

Franklin Regional Council of Governments

# Deerfield River Corridor Outdoor Recreation Study



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# Contents

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	Page
1 Introduction	4
2 Profile of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism	6
3 Survey Findings	16
4 Challenges and Opportunities	23
5 Recommendations and Next Steps	33
6 References	40
<b>Tables</b>	
Table 2.1: Employment in the leisure and hospitality sector, 2010-21	14
<b>Figures</b>	
Figure 2-1: Map of Franklin County	6
Figure 2-2: Map of Deerfield River Corridor	8
Figure 2-3: Leisure & Hospitality sectors as share of total employment in Deerfield River Corridor, 2010-21	12
Figure 2-4: Share of total employment in tourism sectors (%), 2010-21	13
Figure 2-5: Employment index for Leisure and Hospitality supersector (2010 = 100), 2010-21	14
Figure 2-6: Average weekly wages (current \$) in the Leisure and Hospitality supersector compared to the all-industry average, Q2 2021	15
Figure 3-1: Respondents by type of organization, % total	16
Figure 3-2: Challenges to overcome regarding outdoor recreation, by level of importance, % total	17
Figure 3-3: Opportunities for the Deerfield River Corridor, by level of importance, % of total	20

# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 Study background and objectives

Funded by an earmark sponsored by Senator Adam Hinds in the Fiscal Year 2022 State Budget, the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) received a grant from the Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism (MOTT) to study outdoor recreation on the Deerfield River. The Deerfield River Corridor in Massachusetts extends from the Vermont border to the confluence with the Connecticut River, through the towns of Monroe, Rowe, Charlemont, Buckland, Shelburne, Conway, Deerfield and Greenfield in Franklin County and Florida in Berkshire County. While this river's watershed encompasses many small rivers and tributaries, this study only focuses on the Deerfield River.

Outdoor recreation is a major economic driver in western Franklin County and northern Berkshire County. During the COVID-19 pandemic, water-based activities on the Deerfield River grew significantly, as people sought outdoor recreation experiences close to home. This rapid growth exacerbated existing over-crowding problems during peak visitor days for businesses in the industry, the physical environment, local municipalities, and the visitor experience. At the same time, business opportunities to serve visitors and residents were being missed.

This study examines existing conditions and recommends strategies to establish a sustainable river-based outdoor recreation industry that takes multiple stakeholders in consideration. Topics in this report include: river access; parking for both recreation companies and individuals; tourism infrastructure (such as public bathrooms, transportation and accommodations); signage; marketing; public safety; and new business development. The study findings and recommendations are broadly grouped into two categories for the Deerfield River Corridor:

Operational and management issues related to existing and current river users, access, safety, over-crowding, communications, etc.

Forward-looking economic development opportunities to capture more economic value from visitation; improve infrastructure, collaboration, and marketing; and improve year-round visitation and facilities to better accommodate visitors.

## 1.2 Methodology

This study draws on a mix of primary and secondary research. In May and June of 2022 an online survey was distributed to over 70 stakeholders, and over 20 individual interviews were conducted with a wide range of public, private, and non-profit stakeholders.

Secondary research, using publicly available data sources, was also undertaken to analyze regional demographics and economic performance, with focus on the

tourism-related sectors for the study region. Prior reports and analyses provided by FRCOG were also reviewed and incorporated into this report.

The recommendations made in this report bring together all strands of research and reflect both the views of stakeholders as well as additional opportunities identified through the research.

The following chapter provides a profile of the Deerfield River Corridor and the outdoor recreation and tourism industry in the area. Chapter 3 presents the findings of the online survey. Chapter 4 summarizes the challenges and opportunities for outdoor recreation and tourism that emerged from the primary and secondary research. Chapter 5 concludes with recommendations and next steps.

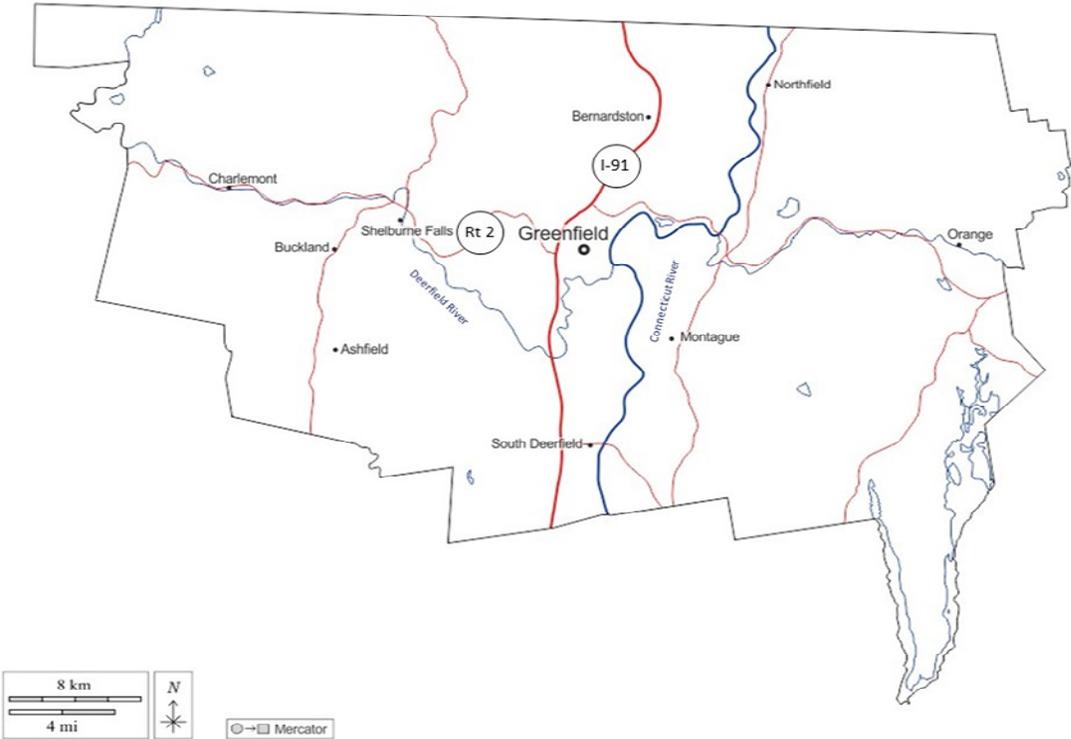
## 2 Profile of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism

### 2.1 Franklin County

The majority of the Deerfield River Corridor study area is in Franklin County, Massachusetts which is bordered by Vermont to the north and Berkshire, Hampshire and Worcester counties of Massachusetts to the west, south and east, respectively. It is dissected west to east by Route 2, which stretches from Boston to Albany, and north to south by Interstate 91, which stretches from Canada down to New Haven, CT.

Franklin County is the least populous of Massachusetts’s mainland counties and the third smallest county in the state in terms of population. It is the most rural in terms of population per square mile. The county had a population of nearly 71,000 in 2020, which was a 0.5% decrease from 2010. Franklin County hosts a population that is predominantly rural as well as older than the Massachusetts and US averages. The median age of residents within Franklin County in 2018 was 46.1 years old, compared to 39.7 in Massachusetts and 37.9 years old across the whole US. The residents of the county are also more likely to be white (90%) compared with the Massachusetts state average (81%). Due to stagnant population growth, the population of the county is projected to decline into the future.

Figure 2-1: Map of Franklin County



Source(s): d-maps.com

The main towns and cities along the Massachusetts stretch of the Deerfield River, which are the focus area of this study, are: Buckland (1,816 residents), Charlemont (1,185 residents), Conway (1,761 residents), Deerfield (5,090 residents), Florida (located in Berkshire County; 694 residents), Greenfield (17,768 residents), Monroe (118 residents), Rowe (424 residents), and Shelburne (1,884 residents). The entire study area has a population of 30,740 residents and will be subsequently referred to as the Deerfield Corridor.

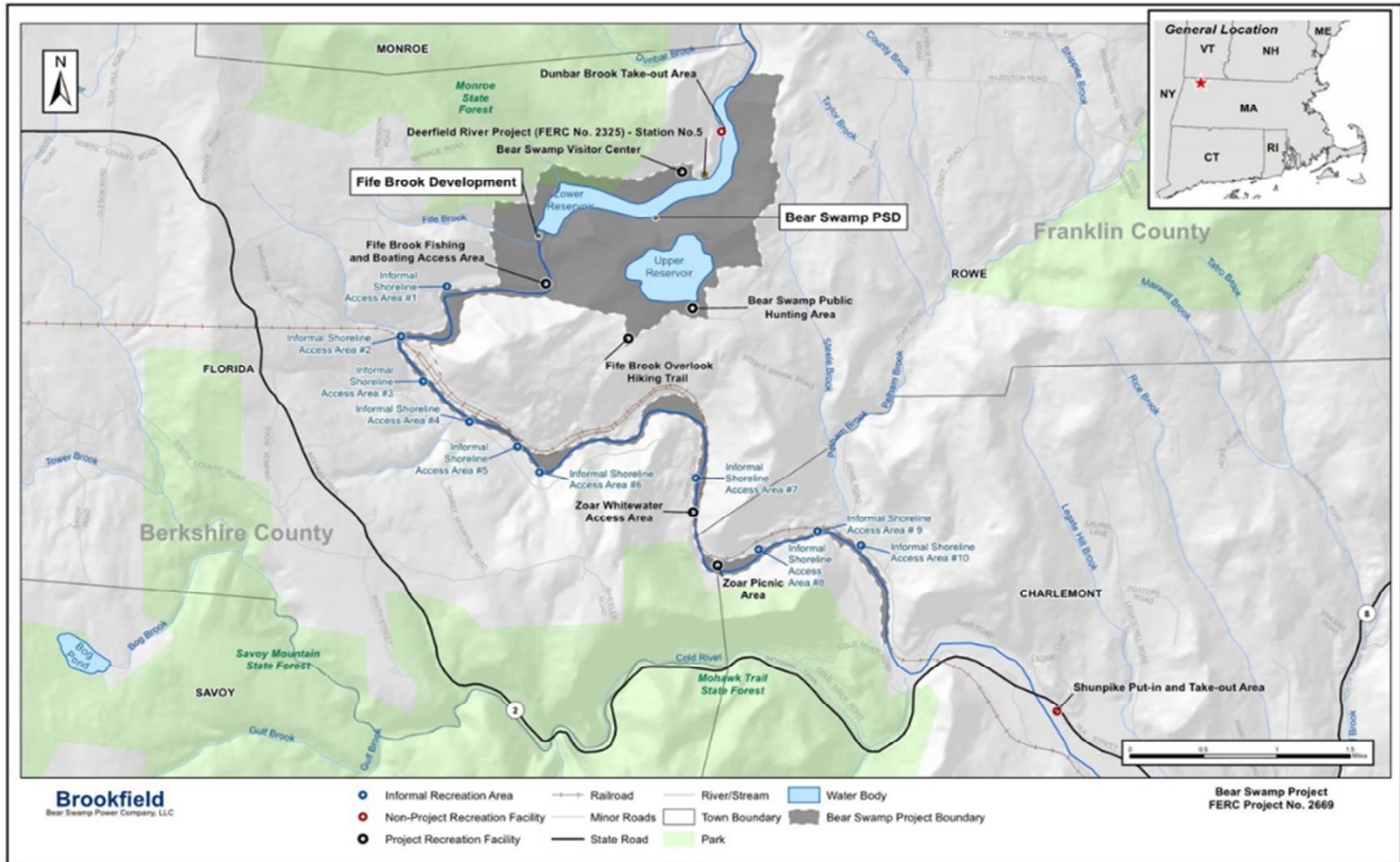
The city of Greenfield is the largest population center in the county and, as the gateway to the Deerfield River Corridor, is situated within driving distance from major urban centers in the wider New England area including Springfield, MA (45 minutes), Hartford, CT (1 hour), Boston, MA (2 hours), Portland, ME (3 hours) and New York City (3.5 hours). In addition to the two major road networks, the county has a train station located at the John W. Olver Transit Center in Greenfield which provides north-south rail service to New York City, Vermont and other origins and destinations roughly along the Connecticut River.

As shown in Figure 2-1, the study area communities are located west of the Connecticut River, and include a variety of very small rural towns (generally north of Rt. 2), along with other towns like Charlemont, Shelburne and Deerfield which have a broader range of tourist-related amenities, town centers with shopping and retail, etc. Each town has their own municipal government led by select boards, except for Greenfield which is a city and the county seat.

## **2.2 The Deerfield River Corridor**

The Deerfield River is one of the coldest and cleanest rivers in the state of Massachusetts. The river extends over 70 miles from southern Vermont through northwestern Massachusetts, where it drains into the Connecticut River at the town of Greenfield in Franklin County. The Deerfield River watershed covers an area of 665 square miles, a substantial portion of which lies within the borders of Franklin County. Figure 2-2 shows a map of the Deerfield River Corridor with recreation areas identified along the northwestern length of the river.

Figure 2-2: Map of Deerfield River Corridor



Source(s): Brookfield Bear Swamp Power Company, LLC

Deerfield River is one of the most important natural resources within the county given the multiple functions it serves. To begin with, it provides power to the region via the ten hydroelectric dams owned by Great River Hydro, Brookfield Power, and Central Rivers Power MA located along the length of the river. The operation of these dams is managed through the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) licensing process, which allows the companies to install new facilities, operate, and maintain the dams for a fixed period. For example, FERC License No. P-2323, held by Great River Hydro, was issued in 1997 for a period of 40 years.

The section of the river below the Fife Brook dam also serves as a recreational resource for the surrounding region, providing opportunities for rafting, kayaking, fishing, and tubing. The rapids used by paddlers and rafters along the river are created through the dam releases, which are scheduled and controlled by the hydroelectric companies. There are 32 scheduled releases in 2022 for the #5 station dam and 106 scheduled releases for the Fife Brook dam. Finally, the river also plays an important role in supporting the local ecosystem in Franklin County, with 78% of its land area being forested.

### Recreation activities and assets

The Deerfield River boasts a range of options and locations for residents and visitors to recreate along the river. The following section presents a non-exhaustive list of recreation activities and assets within the Deerfield River Corridor.

In warmer months and when the water level of the river is high, **swimming** can be enjoyed in areas along the Deerfield River. The following are some of these locations.

- Cascades on Dunbar Brook (Monroe)
- Whirley Baths (Charlemont)
- Zoar Picnic Area (Charlemont)
- Shunpike Rest Area (Charlemont)
- Wilcox Hollow (Shelburne)
- South River State Forest (Conway)

The area has an extensive network of trails for **walking**, **hiking**, and **mountain biking** in the Deerfield River basin. There are a plethora of these opportunities in the Deerfield River watershed, some popular locations include:

- Raycroft Outlook & Dunbar Brook Trail, Monroe State Forest (Florida, Monroe)
- Negus Mountain (Charlemont)
- Mohawk Trail State Forest (Charlemont, Savoy)
- Thunder Mountain Bike Park (Charlemont, Hawley)
- Mohican-Mohawk Trail (Deerfield to Shelburne)
- High Ledges Wildlife Sanctuary (Shelburne)

Many river users enjoy **whitewater rafting** and/or **kayaking** through established tour operators. The following are operators that offer options for rafting or kayaking.:

- Berkshire Whitewater of Berkshire East Resorts (Charlemont)
- Zoar Outdoor (also owned by Berkshire East Resorts) (Charlemont)
- Crabapple Whitewater (Charlemont)
- Adventure East (Sunderland)

River users with their own vessels can enjoy **paddling** and **tubing**. River users can also rent tubes and/or use shuttle services from companies including:

- Hyytinen Hollow Tubes (Charlemont)
- The Great Outdoors Tubing (Charlemont)
- Deerfield River Portage (Conway)

They can then put-in at several locations along the river, including:

- Fife Brook Boating Put In (Florida)
- Zoar Picnic Area (Charlemont)
- Shunpike Rest Area (Charlemont)
- Wilcox Hollow, Shelburne State Forest (Shelburne)

River users enjoy **fishing** along the river for stocked and native trout. In addition to individual river users, there are professional anglers who offer guided trips and lessons. These river users can fish in the Deerfield River itself and other tributaries in the river basin, including:

- Allen Brook, Green River, and Mill Brook (Greenfield)
- Dragon Brook (Shelburne)
- Clesson Brook and Cooley Brook (Buckland)
- Avery Brook, Chickley River, Maxwell Brook, Pelham Brook, and Cold River (Charlemont)
- North Pond and Cold River (Florida)

Additional recreation activities available in the area include camping, snowmobiling, golfing, birdwatching, cross country and downhill skiing, and hunting. A more complete inventory and maps of the recreation assets in the area can be found on the FRCOG website.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.3 Economic trends and conditions

#### In Franklin County

In 2017, more Franklin County residents were employed somewhere outside the county versus inside the county (19,852 vs. 13,511). Franklin County had a very

<sup>1</sup> <https://frcog.org/public-review-of-the-draft-mohawk-trail-woodlands-partnership-recreation-map-and-inventory/>

low unemployment rate in 2019 at 2.7%, and the unemployment rate has been consistently lower than the Massachusetts and US averages since at least 2005.

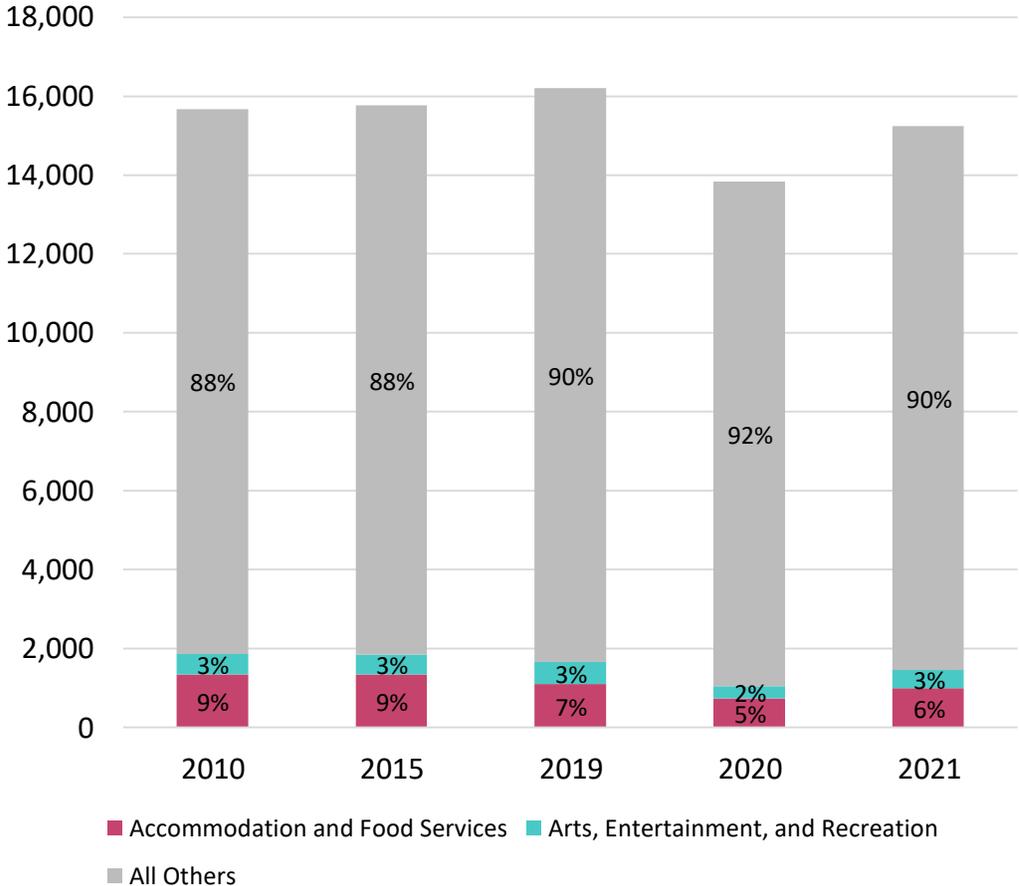
Retail Trade and Accommodation and Food Services were the 3rd and 4th largest industries in the county in terms of filled jobs in 2018, after Health Care and Social Services (1st) and Manufacturing (2nd). Franklin County had the lowest average weekly wages of all counties in Massachusetts in 2021 at \$887, less than the Massachusetts (\$1,732 per week) and US averages (\$1,289 per week).

The Accommodations and Food Services industry in Franklin County had the largest increase in unemployment insurance claimant counts of any industry in the county between April 2019 and April 2020, from 71 to 2,435. These statistics suggest that the tourism industry, an important employer within the county, struggled economically during the period at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **In Deerfield River Corridor**

Within the Deerfield River Corridor study area, the Leisure and Hospitality supersector – including the Accommodation and Food Services and Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation sectors, as classified under the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) – has represented between approximately 7 to 12% of total employment in the area since 2010. Figure 2-3 shows the share of total employment under each of these the two constituent sector classifications within the Deerfield Corridor area from 2010 to 2021.

**Figure 2-3: Leisure & Hospitality sectors as share of total employment in Deerfield River Corridor, 2010-2021**



Note(s): Figures are for the month of June in each year. The towns of Charlemont, Deerfield, Greenfield, and Shelburne comprise the Deerfield Corridor area in this chart. Other towns in the study area had incomplete employment data due to very small samples. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding error.  
 Source(s): Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, ES-202 data.

**Leisure and hospitality**

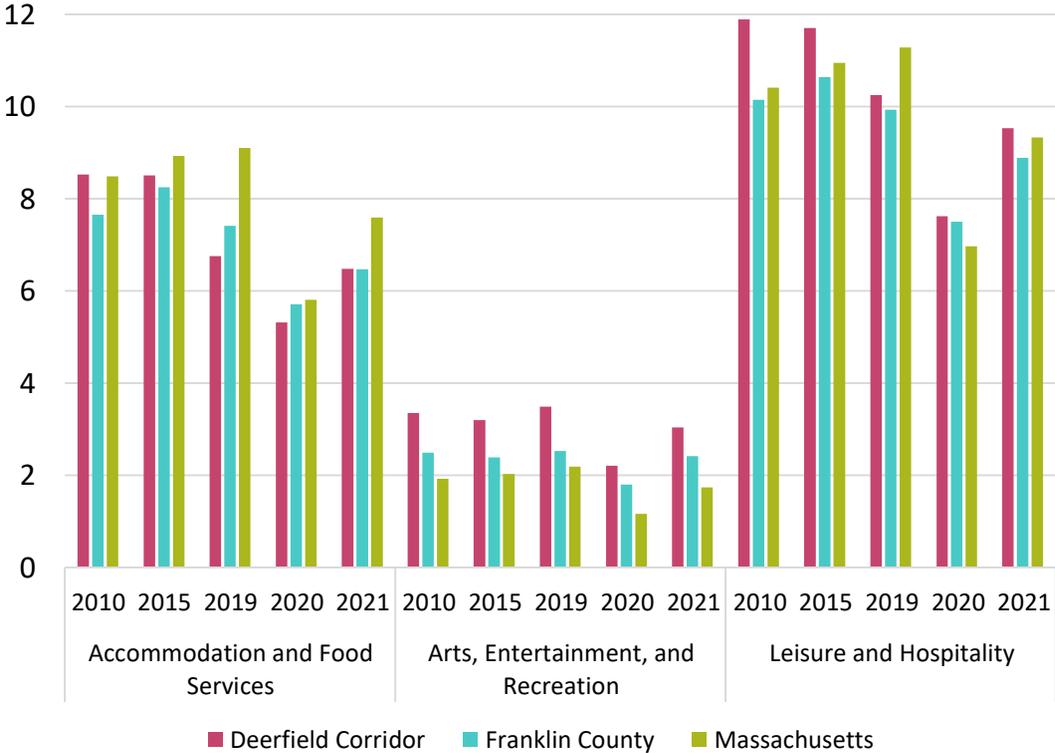
The Leisure and Hospitality supersector includes all businesses that operate in tourism, hospitality, lodging, food service, production of live events, preservation and exhibition of cultural objects, and provision of recreational activities. Of the two sectors within the Leisure and hospitality super sector, The Accommodations and Food Services sector represented the largest share of total employment within the Deerfield Corridor (6.5% in 2021), followed by Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation (3.0% in 2021). Together, these three sectors employed nearly 1,500 people in the study area in 2021.

As seen in Figure 2-3, employment within the Leisure and Hospitality supersector fell sharply in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic recovery of the super sector shows in 2021, approaching their pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 2-4 compares the share of the Deerfield River Corridor’s employment in the Leisure and Hospitality supersector to Franklin County and the state of Massachusetts over 2010 to 2021. The Deerfield River Corridor study area has a

greater share of employment in the Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation sector than Franklin County and Massachusetts over the whole period. The study area also generally had a higher share of employment in the Leisure and Hospitality supersector compared with Franklin County and the state (except for 2019). From 2015 to 2021, the Deerfield River Corridor had a lower share of employment in Accommodation and Food Services than the state average.

**Figure 2-4: Share of total employment in tourism sectors (%), 2010-2021**



**Note(s):** Figures are for the month of June in each year. The towns of Charlemont, Deerfield, Greenfield, and Shelburne comprise the Deerfield Corridor area in this chart. Other towns in the study area had incomplete employment data due to very small samples. The Accommodations and Food Services and Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation sectors combine to form the Leisure and Hospitality supersector.

**Source(s):** Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, ES-202 data.

Focusing on the Leisure and Hospitality supersector, the towns within the Deerfield Corridor study area, represent an important segment of this supersector in Franklin County. Table 2.1 shows employment in the Leisure and Hospitality supersector for the largest towns in the Deerfield River Corridor (other towns had incomplete employment data due to very small samples) and Franklin County over the period of 2010 to 2021. Collectively, the four towns of Charlemont, Deerfield, Greenfield, and Shelburne accounted for more than 1,450 workers, or 63% of the supersector’s workforce within the county in 2021. Over the period, Greenfield has had the largest employment in this supersector, followed by Deerfield, Charlemont, and then Shelburne.

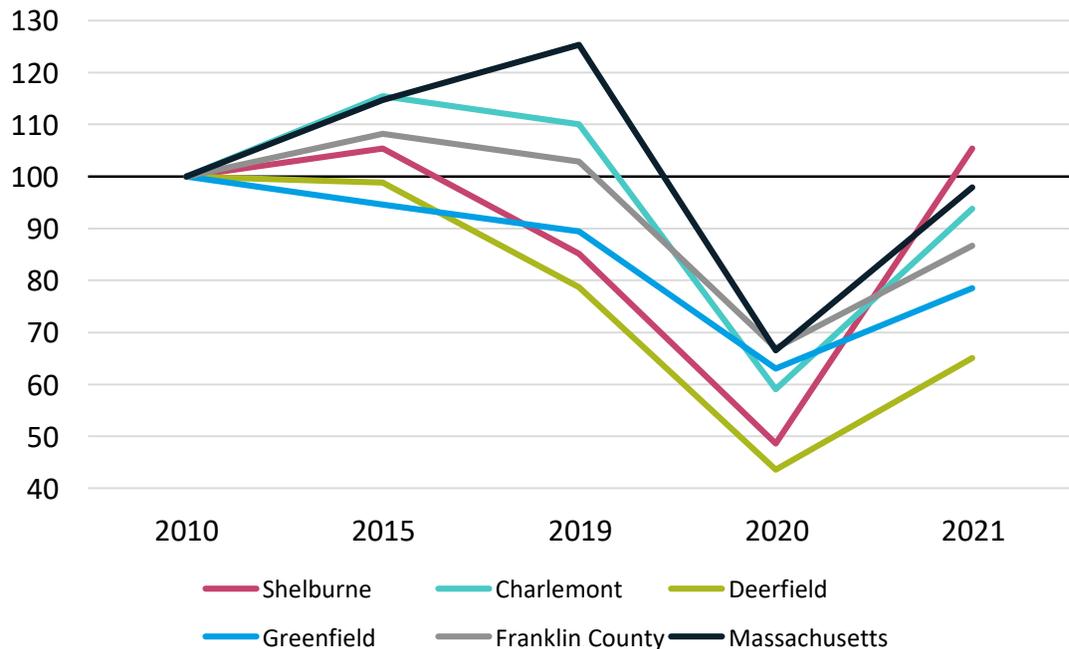
**Table 2.1: Employment in the Leisure and Hospitality supersector, 2010-2021**

Area	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021
Charlemont	259	299	285	153	243
Deerfield	507	501	399	221	330
Greenfield	1,022	967	914	644	802
Shelburne	74	78	63	36	78
Franklin County	2,659	2,877	2,735	1,780	2,306

Note(s): Figures are for the month of June in each year. The towns of Charlemont, Deerfield, Greenfield, and Shelburne are included in this chart for reference. Other towns in the study area had incomplete employment data due to very small samples.

Source(s): Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, ES-202 data.

Between 2010 and 2019, absolute employment within the Leisure and Hospitality supersector was generally on a trajectory of growth, but this growth was halted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As of 2021, Leisure and Hospitality employment in Massachusetts, Franklin County, and most of the towns in the Deerfield Corridor (except for Shelburne) has not recovered to 2019 levels. Figure 2-5 presents an index of employment within the Leisure of Hospitality supersector, showing growth in absolute levels of employment in this supersector relative to 2010 (2010 = 100).

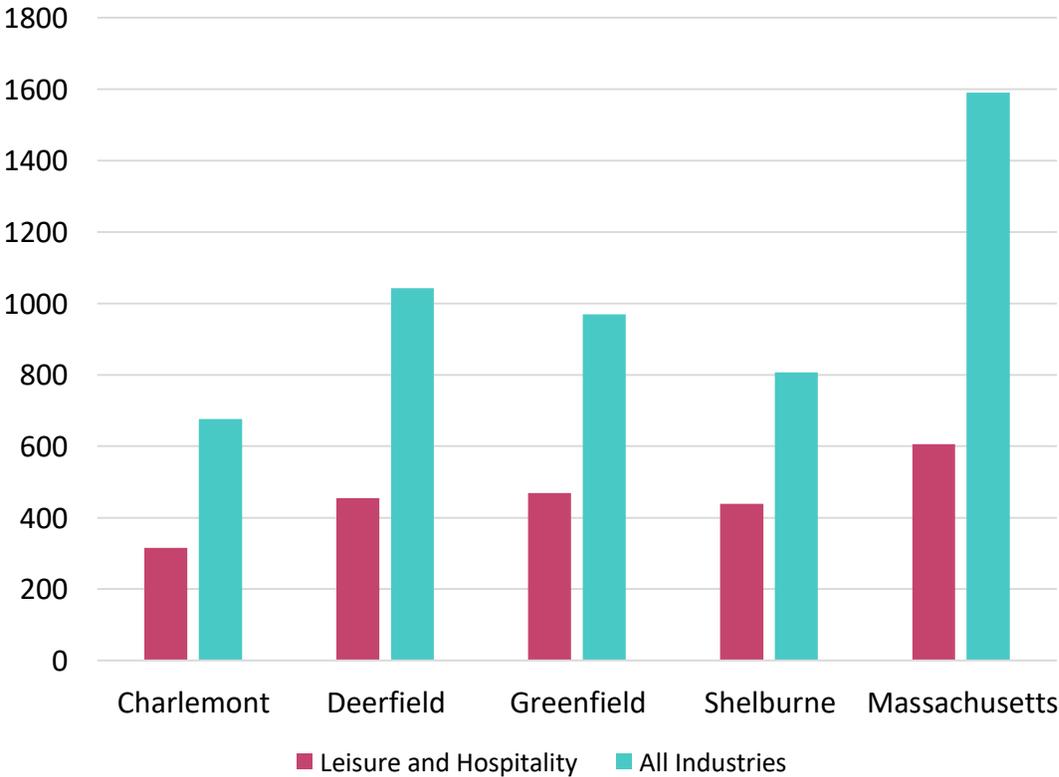
**Figure 2-5: Employment index for Leisure and Hospitality supersector (2010 = 100), 2010-2021**

Note(s): The towns of Charlemont, Deerfield, Greenfield, and Shelburne are included in this chart for reference. Other towns in the study area had incomplete employment data due to very small samples.

Source(s): Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, ES-202 data.

While the Leisure and Hospitality supersector is an important contributor to employment in the Deerfield Corridor study area, the average wages within this supersector are far below the economy-wide average across all industries. Figure 2-6 shows the average weekly wages of the Leisure and Hospitality supersector compared to all industries in quarter two of 2021 for towns within the Deerfield Corridor and the state. Across all towns (Charlemont [\$315], Deerfield [\$455], Greenfield [\$469], and Shelburne [\$439]), the average weekly wage in the Leisure and Hospitality supersector was lower than the state average [\$606]. Furthermore, average Leisure and Hospitality wages in Massachusetts were 62% lower than all-industry average of \$1,591.

**Figure 2-6: Average weekly wages (current \$) in the Leisure and Hospitality supersector compared to the all-industry average, Q2 2021**



Note(s): Figures are the average of weekly wages in quarter two (April, May, and June) of 2021.  
Source(s): Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, ES-202 data.

The Leisure and Hospitality supersector is an important element of the economy within the Deerfield Corridor, accounting for a large share of employment within the area. However, this industry also faces challenges, including its vulnerability to shocks in demand, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and its relatively low wages compared with other industries. Combined with the supersector’s typically seasonal nature (i.e., employment tends to grow and shrink seasonally each year depending on tourists’ demand in that season), businesses within Leisure and Hospitality may face challenges recruiting and retaining a suitable workforce to help them grow.

### 3 Survey Findings

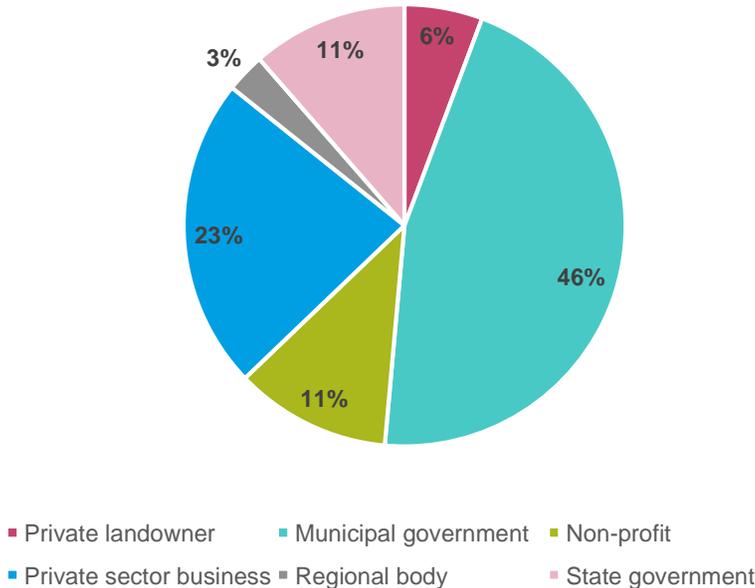
In June 2022 an online survey was distributed by FRCOG to 77 stakeholders who ranged from members of the municipal governments covered in this study to business owners, non-profits, and private landowners impacted by river usage. A total of 35 people responded to the survey.

#### 3.1 Respondent overview

The survey respondents represented a spread of geographic areas throughout Franklin County, with the greatest number from Charlemont (40%), followed by Greenfield (11%) and Shelburne Falls (9%). The remaining responses came from other towns within the county such as Monroe and Rowe. Others were from stakeholders who represented county or statewide interests related public services (such as law enforcement and transportation) and regional government.

Six different types of organizations are represented within the survey responses (Figure 3-1). The two largest proportions of respondents were from local municipal governments (46%) and private sector businesses (23%). Of the private sector businesses that responded, over half are in Charlemont. Private landowners affected by river usage and regional bodies were represented in smaller numbers (6% and 3% respectively).

Figure 3-1: Respondents by type of organization, % total



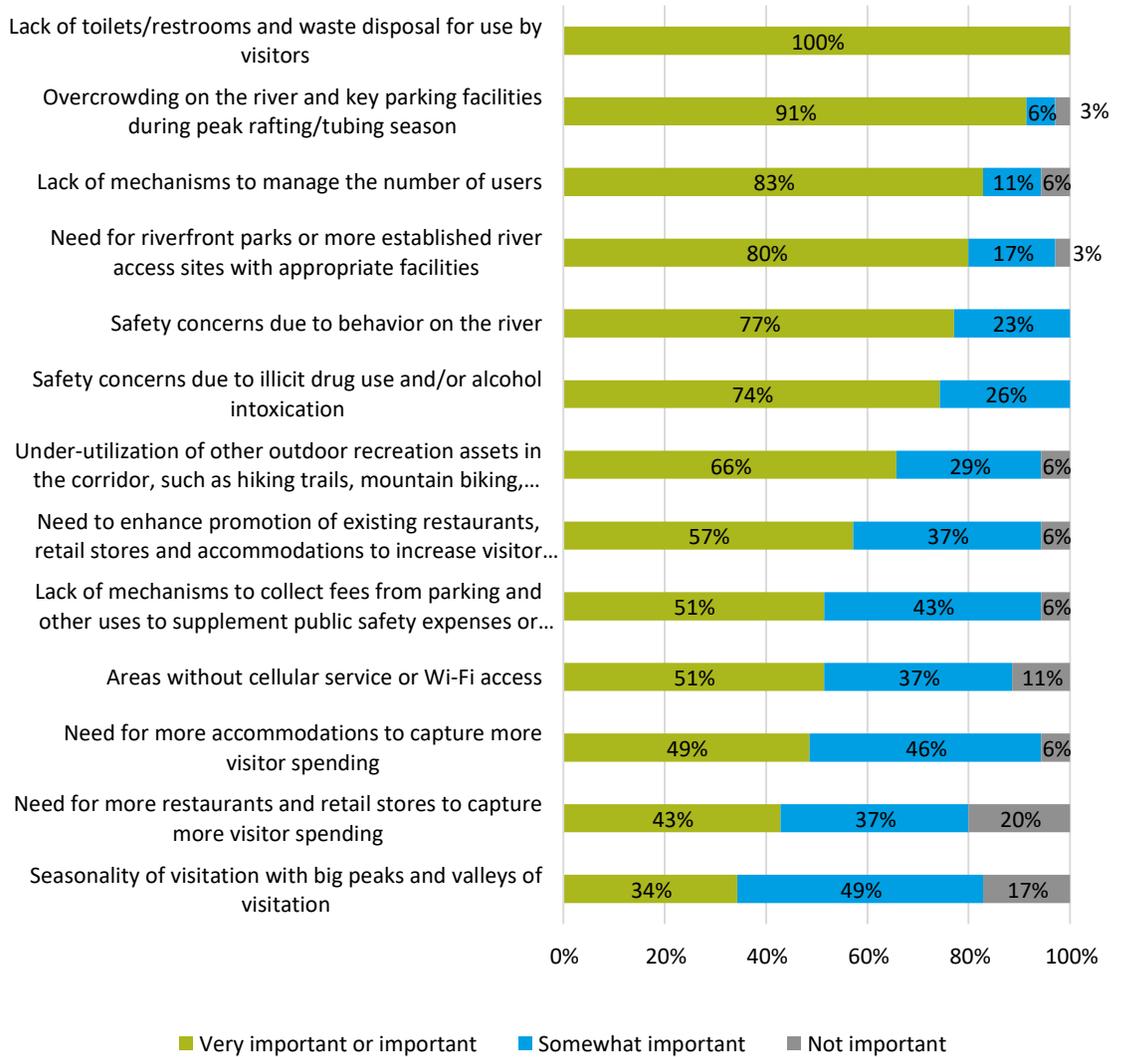
Source(s): Cambridge Econometrics.

#### 3.2 Challenges

Question 7 of the survey asked stakeholders what they saw as the greatest challenge to overcome regarding outdoor recreation tourism in the Deerfield River Corridor (Figure 3-2). They were given a list of 13 challenges and were asked to

rank each by level of importance: very important, important, somewhat important, not important. For analysis purposes, responses of ‘very important’ and ‘important’ were considered together.

**Figure 3-2: Challenges to overcome regarding outdoor recreation, by level of importance, % total**



Source(s): Cambridge Econometrics.

*Lack of restrooms and waste disposal identified unanimously as an important challenge*

The lack of restrooms and waste disposal facilities along the river was identified by all respondents as an important challenge to overcome (100% ranking as either ‘very important’ or ‘important’) followed by the issue of overcrowding during peak season (ranked by 91% of respondents as ‘very important’ or ‘important’). Other challenges ranked of high importance by a large proportion of respondents included the lack of mechanisms to manage user numbers (83%) and the need for more riverfront parks or established access sites (80%).

All users agreed that safety concerns due to behavior on the river and illicit drug use and/or alcohol intoxication were of some degree of importance, with about three-quarters of respondents ranking it as ‘very important’ or ‘important’ and no one ranking it as ‘not important’.

There were several challenges where respondents' views varied more in terms of their level of importance. About half of all respondents (49%) viewed the need for more accommodations as 'very important' or 'important', with an almost equal percentage seeing this challenge as only 'somewhat important' (46%). The need for more restaurants and retail further divided respondents, with 43% ranking it as 'very important' or 'important', 37% as 'somewhat important' and 20% as 'not important'.

Interestingly, the need for more restaurants and retail was the challenge which the greatest number of respondents deemed 'not important' (20%), followed by the issue of seasonality of visitation (17%).

**Question 8** asked stakeholders what they saw as the top priorities to address in order to improve the operations and management of outdoor recreation in the region. The open-ended responses were coded, and the most frequently mentioned issues are analyzed below.

### Provision of river facilities

The provision of river facilities, such as trash receptacles (including recycling), restrooms and parking, was the most frequently cited issue (12 respondents). When referencing the need for additional restrooms and trash receptacles, several stakeholders highlighted the challenge around funding for their upkeep and maintenance, as well as the current burden on residents and private landowners to keep the river area clean. Similarly, the challenge of providing "guided oversight and supervision" to manage these key elements of tourism infrastructure was underscored.

*Parking, trash receptacles, and restrooms are key pieces of missing tourism infrastructure*

Parking was often grouped together with trash receptacles and restrooms as key tourism infrastructure. Of the 10 respondents who referenced parking, their comments focused on the need to increase parking options, manage parking overflow, establish clear and consistent parking signage, and the ability to charge for parking.

### River safety

Eleven respondents cited river safety for rafters and tubers as a challenge, especially for those users who choose to access the river independently and not via a rafting or tubing company. Several stakeholders noted the difficulty in sharing river safety information, such as the importance of personal flotation devices (PFDs) for independent river users, especially those with little river experience.

Interestingly, views were divided on prioritization of river safety and the right to independent access. While some stakeholders suggested that users be directed to the tubing and rafting companies to educate new users and ensure proper PFD usage, others underscored the importance of protecting independent access while still finding a way to share safety information.

The need for a sufficient police, ranger and emergency responders was also noted by 10 respondents alongside the issue of river safety. Specifically, stakeholders mentioned the need for increased ranger assistance as well as police presence to enforce drug and alcohol violations. Most respondents also referred to the challenge of how to fund these additional public services.

### River Access and Management

Issues relating to river access and management were cited by 10 respondents. Finding the balance between how to control crowds while still protecting river access were highlighted. Additionally, the importance of “relieving pressure on popular access points” such as Shunpike was highlighted but countered by the current lack of a regional coordinator who could address this issue.

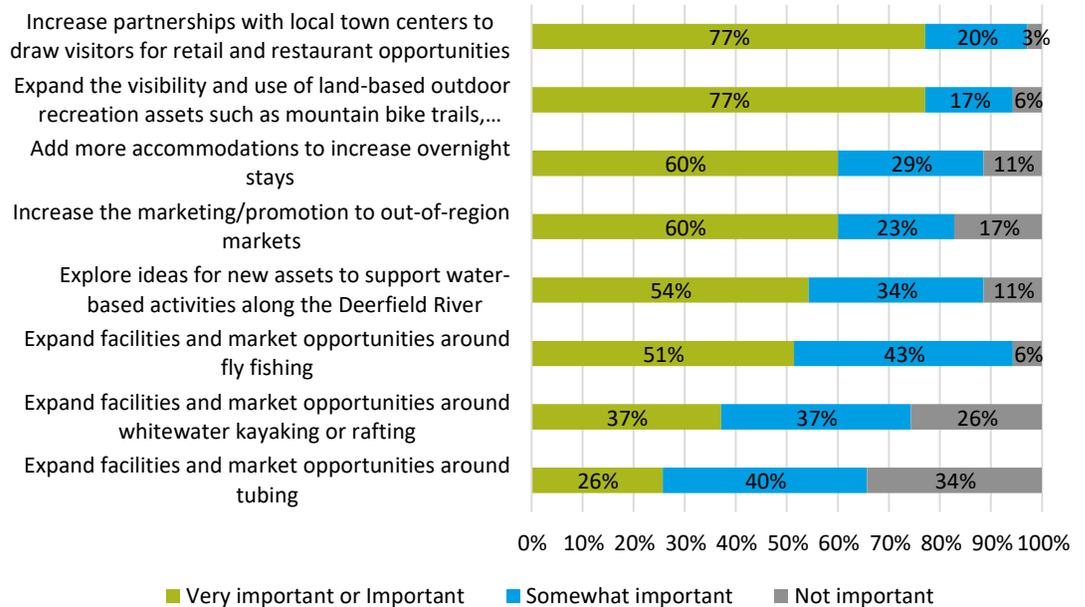
*Regional coordination and communication among key stakeholders are needed*

The need for regional coordination (across local municipalities and businesses) was also mentioned in relation to river safety, recreational information, promotion, and the need to protect and coordinate all forms of recreation along the river. Specifically, the need for communication “among various parties and entities about resources, planning and needs of communities and tourists”. Linked to this point was the challenge of how businesses can capture value from visitors, cited by one respondent.

Finally, the issue of stewardship was mentioned alongside river management by four respondents who emphasized the importance of stewardship education to “leave no trace”.

### 3.3 Opportunities

**Question 9** asked stakeholders what they think are the top opportunities for the Deerfield River Corridor to enhance its outdoor recreation tourism industry over the next 10 years. They were presented with eight opportunities and asked to rank each according to its level of importance (Figure 3-3).

**Figure 3-3: Opportunities for the Deerfield River Corridor, by level of importance, % of total**

Source(s): Cambridge Econometrics.

*Increasing patronage of retail shops and expanding visibility of outdoor recreation are important opportunities*

Over three quarters of respondents (77%) saw the opportunity to increase patronage of town retail shops and restaurants as 'very important' or 'important'. The same amount also saw the opportunity to expand the visibility and usage of land-based outdoor recreation as 'very important' or 'important'.

The opportunities to add more accommodation options and increase the marketing to out-of-region areas were seen as 'very important' or 'important' to 60% of respondents. These were followed by the opportunity to explore ideas for new assets for water-based activities deemed 'very important' or 'important' by 54% of respondents.

The opportunity to expand facilities for and further market whitewater kayaking or rafting and tubing were ranked as 'not important' by the greatest number of respondents (26% and 34%, respectively).

**Question 10** asked stakeholders what opportunities they saw to create more outdoor recreation or tourism industry jobs in the Deerfield River Corridor. While the free-response question generated many ideas, they all centered around several key themes.

### The creation of more accommodation options

Lodging was seen as an important opportunity to both create jobs and support the outdoor recreation tourism sector, with some believing that additional accommodation will help generate more demand for retail and restaurant businesses in the towns. Campgrounds were mentioned multiple times as a specific type of accommodation that should be further provided. Some

respondents suggested that increased capacity on conservation land should be made for campgrounds, while another said that with more campgrounds, the area could build out the offering for international and summer camps for children.

### Promotion and expansion of land-based recreation

Other respondents saw an opportunity to create more jobs by further promoting and expanding the offering for land-based recreation. This included hiking, birding, and mountain biking. The opportunity around cross-country and gravel cycling, which is growing in popularity was referenced, with one respondent stating that this activity would allow people to bike into town for lunch or dinner directly from the biking trails and would present a great opportunity to open a bike retail or repair shop in town.

### Packaging of recreation activities

Packaging of recreation activities to attract more people and extend their stays was also mentioned. Linked to this, several respondents felt that the regional marketing could be reformed (and funding increased), with greater collaboration across counties so that a single coordinated message about the area as a recreation destination could be widely communicated.

### Events

Events were also mentioned as an idea to draw more footfall into the towns and support local businesses. Ideas for events included farmers markets, maple weekend and creating events as part of Franklin County Cider Days. Business ideas also suggested included forest bathing tours, foraging tours, historical tours, falconry, marathons, car shows, and catering experiences (such as food trucks and outdoor dining).

### Improve town infrastructure and business support

Finally, several respondents felt that to support more jobs, wider infrastructure and business support within the towns needed to be addressed. The issue of housing was frequently mentioned, with stakeholders saying that before additional jobs could be created, additional employee housing was needed, especially to attract seasonal workers. Others mentioned the need to make Main Street more accessible by foot and bikes by providing pedestrian bridges, marked signage, more public parking, shuttle buses and a picnic park in the village. Finally, the need for more small business support in the form of grants and pooled insurance opportunities was mentioned.

**Question 11** asked what opportunities stakeholders saw to work collaboratively with other municipalities to address challenges or enhance efforts to increase economic activity. All respondents were supportive of increased collaboration across the municipalities. Suggestions on how to increase collaboration were focused on several areas:

- **Marketing and events coordination:** the opportunity better coordinate how the region is marketed as a whole so that people can extend their stays and engage in multiple forms of recreation. Local events were also mentioned as

an opportunity for regional collaboration, as well as the opportunity to create a tourism center based in a central location.

- **Transportation:** several respondents felt that towns could better collaborate on the issue of transportation and improve the ability of people to move from town to town, such as via a shuttle service on peak days. Parking was also mentioned, with the need to coordinate, charge, and formalize (with the need to formalize parking on Mill Village Road past Stillwater Bridge in Deerfield mentioned specifically).
- **Local businesses:** many respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring local businesses have equal access to important information (e.g., permitting, public safety, rule changes). The need for a formalized mechanism to disseminate information and track engagement invitations to stakeholders was also mentioned, to ensure that all businesses are supported. The importance of rafting companies working with towns on overcrowding was also mentioned as an important area for collaboration.
- **River access and broader river management:** the most mentioned area for collaboration, with stakeholders stressing the importance of collaboration when addressing issues such as parking, restroom facilities and trash removal. River access was the most referenced issue of overall river management, given the knock-on effects changing access in one town can have on other towns nearby.

*Preservation and protection of the river is emphasized*

The final question in the survey asked stakeholders if there were any additional views or information, they wanted to provide on the area's outdoor recreation assets and opportunities. Many stakeholders reiterated how important it is to ensure the protection of the river and preserve its 'untouched' look and feel. Several specific suggestions were also made:

- *“Consider finding a non-traditional developer for key sites in Charlemont for additional accommodation and consider creating more campsites as another way for small investors to provide lodging in the area.”*
- *“The area provides some of the best road, mountain, gravel, and downhill cycling. Promote these activities since the river is already overcrowded.”*
- *“Create an easy-to-access, central repository for information on river levels, trail locations and river access locations.”*
- *“I think the focus needs to be on the businesses and fundamentals that support the outdoor tourism industry. One of priorities in improving the Charlemont tourism economy is blight remediation by making the historic village/Main Street of Charlemont appealing so that entrepreneurs can feel inspired and visualize operating a successful business in our town.”*

## 4 Challenges and Opportunities

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This section profiles the current challenges and opportunities facing outdoor recreation and tourism on the Deerfield River Corridor. It draws on secondary research from previously published reports as well as primary research conducted via the online survey and one-to-one interviews with stakeholders.

### 4.1 Challenges

Given the bounty of recreational activities available on the Deerfield River as well as its proximity to major population centers in the Northeast, it is unsurprising that the river has increasingly become a destination for outdoor recreation in recent years. The increase in river usage has coincided with the rise in popularity of tubing, a relatively accessible recreational activity. Unfortunately, demand for access to recreate on the river has outpaced the area's ability to manage the crowds of tourists that visit during peak season. The rural nature of Franklin County and the lack of infrastructure, both physical and regulatory, to manage sustainable use of the river have led to challenges for stakeholders including residents, river users, municipal governments, and local businesses.

#### Challenge 1: There is no 'center of gravity' to coordinate river management

A challenge that was frequently mentioned throughout the research was the need for greater regional coordination of all aspects of river management as well as the wider outdoor recreation industry in the Deerfield River Corridor.

There are several drivers behind the challenge of coordination, the first being the lack of a single designated entity with **authority** and **funding** to **coordinate** and **enforce** comprehensive river management. Contrary to other areas in the country, the Massachusetts state government is not involved in comprehensive river management, nor is county government. Although it should be noted that it is involved in environmental regulation via the 401 Water Quality Certification. Since there is no single entity charged with managing the Deerfield River Corridor in its entirety, most aspects of river management are left to a range of different stakeholders across multiple municipalities. These stakeholders range from the individual municipalities and their select boards, the hydro-electric companies, landowners, non-profits, and businesses.

Another reason that coordination is a significant challenge along the Deerfield is because of the many uses of the river. The river is used to generate power, is a thriving environmental ecosystem, and provides opportunity for multiple types of recreation including rafting, kayaking, fly fishing, and tubing. As a result of these multiple uses of the river, there are many different impacts to consider both directly (e.g., litter, sanitation, safety) and indirectly (e.g., environmental impacts, long-term sustainability). There is a need to coordinate all forms of recreation along the river.

The lack of coordination in managing the river results in inconsistency and sub-optimal decisions being made. Specifically, it leads to decisions being made in isolation which only consider the impacts on a specific part of the river, rather than the corridor as a whole. For example, stakeholders in the online survey referenced how restricting parking or river access in one town only pushes traffic to nearby towns causing further overcrowding and congestion. A similar situation occurs with regards to river access when certain access points are closed.

Stakeholders also referred to the current lack of a regional coordinator to address “relieving pressure on popular access points” such as Shunpike. The lack of coordination also leads to a lack of enforceable measures to control crowds on peak days, leading to parking problems, trespassing, and overcrowding.

In addition to the challenge of coordinating river management, there is a challenge in coordinating a wider strategy for outdoor recreation in the region. As one survey respondent stated, there is a need for communication “among various parties and entities about resources, planning and needs of communities and tourists”. However, as one stakeholder stated in an interview, “there is a sense of not everyone being on the same page. There is a need for a shared vision and to agree what direction we’re headed in.”

## **Challenge 2: Insufficient and uncoordinated parking**

Parking has been cited as a major challenge by many stakeholders because the current parking infrastructure is inadequate to meet tourism demand during peak season. Relative to the number of visitors trying to access the river during busy summer weekends, there is a lack of parking for visitors who drive into the area, especially in downtown areas of the towns along the river. Older and disabled visitors in particular face difficulties accessing downtown areas in towns along the Deerfield River. The lack of formal parking has led to people parking on private property, blocking emergency vehicle routes, damaging sensitive environmental areas, and causing safety hazards.

At present, there are numerous pull-offs and shoulders as well as several main parking areas along the river, which are all owned and operated by different organizations:

- Fife Brook below the dam (Brookfield Renewable)
- Zoar Gap put-ins and take-outs (Brookfield Renewable)
- Zoar Picnic Area (Brookfield Renewable)
- Shunpike Rest Area Parking (MassDOT)

Parking is a challenge not only because of its scarcity, but also because there is not a coordinated parking policy along the riverfront. Specifically, this includes the lack of consistent rules on where parking is allowed and not allowed, whether

parking is free or paid, and how rules can be enforced. Without a consistent approach along the riverfront, any action taken to control parking in one area just pushes users to the next unregulated area.

Parking was highlighted by stakeholders as a fundamental element of infrastructure needed to manage river usage and a support wider tourism in the towns. Stakeholders referenced the need to increase parking options, manage parking overflow, establish clear and consistent parking signage, and the ability to charge for parking.

The ability to charge for parking was noted as both a challenge and a necessity. Paid parking presents the opportunity to both raise necessary funds to support river management and help curbing demand and control crowds. Overcrowding was ranked by 91% of the survey respondents as a 'very important' or 'important' challenge, with 83% also citing the inability to manage user numbers as another important challenge.

As one stakeholder explained, the river is an example of tragedy of the commons. It is a free resource that everyone is allowed to use, but since user numbers cannot be regulated or controlled, it is becoming hard for individuals to enjoy the benefits due to overcrowding. While parking is a challenge to be managed, it may also present an opportunity.

Finally, the lack of downtown parking areas was also highlighted as a challenge to increasing footfall and visitor spend in the local towns.

### **Challenge 3: Under provision of river access points and frequent use of informal access**

The main official river access points along the Deerfield River include Dunbar Brook, Fife Brook, and Zoar Picnic Area. There are also many informal access points along the length of the river. The Shunpike Rest Area is not formally managed as a river access point, but is very popular for this purpose. The issue of river access is a challenge in terms of the need to provide sufficient river access as well as adequate management of these access points.

The need to provide sufficient river access and management of these access points are important challenges (as noted by 80% of stakeholders surveyed) because they directly link to the issues of parking, overcrowding, trespassing, safety, and environmental protection. Many of the official access points become overcrowded on peak days and are unable to meet demand.

Stakeholders have reported a decline in river access points and underscored the need for additional access points that are adequately managed and coordinated.

Due to overcrowding on busy days, (and lack of clear signage and information) some users choose to access the river via private property, causing a host of negative impacts and fear of legal liability for the landowner. Residents of areas

along the river have reported river users creating excessive noise, partaking in drug and alcohol consumption, acting belligerent, trespassing on private property to dump trash or relieve themselves, and even threatening physical violence towards property owners. As a result, landowners are less inclined to allow river access from their property, resulting in more pressure on the already overcrowded access points.

Negative environmental impacts also stem from the lack of sufficient access points. There are reports of highly eroded streambanks at the informal access points, which can lead to streambank retreat and impaired water quality. These impaired conditions also represent safety hazards for users, with exposed roots and steep slopes.

The management of river access points is equally as important, as it directly relates to other challenges such as adequate facility provision (trash and restroom), river safety and information sharing. As these are areas that see the highest traffic of river users, they need to be set up with sufficient restrooms and trash receptacles to meet user demand and provide river safety information to users via signs and kiosks. Some users referenced Shunpike Rest Area managed by MassDOT, and questioned whether it should be managed as a rest area or a river access point, which is what it is often used as.

Finally, the challenge to providing and managing river access also links several social issues including how to ensure that river safety and other information at access points is accessible to all communities, including those whose first language is not English.

#### **Challenge 4: Under provision of restroom and waste disposal facilities at high traffic river access points**

As mentioned in relation to river access, the provision of restrooms and waste disposal facilities is an important challenge to address. Once visitors have reached river access points, there is currently a reported lack of sanitary facilities and waste disposal options, even at formal access points. Especially for tubers, there is insufficient posted information about where to find public restrooms, trash receptacles, or other important locations such as river exit points at times of emergency. This lack of information and infrastructure contributes to litter and illegal dumping and human waste near access points and even on private property adjoining the river.

Specifically, research suggests that on peak days, restroom provision is insufficient at Zoar Picnic Area, Fife Brook Parking Area and Shunpike Rest Area.

Funding the maintenance of the additional restrooms and waste disposal facilities is also an additional challenge. As reported in stakeholder interviews, there is a significant burden being placed on residents and private landowners to keep the river clean, which is not sustainable. While additional facilities are needed, so is the funding to maintain them.

### **Challenge 5: Towns are not capturing value from the increase in visitors**

Despite the influx of outdoor recreation visitors to the region, especially during the summer, tourists who travel to the area rarely stop in towns along the river to patronize local businesses. There are several drivers behind this challenge.

Firstly, the research indicates that the offering of retail, restaurants and accommodations for visitors is limited. Half of all stakeholders surveyed indicated that the need for more accommodation options in the towns was a 'very important' or 'important' challenge to address. Without a sufficient supply and range of different types of lodging options (hotels, inns, campgrounds, etc.), the towns are unable to convert daytrip visits into overnight stays. The same goes for eating establishments, with many local businesses interviewed saying that lunch and dinner options in the local towns are limited. A greater supply of both accommodation options and eating establishments would enable more overnight stays and capture more value in the local area from visitors.

The challenge of capturing more spending by visitors is also driven by the physical disconnect between outdoor recreation assets and the towns themselves. Improved transportation infrastructure including taxis, shuttles, public transport, and additional parking in the downtown areas would all help draw visitors from the river into the towns, increasing footfall and spend in the local towns. At present, the town of Charlemont becomes overcrowded on peak days and does not have sufficient parking and service offering to meet peak demand. There is a need to not only increase supply of the tourism offering, but to also help visitors move between the different towns along the river as a way to manage overcrowding. Additional transport options would also cater to those visitors who arrive via train from major urban centers and do not rent a car. Signage, wayfinding, and consolidated visitor information is another important element of tourism infrastructure that would help channel visitors from the river into the towns.

### **Challenge 6: Educating safe use of the river, especially to novice users accessing the river independently**

The issue of river user safety is not uncommon along any river corridor. However, there are certain factors that make this a particular challenge along the Deerfield River. The first of which is the range of river experience that different users have. While some visitors are experienced on the water, others have very little experience and river safety knowledge. While accessing the river through an organized tour via the rafting companies provides the opportunity to educate users and ensure the usage of PFDs, other inexperienced river users choose to access the water independently, many of whom are tubers. For this segment of inexperienced river users who recreate independently, signage and safety information at river access points is extremely important. Many stakeholders have

reported seeing independent river users using pool floats, not wearing PFDs and unaware of river conditions that could make it unsafe for users.

At present, there is a lack of consistent signage and information on river conditions and safety provided at the most used river access points, many of which are informal. Many stakeholders believe the right to access the river independently should be protected and therefore providing as much safety information at river access points is fundamental. Other stakeholders feel strongly that more could be done with the rafting companies to help educate new users about river safety before they access the water on their own.

The topic of social equity is also linked to the challenge of river safety, since river users are increasingly diverse, with many not speaking English as their first language. In addition, novice users, particularly those coming from outside the area, may not be familiar with the unique conditions of the Deerfield River, such as the schedules for hydro-electric dam releases. Ensuring that all river users are able to access information about river safety, as well as other important topics like information about environmental stewardship and available facilities, is an important consideration.

Linked to river safety education was also the issue of emergency responders. At present, there is a lack of adequately marked and managed emergency access points, an issue linked to river access discussed above. This results in emergency vehicles needing to access private properties to help visitors in distress. The inherent hazards involved with river usage as well as those caused by inadequate management (lack of facilities, etc.) bring up the question of liability, which is especially relevant for private property owners who worry they could be liable for river users' injuries on their property.

The need for a sufficient police, ranger and emergency responders was also noted many stakeholders alongside the challenge of river safety. Specifically, there is both a need for increased ranger assistance to support river safety as well as police presence to enforce drug and alcohol violations as well as funding to provide these public services.

### **Challenge 7: Accessing funding to support increased strain on public services**

The challenges set out in this section are generally seen to be the responsibility of the towns and communities along the Deerfield River to address. However, these communities, with their limited tax bases, do not currently have the necessary funds to appropriately respond to the many challenges present along the river. Enforcement of existing or newly adopted rules and regulations to manage river use will require many trained staff to be effective. The provision of any additional infrastructure ranging from new parking facilities, river signage and river access points will need an identified funding source. Any solutions will likely require funding that local communities do not currently have.

## 4.2 Opportunities

This section presents a range of opportunities that can be capitalized on to improve and enhance outdoor recreation along the Deerfield River Corridor. These opportunities have been identified through both the primary and secondary research.

It is important to make a clear distinction between the opportunities set out below and the recommendations made in the following chapter. The opportunities identified are favorable circumstances, conditions, and trends of the Deerfield River Corridor and the wider outdoor recreation industry, which can be capitalized on. The recommendations which follow are specific actions which can be taken to both address challenges and build upon the opportunities identified.

### Opportunity 1: First-class outdoor recreation assets

The Deerfield River Corridor is home to a wide range of first-class outdoor recreation activities on both water and land:

- Fishing and fly fishing
- White water rafting (Class I-IV rapids)
- Kayaking
- Tubing
- Swimming holes
- Downhill mountain biking and gravel cycling
- Hiking and walking
- Ziplining and outdoor adventure courses
- Ski, snowboarding and snow tubing

These recreational activities have been recognized as some of the best in the region and provide the opportunity to provide a year-round recreation offering to visitors. Stakeholders reported that although visitors tend to come for one specific activity and then leave, there is an opportunity to extend people's stay by having them partake in multiple outdoor activities over a longer period. This may also help to partially address overcrowding if visitor's stays and recreation activities can be smoothed over longer period. Although the issue of seasonality was noted as a challenge by some stakeholders in the primary research, there is a definite opportunity to create a more consistent four-season tourism market given the existing offer of winter activities.

The breadth of the recreational offer also attracts a wide range of visitor segments with different propensities for their length of stay, average spend per day and

preferred activities. For example, anecdotal evidence from the primary research suggests that visitors who come to partake in fly-fishing are likely to stay overnight and have a higher average spend per day on things such as accommodation, food and beverage and river guides. Conversely, people who tube on the river tend to come for just the day and often bring a packed lunch or food to grill in the recreation sites, spending little to nothing in the local towns. Further research on the different visitor segments could create opportunities for how the area is marketed and how businesses develop product offerings and recreation bundles for the specific visitor segments.

### **Opportunity 2: Engaged local stakeholders**

Although visits to the region have grown significantly in recent years, the area has a history of outdoor recreation along the Deerfield and has been providing high-quality, 'untouched' outdoor recreation for many decades. All stakeholders that engaged with the primary research had a desire to actively participate in shaping the management of Deerfield River Corridor and its wider tourism strategy.

Furthermore, the stakeholders that are actively engaged represent a lot of the important players that must come together to develop any type of coordinated river management. These include local businesses, individual municipalities, hydro-electric power companies, conservation and environmental organizations, tourism bodies, and the community college, amongst others. While some had ideas on how a task force could be organized or business support that could be given, others had ideas on how to improve marketing, make downtown areas more attractive for business owners and provide visitor services not currently offered. This willingness to engage and participate presents an opportunity to develop a coordinated strategy with participation and buy-in from most if not all of the relevant stakeholders.

### **Opportunity 3: Gathering of visitors at river access points**

The issue of overcrowding on peak days at popular river access points is a significant challenge the area faces. Nevertheless, the grouping of river users at several key locations also presents an opportunity for obtaining user information (e.g., a visitor survey), disseminating important information about river conditions, water safety, and wider tourism offer within the towns, and offering services such as food and beverages. While there are a number of issues that need to be resolved related to river access, they also present opportunities as strategic locations that offer direct access to river users.

### **Opportunity 4: Sites for development**

The challenges section identified additional tourism infrastructure that is needed, which would require land for development. These assets range from additional parking, river access points, riverfront parks, campsites and lodging options, and more places to eat and drink.

Although there is a lot of land surrounding the Deerfield River Corridor, there are construction and conservation related hurdles. Nevertheless, stakeholders have identified several opportunity sites where some of these necessary assets could be provided.

- Riverfront on Route 2, west of Charlemont: potential location for river parking and take-out to relieve congestion at Shunpike.
- Site across the Long Bridge on the south side of the river in Charlemont: could provide river access via the easement under the Charlemont bridge, parking, and commercial development.
- Site in Charlemont west of Hawlemont School: opportunity to provide a river access park with parking, playground, bathrooms, and river recreation facilities such as surfing waves or a fish habitat.

This list was generated from suggestions made by stakeholders and is not exhaustive. There may be additional sites suitable for consideration. Of course, property owner support and further evaluation of suggested sites would need to be undertaken before any proposal could be advanced.

### Opportunity 5: Growth of gravel cycling

Gravel cycling is a segment of cycling that takes place on unpaved roads, trails and connecting routes. While it is not new, its recent growth has been fueled by gravel cycling events and new bike technology. Although interest in gravel cycling has been growing steadily since 2018, gravel bike sales over the 12 months ending in February 2022 increased 62% compared with February 2020.<sup>2</sup> Gravel cycling events are an important component to the segment's growth: around 250-300 gravel events were hosted in 2016 across the United States, increasing to 550 events in 2019.<sup>3</sup> Gravel cyclists can be segmented into two groups – leisure (routes 10km-50km) and experienced (routes 50km-160km).

The Deerfield River Corridor comprises several trail networks, including the Hawley Trails in Hawley State Forest, the Warfield House / Zoar Properties trails, and Berkshire East Thunder Mountain Bike Park. Research indicates that there are opportunities to further develop the public trail system and connect three major trail networks by the following main arteries: arterial trail network that connects Hawley, Charlemont and the Mohawk State Forest and beyond.

The promotion of gravel cycling presents the opportunity to increase visitor numbers and local spend. There are many opportunities for the local community to monetize activities stemming from gravel cycling, ranging from events, bike

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2022/05/09/gravel-cycling-primer/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.transportationoptions.org/uploads/8/7/2/0/8720033/gravel\\_cycling\\_market\\_research\\_report\\_final\\_-\\_public\\_.pdf](https://www.transportationoptions.org/uploads/8/7/2/0/8720033/gravel_cycling_market_research_report_final_-_public_.pdf)

shops and mechanics, and cycling cafes, in addition to the wider tourism activity such as lodging, transportation, and food and beverage.

### **Opportunity 6: Available grants and other funding strategies**

One opportunity to obtain funding to address challenges along the Deerfield River is an outdoor recreation tax. This could bring in necessary funds to pay for improved river management initiatives (police and first responders, improved signage, additional parking and access points, etc.) as well as wider tourism infrastructure. Charging visitors for parking and/or access of other public space could provide needed funds for other initiatives or development. Obtaining “National Wild and Scenic River” designation for the Deerfield River through the Federal Government would come with protection and grant support for the river. Additionally, there are also grant funding opportunities for local economic development available, including:

- United States Economic Development Administration
- Massachusetts Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) grant program
- Massachusetts Land and Recreation Grants and Loans
- MassDevelopment Commonwealth Places grants
- MassDevelopment COVID-19 Response Round: Resurgent Places grants
- Massachusetts Greenways and Trails Program grants
- Massachusetts Shared Streets and Spaces grant program

## 5 Recommendations and Next Steps

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The challenges and opportunities identified in this report highlight the need for improved river management as well as a desire to capture more local economic value from the growing outdoor recreation activity along the Deerfield River Corridor. Through the primary research, stakeholders expressed a number of goals and aspirations for what successful river management and tourism sector would look like.

The recommendations set out below are centered around these goals and provide initial next steps that can be taken.

### 5.1 Goal 1: Improve the coordination of river management and operations

#### Recommendation 1: Create a Deerfield River Corridor Task Force

The purpose of the task force would be to establish a dedicated entity that has the authority and buy-in from stakeholders to coordinate comprehensive river management. The priority areas for river management, as identified through this research are parking, river access, facilities provision, river safety and stewardship education, and funding.

The task force itself would need to be coordinated by a lead entity and would comprise a range of participating stakeholders including town municipalities, local businesses, landowners and non-profits. The Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) and the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce are well positioned to have a leadership role in such a task force, given their regional focus and existing relationships with key stakeholders.

In establishing the task force, several initial decisions should be made regarding its structure, participation, and governance. For example, a task force leadership board could be formed with a representative from FRCOG and several other key stakeholder groups. The leadership board would be responsible for: a) identifying the initiatives the task force would focus on; b) organizing specific working groups to drive those initiatives forward; c) following-up on the implementation of any new initiatives.

#### Recommendation 2: Create working groups within the Task Force

This report has identified the priority issues that need to be addressed relating to river management. These priority issues stem from significant primary research and therefore represent the views of many stakeholders local to the Deerfield River Corridor.

A working group could be established around each of these issues, with the purpose of developing an action plan based on the findings and recommendations made in this report, as well as ideas that were proposed via the online survey and stakeholder interviews. The working group would be formed by the relevant stakeholders for each river management priority issue identified in this report.

## **5.2 Goal 2: Keep river users safe and protect the natural environment**

### **Recommendation 3: Increase availability of river safety and environmental stewardship information**

Convene a session with the relevant stakeholders to establish the fundamental river safety information that should be accessible to all river users, especially those who access the river independently and not via a rafting or tubing company. This should include (but not be limited to) information on the use of personal flotation devices, rafts and tubing equipment that are suitable for the river, river conditions, river hazards and emergency access points.

In addition to river safety, environmental stewardship information should also be provided, such as reminders to leave no trace, how to dispose of ashes from grills, and how to protect the natural habitat around the river access points.

This information should be made available on signs as well as digitally so people can access on their mobile devices either at the river or in advance of their trip. Given the diversity of the river users, the information should also be made available in Spanish.

In summer of 2022, FRCOG developed the Public Safety Reference Map for the Upper Deerfield River, which identifies nine emergency takeout locations as well as other key points along the river including parks and businesses, commonly used names for the rapids, and previously established emergency helicopter landing zones. This map was distributed to rafting tour companies, tube rental companies and public safety officials. Building on this initial mapping effort, metal signs identifying emergency takeout locations were manufactured and will be installed in the fall of 2022. FRCOG has proposed a future online map for use by the general public, which would include important river safety information and also highlight visitor attractions.

The display of the river safety and environmental stewardship information at all formal river access points should be consistent with a wider signage strategy (including parking, river access, emergency exits and river hazards). There is an opportunity for FRCOG to integrate this information as they develop the future online map for the general public. Consideration should also be given to other key visitor destinations where this information could be displayed, or digital access could be signposted (e.g., tourism websites).

#### **Recommendation 4: Explore possibilities for in-person river safety education**

Organize a river safety collaboration meeting with key stakeholders, which could include the rafting and tubing companies, first responders, and relevant non-profits, to consider any additional initiatives that could be implemented to disseminate basic river and water safety to inexperienced visitors along the Deerfield River. For example, additional initiatives could include in-person safety demonstrations at key river access points at the beginning of the summer season. As suggested by several stakeholders, this initiative could be implemented by partnering with a local volunteer or community service group to appoint education outreach stewards.

#### **Recommendation 5: Continue enforcement of illegal drug and alcohol use**

A law enforcement presence along the river on peak days has proven effective at curbing drug and alcohol use and should be continued and increased on peak days. Enforcement will need to involve local police to enforce all illegal behaviors ranging from parking tickets and DUI checks, as well as State police who can help further enforce formalized river management. A clear message should be spread via signage as well as digitally about enforcement of rules and regulations along the river, with the goal of enhancing safety and protecting the environment.

### **5.3 Goal 3: Reduce informal parking and vehicle congestion on peak days**

#### **Recommendation 6: Develop consistent parking signage along the river corridor**

Parking rules and regulations should be coordinated across the Deerfield River Corridor and marked with clear and consistent signage. Existing parking signage should be increased and the installation of barriers to physically prevent cars from parking in certain areas could be considered. A consistent approach to parking should be coupled with enforcement to ensure its effectiveness. A map of official parking locations and whether they are free or paid should be developed, which also highlights designated river access points and emergency exits. There is an opportunity for this information to be integrated into the future online map FRCOG intends to develop for use by the general public.

#### **Recommendation 7: Explore the option of paid parking locations**

Consider developing an action plan to implement paid parking at certain river access points to help manage vehicle flow and provide funds for enforcement and river management. Consultation with individual access point owners and operators would need to be undertaken to explore the possibility in detail. There are various parking models which could be considered, such as free parking during the week and paid parking on the weekends, to help incentivize visits during the week and curb weekend congestion.

### **Recommendation 8: Identify sites for additional parking provision**

A working group should be established to identify sites for additional parking provision, and specifically explore the feasibility of developing a riverfront park in Charlemont. A Charlemont riverfront park has been suggested in the past, as a strategic site that could provide river access, parking, and riverside amenities and greenspace. The provision of overflow parking at locations in the towns should also be considered, which would also serve the dual purpose of increasing footfall in the towns and relieving congestion along the river.

## **5.4 Goal 4: Reduce informal river access and keep official access points safe and clean**

### **Recommendation 9: Undertake a river user survey**

FRCOG has already taken steps to implement a river user survey which will be available digitally at key river access points. This survey will collect valuable information and provide insight on issues such as peak visit days and times, residential location of visitors, levels of river safety education, awareness of recreation and tourism offer, and appetite for additional services.

This data is fundamental to supporting effective river management and would allow for more precise planning and forecasting of river usage. Specific to river access, it will provide data on the number of people accessing the river at specific locations and when they access. It could also be used to understand how towns could adjust and grow their existing offering of retail, food, beverage, and accommodation offering to meet visitor demand and capture more value.

### **Recommendation 10: Clearly mark and publicize official river access points**

Ensure that all available access points (including emergency access) and facilities such as parking and restrooms are included in the river map, which FRCOG hopes to develop and make available to the general public. Ensure that a digital version of this map be made available at all river access locations, to help direct visitors to other official access point if one is already at capacity and thereby deter unofficial access. The official river access locations should also be incorporated into the coordinated signage along the entire Deerfield River Corridor.

### **Recommendation 11: Identify additional river access points**

While there are four main river access points, which are most widely used, additional official access points are needed in order to meet demand and curtail the use of unofficial access locations. Seeing where access is and can become official would help towns decide if there is an opportunity to increase accessibility in their own town to become part of a wider network of access points along the river. Regional planning and support for official access points should be coupled

with protections for unofficial ones that are being used, with signage and enforcement.

## **5.5 Goal 5: Obtain Funding to Support River Management**

### **Recommendation 12: Consider local opt-in taxes**

Funding is a key component to enabling the necessary interventions required for comprehensive and coordinated river management. From the cost of enforcement to improved signage and facilities provision, additional funding is required.

At present, there are optional local taxes that towns have adopted on items such as meals, rooms, short-term rentals, marijuana and Community Preservation Act (CPA). However, the adoption of these taxes is not consistent across towns along the Deerfield River. There is an opportunity for the adoption of these taxes to be reviewed on a town-by-town basis and, if adopted, revenues could be directed to address issues identified in this study.

### **Recommendation 13: Develop a funding strategy**

As widely publicized, there are a number of funding opportunities that are currently available through state and federal grants. FRCOG has developed an initial analysis of prospective funding sources, which identifies the use of funding and the requirements. This analysis could be used by the river management task force leadership group to begin linking prospective funding sources to required interventions. Other alternative funding and tax mechanisms could also be studied within the funding strategy, such as the feasibility of implementing a recreation tax, an initiative suggested by several stakeholders. Time resource will need to be dedicated by members of the task force to apply for the identified funding programs and meet funding requirements.

## **5.6 Goal 6: Increase footfall and visitor spend in the local towns**

### **Recommendation 14: Consolidate information on regional tourism offer**

Information on the local towns' tourism offer should be consolidated for the region and made accessible for visitors. Information on options of where to eat, stay and shop could be brought together in a digital format, with access provided via QR codes at river access points and recreation outfitters as well as links on other tourism websites. In addition, stakeholders suggested that physical signage could be improved within the high-traffic tourism areas that help direct people from the river to shops and services in the towns.

A logical first step would be to take stock of existing tourism promotion and marketing activities undertaken by Franklin County Chamber of Commerce and others, to understand where stakeholders could further collaborate, coordinate and expand their existing efforts.

### **Recommendation 15: Test temporary river-to-town transportation**

Many stakeholders felt that improving transportation between the river and the towns as well as across towns, would help to increase the footfall to local shops and restaurants. At present, many people who recreate on the river park their vehicles at river access points and do not venture into the town centers. A working group should be established to explore how a river-to-town shuttle could be trialed on peak summer days, bringing visitors from popular river access points into the towns. The development of a riverfront park in Charlemont is another important suggestion that would support footfall between the riverfront and towns. The river-to-town transportation initiative could be coupled with specific town events, business promotions, and other incentives that draw visitors up from the river and give them a specific reason to visit.

### **Recommendation 16: Develop a year-round schedule of Deerfield River Corridor events**

A year-round schedule of events, either within individual towns or coordinated across the river corridor, will help to attract more visitors, and increase footfall. Many ideas for this calendar were suggested through the primary research, from one-off events such as Cider Days and car shows, to more comprehensive programs such as a 'Mohawk Trail Passport' that could exist in the form of an app that would list various places and activities for people to try. The goal would be to have a social media presence with a catchy hashtag so people can share their passport adventures and increase publicity on the region.

## **5.7 Goal 7: Extend visitor stays in local area**

### **Recommendation 17: Support creation of additional accommodation options**

A working group should be established to explore how additional accommodation options such as hotels, inns and campsites could be established in the area. Many stakeholders cited this as fundamental to capturing more value from the recreation sector and suggested that a greater range of options is needed. While actions could be taken to identify specialized investors in this area, steps could also be taken in relation to land-use and zoning to identify sites suitable for development or for campgrounds.

### **Recommendation 18: Create networking opportunities for local businesses**

There is a growing base of recreation focused businesses in the towns along the Deerfield River Corridor, as well as a wider cohort of food and beverage and accommodation restaurants that cater to visitors. Creating opportunities for these businesses to network and identify opportunities for collaboration will help to grow and improve the visitor offer as well as the business base as a whole. A number

of stakeholders also expressed the desire to build more links to the wider regional tourism network, even reaching into Vermont. Exploring opportunities to bundle the Deerfield River Corridor's offering with that of the wider region could also help to extend stay and attract new visitors.

## **5.8 Goal 8: Expand market for land-based recreation and year-round tourism**

### **Recommendation 19: Further develop and promote trail network for hiking and biking**

The area surrounding the Deerfield River Corridor already attracts a large number of mountain bikers to trails including the Hawley Trails, the Warfield House/ Zoar properties and Berkshire East / Thunder Mountain Bike Park properties. There is further opportunity to connect the trail networks and develop marking materials that would further attract hikers, mountain bikers and gravel cyclists to the area. Specifically, stakeholders have referenced the opportunity to promote an arterial trail network that connects Hawley, Charlemont and the Mohawk State Forest. While some of the existing private trails already host biking events, given the growth of gravel cycling, opportunities to host further events could also be explored.

### **Recommendation 20: Consider developing a long-term recreation tourism strategy**

Test the appetite for a Deerfield River Corridor outdoor recreation tourism strategy which could bring together local businesses, municipalities and tourism boards to buy-into a medium to long term plan focused specially on outdoor recreation. Recommendations in this report provide some initial steps that can be taken to help capture more value from the existing outdoor recreation, but a coordinated strategy would provide the opportunity for a longer-term plan to be developed. A suggested range of themes for it to consider includes:

1. Collaboration
2. Marketing, signage and local information
3. Business support
4. Events
5. Transport and parking
6. Funding

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