



# **Rural Policy Plan**

**for the Commonwealth of  
Massachusetts**

**Prepared by the  
Rural Policy Advisory Commission**

**October 2019**

## **Making the Rural Policy Plan Possible**

The members of the Massachusetts Rural Policy Advisory Commission are honored to present the Massachusetts Rural Policy Plan. It is the hope and mission of the Commission that this Plan is actively used to guide policy and programming to address issues and realize opportunities in rural Massachusetts.

### **Members of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission:**

Brian Bullock, Gubernatorial Appointment

Dave Christopolis, Secretary, Hilltown Community Development Corporation, Gubernatorial Appointment

Jay Coburn, Vice Chair, Community Development Partnership, Cape Cod Commission Designee

Linda Dunlavy, Chair, Franklin Regional Council of Governments Designee

Corinne Fitzgerald, Senate President Designee

Helena Fruscio Altsman, Secretary of Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development Designee

Representative Paul Mark, Speaker of the House Designee

Thomas Matuszko, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission Designee

Wendy Morton Hudson, Nantucket Planning and Economic Development Commission Designee

Trish Settles, Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission Designee

Sara Smiarowski, Gubernatorial Appointment

Shaun Suhoski, Town of Athol and Montachusett Regional Planning Commission Designee

Judy Terry, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission Designee

Bill Veno, Martha's Vineyard Commission Designee

Helen Zincavage, Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District, Gubernatorial Appointment

### **Acknowledgements:**

The Commission thanks the hundreds of stakeholders throughout the rural communities of Massachusetts that contributed their time, ideas, and recommendations during the drafting of this Plan and specifically thanks the following organizations for their assistance in the writing of the Plan.

Community Development Partnership

Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission

Collaborative for Educational Services

Franklin Regional Council of Governments

Hilltown Community Development Corporation

Mass Housing Partnership

Mohawk Trail Regional School District

Pioneer Valley Regional Planning Commission

Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District

And a special thanks to Dan Hodge of Hodge Economic Consulting for his writing, editing, project management, guidance and facilitation.

The Rural Policy Plan was created through funding from the State's District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) program, apportioned from each of the state's 13 Regional Planning Agencies. We thank the RPAs for their contribution to this effort, and the Baker-Polito Administration and the Massachusetts Legislature for their continued support of the DLTA program.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	I
Top Priorities of the Rural Policy Plan.....	II
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Economic and Demographic Trends in Rural Massachusetts ..	4
The Key Assets and Issues in Rural Massachusetts .....	7
Purpose of the Rural Policy Plan .....	11
Process to develop the Rural Policy Plan .....	12
FOCUS AREAS.....	13
<b>Infrastructure</b> .....	14
Broadband & Cell Service .....	16
Transportation Infrastructure .....	20
Transportation Mobility .....	24
Water & Sewer.....	28
<b>Economy</b> .....	32
Economic Development.....	34
Land Use & Working Lands.....	38
Population Trends.....	42
<b>Community</b> .....	50
Education.....	52
Housing.....	56
Public Health.....	60
<b>Governance</b> .....	64
Boards & Staffing.....	66
Finances .....	70
Service Sharing .....	74
<b>Resiliency</b> .....	78
Climate Change & Resiliency .....	80
PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS & ACTION PLAN .....	85
Top Priorities of the Rural Policy Plan.....	87
Action Plan to implement the Rural Policy Plan.....	91
End Notes & Citations .....	92
APPENDICES .....	93
Appendix A: Existing Policies & Program Details .....	94
Appendix B: Stakeholder Participants by Focus Area ....	105





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rural areas of Massachusetts face different challenges than the rest of the Commonwealth. Unlike the economic growth engine of Greater Boston, rural areas are dealing with issues such as: small, aging and often declining populations; limited fiscal resources and staffing constraints; inadequate infrastructure and mobility options; and acute public health challenges. To help identify strategies and opportunities to address these issues, the Rural Policy Advisory Commission was created by the state Legislature in 2015 with a mission to “enhance the economic vitality of rural communities.”

Rural communities (those with population densities of less than 500 persons per square mile) comprise 59 percent of the land area in the Commonwealth yet only 13 percent of its population. Totalling 170 communities, rural municipalities are primarily located in western and central Massachusetts, with clusters in the northeast, southeast and the Cape and Islands.

Over a two-year period, the Commission engaged in a comprehensive program of research and outreach including listening sessions at ten locations across the Commonwealth in late 2018 and continuing in 2019 with over 20 focused stakeholder meetings to refine the information and develop the recommendations in this first of its kind Rural Policy Plan for Massachusetts. The key issues identified through this work included:

- Demographic trends and declining populations are the single biggest challenge in rural areas
- Enhancing rural competitiveness depends on upgrading the infrastructure in rural areas
- Economic opportunities and workforce needs are different in rural areas and require different strategies
- Rural areas have unique housing needs, which are not being met
- Education and health care – known as strengths statewide – can be significant challenges in rural areas
- Rural communities struggle to achieve equal access to funding resources and have difficulty attracting professional staff

## THE PLAN

The intent of the Rural Policy Plan is to illustrate the unique attributes and challenges faced by rural communities, inform policy makers of existing best-practices and identify a series of recommendations to be explored and implemented under a proposed new Office of Rural Policy.

The report spans 15 distinct focus areas within the categories of Infrastructure, Economy, Community, Governance and Resiliency. Contained within each category and in each specific focus area are a series of prioritized recommendations for further analysis and implementation. From the roughly one hundred suggestions, the Commission identified a set of top priorities that, along with achievable action items, will assist rural communities in the near term.



# THE PATH FORWARD

## TOP PRIORITIES OF THE RURAL POLICY PLAN

Expand diversity and implement relocation strategies to boost population in rural Massachusetts

Develop a statewide land use plan/growth management strategy

Determine and create a rural factor to adjust state funding formulas

## CORE STRATEGIES

Develop municipal capacity and incentives for service sharing

Create a dedicated funding stream for water and sewer infrastructure

Redesign public transportation provision in rural Massachusetts

Develop targeted economic development strategies for rural sectors

Ensure equitable and quality education to children in rural Massachusetts

Address the impacts of climate change in rural Massachusetts by enhancing the capacity of rural lands to provide mitigative solutions

## SUSTAINED IMPLEMENTATION

CREATE AN OFFICE OF RURAL POLICY

---

## TOP PRIORITIES

**Expand diversity and implement relocation strategies to boost population in rural Massachusetts.** While rural towns face declining population – especially in the western reach of the state – the overall population growth in Massachusetts is bolstered by a steady influx of migrants who overwhelmingly locate in urban areas. A multi-faceted strategy is required to make rural Massachusetts a more comfortable, welcoming and inclusive environment. Strategies that could be emulated to attract a more diverse and youthful population can be found in upstate New York, Vermont and Maine.

**Develop a statewide land use plan / growth management strategy.** Forecasts that portend significant population growth in Boston and continued population decline in rural communities do not present a favorable long-term growth pattern for the state. Boston will face more congestion and higher housing prices while rural communities will struggle to provide basic services to residents. A thoughtful growth strategy that addresses land use, housing and jobs can guide future growth in a more responsible, proactive and conscionable manner, especially in the face of climate change.

**Determine and create a rural factor within state funding formulas.** State aid for education and road maintenance are vital lifelines to municipalities, however, the allocation formulas must be reviewed and revised to ensure equity to rural Massachusetts. Instituting a permanent rural factor within the Chapter 70 formula will help school districts faced with declining or stagnant enrollments and high transportation costs provide quality education. Adjusting the Chapter 90 program (rural communities receive less funding per mile due to lower population and employment) would provide equity to those citizens most in need of an accessible road network. Any change must consider the impact of seasonal population swells that affect the Cape, Islands, Berkshires and tourist areas.

In addition, this plan outlines many existing best practices, ideas and recommendations for improving the economic vitality of rural communities. Among the prioritized recommendations include:

- **Develop municipal capacity and incentives for service sharing.**
- **Create a dedicated funding stream for water and sewer infrastructure.**
- **Redesign public transportation provision in rural Massachusetts.**
- **Develop targeted economic development strategies for rural sectors.**
- **Ensure equitable and quality education to children in rural Massachusetts.**
- **Address the impacts of climate change in rural Massachusetts by enhancing the capacity of rural lands to provide mitigative solutions.**

**Create Office of Rural Policy.** The Rural Policy Advisory Commission recommends that the Legislature begin by authorizing and funding an Office of Rural Policy to provide purposed focus on rural issues and advance the recommendations in this Plan. And, whereas the report is intended to be a living document, the Commission itself should be charged with a continuing mission to research and report on issues that impact rural communities.

This Plan presents a bold starting point by which the Legislature and other stakeholders can effectuate needed policy reforms to advance and ensure the long-term economic vibrancy of rural Massachusetts.





# INTRODUCTION

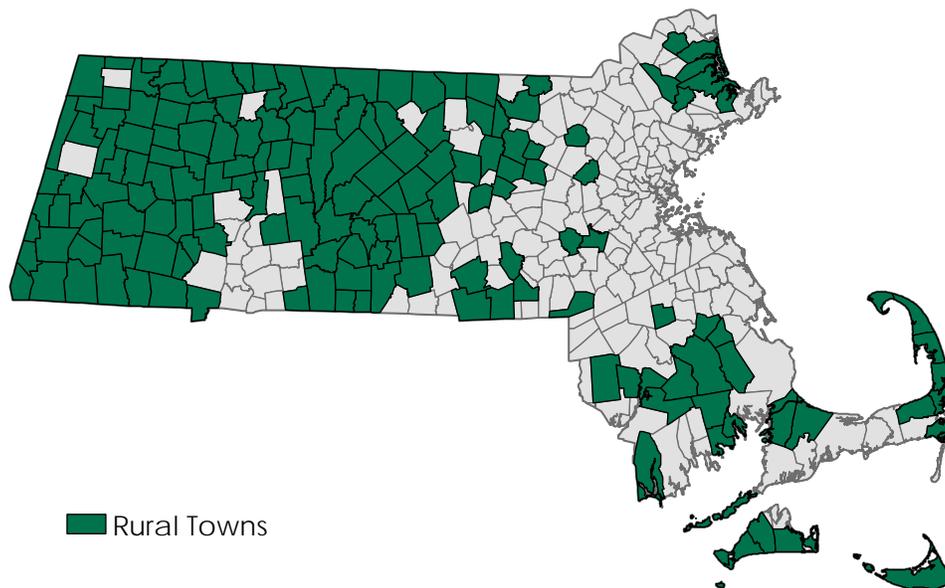


# INTRODUCTION

Similar to the rest of the country, Massachusetts' 170 rural towns and cities face challenges different from larger metropolitan areas. Unlike the growing economic engine of Greater Boston which is experiencing severe housing costs and traffic congestion issues, rural areas are dealing with a mix of issues such as: small, aging and often declining populations; limited fiscal resources and staffing constraints; inadequate infrastructure and mobility options that don't meet 21st century expectations; declining school enrollments; acute public health challenges; and housing issues that include affordability challenges due to second home ownership in some areas and the combined cost of housing and transportation in other rural areas.

Recognizing these unique challenges, this Rural Policy Plan – a first-of-its-kind in Massachusetts – was developed by the Rural Policy Advisory Commission (RPAC) to identify key issues, describe how rural areas differ within the state, highlight best practices underway in Massachusetts and beyond, and identify a series of action-oriented policy, investment and regulatory recommendations prioritized for implementation.

## MAP OF MASSACHUSETTS RURAL AREAS BY MUNICIPALITY



Rural areas are defined as cities and towns with a population density of less than 500 people per square mile. As indicated in the map, the vast majority of rural areas are located west of Worcester, with other rural areas in the north central, north east, and southeast Massachusetts, as well as the Cape and Islands. Rural towns are found in every county in the state except Suffolk.



Massachusetts is not known as a “rural” state. And yet, 59 percent of the Commonwealth’s land area and nearly half of all municipalities (170 out of 351) are defined as rural based on low population density.

---

In 2015, the Commonwealth’s Legislature<sup>1</sup> designated the Rural Policy Advisory Commission to address rural challenges with a mission “to enhance the economic vitality of rural communities.” The Rural Policy Advisory Commission members, as specified by the Legislature, include:

- One member from the House of Representatives and one member from the Senate (or a designee)
- The Secretary of the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development (EOHED) or their designee
- Eight gubernatorial appointments from regional planning agencies (RPAs) serving rural communities – Berkshire, Cape Cod, Central Massachusetts, Franklin County, Martha’s Vineyard, Montachusett, Nantucket and the Pioneer Valley (current efforts are underway to amend this list to include the Southeast region)
- Four at-large members

The Rural Policy Advisory Commission has been meeting regularly since its formation in 2015 and has produced a series of presentations, analysis, and findings that are available online at: <https://frcog.org/rpac-documents-page/>.

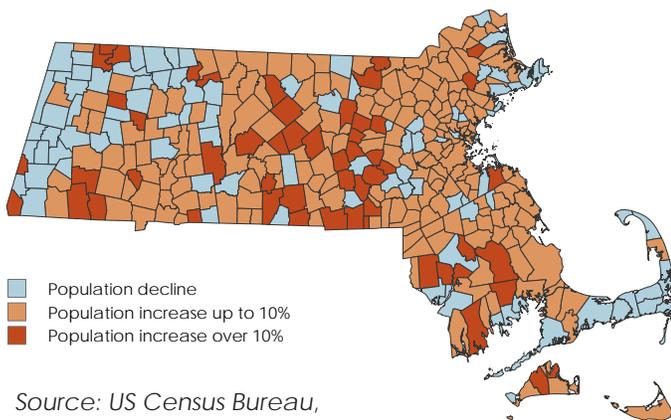
In particular, and prior to initiating the Rural Policy Plan, the Rural Policy Advisory Commission conducted a series of listening sessions on rural issues throughout the Commonwealth – ten (10) meetings conducted in November and December 2018. These listening sessions have played an influential role in identifying key Focus Areas and defining the critical issues that need to be addressed to enhance economic vitality in rural areas of Massachusetts.

# ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS IN RURAL MASSACHUSETTS

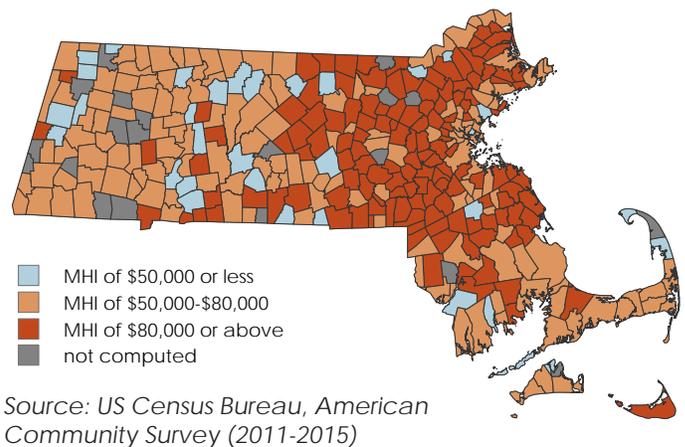
Massachusetts has experienced impressive growth in both jobs and population over the past decade, but much of this success has been driven by Greater Boston. The economic and demographic trends in rural Massachusetts are more varied, with some small areas growing quickly (primarily communities within a long-commute of Boston) but many others are facing slow to declining growth, lower income levels, lower housing values, and economies more dependent on public and non-profit sectors.

While most Massachusetts communities experienced population growth from 2000 to 2010 (the last complete census), the areas of decline were primarily located in rural areas in the western part of the state and Cape Cod. And while rural areas in total grew by 5 percent from 2000 to 2010, the most rural areas of the state experienced decline – for example, 42 of 73 towns in Barnstable, Berkshire, and Franklin counties had a lower population in 2010 than 2000, a decline of 2.4 percent. More recently, while the state of Massachusetts expanded by 5.4 percent from 2010 to 2018, population in all three of those predominately rural counties decreased by a combined loss of 1.8 percent. These trends are likely to continue in the near-term based on the aging of rural populations where 17 percent of people are 65 years or over in rural towns versus 15 percent statewide (and many rural communities have over 20 percent of population in that age category).

**POPULATION GROWTH 2000 TO 2010  
BY MUNICIPALITY**



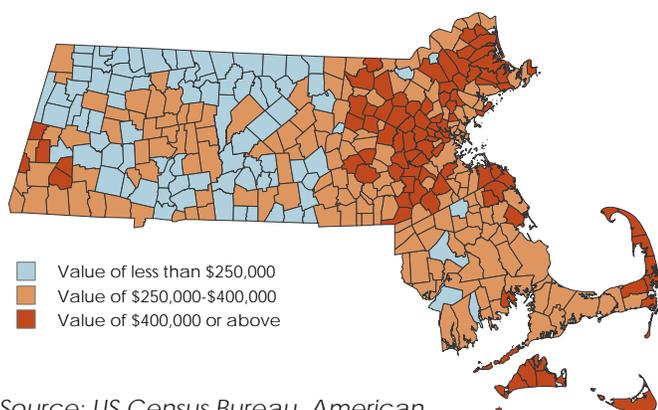
**MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME IN 2015  
BY MUNICIPALITY**



Income levels are generally higher in eastern Massachusetts and near major urban centers, and lower in rural areas. In the three most rural counties (Barnstable, Berkshire, Franklin), 51 towns out of 73 had a median income lower than the statewide median of \$68,653.

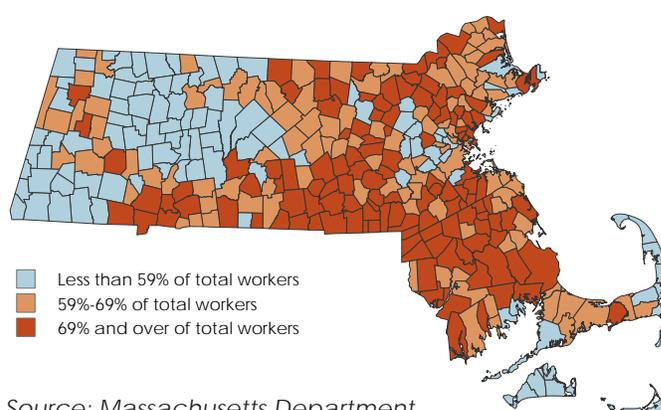
Closely related to income levels, housing values tend to be lower in rural areas than the rest of the state. While this generally reflects lower demand for housing and declining population, property values are the most critical source of revenue generation for municipalities, leading to a systemic lack of financing capacity in many rural communities. The median housing price for rural areas is just over \$300,000 compared to approximately \$385,000 statewide. Similar to income, about 50 of 73 towns in the most rural counties have housing values lower than the statewide average. Especially on the Cape, the Islands, and parts of southern Berkshire County, housing prices are more expensive (above \$400,000 on average) with second home owners pushing up values, making housing unaffordable for year-round local workers and residents.

**MEDIAN OWNER-OCCUPIED HOME VALUE IN 2015 BY MUNICIPALITY**



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey (2011-2015)

**PERCENT OF EMPLOYMENT IN FOR-PROFIT INDUSTRY SECTORS**



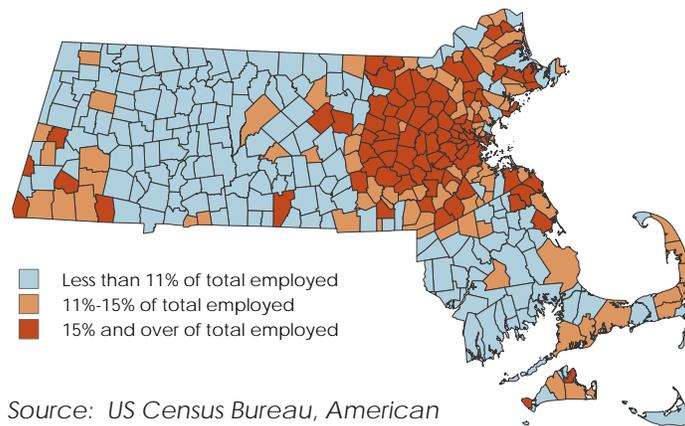
Source: Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Division of Local Services

Lower housing costs in rural Massachusetts are offset by higher transportation costs with limited and often no public transportation options. Most rural households have no choice but to have an maintain vehicles. The combined cost of housing and transportation often exceeds the same cost for urban households. For instance, in 2019 54% of median household income in Berkshire County was spent on housing and transportation costs compared to only 38% of median household income in Suffolk County (as reported in the Housing and Transportation Affordability Index published by CNT.org).

The economy of rural areas also differs from the rest of the state. In particular, rural areas are more reliant on public and non-profit sectors for job opportunities with about 66 percent of jobs in private, for-profit industry sectors compared to 69 percent statewide. This is partly due to the over-sized employment importance of non-profit institutions like hospitals, community colleges and other higher education in rural areas.

Rural areas are also home to a larger percentage of self-employed workers (entrepreneurs and contractors) – 12 percent compared to 9 percent statewide. Manufacturing is still a very important sector in rural Massachusetts with 11 percent of all employment versus 9 percent in Massachusetts overall. And the booming, high-wage professional, scientific and technical services industry is much more prevalent in Greater Boston than rural areas.

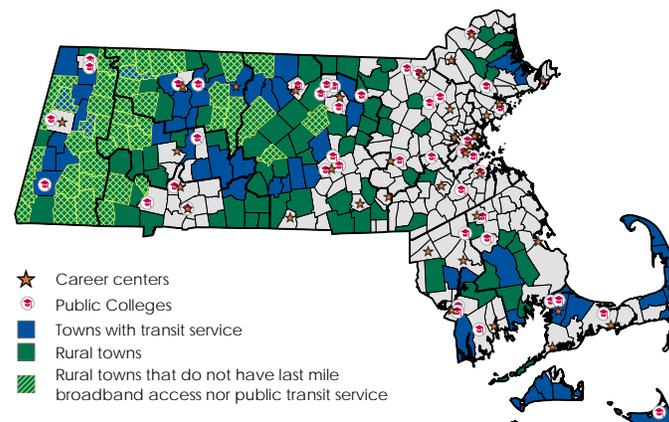
### SHARE OF EMPLOYMENT IN PROFESSIONAL, SCIENTIFIC, MANAGEMENT SERVICES BY MUNICIPALITY



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey (2011-2015)

Finally, rural areas have much less access to workforce support services, public higher education, public transit and broadband infrastructure. In addition to the large number of rural towns without public transit (in green), it is particularly striking to see how few public higher education institutions are located in rural towns (red dots), and similarly, how almost all career centers for workforce (yellow stars) are in non-rural cities and towns.

### ACCESS TO WORKFORCE SUPPORT SERVICES



# THE KEY ASSETS AND ISSUES IN RURAL MASSACHUSETTS

---

Based on the research, data analysis and listening sessions, a number of themes became clear in terms of the challenges and opportunities in rural Massachusetts.

## KEY ASSETS:

Rural areas have **strong assets to leverage**. While considerable challenges have been identified, rural areas in Massachusetts have strong assets and advantages that can be built on to enhance economic vitality:

- **Natural beauty and physical landscapes that are conducive for outdoor recreation and tourism** – this includes mountains and forests that allow for skiing, hiking, and world-class mountain biking facilities; and rivers, lakes and ocean for kayaking, fishing and other water sports.
- **Full participation in the movement towards small-scale farming, and locally made food and beverage products** – rural Massachusetts is home to many of the state's farms which are finding innovative ways to support the movement towards farm-to-table eating and dining, as well as producing a wide-range of food and beverage products, including successful breweries and distilleries located from the Cape and Islands to the Berkshires.
- **Smaller scale that is focused on problem-solving, innovation and collaboration** – the smaller size of rural communities increases the social cohesion and focus on problem-solving such as best practice efforts to fight the opioid crisis, initiatives to regionalize to lower costs, and collaborative efforts to expand access to high-speed broadband.
- **A quality of life that still attracts new residents and visitors** – while “quality of life” can sound like a cliché, interviews with stakeholders and business owners who chose to locate in more rural areas consistently find that quality of life was critical to their location decision. This can be reflected in lower traffic congestion and more affordable housing, easy access to outdoor recreation, and a less hectic pace of life – all of this within reach of the major cities of Boston and New York.

Despite these assets, the issues facing rural Massachusetts are challenging.

## KEY ISSUES:

**Demographic trends are the single biggest overall challenge for rural areas.** For many rural areas in Massachusetts, the four inter-related population trends are: 1) slow to declining population growth; 2) aging population with median ages rising and the challenges of providing health care and mobility options; 3) difficulty in attracting or retaining younger, skilled workers which are critical to local economies; and 4) foreign born residents are generally not moving to rural areas. Collectively, these demographic trends have profound, difficult to reverse impacts on rural areas, including:

- Declining school enrollments, loss of schools and hospitals;
- Lower property values and property tax revenue (the primary source of locally-generated fiscal resources);
- Fewer workers to meet the needs of businesses; and
- Greater need for public and non-profit services for aging populations.

.....

**Rural competitiveness depends on upgrading the infrastructure.** To be competitive in retaining and attracting workers, residents, tourists, and businesses, communities need infrastructure that meets their needs. But too often, the available infrastructure is not sufficient and resources to invest in upgrades are lacking. While many instances were identified as part of this work, examples include the lack of broadband connectivity that still plagues many rural communities; water and sewer infrastructure required by some businesses is not present in village centers or industrial parks; public transit is inherently challenging in rural areas which places even more importance on maintaining roads and bridges; and climate change is quickly increasing the need for more resilient infrastructure with new structural requirements to address floods and other weather incidents.

**Economic opportunities and workforce needs are different in rural areas.** The industry strengths that power the Massachusetts economy – life sciences and bio-tech, higher education, technology, finance, professional services – are much less prevalent in rural Massachusetts. Meanwhile, other sectors like manufacturing, agriculture and food products, tourism and outdoor recreation, and the creative economy are even more important (on a relative basis) in rural communities. And rural areas have even more self-employed workers and micro-businesses with a sometimes tenuous dependence on anchor institutions (hospitals, colleges, large manufacturers). Together, this means that the economic strategies for the rest of the state may not fully be aligned with the business and workforce needs of rural areas.

**Rural areas have unique housing needs which are not being met.** Building more housing and trying to counteract the high housing prices in some areas of the Commonwealth is a state-level priority. This broad challenge extends to rural areas but the issues are different. The housing needs not being met are most acutely felt in terms of senior housing offerings as well as affordable workforce housing for both year-round and seasonal workers. Of the housing stock that exists, significant portions have fallen into disrepair but the costs of rehabilitation are often beyond financial resources and more distressed areas face low home values but construction costs that rival the Boston area. In addition, many of the state's housing policies and programs are best utilized at a scale and complexity that is beyond the capacity of rural communities.

**Education and healthcare – known as strengths statewide – can be challenges in rural areas.** Massachusetts is rightly known as a hub for educational excellence as well as world-class hospital facilities, doctors and researchers. Despite a significant presence of jobs in health care and education, these statewide strengths provide very real challenges to our rural areas and residents. On education, the most pressing issue is declining school enrollments and the related drop in municipal funding for schools. It can also be more difficult to access vocational education, English as a second language (ESL), or continuing education courses. On healthcare, a key long-term issue is the lack of access to doctors (MDs), primary care physicians, mental health professionals, and the challenges of maintaining community hospitals, which are often under threat of closure. The more recent healthcare challenge has been the opioid crisis and the toll that has already taken on our rural areas.

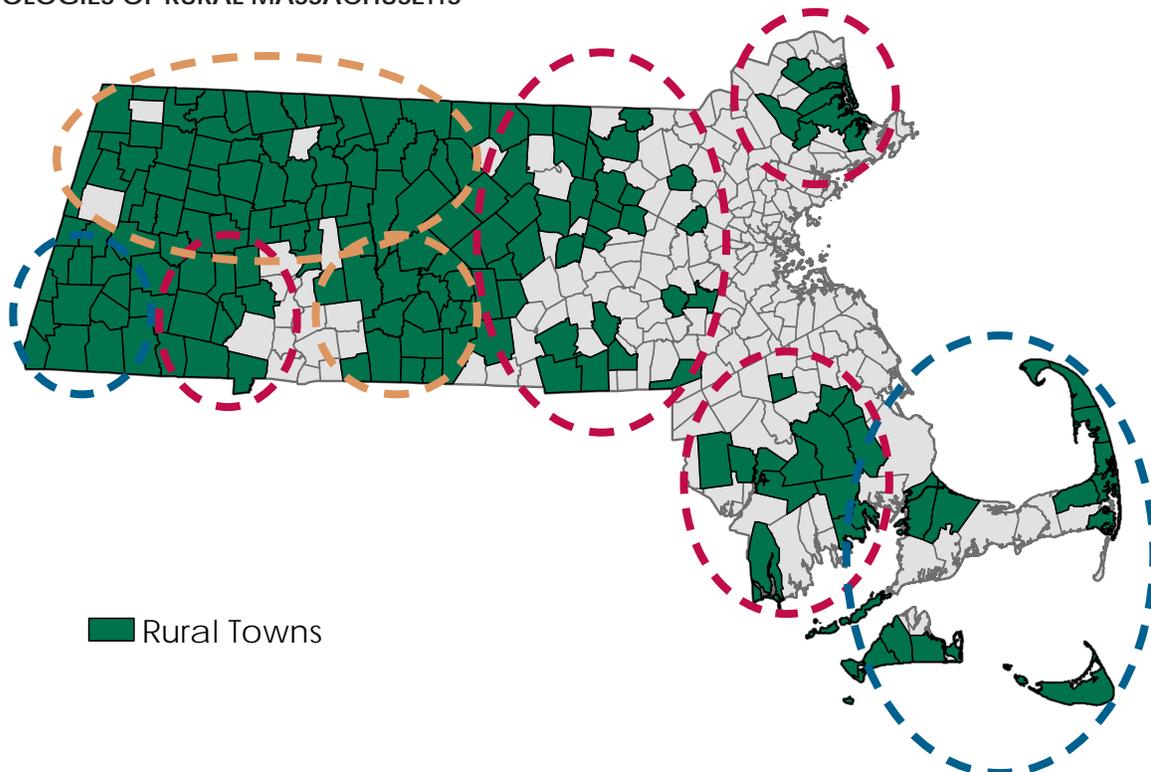
**Rural areas vary across the state – three typologies identified.** As demonstrated by the data analysis above, rural areas differ across the state in terms of their characteristics, issues and opportunities. Based on our data analysis, listening sessions, and Rural Policy Advisory Commission input, we have identified three categories of rural areas:

**Suburbs / Bedroom Communities** – these towns are generally located in the far reaches of the Greater Boston suburbs or outside of Worcester and Springfield (the 2nd and 3rd largest cities in Massachusetts), as well as near Providence, RI. Many of these rural communities are actually experiencing growth as people are priced out of the Boston housing market and are seeking lower home prices, albeit with longer commutes.

**Areas of Economic Distress** – these towns represent the most rural, least dense, and isolated areas of Massachusetts with concentrations in the northern Berkshires, Franklin County, and parts of Hampshire, Hampden and Worcester counties. These areas are generally characterized by declining populations, lower income levels, and fewer transportation and broadband options.

**Concentrations of Second Homes** – rural areas in the southern Berkshires, and the Cape and Islands represent a third kind of rural area with fewer year-round residents, relatively high home prices (often a challenge for local or seasonal workers), and greater dependence on seasonal tourism.

### THREE TYPOLOGIES OF RURAL MASSACHUSETTS



.....

**Rural municipalities struggle to attract professional staff and achieve equal access to financial resources.**

The primary function of local government is to deliver direct services to its residents including maintaining public works infrastructure, providing police, fire and emergency medical services, and ensuring a quality education for its children while properly managing public funds. Rural communities in particular suffer from an insufficient pool of qualified applicants to fill positions in administration and finance, fire and emergency medical response and code inspection. Many small towns have little or no information technology or planning and development staff. Without sufficient human capital, rural communities have greater difficulty accessing and administering financial capital through grants or technical assistance programs, which then severely limits community economic development in these regions. The lack of financial capital yields insufficient transportation and broadband infrastructure, deteriorating public works, lack of housing development or rehabilitation programs and inadequate resources for education, health, cybersecurity and business development initiatives.

**SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH FRAMEWORK**

Social Determinants of Health is a framework developed and applied by public health researchers, practitioners, and advocates. The framework recognizes that conditions in the environment in which people live, learn, work, play, worship, and age directly affect health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks. The five key areas of the Social Determinants of Health are:

- Economic Stability
- Education
- Social and Community Context
- Health and Health Care
- Neighborhood and Built Environment



While the Rural Policy Plan does not specifically follow the framework, it does mirror the framework in many ways especially in the categorization of Focus Areas used in the Plan: Community, Economy, Governance, Infrastructure, and Resiliency.

# PURPOSE OF THE RURAL POLICY PLAN

There are **four primary objectives** of this Rural Policy Plan for Massachusetts:

1. To guide the on-going work priorities for the Rural Policy Advisory Commission;
2. To develop specific, action-oriented strategic recommendations that can be implemented over time to enhance rural economic vitality;
3. To advise and inform the Governor, Legislature, and state agencies about the unique challenges and opportunities in rural areas; and
4. To reflect the concerns, ideas, and hopes of rural municipalities, residents, businesses, and stakeholders.

The Rural Policy Plan includes clear but succinct summaries for 15 interrelated Focus Areas that were identified by the Rural Policy Advisory Commission and informed by the listening sessions.

## RURAL POLICY PLAN FOCUS AREA DISTRIBUTION INTO MAJOR CATEGORIES



Each Focus Area summary includes:

- The overarching goal for improving conditions in the Focus Area.
- Identification and description of the key issues within each Focus Area, including how issues vary across rural areas within Massachusetts.
- A brief statement of the existing policies and programs in the Commonwealth that are relevant to each Focus Area, with more detail provided on these programs in Appendix A.
- Examples of best practices within or beyond Massachusetts that provide ideas about what kinds of programs, policies, investments or regulations could be duplicated or expanded.
- Action-oriented recommendations for state, regional and local leaders to implement in the near-term and longer-term to address issues and realize opportunities in rural areas.

The RPAC, through discussion and member voting, compared all of the recommendations within each major Focus Area category, and prioritized the top five from each in terms of their importance for changing conditions in rural Massachusetts. These are listed at the end of each Focus Area section.

# PROCESS TO DEVELOP THE RURAL POLICY PLAN

This Rural Policy Plan was developed over a roughly two-year process that included four major components:

1. Establishment of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission, and the initial research and meetings which set the stage for this plan;
2. The stakeholder listening sessions which were conducted in ten locations in late 2018 to gather input on the key issues facing rural areas;<sup>2</sup>
3. Identification of the 15 Focus Areas with content developed to define issues, highlight best practices and recommend policy actions; and
4. Review and prioritization of recommendations by the Rural Policy Advisory Commission, and drafting of the final report during the summer of 2019.

## RURAL POLICY PLAN DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

Timeframe	Milestone
November - December 2018	Statewide Listening Sessions to confirm Focus Areas
January - March 2019	Plan format development Consultant secured Focus Area lead developers identified
April - June 2019	Focus Area stakeholder meetings to develop policy recommendations, draft Focus Area content for Plan
July 2019	Prioritization of recommendations
August - September 2019	Plan completed
October 2019	Public rollout
Subsequent Years	Biannual plan review and update in sync with the legislative cycle

The Rural Policy Plan is organized into three sections:

- **Focus Areas:** short summaries of each Focus Area with emphasis on key issues, existing programs and policies, best practices, and strategic recommendations;
- **Short-term and Longer-term Recommendations:** the Rural Policy Advisory Commission carefully reviewed the full set of strategic recommendations to: a) organize strategies into near-term and longer-term actions; and b) prioritize, and where it made sense, combine strategies for the most effective impact in rural areas; and
- **Action Plan:** a concise set of actions to work towards ongoing implementation of the Rural Policy Plan over time, including tasks for the Rural Policy Advisory Commission and roles for other state and local leaders.

# FOCUS AREAS

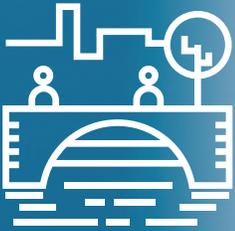


# INFRASTRUCTURE

Broadband and Cell Service  
Transportation Infrastructure  
Transportation Mobility  
Water and Sewer



## TOP RECOMMENDATIONS IN CATEGORY



- Perform an equity assessment of Chapter 90 apportionments
- Build capacity in rural infrastructure for emerging technology and climate resiliency
- Utilize broadband to accelerate economic activity and growth in rural areas
- Redesign and adequately fund public transportation in rural Massachusetts
- Provide additional state funding for rural water and sewer infrastructure needs





# BROADBAND & CELL SERVICE

## The Broadband Challenge in Rural Towns

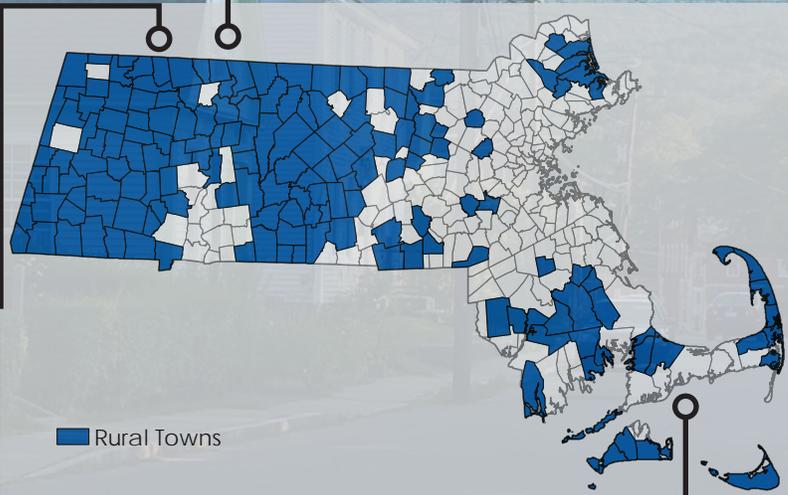
Broadband is critical in every aspect of daily life at work, at home and at school. More than a decade ago, it became clear that public investment was required to bring broadband to the most rural communities of the Commonwealth. After substantial state, federal and local funding investment, Massachusetts is on the cusp of achieving the goal of ubiquitous broadband coverage. Nearly all of the remaining 45 unserved towns (all of which are in western part of the state) have a path forward and work is underway to expand cable networks, and build municipal fiber and wireless networks.

While there are still hurdles and expense, attention needs to shift to sustainability and usage in western and central MA and to bandwidth expansion on the Cape and Islands.

Additionally, much of rural Massachusetts lacks reliable cell phone service. As technological advancements in transportation and communication are expected to more fully rely on cell coverage, rural Massachusetts is at risk of again being a technology have-not.

A significant expense of municipal fiber networks is Make Ready costs, the work required to adjust existing wires on poles to make room for broadband fiber. In Heath (population 706), this will cost \$1.8 million because many poles are more than 80 years old and need to be replaced. This cost is largely borne by the town.

In Leverett, 85% of households subscribe to the municipal fiber network, which is the first municipally-owned fiber-to-the-home network in Massachusetts. Before the network began providing service, a home for sale was on the market for an average of 166 days. In 2018, homes are in much greater demand, averaging only 95 days on the market.



Areas of the Cape with cable broadband struggle with an aging copper and coaxial cable network that cannot meet summer bandwidth needs. Businesses in Falmouth do not have enough bandwidth to process credit cards. Outer Cape beaches do not have enough bandwidth to provide emergency communication.

## OUR GOAL

Ensure that rural areas with existing and newly acquired broadband use it robustly to enhance the economy, keep municipally-owned networks sustainable, and address the lack of cell coverage in rural areas.



### BEST PRACTICES

- **Broadband adoption critical to economic growth.** Cornell University studied two non-metro counties with similar characteristics before and after broadband availability to determine the economic impact of broadband. Findings show that broadband adoption is more important to economic growth than availability.<sup>3</sup> Counties with an adoption rate of greater than 60% had significantly higher growth in median income, lower unemployment rates and higher growth in number of firms and total employment. In 2014, the MBI studied broadband adoption and developed a concept paper on adoption measures, “Digital Opportunities for All”, that could be used in Massachusetts to enhance usage and digital literacy. The recommendations from this work included:
  - » Integrate broadband adoption and digital inclusion into state policies.
  - » Create digital education and literacy training programs targeting key non-adoption populations.
  - » Provide discounted service options for low income households and low income businesses.
  - » Create an inventory of public computer centers and training programs.

- **Maine’s “An Act To Establish Municipal Access to Utility Poles Located in Municipal Rights-of-way.”** This recently passed legislation exempts municipalities from “make-ready” fees when they’re attaching equipment related to community safety or providing broadband services to unserved or underserved areas.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **Last Mile Broadband Program.** Funded through state bond and managed jointly by the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development (EOHED) and the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI).
- **MassBroadband 123.** Owned and operated by the Commonwealth via MBI.
- **Mobility Fund.** A program of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

# BROADBAND & CELL SERVICE RECOMMENDATIONS



- 1. Utilize broadband to accelerate economic activity and growth in rural areas.**
  - a. Implement a digital literacy program for small business owners in newly served areas.
  - b. Create innovation hubs in remote locations with gigabit speed broadband. Work with EOHED, MassDevelopment and the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative to develop innovation and small business support hubs in rural regions.
- 2. Create a revolving loan fund for broadband bandwidth expansion.** Massachusetts would benefit from bandwidth expansion for existing and future business, commercial and industrial use. A revolving loan fund for targeted municipal investment, created with state bond funds and overseen by MTC/MBI or the Department of Revenue, will keep Massachusetts competitive.
- 3. Conduct a data-driven assessment to determine the extent of cell coverage in rural MA.** Much of rural Massachusetts lacks cell service but comprehensive, up-to-date data does not exist to understand the extent and severity of this issue. A detailed assessment study is needed to understand and to start to develop strategies about how to address this growing problem.
- 4. To ensure the continued viability of the MassBroadband 123 network, lower the pricing structure to access the network.** Current pricing is too high for the network to be used by many municipalities and other service organizations, which weakens the sustainability of the network and results in underutilization of this infrastructure asset.
- 5. Release state bond funding earmarked for fiber expansion in Falmouth, Hyannis and Provincetown.** The Comcast cable network is not designed to serve the summer swell of visitors to the Cape. Expanding fiber to village centers for business use is needed.

**6. Ensure the completion and viability of municipal fiber networks.**

- a. Broadband 'make ready' costs that are above modeled estimates should continue to be covered by the Commonwealth. Municipalities building fiber networks based their bonding on costs estimated by the MBI. For some municipalities, actual make ready costs are far exceeding estimates.
- b. The Commonwealth should consider subsidizing initial homeowner access costs to ensure municipal broadband network sustainability and high adoption and usage rates. To ensure small municipal network sustainability, at least 70% of homeowners must subscribe for service. The Commonwealth should consider supporting installation costs for all or some (e.g., low income, elderly) homeowners.



**7. The Make Ready process should change to better recognize the infrastructure benefit received by pole owners and to reduce costs for project proponents.**

- a. The Commonwealth should adopt something like the Federal Communications Commission's new One Touch Make Ready (OTMR) Policy. OTMR is designed to simplify the make ready process and promote coordination between entities that move wires on a pole (Verizon, Eversource, National Grid, Charter, Comcast, MBI and others).
- b. Utility companies should be required to make initial infrastructure investments to aged infrastructure. Pole owners should be required to replace, at their cost, any pole that is 50 years old or older and/or is less than 45 feet tall.
- c. Municipal investment to improve privately owned infrastructure (poles) should be recouped. Massachusetts DOR should tax pole owners a higher tax rate for new infrastructure and legislation should be pursued that would disallow pole owners from charging annual pole rental fees for municipal infrastructure.





# TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

## The Transportation Challenge in Rural Towns

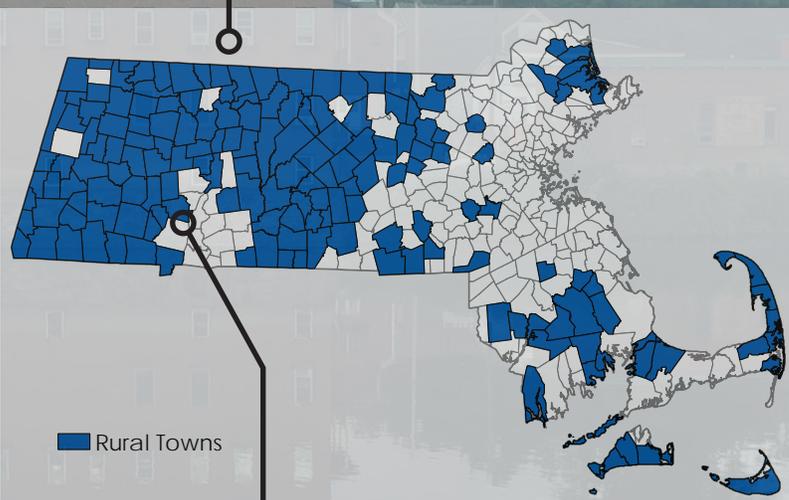
Rural communities are overburdened by the costs of maintaining transportation infrastructure. The Commonwealth's MGL Chapter 90 Program ("Chapter 90") is the main source of funding used by municipalities to complete improvements and maintenance and is insufficient to keep up with needs. Many rural towns have large networks of aging roads, bridges, and culverts that are in need of maintenance and repair.

Rural communities struggle to pay for design and engineering plans in order to get projects included on the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) or to apply for other grants. The low regional TIP targets in rural regions make the wait for federal transportation funding long, and project cost estimates can become inaccurate or design standards can change during that time leading to additional project design costs. In addition, lower project evaluation scores from the MassDOT selection process make it difficult for projects in rural communities to benefit from federal transportation funding.

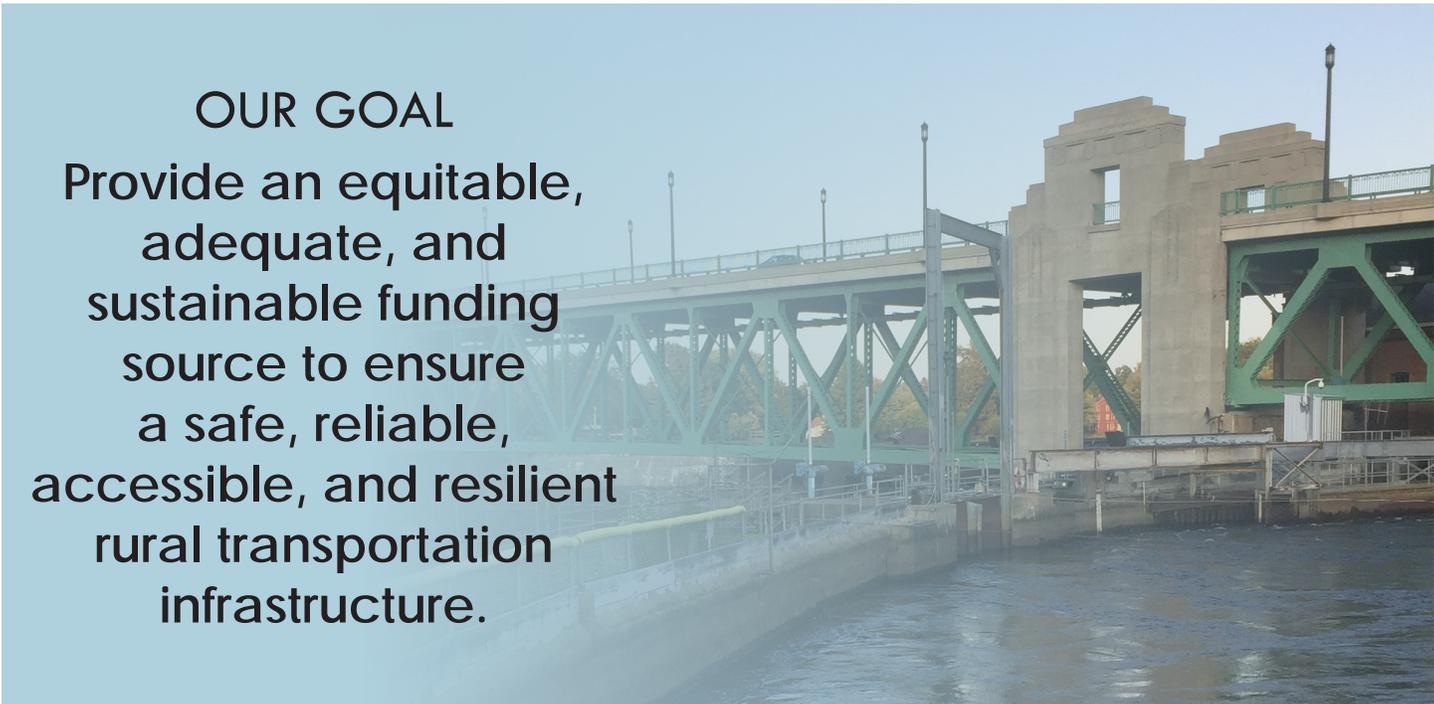
Broadband and cellular infrastructure is lacking in some places which will hamper future technological advances in transportation. A robust system of telecommunication and utility infrastructure is necessary to support the next generation of transportation technology. Inconsistent cellular service limits opportunities to use shared mobility transportation and to support the future of autonomous vehicles. A network of charging stations is needed to support the broad use of electric vehicles.

Aging roads, bridges, and culverts are vulnerable to severe weather. In Hawley, miles of roads and culverts washed out in Tropical Storm Irene. The town is responsible for maintaining 350 culverts and drainage outlets.

The MMA estimates annual costs of local road maintenance at \$685 million, while only \$200 million has been available.<sup>4</sup>



The East Street Bridge in Southamptown (built in the 1930s) will cost \$2.6 million to replace. The Town funded the replacement with a \$1.6 million 20-year bond, and a \$1 million MassWorks grant. Property taxes for the average Southamptown homeowner will increase by \$46.66 per year for 20 years to pay for this one bridge repair project.



**OUR GOAL**  
Provide an equitable,  
adequate, and  
sustainable funding  
source to ensure  
a safe, reliable,  
accessible, and resilient  
rural transportation  
infrastructure.

## BEST PRACTICES

- **Spencer Roads FMPC Capital Improvement Project.** The Town of Spencer, MA formed a Financial Management Planning Committee (FMPC) to analyze the most efficient method to improve the condition of the Town's roadway network. Through a consultant the FMPC worked to evaluate improvements needed to bring local roads into a state of good repair and estimated that the Town faced a backlog of road improvement projects in excess of \$30 million. Spencer residents subsequently approved a \$19 million bond to improve their transportation infrastructure. To date, Spencer has completed three projects and is advancing work on additional projects based on the schedule it outlined in its capital plan.<sup>5</sup>
- **Complete Streets Prioritization Plans.** The Town of Buckland created a prioritized list of improvement projects to enable all modes of transportation to safely use municipal roads. Total project costs needed are an estimated \$1.4 million.

## EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

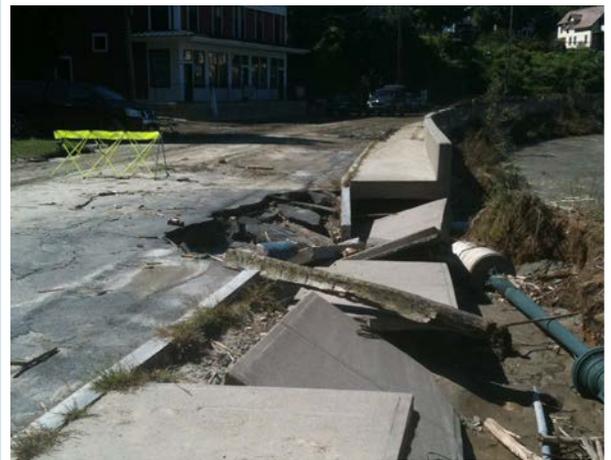
- **Chapter 90 Program.** State Transportation Bond funding allocated to municipalities and administered by MassDOT.
- **Municipal Small Bridge Program.** A \$50 million MassDOT program.<sup>6</sup>
- **Culvert Replacement Municipal Assistance Grant Program.** Administered by the MA Division of Ecological Resources.<sup>7</sup>
- **Complete Streets Funding Program.** Planning and \$400,000 worth of construction funding awarded to municipalities on grant basis by MassDOT.
- **ADA Improvement Grants.** Funding through the Massachusetts Office on Disability to support projects that increase access or remove barriers.

# TRANSPORTATION RECOMMENDATIONS



- 1. Perform an equity assessment of Chapter 90 apportionments.** The Massachusetts Legislature should commission a study to identify how current Chapter 90 funds are spent; compare rural and urban infrastructure needs; and develop recommendations to update the Program to ensure it is equitable for all cities and towns. The current Chapter 90 formula incorporates roadway mileage, population, and employment to derive the annual apportionment for each community. As a result, a rural community receives significantly less Chapter 90 funds than an urban community with similar roadway mileage due to its lower population and employment. For rural communities affected by tourism and seasonal population increases, recognize that local roads are used by seasonal residents and visitors, and consider the total number of persons served instead of solely the year-round resident population.
- 2. Match the Chapter 90 Program to inflation.** It is recommended that the spending level for Chapter 90 be raised and increased at a rate comparable to inflation in future years to assist communities in advancing necessary transportation improvements. The bond authorization for this program remains 'flat' at \$200 million per year.
- 3. Build capacity in rural infrastructure for emerging transportation technologies and climate resiliency.** Develop a new grant program specific to rural towns for the purpose of assessing and upgrading their current infrastructure to support emerging technology and climate resiliency. Investment in infrastructure to support new technologies such as autonomous vehicles, electric vehicles, microtransit services, broadband communications including 5G networks, and ITS are needed.

4. **Expedite permitting and develop increased funding to address small bridge and culvert needs.** MassDOT, EOEEA and MMA are facilitating a Small Bridge and Culvert Working Group that will be recommending policy, regulation and funding changes to improve access to technical assistance and funding.
5. **Adopt Regional Ballot Initiative legislation.** The Legislature should adopt Regional Ballot Initiative to allow communities to generate funds to support roadway improvements, emerging technologies and climate resiliency infrastructure.
6. **Explore options to provide funding assistance for engineering costs.** Create a grant program or regional capital trust fund to defray engineering design costs to advance rural town roadway projects to the TIP. Design funds should be eligible for Complete Streets where so desired by a community.
7. **Support non-vehicular modes of transportation when feasible.** The MassDOT Complete Streets Program helps with planning and construction funding, but support and funding for alternative modes of transportation are needed.





# TRANSPORTATION MOBILITY

## The Transportation Mobility Challenge in Rural Towns

Many rural communities are unserved or marginally served by Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) and shared-use transportation such as passenger rail and ridesharing alternatives. New service options face challenges associated with providing cost-effective and efficient service over longer distances to lower population densities. While residents desire to travel via transit and shared mobility services, rural areas have remained dependent on limited traditional fixed route transit and the single occupant vehicle.

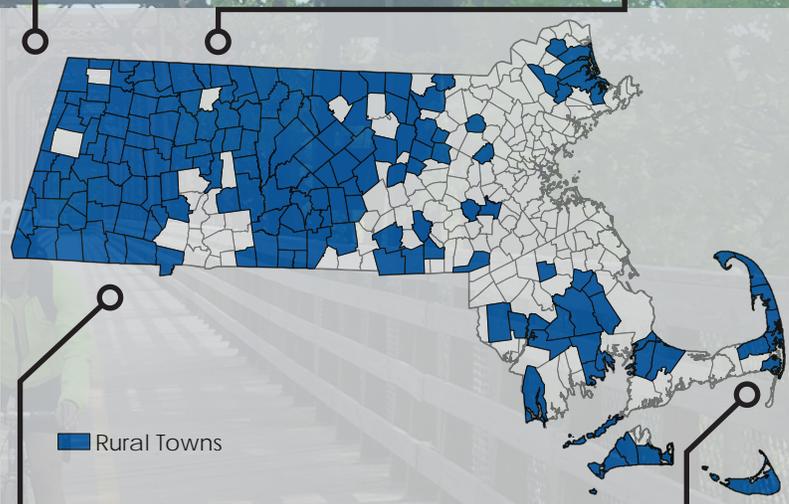
The current RTA funding mechanism does not provide predictable or sufficient year-to-year State Contract Assistance (SCA) funding, and does not increase with inflation. Level funding for public transit in FY2018 and FY2019 resulted in operating deficits for the RTAs, requiring service cuts and fare increases. In addition, rural RTAs must comply with extensive regulations that hinder their capacity to make the most efficient use of assets.

The increasing mobility needs of youth, the growing aging population and others who cannot or choose not to drive will generate more on-call and appointment-based transportation demand. Shared-use mobility services have the potential to provide flexible options, but there is less financial incentive to start up in rural areas.

Passenger rail service connecting rural communities to one another as well as to urban areas like Boston and New York is very limited and a growing priority, but requires significant infrastructure and operational investments.

Due to funding limitations, the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority (BRTA) and Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA) do not provide transit service after 7:00 p.m. The FRTA is not able to provide any service on weekends, and BRTA does not provide any service on Sundays.

As of early 2019, there is one Uber driver in Franklin County.

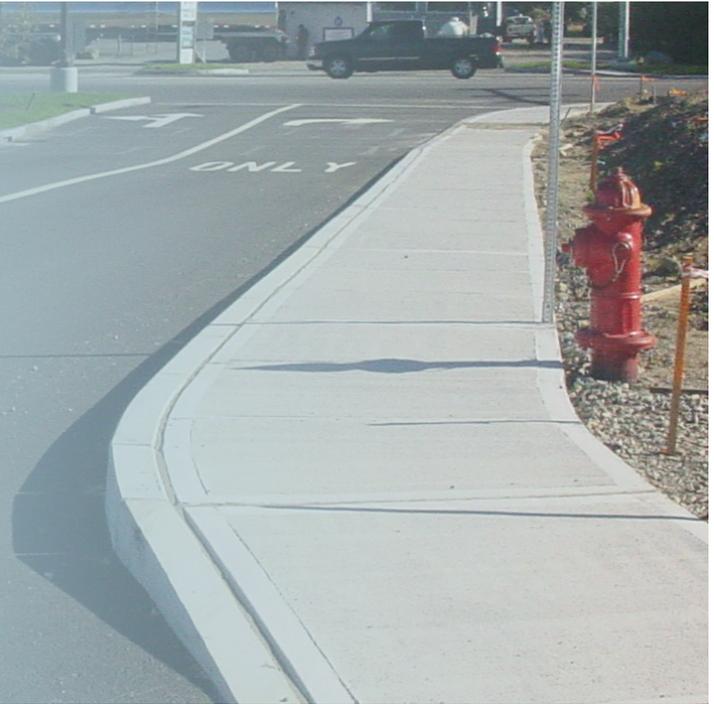


East-west passenger rail service west of Worcester is limited to one train per day serving Springfield and Pittsfield.

Mobility challenges are acute for residents of the Outer Cape who must travel great distances to critical services. The only hospital on Cape Cod is located in Hyannis, nearly an hour from Provincetown.

## OUR GOAL

Develop and fund sustainable, efficient, and convenient transportation options in rural areas to provide optimal mobility and accessibility to goods, services and employment.



### BEST PRACTICES

- **Quaboag Connector** serves nine rural communities in the Pioneer Valley and Central Massachusetts regions to provide transportation options for residents traveling to work and school.<sup>8</sup> The service was funded through the Community Transit Grant Program. It provides service on weekdays from 6:30 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. and costs \$2 per trip. Rides must be requested two days in advance and trips related to employment and education are given priority. The ridership has grown from 5,720 rides in 2017 to 8,871 in 2018.
- **SCM Elderbus**, established in 1974, is a private non-profit providing transportation to elderly and disabled residents in twenty-one Central Massachusetts communities.<sup>9</sup> Service is reserved in advance and available weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The fare pricing starts at \$1.50 each way for trips that begin and end in the same town.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts' Regional Transit Authorities** was legislatively required and recently completed by The Task Force on Regional Transit Authority (RTA) Performance and Funding.<sup>10</sup>
- **Rural Regional Transit Authority funding** is limited and comes from federal, state and local sources.
- The **East-West Rail Study** was legislatively required and is being conducted by MassDOT.

# TRANSPORTATION MOBILITY RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Implement Recommendations #1 and #4 from the RTA Task Force - "A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts' Regional Transit Authorities":**
  - a. Recommendation #1: "The legislature should fund the RTAs in fiscal year 2020 with a base of \$90.5 million in state contract assistance. Each subsequent year increase the state contract assistance by an automatic inflator." This funding should not include discretionary funding.
  - b. Recommendation #4: "Establish a Human Services Transportation working group to explore ways to better collaborate, improve service and save money through the brokerage system."
2. **Redesign public transportation in rural MA to allow for a more nimble system that uses smaller vehicles and information technology to serve different areas and needs throughout the day and evening.** Explore options for coordinating shared transportation assets such as resources owned and/or operated by/for RTAs, schools, councils on aging, and private service providers to actively develop sustainable cross-border transportation partnerships. Develop a pilot project to expand on the existing best practices in shared transportation.
3. **Provide efficient, reliable, and affordable passenger rail and intercity bus service to connect rural areas in Massachusetts to one another and to urban areas.** Secure funding to implement the recommendations of the ongoing MassDOT passenger rail studies, and ensure that pilot passenger rail initiatives like the expanded rail to Holyoke, Northampton, and Greenfield are marketed and operated to attract ridership and increase the chances of success.

4. **Reevaluate the RTA funding formula in order to create a more equitable distribution of transit funds to all areas of the Commonwealth.** Even if SCA is increased in accordance with RTA Task Force recommendations, performance measures and incentives will favor transit operations in urban areas. It is recommended that the Massachusetts Legislature reevaluate the current funding formula to boost funding opportunities for rural areas and consider the seasonal population swell on the Cape and Islands.
5. **Support the expansion of green infrastructure and fleet vehicles in rural areas.** Support the installation of charging stations and other infrastructure in rural areas to support and promote the use of electric vehicles by fleet owners, lessors, and the general public.
6. **Promote bicycle and pedestrian modes of travel to connect destinations.** For households without vehicles, walking and biking combined with public transit are often necessary modes of travel. Increased funding to support the design and construction of sidewalks and bicycle routes, as well as funding for critical winter maintenance of these facilities, would increase the safety of residents.





# WATER & SEWER

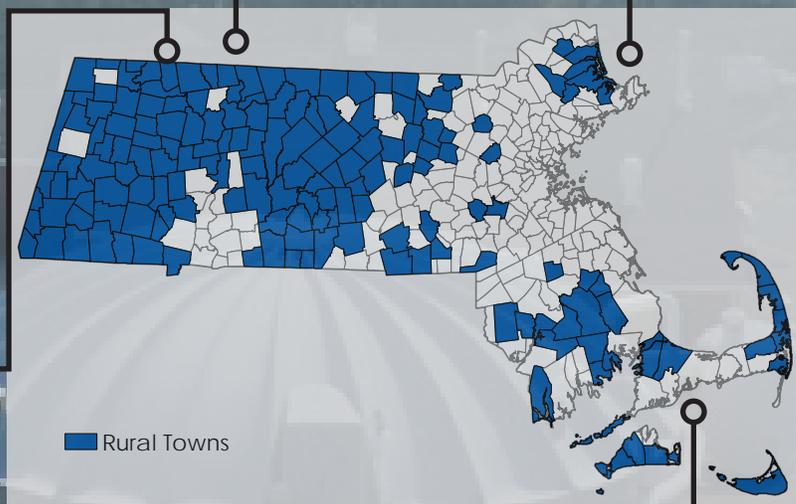
## The Water and Sewer Challenge in Rural Towns

Rural areas lack centralized systems of water and wastewater infrastructure, which restricts creation of housing and commercial development. Private wells and septic systems can be prohibitively expensive to build and require suitable land area and topography. Rural taxpayers often cannot afford to construct centralized systems without state and federal investment, and some districts do not meet financial stability guidelines for loans. Grant applications require long lead times and expensive up-front engineering costs. Even with funding support, systems can be difficult to site to meet environmental, zoning and permitting requirements. Once constructed, governance, staffing and oversight issues provide additional challenges: finding Commissioners that live in the District; dealing with a neighbor's non-payment of fees; finding, training and keeping part-time operators; and providing public oversight of small, private systems. The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) historically has not embraced permitting of innovative/ alternative technologies, and DEP is not adequately funded so it is chronically understaffed. And yet, water and sewer solutions must be found both to address environmental concerns, impacts of climate change and for economic growth in rural areas.

In areas without public water systems, business expansion can trigger DEP thresholds that require transitioning from a "private well" to a "public water supply" that uses the same well but requires increased water quality testing. There is no written guidance on how to transition to a public water supply, and getting DEP approval is long, opaque, and often requires significant pressure.

A proposed regional anaerobic digester in Franklin County is estimated to cost over \$7 million. Sludge disposal costs are increasing due to trucking greater distances to disposal sites outside Massachusetts.

Private wells are going brackish in North Shore towns.



Excess nitrogen from densely-packed individual septic systems causes eelgrass die-off in coastal waters, which impacts fisheries and recreational assets. Areas with many second homes require sewer systems designed for peak summertime flows, which can significantly increase capital costs and impair operations efforts during off-peak months.

## OUR GOAL

The Commonwealth should ensure that all rural communities have potable water and sanitary wastewater infrastructure suitable for supporting and enabling both current and future needs for housing and economic development.



### BEST PRACTICES

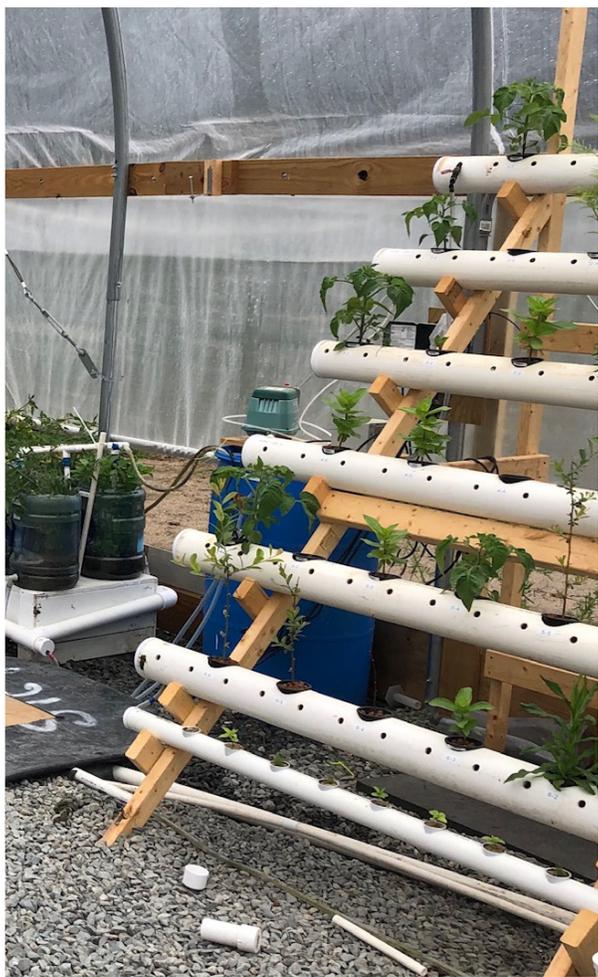
- **Massachusetts Alternative Septic System Test Center (MASSTC).** Operated by Barnstable County, the MASSTC conducts testing and allows for R&D of products that remove contaminants found in domestic wastewater. The facility can accommodate over 20 concurrent tests. MASSTC also tracks and monitors approximately 2,200 innovative/alternative septic systems installed to reduce nitrogen output across the Cape and Islands. MASSTC tests innovative/alternative systems designed to treat less than 10,000 gallons per day. Current testing includes vertical permeable reactive barriers to reduce nitrogen output, as well as testing options for what to do with septic system effluent to reduce the need for or size of leach fields or sewer treatment systems. Wastewater used in the tests on site is sourced from the Barnstable County Correctional Facility and U.S. Coast Guard housing at the nearby Joint Base Cape Cod. Operating expenses are paid for with grants or by private companies that pay to do their own testing on the site. While the MASSTC is self-sustaining operationally, it has capital needs to correct health and safety issues in

its office and laboratory spaces. The work of the MASSTC could be expanded or replicated to serve statewide needs to test innovative/alternative systems.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **Clean Water and Drinking Water Loan Programs** administered by the MA Department of Environmental Protection.
- **Water & Waste Disposal Loan & Grant Program** administered by USDA Rural Development.
- **Cape Cod and Islands Water Protection Fund.** Created by state law (Chapter 337 of the Acts of 2018, the short-term rental bill).
- **MassWorks Infrastructure Program** administered by the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development.
- **MassHousing Homeowner Septic Repair Loan Program** sponsored by the combined effort of DEP, DOR and MassHousing.
- **Massachusetts Water Infrastructure Finance Commission,** formed in 2012 to study water infrastructure.

# WATER & SEWER RECOMMENDATIONS



- 1. Provide additional state funding for rural water and sewer infrastructure needs:**
  - a. Provide more funding for water and sewer infrastructure investment.
  - b. Provide funding to test and pilot innovative / alternative system technologies.
  - c. Encourage collaboration among state and federal funding sources to maximize use of available funding.
  - d. Provide additional funding for MA DEP to hire staff to work with towns to protect public health, review and approve I/A systems, and train and mentor new system operators.
- 2. DEP should allow and encourage implementation of innovative / alternative systems to address unique rural problems.** Full scale treatment plants may be too expensive and unwarranted in rural areas. New technology is needed to address the system design problems created by the seasonality of population on the Cape and Islands and other areas with large numbers of second homes, to help communities forced to keep large facilities open, and to allow economic growth in rural, village centers. To address these issues, DEP should revise regulations as needed to:
  - a. Encourage and allow shared septic systems for small cluster developments.
  - b. Encourage small scale and shared treatment systems.
  - c. Encourage economic and housing development by approving more site-specific waivers from existing regulations.
- 3. Massachusetts Alternate Septic System Test Center (MASSTC) should receive greater state support so it can serve statewide testing needs.** The MASSTC is testing small scale systems that can benefit rural environmental, housing and economic development needs on the Cape and Islands. Its work should be expanded to test innovative / alternative systems that will work in other areas across the entire state.

**4. DEP should provide additional local technical assistance and operator training.**

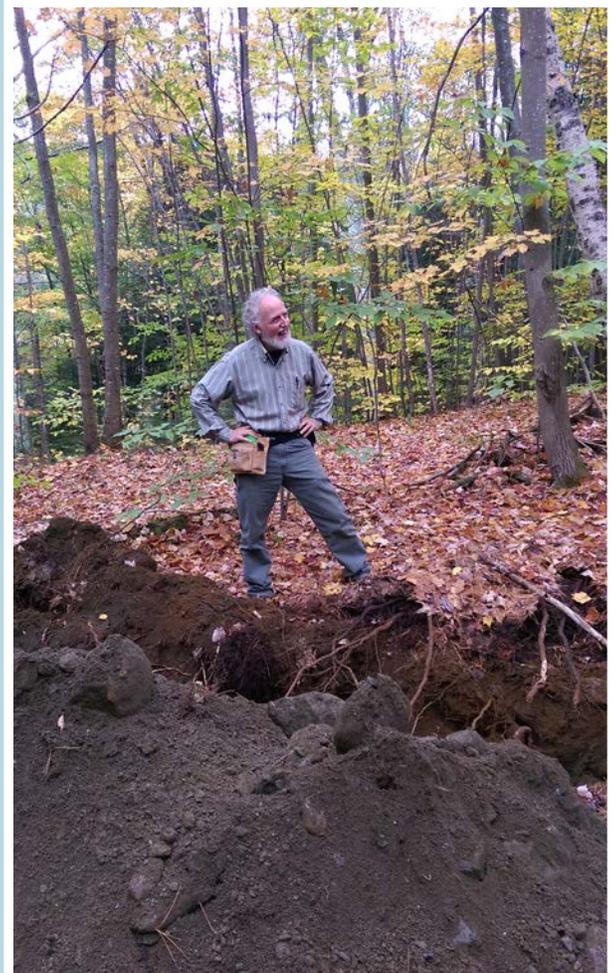
- a. Prioritize technical assistance to rural towns and water & sewer districts. Small rural towns cannot afford to employ professional staff and must rely on volunteer boards and committees. These volunteers often need professional assistance. Towns also need help addressing issues related to the management of private wells and septic systems.
- b. Provide training for new system operators that is accessible statewide. Consider holding in-person training sessions in various locations across the state and the use of online training to remove the need for travel and time off from other employment to learn to be an operator. Create a pathway to training through community colleges and trade schools.

**5. Legislation should be pursued to improve the governance and operation of rural water and sewer districts.** Depending on the language of their enabling documents, public and private districts need legislation to ensure they may borrow for capital projects, allow for commissioners to serve that do not live in-district, and allow access to more tools to collect user fees, thus improving cash flow and long term sustainability.

**6. DEP should encourage and support the sharing of operators for small systems** and provide adequate training, mentoring and support for those operators to succeed.

**7. DEP should develop clear requirements and procedures for the transitioning of a private well to a public water supply** so that business expansion can occur in rural areas without unnecessary impediment.

**8. Create a state-funded or subsidized private well water testing program for homeowners** so contaminants can be known and treated.





# ECONOMY

Economic Development  
Land Use and Working Landscapes  
Population Trends  
Workforce





## TOP RECOMMENDATIONS IN CATEGORY



- Expand PILOT for ecosystem value of land
- Target economic development strategies to rural sub regions and sectors
- Foster greater collaboration among public education and training institutions
- Fund revisions to smart growth and low impact development in local zoning bylaws
- Increase the MGCC's Small Business Technical Assistance budget to \$4 million





# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

## The Economic Development Challenge in Rural Towns

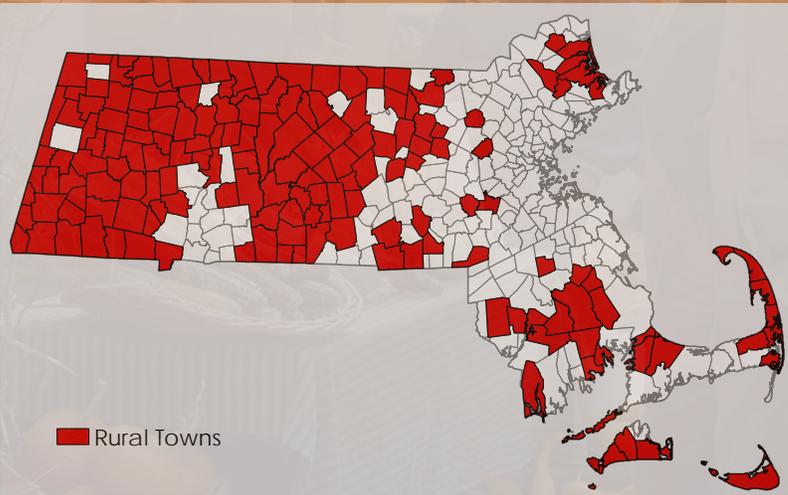
The Massachusetts rural economy is different than the economies of the greater Boston area and other urban areas. Economic sectors important to rural Massachusetts include agriculture, aquaculture, forestry, sustainable energy generation, outdoor recreation and the creative economy. Manufacturing makes up a larger percentage of the rural Massachusetts employment base than compared to the state and nation. Rural regions have slower job growth and benefit less during economic boons than urban and suburban areas. Most rural businesses are small or very small, with less than 5 employees or are self-employed operations. Often rural businesses are locally or family-owned.

A recent study<sup>11</sup> notes that state and federal economic policy and investment often focus on innovation, which is narrowly defined and measured by number of patents and research and development activity, which are less prevalent in rural areas. Even though many small businesses and self-employed individuals have been successful in evolving to adapt to changing economic conditions, state efforts to nurture innovation should include industry sectors that are prominent in rural areas.

Rural municipalities are challenged in their ability to foster economic development because of limited professional capacity, lack of infrastructure, and an inability to be competitive for discretionary grants.

The rural economy is fragile and is greatly impacted by climate change, stagnant population trends, a shortage of available workers, and limited investment in small business support and municipal infrastructure.

Rural areas often rely on small, independent locally owned businesses that are not supported by national or international corporations. The closure of a business can have a significant impact on a rural community, so it is particularly important to help local businesses transition to a younger generation of workers or to adopt a co-op model of employee ownership for business sustainability.



The RPAC surveyed the 170 rural communities in 2017. Respondents noted that lack of basic infrastructure – broadband, sewer and water – were the largest constraint to business expansion in their communities.

## OUR GOAL

Expand programming and resources to strengthen the economic vitality of rural Massachusetts through small business technical support, sector-specific initiatives, and municipal infrastructure and long-term capacity building.



### BEST PRACTICES

- The 2012 study, **Strategies for Economic Improvement in Appalachia's Distressed Counties**, examined rural counties throughout the country, identifying the following steps a distressed region can take to enhance economic vitality: encourage dialog and partnership between towns and regions; form strong partnerships with regional academic institutions; secure broadband; develop youth leadership programs; share government services; redevelop and reuse vacant industrial sites; grow local jobs and leverage local assets; devote more money to education; develop tourism and hospitality services; and promote racial diversity.
- The **Western MA Food Processing Center**, owned and operated by the Franklin County Community Development Corporation (CDC) is a regional asset that has incubated over 400 food businesses since opening in 2001. Recently, 14 businesses have added jobs and seven have outgrown the Center's shared commercial kitchen and moved into their own facilities. Many businesses receive food industry-specific technical assistance and financing from the PV Grows Investment Fund, which focuses on farm and food system ventures.

- **Wisconsin: Farm/Art DTour** is a self-guided driving tour through farm land of Sauk County, Wisconsin, punctuated with temporary art installations, educational signs, artist-built mobile farm stands, farm forums, performances and roadside poetry. The tour highlights the county's most important economic sectors: agriculture and the creative economy.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **Opportunity Zone Program.** A new federal tax incentive program.
- **Small Business Technical Assistance Program (SBTA).** Administered by the Mass Growth Capital Corporation.
- **MA Small Business Development Center (MSBDC) Network.** A partnership between the U.S. Small Business Administration and the Massachusetts Office of Business Development.
- **Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFI).** Federally and state funded non-profit small business lending organizations.
- **Opportunities for All.** The EOHEd statewide economic development plan.
- **Community Investment Tax Credit (CITC).** Massachusetts tax credit program.
- **Collaborative Workspaces program.** Administered by MassDevelopment.

# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS



1. Ensure that the statewide economic development plan, **Opportunities for All**, recognizes and plans for the unique economic development needs and issues of rural MA.
2. Target economic development strategies to rural sub-regions and sectors, similar to the **Transformative Development Initiative**. The TDI was developed to support designated Gateway Cities and is a proven model to develop new and innovative approaches to economic revitalization. The program provides a 2-year state-funded Fellow whose job is to bring economic visions to life while also developing partnerships, collaboration and focused leadership. Re-creating this model for a rural sub-region of communities, such as the North Quabbin area, or for focused sector-specific initiatives could be similarly transformative in rural regions.
3. Sustain and further increase funding to the **Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation's Small Business Technical Assistance (SBTA) budget**. SBTA, through CDCs, directly assists small businesses with business planning and development, other technical assistance and loans, and is a critically important funding source in rural areas.
4. Review application, selection and funding protocols for state-funded municipal infrastructure and capacity grants to remove barriers to access for small towns. This could include allowing 501c3 non-profits and regional planning agencies (RPAs) to legally partner with towns to apply for municipal grants.
5. Enact the **Rural Jobs Act**. The Rural Jobs Act filed by Senator Hinds and other Senate Rural Caucus members would be another strong tool to provide capital and other resources to small, rural businesses. Based on USDA Rural Business Investment Program and the SBA's Small Business Investment Company, it is intended to enable rural small businesses to expand and create private-sector jobs by providing access to affordable, growth capital.

6. **Create an infrastructure fund for safe drinking water and septic installation in rural areas.** See Sewer and Water for additional details.
7. **Create an Office of Outdoor Recreation.** The bill filed by Senator Adam Hinds and others would create an Office of Outdoor Recreation to promote the economic and health benefits of outdoor recreation in Massachusetts with tangible economic vitality impacts in rural areas of the state that depend heavily on outdoor recreation.
8. **Increase funding to assist farmers with aggregation, marketing and delivery of products** by setting aside small business funds exclusively for the agriculture/aquaculture industry.
9. **Provide resources to plan and implement creative economy and natural resource based tourism events in rural Massachusetts.** Like the Farm/Art tour model, these resources could be provided by securing and increasing state funding for the Mass Cultural Council, which funds local cultural councils and small grant programs like the Festivals Program (which provides grants of up to \$500 for organizers of new festival events).
10. **Support the creation of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)** in applicable rural village centers to enhance or maintain commercial economic activity.





# LAND USE & WORKING LANDS

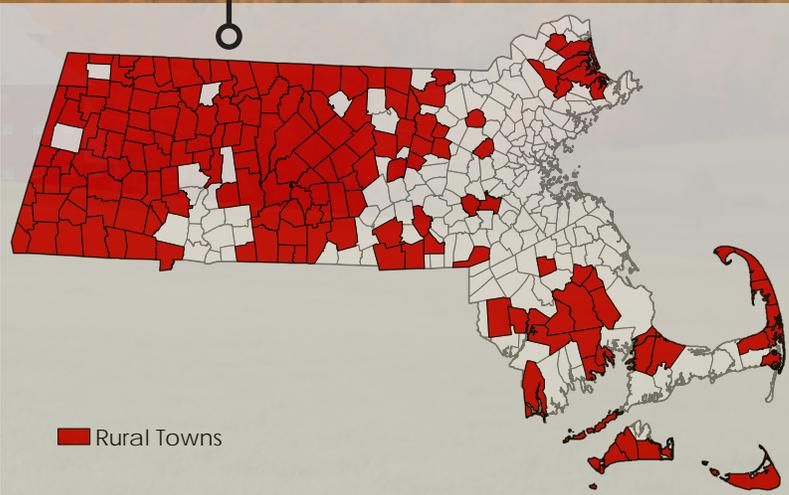
## The Land Use and Working Lands Challenge in Rural Towns

Land is the primary asset of rural Massachusetts – forested land, land in agricultural production, land that is untouched and pristine, and land that, with planning, can be used for housing and employment expansion. However, inadequate zoning flexibility and limited sewer and water infrastructure creates barriers to implementing proactive land use planning like smart growth. Done well, smart growth incentivizes compact development in town centers to expand housing choice and create walkable communities, all while consuming less land than traditional development and maintaining rural functions and character.

Agriculture and forestry face uncertain futures from the effects of climate change. Farmers are considering growing different, non-traditional crops, while foresters are managing operations as tree species shift. These land stewards need current research and information on how to adapt, but funding for extension services and technical assistance from universities and conservation districts has diminished significantly.

The value that rural lands provide in terms of drinking water infiltration, habitat, carbon sequestration, and food production go unrecognized and uncompensated. Large tracts of protected land in rural towns benefit the state as a whole, but can severely limit the expansion of the local tax base. There is a disconnect between local zoning bylaws and state incentives to accomplish statewide goals, such as moving to clean energy. Zoning bylaws are out of date in many communities, and towns lack staff capacity for updates.

Franklin County is 70% forested, most of it privately owned and in reduced tax status. The land is critical for the health and well-being of Massachusetts and should be conserved but there is little incentive for towns to encourage this and little power to enforce it.



A national discount chain store has recently announced plans to site stores in several rural communities. These towns, especially those without a professional planner to staff their volunteer Planning Boards, are shocked and unprepared for the siting of a big-box chain store that will dramatically alter their historic commercial corridor.

## OUR GOAL

Empower rural areas with policies and programs to make proactive land use decisions that support resilient development, maintain working lands and recognize their value, and manage the interconnectedness of rural, urban, and suburban lands.



### BEST PRACTICES

- **Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Initiative.** Made possible through the support of the state legislature, multiple state organizations and public/private donors, the program supports entrepreneurs at the forefront of Vermont's Working Lands economy through technical and financial assistance. The program includes direct grants to businesses and to technical assistance service providers.
- **Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and Trust Fund.** The Fund links the dual goals of affordable housing provision and land conservation in a single common program, making loans and grants to municipalities, nonprofit organizations, and state agencies. Eligible activities conserve agricultural lands, natural areas, recreational lands and historic properties, and preserve, rehabilitate, and develop affordable housing. Since 1987, VHCB has conserved 161,700 acres of agricultural land, 261,000 acres of natural areas and recreational lands, and provided affordable housing for more than 30,000 people.
- **New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan** classifies the entire state into major Planning Area categories (urban, rural, etc.) with a secondary

set of classifications for nodes, centers, and environs. Land use planning recommendations are tailored to the major categories and subcategories. The Plan was developed through a "cross acceptance" mechanism that allowed for an interplay of local, county and state priorities.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **Community Priority Area Initiatives' Priority Development Areas and Priority Preservation Areas** encourage smart growth.
- **MassWorks STRAP grants** are a dedicated source of funding within MassWorks overseen by EOHED.
- **40R Program** overseen by DHCD encourages communities to create mixed-use smart growth districts with financial incentives.
- **Smart Growth / Smart Energy Toolkit, Municipal Vulnerability Program Action Grants and EEA Municipal Planning Grants** administered by EOEEA.
- **Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR)** program administered by Department of Agricultural Resources within EOEEA.
- **Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program** encouraged and overseen by EOEEA.

# LAND USE & WORKING LANDS RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Develop a State Land Use/Growth Management Strategy** to promote the unique functions of each land use type and the interconnection of varying land uses throughout the state. The creation of the strategy could be overseen by EOEEA and coordinated by Regional Planning Agencies. Funding for the RPAs to conduct this work, and staffing resources at EOEEA would be required. Integrate this strategy with other plans, such as the forthcoming Healthy Soils Action Plan and Resilient Lands Initiative.
2. **Provide assistance and funding to rural communities for revision of local zoning to encourage smart growth and low impact development.** Develop better mechanisms for tracking trends in land use regulation so that state policy responds to local realities and issues.
3. **Create a dedicated funding stream for the provision of water and sewer infrastructure in rural town centers.** The program should focus specifically on water and sewer as the major hurdle to smart growth and center-based development in rural towns, and include feasibility studies and engineering design work as eligible actions.
4. **Significantly expand UMass technical assistance services for farms and forests** by supporting county conservation districts, or by modeling another approach such as the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Initiative. Robust technical assistance for farmers and foresters is essential in communicating the research being done at UMass and Harvard Forests, for continuing critical services such as soils testing, and for propagating more climate resilient crops and tree species.
5. **Expand or develop an alternative to the PILOT framework that values the full array of nature-based solutions and ecosystem services provided by rural lands.** PILOT is chronically and persistently underfunded by the Legislature (see Municipal Financial Constraints) and does not include in its reimbursement formula the full value of protected land including food safety and security, and carbon sequestration.

6. **Prioritize policies that address farmland and fishery adaptation to climate change and new market conditions**, such as the use of cranberry operations for wild rice, blueberries, or other crops.

7. **Increase the engagement of farmers and foresters in Municipal Vulnerability Program work, open space and other planning projects.** These groups are rural land stewards but are not always well represented in MVP core teams. Opportunities are missed for incorporating farming and forestry as companion land management practices in open space planning when these voices are left out.

8. **Model the Vermont Housing and Conservation Trust Fund (referenced in Best Practices) as a method for coupling the goals of affordable housing development and land conservation**, which would assist rural towns that are striving to meet the needs of aging, downsizing populations today and facing uncertain and potentially elevated development pressures in the future. Such a fund would strengthen the efforts of Community Preservation Act (CPA) communities, and provide an alternative for communities yet to pass CPA.

9. **Strengthen the working lands economy by focusing on the economic development potential of the agricultural and woodlot processing sector.** Explore the possibility of using Industrial Revenue Bonds to set up a Cross-laminated Timber (CLT) manufacturing facility, and meat and poultry processing plants. Without these, growing the working lands economy is impeded. Model the Vermont Working Lands Enterprise Initiative by directing grants and loans to small and local forestry and farming operations.

10. **Remove rollback taxes when moving land into permanent protection as part of cluster development projects.** Correct an oversight in the Chapter 61 program that makes large landowners pay rollback taxes on an entire land tract when seeking to move a portion of it into permanent protection in the context of a cluster development project. Rollbacks for the entire development area is a disincentive to utilizing a cluster development option that is often the best development outcome.





# POPULATION TRENDS

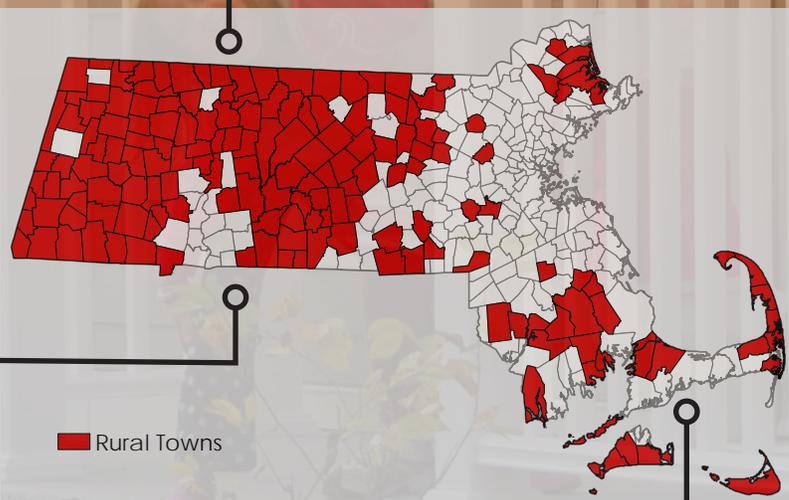
## The Demographic Challenge in Rural Towns

While Massachusetts and the Boston area (in particular) have experienced historically strong population growth in recent years, Franklin and Berkshire Counties and the Outer Cape have experienced stagnant and/or declining population trends for the last 20 years.

Population forecasting models project a 18.5% population decline in Barnstable County between 2010 and 2040, a 2.7% decline in Franklin County and a 2.4% decline in Berkshire County during the same time period. While other parts of rural Massachusetts are projected to grow in population between 2010 and 2040, no part of Massachusetts will grow nearly as fast Suffolk County (Boston), which is projected to grow by 31.6%. This imbalance of population will further exacerbate traffic congestion and exorbitant housing prices in Greater Boston while making life in the rural areas of the Commonwealth even more challenging because of a lack of jobs, basic services, and dwindling fiscal resources.

Most of the state local aid categories, which is aid distributed to municipalities, use formulas that include population. On average across Massachusetts, 20% of municipal revenue is state local aid. In Franklin County, state local aid makes up only 16% of local revenue. In comparison, 58% of Springfield's revenue and 41% of Worcester's revenue come from state local aid.

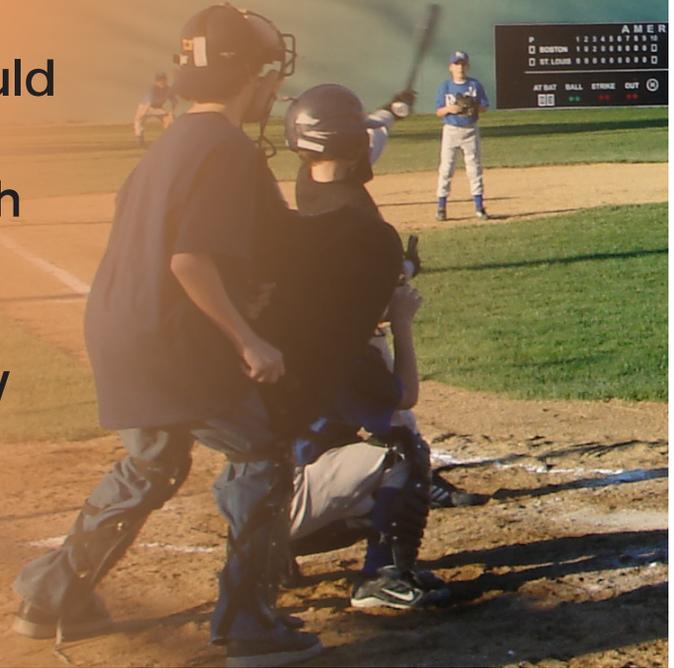
Foreign-born individuals, who largely represent the population growth in Massachusetts, have stayed within the I-495 belt and are not moving to the western rural municipalities.



The statewide municipal average of people aged 65 and older is 15.5%. The rural aging issue is most severe on the Cape where the percentage is significantly higher: in Chatham, a staggering 39.4% of residents are age 65 and older. This dynamic challenges housing prices, school enrollment, workforce and service delivery with fewer young workers and school-age children versus older populations. Compounding this problem is that Cape Cod, by and large, is built-out so the population on the Cape needs to shift to more year-round, younger residents.

## OUR GOAL

As a Commonwealth, we should encourage more balanced, sustainable, population growth across the State, especially reversing stagnant and declining population trends by working to retain and attract a younger and more diverse population in rural areas of Massachusetts.



### BEST PRACTICES

- **Vermont's Remote Worker Grant and Stay to Stay Programs.** To attract workers to Vermont, the Remote Worker Grant Program pays individuals up to \$10,000 to relocate to Vermont.<sup>12</sup> Stay to Stay encourages people coming to Vermont for a weekend getaway to stay a day longer to learn about business and employment opportunities.<sup>13</sup>
- **Live and Work in Maine.** In recognition of a declining and aging population, this public-private initiative includes a student loan forgiveness program for Maine college students who live and work in Maine, opportunities for employers to highlight their companies, a job site for job seekers, and testimonials from people that have relocated to the state.<sup>14</sup>
- **Town-Subsidized Childcare and Universal Pre-K.** To help attract young families to the Cape and fill empty classrooms in elementary schools, Town Meeting in Chatham and Wellfleet voted to subsidize and provide childcare in schools. Provincetown voters supported universal Pre-K for residents and municipal employees.

- **Cape Cod Young Professionals (CCYP).** The goals of CCYP are to promote Cape Cod, attract young professionals, and make it easier for young professionals to live and work on the Cape. "My Cape Cod Story" highlights the life, work and social activities of young adults that have chosen Cape Cod as their home.<sup>15</sup>

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **Population-Based Funding Formulas** used by the federal and state government.
- **S208 An Act Establishing the Western Massachusetts Remote Worker Relocation Incentive Program** submitted by State Senator Eric Lesser.

# POPULATION TRENDS RECOMMENDATIONS



If this Plan and the work of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission are successful, population trends in rural areas with declining and/or aging populations will begin to reverse. That said, the following recommendations are designed to specifically address the issue of reversing population trends.

- 1. Create the MA Office of Rural Policy** by enacting An Act Relative to the Rural Policy Advisory Commission. Creation of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission has given focus to the challenges faced by rural communities, businesses and residents but the Commission's work is limited as an unstaffed and unfunded appointed Commission. An Office of Rural Policy will provide consistent, productive focus on rural issues in the Commonwealth.
- 2. Develop a statewide land use plan/growth management strategy.** Forecasts that project significant population growth in greater Boston and continued population decline in the most rural parts of Massachusetts is not a sustainable, long-term growth pattern for the state. The Commonwealth should develop a thoughtful growth management strategy that identifies a more desirable growth pattern that balances economic, transportation, housing, climate resiliency and mitigation, food security, and land conservation needs. Targeted strategies should be identified and implemented to disburse future growth in a more deliberate and beneficial way.
- 3. Expand racial and ethnic diversity in rural Massachusetts.** A multi-faceted strategy is required to make rural Massachusetts a more comfortable, welcoming and inclusive environment for all people. This includes working to understand historical instances of exclusion and existing biases and conditions, removing existing barriers to racial and cultural diversity, and developing housing, education, social and employment opportunities for all.

4. **Replicate Maine and Vermont relocation strategies targeted to rural areas of Massachusetts.** Learning from the proactive efforts of our neighbors to attract more young people to their rural states, student loan forgiveness, marketing rural Massachusetts as places to live and work, and relocation incentives should be explored.
5. **Study the feasibility and equity of a rurality factor in statewide funding formulas.** Such a factor could ease the disparity of population playing such a significant role in funding formulas.
6. **Support rural Young Professional Societies.** Young people that choose to live and work in rural Massachusetts are our best source for effective strategies to attract more young people to rural areas. Providing resources to efforts specifically aimed at marketing and attracting young people should be pursued.
7. **Ensure that every rural Massachusetts resident is counted in the 2020 U.S Decennial Census.** While this recommendation will not reverse population trends, it will ensure that rural Massachusetts is accurately represented for the next decade. Lack of broadband and cell service, limited access to television and public media and isolation make Census response challenging in rural communities. All rural regions have already formed Complete Count Committees to meet this goal.
8. **Prepare rural communities for the aging of their population.** Towns should increase their use of Community Compact funds to begin Age-Friendly community planning.
9. **Promote a diversity in housing stock so that older homeowners can comfortably downsize, freeing up single family homes for young people.**
10. **Rural municipalities should assess and reconsider any municipally-imposed barriers to housing development such as stricter Title 5 regulations or land use regulations.**





# WORKFORCE

## The Workforce Challenge in Rural Towns

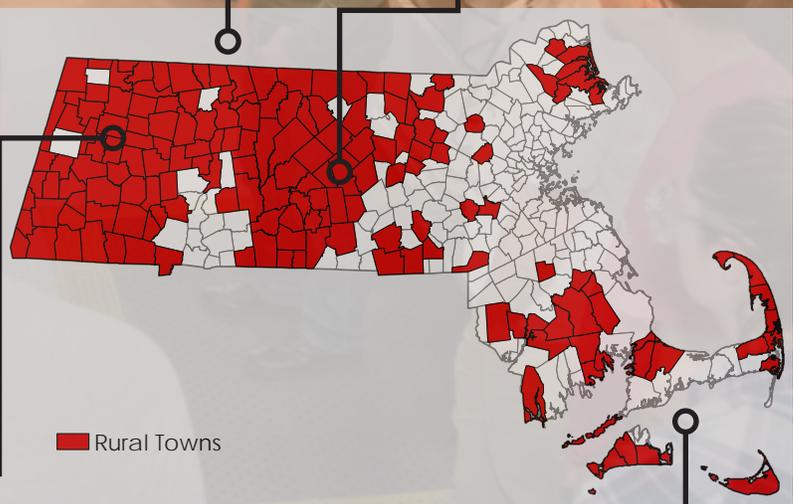
Massachusetts rural workforce development systems are challenged, serving large geographic areas with limited funding. Rural regions typically have fewer educational institutions providing workforce support. Social safety net services, like Social Security and unemployment offices, have been relocated to urban centers that are not easily accessible. Rural residents have limited public transit access, few childcare options, limited digital literacy due to a lack of broadband, and a dearth of healthcare and mental healthcare services. In addition, there are few options for vocational and occupational education, or adult basic education (ABE), including English as a second language (ESL).

Rural career centers serve large geographic areas with fewer staff members based on lower population. Because career center funding is tied to the unemployment rate, a rural career center can be forced to close satellite offices and further reduce staffing when unemployment rates go down, making it difficult to serve the remaining dislocated, unemployed or under-employed workers. As a result, rural career centers must continuously apply for competitive grants, which are not designed to provide core services. Community colleges are incorporated into rural workforce training systems although continued support is needed to strengthen this connection.

The combined Franklin-Hampshire and Berkshire Workforce Development Areas (WDA) encompasses 2,315 square miles or 30% of the state's total land area. These two WDAs each have only one full-time career center and only one Transitional Assistance Office, located in Greenfield and Pittsfield.

Community Action Pioneer Valley reports fewer child care providers, consistent with 2018 report findings that "rural areas have the highest concentration of child care deserts."<sup>16</sup>

In Central MA, the limited availability of public transit outside of Fitchburg and Worcester hinders access to job options for residents without a reliable vehicle.



The "Blue Economy," including businesses either directly dependent on the water or on proximity to water, drives economic activity on the Cape and Islands, but also constrains it. Attracting a younger workforce or new businesses will require development that cannot come to be until wastewater infrastructure is addressed.

## OUR GOAL

Massachusetts should better address the unique needs of employers and current and prospective employees in rural areas through education and workforce system support that reduces barriers to employment.

### BEST PRACTICES

#### State-Funded/Subsidized Pre-K and Childcare.

Approximately five states in the U.S. provide funding for universal Pre-K to ensure children in high need receive early education. This provides critical educational advantages to children, allows parents and guardians easier opportunity to rejoin the workforce, and subsidizes early childcare salaries and professional development, all of which are needed in rural Massachusetts. The State of Washington provides preschool services and subsidizes private childcare providers. Contingent with this funding is an assessment of quality care. High quality providers are eligible for grants to be used for salary increases and tuition for ongoing staff education. North Carolina subsidizes childcare providers based on a licensing system that ensures level of care standards and provides higher subsidies to higher quality caregivers.<sup>17</sup>

- **Community College and Industry Partnerships.** The Berkshire Hospitality Industry partnered with Berkshire Community College to develop three new noncredit certificates taught by industry experts. This program is designed to provide skills and experiences to meet the acute shortage of service professionals in the region, and to elevate the Berkshire experience for visitors and residents alike.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.** A federal program that funds employment and training programs and career centers.
- **Workforce Training Fund Program.** A state program that provides grants to businesses, employer organizations and similar entities to train their current or new employees.
- **Workforce Skills Cabinet.** A Baker-Polito Administration initiative to better align education, labor and workforce development, and economic development.
- **Massachusetts Skills Capital Grants Program.** State funding administered by the Executive Office of Education.
- **Community College and Career Center TRAIN (Training Resources and Internship) Program** is funded by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education.
- **Career Education for Youth.** The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's School-to-Career/Connecting Activities Initiative.
- **Coordinated Government Services.** A Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and Career Center collaboration.

# WORKFORCE RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Provide state funding to stabilize core services of rural MassHire Career Centers.** The federal funding formula is tied to unemployment rates and to areas of significant unemployment that have a population of 10,000 or more. Both of these factors disproportionately impact career centers in regions of small population size but large geographic area.
2. **Ensure an equitable distribution of workforce funds and program opportunities to rural areas.** Often state programs are out of reach for rural workforce providers because of sparse population density. These programs should be revised to include a rurality factor or waiver process. A waiver that allows for an expanded geography (such as a group of neighboring towns, rather than just one city) or for an expanded cohort of disadvantaged populations (for example, not solely disabled veterans, or long-term unemployed) should be considered.
3. **Foster greater collaboration among public education and training institutions.** Enhance investment in program development and staffing of training programs that connect regional workforce boards, career centers, community colleges, and technical high schools.
4. **Develop and invest in Massachusetts universal pre K and childcare.** Massachusetts should be a leader in addressing universal childcare needs and addressing the childcare “desert” in rural areas. Meeting the needs of the Commonwealth’s children, attracting people to the early childcare workforce with competitive salaries and training, and meeting the workforce needs of parents and guardians should be equal priorities.

5. Address unique rural barriers that prevent workers from joining the workforce.

- a. Public transportation is an essential economic and workforce development partner. **Invest in non-traditional transit models in rural areas to enhance workers' ability to commute to jobs and training**, such as flexible and dynamic transit services that use technology to adjust to real time demand by rider
- b. Access to early education/child care services in rural areas is a significant barrier for current and prospective workers. **Increase the Commonwealth's child care reimbursement rate policies** to allow for-profit and non-profit providers to pay workers more, which would incentivize more people to work in the industry.



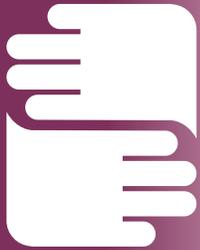


# COMMUNITY

Education  
Housing  
Public Health



## TOP RECOMMENDATIONS IN CATEGORY



- Revise the Community Scale Housing Initiative to be more useable in small towns
- Revise chapter 70 formula to achieve better equity for rural school districts
- Support rehabilitation of underutilized, vacant, or distressed properties in rural areas
- Facilitate and reward regional solutions to local housing challenges
- Commit to sustained funding to improve the public health of rural residents





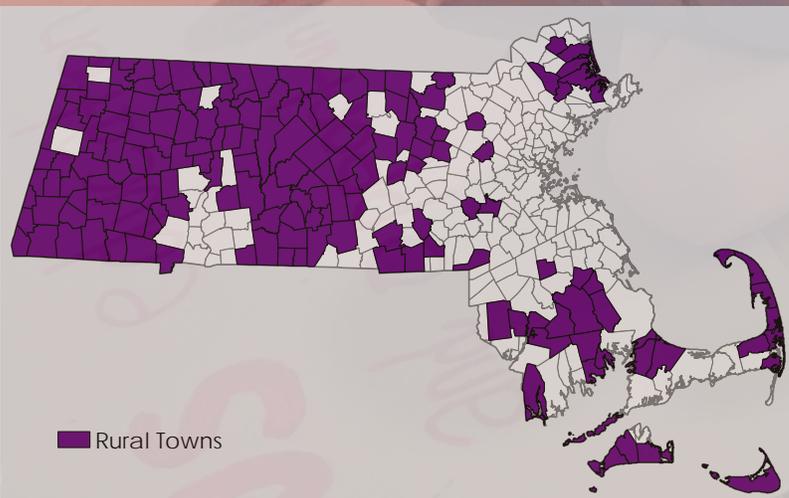
# EDUCATION

## The Education Challenge in Rural Towns

In rural districts, per pupil costs are high because it is difficult for small districts to create economies of scale. Many small districts have decreasing enrollment due to demographic changes and competition from private schools, homeschooling, cross-district school choice, charter schools and career-vocational-technical (CVTE) high schools. From 2008 to 2017, enrollment in rural districts declined by 14%, compared to a decline of 2.7% in districts across the rest of the state.<sup>18</sup> Declining enrollments do not lead to proportional decreases in expenses due to transportation, employee benefits, special education, higher per pupil costs for Charter and CVTE students (that are the responsibility of the sending district), and other costs that cannot be eliminated. The Chapter 70 school funding formula does not account for the higher per-pupil cost of rural schools, which results in a disparity in the quality of education from district to district and in competition for limited financial resources between schools and town government.

While rural districts work collaboratively on some services, more comprehensive regionalization is often difficult and prohibitively expensive. As the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has noted, "While there are obstacles to consolidating central offices, the obstacles to consolidating schools may be more difficult to overcome...Small elementary schools are often considered the centers of the communities that they serve, and towns are often willing to pay a premium to keep their small schools open. It can also be difficult to bus young children long distances to attend school in a neighboring community."

Rural districts spend 50% more on transportation costs per pupil than non-rural districts due to: large geographic service areas; no reimbursement for out-of-district transportation to Special Education placements; and minimal competition in the bussing industry. The impacts of poverty in rural districts are compounded by the limited availability of health and social services in schools.



Rural schools rely heavily on school choice, an option that allows students to "choice" into a different district. Some districts come to depend on the income from students "choicing" into their schools, while other districts lose funding associated with students "choicing" out.

## OUR GOAL

Provide additional support and incentives to rural school districts, especially those with declining enrollment, large geographic service areas and rising costs, to sustainably improve the quality of education to meet the needs of their students.

### BEST PRACTICES

- **Massachusetts Rural Schools Coalition.** The Massachusetts Rural Schools Coalition (MRSC) was formed in 2016 to address the escalating plight of rural school districts within the Commonwealth. Through its advocacy, Rural School Aid was established in 2018 and continued into 2019. MRSC:
  - » Facilitates collaboration between rural school districts;
  - » Develops and provides educational programs for rural school districts;
  - » Researches the nature and problems of rural school districts; and
  - » Develops innovative ways that rural school districts can share expenses in order to operate more efficiently.
- **Berkshire County Education Task Force.** Formed in 2015 on the recognition that declining enrollments and rising costs placed all Berkshire County school districts in jeopardy, the Task Force envisioned a new way to provide public education in Berkshire County. After analysis of existing and projected conditions, socioeconomic factors, and alternatives, the Task Force determined that Berkshire County should slowly but proactively work toward a single, regional school district.
- **Wisconsin (Education) Sparsity Aid.** Initially created under the 2007-09 biennial Wisconsin budget, the Sparsity Aid program provides

additional unrestricted aid to rural school districts with relatively small economies of scale. A school district is eligible for aid if the school district's enrollment in the previous school year was no more than 745 students and there were no more than 10 students per square mile. Aid is equal to \$400/student.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- Annual aid built into the Commonwealth's budget includes **Chapter 70 Funding, Rural School Aid** (included in FY19 and 20 but not permanent), and **Reimbursement for Regional School Transportation**.
- **Safe Routes to Schools (SRTS).** Federal funding administered by MassDOT.
- **Skills Capital Grants.** Funding administered by the Executive Office of Education.
- **Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).** State agency responsible for all public school services in the Commonwealth from pre-k to high school
- **Perkins Grant Program.** Federal funding administered by DESE.
- **Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) capital funding.** State funding administered by MSBA, a quasi-independent government authority.
- **Educational Collaborative.** Non-profit organizations serving school districts across Massachusetts.

# EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Revise the Chapter 70 formula to achieve better equity for rural school districts.** Build a permanent rural factor into the Chapter 70 funding to aid school districts with relatively small economies of scale, similar to the Wisconsin Sparsity Aid Program. Alternatively, a factor that prioritizes low income areas could benefit many rural districts plus other urban and suburban districts that are struggling. Either of these alternatives could be supplemented by the Fair Share Amendment that would create an additional tax of four percentage points on the portion of a person's annual income above \$1 million.
2. **Support collaboration between rural schools by:**
  - a. creating state incentives for districts to share services like Special Education, Transportation, Human Resources, Procurement, Collective Bargaining, and Superintendents;
  - b. forming a "Rural School Authority" to be a hub for shared services, advocacy, and other initiatives; and
  - c. encouraging collaboration between rural schools by allowing a consortia of rural schools, perhaps through educational collaboratives, to apply for competitive state grants and funding.
3. **Help rural schools curtail declining enrollments by minimizing the adverse impact from Charter Schools.** The legislature should revise the Charter School per pupil funding formula to match a sending school's per pupil spending and prohibit expansion of Charter Schools in regions with declining K-12 enrollment or establish a cap on the number of charter schools in a region based on school-aged populations. Charter School administrators should be required to attend each of the town meetings in the towns that send students to their school and defend their budgets and programs, just as Superintendents of regional districts and CVTE schools are required.

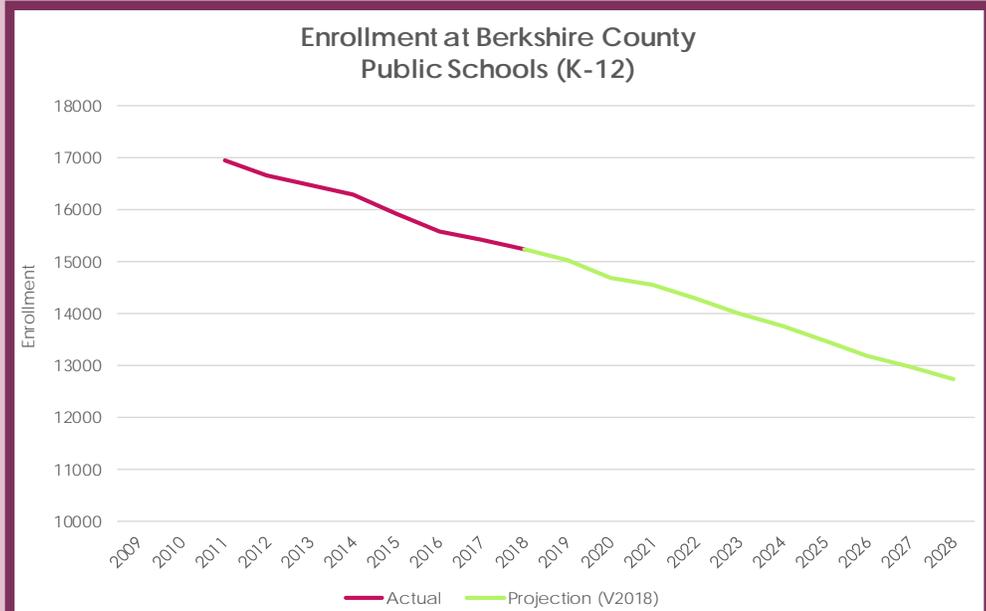


**Lead Teacher Preschool (Turners Falls, Northampton) \$1,000 sign on bonus!** Head Start Program seeks experienced preschool teachers. NAEYC Accredited, excellent teacher: child ratios. Successful candidate must be EEC LT/Pre-K certified and have a minimum of an AA in Early Childhood Education or related field; BA preferred. Position is 37.5 hours a week/full year. Pay Range: \$17.81-\$18.89 plus \$1.35/hour full day differential.

**Teacher Preschool (Greenfield, Turners Falls) \$1,000 sign on bonus!** Head Start program seeks Preschool teachers. NAEYC Accredited, excellent teacher: child ratios. Minimum AA in Early Childhood Education or related field with EEC Preschool Teacher Certification. 37.5 hours/week. Pay Range: \$15.55-\$16.50 plus \$1.35/hour full day differential.

**Anticipated Teacher Infant Toddler (Turners Falls) \$1,000 sign on bonus!** Head Start program seeks Infant Toddler teacher. NAEYC Accredited, excellent teacher: child ratios. Minimum AA in Early childhood Education or related field with EEC Infant Toddler Teacher Certification. 37.5 hours/week. Pay Range: \$15.55-\$16.50 plus \$1.35/hour full day differential.

**Education Site Supervisor (Turners Falls) \$1,000 sign on bonus!** Early Head Start Program seeks leader to join our experienced team in running a two-classroom full day site for infants and toddlers. Spacious rooms in a rural community, NAEYC Accredited, and excellent teacher: child ratios. Must have demonstrated ability to develop authentic and professional relationships with children, families, and staff. Brazelton Touchpoint Site, offering ongoing training and support. Minimum qualifications include a BA in Early Childhood Education or directly related field with early education and supervisory experience, EEC D II certified. Annual Salary Range is \$43,660-\$46,312, full year.



4. **Expand funding for vocational education to cover operating and transportation costs at existing CVTE schools and to create specialized satellite programs in rural areas.** Massachusetts has identified a near future workforce middle skills gap that can be lessened by vocational education. However, rural districts rely on a limited number of CVTEs that have high per pupil and transportation costs. For instance, there are only two CVTEs in the state that provide agricultural training, a critical economic sector for rural Massachusetts. The legislature should provide more dedicated funding for vocational education both in CVTE schools and in non-CVTE high schools to reduce per pupil costs.



5. **Address the growing need for in-school and community-based health, mental health and wrap-around services for children impacted by poverty and trauma in rural areas.** Form a taskforce to examine data and generate creative solutions such as:

- a. incentivizing professionals to work with schools and communities in rural areas, similar to what is already provided in high need urban areas;
- b. exploring approaches akin to tele-medicine that could bring some services into schools from other locations; and
- c. investing in professional development for educators on supporting the social, emotional, mental health, and other non-academic needs of students.



6. **Support, assess and replicate the work of the Berkshire County Education Task Force and other efforts that consider bold, new approaches to educate the children of rural Massachusetts.** The Berkshire County Education Task Force is facing the reality of declining enrollment while remaining focused on the quality of education for its children as it considers creating a single school district for the county.





# HOUSING

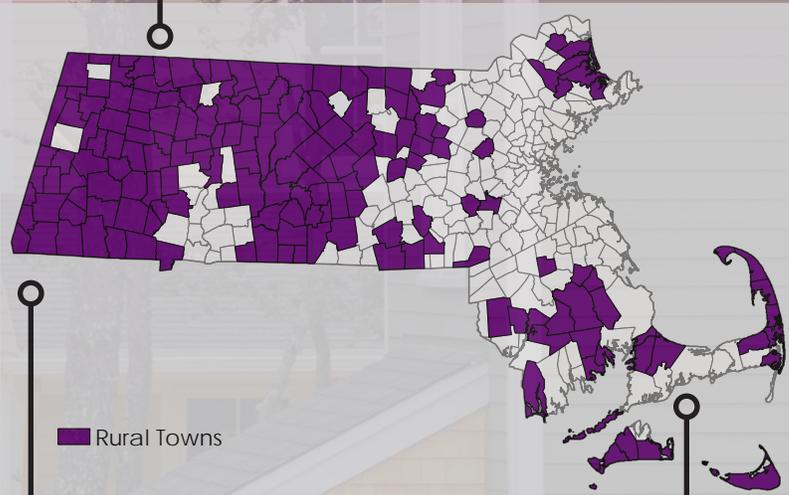
## The Housing Challenge in Rural Towns

Investment in new and existing housing is a critical need in rural towns, where a mismatch exists between current housing stock and current needs. A lack of housing production, an old housing stock, changing demographics (smaller households and an aging population), and competition with short-term rentals and second homes in some areas, has led to a shortage of decent, affordable housing that meets the needs of residents.

Low property values in economically distressed rural areas make it difficult to rehabilitate a property without triggering requirements to bring the structure fully up to code (further increasing costs); but making this investment cannot be justified under current rent and sale prices, leading to a downward trend in housing conditions and feeding into the loss of population in rural areas. Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), one of the only sources of funding for housing rehabilitation in rural areas, cannot resolve all the issues of older housing. Wages have not kept up with the cost of housing and transportation, placing a significant burden on many rural residents. On the Cape and Islands, there is a large gap between the median home value and what a median income family can afford.

High development costs and lack of infrastructure make rural affordable and workforce housing development projects noncompetitive for limited State and Federal funding because of their small scale, and lack of municipal and developer capacity and experience with affordable housing. The majority of State affordable housing funds go to supporting larger-scale Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) projects (20+ units).

A moderate income family in Heath spends an average of 68% of household income on housing and transportation, compared to a moderate income family in Waltham that spends an average of 54% of household income on housing and transportation.<sup>19</sup>



Demand for high-end second homes has elevated prices and reduced availability of moderately priced housing in Berkshire County.

The seasonal rental market makes it very difficult for residents to find affordable year-round housing, a phenomenon known as the "Island Shuffle."

## OUR GOAL

The Commonwealth should formulate policies and programs to help rural communities overcome barriers to creating decent, affordable housing for its residents.



### BEST PRACTICES

- **Regional collaborations to support housing.** The Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority administers a CDBG program for multiple towns in Franklin County, including a housing rehabilitation program. On Martha's Vineyard, a rental assistance program is administered by the Dukes County Regional Housing Authority with CPA funding from the six island towns. The towns of Harwich and Chatham hired Community Development Partnership using CPA funds to provide housing coordinator services for each town, including staffing the local housing committee / housing trust, and assisting each town with implementing their Housing Production Plan. The Cape Housing Institute offers training to local officials and fosters discussion of addressing housing needs at a regional level. As a follow up to the annual training, a peer group meets quarterly to collaborate.
- **Promoting affordability in existing housing.** In towns with limited or no public water and sewer, developing affordable housing can be challenging. Leverett's Housing Committee determined that the best use of CPA funds was to offer income-eligible homebuyers a grant to "buy down" the purchase price of a market rate home in Leverett. In return, a restriction is placed on the home, ensuring that it will be sold to another income eligible purchaser in the future. The Town of Pelham uses CPA funds to provide down payment assistance to income-eligible homebuyers.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **Community Preservation Act (CPA).** Signed into law in 2000, CPA allows communities to create a local Community Preservation Fund for open space protection, historic preservation, affordable housing and outdoor recreation through a local property tax surcharge of up to 3%.
- **Community Scale Housing Initiative (CSHI).** This DHCD program funds small-scale affordable rental projects of 5 to 20 units in municipalities with a maximum population of 200,000.
- **Housing Choice Initiative (HCI).** This State initiative includes the Housing Choice Designation and Grant program, and the Small Town Grant program, exclusively for towns with a population under 7,000.
- **Community Development Block Grants (CDBG).** This federally-funded program is the State's major resource to address a broad range of community development needs in small cities and towns, though Massachusetts CDBG funds have fallen by 37% since 2000.<sup>20</sup>
- **Federal Home Loan Bank; MHP ONE Mortgage.** Habitat for Humanity and other rural affordable housing developers utilize the Affordable Housing Program from the Federal Home Loan Bank in Boston to help close gaps on affordable housing development.

# HOUSING RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Support rehabilitation of underutilized, vacant, distressed, or deteriorated properties in rural areas.** While new housing production is called for to meet the State's housing shortage, many rural areas have underutilized housing and building stock that, with some investment, could help meet the State's housing needs while improving the vibrancy and health of rural towns. Take such actions as:
  - a. Supplement CDBG funding with State funds – use the existing program to more fully meet the rehabilitation needs of small towns
  - b. Clarify CPA language to allow funds to be used for rehabilitation of existing housing when a new affordable unit is created, e.g. conversion of a single-family home to a two-family home, creation of an accessory apartment, conversion of a seasonal home to a year-round home, etc.
  - c. Continue to fund the Get the Lead Out Program for lead abatement
  - d. Address the 30% assessed value threshold that requires a structure be brought fully up to code during rehabilitation
  - e. Create regional, multi-town approaches with added technical assistance for existing and proposed programs to help make them more applicable to rural areas – AGOs Abandoned Housing Initiative, Neighborhood Stabilization Initiative, etc.

2. **Revise the Community Scale Housing Initiative (CSHI) so that it is more useable in small towns.** Allocate a portion of the CSHI funds to rural towns. Remove the per project cap and allow a flat \$200,000 per unit subsidy. Reduce the "soft costs" for small developments – create a rolling application period and a simplified lottery process. Provide targeted funds for septic and wells to make small projects feasible in rural towns with no water and sewer.

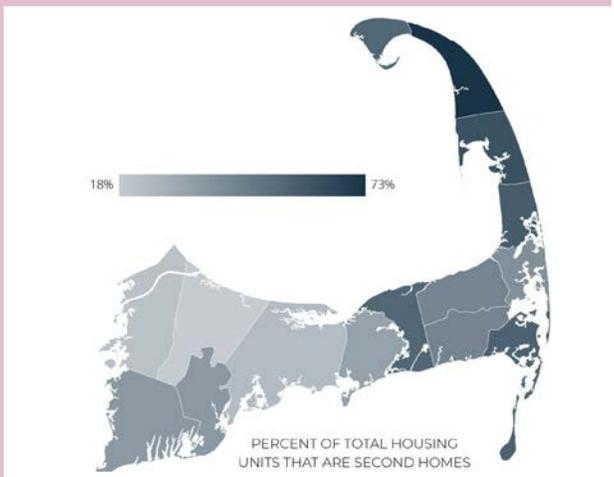
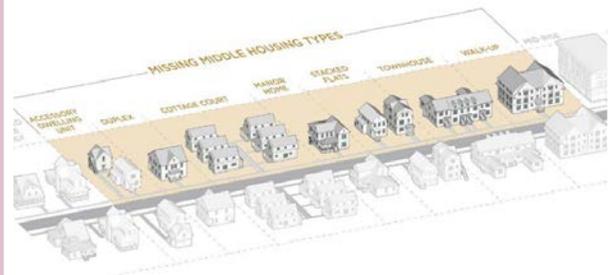
**3. Facilitate and reward regional solutions to local challenges.** The State should support existing regional collaborations and facilitate the creation of new regional solutions, including: embracing the creation of regional housing authorities and incentivizing efforts such as multi-town use of CPA or short-term rental tax income to fund housing development through a regional approach. Allow a percent of units developed in another town be counted towards a supporting community's Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI) when formal agreements or a regional housing plan is in place.

**4. Build capacity in rural areas to develop and manage housing.** Provide seed funding to build capacity in existing organizations, or through new collaborations among towns, to create housing coordinator services in rural areas to move community housing efforts forward and to assist developers with creating affordable housing. Replicate the Cape Housing Institute in other rural regions of the State.

**5. Support year-round homeownership in rural towns.** Make homeownership more accessible to first generation and first-time homebuyers through the promotion of down payment/closing cost assistance and subsidized mortgage products (which in turn require year-round residence in the home). Provide targeted funding to non-CPA communities for development of small-scale affordable homeownership opportunities.

**6. Create flexibility in State programs to meet the needs of rural communities.** Rebrand the 40R Starter Home Zoning to reflect the needs of new homeowners and seniors looking to downsize; simplify 40R to make it easier for towns with no planning staff to implement, and to be more adaptable to a town's existing zoning. Amend the Housing Choice Initiative designation criteria to recognize regional best practices and allow for multi-town designation applications.

### Missing Middle





# PUBLIC HEALTH

## The Public Health Challenge in Rural Towns

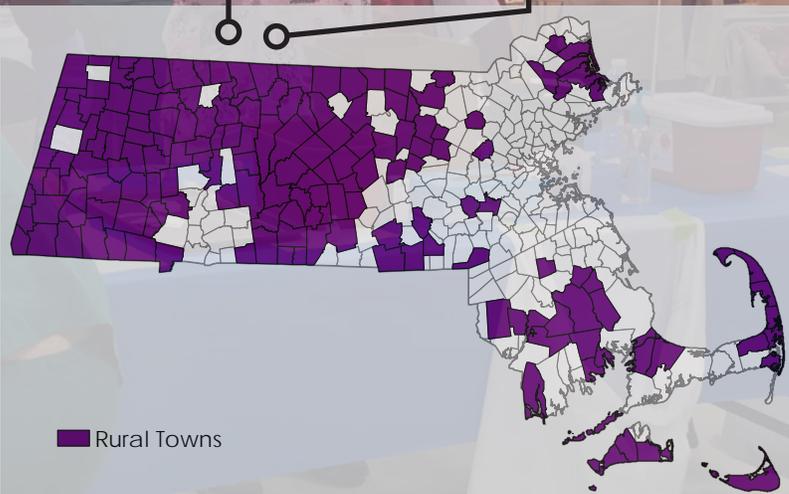
Rural residents face unique health challenges. They are more likely to die from a variety of diseases, and have a 50% higher rate of death from unintentional injuries than their urban counterparts.<sup>21</sup> Rural areas have less access to transportation, healthcare, government public health protections, education, employment, good housing, opportunities for exercise, and healthy food. Along with the impacts of historical racism, these factors, known as the social determinants of health, have a profound impact on health outcomes. The suicide death rate in New England is 60% higher in rural areas,<sup>22</sup> and opioid fatalities and sexual and domestic violence rates are higher as well. Rural areas have some of the lowest rates of childhood immunization, leaving communities vulnerable to outbreaks. With fewer tax dollars, rural areas have less capacity to fund programs that positively impact health.

Rural areas struggle to attract healthcare professionals. Access to rapidly available and highly qualified Emergency Medical Services and Advanced Lifesaving Services is limited, creating longer wait times and more complicated emergency transports. Rural populations are aging faster than urban counterparts, with an increased need for medical services. The smaller, dispersed populations of rural areas result in fewer hospitals overall. Often community hospitals and health centers are major employers in a region. Closure of any of these facilities has an enormous impact on both available services and the regional economy.

Massachusetts does not fund public health in the state budget, leaving municipalities to support this important work on their own. Because rural areas have limited municipal staffing, Boards of Health are often part-time volunteers carrying out the essential work of ensuring clean water, safe food, and safe housing.

The rate of issuing restraining orders in Berkshire, Franklin, and Northwest Worcester County are 37%, 36%, and 53% higher, respectively, than the state rate.<sup>23</sup>

In 2018, Franklin County had a higher rate of fatal opioid overdoses than Boston.<sup>24</sup>



Great Barrington, Lenox, West Tisbury, Nantucket, and Hadley schools are among the schools with the highest unvaccinated rates in the state.

**OUR GOAL**  
Residents of rural Massachusetts should have access to the same quality of healthcare services, public health protections, state policies, and support programs as their urban and suburban counterparts.



## BEST PRACTICES

- **Collective Impact Coalitions** bring together a variety of stakeholders to tackle complex issues that no single policy, government department, organization, or program can independently solve.<sup>25</sup> Examples of effective rural coalitions include the Communities That Care Coalition and the Opioid Task Force in Western Massachusetts.
- **Rural Community Health Workers** are front-line healthcare professionals that are trusted members of the community with unusually close understandings of their clientele due to shared language, ethnicity, or socio-economic status.<sup>26</sup> The Hilltown Community Health Center uses Community Health Workers to reach out to isolated rural elders, and provide domestic violence support.<sup>27</sup>
- **Rural telehealth programs** allow healthcare professionals to increase healthcare access by using technology to connect providers with patients when factors like distance are a barrier to care. Heywood Healthcare uses its Rural Tele-Behavioral Health Network to allow school children to meet with therapists and psychiatrists remotely, instead of traveling an hour each way.

- **Regional public health districts** allow rural communities to share public health professionals and resources, thereby providing help when needed and reducing municipal costs. The Franklin County Cooperative Public Health Service serves 13 rural communities, providing fully credentialed health agents and nurses, wellness clinics, and public health code enforcement. Other rural health districts include Tri-Town in Lee, Lenox and Stockbridge; the Quabbin Health District in Belchertown, Pelham and Ware; and the Berkshire Public Health Alliance.

## EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **The Population Urban and Rural Community Health (PURCH) Program** is a collaboration between UMass Medical School (UMMS) and Baystate Health. The UMMS also has a Rural Health Scholars program.<sup>28</sup>
- **Mobile Integrated Health (MIH) and Community EMS** are new programs from the Office of Emergency Medical Services.<sup>29</sup>
- **Massachusetts State Office of Rural Health (SORH)** builds partnerships and links rural communities with state and federal resources.<sup>30</sup>

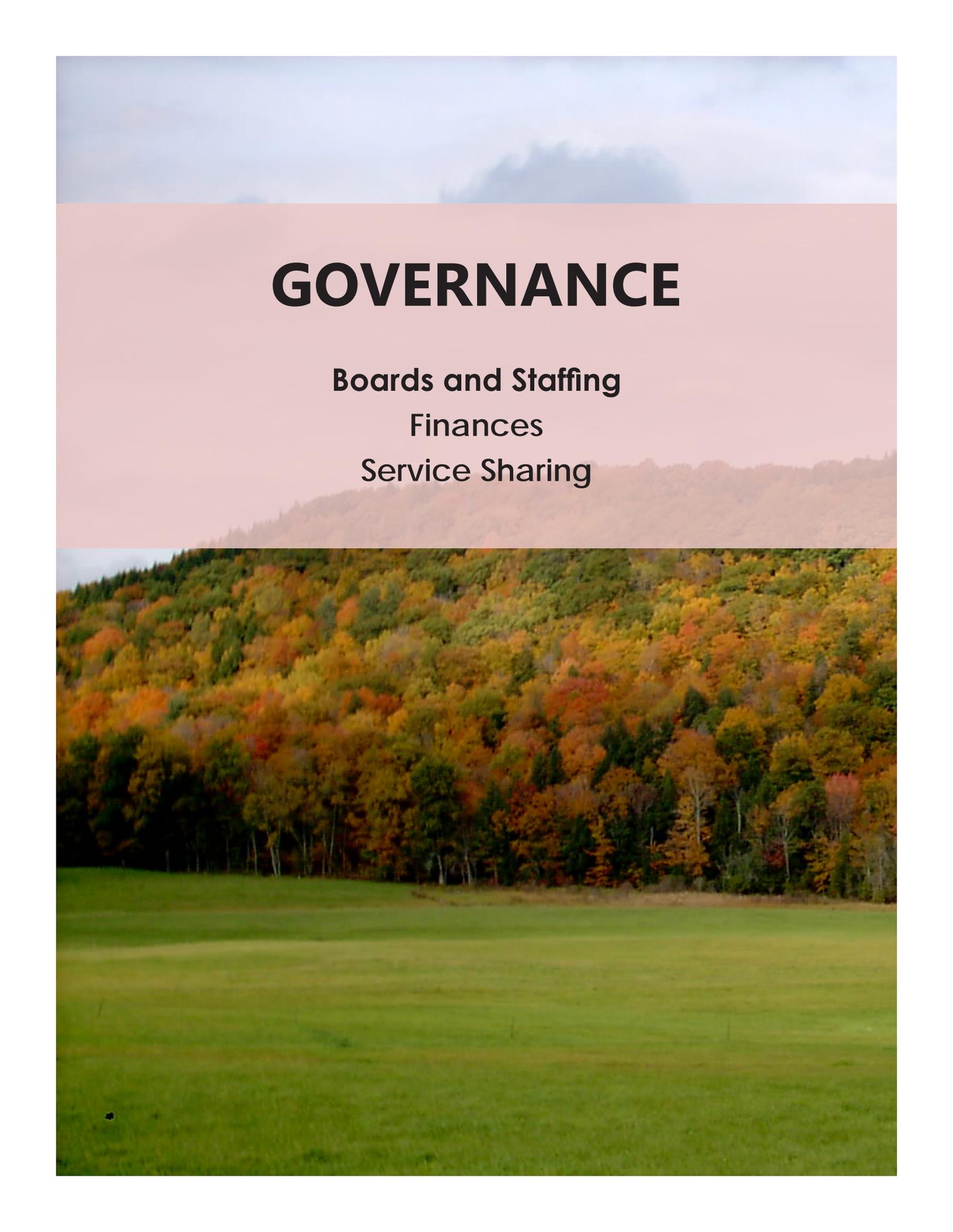
# PUBLIC HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Pass currently filed state legislation to improve rural health and healthcare including:**
  - a. Telehealth Parity Legislation that increases the number of insurers covering telehealth visits at the same rate as in-person visits (numerous bills).
  - b. Scope of Practice Legislation that creates additional levels of practice for dental therapists, nurses, nurse practitioners, optometrists and others (numerous bills).
  - c. Legislation to encourage the U.S. Congress to address the disparity in Suboxone training requirements for nurse practitioners vs. doctors.
  - d. Legislation allowing rural EMS to run ambulances with one driver and one EMT to reduce response times.
  - e. The State Action for Public Health Excellence (SAPHE) Bill to improve public health infrastructure.
2. **Fund initiatives to improve the healthcare infrastructure and public health of rural residents such as:**
  - a. Creation of a Community Health Center Transformation Fund providing financial stabilization.
  - b. Funding for broad-based community coalitions using a collective impact model to address complex community problems affecting health outcomes.
  - c. Reinstatement of rural sexual and domestic violence prevention and response funding giving rural residents access to Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANE) and tele-SANE services.
  - d. Strengthening support for rural residents along the continuum of substance use disorder prevention and treatment.
  - e. Funding to support equitable provision of rural local public health protections through the cross-jurisdictional sharing recommendations of the Special Commission on Local and Regional Health.

3. **Allow Nurse Practitioners to practice without the oversight of an MD,** as exists in 37 other states.
4. **Fully fund a Rural Healthcare Workforce Student Loan Repayment Fund,** allowing rural health care organizations to use this proactively as an incentive for employee recruitment.
5. **Provide incentives and reduce barriers to access workforce training for all levels of rural healthcare workers.** Take advantage of local community colleges and medical schools to partner and provide this training.
6. **Designate rural healthcare practices as “Critical Access Providers.”** Similar to the Critical Access Hospital designation that the U.S. Congress developed to reduce the financial vulnerability of rural hospitals, the state Office of Rural Health should determine how best to designate rural health care practices in Massachusetts as “critical access providers” to ensure sustained access to quality healthcare.
7. **Reduce the cost of DPH Community Paramedicine certification** for rural towns that will allow Emergency Medical Services to address rural needs. Currently, the high cost of certification is a barrier to this happening.
8. **Encourage towns to increase the use of Community Compact funds to begin Age-Friendly Community Planning.** Age-Friendly communities create physical and social environments that are set up to help seniors live safely, enjoy good health and stay involved.
9. **Be sensitive to the geography and population density of rural areas when developing public health grant program requirements** for numbers served and minimum registration requirements for trainings offered by DPH and its contractors. Rural projects and workshops face challenges in meeting the same economies of scale required in urban settings, but are no less deserving of funding.





# **GOVERNANCE**

**Boards and Staffing**

**Finances**

**Service Sharing**

## TOP RECOMMENDATIONS IN CATEGORY



- Invest in training programs for municipal roles
- Encourage municipal service sharing through funding and other incentives
- Enact legislation that increases revenue and improves equity for rural municipalities
- Incentivize communities to develop a shared services strategy and priorities
- Support DOR DLS' development of local officials' training





# BOARDS & STAFFING

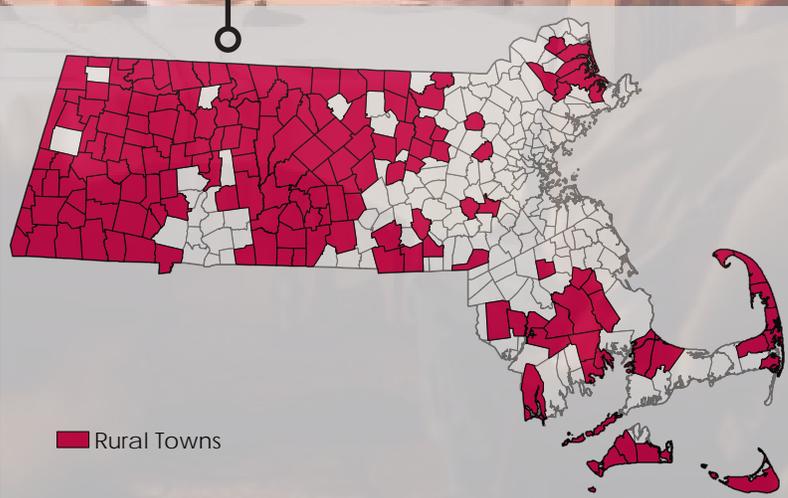
## The Municipal Boards and Staffing Challenge in Rural Towns

Massachusetts' rural municipal governments face serious challenges in finding and retaining qualified candidates for numerous positions that are critical to effective government functioning. In Massachusetts, there is no formal education and training pipeline for many vital municipal positions; employees must learn on the job. In the small governments typical of rural areas, a single staff position can comprise an entire department and they are therefore not able to learn from a manager or predecessor. The limited financial resources available to small towns results in lower wages and part-time hours, hampering attraction and retention of employees. Another factor is the looming wave of baby boomers expected to retire from key municipal roles. Millennials who could fill these jobs are currently less likely to relocate to rural areas for work.

Given these challenges, rural communities are particularly reliant on a robust set of volunteers for membership on select boards, planning boards, conservation commissions, boards of health, boards of assessors, finance committees and more. Yet, over the past decades, there has been a dramatic decrease of these volunteers at the town level. Many town elections have few or no contested elections while vacancies on appointed boards make it difficult to achieve a quorum and conduct business.

With no one listed on the ballot, a Hadley School Committee member was elected with less than 5 votes.

With a steady decline in volunteer firefighters and EMTs, rural communities are unable to reliably staff incidents. The lack stems from increasing levels of required training, and volunteers being unable to leave work.



There are no college or community college courses designed to teach municipal accounting; professional association certificate programs currently require prior related employment; and private sector accounting positions usually pay more. As a result, the pool of qualified, or even unqualified but interested, town accountant candidates is extraordinarily limited for rural municipalities, especially for part-time, unbenefited positions.

## OUR GOAL

Deliver a more streamlined workforce training system, better tools to share staffing, and stronger recruitment and retention programs for both town staff and local officials.

### BEST PRACTICES

- **Citizens Academies** are designed to educate residents about their municipal government's departments, budgets, boards and functions. Academies are typically six to nine months long with monthly programs. The academies often develop a pool of informed residents to serve as local leaders on boards, committees, and commissions, and help citizens participate more effectively in Town Meetings, particularly by increasing an understanding of the budget process. Local academy models in Massachusetts include those in Lexington, Easthampton, Pittsfield, and others. Bringing these to more rural communities is an idea with promise.
- **Supplementing Municipal Staff through Senior Tax Work-Off and/or Student Internship Programs.** Senior tax programs typically match "volunteers" to assist municipal departments in exchange for a tax abatement, which can provide critical skilled capacity to small town governments. The towns of Westminster and Sutton partner with their area high schools for municipal government internships, providing the towns with capacity and introducing municipal government to students.

- **Remote, Austere and Wilderness EMT Protocols.** Vermont and Maine are in the process of defining rural and remote protocols, likely by number of miles and/or minutes from higher level of care, that would allow local EMTs, with advanced wilderness medical training, to provide life-saving treatment beyond their normal licensure limits in certain emergencies, while still having the primary goal of getting a patient to a medical facility as quickly as possible.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **Community Compact Program.** The first Executive Order of the Baker administration created this program that is overseen by the Department of Revenue Division of Local Service (DOR DLS) and is funded by a line item in the state budget.
- **Efficiency and Regionalization Grant Program.** Administered by DOR DLS and funded by a line item in the state budget.
- **Municipal Government Annual Certification Programs.**
- **Optional Training and Certification for Board Members** include the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards Certification, the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative, and the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners' Trustee.
- **Local Government Workforce Skills Gap** is the product of a working group convened by Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito.<sup>31</sup>

# BOARDS AND STAFFING RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **The Administration, legislature and professional associations should invest in training programs for municipal roles to incentivize employment and service in local government and encourage continued professional development.**
  - a. Increase the frequency of professional organizations' existing programs while also opening programs to non-members and those not currently working in local government;
  - b. Codify informal practices like the DLS new Town Managers municipal financing training session;
  - c. Create college credit workforce training opportunities, especially at community colleges, and high school internships;
  - d. Increase use of online training;
  - e. Develop a student loan reduction/forgiveness program for municipal government employees;
  - f. Offer workshop and training sessions throughout Massachusetts both during the day and evening to make attendance easier for all; and
  - g. Subsidize critical training programs like the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative to ensure that volunteer municipal boards have the skills and knowledge they need.
2. **The Legislature should pass the volunteer ambulance driver legislation.** This bill would allow struggling local emergency medical services to use non-EMTs to drive ambulances, making better use of scarce first responder resources in rural areas. Development of a rural and remote EMT certification should also be assessed.
3. **Reduce retiree work restrictions for critical municipal workforce shortages.** Until other training and incentive programs are established that build the municipal workforce, pension-related work restrictions that limit annual hours and income should be reduced.

4. **Implement the recommendations of the Local Government Workforce Skills Gap Report.**  
Recommended short-term action steps include creation of a promotional campaign highlighting jobs in municipal government, development of a statewide municipal job posting site, better coordination of current professional associations and state community and other colleges to expand training programs, and development of mentorship, apprenticeship, and internship opportunities in municipal government.
5. **The Legislature should create and pass legislation to make it easier to transition town roles from elected to appointed,** currently a cumbersome process. Appointed positions allow minimum job qualifications to be developed, can draw a larger pool of candidates, and allow for easier service sharing collaborations with other municipalities.
6. **Encourage cross jurisdictional service sharing opportunities,** as outlined in the Service Sharing chapter of this report.





# FINANCES

## The Municipal Finance Challenge in Rural Towns

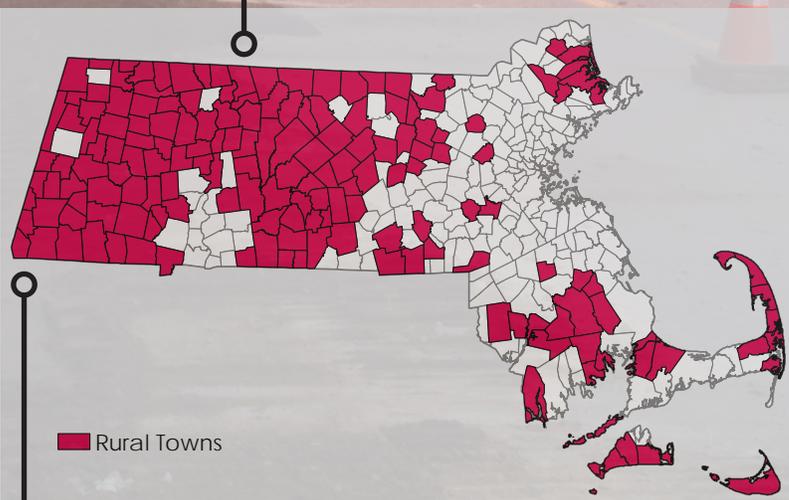
Rural municipalities have limited sources of revenue to fund local budgets, and residential property owners bear the majority of the tax burden. There is limited commercial and industrial activity in rural communities and tax-exempt property often comprises a large percentage of total acreage in rural towns, including property classified as “chapter land” (MGL Chapters 61, 61A and 61B) that reduces the tax value of farm and forest land. Payments in lieu of taxes (PILOT) are required for publicly-owned property, but the amount is subject to appropriation and rarely fully funded.<sup>32</sup>

State funding for education and regional school transportation seldom cover actual costs, further constricting the revenue available for local services. Annual cost increases on items like health insurance, school assessments and capital projects often outpace the ability of a municipality to raise revenue, forcing reductions in other budget lines. Proposition 2½ limits the yearly property tax levy and many rural towns are approaching tax levy and rate ceilings that remove their ability to raise revenue by override.

State funding formulas often skew toward more populated municipalities. Formulas that use population figures tied to zip code data cause rural towns served by multiple US Post Offices to lose out. A lack of prior fiscal analysis of state legislation can negatively impact town finances, especially in rural municipalities. Prevailing wage requirements and labor markets that include more expensive urban areas add extra cost and burden to rural municipalities.

Wendell has a 2019 tax rate of \$22.61 with zero override and only limited debt exclusion capacity.

Contractors in rural areas often avoid public project bids. Prevailing wage paperwork and reporting are too burdensome, and the hourly rate differential is so great that employers find it difficult to assign an employee.



97% of Mount Washington’s total tax levy is on residential property and 59% of Mount Washington’s land is owned by the state. In FY2018, rural towns were paid \$5.35M less in PILOT than if the land was privately owned.<sup>33</sup>

## OUR GOAL

The Commonwealth should help rural municipalities increase and diversify revenue sources and reduce state laws and regulations that can both mandate spending and limit sources of revenue.



### BEST PRACTICES

- **Fiscal Analyses of Proposed Legislation.** Many states require a fiscal analysis of the impact of proposed legislation on local governments before enactment.
  - » **The Maryland General Assembly's Fiscal and Policy Notes** provides a summary of most bills that includes an estimate of the fiscal impact of the bill on the revenues and expenditures of local governments during the year in which the bill is to become effective and for the next four years. The Notes also identify when a bill establishes a mandate on a unit of local government.
  - » **The Connecticut General Assembly requires a brief statement** on every bill that is approved by a committee or that reaches the floor of the House or Senate of the fiscal impact that the legislation would have on local government.
  - » **Vermont's Legislative Joint Fiscal Office was created in 1973** with a mission to provide non-partisan financial analyses to legislative committees.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **State local aid.** Unrestricted General Government Aid through the annual Commonwealth budget.
- **Community Compact Cabinet and other technical assistance.** Administered by Department of Revenue (DOR) Division of Local Services (DLS) and funded through a line item in the annual Commonwealth budget.
- **Community Preservation Act.** Through a local option property tax surcharge and augmented with state matching funds.

# FINANCES RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Require a legislative fiscal analysis of a bill's impact on local governments**, with particular attention on the impact to rural municipalities, prior to enactment of state legislation.
2. **Require predictable and fair PILOT** on all state-owned land and buildings including revision of the payment formula to recognize the value of food production, carbon sequestration, climate resiliency and sustainability, and require that the Commonwealth negotiate with municipalities before purchase of additional property. Address issues related to the property tax status of non-profits and charitable organizations.
3. **Explore the addition of a rural factor to state funding formulas**, like chapter 70 school aid and chapter 90 road maintenance funding to reduce reliance on population as the predominant factor in distribution formulas. The impact of seasonal population swells on the Cape and Islands should also be considered.
4. **Enact legislation that increases revenue, recognizes unique rural challenges and improves equity for rural municipalities.**
  - a. **Tackle Proposition 2½** reform to assist towns that are approaching the levy ceiling and tax rate ceiling.
  - b. **Reform Chapter 90**, as covered in Transportation Infrastructure.
  - c. **Correct funding inequities created by quantifying population data using ZIP codes.** Require the use of physical locations, not mailing addresses, when calculating population for various state formulas.
  - d. **Revise prevailing wage law.** 1) Make wage rates more geographically sensitive so that rural areas are not saddled with urban wage rates. 2) Create exemptions for small projects, tied to procurement law thresholds. 3) Reduce the paperwork burden that causes small local contractors not to bid.

e. **Enact stable state/local revenue sharing agreements for predictable local aid**, such as those outlined in various policy requests of the MMA and the recommendations of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston in its Policy Brief 10-2: *Reforming Municipal Aid in Massachusetts: The Case for a Gap-Based Formula*.

f. **Provide additional local option taxes**, to be available statewide, regionally, or locally as warranted. Rural towns are often not able to make use of existing local option taxes with few, if any, restaurants, rooms for rent, or adult-use cannabis shops. Allow towns to tap into unique local opportunities, such as Charlemont's effort to add a fee to outdoor recreation uses.

g. **Reform Other Post Employee Benefits (OPEB)** to provide local officials with tools to help them contain retiree health insurance costs.

5. **Support DOR DLS' development of local officials' training.** DOR DLS is developing a program to provide municipal finance training to new town administrators and to provide workshops around the state on various municipal finance topics that will help expand the knowledge base of local officials. A good financial management team will positively impact the financial condition of a town.

6. **Explore and encourage models for merging town government functions.** The current structure of municipal government encourages 351 unique silos of operation. There are many examples of regional approaches to providing services. There are additional models to be encouraged, including merging functions across multiple towns.

7. **Explore and encourage shared town – school functions.**

8. **Provide state funding support for public safety, public works and other local facilities**, through grants and zero-interest loans. Towns could use additional options to help make necessary capital investments affordable to property taxpayers.

9. **Allow local public health nurses to bill insurers for billable services.**





# SERVICE SHARING

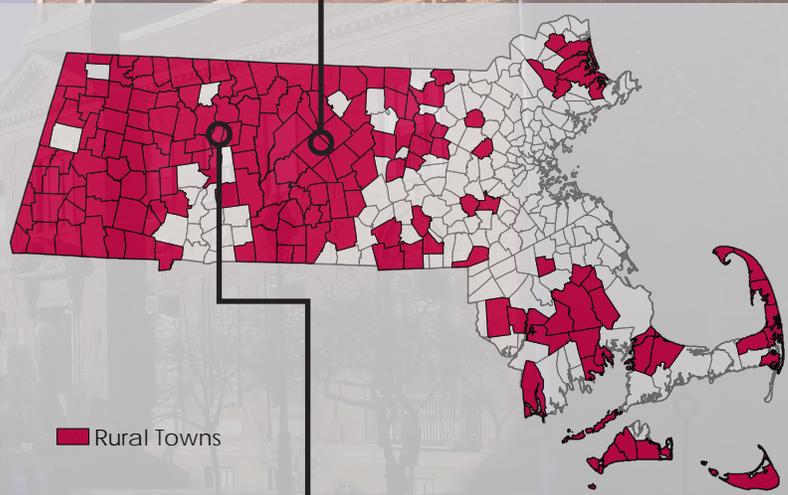
## The Service Sharing Challenge in Rural Towns

Rural municipalities have limited staff capacity, often with town departments consisting of only one employee or a part-time employee. Competing operating and capital priorities along with increasing benefit and other governmental costs limit the ability to expand staffing to provide the services residents need and expect. Sharing the provision of critical services with other municipalities is an option to improve the level and quality of service but comes with challenges. Assessing feasibility, creating an organizational and cost-sharing structure and governance documents takes time and capacity that are often unavailable.

As a home rule state with a centuries-long history of local autonomy and control, it can be a difficult obstacle to overcome in Massachusetts. And while sharing services results in improved service, it does not always save money, as local officials often assume, especially when the service has been historically under-funded. Fortunately, there are many examples of successful service sharing throughout the state and current state funding sources to encourage more.

Partnering with regional organizations for purchasing and procurement services saves rural municipalities money and ensures compliance with state procurement laws. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council in Boston offers emergency vehicle and LED streetlight purchasing to all municipalities in the state.

Towns in the Quabbin Regional School District have formed an Educational and Municipal Partnership among leadership from five towns in order to foster communication and develop robust intergovernmental agreements.



The three towns of Sunderland, Whately, and Deerfield created a regional ambulance service with a representative governance structure and cost-sharing agreement. Response times improved dramatically in all three towns.

## OUR GOAL

Improve government services to rural residents of Massachusetts by assisting, encouraging, incentivizing, simplifying and legislating options for inter-municipal service sharing.



### BEST PRACTICES

- **Municipal service delivery through a regional organization.** The Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) provides town accounting services to 12 municipalities, and public health and nursing services to 13 municipalities through its Cooperative Public Health Service. Both are touted as statewide regional models.

#### Benefits

- » Using the FRCOG's accounting and permitting software saves money.
- » Shared practices create efficiencies and allow staff to serve any town.
- » Combining the service-hour needs of many towns allows for the hiring of full-time, benefited employees.

#### Challenges

- » Municipalities rarely need to calculate the full cost of an employee - the cost to operate Town Hall and the cost of benefits are usually in another part of a town budget - so the service cost is considered high.
- » Even with the ability to offer a full-time, benefited position, the pool of available candidates is slim - few accountants have municipal experience and most can be paid a much higher rate in the private sector, and there are very few qualified health agents in MA.
- » Large service areas results in travel costs.

- **Municipal service delivery through an inter-municipal agreement.** The towns of Lee and Lenox created a shared Town Manager position via a 3-year inter-municipal agreement that allows each Select Board to assess and evaluate whether to continue the arrangement at the end of the contract term. The agreement also included the hiring of a chief administrative officer who will provide human resources services to both towns, a position that neither town had or could afford before. This transition was preceded by a long-time shared health district and more recent combining of inspection services.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **Community Compact Program.** The first Executive Order of the Baker administration created this program that is overseen by the Department of Revenue, Division of Local Service (DOR DLS).
- **Efficiency and Regionalization Grant Program.** Administered by DOR DLS and funded by a line item in the state budget.
- **District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) Funds.** State funds distributed by DHCD to the state's 13 regional planning agencies (RPAs).
- **State 911 Department Support & Incentive Grant.** The State 911 Department is responsible for administering this grant and program
- **RPAs and councils of government (COGs).** Legislatively designated and funded by a variety of federal, state and local sources.

# SERVICE SHARING RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Create a pool of experienced and compensated technical assistance providers to assist municipalities with new service sharing opportunities.** Similar to the Peer-to-Peer Technical Assistance Program model from DHCD, staff from the DOR DLS, RPAs and from successful shared service projects should be tapped to help facilitate the community buy-in process and to assist with creation of financing, staffing, and governance documents for new service sharing projects.
2. **Incentivize communities to develop a shared services strategy and priorities.** Municipalities should proactively identify priorities for collaboration (for example, when the long-time police chief retires, consider creating a shared chief position with a neighboring town). The strategies should develop and identify potential partners, responsible parties for moving goals forward, and be shared with other towns to spark potential partnerships.
3. **Pursue legislation that would encourage the merger of two or more public safety entities, especially fire services.** Unlike MGL Chapter 41 Section 99B to 99K which explicitly describes the process for the merger of police departments, there is little guidance and no legislation on how to consolidate municipal or district-governed fire departments. The lack of guidance and legislation is a barrier to municipalities and districts who recognize potential efficiencies through collaboration.
4. **Build incentives for cooperation into new and existing grant programs.** Some programs should encourage multi-town planning and project implementation, such as the Municipal Vulnerabilities Preparedness (MVP) program for watershed planning. Other programs could provide scoring bonus points, reduced match requirements or increased funding to incent service sharing and cooperation.

5. **Continue to support Efficiency and Regionalization grant funding to encourage municipal service sharing** both for facilitation and management of planning and development processes, and to fund startup or transition costs of a project or shared position.
6. **Support cross-jurisdictional sharing of local health department functions.** The Public Health Council should adopt the Special Commission on Local and Regional Health's Workforce Credential Standards, and the Legislature should fully fund the State Action for Public Health Excellence (SAPHE) program.
7. **DLS should work with the Rural Policy Advisory Commission, the Massachusetts Municipal Association and others to develop models for the complete merger of town government functions.** There may be a time that a rural community can no longer afford or justify its autonomous existence. Helping municipalities merge to bolster service levels and revenues could be the future of a sustainable rural Massachusetts.
8. **RPA's should increase their capacity to facilitate the development of shared municipal functions,** as well as their capacity to act as a host agency where advisable.
9. **Towns should explore private sector partnerships as a way of receiving municipal services.** Private vendors have proven to be an efficient and effective means of providing municipal services. Small communities may benefit from harnessing their collective buying power and collaborating on joint procurements.





## TOP RECOMMENDATIONS IN CATEGORY



- Expand watershed-based resiliency planning
- Set aside at least 1% of the state budget for environmental programs and departments
- Streamline permitting for sea level rise mitigation
- Give municipalities more climate adaptation power and flexibility
- Link statewide carbon policy to rural issues and assets





# CLIMATE CHANGE & RESILIENCY

## The Resiliency Challenge in Rural Towns

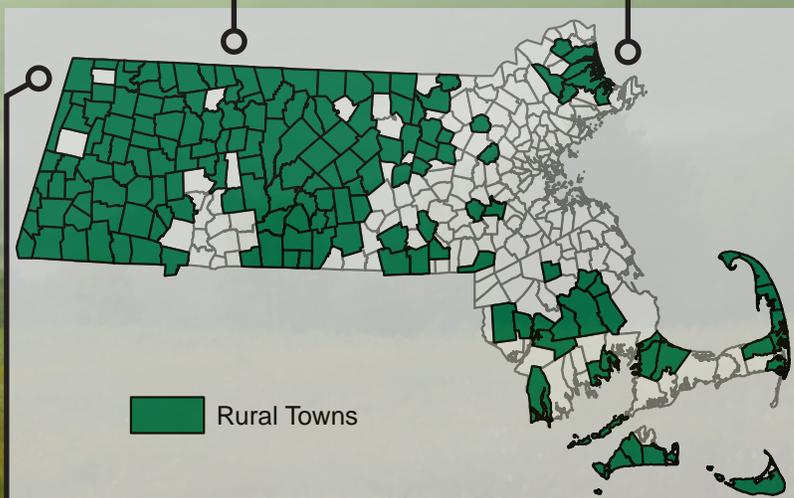
Rural towns have deep cultural and economic ties to the natural landscapes and resources that comprise their communities. Climate change threatens these relationships, and left unchecked will disrupt the lives and livelihood of rural residents.

Intensified rainfall and more severe storms, both of which are anticipated to worsen, affect critical agricultural land and damage town infrastructure. The smaller transportation and utility networks that exist in rural areas experience greater hardships with outages due to the lack of alternatives and backups. Rural businesses that are natural resource-based, such as farming, forestry, fisheries, and tourism, face extreme challenges from a warmed and volatile climate. Increased rainfall, more drought, warming ocean temperatures and acidic water conditions lead to intensified erosion, movement of polluted runoff, extremes in dam and dry field conditions, and migration of species.

Residents of rural towns include environmental justice communities and vulnerable populations. The public health effects of extreme heat, contaminants in downstream flooding, and vector-borne diseases may affect vulnerable populations disproportionately because they have less recourse to avoid climate change impacts. In the context of all these changes, rural towns operate with minimal professional staff and volunteers who have little time to focus on preventative, future-oriented actions or the ability to seek funding for innovative projects.

In 2018, after two years of crop losses due to heavy rains followed by drought, the Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) opened an Emergency Farm Fund loan program.<sup>34</sup>

Water wells on the North Shore are becoming brackish due to extended drought conditions coupled with sea level rise.



In 2011, Tropical Storm Irene brought mudslides and a washout of Route 2, a major highway across the northern tier of the Commonwealth, in Florida and Charlemont that resulted in a complete closure of the road and a 56-mile detour for 4 months.

## OUR GOAL

The Commonwealth should equip municipalities with the knowledge and resources necessary to address the impacts of climate change and improve resiliency for both the health and safety of rural residents and the rural economy.

### BEST PRACTICES

- **The Fluvial Geomorphology Assessment Protocol piloted in the Deerfield River Watershed by the FRCOG** recommends specific climate resiliency projects for rivers such as reconnecting floodplains, removing obstructions, and more. The work in the Deerfield watershed was modeled on similar work conducted by the **Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation Rivers Program**. Through this protocol, river resource protection is achieved through a combination of permitting, technical assistance, assessment, planning, education and outreach.
- **The 4 per 1,000 Initiative** (France) is an innovative model for mitigating climate change by using healthy soil farming techniques to increase the annual sequestration of carbon (by 0.4%) into the top 1 – 1 ½ feet of agricultural soils, while simultaneously improving soil health, strengthening essential ecosystems, and contributing to food security. The use of similar farming techniques is also being explored through a partnership of government, public academic institutions, and private farmers in the **Farmer Scientists Trials in Managing for Soil Health project (South Carolina)**, funded by a USDA and NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant.

- Though stalled, **Oregon's Cap and Invest Bill (HB 2020)** would have created a carbon emission cap that applies to all sectors, and dedicated 20% of investment funds to support natural and working lands, and those communities most affected by climate change.

### EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAMS

- **The Municipal Vulnerability Program (MVP)**. A state program administered by the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEEA).
- **The Agricultural Climate Resiliency & Efficiencies (ACRE) Program**. A state program administered by the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources.
- **The StormSmart Coasts Program and Shoreline Change Project** is a tool offered by the Office of Coastal Zone Management.
- **Climate and Health Program and Climate exchange Vulnerability Mapping Tool** administered by the Department of Public Health.
- The **Healthy Soils Action Plan**, currently under development with support from EOEEA.

# RESILIENCY RECOMMENDATIONS



1. **Revive the Massachusetts Watershed Initiative approach to conduct watershed-based resiliency planning**, perhaps coordinated at the RPA/COG level, to connect communities in a shared watershed, promote collaboration on shared projects, connect upstream and downstream effects and achieve economies of scale for smaller rural towns.
2. **Achieve the “One Percent for Nature” revenue goal whereby 1% of the Commonwealth’s budget is set aside for environmental programs (it was 0.64% in 2014).**<sup>35</sup> Some of this funding should be targeted to staff and adequately fund all state agencies involved in climate change resiliency, including the funding of the Division of Ecological Restoration to expand its work related to restoring natural river and floodplain processes to enhance flood resilience, and for property buy-outs in repetitive loss locations.
3. **Streamline the permitting process for climate change resiliency projects.** Communities are choosing not to implement valuable projects because the complicated and lengthy permitting process overwhelms limited staff capacity.
4. **Link statewide carbon policy to rural issues and assets.** The consideration of carbon reduction policies should explicitly include rural assets like working farms. For example, a soil carbon offset accreditation scheme that pays landowners for measurable increases in soil carbon, would assist rural working lands in continuing their operations and the climate change mitigation services they provide. In depth discussion is required about the implementation of such a program on how to distribute the costs and benefits, and requires voices at the table to represent a diversity of rural constituencies from the earliest planning stages.
5. **Manage rainwater** so that it will find unimpeded river pathways to floodplains, infiltrate efficiently, cause as little runoff and erosion as possible, have the least conflict with homes and infrastructure, and be stored for seasonal drought mitigation.

6. **Upgrade design storm standards** for infrastructure, such as culvert sizing, to the most current figures as a better reflection of current conditions, and create accurate floodplain mapping to support emergency preparedness and land use decisions.
7. **Provide additional funding for the resiliency of the transportation and water/sewer infrastructure** such as planning for the abandonment or relocation of utility and roadway infrastructure that continually floods and replacing private wells with public water systems.
8. **Revise enabling legislation to give local communities greater flexibility with land use regulations**, such as the ability to provide incentives to developers willing to implement green infrastructure and low impact development (LID) practices.
9. **Update the 2003 *Environmental Permitting in Massachusetts* document** produced by Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management (CZM) and elevate CZM's role in communicating resiliency practices.
10. **Prioritize resources for setting up heating and cooling shelters accessible by vulnerable populations.** Consider cooling shelters for pets and livestock, as the need to care for these animals prevents rural residents from leaving their homes to seek assistance.
11. **Use Regional Planning Agency staff that are trained in the MVP program to assist towns in developing and implementing climate resiliency projects.**
12. **Partner with and fund state academic institutions to study climate-related issues that are still not well understood** such as saltwater intrusion impacts and points of dam failure.
13. **Target the prevention of increased disease from ticks and mosquitoes with a public health campaign for repellent products and behaviors**, similar to those for sun screen/UV protection.





# **PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS & ACTION PLAN**





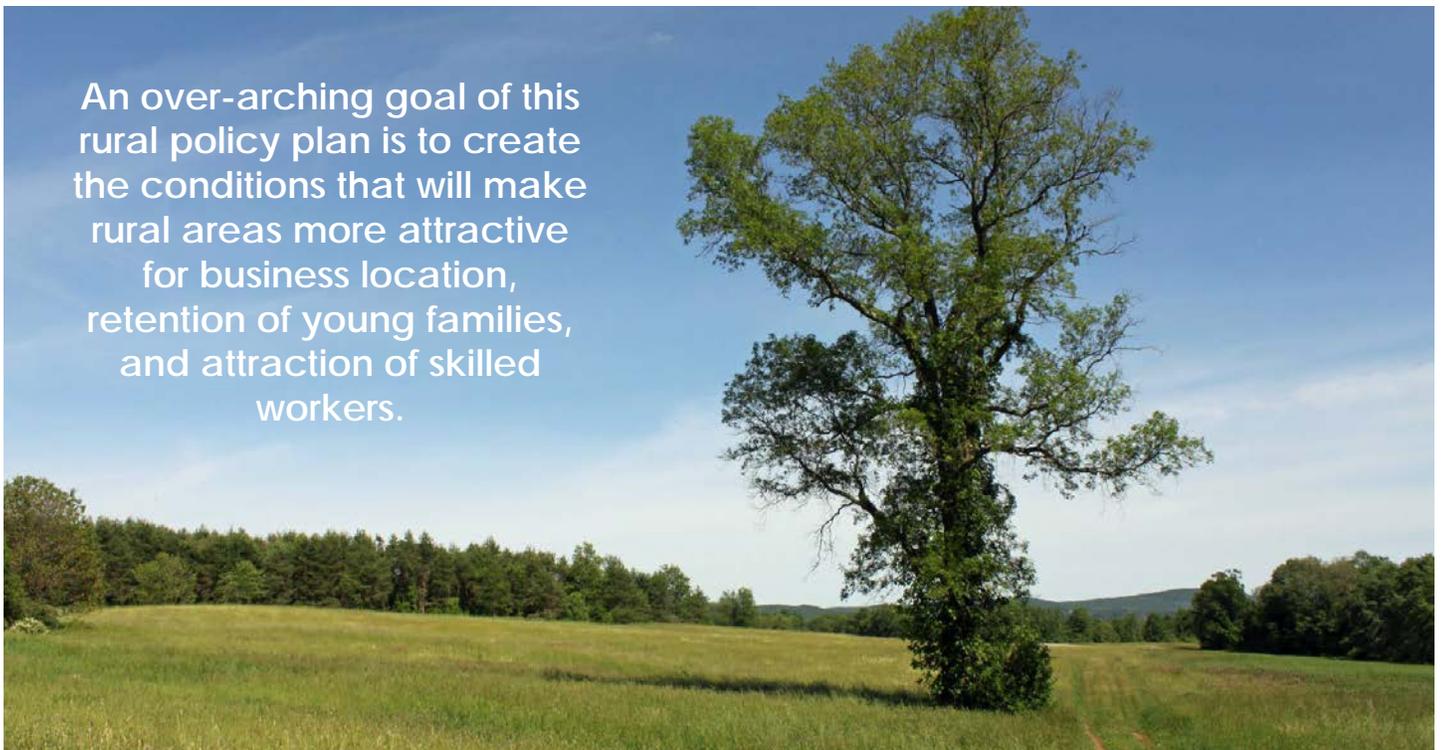
## PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION PLAN

As documented throughout this Rural Policy Plan, there are many challenges to address in rural Massachusetts, and the detailed assessment of fifteen (15) focus areas showcased a wide-range of high-level strategies and detailed recommendations. To summarize and organize this important work, the final chapter presents:

1. A set of **top priorities** for rural policy in Massachusetts, highlighted by the call to establish an Office of Rural Policy.
2. An **Action Plan** focused on near-term steps to advance and implement the rural policy plan.

Woven throughout this work is the reality that rural places in Massachusetts (and nationwide) are struggling to retain, attract and grow their population. This challenge varies across rural areas as some ex-urban areas in the outer reaches of commuting to urban markets are experiencing growth. But the most rural areas of the state (Franklin and Berkshire County, areas of Cape Cod) are losing population and that trend is projected to continue. If we are successful at implementing the recommendations in this report, we feel strongly that rural areas will be much more competitive, vibrant, and sustainable for future generations to come.

An over-arching goal of this rural policy plan is to create the conditions that will make rural areas more attractive for business location, retention of young families, and attraction of skilled workers.





# THE PATH FORWARD

## TOP PRIORITIES OF THE RURAL POLICY PLAN

Expand diversity and implement relocation strategies to boost population in rural Massachusetts

Develop a statewide land use plan/growth management strategy

Determine and create a rural factor to adjust state funding formulas

## CORE STRATEGIES

Develop municipal capacity and incentives for service sharing

Create a dedicated funding stream for water and sewer infrastructure

Redesign public transportation provision in rural Massachusetts

Develop targeted economic development strategies for rural sectors

Ensure equitable and quality education to children in rural Massachusetts

Address the impacts of climate change in rural Massachusetts by enhancing the capacity of rural lands to provide mitigative solutions

## SUSTAINED IMPLEMENTATION

CREATE AN OFFICE OF RURAL POLICY

.....

**Create an Office of Rural Policy.** The state should enact An Act to Relative to the Rural Policy Advisory Commission, which would create an Office of Rural Policy. Creation of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission has given focus to the challenges faced by rural communities, businesses and residents but the Commission’s work is limited as an unstaffed and unfunded appointed Commission. This legislation will create a state office with permanent staff capacity to provide a consistent, productive focus on rural issues in the Commonwealth, and help implement the recommendations of this rural policy plan.

**Expand diversity and implement relocation strategies to boost population in rural Massachusetts.** A sometimes over-looked aspect of the state’s population growth is the steady stream of international migrants, but these immigrants overwhelmingly locate in urban areas. A multi-faceted strategy is required to make rural Massachusetts a more comfortable, welcoming and inclusive environment for all people. This includes working to understand historical instances of exclusion and existing biases and conditions, removing existing barriers to racial and cultural diversity, learning from efforts in places like upstate New York to attract international migrants, and developing housing, education, social and employment opportunities for all. Learning from the success of our neighbors in Vermont and Maine to attract more and younger people to their rural states should be emulated for the rural regions of Massachusetts. This includes passing An Act Establishing the Western Massachusetts Remote Worker Relocation Incentive Program submitted by State Senator Eric Lesser as well as strategies for student loan forgiveness, and marketing rural Massachusetts as places to live and work.

**Develop a statewide land use plan/growth management strategy.** Forecasts that portend significant population growth in Boston and continued population decline in rural communities do not represent a good, long-term growth pattern for the state. Boston will face congestion and even higher housing prices while rural MA will struggle to provide basic services to citizens. A thoughtful strategy can identify ways to disburse future growth in a more responsible, proactive, and conscionable manner, especially in the face of climate change. The creation of the plan could be overseen by EEA and coordinated by RPA’s with a bottom-up approach similar to that used in previous Land Use Prioritization initiatives. Funding for the RPAs to conduct this work and staffing resources at EEA would be required. Future grants and programs could be targeted to specific priority areas or land use planning area types.

.....

**Determine and create a rural factor to adjust state funding formulas,** like chapter 70 school aid and chapter 90 road maintenance funding and/or reduce reliance on population as the predominant factor in distribution formulas. Recognizing the impact of seasonal population swells on the Cape and Islands should also be considered, as well as reevaluating the existing RTA funding formula in order to create a more equitable distribution of transit funds to all areas of the Commonwealth. The funding disparity to rural areas is also revealed through state programs such as workforce training due to sparse population density. For example, including a waiver or a rurality factor that allows for an expanded geography (such as a group of neighboring towns, rather than just one city) or for an expanded cohort of disadvantaged populations (for example, not solely disabled veterans, or solely long-term unemployed, or solely those on transitional assistance) should be considered.

**Develop municipal capacity and incentives for service sharing.** This includes exploring and encouraging models for merging the functions and services of town government. The current structure of municipal government encourages 351 unique silos of operation. There are many examples of regional approaches to providing services. There are additional models to be encouraged, including merging functions across multiple towns.

**Create a dedicated funding stream for water and sewer infrastructure.** A funding program could be similar to MassWorks STRAP, but should focus specifically on water and sewer as the major hurdle to smart growth and center-based development in rural towns, and include feasibility studies and engineering design work as eligible actions. In addition, the DEP should allow implementation of additional innovative / alternative systems to address unique rural problems. Full scale treatment plants may be too expensive and unwarranted in rural areas. New technology is needed to address the system design problems created by the seasonality of population on the Cape and Islands and other areas with large numbers of second homes. To address these issues, DEP should revise regulations as needed to encourage shared septic systems for small cluster developments, encourage small scale treatment systems, encourage shared treatment systems, and approve more site-specific waivers from existing regulations to encourage economic development.

**Redesign public transportation provision in rural Massachusetts.** Public transportation is an essential economic and workforce development partner, critical to reaching educational and health care services, and mobility lifeline for many who do not own a vehicle. The current system of large buses serving primary corridors needs to transition to a more nimble system of smaller vehicles using information technology to serve different areas and needs throughout the day and evening. For example, the state and regional partners should explore options for coordinating shared transportation assets such as resources owned and/or operated by/for RTAs, schools, Councils on Aging, and private service providers to actively develop sustainable cross-border transportation partnerships. Develop a pilot project to expand on the existing best practices in shared transportation.

.....

**Develop targeted economic development strategies for rural sectors.** The economic and industry assets of rural Massachusetts are different from Greater Boston and other urban areas of the state, so targeted strategies are needed to support and expand the key sectors and small businesses in rural Massachusetts. For example, a bill filed by Senator Adam Hinds and others would create an Office of Outdoor Recreation whose charge would be to promote the economic and health benefits of outdoor recreation in Massachusetts. Other initiatives should include: a) providing resources to plan and implement creative economy and natural resources based tourism events (like the Farm/Art tour model) that highlight the rural economy of Massachusetts; b) bolstering the working lands economy by focusing on the economic development potential of the agricultural and woodlot processing sector such as through Industrial Revenue Bonds to set up a Cross Laminated Timber (CLT) forestry plant and meat and poultry processing plants here in Massachusetts; and c) building more awareness of locally-produced agricultural (vegetables, livestock, etc.), forestry and marine products and their benefits to health, local economy, and the environment.

**Ensure equitable and quality education to children in rural Massachusetts.** The challenges facing rural school districts are daunting and real: declining enrollments that do not decrease but increase the price of education per child; large geographic service areas that result in more expensive transportation costs; and larger and larger percentages of small municipal budgets devoted to education costs. These realities need to be acknowledged as the state considers how to disburse state education aid. Assisting with and incentivizing districts to share services with other districts or municipalities needs priority and efforts like the Berkshire County Education Task Force and the Massachusetts Rural Schools Coalition should be supported so that new models of education delivery can be tested and then replicated.

**Address the impacts of climate change in rural Massachusetts by enhancing the capacity of rural lands to provide mitigative solutions.** A changing climate will bring about significant departures from the traditional New England landscape. Predicted conditions include increased total rainfall in winter and spring, more drought potential in summer and fall, warming ocean temperatures and acidic water conditions. These changes are accompanied by secondary impacts such as intensified erosion, movement of polluted runoff, extremes in damp and dry field conditions, and the migration of plant and animal species.<sup>36</sup> Rural areas that depend upon natural resource-based industries such as agriculture, forestry, aquaculture, and tourism will need information and resources to adapt to changed conditions, particularly in light of the direct relationship between the landscape and the livelihood of rural populations. While they face serious impacts, rural lands have the ability to perform significant climate mitigation services such as the sequestration of carbon in healthy soils and the absorption of storm water within connected floodplains, as well as adaptive services such as providing a home for forced climate migrants. To perform these functions, rural lands must be well-managed, with resources, programs and policy incentives in place to acknowledge their role in resiliency and encourage the widespread adoption of resilient land management practices.

# ACTION PLAN TO IMPLEMENT THE RURAL POLICY PLAN

---

Implementing the Rural Policy Plan and creating the change needed to empower rural areas in Massachusetts is a big job, which can seem overwhelming. So, it is critical that we also identify some near-term action steps to advance this work, demonstrate progress, and earn some early 'wins' for rural Massachusetts. In particular, we are focused on:

**Establishing an Office of Rural Policy.** The state should enact An Act to Relative to the Rural Policy Advisory Commission, to create an Office of Rural Policy. Implementation of this plan and sustaining improvement in our rural areas requires a dedicated office and staffing. This will require modest funding and hiring authorization consistent with the challenges and opportunities of our rural areas.

**Passing current legislative proposals in support of rural areas.** As noted throughout this document, there are a wide-range of active legislative proposals that would directly support rural areas of Massachusetts. This includes the establishment of an Office of Outdoor Recreation, a remote worker incentive program, and the Massachusetts Rural Jobs Act which would enable rural small businesses to expand and create private-sector jobs by providing access to affordable, growth capital.

**Continue the Rural Policy Advisory Commission with a focus on implementation and progress monitoring.** The Rural Policy Advisory Commission has played a vital role in the development of the Rural Policy Plan, engaging with stakeholders, leading research, and prioritizing strategic recommendations. With the publication of this plan, the Rural Policy Advisory Commission's role should shift towards implementation of the plan, raising awareness of the rural issues and opportunities in Massachusetts, participating in hearings on key rural topics, and monitoring the progress towards implementation of the rural policy agenda.

**Approve and fund key studies and research to help advance rural issues.** In some cases, a lack of detailed information means that the logical next step is to conduct new research on topics vital to rural interests. A clear example is the lack of detailed data on cell coverage in rural areas of Massachusetts as a new study is needed to understand the severity of the challenge before effective solutions can be determine. Another important piece of new research is to study current funding formulas to determine the best way to include a rurality factor for fairer funding.



# END NOTES & CITATIONS

1. For more complete background on the RPAC, please see: <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/rural-policy-advisory-commission-rpac>
2. For a summation of the listening sessions, see: <https://frcog.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/RPAC-January-2019-Listening-Session-Results.pdf>
3. Cornell University reference, <https://cardi.cals.cornell.edu/publications/research-policy-briefs/broadband%e2%80%99s-contribution-economic-health-rural-areas>
4. <https://www.mma.org/advocacy/chapter-90-funding-needs-a-boost/>
5. [http://www.spencerma.gov/Pages/SpencerMA\\_Highway/roadsproject](http://www.spencerma.gov/Pages/SpencerMA_Highway/roadsproject)
6. MassDOT Bridges Web Application: <http://masdot.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=d42ae2ac2cb640ac992f763570ce10ed>
7. NAACC Data Center: [https://naacc.org/naacc\\_search\\_crossing.cfm](https://naacc.org/naacc_search_crossing.cfm)
8. Quaboag Connector, <https://www.rideconnector.org/>
9. SCM Elderbus, <https://www.scmelderbus.org/>
10. A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts' Regional Transit Authorities, [https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2019/04/17/dot-rta\\_task\\_force\\_report\\_040519.pdf](https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2019/04/17/dot-rta_task_force_report_040519.pdf)
11. <https://www.dailyyonder.com/new-research-shows-impact-innovation-rural-areas/2019/06/27/32554/>
12. <https://accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/remoteworkergrantprogram>
13. <https://www.vermontvacation.com/staytostay>
14. <https://www.liveandworkinmaine.com/>
15. <https://capecodyoungprofessionals.org/about-us/strategic-priorities>
16. America's Child Care Deserts in 2018
17. "The Road to High Quality Early Learning: Lesson from the States", Learning Policy Institute, June 2016.
18. 2017 DESE Fiscal Conditions in Rural School District Report
19. Center for Neighborhood Technology Housing and Transportation Index: <https://htaindex.cnt.org/map/>.
20. Building Communities of Promise and Possibility: State and Local Blueprints for Neighborhood Stabilization. MassINC and MACDC, January 2019.
21. National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO).
22. Center for Rural Health, University of North Dakota.
23. MA Department of Public Health, MA Domestic Violence Disparities Report, 2013.
24. Opioid Task Force of Franklin County and the North Quabbin.
25. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/networks/2/collective-impact>
26. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/community-health-workers>
27. <https://www.hchcweb.org/connect-to-services/service-we-offer/community-programs/>
28. <https://www.umassmed.edu/fmch/communityhealth/sep/rural-health-scholars/>
29. <https://www.mass.gov/mobile-integrated-health-care-and-community-emergency-services>
30. <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/state-office-of-rural-health-overview>
31. Municipal Workforce Skills Gap Report
32. Municipal Databank Reports, MA Department of Revenue, Division of Local Services, July 2019
33. Parks & Restitution: State-Owned Land Causing Pain in Rural Massachusetts, Rural Commonwealth, September 2018
34. Greta Jochem, Wetter Weather Weighing on Pioneer Valley Farmers, Daily Hampshire Gazette, 12/12/2018.
35. MassAudubon, Losing Ground: Planning for Resilience (Fifth Edition), June 2014
36. USGCRP, 2017: Climate Science Special Report: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume I [Wuebbles, D.J., D.W. Fahey, K.A. Hibbard, D.J. Dokken, B.C. Stewart, and T.K. Maycock (eds.)]. U.S. Global Change Research Program, Washington, DC.



# APPENDICES



# APPENDIX A: EXISTING POLICIES & PROGRAM DETAILS

## BROADBAND & CELL SERVICE FOCUS AREA

**Last Mile Broadband Program:** State bond funding, managed by the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development (EOHED) and the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI), was allocated formulaically to the remaining 45 unserved and 9 underserved communities for broadband expansion. This funding is being used to incent cable companies to extend their networks into unserved areas, for communities to develop municipal fiber networks, or to build municipal or sub-regional wireless networks. For municipalities choosing to build a fiber network, state funding totals approximately 40% of the cost.

**MassBroadband 123:** This is a middle mile fiber network built with federal and state funds and located in central and western Massachusetts and is owned by the Commonwealth via MBI. The network also includes more than 1,000 direct access points in town halls, libraries, schools and public service organizations. The current pricing structure to access broadband service through these connections limits use of this significant public infrastructure asset.

**Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Mobility Fund:** The FCC is in the process of administering the Mobility Fund to grant federal money to wireless carriers for unserved areas. There are pockets of Massachusetts that are eligible for these funds that will be distributed to bidding wireless carriers but it's unclear at this point if any wireless carriers will submit bids.

## TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE FOCUS AREA

**Chapter 90 Program:** Municipalities are reimbursed through the program for road-related construction projects. Each community receives an allocation based on a formula that considers population, employment and accepted roadway miles. This program is the main source of funding for roadway construction and maintenance, and is currently funded at \$200 million per year.

**Municipal Small Bridge Program:** A \$50 million MassDOT program over five years to assist cities and towns to replace or preserve bridges with spans between 10' and 20'. Municipality may qualify for up to \$500,000 per year for the design and construction of bridges that are not eligible for federal aid under existing programs.

**Culvert Replacement Municipal Assistance Grant Program:** The MA Division of Ecological Resources program assists municipalities to replace undersized, perched, and/or degraded culverts in areas of high ecological value. However, the Program's project eligibility requirements and funding levels (\$750,000 in 2019) do not match most rural communities' needs.



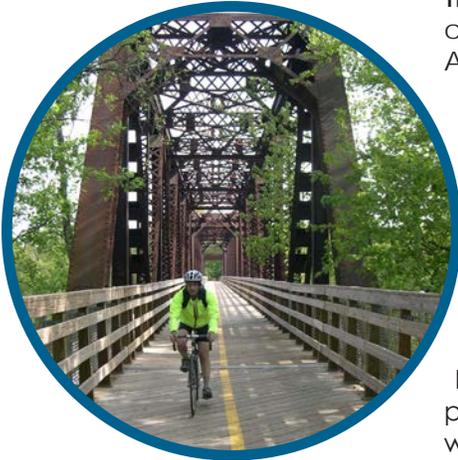
---

## TRANSPORTATION MOBILITY FOCUS AREA

**The Task Force on Regional Transit Authority (RTA) Performance and Funding** completed A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts' Regional Transit Authorities in 2018 to identify challenges and opportunities for RTAs.

**Rural Regional Transit Authority funding** is limited. Section 5311 funding is the only federal funding the three rural Regional Transit Authorities (Franklin, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket) receive other than occasional federal discretionary grants. State Contract Assistance supplements this funding but was level funded in FY18 and 19, which required fare hikes and schedule reductions. The final consistent funding source is local assessments, which is a limited source of funding for rural RTAs.

MassDOT is currently completing an **East-West Rail Study** to examine passenger rail service from Boston to Springfield and Pittsfield. The study will examine the costs, benefits, and investments necessary to implement passenger rail service as a competitive travel option on this corridor.



## WATER & SEWER FOCUS AREA

**Clean Water and Drinking Water Loan Programs** administered by the MA Department of Environmental Protection offer affordable loan options to cities and towns to improve water supply infrastructure and drinking water safety; and to help them to comply with federal and state water quality requirements that deal with wastewater treatment plants and collection systems, while addressing issues such as watershed management priorities, storm water management, and green infrastructure. Additionally, the SRF supplies financial assistance to address communities with septic system problems.– state revolving fund administered by the Department of Environmental Protection.

**Water & Waste Disposal Loan & Grant Program (USDA Rural Development).** Provides loan funding for up to 40 years for drinking water systems, sanitary sewage disposal, sanitary solid waste disposal, and storm water drainage in eligible rural areas and towns with populations of 10,000 or less. This program assists qualified applicants who are not otherwise able to obtain commercial credit on reasonable terms. Eligible applicants include local governmental entities and private nonprofits.

**Cape Cod and Islands Water Protection Fund** was created by state law (Chapter 337 of the Acts of 2018, the short-term rental bill). All Cape Cod towns are members, and Island towns are eligible to participate, and its purpose is to capture revenue, mainly through a 2.75% excise tax on short-term room rentals, and help member towns pay for the estimated \$4 billion cost of reducing nitrogen contamination in coastal waters. Each participating town may appoint a representative to the Fund Management Board that oversees use of the Fund.

**MassWorks Infrastructure Program.** A competitive state grant program for public infrastructure projects that support and accelerate housing production, spur private development, and create jobs throughout the Commonwealth. MassWorks emphasizes the production of multi-family housing in appropriately located walkable, mixed-use districts that result in direct and immediate job creation and/or that support economic development in weak or distressed areas.



---

## WATER & SEWER (continued)

**MassHousing Homeowner Septic Repair Loan Program** provides financial help to repair a failed septic system for owner-occupied 1-4 family homes and condominium associations. Income eligibility determines if 0%/3%/5% loan. Sponsored by the combined effort of DEP, DOR and MassHousing.

**Local/Regional Housing Authority Loan Programs** that help homeowners fix code violations, including plumbing and septic system repairs. For example, the Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority administers a Housing Rehabilitation Loan Program on behalf of 24 of the 26 towns in Franklin County. Homes must be owner-occupied with annual household income equal to or less than the area median income. Projects must address code violations and bring the property into compliance. Barnstable County offers financial assistance with a 5% interest rate betterment loan through the Cape's Community Septic Management Loan Program. Loans, repayable over 20 years, cover all costs directly associated with septic system upgrades to comply with Title 5 regulations.

**Massachusetts Water Infrastructure Finance Commission** was legislatively formed in 2012 to study water infrastructure. The Commission estimated a \$20.4 billion gap in water infrastructure funding, which was found to largely be the responsibility of municipalities. The Commission recommended a larger role for state government and state policies that provided financial incentives and regulatory flexibility to encourage regional solutions, technological innovation and public-private partnerships.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOCUS AREA

**Opportunity Zone Program.** Of the 79 cities and towns in MA with federally designated Opportunity Zone Census Tracts, 19 are located in rural towns. The program incentivizes private equity investment in business and real estate projects located in designated areas. To achieve the greatest tax advantage, investors are seeking "shovel ready" projects. Most rural towns with designated Opportunity Zones do not have such projects, due to the lack of commercial or industrial activity that would require equity investment, or because of the lack of infrastructure and capacity to develop projects.

**Mass Growth Capital Corporation's Small Business Technical Assistance Program (SBTA).** Provides annual grants to 40+ community development corporations (CDCs) and other nonprofits that provide training, technical assistance and access to capital to small businesses across the state including in rural communities.

**MA Small Business Development Center (MSBDC) Network.** Provides free and confidential business advice and low cost entrepreneurial workshops at five regional offices and partnering locations.

**Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFI).** Institutions such as Coastal Community Capital, Common Capital, and Franklin CDC access state and federal funding for lending to small businesses including the recently implemented MA Food Trust that will provide funding to the rural agricultural base to increase food access in underserved communities.

**Opportunities for All.** The statewide economic development plan, currently being updated, will guide the work and programs of EOHD and other state agencies through the current Baker-Polito Administration term.



---

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOCUS AREA (continued)

**Gateway Cities.** There are no Gateway Cities on Cape Cod, in Franklin or Hampshire Counties, and there is only one in Berkshire County. This designation gives priority access to many state discretionary grants and exclusive access to programs such as Mass Development’s Transformative Development Initiative, which is designed to accelerate economic revitalization. The Gateway City model could be adapted to serve distressed rural regions.

**The Community Investment Tax Credit (CITC).** Provides a 50% tax credit against the Massachusetts tax liability of individuals and businesses who donate to CDCs awarded these tax credits. These donations provide flexible funding for CDCs to support business assistance, housing, and other community development initiatives. Such funding maintains staffing levels, supports operations, and provides match funds to leverage grants.

**MassDevelopment Collaborative Workspaces program.** Provides grants to establish makerspaces, co-working spaces and similar facilities that support entrepreneurship. These facilities offer skills training, low cost space and equipment for start-ups, and create communities of entrepreneurs to provide support to new ventures.

## LAND USE & WORKING LANDS FOCUS AREA

Larger projects undertaken in some areas of the state (South Coast Rail, as one example) have involved **Community Priority Area Initiatives** through which Regional Planning Agencies provided technical assistance enabling local review of land use priorities and the identification of Priority Development Areas and Priority Preservation Areas within each town. One intention was for state agencies to consider consistency with these designations when making funding decisions.

**STRAP grants** are a dedicated pool of funding for rural communities within the MassWorks. STRAP, however, is limited to financing roadway infrastructure. Making strategic investments in other infrastructure systems, such as water and sewer package plants, is essential to providing additional housing in rural town centers and villages.

**DHCD’s 40R Program** encourages communities to create dense residential or mixed-use smart growth zoning districts with financial incentives. The 40R program conditional eligibility requirements are generally flexible enough so that rural towns, that may not have extensive existing towns centers, can still demonstrate that they are applying under Existing Rural Village District category or as an Other Highly Suitable Location.

The **Healthy Incentives Program**, which enables SNAP users to receive a dollar-for-dollar match in their spending on fruits and vegetables purchased from local farms, benefits both food producers and consumers.

**EEA Smart Growth / Smart Energy Toolkit** provides guidance on a range of land use and zoning bylaw topic areas, often with case studies of a rural application. While the toolkit is very helpful, the issue of local capacity to implement suggested policies is a challenge in rural communities, making it crucial to expand the role of programs such as the MVP Action Grants and EEA Municipal Planning Grants which make implementation possible.



.....

**EEA Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program** preserves farmland by paying owners the difference between the “fair market value” and the “agricultural value” of land in exchange for a permanent deed restriction.

**Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program** allow transfers of development potential from a “sending” district to another “receiving” district in order to achieve both open space and development goals without changing a town’s overall development potential. TDR has been difficult to employ in single towns, but a regional framework may expand its potential.

### POPULATION TRENDS

**Population-Based Funding Formulas.** More than 132 federal programs use population in funding formulas totaling \$689 billion of federal aid. In Massachusetts, Chapter 90, Chapter 70, library incentive grants, STRAP, Mass Cultural Council grants, PARC grants, fire assistance grants and more use population in the funding formula leaving rural municipalities with less funding to adequately maintain infrastructure, educate children and be competitive for discretionary grants.

**S208 An Act Establishing the Western Massachusetts Remote Worker Relocation Incentive Program.** State Senator Eric Lesser has introduced legislation that would create a grant program to be used to incent workers to leave the Boston area and move to western MA to work remotely by offering a relocation allowance of up to \$10,000 over a 2-year period. Some in rural MA are supportive of this concept while others worry about a lack of community investment and involvement.



### WORKFORCE

**Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.** This federal program funds employment and training programs provided by regional MassHire Workforce Boards and MassHire Career Centers across the Commonwealth, and provides the majority of funding for Career Centers in rural MA. Funding is calculated based on the unemployment rate, which does not provide for a minimum service level. If the unemployment rate decreases, funds are reduced, resulting in the loss of skilled staff and programming. When unemployment rates rise, Career Centers are not prepared to address the increased need for services.

**Workforce Training Fund Program.** A state program that provides grants to businesses, employer organizations and similar entities to train their current or new employees.

**Workforce Skills Cabinet.** The Baker-Polito Administration’s initiative to better align education, labor and workforce development, and economic development systems across regions and the Commonwealth, which resulted in the creation of new five-year regional labor market blueprints in 2018. Through this initiative a more coordinated system is being established that seeks to efficiently and cost effectively address worker and employer needs. However, due to rural areas being combined with their urban counterparts, rural workforce needs were difficult to highlight.



---

## WORKFORCE (continued)

**Massachusetts Skills Capital Grant Program.** A competitive grant program to support vocational and technical training programs by funding the purchase and installation of equipment and related improvements or renovations to install or use the equipment. This program provides the investment needed to keep up with employment sectors of particular importance to rural areas, such as manufacturing, construction, and hospitality.

**Connecting Community College Students to Jobs.** The Community College and Career Center TRAIN (Training Resources and Internship) Program, funded by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, includes 60 hours of job readiness, occupational training, internship, and job placement for unemployed/underemployed residents in high demand manufacturing and food service/hospitality positions.

**Career Education for Youth.** The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's School-to-Career/Connecting Activities Initiative, places workforce board staff in partner public schools to help implement career development activities. Future workers are informed of the variety of careers available to them in the region.

**Coordinated Government Services.** The Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and Career Center collaborate to provide work readiness skills, job search, and job placement assistance to DTA recipients. By having organizations working collaboratively, individuals are able to leverage resources more efficiently, which is key given the limitations rural residents have to access services.

## EDUCATION

**Chapter 70 Funding.** The Chapter 70 program is the major program of state aid to public elementary and secondary schools. In addition to providing state aid to support school operations, it also establishes minimum spending requirements for each school district and minimum requirements for each municipality's share of school costs.

**Rural School Aid.** If a school district has a student density of not more than 21 students per square mile and an average annual per capita income of not more than the average annual per capita income for the commonwealth, they are eligible to receive a portion of the \$1.5M allocated for Rural School Aid. Furthermore, school districts serving fewer than 11 students per square mile are given priority for Rural School Aid. Any district receiving funds under this item has to submit a plan to Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) outlining steps the district will take to increase regional collaboration, consolidation or other efficiencies over the next 3 years.

**Reimbursement for Regional School Transportation.** The Commonwealth sets aside funding to help cover the higher transportation costs of regional school districts. The funding designated by the state each year goes into special funds called Regional Transportation Reimbursement Funds (RTR). These funds allow regional districts to carry over reimbursements that they receive in one fiscal year into the next, providing useful budgeting flexibility. The DESE sets a reimbursement rate each year based on the state's total appropriation for regional school district transportation.



---

## EDUCATION (continued)

**Safe Routes to Schools (SRTS).** This program makes funding available to increase safe biking and walking among elementary and middle school students by using a collaborative, community-focused approach that bridges the gap between health and transportation.

**Skills Capital Grants.** This program awards grants for the purchase and installation of equipment and related improvements and renovations necessary for installation and use of such equipment to support vocational and technical training. This equipment is meant to upgrade and expand career technical education and training programs that are aligned to regional economic and workforce development priorities for in-demand industries, provided that grant applications facilitate collaboration to provide students training pathway's to career opportunities in high-skill, high-demand industry sectors.

**Perkins Grant Program.** The purpose of the Carl D. Perkins grant is to assist school districts and public two-year colleges in improving secondary and postsecondary-level career and technical education programs. As set forth in Perkins, the main priority is to close the achievement gap for special populations on the Perkins core indicators of performance.

**Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA).** The Massachusetts School Building Authority ("MSBA") is a quasi-independent government authority created to reform the process of funding capital improvement projects in the Commonwealth's public schools. The MSBA strives to work with local communities to create affordable, sustainable, and energy efficient schools across Massachusetts.

**Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).** DESE is responsible for all public school services in the Commonwealth from pre-k to high school. In addition to traditional schooling, DESE provides a number of services, as well as funding for districts, for students, families, and educators including special needs accommodations, professional development, vocational and other alternative schooling, and opportunities for college preparation.

**Educational Collaboratives and Consortiums.** The state's Education Collaboratives provide school districts with the opportunity to work together. Collaborative services include special education, early education, professional development, advocacy, and collective purchasing. Educational collaboratives are especially critical to rural districts that do not have the capacity or scale to provide the services.

## HOUSING

**Community Preservation Act (CPA).** Signed into law in 2000, CPA allows communities to create a local Community Preservation Fund for open space protection, historic preservation, affordable housing and outdoor recreation through a local property tax surcharge of up to 3%. To date, 65 of the 170 rural towns in Massachusetts have adopted CPA (38%). A State match includes a distribution round that favors smaller, poorer towns that have adopted CPA at the 3% surcharge. Despite this favorable weighting, CPA can be a hard sell in small towns already burdened with high property taxes relying largely on a residential tax base. CPA cannot be used for housing rehabilitation.



---

## HOUSING (continued)

**Community Scale Housing Initiative (CSHI).** Established in 2017, this DHCD program funds small-scale affordable rental projects between 5 to 20 units in municipalities with a population of no more than 200,000. A subsidy of up to \$200,000 per unit is available, and the total development cost per unit may not exceed \$350,000. This program fills a critical gap in affordable housing funding for small projects that cannot access low income housing tax credits (LIHTC); however, the economics often still don't work in rural towns unless a community can contribute a significant local subsidy.

**Housing Choice Initiative (HCI).** This State initiative began in 2018 and includes the Housing Choice Designation and Grant program, and the Small Town Grant program, exclusively for towns with a population under 7,000. Designated municipalities have access to the Housing Choice Capital Grants, and receive priority on State funding programs such as MassWorks, Complete Streets, MassDOT capital projects, and LAND and PARC grants. Many rural towns with stagnant or declining population do not meet the minimum housing production criteria to be designated.

**Community Development Block Grants (CDBG).** This federally-funded program is the State's major resource to address a broad range of community development needs in small cities and towns. Applications can be submitted by individual communities or regionally. Massachusetts CDBG funds have fallen by 37 percent since 2000; nothing has filled this reduction in funding in rural areas.

**Federal Home Loan Bank; MHP ONE Mortgage.** Habitat for Humanity and other rural affordable housing developers utilize the Affordable Housing Program from the Federal Home Loan Bank in Boston to help close gaps on affordable housing development. The bank recently launched the Equity Builder Program, a \$3.6 million program providing grants to member financial institutions to assist households at or below 80 percent of AMI with down-payment and closing cost assistance. MHP's ONE mortgage program helps low-moderate income residents purchase homes across the State, with low down payment requirements and elimination of PMI payments.

## PUBLIC HEALTH

**The Population Urban and Rural Community Health (PURCH) Program,** a collaboration between UMass Medical School (UMMS) and Baystate Health, allows 25 medical students a year to focus on population health in western Massachusetts. The UMMS also has a **Rural Health Scholars program**, open to nursing and medical students interested in building careers in rural areas.

**Mobile Integrated Health (MIH) and Community EMS** are new programs from the Office of Emergency Medical Services that utilize mobile resources to deliver care and services to patients in an out-of-hospital environment (and receive insurance reimbursement) in coordination with healthcare facilities or other healthcare providers.



---

## PUBLIC HEALTH (continued)

**Massachusetts State Office of Rural Health (SORH)** builds partnerships and links rural communities with state and federal resources in order to increase access to health services, develop better systems of care, and help create solutions to rural health problems. Among other things, this office is responsible for administering the Massachusetts Rural Hospital Programs including the Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility Program and the Small Rural Hospital Improvement Program.

## BOARDS & STAFFING

**Community Compact Program.** The first Executive Order of the Baker administration created this program that is overseen by the Department of Revenue Division of Local Service (DOR DLS) and is funded by a line item in the state budget. Interested communities agree to implement a best practice from across a variety of subject areas, including several that are designed to increase the capacity of municipalities.

**Efficiency and Regionalization Grant Program.** The purpose of this competitive grant program, administered by DOR DLS and funded by a line item in the state budget, is to provide financial support for governmental entities interested in implementing regionalization and other efficiency initiatives that allow for long-term sustainability. These grants provide funds for one-time or transition costs for municipalities, school districts, and regional planning agencies and councils of governments.

**Municipal Government Annual Certification Programs.** A number of municipal staff roles have optional annual certifications that provide continuing education and baseline training. Not enough of these programs offer legislatively required financial incentives for those who complete them, and few are mandatory. Some examples include Suffolk University's Local Government and Leadership Management Certificate Program, Massachusetts Collector/Treasurer, Massachusetts Accountants, DLS Assessors Training, and the Local Public Health Institute. Among the few municipal roles in the state with required credentials are Veterans Service Officers, Building Commissioners and Inspectors, and Animal Control Officers.

**Optional Training and Certification for Board Members.** Relatively few certification programs exist for municipal officials, and many have annual or biannual continuing education programs in a centralized location(s) that are challenging for rural officials to reach. Training programs include the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards Certification, the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative annual series, and the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners' Trustee Institute.

**The Local Government Workforce Skills Gap Report** is the product of a working group convened by Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito. It contains a number of recommendations to address a statewide challenge in recruitment that would benefit rural communities, including workforce training, mentorship, and greater civics education.



---

## FINANCES

**State local aid.** Funding is provided directly to towns and school districts through yearly allocations such as Chapter 70 school aid, Chapter 90 road aid, and State Lottery revenue distributed through Unrestricted General Government Aid.

**Community Compact Cabinet.** Towns may petition the state for technical assistance funding to implement various best practices, including several related to municipal finance.

**Local Option Taxes.** The state allows municipalities to add a local option tax for meals, hotel/motel rooms and short-term rentals, and adult-use cannabis, which can provide additional local revenue but many rural towns have few such facilities.

**Community Preservation Act.** Through a local option property tax surcharge, augmented with state matching funds, towns can provide funding to preserve open space and historic sites, create affordable housing, and develop outdoor recreational facilities.

**Technical Assistance.** Some state agencies, such as the Department of Revenue (DOR) Division of Local Services (DLS), provide technical assistance to local officials to help build local management capacity.

## SERVICE SHARING

**Community Compact Program.** The first Executive Order of the Baker administration created this program that is overseen by the Department of Revenue Division of Local Service (DOR DLS) and is funded by a line item in the state budget. Interested communities agree to implement a best practice from across a variety of subject areas, including Regionalization. If a municipality selects regionalization as a best practice, the program makes state funds available that towns can use to explore sharing important municipal staffing roles.

**Efficiency and Regionalization Grant Program.** The purpose of this competitive grant program, administered by DOR DLS and funded by a line item in the state budget, is to provide financial support for governmental entities interested in implementing regionalization and other efficiency initiatives that allow for long-term sustainability. These grants provide funds for one-time or transition costs for municipalities, school districts, and regional planning agencies and councils of governments.

**District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) Funds.** State funds are distributed among the state's 13 Regional Planning Agencies (RPAs) to provide cities and towns with technical assistance to help move municipalities forward with projects that meet State Sustainable Development Principles, create municipal partnerships, address regional priorities, and serve as a model for other towns. RPAs dedicate funding to service sharing efforts.



---

## SERVICE SHARING (continued)

**State 911 Department Support & Incentive Grant.** The State 911 Department, as part of the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, is responsible for administering this program and grant. The purpose of these grants is to assist Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) and Regional Emergency Communication Centers (RECCs) in providing enhanced 911 service and to encourage the development of regional PSAPs, regional secondary PSAPs, and RECCs.

**Regional Planning Agencies (RPAs) and Councils of Government (COGs).** These public organizations serve the local governments and citizens within their planning districts with planning, policymaking, communication coordination, advocacy, education, analysis, and technical assistance. The RPAs research, analyze and provide leadership on a wide range of their members' responsibilities, including assessing, planning, and implementing service sharing initiatives.

### Laws that allow for service sharing.

- Intermunicipal Agreements & Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40, Section 4A, the most commonly used form of contracts in regionalization projects and are often used to create mutual aid agreements, shared service agreements and agreements between municipalities and host agencies.
- The Joint Powers Act, Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40, Section 4A 1/2 is legislation that allows two or more units of local government to jointly perform municipal services through the creation of a new regional entity.
- Municipal officials may also draft and seek approval of special legislation allowing for the creation of new regional entities. Such legislation must be introduced by a state legislator and passed by the Massachusetts Legislature.

## RESILIENCY

**The Municipal Vulnerability Program, a state program administered by EOEAA,** brings effective climate change projects down to the local level. The program allows communities to pursue all phases of a project from planning to engineering to construction. Rural communities, however, often struggle to find the required local match and lack the staff capacity to manage implementation. EOEAA has recognized the latter and is hiring regional MVP staff to assist. This capacity also exists within many state RPAs, who could support these efforts as well.

**The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) Agricultural Climate Resiliency & Efficiencies (ACRE) program** offers grants to farmers for projects that improve soil management and water use efficiency and availability.

**The Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management's StormSmart Coasts Program and Shoreline Change Project** offers the Massachusetts Sea Level Rise and Coastal Flooding Viewer, allowing towns to see localized inundation predictions. A similar tool in the public health realm is provided by **DPH's Climate and Health Program and Climate Change Vulnerability Mapping Tool.**



# APPENDIX B: STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPANTS BY FOCUS AREA

Many people, agencies and organizations were consulted in the drafting of this Plan. Recommendations contained in this document are not necessarily supported or endorsed by all parties listed below.

## BROADBAND & CELL SERVICE

- EOHED
- DTC
- MTC
- MBI staff and Board
- JAI
- Open Cape
- Municipal Broadband Committees
- Realtors
- Legislators

## TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

- MassDOT
- Massachusetts Regional Planning Agencies (RPAs)
- Town of Granby, MA
- Transportation for Massachusetts (T4MA)
- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
- Federal Transit Administration (FTA)
- MA Division of Ecological Restoration
- The Nature Conservancy
- Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA)
- Town of Williamstown, MA
- University of Massachusetts
- Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group (MassPIRG)
- Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA)
- Union of Concerned Scientists
- Acadia Center
- Town of Whately Highway Department
- Town of Princeton Road Advisory Committee

## TRANSPORTATION MOBILITY

- Transportation for Massachusetts (T4MA)
- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
- Federal Transit Administration (FTA)
- Massachusetts Association of Regional Planning Agencies (MARPA)

- Massachusetts Association of Regional Transit Authorities (MARTA)
- The Nature Conservancy
- Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA)
- Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation (QVCDC)
- MassDOT Rail and Transit Division
- Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group (MassPIRG)
- Union of Concerned Scientists

## WATER & SEWER

- RCAP
- STAM
- MMA
- MA DOR DLS
- MA DEP
- MA EOHED
- MASSDEVELOPMENT
- EPA
- RURAL COMMONWEALTH
- USDA-RURAL DEVELOPMENT
- SELECT BOARD ASSOCIATIONS
- MA RURAL WATER ASSOCIATION
- RPAS
- COLLINS CENTER AT UMASS BOSTON
- EAST NORTHFIELD WATER COMPANY

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- SBDC
- EOHED
- MassDevelopment
- 1 Berkshire
- MGCC
- USDA
- Cape Cod Commission
- MACDC
- RPA's of FRCOG, CMRPC, BRPC

---

## LAND USE & WORKING LANDS

- EEA
- DHCD
- USDA
- New England Forestry Foundation
- Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance
- MA Food System Collaborative
- Central Mass Grown
- MassConn Sustainable Forest Partnership
- Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture
- American Farmland Trust
- Rural Planning Associates
- Harvard Forest
- MassAudubon
- EEA
- DHCD
- USDA
- New England Forestry Foundation
- Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance
- MA Food System Collaborative
- Central Mass Grown
- MassConn Sustainable Forest Partnership
- Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture
- American Farmland Trust
- Rural Planning Associates
- Harvard Forest
- MassAudubon
- Town officials or farmers/foresters from Brookfield, Petersham, Carver
- Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission
- Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District
- Pioneer Valley Planning Commission
- Franklin Regional Council of Governments

## POPULATION TRENDS

- Rural YPS'
- All stakeholder sessions

## WORKFORCE

- MassHire Career Centers and Workforce Boards of Berkshire County, Franklin-Hampshire, North Central
- BRPC
- CCC
- Community Action Pioneer Valley

## EDUCATION

- Massachusetts Municipal Association
- Small Town Administrators of Massachusetts
- FRCOG, CMRPC
- Massachusetts Rural Schools Coalition
- Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- Massachusetts School Building Authority
- Collaborative for Educational Services
- Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives

## HOUSING

- Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development (EOHED)
- Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP)
- Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations (MACDC)
- Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD)
- Cape Cod Community Development Partnership
- Hilltown CDC
- Berkshire Housing Development Corporation / Berkshire Housing Services, Inc.
- Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority / Rural Development, Inc.
- Pioneer Valley Habitat for Humanity
- Town of Brewster
- Regional Planning Agencies including Berkshire Regional Planning Agency (BRPC), Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG), Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC), Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD), Old Colony Planning Council (OCPC), Cape Cod Commission (CCC), Martha's Vineyard Commission (MVC)

## PUBLIC HEALTH

- Cape and Island Area Health Education Center
- Community Health Center of Franklin County
- DPH Office of Local and Regional Health
- DPH Office of Rural Health
- DPH Healthcare Workforce Center
- Hilltown Community Health Center
- MA Hospital Association
- MA League of Community Health Centers
- MA Municipal Association
- MA Public Health Association
- MA Rural Coalition for Health (MARCH)

- New England Rural Health Association
- Outer Cape Health Services
- Public Health Institute of Western MA
- Special Commission on Local and Regional Health
- UMass Medical School Rural Health Scholars and Population-Based Urban and Rural Community Health (PURCH) Program

**BOARDS & STAFFING**

- EMS Chief for the State of Vermont, Dan Batsie
- Massachusetts Municipal Association
- Small Town Administrators of Massachusetts
- MA Dept of Revenue Division of Local Services
- Regional Planning Agencies: MRPC, FRCOG, CMRPC
- MA Treasurer Collector Association
- MA Municipal Accounting Association
- MA Assn of Assessing Officers
- Assn of Town Finance Committees
- Suffolk University
- Community College Workforce Programs
- MA Firefighters Association
- Fire Chiefs Associations
- MA DPH State Office of Rural Health
- MA DPH Office of Local and Rural Health
- Local Public Health Institute
- Special Commission on Local and Regional Health

**FINANCES**

- Massachusetts Municipal Association
- Small Town Administrators of Massachusetts
- MA Dept of Revenue Division of Local Services
- Mark Abrams, private consultant on municipal financial management
- Select Board Associations - Worcester, Franklin, MSA
- Collins Center, UMASS Boston
- Collectors & Treasurers Associations – Worcester, MCTA
- MA Association of Assessing Officers
- Association of Town Finance Committees
- MA Municipal Auditors and Accountants Association
- Fire Chiefs Association of MA
- Rural Commonwealth
- USDA Rural Development

**SERVICE SHARING**

- Massachusetts Municipal Association
- Small Town Administrators of Massachusetts
- MA Dept of Revenue Division of Local Services
- MRPC, FRCOG, CMRPC
- MA Treasurer Collector Association
- MA Municipal Accounting Association
- MA Assn of Assessing Officers
- Assn of Town Finance Committees
- Massachusetts Selectmen’s Association
- Worcester County Selectmen’s Association
- Collins Center at UMass Boston
- MA Firefighters Association
- Fire Chiefs Associations
- Worcester County Treasurer Collector Association
- Massachusetts Treasurer Collector Association
- Massachusetts Municipal Accounting Association
- Massachusetts DPH Office of Local and Rural Health
- Local Public Health Institute
- MA DPH State Office of Rural Health
- Special Commission on Local and Regional Health

**CLIMATE CHANGE & RESILIENCY**

- MassAudubon
- The Nature Conservancy
- MA Food System Collaborative
- Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association
- Blackstone River Watershed Association
- Manomet, Inc
- Mass Climate Action Network
- Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership
- DCR
- CZM
- USGS
- Town officials representing Carver, Dighton, Westport, Freetown
- Regional Planning Agencies including SRPEDD, CMRPC, Cape Cod Commission, FRCOG



THANK  
YOU