

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Town of Barre has a rich agricultural and industrial history. Farms dot the countryside and wool mills can still be found in South Barre, where the Ware River enabled industrial growth. Many residents have ties to Barre that go back generations. A close-knit community and connection to the land have helped Barre preserve its small-town character.

Contemporary Barre has a small but vibrant commercial sector. The town has great economic potential and can encourage and support entrepreneurial activity as well as existing businesses.

Through community engagement, the Master Plan team heard requests for more local businesses, a new fitness

facility, and improvements to South Barre Village. Such changes are realistic and well-suited to the town's existing character.

Compared to neighboring towns, Barre boasts a high commercial and residential levy. As of February 2026, Barre is home to approximately 250 businesses. The largest employers are the Seven Hills Foundation, the Quabbin Regional School District, and Camp Coldbrook. The top industries for residents are education services, health care, and construction.¹⁵

This chapter will highlight strategies to support existing businesses, employees, and budding entrepreneurs.

THEMES

- New locally-owned shops
- New fitness facility
- South Barre Village improvements
- Town Center improvements
- Maintain agricultural roots

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Massachusetts Department of Economic Research <https://lmi.dua.eol.mass.gov/lmi/CitiesAndTowns>

Barre Common. Photo Source: CMRPC



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEFINITIONS

Economic Development

Encompasses all community efforts to build a strong and resilient economy. On a local governance scale, economic development is the process of dividing a community's limited resources to support business growth, employment, and income distribution patterns.

Agritourism

Any farm activity that brings people onto the farm. Typically links agricultural production to entertaining visitors to make agricultural business activity more financially feasible.

Ecotourism

Any tourism activity that connects people with natural facets of the environment. Typically linked with conservation efforts to preserve the environment while improving quality of life and sustainable commercial activity.

Low Impact Development

Connects engineering and design with the natural flow of stormwater and other natural processes such as using

pavement with gaps designed for rainwater to permeate. It is important to consider when developing near bodies of water at risk of stormwater pollution.

Mixed-Use

The combination of residential and commercial uses on the same lot. Traditionally done through first-floor commercial space and dwelling units above.

Placemaking

Shapes public spaces to foster community and belonging by leveraging assets and connections between people and their community. Murals depicting community values, beautification projects, historical preservation and monuments, and events can all bring more meaning and connection to a town.

Smart Growth

Smart growth is an "approach to development that encourages a mix of building types and uses, diverse housing and transportation options, development within existing

neighborhoods, and robust community engagement."¹⁶ The smart growth principles are useful in identifying best practices in contemporary community planning policy.

Streetscape Improvements

Any improvements to the road network that make people feel safe, or that beautify the space. Can include sidewalks, street crossings, benches, bike racks, and street lighting. Related to economic development through attracting foot traffic.

Walkability

Improving how welcome a person feels walking in an area, not just sidewalks. Includes vehicle speed, sidewalk grade and width, lighting, and building proximity.

Wayfinding

Signage that directs visitors and residents to local landmarks, shops, and trails. Can demarcate and create distinct senses of place for different areas of a town.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

Town Center Improvements

Quality of life is the highest priority for Barre residents. This includes opportunities for job growth and youth jobs, equitable access to health care, food and goods, and commercial corridors that enable a strong and supportive community.

Barre has exceptional natural beauty, river access, and significant cultural assets. The preservation of Barre's small-town feel and landscapes emerged as a key priority during Master Plan community engagement. An effective way to meet the needs of residents while preserving land is to direct higher-density development to key locations in the village centers.

Like much of Central Massachusetts, commercial development emerged in mill centers around dense worker housing and a town common. Car-oriented travel may make this development pattern confusing to residents and visitors. To assist with wayfinding and placemaking, signage for attractions and clear paths for multi-modal transportation and parking can connect residents with brick-and-mortar experiences.

The first step toward revitalizing Barre's village centers is a comprehensive zoning review. Zoning bylaws with strict distinctions between commercial and residential areas provide limited flexibility for business owners and developers. Through the development

of new use and dimensional regulations that match the Master Plan vision, Barre can accommodate its aging population, new families, and young adults looking for housing. Village mixed-use zoning allows for access to goods and services in a walkable neighborhood. Allowing apartments in mixed-use buildings with first-floor commercial development will benefit property owners and lead to the construction of more cost-accessible units.

Once zoning is updated to create a business-friendly environment, the Town can engage in smaller economic development projects to support existing businesses and encourage local spending. Community groups



Cafe on the Common .Photo source: CMRPC

like the Barre Business Group, the South Barre Common Committee, the Cultural Council, the Parks and Recreation Committee, and the Council on Aging can take on the role of an Economic Development Commission by promoting existing businesses, installing placemaking and wayfinding infrastructure, and creating events to generate foot traffic.

Through these efforts, the Town can encourage the types of businesses residents in Barre desire: locally-owned restaurants and cafes, a new gas station, a fitness center, and recreation opportunities.

The Village of South Barre needs the most business support, zoning changes, and investment.

Zoning updates should encourage mixed-use buildings, walkable neighborhoods, and low-impact development to protect the Ware River.

Barre Plains Village Center has similar needs to South Barre. A project such as Nornay Park could enhance the Village Center and bring connectivity to the surrounding area.

Barre residents have immense pride in their town and the small businesses that

make it unique. Planning and investing in locally-owned businesses will bring revenue and jobs to the town and build a strong, accountable community.

PLACEMAKING IN BARRE
Programming is one way that people develop a connection to a place. Barre can continue hosting town events and activities that connect people and facilitate economic activity.



“Feet on the street” are also important to sense of place and economic development. Barre’s two-story commercial buildings with housing units can contribute to small-town community and aesthetic charm.



Wayfinding and branding are important to placemaking. Cost effective, attractive signage can draw in tourists and enhance community pride.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FINDINGS

New Mom and Pop Shops

When asked which types of commercial development Barre needs more of, nearly eighty percent of respondents requested more family-operated businesses and mom-and-pop stores. When prompted to explain the challenges Barre faces concerning economic development, “not enough local jobs” was the top answer.

In part, commercial development has lagged in Barre due to limited available commercial land. This can be addressed. There is potential to modify zoning regulations in a way that clusters small businesses in existing commercial areas to increase the tax base while sustaining a unique small-town feel. Barre has the potential for growth in ecotourism and agritourism, historical tourism, lodging, restaurants, breweries, general merchandise, convenience stores, gas stations, and auto repair.

The Town can support businesses by underscoring its sense of place through historical preservation and programming. Key assets such as the historic town hall, library, and other town center buildings should

be preserved and complemented by aesthetic elements such as historic markers, design elements, and programming. The town’s connection to the Quock Walker cases is historically significant and presents opportunities for celebrations and activities that drive commercial activity.

South Barre Village Improvements

South Barre needs streetscape improvements, business support, and job opportunities. Placemaking and wayfinding tools crafted to enhance the area’s rich history and culture will build community pride and attract visitors.

Existing businesses in the area should be supported by the Town through straightforward permitting processes. New developments can be incentivized to conserve land, enable pedestrian and cyclist access, and preserve rural

character. Re-envisioning the land around the Ware River and Mill Canal along Route 32 can be a catalyst for the area. Zoning changes will be needed to support the added density with housing and walkable services.

Maintain Agricultural Roots

The Town of Barre has the potential to leverage nearly one hundred nearby farms to maintain its agricultural roots and innovate modern farming practices. Agriculture has been a pivotal part of Barre’s history. Supporting existing and new farms will preserve Barre’s culture and secure a resilient future for the Barre community. The Stone Cow Brewery is an excellent example of modernizing farming practices, in this case adding brewing, to make the preservation of farmland financially feasible. The Town can encourage similar practices, such as new growing technologies, farm stands, and utilizing farmland for event spaces.

Town Center Improvements

At the heart of Barre, the town common has an opportunity to

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Focus on South Barre. It really needs help!

(2023 Community Survey)



preserve and enhance the character of the town center. Surveyed residents supported more business opportunities in existing buildings, new mixed-use development, and more design guidelines to maintain character in the town common. The current commercial zoning areas on South Street and Common Street are saturated with active commercial properties. A zoning change for the area could incentivize targeted new developments that integrate with Barre’s small-town feel while activating the area. Zoning changes should prepare for future needs of the existing commercial buildings, including renovations, expansions, and opportunities for mixed-use.

Town Center businesses can be supported through soft economic development improvements, such as one-off, annual, and recurring events

that generate community engagement and attract day trip visitors. The farmers’ market is an example of an event that brings foot traffic to the businesses on South Street and Common Street.

New Town Fitness Facility

Master Plan workshop participants identified a new fitness facility as the top request for new businesses. The Master Plan survey found a similar pattern, with many requests for a gym, fitness center, and new recreation options. The Town of Barre can identify appropriate lots and developers to ensure potential new facilities are welcomed.

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Improving both the center of Barre and the common in South Barre where many activities and festivals take place would be a great service for both residents and to attract more visitors. More retail and walkability in the two areas would be fantastic.

(2023 Community Survey)



GOAL 1: ENCOURAGE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECREATION.

The Town of Barre has great potential to optimize its natural charm for residents and tourists alike. In a time of high inflation, traffic, and fees, free public access to natural amenities is crucial for quality of life.



Ware River. Photo source: CMRPC

FINAL DRAFT

STRATEGY 1.1. EXPAND PUBLIC ACCESS TO THE WARE RIVER.

Running through South Barre, the Ware River has untapped potential for increased waterfront commercial and recreational activities. A restoration and design of the riverfront and canal can function as a catalyst project for the village center, connecting residents and beautifying the area by highlighting natural assets.

- 1.1.1 Assess options for adding public launch access on the Ware River.
- 1.1.2. Consult with MassDEP about the contamination concerns at Powder Mill Pond, where there was formerly a public beach. Explore testing and possible remediation of the water body and the nearby dump.
- 1.1.3. Assess options for restoration

of the Mill Pond and Canal (formerly Rich's Pond). Study the feasibility of filling in the canal to create a new greenspace.

- 1.1.3. Explore opportunities for commercial development along the river and canal.

STRATEGY 1.2. EXPAND THE MASS CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL.

According to the Mass Central Rail Trail Feasibility Study completed in March 2021 by MassDOT, Barre has options for potential expansion of the trail into South Barre Village through routes south of Route 32. A western expansion of the Rail Trail has the potential to link with waterfront access to Powder Mill Pond and potential projects described in Strategy 1.1.

- 1.2.1. Establish a committee to help foster the development of the Mass



Central Rail Trail in Barre.

- 1.2.2. Partner with Mass Trails to determine the best route for expansion and connections.
- 1.2.3. Install bicycle infrastructure, including bicycle stands, around the Rail Trail.
- 1.2.4. Explore opportunities to continue bicycle paths on nearby roads to encourage riders into commercial corridors.

STRATEGY 1.3
ASSESS THE CURRENT TRAIL SYSTEM AND PLAN FOR INCREASED MAINTENANCE AND EXPANSION.

To inspire a sense of pride and ownership in Barre’s trail system, a committee can be formed to oversee maintenance needs and expansion plans for any public trails not maintained by other entities. This committee can enhance wayfinding for visitors and promote trail accessibility around town and online. Well-marketed trails have the potential to drive foot traffic to existing businesses.

- 1.3.1. Establish a formal Trails Committee to volunteer for additional maintenance needs.
- 1.3.2. Assess wayfinding needs for

local trails near trailheads and in village centers.

- 1.3.3. Assess options for expanding trail access for hiking, biking, horse riding, and ATVs, especially near commercial corridors.
- 1.3.4. Create a comprehensive trail map and online resources for trail access.
- 1.3.5 Boost wayfinding on and around Mass Central Rail Trail for local services and restaurants.

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Barre is a great town with rich history and great agricultural value. Support the land owners and farmers and protect their land.

Preserve the woods and natural spaces and allow for more outdoor recreational vehicles as it is a growing hobby for lots residents in town

(2023 Community Survey)



GOAL 2: ENCOURAGE NEW SMALL BUSINESSES TO OPEN AND SUPPORT EXISTING BUSINESSES.

The Town of Barre can re-evaluate town policies, regulations, and procedures to be more business friendly, especially for the growing sectors of agritourism and ecotourism. To support existing businesses, the Town can tap into community and region-wide assets.



Stone Cow Brewery and Farm. Photo source: CMRPC

FINAL DRAFT

STRATEGY 2.1. ADAPT THE ZONING BYLAWS TO REFLECT THE VISION OF THIS MASTER PLAN.

Barre's zoning regulations include patchwork commercial districts that reflect how land is currently used but do not inspire a vision for how land could be used in the coming years. Zoning regulations should follow Smart Growth Principles to ensure the town can meet the residential and commercial needs of its residents while preserving open land. Using mixed-use zoning in carefully designed village centers is an effective way to add density while maintaining the historical charm of Barre. To speak to the unique conditions and needs of Barre's commercial corridors, distinct zoning regulations should be created for Town Center, South Barre, and Barre Plains.

- 2.1.1. Complete a comprehensive review of Barre's Zoning Bylaws.
- 2.1.2. Assess current use and dimensional requirements for all commercial zones to follow Smart Growth Principles.
- 2.1.3. Enact village zoning in the Town Center to increase the potential for commercial and mixed-use development by-right onto streets abutting the Common, including School Street, Newton Street, Mechanic Street, and Barre Road.
- 2.1.4. Enact village zoning in South Barre to increase the potential for mixed-use and commercial development on Main Street and Vernon Ave, with special consideration for parcels abutting Ware River.
- 2.1.5. Enact village zoning in Barre Plains Village to incentivize more dense commercial strips.



STRATEGY 2.2. STREAMLINE PERMITTING PROCESSES.

Developers often decide whether to invest in a community based on perceptions of the town as “business-friendly.” Through transparent and efficient permitting processes, Barre may attract new businesses, including a gas station, a fitness center, and dining establishments. Ensuring a business-friendly environment will help incentivize developers to invest in Barre.

- 2.2.1. Assess Site Plan Review criteria for opportunities to eliminate subjectivity and make the process more predictable.
- 2.2.2. Where appropriate, streamline permitting processes for desired business types by replacing Special Permit with Site Plan Review. Site Plan Review is generally seen as more predictable and appealing by developers.
- 2.2.3. Consider implementing a tiered Site Plan Review process so that minor developments are not subject to the same level of review complexity as large-scale developments.
- 2.2.4. Create a Permitting Guidebook to clarify the permitting

process for developers and prospective business owners.

- 2.2.5. Designate a single point of contact to shepherd developers and prospective business owners through the permitting process.
- 2.2.6. Research and assess the utility of various permit tracking software for enhancing the issuance and enforcement of permits.

STRATEGY 2.3. ENCOURAGE AGRITOURISM AND ECOTOURISM VENTURES.

The emerging agritourism and ecotourism sectors are fantastic ways to bring visitors to Barre, increase local jobs, and celebrate the history and culture of the community. To tap into these growth markets, Barre can take the following actions:

- 2.3.1. Assess zoning to ensure flexibility for agritourism and ecotourism ventures (e.g., allowing on-farm events, overnight accommodation, and concerts).
- 2.3.2. Assess underutilized parcels for their potential to support ecotourism and agritourism ventures. Consider developing a conceptual site design for high-ranking lots and market the sites

to potential developers and businesses.

- 2.3.3. Collaborate with the Quabbin Regional School District and local farmers to create educational and mentoring opportunities for students interested in agriculture.
- 2.3.4. Incorporate agritourism and ecotourism strategies in the agenda of the Agricultural Commission.
- 2.3.5. Consider adopting the Community Preservation Act (CPA) as a funding source for municipal agritourism and ecotourism strategies and other preservation measures.
- 2.3.6. Consider promoting the Lost Villages Scenic Byway as an ecotourism corridor in the town.
- 2.3.7. Consider adopting a scenic roads bylaw to restrict certain activities that could alter the appearance or character of specified roadways in town.
- 2.3.8. Consider the development of a municipal agritourism and ecotourism master plan.
- 2.3.9. Relaunch the “Quabbin Country” branding campaign, a previous effort among the Towns of Barre, Hardwick, Hubbardston, New Braintree, and Oakham to promote the region and its agritourism and ecotourism commercial bases.



STRATEGY 2.4.
ENCOURAGE THE
DEVELOPMENT OF TOWN-
OWNED, UNOCCUPIED, OR
VACANT LAND IN SOUTH BARRE
VILLAGE AND OTHER VILLAGE
CENTERS.

The 2021 South Barre Village Strategic Plan identified many town-owned, unoccupied, or vacant property parcels in South Barre Village. Developing these properties, some of which border the Ware River, presents an opportunity to introduce more small-scale commercial development to the town without compromising its small-town, rural character.

- 2.4.1. Create a vacant property inventory to ensure that underutilized properties are known and brought to the attention of Town staff and boards.
- 2.4.2. Create a Vacant Properties Action plan to help ensure that vacant properties are returned to productive use.
- 2.4.3. Investigate the need for assessment and cleanup of contamination at possible brownfield sites, such as the Barre Wool Mill property and the former Barre landfill on Town Farm Road.

STRATEGY 2.5.
FOSTER SUPPORT FOR EXISTING
BUSINESS AND POTENTIAL
BUSINESS OWNERS.

Fundamental to creating a friendly local business environment is providing business owners with tools and support to help them succeed. Barre can achieve this by embracing proven frameworks for downtown economic development and drawing on the resources and knowledge of local and regional business organizations.

- 2.5.1. Connect Barre business owners to the Worcester Business Resource Alliance and North Central Chamber of Commerce.
- 2.5.2. Support expansion of the Barre Business Alliance.
- 2.5.3. Create a “Discover Barre” page geared toward tourists.
- 2.5.4. Join the Main Street America Program. Main Street America offers various educational resources and services to advance preservation-based economic development in historic downtowns.
- 2.5.5. Consider creating a Facade and Storefront Improvement Program. Other nearby communities that have organized recent facade programs include the Town of

Ashburnham, the Town of Upton, and the City of Gardner.

- 2.5.6. Explore the possibility of forming an Economic Development Committee. Composed of local business owners, the committee would complement the Barre Business Alliance and provide guidance, support, and advocacy for the town’s economic development initiatives.



GOAL 3: PRESERVE BARRE'S SMALL-TOWN CHARM.

Small-town charm is part of what makes Barre so special. Enhancements to the Town Common, South Barre, and Barre Plains will underscore the Town's sense of place and drive business activity.



Photo source: Salvatore Strzelecki

FINAL DRAFT

STRATEGY 3.1. CREATE BRANDING FOR SOUTH BARRE, BARRE PLAINS, AND TOWN COMMON AREAS.

Consistent branding, including colors, fonts, and phrases can enhance the small-town charm of specific neighborhoods and commemorate history. Branding can be used in micro-infrastructure projects such as lamp-post banners and signage, as well as online marketing materials such as websites, Facebook events, and newspaper articles. The Nornay Park website is a notable example of effective marketing. Similar pages can be embedded into the Town website for commercial corridors, attractions, and recreation.

- 3.1.1. Create branding identities for village centers including logos, banners, landscaping, and signage.
- 3.1.2. Utilize branding identities to create "shop local" campaigns,

economic development events, and tourism.

- 3.1.3. Assess current wayfinding for local attractions and commercial corridors.
- 3.1.4. Install new wayfinding signage and maps for visitors.
- 3.1.5. Assess geo-tagging of amenities and attractions through Google Maps to ensure clarity.

STRATEGY 3.2. ENCOURAGE AND LEAD TOWN-WIDE EVENTS TO FACILITATE FOOT TRAFFIC AND COMMUNITY PRIDE.

Community events, including farmers' markets, craft fairs, festivals, movie nights, and themed events are an effective method for increasing foot traffic in rural towns. History themed events may present a unique draw. The Town should assess current barriers for groups and organizations to lead events at town-owned land and



buildings. Strategy 3.1 will assist visitors in making second and third stops in Barre corridors before and after large events.

- 3.2.1. Continue supporting the Barre Town Common Farmers' Market.
- 3.2.2. Assess current permitting procedures for one-off events at the Town Common, South Barre Common, Nornay Park, and Felton Field to encourage event planning efficiency.
- 3.2.3. Explore events that leverage Barre's unique history, including the Quock Walker cases. A race and celebration honoring the abolition of slavery and the Walkers would be unique.
- 3.2.3. Facilitate partnerships with local and regional communication outlets (such as Discover Central Mass) to promote local events.
- 3.2.4. Explore additional methods to promote town events (such as electronic signage, newsletters, social media).

STRATEGY 3.3: SUPPORT COMMERCIAL CORRIDORS THROUGH AESTHETIC IMPROVEMENTS.

To assist small businesses facing rising costs, the Town should assess the needs of business owners and explore options for financial support. These tasks are typically overlooked in smaller towns with less municipal capacity. To acknowledge this gap, the Barre Business Alliance can take responsibility for business support functions.

- 3.3.1. Assess needs through business owner surveys.
- 3.3.2. Explore options for facade improvements.
- 3.3.3. Explore options for landscaping improvements.
- 3.3.4. Designate or contract with a grant writer to acquire funding from state and federal grants.

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I really like what Vermont does—limits billboards, makes use of old buildings, lots of cute restaurants and shops.

(2023 Community Survey)



Barre Center. Photo source: CMRPC

