

The Lexington We Want

The Town of Lexington decided in the past few years to prepare a new comprehensive plan (*ComPlan*), something that the town had not had since the 1960's. This initiative emanated from the Planning Board and Town Meeting. While well known for zoning and policy innovations over the years, Lexington did not have a policy document with the sweeping and long-term purview of a new community plan. Earlier efforts between 1996 and 2000 (see paragraph to follow) segued into the more detailed *ComPlan* in 2001 under the aegis of the Planning Board, with four of the statutorily-required elements proceeding at that time.

The four planning elements that follow—Land Use, Natural And Cultural Resources, Housing and Economic Development, are the beginning of a broad statement of collective intentions about the kind of town that those involved want Lexington to be. It both frames overarching policy and outlines the specific actions for implementation. This work builds upon a strong planning legacy that reaches from the Town's pioneering efforts in the early 20th century to the more contemporary Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC) Report of the mid-1990s, and the Board of Selectman's ongoing *Vision 2020* strategic planning process that was begun in 1999.

Over that entire period, Lexington's growth and change have been guided thoughtfully and creatively in a process to which the preparation of these four elements is one more contribution. This effort will be followed by many others, most immediately by preparation of the remaining elements included in the current statutory outline of what constitutes a comprehensive plan. These include Transportation and Public Facilities, along with an overall Implementation piece. An Open Space Plan is also part of the document, but this piece has been left for its traditional steward, the Conservation Commission.

The current effort has been carried out under the direction of the Planning Board, assisted by a Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee (CPAC) created by the Board, and supported by staff and consultants. These four elements were adopted by the Planning Board on January 30, 2002. This *Plan* will not be a law or regulation or a commitment to funding or organizational change, but it will provide guidance for all of those, reflecting agreement about intentions among those it is hoped will carry out the *Plan*.

The Lexington which people want has been revealed in many ways through this planning work, importantly including a range of public activities ranging from small early morning meetings to large evening forums. There is a healthy diversity of views on the particulars of that future vision, but there is a clear thread on which there is wide agreement. For example, the LRPC identified four "Core Values" which continue to have salience: these include: 1) quality public education; 2) preservation of a level of open space that maintains our "semi-rural" character; 3) a public safety establishment which enables Lexingtonians both to be safe and feel safe; and 4) affordability to the point where we can maintain and enhance our economic diversity.¹ Strikingly, the "Town-Wide Vision Statement" for the Lexington of 2020, as earlier articulated by the Vision 2020 Core Participants Group, can equally well stand as a vision for this work on the

¹ *LRPC Draft Report*, April 1996, page 1-1 (Strategic Planning and Implementation Group).

Comprehensive Plan. That congruence in values expressed provides an affirmation for both efforts, so it is repeated here in the form of an excerpt from the CPG Town-Wide Vision Statement (Written in 2000 as if in the year 2020):

The Town of Lexington prides itself on being a great place to live. Residents and visitors alike characterize it as a vibrant and active community, which places a high value on learning at all ages. Its residents and employees welcome the diversity of people who are attracted to Lexington and choose to call it their home and/or place of employment.

Lexington is, and will stay, a primarily residential community with a tradition of offering quality, broad-reaching municipal services. It is committed to preserving and maintaining a sense of community that includes its historic tradition, its public and private open spaces, and its public support for civic life. It strives, however, to maintain a range of affordability. Residents recognize that these qualities are always difficult to balance.

An open and structured process of community conversation and long-term planning help the town remain forward-looking. Major elements, which are consistently addressed and evaluated, include: fiscal responsibility; sustainability of natural and human resources; transportation issues; education; and regional cooperation and integration. Residents are invested in and rely on this process as they reconcile competing needs and interests.²

Each planning element begins with a discussion of background information, sets goals and objectives, describes a strategy for approaching those objectives, then lays out an agenda of implementing actions to be taken or at least explored. A final section summarizes those actions and organizes them by the board, official, or committee that is to initiate their implementation. Some actions by their nature appear in multiple elements. As a result, much of the Land Use element is an abbreviated restatement of initiatives more fully outlined in the other three elements. Sustainability was such a pervasive but complex theme that it is further discussed in an Appendix.

There similarly will be convergence between some items in these elements and actions not yet developed in the *ComPlan* elements still to come in the Planning Board's initiative: Transportation, Public Services and Facilities, and an integration of Implementing efforts. For that reason, the *Plan* cannot be 100% adopted until the completion of those remaining elements, even then recognizing that no plan of this kind is ever "Final," and that the process of thoughtful and creative guidance for Lexington will continue to evolve after that.

Most of these actions entail significant consensus building, research and technical analysis, crafting of the product and negotiating of the twists and turns of public process. These realities demand the participation of multiple supporting parties. The job of moving forward with initiatives from the *ComPlan* over the next few years is too formidable to lie solely with any one board, department or committee. Although state law requires municipalities to engage in long range planning, it puts few teeth into the enforcement and realization of that dictum. In the end, then, the document is only as useful as the desire of people in those communities to see the proposals press ahead.

² *Lexington 2020 Vision: A Status Report of the Planning Process*, Executive Summary & Volume 1, January 2000, page ii.