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COMMUNITY VISION & GOALS

A Report on the Master Plan Public Forums, Oct. 24-Nov. 9, 2002

On October 24-November 9, 2002, the Master Plan Committee sponsored two public forums to engage residents in shaping a community vision and goals for Tewksbury's future.

Approximately 60 people participated in the visioning process. The forums attracted a mixed population in terms of age, interests and length of residence, though most participants said they have lived in Tewksbury for more than a decade. This report explores and synthesizes their ideas toward an overall direction for the Master Plan.



Recurring Themes

Participants in the Master Plan Committee's vision meetings offered many insights about the town. They spoke enthusiastically about the benefits of living in Tewksbury and passionately about the disadvantages. Though the second forum attracted more people and culminated in a broader slate of issues, both meetings produced remarkably similar ideas about Tewksbury's strengths and needs. Below are several ideas that surfaced, in varying ways, at both public events.¹

Tewksbury's Key Strength/Assets

- Convenient location with access to major highways.
- A safe, family-oriented community of nice people, many with long-term ties to the town.
- Recreation facilities and programs, especially youth sports.
- Quality schools and municipal services, especially the police and fire departments.
- The attractiveness of older, established neighborhoods with winding roads, mature trees, and different types of homes.

Tewksbury's Key Problems/Challenges

- Uncontrolled commercial growth and land use conflicts between industrial and residential areas.
- No sense of place, in part because Tewksbury lacks an organized downtown or village center.
- Lack of preparedness to address Chapter 40B, i.e., no plan or strategy to create affordable housing for those who need it or to combat unfriendly comprehensive permits.

¹ See Exhibits 1 and 2 for a more complete record of ideas expressed at the visioning forums. The lists have been edited only for grammatical and technical accuracy. Parenthetical notations appear where necessary to make the information understandable to readers who did not attend the meetings.

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- The volume and speed of traffic on local roads, notably Route 38.
- Distrust of town government and perception that “special interests” take advantage of Tewksbury.

Observations

Community Values

The visioning process encouraged residents to identify and explain what they value about Tewksbury. Their spontaneity and words conveyed fond sentiments toward the town and the people who live in it. For many residents, Tewksbury seems to have retained the close-knit feel that suburbs of comparable size often lose. Participants with long-term ties to the town said they had moved here because of family roots, jobs, the town’s convenient highway access or its affordably priced homes, and many of the older residents recalled Tewksbury as a pleasant, unpretentious place with a warm, rural feel. As participants discussed their town’s past and present, the word “rural” came to embody a set of visual, economic, social and environmental meanings: tree-lined roads, farms, a community of families, and plenty of open space. People appreciate and want to protect the small-town qualities that endure in Tewksbury today.

Many residents said that while new development has created problems for Tewksbury, they do not oppose growth per se. They sensed that with responsive leadership, better zoning regulations and a commitment to open space, Tewksbury could accommodate development and simultaneously protect both the visual character and property values of established neighborhoods. Some of the residents said they yearn for a downtown or village center near Town Hall, well-organized business areas of high-quality design on Route 38, and attractive points of entry into their community. When asked about places they consider special to Tewksbury’s identity, participants had many ideas and they spoke without hesitation. They nominated the large expanse of open space around Tewksbury State Hospital, water resources such as Ames, Round and Mud Ponds, and Tewksbury’s unusual collection of public art, notably Mico Kaufman’s sculptures. They also cited the civic space around Town Hall, Krochmal Farm on South Street and Trull Brook, and they spoke affectionately of local events that build a sense of community: parades, youth sports, winter sledding, or activities at the Teen Center. One speaker’s words brought nods of agreement from many in the room when she classified Raytheon as special for its role as a major source of local employment. In short, the visioning forums provide useful guidance about what residents want to preserve, enhance or encourage as the town continues to develop.

Community Concerns

The forums show that many residents worry about Tewksbury’s present and future condition. Two beliefs permeated the vision process: Tewksbury does not have enough control over high-impact commercial and industrial development, and local government responds more to “special interests” and developers than to the needs of residents. Participants cited a number of land use conflicts, particularly between industrial and residential zones, and though the proposed mall was not discussed, it was clearly on the minds of those who said they prefer Tewksbury’s base of small businesses to “big box” commercial development. They think Tewksbury deserves an attractive, higher-quality business zone that enhances their town and respects the way of life in established neighborhoods. While they bemoaned public “apathy,” participants claimed that many townspeople “do not feel empowered” to engage in civic life. They criticized town officials and developers for

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actions that make it difficult for the public to make knowledgeable decisions, e.g., by providing inadequate or incomplete information or failing to plan for the town's future.

Residents seem especially concerned about the environmental, fiscal and "quality of life" impacts of uncontrolled growth. They foresee the loss of mature, character-defining vegetation along Tewksbury's roads because of insensitive or needlessly intrusive clearing of land for new development. They anticipate more severe traffic congestion on Route 38 and neighborhoods made unlivable by their proximity to large industrial, warehouse and shipping operations. They worry about the air and water pollution that industry may bring, and the vulnerability of flood-prone areas as land is put to more intensive use. Residents are also troubled by the large housing developments they associate with Chapter 40B. Overcrowded schools, water shortages, traffic-burdened roads and inadequate sidewalks, public safety services pushed beyond capacity and spiraling tax bills formed the basis for a disturbing image of tomorrow's Tewksbury, as expressed by participants in the vision forums.

The sense that outsiders have imposed unwanted conditions on Tewksbury surfaced a number of times during the visioning forums. At both meetings but more forcefully at the second, participants mentioned problems at the town's motels: disturbances and crime on one hand, and on the other, long-term tenancy by a number of homeless families placed in Tewksbury. The objections lay less with the presence of homeless families than with the mandate that Tewksbury educate children for whom the town receives little or no financial support – in schools that may already have reached their planned operating capacity. Participants also expressed great disdain for Chapter 40B, a topic that seemed to unite people who disagreed on other issues. While conscious of Tewksbury's Chapter 40B shortfall and sympathetic to low-income households, several speakers chastised Chapter 40B developers who bypass local zoning to build housing for "people who do not need it." In addition, cut-through traffic on Route 38 and regional sprawl were named as external factors that reduce the quality of life in Tewksbury.

Conflicting Ideas

In most towns, residents have conflicting or ambiguous notions of what constitutes an ideal community, and Tewksbury is no exception. The vision meetings generated some noteworthy examples, especially perceptions of town meeting and local elections. Participants said they value Tewksbury's tradition of open town meeting because it encourages civic involvement and enables residents to influence public policy through democratic channels. However, they also said that since town meeting attendance is often low, "special interests" pack the hall and secure what they want, leaving behind powerless citizens. The reality is that by design, open town meeting encourages groups to organize and assemble votes for their cause. Open town meeting generally meets the needs of communities that have either substantial consensus about key issues or enough organized groups to safeguard against what Tewksbury's vision participants called "abuse." Any group that organizes for the explicit purpose of influencing public policy in its favor qualifies as a special interest group: not only developers, but also neighborhood associations, environmental organizations, promoters of public school spending and "public interest" groups that advocate for the common good – as they define it.

Presumably Tewksbury's vision participants intended to distinguish individuals or groups with a personal financial stake from those with no direct financial interest in the outcome of a town meeting vote. Still, it is important to remember that town meeting, open or representative, is a legislative

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body that sets local legislative policy and its decisions determine how a community distributes public resources. Organized groups often find it easier to sway decisions made by an open town meeting than a representative town meeting because the former entitles them to vote. Ironically, the way for dissatisfied residents to arrest power from one interest group is to establish their own, yet few people want to see their communities dissolve into a myriad of factions. The visioning forums revealed obvious “we/they” rifts in Tewksbury, not only in comments about town meeting but also the electoral process. The most oft-cited remedy for perceived leadership problems was the power to elect new town officials. Reconciliation was conspicuously absent from the list of possibilities to effect change. However, if Tewksbury wants a master plan that it can successfully implement, people must be motivated to resolve conflicts and, where possible, find some common ground.

Directions for the Master Plan

Imagining Tewksbury

At the second visioning session (Nov. 9), residents worked in small groups to design and map an imaginary future tour of Tewksbury. Though the groups identified a range of existing and “wish list” landmarks that they would want a visitor to see, their itineraries had much in common. The participants described a town they would be proud to call home – a town that not only retains the qualities residents found attractive when they moved to Tewksbury, but also solves the problems that sometimes make it difficult to live here today. Below are the significant, recurring ideas that residents expressed in words and in pictures sketched on a map of the town:

- The character-defining importance of Tewksbury’s historic roadways, especially Main Street, East Street/Livingston Street, North Street, Andover Street, and Pleasant Street.
- A town center with attractive public buildings, civic space and village businesses.
- A sense of heritage: open space, well-preserved historic buildings, public art.
- Plenty of places for outdoor recreation: boating, fishing, walking, golf, or youth sports.
- Clean, usable water resources.
- Gateways that convey a positive impression of Tewksbury.
- A community that protects the quality of life in residential neighborhoods.
- A community that attracts high-quality, low-impact business development along Main Street and in other locations.

Master Plan Goals

The visioning process suggests several priorities that Tewksbury’s new master plan needs to address. Strategies to address the following goals seem essential:

- Reduce conflicts between industrial zones and adjacent neighborhoods.
- Promote a traditional village center in the area surrounding Town Hall.
- Promote a coordinated approach to land use on Route 38, aiming for small-scale, mixed-use development of high-quality design, consolidated curb cuts, and attractive landscaping, lighting and parking.

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- Subordinate the rate and total amount of development to the capacity of Tewksbury's environmental resources.
- Improve and enhance Tewksbury's gateways.
- Recognize and protect Tewksbury's character-defining roads, natural and built assets and unique local landmarks.
- Establish and follow sustainable economic development policies to provide local employment and tax revenue, encourage a diverse economic base and direct business and industrial growth to appropriate locations.
- Preserve large tracts of open space and recreation land.
- Give preference to reuse and redevelopment of existing structures and infill development over new growth, assuring that reuse activities respect the architectural integrity of historic buildings.
- Preserve Tewksbury's traditional housing affordability by providing a mix of residential use types and home prices.
- Manage development so that it respects the topography and character of the land, existing vegetation and scenic road features.
- Encourage pedestrian and bicycle access throughout Tewksbury by providing a safe network of roads, sidewalks and trails.
- Establish and follow capital improvement and asset management plans to assure the adequacy of municipal and school facilities.
- Eliminate existing and potential environmental hazards.
- Provide quality municipal and school services at a price affordable to average homeowners.

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EXHIBIT 1

Public Forum #1: October 24, 2002 – Tewksbury Senior Center, 7-9 p.m.

Tewksbury's Strengths

When asked why they moved to Tewksbury and why they choose to stay in Tewksbury, participants said:

- A rural type town, appreciate the open space, especially along East Street.
- Marriage.
- Town is comfortable and convenient.
- Nice retirement area, good location for seniors.
- Moved closer to family.
- The youth and sports activities.
- Family moved here 50 years ago to get out of the city, and then I just chose to stay here.
- Affordability.
- Location, access to employment, highway and housing.
- In some neighborhoods, the neighbors have lived there for 30 years... there are pockets of continuity in Tewksbury.
- Elders are selling their homes and moving into condos and assisted living facilities in and around town.
- People are kind/pleasant.
- Houses are so different, different kinds of trees, diversity of housing stock.
- Maturity of vegetation in established areas.
- Services, the wide variety available (seniors, sports, library, active municipal community).
- Near shopping malls in New Hampshire and ski areas.
- Close to I-93 and I-495: good highway access.
- City of Lowell is a benefit because Tewksbury is in close proximity to it and its services...they [Lowell] have come a long way.
- Location... to go to the seacoast, mountains, the open space; Tewksbury is near all of this, which provides a nice rural feel.
- Adequate health services nearby.
- Lots of good restaurants in Tewksbury.

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As for places that make Tewksbury special, participants said:

- The big empty space in the middle -- Livingston Street -- the big huge fields and open space. It's the last open space accessible to people in town: "Don't touch it."
- Lots of wildlife/habitat thriving, "turkeys and deer in my backyard."
- Ames Hill area.
- Ames Pond.
- Trull Brook is fun for sledding in the winter.
- Sculptures in town (e.g., Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller in Town Common).
- Teen Center on Livingston Street: they sponsor trips, dances, lot of volunteers, some paid staff, revenue neutral, some user fees, summer camp runs out if it.
- Krochmal Farm on South Street: pumpkin picking, hayrides.
- Baseball fields, elderly housing, 4th of July at Teen Center, the playground near Teen Center.
- Silver Lake in Wilmington.
- Main Street from Town Hall, common area and civic spaces (for parades).
- Round Pond and Mud Pond.
- Senior Center.
- Cemetery on State Hospital land and other very old cemeteries, e.g., at the corner of East and Livingston, Main Street, and Shawsheen Street.
- The two glass time capsules on state at Town Hall (these are not very old yet).
- State hospital is a special place... a lot of people in the area worked there... they raised cows, farmed, they were self-sufficient.
- Raytheon -- as a business for employment and a revenue generator for the town.
- Trull Brook Golf Course.
- At the corner of Lee and East Street, the row of trees and a stone wall with a cemetery nearby.

Tewksbury's Weaknesses

Participants were asked to identify problems in Tewksbury, i.e., reasons they would move to another town. As worded, the question invited residents to describe what they would encourage or discourage in order to address the problems they see. They said:

- Uncontrolled and unattractive commercial growth.
- Encourage keeping the character of the town even as the town changes and grows.
- Need to enhance Tewksbury's character.
- Encourage a viable town center, a downtown.
- Tewksbury lacks a sense of place and village center.

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- Development in Tewksbury was always economically driven. Tewksbury lives in the shadow of Lowell... so people go to Lowell for many things.
- Why don't we attract the businesses like Andover does, e.g., the Genetics Institute?
- Traffic – but traffic can also be a good thing if it prevents more people from cutting through town.
- The power lines are horrendous.
- Traffic on Route 38, a lot of traffic in Tewksbury is not related to Tewksbury. People use Route 38 as a cut through and if there is an accident on I-495 or I-93, the backup is horrible.
- Motels/hotels are a problem. The police are there every single weekend.
- Outside town center, more attention should be paid to design and building standards and what is acceptable or unacceptable.
- The landfill is a problem. It needs to be cleaned up and decisions have to be made about what to do with the space. It is a Superfund site.
- Zoning issues: heavy industry abutting residential areas, there are many land use conflicts between these two zones.
- Proposed expansions... if you improve traffic, you will then allow for more development.
- Premature site clearing.
- Lack of sewer, or on the other hand, sewer, i.e., the growth that will occur with the new sewer across the whole town. Will this open the door for more development?
- Lack of sidewalks.
- Need for more pedestrian amenities.
- Flooding in several areas, including South and Bridge Streets, Route 38 and Shawsheen near the shopping center site, East Street sometimes, Shawsheen and the railroad tracks.
- Zoning – no noise specifications/criteria... the bylaw is vague about what is or isn't allowed.
- There are no pollution regulations.
- The piggeries (the smell), farm-related odors.

Desired Actions

Participants were asked to identify actions that would make Tewksbury a better place to live. Their answers varied, including:

- Protect and improve Round, Mud and Long Ponds.
- Protect and enhance significant natural resources.
- Encourage a higher percentage of affordability (more true affordable housing, and make it stay that way).

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- Encourage the affordability not only of housing, but also of taxes and utilities as well; public services and utilities should remain affordable.
- Maintain Tewksbury as a nice place for retirement.
- Expand the Senior Center.
- Balance and make more efficient use of existing open space and recreation areas. If new ones are built, make them for a dual purpose.
- Promote recreation facilities with alternative residential uses.
- Protect existing vegetation and discourage premature clearing.
- Establish performance standards to preserve town character.
- Discourage uniform housing, offer affordability and diversity incentives to new housing developments.
- Preserve remaining open space and evaluate options to protect open space priorities.
- Keep and nurture some aspects of local economy (Raytheon).
- Investigate the feasibility and redesign of town center.
- Enhance and improve the public realm.
- Manage uncontrolled growth and improve quality of development, particularly Route 38.
- Increase buffers around residential/commercial/industrial areas.
- Enforce bylaws and regulations.
- Establish and define a community identity for building/growth.
- Promote the reuse of existing commercial buildings instead of continuing to build new ones.
- Consider transitional zoning, require buffer between industrial and residential areas.

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EXHIBIT 2

Public Forum #2: November 9, 2002 – Tewksbury Public Library, 1:30-3:30 p.m.

Tewksbury's Strengths

Participants were asked to identify Tewksbury's strong points. They said:

- The people: they are nice, fair, friendly, pay their bills and want to do the right thing for the most part.
- Presence of small businesses (i.e., not mall-type businesses).
- Wonderful recreation area: Livingston Street is a plus, centralized, with fields and open space for community gatherings.
- Youth sports programs – there is a lot of participation.
- Tewksbury is very pretty and quaint, with trees, no big buildings, windy roads, natural settings.
- Good family community: you don't have to feel like you need to leave your car and house locked...it is safe.
- Good financial management of the town.
- Fire and police departments are great (good public safety services).
- A participatory Town Meeting, open to all.

Tewksbury's Weaknesses

When asked to identify Tewksbury's weak points and problems, participants replied:

- Demoulas/Market Basket: tractor trailers, heavy trucking, diesel fumes.
- No housing plan: how will Tewksbury handle affordable housing?
- Overcrowding in schools, in all grades and classes: most classes have over 30 students.
- Widen route 38, from one end to the other, maybe a turning lane in the middle, or four lanes total (there was an overwhelming gasp, no one else liked this idea).
- Speeding traffic.
- 53 homeless families are living in hotels, the homeless are not Tewksbury residents.
- Increasing property taxes, and it is getting worse.
- Sprawl (McDonalds, Wal-Mart, Burger King).
- Land use conflicts: heavy industry abuts residential, and there are hazardous waste (at least three).
- Lack of drinkable water... sometimes adds up to a shortage, the delivery system and shortage... some sections of town use bottled water.
- Not enough of a tax break for seniors.

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- Special interest groups (pack a town meeting).
- Not getting what you vote for... the 60 acres they voted assisted living, now it is not going to be that, but will be multifamily instead.
- Lack of trust in town government.
- Lack of interest in music and the arts, especially in the schools.

Opportunities

Participants were asked if they saw any opportunities for Tewksbury to preserve its strong qualities or improve on its weaknesses. They said:

- The new conservation/open space plan... it is open to everyone to use.
- Tewksbury has not yet turned into a cookie cutter town. There are still pieces that we can keep which are unique to Tewksbury.
- Changes to the Zoning Bylaw.
- If we have vision and work together, we can provide affordable housing.
- Use the ballot to vote selectmen in and out; recall is an opportunity if necessary.
- Establish a homeowners association or a citizens organization to fight back against unwanted development.

Threats

- Apathy is a threat and weakness.
- Local government administration, specifically zoning. The Zoning Board of Appeals has its own agenda...rules are made for people who don't have friends.
- Lack of participation, but many people do not feel empowered to participate.
- Lack of time to babysit what is going on in town.
- People who make their livelihood by taking advantage of this town... they are a real threat.
- Inadequate school enrollment forecasts.
- Lack of information/clarity from town officials.
- Lack of historic preservation. We rapidly losing the historic pieces of our town.

Desired Actions

Participants were asked to identify actions that would make Tewksbury a better place to live, working with a sample of ideas they expressed under "Strengths" and "Weaknesses." Their answers varied, including:

- Encourage more small businesses.

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- Preserve Tewksbury's beauty with landscape design regulations and a bylaw against clear cutting.
- Preserve and enhance East Street.
- Maintain good fire and police departments.
- Minimize, discourage, limit heavy truck traffic and diesel fumes, enforce statutes.
- Complete and implement an affordable housing plan.
- Increase sources and storage capacity of public water system.
- De-emphasize and discourage special-interest group activity.
- Increase voter participation in town meeting and town elections.
- Evaluate services offered by the town (we used to plant trees).