

Palmer, MA

Town Manager

Community & Position Profile



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The Community

The Town of Palmer, Massachusetts, is a vibrant and inclusive community of approximately 12,100 residents. The Town comprises four separate and distinct villages: Depot Village (typically referred to as Palmer), Thorndike, Three Rivers, and Bondsville. It has a tradition of highly responsive government service and strong financial management. The Town is seeking an innovative and energetic municipal management professional with exceptional leadership and communication skills to serve as Palmer's next Town Manager.



Photo: John Phelan

History: Founded in 1716, this small community has had a long history of supporting industry along the Ware, Swift, Quaboag, and Chicopee Rivers. Thanks to its interchange with the Massachusetts turnpike, intersection with commercial train lines and close proximity to the Five College Area, the [Town of Palmer](#) is a premier location for economic and community development in Western Massachusetts. Palmer was originally a part of Brimfield but separated after being considered too far from the center of Brimfield. Palmer was officially incorporated in 1776.

The villages began to develop their distinctive characters in the 18th century and by the 19th century, two rail lines and a trolley line opened the Town to population growth. Depot Village became Palmer's main commercial and business center during the late 19th century and remains so today. Palmer's industry developed in Bondsville. During the 18th century, saw and grist mills were established by the rivers, and, by 1825, Palmer woolen mills began to produce textiles. A number of large mills in Town developed major industrial capacity and constructed substantial amounts of workers' housing. Today, many of those mill buildings are home to various entrepreneurial pursuits, a variety of companies, and housing. Others are awaiting the right redevelopment projects.

Palmer is known as "The Town of Seven Railroads." The railroads included five operating rail lines, a rail line which was built but never operated, and a rail line which was never completed. There are currently three active freight rail lines within the Town. Union Station, which was designed by noted architect H.H. Richardson and once had three rail lines serving it, is now privately owned and houses a popular restaurant. The adjacent Frederick Law Olmsted-designed Union Station Park is also considered a gem. The Commonwealth is currently considering a Boston to Pittsfield rail service and the Town is making significant efforts to have Palmer serve as the location for a passenger rail stop.



Geography: Palmer is 32.0 square miles in size, including 31.5 square miles of land and 0.5 square miles of water. There are approximately 150 miles of streets and highways in Town.

Part of Hampden County, Palmer is bordered by Ludlow and Wilbraham on the southwest, Belchertown on the northwest, Ware on the northeast, Warren on the east, Brimfield on the southeast, and Monson on the south. Palmer is about 15 miles east of Springfield and about 74 miles from Boston. Palmer has easy access to the Mass Pike, Route 32, Route 20, and Route 181. Airport access is available in Boston; Providence, RI; Hartford, CT; and Manchester, NH.

The community consists primarily of residential properties with large areas of open space as well as various business and retail districts located in the villages and along major thoroughfares. The Town is interested in thoughtful economic development that will align with the community's character, provide employment for residents, and increase the vibrancy of Palmer.



Assessed Values: Palmer's total assessed value is approximately \$950 million in FY2019. Residential properties account for about \$772.6 million of the Town's total assessed value, while commercial and industrial properties account for approximately \$111 million and personal property for \$66.5 million, according to the Massachusetts Department of Revenue Division of Local Services. Palmer's CIP Ratio of 18.71% is the highest in the area. The average residential property assessment in Palmer for FY19 is \$182,450 and the average single-family tax bill is \$3,777. The FY19 property tax rate is \$20.70 per \$1,000 valuation for all properties. The Town's population is primarily middle-income, however, according to the 2010 U.S. Census statistics, there are 14.1% of residents with annual incomes below the poverty level.

Principal Employers: Baystate Wing Hospital is the largest employer in Palmer, with about 500 employees. Other major employers in addition to the Town of Palmer, include: Sanderson MacLeod, Inc., Big Y World Class Market, Rathbone Corporation, Palmer Foundry, Polymer Corporation, Detector Technology, Northern Construction Company, Palmer Paving, and Northern Tree Services.

Census Data: According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the Town of Palmer's racial makeup is 94.7% white, 4.16% Hispanic or Latino, 3.0% two or more races, 1.5% Black or African American, and 0.4% Asian. The median household annual income is \$57,022, which is lower than the state median household annual income of \$70,954 and is about 93.8% of the U.S. level. More than 52% of the Town's population is low to moderate-income and 12% of households have incomes below the poverty level, according to U.S. Census data.

The Town is demographically somewhat dissimilar to the state regarding resident age cohorts with differences in, for example, the under-18 years cohort with Palmer at 18.0% in the 2010 U.S. Census versus 20.0% for the state. In the under-5 years cohort, Palmer has 4.6% of its population which is slightly lower than the state's 5.3%. Additionally, in the 65 years and over cohort Palmer has 17.5% of its population compared to the state's 16.2%. The median age of residents in Palmer is 41.7 years, which is somewhat older than the state's 39.1 years.



Government and Finance

Town Council: Palmer adopted a home rule charter in 2004 with a Council-Manager form of government. Palmer's seven-member [Town Council](#) exercises the legislative powers of the Town. Town Council members, one each for the Town's four separate districts and three at-large, are elected to staggered three-year terms to oversee all matters impacting the interest and welfare of the community and are responsible for ensuring that Town government is responsive to and reflective of community needs and values. The [Town of Palmer Charter](#) and the Town's [Code of Ordinances](#) can be viewed on Palmer's municipal website. The Council would like a Town Manager to work collaboratively with members on creating joint goals and objectives and routinely reporting on the metrics of those goals. Economic development is considered a high priority for the Town Council and Town Manager.

Committees: There is also an elected five-member School Committee that oversees the long-range policies of the Town's public school system. The FY2019 budget for public education is \$16.1 million. Other elected positions in Town include the Planning Board and two members of the [Pathfinder Regional School Committee](#). In addition, the Town utilizes many other appointed boards and commissions to conduct municipal operations. The [FY2018 Annual Town Report](#) is available online.

Town Manager: The Town Council is the legislative body of the Town and appoints the position of [Town Manager](#) to serve as chief executive officer of the Town. The Town Manager is responsible for executing the policy directives of the Town Council and for managing the operations and activities of the Town. Details regarding the qualifications and powers and duties of the Town Manager can be found in Section 3 of the [Code of Ordinances](#). The [Town Manager's Goals for 2018](#) can be accessed via the Town's website.

The Town Manager is specifically responsible for enacting the policies adopted by the Town Council; supervising all departments under his/her jurisdiction; financial management and budgeting; handling personnel and benefits administration, hiring and firing of personnel, and collective bargaining (except for the school department and Palmer Public Library); procurement of supplies, materials, and equipment (except for books and other educational material for schools and libraries); attending Town Council meetings, maintaining all records of the Town Council meetings, responding to written and verbal inquiries from the public, inventory of all Town property, maintenance and use of all Town facilities, and coordination of the Annual Town Report.

Financial Snapshot: Palmer holds a Moody's rating of A1, as stated in an annual issuer comment of September 2018. Moody's noted that the Town has a very solid financial position, a healthy wealth and income profile, a modestly sized tax base, and moderate debt and pension liabilities. Local property taxes generate about 48% of revenue, while state aid is 32.57%, local receipts brings in 13.06%, and other available revenue brings in 6.63%.

In FY19, the Town has a [\\$37.05 million budget](#), which includes general government, education, public safety, public works, public library, and wastewater fund. According to the Massachusetts Department of Revenue Division of Local Services, Palmer had a FY18 general stabilization balance of \$2,397,577. Palmer's OPEB trust fund balance is about \$60,000 and, as of June 30, 2018, the Town's OPEB liability is approximately \$38 million. As of September 2018, Palmer's net pension liability was about \$22 million. The Town's FY19 free cash balance is \$3,010,232. Palmer has excess levy capacity of \$15,188 and its new growth for FY19 is \$183,950.

Challenges and Opportunities

- **Finances**

Palmer has a Moody's rating of A1, according to a September 2018 annual issuer comment. The Town's goal is to manage its finances in a manner that will serve to improve its rating. Palmer's [FY19 budget](#) is approximately \$37.05 million. The FY19 budget represents a 2.8% increase over the prior year.

- **Economic Development**

Palmer is highly interested in increasing its economic development. The Town has a number of former mill buildings that are ready for development or are partially redeveloped. The former Converse Middle School was vacated by the School two years ago and a feasibility study for converting it to senior Affordable Housing and a Community Center was completed in January. An RFQ for a qualified project developer was issued on March 15th. There are three industrial parks in Palmer that house a variety of businesses, including machine shops and technical shops. Palmer also saw 10 large-scale solar projects open in Town over the past few years.

There is currently a preliminary proposal to build a \$500 million to \$650 million water park and recreation destination in Palmer that would include an upscale hotel, baseball fields, volleyball courts, and more. The Town Council has approved three Tax Increment Financing agreements over the past three years for Polymer Corporation, Detector Technology and Michaels' Party Rentals which have added over 150 jobs to Palmer. Recent business projects include: the opening of a 4,000-square-foot variety store in Depot Village; a CrossFit gym that moved to Depot Village from Brimfield; a massage therapy and wellness center opened on North Main Street; a pet-grooming business opened on Park Street; Palmer Animal Hospital expanded; a showroom and art gallery opened in Thorndike; Baystate Wing Hospital has nearly completed a \$17.2 million project to expand its Emergency Department by 17,800 square feet; and Altitude Organic, a marijuana growing facility and a retail dispensary, is under construction and expected to open within the next year. A [video](#) giving an inside look at local businesses in Palmer can be accessed via the Town's website. Approximately 60% of the Town is connected to municipal sewers, while the rest have private septic systems.

There are concerted efforts in Palmer's four villages to boost economic development. For example, property and business owners in Three Rivers have been part of a grass-roots revitalization effort to fill vacant storefronts and a consortium has been working to build a cultural and creative economy in the village. A [Revitalization Study](#) for the Village of Three Rivers was completed in 2017. In Thorndike, the Thorndike Mills micro-grid project could significantly impact the ability to renovate those mill spaces since the property would be able to offer reduced electricity costs and water as a hydropower turbine operation is installed there. The [Palmer Redevelopment Authority](#) published [The Main Street Bondsville Urban Renewal Plan](#) in 2018. It is designed to outline future growth and accelerate the revitalization of the Main Street corridor of Bondsville.

I-90 (Mass. Turnpike) has an exit in Palmer near the center of the Town, which greatly enhances the Town's accessibility for businesses and commuters. Mass. Route 32 runs south to north from Monson to the center of Palmer and then through the eastern side of Town. U.S. Route 20 runs east to west, coming from Brimfield and then entering the center of Palmer where it intersects with Route 32 and Route 181. A state plan currently under consideration to have Boston to Pittsfield rail service may include a passenger rail stop in Palmer. The Town is lobbying heavily to have Palmer selected as the passenger rail stop as its proximity to a variety of areas makes it a prime location.



- **Education**

Palmer residents place a high value on education. The [Palmer Public School District](#) operates [Old Mill Pond Elementary School](#) for students in grades PreK-5 and [Palmer High School](#) for students in grades 6-12. Palmer currently has 700 students attending Old Mill Pond Elementary School and 500 students enrolled at Palmer High School. Students also have the opportunity to attend [Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical High School](#). The school budget for FY19 is approximately \$16.1 million. Illustrative of the Town's strong support of education is the fact that nearly 93% of Palmer's residents age 25 years and older have a high school diploma and about 27% of the population age 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher.



- **Capital Needs**

Like many communities, Palmer is facing a number of significant capital projects as infrastructure ages and programmatic needs change with time. In the past two years, a new heating and air-conditioning system was installed in Town Hall and the entire building was renovated. The Police Department moved into a new \$7.4 million station in 2014. Future projects may include: a new DPW Garage; a major bridge repair/replacement program; upgrading Palmer's wastewater treatment facility; a recreation building at Burleigh Park; rehabilitating Hryniewicz Park; and a regional animal control shelter. These projects will require creative financing, state and federal funding advocacy, and strong community support.

- **Green Community**

Palmer is a Massachusetts-designated [Green Community](#). It was one of the first communities to receive the designation by the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources in 2008. To date, the Town has implemented energy efficiency upgrades in almost every Town facility and has received three Green Communities grants totaling over \$600,000.

- **Housing**

The Town's overarching housing goal is to make Palmer a vibrant community in which all residents have access to housing that is affordable. Approximately 75% of the housing units in Palmer are owner occupied with a median value of \$188,600, according to U.S. Census data. There are approximately 5,271 total housing units in Palmer. The housing stock in Palmer is aging, with most housing units having been constructed in 1979 or earlier. There has been a recent uptick in substantial home renovations and related resales. Additionally, approximately 200 three-season cottages were approved in December 2018 for construction at Forest Lake.

- **Water**

Palmer is served by four separate water districts: [Bondsville Water District](#), [Palmer Water District](#), [Thorndike Water District](#), and [Three Rivers Water District](#). The mission of all four districts is to protect water resources, provide safe, high-quality drinking water, and water for fire protection.

- **Open Space and Recreation**

In 2014, Palmer published its [Open Space and Recreation Plan](#), which is an important component of the Town's initiative to preserve and protect its open space lands and recreational resources. The plan provides an inventory of the Town's open space and recreation lands and a set of recommendations to preserve and enhance those valuable natural assets. There are 3,752 acres permanently protected from development in Palmer, with an additional 3,023 acres protected on a limited basis. Palmer is fortunate to have numerous recreation areas, conservation lands, rivers, ponds, forestlands, and open fields. There are miles of trails for hiking, bird watching, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing. Other areas are used for picnicking, nature study, and fishing. Palmer also has numerous playing fields, sports programs and playgrounds. Endelson playground in Bondsville was recently rebuilt to include a splash park with grant funding of \$450,000. Camp Ramah and Camp Stanica, both overnight private camps for children, are located in Palmer.

- **Public Safety**

The Palmer [Police Department](#) has 22 sworn officers. The department's FY19 budget is about \$2.4 million. Dispatch is handled by six full-time and two per diem civilian dispatchers. A new, state-of-the-art \$7.4 million police station opened in 2014. Palmer is served by three separate Fire Districts: [Palmer Fire District No. 1](#), [Bondsville Fire Department](#), and [Three Rivers Fire Department](#). The Palmer Fire District serves both the Depot Village and Thorndike village areas. The Palmer Ambulance Service is a privately run service, with dispatch handled through the Police Department

- **Citizen Engagement**

The Town embraces civic engagement and appreciates the levels of participation and discourse residents provide. The next Town Manager must be a skilled communicator with a strong belief in transparency. Citizens serve on a significant number of elected and appointed boards and committees as well as in other volunteer capacities. Maintaining a strong and collaborative relationship between residents, employees, and volunteers is vital to the success of the community. Ideas and recommendations regarding improved methods of communicating with and engaging citizens, including new technologies and use of social media, would be welcome.



Candidate Qualifications

Competencies: The Palmer Town Council seeks an innovative and energetic Town Manager with strong leadership abilities, municipal management experience, and an interest in becoming highly engaged with the community.

The successful candidate:

- should be able to demonstrate prior success in leading a complex municipal or private sector organization; municipal management experience preferred.
- should be competent in all areas of municipal management and operations, but especially in finance and budgeting, economic and community development, personnel administration, and project management.
- should have experience in sustainable economic development.
- must be a visionary and decisive leader who can work well with various interests of the Town.
- is expected to work cooperatively and collaboratively with staff, citizens, volunteers, and the business community. He or she should make customer service a priority.
- should be highly approachable, accessible, respectful, and relatable.
- must be a skilled and effective communicator, and have an open-door management style.
- should be knowledgeable of and willing to implement municipal management best practices.
- must be honest, fair, inclusive, collaborative, ethical, and committed to transparency in government.
- must be able to delegate effectively, mentor department heads, and provide support and motivation to ensure continued high performance and professional growth for Palmer employees.
- must be a strategic and dynamic leader who employs a teamwork approach.
- should be highly motivated, enthusiastic and strive to build morale.
- must be dedicated, organized, patient, have a strong work ethic, and inspire trust and confidence.
- must have the ability to effectively explain complex issues to individuals, committees, and the citizenry.
- must have strong finance skills and be a strategic thinker, particularly in regard to budgeting, project management, and economic and community development.
- must be able to develop and sustain credible relations with residents, staff, public officials, and union representatives.
- should have proven experience working with state officials and state government, particularly related to funding and grants.
- should have proven experience in all phases of grant management, from acquisition to completion.
- should be skilled in team building, and in developing and maintaining relationships.
- should be a creative problem-solver and active listener who is open to new ideas and considered is a consensus-builder.
- must lead by example, have conflict resolution skills, inspire respect, and be respectful.
- must be a community unifier who manages projects in a participatory manner.
- should embrace participation in community events and enjoy being part of the community.

Education and Experience:

- The successful candidate should hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree in Public Administration or a related field and five (5) years relevant experience or a master's degree in Public Administration or a related field and three (3) years relevant experience.
- Massachusetts experience is preferred, but not required.

Compensation Package

The Town of Palmer will offer an employment agreement and compensation package that is competitive with comparable area communities, with a salary of \$140,000+/-, commensurate upon qualifications. An attractive benefits package, including health and retirement plans, is part of the Town Manager's total compensation. Palmer Town Hall is closed on Fridays. Residency is not required.

How To Apply

Interested applicants should send cover letters and résumés, in confidence, by April 15, 2019, 5:00 p.m., via email to:

Apply@communityparadigm.com

Subject: Palmer Town Manager Search

Please submit a single PDF containing both cover letter and résumé.

Following the closing date, résumés will be reviewed according to the outlined qualifications. The Palmer Town Manager Screening Committee will interview the most qualified candidates in confidence. Based upon these interviews, a selection of finalists will be chosen for further evaluation and reference checks and then forwarded to the Town Council. Finalists will be contacted for references and approval of background reviews before their selection is advanced to the Town Council. The Palmer Town Council will select the Town Manager.

Questions regarding the position should be directed to:

Bernard Lynch, Principal
Community Paradigm Associates
Blynch@communityparadigm.com
978-621-6733

The Town of Palmer, Mass., is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

