

Turners Falls Cultural District

DRAFT

City/Town Information

Chief elected official: Richard Kuklewicz
Chairman, Montague Select Board
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Population of city/town: 8,394 (2014 ACS Estimates)
Median Household income: \$47,236 (2014 ACS Estimates)
NO

Cultural Council Information

Name of the District: The Turners Falls Cultural District
We decided on this name because there is a core density of cultural and recreational amenities located in the very walk able and architecturally rich downtown Turners Falls. The area is roughly 10 square blocks and takes about 12 minutes to walk from one side to the other.

The cultural district extends South from the Turners Falls- Gill Bridge, along Avenue A to the Carnegie Library on Seventh Street. The cultural district extends to the area North of Third Street, between Canal Street to the Unity Park waterfront.

List any zoning overlays, municipal incentives or special designations of relevance

The Town of Montague has implemented over 3 decades of revitalization planning focused on downtown Turners Falls. We are pleased to be at point in revitalization where the community can apply for designation as cultural district. Some of the relevant planning and economic tools that the town has in place includes the following: The Turners Falls National Register Historic District incentives historic rehabilitation through federal tax credits. Historic-Industrial Zoning District was adopted by the Town in 2001 for the purpose of encouraging adaptive reuse of historic industrial buildings and sites in Downtown Turners Falls. New Market Tax Credits are available in the Turners Falls census tract. The municipal Commercial Homesteading Program has been used to rehabilitate blighted tax-delinquent properties in Turners Falls by selling them to developer for \$1 in exchange for a commitment to adaptive reuse and historic rehabilitation. Two projects have been completed in cultural district and two more are in development. The Town offers a competitive Tax Increment Financing incentive eligible to projects within Turners Falls.

Cultural District Narrative

Nestled along the Connecticut River, Turners Falls is an extraordinary historic mill village that has blossomed from its industrial roots to become a hub of artistic inspiration, historic rediscovery, recreational adventure, and natural beauty. The largest of 5 villages in the Town of Montague, this planned industrial community is organized in a grid and noted for its outstanding examples of the late 19th century architecture. Over the last thirty years, The Town of Montague has made a concerted effort to preserve the village's architectural heritage as part of its revitalization efforts. There are four major cultural focal points in the proposed district: The Shea Theater, Unity Park/Unity Skatepark, The Great Falls Discovery Center and The Carnegie Library.

Give examples of important cultural, historical and recreational facilities

The Shea Theater Arts Center (STAC) is a 320 seat community theater owned by the Town of Montague and operated by a private-non profit group. The Shea provides a venue for year-round performances from local performing artists, as well as regional and national talent. In 2016 STAC received a \$120,000 dollar renovation which included improvements to the mechanical systems, and

updates to the interior and facade. The Shea Theater is one of many performance venues in the proposed Cultural District. Residents and visitors enjoy cultural events at a number of galleries, bar/restaurants and artist studios and The Brick House Community Resource Center.

Unity Park enjoys stunning views of the Connecticut River. With recent facility improvements totaling nearly 2 million dollars, Unity Park is the center of outdoor recreation in Turners Falls. Amenities include a playground, ball fields, basketball courts, community gardens, a fitness circuit and sand volleyball. The addition of a professionally designed skatepark in 2016 makes Unity Park unparalleled in the region.

A short walk along the Canalside Railtrail are the manicured gardens of the Great Falls Discovery Center. Housed within a complex of old mill buildings, the mission of the Great Falls Discovery Center is to interpret the natural, cultural, and industrial history of the Connecticut River watershed. Adjacent to the main building is the Great Hall, a former machine shop which was completely renovated in 2003. The Great Hall now regularly hosts art exhibits, educational programs and live-music performances.

On the south end of the District is the Georgian style Carnegie Library, named after Andrew Carnegie who donated construction funds in 1905. The library hosted approximately 210 free public programs in 2016 with total audience of over 5,000. About 84,000 items were checked out last year, and the library has five very popular free computers used by children, adults and seniors, alike.

Give examples of cultural programming

In the last 12 months, the Turners Falls Cultural District has hosted a wide variety of cultural programming designed to bring the community together including: Black History Month: Music and Diversity II, The Pocumtuck Homelands Festival, Unity Skatepark Opening Celebration, Pumpkinfest, The Upper Valley Music Festival, and Turners Falls History Month, Montague Community Band Concerts. The recently rehabilitated Shea Theater has hosted an ArtSalon, the Lost and Found Fashion Show, a Latin Heritage dance event, and a wide array of musical and artistic performances. The Great Falls Discovery Center hosts a monthly ‘coffeehouse’ performance series, a rotating art gallery, permanent natural history exhibits, and an impressive array of children’s events and historical talks. The Carnegie Library also hosts regular children’s programming and cultural events. The Women’s Resource Center and Casa Rara have recently emerged as cultural centers for the emerging Hispanic community in Turners Falls. The Brick House houses art and performance programs for youth and teens. They also host impressive array of underground touring acts. There are 5 bars and restaurants in the Cultural District that regularly offer music on any given night.

Describe how the town's public amenities enhance the district

The public amenities of Turners Falls are a rare combination of natural beauty, historic architecture and carefully considered projects which give the village a unique identity. The reconstructed Turners Falls-Gill Bridge over the Connecticut River is an impressive gateway. The footprint of this Industrial Revolution era planned community remains largely intact, with a nice sense of proportion to the streets, tree-lined sidewalks and brick buildings. New energy efficient street lamps on Avenue A (2015) make Turners Falls feel safer in addition to being brighter. The community was so supportive of the new lighting that 30 more lights will be installed in the district in 2017. The Town offers ample free parking which is a true asset to visitors and residents.

The Town of Montague, in partnership with RiverCulture, provides public furnishings that are consistent with the 2008 Turners Falls Public Art Strategy. Wayfinding signage downtown guides tourists between shops, restaurants, cultural attractions and outdoor recreation. There are also four sculptural information kiosks within the proposed Cultural District, one of which received a complete renovation (2016) to be illuminated at night. In the Spring of 2017, RiverCulture and Town of Montague will facilitate the installation of a permanent sculpture by internationally recognized artist Tim de Christopher. The work will be integrated into the new seating area on the corner of Avenue A

and 3rd Street. This location was identified in the Town of Montague 2013 Livability Plan as place for pedestrians to meet and socialize. The public amenities of the waterfront, The Canalside Rail Trail, Unity Park and Unity Skatepark add greatly to the quality of life of our residents, and continue to attract tourists from throughout the region.

Vision and Goals

Why does Turners Falls want to become a cultural district?

Turners Falls wants to become a cultural district in order to preserve and promote the unique identity of the Village, and to continue to establish art and culture as the economic engine for growth in the community. These goals, identified in both the RiverCulture mission statement and the Livability Plan, would have a positive impact on the daily lives of our residents.

Outline the vision for the District

Our vision for the District is two fold. First, we believe that increased cultural activity will enhance the livable/walkable nature of downtown Turners Falls. While we are located in the State's most rural county, many residents do not own automobiles and instead walk, bike or take public transportation to the majority of their appointments. Enhancing access to the Arts is a critical standard of living issue for these residents. Second, we believe branding the Turners Falls Cultural District will lead to more cross promotion and partnership throughout Western Massachusetts and thus, more interest from outside investors and tourists.

Outline the goals of the district as they relate to the Cultural District Initiative

The goals of the Turners Falls Cultural District directly align with both the mission of RiverCulture and the Cultural District Initiative.

RiverCulture, the business and arts community will work together with FCCC on marketing initiatives that brand the Cultural District. These efforts might revolve around a RiverCulture event, a Shea performance, a theme, the design of a map, or a FCCC tourism package. By branding the identity of the District we hope to attract tourists, investors, artists and new residents who appreciate our quality of life, access to the arts, and the natural beauty of our surroundings.

Our second goal is to use the arts as a catalyst to business development in the District. We know from experience that the arts has a role in renewal and redevelopment. An example includes the recent sale of a large vacant building on Avenue A. The building was sold this summer and is currently receiving a complete renovation of four street level retail spaces and eleven apartments. While the evidence is anecdotal, rotating art exhibitions in the storefronts and regular RiverCulture events probably had something to do with the saleability of the property.

A third goal of the district is to preserve and maintain the architecture of the district. This will be accomplished by complementary through a suite of planning tools, incentives, and grant opportunities. The district is within a national register historic district. The Town will build off its fantastic track record of historic preservation and adaptive reuse in the district. The CD designation will help attract investment from CDBG, MassWorks, and Historic Preservation, Cultural Facilities Fund, and town taxpayers to implement the vision for the district.

Past accomplishments and future plans to maximize the potential of the cultural organizations, real estate opportunities, and cultural programs

RiverCulture and The Town of Montague have a foundation of redevelopment projects, partnerships and initiatives which will lend to the success of the Turners Falls Cultural District.

As the voice and vision of local residents, property owners, business proprietors, and planning agencies, The 2013 Livability Plan guides redevelopment in Turners Falls. Clearly detailed are short

and long term recommendations to improve livability/mobility downtown, as well as practical streetscape improvements, key redevelopment projects, and ways to foster a unique sense of place. We are fortunate to have such a document and intent to maximize its potential.

A change in leadership and \$120 thousand dollars in capital improvements has been a “game changer” for The Shea Theater and Turners Falls, in general. The Shea books a wide variety of entertainment that draws attendance from well beyond Franklin County. In one year, The Shea Theater has become not just a cultural hub but an important economic engine, boosting restaurant and business sales.

Other investors are banking on both short term and long term returns in Turners Falls. As previously described, a large commercial buildings was recently purchased in the District and undergoing a complete renovation. The nature of the businesses that will occupy these retail spaces in the spring will change the character of downtown and influence advertising/promotion efforts in the District.

Two buildings have been bought in the Mill District through the Homesteading Project. Building 11 and The Annex are complex projects with major infrastructure issues to be solved. While these buildings are outside of the District, it is important to note that investors are “hedging their bets” on the viability of the Mill District. Furthermore, early investors view the Town of Montague as willing and competent to tackle the considerable redevelopment issues surrounding the site.

The most important step to addressing issues in the Mill District will happen in 2018 when the Town of Montague renegotiates with FirstLight Power for access to the Connecticut River and the Mill District. Happening only once every 40 years, these negotiations are paramount to long term redevelopment to the area. Public recreation will include white water rafting, boating and fishing.

Finally, The Turners Falls Cultural District will capitalize on increased interest in local Native American culture and history. Very successful relationships with regional Tribes and Nations has lead to terrific collaborations like the Battlefield Grant, The Pocumtuck Homelands Festival and regular history talks at The Great Falls Discovery Center.

Relevant zoning, planning, or financial tools that will be used in the district

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Action Plan for the first 6 months

The Turners Falls Cultural District Advisers will meet to make plans for the year during the first month. RiverCulture will host an event to celebrate and promote the Cultural District. If possible, this celebration would coincide with the dedication of the new public sculpture on Avenue A. Social media sites will be updated to reflect the designation. The RiverCulture website and the Shea Theater website will both get updates so that the two organizations appear like cultural partners in the District. A map will be created to identify the cultural and recreational amenities of the District. This map will be free and available in local shops and information kiosks. The Montague Planning Department will work

with the MASS DOT to improve signage for Turners Falls on Highway 91, Routes 2 and 2A. Additionally, the Planning Department will work with the Montague DPW on gateway signage to identify the Turners Falls Cultural District.

Evaluating Methods: statistical, economic, attendance

RiverCulture will employ statistical analytics on the website and facebook page. Through the partnership we will be able to track attendance records at The Great Falls Discovery Center, Unity Park, Carnegie Library and the Shea Theater. This will be reported annually in December by each of the four venues.

Public/ Private Partnership & Management Narrative

Outline the plan for managing the district and the district partnership

There will be quarterly meetings with the Management Team and more frequent advising with additional partners as necessary for specific projects. Communication with all partners is the responsibility of the Director of Turners Falls RiverCulture.

Current Collective Marketing efforts in the community

Most of the collaborative marketing efforts in Turners Falls happen through RiverCulture. As a sounding board for the arts, RiverCulture gives guidance and support to grass roots projects which frequently result in new partnerships and collaborations. RiverCulture maintains a social media presence which, while focused on the arts, is always working to “tie in” opportunities for the downtown business community. RiverCulture maintains a comprehensive website where visitors can get a more complete picture of the Town, local events, shops, restaurants and recreational amenities. Other cooperative marketing projects include the renovation of a downtown information kiosk and a wayfinding map that connects our arts and business district with the Unity Park waterfront.

RiverCulture and business community also work with the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce (FCCC) to develop content that highlights the village's unique assets, especially as it relates to the rest of the county's offerings. The kind of cooperative marketing that FCCC offers makes it possible for small businesses and arts organizations to advertise in large, expensive publications. They produce 50,000 copies of the Franklin County guidebook which lists visitor information, town descriptions and attractions and amenities for those visiting. The guide is distributed up and down the i91 corridor and in Eastern Mass. They also place print and digital ads promoting Franklin County, both in general and niche market publications. FCCC will also share statistics on travelers to the region as well as travel trends to help towns shape programming and marketing. FCCC also advocates on a state level to secure tourism funding to enable more visitors and generate revenue in local shops, hotels and restaurants. Having a third Cultural District in the county adds to the collective amenities in Franklin County, making it more marketable.

Marketing and Promotion plan for the District

A logo for the Turners Falls Cultural District will be designed and used for branding and marketing efforts. The boundaries of the District will be marked by signage, completed in partnership with the Montague DPW. A map of downtown businesses and cultural amenities will be created and distributed in partnership with RiverCulture. The Turners Falls Cultural District will be marked on this map. The RiverCulture website will be updated to reflect this new designation, as well as the more information about the MCC program. RiverCulture will work with the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce on tourism ideas and cross promotion projects.

Management Team

The municipal management team is Walter Ramsey (Montague Town Planner), Suzanne LoManto (Director of Turners Falls RiverCulture), Steven Ellis (Montague Administrator) and Linda Hickman

(Carnegie Library) with additional support from Great Falls Discovery Center, The Shea Theater and several small business stakeholders.

Public Infrastructure and Amenities Inventory

Public Space and Amenities

As previously mentioned, the original 19th century layout of Turners Falls is largely in tact, with many buildings renovated in keeping with their historic character. Brick sidewalks are wide, well lit, and lined with gardens which lend to the uniqueness of downtown. There are four public parks in the District. Unity Park, the largest, enjoys stunning views of the Connecticut River. With facility improvements (2014) totaling 1.6 million dollars, Unity Park is the focus of outdoor recreation in Turners Falls. The addition of a \$400 thousand dollar professionally designed skatepark (2016) makes the amenities of Unity Park unparalleled in the region. A short walk along the Canalside Railtrail are the manicured gardens of the Great Falls Discovery Center, which also host the Great Falls Farmers Market. The Center's four acres of native plants, butterfly gardens, and open lawn nestle into a bend in the Connecticut River to provide a pleasant atmosphere for a picnic or to view the mills. The whole of these outdoor recreation facilities are within walking distance to the cultural facilities and restaurants along Avenue A. For a park experience downtown, pedestrians can enjoy Spinner Park which commemorates the textiles and manufacturing industries. The District also includes Peskeomskut Park which borders the south end of the District. The most notable feature of Peskeomskut Park is the band shell which hosts summer musical concerts and other live entertainment.

Public Buildings

The District has a number of notable public buildings including The Great Falls Discovery Center, situated at the gateway to the District. Operated by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Center is the flagship visitor center for the Silvio O. Conte National Fish & Wildlife Refuge. RiverCulture frequently collaborates on events with The Friends of the Discovery Center, the organization's active volunteer board. Directly across the street from the The Great Falls Discovery Center is Montague Town Hall which is used for public meetings in addition to Town business. The Carnegie Library is among the most notable public buildings on Avenue A. The Georgian style structure was built from 1905 to 1906 and is named after Andrew Carnegie, who donated the construction funds. In 2016 there were approximately 210 free public programs hosted at the library with a total audience of over 5,000.

Transportation Amenities

Motorists enjoy easy access (and breathtaking views!) from route 2 over the Gill- Montague Bridge. Providing ample, free parking is an ongoing focus of the Planning Department. In November the Town completed a new parking lot on the corner of Third and Canal Streets, at the west edge of the District. Parking in this area of Turners Falls is critical to all future redevelopment plans in the mill district and the Planning Department is working strategically to meet these challenges.

Franklin Regional Transit Authority operates three bus routes which connect the villages of Montague to Greenfield where patrons can transfer service or connect with Amtrack. The District has one new bus shelter on Third Street. There is no weekend bus service in Turners Falls which is an obstacle for residents without automobiles or with limited mobility. Safe, well lit sidewalks, wayfinding signage and wheelchair accessibility is a priority to the Town. Biking is encouraged for both transportation and recreation. The Canalside Railtrail, a 3 mile paved path that hugs the waterfront along the power canal, was named by Yankee Magazine as one of the "Best Urban Bike Path in New England."

Other:

There are several organizations in the District that provide support and specialized cultural programming. The Brick House Community Resource Center has regular drop-in hours as well as more structured classes for Montague youth. Young adults have access to a variety of resources including art supplies, instruments and music production equipment, computers, audio-video equipment, books and

games. The Brick House performance venue regularly hosts live music and open mic nights. Montague Catholic Social Ministries (MCSM) shares many of the goals of The Brick House: outreach, family education, positive conflict resolution, leadership development and group empowerment. A special aspect of their work is to help immigrant families from South and Central America transition to life in Franklin County. In October, these families worked with MCSM on an marvelous exhibition of Guatemalan art and a festival featuring authentic food, Ecuadorian dancers, a special performance by *Grupo Folklorico*, a new children's dance troupe. The excitement and pleasure that these families felt sharing their culture with their new neighbors was a tribute to their heritage, as well as an opportunity for the larger community to experience the beauty of their culture.

Finally, it is important to mention The Montague Reporter for their excellent work providing news, arts and feature coverage to 2000+ readers in Montague, Erving, Gill, Leverett, and Wendell. This non-profit organization is headed by a volunteer board and run by a mix of volunteers and freelance staff. As a District asset, The Montague Reporter can not be overestimated for their informed coverage and mission to engage citizens.