

Introduction

A small Merrimack Valley community in the state's northernmost corner, Merrimac is bounded by Amesbury on the east, Haverhill on the west, the Merrimack River to the south and the New Hampshire border to the north. Its 8.6 mi² area includes serene views of the Merrimack River, more than 900 acres of farmland and a classic 19th century industrial village, Merrimac Square. Despite the imposing presence of I-495 and modern subdivisions scattered about the town, Merrimac retains a rural, small-town ambiance that is very important to residents.

Along with Salisbury and Amesbury, Merrimac was originally part of the Merrimack Plantation, a large colonial land grant that also included portions of New Hampshire. From Amesbury's incorporation in 1668 until 1876, Merrimac was part of Amesbury and by 1726, it had become known as West Amesbury or the West Parish. Throughout Merrimac's earliest years, it was predominately an agricultural settlement with an economy based on subsistence farming and cottage industries. To the east, Amesbury proper cultivated an increasingly diverse economy that included shipbuilding, fishing, hat making shops, an iron works and fulling mills.

The distribution of land uses and the structure of Amesbury's colonial economy played an important part in shaping Merrimac's future. While an industrial and commercial center took hold along the banks of the Powow River, rural Merrimac lay considerably west, accessible to its parent town by a limited road system and the Merrimack River. The roadways that defined the

If I had visitors arrive in Merrimac 15 years from now, I would want them to see...

A quintessential Town Square and a library that is an exemplary cultural center, i.e., meaningful representations of local culture and traditions, a true measure of a community's self-worth.

People...children around our schools, people walking along sidewalks, children and adults playing in fields, people coming and going from shops and business establishments, fewer people in cars.

The quaintness of the downtown area, and natural beauty and openness of the many areas around town.

A ride through the rural sections of town, to view the farmland and river views, and then to enjoy a walk through downtown.

The historic architecture in the center of town, and then drive along River Road and see the water.

That people of this community can live together peacefully, non-critically, with acceptance of each other's viewpoints and lifestyles.

How beautiful the river is and to see the beautiful homes along it. Then, I want to take them up to the Town Square to walk around the cute little shops and have coffee at an outdoor café.

The results of a disciplined growth in housing. I would really like them to see people riding horses on Bear Hill Road on a summer afternoon.

The eagles on the river, and the vistas from the farm on Bear Hill Road.

Master Plan Forum – 21 March 2001

West Parish's pastoral identity occupied the valleys between Bear Hill, Brush Hill and Long Hill, and Brandy Brow Hill in neighboring Haverhill. These north-south routes, extending from the Merrimack River into Newton, New Hampshire, forged economic and social connections between West Amesbury and its northern neighbor. They form the basis for the rural character of northern Merrimac today.

West Amesbury was transformed by the Merrimack River Valley's role as the epicenter of the American Industrial Revolution. In the early 1800s, Amesbury and West Amesbury capitalized on their respective opportunities and took somewhat different industrial directions – Amesbury replaced its sawmills and shipbuilding center with textile mills on the Powow River, and West Amesbury's crossroads supplied the setting for an emerging industry of horse-drawn carriage shops. By mid-century, carriage assembly and spin-off industries had restructured West Amesbury's economy, triggered population growth and changed the character of the land. Moreover, industrialization supplied some of the impetus for secession. Expanding West Amesbury's carriage trade (which also existed in Amesbury proper) depended in part on building a rail connection to the Boston and Maine Railroad in Newton Junction, New Hampshire. The rail leg was built in 1872 and today, it serves as the Jay McLaren Trail.

In 1876, West Amesbury divided from Amesbury and was incorporated as the Town of Merrimac at a point in Massachusetts history when the rapid emergence of new population centers spawned a wave of incorporations across the Commonwealth. Merrimac appropriated nearly half of Amesbury's land base and two-thirds of its population, and within a decade, 29 local carriage shops employed about 500 of Merrimac's 2,000 residents. Like many communities born of the same era, Merrimac was a one-industry town. When the automobile signaled the end of horse-drawn carriages, it also posed new challenges to Merrimac's industrial base.

During the early 20th century, the community that had gained fame for its fine carriages produced custom automobile bodies for Cadillac and Packard. Nonetheless, the narrow composition of Merrimac's industrial economy proved fatal; the assembly line eclipsed demand for custom manufacturing, and ultimately the Great Depression disrupted industrial activity everywhere. Merrimac's unemployed left to find jobs elsewhere, causing a slight population decline between 1930-1940. Still, the legacy of Merrimac's industrial moment is a major ingredient in the current land use pattern. Carriage manufacturing and the auto body industry were focused along Route 110 and Merrimac Square. This concentrated industrial activity produced not only a formal town center with prominent commercial and institutional buildings, but also a residential enclave that housed much of the town's population. It also brought freight rail service into the heart of town, and facilitated Merrimac's enduring rural-economic character: a compact village nestled above a colonial riverfront settlement, leaving most of the town's remaining land to agriculture.

By 1950, Merrimac was no longer an industrial center. However, its industrial heritage remained fixed on the land and endured in the blue-collar composition of its workforce. Suburban development during the 1950s caused new housing growth to extend beyond the village core, but once three interstate highways traversed the Merrimack Valley – I-95, I-93 and later, I-495 – Merrimac entered a new development era. Not surprisingly, the town adopted zoning in the same period. Owing to both the decline of Merrimac’s older business base and Merrimack Valley’s economic revival, the town has gradually become a “bedroom community” – home to a labor force of commuters. After 1970, pressure to build new homes here stemmed from job growth in Eastern Massachusetts, the availability of land and the improved access brought by I-495. The land use pattern molded and reinforced by the carriage industry 150 years ago has shifted toward a more conventional suburban form. Merrimac’s changing appearance, loss of open space, rising tax bills, weak economic base and escalating home prices converged to create a sense of urgency about the future. These concerns and others formed the backdrop for a new master plan.¹

Master Plan Overview

The Master Plan represents an 18-month endeavor by the Master Plan Steering Committee (MPSC) to guide Merrimac’s future development with four key outcomes in mind:

- Environmentally responsible.
- Socially inclusive.
- Economically vibrant.
- Fiscally stable.

On the advice of the Steering Committee’s predecessor, the Long Range Planning Committee, Merrimac voters agreed to commission a master plan at the 2000 Annual Town Meeting. By appropriating funds to retain a consulting planner, residents and town officials signaled their concern about Merrimac’s future. They also registered, at least implicitly, a belief that Merrimac has choices about the kind of community it will become as development occurs on the town’s remaining vacant land.

As a result of outreach efforts by the Long Range Planning Committee, the Steering Committee was formed in the fall of 2000. Ultimately, 35 residents volunteered to serve as members of the Steering Committee or its subcommittees, which were organized around the major elements of the

¹ Sources for historical profile: Town of Merrimac [Open Space Plan](#) (Draft), [Master Plan](#) (1977); DHCD Community Profile Series; Town of Amesbury [Preservation Plan](#) (1999); Roy Mann Associates, [A Plan for Merrimac Square](#) (1973).

Master Plan. The Steering Committee managed the consultant selection process, sponsored public forums, and continuously sought advice from town staff and knowledgeable people in the community. For more than a year, the Steering Committee held open meetings every month to discuss reports, data, and recommendations developed by the planning consultants, Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

That residents are proud of Merrimac echoed throughout the master plan process. They spoke with striking unanimity about Merrimac's strong points: its small-town ambiance, mix of people, scenic vistas and farms. They love the Merrimack River, and virtually everyone identifies Merrimac Square as a landmark. When residents spoke of Merrimac's drawbacks, they were equally consistent: population growth, lost open space, traffic, a weak tax base and a town hall sorely in need of modernization topped the list of problems.

The people of Merrimac accurately perceive that many of their town's special qualities are at risk. The planning process revealed, however, that the factors which place Merrimac's character and well-being at risk are more complicated than some may realize. To address the causes and not merely the symptoms of unwanted change, residents will have to consider trade-offs and entertain creative ways to achieve their goals. They will need to give local officials superior tools to manage growth. At some point, they also may have to evaluate the fit between their form of government and the realities of managing a municipal corporation, large or small. If the 2020 vision statement is to be realized at all, Merrimac must be open to different ideas about land use and adopt a development culture that emphasizes "direct" over "protect."

Merrimac does have choices. First, it has a considerable amount of open land. While the town is growing steadily, market pressure for new homes here has not accelerated at the rate experienced by I-495 communities to the south. Second, it has an established physical form with both obvious and hidden opportunities for infill development. These opportunities suit Merrimac to direct growth toward existing areas and reduce pressure on the open, agricultural landscapes that characterize the northern end of town. In contemporary planning parlance, sustainable development policies need to be implemented in Merrimac now. Third, with new zoning, Merrimac could accommodate the same amount of "build-out" growth that it already faces, but with more open space and a healthier fiscal condition than it can hope to achieve under present zoning policies.

The challenge for Merrimac has less to do with the availability of meaningful choices than with political will and organizational capacity. In more ways than one, Merrimac is at the crossroads of profound change. The town has enjoyed several advantages to date: a small, close-knit population, a compact development pattern, citizens with time for local government service, and the endurance of working farms. Merrimac's population will remain relatively small, but its land use pattern is clearly shifting toward that of a suburban community: subdivided and auto dependent. In

addition, Merrimac has found it increasingly difficult to engage residents in public life, as evidenced by declining attendance at town meetings and a lack of candidates for elected local office. Merrimac benefits from having a dedicated corps of volunteers who juggle civic responsibilities, work and family life. Judging by the number of town government volunteers who serve in multiple capacities, however, there are clearly many more roles to fill than people to fill them.

Finally, although the town's farms seem secure, it is worth noting that 30 years ago, 815 acres of Merrimac's land were used for agricultural purposes. By the close of the century, land in active agricultural use had dropped to 592 acres. For those who depend on farm income for their livelihood, agriculture is very demanding work. In Merrimac and countless other small towns, the bucolic image that onlookers ascribe to farming does not square with the challenges of running a profitable farm. Since the general public conceives of agriculture as an open space issue, not an economic one, development policies everywhere presume compatibility between residential and agricultural land uses. Zoning bylaws like Merrimac's Agricultural-Residential District attest to this belief, yet Merrimac has discovered that sometimes, neighborhoods and farms actually conflict. Moreover, by zoning farmland for single-family homes, communities unwittingly create land market competition that pits agriculture against real estate development. In the state's highest-growth communities along I-495, the competition between farm and non-farm land markets is so intense that Chapter 61A tax policy has not been adequate to tip the scales in favor of agriculture. Even though Merrimac has successfully acquired two Agricultural Preservation Restrictions (APR's) – a noteworthy achievement for a very small town – the APR's protect only one-third of the today's Chapter 61A land.

The people of Merrimac worry that their town will grow too much, yet the amount of development that may occur here – even under existing zoning – is not particularly daunting compared to the prospects for many towns in the Commonwealth. According to a build-out study conducted by the regional planning agency nearly two years ago, Merrimac may grow by another 606 single-family homes. The master plan's build-out study reaches a similar conclusion, 622 single-family homes. Unfortunately, the 606-622 single-family homes that Merrimac could absorb between now and its hypothetical build-out have only one place to go: the northern end of town, where rolling hills and broad, open valleys hold the key to preserving Merrimac's rural-agricultural identity. This finding is neither surprising nor original. In fact, the town's first master plan (1977) identified the same concern. It promoted the adoption of both single-family cluster and planned unit development zoning as tools to thwart the loss of open space as Merrimac continued to grow. For a number of reasons, the town never embraced these strategies. Since 1980, Merrimac has absorbed a 38% increase in housing units at the expense of 65% of the fields and forests that existed 20 years ago.

The town's growth management needs have little to do with limiting the total number of new homes and everything to do with containing their location. Not so long ago, Merrimac took steps to reduce housing growth by extending two-acre zoning to nearly every part of town where development had not already occurred. This noble move to control growth unwittingly encouraged a frontage-lot development pattern along Merrimac's rural roadways and triggered the loss of more open space per home than voters probably intended. The inefficient use of land in Merrimac today, driven not only by zoning regulations but also by the town's subdivision standards, underlies virtually every complaint that residents and town officials have about growth in their community: the measurable decline in open space, escalating home prices, water supply inadequacies, higher tax bills, higher home prices, and traffic. These problems will *not* be solved by mandating larger house lots and imposing unreasonable or needlessly expensive requirements on developers. Rather, they are qualitative issues that require "quality development" solutions.



Existing street pattern: Merrimac Center

Master Plan Goals

In March-April 2001, the MPSC sponsored two community planning forums and encouraged residents to participate in shaping the direction of their new master plan. The public consultation process led to a master plan vision that MPSC members developed during a series of meetings in the spring and summer months,² followed by broad goals for each element of the master plan and ultimately, a companion set of policy statements.³ The master plan goals include:

² See p. ii.

³ For the complete text of goals and policy statements, see Chapter 4.

Land Use

- Reinforce Merrimac’s rural-village land use pattern by conforming future development to the historic arrangement of buildings and streets.
- Develop an orderly arrangement of residential, non-residential and public land uses along and adjacent to the Route 110 corridor.



Historic barn on River Road

- Use land efficiently and in an environmentally responsible manner when developing new neighborhoods and business areas.

Traffic & Circulation

- Encourage pedestrian and bicycle access to all parts of town by providing a safe, scenic, interconnected system of roads, sidewalks and trails.
- Assure vehicular and pedestrian safety along Route 110 and within Merrimac Square, using development controls, public transportation, parking, traffic calming techniques, and corridor improvements to achieve these ends.
- Improve and enhance the town’s gateways.

Natural and Cultural Resources

- Treat Merrimac’s natural resources, historic architecture and landmarks as irreplaceable public assets.
- Assure that new development respects the topography and character of the land.
- Retain and enhance Merrimac Square as the town’s social, economic, civic and governmental center.
- Support and promote cultural activities for the education, entertainment and general benefit of Merrimac residents.

Open Space and Recreation

- Preserve and connect large tracts of open space.
- Assure the continuity of agriculture as a vital open space feature in Merrimac.
- Provide accessible parks and recreation facilities that foster a sense of community, serve residents of all ages and increase public awareness of Merrimac’s open space resources.

Housing

- 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.

Community Facilities and Services

- Manage and maintain conveniently located public facilities that meet the needs of Merrimac residents and town employees.
- Provide high quality municipal and school services at a price residents can afford.
- Develop, manage and maintain public utilities and infrastructure to achieve the town's land use goals in a fiscally sound manner.

Economic Development

- Create commercial and mixed-use districts that encourage small businesses to thrive in Merrimac.
- Promote and nurture new small business enterprise.
- Develop and strengthen Merrimac's employment base to provide regionally competitive wages.
- Retain agriculture as a vital element of the local economy.

Major Findings of the Master Plan

Research conducted for the master plan reveals several conflicts between the town's goals, existing conditions and development trends.⁴ For example:

The Character and Quality of Development in Merrimac

- Merrimac's present land use policies neither encourage nor allow the kinds of development that many town officials and residents say they want in their community. Despite its good

⁴ See also, "Community Indicators," this chapter.

intentions, the zoning bylaw promotes outcomes that defy sound planning principles and fundamentally differ from the goals of the master plan.

- Merrimac lacks zoning incentives to use land efficiently, preserve open space and protect scenic views. Since 1990, most new development in Merrimac has consisted of single-family homes on “Form A” or “Approval Not Required” lots along existing streets. The incremental extension of housing into rural areas detracts from Merrimac’s visual character, promotes sprawl and increases locally generated traffic on town roads.
- Merrimac values its historic architectural traditions, but the town has no regulations to protect historically significant buildings from being demolished or altered inappropriately.
- Merrimac wants to keep senior citizens in town, but the zoning bylaw provides no incentives to develop housing suitable for the elderly.
- The only industrially zoned land in town is poorly suited for industrial development, which helps to explain why Merrimac has very little industry and has lost manufacturing jobs since 1985.
- Instead of an industrial zone with construction-ready land, Merrimac allows industrial development in the commercial district on Route 110. Merrimac *also* allows single-family homes in the commercial district, a situation that will eventually produce land use conflicts and may impede the town’s ability to develop a sound economic base.
- Merrimac’s subdivision regulations call for pavement widths and design elements that encourage neighborhood streets with a distinctly suburban character. The regulations do not encourage creative ways to make development compatible with the character of the land or to protect natural features and vegetation. Together with the zoning bylaw’s inflexible lot sizes and frontage requirements, the subdivision regulations promote residential development that is not at all like older forms of development in Merrimac. Under the present regulatory framework, Merrimac cannot re-create or reinforce its historic development pattern.
- Residents cherish Merrimac Square, as indeed they should. Its brick Victorian buildings, anchored by the Town Hall, create a classic frame around an industrial village center and give Merrimac its distinct identity. As an established district with a mix of land uses, Merrimac Square does not comply with the density or dimensional requirements of Merrimac’s zoning bylaw. In fact, existing regulations run counter to virtually every principle of downtown development. If Merrimac wants to maintain and enhance the vitality of Merrimac Square, the town needs zoning that encourages use and reuse flexibility for its historic buildings and requires new development to fit the character of the district.

Structure and Composition of the Local Economy

- Farmland preservation and active agriculture are important to the people of Merrimac, yet the town has no regulatory incentives to promote agriculture, e.g., flexible ways to develop small portions of farms in exchange for permanent restrictions on the use of remaining land, or provisions for agricultural-retail business activity beyond conventional farm stands.
- The number of employers in Merrimac increased by nearly 75% during the past 15 years. However, the number of employees working in local businesses increased by only 33% in the same period. The largest employment growth has occurred in lower-wage business and personal service establishments.
- Wages paid by local employers generally fall below wages paid by employers across the Commonwealth, except for retail trade and human services. In the construction trades, real estate, banking and insurance, the average annual wages in Merrimac are only 50-67% of average wages statewide – indicators of general economic weakness and greater reliance on part-time over full-time employment in these sectors.
- In 1985, Merrimac’s average annual wage for all establishments was 83% of the average for all of Merrimack Valley. By 1999, the average local wage had dropped to 77% of the region’s.
- Forty years ago, more than half of Merrimac’s labor force held manufacturing jobs and about 22%, professional or management jobs. Merrimac was essentially a blue-collar town with a very small percentage of the labor force employed in agriculture. By 1990, 30% of the labor force worked as professionals or managers and 30% as laborers or craftsmen. The remainder – nearly 40% – held clerical, sales or service jobs in town or close by, and a majority of these workers were women.
- In the same period, 1960-1990, commute-to-work patterns and travel times changed fundamentally for the people of Merrimac. More residents traveled by car, bus or train to jobs in the Metropolitan Boston area as the local and regional economy weakened. Merrimac became a suburb, in lifestyle if not in appearance. Its employment base gradually shifted toward lower-wage jobs that in most cases cannot support a family, let alone the cost of a home in town.
- About 3.6% of all land in Merrimac is presently developed for commercial or industrial purposes. However, the aggregate assessed value of developed commercial and industrial property is only 3.2% of the value of all developed real estate in Merrimac.
- Merrimac has a number of home-based businesses: entrepreneurs working from their homes, either in start-up ventures or an established home occupation, e.g., a professional office. Townspeople want to encourage the development of more locally owned businesses and they

recognize that a home-based operation is often the starting point for successful microenterprises. To grow and become profitable, these businesses need low-cost commercial or industrial space, access to business services, technical support and often, flexible financing. At present, Merrimac does not have the organizational capacity, regulations, financing tools and development expertise to nurture local entrepreneurs.

Housing in Merrimac

- Not surprisingly, new homes in Merrimac are much larger than older homes. The average house built in Merrimac between 1995-2000 is 38% larger than the single-family homes that pre-date 1940. Moreover, the average new house occupies a lot that is 27% larger than the house lots of older homes.
- Today, 82% of all residential buildings in Merrimac – and 64% of all housing units – are single-family homes. Before World War II, however, single-family homes constituted only 74% of the town's residential base and less than half of all housing units.
- Merrimac's housing stock is becoming not only more homogenous, but also more expensive. Between 1990-2000, the median sale price of single-family homes in Merrimac shot upward by 118%. More recently, sale prices have escalated in neighborhoods around Lake Attitash, where a 52% median sale price increase occurred in the past three years.
- The single-family home median sale price in Merrimac today is \$240,000 – affordable to a household with annual earnings of about \$90,000. However, the estimated median family income in the region surrounding Lawrence is only \$67,400 and in Merrimac, it is \$56,198. Clearly, homes in Merrimac exceed the buying power of many people. A household earning the estimated median income of \$56,198 faces a housing affordability gap of \$54,400.
- The number of rental units in Merrimac declined between 1990-2000, from 22% to about 17%. For at least ten years, no new multi-family units have been developed in Merrimac and some of the town's former rental units have been converted to condominiums.
- Merrimac has 76 units of housing affordable to lower-income people, or 3.3% of all year-round homes in town. The town also has about 226 mobile homes that meet affordable housing needs, although they do not meet the statutory definition of a low- or moderate-income housing unit. Since Merrimac has not secured at least 10% of its housing stock for occupancy by lower-income households, the town is vulnerable to comprehensive permits that are too large, inadequately planned or unresponsive to local housing needs. Merrimac needs an affordable housing strategy, comprehensive permit review guidelines, community development capacity and mechanisms to encourage low- and moderate-income housing that can address the goals of the master plan.

Open Space and Preservation of Community Resources

- Merrimac’s historic development pattern is organized by rolling hills and broad valleys that extend to the town’s southern boundary, the Merrimack River. The old north-south roads that connect with Route 110 largely conform to the contours of Merrimac’s natural landscape. They supply breathtaking views, especially in northern Merrimac, and their rural design is important to the character of a rural economic center. Merrimac has no regulations or policies in place to protect the trees, stone walls and vistas that make its rural byways special to those who live or travel through the northern part of town.
- Like all Conservation Commissions, Merrimac’s is responsible for administering and enforcing M.G.L.c.131 Section 40, the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act. Unlike many Conservation Commissions, Merrimac’s does not have the tools to supplement or tailor the state law to address local conditions and needs. The town does not have a local wetlands bylaw or regulations, nor does it have high-quality, accurate resource maps.
- Merrimac does not have basic tools to protect its cultural resources.
 - Many years ago, Merrimac initiated a survey of historic properties, which other towns often use to nominate buildings and landmarks to the National Register of Historic Places and create local historic districts. No historically significant properties in Merrimac have been placed on the National Register and the town has never enacted local historic districts, yet many residents say their town’s history – as expressed by its architecture – is a critical community resource. Listing on the National Register is a very important criterion for access to federal and state preservation incentives, and a local historic district gives communities the tools they need to prevent inappropriate change to historic buildings.
 - Merrimac has no bylaws and regulations to protect historic buildings from whole or partial destruction. Demolition delay, an increasingly common technique to save significant buildings, is unavailable to local authorities in Merrimac. As changes in the land market make developed parcels more desirable than vacant land, Merrimac’s historic buildings will be placed at increasing risk. The town has already lost one important building to demolition. Moreover, there is ample evidence throughout Merrimac that buying, modernizing and expanding older homes is an attractive alternative to home-seekers.
- From time to time, Merrimac has acquired or accepted gifts of conservation and recreation land. Merrimac has a beautiful Town Forest and a large conservation holding known as the Perkins Conservation Area, which serves open space and aquifer protection needs. Merrimac also has an enviable asset that can be used to connect outlying open space to the center of

town – the Jay McLaren Trail. Although much of the open space that Merrimac wants to protect is under some form of public or non-profit site control, many parcels remain unprotected.

- The town needs to complete and maintain an open space plan in order to qualify for land acquisition grants. It also needs sustained local capacity to plan, negotiate with landowners, and acquire and manage conservation land.
- Finally, Merrimac needs a predictable source of funds to buy land as it becomes available. Annual appropriations to a Conservation Fund, a bond authorization for open space purchases, adoption of the Community Preservation Act or other strategies developed in conjunction with larger regional land trusts will be essential if Merrimac wants to protect land, water resources and wildlife habitat.

The Quality of Life in Merrimac

- Merrimac is concerned about municipal and school service costs and the impact of rising tax bills on seniors or moderate-income families, yet the town lacks policies, regulations and programs to promote economic development. As a result, Merrimac's economic base is weak and the burden of property taxes falls mainly on homeowners.
- In 1988, residential tax payers paid 88% of Merrimac's tax levy; by 2000, they were paying 93%.
- Residential property values increased by 55% between 1997-2001, but during the same period commercial property values grew by only 17%. Still, the value of the town's commercial base in 2001 was only 79% of its pre-recession, 1990 level.
- Because Merrimac has so few businesses, the majority of its town service costs – and clearly, all of its school costs – are generated by residents. Between 1996-2002, school expenditures as a percentage of the residential tax levy increased from 83% to 88%.
- On average, new homes in Merrimac cost the town approximately \$1.23 in municipal and school services for every \$1.00 they generate in tax and other revenue.

Community Indicators

Table 1-1 Indicators of Growth, Change and Use of Community Resources: Merrimac

Land Use			
<u>Land Use Trends</u>	<u>1971</u>	<u>1985</u>	<u>2000</u>
Residential Land Per Capita	0.20	0.21	0.24
Farmland Per Capita	0.19	0.16	0.10
Forests Per Capita	0.76	0.63	0.46
<u>Development Trends</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>
Acres Developed, Total	1,318	1,718	2,245
Average Single-Family House Lot	1.08	1.23	1.29
Acres of Residential Development/Housing Unit	0.71	0.79	0.92
Natural & Cultural Resources			
<u>Water Consumption</u>	<u>1995</u>	<u>2000</u>	
Residential Water Consumption Per Capita	51	57	
Average-Day Demand to Authorized Withdrawal (Ratio)	1.13	1.24	
Maximum Day GPM/Service Connection	0.35	0.31	
<u>Open Space</u>	<u>2000</u>		
Total Open Space Per Capita	0.26		
Protected Open Space Per Capita	0.17		
<u>Community Investment: Culture & Recreation</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1995</u>	<u>2000</u>
Culture/Recreation Expenditures Per Capita	\$ 19.55	\$ 21.78	\$ 30.33
Total Expenditures Per Capita	\$ 977	\$ 1,089	\$ 1,339
Ratio C-R Expenditures to Total Expenditures	0.02	0.02	0.02
Population & Housing			
<u>Chapter 40B</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>	
Low-Income Housing % of Year-Round Housing Units	3.83%	3.33%	
% Family Units of Low-Income Units	0.00%	0.00%	
<u>Housing Type/Occupancy Trends</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>	
Single-Family as % All Housing Units	65.2%	69.5%	
Renter-Occupied as % All Occupied Housing Units	22.3%	17.2%	
<u>Income Trends</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>	
Merrimac Median Income to Regional Median Income	0.99	0.83	

Table 1-1 Indicators of Growth, Change and Use of Community Resources: Merrimac

<u>Population Trends</u>			
Persons < 18 Per Household	0.70	0.80	
Persons 65+ Per Household	0.29	0.38	
Economic Development			
<u>Local Economic Trends</u>			
	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>	
Ratio Local Jobs to Housing Units	0.36	0.42	
Labor Force as % of Total Population	48.4%	55.5%	
Ratio Local Jobs to Labor Force	0.29	0.28	
Commercial-Industrial Land Value as % Total Land Value	8.7%	5.7%	
Town Finances			
<u>Community Services</u>			
	<u>1990</u>	<u>1995</u>	<u>2000</u>
Average Tax Bill	\$ 1,478	\$ 2,158	\$ 2,511
Town Government Expenditures Per Capita	\$ 370	\$ 610	\$ 725
Total Expenditures Per Capita	\$ 977	\$ 1,089	\$ 1,339
<u>School Services</u>			
	<u>1990</u>	<u>1995</u>	<u>2000</u>
Per Pupil Cost	\$ 4,707	\$ 4,702	\$ 6,188
Integrated Cost of Education Per Capita	\$ 846	\$ 884	\$ 1,317
School Expenditures (Net) as % Residential Tax Levy		88%	93%
<u>Municipal-School Debt Obligations</u>			
	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>	
Debt Service Expenditures Per Capita	\$ 31	\$ 160	
Debt Service % of Total Expenditures	3.22%	11.91%	
Total Long-Term Debt as % Assessed Value	0.42%	2.83%	

Source notes: Land Use, MassGIS, Bureau of the Census; Development Trends, Merrimac Assessor's Office, Parcel Data File, Bureau of the Census; Water Consumption, Merrimac Water Department, Public Water Supply Annual Statistical Reports to MADEP, 1995-2000; Open Space, MassGIS, Bureau of the Census; Community Investment, Culture & Recreation, MADOR; Chapter 40B, DHCD Subsidized Housing Inventories, 1997, 2001; Housing Type/Occupancy Trends, Bureau of the Census; Income Trends, Bureau of the Census, Citizens Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA), U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; Population Trends, Bureau of the Census; Economic Development, Bureau of the Census, MADET, MADOR; Town Finances, MADOR; School Services, MADOE, MADOR; Municipal-School Debt Obligations, MADOR.

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Change the “development blueprint” in Merrimac with new zoning that encourages natural resource protection, quality development, preservation of town character and more efficient use of land.

Implementation Measures	Master Plan Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt the Master Plan Guidance Plan (Map 8) as a basis for new zoning and other development policies in Merrimac. 	Land Use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a Village Center District to protect the historic character of Merrimac Square. Emphasize design, reuse flexibility, and mix of commercial, institutional, municipal and accessory residential uses. 	Land Use Economic Development Cultural Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Replace the current Commercial District on Route 110 with a Rural Highway District that encourages greater land use diversity, attractive buildings and traffic safety. 	Traffic & Circulation Economic Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a gateway plan and establish a Highway Services district on Broad Street between I-495 and Route 110 in order to encourage small-scale business development, provide for commuter services, and reduce traffic impacts on Merrimac Square. 	Economic Development Traffic & Circulation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To guide future uses of Merrimac’s farmland and scenic vistas toward development types that can save large amounts of open space and/or enable the continuation of active farming, transfer approximately 1,000 of land presently zoned as Agricultural-Residential to a new district, the Conservation-Agricultural District. 	Land Use Natural & Cultural Resources Open Space Economic Development

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a Village Residential Overlay District to encourage a greater mix of housing stock, re-use of existing structures and more affordable housing near Merrimac Square. 	<p>Land Use Housing</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a Wetlands and Watershed Protection Overlay District to protect critical resource areas from development. 	<p>Land Use Natural Resources</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish an Open Space-Institutional Overlay District that encourages the development of cultural and recreational facilities and low-intensity economic development in designated areas of town. 	<p>Natural & Cultural Resources Economic Development Open Space</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt a Conservation-Residential Development bylaw to preserve open space and promote village-style neighborhood design. 	<p>Land Use Open Space Housing</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage housing for restricted occupancy by elderly residents – assisted living facilities and “over-55” housing development. 	<p>Housing</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt flexible development regulations to allow trade-offs that benefit both landowners and the town – waive frontage requirements in exchange for larger lots and allow common driveways to reduce needless clearing of land. 	<p>Land Use</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require attractive, safe, pedestrian-friendly development on Route 110 – adopt high-quality site plan standards. 	<p>Land Use Traffic & Circulation Economic Development</p>

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

Recommendation #2: Adopt a culture of stewardship toward Merrimac’s natural and built assets.

Implementation Measures	Master Plan Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement a demolition delay bylaw to prevent needless destruction of historically significant buildings. 	Cultural Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designate additional Scenic Roads under the Massachusetts Scenic Road Act, giving priority to the “heritage corridors” identified on the Guidance Plan, and adopt standards to protect trees and stone walls. 	Natural & Cultural Resources Traffic & Circulation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Become a Certified Local Government and use Survey & Planning Grants to update Merrimac’s historic property surveys. 	Cultural Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare nominations to the National Register of Historic Places. 	Cultural Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider establishing local historic districts under M.G.L.c.40C, particularly in Merrimac Square and along River Road in Merrimacport. 	Cultural Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Amend the Zoning Bylaw to provide for a comprehensive wetlands and watershed protection district. 	Land Use Natural Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt a local wetlands protection bylaw, authorizing the Conservation Commission to implement and enforce wetland regulations that supplement M.G.L. c.131 Sec. 40. 	Land Use Natural Resources

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate funds to obtain detailed (high resolution) wetlands maps for use by the Conservation Commission and other land use boards in Merrimac. 	<p>Land Use Natural Resources</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt mandatory septic system cleaning/maintenance regulations to protect wetland and groundwater resources in non-sewered areas of the town. 	<p>Natural Resources</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make timely updates to the Merrimac Open Space and Recreation Plan so the town can qualify for grants from the Division of Conservation Services. Emphasize these priorities: 	<p>Open Space</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Trails and conservation corridors to connect existing with desired future open space. 	<p>Open Space Traffic & Circulation</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> b. Aquifer protection. 	<p>Natural Resources</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c. Land or development rights to protect Merrimac's remaining farms. 	<p>Natural & Cultural Resources Economic Development</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> d. Land within the Lake Attitash watershed. 	<p>Natural Resources</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> e. Land that can serve several needs: passive recreation, a future school site, additional playing fields. 	<p>Open Space Community Facilities & Services</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> f. A master plan for public access along the Merrimack River. 	<p>Open Space Community Facilities & Services Natural Resources</p>

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

- Establish and make annual appropriations to a Conservation Fund, and reconsider the merits of adopting the Community Preservation Act with exemptions for elderly and lower-income homeowners. Land Use
Open Space

- Work with owners of larger, forested parcels to place their land under Chapter 61 agreements. Land Use

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

Recommendation #3: Manage the town’s circulation system by coordinating land use, open space, highway and public safety policies.

Implementation Measures	Master Plan Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a committee to work with Merrimac’s highway and public safety authorities on a town-wide street classification system. 	Traffic & Circulation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inventory and classify all roadways, major intersections, sidewalks and pedestrian routes. 	Traffic & Circulation Open Space
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify priorities for road, sidewalk and pathway connections. 	Traffic & Circulation Open Space Community Facilities & Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a capital improvements plan for Merrimac’s circulation elements. 	Community Facilities & Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the classification system as a basis for scheduling and designing improvements to public ways and setting enforcement priorities. 	Traffic & Circulation Community Facilities & Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain and improve the Jay McLaren Trail. 	Open Space Traffic & Circulation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt consistent standards for designating crosswalks and bicycle paths. 	Traffic & Circulation

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

- Enhance the town’s gateways by making them both visually attractive and effective at communicating local traffic policies. Traffic & Circulation
Natural & Cultural Resources
- Adopt consistent signage that welcomes visitors and announces strict speed limit enforcement. Traffic & Circulation
- Designate the section of Broad Street between I-495 and Route 110 as a “highway oasis,” promoting development that curbs non-local traffic into the village and the provision of small commuter facilities. Traffic & Circulation
Economic Development
Land Use

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

Recommendation #4: Recognize Merrimac’s traditional housing diversity as a resource that merits protection.

Implementation Measures	Master Plan Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	<p>Land Use Housing</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow accessory apartments by right in the Village Residential Overlay District. 	<p>Land Use Housing</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow conversions of existing structures and infill development in the proposed Village Residential Overlay District in exchange for deed-restricted affordable housing units. 	<p>Land Use Housing Community Facilities & Services</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the comprehensive permit process under M.G.L. c.40B to Merrimac’s advantage. Merrimac needs 152 additional units of lower-income housing to meet state requirements. However, the town does not have to accept badly designed proposals that result in congested land use and undue burdens on municipal and school services. Attracting high-quality, attractive low-income housing that meets local needs requires Merrimac to adopt and implement a local housing strategy. 	<p>Housing</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a permanent housing partnership committee. 	<p>Housing</p>

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

- Adopt written policies that identify local housing needs and preferences. Housing
- Adopt comprehensive permit review standards, using the state's Housing Appeal Committee Model Guidelines as a base. Land Use
Housing
- Become pro-active about seeking quality proposals from responsible developers. Housing
- Use the Local Initiatives Program (LIP) to place long-term affordability restrictions on units developed in the Village Residential Overlay District. Housing
- Establish a local housing trust, a non-profit subsidiary of the Merrimac Housing Authority or a community development corporation (CDC) to develop and manage affordable and elderly housing, and to carry out other community economic development projects. Housing
Economic
Development
- 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 elderly. Housing
- Apply for Mass. CDBG funds to restore housing rehabilitation assistance in Merrimac. Housing

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

- Use CDBG and HOME funds to subsidize the development of accessory apartments or single-family to two-family conversions in exchange for long-term housing affordability. Land Use
Housing
- Identify town-owned land, including tax-title parcels, that can support small-scale affordable housing development by such organizations as Habitat for Humanity. Land Use
Housing

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

Recommendation #5: Restore and enhance Merrimac’s economic base by nurturing local entrepreneurs, making wise use of existing industrial buildings, and encouraging high-quality commercial development.

Implementation Measures	Master Plan Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish an economic development and industrial commission and charge it with three tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. To provide policy, coordinating and project review assistance to other town boards and committees b. To develop a coherent economic development strategy for Merrimac c. To offer or arrange for technical assistance to established small businesses and new entrepreneurs. 	Economic Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with owners of older non-residential buildings in and adjacent to Merrimac Square, identify community economic development opportunities and secure the resources necessary to achieve them. 	Land Use Economic Development Cultural Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a non-profit community development corporation to acquire, restore and manage difficult-to-develop properties for such purposes as a microenterprise incubator or a small-business cooperative. 	Economic Development Housing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailor local policies to encourage work-at-home activity in Merrimac. 	Economic Development Housing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserve and enhance the vitality of Merrimac Square by: 	Economic Development Cultural Resources

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

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| a. | Providing use and reuse flexibility for existing buildings. | Traffic & Circulation
Housing |
| b. | Improving pedestrian safety. | |
| c. | Making the provision of adequate parking a public responsibility. | |

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

Recommendation #6: Recognize that Route 110 is essential to protecting Merrimac’s desirability and visual character. Work to develop an attractive, safe, mixed-use environment that provides goods and services, jobs, and a pleasant place to live.

Implementation Measures	Master Plan Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish, adopt and implement a community development strategy for Route 110, focusing on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. A mix of land uses. b. Flexible development rules with strong incentives for high-quality architectural and site design. c. Vehicular and pedestrian safety. d. Opportunities for small-business success. 	Land Use Economic Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate the use of public resources – grants, tax incentives and technical assistance – to strengthen the town’s employment base and encourage the profitability of locally-owned businesses. 	Economic Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage elderly and multi-family housing. 	Housing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modify the boundaries of the existing C District to make the best use of available land at key locations and preclude strip development. 	Land Use Economic Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserve and enhance Merrimac Square. 	Economic Development Community Facilities & Services Cultural Resources Traffic & Circulation

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

Recommendation #7: Think, plan and act strategically to provide a strong fiscal future for Merrimac.

Implementation Measures	Master Plan Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on sustainable community development techniques to increase local revenue. 	Land Use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make the highest and best use of an existing local asset: promote the Rural Highway District on Route 110 as a desirable location for mixed-use development. 	Land Use Economic Development Housing Traffic & Circulation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide zoning, tax and other incentives to encourage business on Route 110. 	Economic Development Land Use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize that the key to increasing local revenue is not necessarily <i>more</i> commercial and industrial development, but rather, <i>increasing the value of business-zoned property</i>. Zone for efficient, higher-value use of land and <i>against</i> land waste, sprawl and excessive site coverage. 	Land Use Economic Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capitalize on Merrimac’s inclusion in the regional ETA – Haverhill, Merrimac, Amesbury and Salisbury – to obtain resources for economic development. 	Economic Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage such uses as assisted living facilities that can accomplish the dual aims of elderly housing and positive fiscal return to the town. 	Land Use Housing

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

- Maximize opportunities to contain growth in local expenditures, especially school costs.

Land Use
Community Facilities & Services
- Diversify the town’s housing stock so that Merrimac attracts and retains family *and* non-family households.

Land Use
Housing
- Emphasize housing for the elderly and persons with disabilities.

Land Use
Housing
- Buy open space.

Land Use
Open Space
- Avoid “over-commercialization” of Route 110 in order to limit fiscal impacts on public safety services.

Land Use
Economic Development
Community Facilities & Services
- Focus new residential and non-residential uses in existing developed areas, giving preference to in-fill development, reuse of older buildings and higher density where the land and infrastructure can support it.

Land Use
Natural & Cultural Resources
- Build adequate reserves for major capital projects and community re-investment.

Community Facilities & Services
- Evaluate policies and criteria used to set sewer rates, and adjust as necessary to build a permanent capital improvements fund. Merrimac must manage and improve its wastewater treatment plant in order to meet the goals of the master plan.

Community Facilities & Services
Natural Resources
Land Use

Summary of Master Plan Recommendations

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected officials and voters should think like trustees when making decisions about the uses of local revenue, management of long-term debt and reduction of risk. Continue to build annual reserves in order to maintain free cash and stabilization fund balances of at least 10% of the general fund budget. | <p>Community Facilities & Services</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move with all due speed to develop a third water supply and build additional storage capacity in the town’s public water system. | <p>Community Facilities & Services</p> <p>Land Use</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate Merrimac’s form of government for adequacy and suitability to meet the town’s changing needs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Consolidate public works functions such as highway, water, sewer, cemeteries, playgrounds and building maintenance to improve efficiency, capital planning, policy making, and consistency in procedures for costing municipal services. b. Consider the need for a town administrator or town manager. | <p>Community Facilities & Services</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To the maximum extent feasible, keep municipal services in Merrimac Square. | <p>Land Use</p> <p>Community Facilities & Services</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make wise use of existing public facilities so they can be recycled and preserved when replaced by new buildings. Plan <i>now</i> for the reuse of Merrimac’s public library and the old Senior Center. | <p>Land Use</p> <p>Community Facilities & Services</p> <p>Cultural Resources</p> |