



**Master Plan Implementation Committee
Report to Town Meeting
June 2020**

It seems entirely fitting that one of the proposed goals of the updated Master Plan is enhanced community resilience. We are in the midst of a situation with little precedent, dealing with very difficult challenges and we can only speculate about what life in South Hadley will be once we're on the far side of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is likely that our lives will change in many ways for shorter or longer periods of time. If ever there was a need for a solid plan to guide us towards the town's future, it is now. Though specific tasks may vary as situations change, a clear statement of our goals for the future can be a powerful tool as we recover and move forward. We are hopeful that the updated plan, currently in draft form, will be that tool.

In our 2019 report we noted that most of the tasks assigned in the 2010 Master Plan had either been completed, were ongoing, or had been determined to be no longer relevant. Consequently, we saw little need to update the task matrices this year. But we do want to note a few major accomplishments: the final approval of the South Hadley Urban Redevelopment and Renewal Plan, submitted by the Redevelopment Agency; and the new Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP). The Redevelopment Plan references a walking trail along the river and actions to ensure the health of BATTERY Brook, both called for in the 2010 plan, while the OSRP fulfills a task assigned to the Recreation Commission in the 2010 plan, to develop a vision for town-wide recreation opportunities. In addition, a study of the Rte. 202-33 corridor - an area cited in the 2010 plan as needing a comprehensive review - is underway .

Most of the Master Plan Implementation Committee's (MPIC's) time this past year was committed to the process of updating the Master Plan. Several members of MPIC served on the Open Space and Recreation Plan Advisory Committee, now disbanded, and on the Master Plan Update Advisory Committee (MPUAC), still functioning. All three entities shared the goal of eliciting as much public input into the plans as possible, and all MPIC members participated in various outreach efforts. These included the October Forum and subsequent "meetings in a box", and meetings, often multiple, with 21 boards, committees and commissions to get their

reactions to drafted goals. The Chair and Vice Chair of MPIC also met, in the company of the Town Administrator, with 19 Town department heads and staff.

Responses from the various entities and individuals were generally positive, though the Bike/Walk Committee, which had been very involved in the OSRP, mentioned that they were feeling “planned out.” Several entities, among them the Council on Aging and the Historical Commission, used the goals description as a planning tool. Many individuals had useful suggestions about actions that could be taken to achieve the various goals, and these were collected and passed along to the consultant who is putting together the updated plan.

The need for good communication – in all directions - came up in almost all meetings, and participants suggested many ways to improve on current systems. We think that improved communication is a particularly critical goal. Effective communication is one of the major ways of ensuring transparency, building trust, and strengthening our ties to each other, and is thus a key tool for increasing resilience. The updated plan will contain a number of action items intended to enhance communication within Town departments, among boards and committees and between Town government and the general public.

Other issues that surfaced will be reflected in the updated plan in some form. Some issues will require significant discussion and cooperation among many groups because of their complexity and the new financial challenges we are likely to face. For example, as a community we will need to decide:

How to resolve the tension between providing appropriate services for the increasing percentage of elderly residents and the decreasing percentage of school-aged children;

How to preserve water quality and availability;

How to encourage development to expand the tax base and still maintain the Town’s small town feel;

How to deal with climate change;

How to engage more residents as volunteers for short term projects, and as members of boards and committees;

And how to increase participation in making decisions that affect the whole community in the short and the long term. This is likely to require virtual meetings and other forms of distanced discussion, and other efforts to reach out to segments of the community that find it challenging to participate.

The Selectboard is an obvious initiator for many of these discussions. It is also positioned to be a role model in how to approach complex issues, and how to make some tough choices. It isn’t possible to please everyone. How do we as a community decide that in some instances some segments of the community might have to sacrifice for the common good? And how can we

make it clearer to those who may perceive that their particular interests are sacrificed in a particular case that they also benefit as members of the community?

As of this writing MPIC has not yet seen the draft updated Plan. It is scheduled to be shared with the Master Plan Update Advisory Committee shortly, and the committee will have a couple of weeks to prepare its comments. From there it goes to the Planning Board, followed by a period for public comment. After that, the Planning Board will vote on its adoption, and at a subsequent Town Meeting the members will be asked to endorse it. Once that happens, MPIC members will meet again with all entities that have action items assigned to them and begin the task of assessing progress. At the same time, MPIC will almost certainly be involved in developing outcome evaluation mechanisms that will help the community determine not just whether tasks have been accomplished, but whether they are actually making a difference.

This is a time of great challenge and great uncertainty. But we are enormously heartened by the many ways in which townspeople are pulling together and supporting each other. We commend them, as well as the Town employees and the many volunteers who are doing their best to ensure that we come through this pandemic with as little damage as possible. May we emerge from this crisis with renewed commitment and a stronger sense of community.

Respectfully submitted,

The Master Plan Implementation Committee

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