MARKET ANALYSIS REPORT

PALMER STATION
PLANNING + DESIGN

MassDOT Palmer Station Planning & Design

Market Analysis

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Introduction

The proposed train station in Palmer, Massachusetts, represents a transformative infrastructure investment poised to enhance local and regional connectivity between Boston and Springfield. By improving access to rail, the station has the potential to stimulate economic growth, attract tourism, and generate new residential and commercial development. The following market analysis evaluates these opportunities through a comprehensive review of Palmer's demographic, economic, and real estate conditions, combined with input from key stakeholders and planning documents.

Aerial photo of the proposed station site (1199 South Main Street), looking northwest

1.1 Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to assess how the proposed Palmer station may influence local and regional market dynamics and identify strategies to leverage investment for sustainable growth. Specific objectives of the market analysis include:

- Define local and regional market areas to understand the anticipated economic activity and development opportunities associated with this infrastructure investment.
- Evaluate baseline demographic, economic, and real estate conditions using quantitative and qualitative research methods.
- Assess existing planning and regulatory frameworks to identify updates that can support station area development.
- Assess potential residential and commercial demand generated by improved rail access.
- Synthesize insights from stakeholder engagement to inform policy and investment decisions.

1.2 Approach

The following market analysis combines quantitative and qualitative research methods to capture a comprehensive picture of both current and future market dynamics. Quantitative data were collected from sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics, ESRI Community Analyst, and CoStar to assess population trends, employment patterns, and real estate market performance.

Qualitative insights were obtained through roundtables with municipal officials, local business owners, and real estate professionals to glean insight into local perspectives and potential challenges associated with the proposed new station. The study also reviews comparable station-area developments in similar communities to draw lessons and best practices. Together, these methods establish a nuanced understanding of the market landscape, facilitating informed decision-making for the station's development and integration into Palmer's built environment.

1.3 Key Findings

The introduction of a new train station in Palmer is expected to influence local and regional market dynamics. Palmer is poised to occupy a unique position within the West-East Rail corridor. The proposed station could enhance regional mobility and catalyze new opportunities for residential and commercial development by providing a focal point for new station-area development. New market activity may arise as a result of improved access, economic growth, and reinvestment around the station area, providing an opportunity for compact, mixed-use development that strengthens the connection between the downtown area and the station.

The following key findings summarize the current housing and commercial market conditions in Palmer and the surrounding Regional Market Area, highlighting factors that will influence ridership, development potential, and economic impacts of a future intercity rail station. This analysis considers the composition of the housing stock, affordability, vacancy, and commercial real estate dynamics, as well as anticipated regional developments, to provide a foundation for understanding how the station could shape both residential and commercial growth.

- Palmer's housing stock is predominantly single-family (62%) and owner-occupied (67%), with multi-unit structures comprising roughly one-third of units; combined with the expected addition of an estimated 150 to 300 units at the nearby Monson Developmental Center, the market is positioned for station-area growth that can broaden Palmer's appeal to younger and moderate-income households.
- Housing affordability remains a central issue: median home value ($254,952) and median rent ($1,041) fall below regional averages, yet nearly half of renters (48%) are cost-burdened. A future rail station would improve access to regional job centers that have higher housing costs, and together with supportive zoning, make multi-family and mixed-use development more financially viable while helping to expand the local supply of diversified housing options.
- Vacancy rates in Palmer are modest at 7%, with some variation across neighboring towns; many "vacant" units in Census data reflect seasonal or temporary conditions. Redevelopment of underutilized parcels within the station walkshed, supported by stronger demand tied to rail access, offers an opportunity to bring more units into active use.
- Major cities along the corridor, including Boston, Worcester, and Hartford, exhibit considerably higher home prices and rents; improved rail connectivity positions Palmer to attract households seeking more affordable living while maintaining access to regional employment markets, thereby reinforcing growth in and around the downtown core.
- Palmer's retail and office markets are small but stable, with retail vacancy at 3.79% (average lease $13.99/sf) and office vacancy at 1.13% (average lease $17.55/sf). These comparatively affordable commercial costs, paired with the visibility and activity generated by a new station, strengthen Palmer's competitiveness for small firms, services, and local entrepreneurs.
- Increased accessibility and foot traffic near the station could spur incremental business expansion, support mixed-use redevelopment on underutilized parcels, and encourage rezoning that enables higher-value, rail-oriented projects.
- By drawing customers, tenants, and investment, a future station can enhance the performance of downtown retail and office properties, improve land utilization, and support the transition toward denser, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods that reinforce Palmer's role in the regional economic and commuter network.

Taken together, these conditions point to a market that is both poised for change and responsive to strategic investment. The interplay between attainable housing, emerging redevelopment opportunities, and relatively affordable commercial space creates a foundation on which a future intercity rail station could have meaningful influence.

1.4 Opportunities

The current conditions in Palmer and the surrounding region suggest that the town is moderately positioned to capture the demand associated with a future intercity rail station, but not fully without targeted policy and process changes. Market interest exists, particularly for smaller-scale residential and mixed-use development, yet the regulatory environment, infrastructure constraints, and the supply of ready-to-develop sites are likely to limit how much of this demand can be realized under existing conditions. The region's broader housing pressures and Palmer's relative affordability create favorable conditions for new investment, but capturing that investment will require clearer zoning pathways for multi-family and mixed-use projects and coordinated public realm upgrades that reinforce downtown as a viable location for new housing and commercial activity.

In short, the demand is plausible and supported by regional trends, but the town's ability to fully benefit from it depends on adopting targeted changes that help bridge the gap between market interest and actual development outcomes. The opportunities that follow build on the findings presented above in **Chapter 1.3**, translating the data, analysis, and observed patterns from comparable intercity rail communities into a framework of opportunities for Palmer to capture the full benefits of an intercity rail station. Taken together, these findings suggest that early, incremental action, particularly in policy, zoning, and public realm planning, can better position the town to respond to new rail service. Preparing in advance allows Palmer to guide future investment in a deliberate and coordinated manner.

The opportunities are organized into four themes:

Stakeholder Alignment and Visioning

Zoning and Land Use

Public Realm and Site Infrastructure

Economic Development

The remaining chapters of this report include callouts associated with each of these themes, highlighting the data and findings that warrant the suggested opportunities or identifying specific interventions that reinforce the need for the suggested opportunities below.

Stakeholder Alignment and Visioning

- Develop a comprehensive station area plan that fosters collaboration among local stakeholders, the town, and regional partners to unify vision, align infrastructure, and attract developer interest.
- Foster diverse developer engagement to invigorate regional development, leveraging community-centered projects to build trust, strengthen collaboration, and attract investment.

Zoning and Land Use

- Establish a station area overlay that permits rail-supportive uses by right, encourages compact, mixed-use development within walking distance of the station, and allows increased building heights and floor area ratios to support higher density and economic activity.
- Reduce minimum parking requirements and promote shared parking strategies to enhance walkability and maximize development potential.
- Establish inclusionary zoning within the station area overlay district requiring a share of new housing units to be affordable to households below the AMI, with incentives such as density bonuses or flexible options like contributions to an affordable housing fund.
- Target underutilized and vacant opportunity parcels for redevelopment to catalyze growth and attract diverse developers.

Public Realm and Site Infrastructure

- Leverage the station as a central anchor to enhance walkability, guide targeted redevelopment, and strengthen district identity, using infrastructure and public realm improvements to capture local travel demand and stimulate development.
- Implement flexible form-based standards in existing zones such as VC1 and a future overlay district that promotes active street frontages, enhanced accessibility, sustainable building practices, reduced setbacks, and complete streets.
- Integrate infrastructure improvements, including pedestrian safety enhancements and last-mile connections, to support development and improve station access.

Economic Development

- Explore Tax Increment Financing (TIF) and expand District Improvement Financing (DIF) to the station-area to fund infrastructure and public realm improvements that support station-area growth.
- Pursue state and federal funding opportunities to support planning, community engagement, and infrastructure improvements that align station-area development with regional economic demand.
- Leverage tourism and recreation assets, such as the Mass Central Rail Trail and agri-tourism, to attract visitors and stimulate local economic activity.

Together, these measures offer a practical framework for guiding growth around a future station in ways that strengthen placemaking, expand housing options, and improve mobility. Each strategy is designed to coordinate land use decisions, development standards, and funding mechanisms so the station area can evolve in a steady, organized way that supports long-term public and private investment.

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2

Local & Regional Market Areas

Defining the local and regional market areas is critical to framing where the economic and development impacts of the proposed Palmer train station are likely to occur. Establishing clear geographic boundaries allows this analysis to focus on the areas most directly influenced by new rail access, including shifts in real estate demand, business activity, and commuter behavior. As shown in **Figure 1**, the Local Market Area encompasses a one-mile radius around the proposed station, capturing the immediate impacts on businesses, residential zones, and public services. In **Figure 2**, the Regional Market Area encompasses Palmer and neighboring towns, extending to areas such as UMass Amherst, with the potential station enabling transfers for students commuting to Boston. This multi-scalar approach addresses both immediate and extended transportation needs, while considering evolving telecommuting and live-work patterns.

2.1 Proposed Station Site

The proposed station site is located south of Palmer Yard, approximately half a mile from downtown Palmer. Its proximity to Main Street and the downtown area provides a strategic opportunity to strengthen connections between the station, local businesses, and community destinations. The site's location enables convenient pedestrian and vehicular access, positioning it to serve as a catalyst for economic revitalization and as a focal point for future station-area development. With accompanying planning and investment, the station can anchor new housing, retail, and public space, enhancing mobility and economic vitality in Palmer and the broader region.

The future station in Palmer is expected to be served by intercity rail with a modest number of daily trips, likely in the range of two to five stops per day. This level of service is very different from all-day commuter rail, which operates around peak-hour demand and provides high-frequency connections to a single major job center. Intercity rail functions instead as a dependable regional link that supports longer trips, day travel in multiple directions, and a steady but not constant flow of passengers throughout the day. Even with limited frequency, this type of service can still anchor meaningful activity around a station, attract visitors, and offer residents a reliable connection to larger markets.

2.2 Local Market Area

The Local Market Area shown in **Figure 1** encompasses the one-mile radius surrounding the proposed station site, representing roughly a 15- to 20-minute walkshed. This boundary captures the businesses, residents, and institutions most directly affected by the station's presence. Within this area, improved regional transportation access is anticipated to generate higher foot traffic, increase property values, and stimulate demand for new housing and commercial uses.

An emphasis on walkability positions the Local Market Area as a core opportunity area for compact, mixed-use development that strengthens the connection between the downtown area and the station. Retail, dining, and service establishments are likely to benefit from increased visibility and convenience, while nearby residential neighborhoods could see rising demand from households seeking affordable, rail-accessible living. Enhancing the pedestrian environment and reconfiguring underutilized parcels within this radius through informed planning and development decisions will be critical to realizing these opportunities.

2.3 Regional Market Area

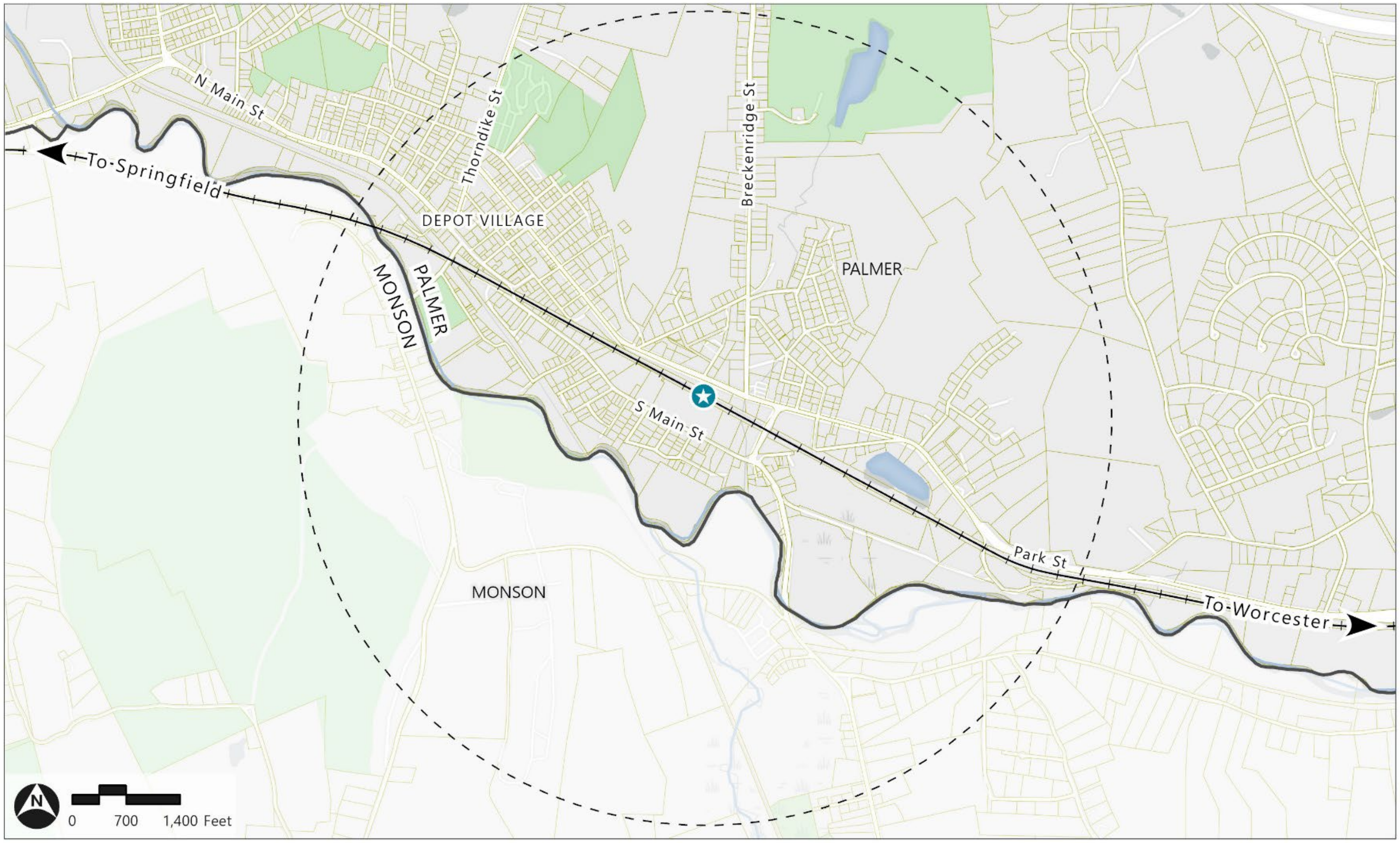
The Regional Market Area, shown in **Figure 2**, encompasses Palmer and its surrounding towns—Amherst, Belchertown, Brimfield, Hampden, Ludlow, Monson, Ware, Warren, West Brookfield, and Wilbraham. This broader geography provides the context for assessing regional commuting patterns, housing demand, and economic linkages that the new station could influence.

The Regional Market Area captures key destinations such as portions of metropolitan Springfield and Worcester, as well as the University of Massachusetts Amherst, all of which could be better connected through improved rail service. Enhanced accessibility to these employment and education centers positions Palmer as a potential residential and commercial hub within Western Massachusetts.

By evaluating economic and demographic conditions across the region, this analysis identifies where Palmer's new station could strengthen regional integration, attract investment, and support equitable growth. The station's influence extends beyond the town's borders, offering an opportunity to serve a regional commuter base, reduce highway congestion, and promote sustainable development patterns anchored by rail access.

Figure 1: Local Market Area (Palmer)

Palmer Station | Palmer, Massachusetts



Proposed Station Location

1 Mi Radius

Parcels

Source: MassGIS, ArcGIS Online

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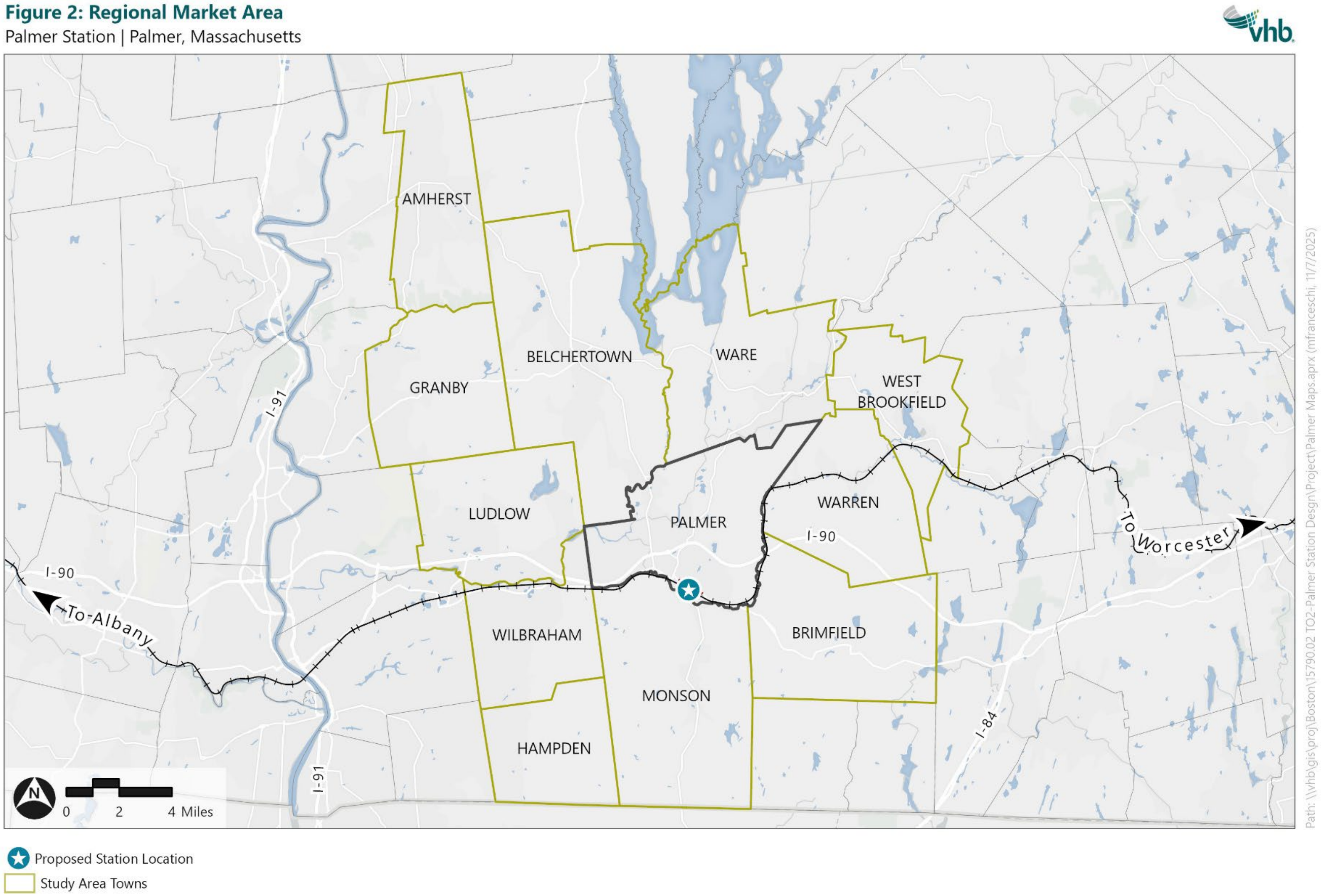
Figure 2: Regional Market Area

Palmer Station | Palmer, Massachusetts



Source: MassGIS, ArcGIS Online

PALMER STATION PLANNING + DESIGN

3

Baseline Conditions

Palmer's current demographic, economic, and real estate conditions provide critical context for evaluating the potential impacts of a new train station in Palmer. The following section establishes this foundation by exploring population trends, workforce characteristics, housing supply, and commercial market dynamics within both the Local and Regional Market areas. It highlights Palmer's current strengths and challenges, providing a reference point against which to assess future station-driven changes and opportunities.

3.1 Planning & Regulatory Context

Palmer has undertaken several planning efforts to support revitalization and sustainable development, particularly in anticipation of a future Compass Rail stop. These include the **Palmer Master Plan (2021)**,[1] **Towards a Passenger Station on the East-West Massachusetts Train Line: A Case for Palmer (2019)**,[2] and the **Palmer Transit Oriented Development Draft Conceptual Downtown Plan (2017)**.[3] In addition, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission prepared the **Plan for Progress – Building on Success: Economic Strategies for the Region (2015–2025)**,[4] which provides regional context relevant to Palmer's efforts. Collectively, these documents emphasize the need for compact, walkable, mixed-use development near downtown and potential rail infrastructure. However, the current zoning of the preferred station area property and its surrounding areas remains auto-oriented, which may limit the density and mixed-use formats necessary to support successful station-area development.

[1] Palmer Master Plan (2021). Town of Palmer, Massachusetts. https://www.townofpalmer.com/vertical/sites/%7B034F9CAE-5196-4551-90C2-FBFD76374BDB%7D/uploads/PalmerMP_Final_07292021.pdf

[2] Towards a Passenger Station on the East-West Massachusetts Train Line: A Case for Palmer (2019). UMass Amherst Center for Economic Development. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/4656

[3] Palmer Transit Oriented Development Draft Conceptual Downtown Plan (2017). Palmer Redevelopment Authority. https://trainsinthevalley.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/palmer-tod-draft-plan-presentation-2017-09-26.pdf

[4] Plan for Progress – Building on Success: Economic Strategies for the Region (2015–2025). Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. https://pvpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Plan-for-Progress-2015-Final.pdf

3.1.1 Previous Studies

Palmer's station-area development vision centers on establishing Palmer as a regional rail destination, capitalizing on its central location and rich rail history. Two specific reports – the 2017 Palmer Transit Oriented Development (TOD) Draft Conceptual Downtown Plan and UMass Amherst's 2019 Towards a Passenger Station on the East -West Train Lines: The Case for Palmer –both underscore the goal of attracting housing, retail, and civic space within a quarter-mile radius of a future station. While several locations were studied, recommendations in the reports can be applied to any potential future station-area redevelopment in Palmer's downtown as part of a new rail station.

Key station-area recommendations from the 2017 and 2019 plans include:

- Mandatory ground-floor commercial, especially along Main Street and surrounding the proposed station-area;
- Mid-rise density of 2-4 stories to encourage compact infill development, especially in areas near the proposed station;
- Shared and rear parking strategies, including municipal lots, to reduce surface parking dominance and support walkability;
- Mixed-use zoning allowing residential units above commercial use in downtown and transition areas; and
- Improved pedestrian connectivity between Palmer's Depot Village area – the area in the vicinity of Park Street, Thorndike Street, and Main Street – and the future station area to enhance access and support ridership.[5,6]

These recommendations are supported by the 2015 Plan for Progress regional strategy, which encourages integrated land use and transportation planning and highlights Palmer's potential to anchor a "crossroads" station site serving the broader Lower Quabbin Region.[7]

3.1.2 Zoning Considerations

Existing zoning for Palmer was analyzed within the one-mile proposed station site radius and consists of a range of uses and densities, as summarized in **Table 1** and shown in **Figure 3**. Palmer's zoning districts range from rural and low-density residential areas to more compact, mixed-use centers and industrial zones. The residential districts (Rural, Suburban, and Town Residential) provide a progression of housing types and densities from large-lot rural parcels to higher-density multi-family neighborhoods. Commercial districts vary in scale and character, where Neighborhood Business areas serve nearby residents with small, walkable retail nodes, General Business corridors support mixed-use and pedestrian-oriented activity, and Highway Business zones accommodate larger, auto-oriented commercial uses along major routes. The Industrial A and B districts offer locations for light and heavy industrial operations, with differing intensity and buffering requirements. At the heart of this framework, the Village Center I – Depot Village district promotes a traditional, walkable, mixed-use environment combining housing, shops, and services in Palmer's downtown.

[5] Palmer Transit Oriented Development Draft Conceptual Downtown Plan (2017). Palmer Redevelopment Authority. https://trainsinthevalley.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/palmer-tod-draft-plan-presentation-2017-09-26.pdf

[6] Towards a Passenger Station on the East-West Massachusetts Train Line: A Case for Palmer (2019). UMass Amherst Center for Economic Development. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/4656

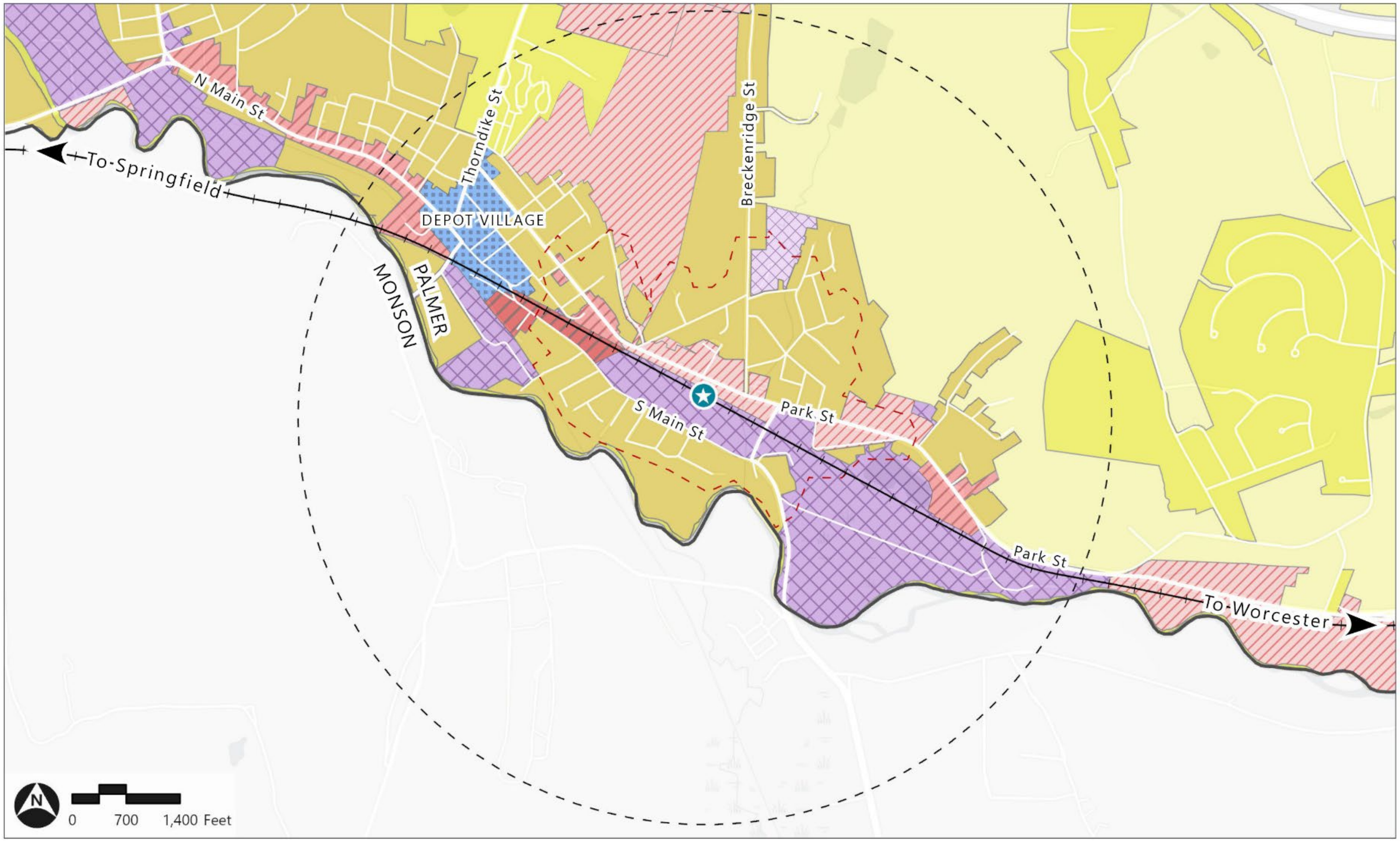
[7] Plan for Progress – Building on Success: Economic Strategies for the Region (2015–2025). Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. https://pvpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Plan-for-Progress-2015-Final.pdf

Table 1: Palmer Existing Zoning Regulations

Zoning District	Intent / Purpose	Typical Uses Supported
General Business (GB)	Designed to strengthen and update older commercial corridors with a walkable, storefront character. It supports a broad mix of retail, service, and office uses serving both local and regional needs, with buildings oriented toward the street to encourage pedestrian activity	Retail shops, restaurants, offices, small services, and mixed-use buildings with upper-floor housing
Highway Business (HB)	Intended for commercial areas along major roads that cater primarily to vehicle traffic. The district supports larger-scale or auto-oriented retail and service uses, while encouraging well-designed, visually appealing sites along highway corridors	Auto-related businesses, big-box stores, hotels, drive-throughs, and other highway-oriented commercial uses
Industrial A (IA)	Provides space for moderate-intensity industrial and manufacturing operations that can coexist compatibly with surrounding districts. Standards are aimed at minimizing environmental and neighborhood impacts	Light manufacturing, assembly, warehousing, and research or distribution facilities
Industrial B (IB)	Supports heavier or large-scale industrial activities that require more extensive buffering and site controls. It accommodates industries that may generate higher noise, traffic, or visual impacts than permitted in Industrial A areas	Heavy manufacturing, processing, large-scale storage, logistics, and industrial parks
Neighborhood Business (NB)	Focused on small commercial nodes within or near residential areas, offering convenient retail and service options for nearby residents. Development is scaled to blend with adjacent homes and encourage pedestrian access	Convenience stores, cafes, salons, small offices, and neighborhood-serving shops
Rural Residential / Agricultural (RR)	Aims to preserve the town's rural character by maintaining low-density housing and open landscapes. It allows single-family homes and agricultural uses while limiting development that could alter the rural setting	Single-family homes, farms, equestrian uses, forestry, and limited home-based businesses
Suburban Residential (SR)	Intended for moderately dense residential neighborhoods that transition between rural and urban areas. Development supports primarily single-family homes on medium-sized lots with compatible community services	Detached homes, schools, and small institutional uses consistent with suburban living patterns
Town Residential (TR)	Encourages higher-density residential development, including multifamily and attached housing, in areas close to services and infrastructure. The goal is to provide diverse housing options while maintaining compatibility with town character	Duplexes, apartments, townhouses, and small multifamily buildings
Village Center I – Depot Village (VC I)	Promotes compact, mixed-use development that integrates housing, retail, and service uses in a walkable, village-style setting. The district emphasizes street-oriented buildings and active ground-floor commercial spaces with residences above	Mixed-use buildings, shops, restaurants, offices, and upper-story housing within a traditional village environment

Figure 3: Existing Zoning Map of Proposed Station Site Vicinity

Palmer Station | Palmer, Massachusetts



Proposed Station Location
1 Mi Radius
0.5 Mi Walkshed

Zoning
Highway Business
General Business
Neighborhood Business
Rural Residential
Suburban Residential
Town Residential
Industrial A
Industrial B
VC I Depot Village

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Source: MassGIS, ArcGIS Online

Of note, the existing zoning does not permit "Railroad Passenger Terminal" uses as-of-right or fully align with station-area development objectives. Of all the zones within the station-area, Highway Business (HB) allows for "Railroad Passenger Terminal" uses through Special Permit (SP) and Site Plan Approval (SPA). Without modifications to the current zoning framework, the prevailing Industrial (IA) and Highway Business (HB) zoning in the surrounding area may prevent the type of compact mixed-use development needed to support station-area ridership and revitalization.

In order to allow for "Railroad Passenger Terminal" use as-of-right, as well as supporting uses surrounding the station area, zoning amendments and public policies promoting rail-oriented and rail-supportive uses could be implemented.

3.2 Demographic Overview

Population size, age composition, and household characteristics together define the core demand base for rail and economic growth potential in Palmer and the Regional Market Area. Population trends indicate whether the number of potential riders is increasing or remaining stable. At the same time, age structure reveals the mix of younger individuals who often use rail and older individuals who rely on it for essential trips. Household income, size, and tenure further shape how affordable and attractive rail is likely to be for different segments of the community. These factors clarify both the scale and nature of potential ridership and highlight how a new rail station could influence household decisions about where to live, work, and spend through 2030. Of importance, due to residency-reporting patterns among UMass Amherst students, official demographic and housing data may understate the student-driven component of demand within the regional market.

3.2.1 Population Trends

Over the past 15 years, Palmer has experienced relatively minimal fluctuations in overall population change. The population is estimated to be 12,372 residents. Some of the neighboring regional towns that experienced a net increase in population between 2010 and 2020 included Amherst, with an increase of 1,444 residents, Belchertown, with an increase of 701 residents, and Wilbraham, with an increase of 394 residents. However, several areas within the region did have population decreases over the same period, including Ludlow, which lost 101 residents, Monson, which lost 413 residents, and Hampden, which lost 172 residents.[8]

According to population growth projections for 2025 to 2030, many towns are likely to experience a decrease in population size. Projections indicate population in Palmer will decline by 0.38 percent, Ludlow by 0.42 percent, and Monson by 0.47 percent. Conversely, projections anticipate growth in several towns, including Ware by 0.13 percent, Amherst by 0.16 percent, and West Brookfield by 0.53 percent as shown in **Table 2**.[9]

[8] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census Data 2010-2020)

[9] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census Data Projections 2025-2030); UMass Donahue Institute (Population Projections)

Table 2: Population Percent Change 2025-2030

Location	Population 2025	Population 2030	Percent Change
Palmer	12,122	11,896	-0.38%
Amherst	40,040	40,363	0.16%
Belchertown	15,185	15,088	-0.13%
Brimfield	3,751	3,746	-0.03%
Granby	6,079	6,052	-0.09%
Hampden	4,815	4,763	-0.22%
Ludlow	20,495	20,073	-0.42%
Monson	7,904	7,721	-0.47%
Ware	10,269	10,335	0.13%
Warren	4,937	4,929	-0.03%
West Brookfield	4,058	4,167	0.53%
Wilbraham	14,385	14,176	-0.29%

Source(s): ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census Data Projections 2025-2030); UMass Donahue Institute (Population Projections)

The population trends in the Regional Market Area indicate a largely stable but slowly shifting demographic base through 2030, as shown in **Figure 4** (including projections for 2025-2030). Palmer itself has seen little long-term movement and is projected to contract slightly, suggesting that organic growth in public transportation demand will be modest within Palmer.

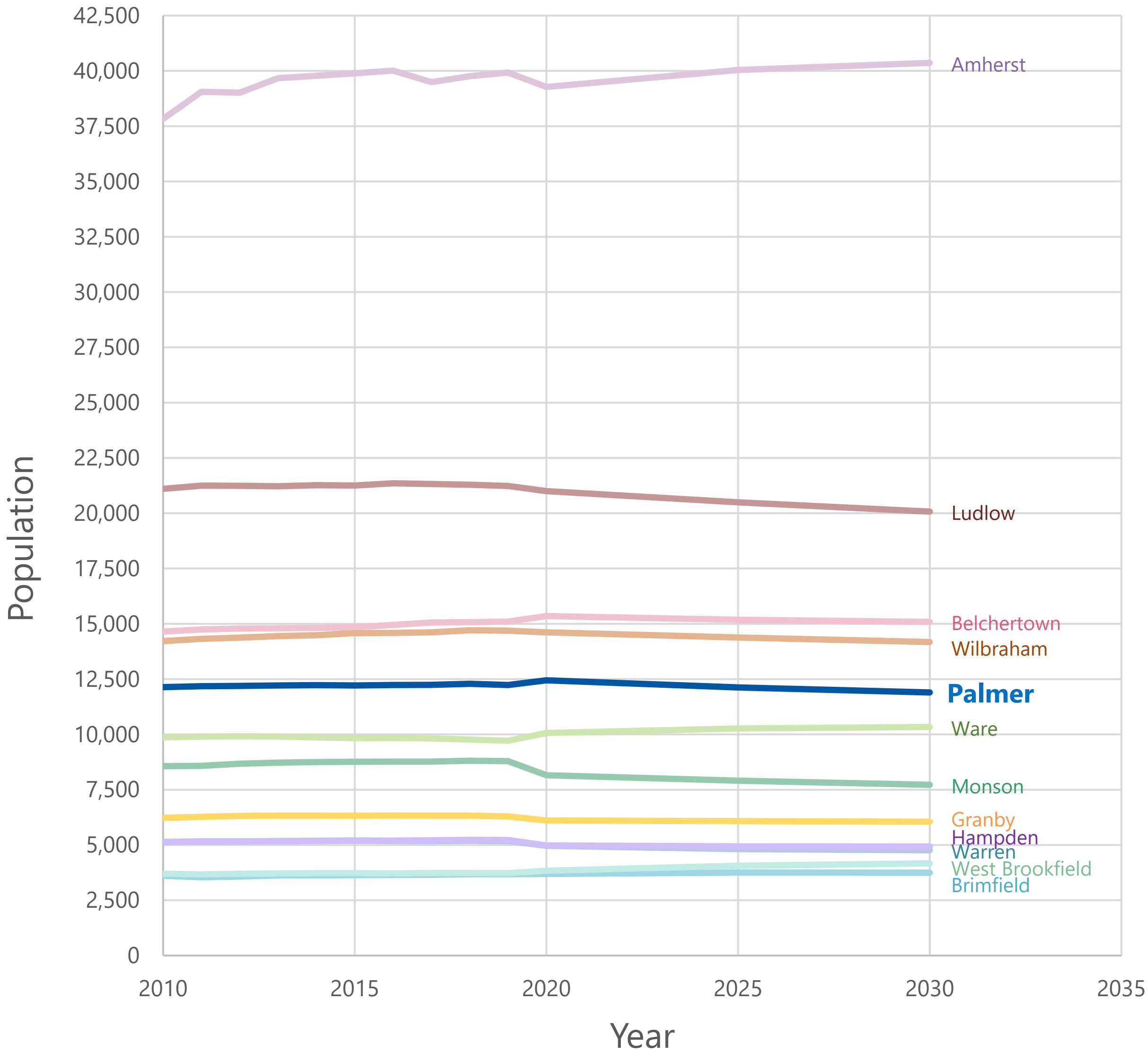
For market conditions, this implies that the rail station's customer base will not be driven solely by population growth; instead, ridership potential will hinge on shifts in commuting patterns, regional connectivity, and economic pull factors.

On the economic side, areas with stable or slightly increasing populations (e.g., Amherst, Belchertown, West Brookfield) may see more spillover development activity. At the same time, declining towns may depend more heavily on the station to retain competitiveness and offset demographic trends.

> Overall, the data suggest a steady but not expanding demand pool, meaning the station's economic impact will come less from population growth and more from capturing the travel needs of existing residents and catalyzing new development opportunities.

This is further reinforced in **Figure 5,** which visualizes areas with the highest concentration of dwelling units per acre, a large number of which are located within roughly one mile of the proposed rail station site, creating a natural focal zone for rail service. This proximity means that a number of residents would be within convenient walking or biking distance of the station, increasing the potential for daily ridership.

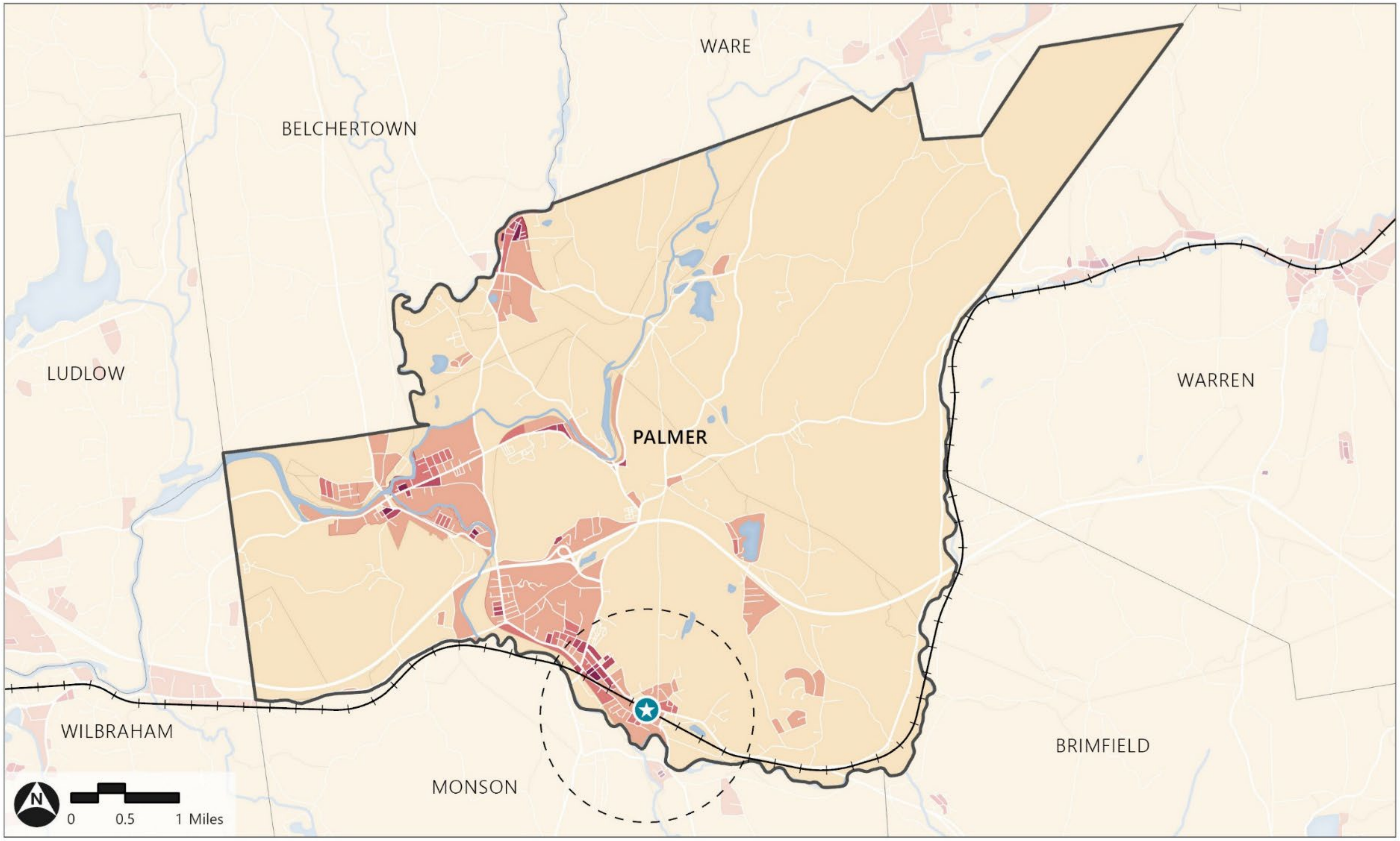
Figure 4: Population Growth Trends (2010-2030)



Source(s): ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census Data 2010-2020); ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census Data Projections 2025-2030); UMass Donahue Institute (Population Projections)

Figure 5: Population Density Map

Palmer Station | Palmer, Massachusetts



Proposed Station Location

1 Mi Radius

Dwelling Units/Acre

- < 1
- 1 - 2
- 3 - 4
- 5 - 8
- >8

Source: MassGIS, ArcGIS Online

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3.2.2 Age Distribution

Palmer has a median age of 44.9 years, with 25 percent of the population aged 25 to 44, and 40 percent between the ages of 45 and 74. Regionally, the average age is 45 years old, with Amherst having the youngest median age at 23.3 years (with 66 percent of the population between the ages of 15 and 34) and Hampden having the oldest median age at 52 years old.[10]

The age and demographic profile of the Palmer region highlights two contrasting dynamics: Palmer and most neighboring towns have an aging population. Conversely, Amherst stands out as a youthful, diverse outlier due to its student-driven demographic. For rail demand, this split is critical. The older base in Palmer and surrounding towns suggests steadier but less frequent commuter travel, often tied to healthcare, services, and limited workforce mobility. In contrast, Amherst's younger residents, primarily students and young professionals, represent a high-frequency, rail-friendly market more inclined to adopt rail as an affordable and flexible option. Furthermore, because a portion of the UMass Amherst student population does not claim formal residency in the region, the university's influence on actual demand may be understated.

Regionally, while the prevalence of an aging population indicates flat or declining ridership from residents, Amherst injects a strong, ongoing source of potential riders. Economically, this demographic mix suggests that the station's direct ridership may heavily rely on Amherst's younger population. At the same time, the broader impact will depend on leveraging the station as a tool for retaining and attracting younger households and workers to offset the region's aging trend.

This opportunity positions the proposed station to serve as a strategic lever in slowing demographic decline and attracting outside economic activity.

3.2.3 Household Characteristics

In Palmer, there are 5,546 households, with an average household size of 2.20 people. Additionally, the median home value was $254,952, with a median household income of $77,734. From an income standpoint, 1,189 households (21.6 percent) earned between $10,000 and $34,999. One thousand four hundred twenty-six households (26 percent) earned between $35,000 and $74,999. One thousand five hundred sixty-six households (28.2 percent) earned between $75,000 and $125,000. Lastly, 1,356 households (24.5 percent) earned greater than $125,000 annually.[11]

Regionally, there are 52,565 households across the 12 localities, and a combined total of 56,512 housing units. The average median household income across the region in 2025 is $90,053. The towns with the highest median income include Wilbraham ($123,972), Granby ($118,938), and Hampden ($109,007). The towns with the lowest median income include Ware ($71,434), Amherst ($67,616), and Warren ($67,571). In 2025, the median household size for the region was 2.36 people. The town with the smallest household size was Palmer, at 2.20 people per household, and the largest was Wilbraham, at 2.54 people per household. **Table 3** compares characteristics across Palmer and the Regional Market Area.[12]

[10] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

[11] Ibid.

[12] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

Table 3: Household Characteristics

Location	Median Household Income	Household Size
Palmer	$77,734	2.20
Regional	$90,053	2.36

Source(s): ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

The household and income profile in Palmer and the surrounding Regional Market Area indicates a mixed but generally middle-income market, with notable variation between towns. Palmer households are slightly smaller (averaging 2.20 people) and earn below the regional median income. Roughly half of Palmer households earn between $35,000 and $125,000, suggesting a large core of residents with moderate discretionary income but also cost sensitivity, making affordable rail alternatives attractive.

Regionally, wealth is concentrated in towns like Wilbraham, Granby, and Hampden, while Amherst, Ware, and Warren skew lower income, creating a broad base of potential riders seeking cost-effective mobility. The relatively modest home values in Palmer compared to the region highlight its positioning as a more affordable residential option, which could see additional demand if the station enhances commuter access to job centers. Regarding market conditions, the station could attract steady ridership from cost-conscious households and stimulate economic growth in Palmer by enhancing the appeal of housing and businesses.

Through 2030, the station-area development potential lies in leveraging affordability to attract younger or moderate-income households while also providing a mobility upgrade valued by higher-income commuters in neighboring towns.

3.3 Employment Context

In Palmer, as of 2025, the overall working population aged 16 and above is 10,311 people. Of that population, 5,970 are employed and 328 are unemployed, resulting in Palmer having an overall unemployment rate of 5 percent and an overall labor participation rate of 61 percent. White collar jobs comprise about 59 percent of this workforce population (3,520 employees). Blue-collar jobs comprise 25 percent of the workforce population (1,502 employees). Lastly, service jobs comprise 16 percent of the workforce (947 employees).[13] Based on a five-year average from 2023, 4,032 employees (70 percent) work inside Palmer and do not commute to another town or region, while 1,762 employees (30 percent) work out of Palmer and commute to another town or region.[14] Comparisons of Palmer and the Regional Market Area are shown in **Table 4**.

Table 4: Employment Data

Location	Employed Population	Unemployment Rate	Labor Participation Rate	White Collar	Blue Collar
Palmer	5,970	5%	61%	59%	25%
Regional	71,937	5.3%	60.5%	65%	18%

Source(s): ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census, 2025 ACS)

[13] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census, 2025 ACS)

[14] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

Based on 2025 data, the Regional Market Area's employed working population is 71,937 employees. There are 4,121 unemployed people in the region across its communities, resulting in an average unemployment rate of 5.3 percent. The overall average regional labor force participation rate is 60.5 percent. Regionally, white-collar jobs account for 65 percent of employment (46,536 employees), while blue-collar jobs account for 18 percent of regional employment (12,566 employees). Lastly, service jobs account for 18 percent of regional employment (12,833 employees).[15]

Based on a five-year average from 2019-2023 regarding regional commuting patterns, 16,031 employees (25 percent) work outside their town of residence while 48,444 employees (75 percent) work within their town of residence. Comparisons for Palmer and the Regional Market Area are shown in **Table 5**.[16] The totals for employed residents in Table 4 and commuting patterns in Table 5 come from slightly different sources and reporting periods, which may cause small discrepancies in the sums without affecting the overall trends.

Table 5: Commuting Patterns

Location	% (#) Work in Town of Residence	% (#) Leave Town of Residence
Palmer	70% (4,032)	30% (1,762)
Regional	75% (48,444)	25% (16,031)

Source(s): ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

A diverse mix of employers across various sectors characterizes the regional labor market. Notable employers include the University of Massachusetts, Amherst College, Hampshire College, and Baystate Health. Collectively, these employers contribute to a diverse and resilient regional economy, offering a wide range of employment opportunities across various sectors.

The employment landscape in Palmer and the Regional Market Area reveals a labor force with participation rates of just over 60 percent and unemployment rates hovering around 5.2-5.3 percent. Palmer itself leans slightly bluer collar than the region overall (25 percent vs. 18 percent), while the region skews more heavily white collar (65 percent). This mix suggests that Palmer's base includes a share of workers in industries tied to manufacturing, trades, and local services. At the same time, neighboring towns tend to have more professional and office-based employment. Importantly, Palmer has a significant commuting segment with nearly 1,800 residents leaving town for work elsewhere, underscoring a latent demand for improved regional mobility.

Regionally, over 16,000 residents commute outside their towns, pointing to an even larger pool of potential rail users who could shift from car to rail if travel times, service schedules, and costs align competitively. From an economic standpoint, a new rail station would not only serve existing vehicular commuters more efficiently but could also attract new employers seeking accessible locations between Worcester and Springfield.

[15] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

[16] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

3.4 Residential Market Profile

Housing conditions in Palmer and the Regional Market Area offer critical insights into both the current market dynamics and the potential future impacts of a new rail station. The composition of the housing stock, patterns of ownership versus renting, vacancy levels, and measures of affordability all influence how residents make decisions about location and commuting. Affordability pressures, especially for renters, highlight where unmet demand exists and where rail access could shift market behavior. Understanding these housing characteristics helps clarify whether a new station would serve existing households or also act as a catalyst for new residential growth, increased housing demand, and economic activity in Palmer and the Regional Market Area. Additionally, the upcoming redevelopment of the Monson Developmental Center will bring approximately 600 additional housing units to the Regional Market Area. This new development will be located approximately one mile away from the proposed Palmer Station. The development of such housing will help to bolster station-area development and spur regional connectivity for all residents and community members.

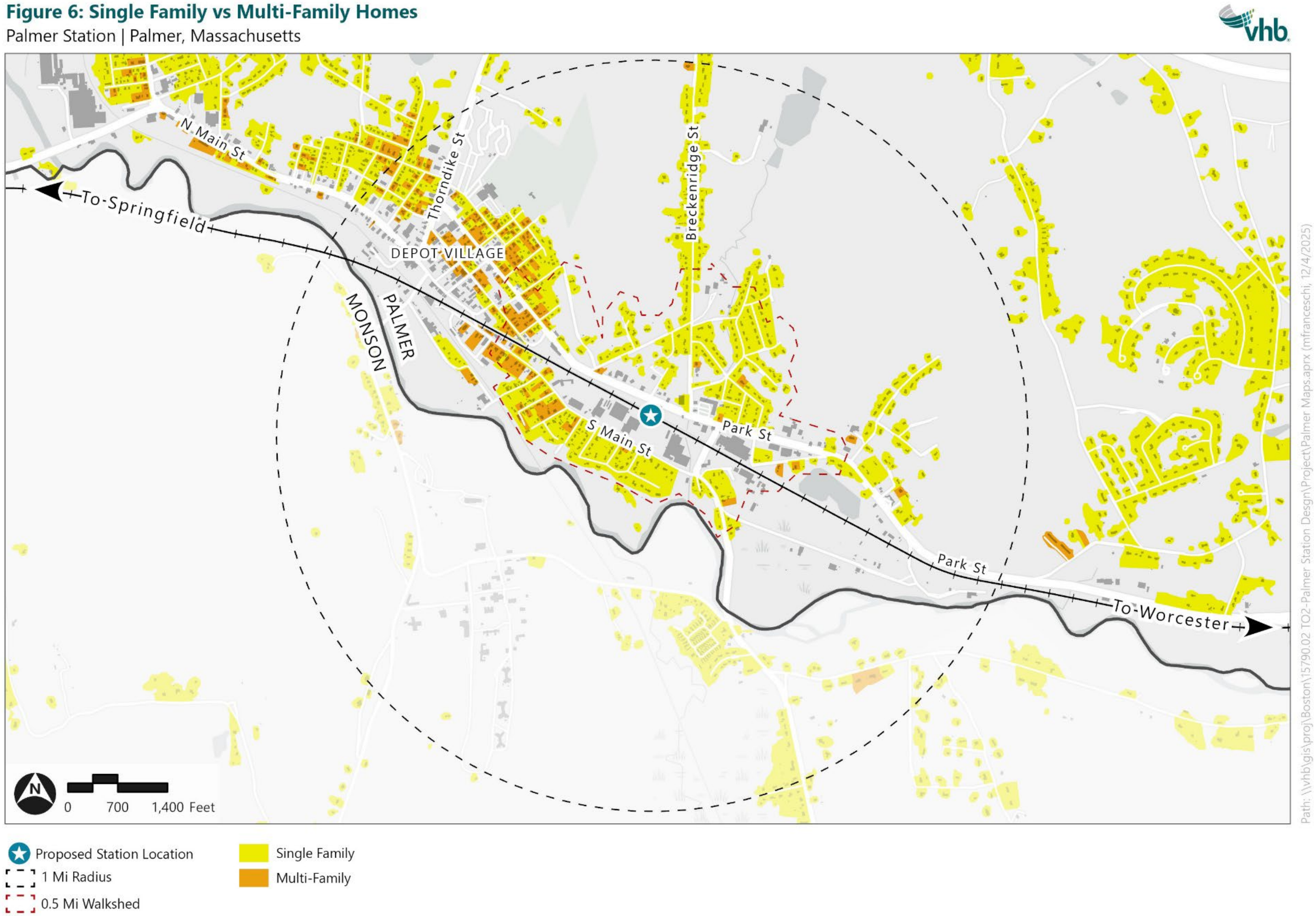
In Palmer, between 2019 and 2023, single-family detached homes comprised 3,597 units of the housing stock (62 percent), while small multi-unit structures, ranging from two to nine units per structure, comprised 1,417 units of the housing stock, as shown in **Figure 6**. Larger multi-family units, ranging from 10 to 50 or more units per structure, comprised 302 units of the housing stock, totaling 1,719 units (33.5 percent) for multi-unit structures in Palmer. Regionally in 2025, across the 12 towns, the total number of available single-family detached units is 38,366 units (68 percent). Conversely, the number of multi-family units (two to 50 units) per structure comprises 16,504 units of housing stock (29 percent).[17] Most of the housing stock in Palmer is owner-occupied. In 2025, out of the 5,858 total housing units, 3,761 were owner-occupied (67 percent) and 1,792 were renter-occupied (33 percent). From a regional standpoint, there are 53,299 occupied units across the 12 towns. 38,527 of these units (72 percent) are owner-occupied. Conversely, 14,772 of the units in the region are renter-occupied (28 percent).[18]

[17] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census Data, 2010-2025)

[18] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census Data, 2010-2025)

Figure 6: Single Family vs Multi-Family Homes

Palmer Station | Palmer, Massachusetts



Source: MassGIS, ArcGIS Online

In Palmer in 2025, there are 395 vacant units out of the 5,858 total housing units (seven percent). Additionally, there were 44 units for sale and 24 units that were sold but not occupied.[19] Regionally, the communities with the highest vacancy rates included Amherst (9 percent), Brimfield (11 percent), and West Brookfield (10 percent). Across the Regional Market Area, there were roughly 851 vacant housing units for rent in addition to approximately 389 vacant for-sale units.[20] Census-reported "vacant" units include homes that are for sale, for rent, temporarily between occupants, or used seasonally, so these figures do not necessarily represent long-term or truly unoccupied housing.

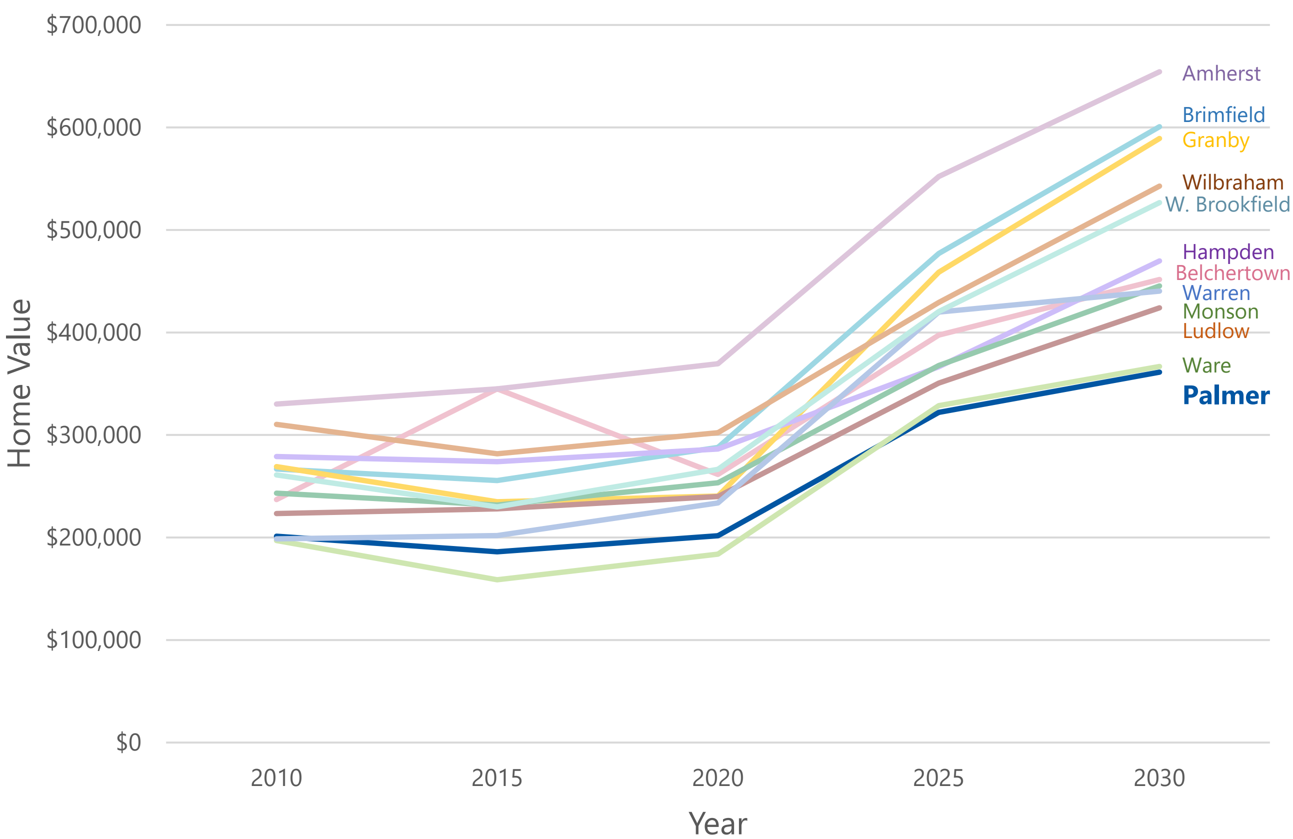
A key measure of housing affordability is the share of households that are cost-burdened, meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. Between 2019 and 2023, in Palmer, the median home value was $254,952, with a median household income of $77,734, and the median gross rent was $1,041. Homeowners in Palmer were cost-burdened at a rate of 28 percent, and renters were cost-burdened at a rate of 48 percent.[21] Regionally, the average median home value across the 12 communities was $337,442, and the average median gross rent was $1,043. Comparisons of median home values and median gross rent for Palmer and the Regional Market Area are shown in **Figure 7** and **Figure 8**. Figure 7 includes projections for 2025-2030.

[19] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census Data, 2010-2025)

[20] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census Data, 2010-2025)

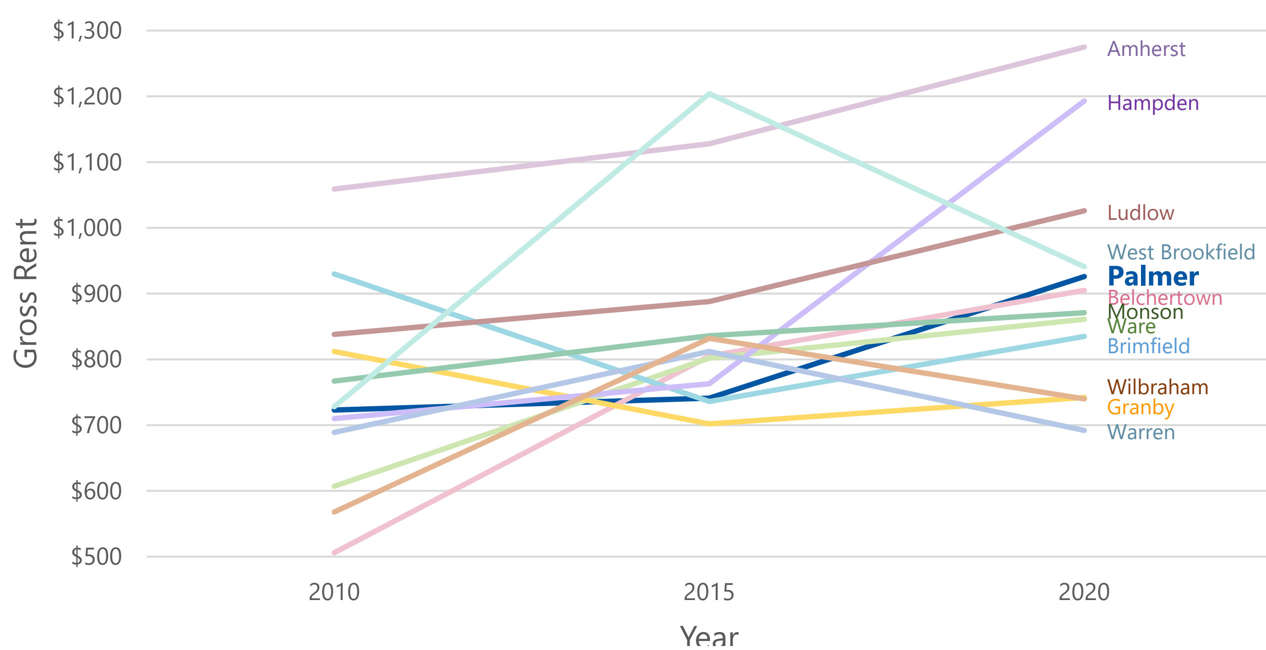
[21] Pioneer Valley Data Community Profiles (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

Figure 7: Median Home Values (2010-2030)



Source(s): ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census Data, 2010-2025); Pioneer Valley Data Community Profiles (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

Figure 8: Median Gross Rents (2010-2020)



Source(s): ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census Data, 2010-2025); Pioneer Valley Data Community Profiles (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

The Pioneer Valley Region comprises Hampden and Hampshire counties. In 2022, from a cost-burdened perspective, 27 percent of homeowners in Hampden County were considered cost-burdened, and 50 percent of renters were considered cost-burdened. In Hampshire County, in 2022, roughly 51 percent of renters were cost-burdened, and 24 percent of homeowners were cost-burdened.[22]

Palmer's housing market and that of the surrounding region are relatively affordable compared to the broader Pioneer Valley, but there is persistent pressure on renters. Palmer's stock leans heavily toward single-family homes (62 percent) and is primarily owner-occupied (67 percent), aligning closely with regional trends. Vacancy rates are modest at seven percent, indicating a tight market, although nearby towns like Brimfield and West Brookfield exhibit higher levels of underutilized housing. With a median home value of $255,000, well below the regional average of $337,442, Palmer positions itself as a more attainable option for buyers, particularly for cost-sensitive households priced out of higher-value markets.

Nearly half of renters (48 percent) are cost-burdened, compared with about 28 percent of homeowners, indicating an apparent shortage of affordable rental options.

Regionally, similar patterns exist, with renter cost burdens consistently higher than those of owners. For market conditions, a new rail station could enhance Palmer's attractiveness as a value-driven housing market, attracting households seeking affordability and commuter access. By 2030, the outcome may be renewed housing demand near the station, growth in multifamily development to address rental pressure, and incremental upward pressure on home values as Palmer becomes more competitive within the regional housing landscape.

To contextualize Palmer’s housing conditions within the broader rail corridor market, it is useful to compare the town to statewide benchmarks and key destinations including Boston, Worcester, and Hartford, which each represent distinct cost environments. These differences highlight potential demand shifts, particularly whether lower home prices could attract new residents. Between 2019 and 2023, Massachusetts had a median home value of $525,800, a median household income of $105,410, and a median gross rent of $1,687, with 27 percent of homeowners and 52 percent of renters cost-burdened. In Boston, the median home value was $710,400, with a household income of $102,564 and rent of $2,093; 29 percent of homeowners and 46 percent of renters were cost-burdened. Worcester’s median home value was $339,500, with a household income of $70,924 and rent of $1,415; 36 percent of homeowners and 52 percent of renters were cost-burdened. Hartford had a median home value of $217,200, a household income of $46,709, and rent of $1,221, with 40 percent of homeowners and 58 percent of renters cost-burdened.[23] A comparison of median home values, household income, gross rent, and cost burden amongst renters and homeowners are summarized in **Table 6**.

[22] Pioneer Valley Data Community Profiles (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

[23] ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

Table 6: Residential Real Estate Market Comparisons

Location	Median Home Value ($)	Median Household Income ($)	Median Gross Rent ($)	% Owners Cost-Burdened	% Renters Cost-Burdened
Palmer	254,952	77,734	1,041	28%	48%
Massachusetts (Statewide)	525,800	105,410	1,687	27%	52%
Boston	710,400	102,564	2,093	29%	46%
Worcester	339,500	70,924	1,415	36%	52%
Hartford, CT	217,200	46,709	1,221	40%	58%

Source(s): Pioneer Valley Data Community Profiles (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS); ESRI Business Analyst (U.S. Census, 2019-2023 ACS)

Palmer's housing market stands out as relatively affordable compared with both its surrounding region and the major cities connected by the proposed rail corridor. Between 2019 and 2023, the town's median home value was $254,952, well below the regional average of $337,442, the Massachusetts statewide median of $525,800, and Boston's $710,400. Median rents in Palmer were similarly low at $1,041, under the state average of $1,687 and far below Boston's $2,093. While 28 percent of homeowners and 48 percent of renters in Palmer were considered cost-burdened, these rates are generally in line with or below those observed in larger cities like Worcester and Hartford.. The town's lower home prices, combined with moderate cost-burden rates, position it to capture potential demand from residents priced out of higher-cost markets, signaling that housing demand in Palmer may grow as the corridor improves regional accessibility.

These cost differences suggest that a Palmer station could increase housing demand, especially with improved rail access to nearby cities. Without steps to expand and diversify supply, that added demand could intensify pressure on the already limited housing inventory.

3.5 Commercial Real Estate Profile

This analysis provides an overview of the commercial real estate market by examining the local market of Palmer and the broader regional market. The study involves a review of key market indicators, including total available supply (Rentable Building Area [RBA]), vacancy rates, and average lease trends. By segmenting the data, the analysis offers a comparative perspective on the current conditions and health of both markets.

In the context of the proposed rail station, this market analysis establishes a baseline for understanding the current commercial real estate landscape, revealing specific market conditions that can either hinder or accelerate the positive effects of new rail infrastructure. The findings indicate that Palmer's market exhibits distinct dynamics compared to the broader region, characterized by lower average lease rates and a tight office supply, in contrast to a more balanced regional market. A new rail station could serve as a catalyst to transform this environment.

Palmer's retail market comprises 1,781,582 square feet of Rentable Building Area (RBA). The vacancy rate is 3.79 percent, with 67,458 square feet of available space. The average lease rate for retail properties in this market is approximately $13.99 per square foot. The office sector in Palmer has an RBA of 496,934 square feet. This market exhibits a low vacancy rate of 1.13 percent, with only 5,624 square feet of vacant space. The average lease rate for office properties is notably higher at $17.55 per square foot.[24]

The regional market is significantly larger and more developed across both sectors. For retail, the market supply is 19,365,074 square feet of RBA. It has a low vacancy rate of 1.72 percent, with 333,768 square feet of vacant space. The average lease rate for retail properties in the regional market is approximately $16.77 per square foot. The office market in the region has an RBA of 19,057,565 square feet. This sector shows a 2.03 percent vacancy rate, with 386,950 square feet of vacant space. The average lease rate for regional office space is about $17.09 per square foot.[25]

In direct comparison, the regional market has a larger supply of both retail and office properties than Palmer, due to the size of the regional market, as shown below. While both markets have relatively low vacancy rates, Palmer's retail vacancy rate is higher than the regional average, while its office vacancy rate is lower. The average lease rates in the regional market are higher for both retail and office space compared to Palmer.

Palmer’s commercial real estate market shows a notably different profile from the larger cities and statewide benchmarks along the rail corridor, particularly in terms of vacancy and rental rates as shown in **Table 7**. In the office sector, Palmer has extremely low vacancy at just 1 percent, well below the regional average of 2 percent and dramatically lower than Massachusetts statewide (13.9 percent), Boston (16.1 percent), Worcester (5.7 percent), and Hartford (13.2 percent). This tight vacancy suggests a relatively constrained local office supply and potentially stable demand at the town scale. Office rents in Palmer, at $17.55 per square foot, while slightly above regional ($17.09), are well below Boston ($57.57) and statewide averages ($40.11), indicating a substantially more affordable office environment compared with major employment centers.

A similar pattern appears in the retail market. Palmer’s retail vacancy stands at 4 percent, higher than the regional rate (1.7 percent) but still within a moderate range when compared with Boston (2.1 percent) and Massachusetts overall (3.3 percent). Despite this modestly higher vacancy, Palmer’s retail rents at $13.99 per square foot are significantly lower than regional ($16.77), statewide ($24.72), and Boston ($54.87) averages, and even more affordable than Worcester ($20.26) and Hartford ($15.65). These comparatively low retail rents indicate accessible entry points for small businesses and local-serving commercial uses.

[24] CoStar, July 2025

[25] CoStar, July 2025

Table 7: Commercial Real Estate Market Comparisons

Market	Total Rentable Building Area (RBA) (sf)	Available RBA (sf)	Vacancy Rate (%)	Average Rent ($/SF)
Palmer				
Office	496,934	5,624	1.0%	17.55
Retail	1,781,582	67,458	4.0%	13.99
Regional				
Office	19,057,565	386,950	2.0%	17.09
Retail	19,365,074	333,768	1.7%	16.77
Massachusetts (Statewide)				
Office	438,000,000	60,700,000	13.9%	40.11
Retail	353,000,000	11,500,000	3.3%	24.72
Boston				
Office	113,000,000	18,300,000	16.1%	57.57
Retail	13,800,000	279,000	2.1%	54.87
Worcester				
Office	13,300,000	757,000	5.7%	24.56
Retail	9,000,000	360,000	4.0%	20.26
Hartford, CT				
Office	23,900,000	3,200,000	13.2%	21.17
Retail	5,800,000	91,900	1.6%	15.65

Source(s): CoStar, July 2025

Taken together, these patterns mirror Palmer's position in the residential market: lower commercial costs compared with major cities and the statewide average, alongside generally tight vacancy levels. This affordability positions Palmer to attract smaller firms, entrepreneurs, and service-oriented businesses, especially if improved rail service boosts access to larger markets. The data also indicates that Palmer offers comparatively affordable retail space, which a new station could make more visible and accessible to a wider pool of tenants and customers. Increased foot traffic and stronger connections to nearby workforce and consumer bases could elevate demand for space, potentially pushing lease rates toward regional norms and enhancing the value of commercial properties near the station.

Furthermore, a new station is anticipated to support station-area development, helping to create relatively denser, mixed-use communities around rail stations. While exact outcomes cannot be predicted, experience from comparable intercity rail communities suggests that improved connectivity often encourages private investment and new development near stations, as detailed in Section 3.6.3. This type of development would be particularly beneficial for Palmer given its current market dynamics.

A new rail station could attract tenants and customers to available retail space, encouraging new development to meet future demand. Station-area development could also attract businesses that are specifically seeking locations offering their employees and customers a commute option beyond personal vehicles, thereby increasing demand for office and retail space and leading to new construction.

3.6 Development and Land Considerations

3.6.1 Development Pipeline

Desktop research was conducted to identify key real estate and development activities across Palmer and the Regional Market Area, highlighting ongoing, approved, and proposed development projects, as summarized in **Table 8**. For consistency, projects identified as "proposed" refer to those in planning, permitting, or pre-construction stages, which may still depend on funding or final approvals. This review provides insight into how Palmer and the Regional Market Area are addressing housing needs, mixed-use development opportunities, commercial activity, and adaptive reuse of former institutional or industrial properties.

Table 8: Development Pipeline

Town / Project Name	Uses	Status
Palmer		
Liberty Plaza	Mixed-use	Ongoing
Former Thorndike School	Residential	Ongoing
1524 Park Street	Commercial	Approved
Former Converse School	Residential (Age-Restricted 55+)	Proposed
8 Chamber Road	Industrial	Proposed
Regional Market Area		
Amherst		
5 University Drive	Mixed-Use	Ongoing
East Street School & Belchertown Road Development	Residential (mixed income)	Proposed
Belchertown		
Carriage Grove Development	Mixed-Use	Proposed
Belchertown State School Redevelopment	Residential (mixed income)	Proposed
Monson		
Monson Developmental Center Redevelopment	Mixed-Use	Proposed

In Palmer, projects such as Liberty Plaza, 1524 Park Street, and 8 Chamber Road indicate early momentum for both commercial revitalization and employment-oriented investment. Additionally, residential projects such as the conversion of two former schools – the Thorndike School and Converse School – into residential units are examples of adaptive reuse that expand the local housing supply while reinvesting in underutilized public assets. Within the Regional Market Area, several projects such as Carriage Grove and the Belchertown State School redevelopment in Belchertown, and 5 University Drive and the East Street School redevelopment in Amherst demonstrate a growing pipeline of mixed-use and residential projects that combine new housing with community-serving commercial or institutional uses. Many of these initiatives range from several dozen to several hundred new residential units, with the Belchertown State School Redevelopment and the Monson Developmental Center Redevelopment having the largest share of new development potential. Together, these projects across both Palmer and the Regional Market Area signal an ongoing effort of these communities to expand housing supply and redevelop aging properties.

Taken together, these projects suggest that the regional development market is showing signs of strengthening and gradually densifying, with clear interest in walkable, mixed-use environments similar to what a future station-area district in Palmer could support.

The scale and character of nearby projects provide a useful benchmark for what might be feasible around a new rail station when vacant or underutilized parcels are leveraged for compact, rail-supportive redevelopment that responds to regional housing and economic trends.

3.6.2 Land Considerations

This market analysis included an analysis of underutilized and vacant parcels within a 0.5-mile walkshed of the proposed rail station. The purpose of this desktop assessment was to identify properties that may present near- and long-term opportunities for redevelopment or reinvestment in support of station-area development. By cataloging parcels with limited current use or unrealized development potential, in addition to a screening for limiting environmental factors such as wetlands and steep slopes, the analysis provides a foundation for understanding where future market activity could be most feasible and impactful.

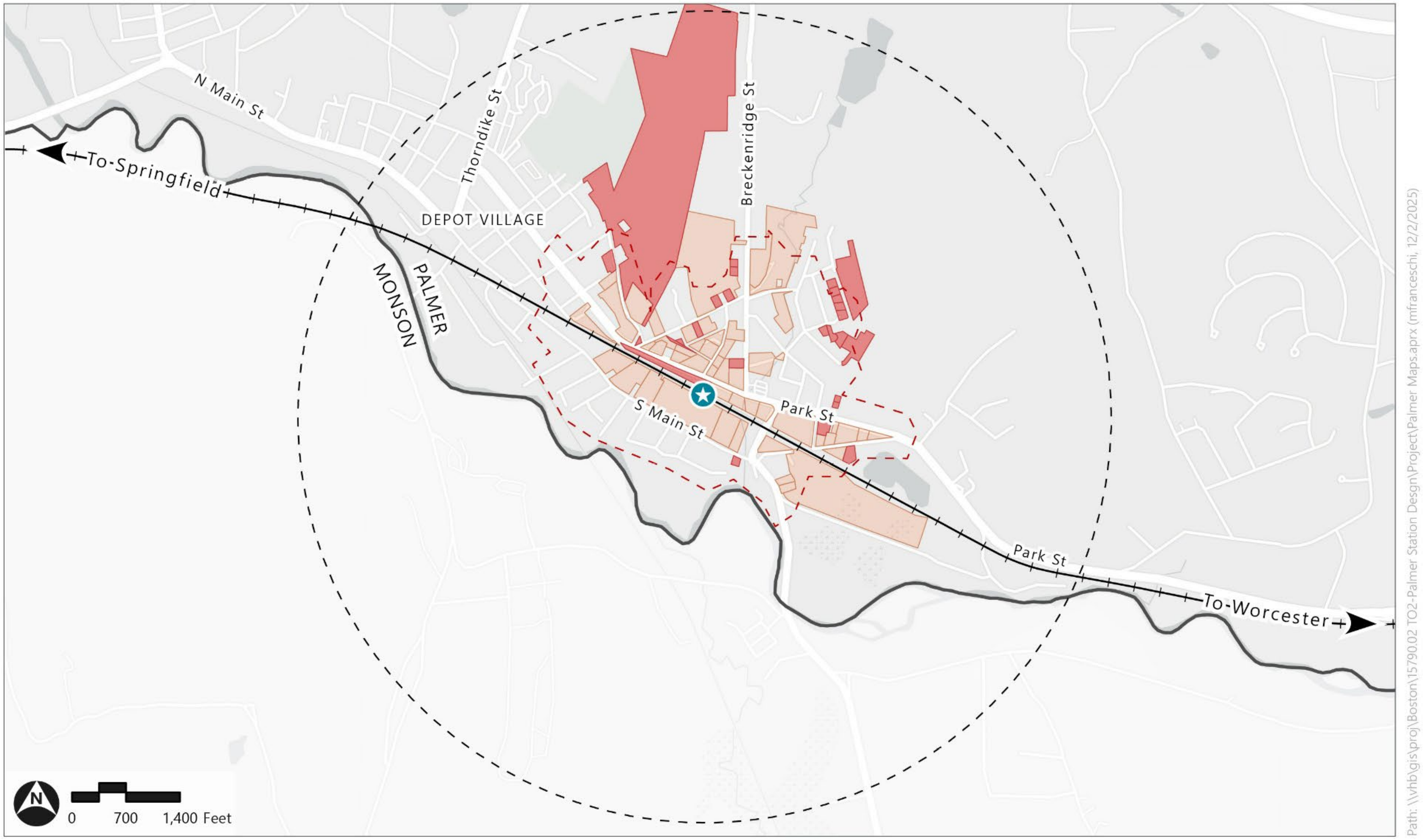
The analysis began with a review of all parcels within the defined 0.5-mile walkshed using assessor data, land use records, and aerial imagery. First, parcels were evaluated based on existing lot coverage and development intensity to identify sites that appeared underutilized relative to their size. Parcels containing no building improvements were classified as vacant, while those with low building coverage or visibly limited use were flagged as potentially underutilized. This initial set was refined according to zoning, focusing specifically on parcels within industrial, low-density residential, or low-density commercial districts, and then screened for limiting environmental conditions such as wetlands and steep slopes. This approach ensures consistency by first identifying parcels with low physical utilization and then narrowing the analysis to those where zoning suggests a mismatch between current use and potential development capacity, in addition to taking environmental considerations into account. While the environmental screen ruled out portions of the larger parcels, a significant enough share of each parcel remains developable and has been included in the analysis.

The findings indicate that within the walkshed, there are approximately 27 parcels totaling approximately 98 acres classified as vacant and 49 parcels totaling approximately 107 acres identified as underutilized, as shown in **Figure 9**. Of note is the "L6 High Street" parcel, comprising just over 90 acres. While this parcel represents a significant opportunity within the station area, its future zoning remains under consideration. While some sites may face barriers to redevelopment due to ownership, infrastructure, or environmental conditions, the overall analysis highlights that the proposed station area encompasses a number of underutilized parcels, positioning Palmer to capitalize on the potential demand generated by improved regional connectivity.

The properties identified in **Figure 9** comprise a strategic inventory of redevelopment opportunities that can accommodate new housing, commercial, or mixed-use projects, aligning with the goals of enhancing access to rail and strengthening the local economy.

Figure 9: Map of Vacant and Underutilized Parcels

Palmer Station | Palmer, Massachusetts



Proposed Station Location
1 Mi Radius
0.5 Mi Walkshed
Vacant Parcels
Underutilized Parcels

Source: MassGIS, ArcGIS Online

3.6.3 Rail Station Impacts

A future intercity rail station in Palmer could offer opportunities similar to those seen in Freeport and Brunswick, Maine after the Downeaster arrived. In both towns, the return of rail service created steady, predictable activity that encouraged people and businesses to pay more attention to the areas around the stations. As these places became part of daily routines, the surrounding blocks gradually shifted toward more active and useful spaces. Palmer can look to these examples to understand how a station can serve as a practical starting point for new development and for improving how residents and visitors experience the town.

The Downeaster's schedule in Freeport and Brunswick offers five daily round trips, providing steady but not commuter-level frequency similar to the potential future service levels in Palmer. This pattern matters because it shows how intercity rail can support meaningful activity and investment. The trains arrive often enough to be dependable for day trips, regional travel, and occasional commuting, yet the service remains oriented toward longer-distance trips rather than peak-hour flows. Palmer is expected to have a similar type of service: consistent, predictable intercity connections that bring a regular flow of visitors and provide residents with a reliable alternative for reaching larger job and activity centers. The Downeaster service in Freeport and Brunswick, Maine shows that this level of service can influence land use, business activity, and public space improvements around a station.

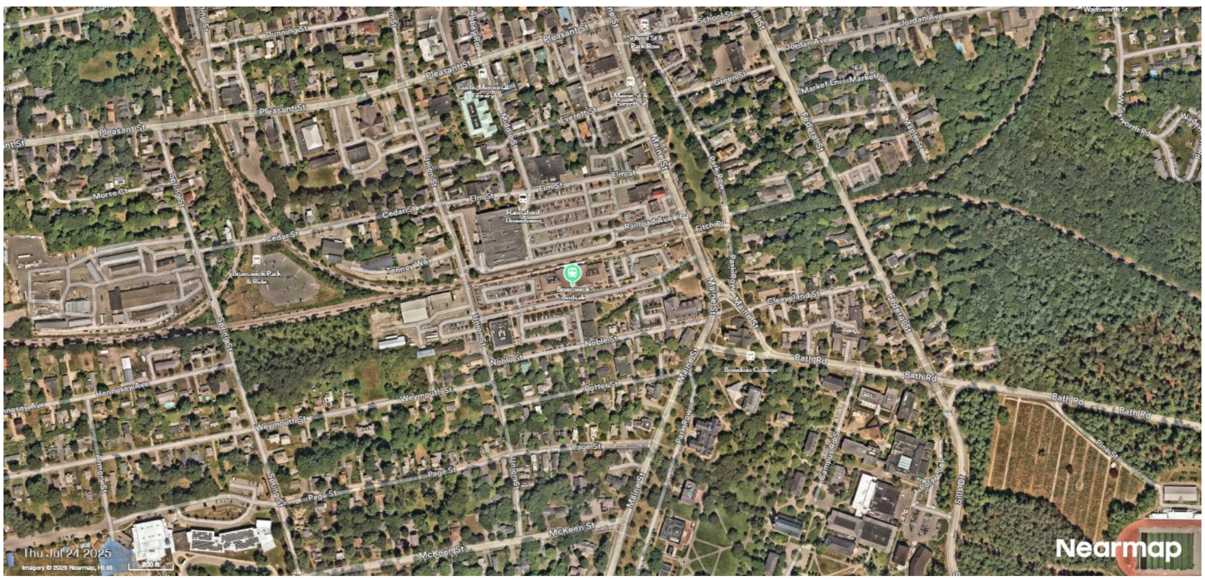
The return of passenger rail service in Freeport and Brunswick produced change that built up over time. When the Downeaster began stopping in each community, the stations quickly became places where people naturally gathered and moved through the day. That consistent presence of riders encouraged local officials, property owners, and developers to reconsider how nearby properties could be used. Areas that had been dominated by parking or low-intensity commercial uses started to transition toward more mixed activity.

In Freeport the station reinforced the town's existing tourism and retail base. Reliable train service made it easier for visitors to plan short trips, which supported off-peak foot traffic. Shops near the station saw more casual browsing, and the increased sidewalk activity encouraged reinvestment in storefronts. The town improved pedestrian routes between the station and Main Street, helping to tie the arrival experience directly into the commercial center. Small upgrades in lighting, seating, and wayfinding strengthened the district's overall usability, and modest infill projects followed as attention returned to the immediate station area.

Freeport's train station surrounded to the north by compact infill development as a result of Downeaster service and improvements to pedestrian infrastructure and the public realm. Source: Nearmap

Brunswick saw a wider range of changes because its station sits near schools, arts organizations, and older industrial sites. The arrival of the Downeaster helped connect these assets, making the town more accessible and more appealing to people who valued walkable access to rail. As ridership grew, underused properties near the station attracted interest for mixed-use redevelopment, and several older buildings became candidates for reuse. This activity supported new housing and small businesses that benefited from proximity to the station.

Public improvements kept pace with private activity. Streetscapes were redesigned to make walking and biking easier between the station, Maine Street, and nearby destinations. Arts and cultural groups expanded programming as access improved, and new restaurants and retail spaces opened in areas that previously struggled to attract consistent customers. Over time these steady changes helped create a downtown environment that felt more active throughout the year.



Brunswick's train station surrounded to the south by compact infill development as a result of Downeaster service and improvements to pedestrian infrastructure and the public realm. Source: Nearmap

Freeport and Brunswick show how intercity rail can help towns focus investment and plan growth more effectively. The Downeaster did not drive change on its own, but it brought a dependable stream of people and attention that encouraged local decision-makers to act.

For Palmer the key takeaway is that a well-located station can serve as a practical anchor for walkability improvements, redevelopment, and clearer district identity, supporting long-term stability in both the market and the town's overall development pattern.

While Freeport and Brunswick illustrate how intercity rail can influence development at the local level, similar patterns emerge in broader regional analysis. Connecticut's Capitol Region Council of Governments' (CRCOG) 2021 study of rail investment in the Hartford-Springfield corridor, "The Economic Benefits of Regional Rail Investment in Metro Hartford-Springfield," places Palmer within a network of communities positioned to benefit from improved passenger rail. It reinforces the relevance of similar gradual, place-based change seen in other small towns.

The CRCOG report identifies Palmer as the only proposed station stop on the West-East rail line between Springfield and Worcester. The report identifies underutilized and undeveloped land in the Town, which local plans have identified as long-term opportunities. The report's quantitative findings also point to a meaningful, if modest, development capacity. Together, these conditions suggest that a station could become a practical focal point for reinvestment rather than a single, transformative project, and support the idea that rail service is more likely to enable steady, incremental growth than rapid change.

> The analysis also emphasizes that the value of passenger rail extends beyond the immediate station area. Improved service expands access to jobs, services, and regional destinations, reshaping commuting patterns, broadening catchment areas, and supporting stronger economic integration across the region.

For residents, a station would offer a reliable alternative to driving. For businesses, it would widen the labor market and customer base. Over time, this added accessibility increases the appeal of locations near the station, shaping how property owners and developers think about future investment.

As in Freeport and Brunswick, the report makes clear that rail alone does not drive development. Change occurs gradually, as predictable service brings a steady flow of people and attention to the station area. Where communities pair rail access with supportive zoning, walkable connections, and targeted public improvements, underused parcels begin to shift toward more active uses. For Palmer, this highlights the importance of aligning station planning with local regulations and public realm investments.

Taken together, the CRCOG findings reinforce the broader narrative of rail-supported growth. They show that Palmer's position in the corridor, its available development capacity, and its regional connections create the conditions for long-term reinvestment. With coordinated planning and steady implementation, a future station can anchor new housing, small businesses, and public space, ultimately helping Palmer capture the everyday economic and community benefits of intercity rail.

Of note, the Palmer Town Council has already begun laying the groundwork for these future investments. In December 2025, the Council approved a District Improvement Financing (DIF) district, initiating a process to evaluate and implement targeted infrastructure upgrades. Because the station area lies adjacent to the DIF District, improvements made through this program will directly support station access, enhance multimodal connections, and position the community to fully leverage the benefits of new rail service.

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Roundtable Insights

MassDOT held a series of roundtable discussions with local and regional stakeholders to support the evaluation of a proposed train station in Palmer. These sessions brought together municipal staff, community organizations, businesses, and regional partners to share perspectives on the project. Across four groups, participants highlighted broad themes related to the station's potential benefits, challenges, and strategic considerations. This chapter provides an overview of those insights and the community priorities that emerged.

4.1 Roundtable Summary and Key Findings

These Roundtable sessions provided valuable perspectives from diverse participants, including municipal staff, local organizations, and regional entities. The discussions comprised four distinct groups:

1. Regional;
2. Real Estate/Development;
3. Small Business/Institutional; and
4. Steering Committee.

A summary of the discussions for each group listed above are included in Sections 4.1.1, 4.1.2, 4.1.3, and 4.1.4 herein. The discussions surfaced several structural and practical barriers that could constrain the overall effectiveness of a new station in Palmer. Participants pointed to conditions that affect development readiness, mobility, and the community's ability to capture broader economic and housing benefits. Taken together, the identified issues are summarized as follows and illustrate the underlying obstacles that would need to be addressed to fully leverage the station's potential:

- Existing zoning and permitting frameworks may constrain new mixed-use development and limit the scale of construction feasible in the station area and central Palmer. Participants noted that, without updates, these regulations could slow or restrict the type of growth envisioned around the proposed station.
- Stakeholders emphasized that last-mile connectivity will be essential for the station to function effectively. They highlighted gaps in safe, accessible pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, which could hinder movement between transportation assets, nearby businesses, and potential mixed-use areas, ultimately reducing foot traffic in the station district and Depot Village.
- Another barrier relates to the availability of developable land. While some parcels are underutilized, identifying sites that are both physically feasible and appropriately zoned remains difficult. This disconnect between land conditions and zoning limits the opportunity to support mixed-use development in the immediate station vicinity.
- Finally, stakeholders underscored a significant shortfall in the regional housing supply. Demand continues to outpace available units, particularly affordable and diverse options such as 55+ housing and workforce housing, making it harder for the community to accommodate new residents and fully benefit from potential station-area growth.

4.1.1 Regional Roundtable Summary

The Regional Roundtable discussions explored the broader real estate market challenges and opportunities within the Palmer area and its neighboring towns. Participants identified significant development constraints due to environmental factors, such as wetlands and perceived outdated zoning regulations, which limit new construction.

Despite strong regional housing demand, development has primarily occurred through frontage lot development, leaving a shortage of new subdivisions. This shortage highlights a pressing need to modernize zoning policies to meet current market demands.

Additionally, the potential for commercial development remains largely untapped, particularly in areas strategically positioned near key assets such as UMass and I-90. Participants noted opportunities for rezoning to attract business interest, leveraging pass-through traffic to stimulate economic development. Telecommuting trends have shifted housing preferences, although their full impact on the workforce and commuting behaviors remains unclear.

The discussions emphasized the need for infrastructure readiness to support site redevelopment, particularly in areas such as the Belchertown campus, which already has existing infrastructure investments. Participants noted the need for job-creating initiatives and diverse housing options to enhance economic vitality. There is an interest in revitalizing areas such as the Ware mill yard, supported by infrastructure planning and brownfields funding, though logistical challenges remain.

Improved mobility through the proposed train station can ease commuting, mitigate regional congestion, and promote downtown revitalization, bolstering tourism and economic growth. Despite a shortage of accommodation, there is growing interest in small-scale developments to cater to visitors, particularly in Wilbraham.

In terms of tourism and recreation, leveraging outdoor assets like the Mass Central Rail Trail offers significant potential for growth. Participants noted the region's strengths in outdoor activities and agri-tourism as avenues for attracting visitors and enhancing local economies.

The roundtable also acknowledged the importance of regional collaboration through organizations like the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, although local-focused efforts sometimes limit broader coordination. Participants expressed concern regarding the potential pressure on housing markets from telecommuters if housing growth does not keep pace.

Engaging communities throughout the planning process is critical to align development efforts with local and regional objectives.

4.1.2 Real Estate/Development Roundtable Summary

The Real Estate/Development Roundtable highlighted several critical trends and challenges surrounding the real estate market in Palmer and the larger region. Participants noted a scarcity of developable industrial land, which may limit the immediate impact of the proposed train station on industrial and office sectors. However, findings from the land availability assessment do show underutilized land zoned as industrial, which could be further analyzed for future redevelopment opportunities. Participants indicated that rail transportation could be a potential economic stimulant, with the Town prepared to adapt to the changes it brings.

There is a need for diversified housing options, particularly 55+ housing, to free up existing single-family homes and create affordable opportunities for workforce housing. The group discussed the concept of a Veterans' Village to support veterans while contributing to housing diversity. Reliable last-mile transportation from the station is crucial for the success of Monson's housing goals.

In discussing Palmer's market conditions, manufacturing, warehousing, and professional services were identified as key pillars supporting the local economy. However, infrastructure challenges, such as an aging electrical grid and gas moratoriums, present obstacles to development and open opportunities for green energy initiatives. The demand for affordable housing aligns with observations of demographic trends, including an aging population. Transportation reliability and infrastructure improvements are also critical to support future growth. Participants noted the role of smaller developers as pivotal in promoting growth around the station area. By identifying and promoting strategic opportunity parcels, smaller firms can play a key role in reinvigorating Palmer's development landscape.

Encouraging diverse developer involvement can help overcome the region's development inertia, with community-focused projects fostering trust and collaboration.

4.1.3 Small Business/Institutional Roundtable Summary

The Small Business/Institutional Roundtable provided valuable insights into challenges and opportunities related to talent retention, commercial development gaps, and the local/regional impacts of the proposed train station in Palmer. Participants highlighted recruitment difficulties in rural areas, such as Palmer, due to competitive pay scales elsewhere and a shortage of skilled trade workers. Participants noted that, with only one vocational school in the area, and many graduates seeking employment outside the region, employers face challenges in finding workers with specific skills. Strategic efforts to enhance vocational education ties with industry could help alleviate these challenges.

Seasonal traffic fluctuations, driven by events such as the Brimfield flea market, impact business demand, underscoring the need for stability in economic activity. Participants expressed interest in developing a combined convention space, hotel, and restaurant to meet the community's evolving needs.

Participants identified commercial and hospitality sectors as key areas with room for growth, with vacant industrial and retail spaces highlighting untapped potential.

The introduction of the rail station can support economic momentum by enhancing infrastructure and development opportunities, benefiting major local employers, and expanding regional talent attraction. Ensuring new developments do not threaten existing businesses is crucial, with discussions around business incubators and cultural spaces indicating potential areas for fostering community engagement and tourism.

Improved connectivity through the rail station could position Palmer as a residential hub, benefiting from the area's strong rental demand. While development costs remain high, the strategic use of available space, combined with renewable energy initiatives such as solar farms, offers promising pathways for sustainable growth. The Chambers of Commerce's proactive role in community engagement and business support underscores the region's readiness to embrace these opportunities for economic development.

4.1.4 Steering Committee Roundtable Summary

The Steering Committee Roundtable discussions centered on development interest, zoning needs, and strategic planning to leverage the proposed train station's potential impact on Palmer. Participants identified opportunities for mixed-use development in the station area, emphasizing the importance of walkability and community engagement. Available properties, such as those on the north side, offer strategic potential for growth, with proposed zoning overlay districts designed to facilitate development processes. Enhancing infrastructure, particularly pedestrian improvements around the Stone St. bridge, was deemed necessary to support further expansion.

Transportation challenges, such as regional congestion on I-90, underscore the need for rail solutions to stimulate local economies. Developing a comprehensive station area plan was suggested as a strategy to unify community vision, align infrastructure improvements, and attract developer interest.

The industrial and commercial sectors were identified for expansion, leveraging existing infrastructure through urban renewal plans focused on areas such as Park Street. Potential growth opportunities were underscored by ongoing projects, including Liberty Plaza and housing developments, signaling positive economic momentum.

Participants discussed incentivizing development through mechanisms such as Tax Increment Financing (TIF) and District Improvement Financing (DIF).

The committee emphasized crafting a sustainable, community-focused vision, fostering collaborative efforts with entities such as the Amherst Railway Society, and referencing station-area development models like the Hartford Line. These insights shape a blueprint for advancing Palmer's growth and maximizing the new station's transformative potential.

Participants recognized State and federal funding as pivotal in supporting planning and community engagement processes, aligning development goals with regional demand.

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Market Demand Assessment: Existing & Induced Demand

The introduction of a new train station in Palmer is expected to influence local and regional market dynamics. The proposed station can both enhance regional mobility and catalyze new opportunities for residential and commercial development. The following section evaluates both existing and induced market demand, the new market activity that may arise as a result of improved access, economic growth, and reinvestment around the station area.

5.1 Residential Demand Assessment

Palmer's housing market is currently characterized by a predominance of single-family homes (62 percent) and the high percentage of owner occupancy (67 percent) in the region. With relatively stable population growth and a moderate-income profile, the town's housing supply reflects limited diversity in housing types and affordability challenges, particularly for renters. Nearly half of renters (48 percent) are cost-burdened, indicating unmet demand for attainable rental housing. Although Palmer's population growth trends and projected age distribution will likely not directly impact ridership, the regional setting is expected to attract younger households, who will draw more rail riders to Palmer.

Regional development trends reinforce this potential. The forthcoming Monson Developmental Center redevelopment, located approximately one mile from the proposed station, will add an estimated 150 to 300 housing units. The Monson Developmental Center redevelopment is set to create a mixed-use village that incorporates commercial opportunities as well as a mix of housing typologies ranging from senior affordable housing, condos, duplexes, and single-family homes.[26] Additional projects in Amherst and Belchertown are similarly introducing new residential and mixed-use developments that will expand the regional housing base and strengthen Palmer's

[26] https://westmassdevelopment.com/monson-developmental-center-is-the-latest-westmass-challenge/

role as a rail-connected community within the West-East corridor. With accompanying retail and residential activation in Palmer, the proposed station can change regional perception of the town as a critical amenity in Western Massachusetts.

Feedback gathered through stakeholder roundtables and public engagement underscores local optimism about the station's impact on housing. Residents emphasized that Palmer could attract households priced out of higher-cost communities such as Framingham or Hopkinton while maintaining reasonable commute times to employment hubs. As one participant noted, people who can't afford Boston-area housing will look to Palmer for affordability while keeping access to their jobs.

In summary, **the station is expected to generate incremental residential demand** by:

- Expanding Palmer's market reach to younger and moderate-income households.
- Supporting redevelopment of underutilized parcels within the half-mile walkshed.
- Encouraging multi-family and mixed-use infill that diversifies the local housing stock.
- Strengthening connections between regional housing growth and Palmer's downtown core.

5.2 Commercial Demand Assessment

Palmer's current commercial market consists of a small but active base of retail and office uses, with below-average lease rates and limited vacancies. Retail space averages $13.99 per square foot, compared to the regional average of $17.09, reflecting Palmer's affordability advantage but also limited market exposure. The proposed station represents a significant opportunity to expand this commercial base by increasing visibility, accessibility, and customer foot traffic.

The Local Market Area includes roughly 98 acres of vacant land and 107 acres of underutilized parcels within a half mile of the proposed station. These sites represent prime opportunities for adaptive reuse and infill development, particularly for small-scale retail, office, hospitality, and service uses that can support commuters and residents alike. Roundtable participants consistently identified the need to leverage these assets for community-serving development and small business growth.

Developments such as Liberty Plaza demonstrate the market's potential to absorb new retail and dining options, while regional initiatives in Amherst, Monson, and Belchertown provide complementary demand drivers. Local stakeholders emphasized that improved rail connectivity will attract both businesses and customers, positioning Palmer as a convenient stop along the West-East corridor. As one former town councilor noted, this is an opportunity to connect Palmer to the region's growth and increase activity in the downtown area.

In the near term, **increased accessibility to rail service is expected to encourage commercial development** by:

- Raising the visibility and competitiveness of Palmer's retail and office markets.
- Spurring small-scale investment and business expansion near the station.
- Supporting station-area-focused rezoning to enable higher-value mixed-use projects.
- Encouraging foot traffic and customer activity that can sustain downtown businesses.

Over time, these improvements could narrow the gap between Palmer's lease rates and those of the broader region, while increasing the overall value of commercial property. Coupled with targeted infrastructure and zoning updates, the proposed station can serve as a catalyst for long-term economic revitalization and regional integration.

While population growth may remain modest, **improved rail access, affordability, and strategic land availability position Palmer to capture new demand and investment**. The new Palmer station offers transformative potential across both residential and commercial markets. Realizing these benefits will depend on aligning infrastructure, zoning, and economic development policies to support station-area growth that strengthens the local economy and reinforces Palmer's role as a regional hub along the West-East rail line.