



Town of Belchertown
2 Jabish Street
Belchertown, Massachusetts 01007

DART Application – September 2015

*Belchertown Beyond –
A Vision for a Lasting Community*



1. Project Summary

- A. Project Title *Belchertown Beyond - A Vision for a Lasting Community*
- B. Name of Community *Belchertown, Mass.*
- C. Primary Contact *Douglas Albertson, Town Planner*
- D. Primate Contact E-mail dalbertson@belchertown.org
- E. Primary Contact Phone *413-323-0407 ext. 320*

F. Project Abstract

Belchertown is on the verge of major change. From the mid-'70s through the mid-'00s, Belchertown went from a being a farm town to a being a suburb, with its population tripling. Adjacent to Amherst and the University of Massachusetts, and less than a half hour to downtown Springfield, Belchertown evolved into a commuter town of low-density car-dependent subdivision and frontage lots. We now see the imminent redevelopment of the former Belchertown State School campus and its surroundings, and we need to very thoughtfully consider long-term sustainability in its design and how it will affect the direction of the community. The past decade has taught us much about the effects of global economics, finance, environmental changes, and the need to adapt to unforeseen and abrupt events. Our duty is to develop plans for the community to be able to recover from shocks and to devise policies and regulations to implement those plans. We have embarked on a different way of viewing development by thinking of how it can contribute to the town's and the region's health over the long term; that is, how development can be more sustainable economically as well as ecologically. This DART project will provide tools and guidance for us to plan with long-term priorities in mind.

G. Objective of the DART process

We hope to bring the ethic of sustainable and resilient community design into the overall policy culture of the town's citizens and decision-makers, but more immediately, into our imminent designs and plans for the redevelopment of our former state school campus and the corridor between the town common and district court that encompasses the state school, the town's school complex, and a main commercial area. DART can provide a great boost to that through publicity, explanation, engagement and a tangible and relevant product. These then can all become incorporated into plans and policies directing our future. The greater benefit is that the DART process will help us identify and then define and refine what our needs are and what our priorities should be; that is, we'll have a specific set of priorities to pursue.

2. Community Description

A. Brief History

Belchertown was founded in 1731 on a rise along the former Bay Path from Hadley through Brookfield to the Bay Colony. The town was named to honor Jonathan Belcher, Royal Governor of Massachusetts from 1730 to 1740. In 1855, an agricultural fair was started by the Farmers and Mechanics Club. The Belchertown fair is one of the longer-running fairs in the country and it

still is held on the town common each September. It is a significant regional attraction and instills great pride in the community.

In the 1800s, several neighborhoods grew around mills, but overall Belchertown remained agrarian. Belchertown underwent tremendous changes in the 1920s and '30s with creation of the Belchertown State School and then Quabbin Reservoir. The state school was built on five farms just west of the town center. At its peak, it included a farm where school residents worked and that provided fresh food for various state institutions in the region. Quabbin was created in the mid-'30s to provide water for metropolitan Boston. About one-fifth of the town's area is within the Quabbin watershed and Swift River Wildlife Management Area. In the mid-1970s the town was discovered by people seeking a less-expensive rural ambience. From 1976 through 2006, Belchertown averaged over 100 new houses per year. The population went from under 6,000 in 1970 to nearly 16,000 now. This growth is largely a result of the University of Massachusetts' expansion of the late '60s and people moving out of the region's urban core.

B. Population, Demographics and Economic Information

Population: Approximately 15,700 (per 2015 town census).

Median Age: 41.3

Per capita income: \$29,018.

Race (per 2010 census)

| | |
|---------------------|-------|
| White | 93.8% |
| Black: | 1.4% |
| Asian: | 2.1% |
| Other: | 1.0% |
| Hispanic or Latino: | 2.6% |

C. Form of Local Government

Belchertown has an open town meeting form of government, with a five-member board of selectmen as the chief executive body. Other elected boards are the planning board, school board, health board, assessors. Municipal budgets and bylaws must all be acted upon by town meeting.

D. Geography

Belchertown has the sixth largest overall area, about 55 square miles, of any municipality in Massachusetts. The landscape is that of wooded hills in the north and mixed woods and farmland in the south, with much of that farmland being developed into housing. Being on a ridge with altitudes ranging between 150' at Lawrence Swamp at the Amherst town line to 1,117' at East Hill near Pelham, Belchertown is the source for multiple waterways and municipal water supplies.

Prominent is Quabbin Reservoir, with its dam and administrative offices in Belchertown, along with much of its watershed and a public boat access at Gate 8. Amherst draws clean water from

the Lawrence Swamp aquifer and has two main wells within Belchertown. The Bondsville Water Department takes all of its water from wells within Belchertown, the Belchertown Water District draws from wells within town, and the Springfield Water Department has Knights Pond and Jabish Brook as an auxiliary water source.

The south end of Belchertown shares the village of Bondsville with Palmer. Massachusetts Turnpike access is nearby in Palmer and Ludlow, resulting in Belchertown being a conduit for much traffic between the turnpike and Amherst. In the other direction, Route 202 carries traffic from Route 2 to the north to the urban centers of Holyoke, Chicopee and Springfield to the southwest. These traffic patterns meet in the center of town, resulting in much through-traffic that the town manages.

E. Important Project or Contextual Information

There is impending convergence of events in Belchertown that will determine the direction for the town's future. Having received a break in the construction boom from the recession, we have had a chance to re-assess our situation and priorities, and are poised to enter into the future with new policies and plans. This is the time to assemble the community to solicit and incorporate the citizens' perspectives and needs. Over the coming decade, the town will see the redevelopment of the former State School, which covers several hundred acres adjacent to the town center. There will also be demographic shifts as the population boom that forced the construction of new schools will age, requiring more senior services while maintaining the school facilities and educational quality. The planning board recently issued a questionnaire to all the registered businesses in town to find that about half of them are based in peoples' homes; this indicates an economic base that is highly individualized and reliant primarily on telecommunications. Providing technological and transportation infrastructure for these business activities will be important, as will managing potential conflicts between residential and commercial uses in neighborhoods.

F. Regional Setting and Influences

Belchertown is notable for transitions; for being on the cusps of several geographic and cultural changes. It is characterized by vast protected areas of forests and farms, and by rapid suburban development. Its residents have the differing perspectives of people whose families have been here for generations and newer residents who now identify Belchertown as home. The south end of town still has some farms and a population who work in manufacturing, while the north end of town is strongly influenced by the academia and politics that characterize Amherst and Northampton. It has a healthy tax base with expensive houses, yet it also has a notable low-income population with a serious lack of affordable housing.

Belchertown's Regional Context



G. Brief Summary of Relevant Planning Efforts and Reports

In 2002, after a four-year effort, Belchertown adopted its comprehensive Community Plan. This was followed quickly with a plan focused on the town center. The Community Plan was revised in 2009. Further, the Open Space and Recreation Plan updates important components of the Community Plan and was revised in 2014.

The redevelopment of the former Belchertown State School has spurred several plans over the past decade. Being designated a Priority Development Site under Mass. General Law 43D gave us the opportunity to have a full market analysis performed for potential redevelopment which resulted in recognition that mixed uses are appropriate and desirable, and in MassDevelopment being engaged as the project's agent. MassDevelopment is creating a master plan for the campus that must incorporate the community's priorities, which are manifest in the zoning adopted for the site that requires energy efficiency, pedestrian priority and community space.

The Mass in Motion program has been in progress for three years with funding recently granted to keep it active in Belchertown as a part of the town's healthy community efforts. This ties in substantially with the vision we have for the community's direction and what we would expect to come from the DART process.

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, as part of the healthy community process, has conducted an exhaustive analysis of the town's existing land use plans, policies, laws and regulations as to how they influence healthy lifestyles, such as walking and access to nutritious food.

Belchertown was one of the first Green Communities in Massachusetts, having been awarded the designation in the first round. Since then, the town has achieved substantial success in reducing municipal energy consumption because of the comprehensive retrofitting of town buildings with insulation, new windows, and better HVAC systems.

Our storm water bylaw is a rigorous method of assuring compliance with EPA mandates, however our bylaw goes beyond the EPA requirements to assure that storm water follows its natural course as much as possible to recharge aquifers, avoid flooding, and to be purified as it would be naturally. Corresponding to this is the *Belchertown Low Impact Development Guide*, prepared by the Belchertown Planning Department with technical assistance from the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission and Fuss & O'Neill, Inc. in 2008.

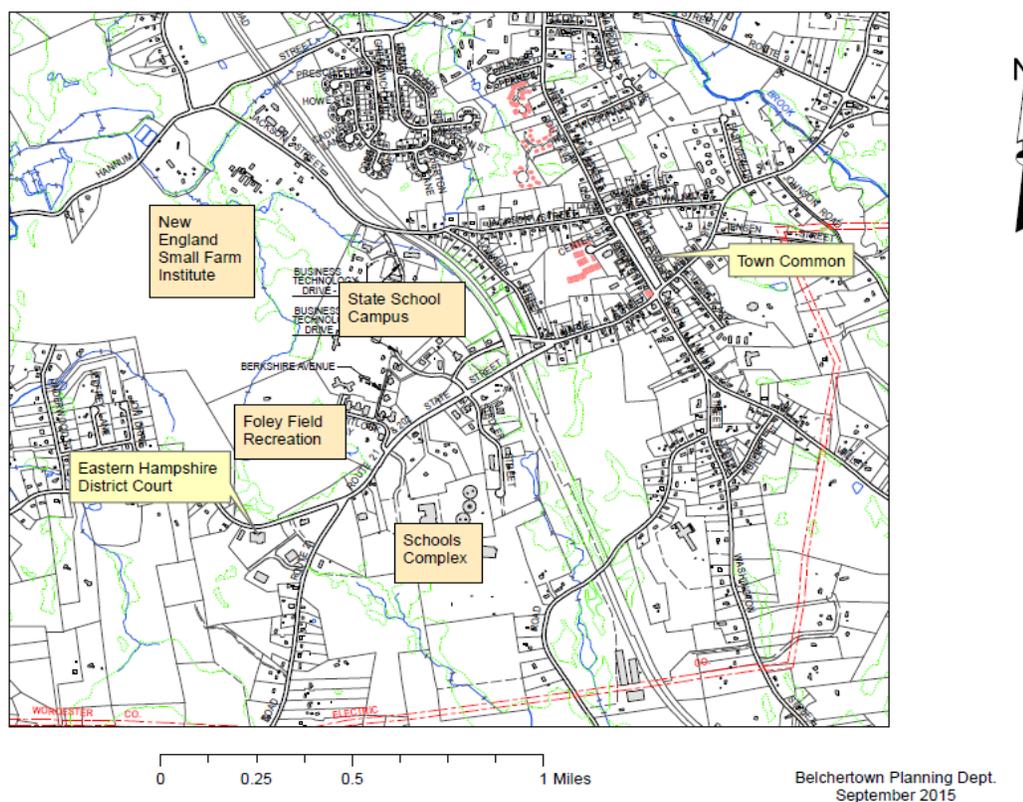
With our limited staff resources, we try to address our lack of affordable housing. We used some Community Preservation money for the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission to help us with a housing needs analysis, and from this, we have been informally approaching developers to encourage the building of some affordable units. The former state school campus again provides an opportunity to address some of this need.

3. Problem Statement and Issues Analysis

A. Study Area

For policy development the area is the entire municipality, for which we want to create long-term policies for sustainably-managed growth; our immediate target area for our DART process is the existing town center and the former state school campus, which is beginning to see growth and has been identified as our priority development area. Our Mass in Motion work has concentrated on what we are calling the "Common to Courthouse corridor" that encompasses our town center, the state school campus, the town school complex, the new fully-accessible playground, senior facilities and the Eastern Hampshire District Court. This area is also subject to a corridor analysis by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission to determine traffic controls and reconfiguration of State Street, which is both US Route 202 and Mass route 21. We envision policies to direct zoning, subdivision regulations, wetland protection, storm water, public health, transportation, housing and business development that will then direct the entire town's growth and sustenance for the foreseeable future.

Common to Courthouse Core Area



B. Existing Barriers

Fragmented policies and regulations among town offices are a barrier to more coordinated policies toward growth. This fragmentation is just the result of each office and board determining how to address its own purview and is more an oversight resulting from expedience than deliberate provincialism. The overall municipal culture is that departments generally work quite well together. With better coordination and systems of communication throughout town government, more consistent planning and regulation could occur.

Belchertown has a large area with discrete economic, social and commuter orientations. As a bedroom community, many residents do not care to be involved in municipal affairs and decisions. There is also a dichotomy between many longer-term residents and the newer ones.

Many residents and officials are concerned about anything that looks like an expense on the town's budget without generating revenue, so spending on planning, policy analysis, technology and other things that don't show a tangible return are seen as luxuries, although such things usually reduce expenses once implemented. There is also reluctance of some people who would see anything appearing to be a regulation or other restriction of private property rights and expected financial gain on one's property.

A major limiting factor to our ability to address resiliency needs is general lack of awareness as to the urgency of the matter. Among town officials, there is an understanding that the community needs emergency preparedness plans, a diverse economic base, and infrastructure capital plans, but there are varied amounts of concern about the concept of resiliency and how natural systems best serve to prevent disasters and economic harm. Although we are in an enlightened academic area and are a relatively wealthy and educated community, there is still the natural tendency of people to care most about the short term and their own personal priorities.

C. Assessment of the Community's Significant Resiliency Needs.

Belchertown is an upland agricultural/suburban community. It is the drinking water resource for five water supplies, including Quabbin Reservoir, the main source of drinking water for metropolitan Boston. The other water supplies are Springfield, Amherst, Belchertown and Bondsville. Maintaining these clean water supplies is a priority for beyond Belchertown alone. Most properties in Belchertown are served by private wells and septic systems.

We see the demands of population growth and greater consumption of resources combined with changing climate and increased weather disasters as factors that combined place tremendous pressure on the natural resources within our borders – resources that provide for many more people than only those within Belchertown. We have a responsibility to manage development in Belchertown to best protect these resources.

Belchertown also has large areas of farmland and forest land. Agriculture has diminished as farms have been turned into house lots, but there is still a vital industry with active marketing of local food production. This is part of a strong regional effort to create greater local food security, and with the Belchertown-based New England Small Farm Institute and the University of Massachusetts' Horticultural Research Station, the Belchertown Agricultural Commission and the planning board have actively worked to strengthen local agriculture.

The logging and forest recreation industries are also active. The New England Scenic Trail is a federally-designated trail in the same category as the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail. The Belchertown section of this trail is highly used by both through-hikers and local residents and we understand the community's responsibility to keep this trail safe and attractive. There is an active snowmobile club that maintains trails, and fishing and hunting still have places to be done despite the forest fragmentation resulting from residential development. There are parts of the Holyoke Range State Park and University of Massachusetts' Cadwell Memorial Forest within Belchertown.

Thus, natural resource protection aligns with agricultural and recreational protection to provide great regional assets that must be maintained over the long term. As housing development increases, there will again be more pressure on land owners to develop their farms and forests.

Smart long-term planning for resiliency needs to be ahead of that while helping land owners keep their properties or develop them more sensitively.

D. Strategic Areas for DART to Focus On and Why

Redevelopment of the Belchertown State School campus, including how that affects the vicinity around it – corridor planning, infrastructure needs, storm water management – is the main specific area around the main center of town. This area is crucial to the regenerated future of the town. Natural resource and agricultural protection make up the second main area. These are very important for regional resource protection, aesthetics, and for the greater resiliency that will be needed in coming years.

4. Logistical Requirements

- A. Aggressive Community Outreach. Belchertown has the good fortune of having a weekly newspaper delivered to every mailbox in town for free. This is an outstanding resource for reaching thousands of residents, most of who at least glance at the *Sentinel*. We also have community access television. Outreach would also be made through the churches, schools and other community organizations, many of whom regularly participate in municipal opinion-gathering efforts.
- B. Venues for DART Workshops and Focus Groups. There are multiple municipal buildings with meeting space, including conference rooms and spaces for larger groups. There are spaces with large-screen televisions for presentations. Some locations are the town hall board meeting room, the senior center cafeteria, the high school cafeteria, and the police station and fire station training rooms.
- C. DART Working Space. Working space would be available in one of the town hall meeting rooms. Copying and scanning are available, as is high-speed internet.
- D. Commitment From Town Officials. The DART opportunity has been received very enthusiastically from the elected planning board, who would be the main hosts. The selectmen are the chief administrative board, who are also supportive of professionally-directed community collaborations. Other officials are staff, primarily the town planner, town administrator, public works director, public health director, and building commissioner, all of whom have supported and participated in community planning activities previously.

5. Community and Educational Partners

- A. Area Colleges. The UMass Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning has often collaborated with various Belchertown departments, mostly planning. One of the department's master's students is presently on the planning board. Several professors live in Belchertown and have been involved through the years, as well as others who have a stake in the town either through property ownership or grown children having settled in town.

- B. Local Non-profits, Clubs, Churches. Belchertown's churches are very active in the community and have actively participated in community sustainability activities. The Kestrel Land Trust is a regional conservation organization that has helped protect hundreds of acres of forest and farm land in town, promotes environmental education, and actively manages several properties to teach outdoor appreciation, edible plant awareness, and natural resource stewardship. The New England Small Farm Institute is based in Belchertown and is a leader in agricultural sustainability education and in supporting beginning farmers. The Quaboag Hills Chamber of commerce is working with the planning board to develop more visibility and support for local businesses, and will host a breakfast meeting for Belchertown businesses in October.
- C. Public Officials, Agencies, Neighborhood Groups. The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission frequently provides assistance to Belchertown and is an active partner in much of our planning and research. MassDevelopment is another key entity to be involved as they are the agency leading the state school design and redevelopment work. As the owner of the state school campus, the Belchertown Economic Development and Industrial Corporation has enthusiastically supported getting more community contributions to design and planning efforts. Healthy Hampshire, the entity leading our Mass in Motion work will assist with community outreach.

6. Communication and Media Outreach Plan

The Belchertown Sentinel is a free weekly newspaper delivered to every postal address in town, as well as being distributed to stores in Belchertown and surrounding towns (Amherst, Hadley, Granby, Ludlow, Palmer, Ware). The Sentinel gladly runs press releases and stories on community activities. They cover events and will conduct and print interviews when they have the chance. These types of activity are seen as an opportunity for them to generate interest in their paper. Belchertown Community Television is on local cable television. They broadcast and archive board meetings, town meetings, and local church services, community events such as band concerts on the common and parades, and public sessions such as charrettes and focus group discussions. Further outreach would be made to the local daily newspapers, the Northampton Daily Hampshire Gazette and the Springfield Republican. Belchertown would be proud to be known as a leader in planning for sustainability and resiliency, and would accordingly want as much publicity as we could get for the DART process.

7. DART Project Timeline

This timeline is appropriate to the planning process we currently have going. We are in the process of soliciting public insight and evaluation of needs for both pedestrian and bicycle accessibility as part of our greater community sustainability planning. The planning board is eager to implement many of the suggestions resulting from both the Mass in Motion work and the PVPC zoning analysis. We are in the process of redeveloping the closed Belchertown State School campus; this has been over a twenty-year project that is now in the master planning process with MassDevelopment. An assisted living complex has been approved that will be near the senior center, and also near the town's schools complex and fully-accessible playground. The first phase of demolition at the state

school is complete, with state funding in place to begin the second phase. We developed zoning for the campus that requires sustainable practices, including primacy of pedestrian facilities over cars, renewable energy, shared and reduced parking, transit accommodations, and natural storm water flows. As this redevelopment process accelerates, it would be most beneficial to have results and the community awareness from the DART process to incorporate into policies and planning. The DART process would be conveniently timed to make the most of our momentum and accelerate our planning and creation of new tools to direct the community's growth.

8. Supplemental Documents

Business Neighborhood Center zoning bylaw – an example of the direction we'd like the town to go in, adopted at Annual Town Meeting, May 2014.

Site Development Feasibility Assessment, Belchertown State School, Priority Development Site, by Fuss & O'Neill, In Association with Massachusetts Development Finance Agency, October 19, 2009.