

TOWN OF MERRIMAC Housing Production Plan

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Merrimac Valley Planning Commission
Haverhill, Massachusetts

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I. COMMUNITY STATEMENT OF SUPPORT FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Merrimac wants to maintain a housing stock that can accommodate every age group, family size and income level. We are proud of our existing mix of housing and the choices available to people who want to live in our town. The Board of Selectmen and Planning Board continue to endorse the goals for future housing as recommended in the 202 Merrimac Master Plan and the 2005 Housing Plan.

- Provide housing choice throughout the community
- Protect and enhance the historic, intimate character of existing neighborhoods
- Use regulations effectively to promote neighborhood scale design in new residential developments

We will continue work to implement the major housing and land use recommendations in the Master Plan and in the 2005 Housing Plan goals and policies by encouraging development or reuse of housing units that are affordable. Many recommendations from these plans have been adopted and implemented in the past few years:

- Encourage a mix of residential use types throughout Merrimac, but focus higher density housing in existing developed areas with adequate infrastructure along Route 110, when carried out in support of mixed-use development, around Merrimac Square, and as replacement uses if the town's mobile home parks cease to operate.
- Encourage housing for restricted occupancy by elderly residents -assisted living facilities and "over-55" housing developments
- Tailor local policies to encourage work-at-home activity.
- Establish a Village Residential District to encourage a greater mix of housing stock, reuse of existing structures and more affordable housing near Merrimac Square, including accessory apartments and multifamily conversions that meet the requirements of the Local Initiative Program (LIP).
- Establish a local housing trust to develop, advise, and promote affordable housing.
- Seek, obtain and use public and private resources to provide housing units that are affordable to and suitable to low and moderate-income and middle-income families and the disabled and elderly: CDBG, HOME.
- Identify town owned land, including tax title parcels that can support small-scale affordable housing development by such organizations as Habitat for Humanity

II. INTRODUCTION

Merrimac is a small town in northern Essex County, bounded by Amesbury, West Newbury, Haverhill, and Newton, N.H. From its distinctive Town Square to the unspoiled hills and farms near the state line, Merrimac has much to offer: an unusual mix of homes, breathtaking views of the Merrimack River, villages and lakeside neighborhoods, and a pastoral countryside. Like most rural economic centers, Merrimac is geographically small –about 8.6 square miles –and it is organized around a compact industrial village with adjacent, densely settled neighborhoods. Agricultural land and forests characterize the town’s outlying areas, yet largely because of regional market forces, both the supply of open space and the agricultural economy it supported have declined considerably over the past 30 years. In 1971, 68% of Merrimac’s total land area was forested or used for farming. By 1999, forests and agricultural land had dropped to 55% of the town.

Evidence of modern ideas about development can be found just about everywhere in Merrimac today: larger house lots with homes set back uniformly from the street, and new subdivision roads lined with granite curbing, wider than some of the old country ways that collect and move the majority of traffic in Merrimac. The force that accelerated Merrimac’s growth, I-495, serves as imposing testimony to the irrevocable land use changes that many small towns faced during the last half of the 20th century. For Merrimac, regional highway improvements meant more than its discovery by a new generation of homebuyers. I-495 also severed the entire southern end of Merrimac from the rest of town, leaving intact only a few of the old roads that once led from New Hampshire south to the Merrimack River.

Out of concern about the impacts of residential development, a weak tax base and the incremental loss of open space along Merrimac’s rural roads, the Town decided to prepare a new master plan at the end of the 1990s. For nearly two years, a committee of local officials and interested citizens worked with a consulting team and steered the plan’s development. In August 2001, the Merrimac Master Plan was adopted by the Planning Board. The Master Plan promotes guiding future growth toward established neighborhoods around Merrimac Square and along Route 110 – areas with adequate infrastructure and utilities to support more development – while reducing pressure on the agricultural and forested landscapes of northern Merrimac. Specifically, the Master Plan recommended the following land use policies, and to the Towns credit, several of the recommendations have been enacted and adopted and are now in place.

1. A variety of regulatory options to encourage multifamily housing, elderly housing and a mix of residential and office uses adjacent to Merrimac Square;
2. Upper story residential uses in Merrimac Square’s commercial buildings;
3. Infill residential development in the Town Center neighborhoods;
4. Mixed use, predominantly commercial development along Route 110, subject to strong site plan and design review guidelines;
5. More flexible regulations for the use of vacant land in Merrimac’s industrial district;

6. No extensions of sewer service into outlying parts of Town in order to preserve remaining treatment plant capacity for future growth along Route 110;
7. Open space zoning and flexible development regulations for rural areas; and
8. Stronger protection for wetland resources, scenic roads and historic buildings.

Against the backdrop of these and other Master Plan recommendations, the Planning Board established a special committee to work on zoning bylaw amendments. Merrimac requested and received permission to use most of an Executive Order 418 grant to update its zoning regulations. However, the entire bylaw was so weak that the committee and consulting team opted for a comprehensive zoning revision. In May 2004, town meeting gave nearly unanimous support to the proposed Zoning Bylaw and a new zoning map.

This Affordable Housing Plan relies on the Merrimac Zoning Bylaw, Chapter 40B and access to state and federal financial resources to assure that Merrimac remains affordable to people living in or seeking to move to the Merrimack Valley region. Merrimac is a pleasant, low-key town that values its close-knit neighborhoods, charming town square, working farms, and views of the water. Its small local government and limited financial resources have not prevented the Town from successfully negotiating the best possible outcomes for several Chapter 40B developments. Unlike many communities across the state, Merrimac has not resisted every comprehensive permit that reached the Board of Appeals, and the Town has 6.5% of its housing stock as affordable. Its accomplishments are impressive, and if all 40B projects that were approved had been built, Merrimac would be over the statutory minimum of 10% affordable housing. Due to the housing collapse which began around 2006, the "Chellis Hill" 40B project was never constructed. This project alone would have put the Town at 10%. In addition, the Town has lost some "expiring-use" housing units; thus the total number of affordable housing units has dropped to 146. Currently, the Town's Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI) is 82 units short of the 10% statutory minimum.

PLANNED PRODUCTION

A community's growth from village to modern suburb can be traced through the styles, age and location of its homes. As fields and forests gradually gave way to development, the homes that replaced them tell a story about the physical evolution of each city and town. This can be seen in Merrimac, where a Victorian town square surrounded by late 19th-century homes serves as a legacy of the Town's renowned horse drawn carriage industry. In many communities across the Commonwealth, however, the loss of open space to new growth has led residents to oppose more housing developments. Concerned about town character, natural resources and the cost of public schools, local officials seek ways to limit growth. Oftentimes, the techniques they choose bring unintended consequences, one of which is the demise of housing choice. In Merrimac, housing choice is not a euphemism for low-income housing. Rather, it means a range of housing types and prices so that homebuyers and renters have meaningful choices about where they will live.

In 2002 and again in 2008, the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) issued new regulations that reward communities for making steady progress toward providing their regional "fair share" of housing affordable to low and moderate-