

City of Fitchburg: Main Street Cultural District Priority Development Area Assessment



Prepared by:
Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC)

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Photo Sources, clockwise from top left: MRPC Photos on October 26th Site Walk: Fitchburg Art Museum, The Boulder, Boulder Art Gallery and H.M. Francis Medallion on the Faith United Parish Building.

**Fitchburg Cultural District
Priority Development Area Assessment
DLTA Project Report**

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**Fitchburg Cultural District
Priority Development Area Assessment
DLTA Project**

Introduction

The City of Fitchburg's participation in this "Fitchburg Cultural District Priority Development Area Assessment" Report came through via Mayor Lisa A. Wong's submission of a District Local Technical Assistance (DLTA) project request. The DLTA request to the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) was to provide "support in the identification, assessment and mapping of Priority Development Areas (PDAs) to create Cultural Districts that will serve as catalysts for cultural development in the Montachusett Region." Mayor Wong submitted the DLTA request on January 27, 2012 and was approved by MRPC on January 31, 2012. Within this DLTA request submission was a support letter from Douglas C. Briggs, Ashburnham Town Administrator. Fitchburg and Ashburnham were able to prepare this one DLTA submission request, which would allow both communities to participate in the Cultural District PDA Assessment with Fitchburg being an "urban" model for the Montachusett Region and Ashburnham a "rural" model.

The DLTA program provides technical assistance at no cost to the Town of Ashburnham and City of Fitchburg and is funded through the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). The DLTA program was established by Chapter 205 of the Acts of 2006, which enables staff of Regional Planning Agencies (RPAs) such as MRPC to provide technical assistance to communities for "any subject within regional planning expertise."

The Town of Ashburnham and City of Fitchburg made use of one of the new eligible DLTA project types for 2012 for the Cultural District Assessment, which is the "Identification, assessment and mapping of Priority Development Areas (PDAs) and Priority Preservation Areas (PPAs) at the local and regional level."

MRPC Principal Planner, Eric R. Smith, was the Project Manager for this DLTA planning project. Mr. Smith prepared a draft Scope of Services document for review by both the Town of Ashburnham and City of Fitchburg, which was subsequently signed by the City of Fitchburg on April 3, 2012. Additional planning assistance was provided by MRPC's Planning Consultant, Jeff Anderson, who facilitated the planning process during the first half of this DLTA Project. Based on the approved Scope of Services for this Cultural District PDA Assessment, Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) completed the work in accordance with all the Tasks associated with the completion of this Cultural District PDA Assessment. The results of this Assessment according to these various Tasks are presented in the pages that follow.

Task 1) Provide an introduction to the Massachusetts Cultural District program to both the City of Fitchburg and Town of Ashburnham, including the set of requirements for adoption of a local Cultural District.

An Introduction to the Massachusetts Cultural District program was provided to the City of Fitchburg as part of a presentation by MRPC at a May 22, 2012 meeting held at Fitchburg City Hall (see Appendix A for a copy of the Fitchburg Cultural District Plan Introductory Meeting Flyer). MRPC also facilitated an introduction to the Cultural District program at the March 29, 2012 Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (MRCEDS) Meeting with Meri Jenkins of the Massachusetts Cultural Council presenting the Cultural District Program information and requirements. MRPC Staff made use of her materials as part of our Cultural District introduction presentation.

MRPC notes these requirements have been incorporated into this Assessment by having a Cultural District application template provided as an attachment to the Assessment Report (see Appendix B). Part of MRPC's planning assistance during 2012, has included helping the City of Fitchburg as much as possible with completion of a Cultural District application, but also to provide recommendations and suggested next steps for the City to take after the DLTA project is completed in order to see the Cultural District application process to an ultimate submission with the Massachusetts Cultural Council. The recommendations are found in Section 8 of this Report.

A summary of the Massachusetts Cultural District program requirements are provided below:

- Cultural District provision Signed into law by Governor Patrick during the Summer of 2010
- Statutory Language included within M.G.L. Ch. 40 Sect. 58A
- Cities and Towns of Massachusetts are the eligible entities – and can have more than one Cultural District in their community.

What is a Cultural District? "A cultural district is a specific geographical area in a city or town that has a concentration of cultural facilities, activities, and assets. **It is a walkable, compact area** that is easily identifiable to visitors and residents and is a center of cultural, artistic and economic activity."

What types of activity(ies) takes place in a Cultural District?

- Art classes and educational offerings
- Art and museum sales
- Demonstrations of artists at work
- Art-related street vendors
- Art creation and rehearsal
- Exhibitions
- Literary readings
- Performing arts events
- Concerts
- Public art
- Festivals
- Open Studios
- Gallery Nights
- Walking Tours
- Signature Events

The State has set a number of goals for the establishment of Cultural Districts:

- Attract artists and cultural enterprises
- Encourage business and job development
- Establish the district as a tourist destination
- Preserve and reuse historic buildings
- Enhance property values
- Foster local cultural development

Currently there has not been any direct money allocated by the State Legislature for the Cultural District program. MRPC did learn at an October 23rd meeting facilitated by the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC) that MCC is going to try to seek some direct program funding for FY '14.

A Cultural District designation will be in effect for five years and is renewable if the District is in compliance with annual reporting requirements in prior years, and there is a recommitment by the city or town to continue their cultural districts work.

Partnership Requirement

Before submitting an application, the City of Fitchburg must form a cultural district partnership. The Requirements include:

- Partnership must be a diverse mix of organizations that represent the interests of the district.
- The partnership must have a governance structure.
- The management responsibility may be assigned to one of the partners or entities such as a Main Streets Programs, Empowerment Zone, Historic District and Business Improvement Districts.

MRPC's assessment of the Cultural District program is that the Partnership requirement is one of the toughest requirements for communities to meet in order to complete a Cultural District application for submission to the Massachusetts Cultural Council. MRPC has studied the Partnership aspects in a number of other designated Cultural Districts. That assessment has been incorporated into this DLTA Report below and we have also included specific Partnership-related recommendations to the City of Fitchburg in this DLTA Report within Task #8.

Additional Partnership Requirements:

- The managing organization must be in good financial standing, and there must be a written agreement between the municipality and the organization outlining benchmarks and responsibilities.
- Cultural organizations located outside of the geographic boundaries of the cultural district may be included as well, but should be connected to the district by way of programming, partnership or support.
- In addition to cultural or historic partners others may include: community non-profit organizations, private, for-profit businesses, funding agencies, educational and/or faith based institutions and regional, state and federal agencies.

For the second bullet above under additional partnership requirements, an example of this would be Fitchburg State University. Having the Fitchburg State University involved ties into the bullet that follows as well for inclusion of educational institutions. The City should consider engaging other Schools as well. Recommendations related to specific organizations, institutions and individuals that should be

considered for Fitchburg's Cultural District Partnership are included in the Task #8 assessment and within Appendix B (the Fitchburg Cultural District Application template). The recommendations also include those individuals who expressed interest in being a "Partner" based on their feedback at the December 11, 2012

MRPC conducted an assessment of the Partnerships of seven (7) Massachusetts Cultural Council-approved Cultural District. For the results of this assessment see Appendix C. There is a requirement that one of the Partners be a 501(C)3 organization. To meet this requirement, the Town of Essex used the Town's Shipbuilding Museum. Fitchburg could use the Fitchburg Cultural Alliance, which the Cultural Alliance has agreed to be.

Although there is no direct funding for this program currently available, as indicated above, MCC has worked with the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism (MOTT) to develop a Cultural District section on their website: <http://www.massvacation.com/culturalDistricts/>

Task 2) Review existing cultural asset information previously identified and mapped within the Town of Ashburnham Cultural/Creative Economy Plan for both Ashburnham and Fitchburg. Collect updated cultural asset information as available on the New England Foundation for the Arts' Culture Count Database.

MRPC began by reviewing any previously identified cultural assets that were recorded within the 2010 Town of Ashburnham Cultural/Creative Economy Plan (funded through a DLTA Project that year). Although this Plan had provided a comprehensive identification of cultural assets for the Town of Ashburnham, as part of MRPC's Scope of Work for that DLTA Project, Regional assets, which included the City of Fitchburg, were included as Appendix B of that Plan. MRPC collected a set of updated CultureCount database information on April 4, 2012, which Staff reviewed to see if there were any new such assets within the City of Fitchburg on this database. Heritage-related cultural assets were collected for the City of Fitchburg from the Freedom's Way National Heritage Area website.

This review and collection of cultural assets from CultureCount and Freedom's Way has been provided in Appendix D.

Task 3) Review existing Priority Development Areas identified for both communities within the Montachusett Regional Strategic Framework Plan.

MRPC reviewed the Priority Development Areas (PDAs) for the City of Fitchburg as identified in the Montachusett Regional Strategic Framework Plan that was adopted by the MRPC Commissioners in August 2011. The City of Fitchburg did not provide any input to MRPC during our outreach efforts, thus MRPC provided a review of PDAs that were identified the City's 2004 Executive Order (EO) 418 Community Development Plan, which are presented below.

Fitchburg:

Based on review of the City's Executive Order (EO) 418 Plan the following Housing PDA was identified:

1. Fitchburg CDBG Housing Strategy Area

Based on review of the City's Executive Order (EO) 418 Plan the following Economic Development PDAs were identified:

1. Along North Street

2. Putnam Place Business and Industrial Center
3. 14 Cleghorn Street
4. 1 Oak Hill Road
5. Montachusett Industrial Park
6. Fitchburg Paper Recycling
7. Downtown
8. Central Business District

Task 4) Assist each community in the identification of specific parcels/properties/buildings to be included within each community's respective Cultural District. Such identification to include the cultural assets associated with each property. Build/expand on the existing cultural asset inventory as needed.

- To assist in the identification of specific parcels/properties/buildings to be included within the City's respective Cultural District, the process began with a review of previously identified Cultural Assets as noted in Task 2 above.
- Jeff Anderson facilitated a second Fitchburg Cultural District DLTA Project Planning Meeting in June. Mr. Anderson worked with Mary Chapin Durling, Ellen DiGeronimo, Jennifer Jones and Kelly Morgan to begin the identification of comprehensive set of cultural assets within Downtown Area. Initially there had been some sub-committees to assist with identification of Fitchburg's Cultural Assets, with focus on the Downtown Area given the requirement that Cultural Districts are to be "a walkable, compact area."
- Jeff Anderson's work with the above individuals led to the development of an initial Draft Cultural Assets Map. Eric R. Smith took over as Project Manager in September, and he shared this initial map on October 17th, 2012 with Mary Chapin Durling, Ellen DiGeronimo, Jennifer Jones, Dick Littlehale, Porter Dickinson, Ann Saalbach, Pete and Ann Capadaglia.
- The October 17th meeting led to an iterative process to make sure MRPC's assistance with Fitchburg on the Cultural District DLTA project was inclusive of all identified Cultural Assets focusing in the Downtown Main Street area. To help complete this Cultural Asset inventory, Eric R. Smith conducted a site walk on Oct. 26th with Dick Littlehale and Peter and Ann Capadaglia from the Boulder Art Gallery.
- MRPC also received information about the various monuments and public art and that information has been incorporated into the Cultural District Template Application Text (full set of Assets list also to be part of Appendix).

Task 5) Provide Draft Map of properties that have been identified and review with each community.

- Based on information collected in Tasks 2 and 4, a set of Draft Maps of the various Cultural Assets were presented initially at a November 19th presentation provided by MRPC.
- MRPC provided a city-wide map of all the Cultural Assets identified as part of this DLTA Project (see Appendix E)
- The focus of identified Cultural Assets on properties in the Downtown/Main Street area of the City of Fitchburg is provided in Appendix F.

Task 6) Based on information provided in Tasks 1-5, recommend a set of properties to be included within the Cultural District boundaries for both the City of Fitchburg and the Town of Ashburnham.

- MRPC, with assistance of the Fitchburg Cultural Alliance, provided a second presentation on the various Cultural Assets on December 11th. With excellent outreach provided by the Fitchburg Cultural Alliance, over 40 City of Fitchburg Officials, Businesses Owners and Other Interested Persons attended this meeting, held at the newly opened storefront space of the Fitchburg Historical Society (located in the Phoenix Building, which is one of the identified Cultural Assets in Downtown Fitchburg). See Appendix G for a copy of the Fitchburg Cultural District Plan Introductory Meeting Flyer.
- The Power Point provided by MRPC at this meeting identifies the set of Cultural Assets on properties that are recommended to be included within a Main Street Cultural District boundary. The Power Point is included within Appendix B as Attachment 2.
- After MRPC analyzed all the existing Cultural Assets in Downtown Fitchburg, especially along Main Street, the next step was to provide a recommended Cultural District boundary. During MRPC's work on this DLTA Project, a couple of different approaches to designating a Cultural District boundary emerged. The first is to have two or three Cultural Districts within Downtown Fitchburg that each would focus on Upper Common, Moran Square and/or the Destare/Chiabo/Riverfront Park areas.
- MRPC notes that the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC) does assist with the boundary determination as part of the site visit MCC facilities once a Cultural District application has been filed. Meri Jenkins has indicated that MCC's review of each of the 14 currently designated Cultural Districts' initial applications has led to the ultimate boundary being changed.
- Given that during the 2012 Cultural District assessment MRPC facilitated for Fitchburg plus also Ashburnham and Clinton, we did learn that the "Compact, Walkable" provision for the Cultural District is key. Hence MRPC recommends a Cultural District Boundary that goes from Main/Blossom Street, including Destare/Chiabo/Riverfront Park and then going up Main Street to the Upper Common. The Fitchburg Cultural Alliance members who were active participants in this Cultural District Planning Process have established a goal of Cultural District running from the Pathways to Upper Common. Thus an alternative Cultural District boundary has been provided. See Appendix H for the Map with the recommended boundary of the City of Fitchburg's Main Street Cultural District.
- This Draft Report is being shared with the MCC in order to get their comment on the Cultural District boundary issue for Fitchburg. Their comments will be incorporated into the Final Report and into the Cultural District application development process.

Task 7) Analyze possible impediments with current zoning in each targeted PDA area, as compared to successfully established Cultural Districts elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

MRPC began this assessment by reviewing Fitchburg's existing zoning provisions. Fitchburg appears to have nothing related to specific uses for arts and culture within their Zoning Bylaw use table. However as part of encouraging residential units in Downtown, including artists, over the past few years the City has changed zoning to allow residences above commercial areas on a by-right basis in the Central Business District Zoning District as indicated below: *"Residential uses are allowed by right in the CBD (Main Street), above the first floor of the structure as viewed from Main Street."*

During MRPC's examination of the other established Cultural Districts, including tours we facilitated of the Rocky Neck (Gloucester), Rockport and the Lynn Cultural Districts, MRPC assessed the zoning provisions of these communities, with a focus on arts and culture-related uses and artist/live work space opportunities.

Rockport has an "Art Studio" provision that allows for individual artist/live work space: "A residence also used as a studio for the creation, display and sale of works of arts and instruction by the resident artist." The Art Studio use is allowed by-right in most of the Town's Zoning Districts, including their Downtown Zoning District, which is where most of the Rockport Cultural District boundary is located.

The City of Lynn adopted an "Artist/Live/Work Space" provision for their Downtown:

- Allows such space by-right on floors above the ground floor for such buildings within 1,500 feet of Commuter Train Station.
- Provision for retail, gallery, museum, restaurant space by-right on street floor

MRPC's assessment indicates that the City of Fitchburg could consider adopting zoning that allows a more explicit artist live/work opportunity. The City has received an ArtistLink Grant, in which MRPC is one of the Project Partners, which affords the opportunity to facilitate this opportunity.

Task 8) Review findings and recommended next steps for Cultural District implementation to assist in creation of Cultural Districts in both communities.

- The City should prioritize the Cultural District Application, building on the momentum of the December 11th meeting, as it offers an economic development opportunity for Downtown Fitchburg. Although there is currently no direct state funding under this initiative, MRPC learned that the MCC plans on seeking state funding for the Cultural District program in FY '14. Also there is an indication that communities that have adopted Cultural Districts could get preference in some of the MCC grant programs, such as the Adams Arts Program and Cultural Facilities Fund. For example, the City of Lynn was awarded a grant under the Adams Arts Program this year to conduct a Marketing Plan for their newly established Cultural District.
- Based on MRPC's review of the Partnership requirements and how other communities have addressed the establishment of such a Partnership for their respective Cultural Districts (see Appendix C for the Cultural District Partnership Assessment), MRPC has provided recommendations related to this important requirement (recall that the Partnership must be established before the City can even apply for the Cultural District designation). A more detailed Partnership recommendations discussion is found on Page 7 in Appendix B (the Cultural District Application Template). It is interesting to note that all of the recommended organizations that MRPC recommends to be included in Fitchburg's Cultural District have indeed expressed an interest to become a "Partner", based on feedback received at the December 11th Cultural District DLTA Meeting. Based on this feedback, there are approximately 25 individuals representing approximately 17 different organizations (including individual artists and business representatives) that are interested in becoming a Cultural District Partner. The complete list of these "Partners" and their respective interest/organization is provided as Attachment 3 within Appendix B.
- Based on review of the established Cultural Districts, the City will need a "champion" and/or "point person" to make the Cultural District application come to fruition, including the process

of Partnership development and to complete the application for submission to the MCC. MRPC realizes that it also needs to be a team effort with participation of the various “Partners.” The City of Fitchburg has the Fitchburg Cultural Alliance, which besides acting as the required 501(c)3 organization, could spearhead the effort to complete the application. MRPC’s role with technical assistance can also continue into 2013 under the Scope of Services developed for the National Endowment of the Arts’ Our Town grant, which the City was awarded in July 2012.

- The City should consider more explicit Artist Live/Work Zoning Provisions, which can be assessed and developed in greater detail in 2013 under the City’s ArtistLink grant award.
- Although not funded in 2012, the rehabilitation of the Fay Club’s Carriage House (aka Lucy’s Barn) for the new permanent location of the Stratton Players Theater could be considered for a new Mass. Cultural Council’s Cultural Facilities Fund (CFF) application in 2013. The MCC announced in the Fall of 2012 that a new round of CFF Grants is expected to open in Early 2013. The Administration of Governor Deval Patrick has allocated \$5 million for the CFF for the current fiscal year (FY13).

More information is available at: <http://www.massculturalcouncil.org/facilities/facilities.htm>.

Task 9) Amend the Montachusett Regional Strategic Framework Plan to include the PDA areas identified by the Town of Ashburnham and City of Fitchburg.

MRPC will prepare documentation at the completion of this DLTA Report to take before the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission for a vote to amend the Montachusett Regional Strategic Framework Plan to include language regarding the Cultural District boundaries of Ashburnham and Fitchburg as PDAs in each respective community. The timeframe for this amendment is the January 2013 MRPC Meeting.