

TOWN OF PALMER

Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Program Action Grant Case Study

Municipality: Palmer

Project Title: Town of Palmer Master Plan

Award Year (FY): 2020-2021

Grant Award: \$ 112,500

Match: \$ 37,500

Match Source: Cash from municipal budget

One or Two-Year Project: Two-year project

Municipal Department Leading Project: Planning and Economic Development

Project Website URL: <http://www.palmermasterplan.com/>

Community Overview:

- **What is the population size of your community and where is it located?**

The Town of Palmer is located in central western Massachusetts, positioned in the northeastern corner of Hampden County with neighboring communities located in both Hampshire and Worcester counties. Palmer is part of the Springfield, Massachusetts Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). It has a total area of 32.0 square miles, of which 31.5 square miles are land and 0.5 square mile (1.53%) is water. It is located at the confluence of three rivers (Swift, Chicopee and Quaboag), at the headwaters of a fourth, and is part of the Chicopee River Watershed. The with a population 12,504, the Town proper is comprised of 4 distinct villages: Bondsville, Three Rivers, Thorndike, and Depot Village which serves as Palmer's main commercial downtown.

- **Do you have any [Environmental Justice](#) or other Climate Vulnerable communities? (Think about both those who live and work in your town.)**

The Town of Palmer's Environmental Justice population is comprised of portions of two census tracts within the downtown areas of both the Village of Three Rivers (8103) and Depot Village (8101). These areas are challenged commercially as a number of the storefronts on the main streets are now vacant. The village of Three Rivers struggles at an intense level economically and as such was certified as an Opportunity Zone as determined by the Tax Cuts and Jobs Acts of 2017.

In addition to those who are struggling financially, other vulnerable populations in the community include senior and disabled residents. Approximately 18% of Palmer's total population lack mobility, have physical or mental impairments, and experience social isolation. Seniors are generally more vulnerable to the effects of extreme temperatures,

and therefore to secondary effects such as power outages, which prevent the use of air conditioning or heating. Ensuring resiliency among Palmer’s senior residents is particularly pressing, as the number of individuals aged 65 or over is anticipated to grow from 1,748 in 2010 to 2,709 in 2030.

In addition to the Opportunity Zone demographics and the contextual Environmental Justice population, 14.1% of Palmer residents are estimated to be living in poverty, compared to 11.1% of individuals in Massachusetts. In terms of climate vulnerability, these community members may lack the financial capacity to evacuate in an emergency, afford air conditioning units or increased heat costs, or keep up with day-to-day costs of living when weather disrupts the local economy. This Master Plan exercise identified numerous elements that will all aid in increasing resiliency to the Environmental Justice populations, in particular the chapters relevant to Transportation and Mobility, Public Health and the associated Health Addendum.

- **Other unique traits of your municipality like who the top employers are, geography, history, etc.**
- The four major rivers (i.e., Ware, Quaboag, Swift, and Chicopee) in Palmer played a critical role in the modern-day development of the Town, particularly with respect to its transformation from a farming community to an industrial community where waterpower was harnessed for the operation of textile mills. These textile mills catalyzed the development of three of the Town’s four villages (i.e., Bondsville, Thorndike, and Three Rivers), which were developed to provide worker housing and related services. - *Excerpt from Chapter 2 – Land Use and Development Patterns.*
- Reflecting on the fact that Palmer had always been dispersed and made up of multiple small settlements, the villages of Bondsville, Thorndike, and Three Rivers began to independently take shape around the textile mills that were constructed on the rivers in the 1830s. As the mills expanded, they required fire suppression, as well as domestic water service. To this day, the town is served by four independent water companies consistent with the legislative boundaries of their associated fire districts. The private ownership of critical infrastructure was noted to affect numerous aspects of the town’s growth and development. The Master Plan elements where this is noted to be particularly impactful are Housing, Economic Development, Transportation and Mobility and Sustainability and Climate Resilience.
- After the railroad came through in the 1840s, the town center shifted to where a depot was established, proximate to the Quaboag River. Palmer Depot became the commercial center, and the Four Corners village became the civic center. The interest in reestablishing Palmer’s vibrant past as a rail transportation hub has been revitalized by the recent E-W Rail MassDOT study. Goal 1 of Chapter 7 - Transportation & Mobility supports improving the Town’s transportation infrastructure by continuing to advocate for a passenger rail

stop in downtown Palmer (Depot Village) and to proactively prepare a Neighborhood Transit-Oriented Development Plan for the area around a preferred location for a new rail station associated with the East-West Passenger Rail Project (Implementation Matrix; Action LU1-1.8).

- Palmer is fortunate to have a strong commercial and industrial base and currently has 8 employers, covering a mix of industries, that support 100+ jobs. As noted in the below Table 4-1 of the Economic Development chapter, in 2020, there were 577 business in Palmer with 5,809 employees according to Esri and Dat. The Baystate Wing Hospital was Palmer’s largest employer with 721 jobs.

Baystate Wing Hospital	721	General Medical-Surgical Hospitals
Camp Ramah in New England	300	Sporting-Recreational Camps
Big Y	150	Grocery Stores
Palmer Paving Corp	140	Asphalt Paving Products
Pathfinder Regional Tech High	130	Vocational Schools
Old Mill Pond School	125	Elementary-Secondary Schools
Turley Publications Inc	125	Publishing and Printing
Sanderson Macleod Inc	100	Equipment and Sales

- Goal 5, of the same chapter, supports paving the way for catalyst projects and advancing strategies that promote large development opportunities with the potential for widespread economic benefits. Specifically, action 5.1 suggests exploring opportunities to expand upon the supply of parcels available for industrial development in response to the fact that Palmer’s industrial-zoned land is almost fully built out.

Project Description and Goals:

- Where was the project located?** The project consisted of writing a Comprehensive Master Plan for the Town of Palmer.
- What climate change impacts did the project address?** Each element of the Master Plan addresses issues related to the town-wide effects of climate change. Exclusively, Chapter 9, entitled “Sustainability and Climate Resilience” details the towns areas of vulnerability and efforts towards sustainability and identifies the following 4 goals with a total of 39 actions:
 - Goal 1. Consistent with the State’s commitment to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, work to eliminate municipal as well as community-wide greenhouse gas emissions. 12 actions

- Goal 2. Better manage waste generated from town operations and community activities and reduce – consistent with state goals – associated waste to landfill or incineration. 3 actions
- Goal 3. Prepare and protect local businesses and residents from the implications of climate change. 14 actions
- Goal 4. Continually assess the implications of potential climate change impacts and strengthen adaptive capacity of the Town’s facilities and infrastructure. 10 actions

- **What were the specific goals and tasks of the project as stated in your application?**

The specific goals and tasks for the project were identified in the application project scope and identified as Attachment B. Attachment B was updated on 5/27/2020 due to timeline adjustments because of the pandemic. Please see the below excel document:

[Palmer - Comprehensive Master Plan - Attachment B Revised 05272020](#)

Did your project meet the goals set forth in your application in terms of:

- **Employing nature-based solutions:** Yes, each chapter offers nature-based solutions in the form of Goals and Actions.
- **Improving equitable outcomes for and fostering strong partnerships with EJ and other Climate Vulnerable Population:** Yes, this can be found in Goal 3 of the Sustainability and Climate Resilience Chapter which provides actions for improving equitable outcomes relative to transportation, broadband service, essential services, and emergency shelters. Additionally, Chapter 10 entitled “Public Health” offers 12 goals with a combined 40 actions that focus on health-based solutions for improved food access and healthier lifestyles.
- **Providing regional benefits:** Yes, examples may be found in Chapter 8 - Transportation and Mobility Goals/Actions 1 and 2.
- **Implementing the public involvement and community engagement plan set forth in your application:** The project began in March 2020 by appointment of a 12-member Master Plan Steering Committee, followed by a kick-off meeting and community immersion day. The 17-month public process included 7 public forums, 2 public surveys, an economic roundtable and 14 steering committee meetings. A Master Plan Public Involvement Plan was created in June of 2020 to ensure that the entire process maintained a high level of public outreach and participation.
- **Finishing the project on time:** Yes, the two-year project was completed on June 30, 2021. The Plan was finalized in July 2021 and is scheduled to be adopted by the Planning Board in August 2021.

Results and Deliverables:

- **Describe, and quantify (where possible) project results (e.g. square footage of habitat restored or created, increase in tree canopy coverage, etc.). Report out on the metrics outlined in your application.**

Each of the 10 chapters of the Master Plan outlines individual goals and actions. The Implementation Element (Chapter 11) incorporates an Implementation Matrix which provides guidance on the leadership team, partners, timeline, potential funding sources and general costs.

- **Provide a brief summary of project deliverables with web links, if available.**

Project deliverables consist of a final version of Palmer's Master Plan – including all written materials, maps, tables, charts, and photographs in both a hard-copy and digital format. Chapter 1 of the Plan details the Master Plan process and highlights how the Plan was prepared in concert with the guidance of the Master Plan Steering Committee (MPSC), the public engagement process, creation of the vision statement and how these efforts combined to establish priority goals, actions, and an Implementation Matrix.

[PalmerMP Final 07292021.pdf](#)

Lessons Learned:

- **What lessons were learned as a result of the project? Focus on both the technical matter of the project and process-oriented lessons learned.**

Public interaction and input are essential to any municipal master plan process. The Covid-19 pandemic created a very real challenge as to how to engage in this necessary interactive process. Vannasse, Hangen, Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) was contracted as the project consultant and the MPSC was appointed in March 2020 just when the pandemic became a serious and socially limiting reality. VHB had previous experience creating virtual reality meetings with break-out rooms, so we relied on them to move the public process forward. The community tour took place in April 2020 when in person meetings were prohibited. Nine members of the MPSC, 3 VHB team members and 2 Palmer staff members individually drove their cars throughout town along a pre-planned route and remained connected during the driving tour via a zoom meeting. Group stops at various outdoor locations were planned along the way to discuss site highlights at a safe social distance. The zoom connection while driving allowed the group to maintain a continued discussion enroute. The overall opinion was that this type of tour was highly efficient and is an example of how a necessary reaction to Covid-19 could result in lessons learned on how to make a community tour more involved and effective even in a normal future.

The community tour was just the first adjustment on how to be publicly engaged during a time of social confinement. As the process and the pandemic continued, all of the public forums and MPSC meetings took place virtually over the Zoom platform. The agendas and notices to the public forums included a zoom link which allowed the public to join and then be interact during the session. Public outreach for each forum included multiple avenues. Notices were posted on several local Facebook social media groups, the town's Facebook and webpage, and a direct email was sent to all those who signed up on the project website. Hard copy flyers were posted at each of the 4 post offices and robo-calls were made directly to residents enrolled in the CodeRED Community alert notification system.

The public forums were then broadcast live on M-PACT-TV and live streamed on the town's Facebook page. People attending were able to interact through either of those medias or could choose to email or call the Planning Department office. VHB incorporated an interactive survey to determine how people were participating in the event. The results of the polleverywhere survey revealed that there were 72 participants at the first public meeting. Fifty-nine percent participate through Zoom, 24% via Facebook live and 18% by local public access TV. Public participation to the 14 MPSC meetings was also made available via live broadcast through M-PACT-TV, and direct phone or email interaction with the Planning Department.

Writing a master plan during a pandemic offered an unusual experience to explore new opportunities to engage in untraditional public awareness and participation avenues. The hopeful thought is that we will never be in this socially restrictive environment again. However, hybrid options of in-person meetings combined with virtual participation may be the optimal way engage more of the public than ever before.

- **What is the best way for other communities to learn from your project/process?**

Other communities can learn the best way to engage in a public master plan process by reading this report and viewing the palmer master plan website. The project website <http://www.palmermasterplan.com/> documents the entire process, including virtual public engagement through video, PowerPoint presentations, and both live and recorded meetings via M-PACT public TV.

The document/project itself produced a traditional master plan that not only addresses the statutory requirements under Chapter 41 Section 81D of the Massachusetts General Laws but also purposefully focuses on essential, yet unmandated, elements such as sustainability, climate change and community health. Communities can view this plan to understand how to develop a master plan that will proactively and wholly bring their community into the mid-21st century.

Partners and Other Support:

- **Include a list of all project partners and describe their role in supporting/assisting in the project.**

1. VHB was the lead consultant on the project. The team leaders were Donny Goris-Kolb, Project Manager and Geoffrey Morrison-Logan, Principal-In-Charge.
2. The Master Plan Steering Committee (MPSC) consisted of a twelve-member Committee. Responsibilities were to provide guidance and oversight to the process, review the work performed by the contractors, and act as a liaison to the wider Palmer community. This dedicated team met virtually for each of the 7 public forums and the 14 MPSC follow-up meetings as well as the final meeting for plan adoption by the Planning Board. Members were appointed by the Town Manager and consisted of representatives from the following Board, Commissions and 4 residents At-large:

Planning Board	Department of Public Works
Conservation Commission	Board of Health
Historical Commission	Council on Aging
School Committee	Town Council

3. Palmer’s Regional Planning Agency, PVPC was responsible for writing the Master Plan Health addendum, including public outreach/forum, administering the public survey, and compiling the survey results. The health addendum was developed in parallel with the Palmer Master Plan as part of the FY21 Work Plan for the Palmer Mass in Motion program, funded through the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and was guided by a local committee made up of the following representatives:

Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation
Baystate Wing Hospital
Palmer Council on Aging
Palmer Town Council
Master Plan Steering Committee
Behavioral Health Network

4. The Palmer Municipal Staff from the Planning & Economic Development Department were responsible for supporting the MPSC and project consultants during all phases of the project. Specifics included posting meeting agendas, attending all public meetings, composing meeting minutes, interacting with the website and interested residents, supporting public outreach and managing the MVP Action Grant timelines and monthly reporting.
5. M-PACT-TV, the local public access television station, was integral in engaging the public throughout the process. The COVID-19 pandemic proved impossible to hold public meetings, but M-PACT-TV was able to live-broadcast each of the 7 public forums and 14 steering committee meetings. They also shared the recordings for posting on the Master

Plan website and conducted an interview with the MPSC Chairman, all of which are available to view on their website.

<http://www.m-pact.tv/maestrov/app/client/webSite/index.php?s=3&category=93>

6. The Economic Development Round Table took place on September 10, 2020, and was well attended by a variety of local government officials, business owners, real estate brokers, and regional and state agencies. Representatives from the below entities were present:

Palmer Town Council
Town Planner, Economic Development Director
Community Development
Palmer Redevelopment Authority
Three Rivers Chamber of Commerce
Quaboag Hills Chamber of Commerce
MassDevelopment, Community Development
Steaming Tender Restaurant
Architectural Insights Inc
Interactive School House
J. Stolar Insurance Company
Palmer Foundry
Bay State Wing Hospital
Adaptas Solutions
Heka, Inc.
Northeast Realty Associates
Maple Tree Industrial Park
CBRE/New England – Commercial/Industrial Brokerage

7. Municipal Department heads, Fire and Water Districts, the Town Manager, as well as Resident Stake Holders, consisting of local business owners, long-time residents, previous and current board and committee members, completed questionnaires which were used to help guide the vision statement.

Project Photos:

- In your electronic submission of this report, please attach (as .jpg or .png) a few high-resolution (at least 300 pixels per inch) representative photos of the project. Photos should not show persons who can be easily identified, and avoid inclusion of any copyrighted, trademarked, or branded logos in the images. MVP may use these images on its website or other promotional purposes, so please also let us know if there is someone who should receive credit for taking the photo.

[pictures for case study](#)