

INTRODUCTION AND DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

By embarking on a master planning process, the people of Fitchburg are demonstrating confidence in the capability of their leaders and themselves to forge a common vision for this historic New England city. History points clearly to the Nashua River as the original source of growth of the community. From around the river, the factories that were built became the source of employment and income that built Fitchburg's neighborhoods. As Fitchburg grew and prospered, it became a destination for the immigrant--moving west from Boston, building the city and its future.

Today Fitchburg residents, descendants of these immigrants, people who have moved to Fitchburg from all points of the compass--including new immigrants, look toward their collective future as a community. As the community looks to the future, it begins by recognizing the past. The Fitchburg community is framing a new vision, building on the past, and shaping the future. This is Fitchburg's plan "Vision2020".

The vision of the Master Plan for the City of Fitchburg is one which maintains and enhances the quality of life for residents and their neighborhoods, and enhances the historic and neighborhood aspects of life for the community. It sees a city in which the existing historic character must be maintained while building opportunities to enhance the quality of life through sensitively

designed new development. The heritage of the city would be protected while the future needs of the community are met--boldly and creatively.

Fitchburg, right now, is a complete city. Fitchburg provides a sensible variety of housing types to accommodate its citizens. The city has a rich diversity of industrial, commercial and professional facilities. The community of Fitchburg generously supports a wide range of religious, health, cultural, and education centers. There are public gathering spaces of all kinds, including literally dozens of beautiful parks and playgrounds strategically located throughout the city.

The Fitchburg community recognizes that the city must continue to change to meet the needs of the future. These include additional housing, expanded employment opportunities within the city, new and different services and adequate public facilities. The Master Plan builds upon and guides these changes. To provide a policy basis for the plan, a series of goals and objectives have been developed. These statements provide a commonly agreed-upon basis for decision-making in the various subjects addressed in the plan.

The goals are statements which the plan is intended to achieve. The objectives following each goal are a series of actions or ideas which would promote that goal. These goals and objectives provide a basis for developing land-use policy for the city and will assist in evaluating land-use and development proposals in the future.

The city's role as a source of prosperity to the region has been changing. The shift away from heavy manufacturing has left the old mill complexes in transition. Economic opportunities have changed. The move toward a service-based economy continues. We know economic values can be enhanced by a desirable community setting. Fitchburg is poised at an era of great opportunity if the community plans its assets wisely for the future.

The demands and expectations of how the city community resources are to be used are changing. Today a richer diversity of land uses is being sought. The work of the Vision2020 Advisory Committee then is both timely and vitally important. Timely in its ability to influence the direction of changing land use patterns. Important since current commitments to land use will affect the lives of the city residents for decades.

Which purposes then will the community assets serve? This plan was developed to address this question. Vision2020 provides direction in making wise policies for the future of the City of Fitchburg.

FITCHBURG - A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Located in the Montachusett region of north central Massachusetts, bordered by Westminster on the west, Ashby on the north, Lunenburg on the east, and Leominster on the south, Fitchburg is 25 miles north of Worcester, 46 miles northwest of Boston, and 211 miles from New York City. Encompassing approximately 28 square miles Fitchburg has a current population of just over 41,000.

Fitchburg's location on the Nashua River led to its development initially as an industrial center where mills were built to take advantage of the readily available water power. The construction of rail lines passing through Fitchburg on the Boston to Albany line increased the city's position as a manufacturing center. Heavy industries such as machine and tool works, clothing, and paper mills were the engines of significant growth throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

These heavy industries attracted large numbers of European immigrants to Fitchburg. The families that came seeking work usually chose to settle close to others with the same background, producing ethnic neighborhoods which retain much of their identity today. Already a diverse city, Fitchburg has seen its ethnic and racial diversity increase even further over the last decade. In addition to the groups which came to Fitchburg during the Industrial Era (Irish, Italian, Finnish, German, English, Welsh, French-Canadian, and many others), Fitchburg has added substantial numbers of Hispanics, Southeast Asians, and African Americans.

As a relatively large and prosperous city in a mainly rural area, Fitchburg developed into the primary commercial center for the region during the first half of the 20th century, with the downtown area growing into a popular shopping and entertainment zone. The demand for housing located within walking distance of Fitchburg's places of employment led to the development of a dense multifamily housing stock in the center of the city. Just over half of Fitchburg's housing units were built prior to World War II.

Since the 1960s, there has been a general trend of heavy industry migration away from the northeastern United States. The paper industry, one of the oldest and historically the largest in Fitchburg, has increasingly chosen to locate its pulp-to-paper mills closer to its northern pulping plants in order to reduce transportation costs. The erosion of the manufacturing base led to a less prosperous population, which in turn took its toll on Fitchburg's commercial sector. During this same period, the rise of the regional shopping center further diminished the role of Intown Fitchburg as a commercial center. This loss of more traditional industries has, in recent years, been mitigated by growth in non-manufacturing industries such as construction and professional services, as well as a rise in certain manufacturing industries such as plastics, medical goods and services, and chemicals.



A crowd gathers for the annual Civic Days celebration.

ADMINISTRATION AND PLANNING

Fitchburg is administered by a mayor-council form of government. Planning, Conservation, and Housing functions, including the administration of state and federal housing funds, are united within the Office of the Planning Coordinator. A seven member Planning Board, an eleven member City Council, and a seven member Zoning Board of Appeals carry out the permitting process related to planning and development, with their specific duties and areas of concern specified in Fitchburg's Zoning Ordinance.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE¹

POPULATION AND AGE

After a significant drop during the 1970s, Fitchburg’s population has been increasing since 1980. Fitchburg’s large and growing population of older residents is primarily responsible for this increase. While the percentage of people in Fitchburg under the age of 18 (24.3%) is comparable to the county (24.4%) and state (22.5%) averages, its percentage of residents age 65 and over (15.5%) is higher than both (13.7% and 13.6%, respectively). It is also substantially higher than those of most communities in the area. Despite the fact that Fitchburg is no longer seeing large scale emigration, the percentage of older residents is expected to continue to rise, as the aging of the “baby boomer” generation is a national demographic trend.

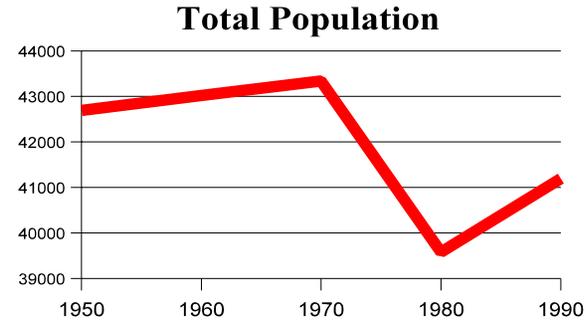


Figure 1

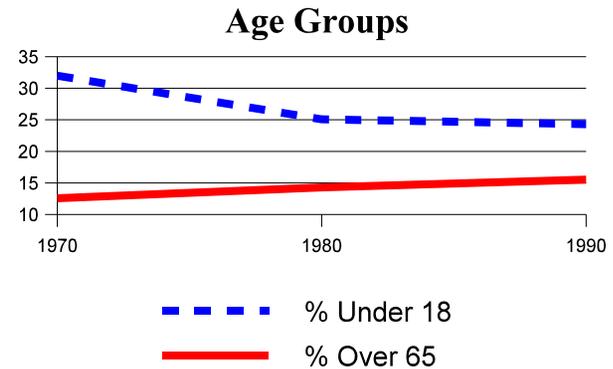


Figure 2

¹Unless otherwise noted, all figures are from the Federal Census.

RACE

Fitchburg has greatly increased its ethnic and racial diversity over the last decade. In 1980, the percentage of non-white city residents was 2.0%, and people of Hispanic origin constituted 2.8%. According the 1990 Census, the city’s Hispanic community rose to 9.6% of the total population. The percentage of non-white residents had nearly tripled, to 5.7%, including 2.9% black and 2.5% Asian. The Asian population is predominantly Hmong-Lao, many of whom are political refugees. Despite the low concentration of minorities in the rural areas in the northern and western areas of Fitchburg and a higher concentration in the inner city, Fitchburg has not experienced widespread segregation with no census tracts holding greater than a 27% minority population².

INCOME

Fitchburg has a relatively poor population. Household and per capita incomes are lower than the regional and State averages. The income of Fitchburg’s relatively large Asian population, in particular, is much lower than average.

Household Income

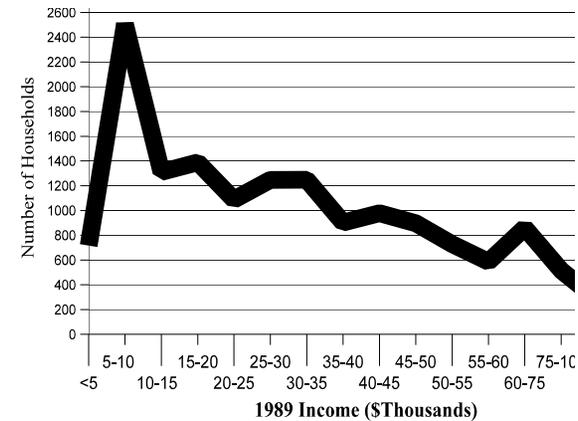


Figure 3

Percentage of Families Below Poverty Level

All Families.....	11.7%
White.....	9.1%
Black.....	41.2%
Hispanic Origin.....	50.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander..	30.2%

²Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing, City of Fitchburg, 1996

PER CAPITA INCOME

	Fitchburg	Fitchburg- Leominster Area	Mass
All Persons	\$12,140.00	\$14,762.00	\$17,224.00
White	\$12,784.00	\$15,221.00	\$18,003.00
Black	\$7,389.00	\$10,000.00	\$10,867.00
Asian/Pacific Islander	\$6,063.00	\$9,644.00	\$12,665.00
Native American	\$10,473.00	\$10,052.00	\$11,176.00
Hispanic Origin	\$5,287.00	\$6,841.00	\$7,833.00
Other Races	\$5,970.00	\$7,129.00	\$6,797.00

COMMUTING PATTERNS

The percentage of Fitchburg residents without access to a vehicle is 18.9%, nearly double the county total of 11.2%. Such a high rate is usually found in larger cities such as Worcester rather than the smaller surrounding communities. This lower percentage of car ownership contributes to a higher percentage of carpoolers than might otherwise be expected. Commuters who carpool make up 15.1% of all transportation to work, half again as much as the State average of 10.7%. While 15.1% is above average, the vast majority, 75.4% of all commuters, drive alone to their jobs. The majority of commuters from Fitchburg head for one of three places: the Fitchburg / Leominster area where almost 70% of city residents work; the Worcester area; and Greater Boston. The three spikes on the “Commuting Times” chart correspond to the average time required to commute to these three areas from Fitchburg.

Commuting Times

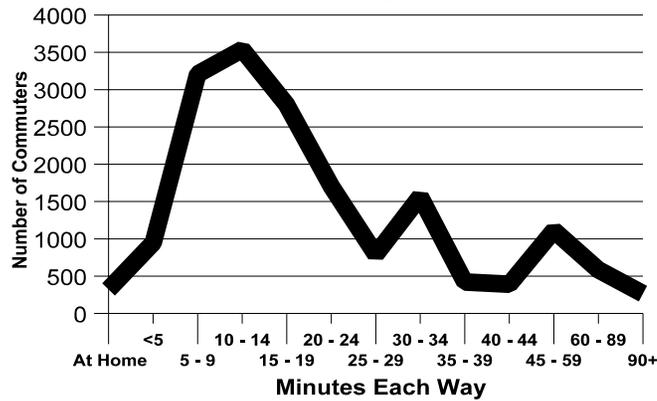


Figure 4

Place of Work

Fitchburg/Leominster MSA.....	69.2%
Fitchburg.....	46.4%
Leominster.....	17.6%
Worcester County.....	78.9%
Worcester County Outside F/L MSA.....	14.5%
Other Massachusetts Counties.....	20.1%
Other States.....	1.0%

Means of Transportation to Work

Car, Truck or Van	90.5%
Drove Alone	75.4%
Carpooled	15.1%
Public Transportation	1.9%
Bus	1.3%
Railroad	0.3%
Taxicab	0.3%
Motorcycle	0.0%
Bicycle	0.3%
Walked	4.8%
Other Means	0.7%
Worked at Home	1.8%

EDUCATION³

Fitchburg has lower levels of educational attainment than the State average, with 68.8% completing high school compared to a State average of 80.0%, and only 13.1% completing their Bachelors compared to 27.2%. Fitchburg's lower than average levels may be attributed to the high percentage of immigrants who have settled in Fitchburg and the dominance of the manufacturing and construction industries which produced jobs that did not require advanced education. A substantially reduced high school dropout rate over the past decade indicates that the value placed on education among city residents has increased.

The chart "Educational Attainment" shows an extreme difference in education levels between Asians in Fitchburg and those statewide with only 7.3% attaining a Bachelors degree, compared to a statewide average of 44.9%. Fitchburg's Asian population is predominantly Hmong-Lao, many of whom came to this country as political refugees and had formerly lived in rural areas of Laos, where advanced education was officially discouraged.



A small sampling of Fitchburg's school children.

Fitchburg's school system, once the object of criticism, has made significant strides in recent years. The dropout rate for Fitchburg High School has decreased from 14% just a few years ago to 3.1% today⁴. This figure compares favorably with those of the region (3.9%) and the state (6.1%)⁵. A new High School, scheduled to be built off Ashby State Road, will feature high-quality labs and other facilities, as well as computers and related hardware.

³ See appendix School for Fitchburg's School Enrollment.

⁴Office of the Superintendent of Schools

⁵Massachusetts Department of Housing and Development

A unique challenge facing Fitchburg’s schools is the high number of transient students, mostly the children of new arrivals, who attend school for part of the year, then leave as their parents follow available work. The School Department estimates that 30% of the students enrolled at the beginning of the school year are replaced by the end of the year.

Educational Attainment (age 25+)

	<u>Fitchburg</u>	<u>Fitchburg- Leominster Area</u>	<u>Massachusetts</u>
White Persons			
High School	70.1%	75.9%	81.2%
Bachelors	13.5%	18.3%	27.7%
Black Persons			
High School	72.9%	76.8%	70.0%
Bachelors	11.3%	14.6%	17.0%
Hispanic Persons			
High School	40.6%	43.3%	52.0%
Bachelors	6.4%	7.4%	10.6%
Asian/Pacific Islanders			
High School	54.7%	64.3%	74.1%
Bachelors	7.3%	23.3%	44.9%
Total			
High School	68.8%	74.9%	80.0%
Bachelors	13.1%	18.2%	27.2%