

Town of Lee Community Development Strategy - Fiscal Year 2011

I. INTRODUCTION

The Town of Lee is located in the Housatonic River Valley in the heart of the Berkshire Hills. Home to approximately 5,800 people, Lee is the “Gateway to the Berkshires” due to its location on Exit 2 of the Massachusetts Turnpike. Residents take pride in the Town’s economic resourcefulness, historic downtown, environmental resources and small-town social fabric. The town’s location on the Housatonic River provided a base for paper manufacturing for many years. Over the past decade, Lee has been transitioning out of a manufacturing-based economy, and has faced the closure of several of its mills and resulting loss of jobs and revenue. Since 2007, Lee has lost at least 300 jobs; approximately fifty percent of its manufacturing employment, because of mill closure and downsizing. Lee has traditionally been an employment center for surrounding rural communities, and the effects of the Town’s recent job losses have been felt throughout the region. Lee’s changing economy has been a pervasive concern of local leaders, and has driven recent planning efforts. Lee’s downtown area is a cornerstone; a healthy, vibrant downtown will directly contribute to the sustainability of the town as a whole. Previous planning efforts, completed with community input and participation, have identified numerous projects, opportunities, strengths, challenges and needs. Many of the Town’s plans reflect issues and efforts that have been ongoing for many years. The nearly three-decades old “Think PositiveLEE” plan to create effective parking and traffic flow in an attractive and viable downtown business district is still valid today. Other challenges, like mill closures and job loss, have arisen more recently. This Community Development Strategy (CDS) summarizes the goals and objectives of Lee’s plans, and prioritizes projects identified through these extensive efforts. It combines the town’s most recent and relevant planning efforts with on-going outreach and collaboration activities. This CDS includes goals for the entire town, with special emphasis provided to the downtown.

II. SUMMARY OF PLANS AND STRATEGIES:

Downtown Economic Development Plan - draft (2009)

The Downtown Economic Development Plan is a companion to, and offshoot of Master and Open Space planning efforts conducted in 2000. The Plan provides an overview of the major issues facing the downtown, and summarizes the actions and initiatives of the Downtown Task Force and Lee Community Development Corporation. The Plan elaborates on action items, leaders and potential funding sources identified in prior planning efforts and studies. The Plan emphasizes the importance of continued community input and participation in an innovative planning process. The business community, local leaders, design professionals and property owners are all key stakeholders. Some key elements identified for further study are opportunities for infill development, and potential for retail, office space and housing. Assessment of structural deterioration, exemplified by the Lee Congregational Church and Baird and Benton Block, is identified as important to prevent further decay. Identification of needs related to infrastructure and public facilities are specifically called out as priorities. Assessments of signage, parking, seating, lighting, landscaping and street furniture, parks, open space, pedestrian links and current river access points are recommended. Regulations and bylaws should also be assessed to determine if they present impediments to downtown development.

Mill Reuse Plans

Market Analysis of 43D Priority Development Sites (2009); Industrial Zoning Modification Study (2009); Town of Lee 43D Project: Eagle Mill (2009-2010)

Showing continued commitment to redeveloping its vacant mill sites, Lee approved the Eagle and Laurel mills as Chapter 43D Priority Development sites in 2008. Several re-use plans and concepts for these mills are nearly complete. These identify opportunities, as well as barriers to successful redevelopment. The Laurel Mill’s large size and location on an active rail close to the Turnpike make it best suited for continued industrial use. The Eagle mill’s downtown location and unique site configuration make a mixed-use project the preferred redevelopment alternative. Issues identified in

these studies include zoning that limits uses on the mill sites, market limitations for potential housing types, structural problems with some existing buildings, limited parking area, unknown existing infrastructure and proximity to the Housatonic River. Products from these studies will be a Developer's Package and an Action Plan outlining steps the community should take to promote mill redevelopment.

Downtown Strategic Review (2009)

The downtown strategic review identified elements that should be included in a comprehensive downtown strategy. The review identified the downtown's strengths and opportunities, as well as threats and concerns. Downtown Lee's "traditional" architecture and street pattern are a tourist draw, it can capitalize on its location near the Turnpike, Prime Outlets and Housatonic River, and has affordable rents compared to other Berkshire communities. However, the size of the downtown and its business types are not at a critical mass and it is noticeably empty at night. Mill closures and job loss have created a high-paying job income gap. The review recommended that the Town focus on business development, effectively manage its parking system without adding visible lots on Main Street, encourage greater activity levels, create a brand for the Town that includes a signage program, and continue to pursue development projects on the east and west sides of the downtown.

Lee Area Traffic Study (2010)

Route 20 in Lee's downtown business district is one of the Berkshires' busiest arteries. The Mass Turnpike Exit 2 is less than a mile from the downtown. The Traffic Study examined Lee's traffic congestion and safety problems, and evaluated alternatives that address those problems. The study included public presentations, and participation of town officials from Lee, Lenox, Becket, Stockbridge, West Stockbridge, and several regional organizations. The study identified deficiencies at intersections throughout the downtown area which now have or are likely to develop serious issues with traffic operations. The Study's recommendations included warrant analyses for new signals, signal coordination, implementation of access management strategies, and additional planning and design analysis for a new Turnpike exit or downtown Lee Bypass.

Downtown Parking Study (2007, 2010)

The Downtown Parking Study examined on and off-street parking areas in the southern downtown area, and compiled an inventory of existing parking throughout the downtown. The Study found that while adequate parking for current conditions presently exists through a mix of on-street, public, and private lots, that a shortage of parking would likely become a problem as infill development occurs. In addition, there is a very limited supply of public parking areas within the downtown. If private lot owners enforce restrictions on public use, public supply would be negatively affected. The Study recommended that the Town pursue a parking plan, including enforcement, studies of potential new public parking spaces, integrating new parking into infill developments where possible and investigation of smart parking techniques and regulations. As of August 2010, an additional study is assessing parking capacity for the entire downtown in order to formulate additional recommendations for modifying parking requirements in the Downtown Central Business Corridor.

Strategy for Parking for the Baird and Benton Block (2007)

Lee received technical assistance from DHCD's downtown initiative program to prepare this study that examined the Town's options for dealing with the lack of parking available for the vacant "Baird and Benton Block", 40-50 Main Street. The study highlighted that limited parking is the obstacle to redevelopment of the site, and provided a detailed examination of a parking lot option to the rear of the Baird and Benton Block, in cooperation with abutting landowners. The Strategy examined several alternatives for parking lot design, and recommended that the Town pursue planning at the local level, in coordination with local legislators, and pursue funding from a variety of state programs.

Community Development Plan (2004)

The Lee Community Development Plan was developed with funding provided by Executive Order 418, issued in January 2000. Goals and findings identified in each of the Plan's four topic areas were:

Open Space and Resource Protection:

The open space element listed areas suitable for open space protection, and suggested bylaw amendments to further protect environmental resources. Seven areas of significant value were identified: Hop Brook WMA/Beartown State Forest, Golden Hill, East Lee Village, the Glassworks Grant area, the Housatonic River to Woods Pond, Laurel Lake/High Lawn Farm and Ferncliff Knoll.

Housing:

Since the 1970's, Lee has experienced increases in demand for seasonal and single-family homes and needs for affordable, rental, and workforce housing. Housing-related priorities identified in the Plan include continuing to pursue housing creation that addresses the needs of its residents while at the same time minimizing sprawl. The Town should also continue rehab programs, pursue affordable rental housing and home ownership and reduce barriers to housing development. The creation of upper story rental housing above ground-floor shops was recommended for the downtown. *Revisit this plan.*

Economic Development:

A parcel-by-parcel study of the Route 102 industrial corridor analyzed buildings and infrastructure to identify future economic development opportunities. Goals included continued elimination of blighted conditions, development of corridor access guidelines, continued investigation of zoning and other regulatory conflicts, and in-depth utility and infrastructure investigations.

Transportation:

The transportation element focused on alternative transportation and existing bike / pedestrian safety compatibility. Linking October Mountain, Beartown State Forest, the Appalachian Trail, and the town's other parks, fields and other recreational areas was identified as a priority, as was creating linkages between the downtown, Route 102, and surrounding residential areas.

Master Plan (2000)

The Master Plan examined Lee's history, identity, transportation network, cultural resources, community facilities, economics and transportation. The Plan created a vision with implementation goals in each topic area. Public services and facilities were identified as community priorities; regionalization was identified as one cost-effectively solution to provide quality services. The Plan identified options for creating a balanced and strong economy, and stressed that new businesses should be located in or near existing developed areas, such as downtown and Route 102. Sustainable land use that utilizes vacant spaces and steers development away from sensitive areas was stated as a goal. Maintaining the downtown as a 'real' shopping area where essential goods and services can be found was a strong community desire. These businesses should be encouraged and supported, as should creation of affordable and elderly housing in the downtown. Connecting mixed-use areas by a network of safe trails and sidewalks was a priority. The Plan noted that the Turnpike brings commuters and tourists directly through downtown, creating economic potential, but also safety issues, truck traffic and congestion.

Open Space and Recreation Plan (2000)

Through community surveys and task force input, the OSRP identified that the Town's vision centers on its natural assets. Open space planning was stated as critical to ensure that the town maintains its high quality of life and remains a special place. Open space and recreation must also tie into the need for business and industry. Pursuing economic development in the Turnpike gateway and downtown areas in a manner consistent with the town's scenic and historic value were important to the community. Plan goals included: pursue permanent protection for treasured open space, ecologically significant and agricultural lands, promote and protect the towns historic resources, provide recreation opportunities for aging and special needs groups, and address contamination at Woods Pond and the Housatonic River. Provision of River access, bicycle trails, a movie theater, pools and beach access were singled out.

I. MUNICIPAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT GOALS:

Previous planning activities have aided the Town of Lee in developing the following Community Development goals:

Economic Development and Downtown Revitalization

- Create a mixed-use development at the Eagle Mill.
- Establish a mixed-use development at 40-50 Main Street (the ‘Baird and Benton Block’).
- Construct a parking facility on the East Side of downtown to unlock development potential.
- Prepare strategies for development on the East and West sides of the downtown.
- Relocate the DPW garage to Route 102 to assume a more suitable location for needs and unlock the economic development potential of the riverside area.
- Encourage public participation in downtown revitalization by engaging the Task Force, business organizations, developers, property owners, municipal leaders and other stakeholders.
- Encourage infill development.
- Increase the number of employers in Lee.
- Determine businesses and offices that will be most successful downtown, and promote those uses.
- Create a downtown business owner group to advise downtown development efforts.
- Enhance the downtown’s visual appeal through streetscape and façade improvements.
- Work with property owners and applicants to reduce vacancy rates.
- Amend zoning as needed to ensure that it allows the type and density of uses desired in the downtown.
- Encourage downtown stores and businesses to cater to needs of both residents and visitors, and examine options for providing an expanded grocery store downtown.
- Promote diversification of uses along Route 102, including continued development of the Quarry Hill Business Park and Lee Corporate Center.
- Expand and support linkages between the downtown and the Prime Outlets.
- Capture some of the Berkshires’ creative economy.
- Develop a framework that provides sufficient opportunities for successful marketplace development without encouraging detrimental or incompatible uses.
- Continue improvements to the downtown gateway area at Exit 2.

Community Services, Utilities and Facilities

- Increase integration of education and work programs, through coordination between schools, regional agencies, and employers.
- Pursue a comprehensive pipe, water and hydrant replacement program.
- Repair and enhance infrastructure from the town center outward.
- Determine the adequacy of current water and sewer in the downtown and beyond.
- Continue to be a shopping and community resource for residents of Lee and surrounding rural communities.
- Work with existing agencies and groups to promote cultural resources, community events and educational programs.
- Continue to work with the Tri-Town collaboration of Lee, Lenox and Stockbridge to provide services, and expand their range and types as opportunities arise.
- Promote and expand the availability of high-speed broadband and wireless internet.
- Increase availability of indoor and outdoor recreational opportunities for all age and special needs groups.
- Continue efforts to extend service for and by the BRTA and Berkshire Scenic Railway.
- Encourage installation of new sidewalks; adequately maintain and improve existing sidewalks.
- Encourage residential developers to meet community service needs within proposed subdivisions.
- Implement a signage program that will attract visitors from the Turnpike.
- Continue and expand community festivals like Founder’s Day.

Housing

- Create, expand and improve town-supported housing programs that preserve and/or create affordable housing in cooperation with Berkshire Housing Development Corporation and Housing Services Inc. and the Lee Housing Authority.
- Reuse and renovate existing vacant or deteriorated buildings for affordable housing and apartments within mixed-use development.
- Continue to provide additional workforce and affordable housing, especially in the downtown.
- Encourage the creation of upper story apartment units in the downtown area.
- Allow single to multifamily unit conversions, especially around the downtown area.
- Encourage developers to include a mix of housing types within new developments.
- Create a zoning framework that encourages a mix of housing types, including accessory units, compact housing, back lot development and pedestrian-oriented housing developments.

Land Use

- Protect areas of significant environmental value, such as wetlands, steep slopes, the Housatonic River and other resources.
- Redevelop industrial and commercial areas as they become vacant and underutilized.
- Encourage development in and near existing infrastructure and already populated areas, especially where pedestrian access to services exists.
- Implement a policy that public investments should reinforce the Town's traditional character and desired land-use patterns.
- Update the Master Plan; incorporating recent planning initiatives.

Transportation

- Continue implementing pedestrian safety improvements in the downtown.
- Reduce the number of trucks traveling through the downtown.
- Develop a comprehensive parking strategy.
- Examine parking requirements, and amend as needed to ensure that they are realistic and reflect industry standards and best practices.
- Promote alternative "smart" parking strategies and bylaws to decrease vehicle trips.

Energy

- Encourage green businesses and energy projects and policies consistent with sustainable principles.
- Obtain 'green community' status.
- Work with Mass DOT and Jacob's Ladder Trail to establish a wayfinding sign program on Route 20.
- Increase energy efficiency of municipal facilities and schools.
- Continue alternative energy development for municipal functions and facilities.

Open Space, Recreation and Historic Resources

- Make the Housatonic River more accessible for boaters, walkers and bikers.
- Work with state and regional officials on the continued cleanup efforts in the Housatonic River.
- Preserve public access to swimming areas, especially Laurel Lake.
- Improve connections between Downtown, the Housatonic River, October Mountain and Woods Pond.
- Continue to pursue bicycle/pedestrian trails, including advancing the north-south County bike trail spine and local connections.
- Preserve and enhance the character of Lee's Historic resources and their architectural heritage of historic sites, homes and buildings, including downtown's First Congregational Church.
- Preserve agricultural lands.
- Update the Open Space and Recreation Plan.

IV. MUNICIPAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PRIORITY LIST:

Lee has determined that the following municipal needs reflect the Town's highest priorities:

1. Advance the East Side Development Project by eliminating blight and establishing pedestrian safety amenities for the newly developing public parking in the rear of the Baird and Benton Block. This will encourage future redevelopment, additional job creation, and enhance use and activity within this long-vacant commercial building and the surrounding area.
2. Respond to recent community needs related to the closure of local mills. Support existing housing retention program modified to address the needs of displaced workers, intended for the prevention of future blight and maintenance of surrounding property values. Pursue and encourage redevelopment of the Town's Chapter 43D Priority Development Sites – the downtown's Eagle Mill, and manufacturing and industry in Route 102's Laurel Mill.
3. Address pressing needs for redevelopment in the West Side by eliminating blight in the anchor location of the former Bull's Eye Pub; develop a strategic, mixed-use plan for the West Side which will address needs to unlock the economic potential of this Housatonic Riverfront area.
4. Design and construct a new water line and sewer main in the central business district to serve short and long-term economic development needs in the downtown.

V. STRATEGY TO ADDRESS THE MUNICIPAL PRIORITY LIST WITH CDBG AND NON-CDBG FUNDS OVER THE NEXT 3-5 YEARS:

The Town of Lee will address its priorities using a variety of local, regional state and national programs and resources including:

1. The Town will continue partnerships with Berkshire Regional Planning, Berkshire Housing Development Corporation and Housing Services Inc., and the Lee CDC in seeking CDBG funds supporting economic development projects and job creation, housing stabilization, and elimination of slum and blight.
2. The Town and partners will continue working with the developer of the downtown's Baird and Benton Block to seek assistance for the rehabilitation of a disinvested building in an anchor location in the downtown, and the surrounding area, in an effort to address the prevention of slums and blight within the established target area.
3. The town will continue to seek funding and appropriation to address critical economic development challenges by planning for eliminate blight and encouragement of private investment in the West Side, a targeted downtown riverfront area.
4. The Town will continue its establishment of new Economic Opportunity Areas and support new growth and job creation with participation in the Massachusetts EDIP through negotiated Certified Projects over the next three years.
5. The Town will finalize planning and engineering studies for two closed paper mill sites supported by funding from MPRO 43D and added companion funding from US Dept of Commerce EDA to undertake. The town will seek additional funding to develop public private partnerships, enhance redevelopment of these sites and promote sustainable energy and green building strategies.
6. The town will seek funding under the PWED program for the upgrading of sewer and water infrastructure in the downtown and other critical areas.
7. The Town will work with the Lee CDC to seek funding for parking facilities and pedestrian accommodations in the downtown through town appropriation, private leverage and CDBG funding.
8. The town will work with utility companies, vendors of energy conservation and production equipment, and non-profit organizations to conduct energy audits and pursue renewable energy creation for town use.
9. The town will work with community groups to update its OSRP and seek funding to develop recreation facilities, greenways and bike paths. The town has appropriated \$50,000 to pursue

connecting to a county wide multi-use trail spine. The town will and request Congressional appropriation of \$150,000 to enhance this effort and develop in-town ped-bike connections to the spine.

VI. CONSISTENCY WITH THE COMMONWEALTH'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES:

Lee's CDS is consistent with the ten Sustainable Development Principles:

1. Concentrate Development and Mixed Use – Activities and initiatives highlighted in the CDS relate to downtown revitalization and maintaining it as a walkable, mixed-use center, i.e. redevelopment activities in the East and West Sides of downtown. The town promotes mixed-use infill development in vacant structures, and is pursuing bicycle and pedestrian connections within and between new and existing development.
2. Advance Equity – Many of the Town's strategic planning efforts have involved extensive community support, with special attention to making meetings completely accessible to all residents, regardless of ability or income. Physical improvement activities include bringing sidewalks in poor condition up to ADA accessibility standards.
3. Make Efficient Decisions – Lee voters approved two Chapter 43D Expedited Permitting districts. A 180-day permitting process was established for these sites that involves the coordination of all permit-granting boards and committees. The Town will use these procedures for redevelopment of Eagle Mill, and intends to expand them to other areas of the community.
4. Protect Land and Eco-Systems – Lee's CDS highlights the town's desire to protect and preserve its critical natural resources, including providing expanded public access. Additional access points to the Housatonic River in the West Side, pocket parks in the downtown, and greenway connections between the Town's parks are all potential projects.
5. Use Natural Resources Wisely – Lee's CDS reflects that the community has identified redevelopment of vacant structures as a priority. The town encourages development to occur within and surrounding areas of existing development, particularly in the East Side and West Side, thereby preserving "green space".
6. Expand Housing Opportunities – Lee, through its housing authority and council of aging, provides housing for low income and elderly residents in several locations. The Town continues to pursue housing rehabilitation funding and other affordable housing opportunities, and continues to encourage housing opportunity in the downtown in particular.
7. Provide Transportation Choice – Lee's CDS reflects the town's desire to provide opportunities for alternate transportation, including bike / pedestrian paths and greenways. The Town works with BRTA to provide public transportation to its residents and visitors. Reducing traffic congestion in the downtown will continue to be a factor in downtown revitalization efforts and plans
8. Increase Job and Business Opportunities – Lee's CDS reflects the Town's goal to expand and diversify its economic base, especially following the closure of several large employers and manufacturers. Providing adequate infrastructure for downtown commerce and mixed-use, as well as for industrial park facilities on the Route 102 corridor is high on Lee's list of priorities. The Town supports existing businesses and actively works to attract new ones.
9. Promote Clean Energy -- Lee is pursuing 'Green Community' designation and is implementing Energy Efficiency Community Block Grant activities. Green initiatives will continue to play a role in the projects and goals identified in the CDS.
10. Plan Regionally – Lee is actively working with the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, Berkshire Housing Development Corporation and Housing Services Inc. to address issues of slum and blight, housing stabilization and rehabilitation, and economic development. Lee has worked with multiple regional planning commissions on the Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway and works with the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority. Lee cooperates extensively with Lenox and Stockbridge, including the Tri-Town Health Department, as is participating in a three-town planning effort to share services.

Reviewed and discussed at a public meeting on _____ and accepted by the Lee Selectboard on

_____.

Gordon D. Bailey, Selectboard Chair