

Ware Community Development Strategy – 2015

Introduction

This Community Development Strategy (CDS) was first developed and accepted by the town in September 2002. It is a community-based planning document designed to assess the needs of the community and identify strategies for addressing those needs. The CDS summarizes Ware's planning efforts, provides highlights of the town's relevant planning documents, identifies the town's development goals, presents an action plan consistent with the Commonwealth's Sustainable Development Principles, and prioritizes community development projects. The CDS also emphasizes continued efforts to target financial resources in areas of the community where community development needs are greatest and where significant measurable improvements can be achieved.

The CDS represents a continued effort on the part of Ware residents and public officials to make community improvements; some primarily to the benefit of low and moderate-income persons and others for the benefit of the entire community. Although programs are designed and managed under the auspices of the Ware Community Development Authority (CDA), public participation is the primary component of project development and management. The Ware CDA is made up of five members appointed by the Board of Selectmen, and resides in the recently formed Planning & Community Development Department. The CDA guides the development and management of community development activities through regular monthly public meetings and provides recommendations to the Town Manager and Board of Selectmen as to which activities are in the best interest of the community.

Target Area

Ware's Census Designated Place is the established target area. It is approximately four square miles and contains the town's residential core and commercial areas. The target area extends approximately ½ to 1 mile west, north and east from Ware's mill complex and 3 miles south toward the Palmer town line. It is bounded by Highland Street, North Street, Walker Road and Doane Road on the north, West Brookfield and Warren to the east, Palmer to the south, and roughly Longview Ave, Palmer Road, and Anderson Roads to the west. The defined target area is a direct response to residents' concerns for improvements to infrastructure and public facilities, and a continued need for housing rehabilitation services.

Planning Efforts

This section summarizes Ware's relevant planning documents and initiatives, highlighting some of the goals identified through the years. Some of these goals may be addressed by specific projects within the town's CDF I grant applications. Others will need funding through other appropriate funding mechanisms, including appropriation of local funds. In each case, the town's various departments, boards, commissions, and committees were involved in the planning processes which identified these goals. Private citizens provided their input by serving on steering committees and participating in public planning meetings, visioning sessions, formal hearings and Town Meeting votes. The following is a short summary of planning activities and documents:

1970 to 2010

- Zoning Bylaw was adopted and amended numerous times.
- Comprehensive planning included a master plan and growth management plan. Both noted problems with the supply of decent affordable multi-family housing, the need for redevelopment of the Millyard, and a desire to revitalize the downtown.
- Open space and recreation planning addressing the preservation of land as well as facility planning, including development of the Ware River Valley Greenway bike path.

- Economic development planning, a capital improvement plan, evaluation of public buildings for accessibility, and a community action statement each identified specific needs in Ware.
- EOEAA Build-out Analysis provided an in-depth look at available land, building constraints, and potential residential growth. (2000)
- Ware Millyard Site Assessment and Economic Development Plan assessed the physical and business conditions at the Ware Millyard and offered recommendations to foster economic growth and redevelopment of the complex. (2001)
- Guiding the Future of Ware: A Strategic Plan for the Next Five Years builds on previous planning efforts. Strategies were developed to address concerns ranging from preserving the environment to economic development efforts; some have been implemented. (2002)
- Quabbin Sub-regional Housing Plan guides the implementation of regional measures to increase the affordable housing supply; for Ware these included programs for housing rehabilitation, homeowner programs such as creative financing and sweat equity projects, land trusts, limited equity ownership, and revision of the zoning bylaw. (2002)
- Ware Community Development Plan is an extension of the 2002 Strategic Plan. Of the eight strategies chosen as priorities, three have been done and one tried (unsuccessful). (2004)
- Open Space and Recreation Plan emphasizes four major goals: providing a broad range of high quality recreation programs, managing open space and recreation cohesively and effectively, acquiring new lands for recreation and open space, and increasing public awareness of open space and recreation resources. (2007, updated in 2013/14)
- Heritage Landscape Inventory identified the downtown with its historic buildings and park, other public parks, historic farmsteads and the Ware River and covered bridge. (2009)

2012 – 2014:

- Zoning Bylaw Update. After 25 years of piecemeal amendments, the Zoning Bylaw was overhauled with a complete review, reorganization, and rewrite. Many provisions were updated, three new districts added, four districts were combined, multi-family provisions were revised to make them more realistic, solar energy and wind energy provisions were added, and the use table was revised to provide a better balance of local control of land uses and streamlining development and redevelopment. Most significant for economic development were provisions for three mixed-use districts and a new district designed to address industries associated with a casino located within the region. The new bylaw was overwhelmingly adopted by the Town Meeting in May 2012. Amendments to tweak the bylaw were adopted in 2013 and 2014.
- Downtown Parking Study included an inventory of existing parking spaces on both private and public property in the downtown area, an analysis of the existing buildings, the uses within them, and the parking demands they create, and a similar analysis based on full utilization of the existing buildings in the study area. The results showed there is a surplus of parking spaces within the downtown, but the distribution, signage, and parking management for the public spaces seem to be inadequate to meet public needs. The study includes recommendations for next steps to address these issues. (2012) Note that Ware had submitted an application for the 2014 MDI Technical Assistance grant program to have a parking management plan completed for the downtown area, but was not funded.
- A Mill Town's Downtown: Assessing the Needs of Ware's Main Street is a thesis prepared by a UMass graduate student which provides a start for the development of a full database of the downtown – what the businesses and other occupants are, how much space they use/need, what physical space is vacant and available to other businesses, and what types of businesses are missing yet desired by the general public. A public “consumers” survey was successfully completed and resulted in several business types being identified as desired. Neither the business

owner nor property owner surveys were successful, thus additional work is needed before this study will yield positive results for the community. (2013)

- “Downtown Organizational Models” was a Peer-to-Peer grant funded project in which experts from other communities presented the most common organizational models for downtown businesses trying to help improve the downtown environment. This led to the formation of a group of highly motivated upper management level business people who are now undertaking other efforts to improve downtown Ware. So far they have initiated seven projects, ranging from beautification on Main Street using window boxes and planters to commercial property utilization, which will hopefully result in occupancy of vacant spaces on Main Street. (2014)
- Ware’s Future is a multi-year project to update the town’s master plan. We worked with a graduate planning studio from the UMass Landscape Architecture & Regional Planning Department in 2012 which resulted in publication of “Prelude to a Master Plan” containing much of the data needed for the plan itself. We have a MindMixer website for public engagement, and are planning several public workshops as we continue with our outreach campaign. A seven member steering committee is working to complete the plan in 2015. Once this blueprint for action is completed, the community will begin implementation of the recommendations to achieve its goals.
- A Property Assessment and Reuse Planning project (PARP), funded with FY12 CDBG, has examined 47 of the worst residential properties in the target area and has made recommendations on best uses (in some cases commercial), estimated costs for rehab of structures, and financing strategies to help property owners get these units, many of which are vacant, back to occupiable condition.
- Ware has hired and is currently working with a consultant on a project to prepare a vision statement, identify and articulate a community identity, and design a comprehensive wayfinding system. The vision statement will become a part of the master plan in addition to informing the identity and wayfinding components of the project. The consultant will also prepare a report on Ware’s market and economic information. All of these products will help Ware to become better known and to improve the town’s image within the region.

As can be seen, there are a number of initiatives going on which all relate to the community pulling together to improve Ware as a place to live, work, and raise a family. These efforts represent a new era in town, harking back to the days when the townspeople got together to purchase the mills to keep employment opportunities in town. But, as is evidenced below, there is much work to be done, and we aim to do it.

Ware Community Development Strategy - Priorities and Action Plan

A Priorities and Action Plan was developed by the Ware CDA, extending previous efforts with a focus on specific activities and implementation methods using both CDBG and non-CDBG funds over a 3-5 year period. Priorities were identified after reviewing existing needs during a public participation process, which involved specific discussion of the CDS at public meetings: most notably at an advertised CDA public meeting held on October 20, 2014 and a follow-up briefing and discussion at the Board of Selectmen meeting on October 21, 2014; the Board endorsed the CDS at this meeting.

The town’s priorities are, listed in order from most important to least: housing, economic development/downtown revitalization, infrastructure improvements, planning, social services, public facilities, and natural resources & open space. These are each discussed below, with actions in priority order.

1. Housing

- Begin implementation of the recommendations in the PARP report to deal with spot “slum & blight” conditions through a combination of demolition and rehabilitation of identified structures.
- Continue to support programs that help low to moderate income homeowners make necessary repairs to their homes to enable them to live in decent housing.
- Research the need for new housing opportunities for elderly citizens to allow residents to move into more appropriate living quarters as their ability to live in single family homes diminishes. Identify strategies to develop such housing, which might include a variety of accommodations as well as continuing care facilities which include several of these accommodations in a single development to provide residents the opportunity to live out their lives without the need to move elsewhere when their situation changes as they age. This could be done on a regional basis with abutting towns.
- Implementation:
 - Elimination of slum and blight conditions. With the PARP project now completed, the Town is moving forward with implementation of the recommendations using a variety of techniques. Ware’s proposed FY15 CDBG application may include projects to demolish structures that are unsafe and pose a threat to the neighborhood, as well as projects aimed at rehabilitating multi-unit investor-owned structures which are identified on the PARP list and are having a significant detrimental impact on their neighborhoods.
 - Ware has successfully served as lead community for a regional housing rehabilitation program funded by CDBG serving the Ware River Valley for over 15 years. The Town and its consultant will investigate the use of a variety of funding sources to continue housing rehabilitation efforts, including the Home Modification Loan program (HMDL), the Low Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), and MHFA Get the Lead Out, and CDBG. In addition, Ware has resurrected a revolving loan program for septic system repairs, available to income-eligible residents town wide.
 - Upon completion of the master plan, begin working with a committee to investigate ways to expand housing opportunities for elderly residents.

Sustainable Development Principle Adherence: Concentrate Development, Advance Equity, Use Natural Resources Wisely, and Expand Housing Opportunities.

2. Economic Development/Downtown Revitalization

- Work with the Department of Public Works to identify and secure funding for physical improvements to the downtown including new traffic and street lights and extensive streetscape work, with an expected outcome of improved traffic flow and safety for both vehicles and pedestrians throughout the downtown corridor.
- Participate with Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation (QV CDC) in supporting business development training programs, one-on-one technical assistance to small and start-up businesses, a revolving loan fund to provide capital for startup and ongoing small and micro-enterprise businesses, regional tourism development, and job readiness training and workforce development programs.
- Where appropriate, offer Ware River Valley Regional Economic Target Area benefits (Tax Increment Financing) to new and expanding businesses.
- Work with property owners and the town to implement recommendations of the parking study.
- Partner with the Ware Business & Civic Association (WBCA) on revitalization activities for the business district, including downtown and the millyard.
- Investigate opportunities to develop alternative energy sources for electricity generation.

- Explore options for the provision of public transit to connect to surrounding transit systems.
- Implementation:
 - The Town will submit an application for needed infrastructure improvements to Main Street for the Pioneer Valley TIP; this project will not address streetscape concerns but will improve flow and safety in the downtown for both pedestrians and vehicles.
 - As a result of the UMass thesis project *A Mill Town's Downtown: Assessing the Needs of Ware's Main Street*, a group has continued the data collection efforts for the business owner and property owner surveys. Once completed, these will be used in conjunction with the efforts previously described for downtown organization to help improve the downtown.
 - The Town is working with a steering committee of the WBCA on several specific initiatives, including a beautification project, a “pooper scooper” program on Main Street, a QR Code initiative for historic landmarks, and a community calendar project to create a central calendar for community events sponsored by various organizations. The steering committee is also working on several larger projects.
 - The QVDCD is partnering with the Ware CDA to provide loans to small businesses; discussions for additional partnerships are ongoing. Two small business loans have been made in the past six months.
 - The Town recently created a new revolving account for the purpose of improving the efficacy and efficiency of the funds in the economic development fund. Stemming from grants obtained in the 1980s and 90s, this money will be used by the CDA to provide assistance to businesses and other organizations as well as individuals in dire circumstances in the form of loans or grants.
 - The Town has secured an agreement for solar energy credits, and continues to explore the potential for development of solar facilities on Town-owned property.

Sustainable Development Principle Adherence: Concentrate Development and Mix Uses, Protect Land and Ecosystems, Use Natural Resources Wisely, Expand Housing Opportunities, Increase Job and Business Growth, and Promote Clean Energy.

3. Infrastructure Improvements

- Continue to make infrastructure improvements in the North Side neighborhood portion of the target area with replacement or repairs to water lines, sewer lines, stormwater drainage facilities, sidewalks (to be ADA compliant), and roadways. This is an older residential neighborhood located within walking distance to the downtown, plagued with deteriorating infrastructure. A Planning study that was funded through the FY08 CDBG award outlined needed improvements to most of the streets in this area.
- Make improvements to the waste water system – both the capacity of the waste water treatment plant and the collection system (sewer lines), especially extending this system into residential neighborhoods where there are high percentages of septic system failures on small lots.
- Use the septic system revolving loan program to assist low-moderate income property owners throughout town with replacement or repairs to their septic systems.
- Implementation:
 - Completed School Street infrastructure improvements funded with FY12 CDBG award.
 - Engineering design completed for High Street with funding from the FY12 CDBG award; construction funding awarded in the CDBG FY14 program.
 - Engineering design for Prospect Street is being funded with the CDBG FY14 program.

- The DPW studied the potential for extending sewer lines into the neighborhoods in close proximity to the main sewer line running to the Gibb's Crossing development, and continues to pursue getting these neighborhoods connected. The primary impediment to these extensions is an acceptable funding formula.

Sustainable Development Principle Adherence: Concentrate Development, Advance Equity, Use Natural Resources Wisely, and Expand Housing Opportunities.

4. Planning

- Complete the new Master Plan, (including extensive public input) which will help guide the steering committee in preparing the action plan. This is a two part plan: the first part will include graphical representations of the snapshot of where the town is regarding demographics, housing, employment, etc. as well as the vision, goals, and action plan; and the second part, the appendix, includes all of the required background data and information.
- Implementation:
 - A steering committee has been working for the last two years with the help of a UMass graduate studio which completed the *Prelude to a Master Plan* and a UMass graduate student summer intern; the plan is expected to be completed in 2015.
 - The Town has hired a consulting firm to help us define a vision for the town. This will become the vision statement for the master plan. This project will also define a community identity and design a wayfinding system for the town, and in support of that work the firm will prepare a market analysis and economic development plan. That information will also be incorporated into the master plan.

Sustainable Development Principle Adherence: Concentrate Development and Mix Uses, Advance Equity, Make Efficient Decisions, Protect Land and Ecosystems, Use Natural Resources Wisely, Expand Housing Opportunities, Increase Job and Business Opportunities, and Promote Clean Energy

5. Social Services

- Continue to support social services programs that help Ware's low-moderate income residents get ahead in their lives. In addition to the Ware Adult Learning Center (WALC) and the Ware Domestic Violence Task Force (WDVTF), delivery of social services will be accomplished using the Planned Approach to Community Health (PATCH) approach, wherein clients receive universal screening and guidance on social services they may need. Client benefits include child care during social service appointments or WALC classes, transportation to services when needed, and consistent tracking to ensure the services are providing benefit to the clients.
- Based on need and as resources permit, support the development of new or expansion of existing social service programs not currently funded through CDBG, including those offered by the YMCA, Council on Aging/Senior Center, Valley Human Services, and other local organizations.
- Implementation:
 - It is expected that these programs will be included in future CDBG applications, at funding levels based on available funds and other programs seeking support.
 - WALC provides an integrated curriculum of adult basic learning, high school equivalency, and economic literacy as well as a crucial transitions component to uneducated and under-educated people. Due to funding cuts, the offerings have been cut back to sustain the program's most basic services, eliminating career path and college prep services. The Literacy Project, which operates the WALC, has secured other funding sources for the basic services but the need for funding through CDBG remains for the

career path and college prep services. The Ware CDA is committed to providing assistance to this important component of the region's social service network through CDBG funding and, if necessary, Program Income funds.

- Domestic violence continues to be a reality in Ware and the hard-won successes are too valuable to risk a downward slide in the DVTF program. The number of restraining orders issued, police responses, and reported teen violence warrant continued DVTF services including outreach, counseling, education, training, and service coordination. The advocate position created several years ago continues to be a significant benefit to the program and to the individuals being served. The Ware CDA acknowledges the importance of this program and the serious negative impact on the community if it ends.
- Both of these programs, along with other services provided in the community and region will become integrated in the PATCH approach described above. This should improve efficiency for the providers and better service for the clients.

Sustainable Development Principle Adherence: Not applicable; Public Social Service Project.

6. Public Facilities

- Continue to work on improving facilities for recreational opportunities. Development of the Ware River Valley Greenway (rail trail) is of particular interest and existing obstacles are currently being worked out. The Town is working this year to get two bridges installed on the southern portion of the trail. The Town is also continuing the assessment of the former gas plant site on Monroe Street for reuse of this brownfield for much needed parking and potentially additional recreational facilities adjacent to Memorial Field.
- Monitor energy needs of public buildings and make improvements to aging structures to increase energy efficiency.
- Continue to evaluate the need for accessibility improvements to public facilities.

Sustainable Development Principle Adherence: Use Natural Resources Wisely, Protect Land and Ecosystems, Promote Clean Energy.

7. Natural Resources & Open Space

- Manage existing town owned lands to allow public access for hiking, fishing, and other passive recreational activities while conserving the natural resources they encompass.
- Investigate methods to permanently preserve open space, including agricultural lands, such as transfer of development rights, revising cluster development regulations to provide better incentive for developers to use it, and partnering with local land trusts to acquire land or conservation restrictions.

Sustainable Development Principle Adherence: Protect Land and Ecosystems, Use Natural Resources Wisely, Advance Equity.

The Ware Community Development Authority reviewed the CDS at a public meeting on October 20, 2014, and concluded that it accurately reflects the desired strategies for the community, after modifications as discussed at the meeting. The Authority voted 5-0 to recommend that the Board of Selectmen endorse the CDS as so modified. The Ware Board of Selectmen reviewed the CDS at a public meeting on October 21, 2014, and determined that the goals and objectives are relevant to meeting the needs of the town. It was endorsed by a 5-0 vote of the Board.


Gregory Harder, Chairman