

By Jed Callen

THE ROLE OF THE MASTER PLAN IN GROWTH MANAGEMENT

In a recent article, I discussed the role of the Master Plan in the planning and land use regulatory process and explained its importance as the foundation and justification for Zoning Ordinances, subdivision and site review regulations, and Growth Control Ordinances. The important point to remember is that a Growth Control Ordinance, or an amendment to an existing Ordinance, must have its basis and justification in the Master Plan. The reviewing court, responding to a challenge to a provision controlling growth, will not likely uphold it unless it is consistent with the Master Plan, or better yet, carefully designed to implement elements of the Master Plan.

Therefore, if you are concerned about shaping your Town's future, you must start by making sure your concerns and goals are reflected in the "Goals and Objectives" section of your Master Plan. Watch for opportunities to contribute to the periodic updating of your Town's Master Plan. When doing so, focus on the future you want.

There are two keys to drafting a meaningful statement of your Town's "Goals and Objectives" for the future. The first key is to break this impossibly huge topic into discrete manageable pieces that people can understand and debate intelligently. No one person can define a Town's "goals", but we all have opinions on how we want our Town to look in 10 years. Breaking the topic into small pieces is the first step. The second is harder. After you define the small questions that together make up a vision of the future, you must debate the answers and come to some kind of consensus in order to have a single Master Plan. This step will take work, communication, flexibility, empathy, and compromise.

What follows is a self test, to aid you in formulating your vision for your Town's future. There are, of course, no right or wrong answers. There are only your answers. And for every choice you make, there will be the expected consequences, the unintended consequences, winners, losers, costs and opportunities. The only thing that is very clear is that if you do not grapple with these questions and offer your best answers to the public debate, others will gladly offer their answers, and decisions will be made without your input. So grab your pencil and get to it!

WHAT THINGS ENHANCE YOUR QUALIFY OF LIFE?

Rank each of the following factors on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the most important:

- _____ Visual beauty, scenic areas
- _____ Local employment opportunities
- _____ Lack of traffic and congestion
- _____ Low property tax rates
- _____ Historic buildings and sites
- _____ Convenience; local shopping and services
- _____ Local outdoor recreational opportunities (hiking, fishing, riding, skiing, etc.)
- _____ Excellent schools
- _____ Clean air and water, open spaces, fields, forests, wetlands, wildlife habitat

- _____ Low cost housing
- _____ Community based activities (sports, concerts, dinners, fairs, etc.)
- _____ Trails, paths
- _____ Community services: road maintenance, police, fire, solid waste disposal
- _____ A walkable, pedestrian-friendly village center

Look at your rankings, and try to articulate to yourself what things about your Town you do not want to see change and what things you want changed. How do you want your Town to look in 10 years? What do you want it to be like in 50 years?

SOME QUESTIONS REGARDING GROWTH

Ask yourself the following questions, and try to actually answer them, instead of just reading the questions. This section is hard!!

- Does your Town have adequate housing now? Adequate business? Commercial? Services?
- Is the mix of housing values what you want it to be?
- Can people who were born here afford to stay?
- Is the property tax burden sustainable?
- How important is it to you to preserve the walking center of the Village?
- How much open space do you want? Where? For what purposes?
- Which costs the taxpayers more in taxes: land in current use, or new houses? (Are you sure?)
- How fast can your town absorb new houses, residents, drivers, school children?
- What kind of development do you want? Industrial, commercial, service sector, residential? What are the effects of each on your tax rates, roads, school?
- Where do we want new residential development to be? Scattered, or clustered?
- Do you want new development along your major roads, or do you want it set back, away from the major arteries?
- How much regulation of your right to develop your land are you willing to accept?
- At what rate can your Town absorb and accommodate population growth?
- What are you willing to spend on roads, police, fire, solid waste, etc. to support growth?
- Do you want to provide more services in the future? (Public sewer, trash collection, public water?)

Not easy, was it? But these are the questions you must discuss and reach some consensus around if you are to develop a Master Plan that will make a difference. This most difficult step is essential, before you can take the easier step of writing a Growth Ordinance that will attempt to shape the rate and direction of your Town's inevitable future growth. Please participate in this essential debate!