

SOUTHAMPTON MASTER PLAN VISIONING WORKSHOPS

MAY 2010

Consultant Report

Pioneer Valley Planning Commission
60 Congress Street
Springfield, MA 01104

“Would increasing services in itself change the rural character of the town?”

Ask most Southamptton residents to describe their community, and they will mention the rural character, the peace and quiet, and the abundance of natural lands, active agriculture, and historic resources. They note the strong community spirit, good schools, and that Southamptton is a wonderful place to raise children. All of these elements, along with the convenient access to major commuter routes and highways, have made Southamptton a desirable place to live – and residents are beginning to see the impacts of this in the “sprawling” land use patterns and “unchecked” residential growth. One of the fastest growing communities in the Pioneer Valley region, Southamptton’s population has almost doubled since 1970, an increase of close to 3,000 new residents. The change has most impacted land use patterns, with close to 1,200 acres of active agriculture and forests lands lost to development since the 1970s.

Southamptton is currently at a crossroads, and residents can use this planning process as a catalyst to determine how the town should evolve over the next 15-20 years. Most residents moved to or remained in Southamptton because of its *rural character*. Residents want the town to be more proactive in acquiring private properties to preserve open space, agricultural land, and scenic vistas. These open, green spaces give Southamptton it’s “sense of place” and tie the community back to its historic and cultural roots as a rural, agricultural community. Open space, and particularly agricultural preservation, is also intimately tied to economic development possibilities in the community. Residents express support for agricultural tourism, farmer’s markets, and promotion of other farming activities that would increase commercial activities, as well as protect the rural landscape.

There is also a need and the opportunity for town policies that support *balanced growth* in Southamptton. Residents believe the town can protect existing natural, agricultural and historic resources, while encouraging affordable, diverse housing stock for residents of all ages and incomes. There is potential to encourage mixed use / commercial development and safer bicycle and pedestrian amenities within the historic Village Center. New commercial and industrial development could be directed to Route 10 along the Easthamptton and Westfield town lines, and an increase in commercial and industrial uses could provide the tax revenue needed to enhance *public services*. The question remains whether increased services would change the rural character of the community. While some residents are willing to accept limited services in exchange for rural community character and low taxes, other residents questioned whether services in themselves would affect the rural character of the town. Meanwhile, some residents would like to see an increase in services, particularly for the library, fire department, EMT, and town hall staff and hours.

The future of Southamptton and how it will grow is substantially dependant on *infrastructure* expansion and improvements. New commercial and industrial development on Route 10, as well as increased development within the Village Center, would need access to a public sewer system. There is concern that the cost of infrastructure expansion does not provide enough benefit to the community, and will only decrease the rural, agricultural character in the community. Southamptton residents will need to decide if they are willing to pay more taxes for increased services, or try to expand the commercial / industrial tax base to meet this need.

Process

The “Southampton 2030: Planning for the Future” visioning workshops culminated a five month public engagement process of collecting community input for the Southampton Master Plan. The three days of community planning workshops gave residents the opportunity to identify issues and opportunities for the future of the community, and discuss particular subject areas in detail, including land use, transportation, housing, open space, agriculture, cultural and historic resources, public services, infrastructure, and economic development. Several alternative growth scenarios were also presented to stimulate discussion and help residents think about where in town they would like to see new development, what kind of development this should be, and where in town they would like to focus on open space preservation. Participants also worked in small groups to create a collage of images describing the kind of development they would like to see in the Village Center and along their main road, College Highway.

Summary of Major Topics

Residents were asked to provide specific challenges and opportunities in relation to the following key topics areas. The following is a summary of the discussion.

Land Use

- Concerned about sprawl development patterns
- Support for “smart growth” policies that conserve agricultural land, wildlife habitat and scenic views
- Involve the public in decision-making and to communicate information in numerous ways
- Promote concentrated commercial development, especially small local businesses
- Support design and development standards
- More gathering spaces and local destinations
- Developing the Village Center will be a challenge due to lack of infrastructure

Transportation

- Expand transportation options, including public transit, zip cars, carpooling, bicycling and walking
- Greater PVRTA bus service from Westfield to Easthampton (Route 10), Southampton to Holyoke (County Road), and for low income residents and seniors.
- Enthusiasm for a bike trail and bike access to public open space
- Build more sidewalks and walking paths, develop commuter parking areas, pursue traffic calming measures, and create bicycle lanes that offer safer road conditions for cyclists

Housing

- Concerns about the affordability of housing in town, as well as density, lot size requirements, zoning, the pace of growth
- Design new housing developments to provide a sense of community
- Support for cluster open space residential developments that allow for alternative lot sizes in order to preserve open space
- Support a broadening the town’s variety of housing types to include tasteful apartments, multiple uses of existing buildings, and mixed-use areas that intermingle business, arts and cultural uses with residences.

Open Space

- Be more proactive in acquiring private properties to preserve open space, agricultural land and vistas
- Think beyond active recreation to increase the variety of parks and open space
- Use zoning tools to preserve vistas (e.g. along Route 10) and open space
- Protect and enhance Conant Memorial Park (e.g. with a concert pavilion)
- Secure access to use the Tighe-Carmody Reservoir area
- Access to launch boats at Hampton Ponds, where the state owns property
- Educate the public about conservation issues
- Establish connections with existing land trusts
- Establish volunteer trail maintenance
- Connect existing open space areas
- Consider the fiscal effects of residential growth versus preservation, and the impacts that public utility expansion (e.g. sewers) would have on open space preservation.

Agriculture

- Focus on the preservation of farms and orchards
- Stimulate consciousness about agriculture and the tools available to protect it
- Create a farmer's market and promote farm stands
- Develop a community garden
- Promote agricultural tourism
- Outreach program to inform the public about trails on agricultural land
- Offer economic relief such as tax incentives for farming activities
- Encourage the use of the state's Chapter 61 program
- Develop a priority list for agricultural land acquisition
- Take prime farm soils into account within the town's zoning regulations.
- Proactive the agricultural commission
- Adopt a Right to Farm bylaw
- Publicize www.farmlandinfo.org and encourage cooperative management of agricultural land

Cultural and Historic Resources

- Cultural tourism and a greater awareness of the town's history
- Flexibility in designating the historical status of a home
- Adopt a Demolition Delay bylaw that requires greater consideration of a building's historic value before it is demolished and replaced with a newer building
- Expand the library and physically connect to the larger community
- Venues for cultural and performance space
- Walkways throughout the historic district
- Development of the historic Village Center area as a destination where artisans could display their works

Public Services

- Expand the library, including more open hours and computers and physically connect the library with the community
- Expand town hall hours
- Strengthen the town's police, fire and EMT services
- Improve the town's land management practices to reduce use of fertilizers
- Plan public services in advance to meet the town's needs as the population grows
- Would increased services in themselves change the rural character of the town?

- Take a holistic view of town services to provide broader financial support for cultural, recreational and historic resources
- Need a recreation center and after school programs
- Assess how the School of Choice Program is affecting student/teacher ratios in schools
- Look into the cost savings of owning a bus company
- Consider developing a public safety complex

Infrastructure

- Need expanded FiOs (fiber optics internet services), and consider the town's options for broadband service
- Questions whether sewers are an option in the center of town
- See the merits of developing sewers to accommodate commercial expansion
- Conduct cost-benefit evaluation of public sewer infrastructure
- At the north and south ends of Route 10, sewers could be extended from Southampton's neighboring communities.
- Desire for rail service
- Need for underground electric wires to avoid power outages
- Improve the safety of roads, address visibility and traffic concerns, but to weigh these improvements against scenic impacts.

Economic Development

- Focus commercial development on the north end of town, from Easthampton to the OPA curve, and Cumberland.
- Consider the west side of southern Route 10 and Russelville for light industrial uses
- Develop an industrial park to improve the town's tax base
- There is little suitable land for industrial development
- Encourage businesses in existing homes, including cottage industries (with restricted noise levels and hours of operation), including web-based businesses, barbers, attorneys, real estate professionals and landscapers
- Economic development policies should be mindful of existing agriculture
- Promote agricultural tourism
- Village Center that is a destination, with appropriate commercial development, including an area where artisans could display work, and a breakfast spot.

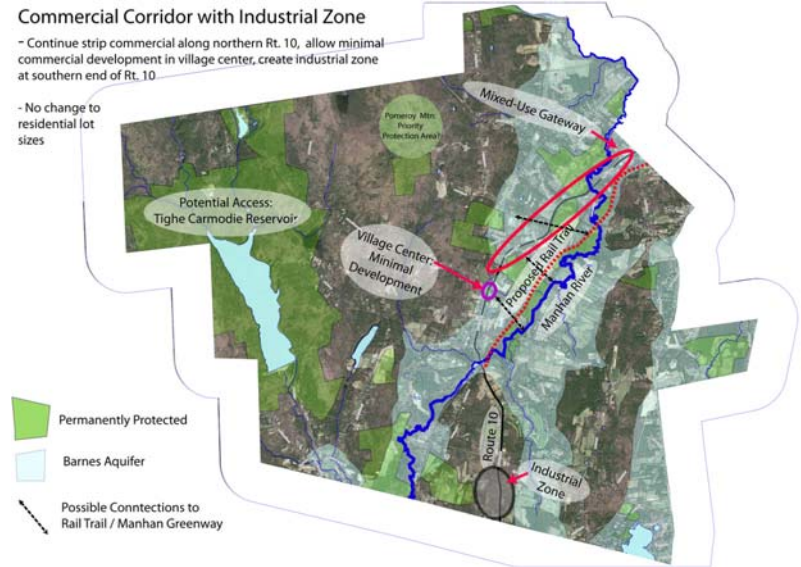
Alternative Growth Scenarios & Future Land Use Map Activity

As stated earlier, Southampton is currently at a crossroads about the future of the community. On one hand, residents want town officials to take steps to keep the rural character of the town – however it is the rural character, community spirit, and quick access to good and services that have prompted significant growth in the community over the past 30 years. This master planning process provides the community members an opportunity to determine how and where new residential, commercial and industrial grow should occur in order to protect the town's sense of place, and provide opportunity for an increased tax base, and in turn more services, for town residents.



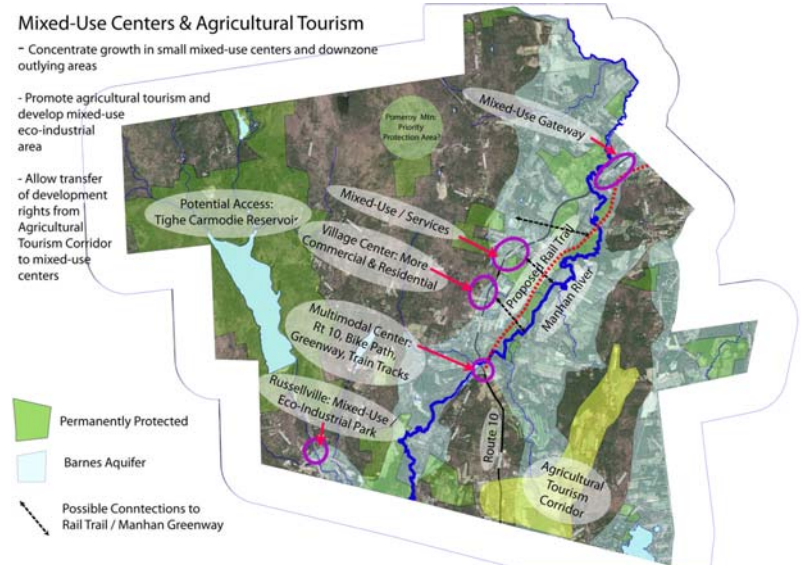
To assist in this process, the consultants provided workshop participants with three different possible future growth scenarios to stimulate discussion on location and type of future growth in the community. The first scenario provided a “do nothing” approach, and was consistent with existing zoning bylaws. The next two scenarios provided areas for concentrated mixed development, by clustering new development in specific areas, leaving the outlying areas as protected open space. The scenarios are:

Scenario One: Commercial Corridor with Industrial Zone



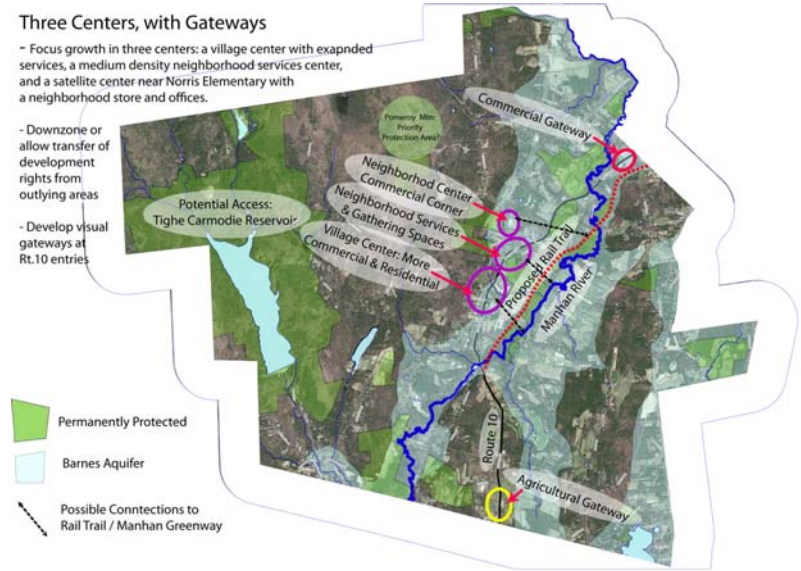
- Similar pattern to current development trends
- Continued strip commercial development along Route 10
- Minimal commercial development in the Village Center
- Continued low density residential growth in outlying areas
- An area for industrial uses at the southern end of Route 10

Scenario Two: Mixed-Use Centers and Agricultural Tourism



- Concentrate growth in several small mixed-use centers with commercial and residential development
- Mixed-use center in Russellville
- Eco-industrial park that has different industries sharing resources and using each other’s waste products.
- Multi-modal center (such as a Park & Ride lot) where Route 10, proposed Manhan River Greenway, and the train tracks converge.
- Agricultural Tourism Corridor

Scenario Three: Three Centers, With Gateways



- Concentrate growth in three adjacent centers
- Expanded Village Center to accommodate more commercial and residential development
- Mixed-use services center north along Route 10
- third smaller center with a neighborhood store and offices near Norris Elementary School
- visual gateways at the Route 10 entrances to town

Discussion Summary

Points of Consensus

- The community character of Southampton should remain rural, and commercial and industrial development should be encouraged in appropriate locations that do not hinder the rural agricultural feel of the community.
- Encourage small mixed-use centers, an agricultural tourism corridor, and an agricultural gateway at the south end of the town.
- The proposed bike path has the opportunity to connect residents to multiple locations in the community, and there should be a focus to connect to Big Y plaza and the Village Center.
- The bike path could also allow for multiple activities, including horseback riding.
- Route 10 at the Easthampton town line is the most appropriate location for commercial and light industrial development, though some participants recommended that there should not be any additional big box stores in this location.

Points of Conflict

- The location of new industrial uses or an industrial park. Route 10 on the Westfield line is currently zoned industrial; however, as the southern gateway into the community, the rural and agricultural uses should be preserved
- Mixed support for industrial park in Russelville
- Limit future growth in the community through zoning techniques such as larger minimum frontages and restricting the expansion of public roads
- The future of the historic Village Center – from a vibrant center with mixed-uses, shops, sewer services, and sidewalks to no change, and everything in between.

Collage Activity Results

The Visioning Workshop Collage Activity was based on a common technique used by architectural and interior design firms to elicit client preferences by asking the clients to create a collage of images and words that look like or represent elements that they would like to see in the final design. This activity was conducted as part of the Southampton Master Plan process in order to gather input on the desired elements, character and design of two key areas of town: the Village Center and the Route 10 Corridor. By using both images and descriptive words, participants were able to show visual examples and to provide short phrases that summarize their preferences for these areas and capture the essence of what they want their experience of these areas to be. One advantage of this format is that, without requiring drawing skills or an extensive working vocabulary of design terms, it allows residents to express their design preferences for how an area should look, function, and feel.

Village Center

The Village Center collages reveal that while residents want to retain historic architecture and a rural, small-town feel, they also want the Village Center to be a vibrant civic and cultural center for Southampton, with public parks, pathways, and multiple activities that accommodate families and children. Activities might include a coffee shop, a corner store, art exhibitions, music and cultural events, community gardens, a farmer's market, a petting farm, and outdoor activities, from nearby water-based activities to field sports, biking and walking. The types of public spaces that would be central to this vision include a civic campus, parks and gardens, indoor and outdoor event spaces, a farmer's market, and a few small stores with outdoor seating. The Village Center would be walkable and should have benches, trash bins, grass, gardens, trees, open areas and, above all, variety.



College Highway (Route 10)

The clear consensus represented by the participants' collages is that College Highway should remain rural, agricultural and scenic; that new development should be compatible with historic architectural styles and should be oriented to the street; and that there should be natural areas, public open spaces, and outdoor recreational activities along the corridor. Residents also want alternative transportation options, including sidewalks and bike paths. Some collages included images of general commercial and light industrial type development, though it was also suggested that development should not be of the auto-oriented strip commercial variety, and that trucks and auto traffic should be minimized.

Themes & Consultant Comments

Residents have expressed a desire to retain the rural character of Southamptton while minimizing sprawl development and providing a greater variety of housing types and transportation options. A future *growth pattern* that concentrates new development around mixed-use centers and limits growth in outlying areas is compatible with residents' desires as well as smart growth principles. However, in practice, it can be difficult to make the zoning changes that are necessary to encourage this type of development pattern, due to a common public aversion to higher density development, as well as opposition from private landowners in outlying areas who perceive that their property will lose value as a result of the proposed changes. In addition, in Southamptton, higher density mixed-use centers could require costly infrastructure improvements.



In addition, the *mix of development* in Southamptton is an important issue. Many residents support more balanced growth that includes a mix of residential and commercial development, and many recognize that commercial development could improve the town's tax base and help keep residents' taxes lower. However, more commercial development would require sewer infrastructure, and there are mixed opinions on how new sewer infrastructure would impact the rural character of the community. If public sewer is developed, it would be easiest to extend existing sewer infrastructure from neighboring communities to the north (Easthampton) or south (Westfield). However, any new development in the Village Center would require sewer infrastructure, which would be difficult to extend from neighboring cities.

One final critical issue is that of services and how new services might impact the existing community character. Services cost money to provide, and some services, such as sewer, are capable of allowing for new development that affects the town's character. Residents would like to see more pedestrian amenities, passive and active recreation opportunities (including a bike path), gathering spaces, traffic calming, and public safety, sewer and library services. In addition, the town would benefit from the services of a Town Planner, who could help develop regulatory changes to pursue balanced growth and smart growth development patterns, and who could help prioritize and establish some of the expanded services that make sense for Southamptton.

Moving Towards a Vision Statement

Based on the vision statements developed by residents during the visioning workshop, the following are offered for consideration:

In 2030, Southampton....

...is a community with balanced growth that promotes economic development yet maintains its rural character.

...has retained the feel of a small New England village by implementing smart growth zoning and preserving open space and scenic views.

...is a community where residents have many transportation options, including walking, biking and public transit.

...is a town with passive recreation, gathering spaces, and programs for all ages.

...is a community that is environmentally friendly.

...is a town that embraces change and is receptive to new technologies.

...is a welcoming, caring, thriving community for all ages with a well-planned Village Center that provides community, cultural, and commercial amenities.

...is a town that has preserved its historic buildings, open spaces and agricultural lands.

...is a close-knit and vibrant community with residents who are committed to sustainability, volunteerism, and each other.

...is a community with many small, local businesses, a well-developed agricultural tourism economy, and a vibrant Village Center that welcomes people of all ages.