CHAPTER 2

The Master Planning Process

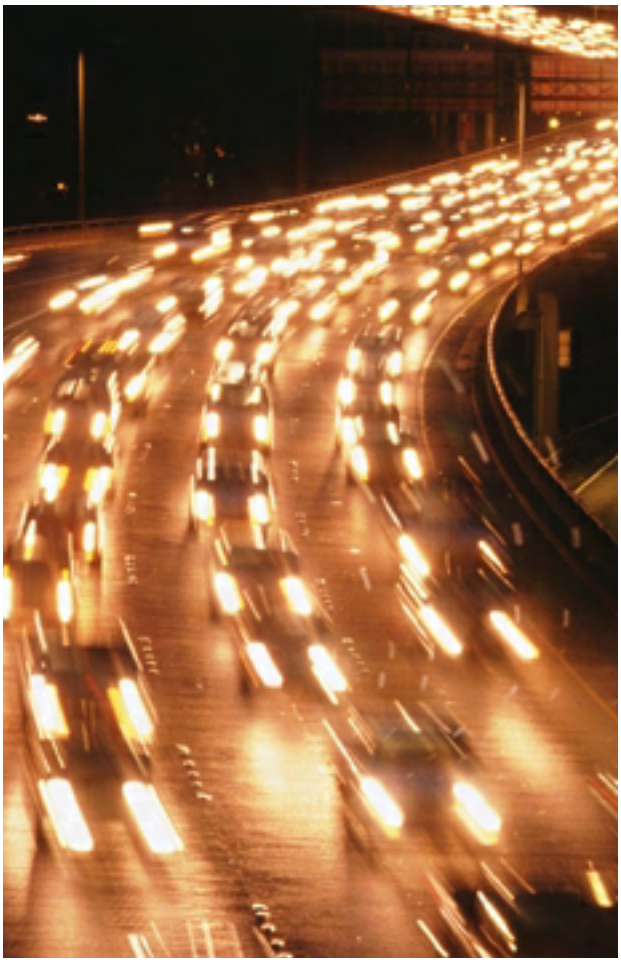
A Brief History of Master Planning in New Hampshire

New Hampshire has a long history of planning at the state, regional, and local levels. Each level of government is charged with preparing a plan that addresses its particular needs. A state development plan is required under RSA 9-A, which "establishes state policy on development related issues and provides new or expanded programs to implement such policies."

> *The future is not completely beyond our control. It is the work of our own hands.*
>
> - Robert F. Kennedy

A "comprehensive master plan for the development of the region" is required of each regional planning commission under RSA 36:47.

Finally, under RSA 674:1, a municipal planning board has the duty "to prepare and amend from time to time a master plan to guide the development of the municipality."



Much of New Hampshire's planning legislation stems from the Standard State Zoning and Standard City Planning Enabling Acts, which were originally developed by the United States Department of Commerce in the 1920s. Adoption of the Standard State City Planning Act in 1935 by the New Hampshire State Legislature authorized towns and cities in New Hampshire to prepare, for the first time, official comprehensive plans for their jurisdictions.

Initially, there was a distinction between the terms "comprehensive plan" and "master plan" in New Hampshire's planning statutes. The New Hampshire planning statutes adopted pursuant to the Standard State Zoning Enabling Act required land use regulations to be in accordance with a "comprehensive plan." However, this term was not defined, and it was often confused with the term "master plan." In 1983, a major recodification of the statutes corrected this problem and had the overall effect of strengthening the role of planning in the state. It merged, into one planning statute, the provisions regarding comprehensive plans and master plans and made it clear that the adoption of a master plan is a prerequisite in order for a municipality to establish a zoning map

(New Hampshire Practice, Volume 15, Land Use, Planning & Zoning, 3rd Edition, Peter J. Loughlin, pgs. 55 and 56).

Some of the earliest master plans in New Hampshire were prepared by the cities of Keene (1945), Hanover (1957), and Dover (1960). During the 1960s and '70s, more communities across the state began to prepare plans, as federal funding for comprehensive planning was made available through urban planning grants. This funding was provided by the Housing and Home Finance Agency, under the provisions of Section 701 of the Housing Act of 1954, as amended.

Unfortunately, many of the early Section 701 comprehensive plans tended to be too heavy on data and too light on action steps, public participation, and implementation. The plans also underestimated the impact technology would have on community development. In many communities, a great number of residents were not even aware that plans existed. Those few residents who were aware generally perceived the comprehensive plan to be an ideal, a utopian vision of what a city or town should be like in 30 or 40 years. In fact, these 30- to 40-year comprehensive plans offered little guidance on how to get from the present to the future. They were ignored because "the future" was too far off. For this reason, use of the term "comprehensive plan" eventually fell out of favor.

It was not until the 1980s and '90s, however, that the term "master plan" became widely accepted. During this period, many more cities and towns across the state began to prepare master plans. The focus of planning shifted from a long-range vision to strategies designed to shape the near or more predictable future. As a result, 10- to 20-year plans became more common.

There were several reasons for this. First, growth, as measured most directly by population, was increasing dramatically, and cities and towns across New Hampshire were struggling to define and provide for this growth. Second, regional planning commissions came of age and could offer the professional and technical expertise needed by local governments to address growth-related problems. Third, a growing emphasis was being placed on the need for citizen participation in the planning process (see Staff Technical Report 2, Land Use Planning, July 1988, New Hampshire State Development Plan, NH OSP).

By 1988, roughly 144 of New Hampshire's 234 communities had adopted master plans (Planning for Growth in New Hampshire Communities: Perceptions and Efforts of Local Officials by D.E. Morris, J.D. Kline, and E.F. Jansen, Jr., New Hampshire Agriculture Experiment Station, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824, pg. 7).

Today almost all of New Hampshire's cities and towns have, at one time or another, adopted a town plan, a comprehensive plan, or a master plan (for more information on the status of master plans, see the New Hampshire Office of Energy and Planning Survey of Master Plans by Municipality, http://www.state.nh.us/osp/library/m.html#municipal_land use_regulations).

Between 1983 and 2002, few, if any, legislative changes were made to New Hampshire's planning statutes. Prior to May 2002, RSA 674:2 stated that all master plans should include, if appropriate or if specifically required as a prerequisite for the adoption of implementation measures, the following ten sections: (1) general Statement of objectives and principles; (2) land use; (3) housing; (4) transportation; (5) utility and public service; (6) community facilities; (7) recreation; (8) conservation and preservation; (9) construction materials; and (10) appendices or separate reports, where appropriate. According to RSA 674:18, the general statement and land use sections of the master plan must be adopted prior to the local legislative body adopting a zoning ordinance. With the adoption of House Bill 650 in May 2002, RSA 674:2 was amended to include references to smart growth and to include two mandatory sections, a vision and a land use section. It also allows a community to include up to thirteen other sections, as specified in the legislation (for a description of these sections, refer to Chapter 3, "What Should Be Included in Your Master Plan").

What Is a Master Plan?

In the simplest terms, a master plan is a planning document that serves to guide the overall character, physical form, growth, and development of a community. It describes how, why, where, and when to build or rebuild a city or town. It provides guidance to local officials when they are making decisions on budgets, ordinances, capital improvements, zoning and subdivision matters, and other growth-related issues.

A master plan also provides an opportunity for community leaders to look ahead, establish new visions and directions, set goals, and map out plans for the future. Properly done, a master plan should describe where, how, and at what pace a community desires to develop physically, economically, and socially. In short, a master plan functions much like a roadmap or a blueprint; it is a guide to the future.

As stated in NH OSP Technical Bulletin 3, *Formulating the Master Plan* (Spring 2003), a master plan is also a reference document. It contains the appropriate maps, charts, and supporting text to present the recommendations of the planning board and offers guidelines for community decision-makers.

A master plan also serves as a summary of local actions. It acts as a continuing reminder of what a community has agreed to accomplish within a specified time period. A master plan should not be engraved in stone, though; it can, and should, be reviewed and updated as conditions change within a community.

A master plan should also be a complete source of information about current conditions and trends within a community, a summary of the base data related to the town's development. By presenting coordinated policies on such topics as future growth and development, transportation, environmental protection, community facilities, and fiscal management, the master plan can help officials deal with change responsibly and guide growth in an orderly, constructive manner (NH OSP, Technical Bulletin 3, page 1).

A Master Plan Is

- a guide to the future
- a reference document
- a summary of local actions
- a source of information

New Hampshire planning statutes define the purpose and function of a master plan as follows:

RSA 674:2 Master Plan: Purpose and Description.
I. 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.

II. The master plan shall be a set of statements and land use and development principles for the municipality with such accompanying maps, diagrams, charts, and descriptions as to give legal standing to the implementation ordinances and other measures of the planning board. Each section of the master plan shall be consistent with the others in its implementation of the vision section. The master plan shall be a public record subject to the provisions of RSA 91-A.

As Provided by RSA 674:2, the Primary Purpose of a Master Plan Is

- to envision the best and most appropriate future development of your community
- to aid your planning board in designing ordinances
- to guide your planning board in performance of its duties, to achieve principles of smart growth, sound planning, and wise resource management
- to establish statements of land use and development principles
- to establish legal standing for implementation ordinances and other measures of your planning board

The Basic Characteristics of a Master Plan

As stated in *The Practice of Local Government Planning* (Hollander, Pollock, Reckinger, and Beal, 2d ed., Washington: International City Management Association, 1988, So and Getzels, editors, pp. 60-61), a master plan has the following characteristics:

• First, it is a **physical plan**. Although a reflection of social and economic values, the plan is fundamentally a guide to the physical development of the community. It translates values into a scheme that describes how, why, when, and where to build, rebuild, or preserve the community.

• A second characteristic is that it is l**ong-range**, covering a time period greater than one year, usually five years or more.

• A third characteristic of a general development plan is that it is **comprehensive**. It covers the entire city geographically – not merely one or more sections. It also encompasses all the functions that make a community work, such as transportation, housing, land use, utility systems, and recreation. Moreover, the plan considers the interrelationships of functions.

•Finally, the master plan is a **guide to decision-making** for the planning board, the governing board and mayor or manager.

Another important characteristic of the master plan is that it is a **statement of public policy**. The plan translates community values, desires, and visions into land use and development principles that can guide the future growth of your community. The policies of the plan provide the basis upon which public decisions can be made.

The Basic Characteristics of a Master Plan

- It's physical.
- It's long-range.
- It's comprehensive.
- It's a guide to decision making.
- It's a statement of public policy.

Legal Significance of a Master Plan

It is important to point out that a master plan is not a land use regulation, nor is it an ordinance of law. Thus, a master plan cannot be legally enforced. However, because a master plan serves as an official policy guide for a municipality, any ordinance pertaining to the use of land or the growth and development of the municipality should conform to the goals and policies of the plan. In short, "a carefully designed community land use plan is the basis for land use control" (Beck v. Town of Raymond 118 NH 793,800, 1978).

While the contents of a master plan may serve as a guide in the public and private development of land, a master plan is not binding upon municipal officials when they are making specific land use decisions. However, nothing in a master plan is intended to prohibit a court of law, in its consideration of governmental action, from considering the reasonableness of a plan or its appropriateness in relation to the governmental action under review.

As presently set forth by New Hampshire statutes, a master plan is a legal prerequisite for the following:

- adoption of a zoning ordinance (RSA 674:18)
- adoption of a historic district (RSA 674:46-a IV)
- establishment of a capital improvement program (RSA 674:6)
- adoption of a growth management ordinance (RSA 674:22)

RSA 674:18 Adoption of a Zoning Ordinance currently provides that "the local legislative body may adopt a zoning ordinance under RSA 674:16 only after the planning board has adopted the mandatory sections of the master plan as described in RSA 674:2, I and II."

As noted earlier, the mandatory sections of a master plan as provided by RSA 674:2 I and II are the vision and land use sections (for more information, see Chapter 3, "What Should Be Included in Your Master Plan"). Your community's master plan must include these two sections. Otherwise, your plan will not comply with RSA 674:18, as a prerequisite to the adoption of future zoning ordinances. This could also be understood to include any innovative land use controls under RSA 674:21.

Roles and Responsibilities in Preparing a Master Plan

The Planning Board

Under state statutes, the preparation of a master plan is the official duty and responsibility of the planning board (see RSA 674:1 as follows).

RSA 674:1 Duties of the Planning Board.
I. It shall be the duty of every planning board established under RSA 673:1 to prepare and amend from time to time a master plan to guide the development of the municipality. A master plan may include consideration of any areas outside the boundaries of the municipality that in the judgment of the planning board bear a relation to or have an impact on the planning of the municipality. Every planning board shall from time to time update and amend the adopted master plan with funds appropriated for that purpose by the local legislative body. In preparing, amending, and updating the master plan:
(a) The planning board shall have responsibility for promoting interest in, and understanding of, the master plan of the municipality. In order to promote this interest and understanding, the planning board may publish and distribute copies of the master plan, or copies of any report relating to the master plan, and may employ such other means of publicity and education as it may deem advisable.
(b) The planning board shall also have authority to make any investigation, maps and reports, and recommendations that relate to the planning and development of the municipality.

RSA 674:1 makes it clear that it is the official duty and responsibility of every planning board in New Hampshire to prepare and amend a master plan to guide the development of the municipality. While the statute is not clear as to when the plan must be prepared, it specifically states that "every planning board shall from time to time update and amend the adopted master plan with funds appropriated for that purpose by the local legislative body." Additionally, RSA 674:3 states that revisions to the plan are recommended every 5 to 10 years.

RSA 674:1 also provides that "the master plan may include consideration of any areas outside of the boundaries of the municipality which in the judgment of the planning board bear a relation to or have an impact on the planning of the municipality." This is an important consideration when addressing issues of regional concern (for more information about regional concerns, see Chapter 3,

"What Should Be Included in Your Master Plan"). RSA 674:1 further provides that the planning board shall be responsible for promoting an interest in and understanding of the master plan within the community and that to promote this interest, the board may publish and distribute copies of the plan or any reports related to the plan, or employ other means of publicity and education that it deems advisable. Finally, the planning board has the authority to make any investigations, maps, reports, and recommendations that relate to the planning and development of the municipality.

The Governing Body

There is currently no legal requirement that the governing body of your municipality must approve or adopt a master plan. However, elected officials are very influential in setting municipal policy on growth and development. Consequently, it is extremely important that your governing body participate and become actively involved in the planning process. By not including the governing body in the planning process, you could jeopardize the outcome or implementation of your plan.

Unless your master plan can be prepared strictly on a voluntary basis or by municipal staff, you will need the support of the governing body in recommending and/or appropriating the funding needed to prepare the plan. In a small town, the board of selectmen and the budget committee will recommend at town meeting whether or not funding should be approved. In a larger town or city, the city council appropriates funding through a budgetary process that typically involves the mayor, the budget committee, and the city manager.

The Town Planner

If your community employs a town planner, it would generally be that person's responsibility to help organize and facilitate the master planning process on behalf of the planning board. Depending upon the size of your community, though, the town planner may be busy with other duties and responsibilities. As a result, your community may need to seek the assistance of an outside planning consultant or utilize the services of the regional planning agency.

The Process of Preparing a Master Plan

Generally, preparing a master plan should be thought of as a forward-thinking process that will help to move a community from today's reality to tomorrow's possibilities. The word "process" is central to this view of planning. There are four processes involved in preparing a master plan: a legal process, a technical process, a public process, and a management process.

As a **legal process**, the development of a master plan is governed by principles, statutes, and codes. The legal authority for local planning is derived from the state. Local officials and community members must be cognizant of the state's enabling laws as they define the planning board's range of duties and responsibilities and the procedural requirements it must follow in the preparation and implementation of a master plan.

As a **technical process**, the preparation of a master plan begins once a community makes the decision to plan and commits the necessary time, energy, human resources, and money to do so. The decision to plan, although important, is meaningless without some framework capable of transforming intent into a planning document. Accordingly, an important technical concern involves the actual steps the planning board should follow to prepare, adopt, implement, and, where needed, update a master plan. Eight basic steps are identified on the next page and described in more detail in the following chapters.

In the real world, the planning process as outlined above does not always unfold in a neat, step-by-step manner. Planning boards must become accustomed to the fact that the process will not always proceed as planned. Accordingly, a planning board's ability to adjust and even improvise is important.

The Eight Steps of the Master Planning Process

Step 1:	Community visioning: engaging the public and developing vision statements, goals, and objectives
Step 2:	Data collection and inventory: preparing the community assessment and existing land use map
Step 3:	Data analysis: formulating future development scenarios based on vision statements, the community assessment, and land use maps
Step 4:	Evaluating future development scenarios
Step 5:	Selecting a preferred development scheme (the future land use map) and preparing and adopting a plan
Step 6:	Implementing the plan
Step 7:	Monitoring the plan
Step 8:	Amending and updating the plan

In addition to the legal and technical processes involved in master plan development is the public process. A planning board must decide what role the public will play. Increasingly, citizens are being asked by planning boards to perform key tasks associated with the development of a master plan. To this end, planning boards need to ask the following questions:

- Who are the key stakeholders in the community?
- How will they be involved in the process?
- What information will the board need from them and from the broader public?
- How will this information be secured?
- What mix of technical analysis and popular opinion will be needed?
- Will the plan be developed as a top-down exercise, a bottom-up effort, or a combination of the two?
- How will public involvement be structured and financed?
- How much time will be allowed for this public process?

Determining in advance how the public will be integrated into the master planning process is a fundamental challenge in preparing a plan.

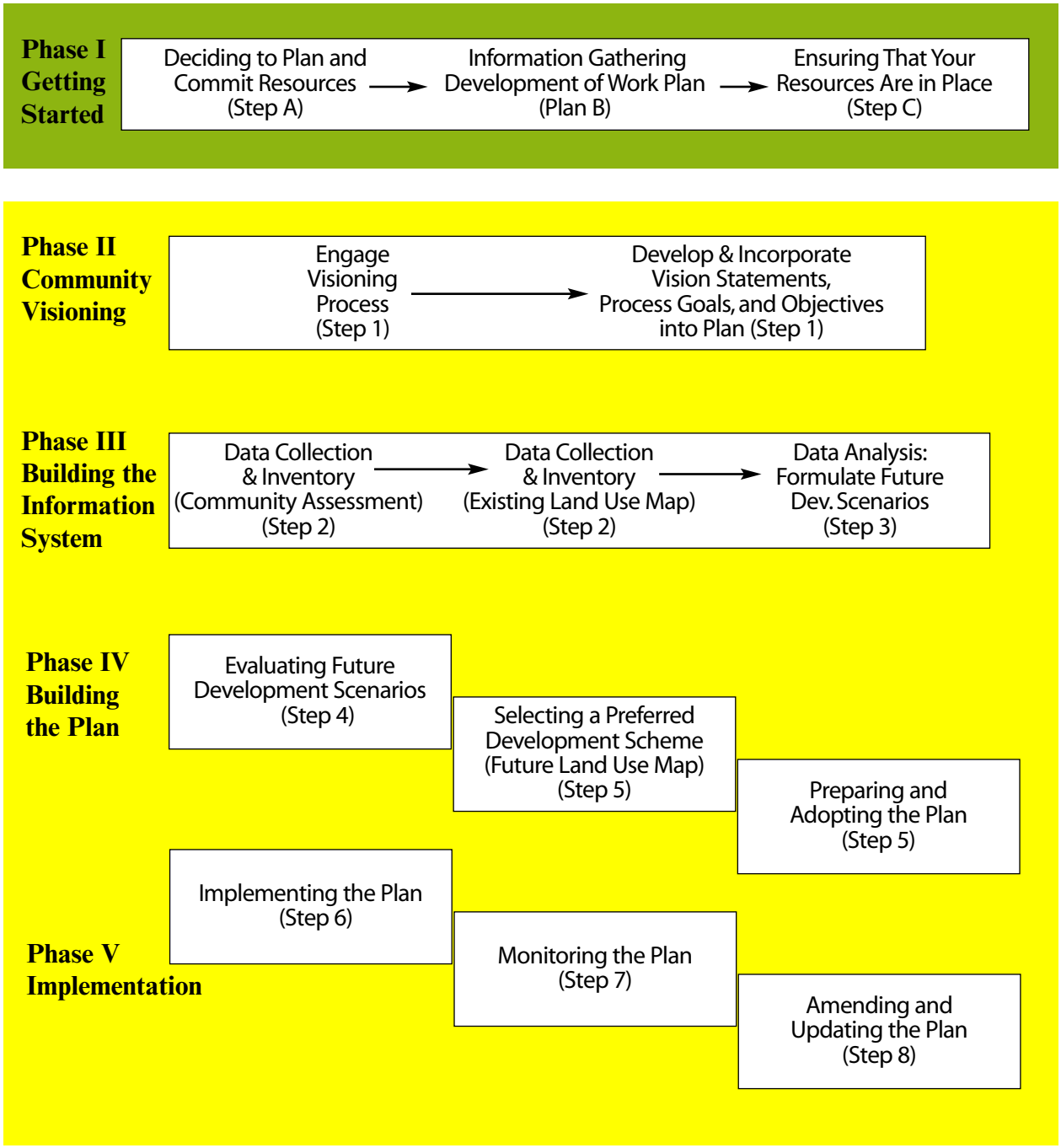
A final consideration involves the management of the planning process. In communities with professional planning staff, much of this will not require the board's attention. Conversely, in communities with limited staff resources, the planning board will have a greater management role. Irrespective of staff resources, however, most planning boards will need to deal with the following management issues:

- the planning board's internal organization
- the development of a work plan
- the establishment of a reporting and working relationship with the governing body

Preparing a master plan is not an easy task, but if the process is followed in an organized manner, it can be readily accomplished by almost anyone. How the planning process is managed and organized is a key factor in determining how well a master plan will turn out.

In this handbook, the eight steps of the master planning process have been organized into five phases: (I) getting started; (II) community visioning; (III) building the information system; (IV) building the plan; and (V) implementation. Each of these phases and the eight steps of the planning process are summarized in the following table and outline, as well as in the individual chapters of this handbook. This table is modeled somewhat after the planning process formatted by Daniels, Keller, and Lapping in the *Small Town Planning Handbook.*

The Master Planning Process



Outline of the Organizational Steps Involved in Preparing a Master Plan

The following outline is provided to help guide you through the organizational steps involved in preparing a master plan. For more detailed information about each phase and step in the process, refer to the individual chapters of this handbook. You can click on any step in the above outline and obtain more detailed information.

Organizational Steps Involved in Preparing a Master Plan

PHASE I: Getting Started

Step A Deciding to Plan and Commit Resources

1. Recognize When It Is Time to Plan

Your planning board has a duty and responsibility as required by state law to prepare and/or update your 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.

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 is strongly encouraged.

3. Prepare Cost Survey and Preliminary Budget

Once the decision is made to proceed, the planning board should, in coordination with elected officials, prepare an initial cost survey and a preliminary budget and timeline. The board should also determine: (1) how the plan should be prepared – by volunteers, by staff, by consultants, or by a combination of all three; (2) the type of master plan it wishes to prepare; and, (3) what sections should be included in the plan.

4. Seek Budget Approval

Upon completion of the planning board's preliminary budget, a warrant article or budget request is generally prepared and submitted for public approval at town meeting or city council budget hearings.

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

(See the *Summary of Action Steps in Developing Your Work Plan* on page 36)

Step C Ensuring That Your Resources Are in Place

1. Double-check Your Funding and Staff/Volunteer Resources

Once you have the commitment to proceed, verify that your funding, staff, volunteers, consultants (if needed), and equipment are in place. This includes working with your town planner and/or municipal finance department to obtain authority for proper funding expenditures/contracts.

2. Appoint a Master Plan Advisory Committee (Optional)

If desirable, the planning board can appoint a master plan advisory committee to assist with preparing the plan. Responsibilities could include organizing the community visioning process and preparing the community assessment studies.

PHASE II: Community Visioning

The eight basic steps of the master planning process begin here.

Step 1: Community Visioning: Engaging the Public and Developing Vision Statements, Goals, and Objectives

Your community visioning process can be carried out by local volunteers or by the UNH Cooperative Extension Community Profile Program (see http://ceinfo.unh.edu/commprof.htm) or by consultants working through the planning board or master plan advisory committee. The desired outcome is to develop community-supported vision statements, goals, and objectives for your master plan.

PHASE III: Building the Information System

Step 2: Data Collection and Inventory: Preparing the Community Assessment and Existing Land Use Map

Typically the planning board, master plan advisory committee, volunteers, staff, and/or consultants prepare your community assessment (a study of population, housing, economic activity, and natural, historical, and cultural resources), as well as the existing land use map of your community. At the same time, data is collected for the various sections of your plan.

Step 3: Data Analysis: Formulate Future Development Scenarios Based on Vision Statements, the Community Assessment, and Land Use Maps

As you prepare your plan, the results of your visioning process and community assessment, in combination with existing land use maps, can be used to identify a variety of future growth and development scenarios for your community. These scenarios can then be laid out and reviewed by your board.

PHASE IV: Building the Plan

Step 4: Data Evaluation: Considering Future Development Scenarios

The evaluation process begins by comparing the advantages and disadvantages of each future development scenario; utilizing your vision statements, information from your community assessment, and existing land use maps; and considering citizen preferences.

Step 5: Selecting a Preferred Development Scheme (Future Land Use Map) and Preparing and Adopting a Plan

Once the growth areas are identified in your community and a preferred development scheme is selected, the future land use map is basically done, and the final draft of the master plan can then be prepared and adopted. Public hearings are held on the plan in accordance with RSA 675:7.

PHASE V: Implementation

Step 6: Implementing the Plan

Typically an implementation strategy is included in a master plan, identifying how, when, and by whom the recommendations of the plan are to be implemented.

Step 7: Monitoring the Plan

After your plan has been adopted by the planning board, it is important to keep track of how well it is being implemented. It should be monitored on an annual basis.

Step 8: Amending and Updating the Plan

RSA 674:3 recommends that revisions to your plan be considered every 5 to 10 years.

What Makes a Good Plan?

The Massachusetts Pioneer Valley Planning Commission's *Planner on a Disc* identifies aspects of a good plan and questions to ask.

- A good plan communicates a sense of place and an understanding of what is special about your community and region.
- It tells a story!
- What was the community like in the past, and what is it like today?
- How is the community changing, and what will the community be like in the future, if present trends continue?
- What are the qualities that give the community a sense of place and that people value?
- What are the forces of change acting on the community?
- A good plan describes alternative futures and the likely consequences of alternative courses of action.
- It reminds citizens and local officials that no outcome is preordained or inevitable; the choices communities make do make a difference.
- It expresses a compelling vision of what residents desire the community to be like in the future.
- It expresses a community's deepest-held aspirations.
- It inspires and offers hope.
- It presents essential data – but not too much.
- It is not padded with data that is not directly pertinent to the substance of the plan and therefore is not so heavy that people are discouraged from taking it with them to community meetings.
- All figures, charts, tables, and maps contained in the plan are included for a reason, because they shed a light on important issues addressed in the plan. (Tables, charts, and graphs presenting interesting but non-essential data are placed in a separate appendix, rather than in the main body of the plan.)
- It puts forward goals and objectives that are capable of being translated into specific policies and actions.
- It avoids goal statements so general that they cannot be meaningfully interpreted or applied in practice.
- It identifies indicators for measuring progress toward meeting specific goals.
- It is realistic. It does not attempt the impossible. It does not put forward goals and objectives without identifying how those goals and objectives might be achieved.
- It results from the process that was used in preparing the plan.
- It is fair and equitable and attempts to balance competing interests.
- It strives to balance development needs against the need to conserve and protect environmental resources. Its aim is to achieve a pattern of land use and development that is sustainable.
- It lets developers know the type of development the community wants – not just what the community does not want – and encourages development in areas most suitable for development.
- It encourages people to think about what is best for the whole community – not just for their neighborhood or for them individually – and about the interests of future residents as well as those of current residents.
- It is packaged and presented in a way that encourages citizens to want to read it. People care about the places where they live and work. They want to know what is happening (and likely to happen) to their community. Do not discourage them from seeking this information by producing a dull or dry plan.