

CHAPTER 2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Executive Summary attempts to capture a top-level view and critical insight into the Master Plan. However, before proceeding, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the hard work and dedication of volunteers, staff and other organizations that made this plan reality. In particular, the Master Plan Advisory Committee (MPAC) would like to recognize the tireless efforts of Reading's Town Planner, Chris Reilly. Additionally, we are grateful for the support of the numerous Town staff members, Town committees and boards, and the public for their involvement in this process. Ultimately, this Master Plan is owned by the community at large, and those responsible for its creation are only caretakers along the way. There was, however, a core team of volunteers and staff that shepherded the Master Plan through the process, and this group (the Master Plan Advisory Committee), deserves a great deal of credit and admiration for their diligence and perseverance.

2.1 PLAN ROLE FOR TOWN/BOARDS

This Master Plan will be used by Town Staff, various boards, community volunteers, local business, civic and even religious organizations. Town administration can and will effectively utilize it while defending legal challenges to Board or Commission decisions, guiding land use through zoning amendments, directing administrative priorities and management, enabling State-sanctioned housing and economic development plans, and accessing state funding to promote ongoing capital projects. More important, the true value of the Plan lies in providing a vision by which the community as a whole can share in the management of Reading's future.

Many, if not all, of these individuals and organizations have been part of the development of the Master Plan. Their input, coupled with validation from the public, forms the basis for the Plan, and has driven the advisory committee to adopt those items that are seen as a priority by these same constituents.

The guidance contained in the 1991 Master Plan has steered the Town's boards, committees and staff to pursue items such as the downtown improvements, capping the landfill and development of the site, increases in affordable housing, and numerous changes to Town by-laws consistent with the prior plan's goals and objectives. A similar, level of planning effort is expected with regards to the 2005 Master Plan.

2.2 VISION STATEMENT ROLE FOR THE PLAN

During the last decade, several large new developments were introduced in Reading, generating substantial public participation in crucial Planning Board (CPDC) meetings. This involvement illustrates a high level of resident interest in the future of the Town. The Town-Wide Visioning Workshop that was held in April 9, 2003 under the public process of the CD Plan, established a set of visioning themes, presented in the subsequent chapter as “Vision Statement.” The development of the Vision Statement was open, all-inclusive and the issues brought forward were diverse, rich and inspiring.

For this Plan, the 7 themes of the Vision Statement have served as the canvas on which several issues and themes have been projected, tested, distilled and enhanced. Throughout its process, the Plan has maintained an increased awareness of the issues brought forward by the Reading residents that attended the Visioning Workshop. The key elements of that vision provided guidance not only for the development of the goals and objectives for the Plan, but also to prioritize action items based on effective short-term impact criteria.

- Sense of Community: neighborhoods, small town feel, scenic ways & volunteerism
- Retain and enhance natural resources and open space
- Provide housing for diversity – expand infrastructure to support housing
- Business friendly atmosphere and vibrant downtown
- Regional road network, road improvements and transportation alternatives
- Town-wide connections, safety and access
- Excellence of School system

2.3 PLAN’S STRUCTURE

The Plan is structured three parts containing 12 chapters. The first part includes the Executive Summary and Introduction to Reading’s History. The second part contains seven themes/land-uses, each one of which develops along background material, analysis of conditions and proposed goals/objectives and focuses on:

- ***Character and Identity*** – this chapter elaborates on what the Town means to its residents and the image it conveys to visitors. Reading’s New England Village structure (center-residential neighborhoods-business corridors-natural environment) requires different types of protection from abrupt changes, while absorbing its share of the region’s growth. The housing crisis in the Boston region has required, is requiring and will require a continuous planning for growth within the Town’s environment of balanced land-uses, human scale neighborhoods and excellent school system.
- ***Housing*** – Since the 1991 Master Plan, a great deal of housing development has occurred, primarily in large farm tracts that could not sustain themselves under the real estate market pressure to develop. The Town has failed to meet a State criterion of having 10% of all housing units affordable, thereby allowing developers to circumvent local zoning and built in Reading with State permits, a process known as 40B developments. Consequently, the character and identity of the community has been threatened by large

housing developments because the community lacks affordable units for its family-starters, seniors and moderate-income families. Those three groups are expected, based on demographic projections, to grow in the next decade, so higher demand for cheaper homes is forthcoming. The community is not complete without offering options for our children and our seniors, for households on fixed income and long-time residents and those who do not drive. Affordability and diversity in housing types and households are fundamental to the open, motivated and proud community that Reading is. The quest for innovative funding mechanisms and the planning for housing strategies are high level goals which have and will require a great deal of effort from the Town to attend to.

- ***Economic Development*** – The business sector in Reading, although showing a 6% gain between from 1990 to 2003, has been contributing lesser as a percentage of the Town's taxes since, during the last decade, Reading has seen a tremendous increase of housing valuation, similar to other communities in the Region. To address the heavy reliance on residential property taxes, the Town will establish a new Economic Development Commission whose purpose would be to solicit the development of new businesses in Reading. In parallel, the Downtown and South Main Street will undergo zoning enhancements that will allow their image to improve.
- ***Natural, Historic and Cultural Resources*** –The quantity and quality of public water supply and the seasonal drainage of Ipswich River has been a major concern for many years, resulting to a recent approval for a summer-time connection MWRA. Further conservation planning for uplands and wooded areas, enforcement of wetlands protection through current zoning bylaws, containment of storm water runoff and flooding, all of them are current environmental concerns that affect Board/Committee decisions for new developments. The impacts of future residential and business growth can be mitigated by an increased effort in environmental planning from the Town. In parallel, the Historical Commission, with a Demolition Delay Bylaw and Scenic Roads Program as tools, will protect buildings of historical significance and establish historic districts where appropriate, as part of the value the Town puts into its architectural heritage and character.
- ***Open Space and Recreation*** – The 2001 Open Space Plan has been a valuable resource for the 2005 Master Plan, in its analyses, recommendations and conclusions. Without the funds to purchase open spaces, the Town is facing a challenge: to maintain open spaces and recreational resources, elements that contribute to the Town's quality of life. CPA (Community Preservation Act), which failed to pass in 2001, can be pursued again to allow State funding for open space protection and acquisition, this time with a better program definition and timeframe. While open spaces and places for recreation are necessary to have, of equal importance is to design a network that connects them, a safe system for pedestrians and bicyclists to move around Town without an automobile.
- ***Services and Facilities*** – During the last decade, the reality of Town's economics has been such that several activities and funds are not available as they used to be. The document used by Town Meeting to appropriate the Fiscal year budget, the 10 Year Capital Plan, contains the state of community services and public facilities and the

expenditures for building, infrastructure and service improvements. This chapter is largely based on the Selectmen’s Mission Statement that ultimately reflects the goals and objectives set forth in that document.

- **Transportation** – After 1990, the ease of acquiring and maintaining a car has contributed substantial congestion to interstates, highways and to town streets throughout the Region. Reading residents have followed the trend of automobile dependency to drive more miles per day and own more cars per household. With the MBTA on limited funding, the current trips to work are unlikely to change in mode. For non-work related trips, local shuttle opportunities will likely arise for seniors and for shopping/recreation purposes. Funding for transit projects will need the Town’s support of area-wide organizations (such as Transportation Management Associations) and state agencies for initiatives that originate out-of-town. The current Town-wide Traffic Study, supplemented with a new Town-wide Parking Study, will be a valuable tool to provide for parking options in the Downtown area, satellite employee parking options and sidewalk improvements where children safety is important. Participation in the I-93/I-95 Interchange Task Force of the Massachusetts Highway Department planning initiative will continue in order to ensure Reading’s interests in the project are well advocated.

The third part of the Plan sets forth action items for the realization of objectives and a conclusion chapter. Each action item draws responsibility for its implementation to a specific Town administrative body or Town board. MPAC realized early on that a realistic implementation effort couldn’t cover all the objectives and action items in the Plan. The action items of this Plan, presented in Chapter 11, address a set of 24 objectives that topped a priority list produced between May and August 2005. These 24 objectives are as follows:

1	Protect the historical village pattern by the balance of its constituents: buildings, streets and natural elements. Promote this balance as a prerequisite for developments to a scale familiar and comfortable to the individual.
2	Promote the design of new construction to seamlessly connect with their receiving surroundings.
3	Pursue an increase in Town involvement and investigate additional funding vehicles, to improve on housing goals Communicate Housing Goals to residents.
4	Encourage rehabilitation and reconstruction of existing buildings for low and moderate-income multi-family housing and promote new developments consistent with Reading’s character and identity and meeting state mandated affordable housing goals.
5	Introduce mixed-use zoning in the Downtown and around the Depot.
6	Study the various options available and recommend to the Board of Selectmen the type of official commission or standing committee to best meet the development needs of the Town and to bring additional clout to bear on obtaining State and Federal developmental grants.

7	Examine properties with regard to re-zoning with particular attention to reducing the current front setback requirements and expanding the use of PUD (B) overlay districts.
8	The Town will pursue all possible state and Federal grants to hire consultants (landscape architects and traffic engineers) to generate a detailed streetscape beautification plan for the area from Washington Street south to I95/128 similar to the plan recently completed for the downtown.
9	Promote the preservation and enhancement of Reading's extent of existing uplands and wooded areas and the extent of public accessibility to these areas, particularly in new developments through appropriate amendments to the Zoning By-Laws and Subdivision Regulations and other measures such as impact fees.
10	Encourage the development of a regional resource-protection plan (Aberjona, Saugus, and Ipswich River water-sheds, Cedar Swamp), and of regional efforts to reduce water, groundwater, and air pollution.
11	Protect wellfields and water-recharge areas, and strengthen and monitor the enforcement of the Aquifer Protection Zoning By-Law.
12	Maintain and add to the Town's inventory of historical and architecturally significant buildings.
13	Create path systems connecting schools, open space, and neighborhoods, e.g. develop walking/biking trails between open spaces.
14	Acquire more land for playing fields, a family picnic area and pocket parks.
15	Make public aware of the importance public and private conservation land and open space.
16	Reconsider the Community Preservation Act.
17	Develop new sources of recreation funding, apply for grants and self-help funds and create a Friends or Stewardship program to help maintain open spaces.
18	Develop an impact fee bylaw consistent with State legislation and the Town's Master Plan goals to apply to new developments of mid- to large-scale.
19	Create and maintain appropriate Town-wide disaster, security and/or health outbreak plans and ensure Town services, departments and nonprofits and other service providers are trained and prepared.
20	Develop strategies to disseminate information from Town Government to residents and businesses in the most effective manner.
21	Develop and conduct a comprehensive customer service survey

22	Develop a comprehensive Town-wide Parking Plan to address satellite employee parking, alternative locations for garages in Downtown with respective zoning amendments and revisit public parking regulations.
23	Develop a sidewalk improvement priority list, complete all needed sidewalk extensions and improve crossings in areas where children safety is a concern.
24	Promote a Regional Transportation Management Association (TMA) to organize carpooling and vanpooling, shuttle-bus, high-occupancy-vehicle (HOV) highway lanes and transit-dedicated lanes and other forms of improved regional vehicular and alternative transportation commuting measures and improvements, as joint transit projects among participant cities.

2.4 TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

The planning process envisioned for each chapter of the Plan can not be fully understood without emphasizing the importance of a common thread binding all land-uses of Reading together: the character of the place and the identity of the community.

Character and identity are facets of traditional communities, especially in a region as old as New England, places that offer choices and human scale qualities on daily activities.

In several occasions during the development of this Plan, the MPAC discovered that the qualities found in the residential neighborhoods in Town are the cornerstones sustaining the unique character and identity of the community. With housing being the dominant land-use element of Reading, it has been imperative to document, understand and illustrate the current land-use balance and how it came out to be this way. In simple terms, how residential areas interrelate and interact with all other uses such as transportation, retail, offices, opens pace and natural environment. Reading housing policies and strategies are fundamental in defining the Town's character in the future, as stated by several participants in the Housing Forum of January 2004, conducted under the CD Plan public process. The community itself is the guardian of its character and identity, from board the volunteers and old residents to Town's administration, we all have a partnership with a livable community, a place to be protected from but also adapted to the challenges of Boston Region's housing reality.

2.5 NEXT STEPS

Although the Community Planning and Development Committee (CPDC) is the board primarily responsible for the Master Plan, that board must work closely with all the other stakeholders identified in this plan, most notably the Board of Selectmen, to ensure these actions are undertaken. The CPDC will retain responsibility for updating the Town on progress toward implementing these actions and achieving the objectives, and as items are completed, provide a new forum to continue to validate the remaining actions, add new ones as deemed appropriate, and assign them to the relevant board or organization to complete. It is the recommendation of the MPAC that these updates be provided to the Board of Selectman on a semi-annual basis (at a minimum).