CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS

(Continued from page 1)

headstones in the oldest sections of the cemetery are broken and deteriorating. The Amherst Historical Commission and the Community Preservation Act Committee obtained Town Meeting approval for $150,000 in Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds to conserve and restore approximately 250 of the oldest headstones. Information on the headstone funding proposal and the West Cemetery preservation plan can also be obtained through the Planning Department. See contact information below.

Progress is being made on the West Cemetery Mural in Town Center.

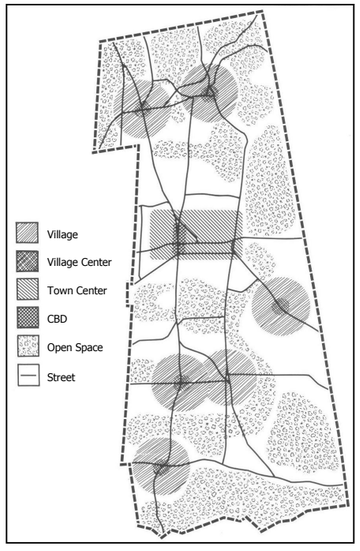
COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING COMMITTEE MOVES FORWARD

(Continued on page 1)

Fortunately, for the past 8 years, a citizen Comprehensive Planning Committee has been working toward such a plan. In general, the Committee's goal is to include as many Amherst residents, from as many facets of the community as possible. As part of its master planning effort, one of the first steps taken by the Comprehensive Planning Committee included a community visioning process. During the winter and spring of 1998, the Town hired Community Visioning Consultants to conduct a series of outreach exercises in which hundreds of Amherst residents participated. The results from this process are articulated in "Amherst Visions," a document outlining the desired 'big picture' aspects of the community's future. The challenge is to take the broad perspectives on a desired future and turn them into specific guidelines, objectives, and actions to guide Amherst's continued development.

The next step is to ask Amherst citizens what kind of master planning process they want, and how that process should be conducted. The Fall 2004 Special Town Meeting appropriated funds for this step. The Comprehensive Planning Committee has reviewed proposals from qualified professional consultants to "design and implement a preliminary public participation process and provide professional consulting services to help determine the future character and scope of a Master Plan for the community and then help to prepare an RFP for the full scope of work for the master plan." Further, this step must be an "inclusive and open public participation process that engages and involves difficult-to-reach segments of the community," with results that are "highly visible" to all within the community. The Committee recently chose Land Use, Inc. to conduct this phase of the master planning process.

The Comprehensive Planning Committee includes members from both the community and Town government. Senior Planner Niels la Cour is the staff liaison for the Committee. Consult the Planning Department's website at www.amherstma.gov/planning for updates regarding the progress of this planning process.



Created by the Select Committee on Goals for Amherst, this Conceptual Plan from 1973 displays the community's early commitment to balancing open space with village center development.

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~Prepared by James Errickson, Graduate Intern, Amherst Planning Department~

Amherst, Massachusetts

PLANNING BRIEFS

PUBLISHED BY THE AMHERST PLANNING DEPARTMENT

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PLANNING FOR THE PLAN: COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING COMMITTEE MOVES FORWARD

Amherst is a community in which social awareness, cultural diversity, urban amenities, working rural landscapes, and preserved natural beauty abound. This is not an accident; it is the result of hard work, perseverance, and planning by many citizens, boards and staff over a period of decades. Since the 1970s, Amherst has held significant community planning exercises at regular intervals, and has consistently planned for specific aspects of the community's needs. The Town has benefited from regular, ongoing attempts to plan for its own future. But Amherst has never developed a truly functional Master Plan—a document created by the community to use as a road map for all of the elements that determine its future.

In nearing its 250th anniversary, Amherst is entering a period of significant change. Housing costs have risen sharply. Community demographics are shifting in new ways—Amherst is aging and becoming economically stratified and culturally diverse. Increased development pressures are pushing against outdated growth regulations. Amherst's citizens will need to choose how their community goes forward or have those choices forced on them by larger economic and social forces. At this critical time, a master plan is becoming more imperative to Amherst's control over its own future.

(Continued on page 4)

CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS: THE WEST CEMETERY MURAL PROJECT

The Amherst Historical Commission is seeking volunteers to help complete a unique community history mural in downtown Amherst. The Commission is also requesting $150,000 in funding from Amherst Town Meeting to restore many of the community's oldest gravestones. Both projects are part of a multi-year plan to preserve and restore West Cemetery, Amherst's oldest burying ground (c. 1730).

Designed by Cambridge muralist David Fichter and Amherst citizens, the community history mural is located on the east (rear) wall of the Carriage Shops and looks out over West Cemetery. The mural was begun last fall, and will be completed in April, May, and June with the help of community volunteers. People interested in helping to paint this unique tribute to Amherst's history are encouraged to contact the Amherst Historical Commission through the Amherst Planning Department. An orientation session for mural volunteers was held on April 28th.

The West Cemetery is located in downtown Amherst. Many of the

(Continued on page 4)

IN THE NEWS

The Planning Board welcomed three new board members this season. Signing on for three-year terms, Rod Francis, Carl Mailler, and Mary Adelaide Scipioni joined the 9 member all-star line-up of resident volunteers. As the Planning Department's advisor to the Board, Niels la Cour comments, "we are excited to have Rod, Carl, and Mary on the Board. They bring years of planning knowledge and expertise to the table, which will certainly help as the Town tackles the Comprehensive Planning process." Turn to page 3 for more complete bios of the new Board members.

RECOMMENDED WEBSITE

Amherst Planning Department
www.amherstma.gov/planning

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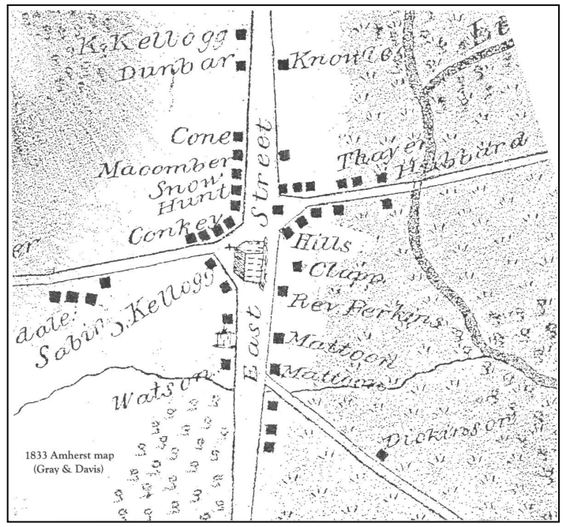
HISTORY FOR LUNCH:
DISCUSSING AMHERST'S COMMONS AND PARKS

Learn about Amherst's varied and rich history by attending "History for Lunch," a new monthly lunch series co-sponsored by the Amherst Historical Commission and Amherst Historical Society. The purpose of the lunch series is to educate the community on the "lesser-known aspects of Amherst's history." The Planning Department's own Jonathan Tucker provided the first of these lunch lectures, held on January 26th, and focused on the history of Amherst's commons.

There are three town commons in Amherst, all with long and storied histories of public use: the Town (West Village) Common, the East Village Common, and the South Amherst Common. All three commons are located within original wide "highways" established in 1703 by the British colonial settlement of Hadley during the first division of land in Hadley's East Parish (present day Amherst). Early British settlers typically used the commons that developed in these highway lands at village centers as communal gardens and protected shared grazing sites for animals. Such uses of commons occurred well into the 1800s, when the commons were still used for haying. Amherst's commons are presently used for public fairs, art exhibits, and other community oriented activities.



1833 Amherst map (Gray & Davis)

This 1833 map of East Amherst Village, Amherst's oldest and original village center, displays the wide layout of the original 1703 East Street highway.

...commons were established for use by all of the residents of a community...

New England town commons, Tucker notes, are not to be confused with parks, which are a different kind of public open space with a different social history. "A common is not a park," though they may have similar present day functions, commons were established for use by all of the residents of a community. Parks, on the other hand, originated as private spaces for the well-to-do. "Until quite recently, parks served only as the private ornamental spaces of the powerful and wealthy," originating first as hunting grounds then evolving into ornamental landscapes and elaborate gardens. By the 19th century, however, parks took on a new life as both democratizing and gentrifying spaces as wealthy industrialists and aspiring upper middle class citizens donated or opened their private open spaces to the public, including the working class. From that point on, public parks developed into spaces for a wide variety of passive and active recreation. Although some "park" influences have been brought to bear on commons, historically they remain utilitarian communal spaces.

Amherst's commons are protected under Massachusetts state law (MGL Ch. 45, Sec. 1 & 7) and shall "be forever kept open." However, these sections of ancient highway must be protected as commons and not as parks. As Tucker notes, "part of what we protect in Amherst's commons is their unique early history as shared public spaces available for the widest possible range of public uses." Preserving Amherst's commons while also allowing them to evolve with the community will be a tricky yet essential challenge for Amherst.

"History for Lunch" lectures are held on the fourth Tuesday of every month in the Amherst Town Hall or the Amherst History Museum. Other lunch lectures to date have included Robert Romer's *Slavery in Colonial Amherst*, Bruce Laurie's *Amherst's Antislavery Movement*, and on April 26th, Ruth Owen Jones' *William S. Clark and Amherst's Asian Landscape*.

Upcoming Lectures: May's lecture, entitled *Significant Trees in Amherst,* will be given by Diane Grey at the Amherst History Museum. Stay tuned to the Town of Amherst's website at www.amherstma.gov for future "History for Lunch" information.

"Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government."
~ Thomas Jefferson ~

TO APPLY OR NOT TO APPLY:
OBTAINING A SPECIAL PERMIT IN AMHERST (PART 1 OF 2)

This article is the first of two intended to help citizens seeking to obtain a Special Permit from the Zoning Board of Appeals. Through gaining an understanding of the process and by consulting the Planning Department at the beginning of a project, applicants will have the tools and knowledge necessary to make their permitting process relatively hassle-free.

When people ask for zoning permission to do something on their land, Amherst's zoning regulations provide four possible answers:

Yes - The land use you propose is normal and expected in your zoning district, so it is permitted under the zoning regulations by right, if you follow the basic zoning rules.

Site Plan Review (SPR) - The land use change you propose is normal and expected in your zoning district. It is permitted by right, but requires that the site plan and the way you're going to manage the site be reviewed and approved by the Planning Board under a Site Plan Review approval.

Special Permit (SP & SPP) – The land use change you propose is not normal or expected in your zoning district and may involve potential negative impacts. You will need to obtain a discretionary Special Permit from either the Planning Board (SPP) or (in most cases) the Zoning Board of Appeals, who can refuse to grant the permit.

No – The land use you are proposing is not expected or desired in your zoning district and is known to have negative impacts, so the Town does not permit the use to occur in that district.

The Planning Board issues a few Special Permits (SPP)—for one selected kind of residential development (Open Space Community Development) and for certain kinds of dimensional waivers for SPR uses. By far the majority of Special Permits (SP), however, are issued by the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA). Special Permits are designed to provide a highly detailed review of certain developments or uses of property that may substantially impact such things as traffic, utility systems, and/or town and neighborhood character.

Special Permits are unique for several reasons. They allow people to use their property in a manner that is not considered "as of right" in the given zoning district. Additionally, the Planning Board and ZBA have the right to deny the permit or to grant it with conditions that respond to the public interests set forth in the Zoning Bylaw, as well as the concerns of neighbors and the community. The responsibility for ensuring the proper application of a Special Permit and enforcing permit conditions thereafter falls under the jurisdiction of Amherst's Building Commissioner.

Citizens are often uncertain whether or not their project requires a Special Permit. The Zoning Bylaw (p. 87) notes that a Special Permit "may be required in situations wherein the issues of use or uses and/or location and design are deemed to warrant a process of review conducted by the Board of Appeals or Planning Board." Section 3.3 (pp. 26-41) of the Zoning Bylaw contains a chart indicating which LAND uses require a Special Permit in a given zoning district.

In order to ensure a smooth permitting experience, the Planning Department recommends that all applicants consult a staff member at the beginning of the permitting process. To learn more about the Special Permit review process, watch for Part 2 of this article to be published in the Summer edition of *Planning Briefs*. More information can also be obtained from the Planning Department's website at www.amherstma.gov/planning.

BOARD WELCOMES NEW MEMBERS
(Continued from page 1)

Rod Francis, filling the role of the Planning Board's token Aussie, teaches regional planning and geography at Westfield State College. Rod's major planning interests include redevelopment of New England mill towns, housing, and community planning techniques. When not teaching, Rod enjoys gardening, music, the outdoors, and spending time with his two children.

Carl Mailler is an economic planner for the American Farmland Trust (AFT) where he works on economic research and analysis for farmland protection and growth management. Before starting at AFT in 1999, Mailler worked as a land use and environmental planner with regional planning commissions in western Massachusetts and southern Maine, where he developed an expertise in water quality and resource management issues.

Mary Adelaide Scipioni is a landscape designer practicing in Amherst. She received her Master's degree in Landscape Architecture from the University of Massachusetts, where she focused on water systems and waterway landscape restoration. Additionally, she is interested in teaching and trans-disciplinary research and consulting. She is also a member of the Comprehensive Planning Committee.

Rod, Carl, and Mary join a fine team of Planning Board members in working to make Amherst a better community for all its residents.

"A democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where fifty-one percent of the people may take away the rights of the other forty-nine."
~ Thomas Jefferson ~