



*First Church of Christ Unitarian (Bulfinch Church)*

*Photo by Steve Piazza*

### **Section 3. Community Setting**

#### **3.A. Regional Context**

Lancaster is located in northern Worcester County and is bordered by the Towns of Lunenburg and Shirley to the north, Harvard and Bolton to the east, Clinton to the south, and Sterling and Leominster to the west. Lancaster and its neighboring communities, Harvard and Bolton, remain in striking contrast to the urbanized centers of Worcester, Fitchburg and Leominster, which lie just a few miles away, and to the more suburban communities that approach Boston to the east.

The town seal reads "Lancaster on the Nashua," and it is the Nashua River and its tributaries which define much of the community's character. The Nashua forms much of the eastern boundary of the town, where significant, protected open space areas lie along the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge and on Bolton Flats (See Map 1, Regional Context). The Nashua River Watershed Association (NRWA), of which Lancaster is the founding member, brings together 32 communities in North Central Massachusetts and Southern New Hampshire for information exchange, technical assistance and recreational activities.

Route 2 is the major transportation (east-west) corridor that runs through Lancaster, linking Boston to Albany. Since the completion of Interstate Route 190 (Leominster to Worcester) along Lancaster's western border with Leominster, traffic on Route 117 in Lancaster has increased dramatically. During peak times, commuters use Route 117 to connect to Route 495, which loops around Boston and eventually connects to Interstate 95 near Newburyport. Routes 110 (Clinton to Bolton) and 62 (Sterling to Clinton) are less heavily traveled. Route 70 leads from Route 2 south into the center of Lancaster and

on into Worcester. Local roads usher people to and from towns that are not linked to Lancaster via a federal or state highway.

Lancaster is also served by other modes of transportation. The majority of transit services in the region are run or administered by the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART). The local transit bus service is the most prominent method of public transportation in the region and is available in Fitchburg, Leominster, and Gardner. The MART has one fixed route, which is to D'Ambrosio Eye Care in Lancaster and provides services to Medicaid recipients. For those unwilling to brave traffic along roadways, Boston's subway system lies 30 miles to the east and commuter rail service is available in the neighboring towns of Leominster and Shirley. The Springfield Rail Terminal Railway, which bisects the southeast corner of Lancaster, offers freight rail service although it does not stop in Lancaster. CSX Transportation also operates one line running from Fitchburg to Clinton that runs through the westerly side of Lancaster. Major commercial flights are available at Logan International Airport in Boston; T.F. Green International Airport in Providence, Rhode Island; Manchester Airport in Manchester, New Hampshire; Bradley International Airport in Bradley Field Connecticut; and to a lesser degree, Worcester Municipal Airport in Worcester.

Lancaster is primarily characterized as a bedroom community and the national, state, and regional economy places residential development pressure on the Town which in turn affects open space and recreation needs. Historically, the average house price in Central Massachusetts where Lancaster is located, has been lower than state averages so that the housing stock remains relatively affordable. This continues to attract homebuyers who use Routes 2 and 190 to commute to employment in Devens and around the Rt. 495 belt and Worcester. Although residential development slowed considerably during the economic recession, the economy has been improving and residential development is increasing making it vital to Lancaster to continue to plan for growth.

### **3.B. History of the Community**

Lancaster, the oldest town in Worcester County, was incorporated in 1653. European settlement began here when the Sholan of the Nashaway Indians sold 80 square miles to the English. Most settlers were farmers who lived in harmony with the native population. But upon the untimely death of the Nashaway leader, Sachem Nashawhonon (now known as Sholan), hostilities began. On February 10, 1676, the garrison home of the minister, Joseph Rowlandson, was attacked by over four hundred Native Americans. Many of the gathered inhabitants were killed and approximately 24 were taken captive. Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, one of the captives, was forced to live with the natives who traveled as far north as modern Chesterfield, Vermont. In May, she was ransomed at Redemption Rock in Princeton. An educated woman, Mary Rowlandson wrote a narrative about her three months in captivity, thus becoming the first published female author in America. Her experiences are documented in the book, *The Captive: The True Story of the Captivity of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson among the Indians and God's Faithfulness in Her Time of Trial*, copies of which are available from the Lancaster Historical Commission.

More than fifty families had come to reside in Lancaster by 1675. With the acquisition of an additional 112 square miles in 1701, in time Lancaster evolved into the most populous, commercial and developed town in the central Massachusetts region. Because this fertile valley was located at important local transportation nodes, it was a well-known regional activity center second only to Worcester. Over a period of years, growth and self-reliance resulted in the portioning of Lancaster's lands to create the towns of Bolton, Berlin, Clinton, Harvard, Boylston, West Boylston, Sterling, Leominster, and some of Hudson. By 1850, Lancaster had shrunk to its present size of approximately 24 square miles.

Although agriculture dominated Lancaster's economy, by 1771 the economic base also included commercial shops, cider, hat and potash production, cast hollowware and a variety of mills. Seventeen mills, producing various manufactured goods such as cloth, leather boards and shoe shanks, were scattered on a half dozen ponds and numerous Nashua tributaries as well as a number of brick factories. During this period, Lancaster slate was mined for building and for gravestones. In fact, John Hancock's Boston home and Massachusetts' Old State House were roofed in Lancaster slate. Slate Rock Pond, a remnant from the slate mining era, can be found on what is now federal, South Post property. The arrival of the Worcester and Nashua Railroad in 1849 stimulated commercial activity. Many of the buildings in Lancaster's town center date from this period.

Lancaster, well known for its architecturally and historically significant structures, contains three Historic Districts. Both North Village and Lancaster Center are designated National Historical Districts. They contain many noteworthy residential structures from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries including a 1717 center chimney house (the type commonly built by early settlers), a Federalist style residence dating from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and several examples of Queen Anne, Neoclassical and Greek revival homes. The South Village contains several isolated historic structures; in fact, the Historical Commission has inventoried to date over 250 homes. The "Bulfinch Church", Lancaster's fifth meeting house, was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1971. Charles Bulfinch, architect of the capital in Washington D.C., designed the church which was built in 1816. Also listed on the National Register of Historical Places are the Anthony Lane house, the Nathaniel Thayer estate and the South Lancaster Engine House (see Map 5 - Unique Features and Scenic Resources).

Luther Burbank, the horticulturist and pioneer in agricultural science, was born in Lancaster in 1849. He developed over 800 strains and varieties of plants. He later moved to California and pursued his research in hybridization. The middle school in Lancaster is named after him.

With the incorporation of Clinton in 1850, most of Lancaster's best water power sites were lost, leaving far fewer sites adaptable to small-scale manufacturing. Instead, the town, with its numerous low-lying, rich tracts of land along the Nashua's two branches, tended to develop an economy more based upon its agricultural resources.

During this period of 1849 to 1899, Lancaster's agricultural production more than doubled in value with the greatest increase occurring in dairying and the growing of hay and fodder. The town greatly benefitted from the tremendous growth of its daughter town Clinton and the newly established railroad connection to Boston. Both were markets for Lancaster's vegetables, eggs and poultry, hay and fodder, milk, beef, pork and veal.

Another important Lancaster enterprise was the harvesting and processing of forest products. These comprised nearly one third of the town's total manufacturing output in 1855. Nearly one million board feet of lumber were cut in Lancaster's three sawmills, and 22, 680 cords of wood were cut and sold, probably supplying demands for railroad construction as well as for Clinton's building boom.

During the 1840's and 1850's, Lancaster's small-scale manufacturing had included boots and shoes, palm-leaf hats and mattresses, piano forte keys, farm implements, tinsmith items, soap, and, wallets and pocketbooks. By the end of the nineteenth century, most of these establishments and shops had ceased operation and disappeared.

Much of the land in the Old Common area was used for farming. During this time, a portion of it was purchased to create a campus for the Industrial School for Girls established in 1856. Later in 1876, a large parcel nearby was designated by the town for Eastwood Cemetery designed by Horace Cleveland. It is a fine example of using the natural landscape to create serene burial sites.

Also during this time wealthy financier Nathaniel Thayer and four of his sons built large country estates in South Lancaster. Collectively, the Thayer family owned between 3000-4000 acres of land. Large portions of acreage were devoted to agricultural and horticultural pursuits. The family maintained a large dairy farm, numerous vegetable gardens and greenhouses for growing fruits and exotic flowering plants such as orchids and camellias.

At his estate on George Hill, Bayard Thayer maintained a pheasant preserve inviting hunting parties to his property during the shooting season. Further, he developed a pinetum containing representatives from every coniferous plant which can grow in Massachusetts. Protected by natural woods, Thayer planned generous space for tree growth and for expansion.

Twin brother John E. Thayer raised champion trotting horses. The St. John's Cemetery area in Clinton was used for fairs, horse shows and racing. He also collected North American birds and displayed his large collection of specimens in a museum he built in South Lancaster which drew numerous visitors in its early years.

The brothers built private driving roads and bridle paths connecting their estates. A golf course on George Hill was built for the recreational enjoyment of family members and guests.

During these early times, Lancaster was recognized for its stately Elm trees and the scenic beauty of its country roads. The dirt roads were maintained by the town's Department of Public Works.

During this period of 1900 to 1949, WWI had a direct impact on Lancaster when the Harvard ROTC conducted military training on George Hill land now known as "Thayer Woods". Mrs. Nathaniel Thayer also designated part of her farmland to produce food for personnel at nearby Camp Devens.

A POW camp was established in a huge corn field near the intersection of Rt. 110 and Rt. 117. Inmates of the camp were merchant seamen captured on April 6, 1917, when the United States declared war on Germany. All German ships in US ports were seized and some of the prisoners sent to Lancaster to work in the fields growing vegetables and in nearby orchards picking fruit. During WWII, another POW camp was located in the same area for similar purposes.

Lancaster felt the effects of the "Great Depression" as wealthy residents lost their fortunes and their employees lost their jobs. The "Flood of 1936" had a negative impact on citizens destroying homes and property. Shortly thereafter, the "Great Hurricane" of 1938 battered the area doing significant damage to the trees and bridges and, for a time, leaving only one route out of town.

With the coming of World War II, a very significant portion of land in North Lancaster was taken by Fort Devens. Between 1938-1947, all of the homes in the area were demolished and area roads were closed. The 1963 Town Report stated that during WWII the US Army annexed approximately 30% of the town's area, 4000 acres, without compensation. To the present time, the land on the "South Post", now used for training exercises, is accessible only with permission.

During the 1940's Atlantic Union College, founded in 1882, experienced a period of expansion and greatly changed the appearance of the village of South Lancaster. Numerous buildings were moved or demolished to make way for a dormitory, administration building and gymnasium. More buildings were added in later decades.

In 1946, a trailer park for returning servicemen using the GI bill to attend college went up in a field north of Atlantic Union College. However, by 1950, these trailers, near the Rowlandson Garrison site, were sold leaving the land open once again.

The Blood family, in 1946, donated land in the Ballard Hill area as a Town Forest. It provided trees for harvesting and a recreational area. Nearby Bartlett Pond, which once provided power for a chair factory, later became a public recreational area. Spectacle and Fort Ponds on the north side of Lancaster started to be used for recreational purposes. The YMCA Camp Lowe on Fort Pond was enjoyed by many. The Ski Jump on George Hill at Goss Lane attracted many professional ski jumpers to the area for winter competitions.

The 1954 Lancaster Town Report noted that the "Old Order Changeth". During the 1950's new housing areas, such as "George Hill Park" in the Whitcomb Drive area in South Lancaster, were developed. Single story ranch, split level, and raised ranch styled homes began to appear in these specially designated sub-divisions as well as along many roadsides in town. Lancaster was becoming a bedroom community.

In later decades, as family-based farming diminished, some farmers chose to sell large tracts of land to developers. The look of the town changed as larger houses, on bigger lots sprang up in formerly open fields.

From the late 50's through the early 80's, the demand for sand and gravel for building purposes increased. Pine Hill resources in North Lancaster were trucked away leveling areas that had once been rolling and forested hills.

In the 1950's, with the post-war baby boom, the need for larger centralized schools became apparent. Lancaster built the Tercentenary Building and Memorial School in the center of Town. All outlying schools were closed.

In 1960 the Lancaster High School closed and by 1961 students attended the new Nashoba Regional High School, which included Bolton and Stow. In 1973, the Lancaster Middle School (now Luther Burbank Middle School) was built on previously open farm land. Later, the campus was further developed to include Mary Rowlandson Elementary School which opened in 2002.

Land located on Seven Bridge Road, was sold by Robert Culley to the Bolton Fair Organization in the early 2000's. This tract is now the Fair Grounds at Lancaster.

During the building boom of the early 2000's, the rolling hills and open spaces of Lancaster continued to dwindle with the development of new housing subdivisions such as Eagle Ridge, Devonshire Estates, Blue Heron Pond, Shaker Village, Turner Woods, Turner Heights, Lancaster Woods and Runaway Brook.

A limited number of farms and orchards still operate today: DiMeco's Farmstand on Chace Hill Road, Bob's Turkey Farm on Old Common Road, George Hill Orchards on George Hill Road, Liberty Hill Farm on

George Hill Road, Harper Farm on Main Street, Manny's Dairy Farm on Brockelman Road which is now a beef and cattle farm, and the Flats Mentor Farm on the flood plain off of Seven Bridge Road near Bolton which produces numerous agricultural products.

As the twenty-first century continues, issues regarding open versus developed space will no doubt continue.

### **3.C. Population Characteristics**

Evaluation of a town's population, its density, distribution and rate of growth is essential for ascertaining the open space and recreation needs of the community. Therefore, this section describes the social and economic factors that impact Lancaster's open space planning.

The 2010 Census counted 8,055 residents in Lancaster, an increase of 675 persons from the 2000 Census count of 7,380 but it should be noted that the U.S. Census includes the prison population. For the purposes of this Open Space and Recreation Plan, Table 3-1 below excludes the prison population by utilizing information obtained from the Commonwealth Department of Correction. The table below shows that Lancaster experienced moderate population growth during the 1970s (239 persons or 3.9%) and the 1980s (327 persons or 5.2%). However, from 1990 to the year 2000 growth decreased by about 6.8%. From the year 2000 to 2010, population increased by 585 or 9.4%, which is considerably higher than the Montachusett Region (3.58%) and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (3.03%).

Table 3-1. Lancaster Population Growth

<b>Year</b>	<b># of People</b>	<b>Numerical Change</b>	<b>% Change</b>
1970	6,095	-----	-----
1980	6,334	239	3.9%
1990	6,661	327	5.2%
2000	6,211	-450	-6.8%
2010	6,796	585	9.4%

*Source: U.S. Census and Inmate Statistics, Commonwealth Department of Correction*

The majority of Lancaster's population resides in the southern portion of town where municipal water and sewer is situated. This area, which abuts the urban center of Clinton and includes Atlantic Union College, has the greatest population density. A significant number of town residents are Adventists and the group hosts a gathering of their co-religionists from around the country each summer. Overall, the town's population density in 2010 was 290 persons per square mile. Population growth and density can have important implications for open space and recreation planning. As the community's population and density increases, Lancaster should provide a sufficient number and diversity of recreational opportunities to meet the needs of that swelling population. In addition, Lancaster should identify and protect the community's key natural and cultural resources before they are overrun by future residential, commercial and industrial development.

Lancaster also has an Environmental Justice (EJ) population (see Map 2, Environmental Justice Population). Environmental Justice is based on the principle that all people have a right to be protected from environmental pollution and to live in and enjoy a clean and healthful environment. The Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) defines EJ populations as neighborhoods (U.S. Census Bureau census block groups) that either have a median household income at or below 65% of the statewide median income; 25% of the population are minority, 25% or more of the residents are foreign born; or 25% or more of the residents are lacking English language proficiency. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population within Census Block Group 7131-2 is made up of those at or below 65% of the statewide median income, thus qualifying as an EJ population.

Table 3-2 displays the change in age of the Town's population from 2000 to 2010. These figures reflect Lancaster population numbers after excluding individuals that live in correctional facilities. The number of very young children (under 5 years) declined by 5.72% during the decade, while children between 5 and 19 years of age showed an increase of 95 persons or 6.52%. The data also reveals that those aged 20 to 34 showed an increase of 5.34% while those aged 35-54 showed a significant decrease of 368 or -32.99%.

Those between the ages of 45 to 54 increased substantially (283 persons or 32.26%) as did residents between the ages of 55-64 (more than 59%), perhaps due to neighborhoods being created just specifically for that age group (i.e. Eagle Ridge, Blue Heron Pond). Those 65 and older also experienced a population increase of about 30.52% (221 persons) which may be partly explained by advances in health care, as residents are now living longer.

Table 3-2. Population by Age Group, Town of Lancaster

Year	Under 5	5-19	20 - 34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +
2000	367	1,452	1,142	1,114	878	534	724
2010	346	1,547	1,201	747	1162	848	945
Change	-21	95	61	-368	283	315	221
% Change	-5.72%	6.52%	5.34%	-32.99%	32.26%	59.01%	30.52%

*Source: U.S. Census and Inmate Statistics, Commonwealth Department of Correction*

The 2015 American Community Survey reveals that the average travel time for those who commuted to work was 28.7 minutes, exactly the same as the state rate of 28.7 minutes. About 3.2% of residents carpooled. More than 88.7% of employed residents drove to work; the remainder either worked at home or used other means to get to work.

Lancaster's residents participate in a wide array of jobs (see Table 3-3). As can be seen, the majority of the community's residents who work were employed in management/ Business/ Science, and Arts occupations (45%), followed by sales and office jobs (27.2%) and Service occupations (18.1%).

Table 3-3. Occupations of Lancaster Residents in 2015

Occupations	Number	Percentage
<b>Management, Business, Science, and Arts</b>	1700	45.0%
<b>Sales and Office</b>	1028	27.2%
<b>Service Occupations</b>	685	18.1%
<b>Natural Resources, Construction, and Maintenance</b>	258	6.8%
<b>Production, Transportation, and Material Moving</b>	109	2.9%

*Source: 2015 American Community Survey*

In the past, the U.S. Army's Fort Devens was a major employer for the Town. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Base supported military and civilian employment for approximately 7,000 to 8,000 workers (Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc, 1994). Its 1996, closure created job loss in Lancaster as well as other nearby communities. Now, Devens is home to more than 87 organizations, employs more than 3,600 persons that earn \$69,210 annually on average, and continues to have a major impact on Lancaster.

In 2015, the Department of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD) listed 192 establishments in Lancaster with a total annual payroll of \$87,180,612. Significant levels of commercial and industrial activity are important to a town since income tax derived from these sources shifts the burden of costly public services away from residents who are less able to afford stiff rates. According to the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Division of Local Services, residential, commercial and industrial uses in Lancaster shared a common tax rate of \$19.79 per \$1,000 valuation in FY17. The average single family tax bill is \$4,758. While industrial and commercial uses contributed less than 14.71% of municipal tax revenues, residential uses contributed about 85.29%. Additional information can be found at [www.mass.gov/dor/local-officials/municipal-databank-and-local-aid-unit/databank-reports-new.html](http://www.mass.gov/dor/local-officials/municipal-databank-and-local-aid-unit/databank-reports-new.html)

The 2015 American Community Survey reports that the Town's median family income was \$99,207, which was higher than the state median income of \$87,085. Median Family Income is defined as an annual income figure for which there are as many families with incomes below that level as there are above that level. Per capita income was \$32,899, somewhat lower than the state's average per capita income of \$36,895. Per Capita Income is the total income divided by the total population. According to the 2015 ACS, 9.2% of the total population in Lancaster were living below the poverty level compared to the state rate of 11.6%.

According to statistics from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, the continuing recovery from the great recession is evident in Lancaster in terms of unemployment rates. In fact, the annual unemployment rate for the year 2016 is just 2.8% compared to a high of 9.1% in 2009. Also, according to the 2015 ACS, just 2.2% of households in Lancaster utilize food stamps/SNAP in contrast to the state rate of 12.5%.

In Table 3-4 below, family households are differentiated from non-family households. A family household refers to a household that contains at least one census family, that is, a married couple with or without children, or a lone parent living with one or more children. Non-family household refers to either one person living alone in a private dwelling or to a group of two or more people who share a private dwelling, but who do not constitute a census family. The table indicates that 72.81% of Lancaster's households consist of families. This represents a decrease since the 2000 Census when



family households accounted for about 75.74% of all households. However, there has been an increase in the number of households headed by females. The 2000 Census counted 168 households headed by females while the 2010 Census counted 216, or 48 more households.

Table 3-4. Lancaster Households by Type (2010)

Household Type	# of Households	Percentage
Family Household	1,758	72.81%
Non-Family Household	651	27.19%

*Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2010.*

Since the majority of more rural/suburban communities are usually made up of single-family homes, they tend to have a higher percentage of family households.

There is a national trend towards smaller household sizes, which is occurring in both the Montachusett Region and the Town of Lancaster. Couples are having fewer children today and many households are the single-parent variety. Lancaster showed a decrease from 2.8 persons per household in the year 2000, to 2.66 in 2010.

Another factor contributing to smaller household sizes is “the graying of America,” that is, our nation’s elderly population is expanding. This national trend is taking place in every community throughout the Montachusett Region, including the Town of Lancaster. Between 1980 and 2000 the regional median age grew by 7.6 years from an average of 29.8 years in 1980, to 32.9 in 1990, 37.4 in 2000, and 41.4 in 2010. In Lancaster, the 1980 median age was 27.5 years of age and, in 1990 it edged up to 31.2 years of age. By the year 2000, the Census shows Lancaster’s median age stood at 35.9 years of age and now in the year 2010 it is 38.9. However, the Town of Lancaster has a lower median age than both the Montachusett Region (41.4) and the state (39.1).

### **3.D. Growth & Development Patterns**

#### **Patterns and Trends**

The Town of Lancaster originated as a compact, linear village surrounded by agricultural fields. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it emerged from its farming tradition as a popular summer residence for wealthy Bostonians. Today, the Town is a bedroom community that possesses little industry, but does contain some working farms and several educational non-profits. Commercial activity is concentrated along Route 2, in the northern part of town, and in the southern part of town in the neighborhood business zoning district (see Maps 3a, b and c, Zoning).

Lancaster has been working to diversify its economy by attracting new industries. Recent efforts include:

- Received Massworks public infrastructure funds for a sewer extension on Sterling Road so that several local engineering and manufacturing businesses can expand and add jobs.
- Completion of an Economic Development Self-Assessment Tool (EDSAT) in collaboration with the Dukakis Center at Northeastern University.

- Sourced a new water supply from the Lunenburg Water District (LWD). Received Massworks public infrastructure funds to design the new water system.
- Consolidated the zoning districts along the Route 2 corridor to create a new Enterprise Zoning District that allows for mixed uses for commercial and office.
- Completed a Water and Wastewater Sourcing Study for exploring options for bringing water and sewer to the North Lancaster Economic Development Target Area.
- Receipt of State transportation funding to improve two major intersections at Rt. 70 and 117 in order to improve the intersections for safety, congestion, and to handle the anticipated increase in traffic caused by the new development in this area.

The Town of Lancaster is always looking for additional opportunities to foster high quality development that will create jobs for residents, broaden the tax base, and enhance Lancaster as a viable place to live and work.

The bulk of the Town's population lives in three small village centers: North Village, Lancaster Center, and South Lancaster. Lancaster experienced a significant building boom between 1950 and 1980. However, during most of the 1980s building starts slowed, but then increased substantially throughout the 1990s and mid- 2000s. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, from the year 2000-2008 it is estimated that 396 building permits were issued for new privately-owned residences. However, with the recession in the years 2008-2013, there was a dramatic decline in real estate values and real estate sales. New building starts have been slowly on the rise since 2013 with the issuance of 34 building permits in 2014-2017 to date.

Most of the homes in Lancaster are single family dwellings, although some multi-family homes can be found. Real estate prices have fluctuated in Lancaster over time. Similar to other communities throughout the Commonwealth, real estate prices dramatically increased in the 2000s, widening the gap between income and purchase price. Historically, the average house price in Central Massachusetts where Lancaster is located has been lower than state averages so that housing stock remained relatively affordable for local residents. This, however, changed over the years as the area, with its lower housing prices, attracted homebuyers who use Routes 2 and 190 to commute to employment in the Rt. 495 belt and Worcester. The result was a dramatic market-driven rise in overall home prices. For example, according to the Warren Group ([www.thewarrengroup.com](http://www.thewarrengroup.com)), the median sale price of a home in Lancaster in 1999 was \$185,000 compared to \$263,750 in 2008 resulting in an increase of more than 42%. But, given the recent national and state economic recession in 2008, this trend reversed itself; according to the Warren Group, the sales price of a home in Lancaster between the years 2008 and 2010 decreased by more than 23%. Since 2010, the median price of a home in Lancaster has been re-leveling to \$300,000 in 2017.

Lancaster has remained a rural community despite increasing development pressure over the years. While many of the Town's historic areas are valued and preserved, many of the open spaces that beautify the landscape, protect surface and ground waters, provide habitat to rare and endangered species, and support recreation for residents, are not permanently protected. There are many other parcels of Town-owned land or institutional land (schools, prisons) that are also subject to development. The most striking example is Fort Devens South Post (FDSP). A 1996 Department of Defense

appropriations bill designated most of the Fort Devens South Post (4,800 acres) for transfer to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service for incorporation into the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge, with approximately 100 additional acres returning to the Town when the site eventually gets retired from military use. This underscores the need to distinguish between *protected* open space and *unprotected* open space.

In the *Open Space Planner's Workbook*, the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs is careful to point out that not all government land (town-owned, state, federal) that is valued as open space, is actually protected. Unless permanent deed restrictions are placed on properties, they may be released to development according to political or economic whim.

Given that governmental and institutional interests, including the Fort Devens South Post, MCI-Shirley and the community's half dozen schools and other non-profits, control large blocks of the Town's land, it is essential that Lancaster officials, boards and residents have a voice in determining if and how these properties and other open spaces are developed. The Town has made a step in this direction by interfacing with the Devens Enterprise Commission to keep abreast of changes at Devens and how those changes may impact Lancaster's open space and recreation needs. Yet, if Lancaster wants to retain its character, more must be done.

Sound economic policy provides another reason for why a community's open spaces should be maintained. In the mid-1980s, the American Farmland Trust developed Cost of Community Services Studies (COCS) to help communities determine the amount that residences, businesses, industries and open spaces contribute to the municipal tax base. Since that time, COCS studies have been conducted for many communities throughout the northeast and midwest. Results show that owners of woodlands, farms and other open spaces pay more in local property taxes than the government provides in services for these properties. Residential development, on the other hand, puts a greater demand on services than residential landowners pay in property taxes. This proved true in every community studied. A 1992 COCS study conducted in Deerfield, Massachusetts determined that for each dollar of revenue raised, residential development consumed \$1.16 in services. Commercial and industrial uses consumed only .38 cents for each dollar raised, while farms, forests and open land demanded even less – a mere .29 cents. Even in cases where land is assessed at its agricultural value, open spaces contribute a fiscal surplus that helps offset the net drain generated by the residential demand for services (American Farmland Trust, 1992).

### **Infrastructure**

Lancaster's infrastructure consists of roads, a municipal water system and a public sewer system. Currently expansions to the transportation network are limited to subdivision roads and intersection improvements.

### **Roads**

The private vehicle still dominates as the main mode of transportation and mobility in Lancaster. Many factors contribute to this – land use patterns that separate homes from shopping and school areas, regional growth and transportation patterns that make it possible for people to live far from their places of employment, and few feasible alternatives to driving alone, such as public transportation, van pools, organized ride-sharing, walking or biking. At the same time, there is a growing awareness in Lancaster of the importance and preference of walking and using bikes to driving cars, and also the need to increase these alternatives for young people who cannot yet drive. During the master planning process, there were clear calls from citizen working groups to increase the options throughout Town for people who wanted to see more alternatives for walking and biking.

There is already an existing network of trails in Lancaster, as illustrated in the Trails Map (appendix). Upgrading existing trails and creating trails that connect existing open and conservation lands in Lancaster has been a priority in Lancaster's Open Space and Recreation Plan. Subsequently, a Lancaster Trail & Bikeway Coalition (LTBC) was formed in 2013 to utilize, maintain and promote the more than 100 miles of trails throughout the Town. The LTBC is working to connect these trail systems with natural resources such as open space parcels, conservation areas, recreational areas, wildlife corridors and points of historical and cultural interest.

Based upon a State classification system, Lancaster's 68 miles of roads comprise 2.0 miles of interstate roads, 15.6 miles of arterial roads, 13.7 miles of collector roads, and 36.9 miles of local roads. New road design standards introduced in 2006 by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation are far more context-sensitive than in the past, and friendlier to the environment, bicyclists and pedestrians than in the past.

As a result, the Town has been designated as a Complete Streets community, a program offered by MassDOT that offers technical assistance and construction funding to designated towns for improvement to their bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. Over the course of the next ten years, many of the Town's sidewalks will be repaired, accessibility features added or improved, and bike lanes installed.

There are other transportation modes available in the region for public transit. The MBTA commuter rail runs from Leominster along the northernmost Lancaster border, along with Lunenburg and Shirley. The nearest commuter rail stops to Lancaster are in North Leominster and Shirley.

The Montachusett Regional Transportation Authority (MART) offers commuter rail buses in Fitchburg, Leominster and Gardner, but not in Lancaster. MART offers rides for disabled persons and Dial-A-Mart rides to human services agencies for certain sections of Lancaster, but not for the entire Town.

#### Municipal Water System

The Town's water supply consists of two artesian wells, which are situated in sand and gravel deposits in the southeastern portion of town. As of March 2017, according to the Lancaster Department of Public Works (DPW), periodic testing mandated by DEP reveals that the quality of the municipal water supply is generally excellent. These wells provide approximately 90% of Lancaster residents with drinking water, while the remainder maintains private wells or receive water through other sources. Combined, the public wells have a safe yield of approximately 1.5 million gallons per day. During normal conditions, this is sufficient to meet the needs of current residents.

The Lancaster DPW has diligently been replacing sections of the water distribution system as it is aging and inadequate in certain locations. The lines either needed complete replacement or increased in size.

The Lancaster DPW has been investigating sites in Town to locate another water source to supplement the existing supplies. According to Scott A. Miller, PE and President of Haley and Ward, Inc., the site is located off of Rt. 110 near the RFK Children's Action Corp. facility and Forbush Mill Road directly across the street from the southern end of the Bolton Flats Wildlife Management Area. Haley and Ward states that this well would help meet present and future water demand. The proposed well is in a different location from the Town's existing wells and would allow for reduced pumping at existing wells, thereby reducing the demand on the aquifer particularly needed in the summer months. The report states that

the water quality is good and that the land surrounding the area of the proposed well is mostly forest and crop land. While there are a few residential houses near the site, there is little room for further residential development.

The Town is also investigating water supply sources outside of their borders in the Towns of Lunenburg, Shirley and Leominster. Currently, Lancaster has executed an Inter-Municipal Agreement with the Lunenburg Water District (LWD) for bringing water into North Lancaster to supply the two major business corridors along Lunenburg Road and Old Union Turnpike.

#### Public Sewer System

Much of South Lancaster is within the Lancaster Sewer District where the bulk of commercial and residential development is situated, while buildings in the remainder of the Town are served by individual septic systems. The failure of existing septic systems and the difficulty of upgrading them to meet current regulatory standards is always a concern. The most effective way to deal with septic system failures is to connect difficult sites to the municipal sewer system. While the Lancaster Sewer District does not extend throughout the entire town, it does connect about 720 (update) properties to the sewer system including Atlantic Union College. The most current district boundary and service area can be viewed at [www.lsd-ma.com/about/boundaries.html](http://www.lsd-ma.com/about/boundaries.html). The Master Plan states that residential customers, along with a few businesses and non-profits, account for 60% of the average daily flow while the remaining 40% is created by the District's two largest single users (Atlantic Union College and the Massachusetts Division of Capital Asset Management). Recent extensions to the sewage collection system include George Hill Road and Sterling Road. Treatment of sewage is by agreement with the Town of Clinton.

There is always concern among some that expansion of municipal infrastructure will encourage sprawl and the conversion of farms and other open spaces to industrial, commercial or residential uses; and, in some instances, this is not unfounded. However, implementation of long-range plans like the Town's Master Plan and this Open Space and Recreation Plan are perhaps the best way to ensure that sprawl does not destroy Lancaster's rural character.

#### Long-term Development Patterns

According to the Town's Master Plan, less than a fifth of the Town's land area has been developed. And, according to a build-out scenario conducted by MRPC in the year 2015, there were more than 7,713 acres of developable land that could potentially accommodate an approximate 2,400 residential units. While the build-out scenario is only an illustrative tool, it could indicate that land scarcity is probably not limiting development capacity yet. But, even if build-out is not reached for quite some time in Lancaster, the numerous effects of growth—loss of open space, degraded water quality, loss of town character, and other impacts—are felt long before a town reaches build-out.

While the infrastructure continues to expand as outlined above, and the Town continues to grow with a number of residential and commercial developments, the Lancaster Zoning Bylaws (see Maps 3a, 3b and 3c, Zoning) are clearly intended to preserve the community's rural character. Since their adoption in 1950, the bylaws have successfully kept growth at manageable levels. The bylaws permit flexible/cluster developments, require a site plan review for large-scale developments, establish design guidelines, offer bonus lots for conserving land, create special districts, allow transfer of development rights, restrict building on floodplains, protect local water supplies through a Water Resource Overlay District, and set the minimum lot size at two acres. The bylaws also include an entire section on "Environmental Controls" and specify disturbance controls for construction sites. The Town enacted a Stormwater

Management bylaw, Illicit Discharge bylaw, and a Wetlands Protection bylaw. In addition, two new zoning districts were added – the Enterprise Zoning District and the Integrated Planning Overlay District (IPOD) for mixed-use development.

The vast majority of the Town is zoned residential, which permits single-family detached dwellings. Two-family conversions, accessory apartments, home occupations and other uses are permitted by Special Permit. No commercial or industrial uses are permitted in the Residential Zoning District. In 1998, minimum lot sizes were set at two acres. The aim of this amendment was to manage growth by ensuring that land is left open in the form of yards. However, this can have both positive and negative effects on build-out patterns. In the short term, large lot residential zoning can accelerate the conversion of a community from rural to suburban in character by consuming large amounts of land and encouraging sprawled development. Moreover, large lot sizes can destroy the ecological benefits of open spaces by fragmenting wildlife habitats, harming water quality, and increasing air pollution levels.

One way to compensate for the establishment of large lot sizes is through Lancaster's Flexible Development bylaw. Upon approval from the Planning Board, this bylaw allows density to be increased by as much as 50% when preserving areas of critical importance described as:

"...a natural buffer two hundred feet or more in depth from an existing street, with prohibitions against buildings, parking, or driveways; or because of its visual prominence or potential vista blockage, because of its ecological significance or fragility, special importance as farmland, or value for recreation or future Town water supply; or because it is important to the Town's open space plan."

A transfer provision allows credit for land not contiguous or part of the development as long as it is placed under permanent conservation restriction. The Town continues to promote the use of this bylaw.

Outside of the residential areas, the Town established three special districts for commercial activity: Neighborhood Business, Enterprise, and Integrated Planning Overlay District (IPOD) (see Maps 3a, 3b, 3c, Zoning). All of these areas permit some form of mixed uses which will provide greater flexibility in accommodating mixed-use development, while assuring careful respect for existing neighborhoods, other developments, and the natural environment.

Two additional overlay districts are defined. The Floodplain District restricts development within the area delineated on the Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM). The Water Resource bylaw restricts uses involving any hazardous materials and requires a special permit for proposed construction that results in 40% impervious lot cover, large septic systems, storage tanks, or the removal of trees or vegetation.

Site plan review is mandatory for all new buildings. The design requirements call for 1) access for emergency vehicles, 2) adequate drainage and utility service, 3) safe movement of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, 4) minimized displacement of wetland vegetation, 5) minimized removal of earth and trees, 6) adequate control of soil erosion, 7) mediation of air and water pollution, 8) minimized obstruction of water views, 9) required screening of outdoor service areas, parking lots and storage, and 10) minimized glare from headlights or area lighting. Buildings in the Enterprise and IPOD Districts must be aesthetically pleasing and be consistent with the abutting premises if facing the same street.

The Environmental Controls bylaw mandates that sound, noise, vibration, odor or flashing should not be observed more than 200 feet from the source's boundaries. Through this provision, the Town is

attempting to regulate the performance of particular uses rather than uses alone. This is a much more progressive use of zoning.

As one can see, much of the groundwork necessary to effectively guide development and preserve Lancaster's character is already in place. The Zoning Bylaws help protect sensitive natural resources while preventing explosive residential growth and providing for commercial and industrial development that blends aesthetically with the surrounding community. In addition to zoning, physical constraints such as steep slopes, two major rivers, a number of wetlands, and unsuitable soil conditions have precluded development on several sites. Moreover, the inclusion of most of Lancaster in the Central Nashua River Valley Resource Area, a designated Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) since 1995, provides another trigger when state agencies are asked to review development in the area. Importantly, Lancaster is in the process of revising its 2007 Master Plan, and continues to work to implement recommendations in that document, making it a very progressive Town within the Montachusett Region.