



EDA PLANNING ASSISTANCE GRANT MERRIMACK VALLEY PLANNING COMMISSION SEMI-ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT 2016-2017

Submitted by

MERRIMACK VALLEY PLANNING COMMISSION

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January 30, 2017

The preparation of this document was financed by the Economic Development Administration (EDA) of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Award Number ED16PHI3020062, with matching funds provided by the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission.

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This semi-annual progress report summarizes the economic development activities undertaken by the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission (MVPC) through December 31, 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 in the MVPC region: Amesbury, Andover, Boxford, Georgetown, Groveland, Haverhill, Lawrence, Merrimac, Methuen, Newbury, Newburyport, North Andover, Rowley, Salisbury, and West Newbury. This report contains six sections:

[Section 1. CEDS Progress in the Merrimack Valley](#)

[Section 2. MVPC's Accomplishments, Benefits and Impacts](#)

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Section 6 includes a brief workplan for the remainder of 2017.

Section 1: Merrimack Valley CEDS Progress Overview

The last 6 months have been very productive for MVPC. Our focus was on networking with communities, organizations, companies, and state agencies to better coordinate on our efforts; staying current on economic development best practices, programs and funding opportunities that will benefit the Merrimack Valley; and keeping our communications and resources fresh and up-to-date for our partners. We were also focused on the launch of the Merrimack Valley Region Marketing Campaign to develop a brand identity for the region. And lastly, we are determined to submit a solid project concept for EDA funding for the City of Lawrence. Section 2 highlights our specific achievements in these areas. We look forward to reporting our progress on achieving our CEDS goals and objectives again in June 2017.

Section 2: MVPC's Accomplishments, Benefits and Impacts

This section follows MVPC's Scope of Work outline and highlights activities that led to job creation/retention, private investment, increased regional collaboration, engagement with historically excluded groups or regions, enhanced regional capacity, and other positive economic benefits. When relevant, a *CEDS Objective that is addressed is in italics*.

1. Coordinate the Region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

- **Created a CEDS Plan tracking sheet** to keep tabs on the status of the strategies in the Merrimack Valley CEDS Plan and the stakeholders to work with in order to achieve those strategies.
- **Promote EDA-related assistance** on Facebook, Twitter, MVPC website, and on the newsfeed on www.mvmb.biz. Also retweet EDA posts regularly.
- **Began planning for January 31, 2017 CEDS Meeting** with CEDS Chair, Lane Glenn.

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- **Regularly promote collaborations between public, private and non-profit organizations** through social media and participation in programs and events sponsored by the City of Lawrence, Lawrence Partnership, MassDevelopment, Massachusetts Office of Business Development (MOBD), and the Chambers of Commerce in the region.
- **Regularly promote the incubator and collaborative spaces** in the region through social media and physical fields to places like: The Everett Mills in Lawrence, 60 Island Street in Lawrence, and the Chestnut Innovation Center in Amesbury. This supports our CEDS Objective to *Encourage Innovation and Cluster Development*.
- Participated in the review of RFPs and in interviews for new Qualified Environmental Professionals to **manage the Brownfields Revolving Loan Fund** in the Merrimack Valley Region. This helps to achieve our CEDS Objective to *Direct Investment to Priority Development Areas and Town Centers*.
- **Attend regular workshops, meetings, webinars, and seminars** to learn more about local, regional, state and national economic development issues. Topics include: *American Community Survey webinars* from the U.S. Census, a NAIOP course on “*Real Estate Finance Fundamentals*”, “*Census Builder*” webinars, and workshops sponsored by the North Shore Alliance for Economic Development.
- **Work closely with State officials** such as Massachusetts Office of Business Development (MOBD), MassDevelopment, Department of Housing and Community Development, and Congressman Seth Moulton's Office. This includes regular meetings or calls, and guidance as needed from staff at these departments and helps to achieve our CEDS Objective to *Support New and Expanding Firms*.
- **Regularly network with sister planning agencies** including: participating in a conference call with EDD Directors around the Commonwealth to discuss CEDS activities; talking with peers at Metropolitan Area Planning Council and EDA regarding a Federal Agencies Forum in MA; and meeting with the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission about their efforts to develop a CEDS.
- **Secured funding for a Regional Housing Plan**, to begin in February 2017. This will address our CEDS Objective to *Establish a Proactive Residential Development Plan*.

2. Engage in an Enhanced Branding and Marketing Campaign for the Merrimack Valley Region.

- **Launched Phase I of the Merrimack Valley Region Marketing Campaign to rebrand the region.** MVPC began Phase 1 to rebrand and market the Merrimack Valley Region. We created a Roundtable, conducted nearly 30 individual focus groups with regional stakeholders, and developed a final logo and tagline for the region. Phase II will include a public relations campaign, design of a new website and coordination with partners to begin using the logo and tagline. This helps to achieve the CEDS Objective to *Promote a Regional Identity*.



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3. Increase Focus on Lawrence and Minority Workforce and Business Development

- **Begin developing EDA Grant Project application** with the City of Lawrence. In October 2016, the City began discussing with EDA the concept of a feasibility analysis to create an innovation center in the Lawrence. After several internal meetings and two calls with EDA, we invited Robert Gittler to Lawrence to talk with City Planners about the concept and conduct a field trip of the City and potential sites. We are proceeding with a grant application in early 2017.
- **Promote Priority Development Sites** regularly, including recognizing Priority Development areas (local, regional and state) on CoStar listings and updating community pages on www.mvmb.biz to highlight these areas. Staff also helped two companies search for larger space via CoStar in the Merrimack Valley. This is consistent with our CEDS Objective to *Support New and Expanding Firms*.
- **Investigated and secured office space in the City of Lawrence** at MassDevelopment/MOBD to have a physical presence in the City.

4. Provide Technical Assistance in Economic Development Planning

- **Assisted the Town of West Newbury** with a Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (MDI) Application to conduct a feasibility analysis of a compact sewage plant.
- **Attended Georgetown Economic Development Committee meeting** and began discussing a 2017 grant application to conduct an economic development feasibility study.

5. Provide Economic Development Support as Needed

- **Began coordinating an “Access to Jobs Forum”** with the MVPC Transportation Staff to discuss the disconnects between public transit and available jobs within and outside the Merrimack Valley Region.
- **Coordinated regularly with the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board**, including serving on the Planning Committee of the Board of Directors and meeting with staff regularly to coordinate programming.
- **Received a grant from the MA Office of Technical Assistance** to provide resiliency planning for manufacturing companies throughout the Merrimack Valley.
- **Regularly posted unemployment numbers** on www.mvmb.biz.

Section 3: Upcoming or Potential Press Events or Opportunities to Highlight EDA Investment

MVPC will continue to work on identifying press events or opportunities to highlight EDA investment, which is primarily achieved through social media posts and website postings. Two economic development-related grant applications will be submitted in early 2017, both of which have significant opportunities for highlighting EDA investment and assistance. One is the EDA Planning and Local Technical Assistance Grant for an innovation center feasibility study and the other is for technical assistance from the Smart Growth Alliance to determine the right “mix” of manufacturing in downtown Lawrence.

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Section 4: Project Timeline Update

MVPC is on track with addressing and/or achieving the actions included in the EDA Planning Grant's Authorized Scope of Work.

Section 5: Challenges to Economic Development in the Merrimack Valley

There are several challenges to economic development in the Merrimack Valley:

- **Access to public transportation that takes eligible potential employees to existing job opportunities** (within and outside the region). We will be addressing this through the Access to Jobs Forum that was mentioned in Section 2. The Forum is planned for Spring 2017.
- **Skills gap** (above and beyond people's access to available employment). We are still on track to develop an industry cluster consortium to begin discussing this in a meaningful way. However, the workforce development organizations in this region are also addressing this.
- **Resistant landowners of run-down, dilapidated buildings** who are not cooperative with identifying the highest and best use for their property. The City of Lawrence applied for funds from Smart Growth America for technical assistance to help start the conversation with these landowners.
- **Development regulations and permitting** are outdated or prohibitive in some communities. While we won't be able to achieve this in 2017, we hope to begin working on a *Guide for Doing Business in the Merrimack Valley* before the end of this grant cycle.

Section 6: EDA Assistance Needed in 2017 and MVPC Workplan

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, MVPC 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 emerging businesses. In these changing times, it is important to reevaluate and reinvigorate. This Project has already begun to breathe new life and energy into this region and we are looking forward to giving 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.

MVPC started 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 Remainder of 2017

1) Enhanced Branding and Marketing of the Region

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- Research and secure funding to support Phase II of the Merrimack Valley Region Marketing Project.
- Continue emphasizing and promoting the region's Priority Development sites.
- Revamp www.mvmb.biz.

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.
- Host the Access to Jobs Forum to better understand the impact of and solutions for connecting eligible workforce members to available jobs.

3) Build Local Capacity for Economic Development

- Continue to increase social media presence, including: promoting best practices, tools, resources, grants, and the impact of EDA's investment in the Merrimack Valley.
- Enhance the work of the CEDS Committee with learning and networking opportunities, projects and increased collaboration. Hold quarterly meetings.
- Submit EDA Planning and Local Technical Assistance Grant Application for the *Lawrence Innovation Center Project*.
- Begin working on a *Guide for Doing Business in the Merrimack Valley*, with a focus on permitting and other regulatory guidelines.

Measures of successful implementation will include:

- Secure funding to complete Phase II of the Merrimack Valley Region Marketing Project.
- At least 10 Stakeholders are using the new logo and tagline.
- Begin working on a new MVMB.biz website.
- At least 3 social media postings a week.
- Hold quarterly CEDS meetings.
- Create at least one Cluster Network/Consortium.
- Submit one local/regional project for an EDA Planning and Local Technical Assistance Grant.
- Develop metrics to assess jobs created and private investment from the CEDS strategies that are implemented.