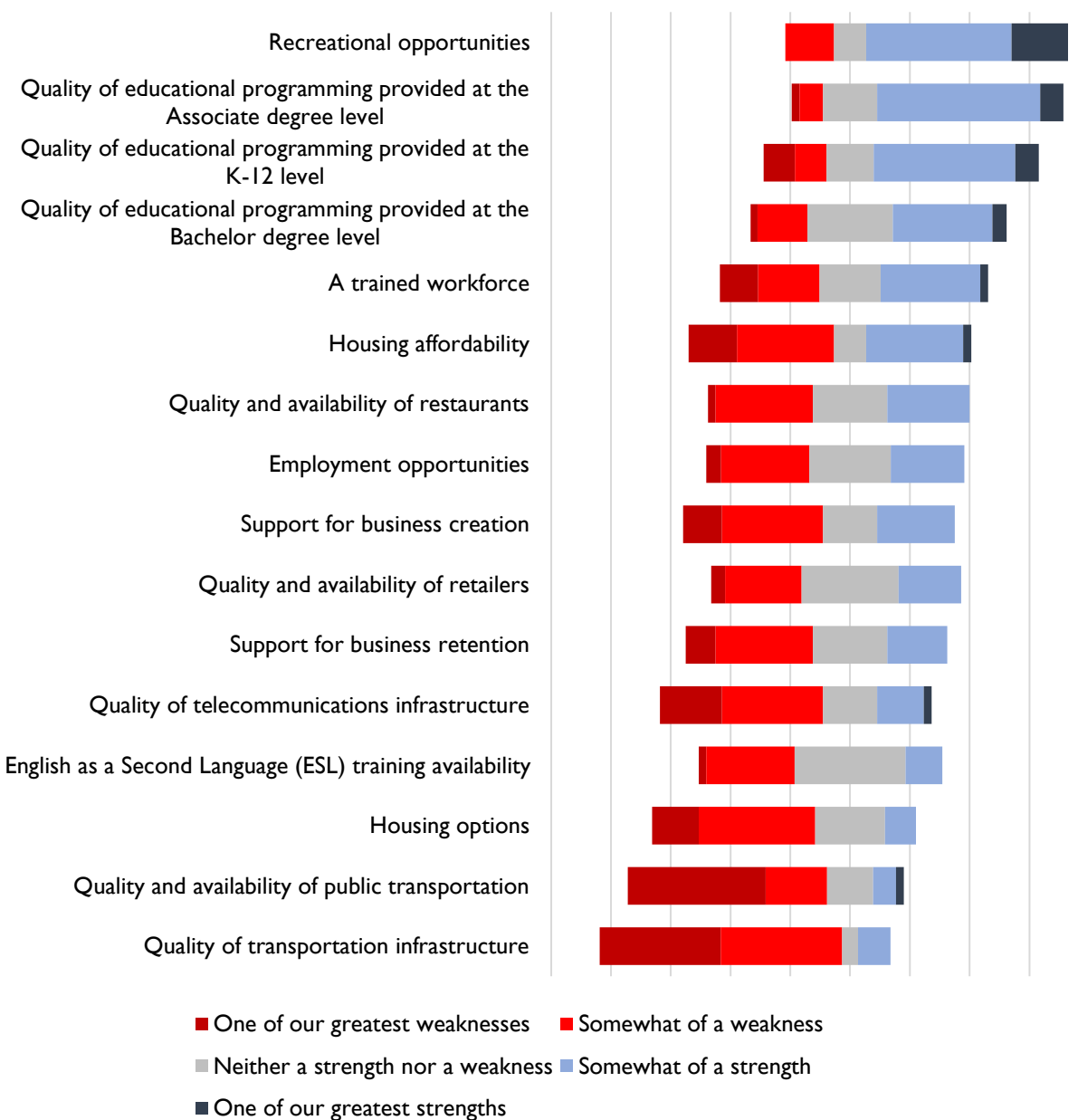
For comparative reasons, the 2019 survey's questions and their order were left completely intact. The only change made was the addition of a question towards the end asking the degree to which "COVID-19 has impacted the community or communities within which you operate." The 2021 survey was also distributed around the same time of year as 2019's, further replicating the original survey. As was the case in 2019, the recipients included elected officials, town and city planners, economic development professionals, regional chambers of commerce, and nonprofit service providers. These partners were not only encouraged to complete the survey themselves, but distributed it amongst their respective constituencies. The survey was also shared via the MRPC's social media outlets and advertised publicly on its website.

In total, 43 responses were collected; nearly a 20% increase over the previous survey's return. The majority of respondents (72%) identified themselves as a "local government representative" followed by "resident" at 30% of respondents. "Business representative" was the third most common answer at 21% of respondents. It should be noted that these answers are not mutually exclusive and participants were encouraged to "select all that apply" for this question.



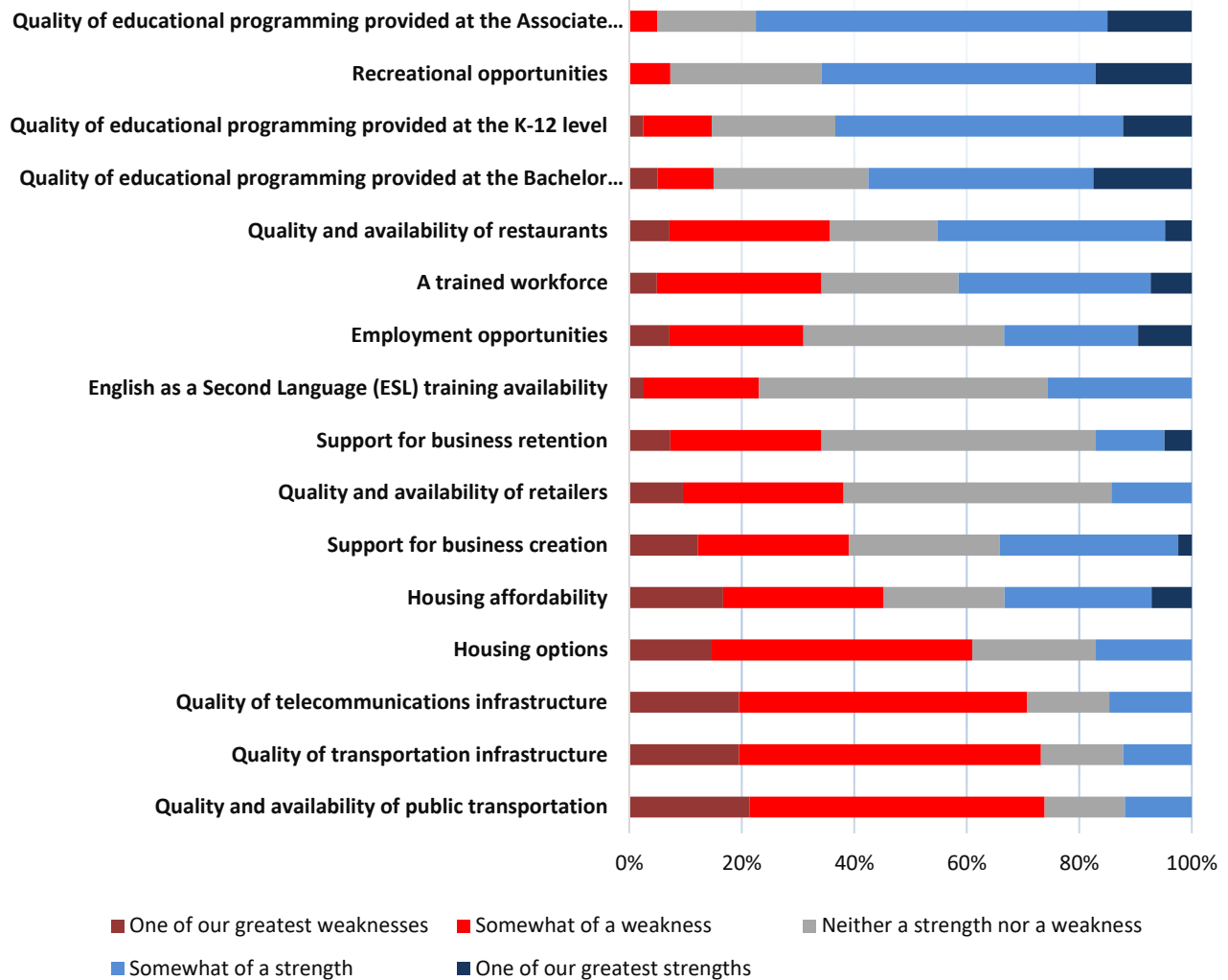
**Figure 23. Responses to survey question, “How would you characterize each of the following as they relate to the economy of the Montachusett Region?”**

**2019**





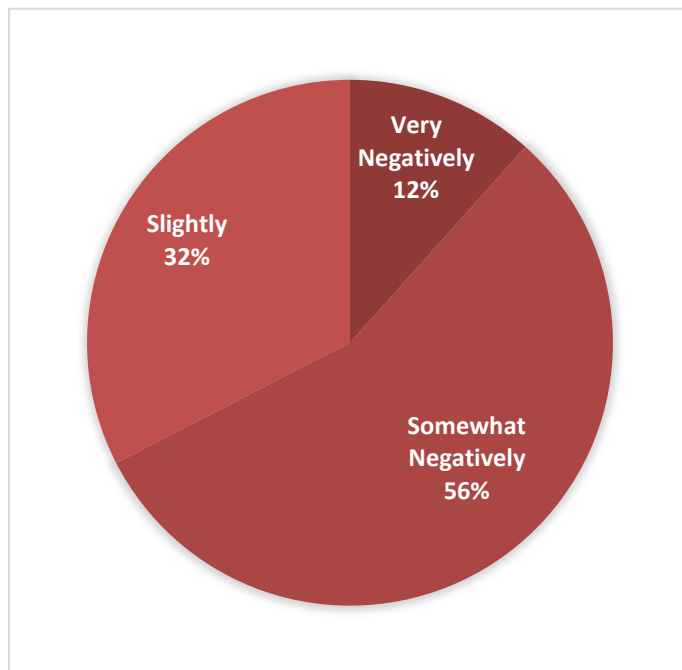
## 2021





## A. *The Pandemic's Impact*

**Figure 25. Responses to survey question “To what degree has COVID-19 impacted the community or communities within which you operate?”**



As mentioned earlier, the only question added to the survey asked participants what degree to which the pandemic had impacted their community or the community in which they operated. The options provided were:

- Very negatively;
- Somewhat negatively;
- Slightly;
- Not at all; and,
- Other with a text box provided for clarification.

The responses are reflected in the table above. As can be seen, over half the participants selected “Somewhat Negatively,” followed by “Slightly” at 32%. The remainder (12%) selected “Very Negatively.” This is unsurprising given the degree to which

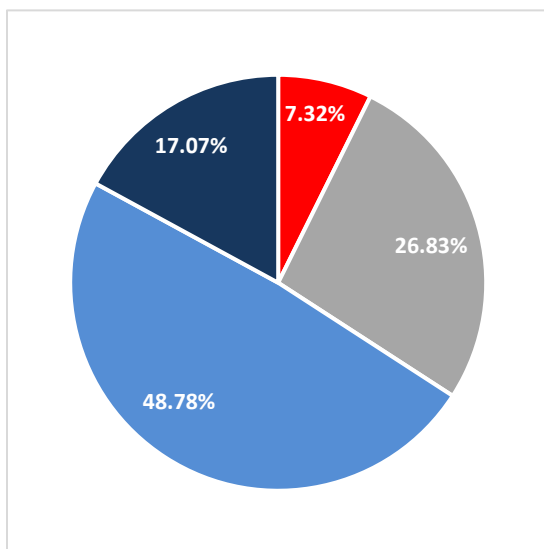
COVID-19’s spread varied from town to town. While the share of residents across the Region who became infected (9.15% as of July 10, 2021) was in line with the state’s (9.55%), roughly two thirds of Montachusett’s communities fell below this measure.

This may help explain the relative lack of change in survey results between 2019 and 2021. As can be seen above in Figure 26, the Region’s top identified strengths and weaknesses remained largely the same, with educational programming and recreational opportunities constituting the former while infrastructure, transportation, and housing options comprise the latter.



## B. Regional Strengths

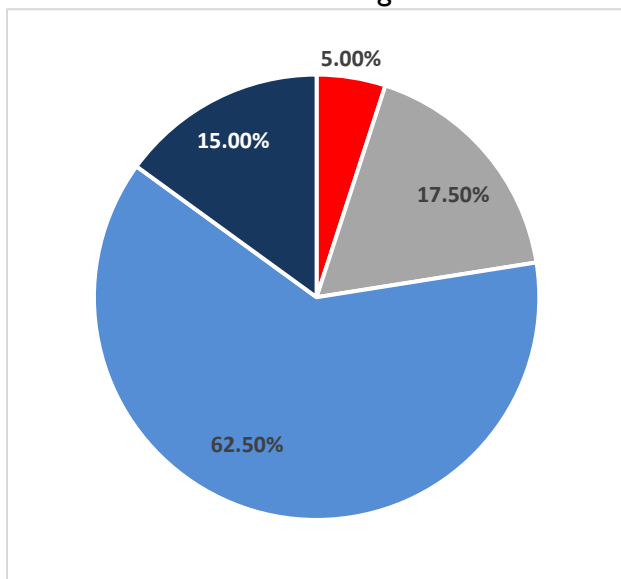
### 1) Recreational opportunities



Among Montachusett's strengths is an abundance of recreational opportunities across the region. Sixty-six 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

The most identified strength was the region's educational programming at the associate degree level. Seventy eight percent of survey respondents agreed this represented one of the region's greatest strengths or somewhat of a strength. 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 can 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

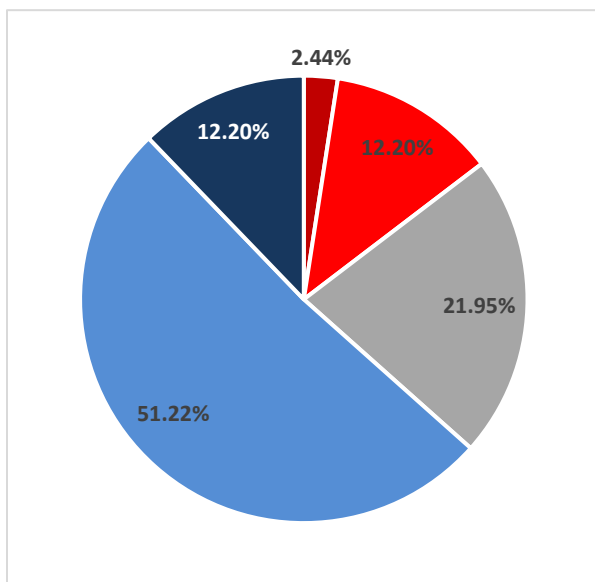


**Mount Wachusett  
Community College**

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.

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 its Leominster campus, as well as continuing education (i.e. noncredit) classes for personal enrichment on a year-round basis. The college also offers several 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

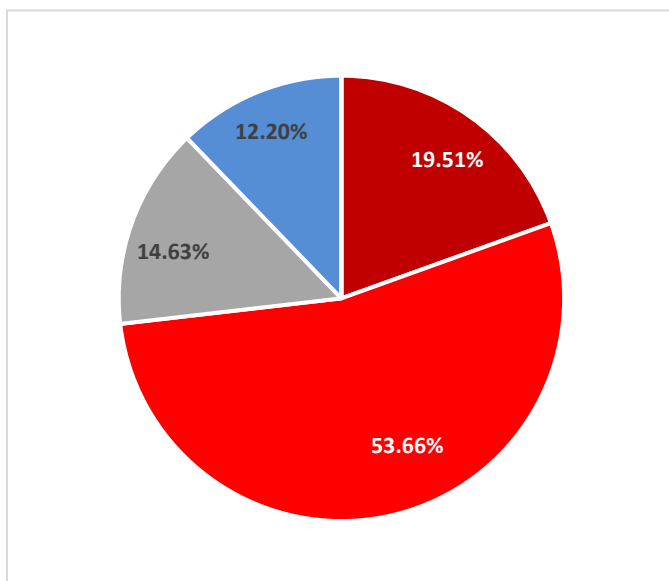


The region’s third most identified strength in our Region is the quality of educational programming at the elementary and high school levels. More than half (51.22%) of respondents identified K through 12 education as somewhat of a strength, while 12.2% said it is one of the region’s greatest strengths.



## C. Regional Weaknesses

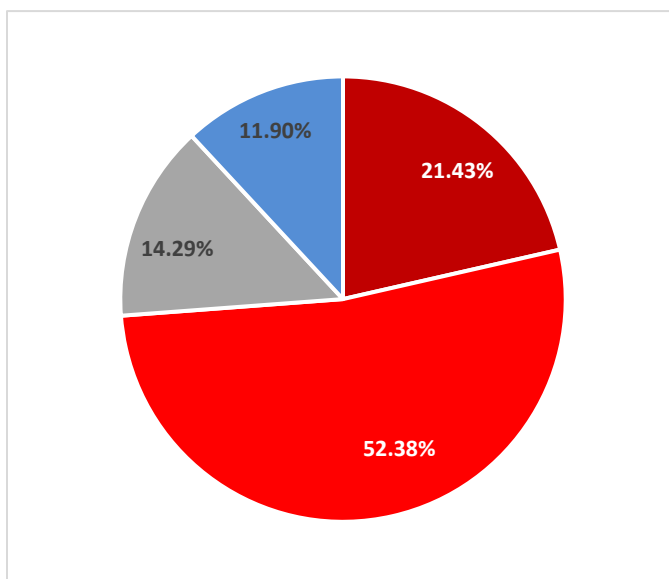
### 1) Quality of transportation infrastructure



A critical weakness identified by leaders in the region is the quality of our transportation infrastructure. The challenges associated with maintaining and improving these assets 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) was developed concurrently with the 2019 CEDS update. The goals and objectives of the RTP are critical to the advancement of the economic health of the region. (Source,

<https://www.mrpc.org/montachusett-metropolitan-planning-organization-mmpo/pages/working-towards-the-future>.)

### 2) Quality and availability of public transportation



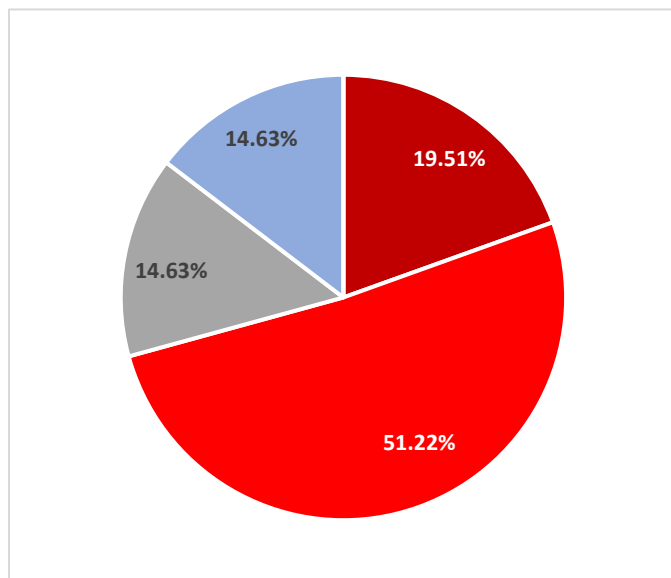
As mentioned above, promoting transit and commuter rail options is a major priority for the Montachusett Region. However, 52% of respondents presently agree that the quality and availability of public transportation is somewhat of a weakness, and an additional 21.4% say it is one of the region's greatest weaknesses. 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. Among those 46% who could be encouraged to use public transit, geographic expansion was the most popular recommendation.

### 3) Quality of Telecommunications Infrastructure



Overtaking housing options, the quality of telecommunications infrastructure emerged as the third most pressing concern amongst respondents. A majority (70.73%) of respondents perceived it as either somewhat of a weakness (51.22%) or one of the region's greatest weaknesses (19.51%).

Though internet connectivity has stood out as a regional challenge for years, this represents a significant increase from 2019 when only 60% listed it as a weakness. The change is likely due to the increased dependence upon local broadband

resources amongst individuals working from home during the Pandemic. The increased number of business owners and employees attempting to utilize these resources during business hours likely strained the existing capacity and cast the system's deficiencies in a much starker light. If a significant share of individuals continues to work from home as the economy reopens, addressing these issues will grow increasingly important.

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 inhabitants who are already here, the Montachusett Region needs to ensure that a robust and affordable housing stock exists. Many communities saw a significant decline in housing production at the beginning of the Great Recession. The number of housing permits rose steadily after that economic decline, but not enough to provide enough housing units or the diversity that is not only needed in the Montachusett Region, but throughout Massachusetts. Finally, housing construction came to a virtual halt when the COVID-19 disease, subsequent pandemic, and economic decline occurred in rapid succession starting in March 2020. Housing production picked up in 2021, but we have still not achieved an adequate level of production to address the thousands of new housing units that the current Governor Baker/Lieutenant Governor Polito Administration has calculated are needed to house the workforce throughout Massachusetts.



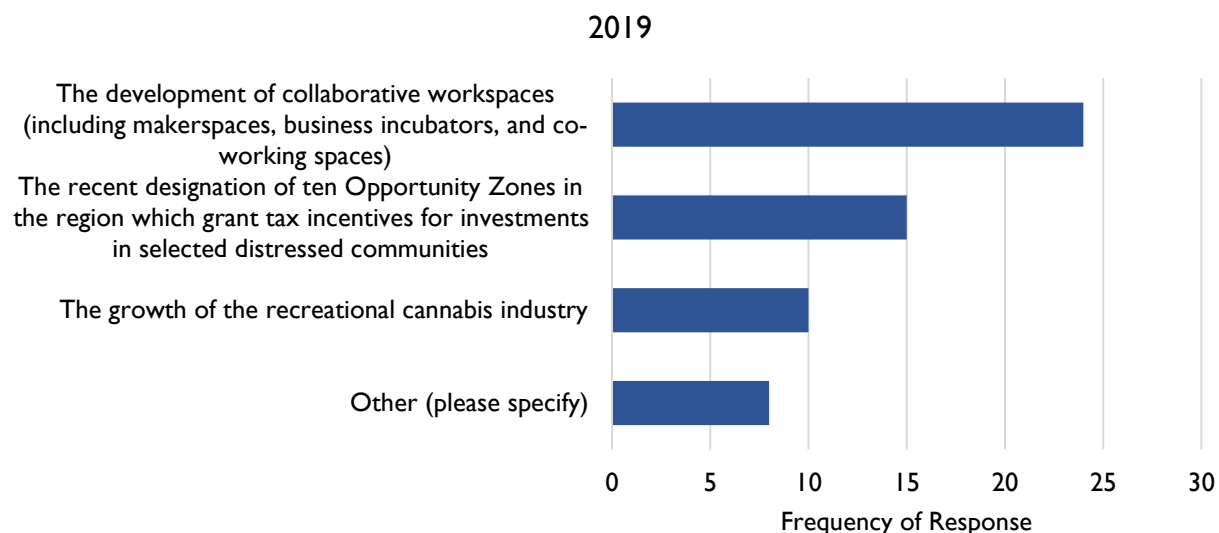


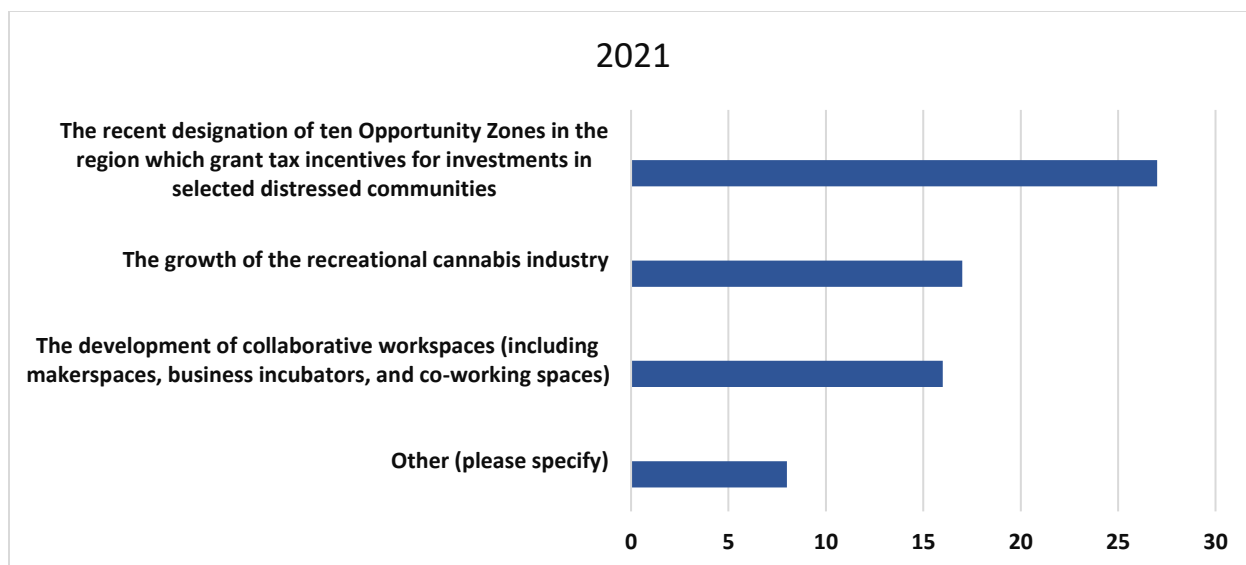
## D. Possible Opportunities

Among the areas that saw the greatest degree of change between 2019 and 2021 was the identification of potential regional opportunities. In both surveys, the second question asked respondents to select which economic development priorities should be supported. In 2019, collaborative workspaces (or “makerspaces”) were identified as the most promising opportunity, followed by the designation of six opportunity zones across the region, and growth of a nascent recreational marijuana industry trailing these as a distant third option.

As will be discussed below, development of collaborative workspaces fell to third place in 2021, with respondents gaining confidence in the economic potential of both opportunity zones and marijuana cultivation.

**Figure 24. What do you see as the top economic development opportunities for the Montachusett Region to support? Please select all that apply**





## I) Collaborative Workspaces

In 2019, the majority of respondents supported the development of collaborative workspaces in the Montachusett Region. Makerspaces, co-working spaces, and business incubators provide a range of services- such as temporary office space, business coaching, shared equipment, and even training in specialized skills. Often, these facilities center around a communal space and design that is intended promote interaction and collaboration amongst its users. At the time of the 2019 report's publication, a number of these facilities were under development across the region, including the Wachusett Business Incubator (WBI) in Gardner and LaunchSpace, Inc. (LSI) in Athol.



**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**

Unfortunately, the very concept of a shared workspace faced challenges leading up to and throughout the Pandemic. In September of 2019, a nationwide network of shared office spaces was forced to withdraw its initial public offering (IPO), part ways with its longtime chief executive, and lay off 2,400 employees when its \$47 billion valuation drew scrutiny. Ultimately, this valuation fell to \$8 billion. At the time, these public setbacks caused some in the business and real estate communities to question the viability of and need for shared workspaces. (Source, <https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/softbank-vision-fund-wework-valuation-5->



[billion-without-rescue-deal-2019-11](#); <https://www.businessinsider.com/wework-ipo-fiasco-adam-neumann-explained-events-timeline-2019-9>;  
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/01/29/business/bostons-coworking-boom-is-now-pause/>)

The need to socially distance and ensuing shutdowns which the Pandemic precipitated, just five months after the events described above, introduced further challenges for this industry. As with other businesses and services, many of these facilities were forced to shutter for extended periods of time. As of this writing, all employees have been called back to work at some business but, many businesses that utilized office space of any kind have yet to fully return to their previous modes of operation (with all employees in their respective offices). Anecdotally, a large regional credit union based in Fitchburg has installed additional electronic teller machines and automated teller machines (ATM's), have locked the doors to branch offices, and no longer provided in-person banking services. Questions persist regarding what "new normal" will emerge in the Pandemic's wake and what lasting impacts the remote and hybrid work patterns it necessitated will have. These considerations likely explain the presently decreased interest in shared workspaces as an economic opportunity.

Fortunately, this pessimism may prove unfounded. The comfort individuals feel with this model of workspace is likely to recover as COVID-19 Pandemic cases decrease (as we enter the endemic phase), and the economy continues to open. Moreover, the flexibility these shared or short-term rental spaces provide might actually increase in value as employers move towards hybrid work models. This appears to be the case for WeWork which has seen its occupancy rates begin to recover in recent months. (Source, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-21/wework-posts-best-sales-since-dropping-ipo-plans-in-2019>)

From a regional perspective, shared workspaces continue to represent a critical tool for catalyzing growth. These spaces provide a vital stepping stone to entrepreneurs who need offices, conference rooms, front-office services, workbenches, tools, machinery, and even training, but lack the resources to independently procure the aforementioned amenities. There are a small number of collaborative workspaces being developed in the region (such as LaunchSpace, Inc. in Athol and Orange) or are in the planning stages (in Clinton, in Gardner as the Chair City Legacy Makerspace, and Wachusett Business Incubator in Gardner, and a commercial kitchen for emerging, currently home-based, food processors in Winchendon). As these spaces become common, they will hopefully be able to provide valuable guidance and lessons to others interested in collaborative and community-based economic development. MRPC fully expects the number of collaborative workspaces to grow over the next ten years as these facilities not only provide spaces for people that need to rent machinery to make something for an occasional household improvements project (such as building tables or cabinets for a kitchen), but they will become job training centers operating outside of the world of academia but partnership with K-12 and post-secondary schools on mutually beneficial projects and programming to provide another worker training option for adults. It is our estimate that every school district and/or local library will create and maintain makerspaces within their public spaces targeting the population in grades K-12 and that the urban centers will also see the creation of non-profit makerspaces in our more densely populated communities.



## 2) Opportunity Zones

In 2018, the federal government designated ten Opportunity Zones across the Montachusett Region. This program seeks to encourage development in distressed communities by providing tax incentives for investment in specifically identified Census tracts that meet certain socio-economic criteria. While these incentives promised significant returns, the complicated financial mechanisms, significant capital outlays, and extended maturation period necessary to unlocking them left many uncertain as to the program's utility. As one survey respondent noted in 2019:

“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.)”

Between the 2019 and 2021 surveys however, interest in this program as a regional economic development opportunity increased by 21.1%. While no investments utilizing this program have come to fruition as of this writing, this shift suggests that public officials- who constitute the majority of respondents- have perceived an increased interest in it. A local economic development official gave anecdotal evidence of this during a June 2021 presentation of the latter surveys findings, stating that her community had recently received a number of inquiries regarding properties available in their two opportunity zones.

This might also suggest that investors are growing more comfortable with opportunity zones as investment vehicles or finding that- even with these benefits- they remain priced out of more expensive, traditional markets such as the Route 128 Corridor. Should real estate prices continue to climb, rendering new investments in those markets ever less attractive, the benefits this program provides could prove critical to attracting attention and increasing awareness of Montachusett's relative affordability.

## 3) Recreational cannabis industry

The recently established recreational cannabis industry was included in 2019 due to its emerging role in the Region, having recently leased, improved, and occupied a number of very large commercial and industrial spaces. However, at the time, this industry faced a number of challenges, including implementation of a novel regulatory framework, out of state and black market competition, and its precarious legal status at the federal level. Regarding the last point, it should be noted that the US Attorney for Massachusetts at the time had made public statements regarding his opposition to legalization and his willingness to enforce the federal government's longstanding prohibition on marijuana. These considerations likely help to explain the lack of excitement this industry generated, despite having just reactivated a number of long vacant mills.

This reticence seems to have declined over the last two years. Between 2019 and 2021 the share of respondents who identified “The growth of the recreational cannabis industry” as a “top economic development opportunity” grew by 13.68%. This is likely due to the industry's



continued growth and stability over that time period. Moreover- while federal law remains an impediment to this sector's growth, the 2020 Election led the aforementioned US Attorney's resignation, significantly decreasing the likelihood of imminent federal action against these businesses.

#### **4) Other identified opportunities**

Beyond the potential opportunities already listed, respondents in 2019 and 2021 identified other opportunities which should be support for the CEDS region.

##### *a) Housing*

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.



### c) *Business Incubators*

There are two, known small business incubators in the Montachusett Region. One operates in the world of academia and the other by a non-profit organization in Fitchburg and Gardner, respectively.

#### ideaLab

Fitchburg State University (FSU) acquired the former Fitchburg Theater property and created ideaLab for University students and others. According to the University's website, "It is the mission of Fitchburg State's ideaLab to open pathways of exploration for students, faculty, and the greater community to uncover their passions, develop their skills, and have access to resources that enable the creation of innovations and new ventures. A center where curiosity is amplified by access, the ideaLab will help people turn passion into projects that lead to personal and professional success." The IdeaLab offers the following services and programs:

- FirstStopFitchburg.com
  - First Stop Fitchburg is an initiative led by ideaLab stakeholders that seeks to be an evolving online resource for prospective, new and existing business owners that informs, connects, and excites people to grow their ventures in Fitchburg;
- Creative Sparks Studio
  - Creative Sparks Studio is a student-run creative studio providing services that support the growth of new enterprises in Fitchburg and elevate community awareness of organizations, institutions, and projects in the City; and,
- Community Hackathons
  - Community Hackathons are fun, social brainstorming events that brings together members across the Fitchburg community including Students, Faculty, Residents, and other stakeholders to tackle topics and issues that inform, connect, and excite people to be involved in the City of Fitchburg.

#### Wachusett Business Incubator

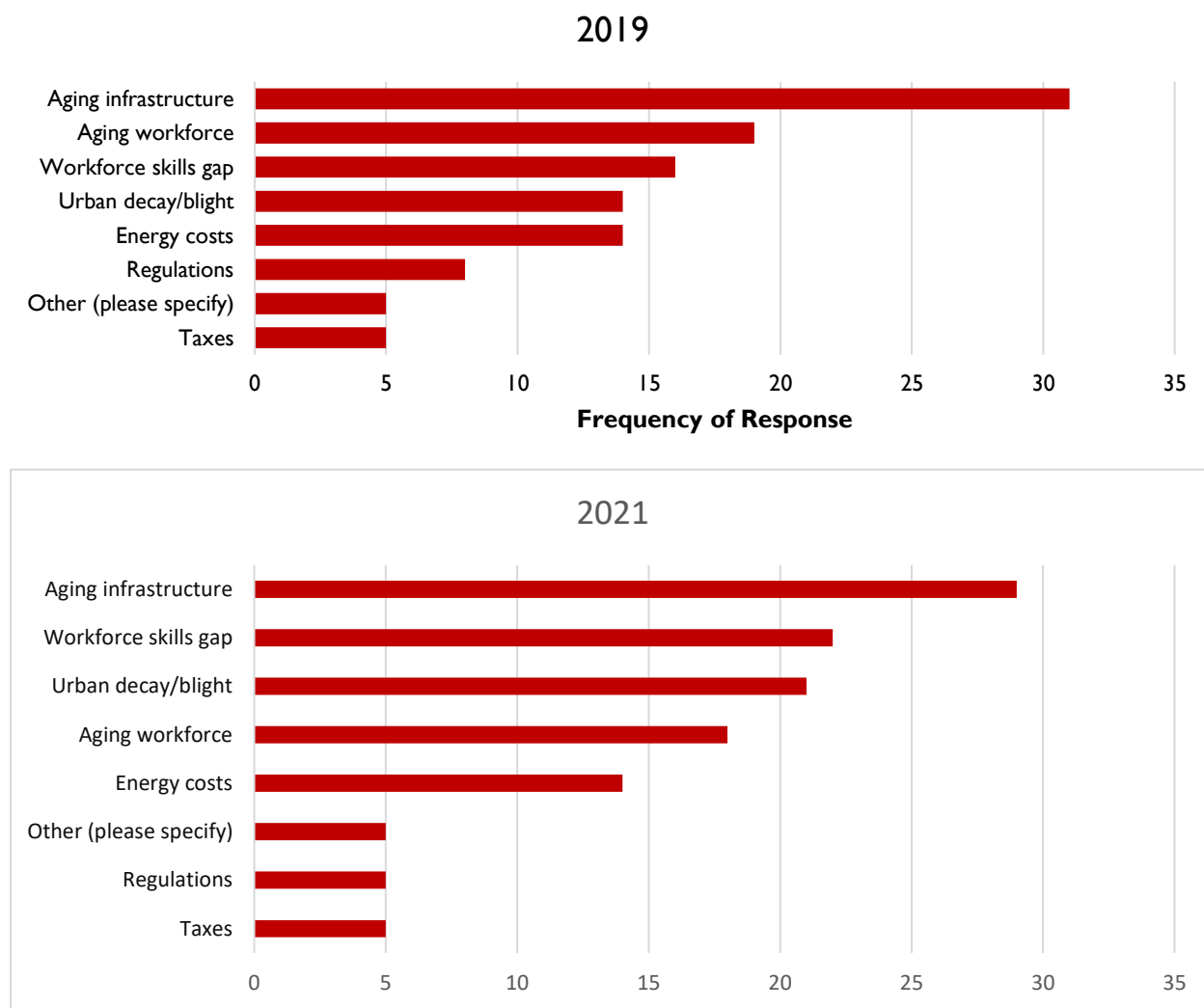
The Greater Gardner Business Incubator Network, Inc dba Wachusett Business Incubator (WBI) has operated in Gardner for more than five years. Currently, WBI is opening a new office in downtown Gardner at 31 Lake Street in the former Heywood Wakefield Furniture Manufacturing complex. Heywood-Wakefield was in business for more than a hundred years. Within the facility many new patented items were created in the heart of downtown Gardner. WBI continues to deliver free business planning technical assistance services to entrepreneurs starting-up new enterprises and scaling-up existing ventures. Persons creating new intellectual properties (IP) are the focus of the WBI, however the organization will work with all individuals in start-up or scale-up mode. One of the organization's goals is to provide assistance to people that will create sustainable business and retain and create employment opportunities within its 29-community catchment area located in greater north central Massachusetts.



## E. 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 wellbeing. Unlike the region's top economic development opportunities, there was relatively little change in the ranking of these challenges. This is somewhat unsurprising as the majority of these represent longstanding issues that are not likely to be resolved in a two-year time span.

**Figure 25. What are the top threats that are affecting the economic well-being of the Montachusett Region? Please select all that apply**





Aging infrastructure was chosen as the greatest threat to the regional economy by a significant margin in both years. The connection between transportation infrastructure and economic vitality is critical, as was discussed in the 2020 Montachusett Regional Transportation Plan. The issues identified below in Table 11 represent some of the most significant infrastructure improvements to be pursued.

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

Community	Location	Description
Athol	S. Athol Road Interchange	Access, Safety
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

While an aging workforce fell to fourth position, it was overtaken by the related issue of the workforce skills gap. As the longtime employees whose skills and trade knowledge made the Region's industrial dominance possible approach retirement, manufacturers and other employers have faced difficulty finding and training replacements. For that reason, 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 laborers to fill these roles, alongside 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 in 2019, 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."

Both in 2019 and 2021, two of the top four threats identified illustrated this divide. Among the top challenges respondents selected were an aging workforce and urban decay. Both of these challenges are particularly prominent in the region's central and western segments, where mill towns proliferated through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

While the first challenge was discussed above and pertains to those manufacturers still in operation, the latter proves to be a particular challenge in the high-density communities that





arose within walking distance of factories that have since closed. Lacking their industrial anchors- alongside the apartments and foot traffic they supported- the businesses which populated these downtowns were likewise forced to shutter. This has led to vacancies, deteriorating structures, and public safety challenges throughout these towns and cities. Since its relative proximity to Boston and other employment centers attracts younger residents and its relative lack of legacy urban centers greatly decreases the surplus building stock, these issues are less prevalent in Montachusett's eastern quadrant.

Another example of this divide was discussed at the June 2021 MRCEDS Committee meeting. While the vast majority of respondents identified public transportation as the Region's greatest weaknesses, Montachusett's three cities are served by a robust bus service operated by the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority- stylized MART. The communities directly east of Fitchburg are also served by the state's commuter rail system, which provides residents in these communities regular trains to and from Boston during commuting hours.

West of Gardner however, these services have little presence or impact. Unfortunately, the sparsely populated, rural character of these communities renders bus service impractical. Despite high car ownership rates- or perhaps due to them- services like Uber and Lyft also have limited coverage in these areas. This creates service gaps if a vehicle fails which is an increased likelihood in lower income communities where vehicle maintenance might be deferred. This may be a contributing factor to why many employers complain regularly about employee attendance and tardiness.

Given this diversity of environments, a variety of tools and programs will be needed to address Montachusett's challenges. One approach that could benefit the region in its entirety would be to promote 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. The region's chambers of commerce and regional tourism councils have already embraced this strategy, and these efforts will be supported by the MRPC wherever possible.



## F. Possible disconnect between business representatives and local government officials

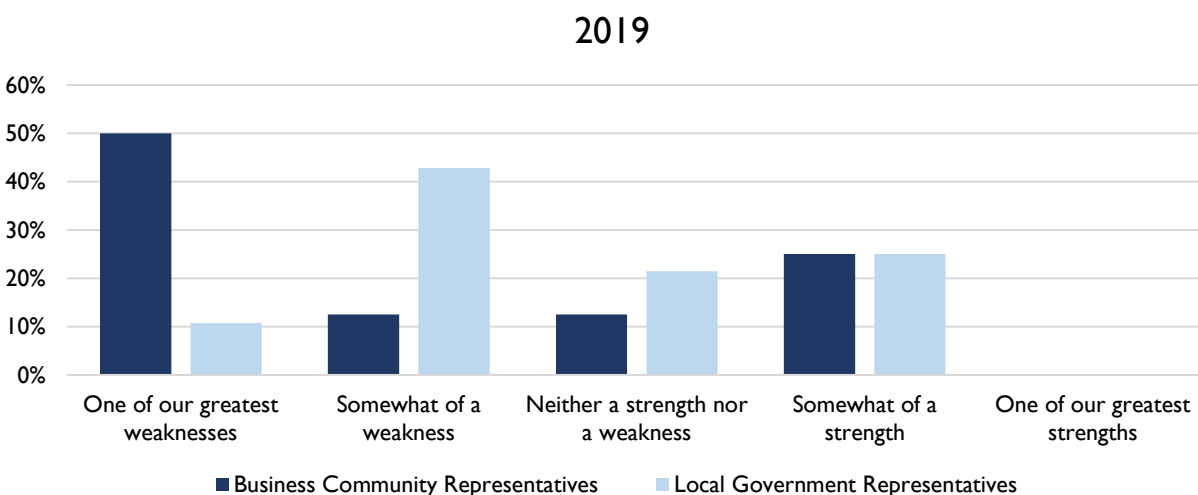
To better understand differences in perception between the business community and public sector officials, respondents were asked, “Which of the following best describes your role in the Montachusett Region? Select all that apply” and given the following options:

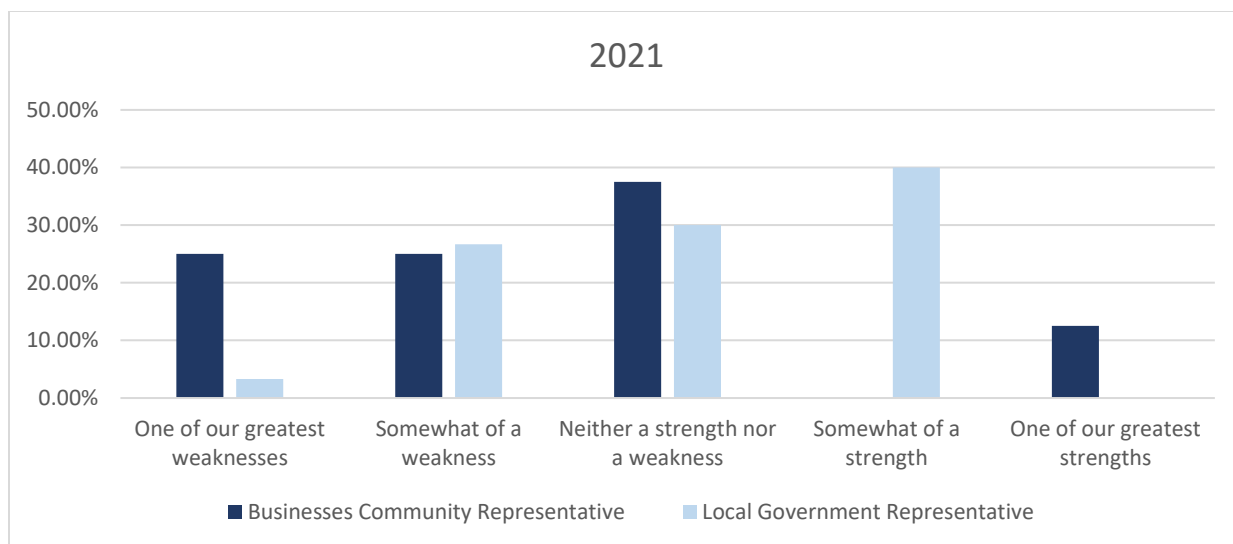
- Business community representative;
- Local government representative;
- Resident; and,
- Other (please specify).

The purpose of this question was to better understand how local government representatives and business leaders might vary in their perception of Montachusett’s strengths and weaknesses. While differences remain, this divide has also shifted over the past two years with pessimism amongst business respondents easing, in line with the survey’s overall trends.

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 in 2019. When then asked survey respondents to characterize the availability of support for business creation in the region, 50% of surveyed business community representatives identified this as one our greatest weaknesses, compared to just 11% of local government officials. The public sector outlook on this aspect of the Region was far from positive- with 43% of government representatives labeling it as “Somewhat of a weakness,” only 25% listing it as “Somewhat of a strength,” and none identifying it as “One of our greatest strengths.”

Figure 28. Support for business creation





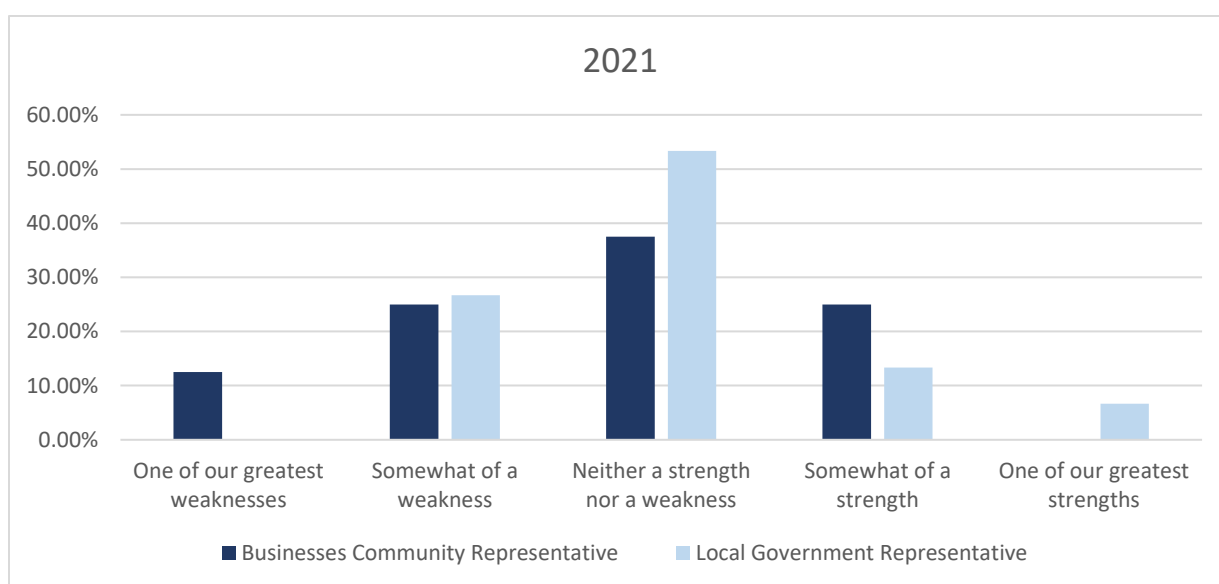
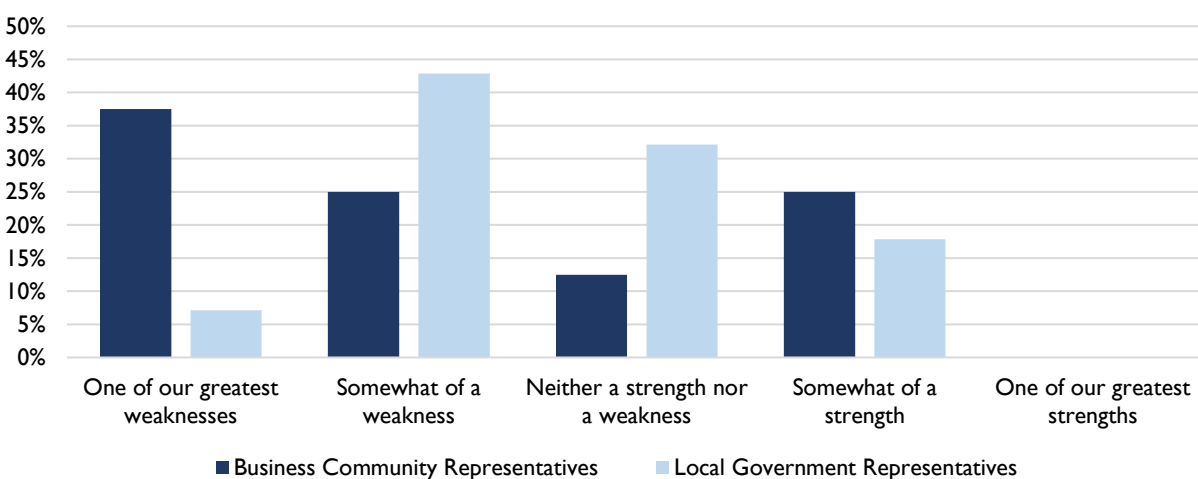
This outlook appears to have moderated in the time since. Amongst those representing the business community, the share who viewed it as one of the Region's "greatest weaknesses" fell by half to 25%. Ultimately, the share of the business community which saw it as a weakness of any kind fell by 13%, while those who saw it as a strength also declined by almost the same margin (12.5%). Not surprisingly, nearly this entire shift gravitated towards the share who recognize this as "Neither a strength nor a weakness," with that category increasing 24.5%.

Likewise with public officials- those who saw it as a weakness fell by 24%, while those who saw it as a strength increased by 15% and those who saw it as neither rose by 9%. Disparities still remain. The response indicates that government officials are most likely to view "Support for business creation" as a regional strength while business representatives are indifferent to pessimistic. The scale and degree of these disparities has been reduced significantly.

A similar pattern emerges concerning support for business retention. Both the business community and local government officials generally identified this as a regional weakness in 2019. However, perceptions around the severity of the problem appear to differ. Thirty eight percent of business community representatives identified support for business retention as one of our greatest weaknesses in that survey, compared to just 7% of government representatives.



**Figure 29. Support for business retention**

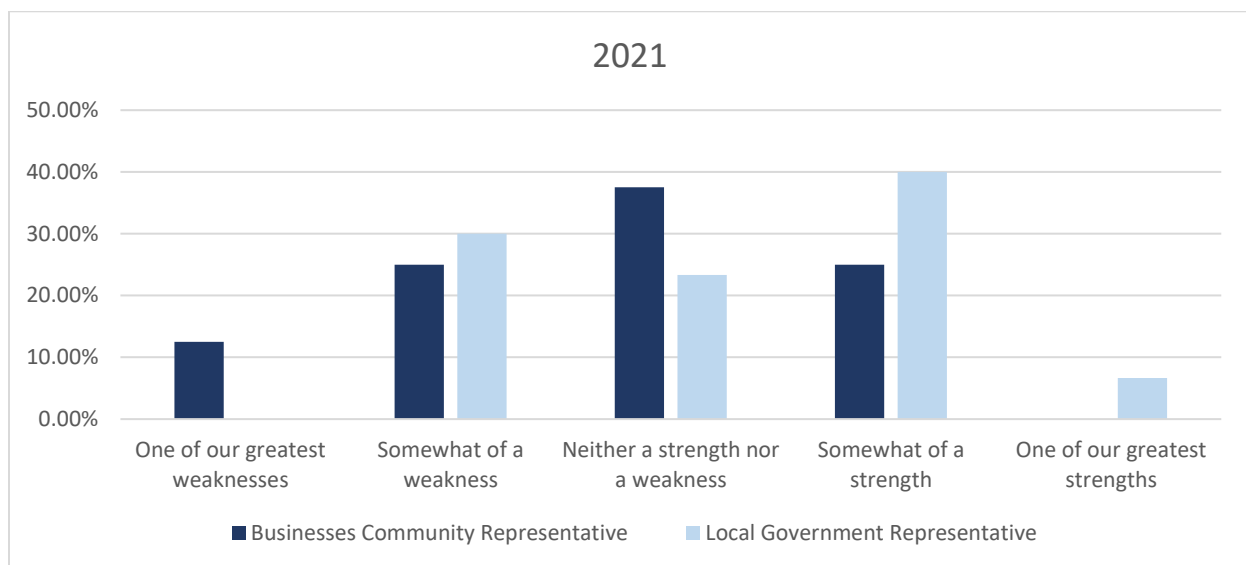
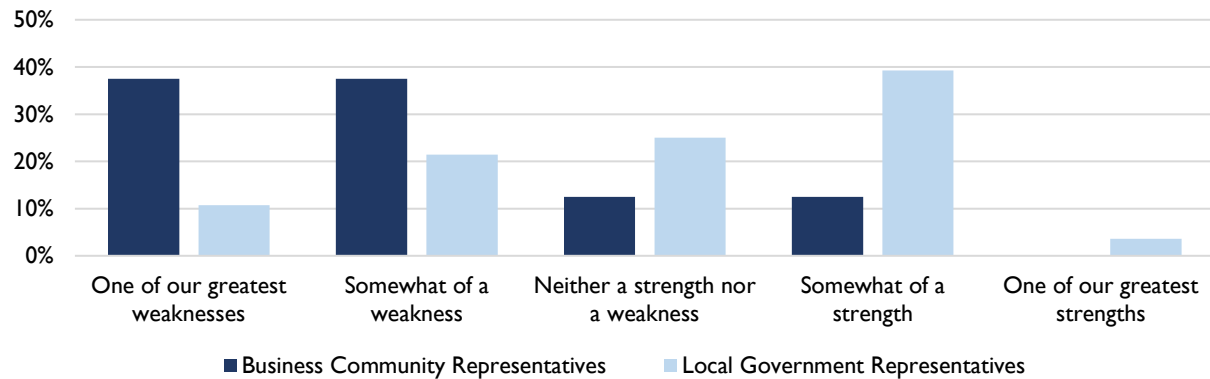


These perspectives appear to have moderated and the gaps between groups seem to have narrowed. Among business community representatives, extreme pessimism saw the steepest decline at a reduction of 25%. The entirety of that reduction appears to have shifted towards indifference, which rose by the same margin, as the share who saw this as “somewhat of a weakness” held firm. Likewise with public officials, the share of whom saw “support for business retention” as “somewhat of a weakness” fell by 21%. The majority of this decline was recovered by the share who were indifferent, which rose by 16%. Again, differences exist, with the business community leaning further towards pessimism and local government officials appearing more optimistic. Still, antipathy arose as the predominant outlook for both groups at the expense of more discouraging outlooks.



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 in 2019, compared to just 32% of government representatives.

**Figure 30. A trained workforce**



Once more, these outlooks appear to have come closer in line with each. Among business community representatives, the share who viewed the region's trained workforce as a weakness fell by half to 38%. Moreover, most of this decline drew from the share who held the most severe opinion, that a trained workforce represented one of the region's "greatest weaknesses." While the majority of this shift was captured by those who stated the workforce was "neither a weakness nor a strength," an increase of 25%, the share who viewed it as "somewhat of a strength" also grew by 12%.

By comparison, the outlook among local government representatives was far more static. Though those who viewed the Region's workforce as one of its "greatest weakness" fell to zero, these individuals only represented 11% of local government respondents in 2019. The other segments



held fast, with the most common response in both years, “Somewhat of a strength,” only increasing by a single point to 40% between 2019 and 2021.

Despite this lack of change among public officials however, views between them and their counterparts in the business community still narrowed. The latter’s cautious improvement in outlook coalesced into an increasingly neutral opinion on all of three of these matters. In one case, “support for business retention,” business community representatives even appeared more optimistic than their public sector counterparts. The effect has been to bring the outlooks of these parties closer in line with one another.

There could be numerous reasons for this improved alignment of perspectives, but one possibility would be the COVID-19 Pandemic. At the outset of 2020’s lockdowns and the economic crisis that followed, the federal and state governments launched a number of programs to assist closing businesses. Local public officials often found themselves serving as a point of contact, directing area businesses to various programs, and assisting them in their applications. This may have improved communications between these two demographics and may well have raised awareness of preexisting business support programs as well.

Regardless of the reason, it is important to build on this success and narrow the gaps in perception that still exist. This CEDS update seeks to identify resources and objectives which will help promote communication and collaboration across these different sectors. An ongoing, open dialogue could prove very beneficial for local government representatives to actively invite and listen to representatives of the business community to better understand the identified lack of support for business creation and retention, as well as workforce training needs in the region.



## ***G. 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, highly trained and high-quality 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, earthen materials for mining, and rivers and streams for eco-tourism). A balanced use of our natural resources should be promoted 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, sidewalks, bicycle trails, bridges, water, wastewater, and drainage systems, high-capacity electrical grid, 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.



(Source, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/notice-of-funding-availability-commonwealths-sustainable-development-principles/download>.)





## ***H. 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** – Athol Department of Planning and Athol Economic Development Industrial Corporation (EDIC)
- **Ayer** – Office of Community and Economic Development
- **Clinton** – Office of Community and Economic Development
- **Devens** – Devens Enterprise Commission (DEC)
- **Fitchburg** – Department of Community Development and Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority (FRA)
- **Gardner** – Department of Community Development and Planning and Gardner Redevelopment Authority (GRA)
- **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 (EDIC)
- **Westminster** – Economic Development Committee and Planning Department
- **Winchendon** – Community & Economic Development Steering Committee, Department of Planning and Development, and Winchendon Redevelopment Authority (WRA)

### **Non-profits**

- Greater Gardner Business Incubator Network, Inc. dba Wachusett Business Incubator (WBI)
- LaunchSpace, Inc. (LSI)
- Montachusett Enterprise Center, Inc. (MEC, an affiliate of the MRPC)
- Montachusett Opportunity Council, Inc. (MOC)
- North Central Massachusetts Community Reinvestment Act Coalition (NCMCRA)
- North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation (NCMDC, and affiliate of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce [NCMCC])
- North Quabbin Community Coalition, Inc. (NQCC)
- NewVue Communities (“NewVue”)



- United Way of North Central Massachusetts & Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts

### **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 (GGCC), based in Gardner
- Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce (NVCC), based in Shirley
- North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce (NCMCC), based in Fitchburg
- North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce (NQCC), based in Athol

### **Education and Job Training Partners**

- Applewild (Fitchburg), Cushing Academy (Ashburnham), and Groton School (Groton) (private schools);
- Fitchburg State University (FSU);
- Mount Wachusett Community College (“The Mount” or MWCC);
- Worcester State University (WSU);
- Quinsigamond Community College (QCC);
- Leominster Center for Technical Education (LCTE), Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical High School (“Monty Tech”), and Nashoba Valley Technical High School (NVTHS);
- MassHire North Central Workforce Board;
- MassHire North Central Career Center;
- Shriver Job Corps, Devens; and,
- Pre-K, Elementary, Middle, and High Schools in virtually all communities in the Montachusett Region

### **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; it is an affiliate of the MRPC. MRPC planning services have been delivered to MEC to identify affordable housing development sites in the region.



Accomplishments include the construction of affordable homes in Athol and Fitchburg and Worcester Housing Court designation as an eligible receiver. As a receiver, MEC was authorized to take temporary possession of abandoned and/or foreclosed homes which posed a threat to public health and safety, make necessary repairs in accordance with the Massachusetts Sanitary Code, and recover its costs through the foreclosure auction process.

### **Montachusett Brownfields Group (MBG)**

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

MRPC has administered six Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Site Assessments Grants and one EPA Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) grant. Utilizing Environmental Site Assessment (ESA) grants, our member communities were able to complete 79 brownfield site assessments. The EPA's Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) grant award to the MRPC provided for the successful cleanup and redevelopment of the former Amory Packaging (plastics manufacturing) site in Clinton. The site is currently a commercial and warehouse and 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***

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. 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 and related initiatives (such as providing transit services to and from employment centers and workforce housing sites);
- Equitable growth and development that address the needs of all Montachusett inhabitants; and,
- Housing development, improvements, and programs that provide a supply that is sufficient for the region's workforce.

### ***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. Development, Redevelopment, Reuse, Business Retention and Attraction;
7. Education (i.e. K-12, post secondary, and workforce training and retraining);
8. Housing;
9. Public Health and Safety; and,
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;
2. Advance high-quality infrastructure and community improvements to support development, redevelopment and revitalization of the built environment; and,
3. Expand broadband and high speed internet service to all Montachusett communities, residents, and businesses.

## Regional Cooperation

1. Coordinate the Region's economic recovery following the COVID19 Pandemic by cataloguing resources available to area stakeholders and municipalities, educating these partners regarding what those resources are, supporting efforts taken to support employers and small businesses, and spearheading planning and research activities to ensure an equitable and resilient reopening;
2. 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;
3. Inventory business assets in all regional clusters- including supply chains, 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;
4. Work to increase awareness and understanding of the Region's various economic development organizations and their roles, processes for directing resources, and the impact of their work;
5. 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;
6. Distribute this work widely and make it easily accessible on the organization's websites;
7. Define resources needed to adequately implement the CEDS;
8. Define the role of the CEDS committee and any potential task forces related to advocacy/legislative issues or other specific topics. Establish regularly scheduled meetings of the CEDS Committee (four to twelve times per year) to review progress, make refinements to the strategy, and pursue new initiatives;
9. Work in coordination with the four regional Chambers to further engage local, state, and national media related to economic development initiatives in the region; and,



10. Pursue and strengthen relationships and partnerships with neighboring EDD's and counties to leverage the opportunities, assets, and workforces that exist their; and,

### **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 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 four 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 (i.e. collaborative workspaces), business incubators, and co-working spaces;
2. Support capacity building for innovation leaders, including programming and 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 providers, universities, and industry to identify and further develop 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,
4. Pursue and, where and when possible, implement strategies to develop the greater Montachusett region into the center for research, training, practical experience, and collaboration. in these topics.



## Workforce Development, Attraction, Retention, and Resiliency

1. Support efforts to work with local and regional K-12 school administrators, educators, and guidance counselors to identify and promote job opportunities in the area, as well as non-college related pathways for students;
2. Support programs which increase adult residents' workforce readiness and options, including assistance with interview preparation and resume review;
3. Foster digital literacy and technology education programming in the Region's schools, colleges, and community centers;
4. 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, thus creating, maintaining, and growing workforce pipelines; and,
5. Research addiction recovery efforts in other communities and identify programs; and services that could be brought to North Central Massachusetts. Support the implementation of programs and policies as appropriate. The approach will 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.

## Development, Redevelopment, Reuse and Business Retention and Attraction

1. Educate public officials and offer technical assistance to communities on the most appropriate uses of the Region's 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; ,
3. Develop a comprehensive, user friendly map detailing major development sites, their zoning, and **their available infrastructure capacity that can be shared with developers and site scouts seeking to invest in the Region**; and,
4. 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. Collaborate with partners to design and create programs and projects that will eliminate homelessness in the Montachusett Region;
2. Support efforts to incentivize the redevelopment and development of housing affordable to all inhabitants of all income levels;
3. Focus resources and investments on helping existing inhabitants, 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;
4. 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;
5. Conduct a region wide housing needs and opportunities assessment, utilizing existing work that has been done to establish a comprehensive understanding of housing supply gaps for current and future inhabitants especially disadvantaged groups such as, but not limited to, homeless and veterans;
6. Establish an inventory of available funding and financial assistance programs for housing development and redevelopment work, identifying funding gaps and mechanisms for filling them;
7. Identify zoning or other regulations that hinder effective residential development needed to respond to current market needs and address them, where possible, with partner organizations; and,
8. Provide support to Housing Choice Initiative and MBTA communities where and when appropriate.





## Public Health and Safety

1. Where necessary, support the acquisition and stockpile of personal protective equipment by municipal health departments and healthcare providers in preparation for future epidemiological events;
2. Review regional policies and procedures relative to communicable diseases and develop a coordinated plan that could utilized to stem the spread of infectious diseases through future epidemics, pandemics, and in endemic conditions;
3. Work in collaboration with local health care providers and all, appropriate educational institutions to meet the growing need for trained healthcare professionals in the Montachusett Region;
4. Convene a discussion with major employers regarding the potential for a cooperative approach to childcare and early childhood education programs and other community-based solutions;
5. Support, improve and promote locally based community health systems and food systems; and,
6. 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;
3. Encourage the modernization of building stock constructed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and earlier, improving the energy efficiency of these structures;
4. 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; and,
5. Continue the work originated by the MRPC’s Regionwide Energy resiliency Plan by promoting the installation of backup power systems at critical facilities (i.e. all medical facilities, fueling stations, grocery stores)



### ***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 epidemic, pandemic, significant adverse weather event [snow, ice, or heavy rainstorms], and/or 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 current COVID-19 Pandemic.

An ecosystem's "resiliency" generally refers to its ability to rapidly return to "normal" in the face of shocks or stress. While this often assumes minimal changes to previous routines and ways of life, adaptation, and innovation in the wake of a crisis are sometimes necessary. This is especially true in the wake of COVID-19 as employers and communities struggle to ascertain how recent events and developments will alter the way they conduct business, post-pandemic. 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 inhabitants.

#### *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 several 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 exiting the region. While some negative trends had slowed or even reversed in recent years, the Region must be better prepared to absorb these shocks through planning and the development of a robust business ecosystem in the years to come.

Critical to this is a diversification of the Montachusett Region's private sector and workforce, coupled with support for those businesses and employees who currently reside within the Region. Several programs exist which provide funding and technical assistance to regional employers and entrepreneurs. Both the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation (NCMDC, Microloan and SBA loan programs), North Quabbin Community Coalition (NQCC, North Quabbin Loan Fund), and NewVue Communities operate microloan programs that can provide entrepreneurs with seed capital and employers with emergency funding. MRPC's affiliate, the Montachusett Enterprise Center, Inc. (MEC), has also obtained private foundation grants to provide plans to improve transit assistance for seniors and other programming for the benefit of the inhabitants of the region. The Wachusett Business Incubator (WBI) operates an incubator, and is creating a high-tech collaborative workspace, providing business planning technical assistance (BPTA) services to inhabitants in startup and scale-up mode for 29 cities and towns in the greater north central Massachusetts area. Located in Gardner the WBI provides nascent operations with the space and technical assistance needed as they grow to scale. Fitchburg State University (FSU) and NewVue communities provide business incubation services in Fitchburg. These agencies and their programming will be leveraged to ensure that there are resources and funding mechanisms available for entrepreneurs at every stage of business development.

MRPC is developing efforts directed towards promoting development. These programs, described in greater detail in the "Development and Business Attraction" subsection of *Section B. Goals and Objectives* above, are intended not only to provide local, growing companies with the real estate solutions they need to remain in Montachusett, but also attract external employers in the process of relocating, diversifying the regional economic base in the process. Doing so will insulate the Region from future economic shocks by ensuring sectoral crises have only a limited impact and that existing local programs and assistance mechanisms are less likely to be overwhelmed.

A diverse and nimble workforce is also critical if the Region is to guard against future shocks. To this end, MRPC will collaborate with MassHire North Central, regional employers, local unions, and the area's numerous other workforce development organizations to ensure that training in relevant skills and credentials are available. Similar efforts will be made relative to the Montachusett Region's secondary educational facilities and higher learning institutions.



### *Post-Pandemic Recovery*

Since March of 2020, efforts have been made to leverage the programs and resources described above to mitigate the COVID-19 Pandemic's impact on the Region. The North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation and NewVue Communities, alongside numerous regional banks and financial institutions, were involved in distributing Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans and informing employers of the Economic Injury Disaster Loan Program (EIDL) at the Pandemic's outset. Meanwhile, MassHire North Central and the Montachusett Region's numerous social service providers assisted thousands of residents in securing unemployment assistance.

MRPC was likewise involved in the distribution of grant dollars to area food banks in Lunenburg, Shirley, and Townsend, assisting with expenses and needs those previous programs were unable to address.



## **D. Action Plan**

MRPC has received a \$70,000 partnership grant and a \$400,000 CARES Act grant, matched with \$17,500 in cash and \$52,500 in funds from the Massachusetts District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) program (state funds), to implement the following 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**

Aid 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, storing, analyzing, and presenting land forms suitable for business development and job creation in two- and three-dimensions (“2D” and “3D”), 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. In June 2019, the EPA selected MRPC for a \$300,000 Community-wide Brownfields Assessment grant for hazardous substances contaminated sites. Hazardous substances grant funds will be used to inventory and prioritize sites and to conduct Phase I and Phase II environmental site assessments on sites to be determined. Grant funds also will be used to conduct community outreach activities and cleanup planning. 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:

1. Continue to offer planning and economic development technical assistance to Montachusett communities without professional staff as needed;
2. Provide staff support to the Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (MRCEDS) Committee, at regularly scheduled meetings (no less than quarterly and no more than monthly);
3. Provide staff support to the Montachusett Economic Development District (MEDD), as needed;
4. 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; and,
5. MRPC will enhance and create collaborative ventures with local, state, and federal counterparts alongside non-profit, educational, and job training institutions to improve the economic health of the region.

MRPC will use quantitative performance measures on an annual basis to assess progress the region is making toward this Action Plan. These measures will also be used to gauge how effectively the strategies undertaken are meeting overall objectives of the planning effort.

MRPC will track and evaluate the following primary CEDS performance measures:

1. Total and change in the number of jobs within the Region by industry sectors;
2. Total and change in unemployment within the Region compared to counties, state, and nation;
3. Inventory of major private sector investment projects over \$5 million;
4. Inventory of major Federal and State investment projects (grants and development projects); and,
5. Total and change in number of residential housing units within the region by community.

To provide further insight into the economic condition of the region and progress towards achieving the goals and objectives of the CEDS, the following performance measures will also be assessed:

1. Inventory of major private sector investment projects funded through registered Opportunity Funds;
2. Annual Dollar Value of Transportation Improvements expended using Federal and/or State Financial Resources;
3. Percent of Students passing MCAS;
4. Dropout Rate of High School Students;
5. Percent of Housing Units that are Owner Occupied;
6. Percent of Owners with Mortgages Paying more than 30% of their income on housing costs;
7. Percent of Renters Paying more than 30% of their income on rent; and,



## 8. Building Permits Issued for New Residential Construction.

In parallel to these measures, additional performance measure will be established which correlate with the specific tasks being funded through MRPC's EDA Planning Assistance grant:

- ***Technical Assistance to Communities to Prepare Grant Applications for Community and Economic Development Funding***
  1. Number of Communities Assisted;
  2. Number of Grant Applications Supported; and,
  3. Number of Successful Grant Awards and amount of Funding Received.
- ***Pursuit of Additional Brownfields Redevelopment Funding***
  1. Number of Brownfields Environmental Site Assessment Grants Submitted; and,
  2. Number of Brownfields Environmental Site Assessment Grant Awards and amount of Funding Received.
- ***Assist with the EDIP Tax Incentives Program***
  1. Number of Communities receiving EDIP and NWCETA Assistance.
- ***Update and Maintain the Regional CEDS***
  1. Evaluation will be based on the CEDS performance measures cited above.





## VI. 2021 – 2026 MRCEDS Projects

### Athol

#### ***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 MRPC to advance the concept planning towards potential establishment of a formal Urban Renewal Plan. A site visit has since been conducted and a map identifying key parcels developed.

#### ***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 Montachusett EDD service area (within the EDD of Franklin County). 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.



## **Ayer**

### ***F. West Ayer Village Project***

Ayer, MA

This infrastructure improvement project activates under-utilized space in connection with a recently passed, form-based, smart growth zoning bylaw. to encourage smart, sustainable, compact development that accommodates a range of transit options. Advanced by a partnership between the Town of Ayer, Devens Enterprise Commission, and MassDevelopment at Devens- with preliminary work funded through a \$3.1 million 2020 MassWorks Grant- the project will deliver new roadway surfaces, shade trees, sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and water lines alongside improvements to the site's stormwater management. It will also include the installation of a bus terminal and bicycle share station, alongside ample on-street parking. The result will be the landmark transformation of an obsolete, auto-centric, strip corridor into a traditional, multi-modal, transit oriented New England village center.



## Clinton

### ***G. Rockbestos-Suprenant Site***

Clinton, MA

Located at 172 Sterling Street, the Rockbestos-Suprenant Site had been producing large cable and component parts for ships and industry from as early as 1918 until 2004, when Rockbestos left the site for its headquarters in Connecticut. Since the site's closing, the empty factory – including at least five buildings and several loading docks – was razed due to safety concerns. The property, off Route 62, remains in a visible section of town with significant redevelopment potential. Plans for the project include the remediation and redevelopment of the remaining brownfield for industrial or commercial use.

### ***H. Bigelow Spinning Mills***

Clinton, MA

The Bigelow Spinning Mills, located on 460-530R Main Street, is a blighted mill complex which includes eight brick mill buildings dating from 1810 to 1898. The earliest buildings were constructed for Poignand and Plant. The Bigelow Carpet Company was incorporated in 1854, and ten years later, it embarked on an extensive construction campaign. Many of the buildings in this complex date from the Bigelow's expansion phase. The mill ultimately closed in 1932. Today, the Bigelow Mill's brick tower still dominates Clinton's skyline. Manufacturing and commercial companies occupy portions of the site while a smaller, four-story brick building was recently renovated for residential condominiums. Plans for the site include revitalization of the mill complex within downtown for industrial, commercial, or mixed use.

### ***I. 285 West Boylston Street-37 South Meadow Road***

Clinton, MA

The 23-acre site spanning from 285 West Boylston Street to 37 South Meadow Road is being planned for future industrial or commercial use, potentially in conjunction with lands within the neighboring Town of Sterling.

### ***J. Clinton STEM Center***

Clinton, MA

The Town of Clinton has been proactively studying the feasibility of a STEM center intended to help foster local innovation and entrepreneurship, as well as support local manufacturers and residents through workplace skills training. The proposed project would be located at 42 Church Street in a former fire station now owned by the school department.

### ***K. Counterpane Brook Basic Drainage Improvements***

Clinton, MA



Improvements to surface and sub-surface drainage infrastructure, primarily along Union, Main, and High Streets, are needed to promote resiliency, preserve jobs, and provide for business expansion.

### ***L. Downtown Revitalization***

Clinton, MA

Infrastructure improvements and targeted investment within the 112-acre Downtown Clinton Target Area, to create and retain employment and advance innovation.

### ***M. Clinton Collaborative Workspace***

Clinton, MA

The development of the Clinton Collaborative Workspace originated in recommendation made within the Bigelow Mills Feasibility Analysis. The project will aim to create jobs and advance innovation in the region.



## Devens

### ***N. Salerno Circle***

Devens, MA

MassDevelopment owns 118-acre Salerno Circle, a former US Army housing area in the Devens redevelopment. Building have been removed and the site can accommodate office, R&D, and life science projects. The site is flat and partially cleared and is accessed from Marne Road, a private ½ mile drive that meanders through the Red Tail Golf Club. The property is surrounded by woods and has good exposure to Route 2. Commercial development at Salerno will require roadway and utility infrastructure improvements.

### ***O. III Hospital Road***

Devens, MA

MassDevelopment owns 111 Hospital Road, a 60-acre site that is being marketed for office, R&D, light manufacturing, and life science projects. The site is partially cleared and is comprised of four former Army housing areas which have all been demolished. 111 Hospital Road is serviced with all utilities and can support up to 1,000,000 SF.

### ***P. Red Tail Heights***

Devens, MA

Red Tail Heights is a shovel-ready, 25.4 acre-land site that overlooks the Red Tail Golf Course and club house. The lot is partially cleared and can accommodate up to 350,000 SF for office, R&D, life science, and light manufacturing. Red Tail Heights is serviced by all utilities.



## **Fitchburg**

### **Q. 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.

### **R. Lagoons 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.

### **S. 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 with 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.

### **T. Fitchburg State University Theater Block Project**

Fitchburg, MA

Downtown Fitchburg's Theater Block lies at the heart of the City's Transformative Development Initiative (TDI) District. Fitchburg State University purchased the long-vacant theater block at 717 Main Street in 2016 and has embarked on a multi-phase, multimillion-dollar renovation project. To date, the University has completed the first of four planned construction phases with the build out of 7,000 square feet on the building's second floor. This area now houses a growing, state of the art video game design program and a shared workspace- known as the idealab (<https://www.fitchburgidealab.com/>). Future work includes rehabilitating the



building's ground level storefronts (Phase II), construction of a black box theater (Phase III), and restoration of the building's historic theater (Phase IV). In connection with the restoration of Fitchburg's historic City Hall across the street, this project will attract increase foot traffic along Main Street, bringing new business and investment to the area's adjacent store fronts.





## **Gardner**

### ***U. Wachusett Business Incubator***

Gardner, MA

The Wachusett Business Incubator (WBI) is located at 31 Lake Street, Gardner (in the former Heywood-Wakefield Furniture manufacturing buildings which is now Heywood Place, a mixed-use commercial and residential property). Developed by a consortium of local business leaders, the goal of the WBI is to foster economic growth in the greater north central Massachusetts region by providing targeted business planning technical assistance services 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 (and scaling-up) companies along the path to commercial maturity.

### ***V. 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).

### ***W. The Mill Street Corridor***

Gardner, MA

The Mill Street Corridor Urban Renewal Area (the URA or Project Area) is an industrially developed section of South Gardner. Much of the URA historically contained now-defunct furniture manufacturing businesses, including the S. Bent & Brothers Company that operated from about 1867 to 2001. The URA is approximately 45 acres, including sections of Mill and Winter Streets and a short segment of an inactive railroad spur.



The overall goal for the Project is to create a framework for the redevelopment of the Mill Street Corridor, thus restoring unproductive and contaminated properties to productive use that will generate commercial and industrial training and job opportunities, foster an environment for businesses to thrive and create sustainable jobs provide business opportunities for economic development, and increase the City's tax base. The objectives described below were established for the Project to achieve this goal.

- Transform Gardner's historic manufacturing economic base to serve 21st century industry through redevelopment of former industrial properties, and in so doing increase the number and diversity of well-paying jobs in the City.
- Encourage and preserve economic diversity and quality of life by providing opportunities for businesses serving a diversity of incomes and skills.
- Increase real estate tax income generating properties in the URA.
- Encourage private sector investment and utilize public funds judiciously and strategically as a catalyst for private investment.
- Facilitate land assembly and disposition to advance the goals, objectives and activities of the URP.
- Integrate the URA with adjacent residential and commercial uses, as well as transportation networks, be developing an improved roadway network and recreation trails.

## ***X. Gardner Industrial Park Study***

Gardner, MA

The City of Gardner has two industrial parks, which are at 95% capacity for build out. With a need for emerging manufacturing and office business spaces, the City of Gardner is in the process of identifying land for a new industrial park. The City and designated consultant will determine eligibility and Identify suitable land for the new business park. Once identified the City will need federal and state assistance to construct and complete the build out. The new business park will expand opportunities for economic growth.

## ***Y. Downtown Street Scape Improvements***

Gardner, MA

A 5-year plan to improve the Downtown infrastructure, is an extensive project that includes water main replacements, service connections, fire connections, and sewer improvements. Complete Streets are designed and operated to provide safety and accessibility for all the users of our roadways, trails, and transit systems, including pedestrians, cyclists, transit riders, motorists, commercial vehicles, and emergency vehicles and for people of all ages and of all abilities. Furthermore, Complete Streets principles contribute toward safety, health, economic viability, and the quality of life in a community by providing accessible efficient connections between home, schools, work, recreation and retail destinations by improving the pedestrian and



vehicular environments throughout communities. The City of Gardner's Downtown Street Scape Program plan is to implement six Priority Projects including signalized crossings, accessible ramps and crosswalks, safety lighting, and improved bicycle signage, lane markings, and connections.

## **Z. *Bike & Pedestrian Bridge over Route 140***

Gardner, MA

Plans for a completed bridge over Route 140 to complete The North Central Pathway trail that winds through Gardner into Winchendon. This Gardner section begins at the Veterans Memorial Skating Rink on the eastern shore of Crystal Lake and goes behind Heywood Hospital where there is a Wellness Loop off the paved path. The plan is to implement a complete bike trail connecting the historic downtowns of Gardner and Winchendon.



## Harvard

### AA. ***Ayer Road Corridor***

Harvard, MA

The Ayer Road corridor remains Harvard's most prominent and nearly singular opportunity for commercial development and other complementary land uses. The three-phase proposed project for the Ayer Road Commercial Corridor is intended to be cumulative and include an initial market analysis, a vision plan for the Ayer Road corridor, and the development of a very carefully crafted set of zoning tools to facilitate and realize the vision. At this time there are two priority components of the Ayer Road Corridor project for which funds are being sought. The first priority is to obtain funds to retain a consultant to conduct a complete market analysis for the Ayer Road corridor and include a fiscal impact analysis of the findings. The second priority is to obtain funds to conduct a comprehensive water and sewer feasibility study of the Ayer Road corridor including to determine the optimal plan for connecting to and carrying the system from Devens to a location along Ayer Road corridor where it can service the entire Commercial or "C" district.



## **Leominster**

### ***BB. Spanish American Center***

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.

### ***CC. Revitalization of Downtown Leominster***

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.

### ***DD. Sholan Farms***

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.

### ***EE. Connection between Adams Street and Downtown***

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.

### ***FF. Downtown Parking Garage***

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.



## Townsend

### ***GG. Revitalization of Downtown Townsend***

With Townsend's growth, rich cultural history, and significant interest in reusing vacant buildings as well as developing public areas for outdoor activities in and near the Downtown Commercial District, the Town is seeking to develop a Downtown Townsend revitalization strategy. The strategy would include a plan for reuse of vacant buildings, installation of new or replacement of existing infrastructure, assessment of walkability and wayfinding, pedestrian amenities, as well as construction of a new corridor in the Townsend Downtown Commercial District.



## **Westminster**

### ***HH.Simplex Drive Industrial District***

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.

### ***II. Westminster Business Park Industrial District***

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.





## **Winchendon**

### **JJ. Commercial Drive Extension**

This project is another phase to the development of the Hillview Business Park. This development expands onto land owned by the Winchendon Redevelopment Authority. Two developers have signed on. Both investments total 13 million and have the potential to create 50 jobs. However, all is contingent upon MassWorks funding to construct the roadway into the site.

### **KK. Enteral Street (Winchendon Village Downtown Area)**

The town has been successful in securing funding for the reconstruction of Central Street through the TIP program and the development of a branding and wayfinding plan. However, funds are needed for water and sewer in conjunction with the reconstruction. Funds are also needed for further revitalization projects through a sign and façade program and to realize the recommendations of the branding and wayfinding plan.

### **LL. Lincoln Ave Ext. Revitalization (Toy Industrial Park Area)**

Brownfield assessment and remediation funds are necessary to create town owned "Pad Ready" sites in an area that is serviced by Town Water, Sewer and Three Phase power. The sites are part of the Toy Town Industrial Park area. The town owns one site and is in the process of obtaining the other. The sites need to be assessed and the remediation performed for them to be marketed as pad ready. They are in a location that substantial investment has already taken place (sewer, water, electric, etc.).

### **MM. Blair Square Redesign**

The project aims to reconfigure traffic patterns of Blair Square that take into consideration multiple users. Blair Square is the "gateway" to downtown commercial area. It needs to be reconfigured to accommodate multiple types of users and improve safety. Additionally, it serves as the gateway to the downtown area, but its present state detracts rather than attracts.

### **NN. Poland / Streeter Schools**

Revitalization of two school of prominent buildings in downtown area clearing the area of blight "town owned" properties to promote health and vibrancy. Improved "quality of life" leads to the overall financial of the community. The two vacant schools are slated to be redeveloped into veteran housing pending funding.