

Southampton Master Plan Stakeholder Interviews, Community Survey and Visioning Workshops: Cross Analysis of Key Issues

Southampton residents support maintaining rural character, preventing sprawl development patterns, and pursuing balanced growth. There is support for the idea of clustering buildings and lots together in new developments in order to preserve open space. However, in the Community Survey, while some respondents expressed strong support for mandatory “cluster development” provisions, some respondents expressed strong opposition to such a requirement.

One area in which opinions vary is how the Village Center should be treated in the future. According to the Community Survey, most residents want the Village Center to remain unchanged with regard to new development. However, at the Visioning Workshops, residents expressed a desire for a more vibrant Village Center that is full of activities, including some commercial establishments.

Overall, residents are satisfied with town services. However, some possible areas of future services expansion were discussed at the Visioning Workshops. Residents also expressed support for a future development pattern that concentrates growth around small mixed-use centers in order to preserve outlying areas, and there is support for preserving land by creating larger minimum lot sizes. If the town chooses to concentrate development in some areas, including the Village Center, the need for and cost of sewer services will need to be assessed.

Town Identity and Overall Growth Patterns

The Stakeholder Interview Summary notes that while residents value the town’s rural character and agricultural heritage, Southampton has developed into a bedroom community in the region. Residents are looking for ways to slow and to manage residential and other growth in order to protect rural character. Similar views were expressed in the Visioning Workshops, where residents said that they like Southampton’s rural feel, community, schools and location, but they are concerned about sprawl development patterns and want balanced growth.

In the Community Survey, residents were asked to identify the kinds of towns that should serve as a model for the way Southampton should grow and look in the future. Thirty-seven percent of the 294 respondents to this question supported “a rural residential community with a small commercial center (e.g. Huntington).” However, “a mostly residential “bedroom” community with dispersed small-scale commercial development along main roads (e.g. Granby)” was a close second (33% support), and “a rural residential community without a commercial center or significant commercial development (e.g. Westhampton) was also not far behind (28% support).

Community Survey respondents expressed support for new commercial development along College Highway near Easthampton, and support for this was also expressed at the Visioning Workshops. However, at the same time, in both the Community Survey and Visioning Workshops, residents expressed support for limiting commercial development in town, except for small businesses, which enjoy widespread support.

As part of the Visioning Workshops, residents discussed three different alternative development scenarios, and participants expressed support for mixed-use centers, agricultural tourism, and open space protection. Overall, participants supported the development scenario with multiple mixed-use centers over the scenario in which the Village Center is expanded to accommodate more commercial and residential development. This is consistent with the Community Survey, which indicates that residents

are not in favor of “concentrating residential development near the village center while preserving the outlying areas.” In the Community Survey, respondents were split on whether to cluster commercial development at major intersections, and the overall average response was nearly neutral. However, overall, respondents did not favor clustering commercial development in neighborhood commercial centers.

With regard to residential growth, Community Survey respondents were split on whether to continue current large-lot (1 acre) single family home development policies, and the average rating in response to this question was nearly neutral. Respondents were strongly in favor of promoting detached single family homes, and there was limited support for promoting other housing types such as duplexes, town houses, accessory apartments, apartment buildings, conversion of single family to multi-family units, and housing for the disabled. Survey respondents were also not in favor of allowing higher density housing in selected smart-growth locations. There was both strong opposition and strong support for mandatory “cluster development” provisions, resulting in a nearly neutral average rating for provisions that require clustered development with open space protection in sensitive natural resource areas. Visioning Workshop participants expressed support for clustered open space residential developments that preserve open space. Contrary to the preferences expressed in the Community Survey, workshop participants supported 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. In the Community Survey, the average response to the idea promoting mixed-use buildings was neutral.

Finally, in the Community Survey, respondents were strongly in favor of creating larger minimum lot sizes to preserve rural character and limit residential growth, as well as zoning some areas for agricultural and very low density uses (e.g. 5 or more acres minimum lot size). This is consistent with opinions expressed in the Visioning Workshops and the Stakeholder Interviews. However, in the Stakeholder Interviews, some residents expressed concerns that large minimum lot sizes could drive up housing prices in town and affect affordability.

Village Center

The Stakeholder Interview Summary notes that Southampton lacks gathering spaces such as coffee shops and that interviewees wanted a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly town center and a network of sidewalks that connect town buildings to each other. At the Visioning Workshops, participants expressed similar views, describing a future with a vibrant Village Center with lots of activities and a small-town feel. However, in the Community Survey, 79% of respondents said they like the Village Center just as it is, and only 21% said they wanted to see it developed with more commercial, civic and residential uses. This is not entirely inconsistent with the feedback at the Visioning Workshops, where participants did not favor the future growth scenario that concentrates new development around the Village Center.

It seems likely that the Community Survey question was not nuanced enough, as the question coupled commercial, civic, and residential uses together. Overall, the public input results suggest that residents support new activities (e.g. parks, recreational paths, farmer’s market, arts and cultural activities, ball fields, etc.) and some small businesses (e.g. coffee shop, general store, ice cream), but not significant commercial or residential development. In the recently completed Valley Ideas Smart Growth Design Competition, for the “People’s Choice Award” residents selected the scenario with a farmer’s market, community gardens and additional agricultural tourism activities; a denser Village Center with new retail and housing; and improved bicycle and pedestrian access.

Services

The Stakeholder Interviews highlighted services as a critical issue in Southampton. Most interviewees stated that they were happy with the level of town services, and it was noted that expansion of services could impact the town's rural character. For those who desire more services, requests included increasing town hall hours, hiring a town planner, increasing the number of snow-plowing staff, and building a stand-alone senior center.

Results from the Community Survey are consistent with this, with the vast majority of respondents (upwards of 85% for each service area) indicating that they are satisfied with the level of town services. For those who are not satisfied, numerous suggestions for improvement were made, including hiring more police officers, creating a paid fire department and ambulance service to support or replace the volunteer force, reducing the costs of using the transfer station, increasing public transit options, and enhancing plowing, library, senior, recreation and school services.

Finally, at the Visioning Workshops, residents did not complain about a lack of services. However, when asked what kinds of services they would like to see in the future, their requests suggested a desire for a moderate increase in services. Participants at the Visioning Workshops expressed a desire to expand library, fire, EMT, and town hall services (staff and hours).

Conclusion

Taken together, there is support for maintaining rural character, preventing sprawl development patterns, and pursuing balanced development. Residents want the town to remain rural in character and to have a vibrant center that is full of activities. New residential and commercial growth could be concentrated around small mixed-use centers in key locations, and growth outside of these areas could be limited through changes to minimum lot size requirements and by allowing and strongly encouraging cluster development. Residents might also support limited areas, such as areas targeted for agricultural preservation, where cluster development is required. There is also an opportunity in Southampton to maintain existing agricultural areas by creating larger minimum lot sizes.

In the Village Center, the town should develop a master plan that views the Village Center as a civic campus with some small businesses. This plan could focus on greater use of the Village Center for civic purposes, a farmer's market, town fairs, recreation, outdoor music and theater, and space to display the work of local artists and artisans. The Village Center could also have a small commercial area that accommodates shops. Some new residential growth nearby could help support a more vibrant center as well, but the public input that has been collected suggests that this would need to be fairly inconspicuous, and not purposely integrated into the Village Center.

Finally, overall, residents are satisfied with the level of town services. Some possible areas of future expansion of services could include expanded library and town hall hours, and creation of a professional fire and ambulance service. One pressing issue could be the need for sewer services. If the town chooses to concentrate development in some areas, in order to minimize development on other areas, or to promote any new development in its Village Center, the need for and cost of sewer services will need to be assessed.