

2. Goals and Policies



Master Plan

A. Overview

Amherst is a highly desirable community in which to live, work, study, and play. It also is a town experiencing change. While change at some level is inevitable, both the rate and character of change in Amherst have been significant in recent decades. The key questions before the community—and the essence of the master planning effort—are “What kind of community do we want Amherst to be in the future?” and “What do we need to do about it today?”

This Master Plan is an attempt to capture the community’s aspirations and confront the challenges that Amherst faces. The community struggles to maintain its quality of life in the face of fiscal challenges exacerbated by diminishing state tax support. A significant amount of land in Amherst is permanently protected. Development of remaining unprotected open space continues, primarily for expensive single-family housing. Demographic changes and University expansion put pressure on housing and Town services. Land costs and housing costs continue to rise. These and other interrelated issues impact the lives of individual residents as well as the future of the community as a whole.

By addressing issues of growth and development, this Plan also seeks to preserve and enhance the character of Amherst community life—fundamental civility, access to public resources and decision-making, cohesive neighborhoods, ongoing cultural activities, and the preservation of longstanding community-defining traditions in the face of the change and fluidity imposed by a highly transient population.

This Master Plan—Amherst’s first in nearly 40 years—seeks to create a framework for addressing the challenges and realizing the aspirations of the Amherst community. The Plan uses words, maps, and illustrations to describe shared expectations for the types, location, and intensity of future development. It also outlines an implementation schedule for the actions necessary to achieve the Plan’s objectives.

In using this document—and especially when implementing its recommendations—there are two very important points to keep in mind:

- **Dynamic Nature of a Master Plan:** This document is not intended to be forever fixed. It will require diligence to continually monitor the relevance, priorities, and progress of this Plan. Members of Town boards and committees, elected and appointed Town officials, members of Town Meeting, and all interested citizens will be responsible for keeping abreast of the needs of the Town, for bringing new ideas to those responsible for implementing the

Master Plan, and for ensuring that the Plan is being used effectively. The Implementation Chapter prescribes specific actions that will help the Town evaluate, interpret, and amend the Plan. Adoption of this Master Plan is the beginning, not the end, of the process.

- **Need for Action:** There are many pressing needs in the community, and growth and development pressures continue. Many of the priorities identified in this Plan beg for action sooner rather than later. For example, the Town's regulatory tools need to be comprehensively reviewed and updated to protect and create the kind of physical environment desired by town residents.

B. Process Highlights

The Comprehensive Planning Committee encouraged a high level of public participation in the *Planning Amherst Together* master planning process in an effort to develop a community consensus on hopes and expectations for the future of Amherst. *Planning Amherst Together* was a multi-step open community-based planning process involving hundreds of Amherst citizens taking advantage of multiple opportunities to share and discuss their ideas about how to maintain and build on Amherst's best qualities. *Planning Amherst Together* considered the crucial issues confronting Amherst. It built upon past planning efforts, provided new technical information, and created multiple opportunities for public input and guidance.

A timeline of major activities can be found in the table below.

Table 1.1 Planning Amherst Together – Timeline of Major Activities

Activity (* signifies a public involvement activity)	Timeframe
Public Idea Gathering Meetings * - Several large public brainstorming sessions to identify community needs, concerns, and desires.	Fall 2006
Technical Research, Drafting of Existing Conditions and Trends Report – Staff and consultant data-gathering.	Summer/Fall 2006
Work Group Workshops * - Groups of citizens assigned to focus on specific aspects of the community in open sessions.	Winter/Spring 2007
Community Choices * - Priority setting meetings.	March 2007
Community Survey * - A professionally-conducted survey of community preferences.	Summer 2007
Develop Draft Master Plan	Summer 2007
Last Call * - Mailing to Town Meeting members	Aug./Sept. 2007
Open House * - Review of the initial draft master plan.	October 2007
Revise and Finalize Master Plan – Work by a CPC subcommittee.	November 2007 – Nov. 2008
Planning Board Review and Adoption *	Nov. 2008 – Feb. 3, 2010

The resulting Master Plan records and synthesizes the intentions of the hundreds of community residents participating, spells out priorities and actions, and identifies implementation and public decision-making procedures through which future priorities and actions can be identified and pursued in a timely and responsible fashion.

C. Key Directions for the Community

This section summarizes the key directions that the community has said it wants Amherst to go in the foreseeable future. Taken together, these directions constitute the vision inherent in this Plan. These directions arise from public sentiment expressed throughout the *Planning Amherst Together* process, an analysis of the Plan's objectives and strategies, and the deliberations of the CPC. Although the Master Plan consists of distinctive elements, these key directions highlight the principal shared themes found in the following chapters.

Sustainability is a primary integrating goal of the Amherst community and this Master Plan. A broadly-accepted definition of sustainability first appeared in *Our Common Future*, a 1987 report commissioned by the United Nations:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The goal of sustainability underlies each of the key directions for Amherst's Master Plan:

- **Maintain Amherst's existing community character.** The preservation of Amherst's community character will require a variety of different approaches, including protecting and promoting adaptive reuse of historic buildings and landscapes, focusing development in already-developed areas, creating design standards that ensure new development is in accord with existing neighborhood character, protecting critical conservation lands and farmland, and promoting the local agricultural economy. The residents of Amherst have a strong interest in maintaining the character of their community for years to come, and the use of appropriate tools such as form-based zoning and conservation easements will help to ensure that this goal is achieved.
- **Encourage vitality in the downtown and village centers.** Amherst's downtown and village centers should be a focus for the community's economic life, cultural vigor, and social activity. Vitality in these areas can be pursued through a variety of initiatives, including encouraging additional housing development, economic investment, expansion of cultural facilities, promotion of a mix of uses, and improvements to the public realm (parks, streetscapes, and public squares). These initiatives will lead to a

more walkable community, allow for more day-to-day interactions among residents, and attract more visitors to the community while enhancing Amherst's growing tourism industry.

- **Balance land preservation objectives with more intensive development in appropriate areas.** Perhaps the most significant theme that surfaced throughout the *Planning Amherst Together* process is the need to protect the Town's significant open spaces, including wildlife habitats, farmland, recreational lands, scenic vistas, and environmentally sensitive areas. Conservation of large tracts of land will require trade-offs in other areas. For example, in order to deal with rising land prices that can result from reducing the supply of buildable land, higher density development must be allowed and incentives must be developed to direct more growth and increased economic activity to the appropriate areas. A mix of uses should likewise be promoted to encourage a more walkable community and bring residents closer to jobs, shops, and services. This Master Plan tries to address these trade-offs, striking a balance between land preservation and the need for intensified responsible development in Amherst.
- **Provide housing that meets the needs of all residents while minimizing impacts on the environment.** Amherst values its economic and cultural diversity. Sustaining this diversity now and into the future will require addressing the needs of large segments of the population, including both renters and homeowners, that are financially strained by rising housing costs. It is critically important to encourage a broad mix of housing types with a full range of initiatives designed to preserve, develop, and/or replenish the community's low and moderate income affordable housing inventory. Housing strategies must also ensure that the mix of housing in the Town meets the varying physical needs of all residents and is affordable to the broadest spectrum of a growing community while minimizing the impact of housing development on the environment.
- **Provide community services to meet the needs of all residents.** Amherst is becoming an increasingly diverse community in terms of ethnicity, age, income, education, physical ability, and in many other ways. Amherst's services and facilities must keep pace with the population's changing needs, including maintaining its historically strong schools, planning for needed fire department, public works, school, library, and recreation facilities, and providing critical social support services.
- **Diversify and expand the economic base.** Amherst should pursue policies and regulations that encourage the diversification and expansion of its economic base in a manner consistent with the community's character and desires. This will generate fiscal

benefits for the community, provide revenue to pay for community services, create more private sector job opportunities for residents, and reduce dependence on the University and colleges as the economic engines of the community.

- **Enhance Town/Gown relations and cooperation.** The Town of Amherst and the educational institutions that are located within its boundaries have a symbiotic relationship. The University and colleges are major employers and provide economic support to local businesses; they also enhance the cultural opportunities available to Amherst residents. On the other hand, Amherst taxpayers provide a wide variety of public facilities and services to the large student population, with limited opportunities to obtain fiscal support for these services through local fees or taxation. A central theme of this plan is the need to enhance cooperation between Amherst, the University, and colleges in order to more equitably share the costs and benefits of this symbiotic relationship.
- **Promote an ethic of sustainable environmental and energy practices in all Town activities.** Amherst citizens have a high degree of awareness regarding environmental and energy issues. This Plan details ways to protect natural resources, conserve energy, reduce reliance on the private automobile, promote healthier lifestyles, and encourage green building techniques. Public outreach and education will be a key component in supporting this ethic of sustainability throughout the community. Requiring greater sustainability in Town policies, regulations and practices can enhance Amherst's ability to provide jobs, housing, security, education, and the other elements of a good life. This can set the tone for the community, help ensure environmental justice, and serve as an example for local businesses and developers.

D. Policy Foundation for the Plan

The policy foundation of the Plan was shaped by an extensive community involvement and planning process. The Master Plan has three key layers of policies: goals, objectives and strategies. Goals are the broadest policy statements that state a desired outcome in general terms. Objectives indicate a more specific policy direction and help organize strategies. Strategies are detailed actions necessary to initiate or complete an objective – such as a project, program or policy. There are multiple objectives for each goal and multiple strategies for each objective.

Goals and Objectives

This Plan includes goals, objectives, and strategies which are described in detail in the following seven chapters and summarized in Chapter 10: Implementation. The goals and objectives are listed below.

Land Use: A sustainable, attractive town with a vital downtown and viable mixed-use village centers well connected to livable and diverse neighborhoods and campuses, and interwoven with protected open space, natural resources, and active farmland.

- Preferentially direct future development to existing built-up areas.
- Create vital downtown and village centers (areas of mixed use, including retail, commercial, and residential elements) that are walkable, attractive and efficient.
- Preserve key un-developed lands.
- Protect key farmland and farming in Amherst.
- Identify and inventory key locations for business development, and adopt land use regulations that can help broaden the Town’s business tax base while avoiding inappropriate businesses, big boxes, heavy industry, etc.
- Guide new housing growth so as to minimize impact on Amherst’s open space and small-town rural character.
- Identify appropriate locations for future municipal recreation facilities.
- Create a process/committee/mechanism for sorting competing public and private interests in public projects and on individual properties.
- Honor the historical/cultural character and beauty of neighborhoods.
- Utilize “greenways” and walkways to tie neighborhoods, public spaces, etc. together and make it easier for Amherst residents to walk or bicycle to more destinations.

Demographics and Housing: A mix of housing that meets the physical needs of and is affordable to the broadest possible spectrum of our community, and that minimizes the impact on the environment.

- Encourage a greater mix of housing types, sizes, and prices serving a wider range of income levels than is currently available throughout Amherst. Encourage the development of economically diverse neighborhoods.
- Preserve and expand the number of affordable and moderately priced rental and ownership units in the housing stock.
- Revise the zoning code to promote infill development in strategic locations.
- Increase the opportunity for infill development and the location of housing development near services.
- Encourage the production of housing in an environmentally sound manner, with respect to design, siting, materials and resource use.
- Encourage housing that meets the needs of special populations.
- Improve housing and services for people in the area who are homeless.
- Support the creation of taxable student housing that will lessen the pressures on residential neighborhoods.
- Build and sustain the Town’s capacity for regulatory oversight over Amherst’s housing stock, and pursue ways to enhance security.

Economic Development: To strengthen, diversify and grow the economic base and employment opportunities in the town, through smart development in the downtown, village centers, and commercial zones. Initiatives will be focused on clusters of businesses, mixed services, high technology/clean industries, cultural attractions, education, tourism and agricultural resources. Such development will maintain, improve and sustain quality of life, ecological consciousness and social values.

- Support sustainable growth of existing businesses and attract new ones while protecting environmental values.
- Support “relocalization” of the Amherst economy.
- Promote downtown as a key cultural, commercial and entertainment center of Amherst.
- Broaden and leverage partnerships with UMass and the Colleges.
- Improve regulatory environment to encourage business development.
- Create an Integrated Economic Development Program.
- Encourage physical and technological infrastructure that support business & industrial growth.
- Develop the current and future workforce to enhance economic opportunities.
- Advocate for changes to state tax regulation in order to allow a reformulation of the town’s tax structure.

Natural and Cultural Resources: Preserve the town’s historic fabric and agrarian and academic heritage, and protect the quality of our natural resources, to ensure a vibrant, diverse, sustainable community.

- Promote the preservation, appreciation, and sustainable use of our historical and cultural resources for residents and visitors.
- Provide support for a rich variety of cultural opportunities, and activities for all groups and individuals in the community.
- Conserve land in sufficient quantity and quality to meet agricultural, recreational, and wildlife needs.
- Apply principles of environmental sustainability town-wide.

Open Space and Recreation: Protect and enhance our rural character and agricultural viability, and provide and develop multi-use and multi-generational recreational opportunities that bring townspeople together.

- Protect land parcels that provide significant value for agriculture, watershed protection, trail systems, habitat, and biodiversity attributes.
- Improve the economic viability of the farm community within Amherst.
- Provide accessible, well-maintained recreational facilities that meet the changing needs of the community.
- Institutionalize a process for rationalizing competing public land use interests.

Services and Facilities: To provide excellent, cost effective, accessible facilities, services, and programs reflecting values respectful of our ages and our diversity, which, through collaboration, contribute to a high quality safe, civil, healthy, and sustainable community.

- Deliver high quality public safety services.
- Deliver high quality education from pre-school through grade 12.
- Provide high quality facilities, services, and programs that serve the needs of all the people of Amherst.
- Maintain and enhance Town infrastructure and facilities consistent with best practices.
- Anticipate, plan and budget for large projects in response to growing demand on Town services.
- Take a leadership role in promoting environmentally sound practices in services and facilities.
- Strengthen partnerships with colleges and University and improve coordination of services and facilities.
- Incorporate emerging technologies, such as wireless networking technology, into future infrastructure planning.

Transportation: A balanced, inclusive, accessible, safe, environmentally responsible transportation and circulation system that serves users of public transit, pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers, and that is connected within and among different modes both in town and to the region.

- Plan for an integrated Town-wide transportation system.
- Actively promote alternative modes of transportation.
- Increase the frequency, connectivity, and utility of public transit services to meet the needs of residents throughout the community.
- Observe transportation demand management principles in local planning and regulation.
- Within the context of community transportation demand management planning, provide for adequate parking to support existing and desired new development in the downtown and elsewhere.
- Improve the flow of traffic on major roadways and residential streets to reduce congestion and improve safety.
- Engage in traffic management initiatives with businesses and employers.
- Aggressively pursue funding strategies for achieving transportation goals.

Implementation: Once the Master Plan has been finalized, the community will need to shift its energies towards successfully implementing the strategies it has identified.

- Provide resources for implementing the Master Plan.
- Monitor and evaluate implementation of the Master Plan.
- Involve a wide variety of stakeholders in implementation.
- Develop appropriate regulatory tools to implement the Master Plan.

- Require concurrence of Town actions with the Master Plan.
- Update the Master Plan at least every five years.

Other Plans Incorporated by Reference

The key directions, policies, objectives, and strategies in each chapter of this Master Plan build upon decades of previous community planning efforts by Amherst citizens. This Plan incorporates and implements aspects of past strategic plans and policy documents, as well as current reports and studies guiding the ongoing activity of Town boards/committees and departments. This Master Plan has been developed to be consistent with all applicable current regional and state plans and policies regarding community planning.

Specific policies or recommended actions in past plans and documents may have been superseded or may upon review be found to be in conflict with the provisions of this Plan. Under the provisions of M.G.L. Ch. 41, Section 81D, interpretations of this Plan, as well as necessary amendments between Plan updates, shall be made by the Planning Board following public review according to procedures established under this Plan (see Chapter 10, Implementation).

E. Priority Implementation

The following actions represent the initial priorities for implementation of this Master Plan for members of Town boards and committees, elected and appointed Town officials, Town staff, Town Meeting members, and all interested citizens.

Undertake the following additional community planning steps:

- Complete the comprehensive inventory and evaluation of lands, resources, services, and facilities in Amherst under each element of this Plan, to provide a responsible basis for future planning and public decision-making.
- Conduct a public process using the completed inventory and evaluations, to determine and map the following general categories of geographic areas in Amherst:

~ *Areas to Protect* – Areas dominated by critical community resources (environmental, historic, cultural, etc.) requiring significant protections from development.

~ *Areas to Develop* – Areas available and suitable for infill, redevelopment, and/or more intensive new development for housing, commercial activity, public facilities and infrastructure.

~ *Areas of Compromise* – Areas that include a closely-woven mixture of critical resources and developable lands, so that meeting the community's urgent needs for both preservation and development will require a carefully planned approach of balance and compromise.

- Based on the results of the above process, comprehensively revise and coordinate Amherst’s development regulations—zoning bylaw and map, subdivision regulations, local wetlands regulations, health regulations, etc.—to reflect the key directions of this Master Plan, to ensure desired future patterns of development, and to improve consistency, efficiency, and fairness in Amherst’s growth regulations.

Undertake the following specific planning projects and action steps:

- Create a “Green Infrastructure” Plan: Build on the work embodied in the Climate Action Plan to address future growth patterns, and comprehensively assess and amend existing community plans, policies, and regulations according to principles of environmental sustainability by increasing energy efficiency and reducing Amherst’s carbon footprint. See LU.1.E, LU.1.G, and Objectives NC.4 and S.4.
- Create and assertively implement a strategic Economic Development Plan for Amherst that is consistent with community values, assigning responsibility for this task to a new or existing standing Town committee with appropriate staff support. See Objective E.6.
- Update the Affordable Housing Plan in a manner consistent with this Master Plan, and fund and implement priority actions to improve the mix of housing available to Amherst residents. See Chapter 4.
- Develop and implement a Transportation Plan which supports Amherst’s land use, housing, economic development, and other public interests in a manner consistent with this Master Plan and its intentions for community sustainability over time. See T.1.A.
- Pursue and refine agreements for increased cooperation and sharing of service burdens with Amherst’s educational institutions, nearby towns, and appropriate regional entities. See Objective S.7.
- Create a representative master plan implementation committee to monitor and assist with the implementation of this Plan. See Chapter 10.
- Provide sufficient operating and capital funding and staff resources to accomplish priority implementation steps. See Objective IM.1.