

**Ashby Sustainable Rural Economic Development
Plan Public Visioning Session
May 21, 2011**



Prepared by the
Montachusett Regional
Planning Commission
For
**THE ASHBY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
COMMITTEE
AND
THE TOWN OF ASHBY, MA**

Acknowledgements

The Town of Ashby would like to thank the following contributors:

- The Ashby Economic Development Committee who acted as the catalyst for this event and the study in its entirety.
- Participating residents, business owners, and public officials from the Town of Ashby, and all other participating stakeholders who worked on a Saturday morning to make the forum an active and productive event. This report would not have been possible without their input and support.
- An event such as the Ashby Public Visioning Session needs to be held in a suitable location. The support received from the Ashby Free Public Library is very much appreciated.



Ashby Free Public Library

This report is based upon the input given to the facilitators of the Public Visioning Session. This document should be used for planning purposes only.

Introduction

In February 2011, the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) executed a contract with the Town of Ashby to assist the Town and its newly formed Economic Development Committee to develop a Sustainable Economic Development Plan through MRPC's District Local Technical Assistance Program at no cost to the community (funds provided by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts). Public input was deemed a critical part of this study by the Town and as part of this contract MRPC conducted a Community Forum with residents and business representatives. The Community Forum was held on May 21, 2011.

In March, the Economic Development Committee, with assistance from MRPC, began the necessary preparations. The purpose of the Community Forum was to solicit public input to identify Ashby's key issues for the Planning Team to address in the Ashby Sustainable Economic Development Plan to be completed in November 2011.

It was determined that public involvement would be critical if the Community Forum was to be a successful one. The widely publicized event was open to the general public; everyone with an interest in Economic Development in Ashby was highly

encouraged to attend including citizens, local and officials, business owners and others.

On Saturday, May 21 at 9 AM interested parties met in the lower level of the Ashby Free Public Library. The weather was pleasantly warm and sunny that morning – a welcome change from the cool rainy pattern of early/mid May. Open, uninhibited conversation and dialog was the order of the day.

The collective energy of the participants was used to weld together their ideas with a highly-charged spirit to plant the seeds of implementation to make measurable, consistent, and appropriate improvements to economic development in Ashby. To enhance factual knowledge and generate ideas, large scale color coded zoning maps of the town were available for viewing throughout the duration of the event.

This part of the sustainable rural economic plan has been completed with the intention of respecting, reflecting, and documenting the day's events, methodology, and all of the recorded input provided by the participants to complement other planning efforts.

Process and Methodology

The **Community Forum** was held on Saturday May 21. It began at about 9:15 A.M. and ended at approximately 12:00 P.M. The Forum was designed to gain public input, insight, and ideas concerning any possible future economic development activities in the Town of Ashby. It was open to all community



residents and businesses interested in providing input and bringing ideas into this document to make it more comprehensive and complete.

The Ashby Economic Development Committee and the MRPC handled community outreach for the event. Outreach included, but was not limited to press releases in local newspapers, flyers forwarded to businesses and local officials, and postings throughout the community to attract residents. The majority of people signed in at registration (See Appendix A - Registration Sheet) but over the course of the morning additional people were known to have been involved.

The mood of the day was an open, active, and public process that brought interested parties together to work towards a common goal; to improve the future of the community.

The Community Forum Agenda was available as a handout along with light refreshments at the Registration Table at the lower level of the Ashby Free Public Library. The Agenda indicated that the morning would start with introductory remarks, an outline of the process of the day, and breakout sessions into three smaller discussion groups. This would all be followed by the reconvening into the initial large group with presentations by group reporters, and a discussion of the “Next Steps”.

Alan Pease, Ashby Planning Board Member and a highly involved participant on the Ashby Economic Development Committee provided a welcome to all, and added his comments and encouragement to all. He provided background statements and encouraged public input and guidance while indicating the importance of public input.

Chris Ryan, Ashby Land Use Consultant provided a description of the goals of the Forum. Elements of the study being undertaken include a vision and goals and objectives for the rural sustainable economic development in Ashby. He indicated

that an objective of the Forum was to identify those things that are most important to the residents of Ashby.

John Hume, Planning and Development Director at MRPC, provided a description of what the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission is and the services it provides. The Montachusett Region consists of 22 communities. Services range from economic development planning and promotion to writing grant proposals and facilitating both regional and community plans in a wide range of planning areas: economic development, transportation and transit, environment and land use, Geographic Information System mapping, and community development.

Mr. Hume indicated that he will serve as a small group facilitator today along with two other MRPC staff members and the Ashby Land Use Consultant (See Appendix B – Moderators). He underscored the importance of positive attitude and mutual respect. The successful outcome of the public forum hinged on this: all ideas are welcome from all attendees; all participants have equal status; provide input and let your neighbor speak, and; there is no such thing as a bad idea.

It was indicated that we would be breaking out into smaller groups. Each group would answer eight (8)

questions – the questions for each group were identical. The groups would reconvene later and report findings.



Mr. Hume randomly designated each participant a number between one and three. Participants were then divided into three groups depending on the number assigned. There was one facilitator and one volunteer recorder per group, along with a newsprint sheet. Large sticker pads of lined newsprint paper were also provided to record participant responses. All groups were instructed by facilitators that:

A. As a group, participants should discuss, and then answer each individual question on the newsprint.

B. Each group was instructed to select a reporter to present the group's work and results to the other Groups when they reconvened.

In the next part of the process, participants returned to reconvene in the large group for further discussion

and the setting of priority items. Jennifer Siciliano, Regional Planner with MRPC and Project Manager of this particular project, facilitated the reconvening. A reporter from each group presented the responses to the participants.

After the presentations, a Prioritization exercise was conducted; participants placed Preference Dots on the newsprint to express their preference for each of the news-printed lists presented by the reporters.

In conclusion, the Next Steps of the study were outlined. The participants were encouraged to take either a paper or online survey to express their opinions and feelings about economic development in the Town in a more in-depth manner. They were also invited to attend the next Economic Development Committee meeting in June and that meeting notes regarding this Forum and the survey results will be available on the Town's official website. Additionally, a draft Sustainable Economic Development Plan will be available on the Town's website in the fall of 2011.



Summary of Findings Based Upon Prioritization

Comments made by the forum's participants have been documented and categorized by Eight (8) questions posed for the three breakout groups. Numbers in parentheses represent relative importance assigned to each issue by participants using sticker dots during the prioritization exercise previously described. *Only issues prioritized by a minimum of at least one sticker dot are documented below* - full group responses to all questions that were also presented by a representative of each group when the participants reconvened into the larger group can be found in Appendix C. It should be noted that while the participants of this Forum prioritized some issues over others, those issues with a lesser priority may have equal or greater importance during future planning efforts.

QUESTION #1: What are Ashby's Strengths? What characteristics of the Town of Ashby do you think are strong points, attractants, and features that bring people to town as visitors, attract people to move here or establish businesses here, or keep people here long term.

Priorities Concerning Ashby's greatest strengths:

- Rural Aspects (21)
- Mount Watatic - Pearl Hill State Park – Blood Hill State Park (7)
- Natural Resources (5)
- Horses and Livestock (3)
- Schools (i.e. class size/music program) (3)
- Town Center (3)
- Open Space (3)
- Scenic Rte. 119 Traffic Flow (1)
- Hiking, Snowmobiles, Recreational Opportunities (1)
- Band Concert at the Common (1)

QUESTION #2: What are Ashby's challenges and how should they be addressed? What do you think, if any, are Ashby's key issues and challenges and how should they be addressed. What do you think the problems are, anything that makes work and life more difficult or demanding. This could be the lack of retail choices, municipal services, high (or low) taxes, excessive or loose regulations

Priorities Concerning Ashby's Challenges:

- Tied to Nashoba Board of Health (38)
- Utilities - limited power for manufacturers – second highest utility cost in the country (9)
- Zoning restrictions - the town is not very encouraging (9)
- Not business friendly – difficult to establish businesses (8)
- Water/well issues (7)
- Help with the business process (3)
- Marketing – no communication with business, lack of information available (2)
- Regulations – more cooperation (2)

QUESTION #3: How do you feel about growth and change in Ashby and what would you like to preserve or change? How do you feel about growth and change in Ashby and what would you like to preserve or change. This could be growth in size/population, growth in commercial activity, growth in government, traffic or any way you want to define growth.

Priorities Concerning Growth, Change, and Preservation:

- Keep the rural Ashby flavor (20)
- Sprawl (17)

- Areas to display and sell residence goods (11)
- Zoning issues regarding growth (9)
- Need business growth to generate revenue to help with the tax base (8)
- Population should remain the same but encourage business so we don't have to drive so far (4)

QUESTION #4: What kinds of municipal assets are missing that you would like to see in Ashby? What kinds of municipal or public assets are missing that you would like to see in Ashby? (e.g. sewers, second elementary school, more parks, town forest or farm, nature center, etc.).

Priorities Concerning Missing Municipal Assets:

- Open public meeting place for more regular events (17)
- Eateries – no place to stop and eat (15)
- Public water/utilities (12)
- Activities for kids/teens, in the summer particularly (11)
- Banking (9)
- Pubs – family friendly (7)
- Food and crafts (5)
- Green business (Ashburnham Country Store) (5)
- Newspaper or newsletter (3)
- Public transit (3)
- Promoting existing businesses (2)

QUESTION #5: Why is Ashby a good place to do business? What are the characteristics of the town that make establishing and/or running a business here in Ashby easy? What else makes the town a good place for business?

Priorities Concerning Why Ashby is a Good Place to do Business:

- Weekend tourists (10)
- Route 119 Accessibility, we don't take advantage of it (8)
- Home based business with low overhead (5)
- Farming, horses, sale of produce (4)
- Good network of people that communicate with someone (3)
- Little regulation of home based business, easy to get started (1)

QUESTION #6: What makes it difficult to run a business in Ashby and how can the Town help? What could businesses do together to help? What makes it difficult to run a business in Ashby and how can the Town help? What could businesses do together to help? What kind of programs could help business? What kind of group or organization could businesses collaborate on to advance their needs and interests?

Priorities Concerning What Makes it Difficult to Run a Business in Ashby:

- Resistance in town (zoning) (17)
- Roads need work (11)
- No Banking (9)
- Few transportation options (9)
- More regular activities (fairs etc.) to bring people to Ashby (4)
- Parking issues (3)

QUESTION #7: Where do residents and businesses do *their* business? Where do people in the Town purchase everyday necessities (food, gas, etc.) and services (dry cleaning, etc). What kinds of businesses would you like to see in Ashby that aren't here and what is stopping these businesses from coming to Ashby?

Priorities Concerning where Residents and Businesses do their Business:

- No Group Responses to this question were prioritized by Sticker Dots.

QUESTION #8: Would you like to see festivals and events to increase tourism in town? Why? Would you like to see festivals and events to increase tourism in town? Why? What kind of events would be successful here?

Priorities Concerning Festivals and Events to Increase Tourism:

- Farmer's Market (16)
- Proper advertising is needed (10)
- Advertise and share locally through many communities (5)
- Networking and bringing community goods out (4)
- Great current festivals (3)
- Great current activities (3)

Conclusions: Based on public input prioritization during the Visioning Session documented above, Ashby's greatest strengths are its rural character and natural resources including Mount Watatic, Pearl Hill State Park, and Blood Hill State Park. In accordance with this, participants prioritized the need to retain this rural flavor and keep sprawl in check. But it was also indicated that Ashby needs some business growth to generate tax revenue.

Participants stated that town challenges include both a strained relationship with the Nashoba Boards of Health and inadequate/expensive services provided by Unitil. Zoning restrictions, difficulty establishing a business, and water/well issues were also prioritized relatively high. It was indicated that the town could improve upon its municipal assets if it had an open public meeting place for more regular events, a restaurant(s), better public water and utilities, activities for youths, and banking facilities.

Most participants thought that Ashby is good for businesses because of the weekend tourists, Route 119 accessibility (even in the winter months), and home based businesses can operate with little overhead. Some participants indicated ways to improve/facilitate business in Ashby such as more business friendly zoning, road improvements, more transportation options, and even areas to display and sell residence goods. Overall, a farmers market was viewed as a good idea – a farmers market along with current festivals and activities should be widely advertised throughout the community and beyond town borders.

APPENDIX A – Registration List

Registration List*

First Name	Last Name
Patrick	Leach
John	Lavin
Ginger	Wall
Tom	Wallerstein
Alan	Pease
Joe	Novello
Brenda	Armstrong-Champ
Kate	Stacy
Jim	Stacy
Patty	Doody-King
Claire	Lavin
Mark	Hainer
Pat	Stewart
Francie	Stettion

*Note: This list only includes those who signed the Registration List.

Chris	Ryan
John	Hume
Bobbi Jo	Johnson
Brian	Doherty
Jennifer	Siciliano

APPENDIX B – Moderators

Moderators

(left to right)

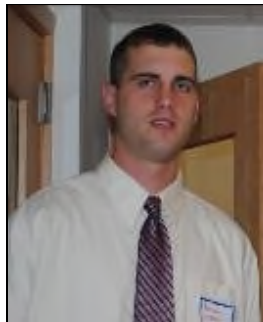
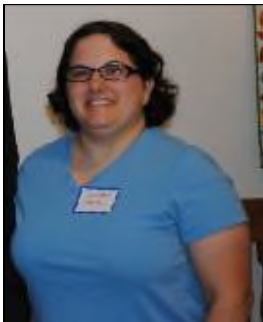
**Christopher Ryan, Ashby Land Use
Consultant**

**John Hume, Planning and Development
Director, MRPC**

Jennifer Siciliano, Regional Planner, MRPC

**Brian Doherty, Transportation Planner,
MRPC**

**Bobbi Jo Johnson, Fiscal/Planning
Assistant, MRPC**



APPENDIX C – Full Group Responses to all Questions

Full Group Responses to all Questions

Comments made by the forum's participants have been documented and categorized by Eight (8) questions posed for the three breakout groups. Below are all responses from the breakout groups. Numbers in parentheses represent relative importance assigned to each issue by participants using sticker dots during the prioritization exercise previously described.

QUESTION #1: What are Ashby's Strengths? What characteristics of the Town of Ashby do you think are strong points, attractants, and features that bring people to town as visitors, attract people to move here or establish businesses here, or keep people here long term.

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 1** are as Follows:

- Scenic Rte. 119 Traffic Flow (1)
- Mount Watatic - Pearl Hill State Park – Blood Hill State Park (7)
- Rural Aspects (21)
- Small Population
- Centrally located
- Horses and Livestock (3)
- Hiking, Snowmobiles, Recreational Opportunities (1)
- Summer Camps
- Band Concert at the Common (1)
- Welcoming/Friendly Group People
- Farming Opportunities
- Schools (i.e. class size/music program) (3)
- Cottage Industries, Regulations
- Town Functions

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 2** are as Follows:

- Scenic Rte. 119 Traffic Flow
- Mount Watatic - Pearl Hill State Park – Blood Hill State Park
- Band Concert at the Common
- Rural Aspects
- Small Population

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 3** are as Follows:

- Home based businesses
- Off the beaten path
- Rural Charm
- Natural Resources (5)
- Parks
- Town Center (3)
- Diversity – willingness to accept people with different ideas and views
- A lot of parcels – the intent to have connecting trails
- Open Space (3)

QUESTION #2: What are Ashby’s challenges and how should they be addressed? What do you think, if any, are Ashby’s key issues and challenges and how should they be addressed. What do you think the problems are, anything that makes work and life more difficult or demanding. This could be the lack of retail choices, municipal services, high (or low) taxes, excessive or loose regulations

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 1** are as Follows:

- Not business friendly – difficult to establish businesses (8)
- Water/well issues (7)
- Regulations – more cooperation (2)
- Perceptions of the weather – making Ashby inaccessible
- Sense of community is not what it could be – find a way to bring people closer together
- No community kitchen – including classes

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 2** are as Follows:

- Utilities - limited power for manufacturers – second highest utility cost in the country (9)
- No public water and sewer source

- Lack of communication services – need to present new people with a package of information
- Zoning restrictions - the town is not very encouraging (9)
- Tied to Nashoba Board of Health (38)
- Funding resources
- Help with the business process (3)

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 3** are as Follows:

- Home based businesses – don't provide any tax revenue or employment opportunities
- Road maintenance (other than 119) not enough money set aside
- Capturing tourist – nobody stops in Ashby
- State park – declined activity
- Zoning
- Marketing – no communication with business, lack of information available (2)
- Limited communication services
- Higher insurance rate, fire protection

QUESTION #3: How do you feel about growth and change in Ashby and what would you like to preserve or change? How do you feel about growth and change in Ashby and what would you like to preserve or change. This could be growth in size/population, growth in commercial activity, growth in government, traffic or any way you want to define growth.

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 1** are as Follows:

- Growth is transient – no place for anyone to stay if they want to visit
- Need business growth to generate revenue to help with the tax base (8)
- Keep the rural Ashby flavor (20)
- Areas to display and sell residence goods (11)
- Need a farmer's market

- Zoning issues regarding growth (9)
- Deteriorated building that should be restored and used as businesses
- Town information accessibility
- Sprawl (17)

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 2** are as Follows:

- Population should remain the same but encourage business so we don't have to drive so far (4)
- Types of businesses – want them on Main St.
- We have to go out of town to do banking – need a bank in town – encourage local borrowing
- Network to keep businesses communicating – jobs for teens

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 3** are as Follows:

- Town needs to be more active in seeking growth
- Concern about sprawl – inadvertently destroying the character of the town
- Zoning – focus on the center of town

QUESTION #4: What kinds of municipal assets are missing that you would like to see in Ashby? What kinds of municipal or public assets are missing that you would like to see in Ashby? (e.g. sewers, second elementary school, more parks, town forest or farm, nature center, etc.).

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 1** are as Follows:

- Visitors Center – to show what Ashby has to offer
- Eateries – no place to stop and eat (15)
- Open public meeting place for more regular events (17)
- Pubs – family friendly (7)
- Newspaper or newsletter (3)

- Promoting existing businesses (2)

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 2** are as Follows:

- Banking (9)
- Vermont – little town and how did they do it
- Public water/utilities (12)
- Business association
- Food and crafts (5)
- Green business (Ashburnham Country Store) (5)
- Light manufacturing needs to be encouraged

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 3** are as Follows:

- Banking
- Restaurants, coffee shops etc.
- Pharmacy – medical
- General store
- Agriculture, grains, feed, hardware etc.
- Activities for kids/teens, in the summer particularly (11)
- Public transit (3)

QUESTION #5: Why is Ashby a good place to do business? What are the characteristics of the town that make establishing and/or running a business here in Ashby easy? What else makes the town a good place for business?

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 1** are as Follows:

- Route 119 Accessibility, we don't take advantage of it (8)
- Farming, horses, sale of produce (4)

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 2** are as Follows:

- Good network of people that communicate with someone (3)
- Location (Rte. 119)
- Community based support of local businesses
- Weekend tourists (10)

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 3** are as Follows:

- Home based business with low overhead (5)
- Little regulation of home based business, easy to get started (1)

QUESTION #6: What makes it difficult to run a business in Ashby and how can the Town help? What could businesses do together to help?

What makes it difficult to run a business in Ashby and how can the Town help? What could businesses do together to help? What kind of programs could help business? What kind of group or organization could businesses collaborate on to advance their needs and interests?

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 1** are as Follows:

- Resistance in town (zoning) (17)
- Need to be more helpful in helping businesses grow
- More business zoning with appropriate guidelines
- More regular activities (fairs etc.) to bring people to Ashby (4)
- Parking issues (3)
- Ashby is not a destination but a drive through town

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 2** are as Follows:

- Restrictive Zoning
- No Banking (9)
- Water/Sewer Issues
- Lack of business association, lack of a support team

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 3** are as Follows:

- Location, off the beaten path
- Few transportation options (9)
- Roads need work (11)
- Low population – limited market
- Telecommunications and utilities (limited)
- ConCom is an impediment

QUESTION #7: Where do residents and businesses do *their* business?

Where do people in the Town purchase everyday necessities (food, gas, etc.) and services (dry cleaning, etc). What kinds of businesses would you like to see in Ashby that aren't here and what is stopping these businesses from coming to Ashby?

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 1** are as Follows:

- The Town Needs a Bank
- More business needed on Main St.
- Most business is in Fitchburg

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 2** are as Follows:

- Supply Sources – Fitchburg, Lunenburg, New Hampshire
- Restaurants – out of town

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 3** are as Follows:

- Fitchburg/Leominster Area
- Online shopping
- Peterborough, Groton

QUESTION #8: Would you like to see festivals and events to increase tourism in town? Why? Would you like to see festivals and events to increase tourism in town? Why? What kind of events would be successful here?

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 1** are as Follows:

- Advertise and share locally through many communities (5)

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 2** are as Follows:

- Networking and bringing community goods out (4)
- Farmer's Market (16)
- Great current festivals (3)
- Proper advertising is needed (10)

Comments Received on this Question from **Group 3** are as Follows:

- Great current activities (3)
- Nature viewing
- Farmers market
- More local crafts