

**SOUTHAMPTON MASTER PLAN
COMMUNITY/STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS SUMMARY
January 2010**

Consultant Report

*Pioneer Valley Planning Commission
60 Congress Street
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Overview

Community / stakeholder interviews were the first opportunity in the Southampton master planning process to engage the public in a meaningful discussion about the long-range issues and opportunities the community will face over the next 10-20 years. This interview format is an effective method of obtaining a large volume of public opinion during a short period of time, and can help both the community and the consultant team pinpoint some of the key issues and concerns that will need to be addressed in the plan.

Interviews with community members were held from December 10-11, 2009 at the Edwards Library as the first step toward gathering information about Southampton for the development of the town's master plan. The purpose of the interviews was to listen to Southampton residents, employers, and employees and hear their thoughts on pressing issues facing the community, and recommendations for improving the quality of life in town.

Master Plan Committee members identified key community stakeholders that should be interviewed as part of this public participation process. Interviews were also open to the general public. The interviewees included town staff, town committee members, owners and employees of town businesses, and active and interested residents.

Seventy-one people were interviewed over the two day session. Each interview session was 50 minutes and ranged from 2-6 people per interview group. Stakeholders of varying interests were grouped together in order to encourage a dynamic discussion. Participants were encouraged to speak honestly and openly, with no names attributed to their comments. The interviewees were asked to answer the following questions in their interview session:

- What issues does Southampton face today and in the future?
- What do you like and dislike about Southampton?
- If money were no object, what recommendations would you have to plan or Southampton's future?
- Do you have any questions regarding the master plan process or the town in general?

Key Issues and Debates

The biggest challenge that Southampton faces as it proceeds in this planning process is coming to a consensus on the *town's identity*. Residents value the town's rural character and agricultural heritage, but there is no doubt that Southampton is transitioning to a bedroom community in the region. As one of the fastest growing communities in the Pioneer Valley, people are moving to Southampton for its rural character, quality school system, and quick access to major transportation routes. Stakeholders were concerned with the increase of residential development in Southampton in recent years, and are looking for ways to manage this type of growth in order to protect the rural character.

To many interviewees, a way to maintain the rural character in Southampton was to increase the *lot size* and frontage requirements for new residential development. Other interviewees believed this type of development only increases the cost of land and housing in town, making Southampton unaffordable. Smaller lot sizes in appropriate areas could address this issue, but could be in conflict with the opinion of some residents that this type of development is not "rural" in character.

This decision on town identity will also play a role in maintaining a *healthy tax base*. Are homeowners willing to shoulder the majority of taxes in order to maintain the rural character? Or should the community consider diversifying the tax base by permitting more commercial and industrial development? Can the community afford to limit residential, commercial, and industrial growth and still maintain town services? Are there new town services that residents would like, but cannot afford at this time? Would these services be a detriment to the community's "rural" character?

As the community moves forward in this planning process, it will be important for residents to determine the right *balance* on how to maintain its sense of place and acknowledge Southampton's role in the region as a growing bedroom community to the greater Northampton and Springfield area. Should Southampton try to remain a rural town or become a bedroom community? Can it be both? The answer to these questions will affect the overarching goals of the master plan, as well as future economic development policy, level of town services, infrastructure improvements, and town facility upgrades.

The Master Plan Committee and town residents will be able to continue this discussion and decide a vision for the community in additional public engagement activities to be held in Winter / Spring 2010.

Summary of Interview Results

Strongest Likes: Rural, historic character, farms, proximity to everything (jobs, shopping, culture, and recreation), calm & quiet atmosphere, quality school system, people know each other.

Strongest Dislikes: Rapid unplanned growth, lack of citizen interest in town government, personal interests governing town boards/committees, town budget woes, lack of community gathering spots.

Diversification of the Tax Base

Many interviewees acknowledged the need for the town to diversify its tax base to lessen the tax burden on residents and to expand town services. At the same time, some interviewees questioned if these actions were necessary if the town truly wanted to stay a rural town.

Undecided on the need for infrastructure upgrades

Many interviewees cited the need for a sewer system to attract additional commercial and industrial businesses to help diversify the tax base. It was also noted that the town lacks a network of gas lines, which industrial businesses desire for their operations. Most interviewees acknowledged that such upgrades could bring unwanted growth and development and, for this reason, cited the need for the town to carefully plan where such infrastructure upgrades will occur.

Uncertainty about growing Southampton's industrial base

Interviewees agreed that the town cannot realistically grow industry in town without sewer and gas lines. Many interviewees noted that it would not be worth the town's time and money to attract industry to town when the northern end of Westfield is already better suited for industry in terms of location, infrastructure, and availability of space.

Retain and support small businesses

All interviewees spoke positively about Southampton's economic base of small businesses. They struggled with how the town could increase the number of businesses to generate additional tax-based revenues while maintaining the historic character of Route 10 and that of the overall town. Many feared that Route 10 would eventually evolve into looking like Route 9 in Hadley. Many interviewees strongly disliked the new car wash along Route 10 in the northern part of town and viewed it as symbolic of unnecessary commercial sprawl. Interviewees also noted that they do not mind driving to neighboring communities for goods and services and claimed that

people should not expect these services in town if they want Southampton to stay rural. There was support for a farmers market. Existing business owners who were interviewed stated that they found town staff and boards supportive of small business.

Revision of town zoning bylaws and town codes

Interviewees agreed that town zoning bylaws are outdated and need to be revised. Most favored strengthening zoning regulations to protect the town's rural character and suggested cluster development bylaw, lighting standards, signage standards, design guidelines for commercial and residential, scenic view protections and rate-of-growth bylaw.

Residents do not want to see more residential growth

Interviewees overwhelmingly do not want to see more housing units created in town. They fear that residential growth is causing the town to rapidly lose its rural character. Many people want to see the town consider a moratorium on the number of buildings permits issued or implementing a rate-of-growth bylaw, but others thought such action was not worth the time. All agreed that the town needs to protect the town's distinguished features and direct growth to appropriate areas, if these areas can be found. Several residents mentioned the aesthetic and functional benefits of cluster-style residential developments.

Minimum Lot Size

Interviewees were divided when it came to minimum lot sizes requirements. Many favored increasing frontage and minimum lot size requirements to limit housing development. Others noted that this would only continue to drive up land values and housing prices in town, making Southampton an unaffordable place to live for people without family land. This group favored smaller lot zoning in appropriate areas in town to enable the production of smaller houses. Overall, residents hoped a revision to the town's zoning bylaws will provide some clarity to this question: where will growth occur and on whose terms? They were also optimistic that the master plan will help the town establish goals and priorities, but many shared the concern that the final plan will not be implemented.

High housing prices

Several interviewees expressed concern that Southampton was becoming a town for the wealthy and observed there are few affordable housing opportunities for young adults or elderly residents. It was suggested that the town find creative ways to keep existing elderly residents in town. The town has 40 subsidized housing units located in the Southampton Meadows apartments, and they are reserved exclusively for the elderly and disabled.

Active steps to maintain rural, historic character

Town residents value Southampton's rural character and support using town or Community Preservation funds to acquire parcels for conservation and/or recreation. Town has National Register Historic Districts, like East Street, but not local historic districts. This means there is no actual protection for these historic areas of town. Some noted that the town should not only actively work to preserve farmland for its aesthetic value and character, but also for future food security.

Current level of town services

Most interviewees stated that they were happy with the level of town services and believed that expanding or enhancing existing town services would only bring the town further away from its rural roots. The noted exception was the need for new or enhanced fire and police facilities. To that end, many recommended the construction of a public safety complex. Several questioned whether it was possible to regionalize some of the town's existing services. Those that were not satisfied with the current level of town services would like expanded town hall hours, to hire a town planner, increase number of snow-plowing staff, and build a stand-alone senior center. Residents recognized that the town will have to grapple with how to pay for new or expanded services if levels are to be increased. Residents raised questions such as: Will town residents be willing to raise the tax rate or be willing to support future commercial or industrial growth to generate additional tax-based revenues? Is Southampton going to choose maintaining the library or creating a bike trail? Many people noted that approving the town budget is a struggle every year and this process can create resentment.

Pedestrian amenities -- sidewalks and bike path

The desire for additional sidewalks in town was cited often by residents during the interview process. Interviewees noted that the sidewalks along Pomeroy Meadow are well-utilized by residents of all ages and at all hours of the day. They suggested that the Town construct more sidewalks, especially to connect town facilities to one another, but cautioned that sidewalks were not needed on every street or on both sides of the street. Interviewees thought that town residents were ready to revisit the usefulness of a bike path, citing that many towns have since implemented their bike paths and residents, especially the youth, would benefit from the safety it would provide.

Need for increased citizen participation in town government

Interviewees were divided on their level of ease with elected or appointed officials in town. Some interviewees believed these officials were doing a good job considering budget and growth constraints. Others believed that existing leadership represented antiquated points of

view or the interests of friends. Some suggested ensuring that the town had legitimate standards for town department heads and for people to serve on town boards/committees. All agreed that the town needed more citizen involvement especially from newer residents and that increased involvement would lead to more evenhanded outcomes in town government.

Need for town-sponsored community events

Interviewees remarked that there is a lack of gathering spots and there needs to be more events where the community can get together outside of town meeting. Interviewees expressed concern that the town may be losing its community spirit. There should be events that welcome new residents to town and tie the varying generations of Southampton residents together. Older residents reminisced about the town used to hold a town picnic and suggested similar events.

Lack of communication about town events

Interviewees resoundingly desired better channels of communication to promote community events, enhance the transparency of local government operations, and increase participation in local government activities. They suggested better usage of the newspaper, public cable, electronic sign boards, town website, mailings, and automated telephone messaging.

Satisfaction with public school system

Most interviewees were very satisfied with the public school system and noted the school does a wonderful job with the budget constraints it routinely faces. Interviewees appreciate that the school system does not have problems found in the nearby city public schools, and stated that people move to Southampton for the school system. Several interviewees were concerned that the William Norris School could soon become overcrowded if the town continues to grow. Several interviewees also expressed disappointment that the town did not purchase the land adjacent to the school when it was available.

Potential need for additional community facilities and activities

Many interviewees stated that the town needs more playing fields, gathering spaces, and activities for all age levels. The Southampton Youth Athletic Association (SYAA) has a good athletic program, but there is a lack of things to do for children not interested in athletics. In addition, the program only takes children through the 6th grade. Others believed that existing spaces like Conant Park and the William Norris School could be better utilized and often sit empty. Residents are optimistic that recreational and community space needs will be partially met with the purchase of the Labrie field and rehabilitation of the Larrabee School. Others also questioned the need for additional types of recreational activities, citing that they should not be expected in a small town. Interviewees suggested the town should continue to acquire land as it

is reasonable for parks and schools and consider purchases for joint uses. Overall, there appears to be a misunderstanding over what entity provides programs in town and maintenance to town facilities. For example, many interviewees thought that Southampton had a Parks and Recreation Department.

Indecision about increased activity in the town center

Interviewees desired a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly town center, but many acknowledged that the prevalence of existing buildings and market forces would prevent types of desirable businesses and activities from occurring. They also noted that the town lacked gathering places such as coffee shops for residents to come together. Residents are optimistic that the rehabilitation of the Larrabee School will be the impetus for activity in the town center and perhaps lead to the creation of a network of sidewalks that connect town buildings to one another.

Dangerous intersections in town

Some residents complained about an increase in truck traffic on Route 10, but overall traffic was not an issue. Residents did express concern over two particular dangerous intersections in town: Route 10-East Street and Route 10-Pomeroy Meadow Road. The latter intersection, commonly referred to as the "Opa-Opa" curve, was considered dangerous due to the number of children crossing the road to reach Subway.

Effect of regional trends and projects on Southampton

Interviewees believe that Southampton is facing enormous growth pressures from its neighboring communities. Poor-performing school systems, suburban sprawl, and shifting demographics in other areas of the Pioneer Valley are encouraging people to move elsewhere and many look to locate in Southampton. Some interviewees expressed concern with the Russell Biomass Plant and potential wind turbine projects on Mount Tom.