

Williamsburg, MA

Williamsburg, MA (population 2,482) is a small community set at the foothills of the Berkshires. Originally settled as a mill town to take advantage of the Mill River, it suffered an industrial disaster in 1874 when a reservoir burst, destroying much of the community and killing 139 people. Volunteers provided early warning, saving many lives. They also recovered the dead and helped bring the village back to life.

The town was greatly impacted by the calamity but few of the mills rebuilt within Williamsburg. However, the spirit of volunteerism and civic pride reflected in the disaster response continues today as reflected in the community's museums, libraries, schools, and other resources. The town today has two distinct centers—Williamsburg or “Burgy” and the Village of Haydenville.¹

Williamsburg must soon make several key redevelopment decisions that will impact the town's character for many years to come:

- A number of public buildings in disrepair, vacant, or otherwise inappropriate for their intended usage. Redevelopment opportunities include:
 - Brass Works building in Haydenville, built in 1875 following the industrial disaster and most recently used as a school building and incubator space for small businesses.
 - Fire Station #1 in Burgy
 - Helen E. James School, also in Burgy (largely vacant)
 - Haydenville Police/Fire Station
- A location for a new public safety complex
- Where to house expanded senior services

Not only will these decisions impact municipal service delivery in the coming decades, but they will also shape the economic and social character of the two town centers.

A recently opened community resource is the Commons Coworking space, founded by local residents. Located in a former school, the coworking space intends to increase economic opportunity in Williamsburg by providing shared office space reliable and accessible broadband Internet for entrepreneurs and independent workers. High speed Internet access is not widely available outside of the town center. The space also drives daytime foot traffic to the town center and provides teleworking capabilities that keep local residents, particularly Millennials, from leaving for jobs in larger metropolitan areas.

Williamsburg, led by its senior center and Council on Aging, sought guidance to address these economic and population challenges that the community is now facing. The community was selected to receive a technical assistance workshop on planning for economic and fiscal health to help it find its path towards sustainable prosperity. The workshop helped the community recognize the assets it already has at hand, including a compact main street, an engaged community, a strong regional job market, and the availability of buildings and vacant lots for redevelopment. The question that Williamsburg set out to answer through this process is a familiar one for many small

Source for historical information: <http://www.burgy.org/about-town>.

towns: How will building reuse and the potential siting of new buildings in Williamsburg impact healthy aging, walkability and the economic vibrancy of the town centers?

The following issues and sentiments came out of the workshop from participants:

- Optimism for achieving active and compact town centers that support walkability with a connected main street corridor between them. This will lead to more fiscally responsible growth and greater prosperity.
- The community should focus on the Brass Works site as one of several high priority redevelopment sites. Next steps for that site include:
 - Parking requirements of the site including possible zoning changes to reduce minimum parking requirements
 - Dialogue with the property owner on the site's future use.
- The community underutilizes the Mill River today, despite its importance to its history, both as an industrial town as well as subsequent problems with flooding. Recommendations from the workshop included:
 - Improving pedestrian amenities along the river
 - Providing outdoor seating at parks and restaurants oriented towards the river.

The technical assistance also included a “hot spot” redevelopment analysis. This analysis examined parcel values in the community and identified clusters of high-value parcels—or “hot spots”— using total value per acre at both town centers. Three parcels under consideration for redevelopment within these hotspots were: Fire Station #1 in Burgy; the Helen E. James School, also in Burgy; and the Haydenville Police/Fire Station.

The principal conclusion was that the potential return to the town from conveying the properties for private development (which would likely be residential) appears relatively small. On the other hand, the hotspot analysis points to the potential for some of the parcels (in particular, the James School site) to be leveraged to enhance the value of existing property in the town, and augment town revenues, while continuing to meet municipal needs.

Six actionable next steps for the community included:

1. Conduct a parking audit and feasibility study to identify potential sites for special events downtown and to better understand supply and demand at high priority sites
2. Develop an economic development entity to proactively pursue new projects, increase broadband Internet access, and focus on affordable / senior housing in town centers
3. Revise current zoning to allow for more compact housing types such as infill and affordable housing including removing limitations to the number of units in a single building
4. Reorient public spaces towards natural features such as the Mill River through pedestrian amenities and outdoor seating
5. Develop a strategic plan for the Haydenville and Williamsburg town centers and the main street corridor and potentially “stretch the town centers” with viable new development
6. Write and implement a complete streets policy to provide safe and convenient access to local streets for “all users of all abilities”