

North Amherst Master Plan Study Group Report

September 19, 2022

Authoring Statement

Our Master Plan Study Group (MPSG) met five times over 5 weeks with discussions covering every chapter. Our recommendations here represent a first attempt to develop ideas for how the Town could better implement the Master Plan in North Amherst. We were encouraged to bring together a group of North Amherst residents and stakeholders who represent a broad range of perspectives about the Town to study the Master Plan for ways of using the Plan to improve our Village Center.

Not all signers support every line of this, but all of us support the overall message, many of the details, and most enthusiastically of all, the effort of these North Amherst leaders to bring together people from different walks of life to share ideas, talk about goals and practical solutions to knotty challenges, and to build a shared vision together. We hope that more of this will be part of the town wide master planning effort.

While the committee represents some diversity in voices, we recognize that we do not represent all North Amherst residents. One of our primary goals is to reach more people living and working in North Amherst, so that *together* we can create a neighborhood that reflects all of us.

Our Study Group was organized by the District One Neighborhood Association (DONA) and facilitated by Michele Miller, one of our District One councilors. We are deeply grateful for their leadership, passion, and energy.

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Introduction

North Amherst Village Center is a National Historic District and principal gateway to the Town of Amherst, where five roads merge to one, bringing visitors and workers from the North, West and East. The North Amherst Village Center includes the historic North Amherst intersection, the Mill River Recreational Center, the Amherst Survival Center, and the Mill District. Like any village center, there is much to admire and much to improve.

Presently, the North Amherst Village Center is experiencing a revitalization including an expansion of the 1893 North Amherst library, a planned restoration of the 1826 North Amherst Congressional church, and the purchase by the Town of the old Sunoco gas station property for the purpose of improving the appearance and circulation of the historic North Amherst intersection. These efforts, in addition to other recent developments and improvements, are contributing to North Amherst being a lively, historic, civic and commercial center.

North Amherst also includes a second Village Center, Cushman Village, and a number of other arterials, neighborhoods, and apartment complexes.

Elevated and sustained attention paid by the Town, community members, and other stakeholders to this significant part of Town will ensure that North Amherst can meet the goals of the Master Plan and realize its greatest potential.

North Amherst Specific Observations About the Master Plan

The report details our recommendations for each of the seven chapters of the Master Plan, specific to how the stated goals can be implemented in North Amherst. The following bullets embody the overarching themes that emerged from our discussions:

- An up-to-date inventory is needed to determine areas where development can and can't happen - areas appropriate for housing or business, and areas off-limits due to wetlands or protected parcels.
- An integrated transportation plan is needed – that integrates pedestrians, bicycles, public transportation, cars and commercial trucks, and connects North Amherst to the rest of Town and UMass.
- A participatory process for developing Village Design Guidelines that reflect the needs and desires of all North Amherst residents.
- A reimagined approach to placemaking and community building in the e-commerce era.
- Strategies for maintaining affordable and middle income housing will ensure the next generation can purchase homes.

The annual review of the Town of Amherst Master Plan gives us an opportunity to bring attention to this Village Center with so much economic development and historic preservation potential. The following represent detailed implementation recommendations, specific to North Amherst, for each of the seven categories of the Master Plan.

Land Use (LU)

2010 Master Plan's Stated Goal:

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

- The Master Plan Study Group (MPSG) enthusiastically supports Objective LU 2, creating “vital ... village centers...that are walkable, attractive and efficient.” We would like our historic North Amherst village center to have better traffic flow, safer pedestrian and bike ways, committed protection of historic buildings, more trees along major streets, more commercial activity that meets the needs of families, like a grocery store, places for community gatherings and events, and more multi-use trails and bike lanes that connect the different North Amherst neighborhoods, and connect North Amherst and Cushman Village centers to the rest of Amherst and UMass, reducing the need for cars.
- We would like to explore developing Village Design Guidelines (also referred to as form-based design) based upon a facilitated resident participatory process, with the possibility of adopting form-based code as an outcome. Village Design Guidelines must be combined with zoning regulations that ensure land uses are compatible with the underlying land, water, and flood retention resources that we need to support viable residential and commercial development.
- Let's plant more shade trees along the streets in the village center and along the major roads for aesthetic and environmental benefits.
- We strongly support LU 4 and LU 6, protecting key farmland and farming in Amherst (LU4), and guiding new home growth to “minimize impact on Amherst’s open space and small-town rural character” (LU6). Are there plans for accomplishing this in North Amherst where we have significant farms that are just scraping by?
- We would like to see an up-to-date inventory map of land use eliminating unbuildable areas of wetlands, steep slopes, conserved parcels, etc. and identifying areas where development for housing, business, and solar is possible.
- We are in strong support of LU 9, honoring “the historic/cultural character and beauty of neighborhoods.” North Amherst was the industrial center of town for much of the 18th and 19th century. In the early 20th century it was a destination for immigrants from Europe; in the 1930s there were only 2 households on Summer Street that didn't speak Lithuanian. The Amherst Anti-Slavery Society was launched in 1833 by the first pastor of the North Amherst Church. Today we have a Korean church, International grocery large international population, and international restaurants .

- We think that North Amherst may have a key to thinking about ways to protect and recognize history and culture that are also inclusive of all classes, immigrants, and diverse housing types.

Specifically:

- Continued support by Community Preservation Act Committee (CPA) of the Mill River History Trail project that seeks to tell the story of the 18th and 19th century mills along the Mill River between what is now Mill River Recreation Park and Cushman Common.
 - CPA Committee support for the Korean Church's request for support to restore and paint their historic church.
 - Solve the problematic North Amherst traffic without compromising the historic and neighborhood elements of our Village Center.
 - Initiate outreach efforts to engage diverse classes, immigrants, students, and residents of all housing types (not only in implementing but shaping plans/priorities).
- We enthusiastically support objective LU 10, which envisions "greenways and walkways to tie neighborhoods, public spaces, etc. together and makes it easier for Amherst residents to walk or bicycle to more destinations."

Demographics and Housing (H)

2010 Master Plan's Stated Goal:

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

- We support Objective H.2 which recommends preserving and expanding "the number of affordable and moderately priced rental units and housing stock." But how do we make this happen given the economic realities with off-campus student housing driving the housing market and pushing homes out of reach for middle-income families?
- We support Objective H.6 which seems to have relevance to North Amherst. It seeks to improve "housing and services for people in the area who are homeless."

Specifically: The Survival Center provides crucial services to people in need. But while the Center attracts people in need to North Amherst, it cannot meet the needs. People camp illegally in wooded areas off the beaten path and hang out around the village. We need a plan to provide more support.

- Where viable, we would like greater implementation of Objective H.7 to "support the creation of taxable student housing that will lessen the pressures on residential neighborhoods."
- Greater implementations of Objective H.8, building and sustaining "the Town's capacity for regulatory oversight for Amherst's housing stock, and pursue ways to enhance security."

Specifically: Develop high standards for private student housing zones and enforce the standards. Does the Town have the capacity to enforce regulations? Can we entice the University and Amherst College into greater collaboration in solving these problems?

Economic Development (E)

2010 Master Plan's Stated Goal:

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.

- The Master Plan was written before the Amazon explosion and the plethora of on-line shopping and lacks strategies for addressing how this dynamic undermines our economic community development goals. We suggest launching a Shop Local Campaign, targeting students as well as year-round residents, describing the cascading benefits (economic, environmental sustainability, community building) of supporting local merchants rather than shopping online. How we shop is a political decision!
- Improve signage to lead people to shops and community centers as well as to historic Village Centers and to recreation and conservation areas.
- We like Objective E. 5, to "improve the regulatory environment to encourage business development." The UMass on-campus businesses have expanded so much it's hard for the town to compete.
- We propose exploring Transfer Development Rights (TDR) to conserve land by redirecting development that would otherwise occur on the land (the sending area) to a receiving area suitable for denser development.
- We need to evolve outdated zoning in the Village Center of North Amherst so that mixed use areas are sensibly connected and walkable. Zoning so both sides of a street are consistent and compatible.

Natural and Cultural Resources (NC)

2010 Master Plan's Stated Goal:

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.

- We support Objective NC 1, to "promote the preservation, appreciation, and sustainable use of our historical and cultural resources for residents and visitors;" we envision numerous opportunities to accomplish this in North Amherst.

Specifically:

- o We encourage the town to maintain the North Amherst School, specifically to repair the roof. It is a historic building, built in 1870 and is generally in good shape with a potential future benefit to and use for Amherst.
- o We propose renovating the Cherry Hill Club House, insulating it for year-round use, improving the food service, and making it available to rent for year-round gatherings, performances, and cultural events.
- North Amherst provides a huge opportunity for the town to advance Objective NC 3 to “conserve land in sufficient quantity and quality to meet agricultural, recreational, and wildlife needs.”

Specifically:

- o Locate and prioritize key biodiversity areas and corridors.
- o Create landscape corridors, connected with trails and bike paths.
- o Create walkways and bike paths to connect the library, North Square, the Black Walnut Inn, Cushman Common and the UMass campus.
- o Enhance particular places with specific ecological value, with hubs and links.
- o Create greenways to protect wildlife from being hit by cars.

Open Space and Recreation (O)

2010 Master Plan’s Stated Goal:

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

- We think Objective O.2 could be helpful in North Amherst: to “improve the economic viability of the farm community within Amherst:
 - o Could the town change regulations so farms can more easily sponsor public events like concerts and festivals?
 - o Organize and host a regional conference to explore how Valley communities might improve the economic viability of our farmland. Might we do this in conjunction with the Stockbridge School of Agriculture at UMass?
 - o Seek funding to create a venue where local farmers can package and process their produce to sell locally. A facility that might produce sauerkraut, chutney, jams, and hot sauces, frozen vegetables or sausages, as examples.
- Objective O.3, “Provide a supply of accessible, well-maintained recreational facilities that meet the changing needs of the community.
 - o More protected sidewalks and multi-use paths where new, small, young, old, and inexperienced bicyclists, elders with walkers, and wheelchair users can easily access amenities without a car, from neighborhoods, to farm stands, to schools.
 - o A Valley Bikes location in North Amherst, either at the Mill District or near the library.
 - o Upgrade the playground equipment at Mill River Recreational Park.

Services and Facilities (S)

2010 Master Plan's Stated Goal:

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

- We support creating universal, public Pre-K for all children in Amherst, age four and above, in support of Objective S.2, to “deliver high-quality education from preschool through grade 12.” While this would benefit the whole town, the many low-income families in North Amherst would benefit disproportionately. Many parents can't afford to take a minimum wage job because childcare is so expensive. This is a big-ticket item, but we need to figure out a way to make it happen for the benefit of our children's education, economic development and to alleviate poverty.
- We need good programs for teens. Can we use Cherry Hill, the Survival Center, the North Amherst School and/or the Korean Church to develop programs for teens? These are underutilized spaces that, with some creative thinking, might be available for public use.
- Objective S.4 “Maintain and enhance Town infrastructure and facilities consistent with best practices” has useful applications for North Amherst.

Specifically:

- Sidewalks on East Pleasant St where school buses and PVTAs buses pick up and deposit passengers right on the road, no pull-offs, especially dangerous after snowstorms when the road is narrow and there are snowbanks children have to crawl over as traffic speeds by.
- Free and accessible Wi-Fi throughout North Amherst would be amazing!

Transportation and Circulation (T)

2010 Master Plan's Stated Goal:

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 Amherst and the region.

- Probably our highest priority in this section is Objective T.1: “Plan for an integrated town-wide transportation system.”
- A draft Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan exists and is the result of a great deal of public input. It is high time to for this to get finalized!

Specifically:

- A plan that reflects a ‘complete streets’ approach that integrates pedestrians, bicycles, public transportation, cars and commercial trucks. Perhaps no part of town needs this more than North Amherst. Many see North Amherst as a place

to drive through as quickly as possible, on the way to or from Greenfield, Montague, Sunderland, Leverett, etc. We need a plan that keeps traffic moving but without compromising the safety and wellbeing of the many residents who live here.

- o Better multi-use lanes that enable students of all ages to ride bikes to school, elders and wheelchair users to have access to mobility options.
 - o Improved safety for pedestrians, especially children walking to the library across busy streets.
 - o Footpaths that facilitate walking around North Amherst, between the Village Center and North Square.
 - o Adequate lighting on pedestrian walkways and bikeways, perhaps shining downward in order not to disrupt the night sky.
 - o Traffic routes that slow the cars and trucks down as they navigate the North Amherst Village Center.
 - o Research a commuter park-and-ride system.
- We like Objective T.7 “Engage in traffic management initiatives with businesses and employers.”
 - o Can we encourage North Amherst businesses to create incentives for employees to bicycle or use public transportation?
 - o How can we encourage UMass employees to walk, bike, or take public transport to campus? Incentives? Prizes?
 - We strongly encourage the Town to support Objective T. 8: “Aggressively pursue funding strategies for achieving transportation goals.” We believe there is funding available for energy saving initiatives, and we need to find them. All the strategies under this objective are worthy and apply to all of Amherst. We would like to help!

Other High-Level Observations About the Master Plan

While this report aims to provide specific guidance and recommendations about how the Master Plan can be effectively implemented in North Amherst and considering points from the Plan’s *Goals and Policies* about the “Dynamic Nature of a Master Plan” and the “Need for Action”, the MPSG identified several high-level observations about the Master Plan.

- The Plan was written before the arrival of Amazon and on-line shopping; the Plan needs to be reconsidered given the current economic development challenges and opportunities.
- High taxes and housing prices are raising concerns among existing residents and keeping the next generation from purchasing homes. A growing number of properties is being sold to investors for student housing. It is important to stabilize rapidly increasing real estate taxes and housing prices.
- We question whether the plan includes the vision, needs and goals of low-income Amherst residents? When the plan talks about “neighborhoods” does it mean single-family homes on tree-lined streets? (We would like to explore the different kinds of Amherst neighborhoods we have in North Amherst and we encourage this townwide.)

- While the Town has made efforts to engage the community in the planning process, more robust efforts are needed to ensure equitable implementation of the Plan.
- The Town, and particularly the Planning Department, are already stretched and budget constraints make it difficult to increase capacity to implement the Plan.