



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TECHNICAL PAPER

OVERVIEW

Though life may seem to move slowly in a place like Blandford, rarely does anything remain static. A long period of economic decline (common to so many rural areas across the nation) could now be shifting. For Blandford, a multiplicity of factors is emerging to possibly reshape the local economy. Open spaces, once used for farming and forestry, are now attractive for new natural resource-based businesses, including solar power developers and marijuana grow operations. In the past three years, the Town has had five solar development proposals, three of which are currently operational and occupy a total of 173 acres, generating an estimated total of 16 megawatts per day. In addition, two marijuana grow proposals have been put forward, one of which has been permitted to date, operating on a total of 36.5 acres of land.

At the same time, there are other trends that may bring change to Blandford, including the ability now for people to work remotely with the installation of broadband, and greater attractiveness of living in rural locations compared to heavily urbanized areas given pandemic associated risks in crowds and urban heat impacts during increasingly hotter summers due to climate change. The possibility of a new east-west rail stop in Chester adds to the mix of forces that could bring change. Going forward, it is worth keeping an eye on some of the possible indicators, including population, number of home sales, median home sale prices, number of building permits issued for new homes, and number of people making their second homes permanent places of residence.

More important than ever, Blandford's residents and local businesses need to work together to help realize the vision they have articulated within this document. With Blandford's small-town atmosphere being such an important value for those who responded to the Master Plan Survey, economic development ought to be scaled and appropriate to be protective of this quality. One of the most important places to start is to ensure that existing assets, including Blandford's central village area, the resources and facilities at Ski Blandford, and expansive tracts of forestlands across Town retain integrity over the long term.

This chapter reviews some of the important data to consider and then explores how the Town might build on these existing key assets.

INVENTORY AND EXISTING CONDITIONS

Municipal Expenses and Revenues

Overall, the Town of Blandford is on good financial footing. While deferred maintenance, especially on the public drinking water system and other municipal facilities is evident, the Town's budget should provide enough of a foundation that enables reasonable borrowing to attend to

needs. Town Administrator Josh Garcia notes that several elements must come together to support this work, including understanding the Town's debt capacity, defining clear priorities and timetable, and good forecasting. Staff from the UMass Collins Center for Public Management and Eric Kinsherf CPA are providing technical assistance that will help set this course for the Town.¹

The "out-sourcing" of these important financial roles for the Town is part of an ongoing recovery effort from a tough period in history when money had not been managed properly. This July, the Town begins the 4th year of its 5-year reorganization plan that is putting Blandford in a far stronger position. By fiscal year 2023, the Town aims to hire a full-time treasurer and collector. Staying the course and keeping to MA Department of Revenue best practices is paramount to the Town's financial health.

Looking back over an arc of 30 years, expenses for the Town have increased 130%, from \$2.0 million in 1990 adjusted for inflation dollars to \$4.6 million in 2020. Categories with the highest increases include: General Government with a 8.56% increase and Public Safety with a 4.34% increase. The category with the largest decrease was Education at 15.77%. The increase in the General Government category has to do with a change in staffing from largely part-time to now 8 full-time municipal staff.

Revenues have increased 121.82% from \$2.2 million in 1990 adjusted for inflation dollars to \$4.8 million in 2020. Proportionally, revenue from property taxes has remained relatively stable, but state aid has been in steady decline over the 30-year period from a high of providing 13.14% of all revenue to the Town in 1990 to 4.47% in 2020.² Local Receipts also declined from 19.27% in 1990 to 11.85% in 2020, but other sources (defined as all other) increased from 2.79% in 1990 to 20.11 in 2020. See Figures 1 and 2 below.

While Blandford continues to rely heavily on local property taxes for revenue (shown as "tax levy" in Figures 1 and 2 below), the tax rate compares favorably with surrounding towns (Chester, Granville, Huntington, Otis, and Russell) with only Otis and Granville having lower tax rates. See Figure 3 below. Blandford has other sources of income coming on-line from marijuana where the host community agreement includes 3% of gross revenue.

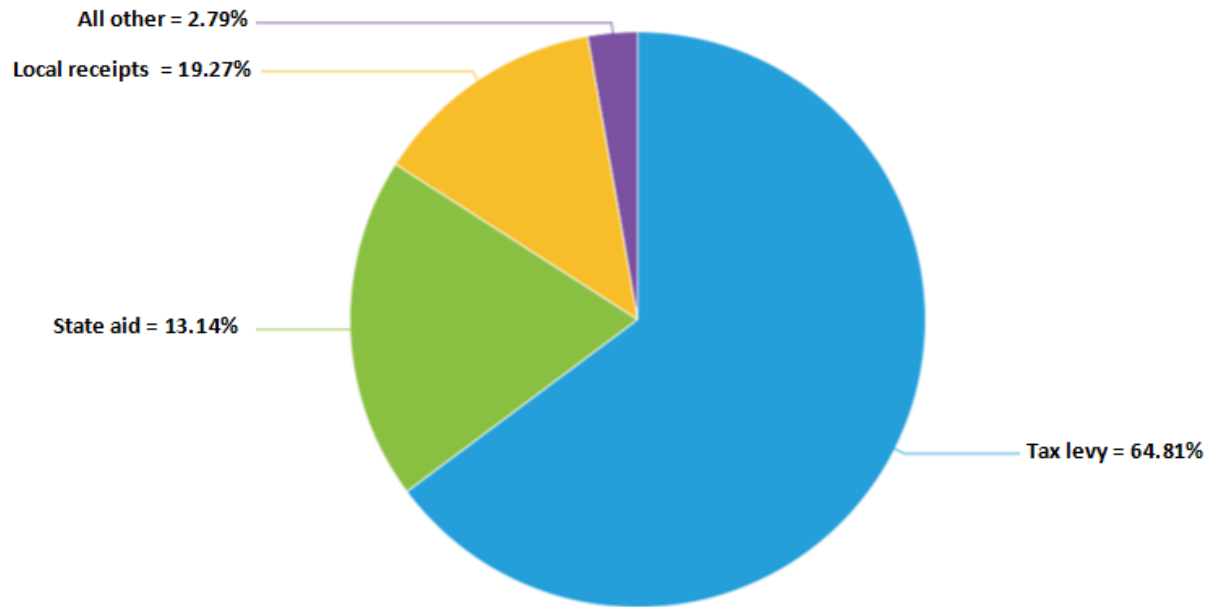
¹ The Collins Center is preparing a capital improvement plan and Kinsherf CPA is doing financial forecasting for the Town.

² Note that the proportionality here for 2020 does not account for Community Preservation Act revenues since CPA did not exist in 1990.

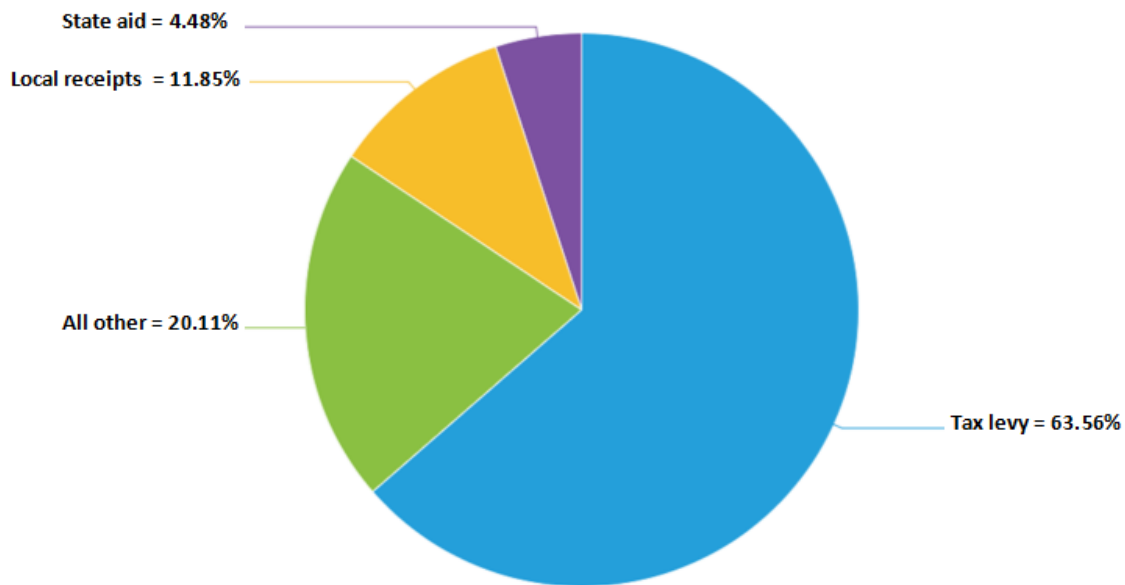


Figures 1 and 2: Revenues FY1990 and FY2020

Revenues by Source — FY 1990



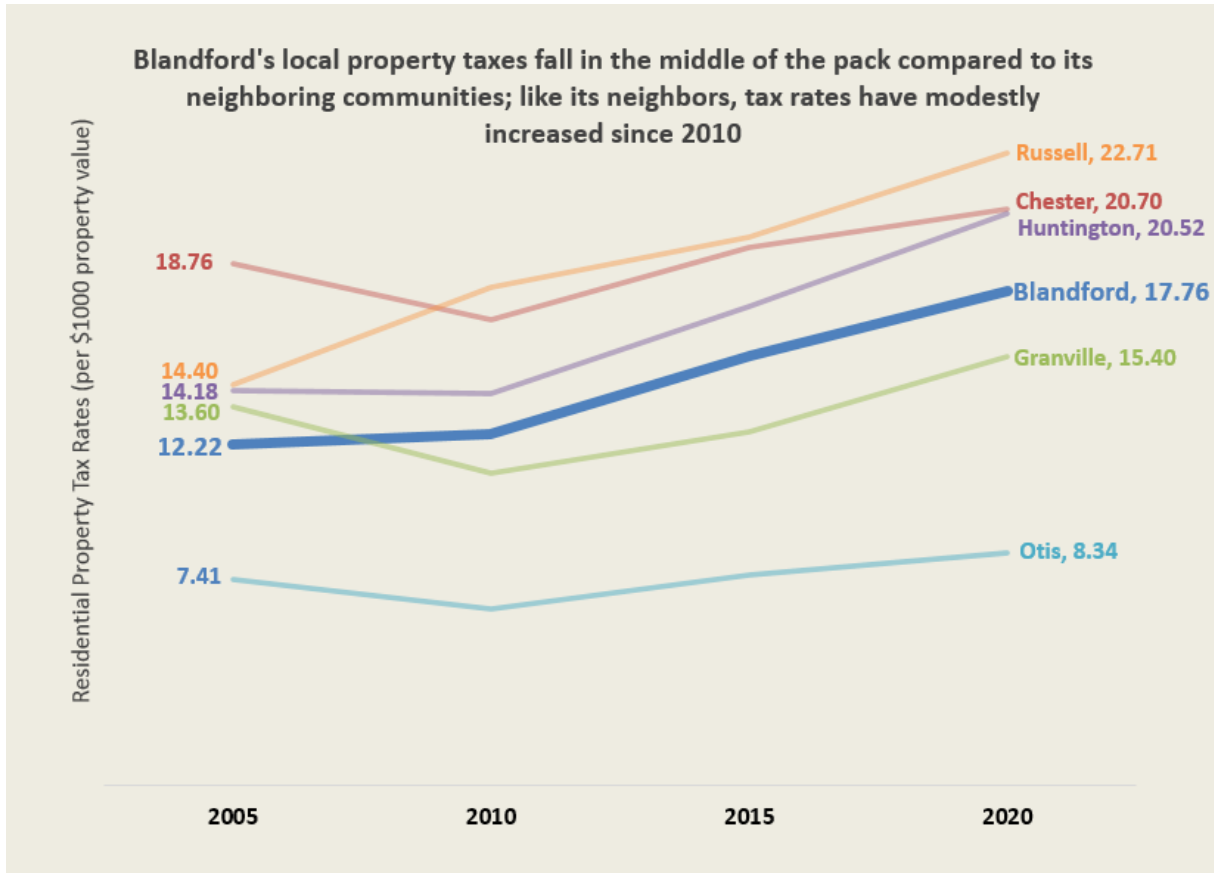
Revenues by Source — FY 2020



Source: MA Department of Revenue



Figure 3: Tax Rates in Blandford and Surrounding Towns



Source: MA Department of Revenue



Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT)

Conserved land owned by nonprofit organizations and government agencies is typically property tax exempt and as a result can impact municipal fiscal health. Payment in lieu of taxes, whereby such landowners annually provide some form of payment to a municipality to mitigate for property tax losses, is common practice in Massachusetts.

PILOT payments accounted for approximately 6% of Blandford's revenue in 2020. These are inclusive of amounts paid by Springfield Water & Sewer and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for state owned lands. While not a significant part of income for the Town, there may be some important adjustments coming with state PILOT payments in the coming years that could lead to increases for Blandford.

And with so much protected land in Blandford, understanding the nature of these payments seems important.

Figure 4: Payments in Lieu of Taxes to Town of Blandford

Fiscal Year	Actual Amount
2020.	\$284,103
2015.	\$205,161
2010.	\$180,624
2005.	\$242,015

*Source: Division of Local Services
MA Department of Revenue*

The amount of permanently protected land in Blandford has increased from 15,100 acres in 2004 to approximately 21,484 acres or 50.6% of the Town in 2020. The 21,484 acres with permanent protection include land owned by Springfield Water & Sewer Commission, state agencies (Mass DCR and Mass Fish & Game), the Towns of Blandford and Russell, private landowners, and nonprofit organizations as show in Figure 5 below. Lands in private hands are under Conservation Restrictions.³

The largest landowner in this group is the Springfield Water & Sewer Commission, which operates both the Borden Brook and Cobble Mountain Reservoirs to provide drinking water supply to several communities in the region. Land protection in the watersheds of these reservoirs is an important strategy for water supply protection. Blandford Town officials have been working with Springfield Water & Sewer Commission to ensure that acreages are accurate and that the formula for PILOT payments is applied appropriately. In FY 2020, the PILOT payment from Springfield Water & Sewer Commission was \$247,674.28, approximately \$24.12 per acre.⁴

³ A Conservation Restriction (CR) is a legally binding agreement between a landowner and the CR holder, usually a public agency or a private land trust, whereby the landowner agrees not to develop the land in order to protect certain conservation values. The CR is recorded at the Registry of Deeds, and the land is considered permanently protected if the CR runs in perpetuity.

⁴ Blandford Board of Assessors, City of Springfield Watershed Holdings and Valuation Summary, February 13, 2020. RDG Associates provided revised acreage, from 10,264 to 10,270, April 2021.



The State of Massachusetts is the second largest landowner in this category. In FY20, Blandford saw a total of \$20,571 in PILOT payments for state owned lands (SOL), approximately \$7.85 per acre.⁵ The amounts provided by these state PILOT payments may change. In December 2020, State Auditor Suzanne M. Bump's office completed an analysis that identifies certain inequities in the state PILOT formula. The executive summary for the report notes:

PILOT reimbursements for SOL are reliant on a legislative appropriation, yet the formula provides larger reimbursements to municipalities with high and fast-growing property values at the expense of other communities. Voices from communities and the Legislature have called for a reexamination of the SOL program in order to alter arrangements that disadvantage rural communities.⁶

For the active solar operations in Blandford, estimated payments in lieu of taxes are \$247,459.⁷

The State Auditor's report also looked at these types of payments as well and the confusion for municipalities in the current approach. The report observes:

Power generation facilities provide another important source of tax revenue for municipalities. Small-scale, residential installations of solar panels have been exempted from taxation for decades. Decisions by the Appellate Tax Board (ATB) interpreting this law have extended tax exemptions for solar equipment to commercial entities. This change has resulted in varied reactions from communities, such as taxing solar facilities, negotiating PILOTs, and granting exemptions for varying rates and terms. Legislative action to clarify the law has advanced in recent years but has not yet resulted in enacted legislation.

As solar development seems to have slowed slightly for now given general program caps with utility companies, it seems an important time to revisit the topic of how the Town might best manage and locate such developments. A potentially significant source of new revenue, generating roughly \$2,000 in annual tax revenue per acre, solar ought to be done in such a way as to least impact rural character.⁸

⁵ Note that the state also has a separate PILOT program for water supply protection lands, which is separate from the program under which Blandford's state-owned lands fall. Under the state water supply PILOT, the formula yielded \$186.27 per acre for the Town of Belchertown and \$314.57 for the Town of Pelham in 2021. These PILOTs were provided for state-owned land associated with the Quabbin Reservoir.

⁶ *The Impact of the State-Owned Land PILOT and Solar Taxation Policies on Municipalities*, Local Financial Impact Review, December 10, 2020, Commonwealth of Massachusetts Office of the State Auditor, Suzanne M. Bump. See: associated webpage: <https://www.mass.gov/report/the-impact-of-the-state-owned-land-pilot-and-solar-taxation-policies-on-municipalities>.

⁷ Blandford Board of Assessors Fiscal Year 2021 Revaluation Summary of Solar Properties and PILOTs, October 5, 2020.

⁸ Rough estimate on annual tax revenue is from Harald Scheid of RDG Associates.



Figure 5: Ownership of Permanently Protected Land within Blandford 2020

Ownership	Property	Acres	% of total protected land acreage
Springfield Water & Sewer Commission	Various watershed lands throughout Blandford	10,270	48%
State Agencies		2,958	14%
MA DCR	Chester-Blandford SF	1,796	
MA DCR	Tolland SF	1,012	
MA DF&G	Stage Brook WMA	150	
Town of Russell	Russell Water Supply Land	2,952	14%
Town of Blandford	Various properties, including Long Pond and Herrick-Knittel Conservation Areas, Blandford Water Supply Land, and the General Knox Trail Historical Area	1,014	4.5%
Nonprofit organizations	Arms Acres Memorial Forest and Gibbs Road Conservation Area	127	.5%
Private	Various with Conservation Restrictions	4,169	19%
Total		21,484	

Chapter 60 Lands

It is also important to acknowledge that 4,880 acres of land in Blandford are enrolled wholly in the Chapter 61 program. Also, there are parcels totaling 4,323 in acres where a portion of the acreage is enrolled in the program. The Chapter 61 program provides tax relief to qualifying landowners who continue use of their land for forestry, agriculture, and recreation. For point of comparison, the 2004 Community Development Plan reports there were a total of 4,248 acres of land in Blandford enrolled in the Chapter 61 program.

Gateway Hilltowns Collaborative

Blandford has been part of the Gateway Hilltowns Collaborative since its inception in 2016. The group of six hilltown communities (Blandford, Chester, Huntington, Middlefield, Montgomery, and Russell) collaborated in hiring an economic development director and focusing on several projects, including marketing and promotion of the area, shared services arrangements, small business support, among other activities.



Most importantly, the group worked with Elan Planning, Design, and Landscape Architecture PLLC to develop a multi-town economic development strategy focused on increasing tourism. Called Gateway Hilltowns Economic Development Strategy (2017), the document includes a number of strategies that capitalize on the region’s wealth of cultural attractions and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Local Businesses

There are some 47 businesses operating in Blandford currently, from the trades, such as plumbing, electrical, flooring, excavating and construction, to farms, lumber and stone related. Both Hull Forest Products and New England Forestry Foundation have lands in Blandford. The largest employers located in Blandford include the McDonald’s on the east and west-bound plazas of the Massachusetts Turnpike and the Blandford Country Club. Ski Blandford had been a top employer before its closure in 2020. The Town is also an important local employer. Most people employed in Blandford travel from other communities, including Russell, Granville, and Westfield among others.

Figure 6: Categories of Several Businesses

13	=	trades related (plumbing, electrical, flooring, excavating, construction)
6	=	farm related
6	=	food related
4	=	recreation related
4	=	lumber or stone related
3	=	trucking related



Workforce and Employment

Among Blandford's residents who work, four in ten are employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations. This reflects what people do for work. See Figure 7 at right.

Blandford residents have employment largely to the east, including Westfield (94 people), Springfield (56 people), Agawam (24 people), and West Springfield (24 people), but several also travel much further to work in

Worcester (16 people) and Boston (16 people). Figure 8 draws from 2018 data to show that Blandford provided employment to about 80 people with 77 of those people coming from outside town to work. Meanwhile, most Blandford residents travel out of town for employment.

Figure 7: Employment Among Blandford Residents

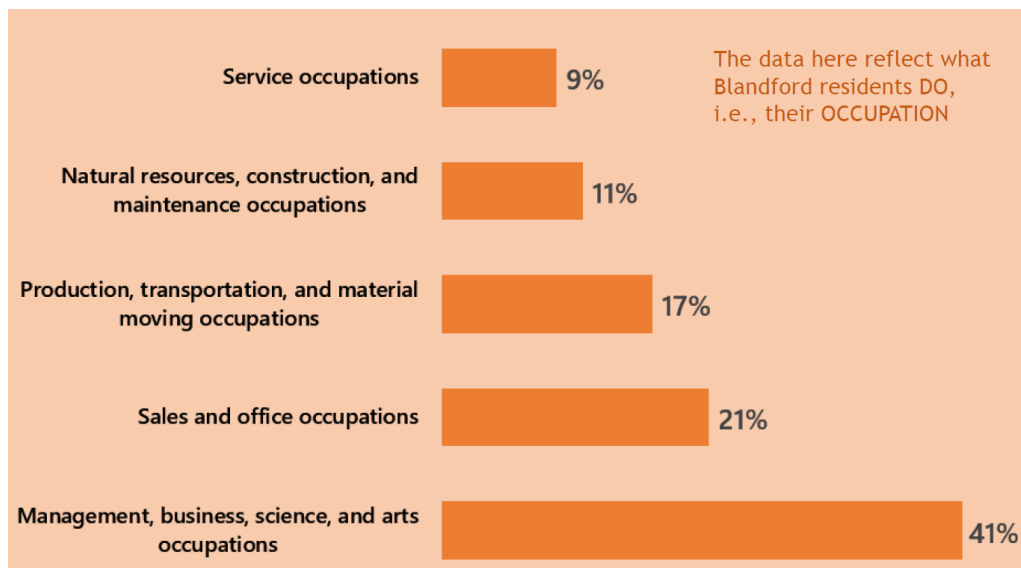
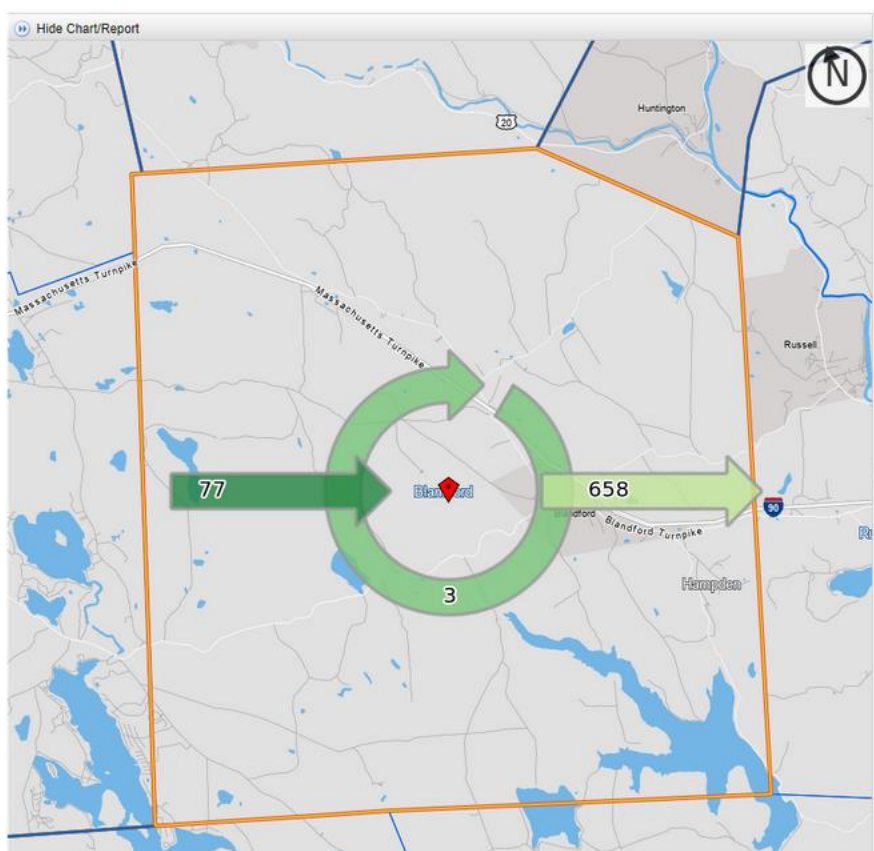


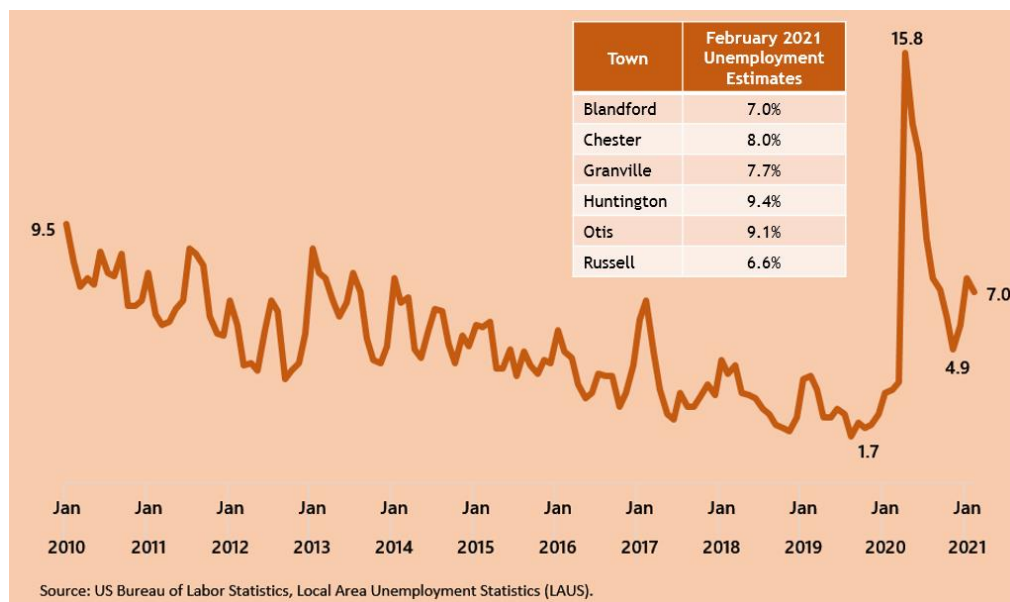
Figure 8: Inflow – Outflow of People for Employment



Unemployment among Blandford residents had been trending generally downward. As in many places, however, the Covid-19 pandemic produced a spike in unemployment. During the pandemic, Blandford had an estimated peak unemployment rate of 15.8% in April 2020. By November 2020, there had been some important recovery to reflect 4.9% unemployment, though the unemployment rate among Blandford residents has risen slightly to 7.0% in February 2021. This February unemployment figure is

comparable to surrounding communities. See Figure 9 at right.

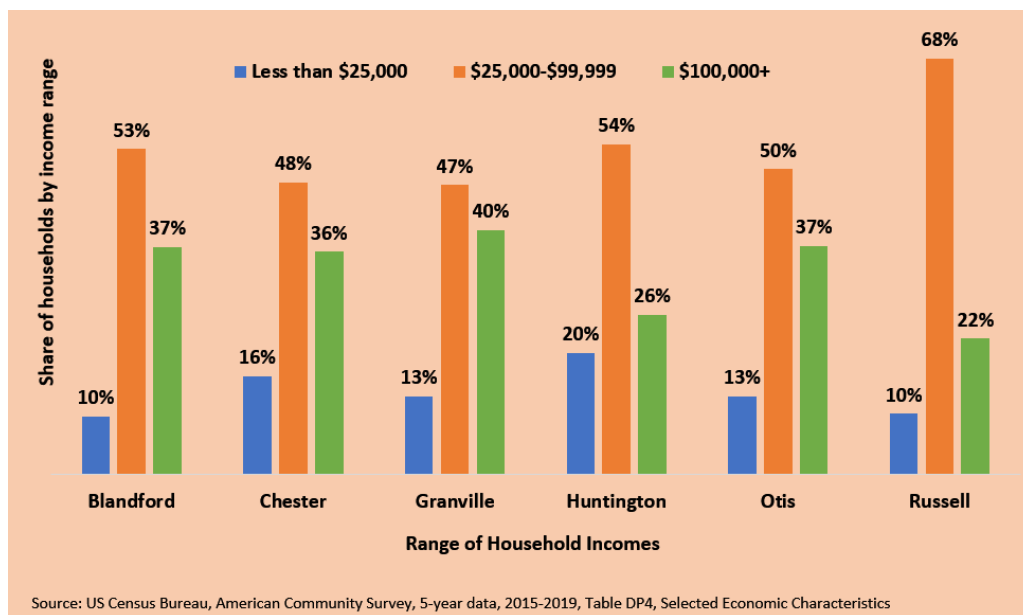
Figure 9: Unemployment Among Blandford Residents



Household Income

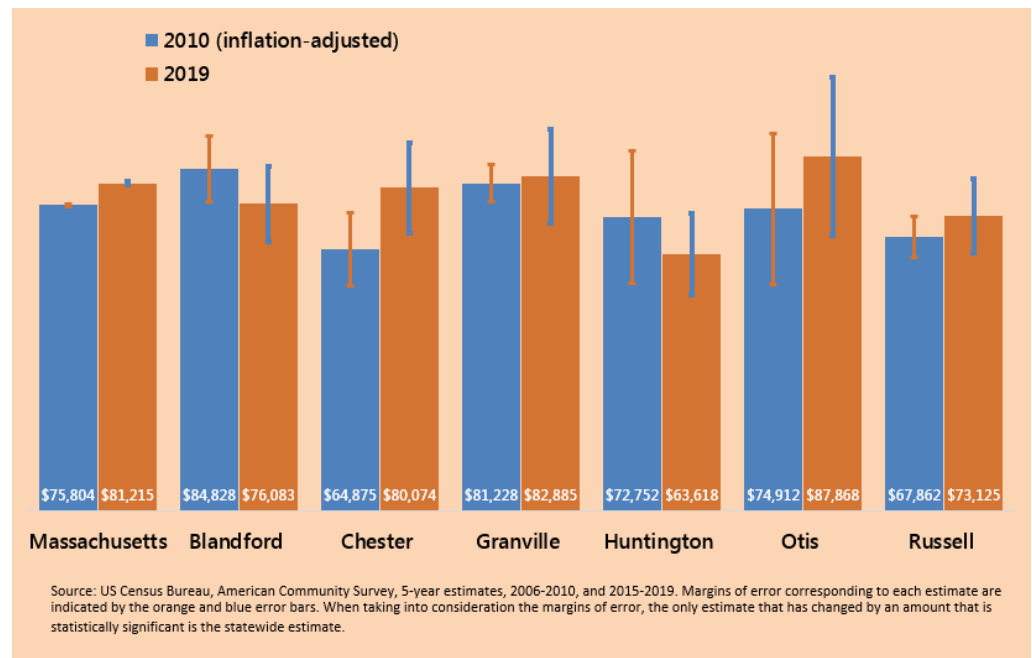
Compared to neighboring communities, Blandford generally has a smaller share of lower-income households, with 10% earning less than \$25,000 per year, and a larger share of higher-income households, with 37% earning more than \$100,000 per year. Blandford's profile of household incomes seems closest to that of Otis. See figure 10 at right.

Figure 10: Range of Household Incomes



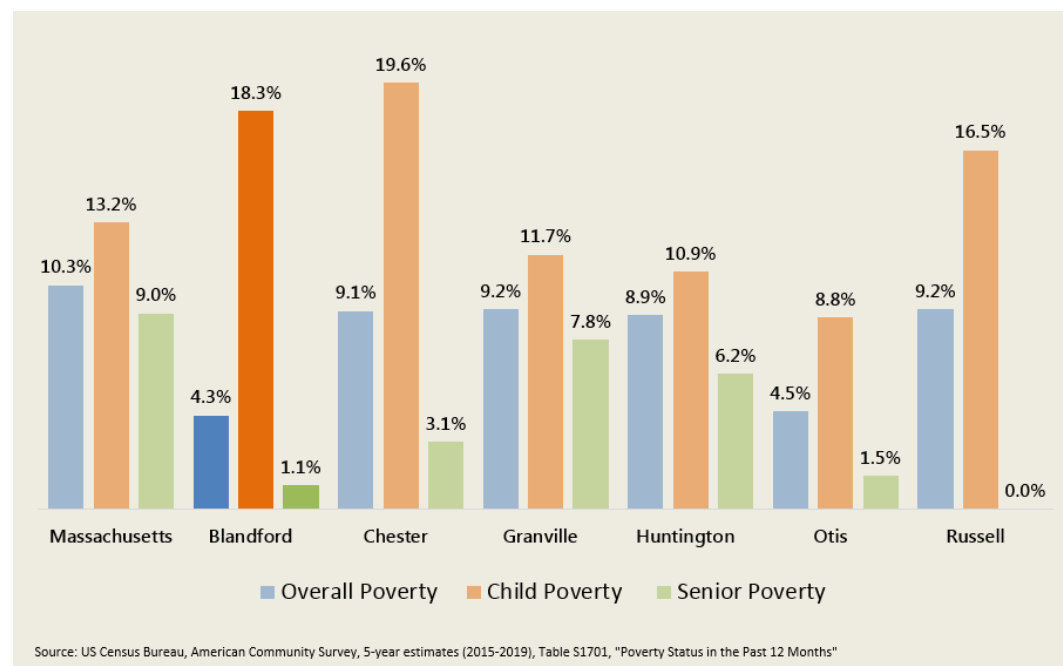
Blandford's median household income compares favorably to neighboring communities and to the state-wide numbers. While Blandford's median household income appears to have declined from \$84,828 in 2010 inflation-adjusted dollars to \$76,083 in 2019, the margins of error on this data are fairly large. See Figure 11 at right. Margins of error are indicated by lines at the top of each stack.

Figure 11: Median Household Incomes



Gauging poverty rates in Blandford has large margins of error given the small sample size. Nonetheless, the data shows an estimated 2019 child poverty rate in Blandford of 18.3%. This is higher than the overall poverty rate of 4.3% and the senior poverty rate of 1.1%. The range of potential values is much wider however. Figure 12a, at right, shows the poverty rates and Figure

Figure 12a: Poverty Rates



12b shows that the true value of these poverty rates fall between the value of the estimate in 12a., plus or minus certain values shown.

Figure 12b: Confidence Intervals for Poverty Rates

Town/State	Overall Poverty	Child Poverty (under 18 years)	Senior Poverty (65 years and over)
Massachusetts	±0.2%	±0.3%	±0.2%
Blandford	±4.6%	±25.2%	±1.6%
Chester	±5.9%	±20.7%	±2.6%
Granville	±5.7%	±9.8%	±7.1%
Huntington	±4.4%	±15.1%	±5.8%
Otis	±2.8%	±14.1%	±2.4%
Russell	±5.6%	±16.7%	±14.3%

Indicators of Change

While there is discussion in some quarters about change in the Hilltowns due to what people are experiencing, including a “hot housing market,” an unusual pace of new development, and generally more people visiting or staying in the area from urban locations, the data for Blandford is not yet providing any clear indication. Going forward, it seems important to keep an eye on some of the possible indicators of change, including population, number of home sales, median sale prices, number of building permits for new homes, and number of second homes becoming permanent places of residence. While sources for some of these numbers are easily obtained, it will be important to track other numbers, particularly number of building permits issued for construction of new homes. Current numbers are shown in Figure 13 below to help provide a baseline understanding.



Figure 13: Blandford Numbers to Watch Going Forward

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Population <i>(Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 5-year estimates; and UMass Donahue Institute, population projections for 2020)</i>	1,144	1,164	1,259	1,177	1,105	1,205
Number of single-family home sales <i>(Source: Warren Group)</i>	12	20	22	18	18	20
Median home sale price for single family home – inflation adjusted to 2020 <i>(Source: Warren Group)</i>	\$229,785	\$167,443	\$207,277	\$202,603	\$190,074	\$232,000
Number of building permits for new single-family homes <i>(Source: Building Inspector)</i>	Currently not tracked separately.					
Number of building permits for improvements to single family homes <i>(Source: Building Inspector)</i>	Currently not tracked separately.					
Number of people making second homes permanent places of residence <i>Best current indicator that can find is number of housing units indicated for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use versus total number of housing units</i> <i>(Source: US Census Bureau, 5-year data, 2010-2019, Tables B25004 and DP04)</i>	34 / 582 6%	50 / 635 8%	61 / 663 9%	66 / 623 11%	86 / 610 14%	NA



OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

There are important opportunities in shaping a future that will help retain what Blandford residents hold most dear: the small-town atmosphere. Economic development need not run contrary to that aim. In fact, the five elements that residents indicate they most want to see more of in Town—recreation, musical events, restaurants, neighborhood stores/boutiques, and art in public spaces—integrate well with a small-scale rural economic development program.

With a focus on enhancing and supporting existing resources, Blandford can work with the excellent building blocks it has in place already. The discussion here involves what seem the most important of these building blocks toward a more robust rural economy with an acknowledgement of current challenges: Blandford’s town center and the abundance of outdoor recreational opportunities.

Town Center

At the heart of Blandford are a stand of beloved historic and cultural resources in the Town Center and Town Common area. See Figure 12 below. These include the Country Club, Fairgrounds, White Church, and Watson Memorial Park along North Street, and the Historical Society, Congregational Church, Post Office/Old Town Hall building, the Library, and the Country Store and Café along Main Street.

The White Church, Watson Memorial Park, Historical Society, Congregational Church, and Porter Memorial Library

Described more fully in the Cultural Resources Chapter of this Master Plan, these institutions include facilities and programming within Blandford that are critical to the town’s cultural life. Programs include a robust series of events by both the Porter Memorial Library and Historical Society and the Bel Canto Opera at the White Church during summer months. The Bel Canto

Civic Tourism

The word “tourism” carries with it the weight of what we may have witnessed in other places overrun by crowds of people seeking a popular destination. The rural fabric of the Western Massachusetts Hilltowns, however, makes possible the idea of a tourism that is based on an attractive combination of experiences spread over an extensive geography, from cultural adventures in quaint New England village centers to recreational adventures in the expanses of nearby forested hillsides.

One idea to explore in revitalizing local economy is “civic tourism,” a phrase coined by Dan Shilling in his book, *Civic Tourism: The Poetry and Politics of Place*. This concept aims to reframe tourism’s purpose from an end to a means, from an economic goal to a tool that can help people enhance what they love about the place where they live. Out of this concept come strategies for deciding if, how, and for what purpose the ingredients of place (cultural, built, natural) can be integrated to create a dynamic, distinctive, and prosperous community.
Summary of civic tourism in paragraph above adapted from: www.civictourism.org



Opera is indicated as an attraction of state-wide significance in the *Gateway Hilltowns Economic Development Strategy*. At Watson Memorial Park, the Town maintains a network of walking paths that lead to scenic views of the Connecticut and Westfield River valleys. The park also includes picnic facilities with barbecue grills, a playground, little league ball field, and two historic barns.

Blandford Country Club

Originally established in 1909 with the purchase of the 1822 summer home of Josephine Porter, the Blandford Country Club had been struggling with declining membership and mounting debt over the past 20 years or so. The facility had been planned for closure when a core group of members who feared that the property's 56 acres would be converted into a housing subdivision, joined forces to purchase the Club in 2019. Among the new owners is Mark Amanti, owner of the Knox Trail Inn in Otis. The new owners have been working to reinvigorate the club at a time when the sport of golf itself is undergoing a reimagining. According to an April 2019, *Republican* news article, the new owners envision making golf more fun, less expensive, and less exclusive. The club is now open to the public and they offer facilities to play tennis and pickle ball, as well as a restaurant to promote the club as a gathering place for family and friends. It is not clear what the impacts of Covid-19 have been on the club and its prospects.



New owners of the Blandford Country Club are working to reinvigorate the club, making golf less expensive and less exclusive, and adding other activities and amenities.

Fair Grounds

For the annual Labor Day celebration, the all-volunteer staff of the Blandford Fair Grounds have been in the process of transition. Originally an opportunity for area farmers to showcase their animals and abundance of their harvests, the cost of transporting farm animals to Blandford has increased and fair attendance has been on the decline. The fall fair now features



food booths and entertainment, such as a horse show, an art show, and fiddler's contest as the main attractions. To boost Fair Grounds activity, organizers are developing a companion fair planned to occur the last Saturday in June and to include a horse show, a flea market and craft show, and a "touch a truck" feature for youth. One of the major challenges for the Fairgrounds is that existing buildings often do not meet current standards for fire code, accessibility, and utilities, especially water.

Old Town Hall

Currently occupied by the Fire Department and the U.S. Post Office, the Town is considering what may be the best use of this building going forward. By appearances the building is essentially a duplex commercial storefront. The plan is for the Fire Department to move to new quarters at the Highway Garage in fiscal year 2023-2024, but the Post Office, which pays rent to the Town for its use of the space will remain. Should the Town retain ownership of the building and seek a new commercial tenant for the vacant space or rather sell the building to better attract and enable a new business owner (given the rental income from the Post Office) within the town center? Another idea that emerged in the course of Master Plan development is to create in the vacated part of the building a community professional center where local home-based businesses might have office space and share meeting space and certain resources, such as photocopy and fax machines.



Owned by the Town of Blandford, Old Town Hall currently houses the local U.S. Post Office on one side and the fire department on the other side of the building. As the fire department will be moving soon to new quarters at the Highway Garage, there is



important conversation to be had around the building's future and what use might best contribute to economic development in the Town overall.

Blandford Country Store and Café

Jen Girard and her husband Greg purchased the Country Store property in 2018 with the intention of creating a friendly community store suited to Blandford's small-town atmosphere. They encountered several barriers over the past few years that have made success difficult. These include loss of typical foot traffic to the store due to the newspaper distribution company determining that Blandford is 20 minutes too far for deliveries, repeated breakdowns in the antiquated refrigeration system, and the inability to compete with pricing and supply of big box grocery retailers (Stop & Shop and Big Y) on the path home from work for many Blandford residents. More recently with Covid-19, the lack of foot traffic from the church before and after services has produced additional impact.

Girard is in the process of making several improvements to help position the store for success. One of the lessons learned is that they need to pivot away from total reliance on retail sales. Though she will continue the store at a smaller scale, Girard and her husband are making investments to convert more fully to a restaurant, along with an ice cream and confection business. She noted that locally people are more interested in meals and eating out than a nearby shop that can provide staples. Investments to date include creating more indoor space for dining and remodeling to commercial kitchen standards.



Owners of the Blandford Country Store and Café are making several changes to better serve the community and remain economically viable in a rural setting.

All of these institutions described above have faced certain challenges through recent years, even more so with the Covid-19 pandemic in the past year. The pathway to recovery though seems to be evolving through creative problem solving and great heart from those who care so deeply. Continued investments of energy and funding remain paramount to ensuring a thriving center at the heart of Blandford. As recovery and infrastructure monies may become available, it will be important to invest in these places to the greatest extent possible.

To support the Town Center, the Town is working toward much needed drinking water infrastructure upgrades to support local institutions, businesses, and residences. The Town also recently expanded the business district in early 2021. Uses permitted in the business district include: any purpose authorized in the Residential District; offices, banks, and places of assembly; retail stores, salesrooms, shops for custom work; or the making of articles to be sold at retail on the premises; restaurants excluding drive-ins or businesses using curb service; theaters, halls, and clubs; public or semipublic buildings; places of business of a barber and similar public service, baker blacksmith, builder, carpenter, caterer, clothes cleaner, confectioner, decorator dressmaker, dyer, electrician, florists, furrier, laundry, laundromat, lumber, mail-order business, milliner, motor vehicle salesroom, milk bottling and distributing, news dealers, optician, painter, paper hanger, pastry shop, photographer, plumber, printer, publisher, radio broadcasting studio, shoemaker, shoe repair, tailor, telegraph office, tinsmith, undertaker, upholsterer, and other similar uses; gasoline and oil stations and garages for storage and repair; registered marijuana dispensary (requires a Special Permit and Site Plan Review issued by the Planning Board); and any additional use, which is not specifically prohibited or already requires a Special Permit from another Board, for which the Zoning Board of Appeals may grant permission.



Figure 12: The Institutions and Businesses of Blandford’s Town Center and Town Common



Outdoor Recreational Opportunities

Blandford has long been a place where people from the surrounding area and afar have sought respite during summer months. Participants in the economic development focus group, held as part of the master planning process, talked about how second homeowners in the 1950s through 1970s came to Blandford in the summers for the rural atmosphere, cooler fresh air, walks in the woods, and enjoyment of recreational activities, particularly golf. At the same time, Blandford has long been an important destination during winter months for families throughout the region seeking a day out on the slopes of the Blandford ski area.

Recreational opportunities in and around Blandford remain abundant and include: the facilities of Ski Blandford and the Blandford Country Club, the 11-acre Watson Memorial Park in the center of town, miles of local hiking trails and dirt roads (including at the 300-acre Long Pond Conservation Area, and 254-acre Knittel Conservation Area), possible connection to the Highlands Footpath, overnight accommodations at Laurel Ridge Camping Area, and proximity to the 2,490 acres of Chester-Blandford State Forest, 2,378 acres of Granville State Forest, 6,878 acres of Tolland State Forest, and the 1,085-acre Otis Reservoir.

By enhancing these resources and elevating the mix of opportunities available for outdoor enjoyment, Blandford could produce a robust local recreational economy. Such a focus would be in keeping with many of the values articulated by residents in the master planning process. Collaboration with nearby neighboring towns, particularly Chester, Otis, and Granville seems essential in this work.

Trail linkages

While Blandford does not have an extensive formal network of trails, possibilities to make connections to large tracts of public open space and the Highlands Footpath abound. These connections could for the time being, make use of dirt roads and off-road trails where possible. Currently, the Highlands Footpath has a segment from the center of Chester through Chester-Blandford State Forest to Observation Hill. Blandford could explore with the membership of Highlands Footpath, Inc., and Mass DCR a segment that would connect Observation Hill through the southeastern area of Blandford State Forest along Mica Mine Road to Blandford Town Center. This could begin to expand the options for a local walking journey. The former Commissioner of DCR had indicated to members of Highlands Footpath, Inc. that though camping will not be restored at Chester-Blandford State Forest (due to the cost of overcoming drinking water and sanitary issues), his agency would be open to the idea of installing several lean-to facilities for long distance hikers within the boundaries of the State Forest.



Ski Blandford

The oldest club-owned ski area, Ski Blandford has been struggling financially for years. Sold in 2017 to hopeful investors, the area closed permanently in 2020. Ski area manager Ron Crozier has indicated that they are unable to commit to opening the ski area any time soon and there are no plans for the ski area's future. The owners had investigated the possibility of a snow tube operation but were unable to come up with a business model that would even approach the break-even point. They also showed the facility to a couple of potential buyers, though there was nothing more than the initial viewing, according to Crozier.

One idea posed to Mr. Crozier has been development of a mountain biking park. With proximity to Chester-Blandford State Forest (4.4 miles via Nye Brook Road and John Knox Road), and other vast tracts of protected open space, and the volume of informal biking activity in the area already, a downhill bike park at Ski Blandford could be well timed and placed.



Ski Blandford closed permanently in 2020.



Compared to ski operations, investments for mountain biking appear to be providing healthy returns. The nearest example of this success is Berkshire East, where it has been reported the owners are now earning more in the summer from mountain biking than what they earn in the winter with skiing. Mr. Crozier indicated that there have been only brief internal discussions about mountain biking and that one of the issues they have is that Ski Blandford has older style chair lifts that would not adequately provide uphill lift transport with bikes.

Additional conversation with Ski Blandford owners on this topic seems important. Mountain biking has helped to create strong new local economies in several regions of the northeast, most notably Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, and Mount Ascutney in West Windsor, Vermont. Mountain bikers will travel in order to ride and when they travel, they also spend money, giving rise to such businesses as craft breweries, wood-fired pizza joints, and overnight accommodations. Oftentimes, mountain bikers also decide to settle in trail-friendly communities bringing new young energy and dollars.

The Example of Mount Ascutney

No longer financially viable as a commercial operation, Mount Ascutney Ski Area in West Windsor, Vermont, closed in 2010. The value of second homes and mountainside condominiums plummeted, and many residents feared the place they most loved would become a ghost town.

Through a series of community meetings, residents decided to purchase the 470-acre resort area in 2015. They had support from the Trust for Public Land and individual donors. A conservation and recreation easement was conveyed to the local land trust over what became an expanded 1,581 acres of town forest.

Today, Mount Ascutney includes a 30-mile network of non-motorized, recreational trails that stretch to the peak and hug the western base of the mountain. The network has become a destination for mountain bikers, backcountry skiers, and hikers locally and from across New England.

An independent nonprofit, called Mt. Ascutney Outdoors, is responsible for the management, oversight and development of recreational, educational and community activities and conservation on the land under a delegation of authority from the Town of West Windsor. As part of their work, they are creating a nonprofit community ski area on a portion of the property, providing inexpensive skiing opportunities for all families.

COVID-19 Economic Recovery Funding

Given the tremendous impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on local business and economies, the state and federal governments have developed several programs to help with recovery. Some of these programs are meant to issue direct funding to local businesses and other programs enable



cities and towns to accelerate recovery from the pandemic, address its economic fallout, and lay the foundation for a strong and equitable recovery.

Economic Development Strategies in the 2003 Community Development Plan

Blandford's Community Development from 2003 included seven economic development strategies. Several of these have their counterparts in this chapter of the 2021 Master Plan.

- Support and encourage appropriate local business activity that contributes to the rural character of Blandford
- Study ways to compensate the Town for providing and protecting natural resources that are vital to health and prosperity of the region
- Promote Blandford as a destination for tourist and recreational activities
- Mixed use town center development bylaw
- Promote Blandford as a location for retirement and vacation homes
- Encourage and promote specialized agricultural activities that create "value-added" products for the wholesale and retail markets
- Encourage cottage industries and expanded home occupations in Blandford while providing adequate protection of neighborhood character and property values



