

Town of Ayer



2009 Community Development Strategy

The Town of Ayer was incorporated in 1871 during a period of rapid development of railroad transportation. Just 9.5 square miles in area, the Town became a major railroad junction and developed into an important commercial center oriented towards the rail industry during the late 1800s and early 1900s. At the turn of the century, a portion of Ayer's land was taken by the Federal Government in order to situate Camp Devens (later Fort Devens) there. This base helped fuel Ayer's economic growth, so the closure of the base in 1995 hit the area particularly hard – Ayer lost 6.1% of its total population and approximately \$6 million in wages from base personnel.

As one of the more racially and ethnically diverse communities in the region, Ayer's citizenship continues to strive to make ends meet on a median household income that is among the lowest in this area. One strategy for improvement, which Ayer is aggressively pursuing, is to enhance economic development by capitalizing on its position as home to a key commuter rail station on the Fitchburg-Boston line. Ayer is also committed to actively pursuing the designation of a "Green Community," including setting carbon-reduction goals, fostering the growth of the new Ayer Local (a group dedicated to issues of sustainability), and expanding its membership in organizations such as the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) – Local Governments for Sustainability.

Ayer is also proud to be designated as the head of the Ayer-to-New Hampshire Rail Trail, an 11-mile long, beautifully maintained, pastoral corridor connecting five New England towns. As a small town Ayer is governed under a combination of general laws, special legislative acts, and local bylaws. Like other small Massachusetts towns, Ayer's Board of Selectmen serve as chief elected officials, with other elected officers and boards sharing some executive-branch responsibilities. In formulating its plans for the future, the Town of Ayer has incorporated the key recommendations of the *2005 Ayer Comprehensive Plan Update* as a primary input document guiding the goals and priorities for Ayer's 2008 Community Development Strategy.

The Town has updated this strategy based on citizen input from a preliminary Community Development Strategy meeting held on September 25, 2008, and a formal Community Development Strategy Meeting held on October 23, 2008. Additionally, comments on the Community Development Strategy document were received at the Town's public input meeting on November 20, 2008. At the January 20, 2009 Board of Selectmen meeting, the Board allowed an additional two weeks for any final public comments prior to accepting the strategy as complete for the purpose of Ayer's 2009 CDF II CDBG application.

2005 Comprehensive Plan Process

In 2003, the Department of Planning & Development (DPD) began working on an update to the Town's 1997 Comprehensive Plan. Fifty-percent of the project was funded with state and federal grants and 50 percent by Town funds. The Town utilized Community Opportunities Group, Inc. (COG) as the primary consultant leading coordination of the process in tandem with the Comprehensive Planning Committee, a group comprised of members from many town

boards and commissions. The Comprehensive Plan incorporates the findings of other Ayer planning processes, including the Open Space and Recreation Plan, Capital Improvements Plan, E.O. 418 Affordable Housing Plan, Devens Reuse Plan (and Five-Year Review for JBOS), Nashua River Watershed 5-Year Action Plan, and the Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.

The DPD and Comprehensive Planning Committee sponsored two public hearings, facilitated by COG, at Ayer Middle School. Each meeting was designed so that residents could participate in small discussion groups and breakout sessions on topics of importance. Approximately 30 persons attended each workshop. The issues and recommendations discussed at the meetings, as well as all applicable data, were then condensed by COG into topic papers and distributed to the committee for comments.

The final result is a publicly driven, professionally written, comprehensive document focusing on eight elements of community development and planning. The *2005 Comprehensive Plan Update* was formally adopted by the Ayer Planning Board, following an additional public hearing, on March 10, 2005.

Housing Goals – These address the Governor’s Sustainable Development Principles of Concentrate Development and Mix Uses, Expand Housing Opportunities, and Plan Regionally.

- Inventory Units: Maintain a comprehensive inventory of approved housing developments, including number of units approved, date of approval, unit sizes, number of affordable units, sales prices, site area, location, and date of construction completion.
- Target List of Distressed Properties: Develop a target list of deteriorated rental properties for housing rehabilitation assistance through the Ayer Housing Rehabilitation Program, DHCD’s Housing Development Support Program (HDSP), or other financing programs in exchange for an affordable housing restriction.
- Zoning for Mixed-Income and Multi-Family: Modify the Zoning Bylaw to encourage affordable and mixed-income multi-family developments in the General Residential, Downtown Business and General Business districts, using frontage and lot area waivers as infill development tools, and promote affordable accessory dwellings or conversion units throughout the town.
- Ayer Housing Rehabilitation Program: Continue the Ayer Housing Rehabilitation Program and consider ways to offer enhanced financing.
- Expand the public outreach of the Citizens’ Advisory Committee in order to acquaint Ayer residents with the opportunities offered by the Ayer Housing Rehabilitation Program.
- Expand First-Time Homebuyer Program: Continue and expand the First-Time Homebuyer Program and seek additional funding sources.

Community Facilities and Services Goals – These address the Governor’s Sustainable Development Principles of Concentrate Development and Mix Uses, Advance Equity, Promote Clean Energy, Protect Land and Ecosystems, and Make Efficient Decisions

- Maintain town, public, and school facilities that meet the needs of Ayer residents and town employees, giving special focus to the elderly, children, and low- and moderate-income residents.
- Provide the highest quality town and school services at a price that is equally fair to residents and businesses.
- Ayer Senior Center: Provide a facility where seniors and individuals with disabilities can receive service and be involved in activities that will enhance their quality of life.
- Use local revenue or CDBG funds to purchase an additional van for senior transportation, and evaluate operations funding and program delivery.
- Expand, diversify, and maintain Ayer's recreation facilities.
- Create a volunteer corps to assist the town in maintaining recreation areas, blazing trails, posting signs, constructing picnic areas, and small boat launches.

Land Use Goals – These address the Governor’s Sustainable Development Principles of Concentrate Development and Mix Uses, Make Efficient Decisions, Protect Land and Ecosystems, Increase Job and Business Opportunities and Plan Regionally:

- Adopt a Growth Management Bylaw: Using Governor Deval Patrick’s principles of “Smart Growth,” the Town seeks to develop a Growth Management Bylaw to enhance Ayer’s sense of community and decrease urban sprawl. This bylaw will help reinforce Ayer’s industrial/commercial village land use pattern and historic arrangement of buildings and streets. It facilitates the small-scale redevelopment and reuse projects that encourage preservation and reduces the potential for teardowns: it also focuses on a planned mix of residential, non-residential, and public land uses along and adjacent to the town’s main roads.
- Maximize Commercial and Industrial Development: The Town will strive to achieve high-quality, high-value development in the commercial and industrial districts.
- Revise the Downtown Business (DB) Zoning District: The Town will revise the current DB zoning regulations to facilitate greater investment in the downtown area, allow a greater residential presence above storefronts, permit greater flexibility to ensure lot line development, promote transit-oriented development, and promote creative strategies such as using culture and the arts as an economic development strategy in addition to enhancing quality of life. This is one of several strategies to enhance the Downtown. Others include use of MGL Chapter 40R, exploring federal and state grant opportunities to continue Ayer’s commercial façade and sign program, facilitating the development of commuter rail parking in downtown, and using the Industrial Development Finance Authority to enhance downtown commercial properties.

Natural Resource Goals – These address the Governor’s Sustainable Development Principles of Advance Equity, Make Efficient Decisions, Protect Land and Ecosystems, Use Natural Resources Wisely, Promote Clean Energy, and Plan Regionally.

- Protect Drinking Water: Engage industry to participate in water supply conservation, and water quality protection including monitoring and best management practices.

- Revise Ayer's Local Wetlands Protection Bylaw (non-zoning) which was adopted in 1972 and has remained in place without modification since that time: (a) Extend protection to wetlands and intermittent streams that are minimally protected by Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act and Rivers Protection Act. (b) Establish local "no-disturbance" and "no-build" zones. (c) Establish a reasonable fee schedule for permit applications under the local bylaw, and use schedule for permit applications under the local bylaw, and use the revenue to provide adequate professional support for the Conservation Commission.
- Redevelopment of North Post: In conjunction with MassDevelopment, the JBOS and the Town of Shirley, develop a long-term plan for North Post. The plan should be informed by an environmental inventory and provide buffer zones for Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge and habitat preservation. Development should emphasize "environmentally friendly" businesses or uses that typically protect large amounts of open space. Review should include an ecological impact analysis and environmental performance standards to protect resource areas.

Cultural Resource Goals – These address the Governor's Sustainable Development Principles of Concentrate Development and Mix Uses, Make Efficient Decisions, Expand Housing Opportunities, and Plan Regionally.

- Adopt Demolition Delay Bylaw: Adopt a demolition delay bylaw that protects structures more than 50 years old from demolition for at least six months. Provide corresponding zoning regulations to make preservation economically feasible.
- Zoning Bylaws: Adopt zoning that supports appropriately-designed conversions of historic residences to multi-family or mixed-use buildings.
- Conduct Surveys and Inventories: Initiate and complete planning, surveys, and inventories as a first step toward creating or expanding historic districts and nominating individual listings in Ayer, including single-property or parcel districts. Nominate additional properties for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Prioritize the inventory by starting with the Ayer Main Street Historic District, and Pleasant and Washington streets. Apply for a Planning and Survey Grant from the Mass. Historical Commission using CPA funds for the required match.

Open Space Goals – These address the Governor's Sustainable Development Principles of Protect Land and Ecosystems, Concentrate Development and Mix Uses, Make Efficient Decisions, and Use Natural Resources Wisely.

- Acquire Zone I and II Land: Authorize a water conservation bond and acquire land in Zone I, Zone II and the Interim Wellhead Protection Area (IPWA) of existing and potential future water supplies.
- Conservation Protections: Take tax title properties and set aside those with ecological significance as permanently protected conservation land.
- Clustered Housing: Encourage clustered housing development on vacant residential land to conserve open space and create recreation areas. This would likely employ Randall Arendt's model of Open Space Design Development and encourage significant open space set asides.

Economic Development Goals – These address the Governor’s Sustainable Development Principles of *Make Efficient Decisions, Provide Transportation Choice, Increase Job and Business Opportunities, and Plan Regionally.*

- **Match Skills to Needs:** Better coordinate Ayer residents’ skills to existing and future employment at the Devens Enterprise Zone and within Ayer. Increase healthcare employment opportunities: (a) use Nashoba Valley Medical Center as an economic engine and take advantage of the high growth rate expected in the healthcare sector, and (b) study the potential for creating education, office and limited research and development uses to the east and south of the medical center. If the zoning for these uses is written carefully, they will be highly compatible with the resource protection and open space objectives of the Petapawag Overlay District.
- **Focus on Downtown Ayer:** Increase downtown Ayer’s economic competitiveness through improved access for residents and workers. Ayer should actively plan, fund, or lobby for transportation improvements.
- **Sign and Façade Program:** Continue Ayer’s Downtown sign and façade improvement program by focusing on grant monies available from a variety of federal and state sources.
- **Improve MBTA Function:** Support and encourage enhanced service on the MBTA Fitchburg Line, including double tracking express trains and higher speeds.
- **Enhance Traffic Routes:** Improve commercial vehicle routes from Route 2 and Interstate 495 to the Westford Road industrial district, the North Post and Fitchburg Road industrial area.

Transportation Goals – These address the Governor’s Sustainable Development Principles of *Concentrate Development and Mix Uses, Make Efficient Decisions, Provide Transportation Choice, Increase Job and Business Opportunities, Protect Land and Ecosystems, and Promote Clean Energy.*

- **Linkage Improvements:** Encourage pedestrian and bicycle access throughout Ayer by providing a safe, scenic, interconnected system of roads, sidewalks and trails.
- **Downtown Parking Capacity:** Provide and manage downtown parking facilities to meet the needs of residents, shoppers, business owners and employees, commuters and visitors. This includes working with MART and MBTA to develop downtown commuter rail facilities in downtown Ayer.
- **Gateway Upgrades:** Improve and enhance Ayer’s gateways, and pedestrian and bicycle facilities.
- **Devens Traffic Mitigation:** Mitigate the impacts of traffic generated by development in the Devens Enterprise Zone.

2009 Community Development Strategy Priorities, Timelines, Responsible Parties, and Target Areas

The Town has designated the historic downtown and central residential areas of Ayer as the Target Area for its Community development activities. This area, named the Sustainable Development Target Area, comprises within it the historic downtown area,

the MBTA commuter rail station, major municipal services and much of the Town's older historic housing stock.

1. Continue the Housing Rehabilitation Program, with leveraged funds through Gap Filler and "Get the Lead Out" lead abatement programs, focused upon the denser Census blocks identified in the Town's Sustainable Development Target Area. (As part of "**Housing Priorities**") An ongoing priority to be accomplished by HR Program Manager with the support of the Department of Planning & Development, using CDBG funds from FY06 and FY09.
2. Improve infrastructure (drainage, street surface conditions, sidewalks, etc.) in the Town's Sustainable Development Target Area. (As part of "**Economic Development Priorities**" and "**Community Services and Facilities Priorities**") This area is characterized by poor drainage, cracking and buckling sidewalks and streets, deteriorated curbing and gutters, and deteriorated street furniture and fixtures and landscaping. A 2009 priority to be accomplished through the efforts of the Department of Planning & Development, the Downtown Business Alliance, the Downtown Revitalization Group, Weston & Sampson, and Ayer's Department of Public Works, using UDAG funds.
3. Continue application of Downtown Sign & Façade Program within the DHCD-approved Downtown Target Area. This area encompasses the Downtown Main Street area, parts of Central Avenue, West Main Street, and Park Street. An attached map shows this Downtown Target Area. (As part of "**Economic Development Priorities**") An ongoing priority to be accomplished by S&F Program Manager with the support of the Department of Planning & Development, using CDBG funds from FY06 and other grant programs aimed at revitalizing Main Streets.
4. Update Ayer's Zoning Bylaw in accordance with "smart growth" principles. (As part of "**Land Use Priorities**") An ongoing priority to be accomplished by the Department of Planning & Development, the Planning Board, and CPIC, using funds received from a MGL 43D grant and remaining funds from a \$30,000 authorization approved by the citizens of Ayer at the 2006 Annual Meeting.
5. Develop target list of deteriorated rental properties in the Sustainable Development Target Area for assistance through the Ayer Housing Rehabilitation Program or other financing programs in exchange for an affordable housing restriction (ongoing through DPD). (As part of "**Land Use Priorities**" and "**Housing Priorities**") An ongoing priority to be accomplished by HR Program Manager with the support of the Department of Planning & Development and Ayer's Housing Authority, using CDBG funds from FY06 and FY09.
6. Facilitate the funding process for the expansion of Ayer's Senior Center (located in the Sustainable Development Target Area), using the bid-ready specifications created for the expansion (As part of "**Community Services and Facilities Priorities**") A 2009 priority to be accomplished by the Department of

Planning & Development, Ayer Housing Authority, and the Executive Director of Ayer's Senior Center using a variety of state and federal funding sources.

7. Develop a comprehensive plan for the removal of the play structure at Pirone Park (located in the Sustainable Development Target Area) as well as soil remediation to remove arsenic contamination. **(As part of "Community Services and Facilities Priorities")** A 2009 priority to be accomplished through the efforts of Grants Administrator and the Parks Department, utilizing state and national grant monies as well as private donations.
8. Continue to work with the Montachusett Area Regional Transit Authority (MART) and Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) on providing additional parking and an improved downtown rail station proximate to housing, commercial and institutional uses (Town has secured \$3.15 million federal earmark, and \$2.0 million in state matching funds, for the creation of new parking facility. The Town has decided to use the rail trail parking area (plans for joint use have been approved by the State Dept. of Conservation and Recreation) as part of a hybrid solution in the development of sufficient commuter parking in the downtown area. The chosen sites were determined through a charette and subsequently approved by the BOS and Town Meeting; these sites fall within the Downtown Target Area. The Town is currently awaiting a transfer of funds from a highway account to a transit account so that preliminary design can begin. State matching funds of approximately \$2 million dollars were also obtained by former Senator Pamela Resor, included in the most recent State Bond Bill, which will apply to construction. **(As part of "Economic Development Priorities" and "Transportation Priorities")** A 2009 priority to be accomplished by the efforts of the Department of Planning & Development, Ayer's Board of Selectmen, MBTA, and MRPC using funding as described above.
9. Develop financial planning/mortgage awareness workshops that are tailored to citizens struggling to make ends meet in a difficult economy and/or facing the loss of their homes due to the secondary housing market crisis. Such workshops will facilitate educated choices about the economic decisions that affect their livelihood. **(As part of "Community Services and Facilities Priorities")** A 2009 priority to be accomplished through the efforts of the Grants Administrator and a volunteer group of concerned citizens, utilizing specially earmarked grants geared to low- and moderate-income groups who need help in making informed economic decisions.
10. Maintain a comprehensive inventory of approved housing developments, including number of units approved, date of approval, unit sizes, number of affordable units, sales prices, site area, location, and date of construction completion. **(As part of "Land Use Priorities" and "Housing Priorities")** An ongoing priority to be accomplished by HR Program Manager with the support of the Department of Planning & Development and Ayer's Housing Authority, using CDBG funds from FY06 and FY08 and HDSP grant opportunities.