

## TOWN OF MERRIMAC – 2015/2016 COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

### Introduction

Along with Salisbury and Amesbury, Merrimac was originally part of the Merrimack Plantation, a large colonial land grant that also included portions of New Hampshire. From Amesbury's incorporation in 1668 until 1876, Merrimac was part of Amesbury and by 1726 it had become known as West Amesbury. Throughout Merrimac's earliest days, it was predominantly an agricultural settlement with an economy based on subsistence farming and cottage industries along the river front.

Incorporated in 1876, during the first quarter century of its existence, Merrimac enjoyed a heyday of growth and prosperity based on the reputation of producing the highest quality of horse drawn vehicles. In 1888, at the peak of the carriage era prosperity, there was no less than 19 carriage shops in town that employed 469 men within a total population of just over two thousand. Soon after 1900, the carriage business gradually declined and was replaced by the manufacture of custom-made automobile bodies. Three thriving companies catered almost exclusively to affluent clients, until the Great Depression of the 1930's forced them out of existence. Most of the manufacturing buildings associated with the carriage and auto body industries were demolished years ago.

By 1950, Merrimac was no longer an industrial center. However, its industrial heritage remained fixed on the land and endured in the blue-collar composition of its workforce. Suburban development since the 1950's has caused new housing growth to extend beyond the village center. Since the construction of Route 495 in the 1960s, Merrimac has become primarily a residential community. Merrimac is a pleasant, low-key town that values its close-knit neighborhoods, charming town square, working farms, and views of the water. Its small local government and limited financial resources have not prevented the Town from developing strategic plans to help guide its future growth and development.

Merrimac in 2010 was home to 6,300 residents, an increase of 3.3 percent from 2000. In 2010, working-age adults between 20 and 65 constituted 60 percent of the population and seniors over 65 made up 13 percent. School-age children (between ages 5 and 19) constituted 15 percent of all residents in 2010. Merrimac's total population is projected to decline slightly between 2010 and 2020, and to increase to its 2010 population level by 2030. But the aging of the Baby Boomers will cause the senior population to increase by 1,100 people, or 130 percent, through 2030.

While the region's population is expected to grow modestly over the next 25 years, regional employment levels are expected to remain virtually unchanged. Total employment is projected to grow by only 1.7% over 2010 levels. In Merrimac, it is projected that employment will stay virtually constant at 877 from 2010 to 2040.

### Town Facts

- 2010 population – 6,338 (US Census)
- 2010 median household income - \$76,923 (US Census)
- Labor force – 3,791    Employed – 3,652    Unemployment rate – 3.7% (MassGov – Oct. 2015)

- Total housing units – 2,500; 34% built before 1939; almost 10% are mobile home units
- FY 16 average tax bill - \$5,478
- FY 16 General budget - \$13,218,403
- FY 16 Water budget - \$980,079
- Average home value - \$339,000
- FY 16 COA budget - \$237,839
- FY 16 Sewer budget - \$1,108,703

## Strategy

The Town of Merrimac’s comprehensive Master Plan forms the foundation for its Community Development Strategy (CDS). The Master Plan has been guiding the Town’s actions since its creation in 2002. It has served as the policy document for achieving the community’s vision for future growth and development with four key outcomes in mind: 1) environmentally responsible, 2) socially inclusive, 3) economically vibrant, and 4) fiscally stable.

The development of the Master Plan represents an 18-month endeavor lead by an 18 member steering committee with participation of over 35 people on its sub-committees organized around the major elements of the Master Plan. The Steering Committee sponsored two community planning forums and encouraged residents to participate in guiding the committee work and shaping the direction of their new master plan.

Guided by the policies layout in the Master Plan the Town of Merrimac embarked on a wholesale revision of its zoning by-laws in 2004. The goals of the Master Plan have been furthered refined with the creation of five-year housing production plans to provide targets and policy guidance for the production of affordable housing. The Affordable Housing Board of Trustees, a volunteer citizen committee, is in the process of updating the 2010 HPP with assistance from Merrimack Valley Planning Committee. Development in the community has also been guided by a series of five-year open spaces plans. The Open Space Committee is in the process of updating the most recent Open Space and Recreation Plan.

### Open Space, Natural and Cultural Resources

Merrimac has outstanding and irreplaceable natural assets that the Town needs to protect from adverse impacts of existing and future development: the Merrimack River, a rolling landscape with vast tracts of agricultural land, large, still unaltered forests, and an intricate system of wetlands, surface water and ground water resources that support local and regional populations. There are several habitat areas along the Merrimack River and north of Route 110, where large, contiguous tracts of undeveloped land serve as a buffer to riparian corridors and help to protect the quality of surface and ground water resources. For the most part, the open landscapes of northern Merrimac adjoin a simple frame of north south byways that supported early colonial settlement patterns. Today, the same roads channel a significant amount of cut through traffic between New Hampshire and I-495, a task for which they are poorly equipped by design and general condition.

#### Goals:

- Establish/preserve open space corridors

- Provide accessible parks and recreation facilities for all ages that foster a sense of community and increase awareness of rich natural resources
- Safeguard water resources for personal and habitat
- Encourage residents to steward natural resources, agricultural land use, historic architecture and landmarks

### Housing and Households

Since 2000, the number of households has increased faster than population because of declines in average household size. This trend is expected to continue as seniors make up a greater share of householders and younger householders wait longer to form families that are smaller on average than their predecessors. In Merrimac, total households increased by 200, or 9.1 percent, between 2000 and 2010. At the same time, average household size decreased from 2.7 to 2.6. In Merrimac, householders over 60 will increase from 33 percent of the population in 2010 to 55 percent in 2030. Meanwhile, householders under 60 will decrease by 300, or 19 percent. These figures mirror what is happening across the state.

The housing stock in Merrimac is diverse. Every age group, family size and level of income is accommodated. There is a range of housing choice: mobile home parks, apartments, modest cottages, condominium units, duplexes, home office/studio, commodious single family dwellings, in-law unit, farm homestead, and group home. From authentic to reproduction, the age and style of the housing stock represents every architectural period from colonial to modern. In recent years, the greatest area of development has been infill of duplexes in the Village Residential District.

#### Goals:

- Provide housing choice throughout the community
- Protect and enhance the historic, intimate character of existing neighborhoods
- Use regulations effectively to promote neighborhood-scale design in new residential developments offering a range of affordability
- Use Affordable Housing Trust funds to support development of affordable housing units that qualify for the Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI) list

### Economic Development

Several provisions were incorporated into the major zoning revisions adopted by the Town in 2004 with the intent to encourage greater economic development. The desired results of these changes are yet to be realized and are not projected to happen in the foreseeable future. Merrimac's current level of employment at 877 is not projected to increase through 2040. Due to the lack of a strong business base, the town has retained a single tax rate which places additional tax burden on homeowners and renters alike.

#### Goals:

- Reevaluate the zoning provisions for the Rural Highway District along Route 110 and Highway Services District connecting Route 110 to Route 495 to determine how to make each more economically viable for business development
- Identify means to attract more businesses to the Village Center, a pedestrian friendly area with public transportation access and good public parking

#### Infrastructure and Public Facilities

Over the past 25 years Merrimac has been able to upgrade several of its public facilities. In 1999, Merrimac received a Community Development Block Grant to supplement local appropriations to transform an existing building into a larger, more accommodating Senior Center. More recently the town has built a new library and renovated Town Hall to better offer services to the community. Currently a feasibility study is underway to determine how best to improve the structures housing public safety and public works personnel and equipment. Conversely, Merrimac is reaching maximum capacity at its wastewater treatment facility and utilization of its drinking water sources.

#### Goals:

- Adopt and implement a plan to adequately address public safety and public works facility needs for the foreseeable future
- Continue to seek alternative water sources and to increase the efficiency of the wastewater treatment facility.

#### Transportation

Merrimac has safe, quiet streets that serve the neighborhoods and offer good access for pedestrians and cyclists. In addition, the Town has direct access to Route 495 and is bisected east/west by Route 110. The town is served by a bus route that travels between Haverhill and Amesbury/Newburyport connecting to the commuter rail station in each community. The route runs along Route 110 and makes a side trip passed, Merrimac Village, the public housing development. The reconfiguration of the central square through which Route 110 and two major streets pass has just been completed. This greatly increases the safety of pedestrian traffic and parking in the town center and hopefully will increase utilization of the businesses located there.

#### Goals:

- Regular maintenance of all public roads to ensure safety and ease of access
- Make the main roads and neighborhood streets more pedestrian and biking friendly
- Upgrade drainage, water lines, and sewer lines and improve road conditions on main roads
- Repair sidewalks in older sections of town to improve ease of mobility for seniors and others with movement limitations

#### Social Services

Merrimac's capacity to directly provide social services for adults is primarily limited to services provided through the Council on Aging/Senior Center. Annually an unduplicated count of over 500 individuals

over age 60 receive services such as case management, health screening, and congregate meals; another 1,000 benefit from health education. Additionally, at least another 125 non-elders annually are assisted with general information, and transportation. A food pantry program is also operated out of the Senior Center serving 46 families on a regular basis in the past year.

With no agency serving youth located in the community, the Pentucket Regional School District (PRSD) provides the leadership in this area. The District developed its most recent improvement plan with the input of a broad band of stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, and community members. Student performance data, survey data, and information collected from focus groups contributed to the development of the District's strategic plan. The primary target area that emerged is successful transition from middle school to high school, seen as critical for each student's completion of high school within four years and long-term college and career success. Students' success can be complicated by factors such as economic background, second language acquisition, and substance use/abuse. Pentucket's annual state assessment documents the disparity that exists between the academic performance of the general student population and those students identified as high needs.

#### Goals:

- Continue assessment of what factors best contribute to elder quality of life and self-sufficiency
- Explore options for offering adult day care for seniors, newly identified as an under resourced need
- Develop programming to aid youth in successfully transitioning for middle to high school

#### Governance

Merrimac operates under a Board of Selectman and Open Town meeting form of government drawing from an assortment of general and special laws for its governing powers. Like many small towns, Merrimac relies heavily on volunteer elected and appointed boards and committees and employs a limited complement of paid staff resulting in a highly decentralized system.

#### **Sources**

- Merrimac Comprehensive Master Plan, June 2002
- Town of Merrimac Zoning Bylaw, April 2004 (periodically amended since)
- Merrimac, MA Historic Trail Guide, 2007
- Open Space and Recreation Plan 2015-2020 (draft - based on update of 2006-2010 plan)
- Town of Merrimac Housing Production Plan, November 2015 (update of 2010-2015 plan)
- COA FY '15 Annual Report to EOE-AGA
- PRSD Improvement Plan and 11/25/15 memo from Jeffrey Mulqueen, Superintendent, PRSD

## Priorities List and Action Plan

Item	Priority	Time frame	Status
<b>Open Space, Natural and Cultural Resources</b>			
Discourage degradation and loss of wetlands by enforcing Wetlands Protection Act and adopting regulatory incentives to direct development to upland locations	high	long	Conservation Commission continue to address enforcement and Planning Board (PB) to review applicable zoning
Take steps to increase and encourage resident access to and use of Town Forest, McLaren Trail, Merrimack River, and Lake Attitash.	high	short	Open Space Committee (OSC) plans to publicize accessibility to resources and will work with Board of Selectmen and others to increase awareness
Enforce management plans for town-owned open space that include a range of allowed public use and maintenance of public trails	medium	short	Rules of operation exist for most town-owned open space but enforcement is not a priority. OSC will organize trail maintenance activity
To maximum extent feasible, enlist developer cooperation to provide neighborhood-level parks and playgrounds in residential and mixed-use developments.	medium	long	Planning Board will include in consideration for Special Permits and Sub-Division developments.
<b>Housing</b>			
Give preference to infill affordable housing development in and adjacent to the Town Center such as at the former Coastal Metal site	high	short	Under leadership of (BOS) Board of Selectman, town is seeking funding to assist clean-up and development with support of Affordable Housing Board
Use HOME & CDBG funds to subsidize improvements to existing housing stock or to facilitate conversions that require special permit	high	short & long	Affordable Housing Board of Trustee (AHBT) is pursuing funds to initiate and sustain a home improvement program
Amend zoning in Rural Highway District to permit reduced commercial use when residential use includes specified percent of affordable units	high	short	AHBT will propose zoning bylaw language for changes in RH district to be presented at Annual Town Meeting in 2016
Work closely and efficiently with developers of 40B proposals in order to expand housing opportunities in character with the community	medium	ongoing	ZBA will seek input from AHBT and encourage design for scale not to exceed 100 units.
Adopt Community Preservation Act (CPA) to impose a surcharge of 1-2% on new construction with	medium	long	AHBT and OSC will work together to gain support for passage of the CPA

exemptions for low-income households			which narrowly failed in the first attempt
<b>Economic Development</b>			
Revive local economic development commission and charge it with responsibility to coordinate with regional development activities and provide technical assistance to local entrepreneurs and small business	medium	long	BOS will contact those formerly involved and seek new members to revive the commission.
Use zoning and enforcement to improve appearance of town gateways business properties.	medium	long	Merrimac Garden Club continue to maintain pleasing gateways and PB use Site Plan Review to ensure attractive appearance of properties
<b>Infrastructure and Public Facilities</b>			
Plan for expansion of water supply and wastewater treatment facility	high	short & long	Dept. of Public Works (DPW) will continue to work with consultants to locate additional feasible sources of water and facility expansion.
Develop and implement plan to replace existing public safety and highway facility(s).	high	short & long	Building committee is conducting feasibility study and will make recommendation to Town Meeting
Develop plan for re-use of elementary school if it becomes available	medium	long	Committee will be formed to identify options when appropriate
<b>Transportation</b>			
Adopt and implement a street capital improvement schedule.	high	short	DPW will present a street by street paving and maintenance schedule to the BOS & Capital Planning Committee
Manage and maintain town roads including road paving and sidewalk maintenance.	medium	long	DPW will provide routine maintenance and re-paving for roads and sidewalk throughout town.
<b>Social Services</b>			
Continue to offer a range of services to elders and non-elders as appropriate.	high	ongoing	With funding from the town, available grants, and volunteer assistance, the COA will continue its service delivery
Explore means to increase elder self-sufficiency including financial education and assistance with tax prep	medium	short	COA will use existing resources and identify other referral sources to meet this need.
Strengthen intensive, specialized youth service programming to meet academic and social-emotional learning needs of 8 <sup>th</sup> to 9 <sup>th</sup> grade students	high	long	Create a transitional middle-to-high school program to provide students with individualized services, academic support, and counseling during the summer of transition & periodically through the 9 <sup>th</sup> grade year; key

			elements to be financial education, career goals/training, and substance prevention/abuse counseling.
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