

# Executive Summary

## Ayer Master Plan

### Plan Elements:

1. Land Use
2. Housing
3. Economic Development
4. Resources
5. Transportation and Circulation
6. Infrastructure
7. Municipal Services and Facilities
8. Implementation Plan

### Public Participation:

- 3 Surveys
- 1 Public Forum
- Bi-weekly/Monthly Steering Committee Meetings
- Interviews
- 3 Working Groups
- Department Heads Roundtable
- 4 Public Editing Sessions

### Process:

2015: MPSC Formation  
2016: Public Outreach  
2017: Plan Preparation  
2018: Plan Adoption

## Introduction

The purpose of a Master Plan is to engage in a public process that results in the creation of a document designed to guide the future actions of a community. It presents a vision for the future, with long-range goals and objectives for all activities that affect the local government. This includes guidance on how to make decisions on public and private land development proposals, the expenditure of public funds, availability of tax policy (tax incentives), cooperative efforts and issues of pressing concern, such as economic development or the rehabilitation of older neighborhoods areas. This is Ayer's fourth master plan, with prior plans written in 1969, 1997, and 2007. This plan is written as a guide for the next ten years of Ayer's future, and should be updated in 2027.

### *A Master Plan provides the following:*

**Continuity.** The plan provides continuity across time, as staff and volunteers change, so too does institutional knowledge. The plan leaves a guide for future policy leaders.

**It is the means by which a community can balance competing interests.** Within any community, there is pressure to perform certain duties and functions that are occasionally at odds with one another. There are also limited resources to address all needs. A master plan helps establish priorities and resolves conflicts by establishing a single vision moving forward.

**It allows communities to plan development in a way that protects valued resources.** Ayer is a resource-rich community with sensitive environmental and ecological habitats. Protecting these habitats while enabling growth is of paramount concern in upcoming years.

**Through public dialogue, citizens express a collective vision for the future.** Last, but certainly not least, the planning process provides citizens an opportunity to brainstorm, debate and discuss the future of their community. A plan developed through a robust public input process enjoys strong community support. Subsequent decisions that are consistent with the plan's policies are less likely to become embroiled in public controversy.



The plan is organized into eight (8) topical elements: Land Use, Housing, Economic Development, Resources (Natural, Cultural, Historical, Recreation, and Open Space), Transportation and Circulation, Infrastructure, and the Implementation Plan.

The Implementation Plan, arguably the most important part of any master plan, sets forth the goals and actions to be accomplished in support of the subject area of each topical element. Some actions repeat across elements as they serve more than one objective. To ensure that the plan is implemented, it is advisable to form an implementation committee, and for each department to complete their Implementation Checklist, found in the Appendix of this Master Plan. With annual review of goals and actions during the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) and Budgetary Processes, Ayer will stay on track to achieve its goals.

During the Master Plan process, the Master Plan Steering Committee (MPSC) first established a comprehensive list of values the plan should support. They then developed a mission statement. And finally, a list of five goals were developed that were intended to guide and provide the framework for every other goal and strategy found within the Master Plan.

## Values

These values encompass the spirit with which future policy decisions will be made in Ayer:

### ACCESS

We recognize that access to goods, services, employment, housing, transportation, natural, and cultural resources and opportunities are what make us a stronger and more resilient community.

### CHARACTER

We value our neighborhoods, commercial centers, recreation and conservation areas, public facilities, and historic sites and strive to protect, promote, maintain, and conserve all of the places that are important to us as a community.

### COMMUNITY

We will maintain our “micro-city” feel through the support of small businesses, quality schools, community events, an accessible government, and by investing in our citizens, neighborhoods, local businesses, infrastructure, and amenities.

### CONNECTION

We seek to connect residents both physically and socially. We will improve physical connectivity through the promotion of complete streets by incorporating pedestrian and cycling infrastructure into our streetscapes and through the provision and upgrades to multi-modal transportation systems. We will promote social connections through the provision of information and growth of information resources, communication venues, and community building events.



**DIVERSITY**

We seek to foster our tradition as a demographically diverse and inclusive community by continuing to welcome residents of all walks of life and offering a range of housing and economic opportunities that sustain and serve the needs of the collective good.

**ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

We will be a Town that values and retains its existing business community and high quality commercial corridors. We strive to be a community that businesses seek out as a place to grow and succeed. We seek to foster meaningful economic opportunities for people of all ages and skill levels and to solidify a diverse tax base and continued fiscal health for the community.

**ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY**

We will ensure that our ponds, streams, beaches, open spaces, parks, playing fields, recreational areas, wetlands, and wildlife corridors and habitats are protected for the use, enjoyment, and resiliency of future generations.

**GOVERNANCE**

We value a government that is efficient and accessible and guided by transparency, honesty, diversity, mutual respect, openness, on-going evaluation, celebration, and a commitment to stakeholder participation.

**IDENTITY**

We will foster a feeling of community spirit, inclusion, and promote a sense of full citizen participation, guaranteeing an opportunity for everyone to share in the activities, duties, responsibilities and benefits of life in Ayer.

**QUALITY OF LIFE**

We will accommodate the needs of a diverse population and provide a high quality of life to all residents. By offering a wide range of housing options available to households with different income levels, high quality schools, a diverse labor force and job market, multi-modal transportation access, community events, open spaces and recreation programs and facilities, social services, and a vibrant downtown, Ayer can serve the needs of residents of all ages and abilities.

**SUSTAINABILITY**

We will be a Town that seeks out new ways, methods, and technological advances to be a socially, environmentally, and a fiscally sustainable community.



## Vision Statement

**AYER'S PLACE AS THE "GREAT JUNCTION" ENDOWS THE COMMUNITY WITH ITS HERITAGE, PEOPLE, BUSINESSES, NEIGHBORHOODS, NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES. THESE ASSETS PROVIDE THE FRAMEWORK FOR AYER TO BE A DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY WELCOMING PEOPLE TO LIVE, LEARN, WORK, AND CONNECT.**

## Goals

1. Increase the Town's ability to efficiently and effectively manage Ayer's services and facilities in a fiscally sustainable and environmentally responsible manner to encourage a high quality of life for residents and an advantageous environment in which businesses can prosper.
2. Actively protect, conserve, and preserve Ayer's natural resources, heritage, and supporting infrastructure to protect critical environmental habitats, drinking water supplies, recreational areas, and open spaces.
3. Encourage the comprehensive redevelopment of Downtown Ayer to better accommodate housing opportunities, for both renters and owners at all income levels, and to provide for a vibrant downtown through the creation of new high-quality public gathering places, increased pedestrian access, new commercial space, and an enhanced visitor experience.
4. Expand and upgrade equitable multimodal transportation opportunities, including sidewalks, paths, trails, and rails in addition to roadways, to ensure that residents, workers, and business transportation needs are efficiently met.
5. Enact creative strategies to actively and effectively engage Ayer residents of all ages and walks of life in the Ayer public realm.

## Plan Summary

The following pages offer a snapshot of critical demographics, regional position, economics, and housing information. The data tells an important story about where Ayer has been and where it is going in the future. The town is evolving rapidly from its military past to its future as a micro-city that offers high-quality housing, jobs, open spaces, recreational opportunities, public gathering spaces, maintained infrastructure, and government services. Ayer will be fiscally responsible, responsive to the changing needs of its residents and business, environmentally sustainable, and will work cooperatively to address its challenges while building upon its assets.



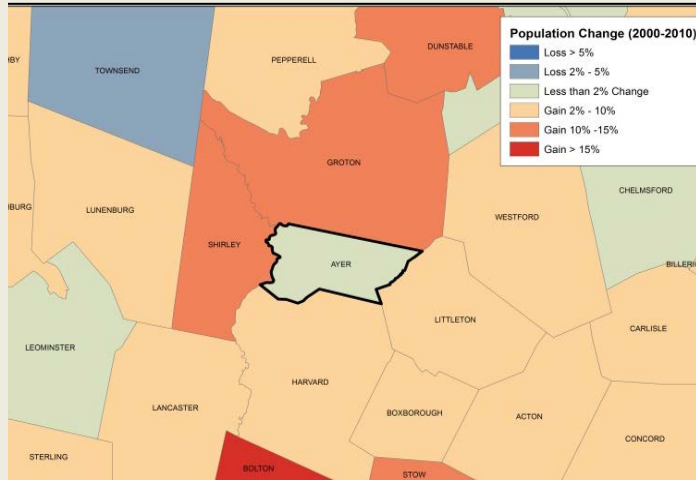


# AYER'S DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

## Who We Are

### Overview (2010)

- Total population: 7,427
- Total households: 3,118
- Average household size: 2.3
- Median age: 39.8
- Non-White population: 16%
- Population density: 770 persons per square mile



### Education of population age 25 and over (2014)

- Completed a 4-year college: 24%
- Graduate level education: 12%

### Households (2010)

- Family households: 58% (1,831)
  - With children under the age of 18: 29% (888)
  - Single parent households: 10% (314)
- Nonfamily Households: 41% (1,287)
- With persons aged 65 and older: 22% (683)
- Individuals living alone: 34% (1,048)
  - Individuals living alone over age 65: 11% (353)

### Income (2014)

- Median household income: \$67,110
- Median family income: \$83,882
- Median nonfamily income: \$49,231
- Households earning over \$200,000: 7%
- People below the poverty level: 13%

Source: 2010 U.S. Census;  
2009-2014 American Community Survey

## How We Are Changing

Between 2000 and 2010 significant changes in Ayer's population occurred:

- The population age 50-64 increased by 59%.
- The population declined among all other age groups.
- Median household income increased by 21%.

Over the next two decades, Ayer's population and the number of households are expected to remain stable.

- **Ayer will continue to see an increasing share of older adults and retirees.**

People over the age of 50 will comprise 42% of the population in 2030.

- **Average household size will continue to decline, as there are fewer families with children and more individuals living alone.**

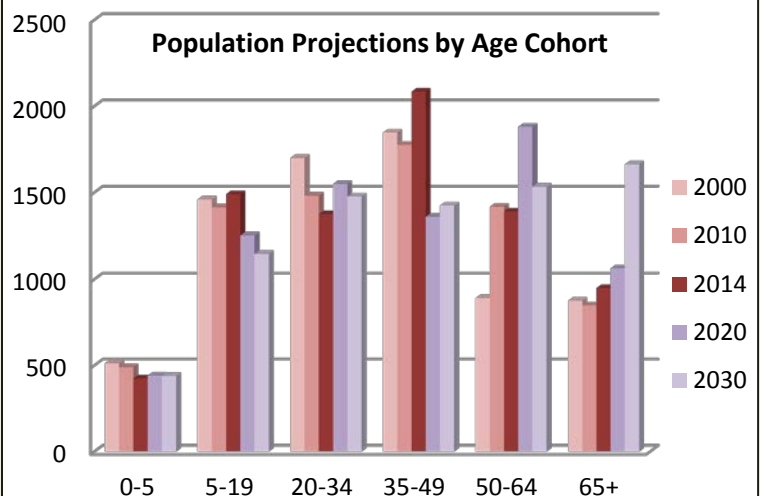
The number of school-aged children is expected to decline by 23% by 2030, while the number of seniors is expected to grow substantially.

Ayer currently has 3,462 housing units. This number is expected to increase to 3,764 housing units by 2030 with 34% of housing units located in multi-family buildings.

### Population Projections

	2000	2010	2014	2020	2030
Population	7,287	7,427	7,716	7,546	7,685
Households	2,982	3,118	3,229	3,331	3,524
Household Size	2.29	2.30	2.32	2.27	2.18

Source: MAPC "Strong Region" Scenario



## AYER'S REGIONAL PROFILE

### Location

- Central Massachusetts community 35 miles northwest of Boston in Middlesex County.
- Developed around railroad transportation, Fort Devens.
- Served by MA Routes 111 and 2A, MBTA commuter rail & Montachusett Regional Transit Authority.

### Population

- Ayer has a comparable population to neighboring communities, less than Groton and Littleton.
- Very slight gain in population between 2000 and 2010. Shirley had most growth.
- High proportion of individuals living alone.
- Relatively low median household income.

### Economic Base

- Relatively large commercial tax base: nearly 37% CIP.
- Employment hub: more jobs than workers who live in Ayer.
- Average weekly wage equates to \$53,000 per year.
- 27% of Ayer jobs are in manufacturing.

	Commercial-Industrial (CIP) Tax Base	Jobs/Workforce Ratio	Average Weekly Wage
Ayer	36.69	1.15	\$1,025
Clinton	15.60	0.54	\$997
Hudson	30.56	0.99	\$1,219
Littleton	20.32	1.51	\$1,781
Maynard	12.17	0.47	\$1,365
Shirley	10.58	1.00	\$1,212

*EOWLD 2014, MA Division of Local Services 2015*

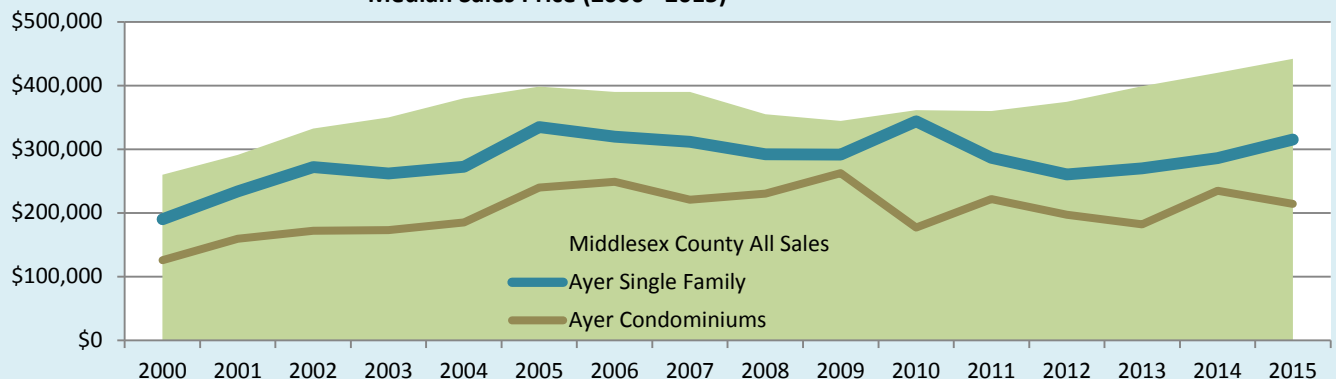
	Population 2010	Population Density	Population Growth 2000-2010	Non-White Population	Living Alone	Median Household Income	Median Sales Price	Single Family	Owner Occupied
<b>Ayer</b>	<b>7,427</b>	<b>833</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>15.7</b>	<b>33.6</b>	<b>\$67,110</b>	<b>\$310,000</b>	42%	59%
Groton	10,646	291	11.5	5.0%	19.4	\$116,686	\$413,500	85%	83%
Harvard	6,520	182	9.0	9.7	16.0	\$131,563	\$537,500	<b>93%</b>	<b>91%</b>
Littleton	8,924	540	9.0	6.7	22.0	\$111,652	\$428,250	84%	85%
Shirley	7,211	455	13.1	13.8	24.5	\$66,453	\$310,000	58%	74%
Middlesex Cty		1,838	2.3%	20.0%	27.8%	\$83,488	\$442,000	49%	62%

*US Census. ACS 2009-2014*

### Housing

- Median home prices lower than average for the region.
- Diverse housing stock; more than half are attached or multifamily units, and 40% are renter-occupied.

**Median Sales Price (2000 - 2015)**



*The Warren Group, 2016*

## AYER'S ECONOMIC SNAPSHOT

### Of the 100 largest employers in Ayer:

- Nashoba Valley Medical Center is the largest employer with more than 500 employees.
- 39 are located in Devens, including 8 of the 18 largest businesses (employing >100 workers)
- 8 are public agencies.
- 4 are fast food restaurants, 3 are restaurants, at least 4 are manufacturers; 0 are grocers.

### Industrial Concentrations of Largest Employers in Ayer

Number	Industry
23	Manufacturing
13	Wholesale Goods
11	Accommodations and Food Service
8	Healthcare
8	Public Admin
6	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services
5	Transportation and Warehousing
5	Educational Services
4	Retail (Auto Related & Food)
3	Information (Publishing + Other)
3	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing
2	Construction
2	Other Services (Laundry + Non-profit)
1	Utilities - Water, sewage, etc.
1	Finance and Insurance
1	Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation
1	Other

### Access

Vehicle: Routes 2A & 111, near Route 2

Rail: 3 Freight, 1 Commuter Line

Air: N/A

### Ayer's Labor Force

Year	Labor Force	Employed	Unemployed	Unemployment Rate
2015	4,055	3,834	221	5.5
2014	4,021	3,771	250	6.2
2013	3,952	3,670	282	7.1
2012	3,927	3,633	294	7.5
2011	3,881	3,560	321	8.3
2010	3,901	3,542	359	9.2

Source: ACS 2010-2014

### Median Earnings by Educational Attainment (2014)

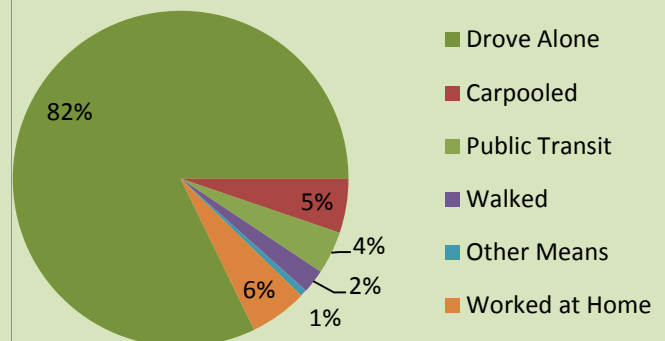
Less than high school graduate	24,598
High school graduate/GED	30,545
Some college or associate's degree	45,739
Bachelor's degree	67,461
Graduate or professional degree	81,862

Source: ACS S1501, 2014

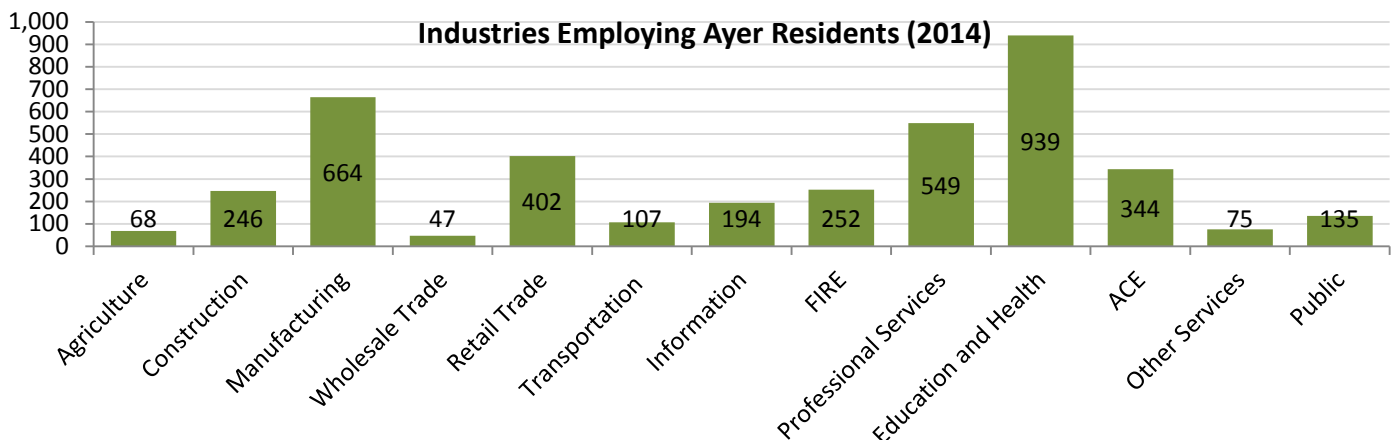
### Labor Force

- 93% of Ayer residents have graduated from High School or equivalent
- 36% of Ayer residents have completed a Bachelor's degree or higher

### Commuting Characteristics of Ayer Residents



### Industries Employing Ayer Residents (2014)



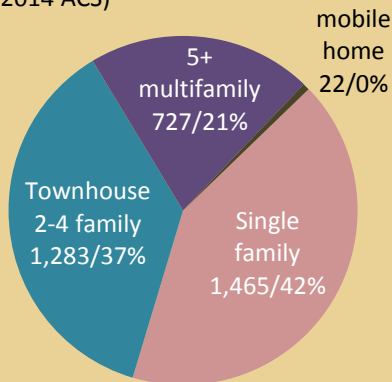
## AYER'S HOUSING SNAPSHOT

### WHERE WE LIVE

#### Ownership (2014 ACS)

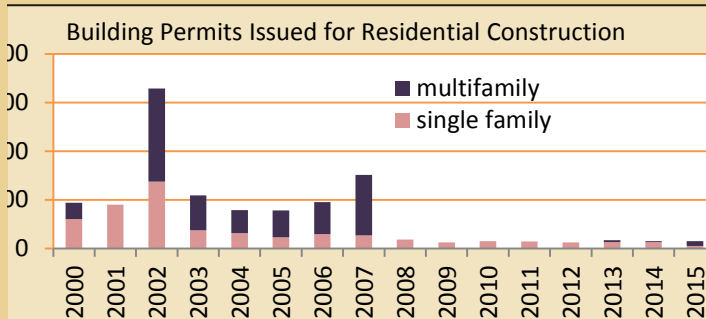
- 59% of units are owner occupied.
- 41% of units are renter occupied.

Total Units: 3,497 (2014 ACS)



#### Condition & Age

- 29% of Ayer's housing was constructed before 1940.
- 39% of Ayer's housing was constructed after 1980.
- 88 building permits were issued between 2010 and 2015, averaging 15 units per year.
- 591 multifamily homes were constructed between 2000 and 2010.
- 8% of Ayer's housing is vacant (5% in Middlesex County).



#### Housing Size (2014 ACS)

- Average of 6.1 rooms per owner-occupied unit.
- Average 3.9 rooms per renter-occupied unit.
- 56 % of housing units have 1-2 bedrooms.
- 44% of housing units have 3+ bedrooms.

#### Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI)

- State threshold for Chapter 40B 344 units (10%)
- Ayer SHI units: 290 units (8.43%), including \_\_\_ rental and \_\_\_ ownership
- Approximately \_\_\_ units are affordable (restricted to low/moderate income households).

### HOUSING CONCERNS

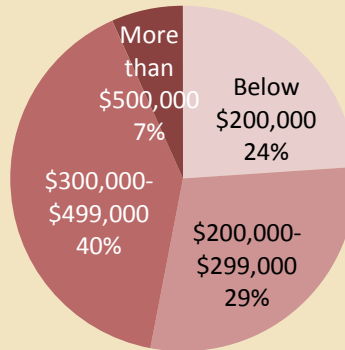
#### Housing Cost

- Median single family home sale price 2015: \$315,000
- Median condominium sale price 2015: \$214,000
- Average single family assessed value:
- Median rent: \$919 (2014 ACS)

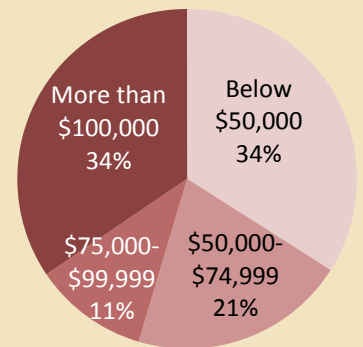
#### Housing Affordability – change between 2000-2014

- increase in median value of a single family home: 69%
- Increase in median household income 45%

#### Home Values



#### Household Incomes



2010-2014 ACS

#### Housing Demand/Population Characteristics.

- 12% of Ayer's population are age 65 and over, compared with 14% in Middlesex County.
- 17% of Ayer's population are between the ages of 20 and 34, compared to 22% in Middlesex County.
- 27 % of households in Ayer are people living alone.
- 29% of Ayer households have children under 18.

#### Median Household Income (ACS 2010-2014)

	All	Families	Seniors	Living Alone
Ayer	\$67,110	\$83,882	\$36,786	\$40,650
Middlesex County	\$83,488	\$105,827	\$46,198	\$39,003

#### Housing Cost Burden

- 1,113 households in Ayer spend more than 30% of their income on housing, including 26% of homeowners and 48% of renters.

DHCD SHI 2015	
Ayer	8.4%
Groton	5.4%
Harvard	5.5%
Littleton	12.5%
Shirley	2.5%

# Land Use

## Land Use

### Land Use by Area:

- 33% Developed Uses (Residential, Commercial & Industrial)
- 18% Infrastructure, Public & Institutional
- 49% Open Space (Protected & Unprotected)

### Assessed Valuation:

65% Residential

35% Commercial

### Zoning:

53% Residential

- R
- R1
- R2

2% Mixed Use/Specialized

- Downtown Business
- Health Care Services

46% Commercial/  
Industrial

- General Business
- Light Industrial
- Heavy Industrial
- Devens Regional Enterprise Zone

33% Natural Resource  
Protection Overlays

- Aquifer Protection Zone
- Floodplain

## Introduction

Ayer's land use has evolved around its natural topography and environmental resources and was deeply influenced by rail and roadway transportation infrastructure as well as the presence of the military. All of these factors have served to attract population to Ayer over the course of the Town's history. Development follows the radial road network consisting of connecting roads that have existed since before the town was incorporated, with hubs at downtown and the Carlton Rotary. While Ayer's distance from regional markets initially slowed the pace of growth, the development of the railroad junction spurred the growth of dense development in downtown Ayer and surrounding neighborhoods.

Critical water resources, including a string of ponds, streams, and brooks, as well as the Nashua River that forms the western border of the town, originally helped to support the Native American population and early agricultural settlers. The ponds have impacted land use both by creating a physical barrier that defines where infrastructure and development can extend, as well as providing economic opportunity such as water-powered industry and ice extraction that served to attract growth. More recently, water resources are perceived to enhance quality of life, attracting residential development around the ponds, while the possibility of increased inland flooding due to climate change may impact land use choices going forward.

The military has also had a significant impact on Ayer's land use. The site occupied by Fort Devens has been in use by armed forces dating as far back as 1656, when Major Simon Willard established a base for the Massachusetts Bay Colony militia. Military usage of the base resumed during the Civil War when Camp Stevens was established on the site. Camp Devens was established in 1917, and became a permanent installation in 1932, at which point it was named Fort Devens. The base operated continuously until 1996, when the base was closed; however, a portion of the base is still used for military training and reserves today. During its heyday, the extensive military presence on the adjacent base spurred commercial activity and demand for residential growth in Ayer. Since the base's closure, much of the land that had been taken to create the base has been permanently preserved as open space, while portions have been redeveloped or converted to civilian commercial and residential use.



Land use determines who lives and works in Ayer, their quality of life, and the fiscal sustainability of the town government. The Land Use Vision integrates the goals and recommendations of all of the Master Plan elements to articulate a consistent set of principles that guide policy and funding choices going forward and shapes what kind of community Ayer aspires to be in the future. These priorities include protecting Ayer's natural and cultural resources, improving transportation access for residents and workers, maintaining the town's socioeconomic and racial and ethnic diversity, providing high quality educational, social services, and recreational resources, and maintaining the high quality of life found within the town's borders.

Ayer can influence future land use to meet its economic, housing, transportation, and resources goals through development regulations, funding priorities, and careful future planning. Development regulations are a critical influence on the patterns of land use and include zoning and subdivision bylaws. These regulations control for what types and how much development can occur throughout the town. Ayer's current zoning bylaw was first adopted zoning in 1973, and has subsequently modified as needed at Town Meeting, with the most significant reorganization occurring in 2009. Ayer is currently in the process of adopting a new zoning bylaw; the creation of which has been in process for over a decade and will be debated at an upcoming Town Meeting where a 2/3 majority vote will be required to adopt the new bylaw.

### Land Use Goals

1. Actively protect, conserve, and preserve Ayer's natural resources and supporting infrastructure to protect critical environmental habitats, drinking water supplies, recreational areas, and open spaces.
2. Encourage the expansion and continued redevelopment of Downtown Ayer to expand housing opportunities, for both renters and owners at all income levels, and promote a vibrant downtown through the creation of new public gathering places, increased pedestrian access, and new commercial space.
3. Expand and upgrade multimodal transportation opportunities, including sidewalks, paths, and trails, and rails in addition to roadways, to ensure that residents, workers, and business transportation needs are efficiently met.





## Existing Conditions

Developed uses, which include houses and apartments, businesses, and manufacturing or other industrial uses, comprise about one third of town's land area. This includes close to 1,200 acres of residential development and about 800 acres of commercial and industrial land. An additional 18 percent of Ayer's land area is occupied by public uses and infrastructure, including transportation, energy transmission, water supply, etc.

Nearly half of the town, is undeveloped; either water, Chapter 61 lands (agriculture, recreation or forestry), or undeveloped land.

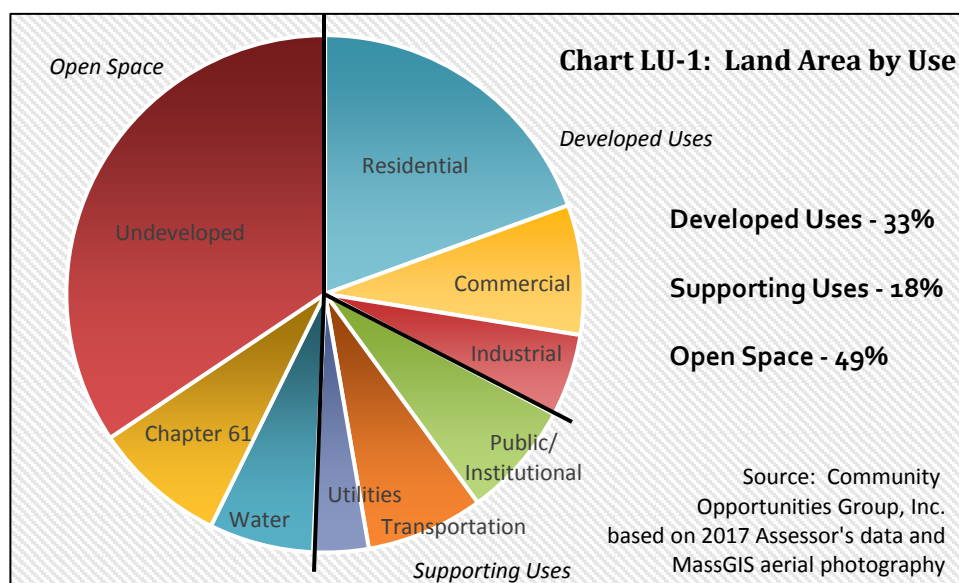


Table LU-1: Land Area Allocation by Use		
Use	Acres	Area
Residential	1,207	19.2%
Commercial/Industrial	1,082	17.3%
Permanent Open Space*	867	13.8%
Utility	210	3.3%
Roads	350	5.6%
Town Owned Land	570	9.1%
Water and Wetlands	878	14%
Other	1,100	17.7%
Type		
Undevelopable	368	5.9%
Potentially Developable	140	2.2%
Developable	190	3.0%

\* Does not include semi-protected or unprotected open space.

Source: Assessor's Database, 2017

potential for the town.

Since the 2004 Comprehensive Plan, the town has lost 79 acres of manufacturing land, while making small gains in land used for small retail (less than 10,000 square feet), dining and entertainment, office, and trucking uses. Some commercial land was also lost and converted to residential uses, an increasing issue in Ayer. There are 101 acres of farmland remaining in Ayer, which the Town has added additional permanently protect open space acreage in the past decade.

Based on the current zoning, there is roughly 200 acres remaining of developable land, and potentially an additional 140 acres that may have some development potential. With so little land remaining, it is imperative that future development proposals efficiently utilize remaining land while maximizing revenue

## Developed Uses

About 1,200 acres in Ayer is occupied by residential development. The downtown and surrounding older neighborhoods such as Devenscrest, the Acre, and other neighborhoods are characterized by higher density, and more diverse forms of housing uses, including single family, two-family, townhouse, small-scale multifamily, and mixed-use structures. Outlying areas such as those around Flanagan and Sandy Pond and located further from Ayer's core, reflect a development pattern that has predominated since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, with single family homes on large lots in residential subdivisions. As shown on **Table H-7**, in the housing chapter, the median age



of most of Ayer's multifamily housing stock is 100 years old, while the vast majority of housing built in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and beyond has been single family homes (or condominiums). With the exception of a handful of subsidized affordable housing developments constructed within the past 40 years, the majority of the rental housing supply is in 100-year-old buildings. The average lot size for houses built prior to 1950 was less than ½ acre, while lot sizes average around 0.8 acres for houses built after 1980.

The trend toward larger lot single family home development reflects the town's land use regulations. This development pattern consumes more open space, and is more expensive due to land value and infrastructure costs, and is a housing choice that is mostly attractive to higher income households and families with children. New housing development increasingly conflicts with sensitive natural resources and detracts from the community's historic character. Demographic trends on **Charts H-1** and **H-2** show that the town has gained population among families in the past five years, despite a projected decline, while the proportion of young adults and older households has declined or remained flat in spite of projected growth – reflecting type of housing development over this time. The rate of growth is expected to slow over coming decades, as the land available for housing development diminishes.

Commercial and industrial development is located primarily along arterial roadways throughout the town. The downtown has a concentration of intensive, small scale mixed use retail and service-oriented commercial development, as well as an industrial core predominantly occupied by a lumber yard and other uses along Sculley Way, located along the rail line just south of the commuter rail station. Strip commercial and industrial development extends along highway corridors and around the Rotary and the West Main Street gateway. In recent years, conflicts have arisen due to the close proximity of residential properties to industrial properties. Recently, one neighborhood has been besieged by odors from food processing byproducts, while others have had issues with truck traffic, noise, and other nuisances. In upcoming years, Ayer will need to invest in its commercial areas by providing adequate infrastructure and beautification, and protect them by improving design standards and requiring sufficient investment in existing and new properties so as to encourage other property owners to invest. Higher value commercial uses are needed to provide local employment and critical tax revenue, but attracting them will remain a challenge if improvements and investment are not made.

## Supporting Uses

The category of "Supporting Uses" includes public and institutional facilities and public and privately-owned infrastructure. Approximately 440 acres are owned by the Town, state, or other government entity (excluding land designated for open space conservation). This includes land used by the water department, as well as public buildings, cemeteries, churches, and other institutional properties. About 450 acres of land used for transportation includes roadways and property of the MBTA and Department of Transportation, while approximately 210 acres are occupied by private utilities, primarily for electrical transmission lines and substations.





## Open Space

The Open Space category includes open water, Chapter 61 land (agriculture, recreation, and forestry), and other undeveloped land. As described in the Resources element, there are 867 acres of permanently protected open space in Ayer. Some of the protected open space is included under the “public/institutional” category on Chart LU-1, where there may be open space associated with public wells, schools, or other public infrastructure. For purposes of land use classification, protected open space is classified as “Undeveloped” where it is not associated with public buildings and infrastructure.

According to the Assessor’s database, just over 500 acres of land are enrolled in Chapter 61, which provides a financial incentive for private owners to preserve land for agricultural, forestry, or recreational use by reducing the annual property taxes due. Chapter 61 lands are mostly located in the northern section of town, with notable exception of the Ayer Sportsmen’s Club located south of Sandy Pond Road.

There are nearly 700 acres of undeveloped land which are privately-owned and have no protection from future development. Close to 400 acres of privately-owned open space is estimated to be undevelopable due to wetlands, slopes, or other environmental constraints.<sup>1</sup> The northern section of the town hosts a high concentration of sensitive natural resources, most of which is unprotected.

## Zoning

Just over one half of the town is zoned for residential use exclusively. Nearly half is zoned for commercial activity, including General Business, Industrial districts, and the Devens Regional Enterprise Zone. Mixed use/specialized districts include the Downtown Business District and Health Care Services, each comprising 1% of the town’s land area.

### Zoning Diagnostic

The Town is poised to adopt a new zoning bylaw at the 2018 Spring Town Meeting. Although the draft bylaw has been in progress for many years, it is necessary to adopt a new bylaw

expeditiously due to the inadequacy of the current zoning bylaw to address current development trends and issues. Periodic modernization efforts are required to maintain a functional bylaw and responsive Planning Board. The proposed zoning map is located on Page 6 and Existing Land Use map, on which the zoning is based, is located on Page 7.

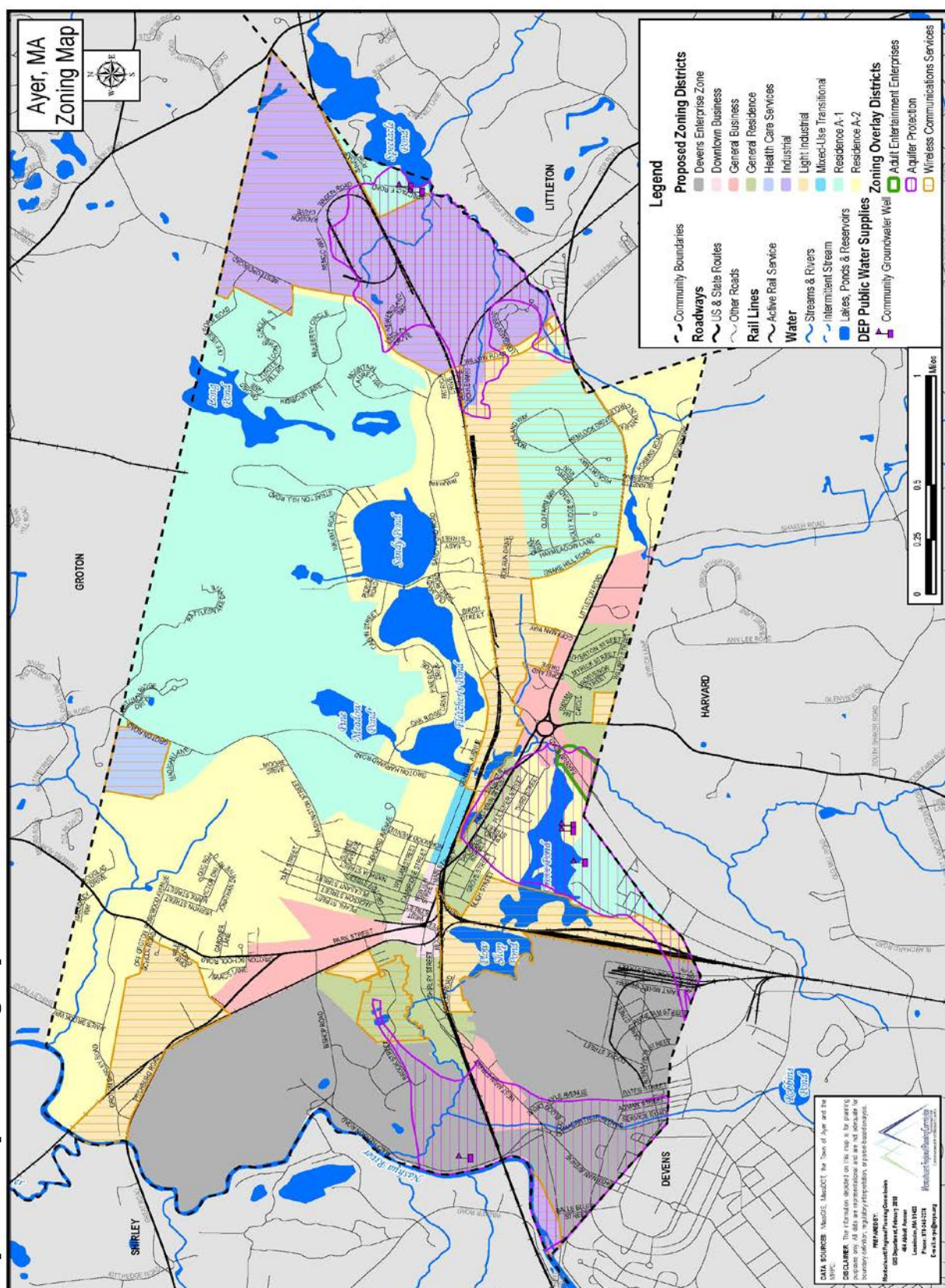
Table LU-2: Zoning Districts by Area (Based on Current Zoning)		
Zoning District	% of Land Area	Est. Acres
<b>Residential</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>3,300</b>
Residence A1	27%	1,670
Residence A2	26%	1,630
<b>Mixed-Use/Specialized</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>120</b>
Downtown Business	1%	60
Health Care Services	1%	60
<b>Commercial</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>2,890</b>
General Business	9%	565
Light Industrial	9%	565
Heavy Industrial	10%	630
Devens Regional Enterprise Zone	18%	1,130
<b>Natural Resource Protection Overlays</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>2,070</b>
Aquifer Protection Zone	15%	940
Floodplain	18%	1,130

Source: Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

<sup>1</sup> Assessor’s Database, 2017.

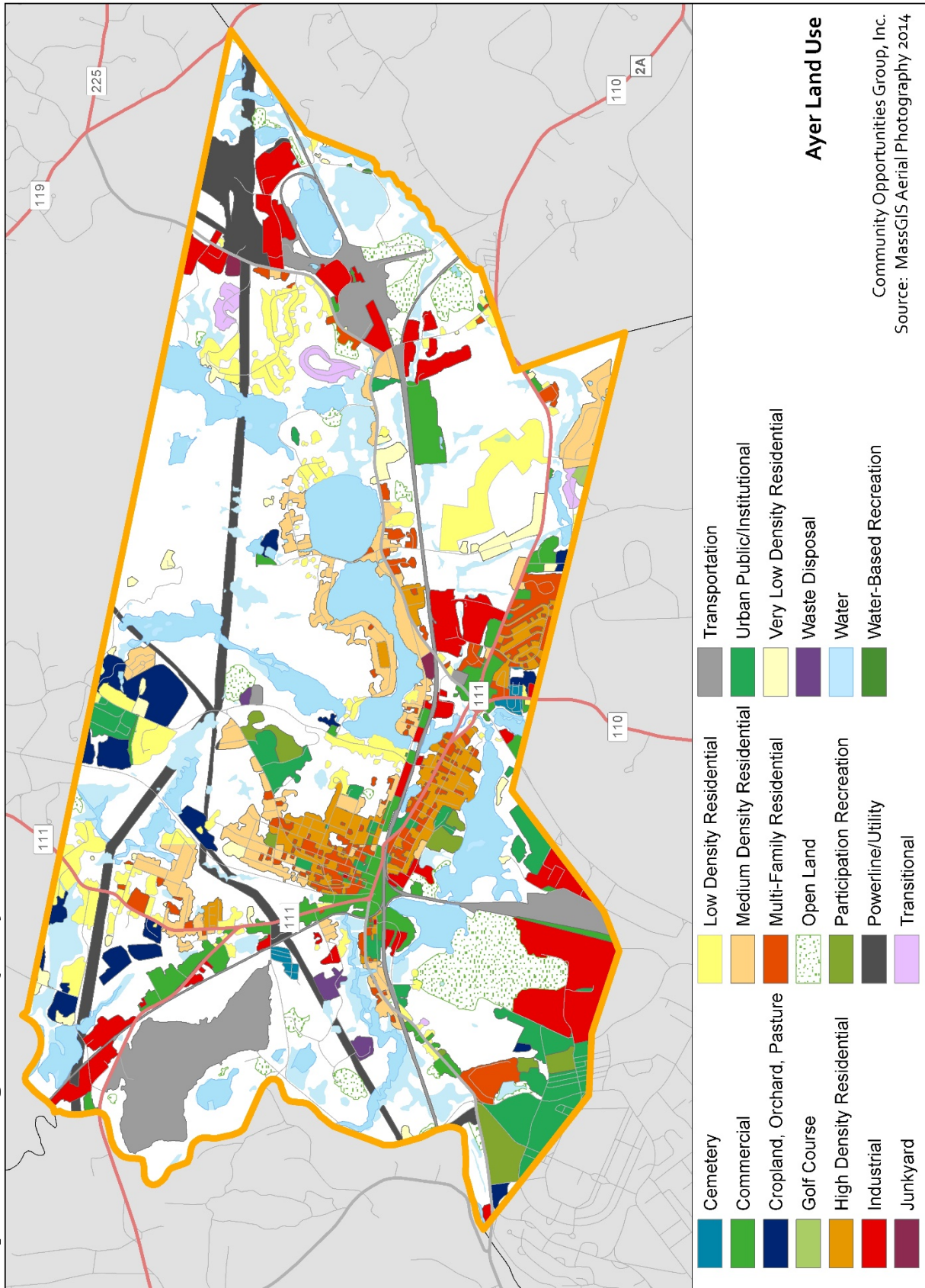


## Map LU-1: Proposed Zoning Map





Map LU-2: Existing Land Use (2017)



The following is a review of the draft Bylaw slated for approval at the 2018 Spring Town Meeting:

### *Content and Organization*

Content and organization refers to the substantive and technical regulations within the bylaw and how they are organized. The intent is generally to have a clearly worded bylaw that is easy to understand, navigate, and interpret. The following recommendations may enhance the clarity and usability of the proposed bylaw:

- Integrate the Table of Uses, Table of Sign Dimensions and Table of Dimensional Requirements into the main bylaw rather than as appendices. These tables tend to become heavily footnoted over time and it can be rather confusing when critical regulations are missing from the body of the bylaw.
- Add Table for Handicap Accessible Parking requirements.
- Summarize Section 9.1.2 as a table to enhance clarity.
- Review provisions for parking waivers to address overbuilding of parking.
- Consider provisions to waive dimensional requirements for pre-existing non-conforming structures so long as the new development is no more nonconforming than the existing portion of the building. This will help the redevelopment of Ayer's urban lots and allow for safe conversions of existing homes into homes with accessory units, and allow for small multi-family development (two- and three-family housing) and single-family starter homes.
- Raise the building heights in the industrial districts from 40' to 50' to build an industrial supply that meets current demand for industrial space.

### *Procedures*

Establishing project thresholds and requiring more extensive submission requirements and board/subcommittee reviews for higher impact projects might be worth writing into the bylaw. At a minimum, all projects seeking site plan review from the planning board should be required to submit: existing and proposed site plan and elevations and a landscape plan. Beyond that, the town might want a stormwater management plan, traffic study, fiscal impact analysis, shadow studies, illumination plans, construction management plan, etc. but only for projects that are big enough to truly merit their expense as submission requirements. Establishing guidelines for which projects those might be, rather than the Planning Board requesting them on-demand and as requested, maintains a predictable permitting process. The town may also want to set up a special review committee for high impact projects, which would allow the applicant to meet with a subcommittee appointed by the Planning Board (typically comprising a local architect or other design professional, member of the Planning Board, and several residents) several times to work out design issues. Such a committee could make a formal recommendation to the Planning Board prior to the Planning Board's decision. This allows for more public review without clogging the Planning Board's agenda for months at a time.

Also, it is not clear from the proposed Zoning Bylaw how various reviews should be timed and what reviews different types of projects will trigger. Although it is not required, it is usually helpful to lay out some kind of flow chart or other mechanism that identifies all the types of reviews that may be required, and in which order they should be performed. For example, there is a reference in this bylaw that a special permit may only be granted if the ZBA has already granted a variance. That is the only way one might know that they need to go to the ZBA first. It is not clear when one should go to Conservation Commission, Historic Commission, Board of Selectman, or other board or official. The more clearly the process is outlined and the timing of reviews is identified, the more easily the town is able to prevent "board shopping" – a process whereby an applicant may



selectively time their appearance at boards in attempt to leverage approvals from boards perceived as being more lenient into final approvals from boards perceived as more difficult.

### *Missing Overlays/Provisions*

- Smart Growth Zoning Overlay District.** Dubbed *Plow Shop Pond Village*, the Town could adopt a zoning overlay as authorized under M.G.L. Ch.40R (“40R”), that enables the Town to efficiently maximize economic development and housing opportunities in the areas in and around downtown (and meets the definition of an **area of concentrated development**<sup>2</sup>). Buildings created under a 40R must provide at least 20% of units as affordable housing units affordable to households earning 80 percent of the Area Median Income (\$104,000 for a family four in 2018). In addition, the Town will receive density bonus payments up to \$3,000 per bonus unit created as a result of the new zoning, a one-time zoning incentive payment worth up to \$600,000 , as well as annual reimbursements for any students generated from a project permitted under 40R. Downtown and surrounding areas near the Ayer MBTA Commuter Station would be highly desirable for new and infill development of commercial, residential, and open space property, including the areas around Plow Shop Pond. Provided development meets **design standards**<sup>3</sup> adopted locally as part of the Smart Growth Overlay District, and density standards required for either starter homes, multifamily, or mixed-use development with commercial, and constructed using as Low Impact Development techniques; such development should be revenue positive for the Town and expand local housing and business opportunities while improving Ayer’s downtown aesthetics. An example of what Plow Shop Pond Village could look like is located on Pages 12-13, for suggested district area see Future Land Use map on Page 17.
- Petapawag Overlay District.** An overlay protecting the Petapawag Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) (which is mostly within land zoned R1) was discussed in the appendix of the last master plan (pg. 172). The recommendations for this overlay remain valid and are geared toward reducing development by increasing open space requirements and standards (e.g. no disturbance zones, emphasis on contiguity with other open spaces, flexible dimensional standards and density bonuses for compact development) increased lot minimum lot sizes, allowance of odd shaped lots, etc. and should be adopted as an overlay district at a future Town Meeting. See Future Land Use Map on Page xx.
- West Main Street Gateway District.** This area is adjacent to several recreation amenities such as a kayak launch on the Nashua River, the Devens recreation fields, and the Hawk’s Nest Disc Golf store and disc golfing facility. This area could be zoned and served by public infrastructure so as to allow it to become a hub for recreation-based businesses, retailers, and eateries.
- Demolition Bylaw.** Structures are being raised without much, if any, notification to the Historic Commission and documentation. Some thought should be given to establishing procedures for demolition and ways to discourage the loss of historically significant structures. Offering incentives for the retention of existing structures (one such mechanism is waivers of dimensional requirements for

<sup>2</sup> An **area of concentrated development** refers to an area with is: 1) currently served by sewer; 2) of which 50% of the land either substantially developed or underutilized; and 3) the primary current use (or, in the case of underutilized land, the primary current zoning) of land and/or buildings is commercial (including retail, office, or industrial businesses) or mixed-use. Land designated as a commercial center under M.G.L. Ch.40, § 60 qualifies as an **Area of Concentrated Development**.

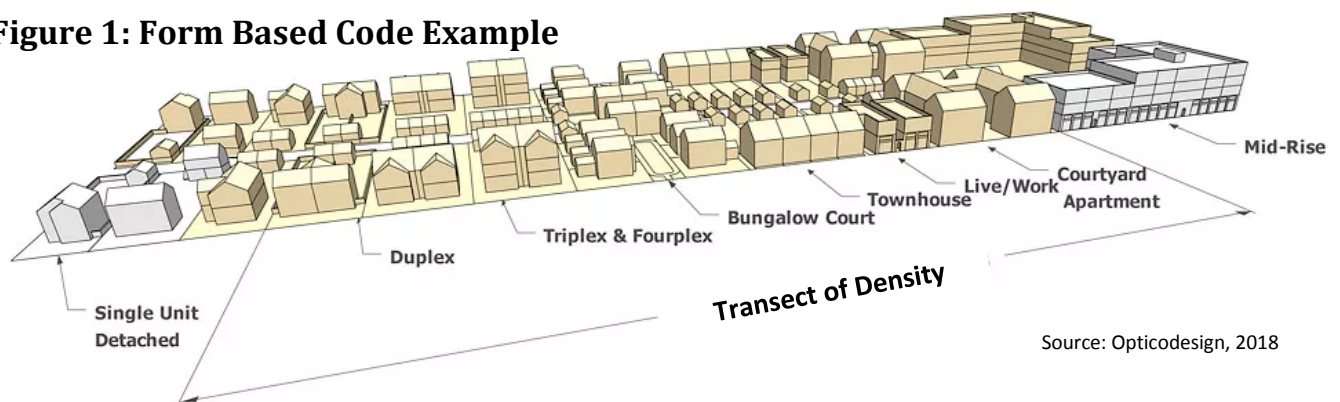
<sup>3</sup> **Design Standards** must be clearly written, fairly and consistently applied, and allow for flexibility and creativity, consistent with the goals of M.G.L. Ch.40R, 760 CMR 59.01, 59.02 and 59.04(1)(f).



preexisting nonconformities that make preserving those preexisting deficient setbacks more valuable; density bonuses and lot coverage waivers could also be considered). A process should be established to allow for adequate notification and documentation of potentially eligible structures (potentially any building, landscape, or object (e.g. a monument) over 50 years old) to allow the Historic Commission time to document the building and work with the applicant to negotiate alternatives.

- **Form Based Code.** The Town recently received a \$15,000 grant to help with the production of a Form Based Code for Downtown Ayer. Form based code focuses on the architectural and aesthetic features of buildings, parking and pedestrian facilities, and other common site features, rather than prescribed uses, dimensional requirements, and other such common features of more traditional zoning.

**Figure 1: Form Based Code Example**

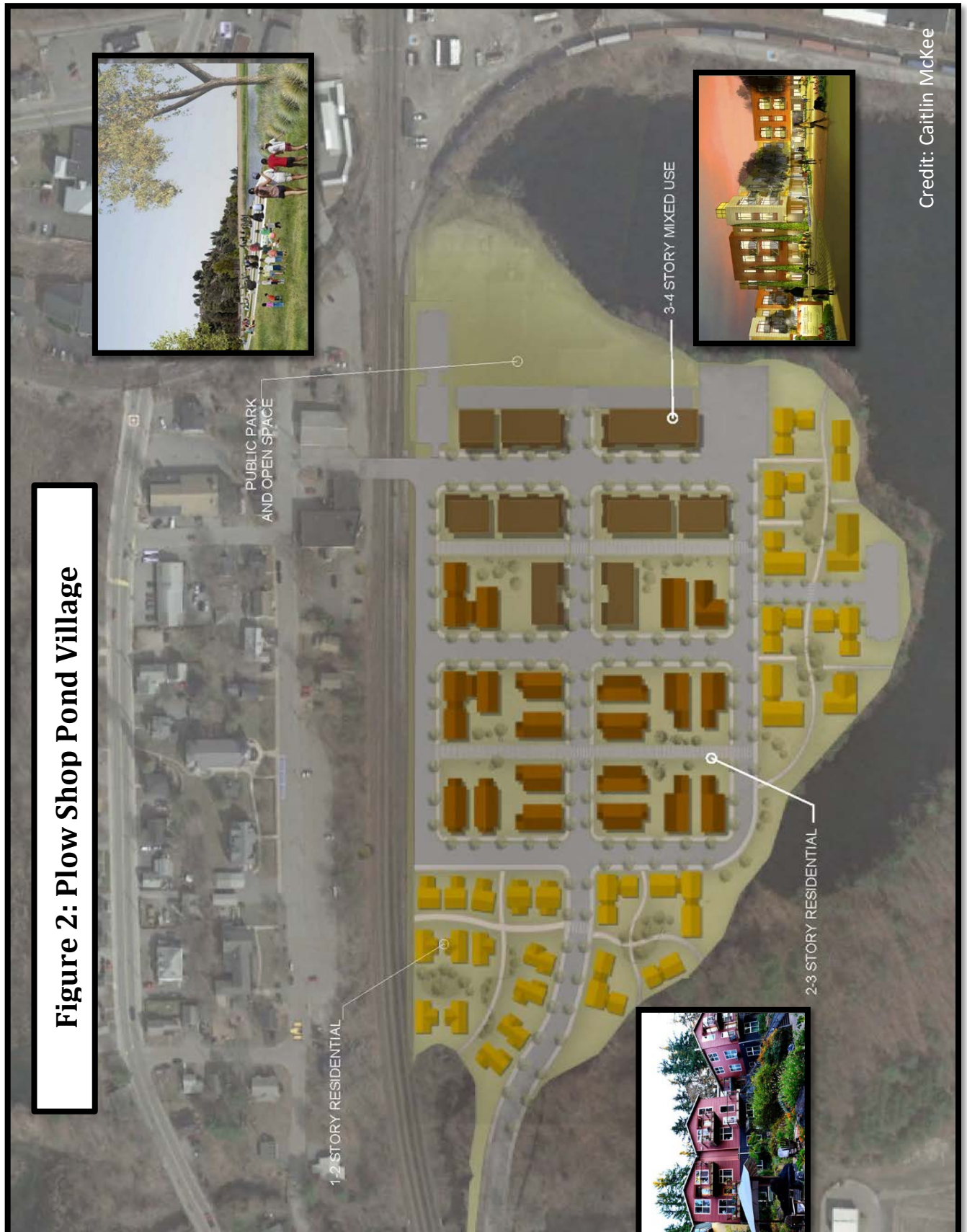


- **Reasonable Accommodations.** There is currently no provision in the bylaw for reasonable accommodations for disabled persons, as required under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Exempting such accommodations from public process, variances, or other special permits to allow for the expeditious and legal issuance of building permits is a best practice for handling such cases.

### *Standards*

The site plan and design review standards are not as robust as they could be. However, they are written so that a well-trained board could use the site plan and performance standards as-is and would allow them to comment and require any element of design that they would reasonably want to address. This method is more ambiguous to the development community in terms of providing clarity in what the town is looking for in terms of quality and design. Performance standards, particularly those encouraging low impact development techniques (which should be developed with input from DPW), and architectural design guidelines should be illustrated, and written clearly and explicitly so as to remove ambiguity from the bylaw and the review process.





**Figure 3: Plow Shop Pond Village Design Elements****Figure 4: Plow Shop Pond Village Land Uses**



## Future Land Use Issues

### Limited Land Supply and Future Demand

At just 9.6 square miles and with less than 200 developable acres remaining, Ayer has very limited land available for future development. The town is no longer in a position to be permissive toward developers and land owners seeking to develop fiscally and environmentally unsustainable projects. New projects must be compact and are best suited to occur on underutilized, rather than undeveloped land. Moving forward, the Town's staff, Planning Board, and Zoning Board of Appeals, must review projects to ensure they are in conformance with the Master Plan's goals to provide inclusive housing and economic opportunities, maximize existing multi-modal transportation options, minimize fiscal impacts to the Town for the cost of delivery of services, and protect critical natural and cultural resource protections.

For future residential development, increasing the supply of diverse housing options will be a key priority. Low density single family development is the among the most expensive types of development for the town to serve. Maximizing development potential within existing neighborhoods by focusing on improving underutilized properties, adding units to existing buildings, and infilling on smaller lots will prevent the destruction of critical environmental resources and protect Ayer's water supply. This type of development will allow for the town to continue to provide a diverse housing stock, which serves multiple household types, including seniors, families, and single-person households, which are all growing demographics in Ayer. Diverse housing also benefits the Town's local economy by provide housing options that are nearby to Ayer's employers; this reduces lateness and absenteeism in the workforce and makes the quality of the labor force more attractive to potential businesses that might seek to locate in Ayer. A lack of affordable housing and transportation issues were among the key challenges identified by local businesses during the Master Plan process. One key way to achieve sustainable development that meets the needs of households and businesses is through the adoption M.G.L. Ch. 40R Smart Growth Zoning.

Ayer's commercial development in principally hindered by three factors: 1) location, 2) population, and 3) supply of commercial property. The bulk of land area dedicated to commercial uses is industrial land located adjacent to the railway and devoted to manufacturing, warehousing, transportation, and lumber. However, there has been growth in small retail (less than 10,000 square feet), and it is anticipated that growth will continue if Ayer's commercial districts receive investment and are improved, and if the downtown population is increased, thereby increasing patronage at downtown shops, restaurants, and personal and professional service providers. Further, the area located near the Verbeck Gate on West Main Street is among Ayer's most underutilized commercial areas. Although vehicle traffic in the area is somewhat low, due to the proximity of recreational facilities (such as disc golf, kayaking, the Nashua River Rail Trail, and the Devens recreation fields) and recreation-based businesses that are already in the area, this area could serve as a recreation gateway and offer additional recreation-based retail, restaurants, and other active uses that will draw visitors to Ayer.

### Resource Management and Pollution

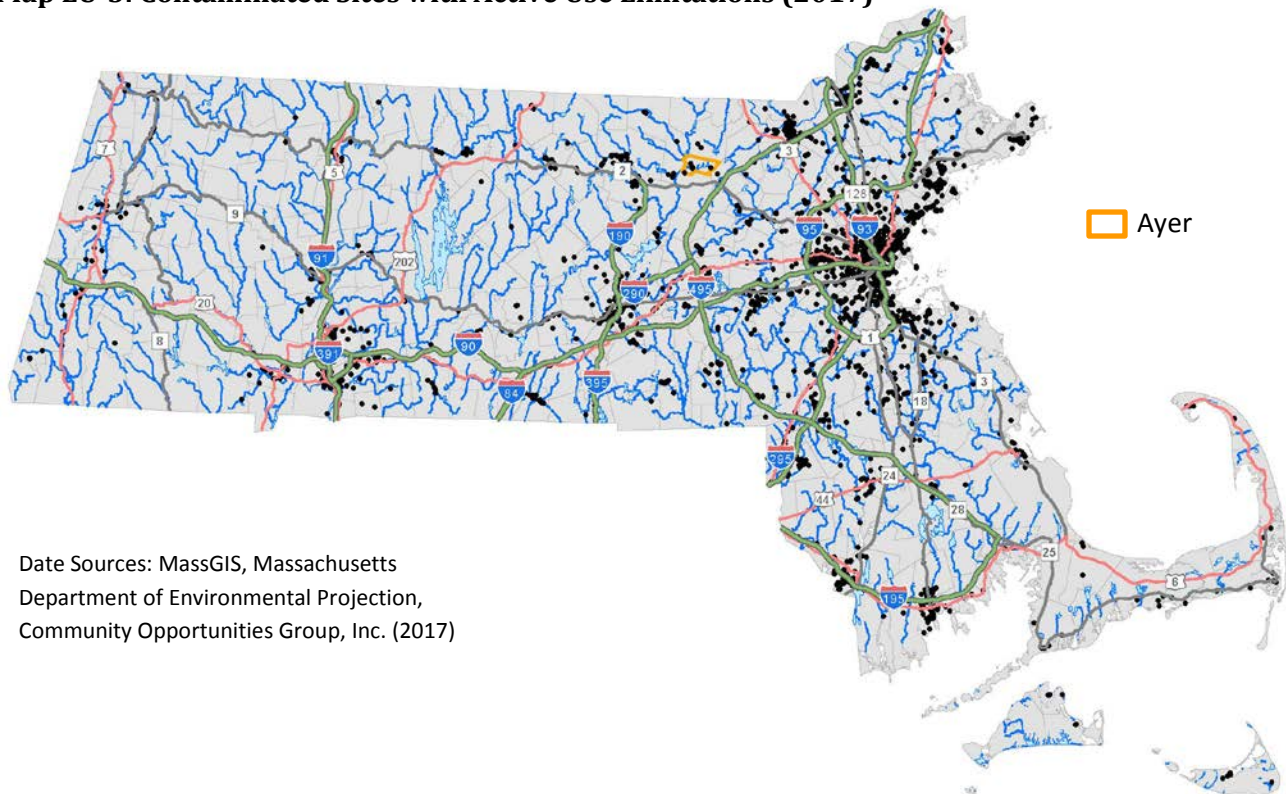
As shown on the Future Land Use map on Page xx, the areas northwestern, central, and southeastern areas of town have critical environmental resources in need of stronger protections. As discussed in the Resources chapter, Ayer is located within two different Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs), two major watersheds (Nashua and Merrimack River), and contains significant amounts of prime forest and habitat lands.



The need to conserve these lands provides more than just wildlife protection, but also contributes greatly to stormwater management and flood prevention as well as protection of the public water supply. Open space allows for natural filtration of contaminants when precipitation and stormwater runoff discharge back into the soils and eventually into the aquifers that supply Ayer's drinking water. Ayer cannot exist without adequate stormwater management, flood control protections, and clean drinking water, and each acre lost makes the Town's position more precarious. The most precarious areas are largely located in the R1 zoning district putting open space concerns in direct competition with residential development. Additional protections are needed under zoning.

In addition to protecting open space lands, there is a need to protect the land from existing uses and contamination. Due to Ayer's long standing industrial tradition and ongoing rail and military usage, Ayer hosts a large concentration of contaminated sites. There are 52 hazardous material (haz-mat) sites monitored by the Environmental Protection Agency in Ayer, among those, seven are classified under M.G.L. Ch21E as having a high likelihood of causing environmental harm and are subject to remediation agreements for ongoing cleanup and use limitations. These limitations typically preclude redevelopment for residential purposes or for daycares, parks, schools or other types of uses that could potentially expose humans to contamination. As there are limited remediation funds, these sites are difficult to clean and reuse and each site requires considerable study to determine reuse potential, remediation costs and potential funding sources. Ensuring these sites are cleaned will require a concentrated effort on the part of the Town to either perform the cleanup or incentivize private landowners to clean private property. One potential incentive may be to rezone the property to increase its development potential, thereby increasing its value.

**Map LU-3: Contaminated Sites with Active Use Limitations (2017)**



Date Sources: MassGIS, Massachusetts  
Department of Environmental Protection,  
Community Opportunities Group, Inc. (2017)

## Devens



Devens is a 4,400 acre mixed-use former military base reuse; 1,130 of these acres are located in Ayer. Devens served as the U.S. Army's New England headquarters, but was closed in 1996 (though it reopened the following day as an Army Reserve training facility so some active military use remains). Following the closure of the base, MassDevelopment purchased the property and, with financial support from the state, has been redeveloping Devens for predominantly commercial purposes for the past twenty years. Today, Devens features over 100

businesses and organizations that collectively employ more than 4,000 workers. With nearly 2,100 acres of open space and recreation land, Devens offers unique opportunities for active and passive recreation, which contributes to Ayer's potential for a recreation gateway near the Verbeck Gate.

Deven's future, however, is unclear. Current agreements, set to expire in 2031, give MassDevelopment predominant control over the Devens lands located within Ayer. The area, served by a separate fire department and infrastructure including sewer and water, and subject to preferential tax rates, could potentially be returned to Ayer, become an independent community and incorporate as a Town, or could remain under the control of MassDevelopment in the future. How Ayer chooses to respond to this will depend on a number of factors – 1) the cost to serve the land versus potential revenues, 2) the desires of those living and working on Devens, and 3) the need for additional land or resources.

Among the areas considered most valuable to Ayer is the former Moore Airfield. Underneath the airfield is a high yield reservoir that could provide additional drinking water to the Town in the future, however, there are contamination concerns and water drawn from a well in this location might be used for non-potable purposes (such as industrial use, system redundancy, and firefighting). The airfield might also be a suitable location for clean energy production, such as a solar orchard, as the land is already cleared. Finally, the recreation fields could help address open space and recreation needs within Ayer. These potential benefits, however, could be outweighed by the costs to deliver services, remediate contaminated lands, and assume liability for activities on Devens. The town will need to carefully consider its options as 2031 approaches.

## Future Land Use Map

The future land use map takes into consideration the formative needs and issues related to natural resource protection and land conservation, environmental contamination, housing needs, economic development goals, clean energy production, transportation needs, educational and recreational needs, cultural resources and heritage opportunities, and so on. The future land use map can be found on Page 16.

<Insert Future Land Use Map Here>



## Formative Issues

Assets and Opportunities	Challenges and Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>New Zoning and Subdivision Bylaws.</b> Ayer is currently preparing to pass and adopt a new zoning bylaw at Spring Town Meeting in 2018. Long in progress, the new bylaw will help the town better manage and provide appropriate public process, levels of review, and conditions of approval for new development. In addition, the Department of Public Works is in the process of reviewing and modernizing the subdivision bylaws. Updates specifications will provide better growth management and reduce development impacts.</li> <li>• <b>Smart Growth Zoning Overlay.</b> Adopting a 40R Smart Growth Overlay District and design guidelines will enable the town to foster and incentivize downtown development. Adoption of such a district enables the town to access significant state funding for incentive, density bonus, and school cost reimbursement payments; while also encouraging growth around existing transit nodes such as the MBTA commuter rail station, providing valuable parkland and open space, facilitating, infill development, and increasing property values throughout downtown.</li> <li>• <b>Form Based Code.</b> Ayer was recently the recipient of a technical assistance grant to create and adopt a Form Based Code on Park Street. This code will establish new standards that will be in place as the area is progressively redeveloped to encourage a more hospitable and aesthetically pleasing streetscape with complementary uses.</li> <li>• <b>Open Space Capitalization.</b> Due to Ayer's vast amount of natural resources, the protection of open space both through regulatory means as well as acquisition is going to be essential in preventing critical environmental habitats and wildlife areas from development. At Town Meeting in 2017, Ayer transferred funds from the Community Preservation Act into an open space trust fund to allow the town to act expeditiously when open space parcels become available – this includes the Town's ability to exercise their right of first refusal on any Chapter 61 lands, should they become available.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Outdated Bylaws and Regulations.</b> Even after the new zoning bylaw is adopted, there will be a number of provisions that will need to be addressed in the future to comprehensively address all of Ayer's future land use needs. In addition, weak subdivision bylaws generate inefficient land use, and generate excessive pavement and other infrastructure issues. The proposed bylaws are a good start but more work is needed to protect natural resources and concentrate development around downtown to minimize fiscal impacts and infrastructure costs.</li> <li>• <b>Blight and Obsolescence.</b> Blight is one of the most critical issues facing Ayer's commercial districts and some residential areas. Blight threatens the overall fiscal health of the town because it discourages investment and devalues property. In addition, as many of the buildings age they are growing obsolete in absence of renovations and upkeep. In addition, some buildings are simply nearing the end of their usable life span and are ready for replacement. Ensuring there are proper incentives to encourage reinvestment will be critical in upcoming years.</li> <li>• <b>Pollution.</b> Ayer has a large number of contaminated sites for a town that is geographically small. There are 7 sites containing Active Use Limitations (AULs), but there a number of other sites containing lower grade contamination including Pirone Park and the MBTA commuter rail parking area. Remediating contamination on public property, in particular, is challenging due to limited remediation funds and difficult application processes. Cleaning up Ayer and preventing new contamination, particularly via industrial accidents will remain a challenge in upcoming years.</li> <li>• <b>Past Mistakes.</b> Ayer has a history of lax land use standards that have sent a message to the development community that Ayer will accept substandard uses and development. This is not true, and with new regulations and motivated staff and board members, this trend will not continue.</li> </ul>





## Goals and Strategies

<b>Goal LU-1</b>	<b>Actively protect, conserve, and preserve Ayer's natural resources and supporting infrastructure to protect critical environmental habitats, drinking water supplies, recreational areas, and open spaces.</b>
Strategy LU-1.1	Draft and adopt the Petapawag Overlay zoning district to reduce development potential and protect the remaining lands within the Petapawag ACEC.
Strategy LU-1.2	Procure lands near wellheads when they become available and place permanent conservation restrictions on them to preclude future development and protect the water supply.
Strategy LU-1.3	Continue to manage, monitor, and treat Ayer's ponds, streams, and open spaces for invasive species and other threats.
Strategy LU-1.4	Remediate contamination on public lands. Perform soils test, studies, and seek grant funds as staff time permit.
Strategy LU-1.5	Revisit the creation of a stormwater utility to fund long term maintenance and system upgrades needed to comply with the Department of Environmental Protection regulations, as well as protect Ayer's surface and ground waters.
Strategy LU-1.6	Update Stormwater regulations and make bylaw available on DPW's website. Continue to implement Best Management Practices with additional rain gardens, bioswales, and bioretention cells to mitigate runoff, erosion, and the discharge of pollutants.
<b>Goal LU-2</b>	<b>Encourage the expansion and continued redevelopment of Downtown Ayer to expand housing opportunities, for both renters and owners at all income levels, and promote a vibrant downtown through the creation of new public gathering places, increased pedestrian access, and new commercial space.</b>
Strategy LU-2.1	Adopt a Smart Growth Overlay District under M.G.L. Ch.40R.
Strategy LU-2.2	Complete and adopt a Form Based Code for Park Street.



<b>Goal LU-3</b>	<b>Expand and upgrade multimodal transportation opportunities, including sidewalks, paths, and trails, and rails in addition to roadways, to ensure that residents, workers, and business transportation needs are efficiently met.</b>
Strategy LU-3.1	Adequately fund and maintain roadways, trails, sidewalks, public parking, and commuter facilities to ensure universal access and reasonable transportation choices for residents, workers, and businesses.
Strategy LU-3.2	Obtain funds to complete upgrades to pedestrian facilities to meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
Strategy LU-3.3	Work with MART and local employers to address connectivity issues between the MBTA commuter rail station and employment centers to address issues with transit options for the first and last mile of local trips.
Strategy LU-3.4	Work with MART and the Ayer Council on Aging to continue to support the Council on Aging's transportation services.



# Resources

## Natural, Cultural, Recreation, and Historic Resources

### Natural Resources

13.5% of Ayer's total area is wetland and open water.

33% of Ayer is forested.

Significant resources include

- Nashua River Corridor
- Chain of ponds
- Snake Hill
- 2 ACECs and Primary Habitat Areas cover nearly ½ of Ayer

1,200 acres protected or semi-protected open space

### Recreation

Pirone Park

Sandy Pond Beach

School facilities

Nashua River Rail Trail

Trail networks

Boating and fishing

Private facilities & vendors

### Historic Resources

State/National Register Historic Districts in Downtown Ayer & Devens

Buildings & other structures from late 18<sup>th</sup> through early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries

### Cultural Resources

Library

Schools/Community Ed.

Senior Center

Cultural Council

Freedom's Way National Heritage Corridor

United Native American Cultural Center

Fort Devens Museum

## Introduction

Ayer's natural and historic resources, open space, recreation, and cultural facilities are essential to the community's identity and vitality. These resources define both the physical character and the social connectivity that foster Ayer's small town feel and its unique sense of place – from glacial topography and surface waters, to the historic influences that shaped the town's development patterns, to the organizations and programs that bring residents together to share information, ideas, teamwork, health, and fun.

Moreover, these natural resources contribute to the town economically. High yield aquifers provide millions of gallons per day of drinking water for residents and large-scale industrial users; wetlands and open space help to protect developed areas of the town from flooding and from contamination of groundwater and surface waters; regionally significant recreational and cultural facilities attract visitors; and the resources that contribute to the quality of life and aesthetic beauty of the town help to attract investment in residential and commercial development that maintain the Town's fiscal sustainability.

Town staff, citizen volunteers, and regional organizations have effectively partnered to manage the stewardship of Ayer's natural and historic resources and to develop facilities and programming to serve the recreational and cultural needs of the public. A number of planning efforts, including the Town's and Devens' Open Space and Recreation Plans, Master Plans for the Nashua River Watershed Association and Oxbow National Wildlife Area, the Freedom's Way National Heritage Corridor, and specific resource management studies have highlighted strategies for resource protection, partnership, and the development of regional connections. Continued collaboration in the implementation of these plans will help to accomplish mutual goals to protect irreplaceable resources and to build awareness and strengthen bonds between residents and between partners in the community and the region.

## Resource Goals:

1. Protect Ayer's natural resources, including surface and groundwater, habitats, and unique landscapes.
2. Expand access to recreational opportunities for all residents.
3. Highlight and promote Ayer's historical and natural assets that define the Town's character.
4. Expand organizational capacity and awareness of Ayer's recreational and cultural programming.
5. Make Ayer more sustainable by promoting the concept of a local food system and increase access to local food.



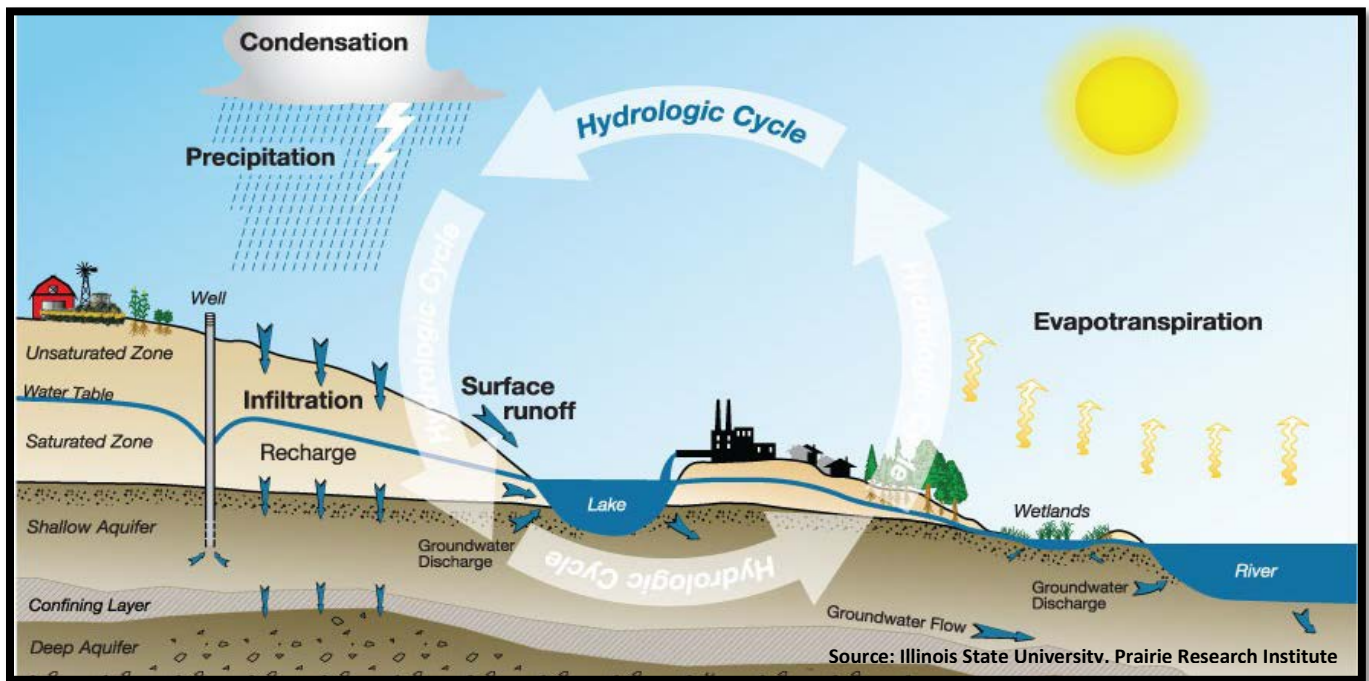


## Inventory of Natural Resources

Ayer's topography has been distinctively shaped by glaciers which left behind a unique system of landforms, ponds, and soil deposits. Ayer's landscape is dominated by a network of large and small rivers, brooks and ponds. Water resources, forests, geological features, and other natural resources within a variety of undeveloped areas define the town's physical character and provide wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities. Surface-water and groundwater resources provide drinking water throughout the region and supply major industrial users. Open space areas are also important for reducing flood hazards, filtering ground water to remove pollutants, and stabilizing soils to prevent erosion and sedimentation.

## Water Resources

Figure 1 - The Atmospheric, Surface, and Groundwater Cycle



Ayer's water resources are comprised of three different, but related and interconnected types of water: surface, ground, and atmospheric. **Atmospheric water** is generally felt or seen in the form of clouds, precipitation, and humidity. Precipitation is caused by the evaporation of water from water bodies (lakes, rivers, oceans) and transpiration of water from plants, which turns liquid water into vapor and rises into the atmosphere. The vapor is then cooled by the atmosphere and condenses into clouds, the clouds are then moved by winds which cause them to condense and produce precipitation. Precipitation then collects on the earth's surface and becomes surface water. **Surface waters** collect within watershed systems and drain into wetlands or other types of water bodies, which act as a filtration system to remove contaminants and pollutants before the water is absorbed into the ground and becomes ground water. **Groundwater** is the water found underground in the cracks and spaces in soil, sand and rock and is stored in and moves slowly through geologic formations of soil, sand and rocks called aquifers. **Aquifers** provide drinking water to homes and businesses and are absolutely vital to the survival of the community. Ensuring that ground water resources are protected from contamination, overuse, or other types of impairment requires the protection of surface waters and surrounding open space areas. Effective storm water management to control pollution and mitigate flooding, reducing impervious surfaces, air quality control measures, and continuous water quality monitoring all can contribute positively.

## Ayer's Water Resources

### Watersheds

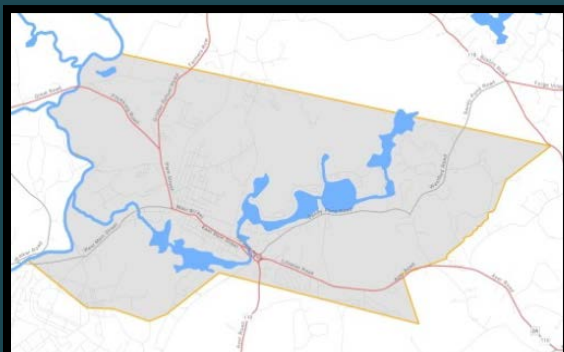


A **watershed** is a drainage basin where all precipitation collects and flows into a stream or set of streams. Ayer is located within the Nashua River (Purple) and the Merrimack River Watersheds (Green).

Ayer lies mostly within the Nashua River Watershed, which encompasses 538 square miles in 31 communities in north central Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire. The eastern end of the town lies with the larger Merrimack River Watershed which extends to the north and east, with the boundary between the two located approximately along Westford Road.

Nashua River Watershed Association (NRWA) is a non-profit organization founded in 1969 to promote clean-up of what had been one of the nation's most polluted rivers. The organization continues to work to support clean water and open spaces and a healthy ecosystem for both human and wildlife communities within the watershed region. NRWA completed a 2020 Vision Plan in 1995, outlining goals and priorities for natural resource restoration, conservation and education, guiding the organization's ongoing projects and initiatives.

### Surface Waters



**Surface water** is the water on the surface of the planet, i.e. lakes, streams, rivers, and oceans. Surface water is replenished by precipitation and ground water sources.

Ayer's rivers and ponds are shown in blue above.

The main stem of the Nashua river forms the western boundary of the town, spanning 100 feet wide in Ayer. The Nashua River provides drinking water, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and scenic views; there is an ongoing effort to have the Nashua River designated as a Wild and Scenic River through the National Park Service. A chain of ponds begins in easternmost Ayer at Spectacle Pond on the Littleton border and Long Pond on the Groton border and extends southwest to Plow Shop Pond before entering the Nonaicoicus Brook and eventually the Nashua River. Three of Ayer's ponds – Long, Sandy and Spectacle – are classified by the state as Great Ponds, and must be kept open to general public. Grove, Flannagan and Pine Meadow ponds are manmade and were created by damming.

Five smaller brooks in Ayer feed the Nashua River and local ponds, including Bennett's Brook, Cold Spring Brook, the Nonaicoicus Brook, and James Brook. Beginning in the late 1800's, tremendous amounts of industrial pollution were dumped daily into the Nashua River and some of Ayer's ponds. Subsequently, the Nashua River had nationally recognized pollution issues, and despite significant cleanup efforts it is still listed as an impaired waterway, as are Grove, Plow Shop, and Spectacle Ponds.<sup>1</sup> Grove and Plow Shop Ponds not only contain invasive aquatic plants but also suffer from heavy metal contamination, in particular arsenic and mercury. The public use of Plow Shop Pond is prohibited due to heavy metal toxicity in its sediment, and only boating is allowed on Grove Pond for the same reason. In 2013, the U.S. Army engaged in a clean-up effort on a portion of Plow Shop Pond, removing several thousand cubic feet of heavy-metal impacted sediment from Red Cove and the Railroad Roundhouse shoreline.<sup>2</sup> The Ayer Conservation Commission and DPW commissioned a biological survey and management plan in 2014, and is working with the Pond & Dam Management Committee to plan for long term management of key ponds.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> These waterways are designated as Class B or Category 5 on the 2014 Massachusetts Integrated List of Waters, meaning they require Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) or environmental remediation plans. Flannagan Pond is also listed as impaired, but under Category 4, due to invasive species growth rather than pollutants.

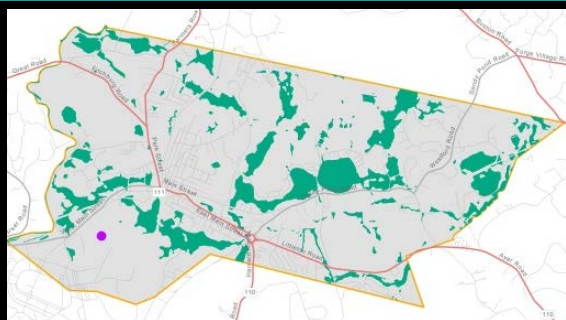
<sup>2</sup> QSRP 2015 page 49

<sup>3</sup> Geosyntec, "Biological Survey, Assessment and Management Recommendations for Ayer's Ponds." 2016.



## Ayer's Water Resources

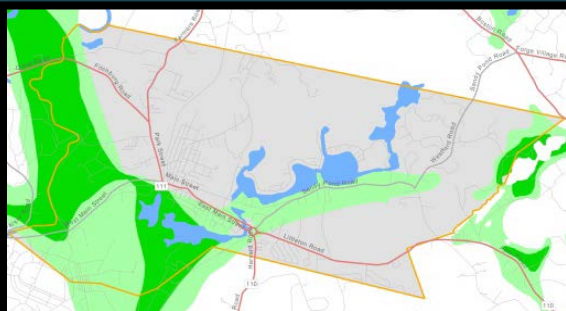
### Wetlands and Vernal Pools



*Ayer's wetlands (shown in green) and vernal pools (magenta dots) are found in low lying areas and are typically adjacent to surface waters.*

Wetlands play a critical role in water storage and flood control, and many species of wildlife depend on wetland habitat. Wetlands also protect water quality and function as groundwater recharge and discharge areas. A diverse array of wetlands in Ayer include bog habitats in the central-east, shallow marsh meadow/fens in the west and east, deep marsh areas scattered throughout, and mixed wooded swamps in the east and west of town. There are two certified vernal pools and over twenty potential vernal pools that have not been officially recognized in Ayer. Vernal pools, also known as ephemeral pools, autumnal pools, and temporary woodland ponds, typically fill with water in the autumn or winter due to rainfall and rising groundwater and remain ponded through the spring and into summer. They provide critical habitat area for certain types of wildlife that typically use the vernal pools for spawning, as well as for certain types of plants which thrive in the shallow waters.

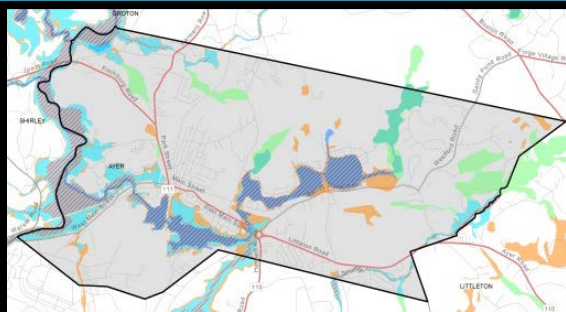
### Aquifers



*Underground aquifers extend outside Ayer's boundaries, and require regional coordination to manage. Aquifers vary in yield (how much water can be sustainably pumped and recharged back into the aquifer) and are a competitive resource.*

Ayer's drinking water is supplied by four wellheads located within two high-yield aquifers – one along the Nashua River, and a smaller aquifer that follows Ayer's eastern border within the Merrimack River Watershed. The aquifers are shown in dark green and light green on the map (darker green aquifers are higher yield than the aquifer areas colored in light green). The Town's wellheads are located at Spectacle Pond and Grove Pond; there is a filtration plant at Spectacle Pond and a treatment plant at Grove Pond to ensure Ayer's public water supply meets water quality standards. An additional aquifer, located beneath the Moore Airfield at Devens, may present an opportunity in the future to expand Ayer's drinking water resources. However, the return of the Airfield to Ayer is deeply uncertain, and if it were returned, there may be additional challenges as DEP regulations may preclude tapping into the aquifer instead of utilizing clean sources from existing wells due to contamination stemming from past and present uses of the airfield.

### Flood Hazard Areas



*Floodplains, areas of low-lying ground adjacent to a river, formed mainly of river sediments and subject to flooding are the primary types of flood hazard in Ayer.*

Flood Hazard areas in Ayer that have strong potential for flooding follow the Nashua River corridor and along the network of ponds and brooks. Due to the presence of Devens and the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge along the Nashua River, which has approximately 263 acres located in Ayer, little to no infrastructure has been built in the 100- and 500-year flood zones along the river in the western part of town. The town has adopted an Overlay Floodplain Zoning District, the boundaries of which are defined by the Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) dated 1982. However, several areas remain vulnerable to flooding during heavy rain events, such as the area near Park Street and West Main Street. Recent years have brought property damage due to flooding. Upgrades to Ayer's stormwater system and continued protection of flood prone areas will remain critical in upcoming years to mitigate the impacts of stronger storms on inland waterways.

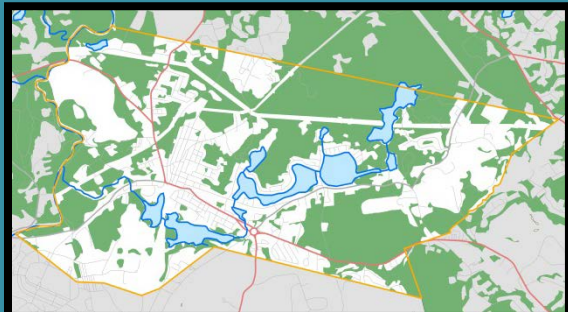


## Species & Habitats

Ayer's rivers, ponds, brooks, streams, vernal pools, swamps, marshes provide aquatic and semi-aquatic habitat for water-specific species. Corridors are important to the health of certain wildlife species, in particular larger mammals that require larger habitat areas. Ayer has three important wildlife corridors, including the riparian corridor along the Nashua River, undeveloped forests in eastern Ayer, and the high-tension power line corridor.

### Plant and Animal Species in Ayer

#### Vegetation

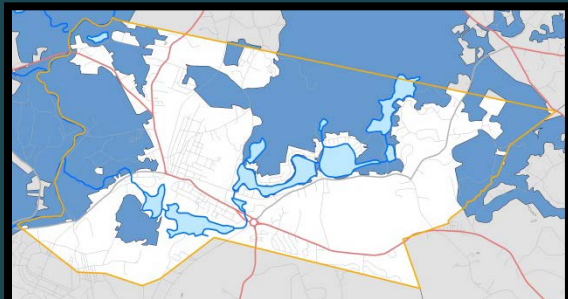


Nearly half of Ayer is identified as Prime Forest Land (Identified in green); of that area, 235 acres located near Bennett's Brook contain the most productive forest land soils.

According to National Land Cover Data (NLCD), close to one-third of Ayer's land area (approximately 2,000 acres) is forested, a substantial portion of which is identified as prime forest by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The largest contiguous block of forest is located in the north-central area on Snake Hill and down to Pine Meadow Conservation area. A small Floodplain Forest, located east of the Nashua River along Nonaicoicus Brook, is a unique environment for specific species of plants and animals.

Invasive species have become a problem in some of Ayer's open space areas. The invasive purple loosestrife, for example, is found in some of the town's wetlands, and some ponds are filling with invasive aquatic plants and algae. In the absence of natural predators, invasive species can degrade or destroy the habitat of local species.

#### Fauna



Areas identified as Priority Habitat areas for rare species by the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP) are shown in blue.

Ayer's forests are home to common eastern woodland animals, while diverse freshwater areas provide habitat for fish, amphibians and some birds. A thirty-acre beaver pond dam at the power line cut on Snake Hill is mentioned as an important habitat in the Natural Communities and Wildlife Habitat Inventory of Snake Hill in Ayer, Massachusetts (NRWA2002). NHESP (spell out) has documented four species of vertebrates that are endangered, threatened or of special concern in Ayer. Four state-endangered species include the least bittern, blandings turtle, upland sandpiper, wood turtle, and the Eastern box turtle is a species of special concern.

A substantial portion of Ayer has been identified as part of a regional network of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs), including the Snake Hill-Long Pond area which lies within the Petapawag ACEC, and the Nonaicoicus Brook-Grove and Plowshop ponds section of Ayer, which is located within the Squannassit ACEC. Twelve species of flora and fauna that are rare, endangered, or of special concern are identified within these two ACECs making them critical wildlife habitat areas. There is very little protected open space within Ayer in the Petapawag ACEC, which is a priority area for habitat conservation – particularly land on Long Pond.

The Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP) has also documented 2,597 acres of core wildlife habitat in Ayer (largely coterminous with ACECs), just over a quarter of which is permanently protected at this time.<sup>4</sup> The NHESP maintains an inventory of critical habitat areas of statewide significance, which has identified four Priority Habitat areas in Ayer. Most, if not all of these documented areas are related to wetlands and plants that need wet conditions to thrive. Further protection of forested and vegetated wetland areas like vernal pools, bogs and wet meadows could support the long term continuance of rare species in Ayer.

Among the areas that have been identified as significant habitats, the Snake Hill area is a priority for permanent land protection due to its diversity of natural communities, unique geology, size, and location relative to a contiguous core habitat (located largely in Groton). Recreation in this area must be balanced with the need for habitat isolation to protect endangered species. In addition to habitat concerns, it is not advisable to build structures or develop in this area due to soil instability and steep slopes.

## Agriculture

Although Ayer was once a farming community, much of Ayer's agricultural land was developed in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and the only agriculture that remains today is hay production in the highland areas of town. The 80-acre Eliades farm includes a barn sited in the midst of a rolling hayfield. The former Smith Farm includes an early 19<sup>th</sup> Century house and a 20<sup>th</sup> Century dairy barn complex. A portion of the farm was subdivided to create the Autumn Ridge active adult housing development, with the remaining portion, now the Smith Conservation Land, protected through deed restrictions. The Ayer State Game Farm on Groton-Shirley Road was an 87-acre state-owned farm.

The loss of agriculture in Ayer presents new challenges in the creation of a sustainable food system as Ayer is not able to locally source much of its food supply. A **sustainable food system** is a collaborative network that integrates several components in order to enhance a community's environmental, economic and social well-being. It is built on principles that further the ecological, social and economic values of a community and region. While Ayer may not be able to produce all of its own food, there are several actions that could be taken to increase access to affordable, healthy, and sustainably sourced foods. Several ideas that are currently being discussed to promote a sustainable food network include the creation of a community garden to provide all residents with access to planting areas with clean soils, as well finding new vendors and bringing the Farmer's Market back to Ayer.

## Scenic Landscapes

The Massachusetts Scenic Landscape Inventory has designated the area between the former state game farm and Snake Hill along the Groton border as a "distinctive landscape" with highest visual and aesthetic quality that is worthy of protection. In the 2000 Nashua River Habitat Report, the Massachusetts Audubon Society has also included the vicinity of Snake Hill-Long Pond as a habitat protection focus area.

The Ayer Reconnaissance Report prepared by the Freedom's Way Heritage Association and the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation in 2006 as part of the documentation for establishing the Freedom's Way National Heritage Area identified additional landscapes of importance in Ayer, including MacPherson Road located in an ecologically sensitive and flood-prone area, Frederick Carlton Circle which serves as a main gateway to the town, and the North Washington Street Agricultural Area, as well as some historic sections around downtown Ayer as important heritage landscapes.

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<sup>4</sup> MassGIS, as of August 2017



## Inventory of Open Space and Recreational Resources

### What is open space?

**Parks and gardens** – including landscaped parks, land surrounding public buildings, and pocket parks and islands.

**Natural and semi-natural green spaces** - including habitat, water resource or flood protection areas; woodlands, wetlands, open water, wastelands, steep slopes and rocky outcroppings, and urban wilds.

**Green corridors** – including river and canal banks, bike paths, and vegetated rights of way.

**Outdoor sports facilities** – including tennis courts, playing fields, golf courses, athletic tracks, public pools, and multipurpose fields.

**Provisions for children and teenagers** – including play structures, skateboard parks, outdoor basketball hoops, and other informal gathering areas.

**Agriculture** – Farms and community gardens

**Civic spaces** – Civic and market squares, and other hard-surfaced areas designed for pedestrians and public gatherings and events.

**Cultural facilities** – Cemeteries, churchyards, and historic sites.

**Urban forest and green infrastructure** – Street trees, landscaping around commercial buildings and parking lots, and rain gardens or other natural stormwater management systems.

Open spaces, recreational facilities, and high quality landscaped greenspaces are critical in providing a healthy living environment, protecting natural resources, and contributing to the aesthetic character of the community. Open space areas may include publicly-owned, and/or privately-owned properties, and comprises both natural areas, as well as passive and active recreational areas. In all, there are close to 1,200 acres of open space that has some form of permanent or temporary protected status, and nearly 1,000 acres that are privately-owned and unprotected.

- There are approximately 867 acres of protected open space in Ayer, including federal, state, and town-owned conservation land, as well as land owned by other government entities or privately-owned and protected as part of a cluster development program. These open space parcels have permanent protection from future development either through a Conservation Restriction (CR) or Article 97 designation under Massachusetts General Laws (MGL) which requires two-thirds vote of the state legislature in order to change from open space or conservation use.
- An additional 79 acres functionally serve as opens space, such as school fields and cemeteries. Owned by the Town of Ayer or nonprofit institutions, they are not protected under Chapter 97 or deed restriction and thus are not permanently protected, however they are unlikely to be developed for another use.
- There are 233 acres of privately-owned land in Ayer that is enrolled in Chapter 61, which enables land to be taxed at a lower rate according to its agricultural, forestry, or recreational open space use. Chapter 61 provides a financial incentive to preserve land as open space, but does not ensure permanent protection from development. The Town has the right of first refusal if Chapter 61 land is to be sold.
- Finally, there are 971 acres of undeveloped land in Ayer which are privately-owned and do not have any form of protection from future development. Portions of this land may be unbuildable due to environmental constraints such as wetlands, flood hazards, or steep slopes, but the remainder is unprotected and potentially developable.



Ayer Open Space Inventory		
Name	Owner/Manager/Use	Acres
<b>Permanently Protected Open Space</b>		<b>863.1 acres</b>
Oxbow National Wildlife Area	Federal	252.5
Commonwealth of Massachusetts Former State Game Farm	State	126.0
Shepley's Hill	Devens / MDFA	44.7
Pine Meadow Conservation Area (former Erskine Property)	Con Com	129.0
Tooker Property (Extension of Pine Meadow Conservation Area)	Con Com	5.5
Northeast Milling	Con Com	33.6
Mini-French	Con Com	25.8
Snake Hill Road Conservation Area	Con Com	7.5
Tithe	Con Com	0.5
Long Pond	Water Dept.	29.7
Phelps	Water Dept.	17.0
Nemco Way	Water Dept.	15.0
Spectacle Pond Well	Water Dept.	11.6
Fletcher Pond	Water Dept.	0.5
Autumn Ridge Development (former Smith Farm)	Conservation Restriction	55.0
Pond View Estates on Westford Road	Conservation Restriction	46.1
Nonacoicus Brook	Conservation Restriction	8.1
Orion Park Drive	Conservation Restriction	7.3
Balchs Pond	Conservation Restriction	0.5
Pirone Park	Recreation	20.9
Sandy Pond Beach	Recreation	1.3
Groton Conservation Trust*	Groton	16.6
Rocky Hill Wildlife Sanctuary (portion located in Ayer) *	Mass Audubon	7.4
Ayer Dog Park (Currently under Construction)	DPW/Recreation	1.0
<b>Institutional Open Space (Not Permanently Protected)</b>		<b>79.4 acres</b>
Ayer Shirley Regional High School Athletic Fields	Recreation	42.2
Woodlawn Cemetery*	Cemetery	10.5
St Mary's Cemetery/ Church Property*	Cemetery	21.6
Other institutional potential open space*	Nonprofit/institution	5.1
<b>Temporarily Protected Open Space (Chapter 61, 61A, and 61B)</b>		<b>232.5 acres</b>
Ayer Sportsmen's Club / Snake Hill Road	Chapter 61B	99.7
Eliades / Old Groton Road*	Chapter 61A	55.8
Matheson / Snake Hill Road*	Chapter 61A	43.0
Maxant-Delke / Willard Street*	Chapter 61A	1.2
Cowley / Sandy Pond Road*	Chapter 61A	1.0
Cowfield Realty Trust (Calvin Moore) / Snake Hill Road*	Chapter 61	25.5
Riley Jayne Farm / Pleasant Street*	Chapter 61	6.2
Tracey / Shaker Road*	Chapter 61	0.1
<b>Privately-Owned Unprotected Open Space</b>		<b>971.4 acres</b>
New England Power Company*	Utility	138.2
Undeveloped residential or commercial land (total)*	Private	833.2
<b>Pending Open Space Parcels</b>		<b>38.9 acres</b>
Bennet's Crossing***	Conservation Restriction	0.6
Stratton Hill Road***	Conservation Restriction	7.4
Sandy Pond Road**	Conservation Restriction	10
Pleasant Street School***	Conservation Restriction	0.7
Kohler Place***	Conservation Restriction	20.2
<b>Total Open Space (All Types)</b>		<b>2,185.3 acres</b>

Data Sources: MassGIS, \*Assessor Database 2017, \*\*Community Preservation Plan, \*\*\*Conservation Commission 11/30/2017

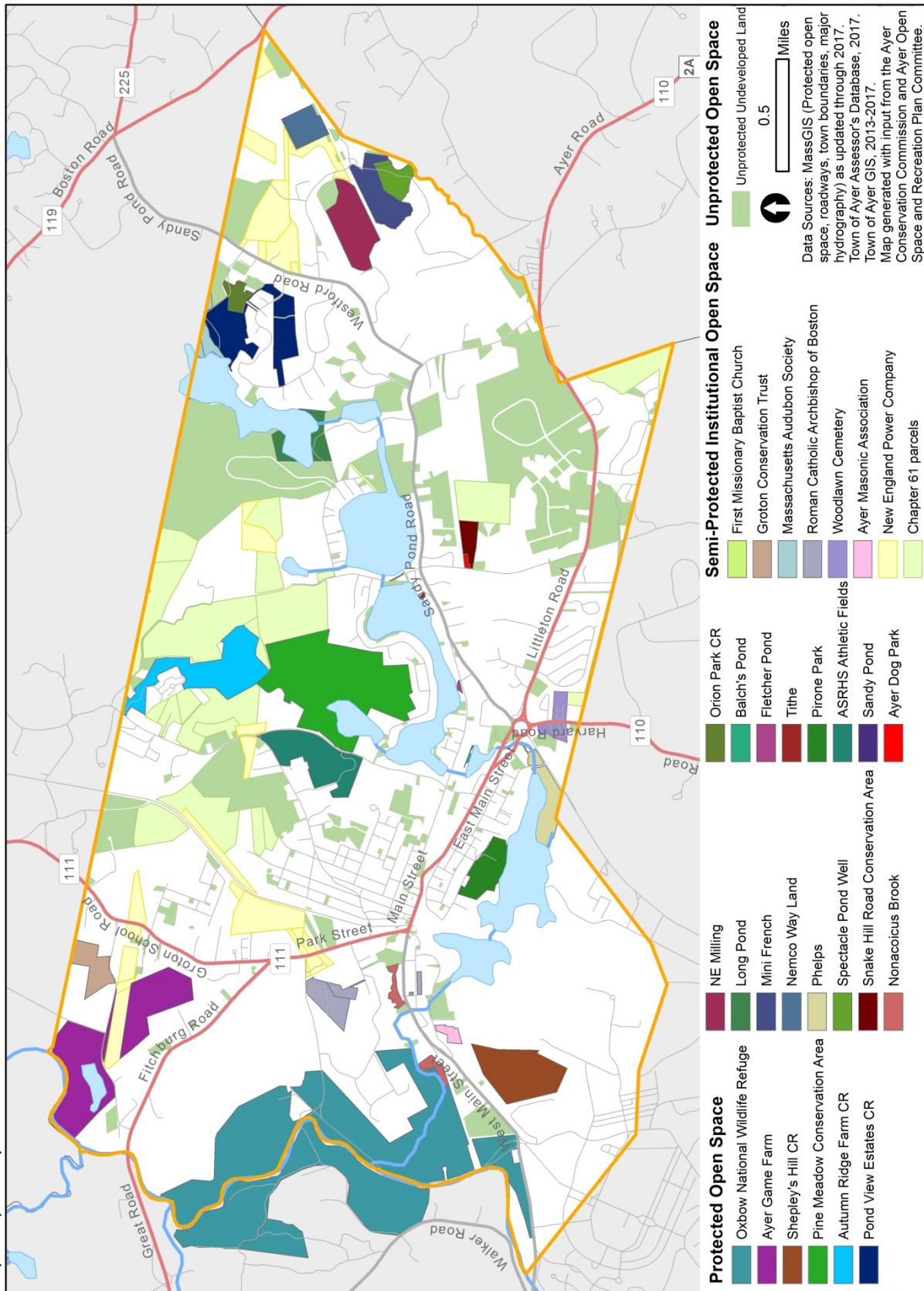
Notes: Lands identified as under the management of a Conservation Restriction may be privately owned, with CRs placed on them as a regulatory requirement during permitting for development. 61A lands < 5 acres are located in both Ayer and neighboring communities.





# Ayer, Massachusetts

## Open Space by Level of Protection





## Recreation



*The playground at Pirone Park is a well-loved community resource with an uncertain future. The playscape must be replaced in upcoming years, but a funding source to perform the project has not yet been identified.*

Ayer's significant natural resources, such as its ponds, rivers, and trails, offer numerous recreation opportunities. A network of trails through open space areas in Ayer provide opportunities for hiking, picnicking, and birdwatching, while the ponds and rivers provide kayaking and educational opportunities. Despite Ayer's abundance of surface waters, there is limited public access for boating and fishing. However, youth sports and other recreation offered through the Ayer Parks Department and the schools, which place a significant demand on local resources, as well as private recreation, such as fitness clubs, Gun & Sportsmen Club, the Hawk's Nest Disc Golf facility, enhance the recreational offerings.

Recreation Resources in Ayer	
<b>Trails</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Nashua River Rail Trail is a former railroad right of way owned by DCR that begins in downtown Ayer and travels 11 miles through the towns of Groton, Pepperell and Dunstable. The trail offers a 10-foot wide paved surface, open to pedestrians, bicyclists, inline skaters, wheelchairs, and cross-country skiers.</li> <li>The Ayer Greenway Committee has developed several trails through the Pine Meadow Conservation Area. There are also formal trails in Shepley's Hill and in the vicinity of Long Pond.</li> <li>Informal trail networks extend through the State Game Farm, and connect to larger trail networks in the Groton Town Forest and Audubon Rocky Hill Wildlife Sanctuary in Groton.</li> <li>The nearest hiking access in the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge is located in Shirley and Harvard.</li> <li>Devens Regional Trails Initiative (2001) envisions the development of pedestrian connections with neighboring communities, including a trail to Ayer via Shepley's Hill.</li> </ul>
<b>Water-based recreation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sandy Pond is the main public swimming area for Ayer, with the Town Beach located on its southwestern shore. It is also extensively used for boating and fishing, including ice fishing in the winter.</li> <li>On the Nashua River, the closest canoe launch to Ayer is located just across the border in Shirley, at the Ayer Ice House Dam. Another launch is located further south on Hospital Road in the Harvard portion of Devens.</li> <li>There is public boating access on Spectacle Pond, located on the border with Littleton. The boat launch is located in Littleton on Route 119.</li> </ul>
<b>Sports and Play</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sandy Pond Beach: swimming, volleyball, basketball, playground, picnic areas</li> <li>Pirone Park: Playground, basketball courts, soccer fields, baseball fields, picnic area</li> <li>Ayer-Shirley Regional Schools: Basketball, soccer, baseball, tennis, track, playground</li> <li>Devens: 36 hole disc golf course at Shepley Hill, Willard Field, sports fields, playground, cross-country skiing</li> <li>Recreational programming is offered through the Ayer School District, Park Department, youth sports programs, and the Ayer Youth Outdoors Program.</li> </ul>
<b>Private Recreation and Fitness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ayer Gun &amp; Sportsmen's Club: 100 acres with woods, ponds, and fields, as well as a function hall supporting a variety of sports activities and events.</li> <li>Sporting goods retailers: Hawks Nest Disk Golf and Fresh Ayer Sports</li> <li>Fitness clubs: Nashoba Valley Fitness Center, Ross Fitness, Signature Fitness</li> <li>Motor sports/road racing at former Moore Army Airfield at Devens</li> </ul>



## Ayer Conservation Fund

### Community Preservation Act

MGL 44B, CPA enables towns to raise local revenue which is partially matched by state funds, specifically to be used to meet local needs for open space, recreation, historic preservation, and affordable housing. Ayer initially adopted a 3% surcharge on local property tax bills which was reduced in 2002 to 1%, generating approximately \$200,000 per year in combined local and state revenue through CPA, raising a total of \$3.4M since 2002. At least 10% of CPA funds must be spent in each of the following program areas:

1. Open Space & Recreation
2. Historic & Cultural Resource Preservation
3. Affordable Housing

The remaining 70% of funds may be spent in any of the program areas. In Ayer, these funds have supported affordable housing construction and preservation, rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of the Pleasant Street School and Nutting Building, Town Hall, Sandy Pond School, recreation facilities at Sandy Pond, Pirone Park, and other sites, greenway and habitat projects, and a fund for open space acquisition. A Community Preservation Plan was prepared in 2009 to guide the Community Preservation Committee in making recommendations for the use of CPA funds, which must be approved by Town Meeting.

At Special Fall Town Meeting in 2017, residents voted to establish a conservation fund, pursuant to Massachusetts General Law, Chapter 40, Section 8, to be administered by the Town Treasurer and overseen by the Conservation Commission. Funds may be expended by the Conservation Commission for any purpose authorized under M.G.L. CH. 40, Section 8, for conservation purposes. The conservation fund may be funded through gifts, donations, and bequests, in addition to funds appropriated by the Town. The purpose of the conservation fund is to provide the Town with the resources to purchase open space and recreational lands; including the Town's ability to exercise its right of first refusal when open space lands currently held under M.G.L. Chapter 61 become available for purchase. Without the fund, any expenditure for the acquisition of open space and/or recreation lands would require Town Meeting approval, which can be a lengthy process and typically precludes the Town from being able to act quickly enough to purchase available land on the open real estate market and within prescribed time limits established under M.G.L. Chapter 61.

The Conservation Fund was capitalized with a one-time \$500,000 appropriation from the

Community Preservation Act (CPA) Open Space fund. The transfer of funds was approved at Special Fall Town Meeting in 2017, and is likely to be an ongoing funding source for the conservation fund. The Community Preservation Act (CPA) is one of Ayer's most critical long-term funding sources for the preservation of natural, historical, and cultural resources. To date, open space and recreation projects have represented 57 percent of the expenditures CPA funds and have been used to fund the Oak Ridge Drive expansion open space acquisition, greenway projects, and the invasive vegetation study, as well as upgrades to Sandy Pond beach, Pirone Park, and the Paige-Hilltop School park.

#### Ayer CPA Fund Balance (as of 5/17)

Local Revenue 2002-2017	\$2,145,483
State matching funds 2002-2016	\$1,298,233
Total Revenue 2002-2017	\$3,443,716
Funds Committed 2002-2017	\$2,297,599
Estimated Available Funds (as of 5/17)	\$1,146,117

Source: Community Preservation Coalition, Community Opportunities Group



## Historic Resources

Ayer's historic resources represent a wide range of periods important in Ayer's history, including Native American, Colonial and Federal rural settlement, 19<sup>th</sup> Century industrial village, and early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century influenced heavily by Fort Devens.

Initially part of Groton, Ayer was sparsely settled throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries until the arrival of railroads in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century brought an influx of population. Housing stock greatly expanded during this period, and new churches were built. Civic and institutional buildings including schools, town hall, and library, were constructed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, after Ayer was incorporated as a town in 1871 and a fire

destroyed much of the commercial center in 1872. Camp Devens (later renamed Fort Devens) was established in 1917 as a military training center, and by 1940 was the largest military installation in New England. Large numbers of military personnel and families lived in Ayer for nearly 75 years, heavily influencing all aspects of the town. Fort Devens was decommissioned in 1996 and is now administered by the Devens Enterprise Commission.

A total of 61 sites in Ayer have been listed on the National or State Historic Registers, including two National Register districts (located on Fort Devens and Downtown) and numerous individual buildings (many of which are located within these districts). A listing with the National Register does not automatically protect structures from inappropriate alteration or demolition. However, it creates the potential for property owners to qualify for historic preservation tax credits and prevents public agencies from using federal funds to demolish a historic structure, except to address an imminent health or safety hazard.

*Ayer is located at the center of the **Freedom's Way National Heritage Area**, which comprises 46 communities in Massachusetts and New Hampshire extending from Malden on the east to Winchendon on the west, linked by historic events that helped to shape American traditions and culture. The Freedom's Way National Heritage Association works to identify, promote, and advocate for the preservation of natural, cultural, and historic assets in communities throughout the region.*

### Ayer's Historic Resources

#### Listed Historic Resources



*Ayer's Town Hall won a Preservation Award from the Massachusetts Historic Commission in 2003.*

- **Main Street Historic Mercantile District.** Located on Main Street between Park Street and the Main Street B&M Railroad Bridge, includes 22 two- and three-story structures mostly dating to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.
- **Fort Devens Historic District.** Bound by El Caney Street, Antietam Street, Sherman Avenue, MacArthur Avenue and Buena Vista Street, includes 58 properties from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a large portion of which are located in the Ayer portion of Devens.
- **Ayer Town Hall.** Originally constructed with funding provided by Dr. James Cook Ayer, of Lowell, in 1876. In 2003, the Town Hall underwent a significant rehabilitation and restoration project, including accessibility accommodations and preservation of both interior and exterior historic features. In addition, the town used a Historic Landscape Preservation Grant to develop a small pocket park, which is the only public gathering space located in Downtown Ayer.
- **Pleasant Street School.** Built in 1894, the school was a three-story, wood frame Colonial Revival building. The building was subsequently converted to affordable senior housing.
- **The District School #11.** The district school was a one-room wooden schoolhouse originally built in 1792, and the current brick building dates from 1868. Located at the junction of Sandy Pond, Westford and Willow Roads, the District School #11 is owned and managed by the Sandy Pond School Association, and was added to the National Register in May, 2017.

*List continues on next page.*



## Ayer's Historic Resources

### Buildings and Landmarks not listed on National or State Registers



*Ayer's library was originally constructed in 1894, but has been altered and expanded project since its initial date of construction.*

According to the Assessor's database, there are approximately 1,115 residential and commercial structures constructed prior to 1967 and potentially eligible for inclusion on State and National registers.<sup>5</sup> Inventory forms have been submitted to the Massachusetts Historical Commission for over 250 buildings and structures throughout the town, including homes, commercial buildings, churches, bridges, and military facilities.

- **Neighborhoods** with collections of late 17<sup>th</sup> through early 20<sup>th</sup> Century buildings and farms identified on MACRIS inventory forms and in the Reconnaissance Report, including "Pingryville", Ayer/Groton Road, Pleasant/Washington, and East and West Main Streets.
- **Public buildings**, in particular the Ayer Library, c. 1894, on East Main Street, and the historic Central Fire Station at 14 Washington Street built in 1934. The fire station and the post office, also built in 1934, were both constructed as Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects.
- **Camp Stevens** on the Nashua River was used as a training ground for the Union Army during the Civil War. The site is marked with a stone monument.
- **Cemeteries.** St. Mary's (est. 1857) and Woodland Cemetery (est. 1859).
- **Railroad artifacts**, including a 1925 switch tower, turntable, bridges, and abandoned rail lines, are physical remnants of Ayer's history as an important railroad junction.
- **Scenic roads and stone walls** throughout many of Ayer's more rural roads, in particular one that runs from Stratton Hill to the Sportsman's Club.
- **Historic artifacts, documents, and records.** Many objects which document the history of Ayer are located at the Library, Town Hall, Fire Station, and DPW building, as well held in private collections.

### Archeological Sites



*Grady Research Occupies one former ice house site.*

- **Native American Sites.** According to the Reconnaissance Report, Ayer has ten documented Native American sites, mostly located at Devens along the Nashua River. There are likely to be more areas with Native American archeological resources, especially in the area along MacPherson Road and the Nashua River.<sup>6</sup>
- **Nonacoicus Plantation** is thought to be the site of battle in the King Philip's War.
- Remnants of the Sandy Pond Ice House located on Sandy Pond Road and the Horgan Ayer Ice House located on West Main Street on the Shirley town line.
- Remnants of the Shaker Village Foundations on Snake Hill Road

Ayer has an appointed Historical Commission pursuant to M.G.L. Ch.40C. Its mission is to identify, evaluate, and protect the historical resources of the town through education and outreach. The Commission has completed the first phase of an inventory of historic resources, published a book on the history of Ayer, and refurbished a historic monument commemorating Camp Stevens and an 1896 Women's Temperance Christian Union (WTCU) fountain located in front of Town Hall. Projects in progress include an oral history program and a self-guided walking tour of downtown. Ayer has not established any *Local Historic Districts* under M.G.L. Chapter 40C, which would provide the Historical Commission with authority to monitor and regulate demolition, exterior alterations and new construction within local historic districts.

<sup>5</sup> Assessor's Database, FY 2017

<sup>6</sup> Massachusetts Heritage Landscape Inventory Program, 2007 Reconnaissance Report, Page 10





## Historic Neighborhoods in Ayer

### *Downtown – Pleasant Street/Washington Street Area*



The tree-lined streets in this neighborhood are characterized by a diverse collection of well-kept homes constructed in a variety of architectural styles. There is a mix of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century homes in Queen Anne, Shingle, and Colonial Revival styles. While Washington Street boasts slightly grander homes set on larger lots, most of the homes in the neighborhood were originally constructed as single family residences. The homes on Pleasant Street and some of the small side streets tend to be slightly smaller in scale and include some multi-family housing. In recent years, the area has seen some infill development as well as the redevelopment of the Pleasant Street School into the Nashoba Valley Nursing home. The neighborhood has long been prized for its proximity to Downtown Ayer.

### *West Main Street*

The West Main Street neighborhood is a small enclave of residential properties on both the north and south sides of West Main Street. On the north side of the street, there is a line of modest Greek revival houses and multifamily buildings with Greek revival details. Many of the buildings in this area have been altered, but include a range of 19th century styles such as Italianate and Stick Style. On the south side of West Main Street is the St. Mary's Catholic Church campus, also an important local feature and the neighborhood known as the Acre; once used to house many of Ayer's immigrant communities.

### *Grove Pond*

The Grove Pond Neighborhood was formed in a grid street pattern from 1850-1860. Compactly and comfortably situated between East Main Street (to the north), Grove Pond (to the south), and the Ayer Junction Rail Yard (to the west), the Grove Pond Neighborhood accommodates a noteworthy and diverse collection of historic residential homes of various architectural types spanning the mid-late 19th century and early 20th century. The neighborhood provides lifestyle choices for a range of income levels, as well as single family and multi-family dwellings. The neighborhood retains its traditional, compact, walkable, human-scale, and still relatively affordable qualities and character; however new and (more auto-oriented lifestyle) residential infill development is increasingly eroding the traditional neighborhood pattern and associated social cohesion.

### *Pingryville*

Pingryville was settled shortly after the American Revolution by the Pingry family. The Pingry family purchased a gristmill in the area and converted it to a sawmill; eventually it was used to produce nails. No traces of the area's mill history remain today. However, a series of homes, the oldest dating back to 1780, have been inventoried in the area. The homes, located at 55-62 Willow Road, represent a mix of federal Greek revival styles. The area was served by a schoolhouse, which still exists on Willow Road, though it is no longer used for educational purposes.



### *Devenscrest*

Devenscrest is a planned residential community built before World War II and represents among the last wood structures from Devens. The development is on the south side of Littleton Road and abuts land to the west that was formally part of the military base. The streets are lined with small lots upon which there are mostly World War II-era homes. A few houses have been replaced by modest mid-20th century ranch houses and fewer have been replaced by late-20th century, 2-story, Colonial-style homes, but the area largely remains a mix of single, two-, and multi-family housing.

### *Sandy Pond Cottages*

Several small cottages remain around Sandy Pond. Constructed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ayer residents took the street car out to their summer cottages – along Central Avenue, hence the extra width of that road. Several of these cottages remain, having been turned



## Cultural Resources

### Public Resources

#### Ayer-Shirley Regional School District

The towns of Ayer and Shirley share a regional public school district since 2011. Four school buildings include the Page Hilltop Elementary School and the Ayer-Shirley Regional High School both located in Ayer, and the Lura A. White Elementary School and Ayer-Shirley Regional Middle School located in Shirley. Renovation of the high school was completed in 2016. In addition to K-12 academic curriculum, the public school offers an early childhood program at both elementary schools and extracurricular programs at the middle and high schools, including sports, drama, music, art, robotics, and mock trial. A non-profit program offers before- and after-school care to pre-school and elementary aged children in Ayer through the school district. A private education foundation serves the public school district with grants of up to \$300,000 for enrichment project and programs.

Ayer-Shirley Community Education provides a continuing education program through the regional school district. Courses, seminars, recreational activities and outings for community-members of all ages occur outside of school hours on evenings and weekends. Offerings include fitness, art, nature walks, ESL, technical skills, and other personal improvement workshops.

#### Ayer Library

The Ayer Library serves approximately 80,000 people annually. The building was constructed in 1894, with an addition built in 1997. In addition to circulating books and other media, the Library offers access to online reference resources, public computers, museum passes, and educational, cultural, and social programming for all ages. There is a meeting room which accommodates up to 70 people, as well as a heavily-used study room. Space is adequate for now, although there may be a need to expand capacity to increase library usage and future visitation. The Library is supported by the Friends of the Ayer Library organization.

The Nutting Historical Room at the Ayer library holds a variety of historical collections that describe the history of Ayer and Devens, and genealogical resources. The Library houses photographs, maps, documents, vital records, year books, town reports, and local newspaper issues dating back to 1869. There is also a large and unique military collection including books and photographs. The Nutting Room has capacity to accommodate expansion of the historic collections.

#### The Council on Aging, The Center



The Council on Aging is dedicated to improving the quality of life for seniors, providing a range of social activities, fitness, educational programs, and luncheons at the Community Senior Center, commonly known as The Center. The Council on Aging also offers services and outreach to provide assistance to seniors for accessing transportation, health care, economic assistance, and navigating other challenges. Programming and services incorporate Ayer residents of all ages who seek to participate as volunteers or to obtain support on behalf of

elderly family members. Approximately 1,200 people are served per year, including seniors, people with disabilities, and intergenerational residents.

The facilities occupied by the Center are located in a 2,000 square foot space that includes kitchen/dining/ living room, and a 2,000 square foot common space that is used for social activities, classes, and lunches. There is no private office space. With capacity for 70 participants, the Center has a waiting list for people who wish to participate in social and enrichment activities. A few times a year the Center coordinates larger events that take place at the School or Fire Station.

### **Ayer Cultural Council**

Town-appointed volunteers oversee funding from the state and town to provide cultural activities and events. Some of the types of programs funded through the Ayer Cultural Council (ACC) include field trips and after-school programs, performing and visual arts, interpretive sciences, history and nature walks. Individuals, community groups and organizations can apply for funding. Every three years the ACC gathers community input to develop funding priorities and criteria.

## **Institutional Resources**

### **Freedom's Way National Heritage Area**

The Freedom's Way National Heritage Area has its headquarters at Devens, serving 45 communities in north central Massachusetts and New Hampshire. The program identifies a wide range of natural, cultural, and historic resources throughout the region, providing listings of assets by community and type, a map, and a calendar of events. The organization has undertaken several initiatives in partnership with other cultural and natural resource-based organizations to highlight specific resources and histories and to build connections among member communities.

### **United Native American Cultural Center**

A volunteer organization dedicated to cultural enrichment, education, and support for Native American people. Located at Devens, they offer programs and cultural experiences featuring Native American crafts, artwork, and traditional ways.

### **Fort Devens Museum**

A civilian operated nonprofit museum dedicated to preserving the history of the men and women who served at Camp Devens, Fort Devens, and the current Military Training Center at Devens. The Fort Devens Museum aims to show the landscape of past and present forts, encampments, and training ground, as well as the social, cultural, and economic impact of Devens upon surrounding communities.

### **Natural Resources Education**

Although most programs are not directly located in Ayer, there are educational classes and events sponsored by organizations focused on natural resources that extend within Ayer's boundaries. The Nashua River Watershed Association and the Friends of the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge offer programs such as nature walks and ecology classes for children, adults, and families throughout the year. The Merrimack River Watershed Association may also provide educational resources that would be of interest to Ayer.





## Formative Issues

### Assets and Opportunities

- **Water quality protection.** Ayer's prolific water resources - including surface and groundwaters - provide drinking water for residential and commercial users, unique habitat, and recreation opportunities. Continued efforts are needed to clean up and prevent further contamination, and to combat threats from invasive species and development impacts.
- **Open space protection.** While Ayer is home to uniquely natural resource areas that support several endangered species and define the town's heritage, a relatively small proportion of the town's open space has been permanently protected from future development. In particular, areas that have been identified as critical habitat, that provide connections for wildlife or public access to existing conservation lands, water resources or cultural and recreational amenities, scenic landscapes, and areas that support groundwater protection should be prioritized for acquisition, donation, or in seeking conservation restrictions. The Town should consider these priorities in evaluating land that is coming out of Chapter 61 protection, or where there might be open space set aside as part of development proposals. The Town might also approach key landowners to coordinate purchase or donation of conservation restrictions.
- **Access to open space for recreation.** Ayer's natural resource areas are sometimes described as a "well-kept secret". Despite Ayer's proximity to the Nashua River and its network of ponds and forests, public access points such as boat launches or walking trails are lacking or are not well marked or known throughout the town.
- **Coordination.** Facilities such as the library, Council on Aging, Community Schools, and other cultural institutions offer programs, community gathering spaces, and cultural offerings that could be better utilized by the community. More coordination between these programs and other community services, schools, local businesses, and municipal departments, boards and committees, could help to increase awareness and to allow for cross-promotion and sharing of resources.

### Challenges and Weaknesses

- **Local capacity.** Recreation and cultural programming are heavily dependent on volunteers, as funding is very limited to support staff coordination or facilities maintenance. Cost-efficiency has helped to keep programs affordable for residents; however additional sources of funding need to be identified to enable them to remain sustainable or to expand to serve a broader public. More volunteers are needed to help support and maintain Ayer's open space, recreation, natural, cultural, and historical resources. Reviving the Greenway Committee and other resource-based committees may help provide additional oversight and capacity.
- **Facilities gaps.** The Town is lacking in indoor recreation or social gathering spaces, as well as pocket parks or neighborhood playgrounds near the downtown or other places residents can walk to. In addition, the Center has severely inadequate facilities for their senior recreation programs. These limitations can make registration an issue impacting all age groups in Ayer. Further, there is also a lack of public access to Ayer's ponds and rivers for boating, fishing, or other recreation.
- **Finance limitations.** While the Town has set aside Community Preservation Act Funds for open space acquisition and established an open space trust fund that can more readily respond to opportunities to purchase land, challenges such as high land costs remain. By working in advance with owners of targeted properties and by pre-emptively appropriating CPA funds for the purpose of purchasing open space properties, the Town is in a better position to purchase land for conservation or recreation purposes.
- **Inadequate development controls.** Ayer's subdivision control and zoning bylaws do very little to limit development in ecologically and environmentally sensitive areas in town. Conservation zoning and performance standards requiring the utilization of Low Impact Development techniques, particularly with respect to on-site storm water management would be beneficial. Better tracking of Conservation Restrictions is also needed.



## Goals and Strategies

Goal R-1	Protect Ayer's natural resources, including surface and groundwater, habitats, and unique landscapes.
Strategy R-1.1	Advocate for clean-up of MGL Ch. 21e sites by seeking remediation funds, incentivizing private investment for projects involving clean-up of contaminated sites, and raising awareness of pollution in Ayer's soils and waterways.
Strategy R-1.2	Prioritize open space acquisition that will serve to protect sensitive natural resources, such as parcels adjacent to existing protected open spaces and drinking water supply areas, as well as lands reverting from the MGL Ch. 61 program.
Strategy R-1.3	Coordinate volunteer efforts to enhance stewardship of open spaces. Hikers, boaters, bird watchers, fishers, and other outdoor recreation enthusiasts can help identify and monitor concerns, as well as participate in habitat restoration projects and the removal of invasive plants.
Strategy R-1.4	Encourage qualifying property owners to utilize the MGL Ch. 61 program and work with landowners in sensitive natural resource areas to consider Conservation Restrictions on their properties.
Strategy R-1.5	Identify a sustainable funding source, such as Community Preservation Act funds, and earmark open space funds in the Town's Annual Budget to authorize the purchase of open space, should a Chapter 61 or other critical open space parcel become available.
Strategy R-1.6	Coordinate with both Watershed Associations, MassDevelopment, US Fish & Wildlife, Mass Fisheries & Wildlife, Mass Audubon, and the Town of Groton to support conservation initiatives within or adjacent to Ayer.
Strategy R-1.7	Explore formation of a land trust or partnership with a regional land trust to help facilitate timely acquisition of open space.
Strategy R-1.8	Employ best practices to ensure that zoning and subdivision regulations and DPW specifications adequately protect Ayer's natural resources from contamination or erosion and encourage the protection of priority open space.

Goal R-2	Expand access to recreational opportunities for all residents.
Strategy R-2.1	Prioritize the expansion of open space and/or public access easements around ponds and streams in Ayer to facilitate public access for recreational use such as kayaking launches and hiking trails.
Strategy R-2.1	Expand the network of trails where appropriate, particularly where they can connect recreational, cultural, and neighborhood amenities, as well as regional open space resources. Ensure that trails will remain in existence by seeking public access easements where trails currently traverse privately owned land.
Strategy R-2.2	Identify opportunities to create pocket parks within neighborhoods that are not currently walkable to, or served by, a public park. Pocket parks should be designed with input from prospective users and should consider the needs of users of all ages and abilities.
Strategy R-2.3	Address and budget for the need for indoor recreation space by finding or creating a suitable indoor space to allow for youth sports and adult recreation to be adequately served.
Strategy R-2.4	Identify a location that could accommodate the space needs of the Senior Center to expand capacity for services and programs.
Strategy R-2.5	Provide signage, maps, and online information about the location of Ayer's parks, trails, and recreational assets, including water access for boating and fishing.



Goal R-3	Highlight and promote Ayer's historical, natural, cultural assets that define the Town's character.
Strategy R-3.1	Utilize CPA funds to create a Historic Preservation Plan to identify historic resources, local needs and priorities, and to create a long-term strategy to ensure that Ayer's heritage endures and is documented, preserved, and promoted.
Strategy R-3.2	Develop a strategy for completing Ayer's inventory of historic objects, landscapes, and structures for submission to the Massachusetts Historic Commission.
Strategy R-3.3	Identify funding and regulatory incentives to encourage the rehabilitation and reuse of historic buildings.
Strategy R-3.4	Install interpretive elements, such as signs, markers, and monuments to highlight important stories and features in Ayer's landscape.
Strategy R-3.5	Continue to archive, preserve, and digitize artifacts and records that document Ayer's history through the Nutting Room at the Library or other publicly accessible facilities
Strategy R-3.6	Investigate the adoption of a Local Historic District or Neighborhood Conservation District to ensure sensitive historic resources are preserved.

Goal R-4	Expand organizational capacity and awareness of Ayer's recreational and cultural programming.
Strategy R-4.1	Increase coordination between Schools, Community Education Program, Library, Senior Center, Recreation Department, Cultural Council, and other entities that offer cultural, educational, and recreational programs, to facilitate cross-marketing and broaden awareness of what is happening in town.
Strategy R-4.2	Increase the amount of part time staff time available to coordinate outreach efforts for volunteer-based activities.
Strategy R-4.3	Establish a volunteer coordination web page to alert people to volunteer opportunities, as well as open seats on Town Boards and Commissions.
Strategy R-4.4	Connect with local businesses and nonprofit groups to cross-market and invite sponsorship of recreation and cultural events.
Strategy R-4.5	Utilize display space in public buildings for art, historic artifacts, or other cultural exhibits.
Strategy R-4.6	Explore opportunities to develop a Community Center to address insufficient indoor recreation facilities for youth sports and recreation as well as senior recreation offered through the Council on Aging.

Goal R-5	Make Ayer more sustainable by promoting the concept of a local food system and increase access to local food.
Strategy R-5.1	Identify leadership to be responsible for coordinating the return of the Ayer Farmer's Market. A committee of interested residents, Town staff, representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, local artisans, crafters, farmers, and other parties could be established to coordinate vendors and promotion.
Strategy R-5.2	Identify a location to establish a community garden with plots available to residents, particularly those who do not have access to private open space, to provide planting areas with clean soils, varied sun exposure, and a water source.



# Housing

## Population and Housing

### Demographic Profile

7,800 Residents

3,365 Households

Average household size 2.29

25% Families with children

23% Over age 65

29% Living alone

19% Minority

11% Have disability

### Housing Profile

64% owner-occupied

55% multifamily or attached

89,500 median value

8.4% Subsidized Housing

### Housing Needs:

- Approximately 148 affordable units by 2020
- Units affordable to incomes below 50% of the median
- Rehabilitation/ Redevelopment of older housing structures
- Modest market-rate housing for seniors, individuals, and families

## Introduction

Ayer values its unique combination of diversity, historic character, and quality of life. However, these assets may be impacted by changes that are coming on the horizon. Situated on the edge of the metropolitan economic region, Ayer's housing market presents challenges in terms of supporting continued diversity in its housing supply that accommodates various types of households. In addition, Ayer housing is increasingly becoming unaffordable. At the same time, much of Ayer's less expensive housing stock is aged and in varied states of disrepair. Preserving housing and socioeconomic diversity in Ayer through new development and the improvement of existing neighborhoods is consistent with protecting the town's distinctive character and values.

Although settled earlier, much of Ayer was originally built around the railroad in the 1840s and Ayer's industrial base attracted new residents who worked in the railroad switching yards, foundries, and tanneries. The establishment of Fort Devens in 1917 brought a wave of housing development to serve military personnel and their families. These operations served to introduce a mobile and relatively diverse population to Ayer. As a result, the town offers a wide range of homes, especially around the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods.

Today, Ayer is in the midst of another transformation. The westward push of people from Metro-Boston seeking reasonably priced housing and a small-town quality of life is stimulating a new surge of housing development and a shift in population characteristics. Ayer's access to the MBTA commuter rail and proximity to Routes 2, I-495 and I-290 make Ayer desirable for workers commuting to employment anywhere throughout Central and Eastern Massachusetts. More recent housing development in Ayer has primarily been focused in outlying areas outside of downtown, typically producing single-family homes on larger lots. However, as developable land becomes increasingly more scarce; modest single-family housing that supports aging in place and townhouse development is becoming more favored by local developers.

## Housing Goals:

1. Continue developing local capacity to plan, develop and manage housing units that meet local needs.
2. Increase variety of housing opportunities for Ayer residents.
3. Encourage housing development that is sustainable, affordable, and serves all members of the population.
4. Work to preserve the affordability and diversity of Ayer's existing housing stock.





## Demographic Profile

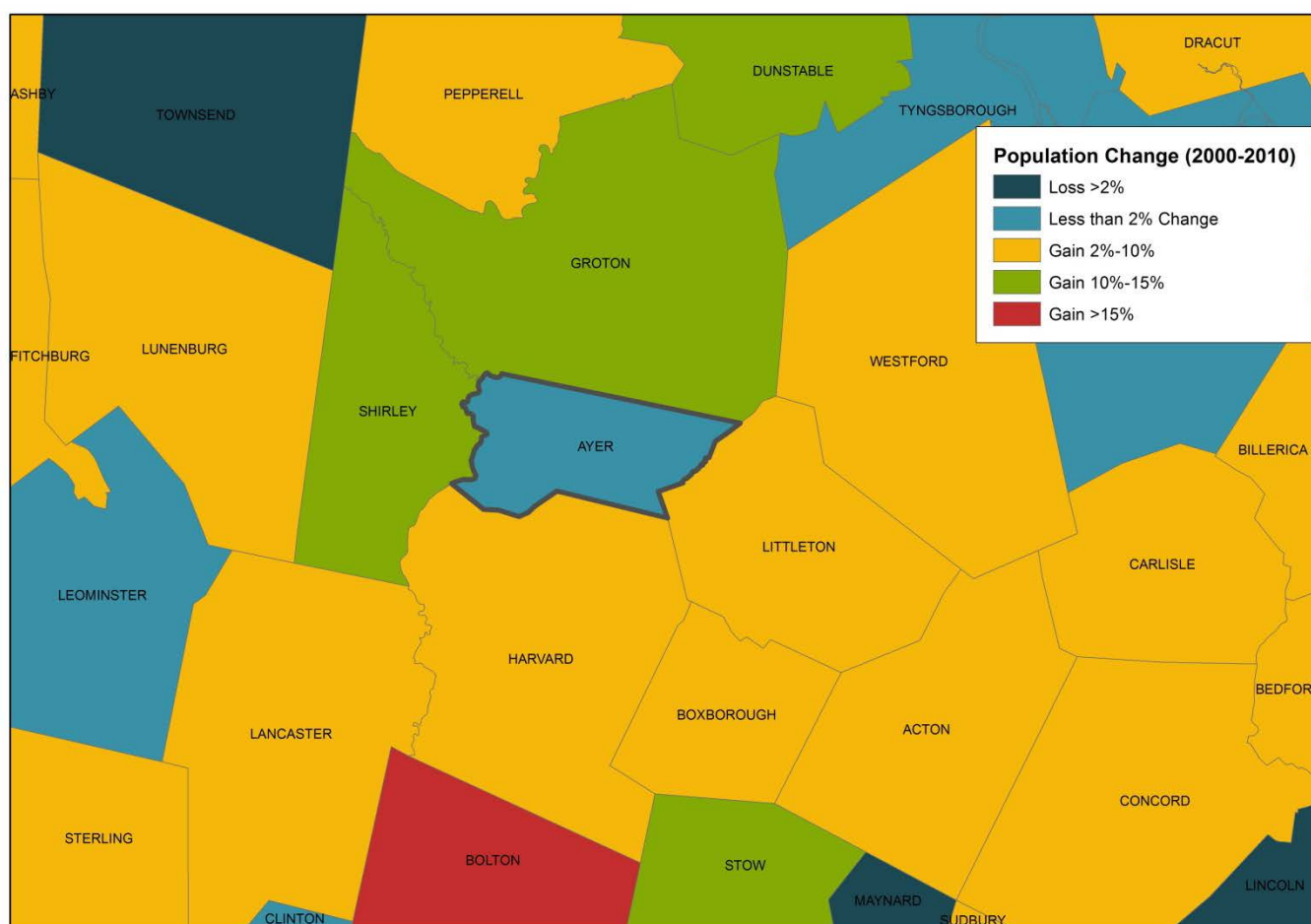
Ayer experienced slow population growth over recent decades, following the 1996 closure of Fort Devens, but growth has accelerated in the past five years due to new development and increased housing demand. Ayer has a population of approximately 7,800 residents.<sup>1</sup> Ayer is comparable in population size to neighboring communities of Harvard, Littleton, and Shirley.

**Table H-1: Regional Growth Comparison**

	1990	2000	2010	2015*	Act. Change 2000-2010	Est. Change 2010-2015
<b>Ayer</b>	<b>6,871</b>	<b>7,287</b>	<b>7,427</b>	<b>7,810</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>5%</b>
Groton	7,511	9,547	10,646	11,120	12%	4%
Littleton	7,051	8,184	8,924	9,359	9%	5%
Harvard	12,329	5,981	6,520	6,567	9%	1%
Shirley	6,118	6,373	7,211	7,436	13%	3%
Clinton	13,222	13,435	13,606	13,727	1%	1%
Hudson	17,233	18,113	19,063	19,602	5%	3%
Maynard	10,325	10,433	10,106	10,459	-3%	3%
Pepperell	10,098	11,142	11,497	11,953	3%	4%

Source: US Census 1990-2010, \*ACS Estimates 2011-2015

**Map H-1 – Actual Population Change in North Central Massachusetts Region (2000-2010)**



Data Source: MassGIS, US Census 2000, 2010

Map Source: Community Opportunities Group, Inc. 2017

<sup>1</sup> ACS DP03 (2011-2015)

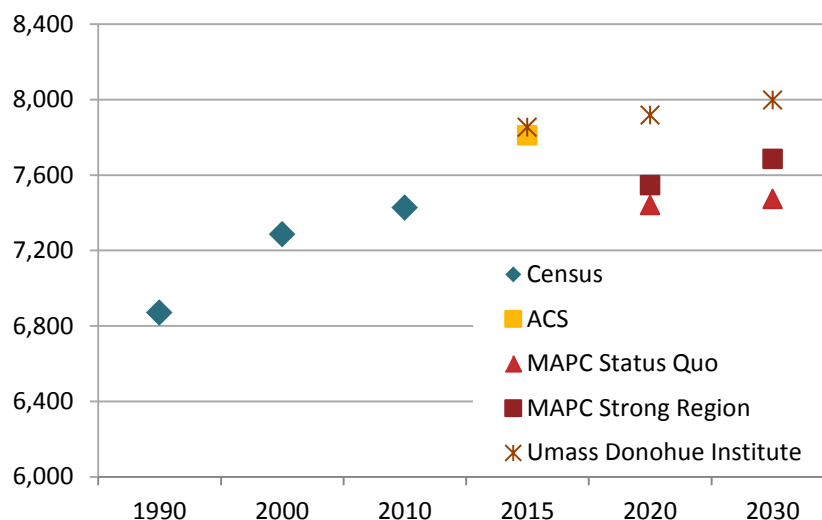


## Population Projections

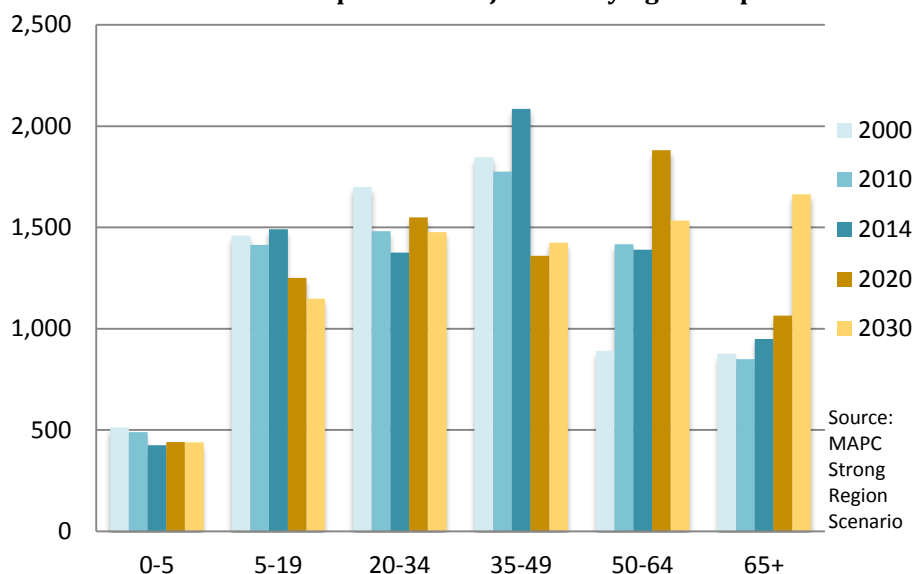
Population projections for the region have been developed by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) and UMass/ Donohue Institute. MAPC population forecasts include two scenarios. The “Status Quo” scenario projects that recent development trends will continue into the future, while the “Strong Region” scenario anticipates that local, regional, and state-wide policy changes and investments will result in a higher level of growth. MAPC projections show level population or continued slow growth over the coming decades. The Donohue

Institute by contrast projected acceleration in population growth between 2010 and 2015, which more closely reflects what has occurred over this period, with a more moderate rate of growth over the coming decades. While total population growth is expected to increase slowly, it will not increase uniformly across all age groups.

**Chart H-1: Population Projections**



**Chart H-2: Population Projections by Age Group**



Between 2000 and 2015, most growth in Ayer has occurred among adults ages 35-49, while the number of young adults (ages 20-34) has declined. The proportion of children and seniors has been relatively stable. MAPC projects that the highest rates of growth over the coming decades will be among older adults and seniors, however recent trends suggest that the town is attracting more families and working age residents; opposite the trend for much of the region.

Moving forward, it will be critical for the town to monitor demographic shifts to ensure that new housing development supports the needs of its residents. Housing that is suitable both for aging residents as well as younger residents seeking starter and transition homes, and housing options that are affordable for Ayer’s workforce and low and moderate-income households will be necessary for maintaining Ayer’s diversity and character.



## Social Characteristics

ACS estimates that 660 households in Ayer include people with disabilities, who comprise 11 percent of the town's population. Disabilities include hearing or vision impairment, cognitive or ambulatory difficulty, and difficulty with self-care or independent living. Thirty-three percent (33%) of individuals over the age of 65 have one or more disabilities, compared with 8 percent (8%) of younger residents.

Half of Ayer residents age 25 and over have graduated high school and/or have some college education but have not earned a degree. Forty-four percent (44%) have received an associate's degree or higher level of education. Completion of bachelor's and graduate degrees is slightly lower in Ayer than the state overall.

Ayer prides itself on the racial and ethnic diversity of its residents. Ayer's minority population constitutes almost one-fifth of its total population, an increase since the Census in 2000. The largest minority groups include African-Americans and people with Hispanic ethnicity, each comprising 6 percent (6%) of Ayer's population. About one in ten Ayer residents were born outside of the United States, and 13 percent (13%) of residents speak a language other than English at home.

Ayer's population is relatively diverse compared with neighboring communities of Groton, Littleton, and Harvard. Ayer's social characteristics are similar to Shirley. Groton, Littleton and Harvard have a higher proportion of college graduates than Ayer, while Shirley's is lower. The age profile of Ayer residents is also comparable to neighboring communities, although the median age is slightly lower.

**Table H-2: Social Characteristics**

Disability Status				
	Total Population	With a Disability	% w/ Disability	MA % w/ Disability
Population	7,797	859	11%	12%
Under 18 years	1,574	130	8%	-
18 to 64 years	5296	424	8%	-
65 years & over	927	305	33%	14%
Educational Attainment, Population Age 25 and Over				
			Ayer	MA
Less than high school graduate			5%	10%
High school graduate or equivalent			30%	25%
Some college, no degree			20%	16%
Associate's degree			8%	8%
Bachelor's degree			21%	23%
Graduate or professional degree			15%	18%
Race, Ethnicity and National Origin				
			2000	2010
White alone, not Hispanic			84%	81%
Black or African American			6%	6%
Asian			3%	4%
Other race			3%	4%
Hispanic, any race			5%	6%
			2000	2015
Born in MA			65%	66%
Born in elsewhere in US			23%	24%
Foreign Born			10%	10%
Foreign Language Spoken at Home			13%	13%

Source: Census 2000, 2010, ACS 2011-2015

**Table H-3: Social Characteristics Regional Comparison**

	Ayer	Groton	Littleton	Harvard	Shirley	Hudson	Maynard	Pepperell
2015 Population	<b>7,810</b>	11,120	9,359	6,567	7,435	19,602	10,459	11,953
Racial or ethnic minority	<b>19%</b>	6%	8%	13%	20%	11%	10%	5%
Born outside of US	<b>10%</b>	8%	9%	10%	10%	16%	12%	4%
Bachelor's degree or higher	<b>36%</b>	67%	56%	63%	24%	37%	50%	37%
Median age	<b>40.0</b>	44.4	44.5	45.5	43.1	43.3	42.2	42.8
Under age 20	<b>26%</b>	31%	28%	25%	20%	25%	24%	28%
Over age 65	<b>11%</b>	10%	14%	10%	9%	14%	13%	10%

Source: US Census 2000, ACS 2011-2015



## Household Characteristics

Households in Ayer are slightly smaller than those in neighboring community, in large part because Ayer has fewer families with children that are under 18 years of age. About 43 percent (43%) of individuals living alone in Ayer are age 65 and over. The proportion of households with children decreased from 32 percent (32%) in 2000 to an estimated 25 percent (25%) in 2015, while the proportion of households with seniors over the age of 65 increased from 19 percent (19%) in 2000 to 23 percent (23%) in 2015.

**Table H-4: Household Composition in Ayer and the Region**

	Households	Average Household Size	Families	Nonfamily Households	Individuals Living Alone	With Children under 18	With Seniors over 65
<b>Ayer</b>	<b>3,365</b>	<b>2.29</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>23%</b>
Groton	3,992	2.76	81%	19%	15%	40%	26%
Littleton	3,446	2.67	73%	27%	23%	34%	26%
Harvard	1,868	2.91	82%	18%	11%	44%	29%
Shirley	2,331	2.41	66%	34%	27%	35%	27%
Clinton	5,644	2.43	59%	41%	34%	27%	24%
Hudson	7,638	2.56	69%	31%	25%	30%	32%
Maynard	4,284	2.44	60%	40%	33%	28%	27%
Pepperell	4,247	2.81	74%	26%	20%	39%	25%

Source: ACS 2011-2015

The 2010 Census counted 259 Ayer residents living in group quarters, all of whom were described as living in “non-institutional facilities.” Of those residing in group quarters, 44 were children under the age of 18, 212 were between the ages of 18 and 65, and 3 were over the age of 65.

There is substantial income disparity within Ayer and among towns in the surrounding region. **The median income for senior households is less than half the median for all households, while families have considerably higher incomes than nonfamilies** (many of whom are young adults or individuals living alone rather than two-income earning households). Ayer’s median income climbed by more than 30 percent between 2009 and 2015, outpacing all neighboring communities in the region. To some extent, this shift in demographics is likely related to new housing constructed in Ayer during this time period attracting more affluent households; consequently, maintaining housing diversity will be essential to maintaining social and economic diversity in Ayer.

**Table H-5: Median Household Incomes**

	Median Household Income	Median Family Income	Median Nonfamily Income	Income Senior Households	Change in Household Income since 2009
<b>Ayer</b>	<b>74,659</b>	<b>92,399</b>	<b>52,018</b>	<b>36,768</b>	<b>34%</b>
Groton	116,642	135,444	43,173	39,375	-1%
Littleton	111,680	130,450	55,875	44,141	13%
Harvard	126,061	140,365	67,014	91,250	-9%
Shirley	67,896	79,708	32,134	44,453	-6%
Clinton	62,805	76,189	39,713	31,156	7%
Hudson	75,985	96,213	39,799	43,156	3%
Maynard	88,333	114,350	40,158	41,745	14%
Pepperell	80,524	91,305	41,117	33,281	-9%

Source: ACS 2011-2015, ACS 2005-2009

\*ACS data is missing for several towns for 2011-2015. Median income for seniors is reported for 2010-2014.





Household income generally increases with the age of householders, peaking between ages 45-64 years. While working-age households in Ayer tend to have higher incomes than the state overall, Ayer has a higher proportion of households headed by younger middle-aged adults who are earlier in their careers and have generally not yet

reached their peak income earning potential. Senior households, which represent one in five Ayer households, have median household incomes that are less than half that of working age adults. This is not an unusual situation as senior households are more likely to be comprised of retired and fixed-income individuals. This may however, decrease the ability of seniors to afford and maintain their housing; particularly if significant repairs or maintenance is needed.

**Table H-6: Household Income by Age of Householder**

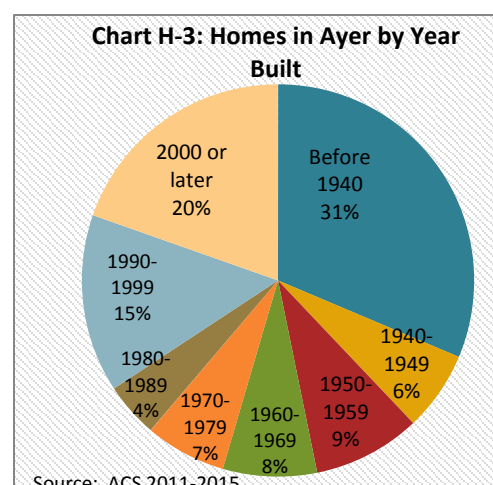
	Ayer		Massachusetts	
	Households	Median Income	Households	Median Income
15 to 24 years	2.0%	\$44,792	2.9%	\$30,397
25 to 44 years	41.4%	\$78,314	32.4%	\$76,699
45 to 64 years	34.7%	\$87,788	41.4%	\$84,099
65 years and over	21.8%	\$36,768	23.4%	\$39,550

Source: ACS S1903 (2011-2015)

## Housing

### Housing Stock

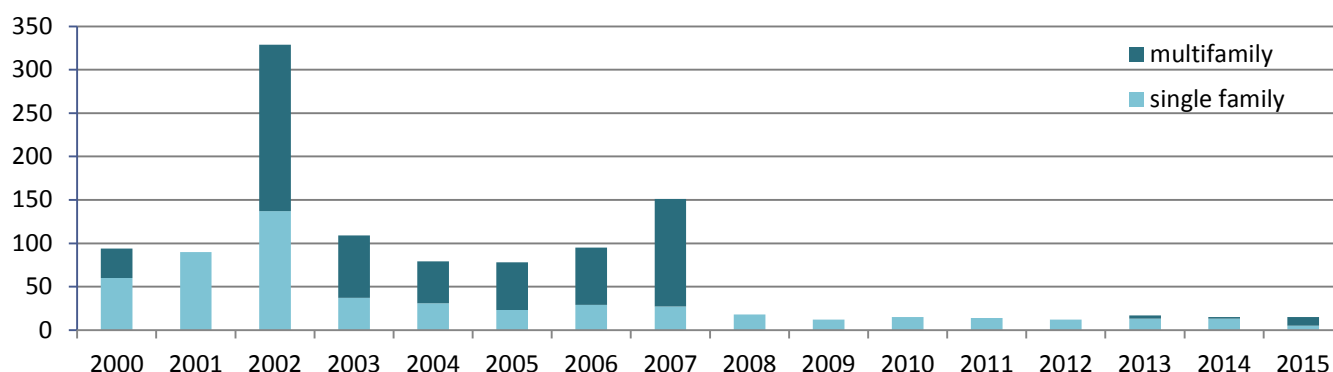
By most recent estimates there are approximately 3,600 dwelling units in Ayer.<sup>2</sup> The Decennial Census in 2010 counted 3,440 year round housing units, reflecting an estimated increase of approximately 160 units. About half of Ayer's housing stock dates from the mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, while 30 percent was built earlier than 1940, and 20 percent built after 2000. The decade of construction, particularly for houses built in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century or later, provides an indication of the condition of the structures and the quality of materials that may have been used in construction. For example, lead paint which was banned for residential use in 1978, is not a concern for houses constructed after 1980, but may be present in structures built prior to this time. About 60 percent of Ayer's housing was built prior to 1980 and may contain lead paint and be unsafe for households with small children to inhabit. The decades in which the greatest amount of housing construction occurred were the 1990s and early 2000s, following the end of the sewer moratorium in 2003. Between 2000 and 2007, the town permitted the construction of 434 single-family homes and 591 multifamily units. After 2007, the rate of construction slowed considerably during the recession with an average of 16 single-family units per year and just a few small-scale multifamily developments having been constructed since 2008.<sup>3</sup> **It is anticipated modest attached and detached single-family development and small scale multi-family infill development will continue to increase in upcoming years as efficient land use patterns, municipal fiscal sustainability, and controlling housing costs will be paramount concerns in housing development.**



<sup>2</sup> ACS DP04 (2011-2015)

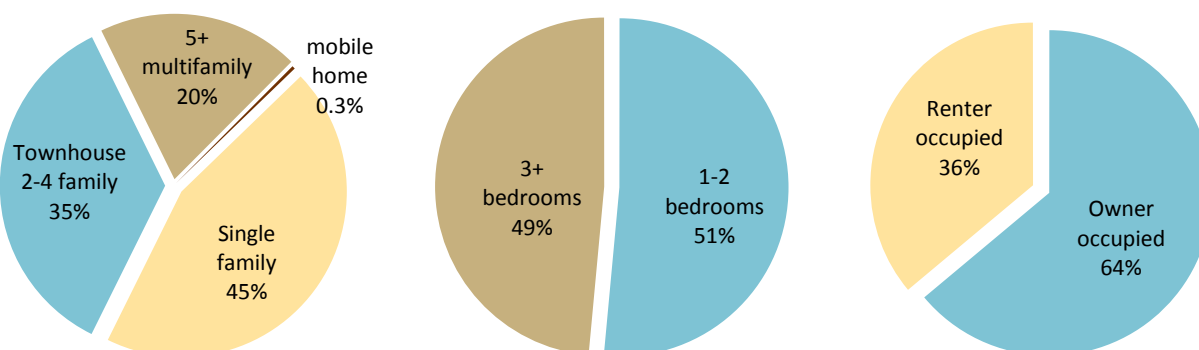
<sup>3</sup> US Census Building Permit Data



**Chart H-4: Building Permits Issued for Residential Construction, 2000-2011**

Source: US Census, Building Permit Data (2000-2015)

Ayer offers fairly diverse housing options. Single-family homes, while dominant in many communities, comprise less than half of the town's housing stock. About 35 percent (35%) of Ayer's housing units are in attached townhouse and small-scale multifamily structures, while 20 percent (20%) are in multifamily structures with 5 or more units. Nearly two-thirds of the housing is owner-occupied. Roughly half of Ayer's housing inventory includes units with 3 or more bedrooms (37 percent are 3-bedroom, 12 percent have 4+ bedrooms), while the other half are studio, one and two-bedroom units (16 percent and 35 percent respectively).<sup>4</sup>

**Chart H-5: Characteristics of Ayer Housing Inventory**

Source: ACS 2011-2015

According to the Town's Assessor, there are 2,524 residential lots in Ayer. About 63 percent (63%) of residential lots are single-family parcels, although only 45% of actual housing units are single-family houses. An additional 22 percent of lots are condominiums, and 16 percent are 2-3 family, multifamily, or other housing types containing more than one housing unit on a single lot. A variety of housing types were built prior to 1920, including 2-3 family, small-scale multi-family, and mixed use housing. However, following the completion of Devenscrest in the 1930s, the preferred type of housing development throughout the Post-War period shifted to single-family housing, which tends to consume more land while providing fewer housing units. Most of the town's condominium and large-scale housing development has been constructed within the past four decades and includes newer developments such as Pingry Hill, the Willows, and Olde Towne Village, as well as older developments such as Zodiac Village, constructed in 1970.

<sup>4</sup> ACS DP04 (2011-2015)

**Table H-7: Residential Properties**

Use/Year Built	Parcels	Average Lot Acres	Average Value	Average Living Area (s.f.)	Value per S.F.
<b>Single-family</b>	<b>1,586</b>	<b>0.62</b>	<b>\$297,646</b>	<b>1,679</b>	<b>184</b>
before 1900	129	0.36	\$222,344	1,605	142
1900-1919	121	0.34	\$247,302	1,762	149
1920-1939	81	0.41	\$262,094	1,734	161
1940-1949	280	0.43	\$224,558	1,362	175
1950-1959	182	0.66	\$242,116	1,347	189
1960-1979	81	0.60	\$259,812	1,391	194
1980-1999	410	0.77	\$340,297	1,792	198
after 2000	302	0.86	\$412,991	2,081	203
<b>Condominiums</b>	<b>544</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>\$198,380</b>	<b>1,268</b>	<b>152</b>
before 1960	24		\$125,900	1,129	112
1960-1979	152		\$121,029	971	124
1980-1999	139		\$172,468	1,100	157
after 2000	229		\$273,047	1,582	172
Other Residential	Parcels	Median Year Built	Average Value	Value per Square Foot	
Two Family	211	1911	\$213,809		106
Three Family	49	1901	\$234,355		91
Multi-family Apartments (4-8 Units)	62	1906	\$320,098		89
Multifamily Apartments (8+Units)	9	N/A	\$2,848,633		91
Multiple Houses on Single Lot	27	1911	\$405,048		106
Mobile Home	8	1976	\$273,200		158
Mixed-Use (Residential/Commercial)	23	1924	\$332,261		129
Specialized/Subsidized Housing <sup>5</sup>	5	1989	\$3,102,760		101

Source: Vision Governmental Solutions, Town of Ayer Assessor's Database, FY2017

As indicated by property value and unit size, the quality of housing in Ayer is related to its age. The average value of newer property is significantly higher than older properties of all housing types. For single-family homes, the average value per square foot directly correlates with the age of the property. Small-scale multifamily and mixed use properties, which are primarily in older structures, are generally low in value, averaging less than \$100,000 per unit.

**Rehabilitation of older multifamily structures would help to meet housing needs, encourage reinvestment, and preserve historic character.**

The average size living space for single-family homes built prior to 1939 was about 1,700 square feet. During the Post-War period and through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, new houses were smaller, with average sizes around 1,400 square feet. Sizes have increased substantially in recent decades, with an average of 2,000 square feet for houses built after 2000. Yard size has also increased; houses built prior to 1950 typically had lot sizes of less than 0.50 acres, while those built since 1980 average more than 0.8 acres.

Condominiums are also increasing in size. While units in structures built in the 1960s and 70s averaged in size well below 1,000 square feet, more recently constructed condos average around 1,500 square feet. Over 85 percent of condominium units have two bedrooms, while 14 percent have 3 or more bedrooms.

<sup>5</sup> Includes public housing, nursing homes, assisted living, mobile homes, and nonprofit-owned housing



Over the past 15 years, home-ownership rates have increased in Ayer by 8 percent and the number of housing units occupied by homeowners has increased by nearly 500 units. During the same period of time, the number of rental units decreased. The loss of rental units generally occurs when buildings are converted to condominiums, properties are redeveloped, or rental housing is demolished. The loss of rental housing in

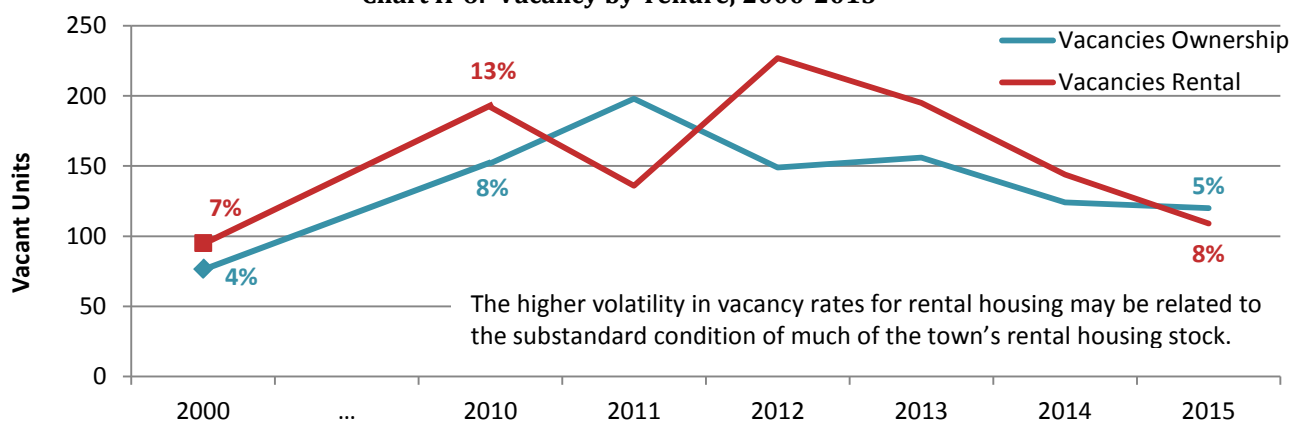
Ayer is concerning because it means that the housing stock is becoming less diverse. Rental homes fulfill the needs of many families. For some, especially low- and moderate- income households in high- cost markets or those who have recently lost a home to foreclosure, rental homes are the most financially realistic option. Other people rent to reduce maintenance costs and responsibilities or because they expect to move frequently. For others, affordable rental housing is an important stepping stone that allows them to accumulate savings and prepare for homeownership. A mix of rental and ownership housing is critical to meeting the needs of a variety of households.

**Table H-8: Housing Tenure, 2000 and 2010**

	2000	2000 %	2010	2010 %	2015	2015 %
<b>Total Housing Units</b>	<b>3,154</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>3,462</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>3,594</b>	<b>-</b>
Occupied Units	2,982	95%	3,118	90%	3,365	94%
Owner-Occupied	1,661	56%	1,861	60%	2,151	64%
Renter-Occupied	1,321	44%	1,257	40%	1,214	36%
Vacant Units	172	5%	344	10%	229	6%

Source: US Census 2000 and 2010

**Chart H-6: Vacancy by Tenure, 2000-2015**



Source: Census 2000, 2010; ACS 2011-2015

## Affordable Housing Inventory

**Table H-9: Affordable Housing Inventory Needs**

	2010	2020
Total Housing Units	3,440	3,760*
Required Affordable Units	344	367
Existing Affordable Units	290	219
<b>Shortage (Units)</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>148</b>

\*Note: ACS estimated 3,600 housing units in Ayer in 2015, 3,760 assumes even growth in housing units from 2010-2020.

affordable. The last decennial census in 2010 recorded a total of 3,440 housing units in Ayer, meaning the Town of Ayer must have 344 affordable housing units in order to be in compliance with the law. In 2020, when the next decennial census is released, Ayer's target will increase to an estimated 367 units.

Under a state law which went into effect in 1969, all communities are encouraged to provide housing that is required to remain affordable to lower income households. The units are restricted so that only an income eligible household may purchase or rent an affordable housing unit. The law requires that ten percent of the total number of year-round housing units, as reported in the most recent decennial census, must be





The Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) maintains a list of the deed-restricted affordable units in each city and town, known as the Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI). **Table H-10** reports Ayer's SHI as of July, 2017. There are 180 listed rental units and 26 affordable homeownership units, for a total of 206 units. Recently, an additional 11 units were added to the SHI at The Willows, which is not yet reflected on the current inventory. In addition, DHCD lists 84 units that were assisted through a housing rehabilitation program; however, these units do not meet the current criteria for inclusion on the SHI and therefore do not count towards the Town's inventory, although they will continue to be listed on the Town's SHI by DHCD until the final deed restriction expires in 2023. **The majority of Ayer's affordable housing units are reserved for people over the age of 55.** The Ayer Housing Authority properties, Nashoba Park Assisted Living, and Autumn Ridge Farms have a combined total of 158 affordable units that have additional age restrictions. The remaining 24 rental units and 24 ownership units are available to households regardless of age provided that they are income qualified.

**Table H-10: Subsidized Housing Inventory Properties in Ayer**

Housing Development	Address	Type	Units	Affordability Expires
Silas Nutting Grove Apts	Pond St.	Rental	61	Perp
Pleasant Street School	62 Pleasant St.	Rental	22	2059
Housing Authority	Isaac's Ln./Pond St.	Rental	11	Perp
Nashoba Park / Assisted Living	Winthrop Ave.	Rental	73	2035
DDS Group Homes	Confidential	Rental	0	n/a
The Spaulding Building	25 Main St.	Rental	7	2036
Fletcher Building	49 Main St.	Rental	4	2026
Woodland Village	68 East Main St.	Ownership	3	2031
Habitat for Humanity	Forest St.	Ownership	1	Perp
Estates at Harvard Hills	Bates St. & Auman St.	Ownership	12	Perp.
Chandler Place	West Street	Ownership	2	2054
Autumn Ridge Farms	Groton Rd.	Ownership	2	Perp
The Willows	Willow Road	Ownership	6	Perp
Habitat for Humanity	76 Central Ave	Ownership	2	Perp
Housing Rehab Program*	Various sites		84	2017-2023*
<b>Total Units Listed on SHI</b>			<b>290</b>	<b>8.4%</b>

\*\*The subsidy program through which these 84 units were originally created, does not meet current SHI requirements and these units can no longer be counted toward the Town's SHI. An updated inventory reflecting this policy change has not yet been issued by DHCD, but an updated inventory would reflect 84 units lost, and 11 additional affordable units at the Willows (for a total of 17 units) and 2 Habitat for Humanity units, for an overall inventory of 219 units, representing 6.4% of housing units (as of 2010).

Source: DHCD SHI (Last updated August, 2017)

The SHI includes affordable units in mixed income developments that were permitted using Chapter 40B Comprehensive Permits, including the Estates at Harvard Hills and the Willows. Within these developments, 25 percent of the total number of units are deed restricted for affordability to low- and moderate-income households, while the remaining 75 percent of units were sold at market rate. The Woodland Village condominium development was built in 2000 under a TIF agreement, wherein 3 out of 11 total units were to be deed restricted affordable units. Due to these developments being home ownership projects, only the deed restricted affordable units counted towards the Town's SHI. Rental projects developed under a Chapter 40B comprehensive permit, allow all units within the project to be counted towards the Town's SHI, even though only a portion of the units will actually carry deed restriction. In order to meet the Town's affordable housing obligation, pursuing the development of rental projects will advance the Town's goals more quickly than home ownership projects.



### Ayer Housing Authority

The Ayer Housing Authority owns two properties: Silas Nutting Grove Apartments and Isaac's Lane. Silas Nutting Grove includes 54 apartments and 7 units of congregate housing. Isaac's Lane offers 6 duplexes with the ability to house up to 12 families. The Pleasant Street School was developed by the Ayer Elderly Housing Partnership in 2007 as a historic preservation/adaptive reuse project using Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds along with other funding sources, and is overseen by the Ayer Housing Authority. The housing authority has a waiting list of 348 applicants for units in their properties. There are vacancies in the congregate housing units at Silas Nutting Grove, where individuals must meet certain eligibility criteria including interviews and doctor certifications.

### Community Preservation Act (CPA) and Tax Increment Finance (TIF)

In 2011, The Town contributed CPA funds to assist in the rehabilitation of the historic Fletcher building on Main Street which resulted in the creation of 4 affordable housing units. The funds also supported the development of one homeownership units by Habitat for Humanity in 2004. In 2016, two additional units were constructed by Habitat for Humanity on Central Ave with CPA funds. These units are not yet reflected in the SHI. The historic Spaulding Building, also located in downtown Ayer on Main Street, was rehabilitated in 2004 using a TIF agreement.

### Rental Housing Vouchers

Some households in Ayer receive housing subsidies through various state and federal voucher programs, which are not counted on the Subsidized Housing Inventory. RCAP Solutions, Inc., a non-profit based in Worcester, administers [REDACTED] Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers which may be utilized in any rental property where a landlord agrees to participate. An estimated [REDACTED] households in Ayer are using housing choice vouchers to help assist with monthly rental costs. There may also be people residing in Ayer using housing vouchers that are administered by other agencies such as outside housing authorities. HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for homeless Veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Approximately 10 Ayer veterans are utilizing vouchers and may be living in Ayer or surrounding communities.

## Regional Housing Comparison

**Table H-11: Housing Characteristics in Ayer and Region**

	Total housing units	Owner-occupied Units	Detached Single-family Homes	5 Unit + Multifamily	Median Value	% Affordable (SHI)
<b>Ayer</b>	<b>3,594</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>\$289,500</b>	<b>8.4%<sup>6</sup></b>
Groton	4,243	86%	83%	5%	\$430,000	5.4%
Littleton	3,691	83%	84%	7%	\$392,900	12.5%
Harvard	1,939	92%	93%	3%	\$522,900	5.5%
Shirley	2,462	68%	59%	8%	\$308,700	2.5%
Clinton	6,211	54%	40%	21%	\$241,200	8.6%
Hudson	7,947	76%	58%	16%	\$296,600	11.5%
Maynard	4,544	69%	62%	12%	\$334,000	8.3%
Pepperell	4,451	77%	72%	8%	\$310,800	3.0%

Source: ACS DP04 (2011-2015), DHCD SHI (Last Updated December, 2014)

<sup>6</sup> The figures shown in the comparison table do not account for corrections to the SHI where some units may have been omitted or some listed are not actually eligible for inclusion. As noted above, the actual number of SHI-eligible housing units in Ayer puts the town at 6.4%.

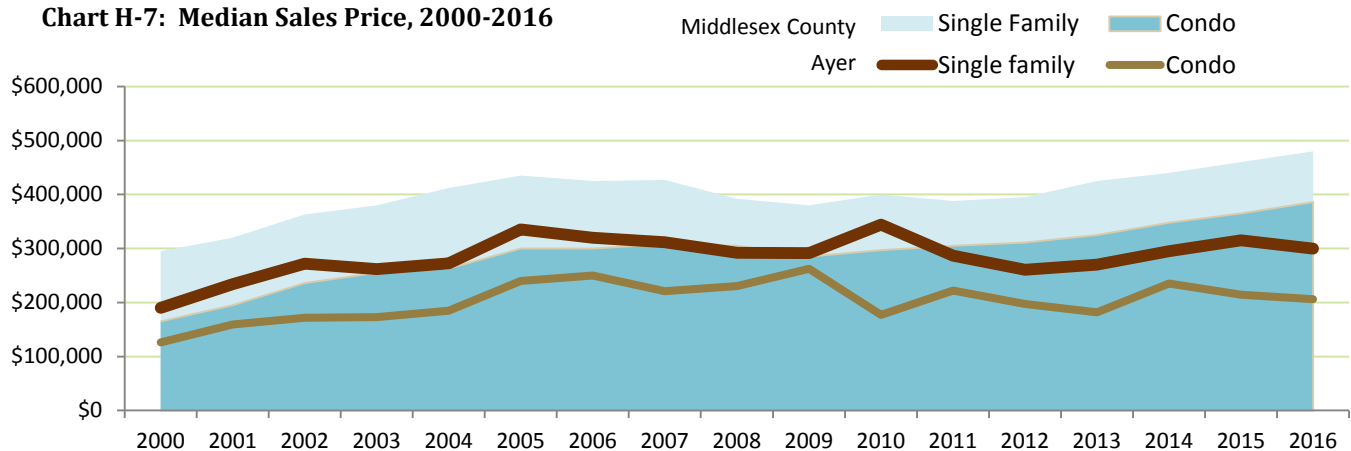


Ayer's housing inventory is relatively diverse in comparison to surrounding towns, with Ayer having a higher proportion of rental units and more varied types of housing structures. With median home values below \$300,000, Ayer is also more affordable than its neighbors. Ayer has a larger share of affordable units than Groton, Harvard, or Shirley. The composition of Ayer's housing supply is more comparable to Clinton, Hudson, or Maynard. Among comparison communities, only Littleton and Hudson have met the 10 percent SHI target.

## Housing Market Trends

As demonstrated in the table above, housing costs in Ayer are on the low end compared with the rest of Middlesex County. Ayer's housing prices have fluctuated over the past fifteen years reflecting overall housing market conditions in the region, although the prices in Ayer have remained relatively flat in the past five years. The median sales price for single-family homes peaked at \$343,000 in 2010, and has since hovered around \$300,000. For condominiums, the median price peaked as high as \$263,000 in 2009, but currently remains closer to \$200,000. For homebuyers in Middlesex County, Ayer's home prices present an opportunity to obtain more substantial housing for affordable prices, as Ayer's single-family home values are less than the median cost for condominiums throughout the rest of the county. Ayer's condominium prices are almost 50 percent of the median condo price throughout the region.

**Chart H-7: Median Sales Price, 2000-2016**



Source: The Warren Group/Banker & Tradesman

The median price for a single-family home in 2016 was \$480,000 for Middlesex County, which is approximately the price that a homebuyer earning at least the median household income can afford. First-time homebuyers, who are likely to earn less and have a smaller amount to contribute toward a down payment may have a more difficult time finding single-family homes they can afford; however, the median sales price for condominiums in Ayer was just over \$200,000, which may be more within reach for homebuyers earning \$50,000 per year.

As shown in **Table H-12**, a survey of rental units advertised in July, 2017, shows between 10-15 current available listings. Some larger developments such as Zodiac Village Apartments, Littleton Lyne Apartments, and Old Towne Village advertise rental costs for their units, although they currently have no vacancies. Few of the apartment listings in the region have 3 or more bedrooms (none in Ayer), while a handful indicate they are for single rooms in shared units.



**Table H-12: Survey of Advertised Rents in Ayer and Surrounding Towns**

		1 BR	2 BR	3 BR
Ayer (39 listings)	Range Average	\$740-\$1,625 \$1,169	\$800-\$2,495 \$1,389	-
Hudson and Maynard (19 listings)		\$800-\$1,749 \$1,375	\$1,500-\$2,300 \$1,804	\$1,000-\$1,850 \$1,600
Littleton, Groton, Shirley, and Pepperell (15 listings)		\$700-\$1,995 \$1,325	\$1,250-\$2,468 \$2,034	\$1,378-\$2,395 \$1,945

Source: COG, data collected on July 26, 2017 from rental listing sites, including Craigslist, Trulia, Apartments.com, Zumper, Hotpads, and rental property management websites

While sales and advertised rent prices reflect the cost for people seeking housing today, ACS estimates median housing values and median rent based on a sample of all units in the community. The ACS estimate for median gross monthly rent in Ayer from 2011-2015 was \$924, which includes affordable units along with market rate units.

Since 2000, the median income of Ayer homeowners has risen faster than the median home values, perhaps reflecting that middle income homebuyers in the region are being attracted by Ayer's relatively affordable housing prices. The median income for renter households, on the other hand, is significantly lower than homeowners and has increased little since 2000, despite rents increasing by 43 percent.

**Table H-13: Change in Median Housing Costs and Median Income**

	2000	2015	Change 2000-2015	% Change
Median Value Owner-Occupied Units	\$171,000	\$289,500	\$118,500	69%
Median Household Income (Owners)	\$62,181	\$105,765	\$43,584	70%
Median Gross Rent	\$646	\$924	\$278	43%
Median Household Income (Renters)	\$35,417	\$40,385	\$4,968	14%

Source: Census 2000, ACS 2011-2015

Ayer is part of the Boston/Cambridge/Quincy Fair Market Rent (FMR) region. According to HUD, the 2017 median income for all households in the region is \$103,400. This defines the Area Median Income (AMI), which is the basis for determining affordability thresholds for subsidized housing.<sup>7</sup> The median income for homeowners in Ayer is comparable to the AMI, while the median income for Ayer renters is significantly lower and within the range that would be considered **very low income** by HUD standards.

**Table H-14: HUD Income Limits, FY17 (Area Median Income = \$103,400)**

Household Size	1 Person	2 Person	3 Person	4 Person	5 Person	6 Person	7 Person
Extremely Low Income (30% AMI)	21,700	24,800	27,900	31,000	33,500	36,000	41,320
Very Low Income (50% AMI)	36,200	42,400	46,550	51,700	55,850	60,000	68,250
Low Income (70% AMI)	54,750	62,550	70,350	78,150	84,450	90,700	103,200

Source: HUD, FY2017

<sup>7</sup> Chapter 40B requires affordable units to be affordable to households earning 80% of Area Median Income. In practice, many subsidizing agencies establish income thresholds for affordable units based on the HUD Income Limits for Low Income households, shown in Table H-13.





Approximately 63 percent of Ayer's housing is valued in the \$200,000 - \$400,000 range, which is affordable to households earning \$50,000-\$100,000. Approximately one third of households fall into this income range. Another one third of households earn below \$50,000, and 15 percent of households earn less than \$25,000. Homeownership is largely out of reach for those households. In addition, market rate rental housing may also be beyond the means of those households putting them at greater risk for housing insecurity and/or homelessness.

**Table H-15: Housing Demand and Supply by Income Threshold**

Income	Households (ACS)	% of all Households	Affordable Purchase Price*	Housing Units	% of Housing
<\$25,000	535	15%	\$100,000	67	3%
\$25,000-\$49,999	548	16%	\$100,000 - \$200,000	483	23%
\$50,000-\$74,999	629	19%	\$200,000 - \$300,000	744	35%
\$75,000-\$99,999	431	13%	\$300,000 - \$400,000	591	28%
\$100,000-\$149,999	996	30%	\$400,000 - \$500,000	218	10%
>\$150,000	609	18%	>\$500,000	27	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,586</b>		<b>Total</b>	<b>2,130</b>	

Sources: ACS 2011-2015, COG; Assessor 2017

\* Assumes mortgage + property tax + insurance payment = 30% of monthly income with 10-15% down payment, 4% interest rate, and estimated tax and insurance.

When property taxes, insurance, and utilities are included, housing costs have also increased for those who own homes and are not seeking new housing. Ayer's average single-family tax bill increased by nearly 50 percent between 2006 and 2016, while statewide the average tax bill increased by 43 percent over the same period. In 2016, the latest year for which ranking is available, Ayer placed 210 out of 337 communities statewide in terms of having the highest tax bill. Tax bills are a function of both the local residential tax rate and the value of the property. In surrounding communities such as Littleton and Harvard, the average single-family tax bills are significantly higher than those in Ayer

due to a higher valuation of residential property, although the tax rates are relatively similar. Moreover, while Ayer's single-family tax bills are lower than those in most neighboring communities, with the exception of Shirley, Ayer also derives significantly more of its tax levy from commercial taxes. Commercial taxes traditionally offset the burden of residents paying for municipal services and facilities. However, the ability of the commercial base to offset tax burdens is becoming more limited as the Town has been facing reductions in state aid and other revenues. In order for the Town to remain fiscally healthy, residents will increasingly need to shoulder the costs of Town operations.

**Table H-16: Average Single-family Tax Bills, 2005-2015**

Fiscal Year	Ayer	Rank	State
2006	\$2,741	232	\$3,801
2011	\$3,293	234	\$4,573
2016	\$4,089	210	\$5,419
Change 2006-2016	49%		43%

There is a growing unmet need for modest housing alternatives, such as townhouses, small single-family houses, and inexpensive studio apartments or private room rentals within housing units.



## Housing Cost Burden

Households are considered to be **cost-burdened** if they spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent or homeownership costs. Those who have housing costs that exceed 50 percent of their income are considered to be **severely cost burdened**. According to this metric, as of 2015, a third of Ayer households are cost-burdened. The largest group of cost-burdened households is renters with incomes below \$50,000, who constitute nearly 60 percent of all renter households. More than half of homeowners with incomes below \$75,000 are also paying more than they can afford for housing.

**Table H-17: Housing Cost Burden by Income**

<u>Renters</u> Household Income	Total Households	Pay 30-50% of Income	Pay more than 50% of Income	Total Cost-burdened Renters	Total % Cost Burdened
Less than \$50,000	713	284	249	533	75%
\$50,000-\$74,999	225	64	0	64	28%
\$75,000 or more	276	0	0	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,214</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>249</b>	<b>597</b>	<b>49%</b>
<u>Homeowners</u> Household Income	Total Households	Pay 30-50% of Income	Pay more than 50% of Income	Total Cost-burdened Homeowners	Total % Cost Burdened
Less than \$50,000	341	41	170	211	62%
\$50,000-\$74,999	405	198	12	210	52%
\$75,000-\$99,999	239	69	0	69	29%
\$100,000 or more	1,166	27	0	27	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,151</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>517</b>	<b>24%</b>

Source: ACS 2011-2015

About half of renter households across all age groups are cost-burdened, however the issue is most acute for young adults ages 25-34. Amongst homeowners, seniors are most likely to be cost-burdened.

**Table H-18: Housing Cost Burden by Age of Householder**

Age of Householder	Renter households	% Cost Burdened	Owner households	% Cost Burdened
Under 25 years	34	32%	33	0%
25-34 years	309	53%	376	13%
35-64 years	679	48%	1,130	25%
65+ years	192	49%	479	34%

Source: ACS 2011-2015

## Homelessness

Homelessness or housing insecurity is a persistent concern in Ayer. In addition to people who are without a permanent place to live, there are many residents who are not stably housed because they live in substandard housing units that lack heat, electricity, and/or kitchen facilities, or who are housed but are unable to care for themselves. Out of roughly 100 people in Ayer who face housing insecurity, approximately 40 percent are unsheltered – that is, they sleep on the street or in encampments – while the remaining may be doubled up in housing units, live in local hotels, live in houses that lack basic facilities, or have other conditions that put them at risk of homelessness.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Pastor Stephen Wells, August 2, 2017. There is no official count of homeless people in Ayer. Our Father's House in Fitchburg is the closest social service agency that participates in the "Point in Time" count, a national tally of



Ayer has numerous resources – public and private– that serve people experiencing homelessness. Two homeless shelters located in Devens provide temporary housing and support services for victims of domestic violence and for veterans. There are also programs offering nutritional assistance, clothing, and social services to people with housing instability. These programs often help connect those in need with transitional or permanent housing programs or assistance with moving into one of two private (unsubsidized) motor lodges in Ayer that serve as de facto transitional housing sites. The Town of Ayer also manages a Community Development Block Grant funded housing rehabilitation program to improve the condition of housing for income-eligible homeowners.

### Homelessness Resources

- Transitions at Devens is a program through Fitchburg-based Our Father’s House, Inc., which provides temporary housing for women and their children who are experiencing homelessness due to domestic violence. There are 13 apartments at Devens, with additional scattered-site apartments located in Fitchburg and Leominster. The emergency shelter receives funding from the Department of Housing and Community Development. Clients who move out of the program on their own receive rent assistance from the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program and the state's HomeBASE program.
- Our Father’s House also provides street outreach to the homeless in Ayer.
- Veterans Inc. operates a 36 unit transitional housing facility in Devens that provides temporary housing (up to two years) for veterans.
- The Veteran’s Office in Ayer administers Chapter 115 benefits for low income veterans and helps to connect veterans with VASH or other housing resources.
- Nutritional assistance is offered by food pantries, Loaves and Fishes, and faith-based programs such as New Hope and God’s Kitchen, which provide emergency aid as well as meals or pantry. Volunteers and staff at these programs help to connect patrons with housing or other services in the region.
- Two private motels each have about 10 units that mostly house transitioning or long-term residents, including families.

There are more resources to assist with homelessness in the surrounding region, particularly in larger communities such as Fitchburg. With support from a network of service providers, families, elderly, or veterans are typically able to be placed within transitional or permanent housing. In Ayer, the most vulnerable population for experiencing chronic homelessness is adults with substance abuse and/or mental health problems. There is a shortage of housing within Ayer or surrounding towns that can serve the long term needs of these residents.

### Housing Needs

Ayer’s housing diversity and historic character are elements that help attract new residents, particularly in the neighborhoods surrounding Downtown that are well served by transit. Ayer’s housing offers real diversity in that there is a wide mix of housing types (single-family, apartments, duplexes, townhouses, etc.) and a supply of housing for both rental and ownership. This is critical in being able to serve

**Affordable housing development should target household income thresholds at 50% AMI or lower. Of the 1,100 cost-burdened households living in Ayer, the majority earn less than \$50,000 per year.**

homeless people observed on a single day each year coordinated by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), however Ayer is not included in the region covered by their count.



different types of households – seniors, families with children, young adults, single person households, multigenerational families, and so on. Contrary to the enclave approach that is taken in many communities, it is to Ayer's benefit to have something for everyone – it allows people of all kinds to live and establish roots in Ayer and keep it the funky, real, and authentic place that it has always been. A diverse population helps support the local economy by providing both labor and patronage, it improves the sense of community found within Ayer's neighborhoods, and it sustains local government by supplying the human capital and energy to provide the services and facilities that give Ayer its high quality of life.

While Ayer currently has an inventory of market rate housing that is sold or rented at a relatively lower cost than other areas in the region, the availability of modestly priced housing cannot be assured in a growing and increasingly competitive real estate market. As previously mentioned, Chapter 40B establishes a goal that communities should have at least 10 percent of their housing units deed restricted to ensure affordability for low-income households. By 2020, it is estimated that Ayer will need an additional 148 units of affordable housing that is eligible for inclusion on the SHI. The Town has a strong commitment to providing housing and is advancing inclusionary zoning efforts requiring that a percentage of units within new housing developments be reserved as affordable housing units as part of the new zoning bylaw. The adoption of a Chapter 40R Smart Growth District, also requiring affordable housing, could also help expand opportunities for the creation of affordably priced housing.

However, price is not the only component of housing needs. Other needs stem from the condition of Ayer's aging housing stock. Many older homes are in poor condition and require extensive repairs. For some owners, these repairs can represent a significant financial hardship that renders such repairs infeasible. To help with this issue, the Town administers a housing rehabilitation program funded with Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds that allows for the rehabilitation of homes owned by income-eligible applicants; in the average two-year period, approximately five homes are rehabilitated through this program. Regulatory incentives provided through zoning as well as the establishment of a uniform process for the enforcement of building and health codes may also help incentivize rehabilitation of Ayer's housing stock.

### **What types of housing are most needed?**

- Affordable housing restricted to extremely-low and low-income households.
- Homeless services geared toward single men and single parents.
- Affordable and market rate housing appropriate for seniors (i.e. single story floor plans, laundry in unit, modest size, limited upkeep and maintenance).
- Expand housing rehabilitation services.
- Rental units with 3+ bedrooms that is appropriate for families with children and multigenerational households.





## Formative Issues

Assets and Opportunities	Challenges and Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Changing Demands.</b> While new housing development has mainly focused on large single-family houses on large lots, there is an increasing demand for modestly-sized single-family, townhouse, or multifamily units in walkable neighborhoods with access to the commuter rail, commercial, and recreational amenities. As an amenity rich community with limited remaining land or fiscal resources to dedicate to sprawling development, Ayer is better suited for compact residential development.</li> <li>• <b>Changing Demographics.</b> Ayer is attracting higher income homebuyers, typically residents who commute for work. An influx of working age residents with higher incomes can have a positive impact on the condition of privately owned housing; however, great care must be taken to ensure Ayer's longtime residents are not displaced by increased housing costs.</li> <li>• <b>Senior Housing.</b> As the Baby-Boom generation ages, the proportion of Ayer residents over the age of 65 is expected to climb. Ayer has excellent senior services through the Council on Aging, a framework to administer subsidized senior housing through the Housing Authority, and the presence of the hospital and availability of nursing care provide a continuum of care all within Ayer.</li> <li>• <b>Downtown Housing.</b> Ayer's traditional Main Street and Downtown area are well served by transportation and supported by retail, dining, and entertainment options, which make it an ideal place to live. Increasing residential density downtown and in the immediate surrounding neighborhoods will help support Ayer's small, locally owned, downtown businesses and enhance the vibrancy of the district. Adopting a Ch.40R Smart Growth District will ensure that affordable housing is created and that any growth preserves Ayer's socioeconomic diversity while providing new housing options for coming generations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Maintaining affordability.</b> Housing in Ayer is becoming increasingly expensive, particularly for people who work in Ayer and/or long-time residents. Both affordable housing and more modest market rate housing are needed to maintain affordability.</li> <li>• <b>Blighted Properties.</b> Much of Ayer's older rental housing stock is undervalued, indicating neglect and disrepair. The cost of bringing these units up to code and a state of good repair may not be economical in Ayer's housing market without incentive or subsidy.</li> <li>• <b>Homelessness.</b> The lack of affordable and modestly-priced housing is leading to an increase in homelessness among all types of households, including families. There are insufficient resources in Ayer to serve the needs of people who are experiencing homelessness, in particular chronically homeless individuals.</li> <li>• <b>Local Capacity.</b> Effectively addressing housing issues requires a strong commitment of resources from the Town with respect to staffing, funding, and leadership. Affordable housing is particularly complex due to funding challenges and regulatory compliance requirements. Developing additional capacity to oversee Ayer's existing affordable housing (excluding Housing Authority units) and to seek and promote new opportunities to create affordable housing will be necessary in maintaining affordability and diversity in Ayer.</li> <li>• <b>Regulatory Constraints.</b> Ayer's subdivision and zoning regulations do not currently encourage the type of development that is most needed or sought after. Large minimum lot sizes and wide roadway requirements drive up development costs and necessitate the construction of larger homes to offset costs. Smaller and more compact developments that are walkable and have access to services and amenities must be incentivized in local regulations.</li> </ul>



## Goals and Strategies

Goal H-1	Develop local capacity to plan, develop and manage housing units that meet local needs.
Strategy H-1.1	Form Housing Committee to maintain an inventory of Ayer's affordable housing options and administration to determine if it is meeting the needs and goals of Ayer's residents today.
Strategy H-1.2	Formally coordinate meetings between the Housing Committee, COA, Housing Authority, Community & Economic Development Department, Planning Board, and Community Preservation Committee staff and committee chairs on a quarterly basis to discuss housing issues and opportunities to ensure information is being transmitted throughout Town Hall.
Strategy H-1.3	Increase the availability of information regarding housing assistance and request agency brochures to keep in Town Hall and links on the Town's website. (MassHousing loan programs, Section 8 application, private bank loans available to Low/Mod income households, etc.) Utilize the Town's social media to advertise new opportunities.
Strategy H-1.4	Track affordable developments listed on the SHI and proactively address expiring restrictions.

Goal H-2	Increase housing opportunities for Ayer residents.
Strategy H-2.1	Work with the Planning Board to provide education on housing needs, particularly with respect to the types of housing needed, to ensure that new development is appropriately designed for and reviewed by the Town of Ayer.
Strategy H-2.2	Inventory affordable housing opportunities, both existing and in the development pipeline, and distribute between COA, HA, C&ED, CPC to increase local awareness of housing opportunities.
Strategy H-2.3	Promote and advertise the Housing Rehab program to increase awareness.
Strategy H-2.4	Coordinate with Caza Manor and the Ayer Motor Lodge (currently providing most homelessness services) and local nonprofits to formalize and improve emergency housing.
Strategy H-2.5	Identify town owned property and/or affordable properties (market rate) to convert into affordable housing as Local Initiative Projects.

Goal H-3	Encourage housing development that is sustainable, affordable, and serves all members of Ayer's population.
Strategy H-3.1	Strengthen site plan review process and standards to ensure that new development will adequately serve its residents. Waivers for sidewalks and other design standards should be discouraged. Board level review should encourage floor plans for 3+ br family apartments, starter homes, and housing appropriate for seniors.
Strategy H-3.2	Adopt a Chapter 40R Smart Growth Zoning District around Downtown to encourage redevelopment that will generate additional housing units, including affordable units.
Strategy H-3.3	Increase infill development opportunities in existing residential areas to minimize the destruction of critical environmental habitats and drinking water supply areas. Incentives could include zoning amendments that allow for compact neighborhoods, minimum lot size reductions, shared driveway waivers, and accessory dwelling units.
Strategy H-3.4	Update subdivision bylaws to remove sections that encourage inefficient housing development (remove excessive roadway widths, ban cul-de-sacs and other roads that do not connect, mandate sidewalks, etc.).





# Economic Development

## Ayer's Local Economy

### Businesses & Labor Force

316 Businesses

Employing 4,653 Workers

Labor Force: 4,707 Workers

Jobs per Workers: 0.99

### Commercial Uses:

18% of Ayer's Land Area

4.3m s.f. of Commercial Space

\$371m in Assessed Value

\$11.5m in Tax Revenues

Generates 54% of Tax Levy

Provides 35% of Total Budget

### Largest Employers:

Nashoba Valley Medical  
Center

Apple Valley Center

CPF Inc. (Pepsi Bottling)

Nasoya, Inc.

Gervais Ford

Sealed Air Corp.

Ayer-Shirley Regional School  
District

## Introduction

Settled by English colonists in 1656 as the Township of Groton, the Town of Ayer (originally South Groton) emerged from its ancient agrarian socio-economic culture by separation from its "mother" township of Groton in February 1871; thus the Town of Ayer was chartered. Technological innovation, disruptive invention, and revolutionary economic shifts away from agrarianism and towards progressive industrialization drove Ayer's destiny as a compact and dynamic New England railroad town.

The dawn of Massachusetts & American railroading brought about the major intersection of four regional railroad lines at South Groton from (1845-1850); the Fitchburg Railroad (1845); the Stony Brook Railroad (1848); the Peterborough & Shirley Railroad (1848); and the Worcester & Nashua Railroad (1849). As reported in the Nashua Telegraph, May 26, 1849, *"We doubt if there is a place anywhere, where so many railroad trains meet simultaneously. Here the Worcester & Nashua, the Stony Brook, and the Townsend railroads connect with the Fitchburg, and three times a day trains meet here from Boston, Lowell, Worcester, Fitchburg, Nashua and Townsend, their six locomotives puffing and blowing and roaring like the Bulls of Bashan. A man can start from there for anywhere."* Thus, the place known anciently as South Groton transformed into "Groton Junction" or popularly "The Great Junction" and by 1871 the Town of Ayer.

The built-form of the new township, with grand Passenger Railroad Depot at the core (Depot Square), surrounded by residential urban street grids, a modest Main Street district three-blocks in length, with two-to-four story brick/wooden buildings arranged compactly together, highly-active and never-idle freight railroad yards, sheds, roundhouses, repair shops, platforms, and massive storage bins that dominated the land along the rail line corridors, and associated small-scale industries including tanneries, foundries, vinegar mills, woodworking, tool-making, lumber mills, and other modest-scale industrial enterprise came to define the 19<sup>th</sup> & early 20<sup>th</sup> century economic identity of the energetic railroad township.

The Nashua River runs along the west border of the town, however, Ayer never accommodated the great cotton/woolen textile mills so familiar to mid-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century New England, due to a lack of sufficient natural falls and lack of suitable broad & flat land sites along river-ways & falls. Contemporarily, Ayer remains challenged in accommodating larger industry and enterprise due to physical land parcel constraints resulting from topography, numerous small waterways/brooks, railroad line corridors, limited 9.8 square miles, etc.

Ayer's "national" military heritage began with the establishment of Camp Stevens (1861) along the Nashua River at the start of the American Civil War; South Groton served as a regional railroad hub in assembling and transporting Union troops. Just prior to America's entrance into World War I, the US Army selected a





large land area situated within portions of Ayer, Harvard and Shirley as Camp Devens (Spring 1917); later becoming Fort Devens. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and through WWI, WWII, Korean War, Vietnam War, and the Gulf War, Fort Devens expanded occupying nearly 20% of Ayer's total land area. Fort Devens came to dominate Ayer's local economy, as a "built-in" and seemingly-perpetual market of military & civilian personnel associated with the Base. The town socio-economically functioned to provide goods and services for the needs, lifestyles, and preferences of this limited, but lucrative "captured" local market. In (1996) Fort Devens was decommissioned; the seemingly-perpetual "captured" market and local economy that was built upon it had run its course, completed its socio-economic lifecycle, and the next chapter of the Town of Ayer began. The U.S. Army Reserve and 25<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment remain today stationed at Devens.

Following the closure of the Fort Devens, the bulk of the land occupying the former base came under control of MassDevelopment, which in concert with the Devens Enterprise Commission, now oversees the comprehensive redevelopment within the Devens Regional Enterprise Zone.

Ayer's contemporary economy includes manufacturing, technology, distribution, food & beverage processing & packaging, professional/personal services, and retail. The healthcare sector accounts for 15% of local employment, led by the Nashoba Valley Medical Center, complimented by private medical offices and the Apple Valley Center residential senior care/recovery facility. The combined education, health care and educational services sectors provide 25% of all local employment. Ayer's manufacturing sector provides 1,200 employment opportunities in food & beverage production/processing, scientific research & development, and the fabrication/assembly of products. Ayer's transportation, distribution, warehousing, and wholesale/retail trade add an additional 800 jobs. Ayer's traditional industrial/manufacturing/processing sector remains strong, however, the local economy (as is the case in all American towns, cities & regions) is not economically invulnerable and continues to face considerable challenges as the town consistently and diligently works in retaining existing business and attract new 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge-based/innovation-based enterprise in an era of rapidly changing technology, transportation, information transmission, lifestyles, and expectations.

### **Economic Development Goals:**

1. Retain and assist the growth of existing business & attract new enterprise through active promotion of Ayer's socio-economic advantages & benefits.
2. Position Downtown Ayer as a regional destination for specialty retail shopping, dining, entertainment, special events, heritage tourism, and professional/personal services within a high-quality public space experience.
3. Strengthen Ayer's regional economic competitiveness.



## Commercial Districts and Corridors



### Downtown

Downtown Ayer is the home of nearly 3.6 million square feet of commercial space. Anchored by the MBTA Commuter Rail Station and the Nashua River Rail Trail, Downtown Ayer is a traditional Main Street with retail, professional office, and personal service based businesses as well as local eateries and taverns. As most of Ayer's daytime population consists of local workers in Ayer's industrial parks and corridors, Downtown Ayer can be rather quiet during the day with most business activity occurring at night.



### Gateways

The Carlton Rotary and West Main Street commercial district serve as Ayer's automobile gateways. The Carlton Rotary is home to several fast food restaurants and other auto-oriented businesses such as Gervais Ford and the Tidal Wave Car Wash. The gateway at West Main Street offers several small restaurants, poorly maintained strip development, mini-storage, and a power substation. While both areas serve a function, neither represents a welcoming gateway that gives a strong sense of having arrived in Ayer or of the Town's history, heritage, or charm.



### Corridors

Pleasant Street, Fitchburg Road, and Central Avenue are key transportation corridors in Ayer that offer a variety of uses. Central Avenue is predominately industrial in character and houses a variety of shipping, transportation, and warehousing businesses while Pleasant Street and Fitchburg Road more commonly accommodate strip retail. Abandonment, disrepair, and neglect characterize large swaths of these corridors and detract from those businesses that are valiantly trying to maintain their properties and promote their businesses.



### Industrial Areas

Ayer is home to two primary industrial areas: one is located along Westford Road and includes New England Way and Nemco Way, while the other is located just south of West Main Street, and is accessed by Scully Road. Both areas abut residential neighbors and sensitive environmental resources. The Scully Road industrial area abuts Plow Shop Pond and is primarily occupied by Moore Lumber. Should the area be redeveloped in the future, it could provide the opportunity to integrate this land into Downtown Ayer and increasing its economic productivity and allowing for new housing opportunities.

## Existing Conditions

### Labor Force and Commuting Patterns

**Table ED-1: Regional Labor Force and Jobs**

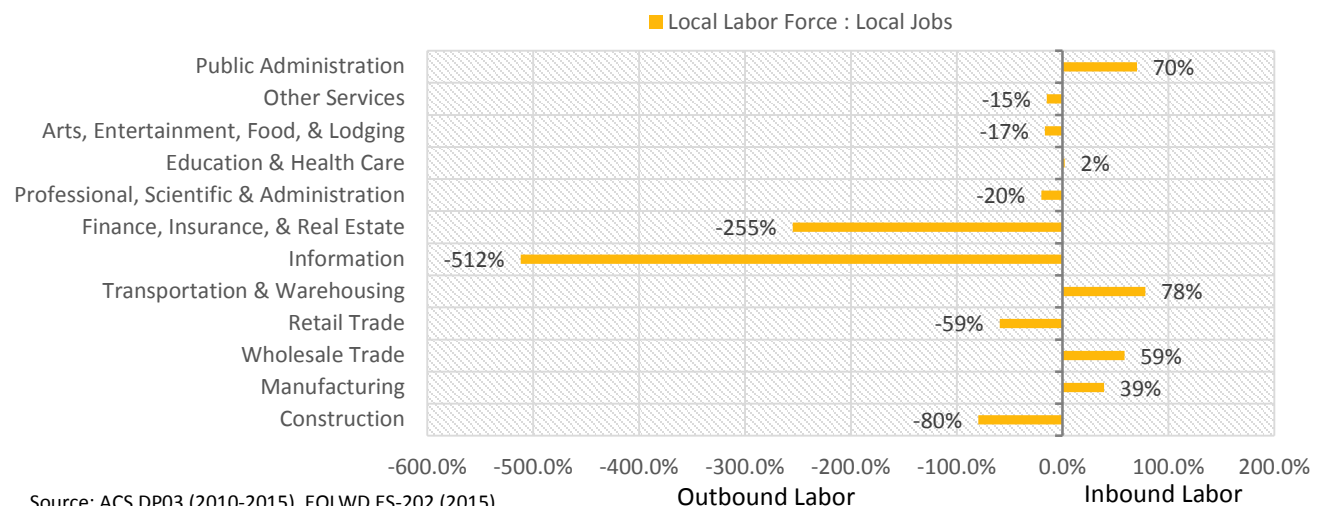
	Civilian Labor Force	Number of Jobs	Jobs per Worker
<i>Ayer</i>	4,707	4,653	0.99
Clinton	7,894	4,347	0.55
Hudson	10,862	10,447	0.96
Littleton	5,202	7,635	1.47
Maynard	6,208	2,889	0.47
Pepperell	6,592	1,652	0.25
Shirley	2,914	2,799	0.96
Massachusetts	3,696,139	3,428,259	0.93

Source: ACS DP03 (2010-2015) & EOLWD ES-202 (2015)

The **civilian labor force** is comprised of individuals above the age of 16 who are not members of the armed forces and are actively employed or seeking employment. Ayer's labor force is sizable for a community of its size and has a higher participation rate (74.3 percent) than found in neighboring communities and the state.<sup>1</sup> For example, Shirley's labor force participation rate is 45.7 percent, while the state's is 67.5 percent.<sup>2</sup> Further, Ayer's local economy offers nearly one job for every worker who lives in town. However, as shown on **Chart ED-1**, all but an estimated 350 resident members of the local labor force leave Ayer daily to work in outside communities.<sup>3</sup>

Those Employed in Ayer are concentrated in a limited number of industries – public administration (inclusive of the Ayer-Shirley Regional School District, Town employees, the Ayer District Court, and State employees with the Department of Fish and Wildlife), transportation and warehousing, wholesale trade, and manufacturing. With the exception of public administration employees, many of those who work in Ayer but residing elsewhere are industrial workers who tend to live in Fitchburg, Lowell, Gardner, and other communities with lower cost housing than is found in Ayer. The mismatch between local jobs and the local labor force is also demonstrated by the industries employing Ayer residents who are considered “outbound labor” – the so called FIRE industries (finance, insurance, and real estate), information, and construction where jobs are concentrated primarily in the Boston Metro Area. **The people who live in Ayer are increasingly not the same people who work in Ayer.** This is in part due to rising housing prices in the region creating pressure on Ayer, the presence of the MBTA commuter rail which attracts commuters to live in Ayer, as well as a local economy whose composition is not changing as quickly as the composition of the local workforce.

**Chart ED-1: Commuting Patters of Ayer's Workforce by Industry**

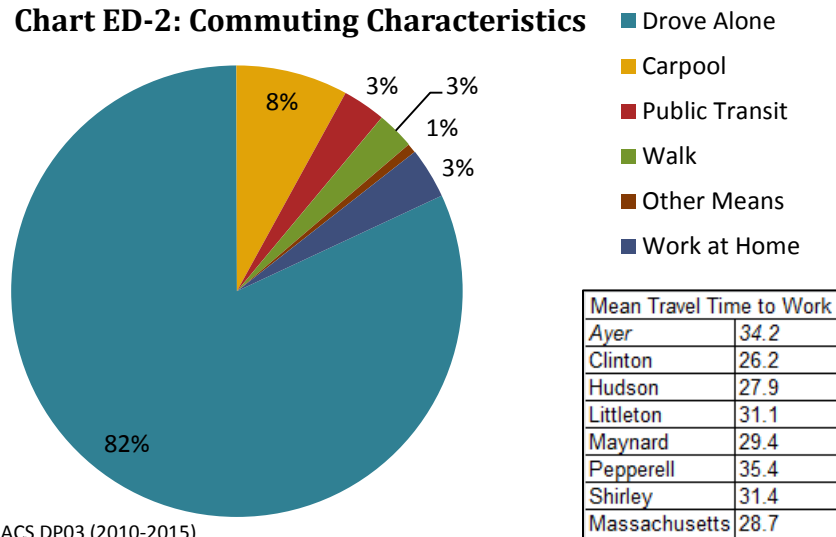


<sup>1</sup> ACS DP03 (2010-2015)

<sup>2</sup> ACS DP03 (2010-2015)

<sup>3</sup> ACS SO801 (2010-2015), EOLWD ES-202 (2015)



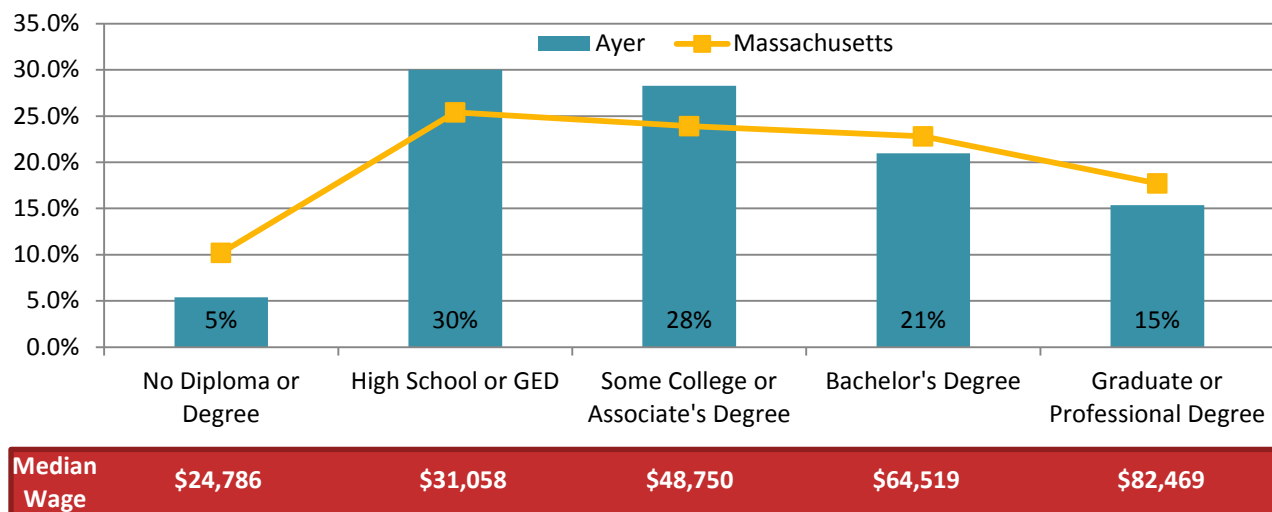
**Chart ED-2: Commuting Characteristics**

Source: ACS DP03 (2010-2015)

How Ayer's labor force gets to work largely correlates with the industries employing residents. For example, those who carpool in Ayer tend to be employed in education and health services or manufacturing industry jobs, while those who take public transit are largely represented by those working in the FIRE industries, and also educational and health services.<sup>4</sup> Although the vast majority of Ayer's residents drive by themselves to work, they also tend to have a longer commute than workers in

neighboring communities. This is reflective both of Ayer's large share of outbound workers as well as the Town's geographic location in proximity to several major highways and the MBTA commuter rail. Highway and commuter rail access put Ayer within commuting distance of several major regional employment centers. Although Ayer is not physically "close" to every place that is commutable from the town, the combination of access and relatively lower cost housing than can be found in other areas of the region attract residents willing to endure slightly longer commutes in exchange for less expensive or more spacious housing. This represents a change in Ayer's residential population and impacts local business that need to recruit further out to find workers with the appropriate skills and occupations to meet their needs.

## Educational Attainment and Income

**Chart ED-3: Educational Attainment and Wages**

Source: ACS S1501 (2010-2015)

<sup>4</sup> ACS S0802 (2010-2015)

**Table ED-2: Income and Wages**

	Median HH* Income	Avg. Wage per Worker	% Change in HH* Income (2010-2015)
Ayer	\$74,659	\$43,324	34%
Clinton	\$62,805	\$37,981	7%
Hudson	\$75,985	\$41,707	1%
Littleton	\$111,680	\$58,422	8%
Maynard	\$88,333	\$44,558	17%
Pepperell	\$80,524	\$41,213	-2%
Shirley	\$67,896	\$35,806	-7%
Massachusetts	\$68,563	\$37,452	6%

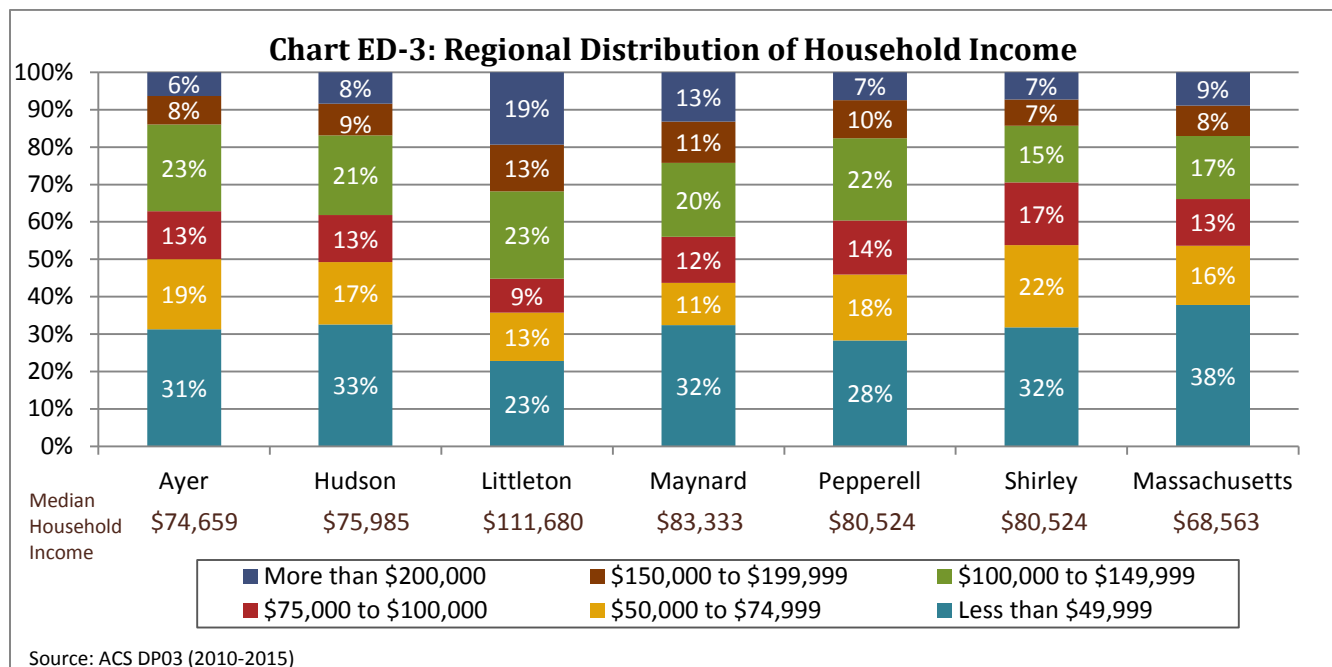
\* Household

Source: ACS DP03 (2006-2010, 2010-2015)

wages, and distribution of income. It is notable that Ayer has seen the largest growth in household income in the past five years, another indication that Ayer's residential composition and workforce is changing rapidly. However, in spite of rising household incomes, the overall distribution of income in Ayer remains on par with the majority of Ayer's peer communities, with a slightly smaller share of households with incomes above \$150,000, and a slightly larger share than those earning less than \$75,000 in Ayer.

As shown on **Chart ED-3**, Wages are generally influenced positively by educational attainment; in Ayer, wages for both the least and most educated members of the workforce tend to be lower than the state median wages. However, for high school graduates or equivalent and those who attended some college or have attained an associate's degree, their wages tend to be higher than the state median. This is, in large part, due to the presence of industrial and advanced manufacturing employers that offer higher wages than are typically available to those who did not complete a four-year degree program.

**Table ED-2** and **Chart ED-3** compare Ayer to its neighbors and peers in terms of household incomes,



## Occupations and Industries

More than ¼ of Ayer's residents are employed in the educational services, health care, and social services industries; representing the largest individual industry employing Ayer's labor force. The next largest industry is manufacturing, employing 18 percent of Ayer's labor force, followed by professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services (10 percent), retail trade (9 percent), and construction (6 percent).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> ACS DP03 (2010-2015)





The industries employing Ayer's labor force are shifting, and the largest industries employing Ayer residents are also seeing the biggest declines. In the past five years, the number of residents employed in educational services and healthcare has declined by nearly 40 percent, while employment in manufacturing declined by nearly 45 percent. During the same time period, employment in public administration increased by nearly 175 percent, transportation and warehousing by 120 percent, and professional, scientific, management, and administrative services rose by 40 percent.<sup>6</sup> These changes are consistent with the shifts in commuting characteristics and income and wages in Ayer, as well as the geographic mobility of Ayer residents, wherein approximately 20 percent of Ayer's residents have moved within the past year.<sup>7</sup> In short, change is occurring within composition of Ayer's local labor force and the industries and occupations that employ them. Ayer's residents are increasingly more likely to be "white collar" and commute outside of Ayer, while Ayer's local economy remains largely predicated upon "blue collar" occupations, forcing employers to look further away for to staff their businesses, or in some cases, these businesses choose to close or relocate.

**Table ED-3: Occupations of Ayer Residents (2000-2015)**

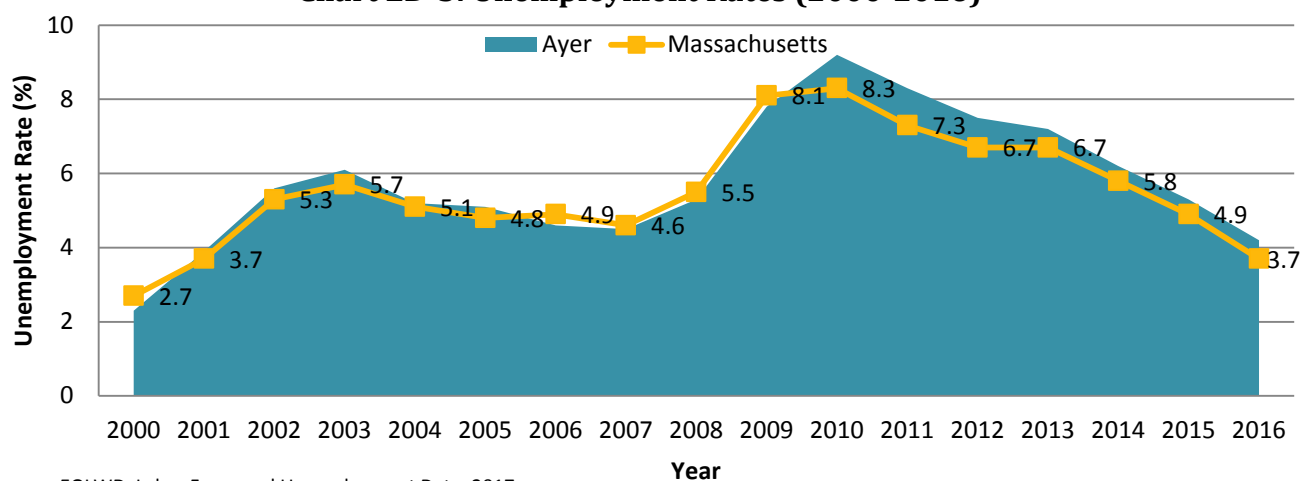
	Employed Civilian Labor Force	Management, Business, Arts, and Sciences	Service Occupations	Sales and Office	Nat. Resources, Construction, & Maintenance	Transportation, Production, and Material Moving
Ayer 2000	4,089	38%	14%	24%	10%	14%
Ayer 2015	4,707	52%	15%	17%	11%	5%
% change	15%	36%	6%	-27%	10%	-64%
Massachusetts 2015	3,415,975	44%	17%	23%	7%	9%

Source: ACS DP03 (2010-2015), US Census DP-3 (2000)

## Unemployment

Unemployment rates track the number of individuals who are employed or currently seeking work. The statistics do not reflect those who have given up looking for work or those who are underemployed (i.e. their current employment doesn't meet their needs in terms of hours and/or wages). Ayer's unemployment rate remains low, and is generally lower than the unemployment rate for the state overall, but there have been some fluctuations recently during the recession years.

**Chart ED-5: Unemployment Rates (2000-2016)**



Source: EOLWD, Labor Force and Unemployment Data, 2017

<sup>6</sup> ACS DP03 (2006-2010, 2010-2015)

<sup>7</sup> ACS SO701 (2010-2015)



## Employment Base

The Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD) tracks economic data and labor market information for the state, workforce investment areas, labor market areas, and cities and towns. **Table ED-4** shows Ayer's most recent annual report for employment and wages. Industries are divided by the goods producing domain, under which construction and manufacturing are counted; the service providing domain, where transportation, information, FIRE, service businesses are counted, and public administration. Goods producing jobs are considered "basic" employment, in the sense that they provide export goods that bring money in from outside the region. These jobs are thought to have a multiplier effect in that they create and necessitate service based jobs (non-basic employment) to support these industries. Just 18 percent of Ayer businesses are employers that are considered "basic", but provide 30 percent of local jobs. Further, these jobs provide among the highest average weekly wages. It should be noted, however, that in nearly all industries, average weekly wages in Ayer are measurably lower than the state average. Although this is common in the region, the reduction in wages in North Central Massachusetts is not commensurate with the reduction in cost of living, and accessing housing in Ayer on Ayer wages can be a significant challenge for some workers.

**Table ED-4: Businesses, Jobs, and Wages in Ayer (2016)**

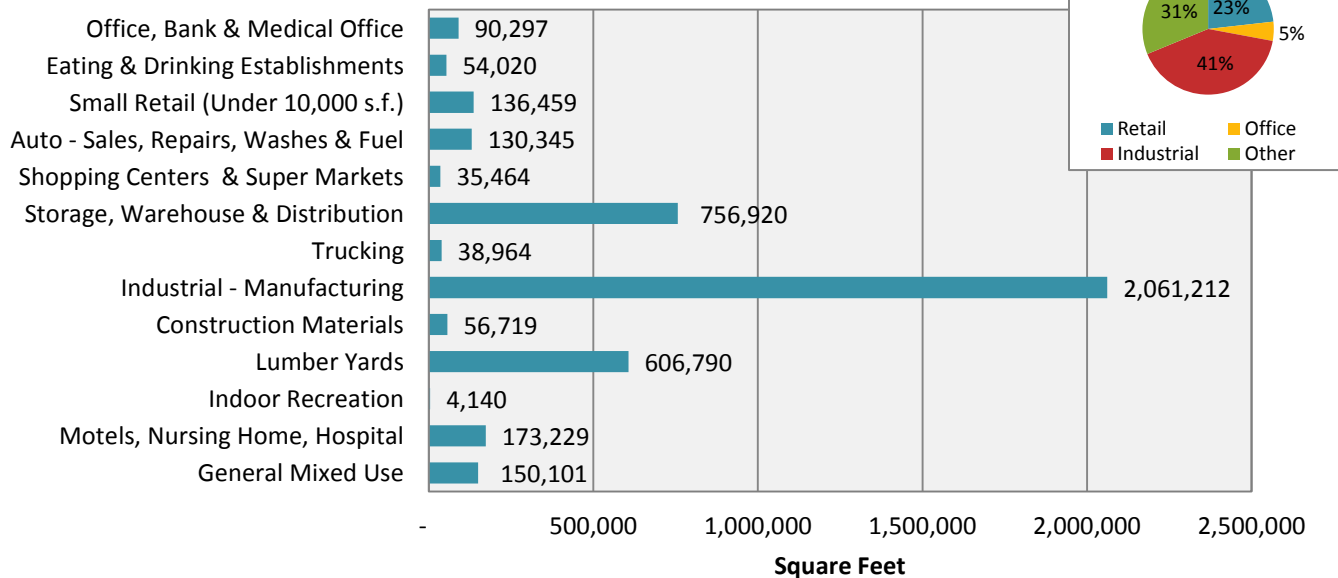
	Businesses	Employees	Avg. Weekly Wage	Share of Local Jobs	Local Wages compared to State Wages
<b>Total, All Industries</b>	<b>316</b>	<b>4,653</b>	<b>\$1,025</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Goods-Producing Domain</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>1,416</b>	<b>\$1,228</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Construction</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>\$1,203</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>88%</b>
<b>Manufacturing</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>1,264</b>	<b>\$1,233</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>74%</b>
Durable Goods Manufacturing	16	548	\$1,244	12%	70%
Non-Durable Goods Manufacturing	10	716	\$1,224	15%	86%
<b>Service-Providing Domain</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>3,238</b>	<b>\$936</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>75%</b>
<b>Trade, Transportation and Utilities</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>799</b>	<b>\$870</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>92%</b>
Wholesale Trade	20	210	\$1,357	5%	77%
Retail Trade	29	241	\$765	5%	127%
Transportation and Warehousing	17	329	\$574	7%	57%
<b>Information</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>\$1,537</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>77%</b>
<b>Financial Activities</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>\$1,119</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>45%</b>
Finance and Insurance	6	47	\$1,413	1%	50%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	10	24	\$543	1%	39%
<b>Professional and Business Services</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>347</b>	<b>\$1,156</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>62%</b>
<b>Education and Health Services</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>1,152</b>	<b>\$903</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>84%</b>
Educational Services	5	392	\$998	8%	88%
Health Care and Social Assistance	38	760	\$854	16%	82%
<b>Leisure and Hospitality</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>\$300</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>63%</b>
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	6	21	\$548	1%	78%
Accommodation and Food Services	23	277	\$281	6%	65%
<b>Other Services</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>\$574</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>84%</b>
<b>Public Administration</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>456</b>	<b>\$1,376</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>98%</b>

Source: EOLWD, ES-202 (2016)



## Existing Commercial Space

**Chart ED-6: Allocation of Commercial Space by Use**



Source: Town of Ayer, Assessor's Database (FY17)

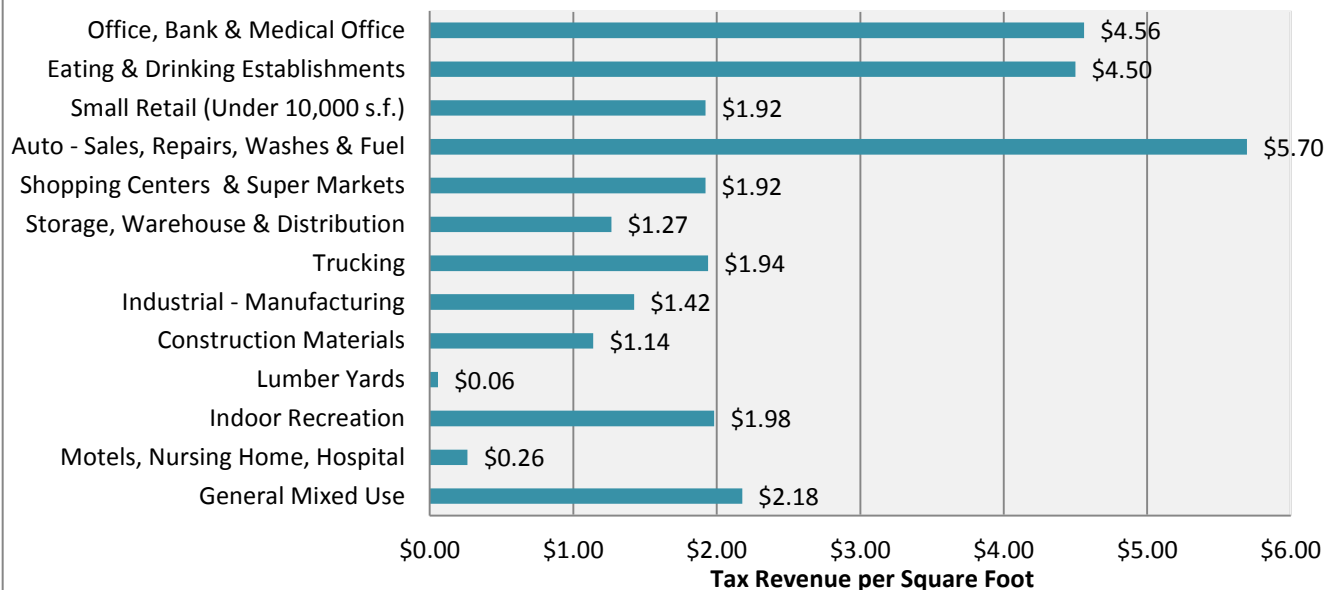
**Table ED-5: Total Commercial Space**

Use	S.F.	Acres
Retail	428,098	226
Office	195,856	46
Industrial	3,520,605	397
Other	150,101	298
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,294,660</b>	<b>973</b>

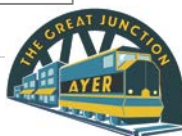
Source: Town of Ayer, Assessor's Database (FY17)

Approximately 17 percent of Ayer's total land area (973 acres) is used for commercial purposes and houses approximately 4.3m square feet of retail, office, industrial, and other commercial space. Over 40 percent of commercial land in Ayer encompasses over 2m square feet of industrial manufacturing space, by far the largest commercial use by size and space. However, industrial space is not the most lucrative space from the perspective of tax revenues; where auto related uses yield the highest tax revenues per square foot of building area at \$5.70/square foot.

**Chart Ed-7: Average Tax Revenue by Use (FY16)**



Source: Town of Ayer, Assessor's Database (FY17)



## Municipal Finance

Ayer's municipal fiscal health is inherently related to its commercial tax base. Ayer is one of 110 communities in Massachusetts with a **split tax rate** – meaning that there are different tax rates for residential and commercial properties. The commercial tax base comprises Commercial, Industrial, and Personal Property (CIP). Tax revenues generated from CIP properties are based on their assessed valuation multiplied by the tax rate (the FY 16 CIP tax rate was \$30.92 per \$1,000 assessed value). The total of all tax revenue from CIP properties is called the CIP Levy. The total tax levy includes CIP property taxes and taxes generated from residential property, which together made up 65 percent of the local budget in FY16. The total tax levy is then combined with state aid, local receipts (excise taxes, meals taxes, permit fees, etc.), and other revenue (any other monies received by the Town – i.e. interest payments on investment, donations, certain types of grants, etc.) to determine total annual revenues (i.e. funds available to spend on the budget). Annual revenues are measured against requested expenditures, which are reviewed by the Finance Committee to determine the overall annual Town Budget to be voted on at Town Meeting.

**Table ED-5: Municipal Finance Trends in Ayer (FY2006-FY2016)**

Fiscal Year	CIP Assessed Value	CIP Tax Rate	Residential Tax Rate	CIP Levy	Total Tax Levy	CIP as % of Budget
2006	\$330,817,180	24.54	9.39	\$8,118,253	\$13,740,098	31.0%
2007	\$327,414,880	24.10	9.54	\$7,890,698	\$13,906,991	29.4%
2008	\$338,174,860	23.85	9.84	\$8,065,470	\$14,645,037	28.1%
2009	\$340,310,100	24.74	10.61	\$8,419,272	\$15,320,578	28.2%
2010	\$345,280,150	25.54	11.49	\$8,818,454	\$16,028,007	29.4%
2011	\$342,447,190	26.82	12.09	\$9,184,434	\$16,739,697	28.7%
2012	\$346,729,920	27.20	13.10	\$9,431,054	\$17,617,236	35.3%
2013	\$348,143,990	27.99	13.63	\$9,744,551	\$18,210,410	36.0%
2014	\$353,847,970	28.55	14.08	\$10,102,360	\$18,958,169	35.5%
2015	\$372,743,600	29.97	14.62	\$11,171,126	\$20,572,763	35.2%
2016	\$370,933,080	30.92	14.53	\$11,469,251	\$21,279,654	35.3%

Note: CIP includes Commercial, Industrial, and Personal Property Taxes

Source: Massachusetts DOR (2017)

Like many communities, Ayer has faced rising property tax rates in recent years to offset increasing local costs and reductions in state and federal aid. Ten years ago, Ayer received over 20 percent of its budget in state aid; in FY16 state aid made up just 2.7 percent of its budget. Consequently, the Town has become more reliant upon the local tax levy, particularly the CIP levy, to meet budgetary requirements. **CIP properties make up just 18 percent of Ayer's taxable parcels yet generated 54 percent of the local tax levy, and provided 35 percent of the local budget in FY16.**

**Table ED-6: Regional Municipal Finance Characteristics (FY16)**

Municipality	Commercial Tax Rate	Total Assessed Value (\$)	Tax Levy (\$)	Municipal Budget (\$)	Residential Tax Base (\$)	Commercial Tax Base (%)	Avg. Single Fam. Tax Bill
Ayer	30.92	1,046,115,680	21,279,654	32,494,284	46.1	53.9	\$4,089
Clinton	31.45	1,157,307,120	22,468,375	46,283,751	75.5	24.5	\$3,944
Hudson	35.37	2,287,457,300	46,226,495	78,968,856	71.8	28.3	\$5,447
Littleton	28.04	1,625,366,807	32,319,141	46,936,136	70.1	29.9	\$6,999
Maynard	29.57	1,275,469,015	28,358,147	46,291,010	84.3	15.7	\$6,960
Pepperell	16.53	1,112,450,298	18,388,803	28,217,288	93.8	6.2	\$4,638
Shirley	16.51	605,712,883	10,000,320	15,718,124	89.7	10.3	\$4,525

Source: Massachusetts Department of Revenue (2017)



## Business Attraction and Retention

Compared to its neighbors and peer communities, Ayer relies significantly less on residential property taxes to generate revenues, with just over 45 percent of the tax levy derived from residential property taxes. It is common throughout Massachusetts to see communities that derive upwards of 80-90 percent of their tax levy from residential taxes. Ayer's current tax policy shows a very deliberate effort to reduce the residential tax burden by offsetting residential costs with the commercial tax levy. However, with rising municipal costs and declining state aid, relying solely on the CIP base to offset municipal costs may have a deleterious effect on the composition of Ayer's business community and quality of life and may not be a sustainable strategy in the long term for the Town.

### Tax Increment Financing



*Grady Research Inc. was granted a TIF in 2000 to rehalitate the former Ice House property.*

redevelopment, infrastructure, or other community improvements within a specific project site or district. Generally, TIFs are used to attract (and in some cases retain) businesses to locate in Ayer by offering a more competitive tax environment. TIFs are not typically used on small projects, but are reserved for larger projects that will yield significant benefits to the public in the form of high quality jobs, increased long term tax revenues, and upgraded infrastructure and facilities. The utilization of TIFs can be controversial in Ayer, but they can – and have made the difference between a business choosing to locate (or remain) in Ayer as opposed to neighboring communities and states.

Ayer's tax policies have a very direct impact on local economic development and impact the Town's ability to compete to retain and attract businesses. Tax rates are one metric that is commonly used by businesses when they are making location decisions, and while it is not the only point of consideration they will use, it is one of the only points that Town can influence. As Ayer's taxes are relatively high (for example, the FY16 CIP tax rate in Devens was \$22.64 per \$1,000 assessed value, compared to \$30.92 in Ayer)<sup>8</sup>, the Town does occasionally offset this issue through the authorization of **tax increment financing (TIF)**. TIFs are a tool which allows the Town to subsidize Ayer businesses by refunding or diverting a portion of their taxes for a defined period of time (years) to help finance

### Small Commercial Exemption (MGL Ch. 59, Section 51)

Large enterprises are not the only businesses impact by Ayer's tax policies. Small businesses and all commercial property owners are impacted by these policies and the effects are born out in different ways. For commercial landlords, and businesses whose buildings are owner-occupied, these policies can indirectly incentivize disinvestment in their properties. Any physical improvements will result in an increased assessed value which will make their taxes rise and increase operating costs. However, for landlords, this issue is particularly acute because market rents in Ayer for commercial space are relatively low, and may not offset increased costs. As there is little incentive for property owners to invest, small businesses are put in a precarious position as they are frequently faced with shouldering the costs of improvements necessary to meet building or health codes in addition to their other startup and operating costs. If these improvements lead to a higher assessment, they could have that cost passed onto them through their landlord, or if they own, they will bear all of the increased costs.

To offset this issue, Ayer's Board of Selectman can choose to adopt, on an annual basis, a Small Commercial Exemption of up to 10 percent of the value of a commercial property from local property taxes for qualifying small businesses. Qualifying businesses are defined by the Massachusetts Department of Revenue as businesses employing fewer than ten employees.

<sup>8</sup> Deven's Tax Assessor. <http://www.devenscommunity.com/assessor>. Accessed 8/8/2017.



## Economic Resources

### Ayer Industrial Development Financing Authority (IDFA)

The IDFA is a five-member board that oversees a \$1.5 million dollar revolving fund. The IDFA finances worthy community-based projects that create or retain jobs, and invests in needed infrastructure, and improvements to strengthen local business districts. The Ayer Business Loan Fund offers the following financial products to local businesses:

- Permanent Working Capital – loans from \$25,000 to \$200,000 - fixed rate for five years up to 50% of project cost
- Business Development Gap – to purchase or improve fixed assets - \$25,000 to \$200,000 15 years/ adjustable rate
- Microcapital Loan – especially for new businesses - \$5,000 to \$25,000 80% of project cost - one to five year note
- Sign and Façade – to improve the exterior of business properties - \$5000 to \$10,000 - Interest Free - 1 to 5 years<sup>9</sup>

### Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce

The Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce is a nonprofit business advocacy, community and economic development association and provides services to members businesses in Ayer, Berlin, Bolton, Boylston, Clinton, Devens, Groton, Harvard, Lancaster, Littleton, Pepperell, Shirley, Sterling, Townsend, West Boylston, Westford, and nearby towns. The chamber offers technical assistance, business training, events, marketing, and public policy work for member businesses.

### Shriver Jobs Corps Center

The Job Corps is a vocational training program administered by the U.S. Department of Labor. The Shriver Jobs Corps Center is located on Devens and serves young people ages 16 to 24. Job Corps offers training in information technology, advanced manufacturing, transportation, automotive and machine repair, construction, healthcare, and finance and business. In addition to technical training, the Job Corps assists corps members with completing their high school educations or GEDs, obtaining driver's licenses, and with improving English proficiency.

### Mount Wachusett Community College - Division of Lifelong Learning

In 2013, Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC) was selected to oversee a grant award of \$15m from the Federal Government to oversee a consortium of community colleges offering advanced manufacturing degree programs. The project's intent is that all students will complete the training with the National Career Readiness Certificate and one or more industry-recognized certifications that can be stacked and latticed for greater skill attainment and employment flexibility. In addition, the Division of Lifelong Learning at MWCC offers workforce training programs in the following areas: accounting and finance, business, computer applications, design and composition, healthcare and medical, language arts, law and legal, personal development, teaching and education, technology, and writing and publishing.

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<sup>9</sup> Ayer IDFA. <https://www.ayer.ma.us/community-economic-development/pages/idfa>. Accessed 8/9/2017.



## Formative Issues

Assets and Opportunities	Challenges and Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Downtown Ayer</b> – a traditional, walkable Main Street peppered with historic buildings that honor Ayer’s heritage. Anchored by the MBTA Commuter Rail Station and the Nashua River Rail Trail, Ayer’s downtown packs more tax revenue per square foot than any other commercial district in Ayer.</li> <li>• <b>Industrial Parks and Infrastructure</b> – Ayer has long been a home to food and beverage manufacturing due to its abundant water resources and infrastructure capacity. The presence of the PanAm rail opens additional opportunities for industrial businesses relying on multimodal transportation for shipping and warehousing.</li> <li>• <b>Diverse Labor Force</b> – Although Ayer’s labor force is changing and becoming increasingly more homogenous, there is a significant presence of both “blue” and “white” collar workers. Businesses are most influenced by the availability of a workforce that suits their needs – regardless of industry – and the diversity among Ayer’s residents can serve as a magnet for business employing workers of all skill levels.</li> <li>• <b>Proximity</b> – Ayer has excellent transportation access that makes the Town within range of several commutersheds giving residents a wide range of employment opportunities and businesses a wider range of potential employees. Further, the presence of Devens-based businesses can be leveraged to increase opportunities in Ayer. For example, New England Studios at Devens contributed to two movies being filmed in Ayer in 2016-2017. Finally, proximity to natural resources and recreation resources draw outsiders to visit the Town.</li> <li>• <b>40R Smart Growth District</b> – Ayer has received a technical assistance grant from the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) to draft new zoning for Ayer’s Downtown. Ayer has the potential to adopt a Smart Growth district with appropriate design guidelines and standards to incentivize new mixed-used development in Downtown Ayer, including the development of affordable housing units.</li> <li>• <b>Heritage</b> – Ayer has a rich local history and lies within the Freedom’s Way National Heritage Area. Ayer can build upon its history and heritage to create a unique brand and identity to attract outsiders to visit, live, and work in Ayer.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Daytime Population</b> – Ayer’s Downtown struggles due to a low daytime population. As most residents leave Ayer to go to work, and are replaced by an inbound workforce that largely works outside of Downtown, there is a limited population to support the daytime activities of Ayer’s Downtown businesses. This issue could be offset by increasing the amount of housing in residential areas abutting Downtown Ayer.</li> <li>• <b>Transportation</b> – Many of Ayer’s businesses are not currently accessible by transit. Businesses like the Nashoba Valley Medical Center and Castania Oils are located too far from the commuter rail to benefit from its presence, creating transportation difficulties for employees. Further, a lack of sufficient truck routes creates tension between businesses and residents.</li> <li>• <b>Parking</b> – Much of Ayer’s Downtown parking is held in private ownership, and access to parking is determined by individual property owners. Coordination is required to ensure that Downtown businesses have sufficient parking to meet the demand of patrons and workers.</li> <li>• <b>High Taxes</b> – the heavy reliance on CIP taxes puts Ayer in the position of needing to decide if they are a Town who will accept any business willing to pay the premium rate because most other communities will not allow them in, or if Ayer is the kind of Town that is willing to expand the political capital to create an environment in which both high quality businesses and residents can thrive.</li> <li>• <b>Blighted Commercial Districts</b> – Ayer’s Gateways (Carlton Rotary and West Main Street) and Corridors (Park Street and Central Avenue) possess a number of underutilized and/or blighted properties. These properties make it difficult to attract new businesses to Ayer and realtors as well as local staff report “curb appeal” in the commercial districts as a major obstacle in tenanting commercial space.</li> <li>• <b>Zoning</b> – Ayer’s Zoning Bylaw is in the process of being updated, but remains a significant barrier to generating high quality development in Ayer.</li> <li>• <b>Brownfields</b> – Ayer’s industrial and military history have led to areas within the Town that have significant contamination issues and lands with Active Use Limitations (AULs) from the Department of Environmental Protection.</li> </ul>



## Recommendations:

- Adopt Small Business Exemption as authorized by the Department of Revenue to reduce the tax burden for small businesses.
- Adopt a M.G.L. Ch.40R Smart Growth Overlay District to increase the amount of high-quality commercial space in Downtown Ayer and expand economic opportunities for residents and business owners.
- Work with New England Studios to promote Ayer as a filming location for major motion pictures.
- Continue to maintain the Town's Economic Development website and promote workforce development opportunities.
- Continue to fund economic development as a municipal activity to ensure continued prosperity and increased commercial and industrial tax revenues.
- Clean up Ayer's commercial corridors by incentivizing good urban form in the public realm and encouraging public amenities such as sidewalks, landscaping, and buildings designed to interact and enliven the streetscape.



# Transportation and Circulation

## Transportation and Circ

### Transportation

51 Miles of Roadway

1.25 Miles of Rail Trail

8,000 Registered Vehicles

22.3 Miles of Sidewalk

2 Freight Rail Operators

1 Truck to Rail Facility

17 MBTA Trains

2 COA Buses

1 Mart Bus

5 Bridges

#### Complete Streets Policy

- Safe pedestrian and bicycle facilities
- Smart Pricing
- Multimodal transportation
- Street geometry upgrades

#### Parking Management Plan

- Smart pricing based on demand
- Parking enforcement
- Parking management during MBTA garage construction for displaced commuters

## Introduction

Improved safety, accessibility, connectivity, and environmental awareness are important transportation priorities. This plan seeks to maintain, upgrade and expand the Town's transportation systems in an efficient, cost effective and environmentally sound manner. The plan aims to develop strategies that would improve traffic flow on major streets, promote traffic calming in residential areas, expand commuter rail access and provide better parking in the downtown area. The plan encourages implementation of Complete Streets concepts, the focus on walking and biking by improving the pedestrian and bicycling infrastructure in Ayer. Finally, the plan will provide concepts for future transportation modes including autonomous vehicles, ride sharing and electric vehicles.

The Town of Ayer transportation systems and infrastructure, like many New England communities, covers a broad range of modes, services and responsibility. The road system includes town owned (and maintained) roads, private roads and state highways. In addition, the Town has commuter rail service and numerous freight rail operations.

The challenges for implementing transportation improvements and enhancements in Ayer are funding, coordination with State Agencies (MassDOT, MBTA) and changing modes and uses.

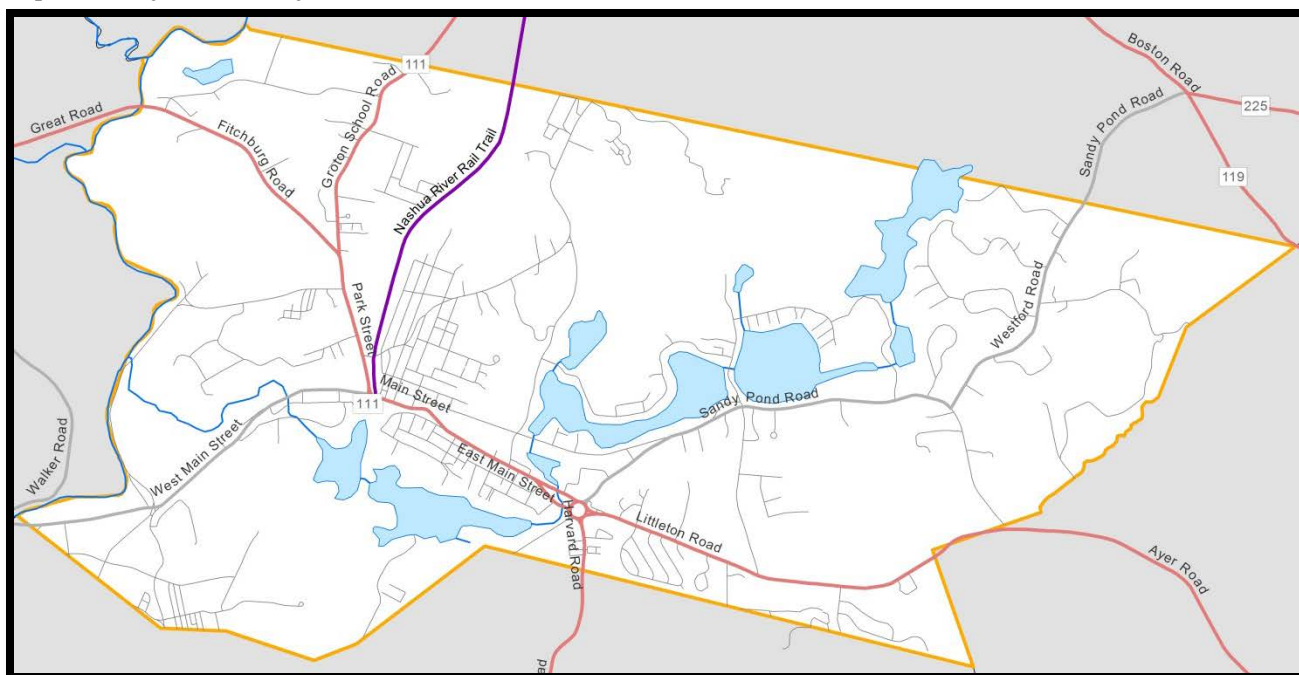
## Transportation Goals:

1. Adequately fund and maintain roadways, trails, sidewalks, public parking, and commuter facilities to ensure universal access and reasonable transportation choices for residents, workers, and businesses.
2. Implement intersection and traffic calming improvements to improve circulation and public safety.
3. Implement Parking Management Plan to improve parking in the downtown area.
4. Improve and enhance Ayer's pedestrian and bicycle access by providing a safe, scenic, interconnected system of roads, sidewalks and trails.
5. Provide train commuters with parking and access improvements to promote the use of commuter rail in the community
6. Ensure the operations of rail freight do not have a negative impact on the residents, natural resources and image of the community
7. Continue accepting private roads in Town



## Roadways

**Map TC-1 - Ayer Roadways**



Within Ayer's 9.8 square miles, lies approximately 41 centerline miles of roadway.<sup>1</sup> Note that this does not include the roads in the Devens Enterprise Zone. They are maintained by MassDevelopment Corporation.

Of the 41 miles of road, they are owned / maintained as follows:

Town of Ayer • 32 Miles      MassDOT • 3.9 miles      Private • 6.1 Miles

**Table TC-1: Ayer Traffic Counts (2016)**

Street Name	Two-Way Count
W. Main St. (at Park St.)	16,780
Park St.	13,462
Fitchburg Rd.	6,751
Groton School Rd.	5,423
<b>Carleton Rotary Exits:</b>	
Ayer Rd. (Rte. 111)	13,199
Littleton Rd. (Rte. 2a)	13,392
Sandy Pond Rd.	4,307
Willow Rd.	4,401

Source: MassDOT 2017, Transportation Data Mgmt. System

The roads are largely maintained by the Ayer Department of Public Works, with exception of state Route 2A (Littleton Road and Park St / Fitchburg Road), which is under the authority of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT). Private roads are maintained by the abutters or a Home Owners association. The Town provides snow plowing on private roads in Town but only provides minimal maintenance as required for emergency access.

In addition to roadways, the town also provides and maintains the sidewalks, crosswalks, curbing, traffic lights, and signage that are accessory and necessary to the operation of the roads.

With roughly as many vehicles registered in Ayer as residents,<sup>2</sup> the roads are of critical importance to both residents and businesses in Ayer.

<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Community Comparison Report, 2017

<sup>2</sup> The Massachusetts Department of Revenue reported 7,992 vehicles registered in Ayer in 2012.

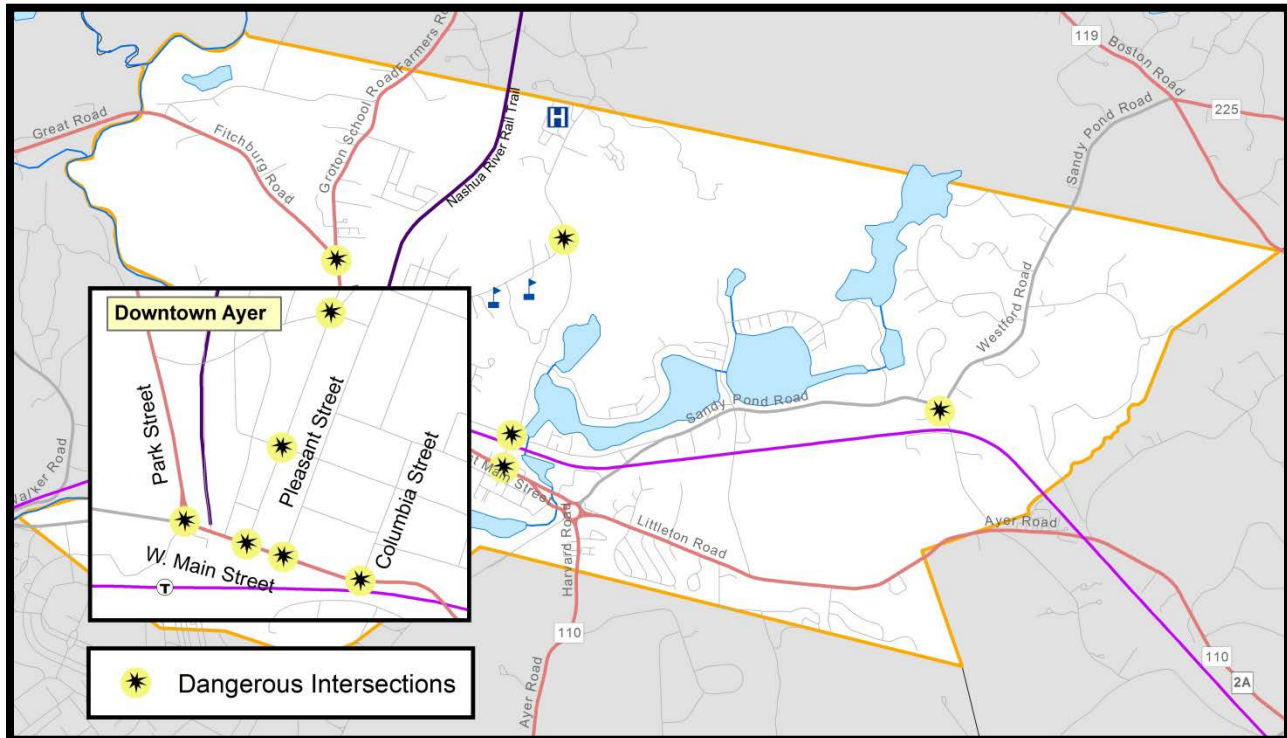




Peak traffic volumes in Ayer generally coincide with the departures and arrivals of the MBTA Commuter Rail trains and nearly 17,000 vehicles pass through Downtown Ayer every day.<sup>3</sup> During peak times, the Ayer Police Department assists by directing traffic through downtown at the intersection of Main Street and Park Street and Groton and Park Streets. According to MassDOT, traffic counts in Ayer are increasing at approximately 1 percent per year. Increased volumes on the roadway require creative design solutions and increased use of multi-modal transportation options to offset impacts.

### Problem Intersections

#### Map TC-2 - Dangerous Intersections



Most of Ayer's traffic is funneled through the downtown (Main Street and Park Street) including a significant amount of truck traffic. The seven intersections and pedestrian crossings on Main Street, including the intersections with Park, Pleasant, Columbia and Washington Streets, and are among Ayer's most difficult intersections for vehicles, pedestrians, and cyclists to navigate. Peak demands for downtown street parking result in vehicles parked adjacent to intersections blocking critical sight lines needed to make safe turning maneuvers from side streets entering onto Main Street. Parked vehicles also prevent drivers from seeing pedestrians in crosswalks and create unsafe conditions for both road users. Further, the lack of signal at West Main Street and Park Streets and wide crosswalk (pictured below) can create a "no man's land" for pedestrians.



The intersection at W. Main Street and Park Street provides access between the MBTA Commuter Rail Station and Parking Lot. Crossing can be a challenge for both pedestrians and motorists to navigate.

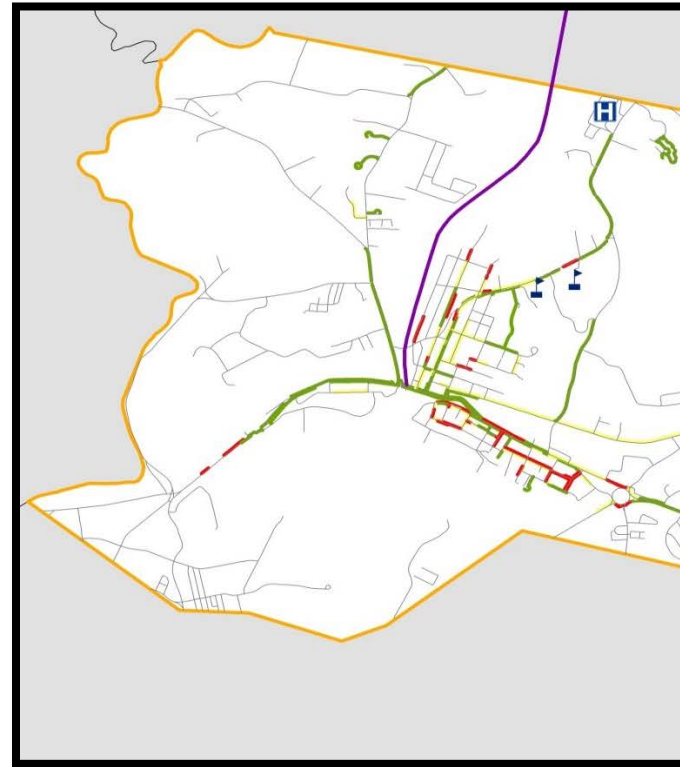
The intersections at Groton-Harvard Road and Central Avenue and East Main Street also present challenges and tend to yield the highest number and most serious accidents in Ayer. As these

Massachusetts Department of Transportation, 2016. Figure includes two-way trips; there were 9,928 eastbound trips, and 6,853 westbound trips measured at Main Street and Park Street by DOT in 2016.



intersections are not signalized, heavy traffic may prompt motorists to make riskier maneuvers in order to complete turning sequences resulting in accidents. Other problematic intersections include the confluence of Park Street, Fitchburg Road, and Groton School Road and intersections along Pleasant Street at Pearl and Groton Streets, and Washington Street and Groton-Harvard Road.

Frederick Carlton Circle on Route 2A is the largest intersection in Ayer. This is the main point of entry into Ayer from the south is via Harvard Road (Route 110/111) and from the east is via Littleton Road (Route 110/2A). These two roads converge at this rotary, a five-way junction that also includes Barnum Road, Sandy Pond Road and East Main Street (Route 111/2A). All three numbered routes are designated as minor arterial/major collectors. The large heavily landscaped circle, located just east of the downtown area, is an important gateway to the town and has several commercial developments on the perimeter. There have been past discussions about changing this from a rotary to a signalized intersection, however the rotary functions well and MassDOT is proposing some minor improvements to improve the efficiency.



Ayer maintains approximately 22.3 miles of sidewalk. Sidewalks are a critical component to providing a safe mechanism for pedestrian circulation and reducing automobile reliance within a community by providing access from residential areas to places of interest.



Ayer completed a Complete Streets prioritization plan in 2017. This plan identifies gaps in the sidewalk network and will be used as a basis for implementing improvements.

### Complete Streets

*Complete Streets are streets for everyone. They are designed and operated to enable safe access for all*

#### Map TC-3 - Downtown Ayer Sidewalks



*medians*

- *Bicycle facilities*
- *Accessible Public*

Currently, there are three key locations within Ayer that are not completely accessible by sidewalk – Sandy Pond Beach, Perone Park and the Shop N Save grocery store. Connections between these locations, the Nashua River Rail Trail and the commuter rail stop should be a priority in upcoming years, as well as the installation of sidewalks in all new developments.

### Truck Routes

Truck routes through Ayer are a major traffic related issue and requires striking a balance between the needs and desires of residential abutters, local businesses and the businesses they rely upon trucking as part of their operations for shipping and receiving purposes. Ayer's Board of Selectmen has the authority to exclude truck traffic from local roads and establish truck routes. Changes to truck routes or new exclusions can be requested by residents to the Board of Selectmen; however, any consideration of such changes should require notification of, and input from, the local businesses that may be impacted. Prior failures to notify businesses of proposed changes have impacted the relationships and level of trust some businesses have in the Town and considerably more care should be taken in the future to review such proposals and receive

appropriate feedback. As many industrial and commercial businesses live side by side with residential neighbors in Ayer, it is to their benefit when businesses work with their neighbors to manage the impacts of their activities. Reducing idling times and the utilization of engine air brakes, maintaining consistent routes, having well signed delivery entrances, ensuring truckers are aware of local rules and regulations, and other such efforts will help residents and business live more peacefully alongside one another.

### Complete Streets

Ayer is a Complete Streets community. The Board of Selectmen adopted Ayer's Complete Streets policy in 2016, and a Complete Streets study was completed under the direction of Ayer's Department of Public Works. The Complete Streets plan highlights 21 different roadway improvements ranging from the installation of handicap accessible crosswalks, curbing, and ramps, repairing and installing new sidewalks, to the installation of new bicycle lanes and racks. The designation as a Complete Streets community makes Ayer eligible for certain types of funding through MassDOT to assist with design and construction of complete streets facilities.

Using a Complete Streets approach to designing roadways and sidewalks as repairs and improvements are made helps to ensure streets are safe for people of all ages and abilities, and balance the needs of different transportation modes. Complete streets benefit the Town's economy by providing a pleasant pedestrian experience and inviting streetscapes that urge residents to spend time downtown and patronize local businesses, and can improve public health by connecting residents to recreational opportunities. Complete



streets provide access and support the transit needs of all age groups. For more information about the Town's Complete Streets policy, please visit the Town's website at:

## Parking

**Map 4 - Downtown Ayer Parking**



Parking is a valuable resource that is provided both on-street, in the form of public parking, and off-street, which can be public or private parking depending on the ownership and management of the lot. The availability, location, and safety of parking facilities impacts the viability of residential and commercial districts, and is an issue most acutely felt in Ayer in the Downtown area, and also at Sandy Pond Beach during the summer season. Parking management seeks to ensure that there is a reasonable amount of parking available to the meet the needs of residents, commuters, and businesses and minimize conflicts between different types of users.

### Downtown Parking Management Study

Parking in the Main Street business district is consistently an issue brought up from residents, business owners and commuters. To better manage this resource, the Town completed a parking management study in 2017. The goals of the study are:

- Manage parking through optimization, pricing, regulation and the phased supply of parking spaces;
- Designate specific on-street and off-street parking regulations and pricing on area maps;
- Identify necessary signs and locations;
- Include a phased implementation timeline and monitoring plan;
- Establish a parking management program that will encourage investment in Ayer, encourage additional residential development, and enhance the business climate.

Ayer currently has approximately 619 parking spaces located both on and off street in Downtown Ayer. Of these spaces, 170 are located on-street along portions of Lawton, Pleasant, Cambridge, Main, West, Washington and Columbia Streets and Central Avenue. Those spaces located on Main Street (Columbia Street to Park Street) are the most heavily utilized with some periods in the evening where there is no vacancy, and the peak utilization for all street parking spaces occurs in the evening between 5pm-8pm. In addition, there are 449 off-street parking spaces; 80 of those spaces are located in the Nashua River Rail Trail parking lot, 20 are located in the Town-owned lot across from the rail trail parking, 12 are located in the Town Hall lot, and the remainder is on private property. The rail trail parking and adjacent town-owned lots are the most heavily utilized of the off-

street parking lots, with approximately 80 and 90 percent (respectively) of spaces occupied during business hours.<sup>4</sup>

Parking strategies recommended in the study include:

- Marked spaces on Main Street
- Shared parking at private lots for customers and employees
- On-Street parking permits for neighborhood residents and businesses
- Permit parking only on specific streets
- Pay kiosk for O Park Street lot
- Improved signage – Time restrictions, wayfinding

It is important that the implementation of these strategies is coordinated with the construction of the new MART parking facility.

### **MART Commuter Facility and Depot Square Redevelopment**

The Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART) received a federal grant to construct additional parking at the Nashua River Rail Trail parking lot off of Groton Street and east of Park Street. The purpose of this project is to provide additional parking for the MBTA commuters as well as parking for businesses in the downtown area. The project is in the final design phase and includes a parking deck. Construction is anticipated to begin in Summer 2018. The project also includes upgrades to the access from Main Street to the commuter rail stop. This includes a new crosswalk on Main Street, a drop-off roadway with sidewalks and fencing and a pedestrian plaza.

The rail trail parking lot is being expanded from the current 80 spaces to 160 spaces which will improve the parking in Town but will create additional traffic impacts on Park Street at Groton Street and the intersection of Park Street and Main Street. There will be free spaces provided for the rail trail users, but the remaining spaces will pay a daily parking fee.

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<sup>4</sup> WorldTech Engineering, Town of Ayer Parking Demand Management Program, Parking Utilization Summary, 2017.





**Figure 1 – Concept Drawing of Proposed Parking Deck – Weston & Sampson Engineers (2017)**

## Public Transit

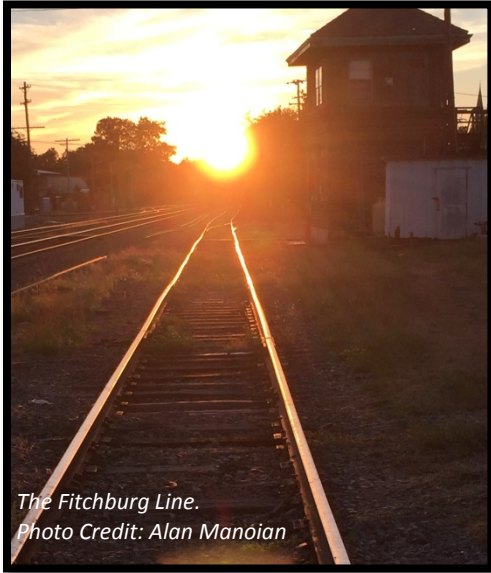
Ayer is currently served by the Fitchburg line of the MBTA commuter rail, a limited service MART bus operating between the commuter rail, Devens, Nashoba Valley Medical Center and Ayer Shirley High School. There is also a bus to serve seniors and disabled residents, which is provided by MART and staffed and funded through the Council on Aging (COA) and has both scheduled routes as well as on-demand services.

The Ayer Commuter Rail station is located 36 miles from Boston's North Station. The Fitchburg line accommodates approximately 5,000 one-way passengers every day; approximately 435 of which board in Ayer. The Ayer station is the 73<sup>rd</sup> busiest commuter rail station out of the 133 stations that are part of the system, and is located in Zone 8, where tickets are currently priced one-way at \$11.50. The current train schedule includes 17 round trip trains on week days, which depart from and arrive in Ayer nearly hourly to make the 70 minute journey to and from North Station.<sup>5</sup>

The limited service MART bus line began operation as a pilot program in early 2017, and has been made a permanent service. The bus line runs six times a day with three morning trips and three evening trips and makes stops at the Ayer Commuter Rail Station, the Ayer-Shirley Regional High School, the Nashoba Valley Medical Center, and the Carlton Rotary within Ayer, several points within Devens, and also has stops in Shirley and Littleton. The primary purpose of this bus is to improve the connections between the commuter rail stations and area businesses that are not located within walking distance of the station.

## Freight Rail

<sup>5</sup> Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority, Ridership and Service Statistics, 14<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2014.



The railroad is an intrinsic part of Ayer's history, and Ayer has long served as a junction for rail lines headed to Canada, the Midwest, and points south which continues at present. The rail lines, once part of the Boston & Maine Railroad, were acquired in 1983 by Guilford Transportation Industries. Guilford then acquired Pan Am World Airways in 1997 and the company changed their name to Pan Am Systems. In 2006, the rail lines were rebranded as Pan Am Railways. In 2009, Pan Am Railways (PAR) partnered with Norfolk Southern Railway (NS) to form Pan Am Southern (PAS) with a goal of improving freight service between Boston and Albany, New York. PAS has constructed new and expanded intermodal and automotive terminal capacity in the Albany area, as well as a new automotive terminal in Ayer and added capacity at the existing Ayer intermodal terminal. The construction of these terminals, and a similar facility in Worcester that is owned by CSX, has had a profound impact on

freight rail in New England and resulted the cessation of much of the freight rail service in Maine and other outlying areas of New England due to insufficient demand. The result of reductions in service to outlying areas matters to Ayer because those former freight users (who are not currently served) are sending goods intended for freight rail shipping in containers via trucks to be loaded onto trains in Ayer.

There are six freight lines and branches traversing Ayer: 1) Greenville Industrial Track, which is owned by Pan Am Railways and heads northwesterly roughly in the direction of Fitchburg Road, 2) Worcester Main Line, which is owned and operated in partnership by CSX Railways and Pan Am Southern and enters Ayer from the south and terminates at Depot Square, 3) the Fitchburg Line, which is owned by the MBTA and operated by the MBTA and Pan Am Southern and runs through Ayer from east to west, 4) the Stony Brook branch, which is owned and operated by Pan Am, and runs off of the Fitchburg line through the northeast corner of Ayer and connects with lines headed to New Hampshire further north, 5) the New England Millbury Loop, which is owned by Pan Am and services the industrial properties near Nemco Way and New England Way, and 6) the Devens Trade Transport branch, which is owned by the Federal Government and serviced by Pan Am, and provides rail connections to Devens businesses within Ayer's boundaries.

Ayer's recent history with the railways has been somewhat contentious due to environmental issues. In 2006, approximately 947 gallons of diesel oil were spilled from an engine parked at Pan Am's Ayer facilities. The spill was not reported in a timely manner and resulted in criminal charges against Pan Am Railways, Springfield Terminal Railway, Boston & Maine Corp. and Maine Central Railroad, were filed for not reporting the spill in a timely manner and for an active attempt to cover up the spill. In 2009, Pan Am Railways and its subsidiaries were found guilty and issued the largest corporate fines in Massachusetts history. Following this incident, there were further controversies in 2011 regarding stormwater management at Pan Am's rail-to-truck intermodal facilities in Ayer. These facilities are located near the Spectacle Pond public drinking water supply wellheads, making resource protection a critical concern. Most recently, Splash Products, an Ayer business, released 7,000 gallons of methanol when the crew pumping methanol from a tank truck to a rail car failed to hook up a hose to

the railcar and spilled methanol directly on the ground in a sudden release in 2016. That site currently monitored by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

In addition to environmental concerns, there are a number of Ayer businesses who utilize Pan Am's rail services and have rail access on their properties. Businesses located on the Stony Brook Branch, including those that connect to the Stony Brook branch from the New England Millbury Loop, and also those located on Greenville Industrial track, have independently reported issues with freight rail service during interviews, focus groups, and in surveys that were part of the Ayer Master Plan Update process. The signals for these branches are operated by hand and businesses can experience frequent delays, for days at a time, before an engineer is available to switch the signals at the rail yards to allow stopped and sidetracked trains to proceed. Persistent signal issues and a failure to perform snow removal create hardships for Ayer's industrial and manufacturing base that depends on the railways. The Town's government works in partnership with Ayer's businesses to address service issues with Pan Am and incremental progress is being made to reduce delays and improve rail operations.

## Nashua River Rail Trail



The right-of-way used by the Nashua River Trail was originally built by Worcester & Nashua Railroad, a system organized in 1845. The system expanded for a number of years by absorbing smaller competing rail lines, but started falling into disuse after World War I. The system repeatedly consolidated as the years passed as minor (and occasionally major) segments were abandoned when customers were lost. The 11.6 miles of track between Ayer and Hollis that is part of the Nashua River Rail Trail remained in use until 1981 to serve remaining paper mills. The line was abandoned when the paper mills closed and the tracks were soon removed. The Hollis Branch was then purchased by the

Department of Conservation and Recreation in 1987, and Mass Highway completed the Nashua River Rail Trail between 2001 and 2002. The rail trail was officially opened and dedicated on October 25, 2002. The rail trail extends for 12.3 miles connecting Ayer to Groton, Pepperell, Dunstable, and terminates just south of the Nashua, New Hampshire border. The rail trail in Ayer is accessed at the 80 car parking lot (which doubles as commuter rail parking), and has period access points throughout Ayer. The creation of a new access point between Ayer-Shirley Regional High School and the rail trail would help improve the rail trail's local connectivity and usability, but otherwise the trail is a regional draw for cyclists, pedestrians, inline skaters wheelchairs, and cross country skiers.



## Future Technologies

Ayer's transportation network in upcoming years will be impacted by technological advances in transportation modes. These advances will change how parking facilities, road networks, neighborhoods, and streetscapes are designed, how goods and services are distributed, where people live in Ayer and how transportation services are delivered. The changes seen in transportation in upcoming decades include:



**Autonomous vehicles (AVs)** are driverless cars that self- drive. AVs are currently being developed and are already available on the roads. It is anticipated by 2060 that the world will be populated by AVs.<sup>6</sup> There will be a significant impact on urban design – and

provide new opportunities. The provision of parking, for example, could be revolutionized as parking would no longer need to be located as close to the occupants' destination. Parking facilities for vehicles could be located more remotely, allowing the AV to drop off its occupant in a designated drop off zones that could replace street parking, and then be directed to a parking facility away from pedestrian activity. Large swaths of land currently dedicated to parking could be converted for other uses, such as parklands and pedestrian malls, and could ease stormwater management.

**Vehicle subscription services**, aka rideshare or ride hailing subscription services (e.g. Uber or Lyft), rather

### Concept Drawing of the impacts of AVs on Streetscape Design

than individual ownership, may become a dominant model for AV transportation. Such a change would reduce the amount of parking needed in residential areas. Further, as AVs will be able to communicate and will navigate based on optimized routes, traffic signals and stops will no longer be a necessity. This will present a very real change in how roads are designed as these vehicles can utilize narrower lanes (not to mention smaller parking garages that do not require human comforts such as ventilation and light), and will not require the same amount of space that we currently dedicate to roadways.

**Personal rapid transit (PRT)**, also referred to as podcars, are a public transportation system /network that uses small automated vehicles operating on specially built guideways. PRT vehicles are sized for individual or small group travel, typically carrying three to six passengers per vehicle. The guideways are arranged in a network topology, with stations located on sidings, and with frequent merge/diverge points. This allows for nonstop, point-to-point travel, bypassing all intermediate stations. This mode of transportation is ideally suited to densely

<sup>6</sup> Envisioning Florida's Future: Transportation and Land Use in an Automated Vehicle World, Florida Department of Transportation, 2016

populated areas or for point to point transportation from a hub, such as the commuter rail station to a large industrial park or employer.

## Public Input Issues and Ideas

The public input process of this planning process included surveys and public meetings to identify issues that residents and business identify. The key transportation issues that were identified include:

1. Speeding on West Main Street
2. Traffic Congestion during commute hours
3. Traffic lights at Park St and Main St, Washington St and Main St
4. Safety for Pedestrians at Crosswalks (install cameras; take picture of plate, mail ticket)
5. More sidewalks and cross walks
6. Semi-trucks banned from downtown
7. Better traffic patterns
8. Improved sight-lines at Main Street from Washington Street
9. Intersection at Park Street and Groton School Road
10. Reduce traffic volume
11. Handicapped accessibility
12. Better Parking
13. Public transportation available at train and in town.
14. Improved cycling, bus service, taxi, etc. access from commuter rail to local businesses and residences

These issues will be used to develop the formative issues and strategies to be implemented in the Master Plan.

## Specific Transportation Issues

1. Road condition and funding for road repairs
  - a. Neighborhood streets have low Pavement Condition Index values
  - b. Chapter 90 funding has been reduced limiting the annual road repaving
  - c. Back log of work to repair / replace buried infrastructure impacts repaving schedules
  - d. TIP funding for East Main Street and Main Street
2. Sidewalks
  - a. Condition and replacement
  - b. Gaps in sidewalk network
  - c. ADA compliance
3. Parking for businesses, residents and commuters in the Main Street area
  - a. MART Lot
  - b. Parking management plan implementation
4. Truck traffic
5. Traffic at Main Street / Park Street intersection
6. Limited commuter options between rail depot and large employers
7. Rail traffic throughout the Town
  - a. Noise
  - b. Traffic delays
  - c. Potential for accidents and spills
8. Bicycle paths and safety
  - a. Improve bicycle path links / routes in Town





## Formative Issues

Assets and Opportunities	Challenges and Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Proximity</b> – Ayer has excellent transportation access that makes the Town within range of several commutersheds giving residents a wide range of employment, recreation and housing opportunities.</li> <li>• <b>Complete Streets</b> – As a Complete Streets community, Ayer is eligible for funding through the state and other organizations to advance Complete Streets concepts to ensure that roadways are usable to people of all ages and abilities, are served by wayfinding signs, and offer choice with respect to transportation mode.</li> <li>• <b>ADA Compliance</b> – Compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires upgrades to pedestrian facilities to ensure that sidewalks and curbing is accessible to people of all abilities. ADA improvements are incrementally being performed as part of the Complete Streets plan, making it easier for Ayer's residents to navigate the Town.</li> <li>• <b>Compact Development</b> – Ayer is in the process of updating its Zoning Bylaw and Subdivision Bylaws. The revisions of these regulations give Ayer the opportunity to reevaluate current standards that encourage development that is fiscally unsustainable for the Town to maintain. New regulations, encouraging more compact development, and infill development, reduce the needs to construct new public works facilities such as sewer and water lines, or roadways.</li> <li>• <b>Commuter Rail</b> – The ability to access a major commuter rail line, with service to the greater Boston Area is a major advantage for the Town.</li> <li>• <b>Increased Commuter Parking</b> – The new MBTA parking facility will help provide adequate parking for local commuters. Currently, commuters occupy limited parking split between two surface lots, and frequently resort to using street parking which impacts local downtown businesses. The ability to manage overflow parking in one location will adequately serve commuters, while providing additional parking opportunities for cyclists and walker.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Funding</b> – Funding of transportation improvements is a significant challenge facing Ayer's DPW. The needs of the stormwater, wastewater, and water systems and facilities are extensive, and expensive to address. While water and wastewater are operated as utilities and user fees are levied to help support those systems, there is no provision in place to address the stormwater system, which keeps the Town from flooding and discharging pollutants into the groundwater supply. Long term funding solutions is absolutely critical to Ayer's ability to support its residential and business community.</li> <li>• <b>First/Last Mile Transportation</b> – Many of Ayer's businesses are not currently accessible by transit. Businesses like the Nashoba Valley Medical Center, Nasoya Foods and Catania Oils are located too far from the commuter rail to benefit from its presence, creating transportation difficulties for employees. Further, a lack of sufficient truck routes creates tension between businesses and residents.</li> <li>• <b>Parking</b> – Much of Ayer's Downtown parking is held in private ownership, and access to parking is determined by individual property owners. Coordination is required to ensure that Downtown businesses have sufficient parking to meet the demand of patrons and workers, while also managing the needs of commuters and rail trail visitors.</li> <li>• <b>Traffic</b> – Most of Ayer's traffic is directed through Downtown Ayer, including heavy truck traffic. Ensuring pedestrian safety in those conditions will remain a challenge.</li> <li>• <b>Future Technologies</b> – The impact emerging technologies will have on Ayer's transportation network could be beneficial in solving some of Ayer's connectivity issues while also disrupting urban design standards and allowing for reduced parking and impervious surfaces resulting from roads and parking lots designed to serve human operators.</li> </ul>



## Recommendations:

- Coordinate underground utility work with paving schedules to reduce recently repaved roads getting torn up to install new infrastructure to reduce need to repave as frequently on some streets.
- Mandate new development or redevelopment provided public sidewalks and easements during site plan review. Construct new sidewalks in critical areas to increase pedestrian safety (such as near Stop n Save on Fitchburg Road to Park Street, as well as near the schools.
- Provide wayfinding signage and explore agreements with private property owners with parking to better management parking circulation.
- Continue to manage large volumes of truck traffic by restricting their travel to specific roads to reduce residential conflicts.
- Install a traffic signal or adjust the geometry (i.e. install a rotary) at the intersection at Park Street and Main Street to improve safety.
- Support the MART bus that connects the commuter rails stations in Ayer and Littleton to Devens, Nashoba Valley Hospital, and Ayer's industrial districts in addition to other points to reduce automobile dependency and employee tardiness.
- Provide more linkages to the Rail Trail and better connect it to shared roadways popular amongst cyclists.



# Infrastructure

## Infrastructure

### DPW

Engineering & Admin

Streets & Sidewalks Division

Water Department

Wastewater Division

Solid Waste Department

### Water

4 Wells , 2 Water Tanks

2 Treatment Facilities

47 miles of water mains

### Wastewater

1 Treatment Plant

19 pumping stations

37 miles of mains

### Stormwater

1,240 Catch basins

97 Outfalls

109 Culverts

### Solid Waste

1 Transfer Station –  
Recycling and Solid Waste

No curb side pickup

Sewage sludge removal  
needs regional support

## Introduction

This chapter examines Ayer's Town infrastructure and public utilities. The Town has a strong interest in continuing to provide high-quality services including water, wastewater, stormwater and solid waste. Alternative funding sources and creative partnerships need to be pursued to ensure that these services continue to meet the high standards of the community. Many of the utilities within Ayer were constructed decades ago and systematic repair and replacements are needed. Infrastructure planning will focus on upgrades, meeting existing and future regulatory requirements, sustainability and energy conservation.

The Department of Public Works actively monitors each of their systems and commences with frequent and critical studies to improve the systems and maintain regulatory compliance. DPW studies focus on the condition of the water system, both with testing for contaminants, and also to increase efficiency by installing modern water meters and perform pipe maintenance for compliance with state permits. Similarly, DPW studies their facilities need to ensure their equipment, staff, and workspaces meet the Town's needs for their provision of services. The transfer station also falls under DPW's jurisdiction. There have been attempts to bring curbside pickup to Ayer, but they have been unsuccessful. Finally, DPW performs frequent studies of Ayer's roadways and parking (discussed in the Transportation & Circulation Chapter).

## Infrastructure Goals:

1. Continue to provide a safe and reliable drinking water supply to Ayer residents and businesses.
2. Maintain and protect Ayer's wastewater system to ensure that current and future development can be supported in a manner that is safe, sanitary, and protects the public health.
3. Protect the Town's water resources and reduce localized flooding through effective stormwater management practices.
4. Provide solid waste and recycling opportunities for the Town's residents minimizing waste volumes, environmental impacts and maximizing reuse and recycling.
5. Reduce the energy consumption of for Town services



## Department of Public Works

The Ayer Department of Public Works (DPW) is staffed by 23 full time employees and is charged with maintaining and improving Ayer's infrastructure – streets and sidewalks, roads, trails, public water system, wastewater system, stormwater system, solid waste / recycling and municipal streetlights – and ensuring its safe, continued and efficient operation. DPW works in partnership with the residents, businesses, institutions and State agencies to provide a high level of service with great attention toward future system needs. Residents and businesses are able to connect with DPW through an online service request form, a stormwater hotline, and standard email and telephone contacts. Further, DPW routinely conducts public outreach as part of their operations to keep residents informed about upcoming work – whether the work involved is construction projects, chemical treatments to the ponds to reduce invasive species and improve pond health, or even to provide tips on how to reduce environmental impacts when caring for a lawn. While upcoming financial needs of Ayer's aging infrastructure is significant, Ayer's DPW has been proactive in studying each of its systems, and their individual components, to identify the most immediate and pressing concerns each system is facing. Further, in efforts to reduce the burden of paying for these improvements on residents, DPW consistently seeks and obtains grant funding to complete high priority studies and implement plan findings.

Maintaining the Town infrastructure requires a significant amount of vehicles, equipment and licensing.

## Water



Providing a safe and reliable water supply is a highly regulated operation. Ayer's water system provides potable drinking water and fire protection to over 95% of the Town including several large food and beverage processing industries. The water supply meets all State and Federal Safe Drinking Water Regulations and is operated by the DPW Water Division.

Ayer's water supply system was started in 1896 with a supply well near Balch Pond and a water storage reservoir on Washington Street. It has expanded over the years with the addition of new

water supplies, treatment plants, water tanks and distribution piping. The ground water supply system currently consists of the following facilities: for four wells – located at Spectacle Pond and Grove Pond, two treatment facilities, and two storage tanks. **The Town of Ayer's water distribution system consists of approximately 47 miles of water mains ranging in diameter from four to sixteen inches. Approximately 9 miles of pipe is over 100 years old.**

**Table I-1 Ayer Water System**

Facility	Capacity
Spectacle Pond Wells	2.0 mgd
Grove Pond Wells	2.7 mgd
Spectacle Pond Filtration Facility	2.8 mgd
Grove Pond Treatment Facility	N/A
Washington Street Storage Tank (1995)	1.5 mg
Pingry Hill Storage Tank (2016)	1 mg

Source: Ayer DPW, 2017

The Town of Ayer has two groundwater supply sources - the Spectacle Pond wells and Grove Pond wells. The Spectacle Pond supply source consists of two wells located in the Merrimack River Basin. The two wells at the Grove Pond site had only been used as an emergency backup source since the late 1980's due to high concentrations of iron and manganese in the groundwater. However, in 1998, the Grove

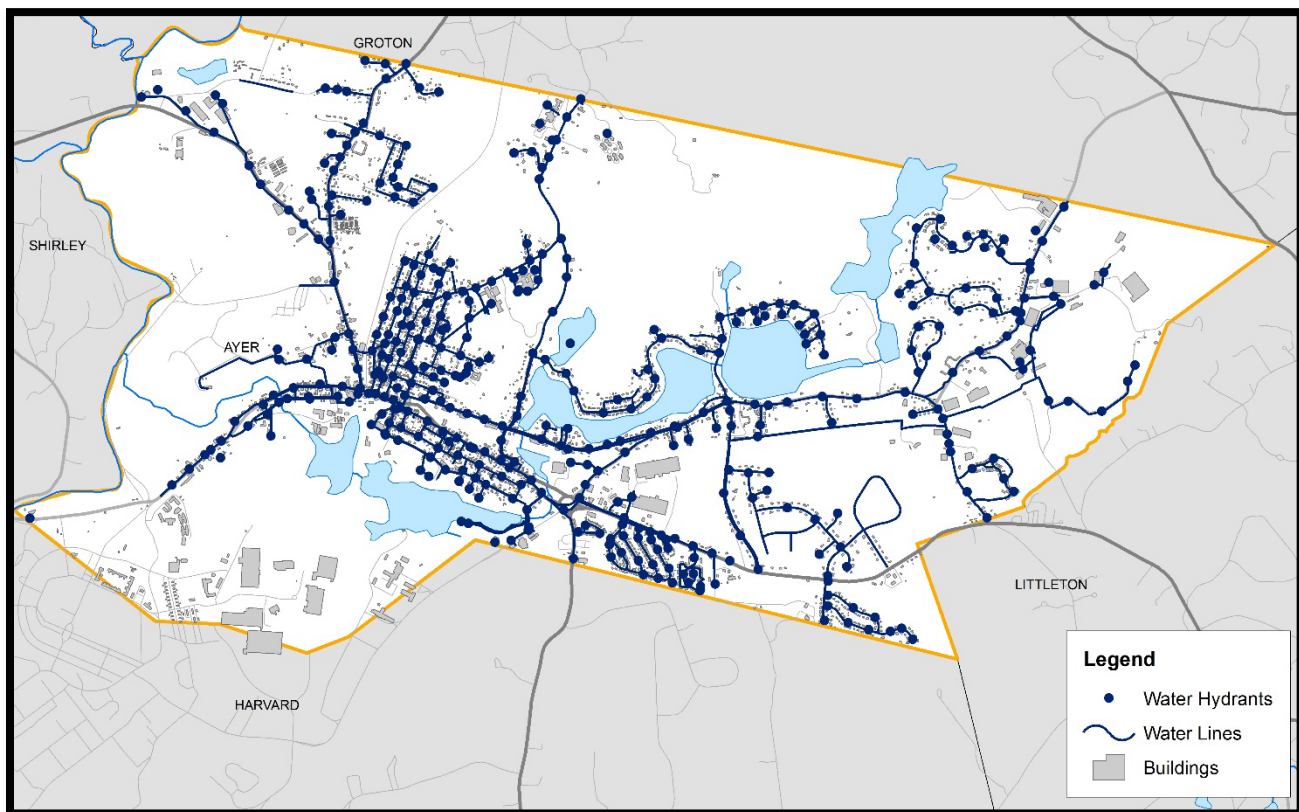
Pond wells were redeveloped and a water filtration facility constructed. These improvements have enabled the Town to utilize the Grove Pond water supply source again on a regular basis. In addition to the groundwater supply sources, the Town has three interconnections with adjoining water systems in case of emergency.

The existing Grove Pond Water Treatment Facility treats water from three water supply wells, Grove Pond Wells No. 1 and 2, with a combined yield of 2.7 mgd (million gallons per day) and a permitted maximum daily rate of 2.0 mgd. The treatment facility uses pressure greensand filters to remove iron, manganese and arsenic from the water, Potassium hydroxide and chlorine are added for corrosion control and disinfection, respectively.

The Spectacle Pond well site is located in the northeast section of the distribution system near the border of Littleton and Ayer. The site consists of two gravel packed wells. A 2.8 mgd capacity water filtration facility on site uses greensand filtration for the removal of iron, manganese, turbidity and color. Sodium hypochlorite is used to oxidize the iron and manganese and provides a chlorine residual in the finished water. The two wells have permitted average daily withdrawal volume of 1.16 MGD and a maximum daily withdrawal of 2.14 MGD.

The Town has two distribution storage tanks, one 1.5 million gallon (MG) welded steel water storage tank located on Washington Street behind the Page Hilltop Elementary School. The tank was constructed in 1995. The other tank is 1 prestressed concrete tank with a 1.0 MG capacity and is located on Pingry Hill off of Woodland Way. This tank was completed in 2016. Both tanks have an overflow elevation of 442 feet, which sets the pressure gradient for the Town.

**Map I-1 - Ayer's Water System**





## Water Usage

The water system currently has an average day water demand of 1.45 MGD with a maximum day demand of 2.5 MGD. The per capita usage is approximately 60 GPD. Water rates are established on an annual basis by the Board of Selectmen, with a split rate system for commercial and residential users. **The commercial and industrial usage accounts for approximately 65% of the total water usage, and pay a higher rate than residential customers.** Should Ayer lose a large industrial consumer, the Town's ability to fund the long-term maintenance needs and routine operations of the water system could be severely impacted.

## Ongoing Evaluations and Improvements

### DPW's Water System Forecast



#### Planned Improvements:

- Replacement of the 1896 cast iron water main in East Main Street with a new 16-inch ductile iron water main.
- Construction of an additional well at the Grove Pond wellfield, including improvements to the water treatment facility.
- Construction of a replacement well for Spectacle Pond Well 2.
- Annual water main improvement budget of \$250,000 to replace aging water mains throughout town.
- Installing new water meters with radio transmitters throughout the Town.
- Implementing new water conservation measures.
- Constructing water main improvements to improve reliability and water pressure for the Groton School Road area, Wright Road area and an emergency interconnection with Devens on Barnum Road.

#### System Needs:

1. Potential need for additional treatment at Grove Pond Wellfield due to groundwater contamination from Fort Devens.
2. The water distribution system is composed of aging pipes. It is estimated that the cost to replace the 9 miles of pipes over 100 years old will be \$8.1 million.
3. Loss of a large industrial user will have a significant impact on the sewer rate structure.
4. The Town needs to identify an additional long term water supply source to meet future needs and begin the process of approving the supply.

Ayer's DPW is very active in evaluating and upgrading the Town's aging water infrastructure. In 2013, DPW developed a Water Distribution System Improvement Program to review the condition of Ayer's pipes, where over 65,000 feet of pipe was found to be in poor condition at a totally cost of \$11.4m to fix. Further, DPW monitors Ayer's water quality and issues annual reports highlighting current conditions and upcoming concerns. The long term capital needs to maintain and improve Ayer's water system are significant, as is common in any

system of its size. The needs range from the replacement of aging pipes and connections to upgrading filtration and treatment facilities to meet evolving regulatory requirements and respond to new contaminants. Ayer's DPW engages in both short term and long range planning, and operates based on a five-year Capital Improvement Program. The continued study and maintenance of Ayer's water system is integral to ensuring the public water supply is well protected.

## Wastewater



The Town of Ayer owns and maintains a town-wide wastewater collection and treatment system. The system was initially constructed in 1942, serving the Main Street/Washington Street area, East Main Street Area and West Main Street Area. As the Town has grown, the sewer system has expanded to serve the majority of the Town. The operation and maintenance of the sewer system and wastewater treatment plant is performed by the Wastewater Division of the Department of Public Works (DPW).

The Town of Ayer has a large industrial and commercial presence contributing to the wastewater flows. Approximately 90% of the industries, businesses and residences in Ayer tie into the sanitary sewer system. **Non-residential sewer use accounts for approximately 54% of the total flow.** There are 3 Significant Industrial Users (SIU) who require a pre-treatment permit and dispose of some of their wastewater off-site; these users are generally involved in food and beverage manufacturing and have greater needs for managing wastewater than average users.

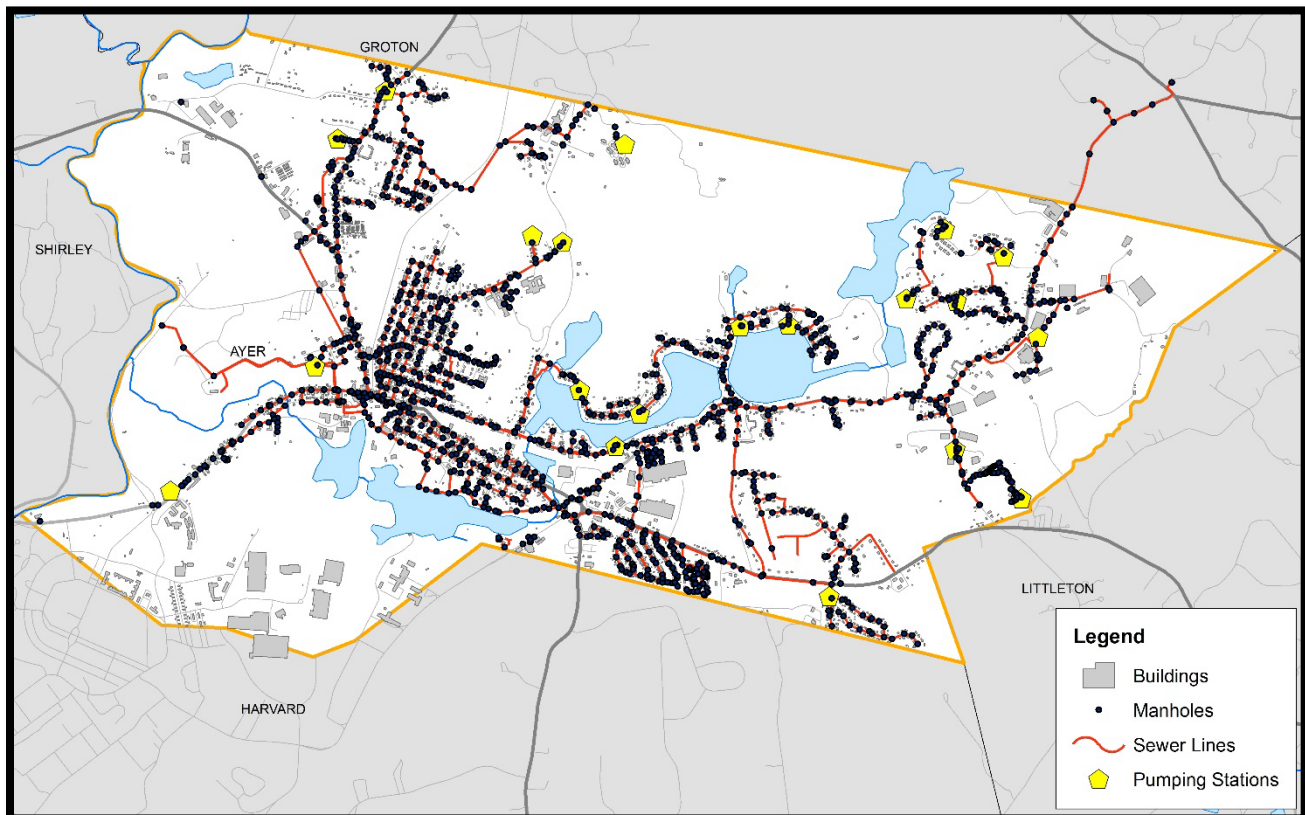
The sanitary sewer system consists of approximately 177,000 linear feet (LF) of gravity sewer. Gravity sewers are the most common type of sewer and are generally constructed wherever conditions are favorable to move wastewater from higher elevations to lower elevations. However, where this is not possible, sewer pumps and lifts are constructed to address grade and pressure issues. There are approximately 17,000 LF of force mains, and 19 pump stations. Of these pump stations, 5 are classified as primary pump stations and require daily inspections by an operator. The main pump station owned by the Town, is located just upstream of the Town's Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP), and is the largest station and pumps all sanitary flow in the Town to the WWTP. There are 2 pumps within the station to pump excess flows to the Devens WWTP, where the Town is contractually required to pump a minimum of 100,000 gpd, at an additional cost to the Town. **Ayer's Wastewater disposal agreement with Deven will end in 2021. The agreement is critical for both systems; Ayer needs capacity from Devens to meet state regulations.** The negotiation of a new agreement is critical to the long term wastewater capacity of the Town, but both financial and political issues will need to be addressed.

The Ayer WWTP was designed in 1978 and placed into operation in 1982. Since this date, the Town has conducted a number of upgrades to both maintain and improve operations. The first major facility improvement was the upgrade from mechanical to fine bubble aeration in 1994. This project included the construction of a blower building to house new blowers associated with the fine bubble aeration system. In 1997, the Town was issued an Administrative Consent Order with Penalties (ACOP) by the Massachusetts Department of

Environmental Protection (DEP) for noncompliance of wastewater treatment facilities. In response, the Town passed a Sewer Moratorium to preclude new development from connecting to the Town's wastewater system as upgrades were made to the system. The moratorium was lifted in 2003 following the completion of upgrades to the wastewater facilities at 25 Brook Street and the execution of the agreement with Devens to ensure sufficient capacity and redundancy to meet state regulations.

A second major upgrade was completed in 2007. In this project, a vortex grit system, a set of anoxic tanks, tertiary cloth disk filters, and UV disinfection were added, accompanied by the replacement of most process pumps including two primary sludge pumps, the primary scum pump, three return activated sludge pumps, two waste activated sludge pumps, and the secondary scum pump. In addition, former aerated grit tanks were converted to sludge storage tanks, associated sludge transfer pumps were installed, the septage handling system was reconfigured, mixed liquor recycle pumps were added to the aeration tanks, aeration blower motors were replaced, a fourth blower was added, the plant water system was replaced, and major upgrades were performed to both electrical and controls systems. Along with these large upgrade projects, smaller improvements and investigations have been undertaken throughout the past three decades. These include replacement of the UV disinfection system and an energy upgrade project.

**Map I-2- Ayer's Wastewater System**





## Ongoing evaluations and improvements

### DPW's Wastewater System Forecast



#### Planned Improvements:

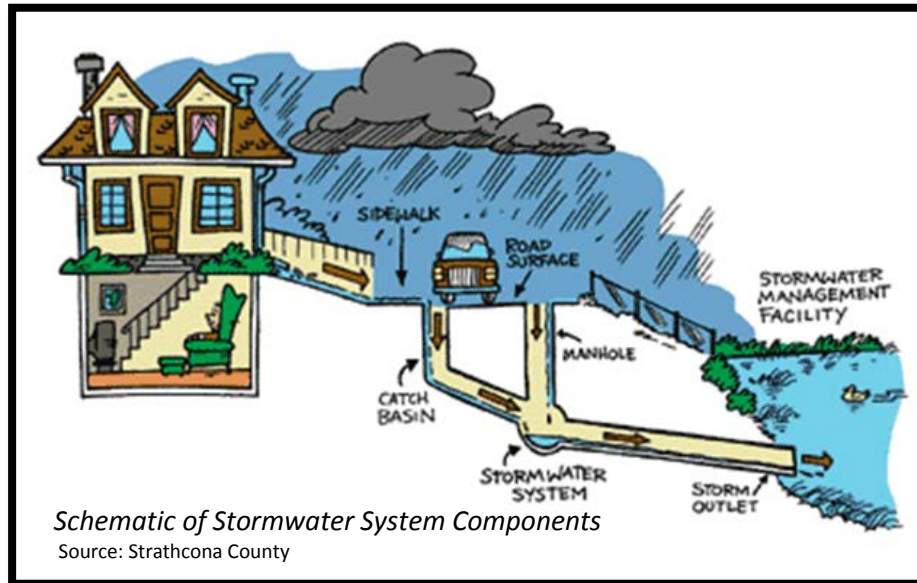
- **Wastewater Treatment Plant Evaluation and Capital Improvement Plan** – In 2015, the DPW hired engineering company CDM-Smith to perform a detailed evaluation of the wastewater treatment facility. The evaluation resulted in a multi-year capital plan that is currently being implemented
- **Inflow and Infiltration Study** – The DPW completed the initial phase of the Inflow and Infiltration study in 2016 and 2017. While this was a regulatory requirement, it was also a valuable in identifying and prioritizing the critical infrastructure repairs in the system. The next phase in the study will include detailed pipe and manhole inspections.
- **East Main Street Sewer Rehabilitation** – In 2016, the sewer in East Main Street, Faulkner Street and Tannery Street was repaired and relined. This was done in anticipation of roadway improvements to be done in 2018.
- **Pleasant Street Sewer Rehabilitation** – The sewer in Pleasant Street was repaired and relined in 2016 as the road was being repaved.
- **Sewer System Operations and Maintenance Plan** – The Ayer DPW developed an operations and maintenance plan for the sewer collection system in 2016.

#### System Needs:

1. Wastewater Treatment Plant is aging and in need of facility upgrades to:
  - a. Extend the useful life of the facility
  - b. Meet current health, safety and building codes
  - c. Meet NPDES discharge permit requirements
  - d. Improve operational efficiency
2. Wastewater sludge disposal is costly, energy intensive (trucking, incineration) and unreliable. A long term regional solution is required.
3. The collection system has significant inflow and infiltration and the Town has begun a program to identify the locations of the leaks. Correcting this will require a major annual expense in order to make incremental improvements to the system.
4. Ayer's Wastewater disposal agreement with Deven will end in 2021. The renegotiation of a new agreement is critical to the long term wastewater capacity of the Town.
5. Loss of a large industrial user will have a significant impact on the sewer rate structure. With more than half of wastewater flows being generated by non-residential users, a loss of a major user will fundamentally alter Ayer's funding capabilities for future capital improvements.

The Ayer DPW has been proactive in evaluating and maintaining the Town's wastewater system and has completed several key studies in recent years to determine the adequacy of Ayer's sewer infrastructure and wastewater treatment facilities and prioritize improvements. Improvements to wastewater operations includes investing in new technologies for water treatment and filtration, replacement of mains and pump stations, communications upgrades for monitoring wastewater systems, identifying sources for inflow and infiltration, and other activities.

## Stormwater



Construction on Ayer's stormwater system was constructed primarily during the 1960s. The current system consists of miles of stormwater mains, 1,240 catch basins, 400 manholes, 109 culverts, 3 detention areas, and 97 stormwater outfalls.<sup>1</sup> Stormwater systems work by collecting run off, which is water from precipitation like rain and snow, but also from sprinklers and hoses, that collects on impervious surfaces

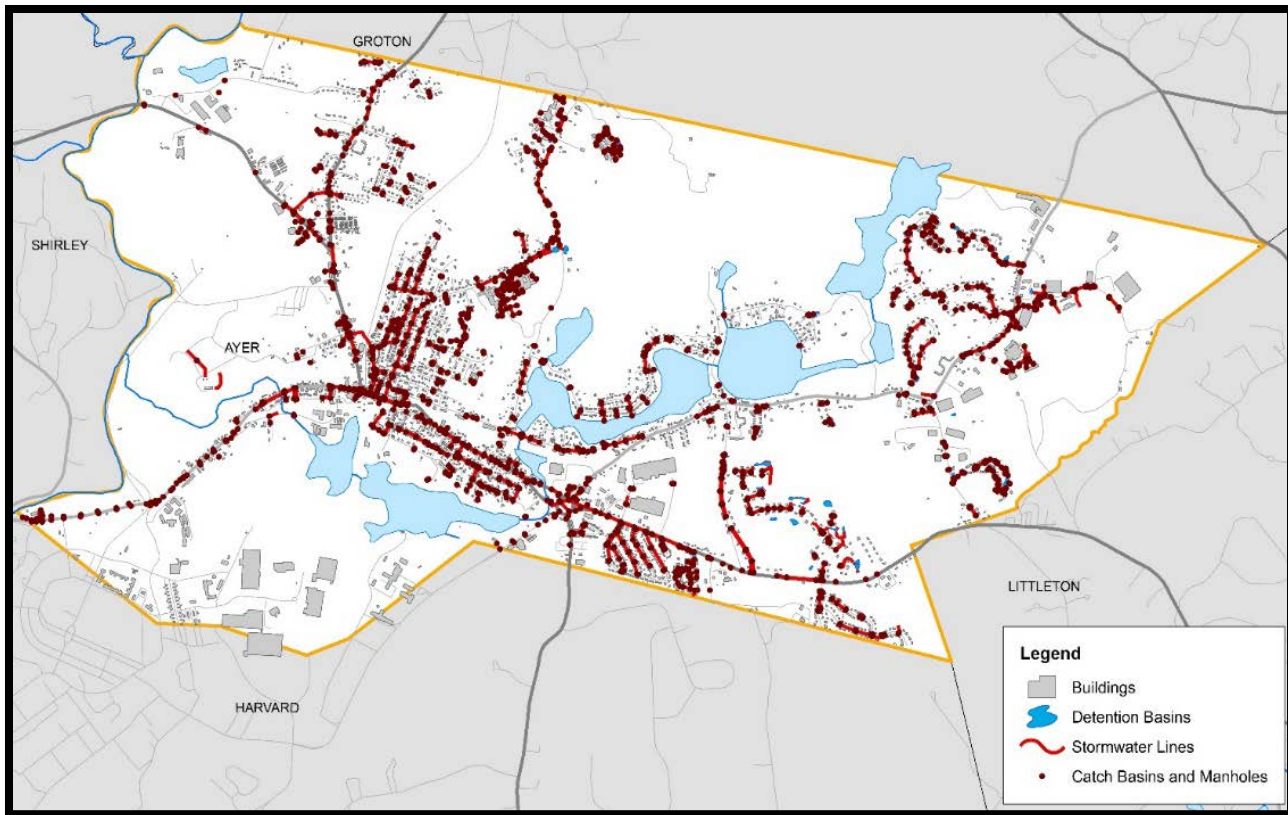
(paved roads and parking areas, sidewalks, roofs, etc.) and travels into the stormwater system via catch basins and manholes. As the stormwater runoff moves along during a weather event, the water collects trash, fertilizer, pesticides, motor oil, heavy metals, and other pollutants. This water can then be absorbed back into the ground and waterways, having a significant impact on water quality, including the public drinking water supply, as well as natural environments, water resources, and wildlife.

<sup>1</sup> Ayer Geographic Information System attribute data, 2017.



Map I-8: Ayer's Stormwater System

The National Pollutant



Discharge Elimination program has been in operation through the US Department of Environmental Protection since 1990 to regulate stormwater discharge and protect water quality. The program requires that Ayer obtain an MS4 permit to operate the stormwater system. The MS4 permit authorizes the discharge of stormwater from small municipal separate storm sewer systems that are located entirely or partially within an urbanized area, the Town's most recent MS4 permit was issued on July 1, 2017. As part of the permit, DPW is required to submit a Notice of Intent, Stormwater Management Plan, inventory all sanitary sewer outfalls, rank outfalls and catchment areas for illicit discharge detection elimination, identify illicit connections, inspect and enforce erosion control measures, perform more frequent street sweeping and catch basin inspections, and perform public outreach and education on issues such as lawn care, improper waste handling, and other issues. DPW has made great strides in mapping the system, monitoring for illicit discharges, inspections, water quality monitoring, street sweeping, and notably, the installation of Best Management Practices in three locations: Pirone Park Rain Garden, Oak Ridge Drive Hydodynamic Separator, and a bioswale.

However, continued compliance will be expensive. Ayer hopes to pay for some of its stormwater requirements through matching grants that the Town has applied for, but at current, maintenance of the stormwater system is funded through the Town's General Fund. An attempt was made in the 1990s to create a stormwater utility, but the measure failed at the Board of Selectmen and no long term funding mechanism has been established to address long term system needs.

### Ongoing Evaluations and Improvements

Ayer's DPW has been working toward creating an effective stormwater system:

#### DPW's Stormwater System Forecast



#### Planned Improvements:

- Annual Education Materials
- Catchment Investigation Plan and Dry Weather Screening
- New Stormwater Management Bylaw & Site Plan standards
- Source reduction plans for impaired waters
- Planning and implementation of Total Maximum Daily Load allocation
- Maintenance/Inspection Plan for Stormwater Facilities
- Develop Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan

#### System Needs:

1. Implementation of the MS4 permit is anticipated to require a 20% budget increase on average. There is currently no dedicated funding mechanism to pay for Ayer's stormwater system needs.
2. A Permitting and inspections management system needs to be established to track DPW's efforts.
3. Enhance Best Management Practices (BMPs) through the installation of "green" stormwater management facilities.

## Formative Issues

Assets and Opportunities	Challenges and Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>DPW</b> – Ayer’s single greatest asset with respect to Infrastructure is the Department of Public Works employees. Ayer’s dedicated workforce of Town employees ensure that the Town is well maintained and that the complex issues facing each major system are not disregarded and ignored because they are difficult issues to resolve. Ayer’s talented staff manages to stretch every penny and leverage every opportunity to make improvements for the safety and public health of Ayer, with minimal impacts to the residential tax burden.</li> <li>• <b>Customer Base</b> – Ayer has a varied customer base including industrial users and residential customers. However, much of Ayer’s water and sewerage price policy is based on assumptions regarding large industrial users. Without industrial users, the current pricing system will no longer be sustainable thereby impacting residential customers.</li> <li>• <b>Stormwater Utility</b> – Although it is not a current priority of DPW, the successor to the current director should revisit the creation of a stormwater utility to help offset maintenance costs and improvements to the stormwater system. With increased concerns regarding storms, inland flooding, and other impacts of climate change, getting ahead of stormwater issues will be essential in upcoming years.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Funding</b> – Funding remains the most significant challenge facing Ayer’s DPW. The needs of the stormwater, wastewater, and water systems and facilities are extensive, and expensive to address. While water and wastewater are operated as utilities and user fees are levied to help support those systems, there is no provision in place to address the stormwater system, which keeps the Town from flooding and discharging pollutants into the groundwater supply. Long term funding solutions is absolutely critical to Ayer’s ability to support its residential and business community.</li> <li>• <b>Pollutants and Impaired Waters</b> – Ayer’s industrial legacy will have long ranging impacts on Ayer’s water quality and stormwater management needs. Contaminants from recent industrial accidents and past industrial negligence will require that Ayer remain vigilant in protecting its water resources.</li> <li>• <b>Systems Capacity</b> – Ayer’s water, wastewater, and stormwater systems are regulated by the Department of Environmental Protection. Meeting their standards for capacity, redundancy, and emergency conditions will continue to be a challenge for Ayer. Regulatory changes typically result in unfunded mandates that require Ayer to find their own funding sources to offset increased costs with increasingly less assistance from state and federal government sources.</li> </ul>

## Recommendations:

- Implement stormwater utility to offset general fund costs for the purposes of basic maintenance.
- Explore new opportunities to construct wellheads on uncontaminated aquifers to ensure Ayer’s long-term access to potable water.
- Continue to fund the replacement and maintenance of sewer and water lines to prevent exfiltration and infiltration of sewage and water.
- Continue to perform long range planning, particularly for capital needs such as equipment and facilities, to ensure long term compliance with state regulations.
- Find regional solution for sludge treatment to reduce solid waste costs.

# Municipal Services & Facilities

## Municipal Services and Facilities

### Staff and Budget:

90 Full-time Employees

120 Part-time or On-Call  
Personnel

\$26m operating budget

\$32m overall budget

### Tax Levy:

\$1.15b in total value

\$22.5m in tax revenues

35% of total Budget

### Town-Owned Facilities:

- Town Hall
- Police Station
- Fire Department
- DPW Complex
- Transfer Station
- Public Library
- Council on Aging  
Senior Center
- Pirone Park
- Sandy Pond Beach
- Dog Park

### Future Needs:

DPW Operations Center

& Equipment Garage

Elementary School

Community/Senior Center

Storage, meeting, and office  
space

Farmers Market Location

Neighborhood Parks

## Introduction

Incorporated in 1871, The Town of Ayer is governed by a combination of general bylaws, special legislative acts, and local bylaws. These regulations encompass a range of mandates such as the quality of the public drinking water supply, what can be built and where, health and sanitation requirements, and define the decision-making authority on how to spend local tax revenues. Like many small communities in Massachusetts, the Town of Ayer does not operate under a “Home Rule” charter adopted under Article 89 of the Massachusetts General Laws, which formally defines the powers, functions, and procedures of the local government. Instead, the Board of Selectmen (BOS) serve as the Chief Elected Officers, while the Town Administrator position has been increasingly evolving to perform many of the executive duties of the local government with respect to purchasing, personnel, and budget as is typical of a Town Manager. At Special Fall Town Meeting in 2017, the Town Administrator position was restructured into a Town Manager position that is appointed for three-year terms by the BOS. The consolidation of executive functions authorizes the Town Manager to hire and fire department heads, serve as the Chief Procurement Officer and enter into contracts, administer all personnel policies and collective bargaining agreements, and allow for the coordination of all Town agencies within one department among other duties. In addition to the BOS and Town Manager, the Town is served by 32 elected or appointed boards, commissions, committees. These bodies have the authority to set policy, review projects or proposals, and make recommendations for funding. Due to chronic vacancies on some boards (for example the Commission on Disabilities), and an overall board vacancy rate of approximately 12 percent, many elected board and commission positions are transitioning into appointed positions.

Many of the Town’s executive functions are performed by departments within the Town Hall. Various aspects of the Town’s finances are overseen by the Assessor’s Department, which is charged with determining local tax valuations, Benefits and Payroll, which manages Town employee compensation, and the Tax Collector and Treasurer, which were recently consolidated into a single appointed position responsible for collecting and processing bills and payments. In addition to these positions, the Town Hall also houses the Information Technology Department, which is tasked with maintaining the Town’s IT systems, website, and social media, as well as protecting the Town’s electronic data from cyberattack. The



Building Department and Department of Planning and Community Development also operate within the Town Hall. These departments serve as staff to the Planning Board and Conservation Commission, oversee all land and community development activities within the Town, work to provide safe and affordable housing opportunities, and work to retain and attract local businesses and provide resources for workforce development. Finally, the Town Hall also houses the Recreation Department. The Recreation Department is served by one full time staff member and individual recreation programs and overseen by one of the five members of the Recreation Commission.

In addition to its executive functions, the Town also performs public safety functions through the police, fire, ambulance, health and human services, and public works departments. The Council on Aging serves approximately 1,200 seniors every year and provides transportation services, financial counseling, health screenings, recreation, and other services to ensure Ayer's seniors and disabled residents are adequately served. The Police Department is staffed by 32 officers, patrolmen, prisoner watch personnel, and dispatchers. The Fire Department is staffed by 43 firefighters, dispatchers, and emergency medical technicians and paramedics. Ayer's Police, Fire and Ambulance crews respond to nearly 20,000 calls annually. The Department of Public Works (DPW) oversees the transfer station, streets and sidewalks, and operates and maintains the public water, storm water, and wastewater systems. The Board of Health is a three-member board, with the Nashoba Associated Boards of Health functioning as the Health Agent. The Board of Health issues permits, operates flu and rabies clinics, oversees mosquito and tick control, issues updates regarding Plow Shop Pond, disseminates public health information, and assists residents with disposal of hazardous materials, medications, and needles.

Finally, the Ayer-Shirley Regional School District provides educational, arts, athletic, recreational, and enrichment programming for youths in Ayer and Shirley. The school district was regionalized in 2011 and with over 1,750 students enrolled, is at its highest enrollment since the closure of Fort Devens. The school system consists of four schools, of which the Page-Hilltop Elementary School and the Ayer-Shirley Regional High School are located in Ayer, and the Lura A. White Elementary School and Ayer-Shirley Regional Middle School are located in Shirley. The district employs approximately 140 teachers with average class sizes of approximately 20 students.<sup>1</sup> The school district is overseen by the Superintendent of Schools and the Regional School Committee. The Regional School Committee consists of six elected members, with three members representing Ayer and three members representing Shirley.

### **Municipal Services and Facilities Goals:**

1. Address municipal facilities needs for recreation and social services programming, an improved senior center, and adequate storage and meeting space.
2. Recruit and increase civic involvement on local boards, commissions, and committees to improve civic engagement, expand institutional knowledge and memory, and address succession planning issues as current staff and volunteers approach retirement.
3. Increase the Town's ability to efficiently and effectively manage Ayer's services and facilities in a fiscally sustainable and environmentally responsible manner to encourage a high quality of life for residents and an attractive environment in which businesses can prosper.

<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education, 2017.





## Municipal Budget

### Budget Process

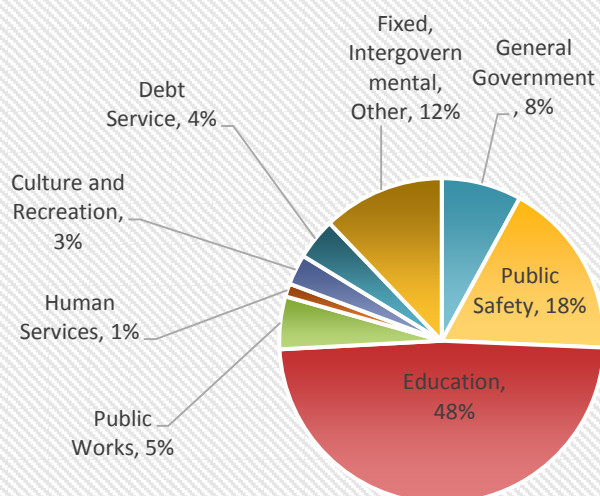
The Town's ability to provide municipal services and facilities is dependent upon the budgetary process. Every year, the Town undergoes a budgetary process that generally occurs in six stages: 1) Planning – during this period, the Town's Accounting Department estimates necessary expenditures (fixed costs such as debt service, insurance, contractual agreements, etc.) and revenues (based on prior year revenues, year to date collections, etc.), as well as the impacts of any known changes (such as to rates, debt exclusions or overrides, and fee increases) to determine the funds available for operating costs and other discretionary funding. 2) Departmental Spending – following the determination of funds available, The BOS and Finance Committee establish guidelines for departmental spending and forms are distributed to department heads for funding requests. 3) Review – the budget requests are then reviewed by the Finance Committee. The reviews are based on descriptions of specific projects covered under the department's budget request, as well as how the spending relates to the overall goals and objectives of the Town. 4) Approval – Following budget reviews and negotiations, the budget is then presented at Town Meeting by the Finance Committee for approval. A quorum is required at Town Meeting to approve the budget on annual basis, and then Town cannot legally operate without a budget.

In addition to the budget process, the Town must also undergo a related, but longer term financial planning process to develop an annual Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). The CIP is used to address major costs that have multi-year impacts on municipal finance. A capital investment is usually a larger expense such as a building, fire engine, infrastructure improvement, or other item that has an economic life that lasts several years. The CIP process seeks to identify, prioritize, and schedule for acquisition future capital funding needs and the final CIP plan is approved by the Planning Board on annual basis.

## Local Budget

### Expenditures

**Chart MSF-1: Ayer Budgetary Spending (FY16)**



Source: Massachusetts DOR (2016)

The Town of Ayer has an annual operating budget of approximately \$26 million and employs 90 full-time personnel, and an additional 120 part-time or on-call personnel as well as compensated elected officials. As of 2016 (the last fiscal year for which comparison revenue and expenditure data was available), education comprises approximately half of municipal expenses, while public safety receives about one fifth of the budget.

Total expenditures increased by 16% between 2007 and 2016 (**Table MSF-1**). Although the town spent more for services in all departments, the total amount of spending required for debt service and fixed costs declined during the same time

period representing a reduction in long term expenses and sound fiscal management. The greatest spending increases were for public safety, in particular Fire and Other Public Safety, and Culture and Recreation.

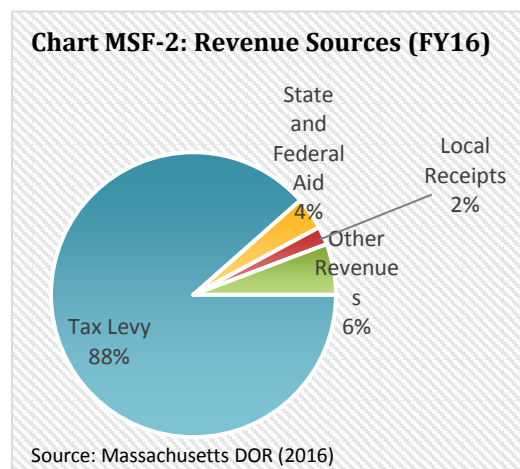


Table MSF-1, Expenditures					
	FY2007	FY2016	2016 share of budget	10 year change 2007-2016 (\$)	10 year change 2007-2016 (%)
General Government	1,399,635	1,892,042	8%	492,407	35%
Public Safety	2,773,921	4,210,550	18%	1,436,629	52%
Police	1,532,322	2,012,208	8%	479,886	31%
Fire	1,178,481	2,054,828	9%	876,347	74%
Other Public Safety	63,118	143,514	1%	80,396	127%
Education	9,310,413	11,524,739	48%	2,214,326	24%
Public Works	877,063	1,247,384	5%	370,321	42%
Human Services	181,565	308,551	1%	126,986	70%
Culture and Recreation	540,638	721,984	3%	181,346	34%
Debt Service	1,576,752	981,766	4%	-594,986	-38%
Fixed, Intergovernmental, Other	3,870,916	2,883,779	12%	-987,137	-26%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20,530,903</b>	<b>23,770,795</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>3,239,892</b>	<b>16%</b>

Source: Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Municipal Databank (2017)

## Revenue

Chart MSF-2: Revenue Sources (FY16)



All revenue received or collected by the Town of Ayer from any source and by any department, belongs to a common pool referred to as the *general fund*. The general fund is used to fund the majority of Town services and facilities, including the maintenance of public buildings, managing the public payroll, benefits, insurance, contracts, equipment, and so on; however, other funds may also exist, such as trust funds for affordable housing, open space, or other community benefits. The majority of general fund revenue in most communities comes from municipal property taxes, as well as some contributions from state and federal aid, local receipts (such as motor vehicle excise tax, meals taxes, and other such local taxes authorized by the Massachusetts

Department of Revenue), and other revenue sources which may include grants, donations, and proceeds from investment accounts like local enterprise funds. State and federal aid tends to include funding for schools, school buildings, public roadways, utilities, open space, water quality, and other complex funding issues. Generally, the more outside aid a community receives, the less reliant they are on the *local tax levy* to fund local activities. In Ayer, state and federal aid and other sources of revenue contributed just 10 percent of the General Fund in 2016. The local tax levy is comprised of commercial, industrial, and personal (CIP) and residential property taxes.

As shown in **Table MSF-2**, reliance on property taxes and local receipts has increased significantly over the past decade. Most notably state and federal aid decreased by 83 percent between 2007 and 2016. Much of this decrease may be due to the change to a regional school district, which altered the previous local funding formula. Since 2012, the first fiscal year under the current school structure, Ayer has seen a 26 percent decline in state and federal aid. This decrease has been mitigated by an increase in all of the other sources of general fund revenue, in particular the tax levy and other revenue sources (which includes revenue from other governments, transfers, miscellaneous, and other financing sources). These increases in other revenues are a



reflection of the extreme dedication on behalf of the Town's leadership, staff, and volunteers to control costs, provide local services and facilities at a level that sustains and increases the value of the tax base, and to find every available funding opportunity to offset local costs.

<b>Table MSF-2, General Fund Revenue, 2007-2016</b>							
	2007	2012	2016	10 year change 2007-2016	10 year change %	4 year change 2012-2016	4 year change %
Tax Levy	14,673,364	22,497,010	22,497,010	22,497,010	53%	3,514,723	19%
State & Federal Aid	5,594,424	936,038	936,038	936,038	-83%	-225,324	-19%
Local Receipts	390,979	523,011	523,011	523,011	34%	108,074	26%
Other Revenues	894,988	1,469,292	1,469,292	1,469,291	64%	581,800	66%
<b>Total</b>	<b>21,553,755</b>	<b>25,425,351</b>	<b>25,425,351</b>	<b>25,425,351</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>3,979,273</b>	<b>19%</b>

Source: Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Municipal Databank

### Regional Comparison

<b>Table MSF-3, Municipal Revenue Comparison (FY16)</b>				
	Total Budget	Tax Levy % of Budget	State Aid % of Budget	2016 Average Single Family Tax Bill
Ayer	32,494,284	65.5	2.7	\$4,089
Clinton	46,283,751	48.5	34.7	\$3,944
Hudson	78,968,856	58.5	18.5	\$5,447
Littleton	46,936,136	68.9	11.1	\$6,999
Maynard	46,291,010	61.3	15.7	\$6,960
Pepperell	28,217,288	65.2	5.7	\$4,638
Shirley	15,718,124	63.6	8.9	\$4,525

Source: Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Municipal Databank

As shown in **Table MSF-4**, Ayer receives relatively little state aid, but remains relatively less reliant on the local tax levy and expensive local property taxes relative to the size of its overall budget to maintain budget levels than similar communities. Ayer has an Aa2 bond rating, which is the second highest bond rating, and rates Ayer's

credit worthiness when the Town needs to borrow. The ability to borrow is occasionally required to meet budgetary needs, particularly for capital expenses.

<b>Table MSF-4, Regional Commercial Tax Rate Comparison</b>						
	Total valuation 2018	% CIP Assessed Valuation	CIP Tax Rate 2018	CIP as % of Res Tax Rate 2018	CIP Growth 2009-2018	Residential Growth 2009-2018
Ayer	1,153,576,260	34%	31.0	2.15	17%	16%
Clinton	1,311,656,461	18%	30.73	1.81	54%	2%
Devens	277,581,200	84%	22.64	1.39	23%	43%
Hudson	2,576,517,300	15%	35.18	2.01	-16%	6%
Littleton	1,807,036,759	22%	28.03	1.55	51%	18%
Maynard	1,289,112,607	11%	31.10	1.37	-24%	-1%
Pepperell	1,250,607,586	6%	16.39	1	13%	-1%
Shirley	662,192,209	12%	16.42	1	12%	0%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Municipal Databank

As shown in **Table MSF-4**, Ayer is heavily dependent on commercial property taxes, which contributes 53 percent of the total tax levy. This is due in part to a relatively high proportion of commercial property, which comprises 34 percent of total assessed valuation. Of comparison communities, only Devens has a higher proportion of commercial valuation, at 84 percent of its tax base. Like most of the comparison communities,



Ayer has a split tax rate, applying a higher tax rate for commercial property than for residential property. Commercial properties in Ayer pay more than twice the rate as residential properties, which is higher than comparable communities. Significantly, Ayer's commercial tax rate is substantially higher than Devens, which can provide significant competition when recruiting new businesses to Ayer. The value of Ayer's commercial property grew by 17 percent over the past decade, on par with residential growth.

Ayer's split tax rate has been the subject of debate for a number of years. The higher tax rates for commercial, industrial, and personal property has been linked with a long tradition of Ayer attracting high impact commercial users who are willing to pay higher taxes in Ayer because Ayer is willing to accept their potential impacts in exchange for higher tax revenues. However, not all businesses in Ayer are high impact businesses. There are many small and local businesses in Ayer that struggle to pay their taxes and are discouraged in investing in their properties. However, reduce the commercial tax rate would require increasing the residential tax rate to offset lost revenue. **Table MSF-5** shows what the impact would be of leveling the tax rates so that residential properties pay a more proportional share of property taxes. Eliminating the rate split so that commercial and residential properties pay the same property tax rate would result in a blended property tax rate of \$20.13 per \$1,000 of assessed value. This rate would reduce the commercial rate by one third, while raising the residential rate by approximately \$6 per mil. Consequently, the average single-family tax bill would increase by \$1,784, which would be significant to local voters. Reducing the split rate so that the commercial tax rate is more competitive with Devens and offering a small business exemption would have a more moderate impact on residential tax bills than eliminating the split tax rate entirely.

**Table MSF-5, Ayer Tax Rates: Actual 2018 Split Rate versus Alternative Rates**

	Residential rate (per \$1,000)	CIP rate (per \$1,000)	Average Single Family tax bill	Difference from current average SF tax bill
Current Split Rate (Actual)	14.43	31.00	\$4,514	
Blended Rate (No Split)	20.13	20.13	\$6,298	\$1,784
Competitive Rate (Reduced Split)	17.58	25.00	\$5,499	\$985

Source: Community Opportunities Group, Inc., based on Massachusetts Department of Revenue 2018 tax rates, tax levy, and assessed valuation by class

## Municipal Services

### Town Hall

The day to day activities of the Town are overseen by the Town Manager, with oversight from the elected three-member Board of Selectmen (BOS). The roles of the Town Manager and BOS have been evolving over the past decade to become more efficient and more responsive to the needs of residents and businesses while meeting the Town's regulatory, statutory, and financial obligations. Below is a summary of Town's staffing levels and municipal functions that are performed in the Town Hall:



Department	Primary Responsibilities
<b>Accounting</b>	
Lisa Gabree, Town Accountant/Finance Manager Martha Reilly, Assistant Accountant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparation of Payable Warrant</li> <li>• Review of Payroll</li> <li>• Month &amp; Year End Closings</li> <li>• Budget Reports: Monthly, Balance Sheet Documentation, Schedule A, and Annual Reports</li> <li>• Budget &amp; Forecast</li> <li>• Borrowing</li> </ul>
<b>Assessing</b>	
Tim Hogan, Assessing Dept. Administrator Jacquelyn Ann Guthrie, Assessing Dept. Assistant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motor Vehicle Excise Tax Administration</li> <li>• Statutory Exemption Administration</li> <li>• Deed/Ownership Processing</li> <li>• General Taxpayer Inquiries</li> <li>• Quinquennial Property Revaluation Program</li> <li>• New Growth &amp; Tax Rate Certification Processes</li> <li>• Inspections &amp; Abatements</li> <li>• Represent Town at Appellate Tax Board (ATB)</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits &amp; Payroll</b>	
Kevin Johnston, Benefits & Payroll Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oversee payroll through Harpers Payroll Services</li> <li>• Manage Employee Benefits (varies by contract): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Health &amp; Life Insurance</li> <li>○ Retirement – Social Security, Pensions, Individual 457K plans, etc.</li> <li>○ Short &amp; Long Term Disability</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Building</b>	
Charles Shultz Jr., Building Commissioner & Zoning Enforcement Officer Heather Hampson, Administrative Coordinator Alan Parker, Wiring / Electrical Inspector Robert Friedrich, Plumbing & Gas Inspector Eric Aaltonen, Sealer of Weights and Measures Ronald Bernier, Alt. Building Inspector James Bakum, Asst. Plumbing / Gas Inspector Phil Horgan, Asst. Wiring / Electrical Inspector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building Permit Applications: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Additions &amp; Renovations</li> <li>○ Outbuildings (Sheds, barns, garages, pools)</li> <li>○ Electrical</li> <li>○ Gas Fitting &amp; Plumbing</li> <li>○ New Structures (Residential/Commercial/Other)</li> <li>○ Party Tents and Temporary Structures</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Subdivision Plan Applications</li> </ul>
<b>Clerk</b>	
Susan Copeland, Town Clerk Lauri Fritz, Assistant Town Clerk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief Election Official</li> <li>• Licensing, Recording, and Public Records Official</li> <li>• Registrar of Vital Records</li> <li>• Election Oversight</li> <li>• Town Meeting Warrant &amp; Vote Recording</li> <li>• Oaths of Office, Appointments, and Resignations</li> <li>• Licenses (Marriage, Business, &amp; Dog)</li> <li>• Notary Public &amp; Justice of the Peace</li> </ul>





Department	Primary Responsibilities
<b>Department of Public Works</b>	
Mark Wetzel, PE, Superintendent Pamela Martin, Business Manager Dan Van Schalkwyk, Town Engineer Mona Bean, Department Assistant Water Department Staff Highway Department Staff Wastewater Department Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide clean drinking water</li> <li>• Maintain and upgrade sewer and stormwater systems</li> <li>• Wastewater treatment</li> <li>• Maintain streets and sidewalks in good condition</li> <li>• Snow removal</li> <li>• Transfer station and solid waste removal</li> </ul>
<b>Economic and Community Development</b>	
Alan Manoian, AICP, Director Mark Archambault, AICP, Town Planner Jo-Anne Crystoff, Conservation Administrator Alicia Hersey, CDP Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zoning, Subdivision, and Conservation Bylaw Administration &amp; Permitting</li> <li>• Ayer Industrial Finance Authority (IDFA)</li> <li>• Business/employee recruitment, attraction, retention</li> <li>• Community Development – Affordable and Senior Housing, Housing Rehabilitation Program</li> <li>• Special Projects (Master Plan, Zoning Rewrite, redevelopment of former fire station, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Information Technology</b>	
Cindy Knox, Information Technology Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain the Town's IT systems – hardware, software, security, backups, servers, radios, etc. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Hardware – Computers, printers, copiers, fire &amp; police radios, weather station, servers</li> <li>○ Facilities – DPW, Police, Fire, Council on Aging, and Town Hall</li> <li>○ Software – Maintain subscriptions for all of the Town's proprietary software</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Security and Email</li> <li>• Custodian of Town Website &amp; Social Media Accounts</li> </ul>
<b>Parks and Recreation</b>	
Jeff Thomas, Ayer Parks Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrative – invoices, deposits, scheduling</li> <li>• Hiring, training, scheduling, and supervision of maintenance employees and volunteers</li> <li>• Program &amp; Facilities Management including servicing vehicles, tools, equipment, irrigation systems, as well as mowing, weed control, waste management, cleaning, etc.</li> <li>• Oversees youth recreation and sports programming</li> <li>• Manage Sandy Pond Beach and Pirone Park</li> </ul>
<b>Tax Collector/Treasurer</b>	
Susan Copeland, Tax Collector & Treasurer Christina Roberts, Assistant Tax Collector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect property and excise taxes, permit and license fees</li> <li>• Sewer and stormwater liens</li> <li>• Receiving and accounting for Town Funds</li> </ul>
<b>Town Manager</b>	
Robert Pontbriand, Town Manager Carly Antonelis, Asst. Town Manager	<p>Perform primary municipal functions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personnel – hiring and firing, disciplinary action, contract negotiations, employment policies</li> <li>• Purchasing – enter into contracts for consulting services, equipment, technology, and other expenditures.</li> <li>• Budget – contract negotiations, staffing levels, etc.</li> </ul>



### Town Government Structure

Following the last Master Plan, the BOS appointed a Town Government Study Committee in 2010 to assess the organizational structure of the local government. The seven member committee was tasked with reviewing how well the government was performing services to residents and business and make recommendations for efficiencies that would maximize cost savings. The study made a number of recommendations including reducing the size and compensation of the BOS, adjusting job descriptions or consolidating positions, and reconfiguring some elected positions to appointed positions, in addition to an overall policy recommendation to establish a Town Charter. As a result of the study, some of the recommendations have been implemented or are in the process of being implemented. For example, in 2012, Town Meeting voted to reduce the size of the Board of Selectmen from five members to three members. During the same Town Meeting, voters also changed the appointing authority for the Finance Committee from the BOS to the Town Moderator. There was also an attempt to reorganize the Town Treasurer and Tax Collector positions into one consolidated position and make it appointed rather than elected that same year, which failed on its first attempt at Town Meeting, but was approved at a Special Fall Town Meeting in 2017. Approved at the same Town Meeting in 2017, were an article establishing an appointed rather than elected Tree Warden, and an authorization for the BOS to file a petition with the General Court for special legislation establishing the position of Town Manager in lieu of the current Town Administrator position. This change will expand the Town Administrator's authority with respect to personnel, budget, and purchasing powers to allow the Town to conduct business more efficiently while meeting the Town's regulatory, statutory, and financial obligations. Moving forward, it is anticipated the Town will continue its efforts to professionalize services, increase public participation, and ensure that all boards, commissions, and committees are adequately staffed with Town employees and volunteers to better meet all municipal functions and responsibilities.

## Public Safety

### Ayer Police Department



The police station employs 1 chief, 1 lieutenant, 4 sergeants, 2 detectives, 12 patrol officers, 1 records clerk, 7 dispatchers, 4 prison watch personnel, 1 reserve officer, 1 animal control officer, and 1 administrative assistant. The police respond to more than 15,000 service calls on an annual basis, and the Police Department works closely with the Ayer-Shirley Regional School District and the Department's School Resource Officer to establish a positive relationship and address any school related issues. Although

serious crime in Ayer is rare, the most common issues the police attend to are accidents, assaults, burglaries and other types of larceny, drug/narcotic violations, and destruction of property. The Ayer Police perform a variety of community services and programs including: Bring Me Home, CORI requests, Citizen's Police Academy, process firearms forms and applications and solicitor's applications, traffic enforcement, and special events such as their annual 5k race.



## Ayer Fire Department



**Sparky the Firedog visits children at the Paige-Hilltop School**

The Fire Department (AFD) is served by a full-time chief, four captains, 5 lieutenants, and 4 full-time firefighters. Combination Company No. 1 has one captain, three lieutenants, 19 firefighters, and 4 Emergency Medical Technicians. AFD is responsible for fire protection, inspections, hazardous material removal permits, and ambulance services. AFD also participates in the S.A.F.E. (Student Awareness of Fire Safety), and works to provide students and senior citizens with knowledge about the dangers of fire and the necessity of fire prevention and working smoke detectors. In 2016, the AFD performed 406 inspections, issued 400 permits, and responded to 867 fire incidents and 1,392 ambulance calls for a total of 2,159 emergency responses. AFD maintains 2 engines, 1 ladder trucks, 1 heavy rescue truck, 1 rough terrain vehicle, 2 forestry vehicles, 1 service vehicle, 2 cars, and 2 ambulances, including a new Ambulance #1 that was purchased last year to replace the Town's 1997 ambulance. In upcoming years, the AFD anticipates they will need to replace Ambulance #2 which is slated to occur in 2019. As Engine #4 was built in 1993 and refurbished in 2014 and Ladder #1 was built in 1996, and refurbished in 2016, it is anticipated the Town will get some additional use out of those trucks before needing to replace them; Engine #2 was built in 2001 and is currently the oldest vehicle in the Fire Department's fleet that has not been refurbished or replaced.

## Board of Health

The Ayer Board of Health is a three-member board that employs a part-time assistant with offices located in the Town Hall. The Board of Health is associated with the Nashoba Associated Boards of Health (NABH), which functions as the Town's health agent. The Board of Health implements and oversees the policies and regulations as mandated by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the Department of Environmental Protection. The Board of Health issues permits and performs inspections, oversees environmental cleanups, and offers information about public health issues like mosquito and tick born disease, ground water quality, flu clinics, medication and needles disposal, and other public health advisories.

## Department of Public Works

The Department of Public Works (DPW) is a key component to ensuring the safety, health, and welfare of Ayer residents. DPW is responsible for maintaining Ayer's roadways, water, sewer, and stormwater systems, as well as operating the transfer station and performing waste management services. DPW ensures that Ayer's drinking water supply and delivery systems meets state standards for cleanliness, Ayer's stormwater system and policies comply with the Town's MS4 stormwater permit, and that Ayer's roadways, bridges, and culverts are structurally sound, safe, and well maintained, including during snow and other emergency events. In addition to providing these public safety services, DPW also offers an online platform to submit service requests for things like potholes, sidewalk repairs, streetlight maintenance, illegal dumping, graffiti, and other issues. For more information regarding DPW's services and facilities and future needs, please review the Transportation and Infrastructure chapter within this Master Plan.



## Council on Aging

### COA MISSION STATEMENT

*THE COUNCIL ON AGING IS HERE TO SERVE THE COMMUNITY OF AYER AND ITS RESIDENTS THAT ARE 60+ YEARS OF AGE. THE COA IS A SERVE BASED DEPARTMENT TO HELP INCREASE THE QUALITY OF LIFE. WE ARE HERE TO ALSO HELP FAMILY MEMBERS CARING FOR THEIR LOVED ONES.*

Dubbed “The Center”, Ayer’s Council on Aging is staffed by 7 full and part-time employees, including an executive director, housekeeping, outreach, exercise, and nutrition coordinators, two MART van coordinators, as well as two volunteers. The Center is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., and also provides services like meals, transportation, and special events outside of standard business hours. The Council on Aging is overseen by a five-member Executive Board, which currently has one vacancy, and meets monthly.

Membership to the Council on Aging is free to all residents 60 years of age and above in Ayer, which is approximately 1,200 people.<sup>2</sup> The

Center provides resources and services to promote the financial, physical, mental, and emotional well-being of Ayer’s seniors. There are free exercises classes offered at The Center three days a week, movies are shown twice a week, and crafting or adult coloring sessions are offered once a week. Lunch is served five days a week for a suggested \$3 donation, in addition to home-cooked meals which are served twice monthly, and free baked goods which are delivered three times a week. The Center also helps connect seniors with SHINE counselors, who provide free Medicare and Medicaid related insurance counseling. The Center operates an annual flu clinic, and offers assistance with the AARP tax program as well as the local senior tax exemptions and utility discounts, and fuel assistance. The COA organizes out-of-town and overnight trips, as well as functions with the Police, Fire, and School departments. The COA also holds a holiday party, and annual Italian Night with the Ayer Fire Department, and a May Day Celebration. **The COA serves approximately 1,200 seniors and their caregivers every year.**<sup>3</sup> In an average week, the COA serves approximately 375-400 people, but that number can increase by nearly 200 additional people when there are functions.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to health and wellness services, the COA provides transportation services to elderly and disabled residents in Ayer. The Montachusett Regional Transit Authority provides the COA with two MART vans which are operated by the MART van coordinators. MART van appointments are available Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., and weekly trips are offered after 3 p.m. to Tiny’s Diner, Walmart, Market Basket and loaves and fishes. Rides from the COA can be arranged by telephone 24 hours in advance and costs \$2 round-trip in Ayer, and \$4 round-trip outside of Ayer.



With the growth in the number of Ayer residents who are becoming seniors and utilizing the COA’s services, the existing space and parking at 18 Pond Street location is inadequate for existing services and is impeding the

<sup>2</sup> US Census 2010, DP1.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Karin Dynice-Swanfeldt, December 15, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Town of Ayer, *Annual Report*, 2016.



ability of The Center to meet the demand for services. The current facility has a maximum capacity of 70 persons, and consequently there are waiting lists for many events and activities. The Council on Aging will be seeking a \$30,000 appropriation at the Annual Spring Town Meeting in 2018 to study the feasibility of a new location for The Center.

## Parks & Recreation

Ayer's Parks and Recreation Department offers a wide variety of services to Ayer residents ranging from youth sports to summer camps, STEM educational programming, swimming lessons, lifeguarding at Sandy Pond, and special events. Parks and Recreation also performs the physical and administrative tasks required to deliver these services, such as park maintenance, scheduling, billing, and volunteer/part-time employee management. With one full-time employee in the Parks and Recreation Department, Ayer's recreational offerings are extremely dependent upon volunteers and the Parks Commissioners. Major programs offered in Ayer, like youth soccer, basketball, baseball, and softball are run independently, but in coordination with the Parks and Recreation Department. These programs are administered by a small committee that oversees each athletic program and handles scheduling, coaching, practices, equipment, and other necessities. The committees are typically made up of one of the five Parks Commissioners acting as chair, the Parks and Recreation Director acting as coordinator, and 3-5 additional volunteers serving as members. The following sports and recreation activities are offered:

Program	Description
Fall & Spring Soccer	Youth soccer is open to players ages 2-18 and has a program for all levels of play. U4, U6, and U8 teams are available for children under 8, and children ages 9 and above are eligible for travel teams.
Little Diggers Volleyball	Open to players in 3 <sup>rd</sup> to 8 <sup>th</sup> grade who are interested in learning to play volleyball. Sessions run from March to early May.
Basketball	Programs are available for PreK-8 <sup>th</sup> grade including the Miniballers PreK program, the K-2 Skills and Drills program, the 3 <sup>rd</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> grade in-town instructional league, and 5 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> grade travel teams. Basketball season extends March through Early June.
Swimming	Open to all levels 1-6, lessons are offered in the day and evening from July through August.
Baseball/Softball	Ayer Youth Baseball and Softball is offered to players ages 3-18 and runs from April through the summer, depending on the team and program.
Football/Cheer	Football and cheer are run independently through the ASYFC Board. Practices begin in August and run through November.
Yo!	Hiking, camping, and other outdoor recreation events for youth and families planned by YO! Organizers are offered to the public, often for little or no fee.
Tech Kids	A STEM program offering experiments and projects for girls in the 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> grade is offered in the springtime to connect girls to female mentors in the STEM fields.
Summer Camps	The Parks Department offers a variety of Summer Camps in the Summer, and usually includes camps for soccer, baseball, softball, football, and basketball.

Demand for youth recreational and athletic programming exceeds the capacity of Ayer's Parks and Recreation Department offerings. In addition to Parks and Recreation, some needs are met through offerings of the Ayer-Shirley Regional School District and/or private recreation opportunities, however there are significant needs that





remain unmet. Presently there is no programming available for adults between the ages of 18 and 59. For residents 60 years of age and above, there is some recreational programming available through the Council on Aging, but the availability and frequency of these programs are constrained by the spatial limitations of The Center, and there is additional unmet demand in that age cohort as well. Further, there are times of the year (such as the winter) when there are either very few recreation options available or there could be more options offered but there are no facilities available for play or recreation due to demand from other sports and activities. **Figure MSF-1** shows the overlap in recreational programming offered by or coordinated through Ayer Parks and Recreation. Private recreation, travel teams, and Ayer-Shirley Regional School District teams generally follow the same seasons as Parks and Recreation and utilize the same facilities, thereby increasing the demand on public resources.

**Figure MSF-1: Ayer Parks and Recreation Programming**

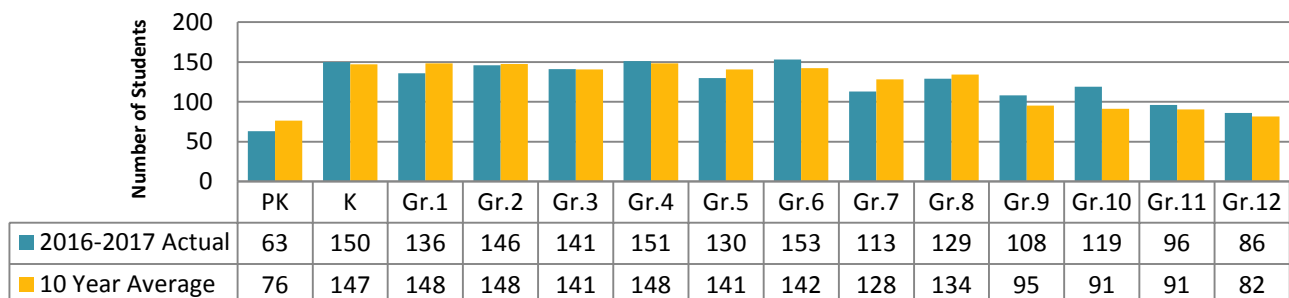
	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	July	Aug
Soccer													
Volleyball													
Basketball													
Swimming													
BB/SB													
ASYFC													

Future challenges to the provision of services for Ayer's Park and Recreation will be to maintain adequate volunteer staffing levels and to address the constraints of limited facilities to sustain even the existing level of programming. Expanding services to offer programming to wider age ranges, expanding recreational offerings beyond athletics, and offering more community and arts-based programming will require new facilities and additional administrative oversight capabilities.

## Schools

Ayer's school system has experienced several major changes since the closure of Fort Devens in 1996, most notably the regionalization of the district and the major renovations of the High School and Middle School. Enrollment has been impacted by these changes. During the 1980's, Ayer's school enrollment was above 3,000 students. The 2016-2017 academic year saw peak enrollment since the 2011 district regionalization, but with a total student population of 1,721 students, enrollment remains well below levels seen while the military base was still in operation and is still slightly lower than enrollment levels prior to regionalization (**Chart MSF-3**).

**Chart MSF- 3: Ayer-Shirley Regional School District Enrollment By Grade (2016-2017)**



**Table MSF-6: Ayer-Shirley School-Age Children Population (1990-2030)**

Year	Population Count
1990	2,505
2000	2,576
2010	2,570
Proj. 2020	2,240
Proj. 2030	2,060

Source: MAPC Population Projections

Using population projections created by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, the population of school-age children in Ayer is expected to decline in upcoming years. Factors like decisions regarding future housing development, as well as larger regional and national demographic trends, influence the size of the student population. However, even with the assumption of strong growth in the region, it is still projected that the overall size of Ayer's student population will decrease in upcoming years. A declining population of school-age children has long range planning implications for both facilities and services, as there will be fewer students to support and fund future district obligations.

**Table MSF-7: Profile of Ayer Schools (2016-2017 Academic Year)**

		Ayer-Shirley	Nashoba Tech	Francis Parker	Mass.
<b>Total Number of Students</b>		<b>1,721</b>	<b>731</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>953,701</b>
Population	Male	882	431	180	488,985
	Female	839	300	214	464,716
	Preschool and Kindergarten	213	-	-	95,605
	Elementary School (Grades 1-5)	704	-	-	352,732
	Middle School (Grades 6-8)	395	-	133	213,948
	High School (Grades 9-12)	409	715	262	291,463
Race (%)	African American	4.4	0.7	0.5	8.9
	Asian	2.8	0.8	1.5	6.7
	Hispanic	10.7	6.3	2.8	19.4
	Native American	0.3	0.8	0	0.2
	White	76.4	88.7	91.6	61.3
	Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.4	0	0	0.1
	Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	4.9	2.7	3.5	3.4
Social Factors (%)	First Language not English	7.7	1.1	1	20.1
	English Language Learner	3.4	0	0	9.5
	Students With Disabilities	20.1	34.2	15.9	17.4
	High Needs	38.8	47.8	19.7	45.2
	Economically Disadvantaged	23.8	19.5	5.3	30.2
Performance	Graduation Rate (2016)	93.5%	96.8%	85.2%	87.5%
	Student/Teacher Ratio (2016)	12 : 1	11.6 : 1	8.6 : 1	13.2 : 1
	Total Expenditure per Student (Avg. 2012-2016)	\$14,090	\$18,374	n/a	\$15,545
	Number of Teachers (Avg. 2012-2016)	122	58	46	69,734
	Average Teacher Salary (Avg. 2012-2016)	\$68,154	\$71,504	n/a	\$76,522

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2017)



**Table MSF-7** provides a comparison profile of Ayer schools and schools in Massachusetts as a whole. Following regionalization, approximately 60 percent of the students enrolled in the Ayer-Shirley School District reside in Ayer. There are currently 528 students enrolled at the Page-Hilltop School, serving Ayer students, and an additional 389 enrolled at the Lura White Elementary School in Shirley. In addition to the Ayer-Shirley Regional School District, students in Ayer have the option to attend the Nashoba Valley Technical High School, offering grades 9 through 12 and located in Westford, or the Francis Parker Charter School, which offers grades 6-12 and is located on Devens.



*Ayer-Shirley Regional School Committee*

Although the Ayer-Shirley Regional School District and the six-member School Committee are semi-autonomous from the Towns of Ayer and Shirley, their programming and services are most directly influenced by local voters. The middle school and high school provide athletic programming that is generally not provided through Parks and Recreation. This includes school sports such as football, soccer, baseball, softball, track, volleyball, hockey, swimming, and golf. The ASRHS swim team practices with the Bromfield School in Harvard, and swims at the Harvard Ridge pool in Boxborough. The ASRHS hockey team plays with Lunenburg and practices at the Wallace Arena in Fitchburg. The ASRHS indoor track team practices in the ASRHS gym and outdoor

facilities when weather and availability permits, but holds their home meets at Fitchburg High School. In addition to athletics, the high school also offers the following clubs: Literary Magazine, Destination Imagination, Drama, Leadership Club, Mock Trial, Model United Nations, Music/Band/Choir, National Honor Society, Robotics, Student Council, and Yearbook.

In addition to athletics and enrichment, the Ayer-Shirley Regional School District offers an early childhood program for PreK and full-day tuition-free Kindergarten education at both elementary schools, which gives Ayer's youngest residents an educational advantage in obtaining language, mathematics, and socialization skills. The school district also offers the Ayer Childcare Program, which operates at the Page Hilltop School and provides preschool through middle school children with a safe, supervised and fun place to spend before/after school hours from 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on school days. In addition to school days the program operates on professional development days, early release days, December, February and April school vacations, and offers a full day summer camp to provide working parents with an affordable and enriching childcare option within Ayer.



## Municipal Facilities

### Public Buildings

#### Town Hall



Constructed in 1876 with funds provided by Dr. James Cook Ayer of Lowell, Ayer's Town Hall was the recipient of a Preservation Award from the Massachusetts Historical Commission after its 2003 restoration. The restoration included modernization projects such as the installation of an elevator and egress stair and other accessibility accommodations, refurbishment of historic interiors including the Great Hall, and the restoration of the polychromed brick, tile, and stone exterior façade. Although the Town Hall previously housed the Fire Department until 1934, and the Police Department and local jail until 1997, those departments were separated and are

now located in separate purpose-built municipal buildings. The Town Hall currently houses the offices of the Town Administration, Assessor, Tax Collector and Treasurer, Town Clerk, Economic and Community Development, Parks and Recreation, Veterans' Services, and Information Technology departments.

Today, Ayer's Town Hall is a hub of activity with some departments experiencing severe constraints with respect to meeting space, storage space, and office space; while other areas of the building, such as the Great Hall, remain largely underutilized. Ensuring that the Town has adequate public meeting spaces to meet the scheduling needs of all boards, commissions, and department activities, and that Town employees have the physical space and resources to perform their duties will become increasingly challenging in upcoming years and may require some creative solutions.

#### Police Station



Ayer's police station, located at 54 Brook Street, was completed and occupied in 1997 on the site of a former Department of Public Works facility. The building is approximately 13,300 square feet, fully accessible, hosts a community meeting room with space for 30 people, and sits on a 1.2 acre lot with parking on site.

When the building was originally constructed, it was built with room to accommodate future growth. However, after 20 years of occupancy, the Police Department has grown in size and is experiencing some challenges with having inadequate space and facilities to perform all of their community functions.





### *Fire Station*



The Fire Department occupies a 20,100 square foot building located on a 1.3 acre lot at 15 West Main Street. The building was constructed and completed in 2005 after the Fire Department had outgrown their previous facility. The old fire station, located on Washington Street, is a historic building and had been in

use from 1934 until 2005. The building is now a surplus building in the process of disposition and is slated for redevelopment into luxury housing. The current home of the Fire Station on West Main Street is located on a former brownfield site that contained asbestos, and arsenic as well as undocumented underground storage tanks, the discovery of which led to project delays and costly budget overruns. The current fire department facility meets the spatial needs of fire operations, but has inadequate parking and is subject to sporadic flooding. Increasing parking capacity and managing storm water and flooding concerns are the biggest spatial challenges facing Ayer's Fire Department in upcoming years.

### *Ayer Public Library*



The historic Ayer Library was originally constructed in 1894, and significantly expanded and renovated in 1997 after a significant community planning effort. The building grew from 2,700 square feet to 11,000 square feet, with a parking lot to accommodate 60 vehicles; both the building and the parking lot

are completely accessible to persons with disabilities. The library is overseen by an elected nine-member Board of Trustees, who are responsible for general policy guidance and long-term planning. The library employs eight people, including a director, assistant director, a children's and young adult services provider, two circulation librarians, a library technician, and two circulation assistants. Ayer's public library serves as a regional resource. The library's collections include over 50,000 print materials including books, newspapers, magazines, and journals, in addition to DVDs, audio-books, compact discs, and numerous digital resources and subscriptions. The library also includes a heavily utilized children's room, a community meeting room which seats 50 people and has a kitchenette, publicly available computers, and an Ayer resource room that holds historic collections of local and regional interest. A study will need to be undertaken in upcoming years to reconfigure interior space to meet programming needs.

### *The Center*







*The Center and parking at 18 Pond Street*

The Council on Aging (COA) offices, programming, and services for residents 60 years of age and older are operated out of The Center at 18 Pond Street. The Center is a 4,000 square foot space located in the basement of the Ayer Housing Authority senior and congregate housing complex, and is adjacent to Pirone Park. As the building is built into a hill, The Center is located at-grade with parking in the rear of the building, but is not easily accessible from the front of the building where additional parking is located. The 17 space parking lot serving the Center is shared by employees, patrons, and the COA's MART vans, and is frequently in short supply during high demand times at The Center.



### Town-Owned Recreational Facilities

*For a comprehensive review of all recreational facilities, please see the Resources chapter of this Master Plan.*

#### Sandy Pond Beach



Ayer's chain of ponds provides a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities for hiking, swimming, boating, bird watching, and other activities. Sandy Pond Beach, which is maintained by the Parks and Recreation Department, offers volleyball and basketball courts, a playground, and a clubhouse, in addition to a sand beach and swim raft that is overseen by a team of lifeguards. Sandy Pond Beach is well-loved by Ayer residents and in recent years, crowding and parking management have

become increasingly more significant issues. In 2016, the Parks Commission changed park policies to charge non-residents a daily fee for park usage (\$5 for adults, and \$3 for children) and to reserve the lower parking lot for Ayer residents only. There was some consideration to close the park and beach entirely to non-residents, but as the Town receives funding from the state's Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the beach must remain



open to the general public or forfeit funds. However, the entrance fees will help offset the estimated \$35,000-\$40,000 annual operating cost of the beach, and Ayer residents should experience less parking pressure due to these changes. Finding a long-term parking solution for and maintaining a safe level of usership will be long-term needs for Sandy Pond Beach.

### *Pirone Park*



Pirone Park is the crown jewel of Ayer's public parks. Situated on Grove Pond, the 18 acre park's waterfront views and open fields offer exceptional passive recreation opportunities. Pirone Park hosts the Town's largest annual event, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration, which includes vendors, food, a bike decorating contest (originating at the Nashoba Valley Rail Trail), activities, music, and fireworks.

There is one boat launch to provide boating access to Grove Pond at Pirone Park, however, swimming is not

available as there is some heavy metal sedimentation in the pond soil from prior industrial use. The park's athletic fields, which include 5 baseball/softball diamonds, 5 soccer fields, and 2 basketball courts are in heavy use (largely by Ayer youth sports) and require regular maintenance to ensure their continued and future utility. The park also features a playground with a sizable and beloved wooden playscape. Unfortunately, the playscape, constructed with pressure treated lumber, contains arsenic and its remediation and replacement with comparable equipment is a long-term necessity and future funding challenge.

Parking and stormwater management are also long-term challenges. To address storm water runoff, a rain garden was installed in 2016 in the upper parking lot at Pirone Park. The parking lot was originally designed so that the water in the parking lot would funnel into the lower field and the west side of the playground during heavy rain. Channels cut into the field and hillside from heavy rain flows created unsafe conditions and contributed to erosion. With the installation of the raingarden, a system was created to trap the water as it flowed out of the lot and funnel it into a chamber that would slowly release the water as it drained into the lower field. The rain garden, pictured above, is both decorative and functional as it prevents the harmful erosion previously being caused by storm water runoff.

### *Dog Park*



Ayer is currently in the process of constructing a 1-acre dog park near the intersection of Sandy Pond Road and Snake Hill Road. The dog park will provide a safe, partially shaded, and fully enclosed area for Ayer residents to bring their dogs to socialize and play off-leash. The dog park will feature benches and parking for the dogs' human companions and will serve as a future gathering place for Ayer residents and their [well socialized] dogs.

### Future Recreation Facilities Needs

Table MSF-8: Current & Future Recreation Resource Needs in Ayer				
Activity	# Facilities	Recommended per Population Size*	2015 Needs	2030 Needs
Basketball	4	1 per 5,000	-2.5	-2.5
Ice Hockey	1**	1 per 100,000	-0.9	-0.9
Field Hockey	0	1 per 20,000	0.4	0.4
Volleyball	2	1 per 3,000	0.5	0.6
Baseball	3	1 per 3,000	-0.5	-0.4
Softball	2	1 per 3,000	0.5	0.6
Football	1	1 per 20,000	-0.6	-0.6
1/4 Mile Track	1	1 per 20,000	-0.6	-0.6
Soccer	3	1 per 10,000	-2.3	-2.2
Pool	1**	1 per 20,000	-0.6	-0.6
Golf Course	18**	18 holes per 25,000	-0.7	-0.7
Tennis	3	1 per 2,000	0.7	0.8
Additional Public Resources:				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 General Use School Gymnasiums</li> <li>Nashua River Rail Trail</li> <li>Hiking Trails</li> <li>Kayak Launches</li> <li>Sandy Pond Public Beach</li> <li>Dog Park (currently under construction)</li> </ul>				
<p>* Standards for the provision of facilities were developed by the National Recreational and Park Association (NRPA)</p> <p>** ASRHS Ice Hockey is offered at Wallace Rink in Fitchburg</p> <p>ASRHS swimming is offered at the Harvard Ridge Pool in Boxborough</p> <p>ASRHS golf is offered at Shaker Hills and/or Groton Country Club</p>				

The National Recreational and Park Association (NRPA) has established general guidelines for municipal needs on a per capita basis. While their guidelines do not address all types of recreational facilities (omitting such popular features as hiking or bicycling trails, beaches, or general use parks), they do help provide a framework for evaluating future needs. In **Table MSF-8**, current needs (as of 2015) and future needs (based on strong population growth projections by MAPC) are shown. Values highlighted in red show the number of facilities that will need to be built in the future. Per NRPA standards, softball, field hockey, and tennis facilities are currently deficient, and will become more deficient in the future.

However, current demand for recreation facilities already outstrips the ability of the Town meet all

requests for use. Indoor space, a general use gymnasium, in particular, are cited by the Parks Director, is the Town's most critical recreation facilities needs. To address this concern, there have been discussions about constructing an additional stand-alone gym at ASRHS, as well as a \$7m proposal to refurbish the school's athletic fields. However, given the recreation and facilities needs of the senior, adult, and youth populations, a community center that can meet multiple programming and facilities needs is likely the most efficient way for the Town to comprehensively address these otherwise competing issues.

### Schools

Extensive studies of Ayer's school buildings were conducted prior to regionalization to determine the best course of action for consolidating Ayer and Shirley's existing facilities and constructing new facilities to meet future needs. Options included construction of a new high school, combining the high schools and middle schools and expanding at the middle school, or renovating and expanding the existing high school. Ultimately, the Towns decided to renovate and expand the existing combined middle and high school building in Ayer and turn it into a regional high school. The 145,000 square foot building, originally constructed in 1963 with upgrades in 1983 and 1996, was approved by voters for a \$55.6m renovation in 2012. The building, which once



housed over 1,000 students, is now built to have capacity for 460 students. The Massachusetts School Building Association provided 70 percent of the funds for the school building, with the towns providing the remaining \$19m needed to complete the project. The High School, Middle School, and Page-Hilltop Elementary School sites were reimagined as a campus with shared administrative space, and with the new main entrance of the high school replacing a former loading dock that faced the elementary school, and the installation of courtyards, the connectivity of the buildings was improved substantially. The middle school, which was constructed in 2003, was retained for use by the ASRSD, as it was determined to meet the district-wide needs for middle school education during that analysis. The Page-Hilltop School has the most uncertain future. Originally constructed in 1965 and expanded in 1975, the Page-Hilltop School has the most serious issues with facilities. In addition to typical maintenance and repair issues, trace amounts of lead were found in the school's water bubblers due to the presence of lead elbow joints during the Summer of 2017. The future of the Lura A. White Elementary School, which was originally built in 1936, expanded in 1959 and 1978, and renovated as part of the regionalization master plan, also remains uncertain. It is likely both communities will have a strong desire to retain their elementary schools in upcoming years, but with both buildings in need of repairs, and a declining population of school-age children, decisions regarding the future of these buildings, as well as opportunities related to their potential reuse (such as a community center), will be necessary in upcoming years.

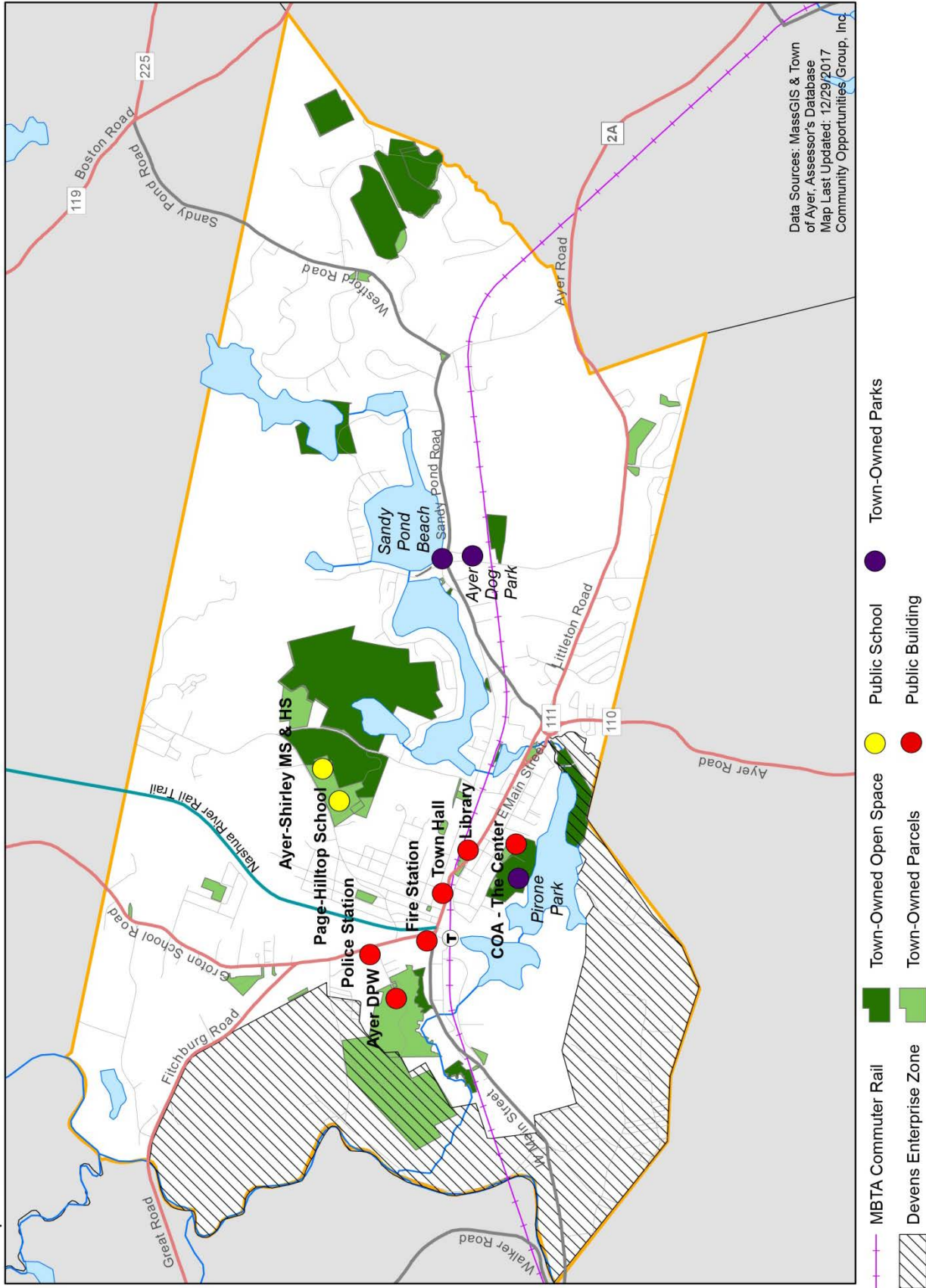
## Future Needs

Programs & Services	Facilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expanded senior recreation offerings</li> <li>Expanded special education and advanced placement course offerings as required</li> <li>Adult recreation and enrichment programming</li> <li>American's with Disabilities Act Transition Plan</li> <li>Community Center feasibility study</li> <li>Parking study for rec resources</li> <li>Downtown wayfinding signage and Parking Management Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DPW Operations Center</li> <li>DPW Equipment Garage</li> <li>Elementary School</li> <li>Community/Senior Center</li> <li>Indoor Recreation</li> <li>Storage, meeting, and office space</li> <li>Farmers Market Location</li> <li>Neighborhood Parks in underserved areas (e.g. Devenscrest, Grove Pond)</li> </ul>





# **Town of Ayer, Massachusetts** Municipal Facilities





## Formative Issues

Assets and Opportunities	Challenges and Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Governance.</b> Ayer is making great strides to improve the efficiency and efficacy of the local government to cost-effective services and programs. Moving to a Town Manager form of government allows the town to operate more efficiently by concentrating and sufficiently endowing decision-making authority in one office. This allows for the timely processing of contracts and other important paperwork, as well as for the procurement of goods and services, and staffing maintenance.</li> <li>• <b>Professionalization of Services.</b> Moving to appointed rather than elected board, commission, and staff positions, the Town is more able to recruit and retain qualified candidates that are entrusted to make decisions impacting Ayer's current and future quality of life.</li> <li>• <b>Volunteerism.</b> Much of Ayer's ability to keep residential property taxes low depends on town residents volunteering to perform critical functions such as serving on boards, commissions, and committees, attending public meetings, participating in clean-ups and water testing and other routine maintenance, administering recreation programming, and other such activities. Ayer's volunteers are essential in maintaining a high quality of life. Further, the Town is committed to increasing citizen participation and has created a portal on the Town's website to view and apply for all available town-related volunteer opportunities.</li> <li>• <b>Proactive Financial Planning.</b> Although the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) process is required of all municipalities, Ayer's Town leadership and staff are particularly proactive in ensuring ongoing and adequate investment in Ayer's facilities, infrastructure, and resources to ensure their continued health. Although serious funding challenges remain, the Town is proactive in identifying future needs, regulatory changes, and funding opportunities to ensure the Town's ongoing success.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Participation and Civic Engagement.</b> A number of Ayer's local boards and commissions suffer from chronic vacancies, and the Town has a difficult time garnering enough interest to sustainably fill these positions. In addition, attendance rates at Town Meetings are extremely low, with quorums periodically jeopardized. If quorums are not reached at Town Meeting, the Town cannot approve its budget and other critical warrants that are required to ensure the Town remains in compliance with local and state regulations. The Town would like to see a participation rate of 80 percent of registered voting to ensure that local votes are more broadly representative of Ayer's entire residential population.</li> <li>• <b>Succession Planning.</b> The majority of Ayer's municipal department heads will be reaching retirement age within the next 5-10 years. With extremely limited budgets, the Town has limited opportunity to create junior staffing positions to ensure that institutional knowledge and occupational training are extended to the next generation of public employees. In addition, many of Ayer's board and committee members are also reaching the end of their tenures in Town leadership and vacancies will increase without new volunteers to serve in these positions.</li> <li>• <b>Expanding Facilities and Services.</b> Many of the Town's departments are constricted by insufficient meeting and program space, storage space, and office space. Addressing facilities needs while also expanding programming and services to meet residential demand will be enormously challenging in upcoming years as the solution to these issues likely requires the construction of a new facility, such as a community center, to provide meeting space, storage space, recreation, and senior programming and facilities.</li> <li>• <b>Finance limitations.</b> Meeting funding needs to perform required functions, provide sufficient services, and maintain and upgrade existing facilities and infrastructure will remain Ayer's greatest challenge in upcoming years.</li> </ul>



## Recommendations:

- Work with industrial and residential users to participate in water conservation and water quality protection, including monitoring best management practices, the installation of new meters, and banning underground sprinklers in lieu of using native plants.
- Use zoning to limit development and adequately protect areas around sensitive water resources.
- Find new wellhead locations to continue to serve Ayer's water users with safe and clean drinking water.
- Expand Ayer's recreation offerings and improve facilities. There is currently no adult programming, limited senior programming, and youth sports offered through the ASRSD or Recreation. Youth sports are greatly impacted by the availability of indoor recreation space and outdoor fields.
- Establish a community garden program at the Paige-Hilltop School to produce healthy food for the school and teach students about sustainable food systems. Gardens in other areas of town should be considered as well as some lots do not have adequate sun exposure, soil conditions, or a water source.
- Evaluate the Town's taxation policy and consider the adoption of a Small Business Tax Exemption.
- Continue to fund and professionalize town services to meet regulatory compliance needs and the needs of residents and businesses in Ayer.
- Create an accurate inventory of Town assets and review town buildings and land that may be appropriate for disposition or redevelopment.



# Implementation Plan

## Introduction

The Implementation Plan is intended to guide Ayer through the next ten years as the Town transitions from its military and industrial roots to a modern community of eclectic businesses, affordable housing opportunities, and diverse recreation opportunities overseen by an efficient Town government. The purpose of the implementation plan is to create a blueprint to establish policies and actions that offer high quality municipal services and facilities that will serve the community's needs in upcoming years.

The goals and strategies listed in the Implementation Plan are derived from the three-year master plan process, commencing in 2015 by the Master Plan Steering Committee and municipal staff. The five Master Plan Goals are intended to be the framework for the goals and actions developed for each of the topical elements: Land Use, Housing, Resources (natural, cultural, open space, and recreation), Transportation, Infrastructure, and Municipal Services and Facilities. Note that some actions appear more than once under different elements as they may serve several different objectives.

Within this plan, there are a number of acronyms referring to responsible parties. Please refer to the table below for a complete list of responsible parties for each action.

Acronym	Name	Acronym	Name
BOS	Board of Selectmen	CC	Conservation Commission
TA	Town Administrator	CA	Conservation Agent
C&ED	Office of Com. & Economic Development	HC	Historical Commission
TP	Town Planner	CPC	Com. Preservation Committee
PB	Planning Board	FC	Finance Committee
DIR	Director of C&EH	LIB	Library
CDP	Com. Development Program Manager	APD	Ayer Police Department
DPW	Department of Public Works	AO	Assessor's Office
MART	Regional Transportation Planning	MRPC	Regional Planning Commission
HA	Housing Authority	COA	Council on Aging
REC	Parks and Recreation	IDFA	Industrial Development Financing Authority
CuCo	Cultural Council	BOH	Board of Health

## Master Plan Goals:

1. Increase the Town's ability to efficiently and effectively manage Ayer's services and facilities in a fiscally sustainable and environmentally responsible manner to encourage a high quality of life for residents and an advantageous environment in which businesses can prosper.
2. Actively protect, conserve, and preserve Ayer's natural resources, heritage, and supporting infrastructure to protect critical environmental habitats, drinking water supplies, recreational areas, and open spaces.
3. Encourage the comprehensive redevelopment of Downtown Ayer to better accommodate housing opportunities, for both renters and owners at all income levels, and to provide for a vibrant downtown through the creation of new high-quality public gathering places, increased pedestrian access, new commercial space, and an enhanced visitor experience.
4. Expand and upgrade equitable multimodal transportation opportunities, including sidewalks, paths, trails, and rails in addition to roadways, to ensure that residents, workers, and business transportation needs are efficiently met.
5. Enact creative strategies to actively and effectively engage Ayer residents of all ages and walks of life in the Ayer public realm.



## Land Use Goals:

<b>1. Actively protect, conserve, and preserve Ayer's natural resources and supporting infrastructure to protect critical environmental habitats, drinking water supplies, recreational areas, and open spaces.</b>		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Draft and adopt the Petapawag Overlay zoning district to reduce development potential and protect the remaining lands within the Petapawag ACEC.	High	CA, TP
b. Procure lands near wellheads when they become available and place permanent conservation restrictions on them to preclude future development and protect the water supply.	Ongoing	CPC, CC, TA, BOS
c. Continue to manage, monitor, and treat Ayer's ponds, streams, and open spaces for invasive species and other threats.	Ongoing	DPW, CC, CA
d. Remediate contamination on public lands. Perform soils test, studies, and seek grant funds as staff time permits.	Ongoing	BOS, TA, DPW, FC
e. Revisit the creation of a stormwater utility to fund long term maintenance and system upgrades needed to comply with the Department of Environmental Protection regulations, as well as protect Ayer's surface and ground waters.	Medium	DPW, TA, BOS
f. Modernize Stormwater regulations and make bylaw available on DPW's website.	High	DPW
g. Continue to implement Best Management Practices with additional rain gardens, bioswales, and bioretention cells to mitigate runoff, erosion, and the discharge of pollutants.	Ongoing	DPW, CC
Funding Sources: General Fund, Open Space Trust Fund, CPA Funds, Grants		

<b>2. Encourage the expansion and continued redevelopment of Downtown Ayer to expand housing opportunities, for both renters and owners at all income levels, and promote a vibrant downtown through the creation of new public gathering places, increased pedestrian access, and new commercial space.</b>		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Adopt a Smart Growth Overlay District under M.G.L. Ch.40R.	High	TP, DIR
a. Formulate and adopt a Form Based Code for Park Street.	High	TP, DIR, MART
Funding Sources: General Fund, MART		



## Housing Goals:

1. Increase local capacity to plan, develop and manage housing units that meet local needs.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Form Housing Committee to maintain an inventory of Ayer's affordable housing options and administration to determine if it is meeting the needs and goals of Ayer's residents today.	High	C&ED
b. Formally coordinate meetings between the Housing Committee, COA, Housing Authority, Community & Economic Development Department, Planning Board, and Community Preservation Committee staff and committee chairs on a quarterly basis to discuss housing issues and opportunities to ensure information is being transmitted throughout Town Hall.	High	CDP
c. Increase the availability of information regarding housing assistance and request agency brochures to keep in Town Hall and links on the Town's website. (MassHousing loan programs, Section 8 application, private bank loans available to Low/Mod income households, etc.) Utilize the Town's social media to advertise new opportunities.	Medium	CDP
d. Track affordable developments listed on the SHI and proactively address expiring restrictions.	Ongoing	CDP, CPC
Funding Sources: General Fund, CPA Funds, Grants		

2. Increase housing opportunities for Ayer residents.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Work with the Planning Board to provide education on housing needs, particularly with respect to the types of housing needed, to ensure that new development is appropriately designed for and reviewed by the Town of Ayer.	High	PB, TP, CDP
b. Inventory affordable housing opportunities, both existing and in the development pipeline, and distribute between COA, HA, C&ED, CPCP to increase awareness of local housing opportunities.	Medium	CDP
c. Promote and advertise the Housing Rehab program to increase awareness.	Medium	CDP
d. Coordinate with Casa Manor, the Ayer Motor Lodge, and Pastor Wells, who are currently providing most emergency housing services, and local nonprofits to formalize and improve rapid rehousing in Ayer.	Low	CDP
e. Identify town-owned property and/or lower cost market rate to convert into affordable housing as Local Initiative Projects (LIP).	Ongoing	CDP, TA, BOS
Funding Sources: General Fund, CPA Funds, Grants		





3. Encourage housing development that is sustainable, affordable, and serves all members of Ayer's population.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Strengthen site plan review process and standards to ensure that new development will adequately serve its residents. Waivers for sidewalks and other design standards should be discouraged. Board level review should encourage floor plans for 3+ bedroom family apartments, starter homes, and housing appropriate for seniors.	High	C&ED, DPW
b. Adopt a Chapter 40R Smart Growth Zoning District around Downtown to encourage redevelopment that will generate additional housing units, including affordable units.	High	TP, DIR, PB
c. Increase infill development opportunities in existing residential areas to minimize the destruction of critical environmental habitats and drinking water supply areas. Incentives could include zoning amendments that allow for Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND), minimum lot size reductions, shared driveway waivers, and accessory dwelling units.	High	TP, DIR, PB
d. Update subdivision bylaws to remove sections that encourage inefficient housing development (remove excessive roadway widths, ban cul-de-sacs and other roads that do not connect, mandate sidewalks, etc.).	High	DPW
Funding Sources: General Fund, MRPC, CPA Funds, Grants		

### Economic Development Goals:

1. Position Downtown Ayer as a regional destination for specialty retail shopping, dining, entertainment, special events, heritage tourism, and services within a high-quality public space experience.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Perform outreach to local businesses to inform them of IDFA loans, state and federal resources, technical assistance and events through the Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce, and employee training programs offered through the Job Corps, Nashua Valley Technical School, and Mount Wachusett Community College.	Medium	DIR, IDFA
b. Continue to support and advocate for Ayer's transportation needs at the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART) to expand the current bus service from the MBTA Commuter Rail Station to Devens to include the Nashoba Valley Medical Center and Nemco Way Industrial Park address first/last mile transportation issues facing Ayer business employees.	High	DIR, TA, BOS
c. Maintain and promote an inventory of available commercial properties on the Town's Economic Development homepage.	Ongoing	DIR
d. Continue to support and fund an economic development advocacy position in Town government to oversee attraction and retention, coordinate IDFA activities, provide representation for Ayer at regional and state organizations, and to provide an interface between the business community and Town government.	High	BOS, TA, FC
e. Adopt design standards and guidelines as part of the Town's Zoning Bylaws and the Planning Board's rules and procedures to ensure that new commercial development in Ayer's gateways, corridors, and industrial areas contribute positively to Ayer's streetscape and increases the Town's "curb appeal".	High	DIR, TP, PB
Funding Sources: General Fund, Grants		



<b>2. Strengthen Ayer's downtown to serve as a destination for retail, entertainment, and professional and personal services.</b>		
<b>Action</b>	<b>Priority</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
a. Adopt a MGL Ch.40R Smart Growth overlay district to incentivize new, mixed use development and the increased production of housing that is affordable to Ayer's residents and business employees. Adoption of a 40R Smart Growth district will make the Town eligible for funding from the State's Smart Growth Housing Trust Fund to subsidize development.	High	DIR, TP, PB
b. As part of the Smart Growth District, develop uniform design standards and guidelines for Downtown to ensure new development is complementary to Ayer's built form and promotes current "best practices" for the design of inclusive and vibrant downtown spaces.	High	DIR, TP, PB
c. Incentivize redevelopment of underutilized properties downtown by increasing development potential through zoning.	Medium	DIR, TP, PB
d. Commit to providing a high-quality public realm by installing benches, banners, bike racks, and other streetscape amenities that encourage visitors to spend time in Downtown.	Ongoing	DIR, DPW, FC
Funding Sources: General Fund, Grants		

<b>3. Strengthen Ayer's regional economic competitiveness.</b>		
<b>Action</b>	<b>Priority</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
a. Review Ayer's property taxation policies and consider the adoption of a Small Businesses Exemption under MGL Ch. 59 Section 51 to ease the tax burden on small local businesses.	High	BOS, TA, FC
b. Upgrade zoning and site plan review standards to ensure that reasonable buffers between residential and commercial (especially industrial) properties are maintained to mitigate impacts, and that performance standards with respect to stormwater management, energy efficiency, and climate resiliency are commensurate with current best practices.	High	TP, PB
c. Provide sufficient training and education opportunities for local leaders, board members, and commissioners to ensure that projects are sufficiently reviewed for conformance to zoning, subdivision, and general bylaws and that financial tools such as TIFs and grants are used as effectively and fairly as possible.	High	TA
Funding Sources: General Fund, Grants		



## Resources Goals:

1. Protect Ayer's natural resources, including surface and ground water, habitats, and unique landscapes.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Advocate for clean-up of MGL Ch. 21e sites by seeking remediation funds, incentivizing private investment for projects involving clean-up of contaminated sites, and raising awareness of pollution in Ayer's soils, aquifers, and waterways.	High	TA, DPW, C&ED
b. Prioritize open space acquisition that will serve to protect sensitive natural resources, such as parcels adjacent to existing protected open spaces and drinking water supply areas, as well as lands reverting from the MGL Ch. 61 program.	Ongoing	CC, CA, CPC
c. Coordinate volunteer efforts to enhance stewardship of open spaces. Hikers, boaters, bird watchers, hunters, fishers, and other outdoor recreation enthusiasts can help identify and monitor concerns, as well as participate in habitat restoration projects and the removal of invasive plants.	Medium	CC, CA, REC
d. Encourage qualifying property owners to utilize the MGL Ch. 61 program and work with landowners in sensitive natural resource areas to consider Conservation Restrictions on their properties.	Low	Assessor, CA
e. Coordinate with both Watershed Associations, MassDevelopment, US Fish & Wildlife, Mass Fisheries & Wildlife, Mass Audubon, and the Town of Groton to support conservation initiatives within or adjacent to Ayer.	Medium	CA, CA
f. Explore formation of a land trust or partnership with a regional land trust to help facilitate timely acquisition of open space.	Low	CA, CC, BOS
g. Employ best practices to ensure that zoning and subdivision regulations and DPW specifications adequately protect Ayer's natural resources from contamination or erosion and encourage the protection of priority open spaces.	High	DPW, TP, PB
Funding Sources: General Fund, Open Space Trust Fund, CPA Funds, Grants		

2. Expand access to recreational opportunities for all residents.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Prioritize the expansion of open space and/or public access easements around ponds and streams in Ayer to facilitate public access for recreational use such as kayaking launches and hiking trails.	High	CC, REC
b. Expand the network of trails where appropriate, particularly where they can connect recreational, cultural, and neighborhood amenities, as well as regional open space resources. Ensure that trails will remain in existence by seeking public access easements where trails currently traverse privately owned land.	Medium	REC, TA, BOS, TOWN COUNSEL
c. Identify opportunities to create neighborhood parks within neighborhoods that are not currently walkable to, or served by, a public park. Parks should be designed with input from prospective users and should consider the needs of users of all of ages and abilities.	Medium	C&ED, REC, DPW



d. Address and budget for the need for indoor recreation space by finding or a creating a suitable indoor space to allow for youth sports and adult recreation (including seniors) to be adequately served.	High	REC, TA, BOS, COA
e. Identify a location that could accommodate the space needs of the Senior Center to expand capacity for services and programs.	High	COA, TA, BOS
f. Provide wayfinding signage, maps, and online information about the location of Ayer's parks, trails, and recreational assets, including water access for boating and fishing.	Low	REC, CC, C&ED
Funding Sources: General Fund, Open Space Trust Fund, CPA Funds, Grants, User Fees		

3. Highlight and promote Ayer's historical, cultural, and natural assets that embody the Town's heritage.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Utilize CPA funds to create a Historic Preservation Plan to identify historic resources, local needs and priorities, and to create a long-term strategy to ensure that Ayer's heritage endures and is documented, preserved, and promoted.	High	CPC, HC, LIB
b. Develop a strategy for completing Ayer's inventory of historic objects, landscapes, and structures for submission to the Massachusetts Historic Commission.	High	CPC, HC, CUCO
c. Identify funding and regulatory incentives to encourage the rehabilitation and reuse of historic buildings.	Medium	C&ED
d. Install interpretive elements, such as signs, markers, and monuments to highlight important stories and features in Ayer's landscape.	Low	HC, LIB, CUCO
e. Continue to archive, preserve, and digitize artifacts and records that document Ayer's history through the Nutting Room at the Library or other publicly accessible facilities	Ongoing	LIB, HC, CPC
f. Investigate the adoption of a Local Historic District or Neighborhood Conservation District to ensure sensitive historic resources are preserved.	Low	HC
Funding Sources: General Fund, CPA Funds, Grants		

4. Increase organizational capacity and awareness of Ayer's recreational and cultural programming.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Increase coordination between Schools, Community Education Program, Library, Senior Center, Recreation Department, Cultural Council, Freedom's Way Heritage National Heritage Area, and other entities that offer cultural, educational, and recreational programs, to facilitate cross-marketing and broaden awareness of what is happening in town.	Medium	ASRSD, LIB, CUCO, REC, COA, Freedom's Way
b. Increase the amount of part-time staff time available through adequate funds to coordinate outreach efforts for volunteer-based activities.	Medium	LIB, FC, TA
c. Maintain the volunteer coordination web page to alert people to volunteer opportunities, as well as open seats on Town Boards and Commissions.	High	TA



d. Connect with local businesses and nonprofit groups to cross-market and invite sponsorship of recreation and cultural events.	Low	C&ED, REC
e. Utilize display space in public buildings for art, historic artifacts, or other cultural exhibits.	Medium	LIB, COA, TA, HC, CUCO
f. Explore opportunities to develop a Community Center to address insufficient indoor recreation facilities for youth sports and recreation as well as senior recreation and services offered through the Council on Aging.	High	COA, TA, BOS, FC, REC
Funding Sources: General Fund, Grants		

5. Make Ayer more sustainable by promoting the concept of a local food system and increase access to local food		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Identify leadership to be responsible for coordinating the return of the Ayer Farmer's Market. A committee of interested residents, Town staff, representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, local artisans, crafters, farmers, and other parties could be established to coordinate vendors and promotion.	Medium	CUCO, BOH, BOS, TA
b. Identify a location to establish a community garden with plots available to residents, particularly those who do not have access to private open space, to provide planting areas with clean soils, varied sun exposure, and a water source.	Low	DPW
Funding Sources: General Fund, Grants		





## Transportation and Circulation Goals:

1. Adequately fund and maintain roadways, trails, sidewalks, public parking, and commuter facilities to ensure universal access and reasonable transportation choices for residents, workers, and businesses.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Continue to monitor the state of available road funds through Massachusetts Chapter 90 and other DOT programs to provide funding for the annual Capital Improvement Plan, and implementation of the Complete Streets Plan.	High	FC, DPW
a. Develop a prioritization matrix to prioritize roadwork projects to maximize positive impacts on quality of life by addressing congestion, improving safety, and managing train and school related peak traffic volumes.	Medium	DPW
b. Obtain funds to complete upgrades to pedestrian facilities to meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).	Medium	DPW, TA, Building Dept
c. Explore the potential to upgrade the MBTA commuter rail station facilities to include bike racks, pick up and drop off area, upgraded waiting facilities, improve pedestrian crossings to public parking, and restrooms.	Medium	DPW, MART, MBTA, TA
d. Work with PanAm to ensure that the needs of businesses relying on freight transit are being reasonably accommodated with respect to upgrades to signalization and shared rail service.	High	C&ED
e. Continue to explore public-private partnership with MART to operate a shuttle from the Commuter Rail station to Devens, Nashoba Valley Medical Center, and other key employment centers within Ayer.	Medium	C&ED, MART
Funding Sources: General Fund, Grants		

2. Ensure new transportation facilities including roads, trails, sidewalks, driveways, parking areas, and multimodal hubs are designed to meet current best practices and future needs.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Update subdivision bylaw regulations regarding sidewalk installation, roadway geometry, and roadway specifications to meet modern standards.	High	DPW, TP
b. Consider the needs of future transportation technologies (such as ride sharing, ride hailing, driverless cars/Automated Vehicles (AVs)) by designing more efficient roadways and exploring opportunities for the location of pick-up and drop-off areas in key locations through Ayer to accommodate future changes to modes of transportation, including MART bus service and evolving transportation technologies.	Medium	DPW
c. Update zoning bylaws to consider the adoption of flexible dimensional standards for new residential and mixed-use developments to decrease the amount of roadways, curbcuts, and other paved roadways necessary to serve a development.	High	TP, PB
d. Update zoning bylaws to ensure that new developments are served by sidewalks, oriented around multimodal transportation networks (e.g. 40R Smart Growth Zoning adjacent to MBTA commuter rail station) and employment centers to reduce auto dependency.	High	TP, PB



e. Create a test-street program to pilot experimental low-cost transportation policies; e.g. shared bike lanes, crosswalks signalizations and paint, alterations to parking programs; to determine the appropriateness of such policies, programs, or designs for Ayer.	Low	DPW
Funding Sources: General Fund, Grants		

3. Improve and enhance Ayer's Gateways, pedestrian, and bicycle access throughout Ayer by providing a safe, scenic, interconnected system of roads, sidewalks and trails.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Implement key components of the Complete Streets plan to ensure safe pedestrian crossings, shared usage of roadways, and safe sight lines at intersections.	High	DPW
b. Provide safety and operational improvements at Park Street/Main Street intersection.	Medium	DPW, APD
c. Create additional access points to the Nashua River Rail Trail from residential neighborhoods through property acquisitions, easements, and site plan reviews of new development to create safe routes to local schools and athletic fields.	Ongoing	C&ED, REC, BOS, Town Counsel
d. Install critical missing sidewalk segments: along Groton-Harvard Road and Washington Street to accommodate pedestrian traffic to the Paige Hilltop School and the Ayer Shirley Regional High School; as well as along Fitchburg Road connecting to Park Street to provide access to the Shop N Save.	High	DPW
Funding Sources: General Fund, Grants		

4. Provide and manage downtown parking facilities to meet the needs of residents, shoppers, business owners and employees, commuters and visitors.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Support the construction of a parking deck to accommodate commuter rail parking. Adequately support the neighborhoods and businesses abutting the MBTA and MART facilities by ensuring that a construction management plan to manage impacts during the construction process as well the development and implementation of a parking management and enforcement program are in place prior to the commencement of construction.	High	TA, BOS, C&ED, DPW
b. Complete and implement recommendations of Downtown Parking Study: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Wayfinding signs</li> <li>ii. Smart pricing – meters, pay lots, and parking restrictions and enforcement.</li> <li>iii. Resident/employee permit program</li> </ul>	High	DPW, APD, BOS
c. Revise zoning bylaws and site plan standard to protect and enhance the streetscape by encouraging buildings rather parking areas to be sited in such a way as to interact and contribute to the streetscape.	High	TP, PB
Funding Sources: General Fund, Parking Revenues, MRPC, Grants		



5. Provide a safe, efficient roadway network that meets the distribution and workforce transportation needs of Ayer's industrial employers and also protects neighborhoods from residential-industrial use conflicts.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Work with MART and local employers to address connectivity issues between the MBTA commuter rail station and employment centers to address issues with transit options for the first and last mile of local trips.	Ongoing	C&ED
b. Work with MART and the Ayer Council on Aging to continue to support the Council on Aging's transportation services.	Ongoing	COA, MART, TA
c. Work with leaders in Lowell, Fitchburg, and Leominster as well as MART to explore regional transportation solutions from regional residential centers that house many Ayer workers to Ayer businesses; and from Ayer to social service providers in neighboring communities.	Ongoing	C&ED, TA
d. Provide signage and roadway improvements to manage heavy truck traffic through Ayer to mitigate impacts on residential neighborhoods.	Medium	DPW
Funding Sources: General Fund, MART, Grants, User Fees		

## Infrastructure Goals:

1. Continue to provide a safe and reliable drinking water supply to Ayer residents and businesses.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Construct additional wells at Spectacle Pond to ensure the Town's continued access to safe, potable water.	High	DPW
b. Continue to fund and improve water treatment facilities to ensure that Ayer's system will remain compliant as regulations evolve and require the monitoring and treatment of additional contaminants.	High	DPW, FC, BOS
c. Adequately fund the annual water main improvement budget, budgeted at approximately \$250,000 a year, to replace aging water mains throughout Ayer and keep up with maintenance needs.	High	DPW, FC, BOS
d. Complete installation of new water meters in private buildings to improve efficiency and mitigate illegal connections, abate leaks, and prevent infiltration.	Medium	DPW
e. Implement water conservation measures and provide public education regarding ways to reduce water consumption.	Medium	DPW, BOS
f. Ensure long term protection of Ayer's public water supply by acquiring open space near wellheads and continuing to look for new water sources (e.g. connections with Devens or a new well at Moore Airfield).	Ongoing	DPW, CPC, BOS
Funding Sources: General Fund, Grants, User Fees		



<b>2. Maintain and protect Ayer's wastewater system to ensure that current and future development can be supported in a manner that is safe, sanitary, and protects the public health.</b>		
<b>Action</b>	<b>Priority</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
a. Continue to implement the 2015 Wastewater Treatment Plant Evaluation and Capital Improvement Program.	High	DPW
b. Complete and implement recommendations resulting from the Inflow and Infiltration Study, to reduce waste, leakage, and infiltration into the Town's sanitary sewer system.	High	DPW
c. Continue policy to evaluate underground infrastructure, including sewer lines, prior to making roadway improvements to ensure pipes will not collapse and fail, and reduce needs for repaving.	Ongoing	DPW
d. Fund and implement recommendations found in the Sewer System Operations and Maintenance Plan.	High	DPW, FC, BOS
e. Seek regional solution to wastewater sludge disposal to reduce costs and increase reliability for sludge removal.	High	DPW, BOS
f. Begin negotiations with Devens regarding Ayer's wastewater disposal agreement which is set to expire in 2021. This agreement is necessary for Ayer's wastewater system to meet permitting requirements with respect to capacity.	High	DPW, BOS, TA
Funding Sources: General Fund, Grants, User Fees		

## Municipal Services and Facilities Goals:

<b>1. Address municipal facilities needs for recreation and social services programming, an improved senior center, and adequate storage and meeting space.</b>		
<b>Action</b>	<b>Priority</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
a. Perform a needs analysis for services and facilities in Ayer to determine what type of programming, services, and facilities are needed and/or wanted by Ayer residents.	High	TA
b. Conduct feasibility analysis for the construction of a community center to determine if all facilities needs could potentially be accommodated by one facility, or if separate facilities for a senior center, community center, and Town Hall Annex would be most appropriate.	High	TA, BOS
c. Identify a potential site and if new construction or rehabilitation of an existing building will be required.	Medium	TA, BOS
d. Identify potential funding sources and grant opportunities for construction and programming.	Ongoing	TA, BOS, COA
Funding Sources: General Fund, CPA Funds, Grants, User Fees		



2. Recruit and increase civic involvement on local boards, commissions, and committees to improve civic engagement, expand institutional knowledge and memory, and address succession planning issues as current staff and volunteers approach retirement.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Maintain online portal advertising boards openings and volunteer opportunities, applications, and other important resources for Town Opportunities.	Ongoing	TA
b. Engage with the Ayer-Shirley Regional School district to expand the Town's youth volunteer and work opportunities in the Department of Public Work and the Recreation Department. The Town may also expand membership of local boards and commission to include non-voting student members.	Medium	Ayer-Shirley Regional School District, DPW, REC
c. Advocate for the implementation of junior level staffing positions in single-person departments, as well as in the Police and Fire Departments to help offset impacts from departing and retiring personnel.	Medium	TA, BOS, FC
d. Ensure that boards are staffed by qualified professionals with proper credentials rather than by political appointees. For example, the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) is typically served by a Town Planner rather than the Town Manager's office as a Town Planner is trained in such matters, typically at a graduate level of education. Failure to assign appropriate staff is a significant liability to the Town.	High	TA, BOS
Funding Sources: General Fund, Grants		

3. Increase the Town's ability to efficiently and effectively manage Ayer's services and facilities in a fiscally sustainable and environmentally responsible manner to encourage a high quality of life for residents and an attractive environment in which businesses can operate.		
Action	Priority	Responsibility
a. Adequately fund and maintain roadways, trails, sidewalks, public parking, and commuter facilities to ensure universal access and reasonable transportation choices for residents, workers, and businesses.	High	CA, TP
b. Procure lands near wellheads when they become available and place permanent conservation restrictions on them to preclude future development and protect the water supply.	Ongoing	CPC, CC, TA, BOS
c. Work with MART and local employers to address connectivity issues between the MBTA commuter rail station and employment centers to address issues with transit options for the first and last mile of local trips.	High	DPW, CC, CA
d. Work with MART and the Ayer Council on Aging to continue to support the Council on Aging's transportation services.	Ongoing	BOS, TA, DPW, FC
Funding Sources: General Fund, Open Space Trust Fund, CPA Funds, Grants		

Please see the **Appendix for Implementation Checklists** for each department to monitor implementation progress on an annual basis as part of the Capital Improvement Plan and the Budgetary Processes.

