



TOWN OF ASHBY LAND USE and TAX BASE SUMMARY



PURPOSE:

To analyze and assessment the existing land use and its relationship to the tax base of the Town of Ashby for the purpose of identifying trends, opportunities, constraints, and potential adjustments to the Land Use.

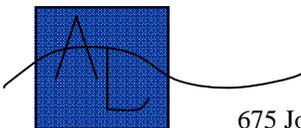
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Prepared For:

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SECTION I

EXISTING LAND USE

General Description of Ashby

- Ashby is a small, rural community of 3,213 people (2006 data).
- Ashby is 24.2 square miles (or 15,488 acres) with 52 miles of roads - 23.8 square miles of land and 0.4 square miles of water.
- The average density is 47.5 housing units per square mile (2006 data). The average population density is 132.8 people per square mile.
- The median household income is \$61,000 (2004 data).
- Average elevation is 904 feet above sea level.

Existing Land Use Breakdown

Ashby consists of six land use categories: residential, temporarily protected / agricultural, commercial, industrial, camp / charity, and government / open space.

| <u>Land Use Type</u> | <u>% of Total Land Area</u> |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Residential | 59.80% |
| Temporarily Protected & Agricultural | 17.70% |
| Commercial | 2.52% |
| Industrial | .08% |
| Camp / Charity | 1.20% |
| Government / Open Space | <u>18.70%</u> |
| | 100.00% |

Historic Land Use

Ashby's historic land use was based on series of small clusters of dense mixed use activity for housing, mills, trades, and stores. The remainder of the town was comprised of proportionally larger parcels of farms and forests. The remains of these land uses can be seen in the density of the Town Center and South Village as well as foundation remains of the old mills. Based upon work, water, wealth and functionality, this historic land use formed the structure of rural character that makes Ashby such a unique community.

Current Zoning

Current zoning creates a different future for Ashby as a suburban sprawl style residential community. The density will be in two forms: a denser Town center and the remainder of the Town as 2 acre plots with 200 feet of frontage. The current zoning was a response to a planning trend in the 1960's and 1970's to provide order and controls to Towns. As Ashby had no significant commercial base after the mills and even most farms left, the focus of the zoning plan was residential. The commercial zone of Ashby is based upon the expansion from Fitchburg and small area near the Town center.

According to the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, under current zoning the Expansion Potential of Residential Zone is:

- 4,608 additional housing units,
- 13,823 additional residents
- 2,765 additional school children
- 103 miles of additional roads

As the current zoning is not based on the natural and cultural assets of the Town, it will slowly erode the rural character of Ashby as defined over the previous 200 years. The density consistency will make affordable housing more difficult to create as 90% of lots are the same size. The historic land use model provided opportunity for more variety in housing, including affordable housing in denser areas while preserving the open space and larger lots along the outskirts.

SECTION 2

EXISTING RELATIONSHIP OF LAND USE TO TAX BASE

Revenue Basis

Ashby collects tax revenue from nine sources: total taxes (real estate, personal property, and excise), charges for services (tickets, permits), local licenses & fees, federal aid, state aid, other governments, special assessments, fines & forfeitures, and miscellaneous revenue. As it's primary revenue source, Ashby levies a tax of \$10.64 (FY2006) per thousand of assessed value of property, regardless of land use type. Government, Open Space and Camps / Charities properties are exempt from the tax levy. For the purpose of the Land Use Study, revenue will be paired down to real estate tax, government aid, local fees & excise tax, personal property tax, and special assessment.

ASSESSED VALUE per LAND USE

The highest per property assessed value is residential properties. Residential properties account for 87% of the total parcels in Ashby and 96% of the assessed value of the Town. The lowest per property assessed value is Chap 61 lands to which an artificially reduced assessed value is applied in exchange for temporary protection of the forested, agricultural, and recreational lands. Chap 61 lands account for 17.7% of the land area of Ashby and .1% of the assessed value of the Town. The second lowest per property assessed value is commercial properties. Commercial properties, comprised of smaller parcels on average, are located in the Town Center and other higher density areas.

ANTICIPATED FY 2007 REVENUE per LAND USE

Residential properties account for the overwhelming majority of income produced through real estate property taxes. However, revenues from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, other Government Sources, Excise Tax, and Local Fees are critical to the Town of Ashby budget, accounting for approximately one-fifth of total revenue. Ashby must focus on issues on which the State and Federal governments evaluate Towns in order to maximize the contribution from other governmental organizations. Ashby must also monitor a fair level of fees and excise tax as it is a significant portion of the overall revenue.

Expense Basis

Ashby expends funds into nine categories: general government expenses, North Middlesex Regional School assessment, Fixed Costs (insurance and retirement for Town employees), protection (Police, Fire, & Inspections), Highway department, human services, library, cultural events, and one time expenses.

BUDGETED FY 2007 EXPENSES by CATEGORY

The highest category of expense is the North Middlesex Regional School Assessment, accounting for 55.4% of the total expenditures for the Town. The lowest category of expense is human services at 0.7% of the total expenditures of the Town. Other notable expense categories are General Government (12%) and Protection (15.3%), which are high percentages of the total budget for towns of Ashby's size.

BUDGETED FY 2007 EXPENSES per LAND USE

Expenses were allocated to each land use as a percentage of the total assessed value of the properties; thus, keeping the expenses in line with the revenue generation of the tax levy. Notable exceptions to the allocation of expenses are items that are specific to residential land use including the North Middlesex Regional School assessment, and human services expenses. Residential land uses account for 98.28% of the total expenses for the town of Ashby. Ashby must focus on the expenses for residential land uses as all other land uses combined for less than 2% of the total expenses.

FOR SUMMARY SPREADSHEET OF FY2007 REVENUE AND EXPENSES IN RELATION TO LAND USE, SEE **ASHBY LAND USE TAX BASE SPREADSHEET.PDF**

Assessment

Ashby is a rural bedroom community. Therefore, a significant difference is expected between the residential land use assessment and expenditures and other land use assessment and expenditures. With a limited commercial and industrial base, families move to Ashby for the unique rural character and the sense of community while working in nearby cities and Boston.

ASSESSMENT OF REVENUE AND EXPENSES IN RELATIONSHIP TO LAND USE

The following items are assessments of the information gathered regarding Town revenue and expenses in relationship to land use. The assessments are not solutions; they are deductions based upon the data.

- **Residential Net**
The residential land use is by far the largest land use by area, by assessed value, by total property tax revenue, and by total expenditures. This is not a problem in and of itself. However, the residential land use is running an enormous net loss. The expenses for the residential land use are approximately \$1,100,000 more than revenue generated. Under the current conditions, the loss generated from the residential land use will only worsen as more families move to Ashby, as long as inflation exceeds the increase to the assessed value, and as demands of more services increase government costs.
- **Reliance on Funding from Commonwealth of Massachusetts, other Government Sources, Local Fees, and Excise Taxes**
Revenues from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, other Government Sources, Local Fees, and Excise Tax account for 20% of the total Town revenue. This revenue essentially offsets the loss from the residential land use. As the government funds and fees are volatile and dependent on the political and economic climate, the reliance on these funds to compensate for a deficit will create uncertainty in budgeting and limiting to proper planning and appropriation. On the other hand, since Ashby relies on government funding and fees, the Town should focus on the issues that make it look favorable to government funding (i.e. rural character, affordable housing, etc.) and review fees to maintain a fair, sustainable level.
- **Need to Expand Commercial**
Ashby needs to explore the expansion of its commercial tax base. The commercial tax base has the best ratio of revenue to expenditures. The expansion of the commercial will not make a significant impact on the budget but will help offset the net loss of the residential land use.
- **Chapter 61**
Temporary protected properties under Chapter 61 are valuable to the restriction of the growth of the residential land use. Chapter 61 lands are usually located in residential areas and are typically properties of significant size. Chapter 61 does not provide additional revenue to the Town. However, the properties have limited to no expenses associated with them. In the end, Chapter 61 properties would reduce the expansion of housing, slow the expansion of the net loss of the residential land use, and help preserve the rural character of the community.
- **Open Space and Camp / Charity**
The open space and camp / charity are tax exempt and do not generate revenue to the Town from property taxes. However, these land uses are important draws of visitors to the community who could contribute to the commercial land uses.

SECTION 3

POTENTIAL RELATIONSHIP OF LAND USE TO TAX BASE

Summary of Land Use and Tax Base Study about Ashby

The following list is a series of summary assessments of the existing land use and tax base.

1. Ashby is a rural bedroom community.
2. The dominant land use is and is always likely be residential.
3. The other land uses will continue to comprise a small portion of the overall revenue and expenditures.
4. Temporarily protected / Agricultural lands need to be preserved in order to minimize residential development and maintain a rural fabric to the community.
5. Protected open space and other natural features will continue to draw visitors from Ashby and from tourists.
6. The rural character and sense of community will be valuable assets as surrounding communities succumb to suburban sprawl.
7. The budgeting process will be focused on expense control and prioritization of the services to be funded.
8. The residential land use (even without expansion) without increasing the residential tax rate or subsidizing with additional commercial uses will continue to weigh the finances of the town.

Opportunities

Ashby has tremendous opportunities to improve the relationship between the land use and tax base. The opportunities exist in its natural and cultural resources, the in-home business, recreation, and agricultural. However, these opportunities are not similar to those of typical North Central Massachusetts communities. Ashby is a unique natural landscape and has a strong cultural fabric.

- Preserved Rural Community
- Rural Living – Home Business
- Natural Features / Recreation
- Agricultural as a Tourism Draw and Commodity
- Community Events

Constraints

Ashby has some constraints to the balancing of the relationship between the land uses and tax base. These constraints vary in significance depending on the direction selected by the Town.

- % of Residential Land Use
- Existing Zoning
- Access / Road Condition
- Population Size
- Landscape Features (topography, wetland systems)
- Marketing

Premise of Land Use and Zoning Ideas

- The premise of the ideas for land use and zoning for Ashby is to provide items for future research and study that could assist in the balancing of the relationship of land use, rural character, and tax base. The goal is to create a sustainable situation for Ashby as a rural bedroom community while preserving the sense of community, rural characteristics, and community demographic.

Land Use and Zoning Ideas to Improve Relationship of Land Use to Tax Base

COMMERCIAL BASE THROUGH TOURISM & EVENTS

- Town Center
Ashby Town Center is the hub of community activity. The Town Center can provide for additional community events as a draw of people to the community. The Center can also support small service based business clustered into structure like the “Tavern.”
- Agri-Business Zone (Farms, Bed and Breakfast, Equestrian, etc)
The idea of an Agri-business Zone is to promote agricultural businesses along the Route 119 west of Town Center and Route 31 north of Route 119 corridors, like the Ashby Stock Farm and Ashby Organics. These agricultural properties would preserve rural character and provide a draw of visitors to the community. The visitors in theory would support smaller establishments around town including bed and breakfast inns, “gentlemen” farms, and the Town Center. The agricultural properties could be connected through a map or other tour to help support the farms. The properties could host family focused festivals and events year round.
- Recreation Zone (Trails, Connecting Properties)
The idea of a Recreation Zone is to connect the permanent open space of the Town into a “Greenway.” The Town Open Space already does draw visitors from Town and across New England. This greenway could be promoted along Ashby to serve as a hub to the region’s trail system. This would support bed and breakfasts and other small service based businesses year round.

PROTECT RURAL CHARACTER

- Low Impact Development and Open Space Residential Development Bylaws
Low Impact Development Bylaw focuses on a method of development that responds to and respect the natural and cultural features of a site, especially stormwater. The goal of this bylaw is lessen the impact of development on the landscape and the neighborhood. Open Space Residential Development Bylaw focuses on subdivisions and allows developers flexible in zoning setback and lot size in order to preserve desired open space and cluster housing on more suitable locations. These bylaws would give protection to the resources of the Town and help preserve rural character. The limitation of these bylaws is that they do not apply well to current zoning due to the large amount ANR lots.
- Restructure Zoning
The majority of Ashby is in an Agricultural Zone, which allows a lot of a minimum of 2 acre every 200 feet by right (ANR lots). This zoning “chops” the street into a suburban style of development of equal sized lots with limited to no open space. Historical rural development was of varying density: the dense clusters at centers in combinations large lots on the outskirts. In order to preserve rural character, the zoning structure needs to reflect a rural development approach not a suburban development approach.

AQUIFER PROTECTION (Water as Future Commodity)

- Ashby’s extensive water system and aquifers need to be protected for future use. As population grows, water becomes a scarce resource and a major commodity. The Western United States is dealing with this issue already. Ashby is in a good position in regards to water supply and should consider protecting the resource.

MASTER PLAN

- A Master Plan is critical to shaping and controlling the future of Ashby. The Master Plan would focus on the issues of growth and restriction of land uses, reevaluate zoning, and balance the natural and cultural features of the Town. This process involves community participation and significant research and study. However, the Master Plan should provide focus and energy to the Town’s effort to shape its future.