

The Wachusett Station Smart Growth Corridor Plan:

A Case Study on Engaging Diverse Communities in Planning a Rail Station Neighborhood



Targeted engagement with underrepresented and diverse communities can be a critical strategy for developing an effective and authentic neighborhood or regional plan. This NADO Research Foundation case study highlights the efforts of the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission to ensure an inclusive, participatory approach to corridor planning around a transit stop.

A Plan for the Future

In 2011, the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) received a \$129,500 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to create the *Wachusett Station Smart Growth Corridor Plan*. The goal of the plan is to design a walkable, bikeable, transit-oriented corridor in the 2.5-mile radius around the Wachusett station in Fitchburg, a city of 40,000 residents located in central Massachusetts. The Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART) received a \$55.5 million Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) in 2010 to build the station to better connect the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) commuter rail system with the area. The station is expected to be completed by the end of 2014.ⁱ



During the planning process, MRPC intentionally sought to engage diverse and historically underrepresented populations in community conversations and focus groups, including local Latino, Hmong, and Vietnamese residents. MRPC recognized early that collaboration with diverse communities would create the best possible plan for the future and better address some of the challenges facing neighborhoods near the station. The unemployment rate in Fitchburg was 9.5 percent in April 2013, higher than the 6.4 percent for the state and 7.5 percent for the entire country. Over 19 percent of people in Fitchburg live in poverty, compared to the 10.1 percent state level. The city's median household income is \$47,369, while Massachusetts' median is \$64,496.ⁱ



The new train station brings opportunity to connect the local municipalities' residents with jobs, services, and more. A key step, however, is to locate affordable housing options near the transit station to ensure accessibility. The residents who currently live in the area around the site spend between

Project at a Glance

Lead Organization: Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC)

Grant Type: HUD Community Challenge Grant (FY 2011)

Other Funding: \$55.5 million Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant to the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART) from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)

Project Description: The Montachusett Regional Planning Commission engaged historically underrepresented populations in the creation of the Wachusett Station Smart Growth Corridor Plan.

Key Benefits/Outcomes: More inclusive decision making, the incorporation of the needs and desires of diverse populations, a more effective and enduring end product.

Partners: The City of Fitchburg, the City of Leominster, the Town of Westminster, Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART), Regional Economic Development Institute (REDI) at Fitchburg State University (FSU), the Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority (FRA), Cleghorn Neighborhood Center, Three Pyramids Inc., Westminster Business Park

Website: <http://www.mrpc.org/>

49 percent and 79 percent of their household income on combined housing and transportation costs. The built environment surrounding the future station was also a major concern. The majority of the housing stock in the area is at least 70 years old. The area where the station is to be developed was historically full of industrial properties. Of all the industrial properties that remain, almost 700,000 square feet are vacant. About 136,000 square feet of the vacant industrial space is in former mill buildings. The MRPC connected the station planning process with the context of the area, by recognizing these social and physical challenges but seeing them as opportunities for transformative redevelopment.

An Opportunity to Engage the Community

It is from these unique challenges that the MRPC recognized an opportunity to engage diverse groups of people to design an inclusive process, meeting the many needs of the local population by designing the planning process

to incorporate as many people as possible. Fitchburg is home to residents of different races, ethnicities, ages, and education levels. A Steering Committee was created by the MRPC to gain input from groups in the region. Committee members included local officials from the participating cities of Westminster, Leominster, and Fitchburg; the Montachusett Area Regional Transit Authority (MART); community organizations; educational institutions; and other non-profits. The Committee meets every other month during the course of the planning process.

The Steering Committee meetings are not designed to be passive meetings around a boardroom table, but rather interactive and engaging gatherings. One of the recent meetings included a tour of the project site, local businesses, local recreation areas, the industrial park, the local meditation temple, and a resource and meeting center for the Latino community. Committee members met with stakeholders, toured these facilities, and learned about the many elements of the future station.

In addition to the Steering Committee meetings, the MRPC wanted to engage a diverse group of residents in the local community. John Hume, MRPC's Planning and Development Director, said, "All local groups are part of clarifying strengths and weaknesses and the unique characteristics that make this area a special place. Their input is directly guiding

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John Hume

Planning and Development Director, MRPC

the development of the plan to boost these strengths and improve its weaknesses all the while maintaining the unique characteristics of the community”.ⁱⁱⁱ

MRPC reached out to the local Hmong and Vietnamese populations by contacting the United Hmong of Massachusetts, the Hue Lam Meditation Temple, Asian markets, and local Vietnamese businesses. MRPC also worked closely with the Cleghorn Neighborhood Center to involve Latino residents in the planning process. Outreach announcements and documents were translated into Vietnamese, Hmong, and Spanish.

‘Making History’ as Part of the Planning Process

Focus group sessions were conducted with Latino, Hmong, and Vietnamese residents to help establish the larger community’s vision for the site and brainstorm specific ideas for the project’s features. The meetings were facilitated by bilingual leaders who are trained in plan facilitation. Ten people participated in the Latino Focus Group. The participants were from Uruguay, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia. In addition to charrette-style planning, the event provided food, child care, and a gift card raffle. Participants voiced their desire for more affordable housing options, improved public transportation schedules, more green space, a more diverse retail sector, more schools and clinics, and other community improvements.

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The facilitator of the session reported that the “participants in this group feel that they made history” by participating in the planning process.^{iv}

The Hmong and Vietnamese Focus Groups were equally as successful. The Hmong participants voiced concerns about potentially rising rents, a desire to maintain the forestland, and the need for more small retail establishments. The Vietnamese Focus Group expressed a desire for additional residential options near the station, more bike trails, an Asian supermarket, and an increased police force.

The MRPC also held a public forum for English speakers, attracting over 50 participants who voiced many of the same concerns as the focus group participants when describing their vision for the future of the community. Findings and comments from the focus groups and public forum were presented to the Steering Committee and developed into the Plan.

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‘Everyone Has an Opportunity to Be Heard’

As of October 2013, MRPC reported they were in the process of completing the transportation plan, land use plan, housing plan, economic development analysis, open space/recreation plan, facilities/institutional element, policy recommendations and implementation plans. The input from the focus group meetings and the public forum is being used to form each element of the plan.

HUD’s Sustainable Communities Community Challenge grants are meant to “foste[r] reform and reduc[e] barriers to achieving affordable, economically vital, and sustainable communities.”^v

To meet this goal, MRPC ensured the Wachusett Station planning process was completely open to the public – which meant designing an inclusive community engagement process that would reach a wide group of residents.

According to Hume at MRPC, “We have learned the importance of ensuring that the local communities, including traditionally marginalized populations, participate in the development of the plan...so that everyone has an opportunity to be heard including minority populations and non-English speaking individuals so that anyone interested can have a say in the future plans of the area.”ⁱⁱ MRPC is confident that its inclusive planning process will create a strong, sustainable region for the area’s current and future residents for years to come.

- ⁱ “Wachusett Smart Growth Corridor Analysis Work Plan”, Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, 2012.
- ⁱⁱ Bureau of Labor Statistics, June 2013, http://www.bls.gov/cps/cps_htgm.htm.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with John Hume, Director of Planning and Development Director, MRPC, 2013.
- ^{iv} “Wachusett Smart Growth Corridor Analysis” presentation, Steering Committee Meeting, 11/15/12.
- ^v “Sustainable Communities Community Challenge Grants”, www.hud.gov, 2013.

For more information:

Montachusett Regional Planning Commission: www.mrpc.org

Montachusett Regional Transit Authority: www.mrta.us

HUD’s Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities: http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/sustainable_housing_communities

Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grants: <http://www.dot.gov/tiger>

Partnership for Sustainable Communities: <http://www.sustainablecommunities.gov/>

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All images are courtesy John Hume, Montachusett Regional Planning Commission



The work that provided the basis for this publication was supported by funding under an award with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The substance and findings of the work are dedicated to the public. The author and publisher are solely responsible for the accuracy of the statements and interpretations contained in this publication. Such interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government.