

# Rural Downtown District Management Study

## Turners Falls Stakeholder Presentation – January 14, 2025



# Agenda

- Introductions
- Project Overview/History
- Summary of Research
- Findings and Recommendations
- Next Steps
- Questions/Discussion/Feedback



# Project Overview/History



## Rapid Recovery Plan

2021

Turners Falls  
in Montague,  
MA



- In 2023, FRCOG applied for and received funding from the State to explore various models to support a rural downtown district management structure.
- The need for additional administrative capacity was identified in the Commonwealth's Rural Policy Plan (2019) and as a high priority during the Local Rapid Recovery Planning process in 2021.
- The goal is to create a model for rural downtowns and village centers, with dedicated staff to support and complement municipal efforts, coordinate with the business community, and be sustainable over time.
- The focus area for this study were Turners Falls, Shelburne Falls, and Northfield Center.

# Summary of Research



- We researched the communities' needs to identify the critical elements necessary to create a sustainable program. We found that:
  - Businesses and foot traffic are critical to creating and sustaining vibrant downtowns.
  - Businesses need additional support and generating foot traffic requires constant effort.
  - Additional coordination is needed to keep the region relevant and capture people's time and disposable income.
  - Other efforts (e.g., individual business associations) were narrowly focused and underfunded leading to burnout, splintering, and dilution.
- The time is now to re-invest in the downtowns of Franklin County.

# Summary of Research – Focus Areas



## Business Development & Advocacy

- Coordination
- Technical Assistance
- Workforce
- Lending
- Recruitment & Retention
- Unified Voice
- Funding
- Seat at the Table
- Liaison to Municipality



## Infrastructure & Placemaking

- Parking
- Parking Management
- Placemaking & Public Spaces
- Storefront & Facade Improvements
- Outdoor Dining
- Infrastructure Investments
- Curb Appeal



## Arts & Culture

- Special Events
- Creative Economy Business Support
- Public Art Activations
- Regional Branding/Identity
- Outdoor Recreation



## Marketing & Communication

- Marketing
- Social Media
- Website
- Branding
- Tourism
- Event Promotion

# Key Findings

1. Too costly for every town to hire dedicated staff.
2. Create a “Downtown Coordinator” in an existing regional organization.
3. Full-time benefitted position will provide consistency, reduce volunteer burnout.
4. Public investment may be needed to launch the pilot project.
5. MDI and the Rural Development Fund grants provide essential seed money to launch the project.
6. Sustainability over time will require participation by all stakeholders.
7. Project includes several downtowns, municipalities, business and property owners, corporate anchors, and regional entities (FRCOG, FC Community Development Corporation, and the FC Chamber).
8. Better coordination of resources will:
  - a. Maximize the project’s overall impact.
  - b. Bolster grassroots initiatives, regional collaboration, and targeted investment.
  - c. Leverage existing assets including outdoor recreation, arts and culture, and the creative economy.
9. There are more projects and needs than ever before; now is the time.

# Recommendations

1. **Apply a phased approach to implementing the model to ensure community support and effectiveness:**
  - a. Initial phase will be to conduct a pilot project using grant funds to initially launch the model.
  - b. The pilot will allow time to refine the scope and activities to be undertaken, focus on engagement with stakeholders, and demonstrate the proof of concept and value proposition for the model.
  
2. **Create a “Downtown Coordinator” position that will be:**
  - a. A full-time, shared position, whose work will be tailored to meet the needs of each community while also leveraging cooperative opportunities.
  - b. Responsible to coordinate with stakeholders (businesses, community groups, volunteers) and compliment/add value to existing efforts and advance new initiatives in each downtown.
  - c. Active in seeking regional and state resources and opportunities for the downtowns.
  
3. **House the “Downtown Coordinator” in a regional organization.** Some of the benefits include:
  - a. Provides an efficient structure for managing the position and contributes cash and/or in-kind resources to supplement the cost of the position.
  - b. Reduces potential for redundancy of activities, aligns, and leverages existing services offered by the host agency.
  - c. Adds staff capacity to concentrate and enhance support in defined geographic areas.
  - d. Housed in a 501(c)(3) entity will allow contributions can be tax deductible and earmarked for this work.

# Franklin County Rural Downtown District – General Model

## Areas of Support



Marketing & Communication



Business Development & Advocacy



Regional Outdoor Recreation



Arts & Culture



Infrastructure & Placemaking



Municipal Liason

## Structure

Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG)  
MassDevelopment  
Mass Cultural Council  
Mass Office of Business Development



**Franklin County Community Development Corporation**

Downtown Coordinator enhances access to business development lending programs, fiduciary agent & technical services

**Franklin County Chamber of Commerce and Regional Tourism Council \***

**Downtown Coordinator**

Participating communities guide work to be conducted by the Downtown Coordinator

Shelburne Falls

Northfield Center

Turners Falls

## Funding

- Municipal Contributions
- Downtown Business / Property Owners
- State Grants
- Sponsorships

\*The Chamber of Commerce is one option for an existing organization



# Preliminary Costs

## Revised model shows a base budget for 3 downtowns at \$98,000

(Key changes: adjusted salary and reduced program expenses)

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<b>Administration:</b>	<b>\$84,000</b>
<b>Program Expenses:</b>	<b>\$6,000</b>
<b>Misc. Costs:</b>	<b><u>\$8,000</u></b>
<b>Total expenses</b>	<b>\$98,000</b>

Assumptions: 1 FTE (Salary \$65,000 + benefits at 30%, \$19,500), Miscellaneous is overhead and direct costs.

Program expenses are minimized but are important to support project implementation. Additional funding may be available from grants/sponsorships.

# Model Implementation: A Phased Approach

## PILOT/Launch Phase

- The Launch Phase will allow the following:
  - Host organization hires Downtown Coordinator.
  - Steering committee or working group formed in each downtown with representatives from the municipality, businesses, property owners, arts organizations, non-profit organizations etc. to establish goals/priorities and to work with the Downtown Coordinator.
  - Define how the shared position will work in partnering communities and best leverage the host's assets as well as local, regional, state and other opportunities.
  - Implement 1-3 priority activities in each downtown.
  - Engage stakeholders and evaluate the effectiveness and value of model.
  - If backed, conduct outreach on next phase of the model and build support for and refine funding contribution levels.

# Model Implementation: A Phased Approach

## Transition Phase

- If the partnering entities want to continue the initiative, there would be increased levels of funding from municipalities and business/property owners.
- Strategically pursue additional grant funding to offset project implementation costs.
- Seek modest funding via sponsorships for events and programming in each community.
- Begin coordination and implementation of key projects in each downtown.



# Model Implementation: A Phased Approach

## Sustainability Phase

- If the partnering entities want to ensure sustainability over time and increase the level of commitment, a formal structure would be established to collect funds and establish set agreements.
  - Engage and inform stakeholders about different district organization options.
  - Develop and build support for broader participation



# Model Implementation: A Phased Approach

## Expansion Phase

- If the downtown (s) in Franklin County are interested in joining this initiative, explore expansion to more than one full-time Downtown Coordinator.
- If Downtown Coordinator services are expanded, contributions from the new municipalities, businesses, and property owners in these communities will be required.



# Next Steps

- **Finalize Report – January/February 2025**  
*To be made available online*
- **Rural Downtown Coordinator PILOT Project**
  - Rural Development Fund grant award to FRCOG for services in Northfield Center, Shelburne Falls and Turners Falls.
  - Begins in February/March 2025 for a 12–18-month period.
  - Additional contributions from FRCOG’s DLTA program and selected host organization to be sought and nominal contributions to be requested from participating municipal governments and downtown businesses and property owners.