

## I. Introduction

### A. What Is This Document?

You are holding in your hands the cumulative effort of hundreds of people who thought seriously and conscientiously about the future of our town. Massachusetts General Laws requires each city and town to have a Master Plan that includes an assessment of the community's current situation, consideration of the trends it is experiencing, documentation of the community's desired future, and action steps that will guide the community toward that desired future.

Early in the process of complying with this requirement, it became clear that we would be involved in something that would be much more than simply "another report to satisfy some bureaucracy and then sit on a bookshelf." As more and more people spoke of their hopes for our town and what it means to them and to their children, we decided that we were not writing a Master Plan, but rather, we were writing a Community Plan. It became our constant reminder that this effort had to be based on the input of the whole community, with consideration of more than just numbers and maps, and that preserving our sense of community was more important than planning exactly where the next sewer line would go.

The Community Plan now expresses where Belchertown is, where we want it to go, and what steps we need to take to get there. But, this is just the beginning. The Community Plan is a living document that should be used by every elected and appointed town official to guide the decisions of our town. It will be formally reviewed and revised every five years.

It is possible that the effort was in vain and the plan is ignored. To make sure this Community Plan serves its intended purpose of being a policy guide through the future, the first recommendations are:

- Consider the priorities of the Community Plan in developing the town budget for town meeting approval.
- Urge each department, board, commission, and committee to annually develop a five-year programming plan that will include estimated costs and funding sources.
- Have each department's, board's, commission's, and committee's annual report include progress on implementing the Community Plan and target actions for coming year.
- Four years after the adoption of this plan, and every five years thereafter, reconvene the Community Plan Steering Committee for a comprehensive update of the Community Plan.

We call on each Belchertown citizen to help ensure that this work is not ignored. Every citizen needs to help remind our town officials and department heads to use this plan as their guide. *This Community Plan is Our Community Plan.*

### B. The Process That Produced The 2002 Community Plan

Belchertown's 2002 Community Plan emerged from a four-year, inclusive, citizen-conducted effort. The genesis of this project was a group of interested citizens and town officials who realized the need for comprehensive planning, and who formed a "Land Use Study Committee" in 1997 upon the hiring of a town planner. In 1998, the planning department hired a University of Massachusetts graduate student, Jennifer Phelan, to do a build-out analysis and research similar towns in Massachusetts with master plans. This was the first formal work toward the completion of this Belchertown Community Plan.

In 1999, the Planning Board made the process official by convening a Master Plan Steering Committee composed of Jim Barry, Tibby Chase, Carmine Angeloni, Jay Whelihan, Steve Rose, Mark Lindhult, and Jay Rossi. The committee began with a review of studies that had already been conducted for the community. This review was documented in a fall 1999 report, Existing Studies of Town of Belchertown Resources, by Matthew N. Steinberg, also a graduate assistant at the University of Massachusetts. In his summary of this overview, Mr. Steinberg commented on themes that would continue through the subsequent years of planning effort<sup>1</sup>:

- Lack of updated and seemingly accurate information
- Increasing population
- Predominant construction of single family residential
- Meeting needs of the diverse and growing population with variety of housing types
- Need to plan for sewer system
- Open space protection
- Incorporating economic development into desires for development and conservation
- Failure to implement growth management schemes that have been proposed in the past
- Securing wide-spread support through education and information sessions

By the spring of 2000, a community-wide survey had been conducted and results compiled. Dave Loomis, a University of Massachusetts forestry and wildlife professor and professional survey consultant, donated his time and expertise to the design and tabulation of the 2002 Community Survey. The results of that scientifically designed and statistically valid survey are a detailed database that will continue to provide guidance regarding townspeople and their perceptions of Belchertown. One key finding from the survey was that while a large proportion of townspeople valued Belchertown's "rural" character, there was also a desire for amenities and conveniences that are not typical of truly rural communities. Much of subsequent deliberations centered around what we in Belchertown mean by "rural", and how we can maintain the rural attributes that are important as we accommodate changes.

In June, 2000, the Board of Selectmen appointed the newly constituted Master Plan Steering Committee, whose task was to develop and distribute a Request for Proposals for consulting assistance to Belchertown's process of public participation, and to recommend a choice of consultant to the Board of Selectmen. Steering Committee members were Jim Barry [Chair], Joe Gilman, and Tibby Chase [each representing the Planning Board], Barbara Schaffer-Bacon [School Committee], Rob Rizzo [Conservation Commission], Ron Aponte [Selectmen], Gail Gramarossa [Board of Health], plus citizens-at-large Mark Lindhult, and Bill Cary. Jeanne Armstrong of LandUse, Incorporated, was selected to work with the community's 2000 – 2001 public participation phase. The Steering Committee launched the fall 2000 – Spring 2001 effort with a highly successful booth at the Belchertown Community Fair. Over 200 people stopped by to make comments, ask questions, and stick a pin in a Belchertown map representing where they live. Picking up where the survey had left off, this phase worked through two public forums to draft a consensus-based statement of growth management goals and objectives, and to agree on the next most fruitful steps for the community planning effort. This phase culminated with the May 2001 Town Meeting receiving and endorsing the Statement of Goals and Objectives that are the heart of the *Belchertown Community Plan*.

In the fall of 2001 began the phase of drafting the Community Plan document itself. In October, a workshop of town officials provided input regarding the aspects of change and conservation that

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<sup>1</sup> Steinberg, Matthew, Belchertown Master Plan: Executive Summary, Fall 1999.

officials felt needed to be addressed by the Community Plan. The Steering Committee continued these deliberations by attending subsequent meetings of boards and commissions. Simultaneously, a team of volunteer “scribes” took on the task of working from the Statement of Goals and Objectives to compile information, draft analysis, and list potential action steps for each element of the Community Plan. The scribes were Tibby Chase, Chair [Land Use], Julie Peck [Housing], Cliff McCarthy [Historical and Cultural Resources], Shannon and George Synan [Economic Development], Bill Cary [Natural Resources], Paula Davitt [Open Space and Recreation], Jim Barry [Services and Facilities], Doug Albertson [Circulation and Transportation], and Gail Gramarossa [Health and Human Services]. Consultant Jeanne Armstrong gave some assistance to the scribes and helped compile the Implementation Element. Based upon conversations with local officials and upon the work of the scribes, the Steering Committee convened the Spring 2002 Community Plan Forum, which gained input from the community regarding which potential action strategies seemed most appropriate for implementing the Community Plan.

At the spring 2002 Community Plan forum, townspeople considered the action steps that could move Belchertown toward achieving the community’s desired future. The Conceptual Land Use Plan and Implementation Actions outlined in this plan are based upon the guidance received at that forum.

The 2002 Belchertown Community Plan is a consensus-based document that has been shaped by all this broad input. In coming years, even as we begin to implement the Plan, we expect to continue deliberating issues and seeking agreement on further actions. Future updates of the Community Plan will record the new levels of agreement that are reached by the community.

### **C. The Process That Produced This 2009 Community Plan**

Similarly, Belchertown’s 2009 Community Plan emerged from an inclusive, citizen-conducted effort that took place over one-year. The town planner, Doug Albertson, initiated the review by soliciting and assembling a group of interested citizens and town officials who realized the need for continued comprehensive planning. Doug Albertson [Town Planner], Ron Aponte [Board of Selectmen], Jon Clements [Agricultural Commission], Judy Gillan [Historical Commission], Christopher Laurenzo [Planning Board], Linda Leduc [Conservation Commission], Bernie Schliemann [at large citizen and committee chair], and Woody Sherman [Economic Development and Industrial Corporation] served on the Community Plan Steering Committee from April 2007 – April 2008. The group began its work by conducting a complete review and update of the existing 2002 plan. This included the identification of changes within the town since the last plan was published; the following list includes completed actions from the 2002 plan:

1. completion of a 2003 Town Center Plan,
2. adoption of the Community Preservation Act,
3. revision of zoning bylaws to address home-based businesses,
4. enactment of a Town Scenic Roads bylaw,
5. completion of research for stone mile markers,
6. opening of Piper Farm for passive educational recreation, and
7. implementation of 24-hour ambulance coverage.

Other items were no longer relevant and were deleted. Finally, the committee completed a tentative prioritization of the implementation action items identified at the end of each section. This section prioritization was the basis for a survey and comprehensive priority list for the town.

The committee next developed a survey for town residents. The survey was announced through a series of announcements in the *Sentinel* (the local weekly area newspaper) and articles written and published by *Sentinel* staff. The survey and results are included as Section XI of this plan. The survey was available at Town Hall, on the town's planning website, through SurveyMonkey.com on the world-wide web, and at the library, Checkers, Sports Shed, and a few other town businesses. The survey was available and open from October 2007 through January 2008; a total of about three months.

In addition, a public forum was conducted at the Belchertown High School cafeteria on November 7, 2008. The forum was also advertised in the *Sentinel* as well as the local access cable television station, Channel 5. Although attendance was fairly poor (24 residents attended), the discussion was excellent and the committee left with a better understanding of the town's priorities.

The results of the survey and the comments received at the public forum provided the basis for the final priority list included in Section XI. This list should serve as the basis of the town priorities for the Board of Selectmen as well as the town's various committees and departments. In addition, quarterly updates and an annual written progress report should be drafted by each committee and department for the Board of Selectmen and town residents.

While Doug Albertson and Evan Aird (a University of Massachusetts Amherst graduate student within the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning) updated the tabular and other data within the plan, the remainder of the committee made final revisions to each of the sections within the 2002 plan. At this time a section was added outlining the historical and current significance of agriculture to the town. The plan was then presented to both the Planning Board and Board of Selectmen. It is intended that the 2009 plan be reviewed again in five years to provide further direction and refinement to the town's vision.

#### **D. References**

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