

Town of Palmer

HOUSING PRODUCTION PLAN

PREPARED by THE TOWN of PALMER
with assistance from
PIONEER VALLEY PLANNING COMMISSION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Housing Production Plan was prepared during 2022-23 following an extensive community engagement process for the Town of Palmer Master Plan. The Master Plan includes a Housing Chapter and recommendations which were incorporated into this plan.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Purpose

A Housing Production Plan (HPP) is a valuable community document that provides municipalities in Massachusetts with the opportunity to present a proposed approach to addressing its need for affordable housing. While communities may address housing through other plan documents such as a Comprehensive Plan or Open Space and Recreation Plan, the HPP serves the clear purpose of addressing clear strategies and initiatives that will enable the community to work to meet its current and future housing needs in a way that aligns with the community's values and is consistent with Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40B and other related state and federal regulations. The Housing Production Plan is intended to address a five-year timeline and is effective for that period after it is approved.

1.2 What is Affordable Housing and Why is it Important?

For the purpose of this Plan, affordable housing is identified as housing that is available to seniors or families that earn below 80% of the local Area Median Income (AMI) and that is protected as affordable through long-term affordability restrictions.

In most contexts, housing is considered "affordable" if the individual or family (hereinafter known as "households") that occupies, or wishes to occupy, the home pays no more than 30% of their income on "housing," which includes mortgage, or rent, and any property taxes. Households that pay more than 30% of their income on housing are considered "cost-burdened" and may have difficulty affording necessities such as food, clothing, transportation, and medical care, as well as saving for their future. A moderately cost-burdened household pays 30% to 50% of its income for housing. Households that pay more than 50% of their income are considered to be severely cost-burdened.

This is also the generally accepted definition of housing affordability used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC) in the calculation of the Area Median Income (AMI) and promotion of income-restricted housing. The AMI is the median family income for a given area, in this case the Springfield HUD Metro Fair Market Rent Area, which includes Palmer. HUD calculates the AMI annually, based on the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey's (ACS) estimated median family income for the area. The Springfield area AMI was \$91,200 in 2022, which is based on a 4-person family.

Affordable housing is needed by a large diversity of people ranging from young families to seniors, the local work force to retirees. There is no singular type of affordable housing. Affordable housing can take on many types, sizes, and forms. It can be rented or owned.

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Below are the guidelines for who may qualify for affordable housing in the Greater Springfield area:

FY 2023 Income Limits Summary

FY 2023 Income Limit Area	Median Family Income Click for More Detail	FY 2023 Income Limit Category	Persons in Family							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Springfield, MA HUD Metro FMR Area	\$93,700	Very Low (50%) Income Limits (\$) Click for More Detail	34,900	39,850	44,850	49,800	53,800	57,800	61,800	65,750
		Extremely Low Income Limits (\$)* Click for More Detail	20,950	23,950	26,950	30,000	35,140	40,280	45,420	50,560
		Low (80%) Income Limits (\$) Click for More Detail	55,800	63,800	71,750	79,700	86,100	92,500	98,850	105,250

Source: HUD, 2023 Income Limits

Affordable housing provides many benefits to a community. Growing the number of affordable housing units would allow those with roots in the community to continue living here, regardless of their economic status. Affordable and diverse housing choices would allow young adults to move back to the community in which they grew up. Seniors would be able to remain in the community after they retire and have opportunities to downsize, should they choose. Households that experience a loss of income due to economic circumstances, disability, divorce, or loss of a spouse will not be displaced from the community due to the inability to pay for housing. Workers in essential jobs such as teachers, grocery store workers, home health aides, childcare workers, restaurant workers, and first responders would have an opportunity to live where they work or attract new residents who could contribute to the local economy. Affordable housing can also support businesses by providing housing choices for entry level and lower wage workers at major employers.

1.3 Housing Production Plans and MGL Chapter 40B

In Massachusetts, state laws and regulations apply to local housing production plans.

Under Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40B, municipalities are encouraged to ensure that at least 10% of their total housing stock qualifies as affordable to individuals and families who earn up to 80% of their region's Area Median Income (AMI). Chapter 40B provides communities that have not yet reached this 10% goal with an incentive to do so: in these municipalities, a developer who proposes a housing project containing a portion of affordable units is allowed to override most local zoning and wetlands regulations by applying for what is known as a "comprehensive

permit,” which the board is obligated by state law to issue under most circumstances. Municipalities that attain 10% affordable housing stock are exempt from 40B projects.

Any decisions by the local Zoning Board of Appeals to deny a comprehensive permit will be deemed consistent with local needs under Chapter 40B by the Massachusetts Housing Appeals Court, and the local zoning board of appeal’s denial of a comprehensive permit application will be upheld, provided that the board complies with the requirements of 760 CMR 56.03(8). A developer may still appeal the denial of a comprehensive permit in such cases, first to EOHLC and then to an interlocutory appeal with the Massachusetts Housing Appeals Committee, on an expedited basis. Additional information about the HPP program, including information on compliance, is provided on the EOHLC website: www.mass.gov/hed/community/40b-plan/housing-production-plan.html.

A Housing Production Plan (HPP) is a proactive approach to help communities make progress toward reaching the 10% goal, after which they are no longer required to issue comprehensive permits and they can retain their local control over housing development. The Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC) encourages local governments to prepare and submit a Housing Production Plan (HPP) for their approval by two incentives for doing so: First, communities with approved and certified HPPs are given preference over non-HPP communities for certain state grant funds. Second, a municipality can avoid the Chapter 40B comprehensive permit process for as long as the municipality has an approved and certified HPP in place and is making progress toward the 10% goal at a rate of at least 0.5% per year.

Under EOHLC, the HPP program requires communities to:

- Complete a comprehensive housing needs assessment that takes into consideration both local and regional housing needs and identifies opportunities and constraints to meeting those needs.
- Develop strategies to enable the community to meet its affordable housing needs, including an explanation of how constraints will be mitigated. Specifically, the HPP must show how the community will meet its annual affordable housing production goal of 0.5%.
- Receive approval of the HPP by the local planning board, Town Council, and EOHLC.

This HPP was prepared according to the requirements of the HPP program. Upon approval of this HPP by the Palmer Town Council, Planning Board, and EOHLC, the Town of Palmer will be eligible to become temporarily “appeal-proof” from the Chapter 40B comprehensive permit for one calendar year, so long as **29 (0.5% of 5,828) or more affordable housing units were created** during the year prior to approval.

1.4 Fair Housing and Housing Discrimination

This HPP, as well as Chapter 40B itself, are rooted in society's broader efforts to assure fair housing and combat housing discrimination for all. This section summarizes key federal and state statutes and regulations applicable to these topics.

Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, commonly referred to as the Fair Housing Act, was enacted with the primary purpose of prohibiting discrimination in transactions involving the rental, sale or financing of a home based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status and mental or physical handicap. Massachusetts law includes additional protected classes: marital status, sexual orientation, age, gender identity and expression, military or veteran status, ancestry, genetic information, and receipt of public assistance or rental subsidies (complete list follows at the end of this section).

Under Federal law, state and local governments that receive federal housing funds are not only required to refrain from discriminatory practices, but they must also take steps to advance the goals of fair housing and use their policies and programs to help promote open and inclusive patterns of housing (also referred to as "affirmatively furthering fair housing.") HUD defines "affirmatively furthering fair housing" to include the following:

- Analyze and eliminate housing discrimination in the jurisdiction.
- Promote fair housing choice for all persons.
- Provide opportunities for inclusive patterns of housing occupancy regardless of race, color, religion, sex, familial status, disability, and national origin.
- Promote housing that is structurally accessible to, and usable by all persons, particularly persons with disabilities.
- Foster compliance with the nondiscrimination provision of the Fair Housing Act.

The key federal fair housing statutes informing housing affordability are:

- Fair Housing Act (Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, as amended)
- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended
- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended

The key state fair housing statutes in Massachusetts are:

- Massachusetts Fair Housing Law (M.G.L. Chapter 151B)
- Massachusetts Public Accommodation Law (M.G.L. Chapter 272, section 98)
- Massachusetts Lead Paint Law (Chapter 111, section 199A)

Under both groups of laws and regulations, the "protected classes" of people are

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- Race
- Color
- National Origin
- Religion
- Sex
- Disability/Handicap
- Familial Status; Children
- Marital Status
- Age
- Sexual Orientation
- Gender Identity
- Military Status (veteran or member of the armed forces)
- Public Assistance/Housing Subsidy Recipient
- Genetic Information
- Ancestry

Massachusetts Executive Order 526 (2011), an “Order Regarding Non-Discrimination, Diversity, Equal Opportunity, and Affirmative Action,” provides that “Equal opportunity and diversity shall be protected and affirmatively promoted in all state, state-assisted, and state-regulated programs, activities, and services.” All state funded programs, including Community Preservation Act funds, fall under this Executive Order.

Under Federal and State law, municipalities must also ensure that municipal policies and programs do not have a disparate impact (negative impact) on members of a protected class compared to the general population. Disparate impact is an important legal theory in which liability based upon a finding of discrimination may be incurred even when the discrimination was not purposeful or intentional. The municipality should consider if the policy or practice at hand is necessary to achieve substantial, legitimate, non-discriminatory interests and if there is a less discriminatory alternative that would meet the same interest.

Examples of municipal policies and programs that would have a disparate impact include:

- Municipal plans or zoning ordinances that prioritize 1-bedroom units or strictly limit number of bedrooms by unit rather than by development or lot
- Single-family or large lot size requirements
- Requirements for unlimited local residency preferences in communities with limited racial/ethnic diversity.

- Plans to fund affordable housing for elders only
- Planning or zoning approval processes that mandate or prioritize townhouses

1.5 Housing Discrimination in Massachusetts and the Pioneer Valley

Sources of housing discrimination can be landlords or realtors, or other entities associated with housing related transactions, programs, or policies, such as municipalities, lenders, and insurance companies.

Unfortunately, local research, studies, audits, and input from the Massachusetts Fair Housing Center (MFHC), Way Finders, and the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) shows that illegal discrimination continues to persist throughout the Pioneer Valley and limits housing choice. Housing discrimination data specific to Palmer was not available to be included as part of this HPP.

However, interviews conducted with staff at the MFHC, Way Finders and MCAD during development of the Pioneer Valley Regional Housing Plan 2014 found that housing discrimination occurs in every community in the region. Following are the most prevalent examples of discrimination that affect housing siting, access to housing, or access to housing services in the region:

- Predatory lending, redlining, and active steering of home buyers of color towards certain areas of a community based on race/ethnicity, economic characteristics, and familial status.
- Rental discrimination against families with children and particularly against families with young children due to the presence or potential presence of lead-based hazards.
- Municipal zoning that restricts housing choice and mobility in the region by not allowing or restricting uses that favor more affordably priced homes and rents, particular prohibitions on multi-family housing. (While such regulations are not in violation of housing laws and can be well-intentioned, they potentially also have the effect of disproportionately reducing housing choice for people with specific demographics, such race, color, religion, sex, familial status, disability, and national origin.)
- Linguistic profiling in both the rental and homeownership markets, especially against persons of Latino origin.
- Landlords who refuse to make reasonable accommodations, changes in rules or policies to allow an equal opportunity to use and enjoy housing, or reasonable modifications, structural changes to allow an equal opportunity to use and enjoy housing, for individuals with disabilities.
- Landlords who refuse to accept housing subsidies, such as a Section 8 housing choice rental voucher, as a source of rental payment.

1.6 Impediments to Fair Housing

The Massachusetts Fair Housing Center notes that while the Pioneer Valley region is quite diverse racially and ethnically overall, this diversity is fairly concentrated to the urban centers of the region, in particular Holyoke and Springfield. For all racial categories, Palmer is less racially diverse than the rest of Massachusetts. For almost all categories, Palmer is less racially diverse than Hampden County as a whole. Specific related concerns related to this lack of diversity may affect fair housing in the following respects:

- Members of certain protected classes may experience a housing cost burden: Though more affordable than many rental housing markets in other cities and towns in Western Massachusetts, there are still affordability problems for many low-income individuals and families. With 52.9% of low-income households in Palmer spending 30% or more of their household income on housing in 2005-2019, the need for affordable housing continues to be a pressing issue.
- A lack of subsidized housing for families acts as a barrier to housing choice: Of the limited subsidized housing stock available through the Palmer Housing Authority (48 units), no units are designed for families.
- Members of some protected classes may be unable to find affordable rental units with four or more bedrooms: Larger-sized families with low incomes may have a challenging time locating and securing homes with four or more bedrooms that are vacant and/or affordable for their income levels. Palmer has a limited supply of rental homes and apartments with four or more bedrooms.
- A lack of studio rental units may act as a barrier to housing choice for certain protected classes, particularly disabled individuals. Adults living alone comprised nearly 30% of the town's population in 2021; however, the percentage of efficiency (no bedroom) rental units in Palmer is only 1.7% in 2021.
- Issues related to older housing stock may pose problems related to lead paint and other health, safety, and accessibility issues. A significant portion of Palmer's rental housing stock (24%) was built before 1939. The presence of lead paint in older homes and apartments may create obstacles for families in accessing housing. Landlords, who suspect there may be lead paint in a unit, may illegally refuse to rent to families with young children or discourage such families from renting older units. Additionally, maintenance or accessibility problems with older units may make housing unsafe or inaccessible to prospective renters or buyers.
- Home ownership may be beyond the financial means for low-income individuals and families: The median value of a home in Palmer in 2021 was \$208,500. A significant proportion of the current homes available for purchase in Palmer exceed the maximum sales prices for low-income families or would make them face a significant housing cost burden.

1.7 Palmer's Housing Vision

Palmer is a preeminent destination to live, work and play in Western Massachusetts. Our collective, small-town identity is defined by the unique qualities of our four villages—Depot Village, Thorndike, Three Rivers and Bondsville. This identity is continually built upon by residents and organizations with incredible spirit and who are deeply invested in and celebrate the Town and its history. By expanding housing accessibility and affordability, Palmer's top performing school system, high quality local health care facilities and convenient road and rail transportation access will be attainable to a wide-ranging diversity of residents across all ages, incomes, family types, races and disabilities that will strengthen our community for years to come.

This Housing Production Plan continues to build on themes from Palmer's 2021 Master Plan: diversifying the housing stock and ensuring that it is affordable to all income ranges while also protecting the town's natural, scenic, and historic resources.

Master Plan

Palmer completed a Master Plan Update in 2021 following a robust community engagement process. The Housing chapter of the Plan identified the following housing-related goals:

- Goal 1. Increase the Town's housing affordability.
 - Complete and regularly update a Housing Production Plan
 - Reactivate the Palmer Housing Authority
 - Create a "friendly 40B" policy
 - Adopt the Community Preservation Act
 - Explore a housing trust fund
 - Improve community outreach and program partnerships
- Goal 2. Create greater housing choice within Palmer with a focus in and around the Town's Village Centers.
 - Minimize or eliminate barriers to non-single-family residential housing typologies particularly in the Village Centers
 - Identify opportunity sites for non-single-family residential housing projects
 - Incentivize creative adaptive re-use projects
 - Incentivize a range of smaller unit typologies
 - Work with private developers on the potential development of senior care facilities
- Goal 3. Preserve and improve the existing housing stock.

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- Continue the Blight and Abandoned Property Reduction Initiative
- Encourage formation of neighborhood associations
- Evaluate existing housing improvement programs
- Evaluate Palmer's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds

This Housing Production Plan serves as a companion document to the 2021 Master Plan and provides specific, actionable steps to achieve higher numbers of affordable housing units. The Master Plan includes more detail related to long-term planning, maintenance and development of housing in general, including owner- and renter-occupied market rate housing in various forms (single-unit, duplex, townhouses, multifamily, 55+, assisted living, and so on).

1.8 Plan Process

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) worked with the Town of Palmer to develop this Housing Production Plan in accordance with the requirements of 760 CMR 56.03(4) (Housing Production Plans). The Palmer Community Development Department and Palmer Planning Board were the reviewing bodies for this plan, working cooperatively with other town boards and committees over the course of the process. PVPC staff met with Community Development staff and Planning Board members to review chapter drafts; identify and prioritize recommendations; prepare public presentations; and other related tasks.

A community forum on June 5th, 2023 included a presentation of the planning process and a public comment period to receive input on the draft plan. Results from the Housing section of a community survey conducted for the town's 2021 Master Plan are included in the Appendices, along with public meeting materials.

1.9 Sources

Data about Palmer for this report was obtained from the following sources:

Palmer Assessor's Office
Palmer Inspection Department
Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC)
Citizens Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA)
Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP)
Massachusetts Department of Employment and Training
Massachusetts Department of Revenue
Massachusetts Department of Education

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Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities

American Community Survey, 2021

U.S. Decennial Census, 2020

The Warren Group

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute

The following documents were consulted frequently during the development of this HPP:

Palmer Master Plan (2021)

Palmer Zoning Ordinance

Palmer Open Space and Recreation Plan (2021)

Pioneer Valley Regional Housing Plan (2014)

Chapter 2: Housing Needs Assessment

2.1 Community Overview

Palmer is located in eastern Hampden County on the border of Worcester County with a population of 12,448 and a land area of 32 square miles (about 20,500 acres). Palmer is bordered by the towns of Belchertown and Ware to the north, Ludlow and Wilbraham to the west, Brimfield and Monson to the south, and Warren to the east. It is approximately 17 miles east of Springfield, the largest regional center, and 73 miles west of Boston. Palmer calls itself “the Town of Seven Railroads” in honor of the many train services that have gone through or from the town.

Natural land comprises most of the land cover in the community, encompassing more than 70 percent of the Town’s land area. About 51% of land in Palmer is zoned for residential uses, with 47.5% of residential land use consisting of single-family typology. A significant amount of residentially zoned land is currently vacant (about 4,240 acres) and about 73.2% of this undeveloped land has been identified by the Town as having the potential to be developed. As is the case in many communities throughout the Commonwealth, the rate of land development is exceeding the rate of population growth. The trend toward larger homes on larger lots is consuming more land in Palmer. The high price of land has served as an enticement for landowners and farmers to begin selling off prime agricultural and forestland for development. Therefore, many areas that were once dominated by protected open space, woodlands, and farmlands, are now dotted with new homes.

Over the past decades, Palmer has seen a substantial decline in agricultural use as well as a large decline in medium density residential uses. Conversely, commercial uses and lower density residential uses have largely increased during the same period. Residential uses are spread across the town with the highest densities being found in the town’s four village centers – Bondsville, Depot Village, Thorndike, and Three Rivers along with most residential uses. Commercial areas can also be found along Thorndike Street and Wilbraham Street, both south of Interstate 90. Since its establishment, Palmer has evolved from a farming community during the 18th century to a manufacturing community in the mid-19th century to a light industrial/bedroom community in the 21st century.

Palmer’s major transportation connection is Interstate 90 which runs east-west through town. Other major routes include Route 20, also running east-west, and Route 32, running north-south. Currently, Palmer is served by regional transit services including the Quaboag Connector. There is currently no passenger rail stop in town, but one is proposed as part of the future East-West Passenger Rail project, which would provide passenger rail service from Boston to Springfield and Pittsfield.

About 14.7% of land in Palmer is enrolled in the Chapter 61 forestry, agriculture, and recreational tax programs, or it is protected conservation and watershed land. It is important to note that the Chapter 61 programs do not prevent development.

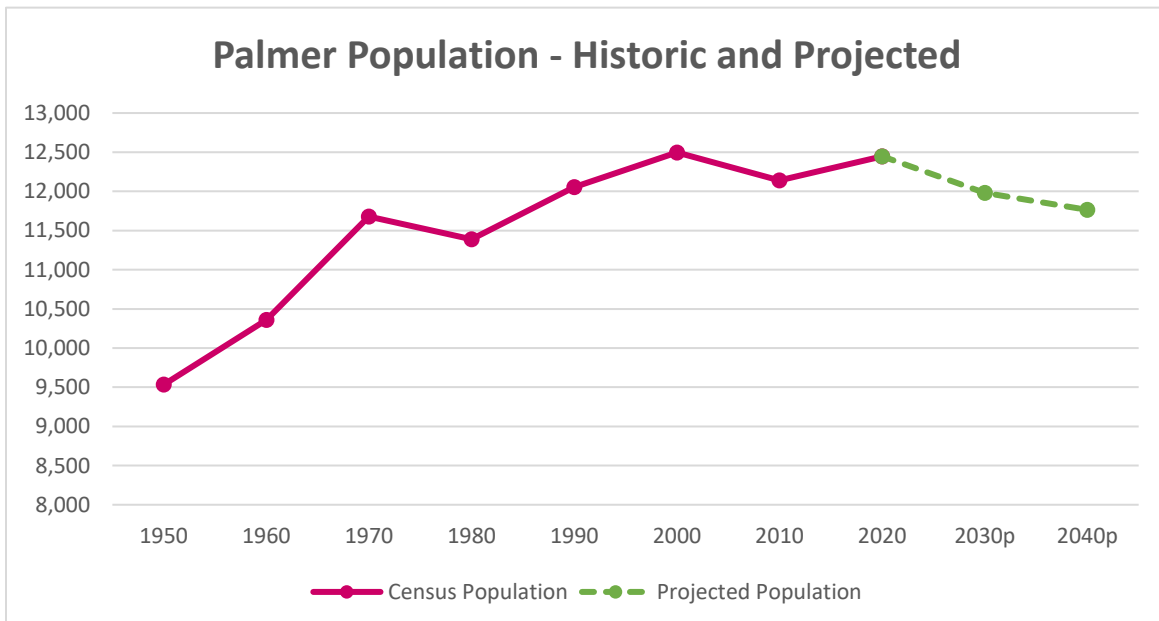
The town's water networks are a large component of its natural composition. Four major rivers (Ware, Quaboag, Swift, and Chicopee) converge in the village of Three Rivers and form the headwaters of the Chicopee River, which flows southwest towards the Connecticut River Valley and have historically been intrinsically tied to Palmer's development as a textile community.

2.2 Population Characteristics

Population Change

Palmer's population has been relatively steady over the past few decades. Since 1990, the town has had a population of roughly 12,000 residents with some minor up and down fluctuations. Most recently, the 2020 Decennial Census found Palmer's population to be 12,448. Population projections calculated by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) predict a slight decrease in the town's population by 2040 with totals projected to fall to 11,764. This figure is closer to what the town's population was in 1970.

However, ESRI projections provided in the town's 2021 Master Plan show a slow but modest increase in population over this time. Neither of these projections consider a potential passenger rail station in Palmer providing direct service to Boston. If this new station is built as part of the implementation of a new East-West Passenger Rail, the population of Palmer will most likely increase in the decades to follow. Although exact population predictions are very difficult to make at present, the build-out scenarios conducted for the 2021 Palmer Master Plan indicate that



Source: 2020 Decennial Census, UMass Donahue Institute projections

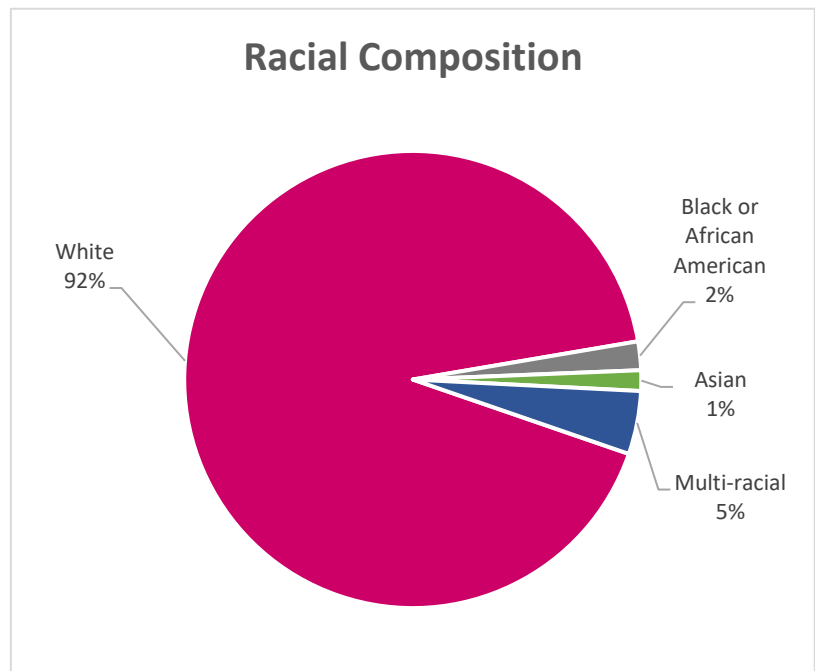
maximum development at the current zoning could yield over 7,000 new residents, an increase of more than 50% over the current population.

Furthermore, while overall population totals may decrease or increase minimally, the composition of the population regarding residents' age, household size, household type, etc. necessitates that housing opportunities reflect current needs.

Racial Composition

Residents of Palmer are predominantly White. In 2020, of residents who identified as belonging to only one race (89.5%), 85.8% of those residents identified as White. 1.9% identified as Black, 1.4% as Asian. 4.2% of residents identified as belonging to two or more races.

6.4% of the total population self-identified as Hispanic or Latino. Between 2010 and 2020, Palmer saw an increase in the Hispanic/Latino population – rising from 2.4% to 6.4%. The population of other racial minority groups grew significantly less. The Black population increased by 0.9% and the Asian population grew up 0.5%. The number of residents identified as belonging to more than one race increased by 3%. This indicates a small increase in the racial diversity in Palmer over the past decade.



Source: Decennial Census 2020, Table DPI

Age

The median age of Palmer residents is 46.8 years old. This is a higher median than that of Hampden County (39.4 years) and the State of Massachusetts (39.6 years).

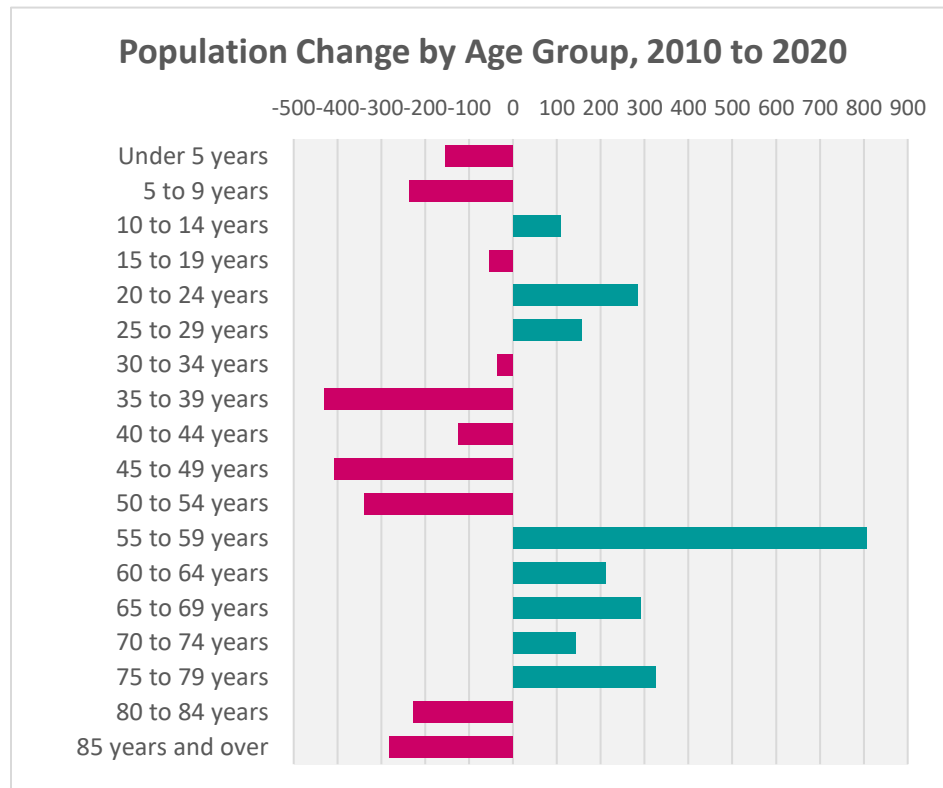
Consistent with trends nationwide, the age of Palmer residents is increasing overall as members of the Baby Boomer generation are reaching retirement age and beyond. In 2020, 18.5% of Palmer residents were over age 65, an increase from 14.3% in 2010.

Between 2010 and 2020, Palmer saw large increases in the age cohorts between 55 and 79 years old. Conversely, all age cohorts between 30- and 54-years old saw decreases during the same period along with a decrease in most cohorts of school-age children. This could indicate that the number of young families overall has decreased in Palmer.

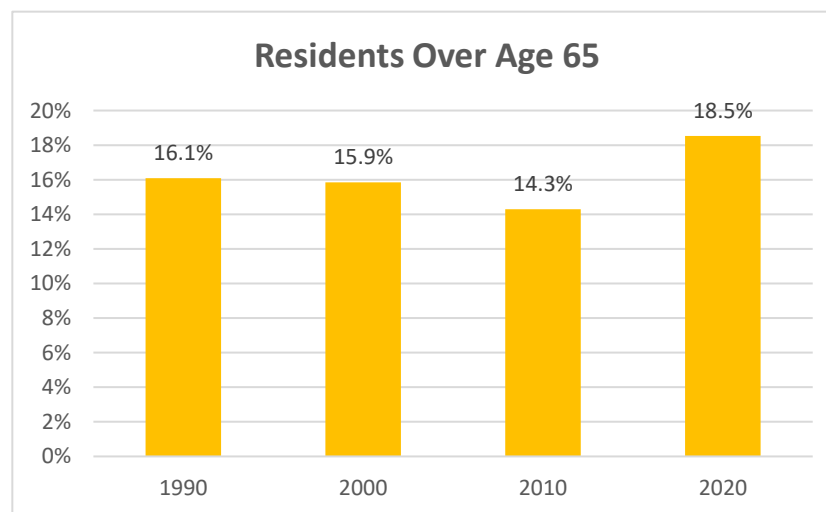
The types of housing units available as well as their cost play a large role in determining what types of residents a community can retain and attract. With a growing senior population, a community needs housing options for those who would like to “age in place” – they may be

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downsizing their homes or looking for assisted living facilities. Young families are often looking for smaller “starter homes” and first-time home ownership opportunities. Young singles or recent graduates may be interested in returning to their hometowns if there are living options such as affordable rental apartments.



Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Estimates, Table C11016



Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Estimates, Table C11016

The Palmer Master Plan completed in 2021 included a Health Addendum that addressed “Opportunities for Healthy Eating, Active Living, and Healthy Aging.” The Master Plan community survey suggested that housing is both a challenge and an asset for older adults living in Palmer. While housing is somewhat more affordable in Palmer than in some other communities, there is no housing with supported services for older adults, and there are very few subsidized units that are handicapped accessible.

For older adults who wish to age in place, or to continue to live in their own homes as they age, support services may be needed. While not everyone loses their ability to drive at the age of 80, people are more likely to have physical or cognitive limitations as they age, making driving less safe. Home modifications may also be necessary for people with mobility or visual impairments, as well as assistance with basic tasks such as shoveling snow, cooking, or cleaning.

Population and School Enrollment

The same demographic trends that have led to an older population have also reduced the school population in Palmer. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Palmer School District served 1,188 students during the 2020-21 school year, a decrease of 26.6% from 2010-11 enrollments.¹ In 2017, the District closed the Converse Middle School. In many cases, older schools that have been closed provide opportunities to create new housing units, and because the municipality owns the property, there is a greater potential to develop affordable housing.

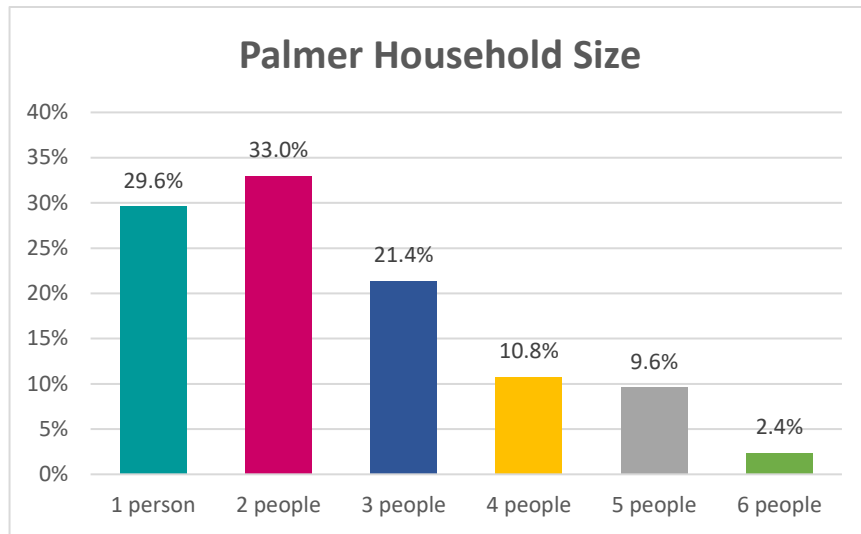
Housing Units and Households

Palmer has 5,207 total households. A household is defined as all the people who occupy a housing unit, regardless of their relationship, including individuals alone. Of Palmer’s households, 43.6% are comprised of married couple families. About 30% of all households are single-person households. About 33% of households contain two people, 21% contain three people and about 22% contain four or more people. About 8% of households in Palmer are made up of non-related people living together.

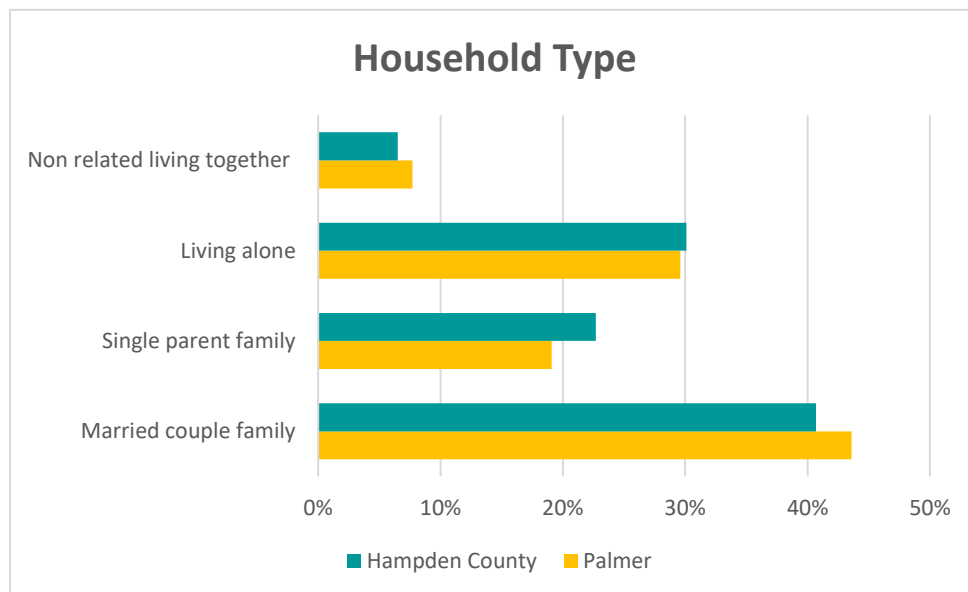
This breakdown of households shows that almost two-thirds - 63% - of all households are made up of only one or two people. Aging population, empty nesters, families choosing not to have children or delaying having children and people living alone are all trends that lead to smaller household sizes. This shifting trend can result in a mismatch of housing options as large single-family homes are often too large for these small households. A lack of smaller sized options, such as studios, one- or two-bedroom apartments can leave small households without housing options for the type of house best suited and most affordable to them.

¹ Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2021) School and District Profiles.

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Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Estimates, Table C11016



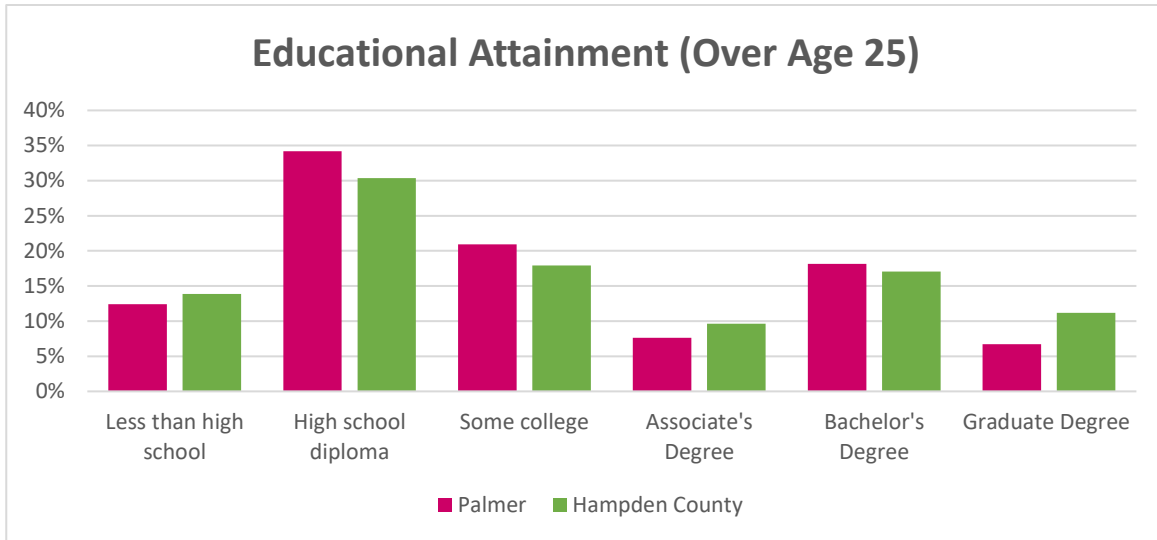
Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Estimates, Table C11016

Education

87.6% of Palmer residents over the age of 25 are high school graduates. This percentage is slightly above the rate for Hampden County but less than that of Massachusetts overall (91.2%). 18.1% of Palmer's residents have earned a bachelor's degree and 6.7% have a graduate or professional degree.

Labor Force and Employment

A community's labor force includes all civilian residents 16 years and over with a job or in the market for a job. Palmer's labor force includes approximately 6,500, or 52% of the total population. The unemployment rate has fluctuated significantly over the past several years due



Source: Massachusetts Department of Economic Research; [Palmer, MA Unemployment Rate \(ycharts.com\)](#)

to the COVID-19 pandemic; it is at 5.9% as of January 2023, but has ranged from a high of 18% in April 2020 to 5.1% in April 2022.

The three largest employers within the Town of Palmer are Wing Memorial Hospital (721 employees), Camp Ramah in New England (300 employees) and Big Y Supermarket (150 employees). The industry in Palmer with the highest number of workers is Manufacturing with 15.3% of the total civilian workforce, followed by Retail Trade (11.8%), Health Care/Social Assistance at 11.6%, Transportation/Warehousing at 9.1%, and Educational Services at 8.2%.

Workers who reside in Palmer rely primarily on car, truck or van transportation for commuting, with 84.2% commuting alone in this fashion and 6.9% carpooling. About 6.5% worked from home. The remainder of workers walked or used other methods including public transit. The average commute time is 31.7 minutes. The percentage of people who work from home may be higher and in flux due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of all workers employed in Palmer, 20.5% also reside in Palmer. For those that commute to Palmer from other communities, 8% commute from Ware, 7.7% from Springfield, 7.4% from Monson and 4.6% from Belchertown. The remaining workers commute from elsewhere in Hampden, Hampshire and Worcester Counties as well as other further locations. Commuting times and the number of workers residing outside their place of work could indicate that there is a lack of housing for Palmer's local workforce preventing those who work in Palmer from residing in the same place where they work.

Disability

Disability is a protected class under federal law. The U.S. Census Bureau defines a disability as a long-lasting physical, mental, or emotional condition that may make it difficult for a person to do activities such as walking, climbing stairs, dressing, bathing, learning, or remembering. Disability can impact a person's ability to leave their home or be employed. Many residents with disabilities face housing challenges due to a lack of housing that is affordable and physically accessible to them.

An estimated 16.8% of Palmer's total population is considered disabled. An estimated 45% of residents over the age of 65 reported having one or more disabilities. Palmer's elderly population is expected to continue to increase, which will likely raise demand for affordable and barrier-free housing.

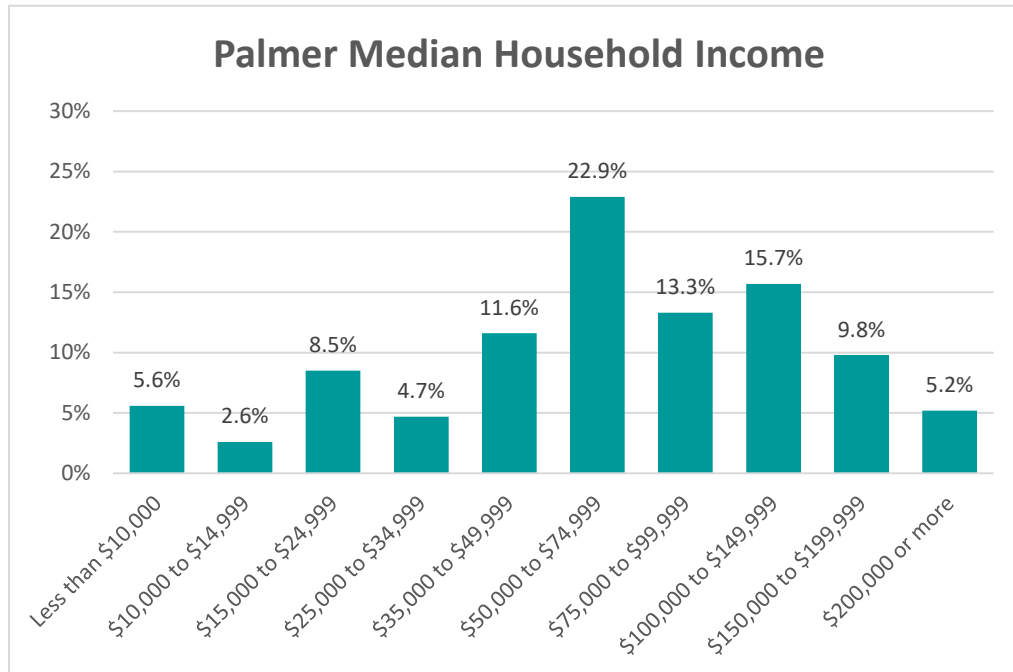
The 2014 Pioneer Valley Regional Housing Plan notes that there is a critical need for more accessible housing to meet an existing and growing demand in our region. The plan notes the following:

- The range of disabilities present in our region requires different types of accessible housing to serve the needs of person with disabilities
- The need for more concerted efforts to integrate accessible housing and housing with supportive services into our planning for market-rate and affordable housing development
- Many existing units with accessibility features are often rented to people who do not need them or do not need all of the features that are included in the unit.

Income

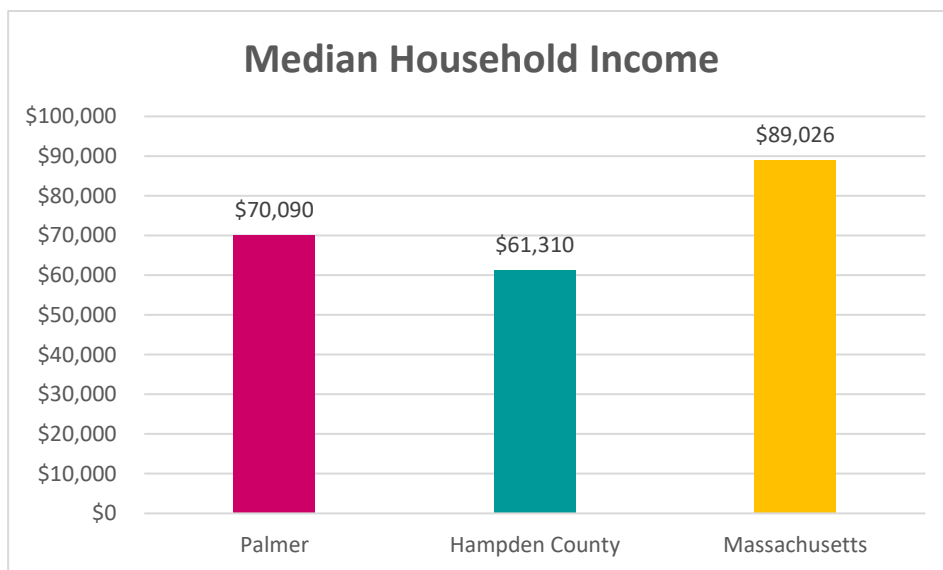
The ability to exercise housing choice bears a strong relationship to the amount of money a household can afford to spend on housing. Housing that is affordable to lower income households is critical to creating household stability and economic self-sufficiency. Housing that is affordable to working class and middle-class households is critical to building and retaining talent and for improving the region and the state's overall economic competitiveness.

Town of Palmer Housing Production Plan



Source: 2021 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table S1901

Palmer overall is a moderate-income community. Palmer's median income is \$70,090 which is higher than that of Hampden County as a whole (\$61,310) but significantly lower than that of Massachusetts (\$89,026).



Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Estimates, Table C11016

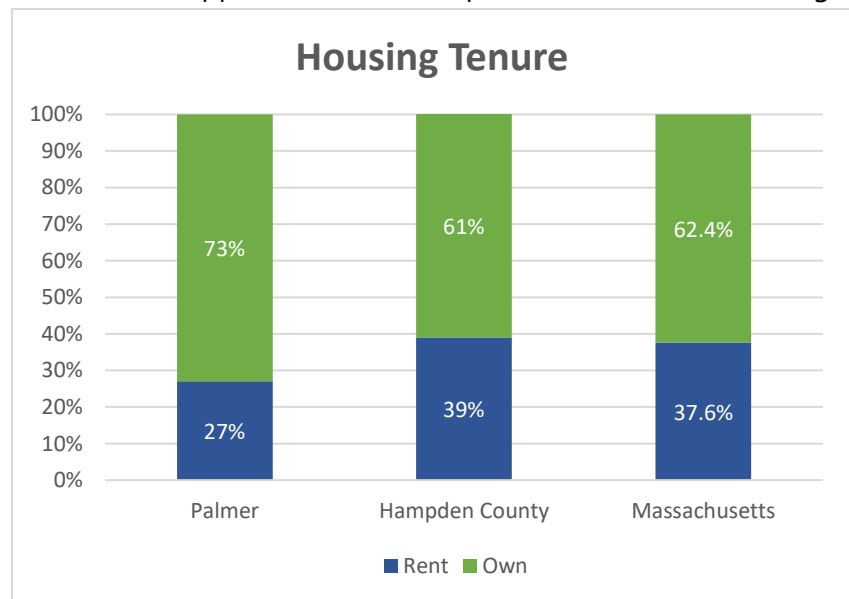
2.3 Housing Supply Characteristics

The purpose of this section is to review the characteristics and types of housing in Palmer to assess how the town's housing stock is responding to changing demographics, affordability pressures and market conditions. As of 2020, there are 5,854 housing units in Palmer. The current housing landscape reflects existing land use policies, the strength or weakness of the housing market, mortgage lending practices, housing discrimination, transportation networks, topography, and public infrastructure, some of which are discussed in this chapter as well as the next chapter on housing development conditions. Settlement patterns and the built environment are also a reflection of structural issues that were discussed in the first section of this chapter such as economic security and educational attainment, which taken together, can encourage self-sufficiency, mobility, and residents' abilities to obtain and maintain housing.

The Town needs a full range of housing opportunities that are affordable to households of all sizes, compositions, racial and ethnic backgrounds, abilities, and income ranges to ensure that the town and region remain economically competitive.

Tenure

Analysis of homeownership levels and rental opportunities is an important feature of a housing assessment. Data on owner-occupancy and renter-occupancy is used to aid in the distribution of funds for government programs, including mortgage insurance and public housing programs. It also allows planners to evaluate the overall viability of housing markets, to assess the stability of neighborhoods and to aid in the planning of housing programs and services.



Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Estimates, Table B25003

Palmer has a higher percentage of homeowners than the County and the State and fewer renters. 73% of residents own their homes and 27% rent. This lower number of rental opportunities could result in lower-income households struggling to find attainable housing in Palmer.

Occupied vs Vacant

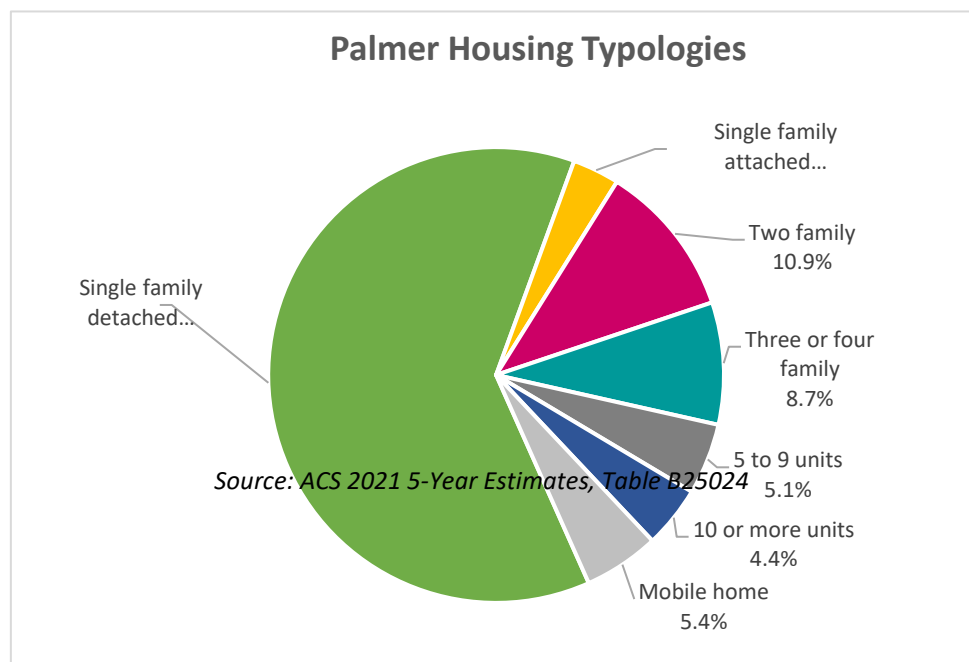
The vacancy rate of homes in Palmer is quite low – 5.3% of all units were vacant as of 2021. There are five reasons that a house is categorized as vacant by the US Census Bureau: the house is:

Town of Palmer Housing Production Plan

1. For seasonal, recreational, or occasional use
2. For rent
3. For sale
4. Rented or sold, but not occupied
5. Considered to be an "other" vacant unit.

Housing Structure Type

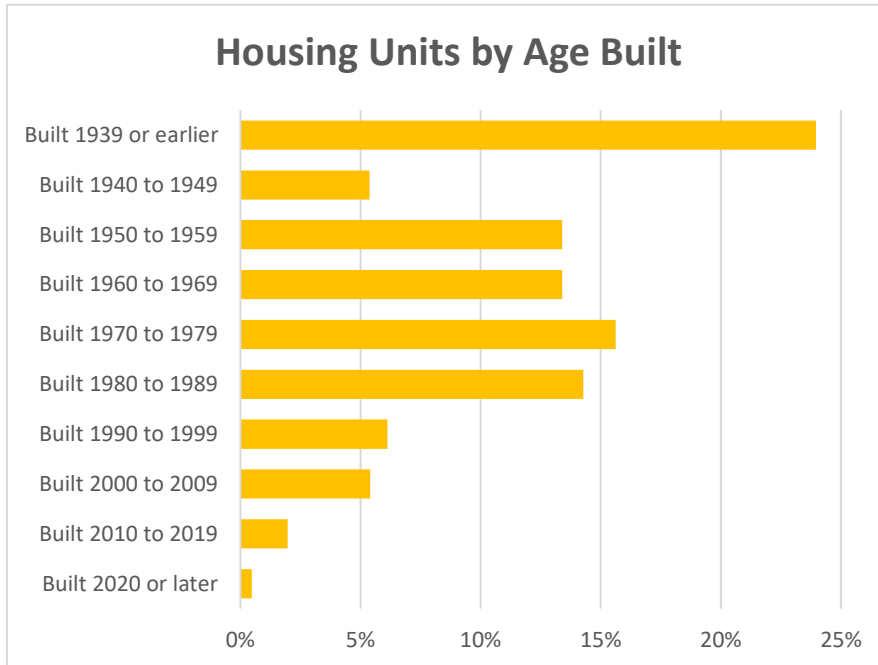
Housing affordability is closely related to the housing structure type. Multi-family housing, two-family housing, and smaller single-family homes on smaller lots tend to be more affordable to a wider range of households (such as singles, young families or seniors living alone) than larger single-family homes on large lots. While the majority of housing units in Palmer are single-family detached homes, there are some multi-family options in town. As shown on the graph below, two-family, three-family, and four-family units make up almost 20% of the housing stock with other larger multi-family unit structures comprising nearly 10%. Mobile homes make up 5.4% of all units.



Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Estimates, Table B25034

Age of Housing

The age of a town's housing stock and areas with concentrated numbers of older housing are important elements to consider when developing a housing production plan, as certain public monies may be available to improve the housing condition of substandard housing. Palmer's housing stock is decidedly on the older side, with nearly a quarter of all homes built before 1939. 44% of homes have been built since 1970, but construction slowed down significantly by 1990



and has been very limited since 2010. New housing stock is not being added at a substantial rate in recent years. There are particular challenges to having an older housing stock. These homes were built during times when housing needs and households looked vastly different than they do today.

Challenges of Older Housing Stock

Well-maintained older homes are an important part of a community's local history and help preserve historic character. However, older homes can have many challenges. These can include:

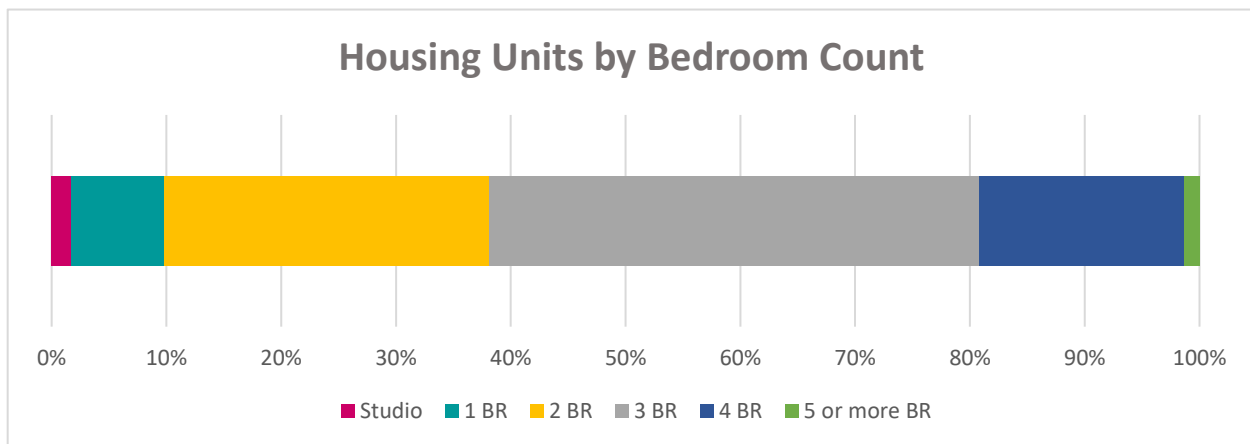
- Increased need for maintenance and repairs
- Poor past maintenance and repair history
- Design not well-suited for people with mobility impairments (particularly relevant with an aging population)
- Outdated and inefficient heating, cooling, and insulation systems
- Lead paint, asbestos, and lead pipes that present health risks (particularly true in housing built before 1978).
- Less efficient in terms of heating and cooling.

Since the cost to rehabilitate and achieve code compliance in older houses can be extremely high, some landlords and homeowners may not be able to afford to make these improvements or some may not invest in their properties because they fear that a low home value does not justify the

cost of capital or maintenance improvements. Deferred maintenance and repairs can result in unsafe or poor-quality housing for renters. The age of the housing can also create impediments to fair housing. Rehabilitation or modification costs can result in deferred maintenance or upgrades, which may limit the supply and availability of accessible and affordable housing. Some landlords have tried to avoid renting to families with young children because of the presence—or perceived presence—of lead paint in their units and the associated expense of lead abatement, even though doing so is prohibited by law. This has the effect of limiting the supply and availability of housing, especially for families with young children.

Bedroom Count

The bedroom count of housing units can serve as an indicator of how matched existing unit sizes are to existing household sizes. As described above, older homes were traditionally built with



Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Estimates, Table B25041

larger numbers of bedrooms for larger family sizes during the mid-20th century.

As shown above, the most prevalent household sizes in Palmer are single- or two-person households. Yet, the breakdown of units by bedroom size below shows that almost 60% of all houses have 3 or more bedrooms. This could indicate a mismatch between the housing stock and housing need. Nearly 30% of units in Palmer are two-bedroom units but a very small percentage are one bedroom or studio units. This could indicate a lack of supply for individuals living alone or couples living without children. Additionally, smaller units (particularly rentals) tend to be the most affordable housing type for lower income households.

Another common housing deficiency is for large families – often those that have multi-generational family members living together. Rental units tend to not have enough bedrooms to accommodate these types of households, leaving certain families without options for housing with three or more bedrooms. The Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC), Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP), MassHousing, MassDevelopment and Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation (CEDAC) now require that at least 10% of new

affordable units funded, assisted, or approved by a State Housing Agency have three or more bedrooms.

Housing Cost

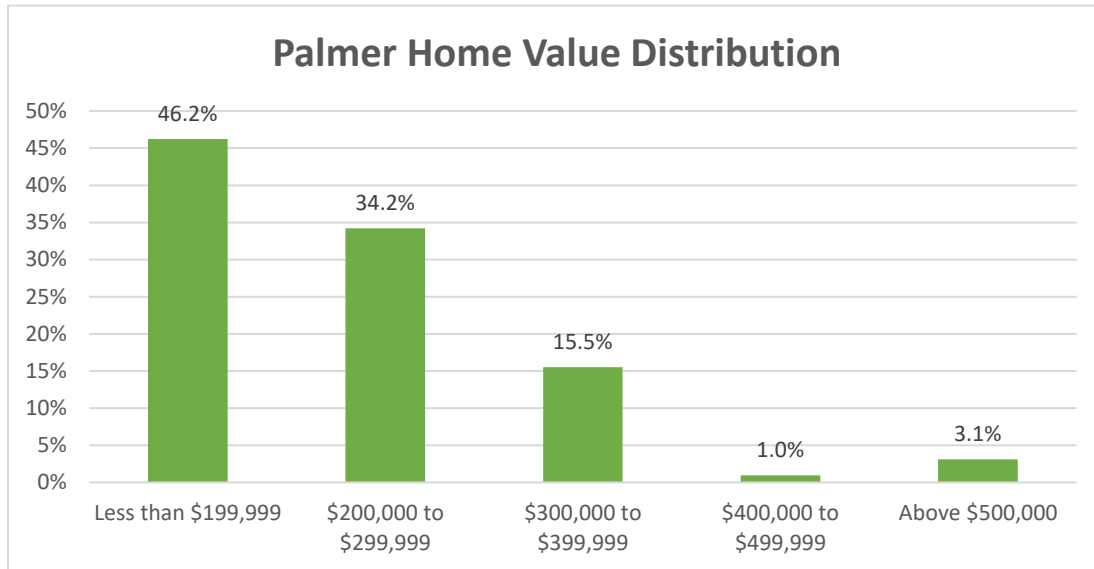
Housing is a basic human need and is often the largest expenditure for a household. Massachusetts is an expensive place to live. According to the Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER), Massachusetts has the 5th highest cost of living in the nation both as an index and with the cost of housing, trailing behind only Hawaii, District of Columbia, New York, and California. While single-family homes prices and rents are more affordable in the western half of Massachusetts than the eastern part of the state, prices in the Pioneer Valley and in Palmer are still more expensive than in many places across the country.

Home Values

About 80% of homes in Palmer are valued under \$299,999. Although Palmer, Hampden County and the Pioneer Valley have historically been more affordable places to live than the eastern part of the state, the dramatic increase in housing prices (which outpaced growth in household income) in the late 1990s and early 2000s has affected many households' ability to buy a home.

Despite the drop in home values that occurred after the housing crisis/ economic recession of the late 2000s, homeownership continues to be a challenge for lower income households. Factors driving this inability to access homeownership opportunities include:

- Tighter lending requirements instituted in response to the housing crisis
- Household income has not kept pace with increasing housing costs
- Households made up of younger individuals are increasingly saddled with large amounts of college debt.
- Purchasing a home typically requires a large upfront payment due to more stringent mortgage financing terms and conditions. For example, many mortgage lenders require down payments equaling 20% of the purchase price—much higher than the 5-10% down payment that used to be common.



Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Estimates, Table B25075

Sale Prices

As of 2021, the median price of a single-family home in Palmer was \$250,000. This is a significant increase over the previous year (less than \$200,000) and corresponded with a national increase in housing costs during the latter half of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has made homeownership a more distant prospect for many Massachusetts residents, although Palmer's housing is relatively lower-priced. By comparison, in 2021, the median sales price of a single-family home in Hampden County was \$265,000.²

Mortgage costs are spread widely, but primarily in the range of \$1,000 to \$2,500. Mortgage costs over \$2,000 a month can be a sign of a housing cost burden, particularly for moderate-income residents.

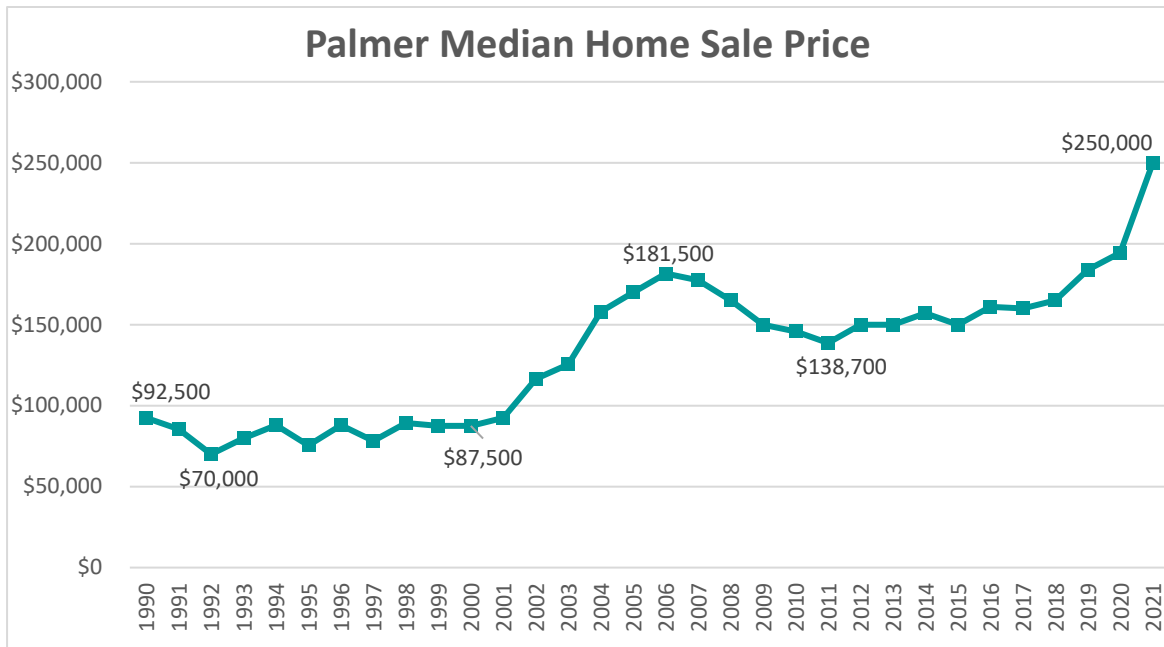
Rents

The majority of rental units in Palmer rent for under \$1,499. Over half rent for less than \$999. While these figures indicate that there is a supply of "naturally" affordable rental units in town, it is important to note that rental units may be less readily available overall, as indicated in the Tenure section above.

Additionally, these naturally affordable rents are not protected as affordable and are subject to market increases as supply and demand changes. What may be "affordable" today may not be in

² Source: [2022-09 Counties.pdf \(mards.wpenginepowered.com\)](#)

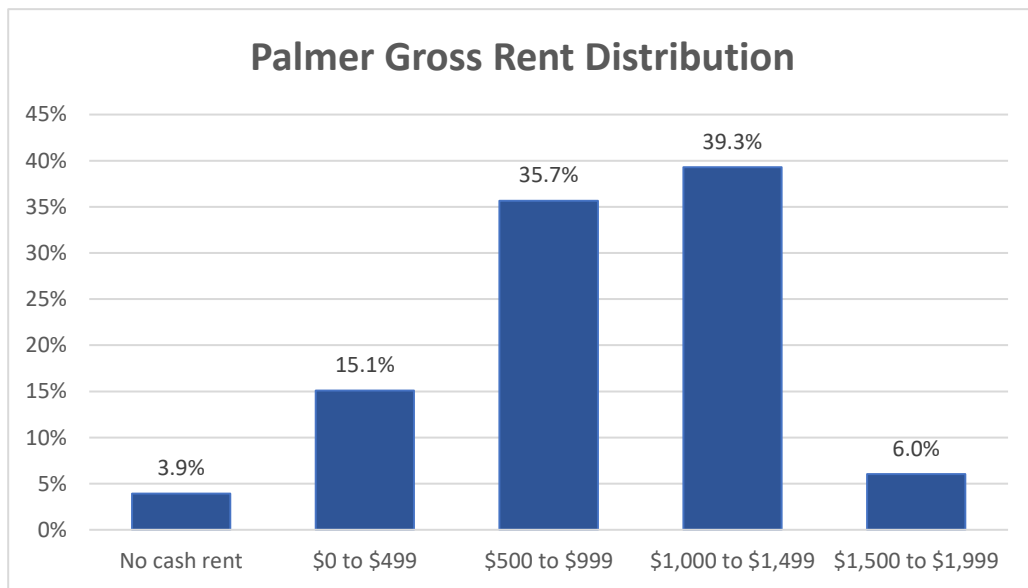
Town of Palmer Housing Production Plan



Source: The Warren Group

the future. Many barriers to affordable rental units still exist for low-income households who may still not qualify to afford rents at these levels.

Initial costs of renting an apartment – first and last month’s rent, security deposit, and for some, broker’s fees- can be an expensive outlay and can preclude some lower income households from obtaining a home. Rents have risen in the region, despite the economic downturn and the recovering economy, because of the increased demand for rental housing and little to no growth in the rental stock. Reasons for an increased demand in the rental market include:



Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Estimates, Table B25063

- Desire to remain a renter because of the financial uncertainty of owning a home (as shown by the foreclosure crisis)
- Inability to afford to buy a home because of the initial expense to enter the homeownership market, which requires a 20% down payment, higher credit scores and tighter lending requirements.
- Significant individual debt, which prevents entrance into the homeownership market and in many cases the rental market. Many young adults trying to get into the housing market are currently facing this challenge having recently graduated with high amounts of student loan debt.
- Loss of one's home as result of the foreclosure crisis, which drove homeowners back into the rental market.

Foreclosures

In the lead-up to and aftermath of the real estate crisis of 2008, foreclosures became a major concern across the nation. Foreclosures in Palmer reached a high of 39 in the year 2008. Since 2008, foreclosures have generally been decreasing, dipping to only 14 foreclosures in 2019.

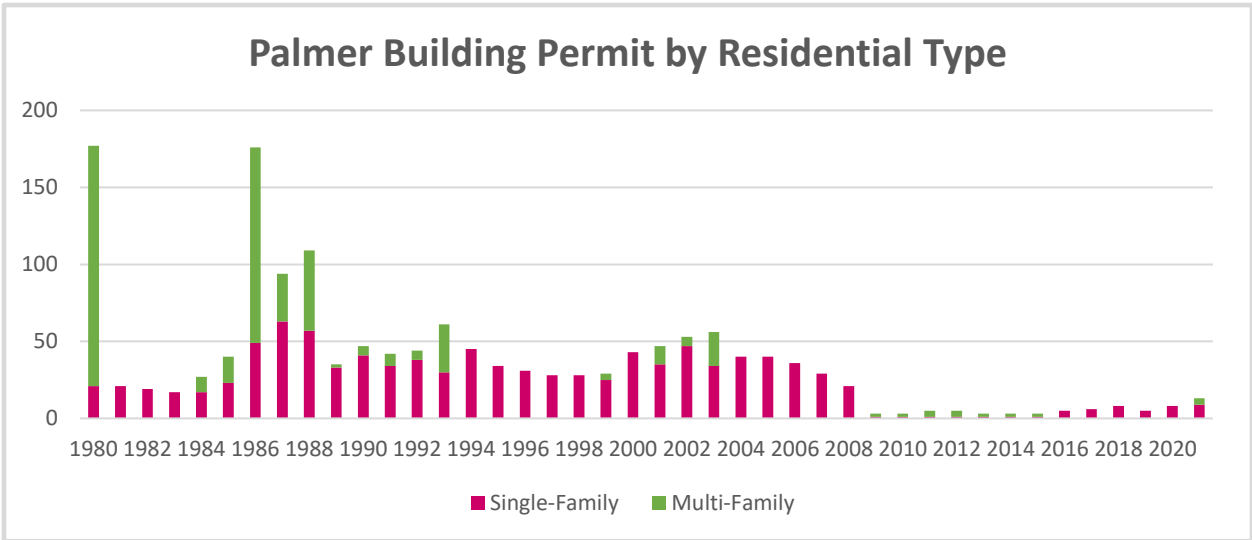
Building Activity

Home-building in Palmer has followed a pattern seen in many communities across the northeast. Significant construction of new homes took place in the 1980s and 1990s and into the early 2000s. Over time, the land available for development begins to decrease. Further, after the economic recession in 2008, home construction in Palmer dwindled substantially. Since 2016, growth has begun to slowly increase but at a minimal rate. This limited growth of new housing has not kept pace with demand and is contributing to the price increases in the rental and ownership markets.

Although single-family units largely predominate in Palmer, there have been years in the 1980s when there were large numbers of multi-family units built. This indicates that a large number of the multi-unit structures date to this time but that there are few newer multi-family units. Recently, there have been many years in the 2000s where zero multi-family structures have been built.

In 2021, there were 13 building permits issued – nine for single family units and four for multi-family units.

Town of Palmer Housing Production Plan

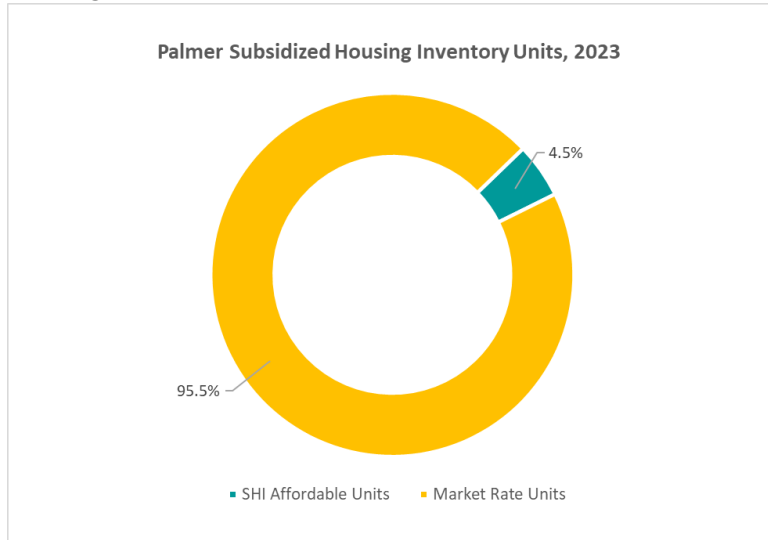


Source: HUD Residential Permits, 2021

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Affordable Housing Inventory (SHI)

As of 2023, Palmer has 262 units on the State's subsidized housing inventory (SHI), which amounts to 4.5% of the town's current total year-round housing stock of 5,828 units. Through Chapter 40B, Massachusetts municipalities are encouraged to increase their overall percentage of affordable units to 10% or more. This indicates that Palmer has about half the amount of desired affordable housing units. The SHI list represents those units in a municipality that are available to residents earning less than 80% of the Area Median Income (AMI). While a community may contain units



that are naturally affordable, only those that are protected in perpetuity are eligible for listing on the SHI. A further analysis of Palmer's SHI inventory and protected affordable units can be found in Chapter 4.

Currently, protected affordable units in Palmer can be found at Laurel Manor, Kirkwood Place, Palmer Green Estates, Crystal Lake Village and at various group home locations.

Housing Authority

The state Congregate Elderly/Handicapped housing program (Chapter 667) provides housing for qualified low-income elderly and handicapped people, as defined in Massachusetts General Law Chapter 121B. Net income and age are the basis for eligibility, and income limits are set at 80% of the median income for the area in which the community is located. Tenants who live in state-aided Chapter 667 elderly/handicapped housing pay 30% of their income for rent. Heat and electricity are included.

The Palmer Housing Authority operates one



property at Laurel Manor. Laurel Manor consists

of 48 one-bedroom units for low-income elderly or disabled tenants. Currently, the Palmer Housing Authority is operating under the Monson Housing Authority for efficiency in budget and operations.

Group Home Units

Four units on the town's SHI are listed as group homes. A group home is a state-licensed facility intended for occupancy by elderly persons and/or persons with disabilities. Except for live-in aides, all persons living in a group home, whether assisted or not, must be elderly persons or persons with disabilities who do not require continuous medical or nursing care.

Rental Assistance for Low Income Households

Low-income households can also get rental assistance in the form of a housing voucher to afford housing. With a voucher, the subsidy is used by the tenant to find housing in the private market and is paid to a private landlord. Unlike subsidies to development units, the subsidy associated with vouchers stays with the tenant. There are two rental voucher programs available in Massachusetts:

1. Federal Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher. This program is administered by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. The program was enacted in 1974 to promote economic and racial integration and to shift public assistance to the private market.
2. Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP). This program is operated by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities. Created in 1990, the MRVP has a similar purpose to the Federal Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program.

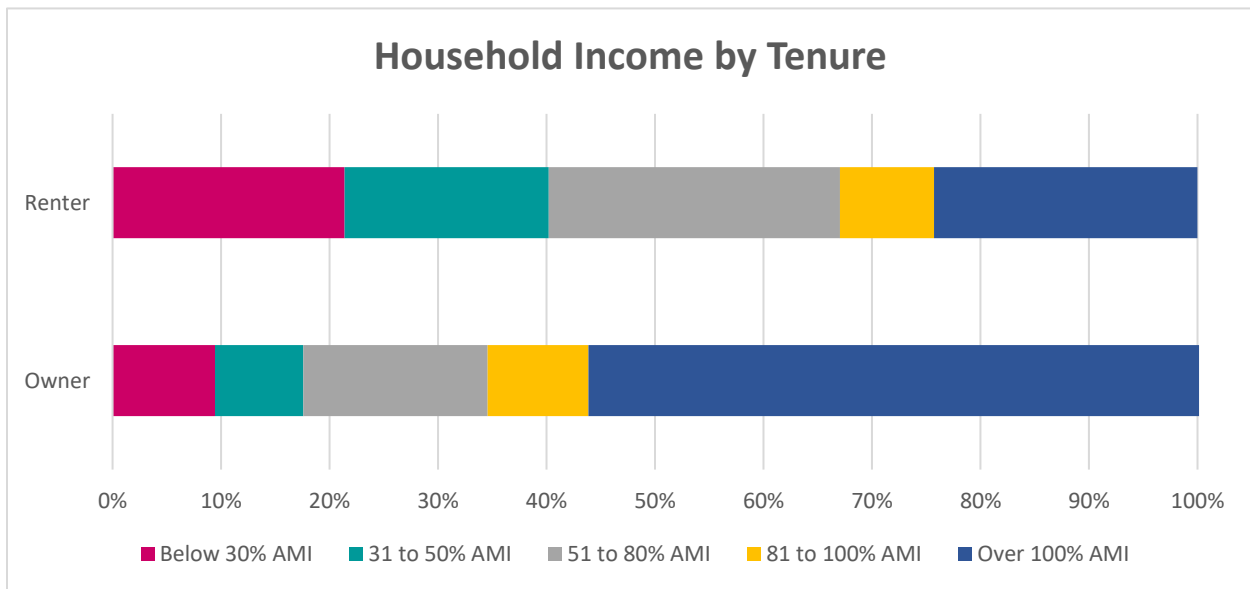
2.4 Housing Needs Assessment

Affordability

The below table shows the breakdown of Palmer residents by HUD Area Median Family Income (HAMFI). Out of a total of 4,885 households in Palmer (2015 to 2019), these figures show how many fall into categories of earning less than 80% HAMFI (low-income), less than 50% HAMFI (very low-income) and less than 30% HAMFI (extremely low-income). In total, 2,135 Palmer households qualify as low-income, or about 18%. The largest percentage of these households fall under the 50 to 80% of HAMFI range.

Town of Palmer Housing Production Plan

Income Distribution	Owner	Renter	Total
Household Income <= 30% HAMFI	330	295	625
Household Income >30% to <=50% HAMFI	285	260	545
<i>Source: HUD Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy, 2015-2019</i>			
Household Income >50% to <=80% HAMFI	595	370	965

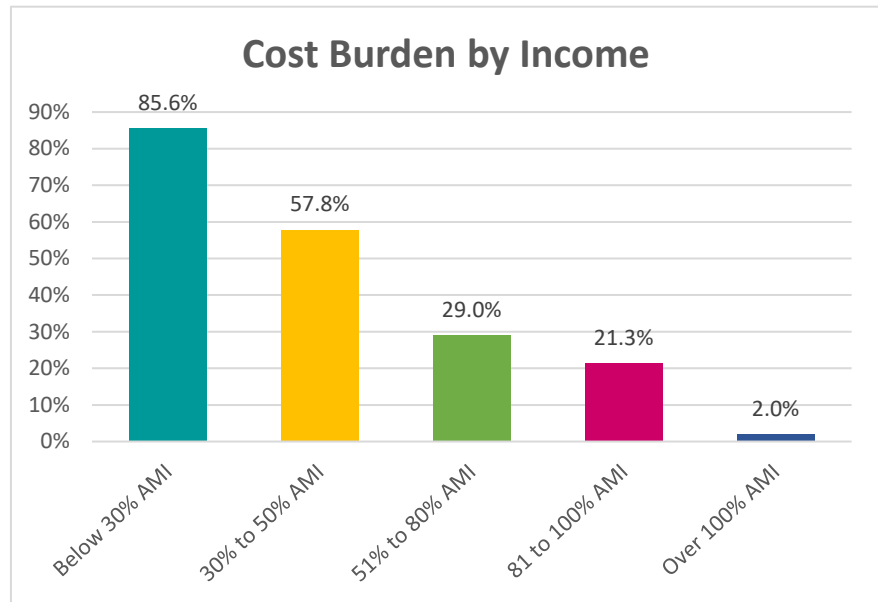


Source: HUD Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy, 2015-2019

Housing Cost Burden

Although Palmer, Hampden County and the Pioneer Valley have historically been more affordable places to live in than the eastern part of the state, the cost of housing is a strain on many households. The general rule of thumb is that for housing to be 'affordable', the household must pay no more than 30% of its annual income on housing. Households who pay more than this suggested 30% are considered "cost burdened" and may have difficulty affording necessities such as food, medical costs, transportation, and childcare. Although any household, regardless of income level, can be considered cost-burdened if they are paying too much of their overall income on housing, a primary concern is for low-income households who have the most severe challenge in affording necessities.

Thus, examining housing costs as a percentage of a household's income gives us an idea of the portion of households in Palmer that are likely to be cost burdened (defined as those spending more than 30% of their income on housing costs) or extremely cost burdened (defined as those spending more than 50% of their income on housing costs). Approximately 26% (1,270 households) of all households in Palmer are cost burdened or severely cost burdened. When looking at rental households, 39% of households in Palmer are cost burdened. 64% of these rental households that are cost burdened earn below 80% of the Area Median Income and would be classified as low-income.



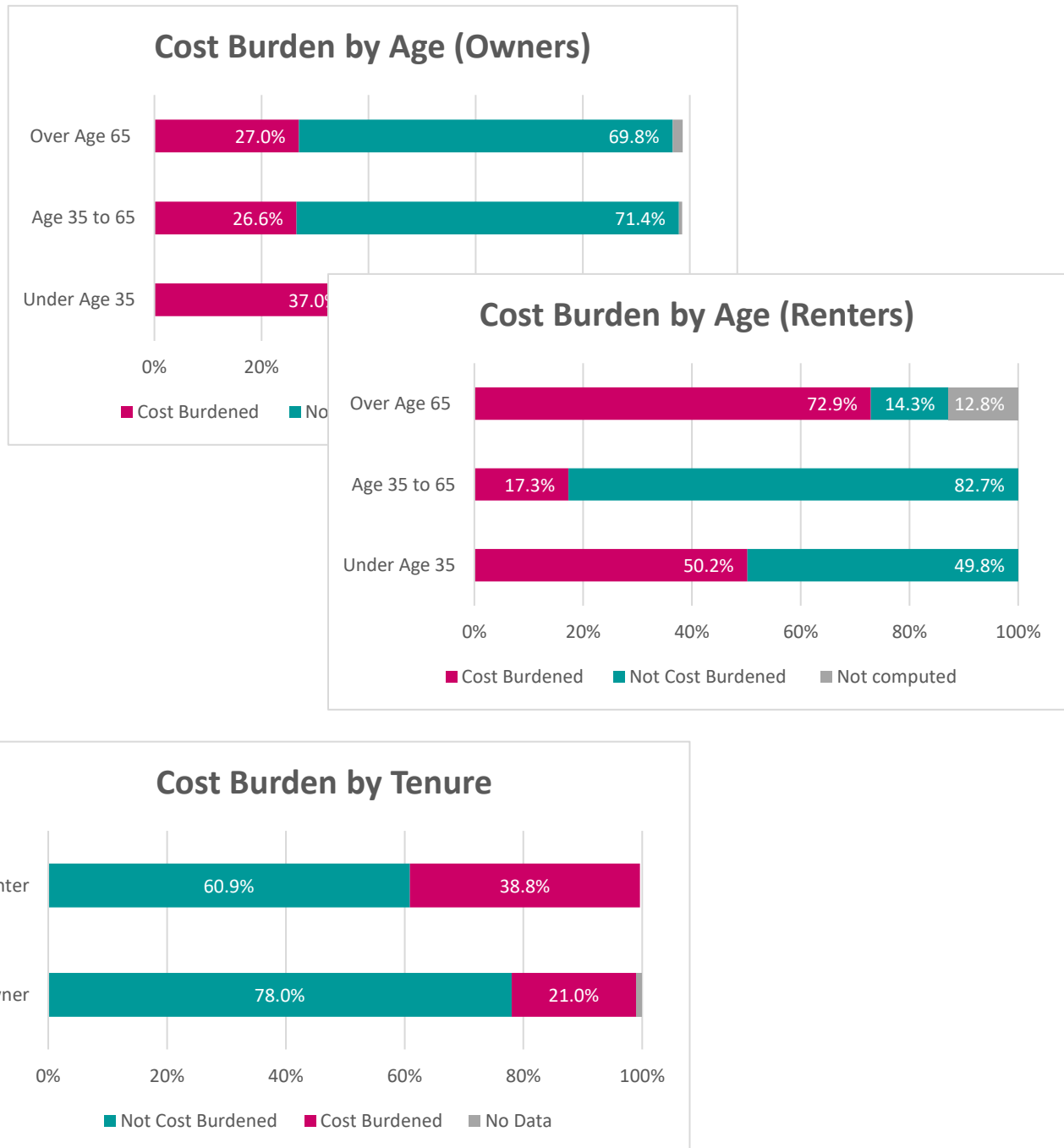
Source: HUD Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy, 2015-2019

When affordable housing is discussed, many fail to recognize that homeowners (not just renters) can also be cost burdened. For residents who own their homes in Palmer, 21% of all households are paying more than 30% of their income to their housing costs (such as mortgage payments, condo association fees and taxes). When looking only at low-income owner households, 30% of low-income households are cost burdened by their home ownership costs.

Of all low-income households (rented and owned) in Palmer, 52.9% of them are burdened by their housing costs. Whether or not a household is cost-burdened also depends on age. Renters over age 65 are highly likely to be housing cost-burdened, but homeowners under 35 are almost as likely to be in that category. Senior residents are limited by fixed incomes which can impact how much they have available to spend on housing costs, especially if they rent or have other housing-related expenses that may be continuing to increase. Renters under 35 constitute the largest category of housing cost-burdened residents. These figures are not surprising, since residents

Town of Palmer Housing Production Plan

under 35 are starting out in the working world and are generally at the lowest income and salary levels of their careers.



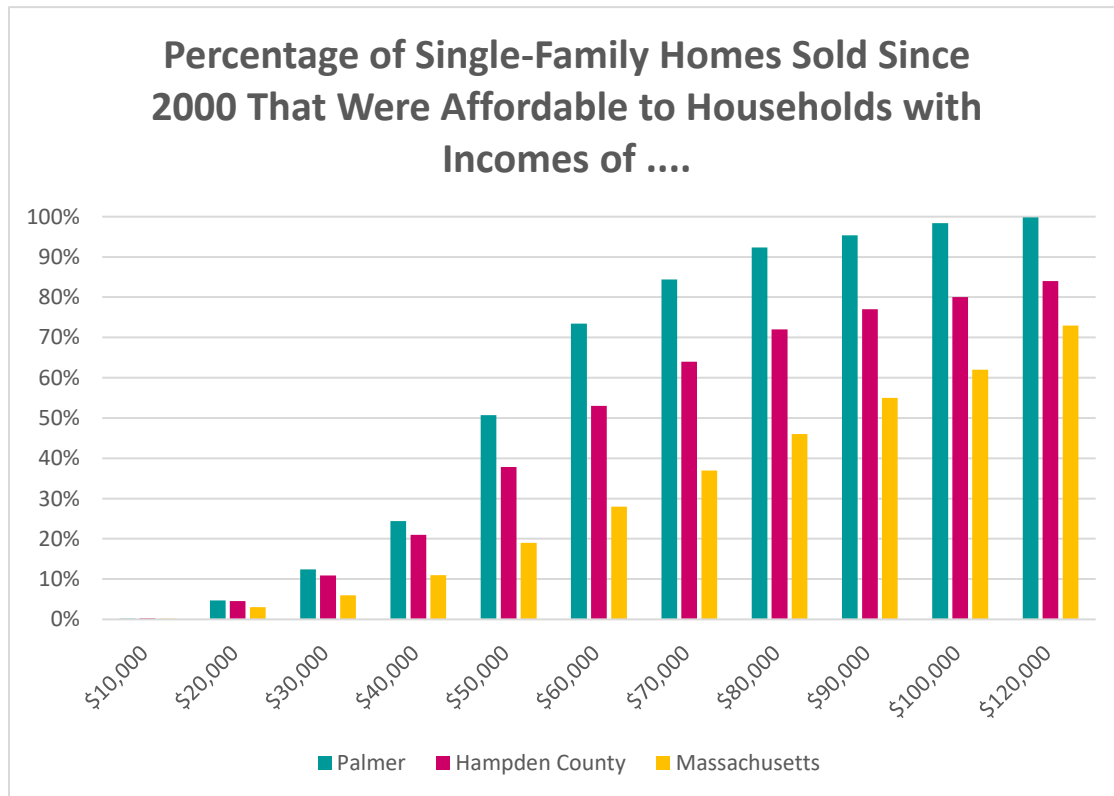
Source: HUD Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy, 2015-2019

Who Needs Housing in Palmer?

The National Low Income Housing Coalition's (NLIHC) data on housing affordability for the Springfield Metropolitan Area indicates that the annual household income needed to afford a one-bedroom apartment in the region is \$34,960. To afford a two-bedroom apartment, a household would need to earn \$43,760 and for a four-bedroom unit a family would need to earn \$64,920.

For a household that earns 30% of the Area Median Income (AMI), a rent of \$684 is considered affordable and for households earning 50% of AMI, a rent of \$1,140 is affordable. These rent prices would prevent these households from becoming cost burdened.

For homeowners, the Massachusetts Housing Data Portal provides data on what percentage of single-family homes that have sold since 2000 in a municipality have been affordable to households at different income levels. In Palmer, 84.4% of homes sold were affordable to households earning \$70,000 (about 80% of AMI). 50.8% of homes were affordable to households with an income of \$50,000 (about 50% of AMI) and 12.4% of homes were affordable to households that earned \$30,000 (about 30% of AMI). Overall, 99.5% of Palmer housing that has sold since 2000 has been affordable for households earning \$120,000. This data indicates that while Palmer's housing stock provides options across a wide range of income levels, those earning the median income or higher have significantly more opportunities compared to low-income households, particularly those that fall into the categories of "extremely low-income".



Source: MAPC Housing MA Data Portal

Units that are affordable to low-income households are not necessarily occupied by low-income households. This mismatch between households' incomes and the units they occupy can exacerbate affordability problems. To measure the extent to which affordability is a supply problem versus a distribution problem, we calculate the affordability gap. The gap is the difference between the number of households at a given income level and the number of units affordable to households at that income level. A positive gap indicates a shortage of units at a given income level, even if households and units were perfectly matched by incomes and costs. Palmer households at less than 50% AMI, 50 to 80% AMI, and above 80% AMI, face affordability gaps of -120, -730, and 840, respectively. These gap figures show that housing options for households who earn between 50 and 80% of AMI are currently lacking the most and that over 700 additional housing units would be needed to fill the gap for these households to attain affordable homes.

Chapter 3: Housing Development Constraints

Local housing development is influenced by a variety of conditions including both natural and man-made constraints that can determine where housing can and cannot be developed. These characteristics include the availability of land, presence of roads and infrastructure, environmental constraints, proximity to jobs and accessibility to desirable amenities. Other conditions that impact development are regulatory. These regulations include zoning and subdivision regulations, permitting processes, building codes and environmental regulations. Other factors including the economy and availability of housing financing can impact if development is feasible or likely in a community.

Palmer's character is shaped by its four densely developed village centers located amidst abundant forestland, open space, and agriculture. It is also closely connected to a robust transportation network, including a major interchange with the Massachusetts Turnpike (Interstate Route 90) and an east-west rail line with potential for a new passenger rail station in Depot Village. These factors mean that Palmer may face a period of growth over the next couple of decades. The landscape is varied and presents some constraints to development, but with careful planning, desirable economic and residential growth is possible.

This chapter will look at the various conditions impacting development in Palmer. Additionally, existing land use, zoning, and constraints will be utilized to assess possible future sites for housing.

3.1 Development Constraints, Limitations and Opportunities

As in many communities in the region, the amount of developed land in Palmer continues to increase. The following environmental constraints will affect future development patterns.

Protected Lands

Palmer updated its Open Space and Recreation Plan in 2021 and inventoried its protected open space. In Palmer, open space can be protected from development in several ways that differ in the level of legal protection they provide, the method by which they are protected, and by the type of landowner. When land is "protected," it is intended to remain undeveloped in perpetuity. This level of protection is ensured in one of two ways: (1) ownership by a state conservation agency, a not-for-profit conservation land trust, or the local Conservation Commission; or (2) attachment of a conservation restriction (CR) or similar legal mechanism to the deed.

Palmer has approximately 3,958 acres of protected open space owned in fee by governmental agencies and private, nonprofit groups whose mission is primarily the acquisition and holding of conservation lands. This represents over 19% of the Town's total area of 32 square miles (20,481 acres). The Commonwealth of Massachusetts controls the largest portion (1,819 acres), followed by the Palmer Conservation Commission (691 acres), and the Town of Palmer (646 acres).

MGL Chapter 61, 61A and 61B are land classification programs that help maintain open land by providing tax benefits to maintain forests, agricultural land, and recreational areas. The Town of Palmer currently has 1,503 acres of land designated under Chapter 61 (forest), 1,595 acres in Chapter 61A land (agriculture), and 259 acres in Chapter 61B (open space and recreation).

Topography + Steep Slopes

Generally, any slope zero to fifteen (15) percent is considerable suitable for development. Slopes greater than 15 percent are considered “excessive” or “steep” for residential uses. It is generally preferred to leave steep slopes undeveloped due to the high potential for erosion.

Elevations in Palmer range from 330 feet above sea level within flood plains and river corridors to peaks at Mt. Pattaquatic (1,094 feet) and Colonel’s Mountain (1,129 feet). Steep hills and ridges on glacial uplands with stone outcrops are predominantly located within the Town’s eastern and northern parts, while gentle slopes generally comprise the remainder of the Town. Some lands in Palmer, and more generally speaking, are more prone to problems such as erosion and flooding. Accordingly, they are sensitive to development and intensive land uses. These conditions are influenced by steep slopes and stony and erosive subsoils.

Geology + Soils

Palmer is one of the northernmost towns in Hampden County within the central uplands of Massachusetts. It sits at the confluence of three rivers forming the Chicopee River, south of the Quabbin Reservoir and east of the Connecticut River Valley on the Worcester Plateau. The geology of the Town and its larger region reflects the relatively recent glacial history that imprinted its effects on the land. Moderately thick ice-deposited glacial till and exposed bedrock in the rugged uplands intermingle with glacial out wash terraces and alluvial deposits in the major river valleys and floodplain terraces.

Soil types and percolation rates are some of the major limiting factors for development and influence land uses. As the demand for new homes increases, developers and engineers are devising new technologies to overcome previous obstacles such as steep slopes and unsuitable soils. Soil types and subsurface geology affect water infiltration and surface drainage. Consequently, soils are a major factor in determining natural wildlife population communities as well as land use, where and what type of development in each area. According to the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources and Conservation Service Soil Survey, there are four major soil associations that make up the Town’s land area. These include the Charlton-Woodbridge-Paxton Association, Narragansett-Charlton Association, Hinckley-Windsor-Merrimac Association, and Brookfield-Brimfield Association. The Hinckley-Windsor-Merrimac Association soils derive from glacial outwash, while the others are glacial till with varying drainage and slope.

Soil erosion is a naturally occurring event but accelerates with the removal of vegetative cover and alteration of natural grades. As reported in the 2014 OSRP, erosion is impacting Palmer’s ponds, wetlands, and rivers. Exposed soils, unpaved roads, and construction sites contribute tons

of silt and sediment to these water resources every year, and this sedimentation interferes with their natural processes and the life cycles of many fish and aquatic species. The Town's Stormwater Management Ordinance has an objective of preventing erosion and sedimentation from land development, and to this end, requires an Erosion and Sediment Control Plan with proper inspection protocols. Stormwater Management Permit applications are reviewed by the Town's Department of Public Works or the Planning Board, depending on the project type.

Flood Plains and Flood Hazard Areas

The 100-year floodplain is defined as an area with 1% chance of flooding in a given year. The floodplain serves as a critical habitat for many plant and animal species and provides some of the most fertile soils in the region. Accurate mapping of the flood plains has been achieved and zoning created accordingly as part of the Federal Government's flood plain insurance program.

Palmer's flood hazard areas are generally associated with the Ware and Quaboag Rivers and their tributaries. Although sites along these rivers are prone to flooding, much of the land along their tributary streams was built upon prior to regulations limiting such actions. The Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRM), which show the 100-year flood areas, including elevations in some study areas, are available for review at the Building Department. Palmer's Zoning Ordinances now prohibit construction or filling in the Flood Plain Overlay District without a Special Permit from the Planning Board. Palmer also incorporates extensive stormwater runoff zoning performance standards for all projects and requires compliance with the Massachusetts DEP Stormwater Management Policy Standards, now incorporated into the Wetland Protection Act's Regulations. The Palmer DPW reviews Stormwater Management permits for 1- and 2-family dwellings, and all commercial development is reviewed and permitted by the Planning Board.

Wetlands and Vernal Pools

Wetlands have many beneficial functions including the protection of public and private water supply, protection of surface and ground waters, nutrient retention, shoreline anchoring and dissipation of erosive forces, pollution prevention, fisheries and wildlife habitat, and aquifer recharge. In Massachusetts, wetlands are protected by the Wetlands Protection Act (MGL Ch. 131 §40). Palmer also further regulates wetlands through a Wetlands Protection Ordinance (Chapter 143, Amended 2015). Under Chapter 143, alterations are prohibited within 50 feet of a bordering vegetated wetland or an inland bank. The Ordinance's "no build zone, no disturb zone" or vegetated buffer strip not only serves as the first line of defense in protecting the beneficial functions of wetlands but also provides water quality protection to wetlands and lakes, flood protection and habitat to a wide variety of wildlife species. A 50-foot buffer is considered a minimum, depending upon site conditions (increased width is recommended in areas with steep slope or high sediment or pollutant concentrations). Wider buffer strips provide wildlife habitat which support a higher diversity of plants and animals (biodiversity).

Palmer is graced with approximately 858 acres of wetlands both along the rivers and floodplains and in other areas. Significant wetland areas occur along the Swift, Ware and Quaboag River

corridors in conjunction with their floodplains; at the State Fish Hatchery on Rt. 32; along King's Brook; and at the confluence of the Swift and Ware Rivers between the villages of Bondsville, Three Rivers, and Thorndike. These wetlands are important in containing stormwater, filtering contaminants, and providing habitat for numerous plant and wildlife species. The Palmer Conservation Commission and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Conservation (DEP) regulate activity around wetlands.

Watersheds

Palmer has numerous water resources, including rivers, ponds, and wetlands. Together, these resources comprise approximately 3 percent of the Town's total land area. Notably, four rivers intersect the Town including the Quaboag, Ware, and Swift Rivers, which form the headwaters of the Chicopee River that flows through Palmer downstream to the Connecticut River. The Chicopee River basin is the largest basin in Massachusetts at 721 square miles, and all of Palmer is within the Chicopee River Watershed – an important sub-watershed within the larger Connecticut River Watershed. The Chicopee River Watershed includes the Swift River, Quaboag River, Ware River, and Chicopee River subbasins. Given these connections, local water resources are integral to regional water systems, and any changes to local water quality can have associated impacts in surrounding towns and the larger region.

Surface Waters

There are four major rivers which pass through the Town of Palmer: the Quaboag, Swift, Ware, and Chicopee. The Quaboag and Swift Rivers have public and handicapped access through Town-owned or public access areas. The Ware and the Chicopee Rivers can only be accessed via private landowners. Negotiations are underway to provide public access to the Chicopee River and the Town-owned old railroad bed used as a habitat corridor and hiking trail. At one time these rivers were a vital economic resource providing waterpower for textile mills, which were built upon their banks. Today, they serve as a resource for recreation, wildlife habitat, and flood control.

In addition to these rivers, there are three lakes and five ponds contributing to a total of 550 acres of open water in Palmer: Forest Lake covers 44 acres and is a Great Pond.³ There is public access through the Commonwealth of MA which purchased the beach and surrounding land in 2020. Both Lake Thompson (32 acres) and Crystal Lake (16 acres) are privately owned. In 2004, negotiations for a housing development by Crystal Lake included restoration of a filled wetland and the creation of a small public access via pedestrian walkway through a lakeside greenspace. Round Pond, Ice House Pond, Allen's Pond and Knox Pond (a glacial kettle hole) are all privately owned. Lily Pond in the Village of Bondsville belongs to the town and has public access. The Commission owns a small piece of land on South High Street to provide better access to the pond.

³ A "Great Pond" is defined as any pond or lake that contained more than 10 acres in its natural state. Ponds that once measured 10 or more acres in their natural state, but which are now smaller, are still considered great ponds. Any project located in, on, over or under the water of a great pond is within the jurisdiction of Chapter 91, the Massachusetts Public Waterfront Act.

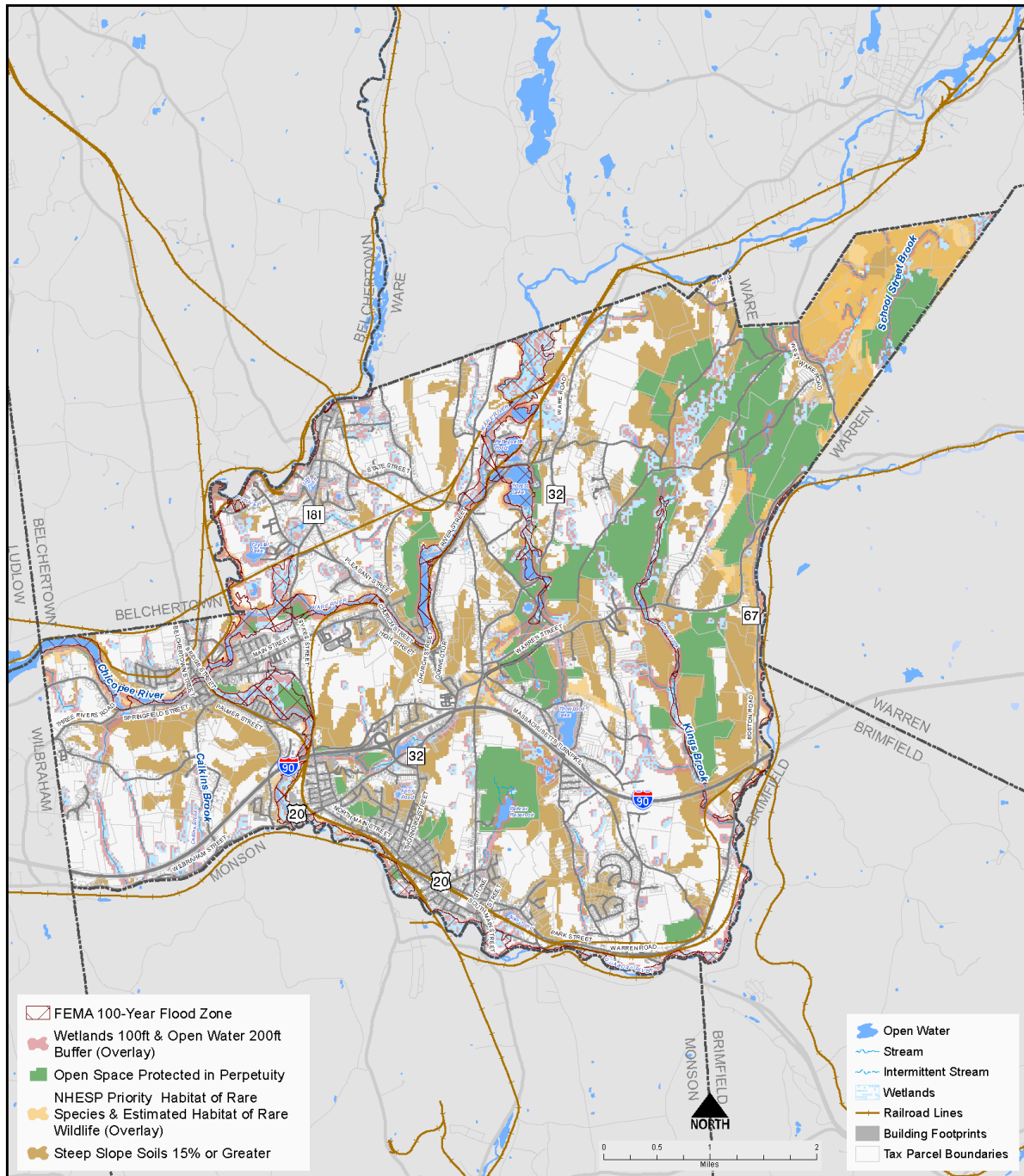
However, there have been no improvements made to the land as of this time. Both Forest Lake and Knox Pond are accessible to both the public and the handicapped.

Aquifer Recharge Areas

There are several aquifer recharge areas in town. Large recharge areas are at the confluence of the Swift and Ware Rivers and at the Quaboag River by South Main Street. Other smaller recharge areas are located throughout Palmer. Permitted, prohibited, and restricted uses within aquifer recharge areas are described in the Town of Palmer Zoning Ordinance, Article XIV. The purpose is to promote the health, safety, and welfare of the community by protecting and preserving the surface and groundwater resources of the town and the region from any use of land or buildings which may reduce the quality or quantity of its water resources.

The following map illustrates environmental constraints in the Town of Palmer.

Environmental Constraints to Development in Northbridge



ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS TO DEVELOPMENT 2023 Housing Production Plan

PALMER, MA

DATA SOURCES:
Map of Palmer, MA
2023 Housing Production Plan
2023

pvpc
Palmer Valley Planning Commission
2023

3.2 Zoning

Zoning is a powerful regulatory tool that allows communities to exercise a level of local control over how land is put to productive use within town borders. Zoning was adopted in the Town of Palmer in 1980 followed by the adoption of a major revision in February 2000. The revised Ordinance was a significant improvement to addressing various residential, commercial, and industrial uses and the maintenance/protection of open space.

As shown on the town's Zoning Map, the town is divided into thirteen zoning districts, including three residential districts, four mixed use districts, three commercial districts, and three industrial districts.

They are as follows:

- Rural Residential (RR)
- Suburban Residential (SR)
- Town Residential (TR)
- Village Center District I – Depot Village (VC I)
- Village Center District II – Three Rivers (VC II)
- Village Center District III – Bondsville (VC III)
- Village Center District IV – Thorndike (VC IV)
- General Business (GB)
- Highway Business (HB)
- Neighborhood Business (NB)
- Industrial A (IA)
- Industrial B (IB)
- Urban Renewal Industrial Park (URIP)

Residential Uses

Among the above districts, the Rural Residential (RR) District is the most prevalent, accounting for more than three-quarters (77%) of the Town. As the Rural Residential District only allows single family housing on lots sized 60,000 square feet or more (with or without public water and sewer), this has maintained a rural character, but may also be limiting housing options for local residents.

Single family homes are also allowed by-right in the Suburban Residential (SR) District (minimum lot size is 30,000 square feet) and the Town Residential (TR) District (minimum lot size is 20,000 to 30,000 square feet depending on the presence of public water and sewer). Meanwhile, two-, three- and four-family homes are only permitted within the TR District and Village Center Districts. In TR, the minimum lot area is 30,000 square feet for two-family homes and 60,000 square feet for three-

or four-family homes. Village Center Districts have minimum setback requirements but no minimum lot sizes.

Townhouses/condominiums/or multi-family units are only allowed in the SR, TR and VC Districts, unless they are for elderly housing. In that case, they are also allowed in the RR District.

In the General Business and Highway Business districts, all types of housing units are allowed.

Accessory Dwellings Units (ADUs) are allowed for family members but require a special permit and site plan approval. Accessory apartments for non-family members are not allowed in the RR District but can be built in the SR and TR Districts subject to a special permit and site plan approval. ADUs are also permitted in the GB, HB, and NB and all 4 VC districts. Also noteworthy is the fact that elderly housing in the form of multi-family units requires a special permit and site plan approval in all residential districts.

Village Center Districts

The Town's four Village Center Districts concentrate denser development in areas that are served by public water and sewer and are proximate to amenities, such as shops and schools. These districts provide for mixed uses, including by promoting commercial and residential uses in a single building (businesses on the ground floor with housing on the upper stories). Busier streets in these districts are afforded higher density allowances, attempting to avoid a strip commercial appearance. These districts are intended to support transit use, provide a buffer between busy streets and residential neighborhoods, and provide new housing opportunities. In the Village Center Districts, all housing types are allowed as well as ADUs.

Overlay Districts

Two overlay districts provide supplemental regulations and standards. They include the Water Supply Protection District and Floodplain District. The purpose of the Water Supply Protection District is to protect the surface and groundwater resources of the Town and the region. The boundaries of this district include any areas lying within the primary and secondary recharge areas of groundwater aquifers and watershed areas of reservoirs that provide public water supply. The Floodplain District primarily includes all special flood hazard areas designated as Zone A, A1-30 on the Town of Palmer Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM), which includes areas of base flood elevation (BFE)—also referred to as the 1-percent annual chance flood or 100-year flood. The master plan notes that in consideration of a changing climate and associated future impacts, good practice in planning has been to also consider moderate flood hazard areas, i.e., areas between the 100-year flood and the 0.2-percent annual chance flood or 500-year flood.

Transfer of Development Rights

The Transfer of Development Rights Ordinance provides for increased density of residential and commercial development in receiving districts, while suitable open space land is permanently preserved from development in sending districts. Sending districts are areas of the Town where

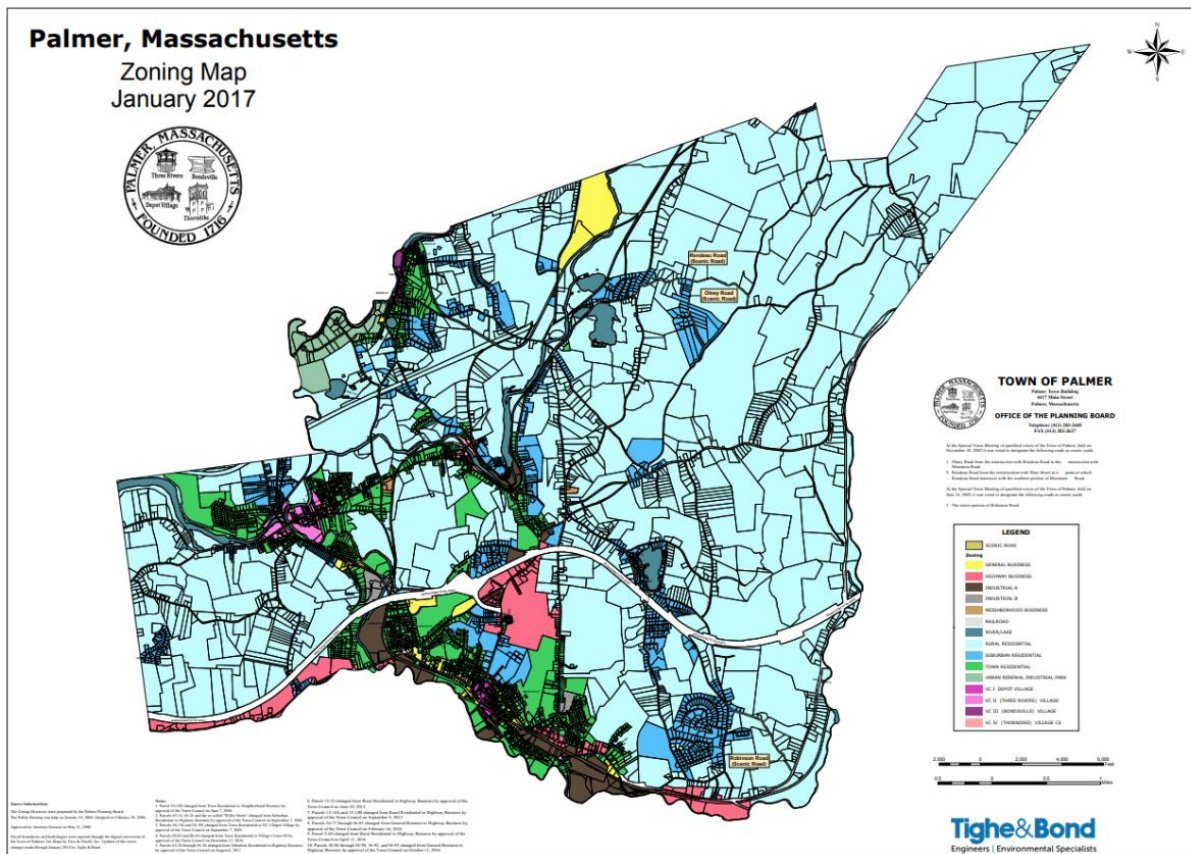
developers sell the development rights to their land, while retaining all other rights, for a fair-market value. Receiving districts are areas where a purchased development right can be transferred, allowing for a greater density than what would normally be allowed through the underlying zoning.

Open Space Residential Development

Open space residential development is intended to promote the location of a variety of housing types clustered together and adjacent to permanently preserved open space. Open space residential development allows for greater flexibility and creativity in the design of residential developments and encourages the permanent preservation of open space, agricultural lands, forest lands and other natural resources including aquifers, water bodies and wetlands, and historical and archaeological resources. Similar to the Transfer of Development Rights Ordinance, the Open Space Residential Development Ordinance has not yet been utilized since its adoption in 2007. However, no subdivision applications of any type have been received by the Town since 2007.

3.3 Town of Palmer Build-Out Analysis

Based on the vacant land uses identified through a review of the Town Assessors Division's 2019 property database and the Town's existing land use regulations, a build-out analysis was performed to determine Palmer's new development potential as part of the 2021 Master Plan process. Informing this analysis were environmental constraints, which removed areas of potential build based on development difficulty (i.e., steep slopes greater than 25 percent), natural resource protection (i.e., wetlands [100-foot buffer] and rivers/streams [200-foot buffer]), open space protection (both permanent and temporary), and hazard avoidance (i.e., flood hazard areas [1 percent and .2 percent]). Applying the number of allowable residential units per acre provided by the Town's Zoning Ordinance, along with the Town's average household size in 2020 (2.384), Palmer could potentially grow by as many as 2,973 new units and 7,197 new residents. This represents a high development scenario, where the maximum allowable units per acre are developed (e.g., four family homes built, where allowed, instead of a single-family home). These figures can be useful in calculating the potential impact of new residential development on local services and the potential opportunities for existing and new residents for affordable housing.



3.4 Infrastructure Conditions and Capacity

Water Supply

Palmer utilizes four private water districts, which serve approximately 50% of the town's potential customers within the four villages. The water lines were mainly established to service the older mill housing and have not been expanded to cover much more than the centers of the villages over the years. The departments have been working on system upgrades over the years, which have included re-lining water lines and increasing the water supply and pressure to the areas they service.

More recently, the districts have been in discussion with the Palmer Town Manager about consolidating the four water districts. Although the districts are longstanding and take pride in the services they provide, it has been challenging for each individual district to keep up with increasing maintenance needs and regulatory requirements. In fact, the Thorndike Water District has already had to abandon its own sources and obtain water from the other three districts. Additionally, the complexity of the multi-district system has been a barrier to development, including housing. Obtaining access to existing public utilities and finding the correct entity to communicate with has created additional hurdles for property owners and developers. This is an

ongoing discussion at present and will not be immediately resolved, but future housing growth will depend on the successful outcome of streamlining the water supply services in Palmer.

Stormwater

The Town's stormwater infrastructure is aged, over 80 years old, and is in poor condition. Additionally, its capacity is inadequate. Drainage issues in many areas of the Town have caused stormwater flooding, resulting in hazardous conditions such as icy roads.

In addition to being undersized for current and future rainfall patterns. Palmer does not currently have a stormwater infrastructure management plan. Relatedly, projects in the Town typically develop to minimum stormwater design standards under the current Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection calculations. The community has raised concerns that this has recently resulted in extreme flooding, erosion, and excessive run-off, and will likely continue to do so until the State's stormwater design standards are updated, which is currently under way. Also, increasing regulatory requirements, namely related to the federal Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) permit, are increasing management costs to the Town. To fund needed improvements and maintain regulatory compliance, the Town is exploring the feasibility of a stormwater utility/enterprise fund.

Wastewater Disposal

The Town's Water Pollution Control Facility is on the banks of the Ware River at 1 Norbell Street and discharges treated effluent into the Chicopee River in Three Rivers. This facility was first operational in 1979, uses the activated sludge process to reduce organic matter present in the wastewater, and has a current service population of 18,000, including parts of Monson. This facility is located within the 0.2 percent annual chance flood hazard area.

The Town's sewer system is comprised of 58 miles of pipe, 10 pump stations, and 50 grinder pumps. Palmer's sewer system services 50% of the residences within the town. The sewer system has been completely separated from the stormwater discharge system. This major upgrade was complete in 2012 and will result in a significant improvement to the health of the riverways by eliminating discharge, during peak rain events, of combined surface runoff/sanitary wastewater through the combined sewer outfalls (CSO). The Town's fiscal year 2021 flat rate for sewer was \$247 (\$494 a year), which represents an increase of 33.5 percent since fiscal year 2009.

Solid Waste Management

The Town of Palmer does not provide curbside trash or recycling pickup. However, recycling can be dropped off at the Department of Public Works Garage on the first Saturday morning of each month. There is a compost area off of Old Warren Rd., open to Palmer residents only, to drop off grass clippings and leaves every weekend, Saturday, and Sunday except during winter. Residents must also dispose of their own trash and can do so at the Warren Transfer Station on South Street in Warren, about a 10-20-minute drive from most parts of town. They may also subscribe for trash pick-up services with a licensed hauler, who is required to also offer

recyclable pick-up services. Palmer residents also have the option of buying a Transfer Station permit from the Town of Wilbraham.

Transportation Infrastructure

The Town of Palmer has a premier location in Western Massachusetts, about 20 road miles east of the City of Springfield and 35 road miles west of the City of Worcester—both major population and economic centers in the region. Palmer is connected to these centers and other regional assets, such as the University of Massachusetts Amherst and other schools in the Five College Area, via direct access to Interstate 90 (Massachusetts Turnpike) (east/west), as well as Routes 20 (east/west), 32 (north/south), and 181 (north/south). The Town relies on this regional transportation network, along with local roads, bicycle and pedestrian trails, and commercial train lines for its economic vitality and to establish vital social and resource connections.

Bikeways and Paths: Trail biking, hiking, and walking paths exist along many of the historic cart paths throughout the rural northeastern section of town, namely along Bacon, Brown, Tavern, Rondeau, Smith and St. John's Roads. An active trail committee maintains many of these historic ways for recreational use, as well as trail ways throughout the Midura Family Conservation Area including McMaster Road. A recent road improvement along MA Route 67 (Boston Road) also included a dedicated bike lane.

Mass Central Rail Trail: The Mass Central Rail trail is a partially complete multi-use path that, upon its completion, will offer 104 miles of trail connecting Boston to Northampton, making it the longest rail trail in the northeast. Approximately 51 miles of trail are open today, with the remaining sections either under active construction or planned for future construction. Once complete, the Mass Central Rail Trail, formerly the path of the Massachusetts Central Railroad, will connect 25 communities, including Palmer, providing a "linear park" for bicyclists, hikers, joggers, and walkers alike.

Rail: Conrail runs freight rail service to the east and west coasts and New England Central Railroad offers north and south freight service with an interchange in Palmer. The Mass Central Railroad, with 26 miles of rail line from Palmer to South Barre, MA, connects with Conrail, New England Central Railroad and Canadian Pacific Railroad. As mentioned above, there is potential for Palmer to host a passenger rail stop once again, as part of the proposed East-West Passenger Rail project. The former rail station and sites for a potential new station are in the aptly named Depot Village.

Pedestrian Facilities: The majority of the Town's sidewalks are in the more densely populated urban areas of town within the village centers, with fewer sidewalks located in the more rural areas. The Town is actively repairing and replacing sidewalks to allow for safer pedestrian access. Many of the bus stops and village parks are located and accessible along roadways that have sidewalks, making for convenient and safe pedestrian connections. The Town's Subdivision Regulations and Site Plan Review include requiring sidewalks within and connected to the existing public accesses. In some cases, the Planning Board may also require bike paths to be located within certain residential developments.

School System

The Palmer School District is comprised of two schools serving students in Pre-K through 12, Old Mill Pond Elementary and Palmer High School. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the District served 1,134 students during the 2021-22 school year, a decrease from the prior year (1,188 students). Among its 2022 enrollments, 59 percent are low-income, 22 percent are students with disabilities, and 4 percent are English language learners. Given the population projections for Palmer that show a gradual decrease in residents, there may not be additional students enrolling over the next several years. However, if a new passenger rail stop is built, new analyses and projections will need to be made, given the potential residential build-out discussed above together with an increased interest in Palmer due to the rail access.

Due to declining enrollments, the Palmer School District closed the Converse Middle School after the 2016-17 school year. The following school year, grades 6-8 were integrated into the facility housing Palmer High School. As a result, the high school is reportedly constrained for space and the layout is not ideally suited for either middle school or high school functions. A new use for the Converse Middle School has yet to be identified; housing may be a possibility.

In addition to Palmer High School, residents have the option of sending their children in grades 9-12 to the Pathfinder Regional Vocation Technical School at 240 Sykes Street. Other member communities of this school include Belchertown, Granby, Hardwick, Monson, New Braintree, Oakham, Ware, and Warren. As of the 2020-21 academic year, enrollments at Pathfinder Regional totaled 610 students, with a student/teacher ratio of 8.9 to 1.25. The former Converse Middle School, Old Pond Elementary, Palmer High School, and Pathfinder Regional Vocation Technical School all serve as emergency shelters.

Chapter 4: Housing Production Implementation Strategies

This chapter of the Housing Production Plan will lay out the current status of housing development and set forth the Town's strategies to increase the number and proportion of affordable units.

4.1 Housing Development Status

There has been very little housing development in Palmer over the past 10-15 years. There have been no new subdivisions proposed or completed since 2010 and no multifamily projects except a seasonal resort at Forest Lake. The resort will include a 220-unit seasonal cottage development that was proposed in 2019 and will break ground in 2023.

A 40B housing development proposed in the early 2000s has been only partially completed. The Crystal Lake Village Condominiums were intended to be a 44-unit development on 15 acres abutting Crystal Lake, located on Ain's Road between Thorndike Village and Bondsville. Thus far, 12 units have been completed, with nine privately owned. The remaining three units, along with the development rights to the remainder of the project (32 additional units) were put up for auction several years ago. The project was to include 11 permanently deed-restricted affordable units, including the three completed and vacant ones. At this time, the project remains incomplete with no indication of future plans.

Two new housing projects are planned on Shearer Street in Depot Village, pending sewer upgrades in the area. The Town is seeking funding for sewer infrastructure upgrades along Thorndike Street and an extension of the sewer lines down Shearer Street. If this occurs, these two projects will be feasible:

- At 358 Shearer Street, Cunningham Equities, LLC is planning to demolish a blighted building and construct 68 market rate housing units with commercial amenities including personal services, dining, fitness & retail.
- At 250 Shearer Street, Wellman Realty LLC is planning to build a new 2-story facility for the Palmer Health Care Center and renovate the current 1-story facility as a 25-unit affordable housing complex.

Several town buildings and properties have been promoted for possible housing development through Requests for Proposals, including the former Converse Middle School in Depot Village, the former Thorndike Grammar School on Main Street in Thorndike, and the former Holbrook site at 1412-1416 Main Street in Depot Village. Another potential development site is the Thorndike Mill complex on Church Street, now the focus for a new mill re-use overlay zoning district.

More details on these properties are included below under Section 4.3, Housing Production Goals and Strategies.

4.2 Palmer's 10% Affordable Housing Goal (Chapter 40B)

Palmer has 262 units of affordable housing listed on the town's Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI), which is 4.5% of the town's year-round housing stock as defined by the 2020 Census. The

Town of Palmer Housing Production Plan

town would need to add 321 additional subsidized housing units – more than double its current total – to meet its 10% affordable housing goal. Of Palmer’s 262 units, only 3 are owned units, the remaining are rentals.

It is also important to note that numerous units currently included in the Town’s SHI inventory will be removed from the list due to expiring affordability restrictions. In 2023, 27 units at Kirkwood Place on Main Street will expire, which will have a significant impact on Palmer’s overall affordable

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF HOUSING AND LIVABLE COMMUNITIES CH40B SUBSIDIZED HOUSING INVENTORY								
Palmer								
DHCD ID #	Project Name	Address	Type	Total SHI Units	Affordability Expires	Built w/ Comp. Permit?	Subsidizing Agency	
2365	Laurel Manor	Fletcher St.	Rental	48	Perp	No	EOHLC	
2366	Kirkwood Place	4216 Main Street	Rental	27	2023	No	RHS	
							EOHLC	
2368	Palmer Green Estates	Beacon Drive	Rental	156	2046	No	MassHousing	
							EOHLC	
4413	DDS Group Homes	Confidential	Rental	28	N/A	No	DDS	
8712	Crystal Lake Village	off Fuller Road	Ownership	3	perp	YES	MassHousing	
Palmer Totals				262	Census 2020 Year Round Housing Units			5,828
					Percent Subsidized			4.50%

housing count.

The state sets housing unit production goals for each municipality for the purpose of providing municipalities annual target numbers to work toward. The annual housing target numbers reflect 0.5% of a community’s housing stock as determined by the latest decennial census. Palmer contained 5,828 housing units in the year 2020, therefore Palmer’s annual affordable housing unit production target is anticipated to be 29 affordable housing units per year.⁴

The Town of Palmer will need to complete the following Housing Production Plan requirements for the state to approve this Housing Production Plan. The Town will work with the Palmer Housing Authority, the Palmer Planning Board and other town boards to complete the necessary steps for this plan to become a state-approved housing plan.

4.3 Housing Production Goals & Strategies

The Town of Palmer has identified the following housing goals and objectives. Working to achieve these goals will help to ensure that Palmer is a community where housing affordability, housing choice and fair access to housing is ensured for all community members.

⁴ [H1: HOUSING UNITS - Census Bureau Table](#)

4.3.1 *Participation in regional collaborations addressing housing development*

The Town Planner will participate in the Valley Development Council and Regional Housing Committee, which oversee regional progress and implementation under the Valley Vision 2: Regional Land Use Plan, Pioneer Valley Plan for Progress, and the Regional Housing Plan.

Timeline: Immediate

4.3.2 *Identify characteristics of proposed residential or mixed-use developments that would be preferred by the municipality.*

- Palmer has identified “missing middle housing” as a concept it would like to explore to widen housing choices. Missing middle housing types can consist of a wide range of unit types that fall between single-family and multi-family units with medium densities including duplexes, triplexes, small cottage homes, townhouses, multiplexes, and live-work units. Missing middle housing can be designed to accommodate a range of household sizes and can cover a range of price points, allowing for housing diversity within the same development. Palmer will work to identify zoning changes that will be necessary to accommodate these additional housing typologies in appropriate areas of Palmer.
- When reviewing age-friendly policies in Palmer, it was identified that there are no housing opportunities for older adults with supported services in Palmer such as assisted living facilities or nursing homes. There are also very few subsidized units that are handicapped accessible. A priority for housing types will include alternatives to single-family homes for seniors looking to downsize such as courtyard apartments or small single-story homes. These homes should be affordable in price and also require minimal maintenance. The Town will consider what types of incentives could be used to encourage these types of development.
- The proposed East-West passenger rail station in Palmer that would connect Boston to Springfield has led to discussions on potential transit-oriented development opportunities near a future rail station. Palmer would like to see mixed-use development located near existing or future businesses to create a node of activity in and around the proposed rail station. Such development could utilize existing historic buildings and could attract younger populations and professionals and support the Town’s economic development.

Timeline: Ongoing

Milestones: Development of these various housing types will depend on the other strategies in this Housing Production Plan. Some of these types of housing will rely on the development of specific zoning bylaws (see below). The proposed East-West rail plan is still in the infancy of planning and finding funding sources and is likely numerous years away from potential service, but development around a new rail station could begin sooner depending on the project timeline.

4.3.3 *Identification of zoning districts or geographic areas in which the municipality proposes to modify current regulations for the purpose of creating SHI Eligible Housing units to meet its housing production goal.*

- Palmer will prioritize creating new opportunities for multi-family residential development where appropriate. Currently, multi-family dwellings are allowed only in the Town Residential District but not the Rural or Suburban Residential districts. However, the Town Residential District has almost no remaining buildable parcels while the Rural and Suburban districts do have substantial available land. Thus, the Town should undertake a review of current zoning districts and boundaries to consider whether vacant land could be re-zoned to Town Residential in areas that would be compatible for higher density, walkable development (such as those areas closest to the existing village centers). This review should be considered in connection with future infrastructure expansions which are needed to upgrade substandard sewer, storm drainage, roads, and sidewalks in order to support additional development capacity.
- Palmer would like to place a focus on housing choices located in the Town's village centers. In order to diversify the types of housing options allowed, and to encourage the creation of non-single family units where already allowed in the village centers, Palmer should engage in a review of dimensional, density and use regulations along with the associated approval processes. This will enable the Town to examine what barriers may currently be preventing development in the village centers and what types of incentives, such as density bonuses, could be utilized to encourage such development. The Town will engage property owners and would-be developers as part of this process.
- Palmer currently allows Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) to a degree in residential zones subject to Special Permit and Site Plan Approval. The Town can lessen the regulatory threshold for ADUs in order to encourage more of these housing units in ways that can be introduced into a suburban area without negatively impacting the rural-suburban experience.
- An Open Space Residential Development Ordinance was adopted in 2007 but has yet to be utilized. This may be due to the requirement for a special permit, whereas traditional subdivision development is allowed by-right, or it may be due to low demand. In any case, the Town will consider changes to this permitting process in order to encourage cluster development for unit creation that aligns with the Town's open space preservation goals.
- As mentioned above, Palmer may in the future host a station on the East-West passenger rail line from Boston to Springfield. This development would spur TOD opportunities surrounding a new rail station in downtown Depot Village and in the general vicinity of Main Street where existing rail tracks intersect with Bridge Street. Should this rail project

move forward, Palmer will work to identify opportunities for mixed-use, mixed-income housing units. The Master Plan recommended the development of a “Neighborhood TOD Plan” that would be drafted in collaboration with the public, property owners, developers, and the Town to begin considering TOD opportunities in anticipation of the future rail station. One possible model for development could be the recently enacted housing requirements for communities that are served by the MBTA in central and eastern portions of Massachusetts which require housing development in proximity to transit.

Timeline: One to three years.

The Master Plan Implementation Committee is currently working to move forward with numerous recommendations. Some actions, such as making amendments to existing zoning ordinances, could be accomplished within the calendar year 2023, while other tasks such as creating a Neighborhood TOD Plan would require significantly longer planning processes.

Milestones:

- Revise ADU regulations and Open Space Residential Development Ordinance (2023)
- Review of Town, Suburban and Rural zoning districts and boundaries for potential re-zonings and expansion for multi-family development (2024)
- Review of dimensional, density and use regulations along with the associated approval processes in the village centers and possible development incentives (2024)
- Neighborhood TOD Plan process to review potential rail station development (2024 through 2025)

4.3.4 Identification of specific sites for which the municipality will encourage development of affordable housing.

▪ **Future Rail Station (Main Street at Bridge Street)**

This Depot Village site, dependent on the future of the East-West Rail project, could be redeveloped into multi-story, mixed-use development with businesses and residential apartments that could particularly attract those who may commute to eastern Massachusetts or work remotely.

▪ **Knox Pond Condominium Site**

This property is across from the Oak Knoll Cemetery in Depot Village. At present, 36 market-rate condominiums are planned for the site. However, there is potential for additional units, and these could be mixed income including SHI-eligible.

- **Depot Village Property**

L6 High Street, Map 7, Lot 6, is a vacant 90-acre parcel adjacent to downtown Palmer (Depot Village) and is served by public water and sewer. This site was recently included in a zone change from residential to highway business to encourage the reuse of the Converse Middle School and accommodate infill housing should a passenger rail stop be located downtown. The Highway Business district allows for a variety of mixed commercial and residential uses as well as various housing development types.

- **Former Saint Bartholemew's Catholic Church Property, 1 State Street**

Previously owned and operated by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield, the ca. 1880 Saint Bartholomew's (St. Bart's) Church building was closed in 2009. It went into private ownership in 2018 and is currently being marketed for potential mixed commercial uses. The commonly owned, adjacent .67-acre vacant lot has previously received interest as a separate housing development where there is potential to locate several affordable housing units.

- **Thorndike Mill Complex (4145 Church Street)**

This five-acre site is comprised of seven buildings and in the past was a major employment center of the village, manufacturing paper-based egg cartons through the late 1900s. The property was deemed historically significant in the 2009 Palmer Reconnaissance Report and has received priority focus from both the town and landowners for significant redevelopment opportunities. The Master Plan identifies this location as a potential site for rezoning into a "Mill Reuse Overlay District" for a mixed-use project that could include "commercial and light industrial activities, as well as residential uses, to foster creativity in growth." The residences would be located on the upper floors where some of the units could be mixed income including SHI-eligible.

- **Three Rivers Grammar School, 2010 Bridge Street**

This former elementary school is under private ownership and is currently used to store the owner's personal belongings. Like the Thorndike Grammar School, this building is centrally located within the village and would be an excellent location as a future housing site to include affordable units.

- **Crystal Lake Village Condominiums (Ain's Manor Road)**

This site was designated for a 40B housing development in the early 2000s but was not completed. The development was intended to include 44 units on 15 acres abutting Crystal Lake. Thus far, 12 units have been completed, with nine privately owned. The remaining three units, along with the development rights to the remainder of the project (32 additional units) were put up for auction several years ago. The project was to include 11 permanently deed-restricted affordable units, including the three completed and

vacant ones. At this time, the project remains incomplete with no indication of future plans, but the property remains buildable.

Timeline: Further development of any of these or other sites will be a medium-term prospect (2025-2027).

Milestones:

- Continue to seek funding for sewer infrastructure upgrades along Thorndike Street and the extension of sewer lines along Shearer Street. This will allow the existing proposals for affordable housing to proceed.
- Revive the Crystal Lake Condominiums project and seek a new developer. Ensure that the original agreement for 11 permanently affordable units remains in place.
- For other Town-owned properties, continue feasibility and/or site planning efforts (2023-2024).
- Discuss other potential opportunities with Town officials and local residents (2023-2024).
- Market one or more properties as a 40B opportunity or rezone areas to indicate desired future use (2024).
- Work with potential housing developers, including Wayfinders, to develop a mix of market rate and subsidized housing (2024-2025).
- Potential new construction (2025-2027).

4.3.5 Identification of municipally owned or Housing Authority-owned parcels for which the municipality or Housing Authority commits to issue requests for proposals (RFP) to develop SHI Eligible Housing.

These properties would ideally be developed for mixed-income housing and possibly mixed uses. However, it is extremely difficult to solicit interest in developing subsidized housing in the former school buildings, due to the exorbitant costs involved. There has also been little interest in developing the vacant Holbrook site for housing. The Town will seek developers for these properties and will encourage and promote affordable housing but cannot guarantee that it will be built.

▪ **1412–1416 Main Street (former Holbrook site)**

This 0.62-acre site near the center of Palmer has existing infrastructure in place that could be targeted for mixed-use redevelopment. It is zoned Village Center (VC1) which allows

for multi-family dwellings and can be built as high as five stories. It is a 43D Priority Development Site, and build-out water and traffic studies are available for the property.

- **Converse Middle School Building (24 Converse Street in Depot Village)**

The Town is seeking a new use for the ca. 1910 Converse Middle School and had investigated modernizing it for municipal use, but the costs were prohibitive. It is possible that a housing developer, specifically one intending to build for residents age 55 and over, can redevelop the site.

- **Thorndike Grammar School Building (4023 Main Street in Thorndike Village)**

The former Thorndike School building is owned by the Town, and there has been some interest over the last few years in redevelopment for housing, up to 8 units. The Town has worked with interested parties to create an RFP for this purpose.

Timeline: These properties, and any others identified, would potentially be developed in the next few years (2024-2027).

Milestones:

- Market one or more properties as a 40B opportunity or rezone areas to indicate desired future use (2024).
- Work with potential housing developers, including Wayfinders, to develop a mix of market rate and subsidized housing (2024-2025).
- Potential new construction (2025-2027).

Additional Strategies

- Consider creating a “Friendly 40B” policy that would encourage the pursuit and promotion of low- and moderate-income housing that qualifies under the state’s regulatory requirements in partnership with private or non-profit organizations.
- Seek local adoption of the Community Preservation Act (CPA), through a community-led effort. This would provide necessary funding for expanding local housing initiatives. This could involve disseminating educational materials that explain the value of the CPA as well as engaging the public through forums and presentations.
- Understand the barriers to and incentivize the creative re-use of older, underutilized properties – for example, converting unused commercial space into housing or converting older single-family homes into multifamily buildings. Look into what regulatory changes may be required to facilitate these types of adaptive

reuse projects and identify potential parcels and structures that may be well suited to such redevelopment.

- Once the Community Preservation Act is in place, explore the formation of a municipal housing trust, which would allow Palmer to collect and segregate funds for local affordable housing initiatives. (See funding resources below, as well as Massachusetts Housing Partnership's guide, [Creating a Housing Trust Fund – Housing Toolbox](#)).

Timeline: These steps can begin in 2023 and may be ongoing through 2028.

Milestones:

- Discuss and develop a "friendly 40B" policy with particular sites and/or areas of town in mind (2023-24)
- Begin community education and outreach around the Community Preservation Act (2023-2024).
- Examine potential regulatory changes necessary to allow mixed use development of underutilized properties (2023-2024)
- Bring the Community Preservation Act to a vote (2025).
- Explore the formation of an Affordable Housing Trust (2025-2026)
- Create Housing Trust and transfer CPA funds for housing (2027-2028).

4.4 Potential Funding Sources

Community Preservation Act Funds

Once adopted, the Act requires towns to dedicate at least 10% of the monies raised to each of the following three categories: open space, historic preservation, and affordable housing. The remaining 70% can be spent on one or all of these three uses, however the community sees fit.

CPA funds can be used for numerous affordable housing initiatives, including rehabilitation or modification programs, predevelopment costs related to property purchases, purchases of property, assistance to private affordable housing developer, or subsidizing one or more units that are existing or under construction for affordable housing. Funds can also be used to develop outreach materials related to affordable housing and to hire staff or a consultant for planning and administrative purposes.

Most pertinent to this Housing Production Plan, CPA funds can be used for the “acquisition, creation, preservation and support of community housing; and for the rehabilitation or restoration of...community housing that is acquired or created [with CPA funds].” A number of CPA communities also allocate funds to physically preserve existing aging affordable housing units, such as at a local housing authority property, although the CPA specifically states that “funds expended pursuant to this chapter shall not be used for maintenance.” (Chapter 44B, Section 5(b)(2)). Rehabilitation or restoration of community housing is only eligible if the property was acquired or created with CPA funds.

In addition to the eligible activities described in Section 5(b)(2), the law allows the municipality to appropriate CPA funds to an affordable housing trust fund per Section 5(f) and to fund regional projects.

Affordable Housing Trust Fund

As identified above, Palmer will explore the adoption of a Municipal Housing Trust which can be used in tandem with the Community Preservation Act.

Under Section 5(f) of the CPA statute, CPA funds may be allocated to a Municipal Housing Trust, and Community Preservation Committee (CPC) members may be represented on the trust board to create overlap and integrate communications between the two municipal entities. Communities may establish the housing trust fund under the Municipal Affordable Housing Trust Fund Law (MGL c.44 s.55C), allowing them to collect funds for affordable housing from various sources, segregate them out of the general municipal budget, and use the funds for local initiatives to create and preserve affordable housing.

Since the law passed in 2005, approximately 70 communities in Massachusetts have established municipal housing trust funds, raising the overall total of communities with local housing trusts to approximately 80. Communities use a variety of funding sources to establish the trusts, including general funds, CPA funds, tax title funds, cell tower lease payments, negotiated developer fees, and others. In most communities with housing trusts, CPA funds are the most common source of funds. In fact, many CPA communities appropriate CPA funds to their trusts in excess of the 10 percent minimum annual expenditure for community housing required by the CPA statute.

Community Development Block Grant Funding

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds are federal dollars that are distributed annually by the state to complete housing and economic development projects. Palmer has obtained significant CDBG funding in the past, including over \$6.8 million to rehabilitate 355 housing units, benefiting 804 residents. The Town has also used the funds to provide housing workshops to 851 households in the region, benefiting 2,150 people.

Other Funding Sources

State and federal funding and financing sources to assist with the development of affordable housing do exist, and experienced affordable housing developers know these funding sources well. Affordable housing developers often coordinate several (8+) funding sources in order to move such projects forward. Some of those funding sources include Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), Local Initiative Program (LIP), HOME investments Partnership Program, and Capital Improvement and Preservation Fund (CIPF). Valley Community Development (Valley CDC) is an excellent resource on funding for affordable housing as is Wayfinders.

4.5 Key Players for Affordable Housing Initiatives

The key players in town that can work together to address housing need are the: Palmer Town Council, Palmer Town Manager, Palmer Planning Board, Palmer Housing Authority, Palmer Council on Aging, town hall staff, regional housing partnerships, and regional community development corporations.

Palmer Town Council: The Town Council members are elected by the town voters. The Town Council have legislative powers of the town and appoint the Town Manager to carry out the executive responsibilities of that position. The Council must approve all appropriations of town funds and amendments to the Zoning Ordinance.

Palmer Town Manager: The Town Manager is the Chief Executive Officer for Palmer. He is responsible to the Town Council for the day-to-day operation of town affairs. His responsibilities include directing and supporting the work of all Department Managers in performing their assigned functions consistent with Massachusetts General Laws, the Palmer Town Charter, and the policies and goals established for the community by the elected Town Council.

Palmer Planning Board: The Planning Board guides development as specified by the Palmer Zoning Ordinance and Massachusetts General Law. The Planning Board makes recommendations for zoning bylaw changes to the Town Council. The Planning Board reviews and approves all subdivisions.

Palmer Housing Authority: Provides broader local oversight of affordable housing initiatives in town. Has legal authority to purchase and hold property in accordance with M.G.L. Chapter 121B, Section 126. (Currently under the purview of the Monson Housing Authority).

Palmer Council on Aging: The Council on Aging runs the senior center and provides nutrition, transportation, and social services for the increasing population of older adults in town. Staff are in tune with elderly housing needs.

Town of Palmer Housing Production Plan

Town Residents: Under council-manager government, local governments can actively engage and involve their residents in community decision making. Residents can guide their community by serving on boards and commissions, participating in visioning and strategic planning sessions, and designing community-oriented local government services. Extensive public outreach should occur on proposed affordable housing initiatives or projects to ensure that town residents are adequately informed.

Regional Resources:

Wayfinders: This agency is a non-profit regional housing agency serving western and central Massachusetts. Wayfinders administers a large percentage of Section 8 vouchers for the region on behalf of the state, including the Housing Choice Voucher Program in Northbridge. It also plans, builds and manages affordable housing projects. [Welcome to Way Finders | Way Finders](#)

Valley Community Development (Valley)

Valley Community Development is a nonprofit formed in 1988 to address the growing needs of low-and moderate-income people through developing and preserving affordable rental and ownership housing, cultivating economic self-sufficiency, and fostering community leadership. The Valley Community Development service area is comprised primarily of Northampton, Easthampton, Amherst, and Hadley though they serve all of Hampshire and Franklin counties for homeownership and small business services. [Valley Community Development, Northampton, Hampshire County \(valleycdc.org\)](#)

Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC):

The PVPC provides municipal planning assistance to communities in its service area and beyond, including master planning, zoning, and housing planning. The PVPC also convenes the Regional Housing Committee.

Town of Palmer Housing Production Plan

Municipal approval of this plan by

Planning Board:

Date:

and

Town Council

Date:
