



TOWN OF ASHBY LAND USE and TAX BASE STUDY



PURPOSE:

To analyze and assessment the existing land use and its relationship to the tax base of the Town of Ashby for the purpose of identifying trends, opportunities, constraints, and potential adjustments to the Land Use.

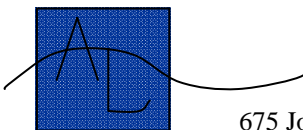
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Prepared For:

Town of Ashby
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SECTION I

EXISTING LAND USE

General Description of Ashby

Ashby is a small, rural community of 3,213 people (2006 data).

Ashby is 24.2 square miles (or 15,488 acres) with 52 miles of roads - 23.8 square miles of land and 0.4 square miles of water.

The average density is 47.5 housing units per square mile (2006 data). The average population density is 132.8 people per square mile.

The median household income is \$61,000 (2004 data).

Average elevation is 904 feet above sea level.

Existing Land Use Breakdown

Ashby consists of six land use categories: residential, temporarily protected / agricultural, commercial, industrial, camp / charity, and government / open space.

<u>Land Use Type</u>	<u>% of Total Land Area</u>
Residential	59.80%
Lands used and occupied for residential purposes	
Temporarily Protected & Agricultural	17.70%
Chap 61 lands – active agriculture, forestry, recreation in residential areas	
Commercial	2.52%
Lands used for businesses	
Industrial	.08%
Lands used for industrial purposes (warehousing, etc.)	
Camp / Charity	1.20%
Lands used for camps or charity organizations	
Government / Open Space	<u>18.70%</u>
Government properties and protected lands	100.00%

The largest land use is residential at 59.80% of the total land area of Ashby. The second largest land use is government and protected open space at 18.70%. Commercial land use comprises only 2.52% of the town land area. The land use breakdown reinforces that Ashby is a rural bedroom community that commutes to work.

Landscape / Natural Features

Ashby is a town rich in natural features including mountains, wetland systems, rolling topography, fields, and forests. Several areas in town have been preserved or protected including Watatic Mountain, Willard Brook State Park, Blood Hill, Fitchburg Reservoir, and a series of US Fish and Wildlife lands. These protected open spaces are enhanced by temporarily protected lands in active forestry or agricultural use (Mass General Law Chapter 61). These natural features provide diverse, natural habitat for a variety of wildlife species. The natural landscape may be Ashby's greatest asset.

Cultural Features

Ashby's cultural fabric is strong and based upon activities in the Town Center, town services, festivals, events, and the needs of a rural community. The cultural events create a sense of community that visitors enjoy and envy. The cultural fabric is critical to the shaping of the future of Ashby.

Recreational Use (local vs. out-of-town)

Recreational use of Ashby's open space has increased almost 15% in ten years. A recent survey provided by the Watatic Management Committee showed the only 22% of visitors to Watatic Mountain are from Ashby. The other visitors are from abutting towns and remainder of the Commonwealth. One half of the visitors came with family members in groups from 2 to 5 people. Most visitors are repeat visitors each year.

Historic Land Use

Ashby's historic land use was based on series of small clusters of dense mixed use activity for housing, mills, trades, and stores. The remainder of the town was comprised of proportionally larger parcels of farms and forests. The remains of these land uses can be seen in the density of the Town Center and South Village as well as foundation remains of the old mills.

Based upon work, water, wealth and functionality, this historic land use formed the structure of rural character that makes Ashby such a unique community.

Current Zoning

Current zoning creates a different future for Ashby as a suburban sprawl style residential community. The density will be in two forms: a denser Town center and the remainder of the Town as 2 acre plots with 200 feet of frontage. The current zoning was a response to a planning trend in the 1960's and 1970's to provide order and controls to Towns. As Ashby had no significant commercial base after the mills and even most farms left, the focus of the zoning plan was residential. The commercial zone of Ashby is based upon the expansion from Fitchburg and small area near the Town center.

According to the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, under current zoning the Expansion Potential of Residential Zone is:

- 4,608 additional housing units,
- 13,823 additional residents
- 2,765 additional school children
- 103 miles of additional roads

As the current zoning is not based on the natural and cultural assets of the Town, it will slowly erode the rural character of Ashby as defined over the previous 200 years. The density consistency will make affordable housing more difficult to create as 90% of lots are the same size. The historic land use model provided opportunity for more variety in housing, including affordable housing in denser areas while preserving the open space and larger lots along the outskirts.

Access

Ashby is accessed from the nearest major highways by Route 31 and Route 119. Each major highway is 20-30 minutes from the Town Center. Ashby is a destination to residents and the occasional service or small business. It is also a through way for people commuting to work and shopping from southern New Hampshire to Fitchburg, Leominster, and beyond.

The highest totals of traffic counts were on Rt. 119 west of New Ipswich Rd at 5600 cars and Rt. 31 south of Rt. 119 at 5500 cars (2004 data).

FOR TRAFFIC COUNTS IN 2004 AND 2006, SEE
[ASHBY 2004 TRAFFIC COUNTS MEOT.PDF](#)
[ASHBY 2006 TRAFFIC COUNTS MRPC. PDF](#)

Road Condition Inventory

Road Conditions are defined as follows:

GOOD	The road is paved or gravel and contains minimal to no deterioration
MODERATE	The road is paved or gravel and contains some deterioration
POOR	The road is paved or gravel and contains significant deterioration

<u>ROAD</u>	<u>SURFACE</u>	<u>CONDITION</u>
Arterial		
Route 119	ASPHALT	GOOD
Route 31	ASPHALT	GOOD
Collector		
Turnpike Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
New Ipswich Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
South Street	ASPHALT	GOOD
West Street	ASPHALT	GOOD
Richardson Road / Northfield Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Rindge Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Connector		
Erickson Road	ASPHALT	GOOD (newly paved)
Piper Road	ASPHALT & GRAVEL	GOOD
Allen Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE to POOR
Bennett Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE to POOR
Wares Road	ASPHALT & GRAVEL	POOR
County Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE to POOR
Foster Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Wheeler Road	ASPHALT	POOR
Mason Road	ASPHALT	POOR
Jones Hill Road	ASPHALT & GRAVEL	POOR
Pillsbury Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE to POOR
Capillary		
Taylor Road	ASPHALT	POOR
Telephone Road	GRAVEL	POOR
Log Cabin Road	GRAVEL	POOR
Mayo Road	ASPHALT & GRAVEL	MODERATE
Scott Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Crocker Hill Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
Russell Hill Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
Spring Hill Road	ASPHALT	POOR
South Brooks Road	ASPHALT & GRAVEL	POOR
Wood Drive	ASPHALT	GOOD
Deer Bay Road	GRAVEL	MODERATE
Valley Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
Kendall Hill Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
George Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Hosmer Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Pine Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
Laurel Wood Drive	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Page Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
Mill Creek Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
Stone Brook Lane	ASPHALT	GOOD

Fort Hill Road	ASPHALT	POOR
Damon Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Nash Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
Ingerson Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Nourse Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE to POOR
Luke Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE to POOR
Whitney Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
Wilder Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
Flint Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Bernhardt Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Davis Road	ASPHALT	POOR
Locke Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE to POOR
Hillside Drive	ASPHALT	GOOD
Heywood Road	ASPHALT	POOR
Churchill Lane	ASPHALT	GOOD
Wright Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Simonds Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE
Frost Road	ASPHALT	MODERATE to POOR
Harris Road	GRAVEL	MODERATE
Elliot Road	GRAVEL	MODERATE
Jewett Hill Road	ASPHALT	POOR
Breed Road	ASPHALT	GOOD
Watatic Mountian Road	ASPHALT	POOR

A MAP OF THE ROAD CONDITION INVENTORY WILL BE RELEASED IN THE SPRING OF 2007.

SECTION 2

EXISTING RELATIONSHIP OF LAND USE TO TAX BASE

Revenue Basis

Ashby collects tax revenue from nine sources: total taxes (real estate, personal property, and excise), charges for services (tickets, permits), local licenses & fees, federal aid, state aid, other governments, special assessments, fines & forfeitures, and miscellaneous revenue. As it's primary revenue source, Ashby levies a tax of \$10.64 (FY2006) per thousand of assessed value of property, regardless of land use type. Government, Open Space and Camps / Charities properties are exempt from the tax levy. For the purpose of the Land Use Study, revenue will be paired down to real estate tax, government aid, local fees & excise tax, personal property tax, and special assessment.

ASSESSED VALUE per LAND USE

The Average Assessed Value of a Commercial Property is \$ 168,468.00 including built and vacant properties.

The Average Assessed Value of a Residential Property is \$ 277,743.00 including built and vacant properties.

The Average Assessed Value of Industrial Properties is \$ 230,920.00 including built and vacant properties.

The Average Assessed Value of a Chap 61 Property is \$ 7,426.00.

The total assessed value of Exempt Properties (Government, Open Space, & Camp / Charities) is \$26,843,400.00. Equivalent to \$ 285,613.77 in revenue assuming a tax levy on the full assessed value.

The highest per property assessed value is residential properties. Residential properties account for 87% of the total parcels in Ashby and 96% of the assessed value of the Town. The lowest per property assessed value is Chap 61 lands to which an artificially reduced assessed value is applied in exchange for temporary protection of the forested, agricultural, and recreational lands. Chap 61 lands account for 17.7% of the land area of Ashby and .1% of the assessed value of the Town. The second lowest per property assessed value is commercial properties. Commercial properties, comprised of smaller parcels on average, are located in the Town Center and other higher density areas.

ANTICIPATED FY 2007 REVENUE per LAND USE

Residential	\$ 3,567,685.69	68.91%
Protected / Agricultural Chap 61	\$ 3,713.24	0.07%
Commercial	\$ 129,220.92	2.50%
Industrial	\$ 12,625.03	0.24%
Camp / Charities	\$ 0.00	0%
<u>Government / Open Space</u>	<u>\$ 0.00</u>	<u>0%</u>
Total Real Estate Property Tax	\$ 3,713,244.89	71.72%
Commonwealth of Massachusetts and Other Government	\$ 586,955.00	11.34%
Local Fees / Excise Tax	\$ 482,118.61	9.31%
Local Personal Property Tax	\$ 46,699.38	0.90%
Special Assessment Tax for Fire Truck	\$ 348,092.00	6.72%
Total Anticipated Revenue	\$ 5,177,109.88	

Residential properties account for the overwhelming majority of income produced through real estate property taxes. However, revenues from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, other Government Sources, Excise Tax, and Local Fees are critical to the Town of Ashby budget, accounting for approximately one-fifth of total revenue. Ashby must focus on issues on which the State and Federal governments evaluate Towns in order to maximize the contribution from other governmental organizations. Ashby must also monitor a fair level of fees and excise tax as it is a significant portion of the overall revenue.

Expense Basis

Ashby expends funds into nine categories: general government expenses, North Middlesex Regional School assessment, Fixed Costs (insurance and retirement for Town employees), protection (Police, Fire, & Inspections), Highway department, human services, library, cultural events, and one time expenses.

BUDGETED FY 2007 EXPENSES by CATEGORY

General Government Expenses	\$ 569348.67	12.0%
North Middlesex Regional School Assessment	\$ 2,635,063.90	55.4%
Fixed Costs (Insurance and Retirement)	\$ 342,118.82	7.2%
Protection (Police, Fire, & Inspections)	\$ 728,280.97	15.3%
Highway Department (no Chap 90 or additional winter operations)	\$ 388,524.78	8.2%
Human Services	\$ 32,859.54	0.7%
Cultural & Recreation (including Library)	<u>\$ 61,075.82</u>	<u>1.3%</u>
	\$ 4,757,272.50	100.0%

The highest category of expense is the North Middlesex Regional School Assessment, accounting for 55.4% of the total expenditures for the Town. The lowest category of expense is human services at 0.7% of the total expenditures of the Town. Notable expenses are General Government (12%) and Protection (15.3%), which are high percentages of the total budget for towns of Ashby's size.

BUDGETED FY 2007 EXPENSES per LAND USE

Residential	\$ 4,675,370.02	98.28%
Protected / Agricultural Chap 61	\$ 2,089.35	0.04%
Commercial	\$ 72,709.35	1.53%
Industrial	\$ 7,103.79	0.15%
Camp / Charities	\$ 0.00	0%
Government / Open Space	<u>\$ 0.00</u>	<u>0%</u>
	\$ 4,757,272.50	100.00%
Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the Federal Government	\$ 0.00 ±	
Fire Truck – One Time Expense	<u>\$ 348,092.00</u>	
	\$ 5,105,364.50	

Expenses were allocated to each land use as a percentage of the total assessed value of the properties; thus, keeping the expenses in line with the revenue generation of the tax levy. Notable exceptions to the allocation of expenses are items that are specific to residential land use including the North Middlesex Regional School assessment, and human services expenses. Residential land uses account for 98.28% of the total expenses for the town of Ashby. Ashby must focus on the expenses for residential land uses as all other land uses combined for less than 2% of the total expenses.

FOR SUMMARY SPREADSHEET OF FY2007 REVENUE AND EXPENSES IN RELATION TO LAND USE, SEE **ASHBY LAND USE TAX BASE SPREADSHEET.PDF**

Assessment

Ashby is a rural bedroom community. Therefore, a significant difference is expected between the residential land use assessment and expenditures and other land use assessment and expenditures. With a limited commercial and industrial base, families move to Ashby for the unique rural character and the sense of community while working in nearby cities and Boston.

ASSESSMENT OF REVENUE AND EXPENSES IN RELATIONSHIP TO LAND USE

The following items are assessments of the information gathered regarding Town revenue and expenses in relationship to land use. The assessments are not solutions; they are deductions based upon the data.

- **Residential Net**
The residential land use is by far the largest land use by area, by assessed value, by total property tax revenue, and by total expenditures. This is not a problem in and of itself. However, the residential land use is running an enormous net loss. The expenses for the residential land use are approximately \$1,100,000 more than revenue generated. Under the current conditions, the loss generated from the residential land use will only worsen as more families move to Ashby, as long as inflation exceeds the increase to the assessed value, and as demands of more services increase government costs.
- **Reliance on Funding from Commonwealth of Massachusetts, other Government Sources, Local Fees, and Excise Taxes**
Revenues from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, other Government Sources, Local Fees, and Excise Tax account for 20% of the total Town revenue. This revenue essentially offsets the loss from the residential land use. As the government funds and fees are volatile and dependent on the political and economic climate, the reliance on these funds to compensate for a deficit will create uncertainty in budgeting and limiting to proper planning and appropriation. On the other hand, since Ashby relies on government funding and fees, the Town should focus on the issues that make it look favorable to government funding (i.e. rural character, affordable housing, etc.) and review fees to maintain a fair, sustainable level.
- **Need to Expand Commercial**
Ashby needs to explore the expansion of its commercial tax base. The commercial tax base has the best ratio of revenue to expenditures. The expansion of the commercial will not make a significant impact on the budget but will help offset the net loss of the residential land use.
- **Chapter 61**
Temporary protected properties under Chapter 61 are valuable to the restriction of the growth of the residential land use. Chapter 61 lands are usually located in residential areas and are typically properties of significant size. Chapter 61 does not provide additional revenue to the Town. However, the properties have limited to no expenses associated with them. In the end, Chapter 61 properties would reduce the expansion of housing, slow the expansion of the net loss of the residential land use, and help preserve the rural character of the community.
- **Open Space and Camp / Charity**
The open space and camp / charity are tax exempt and do not generate revenue to the Town from property taxes. However, these land uses are important draws of visitors to the community who could contribute to the commercial land uses.

SECTION 3

POTENTIAL RELATIONSHIP OF LAND USE TO TAX BASE

Summary of Land Use and Tax Base Study about Ashby

The following list is a series of summary assessments of the existing land use and tax base.

1. Ashby is a rural bedroom community.
2. The dominant land use is and is always likely be residential.
3. The other land uses will continue to comprise a small portion of the overall revenue and expenditures.
4. Temporarily protected / Agricultural lands need to be preserved in order to minimize residential development and maintain a rural fabric to the community.
5. Protected open space and other natural features will continue to draw visitors from Ashby and from tourists.
6. The rural character and sense of community will be valuable assets as surrounding communities succumb to suburban sprawl.
7. The budgeting process will be focused on expense control and prioritization of the services to be funded.
8. The residential land use (even without expansion) without increasing the residential tax rate or subsidizing with additional commercial uses will continue to weigh the finances of the town.

Opportunities

Ashby has tremendous opportunities to improve the relationship between the land use and tax base. The opportunities exist in its natural and cultural resources, the in-home business, recreation, and agricultural. However, these opportunities are not similar to those of typical North Central Massachusetts communities. Ashby is a unique natural landscape and has a strong cultural fabric.

- Preserved Rural Community
The housing boom of the past ten plus years has created wide spread suburban sprawl in North Central Massachusetts. Many of the surrounding towns to Ashby are losing their rural character, their rural people, and the support systems to rural living. Ashby was impacted to a lesser extent by the housing growth. The existing zoning structure and the erosion of support systems to rural living threaten the preservation of the rural community. To date, Ashby remains as one of the few remaining examples of the “quintessential” New England farm towns.
- Rural Living – Home Business
With the expansion of the internet age, Ashby has an opportunity to support businesses that provide services to the region and even the world from the home or small office while living in a rural community. The Town Center and other higher density areas of the Town could be used to for small service based offices, similar to the Tavern building in the Town Center. Technology is critical to the success of the small business in Town.
- Natural Features / Recreation
Ashby is a unique landscape of rolling hills, forests, pastures, meadows, wetland systems, and small mountains. The natural features of Ashby include Watatic Mountain, Blood Hill, Ashby Reservoir, Fitchburg Reservoir, Willard Brook State Park, and many forests and fields. Ashby also has a network of trails on private and public property that interconnect many of the natural features. Ashby has tremendous hydrological and wetland systems which feed the Ashby and Fitchburg Reservoir. Ashby should protect these systems and its aquifers because water will become a major commodity as population grows.

- Agricultural as a Tourism Draw and Commodity
As agricultural becomes more rare in New England communities, Ashby has the opportunity to capitalize on its agricultural land uses as a tourist draw for equestrian centers, trail riding, hay rides, maintained forests, and organic fruits and vegetables. Many of the uses exist in a loose connection while providing a significant impact to the fabric of the community.
- Community Events
The sense of community in Ashby is palpable. This sense of community is from the make-up of the community and the community events that occur including July 4th celebration, Pumpkin festival, Bluegrass festival, Band Concerts, and many others. These events draw people to the Town and connect Ashby's citizen with each other.

Constraints

Ashby has some constraints to the balancing of the relationship between the land uses and tax base. These constraints vary in significance depending on the direction selected by the Town.

- % of Residential Land Use
A significant constraint to the balanced between land use and tax base is the fact that the residential land use is accounts for over 95% of the revenue and expenses for the Town. Any efforts to expand other land uses will appear to have little to no impact on the overall balance. However, any expansion of commercial and industrial land uses will reduce the dependency on the funding from the State and on fees. Also, any increase in the agricultural and recreation land uses will serve to limit the expansion of the residential land use.
- Existing Zoning
The existing zoning structure of the community focuses on the ability of the property owner to create more housing. Although the zoning does not prevent many uses, it does not promote the creation of agricultural, recreational, or commercial entities. The zoning also promotes development along the roads, "sprawl", which over time will significantly change the character of the community. The impacts on Townsend and Pepperell to the east are good examples of the impact of Ashby's zoning, as they have a similar zoning structure.
- Access / Road Condition
Being remote from major population centers, Ashby is very limited by access. No major highways connect Ashby to the region. The limited access has protected Ashby from significant development pressures; but, will be a major hurdle for drawing in commercial and industrial entities. Fitchburg, a small city to the south and closer to major highways, has been significantly limited in its growth due to lack of access. Access to Ashby is sufficient for small groups in casual travel, commuting, or through travel. The road condition of many of the connector and capillary roads is in poor condition and in need capital improvement repairs. The condition will limit growth of non-residential land uses.
- Population Size
Ashby's population, although in keeping with a rural community, is not sufficient to support or draw any large commercial or industrial business.
- Landscape Features (topography, wetland systems)
Although the natural features of Ashby are a tremendous opportunity for recreation and rural character, the natural features, especially soils, topography, and wetland systems, provide a significant limitation to development. This limitation as a negative is only in reference to the need for an extended commercial tax base.

- Marketing
Ashby has no system of connecting or supporting its recreational and agricultural resources and businesses. This weakness prevents Ashby from truly maximizing the value of its resources.

Premise of Land Use and Zoning Ideas

- The premise of the ideas for land use and zoning for Ashby is to provide items for future research and study that could assist in the balancing of the relationship of land use, rural character, and tax base. The goal is to create a sustainable situation for Ashby as a rural bedroom community while preserving the sense of community, rural characteristics, and community demographic.
- The Community Development Plan is professional document. The majority of premises and research performed by the Community Design Partnership of Boston, MA is applicable to Ashby and supports the improvement of relationship between Land Use and Tax Base.

Land Use and Zoning Ideas to Improve Relationship of Land Use to Tax Base

COMMERCIAL BASE THROUGH TOURISM & EVENTS

- Town Center
Ashby Town Center is the hub of community activity. The Town Center can provide for additional community events as a draw of people to the community. The Center can also support small service based business clustered into structure like the “Tavern.”
- Agri-Business Zone (Farms, Bed and Breakfast, Equestrian, etc)
The idea of an Agri-business Zone is to promote agricultural businesses along the Route 119 west of Town Center and Route 31 north of Route 119 corridors, like the Ashby Stock Farm and Ashby Organics. These agricultural properties would preserve rural character and provide a draw of visitors to the community. The visitors in theory would support smaller establishments around town including bed and breakfast inns, “gentlemen” farms, and the Town Center. The agricultural properties could be connected through a map or other tour to help support the farms. The properties could host family focused festivals and events year round.
- Recreation Zone (Trails, Connecting Properties)
The idea of a Recreation Zone is to connect the permanent open space of the Town into a “Greenway.” The Town Open Space already does draw visitors from Town and across New England. This greenway could be promoted along Ashby to serve as a hub to the region’s trail system. This would support bed and breakfasts and other small service based businesses year round.

PROTECT RURAL CHARACTER

- Low Impact Development and Open Space Residential Development Bylaws
Low Impact Development Bylaw focuses on a method of development that responds to and respect the natural and cultural features of a site, especially stormwater. The goal of this bylaw is lessen the impact of development on the landscape and the neighborhood. Open Space Residential Development Bylaw focuses on subdivisions and allows developers flexible in zoning setback and lot size in order to preserve desired open space and cluster housing on more suitable locations. These bylaws would give protection to the resources of the Town and help preserve rural character. The limitation of these bylaws is that they do not apply well to current zoning due to the large amount ANR lots.
- Restructure Zoning
The majority of Ashby is in an Agricultural Zone, which allows a lot of a minimum of 2 acre every 200 feet by right (ANR lots). This zoning “chops” the street into a suburban style of development of equal sized lots with limited to no open space. Historical rural development was of varying density: the dense clusters at centers in combinations large lots on the outskirts. In order to preserve rural character, the zoning structure needs to reflect a rural development approach not a suburban development approach.

AQUIFER PROTECTION (Water as Future Commodity)

- Ashby's extensive water system and aquifers need to be protected for future use. As population grows, water becomes a scarce resource and a major commodity. The Western United States is dealing with this issue already. Ashby is in a good position in regards to water supply and should consider protecting the resource.

MASTER PLAN

- A Master Plan is critical to shaping and controlling the future of Ashby. The Master Plan would focus on the issues of growth and restriction of land uses, reevaluate zoning, and balance the natural and cultural features of the Town. This process involves community participation and significant research and study. However, the Master Plan should provide focus and energy to the Town's effort to shape its future.