

Five Villages: One Future Montague Comprehensive Plan Outreach Results to Date

February 4, 2023 In-Person Workshop Results

Note: this section describes the results of the February 4th workshop only. They have been summarized as general statements reflecting what participants said at the workshop into 3 categories: Strengths, Opportunities, and Weaknesses & Vulnerabilities.

For a combined summary of both the survey and workshop results, see page 7 – “Needs and Objectives”.

Strengths of Montague

Montague attracts lots of different people to live here, in part thanks to the unique feel and close-knit community of each of the five villages, the variety of densities in housing, the uniqueness of the town’s art community, businesses, and tourism experiences, and an abundance and diversity of outdoor facilities and natural areas that are accessible from almost everywhere in town.

Located at the crossroads of major north-south and east-west routes, Montague is well situated for economic activity.

Montague is economically diverse, with manufacturing, education, health, and social services sectors and moderately strong agricultural sector. These diversified revenue sources help the Town to make important investments.

Montague has a few larger-scale economic resources that are somewhat unique in the region, including the Turners Falls Airport and the Turners Falls Industrial Park.

The arts and culture economy is well supported by RiverCulture and the Town government and makes Montague a unique place to live, visit, and do business. The Montague Town Hall is said to have a business friendly permitting process.

Montague has a number of pillars of civic and community life that bring the community together, including three libraries, playgrounds in each village, a senior center, several schools, a local newspaper, two community resource centers, and a recreation center. The Shea Theater, the Montague Bookmill, the Unity Park skatepark, the Great Falls Discovery Center, and many businesses are important community entertainment and gathering spaces that help give Montague a sense of place.

The location of Turners Falls and Millers Falls villages along the Connecticut and Millers Rivers create a unique experience in the region, and the presence of the rivers around nearly half of Montague’s border cultivates a connection for residents to the river and provides valued recreational opportunities.

Montague is an appealing location for young adults to live when they are just starting out and we want them to be able to stay and put down roots here. Montague consistently attracts new residents, including a growing Central American population, who bring investment, innovation, and new

perspectives. In Montague, new ideas can mix with long-standing knowledge in a way that promotes sustainable change.

Montague has good foundations of mixed-use and transit-centered development, with distinct village centers, commercial space in these centers, and denser residential neighborhoods closer to the village centers. Montague has the basic infrastructure that could accommodate an investment in affordable housing.

Montague has the beginnings of good pedestrian and bike infrastructure. Village centers are walkable and the majority of sidewalks are in great condition. The Canal Bike Path is beloved by Montague residents and draws people from out of town. Montague has a reliable public bus system that works well in the parts of town that it serves. Except where bridges are being improved, all of Montague is accessible by car and there is plenty of parking. There is nearby access to passenger rail.

Municipal sewer and water allow for flexibility in how densely or intensively those parts of Montague can be built and there is currently excess capacity in the sewer and water systems.

Much of Montague's farmland has been spared from development. A large amount of open space in Montague is permanently protected. Many of these open space resources are state or town managed, guaranteeing public access.

Montague has more differentiated ecological settings and biodiversity than most of the rest of the county and there is a large amount of protected open space. The Montague Plains, Montague Meadows, Barton's Cove, and the public land in east Montague are large, accessible open spaces favored by residents; people also appreciate the access they have to fishing in Montague.

Opportunities for Montague

Telecommuting is/can bring more people to Montague without necessarily needing more local jobs. It also makes it possible for people to live here have more opportunities.

The possible passenger east-west rail service could create a stop in Montague. This is an opportunity for economic development purposes and for easier access to Boston

The redevelopment of the Farren Care Center area is an opportunity to introduce new public spaces and resources that can serve as an anchor for Montague.

There are many older, vacant properties that can be redeveloped for needed uses such as housing, a maker space, etc.

The community is devoted to its libraries and to a community-driven process for planning the future of the libraries.

There is excess capacity of sewer and water, such that more housing could be developed without major strain on the municipal budget.

There are many public facilities needing updating that could be combined and updated simultaneously, including libraries, the senior center, and cooling centers.

There is room to encourage more intergenerational uses of facilities and programs.

There is an opportunity for winter indoor recreation in Montague now that the Indoor Action facility has shut down in Greenfield.

Montague Center Library's upstairs room is an unused resource (basketball court and stage).

There are great collaborations happening with state agencies, land trusts, and Firstlight, opportunities to continue and improve

There are opportunities for municipal rooftop solar on seven municipal buildings with new roofs

Weaknesses & Vulnerabilities of Montague

Despite loving the villages themselves, many people find the five villages of Montague to create too much separation between residents, both spatially and in the sense of a whole, town-wide community.

Economic and cultural resources are not distributed evenly across all villages; for example, not every village has a community center. There is a concern that because of economic shifts or budget constraints, smaller villages will lose amenities rather than gain them. On the other hand, with so many community facilities, the Town is challenged to balance tax rates with facility needs.

Despite the majority of residents wanting community events, community events are not always well attended and supported.

The Montague school system feels like a liability, preventing people from moving to Montague or investing in the town and schools. Montague schools (in the Gill-Montague School District, which does not include Franklin Technical School), are not considered to be very good quality and enrollment is declining, raising the per-pupil cost of maintaining facilities and providing education.

Both rental housing and homes for sale are generally considered not affordable enough, although some people see Montague's housing stock as financially accessible. Housing and rental prices are tied to regional/state/national trends, and many Montague residents are impacted by the increasing cost of living, including the cost of heating and cooling. Volatility in the housing market threatens the community fabric. Because Montague's housing stock is deteriorating and the town is a wonderful place to live, residents feel the housing market is ripe for outside investment that may lead to the housing stock becoming second homes, rentals by absentee landlords, vacant, and/or gentrified.

Current zoning laws were not specifically called out as having issues, but it was stated that the Town's zoning bylaws are complicated and difficult to understand. There may be in the future a push for more housing development, if there is a large influx of climate refugees for example, and there may not be adequate infrastructure in place and knowledge of density options to promote the protection of valued open space if there was development pressure. While there is sewer and water infrastructure, it does not extend to all parts of town, which limits the kinds of development that can occur in these areas. The existing sewer and water infrastructure is also costly to maintain.

Economic activity in Turners Falls is recovering from the decline in manufacturing and downtown retail and again from the 2019 COVID pandemic, but there is still a high rate of vacancy of downtown

storefronts and foot traffic can be slow in Turners and Millers Falls Villages. Despite Montague being an artist community, that community feels there is a lack of gallery space for artists. There is also poor wayfinding from I-91 to Turners Falls. And although many residents see how passenger rail could bring needed tourism and investment, there are also concerns that it could bring too much development, again with the threat of gentrification.

There is a lack of things for young people to do. Teens need more support, spaces, services.

There are not many medical providers in town, which is especially difficult for seniors.

There are many unused, decaying buildings in Montague that are either privately owned or publicly owned but costly to maintain that are not being repurposed at the rate the community would like to see.

Many of the older municipal buildings are in disrepair, have environmental health concerns, and/or are not ADA accessible. Residents are often frustrated with solid waste services and with internet access.

There are some gaps in public transportation opportunities desired by residents. There is not adequate transportation to school for all students, especially in Turners Falls for elementary students. Some parts of Montague do not have access to a bus route. As the population of seniors grows, the number of seniors without transportation grows. Many people would like better transit to neighboring towns.

Montague is a car-centric community, despite more than 10% of households not having access to a car. The number of bridges in town mean that bridge rehabilitation/replacements are expensive and are often delayed. The bike and pedestrian network is fragmented – particularly between villages. People especially would like to have accessible sidewalks, important sidewalks connected, a way to get safely between Greenfield and Turners Falls on bike or walking, and a bike share program.

Despite having many diverse options for recreation, there is room to improve many of the facilities and a few important recreation opportunities are felt to be missing in town. Despite living along two major rivers and having a swimmable lake in town, there is no public access to swimming. Residents desire safe, accessible access to the rivers, a public swimming pool, a gym, and other outdoor places to recreate in winter (such as a winterized sports arena like there used to be nearby in Greenfield). There are also specific needed improvements to existing parks. People would also like more communication from the Town about recreation and open space opportunities.

Although Montague has a large amount of publicly accessible protected land, the majority of these natural places are controlled by the state, First Light, or another non-municipal entity, so the community has limited control over these places.

As is true throughout the region, invasive plants and pests are abundant in Montague, threatening the health of the forest and other natural habitats.

Farmers are vulnerable to climate change, and community members are not sure how they can help with farm resilience.

On the emergency response side of climate change concerns, Montague lacks adequate cooling and warming facilities.

Parts of Montague's public works are decentralized, making it difficult to maintain facilities and services and complicating needed collaboration. A lot of resilience measures within the Town's purview relate to the work of the Department of Public Works, but the impression of workshop participants is that the DPW often experiences burnout.

Montague is lagging behind some other neighboring communities in developing policies that support climate resiliency and lacks a cohesive climate change strategy across all departments. On the renewable energy and energy reduction side, the town has not started building some important alternative energy infrastructure, such as EV charging stations, battery facilities, etc.

Some participants felt that there is not equitable access for engagement with town politics and affairs, especially for people with lower income. The community has historically had difficulty creating spaces where the Central American community can feel welcome and appreciated.

Villages

Turners Falls

Turners Falls is challenged by the underdevelopment of existing space and the lack of affordable housing. Turners Falls has very limited riverfront access, despite being surrounded by river, and there are concerns about the river's water quality.

Exciting upcoming or potential changes in Turners Falls include the food scene, cultural events, and the possibility of more gardens, maker spaces, more green space, more public art, and improvements to the elementary school.

Sidewalk improvement and maintenance is needed throughout Turners, including along Millers Falls Road and in the Industrial Park area.

In a population growth scenario, while there could be increases in density in other parts of town, it may be important to increase housing density closer to schools. Seniors may be less interested in senior housing downtown than where there is ample open space.

Montague City

Montague City is challenged by lack of visibility as a village, lack of a community center, deteriorating infrastructure, limited Town-owned property, lack of affordable starter homes, and lack of rentals that allow pets.

Exciting upcoming or potential changes in Montague City include the transformation of the Farren Care property to mixed-use community/residential space, the site's suitability for a pool, and the possibility of extending the bike path along a sewer easement.

Montague City needs a new welcome to Montague sign.

Lake Pleasant

Lake Pleasant is challenged by risk of wildfire, tree damage from storms, the work of keeping Lake Pleasant clean and protected, and lack of good non-vehicular transportation options.

People in Lake Pleasant like that they have recreational opportunities (swimming, a park, and trails in the Plains and to other villages), a village association, and a post office.

People in Lake Pleasant would be excited to have a community center with a store, and an east-west rail station nearby.

If Lake Pleasant were to grow, there would be a need to identify potential areas for new housing, and an increased need for a community center and access to transportation.

Montague Center

Montague Center is challenged by vehicles speeding through the village center, the limited options for developing housing that does not impact agricultural land, ADA accessibility of the library and the cost of maintaining and improving the library and town hall, working bridges, management of public use of the Montague Meadows, and housing stock being used as short term rentals.

Montague Center is excited about the diversity of businesses and community gathering places in the village and about the potential of the village's park.

Montague Center needs walking/biking path expansion, better access to the Sawmill River for recreation, improvements to the library, and a good plan for diversifying and expanding housing in areas that are walkable to the village center.

If Montague Center were to grow in population, there would need to be a focus on cluster housing.

Millers Falls

Millers Falls is challenged by being disconnected from the rest of Montague and having the village split between two towns (Montague and Erving). With the exception of a few lots, the village is mostly built out and there is no space for industrial development. In addition, topography/steep slopes are a very serious limitation. The village has lost its source of groceries.

The library and the pub are the village gathering places. Village residents would like more of these kinds of opportunities, especially for youth to do things. The one park in town is an opportunity to draw people from other towns—such as with a skating rink. The park lacks a bathroom. Residents of Millers Falls would like to be able to connect by bike or on foot to Lake Pleasant more easily, and public access to the lake for swimming.

If Millers Falls were to grow in population, the village would need a place to buy food. A couple of lots were identified for housing on the workshop map; potential new housing would likely need a third floor in order to maximize space.

Needs and Objectives (collected from the 2/4 workshop AND survey)

Housing

Needs:

- AFFORDABLE HOUSING
 - Housing for young people
 - Seniors
 - People who already live here are being priced out
 - Workforce
 - Farmworkers
- Promote energy savings for residents
- Promote variety in housing, allow for smaller and denser housing
- Balance housing types
 - Affordable housing (see first bullet)
 - Smaller housing options
 - Increase market rate housing in downtown Turners Falls
- Housing growth directed to established village areas
- Foster multi-generational neighborhoods for greater resiliency
- Discourage absentee landlords / incentivize people in town to become landlords

Objectives:

1. Affordable housing: housing for young people, seniors, workforce
2. Promote energy savings for residents
3. Promote variety in housing, allow for smaller and denser housing
4. Balance housing types (Increase market rate housing in downtown Turners Falls)
5. Housing growth directed to established village areas
6. Foster multi-generational neighborhoods for greater resiliency

Transportation

Needs

- Create more transportation options to school for students, especially in Turners Falls
- Improve bike and pedestrian transportation options
 - Connect the fragmented bike and pedestrian network, including access to village centers, the connections between villages, and access to Greenfield
 - Improve and extend sidewalks
 - Build sidewalks or footpath connections between greenways
 - Create a bike rentals/share (bike rental/share could help with tourism)

- Improve safety and accessibility of biking
 - Clear bike path in winter
 - Accommodation in/along roads
 - More bike parking
- Improve safety of roads and road infrastructure
 - Increase climate resilience of road infrastructure
 - Address specific places called out by residents
- Support a passenger rail stop in Montague
- Protect pedestrians and community character in areas of high density and high traffic speeds
- Increase access to public transit
 - Recognize and accommodate increasing need for senior-friendly public transport
 - Create more transportation between villages
 - Offer weekend transit service

Objectives:

1. Create more transportation options to school for students, especially in Turners Falls
2. Connect the fragmented bike and pedestrian network, including access to village centers, the connections between villages, and access to Greenfield
3. Improve safety and accessibility of biking (accommodation in/along roads, more bike parking)
4. Improve safety of roads and road infrastructure, focusing on specific places called out by residents
5. Support a passenger rail stop in Montague (for economic development purposes and for easier access to Boston)
6. Protect pedestrians and community character in areas of high density and high traffic speeds
7. Increased access to public transit

Land Use & Zoning

Needs

- Protect forest and farmland
 - Keep forest intact
 - Keep/enhance open space connectivity
- Develop housing where there is existing sewer and water capacity; expand sewer and water for places appropriate for denser development
- Improve public communication about opportunities and guidelines regarding public parks and open space
- Focus on regenerative/resilient land management:
 - Pollinator habitat
 - Heat resiliency (shade trees)
 - Stormwater management
 - Healthy soil amendments

- Foster better collaboration with public and non-profit landowners in town to protect new farm and forestland, manage existing public land, and enhance ecosystems
- Promote historic preservation
- Balance housing and open space
 - Promote cluster development
 - Reduce lot size requirements
 - Allow tiny houses
- Reduce water pollution, focusing on wastewater treatment and stormwater management
- With senior portion of the population growing, senior housing needs to be accessible to amenities and vice versa

Objectives:

1. Protect forest and farmland, keep forest intact, Keep/enhance open space connectivity
2. Develop housing where there is existing sewer and water capacity; expand sewer and water for places appropriate for denser development
3. Good public communication about opportunities and guidelines regarding public parks and open space
4. Focus on regenerative/resilient land management: pollinator habitat, heat resiliency (shade trees), stormwater management; healthy soil amendments
5. Foster better collaboration with public and non-profit landowners in town to protect new farm and forestland, manage existing public land, and enhance ecosystems
6. Promote historic preservation
7. Balance housing and open space
8. Reduce water pollution, focusing on wastewater treatment and stormwater management
9. Understand that with senior portion of the population growing, senior housing needs to be accessible to amenities and vice versa

Community Facilities & Services

Needs

- Public swimming
 - Accessible community outdoor pool
 - Safe access to rivers
 - Explore Lake Pleasant as a public swimming location
- Improve municipal parks and open space
 - Need more green spaces closer to population density
 - Take care of village parks to create a “gem in every village”
 - Connect existing greenspace in villages to create an “emerald necklace” both in Turners Falls and throughout the town
 - Expand recreation options in parks
 - Create a dog park (in Turners Falls)
 - Upgrade safety in parks (lights, trash cans)
 - Upgrade accessibility features

- Montague Meadows needs some changes in use rules
 - Explore Lake Pleasant as an expanded recreation resource
- Collaborate with non-municipal entities (FirstLight and the Commonwealth) for improved recreation access to public spaces they manage
- Improve indoor community spaces
 - Use the need for improvements/overhaul of many facilities as an opportunity to combine and update facilities simultaneously
 - Focus on the
 - libraries,
 - senior center
 - an emergency cooling and warming shelter
 - indoor recreation facility (place to do things during winter)
- Improve schools to help improve community's interest/investment in schools
 - Hillcrest most cited facility in need
- Create more accessible things to do for youth/teens
 - Ask YMCA to do more programming in Montague
- Have a community gathering space in every village
 - Lake Pleasant and Millers Falls want indoor community spaces
- Farren Care center could be an economic and/or community anchor
- Improve solid waste management
 - Free store at transfer station
- Make municipal facilities:
 - Energy efficient
 - Climate resilient
 - Environmentally safe
 - ADA accessible
 - In good repair
- Balance tax rates with needs of community facilities
- Digital equity (focused on internet)
- Make sure access to and engagement with Town policies, procedures, and politics is equitable
 - Make concerted effort to bring people with lower income into planning and decision making
 - Improve how Latinx cultures feel welcomed and appreciated in community spaces
- Ensure that people have good access to health care in the community, especially seniors
- Help make the separate water/fire districts work better, re-centralize the parts that makes government inefficient
- Improve Town's communication to residents
 - About open space and recreation opportunities and guidelines
- Improving capacity of the DPW, reduce burnout
- Improve street lighting

Objectives:

1. Create opportunities for public swimming (accessible community outdoor pool and safe access to rivers)
2. Improve parks and open space; make more green space accessible closer to population density; take care of village parks to maintain a “gem in every village”; connect existing greenspace in villages to create an “emerald necklace”; expand recreation options in parks (great number of people desire a dog park) and upgrade safety (lights, trash cans) and accessibility features
3. Green spaces are needed closer to population density
4. Collaborate with non-municipal entities (FirstLight and the Commonwealth) for improved recreation access to public spaces they manage
5. Improve indoor community spaces, use the need for improvements/overhaul of many facilities as an opportunity to combine and update facilities simultaneously, focusing on the libraries, senior center, an emergency cooling and warming shelter, and indoor recreation facility (place to do things when it’s cold)
6. Improve schools to help improve community’s interest/investment in schools (Hillcrest most cited facility in need)
7. Have a community gathering space in every village
8. Farren Care Center could be an economic and/or community anchor
9. Improve solid waste management
10. Make municipal facilities energy efficient, climate resilient, environmentally safe, ADA accessible, and in good repair
11. Balance tax rates with needs of community facilities
12. Digital equity (focused on internet)
13. Make sure access to and engagement with Town policies, procedures, and politics is equitable; make concerted effort to bring people with lower income into planning and decision making; improve how Latinx cultures feel welcomed and appreciated in community spaces
14. Ensure that people have good access to health care in the community, especially seniors.
15. Help make the separate water/fire districts work better, re-centralize the parts that makes government inefficient
16. Improve Town’s communication to residents
17. Improving capacity of the DPW, reduce burnout
18. Help make sewer and water infrastructure less costly to maintain

Economic Development

Needs

- Better utilize vacant buildings (redevelop or remove and rebuild)
 - Turn the Farren Care property into an economic and/or community anchor
- Continue to fill/revitalize downtown Turners Falls and Millers Falls
 - Cafes/restaurants are the number one request
- Support/encourage commercial development

- Bring commercial options to town, especially everyday things that people currently have to leave town for (clothes, household items, groceries)
- Create flexibility and capacity for incubation/temporary amenities (pop up markets, food trucks)
- Support a passenger rail stop in Montague (for economic development purposes and for easier access to Boston)
- Pursue opportunities to involve Native community with historical representation and community building
- Leverage river and other beautiful natural places for economic development
- Support the arts, culture, and entertainment community, and the artists that make it happen
 - Ensure programming is available/accessible to the community
 - Have programming/events that are specifically for the community
 - Create an artist directory
 - Set up more artist maker-spaces
- Make spaces beautiful – more public art
- Build outdoor tourism economy
- Help out-of-towners know about and find Turners Falls more easily
 - Improve wayfinding from 91
 - Create a “brand” like Shelburne Falls that is marketed

Objectives:

1. Better utilize vacant buildings (redevelop or remove and rebuild), Farren Care property could be an economic and/or community anchor
 2. Continue to fill/revitalize downtown Turners Falls and Millers Falls; cafes/restaurants are the number one request
 3. Support/encourage commercial development; bring commercial options to town, especially everyday things that people currently have to leave town for (clothes, household items, groceries); flexibility and capacity for incubation/temporary things (pop up markets, food trucks)
 4. Support a passenger rail stop in Montague (for economic development purposes and for easier access to Boston)
 5. Pursue opportunities to involve Native community with historical representation and community building
- Leverage river and other beautiful natural places for economic development
 - Support the arts, culture, and entertainment community, and the artists that make it happen; ensure programming is available/accessible to the community; have programming/events that are specifically for the community
 - Make spaces beautiful – more public art
 - Build outdoor tourism economy
 - Help out-of-towners know about and find Turners Falls more easily

Climate & Sustainability

Needs

- Create a cohesive climate change strategy across all municipal departments
- Improve flood resilience
 - Resize infrastructure vulnerable to flooding to appropriate sizing
 - Planning of open space should prioritize flood abatement
 - Work with private residents to improve stormwater management on their property
- Build community based social resilience (hubs, supplies)
- Improve emergency communication
- Create green/net zero building codes/efforts that are equitable
- Reduce municipal GHG
 - Buildings
 - Landscaping tools
 - Reduced mowing
- Preserve walkability
- Work with youth to create and highlight the next generation of stewards
- Plant native trees and plants to help natural ecosystem functions: pollinators, stormwater management, and wildlife habitat
- Build food security/resilience
 - Help farmers adapt to climate change
 - Create more downtown garden spaces
 - Help more farmstands become HIP vendors
- Build alternative energy infrastructure
- Anticipate and plan for the need to balance increased access to open space with appropriate protection of open space for climate resilience

Objectives:

- Create a cohesive climate change strategy across all municipal departments
- Improve flood resilience
- Build community based social resilience (hubs, supplies)
- Improve emergency communication
- Create net zero building codes/efforts that are equitable
- Reduce municipal GHG (buildings, landscaping tools, reduce mowing)
- Preserve walkability
- Build food security/resilience, help farmers adapt to climate change
- Build alternative energy infrastructure
- Anticipate and plan for the need to balance increased access to open space with appropriate protection of open space for climate resilience