

TOWN OF AMHERST
Planning Board

September 18, 2019

APPROVED-Amended

1 In attendance: Michael Dell Orfano- Chair, John D'Angelo-Selectman Ex-Officio, Rich Hart,
2 Arnold Rosenblatt, and Brian Coogan.
3 Staff present: Nic Strong, Community Development Director, and Kristan Patenaude, Minute
4 Taker.

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6 Michael Dell Orfano called the work session to order at 7:33 pm at Town Hall.

7
8 **BUSINESS:**
9

10 **1. Master Plan Discussion**
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12 Nic Strong, Community Development Director, explained to the Board that it is recommended
13 that the Town's Master Plan be updated every 5-10 years. The public will be asked to participate
14 in this process and the Board is asked to encourage them to do so.

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16 *Sally Wilkins entered the meeting.*
17

18 Nic Strong quoted RSA 674:1 and RSA 674:2, regarding why a Master Plan is needed and which
19 characteristics and elements make up a Master Plan. She explained that the aim is to make the
20 Plan easy to understand and for it to contain the best and most appropriate information for the
21 area. The goals and visions of the Plan should then trickle down to other Planning Board
22 functions. It should be the Board's intention to take the goals and objectives from the Plan and
23 use them to make the ordinances and regulations for the Town.

24
25 Only two sections are required in the Master Plan: vision and land use. The vision section should
26 include the wishes and desires of the townspeople, with a list of principles and priorities to
27 implement the vision. The land use section then translates the vision into physical terms. There
28 are a number of other sections that can be put into the Plan, including transportation, energy,
29 recreation, community design, etc.

30
31 In order to prepare for the Master Plan there should be surveys taken, data reviewed, and public
32 comment sought. The planning process should be publicized and the Board should work to help
33 the public to understand it. The Master Plan should be a guide to the future development of the
34 Town and a reference document for others. It can outline where, how, and at what pace the
35 community desires to develop the Town. It can also be used to summarize local actions and
36 display the story of the local community. It should be comprehensive and represent the whole
37 community.

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39 Nic Strong stated that the Master Plan is not legally binding, an ordinance or regulation, or a
40 strategic plan. It is an advising document.

41
42 The Master Plan is updated every 5-10 years in order to find out the townspeople's vision for
43 their future community, to guide the Town's development, and to help update the zoning
44 ordinances and land use regulations. It is hoped that the Master Plan can be used as a research

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document by those looking to buy a home in Town, as a way to find out what the community wants before a subdivision is developed, to know what makes Amherst good for businesses, and to aid in creating regulations that implement goals and objectives.

Nic Strong suggested creating a Master Plan Steering Committee that would include members of the Planning Board, other Town boards/committees, and community volunteers. The Master Plan should answer where is the Town today, where does the Town want to go, how is it going to get there, and, in the end, did the Town make it? It should also address how Amherst fits into the southern New Hampshire region, in terms of jobs, land use, etc.

Nic Strong reviewed suggested themes that could be used for the Master Plan and a number of associated documents that could be added to the Plan, including the Conservation Plan, the Multimodal Master Plan, documents and maps from the Historic District Commission and Heritage Commission. There is no requirement for how the Master Plan is presented. She showed the Board a number of different types of Master Plans, including tri-fold brochures, posters, and magazine-type documents.

She explained that the Board shall seek public engagement through outreach throughout the process. There is a benefit to increased public understanding and interest as it builds accountability and trust between the Board and the public. It also allows for different perspectives to be represented.

She explained that the UNH Cooperative Extension offers a process called the Community Profile that the Town could take advantage of. This activity could be started in the fall of 2020. It is a two-day grassroots event that is used to gather input and opinions from residents. The event would address a wide-range of topics, not just Planning Board issues, but information that would aid throughout the Master Plan process. Following the event, UNH will publish a report of the event and provide the Town with the raw data.

The Master Plan vision should be implementable and translatable. The Board should monitor the completed Plan on a regular basis and update it if goals are met or discovered to be non-implementable.

Rich Hart suggested the Master Plan could be presented in poster form with a QR code attached that would take the viewer to different segments of the Plan. This could allow for less paper printing.

Brian Coogan stated that information is needed from citizens in order to know which types of development are preferred or not. The Plan needs to be aware of other surrounding towns and the connections to them. It should also be thoughtful of the Town's planning and effects to abutters.

In response to a question from Brian Coogan, Nic Strong explained that the American Community Survey is a smaller survey source that could be used for preliminary information while waiting for the 2020 census to become available in 2022.

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Brian Coogan suggested that the Board use in-house data in order to start some of the early framing of the Master Plan. This can then be modeled off of in order to create a mosaic. It is important to involve the public, engage the community, and enlist them in creating this Plan.

Sally Wilkins stated that she is concerned about losing people through the process if it is drawn out for a long time. It could quickly become a non-productive process. She hopes that Board members will spend some extra time reading the past two Master Plans. In the 1980's the Plan was a driving document, and developers would come into the Planning Board carrying it. At the time, it mentioned preserving open space in the northern rural area of Town. The Board should look back at past Plans in order to move forward. She is hoping to see if there is a town in New Hampshire that has produced and implemented a Master Plan effectively.

Arnold Rosenblatt stated that, in his past experience, there is a significant risk for the Master Plan to be exploited by developers. The previous Master Plan at least did no harm, as there was no information that could be used against the Planning Board by developers. He would also like to know if there are towns in New Hampshire that have created a Master Plan that is coherent and implementable. He expressed interest in how this process will be spearheaded. The idea of diverse community interest is appealing, but, in the past, public interest only appears when there is very, very narrow individual interest at stake. This is a threshold issue to him.

John D'Angelo stated that the past Master Plan included many nice "wants" but mentioned no tradeoffs for them. He also believes that there should be clearer definitions for some of the terms in the Master Plan, such as 'preserving the "rural characteristics" of Amherst.' 'Rural characteristics' is a vague term that could mean different things to different people. He questioned what Amherst wants to be when it grows up and how to best engage the whole community during this process. An effective Master Plan could lower the public level of anxiety when it comes to new developments in Town and the types of land use and housing mixes would already be thought out and explained in the document.

Town Administrator Dean Shankle stated that he believes the key is to set very specific goals in the Plan and then make someone responsible for them moving forward. He described a couple of examples from the town of Hooksett.

Mike Dell Orfano stated that reaching out to the community in an effective way is difficult. Not many townspeople wanted to participate during the last process, and then only those with a narrow interest in the Village itself partook in the process. He believes that if there is no horizontal communication between all of the groups in Town that nothing much will be achieved.

The Board discussed creating a Steering Committee to work through the beginning of the process.

In response to a question from Mike Dell Orfano, Nic Strong stated that she would feel comfortable using data from the American Community Survey, while waiting for census data.

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She explained that data collection can occur and a subcommittee can be established now, but the Community Profile should be the kick-off for the public process.

Arnold Rosenblatt exited the meeting.

Tom Quinn, 30 Christian Hill Road, explained that he has heard complaints from several of the Board members that the public doesn't attend these meetings. He explained that he may have previously been considered a one-issue person, and is now being told that, as such, his opinion is not valued. He finds this attitude to be naïve, discriminatory, and inappropriate. He does have concerns regarding large scale developments in Town, but holds other interests in the Town as well.

Sally Wilkins apologized if the townspeople felt any of those comments were directed at them. In the past public engagement on a large scale only happened for those with very narrow focuses. There is a great interest in having people engaged who are passionate about the whole Town and community.

Mike Dell Orfano explained that some of the recent focus has been on bowing to the needs of the school system, regardless of the opinion of others in Town. He always encourages participation.

Brian Coogan explained that he joined the Board because he was concerned about the integrated communication across the boards/commissions in Town. He has always felt welcomed by this Board. There is not always consensus across the Board, but they are always listening to the public's concerns.

John D'Angelo stated that all of the Board members volunteer because they are passionate about something. He takes issue with people who are passionate about an issue without being able to hear and discuss the passions of others.

Mike Dell Orfano stated that it is important to have respect for other's passions and how to assimilate these passions in solutions that are in the best interest of the town and its future. It is important to be able to be engaged by others passions and find common ground.

Mike Akillian, 10 Old Mont Vernon Road, expressed concern that history may repeat itself in the creation of the new Master Plan. He explained that the municipalities in this state are organized in silos to do their work. The Planning Board has the opportunity to take a horizontal role across these silos, if it wants to. It can weave discourse between the vertical groups to articulate the visions of these silos through the work of the Master Plan. The complexities and tradeoffs discussed through the process can give other boards/commissions guidance. If this Master Plan creates vertical chapters, it will fall into the same pitfalls as the last one. To engage more people, a broad question could be, why do people of all ages wish to live and stay in Amherst? This is a compelling question and cuts across an opportunity to play linking manager across the silos. He believes the Planning Board needs to present the options and tradeoffs to the community. He expressed concern that there will be major decisions made in Town (new schools, housing developments) that could alter the community while the timeframe for this Master Plan is still

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being defined. He hopes that the Board will engage more people using forums and then solicit the public with the possible tradeoffs. This should be a community-wide dialogue on very important issues and the Planning Board is the catalyst for it.

In response to a question from Mike Dell Orfano, Mike Akillian stated that, instead of using chapters to look at the effects of different housing types, the Planning Board should envision several different scenarios for housing in Amherst in the next ten years. These scenarios can then be laid out with their associated interconnected measures (schools, taxes, DPW, water pollution, etc). This process will engage many more people. The tradeoffs have never been clearly laid out for people to decide on. The idea should be to put meat on the bones for different scenarios, including the impact to taxes, population, etc. Then the Board could determine which integrated scenarios to place priorities on, thus giving the rest of the boards/commissions in town an incredible amount of information going forward.

The Board discussed thinking across ideas and laying out information so that it presents the tradeoffs across larger issues in order to see what the public wants.

In response to a question from Sally Wilkins, Mike Akillian stated that the Board needs to introduce the notion of themes and tradeoffs to the public and ask for their opinion on which are most important to them.

Mike Akillian suggested the Board bring together the vertical silos in a discussion to make others reflect on how their interests reflect on other silos.

Kelly Schmidt, 11 Patricia Lane, expressed her concerns over using the Community Profile format or bringing in outside consultants to create the Plan. She worries that this experience will not provide anything of substance for the Town. She explained that she isn't sure of the costs or tradeoffs for the items that would make up her "best town," and doesn't feel comfortable making decisions without knowing these first. She believes there is a huge disconnect in these meetings when speaking about the schools. It's difficult to decide which bucket to put tax dollars into without having specific numbers to look at. Without studies on the incoming development proposals and what impacts they, as a composite, will bring to the town, it's also difficult to know if she's for or against them.

Sally Wilkins stated that the Board should examine which data has already been collected by the Town and what else needs to be known that currently isn't. Consultants will be used for data collection, but not to create the ideas for the Plan.

Mike Dell Orfano explained that change will happen, but the Master Plan should help to prepare the Town to adapt to changes. People have rights to develop their land if they choose and the Board isn't in a position to say that they cannot, if what they propose is within the law.

Kelly Schmidt disagreed and stated that the Board can impose things to pay back the Town for impacts created from the developments.

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Sally Wilkins echoed the idea that Amherst needs to decide who it wants to be: a retirement community or a bedroom community for Boston, or something else. In the past, the town's taxes were high, so the Planning Board stopped a certain type of housing and encouraged empty-nester housing. After this occurred though, the tax burden didn't go down as expected. Now these empty-nesters want to sell their four bedroom houses but can't afford to pay for the housing that was built for them. The housing market inadvertently shifted and changed the character of the community.

Mike Akillian discussed the possible forums to talk to the public about these issues. There are Board meetings or the Town deliberative session, but there are other missed opportunities to create this horizontal dialogue about issues that resonate with the townspeople. The worst thing would be to not be collectively intentional about our decisions over time. There are many big decisions with possible large impacts that will come up before the Planning Board is done with this process. There is no reason to wait and not have a conference with the community before the data analyses are done. He explained that the town department's Strategic Plans are refreshed annually due to changes made to their goals, and to help budget resident-oriented outcomes. Thus, even the plan to update the Master Plan every 5-10 years is somewhat anachronistic. The Board should update and inform the public of any changes made to the Plan or if it is on track.

Brian Coogan stated that the Board should look at the Plan holistically with the related interconnections.

Mike Akillian said that these conversations will help to get the public all on the same page and present clarity. A possible idea would be to have an annual conference where people are updated on the state of the Town. This Plan should be resident-focused instead of chapter-focused.

Brian Coogan agreed and explained that the more disconnect there is, the more distrustful people become. A continuous feedback loop is critical.

The Board and Nic Strong discussed what the next steps are. There will be a Steering Committee created and then the public will begin to be reached out to for their engagement in the process.

Peter Lyon, Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, suggested that the next step will happen in two weeks, at the next Planning Board meeting, where the full Board can decide on appointments to the Committee. That group can then sit down with Nic Strong and begin to gather others to be involved in developing a process that will then come back to the Planning Board for review.

Due to the upcoming heavy Planning Board agenda, the Board agreed to have a work session on this tentatively on October 23rd.

**John D'Angelo moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:50pm. Sally Wilkins seconded.
All in favor.**

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264

265 Respectfully submitted,
266 Kristan Patenaude

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268 Minutes approved as amended: October 2, 2019