

Master Plan Working Group – Fiscal Year 2018

Group Members: *Meryl Mandell, Chair, and Mary Anne Antonellis, Michele Cunningham, Al Hanson, Jeff Lacy, Tim Logan, Mike Vinskey*

The original Master Plan Working Group (MPWG), teamed with consultants from Harriman Associates, ended the 2017 Fiscal Year by hosting a town-wide meeting and presentation of the Town Vision report. Leading up to this point, over 400 Shutesbury residents had participated in the public process by attending workshops, completing written or on-line surveys, and sending emails sharing concerns and ideas. This input defined the Vision and was reported on in the Community Vision Report, May 2017 (posted on the Shutesbury MPWG Website - https://www.shutesbury.org/master_plan_working_group, along with all the backup information gathered and used to compile the report).

Residents identified four themes in the Vision:

- Community – preserving the town’s unique culture with civil discourse through activities and gatherings;
- Finances - staying fiscally sustainable and affordable, with residents satisfied with the level of municipal services provided relative to their property taxes;
- Infrastructure - improved lifestyles with advanced internet and cell service, social gathering spaces such as a new library/community/senior center, and well maintained, well-utilized existing buildings and roads;
- Land Use and Housing - diversity in housing with localized economic development and protected open space that is more accessible.

In early FY18, the Selectboard voted to endorse the Vision, but then asked the MPWG to reconvene to give the board direction on Vision Statement #2, which included strategies to implement the vision. A reconstituted MPWG (members listed above) convened in August to work on the Selectboard request. Every member came forward with their ideas to implement aspects of the Vision. After extensive discussion, three topics emerged that the group chose to bring forward to the SB for future action: crafting a statement of fiscal issues in town; developing low cost/high benefit actions to improve the quality of life in town; and developing a concept plan for use of Lot O-32.

After long and lively discussions on fiscal sustainability/responsibility, the MPWG issued a statement that recognized that the various entities in town responsible for town finances had already been working on “understanding, developing and implementing best practices for sound fiscal planning with the assistance of a grant-funded consultant from FRCOG.” Rather than reinvent the wheel, the MPWG chose to support the Selectboard and others in continuing their close watch over the town’s budget. The MPWG also strongly encouraged the various financial entities in town to work hard on improving both internal communications on financial matters, and also reaching out to Townspeople to explain financial matters more clearly and thoroughly.

The second recommendation from the MPWG was the establishment of a tentatively titled Achievable Actions Committee, which would encourage residents and town staff to submit ideas and suggestions that were small, achievable, inexpensive and doable. Example ideas that bubbled up were community vegetable gardens, developing a trail or historic site map for Shutesbury, and more. The Committee

would not be the idea originators, but rather the facilitators for applications that would allow residents to implement the suggestions. We recommended that funding be allocated at town meeting to kickstart these low budget projects. The Selectboard acted on this suggestion by creating the “Small Touches: Quality of Life Contest”. Rather than creating a new committee, the Selectboard opted to directly solicit and review all submissions. Chosen submissions were brought to Annual Town Meeting for funding, where two Small Touches were voted and approved – a new bandstand gazebo and the planting of daffodils on town right of way. Nice to see our ideas executed successfully.

The final, and arguably the most impactful, action the MPWG proposed was working on a plan for Lot O-32, an activity that would encompass all four areas highlighted in the Vision. We developed a Lot O-32 Committee mission and charge, and passed this charge on to the Selectboard for action. The MPWG recommended that the Committee not be responsible for coming up with a roadmap or a particular plan set in stone, but rather a vision for the lot consistent with what was gleaned from the data. Following our recommendation to establish the Lot O-32 Committee, the Town Administrator submitted a grant application to the State to fund hiring the Conway School to develop a concept plan for the site. Although the State funded and awarded the Town the grant, the Selectboard lost a member and turned back the grant. This change of heart and reversal of positive progress on the MPWG’s initiatives was an unfortunate set back. However, the MPWG hopes that the new Board of Selectmen starting in July 2018 will have the desire and energy to further planning efforts for Lot O-32, thereby continuing to implement the Vision brought forth from residents.

The MPWG has completed its work, and thanks all those that assisted along the way. We worked long and hard to try and understand the desires and hopes that residents have for the future of Shutesbury. The Community Vision Report provides a documented synthesis of how we want our town to gracefully move into the future. It is now up to the Board of Selectmen and other Town Boards to reflect on and implement the findings.

*- Respectfully submitted,
Meryl Ann Mandell, Chair, Master Plan Working Group*