Executive Summary

For the Fall 2015 Master’s of Regional Planning Studio course, our eight-member team (collectively known as Shire City Consulting) was tasked by the City of Pittsfield with updating their zoning regulations to better align with the needs of the community. As the major urban hub of Berkshire County, Pittsfield boasts a population of roughly 45,000 persons. The City gained its greatest prosperity in the first half of the twentieth century, when General Electric constructed and operated a manufacturing plant. In the 1970s, however, General Electric downsized operations and eventually closed the plant. General Electric’s departure left Pittsfield in economic distress from which it is still recovering. In addition, General Electric also left behind a significant brownfield legacy that has dampened redevelopment of central Pittsfield.

Currently, Pittsfield is rebranding itself by drawing on its cultural heritage and establishing the City as a significant arts community within the Berkshire region. In order to facilitate Pittsfield’s cultural and economic renaissance, our client has given Shire City Consulting seven directives. The successful implementation of these directives will encourage development in Pittsfield that will align with the community values and goals, while creating processes to engage developers.

Throughout this process, Shire City Consulting engaged stakeholders in order to incorporate their concerns and proposed solutions to aid in Pittsfield’s revitalization. Our recommendations include:

1. Design Guidelines to the downtown and gateway districts. Shire City Consulting believes that it is important to update and strengthen Pittsfield’s sign ordinance as part of facilitating Pittsfield’s renaissance. Shire City Consulting recommends adding signage design guidelines to the downtown and gateway districts. These recommendations will be incorporated into the site plan review process.

   - When Pittsfield’s 1973 hand drawn zoning map was digitized with GIS, many zoning boundaries ran through properties, creating split parcels. Our team has identified roughly 370 split parcels in Pittsfield. The inherent uncertainty of these split parcels can make it difficult for property owners and developers to obtain permits for improvements and insurance, especially if the property is damaged. As a pilot project, our team examined the Tyler Street corridor (located in the Morningside neighborhood), which has many parcels split between commercial and residential zones. Our team has two recommendations: creating a mixed-use overlay district for the parcels facing Tyler Street, and rezoning the split parcels on streets parallel to Tyler Street as residential.

   - Pittsfield wishes to become a destination, rather than a pass-through for regional travelers. Pittsfield’s five major gateways are crucial to introducing visitors to Pittsfield. Unfortunately, many of the gateways appear unwelcoming due to lack of green infrastructure, sidewalks, and wayfinding signage. These gateways have the potential to attract visitors to Pittsfield, especially at a time when the City is experiencing a decline in population and employment. Shire City Consulting recommends establishing Gateway District zones, which will incorporate aspects of the design guidelines and sign ordinance to encourage visitors to linger in and return to Pittsfield.

   - Our team has developed thresholds that will trigger site plan review. These thresholds are a project’s square footage, parcel size, land-use, and zoning. After examining Pittsfield’s land-use regulations, our team recommends that the thresholds should be used in the downtown and the commercial gateways. The goal of the thresholds is to implement a streamlined process for small-scale projects, while providing the necessary level of review for larger projects, leading to engaged conversations with developers.

5. Client Directive: Pro Forma Template
   - A pro forma template is a financial model that can evaluate the fiscal impact of new construction in Pittsfield. This tool will allow the City to leverage funding for neighborhood revitalization, while still generating a return on investment for developers. Shire City Consulting recommends using this model to evaluate the construction of multi-family housing developments on vacant land. In turn, through a Tax Yield Per Acre analysis, Pittsfield will be able to address disinvestment in the Westside and Morningside communities through infill development. Our team believes that increased density will increase developers’ return on capital investment while generating a stronger tax base.

   - The site plan review process in Pittsfield allows the city to shape future development. Currently, the site plan review section is buried within the zoning ordinance and is mostly utilized for developments with special uses. Our team has developed thresholds that will trigger site plan review. These thresholds are a project’s square footage, parcel size, land-use, and zoning. After examining Pittsfield’s land-use regulations, our team recommends that the thresholds be used in the downtown and the commercial gateways. The goal of the thresholds is to implement a streamlined process for small-scale projects, while providing the necessary level of review for larger projects, leading to engaged conversations with developers.

7. Client Directive: Sign Ordinance Revision
   - The types and appearances of signage play a large part in forming the overall appearance and character of Pittsfield’s gateways and its downtown. Pittsfield’s sign ordinance has not been updated since 2005 and lacks design guidelines. Although the recent Supreme Court case, Reed v. Gilbert (2015), has introduced new challenges for regulatory signage, Shire City Consulting believes that it is important to update and strengthen Pittsfield’s sign ordinance as part of facilitating Pittsfield’s renaissance. Shire City Consulting recommends adding signage design guidelines to the downtown and gateway districts. These recommendations will be incorporated into the site plan review process.