

# Memo

**To:** Planning Board  
**From:** Jesse Steadman – Town Planner;  
Malcolm Ragan – Assistant Planner  
**Date:** 9.9.2021  
**Re:** Beginning the Master Planning Process

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## Overview

Staff believe the time is right to begin discussions of the 2010 Master Plan update. Running through the list of action steps noted in the 2010 Master Plan, it is clear the town has made real progress on housing, transportation, conservation and more over the last decade. That progress has not only come in the form of bylaws passed, and projects planned and completed, but in the creation of committees and partnerships that will advance planning efforts and have a lasting effect beyond any one member's involvement.

Despite the progress on the 2010 update however, there is growing evidence that expectations of new residents are evolving, adding fresh pressure to current challenges, and raising new issues that will demand new responses. Climate change, together with growing affluence and rising property values are fueling social disparities and driving state level mandates, including housing and stormwater permitting changes, which will force Stow to coordinate creative planning approaches.

The purpose of this memo is to provide guidance on the Master Plan process prior to the Master Plan Committee's formation so the Planning Board can make recommendations to the Selectboard and future Master Plan Committee regarding how to create a functional, inclusive Plan.

## Master Planning Authority

The state of Massachusetts does not require a Master Plan, nor does it direct a schedule for its regular upkeep through MGL c.41 §81D. The statute states that a Planning Board

*“shall make a master plan of such city or town...as said board may deem advisable from time to time...”*

The Town of Stow Charter is more direct in its Master Plan expectations. Section 7.7(C) states:

*“The Master Plan shall be reviewed at the direction of the Planning Board every five years, and a Master Plan Committee shall be appointed two years before the next update is due. The Board of Selectmen shall appoint a special committee of seven members comprised of a member of the Board of Selectmen, the Planning Board, the Board of Health, the Conservation Commission, and the Finance Committee and two Stow voters at large, who are not members of the above named boards.”*

### **Role of the Planning Board**

Given the statutory authority bestowed to the Board and the Town Charter obligations placed upon the Master Plan Committee, the Planning Board can be seen as the directive body tasked with setting the parameters of the process and eventual adoption of the Plan. The Master Plan Committee, on the other hand, is more the “doer,” the entity tasked with implementing the process – working to draft the content in accordance with a process outlined by the Planning Board and the state statute.

### **Outreach from the Start**

With the directive role of the Planning Board at top of mind, Staff believe that a commitment to creative resident outreach will be more important than ever with the next Master Plan. With growing interest in local government, social justice and increased access offered through remote meetings, the Planning Board has the opportunity to insist that the next Master Plan Committee be driven by a commitment to inclusion and participation, not just for the sake of reliable data, but for creating a broader, more durable constituency for resolving the thornier challenges that Stow will face in the next decade - challenges that will force this community to reconcile its self-image with the action steps it is willing to take.

### **Master Plan Approaches**

There has been some discussion among the Planning Board regarding the approach to Master Planning. The current Master Plan update from 2010 is typical in many ways. It is a physical document that follows the statutory outline, including data trends, community goals and action steps for implementation. The Master Plan in Stow has always been something bookended, both literally and figuratively, bound and stored online and on our desks and bookshelves when complete.

Some view the traditional Master Plan process as static, and instantly dated, losing value like a new car rolling off the lot. However, it is also a defined document that lends itself to a finite and manageable process, one with a clear set of goals and procedures that can be managed by the Master Plan Committee and Planning Board charged with guiding its development.

In contrast is the idea of a “living plan,” a document that evolves in real time, reflecting current public opinion in a manner that imitates the iterative nature of problem solving and policy making. It’s an approach that strives for relevance and currency, and is meant to provide an immediate and up to date reflection of a community’s goals. In practice, the living plan would be an ongoing, open ended process, incorporating, for instance, required updates of the Open Space and Recreation Plan, and Housing Production Plans as stand-ins for the traditional chapters on related topics. While there are efficiencies to the approach, such as being able to fold in other required planning processes on a rolling basis, it would require a more coordinated approach among the various stakeholders involved.

## **Considerations for Determining the Master Plan Approach**

In an increasingly on-demand, subscription-based society, the “living plan” seems immediately attractive. However, Staff have identified several focal points for beginning the Master Plan discussion that should be considered prior to any one approach being recommended:

- *Outreach and Inclusion*

Public involvement in Master Planning is something that is designed and implemented. It is a coordinated strategy that requires disciplined commitment. The traditional Master Plan Committee and process may be best suited for clearly defining outreach and inclusion strategies, as well as ensuring their use. In the traditional approach, the implementing body could be guided by an agreed upon framework from the beginning.

If the Planning Board is interested in the living plan approach, Staff recommend the Board consider how commitments to outreach and inclusion could be replicated across the Boards and Committees that may ultimately be responsible for submitting various chapters. For instance, the Board could consider the creation of an outreach and inclusion policy or framework, accepted by the Master Plan Committee, which requires certain standards of outreach. This would help ensure consistency in outreach practices, even when such a process is spread over several years or as the membership on Committees and Boards changes.

- *Interest and Engagement*

Municipal charters may dictate some processes, but Master Plans can often be linked to a series of specific events or noticeable trends - a feeling among the community that sudden or impending changes demand a response. It could be argued that this is the current situation in Stow.

With the “living plan” approach, it may be difficult to maintain the inertia that starts a Master Planning effort. The Planning Board and Master Plan Committee will need to think creatively on how to avoid planning fatigue and maintain engagement and interest in the process, especially when the process may take years, or is simply folded into the normal workings of the Town’s annual planning efforts. While there may be ways to maintain engagement, big ideas and interesting policies are often tied to a sense of urgency. Abandoning the sense of necessity and urgency could drain an important fuel for momentum.

- *Guiding Framework/Lens*

It could benefit a new Master Plan Committee to have some data or recommendations provided to them by the Planning Board at their inception to guide the initial stages of plan development, specifically as it relates to the importance of guiding principles of implementation and planning. Staff could compile information on how other communities have determined frameworks for Master Planning. A guiding framework is most important if the Planning Board and/or Master Plan Committee is interested in pursuing the living

plan approach. An example of a framework could be a systems thinking approach, such as Concord, MA used, which viewed planning as a web of interconnected nature of issues and solutions. It could also be based upon some definition of sustainability, equity or other broad goal that data and public opinion points toward.

Staff have distilled the above information into a series of direct questions that the Planning Board should consider prior to engaging the Selectboard in the Master Planning process.

- Does the Planning Board prefer a traditional or “living plan” approach to Master Planning? What does the Planning Board think that a living or evolving plan approach would like if implemented?
- Regardless of the preferred approach, does the Planning Board want to recommend adoption of a Master Plan Policy that sets standards for planning, outreach and stakeholder engagement, or would the Board prefer to recommend certain approaches be considered?
- Would the Board prefer to conduct initial outreach regarding a guiding framework or lens to provide to the Selectboard or would the Board prefer to recommend that the Master Plan Committee initiate such a process?
- Does the Planning Board want to recommend increased Master Plan/Consulting funds for the process or develop the initial approach and implementation in-house?