

Taxes, Growth and Demographics in Williamstown

Researched and written by Patrick Dunlavey
Version 0.5 - November, 2008

Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.
-- Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Preface

In my twenty years as a resident of Williamstown I have frequently found myself involved in the local political dramas of the day: override efforts, and the seemingly endless debate of “pro” vs. “anti” development. In each case, we argue about taxes, budgets, growth, demographics, open space, etc and make little progress, in part because our arguments are frequently weak on fundamental facts.

Last spring (2008) I found myself having to counter an argument that said that since 74% of Williamstown was “protected land” and could not be developed, we should not approve a proposed wetlands protection bylaw because it would, it was argued (erroneously in my opinion) take even more land off the table for development. The oft-quoted refrain was “enough is enough!” I was surprised to discover that the 74% figure came out of Town Hall itself. However when I was able to obtain an explanation of where the total number came from, it quickly became apparent that it was not the answer to the question “how much land in town is permanently protected from development.” It was, instead, an amalgamation of acreage figures: some for land that actually was permanently protected, and some for land that came under various kinds of extra regulatory controls such as groundwater protection districts. Some of the figures were simply wrong. The 74% figure was not the answer to any precise question at all.

I began writing this with the idea of making a two or three page “frequently asked questions” document centered on that protected land issue. However, I’ve never been very good at looking down a rabbit hole without jumping in, and the answer to one question always seemed to lead to another. After a while, it was no longer plausible to describe these questions as “frequently asked” at all! Nonetheless, I stayed with the Q&A format that – I hope you will forgive me – rambles more than a little, and covers a lot more ground than I initially set out to cover.

This is a work in progress, in a number of ways. There are still many questions that I want to explore. I also expect to find better information for – and find mistakes in – some of the questions that I have already taken a stab at; which may even lead to different conclusions! However, I think what I have done to date is useful and worth sharing (and besides, if I wait until this is fully publication-ready, I don’t think it would ever see any light of day).

I’d like to acknowledge the patient forbearance of my colleagues on the Williamstown Planning Board, Andrew Groff and Michael Card in Inspection Services, and especially, Bill Barkin, Williamstown Assessor. Their help has been invaluable, but please understand that all mistakes herein are my own!

Please send questions, corrections, etc to pat@pdcarto.com, or call me at 458-9836

– Pat Dunlavey

Taxes, Growth and Demographics in Williamstown – by Patrick Dunlavey

Q: What is the property tax levy?

A: This is the total amount of money raised by the town through property taxes. It is determined by taking the town budget (the total cost for town government and schools) and subtracting revenues from non-property tax sources, such as state aid to towns, and sewer and water fees. In FY2008, the total tax levy was a little less than \$12 million.

Q: How is the tax rate determined?

A: The tax rate is determined by dividing the total property tax levy by the total value of taxable property in town. In FY 2007, the tax levy was \$11,742,289 and the assessed taxable value of all personal property was \$1,022,847,500 (slightly over one billion). The tax rate for FY 2007 was, therefore, set at \$11.48 per thousand dollars of assessed property value. It is important to understand that the tax rate is derived from the tax levy and the total value of taxable property in town, and not the other way around.

Q: How is my property assessed for taxation purposes?

A: Williamstown has a Board of Assessors, whose job it is to comprehensively and fairly measure the value of all property in town. The assessors maintain a database with a large amount of information about each property, such as acreage, potential for subdivision, location, square-footage of home, number of bedrooms, condition of home, recent improvements, etc. This information is fed into a formula that has been prepared by the Town and certified by the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, with the end result being a valuation for your property that is intended to reflect its fair market value.

Q: What is a revaluation?

A: Every three years, the Board of Assessors conducts a complex statistical analysis that correlates all the information that they have about each property to actual selling prices in Williamstown and similar markets in the region. The resulting property valuation model is presented to the Department of Revenue for certification. If the DOR determines that the model is an accurate method for calculating the fair market value for properties in Williamstown, it will certify the assessment method. The town can then use the formula to calculate assessments on all properties in the town for the next three years. 2008 is such a revaluation year, and many of us will find tax bills in our mailboxes this fall with balances due that may be more or less than we expect. Because property values are meant to reflect the market, some property values will be found, based on the newly certified model, to have increased compared to average and others will be found to have decreased. The result is that comparatively speaking, property tax bills increase on some properties, and decrease on others. This is an unavoidable result of the need to make the amount that we pay in property taxes fair for all of us. Anyone who feels that their property has been incorrectly assessed may appeal to the Board of Assessors.

Q: How much does an average household pay in property taxes in Williamstown, and how does that compare with other towns?

A: At \$4,635 for FY2008, Williamstown has the highest average household property tax bill in Berkshire County, and is 87th out of 336 towns ranked by the Massachusetts

Department of Revenue. Williamstown's median residential tax bill in FY2008 is \$3,222 (half of households pay less than this amount, half pay more).

Q: How affordable are our property taxes, and how has it changed over time?

A: The average household tax bill in Williamstown in 1988 was \$1,673. In 2008 it is \$4,635, which means that it almost tripled in 20 years. Adjusted for inflation, it is still significant: a 43% increase. However the amount that Williamstown pays in property tax per household has declined over this period compared with other towns in Massachusetts. In 1988, Williamstown ranked 66th from the top, whereas in 2008 it ranks 87th (out of 336 towns for which they had certified data). Furthermore, between the 1990 and 2000 US Censuses, the average percentage of household income spent on property tax in Williamstown declined, from 4.2% to 3.7%.

Another interesting fact comes from the 2000 US Census in a report that compares total housing costs (mortgage, taxes, etc) to household income for people who own and live in their homes. In Williamstown, 1/6th of homeowners were paying 30% or more of their household income for housing costs. It seems fair to suggest that property taxes are a significant burden for these households – numbering 245 in the year 2000. However, compared with all cities and towns in Massachusetts, Williamstown had a smaller proportion of households over this 30% threshold than almost all other towns in Massachusetts (ranking 329th out of 351).

Q: How does Williamstown compare to other towns with respect to total local government expenditures, and how do we compare with other towns in terms of state aid?

A: In 2007, Williamstown's total municipal expenditures were \$15,259,447 for a population of 8,189. (This includes assessments paid for local and regional schools.) For comparison purposes with other towns, we want to know what this works out to on a per-capita basis. Williamstown is a special case however; because we have roughly 2,000 Williams College students counted in that population who see almost no direct benefit from town spending.

If we subtract 2,000 from our population, our per-capita spending comes out to \$2,466 for 6,189 residents, which would put Williamstown 150th in the state in per-capita local spending – near the middle. Among towns with populations under 10,000, Williamstown ranks 67th in per-capita local government spending out of 171 small towns.

In 2007, state aid paid for \$2,671,440 of our municipal budget, or \$432 per-capita (6,189 residents again) ranking us 122nd in the state in terms of state largesse – significantly better than average. Among the towns with populations under 10,000, our per-capita state aid ranks us 34th out of 171 small towns – in the top quarter.

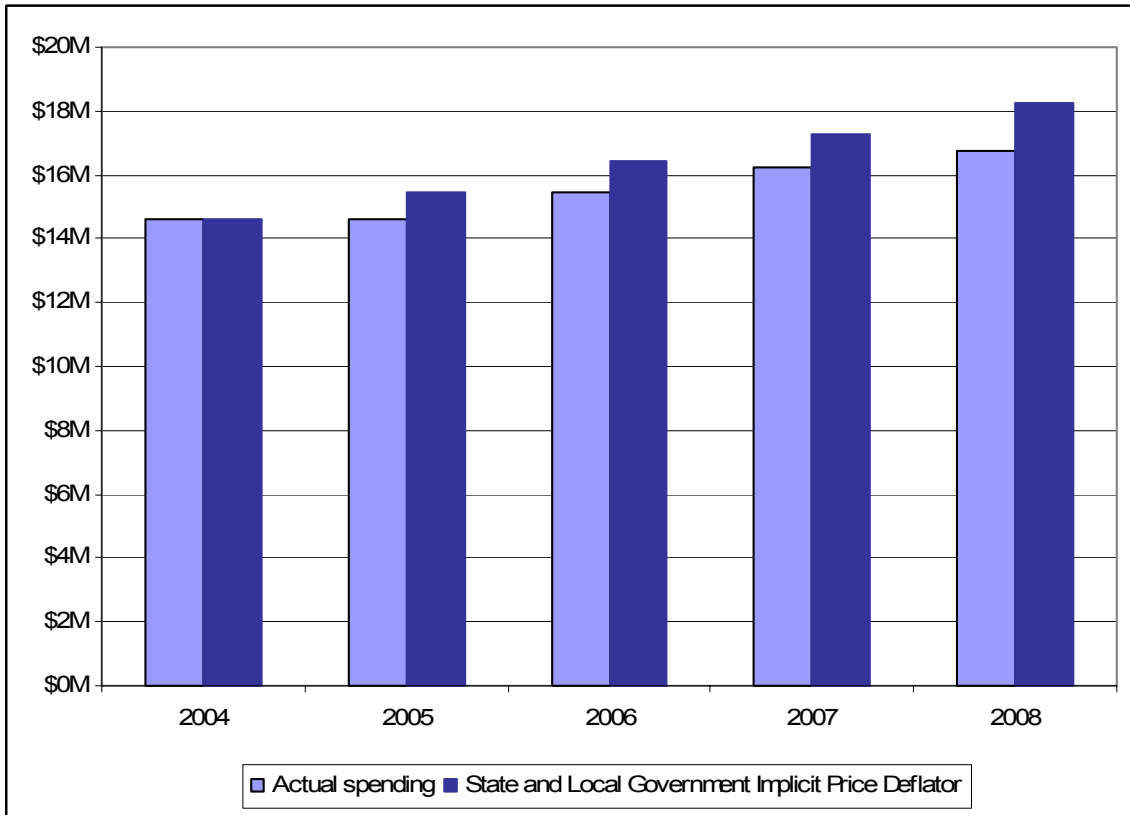
Williamstown spends slightly more than average per resident for town services and schools, and receives significantly more than average in state aid. To the degree that our household tax bills are significantly higher than average, it cannot be plausibly attributed to undisciplined budgeting on the part of either the town or the schools.

Q: Has our municipal spending kept up with inflation?

A: There are many anecdotes to suggest that it has not: elimination of shop classes and some languages at the high school, for example. A more comprehensive way to look at it is to use an index put out by the US Commerce Department which tracks inflation in

Taxes, Growth and Demographics in Williamstown – by Patrick Dunlavey

costs for municipal services. It's similar to the consumer price index. This graph suggests that our spending (in the light blue) has significantly lagged behind inflation (dark blue - the "state and local government implicit price deflator") since 2004.

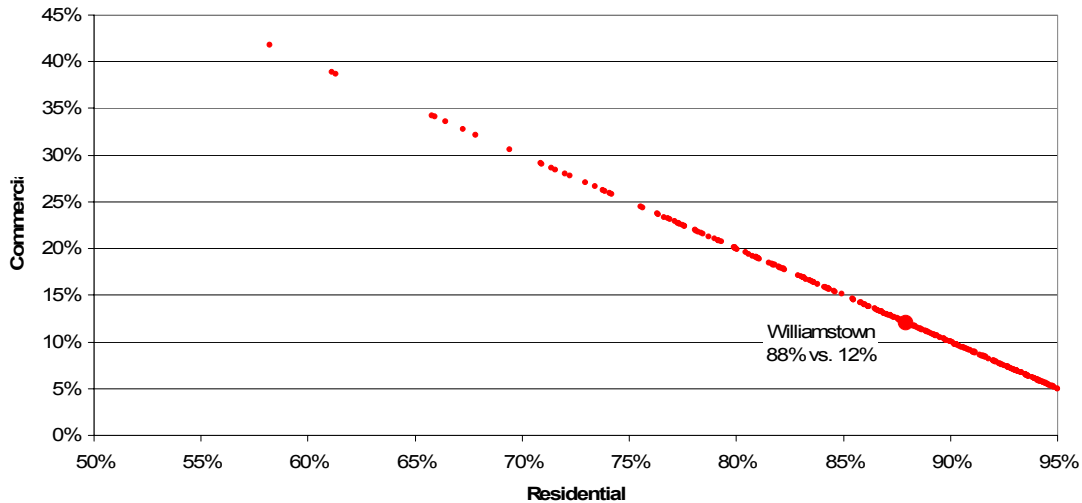


Q: How does our tax base compare to other towns in Massachusetts

A: There are several classifications of property that are treated differently with respect to property taxes, but the major categories are residential property, commercial property, and tax-exempt property. Since residential property generally costs somewhat more in community services than it generates in tax revenue, most towns rely upon tax revenue from commercial property to make up the difference. There is a rough link between the ratio of residential to commercial property value, and the amount of taxes that households must pay – the smaller the percentage of commercial property, the higher the tax burden on households.

Commercial pulls its weight

- Williamstown ranks 148th out of 313 towns in proportion of revenue contributed by commercial, industrial and personal property taxes
- Among small towns (>4,000 & <12,000 population), we rank 34/97



Source: Massachusetts Department of Revenue lvcl08.xls

As can be seen in this figure, Williamstown’s proportion of commercial property is close to the state median, and for similar-sized towns, we actually rank in about the top third. It is also important to understand that the commercial sector requires workers, and those workers require government services. It has been demonstrated that larger commercial tax bases actually correlate with higher residential property taxes, not lower. Ironically, and very narrowly speaking, the most fiscally advantageous kind of commercial activities are those that pay lower wages so that the workers cannot afford to live in the community where the business is located. Of course the cost of government services for those workers doesn’t go away; it is simply exported to neighboring communities!

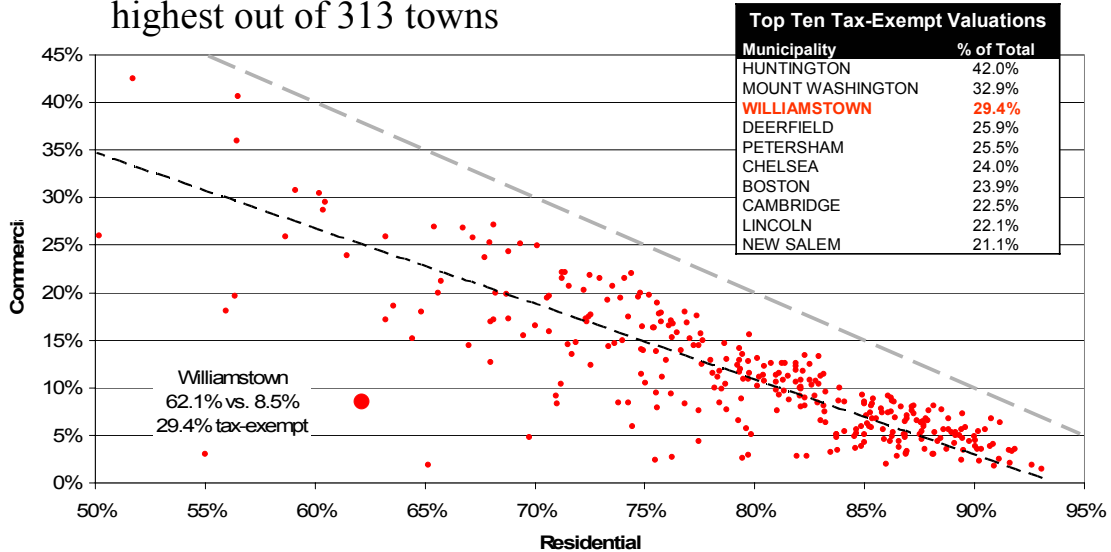
Q: How much and what kinds of property are tax-exempt in Williamstown?

A: Property itself is not inherently tax-exempt, but certain uses of property allow it to be classified as exempt from property tax. These are mainly educational, religious, or

government uses. Because we have several large non-profit educational institutions (Williams College and Clark Art Institute are both classified as such), almost 30% of Williamstown’s property value - assessed in 2008 at \$432 million - is exempt from property tax. Williamstown is the third-highest ranked town in Massachusetts in terms of the proportion of property that is tax-exempt. (Another \$51 million in value has been exempted from taxation due to being enrolled in Chapter 61 agricultural, forestry and recreation land property tax protection – more on this in another question). It should be noted that none of these exemptions to local property taxes are subject to local control.

Residential & Commercial relative to Total Valuation

With 29.4% tax-exempt property, Williamstown ranks 3rd highest out of 313 towns



Source: Massachusetts Department of Revenue 2008, 313 cities and towns compared

As can be seen in this graph, Williamstown is definitely an outlier compared to other medium to small communities in Massachusetts when value of tax-exempt property is plotted against the value of taxable property. Most tax exempt uses do generate costs to the community, so a high proportion of tax exempt property most likely contributes to a fiscal deficit that must be made up through revenues from other sources such as residential property tax. Indirectly, tax exempt uses can further imbalance revenues vs. costs; see the discussion of the tax impact of Williams College below.

Q: Has the relative amount of tax-exempt property increased significantly over the past decade?

A: The rate of construction of tax-exempt property – primarily by the College – has proceeded at several times the rate of construction of taxable commercial and residential

buildings. It would seem that this should result in an increase in the proportion of tax-exempt property over time. However, assessed property value is, in principle, market-based. Tax-exempt (and commercial) property does not appreciate at the same rate that private property does. The result is, though the proportion of tax-exempt property in Williamstown has varied between 27% and 35% since 1993, there is no discernable upward trend.

Q: Does Williams College “pull its weight” with respect to tax revenues vs. costs?

A: The College pays \$640,000 per year in property taxes on the residential and commercial property that it owns in town. But it also has a large amount of property whose use is tax-exempt and generates no tax revenues. If these properties were not tax-exempt, the College would pay an additional \$2.4 million per year in property taxes at current tax rates.

To try to answer this question though, we need to look more broadly at revenues vs. costs attributable to the presence of the College. The College employs roughly 1200 people, with slightly more than half living in Williamstown. The total property tax revenue from the households of these employees is estimated at \$2.6 million per year (including College-owned housing). These households account for, in any given year, an estimated 115 elementary school students and 105 regional high school students which, at an average per-pupil assessed cost to the town of slightly over \$12,000, costs the town approximately \$2.7 million. In addition, the share of non-school municipal costs for these households is estimated to be \$400,000 per year, for a total estimated cost to the town of \$3.1 million. Therefore it could be said that college employees create a half-million dollar shortfall in tax revenues vs. costs which must be made up by other residential taxpayers and commercial taxpayers. In cost of community services terms, college employees generate costs of roughly \$1.20 for each dollar in property tax revenue that they generate, compared with an estimated \$1.07 per year for average Williamstown residents.

On the flip-side, the College pays \$230,000 in taxes per year on its commercial property. There are municipal costs associated with these properties of course, but they are probably considerably less than the revenues that they generate, as is true for most commercial properties. The College frequently provides ad-hoc assistance to the town to help fund critical capital projects. A large part of the half-million dollar tax revenue imbalance mentioned above is made up, not by average homeowners, but by a relatively small number of wealthy homeowners, many of whom are attracted to live here by the presence of the College. And of course, the College drives much of the economy of Williamstown, directly and indirectly accounting for a large proportion of the total economic activity (almost one in four households include a College employee).

Q: Has the amount of land that is sheltered from property tax by being enrolled in the Chapter 61 program for forestry, agricultural or recreation land increased, and what has been its fiscal impact?

A: Some have suggested that private open space protection efforts have removed significant value from the tax rolls in recent years. The number of parcels enrolled in one or more of the three types of Chapter 61 tax shelters has increased from 120 in 1997 (6,585 acres) to 132 in 2008 (7,656 acres; 11 parcels were removed and 23 were added).

As a percentage of the total tax base, the amount of taxable value sheltered under Chapter 61 increased from 3.0% to 4.9% over this period. If all the land in Chapter 61 were removed from that program and taxed at the same rate as other property, it would reduce your tax bill by about 5%. The great majority of land in Chapter 61 has no legal constraint against future development and the penalty for removing land from Chapter 61 is fairly minor (up to ten years in back taxes). The increase in the amount of land in Chapter 61 over the past decade is most likely a reflection of land owners being better informed about its tax advantages. It should also be noted that Chapter 61 provides indirect fiscal benefits to tax payers, such as protecting property values elsewhere in town. Chapter 61 also enables traditional uses of land to continue, such as farming and forestry, that might not otherwise be possible under the market-value-based property tax system.

Q: How does Proposition 2 ½ work?

A: Proposition 2 ½ requires that increasing the town's total property tax levy beyond the town's "levy limit" for the new fiscal year be subject to approval by greater than half of the voters in an election. Such an election is known as a general override. The levy limit for the new year is calculated as last year's levy limit plus 2.5%. If the levy limit is exceeded and an override approved, the levy limit for subsequent years is based on new levy amount.

Q: What is a debt-exclusion override?

A: A debt-exclusion override is similar to a general override, except that the increase in the levy limit is limited to the period of time required for the town to pay off a particular debt. At the end of that time, the levy limit falls back by the amount that it was increased with the override. Construction of the new Elementary School was financed with a debt-exclusion override.

Q: What is New Growth, and what is its relationship to Proposition 2 ½?

A: New Growth is the value of property added during the previous fiscal year from new construction, significant improvements to existing property, subdivision of land, etc. New Growth is exempted from the levy limit of Proposition 2 ½. Over the past several years, New Growth has averaged around \$16 million per year, which has provided an annual boost to our tax levy of around \$200,000 per year. Such levels of annual New Growth have enabled us to avoid overrides in the past few years while maintaining spending levels for town services and schools without severe cuts. (Make no mistake – spending levels have continued to decline with respect to rising costs, but at a slower rate than they would without the boost from new growth.) A result of this has been some pressure for policies that encourage new growth, particularly new home construction and a fueling of "pro-development" vs. "anti-development" discord.

Q: Why is New Growth exempted from Proposition 2 ½?

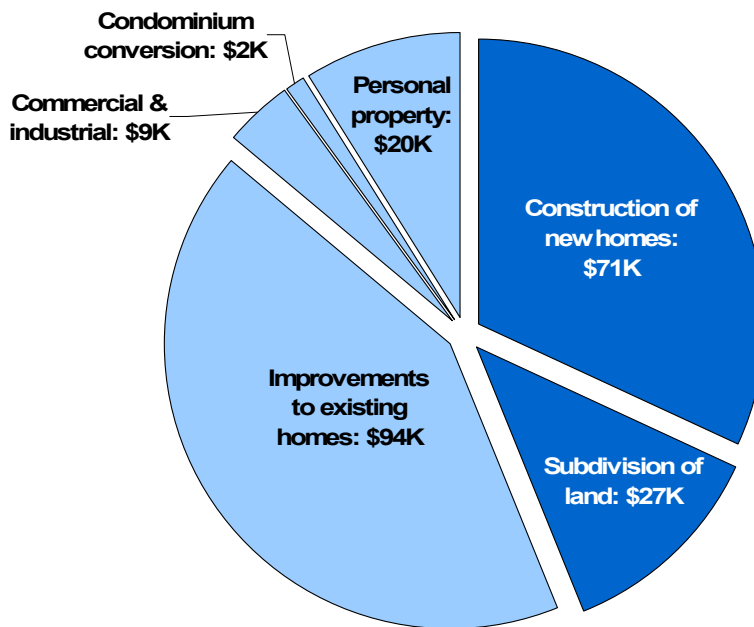
A: Broadly speaking, growth results in new tax revenues, but also in additional costs for municipal infrastructure (e.g. roads, sewer and parks), schools, fire and police, etc. The authors of Proposition 2 ½ did not want to penalize rapidly growing communities by

forcing them to maintain flat budgets in the face of increasing costs for new infrastructure and services.

Q: How much of this growth is coming from construction of new homes?

A: Over the past ten years, about 30% of new growth has come from the construction of new homes. (Of that, about one-third came from new homes built on lots that were recently subdivided, while roughly two-thirds of new home construction has been on preexisting lots.) The largest portion of New Growth, almost 40%, has come from home improvements.

New growth revenue break-down



Sources of New Growth 2004-2008

Source: Assessor's new growth data and building permit data

Q: How has our New Growth avoided creating corresponding greater costs?

A: Almost 70% of New Growth over the past ten years in Williamstown has come from improvements to existing homes, subdivisions of property and acquisitions of personal property – and not actual new home construction. These forms of growth result in almost no increased costs for local government infrastructure and services. About 30% has come from construction of new homes. The typical new home in Williamstown has a relatively high property value, compared with the homes that are already here, and a relatively low percentage of these new homes are being occupied by families with school-age children. Therefore, the new homes that have been built here have tended to pay more in property tax than they require in services.

Q: Does new residential growth improve our tax base?

A: It depends on what kind of residential growth it is and who chooses to live there. High-priced retirement or second-home building produces a clear fiscal benefit, while affordable “family-friendly” housing produces a significant net cost. Public policy that affects rates and kinds of residential growth needs to consider not just the fiscal impacts, but also the social impacts of growth. Do we want to change our community in fundamental ways (for example, to an older, more wealthy and less diverse demographic), and should those changes be driven by near-term cost considerations? This comment from “Winners and Losers in the Massachusetts Housing Market” (2004) from the UMass Donahue Institute is worth thinking about:

Over-55 development is seen as having a “positive impact” specifically because it is guaranteed not to bring more children into the school system, and is expected to generate a “tax surplus” on each over-55 restricted home. Overall, this fiscal engineering of land use has resulted in what one legislator has called “vasectomy zoning” that excludes children from new development. Unfortunately, the inconsistent levels of state aid to communities since the passage of Proposition 2½ (as well as Proposition 2½ itself) has added to municipal anxiety about where the long-term funding for education and other services is going to come from.

Q: Does our existing residential property tax base produce a net fiscal surplus or deficit?

A: On average, one dollar of residential property tax revenue is offset by between \$1.07 and \$1.15 (depending on which study you read) in costs attributable to residences. Almost 90% of that goes to schools (narrowly speaking, residences account for all costs for schools).

Q: How much does it cost to educate one Williamstown child in local public schools?

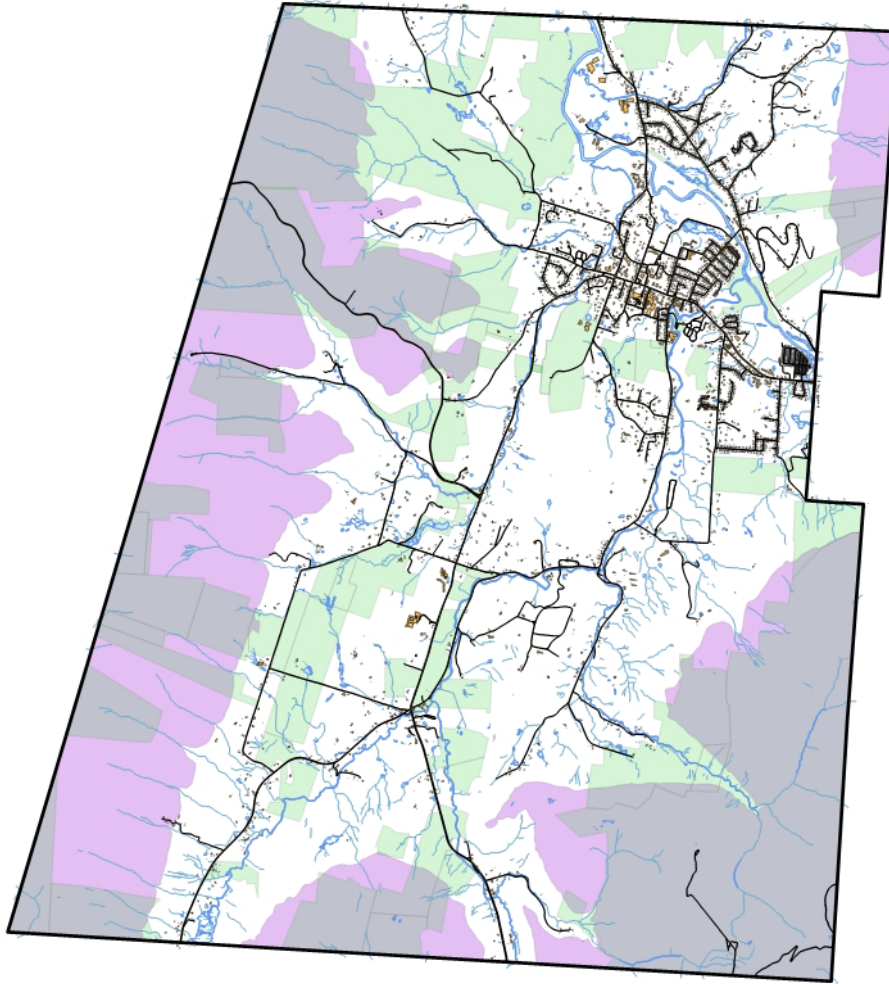
A: If you calculate this simply as the total amount of money that the Town pays to the schools, divided by the number of students that the town sends to them, the cost to educate our current student population is roughly \$12,000 per year per pupil. Therefore a child’s entire local schooling, from kindergarten through graduation from Mount Greylock costs taxpayers an estimated \$156,000 in 2008 dollars.

Q: What is the property tax impact of adding one new home to our tax base?

A: Almost 80% of our property tax levy goes straight into the schools, so from a fiscal impact standpoint, the largest factor is the cost of educating any children who may come to the community as part of the new household. It is not the average cost to educate students that interests us in this case, but rather the added cost to educate an added child. Such an analysis, unfortunately, is complicated and entirely dependent upon which costs you decide to regard as fixed, and which you regard as incremental. For example, adding one student would probably not necessitate hiring a teacher and may result in little or no identifiable increases in school costs. However, adding 20 students raises the probability that you would need to hire one or more new teachers. Adding a severe special needs child to the school system can easily cost that system \$80,000 or \$100,000 per year.

Q: How much protected open space does Williamstown have?

A: About 11,700 acres (38%) of Williamstown is in some form of protected open space, including Mount Greylock State Reservation (3,614 acres), Taconic State Forest (2,266 acres), Hopkins Forest (1,990 acres), Conservation Commission Land (515 acres), Williamstown Rural Lands Foundation (454 acres), Trustees Of Reservations (430 acres), etc. An additional ~4,300 acres is protected from most development in the Upland Conservation Zoning Overlay District, for a total of 53% that is formally or practically protected as open space and restricted from development.



Protected open space is shown in green, upland conservation district is shown in purple.

Q: How much “space for people” is there?

A: At 30,005 acres, Williamstown is one of the larger towns in terms of geographic area in the Commonwealth. Despite having a large amount of protected land, we still have 1.7 acres of non-protected land per-capita. We rank 135th out of 351 Massachusetts towns in this measure. If we don't count the college student population, we have 2.2 non-protected acres per-capita, which would rank us 116th in the state. Despite the large amount of protected open space, Williamstown has more unprotected (developed or developable) land per capita than almost two-thirds of towns in Massachusetts.

Q: What is the “Net Usable Land Area” of Williamstown (and what does that mean)?

A: Net Usable Land Area (NULA) is defined as the land that is potentially available for development. It is determined by taking the total area of town and subtracting those areas that are considered completely constrained against development.

Constraint Category	Area in Category		Area Accumulated		Area Added	
	acres	percent	acres	percent	acres	percent
Roads	418	1%	418	1%	418	1%
Developed Land	3,104	10%	3,289	11%	2,871	10%
Protected Open Space*	8,197	27%	11,391	38%	8,102	27%
Surface Water (Pond, River, Wetland)	361	1%	11,667	39%	276	1%
Upland Conservation District	11,589	39%	17,409	58%	5,743	19%
Hopkins Forest	1,990	7%	18,577	62%	1,168	4%
Clark Art Inst.	127	0%	18,677	62%	100	0%
RPA 100' buffer	991	3%	19,136	64%	459	2%
100 Year Floodplains	1,056	4%	19,417	65%	281	1%
>24% slope (-25m buffer)	8,942	30%	20,371	68%	954	3%
Town Owned Open Space	1,359	5%	20,846	69%	475	2%
Remainder (NULA)					9,159	31%

Because some of these categories overlap geographically, the total acreage is considerably less than the sum of their individual areas. The bottom line is that out of 30,005 acres, an estimated 9,160 acres, or 31%, is “usable” for development.

Within this NULA however, there are partial constraints, such as availability of road frontage, soil permeability (for septic systems), steep slopes, significance of wetlands, natural barriers to accessing otherwise buildable land such as streams, ravines, etc., which taken together may significantly increase the overall constraint against building for a given parcel. For the most part, these partial constraints result in increased cost for development or decreased possible density or intensity of development – but not in actual prohibition. Some of these constraints are codified in bylaws and regulations which are designed to ensure sensible development that protects community values. Because partial constraints ultimately are reflected in development costs, the other side of the coin is the marketplace. Indeed, if you look at the amount of land that theoretically could be developed, even the land whose partial constraints are very low remains mostly undeveloped, year after year. The best explanation for this is simply that most land owners in Williamstown are not motivated to subdivide and build on their land, while at the same time the biggest demand in this area is not for small building lots, but rather for large building lots and even for land that will not be developed at all.

Total Parcels	Unbuilt	Total Acres
663	247	9,159
Max ANR Lots	Max SubDivLots w/Frontage	Max SubDivLots
960	2,557	3,575

This spreadsheet above shows theoretical development potential within the NULA (on 663 existing parcels). 960 new building lots could be created, each with a driveway to an existing town road (ANR Lots). If you took every parcel with any road frontage at all and built a subdivision road into it to maximize the number of building lots allowed by zoning, you would theoretically be able to create 2,557 building lots, which would more than double the existing number of residential buildings.

An interesting analysis took these numbers one step further. A map of hypothetical partial constraints (slope, wetland buffers, etc) was tested against where development actually occurred over the past ten years. A statistically significant correlation was found between the hypothetical constraints and where the development occurred. Taking the average value of this constraint for the recently developed land, and seeing which parcels within all of NULA show a constraint score at or lower than this amount, a new spreadsheet was made.

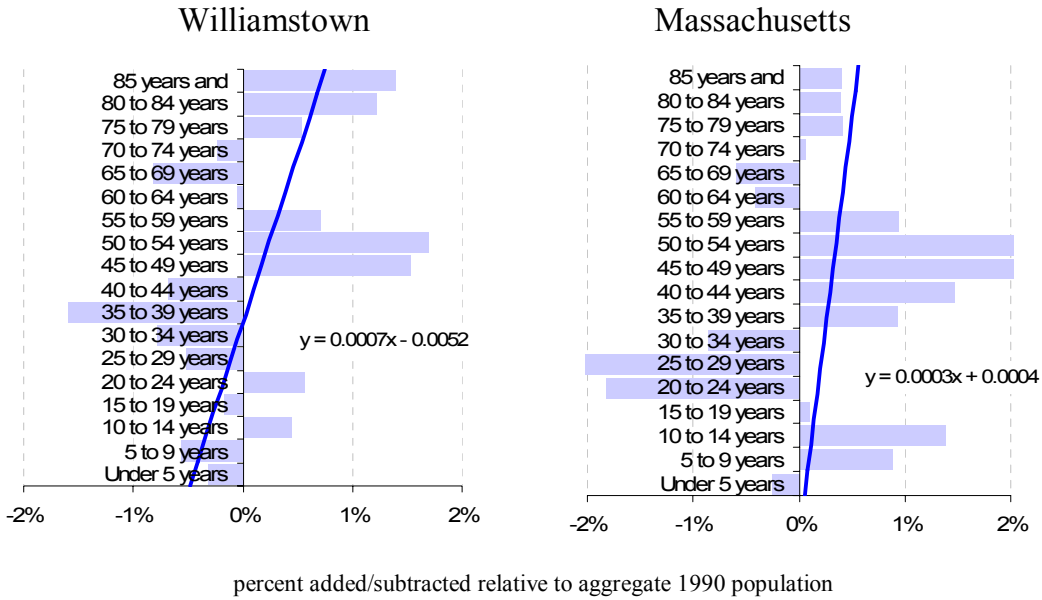
Total Parcels	Unbuilt	TotalAcres
185	73	2,318
Max ANR Lots	Max SubDivLots w/Frontage	Max SubDivLots
291	899	1,233

It could be said that these numbers illustrate the “low hanging fruit” for potential development. However, at recent rates of development, it will be several decades at a minimum before even this amount of “build-out” happens in Williamstown, if ever. The fact seems to be that land in Williamstown is more valuable in the marketplace for large building lots and even for non-building lots (open space), than it is for building at the maximum density permitted by our zoning.

Q: Is the population of Williamstown aging?

A: The population of Williamstown did age significantly between the 1990 and 2000 censuses. Understand that we’re not talking about individuals getting older, but about the shifts in the numbers of people in different age categories. The graph below compares the changes in population between 1990 and 1999 in various age categories between Williamstown and Massachusetts. As can be seen by comparing the overall trend lines, as well as the some individual age categories, Williamstown gained significantly greater numbers in the older age categories, relative to Massachusetts, and lost more in the younger age categories. Because we are comparing to Massachusetts, and not just looking at Williamstown in isolation, we know that the slant of our trend line is not solely attributable to broad demographic patterns, such as the aging of the baby boom population. It is possible that what we see in this graph reflects a one-time boost from the expansion of the nursing home and assisted living businesses. However, at the same time, the total number of residents in Williamstown declined slightly, meaning that the increase in older population has been more than offset by fewer younger residents, and that seems unlikely to be a one-time thing.

Population change 1990 - 1999

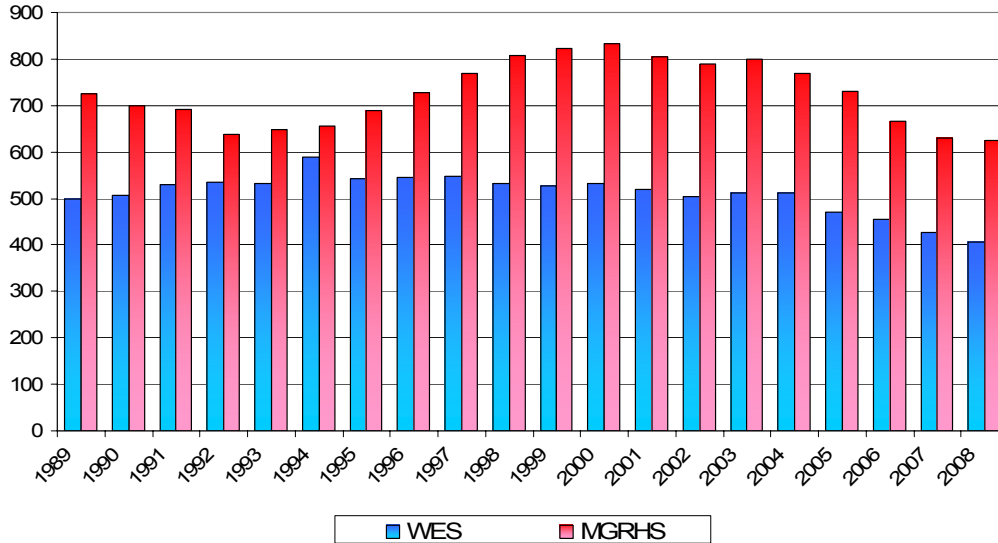


Source: US Census 1990 and 2000

Q: What has been happening to school enrollments?

A: School enrollments are a lagging indicator of demographic trends since school-age children tend to follow migration by a few years. It’s hard to predict anything from enrollment numbers, but it is possible to confirm population shifts that have been happening in the previous several years. School enrollments also tend to be a “canary in a coal mine” – once enrollments start to run downhill, it may be a sign of a potentially serious problem that could be difficult to reverse. It is difficult to reduce expenses in a school in line with reduced enrollments since some significant expenses are locked in for many years; pension plans and health plans for retired staff, for example. As a result, the cost cuts must come disproportionately from areas that directly affect the quality of services to current students: teacher hires, enrichment activities, physical plant maintenance, etc. These kinds of cuts reduce the attractiveness of the school, and thereby the attractiveness of community as a whole to new young families. Reduced in-migration of young families contributes to further enrollment declines and further budget cuts, feeding into a downward spiral. Enrollments in Williamstown’s elementary school and regional high school district have both shown a significant drop-off in enrollment in the last ten years as can be seen in the following graph.

School Enrollments 1989-2008



Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

Budget cuts have been getting closer to the bone each year (some would argue that we've been cutting bone for a while). The difficulties with funding schools in the face of reduced budgets are not unique to Williamstown, however, and as long as we don't start to look worse than other communities, we can, theoretically avoid the downward spiral. The enrollment trends that we see in this graph are worrisome, but a recent up-tick in enrollments this year (largely coming from school choice) may indicate that Williamstown's public schools remain a selling point for the town.

To be continued?