

# NORTH ADAMS VISION 2030: COMMUNITY VISION WORKSHOP SUMMARY

July 11, 2011

## ATTENDANCE

### COMMUNITY MEMBERS

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**In Attendance:** 42 Members of the public and broadcast on public access television

### STAFF

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**City:** Mayor Richard J. Alcombright and Mike Nuwallie (Office of Community Development)

**Berkshire Regional Planning Commission:** Amy Kacala, Daniel Sexton, Mackenzie Greer

## OPEN HOUSE

The first portion of the Community Vision Workshop provided an opportunity to share information with and gather input from community members. Workshop attendees were presented with maps and informational posters highlighting the existing conditions and key issues of the city. The maps and posters covered a broad range of topics (*agriculture & local food, economic development, energy & climate, health & wellness, historic & cultural resources, housing & neighborhoods, land use, natural resources & habitat, infrastructure & services, open space & recreation, and transportation*) which the plan will address. Members of the public were then encouraged to submit key issues, concerns or comments about the information provided or about the topic areas in general.

Comments received were edited for clarity, but not accuracy or content. In some cases there were differing statements.

The comments from attendees are divided into topic categories, below:

### AGRICULTURE & LOCAL FOOD

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- Ensure zoning allows for expanded agriculture, food related businesses (e.g.. community compost, slaughter house or community kitchen), and development of roadside farm stands
- Develop a food production (processing facilities) and processing sector to create jobs
- Support the use and production of local grown foods to reduce poverty and illness
- Increase community awareness and education about food production and cooking
- Offer more organic foods in schools
- Evaluate the Farmers Market to consider expanded offerings, hours and seasons
- Expand the food pantry's offerings to include fresh produce

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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- Develop business- and housing-friendly programs and incentives (rebates, tax moratoriums, etc.)
- Use tax incentives to encourage development by entrepreneurs and innovators
- Attract businesses who will draw and employ well-educated persons
- Job creation in manufacturing, agriculture
- Encourage the growth of “local” small businesses
- Develop programs to retrain the community workforce
- Develop an “Arts District” to encourage the redevelopment of underutilized structures for affordable artists’ housing and arts related businesses

## ENERGY AND CLIMATE

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- Encourage homeowners maintain their structure to ensure maximum energy efficiency (e.g. insulation, siding, roof, etc.)
- Address the high costs of energy and electricity without subsidies
- Modify the Zoning Ordinance to allow the development of residential wind turbines
- Develop and support a local/state fund to help w/long-term financing of residential solar
- Facilitate the development of wind power generation to reduce energy costs and bolster the local tax base

## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

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- Prioritize the availability and serving of healthy foods in the local schools
- Develop more programs to reduce the high rate of teen pregnancy
- Develop a community-wide exercise event/initiative
- Provide more education and programs to address substance abuse for all residents
- Become more pedestrian and bicycle friendly and safe

## HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

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- Improve information for the public and visitors about the city’s historic and cultural resources
- Improve the city’s website to better educate and highlight these assets
- Employ demolition delay to preserve the historic integrity of the community
- Create a plan to guide and facilitate the revitalization of the city’s historic districts
- Emphasize how walkable North Adams is and encourage users to enjoy all parts of the city
- Establish a Cultural District through the Massachusetts Cultural Council
- Complete the restoration of the Mohawk Theatre
- Include Eclipse Mill, Main Street Stage, Mill City and Minerva Arts Center as cultural resources
- Educate residents about and restore Fort Massachusetts
- Revitalize and support the City’s Office of Tourism
- Assist North Adams Historical Commission to update city’s inventory to use correct and modern forms and make them available electronically

## HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOODS

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- Encourage home ownership rather than renting; the city has too many rental properties
- Reduce/eliminate the centralizing of poverty; modernize old housing policies
- Neighborhoods should be connected to downtown through walking and bicycling routes
- Consider schools as neighborhood elements and also address them independently
- Support neighborhoods with schools as focus
- Address schools and education in a separate chapter of the plan
- Find a way to allow second homeowners, without adversely impacting existing residents and neighborhoods
- Amend the Zoning Ordinance to allow artists to live and work from home in Residential Districts
- Develop a Property Maintenance ordinance to reduce neighborhood blight and make community more attractive: ensure property owners dispose of trash appropriately, maintain structures, remove snow (sidewalks) and minimize noise
- Buy foreclosed properties and re-sell at foreclosure prices to spur home ownership
- Develop an incentive program for new buyers of owner-occupied homes

## LAND USE

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- Develop more flexible zoning (e.g. new urbanism movement) or rezone areas to spur economic growth
- Develop more apparent entrances or gateways to the city, specifically Church and Ashland; modify zoning requirements to support this
- Change Zoning Ordinance to allow art studios and artist lofts in residential districts
- Develop a Mixed Use District
- Encourage the development of small businesses through land use changes
- Work with MCLA to better incorporate the college into the community and facilitate expansions
- Protect lands with soils suitable for agricultural production through the creation of an Agricultural District
- Make better use of the Hoosic River and its adjacent properties/developments; encourage green spaces along it and throughout the city
- Develop hydropower generation from the Hoosic River
- Develop partnerships with similar communities in Massachusetts, such as Lowell

## NATURAL RESOURCES AND HABITAT

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- Make natural beauty and resources more accessible (signage, education, and interpretation areas)
- Develop more signage to direct and promote people and visitors to the city's natural resources
- Encourage Eco-Tourism and Agri-Tourism
- Promote the use of native species (plants and trees)

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

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- The city should not be in the landlord business; privatize the Windsor Mill and other properties
- Install more pedestrian curb-cuts and reduce vehicular traffic speeds in residential areas

## OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

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- Promote and educate residents and visitors about the city's resources
- Work on revitalizing the Hoosic River by modifying the concrete flood chutes; provide better access and beautify it throughout the city
- Develop an expansion of the Ashuwillticook Rail trail from Adams through the city to Williamstown
- Develop bike lanes
- Develop ways to welcome hikers from the Appalachian Trail and Mt. Greylock to the city
- Develop former Camp Decker as new entrance to city's campground

## TRANSPORTATION

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- Develop a local trolley (tours and local routes)
- Rail service, both freight and passenger, should be expanded
- Passenger rail should be developed from the city to Boston through the Hoosac Tunnel
- Bus or van service should be re-established to Boston and developed to New York City
- Encourage walking (healthy alternative)
- Slow traffic entering the city
- Develop walking and bicycle routes radiating from downtown (separated paths, bike lanes and maintained sidewalks)
- Close Eagle Street to develop a pedestrian mall

## PRESENTATION WITH Q & A

Ms. Kacala began the presentation by introducing the project staff and formally welcoming everyone to the workshop. She then described the agenda for the remainder of the evening's workshop. Mayor Alcombright welcomed attendees and announced that the city's \$1 million Community Development Block Grant application had been awarded.

Ms. Kacala then discussed the Comprehensive Planning process. Plans allow communities to focus and align ideas, efforts and funding to achieve desired outcomes (in this case the city's vision and goals). There are different types of plans communities can develop which as topic based, area specific or are comprehensive. She noted that most plans have a designated shelf life of 5-10 years; whereas the city's last comprehensive plan was adopted 30 years ago. During that time period the city has initiated and developed more topic-specific planning documents. A comprehensive plan, however, is the most important because it provides a city-wide perspective and holistic approach to addressing key issues and concerns through the integration of all topic and areas. A comprehensive plan can also provide a wide range of benefits, including facilitating investments, aligning and prioritizing activities and efforts, and organizing collaborations and partnerships.

Ms. Kacala explained that Massachusetts General Law requires certain elements to be incorporated into a comprehensive (or master) plan, including an inventory and analysis of existing conditions, a vision statement, goals and priorities, and an implementation plan. Communities, however, have the ability to incorporate other topic areas like energy and climate, food securities, social equity and much more.

She then noted that the period in which it takes to development a comprehensive plan varies. The North Adams process will be developed over three years and alongside the regional plan, entitled *Sustainable Berkshires*, being sheparded by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission. The tandem planning efforts, will allow the communities to utilize information and data to conduct in-depth analysis of factors

impacting the city, ensuring alignment of priorities and strategies, allowing the city to develop a big plan for a smaller budget. The proposed three year development schedule includes:

## YEAR #1

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- Inventory and Analysis
- Vision
- Economy
  - *General Economy*
  - *Arts, Culture, and Historic Economy*
  - *Open Space and Recreation*
  - *Agriculture (start)*
- Immediate Implementation Items

## YEAR #2

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- Community Health and Wellness
- Housing and Neighborhoods
- Energy Plan
- Infrastructure and Services

## YEAR #3

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- Future Land Use Scenarios
- Future Land Use Plan
- Draft Plan Document
- Plan Adoption
- Implementation

Ms. Kacala also noted key themes raised during interviews with representatives from stakeholder groups and organizations in the community (e.g. MCLA, Mass MoCA, North Adams Regional Hospital, North Adams School District, National Grid, North Adams Housing Authority, Northern Berkshire Community Coalition and others). The priorities identified included:

### Community Identity

*Priority:* Retain Core Community Values in The Face of Change

*Priority:* Rebrand the City

### Economic Development

*Priority:* Address Conditions that make Employer and Employee Recruitment and Retention Challenging

*Priority:* Facilitate Economic Growth and Transition

*Priority:* Comprehensive Update of Zoning Code

### Agriculture and Local Food

*Priority:* Ensure Access to Local Healthy Food

### Historic and Cultural Resources

*Priority:* Treat Historic Resources as Assets

*Priority:* Support Stable and Vibrant Arts Community

### Open Space and Recreation

- Priority:* Maintain High Quality Recreation Options
- Priority:* Offer Recreation Options for All Ages
- Priority:* Leverage Presence of Open Space and Wild Lands

#### Health and Wellness

- Priority:* Address Gaps in Health Care Service
- Priority:* Support Healthy, Active Lifestyles

#### Housing and Neighborhoods

- Priority:* Address Widespread Neighborhood Blight
- Priority:* Foster Residential (re)Investment
- Priority:* Integrate Public Housing Developments with their Larger Neighborhoods and Community

#### Infrastructure and Services

- Priority:* Improve Mobility through Viable Multi-Modal Options
- Priority:* Rectify Issues Resulting From Past Deferred Maintenance and Investment in Infrastructure and Services

#### Energy and Climate

- Priority:* Reduce Dependence on Energy from Non-Renewable Sources

## SMALL GROUP SESSION

The attendees were asked to break into small groups to discuss and outline things that they would like to see happen in the city, in all the topic areas. They also identified the Top 3 priorities they thought were essential to the city's future. Each group shared their results with the larger group, noting differences of opinions.

The key priorities raised by the small groups included:

### GROUP #1

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#### Key Priorities

- Historic & Cultural Resources:* Creation of an arts district/center, development of artist housing/stipulation of time commitment, use information/guidance from ArtBased.org (Minnesota organization)
- Housing/Neighborhoods:* Develop a program to assist homeowners to maintain and retrofit their homes and properties, actively distribute or make available sustainability/green initiatives information, develop solar or wind resources to reduce energy prices
- Health/Wellness:* Reduce teen pregnancy and provide better prenatal care, develop a community walk or race to encourage healthy activities/choices, develop urban farms/gardens (zoning change needed)

### GROUP #2

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#### Key Priorities

- Agriculture:* Develop food processing capabilities, partnerships between farmers and businesses/institutions; modify zoning to protect agricultural lands, educate the public on the importance of agriculture

**Historic/Cultural Resources:** Build economic value from these assets, inform and educate the public of the community's many resources (Mt. Greylock, MassMoCA, Heritage Park, etc.), new city brand "Village Historic"

**Economy:** Reduce utility cost through the development of alternative energy resources (solar, wind, etc.), modify the local zoning code to be more business friendly and flexible (mixed-use zoning districts), reinforce the importance of a multi-modal transportation system

**Education:** Encourage community research, education and development of agricultural resources throughout the community, work with MCLA and the NAPSD to educate and re-educate residents, especially elders

## GROUP #3

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### Key Priorities

**Education:** Educate residents about ways to reduce poverty and improve healthcare, ensure the community has access to up-to-date and technologically advanced facilities, attract quality teachers, ensure a broad-base of educational opportunities and academic options, work to implement the goals and objectives from the Berkshire Compact for Education

**Economy:** Job creation (all levels), use existing spaces/mills within built environment

**Climate/Land Use/Zoning:** Modify uses and access to Main Street to create a true "Main Street," further develop the city's multi-modal transportation system (specifically passenger rail), institute curbside recycling, develop wind, solar and hydro energy generation facilities

## GROUP #4

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### Key Priorities

**Economy:** Better utilize and harness capital and knowledge from MCLA staff and students, develop a city-wide marketing plan, develop a brand or identity for the city (use in marketing), better educate the public

**Housing/Neighborhood:** develop well balanced and diverse neighborhoods through infill redevelopment, establish a higher standard for landlords, create mixed housing

**Transportation/Infrastructure:** install bike racks throughout the community, educate and inform the public of the different transit options available in the community (change the mindset), ensure year-round access to entire community (clear and develop sidewalks), by developing and encouraging walking and biking reinforce healthier choices

## GROUP #5

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### Key Priorities

**Economy:** strengthen and support the arts/culture sector of the community's economy, strive to become the greenest community in MA

**Housing/Neighborhoods:** develop programs to help and inform residents on the importance of maintaining their homes/property (specifically the middle-class), institute a higher tax rate for Seasonal/2nd homeowners, purchase and resell foreclosed homes for the development of affordable housing

**Open Space/Recreation:** protect natural and sensitive landscapes, prevent pollution, utilize as an economic asset (Appalachian Trail and possible expansion of the Ashuwillticook Rail Trail)

## GROUP #6

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### Key Priorities

*Health/Wellness:* preserve, support and ensure viability of the North Adams Regional Hospital

*Education:* develop and support partnerships between MCLA, NAPSD, businesses and residents to educate and utilize available resources and assets

*Open Space/Recreation:* support and ensure the viability of the community campground

Comment forms were distributed to give a chance for participants and residents to submit additional comments and input, specifically regarding key issues to consider, Planning Priorities and or Vision Statement priorities. The form was also made available at City Hall and posted to the city's webpage. Respondents were given until noon on Friday, July 29<sup>th</sup> to submit the form.

## WRAP-UP AND NEXT STEPS

Ms. Kacala described the next steps as finalizing the draft Vision Statement, Existing Conditions and Planning Priorities documents. Once completed, these documents will be made available for public review and comment on the city's website and reviewed by the city's Steering Committee and Planning Board.

During the same time period, work will begin on the development of draft language for the Economic, Open Space & Recreation, and Historic & Cultural Resources chapters of the plan. To identify Goals and Priorities for these chapters, topic specific forums and meetings will be held to gather input from the public.