

Growing Better Great Barrington:
A Food System Plan for Climate Resilience, Environmental Sustainability
and Community Food Security

Response to:
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Growing Better Great Barrington: **A Food System Plan for Climate Resilience, Environmental Sustainability and Community Food Security**

Part A: Project Description

In the wake of COVID-19, communities are seeing the weaknesses of food systems and are seeking strategies on how to make them more resilient to climate change impacts, food supply chain breakdowns, and other land-based challenges. Planning requires an in-depth analysis of land uses and how they can be changed or integrated into a robust local food system. With 28% of human greenhouse gas emissions attributed to agriculture, forestry, and other land use by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), such food system planning will also help reduce our carbon footprint.

The project goal of *Growing Better Great Barrington* is to develop a food system plan with practical recommendations to enhance climate resilience, environmental sustainability and community food security. The Great Barrington plan will also serve as a model for mitigating climate impacts and food system vulnerability in other Massachusetts municipalities.

This project will provide strategies, best practices, and recommendations to:

- Lower greenhouse gas emissions by reducing “food miles” and fossil-fuel inputs,
- Improve productivity and resilience to weather extremes through soil carbon restoration,
- Advance food security and safe access to food in emergencies,
- Increase the number and type of green jobs locally,
- Boost workforce housing sustainability and food justice, and
- Enhance the potential for integrating more diverse, and biodiverse, land uses.

The plan will address the triple bottom line of sustainability by addressing the social need for food, with the environmental protection provided by preserved landscapes, and the economic benefits of a locally integrated food business network. At the intersection of the Commonwealth’s Resilient Lands Initiative and the Healthy Soils Initiative, this project could serve as a guide to other communities seeking to improve their community’s overall food security and climate resilience.

For Great Barrington, the food system plan will explore the local and distant sources of food consumed in the community and describe ways the local system can be improved. The plan will report broadly on the external sources of food that cannot be grown locally (such as bananas) and recommend strategies for reducing “food miles” and dependence on globally-sourced food. More specifically, the food plan will assess local

resources, sources, potential, and interconnectedness, including recommending ways to increase community and home gardening. Reducing risks to citizens of potential future food shortages is a core benefit of a resilient local food system.

Note: This project qualifies for the special set-aside described on page 3 of the RFR. The three criteria are: sustainable housing, permanent land conservation, and mitigation of climate change. While this project doesn't propose to address urban housing options, the project does include an analysis of housing options related to agriculture, for a generally low-income population.

Growing Better Great Barrington will evaluate the existing bylaws and options for work-force housing types in the Town. Also, by exploring the Natural Resource Protection Zone option, Great Barrington may consider this tool for controlling growth in the future.

With regard to climate mitigation, the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions (“food miles travelled”) could be a significant contribution to the Commonwealth’s goal of net zero carbon emissions by 2050. In addition, as evident in the COVID-19 pandemic, local food shortages can occur because of distant food supply chain problems. A severe weather event related to climate change could result in similar supply difficulties. A discussion of the supply chain issues could result in new strategies for ensuring a reliable food supply.

The *Growing Better Great Barrington* plan will be completed by a team from the Conway School, guided by faculty experienced with these food system projects:

[Feed Northampton](#) 2010

[Lowell Food Security Plan](#) 2013

[Building Local Food Connections: Concord](#) 2013

[Springfield Urban Agriculture Plan](#) 2014

[Brockton Urban Agriculture Plan](#) 2017

Plan strategies for Great Barrington could include:

- Reviewing the Town’s Master Plan, zoning and bylaws to assist plan implementation
- Identifying the types of locations for growing food locally, in backyards, community gardens, and small-scale farms
- Recommending selected techniques from the Smart Growth/Smart Energy Toolkit
- Assessing existing land uses and proposed development patterns, including the option of Natural Resource Protection Zoning
- Identifying methods for increasing carbon storage in soils

Part B: Process, Budget, and Timeline

After the grant is awarded, the Town's Core Team will meet in the fall to discuss the process and the product, led by the Assistant Town Manager/Planning Director, in coordination with the Chair of the Agricultural Commission. They will work with the various stakeholders including the Town's Agricultural Commission, the Economic Development Committee, the Strategic Sustainability and Livability Committee as well as the Planning Board.

Potential community partners include Berkshire Agricultural Ventures, Berkshire Bounty, Berkshire Grown, Greenagers, Great Barrington Farmers' Market and Great Barrington Land Conservancy along with local grocery stores and supermarkets.

With regard to housing, the Community Development Corporation of South Berkshire and the nonprofit Construct, Inc., each with more than thirty years of experience, are working on providing affordable housing in the community. In the fall, the Core Team will develop a full list of stakeholders and research existing information about the Town and its resources in preparation for the start of the Conway team portion of the project.

The Conway School will assign a team of two or three people to the project the first week in January 2021. The Conway team will meet with the Core Team and launch the plan development period that runs through the end of March. During this time two community forums will take place, either in person or online (as needed).

The Conway team will research case studies and best practices while evaluating the local landscape in a variety of ways. Using GIS mapping, the team will produce relevant maps illustrating the concepts, goals, and strategies being proposed. When the plan is approximately three-fourths complete, around late February, the Conway team will present their findings and draft recommendations to a panel of invited professionals and receive their feedback. The final plan will be delivered to the Town in early April.

The budget for the *Growing Better Great Barrington* project is:

TOTAL COST:	\$13,000
Consultant fee with the Conway School, Northampton, MA: (This represents the amount the Town will request for reimbursement: 80% of the total project cost)	\$10,000

Matching funds provided (professional hours from town staff): \$ 3,000

This is a proposed minimum match of professional town staff including:

- Town Manager
- Assistant Town Manager/Director of Planning and Community Development
- Superintendent of Public Works (and staff)
- Conservation Agent

Reimbursement of 25% of the project fee will be requested on February 1, 2021 by the Town. The remainder will be requested prior to June 30, 2021. (Note: This reimbursement schedule is at EEA's discretion.)

Part C: Evaluation Criteria

When applying the principles of Smart Growth in a community, the process needs to be comprehensive (bringing in a broad array of stakeholders) and it needs to adopt a system-wide approach to problem solving. Food systems are dynamic and complex, making system-wide changes difficult. They involve a workforce that is underpaid and underappreciated. The food system relies on, and is subject to, natural forces that cannot be controlled such as weather, pollinators, and public health emergencies. In order to make shifts in this dynamic system, effective planning requires research and analysis of components, players, and resources.

➤ *How does the proposed project advance sustainable development by directly, quickly, and significantly improving growth?*

The Commonwealth prioritizes the conservation of villages and towns as the fabric of our heritage and as a smart growth tool. As stated on the EEA website regarding the Smart Growth Toolkit: *“Revitalizing and protecting [villages and towns] is a key smart growth strategy. The character and high quality of life found in towns and cities is a competitive advantage that differentiates us from many other areas of our country. Our vibrant neighborhoods, historic buildings, and scenic open spaces and natural features are attractive to new businesses and their employees.”* For Great Barrington, and many small towns, this means embracing and supporting our agricultural heritage and ensuring it has a vibrant place in our community.

Great Barrington is an area with a “high resource value” as described in the criterion. It's a landscape of natural beauty that can also grow food sustainably. However, there are development pressures as a result of being a desirable place to live including a

tendency to sprawl on the edges of town. These challenges have been addressed in the Master Plan and Open Space and Recreation Plan (updated draft in progress) through their continued support of agriculture both as a landscape feature and as an economic engine in the community. The Town's Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Plan prioritizes increasing food security and fixing a broken food system. The Planning Assistance Grant will address the larger food system of inputs and outcomes, using a landscape-based analysis, and proposing policies and strategies for improving the food system. The MVP Action Grant proposes to address the issues around food insecurity with specific analyses and community-based actions.

➤ ***How does the project utilize funding efficiently & provide it where it is most needed?***

While portions of Great Barrington meet only one of the Environmental Justice criteria (low income) the food system plan recommendations could address ways to improve local incomes through food-related green jobs.

The Town has not received grant funding in any previous grant round through the Planning Assistance Grant program. If this grant is received, the Town is committed to ensuring excellent press coverage and widespread distribution of *Growing Better Great Barrington* as a model for other communities.

This outreach will build on the dynamic track record of the [Great Barrington Pollinator Action Plan](#) in generating multi-media coverage as well inspiring other towns to adopt recommended policies and practices. Notably, the *GB Pollinator Action Plan* helped inspire the creation of the [Operation Pollination](#) program by the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area (encompassing the 60-mile long watershed of the upper Housatonic River with 26 towns, including Great Barrington, in Western Massachusetts and Northwest Connecticut). Their [Operation Pollination Summit](#) last year engaged environmental organizations, government agencies as well as educational, farming and business leaders in developing regional pollinator protection educational initiatives.

The Town's track record of efficiently using grants and other funding sources has been demonstrated time and again. As a community who has implemented the Community Preservation Act, Great Barrington has demonstrated its commitment to housing justice by efficiently using CPA funds to create affordable housing.

➤ ***How will the project implement a Master, Climate Change (mitigation or adaptation), Open Space, Housing Production, or other Plan (including priority***

implementation projects identified by a Municipal Vulnerability Program Community)?

Growing Better Great Barrington will build on the [Great Barrington Pollinator Action Plan](#) that demonstrated the need to support pollinators, not just in natural and managed landscapes, but also as an integral part of the system of growing food. No pollinators, no food. This intersection between pollinator-friendly landscapes and food systems is vital for the Town's long-term resilience and rests at the intersection of public health and landscape health.

Considerable local, regional, and statewide planning work precedes the GB Food Resilience Plan and will inform it in meaningful ways. The [Great Barrington Community Master Plan](#) supports the Town's agricultural origins and envisions the conservation of the unique rural character and historic agricultural areas. The Town's Master Plan vision also states the need to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, enhance the economic base, and increase connectivity (see Attachment A, pages 4 and 5). The strategies in the food system plan will address the benefits of a local, connected food system and how to improve on the network for social, environmental, and economic benefits.

The Great Barrington Master Plan's Chapter 7 Agriculture (see Attachment A, pages 43-46) sets five broad goals focused on preserving farmland and prime agricultural soils and increasing the economic viability of the local agriculture system. ***Growing Better Great Barrington food system plan is the platform to transition from the Master Plan's broad goals to actionable strategies for making the local food system more resilient.***

Guidance for the local food system plan is provided by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission's [Sustainable Berkshires: Local Food and Agriculture](#) (2014) a regional assessment of the Berkshire food system. While this study was at a larger scale, it provides an excellent framework and guidance for a local food system study. Likewise, the [Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan](#) (2015) provides statewide goals to support local food systems and can help guide the GB plan's recommendations and strategies.

In their 2020 grant cycle application for a Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) Action Grant, Great Barrington is proposing to complete several actions related to food security. The Town is proposing to complete these tasks after the completion of the GB Food Resilience Plan so that the system-wide assessment can shape the Town's policies for the food system first.

➤ ***Will the project involve more than one municipality collaborating regionally on similar and related tasks?***

While this application is not a collaboration between municipalities, what is learned from this plan will be shared widely to benefit all communities facing the same challenges.

➤ ***Will the match provided exceed the 25% requirement?***

The Town has committed to a match of a minimum of 30% from the staff hours of the Town Manager, the Assistant Town Manager/Planning Director, and the Conservation Agent, in addition to other staff in Town departments.

➤ ***Will the project implement a Smart Growth/ Smart Energy Toolkit technique?***

This toolkit contains many useful guidelines for how to accomplish various goals. Of particular interest is the Agriculture Preservation goal that hopes to curb the alarming rate of loss of farmland. The GB Food Plan project hopes to curb the loss of agricultural lands in Great Barrington by stabilizing the food system and focusing on local sources and local products. The model bylaws will be reviewed by the Conway team and used where appropriate in the project.

➤ ***Will the project pursue a Housing Choice Best Practice?***

The best practices include an emphasis on affordable dwelling units and accessory dwelling units. A part of this plan is to review the Town's bylaws for the presence of barriers to workforce housing to increase opportunities for potential new farmers. This work can be completed with the assistance of the Community Development Corporation of South Berkshire and the nonprofit Construct, Inc.

While Great Barrington has not been designated as a Housing Choice community, in FY19 the Town received and implemented Small Town Housing Choice capital grant funding to support housing and economic development. In addition, the Town continues to address affordable housing using Community Preservation Act funding.

➤ ***Will the project advance a Community Compact Best Practice commitment?***

The Community Compact Best Practices include many that apply to this project ranging from agriculture, education, climate change adaptation and resilience, sustainable development and land protection, to public health. There are multiple intersections between these practices and the sustainable development practices discussed below.

➤ ***How does the project demonstrate consistency with the MA Sustainable Development Principles?***

Sustainable development evaluates all aspects of a proposal to ensure an equity of outcomes. Combining the environment, with social concerns for transportation and housing, and all of the support aspects of land development such as financing, can help meet the goal of utilizing natural and human-based resources wisely and in a climate-informed way.

Growing Better Great Barrington resilient food system planning will set the stage for others to follow by addressing a mix of uses, identifying the best land for conservation, advancing equity, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and mitigating for climate change, while increasing job opportunities free of college debt burden (social equity).

- Producing and consuming food locally reduces the carbon footprint of the food by both reducing vehicle miles travelled and by using soil regeneration practices to grow food while sequestering carbon. Such methods also help make farms more resilient to droughts, flooding, and other extreme weather and climate change impacts.
- The plan will evaluate the local agricultural land uses and make recommendations for increasing the diversity of uses and strategies for implementation. A discussion of the Natural Resource Protection Zoning option will be included.
- The landscape will also be evaluated for areas that should be considered for permanent conservation, in particular those areas that connect critical ecosystems.

One challenge in rural areas is housing for farm workers. With improved workforce housing prospects could come more green and farm-related jobs in the community and improve the value and equity of wage earners. The plan will review the existing bylaws and identify barriers to providing work-force housing in the Town. Community gardening options will be determined for affordable multifamily and elderly housing sites.

Growing Better Great Barrington is an opportunity to explore the food system landscape in a new way that evaluates the impacts of climate change and extreme weather on the system and plans for mitigation and adaptation for a more sustainable future. Great Barrington has the desire and capacity to be a leader in western Massachusetts, to bring their community, and others, forward into a new vision for an equitable, productive and resilient local food system.