

This is the fourth installment in a series submitted by Stow's Master Plan Committee to keep townspeople apprised of the issues it faces in drafting a Master Plan Update. Each installment is dedicated to a different major topic of the Master Plan. This article focuses on transportation.

TRANSPORTATION: YOU CAN GET THERE FROM HERE – IT'S JUST A QUESTION OF HOW

Submitted by the Master Plan Committee

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Much as we might sometimes wish we could just stay home, the ability to get out and go places is a critical one. Whether we want to get across town to a friend's house, into Stow Center to attend a community event, down to the supermarket or all the way to Boston for work, transportation and all the issues it encompasses are a key component of our community's Master Plan.

"Transportation" is an umbrella term addressing myriad kinds of mobility. We use the term for everything from our state highways to the Assabet River Rail Trail, and from the way we use our sidewalks to the option of a public shuttle that could drop people off at the train station. What questions do we need to answer when we examine the topic of transportation?

Ideally, a transportation network for our community would be safe and convenient for pedestrian and vehicular traffic while preserving and enhancing Stow's quality of life. It would encourage healthy living and recreation by making it easy for people to walk or bike if they wished to do so; it would lessen congestion for those who drive their own cars; and it would offer sufficient public transportation options for those who choose to cut back on their individual car use, whether for environmental, economical or physical reasons.

In terms of individual vehicle use, a key question the Master Plan should address is which intersections are not functioning properly and which areas of town experience congestion or back-ups. Transportation specialists assign an "LOS," or "level of service," rating to intersections in roadways throughout the commonwealth. The rating reflects the delay a driver experiences when traveling through an intersection. The standardized measure of level of service ranges from A to F. In a suburban setting the typical functioning level of service range is C-E, which means a delay of 20 to 80 seconds for motorists attempting to make a specific turning movement. Generally, an E represents a compromised intersection operating near its capacity and an F is a failed vehicular movement. However, it is not uncommon for an intersection to be rated F for left turns only or rated E during rush-hour but still function adequately at other times of the day. Each intersection's level of service is determined by the configuration of the intersection, and the ability of an intersection to accommodate the traffic demand that is placed upon it.

One improvement that some townspeople in Stow are interested in exploring is modern roundabouts at some of our busiest intersections. Unlike rotaries, roundabouts are smaller in configuration and channel traffic moving at slower speeds. Vehicles spend less time idling than they would at a traditional signalized intersection. Roundabouts have a high rate of efficiency and are believed to be better for air

quality because they reduce delay time and require no electricity to operate (unlike traditional traffic lights). However, they do have the drawback of taking up more square footage than a traditional intersection would.

The Master Plan is not designed to recommend specific fixes to transportation problems but rather to identify high priorities and areas of concern, which will help target plans for improvement going forward. Before substantive changes could occur the Town would typically require further engineering studies but the Master Plan helps identify and define problem locations.

Beyond physical congestion and intersection delays, a Master Plan will often focus on public transit or other mobility issues such as bike and pedestrian accessibility. Stow has recently joined the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority, a separately constituted legal entity that provides transit services. Its goals for public transit will also be explored in the Master Plan process. The town is also within the Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization that can help communities to obtain state and federal funding for Federal Aid eligible transportation projects.

Along with the larger questions about traffic congestion and availability of public transportation come more localized issues such as parking options and development of the Assabet River Rail Trail. Ideally, the Master Plan will address, in some form, all of these related issues as it looks at current, future and emerging needs of the people of Stow where transportation is concerned.

The overall goal of the MPC is to continue receiving input both from designated committees and from concerned residents. Help us identify the proper course of action for Stow's future. Participate in Master Plan Committee discussions (we generally meet on alternate Wednesdays – check the town website or schedule at the Town Building for exact dates and times); or contact the Master Plan Committee at 978-897-5098 or planning@stow-ma.gov.