



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to write about Princeton without resorting to words that outsiders would dismiss as little more than a nostalgic description of a New England small town. The fact is that Princeton is peerlessly beautiful, and if it were possible to erect a wall at the town line of any community, Princeton ranks high on the list of places that people would want to keep just the way it is now. However, the Princeton we cherish today is not the same as it was 50 years ago, and the Princeton that residents cherish tomorrow will not be the same as it is today. The challenge for any master plan, and particularly this one, is to identify pathways for shaping change so that unmanaged growth does not destroy a community's heritage.

COMMUNITY CHARACTER

Princeton offers breathtaking vistas and magnificent open space, and as one resident said at a public meeting for this master plan, "plenty of elbow room." Many people attribute Princeton's beauty to the large tracts of undisturbed land that extend across much of the town. A member of the planning board also observed that it seems as though one could drive for miles in Princeton and never see a house. Indeed, the impression of Wachusett Mountain etched against the horizon and long, tree-lined roads lead some people to equate Princeton with a vacation getaway.

The view from Princeton's roads recalls a past that has been lost in countless Massachusetts communities. The vistas from Mountain Road, the agricultural fields that can be seen all over town, and winding, rural roadways that cross seamlessly through the forests all help to explain the sense



Historic Silas Fay Barn on Allen Hill Road, built ca. 1812.
(Photo by Joyce Anderson, Princeton Historical Commission.)

that open space is Princeton's key character-defining asset.

Princeton has even more assets that distinguish it from other places and make it a home town for 3,700 people. Princeton would not be all that it is without the prevalence of historic residences and barns at every turn, or the civic and institutional buildings and the Town Common in Princeton Center. East Princeton's special character is influenced not only by the course of Keyes Brook, but also the historic development pattern that formed here because the land had access to flowing water.

Towns are places in which people live, work, celebrate their traditions, send their children to school, pay taxes and decide how to govern their affairs. Without homes, a town hall, a post office, a library, churches and schools, the requisite coffee shop or a small store, there would be no town at all. Sometimes it is hard for communities to

recognize that but for changes made at the hands of generations past – changes brought about by people who needed to work, make a living and support their families – today’s residents would not have the historic homes they live in or the barns and stone walls they appreciate. The relationship between natural and cultural resources defines each town’s character and sense of place, and this is plainly obvious in Princeton.

EARLIER PLANS

Princeton commissioned a master plan in 1970 and updated it three times between 1970 and the late 1980s. In the first plan, planner Carol Thomas characterized the town in terms that will sound familiar to residents today. She described Princeton as “a rural, scenic, residential community with an abundance of open space and almost unlimited potential for outdoor recreation...[and] prime territory for the city-weary who are searching for the solitude and beauty that abounds there.” She cautioned town officials at the time that “...in-migration will not happen overnight; instead, it will be gradual utilization of the beautiful countryside.” Accordingly, Thomas urged Princeton “to direct future growth before uncontrolled development takes place.”¹ Growth and change *do* happen, often at the expense of what people value in their communities.

The vision of the first plan included some ideas that contemporary planners would think of as “smart growth” in the context of a small rural town. For example, Thomas suggested that Princeton devote some land to moderate-density housing and small businesses near villages or activity centers, and reduce the permissible density of development in outlying parts of town. She also said the town could do without so much industrially zoned land, for Princeton’s location, topography and limited public utilities all suggested a low probability of future industrial development.



The David Rice House, 113 Old Colony Road. (Photo by Joyce Anderson, Princeton Historical Commission.)

Moreover, she pointed out that Princeton had unwittingly zoned its business districts for strip commercial development due to the length and narrow width of the few areas zoned for business uses.

Several of the observations that Carol Thomas made nearly 40 years ago were echoed by the authors of subsequent master plan updates, and they remain true in 2007. It has been hard for Princeton to carry out the kind of planning and zoning initiatives that would help to preserve its beautiful countryside. Princeton still has lots of open space, much of it protected from development because the state and non-profit organizations have acquired large amounts of land here. In addition, some of the town’s private landowners have agreed to place use restrictions on their property. Unfortunately, Princeton also has many acres of unprotected countryside and very few tools at its disposal to shape change in the future. The central objective of this Master Plan is to equip Princeton with the tools it needs to guide development to appropriate locations and safeguard the natural and historic built assets that make the town unique.

¹ Universal Engineering, Thomas Associates Division, *Princeton Town Plan 1970*, 10-11.

PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCETON

Residents think of Princeton as a safe, caring community with civic pride and respect for the past. While they appreciate being close to goods and services elsewhere in the Wachusett region, Princeton residents are not particularly interested in bringing commercial development into their own town. There is no question that residents love the town and appreciate all that it has to offer. They speak of it fondly, at times reverently. “Remarkable people,” “talented population,” “civility” and “cultural tolerance” exemplify the ways that residents speak of their neighbors. They hold their schools and town government in unusually high regard, and they value Princeton’s social traditions, too. They cite occasions like the Memorial Day celebration, the Labor Day tennis tournament or concerts on the Town Common as important community-building events.

It would be wrong to say that Princeton residents agree on everything, though. Their seemingly unanimous desire to preserve Princeton’s open space sometimes masks the issues that leave people conflicted about what they want for the future of their town. For example, some residents think Princeton should do more to provide affordable housing, but the prospect of comprehensive permits under Chapter 40B frightens just about everyone. The perception of Chapter 40B as a threat is conspicuously strong here. Princeton’s concerns about comprehensive permits are noteworthy because the town has only one small elderly housing development. So far, it has not attracted the types of affordable housing that people seem to fear: large, awkward multi-family buildings surrounded by blacktop on land once treasured as open space. The degree of anxiety about Chapter 40B at the outset of the master plan process started to make sense when a resident attending one of the community meetings said Princeton is threatened by its own adversarial approach to land use change.



Princeton residents have access to outdoor recreation opportunities throughout the year and all over town. (Upper photo supplied by Alan Sentkowski, lower photo by Gail Lever.)



People also have different ideas about the public purposes that open space should serve. Today, undeveloped land in Princeton provides outdoor recreation opportunities, supports wildlife habitat and agriculture, and protects regional water supplies. While a large percentage of Princeton’s open land is permanently protected from development, the same protected land is also heavily restricted land. As unrestricted vacant land continues to decline, traditional rural activities such as hunting, fishing, farming or horseback riding may begin to decline as well.

Princeton has very limited infrastructure, including few sidewalks, no public water or sewer

service, and lots of narrow, winding roads, some unpaved. These factors contribute to the town's rural image, but they also reduce Princeton's options to guide future growth and increase the risk that it will evolve into the low-density suburb foreseen in the first master plan. Residents worry about the impact of traffic on pedestrian safety and the quality of life in their town, and they are particularly concerned about through traffic. Still, Princeton made a conscious choice long ago to locate businesses on the outskirts of town, which means its own residents have no choice but to drive for convenience goods and services. What is "elbow room" to some people can be reinterpreted as "spread-out" by others.

Finally, there is a sense that Princeton's quality of life is threatened by forces outside the town's control. New growth in neighboring towns means more people vying for house lots in an area that is gradually becoming suburban, more cars vying for space on the region's rural roads, and more demands on the regional school district.

When the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) began to publish community profiles in 1994, each city and town was asked to supply a brief summary of important facts, local history and unique characteristics. The narrative submitted by Princeton reads, in part:

The town is very small, a community which desires, at least on the part of many of its residents, to resist any urbanization and to maintain its rural character as much as possible. It is commonly said that new residents, once they have settled down, feel that Princeton should shut the town gates and restrict its population. It is difficult to categorize all the factors which bring about a sense of proprietorship in newcomers as well as in those who have lived in town all their lives, but residents affirm without fear of exaggeration that those who come seem to feel they have discovered the place.



Wachusett Meadow Wildlife Sanctuary off Goodnow Road.
(Photo by Community Opportunities Group, Inc.)

It is true that many Princeton residents do not want more growth. They are attracted to the town because it is small, beautiful, prestigious and relatively undeveloped, and like residents of any other community they want to keep what they have. Disdain for growth is hardly confined to Princeton, but compared to most towns in the Commonwealth, Princeton has a lot to lose.

To people opposed to growth, taking steps to manage it may seem contradictory to all that they hold dear. Managing growth means directing development toward some areas in order to protect other areas. It requires putting environmental protection and social fairness ahead of individual interests, and planning for growth according to the long-term resource needs of local and regional populations. Growth management means balance by design: balanced growth that saves land, builds

places to live and work, avoids the economic, fiscal and environmental costs of sprawl, and promotes socially inclusive communities. Princeton does have opportunities to provide for development and still protect the qualities that residents love about their town. The challenge is to seize those opportunities before they disappear.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Very few towns could assemble as many volunteers as Princeton recruited to work on this Master Plan. The nine-member Master Plan Steering Committee (MPSC) held 16 regular meetings and two implementation workshops, and sponsored three community meetings between July 2005 and May 2007. In addition, each MPSC member served on at least one subcommittee. The eight subcommittees participating in the Master Plan process attracted more than 50 members and held about 60 meetings. Throughout, one member of the MPSC maintained a website devoted to the Master Plan so that residents could stay informed as the process unfolded.

The subcommittees were remarkable. Some met on numerous occasions and consulted with a variety of people not directly involved with the master plan's development. Rather than rely on the MPSC to coordinate their work or resolve occasional disagreements, the subcommittees took the initiative to communicate on their own. They drafted, revised and perfected the goals for the master plan elements they were asked to oversee, and they gave countless hours to help the consulting team locate information.

Most participants in the community meetings recognized that Princeton has opportunities to gain control over its future. They cited open space-residential development and the Community Preservation Act (CPA) as preservation tools that Princeton could adopt, and some think the town should make better use its own natural resources for economic and tax base development. Concepts such as eco-tourism and agri-tourism



Princeton is special not only because of its beauty, but also because its residents care deeply about the town, each other, and the rural ways of life they want to preserve. *(Photos supplied by Master Plan Steering Committee.)*



came to mind, but Princeton residents also imagined harnessing the power of wind for electricity – thoughts inspired by the efforts of their own municipal light department.

Moreover, there was an implied recognition of the Master Plan process itself as an opportunity, for residents seem to agree that accomplishing good things for the town requires a plan – whether for saving open space, connecting trails or guiding commercial development. Viewed in their entirety, the opportunities perceived by Princeton residents suggest a sense of hope for the town's future.

MASTER PLAN GOALS AND POLICIES

The implementation element of the Master Plan is guided by the following community goals, which were developed and refined by the subcommittees and ratified by the MPSC.

Land Use

- **Countryside.** Maintain the country qualities of Princeton by preserving the trees, stone walls, agricultural fields, tree-lined roads, vistas and historic homes.
- **Villages.** Community planning efforts should promote village concepts that are consistent with Princeton's vision statement and recognizing that the areas of East Princeton, Post Office Place and the Town Center require special attention and zoning strategies tailored to unique local conditions.
- **Consistency.** Revise Princeton's zoning bylaw and other regulations to support and be consistent with Princeton's vision statement.

Open Space & Natural Resources

- **Visual.** From the roadways continue to view open fields, forests, stone walls, and shade-covered roads that open up to scenic vistas.
- **Physical.** Experience Princeton's natural beauty via a network of trails that connect to one another with minimum road use.
- **Ecological.** Continue to provide an environment that sustains wildlife.
- **Environmental Responsibility.** Strengthen Princeton's role as a leader in ecological and environmental concern.



Barn at 21 Greogry Hill Road. (Photo by Joyce Anderson, Princeton Historical Commission.)

Housing

- **Town Character.** Create housing policies and procedures that will help to promote and protect Princeton's rural character and scenic views.
- **Housing Diversity.** Create residential development regulations and policies that will allow a broader mix of housing choices.
- **Interconnected Neighborhoods.** Adopt zoning policies and planning board regulations that encourage interconnected neighborhoods and recreation lands.
- **Affordable Housing.** Adopt an effective strategy to assure that comprehensive permit developments are well designed, consistent with local needs, conscious of impacts on the town, and compatible with the goals of the Master Plan.

Economic Development

- **Business Districts.** Reduce the number of business zones to enhance the viability of desired commercial activity.
- **Town Center.** Maintain the Town Center as a predominately governmental & cultural area.
- **Economic Incentives to Preserve Land.** Take steps to encourage businesses that maintain Princeton's rural character.
- **Local Artists.** Promote the work of local artists and craftsmen.
- **At-Home Businesses.** Allow entrepreneurial activities that are compatible with residential neighborhoods.
- **Government-Business Partnerships.** Improve communication among local businesses, town government and potential developers.

Historic Preservation

- **Artifacts & Documents.** Preserve Princeton's historical artifacts and documents.
- **Public Education.** Continue to educate current and future generations about Princeton's history and its importance.
- **Preservation.** Maintain our legacy of historic buildings, sites and landmarks – public and privately owned.

Transportation

- **Roads Plan.** Implement the Roads Advisory Committee's Six-Year Plan for reconstructing roads in Princeton.
- **Route 140.** Improve the Route 140 corridor through East Princeton for vehicle and pedestrian safety.



The church and the Rev. Clark House in Princeton's historic town center. (Photo by Joyce Anderson, Princeton Historical Commission.)

- **Trail Connections.** Enhance trail system connections and access coordination with the Open Space Committee.
- **Trail System Development.** Investigate the feasibility of developing bike paths and walking trails, utilizing public ways and the railroad right-of-way.
- **Scenic Roads.** Reach agreement about the criteria that are needed to maintain the rural character of Princeton roads.

Community Services & Facilities

- **Public Safety.** Preserve appropriate public safety standards through a long-term ambulance policy and maintaining the proficiency and competence of public safety personnel.
- **Asset Management.** Develop an asset management plan, including mechanisms for the acquisition and disposition of town-owned buildings, land, and public safety and public works equipment.
- **Infrastructure Improvements.** Maintain and improve essential infrastructure, including roads, technology and the wind farm.

- **Staffing and Space Needs.** Analyze and plan for staffing and space needs for municipal buildings, cultural facilities and a public safety complex.
- **Retention and Recruitment of Volunteers.** Provide technology, professional support, recognition programs and uniform policies to enhance the work of town boards, commissions and committees and to retain qualified volunteers.
- **Community Events.** Promote and support community events and festivals to connect townspeople, nurture community pride, and sustain Princeton's culture of outdoor recreation.
- **Financing Town Services.** Work toward self-sustainability of programs from potential fee-based services.
- **Regionalization of Services.** Support efforts to regionalize services with neighboring towns where beneficial.



Princeton public buildings needing priority attention: Mechanics Hall in East Princeton and the Public Safety Building in Princeton Center.
(Photos by Community Opportunities Group, Inc.)

