

Executive Summary of the 2024 Greater Lowell Annual CEDS Report

The major barrier to continued economic growth in the 2023 CEDS program year is the high cost of living, driven by high housing costs and interest rates. Although the latest one-year American Community Survey has indicated that the population of Massachusetts did not shrink in 2021-22, it did shrink in the City of Lowell and potentially the Greater Lowell region. This is likely at least in large part due to the dysfunctional housing market, reflected in a declining number of sales without a decline in median prices. This represents an outflow of talented individuals, often young people who would be entering the labor force, to less-expensive areas. This outflow has, in turn, created a tight labor market that creates impacts such as reduced transit service, reduced municipal services, and reduced hours for small businesses. The housing shortage also has stressed the regional and statewide family shelter system.

Housing is not the only barrier to economic development. Infrastructure, especially affordable energy, clean water, and efficient stormwater/wastewater systems, was identified as a critical barrier to economic development in the five-year CEDS. That concern has only grown as climate change has prompted more flooding events and the state and federal governments have encouraged moves toward greater utilization of clean electricity for home heating, private vehicles, and other uses.

This represents a threat to the region's economic prosperity. Notably, the growth of number of businesses has slowed significantly in the Greater Lowell region. The highest-paid industries in the Greater Lowell region, Information, Financial Activities, and Professional and Business Services, saw declines in number of employees. In addition, Trade, Transportation, and Utilities and Information saw declines in average weekly wages. On a micro-level, municipalities in the region are grappling with increasing numbers of vacant storefronts.

That said, the regional industrial mix is still strong, with a large and growing number of employees in manufacturing, especially advanced manufacturing; a well-educated workforce that is continuing to improve its education; and a strong research university that continues to advance partnerships with private entities. In addition, several goals were advanced over the last year by NMCOG and its CEDS partners, including the completion of a cultural plan for Lowell, the development of proposed multifamily zoning districts in compliance with the Multi-family requirement for MBTA Communities, the award of major grants worth more than \$4 million in grants for workforce development, and the advance of critical state of good repair bridge and highway infrastructure projects.

With this in mind, the recommended economic development priorities are to use the five-year CEDS Update planning process that will begin in 2024 to identify gaps in the region's economic development program to take advantage of the region's excellent industrial mix, in addition to working to attract clean energy technology industries. Another critical priority is to advance housing planning and policy to



National Main St. Conference (Boston) – Lowell-based panel on Equitable Access to Capital, featuring EforAll, CTI's Entrepreneurship Center, City of Lowell, and the LDFC, courtesy Lowell Plan

increase the affordability and accessibility of housing stock in the region to ensure it is no longer a barrier to economic development. A third priority is to restore and expand transit service or other alternative transportation systems through identifying strategies that could be implemented in coming years. A final critical priority is to address the region's aging infrastructure, including identifying strategies and resources to support clean water, affordable energy, and adequate sewer and stormwater systems. 2024 Action Plan and Next Steps

The following table describes the anticipated and priority actions to be undertaken in 2024. These activities will be selected based on their importance to increase the region's resiliency, workforce availability, equity, and flexibility in the face of constantly changing economic conditions. In addition, they follow the recommendations in Local Rapid Recovery Plans and the Economic Resilience and Recovery Plan whenever possible. Activities are nominated by NMCOG based on the analysis in Sections 3 and 4 and stakeholder input, then refined by a working group of CEDS Committee members.

In addition to these activities or projects, communities and agencies will undertake other economic development activities, such as but not limited to continuing business support and recruitment, regular workforce development activities, and infrastructure maintenance and construction. See the full description of goals and objectives in the Greater Lowell CEDS for 2020-2024 at <https://www.nmcog.org/ceds>



Annual Town Meeting, Town of Westford, courtesy Westford Economic Development Committee

TABLE 1: 2024 SCHEDULE OF GOALS

Activity or Project	Task	Lead Agency or Actor	Objectives Advanced	Milestone Complete
1. Complete the 2025-2029 CEDS and Integrate Workforce Planning	1.1. Contract with consultants to develop a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Update for 2025-2029, including a focus on analysis of changes and trends, system dynamics analysis of the labor force, and gaps in economic development activities that could be filled by an additional staff position, including a strategy to build capacity for small-scale economic development projects.	NMCOG		May 2024
	1.2. Seek additional capacity to create a business contact database of the regions’ largest employers that includes estimated number of workers and mission of firms based on proprietary, state, and local data in order to better engage the business community in the CEDS process.	NMCOG, Municipalities	1.1, 2.6, 3.1	July 2024
	1.3. Complete listening sessions and data collection for the CEDS Update, including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A systems dynamics study of the labor market 2. An investigation of the feasibility and process through which local companies operating within the Greater Lowell Region can access MassCEC funding through the Commonwealth's Climatech Initiative 3. Data sources for additional context to new business formation, including size and type of business 4. Development of a region-wide Women-Owned-Businesses and Minority-Owned-Businesses list that can be made available to the public 	NMCOG		August 2024
	1.4. Complete an Economic Development summit and begin drafting the 2024-2029 CEDS Update.	NMCOG		December 2024
	1.5. Continue working with GLHA, GLWB, and LCHC to advance grant-funded work for behavioral health training and the establishment of a Healthcare Hub, both from the Commonwealth Corporation.	GLHA, GLWB, Health Care Providers	1.1, 3.1, 3.2	Continuous
	1.6. Advance the Regional Blueprint focused on manufacturing, healthcare, and IT for the Greater Lowell Region, keeping all stakeholders updated on progress throughout 2024. The recommendations will be integrated into the five-year CEDS plan.	MassHire Workforce Boards	1.1, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.4	December 2024
	1.7. Integrate the recommendations developed as part of the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant and Regional Priority Climate Action Plan into the CEDS Update, including circular economy models at community and regional scales and identify potential partners.	NMCOG	2.2, 4.2	December 2024

TABLE 1: 2024 SCHEDULE OF GOALS

Activity or Project	Task	Lead Agency or Actor	Objectives Advanced	Milestone Complete
2. Plan for Housing at the Local and Regional Levels	2.1. Kickoff the "At Home in Greater Lowell" Regional Housing Strategy plan. This plan will identify priority growth areas for housing across the region to identify strategies and funding to meet regional housing needs, including, but not limited to, developing housing units for those experiencing chronic homelessness, recommending zoning policy for higher-density and affordable residential development, obtaining funding to rehabilitate housing units, and identifying and dedicating existing units to those with lower incomes. This plan will be committed to by all parties, including municipalities, and publicly shared.	NMCOG, Municipalities, Housing Agencies	6.1, 6.2, 6.3	March 2024
	2.2. Complete the "At Home in Greater Lowell" Regional Housing Strategy plan, including the development of a toolkit, storytelling campaign, and final implementation summit. This may include an inventory of underutilized or vacant municipal-owned property that can be redeveloped for housing.	NMCOG, Municipalities, Housing Agencies	2.5, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3	October 2024
	2.3. Seek and secure funding to establish a Regional Housing Services Organization to maintain, monitor, and support the development of affordable housing across the region.	NMCOG, Municipalities	6.2	December 2024
	2.4. Complete the Lowell Housing Production Plan.	NMCOG, Lowell	6.1, 6.2, 6.3	May 2024
	2.5. Complete the Dracut Housing Production Plan.	NMCOG, Dracut	6.1, 6.2, 6.3	August 2024
	2.6. Complete the Chelmsford Housing Production Plan.	NMCOG, Chelmsford	6.1, 6.2, 6.3	December 2024
	2.7. Complete the Tyngsborough Housing Production Plan.	NMCOG, Tyngsborough	6.1, 6.2, 6.3	December 2024
	2.8. Review progress on ERRP Housing Best Practices and report to the CEDS committee.	NMCOG, Municipalities	6.2, 6.3	December 2024
3. Advance MBTA Community Multi-Family Compliance	3.1. Support municipalities in advancing zoning amendments compliant with M.G.L. Ch. 40A, Section 3A (Multi-Family Zoning Requirement for MBTA Communities).	NMCOG, Municipalities	2.5, 6.3	Continuous

TABLE 1: 2024 SCHEDULE OF GOALS

Activity or Project	Task	Lead Agency or Actor	Objectives Advanced	Milestone Complete
4. Invest in Local and Regional Water, Wastewater, and Energy Infrastructure	4.1. Establish a regional working group or committee comprised of representatives from each municipality, wastewater treatment plants, and relevant stakeholders to coordinate efforts and collectively address capacity issues based on the findings of the 2023 Regional Wastewater Infrastructure Study. The goal of this committee will be to create a wastewater feasibility study scope of work to expand the region’s wastewater system to accommodate future growth and development for which NMCOG may seek funding.	NMCOG, Municipalities	4.1	July 2024
	4.2. Coordinate with interested municipalities to create a PFAS Response Strategy.	NMCOG, Municipalities	1.1, 4.3	July 2024
	4.3. Seek funding and research programs to assist with mapping electrical energy sources and availability.	NMCOG, Municipalities	4.1, 4.3	December 2024
5. Regional Energy and Sustainability Planning and Coordination	5.1. Identify best practices or viable financial models for projects outlined in the region’s Regional Priority Climate Action Plan (PCAP).	NMCOG	4.2	December 2024
	5.2. Learn how to use ResilientMass' new infrastructure and climate data projection tools and applications for economic development.	NMCOG, Municipalities	1.1, 4.1	December 2024
	5.3. Educate municipalities on the PACE municipal opt-in process to increase regional participation in the program. Reach out to local banks to create local PACE partners.	NMCOG, Lowell Plan	4.2	December 2024
	5.4. Seek funding or capacity to identify best practices or viable financial models for projects to meet stretch energy codes.	NMCOG, Municipalities	4.2	December 2024
6. Enhance Regional Transportation Planning	6.1. Create scopes of work for Complete Streets and other transportation infrastructure prioritization plans, and assist interested municipalities in identifying funding for transportation projects.	NMCOG	5.2, 5.3	June 2024
	6.2. Use Replica software to evaluate travel patterns throughout the region.	NMCOG	5.1, 5.2, 5.3	December 2024

TABLE 1: 2024 SCHEDULE OF GOALS

Activity or Project	Task	Lead Agency or Actor	Objectives Advanced	Milestone Complete
7. Transit and Alternative Transportation Connections	7.1. Collaborate and develop strategies to restore service to pre-pandemic levels, including a focus on innovative ways to address first-mile, last-mile connections through the Regional Transportation Plan process and in collaboration with private companies and other regional partners. This should include coordination with MBTA and Boston MPO/CPTS	NMCOG, LRTA, Middlesex 3	5.2, 5.3	December 2024
	7.2. Inventory bus routes for amenities and accessibility while supporting LRTA in their planned implementation of vehicle location, automatic passenger counters, and automated voice announcement systems over the next year.	NMCOG, LRTA	5.2, 5.3	December 2024
	7.3. Verify and correct bus stop GTFS data to support vehicle location and passenger count systems.	NMCOG, LRTA	5.2, 5.3	December 2024
	7.4. Develop a scope of work for a regional bicycle and pedestrian plan and commence the planning process.	NMCOG	5.2, 5.3	December 2024
	7.5. Establish a subcommittee to develop CEDS recommendations for regional bicycle improvements based on the Regional Transportation Plan and for actions to leverage existing bicycle assets for economic development. Integrate these recommendations into the bicycle and pedestrian plan.	CEDS Committee	5.2	July 2024
	7.6. Advance the contract for the design and construction of bus stops along Merrimack Street at City Hall and John Street as part of the GoLowell Multimodal Plan.	Lowell	5.2, 5.3	December 2024
	7.7. Evaluate MassHire Greater Lowell Workforce Board's ride sharing pilot project for employees in the region. Consider expansion of these and similar services.	NMCOG, MHGWFB	5.2	December 2024
	7.8. Advance the Billerica-Yankee Doodle Bike Path Project, communicating updates to all stakeholders.	Billerica, NMCOG	5.3	December 2024
	7.9. Continue to explore ways to advance progress on the Capital Corridor Commuter Rail extension or alternatives. The Capital Corridor Commuter Rail is a commuter rail extension project from Lowell, MA to Manchester, NH.	NMCOG, MassDOT, MBTA, NHDOT, MAPCNRPC, Southern NH RPC, MVPC, NH Office of Energy, Central NH Regional Planning Commission, MAPC	5.2	Continuous

TABLE 1: 2024 SCHEDULE OF GOALS

Activity or Project	Task	Lead Agency or Actor	Objectives Advanced	Milestone Complete
8. Continue Focus on Transportation Safety and State of Good Repair on Projects of Regional Importance	8.1. Advance the contract with FHWA and MassDOT to perform repairs and upgrades to the Broadway, Swamp Locks, and Lower Pawtucket Canal bridges.	Lowell	5.1, 5.3	Continuous
	8.2. Continue advancing the Rourke Bridge Replacement Project, communicating updates to all stakeholders.	MassDOT, NMCOG	5.1	Continuous
	8.3. Advance the rehabilitation of Boston Road located in Westford, communicating updates to all stakeholders.	MassDOT, NMCOG	5.1	December 2024
	8.3. Advance the replacements of Chelmsford Bridge and the section Gorham Street over I-495, and the rehabilitation of Westford Street over I-495, communicating updates to all stakeholders.	MassDOT, NMCOG	5.1	December 2024
9. Strengthen Childcare Networks to Support Employment Opportunities and Economic Mobility for Child Guardians	9.1. Review municipal zoning to ensure that childcare-related uses, including in-home family daycares, are allowed by-right.	NMCOG	3.3	December 2024
10. Complete Regional Digital Equity Plan	10.1. Investigate the needs of the people who have barriers to broadband internet and support initiatives to fill those needs, allowing equitable access to essential internet services. The population facing barriers may include seniors, people who make low incomes, people with limited English proficiency, people experiencing homelessness, and other communities.	NMCOG, Municipalities, CBOs	1.1, 4.1	October 2024
	10.2. Seek funding for initiatives to advance digital equity, such as programs providing education towards computer and Internet literacy, appropriate equipment such as computers or routers, financial assistance to pay for access at appropriate speeds, and education and enforcement addressing security and privacy risks.	NMCOG, Municipalities, CBOs	3.3, 3.4, 3.5	October 2024
	10.3. Evaluate small retail and service businesses adoption of internet-based service models and the compare internet-only businesses, brick-and-mortar businesses, and hybrid models to determine best ways to assist very small businesses in growth.	NMCOG, Small Business Centers	2.6, 3.1	October 2024
	10.4. Perform outreach to stakeholders and populations facing barriers to achieving digital equity and connect them with programming to address infrastructure, device, and literacy needs.	NMCOG, Municipalities, CBOs	3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 4.1	Continuous

TABLE 1: 2024 SCHEDULE OF GOALS

Activity or Project	Task	Lead Agency or Actor	Objectives Advanced	Milestone Complete
11. Grant Application and Administration Capacity Building	11.1. Identify top project priorities for Pepperell, Dunstable, and Tewksbury to support grant applications for these priorities.	NMCOG, Pepperell, Dunstable, Tewksbury	2.4	June 2024
	11.2. Research, assess, and identify federal, state and other funding opportunities, especially through the Community Compact, to benefit the region’s municipalities.	NMCOG	2.4	June 2024
12. Revitalization of Regional Network of Village and Neighborhood Centers	12.1. Complete the planning for the sidewalk expansion from the Senior Center at 37 Nashua Road down Mill Street and Main Street towards the Main Street Rotary using the \$2.75 million Massworks grant.	Pepperell	2.1, 5.3, 7.1	December 2024
	12.2. Explore methods and create a process for inventorying vacant storefronts in the regional network of village and neighborhood centers.	NMCOG	2.1, 2.5, 2.6	December 2024
	12.3. Complete the Chelmsford Center Village Master Plan Update.	NMCOG, Chelmsford	2.5, 2.6	December 2024
	12.4. Complete the Dunstable Union Building Reuse Feasibility Study and advance its recommendations.	NMCOG, Dunstable	7.1	May 2024
	12.5. Continue incremental improvements to wayfinding signage for key sites within the City of Lowell.	Lowell	7.1, 7.2	Continuous
	12.6. Investigate funding sources and research strategies to establish small business incubators within underutilized properties throughout the Greater Lowell Region, including the coordination of food-based and other opportunities.	NMCOG, Lowell Plan, Municipalities	7.2, 7.3	December 2024
13. Industrial and Mixed-Use Development	13.1. Continue negotiations with developers about activating the remaining parcels in the Hamilton Canal Innovation District.	Lowell	2.5	Continuous
	13.2. Continue discussions with MassDOT to place construction of a southbound exit on Route 3 near the New Hampshire state line, including evaluation of steps needed to make it a higher priority or place it on the TIP.	NMCOG, Tyngsborough	2.1	Continuous
	13.3. Apply for Federal Economic Development Administration (EDA) funding to make necessary transportation improvements on Locust Avenue if a private beneficiary partner is identified.	NMCOG, Tyngsborough	2.1	As Needed
	13.4. Evaluate the approach to promotion and utilization of Opportunity Zones through case studies or other methods.	NMCOG, Lowell	2.4	December 2024

TABLE 1: 2024 SCHEDULE OF GOALS

Activity or Project	Task	Lead Agency or Actor	Objectives Advanced	Milestone Complete
14. Enhance Tourism and Visitation	14.1. Complete the Greater Lowell Tourism and Visitation Report.	NMCOG	7.1, 7.2, 7.3	April 2024
	14.2. Reconvene the Greater Lowell Tourism and Visitation Subcommittee (GLTVS) of the CEDS Committee.	NMCOG; Greater Lowell Chamber of Commerce; Nashoba Valley Chamber of Commerce ; Middlesex West Chamber of Commerce; Local Dev. Organizations; Municipalities	7.1, 7.2, 7.3	May 2024
	14.3. Brainstorm and define a visual brand and coordinated activities to promote tourism in the Greater Lowell Region in anticipation of the 250th anniversary of the United States and the City of Lowell's 200th anniversary.	GLTVS	7.1, 7.2, 7.3	August 2024
	14.4. Provide support in state-wide initiatives such as the Statewide Trail Mapping program or development of the regional or statewide trail networks.	NMOCG, Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust	7.1	Continuous
15. Economic Development District Application	15.1. Continue working with the Federal Economic Development Administration (EDA) to achieve Economic Development District (EDD) designation.	NMCOG	2.2	Continuous