

Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —

WINCHENDON, MASSACHUSETTS

Known historically as “Toy Town” for its once-thriving wooden toy manufacturing industry, Winchendon is a small town in north-central Massachusetts that has long embraced creativity and craftsmanship. Today, it is home to approximately 10,300 residents and features scenic outdoor and recreational offerings, including forest trails, lakes, and wildlife areas. Like many small towns, Winchendon has faced challenges related to economic transition and civic engagement, but it is also a place of resilience and pride. With a walkable downtown, rich cultural heritage, and a tradition of volunteerism, Winchendon is drawing on Community Heart & Soul to build a stronger, more vibrant future.

POPULATION:
10,360

CHALLENGE:
Economic
stability, creating
a new structure
for community
engagement

FOCUS: Youth
engagement

KEY TOOL:
Community event
collaborations

Winchendon “By the Numbers”:

- **401 residents** were directly engaged in the Community Heart & Soul process—reflecting a broad cross-section of the town’s population.
- **76 meetings and community events** were held to gather input, build trust, and create a shared vision for the town.
- **1,175 data points** were collected and analyzed from resident stories, surveys, and community discussions.
- **Five Heart & Soul Statements were developed**, centered around the themes Local Matters, People Matter, YOUth Matter, Town Pride Matters, and Nature Matters. The statements were officially adopted to guide town planning and decision-making, reflecting community priorities around economic vitality, inclusion, youth engagement, civic pride, and natural beauty.

Local Conditions:

Winchendon launched Community Heart & Soul at a pivotal moment, as town leaders and residents sought to build a stronger, more inclusive foundation for the future. The community had experienced years of economic and social transition, and there was a growing desire to bridge divides, strengthen civic trust, and ensure all voices were heard. The timing aligned with new leadership and a broader push to revitalize downtown and improve overall quality of life. Community Heart & Soul offered a proven, structured process to connect residents, identify shared priorities, and turn local passion into meaningful, community-driven action.

Volunteer and Community Response:

Community Heart & Soul in Winchendon was powered by a broad network of volunteers and partners, led by HEAL Winchendon and the Winchendon Community Action Committee. Residents from a wide variety of demographics participated—youth gathered stories and led creative projects, seniors helped host events, and faith leaders, nonprofits, and town staff united to elevate community voices. Partners like schools, the garden club, senior center, Beals Memorial Library, town officials, the YMCA, and local artists brought Community Heart & Soul to life through art, storytelling, and civic action. This resident-driven effort reflected Winchendon’s spirit of collaboration, care, and shared ownership of change.

Heart & Soul Outcomes:

- **Heart & Soul Statements Integrated with the Town’s Master Plan**, embedding resident values directly into town planning efforts and ensuring long-term strategies reflect community priorities. The 2024 Master Plan is **ambitious and groundbreaking**, marking a shift from a place-based focus to a people-centered approach. Developed through extensive public input over several years, the plan calls for deeper collaboration between town departments, boards, and citizens. It positions the Heart & Soul Statements as foundational to guiding change—emphasizing the need for new ways of working together, adapting, and listening to achieve shared goals. As a **living document**, the plan invites ongoing participation from residents and volunteers, urging all who live and work in Winchendon to take part in shaping a community where all voices are heard and valued. The plan is being stewarded by a newly recommended **Implementation Committee** to help translate these goals into action across sectors.
- **Created a Resident Mini Grant Program** to provide direct funding for community-driven projects aligned with Winchendon’s Heart & Soul value statements. One such project was the
 - **Winchendon Youth Art Club**, a youth-led after-school program fostering creativity, leadership, and community pride.
 - **Family Farm Day & Caregiver Café**, which brought together caregivers, families, and children for educational and fun activities including games, music, local vendors, and live animals—celebrating town pride and promoting caregiver support networks.
 - **Musical Theater Classes**, a youth engagement initiative offering opportunities for children to explore the performing arts, build confidence, and present their talents to the community.

These grants have catalyzed civic participation, supported intergenerational programming, and empowered residents to bring their visions to life.

- **Inspired new civic leadership**, particularly among youth, who led the creation and ongoing success of the **Taste of Winchendon**—a multicultural celebration of food, music, and community pride. Now in its **fifth year**, the 2025 event drew **over 450 attendees** and featured live music, cultural vendors, arts and crafts, and a “Buy Local” passport raffle. It is organized by the Winchendon Youth Ad Hoc Committee and reflects Winchendon Heart & Soul’s commitment to youth empowerment and inclusive celebration.
- **Launched the Winchendon Youth Art Club**, a free, youth-led after-school program for students in grades 3–8. Developed in response to the “YOUth Matter” Statement, the club provides arts education, youth leadership opportunities, and seasonal showcases—like the **Spring Art Walk**—that foster creativity, civic pride, and intergenerational engagement.
- **Secured over \$500,000** through the **MassDOT Regional Transit Innovation Grant** to create the **Community Connector**, a flexible, resident-centered transportation program addressing access gaps for seniors, youth, and workers. The program includes driver staffing, software tools, new shuttle routes, and a strong community outreach campaign under the slogan: **“More Than a Ride…”**. Launched in June 2025, the service reflects Winchendon Heart & Soul’s values of equity, connection, and practical innovation.
- **Strengthened local economic vitality** through the **Local Makers Hub**, a community-rooted space offering tools, mentorship, and market access for small businesses, artists, and entrepreneurs. With 3D printers, Cricut machines, and commercial kitchen equipment, the Hub

nurtures new vendors, supports pop-ups at events, and fosters skills development aligned with the “Local Matters” Statement.

- **Expanded arts and culture access** through projects like community-designed banners, downtown art installations, and youth-led creative events that make public spaces more welcoming and reflective of local identity.
- **Elevated youth voice and leadership across Winchendon.** In response to Heart & Soul's "YOUth Matter" priority, multiple youth-led initiatives have emerged. The **Sunshine Café**, run in partnership with the Community Action Committee, is a paid, youth-led social enterprise offering job training and leadership experience in a supportive setting. **Fresh Start Youth Empowerment**, launching again in summer 2025, will provide at-risk youth with life and job skills, civic engagement opportunities, mentorship, and financial coaching. Youth are now embedded in local government structures, with student members serving on town committees like **Parks and Recreation** and participating in civic decision-making. These efforts reflect a shift toward intergenerational collaboration and institutional recognition of youth as stakeholders in Winchendon's future.
- **Used Community Heart & Soul data to support successful grant applications, inform policy decisions, and align town initiatives with resident-identified priorities.** In direct response to community feedback calling for better communication, the town established a formal **Communications Committee** tasked with improving outreach, engagement, and information-sharing across departments and residents. The **Winchendon Courier**, a once-digital-only community news source, now includes **a print edition** to improve access for all residents and features regular updates on programs like the **Community Connector**. These tools ensure ongoing transparency and keep the public informed about town priorities, services, and events—fulfilling the Winchendon Heart & Soul priority that “Communication is Key.”

