



Gateway Hilltowns Economic Development Strategy June 2017

Sponsored by the Hilltown Collaborative and Mass Development



This report has been formatted for two-sided printing.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Methodology	2
1.2 Project Area Overview.....	2

2. Existing Conditions

2.1 Review of Existing Plans	6
2.2 Familiarization Tour.....	7
2.3 Town of Blandford – Community Profile.....	7
2.4 Town of Chester – Community Profile	12
2.5 Town of Huntington – Community Profile	17
2.6 Town of Middlefield – Community Profile	22
2.7 Town of Montgomery – Community Profile	27
2.8 Town of Russell – Community Profile	32

3. Public Engagement

3.1 Vision.....	38
3.2 Stakeholder Interviews.....	39
3.3 Public Meetings	44

4. Tourism Asset Identification

4.1 Selection Criteria Matrix	48
4.2 Asset Inventory Map	56
4.3 Asset Inventory Table.....	57
4.4 Sample Travel Itineraries.....	62

5. Assets, Challenges & Opportunities

5.1 Assets	66
5.2 Challenges	66
5.3 Opportunities / Project Ideas.....	67

6. Vision, Goals and Recommendations

6.1 Vision Statement	70
6.2 Goal Categories	70
6.3 Recommended Action Items.....	71

7. Implementation Plan

7.1 Implementation Matrix	82
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Photo: Wild and Scenic Westfield River

1 Introduction

In 2016, the Hilltown Collaborative, a group representing the economic interests of the Towns of Blandford, Chester, Huntington, Middlefield, Montgomery, and Russell, received a Community Compact grant, administered by MassDevelopment through its technical assistance program to prepare a multi-town Economic Development Strategy.

The purpose of this study is to identify the natural and cultural assets of the communities that comprise the Hilltown Collaborative and develop a strategy that leverages those assets to:

- Increase the number of visitors to the Gateway Hilltowns,
- Improve the quality of the visitor experience,
- Create jobs and promote economic activity,

Section Contents

1.1 Methodology

1.2 Project Area Overview

- Attract new businesses, workers and residents to the region by showcasing the natural and cultural assets and quality of life of the Gateway Hilltowns.

1.1 Methodology

The Hilltown Collaborative contracted with Elan Planning, Design and Landscape Architecture PLLC to prepare an Economic Development Strategy that outlines steps to increase tourist visitation as a meaningful way to enhance economic growth in the Gateway Hilltowns. To accomplish this task, the project team worked closely with a Steering Committee to complete the following:

- Gather input from residents, property owners, business owners and other stakeholders through an extensive public engagement process.
- Identify the natural, cultural and man-made assets located within the six communities that make up the Gateway Hilltowns.
- Develop a ranking system to identify those assets with the greatest potential to attract visitors and potential residents to the area.
- Map the top thirty premiere tourism assets utilizing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data.
- Prepare a Vision Statement, Goals and Recommendations.
- Prioritize the recommended action steps in an Implementation Matrix.

1.2 Project Area Overview

Regional Location Context

Located in Western Massachusetts, the Gateway Hilltowns is comprised of six rural towns located in Hampden and Hampshire counties. The area is characterized by natural beauty, quaint architecture, an abundance of undeveloped land, and a relaxed lifestyle.

The towns are strategically located within a short drive to a number of well-known Berkshire tourist attractions: Jacob's Pillow Dance (9 miles from Chester), Lee Premium Outlets (16 miles), Tanglewood Music Venue (22 miles), and the Norman Rockwell Museum (24 miles), as well as Westfield State University.



An opportunity exists to provide a complimentary tourist experience based on the natural and man-made attractions that the Gateway Hilltowns offer. A connection needs to be fostered between the well-established Berkshire brand and the authentic tourism offerings of the Gateway Hilltowns, including the area's natural beauty, cultural heritage tourism activities, and outdoor recreation.

The primary transportation access to the Gateway Hilltowns is via Interstate 90 (east-west). One of the concerns raised by the community is the lack of an exit along the Massachusetts Turnpike (Mass Pike) within the Gateway Hilltowns. Residents and business owners stated during the planning process that they feel that without direct access to the Mass Pike, attracting visitors, businesses, and new residents to the area will be difficult.

Demographic Overview

The study area, which includes the towns of Middlefield, Chester, Huntington, Blandford, Montgomery and Russell, covers over 117,000 acres (175 square miles). The majority of land use within the Gateway Hilltowns is classified as undeveloped land (78%). Approximately 2.5% of land is classified as agricultural and another 2.25% is used for residential.



According to 2010 US Census data, the Gateway Hilltowns are home to 7,884 people. American Community Survey census data for 2014 indicates that the Gateway Hilltowns total population dropped by 2% in the year 2014 to 7,744 residents. This represents the first decrease in population over the past five decades.

The age of the population in the Gateway Hilltowns has also starting to shift. 2014 Census data indicates that there has been a steady decrease in the number of school age children since 2000, and an increase in the number of residents ages 45 and up.

Most residents of the Gateway Hilltowns (88%) commute out of their town of residence for work, and the majority (57%) are employed in the services industry. This figure is followed by 17% employed in the arts, entertainment and recreation industry sector, and 11% employed in the health care and social assistance sector.

A detailed socio-economic and demographic profile of each of the six towns that make up the Gateway Hilltowns is provided in Section 2: Existing Conditions.



Photo: Fairgrounds

2 EXISTING CONDITIONS

To gain a better understanding of existing conditions, the project team worked with the Steering Committee to:

- Review existing plans and studies
- Participate in a day-long familiarization tour
- Analyze socio-demographic data
- Prepare community profile for each of the six towns that comprise the Gateway Hilltowns.

Section Contents

- 2.1 Review of Existing Plans
- 2.2 Familiarization Tour
- 2.3 Town of Blandford
- 2.4 Town of Chester
- 2.5 Town of Huntington
- 2.6 Town of Middlefield
- 2.7 Town of Montgomery
- 2.8 Town of Russell

EXISTING CONDITIONS

2.1 Review of Existing Plans

Within the past several years, the communities that comprise the Gateway Hilltowns have engaged in a variety of planning exercises resulting in plans and studies. As part of the planning process, the project team reviewed the following local and regional planning, tourism, and economic development reports:

- Route 112 and Jacob’s Ladder Trail/Route 20 Scenic Byways Trails Linkages Project: Highlands Footpath Action Plan (2016)
- Healthy Hilltowns (2016)
- Jacob’s Ladder Trail Scenic Byway Tourism Marketing Strategy (2014)

Route 112 and Jacob’s Ladder Trail/Route 20 Scenic Byways Trails Linkages Project: Highlands Footpath Action Plan

Completed in 2016, the Highlands Footpath Action Plan identifies an overall strategy to establish a long distance walking trail from October Mountain State Forest in Lee to DAR State Forest in Goshen, Massachusetts. The proposed Highland’s Footpath, Spur and Connector will utilize existing roads and trails located in the Gateway Hilltown communities of Middlefield, Chester, Blandford, and Russell.

Healthy Hilltowns

In 2016, a Healthy Hilltowns report was prepared for ten communities located in the Hilltowns region of Western Massachusetts, including the towns of Blandford, Chester, Huntington, Middlefield, and Russell. The report provides recommendations to address key issues facing the communities as they relate to healthy communities, recreation, open space and town revitalization. The report recognized that based on the Hilltowns’ location and rich asset mix, opportunities exist to grow a robust tourism industry and “explore complimentary business development, such as B&Bs, restaurants, bike shops, gas stations, campgrounds, breweries, outfitter, etc.”.

Jacob’s Ladder Trail Scenic Byway Tourism Marketing Strategy

A Tourism Marketing Strategy was prepared in 2014 to increase the awareness and use of the 24-mile scenic byway, with the goal of increasing visitor spending in the region. The Gateway Hilltowns of Russell, Huntington and Chester are located along

the Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway. Marketing strategies to increase visibility of the Byway include: development of a Gateway, Signage & Wayfinding Plan; establishing a "gateway" at the anchor communities of Lee and Russell; and, partnering with existing organizations around the country to showcase the scenic byway and promote nearby attractions on their websites.

2.2 Familiarization Tour

On July 18, 2016, the Steering Committee hosted a familiarization tour for the members of the Project Team. The group toured all six towns and visited numerous tourism assets, municipal centers, and opportunity areas.



2.3 Town of Blandford – Community Profile

History¹

The largest of the Gateway Hilltowns, Blandford was established as a Scots-Irish Presbyterian community in the 1700's. The town's location along the Boston to Albany route spurred the establishment of a series of industries. Blandford grew as an agricultural and small industrial town throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Blandford's population peaked in 1800 at 1,778 residents. In 1840, rail service to Blandford was established, allowing for increased access for visitors and commerce. Blandford has been a vacation destination and summer retreat for nearby cities since the 1800's, its higher elevation offering respite from the summer heat in cities like nearby Springfield.



¹ GatewayHilltownHistory.com

But, as transportation improvements have made long distance travel easy, Blandford's role as a tourist destination has waned.

Tourism Overview

The Blandford Ski Area is one of the largest attractions in the Gateway Hilltowns, but is very seasonal by nature. The Bel Canto Opera at the White Church is similarly seasonal. Identifying ways to utilize these attractions throughout the entire year may have potential to increase the impact of tourist visitation on a year round basis.

Size

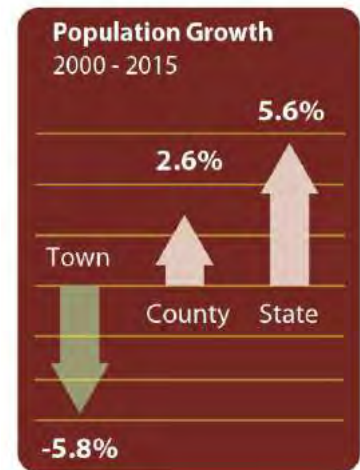
Blandford covers 53.5 square miles and is the largest Gateway Hilltown. Blandford accounts for 31% of the Gateway Hilltowns total land area.

Land Use Coverage

The largest Gateway Hilltown, Blandford consists of over 85% forest followed by almost 6% wetlands. Residential land accounts for less than 2% of the land coverage in Blandford. Blandford contains over 1,000 acres of water, the most of any Gateway Hilltown.

Population

With 1,144 residents, Blandford is the 4th most populous Gateway Hilltown. Blandford's population has been gradually declining over the past 15 years, unlike the state as a whole and Hampden County. However, due to the small sample size this is an approximate estimation. Over the course of the 20th century Blandford's population grew steadily the 1960 census counted 636 residents and the 1980 census counted 1,038.²



Population Trends				
	2000	2010	2015	Change 2000-2015
Blandford	1,214	1,233	1,144	-5.8%
Hampden County	456,228	463,490	468,041	2.6%
Massachusetts	6,349,097	6,547,629	6,705,586	5.6%

Source: US Census, 2015 ACS

Population Projection

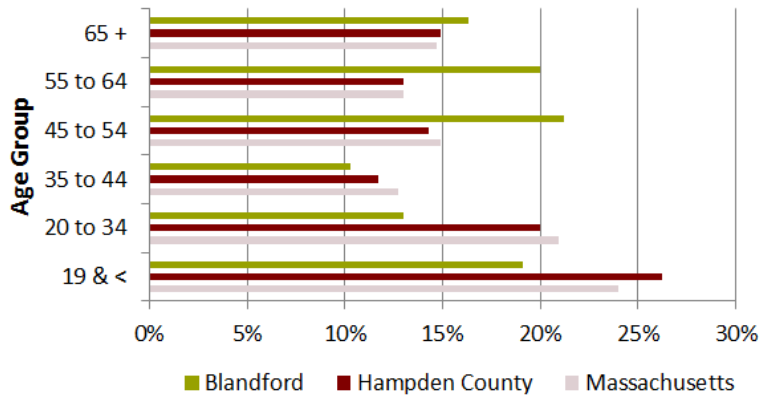
The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MASSDOT) utilizes population projections for service planning throughout the state. The most recent projections for Blandford from

² US Census

MASSDOT forecast an eventual population increase to 1,219 in 2040, approximately the same population as counted at the 2000 Census.

Age

Blandford is the second oldest Gateway Hilltown and most of the population is over the age of 45. There are fewer school age children and young workers living in Blandford. Older residents are over-represented in Blandford as compared to Massachusetts and Hampden County.

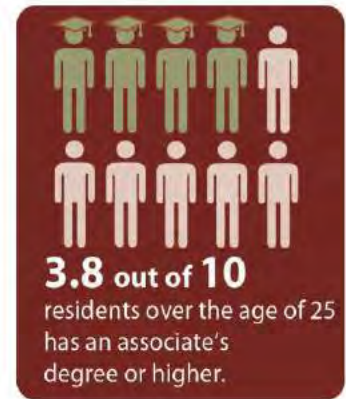


Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates



Education

Blandford residents are slightly less educated than the rest of the state of Massachusetts as a whole but are on par with other Hampden County communities. There are fewer residents in Blandford who have received a four year degree or graduate level education. Older (55+) residents across the US have lower educational attainment rates while younger residents are more likely to have a 4-year college education. Blandford's larger portion of older residents may skew the educational attainment rates to the lower side.



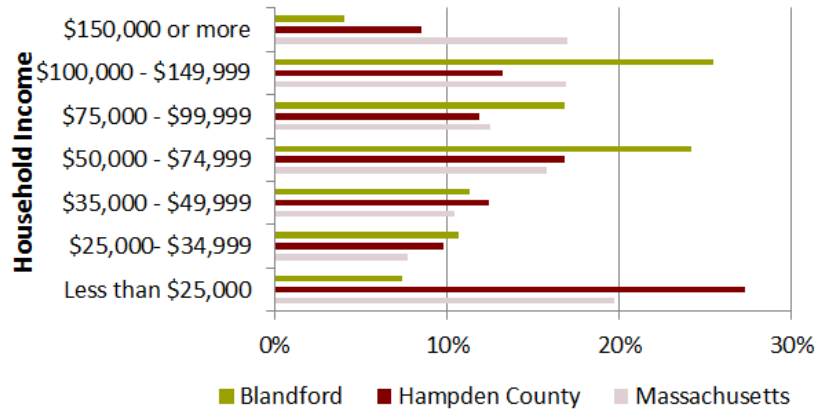
Educational Attainment (Population 25+)			
Highest Level of Education	Blandford	Hampden County	Massachusetts
High school graduate	33.6%	30.8%	25.4%
Associate's degree	10.6%	9.4%	7.7%
Bachelor's degree	16.5%	15.6%	22.8%
Graduate or professional degree	11.2%	10.2%	17.7%

Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Income

Blandford families have a median household income of \$71,458, the 3rd highest of all the Gateway Hilltowns. Blandford residents generally make substantially more than other communities in Hampden County and slightly more than Massachusetts as a whole.



Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Employment Rates

The 2015 American Community Survey 2015 5-year estimates recorded that 72% of Blandford's population over the age of 15 is in the labor force and the unemployment rate was 7.2%.

Occupational Clusters

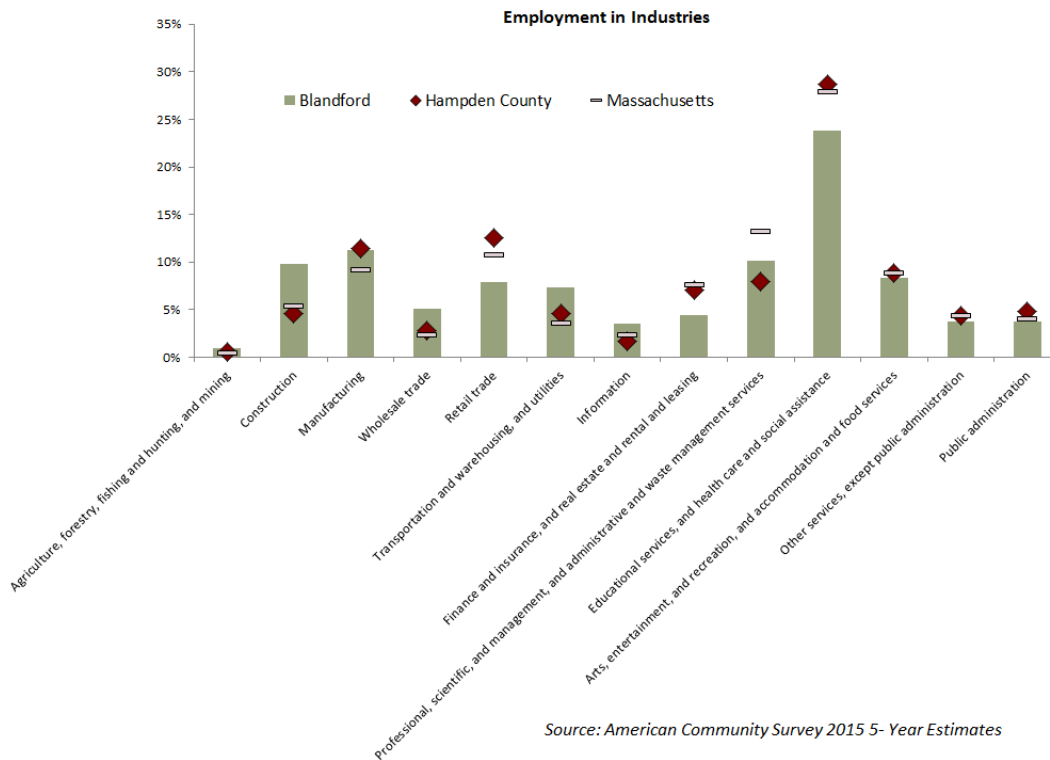
Over one third of Blandford workers are employed in management, business, science and arts occupations, less than in the state as a whole. There are a greater proportion of Blandford workers employed in service occupations than there are in the state as a whole.

Occupational Clusters			
Field	Blandford	Hampden County	State
Management, business, science, and arts occupations	35%	34%	44%
Service occupations	22%	21%	18%
Sales and office occupations	18%	25%	23%
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations	11%	8%	7%
Production, transportation, and material moving occupations	14%	13%	9%

Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5- Year Estimates

Industry Sectors

The industry sector employing the largest number of Blandford's workers (as for all of the Hilltowns) is educational services and health care and social assistance. The "construction" and "transportation and warehousing, and utilities," industry cluster hire proportionately more workers from Blandford than from the rest of the Hilltowns.



Summary of Key Findings

Blandford's established outdoor attractions and cultural events are regionally significant. Formal attractions like the Blandford Ski Area are complimented by protected natural land and trail systems. Retail and commercial activity is limited in Blandford and most workers commute out of town. If Blandford is successful in efforts to establish a local access point to the Mass Turnpike, the town could face increased development pressure from second home owners and commuters. Blandford's population is stagnant or declining slightly. Educational attainment levels are above that of the county but below that of the state. Household incomes in Blandford are higher than regional levels but below that of the state as a whole. Blandford

residents are older, the second oldest of the Gateway Hilltowns, and there are fewer school age children living in the town.

2.4 Town of Chester- Community Profile

History³

Chester's fate has long been tied to its abundant natural resources and connections to transportation routes. Agriculture then water-powered industries followed by mining and quarrying drove Chester's development. The Town's rich mineral deposits lend its name "The Gem of the Valley" and secured the towns prosperity for over a century. Technological advances have rendered many of Chester's famous mineral deposits obsolete.

Three separate areas of Chester were primary development points; Chester Center, Chester Village and Chester Factory Village. Chester Village later became Huntington as it grew into a town center in its own right. Chester Center, which has been designated a historic district, is located on Chester Hill and served as the center of Chester until Route 20 and the railroad were established. Chester Factory Village located along the Westfield River, Route 20 and the railway is the primary population center today.

Service from the Boston and Albany Railroad connected residents to the surrounding population centers- Chester residents could take the train to Springfield for a Saturday night movie. At one point the railway running through Chester was the steepest rail route in America. The opening of the Mass Turnpike and the discontinuance of passenger service from Chester in the mid-20th Century has slowed the pace of life in town considerably.

Tourism Overview

Chester is central to many of the Gateway Hilltowns outdoor and cultural attractions. The existing downtown area could serve as a central staging area for visitors interested in pursuing a varied itinerary of activities in the Gateway Hilltowns.

Strategic Sites/ Opportunity Areas

Chester has considerable access to outdoor recreation areas but does not have a coordinated approach to managing access points for residents and visitors alike. Chester's historic downtown



³ Hidden-Hills.com, GatewayHilltownHistory.com

contains multiple vacant structures that are of historic and architectural interest.

The Chester Railway Museum hosts an annual festival and offers rustic accommodations in the summer. Inside of the restored rail station is a unique collection of mining and railroad history. However, due to lack of full time staffing, the Museum is not open full-time.

Another opportunity site identified by the community is the former Chester Grammar School, located at the corner of Main Street and Route 20. This historic building is privately owned and currently used as a storage facility by a prominent New York City-based costume designer.

Size

Chester encompasses 37.1 square miles and is the 2nd largest Gateway Hilltown. Chester accounts for 21 % of the total land area of the Gateway Hilltowns.

Land Use Coverage

Chester, like all of the other Gateway Hilltowns is primarily forested. The other primary land coverages are agricultural, residential and water.

Population

Chester's population of 1,546 makes it the third most populous Gateway Hilltown. In the past 15 years Chester grew by approximately 18%, gaining over 200 residents. However, due to the small sample size this is an approximate estimation.

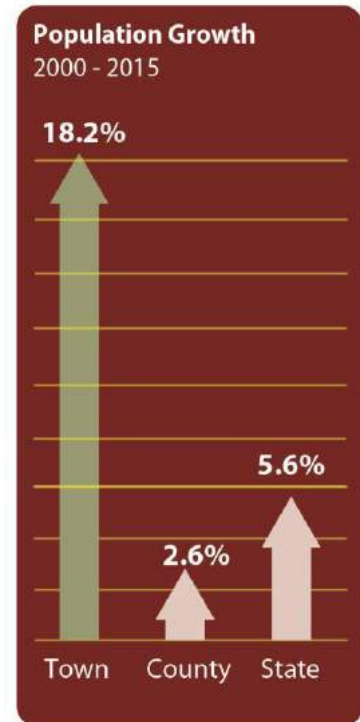
Population Trends				
	2000	2010	2015	Change 2000-15
Chester	1,308	1,337	1,546	18.2%
Hampden County	456,228	463,490	468,041	2.6%
Massachusetts	6,349,097	6,547,629	6,705,586	5.6%

Source: US Census, 2015 ACS

Population Projection

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MASSDOT) utilizes population projections for service planning throughout the state. The most recent projections for Chester from MASSDOT forecast an eventual population decrease to 1,270 in 2040.

Age

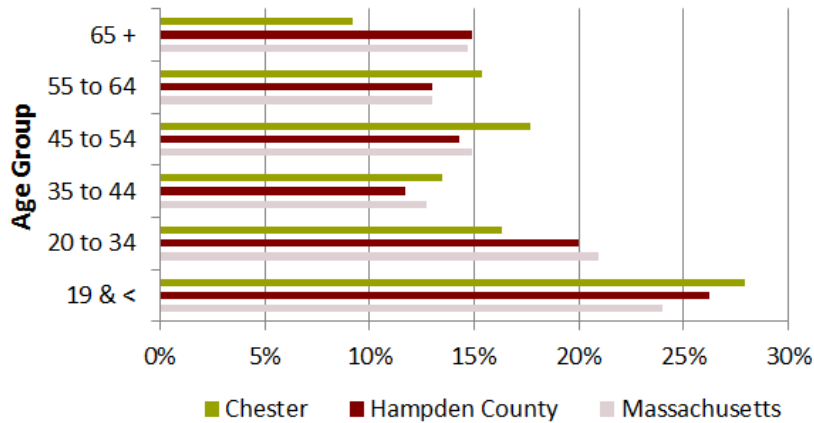


40.3

Median Age of Chester Residents, the youngest of all Gateway Hilltowns

IONS

Chester is the youngest Gateway Hilltown and half of the population is under the age of 40. There are more school age children and young workers living in Chester. Chester has far fewer elderly residents as compared to Massachusetts and Hampden County



Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Education

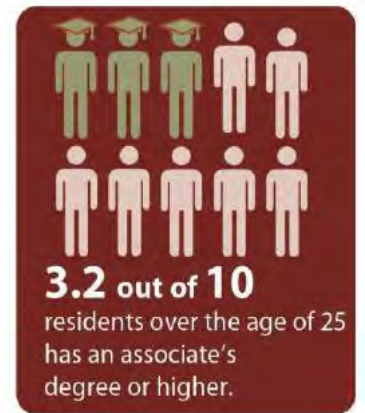
Chester residents have slightly lower educational attainment levels than the other Gateway Hilltowns and the rest of the state as a whole.

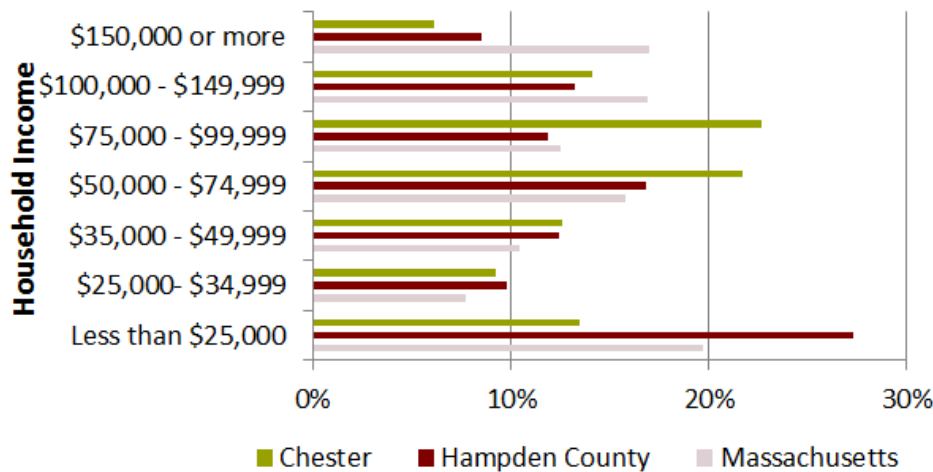
Educational Attainment (Population 25+)			
Highest Level of Education	Chester	Hampden County	Massachusetts
High school graduate	41.5%	30.8%	25.4%
Associate's degree	11.2%	9.4%	7.7%
Bachelor's degree	12.2%	15.6%	22.8%
Graduate or professional degree	8.8%	10.2%	17.7%

Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Income

Chester families have a median household income of \$67,738, the second lowest in all of the Gateway Hilltowns.





Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Employment Rates

75% of Chester residents over the age of 15 are in the labor force. At the time of the 2015 American Community Survey the unemployment rate was 8.2%.

Occupational Clusters

One third of Chester workers are in the “managements, business, science, and arts” occupations. This is the largest occupational cluster for Town workers, but there are proportionately fewer workers in this cluster than in the other Hilltowns and the state. There are more workers in the occupations of “production, transportation, and material moving,” in Chester than in the other Gateway Hilltowns and the state.

Occupational Clusters			
Field	Chester	Hampden County	State
Management, business, science, and arts occupations	30%	34%	44%
Service occupations	19%	21%	18%
Sales and office occupations	20%	25%	23%
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations	13%	8%	7%
Production, transportation, and material moving occupations	19%	13%	9%

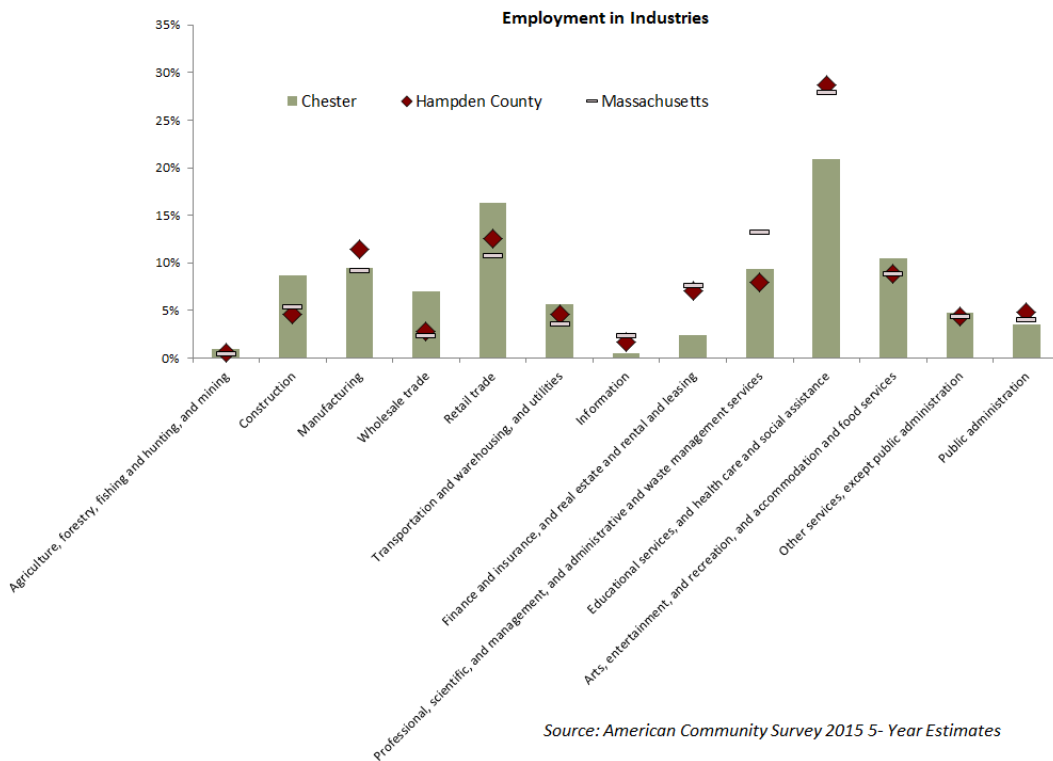
Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5- Year Estimates

Industry Sectors

Out of the six Gateway Hilltowns, Chester has the largest proportion of people working in the retail trade and wholesale

EXISTING CONDITIONS

trade. The largest industry sector (as for all of the Hilltowns) is educational services and health care and social assistance. Chester employs very few people in Information and in Agriculture/Forestry. Chester is second only to Middlefield in terms of the number of residents employed in the “arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation food services industry”



Summary of Key Findings

Chester has the youngest population of all the Gateway Hilltowns, a charming town center, existing tourism assets, ample outdoor recreation options and good access to Scenic Byway 20. Demographically, Chester has the youngest population with the lowest median family income. Chester residents, like all members of the Gateway Hilltowns tend to commute long distances to employment centers. Just as Chester’s central location in the Gateway Hilltowns contributes to long commutes, it also requires that visitors travel a long distance to reach Chester.

2.5 Town of Huntington – Community Profile

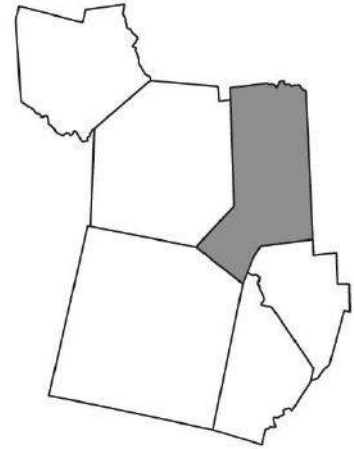
History⁴

Huntington has existed as a town only since its incorporation in 1855 when a growing town center was carved out from surrounding towns. Initially an agricultural community, Huntington's primary industries up until the early 20th century were textile and paper manufacturing. The Town's situation on the Westfield River allowed for the establishment of multiple water-powered mills. Unlike most of the Gateway Hilltowns, over the past 50 years (with the exception of a small downward trend between 2010 and 2015) Huntington's population has grown at a modest rate. Huntington has the largest population and the largest concentration of institutional and commercial buildings in all of the Gateway Hilltowns.

Strategic Sites/ Opportunity Areas

The walkable retail/ commercial area that abuts the municipal campus could provide a walkable, centralized location for new businesses to cluster. Huntington has a fairly large supply of vacant structures that could be stabilized and reused.

- **St. Thomas Catholic Church-** The church was stabilized and outfitted with modern facilities including an elevator. It's central location and ability to host large groups of people made the idea of its use as a performing arts/ visual arts center popular. Other ideas included renting the space to an outdoor outfitter to compliment the outdoor recreation offerings in the area, or a community center. The highlight of this site may be that it has high-speed internet. This could allow the building to serve as a business incubator or shared working space.



Tourism Overview

Huntington hosts a large portion of the Gateway Hilltowns water based recreational activities that are capable of attracting a wide variety of visitors. Like Chester, Huntington's historic downtown could be further developed to serve as a stepping off point for visitors to the areas outdoor recreation attractions.

⁴ HuntingtonMA.us & GatewayHilltownHistory.com

Size

Huntington encompasses 26.8 square miles making it the 3rd largest Gateway Hilltown, encompassing, 15% of total land area of the towns.

Land Use Coverage

Huntington contains the least amount of forest area of all six Gateway Hilltowns, and the most amount of residential land coverage. "Urban/Public Institutional" accounts for 68 acres, a full 41% of all land in that category in the entire Hilltown Communities.

Population

Huntington's population of 2,180 is the highest population of the Hilltowns and represents 26 percent of the Gateway Hilltown population. Over the past 15 years Huntington's population lost 182 residents. However, due to the small sample size this is an approximate estimation.

Population Trends				
	2000	2010	2015	Change 2000-15
Huntington	2,174	2,180	1,992	-8.4%
Hampshire County	152,251	158,080	160,759	5.6%
Massachusetts	6,349,097	6,547,629	6,705,586	5.6%

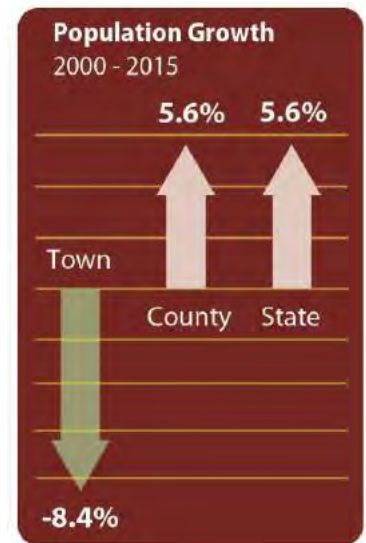
Source: US Census, 2015 ACS

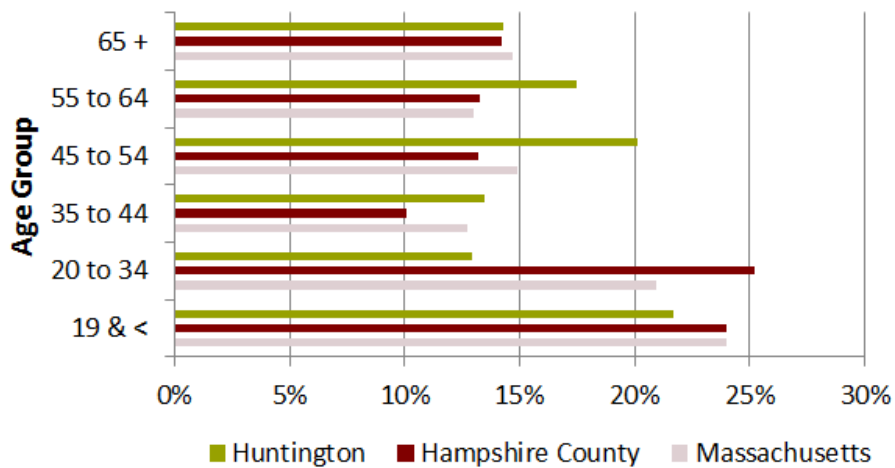
Population Projection

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MASSDOT) utilizes population projections for service planning throughout the state. The most recent projections for Huntington from MASSDOT forecast an eventual population increase to 2006 in 2040.

Age

Huntington residents are the third youngest of the Gateway Hilltowns but are older than both county and state residents. The cohort of school age children is relatively smaller than the county and state. The 20-34 age cohort is markedly smaller than the county or state.





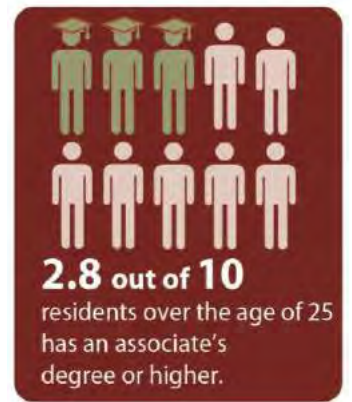
Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Education

Fewer Huntington residents have achieved a 4-year or master's degree than the average rate for the county and state. 28% of the population over the age of 25 have achieved an associate's degree or higher. The proportionately larger percentage of older residents could partially explain this, since older generations are less likely than younger generations to have gone to 4 year schools.

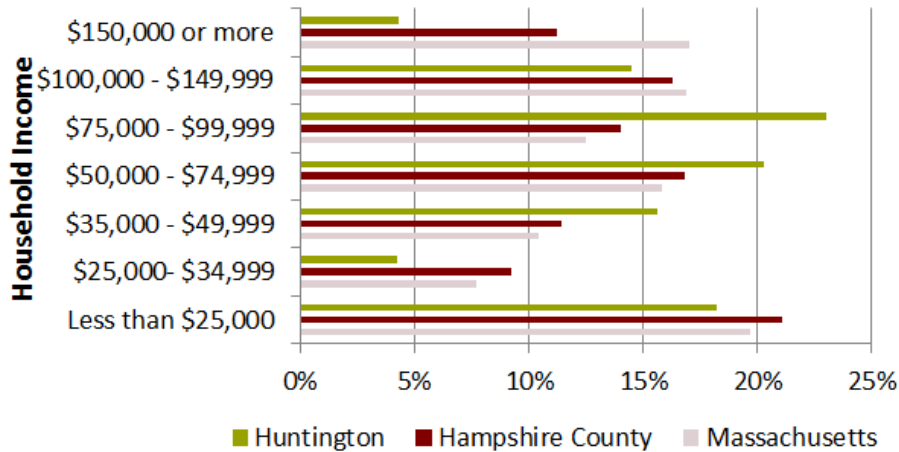
Educational Attainment (Population 25+)			
Highest Level of Education	Huntington	Hampshire County	Massachusetts
High school graduate	38.1%	24.2%	25.4%
Associate's degree	12.0%	9.3%	7.7%
Bachelor's degree	9.2%	21.6%	22.8%
Graduate or professional degree	6.7%	22.6%	17.7%

Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates



Income

Huntington families have a median household income of \$62,976, the lowest of all of the Gateway Hilltowns. Despite being the lowest of all of the Gateway Hilltowns, the Huntington median family income is still greater than that of Hampshire County.



Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Employment Rates

Sixty-nine percent (69%) of Huntington residents older than 15 years are in the labor force. At the time of the 2015 American Community Survey the unemployment rate was measured at 3.4%, far lower than most other Gateway Hilltowns. This lower unemployment rate may be explained by the relatively lower proportion of residents in the work force.

Occupational Clusters

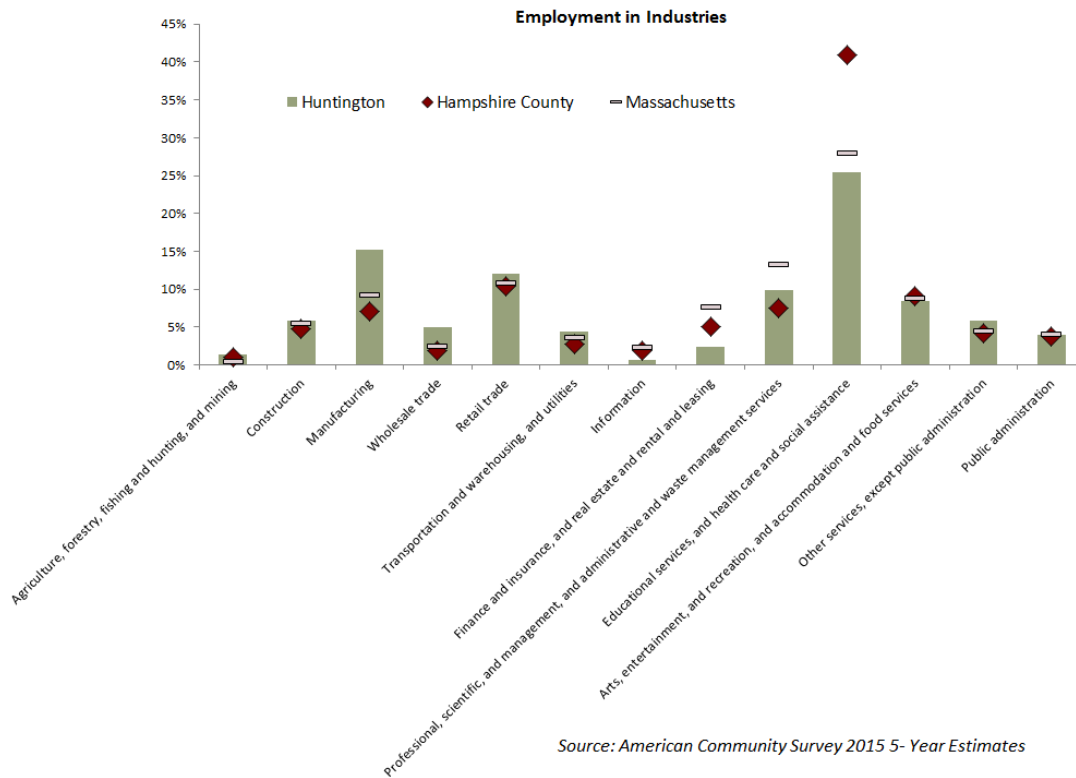
More than one third of Huntington workers are employed in the management, business, science and arts occupations, less than in the state as a whole. "Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations" employ more people in Huntington and the Gateway Hilltowns than the state as a whole.

Occupational Clusters			
Field	Huntington	Hampshire County	State
Management, business, science, and arts occupations	33%	46%	44%
Service occupations	17%	18%	18%
Sales and office occupations	21%	22%	23%
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations	13%	7%	7%
Production, transportation, and material moving occupations	16%	8%	9%

Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5- Year Estimates

Industry Sectors

The industry sector employing the largest number of Huntington's workers (as for all of the Hilltowns) is educational services and health care and social assistance. Manufacturing is the second largest industry and employs more workers than the Hilltown average.



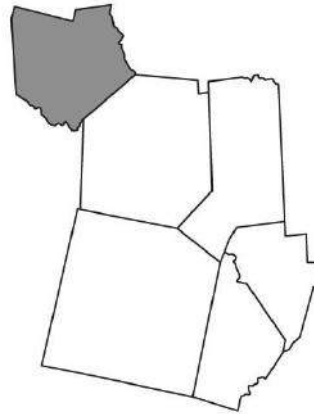
Summary of Key Findings

Huntington has the largest population and a large mix of tourism assets. Most residents commute to out of town locations to work and earn slightly less than the median family income in the Hilltowns. Huntington is fortunate to contain multiple outdoor recreation areas that are maintained by the US Army Corps of Engineers. There are ample opportunities to develop existing assets to provide a unique experiential brand of tourism.

2.6 Town of Middlefield – Community Profile

History⁵

Middlefield, pieced together from five different towns, was incorporated as a town 1783. Initially a sustenance farming community, the introduction of grazing animals resulted in town wide prosperity and the clearance of 75% of the town's forest coverage. In the mid-19th century rail service allowed residents to ship their products to a wider market and to develop as a manufacturing town. However, by the early 20th century a series of natural disasters and a changing national economy had crippled local industries. Now, second homes and some tourism driven by the town's natural beauty and setting are the primary industries. The Town center is largely vacant and commercial activity is minimal.



Tourism Overview

The premier attraction in Middlefield is the scenic Glendale Falls. The cascading waterway is owned and managed by The Trustees of Reservations. Visitors come from the surrounding region to view the 150 foot drop and enjoy the short hike from the parking access.

The Middlefield Agricultural Fair is held every August and can attract thousands of people over the course of a weekend. The fair was established in 1856 and is one of the oldest running agricultural fairs in the Country. Events like the “Frying Pan Toss” are local traditions that draw in visitors from the region.

AzureGreen a large mail-order and retail store specializing in all things metaphysical, is located near the Middlefield Fairgrounds on Bell Road. AzureGreen is also the site of Beltane Hill at the Blossom Center, a meeting space that hosts community events and potluck dinners.

Strategic Sites/ Opportunity Areas

The Middlefield Fairgrounds could support additional event programming. Middlefield's modest Town Center is the only area zoned for commercial business but some of the primary structures are used for road maintenance vehicle and supply storage.

- **The Middlefield Country Store:** located in the center of Town, this site occupies a key location. The Middlefield

⁵ MiddlefieldMA.com

County Store was identified by the community as a good location for a potential café, a visitor’s center, gift shop selling local products, crafts. It is of note that the structure has been vacant for ten years.

Size

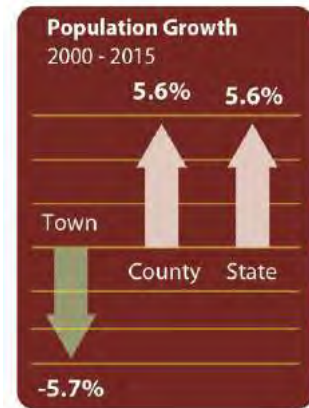
Middlefield encompasses 24.1 square miles making it the 4th largest Gateway Hilltown. Middlefield accounts for 14% of total land area of the Gateway Hilltowns.

Land Use Coverage

Over 90% of Middlefield is forested. Pasture, cropland and low density residential are the next largest uses.

Population

Middle field’s population of 511 is the smallest of the Gateway Hilltowns. Between 2000 and 2015 the population slowly declined by 5.7% due to a loss of 31 residents. The town’s small population make understanding demographic trends complicated by small sample sizes.



Population Trends				
	2000	2010	2015	Change 2000-15
Middlefield	542	521	511	-5.7%
Hampshire County	152,251	158,080	160,759	5.6%
Massachusetts	6,349,097	6,547,629	6,705,586	5.6%

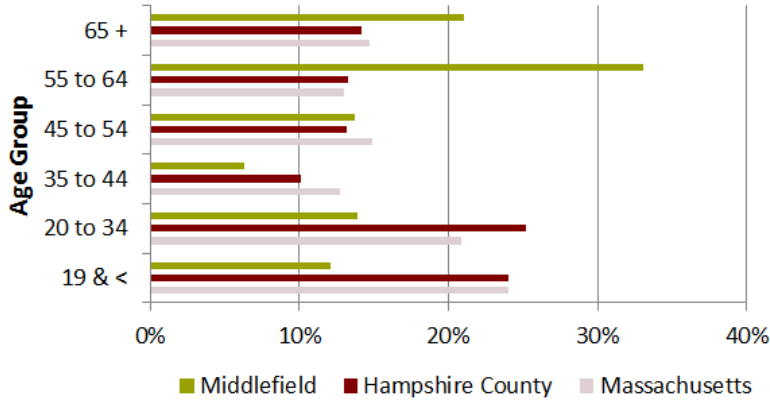
Source: US Census, 2015 ACS

Population Projection

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MASSDOT) utilizes population projections for service planning throughout the state. The most recent projections for Middlefield from MASSDOT forecast an eventual population decrease to 469 in 2040.

Age

Middlefield has the highest median age of all the Gateway Hilltowns. The 55 to 64 year old cohort and the 65+ cohort are both far above Hampshire County and state levels.



Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

56.1

Median Age of Middlefield Residents, the oldest of all Gateway Hilltowns

Education

Middlefield's residents, despite having a high median household incomes have relatively lower educational attainment levels. A high school diploma is the highest level of education for 40% of Middlefield's population. As is the case in all of the Gateway Hilltowns, a lower educational attainment rate for the overall population can partially be accounted for by the larger than average 55+ age cohort whom tend to be less likely than younger cohorts to have a 4 year education.



3.2 out of 10

residents over the age of 25 has an associate's degree or higher.

Educational Attainment (Population 25+)			
Highest Level of Education	Middlefield	Hampshire County	Massachusetts
High school graduate	40.5%	24.2%	25.4%
Associate's degree	9.6%	9.3%	7.7%
Bachelor's degree	13.4%	21.6%	22.8%
Graduate or professional degree	9.4%	22.6%	17.7%

Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

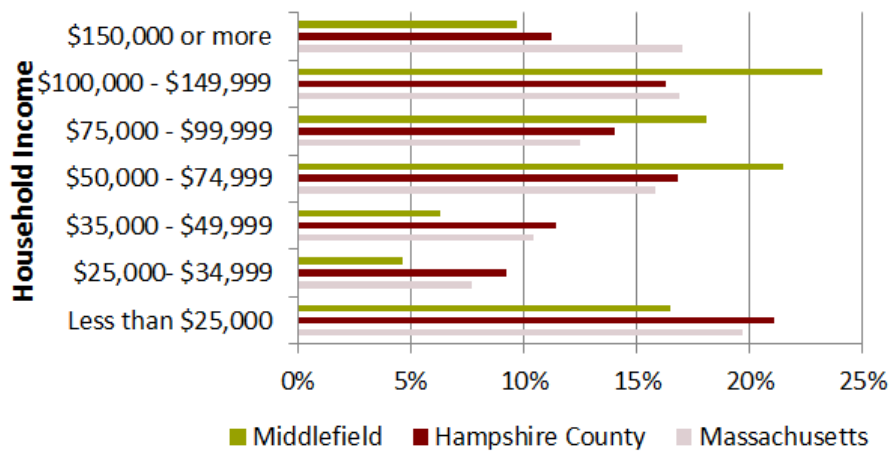
Income

Middlefield has the second highest median household income (\$78,000) of all the Gateway Hilltowns. Middlefield's median household income is almost \$17,000 greater than that of the Hampshire County median household income.

Town Median HH Income
County Median HH Income

\$78,281
\$61,368





Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Employment Rates

75% of Middlefield residents age 16 and above are in the labor force. At the time of the 2015 American Community Survey the unemployment rate was at 2.6%.

Occupational Clusters

More than one third of Middlefield workers are employed in the management, business, science and arts occupations, less than in the state as a whole. “Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations” employ more people in Middlefield and the Gateway Hilltowns than the state as a whole.

Occupational Clusters			
Field	Middlefield	Hampshire County	State
Management, business, science, and arts occupations	40%	46%	44%
Service occupations	15%	18%	18%
Sales and office occupations	13%	22%	23%
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations	25%	7%	7%
Production, transportation, and material moving occupations	8%	8%	9%

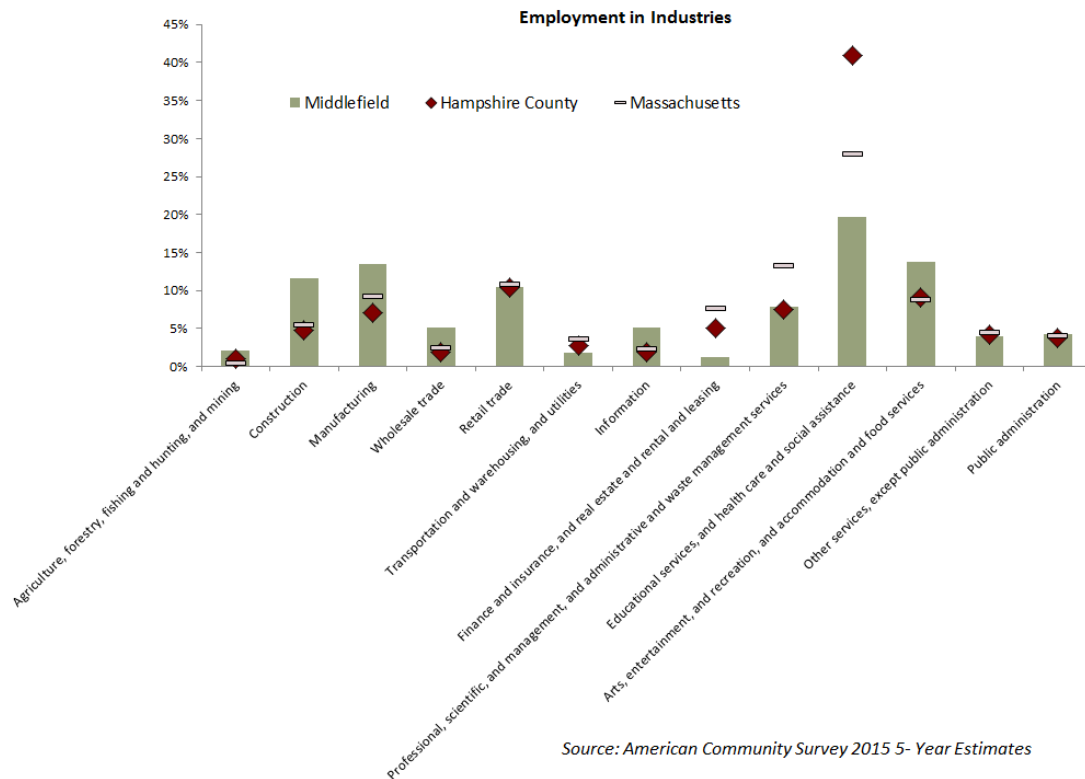
Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5- Year Estimates

Industry Sectors

The industry sector employing the largest number of Middlefield’s workers (as for all of the Hilltowns) is educational services and health care and social assistance, however this industry employs a far smaller share of Middlefield workers than

EXISTING CONDITIONS

workers in other Hilltowns. The “Arts, entertainment and recreation,” industry cluster employs almost 15% of Middlefield workers, well above Hilltown and state averages. The ‘information’ industry cluster is another strong point for Middlefield, employing a greater share of workers than in the other Hilltowns and the state as a whole.



Summary of Key Findings

Middlefield has the smallest population, the oldest population and is the furthest from large population centers. This indicates that many permanent residents of Middlefield may be retirees. Middlefield, with the exception of AzureGreen, hosts very little commercial activity. Temporary, seasonal events draw visitors to the Town but are only active for short periods of time. Middlefield’s small official population is bolstered in the summer months when second home owners take up residence.

2.7 Town of Montgomery– Community Profile

History⁶

Montgomery has always been a small, quiet town. Mountainous terrain and lack of access to large bodies of water ensured that the town's industry didn't develop far beyond forestry and agriculture. Throughout the town's history, its environmental setting has long made the Town an attractive retreat. However, in the Revolutionary War- Era, Richard Falley operated a gunsmithing operation in Montgomery, providing arms for revolutionary soldiers. The site of this clandestine operation presents a unique part of American history that is of national significance.

Montgomery's population hit a low at the 1930 US Census when just 141 residents were counted. Since then the Town has seen a steady increase in population with the exception of the decade between 1990 and 2000 when the town lost roughly 100 residents. Between 2000 and 2015 the Town gained almost 200 residents and had the highest growth rate of all the Gateway Hilltowns.

Tourism Overview

Montgomery's attractiveness to visitors has long been its' naturalistic setting and quality of life. There are fewer site specific attractions in Montgomery, but agricultural tourism represents a potential growth area as there are more workers in the agricultural industry and more land in the town devoted to agricultural uses.

Mount Tekoa (1,122 ft elevation) is a rock mount covered in cliffs and caves, it is a popular tourism destination in warmer months. Mount Tekoa has dramatic views of the Westfield River and is home to a population of Timber Rattlesnakes (it is a designated Wildlife Management Area). Access to trails to the summit of Mount Tekoa is ambiguous but the area still attracts hikers.

Strategic Sites/ Opportunity Areas

Montgomery has a small town center with a collection of historic buildings. Currently these structures are not utilized full time. There may be an opportunity to incorporate these structures into



⁶ HampdenCountyHistory.com

the tourism infrastructure of the larger area. This could include showcasing some of the Town's agricultural or historical assets.

Size

Montgomery is 15 square miles and is the smallest Gateway Hilltown accounting for 9% of total Gateway Hilltown land area

Land Use Coverage

Montgomery is almost 90% forested, the next largest land uses are low density residential, pasture and cropland. There is relatively more agricultural land in Montgomery than in the other Gateway Hilltowns.

Population

Montgomery has the second smallest population of the Gateway Hilltowns but has seen the highest rate of growth of all the Gateway Hilltowns. Taken as an absolute number, Montgomery gained an estimated 192 residents between 2000 and 2015. However, due to the small sample size this is an approximate estimation.

Population Trends				
	2000	2010	2015	Change 2000-15
Montgomery	654	838	846	29.4%
Hampden County	456,228	463,490	468,041	2.6%
Massachusetts	6,349,097	6,547,629	6,705,586	5.6%

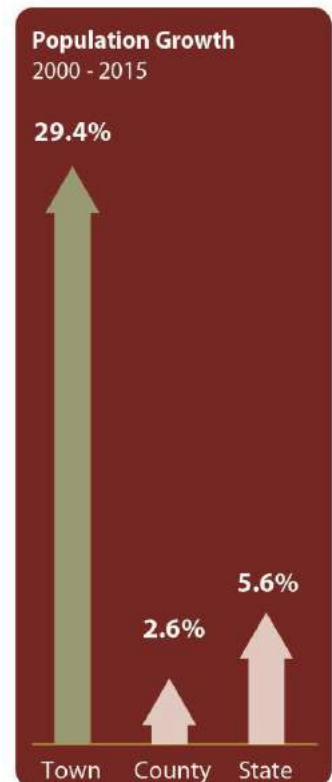
Source: US Census, 2015 ACS

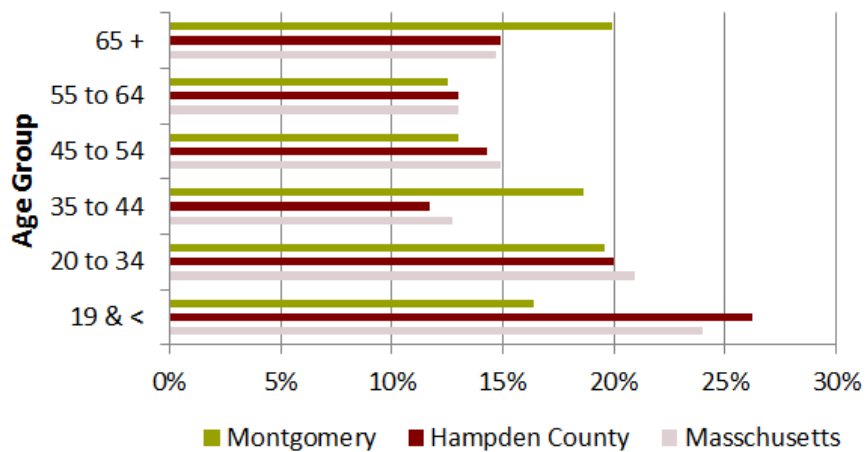
Population Projection

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MASSDOT) utilizes population projections for service planning throughout the state. The most recent projections for Montgomery from MASSDOT forecast an eventual population increase to 904 in 2040.

Age

Montgomery's median age of 48.6 makes it the 4th youngest Gateway Hilltown. There is a much higher proportion of young working families in the 35-44 age cohort than there is in the other Gateway Hilltowns and the state as a whole.

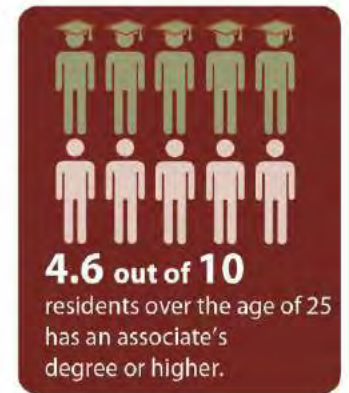




Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Education

Montgomery residents have educational attainment rates above both the Gateway Hilltown and state average. This corresponds with a higher median family income, shorter commutes to nearby employment centers and higher proportion of working age families.

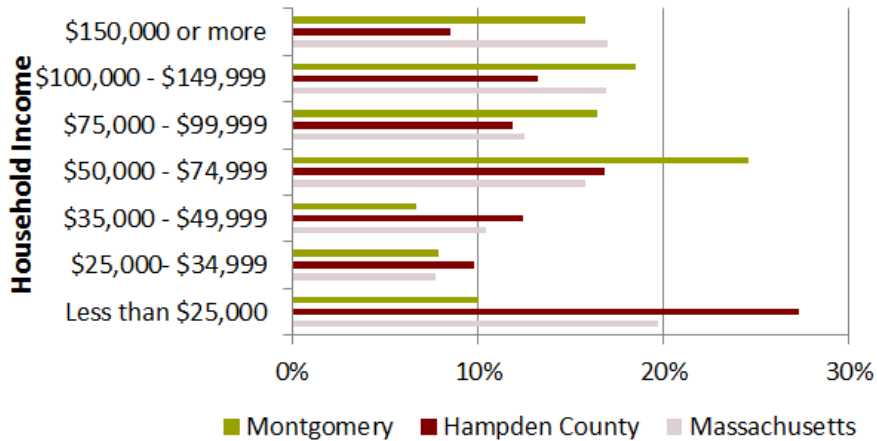


Educational Attainment (Population 25+)			
Highest Level of Education	Montgomery	Hampden County	Massachusetts
High school graduate	27.8%	30.8%	25.4%
Associate's degree	12.1%	9.4%	7.7%
Bachelor's degree	19.4%	15.6%	22.8%
Graduate or professional degree	14.7%	10.2%	17.7%

Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Income

Montgomery's median family income of \$76,250 is the highest of the Gateway Hilltowns. There are far fewer families making below \$49,000 in Montgomery than there are in the Gateway Hilltowns and the state as a whole.



Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Employment Rates

70% Montgomery's 16 years and older population is in labor force and the unemployment rate at the time of the 2015 American Community Survey was 8.2%.

Occupational Clusters

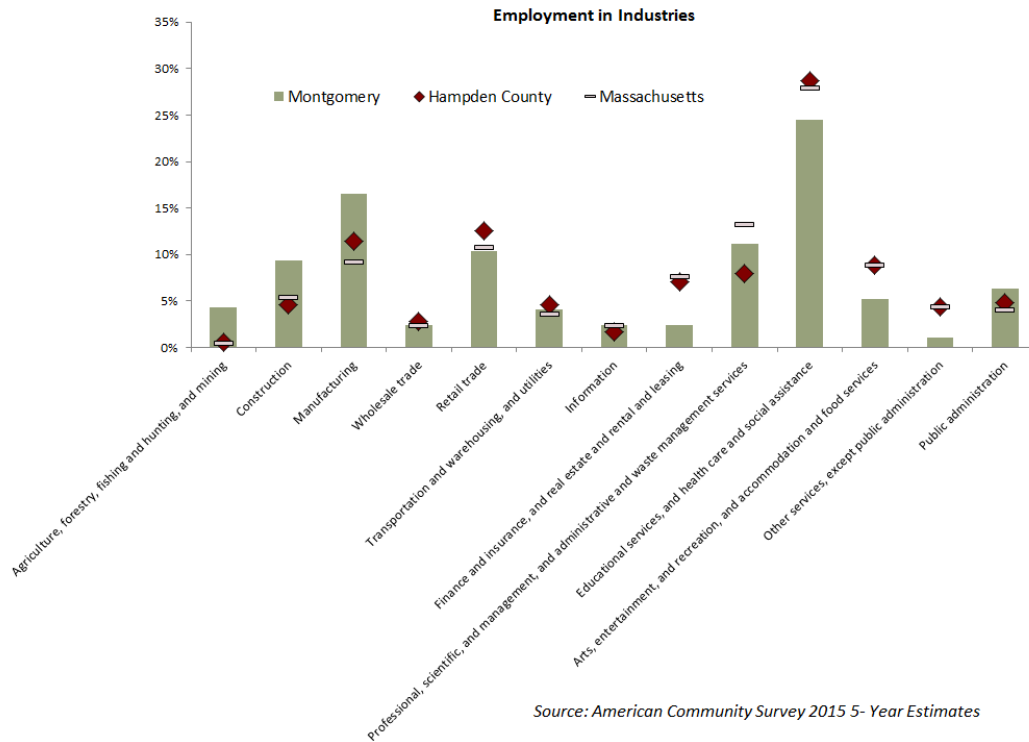
Fewer Montgomery employees work in service occupations than the other Gateway Hilltowns and more work in the "management, business, science and arts occupations.

Occupational Clusters			
Field	Montgomery	Hampden County	State
Management, business, science, and arts occupations	45%	34%	44%
Service occupations	13%	21%	18%
Sales and office occupations	18%	25%	23%
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations	13%	8%	7%
Production, transportation, and material moving occupations	12%	13%	9%

Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5- Year Estimates

Industry Sectors

The industry sector employing the largest number of Montgomery's workers (as for all of the Hilltowns) is 'educational services and health care and social assistance.' 'Manufacturing', 'construction', 'agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting and mining' and 'public administration' are four industry clusters employing a larger proportion of workers than average for the Hilltowns as a whole.



Summary of Key Findings

Montgomery is the smallest Gateway Hilltown community with one of the smallest populations. However, Montgomery is within close driving distance to employment and population centers. Families in Montgomery earn the most out of all Gateway Hilltown families. This may indicate that Montgomery serves as a rural residential area for people employed in Westfield, Holyoke, Chicopee and Springfield.

2.8 Town of Russell Community Profile

History⁷

Russell was incorporated in 1792 with its population clustered around Russell Pond. Russell had rail access by the mid-19th century and new development was spurred along the Westfield River. Waterfalls and cascades along the Westfield provided a tremendous amount of power to a variety of industrial operations.

While the significance of the industrial sites that catalyzed Russell's initial growth has been reduced, Russell's population has not dramatically shrunk. Despite a small decline between 2000 and 2015, Russell's population made incremental growth between 1930 and 2010. The Town's close proximity to nearby population centers may be having a stabilizing effect on the town.

Tourism Overview

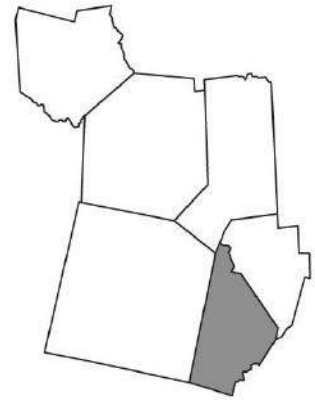
Russell has fewer identified tourism assets than most of the Hilltowns, only behind Montgomery. However, Russell has a number of popular dining and shopping options. The Countryside Furniture store is a shopping destination that attracts out of town visitors and the Bread Basket is a popular eatery. Russell Pond is a local favorite, but access is limited.

The Cream of the Crop Farm is a popular Mennonite run dairy farm that sells products on-site and offers farm tours.

Strategic Sites/ Opportunity Areas

The Woronoco industrial village along the Westfield River is home to a decommissioned paper plant and large amounts of vacant employee housing. On the other side of the River is the former Texon plant that was decommissioned within the last decade. These large mill sites are located along the scenic waterfront and are prime candidates for adaptive reuse. In the past, the Mills were proposed to be used for housing, but the project was never completed. Additional ideas generated from public meetings included using the Mills for recreational centers or over 50 housing.

The Mill Ponds above the abandoned mills could be used for recreational activities including passive visitation and paddle-sports. Improving public access to these sites was highlighted as an opportunity.



⁷ TownOfRussell.us

Size

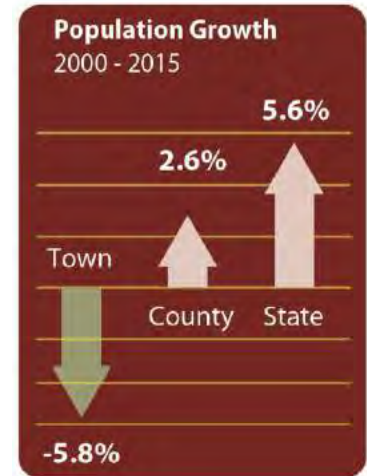
Russell encompasses 18 square miles, the 5th largest Gateway Hilltown accounting for 10% of total Gateway Hilltowns land area

Land Use Coverage

Like the other Hilltowns, Russell is primarily forested (over 90%), followed by residential uses and water. There is less pasture and cropland in Russell than there are in the other Hilltowns. This indicates that agriculture may be a less significant industry in Russell as compared to the other Hilltowns.

Population

Russell's population of 1,561 makes it the 2nd most populated Hilltown and it accounts for 20.5% of the total Hilltown population. Between the years of 2000 and 2015 the population of Russell is estimated to have declined by 5.8%. However, due to the small sample size this is an approximate estimation.



Population Trends

	2000	2010	2015	Change 2000-15
Russell	1,657	1,775	1,561	-5.8%
Hampden County	456,228	463,490	468,041	2.6%
Massachusetts	6,349,097	6,547,629	6,705,586	5.6%

Source: US Census, 2015 ACS

Population Projection

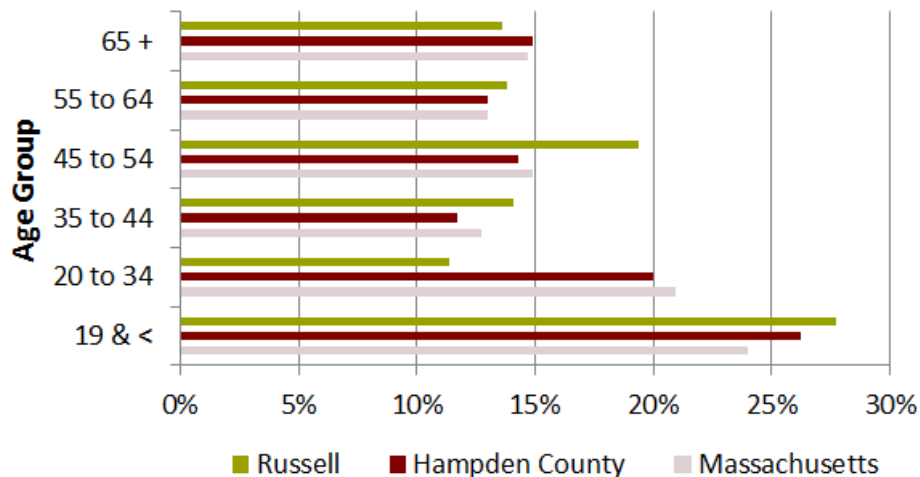
The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MASSDOT) utilizes population projections for service planning throughout the state. The most recent projections for Russell from MASSDOT forecast an eventual population increase to 1782 in 2040.

Age

Russell has the second youngest population of the Gateway Hilltowns with a median age of 41.9. There is a higher proportion of school age children < 19 years old than in Hampden County and the state as a whole.

41.9

Median Age of Russell Residents, the 2nd youngest of all Gateway Hilltowns



Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Education

Russell residents have a higher proportion of residents who have achieved a bachelor's degree than Hampden County but the proportion of residents for which high school is the highest level of education achieved is 38.9%. This indicates that there is an uneven level of educational attainment in the Town.



3.7 out of 10

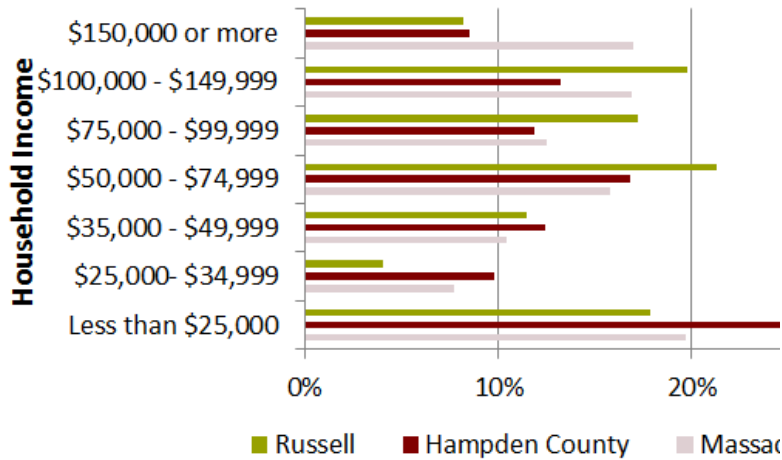
residents over the age of 25 has an associate's degree or higher.

Educational Attainment (Population 25+)			
Highest Level of Education	Russell	Hampden County	Massachusetts
High school graduate	38.9%	30.8%	25.4%
Associate's degree	9.3%	9.4%	7.7%
Bachelor's degree	19.7%	15.6%	22.8%
Graduate or professional degree	8.1%	10.2%	17.7%

Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Income

Russell's median household income of \$68,798 is the 4th highest of all the Gateway Hilltowns. The median household income for Hampden County as a whole is \$50,461- \$18,000 less than Russell's.



Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5-1

Employment

75% of Russell's population age 16 years and more is in the labor force and the unemployment rate at the time of the 2015 American Community Survey was 6.3%.

Occupational Clusters

Russell's workers are above Hilltown averages for employment in the "management, business, science and arts occupations" and slightly below the state average for the cluster. Employment in the "natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations" is well below the Hilltown average.

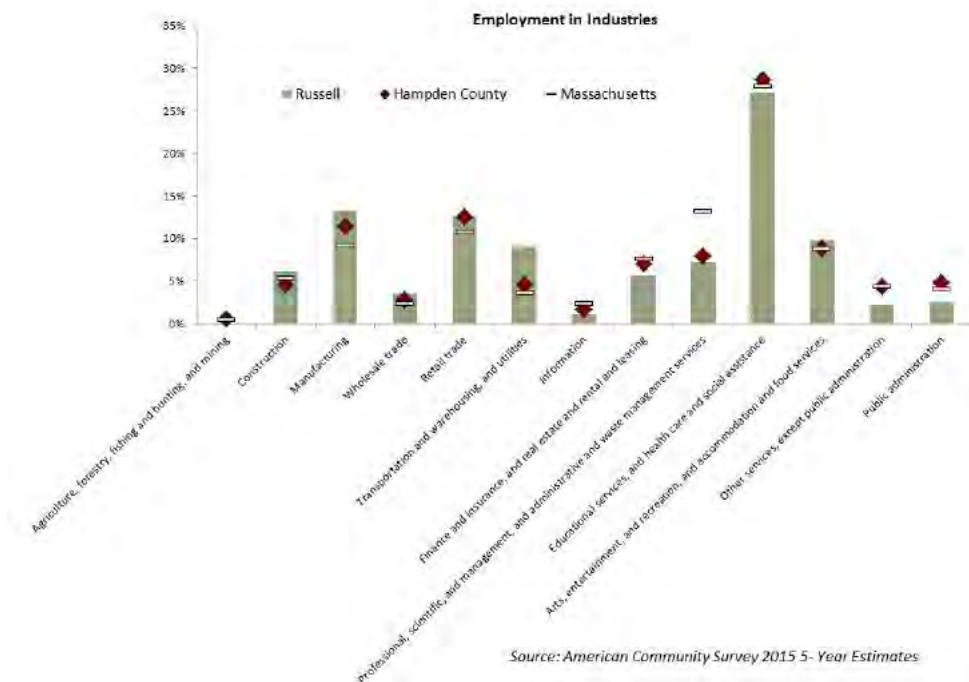
Occupational Clusters			
Field	Russell	Hampden County	State
Management, business, science, and arts occupations	42%	34%	44%
Service occupations	15%	21%	18%
Sales and office occupations	22%	25%	23%
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations	6%	8%	7%
Production, transportation, and material moving occupations	15%	13%	9%

Source: 2015 American Community Survey 5- Year Estimates

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Industry Sectors

The industry sector employing the largest number of Russell's workers (as for all of the Hilltowns) is educational services and health care and social assistance. Employment in the agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting and mining is below the Hilltown average, while finance and insurance, and real estate and rental leasing is above the Hilltown average.



Summary of Key Findings

Russell is closer to larger population centers and contains a large portion of riverfront. It has the second largest population and second youngest population. The large vacant mill sites along the Westfield River could potentially be reused for creative purposes that contribute to the local and regional economy.

A series of community profiles prepared by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) is provided in Appendix A.

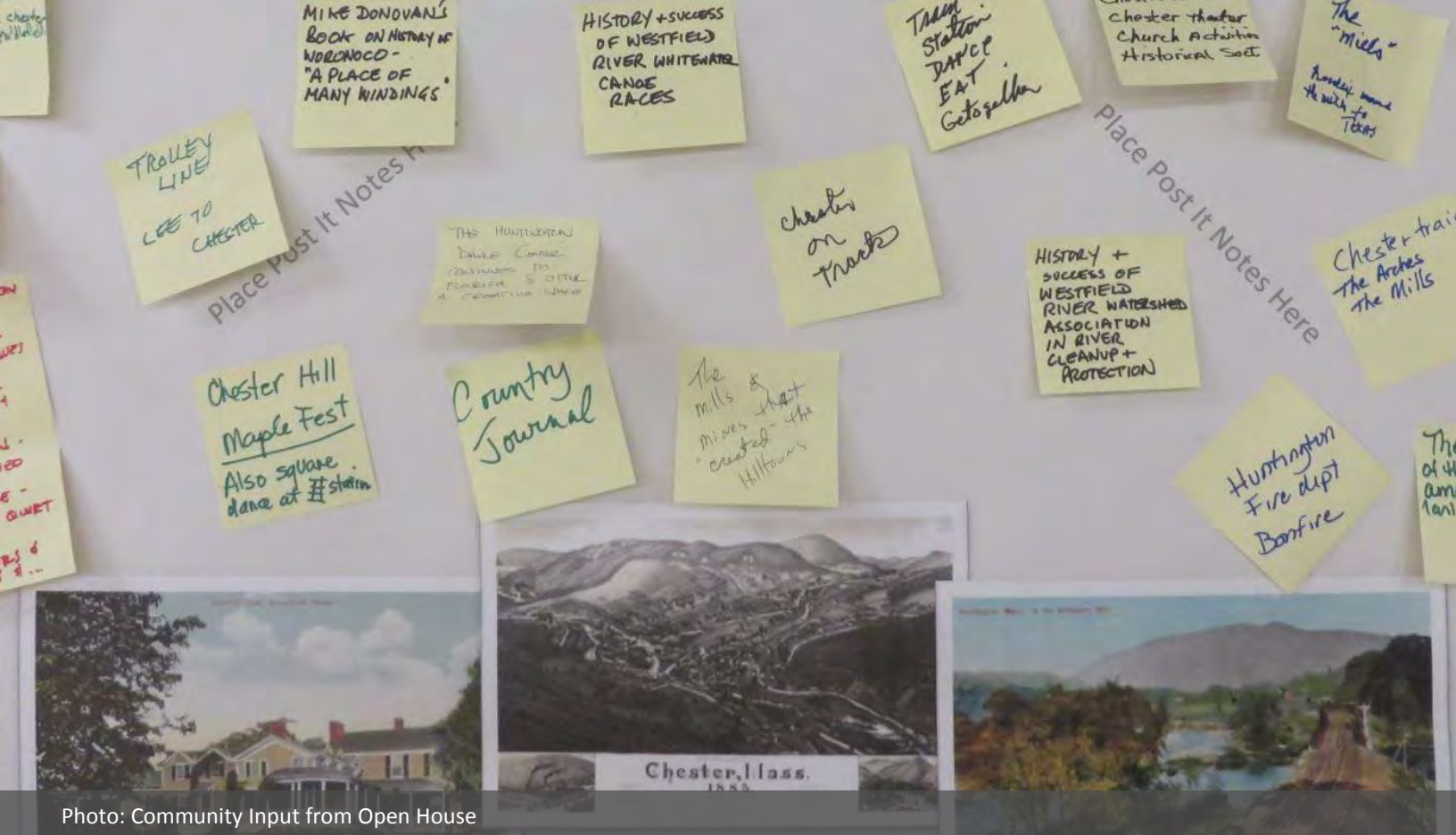


Photo: Community Input from Open House

3 Public Engagement

Citizen participation in the planning process provides an opportunity to compile the public's knowledge of the area and gain an understanding of their hopes, concerns and desires for the future of the Gateway Hilltowns.

To gather public input, the project team worked closely with the Steering Committee. Public outreach methods included:

- Steering Committee
- Stakeholder Interviews
- Public Meetings

Section Contents

3.1 Steering Committee

3.2 Stakeholder Interviews

3.2 Public Meetings

3.1 Steering Committee

To guide development of the Economic Development Strategy, a Steering Committee comprised of representatives from each of the six towns, as well as state and regional planning organizations was established. Multiple meetings were held to discuss community issues and concerns, identify and rank natural and man-made assets, identify techniques to enlist stakeholders and the general public, review key findings, and prepare a vision statement and goals, and prioritize recommendations.

Committee members include:

- Andy Myers, Town of Chester (Chair)
- Randy Austin, Town of Montgomery
- Patrick Beaudry, PVPC
- Chuck Benson, Town of Blandford
- Pat Carlino, Town of Chester
- Angeline Ellison, Town of Blandford
- Joshua Garcia, PVPC
- Joseph Kearns, Town of Middlefield
- Michelle Kenny, Town of Chester
- Derrick Mason, Town of Russell
- Darlene McVeigh, Town of Huntington
- John McVeigh, Town of Huntington
- Elizabeth Murphy, MassDevelopment
- Duane Pease, Town of Middlefield
- Wayne Precanico, Town of Russell
- Jane Thielen, Town of Montgomery



3.2 Stakeholder Interviews

To kick off the public engagement process, the project team worked with the Steering Committee to identify key stakeholders. The project teams met with individuals from the following groups to learn more about the study area, identify issues and concerns, and discuss potential economic development strategies:

- Jacob's Ladder Business Association
- Community Resources
- Outdoor Recreation
- Heritage Tourism/Agri-tourism/Tourism Support

Jacob's Ladder Business Association (JLBA)

On October 18th, 2016 the JLBA held their monthly pot-luck at the Baird Tavern in Blandford. Representatives from JLBA member businesses, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, and Elan Planning and Design gathered at 6:00 pm for informal conversations and dinner, followed by a facilitated discussion focused on the following topic areas:

Harnessing natural attractions

Stakeholders noted that there are abundant outdoor attractions in the Gateway Hilltowns including hiking trails, stone bridges, camping, mountain biking trails, and fishing. It was noted that state funding for outdoor recreation facilities has been reduced resulting in the reduction of services or outright closure of some attractions. It was also noted that there may be a need for more enforcement of existing regulations regarding littering, fishing, and other outdoor recreation activities.

Capturing Visitors

Western Mass Hilltown Hikers stated that publicizing hikes on social media has resulted in an increased number of visitors. Hikers have noted that roadside parking may be inadequate as well as bathroom facilities and signage. On a positive note, channeling visitors to a central parking location adjacent to complimentary attractions could result in increased spending. Collaborating on a system of parking lots, bathrooms, and possibly a parking shuttle is an option.

Local Business Climate

Business owners remarked that residents, including workers and customers, were very business friendly. However, the permitting process, zoning regulations and procedural aspects of local boards have the potential to become more 'business-friendly.' A coordinated review of zoning regulations may be in order. The process may be to identify the types of businesses that fit into the overall economic development scheme and then to understand how the existing zoning regulations are facilitating or hindering their establishment.

Air BnB

- One business owner noted that while there are not many traditional lodging options in the Gateway Hilltowns, there are over a dozen Air BnB hosts in the area. The Air BnB model allows for hosts to interact with their guests and serve as ambassadors of the area. Reaching out to Air BnB hosts to understand visitor's expectations and needs could provide valuable insight.
- Air BnB can also serve as a marketing platform that leads to regional discovery. A marketing campaign for the Hilltowns that includes visually rich material optimized for social media and mobile devices could take advantage of Air BnBs presence.
- Cross-marketing Western Mass Hikers meetups, theatre productions, fairs, etc. with AirBnB locations could be an affordable way to get more visitors without the establishment of a new hotel or motel.
 - Creating a tourism board consisting of representatives from all six towns and members of the JBLA that could engage Air BnB hosts and maintain an ongoing dialogue may provide invaluable information.
 - Encouraging more members of the community to become Air BnB hosts may be another way to attract more visitors and spending.



Photo from the JLBA Stakeholder Interview

On November 29th, 2016 as part of the Community Open House, a series of stakeholder interviews were conducted. Over forty-five stakeholders who had specific knowledge and interest in community resources, outdoor recreation, and Heritage Tourism/Agri-tourism/Tourism Support were invited to attend. Three rounds of interviews were conducted.

During each interview session, participants were asked to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the Hilltown Collaborative, commonly referred to as a SWOT analysis. The following is a summary of the main points brought up during the interviews.

Community Resources

Stakeholders representing community resources in the Gateway Hilltowns provided the following insight into the area's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Strengths

- Natural resources
- Low cost homes
- Good medical support nearby
- 85-90% of students from the Gateway Regional School District go to college
- Strong vocational/ technology schools in region
- Tax base from second homes
- Turnpike fest

Weaknesses

- Lack of infrastructure and long commutes
- Tax revenue forgone by conserved lands and tax exempt forestry/ agricultural lands (note the 61 a/b)
- "Lots of cash poor and land rich residents here"
- Lack of Broadband. Hard to explore career development.
- Hard to attract "Millenials" who don't own cars, want to walk to work and be in the "modern world"- that isn't the Hilltowns.
- Town websites are out of date

Opportunities

- Could increase community and school integration through adult education programs
- "Common Capital" revolving loan fund for CDC projects

Threats/Challenges

- Job training/ workforce development
- Small business assistance/ workforce training
- Hilltowns are considered a part of the Springfield MSA and therefore not classified as rural. This causes competition between an urban/ rural agenda and programs.
- There is a need for an agency or organization to fund and implement local plans
- Lack of rental housing needed to attract younger people and seniors
- Lack of full time, paid staff and administration at Towns make it hard to run local government
- Declining school enrollment and budget- 1,100 kids in 2003 and 800 today
- Access to MassPike
- Political divide between Northern/ Southern Hilltowns- freethinking/blue collar

Recommendations

- Broadband
- Infrastructure improvements - sewer and water, downtown infrastructure, historic properties- via regional grants
- Tourism
 - Sustainable design report
 - Don't go overboard with tourism
 - Creative tourism practices like outdoor recreation

Outdoor Recreation

One of the greatest assets of the Gateway Hilltowns is the abundance of natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities. Stakeholders with knowledge in these areas were asked to discuss what they see as the greatest strengths, challenges and opportunities with respect to outdoor recreation and increasing the number of visitors to the area.

Strengths

- Environmental assets
- Massachusetts has one-third of America's 17th century architecture and one-fourth of the country's 18th century architecture
- Huntington's Green Bridge is the most significant landmark sitting at the intersection of two scenic byways, one river and a federal historic district
- Huntington Trolley Line trail
- Housing is cheaper here and competitive with Westfield

Weaknesses

- Lack of enforcement at outdoor sites (i.e., trash removal, swimming regulations, site monitoring)
- Lack of vision for Hilltowns
- Condition of bridges – need repairs

Opportunities

- Invite the public to places you can share in small bits, don't scare people
- Develop local policies to reuse historic structures
- Could inventory buildings and put placards on them
- Implement *Healthy Hilltowns* (report commissioned by Healthy Hampshire to better understand the current state of policies, programs, and activities in the Hilltown Region of western Massachusetts) and 5 year grant to promote Hilltown Healthy living
- Trail maps are currently under development
- Gobble Mountain, a well-known local landmark at the western edge of Hampden County – part of the Nature Conservancy Preserve
- Implement *2016 Highlands Footpath Action Plan*

Threats/Challenges

- Lifestyle change with internet and tourism
- Hesitancy to share local secrets
- Costs of maintaining and rehabbing historic homes
- Loss of local tax revenue due to tax exemptions
- Fear of too much tourism spoiling local resident's quality of life

Recommendations

- Develop signage to encourage responsible visitors
- Develop a trail conditions app to help alleviate burden on the state
- Brand the area
- Community planner staff person
- Need commercial activity to get people to move here (gas stations, stores – that meet resident's needs)

Heritage Tourism/Agri-tourism/Tourism Support

Representatives from cultural and heritage tourism assets, local farms, and tourism support businesses, including B&Bs, restaurants and local retail shops were invited to attend this stakeholder session. A summary of their comments is provided below.

Strengths

- Railroad history- first mountain climbing train
- 4,000 visitors to Chester Theatre over the course of 9 weeks
- Geological variety (mineral hunters, roadside geologists)
- Chester Rail Station
- Arches Trail
- Chester on Track

Weaknesses

- No train stops in town
- 40 minute commute ("Where ever you come from it's a 40 minute commute.")
- Visitors have money to spend but nowhere to spend it

Challenges

- Can't get Berkshire grants because we're not in the Berkshires
- Fractured ownership of Arches and trails
- Chester Theatre struggles to find place in community
- Chester Theatre attracts an older demographic (60-75)
- Town recently prohibited parking along the road near the Arches trailhead. There is a six-car parking area located at the trailhead.
- No policing of outdoor assets
- Seasonality of Theatre impacts other businesses
- Local residents have mixed feeling on the desirability of increasing tourism

Opportunities

- Guided hikes from train station
- “It’s (Chester) the kind of place that retirement communities try to look like
- Theatre has established marketing mechanism and is capable of cross promotion in its e-blasts
- Could develop the areas attractiveness to mineral hunters

Recommendations

- Do more cross-marketing, Theatre has developed a relationship with Chester Common Table
- Need to develop more accommodations
- Need to develop a mix of reasons to visit and live here
- Develop tourism
- Continue developing partnership between Chester Rail museum and school
- Develop ½ and 1 day itineraries for the area

3.3 Public Meetings

Over the course of the project, the Steering Committee hosted two public open houses for residents to learn about the project and offer ideas, insights, concerns, and other feedback on the future of the area.



Public Open House #1

On Tuesday, November 29, 2016, the Steering Committee hosted the first of two open houses. The event was held 11:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. in Stanton Hall located in Huntington, MA. Community members were encouraged to drop by the open house to contribute ideas for the economic development strategy.

The open house featured a series of interactive stations where community members were encouraged to provide written comments and share their ideas. The stations included a series of questions designed to identify a vision for the Hilltowns, as well as community strengths and challenges; a map illustrating current tourism assets that people can mark up; and, boards featuring photos of economic development opportunity areas that ask participants what they would like to see happen at a particular vacant or underutilized site.

A complete summary of the public input generated from the November Open House is provided in Appendix B.



Members of the community provided input during the open house



The open house provided opportunities for residents to discuss their ideas with the team

Public Open House #2

Using information gathered during the first open house, the Steering Committee, in partnership with the project team, drafted a vision statement, goals and recommendations to increase tourist visitation as a meaningful way to grow economic development in the Gateway Hilltowns.

Station 2: draft Tourism Assets

Time your
participa-
tion here

Place a Yellow Dot	Next to Your Top Ten Favorite Things To Do / Places To Go	
AMC Picnic View	Countryside Woodchop	Littlefield Dairy & Recreation Facility
Duckweed Center	Eastbrook	Littlefield Lake
Appalachian Trail	Gardner State Park	Littlefield Lake (August)
Red Gumbo Open	Glenville Falls	Middlefield Agricultural Fair (August)
Concert (August)	Walden Mountain Preserve	Middlefield State Forest
Walden Fair (September)	Rocky Brook Falls	North Hill
Blanchard Ski Area	H. Newman Marsh	Peru State Forest
Boulder Park	Memorial Trail	Russell Pond
Accessible Trail	Hill and Dale Rapids	Sanderson Brook Falls
Earl Hendrick Knoll	Overlook Area	Skyline Trail
Compassion Area	Huntington County Stone	Tekoa Mountain
Chester Center Historic District (October 1st/2)	Huntington Fall Fest (October)	Westfield River White Water Race (April)
Chester Hill Harvest Festival (October)	Jacob's Ladder Scenic Byway	Wild & Scenic Westfield River
Chester Hill Maple Festival (March)	Keystone Arch Bridges Trail	
Chester on Track Railroad Festival (May)	Keystone Arch	
Chester Railway Museum	Knightsdale Dam & Wildlife Area	
Chester Theatre Company	Lake Noyah	
Chester/Walden State Forest		



Scenes from the 2nd Public Open House

On April 12, 2017, a second open house was held at Stanton Hall. Community members were asked to reflect and provide feedback on the draft vision statement, goals and recommendations. Attendees were invited to use colored dots, markers, pens, and post-it notes to indicate approval or disapproval of the draft recommendations and provide the Steering Committee with additional feedback and ideas. As a result of the information provided at the open house, a number of the Strategy's recommendations were modified.

A summary of the public comments from the April Open House is provided in Appendix C.



Photo: Huntington Country Store

4 Tourism Asset Identification

Tourism equals big business. According to the U.S. Travel Association in 2016, “direct spending by resident and international travelers in the U.S. averaged \$2.7 billion a day, \$113.1 million an hour, \$1.9 million a minute and \$31,400 a second”.¹

To gain a better understanding of the market potential of the natural, cultural and manmade assets within the Gateway Hilltowns, the project team conducted two exercises to help the Steering Committee identify and objectively evaluate the premier tourism attractions located within the six towns. First, the Steering Committee was asked to participate in a brainstorming session to identify

Section Contents

- 4.1 Selection Criteria Matrix
- 4.2 Asset Inventory Map
- 4.3 Asset Inventory Table
- 4.4 Sample Travel Itineraries

¹ <https://www.ustravel.org/answersheet>

tourism assets, services and their favorite places to frequent or take out of town guests to visit.

During the brainstorming session, the Steering Committee identified a total of seventy-one actual or potential visitor attractions for inclusion in the Asset Inventory. For the purpose of this study, an attraction was defined as any tourism related product, site, or event that would be of interest to visitors.

4.1 Selection Criteria Matrix

To narrow down the list of visitor attractions from seventy-one to the top thirty premier tourism assets, a Selection Criteria Matrix was developed. Steering Committee members were asked to use the following five selection criteria to evaluate and rank the study area's recreational, natural, cultural, and historic attractions/events, as well as tourism amenities (lodging, restaurants, and retail establishments):

1. Demand Generators – what drives a visitor to the region
2. Pull Factor – ability to attract out-of-area visitors to the region
3. Seasonality – is the tourism product a seasonal or year round activity
4. Themes – is the tourism product consistent with regional themes
5. Trends – how does the tourism product correlate to national tourism trends

Demand Generators

A demand generator is a tourism product (experience, attraction or facility) that drives/motivates a visitor to travel to a destination. The Steering Committee was asked to assign a point value to each attraction based on whether it was classified as a primary generator, contributing generator, or a demand supporter.

Primary Demand Generators (Awarded 3 points)

Primary demand generators, also known as core attractions, are those tourism products that, based on their individual merit, can be the sole reason for tourists to visit a particular community or region. For a tourism product to be considered a primary demand generator, it must meet the following criteria:

- The product attracts a significant number of visitors annually
- The product has a physical or historical link to the destination
- The product must be a destination landmark
- The product must have a marked “pull factor” outside the local area

Contributing Demand Generators (Awarded 2 points)

A contributing demand generator, also known as a supporting attraction, includes activities, attractions and events that are not the main reason for visitation, but that add to the experience.

Demand Supporters (Awarded 1 point)

Demand supporters include such amenities as accommodations, dining and shopping.

Seasonality

Because tourism is a product that can't be stored, additional points should be awarded to attractions that tourists can visit year round. Steering Committee members awarded 0.25 points for each season that an attraction is open.



"Pull Factor"

For the purpose of this study, "Pull Factor" is a term used to describe a tourism products' importance/relevancy to visitors.

National Significance (4 points)

The Committee awarded four points to those tourism products that have the ability to attract national and international visitors who will spend a full day at the attraction/event.

State Significance (3 points)

Tourism products with State significance will draw Massachusetts residents to spend a ½ day to a full day visit. Three points were awarded to assets with state significance.

Regional Significance (2 points)

Two points were awarded to those tourism products with regional significance will draw visitors to spend a ½ day in the community.

Local Significance (1 point)

One point was awarded to those attractions/events that primarily attract local residents who spend less than one hour.

Themes

Tourism is based on the idea of providing visitors with a memorable experience. That experience is not based solely on a single attraction; rather it is the interaction between all of the tourism products offered in an area. Points were awarded to those tourism products that increase the quality of the visitor experience by creating connections to the following existing assets: Wilderness & Outdoor Recreation (1 point), Cultural Heritage Tourism (1 point), and/or Agri-Tourism (1 point).

National Trends

A study conducted by the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) indicated that shopping ranked as the number one activity that US travelers participate in.

Attending a social/family event and participating in outdoor activities followed this.

For the purpose of this study, the Steering Committee awarded points to Gateway Hilltown tourism products that closely align with the national tourism trends outline in the table below.

Domestic Trip Activity Participation by US Travelers	
Shopping	4 points
Attend a Social Family Event	4 points
Outdoor	4 points
City / Urban Sightseeing	4 points
Rural Sightseeing	4 points
Beach Activities	3 points
Historic Places, Sites, Museums	3 points
Gambling	3 points
Theme / Amusement Park	3 points
National / State Park	3 points
Seminar / Course	2 points
Nightlife / Dancing	2 points
Attend Sports Event	2 points
Zoo / Aquarium / Science Museum	2 points
Water Sports / Boating	2 points
Performance Arts	1 point
Cultural Events / Festivals	1 point
Golf	1 point
Art Museum / Galleries	1 point
Winter Sports	1 point

A copy of the Site Selection Criteria Matrix is provided on the following page. Those tourism assets that received a high score are denoted in bold.

The list of top rated tourism assets was then presented to the public during the second open house so that the community could vote for their favorite tourist destinations and provide comment. Based on community feedback, the list of premier tourism assets was revised.

The premier top tourism assets were then mapped and a narrative description was provided for use in future marketing strategies.

Gateway Hilltowns Tourism Asset Ranking Sheet	Demand Generator	Seasonality	"Pull Factor"	Theme	Activities/National Trends															Total Score															
	Primary Demand Generator (3)	Contributing Demand Generator (2)	Demand Supporter (1)	January to March (.25)	April to June (.25)	July to September (.25)	October to December (.25)	National Significance (4)	State Significance (3)	Regional Significance (2)	Local Significance (1)	Wilderness & Outdoor Recreation (1)	Cultural Heritage (1)	Agri-Tourism (1)	Shopping (4)	Attend a Social Family Event (4)	Outdoor (4)	City/Urban Sightseeing (4)	Rural Sightseeing (4)		Beach Activities (3)	Historic Places, Sites, Museums (3)	Gambling (3)	Theme/Amusement Park (3)	National / State Park (3)	Seminar / Courses (2)	Nightlife/Dancing (2)	Attend Sports Event (2)	Zoo/Aquarium/Science Museum (2)	Water Sports / Boating (2)	Performing Arts (1)	Cultural Events/Festivals (1)	Golf (1)	Art Museum/Galleries (1)	Winter Sports (1)

1	Bel Canto Opera Concert (August)	3				0.25			3				1								3													12.25	
2	Blanford Country Store & Café			1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1			1	4																		8	
3	Blandford Fair (September)	3				0.25				2			1	1			4																	12.25	
4	Blandford Golf & Tennis Club	3				0.25	0.25			2																						1		6.5	
5	Blanford Historical Society & Museum		2		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1		1							3													8	
6	Blandford Ski Area	3			0.25			0.25			2						4																1	10.5	
7	Carl Herrick Knitel Conservation Area		2		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2		1				4																	10	
8	Sheepgate			1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1				4																		7	
9	The Clayground			1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1				4																		7	
10	The White Church		2		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1		1							3													8	
Town of Chester																																			
12	Boulder Park - Accessible Trail		2			0.25	0.25			2		1					4																	12.5	
13	Chester/Blandford State Forest	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25		3			1				4																	15	
14	Chester Center Historic District		2		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1		1					4		3													12	
15	Chester Common Table			1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1																						3	
16	Chester Factory Village			1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1				4																		7	
17	Chester Hill Harvest Festival (October)		2				0.25			2			1				4															1		10.25	
18	Chester Hill Maple Festival (March)		2		0.25					2			1	1			4																1	11.25	
19	Chester Historical Society & Old Jail				0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2			1							3													7	
20	Chester on Track Railroad Festival (May)	3				0.25				2			1								3												1	10.25	
21	Chester Railway Museum	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2			1							3													10	
22	Chester Theatre Company	3				0.25	0.25			3				1																			1	1	9.5
23	Classic Pizza			1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1																						3	
24	Gobble Mountain Preserve	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2			1				4																11	
25	Goldmine Brook Falls	3				0.25	0.25	0.25			2			1				4																10.75	
26	H. Newman Marsh Memorial Trail	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2			1				4																11	

Tourism Asset	Demand Generator			Seasonality				"Pull Factor"				Theme		Activities/National Trends																				Total Score			
	Primary Demand Generator (3)	Contributing Demand Generator (2)	Demand Supporter (1)	January to March (.25)	April to June (.25)	July to September (.25)	October to December (.25)	National Significance (4)	State Significance (3)	Regional Significance (2)	Local Significance (1)	Wilderness & Outdoor Recreation (1)	Cultural Heritage (1)	Agri-Tourism (1)	Shopping (4)	Attend a Social Family Event (4)	Outdoor (4)	City/Urban Sightseeing (4)	Rural Sightseeing (4)	Beach Activities (3)	Historic Places, Sites, Museums (3)	Gambling (3)	Theme/Amusement Park (3)	National / State Park (3)	Seminar / Courses (2)	Nightlife/Dancing (2)	Attend Sports Event (2)	Zoo/Aquarium/Science Museum (2)	Water Sports / Boating (2)	Performing Arts (1)	Cultural Events/Festivals (1)	Golf (1)	Art Museum/Galleries (1)		Winter Sports (1)		
Town of Chester (Continued)																																					
27	High Meadow Farm (U-pick)			2				0.25	0.25				2				1			4																	9.5
28	Kelso Homestead Blueberry Farm (U-pick)			2				0.25	0.25				2				1			4																	9.5
29	Littleville Fair (August)		3						0.25				1		1				4													1					10.25
30	Sanderson Brook Falls		3					0.25	0.25				2		1				4						3												13.5
31	Walker Island Family Campgrounds				1			0.25	0.25				2		1				4																		8.5
Town of Huntington																																					
32	Gardner State Park		3				0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2						4						3												13
33	Gateway Farm & Pet				1		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1				4																			7
34	Green Bridge						0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1		1						3															6
35	Huntington Country Store			2			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2				1	4																			10
36	Huntington Fall Fest (October)		3								0.25			2			1	1			4											1					12.25
37	Knightville Dam & Wildlife Area			2			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2		1				4																	1	11
38	Lake Norwich			2			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2		1				4												2					12	
39	Littleville Dam & Recreation Facility			2			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2		1				4												2					12	
40	Littleville Lake			2			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2		1				4												2				1	13	
41	Moltenbrey's Market				1		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1			1	4																		8	
42	North Hall			2			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1		1						3									1	1				10	
43	Norwich Bridge School Museum			2			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1		1					3															8	
44	Norwich Lake Farm & Sugarhouse Rest.				1		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1			1	4																		8	
45	Prospect Rock				1		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1	1				4																	8	
46	Red Bird Pottery Studio				1		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1				4																		7	
47	The Rapids Bar and Grill				1		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1																						3	
48	The River Café and Bakery				1		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1																						3	
49	The Huntington Shops				1		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25								4																		6	
50	Westfield River White Water Race (April)		3					0.25					3			1				4								2		2						15.25	

Tourism Asset	Demand Generator			Seasonality				"Pull Factor"				Theme			Activities/National Trends																				Total Score		
	Primary Demand Generator (3)	Contributing Demand Generator (2)	Demand Supporter (1)	January to March (.25)	April to June (.25)	July to September (.25)	October to December (.25)	National Significance (4)	State Significance (3)	Regional Significance (2)	Local Significance (1)	Wilderness & Outdoor Recreation (1)	Cultural Heritage (1)	Agri-Tourism (1)	Shopping (4)	Attend a Social Family Event (4)	Outdoor (4)	City/Urban Sightseeing (4)	Rural Sightseeing (4)	Beach Activities (3)	Historic Places, Sites, Museums (3)	Gambling (3)	Theme/Amusement Park (3)	National / State Park (3)	Seminar / Courses (2)	Nightlife/Dancing (2)	Attend Sports Event (2)	Zoo/Aquarium/Science Museum (2)	Water Sports / Boating (2)	Performing Arts (1)	Cultural Events/Festivals (1)	Golf (1)	Art Museum/Galleries (1)	Winter Sports (1)			
Town of Middlefield																																					
51	Glendale Falls		2		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2		1				4																			10	
52	Middlefield Agricultural Fair (August)	3								2			1	1			4														1					12.25	
53	Middlefield State Forest	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25		3			1				4							3													15
54	Peru State Forest	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25		3			1				4																				12
Town of Montgomery																																					
55	Montgomery Marketplace			1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1				4																					7
56	Tekoa Mountain	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2		1				4																				11
Town of Russell																																					
57	AMC Noble View Outdoor Center	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25		3			1				4																				12
58	Bread Basket Deli & Bakery			1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1																									3
59	Cream of the Crop Farm			1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1			1	4																					8
60	Countryside Woodcraft Furniture		2		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2			1		4																					10
61	General Henry Knox Marker			1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1		1							3																7
62	Hill and Dale Rapids Viewing Area		2		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25			2		1				4																				10
63	Russell Inn			1	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1																									3
64	Russell Pond		2		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1	1				4			3											3						15
65	Veterans of Foreign Wars				0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25				1																									2
Regional																																					
66	Appalachian Trail	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	4				1				4																				13
67	Jacob's Ladder Scenic Byway	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25		3								4																			11
68	Keystone Arches	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25		3				1			4				3																15
69	Keystone Arch Bridges Trail	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25		3			1	1			4				3																16
70	Skyline Trail	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25		3			1					4																			12
71	Wild & Scenic Westfield River	3			0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25		3			1				4														3						15

4.2 Asset Inventory

A Premier Tourism Asset Map and Table, which are provided on the following pages, were created to highlight the top ranked tourism assets. The following categories were used to classify the tourism attractions/events:



Cultural and Heritage Attractions

Cultural and heritage attractions include places and events that are unique and points of local pride to the six towns that comprise the Gateway Hilltowns. These authentic attractions, including fairs, festivals, theater and museums, offer visitors a glimpse into the history and culture and are points of local pride.



Forest and Nature Areas

The Hilltowns are home to one of the largest portions of contiguous forest in Massachusetts. Various areas are protected from development and are regional recreation destinations. The hilly and dramatic terrain of the Hilltowns has drawn visitors up from the Pioneer Valley for centuries. Recent regional trail initiatives and growing popularity for active recreation have increased interest in accessible outdoor destinations in the Hilltowns.



Natural and Man-made Attractions

Natural and manmade attractions draw visitors to a particular place in the Hilltowns. Built structures like the Keystone Arches represent some of the manmade attractions while waterfalls and are considered a natural attraction. The Hilltowns rich history is represented in the many built and man-made attractions.



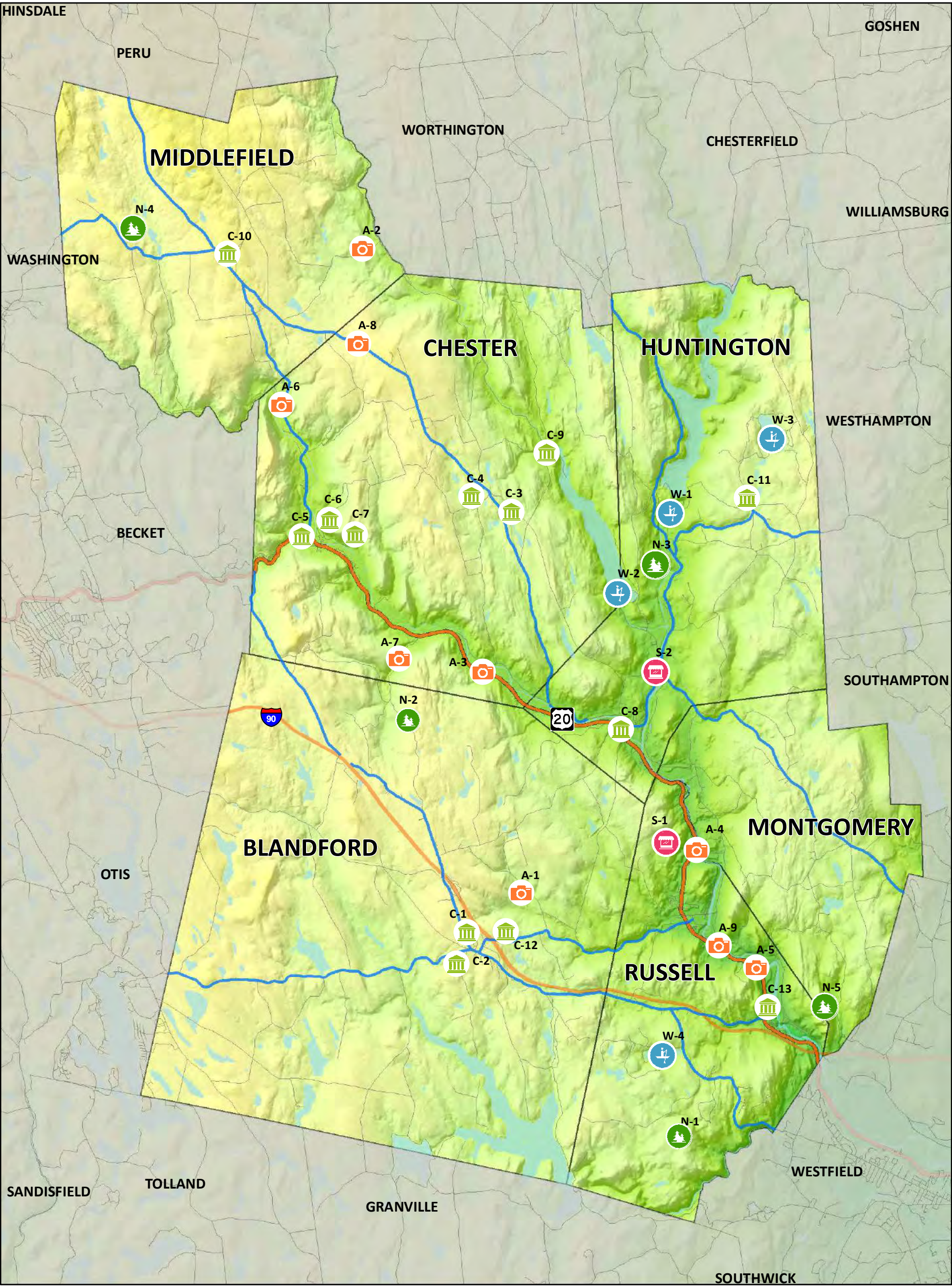
Water Based Recreation

In addition to the Scenic and Wild Westfield River, the Gateway Hilltowns are home to an abundance of water based recreation areas including the Knightville and Littleville Dam recreation areas, and numerous streams and ponds. Opportunities exist for active recreation activities including flatwater and whitewater paddling, swimming, and fishing, as well as passive recreation.



Specialty Shops

According to the U.S. Travel Association, shopping is the top leisure travel activity among U.S. domestic and overseas visitors. The Gateway Hilltowns is home to a variety of skilled craftspeople and artisans, with unique products ranging from pottery to handcrafted furniture to handwoven textiles. The area is also home to a number of farms where visitors can pick their own produce or purchase locally produced goods.



Gateway Hilltowns Premier Tourism Asset Map

**Cultural and Heritage Attractions**

**Forest and Nature Areas**

**Natural and Man-made Attractions**

**Water Based Recreation**

**Specialty Shops**


























Planning / Design / Landscape Architecture PLLC








Data Source: MassGIS
Date: June, 2017







The Gateway Hilltowns Premier Tourism Assets

Symbol	Attraction	Location	Description
Natural and Man-made Attractions			
 A-1	Blandford Ski Area	41 2nd Division Rd, Blandford, MA 01008	This classic New England, family friendly ski area has been club owned and operated since 1936. The site offers access to five lifts, equipment rental, a ski school, and two lodges where guests can dine at the Mountainside Grille.
 A-2	Glendale Falls	111 Clark Wright Rd, Chester, MA 01011	Glendale Falls is the third tallest cascade chain in Massachusetts with a 160 foot water drop. Visitors can access the top of the Falls via a ¼ mile trail, and then hike down to the base.
 A-3	Goldmine Brook Falls	US-20, Chester, MA 01011	Goldmine Brook Falls is hidden gem located within a short walking distance (1/10 mile) from US Route 20. Visitors can access the site by parking at a gravel pull-off located near the Chester town line, and then walking along a moderately steep dirt path to the base of the Falls. Goldmine Brook Falls features a 15-20' cascading water drop and small swimming holes and geologic formations called "potholes" where water has carved out rounded cavities in the stone.
 A-4	Hill and Dale Rapids Viewing Area	US-Route 20 approximately the 600 area of Huntington Road, south of Countryside Woodcraft	Located near Route 20 in the Town of Russell, the Hill and Dale Rapids Viewing Area is a popular destination to watch the annual Westfield River White Water Race.
 A-5	Jacob's Ladder Scenic Byway	Located along Route 20 between Westfield and Lee	The Jacob's Ladder Scenic Byway is part of US Route 20, the longest highway in the US, which stretches from Boston, MA to Newport, OR. The Byway celebrates the history, architecture and scenic beauty of the rural America.
 A-6	Keystone Arches Bridges & Trail	Middlefield Rd & Herbert Cross Rd, Chester, MA 01011	The historic Keystone Arch Bridges, built between 1833 and 1841, are the oldest bridges of their kind in the United States. Built for railroad use, these 70-foot high stone bridges that span the Westfield River at multiple points were built without mortar or steel reinforcements. The Bridges are accessed via a 2.5 mile public hiking trail that provides visitors with spectacular views of the West Branch Gorge. Self-guided tour maps are available at the Chester Railroad Museum.

 A-7	Sanderson Brook Falls & Trail	Off of Route 20, accessed via pull off for Chester-Blandford State forest.	Located in the Chester-Blandford State Forest, Sanderson Brook Falls is a beautiful 60 foot cascade that tumbles down the face of a rock wall. The site is easily accessible via a 1 mile hike from Route 20.
 A-8	Skyline Trail	Enters Middlefield on northern border with Peru, bisects Chester before ending in Huntington	The Skyline Trail is a scenic road that follows along a ridgeline in Middlefield and Chestertown. Hiking, biking and cross-county ski trails abound the area.
 A-9	Wild & Scenic Westfield River	Located along Route 20, Russell, MA	A designated Wild and Scenic River renowned for Trout fishing, paddling, swimming and passive enjoyment. Traverses the Hilltowns from Northeast to Southwest.
Cultural Attractions and Festivals			
 C-1	Blandford Fair (September)	10 North St, Blandford, MA 01008	The Blandford Fair, now in its 150 th year, celebrates the Town's agricultural roots. This family-friendly event includes midway rides, agricultural and livestock judging, ox draws, antique tractor pulls, an Annual art show and sale, a horse show, local history displays, agricultural exhibits, food vendors, and kid's attractions, including a Barnyard Petting Zoo and pony rides.
 C-2	Blandford Historical Society & Museum	2 North Street, Blandford MA, 01008	Blandford's local history organization is located at the Town Common in a historic school house. Open to the public, the museum hosts displays and events.
 C-3	Chester Hill Harvest Festival (October)	Chester Center, Chester MA, 01011	This annual Harvest festival is held in and around the historic Chester Center, the Town Center before the advent of the railroad further west. Runs for one weekend in October.
 C-4	Chester Hill's Annual Maple Fest and Craft Fair (March)	334 Skyline Trail, Chester, MA 01011	Chester Hill's Maple Fest celebrates springtime, local artisans and "all things maple". The event features a pancake breakfast, a craft show featuring local artists and craftspeople, live music, a petting zoo, and of course, maple products. Families can take a tractor or draft horse pulled wagon ride to a local sugar shack to see how maple syrup is made.

 C-5	Chester on Track Railroad Festival (May)	Main Street Chester, Chester, MA, 01011	Chester on Track is a daylong festival that celebrates the community's rich history as a railroad town. This annual event, organized by the Chester Foundation and Chester Historical Society, is free to the public and includes a parade, train show, petting zoo, craft fair and horse-drawn wagon rides.
 C-6	Chester Railway Station and Museum	10 Prospect St, Chester, MA 01011	Housed in a railway station constructed in 1841, the Chester Museum is home to an extensive collection of local railroad memorabilia, artifacts and displays. Housed in a railway station built in 1841, Multiple styles of rail cars are on display, including a 1919 wooden caboose that is available for special events or a unique overnight camping experience, a 1923 tank car, and a restored 1929 wooden boxcar.
 C-7	Chester Theatre	4 Main Street, Chester, MA 01011	The seasonal theatre is housed in Chester Town Hall. Artists take up residence for the season and draw large regional crowds. Open from June through August the season typically includes four different runs of shows.
 C-8	Huntington Fall Fest (October)	Town Common, Rt. 20 and 112, Huntington, MA	Huntington's annual late October, Fall Festival with vendors, food, music and children's activities. Local businesses partner with community groups to organize event and provide food.
 C-9	Littleville Fair	15 Kinnebrook Rd, Chester, MA 01011	Chester's agricultural fair held in early August annually. Features horse and oxen pulls, homemade tractor competitions, food and more.
 C-10	Middlefield Agricultural Fair (August)	7 Bell Rd, Middlefield, MA 01243	One of the oldest running agricultural fairs in the country, the Middlefield fair is held annually in mid-August. Includes truck pulls, music, local food and children's activities.
 C-11	North Hall	40 Searle Rd, Huntington, MA 01050	Historic school house now serving as a community center. In addition to a series of public and private functions, North Hall hosts an annual arts festival highlighting local artists and musicians.

 C-12	The White Church of Blandford/ Bel Canto Opera	4 North St, Blandford, MA 01008	The White Church of Blandford is a historic building built in 1822. Its remarkable setting, perched on a hill makes it an attractive place to hold private and public functions including the annual “Bel Canto Opera” which draws a crowd from a wide region.
 C-13	Westfield River White Water Race (April)	Various Locations along Westfield River	Billed as the ‘oldest continually running canoe races in the US,” the Westfield River White Water Race is held in the Gateway Hilltowns every spring. Contestants from across the Northeast compete in beginner to expert level courses.
Forest and Nature Areas			
 N-1	AMC Noble View Outdoor Center	635 S Quarter Rd, Russell, MA 01071	Situated on a 358 acre preserve, this multi-use center is owned and operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club. An old farmstead was updated to include lodging facilities and educational space for groups.
 N-2	Chester-Blandford State Forest	Route 20, Blandford, MA 01008	The Chester-Blandford State Forest is a 2,500 acre park that includes a trail network and waterfalls. This forest provides excellent outdoor recreation opportunities and connections to regional trail systems.
 N-3	Gardner State Park	MA-112, Huntington, MA 01050	Located between Knightville Dam and Littleville Dam, Gardner State Park is a day use area located along the Westfield River. This is an excellent place for canoeing and picnicking. Open year round.
 N-4	Middlefield State Forest	Middlefield, MA 01235	3,165 acre park, part of the largest contiguous tract of wilderness land in the State of Massachusetts. Contains hiking trails and a variety of flora.
 N-5	Tekoa Mountain	Russell Road, Montgomery, MA	Tekoa Mountain, a 1,122 foot high rocky crest covered in cliffs and caves, offers dramatic views of the Wild and Scenic Westfield River. and his home to a population of Timber Rattle Snakes.

Speciality Retail			
 S-1	Countryside Woodcraft Furniture	665 Huntington Rd, Russell, MA 01071	A family owned and operated furniture store known for high quality, handcrafted dining, bedroom, and kitchen pieces. This specialty retail store draws visitors from a wide region for shopping and special events.
 S-2	Huntington Country Store	70 Worthington Road, Route 112, Huntington, MA 01050	The Huntington Country Store is a family run business offering food, gifts, and souvenirs out of a 200 year old building. Home of the famous Wrapple, a home-made cinnamon apple pastry.
Water Based Recreation			
 W-1	Knightville Dam Recreation Area	Knightville Dam Road, Huntington MA, 01050	The Knightville Dam Recreation Area includes 2,430 acre of public land and waters managed by the US Army Corps of Engineers. When the weather is warm, visitors can enjoy the Hilltown's natural beauty by hiking, horseback riding, birdwatching, or mountain biking the areas many trail. During the winter month, trails are available for cross country-skiing and snowmobiling. Hunting and fishing are also popular activities. Amenities include picnic facilities, restrooms, and the Indian Hollow Group Campground.
 W-2	Littleville Lake & Recreation Facility	32 Goss Hill Road, Huntington MA, 10150	254 acre lake and 1,567 acre recreation area. The reservoir is popular for fishing and boating. Old carriage roads attract hikers and bikers. Interpretive programs, open to the public for free are administered by the Army Corps of Engineers. In the winter, the area is used for snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, sledding and hiking.
 W-3	Norwich Pond	One mile north from Route 66, Huntington, MA 01050	Norwich Pond is a 122 acre reservoir known for baitcasting and fly fishing, swimming, and boating. Fish populations include: yellow perch, rock bass, white perch, largemouth bass, bream, bluegill, brown bullhead, chain pickerel, rainbow trout, black crappie, white sucker, golden shiner, and pumpkinseed. The area also includes a cartop boat launch area, swimming/wading area, and a spot for picnics.
 W-4	Russell Pond	Off General Knox Road, Russell MA, 01071	A 71 acre pond with a public swimming area. Residents and visitors fish, swim and launch small watercraft. In the summer months the public beach is monitored by lifeguards from the Town of Russell.

4.4 Sample Travel Itineraries

During the stakeholder interviews, several participants stated that it would be helpful to establish sample half- or full-day itineraries. A series of four sample itineraries are provided below. The itineraries are organized around four general themes:

- Waterfalls/ Rivers
- Winter Adventure
- Culture/History
- Recreation

Within each theme, sample activities are identified that would appeal to the following three different market niche travelers segments:

- Outdoor Enthusiast
- Weekend Getaway / Leisure Traveler
- Cultural Heritage Tourist

Theme: Waterfalls/ Rivers	
Market Niche	Featured Attractions/ Events
Outdoor Enthusiast/ Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Grab your camera and hike to the Keystone Arches❖ Hike to Sanderson Brook Falls❖ Plan and extended hiking trip in into the Chester-Blandford State forest❖ Take part in the annual Westfield River Whitewater Canoe Race❖ Follow up a morning hike with lunch at the Break Baked
Weekend Getaway/ Leisure Traveler	<ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Take a short hike to photograph Sanderson Falls located off of Route 20❖ Pack a picnic and a blanket and set up a lunch spot near the banks of the Westfield River in Gardner State Park❖ Grab a bite to eat and a beverage at the Rapids Bar and Grill in Huntington
Cultural Heritage Tourist	<ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Start your morning off with breakfast at the River Cafe❖ Drop by the Chester Rail Station to learn more about the Keystone Arches and the role that the railroads played in the Gateway Hilltowns history❖ Book tickets for a show at the Chester Theater❖ Stop into Blandford Historical Preservation Society❖ Explore old Mill Sites and learn about the areas industrial history

Theme: Winter Adventure	
Market Niche	Featured Attractions/ Events
Outdoor Enthusiast/ Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Plan a weekend ski getaway at the Blandford Ski Area ❖ Spend a day snowshoeing through the trails at the Chester-Blandford Forest ❖ Check out frozen waterfalls ❖ Lace up your skates and visit the Knightville Dam ❖ Visit the Maple Corner Farm X-Country Ski Center.
Weekend Getaway/ Leisure Traveler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Take the family to the AMC Nobleview Outdoor Center to use their skiing, sledding and snowshoeing trails ❖ Visit Country Woodcraft ❖ Get on line and find a unique play to stay at one of the local AirBnB offerings
Cultural Heritage Tourist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Explore the Chester Train Museum ❖ Learn about the history of Jacobs Ladder/ Route 20 Scenic Byway ❖ Stop into Blandford Historical Preservation Society ❖ Explore unique artisan and specialty shops like Sheepgate, The Clayground (selling pottery and glass pieces) in Blandford

Theme: Culture/ History	
Market Niche	Featured Attractions/ Events
Outdoor Enthusiast/ Recreation	Hike the trails to the Becket Quarry
Weekend Getaway/ Leisure Traveler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Boating at Littleville or Knightville ❖ View rapids at Hill and Dale area ❖ Enjoy the day at the Chester on Track Rail Festival ❖ Plan a weekend getaway and visit a local fair or U-pick farm
Cultural Heritage Tourist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Stop into the Blandford Historic Preservation Museum ❖ Spend the night in a caboose at the Chester Rail Museum

Theme: Recreation	
Market Niche	Featured Attractions/ Events
Outdoor Enthusiast/ Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Hike the trails of the Chester Blandfield State Forest ❖ Rent a kayak and paddle down the Westfield River ❖ Explore the craggy sides of Mount Tekoa
Weekend Getaway/ Leisure Traveler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Boating at Littleville or Knightville ❖ View rapids at Hill and Dale area ❖ Golf at the Blandford Golf and Tennis Club
Cultural Heritage Tourist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Hike up old cog rail trail ❖ Visit one of the country's longest running agricultural fair ❖ Spend the night in the Caboose after having dinner at Chester Common Table



Photo: Wild and Scenic Westfield River

5 ASSETS, CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

An inventory and analysis conducted during this effort identified current economic and demographic trends within the Gateway Hilltowns. The inventory, coupled with input provided by stakeholders, community residents and business owners, and guidance from the Steering Committee, yielded the list of key assets, challenges and opportunities provided on the following pages.

Section Contents

5.1 Assets

5.2 Challenges

5.3 Opportunities/Project Ideas

ASSETS, CHALLENGES &
OPPORTUNITIES

5.1 Assets

Throughout the planning process, the community stressed that residents of and visitors to the Gateway Hilltowns have access to an abundance of natural resources, outdoor recreation opportunities, and a safe, peaceful place to live, work and play.

A summary of the key assets identified is provided below:

- Natural beauty of the area, dark skies, peaceful energy
- Genuine good people, great neighbors
- Quiet, safe
- Outdoor recreation, hiking, fishing, kayaking
- Country living, but central to Boston, Albany, Hartfield and NYC
- Proximity to cultural treasures such as Jacob's Pillow and Tanglewood
- Working farms

5.2 Challenges

The national trend of a shift in industry sectors from manufacturing to more service-oriented industries has negatively impacted the six rural towns that comprise the Gateway Hilltowns. The closure of three local mills was identified as one of the key challenges facing the local community today.

Other key challenges include a lack of consistent broadband access throughout the Gateway Hilltowns, no local MassPike exit, and the lack of staff capacity to prepare and administer grants and economic development activities.

Staff Capacity

- The six towns that comprise the Gateway Hilltowns do not have a Planner, Economic Development Specialist or Grant Writer on staff.

Infrastructure

- Mass Pike replacing Route 20 as major highway, lack of MassPike exit
- Lack of consistent high speed Internet for businesses, school students
- Lack of a clearly defined Gateway
- Limited wayfinding and directions signage
- Limited lodging and restaurants

Demographics

- Shifting demographics – population growing older
- Gateway school system, lost 43% of students
- Long commutes to work and school have made socializing with co-workers and the parents of other children's classmates difficult. Residents find that the pronounced separation between where people live and social activities has made maintaining a sense of community a challenge. Analysis of US Census

data supported this sentiment and revealed that commutes for Hilltown residents are well above county and state averages.

Economics/Taxes

- Tax bases shrinking
 - Businesses closing or moving away
 - More land preserved as open space
- Property values deteriorating as tax rates are rising
- Shifting economy led to closing of the Mills, loss of jobs
- Railroad station closure in
- Exodus of business/business managers
- Costs for schools and municipal services increasing
- Lack of public transportation which limits job opportunities

5.3 Opportunity Areas/Project Ideas

As part of the planning process, the project team worked with the Steering Committee to identify vacant, abandoned or underutilized properties that had potential for redevelopment. During the first public open house, community residents were asked to identify potential uses for these opportunity areas, as well as project ideas to grow the local economy. A summary of the community's ideas is provided below:

Potential Opportunity Areas

Vacant Mills

- Condos over 50 development, art center, recreation place-tubing
- Arts incubator
- Mixed use – arts, retail, office and housing



Blandford Town Hall

- A restaurant/café that is open 7 days/week
- Artisan Coop on shop to showcase local crafts/artists Visitor Center for tourists, etc.
- Community center for all ages



Middlefield Country Store

- Visitor Center with café and gift shop
- Country store with food and coffee, local artwork, crafts sold



Former St. Thomas Catholic Church, 2 East Main Street,
Huntington

- A Hilltown Branch of the CDC - “Southern Hilltown CDC”
- Community center
- Small business incubator
- Performing arts space with weekly concerts or theatre, performances, etc. (not seasonal)
- Senior Center, Community Arts Center, Emergency Shelter



Project Ideas

- Community event calendar/website
- Maps of area including recreation areas-access, as well as stores, restaurants, theaters/churches
- Crafter’s center with lessons and sales opportunities
- Really cool destination restaurants/shops. We need to be a DESTINATION!
- Use existing trails for hiking, mountain biking, cross country skiing. Town run facilities or let contract out rentals. Access to mountain top scenic view, mountain bike down.
- With an increase in senior population, we need an assisted living facility for Southern Hilltowns. Would create jobs and not force people to move out of the area for services.



Photo: Scenic drive through the Gateway Hilltowns

6 Vision, Goals and Recommendations

The vision, goals and recommendations outlined in this strategy are designed to build upon the rich history and inherent scenic beauty of the region and leverage these assets to spur regional tourism, attract asset-based businesses to the area, and grow the second home market.

Section Contents

- 6.1 Vision Statement
- 6.2 Goal Categories
- 6.3 Recommended Action Items

6.1 Vision Statement

The Steering Committee prepared a vision statement for the Economic Development Strategy based on input received during stakeholder interviews, two public open houses, and conversations with Gateway Hilltown residents and business owners. The vision statement summarizes the community's ideal future—a future that focuses on enhancing economic opportunity and the quality of life for residents.

“The Gateway Hilltowns is a family-friendly, sustainable community that has leveraged its many natural, cultural and historic assets into a welcoming place that attracts tourism and business. The six communities that comprise the Gateway Hilltowns provide residents and visitors of all ages with a healthy lifestyle and exceptional quality of life.”

6.2 Goal Categories

To achieve this vision, a series of broad-based goals categories were identified. These goals are presented in the table below, along with a bulleted list of the issues or concerns that the goal category is designed to address.

Category	Community Feedback
Project Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The towns that comprise the Gateway Hilltowns do not have a grant writer or planner on staff• The communities lack the staff capacity to advance the recommendations outlined in the Strategy
Community Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not everyone knows what or where the Gateway Hilltowns are• Some residents don't think that tourism is the key to economic growth - “Keep the Hidden Hills Hidden”• Regional tourism efforts can sometimes lead to competition between communities
Enhance the Visitor Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of public bathroom, ATMs, gas stations and lodging make it tough to attract tourists• There is no clearly defined sign/monument to announce that you have entered the Gateway Hilltowns• Limited wayfinding and directions signage

Tourism Marketing/Product Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to figure out what events/activities area going on in the communities • No staff or organization to organize/promote events – volunteer dependent
Economic Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mills have closed, tax bases are decreasing • Vacant mills could be redeveloped as artist live/work housing and /or artists in residence retreats • There is a need to reinvest in existing assets • Need businesses that meet needs of local residents as well as tourists • Lack of consistent broadband, public transportation and Mass Pike access make it difficult to attract and grow business

6.3 Recommended Action Items

The Gateway Hilltowns are poised to take advantage of many local assets and regional growth opportunities. To do so, the community must position itself to maximize its assets and existing partnerships. A series of recommended action items are described herein that identify specific steps required to achieve the desired vision.

Goal 1: Project Administration

At the project kick-off meeting, the Steering Committee identified a lack of staff/municipal capacity to obtain and administer tourism and economic development-related grants as one of the highest concerns of the Gateway Hilltowns. During the planning process, the Hilltown Collaborative was awarded grant monies to fund an Economic Development Coordinator for the six towns. The funds will cover salary, benefits, equipment and overhead for one year.

1-A: Secure funds to maintain a shared Economic Development Coordinator position responsible for implementing the recommendations identified in the Economic Development Strategy

This recommendation seeks to secure the funds necessary to maintain the new shared Economic Development Coordinator position. This position will provide the municipal capacity needed to secure grant funding and administer programs to attract new businesses and workers to the region by showcasing the natural/cultural assets and quality of life of the Gateway Hilltowns, as well as advance the recommendations identified in this strategy.

1-B: Establish an Economic Development Advisory Board

An Economic Development Advisory Board (existing Hilltown Collaborative could serve as board) could provide guidance to the Town Boards regarding economic development issues, strategy development and implementation of

VISION, GOALS &
RECOMMENDATIONS

the recommendations outlined in this report. Topics could include tourism asset development, business retention and expansion activities, business attraction, as well as entrepreneurial development.

Goal 2: Community Relations

During the Open House, several participants expressed concern that increased tourism could lead to a reduced quality of life for residents. Participants comments included, “Keep the Hidden Hills Hidden” and “Careful planning is needed to not spoil this beautiful place.”

To improve community relations and educate the general public about the benefits of tourism as a catalyst for economic development, the following strategies are recommended:

2-A: Educate the Public

One of the issues identified during the public engagement sessions was the fact that some residents have a negative perception of the tourism industry. Residents fear that increased tourism will lead to traffic along local roads, low-paying jobs, and excessive commercialization, all of which can contribute to a reduced quality of life.

To improve community relations and educate residents about the value of tourism, the following strategies are recommended:

- Increase Awareness of the Gateway Hilltowns Project

Most of the general public, including business owners, community residents and visitors, are unaware that the Gateway Hilltowns exists as an entity. Members of the Economic Development Advisory Board, in partnership with Economic Development Coordinator, should hold community forums with members of local government, the Jacobs Ladder Business Association, neighborhood groups, and tourism providers to increase awareness of the organization’s vision and goals.

- Educate the General Public about the Economic Benefits of Tourism

The Gateway Hilltowns should make an ongoing commitment to educate the public about the economic benefits associated with tourism. A successful tourism program can lead to increased tax revenues, creation of new jobs, and enhanced community pride.

Members of the Economic Development Advisory Board and/or the Economic Development Coordinator should:

- Speak to local groups about the positive role that tourism can play in the local economy
- Work with local newspapers, like the Country Journal, and social media to promote local tourism-related stories.

- Promote Local Attractions to Area Residents

The Destination Analyst's *State of the American Traveler Survey* dated January 2011 showed that over 65% of US travelers listed "visiting friends and relatives" as their primary reason for travel. By educating Gateway Hilltown residents about the tourism attractions in their own towns they can be transformed into ambassadors when they host guests or make recommendations to friends and family members.

One way to increase awareness of local tourism attractions to community residents is to establish an Annual Resident Tourist Day. Residents could be encouraged to visit local attractions through the provision of discount coupons to area attractions on a specified day, thereby making them tourists in their own town.



2-B: Maintain a positive working relationship with communities that make up the Hilltown Collaborative

One of the problems that can be associated with any regional strategy or plan is the sometimes not-so-friendly competitive attitude that can develop between local governments, businesses, and local tourism providers. To overcome any problems associated with community competition between the six towns, it is recommended that a regional entity (Economic Development Advisory Board) should be created to oversee the implementation of the Economic Development Strategy.

Goal 3: Enhance the Visitor Experience

3-A: Build on Existing Assets

The Gateway Hilltowns have a unique history and culture. When developing a tourism program for the area, special attention should be paid to those natural and man-made attractions that distinguish the Gateway Hilltowns from other communities. Focus on the authenticity and quality of the visitor's experience: celebrate the abundance of wilderness and outdoor recreation opportunities, the rich history and culture centered on the railroads, mining and lumber, and the potential agri-tourism opportunities leveraging local farms.



VISION, GOALS & RECOMMENDATIONS

When visitors come to the Gateway Hilltowns, you want to make sure that they feel welcome and have a quality experience. One way to ensure that visitors enjoy their experience to the Gateway Hilltowns is to educate your town officials, residents, businesses, and front-line hospitality employees on the role of tourism in their community. This can be accomplished through the development and implementation of a tourism training program. Working with existing tourism providers, a program could be developed to educate residents and employees about the economic impact of tourism to their community, the benefits of becoming a “tourism-friendly” destination, and ensure that they are knowledgeable about local tourism attractions, including local events, community history, unique restaurants and lodging options, and even good places to shop for locally made products.

3-B: Establish a Welcome Center

During the Open House and stakeholder interviews, community residents and business owners noted that one of the biggest deterrents to asset-based tourism in the Gateway Hilltowns is the lack of tourism infrastructure including, but not limited to, public bathroom, ATMs, gas stations and lodging.

To enhance the visitor experience, it is recommended that the Gateway Hilltowns explore the feasibility of establishing a Welcome Center. To keep costs low, the Center could be located in a municipally-owned property or existing school building and staffed by volunteers. The Welcome Center should include a public restroom, parking, and space for local attractions, shops and restaurants to display brochures or flyers. If space allows, the Welcome Center could also include a café and exhibit space for local artisans.



3-C: Explore the feasibility of creating short term lodging options

To become a successful tourist destination, the Gateway Hilltowns will need to provide tourist lodging. The addition of bed and breakfast options or an AirBnB would help to increase number and types of lodging options available to visitors. As these initial low-cost endeavors prove successful, they may inspire other entrepreneurs to establish a more commercially-oriented hotel.

Goal 4: Tourism Marketing/Product Development

4-A: Prepare a Tourism Development and Marketing Plan, including a uniform sign strategy

Roger Brooks, a nationally recognized expert in tourism development, states, “Creating a Tourism Development & Marketing Plan is the first rule for successful tourism”. According to Brooks, the plan should integrate existing comprehensive plans and economic development and Main Street efforts.

Specifically, the plan should address:

- product development,
- upgrades and improvements,

- repositioning and/or branding,
- attractions and events,
- visitor amenities and services,
- marketing and public relations,
- public/private partnerships,
- recruitment,
- funding and budgets, and
- organizational responsibilities.

An important component of the Tourism Development & Marketing Plan should be development of a unified brand. A brand is more than a name, a logo, or a banner. A brand should be a tool for the Gateway Hilltowns to use to communicate and promote itself to various target markets, including visitors and prospective investors.

When establishing a marketing brand the following essential elements should be considered:

- Color Palette
- Typeface
- Graphic Icon
- Market Position
- Brand Extension
- Marketing Collateral

The Plan should also include development of a uniform signage strategy. The design and installation of gateway and directional signage is key in letting visitors know when they have arrived at the Gateway Hilltowns, and allows them to easily access local attractions. Authors Maury Forman and Roger Brooks offer the following tips to create a successful signage strategy in their book “Your Town: A Destination – the 25 Immutable Rules of Successful Tourism”:

If it’s not convenient, or easy to find, chances are that visitors will not find what it is you’re offering and move on.

A Gateway, Signage and Wayfinding Plan will help visitors know where attractions and amenities are located, and it lets them know what you have to offer.

All tourism related signage, including wayfinding or directional signs, should be decorative. They should reinforce the brand. When visitors see the signage and gateways into the community, what you are known for should be obvious.



Establish a visual gateway through landscaping and signage to announce to visitors that they are entering the Gateway Hilltowns

VISION, GOALS &
RECOMMENDATIONS

4-B: Coordinate events in a local calendar/website

During the Open House, several residents commented that it would be beneficial to have a single events calendar that promotes community, historic, and cultural events for the six towns that make up the Gateway Hilltowns.

Most tourists depend on the Internet to find information about destinations and events, including how to get there, where they can stay, where they can eat, and places to shop. By establishing a Gateway Hilltowns website, there would be one location for tourists and residents to go to that provide them with tourist related information and a central calendar of events.

The careful development of events across the Hilltowns can provide an effective mechanism for brand building, attracting visitors, and the inclusion of previously excluded areas into the tourism mainstream. Regional cultural or sporting events could be established to promote a unified brand and leverage exposure for the Gateway Hilltowns.

Potential events could include:

- Gateway Hilltowns Extreme Bike Race
- Gateway Hilltowns Running Road Race
- Gateway Hilltowns Farm Tour
- Gateway Hilltowns Railroad History Tour



4-C: Advertise on State and regional tourism websites

Once a Gateway Hilltowns website has been created, links should be established that connect visitors to/from existing local, regional and state tourism websites to gain access to a larger audience. Anyone who visits the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism website will be able to see information about the Gateway Hilltowns.



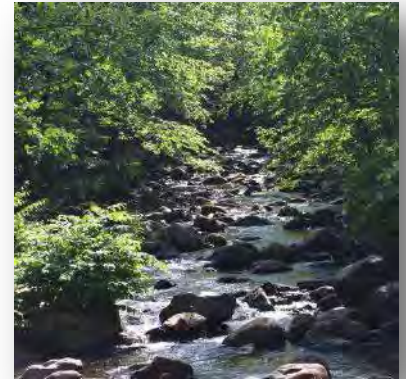
The Economic Development Advisory Committee should also pursue creative relationships with the electronic and print media, both within the region and at a state level.

4-D: Develop improved access to the Westfield Wild & Scenic River and other water bodies

One of the greatest natural resources in the Gateway Hilltowns is the Westfield Wild and Scenic River. Creating additional opportunities for visual and physical access to the river will expand off-trail opportunities for visitors and residents alike, and increases the potential to grow recreation-based businesses within the region.

4-E: Coordinate with local colleges and universities

The Gateway Hilltowns should partner with local colleges and universities to maximize visitor attraction. Opportunities exist for the six towns to partner with higher education staff to support and cross-promote student/parent/alumni events that could increase visitation to local attractions, restaurants and retail shops. It is recommended that the Economic Development Director start with Westfield State University staff, as well as clubs (Outing, Rock Climbing Club, and Ski & Snowboarding) and then expand to area colleges like Smith and Brown, as well as nearby community colleges.



Goal 5: Economic Development

The six towns that comprise the Gateway Hilltowns are known for their scenic beauty and their rich cultural heritage tied to the lumber, railroad and mining industries. The Gateway Hilltowns should take advantage of the inherent natural and cultural assets and leverage them to spur regional tourism.

Tourism has long been considered an effective catalyst for economic development. It is the fastest growing industry sector in the Country and can bring in dollars to the Gateway Hilltowns from outside of the community. In addition, tourism can provide a “front-door” for non-tourism economic development efforts such as asset-based business attraction, the purchase of second homes, and the recruitment of businesses and activities that support the Gateway Hilltown’s lifestyle.

5-A: Explore and secure funding to upgrade/address basic infrastructure needs including, but not limited to, Mass Pike access and broadband

One of the biggest issues or concerns raised during stakeholder interviews and the open houses was the lack of basic infrastructure in the Gateway Hilltowns. This includes infrastructure policy and/or funding to address the lack of public transit, which limits job opportunities for community residents, the lack of consistent high speed broadband throughout the region, and the lack of an exit off the Mass Turnpike, and limited tourist infrastructure including lodging, restaurants, gas stations, and ATMs).

VISION, GOALS &
RECOMMENDATIONS

5-B: Coordinate visitor-oriented business development and management workshops

The Gateway Hilltowns could sponsor workshops throughout the region to help potential and existing visitor-oriented businesses (e.g., Bed & Breakfasts, restaurants, family-owned commercial and retail businesses) to understand how to prepare business plans and offer advice and guidance on how to operate more efficiently more efficiently. A series of workshops could be established that specifically address the needs of Gateway Hilltowns businesses, such as:

- Developing business plan
- How to increase market appeal as a Bed & Breakfast
- How to operate a successful roadside farm stand
- How to find and secure funding
- How to effectively write a proposal
- Public relations



5-C: Create on-line inventory of available space / market identified strategic sites

To increase occupancy rates of commercial properties within the Gateway Hilltowns, the towns should maintain regular contact with property owners and real estate professionals to understand market issues related to vacant properties, and help minimize barriers to development. Specifically, the towns could support the distribution of information related to sites and locations capable of accommodating targeted activity and/or tenants. Available properties could also be inventoried and listed on the town's websites as well as in industry databases, along with a list of available incentives.

5-D: Ensure that the Gateway Hilltowns is a business-friendly community

To attract and retain businesses, the six towns that comprise the Gateway Hilltowns should take active steps to ensure that they are business-friendly communities. In a competitive environment, those communities with the procedures and policies that are perceived to be most accommodating to businesses will ultimately have a significant advantage. To create more business-friendly communities within the Gateway Hilltowns, the towns should consider the following action steps:

- *Review existing zoning bylaws and permitting processes*
Streamlining the development process would further reinforce the message that the towns that make up the Gateway Hilltowns are business friendly communities. Each town should periodically review its development approval procedures to clearly define the roles of local boards and identify specific points in the process and criteria that trigger their respective reviews of a proposal.
- *Create a Gateway Hilltowns Business Welcome Kit*
The Welcome Kit could include lists of contact information for each of the six town's departments, existing local and regional economic development

programs, contact information for local business associations, and financing resources.

5-E: Create an Ambassador Program to promote business attraction, retention and expansion in the Gateway Hilltowns

When asked to identify the strengths of the Gateway Hilltowns, one of the most common responses the project team heard was “the people.” To leverage that asset, the Gateway Hilltowns, working in partnership with the Economic Development Coordinator, should establish and Ambassador Program. Ambassadors could serve as an informal first point of contact for local entrepreneurs or small- to mid-size business owners looking to relocate to one of the six towns. The Ambassadors could be volunteers who have local knowledge of the area, current or retired business owners, or someone who has a solid understanding of a town’s permitting process, tax laws or preparing a business plan. Volunteers could be available to talk with potential business owners by phone, email, or a face-to-face over coffee to provide firsthand experience of what it is like to live and work in the Gateway Hilltowns.



5-F: Actively recruit asset-based businesses

The Economic Development Coordinator should actively recruit businesses that support the arts and outdoor recreation that are not currently represented such as canoe & kayak rental, fishing supplies, and guide services, as well as businesses that cater to hikers, cyclists and skiers.



VISION, GOALS &
RECOMMENDATIONS

5-G: Recruit businesses and activities that support the Gateway Hilltown's lifestyle

Throughout the planning process, the Steering Committee members made it clear that the majority of residents have *chosen* to live in the Gateway Hilltowns. Some were born and raised in the region, while others moved here from far away. During the open houses, residents stated that they were attracted to the area because it offered a safe, peaceful, family-friendly environment, with an abundance of passive and active outdoor recreation opportunities, and an overall slower pace of life. Residents of the six communities that comprise the Gateway Hilltowns have similar values and passions, and therefore, it is recommended that the Economic Development Committee look to provide activities and business that cater to resident's needs. Participants mentioned that they would like to see health food stores, organic restaurants, a downtown farmers' market, events for children, and activities for seniors in their towns.



5-H: Explore the feasibility of transforming one of the vacant mills into a mixed-use property

With the recent closure of three mills in the Gateway Hilltowns, an opportunity exists to celebrate the area's rich history by transforming these vacant and abandoned properties into mixed-use properties. The Economic Development Advisory Committee should pursue funding to conduct a feasibility study to explore the redevelopment potential of either Crescent Mills or Woronoco Mill #1 (both located in Russell).

One of the strengths identified by the community during the public engagement process was the number of talented local artisans that live in the Gateway Hilltowns. An opportunity exists to explore a mixed-use facility that would provide artisan live-work space, a live music venue, visitor's center, gallery space, a retail component, office space, and residential units.



Photo: Scenic Mountain View

7 IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

An implementation plan has been developed to support and advance the recommendations of the Gateway Hilltown’s Economic Development Strategy.

At the most basic level, this Economic Development Strategy identifies critical steps that are needed to enhance the quality of life and improve the economic opportunities in the Gateway Hilltowns. The specific recommendations are provided as a guide to those who participate in the effort to implement the goals of the communities. Achieving these goals will require the efforts of local government, federal and state funding, and the participation of volunteers throughout the community. No one single person or group will be able to achieve the goals independently. It will command the determination, strengths and diversity of many offices, agencies and volunteers working towards a common vision.

Section Contents

7.1 Implementation Matrix

IMPLEMENTATION MATRIX

7.1 Implementation Matrix

The Implementation Matrix, provided on the following page, organizes the Strategy's recommendations by goal category. A Project Champion has been identified for each recommendation, as well as potential partners and funding sources. Finally, the plan sets a level of priority for each strategy. These priorities include immediate, short-term, medium-term, long-term and ongoing.

This implementation plan will be amended and updated as new actions are introduced and as strategies are implemented.

Gateway Hilltowns Economic Development Strategy
Implementation Matrix

Recommendations		Project Champion(s)	Potential Partners/Funding	Immediate*	Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term	Ongoing
PROJECT ADMINISTRATION								
1-A	Secure funds to maintain a shared Economic Development Coordinator position responsible for implementing the recommendations identified in the Economic Development Strategy	Hilltown Collaborative	Town Selectboards / PVPC	H				√
1-B	Establish an Economic Development Advisory Board	Hilltown Collaborative	Town Selectboards	H				
COMMUNITY RELATIONS								
2-A	Educate the Public <ul style="list-style-type: none">Increase Awareness of the Gateway Hilltowns ProjectEducate the General Public about the Economic Benefits of TourismPromote Local Attractions to Area Residents	Economic Development Director	Jacob's Ladder Business Association (JLBA), Hilltown Community Development Corporation (HCDC) / Funding: Healthy Hampshire					H
2-B	Maintain a positive working relationship with communities that make up the Hilltown Collaborative	Hilltown Collaborative	Town Selectboards, Economic Development Director					M
ENHANCE THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE								
3-A	Build on existing assets <ul style="list-style-type: none">Wilderness and outdoor RecreationCultural Heritage TourismAgri-tourism	Economic Development Director	Hilltown Collaborative / Funding: USDA Rural Development, Mass Forest Stewardship Program, Massachusetts Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity (LAND) Program		H			
3-B	Establish a Welcome Center with a public restroom	Economic Development Director	Hilltown Collaborative, Town Selectboards, Gateway Regional School District / Funding: Green Communities Program		H			
3-C	Explore the feasibility of creating short term lodging options	Economic Development Director	HCDC, Southern Hilltowns Adult Education Center	H				√
TOURISM MARKETING/PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT								
4-A	Prepare a Tourism Development and Marketing Plan	Economic Development Director	Hilltown Collaborative / Funding: USDA Rural Development		H			
4_B	Coordinate events in a local calendar/website	Economic Development Director	JLBA / Funding: Local Cultural Council Program	H				√
4-C	Advertise on State and regional tourism websites	Economic Development Director	State and regional tourism agencies	H				
4-D	Develop improved access to the Westfield Wild & Scenic River and other water bodies	Economic Development Director, Hilltown Collaborative	Town Selectboards, private property owners - including CSX / Funding: National Park Service "Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program", Westfield River Watershed Association		M			√
4-E	Coordinate with local colleges and universities, starting with Westfield State University	Economic Development Director	Westfield State University, Trails Linkages Committee, Western Hilltown Hikers, local community colleges		M			√

* Immediate (Year 1), Short Term (Year 2-5), Medium-Term (Year 6-10), Long-term (10+)
H = High Priority, M = Medium Priority, L = Low Priority

Gateway Hilltowns Economic Development Strategy
Implementation Matrix

Recommendations		Project Champion(s)	Potential Partners/Funding	Immediate*	Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term	Ongoing
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT								
5-A	Explore and secure funding to upgrade/address basic infrastructure needs, with focus on MassPike access and broadband	Economic Development Director	Hilltown Collaborative / Funding: MassWorks, MassDOT	H				√
5-B	Coordinate visitor-oriented business development and management workshops	Economic Development Director	JLBA, HCDC, SCORE Association, Small Business Administration (SBA) / Funding: USDA Rural Development	H				
5-C	Create on-line inventory of available space / market identified strategic sites	Economic Development Director	Hilltown Collaborative, HCDC, Realtors, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission	H				√
5-D	Ensure that the Gateway Hilltowns is a business-friendly community	Economic Development Director	Planning Boards / Funding: District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) program	H				√
5-E	Create an Ambassador Program to promote business attraction, retention and expansion in the Gateway Hilltowns	Economic Development Director	JLBA, HCDC, SCORE Association, Small Business Administration (SBA)			M		
5-F	Actively recruit asset-based businesses	Economic Development Director	Hilltown Collaborative / Funding: Economic Development Fund					H
5-G	Recruit businesses and activities that support the Gateway Hilltown’s lifestyle	Economic Development Director	Hilltown Collaborative					√
5-H	Explore the feasibility of transforming one of the vacant mills into a mixed-use property	Economic Development Director	HCDC / Funding: MassHousing Partnership, MassDevelopment			M		

* Immediate (Year 1), Short Term (Year 2-5), Medium-Term (Year 6-10), Long-term (10+)
H = High Priority, M = Medium Priority, L = Low Priority