CHAPTER 4

Phase I: Getting Started

This chapter explains Phase I of the planning process – getting started. It describes how to begin and what should be considered in the development of a work plan. This is the initial planning work that needs to be done before embarking on the eight basic steps of the master planning process.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. - Confucius

Step A: Deciding to Plan and Commit Resources

1. Recognize When It's Time to Plan

Your planning board has a duty and responsibility, as required by state law, to prepare and/or update the community's master plan. It is generally accepted by planning professionals that after five years most existing master plans could stand to be updated. However, if your plan is over seven years old and your city or town has experienced significant change, your community most likely needs a new plan **(click here for guidance about when you should update an existing plan)**. There may also be pressing issues facing your community that need to be addressed, and preparing a new plan or updating your existing plan provides an opportunity to address them. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of your planning board to determine when it is time to prepare, amend, or update your master plan. Your board should be aware of this responsibility and of the importance of maintaining a viable plan.

2. Seek Public Support

Do not assume that everyone within your community recognizes that preparing a master plan is necessary or desirable. While it is ideal to have public support, it is not required in order to proceed. Obviously, however, public support is important and strongly encouraged.

One of the best ways to obtain public support is through education. This can be accomplished by reviewing the master planning requirements of the state statutes and explaining the benefits of planning (for guidance in this area, refer to the sections on Why Communities Plan and Why Should Your Community Want to Prepare a Master Plan in Chapter 9, "The Basics of Master Planning Theory").

Ultimately, public support for the development of a master plan in a small town will be reflected by a vote of approval to proceed at town meeting, or at a public meeting of the planning board or board of selectmen. For larger towns and cities, this may not be necessary, as the commitment to proceed is strictly a decision of the planning board and/or the city council.

3. Prepare Cost Survey and Preliminary Budget

The master planning process begins when the planning board and elected officials in a community make the commitment to prepare a new master plan or update an existing plan and the townspeople vote to appropriate the funds. Typically, the planning board conducts an initial survey of expected costs and prepares a preliminary budget and timeline. The governing body then makes a recommendation that the town should vote to support it. As part of this process, the planning board must also determine how the plan should be prepared – by volunteers, by staff, by consultants, or by a combination of all three. Additionally the board should determine the type of master plan it wishes to prepare and what chapters should be included (refer to Chapter 3, "What Should Be Included in Your Master Plan," as well as the section on Different Ways to Plan in Chapter 9, "The Basics of Planning Theory").

4. Seek Budget Approval

In most small towns, funding for master plan development requires voter approval of a warrant article at town meeting. In large towns and cities, funding must be appropriated in the municipality's annual budget. Some communities carry funds over, year to year, to build up a reserve account in an amount sufficient to undertake the project. Large cities often appropriate the necessary funding within the planning board's or planning department's budget. It is not uncommon for small towns to establish a master plan fund within their capital improvement program (CIP).

Step B: Preparing a Work Plan and Sharing It with Elected Officials and the Public

Once the decision is made to proceed and the community votes to commit funding to the planning process, the planning board prepares a work plan that it shares with elected officials and the public. A work plan helps with organization and management of the planning process. It also helps in the development of a request for proposals (RFP) if a community finds that it needs consulting services.

Everyone has limited time and resources and needs to plan wisely how to use them. It is important to remember that (1) there may be other plans and planning studies already prepared, and (2) the master planning process in New Hampshire is governed by state laws and local codes. Accordingly, the initial preparation work requires a thorough understanding of past studies and of the state's legal requirements. The action steps for developing a work plan are described in the following pages. A summary is also provided at the end of this section.

Action 1: Search Out and Examine Past Plans and Planning Studies

Before setting out to prepare your plan, collect and examine past plans and planning studies that have been prepared for your community. It is possible that the same problems and issues that confront the community today were recognized as problems in the past, and that the recommendations and solutions for addressing those problems are still applicable today.

Take time also to review the current regional plans prepared by the regional planning commission and other regional planning studies and reports that might have a bearing on your community. These plans can provide a broad framework upon which to develop an effective local plan.

Action 2: Research Applicable State Laws and Your Local Codes

This is an absolute necessity. This handbook contains the text of all the New Hampshire planning statutes (RSA 674:1 through 674:4) related to the preparation, adoption, and amendment of a master plan **(click for link to NH planning statutes found at: http://nh.gov/oep/laws/index.htm).** These statutes are:

- RSA 674:1 Duties of the Planning Board
- RSA 674:2 Master Plan; Purpose and Description
- RSA 674:3 Master Plan Preparation
- RSA 674:4 Master Plan Adoption and Amendment

Action 3: Understand the Planning Process and the Different Types of Master Plans

It is absolutely essential to gain an understanding of the variety of ways that a master plan may be prepared. There is no one right way; there are several ways to plan and several types of master plans. What works best for one community may not be ideal for another. Every community is different and has its own specific needs. It is the responsibility of the planning board to determine what type of plan would be best for the community and how to go about preparing it.

The traditional approach to preparing a plan is the basic five-step process outlined by the NH OEP (see NH OEP Technical Bulletin 3, *Master Planning, Summer 2003)*. The first step is community visioning. The second step is data collection and inventory. The third step is analysis and evaluation. The fourth step is plan preparation, including the evaluation of alternatives and the development of recommendations. The fifth and final step is implementation of the plan, which may include revisions to zoning ordinances or adoption of a capital improvement program. This traditional process is generally sequential, with each step begun only after the preceding step has been completed.

The contemporary approach is to bring citizens into the planning process early on, to identify key issues and to engage in discussions about the community's future through community visioning and other citizen participation techniques. The process continues with the bulk of the data collection and analysis targeted at key issues identified through the public dialogue. This process seeks to achieve consensus early on. It may seek approval of some implementation actions before other issues are even addressed. As a result, various issues are identified and addressed at different times while the plan is being prepared. It is a revolving, continuous process that does not appear to have a beginning or an end.

The continuous planning process has several advantages. People are actively engaged around high priority issues, without having to wait for data collection and analysis. Further, the continuous process uses implementation as both a learning experience and a reward mechanism. As people see things accomplished, they gain satisfaction and, as a result, are more likely to stay with the planning process.

The disadvantage is that this approach may lose one important characteristic of the master plan – the comprehensiveness that draws the connections between all the elements and policies in the plan. Some would argue that true comprehensiveness is never achieved. We live in a dynamic world with too much change ever to achieve a grand comprehensive linkage among all the parts.

The planning process will most likely be influenced by the type of professional assistance that is employed. Professional staff may end up following the revolving, continual process by necessity, since they are frequently interrupted by crises and the putting out of brush fires. A consultant, on the other hand, has a block of uninterrupted time that makes the traditional sequential process more realistic.

This is not to suggest that one planning process is better than the other, or that the characteristics of staff and consultants might not be reversed upon occasion.

It is important to be aware of the different types of master plans that can be prepared so that the best type of plan is selected for the community. There are five basic types of master plans: (1) the comprehensive master plan, (2) the small area master plan, (3) the functional master plan, (4) the strategic master plan, and (5) the abridged master plan (for more information about each type of plan, refer to the section Different Ways to Plan in Chapter 9, "The Basics of Planning Theory").

While it is not an absolute requirement to select one type of master plan over another, it is helpful to have a certain type in mind. Because there are advantages and disadvantages associated with each type of plan, it is important to consider each one carefully and select the one that will be most suitable.

Action 4: Research and Determine the Contents of Your Plan

As part of the development of your work plan, it is essential to research and decide upon the contents – the types and number of sections to include in your plan. Other than the vision and land use sections, which are mandatory, there are thirteen other sections that can be included, ranging from regional concerns and smart growth to neighborhoods and community design (for a complete description of these sections and advice on what to include or not include in your plan, see Chapter 3, "What Should Be Included in Your Master Plan").

Action 5: Research the Merits of Citizen Participation

Another important task is to educate the planning board about the merits of different types of citizen participation. Citizen participation is essential if the planning process is to be successful. An inability to achieve public consensus about the future of the community is often a fundamental reason why planning fails. To be successful, planning must reflect the needs and desires of the citizens who live and work in the community. Thus, one of the primary challenges facing a planning board involves developing an effective strategy for getting citizen input during the planning process.

Citizen participation is an emerging field. There are many models, which may or may not work, depending on the characteristics of the community and the nature of the issues it faces. A planning board can choose among a broad range of options when deciding on a citizen participation strategy. What is clear, however, is that the older models of the planning process – those that rely almost exclusively on experts – do not work. Success depends on the members of the planning board and other community leaders whose knowledge and political skills are essential. There are certain roles in the planning process that only you can do.

One older model of the planning process is drawn from the design professions. A planning consultant is hired to prepare a plan for the community in the same way that an architect is hired to design a building. After some preliminary meetings and input from the client, the planner retreats to the office and prepares "the plan." Then, at a public hearing, it is revealed. After its acceptance, the plan is ultimately forgotten.

The Lesson to Be Learned: *When there are no planning roles for those who must implement the plan, it typically ends up on a shelf, collecting dust.*

With this in mind, the most effective citizen participation strategies involve the public and elected officials at the very beginning of the process. Citizens can be recruited to serve on an ad hoc task force or citizen advisory committee charged with completing a particular section of the master plan. This particular strategy has enjoyed broad support because of its simplicity and ability to deliver quality citizen input.

Another citizen involvement technique is the community survey (for more information, see Chapter 10, "Tools and Techniques"). **Click here for examples.** Depending upon the methodology used, a community survey has the potential of reaching a large number of citizens. This can yield a tremendous amount of input and opinions on a broad range ofissues being studied by the planning board.

Still another widely used technique involves the planning board working directly with specialized groups or target audiences, such as farmers, developers, environmentalists, or small-business owners. By grouping persons with like interests, a planning board can capitalize on their accumulated knowledge and perspective. In some cases, this form of citizen participation is essential because of the influential nature of the target audience or special interest group within the community.

Planning boards can also reach out to the public in new, innovative ways. For example, the use of two-way interactive television is gaining popularity. Airtime can often be secured as a public service, at little or no cost to the community. As more people find it difficult to attend meetings, two-way interactive television may well become the preferred medium for citizen involvement in the future.

The charrette, long a mainstay of design professionals as an idea generator, is also gaining acceptance as a citizen participation strategy. Highly interactive and participatory, a charrette can be designed to present citizens with a real world view of planning and the choices their community must make when deciding about future growth and development. The PLAN NH charrette has become a very popular and effective program for communities (see http://www.plannh.com/). It brings experienced design professionals to a community at little or no cost, to produce a plan of action that deals with a particular design issue or concern. The community design charrette is typically held over a weekend and begins with a walking tour of the site in question.

At the other end of the spectrum is an inclusive public participatory process, often called community visioning (for more information, see Chapter 5, "Phase II: Community Visioning," as well as Chapter 10, "Tools and Techniques"). As a prelude to the traditional master planning process, a growing number of communities are engaging their citizens in a structured visioning process. In mostcases, the process is designed to provide answers to such key questions as where the community is headed, what values its citizens find most important, and what kind of future they hope to create. As with a charrette, a visioning forum has the potential to produce a tremendous amount of information, as well as civic energy and spirit.

The visioning process also goes to great lengths to achieve consensus and to build public support. A number of good sources are available on this subject, and the American Planning Association has produced a video on community visioning called "Building Vision and Action" (see Chapter 12, Bibliography/Resources). Another good source is the publication called "Swamp Yankee Planning" by Philip Herr, a former M.I.T. planning professor. This twenty-five-page publication is not about swamps or even Yankees, as the title suggests, but about the inherent good sense of community residents and how they need to be involved in the planning process. It is particularly enlightening on the structure and preparatory steps necessary to have a successful participatory process.

Philip Herr and other planners often point out the need to broaden participation beyond the usual city or town hall "regulars." There are various techniques for doing this, such as citizen surveys by mail or telephone; use of local press and cable television; task forces; visioning sessions; use of facilitators and mediators; focus groups; and a variety of neighborhood, civic, religious, cultural, and fraternal organizations. Even teenagers can participate (see also Chapter 10, "Tools and Techniques"). More extensive participation (beyond that of the usual insiders) is intended to educate the public about local government issues, to generate fresh ideas about old problems, and to improve the political climate by increasing trust. These citizen participation techniques concentrate on finding out what citizens like and dislike. Planning board members listen and attempt to find consensus rather than try to sell a particular proposal.

All citizen participation efforts take time, money, and know-how. They should not be done in a superficial or half-hearted way because they can raise expectations beyond the ability to deliver. That will result in greater cynicism about local government.

Action 6: Develop a Budget and Timeline

As the work plan is prepared, a timeline identifying project milestones and priorities must be developed. Think about this process as budgeting; after you have developed an estimate of the time needed to prepare your plan, triple it. It always takes longer to prepare a master plan than one thinks. An actual budget will also need to be prepared.

Action 7: Set Aside Equal Time at Planning Board Meetings

A planning board can not spend the same amount and kind of time on site plans, subdivisions, and other regulatory matters and get much accomplished on a master plan. There are two principle points to remember about time management. First, a planning board needs to spend equal time on both applications and planning. This can be done, in most cases, without dramatically increasing the number or length of meetings, by establishing time limits within meetings.

Second, greater discipline can be brought to the application process. Planning boards can require that developers provide complete and correct plans. Otherwise their applications can be considered incomplete and returned.

Action 8: Research Basic Background Data about Your Community

In order to plan for the future, a planning board needs to understand the community's past and present. The collection and analysis of background information is an essential early step in the plan development process. Typically, a planning board will conduct studies or gather information about the community's demographics, natural environment, economic base, housing stock, transportation systems, community facilities, and land use. The planning board will then be in a position to analyze trends and draw conclusions about the community.

It is important to note that citizen board members can begin to research some of the basic data needed for the plan. This can done by assigning each planning board member the task of researching one topic and then presenting her or his findings to the board. If your community has an existing master plan, each planning board member can also be assigned a section or chapter of that plan to review.

The regional planning commission can provide population projections and basic housing studies. The town's annual report may have data on housing construction, or the building inspector can provide this information.

Helpful Hint: *Some, or most, of this basic research can be assigned to a master plan advisory committee (see action step 10). However, the planning board still must have a good understanding of the demographic, housing, and economic conditions, along with other trends, in the community.*

Action 9: Understand the Role of Policies, Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

Whether one is preparing a master plan from scratch or updating an existing plan, it is important to find, record, and evaluate the community's existing policies, however obscure. Prior and current plans, planning documents, zoning and subdivision ordinances, and site plan regulations are important sources of information. Rarely are the policies summarized all in one place, except perhaps in the master plan. A municipality is likely to have many more policies than is commonly realized.

A policy is generally defined as a statement expressing an adopted position. It sets forth a definite course of action to guide and determine present and future decisions.

Another important consideration in plan development involves the prediction of future conditions in the community. When findings are generated as a result of background studies, the plan will begin to reflect an orientation toward the future. In most cases, this orientation will be represented in the plan's vision and goal statements which, when implemented, will bring the plan to life.

The challenge of articulating a community's future through words should not be trivialized. For example, there might be agreement on the overall goal of "improving our community," but no agreement on how this will be done. Planning board members must ask themselves whether such a goal carries any real meaning with it. In recognition of the critical role words play in planning, it is important that planning board members and other community officials understand the differences between goals, objectives, and strategies.

- A **goal** is a general statement of a future condition considered desirable for the community; it is an end towards which actions are aimed.
- An **objective** is a statement of a measurable activity to be accomplished in pursuit of the goal; it refers to an aspiration that is reasonably attainable.
- A **strategy** is a specific proposal to do something that relates directly to accomplishing the objective; it identifies the how, the where, and the amount to be done.

As past and current policies are researched, it would be equally wise to find and record all of the community's past and current goals, objectives, and strategies and compare them, looking for similarities and differences.

Action 10: Establish a Master Plan Advisory Committee (Optional)

It is critical that the planning board involve a wide cross section of boards, committees, and departments in the master planning process. Planning involves a number of fields and stretches across a variety of local government activities.

The technique most commonly used is to appoint a master plan advisory or steering committee to guide the master planning process. Generally, it should include all or most members of the planning board, representatives of other boards and committees, department heads, and elected officials, as well as members of the public. The size of the committee should be kept in mind, too. The larger the committee, the more work it will take to manage it.

As a rule, the planning board chair will seek nominations and appoint committee members. Ideally, the master plan advisory committee should consist of key representatives from the following boards, commissions, and departments:

- the planning board
- elected officials (board of selectmen, town or city council, the mayor)
- the city manager or town administrator
- department heads (fire and police chiefs, building inspectors, and heads of the departments of public works, parks and recreation, and health)
- the superintendent of schools and school board
- the conservation commission
- the zoning board of adjustment
- the historic commission (if available)
- the economic development council (if available)
- the parks and recreation commission (if available)
- the budget committee
- the regional planning commission*
- local citizens
- town or staff planners (if available)*

**Regional planning commissions, staff, and town planners should be classified as resource personnel and not as voting members of the committee.*

Step C: Ensuring That Your Resources Are in Place

1. Double-check Funding Sources and Staff/Volunteer Commitments

When the work plan has been accepted, the next step is to make sure that resources, funding, staff, volunteers, consultants (if needed), and equipment are in place. This includes working with the town planner and/or finance department or town administrator to verify funding and to make sure that all necessary contracts for professional services have been properly secured. Also verify that volunteers are committed to the process and ready to participate.

The existence of planning staff and equipment will vary from town to town. Some communities employ a professional town planner or planning staff, who may have the time to facilitate and direct the master plan preparation process. However, for the majority of small towns in New Hampshire, a town planner does not exist. Therefore, it becomes the job of the planning board to organize and facilitate the master planning process.

The main equipment needed includes a facility where people can meet, a computer, a telephone, and mapping capabilities. Today, geographic information systems (GIS) provide the bulk of the mapping work required for most master planning efforts. If the community does not have GIS capabilities, often these services can be provided by the regional planning commission or by a consultant for a fee. Knowledgeable volunteers within your community who have GIS experience may be willing to donate their time and expertise as a service to the community.

2. Have the Master Plan Advisory Committee Review the Work Plan (Optional)

Once the work plan has been completed, the master plan advisory committee can review it with volunteers, staff, and/or consultants working with the community. Responsibilities can then be assigned, including organizing the community visioning process and preparing the community assessment, described in the following chapters.

Summary of Action Steps for Developing Your Work Plan

Action 1: Search out and examine past plans and planning studies prepared for your community, as well as current regional plans, such as the housing needs assessment, the transportation improvement program (TIP), and other regional transportation plans prepared by your regional planning commission that may have a bearing on your community.

Action 2: Research all applicable state laws and local codes related to the preparation, adoption, and amendment of a master plan.

Action 3: Gain an understanding of the planning process and the different types of master plans, and select a type of plan to prepare (see the master planning worksheet for guidance).

Action 4: Begin research to determine the contents of your plan, such as the types and number of chapters needed (see Chapter 3 of the handbook).

Action 5: Research and educate the planning board about the merits and types of citizen participation. Seek wide public involvement and the involvement of elected officials, staff, and other boards and commissions in the planning process.

Action 6: Develop a budget and timeline for preparing the plan. Once the timeline has been completed, triple it.

Action 7: Set aside equal time at planning board meetings to address master planning agenda topics as well as regulatory matters.

Action 8: Begin to research basic background data about your community (see Chapter 6 of the handbook for guidance).

Action 9: Understand the role of policies, goals, objectives, and strategies. Search out and examine all of your community's policies and find and compare past and current goals, objectives, and strategies.

Action 10: Appoint a master plan advisory committee (optional).