



APRIL 10-14, 2023

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WEEK

Updates from Fitchburg Community Development and Planning



CDBG & HOME Overview

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME) funding is a popular, bipartisan budget item that is granted to local governments nationwide through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) through a formula that calculates the age of housing stock and income of residents.

In Year 48 (the current program year), the City was awarded \$929,220 in CDBG funds and \$545,493 in HOME funds.

In 1996, Fitchburg was awarded \$1.5M in CDBG funds and \$505,000 in HOME funds (peak HOME funding, in 2003, was nearly \$700,000). Adjusting for inflation that \$1.5M would now be over \$2.87M in 2023 dollars, and the \$505,000 would surpass \$968,000. While this funding is incredibly valuable, and helps support needs across the City, staff and subrecipients are working to do more with less.

This year kicks off the first of the five years of our newly approved Consolidated plan. The following pages highlight programs supported by CDBG and HOME, and notes the leveraging impact of both these funds and Community Development staff.

What's happening with CDBG?

Last month, the City Council voted to approve the Mayor's recommendations for CDBG funding.

A second public hearing will be held on these projects on April 25 in the First Floor of City Hall to discuss the Action Plan for year 49. All are welcome!

The City will submit its Action plan to HUD by May 15 in advance of the July 1 program year start.

The Year 49 applications brought both returning applicants and new projects to the table. In the upcoming year, CDBG funds will be invested in youth programs, some exciting new Parks and Recreation opportunities, and we will also be supporting some new programs including the Fitchburg Public Market, and Access to Recovery. To view a copy of this year's Action plan, visit our website at: <https://www.fitchburgma.gov/150/Community-Development-Block-Grant-Program>

Year 48 Program Highlights



Mayor Stephen DiNatale, DPW Commissioner Nick Erickson, Former C.D. executive director Tom Skwierawski & the driver of an antique car as they prepare to be the debut driver on 2-way Main Street @ 5am on the morning that the roadway conversion went "live" back in June 2022.

2-Way Main St./Boulder Drive Launch

In June of last year, after many hours of hard work, Fitchburg reopened the city's main thoroughfare to two-way traffic after decades in which its two lanes ran only one way. Mayor DiNatale and other leaders in Fitchburg see the new traffic flow as part of a much bigger effort to more figuratively change the direction of the city as a whole.

DiNatale believes the changes coming with the conversion will make downtown Fitchburg a more appealing place for both residents and businesses.

This Downtown Transformation Project is one of many things that will improve the long-term outlook of Fitchburg. After all, Downtown is the heart of the City.

"All the things that are happening on Main (Street) and Boulder Drive, and quite frankly in the city in general, there's a lot of movement going on, a great deal of growth," he said. "We're excited about it, and it's due to the effort of city departments collaborating and making the most of what we got."

The completion of the two-way conversion will mark the first time in nearly six decades that Main Street has had two-way traffic. The CDBG funds used leveraged over \$4 Million state and local dollars to complete the project.

Work included mobilization and site drainage improvements, sidewalks and lighting improvements, Work on the east and west intersections as well as roadway and landscaping finishes. The largest update being the new traffic signals, which went in on Putnam Street.

All of these improvements assist in slowing down traffic to turn the heads of passersby to the increasing arts, culture, and small business offerings within the downtown district. Home to the Fitchburg Art Museum and Fitchburg State University, and the location of future plans for the reopening of the Historic Fitchburg Theatre, and combined with an increase in housing around Main St., this project will continue to bring a breath of fresh air to Fitchburg for years to come.

-Excerpts from Sentinel & Enterprise and Commonwealth Magazine

Moran Square Apartments

The City's HUD funded HOME Program leveraged over 23 Million dollars in public and private investment to bring the Moran Square Apartments to what was once a long blighted section of Fitchburg's downtown called Moran Square. This transformative project includes 44- mixed income residential units and 7000 square feet of retail space in three storefront units, which concluded its construction in late winter and tenants began moving in March 2023.

Just a month later, the apartments are mostly leased, with the developer reporting they should be fully leased by May. This mixed-use development has transformed the block and has spurred retail investment including the long-shuttered Moran Square Diner across the street. The City was also pleasantly surprised to hear two of the three commercial storefront on the ground floor of the development already have signed lease agreements.

This project is a true transit-oriented development (TOD) project with the City's Intermodal Commuter rail and bus station just one block away. The City's provided \$130,000 of the City's HOME Program funds. This project, along with a number of other public investments in the downtown area have sent a strong signal to developers that the market is right for further housing and commercial development in the downtown corridor. The City is working with a number of small and large project developers to create additional housing and commercial spaces in long vacant properties.





Small Business Technical Assistance Program



NewVue Communities is a forty-three-year-old community development corporation with a mission to develop quality housing, create economic opportunities, and foster civic engagement in North Central Massachusetts. NewVue's Small Business Technical Assistance Program has been offered in Fitchburg for the past 27 years.

The program has benefited from the Community Development Block Grant since the grant funds have been available. The agency has been supporting small business owners and entrepreneurs as they work to start and strengthen their small businesses. While creating new jobs is always at the forefront of their work, supporting struggling businesses as they aim to bring employees back to work or retain those employees is also a large focus of their services.

In the past year, NewVue Communities' Small Business Technical Assistance team has used CDBG funding to help 35 businesses create 19 new jobs and retain 20 jobs. Twenty-seven clients assisted were People of Color. Seventeen were women-owned businesses and fifteen were immigrant-owned businesses. The types of businesses assisted bring a variety of new opportunities to the Fitchburg area including food and beverage, retail, transportation, service, creative economy, and construction. CDBG funding made available to our Housing Services Department's Eviction Prevention Program has supported 27 low-income families.

With their continued commitment and active partnership to revitalize downtown Fitchburg, NewVue helps fill vacant storefronts and empty buildings with emerging small businesses. Achieving these outcomes will call for concerted efforts to ensure that the broader Fitchburg community is well-informed and is encouraged to support those who desire to make a living and provide food service in their neighborhoods.



Community Mural Projects

Putnam Street and Boulder Drive

Last year, four lead artists and 8 assistant artists participated in the Community Mural Institute (a partnership with Commonwealth Murals, Good Space Murals), a program to learn community-engaged design skills, engage with community groups to inform content for design, and learn mural techniques using a lightweight-yet-durable material called 'polytab' to create the designs. The artists formed three teams to create the murals and hosted Community Paint Parties in early May, utilizing a paint-by-numbers technique to guide community members in their painting on the polytab material. Over the next five weeks the artists worked in the temporary studio completing their mural panels.

The City's Community Development & Planning Department was introduced to the principals of the Community Mural Institute, Greta McLean and Britt Ruhe, in the fall of 2021 and recognized immediately that the CMI program could be something really special for the community.

The City used Community Development Block Grant funding to deliver this public facility and blight removal project, and was able to partner with the Relmagine North of Main downtown partnership to secure gap funding to move this project forward. In early winter 2022 the City began working with the CMI team to create a Call for Artists, assembled committee, score and select artists, and begin the project. The Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority allowed the artists to set up a temporary studio inside Putnam Place for the duration of the project.

The CMI artists and staff installed their mural panels on location; they go up like wallpaper panels. Once the panels are up, the artists go back with paint to touch up gaps and seams, then the entire mural is sealed. The end result is more durable than a typical direct-paint mural and will last for 10-20 years.



“This project has surpassed our expectations of beautifying our public spaces and removing blight.” Said Mayor Stephen L. DiNatale, “We are thrilled by the outcome and proud of the talented artists we have in our community and region.”

Joe Ferguson, Director of InTown Fitchburg and the RelImagine North of Main partnership said “In many instances, our collective revitalization work relies upon a stack of partnership resources. In the case of the CMI, we deployed that partnership approach effectively, which results in greater impact within the community. InTown Fitchburg and the RelImagine North of Main partnership are proud of the artists' work and we were glad to support this project. A splash of vibrant colors lifts folks' spirits!”

“These new murals beautify Fitchburg’s downtown, celebrate our community, and represent positive steps towards our collective vision of establishing Fitchburg as the regional center of art and culture. A big thanks to all the artists who participated!” said Nick Capasso, Director of the Fitchburg Art Museum.

Abolitionist Park



Pictured above, completed murals located at Abolitionist Park, on Snow Street in Fitchburg.

One local artist is giving back to the greater community in a profound way through a vivid and powerful mural creation at Abolitionist Park.

The work of Digi Chivetta is prominently on display at the park that was erected as an ode to the men and women of the city and beyond who fought bravely and tenaciously for the abolition of slavery in the U.S. “Although I didn’t shy away from the gravity of the subject, you will notice that there are no depictions of chains or enslaved people,” the talented 34-year-old Northborough artist said. “These images only serve to re-traumatize viewers who have already been through too much. Instead, I filled the composition with twirling Egùngùn masquerade dancers adorned with vibrant costumes.”

She said Egùngùn masquerades “honor a category of collective ancestors” and the practice originates from Yorubaland, Nigeria. “As a Yoruba Orisa devotee, these are the images that I want Black children to have of their ancestors, not the cruelty that was inflicted upon them,” Chivetta said. “The Egùngùn dancers also represent the rich cultures that we, as Black people, were severed from as a result of the slave trade.” The six-panel large scale mural spans a length of fence at the Snow Street space and features images of prominent city abolitionists Benjamin Snow Jr., who the street is named after, his wife Martha Snow Wallace, Theodore Becker, a medic on the side of the abolitionists, the Grimké sisters Sarah Moore and Angelina Emily, and Frederick Douglass, who visited Fitchburg several times and was a major supporter of the movement there.

The white abolitionists surround the composition that also includes abolitionist related quotes. “Their stance and clasped hands are a reference to the ‘white shields’ at Black Lives Matter protests,” Chivetta said of the white abolitionists.



Artist Digi Chivetta worked on creating a powerful mural at the Fitchburg Abolitionist Park all hours of the day, including the middle of the night, since beginning the project last month. (COURTESY LANEIA THOMAS)

"I did this to emphasize the importance of white allies in the process of healing the country from the atrocities of slavery."

Strength, bravery, and alliance are at the heart of the brand new murals she undertook with artist assistants Shara Osgood and William Thompson. They diligently worked side by side all hours of the day since then, even in the middle of the night, using mostly acrylic exterior paint and details with acrylic and enamel spray paint. The works were waterproofed for display at the park.

Of the artists who applied, park founder David Thibault-Muñoz said Chivetta was chosen by their selection committee "because of her authentic vision for the mural."

"Her artistic conceptualization not only includes local and national historic figures within the abolitionist movement, but aims to highlight women, including the Grimke sisters and Fitchburg's very own Caroline Mason, abolitionist, poet, and journalist, as well as the theme of freedom, with her generous sprinklings of West African Yoruba culture and spirituality throughout," said the Mount Wachusett Community College professor who hatched the idea for the park along with his students. "Digi's mural adds so much

color and vibrancy to the park and celebrates not just this historical fight for freedom, but the future of that very same movement."

According to an article posted to [history.com](https://www.history.com), the abolitionist movement was an organized effort to end the practice of slavery in the United States that took place from about 1830 to 1870. Though it started as a movement with religious underpinnings, abolitionism became a controversial political issue that divided much of the country. Supporters and critics often engaged in heated debates and violent, even deadly, confrontations. The divisiveness and animosity fueled by the movement, along with other factors, led to the Civil War and ultimately the end of slavery in the U.S.

Fitchburg has rich history as a supporter of the movement and was home to many prominent figures who helped abolish slavery during the 19th century by seeking the immediate and full emancipation of all enslaved people. Most early abolitionists were white, religious Americans, but some of the most prominent leaders of the movement were also Black men and women who had escaped from bondage.

From her experience she noted, "I'm able to leave some of my supplies in the park overnight because nobody touches them," she said. "Everyone has respect for what I'm trying to do."

She said the reaction to their work has been nothing short of positive and that "another unexpected joy has been feeling adopted by the community."

"I've had neighbors and policemen stop by just to thank me for making their town more beautiful," Chivetta said. "People have brought me bottles of cold water on hot days. Sometimes people come to the park to walk their dogs and I've gotten to take puppy breaks from work to pet them. I usually work in my studio alone, so I'm not used to people cheering me on as I work. It's been quite touching."

The mural was made available to the public in October.

To view the full Article, please visit: [Sentinel & Enterprise](#)

To Learn more about the Friends of Abolitionist Park, please visit: [Abolitionist Park of Fitchburg](#)

Stay tuned for other CDBG projects to be funded in year 49 for Abolitionist Park. Not only will the Friends of Abolitionist Park be installing an interactive display board to bring the Fitchburg Abolitionists to life, but Fitchburg has also provided funding to the City's Department of Public Works for a project that will replace the section of the of current asphalt sidewalk with ADA compliant concrete sidewalk, granite curb, and crosswalk with ADA wheelchair accessible ramps while adding additional street parking on Snow Street. This will provide access to the park for all walks of life.

Youth Programming Updates

YMCA Spartacus Program Brings Hope to Fitchburg Youth

Spartacus is a program for Fitchburg teens, which reduces the number of first-time and repeat juvenile offenders by instilling a sense of community within participants to make their neighborhoods safer for everyone and demonstrating the merits of choosing a more positive course in life. Spartacus engages over 50 participants a year through basketball, health and exercise, academic tutoring, community service, college exploration, and leadership and social skills development.



Lisa Welcome, Executive Director of the YMCA was eager to report on some new programming that was added this year through collaborations with other agencies. "In partnership with LUK, Inc. and the YWCA of Central MA we are offering 2 unique workshop experiences that help males and females meet with members of their own gender to discuss and learn material specific to them and in a safe space.

Manifest (LUK, Inc.) provides an opportunity for young men to learn the history and responsibility of what it means to be a member of the Black race and Male gender.

Girls Choice (YWCA) leads workshops on self-esteem building and goal setting for young women.

We are also offering 2 new activities in partnership with the MA Department of Mental Health. The activities include Art Lessons and Mind Sports (board games such as Chess and GO). These workshops will be led by adult mentors who are trained to "softly touch" upon mental health awareness during these activities. The goal is to destigmatize mental health and provide a safe and non-threatening environment for teens to share their feelings about the topic.

We are also excited to announce that 2 former Spartacus participants and current Montachusett Community Branch staff members are recipients of this year's YMCA Nancy Ware Scholarships. Damaris Cabrera and Eli Jeffreys were both previously members of our Spartacus Program and now they both work in our Youth and Teen Programs.

In 2012, a member from the Montachusett Community Branch Board, established the **Nance Ware Scholarship Fund** to honor her mother's memory, who embraced the Y's values and was a committed volunteer for many years. These scholarships represent so much more than financial assistance to these teens – they mean hope for a bright future. "

To Learn more about the YMCA of Central Massachusetts, visit: [YMCA of Central MA](#)

Transportation to “Full STEAM Ahead” Another Huge Success for The Boys and Girls Club of Fitchburg and Leominster

Project Full STEAM ahead is a program by the Boys and Girls Club of Fitchburg and Leominster that transports Fitchburg youth ages 8-18 from the South Street, McKay, Crocker, Fitchburg High School, and Longsjo Schools from September to June every year. This will provide them the opportunity to participate in the after school program, Project Full STEAM Ahead.

The Boys and Girls Club is uniquely positioned to make a significant difference in the youth they serve. Their Programs boost positive outcomes and inspire great futures. Through participation in Project Full STEAM ahead, club members have shown:

- 1) Increased achievement in math, reading, physical fitness, health, nutrition, and other subjects.
- 2) Developed greater confidence in their academic abilities.
- 3) Increased school attendance rates, improved quantity and quality of completed homework, improved rates of high school graduation, improved student behavior, increased parent and adult involvement.

They also support academic frameworks taught during the school day.

The club offers youth a safe, positive place to learn and grow during crucial after school hours from 2-6pm. Youth engage in activities that enable them to develop self-esteem and to reach their full potential through the five BGC of America Core Program Areas that include: Education and Career, Sports and Recreation, Fitness, Character and Leadership Development, Health and Safety Skills, and Cultural Arts.

Elizabeth Coveney, the Executive Director of the boys and Girl Club extended her gratitude to the CDBG Program saying, *“The BGCFL is grateful for the support of The Fitchburg Community Development Block Grant. We currently serve over 375 members. The funding is critical to our transportation costs, which have continued to increase. Through the generosity of the City of Fitchburg we are able to transport youth from all Fitchburg Public Schools and bring them to The Boys & Girls Club. The impact of socialization from different schools adds to the diverse environment we create. Our members are focused on building good character and citizenship, academic success and healthy lifestyles. Through our formula for impact we are able to deliver an impactful experience for Fitchburg youth. Thank you for the generous support of our Club and our kids.”*

To learn more about their program, visit: [The Boys and Girls Club of Fitchburg and Leominster](#)



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