
Economic Development

Goal: To encourage a stable economy in the Town of Weston that provides employment opportunities, encourages agriculture and forest related enterprises, and allows for the development of new businesses as well as the expansion of existing ones.

Background:

Historically, and typical of a small rural town, Weston's economy had been a diverse one, including retail commerce and inns in the Village, small farms producing agricultural products, harvesting the forests in the surrounding areas, and small manufacturers refining locally produced natural resources.

The current economy is largely dependent on transient visitors and second homeowners. The Town is centrally located among several major ski resorts, and Route 100 traffic provides a steady stream of visitors throughout the year. The historic character of the village center, the scenic agricultural land and natural beauty of our river valley, and the forested ridges surrounding the Town make it a desirable tourist destination, inviting visitors to stop and shop, eat, and sleep, and take advantage of the outdoors, and cultural and spiritual offerings.

An abundance of recreational opportunities are easily accessible in Weston or in nearby communities, including golf, fishing, skiing, snowshoeing, hunting, swimming, boating, hiking, and snowmobiling. Major attractions in Weston include the Vermont Country Store, the Weston Playhouse, Walker Farm performance venue, Kinhaven Music School, the Green Mountain National Forest, and the Weston Priory, among others. The Town should focus its economic development efforts on building on these existing community assets while preserving Weston's small-town rural character and its natural resources.

~~Weston's village center, natural and cultural resources and continued preservation of its scenic resources have contributed to the popularity of Weston as a second home location and tourist destination.~~

The increasing number of second homes has stimulated the economy by creating opportunities in service related businesses such as: construction, skilled trades, landscaping, property caretaking, and real estate sales and rentals. The prevalence of tourism and second home ownership does have some undesirable side effects, including extreme traffic congestion in the village center during peak seasons and a very cyclical annual business pattern.

The last decade has also seen renewed expansion of agricultural enterprises as well as growth in home-based businesses and remote work; whether service or professional oriented. The latter ~~being has been~~ facilitated by the completion of the broadband network in Weston availability of reliable high-speed Internet access and improved cell phone service. There is an opportunity to encourage seasonal homeowners that have an option to work remotely to spend more time in Weston. This in turn helps support local businesses through increased patronage.

The table below provides an inventory of existing businesses in Weston in 2024 as compared to 2015. This list is not comprehensive, but is meant to provide a general snapshot of the types of businesses in the community currently, and changes in recent years.

<u>Inventory of Town Businesses</u>	<u>2015</u>	<u>2024</u>
<u>Antiques</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>
<u>Art Gallery</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Cultural Arts School (seasonal)</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Grocery/Convenience store/gas station</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>
<u>Inns/Bed & Breakfasts</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>Licensed Trades</u>	<u>3</u>	
<u>Non-profit Organizations</u>	<u>6</u>	
<u>Pre-school & Childcare</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Professional Offices</u>	<u>1</u>	
<u>Real Estate Office</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Restaurants</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>Retail Establishments</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Theatre Company</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>

There is a growing recognition of the Town's economic vulnerability due to the flood risks in the village, given that most of the town's commercial services are located here. The July 2023 flood forced the closure of the Weston Market Place and gas station, and the temporary relocation of performances from the Weston Playhouse to the Walker Farm facility. Following the flood, tourism numbers were lower across Vermont due to the outside perception of ongoing road closures. This had an effect on local businesses, especially those that rely on tourism, including retail stores, restaurants, and inns.

Looking forward, there may be a need to locate appropriate areas outside of the village for future commercial growth due to these flood risks. This should be balanced with the need to protect the natural, historic, and scenic resources that help define the community. Commercial development outside of compact villages is often poorly planned and can result in sprawl development patterns that negatively impact the vitality of village centers, traffic safety, and community character. Towns can address these issues by planning for commercial growth in areas that are a natural extension of the village center, and by having design standards for architecture and site design that reflect the existing community character.

Due to the rural setting of Weston, there is also a desire amongst residents for more basic services, such as restaurants, convenience stores, medical offices, a pharmacy, and a bank. While there may be opportunities for some of these types of businesses to locate in Weston, there is the challenge of the community's small population and its relative proximity to existing larger commercial centers, such as Manchester, Ludlow, and Chester.

Inventory of Town Businesses	2006	2011	2015
Antiques	4	4	4
Art Gallery	4	3	2
Churches	3	3	4
Cultural Arts School (seasonal)	4	4	4
Grocery/Convenience store/gas station	4	4	4
Inns/Bed & Breakfasts	4	5	4
Library	4	4	4
Licensed Trades	3	3	3
Manufacturers/Industry	0	0	0
Non-profit Organizations	6	6	6
Pre-school & Childcare	4	4	4
Professional Offices	4	0	4
Real Estate Office	4	4	4
Restaurants	4	4	4
Retail Establishments	3	2	3
Theatre Company	4	4	4

Economic Development Policies

1. Support economic development efforts that provides diversified and stable local employment opportunities with competitive wages that will enhance Weston's small town rural character, while maintaining and that will protect the community's natural resources.
- ~~2. Encourage those industries which best utilize the raw materials or labor already available in Weston and which do not adversely affect the natural resources or scenic beauty of the Town.~~
- ~~3.2.~~ Encourage up-to-date the development of modern communication services of all types to meet the needs of local businesses and the community.
- ~~4.3.~~ Require that all agricultural, industrial and commercial operations adequately control wastes, be environmentally responsible, and relate satisfactorily to existing land uses ~~and account to the Town for both direct and indirect municipal costs.~~

~~5.4.~~ Encourage businesses that provide goods and services that meet the needs of residents, second homeowners, and visitors, including retail stores, restaurants, medical offices, pharmacies, banks, gas stations, lodging, recreational activities, support tourism and second homeowners by providing lodging, dining, recreational activities and other necessary services.

~~6.~~ Encourage home-based work and entrepreneurial ventures that preserve and revitalize the Town's character and add to the diversity of culture and activities available to residents and visitors.

7 Encourage farmlands to remain in a productive state and encourage land that has previously been used for farming to be returned to farming uses whenever possible. Encourage production and marketing of land-based activities such as agriculture and forest products.

8. Encourage and support Weston's cultural and spiritual based economy, including civic, religious, and non-profit organizations that contribute much to the quality and diversity of life in Weston.

~~9. Require that the construction, expansion or providing of public facilities and services not reduce the resource value of adjoining agricultural and forest lands.~~

~~10.9.~~ Encourage sensible forest management and agricultural practices in accordance with United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and applicable State law.

Recommendations for Action

~~1. Consider joining forces with other towns in the district to utilize the resources at Flood Brook School and Promote~~ -nearby technical training centers to enhance employment opportunities for local residents.

~~2. Help the Town prepare a capital budget.~~

~~Form an economic development committee to prepare an economic development plan for the Town to enhance business capabilities, including high speed, broadband telecommunications service.~~

~~2. Review and update the zoning bylaws to support desired business growth and development in appropriate locations in town.~~

~~3. Explore opportunities to partner with adjacent communities on marketing strategies for the region to increase tourism and business revenue.~~

~~4. Conduct a wastewater capacity study to determine the need for, and feasibility of, developing a wastewater facility to service the village to support existing and new businesses.~~

~~3.5.~~