

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

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The Northfield Community Development Plan has been developed under Executive Order 418. Issued in 2000, Executive Order 418 offers municipalities funding to create Community Development (CD) Plans, such as this one, which address four principal areas: open space and natural resources, housing, economic development, and transportation. The CD Plans use the information collected and maps created to establish options and strategies for addressing future development. The CD Plans can supplement existing Master Plans and Open Space Plans, or can be the first step towards creating either. For example, the maps created for the Open Space and Resource Protection chapter meet the State's mapping guidelines for Open Space and Recreation Plans and can also be used for that purpose.

One of the primary motivations for the Town of Northfield to develop a Community Development Plan was the Town's long-term interest in determining whether Northfield has any suitable locations for future commercial or light industrial development. The CD Plan includes an extensive mapping component to help answer that question. The CD Plan contains maps of the Town's natural and open space resources, the areas that are constrained from future development, and the potentially suitable locations for commercial and light industrial growth. Potentially suitable areas for focusing residential growth are also identified.

The purpose of this Executive Summary is to present highlights from each of the four sections of the Northfield Community Development Plan. The recommendations in each section were developed by the Community Development Committee, town officials, and residents who participated in the planning process during the past year.

The recommendations and maps presented in the Community Development Plan reflect the following overall vision for Northfield's future, which is to:

- Preserve the Town's rural character, special qualities, and natural resources;
- Address current development pressures through land use planning and zoning; and
- Support a more diverse mix of businesses and housing for residents which will stabilize the tax base.

## Open Space and Resource Protection

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The Open Space and Resource Protection chapter first focuses on identifying and mapping Northfield's significant natural, open space, historic, and scenic assets. The first part of the chapter contains maps of the Town's water resources, open space resources, prime farmland

soils and steep slopes, and its scenic, historic, and recreational resources, and important habitat areas. Each map is accompanied by a brief description of the resources that it identifies. These maps contain some data that are based on aerial photographs and regional data layers and therefore, they are not accurate at the parcel level.

The following key findings are based on these initial maps.

### **Key Findings**

- 3,440 acres of land (16% of the Town's land area) are permanently protected from development.
- 3,120 additional acres are temporarily protected from development through the Chapter 61, 61A, and 61B programs. This acreage includes properties with prime farmland and prime forestland soils. Northfield has the right of first refusal to purchase Chapter 61, 61A, and 61B properties when they are sold for conversion to development, and can use this tool to permanently protect land which it has identified as important to preserve as open space.
- Some key open space and recreation areas in Northfield are not yet permanently protected from development. These areas include Kiwanis Park and the Northfield Mountain Recreation Area.
- Northfield has eight public water supply sources. Two supply water for the community water systems. The others supply water to Northfield Mount Hermon School, Linden Hill School, and the Northfield Mountain Recreation Area.
- Northfield provides habitat for a number of wildlife species that are endangered or considered to be of special concern by the Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. The Town's primary sensitive habitat areas are located along the Connecticut River, major brooks, and in and near Northfield State Forest.
- Northfield's Main Street Historic District, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, is a significant community historic and scenic asset. Approximately two miles in length, it contains 148 documented historic structures, including 134 buildings, and part of the Northfield Mount Hermon School campus.

### **Development Suitability Maps**

The second section of the Open Space and Resource chapter builds upon the maps created in the first section, and considers what parts of Northfield may be unsuitable for future development due to sensitive environmental characteristics and the important natural, historic, or scenic assets which have been identified. It also considers which areas are potentially developable. The final product of the chapter is the Land Use Suitability Map which shows the potentially developable areas and potential development constraints.

## **Recommendations**

- Develop a current Open Space and Recreation Plan to help prioritize additional open space, farmland, and forestland parcels for preservation. As mentioned earlier, the maps created for the Open Space and Resource Protection chapter can be used for a Open Space and Recreation Plan.
- Review the Town's Water Supply Protection Overlay District's boundaries and regulations, and consider strengthening them to better protect Northfield's water supplies.
- Consider establishing new overlay zoning districts to help protect important natural, scenic, historic, and open space resources.

## **Economic Development**

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### **Main Goals**

- To diversify the types of businesses in Northfield, and promote a stable tax base.
- To provide jobs and services for Northfield residents.
- To encourage economic development that is balanced with the preservation of natural, historic, and scenic resources and the community's character.

The Economic Development chapter reviews Northfield's current economic base and labor pool characteristics, and current zoning for commercial and industrial development.

Below are the key findings from this review.

### **Key Findings**

- In 2001, Northfield had 1,668 residents participating in the labor force. In 2001, the unemployment rate for Northfield was 2.4%, lower than the rates for Franklin County (3.2%) and the State (3.7%) overall.
- Northfield has a high labor force participation rate, with 75% of residents aged 16 and over in the labor force. Massachusetts overall has a labor force participation rate of 66%.
- Northfield residents are highly educated. Overall, 31% of Northfield adults have a degree from a 4-year college and 15% have graduate degrees. In addition, 93% have a high school diploma or higher. Statewide, 85% of adults have a high school diploma.
- Northfield has higher incomes and less poverty than Franklin County overall. Only 5.2% of the Northfield residents live below the poverty level, compared to a poverty rate in Franklin County overall of 9.4%.

- Close to three-quarters (72%) of working residents in Northfield commute to jobs outside of Northfield. This includes 46% who work elsewhere in Franklin County, 14% who work outside of Franklin County elsewhere in the State, and 12% who work outside of Massachusetts, predominantly in Vermont and New Hampshire.
- In 2000, 36% of working Northfield residents were employed in the Education, Health, and Social Services Sector. The next largest sectors were manufacturing (12%) and retail services (10%).
- In 2001, there were approximately 1,100 jobs located in Northfield. A few major employers account for most of them. The larger employer in Northfield is Northfield Mount Hermon School which has 530-600 employees between its two campuses. The second largest employer is the Pioneer Valley School District, with 150 employees. Only four other employers in town have 20 or more workers. They are the Town of Northfield, Linden Hill School, Northeast Utilities, and Sisson Engineering.
- During the 1993 update of the Northfield Master Plan, Town residents expressed support for more businesses, which were seen as the best way to generate additional tax revenues.
- Currently, there is no area in Northfield specifically identified for large commercial or light industrial uses, rather these uses may be allowed by Special Permit in either of the zoning districts.

### **Development Suitability Maps**

The second section of the Economic Development chapter assesses current infrastructure in Northfield, including water, sewer, transportation, and telecommunications, and analyzes which areas may be the most suitable for future large commercial or light industrial development. This analysis starts with the potentially developable areas identified on the Land Use Suitability Map, and then screens these potentially developable areas to meet additional criteria. These criteria include: being located near a major roadway or a rail line, having a slope of 8% percent or less, not being near residential areas, recreation areas, or the Main Street Historic District, not being on prime farmland, and not being within the floodplain or aquifer.

Using these criteria, two potentially suitable areas for future large commercial or light industrial development have been identified, each of which are at least 50 acres in size. These locations are shown on the Large Commercial and Light Industry Development Suitability Map. The first, located off of Millers Falls Road (Route 63), could potentially be suitable for a future office park. The second, located at the Lane Construction gravel mine on Mount Hermon Station Road (Route 142), could potentially be suitable for a future industrial park. Both locations need further investigation and feasibility studies to evaluate the sites' suitability for these potential uses and to consider options and costs for providing them with water and sewage treatment. Neither currently has access to municipal water or sewer.

The Economic Development chapter also considers which areas in Northfield may be most suitable for new small businesses. It was decided that these areas should have the following characteristics: they should be located near major roadways, and be close to existing civic and public uses. One suggestion of the Community Development Committee is to consider infill development, including small commercial uses, in Northfield Center. Another is to consider other potential village centers, which could allow a combination of housing and retail and other small business uses. Potential village centers are shown on the Residential and Small Commercial Development Suitability Map.

### **Selected Recommendations**

- Pursue grant funding and resources to assist with feasibility studies for the potentially suitable sites identified for an office park and an industrial park.
- Consider establishing a zoning district for large commercial/light industrial businesses in these areas if the studies indicate they are feasible for these uses.
- Consider establishing one or more village centers in Northfield, and zoning them as Village Center districts. Investigate the feasibility and support for rezoning each of the identified potential village areas. The village centers could allow housing and some small commercial uses such as a general store or small offices.
- Review which commercial uses are currently allowed by special permit in the Town's zoning districts, and consider updating the zoning bylaws to limit uses in these districts to ones that are compatible with rural residential areas.
- Create voluntary design guidelines for commercial development to encourage new growth or redevelopment which is compatible with the Town's character. The voluntary guidelines could address building materials, signage, lighting, parking, and landscaping, and could include incentives to encourage businesses to follow them.
- Develop performance standards for commercial uses which address noise, lighting, traffic, and other factors, and utilize these standards as criteria for determining which uses should be allowed in different areas.

## **Housing**

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### **Main Goals**

- To encourage a mix of housing types, densities, prices, and ownership patterns that serve diverse Northfield households while maintaining the community's character.
- To balance residential development with the protection of scenic, historic, and natural resources.

The Housing chapter presents an overview of housing characteristics and affordability in Northfield. The key findings are below.

### **Key Findings**

- As of 2000, Northfield has almost 1,400 housing units, compared to a population of 2,951. The number of housing units has increased 33% since 1980. There is currently an average of 2.3 people per occupied housing unit.
- As of 2000, 82% of Northfield's housing is single-family homes. Of all the Town's housing units, 72% are occupied by owners, 21% are occupied by renters, and 8% are vacant or used seasonally.
- Housing in Northfield is currently affordable for most residents. Housing is generally considered affordable when households spend no more than 30% of their income on housing costs. On average, Northfield households spent less than 30% of their incomes on housing. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, renter households spend 23% of their incomes on housing costs, on average, homeowners with mortgages spend 21%, and homeowners without mortgages spend 12%.
- Although housing is affordable for most residents, it is not affordable for some, particularly low-income families. For households with incomes under \$20,000, 60% of homeowners and 79% of renters spend at least 30% of their incomes on housing costs.
- The Town of Northfield is committed to addressing community and regional issues. The Town works with regional agencies, such as the Franklin Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA), to address housing needs. The Town has a Housing Rehabilitation program, run through HRA, which provides 0% interest loans for home repairs. The Town is also working with HRA's partner, Rural Development Inc. (RDI) to identify potential lots for new affordable single-family homes.
- According to population forecasts, Northfield's population is expected to grow by at least 141 people between 2000 and 2010. Assuming an average household size of 2.3 people per household, the new 141 residents will occupy 61 homes. One of the largest population increases is expected for the elderly age group, comprised of people aged 65 and over. The elderly population is projected to increase to 450 people by 2010. Assuming that on average, an elderly household consists of 2 people, elderly residents will make up 225 households, each of which will need appropriate housing. There are currently only 20 units of senior housing in Northfield, at Squakeag Village.
- Single-family and two-family dwellings are allowed by right in both the Town's current zoning districts. Other residential uses, including multi-family homes are allowed by special permit.

### **Development Suitability Maps**

The second portion of the Housing chapter evaluates which areas may be the most suitable for future residential development. The evaluation considers which areas in town have water and sewer access, and where current civic uses and services are focused. Because of the current water and sewer access, and services such as grocery stores, restaurants, offices, Town Hall, and the library in Northfield Center, the Community Development Committee believes that the current village area could be an appropriate location for infill development and new residential growth. Currently, Northfield Center still has considerable room for new development. A review of Northfield Assessors' records indicated that of the approximately 1,800 acres in and near Northfield Center, 305 currently undeveloped acres are considered developable, and another 58 acres are viewed as potentially developable. This acreage is sufficient to accommodate most of the future anticipated residential growth through 2010, and over the next few decades. FRCOG forecasts that, based on historic growth trends, Northfield's population will grow to 3,260 by 2025. This growth could also be accommodated in the current village area.

As with future small business growth, residential growth could also be focused in new potential village centers. These village centers could allow for mixed residential and business development. They could also allow accessory apartments, senior housing, or other higher-density housing such as condominium complexes with townhouses. All of these housing types could help meet identified housing needs, including the demand for more housing for Northfield's senior population. Accessory apartments would also have the advantage of enabling the current housing stock to provide more housing units, and therefore decreasing demand for new residential development. Accessory apartments also provide lower cost housing for seniors and young workers, and offer an income stream for fixed-income households.

### **Selected Recommendations**

- Develop strategies to reduce housing costs for seniors on fixed incomes, and pursue funding for additional senior housing. Continue to work with the Franklin Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) to address housing needs, to preserve current affordable housing stock, and to help residents access HRA programs.
- Consider encouraging infill development in Northfield Center.
- Consider establishing one or more village centers in Northfield, and zoning them as Village Center districts. Investigate the feasibility and support for rezoning each of the identified potential village areas. The village centers could allow higher density housing, such as condominiums and accessory apartments, and some small, complementary commercial uses such as a general store or small offices.
- Consider zoning changes which would allow accessory apartments and other types of housing such as a condominium complex with townhouses.
- Consider creating a Phased Growth Bylaw, to promote phased residential construction to ensure the provision of municipal services which can be financially

supported by the Town without large property tax increases. The Phased Growth Bylaw could include exemptions for affordable housing or other housing with addresses community needs.

- Promote the use of the Open Space Residential Development Bylaw, which allows developments to have smaller lot sizes in exchange for land being set aside as open space.

## **Transportation**

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The Transportation chapter focuses on researching the status of the Town and County roads in Northfield, and developing a list of the Northfield's current public roads, of discontinued former public roads, and roads with an unclear status which will need additional research.

### **Key Findings**

- The 1986 Town Meeting Article to have a blanket discontinuance of all Town roads not enumerated in the Article appears to be legally binding. Blanket discontinuances of town roads were upheld by the Massachusetts Appeals Court in *Rivers v. Warwick* (1994). Northfield Town Counsel has also written an opinion concurring with the Court's finding and citing additional case law in its support.
- Northfield has almost 50 roads which are under Town jurisdiction and maintained by the Town. The Town also has a number of private roads, including those created for recent subdivisions and roads up on the ridge near Stowbridge Hill. The Town can decide to provide some of these roads with town maintenance and plowing in the interest of public access, without bringing them under town jurisdiction or enabling them to be used for Approval Not Required (ANR) residential development.
- The Executive Committee of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments has had principal jurisdiction over the creation, alteration, and discontinuance of County roads since the dissolution of the Franklin County Commission.
- There are continuing road status questions about a few old County roads in Northfield, including Great Swamp Road, Old Warwick Road, and Alexander Hill Road. These roads will need further research to determine their current status.

### **Recommendations**

- Update the Northfield Assessors' maps to reflect the results of this research.
- Continue to research County and Town roads that have uncertainties about their current status and/or their layouts.