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Master Plan

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY AND FACILITATING A VIBRANT FUTURE.

A Master Plan is....

Throughout New Hampshire, each community has a unique set of values which reflect its history and people. A master plan presents an opportunity to document those values, and create a guiding vision for how to ensure that a town's codes and land use designations, reflect those characteristics and values.

A master plan is a planning document that guides the overall character, growth and development of a community, and not a regulatory document. It does not define what can of cannot happen, rather it offers a vision of what may happen. It is designed to aid community as it reviews subdivisions, site plans and capital investment.

In New Hampshire, a master plan is not a legal document, and it **is not required under the law**. Without one, though a community cannot adopt a zoning ordinance, historic district, or capital improvements program.

In New Hampshire, like Zoning ordinances, Master Plans began to be adopted in communities in the 1940s, and as of 2015, most of our towns and cities have a version of them.

RSA 674:2 notes that a master plan must include, at a minimum, two mandatory sections; a Vision chapter and a Land Use chapter. In addition there are optional sections, ranging from topics like transportation and housing to energy and community design. The latest addition to the list of potential sections is a coastal management section.

These sections may be separate or combined with more than one section. They should be used to encourage development that is reasonable and visions that are realistic for a community.

No matter how many sections your community has, you should review the document at least every 10 years.

New Hampshire state law (RSA 674:2 I) provides that:

"The purpose of the master plan is to set down as clearly and practically as possible the best and most appropriate future development of the area under the jurisdiction of the planning board, to aid the board in designing ordinances that result in preserving and enhancing the unique quality of life and culture of New Hampshire, and to guide the board in the performance of its other duties in a manner that achieves the principles of smart growth, sound planning, and wise resource protection."

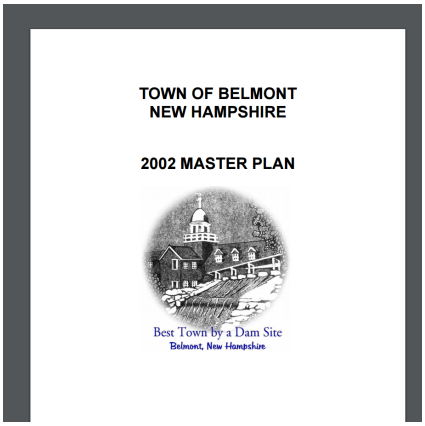
Vision Section

A set of statements documenting the desires of the citizens affected by the master plan. Included shall be a set of guiding principles and priorities to implement that vision.

Land Use Section

Translates the vision into physical development goals. It should note existing demographics, and land uses and consider alternative opportunities for future development, and promote the preferred alternative.

Examples of Master Plans:
One size doesn't have to fit all.



The Town of Belmont is a great example of a New Hampshire community creating one unified Master Plan. This plan, adopted in 2002, lays out a vision and then addresses that vision through the components suggested by RSA 674:2.

The plan uses images and text call outs to isolate ideas and keep the reader interested in the story of Belmont's next stage. It contains maps, charts and other backup data essential for residents, whether part of the Planning Board or not, to understand the vision of their community.

http://www.belmontnh.org/datamasterplan.asp

The City of Burlington Vermont created planBTV to guide its master planning process. The goal was to develop a usable, dynamic and creative guidebook for growth and development.

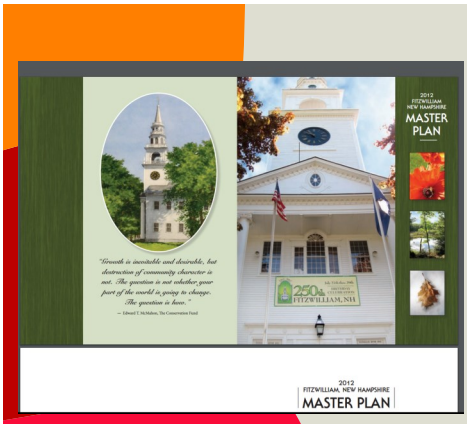
The Downtown and Waterfront chapter, adopted in June of 2013 is unique in that it reads like a magazine, with articles and infographics to convey data and ideas, while at the same time encouraging responsible growth in the coming decade.

https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/planBTV/DW

The Town of Durham won Plan of the year, from the NH Planners Association in 2016 for its Master Plan, completed in 2015. The plan is unique in that it is laid out in landscape style, as opposed to portrait and uses a two column layout to offer short and direct sections.

Strafford Regional Planning worked with the town to complete this 500+ page document covering many of the areas laid out under RSA 674:2. In addition to images, maps and charts, the document has quotes from surveys and public outreach.

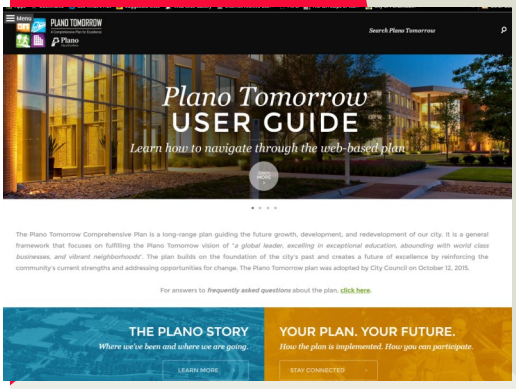
https://www.ci.durham.nh.us/planningandzoning/master-plan-adopted-2015-0



The town of Fitzwilliam, created a landscape style plan in 2012, which at 45 pages, is both succinct and comprehensive. The landscape plan offers both academics and creative people a way to relate to the text, images and goals of the chapter. It is designed to be used as a resource and as a promotional document for the community.

The plan covers many of the areas suggested by RSA 674:2 and is a good example of a community paring the list of optional areas down to just what is necessary for readers to have at their finger tips.

http://fitzwilliam-nh.gov/vertical/sites/%7B5152AF08-0D8E-4832-8682-9F3DC8413E4B%7D/uploads/Master_Plan_2012.pdf

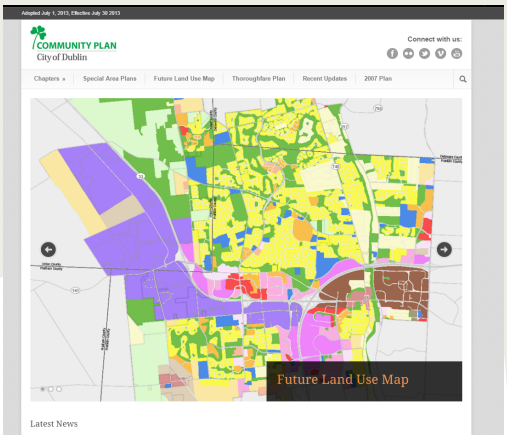


Around the country many communities are doing away with paper copies of their Master Plan (also known as a Comprehensive Plan). The City of Plano Texas is an example of this. Their plan is laid out within a website and is accessible digitally.

The plan uses scrolling graphics, social media and other innovative and modern communication tools to interact with readers of the plan, as a way to create a foundation for modern growth and development.

This method allows for a more dynamic plan which can be updated on the fly by a community.

http://www.planotomorrow.org/



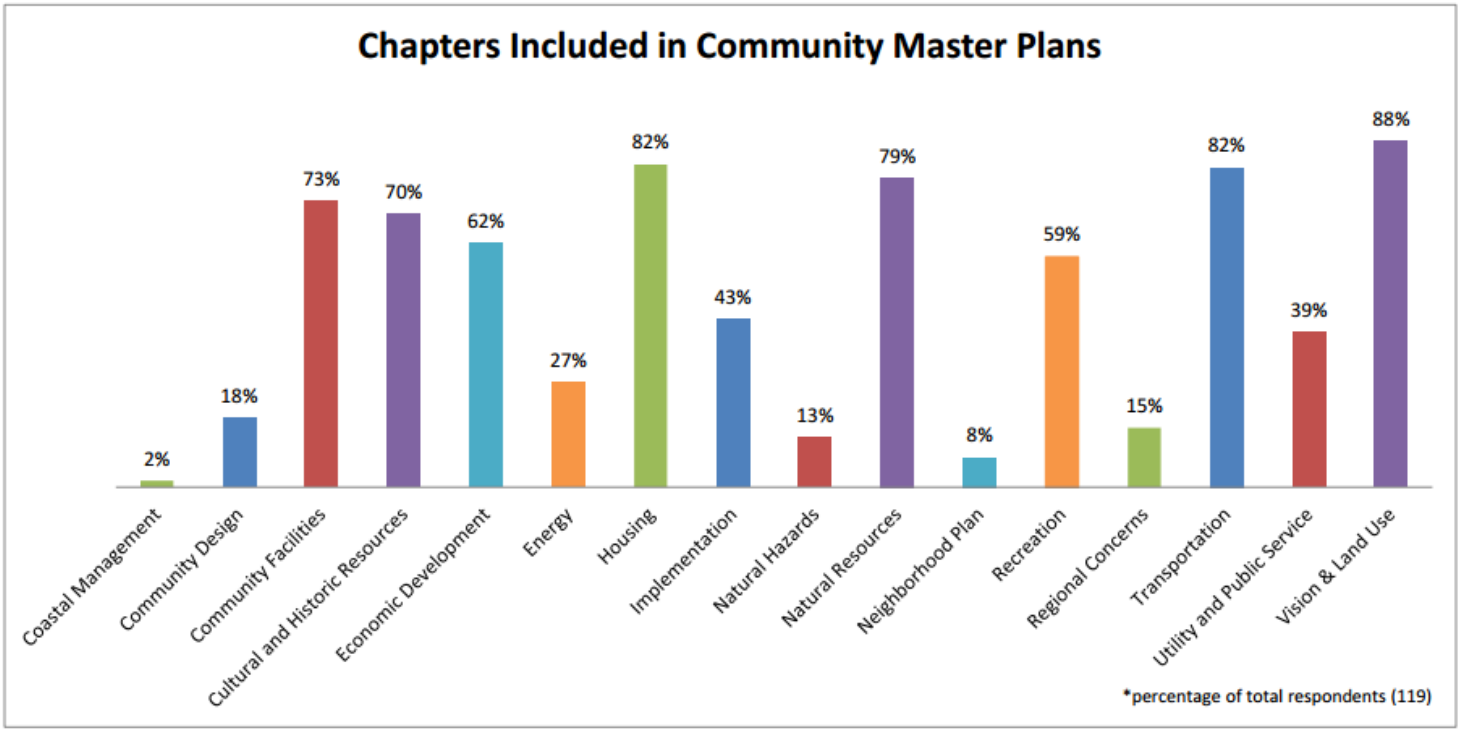
The Town of Dublin Ohio went paperless in 2013 with its Community Plan. The web site offers the many of the same sections we have in New Hampshire, but each is a web page with graphics and information delivered for review.

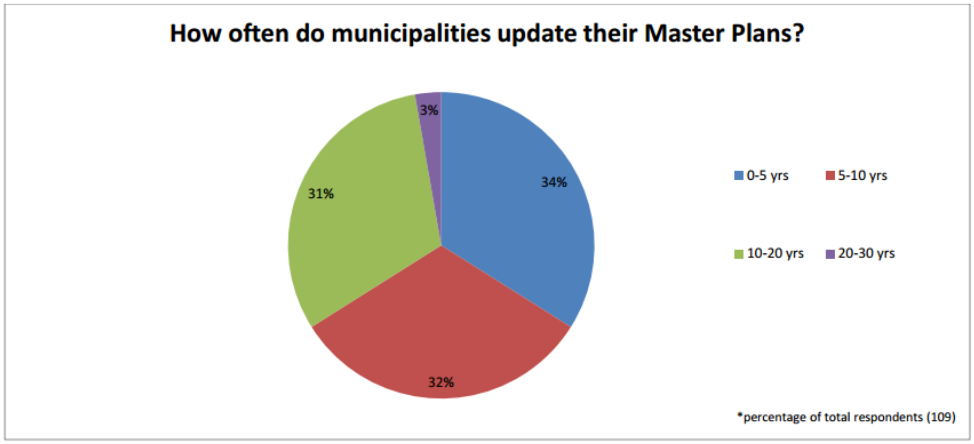
Using ESRI GIS web software, there are embedded maps within the site that allow residents to view the zoning, land use principles and other useful data as they learn about their community and its goals and objectives.

http://communityplan.dublinohiousa.gov/

Annually, the NH Office of Energy and Planning conducts a survey of communities. Among many topics, the survey documents the level of Master Plan activity that occurs within our communities. Two of the questions asked are what chapters do you include and how often do you update your Master Plan?

The charts below show the answers to these questions from the 2015 survey.





Resources

NHOEP Survey:

https://www.nh.gov/oep/resource-library/municipal/index.htm#municipal_survey

Master Planning in NH

https://www.nh.gov/oep/planning/resources/master-planning.htm