

# Town of Royalston

## **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY**

*Adopted by the Board of Selectmen January 16, 2007 and  
updated by vote of the Selectmen August 7, 2007*

Royalston is a small, rural community located among the steep rocky hills of north central Worcester County. Incorporated in 1765, Royalston was a lively agricultural town. The farming population moved elsewhere when more easily worked land became available. Until recently, Royalston was essentially an agricultural village. While logging still employs the highest number of people in town, most residents commute out-of-town (35.1 minutes on average) to reach employment centers in Athol, Greenfield, Fitchburg-Leominster and Southern New Hampshire. Between 1970 and 2000, the population grew from 809 residents to 1,254, an increase of 55% compared with 11.53% in the State. This sharp increase has had an impact on town finances as the costs associated with the demand for expanded town services has exceeded the capacity of the existing residential tax base.

Royalston has almost eighty miles of town roads, most notably two State Routes that bisect the Town and link its two village centers. Town sewer and a water system operated by a private, non-profit corporation service approximately 60 households and are found in South Royalston village, which contains the Town's only convenience store and restaurant. Located in the Millers River Watershed, Royalston has abundant natural resources, including two rivers, three wildlife management areas and two dams managed by the Army Corp of Engineers. Over 27% of the town land is permanently restricted open space.

Royalston is managed by a three-member Board of Selectmen, a part-time Administrative Assistant, numerous part-time employees and volunteers, and an annual Open Town Meeting. A Capital Planning Committee is responsible for studying and prioritizing capital projects over \$10,000, including acquisitions of equipment and property and public facilities improvement or construction. Public Safety functions are provided by a volunteer fire department, part-time police force and a full-time highway department staff. Royalston has joined with adjacent Town of Athol in a Pre-K through 12 Regional School System, using the Royalston Community School for Pre-K through 6 and transporting students to Athol for 7-12.

In order to preserve the historic, rural character of their town, the residents and officials have developed and continue to improve the tools to guide and control future development. Royalston has sponsored several major planning initiatives over the past five years – the development of a *Community Development Plan (2004)* and *Open Space and Recreation Plan (2004)* – that have included significant community participation components. In addition, the Town participated in the preparation of the *Millers River Watershed Assessment* as well as the *Greater Gardner Sustainable Growth Management Plan* and the *Regional Community Development Strategy* developed by the Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission. In the 1990s, the Town also developed Community Action Statements through a public participation process. The goals summarized in this Community Development Strategy are derived from these major planning processes and were reviewed at a public meeting on March 7, 2006 in terms of their integration into the *Sustainable Development Principles* and their priorities.

## NATURAL RESOURCES & OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

*The goals in this category are consistent with the Sustainable Development Principles of #2 Concentrate Development, by encouraging compact development; #4 Restore and Enhance the Environment, through the continued protection of natural resources; #5, Conserve Natural Resources by using “Energy Star” standards and materials; #9, Foster Sustainable Businesses, by protecting agricultural lands; and #10, Plan Regionally, by working with area towns to address water supply issues*

Royalston is engaged in a variety of ongoing efforts to pursue the town's goals of preserving open space, protecting water quality, and maintaining the town's character as a traditional New England village. The Royalston Open Space Plan is based on input from residents and identifies water, forests, small-town character, wildlife habitat and clean air as the most important resources to protect.

### GOALS:

Goal 1: Preserve and maintain open fields and working landscapes

Goal 2: Protect clean water and air.

Goal 3: Protect and preserve the small town character, scenic views, wildlife habitat and endangered species in Royalston.

Goal 4: Limit the amount and location of development to help address some town preservation concerns.

Goal 5: Selectively acquire additional properties for preservation and recreation where necessary and appropriate, with attention to the effects of preservation on municipal finances.

Goal 6: Maintain and improve existing recreational resources (play grounds and fields; trails for walking, hiking, horseback riding, snowmobiling; swimming areas).

### OBJECTIVES:

- **(Priority # 6)** Set priorities for open space protection Protect water resources, agricultural and forested lands, and wildlife habitat, with attention to the impacts on Town finances. (Open Space Advisory Committee, 2006, no additional funds required)
- Develop partnerships with public and private funding sources to identify funding for the acquisition of open space/development rights for properties identified as priorities. (Open Space Advisory Committee and Mt. Grace Land Trust, 2006, no additional cost)
- **(Priority # 7)** Promote compact development to maintain a traditional New England village setting through revision to Town's Zoning By-laws. (Planning Board and consultants, 2006, \$30,000 grant from Commonwealth Development)
- Implement a scenic roadways bylaw that regulates the design of new roadside development both within and outside the road right-of-way. (Planning Board, 2007, no additional funds required)
- **(Priority # 7)** Rewrite Cluster Zoning By-laws to provide stronger incentives to proceed with Cluster Development. Planning Board, 2007, no additional funds required)
- Create penalties for inappropriate use of public recreational facilities that

endanger water and air resources, particularly by non-residents. (Selectmen, 2007, via Town bylaws, no additional funds required)

- Continued participation in the Millers River Watershed Plan and the Massachusetts Watershed Initiative with other communities to identify and remedy threats to the water supply. (Conservation Commission & Selectmen, ongoing, no additional funds required)
- Bring existing public recreational facilities (playgrounds and fields) into compliance with ADA requirements through a regular repair and maintenance program (Town DPW, 2010, from town appropriations to annual operating budgets)
- Encourage the repair/replacement of failed septic systems and energy efficient renovations ("Energy Star) through participation in a Housing Rehabilitation Program. (Selectmen, CDBG funded through Town of Athol, up to \$30,000 per homeowner, 2006)

## HOUSING

*The goals in this category are consistent with the Sustainable Development Principles of L1 Redevelop First and #6, Expand Housing Opportunities, by supporting the rehabilitation of existing homes; and #10, Plan Regionally by continued participation in regional housing programs*

Goal 1: Continue to ensure that Royalston has a full range of housing opportunities that includes adequate ownership and rental options for all residents, especially for low-and moderate income residents, the elderly, and for residents with disabilities

- Establish an Affordable Housing Committee. (Selectmen, 2006, no additional funding required)
- Conduct an inventory of public and private land/buildings to identify those suitable for reuse as subsidized housing should be conducted. (Affordable Housing Committee, 2007, no additional funding required)
- **(Priority # 7)** Amend the zoning by-laws to support Multi-family zoning in areas near existing infrastructure. (Planning Board, 2007, no additional funding required)
- **(Priority # 7)** Amend the zoning by-laws to allow for Accessory Apartments and Senior Housing Bylaw in order to provide additional housing options for seniors. (Planning Board, 2007, no additional funding required)

Goal 2: Focus on the revitalization of existing housing stock as a means to assist low and moderate residents with maintaining safe and sanitary housing

- **(Priority # 4)** Participate in a Housing Rehabilitation Program (Selectmen, CDBG funded through Town of Athol, up to \$35,000 per homeowner, 2006)
- Participate in Title 5 Septic loan program to maintain safe sewer service (Board of Health, DEP funding, 2006)
- **(Priority # 5)** Provide services to residents that provide them with tools to improve their economic self-sufficiency, e.g., Improved Home buying capacity and availability of

home buying home ownership counseling services.

## **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

*The goal in this category is consistent with the Sustainable Development Principle of #1, Redevelop First by supporting the reuse of municipal buildings, #3 Be Fair by clear permitting processes that encourage smart growth, #6 Expand Housing Opportunities by supporting economic self-sufficiency with home ownership*

Royalston may not be appropriate for the development of large-scale commercial and industrial areas due to its relatively isolated location. The town supports the development of small-scale and home-based businesses.

Goal 1: Encourage growth of tourism and recreational businesses that take advantage of the Town's many natural and historic resources.

Goal 2: Support existing businesses in Royalston, including those associated with wood products and home businesses.

- **(Priority # 3)** Support the District Improvement Plan for programming and facilities. Funding by the Athol Royalston Regional School District (ARRSD), 2007
- **(Priority # 7)** Amend the Zoning By-law to clearly allow home businesses. (Planning Board, 2007, no additional funds required).
- **(Priority # 7)** Amend the Zoning By-law to allow the development of service and retail businesses, such as Bed and Breakfast establishments, that cater to tourism, including eco-tourism, historic-tourism and agri-tourism. (Planning Board, 2007, no additional funds required)
- **(Priority # 8)** Support the creation of a regional small business development loan fund that would provide financial support to existing or potential Royalston businesses. (Selectboard, 2007-2009, CDBG.)
- Partner with the North Quabbin Woods Project to provide technical and financial assistance to ongoing and developing wood products businesses (Selectmen and North Quabbin Woods Project, 2006, no additional funds required)
- Offer services to residents that provide them with tools to improve their economic self-sufficiency, e.g., literacy (DHCD CDBG funds, \$20,000 annually, 2007)

## **TRANSPORTATION & INFRASTRUCTURE**

*The goal in this category is consistent with the Sustainable Development Principle of #1, Redevelop First through the improvement of the existing transportation infrastructure*

Cars and trucks are the primary modes of transportation for most people and goods in Royalston and throughout the region. Relatively low population densities and the distance to major urban centers like Boston limit the potential for public transit as a travel mode. CSX provides freight rail service through the region, and airport Access is available in Gardner, Orange, and Fitchburg. Two State

Highways and three local arterials connect Royalston with the greater region.

Goal 1: Improve the local transportation infrastructure to ease commuting and make the system safer for use.

Goal 2: Bring Town Facilities into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Massachusetts CMR 521, per the recently completed 504 ADA Transition Plan

- **(Priority # 1)** Establish a Town Building Committee to survey current uses and to determine which buildings and public facilities might be better suited for adaptive reuse as housing, commercial enterprises or private use; and (b), which buildings should be brought into ADA compliance. (Selectmen, 2006, no funds required)
- **(Priority # 2)** Develop a strategy for repairs and improvements to town roads (Selectmen and DPW, 2007, Mass Highway, Chapter 90 and STRAP (no additional funds required)
- Meet ADA compliance (Building Committee, Selectmen, town appropriations, State funding (CDBG, DCR)
- Make repairs to Routes 32 and 68 priorities of the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission TIP. (Selectmen, ongoing, from Town appropriation & Chapter 90)
- **(Priority # 3)**Support the District Improvement Plan for programming and facilities. Funding by the Athol Royalston Regional School District (ARRSD), 2007
- Amend Sub-division regulations to require homeowner/developer contributions when construction requires town to upgrade dirt roads to paved surfaces (Planning Board, 2007, no cost).

## **PROJECT PRIORITY LIST**

- 1) Establish a Building Committee to determine best use of town facilities and determine which ones should be retained and renovated to meet ADA requirements.
- 2) Develop a strategy for repairs and improvements to town roads
- 3) Support the District Improvement Plan for programming and facilities. Funding by the Athol Royalston Regional School District (ARRSD), 2007
- 4) Continue the Housing Rehabilitation Program, in cooperation with Athol, Petersham and Phillipston, which has provided critical and affordable improvement to residents' homes.
- 5) Provide services to residents that provide them with tools to improve their economic self-sufficiency, e.g., Improved Home buying capacity and availability of home buying home ownership counseling services.
- 6) Establish Priorities and identify funding sources for Open Space Preservation
- 7) Revise the Zoning By-laws to foster appropriate Village development, allow accessory apartments, and encourage multi-family and senior housing, to allow for home businesses and to encourage

tourism related enterprises, and to strengthen cluster development incentives.

- 8) Support the creation of a regional small business development loan fund that would provide financial support to existing or potential Royalston businesses.

Linda M. Alger, Chair  
Royalston Selectboard