



EDA PLANNING ASSISTANCE GRANT MERRIMACK VALLEY PLANNING COMMISSION FINAL PROGRESS REPORT 2015-2016

Submitted by

MERRIMACK VALLEY PLANNING COMMISSION

160 Main Street
Haverhill, Massachusetts 01830
Tel. 978-374-0519
Fax 978-372-4890
www.mvpc.org

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This final progress report summarizes the economic development activities undertaken by the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission (MVPC) through June 30, 2016. This activity was made possible by an Economic Development Administration (EDA) grant through the Partnership Planning Assistance Program. The grant provides for a regional economic development planning program, supporting the fifteen cities and towns of the MVPC region: Amesbury, Andover, Boxford, Georgetown, Groveland, Haverhill, Lawrence, Merrimac, Methuen, Newbury, Newburyport, North Andover, Rowley, Salisbury, and West Newbury. This report contains two sections: 1) Annual Accomplishments and Progress, and 2) Next Steps. The first section is organized by the performance measures established to both achieve MVPC's goals and EDA's mission. The second section includes the 2016-2017 CEDS Workplan for MVPC and how EDA can provide support in completing that workplan.

Section 1: MVPC's Annual Accomplishments and Progress

1. Expand CEDS Committee participation and encourage individuals to look beyond community borders.

a. CEDS Committee Engagement and Meetings

MVPC maintains regular communication with CEDS Committee members via email, personal meetings, and phone calls, particularly with the hiring of MVPC's new Economic Development Planner, who has reached out to several members to get acquainted. On April 25, 2015 the CEDS Committee heard presentations from three prominent businessmen in the region who discussed why and how they continue to invest in the Merrimack Valley Region. See the attached CEDS Committee agenda and sign in sheet. This meeting was the first CEDS Committee meeting to be recorded and uploaded to MVPC's new [YouTube Channel](#).

b. Encourage individuals to look beyond community borders.

At many of MVPC's meetings, especially the monthly meetings of the Mayors and Managers Coalition, the Economic Development Planner provides an update on the [MVMB.biz](#) website activity and engages the group in discussions about how to improve it. The MVMB.biz site is also regularly updated with EDA and Commonwealth grants available or just general promotion about economic development resources and events (i.e., International Economic Development Week and New England B2B Business Networking Events).

2. Increase regional awareness of EDA assistance to the Merrimack Valley.

As indicated in Item #1B, MVPC regularly promotes the [MVMB.biz](#) website at CEDS Committee meetings, Regional Planning Directors meetings, Mayors and Managers meetings and MVPC Commission meetings. MVPC is also promoting EDA-related assistance on Facebook and Twitter, which have both seen an increase in participation over the past year due to a new social media strategy at the Commission. The newsfeed on the MVMB.biz website is another outlet for EDA-related social media postings.

3. Increase the use of the 2013 Merrimack Valley CEDS as a guide to regional development.

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In 2015 and 2016, MVPC made significant progress towards achieving the goals and actions in the [2013 Merrimack Valley CEDS](#). The update on the MVPC CEDS activity is a snapshot of what we have accomplished, however; there are other actions in the development stages which will be reported on in the 2016 Semi-Annual Report. In the meantime, MVPC's accomplishments on CEDS goals are included below.

Goal 4.1: Develop and Promote a Strong, Diversified, and Sustained Regional Economy.

- 1) Increase local capacity through the establishment of a Valley Support Team outreach program concerning financing and programming opportunities available to localities to assist the business community.** The Economic Development Planner held meetings with (1) Lupoli Companies and MassDevelopment about financing opportunities for the Merrimack Street buildings in both Lawrence and downtown Haverhill and exploring ways to utilize the I-Cubed Program to install a public parking facility; (2) MassDevelopment and the City of Haverhill regarding the Transformative Development Initiative and downtown redevelopment of Merrimack Street; and (3) Greater Haverhill Chamber of Commerce to determine how their Ambassador Program could promote more networking/job creation in the Greater Haverhill area. In addition, financing opportunities are included in the Economic Development and Planning Toolkit, specifically the [Economic Incentives](#) available to these stakeholders.
- 2) Work closely with State officials such as Massachusetts Office of Business Development (MOBD).** The new Economic Development Planner recently joined the Northeast Region Municipal Network, a coalition of economic development planners from around the Northeast region of Massachusetts. This network was started, and is supported, by the MOBD. Each meeting consists of a speaker, member updates and field trip to completed and new economic development sites.
- 3) Explore best practices from around the country on regional branding efforts and interagency cooperation AND Expand the “Means Business” marketing campaign beyond site selection...and begin branding the region.** MVPC combined these two actions to jumpstart a Phase 1 approach to branding and marketing the Merrimack Valley Region. It began with a review of regional branding projects from around the USA, including New York State, Virginia, and Florida. Sample RFPs were collected and used to create a Request for Quotes (RFQ). The RFQ was released in the spring of 2016 and resulted in two proposals from local/regionally-based consulting companies. In June 2016, the MVPC interviewed both consulting teams and chose Brand One as the consultant to lead Phase 1 of the marketing project.

Goal 4.2: Identify & Support the Region's Priority Development Areas & Priority Preservation Areas.

- 1) Continue to promote updated zoning to encourage more mixed-use development at village/downtown centers, possibly through the state's Chapter 40R Program.** The Economic Development Coordinator provided technical assistance to the City of Methuen on their [Planning Assistance Towards Housing Grant Application](#), which was awarded in the amount of \$25,000 to the City of Methuen for the creation of a 40R Smart Growth District in their downtown area.

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- 2) **Prioritize pedestrian and bike-oriented transportation planning/increase public transportation options.** MVPC participated in the Shawsheen River Greenway committee in Andover. This multi-use trail will eventually connect three priority development areas and two commuter rail stations in Andover.
- 3) **Increase public transportation options.** MVPC staff assists the Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority with community outreach. MVPC staff have improved the MVRTA transit maps and created a system-wide map to increase public transit use. Over the past year, MVPC organized outreach opportunities to educate and train people about how to use the fixed route bus service. In addition, MVPC helped create a training video to encourage the elderly and disabled to use transit.
- 4) **Seek innovative strategies to increase the stock of workforce housing through community Housing Production Plans and increase collaboration to find regional solutions to housing challenges where appropriate.** In February 2016, the State of Massachusetts approved the [Housing Production Plan for the Town of Merrimac, MA](#) that MVPC developed. Two of the regional recommendations include: (1) Use HOME or CDBG funds to subsidize improvements to existing housing stock or to facilitate conversions that require a special permit; and (2) Establish a fund to cover management and oversight of Subsidized Housing Inventory units, and compensate an appropriate non-profit agency for management services. This could be a regional effort procured through the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission.
- 5) **Continue to implement clean energy strategies promoted in the [Merrimack Valley Clean Energy Plan](#).** MVPC is providing technical assistance to increase the deployment of solar in the Region, specifically on closed landfills (called “brightfields”).
- 6) **Encourage homeowners/businesses/town halls to pursue renewable energy projects and to take advantage of the Massachusetts Clean Energy Center’s various clean energy programs.** MVPC submitted a grant application to the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources (MA DOER) to provide technical assistance in developing an Energy Reduction Plan for the Town of North Andover and energy project administration and planning for the Town of West Newbury. In June 2016, MVPC coordinated a presentation by MA DOER’s Commissioner for the Merrimack Valley Mayors and Managers Coalition to learn more about the Green Communities Program.

Goal 4.3: Strengthen the Connection between Relevant Workforce Development and Industry Needs

- 1) **Develop more programs to meet the specialized skill needs of the employers that are struggling to find enough qualified workers. Make sure these programs are flexible enough to respond quickly to changing industry needs.** MVPC’s Executive Director was appointed to the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board and is an active member of the MVWIB Planning Committee. In addition to making presentations at their meetings about the State of the Region, MVPC is currently

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working with the MVWIB and the Lawrence Partnership to develop a training consortium to follow up on the innovation manufacturing training that currently exists.

4. Develop a “One-Stop Resource Shopping/Economic Development Website”

[The Economic Development and Planning Toolkit](#) was completed in 2016. It contains sections on economic development incentives, downtown planning, marketing economic development, housing incentives and plans, sample bylaws/ordinances/related apps, RFPs, RFQs and IFBs, grants and sample applications and solar/green initiatives. This webpage was designed to assist communities to find information related to community and economic development as a one-stop reference point. It was created to centralize numerous federal, municipal or state resources on planning, community and economic development into one, easy-to-use site. It was also designed to enable users to find approved, land-use related applications, bylaws and town meeting presentations; as well as finance documents, approved grant applications, successful district applications, etc. The [Economic Development and Planning Toolkit](#) is a work in progress; MVPC continues to encourage planners to send their best practices from around the region and the state and look for resources to promote relevant and up-to-date economic development and planning information.

5. Quantity and quality of technical assistance provided to communities

a) Merrimack Valley Support Team Initiative

One of the initiatives to come directly from CEDS Committee meetings is the **Merrimack Valley Support Team Initiative**. In response to ever tightening municipal budgets and resources, MVPC and partner agencies formed a regional resource entity to assist individual communities in the Merrimack Valley with their unique economic and community development needs. This Valley Support Team provides ongoing training and technical assistance to local staff on development matters and encourages the sharing of resources and bolsters communication and cooperation in the region.

The Merrimack Valley Support Team has worked on **numerous projects** to improve economic and community development issues: (1) created the [Development Permitting Guide for the Town of Groveland](#) to streamline the permitting process for businesses and developers; (2) assisted the City of Methuen with their successfully approved Planning Ahead for Housing Grant for the creation of a 40R District, which was awarded in the amount of \$25,000; (3) completed a State-approved Housing Production Plan for the Town of Merrimac (see Goal 4.2 above); (4) conducted a [traffic analysis for the 40R District in the City of Newburyport](#); and (6) provided demographic and research/grant assistance for EforAll for a Regional Innovation Strategies Grant Submittal.

6. The number of economic development initiatives implemented in the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), which lead to private or public investment and jobs created or retained.

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a) Merrimack Valley Means Business Website (MVMB.biz)

The MVPC continued to build a strong MVMB.biz website to support the promotion of leased and for sale properties in the Merrimack Valley. The [Search Properties Feature](#) was programmed by CoStar, the most robust real estate website on the market. CoStar allows MVPC to create customized reports [on each property for lease](#) or [for sale](#) in the region. The reports include a wide variety of details that have not been provided in the past to improve the marketing of these sites. For example, for lease reports include: general leasing information, location and GIS maps powered by Google Earth, whether a site plan is approved at the community's planning office, traffic count reports, demographics, daytime employment reports, and consumer spending reports. In 2015, MVPC added a feature that allows developers and realtors to request a confidential property search on specific characteristics. It is difficult to determine exactly how many jobs the website has created or retained. But the purchase of vacant land, or properties that need rehabilitation, requires labor and creates jobs. A process to measure this will be developed soon.

b) Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board Collaboration

The Executive Director is an appointed member of the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board and is an active member of the Planning Committee. MVWIB works with local community colleges to promote and fill the skills gap needed in the Merrimack Valley Region and to prioritize filling jobs throughout the region with local residents.

7. The number of sub-state jurisdiction members actively participating, of the total eligible to participate, in the Economic Development District (EDD) program.

Including the meetings held for the CEDS on December 3, 2015 and April 25, 2016, the Regional Planners meeting on February 3, 2016, the Regional Planning Day event "State of the Region" on June 23, 2016, the Mayors and Managers Coalition monthly meetings, and the monthly Merrimack Valley Planning Commission meetings, 100% of MVPC's sub-state jurisdiction members have actively participated in the Economic Development District Program over the past year.

Section 2: Next Steps for the MVPC

MVPC is already starting strong in FY2016 on a number of programs under each of the three goal areas of the CEDS. This section summarizes MVPC's 2016-2017 CEDS workplan and highlights any assistance needs from EDA to support the projects in the Merrimack Valley.

MVPC's Workplan for 2016-2017

1) Enhanced Branding and Marketing of the Region

- Research and secure funding to support Phase II of the Merrimack Valley Region Marketing Project.
- Complete the Merrimack Valley Region Marketing Project.
- Continue emphasizing and promoting the Priority Development sites around the region.
- Revamp the Merrimack Valley Means Business website.

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2) Support Workforce Development and Identify Industrial Clusters

- Development of Cluster Network/Consortiums and additional trainings to support the primary industries in the Merrimack Valley Region.
- Continue to work with MVWIB and other stakeholders to strengthen the connection between relevant workforce development and industry needs.
- Complete a Park N Ride Study to examine the long- and short-term parking needs for commuting and other transportation needs. This will result in transportation demand management strategies to ease traffic congestion.

3) Build Local Capacity for Economic Development

- Update the Economic Development and Planning Toolkit, in partnership with the MA Department of Housing and Community Development and other stakeholders.
- Increase social media presence, including: promoting best practices, tools, resources, grants, and the impact of EDA's investment in the Merrimack Valley Region.
- Enhance the work of the CEDS Committee with learning and networking opportunities, projects and increased collaboration. Investigate more frequent/regular meetings (quarterly).
- Research potential EDA Planning Grant Projects for the Merrimack Valley Region for 2016/2017.
- Development of a *Guide for Doing Business in the Merrimack Valley*, with a focus on permitting and other regulatory guidelines.

Measures of successful implementation will include:

- Funding secured to complete Phase II of the Merrimack Valley Region Marketing Project.
- Updated Economic Development and Planning Toolkit.
- New MVMB.biz website started.
- Number of trainings held as standalone events (organized by MVPC) and in collaboration with other economic development efforts.
- At least 3 social media postings a week.
- Quarterly CEDS meetings held.
- Number of events/opportunities to promote the MVMB.biz site.
- Creation of at least one Cluster Network/Consortium.
- Completed *Guide for Doing Business in the Merrimack Valley*.
- At least one local/regional project is submitted for an EDA Planning Grant.
- Develop metrics to assess jobs created and private investment from the CEDS strategies that are implemented.

EDA Assistance Needed to Support Projects

One of the biggest needs MVPC has to achieve the CEDS goals is funding for the Merrimack Valley Region Marketing Project. This project would both create a regional brand for the region and help market the Merrimack Valley Region as a place to work, find a home, and relax. With a ten-year track record of proven success, a booming CoStar realtor listing, and the strong backing of the political leadership of the region, the Merrimack Valley Means Business model is uniquely positioned to generate innovative regional economic development. There is still work to be done to encourage job creation and streamline assistance for new and

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emerging businesses. In these changing times, it is important to reevaluate and reinvigorate. This Project would breathe new life into this region and give it a facelift to attract bigger and brighter economic development to the region.

In addition to this crucial area of assistance needed, we feel it would be beneficial to have a network of Massachusetts, or even New England-wide, EDDs to exchange ideas, best practices, and collaborate with peers. Perhaps a state conference, sponsored by EDA? Or a conference call with all of the State's EDDs to begin? MVPC would be willing to assist in the development of this network, but would like to have EDA's support in creating it.