



PLANNING PRIORITIES

Contents

Community Identity	3
Priority 1: Retain Core Community Values in The Face of Change	3
Priority 2: Rebrand The City	3
Economic Development	3
Priority 3: Address Conditions That Make Employer and Employee Recruitment and Retention Challenging.....	3
Priority 4: Facilitate Economic Growth and Transition	3
Priority 5: Comprehensive Update of Zoning Code	2
Agriculture and Local Food	3
Priority 6: Ensure Access to Local Healthy Food	3
Historic and Cultural Resources	3
Priority 7: Treat Historic Resources as Asset	3
Priority 8: Support Stable and Vibrant Arts Community.....	3
Open Space and Recreation	3
Priority 9: Maintain High Quality Recreation Options	3
Priority 10: Offer Recreation Options for All Ages	4
Priority 11: Leverage Presence of Open Space and Wild Lands.....	4
Health and Wellness	4
Priority 12: Address Gaps in Health Care Service	4
Priority 13: Support Healthy, Active Lifestyles.....	5
Education	5
Priority 14: Ensure the North Adams School District has up-to-date facilities and well educated faculty to inspire learning for the entire community	5
Priority 15: Encourage life-long learning for all residents	5

Housing and Neighborhoods 6
 Priority 16: Address Widespread Neighborhood Blight..... 6
 Priority 17: Foster Residential (re)Investment..... 6
 Priority 18: Integrate Public Housing Developments into broader Neighborhoods and Community 6

Infrastructure and Services 6
 Priority 19: Improve Mobility Through Viable Multi-Modal Options 6

Energy and Climate 7
 Priority 20: Reduce Dependence on Energy from Non-Renewable Sources 7

The following twenty priorities in the ten plan topic areas were initially generated by the North Adams Vision 2030 Steering Committee, and then aligned with the public input from the Visioning Workshop. These priorities will help guide the comprehensive planning process, particularly in the development of policies, goals, and strategies.

COMMUNITY IDENTITY

PRIORITY 1: RETAIN CORE COMMUNITY VALUES IN THE FACE OF CHANGE

North Adams, like many Berkshire communities, has residents with many layers of connection to their community. The city has experienced a population decline since the 1970's, but also an influx of new residents in more recent years. This plan will need to ensure that long-tenured residents and transplants each have a place at the table to successfully build a new future without losing the rich history and community character valued by its residents. Achieving a balance in the future direction of the city is an important component of the visioning and planning process.

PRIORITY 2: REBRAND THE CITY

The city is in a period of rebirth but faces an uphill battle against a decades-old image as a “run-down mill town.” Development of a vision, including a brand for the city, is a first step in the planning process. Rebranding will be included in the strategies and implementation process. The vision developed through the plan can serve as the basis for a clear, cohesive identity.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

PRIORITY 3: ADDRESS CONDITIONS THAT MAKE EMPLOYER AND EMPLOYEE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION CHALLENGING

City stakeholders including MASS MoCA, North Adams Regional Hospital, and MCLA note that blighted conditions throughout the city are a major obstacle to student, visitor, and employee attraction and retention. The visual impact of blighted and condemned buildings upon entry to the city, the concrete flood chutes and chain link blocking off the river, vacant storefronts in Downtown, and the lack of aesthetic and other pedestrian and bike amenities present marketing challenges. Housing conditions and school quality were also discussed as other conditions that negatively influence recruitment of prospective students, businesses, and employees/employers. Target improvements in order to continue supporting the efforts of MCLA, MASS MoCA, and other businesses in North Adams.

PRIORITY 4: FACILITATE ECONOMIC GROWTH AND TRANSITION

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

Factor 1: Facilitate downtown revitalization through cooperation with MCLA and MASS MoCA.

Linking and strengthening connections between MASS MoCA and MCLA with the downtown is essential for furthering downtown revitalizations. These organizations make direct impacts

in terms of bringing people downtown, encouraging small business development, and making their own investments into the built environment. Opportunities to further develop these relationships should be sought and supported.

Factor 2: Baby Boomer Retirements

The majority of senior level positions in local community organizations are nearing retirement. Because of population loss in younger age segments, there is a lack of professionals with the training and capacity to step in to fill these roles as retirements occur. This regional trend is referred to as “brain drain,” primarily influenced by college age students and recent graduates rarely returning to work in the Berkshires.

Employers note that home grown talent is often preferred because of the connection and understanding locals have. Recruitment is a partial solution that needs to be balanced with local workforce development and advancement opportunities.

Factor 3: Training and Capturing Younger Workforce

MCLA brings new young adults to the northern Berkshire region each year, a significant economic development resource to the city and region. Identifying and building economic clusters around the core programs of these institutions to retain a talented young workforce should be a priority. Development of planning strategies should include the city, schools, and private business interests.

Factor 4: Widening Gap between Haves and Have-nots

As a community North Adams faces one of the highest poverty rates in the state, and the gap between those living in poverty and those who are financially stable has grown. The disparity is also felt between North Adams and some of its neighboring communities. Stakeholders interviewed stressed the importance of taking an honest look at the reality of social, economic, and structural conditions in the city; social equity should be a central community value reflected in the plan. Strategies for moving the city forward must address quality of life and opportunities for all residents – not just those already in the “have” category. The focus should be on transitioning away from intergenerational poverty conditions, raising aspirations and increasing opportunity, and reducing dependence on social entitlement programs.

PRIORITY 5: COMPREHENSIVE UPDATE OF ZONING CODE

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

AGRICULTURE AND LOCAL FOOD

PRIORITY 6: ENSURE ACCESS TO LOCAL HEALTHY FOOD

While data is limited, practitioner observations note that hunger and under-nourishment is a significant and growing issue in the community. Poverty rates are high in the city and hunger has increased because of broader economic issues. In particular, hunger impacts those on limited or fixed incomes including the disabled, elderly, and low-income workers. Some initiatives have progressed to help address food insecurity including community gardens, feeding sites, and fresh food subsidies, but more information is needed to assess the extent of need and develop creative solutions. The plan will address needs to enhance the city's farmers market, improve community access to healthy food at the neighborhood level, support local agriculture in the city and the northern Berkshire region, and improve access to anti-hunger programs.

HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

PRIORITY 7: TREAT HISTORIC RESOURCES AS ASSET

There are numerous historic assets in North Adams which contribute to its cultural and historic fabric. However many resources have been lost to disinvestment and demolition by neglect. Major urban renewal projects in the downtown mid-century eliminated entire blocks of historic commercial and mixed-use buildings on Main Street. Currently, numerous churches are vacant and for sale with an uncertain future. Residential demolitions have been conducted by the city for over a decade as properties fall into severe states of disrepair. Programs and incentives can be explored to develop strategies for identifying and protecting historic resources before they succumb to irreparable harm. Strategies will need to address methods for overcoming barriers to restoration and reuse of commercial and residential properties, public and non-profit facilities and historic landscapes and buildings.

PRIORITY 8: SUPPORT STABLE AND VIBRANT ARTS COMMUNITY

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

OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

PRIORITY 9: MAINTAIN HIGH QUALITY RECREATION OPTIONS

Community aesthetics was a recurring theme in stakeholder interviews, impacting residential areas, business success and tourism. The city's many parks and open space offerings are assets, but the value depends upon the ability to maintain them as attractive and inviting public spaces. Success in this area has been hampered in the past because roles and responsibilities for park maintenance across departments and limited budgets. While financial resources will continue to be a consideration for years, this plan will identify opportunities to maximize the impact of the parks and recreation budget. Strategies may include development of creative partnerships to bring volunteer "sweat equity" to make small aesthetic improvements, while the city budgets for larger parks improvements projects.

PRIORITY 10: OFFER RECREATION OPTIONS FOR ALL AGES

Long-term residents of the city are aware of the many and varied recreation amenities North Adams has to offer. However, many of these resources are not well communicated to newer residents, visitors, and potential residents and businesses. The plan can identify and map these resources and develop a strategy for informing locals and visitors about recreational options and programming. The planning process will also provide the opportunity to step back and identify gaps in the parks and recreational system including handicap accessible trail segments, trail grooming priorities, safety treatments, downtown recreational options, and age-specific amenities or programs.

PRIORITY 11: LEVERAGE PRESENCE OF OPEN SPACE AND WILD LANDS

Though it offers incredible beauty, the physically isolating terrain of North Adams has been viewed as a challenge to economic development. As technology and resulting economic activity patterns change, what was once an isolating feature can become a significant asset. The quality of life amenities offered in the city – its livable scale, interesting historic architecture, nearby colleges, and traditional downtown – are all further enhanced by the fact that the city is surrounded by vast areas of open space with two significant long-distance trail routes running through. There is a great opportunity to further enhance and package these assets as a year-round draw for visitors and residents through marketing, river enhancements, trail connections, and wayfinding (i.e. maps and signage). Drawing traffic from Mount Greylock into the downtown is a key strategy.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

PRIORITY 12: ADDRESS GAPS IN HEALTH CARE SERVICE

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

- **Future of Hospital:** The uncertain future of the North Adams Regional Hospital is a variable for health care in the city and all of northern Berkshire County. While it is generally anticipated that the hospital will continue to operate in a modified form, there is a climate of concern.
- **Primary Care Providers:** There are no primary care providers accepting new patients in the city. In particular, this can impact new residents and businesses. The lower salary of primary care doctors (as opposed to specialists) and for those in rural settings exacerbate the problem.
- **Urgent Care:** There are no urgent care facilities which results in higher demand at the Emergency Room, an inefficient and expensive treatment alternative.
- **Growing Language Needs:** There is an increasing population of Spanish language speakers, who need bilingual service at the hospital, which can be expensive to provide.
- **Addiction and mental health treatment and services:** Two serious local health challenges – addiction and mental health – have limited resources available to help combat them, particularly for inpatient care. In addition, there can be a stigma association with seeking help for mental health care and addiction service.

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

PRIORITY 13: SUPPORT HEALTHY, ACTIVE LIFESTYLES

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

EDUCATION

PRIORITY 14: ENSURE SCHOOL FACILITIES AND FACULTY EQUIPED TO INSPIRE LEARNING FOR THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY

The city is working toward improvements in the North Adams Public School District. The district's reconfiguration of its grade levels to a K-7 and 8-12 format, and the encouragement of student participation in extracurricular activities has bolstered student test scores, reduced behavioral problems and decreased the dropout rate. To make certain the community has the best facilities, technology, and is able to attract high quality teachers, the city is examining the possibility of pursuing funding from the Massachusetts Department of Education to the district's facilities. The improvement project, while still under development, is looking at the various alternatives available to the city to provide adequate facilities in a configuration meeting the needs of the community. The alternatives include a combination of additions and/or renovations of existing facilities or the construction of a new facility. While the final recommendation for this improvement project has not been made, this plan will build upon the chosen direction to enable the city to strengthen its education system.

PRIORITY 15: ENCOURAGE LIFE-LONG LEARNING FOR ALL RESIDENTS

To meet the City's economic needs and provide every resident with a high quality of living, all the educational institutions in North Adams have agreed to participate in the Berkshire Compact for Education (known as the Compact) initiative. The Compact is focused on promoting a continuum of education in Berkshire County, serving all county residents, with the premise that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, should have the opportunity to aspire to higher education. Today, the Compact is working to raise the aspirations of residents to view a minimum of 16 years of education or training as the norm; providing them with access to education; and encouraging them to obtain the skills, technologies and tools they need to enjoy all the opportunities present in the new economy of the 21st Century.

Given the economic changes North Adams has experienced, there are significant training and retraining needs for local residents in the workforce. There are a number of educational institutions which can make contributions in this area by ensuring a broad spectrum of educational opportunities which meet the needs of the local labor market. Developing and supporting partnerships between MCLA, the North Adams Public School District, local businesses and residents is essential.

The plan will ensure the city is able to build upon the Compact's partnerships, programs and progress, positioning the city's residents to be able to access education and have aspirations of lifelong learning to support and grow the city's economy. It will also identify key strategies and collaborations to ensure the existing workforce has the skills necessary to compete in the local market.

HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOODS

PRIORITY 16: ADDRESS WIDESPREAD NEIGHBORHOOD BLIGHT

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

PRIORITY 17: FOSTER RESIDENTIAL (RE)INVESTMENT

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

PRIORITY 18: INTEGRATE PUBLIC HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS INTO BROADER NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITY

Affordable housing has historically been developed in concentrated clusters or in large buildings. Initially begun in the 1960's in the US, this approach has fallen out of favor as the detrimental outcomes of such "projects" became clear. Current affordable housing redevelopment best practices have shifted to fostering a mixed-income neighborhood where affordable units are interspersed among market rate housing. This eliminates issues which develop in segregated areas of poverty, such as isolation, blight, crime, and general disinvestment.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

PRIORITY 19: IMPROVE MOBILITY THROUGH VIABLE MULTI-MODAL OPTIONS

The region's rural development and local circulation patterns in North Adams have resulted in low levels of connectivity for non-vehicular travel, both within the city and between neighboring communities. Pedestrian connections within the downtown and between city neighborhoods are a critical component to improving mobility both for those without a car and those who would prefer to walk or bike. Simple amenities like bike racks, benches, signage, and safe sidewalks can make a big impact. Non-vehicular mobility has the added benefits of increased exercise, reduced energy consumption and emissions, and contributing to a more lively and interactive community setting. Bike path planning and improved transit service at the regional level can make non-auto travel a more viable and functional option.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE

PRIORITY 20: REDUCE DEPENDENCE ON ENERGY FROM NON-RENEWABLE SOURCES

The city has taken major strides in the last two years to improve its renewable energy portfolio, recently completing a small stimulus-funded solar array on Drury High School. To foster new projects in this arena, the city is planning on larger solar PV projects in 2012 at its capped landfill (2.1 MW), its former waste water sewage treatment site, the Harriman & West Airport, and another small installation on the roof top at Drury. The Purchase Power and Site Lease Agreements are being developed in the first quarter of 2012, with construction slated for the immediate spring. This will provide immediate and long-term energy savings for the city and school district. In addition, the city is working toward its Green Communities designation, creating eligibility for a restricted grant pool to fund additional energy efficiency and renewable energy projects. While these are significant strides, the plan will enable the city to look more closely into other modes of energy generation, such as wind, and methods for improving energy efficiency in non-municipal buildings.