

**Action Items*****DRAFT***

Ashby's property value share from businesses is low, and several efforts should be made to increase that share, helping to moderate the tax burden on residential properties. The Planning Board can take a lead role in implementing these actions over the near to medium term.

- The values of existing business properties can be enhanced through maintenance, improvements and additions to existing buildings, construction of additional buildings or site improvements on those properties, and existing structures can be replaced with higher value new buildings – whether they are larger, or represent higher value construction.
- Increasing the value of businesses will also boost tax rateables: by increasing occupancy rates; with higher dollar volumes of commerce able to support renovations, improvements and new structures; new businesses needing upgraded facilities; and with the personal property contribution of the machinery, plant and equipment values of more dynamic businesses.

Vacant commercial and industrial sites should be targeted for development to increase overall tax receipts.

- Preferred building types and site usages, and optimal uses of these properties can be granted streamlined or expedited permitting to encourage those uses and shorten the timeline until they can start to contribute to the tax base.

Innovative waste treatment strategies that supercede traditional septic systems can make properties viable, which today are difficult to develop. This can also assist higher value businesses, which would have higher number of employees or customers, and higher water demands, to locate.

- The town center area might benefit greatly from a district package plant serving multiple properties, and might be implemented as a private, profitable enterprise oriented to commercial users.

Existing zoning regulations can be revised to be more amenable to desired future uses, and to guide those uses to preferred locations.

- A Town Center Neighborhood Overlay District could be created to help support the town center and focus new development there, strengthening the existing business cluster and giving stronger identity to that area.
- Revised regulations can help protect existing character while facilitating desired development.

The permitting process can be studied to identify ways that it can be simplified, while maintaining needed controls and oversight.

- Reductions in the number of steps, as well as an expedited process have been successful elsewhere.
- The potential to issue one-stop permits for certain project types or locations, and the implementation of joint review by boards and committees, harmonizing their requirements, can lower the threshold to businesses formation and site development.

To properly maintain the cherished town character prevalent in Ashby, new development needs to be appropriate, both in setting and use. New economic opportunities need to be sought out, bolstering and expanding the existing business base. Local infrastructure also needs to support these uses.

- Roadway improvements to reduce safety concerns, improve and maintain the major roads, reduce the potential for congestion or drivers confusion and difficulty will be helpful to businesses and residents alike. Town DPW, working with MHD will be responsible for roadway improvements. Permitting review by the Planning Board can ensure that site designs minimize safety and congestion impacts.
- Tourism is a regionally significant industry that has so far bypassed Ashby to a great degree. Ashby's historic buildings and heritage, rural landscape would provide great attractions, with a modest increase in businesses focused on those attributes, combined with advertising and marketing initiatives to expand beyond word of mouth.
- Piggybacking on the marketing efforts of nearby communities, regional tourist attractions like Mount Wachusett and MRPC initiatives, and state tourism programs will begin to increase the flow of tourists.

Efforts can also be made to fill in some missing parts of the needed spectrum of tourism oriented services, to increase tourism viability.

- Existing businesses can be encouraged to expand or diversify their offerings and orientation, or new businesses can be attracted.
- Activities and attractions need to be complemented with information, retailing, and restaurants, with potentials for lodging, events, and other supporting services to become established over several year's time.

New types of business should be able to thrive in Ashby, diversifying and supporting the existing businesses, and building on some of the successful enterprises. These business ventures can support the rural landscape, reinforcing the town's character, while providing expanded employment and increased revenues.

- The equestrian sector based on training and boarding horses has already demonstrated its ability to attract business regionally, with potential to expand its reach across New England. The array of businesses which support this sector are widely varied and could provide significant employment of a wide range of skills.

- Farming has receded, but niche orientations such as providing specialty, organic or heirloom produce to restaurants or a cluster of markets could be successful. Greenhouses can expand the growing season.
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) matches consumers with individual farms, contracting for shares of the harvest to be provided over the growing season. CSA eliminates wholesale and retailing markups, allowing consumers access to fresher, high quality, locally grown produce, while farmers receive a far greater return on their labors. CSA can be augmented with farmers markets, and the town granting preference to local produce for schools programs.
- 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 and providing recreational amenities.
- Ashby's hilly location may also prove suitable for the installation of wind generators or wind farms to serve regional energy demands. Wind farms intrusions 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.
- Recreational activities may provide one of the largest economic potentials available, which is also consistent with town desires to maintain rural character. 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 for increased traffic and discretionary spending. Many of these activities could become substantial with only minor infrastructure and marketing efforts, such as bicycle touring, birding, and hiking. The demographics associated with many of these activities are also highly favorable to business ventures.
- 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 artisanal 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.

Many smaller businesses find it difficult to grow well. Helping to establish a business incubator, where businesses have the space and access to shared resources can ease that process. By creating a fertile base for businesses to grow, they will be more likely to remain in town as they grow and thrive, relocating to larger, higher value premises. Ashby currently lacks a facility that lends itself to an incubator use, although several sites may be appropriate.

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.

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 its Selectmen with dedicated local business leaders. Taking advantage of 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 should conduct a market study, or make use of state or regional resources, to help identify and prioritize those businesses and market sectors which can be most successful, and advance the Town's priorities. Encouraging business starts which cannot be successful will discourage other investment and retard the Town's progress. Other businesses can make use of the data and analysis to understand how to best shape their operation to maximize success.

Ashby currently suffers from a small business sector and a low rate of in-town employment, although residents dominate local jobs. Education and skills levels also create difficulty for residents to find well paying, meaningful employment.

- Effort to recruit new businesses which employ current residents and make best use of their skills, and which provide opportunities to increase skills and responsibilities, should receive preference. While it will be difficult to establish a jobs ladder within a single business, a cluster of businesses in various sectors may provide the integration needed for ample opportunities for career advancement.

- Resources should also be targeted to workers and to businesses to expand their opportunities, gain capacity, and achieve stability. Many times, smaller businesses lack the time and investment needed to capitalize on opportunities or contend with business and economic setbacks.

With care and effort, Ashby will be able to implement these recommendations, achieving a moderate rate of economic growth, diversifying and improving the business mix, attracting new dollars to the local and regional economy, while improving residents employment prospects. 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's efforts make them possible. Early, small successes will beget more success, making more ambitious future efforts viable.