

Master Plan Implementation Committee
Report to Town Meeting
October 2025

The Town completed its third full year under the updated Master Plan in spring 2025. The Master Plan Implementation Committee (MPIC) met with each committee and board at least twice during the year to monitor progress and challenges encountered, collecting midyear “work in progress” reports in January and final reports in spring and summer 2025. 18 of the 22 entities contacted by MPIC submitted reports.

Crowded agendas at the Planning Board and Selectboard, not to mention additional time demands generated by an unprecedented budgetary environment, have delayed this year’s annual joint meeting among MPIC, the Planning Board and the Selectboard to review the status of Master Plan implementation. On the upside, MPIC has appreciated the opportunity to meet several times during the year with the Town Administrator. Our work has also been importantly supported by Carol Constant, who joined the Committee this year as liaison to the Selectboard,

The updated Master Plan identifies four major goals. They are outlined below with examples of progress and some summary comments.

The first goal is that South Hadley become a community where everyone can thrive.

Many entities are pursuing this goal on an ongoing basis. A few have initiated new projects, in part inspired by the annual Master Plan Forum, which focused last fall on challenges the community faces and ways to do better. It must be noted that new challenges have emerged in the course of the year, fueled by budgetary shortfalls as well as executive orders at the federal level that have undermined these efforts nationally, including by depriving communities of information that could shape policy decisions. (The same could be said for other Master Plan goals.)

- Promoting cross generational programming is a task assigned in the Master Plan to several entities as a means of building a community where “all can thrive.” It is an appropriate challenge, given the Town’s demographic profile, which shows an aging population, similar to those of our neighbors, but one (in contrast to others) that is not being similarly renewed by the addition (or persistence) of younger people. Entities addressing the challenge include the Schools, the Senior Center, the Library (a perennial standout), SHELD (which runs an annual internship program hosting Mount Holyoke students while also promoting diversity goals), the Recreation Department, Bike Walk and Trails Committee, BATTERY Brook Park, and the Historical Commission (which, among other efforts, recruited a local girl scout troop to prepare a large scale

map showing historical development along the River for an exhibit during Showcase South Hadley).

- The Senior Center revised the times that classes are offered to better suit client schedules and redirected investments to meet client interests. Transportation needs continue unmet due to budget shortfalls, as does the need to support better understanding of information technology and how to avoid elder scams, goals identified in the Master Plan for the Town and the Center.
- The Assessor's Office is working to support the Selectboard's efforts to craft meaningful tax relief programs for resource-challenged residents and has helped identify regressive elements in the Town's tax structure.
- The Cultural Council supported and organized "Showcasing South Hadley" which brought a world of cultural experience to nearly every corner of Town. The Council reports over 40% of featured performers were people of color.
- The Commission on Disabilities has continued its exemplary work seeking to expand opportunities for disabled persons (as well as others) through advocacy and consultation. Members regularly participate as advocates and informants in the meetings of relevant committees.
- The Department of Public Health and Board of Health completed an inventory of cultural food preferences, helping the Food Bank address food insecurity in Town. And it developed a framework for health equity.
- While the Planning Board revised the Flexible Development zoning bylaw, as called for in the Master Plan as a means of encouraging more affordable housing options while preserving natural resources, the proposal was rejected by Town Meeting. On the upside, an Affordable Housing Trust has been formally established, and a duly constituted Board is developing protocols for administering the Trust and for finding means to fund it. In addition, the Planning Board, as called for in the Master Plan, after multiple public meetings, has submitted to Town Meeting a proposal to rezone the 202/33 corridor with the goal of enabling new businesses, as well as a wider range of housing options, including affordable housing and multi-family housing, Town Meeting will review the proposal in November 2025.
- The new department for Human Resources, combining efforts of the Recreation Department, Senior Center and Veterans Affairs, led the renovation of Buttery Brook Park, providing new facilities attracting visitors, young and old. It also improved services and efficiency across the three programs.
- The Human Rights Commission, now in its second year, hosted conversations with leaders seeking to promote the protection of human rights, including Town Planning, the Food Bank, the Schools, and Police. And it is advising on the conduct of the goals and needs assessment being led by the Town Administrator and Selectboard.

Additionally, the Commission strongly advocated for the Welcoming Community bylaw approved by Town Meeting in the spring.

- SHELD actively promoted its low electric rates as well as its now completed Fiber Optic Network as a means of attracting new businesses to Town. And it has won state recognition as a low-income provider of internet service.
- The Redevelopment Authority launched a quarterly newsletter reporting on development in South Hadley Falls, as well as a Business Directory for the Falls that it hopes will encourage new development. Work also begins soon on grant funded infrastructural improvements in the Falls.

The second goal is that as a community we preserve our natural and cultural resources

- The Board of Health consulted with Mount Holyoke College on the Hydrogeological Aquifer study supported jointly by the Town and Water District 2, with the goal of shaping long-term planning for protection of the Town's water supply. The Historical Commission, on its second try, won state support for creation of an Historical District in the Falls dedicated to preserving and renewing holdings at the Old Firehouse Museum and the Fire House itself.
- Despite retraction by federal executive order of a grant to support the inventory and preservation of historical resources held by the Gaylord Library, the Public Library continues to work closely with the Town to inventory historical resources and to promote public education regarding the historical diversity of the Town.
- The Planning and Conservation Department developed a plan for encouraging native and climate resistant landscaping.

Goal three states that as a community we seek to promote resiliency and sustainability

- The Sustainability and Energy Committee, after years of steady work, succeeded in helping the Town win Green Community designation, making the Town eligible for new external funding to promote energy sustainability. The Commission also commented publicly on a major ongoing green initiative by Mount Holyoke College to build an Energy Hub in support of its efforts to achieve carbon neutrality.
- The Water Districts, SHELD and Town have agreed to a Memorandum of Understanding that will encourage coordination among these separate entities that together provide the Town's critical services.

- In the face of extraordinary budget challenges, including surges in health insurance costs, chronic shortfalls in state funding for schools and other Town services, and sudden but likely continuing reductions in federal support for public services at all levels, a Task Force was established to review the Town’s budget and to make proposals for long-term planning, with a report due in January.

Goal four centers on improving communications among Town entities and between Town administration and the public.

- We should begin by noting the critical support offered for this goal by Channel 15 and the office of Dan Pease. Means must be found in the absence of funding previously supplied by Comcast to ensure this irreplaceable service continues. One possible source of support might be SHELD.
- Numerous entities, including Town departments, continue to ramp up their communication efforts, updating websites, offering more public presentations, expanding their social media presence (including, in at least one case, moving beyond Facebook to Instagram!). These include some unlikely suspects, including the Assessor’s Office. The Cultural Council has undertaken to expand the website it created for announcing Showcase South Hadley events to serve as an ongoing digest of all cultural events in Town. Of special note, too, is the creation by the Redevelopment Authority of a quarterly newsletter advertising activity in the Falls.
- Town Administration, the Police Department, and the Selectboard collaborated in developing a checklist of permissions required for organizers of large events and directing organizers to appropriate offices. While not incorporated into a formal ordinance, the information should be helpful to persons seeking to organize events in Town.
- Entities continue offering workshops intended to introduce new users to IT resources: the Library, SHELD, the Senior Center.
- Within Town Hall, the resumption of “Enforcement Team Meetings,” which gather responsible entities regularly to coordinate their separate work in enforcement areas, is improving communication among Town offices and between the Town and the public.
- The Town Administrator’s proposal to encourage meetings of Town Meeting members by precinct before Town Meeting could have major positive effects, addressing the goal of making South Hadley a leader in municipal communications while also improving the quality of municipal decision making.

SOME CHALLENGES:

- As last year, we continue to observe that while most entities support our efforts to monitor and facilitate their work on Master Plan goals by returning written reports (at least 18), some have been less responsive. This is to be expected for many reasons, not the least being that so much of the work of the Plan rests on the shoulders of volunteer boards that are understaffed or not staffed at all. And that membership on boards and committees is constantly shifting. We plan to continue the practice begun last year of meeting more regularly with Town committees while requesting only two sets of reports. But we are open to revising our reporting mechanisms and forms, especially if doing so would bring greater coordination among MPIC, Town Administration and the Select Board in our efforts to monitor and promote implementation of Master Plan goals while facilitating the work of committees and boards.

Given budgetary and time pressures, which are likely to continue and worsen over the next several years, there seems greater need than ever for careful self-

- monitoring of the cost-benefit impacts of tasks undertaken to serve each Plan goal, not only in the case of administrative offices, but volunteer and elected committees. MPIC is committed to supporting this work.
- Drawing new businesses to Town that might provide jobs, new tax revenue streams, and provision of desirable services, is a task identified in the Plan. It is a task likely requiring action by the Planning Board, but also other regulatory entities that could work together to simplify permitting processes. This issue seems especially critical given our budgetary environment.
- The same goes for making changes that will enable and encourage new and more affordable housing. People drive the health of a Town. And young people--- including young families--are the future.
- As cheering as it is to see evidence of more communication across groups and departments and more evidence of groups reaching out to one another, there is still need for more communication infrastructure, including the long planned citizen's guide to town government; a "how to" manual for committee chairs that could help them manage their committee webpages and keep the public informed; a regularly updated email directory facilitating communication among committee chairs and between committees and the public; perhaps also a more assertive (if gentle) monitoring of adherence by committees to a clearly defined set of standards. This infrastructure is even more critical now, given the likely need in future for more volunteer help rather than less—and the need for this work to be coordinated.
- Preserving virtual access by the public to committee and board deliberations currently supplied by Channel 15 and the office of Dan Pease is critical.

CONCLUSION:

In its advisory and facilitative roles, MPIC is eager to continue supporting implementation of the updated Master Plan in close collaboration with the Planning Board, Selectboard, and Town Administration. We look for guidance on how we can support the work of the Plan, especially given these extraordinary times. We have always understood that the four goals identified in the Plan are linked, with the lynchpin being the first: building a community open to all, where all can thrive. We have our work cut out for us.