

BARRE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIC PLAN



PREPARED BY THE
CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS
REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION
Completed October 30, 2019



Telling the Economic Story of Barre, Massachusetts



This report represents Phase 1 of a two-phase Economic Development Plan. CMRPC worked to identify economic development assets and opportunities through consultation with town officials, key stakeholders, field work, and review of existing materials.

Building off the work of the Quabbin Educational and Municipal Partnership (QEMP) project, CMRPC held public workshops to solicit feedback from Barre residents, and conducted a survey and site reconnaissance to develop a SWOT analysis for the Town related to economic development. The project also included a review of Barre's regulations and procedures for best practices and missed opportunities. CMRPC and the Town of Barre have secured additional funding to look further at the village of South Barre. Combined, these plans will serve as a guide for sustainable economic development that improves the lives of those who live, work and play in Barre.



In 1753 Barre was established as a district within the Town of Rutland but in 1774 was incorporated as the Town of Hutchinson. In 1776, at the request of the town's people, the legislature changed its name to Barre. A two-acre town common was first established in 1740, which became the civic center of the community throughout the 18th century with the building of the Town House, several churches, inns and the stagecoach stop. Barre's development follows the pattern of other towns in the region beginning with dispersed agricultural development; the rolling hills and stream valleys were well suited to an early agrarian way of life. Mill development spread down the Prince River corridor through the Ware River valley down to South Barre and Barre Plains. The industrial wealth brought in regional architects to design a number of prominent private and public buildings in town, most notably in the center around the commons.

Although industry in Barre during the late-19th and early-20th centuries turned largely to wood and metal working, industry and development in South Barre centered on textiles. The village of South Barre grew to include the Blythe Hotel, homes for the mill managers on Vernon Avenue, and worker housing in three distinct neighborhoods developed between 1910 and 1916. In 1926 the Massachusetts Department of Conservation began to acquire lands in Barre for the Quabbin Reservoir to supply drinking water to Boston and other points east leading to a decline in population. The Great Depression contributed to declines in both population and the viability of Barre's industrial economy during the early decades of the 20th century. Following World War II and the increasing popularity of the automobile, Barre became primarily a residential town for commuters to Worcester and Boston. At that time, Barre also reinvented itself as one of the cultural centers of the region and hosted popular band concerts in the historic bandstand on the Common. As the 20th century progressed, Barre returned to its small-town roots, becoming once again a relatively quiet, rural town with some active farmland and local businesses and industry. The Common remains the civic and cultural center of the community while South Barre retains its industrial mill village character.



STRENGTHS

**RURAL AND PEACEFUL CHARACTER
BARRE HAS 99 FARMS!
COMMUTER LOCATION
HOUSING IS AFFORDABLE
GREAT SCHOOLS**

**OUTDOOR RECREATION, TRAILS, RIVERS AND OPEN SPACE
FELTON FIELD IS AN ASSET FOR LARGE EVENTS
COMMUNITY EVENTS, ESPECIALLY IN SOUTH BARRE
RECENT IMPROVEMENTS TO TOWN COMMON
ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY**



WEAKNESSES

**EXTREMELY LIMITED COMMERCIAL OR INDUSTRIAL PARCELS
POPULATION IS INCREASING VERY SLOWLY
TRAFFIC COUNTS ARE LOW
HEAVY RESIDENTIAL TAX BURDEN
DISTANCE FROM MAJOR HIGHWAYS
AGING INFRASTRUCTURE
LIMITED INTERNET
OUTDATED ZONING BYLAWS
MUST SHOP IN OTHER TOWNS, EXTREME RETAIL LEAKAGE**

MOVING FORWARD

This Plan focuses on village revitalization, zoning and regulatory updates, tourism and recreation, commercial and industrial development, and well planned housing development. These elements are critical to Barre's Economic Success and are detailed in the Action Item Implementation Matrix.

The South Barre Strategic Plan, the next phase of this Economic Development Plan to be completed by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission, should consider Additional changes to zoning, potential parcels for an industrial park, and improvements that focus on placemaking such as playgrounds, landscaping, and sidewalks. The Town's ability to achieve its goals will rely on continued regional economic development support through The Quabbin Economic Development Coordinator. Essential financial resources are available from state and federal funding programs like Complete Streets, Safe Routes to School, Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness, Community Compacts, MassDevelopment, MassWorks, Brownfields, ADA Grants, District Local Technical Assistance, and others.

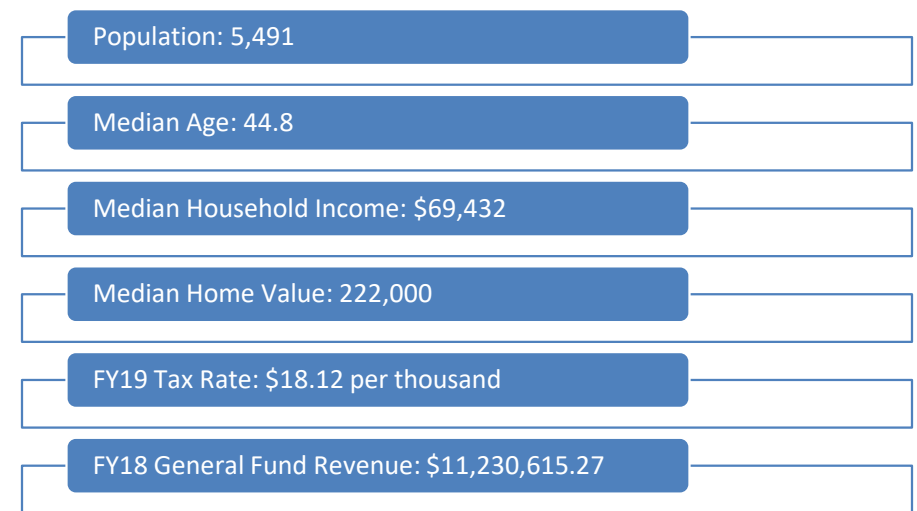
Demographics

Projections developed by CMRPC show the town's population is expected to increase gradually while it continues to age. The figure below shows that Barre's age distribution is currently concentrated around 35-49 year olds and 50-64 year olds. Notably, the population over 65 is paced to outnumber the population under 20 by 2030. Of course, this has a major impact on Barre's economy as well as the services provided by the Town.

While Barre's median household income (\$69,432) is lower than Massachusetts' (\$74,167), it is very much in line with Worcester County's (\$69,313) and has increased steadily over the past 10 years.

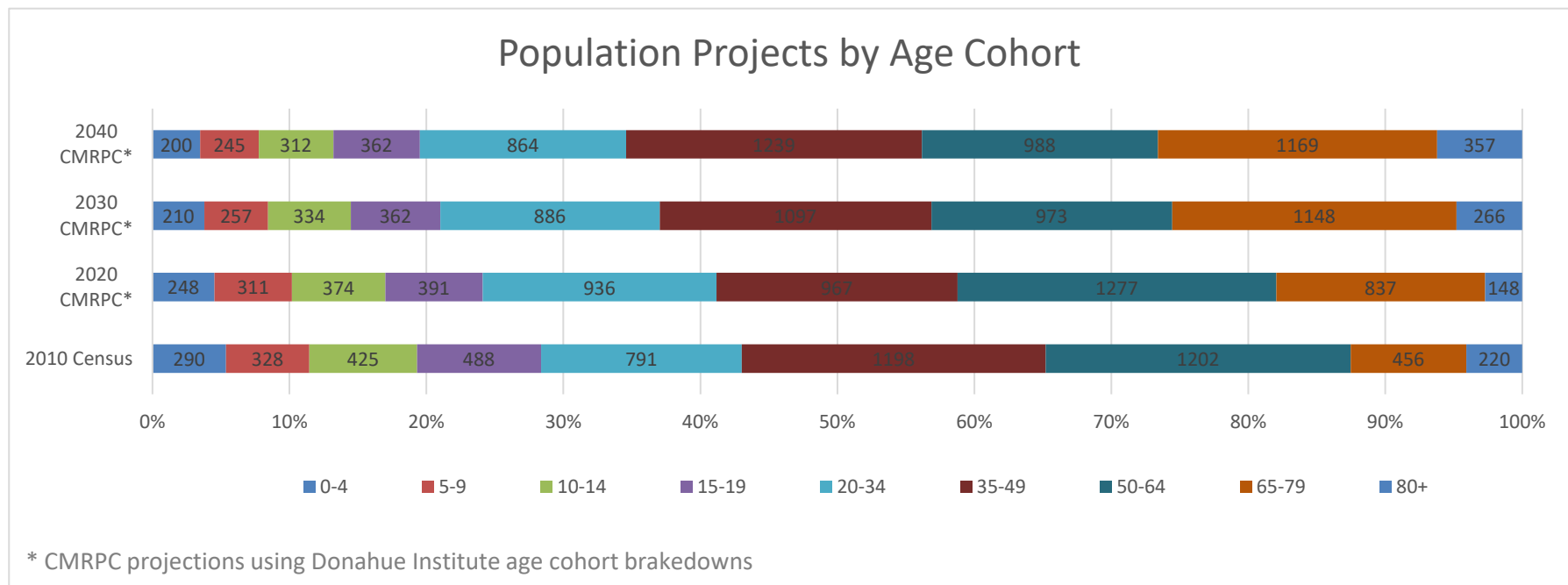
Barre's tax rate (\$18.12) is slightly higher than nearby towns like Rutland (\$17.89), Holden (\$17.45) and Princeton (\$16.02). This may be a result of lower median home values in Barre (\$222,000) as compared to Rutland (\$292,000), Holden (\$284,000) and Princeton (\$336,000). This is compounded by a very high percentage of the tax base (92%) being residential.

QUICK FACTS



Sources: 2013-2017 American Community Survey

Barre Town Report 2018

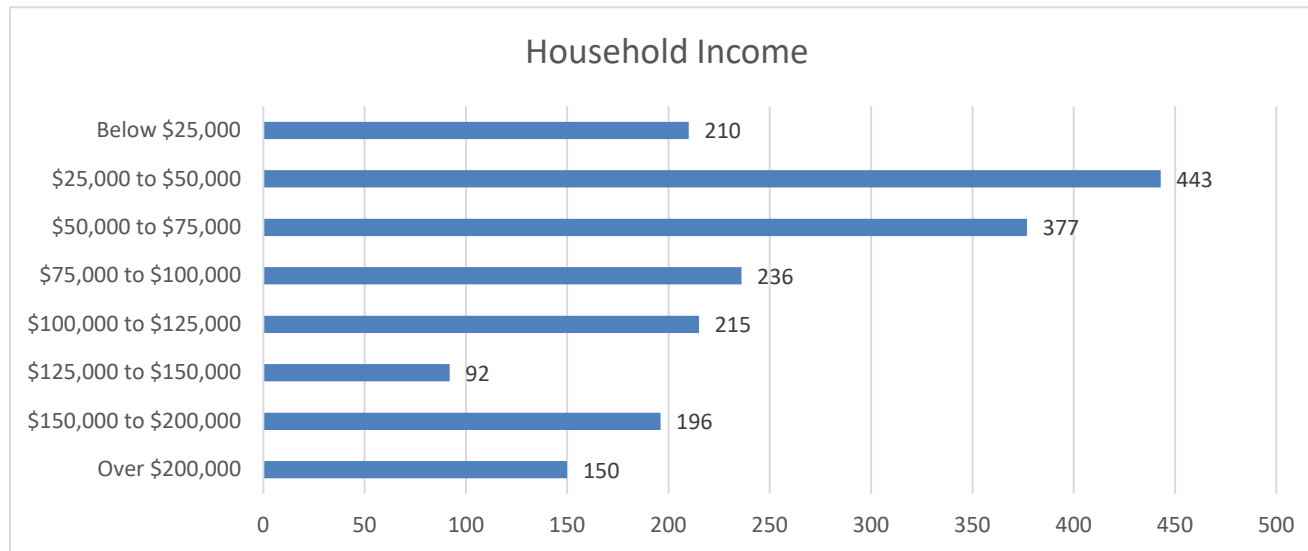


Employment Data

The largest employers in Barre, by far, are schools. Employees of Stetson School, Quabbin Regional High School, and Ruggles Lane Elementary represent the vast majority of those employed in Barre. Many residents report commuting to Gardner, Athol, Worcester, Leominster, and Fitchburg for their jobs. Of course, a primary goal of economic development is to increase the number of jobs in town. Without many parcels for that development to take place, Barre should consider zoning changes that increase density or even convert parcels from residential to business or industrial. A small business park or industrial park would have a huge impact on Barre's economy. This could decrease the residential tax burden and provide additional jobs, however, it's important to carefully consider the effect that increased traffic, noise, or other externalities new development may have on surrounding properties and the Town as a whole. It is certainly possible to preserve Barre's rural character with thoughtful and sustainable development.

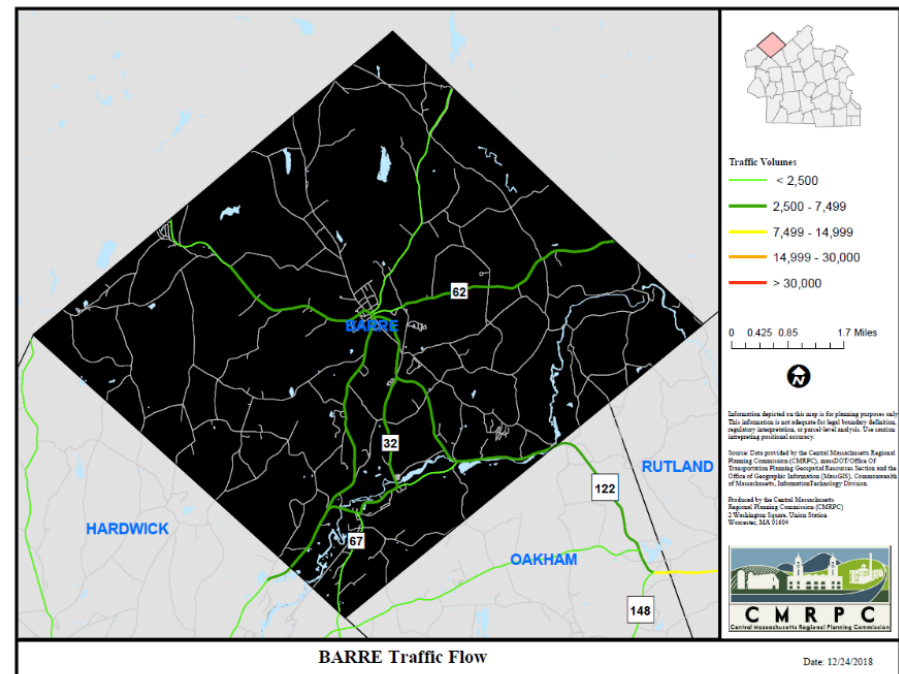
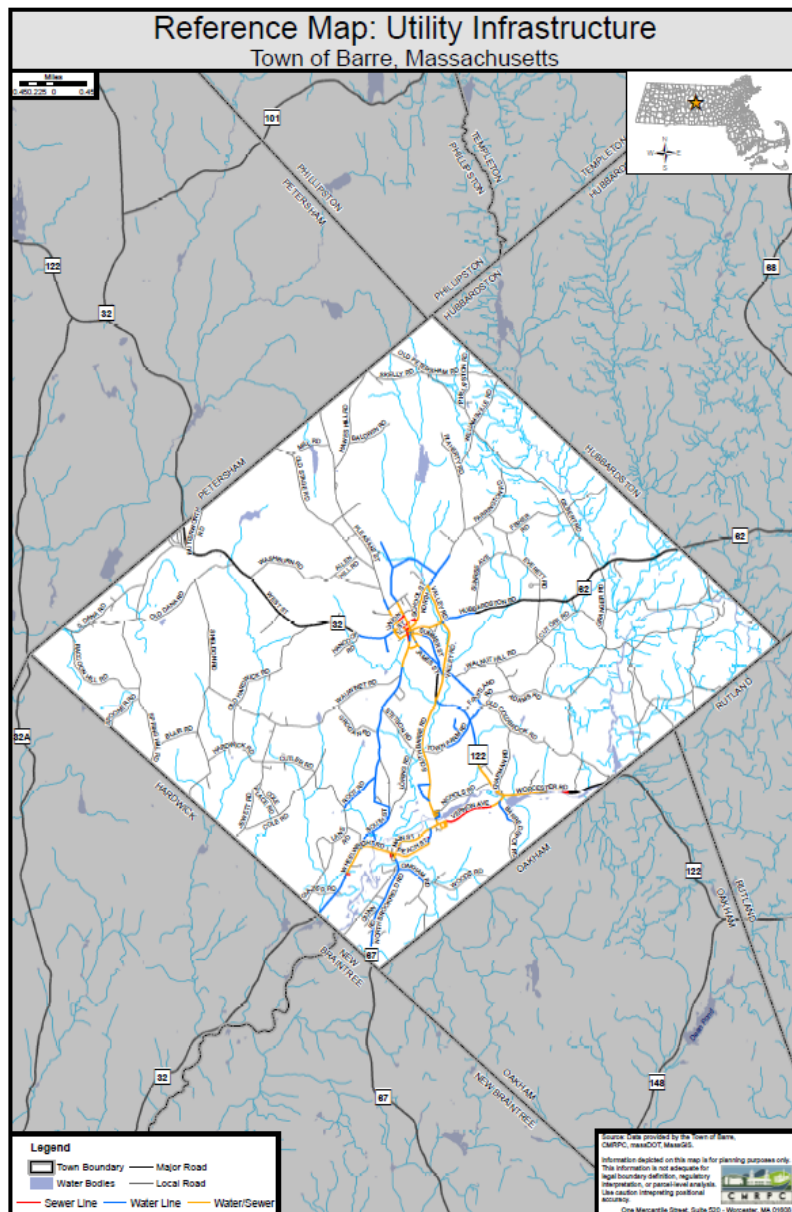
The unemployment rate has decreased drastically from 9.8% in 2010 to 4.1% in 2018, with the total number of employed residents at 2,923 in 2018. Small businesses with under 10 employees make up about half of total employment and home-based businesses continue to be a very important part of the local economy. A major barrier to home-based businesses is limited access to internet service. The Town should continue to explore funding sources to improve internet access and continue to provide public internet access at public places like the Woods Memorial Library.

Another obstacle cited by local business owners was difficulty finding qualified and motivated employees. Rural schools in Massachusetts are limited in terms of the programs they can provide. Regular public schools are not allowed to compete with programming offered through nearby vocational schools. Therefore, it's difficult to meet the needs of all the Town's students. The District's public schools often see their job as preparing students for college and are unable to provide courses in the trades. Thus, many students are left underserved and unprepared for the local job market. While changes at a statewide level will likely be necessary to reverse this trend, it is important for Quabbin Regional School District to continue to make public and private partnerships to improve workforce skills in the region.



Employer	Employees
Stetson School Inc	250-499
Quabbin Regional High School	100-249
Ruggles Lane Elementary School	50-99
Barre Family Health Ctr	20-49
Barre Fire Dept	20-49
Barre Police Dept	20-49
Chas G Allen Co	20-49
E J Prescott Inc	20-49
Harding Allen Estate	20-49
Higgins Powersports	20-49
Insight Meditation Society	20-49
Quality Water Products	20-49
Rockwerx Mobile Climbing Walls	20-49
White Turf Trenching Inc	20-49
Barre Family Pharmacy	10-19
Barre Mill Restaurant	10-19
Barre Town Highway Dept	10-19
Brown's Trucking & Excavating	10-19
Comcast Cable	10-19
Dunkin'	10-19
JC Pools Inc	10-19
Leader Home Ctr	10-19
R J McDonald Inc	10-19
Realty of Mass	10-19
Stone Cow Brewery	10-19

Infrastructure



Barre's water needs are met by the South Barre Road and Barre Wool wells, which supply more than half of the Town's population with their drinking water. Other residents depend on their own private wells. Barre has 1 emergency surface water supply, 6 community ground water wells, 1 non-transient non community water supply. Barre has over 850 households connected to the town sewer system. Aging infrastructure is a major concern across Massachusetts and Barre is no exception. Given limited funding, it is critical for Barre to pursue additional funding sources to address vulnerabilities associated with major storms, wind, and flooding such as FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grants or Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Grants from Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. Additionally, the State's Complete Streets Program and Safe Routes to School Program provide funding opportunities for road and sidewalk improvements.

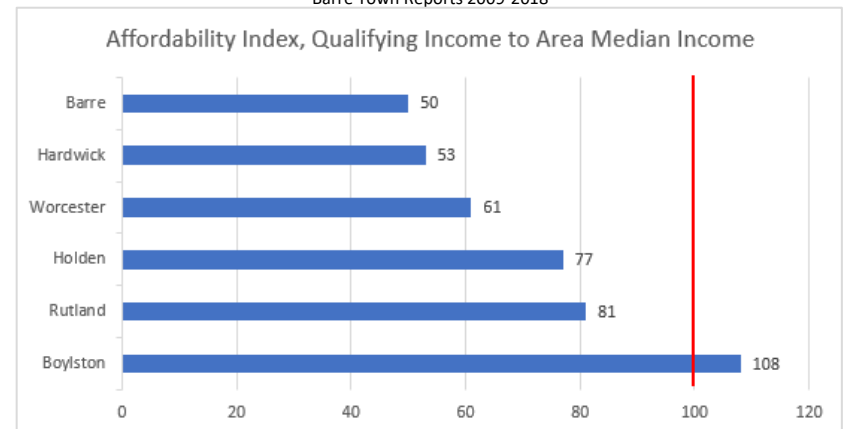
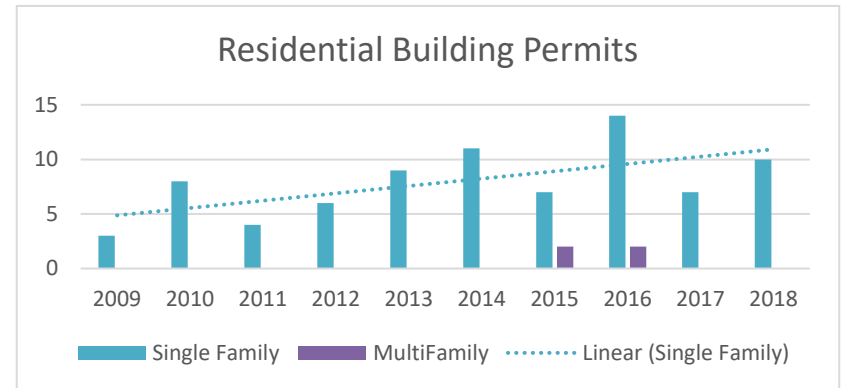
Though traffic volumes are not particularly high in Barre, Routes 32, 62, 67, and 122 represent the most viable corridors for economic development. With the exception of the large tracts that are preserved as state forest and other open space, it will be important to concentrate development in these corridors to limit infrastructure costs in the future.

Housing Market Profile

Barre's residential property value makes up 85% of the Town's total property value. This means housing indicators are especially helpful in measuring Barre's economic performance. Over the past ten years, there has been a reasonably steady trend toward increased single-family housing units being constructed. Given the shortage of housing throughout the state and the increased housing demand from Worcester and the MetroWest area, it is reasonable to expect that the rate of housing development will continue to increase. While this could be helpful in improving population trends and broadening the tax base, it is important that the Town is thoughtful about the way development takes place. Barre should consider "smart growth" principles that preserve open space, take advantage of compact design, and make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective. Encouraging more development along existing infrastructure in village centers and along major corridors can both meet housing demand and reduce many of the long-term costs associated with new housing.

The Affordability Index measures whether or not a typical family could qualify for a mortgage loan on a typical home. A typical home is defined as the national median-priced, existing single-family home. The typical family is defined as one earning the median family income. These components are used to determine if the median income family can qualify for a mortgage on a typical home. To interpret the index, a value of 100 means that a family with the median income has exactly enough income to qualify for a mortgage on a median-priced home. An index below 100 signifies that family earning the median income has more than enough income to qualify for a mortgage loan on a median-priced home. Barre's index is 50, one of the lowest in southern Worcester County. This is in sync with feedback from local real estate agents that reported single family homes under \$250,000 tend to sell very quickly. The story is similar with rental units in Barre with the average monthly rent in 2017 at \$901 as compared to the statewide average of \$1,129 according to the American Community Survey.

CMRPC has taken the developable land in Barre and provided an analysis of complete build-out potential. Wetland areas and excessive slopes place serious limits on development. The Town of Barre has 288.98 acres deemed to have slopes that constrain development. If all land is built out to its full capacity given current zoning and preexisting development constraints and soil conditions, the Town might expect the level of development depicted in the Hypothetical Build-Out Table to the right. Given the potential for residential growth, Barre should revisit its zoning bylaw to ensure new development will align with the community's vision. A full zoning diagnostic is the logical next step for the Town's Planning Board.



Hypothetical Build-Out Statistics for Barre

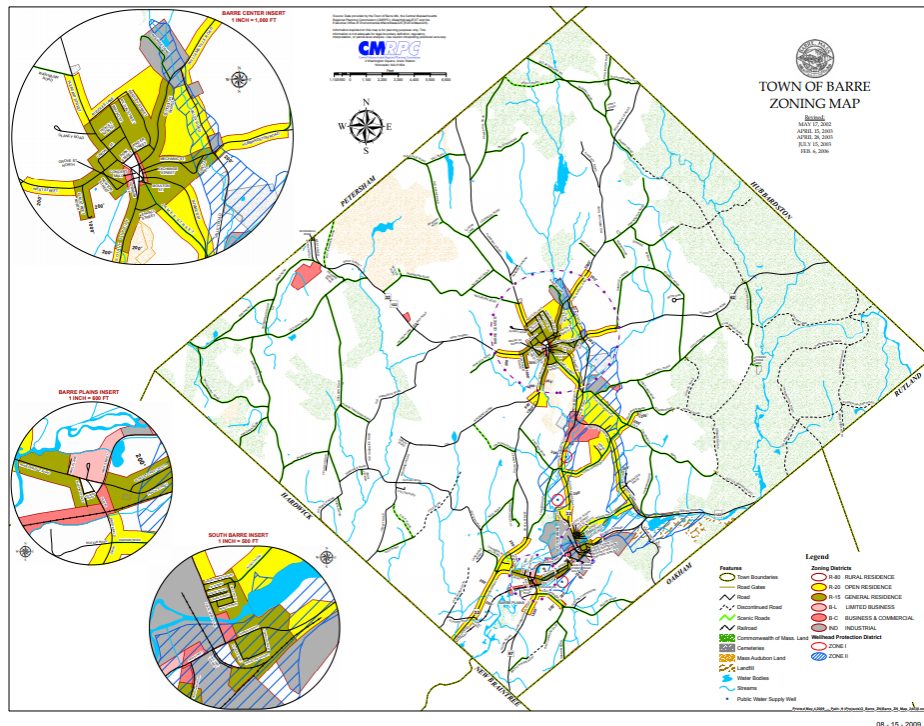
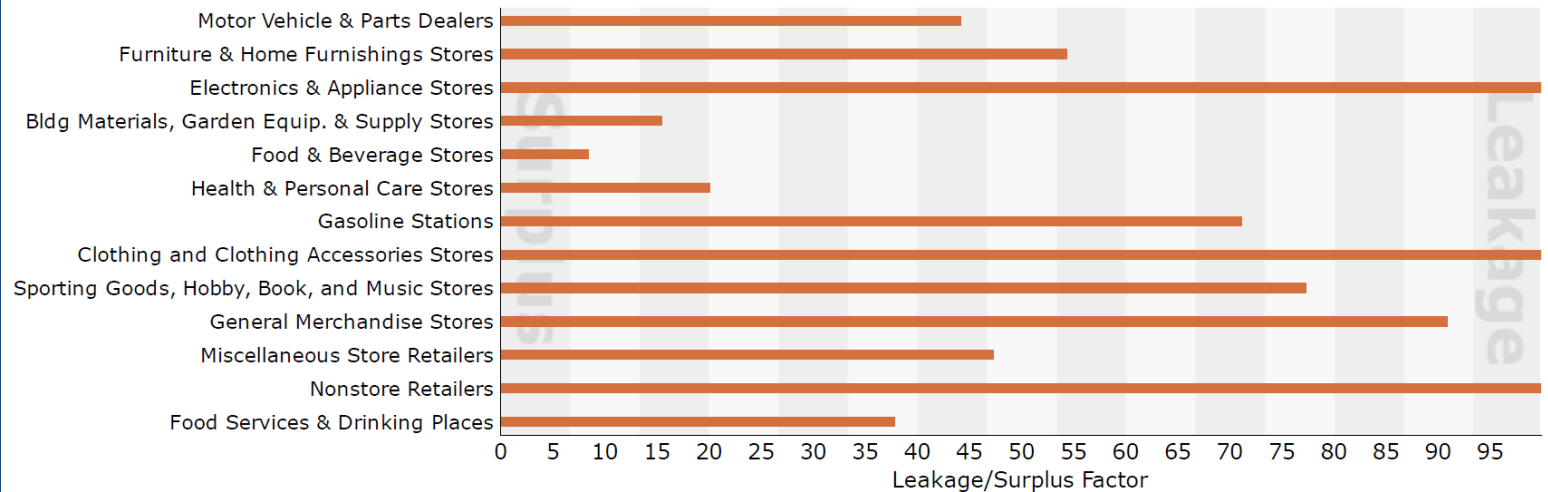
Developable Land (square feet)	611,843,760
Total Residential Lots	5,227
Commercial/Industrial Buildable Floor Area (square feet)	614,967
Residential Water Use (gallons per day)	1,019,291
Commercial/Industrial Water Use (gallons per day)	46,122
Municipal Solid Waste (tons)	8,195
Non-Recycled Solid Waste (tons)	4,961
New Residents	13,591
New Students	3,763

Massachusetts Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Economic Data for Barre
http://lmi2.detma.org/Lmi/Lmi_town.asp

Commercial Market Profile

A Leakage/Surplus factor is the result of comparing the demand for retail goods with the actual supply. If a leakage factor is above zero, that means there is demand for goods or services that aren't being met in town. Those dollars "leak" into markets in surrounding towns. While this isn't a perfect tool, this analysis can help Barre establish industries with the most potential for growth.

Leakage/Surplus Factor by Industry Subsector



Through a public survey and several public forums, CMRPC also collected input on the Town's biggest untapped business opportunities as well as which types of development were most appropriate for Barre. Survey results are attached as Appendix __. The cross section of industry potential and community support should guide the Town's efforts related to commercial development. The most promising commercial sectors for Barre include eco/agro-tourism, lodging, restaurants, breweries, general merchandise or convenience stores, gas stations, auto repair.

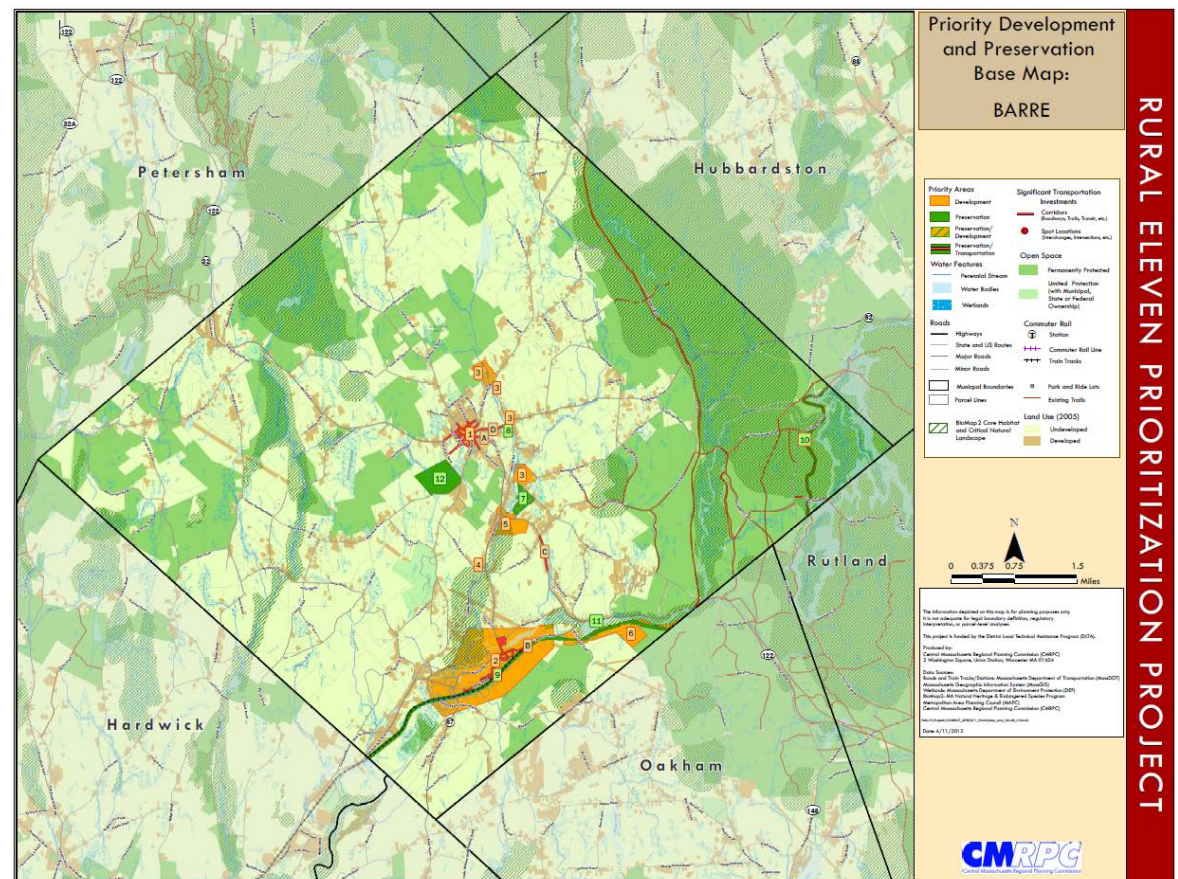
Barre's limited commercial zoning is a major barrier to the type of development the public supports. In areas like South Barre, the Town Center, and Barre Plains zoning changes that increase density and mix commercial and residential uses would promote development that is compact, conserves land, enables pedestrian and bicycle access, preserves rural character, and reduces infrastructure and service costs. A focus on density in village centers is especially important considering so much of the town is owned by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). This planning tool will be explored further in the next phase of economic development planning, a Village Center Strategic Plan for South Barre.

Economic Opportunity Nodes

Priority Development Areas (PDAs) are areas that have been identified as capable of supporting additional development or as candidates for redevelopment. These PDAs are areas on which a town is focusing its energy to promote thoughtful economic development that is closely tied to the community's goals. These were established as part of the Rural Eleven Prioritization Project in 2014 and while progress has been made on some sites like the Town Commons and Pine Ridge Snow Park, the sites identified on the map below are still priorities in 2019. Throughout all public engagement, the most important target area has consistently been South Barre. It's relatively dense housing and location on an important corridor make it a prime candidate for improvement. CMRPC and the Town of Barre have been awarded grant funding from the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs to create a Village Center Strategic Plan that would focus on potential zoning changes, priority parcels, and placemaking in South Barre. For example, we have learned that a local developer would be interested in building additional multifamily housing but the current zoning makes that infeasible. South Barre may also contain an area appropriate for an industrial park. Realigning zoning bylaws to fit the community's vision would promote the highest and best use for land in Barre. Additionally, wayfinding and signage are a huge element of placemaking and also guide visitors to community assets. This could represent an opportunity to further the Quabbin Country initiative and employ a regional branding strategy.

Creating a plan is crucial to guiding decisions at the municipal level and often acts as a catalyst for grant funding. For example, the Barre Mill is a large industrial site likely to be demolished in the near future. CMRPC's Brownfields program offers environmental site assessment grants funded by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to assist in the expansion, redevelopment, or re-use of property which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.

21-1	Barre Common (North, Middle and South)
21-2	South Barre Mill Village and Barre Plain Commercial Industrial Areas (including Wildwood Reload as a Freight Transit facility)
21-3	Prince River Corridor Commercial Sites
21-4	Pine Ridge Snow Park (former)
21-5	Route 32/Route 122 Business Commercial Area
21-6	Rockwerx
21-7	Insight Meditation Center Campus
21-8	Stetson Home Campus
21-9	Possible Housing Development opportunities on Town Farm Rd.



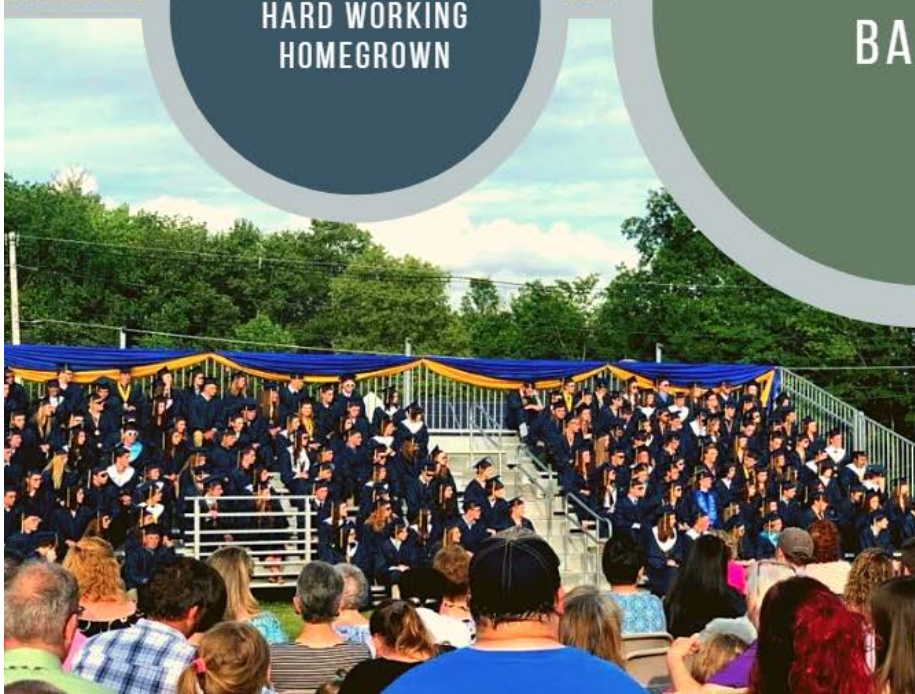


ENTREPRENEURIAL
HARD WORKING
HOMEGROWN



PEACEFUL
NEIGHBORLY
CHARMING

THE COMMUNITY OF
BARRE



Action Items Implementation Matrix

Key: Quabbin Economic Development Coordinator (QEDC), Quabbin Educational and Municipal Partnership (QEMP), Planning Board (PB), Conservation Committee (CC), Town Administrator (TA) Recreation Committee (RC) Department of Public Works (DPW), Business Community of Barre (BCB)

A Short Timeframe is under 1 year, Medium is 1-3, Long is 3-5

Tourism and Recreation Actions Recommendations		Responsible Parties	Timeframe
Build on existing branding and marketing of Quabbin Country.	Form a Quabbin Country Events Committee to coordinate branding, marketing and cultural event activities.	QEMP, QEDC	Short
	A business to business purchasing guide could be a useful addition.	QEDC	Short
	Create linkages to existing State Park promotional materials.	QEDC	Short
	Strengthen partnership with Discover Central Mass and link with their promotional materials.	QEDC	Short
Leverage state forest and other open space Park to draw more visitors.	The Mass Central Rail Trail, Barre Falls Trails, and other trails in the State Forest are a key asset. Seek to connect trails to each other and to other town assets. Work with CMRPC on their upcoming regional website and/or phone "app" with trail maps and recreational amenities.	QEDC, PB, CC, TA, CMRPC	Medium
	Encourage living history exhibits, presentations, or tours, perhaps at the Barre Falls Dam.	QEDC, TA, RC	Short
Build on outdoor recreation as a key draw for the region.	Complete Open Space Recreation Plan. Park grants could be very useful in placemaking efforts	CC	Short
	Establish a canoeing "trail" with parking at access points.	PB, DPW, QEDC, TA	Long
Improve wayfinding to and throughout the town	Move forward on wayfinding and signage with the other Quabbin Country towns (Hardwick, Hubbardston, New Braintree, Oakham)	QEDC, TA, PB, BOS	Medium
	Install directional signage on state highways.	QEDC, TA, MassDOT, DPW	Medium
Preserve agricultural properties and historic working landscapes.	Pursue state and federal assistance opportunities to help ensure that farms can maintain operations.	QEDC, CC, TA, BOS	Long

Village Revitalization Recommendations	Actions	Responsible Party	Timeframe
Continue to support the Business Community of Barre	Engage business owners in discussions and keep them involved in upcoming projects like the Village Strategic Plan in South Barre.	QEDC, TA, PB, BOS, CMRPC	Medium
Improve streetscapes in village centers.	Conduct streetscape design plan and guidelines for South Barre and Barre Plains to assess potential for improvements in façades, signage, sidewalks, lighting, trees/landscaping, benches, public art, etc.	QEDC, TA, PB, BOS, CMRPC	Medium
	Continue to pursue Complete Streets grant funding for improved access and safety.	TA, CMRPC	Short
	Continue to pursue Safe Routes to School grant funding for improved access and safety.	QRSD, TA, CMRPC	Short
	Continue to pursue Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness designation to access grant funding for further assessment and infrastructure improvements.	TA, CMRPC, MVP Committee	Short
	Create more attractive public spaces, including flower boxes, appropriate fencing, and other amenities (such as indicated by streetscape designs). Consider guidelines from Main Street America.	QEDC, TA, BOS	Medium
	Maintain communication with the Wildwood Reload as they consider demolition. Continue a discussion on filling the canal on that site.	QEDC, TA, CMRPC	Short
Improve wayfinding to and within village centers.	Install wayfinding markers to businesses, and historic sites at major intersections and public parking sites.	QEDC, TA, DPW	Medium
	Install clear signage for public parking.	QEDC, TA, DPW	Medium
Preserve and renovate downtown buildings.	Work with state representatives to find or develop programs to help fund the costs of improving vacant/underutilized historic buildings.	QEDC, TA, CMRPC	Short
	Pursue façade improvements programs.	QEDC, TA, CMRPC	Medium
Revitalize individual village centers in keeping with their character.	Preserve the old Barre Town Hall through exploration of alternative uses.	QEDC, TA, PB, BOS	Short
	Create conceptual master plan for redevelopment of South Barre, including an assessment of the existing canal.	QEDC, TA, CMRPC, PB, BOS	Medium
	Adopt zoning for mixed-use development with minimal setbacks and shared parking.	PB	Medium

	Work with existing landlords and tenants to establish viable uses, including retail, restaurants, and services.	QEDC, TA, PB, BOS, CMRPC	Short
	Consider adoption of model Traditional Neighborhood Development Ordinance to encourage infill development in appropriate areas.	PB	Medium
	Continue downtown activities and events such as art walks, sidewalk sales, farmers' markets, restaurant week, etc.	QEDC, TA, Volunteers	Short
Support existing businesses.	Inventory existing businesses and vacancies in village centers to determine business mix, needs, and opportunities.	QEDC	Short
	Continue to build relationships with local business owners.	QEDC	Short
	Continue to seek improvements so the entire town has internet access. Grant programs from USDA may be useful.	QEDC, TA	Short
	Identify at-risk business owners and those needing succession plans; develop intervention strategies to assist them.	QEDC	Short

Land Use and Regulations Recommendations	Actions	Responsible Party	Timeframe
Update Town's zoning bylaw to incorporate modern terms, definitions, and provisions.	Update zoning bylaw to incorporate more specific, commonly used land use terms rather than how uses are currently defined in zoning bylaw.	PB	Medium
	Create a detailed use-table.	PB	Medium
	Review zoning bylaws to better define their scope and purpose through a complete Zoning Diagnostic.	PB	Long
	Expand by-right uses in business, industrial and commercial overlay districts to allow for greatest flexibility for developers and business owners. For example, the town should consider defining and allowing pharmacies, breweries, coworking spaces, makerspaces, and industrial/office "flex" space within the Zoning Bylaws. This may include similar uses such as small-scale manufacturing, shared commercial kitchens, or allowing an attached retail component to such spaces.	PB	Medium
Streamline municipal procedures to facilitate business development.	Hold regular interdepartmental review meetings to ensure all parties are aware of opportunities and potential problems.	TA, PB, Building Inspector, Fire Chief	Short
	Develop a fast-track permitting process, such as E-permitting.	TA, Building Inspector, QEDC	Medium

Explore innovative by-laws, policies, and guidelines for commercial centers	Consider Village Center by-law and design guidelines for South Barre, Barre Plains, and the Town Center.	PB	Medium
	Consider passing a pop-up retail ordinance to allow and streamline temporary uses such as art galleries, seasonal retail, and pilot businesses. This can be especially useful in placemaking efforts that may be effective in South Barre.	BOS	Short
	Consider loosening restrictions on multifamily housing to increase density. This is often necessary to make construction costs feasible for developers. Meet with local developers to hear more about regulatory impediments to development.	PB	Medium
	Consider a shared parking bylaw.	PB	Medium
	Consider adopting Community Preservation Act (CPA) as a source of funding to support housing, community facilities, and open space and recreation .	BOS	Short

Commercial & Industrial Development Recommendations	Actions	Responsible Party	Timeframe
Revitalize existing vacant buildings	Promote use of vacant buildings as business incubators.	QEDC, PB	Short
	Explore South Barre or Barre Plains for a parcel that could support an industrial park.	PB, QEDC, TA, BOS, CMRPC	Medium
	Amend current zoning to allow live/work space in appropriate buildings to promote greater utilization and to encourage the “creative economy.”	PB	Medium
	Consider CMRPC’s Brownfields Program for any necessary remediation at the Old Barre Mill.	Property Owner, QEDC, TA, CMRPC	Short
	Reach out to the owner of the Chas G Allen building to establish whether parts of the building could be repurposed.	QEDC, TA, PB	Short
Conduct a business retention program.	Conduct proactive outreach to existing industrial businesses to determine needs and future plans.	QEDC	Short
Encourage development in industrial zones along major transit corridors	Consider an overlay district or zoning changes to allow wider number of uses by-right.	PB	Medium