3. Cultural Resources

**Historical Preservation**

Rugged hills carved by the Falls River have shaped Bernardston’s history. The original settlement, perched on the eastern mountain range by Huckle Hill, provided refuge for European settlers during Native American raids. The steep terrain limited agriculture and further development, and as the area became more peaceful, the town relocated to the Falls River Valley. The Congregational Unitarian Church was constructed by early settlers and was moved two times before it arrived at its current location in Center Village (DCR, 2009). This church and three other buildings in Bernardston have been listed in the National Register of Historic Places: the Powers Institute, Cushman Library, and the fire station. The latter three buildings are grouped with Cushman Park into a National Register Historic District, created in 1993. Listing in the National Register provides formal recognition of the property’s significance, potential tax incentives for owners of income-producing property, and protection by state or federally funded, licensed, or assisted projects. National Register listing does not limit owner’s use of their property, and does not place restrictions or conditions on changes made by a private property owner unless there is state or federal involvement in a project, or some other regional and/or local regulation is in effect (Simon, Skelly, 2007).

The Powers Institute was built in 1857 and was originally a private academy that later served as a public high school until 1957. With funds from the Massachusetts Historic Commission, and a Community Development Block Grant, the Institute underwent a $1 million renovation in 2001, transforming the lower floor into the Senior Center and adding an elevator for accessibility to the Town’s Historical Society Museum on the upper floor (DCR, 2009). The Institute also added a universally accessible ramp. Upon renovation, a preservation restriction was placed on the building to protect its architectural and historical integrity. Towns can purchase preservation restrictions to assure that a property is protected in perpetuity (Simon, Skelly, Steinitz, 2010). The Senior Center, described by residents as a unique place where people go to play, is managed by the Council on Aging and offers classes for seniors, exercise programs, and social activities. The Senior Center also provides transportation services and Meals On Wheels. The museum showcases memorabilia from the school, farm and household tools, textiles, and a collection of taxidermy donated by the family of Bernardston resident Luman Nelson. The museum is open to the public from May to October but closed in the winter as the second floor does not have heat. The Powers Institute is a treasured resource in town, and the Senior Center is well-used, drawing participants from the nearby towns of Leyden, Northfield, and Greenfield.

Built in 1862, the Cushman Library is a two-story Italianate brick structure with bracketed eaves, pilasters and roundhead windows set in brownstone. The library is an active social center in town; 53 percent of residents in Bernardston have library cards, and there are reading clubs and other activities. Cushman Library has recently updated its technologies to offer an online catalog and wi-fi. The active board of trustees plan to continue improving the quality of services offered to the community in the future, including increasing library hours. Adjacent to the library, the fire station is conveniently located in the center of town; however, the chief of the fire department noted that the department has outgrown the current fire station. (Further information about municipal services and facilities will be discussed in Element 8, to be completed in 2016.) In the southeast corner of Center Village, Cushman Park is used to host community events, including Old Home Day and the Scarecrow Contest. Described by residents as a good community gathering location, Cushman Park is highly valued in town but residents also express a desire to resolve the seasonal flooding that prevents the park from being accessible year-round. At One of the community meetings, residents also commented on the town’s strong sense of community with parades and festivals including the Gas Engine Show and Flea Market.

There are additional historic structures in Bernardston that are not listed in the National Register Historic Places. The Town Hall, built between 1870 and 1915, has offices on the first floor and the second floor is currently used for storage, as it is not universally accessible. The Assembly Hall on the second floor was
Community Preservation Act

The Community Preservation Act (CPA) enables towns to access significant funds for historic preservation, open space recreation, accessible housing, and public recreation projects. Towns raise money locally with a small surcharge on property taxes up to 3 percent and the money collected is matched by funds from the state. Each of these areas must receive a minimum of 10 percent of the total fund each year, and the remaining 70 percent can be spent or reserved for future projects in any of the three areas or for public recreation.

The town of Leverett, Massachusetts, is similar to Bernardston in population, size and a strong commitment to the town’s rural character. In 2002 Leverett adopted the CPA as the town could not afford desired projects by fundraising alone. The first objective was to form the required Community Preservation Committee. The committee was composed of one representative from the Historical Commission, Recreation Commission, Conservation Commission, Planning Board, and Affordable Housing Committee, and two at-large members appointed by the Select Board.

Projects include renovating Town Hall windows, restoring the North Leverett Sawmill and placing a Historic Preservation Easement on it, purchasing contiguous parcels by the Leverett Pond for shoreline protection, extension of the Friendship Trail Land, and adding electrical work and heating to the second floor of the town library to make it usable year round.

Residents and town officials of Bernardston have identified six Priority Heritage Landscapes — dynamic areas that reflect the relationship between human culture, history, and the natural ecology (Cultural Resource Management Consultants). A complete list of Bernardston’s Heritage Landscapes is included in the 2009 Reconnaissance Report. The six areas include Center Village, the Town Hall, the Route 5 Corridor, previously used for town meetings, dances, plays, sporting events, and concerts with a stage and seating capacity for 100 people (DCR, 2009). At the community meeting in 2015, residents expressed a strong desire to renovate this area for public events. According to the Town Clerk, the high costs of renovation and the lack of additional storage areas to house the town records that are currently stored in the Town Hall are significant challenges the Town faces. Neighboring the Town Hall are the United Church and the Baptist Church, which are also not listed as Historic Places. The United Church is active whereas the Baptist Church is no longer in use and is currently for sale. Just south of the Falls River, the Four Arch Stone Railroad Bridge was built in 1846 and is one of the only industrial structures in Bernardston (MHC, 1982). The adjacent grain mill symbolizes the many mills historically established along the Falls River. The 2009 Bernardston Reconnaissance Report recommended that the town expand the National Historic District for the entire Central Village Area, including all civic buildings, historic homes, and the Arch Bridge and surrounding mills. The buildings would then be eligible for recognition, tax incentives for income-producing properties, protection, and grants.

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Eden Trail Corridor, the West Mountain Ledges and the Route 10/ Interstate 91 Corridor. The six-mile stretch of Route 5 running from the center of town to the border of Vermont traverses open fields with barns and historic homes reminiscent of its history as a stagecoach route. Eden Trail Road, in the southwest corner of Bernardston, is framed by several farms and open fields offering scenic views from its high elevation. The West Mountain Range is visible from Center Village and is beautiful, especially in the fall. The Route 10/I-91 Corridor is a mixed-use area with commercial and industrial districts, and residential, historical, and agricultural areas. Scenic and historic areas include open fields at the intersection with Purple Meadow Road, the site of Lieutenant Ebenezer Sheldon’s Fort, and one of the early garrison houses that was used for refuge during conflicts (DCR, 2009). The Town of Bernardston Community Development Plan includes an inventory of additional significant buildings and structures not described here, including homes that are listed in the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System.

**Visibility of Scenic Resources**

Visibility of Scenic Resources and Unique Environments

During the master plan community meetings, residents of Bernardston expressed appreciation for the town’s historic buildings, and the scenic natural landscape.

According to Google Earth Pro, more than 28,000 cars travel through Bernardston daily via the three state roads and when approaching Bernardston from Greenfield, two mountain ranges compose the most visible landscape, with West Mountain forming the backdrop to Center Village. With significant views of the mountainous landscape, there is potential for the town to promote recreation, including hiking and biking for locals and visitors.

In order to maintain the landscape along these visible ranges, the town should consider an Upper Elevation Protection bylaw, to prohibit development in locations or at elevations that would impact Bernardston’s overall rural character. The town should also consider a Scenic Vista Overlay District to provide design standards along Route 5, which is a gateway to Bernardston, and Eden Trail Road, which residents have described as a scenic area with many farms. These two areas are moderately visible throughout town and were identified by residents and town officials as Priority Heritage Landscapes.
Visiblity of Scenic Resources and Unique Environments

2016 Master Plan
Town of Bernardston
4. Vulnerabilities

**Fragmentation**

Forest fragmentation is the process of breaking up large patches of forest into smaller pieces. It can occur when roads are built, for example, or forests cleared for roads or development (EPA, 2003). Forest fragmentation can reduce biodiversity by making it difficult for some species to breed or find food. There are species, especially birds such as the black-throated green warbler, that need large, intact forest to persist. NHESP has identified several negative effects of fragmentation, including nest predation by species associated with development such as skunks, raccoons, and house cats. As forests become more exposed and readily accessed, another impact is nest parasitism by species such as the brown-headed cowbird, which lay their eggs in the nest of other bird species, reducing their productivity. Forest interior habitats support various native plants, animals, and ecological processes that are sensitive to other edge effects, which include noise and light pollution from roads and development, invasive species establishment, and alterations to wind, heat and other climate variables (NHESP, 2011).
Threats to Natural Resources

Developed land and associated impervious cover, land use, and natural disasters all have impacts on the natural environment. Development is a threat particularly near wetlands, which provide habitat and control flooding. A railroad crosses over significant lands critical for key ecosystem services, including the Falls River and along the edge of the Darwin Scott Memorial Wetland. A train derailment could have environmental consequences in these areas. The proximity of Bernardston to Interstate 91 impacts air quality and noise. Exhaust fumes pollute the air and traffic in town, especially along the state roads, produces significant noise, which impacts residents and wildlife. A growing number of studies indicate that wildlife, like humans, are stressed by a noisy environment. For example, female frogs exposed to traffic noise have difficulty locating the male’s signal (National Park Service, 2009). The use of salt on state roads is a potential contaminant of the town’s groundwater, and is also potentially contaminating other water bodies, including wetlands and the Falls River. (See Element 3.) The Highway Department noted several animals are killed yearly when attempting to cross these two roads, especially I-91.

Just six miles northeast of Bernardston, Entergy’s Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Plant closed in December 2014. According to the plant’s government affairs manager, Joe Lynch, the fuel has been removed from the reactor, mixed with older, used fuel in canisters and placed in the spent-fuel pool which will continue to cool until 2020. The plant will then enter “dry-cask storage” and there will no longer be an emergency plan as the casks are designed to withstand any external threat. Lynch said that the only risks to the fuel pool would be loss of cooling or deliberate tampering. He is confident that the amount of water stored above the spent fuel negates the first risk and the tampering would be difficult as the plant is overseen by armed guards. Lynch said that, “if the pool did become compromised, possible radioactive contamination would be limited to an area inside the 125-acre Vermont Yankee property.”

In contrast, Citizens Awareness Network raises concerns about the decommissioning plan that Entergy has submitted for Vermont Yankee, stating that there are “significant errors and deficiencies.” The network remarks that the decommissioning fund is too small; based on a “generic” nuclear plant, the plan does not address known issues at Vermont Yankee such as the large amount of tritium contamination on the site from underground piping. Vermont Yankee “incorrectly assumes that a suitable dump will be available” and the network notes that by the time Vermont Yankee shuts down, there will be no level radioactive waste dumps available and costs are likely to increase if a dump opens. Therefore, Vermont could have to store the waste for several years. “An accident at the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Reactor would expose vast areas of beautiful New England and millions of people to dangerous levels of radiation for decades” (Citizens Awareness Network). If an accident were to occur, the radiation could contaminate the wildlife and habitats in Bernardston, which is within twenty-five miles of the plant.

The town takes pride in its local farms but fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides that residents apply to lawns, gardens, and agricultural fields can contaminate groundwater. In Whately, Massachusetts, the groundwater supply was discovered to be contaminated with common pesticides applied on agricultural lands. More than 30 percent of the wells tested were positive for ethylene dibromide and aldicarb (Temik), exceeding the state safety limits and were subsequently shut down (Sarnat, Willis, Harper, 1987). Uncovered manure piles are also of concern as run-off can contaminate streams, wetlands or ponds and eventually aquifers. The Department of Conservation & Recreation Division of Water Supply Protection states that horse manure contains nutrients that “impair water quality and can contain pathogens that are potentially harmful to humans.” Horses can also potentially alter the runoff characteristics of the landscape, increasing the ability of pollutants to enter the drinking water supply (DCR, “Horse Ownership and the Massachusetts Watershed Protection Act).

As observed at Charity Farm Lot, there are invasive plant species in Bernardston that threaten the native species, some of which are of conservation concern. Local restoration ecologist and designer John Lepore noted several invasive species including multiflora rose, burning bush, barberry, and Russian olive at
Charity Farm Lot. In a 2014 Charity Farm Lot update report Lepore remarked that many of the invasive plants are in “the very early stage of overtaking the site” and expressed the importance of taking action before the growth “overpowers eradication.”

On a broader level, it is important to recognize the impact of climate change on plants and animals. Forests, wetlands, rivers, and streams offer various functions, including supporting wildlife habitat and cleaning air and water. As temperature and precipitation change, some vegetation may be unable to adapt to the altered conditions.

The recommendations at the end of this chapter and in Element 10 address these threats with suggestions including Best Management Practices for protecting water quality through stormwater management, land use planning strategies that would reduce habitat fragmentation, and managing landscapes to protect the many important ecosystem services provided by them.

Threats to Cultural Resources
Residents of Bernardston have always revered their historic buildings as indicated by their efforts to move the Congregational Unitarian Church, and their continued passion for the significant buildings in Center Village. At the first master plan community meeting, many residents expressed their view that more historic preservation is needed. Buildings are aging and many structures are not universally accessible. Center Village does not have a public sewer system, some of the septic systems are failing, and a new system would be expensive.

There are many significant historic properties within and surrounding Center Village that are not listed as Historic Places. Only four of the historic buildings in town are listed as Historic Places and therefore eligible for recognition, tax incentives, protection, and grants. The village’s Historic District designation provides only limited protection from adverse effects of federally assisted projects, and, through automatic inclusion in the State Register of Historic Places, limited protection from state actions (Simon, Skelly, 2007). The National Register Historic District is not as strict as a Local District, which enforces a regulatory review process for all changes to exterior architectural features visible from a public way; however, the Local District provides protection from demolition and renovations that are not aesthetically appropriate given the town’s design standards. Currently, the Expedited Permitting District is the only zone in Bernardston that has design standards. The town could consider including design standards for other zones to ensure that the buildings reflect Bernardston’s historic character. Design guidelines could also include preferred materials that have additional benefits beyond aesthetics, such as pervious pavers which allow for on-site infiltration and provide attractive walkways.

Outside of Center Village, there are several areas that residents value, especially the Priority Heritage Landscapes. None of the agricultural lands or historic sites along Route 5 or within the Route 10/I-91 corridor are permanently protected from development. The only Agricultural Preservation Restriction in Bernardston is located in the northeast corner along the border with Leyden. Of the distinctive barns and historic homes, none are listed in the National Register of Historic
Places or otherwise protected. Properties along Eden Trail Road are valued for the various farms, scenic views and recreational trails but, they are also not permanently protected from development. None of the properties on the West Mountain ridgeline or ledges are permanently protected from development. They are particularly vulnerable due to their scenic vistas and availability of Town water, which extends part of the way up West Mountain Road. Residents reported that from areas west of Fox Hill Road, there is a great view of the center of town. It is important that these areas be protected as they are the backdrop to Center Village. The town should consider protecting significant lands and buildings and seek funding for renovations in an effort to maintain the town’s rural, historic character.

The recommendations at the end of this chapter and in Element 10 address these threats with suggestions, including adopting the Community Preservation Act, listing more buildings as Historic Places, and enacting bylaws with design standards for scenic roads and areas.

Four Arch Stone Bridge

This is one of Bernardston’s valued historic structures built in 1846 by Theodore Judah and is one of the only surviving structures from the Industrial Era (DCR, 2009).
C. Recommendations

Natural and Cultural Strategies

To meet Bernardston’s three goals, the Town should designate areas of significant views and historic and ecological integrity, and create by-laws that preserve Bernardston’s New England character. The town should involve citizens in workshops on preserving historic structures, the range of restrictions that can protect land, and best management practices for sustainable forestry. It should also create maps to promote outdoor recreation and historic tours.

Issues

- Residents express lack of town-wide communication. There is limited knowledge of where to get local produce and town attractions including outdoor recreation.
- Critical Natural Landscape along the western mountain range offers scenic views and recreational opportunities however, is largely unprotected.
- Residents express concern for preserving historic structures. Without attention, neglect and deterioration can threaten significant structures. If buildings deteriorate, restoration can become exceedingly difficult to afford.
- Residents are concerned that new development will alter the town’s New England character.
- Cushman park is conveniently located in the center of town however, the park floods often preventing it from being used for farmers markets, and other town activities.
- Residents treasure the Falls River however, there is no public access to the river.
- Residents take pride in Bernardston’s historic buildings however the town cannot afford renovations and many of the structures, including the second floor of Town Hall, are not universally accessible or heated.

Considering Sustainability

Forests, wetlands, rivers, and streams are natural resources that not only have aesthetic and recreational benefits but also play crucial roles in mitigating the impact of climate change. Scientists predict that, in part due to chemical changes in the atmosphere, there will be an increase in annual precipitation, shifts in temperature, and increased frequency and intensity of storms and flooding in New England. The natural landscape can help to mitigate these changes through the purification of air and water, absorption of subsurface and overland water flow, and the sequestration of carbon in both the above-ground growing vegetation and within the organic components of forest soils. These ecosystems, and their functions, will be crucial in helping natural systems and human communities cope with climate change. Encouraging best management practices and further preservation of open space in Bernardston will not only help to meet the Town’s goals of preserving rural character, but will help to improve the overall health and resiliency of the town in the face of these climate changes.
Recommendations
Recommendation for Bernardston’s future Watershed, Natural and Cultural Resource, and Land Use management cover a range of actions, including educating and conducting out-reach, changing zoning and policy, strengthening community connections, and investing in infrastructure. These changes that require significant planning and funding. The following recommendations are explained in more detail with responsible parties, in Section 10.

Ongoing
Continue to educate and involve residents in Charity Farm Lot with community work days. Encourage public participation in developing hiking trails, picnicking facilities, and removing invasive species. Construct signs with information about the lot’s history and potentially connect trails to the approximate site of the first settlement.

Promote Bernardston as a recreation destination and update the town website with visitor information, including maps of historical buildings, recreational trails and a page for Charity Lot.

Work with conservation organizations and residents to develop a strategy for identifying lands that may be coming out of Chapter 61, 61A, or 61B and anticipate the funding necessary to protect these lands. Prioritize protection in the southern portion of town, which has several wetlands and identified critical habitat that stretches across the town border and is under the highest development pressure. Second priority is the northeast region of Bernardston, which is densely forested and mostly protected, but which has modest development pressure. The town should also consider protecting the large landscape block along the western mountain range, which is predominantly unprotected and has low development pressure.

1 to 5 years
Investigate resources to involve the younger generation in town activities that improve the recreational opportunities and health of the natural environment in Bernardston.

Work with Community Preservation Coalition to host a workshop to educate residents about the benefits of the Community Preservation Act.

Create bike lanes that extend from the Franklin County Bikeway in Northfield and continue along Route 10 and Route 5 to Pratt Field, and up Bald Mountain Road to Charity Lot. This would involve coordination with Franklin County and the state.

Work with the Massachusetts Historic Commission to update the town’s list of State Register of Historic Places for recognition and potential funding through the Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund.

Adopt the Community Preservation Act to raise local money which is matched by the state for projects, including historic preservation, open space and land preservation and affordable housing.

Create a Demolition Delay Bylaw to protect historic structures by granting additional time to fund the renovation of a historical building, or relocate it. Establish criteria for qualified structures.

Create a Scenic Roads Bylaw to protect significant roads’ rural and historic character. This bylaw would establish a local review procedure for the cutting or removal of trees and alteration of stone walls that are within the public right-of-way. Further design guidelines and form-based codes can restrict development by height, materials and landscaping in order to maintain scenic vistas.
Implement development controls to protect the currently forested slopes that provide the backdrop to views of town from erosion. This could be accomplished through restricting development on slopes greater than 15 percent or through a Scenic Vista Overlay District that mandates the preservation of existing vegetation and requires additional natural screening for new developments on hillsides visible from the main roads. An Upper Elevation Protection Bylaw would establish an elevation above which site plan review is required for new developments. The Planning Board can limit building heights above tree lines and require appropriate replanting of native trees and plants and the screening of utilities.

Consider permitting accessory uses on farmland to include conference centers, restaurants, and other small businesses to draw visitors to local farms. This would enable farmers to diversify their operations, provide supplemental income, and increase awareness of local farms.

Create a Conservation Opportunity Subdivision to fast-track subdivisions that conserve at least 80 percent of a site. This would promote denser development, reduce sprawl, and help to preserve land.

5 to 10 years
Expand the National Register Historic District to include historic structures on Church and River Streets, and educate property owners about the benefits of placing their properties on the National Register of Historic Places. Listing buildings in the National Register provides formal recognition, potential tax incentives for owners of income-producing properties, and protection by state or federally funded, licensed or assisted projects.

Create Architectural Preservation Districts/Neighborhood Districts to protect the overall character of an area by regulating demolition and major alteration of buildings. Set design standards for scale, massing, street pattern, setback, and materials.

10 to 20 years
Use funding from the Community Preservation Act to renovate the Town Hall to enable accessibility of the second floor. This would allow gatherings within the center of town for events such as meetings, cultural events, the farmer’s market, or private uses.
Ten percent of the land in Bernardston is in agricultural use.