

# Healthy Hilltowns

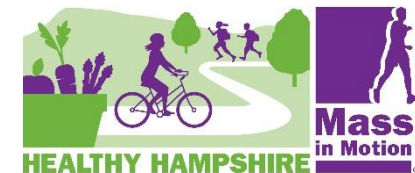
*A report for Healthy Hampshire*

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This report was commissioned by Healthy Hampshire to better understand the current state of policies, programs, and activities related to healthy living in ten towns in the Hilltown Region of western Massachusetts. The information below was obtained through conversations with municipal board members, residents, and regional non-profit staff, as well as field observations from January through March 2016. Funding for the report was provided through the Mass in Motion program of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.



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## Health Data for Hilltown communities

QUINTILES are numbers that range from 1 to 5. Each community was assigned a number based on the percentage of people in the community with a given risk/protective factor or health condition compared to other communities across the state. A number of "1" means the community has one of the lowest percentages of people reporting a health condition, risk factor, or protective factor, while a number of "5" means that the community has one of the highest percentages of people with that health condition, risk factor, or protective factor. All data using quintiles was calculated using the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), which is an annual statewide survey of Massachusetts residents. Cells highlighted in blue represent quintile numbers of concern—in most cases, a "4" or a "5" (high percentage). For prevalence for fruit/vegetable consumption, the quintile numbers of concern would be a "1" or "2" (low percentage).

Quintiles: "1" = lowest percentage, "5" = highest percentage									
	Population	Percent Ages 65+	Percent of individuals whose income is below poverty level (2010)	Prevalence of diabetes (2008-2010)	Prevalence of 5 or more fruits/vegetables per day (2005-2009) *	Prevalence of high blood pressure (2005-2009)	Prevalence of overweight and obesity (2009-2011)	Prevalence of just obesity (2009-2011)	Lack of physical activity (2001-2009)
Massachusetts	6,587,536	14%	11%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Blandford	1,184	8%	6%	3	4	2	3	4	2
Chester	1,275	16%	7%	2	4	3	2	2	3
Chesterfield	1,015	13%	4%	4	2	3	4	3	2
Cummington	1,100	15%	14%	3	2	4	4	3	4
Goshen	1,080	13%	1%	4	2	3	3	4	4
Huntington	2,206	14%	11%	3	2	2	4	5	2
Middlefield	418	13%	1%	5	2	5	4	5	4
Plainfield	611	25%	5%	5	2	5	4	3	4
Russell	1,665	11%	6%	4	1	2	4	4	2
Worthington	1,167	15%	8%	4	4	4	5	2	2

\* High percentage is favorable

# 1. HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS

## 1.1 Local Markets

There is a genuine lack of access to fresh, healthy food in the ten towns, especially for people who do not have transportation or live in the more remote towns. Most people do their grocery shopping in one of the nearby cities like Westfield, Pittsfield, and Northampton. Many people said that they access fresh fruit and vegetables from their own gardens throughout the growing season. Even with poor soils and steep slopes, people are clearly making their gardens work for their own needs. There seems to be a fair amount of interest in classes on preserving food and extending the harvest as well.

There is a market or general store in every town but Plainfield, Middlefield, and Chesterfield. Chesterfield’s former general store is vacant and for sale, and Middlefield’s former store has been condemned and will likely be razed soon. All of the stores, with the exception of the Old Creamery Coop, are more of a convenience store selection and have very limited fresh food. Some of the stores sold some potatoes and onions, though most have milk, eggs, and some meat options. Moltenbrey’s Market in Huntington and the Old Creamery are the only stores that have a real selection of fruit and vegetables and a deli counter with a variety of meat and prepared foods. The Creamery transformed to a cooperative model of ownership about 5 years ago, and sells organic fruit and vegetables.

In the towns north of Huntington, only the Old Creamery Coop accepts SNAP EBT customers, and many people said that the Creamery is too expensive for their budgets, leaving a major gap in healthy food access in Plainfield, Goshen, Chesterfield and Worthington. There are SNAP retailers in nearby Williamsburg and Huntington, but there is no public transportation to these locations. Most of the SNAP retailers in the southern towns are package stores that also sell milk, bread, and canned fruit, so the best selection of foods for SNAP clients is Cumberland Farms in Russell.

Market		Healthy Food	SNAP/EBT
Blandford Store	Blandford	Meat, dairy	
A&L Market	Chester	Deli	
Chester Village Market	Chester	Bananas, oranges	Yes
Old Creamery Coop	Cummington	Organic veggies and fruit, frozen meat, deli	Yes
Goshen General store	Goshen	Potatoes, onions, limited deli	
B and D Variety	Huntington	Bread, limited dairy	Yes
Bridge Store	Huntington	Bread, meat, canned fruit and vegetables	Yes

Moltenbrey's Market	Huntington	Meat, veggies, fruit, deli	Yes
Cumberland Farms	Russell	Dairy, bread, deli	Yes
Russell Package Store and Deli	Russell	Dairy, bread, deli	Yes
Worthington General Store	Worthington	Potatoes, onions, limited dairy, fresh soup, cheese	

## 1.2 Farms

There are 51 farms in the 10 ten-town region that grow and sell fruit, vegetables, dairy, or meat. This does not include the many informal farmstands that pop up during the growing season for home gardeners or homesteaders to sell their extra veggies and eggs. Several of the farms on the list are relatively new, smaller scale, diverse operations run by younger farmers reacting to the demand for grass fed meat as well as more vegetables. Though there are only a couple of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms and year round farm stands, there are additional options in the nearby towns of Ashfield, Williamsburg, and Westhampton. The two CSA's are Crabapple Farm in Chesterfield and Sawyer Farm in Worthington. The Hilltown Food Pantry had a grant funded share at Crabapple that served about 4 families but staff had to pick it up every week in Chesterfield and transport veggies to Goshen. The program funding was not renewed and the program was discontinued. Sawyer Farm is a diverse, year round CSA share mainly of meat, bread, grains, eggs, and storage crops. CSA membership is limited to around 10 members as this new model gets off the ground.

The three year round farm stands are Kinne Brook Farm's beef, eggs, and pork in Worthington, Cream of the Crop Dairy's raw milk, cheese, yogurt, and meat in Russell, and Wolf's Farm Stand in Cummington, offering a range of products from storage crops, milk and cheese, to soda and pet food. The farm stands are unstaffed and operate on the honor system.

Much of the below information on specific farms is drawn from the Keep Farming Initiative led by the Hilltown Community Development Corporation. That grassroots community process generated a wealth of information about agriculture in the Hilltowns and an Action Plan that is pending additional funding for implementation. The valuable report is available on the CDC's website.

### Hilltowns Farm Inventory

Farm	Address	Notes
<b>Blandford</b>		
Falls Brook Farm	39 Herrick Road, Blandford	Seasonal
Walnut Hill Farm	35 Gibbs Road, Blandford	PYO blueberries, vegetables, hay

Barbara Blair's farmstand	Sunset Road, Blandford	Seasonal
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**Chester**

Jameson's High Meadow Farm	410 Skyline Trail Chester	fruit, eggs, hay
Pioneer Valley Organic Farm	97 Old State Rd, Chester	berries

**Chesterfield**

Crabapple Farm	P.O. Box 263, Chesterfield 01012	CSA/farmstand-vegetables, grains, beef, lamb, eggs
Roberts Family Farm	222 South Street, Chesterfield 01012	
Golden Sunset Farm	P.O. Box 112 Chesterfield 01012	
Bare Roots Farm	330 Ireland St., Chesterfield	Seasonal farmstand- vegetables, fruit, herbs, medicinals

**Cummington**

Cranberry Moon Farm	208 Trouble Street, Cummington 01026	
Cumworth Farm	472 West Cummington Road, Cummington 01026	
Goat Nook Farm	42 Main Street, Cummington 01026	Goat milk, soap, eggs
Grace Hill Farm	47 Potash Hill Road, Cummington 01026	Dairy, cheese
Gordon's Fold	556 Stage Rd, Cummington 01026	
Honker's Pond	249 Stage Road, Cummington 01026	
Howes Family Farm	35 Nash Road, Cummington 01026	
Joyner Farm	88 Dodwells Road, Cummington 01026	
Rock Paper Scissors Goat Dairy	11 Porter Hill Road, Cummington 01026	
Splendorview Farm	160 Bryant Road, Cummington 01026	
Taproot Commons Farm	11 Porter Hill Road, Cummington 01026	
Upland Meadows Farm	338 W Cummington Road, Cummington 01026	
Ridale Genetics		
Windswept Farm	216 Porter Hill Road, Cummington 01026	
Doktor Philbrick Farm	87 Potash Hill Road	
Wolf Farm Stand	Plainfield Rd., Cummington	Year round farm stand- meat, vegetables, dairy

**Goshen**

Appalachian Naturals	P.O. Box 704	Bottled sauces, dressings
Judd Family Farm	145 Berkshire Trail West Goshen 01032	
Hilltown Grazers	86 Spruce Corner Rd.	Pork

**Huntington**

Gray's Dog Farm	35 Church Rd, Huntington	Meat CSA
Blue Chick Farm	124 County Rd., Huntington	

**Middlefield**

Blue Heaven Berry Farm	246 Skyline Trail, Middlefield	PYO blueberries and raspberries
Left Field Farm	20 Root Rd., Middlefield	vegetables, herbs

**Plainfield**

Ginny Ansberg's Farm	133 East Main Street, Plainfield 01070	
Manda Farm	P.O. Box 40, Plainfield 01070	Pork, eggs, vegetables
Sangha Farm/Goat Rising	134 West Hill Road, Plainfield 01070	
Summit Farm	131 Summit Street, Plainfield 01070	
Little Birtch Farm	92 Summit Street, Plainfield 01070	
Bellows Farms	35 Grant Street Plainfield	
Two Sisters Farm	208 West Hill Road Plainfield	
4 Corners Vegetable Stand	3 South Central, Plainfield 01070	
Peace Haven Farm	71 Pleasant Street Plainfield	

**Worthington**

Big Sky Farm	67 Radiker Road, Worthington 01098	
Four Corners Farm		
Kinne Brook Farm	481 Kinne Brook Road, Worthington 01098	Beef, pork, eggs
Sawyer Farm	19 Sawyer Road, Worthington 01098	Year round CSA- vegetables, meat, bread
Hickory Hill Farm		
Running Fox Farm	74 Thrasher Hill Road, Worthington 01098	
White Rock Farm	Parish Road	
Bare Roots Farm	P.O. Box 251, 74 Thrasher Hill Road Worthington 01098	

**Russell**

Cream of the Crop Dairy	601 Blandford Rd. Russell	Year round farm stand- beef, pork, dairy, eggs, chicken
Moss Hill Farm	222 Upper Moss Hill Road, Russell	Seasonal vegetables

*Source: Keep Farming in the Hilltowns, CISA Farm Products Guide and website, and personal interviews and reconnaissance  
Maple syrup and tree farms were excluded.*

### **1.3 Farmer's Markets**

There are no farmer's markets in the region. Residents of Blandford patronize the nearby East Otis Farmer's Market on Rt. 23. Transportation to other regional markets such as Ashfield, Northampton, and Westfield is an obstacle, especially for senior citizens. The Highland Valley Elder Services offered many vouchers to senior citizens to pay 50% of the cost of purchases at local farmers markets, but the vouchers were not in high demand, and many vendors seemed confused by them when they were utilized.

For several years in the mid-2000's there was a farmer's market in Cummington organized and supported by the Hilltown CDC, but it never became economically viable to continue on its own.

### **1.4 Food Pantries and Food Assistance**

Hilltown Food Pantry in Goshen serves 9 Hilltowns through the Northampton Survival Center. Farmers donate surplus produce during the growing season on a case by case, informal basis. The Food Pantry used to purchase vegetables through Enterprise Farm in Whately, but after the management changed at Enterprise, they started purchasing food through Squash Trucking. The Pioneer Valley Assembly of God Church operates the weekly Huntington Food Pantry with CDBG funding and food through the Food Bank and Project Bread.

The Village Church and the Old Creamery in Cummington team up every fall to share the cost of delivering turkeys to needy families. The church develops a list of people that the congregation knows could use help, and shares the cost of the turkeys with the Old Creamery.

### **1.5 Community Gardens**

There are two active and one fledgling community gardens in the region. Raspberry Hill Community Garden is located on the Guyette Farm, owned by the Franklin Land Trust. The community garden has about 20 plots, tended by people from both Plainfield and Cummington. One community plot is tended by all the gardeners and the yield is donated weekly to residents of Hillside Terrace, a small public housing complex on Main St. in Cummington. Countryside Community Garden in Russell is run by the director of the Southern Hilltown Adult Education Center, and is located on the land in front of Countryside Woodcraft. Now entering their third year, the garden is adding plots to the 36 existing 20'x20' plots that are available for a suggested donation of \$20/year. Only organic gardening methods are allowed, and classes are offered on non-chemical pest management. Gardeners come from Chester, Blandford, Huntington, Middlefield and Westfield. Michele Kinney, the Director of the SHAEC, coordinates and teaches classes on canning, cheese making, raising animals, etc, at senior centers throughout region to help people learn to preserve their harvest.



The Blandford Council on Aging and the Recreation Committee have launched a community garden to promote intergenerational interaction. Last year they planted fruit bushes on land in front of Town Hall, and this year they plan to expand it to raised beds, herbs, and vegetables. They also plan on including art projects, bird houses, scare crows, and offering gardening classes. This will be more of a community project, and less of a food access or food security effort.

### **1.6 Local Hilltown Initiatives**

The Free Veggie Cart, a 'take or leave' surplus food cart was stationed at the Old Creamery for a few years, but moved to the Cummington Congregational Church after the Creamery turned into a Coop. The Cart required regular volunteer monitoring to close it up at night, clean out unused food, and clean up after animal visits. Old Creamery staff ended up filling the volunteer staffing gaps, which was one of the reasons it was moved to the church, where it languished. It was initially successful thanks in part to one volunteer who had access to a local farm, so would regularly stock it with surplus veggies. That volunteer left after the first year and it never worked as well afterwards.

Similarly, the Blandford Library created a space to leave or take fresh vegetables in the growing season, as well as a seed swap. The librarian reports that not very many people took advantage of it. They also planted a small garden in the front of the library and created a meal for children made from veggies that were grown there.

Alice Cozzolino and Amy Pulley, the former owners of the Old Creamery, are planning a Community Soup project. Their vision is to offer a greatly reduced cooking class (\$10 to cover materials) where they make 6 types of soup in large batches and then distribute the majority of the soup to publically available freezers for people in need. It will likely pilot in Cummington, Plainfield, and Worthington and be located at the Community House and fire stations.

### **1.7 Other Food Access Methods**

Alice Cozzolino and Amy Pulley run Alice's Kitchen at Honey Hill out of their home in Cummington. This is a new model of a Community Supported Foods business, where you can order a weekly prepared meal or order a la carte items. Many of the ingredients used are grown on site or nearby and most are organic.

Schwan's Food delivers fresh and frozen food to the region, though the prices likely prohibit most people from utilizing this company. There are three bulk food purchasing clubs in the region, Acres of Diamonds in Worthington, Wild Mountain Thyme in Huntington, and an unnamed, struggling one in Middlefield. This one flourished with several families with young children, who are now grown, and thus the volume has diminished to the point of becoming unviable.

### **1.8 Senior Citizens and Food Access**

The senior citizen population is served by a team of social service organizations and agencies. Congregate meals in Huntington, Middlefield, and Russell are offered weekly through Highland Valley Elder Services. The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts runs the Brown Bag program, providing a free bag of healthy groceries to eligible seniors once a month. This program is offered through the Councils on Aging in Chester, Chesterfield, Huntington, and Russell. According to COA Coordinators, the attendees seem to care more about the quality of the company and the opportunity to get out of the house than the quality of the food. Meals on Wheels serves frozen meals, but has been cut back severely. Recipients also need to be able to answer the door to receive the food, which limits its utility for the very old and infirm.

### **1.9 Transportation**

The region does not have a comprehensive transportation provider. The Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA) has no plans to extend transit service and the region's population density is too low to support viable transit. The two vans that service the region are operated through a contract with Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA) located in a neighboring county. These two contracted vans are operated through two municipalities (Goshen and Chester). The vans are run out of the town's Council's on Aging and are underutilized at best due to the limited capacity of the towns which are run primarily by volunteer government. In 2015 the town of Goshen approached the Hilltown CDC to see if the non-profit could take over operation of the van and its contract. That was not practical at the time. However, it facilitated a relationship which is now in place between Hilltown CDC and the FRTA. The FRTA is currently working with the Hilltown CDC and the Regional Coordinating Council to study the transportation needs of the Hilltown region.

### **1.10 Opportunities for Increasing Access to Healthy Food**

Working with the local stores to carry more fresh or healthy food would provide the most immediate opportunity for the most residents to access healthier food. That is clearly a tall order with complex economic forces at play.

Kathy Harrison from Cummington who has worked in the social service field for many years had some simple suggestions. She suggested providing cooking classes with some typical food available at food pantries. For example, it's often hard to give away dry beans because people don't know how to cook them. The people that often need the most help are low income women with young children, without a lot of free time. They need assistance learning how to cook healthy food that their kids will eat. Group classes also create social support and networks that help grow community. Women especially connect over cooking food. Kathy also said that the community needs more gardening education and support. For example, use the Victory Gardens as a model of a successful program, and provide people with seeds and information on growing some basic, nutritious plants like tomatoes, kale, and zucchini.

Similarly, community rooms and halls could provide canning space and equipment since it can be expensive, and difficult to access or store, along with group canning classes or canning days.

## **2. PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND WALKING**

### **2.1 Blandford**

Blandford has several town owned resources that residents use as a destination and loops for walks. Watson Park in the center of town is about 10 acres with an old roughly paved road running along its perimeter. The Council on Aging organizes walks for seniors using the park and the sidewalks in the village. Some walkers extend their walks to Kaolin Rd., and out and back routes along North St. and Blandford Rd. in their route.

The Knittel Conservation Area is a former farm that includes many miles of trails, one of which is relatively flat and accessible. The Blandford Forest Committee has identified two areas that would be well suited to developing trails in the future – the Shepard Farm, a wooded property owned by the town, and the old trolley track that runs from Blandford to Huntington center and is still clear enough to hike. The land may be owned by a power company as there are power lines running across the track at various points. As a trolley track, the route is fairly flat and could make for a good bike and walking path, either paved or gravel.

### **2.2 Chester**

Chester's village has sidewalks through Main Street and most side streets. The condition and width varies considerably, with some so narrow and crumbling it would be difficult to walk on them. People do report walking the streets of the village, especially over the beautiful newly reconstructed bridge along Maple Street. Other nearby streets without sidewalks are also used, such as Middlefield Road, which is flat for a section as it follows the river and has a wide shoulder. People also walk along the shoulder of Rt. 20, even though car speeds are 50-60 mph.

The Keystone Arch Bridges Trail is a 2.5 mile trail to a series of beautiful, strikingly high railroad bridges crossing the Westfield River. Portions of the trail follow old roads, and the first mile is relatively flat and could be made more accessible for a wider range of walking abilities. Though most of the trail is on land owned by MA Department of Fish and Game, the access to the trail is privately owned and has been hung up with legal issues. Dave Pierce, the President of the Friends of the Keystone Arch Bridges, has also been working on an "urban footpath" that starts at the Chester Railroad Museum and connects to the Pink Quarry in neighboring Becket following old railroad lines. The route is still in the conceptual phase but would highlight many historic resources such as an old gristmill, remains of a dam, and bridge abutments. This route might dovetail with the Highland Footpath that PVPC is undertaking.

### **2.3 Chesterfield**

Most people in Chesterfield who walk do so on the East Branch Trail which begins at the Chesterfield Gorge. This beautiful discontinued dirt road travels 7 relatively flat miles along the Westfield River. Bikers, fisherman, and snowmobilers use the trail and access points as

well. There is some parking available at the Trustees of Reservations' Gorge parking lot, where a \$3 fee is requested for non-members. Demand is high enough that the abutting Rod and Gun Club recently expanded and improved their parking lot and is now requesting donations by users as well.

The center of town has a short stretch of sidewalks with new curb cuts and a cross walk across Rt. 143. People walk the Main Street Loop on streets emanating from Russell Park in the center of town (see Map). As the state redid Route 143, they planned to redo the sidewalks through the center of town. However, one section of sidewalk was built with historic field stone so residents objected to replacing the sidewalk material. The town applied to the State Accessibility Board to waive the sidewalk upgrade requirement but was denied. The engineer is currently redesigning and getting specifications for a stamped concrete option that would allow the existing field stones to remain with only a new surface added. The state will pay for the new designs and construction, budget allowing.

Chesterfield has identified a 43 acre parcel of land suitable for senior housing. The land has the potential of connecting by trail to the Davenport town offices, and the landowner in the middle (a selectman) has already given his permission for a trail to cross his land. The Conway School will be preparing a site plan as part of its spring semester for the land and possible development.

## **2.4 Cummington**

A popular, flat place for people to walk in Cummington is called 'the Main St. Loop'. Roughly 1.75 miles long, the loop can start at the Congregational Church, the Community House, or the Berkshire Trail Elementary school, then follows Main St. through the heart of the Village, crosses the river and heads back along Nash Rd, Lilac Ave, and Rt. 9. Lots of regulars walk it every day, most of whom live nearby but some drive down and park. Though the Elementary School is closed, a preschool and It Takes a Village's community closet (providing free baby and kids goods) operate there, so it is popular location for parents to walk while their kids are in school. About half of this walk currently has sidewalks, though there is very little car traffic on the other side roads.

A second loop that people report walking is along the very scenic stretch of Rt. 112 near the Bryant Homestead. From Rt. 112, there's a nice loop incorporating Bryant Road, and returns along Potash Hill Rd. These are both paved and dirt roads with no sidewalks, lined with beautiful, mature maple trees.

For off-road walking, the main trail at The Trustees of Reservations' Bryant Homestead is the Rivulet Trail, an easy 1.5 mile walk through stately old growth pine trees along a brook. It's used by tourists and residents alike. Parking at the trail head is on the road shoulder, and is free.

## **2.5 Goshen**

Goshen has no sidewalks. There is a very short pedestrian path between the Congregational Church and its parking lot along Rt. 9. Goshen is the only town in the region that has adopted the Community Preservation Act. The town is currently proposing a senior housing development on land adjacent to the church in the center of town. The town has used CPA funding to do the due diligence and planning phases, and Hilltown CDC is exploring funding and development of the parcel.

The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation's D.A.R. State Forest hosts the only official universally accessible trail in the region. This .8 mile trail traverses the edge of Upper Highland Lake. The trail also features an accessible fishing dock and boat ramp. DCR charges \$5 per vehicle to access the park from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

People report seeing walkers and joggers along West Street, but there are no sidewalks or shoulder, and traffic drives quite fast on this road. It is possible to make a loop, but there are very steep hills involved.

## **2.6 Huntington**

Huntington has sidewalks on most streets in the village, though some are very narrow and in need of repair. A well-traveled walking route is along the main stretch of Rt. 112's sidewalks from the bridge up to the Huntington Country Store, with possible add on loops through Pine St. or Crescent St. This route also passes by the library, Moltenbrey's, and several small stores. Moltenbrey's Market, one of the largest and well stocked stores in the region, is located across the street (Rt. 112) from its main parking lot. This road is busy and there is a faded cross walk between the parking lot and the store. The Healthwise Program located at the Hilltown Family Center coordinates a regular walking group for seniors twice a week, often along this route. They report that the village loop can be a little tricky due to rough and narrow sidewalks.

Just up the road from the village and Gateway Regional School is Littleville Dam, which attracts walkers, dog walkers, bikers, and fishermen. On land owned by the Army Corps of Engineers, the Littleville Dam is a well-used walking site, reported to be used at all times of day, from retirees walking in the early morning to a mothers group in the middle of the day. The wide, flat paved road travels .5 miles across the dam and is located relatively close to the sidewalks in the village and can be turned into a loop walk if hills are not an obstacle.

A nearby site, the Knightville Dam basin, is a dirt road running along the impoundment created by the dam, from Rt. 112 in Huntington to Rt. 112 in Worthington. This route is popular as well, but can't be safely used in the fall due to its popularity with hunters.

Paralleling both the Westfield River and the CSX train tracks, Route 20 between Huntington to Chester is relatively flat with wide shoulders, and is used for walking and jogging despite 50-60 mph travel speeds. This is one of the only major roads in the region that

would be a natural fit for a bike lane or pedestrian path between the two villages. Route 20 is Jacob's Ladder Scenic Byway and the Westfield River is a National Wild and Scenic River, which could both add support for such an endeavor.

## **2.7 Middlefield**

Middlefield is one of the smallest and most remote towns in Massachusetts, and has no sidewalks or public walking trails. People report walking along Skyline Trail, the main road running through Middlefield, though it is not possible to make it a loop route. With very little car traffic, walking on the shoulder of the road does not pose a serious problem, and the road is very scenic. River Road is a popular road for residents to walk, but creating a loop requires steep inclines and a much longer (>8 mile) route. Parking is possible on River Road at the Trustees of Reservations' Glendale Falls Reservation, which has a steep trail and steps along the second highest waterfall in Massachusetts.

## **2.8 Plainfield**

Plainfield has no sidewalks and very few flat roads. People like to walk along South Union St. to River Road, a pretty road along the Mill Brook. Parking is available in the center of town at the Congregational Church, just across Rt. 116 from where South Union St. begins. There is also a pull off on River Rd. at a historic mill site which is owned and preserved by the town. It is possible to make a loop out of these roads, but they are hilly and long routes. There are hiking opportunities nearby at the Dubuque State Forest and the Guyette Farm, but none that are accessible, flat, or well suited to a range of walkers' abilities.

## **2.9 Russell**

Russell has nice sidewalks along its flat Main St. and three side streets in the village, one of which leads to Russell Elementary School. People walk a mile loop along Main St. to Old Westfield Rd. and return along Rt. 20, which does not have sidewalks. Nobleview, a large conservation property owned by the Appalachian Mountain Club has one circuit trail that is an easy, relatively flat 1 mile walk. The other trails at the property are more challenging.

## **2.10 Worthington**

Worthington has no sidewalks in the town, which does not seem to deter its residents from walking. People walk along Rt. 112, which has wide shoulders and fast moving traffic, and is relatively flat through the center of town. One popular loop starts at the Conwell School, where parking is available, proceeds up Ridge Road past the golf course, and then along Buffington Hill Road back to 112. Other popular walking spots are along Kinne Brook Road and the Jones lot/Albert Air Strip, a 300 acre parcel along Rt. 112 with an abandoned air field. The Jones lot is also a good place to walk dogs off leash.

## **2.11 Village Centers**

The village centers of the region range from very sparse to quite compact. The below table summarizes some key characteristics about the villages. Note that housing density comparisons are relative to rural villages, not urban centers.

## Village Centers

	Retail Establishments*	Housing Density	Sidewalks	Library in Village
<b>Blandford</b>	1	Medium	Yes	Yes
<b>Chester</b>	5	High	Yes	Yes
<b>Chesterfield</b>	0	Medium	Yes	Yes
<b>Cummington</b>	1	High	Yes	No
<b>Goshen</b>	1	Low	No	Yes
<b>Huntington</b>	15	High	Yes	Yes
<b>Middlefield</b>	0	Low	No	No
<b>Plainfield</b>	0	Low	No	Yes
<b>Russell</b>	3	High	Yes	Yes
<b>Worthington</b>	1	Low	No	Yes

\*Source: Hilltown CDC Business Directory

### 2.12 Schools

The Gateway Regional School created a community wellness center when the school was renovated about 15 years ago. The fee-based center includes free weights, weight machines, exercise bikes, treadmills, and elliptical machines. The center is open before and after school and on Saturday mornings, and memberships vary from \$225 for an individual to \$550 for a family. The center has been well used over the years, but membership is starting to decline due to the aging equipment, particularly the electronic cardio machines that require a computer to run. These machines have broken down over time and have not been replaced.

The gymnasium at the School is available for rent to community groups for a nominal custodial fee, however the gym is used by many school teams throughout the week and weekend so finding an available time may be a challenge. No other schools in the Gateway district are used by the public for recreation that I could find.

Hampshire Regional High School serves Chesterfield, Goshen, Southampton, Westhampton, and Williamsburg. The high school has a track which is used informally on weekends and non-school hours, but there is no policy in place allowing public access. New Hingham

Elementary school in Chesterfield is used by a weekly men’s basketball game, but there are no other ongoing recreational uses of the school buildings and grounds.

### 2.13 Municipal Buildings and Community Use Agreements

Each town in the region has a town hall, most of which have large halls that are well suited for exercise. Many of these halls are currently being used or have been used at some point in the recent past for group exercise or yoga classes. Based on the number of classes that are no longer offered at these locations, the demand for exercise classes does not appear to be high. For currently operating classes, the towns recognize that offering the classes is a community benefit and do not charge the instructor or organizer, so that all fees go to the instructor. Several of the Councils on Aging offer gentle yoga in their spaces. The only hall that is being used regularly for walking is the Blandford Town Hall, a former elementary school, which is open every day, and is used regularly by two women who walk the halls and gym in the winter.

None of these towns or schools have formal community use agreements, though some do have rental policies and applications for any outside group that wants to use the space. These outline fee structures, liability, and general rules and regulations, as well as the process for obtaining permission to use the hall. Every person interviewed in charge of processing these forms said that the space is used infrequently.

<b>Municipal and Community Buildings</b>		<b>Current or Past Use</b>
<b>Blandford</b>	Town Offices (former elementary school)	Exercise class, 2 women use it for walking
<b>Chester</b>	Chester Blandford Elementary School	None
	Town Hall	Karate
<b>Chesterfield</b>	New Hingham Elementary	Men's basketball
	Town Hall	None
	Senior Center/Grange	None
<b>Cummington</b>	Berkshire Trail Elementary (recently closed)	Preschool, It Takes a Village community closet
	Community House	None
	Village Church	yoga
<b>Goshen</b>	Town Hall	Zumba class
<b>Huntington</b>	Stanton Hall	Zumba, yoga, aerobics



	Littleville Elementary	None
<b>Middlefield</b>	Town Hall (former elementary school)	Zumba in the past
	COA Building	Exercise class in the past
<b>Plainfield</b>	Town Hall	Exercise class in the past
	Old Fire Station	Aerobics class in the past
<b>Russell</b>	Russell Elementary	None
<b>Worthington</b>	Town Hall	Basketball
	Conwell School	None inside, people use playgrounds and fields

### 2.13 Community Organizations

There are number of organizations operating in the Hilltowns that are partners in creating healthy, more active communities. Most of the non-profits and religious organizations listed below are based in the region, though All Out Adventure is located in Northampton, CISA in South Deerfield, and Pioneer Valley Planning Commission in Springfield.

<b>Community Organization</b>	<b>Health Related Work</b>
All Out Adventure	Accessible, organized recreation for seniors
Assembly of God Church	Food security, pantry
Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA)	Food systems connections, local farm marketing
Friends of the Keystone Arch Bridges	Trails
Hilltown Community Development Corporation	Housing, economic development, transportation
Hilltown Community Health Center	Health services, Councils on Aging
Hilltown Families	Family wellness events, connections to local farms
Hilltown Land Trust/The Trustees of Reservations	Land conservation, trails
Jacob's Ladder Scenic Byway Committee	Trails, economic development
Pioneer Valley Mennonite Fellowship	Agriculture, community garden (indirectly)

Pioneer Valley Planning Commission	Policies, bylaws, regulations
Southern Hilltown Adult Education Center	Food cultivation and preservation
Westfield River Wild and Scenic Advisory Committee	Trails

### 2.14 Opportunities and Recommendations

There is very little utilitarian walking underway in the region, though village residents in Chester and Huntington are the best situated to avail themselves of their proximity to a wider range of services by walking. Even here, the sidewalk and pedestrian infrastructure is lacking. Wider, smooth sidewalks, visible crosswalks, curb cuts and extensions would all be significant improvements to the two village centers. With two sidewalk improvement projects underway in Huntington and Chesterfield, the towns and Mass Dept. of Transportation are clearly working to address some of these issues.

Given the increasing awareness of walking as a health promoting strategy and the popularity of fitness gadgets that gauge daily steps, measuring and advertising the distance between common destinations in these village centers would encourage more people to walk them. For example, creating a well-marked route between the Huntington Library and Moltenbrey’s, or the Chester Post Office to the Chester Village Market and promoting them as safe and relatively short walks would be one strategy to encourage walking.

In more rural towns like Worthington and Chesterfield, providing a safe place to park a manageable distance from the center of town could encourage people to leave their cars for part of their trip. Denoting the distance and estimated time it would require to walk to the village would be essential to making the walk more feasible for a wide array of walkers.

The region’s libraries are a major assets in their respective communities, often taking on more of a community building role by organizing social events, gardening projects, etc. Partnering with the libraries, perhaps by creating a safe walking loop using the library as a base, would be a relatively easy and accessible project to encourage walking. A model for this kind of program is the Healthwise Program, where the program director, Diane Meehan, worked with senior citizens to create a personalized walking route from their home.

Though not utilitarian targets, there are three walking loops and destinations that could be promoted as walking destinations, such as the East Branch Trail, Cummington’s Main St. Loop, and Watson Park in Blandford. The East Branch Trail is attractive in all seasons, with the river access and heavy tree cover keeping it cool even during hot summer months. The trail could benefit from more promotion as a relatively accessible destination, and some improvements. More formal mile markers would be a helpful addition to the trail. The Westfield River Wild and Scenic Advisory Committee provides general oversight of the trail, and has identified safe access over the bank to the river as a priority need. DAR State Forest would be a similarly attractive destination but the entrance fee may be a significant

deterrent for regular use. Cummington’s Main Street Loop is in the heart of the quaint village, and could have some utilitarian role as it passes by the post office and Cummington Supply (a lumber and building supply company). The family-friendly uses in the Berkshire Trail school would also dovetail well with building a walking program there and perhaps utilizing some of the interior of the building. Watson Park is a very scenic destination and is very well situated next to the Town Hall, and close to the library and general store.

### **3. REGULATIONS AND POLICIES**

#### **3.1 Zoning And Subdivision Assessment**

Though the zoning bylaws in the Hilltowns tend to be rather straightforward and simple, the region’s Planning Boards have been gradually updating them as evidenced by the inclusion of several wind and solar bylaws (Blandford, Chester, Chesterfield), wireless communication bylaws (Plainfield, Chester, Cummington, Middlefield), a flexible/open space development bylaw (Worthington, Chesterfield, Cummington, Huntington), and river or watershed protection bylaws (most towns). None of the updates, however, substantially improve the bylaws’ consideration of agricultural uses, community gardens, or pedestrian infrastructure, including the open space development bylaws that require conservation land.

#### **3.2 Pedestrian Infrastructure**

Most towns require sidewalks in their subdivision regulations, often with the discretion of the Planning Board. However, many of the planning board members I spoke with felt that such requirements would be out of character since the sidewalks would end at the terminus of the new road. Requiring new roads to include a higher level of pedestrian infrastructure than exists even in the center of their town seems to them irrational.

In several towns (Chester, Middlefield, Cummington) this phrase is the only guidance of whether sidewalks are required or not—“*Due consideration shall also be given by the subdivider to the attractiveness of the street layout in order to obtain the maximum livability and amenity of the subdivision.*” Other towns however have fairly specific requirements for requiring a pedestrian path parallel to the road or a sidewalk if the Planning Board deems it necessary. Trails are only mentioned in Cummington’s Flexible Residential Open Space Development, where a developer is encouraged to connect to any pre-existing trail network.

Chesterfield and Huntington have the most extensive and thorough zoning bylaws in the region, including parking provisions, site plan approval, design guidelines, and performance standards. Plainfield and Blandford have no subdivision regulations whatsoever, so the state standards would apply if a subdivision is ever proposed.

#### **3.3 Agricultural Policies and Bylaws**

Most towns are zoned agricultural residential with a small village or business district in the center of town. Agriculture is allowed according to state statute, with some qualifiers. Large scale raising of poultry, pigs, and fur bearing animals is generally not allowed or by

special permit. In Middlefield, agriculture is allowed by special permit in the business district and must be over 5 acres in the floodplain district. Agricultural buildings are allowed by right as an accessory building in residential zones. Farm stands are allowed, though Chester, Chesterfield, Cummington and Goshen established some requirements. They must be on parcels of 5 acres and up in Chester, are subject to site plan review in Chesterfield, are not allowed in the village or industrial zones in Cummington, and must sell a majority of products grown on-site in Goshen.

Eight towns have adopted a Right to Farm bylaw, which is a general bylaw that establishes the primacy of agriculture as a use, and serves as a notice to residents that the byproducts or disturbances associated with agriculture are not grounds for complaint. Plainfield and Huntington have installed signs at town boundaries on major roads promoting their Right to Farm status.

Community gardens and farmers markets are not mentioned in any zoning bylaw or subdivision regulation.

**See the Appendix for additional town by town details.**

### **3.4 Opportunities and Recommendations**

Changing the regulations or limitations on farm stands are one area that would have immediate benefit for some gardeners and many residents, particularly in Chester, where the 5 acre minimum has prevented some gardeners from selling their surplus. Volunteer capacity and interest in undertaking zoning changes may be an obstacle to broadscale updates, but small, focused changes like allowing farm stands and community gardens would be a far easier task. Working with the Keep Farming Initiative team to implement their recommendations to increase access to local food through town stores and markets may be more effective than creating a new action plan.

Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) serves as a very effective marketing outlet for local farms, and the majority of commercial farms selling direct to consumers are members. However, there are farms that are not members that the local community is not aware of. Town by town marketing of all agricultural products raised within the town borders may be an additional, effective strategy for increasing access to locally grown healthy food. For example, the Agricultural Commission in nearby Whately created an attractive brochure listing all farms in town, their products, and how to access them.

Given the prevalence of home gardening in the region, more support and attention could be provided to help increase yield, extend the growing season, and preserve the harvest for year round healthy food. The Southern Hilltown Adult Education Center's classes are well subscribed and could be replicated in the northern towns of the region.

Lastly, complete street policies would be a helpful strategy for increasing public officials' awareness of the need for more pedestrian amenities and accessing state transportation funds for infrastructure investments.