Chapter 1: Introduction

SUSTAINABLE FRANKLIN COUNTY
Why is sustainability important?

Sustainability can provide:
- Expanded transportation options;
- Lowered energy costs;
- Decreased dependence on oil from foreign countries;
- Increased vitality of local communities;
- Greater food security;
- More affordable housing options;
- Cost savings from greater coordination and leveraging of resources;
- Increased local control of the regional economy;
- Protection of critical resources, such as drinking water supplies and farmland; and
- Many other benefits.
An extensive public participation effort was conducted prior to the drafting of this Plan in order to better understand Franklin County’s residents’ priorities and vision for the future. This process is detailed in “Chapter 3: Public Participation” and the vision and goals that came from the public participation process are detailed in “Chapter 2: Vision and Goals”.

As part of the HUD Sustainable Communities Grant, several of the partner organizations are conducting local planning activities to demonstrate how this Plan can be used to guide planning and implementation at the local level. The Town of Greenfield is developing a Master Plan for Sustainable Development while the Town of Deerfield is conducting a Complete Streets and Livability Plan for the South Deerfield village center. The Town of Montague is conducting a Livability Plan for downtown Turners Falls and the Town of Orange is updating their Subdivision Regulations and Bylaws to incorporate sustainable development practices such as low impact development bylaws. Each of these towns will use this Plan’s vision and goals as a guide as they apply the specific recommendations to each of the towns’ unique characteristics and circumstances.

HUD Livability Principles
1. Provide more transportation choices.
2. Promote equitable, affordable housing.
3. Enhance economic competitiveness.
4. Support existing communities.
5. Coordinate policies and leverage investment.

REGIONAL LANDSCAPE
Franklin County is located in Western Massachusetts on the border of Vermont and New Hampshire. It is the most rural county in the Commonwealth with a population of 71,778, distributed over 26 towns. Only four towns have a population over 5,000. See the Map at the end of this chapter for an overview of Franklin County and the surrounding region.

Franklin County is located in the Connecticut River Valley, which runs north and south through the County. The valley has a broad flat expanse offering unparalleled agricultural soils and beautiful scenic vistas. Flowing into the Connecticut River from the west and the east are the Deerfield and Millers Rivers, respectively. These rivers once provided the necessary power for the early mill towns that thrived on their banks. To the west of the Connecticut River Valley are forested hilltowns, where steep slopes pose some limitations in siting large-scale development, and in some areas can present constraints with respect to transportation access. Not surprisingly, the flat plains of the Connecticut River Valley contain most of the existing large-scale development. However, this area also contains much of the prime farmland in the region. Development pressures in this area could negatively impact the agricultural economy by driving up land prices and making farmland unaffordable to farmers.

In addition to its excellent farmland, Franklin County has a large amount of forestland. In 2005, 77 percent of Franklin County was forested, while only 8 percent of the land was in agriculture and 6 percent was developed.1 There are a number of large, permanently protected state forests and privately-owned forests located in the County, some of which are actively managed and others of which are less impacted by human activity.

1 MassGIS Land Use, 2005.
The largest employment and population centers in Franklin County are located in the towns of Greenfield (pop. 17,537), Montague (pop. 8,175), Orange (pop. 7,699), and Deerfield (pop. 4,692). Of these towns, Greenfield, Montague and Orange have similar characteristics. All are former mill towns with a long history of manufacturing and agriculture. While the traditional, large-scale manufacturing businesses in the tap and die or paper industries have declined over the last several decades, smaller size manufacturers and those serving niche industries remain strong in these towns. Greenfield, Montague and Orange all have densely developed downtown areas while the Town of Deerfield is more rural. Until the last several decades, most of Deerfield’s economy was agricultural-based with manufacturing developing more recently than in the other three employment centers. The County’s largest private employer, retailer Yankee Candle Company, Inc., is located in Deerfield.

Overall, Franklin County’s economy is powered by the following industries: Manufacturing, Health Care & Social Assistance Services, Retail Trade, Accommodations & Food Services, and Education Services. This industry data does not include local, state, and federal government employment, such as public school employees. It also does not include self-employed individuals, such as artisans and others in agricultural and construction trades. Overall, Franklin County has a higher percentage of employment in the Manufacturing, Retail Trade, Arts, Entertainment & Recreation, and Education Services sectors than the state or nation.2

**POPULATION OVERVIEW**

**Population Demographics**3

Over the last 40 years, Franklin County has experienced changing growth rates. Between 1970 and 2000, Franklin County’s population grew by 20 percent – an increase of 12,300 people. Most of this growth took place in the 1980s. During the 1990s, growth slowed substantially. Between 2000 and 2010, the County actually lost population (163 people). These growth patterns are similar to that of the Commonwealth and the northeast region in general. Much of the growth during the 1980s and 1990s took place in the southern portion of Franklin County bordering Hampshire County, where many major employers, such as UMass Amherst, are located.

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3 All data in this section comes from the U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census. The 2010 data comes from the American Community Survey, 2006-2010 Five-Year Estimates.
During the 2000s, the majority of the population growth took place in the northern and eastern portions of the County. This may be due to the fact that these regions still have lower housing costs and a relatively large amount of undeveloped land, which is easily accessible to major employment centers.

Like much of the nation, Franklin County is getting gradually older as the "Baby Boomer" generation ages. Currently, almost half (45%) of the population is aged 45 and older. Of that, 15 percent is aged 65 and older. The largest individual age group in the County are those aged 25-44 years old making up 28 percent of the population. This age group is important, comprising the majority of the current work force and income earners for the region.

Due to its rural nature and location far from the major urban centers, Franklin County is the least racially and ethnically diverse county in the Commonwealth. As of 2010, the U.S. Census shows that 94 percent of the population is White. This is compared to a Massachusetts percentage of 80 percent. The remaining percentage of the population in Franklin is comprised of Hispanic (3.2%), Black (1.1%) and Asian (1.3%). The racial and ethnic composition of the population has remained fairly stable since 2000, although the Hispanic population has increased slightly from two percent of the total population since 2000.

Income and Employment
U.S. Census data show that Franklin County incomes are lower than in Massachusetts as a whole. In 2010, the median household income was $52,002, which is 18% less than Massachusetts’ median household income of $64,509. Another income indicator is per capita income. By this measure, Franklin County’s income is 24 percent lower than the Commonwealth’s. Franklin County’s per capita income is $27,544, compared to the Massachusetts per capita income of $33,966. The lower per capita income and median income figures for Franklin County reflect in part the lower average salaries and lower costs of living in Western Massachusetts compared to Boston and other Eastern Massachusetts communities. However, these statistics also reflect economic challenges within the region. These challenges include a decline in manufacturing employment, which paid higher wages. As numerous manufacturing jobs have left Franklin County, they have often not been replaced by comparable employment opportunities with good wages and benefits. This has resulted in lower incomes in the region.

While Franklin County often experiences a similar pattern of unemployment highs and lows as the Commonwealth and the nation, traditionally Franklin County has had a lower unemployment rate than the state and the nation. The unemployment rate for Franklin County in 2011 was 6.7 percent, down from 7.9 percent in 2009, which was the highest rate in the County since 1991. This is compared to an unemployment rate of 7.4 percent and 8.9 percent in 2011 for the state and the nation, respectively. More recent data from 2011 and 2012 demonstrate the beginning of a decline in unemployment rates as the national economy begins to recover from the recent “Great Recession.”

Population Projections
The demographic data presented previously shows that Franklin County’s population is fairly stable. It is growing slowly, getting older, and the ethnic composition has only slightly increased. It is important to look ahead and forecast how the population may change in order to meet shifting demands of the region. In 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) developed socio-economic forecasts for all regions of the Commonwealth, including Franklin County, projecting out to 2035.
In general, the MassDOT forecasts show that the next 25 years will be a period of moderate growth for the Commonwealth as a whole. Massachusetts is projected to grow at about ten percent – with some places increasing more rapidly and others more slowly. The Commonwealth’s pace of growth also applies to Franklin County. Franklin County’s population is projected to grow by seven percent to 77,000 from 2010 to 2035, an increase of 5,600 people.

Using the MassDOT projections, the FRCOG estimates the future population age distribution for Franklin County. The projections show that the most significant population trend over the next 25 years will be the growing number of elders. From 2000 to 2035, residents aged 65 years old and older will increase by 77 percent, making this segment of the population almost a quarter of the County’s total population. From 2000 to 2035, almost all other age groups will experience declines in their share of the population. Most notably, the largest decrease will occur in residents aged 25-34 years. This group, which makes up a significant part of the workforce, will decrease by 20 percent. These forecasted changes in the age distribution of the future Franklin County population will have significant impacts on the economy, transportation, social services, housing, and more.

**Environmental Justice Populations**

On a regular basis, the FRCOG conducts an Environmental Justice Analysis that examines the locations of large populations of minorities and/or
low-income households. This is done with the objective of ensuring that appropriate services are provided to these populations and that they are not unfairly burdened by or do not benefit from public infrastructure projects. For this analysis, FRCOG defines the “Environmental Justice Target Areas” as blockgroups in which: 1) racial minorities or ethnicities comprise seven percent or more of the blockgroup’s total population; or 2) at least 12 percent of the blockgroup’s population lives below the poverty level. As shown in Map 1 on the previous page, there were 13 blockgroups that met these criteria.

In the most recent analysis that was conducted in 2012, FRCOG found that there was little change in the Target Area locations from previous analyses. These Target Area’s blockgroups contain 43 percent of Franklin County’s population and almost three-quarters (73%) of its minority population. Combined, the Target Areas also include 59 percent of the County residents who are living below the poverty level.

**Fair Housing and Equity**
As part of this Plan, a Fair Housing and Equity Analysis (FHEA) was conducted in order to determine whether everyone in Franklin County has an equal ability to find suitable housing (see the Appendix for the full FHEA and its recommendations). The FHEA revealed that there has not been a history of systemic fair housing violations in Franklin County and that public infrastructure investments have been equitably distributed throughout the region with respect to race and income. However, the FHEA did find that there are a few communities in Franklin County that have higher levels of racial and ethnic concentrations than in the surrounding region. These areas are also highly correlated with poverty. Fortunately, the FHEA revealed that many of the areas of concentrated poverty are also located in areas of high opportunity. Specific recommendations to mitigate a potential over-concentration of poverty can be found in Chapter 6: Housing and in more detail in the Appendix C: Fair Housing Equity Analysis.

**SUSTAINABLE REGIONAL PLANNING**
Because of its rural nature and small town populations, Franklin County has a long history of collaboration at the regional level. The Project Partner Consortium and the Steering Committee created to guide the HUD Sustainable Communities grant are composed of organizations that regularly work together on a variety of topics. The FRCOG has collaborated with many of the organizations to conduct short- and long-term planning for housing, economic development, transportation, energy, natural hazard mitigation, watersheds, and more.

This Plan is an excellent opportunity to synthesize goals from these previous planning efforts and to identify new recommendations and strategies for sustainability. It is also an opportunity to plan for sustainable development by identifying the needs of disadvantaged populations, and developing an integrated plan that will guide development patterns and future infrastructure investments and projects within Franklin County.
Map 1-2: Franklin County Overview