

TOWN OF ASHBY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PLAN

June 2004

TOWN OF ASHBY PLANNING BOARD



Consultants

Community Design Partnership, Boston, MA
MapWorks, Norwell, MA

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Ashby Planning Board

James Hargraves, Chairman

Alan Pease

Jean Lindquist

Wayne Stacy

Derek Saari

Thanks to all the Ashby citizens who participated in the creation of this Community Development Plan.

Consultants

Community Design Partnership, Boston, MA

Larissa Brown

Jon Seward

MapWorks, Norwell, MA

Herb Heidt

Eliza McClennen

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Up winding roads through dense forests, tucked away on the New Hampshire border at the western end of Middlesex County, the Town of Ashby seems even farther in spirit from urban centers than it is in actual miles. With a classic New England town center and the old fields and orchards worked by previous generations, Ashby is still a small town with a population of less than 3,000. But although Ashby has not yet felt the full force of expanding development from metropolitan Boston and Worcester, residents see incremental change. Development along the Town’s roads is giving Ashby an increasingly suburban character, even if there is still abundant back land available. There are fewer and fewer land-based economic activities. Ashby lies just beyond the “sprawl frontier” of expanding residential development, but its neighbors have already begun to feel the effects.

The most important challenge facing Ashby is to find a way to support the continuation of its rural town character and way of life. How can the Town ensure the protection of the water in its streams, ponds and groundwater? How can it preserve open space while still accommodating housing and diversifying the type and affordability of new housing? What kind of business investment can Ashby attract to help reduce the residential tax burden while still preserving the Town’s rural character? This is one of those moments in which it is necessary to innovate in order to preserve. Development pressures have not yet made irrevocable changes in the Town’s character and Ashby now has the opportunity to shape the changes that will inevitably come.

This Community Development Plan is the result of a state program intended to help communities create a balanced plan to accommodate housing development, protect natural resources and open space, provide for economic development, and provide for transportation. The initiative was designed to build on the foundation of the state’s program to provide every community with a series of maps showing the community’s remaining capacity for new development under

existing zoning – the “buildout analysis.” Because Ashby’s transportation planning has already been included in the Montachusett Regional Transportation Plan, this Community Development Plan focuses on Natural Resources and Open Space, Housing, and Economic Development. Two public meetings were held in 2002 to discuss the planning process and identify a vision, assets and liabilities; a series of Working Group meetings open to the public were held on the three focus areas of the plan; and a public meeting was held to discuss the recommendations of the draft master plan, which was posted on the town web site.

Natural Resources and Open Space Preservation

Ashby has a formidable “green infrastructure” of natural communities, streams and ponds, and interconnected open space, not only in lands that are officially protected but in the private back lands of so many town residents. Because this rich environment seems so abundant, it is sometimes difficult for people to realize that it is not infinitely resilient. Both longtime residents and new arrivals can misjudge the extent to which their private actions and land management practices can have damaging cumulative effects on the town’s resources and scenic character. Twenty percent of Ashby is permanently protected open space. Although the majority of that protected land is owned by the state or the Fitchburg water department, in recent years, Ashby residents have been taking the initiative in open space preservation. Through a newly-created Ashby Land Trust, they led Town efforts to preserve Mount Watatic and Blood Hill.

Ashby’s opportunity today is to be foresighted and plan ahead to protect its most important resources. As development pressure becomes more intense, it is imperative that the town understand where the most critical resources are located, which lands need to be permanently protected as key elements of the network of green resources, and how to employ new strategies and tools to make sure that new growth is directed and shaped in ways that protect the town’s green infrastructure. At the same time, residents must become more aware of how their own private land management practices can be improved to assure the continuing health of the town’s environment. For a town like Ashby, this is not only an environmental imperative but an economic one. After the decline of traditional rural economies, nature-based recreation can offer new opportunities.

Goals and Strategies:

- Plan to protect future drinking water supplies
 - Seek assistance to monitor private well water quality and quantity by sponsoring free water testing days.
 - Create a multi-year plan to raise funds for a public water supply feasibility study and mapping of aquifers.
- Protect water quality in streams and ponds
 - Consider passing a local wetlands bylaw.
 - Pursue conservation restrictions on sensitive upland buffer areas.

- Provide town residents with information about best management practices.
- Protect lands that support biodiversity and wildlife habitat
 - Promote protection of areas identified as rare species habitat and BioMap Core Habitat.
 - Promote identification and certification of vernal pools.
 - Promote best management practices in BioMap Supporting Natural Landscape Areas.
 - Create protected corridors for wildlife by pursuing conservation restrictions that form a network.
- Preserve rural scenic character as well as natural resources and habitat
 - Establish new zoning for residential development that preserves open space.
 - Identify and designate scenic roads.
- Identify options for nature-based recreation that coincide with natural resources priorities.

Housing

Ashby is located just beyond the edge of the “sprawl frontier” created by the unmet demand for housing in the Greater Boston housing market. Neighboring towns on the western edge of Interstate 495 have begun to see the consequences of the “drive till you qualify” expensive housing market. In Ashby, the majority of new housing is built along the road frontage every 200 feet on “Approval Not Required” (ANR) lots, rather than in subdivisions. As a result, Ashby is increasingly acquiring a more suburban visual character. As the number of frontage lots diminishes, it is likely that more subdivisions will be proposed in the “back land.” This is the pattern already evident in many towns in the I-495 corridor, where shallow strips of residential development along the roads are followed by subdivisions in the extensive “back land” between the roadways.

As Ashby residents witnessed the increasing development of frontage lots combined with the decline of traditional rural land uses, they decided to take steps to shape the pattern of new residential development. During the course of this planning process, Town Meeting passed a conservation subdivision bylaw that requires potential developers to propose both a conventional and a conservation subdivision for any project of 5 or more house lots. The Planning Board then has the option of choosing the plan it finds most appropriate.

Housing Development Goals and Strategies

- Mitigate the effects of Approval-Not-Required (ANR) development.
 - Establish Scenic Roadways. Road corridor overlay districts.
 - Variable frontage requirements and “backland” zoning.

- Require retention of significant existing vegetation.
- Establish Conservation Subdivision Zoning by right for parcels of 4 acres or more.
- Study wastewater management options for Ashby Center that would permit more development.
- Consider establishing zoning and a Transfer of Development Rights program to promote the emergence of a new compact, village center with design standards compatible with Ashby's character and to encourage small, more compact nodes of housing at major country road intersections.
- Permit innovative housing types by right, such as co-housing, subject to design guidelines and site plan review.

Affordable Housing Goals and Strategies

Ashby has no permanently affordable housing. Although median home prices are still relatively affordable on a regional basis, they are rising faster than the cost of living. The new houses built in Town are nearly twice as expensive, on average as older houses. Rising housing prices, increasing homeownership costs, and an aging housing stock have left some local homeowners unable to afford the necessary renovations to their homes. Lack of affordable alternatives forces older people to stay in homes they can no longer adequately maintain or leave the community. Lack of rental options and increasing home prices also make it more difficult for young people and first time homebuyers to find housing in Ashby.

- Establish the Ashby Housing Partnership to focus on promoting affordable housing
- Seek technical assistance from the Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP).
- Inventory and study the feasibility of using town-owned parcels and buildings for affordable housing.
- Create senior housing with the assistance of the regional nonprofit housing developer and federal funding.
 - RCAP Solutions, the regional affordable housing nonprofit, has helped neighboring communities like Townsend create affordable senior housing using federal funding (HUD 202 funds).
- Explore the possibility of a “friendly 40B” or Local Initiative Program project on town-owned property or private property.
- Establish inclusionary/incentive zoning for subdivisions.
 - Inclusionary zoning requires a developer to provide a certain percentage of affordable units within a development of a certain number of housing units.
- Amend zoning to permit accessory units by right and new duplex housing by right if one unit is permanently affordable.

- Allow affordable single family or two-family affordable housing on substandard parcels.
- Adopt the state law on tax title properties that provides for forgiveness of taxes owed to developers of affordable housing.
- Study creation of a new community land trust for affordable housing or expand the mission of the existing Ashby Land Trust to include projects that combine limited development (including affordable housing) and conservation.
- Explore the feasibility of tax abatements on existing homes occupied by income-eligible households in return for affordability agreements.

Economic Development

Opportunities for Ashby's economic growth center on expanding current assets along state highways and in the village center, focused development of the industrial district, and the service needs of continued residential development. Recreational and historic tourism and niche sectors such as businesses that cater to the equestrian community offer the potential to increase Ashby's economic base while preserving the Town's rural character. Although some of these recommendations are ambitious for a small community, many are low or no-cost and can be phased in over time as resources and resident efforts make them possible. Early, small successes will beget more success, making more ambitious future efforts viable. The number of jobs likely to be created in Ashby through implementation of these measures would probably not exceed 250 (a doubling of present employment). The vast majority of these jobs would be service positions that do not absolutely require a college degree.

- Enhance the tourism infrastructure in Ashby. Ashby offers a location close to the Boston and Worcester metropolitan areas that also provides a sense of distance and rural isolation.
 - Allow B & Bs and inns in all zones. Pursue inclusion of Ashby in regional tourism marketing efforts and in efforts to reach specialized markets, Publicize local festivals to regional tourist agencies
- Enhance business opportunities in Ashby Center. Ashby Center is a classic New England village, but it has few offerings for visitors. Restaurants and hotels are allowed by special permit, but new and expanded business is constrained by lack of wastewater capacity. Some existing septic systems are already failing.
 - Explore new wastewater management strategies for the town center.
 - Explore permitting a wider variety of business activities in the Town Center by right.
 - Consider an overlay district to promote mixed uses
- Explore the economic potential of alternative resource-based activities. With the decline of traditional agriculture, forestry and other rural economic activities, rural areas are searching for ways to continue their way of life in a new economic context.

- *Agriculture.* Very little agriculture for the market still goes on in Ashby, but the Town still has the land and many residents would like to see the remaining farm properties stay intact as working landscapes rather than be subdivided. There are a few enterprises in Ashby that point the way towards new ways of thinking about agriculture, such as the Boundary Llama Farm and the Schippers hydroponic vegetable business. Agricultural tourism, supplying gourmet and restaurant markets, supplying ethnic communities and Community Supported Agriculture programs are among the options.
 - *Recreation.* Ashby has tremendous recreational resources, from Willard Brook State Park to Mount Watatic. Ashby has the potential to develop cross country skiing, snowshoeing, geocaching, bicycle touring, hiking, fishing, birding and hunting activities, with the businesses to support these activities.
 - *Equestrian Activities.* Equestrian focused businesses, combining agricultural and recreational aspects have also proved viable recently. This sector has already proven that it can take root successfully in Ashby, and with limited Town support and encouragement could grow over time to add services and making substantial long-term contributions. Visitors coming for equestrian activities could support and enlarge the base of restaurants, bed and breakfasts, retailing and other services.
 - *Forestry.* With the recovery of the forested hills and the reclamation by forest of overgrown fields, a small forestry and sawmill industry could become viable, particularly to serve higher margin niche markets such as timber framing, or limited production furniture and crafts manufacture.
 - *Sustainable Energy* Ashby's hilly location may prove suitable for the installation of wind generators or wind farms to serve regional energy demands. .
- Review permitted industrial uses and zones
 - Create programs and locations to showcase local arts and crafts
 - Expand festivals and events
 - Encourage and support public-private cooperation for economic development

II. ASHBY'S COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PLAN

What is an EO 418 Community Development Plan?

As a result of Executive Order 418, issued by the Governor in January, 2000, all communities in Massachusetts became eligible for state assistance to create a Community Development Plan. Four state agencies, led by the Department of Housing and Community Development and working together in the Inter-Agency Working Group, created a program and a manual to guide communities in creating a Community Development Plan. The purpose of the program was to help communities plan to accommodate housing in an appropriate balance with protecting natural resources and open space, providing for economic development, and with the support of planning for transportation needs. The initiative was designed to build on the foundation of the state's program to provide every community with a series of maps showing the community's remaining capacity for new development under existing zoning – the "buildout analysis."

A Community Development Plan is not a full Master Plan. The state program focuses on the creation of a vision statement and identification of assets and liabilities followed by only four of the elements of a full Master Plan: Natural Resources and Open Space, Housing, Economic Development, and Transportation. In addition, under the EO 418 program, communities were permitted to submit existing plans as equivalent to one or more of the required EO 418 elements, in order to focus more of the effort and funding on the elements where there had been less local planning attention.

In 2002, the Town of Ashby contacted the consulting team of Community Design Partnership (CDP) and MapWorks, who were pre-qualified by the state for EO 418 planning work, to help prepare the EO418 Community Development Plan. In the fall of 2002, CDP organized a public workshop to create a town vision statement and identify assets and liabilities. CDP assisted the Planning Board in creating a proposed scope for the project, which was submitted to the state Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG) for approval at the end of 2002. Because the Town's transportation issues were included in the regional transportation planning process and other elements of the Community Development Plan were of more immediate concern, the Town asked that the regional transportation plan be accepted as equivalent to the transportation element of the Community Development Plan. The request was granted and in May 2003, the scope was approved by the IAWG.

Community Participation

The Ashby Planning Board took the lead in the planning process. Planning Board members organized three subcommittees to work on the three focus areas – Housing, Natural Resource and Open Space Preservation, and Economic Development – and members of the board participated in all the subcommittee meetings. The meetings were publicly posted and open to the public. In addition, three town-wide meetings were held. In 2002, the Planning Board organized a meeting to discuss the EO 418 Community Development Plan process and in November of that year the consultant organized a Visioning Workshop. The third town-wide meeting was held to discuss the plan's recommendations in June 2004. At the Visioning meeting the consultant presented a slide show with an overview of trends in town development. Maps from the state's buildout process were exhibited, and the participants worked in small groups to identify assets and liabilities and discuss their vision for the town's future. At the second town-wide meeting, in June of 2004, the consultant made a brief presentation on the plan recommendations and maps, followed by a discussion on the plan's recommendations and ways to begin implementing the plan.

III. THE VISION FOR ASHBY'S FUTURE

Preparation of a Vision Statement is the first step in creating a community plan. The Vision Statement, accompanied by a set of goals and policies, becomes the guiding image for decision makers as the Town faces challenges in the future. During the Visioning Workshop, Ashby residents identified the elements of an ideal future for the Town, focusing attention on the values, sense of identity and aspirations of the community.

The Ashby Vision Statement

In 2022,....

The Town of Ashby has maintained its rural New England character, strong sense of community, and independent spirit by shaping change to reflect essential community values:

- A network of permanent open space connecting state, town, and privately protected land maintains excellent water quality and wildlife habitat, and provides recreational opportunities and scenic beauty. In this “green infrastructure”, pedestrian and equestrian trails link the Town Common with other parks and open spaces.
- Historic homes and community buildings are well preserved through the active efforts of Ashby’s Historical Society and appreciative townspeople and homeowners.
- Roadways are lined with mature trees and stone walls, framing passing views of meadows, orchards and farms, which evoke the town’s rural heritage, and demonstrating Ashby’s success in directing development to protect rural scenic character. The roads serving regional traffic also continue to reflect the Town’s rural identity.
- In addition to many thriving home businesses, Ashby has small-scale businesses in clusters – not strip-style development -- on limited portions of Route 31 (Ashby State Road / Main Street / Greenville Road). Visitors come to Ashby for its equestrian centers and nature-based recreational activities. Several new businesses, such as outdoor sports outfitters and bed and breakfast businesses have been established to serve these visitors and local residents. Tourism in Ashby relies on the abundance of the town’s high quality natural resources and preservation of its historic New England character.
- People meet their neighbors for daily socializing in the Town Center and regularly gather at the historic Town Common for community events. Environmentally sensitive technologies have permitted establishment of a restaurant and a few other new businesses in the Town Center to serve residents and visitors.
- Ashby offers a variety of housing choices to residents across a range of incomes, including affordable housing options for seniors and for young families who want to stay in town. Ashby has avoided indiscriminate development and sprawl through careful planning, protection of sensitive environmental and cultural resources, and the application of effective regulations and incentives.

Assets and Liabilities

Part of the process of creating a community plan is to inventory the assets and liabilities of the community. What are the strong points? What are the trends and circumstances that provoke concern? During the Visioning Workshop, participants identified what they liked about Ashby and what they felt was going well in the Town – and they identified liabilities and weaknesses in the Town’s position.

Open Space & Natural Resources

Assets

- Low density
- Expansive backland
- Open fields, forested areas, ponds, acreage, quiet, small, beautiful, topography, scenery
- Agricultural heritage, remaining large parcels in private ownership
- Preserved, lively Town Common
- Active historical society
- Rural, New England feel
- Recreational trails and sites
- Many acres in chapter 61, 61A, and privately held woodlands
- Outstanding Resource Waters include Squannacook River and tributaries that flow to Fitchburg Reservoir
- Land trust
- Lands being acquired to protect open space
- Roadways lined with stone walls and mature trees
- Scenic Fitchburg Reservoir

Liabilities

- Some important open space parcels not permanently protected
- Residential development along road frontage becoming more predominant
- Development pressure from surrounding towns
- Potential contamination from old landfill
- Ashby does not have control over Ashby Reservoir and dam

Housing

Assets

- Relatively affordable
- Large lot sizes available
- Varied and attractive housing stock
- Historic homes

Liabilities

- Increasing rate of development
- New housing attracts families with school age children, potentially increasing costs
- Most development is ANR - limited tools for development review available
- Cost of trash removal is increasing
- No permanently affordable housing (zero percent in the 40B inventory)
- Need for affordable senior housing
- New housing is expensive for local residents

Economic Development

Assets

- Many home based businesses
- Equestrian centers
- Nature-based recreational opportunities, e.g., hiking, snowmobiling, hunting, fishing
- Summer camps
- Potential for new business based on recreational resources, equestrian activities, bicycle routes and related tourism
- Potential for antique stores similar to Townsend

Liabilities

- Non-residential land uses provide only 5% of tax base
- Limited commercial and industrial land available
- Existing commercial zones back into wetlands
- Zoning promotes strip-style commercial development
- Village center dependence on septic systems makes new businesses, such as restaurants, unlikely with conventional techniques
- Population base is small for additional retail businesses

Transportation

Assets

- Accessible from routes 31 and 119
- Regional road system does not facilitate commuting increased development
- Narrow rural road character limits speed and traffic

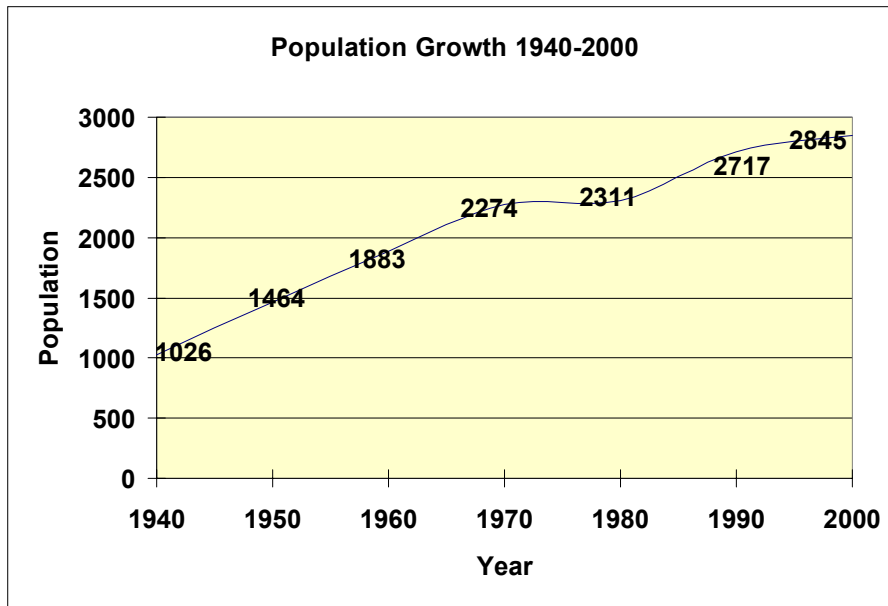
Liabilities

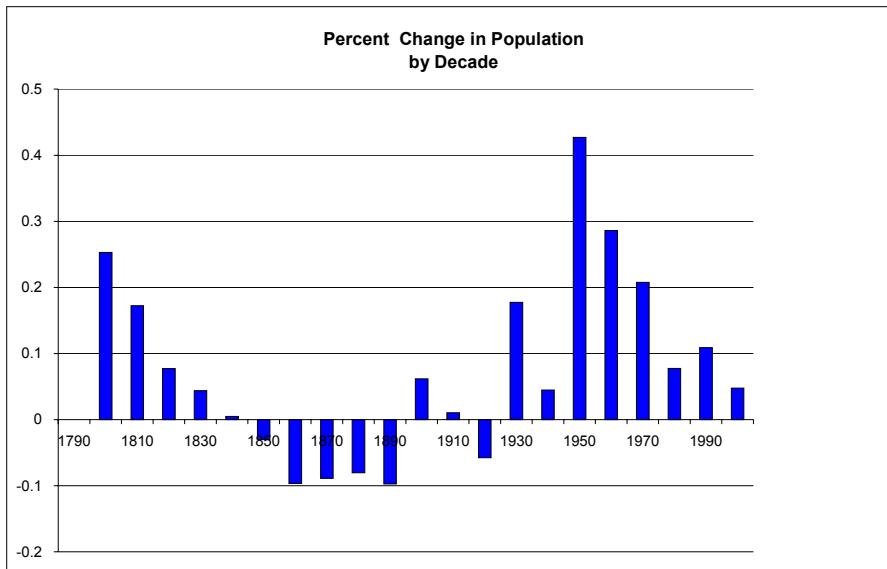
- Deteriorating roadway infrastructure outpaces maintenance
- State right of way through Town Center is very wide and road projects could endanger town character
- Lack of bus service and public transportation
- Intermittent sidewalks / pedestrian and bicycle access in Town Center
- Road salt pollutes water resources
- Potentially unsafe pedestrian conditions

IV. THE CONTEXT

A. POPULATION PROFILE

Ashby is a small community with a population of 2,845 according to the 2000 US Census. After a long period of population decline or little net growth during the nineteenth century, the Town's population began to grow after World War II. Between 1940 and 1970 Ashby's population increased 121 percent and in the subsequent thirty years it grew another 25 percent. During the 1990s, the Town's population growth was moderate compared to some neighboring towns that became more directly affected by the metropolitan Boston housing market.



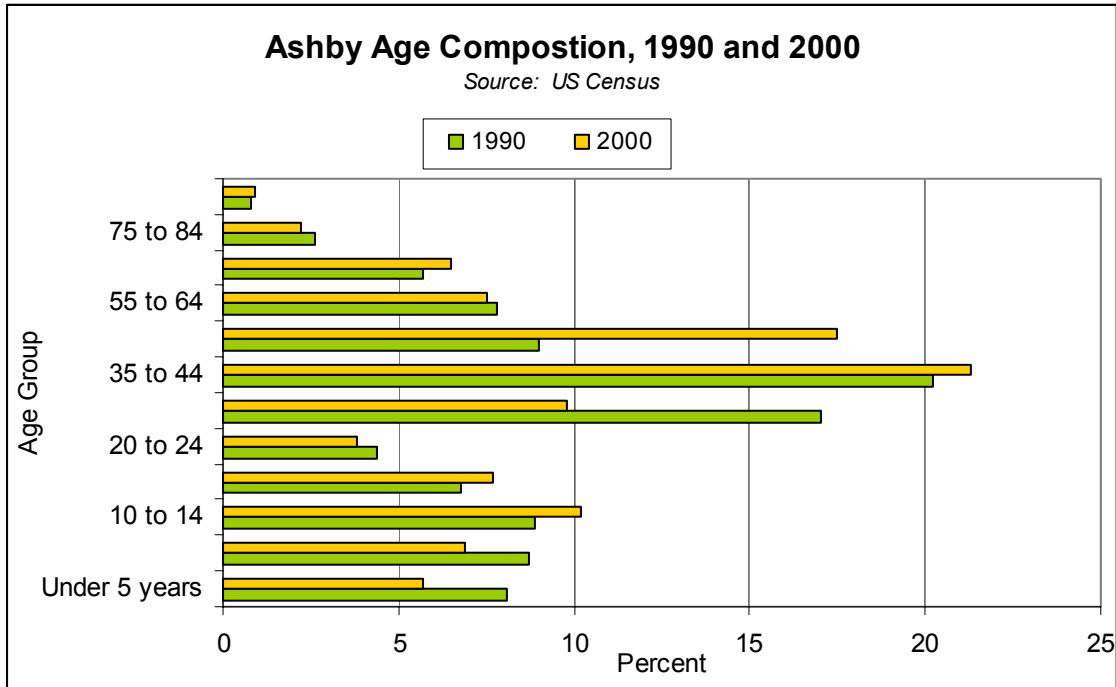


Population Change 1990-2000	
Town	Change
Fitchburg	-5.1%
Ashburnham	2.1%
Lunenburg	3.1%
Gardner	3.2%
Shirley	4.2%
Ashby	4.7%
Leominster	8.3%
Townsend	8.3%
Winchendon	9.2%
Pepperell	10.3%
Westminster	11.6%
Groton	27.1%
<i>Source: US Census</i>	

Household and Age Composition

Ashby is a family community. Eighty percent of households are family households (people related by blood or marriage) and 43% of the households include persons under 18 years old. This is also reflected in the Town's average household size, which is 2.89 persons, and the average family size of 3.25. Single person households make up 15% of all households and 21% of all households include persons 65 years old and older.

Like the rest of Massachusetts, Ashby's population is aging. The median age of the Town's population has risen from 29.7 in 1980 to 38.2 in 2000, closely tracking the Montachusett region median which rose from 29.8 to 37.4 years. The percentage of pre-schoolers is decreasing while the percentage of the very old is growing. However, compared to the Montachusett region as a whole, the town has a greater proportion of its population in younger age groups.



AGE GROUP	Ashby Age Composition			% of total Middlesex County population in 2000	Ashby % Above / Below County in 2000	% of MRPC Region in 2000	Ashby % Above / Below MRPC in 2000
	% of total population in 1990	% of total population in 2000	% change in proportion of total 1990-2000				
	<5	8.1	5.8				
5-9	8.7	8.0	-8.0	6.5	23.1	7.6	5.3
10-14	8.9	8.9	0	6.3	41.3	7.7	15.6
15-19	6.8	8.2	20.6	6.0	36.7	6.7	22.4
20-24	4.4	3.7	-15.9	6.4	-42.2	5.3	-30.2
25-34	17.0	9.9	-41.8	16.1	-38.5	13.3	-25.6
35-44	20.2	21.1	4.5	17.3	22.0	18.2	15.9
45-54	9.0	17.4	93.3	13.8	26.1	14.1	23.4
55-59	4.1	4.0	-2.4	4.8	-16.7	4.7	-14.9
60-64	3.7	3.4	-8.1	3.7	-8.1	3.4	0
65-74	5.7	5.7	0	6.5	-12.3	6.2	-8.1
75-84	2.6	3.1	19.2	4.5	-31.1	4.6	-32.6
85+	0.8	0.8	0	1.7	-52.9	1.7	-52.9
	100.0	100.0		99.9		100.0	

Source: U.S. Census; MRPC

Racial Composition

Ashby is 99% white, with small number of persons identifying themselves as of other races or mixed-race.

Disabled Population.

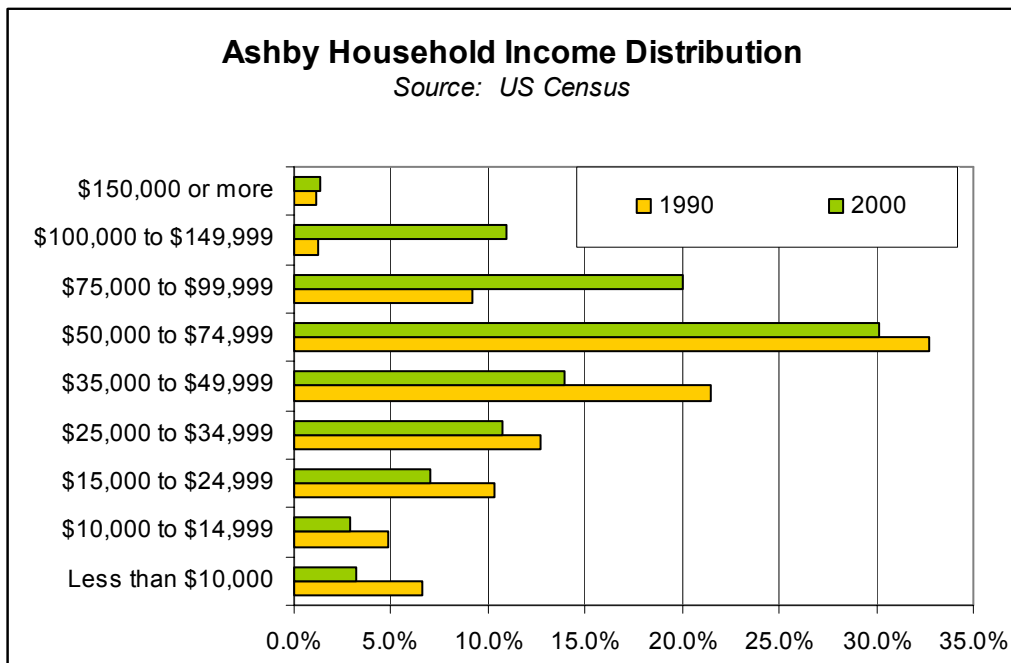
Ten percent of Ashby's population between the ages of 21 and 64 has a disability and 44% of those 65 and over have a disability.

Income Profile

Median household income in 1999	
Age of Householder	
under 25 years	\$37,813
25 to 34 years	\$57,321
35 to 44 years	\$62,656
45 to 54 years	\$74,028
55 to 64 years	\$63,125
65 to 74 years	\$35,250
75 years and over	\$18,438
Total	\$61,000

Source: US Census 2000

With a 1999 median household income of \$61,000, Ashby ranked number 120 out of 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts. The median income was 21% above the Massachusetts median of \$50,502. Median family income was \$64,900, compared to the state median of \$61,664 resulting in a ranking of 164. Ashby's poverty rate of 2.5% in 1989 was the lowest of all towns in the Montachusett region, but it doubled to 5.1% in 1999 (from 68 persons to 143 persons), while 8 out of 22 communities in the Montachusett region in 1999 had lower poverty levels.



Population Projections

Population projects by the Massachusetts Institute of Economic and Social Research (MISER) and the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) are quite different. Both sets of projects envision a growth in population, but MRPC projects a much greater increase, particularly in the 2000-2010 period. The highest growth scenario projects a net increase of 505 people between 2000 and 2020. At the current average household size of 2.89 persons, that would result in the 174 additional households in Ashby. Over the course of twenty years, this would mean an average of 8 new homes a year. This is slightly below the actual average annual increase in housing units since 1980.

Ashby Population and Population Projections					
Year	Census Population	Change	MISER*	MRPC	Change
1930	982				
1940	1026	4.5%			
1950	1464	42.7%			
1960	1883	28.6%			
1970	2274	20.8%			
1980	2311	1.6%			
1990	2717	17.6%			
2000	2845	4.7%			
2010	n/a	n/a	2864		0.7%
				3164	11.2%
2020	n/a	n./a	2924		2.1%
				3350	5.9%
* MISER, Middle Projection					
<i>Source: US Census; Mass Institute of Social and Economic Research; Montachusett Regional Planning Commission</i>					

B. EXISTING CONDITIONS MAPS

Map 1: Existing Conditions – Land Use shows the different types of land uses in Ashby by parcel according to information in the assessor’s database. This map conveys Ashby’s rural character, with small parcels in the historic town center and many large residential parcels occupied by single family homes in most of the town. It also shows that Ashby no longer has many parcels whose primary use is for agriculture or forestry.

Map 2: Zoning shows the simple zoning scheme in Ashby. Single family residential uses are permitted in all but the Industrial zone. Most of the town has a two-acre lot minimum.

V. NATURAL RESOURCE AND OPEN SPACE PROTECTION

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The Vision for Natural Resources and Open Space

- A network of permanent open space connecting state, town, and privately protected land maintains excellent water quality and wildlife habitat, and provides recreational opportunities and scenic beauty. In this “green infrastructure”, pedestrian and equestrian trails link the Town Common with other parks and open spaces.
- Historic homes and community buildings are well preserved through the active efforts of Ashby’s Historical Society and appreciative townspeople and homeowners.
- Roadways are lined with mature trees and stone walls, framing passing views of meadows, orchards and farms, which evoke the town’s rural heritage, and demonstrating Ashby’s success in directing development to protect rural scenic character. The roads serving regional traffic also continue to reflect the Town’s rural identity.

Assets, Liabilities, Opportunities

Assets

- Low density
- Expansive backland
- Open fields, forested areas, ponds, acreage, quiet, small, beautiful, topography, scenery
- Agricultural heritage, remaining large parcels in private ownership
- Preserved, lively Town Common
- Active historical society
- Rural, New England feel

- Recreational trails and sites
- Many acres in chapter 61, 61A, and privately held woodlands
- Outstanding Resource Waters include Squannacook River and tributaries that flow to Fitchburg Reservoir
- Land trust
- Lands being acquired to protect open space
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Liabilities

- Some important open space parcels not permanently protected
- Residential development along road frontage becoming more predominant
- Development pressure from surrounding towns
- Potential contamination from old landfill
- Ashby does not have control over Ashby Reservoir and dam

GOALS

- Plan to protect future drinking water supplies
- Protect water quality in streams and ponds
- Protect lands that support rare habitat and biodiversity and adjacent buffer areas
- Protect upland buffer areas to streams and ponds
- Create protected corridors for wildlife to link large open space and habitat areas
- Preserve rural scenic character
- Identify options for nature-based recreation that coincide with natural resources priorities
- Enhance public awareness about environmentally-sound land management, forestry, and landscape practices
- Collaborate with other municipalities and agencies to achieve regional integration of open space protection and recreational opportunities

A. CURRENT CONDITIONS

This chapter is based on the 1999 Ashby Open Space and Recreation Plan, documents of the Nashua River Watershed Association, and discussions with the Working Group on Natural Resources and Open Space which included representatives of the Planning Board, Conservation Commission, the Nashua River Watershed Association, and the Ashby Land Trust.

TOPOGRAPHY AND LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Ashby is located on the New Hampshire border at an average altitude of 1,000 feet rising on the upper slopes of Mount Watatic to 1,600 feet at the northwestern corner of the town. Ashby's nine hills are divided from one another by wetlands and narrow corridors of streams flowing northwest to southeast, except in the northwest corner of town. The center of town occupies flatter and more gently rolling terrain. Stone walls and a few hayfields, pastures, and old orchards testify to Ashby's agricultural past, but except for the immediate area around house lots, the town is overwhelmingly

forested. Because of the Town's high elevation relative to neighboring communities, it contains the headwaters of two subwatersheds of the Nashua River and one subwatershed of the Merrimack River. The combination of limited development so far, significant amounts of protected open space, and extensive forest cover has kept the town's water resources exceptionally clean.

Ashby's soils are characteristic of the glacial till that covers most of the town. As is typical, these soils have high water tables, frequent wetlands, and low permeability. In addition, there are some stratified drift glacial deposits in Ashby whose sands and gravels have been exploited in gravel pits. A limited amount of alluvium mixtures of sand and gravel, a type of soil often associated with aquifers, is also present.

WATER RESOURCES

Streams and Watersheds

Most of Ashby lies within the Nashua River watershed. The Squannacook subwatershed drains from Trapfall, Willard, Locke and Pearl Hill Brooks east and southeastward; and the Falulah Brook subwatershed drains south. Except for Locke Brook, the headwaters of all of these brooks are in Ashby. The northwestern corner of Ashby includes South Brook, which drains north into New Hampshire to form the Souhegan River, a subwatershed of the Merrimack River. The streams in Ashby are in excellent condition, cooler and faster flowing than those of neighboring communities, because they rise and flow through relatively undeveloped land.

Lakes and Ponds

The major surface water bodies in Ashby are the Fitchburg Reservoir, the Ashby Compensating Reservoir, Upper Wright's Pond, Lower Wright's Pond and Little Watatic Pond. The water quality in the Ashby Reservoir and Little Watatic Pond is threatened by septic failure from former summer cottages that now have been winterized and Upper Wrights Pond is also being treated by the Rod & Gun Club. Because Ashby has no public water supply, a series of fire ponds have been created around town and additional fire ponds may become necessary if the population grows. These ponds also serve for recreation.

Water Supply and Aquifer Recharge Areas

The Town of Ashby has no public water supply or sewer system. The Town's aquifers have not been mapped, though it is known there is a large aquifer north of the Town Center under the Great Meadow wetland and Trapfall Brook. Therefore, a water budget cannot be calculated. Under these conditions, water taken out of an aquifer is generally recharged into the same aquifer. Residents report that wells do run dry and the Town Common has a working water pump available to residents.

Because in many parts of Ashby the depth to bedrock is shallow, contaminants can enter bedrock aquifers easily. Even with large lot zoning, increasingly contiguous development will, over the long term, threaten water quality with excessive nitrogen loads. This has already occurred in the Town Center, where residents are moving wells towards the street because septic systems in back yards are failing. The Ashby Reservoir and several other ponds were once summer cottage settlements. Winterizing and full-time residence in these small cottages on small lots is becoming more common, resulting in excessive nutrient loads and eutrophication of the ponds. Other potential threats to drinking water quality are pollution from improper management of agriculture and animal pens and improper disposal of hazardous waste because Ashby does not have any arrangements for hazardous waste collection.

The Fitchburg Reservoir, the city's surface water supply, is located in the southwest corner of Ashby. The City owns land parcels surrounding the reservoir that are designed to protect the Zone A immediate drainage area around the reservoir and a portion of the Zone B drainage area within one-half mile of the upper boundary of the water source.

The Ashby (Wyman) Compensating Reservoir is not used for drinking water except by a few residents who live on the shores of the reservoir. The Ashby Reservoir was created to compensate for the loss of water power for mills when the Fitchburg Reservoir was purchased by that City for drinking water supplies. Except for few households noted earlier, the Ashby Reservoir is no longer used for any but recreational purposes.

Impervious Surfaces

The developed areas in Ashby are almost completely limited to very shallow strips along roads. The majority of the rest of the town is forested, with some open fields. The amount of land covered by impervious surfaces – roads, driveways and parking lots as well as buildings – is therefore very low. Impervious surfaces are important because they keep rain and snow from percolating back into the ground. Stormwater flows quickly from impervious surfaces into streams, often causing turbidity, and carrying contaminants from cars as well as fertilizers and herbicides. Impervious surfaces and corresponding stormwater can cause flooding and changes in stream channels as well.

Estimating impervious surfaces using the methodology provided by the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and the Charles River Watershed Association results in 3.3% total imperviousness and 0.6% effective imperviousness for the Town of Ashby as a whole. (Since development is limited and distributed equally throughout the town, the percentages were not calculated on a watershed basis.) Effective imperviousness takes into account the fact that some of the water runoff from impervious surfaces will go to permeable areas where it can percolate into the ground. Scientists have found that when impervious surfaces within a subwatershed increase over

10%, there can be significant effects on water quality, biodiversity and the stability of stream channels.¹

This very low level of effective imperviousness is one of the reasons that Ashby has very high water quality in its streams. It is important to keep in mind the potential impact of relatively small increases in impervious surfaces when planning for future development. Although conventional, large-lot zoning might seem the appropriate way to continue keeping impervious surfaces low, in fact it may result in a larger total amount of impervious surfaces than zoning strategies designed to cluster development and leave larger areas free of roads, driveways, and parking areas.

Wetlands

Wetlands in Ashby include cattail marshes, wet meadows and “quaking” bogs. Wetlands mapped from aerial photos constitute only 4 percent of the town’s land area, but there has been no wetlands resource inventory based on field investigation. Wetlands are protected under the Wetlands Protection Act and play an important role in flood control, filtering of contaminants, and aquifer recharge. All of Ashby’s streams also have beaver populations working hard to create more wetlands and ponds. When this occurs close to homes and septic systems it can cause severe problems.

Flood Hazard Areas

Due to the high slopes of the town, there are few areas subject to flooding. Places where flooding does occur exist where there is level land along a stream. Two areas which are prone to flooding are the Great Meadow, between Mason Road, Foster Road and Main Street, and a large wet meadow downstream from Lower Wright’s Pond.

HABITAT AND BIODIVERSITY RESOURCES

“Landscape Ecology” is a relatively new scientific field that provides useful ways to understand how different parts of a town or region, built and unbuilt, are related to one another. In the framework of landscape ecology, a landscape is a mosaic of repeating land uses, spatial elements, or local ecosystems. The landscape mosaic is made up of natural systems and human land uses and is entirely composed on three types of elements:

- Patch – a relatively homogeneous area, such as a woodlot or a subdivision
- Corridor – a strip of land that differs from the land on both sides and links patches, such as a road or a stream
- Matrix – the background ecosystem or land use type in a landscape, such as suburban development or forest

¹ “The Importance of Imperviousness,” *Watershed Protection Techniques* 1(3): 100-111.

Ashby's human uses of the land are principally confined to the road corridors and shallow strips of developed frontage lots along the roads. There are many large patches of forest, smaller patches of pasture, fields, old orchards, and wetlands, and numerous stream corridors.

Vegetation and Natural Communities

Ashby's natural communities range from hardwood and pine forests, to red maple swamps, cattail marshes, wet meadows, and quaking bogs. There are few working farms left, but old orchards and fields are still evident. Many forested areas in Ashby are managed for cordwood and lumber.

Ashby's forests are of the white pine-hemlock-northern hardwood forest type. Ashby may have been named for the abundance of white ash. Old growth oaks have been identified in a few areas and lady slippers are common in some pine and oak forests. Forest understory plants such as mountain laurel, green or striped maple, and hobblebush are common. Other vegetative species found in town are thickets of laurel called "Laurel hells", speckled alder and high bush blueberry.

As agriculture has declined in Ashby and throughout Massachusetts, old fields are increasingly being reclaimed by forest species. This means that open fields and grasslands have become relatively rare and the wildlife species for which this kind of habitat is essential are also less common. However, several properties in Ashby continue to be maintained for haying and grazing: Western Middlesex Stock Farm, the Crocker Farm on Jewell Hill, the Perna property on South Road, the Sumner property on Richardson Road, and the Mickola and Brody properties.

Wetland habitats are home to a wide diversity of wildlife and are essential resources for other animals whose primary habitat is elsewhere. Wetlands and stream corridors shelter animals avoiding human interactions as they move between forests or fields.

Fisheries and Wildlife

Ashby is home to a wide variety of wildlife. Among the smaller animals are several varieties of moles, voles, shrews, rabbits and squirrels. Larger animals include beaver, fisher, porcupines, coyote, otters, mink and muskrats. Moose and bears are regularly seen in Town. Amphibians range from salamanders to toads and frogs. There are also numerous birds, bats and insects which live throughout the varied habitats in Ashby.

Rare Species Habitat, Rare Natural Communities and Biodiversity

There are several areas in Ashby that are especially significant for wildlife habitat and that have been identified as focus areas for protection in a report prepared by the Massachusetts Audubon Society.² This purpose of this report was to identify a framework for the Nashua River Watershed that will provide reserve areas for wildlife and corridors or connectors that allow wildlife to travel safely between the reserve areas. The report identified three categories of habitat:

- Large Focus Areas (or habitat patches) have over 7,000 acres with a large amount of “interior” habitat, that is, lands with very few or no roads that have experienced very little human impact, provide habitat for species that are very sensitive to human contact, and provide a diversity of plant habitats.
- Medium-Sized Focus Areas have less interior habitat but still offer conditions for a broad range of plants and animals and natural communities.
- Small Focus Areas and Connectors provide habitat for smaller animals and allow animals to travel between the Large and Medium Focus Areas.

Large Patches of Habitat

Mount Watatic is the only Large Focus Area identified in the Mass Audubon report that includes part of Ashby. The Ashby Wildlife Management Area controlled by the state Department of Fish and Wildlife is part of this area, which is over 10,000 acres in total size and extends into Ashburnham. Medium Sized Focus areas include Willard Brook State Forest and the Wright Ponds. The report suggested that protection of wet meadows south of the Wright Ponds and upland stream buffers should be a high priority. The state is working with the Fish and Game Club to obtain a conservation restriction on this land, which would create a corridor of protected open space to the Fitchburg Reservoir.

Among the priorities of 1999 Open Space Plan were assuring the protection of Mount Watatic by the state and pursuing the acquisition of Western Middlesex Stock Farm and Blood Hill to help connect Mount Watatic, the State Forest and the Fitchburg Reservoir. The Stock Farm was sold to another private owner, but the other two goals were achieved.

Corridors and Connectors

Small Focus Areas and Connectors identified in the Mass Audubon Report are Falulah Brook, Trapfall Brook, including the 50-acre wetland (which is also state-identified Estimated and Priority Habitat for rare species), and Pearl Hill Brook. The Report suggests that the Trapfall Brook wetland and its adjacent uplands should be a protection priority. The principal priority in the Pearl Hill Brook area between Willard State Forest and Fitchburg is to seek a conservation restriction from a

² Jeffrey Collins, *Focus Areas for Wildlife Habitat Protection in the Nashua River Watershed*. (Lincoln, MA: Massachusetts Audubon Society, 2000).

country club that is not located in Ashby. The Report also highlights the importance of the Squannacook River, mentioning the headwaters, which include Locke and Trapfall Brooks in Ashby as “some of the most forested, least developed in the watershed, leaving the main Squannacook a cold, clean stream that is frequently cited as prime habitat for native brook trout, and listed species of dragonflies, mussels, reptiles, and amphibians.”³

Among the top priorities of the 1999 Ashby Open Space and Recreation Plan was to make progress in protecting habitat corridors between the Town’s large blocks of protected open space. The Town of Ashby, the Ashby Land Trust, the Town of Ashburnham, and the Ashburnham Land Trust cooperated with the state to ensure the protection of Mount Watatic. In addition the Town and the Ashby Land Trust raised funds to protect Blood Hill, which is part of a planned connection between Mount Watatic and the protected Fitchburg Reservoir lands. Although there were preliminary discussions about a conservation restriction with the Shackleton School, whose property abuts Blood Hill, the school is reluctant to preclude opportunities to expand in the future. Protection of parts of several large properties that lie between the Fitchburg Reservoir lands and Willard Brook State Park would advance creation of a corridor linking these large habitat areas: Camp Middlesex, Camp Lapham, and a large private farm. Several large, privately-owned properties are located between the state Department of Fish & Wildlife land in the northwest corner of Ashby and the Great Swamp, but there are no discussions at present to secure conservation restrictions.

Wetlands, Water Bodies and Waterways

Water resources are rich habitat areas and waterways and their adjacent areas function as wildlife corridors. All of Ashby’s waters within the Squannacook and Falulah Brook subwatersheds of the Nashua River Watershed – that is, all waters except for the South Souhegan subwatershed of the Merrimack River in northwest Ashby – have been designated Outstanding Resource Waters by the state. This is a designation made as part of the Massachusetts Surface Water Quality Standards (314 CMR 4:00). Outstanding Resource Waters are defined as “determined by their outstanding socio-economic, recreational, ecological and/or aesthetic values.” (314 CMR 4:04(3)) and include public water supplies. The purpose of the designation is to regulate discharges that might degrade the quality of these waters. The Ashby Board of Health Regulations requires that no leaching field for a septic system can be placed within 200 feet of an Outstanding Resource Water.

The headwaters of the Squannacook River are Ashby’s Trapfall and Willard Brooks – clean, cold streams supporting Native Eastern Brook Trout and stocked trout. In Ashby, the headwaters of Falulah Brook descend from Jewell and Blood Hills to Fitchburg Reservoir and Falulah Brook runs from the reservoir into Fitchburg. Acquisition of Blood Hill has permanently protected a significant portion of the headwaters.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Vernal Pools

Ashby has 11 certified vernal pools, which means they are protected under the state Wetlands Protection Act. Vernal pools are wet depressions in the land that, by definition, are flooded only part of the year. Many rare and valuable species depend on vernal pools. Lacking fish populations and common wetlands vegetation, they support unique wildlife communities that have adapted to wet and dry cycles. Like wetlands in general, protection of vernal pools must often extend beyond the area defined in law, for many amphibians that breed in the pools may move hundreds of yards away during the course of their life cycle. Protecting the pool itself and a 100' buffer is not enough to ensure the survival of creatures like the spotted salamander, for example. Each pool must be examined in its context to determine the appropriate buffer size and management techniques that will ensure the continued survival of its inhabitants. The Ashby Board of Health Regulations requires that no leaching field for a septic system can be placed within 200 feet of a certified vernal pool.

State biologists have analyzed aerial photographs to identify potential vernal pool sites. In Ashby there are 50 to 60 potential vernal pools of a size (100 feet wide) to be identifiable from aerial photos. Field investigation of these areas is necessary to establish the presence of recognized indicator species. Many smaller pools that could not be identified in the aerial photographs might be revealed by field studies. In addition to the 11 certified pools in Ashby, the documentation for another 10 to 15 pools is being prepared for submittal to the state.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

An ACEC (Area of Critical Environmental Concern) is an area designated by the Secretary of Environmental Affairs because of the significance of its environmental resources. ACEC designation requires greater environmental review of certain kinds of proposed development that meets thresholds for state jurisdiction. The Squannassit ACEC includes 2,930 acres of eastern Ashby. This ACEC totaling 36,480 acres extends west from Groton to Ashby and from New Hampshire south to Ayer. The land is connected by the Squannacook, Nashua and Nissitissit Rivers. The Squannassit encompasses habitat that supports rare and endangered species. It is also noteworthy for its water resources, its variety of eco-regions and its regionally significant corridors.

Estimated and Priority Habitat

Ashby has two areas that are both Estimated and Priority Habitat of Rare Species and one area designated only as Priority Habitat. Priority Habitat Areas show where the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP) estimates the existence of habitat for state-listed rare species. These estimates are made on the basis of species population records, habitat requirements and landscape information. Priority habitats are not protected by law, but the rare species that may use these habitats are protected. Estimated Habitat areas are designated by the NHESP where state-listed rare species have been *documented* within the last 25 years in wetlands resources defined under the Wetlands Protection Act. Proponents of projects that come before the Conservation Commission that would affect this habitat must notify the NHESP which will then determine if alteration of the area would have an adverse effect on rare species. The two areas of combined Estimated and Priority Habitat in Ashby are around the Fitchburg Reservoir and the Great Meadow and its environs off Mason Road. In the far northwestern corner of Ashby on the slopes of Mount Watatic is an additional Priority Habitat area. Other areas have been identified as potential Estimated Habitat, submitted to the NHESP by the Ashby Conservation Commission and accepted for future mapping.

BioMap Core Habitat and Supporting Habitat

The NHESP developed the state BioMap to identify areas in Massachusetts where the biodiversity of the state is most in need of protection. The map focuses especially on state-listed rare species and on natural communities of plants and animals that exemplify the biodiversity of the state. The BioMap is divided into two categories: Core Habitat and Supporting Natural Landscape. Core Habitat shows the areas where rare species habitat and natural communities are most viable and likely to persist. These are the largest areas with a minimum of human intrusion and impact. Supporting Habitat provides buffers for Core Habitat, corridors and connections between Core Habitat areas, and undeveloped areas that provide habitat for common Massachusetts species.

In Ashby, four areas have been designated as Core Habitat on the BioMap:

- The area including Great Meadow, Trapfall Brook and adjacent areas between Foster Road and Turnpike Road.
- The wetlands and stream areas of Locke Brook and its tributaries between Locke Road and Heywood Road and continuing to the southeast between Davis and Wheeler Roads.
- The wetlands and drainage area of a Locke Brook tributary north of Davis Road on the southeastern slopes of Juniper Hill.
- The shores of the Fitchburg Reservoir.

With the exception of the lands around Fitchburg Reservoir, these areas are not protected except to the extent that wetlands and streams are protected by the Wetlands Protection Act and the Rivers Protection Act.

Perhaps as much as an additional 40 percent of Ashby land is identified as Supporting Natural Landscape on the BioMap:

- The northwest corner of town including the protected lands around Mount Watatic.
- The western part of town generally south of Whitney Road and east of Piper Road to the Fitchburg Reservoir and the border with Fitchburg, including most of the Fitchburg Water Department protected open space.
- South of Rindge and Scott Roads and then north and east of the Ashby Reservoir and South Road, and south and east of Route 119, including most of Willard Brook State Forest.
- Between Wheeler and Foster Roads and a portion of the adjacent area west of Route 31.

Rare Species

The NHESP keeps records of observations of rare species. The agency does not send staff to survey towns and depends to a great degree on observations submitted by the public or others. The fact that the most recent observation date is quite old in some cases does not mean that the species no longer exists. However, state wetlands and endangered species regulations only consider species with observation dates less than 25 years old when ruling on project reviews. Forms to report observations are available on the agency's web site.

Taxonomic Group	Scientific Name	Common Name	State Rank	Federal Rank	Most Recent Observation
Fish	Notropis bifrenatus	Bridle Shiner	SC		1974
Reptile	Clemmys insculpta	Wood Turtle	SC		1993
Reptile	Clemmys guttata	Spotted Turtle	SC		2003
Bird	Gavia immer	Common Loon	SC		2000
Dragonfly/Damselfly	Gomphus descriptus	Harpoon Clubtail	E		1940
Dragonfly/Damselfly	Ophiogomphus aspersus	Brook Snaketail	SC		1941
Vascular Plant	Scheuchzeria palustris	Pod-Grass	E		1882
Vascular Plant	Viola adunca	Sand Violet	E		1914

E = Endangered
T = Threatened
SC = Special Concern

Documentation is being prepared to submit observations of toad salamanders, spring salamanders and Blandings turtles. The long-tailed or rock shrew (*Sorex dispar*), a species of Special Concern, is

believed to inhabit parts of Mount Watatic, as are other rare species including the American bittern and additional species of dragonfly, but the NHESP records do not indicate a documented report in Ashby.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

Most of the environmental challenges that Ashby faces result from a growing potential to pollute surface and groundwater as the town changes. Individual property owners often do not notice the cumulative impacts of incremental housing development, year-round occupation of former vacation homes, improper septic system maintenance, and careless land management practices. Ashby continues to feel like a rural place, but the Town's natural resources are not infinitely resilient and many individual actions can together stress the environment significantly. In addition to septic contamination mentioned earlier, erosion from logging and off-road vehicle use, pollution from road salt and unsafe disposal of hazardous materials such as motor oil and paint can have damaging effects. On a different scale, the 90-acre Ashby landfill is being monitored to ensure that polluted

Open Space Parcels	
Permanently Protected	Acres
Commonwealth of Massachusetts	2,216.4
City of Fitchburg	555.9
Town of Ashby	69.3
Conservation Restrictions	218.5
<i>Total</i>	<i>3,060.1</i>
Conservation Restrictions under negotiation	147.4
Temporarily Protected	
Chapter 61	721.6
Chapter 61A	224.1
Chapter 61B	70.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,015.80</i>
Lands Owned by Non-Profits	
Camp Middlesex	75.2
Camp Lapham	88.61
Shackleton School	70
All Others	23.41
<i>Total</i>	<i>257.22</i>
<i>Source: Town of Ashby</i>	

leachate does not contaminate surrounding wetlands and nearby Trapfall Brook. These wetlands and Trapfall Brook include some of the most important wildlife habitat in Ashby, and are located over an aquifer that supplies water to neighboring Townsend.

OPEN SPACE

Approximately 26 percent of Ashby's land area is permanently or temporarily protected open space. In addition, there are several important properties with open space interest that are owned by nonprofit organizations, as well as a large amount of land in natural vegetation belonging to residents.

Permanently Protected Lands

Approximately 3,000 acres or 20% of Ashby is permanently protected open space. The Commonwealth owns more than 2,000 acres of permanently protected land in Ashby in Willard Brook State Park and the Ashby Wildlife Management Area. The City of Fitchburg owns 556 acres of water supply protection lands. The remainder is owned by the Town. In addition there are over 200 acres under Conservation Restrictions and other CRs in process.

Temporarily Protected Lands and Working Landscapes

Few of Ashby's orchards and farms remain and none are the primary source of income for their owners. Tax abatements offered by the state for lands in forestry, agricultural or recreational uses under the programs known as Chapter 61, 61A and 61B respectively provide for temporary protection of open space. If lands in these programs are put on the market, the town has the first right of refusal, and sale to private parties entails repayment of some of the taxes abated under the program. More than 1,000 acres in Ashby are enrolled in the Chapter 61 programs, 70 percent in the forestry program. There are 26 property owners in all the Chapter 61 programs and the largest holding by any one owner is 246 acres. In recent years, some property owners have been taking their lands out of the Chapter 61 program.

Haying and forestry are the main resource-based economic activities, though one orchard is identified among the Chapter 61A agricultural properties. Residents value these landscapes for their rural scenic value. Lyman Fields on South Road have been protected with a Conservation Restriction. Generational turnover, as farm and orchard operators retire, threatens many of Ashby's rural properties with subdivision and development. The Western Middlesex Stock Farm has pastures and barns with potential for a substantial equestrian center, but is not operated as such at present. It is not uncommon for residents with smaller properties to keep horses for private use. Other less scenic rural uses of land include several sand and gravel pits.

Existing and Potential Greenway Trails

Except for trails in Willard Brook State Forest and the Ashby Wildlife Management Area, no formal trail system exists in Ashby. Wapack Trail starts in Ashby at the foot of Mount Watatic and runs to the summit of North Pack Monadnock in Peterborough, NH. Some trails exist on old cart roads and logging roads. Many trails pass through private property, and private landowners reserve the right to restrict access to trails on their land.

Scenic Resources and Unique Environments

Ashby's nine hills provide scenic views – as far as Boston in the case of Blood Hill or Caton Hill. Mount Watatic is shared with residents of surrounding communities. Fields and old orchards at

the Middlesex Stock Farm, the Perna property, and a handful of other old farms add variety to the predominantly forested landscape. The town's historic and cultural resources include stone bridges, old mill sites, Native American archeological sites, and the historic Town Center with its iconic village green, Grange Hall, churches and burial ground. Many large barns are thought to add to the rural character of the town and are honored in an annual barn tour hosted by the Historical Society.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

Ashby has a formidable "green infrastructure" of natural communities, streams and ponds, and interconnected open space, not only in lands that are officially protected but in the private back lands of so many town residents. Because this rich environment seems so abundant, it is sometimes difficult for people to realize that it is not infinitely resilient. Both longtime residents and new arrivals can misjudge the extent to which their private actions and land management practices can have damaging cumulative effects on the town's resources and scenic character. Ashby's opportunity today is to be foresighted and plan ahead to protect its most important resources. As development pressure becomes more intense, it is imperative that the town understand where the most critical resources are located, which lands need to be permanently protected as key elements of the network of green resources, and how to employ new strategies and tools to make sure that new growth is directed and shaped in ways that protect the town's green infrastructure. At the same time, residents must become more aware of how their own private land management practices can be improved to assure the continuing health of the town's environment. For a town like Ashby, this is not only an environmental imperative but an economic one. After the decline of traditional rural economies, nature-based recreation can offer new opportunities.

Plan to protect future drinking water supplies

Ashby has been able to continue to depend upon private wells for drinking water. The need for a public water supply is probably not imminent. However, the Town is not going to be able to preserve all open land and it will face new development pressures. As the Town establishes new policies and new zoning to protect open space and preserve rural character, it is important that the potential need for water resources be kept in mind. Despite the tradition of private wells in Ashby, the Town also has a tradition of thinking about water supply as a community – the town water pump on the common. Ashby should begin to take steps to understand its future drinking water supply as a community.

- *Seek assistance to monitor private well water quality and quantity by sponsoring free water testing days.* The Town could seek assistance from the Nashua River Watershed Association or state agencies to encourage residents to test their water.

Keeping records of the results and of water supply problems, such as the location and number of wells running dry, will help residents begin to understand local water supplies better.

- *Create a multi-year plan to raise funds for a public water supply feasibility study.* The Town should approach a water supply study in the same way it would approach capital expenditures. It can research the necessary scope and likely cost of such a study, as well as the potential for state grants, and then plan to raise the money over several years to fund the project. The work should include mapping of aquifers, a study of the potential of using Ashby Reservoir for public water supply, particularly given the development and roads currently on its shores, and options for sharing water with the City of Fitchburg.

Protect water quality in streams and ponds

Ashby's streams are Outstanding Resource Waters because development is still limited and much of the land remains forested. To make sure that these streams remain "Outstanding," the Town should consider a local wetlands bylaw, protect sensitive upland buffer areas and raise public awareness about best management practices around streams. The Nashua River Watershed Association and the Trust for Public Land have developed a Source Water Stewardship Program that can provide assistance to Ashby in identifying lands most in need of protection for water quality and can provide organizational help and materials on best management practices.⁴

- *Consider passing a local wetlands bylaw.* A local bylaw can be crafted to reflect Ashby's particular conditions.
- *Pursue conservation restrictions on sensitive upland buffer areas.* The Ashby Land Trust should identify areas of particular concern and approach landowners about donating conservation restrictions on buffer zones.
- *Provide town residents with information about best management practices.* Informational materials are available from many nonprofit organizations and government agencies to raise public awareness about the purpose of protective measures such as the 200-foot buffer to permanent streams established in the state's Rivers Protection Act. The Town could create a "Preserving Ashby's Waters" web page on the Town web site with links to fact sheets available from the Environmental Protection Agency, the Stormwater Center, and other sources of information.

⁴ See for example, "Nashua River Watershed Source Water Stewardship Exchange Team Report" (July 2003), available at http://www.nashuariverwatershed.org/releases/sws_rpt.html

Protect lands that support biodiversity and wildlife habitat

- *Promote protection of areas identified as rare species habitat and BioMap Core Habitat.* Except for wetlands and stream corridors, most of the land identified on the BioMap as Core Habitat is not permanently protected. The Town and/or the Ashby Land Trust should inform landowners about the special habitat value of their property and provide information on conservation restrictions and best management practices for those lands. Information of this type is often welcomed when presented in the context of opportunities for tax deductions through conservation restrictions. Nonprofit organizations like The Trustees of Reservations can provide speakers on the tax benefits as well as the environmental value for workshops organized by the Town. The Land Trust can identify areas where conservation restrictions are most needed and approach landowners about donating or selling development rights in those areas. The Trust has approached some landowners in other parts of town to make them aware of land preservation options, but not in the Core Habitat area.
- *Promote identification and certification of vernal pools.* In many communities, vernal pool certification has become an activity for school science classes. Information and forms are available on the website of the state's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. The Conservation Commission could work with the schools and with other community groups to promote certification of vernal pools.
- *Promote best management practices in BioMap Supporting Natural Landscape Areas.* Supporting Natural Landscape areas require appropriate management to keep their biodiversity value. State agencies and nonprofit organizations have materials on best practices to enhance the wildlife value of land that can be distributed to landowners along with information on the habitat value of their land.
- *Create protected corridors for wildlife.* Taking into account the areas that are identified as having special wildlife habitat value on Map 4: Land Use Suitability the Town and/or the Ashby Land Trust should pursue conservation restrictions on land that will create protected corridors for wildlife, particularly corridors between existing large patches of protected open space, in upland areas along streams, and making connections to ponds.

Preserve rural scenic character as well as natural resources and habitat

- *Establish new zoning for residential development.* Ashby still has the opportunity to avoid suburbanization. If the town continues with its present regime of one and two-acre zoning, the suburban visual character that is already beginning to appear, as frontage lots are developed along the roads, will overtake much more of the town. This will be accompanied by increasing fragmentation of open space as roads, driveways, septic fields and lawns surround the new houses. In order to avoid this future, the town should establish conservation subdivision zoning. All development sites of at least 4 acres should be considered to require development that is sensitive to environmental and scenic resources, including wildlife corridors and impacts on water quality and quantity. By establishing conservation subdivision zoning as mandatory, by-right zoning for all residential development sites over 4 acres, development will be sited so that environmental and scenic resources will be preserved. More detailed information on conservation subdivision development is provided in the chapter on Housing in this plan.
- *Identify and designate scenic roads.* Scenic road designation requires a public hearing by the Planning Board before trees and stone walls within the right of way of a designated road can be demolished.

Identify options for nature-based recreation that coincide with natural resources priorities

In the survey that accompanied the 1999 Open Space Plan, Ashby residents expressed particular interest in more opportunities for nature-based recreation, such as hiking and cross-country skiing trails and public access to lakes and ponds. Although there are private trails used by hikers and equestrians, landowners are often reluctant to publicize trails, even if they are willing to allow responsible use by people “in the know.”

Following the example of the establishment of the Blood Hill Management Committee, the Conservation Commission could create a Trails Committee to identify options within lands that have conservation restrictions and also to identify the potential for creating greenways with low-impact trails in the high-value habitat areas such as the Trapfall Brook area. Areas that have been identified by the state as having special habitat and open space value would be more likely to attract potential funding from outside sources. Because these would be low-impact trails, the most important cost would be in designing and laying out the trails in the most sensitive manner. In many communities Boy Scouts have been very active in constructing trails and creating trail maps.

C. NATURAL RESOURCES AND OPEN SPACE MAPS

Map 3: Existing Conditions: Natural Resources shows existing natural resources, particularly water and wildlife habitat resources, and protected open space.

Map 4: Land Use Suitability shows three categories of parcels according to existing zoning: built out parcels; vacant parcels that have been identified as developable or potentially developable by the assessor; and parcels that have a house or buildings on them, but include enough open land to be capable of subdivision. These parcels were then overlaid with protected environmental resources: permanently protected open space, wetlands, certified vernal pools, Fitchburg Reservoir buffer zones, and streams and ponds. Additional overlays show environmentally sensitive lands, some of which are subject to regulation under the Wetlands Protection Act or Rivers Protection Act and others which indicate areas that have been identified as especially important habitat areas. Implementation of the Recommendations should be guided by this map, which shows the areas where a concentration of natural resources should be the location of protection strategies.

D. Natural Resources and Open Space Action Plan			Priority H=High M=Medium L=Low	Time Line S= 2 yrs M= 2-5 yrs L=5+ yrs	Responsibility
Goal	Policy	Action			
Plan to protect future drinking water supplies	Monitor private well water quality and quantity	Sponsor free water testing days with assistance of NRWA or others and keep records of well problems	H	S-M	Board of Health
	Create a multi-year plan to raise funds for a public water supply feasibility study	Create a multi-year plan to raise funds for an aquifer mapping project	H	S-M	Board of Selectmen
		Study the potential of Ashby Reservoir for public water supply	M	M	Board of Selectmen
		Study options to share water with Fitchburg from the Fitchburg Reservoir	M	M	Board of Selectmen
Protect water quality in streams and ponds	Protect upland buffer areas to streams and ponds	Identify and prioritize streams for upland protection by conservation restriction	H	S	Conservation Commission (CC)
		Seek conservation restrictions and provide information on best practices	H	S-M	Ashby Land Trust
		Consider enacting a local wetlands bylaw	M	M	CC; Town Meeting
		Provide town residents with information about best management practices	M	S	CC
	Work with the Nashua River Watershed Assoc on the Source Water Stewardship Program	Designate a town resident to work with the NRWA	M	S	CC; Land Trust
Protect lands that support wildlife habitat and biodiversity	Promote protection of areas identified as rare species habitat and BioMap Core Habitat	Inform landowners of the special habitat value of their lands and provide information on conservation restrictions and best practices	H	S	CC, using available materials
	Promote identification and certification of vernal pools	Organize community organizations (schools, scouts, churches) to certify vernal pools	M	S-M	CC to contact community groups and provide information
	Promote best practices in BioMap	Inform landowners of the special habitat value of their lands and provide	M	S-M	CC, using available materials

D. Natural Resources and Open Space Action Plan			Priority H=High M=Medium L=Low	Time Line S= 2 yrs M= 2-5 yrs L=5+ yrs	Responsibility
Goal	Policy	Action			
	Supporting Landscape Areas	information on best practices			
Create protected corridors for wildlife	Give priority to conservation actions that link large open space and habitat areas	Identify and prioritize areas for conservation restrictions	M	S-M	CC: Land Trust
		Work with large landowners in identified corridor areas	M	S-L	Land Trust
Preserve rural scenic character as well as natural resources and habitat		Amend zoning to promote clustering of new housing with protection of priority open space and avoidance of homogeneous roadside development	H	S	Planning Board and Town Meeting
		Identify and designate scenic roads	M	M	Planning Board and Town Meeting
Provide more recreational opportunities for residents	Plan trail and greenway creation in light of natural resource priorities	Identify nature-based recreation options	M	M	CC – Open Space Committee; volunteers
		Create a Trails Subcommittee	M	M	CC
		Seek assistance from Boy Scouts and other groups	M	M	Trails Committee
Enhance public awareness about environmentally-sound private landscape practices	Make public education materials available to residents	Collect existing materials from government and nonprofit sources and make available in town hall, the library, at town meeting, at town activities, through links on the web site, etc.	M	M	Conservation Commission; volunteers;
Collaborate with other municipalities and agencies to achieve regional integration of open space protection and recreational opportunities		Keep aware of regional open space activities through MRPC, NRWA, Land Trust Alliance and other contacts	Ongoing	Ongoing	CC; Land Trust

VI. HOUSING



THE HOUSING VISION

In 2023...

- Ashby offers a variety of housing choices to residents across a range of incomes, including affordable housing options for seniors and for young families who want to stay in town. Ashby has avoided indiscriminate development and sprawl through careful planning, protection of sensitive environmental and cultural resources, and the application of effective regulations and incentives.
- Roadways are lined with mature trees and stone walls, framing passing views of meadows, orchards and farms, which evoke the town's rural heritage, and demonstrating Ashby's success in directing development to protect rural scenic character. The roads serving regional traffic also continue to reflect the Town's rural identity.

HOUSING: ASSETS, LIABILITIES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

Assets

- Relatively affordable
- Large lot sizes available
- Varied and attractive housing stock
- Historic homes

Liabilities

- Increasing rate of development
- New housing attracts families with school age children, potentially increasing costs
- Most development is ANR - limited tools for development review available
- Cost of trash removal is increasing
- No permanently affordable housing (zero percent in the 40B inventory)
- Need for affordable senior housing
- New housing is expensive for local residents

GOALS

- Shape housing development to preserve rural character
- Provide for permanently affordable housing to provide options to senior citizens, young people, and others needing moderately-priced housing and to meet Chapter 40B goals over the long term

A. CURRENT CONDITIONS

EXISTING HOUSING STOCK AND RESIDENTIAL CHARACTER

Change in Population, Households and Housing Units 1990-2000			
	1990	2000	% Change
Population	2717	2845	4.7
Households	892	978	9.6
Housing Units (total)	959	1011	5.4
Housing Units (year-round)	916	1000	9.2
Owner Occupied Units	798	899	12.6
Vacancy Rate Ownership	0.9%	0.3%	
Rental Occupied Units	94	79	-16.0
Vacancy Rate Rental	6.9%	2.5%	
Seasonal Units	43	11	-74.4
Householder 65 years or older	164	161	-1.8

Source: US Census, 1990, 2000

Ashby is a former agricultural town that is just beginning to experience the expansion of the Greater Boston housing market into the towns beyond Interstate 495. Most of the farms and orchards in Ashby are no longer in operation, but the town still conserves its rural character in many places. However, because the majority of new housing is built along the road frontage every 200 feet on "Approval Not Required" (ANR) lots, Ashby is increasingly acquiring a more suburban visual character. As the number of frontage

lots diminishes, it is likely that more subdivisions will be proposed in the "back land." Some 7,900 acres (52%) of Ashby's lands are classified by the Assessor as "developable" and much of that is "back land" extending between the shallow strips of residential development along Ashby's roads.

According to the Town Census, the rate of growth in Ashby's population has been increasing since 1996. This is when housing prices in the metropolitan Boston area began climbing significantly after the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s and more people began to look for housing at the edge of the Boston region. Between the 2000 census and 2003 the Town added 321 residents, an 11% increase. Reflecting national trends, the growth rate in housing units has been outpacing the growth rate in population for several decades as the average number of people in each household or housing unit has been declining.

Housing is located throughout the town with concentrations along Rte. 119 and at the town center. Trends since 1990 include the conversion of seasonal housing to year-round units and a reduction in the already limited number of renter-occupied units. As noted earlier, most new development is located

<i>Ashby Age of Housing Units</i>		
Build Date	Number of Units	Percent of Total
Pre-1940	340	33.6
1940-1959	180	17.8
1960-1969	122	12.1
1970-1979	113	11.2
1980-1989	123	12.2
1990-2000	133	13.1
<i>Source: US Census 2000</i>		

Average Annual Increase in Housing Units 1940-1999	
1940-1959	9
1960-1969	12
1970-1979	11
1980-1989	12
1990-1999	12
<i>Source: US Census 2000</i>	

Ashby Building Permits 1990-2002	
2002	23
2001	15
2000	17
1999	17
1998	22
1997	18E
1996	NA
1995	16E
1994	16
1993	17
1992	17
1991	15
1990	15
average 1990-94, 1998-2002	17.4
<i>Source: Assessor's Data; E=Estimate</i>	

along road frontage and fewer than 10 subdivisions, most with a small number of units, have been built since the mid-1980s.

Age of housing and creation of new units.

One third of Ashby's housing was built before 1940, over one-half before 1960, and 13 percent was built during the 1990s. The number of housing units in Ashby increased at a consistent rate over the past four decades, averaging about 12 new units per year. This steady level of increase indicates the Town's relative insulation until recently from the real estate growth cycles of Eastern Massachusetts, such as the real estate boom of the 1980s.

Over the past twelve years, Ashby has issued a slowly increasing number of building permits each year for construction of new single-family residences. An average of 17 building permits per year has been issued between 1990 and 2002. The average rose to 19 permits per year over the past five years. Although the growth rate is still moderate, many new homes in Ashby tend to be larger and more expensive than existing homes.

Housing Types, Ownership and Rental Housing

According to 2003 assessor's data, of the town's 1,067 housing units, 1,039 (97%) are single-family homes. There are 15 multifamily structures, 10 mobile homes and 3 on-campus teacher residences. Almost all the housing in Ashby is owner-occupied. The 2000 Census estimated 79 renter-occupied housing units, 8% of the total of 978 occupied units. Some of the multifamily structures are most likely owner-occupied with only one or two rental units. Most of the rented housing in Ashby, therefore, is composed of single-family homes, and it is likely that most of these units are rented while their owners are temporarily living away from home or are

waiting for the homes to sell, and very few, if any, are always held for rental purposes. Some of Ashby's older homes need upgrading. Many have sub-standard septic systems, which cost \$10,000 to \$20,000 or more to bring up to Title 5 requirements, and sub-standard electric and heating systems. Wood is the sole source of heat in 8% of housing units.

Zoning and Land Use Regulation

Ashby has four zoning districts. The majority of Ashby is in the Residential/Agricultural zone with 2-acre lots and 200 feet required road frontage. The only multi-family housing permitted by zoning is an allowance for accessory apartments by special permit and for mixed use development in the Residential/Commercial zone, which requires a minimum one-acre lot. Since adoption of the accessory unit bylaw in 2001, four applications have been taken out and all have been approved. Site plan review is required only for nonresidential development and most new homes are not subject to the subdivision regulations because they are on ANR lots.

Zoning District	Minimum Lot Size in Sq. Ft.	Required Frontage in Ft.	Required Front Setback in Ft
<i>Residential</i>	40,000	150	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 75 - from centerline of road less than 50 ft right of way ▪ 100 - from centerline of road at least 50 ft right of way
<i>Residential/Agricultural</i>	80,000	200	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Same
<i>Residential/Commercial</i>	40,000	150	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Same
<i>Industrial</i>	60,000 sf	150	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 75 ft from street centerline

At the Spring 2004 Town Meeting, Ashby adopted a new zoning bylaw authorizing Open Space Residential Development in all but the Industrial zoning district. Subdivisions were divided into two categories:

- Major Residential Development – creation of 5 or more lots on a parcel or contiguous parcels
- Minor Residential Development – creation of 4 or fewer lots on a parcel or contiguous parcels

For Major Residential Developments, developers are required to apply for a special permit for an Open Space Residential Development (OSRD) and prepare two site plans: one for a conventional subdivision and another for a cluster subdivision. The Planning Board will then choose which plan it finds more beneficial to the town in terms of preservation of open space for conservation, agriculture or recreation; “utilizing the natural features of the land;” and more efficient provision of public services. The number of houses in an OSRD subdivision cannot exceed those in a conventional subdivision but the individual lots can be as small as 20,000 square feet with a frontage of 50 feet.

Housing in the Town Center

Ashby residents are proud of their historic town center, but the zoning currently in place for the town center now would not permit it to be built. The Town established a historic district centered around the Town Common in Ashby Center in 1997. This historic village includes a number of nineteenth-century buildings built on small lots. Wastewater capacity is very limited and constrains additional development in the Center.

Development Capacity / Buildout Potential

The total land area of Ashby is 15,232 acres. Of this, about 3,000 acres (20%) is permanently protected open space. According to 2003 Assessor's data, approximately 2,430 acres (16%) is

Buildout Potential in 2000	
Additional Developable Land:	10,281 acres
Additional Housing Units:	4,608
Additional Residents:	13,823
Additional School Children:	2,765
Additional Roadway:	103 miles
<i>Source: Executive Office of Environmental Affairs & MassGIS</i>	

developed and 976 acres (6%) is undevelopable. The remaining 8,826 acres (58%) are classified as developable. The buildout study conducted by state agencies in 2000 showed that Ashby has substantial

development capacity under current zoning. The study, which was based on the application of formulas to map data and not on a parcel by parcel analysis, estimated that if every developable acre were built to the extent permitted by current zoning, Ashby would gain approximately 4,600 new housing units for about 13,800 more people. This study was completed before Mount Watatic and Blood Hill were permanently protected, so these buildout figures now overstate somewhat Ashby's buildout potential.

Another way to approach this question without a parcel by parcel field survey is to analyze the Assessor's database for vacant developable parcels and parcels that have a house built on them but that have sufficient acreage for potential subdivision under current zoning. That analysis results in a figure somewhat higher than the state buildout exercise, as can be seen in the table below. It does not take into account frontage requirements.

ASHBY VACANT AND SUBDIVIDABLE RESIDENTIAL PARCELS								
ZONING DISTRICT	Type	Parcel Size (acres)	# of parcels	Min size (acres)	Max Size (acres)	Average Size (acres)	Total Acres	Potential Single Family Units
Residential	Vacant*	> 40,000	28	0.98	13.42	2.73	76.51	76
	Built	> 80,000	79	1.85	13.7	4.05	319.64	80
Res/Commercial	Vacant*	> 40,000	16	0.93	17.58	3.36	53.74	53
	Built	> 80,000	16	1.97	5.15	2.84	45.49	6
Res/Agricultural	Vacant*	> 80,000	289	1.84	173.13	15.88	4,590.38	2,295
	Built	>160.000	300	3.68	159.3	19.35	5,804.43	2,602
			728				10,890.19	5,112
*Includes Town-owned unprotected parcels within residential zones.								
NOTE: Commonwealth of Massachusetts and Town of Fitchburg parcels not included.								
<i>Source: Ashby Assessor's Data</i>								

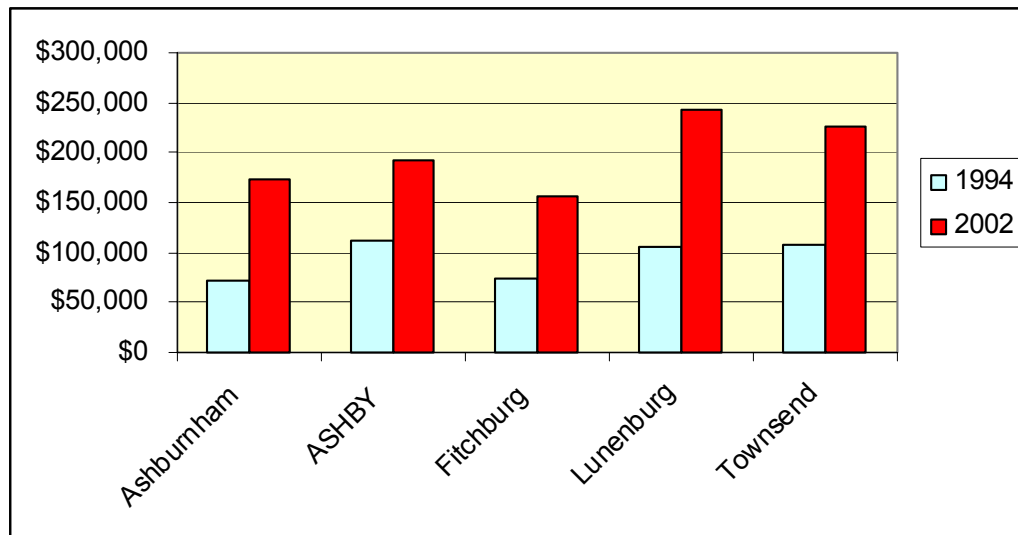
Housing Costs

Median Price of a Single Family Home in Ashby	
Year	1-Family
2002	\$191,450
2001	\$167,250
2000	\$138,500
1999	\$119,950
1998	\$123,900
1997	\$107,500
1996	\$122,000
1995	\$96,000
1994	\$112,000

Source: Warren Group

The median price of a single-family home in Ashby rose 71% between 1994 and 2002. In comparison, the Consumer Price Index for metropolitan Boston increased only 41.6% over the same years. Similar increases have taken place throughout the area, leaving Ashby's 2002 median home sale price of \$191,450 in the middle of its group of nearby towns. If we compare Ashby's single family home prices in 1994 and 2002 with those in neighboring communities, it becomes clear how proximity to I-495 and the metropolitan Boston housing market has affected home prices. While Ashby's median price was slightly higher than both Lunenburg's and Townsend's in 1994, by 2002, both those communities saw median single family home prices rise substantially higher than Ashby's. Although Ashby is on the exurban housing frontier for several employment centers - the metro Boston area, Worcester, and Nashua, NH - it is not near a major highway, making it less immediately attractive for development than more accessible neighboring towns.

Comparative Median Single Family Home Prices, 1994 and 2002



Despite the rising price of housing in Ashby, the town is still affordable in relative terms. During FY2003, 20 building permits were issued for housing assessed at or below the \$299,756 threshold that the state Department of Housing and Community Development designates for housing affordable to middle-income households (with incomes at 80% to 150% of median income). Only two permits were issued for housing valued above this level. Moreover, newer houses in Ashby are worth more than older housing. The median assessed value of an owner occupied home increased 9% between 1990 and 2000, from \$135,300 to \$147,500, while the median value of a new home in 2003 had risen to \$240,000.

Constraints to Development

Twenty-six percent of Ashby's land is permanently protected, primarily in Willard State Park and Department of Fish & Wildlife Land (more than 2,500 acres) and City of Fitchburg water supply protection lands (540 acres). The Ashby Land Trust and the Town recently purchased a 170-acre parcel at Blood Hill and the Town has small holdings for recreational use. Almost 1,600 acres of land in Ashby is temporarily protected under Chapter 61 and 61A tax abatement programs. In the southwestern corner of Ashby, the City of Fitchburg's reservoir is surrounded by Zone A and Zone B buffers to protect drainage areas and tributaries. In addition, Fitchburg owns the so-called Ashby Reservoir or Compensating Reservoir that was created early in the 20th century to compensate for the Fitchburg reservoir being taken out of service as an industrial mill pond. Environmentally-sensitive land includes the recently-created Squannassit Area of Critical Environmental Concern, which extends into Ashby's eastern quarter, and the approximately 60% of the Town that is in Outstanding Resource Waters watershed areas. These designations do not prohibit development, but can trigger higher levels of state review for big projects.

There is no public water supply or sewer system and all residents depend on private wells for drinking water and septic systems for wastewater disposal. Ashby's groundwater has not been mapped. The state buildout project estimated a demand for over one million additional gallons a day of water, if the Town were to develop up to the capacity permitted by zoning. It is clear that long before the buildout level were to be reached, the Town would not be able to continue depending on private wells for drinking water. The lack of septic capacity is a severe constraint to new development of any kind in the Town Center. It may be that unmapped wetlands, steep slopes, high water tables and the requirements of Title 5 for septic systems are also barriers to building on some of the land currently classified as developable. However, recent changes by the state Department of Environmental Protection from 30 minute to 60 minute perc standards may also make more land developable.

CURRENT AND FUTURE HOUSING DEMAND

Vacancy rates in Ashby for year-round ownership units decreased between 1990 and 2000 from 0.87% to 0.30%, and vacancy rates for year-round rental units decreased from 6.93% to 2.50%. Both of these statistics reflect an increasing demand for housing evident statewide.

Population and Housing Unit Changes: 1990-2000

- Total growth in population: +4.7%
- Total growth in number of households: +9.6%
- Total growth in number of year-round housing units: +9.2%
- Growth in owner-occupied year-round units: +12.7%
- Growth in renter-occupied year-round units: -16.0%
- Population change in 20-29 age group: -26.3%
- Population change in 65-74 age group: +3.2%

Source: US Census 1990, 2000

Ashby Households and Families below 80% Fitchburg Area Median Income in 1999

- 37.7% of households had incomes less than \$50,000
- 13.1% of households had incomes less than \$25,000

- 29.8% of families had incomes less than \$50,000
- 8.5% of families had incomes less than \$25,000

- The elderly face a bigger affordability challenge as median income varies with age:
 - Median income for people 65-74 is \$32,250, compared to \$68,342 for people aged 35-54
 - Median income for people 75 and older is even lower (\$18,438)

Source: US Census 2000

Accompanying this rise in housing costs is a population change. The percentage of the population between the ages of 20 and 34 decreased by 41% between 1990 and 2000, which is a greater decrease than that found in the region as a whole. (This age group is the “baby bust” generation.) Some of that increase might be due to rising housing costs. The population between the ages of 65 and 74 increased by 3.2 percent between 1990 and 2000, and can be expected to increase further in the coming decade.

Housing Needs

During the 1990s an average of 12 housing units were added per year, but building permit activity over the last five years suggests an increasing rate of housing growth. Ashby’s 11.2% population increase in almost four years since 2000 (according to the town census) is more than twice the 4.75% increase over the 1990-2000 decade. It is difficult to predict if the residential real estate market will continue to be vigorous during the second half of the current decade. If Ashby were to continue at its historic rate of adding about 12 new single family homes a year, it will have to accommodate 240 new homes in 20 years. If we assume a higher average growth rate of 20 homes a year, there would be 400 homes in 20 years. Even this high-growth scenario would only produce about 9 percent of the buildout development capacity estimated in the state buildout study. These numbers, of course, assume that the new housing units would all be single family homes.

The 1999 Ashby median household income reported in the 2000 Census was \$61,000, which is nearly identical to the Middlesex County median income of \$60,821. The median income for people 65 to 74 years old was \$32,250 and for people 75 and over was \$18,438. According to the 2000 Census, 5% of the town’s population (143 people) and nearly 4% of families (29 families) live below the poverty level. Nearly 44% of people 65 and over in Ashby have some kind of disability. Of the 61 renters identified in

the 2000 Census, 12 (20%) paid more than 30 percent of household income for rent and 25% of owners paid more than 30 percent of household income for housing.

Rising housing prices, increasing homeownership costs, and an aging housing stock have left some local homeowners unable to afford the necessary renovations to their homes. Lack of affordable alternatives forces older people to stay in homes they can no longer adequately maintain or leave the community. Lack of rental options and increasing home prices also make it more difficult for young people and first time homebuyers to find housing in Ashby.

Regional Housing Needs

Ashby has a smaller population than any of its four Massachusetts neighbors: Townsend, Fitchburg, Lunenburg and Ashburnham. The City of Fitchburg, with a population of approximately 40,000, is an urban center, while the others are towns with populations under 10,000. Ashby's 2000 population of 2,845 was 4 percent of the total population of all five communities. All of the four towns, located just beyond I-495, are on the frontier of advancing housing development, with rising home prices. None of the towns has a large stock of permanently affordable housing, but Ashby is the only one of these towns that has no permanently affordable housing units. The *Greater Gardner Sustainable Growth Management Plan* completed in 1999 recognized as one of its goals the need for "a variety of housing options to meet the needs of a population with a wide range of financial means and lifestyle choices." [p.24] However, the numerical need at the regional level was not further specified. The lack of any permanently affordable housing in Ashby, however, suggests that the Town needs to focus attention on affordable housing issues.

HOUSING DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY CHARACTER

The current pattern of residential development is leading inexorably towards making Ashby a suburb in appearance if not in spirit. Housing development is following the path of least resistance and spreading along the entire road frontage in Approval-Not-Required lots and leaving large amounts of open land in the back lands between the roads. The zoning bylaw and the real estate market both tend to promote homogeneity in the siting and design of houses. In fact, under current zoning, the Town Center could not be replicated. After the road frontage is built out, backlands will become more valuable and the Town will begin to see more subdivisions. Despite the fact that the Town has little control over the development of ANR lots because of state law, the Town can take some actions to shape future development, both along the roads and in the backlands, to forestall suburbanization. These actions steps are described in Section B – Recommendations.

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

What is “affordable housing?”

The concept of affordable housing is based on three statistics: the median household income for an area, the appropriate percentage of household income that should be spent on housing, and the median cost of housing in the rental or ownership markets. Under most housing subsidy programs, the housing produced with government financial assistance is targeted to people whose household income is 80 percent or below the median household income for an area. (The median is the point at which half the households have higher incomes and half the households have lower incomes.) Median income levels by size of household are set by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) every year for entire metropolitan areas. Because Ashby is in the Fitchburg-Leominster Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA), it is this median income amount that is used in affordable housing projects, not Ashby’s local median. For Fiscal Year 2004, the median income for all households is \$62,200 and 80 percent of median for a family of four is \$49,750. According to HUD standards, affordable housing for households with incomes at or below 80 percent of median should cost no more than 30 percent of total household income. An affordable home, therefore, could be one that a family of four making no more than \$49,750 a year could buy or rent with 30 percent of their income going to rent or mortgage payments. Census data show that in 1999, 37.7 percent of Ashby households had incomes below \$50,000, and 23.8 percent had incomes below \$35,000. US HUD has estimated that 28% of Ashby’s population is in households with incomes 80% or below the Fitchburg/Leominster Area Median Income.

**PMSA: Fitchburg--Leominster, MA PMSA
FY 2004 MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME: \$62,200**

	I N C O M E L I M I T S – H O U S E H O L D S I Z E (N U M B E R O F P E R S O N S)							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
30% OF MEDIAN	\$13,050	\$14,950	\$16,800	\$18,650	\$20,150	\$21,650	\$23,150	\$24,650
VERY LOW-INCOME (50% OF MEDIAN)	\$21,750	\$24,900	\$28,000	\$31,100	\$33,600	\$36,100	\$38,550	\$41,050
LOW-INCOME (80% OF MEDIAN)	\$34,850	\$39,800	\$44,800	\$49,750	\$53,750	\$57,700	\$61,700	\$65,700

Chapter 40B – the Comprehensive Permit Law

The state Comprehensive Permit Law (Chapter 40B) includes a goal of 10 percent affordable housing in every municipality. Unless a town has deed-restricted housing units affordable to low- and moderate-income households in excess of ten percent of its current total year-round housing units, a developer can submit a Comprehensive Permit application to the Zoning Board of Appeals for an affordable housing project. The Comprehensive Permit consolidates all approvals into one process and

allows a developer to bypass the local zoning bylaw and other Town planning regulations. Chapter 40B projects have been proposed in neighboring towns such as Townsend, but none has yet been filed in Ashby.

Housing units created under Chapter 40B must meet four tests in order to be counted towards that goal:

- The units must be in a development that has been approved for direct state or federal subsidy, for example, through the Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston, or the state Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). With the exception of the Local Initiative Program (LIP), the subsidies are financial. In the case of the LIP, towns work directly with developers but receive technical assistance from DHCD and receive standing as Chapter 40B projects. LIP projects allow towns more flexibility in making decisions about the design and site plan of a project. The state merely has to approve the affordability elements of the project: the incomes of the persons to be housed, the minimum quality of the housing units, fair marketing, and a maximum level of profit.
- At least 25 percent of the units must be restricted to households having incomes at or below 80 percent of the area median income. The units must have rents or sales prices that are restricted to levels that households at those incomes can afford, with housing costs taking up no more than 30% of income. For newly-constructed housing, the affordability restrictions must be in place for at least 15 years.
- The development must be subject to use restrictions and deed restrictions insuring that the units will remain available only to people who have qualifying incomes and these requirements must be monitored by a public agency or a non-profit organization.
- The units must be openly marketed according to fair housing laws. However, within certain limits towns can establish a local preference for their own residents. Typically, potential buyers or tenants participate in a lottery, with extra points given to local residents, town employees or others with connections to the town.

Ashby currently does not have any housing units that meet the Chapter 40B requirement for deed-restricted affordability to households making 80% or below the area median income.

Administrative Changes to Chapter 40B

The legal situation surrounding Chapter 40B is in flux. New regulations were issued in late 2002 that provide for more rapid counting of approved units and of more types of units; more leeway for a town to deny a permit or include conditions if it has an approved affordable housing plan and has made recent progress towards the 10 percent affordable units or if the project is very large in relation to the town's population; and consideration by the Housing Appeals Committee of a community's master plan and affordable housing creation efforts if a developer appeals a denial of a Comprehensive Permit.

A town may submit an Affordable Housing Planned Production Plan to the state Department of Housing and Community Development for approval. An approved affordable housing plan must include:

- A comprehensive housing needs assessment
- Affordable housing goals including the mix of housing, timeframes for the production of units, and the type of use restrictions to be used to insure affordability. The state will not approve a plan restricted to affordable housing for the elderly.
- An affordable housing strategy which may include
 - Zoning areas to be modified to accommodate residential development
 - Identification of specific sites for which comprehensive permit applications would be encouraged
 - Preferred characteristics of development (e.g., cluster development)
 - Identification of municipally-owned parcels for which housing development proposals would be sought

After the affordable housing plan is approved, the town has to show a certain level of production of 40B eligible units in order to receive certification of the plan. If the plan is certified, the town may deny or condition Comprehensive Permits for one year without appeal. Currently, certification requires the production in one year of $\frac{3}{4}$ of 1 percent of the total year-round census units. If 40B-eligible units are created in the amount of 1.5 percent of the total year-round housing units, the town can deny or condition Comprehensive Permits for two years without appeal.

In Ashby's case, certification of compliance with the plan would require production of approximately 8 units. In the absence of a certified plan, Ashby can benefit from having a master plan with an affordable housing component, which now can be considered by the Housing Appeals Committee if a developer appeals a denial or conditional comprehensive permit.

Potential Legislative Changes to 40B

A state Task Force on 40B issued recommendations in June 2003. The State House of Representatives passed a 40B reform bill in May 2004 and the Senate is expected to vote in the summer of 2004. The bill as passed by the House incorporates many of the Task Force recommendations with additional amendments. Major elements of the proposed legislation include the following:

- Affordable ownership units will be counted twice. This provision is retroactive.
- Affordable housing built with Community Preservation Act funding will be counted towards the 40B percentage.
- Recent progress towards the 10% goal, defined as creation of 2 percent of eligible affordable housing, will give a community a one year moratorium on comprehensive permit applications.
- Communities with an approved affordable housing planned production plan may deny comprehensive permit applications for specified periods as follows (fewer units required compared to current regulations):

- ½% of total year round housing units – 1 year period
 - 1% of total year round housing units – 2 year period
 - 1.5% of total year round housing units – 3 year period
- A community that has approved 3 or more comprehensive permits of 20 or more units each in the preceding 12 months may deny the next application for a comprehensive permit.
 - For projects on town borders, communities can have shared hearings, shared infrastructure and services costs, and shared counting towards the 10% goal.

It is expected that the Senate will also pass a 40B reform bill, but whether the provisions will be exactly the same as in the House bill cannot be predicted.

Meeting the 10 percent Chapter 40B goal

The 10% goal for deed-restricted affordable units is calculated on the basis of census-year year-round units – in Ashby’s case, 1000 housing units. This means the Chapter 40B goal for Ashby is 100 affordable housing units. Given the average household size of 2.98 persons, those units could bring an additional 298 people to the town.

Depending on how these units are produced, the goal might increase as the total number of units grows. For example, if 100 affordable ownership units are produced in projects in which 25% of the units are affordable, that means that the total number of new housing units would be 400, thus increasing the 10% goal to 140. Rental projects and projects with higher percentages of affordable units do not have the same impact. Moreover, if the Chapter 40B reform legislation passes with the provision to count ownership units twice, the impact would change again if the affordable housing were ownership housing.

Executive Order 418

Housing Certification through Executive Order 418 is a separate and distinct process from qualifying housing for the Chapter 40B affordable housing inventory. Housing Certification is voluntary, however, certain discretionary state grants, including the Public Works Economic Development grants, will not be available to Ashby if it does not obtain EO 418 Housing Certification. In addition, housing certified communities receive bonus points in grant competitions for open space funds and other environmental grant programs. To be certified, communities must show that they have a strategy to provide housing for low, moderate and middle income households and that units are actually built for households in these income groups.

Unlike 40B, for the purposes of EO 418 qualifying units include not only new units affordable to households with incomes 80 percent and below the median, but also new ownership units affordable to households with up to 150 percent of median income and new rental units affordable to households with up to 100 percent of median income. In the Fitchburg-Leominster area, of which Ashby is a part, this means that middle income ownership units for a family of four can cost up to \$299,759 (well above the Ashby 2002 median single family home price of \$191,450) and middle income rental units can cost up to

\$1,523 a month. Ashby's recent certification request for FY 2004 has been approved on the basis of an addition of 22 ownership units assessed between \$100,000 and \$299,759 during FY 2003.

Current Affordable Housing Activities

Ashby participates in the Montachusett Regional Housing Rehabilitation Program funded by state Community Development Block Grant allocations. This regional rehabilitation program is providing Ashby with up to \$300,000.00 to assist six local homeowners with renovations. The Board of Health also maintains an account to provide low interest loans to upgrade septic systems. Ashby has also participated in several housing programs administered by RCAP Solutions (the new name of Rural Housing Improvement, Inc./RHI): Home Repair and Rehabilitation, Home Ownership and Housing Counseling, and the Home Modifications Loan Program for people with disabilities.

There is no Housing Partnership or affordable housing committee in town, nor is there a local nonprofit development entity. However, RCAP Solutions is a regional nonprofit that could assist Ashby with affordable housing issues.

What Does Affordable Housing Look Like?

Many people have an image of affordable housing that is based on high-rise public housing projects in cities. In fact, affordable housing today takes many other forms, from single family homes to garden apartments. It fits in so well with local character that people in many communities drive by affordable housing every day without realizing it. Examples of affordable housing types are shown below:



From left to right these are a single family home in a mixed-income development in Weston; a multi-family building designed in the vernacular, farmhouse style in Lexington; a duplex in Sudbury; and low-rise garden apartments in Amherst. (Photos courtesy CHAPA.) Affordable housing can be designed to fit into Ashby's rural character.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

HOUSING DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY CHARACTER

Mitigate the effects of Approval-Not-Required (ANR) development.

Because of state law, Ashby has little control over ANR development along road frontage. However, current zoning promotes homogeneity by requiring 200 feet of frontage on two-acre lots in most of Town. There are a few changes that Ashby could make to encourage more variety in how new housing is sited and to preserve the visual character of rural roads.

A bill is currently in the legislature (the Land Use Reform Act) that would eliminate the ANR provision, which is unique to Massachusetts, and modify the grandfathering provisions of the state zoning act (Chapter 40A). The chances of gaining these reforms for communities like Ashby, where ANR development is destroying rural character, is dependent on the willingness of these communities to accept and accommodate a fair share of housing growth and affordable housing.

New zoning and planning tools and new approaches to housing can help Ashby do this while retaining its rural character.

- ***Establish Scenic Roadways*** State law allows towns to establish Scenic Roads (MGL c. 40 sec 15C). Scenic road designation gives a minimum of protection to trees and stone walls within the limits of the road right-of-way only. The Planning Board reviews proposals for removing trees or disturbing stone walls. This does not mean that the trees and walls are completely protected but only that the work must be reviewed in a public hearing and ruling made by the Planning Board.
- ***Road corridor overlay districts.*** The Town could establish an overlay district on both sides of a road corridor in designated areas in which stone walls, natural vegetation, or existing trees and shrubs of a certain size, must be retained within 25 feet of the road except for driveway entrances.
- ***Variable frontage requirements and “backland” zoning.*** ANR development encourages the land along roadways to be developed in shallow strips leaving the “backland” undeveloped. To avoid the consequences of ANR development, Ashby can offer smaller frontage requirements in return for siting homes farther from the road on larger lots than the minimum for the zoning district and requiring that the house not be visible from the road. Significant features in the frontage can be preserved or the resulting land left undeveloped can be protected through conservation easements to prevent further development.

Similarly, backlot zoning permits creation of house lots along a common driveway that goes to the rear of an existing large parcel. For example, a meadow and farm house that front on

the road can be preserved, while some of the land in the rear is sold for house lots. Having a common driveway means there is only one curb cut from the road. This ultimately not only preserves the town character in the view from the road, but it also helps reduce the opportunity for future subdivision development in the backlands.

In order to preserve the rural feel of the landscape for residents who are now used to having large, undeveloped areas at the rear of their properties, zoning changes would need to take into account the need to preserve substantial buffers of natural vegetation at the edges of the parcels where new homes are built.

- *Require retention of significant existing vegetation.* Ashby's current site plan review requirements do not require that the Site Composite Plan show existing vegetation as part of the Natural Site Characteristics. In the Landscape Plan for the proposed development, requirements are limited to showing proposed plantings and using existing vegetation where possible in landscape buffers. The requirements should be modified to require plans that show existing vegetation and the location of significant trees (for example 12 inches DBH [diameter at breast height]) within the area proposed for site modification. Significant trees should be preserved if possible. This information would give the Planning Board the information it needs to evaluate whether existing vegetation is being retained. The Development Impact Statement for subdivisions and site plan review should also explicitly include requirements for impacts on natural vegetation and consultation of the Town's open space and recreation plan to minimize impacts on wildlife habitat and corridors.

Establish Conservation Subdivision Zoning for parcels of 4 acres or more.

Cluster subdivisions, sometimes also called open space or conservation subdivisions allow for flexible siting of homes on a parcel so that larger areas of open space are preserved. In some communities, early versions of cluster bylaws did not include sufficient guidelines to insure that the open space preserved in the project was usable and viable. However, when correctly designed, these kinds of subdivisions can be a powerful tool for communities like Ashby that wish to preserve networks of open space and promote more housing diversity. Because the Town will not be able to preserve all important open space by acquisition, directing potential developers to use this kind of site design within the context of the Town's plan for preferred open space networks will help conserve the rural visual and environmental character of Ashby.

Although Ashby adopted an Open Space Residential Development bylaw at the Spring 2004 Town Meeting applicable to subdivisions of 5 or more house lots, the bylaw as written does not specify a design process. The bylaw gives the Planning Board the discretion to choose either a conventional site plan or a cluster site plan. The lack of more detailed site planning requirements for the cluster provision

may result in a subtle favoring of conventional subdivisions if developers do not make the effort to produce a well-designed cluster site plan. As the Town begins to have experience with this bylaw, it should consider amending the bylaw to include the design process described below.



CONSERVATION SUBDIVISION DESIGN
Conventional Residential Development and
Creative Residential Development in Rural
Areas

Top:

This rural area has a mix of open meadows and forested parcels and a few historic mill villages, as well as streams, ponds, wetlands, and farm fields.



Middle:

Most of this area is zoned for two-acre single family development. The drawing does not show development on areas of poor soils, steep slope and difficult access. Nonetheless, this development pattern results in lowered water quality from polluted runoff, fragmented wildlife habitat, and destruction of scenic vistas.



Bottom:

Two-thirds of the site has been permanently preserved by clustering the same number of houses allowed at the two-acre density on smaller lots at one side of the parcel. Most uses are single family, with provision for a limited number of accessory apartments or duplex units. The houses are clustered in neighborhood groups of 12 to 24 around a public space. Benefits include:

- Conservation restrictions to preserve farm uses and a natural buffer around the stream corridor
- Roads follow the lay of the land
- Shared driveways and parking where possible lower costs and increase yard space

Source: Peter Flinker [Dodson Associates], *South County Design Manual*, 2001

A simple methodology for planning these subdivisions has been developed and publicized by landscape architect Randall Arendt, who uses the name “conservation subdivision design” to emphasize its value as a conservation tool.⁵ Conservation subdivision design has four steps and reverses the process generally used in conventional subdivision design:

- 1) Identify land on the site that should be permanently protected:
 - a. Primary Conservation Area - constrained lands such as wetlands, floodplain and steep slopes
 - b. Secondary Conservation Area - environmental, scenic, and cultural resources such as wildlife corridors, mature woodlands and individual trees, stone walls and farm hedgerows, including attention to key resources and connections identified in the Town Open Space and Recreation Plan

Once these lands are identified, the rest of the site becomes the Potential Development Area. Attention should be given to potential links between the subdivision’s conservation areas and adjacent protected and unprotected open space.

- 2) Locate house sites within the potential development area to maximize views of open space.
- 3) Align streets and trails to serve the houses and provide access to open space.
- 4) Draw in the lot lines.

The advantage of this method is that it first identifies for preservation the most environmentally sensitive and scenic lands for preservation, rather than locating houses and roads first.

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council has prepared a model bylaw under the name Open Space Residential Design that includes the four-step design process described above. The model bylaw includes the following procedural requirements and steps:

- Use of a registered Landscape Architect in the design process
- Encouragement of a pre-application conference with the Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Board of Health and any other appropriate boards or commissions.
- Submission of a Concept Plan made up of a Sketch Plan using the four-part design process and applying the by-law’s design standards and a Yield Plan showing the number of possible lots under a standard subdivision plan
- After Planning Board approval of the Concept Plan, submission of a Site Plan based on the Sketch Plan but fully engineered to include stormwater and wastewater management, utilities and other information required by subdivision rules and regulations.

The design standards include housing types and housing mix, percent of required open space (in the model bylaw, at least 50% of the site must be in contiguous open space and include no more than the

⁵ The most detailed discussion is in his book, *Growing Greener: Putting Conservation into Local Plans and Ordinances*, Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999.

total site percentage of wetlands), buffers to roads and water resources, parking and driveways, screening and landscaping, and so on.

Typically, the total number of units that can be built in a conservation subdivision would be the same number as would be allowed under conventional development and the conservation subdivision by right would be an alternative by-right option. For example, Ashby's current RA zone requires two-acre lots. Therefore, a conservation subdivision on a 10-acre parcel would allow 5 homes in this typical scenario. However, Ashby may wish to offer a slightly higher number of units to encourage use of conservation subdivisions. It could also eliminate conventional subdivisions (except for ANR) altogether and require that all development of more than two houses be clustered, making Conservation Subdivisions the mandatory, by-right subdivision type for all parcels of 4 acres or more. Communities also often establish bonuses to encourage developers to meet a variety of community goals, such as protecting a higher percentage of open space, providing a percentage of affordable units, and providing housing restricted to over-55 occupants. The elements appropriate for Ashby need to be worked out in more detail in the implementation phase of the Community Development Plan.

One of the many concerns that communities face when considering conservation subdivisions is how they can guarantee that quality open space will result. This is accomplished in several ways. Using Arendt's design process, areas important for scenery, wildlife, and cultural preservation are protected, as well as unbuildable wet and steep areas. Many towns require that the open space preserved in the development must not contain more wetland area than the parcel as a whole. In some cases, developers have found it beneficial to preserve more open space than originally planned. For example, in the Old North Mill Development in Hopkinton, the developer eliminated nine lots to save the expense of Conservation Commission filings, infrastructure and carrying costs.

Possible impacts on home values are another potential concern for residents when considering conservation subdivisions. Studies of Massachusetts conservation subdivisions have found that lot size did not make a difference in assessed value of property and resale values have been strong.

Study wastewater management options for Ashby Center that would permit more development.

Ashby's historic center is an obvious place to direct some future residential development, but the center lacks wastewater capacity. Study of the feasibility and financing requirements of a variety of options is needed. Options to consider include package plants, communal wastewater systems that could use land under roads for leaching fields and solar aquatics systems.

Consider establishing zoning and a Transfer of Development Rights program to promote the emergence of a new compact, village center with design standards compatible with Ashby’s character and to encourage small, more compact nodes of housing at major country road intersections.

Ashby could promote the development of a new mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly area for village-style compact housing, including affordable housing and services, in a location that already has food markets and other businesses. This could be done by zoning the area for higher density development with a strong set of standards and guidelines to shape the kind of development that is desired. Country towns often have a clustering of houses around intersections and Ashby could create small overlay districts at designated intersections to promote this kind of hamlet-style settlement pattern.

Because part of the purpose of directing development to a more compact village is to promote the preservation of critical open space, creation of the new village could be coupled with preservation of rural open space by establishment of a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program. In a TDR system, the development rights to one parcel (the sending area) are sold for use on another parcel (the receiving area). It is often difficult to make TDR programs work within a single municipality. TDR programs are most effective when the geographical market is wide enough and the real estate market is large enough to support it. TDR programs also work best when they are paired with complementary rezoning of an area.

If TDR in Ashby were part of an outreach program to owners of critical open space and the linkage made with development of a new residential village, it might be possible to make this tool work for both open space preservation and creation of some compact housing in a village environment. For a type of nodal-village development, it might be better to organize a more hands-on approach through a task force which would be dedicated to achieving certain transfers in order to shape development.

Permit innovative housing types by right, such as co-housing, subject to design guidelines and site plan review.

Cohousing is a type of collaborative housing that began in Denmark in the 1960s and has now spread to the United States. Cohousing communities have private housing units with all amenities for each household but also provide common facilities that often include a kitchen and dining room for community meals, meeting and recreation rooms, space for children, etc. Members of cohousing groups participate in the design and creation of the cohousing community. This kind of housing can fit very well with the rural character of Ashby because cohousing in a rural setting would have a village or farmstead

style of design. It would help break up the homogeneity of building style and siting that conventional development promotes. If this kind of housing were to be permitted by right on parcels of at least 4 acres, it should be made subject to the kind of four-part process that would be required for conservation subdivision zoning and to design standards.

Although cohousing is not widespread, it is a growing phenomenon. In Massachusetts there are seven completed cohousing communities, four that own a site or are building, and three groups that are forming or seeking a site. The completed communities are in Amherst, Acton, West Tisbury, Northampton and Cambridge. If Ashby were to establish a bylaw to encourage cohousing, it could then let organizations such as The Cohousing Association of the United States know that the Town would welcome this kind of development. The idea of trying to attract development might seem to go against the Town’s general desire for as little new development as possible, but the reality is that Ashby will get new residential development and it will be more successful in preserving rural character if it takes action to shape development.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING GOALS

The matrix below suggests a distribution of affordable housing at an average annual production level of 12 units a year, which would bring 120 units of permanently affordable housing to Ashby over ten years. The mix of unit types is intended to ensure that there will be some affordable housing units for senior citizens, for families, and for other household sizes. The emphasis is on creating affordable rental units because that is a type of housing in short supply in Ashby.

Affordable Housing: Unit Mix Goals	Units per year over 10 yrs	Total over 10 yrs
Accessory apartments for low and moderate income households	2	20
Senior affordable rental units for low and moderate income households	5	50
Small scale rental units affordable to low and moderate income households	3	30
Ownership units - single family homes for low and moderate income households	2	20
Total	12	120

Establish the Ashby Housing Partnership to focus on promoting affordable housing

Housing Partnerships are volunteer groups, usually appointed by Boards of Selectmen, which take the lead in planning for affordable housing. Membership should include people with appropriate interest and expertise, such as public officials, business and community leaders, attorneys, realtors, clergy, and

Housing Authority representatives. The activities of the Housing Partnership would likely include the following:

- Increasing public awareness through forums and other public events
- Establishing criteria to evaluate affordable housing proposals
- Making recommendations on the pros and cons of particular housing proposals
- Identifying public and private resources to further development
- Locating available land suitable for development
- Reviewing land use regulations and zoning bylaws
- Working with developers of affordable housing

Seek technical assistance from the Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP).

MHP has assisted many communities in creating effective Housing Partnerships and creating affordable housing that is compatible with community character. It also can provide pre-development funding, technical assistance, bridge financing and assistance to communities in working on Chapter 40B proposals.

Inventory and study the feasibility of using town-owned parcels and buildings for affordable housing.

The cost of land is often one of the barriers to affordable housing creation. If the town can offer land or buildings as a contribution to an affordable housing project, it reduces the cost of production. Ashby does not own large amounts of property but there may be opportunities for the town to contribute on a small scale.

Create senior housing with the assistance of the regional nonprofit housing developer and federal funding.

RCAP Solutions, the regional affordable housing nonprofit, has helped neighboring communities like Townsend create affordable senior housing using federal funding (HUD 202 funds). RCAP Solutions can also help Ashby evaluate the feasibility of developing small-scale, 4-5 unit buildings for seniors, perhaps in the proposed new village.

Explore the possibility of a “friendly 40B” or Local Initiative Program project on town-owned property or private property.

The Department of Housing and Community Development’s Local Initiative Program provides technical assistance to local communities that produce affordable units and counts them towards the Chapter 40B inventory, while allowing a greater degree of flexibility than is available for projects with direct financial subsidies.

Establish inclusionary/incentive zoning for subdivisions.

Inclusionary zoning requires a developer to provide a certain percentage of affordable units within a development of a certain number of housing units. For example, Ashby could require that developers of 10 or more units be required to provide 10 percent affordable units. The Town could also provide for a payment to an affordable housing fund or trust in lieu of providing the actual units, which would help create funding for creation of affordable units. Because Ashby does not have many large subdivisions – at least not now -- inclusionary zoning will not immediately create a large number of units, but it should still be pursued as part of an overall affordable housing strategy. Incentive zoning provides density bonuses in return for the inclusion of affordable housing. Without an incentive, for example, one additional market rate unit for every affordable unit created, developers may prefer to build a smaller number of larger and more expensive units just under the threshold. If the threshold for inclusionary zoning were to be 10 units, developers might make a point of building subdivisions of 9 units. The town would then still be accommodating more market rate housing, but without the benefit of affordable housing.

Amend zoning to permit accessory units by right and new duplex housing by right if one unit is permanently affordable.

Ashby currently allows accessory units by special permit. Permitting accessory units by right, subject to an abbreviated site plan review process, would expand the variety of housing options in Ashby. An incentive to create permanently affordable housing in scattered sites, so that it would be easily integrated into the community, would be to allow duplex housing (currently prohibited) as long as one of the units has a deed restriction for permanent affordability.

Allow affordable single family or two-family affordable housing on substandard parcels.

Parcels that lack required size or frontage but that otherwise provide necessary water and wastewater capacity could be made legal lots for building affordable units or duplexes in which one unit is affordable.

Adopt the state law on tax title properties that provides for forgiveness of taxes owed to developers of affordable housing.

Municipalities can adopt a state law that allows them to forgive taxes owed on tax title properties if a new owner will develop affordable housing. Although there may not be many opportunities of this type in Ashby, it is worthwhile to have this tool should an opportunity arise.

Study creation of a new community land trust for affordable housing or expand the mission of the existing Ashby Land Trust to include projects that combine limited development (including affordable housing) and conservation.

Community Land Trusts keep permanent ownership of land and lease it for the creation of affordable housing. The homeowner or owner of a rental building does not own the land, which is typically provided in a renewable 99-year low rent lease. The low cost of land then makes it possible for the home to be sold at affordable prices or rents to be set at affordable rates. This could be another option whereby Ashby could simultaneously accommodate the need for affordable housing with the preservation of open space and avoidance of conventional, suburban-style development.

Explore the feasibility of tax abatements on existing homes occupied by income-eligible households in return for affordability agreements.

The Town of Marion is developing a program for local homeowners whose incomes are at 80 percent or below the regional median in which they would receive tax abatements in return for affordability agreements that would make the homes eligible for the 40B inventory. In this way the Town would be able to increase its supply of permanently affordable housing without increasing the total number of housing units. The program will require state approval. Ashby could consider a similar program.

C. HOUSING AND RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT MAP

Map 5: Housing Opportunities This map identifies parcels that are built out according to current zoning and parcels that still have development capacity. The parcels less than 4 acres that have a house on them but could be subdivided and the vacant parcels less than 4 acres are suggested for variable frontage/backlot zoning to help retain the rural character of Ashby's roadways. Parcels greater than 4 acres that are subdividable or vacant are suggested for mandatory, by-right conservation subdivision zoning. These parcels would also be the potential sending area for a Transfer of Development Rights

program. A series of small intersections are suggested as suitable for clusters of housing on one-half to one acre lots, with an allowance for duplexes as long as one of the units is permanently affordable. Finally, the existing RC zone on Route 31 is suggested as a location for a new village center that would function as the receiving area for a Transfer of Development Rights program. The new village could include affordable elderly housing, one-quarter acre zoning, building with up to 4 units and housing above shops.

D. Housing Action Plan			Priority	Time Line	Responsibility
<i>Goals</i>	<i>Policies</i>	<i>Strategies</i>	H (High) M (Medium) L (Low)	S (Short: to 2 yrs) M (Medium: 2-5 yrs) L (Long: over 5 yrs)	
Shape housing development to preserve rural character	Mitigate the effects of ANR development	Establish Scenic Roadways	M	S	Town Meeting (TM)
		Establish road corridor overlay districts 25 ft from the road edge to retain existing vegetation and stone walls except for curb cuts	H	S	Planning Board (PB); TM
		In designated areas, establish backlot zoning and smaller frontage requirements in return for siting homes in back land where they are not visible from the road and use common driveways.	H	S	PB; TM
		Establish Conservation Subdivision Zoning by right for parcels of 4 acres or more	H	S	PB
		Require the retention of significant existing vegetation in site plan review	H	S	PB
		Study the feasibility of wastewater management options for Ashby Center that would permit more development	M	M	Board of Selectmen (BoS); TM
		Consider establishing zoning and a Transfer of Development Rights Program for a new compact village center and village nodes with design standards	M	M	PB; TM
		Establish the Ashby Housing Partnership to focus on promoting affordable housing	H	S	BoS
Provide for permanently affordable housing to provide options to senior citizens, young people, and others needing moderately-priced housing and		Seek technical assistance from the Massachusetts Housing Partnership	H	S	Housing Partnership
		Inventory and study the feasibility of using town owned land or buildings for affordable housing	H	S	Housing Partnership
		Create senior housing with the assistance of RCAP Solutions and federal funding	H	M	Housing Partnership; BoS

D. Housing Action Plan			Priority	Time Line	Responsibility
<i>Goals</i>	<i>Policies</i>	<i>Strategies</i>	H (High) M (Medium) L (Low)	S (Short: to 2 yrs) M (Medium: 2-5 yrs) L (Long: over 5 yrs)	
to meet Chapter 40B goals		Explore the possibility of a “friendly 40B” or Local Initiative Program project on town-owned or private property	M	L	Housing Partnership
Provide for permanently affordable housing to provide options to senior citizens, young people, and others needing moderately-priced housing and to meet Chapter 40B goals (continued)		Establish inclusionary / incentive zoning for subdivisions	M	M	PB; TM
		Amend zoning to permit accessory units by right and new duplex housing by right if one unit is permanently affordable	H	S	PB; TM
		Allow affordable single family or two-family housing on substandard size parcels	H	S	PB; TM
		Adopt the state law on tax title properties that promotes affordable housing creation in return for forgiveness of taxes owed	L	S	PB; TM
		Study creation of a new Community Land Trust or expansion of the mission of the Ashby Land Trust	M	M	Housing Partnership; Land Trust
		Explore the feasibility of tax abatements on existing homes for income-eligible households who agree to permanent affordability agreements	M	M	Housing Partnership; TM

VII. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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The Vision for Economic Development

- In addition to many thriving home businesses, Ashby has small-scale businesses in clusters – not strip-style development -- on limited portions of Route 31 (Ashby State Road / Main Street / Greenville Road). Visitors come to Ashby for its equestrian centers and nature-based recreational activities. Several new businesses, such as outdoor sports outfitters and bed and breakfast businesses have been established to serve these visitors and local residents. Tourism in Ashby relies on the abundance of the town's high quality natural resources and preservation of its historic New England character.
- People meet their neighbors for daily socializing in the Town Center and regularly gather at the historic Town Common for community events. Environmentally sensitive technologies have permitted establishment of a restaurant and a few other new businesses in the Town Center to serve residents and visitors.

Assets, Liabilities, Opportunities

Assets

- Many home based businesses
- Equestrian centers
- Nature-based recreational opportunities, e.g., hiking, snowmobiling, hunting, fishing
- Summer camps
- Potential for new business based on recreational resources, equestrian activities, bicycle routes and related tourism
- Potential for antique stores similar to Townsend

Liabilities

- Non-residential land uses provide only 5% of tax base
- Limited commercial and industrial land available
- Existing commercial zones back into wetlands
- Zoning promotes strip-style commercial development
- Village center dependence on septic systems makes new businesses, such as restaurants, unlikely with conventional techniques
- Population base is small for additional retail businesses

GOALS

- Explore the economic potential of alternative resource-based activities
- Expand the nonresidential tax base, consistent with town character
- Enhance business opportunities in Ashby Center
- Provide economic opportunities for Ashby residents to improve skills and jobs

A. CURRENT CONDITIONS

Ashby is now a predominantly residential community. In colonial times Ashby began as a trading and trapping post, developing later into a community dependent on lumbering, sawmills, dairying, poultry farming and fructiculture. The Town's scenery and nature attracted a small seasonal community on the shores of the Ashby reservoir as well as summer camps. Ashby never developed great wealth or became an employment center. The hilly terrain, thin soils and isolation from other communities and transportation corridors have all constrained growth throughout its history. By the end of the twentieth century, resource-based economic activities were limited to haying and a few specialties like Christmas tree farming. Most residents now work outside the Town, though there are also home-based businesses, which are becoming even more viable in the age of high-speed telecommunications. Ashby has remained a rural town with a small economic base, and there are limited opportunities for significant economic growth.

Ashby's economic fortunes have been linked with its southern neighbor, the City of Fitchburg. Located on regional road and rail routes, Fitchburg developed into a strong manufacturing center during the industrial revolution. The City continues to provide many jobs for Ashby residents, despite economic setbacks in recent decades.

The small size of Ashby's economic base means that changes in a single business can have large impacts on aggregate statistics. When there are few businesses in an economic sector, state and federal reporting agencies suppress the information for reasons of confidentiality. In many cases, census data has been shielded to prevent the ready identification of individual businesses or persons. These small sample sizes translate into substantial volatility in many indices, in many cases reflecting individual decisions and the fortunes of a few employees or businesses. Caution must be exercised when trying to deduce larger trends and import from this limited and incomplete data set.

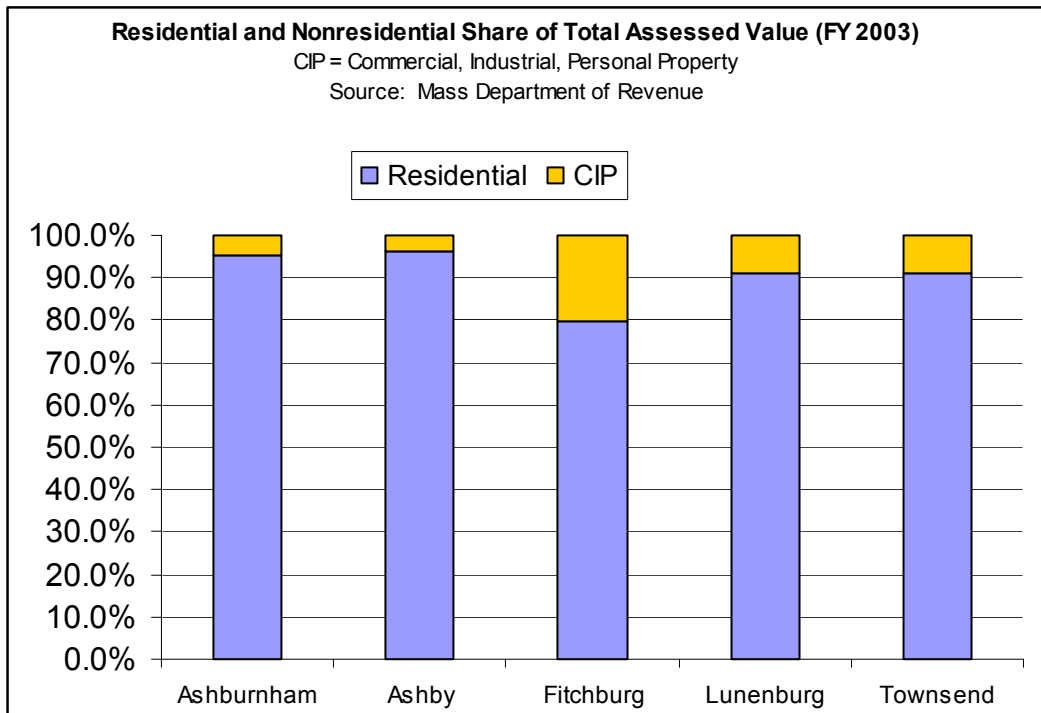
This limited business spectrum consequently affords substantial opportunity for the actions of a single business or a few people to have profound impacts on job growth and business fortunes, economic activity and tax contributions. Small investments, or the courting and support of a few employers, may lead to a remarkable spike in economic activity, substantially improving the local economy.

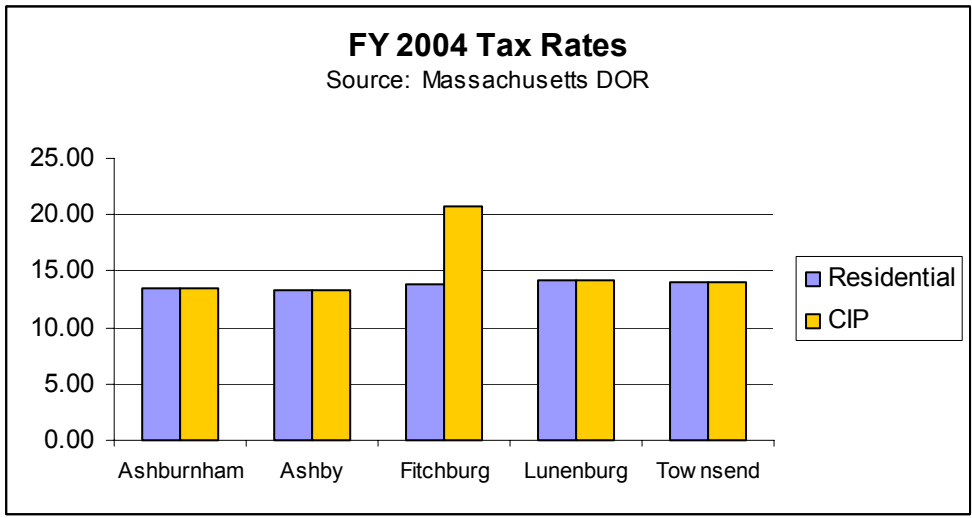
Business Property and Taxes

The value of Ashby's nonresidential tax base increased 75% between 1990 and 2003, but the residential tax base grew slightly more at 83%. The business share of the tax base, including personal property, has consistently ranged from 5.6% to 4.9% during the same period. Among Ashby's immediate neighbors in Massachusetts, all except Fitchburg had a less than 10% share of nonresidential property value in 2003.

Ashby Assessed Value by Property Class							
FY	Residential	Commercial	Industrial	Personal Property	Total	Residential	CIP
						% of Total	% of Total
1990	118,954,510	4,082,373	935,280	1,329,009	125,301,172	94.9	5.1
1991	120,672,474	4,155,369	935,280	1,345,409	127,108,532	94.9	5.1
1992	122,233,980	3,686,893	984,660	1,607,474	128,513,007	95.1	4.9
1993	112,626,270	3,600,432	777,739	1,688,375	118,692,816	94.9	5.1
1994	114,646,032	3,728,026	777,739	1,885,990	121,037,787	94.7	5.3
1995	118,789,933	2,787,620	777,739	2,293,775	124,649,067	95.3	4.7
1996	119,355,506	3,124,098	777,739	2,193,049	125,450,392	95.1	4.9
1997	115,242,000	3,756,200	664,100	2,267,000	121,929,300	94.5	5.5
1998	117,845,900	3,862,000	678,700	2,512,500	124,899,100	94.4	5.6
1999	126,421,700	4,334,000	705,500	2,508,500	133,969,700	94.4	5.6
2000	138,584,800	3,889,200	688,700	2,654,100	145,816,800	95.0	5.0
2001	152,853,900	4,951,500	672,300	2,957,400	161,435,100	94.7	5.3
2002	174,442,100	6,125,100	627,600	3,088,300	184,283,100	94.7	5.3
2003	217,615,600	7,186,600	687,100	3,264,500	228,753,800	95.1	4.9

Source: Mass DOR





If we eliminate the contribution of personal property to the tax base, the commercial and industrial valuation in 2003 made up only 3.4% of total property value. Total commercial and industrial valuation was less than \$8 million, about twice the value of the forty-seven properties in the three state Chapter 61 tax abatement programs for lands devoted to farming, forestry or recreational uses (\$3.5 million). Given the relatively small portion of the town zoned for commercial and industrial uses, and the constraints imposed by soils, geography and Ashby's relatively isolated location, it would be difficult to increase the amount of commercial and industrial value significantly. Substantial increase in the amount or proportion that the business sector contributes would require large efforts, long range planning, and likely entail an unacceptable erosion of existing rural character.

Commercial uses now account for five times the value of Industrial properties, with 2.7% and 0.5% of total valuation respectively. There are 23 properties categorized as mixed use residential, amounting to \$3.7 million in value, compared to 8 properties and \$1.5 million of mixed use commercial uses. These uses exceed by some 50% the combined values of the 17 commercial and six Industrial properties, at \$2.1 million and \$0.7 million respectively. Four vacant commercial parcels add another \$52,000.

The state-sponsored buildout analysis performed by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) identified 25 remaining buildable lots in the Residence/Commercial district, plus the Industrial district as available for commercial or industrial development. The total commercial/industrial potential buildout comes to less than 1.5 million square feet of new building area, on all floors. That buildout is substantially more than currently exists, but even if fully developed might not essentially alter the overall ratio of values between business and residential properties. Over the near to mid term, it is quite likely that residential share of property values will continue to be approximately 95%.

Commercial and Industrial Land Use and Zoning

A small fraction of Ashby is currently zoned to permit non-farm businesses of any kind, in four areas and three zoning classifications. The R residential zone encompassing the town center area, at four percent (4%) of overall area, is several times larger than the other business zones combined. The R area contains nearly all of the traditional retail and service businesses of the town. The R district is bracketed to the east and the west by the Residential/Commercial district (1% of town area) which has more relaxed regulations for roadside businesses, but has not seen much development interest. The I Industrial district has one rectangular area of several parcels to the west side of Route 31, just north of Fitchburg. Overall, it amounts to less than one-half of one percent of the Town's area. The Industrial district has attracted two moderately sized businesses, and still has the majority of its land available for additional development.

Most of the available roadside frontage in the R district near town center is already developed, though predominately with residential and some municipal uses. A few undeveloped sites exist to the east. The R-C district near Fitchburg also has several undeveloped roadside parcels. For these districts to attract a substantial amount of new development, substantial redevelopment of existing properties and conversion of residences to businesses would be required. In the Town Center area the existing septic burden and small parcel structure abruptly limits the amount and intensity of new uses that could be received. Changes to waste treatment handling, requiring a change from the current individual septic systems would be a minimum requirement.

Within the R district, most of the parcels are of fairly small size, while zoning is for one acre lots. Most of the primary roadside is already developed, mainly with residences, and the most advantageous commercial locations have generally already been developed.

The one percent of land zoned R-C or I does have desirable frontage available. The districts closest to Fitchburg also have the benefit of somewhat higher traffic volumes and proximity to the business and residential districts of Fitchburg. The Industrial district is estimated to contain the potential to hold another 881,000 sf of construction, nearly sixty percent of the combined business buildout. The sites, however, are geographically constrained by a combination of hilly terrain and wetlands, which provide limits to development. The roadway linkage leading from Fitchburg center also has a narrow, winding and generally residential aspect, and requires passing by other commercial enterprises in Fitchburg which would siphon off some of the potential clientele.

Lack of Town Water and sewer limits siting possibilities and intensity of land use. Much of the land zoned for commercial purposes perks poorly, has small lot sizes, and is close to water bodies and developed residential areas. Extensive constraints to commercial development are present in the Town Center area, where likely enterprises, such as bed and breakfasts, restaurants and small shops, are all hampered by septic limitations.

Businesses and Employers

No business in Ashby can be considered large. When the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission surveyed towns for “major industries,” defined as having gross yearly earnings of \$5 million or more, none were identified in Ashby. According to the most recent data available, in 2001 Ashby had 48 employers and 57 establishments, not including the estimated 150-some self-employed and home based businesses. Sixty percent of businesses are in the service sector (29 of 48 employers). The goods-producing sector totaled 19 businesses, including eight in the category of Special Trade Contractors, and six in the category of General Building Contractors. The total number of businesses in Ashby has varied over the past twenty years from the low forties to low sixties, with the peak occurring in 1983 and the valley in 1994. In six of the past seventeen years there were declines, year on year, in the number of establishments.

Ashby Goods and Service Producing Industries – Quarter Ending December 2001				
SIC Code	Industry	Number of Employers	Employment	Average Weekly Wage
Service Producing Industries				
42	Trucking And Warehousing	***	***	***
50	Wholesale Trade – Durable Goods	3	11	1,192.00
51	Wholesale Trade – Nondurable Goods	***	***	***
54	Food Stores	***	***	***
55	Automotive Dealers And Service Stations	4	12	424
58	Eating And Drinking Places	***	***	***
64	Insurance Agents, Brokers, And Service	***	***	***
73	Business Services	***	***	***
75	Auto Repair, Services, And Parking	***	***	***
76	Miscellaneous Repair Services	***	***	***
82	Educational Services	***	***	***
83	Social Services	***	***	***
86	Membership Organizations	***	***	***
87	Engineering And Management Services	***	***	***
88	Private Households	***	***	***
Total For All Service Producing Industries		29	97	\$585.42
Goods Producing Industries				
13	Oil And Gas Extraction	***	***	***
15	General Building Contractors	6	13	439
16	Heavy Construction Except Building	***	***	***
17	Special Trade Contractors	8	20	518
24	Lumber And Wood Products Except Furniture	***	***	***
35	Industrial Machinery And Equipment	***	***	***
Total For All Goods Producing Industries		19	56	\$525.20
Total For All Industries		48	153	\$563.38

Jobs

In 2001, Ashby had 238 jobs in all categories, of which 43% were government jobs (including school employment). A total of 97 jobs in the service sector paid an average weekly wage of \$585, slightly above the average for all jobs. The goods-producing sector employed 56 persons, of whom 20 worked for Special Trade Contractors and 13 for General Contractors. Average wage in this sector was \$525 per week. In many cases, because there are only one or two businesses in specific economic sectors, data on employment are not published in order to preserve confidentiality. The data also is limited by the fact that it is collected from employers who are subject to the unemployment compensation laws. Sole proprietor businesses are not likely to be included.

The 238 Ashby jobs in 2001 represent the highest number of jobs since the 1989 peak of 243 jobs. The fewest jobs were recorded in 1992. There is high fluctuation in the number of jobs from year to year but relative stability over the long term. Ashby's share of regional employment has remained steady at about 1.35% of the Montachusett region total over the past decade, while the population has grown.

Jobs in Ashby									
Year	Total	Agriculture Forestry Fishing	Government	Construction	Manufacturing	TCPU*	Trade	FIRE*	Services
1985	165	0	46	31	21	4	40	Conf.	18
1986	174	Conf.	46	47	14	4	43	Conf.	16
1987	186	Conf.	48	53	11	4	35	Conf.	28
1988	194	Conf.	55	61	10	4	23	Conf.	34
1989	243	Conf.	62	45	51	Conf.	26	5	40
1990	191	Conf.	35	35	44	Conf.	35	Conf.	35
1991	158	0	23	33	32	Conf.	26	Conf.	39
1992	142	0	30	30	31	Conf.	18	Conf.	30
1993	166	Conf.	33	27	44	Conf.	29	Conf.	29
1994	160	0	36	23	43	Conf.	33	Conf.	22
1995	205	0	77	21	37	Conf.	41	Conf.	26
1996	214	0	86	22	39	Conf.	34	Conf.	28
1997	232	0	106	20	39	Conf.	32	Conf.	28
1998	228	0	117	24	29	Conf.	30	Conf.	21
1999	220	0	115	25	14	4	32	Conf.	27
2000	229	0	105	35	16	Conf.	34	Conf.	32
2001	238	0	102	33	14	0	37	0	40

TCPU = Transportation, Construction, Public Utilities FIRE = Finance, Insurance, Real Estate

"Conf" = "Confidential" because of the small number of businesses involved.

Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Division of Employment and Training (ES-202 series)

The service-producing sector (including trade) will likely continue to offer more employment than the goods-producing sector. In this, it will follow long standing national trends on the overall

transformation of the economy away from manufacturing enterprises. Service businesses will be needed to cater to the needs of a growing, aging and isolated local population, and will also be needed for any upturns in recreational, hobby and vacationing visitors.

Over the past decade an average of eleven persons were added to Ashby's employment base each year, representing 45% job growth over the decade. Barring explosive residential demand, and associated demand for local employment, it is most probable that prior conditions will tend to drive job creation. In twenty years there might be a doubling of local employment. However, given Ashby's position distant to economic centers, this rate could also be considerably optimistic. The MRPC projects no growth in retail employment in Ashby to 2025. However, the agency projects that the number of non-retail jobs could double between 2000 and 2010 and then grow much more slowly to 2020 and 2025.

<i>Industries in Ashby in Order of Total Employment 2001</i>		
SIC Code	Industry	Employment
17	Special Trade Contractors	20
82	Educational Services	***
15	General Building Contractors	13
55	Automotive Dealers And Service Stations	12
50	Wholesale Trade – Durable Goods	11
35	Industrial Machinery And Equipment	***
87	Engineering And Management Services	***
59	Miscellaneous Retail	***
83	Social Services	***
16	Heavy Construction Except Building	***
54	Food Stores	***
86	Membership Organizations	***
13	Oil And Gas Extraction	***
51	Wholesale Trade – Nondurable Goods	***
73	Business Services	***
24	Lumber And Wood Products Except Furniture	***
42	Trucking And Warehousing	***
64	Insurance Agents, Brokers, And Service	***
65	Real Estate	***
70	Hotels And Other Lodging Places	***
75	Auto Repair, Services, And Parking	***
76	Miscellaneous Repair Services	***
88	Private Households	***

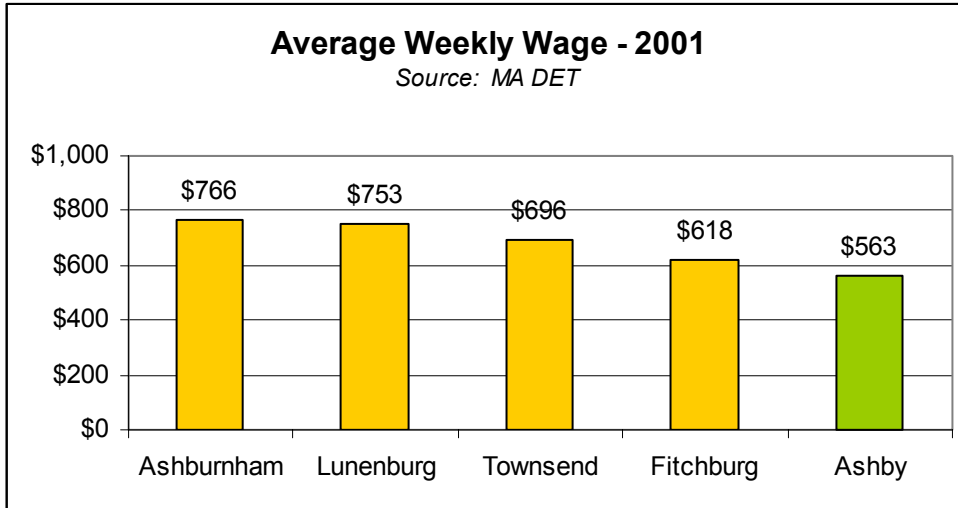
The future trends for the region suggest that there will be continued moderate increases in economic activity. While manufacturing is generally continuing its decline, niche businesses such as specialty plastics have retained their viability. Some of this growth may be driven by continuing residential

construction and population inflows attracted by moderate housing prices and quality of life. Fitchburg has taken steps to move from a declining manufacturing base, while protecting viable existing businesses, towards a more highly skilled, knowledge-based economy. Fitchburg State University, other educational facilities, downtown revitalization efforts and the City's position as a transportation hub have bolstered these efforts to spark Fitchburg's regeneration. For communities like Ashby at the eastern end of the Montachusett region, increased economic development on the Route 2 and Interstate 495 corridors will likely be the primary regional economic engines for the foreseeable future.

Wages

During the 1985-2001 period, average annual pay in Ashby reached an all time peak of \$28,272 per year in 2001, up 26 percent from \$22,445 in 1999. Wages rose 35 percent in the decade between 1989 and 1999, from \$16,583 to \$22,445. Average annual wages paid in Ashby in both 2000 and 2001 increased by approximately \$3,000 per year, a substantial change from the relatively flat period since 1996, when wages had reached \$24,477. Some job sectors pay far more highly than state or national averages, but the preponderance of lower paid jobs suppresses the overall income of Ashby jobs.

Year	Total Annual Payroll (\$)	Average Annual Wage (\$)	Establishments
1985	2,071,600	12,555	46
1986	2,263,000	13,606	57
1987	2,425,100	13,038	63
1988	2,923,100	15,067	60
1989	4,029,685	16,583	63
1990	3,433,063	17,974	59
1991	3,414,160	21,609	56
1992	2,907,682	20,477	45
1993	3,101,447	18,683	45
1994	2,908,615	18,179	42
1995	4,871,095	23,761	47
1996	5,238,160	24,477	54
1997	5,153,768	22,215	49
1998	5,217,575	22,884	52
1999	4,937,942	22,445	47
2000	5,900,123	25,765	51
2001	6,728,816	28,272	57
Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Division of Employment and Training (ES-202 series)			

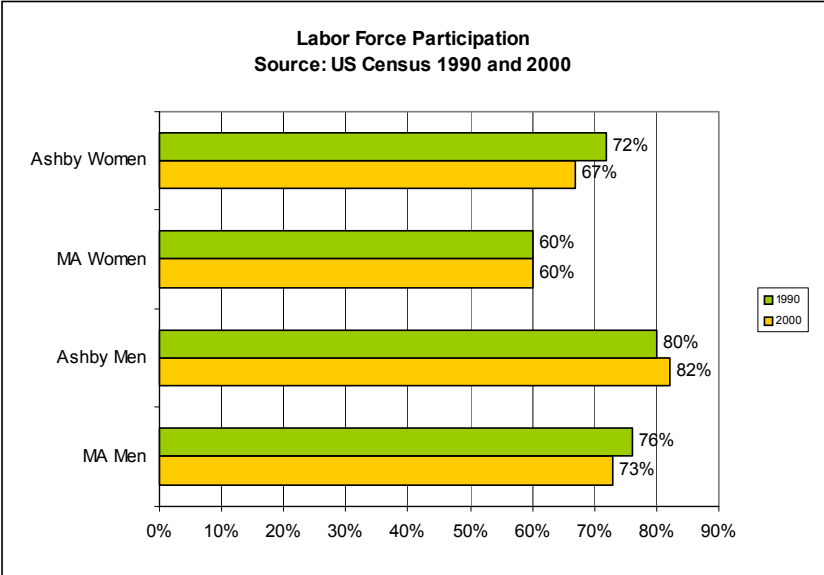
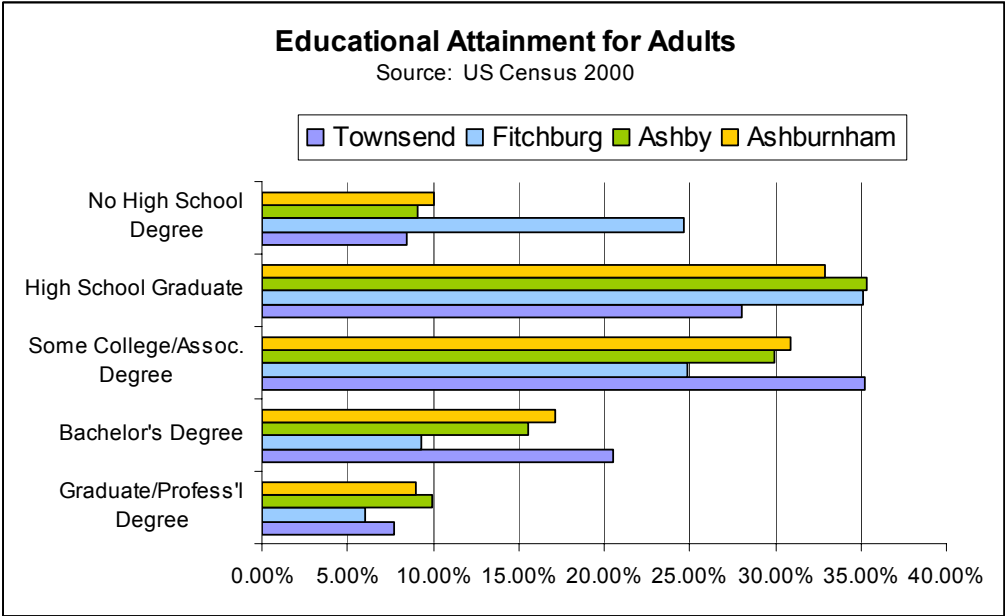


Labor Force Characteristics

Ashby's labor force is over six times bigger than the number of jobs in town (1,541 compared to 238 in 2000). With the long term decline of farming, forestry and other land based endeavors only slightly offset by recent local and regional gains, Ashby's residents have typically had to seek employment elsewhere in the Montachusett area, particularly in Fitchburg. Residents' employment has traditionally been oriented towards labor and production, with a low proportion of professional positions. That distribution is still in effect, but changing. As employment centers have become established along Interstate 495 and Route 2 and as longer commutes to work have become less arduous and more typical, Ashby has become more desirable as a residential community for professional and management employees. The increase in housing prices in metropolitan Boston encourages people to locate at greater distances from their jobs ("drive till you qualify").

Newer arrivals to Ashby are more likely to work in service profession positions throughout the region, gaining higher wages. Those employed within Ashby or in trade and manufacturing jobs nearby are likely to be less well compensated. Continued residential development will likely continue to attract higher income, professionally oriented families to locate in Ashby. Higher income households tend to be employed in higher wage service and professional specialties. As economic recovery solidifies and becomes widespread, Ashby will find that greater numbers of more highly skilled and highly paid jobs will be ever closer. With this ongoing, long term restructuring of the regional and local economy, it may become possible for new types of businesses to successfully become established in Ashby, for the overall local economy to strengthen, and for there to be a substantial rise in local employment.

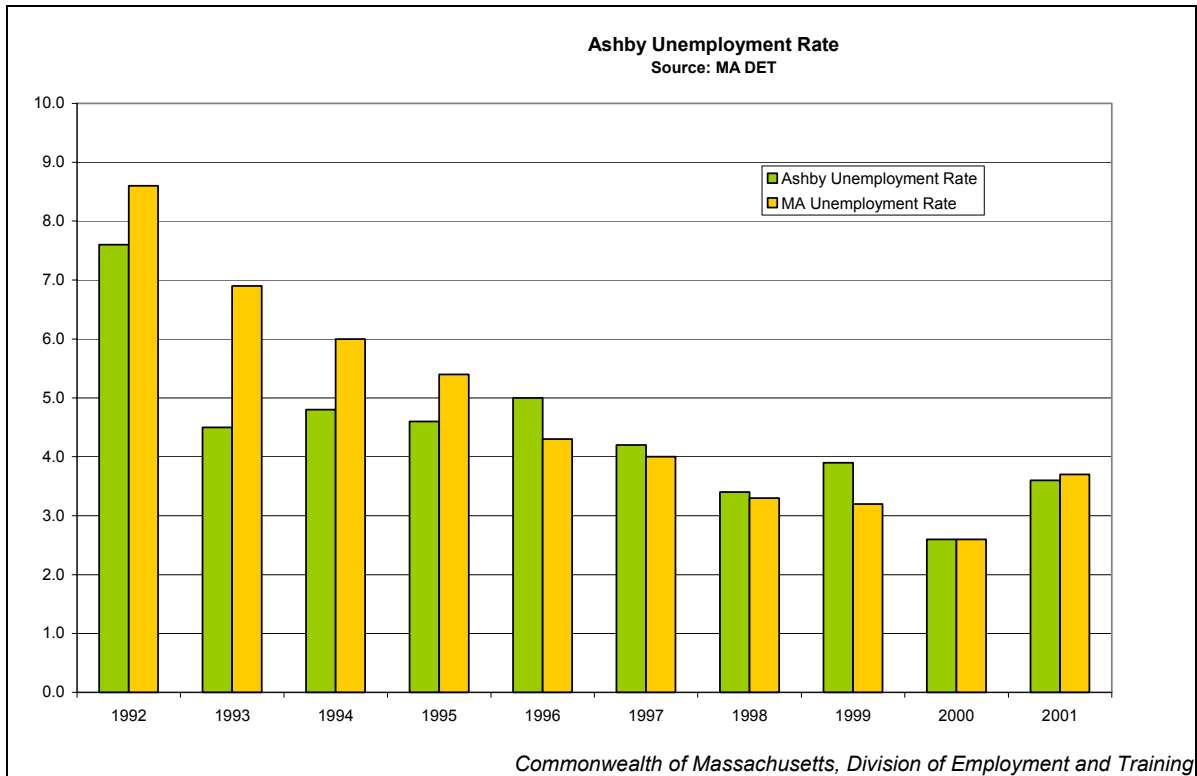
Ashby's labor force mirrors that of the region and state in education and income. Almost a third of the population has at least some college education.



Employment and Unemployment

Ashby's unemployment rate has been higher than the state rate during recessions and very close to the state rate during boom periods. The Montachusett region as a whole has tended to fall closer to the national unemployment rate and somewhat higher than the prevailing Massachusetts rate. Ashby residents have access to employment training resources in nearby Fitchburg, such as Fisher Junior College, the Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School and Fitchburg State College.

<i>Labor Force, Employment, and Unemployment in Ashby</i>					
	Labor Force	Employment	Unemployment	Unemployment Rate	Statewide Rate
1983	1,110	996	114	10.30%	6.90%
1984	1,097	1,026	71	6.50%	4.80%
1985	1,094	1,036	58	5.30%	3.90%
1986	1,084	1,024	60	5.50%	3.80%
1987	1,088	1,036	52	4.80%	3.20%
1988	1,406	1,364	43	3.10%	3.30%
1989	1,382	1,333	49	3.50%	4.00%
1990	1,528	1,430	98	6.40%	6.00%
1991	1,554	1,395	159	10.20%	9.10%
1992	1,565	1,446	119	7.60%	8.60%
1993	1,580	1,509	71	4.50%	6.90%
1994	1,633	1,554	79	4.80%	6.00%
1995	1,557	1,485	72	4.60%	5.40%
1996	1,571	1,493	78	5.00%	4.30%
1997	1,612	1,544	68	4.20%	4.00%
1998	1,596	1,542	54	3.40%	3.30%
1999	1,600	1,538	62	3.90%	3.20%
2000	1,541	1,501	40	2.60%	2.60%
2001	1,541	1,485	56	3.60%	3.70%
Note: Employment within this data series is measured by place of residence, rather than by place of employment.					
Note: Changes in labor market area definitions occurred in 1990, and changes in methodology occurred in 1987, so data prior to those years is not strictly comparable to more recent data.					



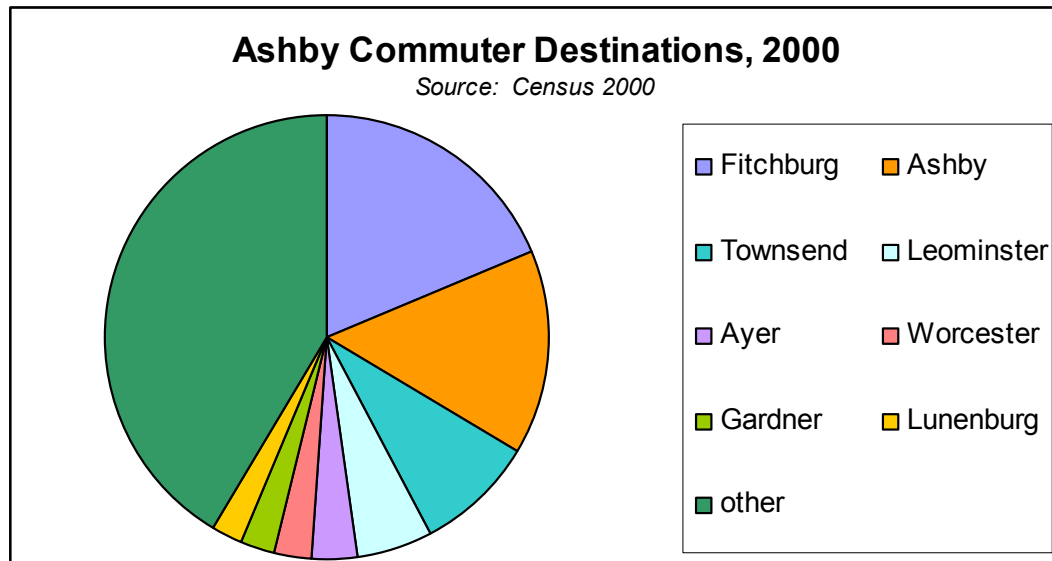
Census data indicate that 15 percent of Ashby’s workforce works in Ashby, accounting for 225 of the 229 persons employed in town, effectively 100%. Generally, somewhere around one-fifth of the labor

force finds employment within the town. This suggests that there is not great regional competition or desire for jobs currently located in Ashby. This lack of competition could be related to lower pay rates, difficulty of access, or lack of awareness of potential job openings, leading to resident’s monopolization of jobs within its borders. Even if the data sets are incomplete and overlook a significant number of local jobs, this remains a remarkably strong allocation of jobs to residents. Since most local businesses are family or resident owned, and there is a long term pattern of family retention in Ashby, resident dominance of the local job market is understandable. This can certainly be expected to continue in the near future, and possibly beyond.

Ashby Journey to Work - Census 2000		
<i>Commuter Destination</i>	#	%
Fitchburg	280	19%
Ashby	228	15%
Townsend	129	9%
Leominster	83	6%
Ayer	52	3%
Worcester	39	3%
Gardner	38	3%
Lunenburg	34	2%
Marlboro	33	2%
Littleton	33	2%
Nashua NH	31	2%
Westminster	31	2%
Pepperell	28	2%
Concord	25	2%
Boston-Cambridge	40	3%
Northboro	18	1%
Groton	16	1%
Billerica	16	1%
other	353	23%
	1507	100%

According to the 2000 census, 76 workers (16 years old or older) worked at home, an increase of 12 since 1990. Home workers make up 5% of the Ashby labor force, more than the 3.1% of Massachusetts workers who work at home but not atypical of communities in the region, such as Groton, also with

5% home workers, Lunenburg with 4.6% and Harvard with 6.3%. In the future, the ranks of home based businesses may be swelled by professionals in white collar occupations who can conduct their work at a distance from their clientele through electronic communication.



Future Economic Profile

The economic profile of Ashby is not likely to change significantly in the foreseeable future. Even if the number of businesses were to double, this would bring the total to less than 120, with employment of less than 500 persons, and a contribution to Town finances of only ten percent. However, this is unlikely to occur in the near term. Business expansion will most likely be seen on the basis of increases within existing businesses and the gradual addition of new establishments. While there have been several year to year increases or losses of up to six businesses, the average is more on the order of three per year. The change in number of businesses is only moderately linked to the economy, shown by the lowest number attained in 1994, and the decline from 52 to 47 in 1997-98, during a period of significant regional economic growth.

Many businesses in Ashby may largely be economically unproductive, generating only sufficient revenues for the employment of the owner and a limited staff. With an average employment of approximately four persons or fewer per establishment, it is difficult to realize economies of scale or to leverage productivity gains to achieve greater profitability. Many local businesses are probably undercapitalized and rely on previously depreciated assets to maintain their viability. It is difficult for such businesses to weather sharp economic downturns, prolonged personal illness, fires or accidents. These realities contribute to the volatility in the number of establishments. It is also possible that during an economic downturn individuals will establish businesses when other employment cannot be found, and return to more highly compensated and dependable employment in other firms when the economy rebounds.

Opportunities to expand the contribution of commercial enterprises to Ashby's economy therefore lie with increasing the values of existing properties through renovation and new construction of existing properties, and the continuing growth of home based businesses. New employment opportunities may arise from continuing residential development. Home construction and the trades and labor required to develop properties will be able to draw from the existing and regional workforce and the number of local businesses and overall employment may expand slightly. New residents will also produce a demand for new services and a desire to source these needs close to home. Stores and service providers are likely to respond to this local demand, seeking to locate or expand facilities following the growing residential population. Pace of residential growth and the numbers of residents will be the primary factor in determining the amount and pace of this commercial activity.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

Opportunities for Ashby's economic growth center on expanding current assets along state highways and in the village center, focused development of the industrial district, and the service needs of continued residential development. Recreational and historic tourism and niche sectors such as businesses that cater to the equestrian community offer the potential to increase Ashby's economic base while preserving the Town's rural character. Although some of these recommendations are ambitious for a small community, many are low or no-cost and can be phased in over time as resources and resident efforts make them possible. Early, small successes will beget more success, making more ambitious future efforts viable. The number of jobs likely to be created in Ashby through implementation of these measures would probably not exceed 250 (a doubling of present employment). The vast majority of these jobs would be service positions that do not absolutely require a college degree.

Enhance the tourism infrastructure in Ashby

Ashby has generally avoided marketing itself and undertaking events and activities that would bring visitors and tourists. Other communities have improved their fortunes through seasonal events and celebrations and nature-based sporting activities. Some initiatives may only require expanding current activities and making linkages to other organizations, which publicize and promote regional activities. Other activities will likely require longer planning and greater involvement within Ashby from many sources to be successful. However, they carry the benefits of increasing local economic activity while preserving the landscape and traditional activities, helping to secure other aspects of Ashby's vision. Ashby offers a location close to the Boston and Worcester metropolitan areas that also provides a sense of distance and rural isolation.

- *Allow B & Bs and inns in all zones.* Currently, hotels and motels are not permitted in the Residential/Agricultural zone and they are permitted in other zones by special permit. Allowing B & B establishments and inns throughout Ashby by special permit would make it possible to host more tourists overnight in Ashby.

- *Pursue inclusion of Ashby in regional tourism marketing efforts and in efforts to reach specialized markets*, such as heritage tourists through the Freedom’s Way Association and the Johnny Appleseed Trail, fishermen and campers through fishing and camping associations, and so on. Freedom’s Way is trying to get federal designation of an area that would include Ashby.
- *Publicize local festivals to regional tourist agencies* and to the metropolitan Boston and Worcester media.

Enhance business opportunities in Ashby Center

Ashby Center is a classic New England village, but it has few offerings for visitors. Restaurants and hotels are allowed by special permit, but new and expanded business is constrained by lack of wastewater capacity. Existing septic systems are already failing.

- *Explore new wastewater management strategies for the town center.* Without new approaches to wastewater management, both residential and business development in the Town Center will be severely constrained. Communal septic systems, solar aquatics systems and wastewater management districts should be investigated and their costs and benefits evaluated.
- *Explore permitting a wider variety of business activities in the Town Center by right.* Many of the businesses uses that normally would be allowed in a town center are allowed in Ashby only in the Residence/Commercial district. Allow shops, B & Bs, arts and crafts studios and professional offices in the Town Center, and, assuming resolution of the wastewater management dilemma, allow housing above shops to provide more activity in the center and an expanded market.
- *Consider an overlay district to promote mixed uses* An overlay district that allows enhanced density, compatible with town character and wastewater constraints, could help promote mixed uses.

Explore the economic potential of alternative resource-based activities.

With the decline of traditional agriculture, forestry and other rural economic activities, rural areas are searching for ways to continue their way of life in a new economic context.

- *Agriculture* Very little agriculture for the market still goes on in Ashby, but the Town still has the land and many residents would like to see the remaining farm properties stay intact as working landscapes rather than be subdivided. By learning about the market opportunities in agriculture today, they may be able to help find new owners for farm properties with an interest in new agricultural pursuits. There are a few enterprises in Ashby that point the way towards new ways of thinking about agriculture, such as the Boundary Llama Farm and the Schippers hydroponic

vegetable business. The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources has a number of programs to assist farmers in marketing their crops and diversifying their economic activities. For example, they give seminars on agricultural tourism and marketing. Gourmet and restaurant markets, supplying ethnic communities and Community Supported Agriculture programs are other options.

- **Recreation** Ashby has tremendous recreational resources, from Willard Brook State Park to Mount Watatic. Ashby has the potential to develop cross country skiing, snowshoeing, geocaching, bicycle touring, hiking, fishing, birding and hunting activities, with the businesses to support these activities. Route 31 north of the Route 119 intersection is already a Class III bicycle route and proposals have been made to make the rest of Route 31 to downtown Fitchburg into a bike route. Some activities, like guiding, can be businesses directly based on the activity, while other businesses would benefit more indirectly, by supplying goods or information, or by benefiting from increased traffic and discretionary spending. Many of these activities could become substantial with only minor infrastructure and marketing efforts. The demographics associated with many of these activities are also highly favorable to business ventures.
- **Equestrian Activities** Equestrian focused businesses, combining agricultural and recreational aspects have also proved viable recently. This sector has already proven that it can take root successfully in Ashby, and with limited Town support and encouragement could grow over time to add services and making substantial long-term contributions. In many ways, horse-based businesses could be the means by which several Town goals are accomplished, particularly keeping large areas of open and forested lands intact and in traditional land-focused pursuits. Horses provide a new business cluster which does not have to be located in the town center and provide a base to support the preservation of rural landscapes and natural resources. Supporting businesses provide a robust, diverse jobs ladder, able to provide employment from stable boys through veterinarians; attracting affluent visitors on a regular or seasonal basis; and providing substantial new real estate valuations to support Town services. Other market niches that an equestrian sector could provide include trainers, farriers, stable hands, saddle and tack shops, clothing, hay and feed, construction of stables, fences and other facilities, and truck and trailer services.

A successful equestrian sector would attract many visitors and patrons to Ashby, whether nearby residents boarding horses and taking lessons or far flung visitors attending seasonal jumping, dressage, races or hunts. This influx could support and enlarge the base of restaurants, bed and breakfasts, retailing and other services.

- **Forestry** With the recovery of the forested hills and the reclamation by forest of overgrown fields, a small forestry and sawmill industry could become viable, particularly to serve higher margin niche markets such as timber framing, or limited production furniture and crafts manufacture. Careful

management of forested lands can increase their productivity and improve their ecological diversity, as well as providing recreational amenities.

- ***Sustainable Energy*** Ashby's hilly location may prove suitable for the installation of wind generators or wind farms to serve regional energy demands. Wind farms' impacts on the landscape are generally minimal and their aesthetic considerations can be successfully addressed. They tend to have very low employment and servicing requirements, occupy a small footprint, and bear few of the impacts of fossil fuel power plants. As industrial facilities, wind generating infrastructure generally has high rates of assessment.

Review permitted industrial uses and zones

Ashby's Industrial District is limited and is not, in fact, the location of the few industrial uses in Town. To provide more flexibility, light manufacturing uses could be added to the uses permitted in the Residential/Commercial zoning district. Ashby's out of the way location will not make it attractive to most industrial users. The many other available sites in Fitchburg and other communities greatly overshadow this industrial district. Fitchburg, for example, has over 2,500 acres in industrial and special permit districts.

Create programs and locations to showcase local arts and crafts

The arts and cultural sector is also a natural fit to capitalize on the inherent assets of heritage and landscape. Cultural enterprises contribute over \$11 billion annually to the state's economy, providing one of the greatest multipliers for returns on public investment. Ashby already has small-scale production of crafts, woodworking products, and artisan industries, but these businesses and their wares are not visible to the public, and they have not been presented as an aggregated sector. With greater awareness and contact of visitors and others to these crafts and the arts, many marginal businesses could become successful, facilities could be expanded and more people employed. A centrally located, well marked and advertised gallery or showroom could be located in the town center.

Expand festivals and events

While it is currently difficult to bring patrons to Ashby to visit a single site or business, people do travel for events and multi-vendor activities. Improving and adding to the current series of seasonal events and activities are methods used successfully by other communities to attract visitors and introduce them to businesses and activities. Retail sales certainly increase during an event or festival, but the larger benefits are often in the raised awareness, word of mouth, and repeat visits that are sparked. The Town needs to support and help plan these events, making them into regular events, with increasing visibility and attractions. Harvest and winter festivals could be quite successful.

Encourage and support public-private cooperation for economic development

While many new businesses will arise locally on their own initiative, the Town should take steps to focus and accelerate these desired businesses. Some of these efforts are traditionally undertaken by regional chambers of commerce and local business organizations, with Town policy support.

In Ashby's case, much of that infrastructure is currently lacking and needs to be built through a partnership of the Town and regional, state and federal resources to support the development of new economic sectors will also be crucial. Efforts should be made to identify, approach and encourage businesses to locate or expand locally. The Town can seek assistance from regional or state agencies, perhaps together with Ashburnham or other neighbors, to conduct a market study to help identify and prioritize those businesses and market sectors which can be most successful

C. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT MAP

Map 6 – Economic Development Opportunities shows the existing commercial and industrial land uses by parcel in Ashby with proposed activities at the Town Center, New Village District, and town-wide.

D. Economic Development Action Plan			Priority	Time Line	Responsibility
<i>Goals</i>	<i>Policies</i>	<i>Strategies</i>	H (High) M (Medium) L (Low)	S (Short: to 2 yrs) M (Medium: 2-5 yrs) L (Long: over 5 yrs)	
Expand the nonresidential tax base, consistent with town character	Enhance the tourism infrastructure	Create an Economic Development Committee	H	S	Board of Selectmen (BoS)
		Allow B & Bs and inns in all zoning districts	H	S	Planning Board (PB); Town Meeting (TM)
		Pursue inclusion of Ashby in regional tourism marketing efforts, e.g., Johnny Appleseed, Freedom's Way	H	S	Eco Dev Committee
		Pursue inclusion of Ashby in efforts to reach specialized markets	M	M	Eco Dev Committee
		Publicize local festivals to regional tourist agencies and greater Boston and Worcester media	H	S	Eco Dev Committee
		Expand festivals and events for a seasonal calendar of activities	M	M	Volunteer groups
Enhance business opportunities in Ashby Center		Explore new wastewater management strategies for the Town Center	H	M	BoS
		Explore allowing a wider variety of business activities in the Town Center by right	H	S	PB
Explore the economic potential of alternative resource-based activities		Study market opportunities for agricultural tourism, specialized crops and animals, and gourmet and ethnic markets	M	M	Eco Dev Committee
		Study market opportunities for recreation businesses	H	S	Eco Dev Committee
		Encourage and support expansion of equestrian-oriented businesses	H	S	Eco Dev Committee; Equestrian Group
		Study market opportunities for specialty production from forests	M	M	Eco Dev Committee
		Study opportunities for wind energy	M	M	Eco Dev Committee
		Create programs and locations to showcase local arts and crafts	M	M	Volunteers; Library

D. Economic Development Action Plan			Priority	Time Line	Responsibility
<i>Goals</i>	<i>Policies</i>	<i>Strategies</i>	H (High) M (Medium) L (Low)	S (Short: to 2 yrs) M (Medium: 2-5 yrs) L (Long: over 5 yrs)	
Provide economic opportunities for Ashby residents to improve skills and jobs		Encourage and support public-private cooperation for economic development	M	M	Eco Dev Committee
Expand the nonresidential tax base consistent with town character		Review permitted industrial zones and light industrial uses	M	M	PB

VIII. PROPOSED LAND USE PLAN

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A. MANAGING LAND USE

Up winding roads through dense forests, tucked away on the New Hampshire border at the western end of Middlesex County, the Town of Ashby seems even farther in spirit from urban centers than it is in actual miles. With a classic New England town center and the old fields and orchards worked by previous generations, Ashby is still a small town with a population of less than 3,000. But although Ashby has not yet felt the full force of expanding development from metropolitan Boston and Worcester, residents see incremental change. ANR development along the Town's roads is giving Ashby an increasingly suburban character, even if there is still abundant back land available. There are fewer and fewer land-based economic activities. Ashby lies just beyond the "sprawl frontier" of expanding residential development, but its neighbor, Townsend, has already begun to feel the effects.

Ashby's destiny depends to some degree on its relative isolation from regional centers and the lack of convenient transportation access. It is currently not scheduled for any unusual transportation projects. The resurfacing of Route 31 was listed for 2003 on the Transportation Improvement Program for the region, and the reconstruction of two bridges over Willard Brook on Valley Road are proposed but not yet programmed. However, depending on the outcome of various planning initiatives, Ashby could become much more tightly linked to the regional transportation network, with substantial impacts to the community, both beneficial and detrimental. The Montachusett Regional Planning Commission has established a long term goal of extending Interstate 190 north from Fitchburg to the New Hampshire border. Implementation of this goal will require considerable additional study and the investment of substantial funds from both the state and federal sector. It is not clear what level of study or prioritization of preferred route alignments has been conducted, but the highway extension could have a great effect on the shape and pace of development in Ashby. Although the expansion of I-190 is not imminent, the highway experienced yearly traffic growth of up to 6 percent recently, suggesting that it is rapidly attracting traffic and will begin to reach capacity, increasing the likelihood of studies being done to determine the possibilities for expansion. Many communities along I-495 have spent the last decade contending with the effects of that highway on their towns.

The most important challenge facing Ashby is to find a way to support the continuation of its rural town character and way of life. This is one of those moments in which it is necessary to innovate in order to preserve. Development pressures have not yet made irrevocable changes in the Town's character and Ashby now has the opportunity to shape the changes that will inevitably come. In each of the three focus areas of this plan, there are suggestions that together can help Ashby successfully achieve its goals.

Natural Resources and Open Space. Ashby has a very good Open Space and Recreation Plan which is now being updated. In recent years, residents have become aware of the need to find ways to preserve open space, forming the Ashby Land Trust and working with state and town officials and

neighboring towns to secure the preservation of Mount Watatic and Blood Hill. However, it will not be possible to acquire all of the important open space resources in town. In addition to seeking donations of conservation restrictions, the Town must also work towards raising public awareness of best management practices on environmentally sensitive land, put into place land use regulations that promote preservation of large blocks of open space, and seek ways to support local economic activities that enhance the value of the rural landscape.

Housing and Residential Development. Ashby needs to establish regulatory frameworks that direct residential growth to the areas of town where it is desired while also recognizing the need to create permanently affordable housing. Mandatory, conservation subdivision zoning by right for development sites of four acres or more will help avoid the fragmentation of open space and wildlife habitat. These large parcels can serve as sending areas for a Transfer of Development Rights system. The receiving areas would be the Town Center, a compact New Village district in the RC zoning district along Route 31, and the “Country Corners” small scale nodes of housing at country intersections. In order to make this possible, new wastewater management systems must be studied and approved for these areas.

Ashby’s need to address affordable housing can be advanced through creation of elderly housing, of which there is none at present, and through giving incentives for the creation of small-scale affordable units throughout town.

Economic Development. Because of its location and small labor force, Ashby is not likely to become a big center of economic development – nor is that something that residents desire. However, paying more attention to promoting economic activities based on Ashby’s rural landscape can be an important element in a strategy to preserve its rural character. If there is work for the working landscapes, if recreational uses of the natural landscape can be increased, if visitors can be enticed to spend a day or two to visiting Ashby’s historic center -- then it will become more economically worthwhile to preserve these lands than to sell them for subdivisions. The economic development strategies in this plan may seem more difficult to implement and more diffuse, but they are an important part of any effort to make sure that the Ashby Vision Statement becomes a reality.

B. PROPOSED LAND USE MAP

Map 7 – Proposed Land Use shows the suggested changes in land use in terms of open space, housing, and economic development on a base of the existing land uses in Ashby. Notable elements are the identification of sending and receiving areas for Transfer of Development Rights, locations for conservation subdivision zoning and for smaller-lot housing at country intersections, and an area with potential for a new village. The general location of open space priority areas are also shown. The map also shows economic development focus areas in the Town Center and potential new village, but many

economic development strategies are applicable town-wide because they are based on promoting the rural assets of the town.