

Williamstown Master Plan

Final Report and Recommendations of the Master Plan Steering Committee

December 2002

Process

Recognizing the changing dynamics of Williamstown and the increasingly competitive demand for our limited resources, the Planning Board, with the approval of the Board of Selectmen, appointed the Master Plan Steering Committee in the summer of 2000. The charge to the Committee was to develop a long-range, comprehensive plan that would accurately reflect community values and preferences and serve as a practical decision-making guide for local officials. The underlying goal is to ensure that Williamstown, steeped in its natural beauty, continues to be a productive, safe and interesting place to live.

The Master Plan Steering Committee was structured to include representatives from various town boards, committees and commissions as well as key local institutions. The twenty original members included (affiliations are noted): Hank Art (Conservation Commission), Anita Barker (Planning Board/Citizen), Charles Bonenti (Historical Commission), Bob Buckwalter (Housing Authority), Mike Card (Inspection Services), Michael Conforti (Clark Art Institute), George "Sam" Crane (Elementary School Committee/Citizen), John Cronin (Northern Berkshire Health Systems), Dick DeMayo (Planning Board), Don Dubendorf (Chamber of Commerce), Town Manger - Peter Fohlin (Town Manager), Sarah Gardner (Berkshire Regional Planning Commission/Planning Board), Dan Gendron (Selectman/Citizen), Andy Hoar (Zoning Board of Appeals), Jack Madden (Finance Committee/Selectman - Committee Coordinator), Tom McHugh (Mount Greylock Regional School Committee), Helen Ouellette (Williams College), Stan Parese (Town Moderator), Leslie Reed-Evans (Rural Lands Foundation/Board of Health) and Chuck Schlesinger (Selectman). During the course of the Committee's deliberations, Dan Gendron and Mike Card left the Committee, and Suzanne Dewey was named as a representative of the Williamstown School Committee.

The work of the Committee was guided by Chapter 41, Section 81D of the General Laws of Massachusetts which specifies that a master plan include statements on Land Use, Housing, Economic Development, Natural and Cultural Resources, Open Space and Recreation, Services and Facilities, and Circulation/Transportation.

The first task of the Committee was to ascertain the collective values and preferences of townspeople. To this end, draft vision statements were prepared for each of the elements specified in the statute. The draft statements were used as a starting point to solicit the views of townspeople through a series of public meetings and from a survey mailed to all households in the spring of 2001. While public attendance at most meetings was rather low, approximately 35% of households responded to the

survey - a high response rate for surveys of this nature. Using all the data collected, final vision statements were prepared that guided the remaining work of the Committee.

By the summer of 2001, the Committee was ready to select a consultant to gather and analyze data so that specific recommendations could be prepared. Proposals were solicited from a number of firms approved by the Commonwealth, and Vanasse Hangen Brustlin (VHB) of Watertown was selected as the lead consultant with RKG Associates of Durham, NH and Walter Cudnohovsky Associates of Ashfield providing key support.

After the initial data-gathering phase of the consultants' work was completed in October 2001, they were asked to draft a master plan based on their knowledge of Williamstown, their understanding of the issues facing the town and their experience preparing plans in other communities. They were asked to be creative in posing a range of proposals for the Committee to consider. The consultants' draft master plan was completed in January 2002.

Over the next several months the Committee discussed the draft plan at great length in scheduled meetings open to the public. Committee members also reviewed the draft with their respective constituent groups. Public meetings were held, and presentations were made to a variety of civic and professional groups. Steering Committee members were guests on radio call-in shows and participated in a number of Willinet community television programs. Scheduled meetings of the Committee were taped and broadcast by Willinet, and the progress of the plan was featured on special "Williamstown Watch" programs. The Committee's work was also well covered in newspaper articles, and citizens were able to share their thoughts by e-mail to the town's website.

By late summer of 2002, the Committee developed a consensus on recommendations to be included in the final plan, and these are presented in the pages that follow.

The Committee received a grant from the Commonwealth to do additional work on four elements of the master plan: Economic Development, Housing, Transportation and Environmental and Resource Protection, and this work was completed in early October 2002.

Acknowledgments

The Committee wishes to express thanks to a number of people and groups who offered support and assistance in completing this project. A special thanks to Rick Myers, Associate Provost at Williams College, for his critical help in structuring, distributing and tabulating the results of the town-wide survey. Marilyn and Carl Faulkner, owners of the Williams Inn, provided hours of complimentary meeting space, as did the Williamstown Financial Center and the American Legion. Thanks also to the staff at Willinet for hours spent in taping and broadcasting meetings and for producing shows featuring the master plan aired on the "Williamstown Watch" series. Thanks, too, to the institutions and individuals who provided generous financial support; they include Williams College, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown Savings Bank, Herb Allen, George

Kennedy, Rural Lands Foundation, Pete Willmott, Williamstown Chamber of Commerce, Village Ventures and South Adams Savings Bank. Production support was provided by Berkshire Direct. Finally, the Committee's thanks goes out to all townspeople who took the time to complete the survey and who attended meetings to offer ideas.

With the full realization that the master plan is never really finished but continually evolving in response to new information and situations, the Committee is happy to present the recommendations that follow.

Plan Structure

There are six distinct elements included in the master plan: Housing, Economic Development, Circulation/Transportation, Open Space and Recreation, Cultural and Natural Resources, and, Services and Facilities. A seventh element, Land Use, is an overarching concept that permeates all of the others.

Each section opens with a vision statement and is followed by excerpts from the consultants' research and analysis. The section concludes with the recommendations of the Master Plan Steering Committee and a summary. Because the Community Development grant from the Commonwealth provided the opportunity to do further research in the four elements noted above, there is more detail presented in those sections of the plan.

In addition to the material cited in the plan, copies of all related documents are available for review at the Town Manager's office and Milne Library. Attention is drawn to the work of our consultants VHB, RKG Associates and Walter Cudnohufsky Associates.

Economic Development

Vision Statement

Williamstown's economy has changed significantly over the last two decades. Manufacturing and agriculture have declined to the point that they are no longer considered significant sources of jobs and economic expansion. The overwhelming majority of townspeople are now employed in professional services - particularly education and healthcare - and in businesses that support tourism, which continues to flourish. This changing economic base has resulted in our having many fewer middle-income jobs, and we tend to have relatively large groups in the low and high income ranges and fewer people in the middle.

We need to encourage the diversification and expansion of our local economy and thereby create a wide range of jobs that meet the needs of the variety of skills, interests, education and income levels of our population.

Capitalizing on the natural and cultural resources that underpin our tourist industry, we need to continue to attract service sector jobs by encouraging the development of small businesses and the expansion of existing businesses.

We need to continue the creation of an environment attractive to the continually developing technology industry.

In our efforts to strengthen and diversify our economy, we want to be committed to addressing the problem of acute income disparity.

Research Findings and Assessments

Responses to the town-wide survey reflect considerable support for expanding and diversifying our local economy (both in terms of expanding existing businesses and in attracting new commercial development) to provide a greater variety of job opportunities. However, the town's population is closely split on whether it is important to encourage more commercial development or to expand the town's nonresidential tax base.

Location Related Findings

- RKG Associates found that there are relatively few existing (or potential) undeveloped locations in Williamstown that are properly zoned and suitable to accommodate major employers. The amount of privately owned, vacant land available for industrial or commercial expansion in Williamstown currently totals less than seven acres. There are also few suitable locations, as well as little public support, to create new or expanded business or industrial zones, or to dramatically increase the amount of nonresidential building space.
- The largest established locations include the Route 2 commercial corridor, the "Spring Street Area" (Spring, Water and Latham Streets), the area surrounding the intersection of Cole Avenue and North Hoosac Road, and North Street (Route 7) near the Vermont border. Each of these areas contains under-developed properties that require reinvestment and possess the potential to support additional nonresidential (or mixed use) development. Priority redevelopment sites include the Carol Cable Mill Property, the Photec Mill site, the former Town Garage and the Moore Property.
- The economic future of the Spring Street Area and its role in community life is an important issue to many Williamstown residents. It contains a variety of retail, service, entertainment, office, governmental and institutional uses. This compact area serves multiple customer markets, including Williams College students/faculty, tourists and town residents. Absent a proactive plan to direct the future of this area, market forces and rising rent levels are likely to encourage Spring Street businesses to increase focus on tourism markets and, consequently, become less relevant to daily needs of town residents.

- Future non-residential space demand in Williamstown is likely to focus on small-scale office/commercial and institutional facilities to accommodate the sectors in which job growth is expected to occur.
- The Berkshire Region has become a nationally and internationally recognized cultural tourism destination. Williams College, the Williamstown Theater and Film Festivals, the Clark Art Institute and MASS MoCA are among the region's major cultural and tourist attractions. These attractions bring visitors to the town and create an important and growing customer base for local hospitality, retail and service businesses. At the same time, these attractions both require and benefit from a network of support services that enhance the experiences of visitors while they are in the community.

Assessments

- It is the goal of this plan to expand and diversify economic activity within the village center (Spring/Latham/Water streets), in order to insure that it retains a mix of businesses that service both local residents and tourists. This goal will require a modest expansion of available commercial/office space within the area, an increase in parking facilities to serve new and existing businesses, complementary residential development to build customer markets for non-tourism oriented businesses, improved pedestrian connections to facilitate cross-shopping of stores, and greater regulatory flexibility to overcome physical and economic constraints to redevelopment.
- Economic development strategies will therefore need to focus on redevelopment, expansion and infill within established business zones.
- Economic development strategies for Williamstown should focus on the reuse and enhancement of existing economic assets.
- It is important to work with the private sector to accomplish redevelopment of priority economic development sites and to use them as a catalyst to encourage revitalization and expansion of surrounding properties.
- It is important to respond to the opportunities/needs of the town's cultural institutions and those businesses that have come to rely upon tourism markets in an effort to better integrate and enhance the long-term viability of both sectors.

Labor Market Findings

- Williamstown has a relatively healthy employment base that is supported by stable institutional employers and a growing tourism economy. However, the town is located within a region that is experiencing relatively slow economic

growth and population declines in several nearby communities. For Williamstown residents who are not employed by Williams College, the lack of regional job growth limits economic opportunities, particularly for primary wage earners with professional skills.

- The consultants report, "Economic Development Element," dated September 2002 contains a good deal of statistical information and analysis on employment, labor force and wages. Among the most important data, much of which is taken from the 2000 Census, are the following:
 - The overall size of Williamstown's labor force declined by more than 800 from 1983 to 1991, but has stabilized since that time. A lack of labor force growth is consistent with local population trends, which showed a lack of household formation and a decline in the town's working-aged population (25-44) during the 1990s. Labor force declines in Berkshire County have been more severe.
 - The number of employed Williamstown residents increased by a modest 5.3% (183) from the trough of the recession in 1991 through 2001. Over the same period, the Berkshire County saw a decline of -2.4% (1500). Our local labor market has thus been more stable than the region as a whole over the past decade.
 - Unemployment in Williamstown has historically been well below the County average and has remained under 3% since 1996.
 - The number of jobs offered by Williamstown businesses has increased faster than resident employment over the past decade. Williamstown's economy expanded by nearly 29% (970) jobs from 1985 to 2000.
 - Williamstown is an important regional employment center, containing 7% of the County's job base. Williamstown also captured nearly 81% of the County's net job growth during the 1990s and 37% of total County employment gained since 1985.
 - Despite modest job growth during the 1990s, the number of businesses in town is still below 1988 levels, indicating that job growth has not resulted from new business formations but largely from a comparatively small number of existing employers.
 - The town has only 6% of its labor force in manufacturing, and while we have experienced modest job losses in retail since 1985 (-130 jobs), job levels in other sectors have been maintained or increased.
 - The number of payroll jobs offered by town employers has been growing faster than the resident labor force over the past several years; the number of jobs in Williamstown exceeded the labor force by more than 750 in 1999. We are thus a net importer of labor since 1995. According

to forecasts, the town is expected to grow in importance as a regional employment center over the next twenty years and capture a disproportional share of future economic growth.

- Williamstown based firms with payrolls employed more than 4,300 workers and paid \$136.8 million in wages in 2000. The average annual wage was \$31,700, twelve percent higher than the average of the surrounding North Adams Labor Market Area of which we are a part.
- Service industries accounted for nearly 65% of the total jobs (educational services and health services being the two largest employment segments).
- It is estimated that tourism supports roughly 1,140 jobs locally or about 26% of the town's job base, and it is projected that the town will capture a disproportionate share of future regional economic growth.

Economic Development Recommendations The Master Plan Steering Committee recommends that . . .

- 1) The business district (village center) be gradually expanded toward Water Street to encourage the continued diversification of business activity to accommodate the needs of residents, students and tourists (i.e., old Town Garage site, Carol Cable and other underutilized properties in the Water Street area) (See map - 'Future Economic Development Locations' attached)
- 2) The old Town Garage site be used for commercial-retail development and to accommodate future parking needs of the business district (See 'Town Garage Redevelopment Concept' illustration attached - Figure 9)
- 3) The Planning Board review zoning bylaws and provide for mixed use throughout the village center (Spring, Latham and Water Streets)
- 4) Tourism be encouraged as a major avenue of economic development
- 5) The development of rental units be encouraged in the village center
- 6) Lower Cole Avenue (Photec, silos and train station parcels) be considered as a single area for mixed use development (See 'Photec Site Redevelopment Concept' and 'Photec Property Redevelopment Concept' illustrations attached)
- 7) A functional pedestrian link between Spring and Water Streets be developed
- 8) Infill commercial development be supported along the Route 2 corridor from Wally Bridge east to the town line by aggressively removing impediments to

business development (e.g., zoning - provide for 'up' vs 'out' expansion) (See 'Route 2 Redevelopment Concept' illustration attached)

- 9) Commercial agricultural related businesses be included as part of an economic development plan (e.g., bee keeping, energy generation, farm stands etc.) by reviewing zoning and other regulations of ancillary manufacturing or retail uses that may be associated with on-going agricultural operations

- 10) The Planning Board undertake a thorough review of existing zoning bylaws to determine if desired land uses are not being advanced because of the rigor of the special permit process and consider ways to streamline the review procedures.

Economic Development - Summary

The majority of people who work in Williamstown are employed in the service sector — primarily education, health care and tourism. While job levels have been stable because of large institutional employers like Williams College, and unemployment has been below that of surrounding communities, new jobs tend to be either relatively high- or low-paying, fostering a sharp income disparity in the community. This disparity can be addressed by creating more diverse employment opportunities.

Williamstown has few undeveloped sites properly zoned and physically suitable to attract new business. Economic growth incentives should focus on existing business districts — particularly Spring/Water/Latham Streets and Route 2 from Adams Road to the North Adams line — and on potential mixed development of the Carol Cable and Phototech mill sites. Mixed housing/commercial uses should be encouraged in these districts, zoning impediments like special-permit reviews should be eased and parking should be developed on the old Town Garage site and along Water Street should it become town owned.

Open Space and Recreation

Vision Statement

Given the importance of our natural setting in defining Williamstown's identity, protecting scenic vistas and preserving open space, and access to it, are important goals to maintain the character of the town and to conserve non-renewable resources.

Given the demographics of Williamstown and the propensity of our citizens to be physically active, we need to provide and manage a wide range of recreational facilities. Respondents to the town-wide survey indicated that biking/running paths and an outdoor

swimming facility are among our clearest recreational needs. Playgrounds and picnic areas also received the highest importance rating, but townspeople felt the supply was about adequate.

Research Findings and Assessments

Findings

Following are excerpts from the report by Walter Cudnuhofsky Associates, "Environmental and Resource Protection" dated September 2002.

- Existing public open spaces in town (Field Park, the Village Green, school grounds) do not invite gathering and lingering, and are hard to travel to and between by foot or bike.
- There has been a rapid loss of working farms and their related views, open space and potential for being green corridors across Town.
- Natural resources are highly valued and well protected.
- Williamstown has abundant recreation potential, particularly with two rivers running through town. Although improvements have been made, both general and handicapped access to existing recreation facilities and in-town natural areas (including rivers) is inadequate.

Assessment

- Williamstown's challenge is to protect open space to maintain the town's distinctive rural character while encouraging economic development and more housing choices to meet the town's diverse needs. It is important to develop a proactive land use strategy to continue a vivid town/country juxtaposition.
- The preservation and management of working landscapes contributes to the economic vitality and rural character of the town.
- An outdoor public swimming pool, more field space and facilities specifically geared toward youth and the elderly are needed.

Open Space and Recreation Recommendations The Master Plan Steering Committee recommends that . . .

Open Space

- 1) The Planning Board create an Agricultural/Commercial/Select Industry Overlay District as a way to support working farms while encouraging appropriately scaled commercial/select industry development

- 2) The Forestry Committee/Conservation Commission develop a comprehensive, cooperative forest-management program to be run by the town, or a non-profit, on town owned lands and provide owners of privately owned lands the opportunity to participate

- 3) Future development be concentrated in existing high density areas - as noted on the attached - *Land Use Concept Plan*, growth should be encouraged within a "growth boundary," determined by the existing public sewer system plus approximately 500 feet, to encourage higher density infill development

- 4) Land preservation should be selective and focus on priority parcels (*See attached map - Priority Land for Protection*)
 - Areas identified A-1, A-2 & A-3 are important agricultural lands which also have value as trail connections and view sheds.
 - The A-4 area has value as special habitat (spring ephemerals)
 - A-5, A-6, A-7 & A-8 are smaller parcels forming part of the farm belt and potential trail connections
 - A-8 also has historic significance
 - A-9 through A-12 are important holdings within existing protected land
 - A-13 through A-16 are "fingers of green" areas that connect the town center with outlying open space areas and also add to existing protected open space
 - Parcels marked "B" may have development potential but need further evaluation to determine if they are better suited for protection or limited development

- 5) Unprotected open lands that exist near the town center should be carefully evaluated as to their best use. (*See Attached maps Protected Open Space and Land Use Concept Plan*)

- 6) Preservation efforts should aim to provide fingers of open space extending out from the town center providing access to outlying open space

- 7) A balance should be struck that meets preservation needs and allows managed growth/development to occur

- 8) The continued protection of natural resources (aquifer recharge areas, wetlands, riparian zones and slopes) be pursued through zoning and a careful balance of land preservation and clustered development (*See attached map Water Resources*)

Recreation

- 1) The Recreation Committee take a leadership role to establish Williamstown as the "Trail Center of Western Massachusetts," and include groups such as the Conservation Commission, Rural Lands Foundation, HooRWA, Williams Outing Club, Trustees of Reservation and citizens noted for their interest and work in this area (*See attached maps Proposed Trails Plan and Proposed Trail Phasing*)
- 2) Recreational trails be developed along the Hoosic and Green Rivers (See attached map Proposed Trails Plan)
- 3) A plan be developed to extend Linear Park along the Green River to the Hoosic River
- 4) A plan be developed to create and foster the use of bike paths for recreation transportation within the town
 - Local roads should be considered as bicycle routes
 - Erect "share the road" signs along key bike routes
 - Provide bicycle racks at key locations
 - Provide adequate paved shoulder or bicycle lands along Routes 2, 43 and 7
- 5) Recreation programs and facilities be expanded within or close to the town center and made easily accessible without a car to groups now under-served - specifically teens, the elderly and the handicapped
- 6) A recreation center be developed with a swimming pool, courts and playing fields
- 7) A plan be developed to provide access to and maintenance of town rivers

Recreation and Open Space - Summary

Preserving open space and access to it are important to maintain the character of Williamstown, and to conserve its nonrenewable resources.

The Master Plan Steering Committee recommends that new development take place within the "growth boundary" of the existing town center to preserve the sharp distinction between settled and open lands. "Fingers" of open space should be established from the town center to outlying areas, the Village Green should be preserved and pedestrian access to the Green and Hoosic Rivers should be improved.

A network of bike and running paths, an outdoor swimming pool and other recreational facilities are to be encouraged.

The Committee also recommends establishing an overlay district to encourage farming in conjunction with light industrial uses and a comprehensive forestry management program

Housing

Vision Statement

Williamstown is changing because of its transformation to a service dominated economy and its attractiveness to retirees and second homeowners. The town-wide survey revealed an unmet need for affordable starter housing and moderately priced homes.

We need to expand the availability of affordable housing for first-time home buyers, young families, moderate income families, single people, people with handicaps, retirees and the elderly.

Consideration should be given in locating new housing to make efficient use of public services, such as transportation and water and sewer lines.

As we increase our housing stock, we want to preserve historic structures to maintain the architectural character of the town and its links to the past.

Research Findings and Assessments

Research Findings

The following excerpts are from the RKG Associates report, "Housing Element," dated September 2002:

- Because of changing economic conditions and its attractiveness to retirees and second home owners, Williamstown is experiencing increasing residential property values and demands for housing at all income levels. This is making it more difficult for renters and prospective homeowners in lower and mid-range income levels to find suitable and affordable housing.
- Because other communities are facing similar difficulties in expanding housing stock, Williamstown cannot rely on the surrounding region to satisfy housing demands that may be created by growth in employment.
- Housing needs must be evaluated in the context of Williamstown's relatively small resident population and its location in a "slow growth" region. Consequently, current and future housing needs may be relatively modest in terms of total numbers.

- The number of housing units constructed each decade has steadily declined since the 1970s.
- The private sector does not appear to be meeting regional needs for new construction, particularly in market rate rentals and low- to mid-priced single-family homes.
- Local employers report that limited housing choices have hurt their ability to recruit workers, and that increasing numbers of people who work in Williamstown are moving to other more affordable communities.
- Due in part to the limited turnover of existing housing and the comparatively high cost of housing, a relatively small number of younger households are moving into the community. This demographic trend could influence future service demands for the elderly, school enrollments and business recruitment efforts.
- The unusually wide range of real estate values in Williamstown and a growing income disparity within the community are viewed as concerns among some segments of the community.
- Because new housing construction in Williamstown has been so limited, acquisitions of land, homes or rental properties by institutions have had an impact on the overall supply and availability of resale housing for the broader market.
- Despite the rapidly rising real estate values, there are still isolated pockets of housing in need of rehabilitation. Many of these units are within or near commercial corridors that are also in need of reinvestment. There are also potential redevelopment sites that can support new housing as part of an overall revitalization strategy.
- Because real estate values in Williamstown are substantially higher than regional averages, issues of housing availability, affordability and choice are more pressing than in some nearby communities.
- Homes built in Williamstown over the past five years have an average lot size of more than five acres and an average assessed value of more than \$350,000. The absence of lower-cost new construction is due in part to a shortage of locations near existing utilities that could accommodate construction on smaller lots which is a function of sub-division regulations

Household Statistics

- Based on the State's definition of low, moderate and middle-income households (50, 80 and 150% respectively of area wide median household income which is \$39,100 for Berkshire County), an estimated 1,040 or 38% of Williamstown's households would be considered low and moderate income. However, median household income in Williamstown is \$51,900 which, using the above definitions, translates to approximately 1,570 or approximately 57%.

- The median estimated housing value of owner-occupied (year round) reported by residents was \$168,400.
- Housing is generally considered to be affordable when households spend no more than 30% of their gross income on housing costs (mortgage, insurance, utilities, property taxes, condominium fees). More than 82% of Williamstown homeowners reported spending less than the 30% threshold in 1999. A similar measure of affordability applies to rental housing (gross rent includes heat, utilities and other costs not included in the actual contract rent), and approximately 74% of Williamstown renters reported spending less than the 30% threshold.
- Households earning less than \$35,000 per year could be classified as either low or moderate income (using the 50 and 80% of the median income definition (Housing)

noted above). In Williamstown, roughly 320 homeowner and 400 renter households fell within this category in 1999. Within these groups, an estimated 128 homeowners and 162 renters paid more than 30% of their monthly income on housing costs.

- Approximately 8 percent of Williamstown's households, including 5.9 percent of the Town's homeowners and nearly 14 percent of all renters, earned incomes below the poverty level in 1999. The 222 households living in poverty were fairly equally split between homeowners (54 percent of the total) and renters (46 percent). Roughly 35 percent of all households in poverty were headed by persons over age 65 (including 69 homeowners and 9 renters). The elderly make up the majority of the town's homeowners who lived in poverty in 1999 (58 percent), while the vast majority of non-elderly poor are renters.
- A full 15 percent of the town's population over age 5 possessed a disability of some kind in 1999, an indicator of persons with a potential need for modified or accessible housing. Of the town's total population with disabilities, roughly 43 percent were over age 65 while 50 percent were non-elderly adults and the remaining 7 percent were under the age of 18.
- Williamstown is about 164 units short of the 292 subsidized housing units needed to satisfy the 10 percent goal established by Chapter 40B. This need could be met by providing a mix of affordable/assisted rental units.
- There is an estimated immediate local demand among non-elderly low, moderate and middle-income renters for roughly 65 affordable ownership units (single-family starter homes and condominiums).
- It is estimated that there is an existing need among 70 local households which could be accommodated by reasonably priced market rate rental housing.
- While there is an estimated existing need for approximately 350 units of housing for low, moderate and middle-income residents (including a mix of assisted family rentals, affordable ownership, elderly housing units and market rate rentals), the

need does not necessarily translate to an adequate market to immediately absorb the additional housing units. The *maximum potential absorption* over the course of the next decade, and a reasonable goal, is estimated to be 190 to 225 units (55-65% of Williamstown's estimated current need).

- The location of additional market rate housing units within walking distance of the Spring and Water Street corridors will be an important strategy to encourage commercial expansion within the village center. The Carol Cable property and nearby sections of Water Street appear to possess the greatest potential to support market rate multi-family housing, including rental and condominium units.

Assessments

- It is important to make significant short- and long-range progress toward meeting the State's "fair share" standard for affordable/assisted housing units.
- It is important to identify locations where lower cost housing might be built in quantities consistent with overall housing needs, compatible with community preservation goals and which does not adversely impact existing neighborhoods.
- It is important to rehabilitate and redevelop priority neighborhoods and sites to meet housing needs.
- It is important to provide for a sufficient level housing growth and diversity to maintain stable public service demands and enable low, moderate and middle-income residents to remain in the community.
- It is important to encourage and work with local institutions to provide for their future housing needs through new construction or adaptive reuse, rather than acquisition of existing properties.

Housing Recommendations The Master Plan Steering Committee recommends that . . .

- 1) Town officials encourage the development of market rate rental housing and condominiums within the Carol Cable Mill and surrounding Water/Spring Street areas as part of a mixed-use redevelopment strategy. Any redevelopment plan for the site should include a housing component preferably including no less than 25% devoted to affordable housing (defined as low, moderate and middle income households, with low: up to 50% of area-wide median income; moderate: 51 – 80%; middle: 81 – 150%. Median 2000 household income for Williamstown per the 2000 census was \$51,875. (See 'Potential Housing Suitability Areas' map.)
- 2) The Photech Mill site be evaluated as a possible location for affordable/assisted rental housing as a component of a larger mixed-use redevelopment strategy for that site, and target the surrounding Cole Avenue neighborhood for housing rehabilitation

- 3) The Planning Board review and redraft bylaws to encourage infill/higher density housing in the town center
- 4) A goal be established to create 100 units of new housing over the next ten years (including rental units) that is affordable to people at various income levels – single family units priced in the ranges of \$150,000 to \$225,000 and \$200,000 to \$400,000
- 5) A portion of the Lowry property be used to address the town's range of housing needs while setting aside a significant portion of the property for open space (see attached 'Lowry Property Conceptual Housing Plan)
- 6) Town officials publicize and encourage owners of substandard housing to seek available State grants and low interest loans to improve properties
- 7) Williams College be encouraged to meet future faculty-staff housing needs through new construction and adaptive reuse, rather than the acquisition of existing housing.

Housing Summary

Apart from new single-family homes averaging \$350,000 on five-acre lots, there has been little recent housing growth in Williamstown. Surveys show a potential need for some 350 units of housing that are affordable or about 190 to 225 over the next 10 years.

At least 100 housing units should be created over the next decade through zoning bylaw changes to encourage infill housing in the town center, rehabilitation of substandard dwellings, mixed use redevelopment of the Carol Cable and Photech mill properties and incentives for private development of portions of the town-owned Lowry property.

Transportation

Vision Statement

Williamstown prides itself on being an easy place in which to move about. We endeavor to make our pedestrian and vehicular circulation safe and efficient. Convenient parking and commercial loading and unloading zones are integral to a sound circulation plan. The town-wide survey indicates that parking in the town center, the traffic pattern at Field Park, sidewalks in selected areas and the availability of public transportation are the most important transportation/circulation issues in need of attention.

Research Findings and Assessments

Research Findings

The following is drawn from the consultant's report, "Transportation Element," dated September 2002. *(Also see attached Recommended Transportation Improvements)*

The report begins with an overview of the existing roadways and intersections. It examines the design and operation of roadways, intersections, traffic control devices, accident data and daily and hourly traffic volumes. It includes an analysis of existing (2002) and future (2012) operating conditions during peak weekday hours (7:00 to 9:00 AM and 4:00 to 6:00 PM). Short-term and long-term recommendations for improving traffic operations and safety along roadways studied are discussed and prioritized. Estimated construction costs are presented for the recommended improvements.

The roadways providing entry points or "gateways" to the town center are Routes 2 and 7, Cole Avenue, and Water Street (Route 43). Although these state numbered routes are important for regional traffic circulation, Route 2 also functions as a commuter route and an arterial collector street serving a significant commercial and retail district within Williamstown.

The portion of Route 2 evaluated in this study is from Adams Road (west intersection) to Field Park, and the following key Route 2 intersections include (see attached 'Study Area Map):

- Adams Road (west intersection)
- Cole Avenue
- Water Street
- Route 7 at Field Park

As part of the analysis of existing conditions, the most recent traffic accident data at the above intersections were reviewed. Accident reports were obtained from the Massachusetts Highway Department for the most recent three-year period (1998-2000).

As indicated in the consultant's report, angle and rear-end are the two major types of accidents occurring at studied intersections.

Based on the Massachusetts Highway Department (MassHighway) crash rate of 0.87 for signalized intersections, the intersection of Route 2 and Cole Avenue experiences a significantly lower rate than the statewide average.

The MassHighway statewide average crash rate for unsignalized intersections is calculated at 0.66. The crash rate for the intersection of Route 2 and Route 7 (Field Park) is calculated at 0.72 which is slightly higher than the statewide average. The crash rates at the Route 2 intersections with Water Street and Adams Road are significantly

lower than the statewide average. However, the intersection of Route 2 and Adams Road has a crash rate of 0.46, which is slightly higher than the *district* average rate of 0.34.

Assessments

The consultant developed the long - and a short-term improvement plans described below.

Short Term Plan (See attached 'Short Term Transportation Management Plan.')

Field Park

This concept was proposed in the Transportation and Parking Draft Vision Plan as Concept Plan A (See attached diagram Concept Plan A). Under this plan, the existing one-way operation is maintained at the rotary. An island is recommended on the Route 2 westbound and the Route 7 southbound approaches to enforce the one-

way traffic flow. Additional design improvements are also recommended at the rotary to further facilitate turning movement by large vehicles. In addition, yield signs are recommended on the Route 7 approach from the north and the Route 2/7 approach from the south to guide safe approaches at the rotary.

Cole Avenue Intersection

Traffic signal operations at this intersection were noted as problematic because the left-turn phasing on the Route 2 eastbound approach follows the through movement (lag phase), so motorists are at times trapped in the middle of intersection. To address this safety concern, it is recommended that a lead left-turn phase be provided to first clear the left-turn vehicles through the intersection.

Raised Pedestrian Crosswalks

There are eight pedestrian crossings on Route 2 between Water Street and Field Park. Because these crossings are used by many Williams College students, it is recommended that two raised pedestrian crosswalks be constructed on Route 2 - one approximately 200 feet east of Field Park and the other approximately 200 feet west of Water Street. Consideration should be given to using a different pavement texture at these crosswalks. Special paving identifies the crosswalk as a place where pedestrians and vehicles meet. Raised pavements alert pedestrians and motorists to use caution as they enter these marked areas. Special pavement treatments, however, should not present safety hazards to wheelchairs, pedestrians, bicycles, or motorcycles. The raised crosswalks will reduce vehicle speed, improve pedestrian visibility and emphasize pedestrian priority, and reduce pedestrian-vehicle accidents.

Long Term Plan (See attached 'Long Term Transportation Management Plan')

Field Park

In this plan, shown as “*Concept Plan C*” (attached), the Route 2/Route 7 link from the south would be realigned to the north to become a two-way road. The west Main Street approach would be realigned to meet the newly constructed road at a right angle. The Route 2 westbound approach would shift to the north, to create a four-way intersection operating under a traffic control signal (as supported by a signal warrant analysis). Curb extensions (neck downs) could be considered at the intersection to enhance pedestrian safety. Crosswalks, handicap ramps, and pedestrian signals are also recommended at this intersection. The existing roadway link south of the rotary would be eliminated and become part of the open space at Field Park. Access to the Milne Library would be via a newly constructed driveway on South Street.

Realign Adams Road and Install Signal at Intersection with Route 2

Adams Road (west end) currently intersects Route 2 at a skewed angle. Recommended safety and operational improvements at this intersection include realigning the Adams Road approach to provide turning lanes, and installing an actuated traffic control signal when warranted.

Install Signal at Water Street/Route 2 Intersection

Traffic analysis of this intersection indicates that motorists exiting Water Street often experience very long delays due to a continuous flow of traffic on Route 2. To improve flow and safety at this intersection, an actuated traffic control signal should be considered. The operation of this signal should be coordinated with the traffic signal at the Cole Avenue intersection. Along with traffic signalization, the following measures are also recommended:

- Curb and sidewalk extensions to reduce the crossing distance for pedestrians
- Strengthen the intersection corners with landscaping and street furniture - trees, planters, benches, and lighting fixtures
- Install textured crosswalks on all approaches
- Improve handicap accessibility.

Route 2 Access Management Plan

Known as an Access Management Action Plan, this strategy is one well suited for this segment of Route 2 corridor to ease congestion and improve safety within this commercial district. VHB has reviewed the Berkshire Access Management Guidelines published by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission in April 2002 and endorses its incorporation into the Williamstown Master Plan. Access management strategies recommended in the Guidelines for Route 2 between the North Adams line and Wally Bridge in Williamstown include:

- Increasing crosswalk visibility with new signs, improved markings and in-pavement reflectors
- Considering locations for new crosswalks and "neck-down" techniques
- Adding safety warning signs

- Consolidating business-access driveways
- Adding new trees as a traffic calming measure and to create a more attractive "gateway" to Williamstown
- Constructing a new sidewalk on Adams Road to provide safe access to the bus stop.

Transportation Recommendations The Master Plan Steering recommends that . . .

- 1) The consultant's recommended "Concept "A" be implemented, and for the longer term a study be conducted of the more comprehensive plan recommended as "Concept C" (two-way traffic on the north side of Field Park etc.)
- 2) Water Street be developed to give access to the Green River with walking paths, picnic areas and boat launches. Linear Park be extended and foot bridges built to give access to the east side of the river
- 3) A parking lot (or garage if demand warrants in the future) be constructed on the old town garage site to provide additional parking for the village center
- 4) The town assume jurisdiction of Water Street and that it be rebuilt to accommodate on-street parking
- 5) The town assume jurisdiction of Green River Road, maintain it as a rural scenic country road and eliminate through truck traffic
- 6) The BRPC sponsored Corridor Access Management Study for the Route 2/ Colonial Plaza area be implemented
- 7) Increased parking enforcement be continued
- 8) A parking sign be installed at the top of Spring Street (to direct drivers to public parking lots)
- 9) The Planning Board review the parking regulations in the zoning bylaw to ensure they are reasonable (e.g., in numbers of spaces required, etc.) and do not create obstacles to commercial activities
- 10) Critical pedestrian walkways be assessed – particularly linking Walden and South Streets and along Syndicate Road

- 11) Non-vehicular modes of transportation be encouraged and accommodated, including bike paths and bike racks
- 12) Continued cooperation with the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority be encouraged.

Transportation Summary

Parking in the town center, traffic flow around the Field Park rotary, sidewalks in particular neighborhoods and adequate public transportation are among the transportation issues identified in the town survey.

The consultants' report focuses on Route 2 (Main Street) as the town's major commuter artery. The major recommendation in it endorsed by the Master Plan Steering Committee is a reconfiguration of the Field Park rotary to enhance traffic flow and safety.

The Committee also recommends use of the old town garage site for parking, a review of zoning bylaws for more creative solutions to parking needs, town ownership of Water Street to permit on-street parking and better provision for non-vehicular modes of transportation (walking, biking) in the town center.

Cultural, Natural and Historic Resources

Vision Statement

Responses to the town-wide survey indicate that cultural, natural and historic resources are among Williamstown's most recognized and appreciated assets, and our collective goal is to manage these resources so they remain undiminished for future generations.

Our cultural resources include the many performing arts activities and museums in or close to Williamstown. They add value to the quality of our lives, and they are significant economic assets to our town. We also recognize the integral role Williams College, the Clark Art Institute and the Williamstown Theatre Festival (and the embryonic Williamstown Film Festival) play in our overall cultural landscape.

The Village Green and village center are important cultural resources and vital aspects of our community. The stability of these focal points of our civic identity, social interaction and commercial activity needs to be supported. Similarly, our historical neighborhoods, such as Main Street, White Oaks, South Williamstown, the Cole Avenue Mill District and Railroad Yard are cultural resources deserving special consideration.

We want to preserve our "working" landscapes (e.g., forests, agricultural landscapes, etc.) so they continue to contribute to the economic vitality and rural character of the town. We also need to balance the protection of sensitive environments with the use of natural resources within these working landscapes.

We should safeguard the biodiversity and natural and historic heritage with which Williamstown is endowed.

Research Findings and Assessments

Selections below are taken from the 'Draft Vision Plan' (Cultural, Natural and Historic Resources Element) prepared by the consultants dated January 31, 2002. Note that here is a degree of overlap between concepts and information included in here and in the previously reviewed "Open Space and Recreation" section of the plan.

Research Findings

- Plans for change and growth, particularly by Williams College and the Clark Art Institute are intimately linked with the character, vitality and nature of the village center as well as the larger Williamstown landscape. In addition, regional tourism is important to the economic vitality of Williamstown, and tourism is expected to significantly increase, bringing with it new opportunities and demands.
- The Williamstown Historic Commission is identifying and documenting buildings and neighborhood districts for the National Register of Historic Places. There are historic sites in need of viable use, care and investment.
- Among Williamstown's most fragile assets are its "working landscapes." These active agricultural lands in combination with forests and open space areas contribute to the rural character of the town. Great efforts are being made to preserve these landscapes, protect sensitive environments and use wisely the natural resources within them - a high priority for many in the community.

Assessments

- Williamstown needs more opportunities for celebrating community events as well as spaces for public gathering.
- Several historic neighborhoods are likely areas for infill development.
- Natural resources are highly valued and well protected in Williamstown. Change in the form of locally produced alternative energy sources, better access to and expanded use of the rivers, maintenance and possible expansion of working agricultural lands and expansion of trail systems has potential to degrade these resources.

Cultural, Natural and Historic Resources Recommendations The Master Plan Steering Committee recommends that . . .

- 1) The Village Green and abutting properties be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places

- 2) Town officials cooperate with our cultural institutions and support their endeavors in ways consistent with legal and regulatory obligations
- 3) The character of our historical neighborhoods be strengthened by tailoring zoning bylaws to allow for improvements to buildings and landscapes in keeping with the preservation of these neighborhoods \
- 4) Town officials work cooperatively with local, regional, state and federal agencies to preserve and protect our natural environment
- 5) The Town maintain sites that give access to the vistas and special places that define our sense of place
- 6) The town's natural resources (forests, rivers, aquifers, soil and air) be managed in accordance with the State's Sustainable Development and Planning Act which stresses efficient use of resources. In addition to the materials these resources can produce, they represent sources of sustainable, renewable energy
- 7) Management plans be developed for all town owned open spaces
- 8) Town officials proactively deal the various types of pollution that have the potential to harm the local environment and our quality of life - this would include both light and non-point source pollution.

Cultural, Natural and Historic Resources Summary

Cultural institutions like Williams College and the Clark Art Institute bring richness and economic benefit to the community and deserve its support. It is also recommended that the town nominate its distinctive Village Green and surrounding properties to the National Register of Historic Places, preserve the character of historic neighborhoods and manage natural resources in accordance with the State's Sustainable Development and Planning Act.

Municipal Finances, Services and Facilities

Vision Statement

To provide a safe and secure environment and make available those resources needed by residents to carry on their lives and occupations, Williamstown needs to continually review and update its services and facilities. Based on the town-wide survey, residents appear to be fairly satisfied with town services. Fire protection was rated as very high in importance, and satisfaction with the present service very good. Water and sewer systems and police facilities exhibited some signs of weakness in that both were rated high in importance by only average in satisfaction. A public restroom facility was cited as an important need.

In the March 2001 town-wide survey, residents recognized the importance of quality public education. The academic excellence of the Williamstown Elementary

School and the Mt. Greylock Regional High School enhances the desirability of the town as a place to live and work. We support our schools as they strive to meet the needs of all students through sound, relevant curriculum taught by committed teachers and staff in up-to-date facilities.

Research Findings and Assessments

Selections from the "Draft Vision Plan," Municipal Finances, Services and Facilities prepared by the consultants dated January 31, 2002 appear below.

Research Findings

- The town-wide survey indicated that the following items are very important to townspeople and there is general satisfaction with each:
 - Recruiting and retaining committed and effective faculty and staff
 - Maintaining small class size as an essential element of effective education
 - Ensuring that curriculum and instruction remain current by integrating new subject matter and technology
 - Maintaining our high school facilities
- Utility infrastructure appears adequate, though upgrades are necessary
(Municipal Finances, Services and Facilities)
- The Hoosac Water Quality District Wastewater Treatment Plant has regularly exceeded its EPA permitted discharge rate since it was put in service in 1977
- The town center has municipal water service and adequate pressure and flow, but some outlying areas may not have adequate pressure or flow for fire protection
- Residents appear to favor investment in recreational facilities and have traditionally supported services for the elderly. With the projected rapid growth of the town's older population, additional services and space for elderly programs may be needed in the near term
- Non-residential property currently contributes about fifteen percent of the town's tax base and is growing at a slower rate than residential property values. Consequently, homeowners are paying an increasing share of the overall tax burden
- The large presence of tax exempt institutions and publicly owned land in Williamstown complicates efforts to balance the town's tax base

Assessments

- Efforts should be made to expand and upgrade existing services and facilities to ensure that sufficient capacities and functions are available to meet growing demands
- Additional space is needed for the police and fire departments
- Education is a high priority, and particular attention needs to be given to Mt. Greylock's physical plant. However, there are competing demands for limited

financial resources, and funding requirements for education need to be considered along with other municipal needs

- There is a need to improve cooperation and enhance the relationship between the town and Williams College

Municipal Finance, Services and Facilities Recommendations The Master Plan Steering Committee recommends that . . .

- 1) The wastewater treatment plant be upgraded to accommodate future growth
- 2) A plan be prepared for the construction of facilities to more adequately meet police department needs
- 3) A review be done to determine the need for police and fire substations
- 4) Public restrooms be constructed in the village center
- 5) Waste disposal policies and practices be improved:
 - By expanding the recycling program by increasing our public awareness of its importance and by increasing the range of materials that can be recycled
 - By expanding our composting efforts and exploring the advantages of joining with our neighbors on a regional approach to composting
 - By increasing the frequency of collection and the materials included in the disposal of household toxic waste. A regional approach should also be examined
- 6) A forum be created to conduct regular discussions of issues of mutual interest with Williams College administration, such as the development of the village center (Spring/Latham/Water Streets area), expansion plans, housing, fiscal issues, economic development and community relations - specific task groups should be created as needed (e.g., development of the village center etc.)
- 7) Discussions be initiated with regional and municipal officials to coordinate planning for a broad range of common service and facilities needs
- 8) Funding be provided for the review and update of zoning bylaws consistent with the recommendations in the master plan and to generally streamline the approval process.

Municipal Finance, Services and Facilities Summary

Williamstown recognizes the importance of quality education as reflected by good teachers, small classes and a vibrant school curriculum. Fire and police services are highly rated and water and sewer service is seen as adequate within the town center, though less so in outlying areas. Improvements in police facilities and in water and sewer infrastructure are recommended along with a public restroom in the village center. Better waste disposal practices should also be encouraged through recycling and regional approaches. The large number of tax exempt properties in town and the lack of growth in the tax base will pose problems in financing improvements.

Land Use

Vision Statement

The attractive village center and the natural beauty of the surrounding mountains and rural landscape are defining attributes of Williamstown. Preserving open space and farmland, preventing unplanned growth, and enhancing the village center are as important to the quality of life for residents as they are to the economic vitality of the town as a tourism and outdoor recreation destination. Distinct boundaries between the village center and countryside are necessary to preserve the character of the town. All of the above are strongly supported by the responses to the March 2001 town-wide survey.

Land Use Recommendations

The Master Plan Steering Committee recommends a three-pronged approach to attain these goals:

- 1) *Intensify land use in the village center* - promote high-density, yet aesthetically pleasing, development for new commercial, industrial, and housing projects through:
 - Effective utilization of existing underused properties such as the Photec and Carol Cable mills
 - Promotion of building renovation or conversion
 - Using as a basis the work already completed ("Town Center: From Chapin Hall Drive to Spring Street" and "Main Street – Williamstown Downtown Assessment"), create an active and vital village center - determine what we want our village center to be in terms of products and services offered as well as public gathering places. This should include an inventory and preservation plan for the Village Green (Main Street from Green River to Field Park) with an eye toward reduction in signage, putting overhead wires underground, removing wooden poles and converting lighting to some non-interstate highway style fixtures
 - Coordinating with other regional and institutional programs such as the Mohawk Trail Master Plan (addressing the corridor from Williamstown to Greenfield, which includes Route 2 east of the Green River) the Williams College campus plan and Clark Art Institute master plan.
- 2) *Preserve land in outlying areas for open space, recreation and farming*
- 3) *Limit consumption of land while increasing residential units* by launching a concerted effort to protect endangered privately-owned agricultural lands. Pursue environmental sustainability - Enhance the environmental quality of Williamstown and the region by:
 - Investigating opportunities for the production or purchase of renewable energy (solar, water, photovoltaic, wind) through Massachusetts Technology Collaborative

- Being proactive in planning for the adoption and regulation of renewable energy production and consumption at municipal, commercial, and domestic levels
- Encouraging sustainability by moving toward zero waste and the enhancement of water and air quality, with zero or reduced impact as a goal of the community and region
- Encourage planning within a regional context and cooperate with regional planning agencies whenever possible.

Land Use Summary

The town should promote higher density uses within the town center through zoning, building conversions and renovations and through mixed commercial/residential development of key sites like the Photech and Carol Cable mills. The town should also protect its open spaces, particularly its remaining agricultural lands, and pursue environmental sustainability.

Afterword

The work of the broad-based Master Plan Steering Committee has consumed a great deal of time over the past two plus years, and while there are some conflicting aspects among several of the recommendations, they do reflect a Committee consensus. A plan such as this is never really finished . . . the planning process will go on as town boards, committees and commissions use it as a guide in making decisions in response to continually changing conditions and events and in ways that reflect the vision, values and preferences of townspeople.