



Strafford Regional Planning Commission

“Planning and action for sustainable development and an improved quality of life.”

Fact Sheet

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Regional and Municipal Master Plans - Purpose, Content and Format for Better Decision Making

Introduction

The Strafford Regional Planning Commission (SRPC) and municipalities are updating their policies and implementation strategies to address major growth/development and conservation issues. These policies and implementation strategies are documented in the Regional and municipal Master Plans. While the Regional Master Plan should set the context for municipal Master Plans and the Regional Master Plan also should respond to local municipal needs. To facilitate this interaction, this Fact Sheet describes the purpose, issues or content to be addressed in each Master Plan and recommends a model format to improve their usefulness for decision making and achieving sustainable development and an improved quality of life for all citizens in the Region.

A Regional Master Plan

New Hampshire law states:

“It shall be the duty of a regional planning commission to prepare a comprehensive master plan for the development of the region within its jurisdiction, including the commission’s recommendations, among other things, for the:

- 1. Use of land within the region;*
- 2. General location, extent, type of use, and character of highways, major streets, intersections, parking lots, railroads, aircraft landing areas, waterways and bridges, and other means of transportation, communication, and other purposes;*
- 3. Development, extent, and general location of parks, playgrounds, shore front developments, parkways, and other public reservations and recreation areas;*
- 4. Location, type, and character of public buildings, schools, community centers, and other public property;*

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5. *Improvement, redevelopment, rehabilitation, or conservation of residential, business, industrial and other areas; including the development of programs for the modernization and coordination of buildings, housing, zoning and subdivision regulations of municipalities and their enforcement on a coordinated and unified basis.”*

New Hampshire law also states:

“In preparing a comprehensive plan for the development of the region within its jurisdiction, each regional planning commission may use the framework for the state’s comprehensive development plan in RSA 9-A: 1.”

This framework applied to a region includes:

- I. *“A Comprehensive Development Plan that establishes (regional) policy on development related to issues and proposes new or expanded programs to implement such policies. Such plan shall provide a basis for identifying critical issues facing the (region), determining (regional) priorities, allocating limited regional resources, and taking into account the plans of various state, regional, and local governmental units.”*
- II. *“The Comprehensive Development Plan shall establish policies in areas related to the orderly physical, social and economic growth and development of the (region).”*
- III. *“The comprehensive plan shall include:*
 - (a) *(Regional) policies to provide for the orderly growth and development of the region and to maximize smart growth.*
 - (b) *Goals and policies which are relevant to the topical areas included in the plan, including but not limited to:*
 - (1) *An overall vision section that serves as the direction for the other sections of the plan. This section shall contain a set of statements, which articulates the desires of the public relative to the future. It shall contain a set of guiding principles and priorities to implement that vision, with special emphasis on maximizing the smart growth principles in RSA 9-B.*
 - (2) *A land use section.*
 - (3) *A transportation section...*
 - (4) *A public facilities section...*
 - (5) *A housing section...*
 - (6) *An economic development section...*
 - (7) *A natural resources section...*
 - (8) *A natural hazards section...*
 - (9) *A recreation section...*
 - (10) *A utility and public service section...*
 - (11) *A local concerns section...*
 - (12) *A cultural and historic resources section...*
 - (13) *An implementation section...”*

(Please see attached for section descriptions.)

In addition, New Hampshire law states:

“For the purpose of assisting municipalities in complying with RSA 674:2,III (m), each regional planning commission shall compile a regional housing needs assessment, which shall include an assessment of the regional need for housing for persons and families of all levels of income. The regional housing needs assessment shall be updated every 5 years and made available to all municipalities in the planning region.”

A Municipal Master Plan

New Hampshire law (RSA 674:2) describes the purpose and structure of a municipal Master Plan as follows:

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.*

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 (i.e. pertaining to access to public records and meetings.).

The Master Plan shall include, at a minimum, the following sections:

- *A vision section that serves to direct the other sections of the plan. This section shall contain a set of statements, which articulate the desires of the citizens affected by the Master Plan, not only for their locality but for the region and the whole state. It shall contain a set of guiding principles and priorities to implement that vision.*
- *A land use section upon which all the following sections shall be based. This section shall translate the vision statements into physical terms. Based on a study of population, economic activity, and natural, historic, and cultural resources, it shall show existing conditions and the proposed location, extent, and intensity of future land use.*
- *The Master Plan may also include the following sections: transportation, community facilities, economic development, natural resources, natural hazards, recreation, utility and public*

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services, cultural and historic resources, regional concerns, neighborhood plans, community design, housing and implementation. (See RSA 674:2III.)

Thus, a Regional or Municipal Master Plan is:

- A long range, comprehensive description of what the region or municipality wants and how to achieve it.
- A commitment to take action.
- Official public policy. The Planning Board adopts it after public notice and hearings.
- A guide to make decisions about community development and preservation issues. The issues may range from water resource protection and residential development to transportation improvements and community facilities and services.
- The basis for implementation programs or projects including but not limited to: land use and development ordinances (e.g. zoning ordinance, street and highways ordinance, growth management ordinance), regulations (e.g. subdivision regulations, site plan review regulations), capital improvement programming, downtown center development and beautification, open space or land conservation, and other programs and projects to improve the quality of life in the region.

In summary, citizens and officials should view the Master Plan like a municipal code that codifies policies and implementation strategies that can be updated as required.

Regional or Municipal Master Plan – Format for Better Decision Making

In this context and to make the Master Plan a more useful document for decision making, the following format has been established for the Regional Master Plan is recommended for municipal Master Plans.

The Master Plan should be divided into for parts:

- I. Introduction
- II. Policies and Implementation Strategies
- III. Implementation Program
- IV. Appendix

Part I Introduction

The Introduction should describe the regional or municipal authority for preparing a Master Plan and the Master Plan’s purpose, use and status / adoption or amendment history.

Part II Policies and Implementation Strategies

The Policies and Implementation Strategies part includes Policies (i.e., goals, principles and standards) and Implementation Strategies to address issues faced by the region or municipality. Typically there are within the categories listed in the State RSA. However, they all should be aimed at defining and achieving a quality, sustainable pattern of development within the Region or municipality.

Policies and Implementation Strategies are defined as follows:

Policies

What citizens want.

Policy Goals

General statements expressing citizens’ desires or what the citizens want to achieve relative to an issue.

(e.g., Natural resources protected to ensure their sustainability to meet community needs.)

Policy Principles

More specific statements expressing citizens’ desires and a commitment to what they want to achieve.

(e.g., Water quantity and quality will be managed and protected.)

Policy Standards

Specific quantitative or qualitative statements that express what the citizen’s want, and establish the legislative basis for zoning and ordinance requirements or regulations.

Examples include:

- The Low Density Residential Area will have a density of one dwelling per two acres.
- The statements in the document “*Buffers for Wetlands and Surface Waters: A Guidebook for New Hampshire Municipalities*” establishing surface water buffer widths aimed at minimizing water quality degradation and providing wildlife habitat.

Implementation Strategies

How citizens will achieve it.

Actions to achieve results.

For example:

- Acquire lands adjacent municipal water wells.

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- Amend the zoning ordinance to prohibit land uses within the municipal water well head protection area that may pollute municipal water wells.

(Comment on Achieving Quality and the Importance of
Setting Policy Standards)

Achieving a quality community, in part, means meeting current standards or setting new standards for development. If *quality* is defined as conformance to a standard, then continually improving quality means continually setting and achieving higher standards for excellence in planning, design, development, service, and operations.

Citizens drive the standards: their aspirations, expectations, goals and principles.

Setting standards and monitoring progress will enable the region to:

- Enable sustainable development.
- Retain and improve the quality of life.
- Promote economic opportunity.
- Promote health and safety.
- Promote environmental conservation, protection and management.
- Promote educational opportunity.

The Regional Master Plan will describe these standards. Some exist in current local ordinances and regulations. Others will need to be prepared and adopted over time. Achieving these standards will result in attaining the vision of a quality, sustainable community.

Part III Implementation Program

The Implementation Program is a list or schedule of all the Implementation Strategies and indicates its priority or when it is to be accomplished and who is responsible for accomplishing it. The Implementation Program should be reviewed annually and used by elected officials, budget committees, planning boards and other committees and staff to identify annual projects set priorities and fix budgets.

Part IV Appendix

The Appendix includes all the research and analysis completed that establishes the basis for

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the adopted policies and implementation strategies. In the past this has been mixed in with the policies and implementation strategies. However, it is more appropriate as backup descriptive information rather than the policy. For example the state law code does not include all the public hearing information that supports the law. It only includes the law. The same should apply to Master Plans. Sorting this out will make the Master Plan more clear and useful for public understanding of where the region or municipality is going and how it intends to get there.

The attached Table of Contents illustrates an example of how these Master Plan Parts and the Policy and Implementation Strategies' sections are organized for the Strafford Regional Master Plan.

Conclusion

The Master Plan is an important document. It is not law, but it sets the basis for laws to guide growth and development. Thus, its content and format are very important so it can be used frequently to improve decision-making and achieve sustainable development and an improved quality of life for all citizens in the Region.

Strafford Regional Master Plan

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* Work In Progress