

Princeton Town Plan

A Summary



Based upon the Town Plan adopted by the Planning Board September 19, 2007.



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January, 2008

Dear Fellow Citizens,

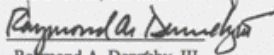
After two years of effort by many members of the community, the Princeton Town Plan is now complete. This brochure summarizes the seven categories detailed in the town plan. A copy of the complete town plan can be viewed at either the town hall or library and can be seen on line at www.town.princeton.ma.us

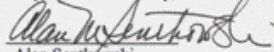
The Board of Selectmen and Planning Board have appointed a Town Plan Implementation Committee to oversee the implementation of this plan. It is expected to take many years of effort to complete.

We deeply appreciate the broad community interest in this project and encourage your active and continued participation as we make progress in implementing the town plan.

Thank you for your support.

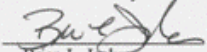

Joe O'Brien, Chairman

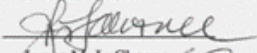

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Preface to the Princeton Town Plan

With this Town Plan, we celebrate what is special about Princeton – the place and the people. We are grateful to those before us who had the foresight to shape change without losing that which we hold dear. This Plan will guide our future as we honor our heritage.

It is little wonder that so many people describe Princeton as a town unblemished by growth. Through thoughtful leadership and creative management, Princeton remains not only a beautiful town, but also a well run town.

Princeton is a civic-minded place. Even though our residents have diverse backgrounds, talents and beliefs, we share a common sense of fairness and volunteer our knowledge and skills for the public good. Some of our families have been here for several generations, others have spent most of their lives here, and still others moved here recently. Yet we have the same appreciation for all that Princeton has to offer.

Princeton will continue to be an exemplary community, mindful of the challenges facing the world and dedicated to local action that may have a positive effect on the region around us. It is a place that each and every one of us is proud to call our home.

Land Use

Existing Condition:

Princeton is a rural-residential community, characterized by mountainous terrain, extensive forest cover, a radial frame of narrow, winding roads and very low-density development – conditions that lend a rustic feel to the town. Much of Princeton's land is vacant and forested. But, an estimated 8,400 acres, including many large, privately owned parcels, may have development potential.

Several of Princeton's neighboring towns have been among the state's fastest growing and they are struggling with sprawl, congestion and the resulting rise in property taxes. The community meetings for this Town Plan consistently expressed Princeton's desire to manage future growth. Growth management means balance by design – balanced development that not only preserves land but also builds places to live and work, avoids the economic and environmental costs of sprawl, and promotes diverse neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, Princeton's current Zoning Bylaw encourages outcomes that bear little relationship to the kind of place residents say they want in the future. It does not provide any flexibility to protect open space by design. Where Princeton's landscape is strikingly beautiful, physically defined by steep terrain, rocky slopes, streams and renowned views, the Zoning Bylaw effectively ignores these attributes. It promotes a homogenous 'one-size-fits-all' development pattern. It is a policy statement that encourages the division of these parcels into so-called "cookie cutter" two-acre lots without regard to their unique characteristics.

Under the current zoning, an estimated 2,200 new building lots could be created on land that is currently unrestricted, vacant or partially developed. Over time, Princeton's roads could become punctuated by a succession of driveways and its roadside open space may become increasingly fragmented. The result is suburban sprawl – one house lot every 225 feet along previously scenic roads. This form of very-low-density residential development runs contrary to the principles of rural planning and the benefits of rural development.

Princeton has many opportunities to provide for development and still protect the qualities that residents cherish.

Goals:

- **Countryside.** Maintain the country qualities of Princeton by preserving the trees, stone walls, agricultural fields, tree-lined roads, vistas and historic homes.
- **Villages.** Community planning efforts should promote village concepts that are consistent with Princeton's vision statement and recognize that the areas of East Princeton, Post Office Place and the Town Center require special attention and zoning strategies tailored to unique local conditions.
- **Consistency.** Revise Princeton's Zoning Bylaw and other regulations to support and be consistent with Princeton's vision statement.

Open Space & Natural Resources

Existing Condition:

There is no question that open space is Princeton's signature feature. For visitors, newcomers and long-time residents, Princeton is known for a peerless collection of working landscapes, open fields, dense forests, and the formal public spaces found in the Town Center. Each of these settings contributes to Princeton's visual character and provides important context for its historic buildings and structures. Wachusett Mountain, the Stillwater River, numerous brooks and ponds, meadows and vast woodlands define Princeton's beauty. These ecosystems comprise an intricate network that is home to a diversity of wildlife, sensitive plant communities and contributes drinking water to more than 2.5 million people.

The same pattern of suburban development that accelerated the loss of forests and farms and contributed to inefficient land use in countless small towns is a threat to Princeton also. Many towns east of Worcester have had trouble adopting and implementing strategies to protect open space and natural resources until they faced an urgent problem – sale of a Chapter 61A farm, an application for a large comprehensive permit or the discovery of contaminated water supplies.

For many of Princeton's residents it's difficult to imagine a future in which much of Princeton's revered qualities have all but disappeared. Princeton needs a shared approach to land use planning and land management that would help our town, state agencies, land trusts and private land owners work together to protect Princeton's land and water resources. Our collective challenge is to agree on how to keep our assets largely intact while acknowledging the rights of all land-owners.

Goals:

- **Visual.** From the roadways continue to view open fields, forests, stone walls, and shade covered roads that open up to scenic vistas.
- **Physical.** Experience Princeton's natural beauty via a network of trails that connect to one another with minimum road use.
- **Ecological.** Continue to provide an environment that sustains wildlife.
- **Environmental Responsibility.** Strengthen Princeton's role as a leader in ecological and environmental concern.

Historic Preservation

Existing Condition:

From the time of Princeton's earliest agricultural settlement, the town has played an important role in American history. The physical beauty of Princeton and its historic structures have continued to inspire poets and charm residents and visitors.

Princeton is blessed with an extraordinary, well-preserved collection of historic buildings, sites, landmarks and historic artifacts spanning more than 250 years. These historic assets contribute significantly to Princeton's character and enhance the unique sense of place and rural heritage we hold dear.

Princeton has two active volunteer organizations dedicated to the preservation of our historic resources: the Princeton Historical Commission and the Princeton Historical Society. These groups participate in preservation planning projects, educational programs, materials conservation and community outreach. The Princeton Historical Commission identifies historic resources through cultural resource surveys and National Register of Historic Places nominations. The Princeton Historical Society maintains the town's repository of historic and cultural artifacts and provides education and outreach.

Many of our historic assets are in danger and preservation must be a priority. Our historic structures must be protected from demolition and decay and our historic artifacts deserve professional conservation.

Goals:

- **Artifacts & Documents.** Preserve Princeton's historical artifacts and documents.
- **Public Education.** Continue to educate current and future generations about Princeton's history and its importance.
- **Preservation.** Maintain our legacy of historic buildings, sites and landmarks - public and privately owned.

Housing

Existing Condition:

Princeton's greatest housing challenge is to diversify housing choice while maintaining the rural character of the town. Virtually all new units built in Princeton since 1980 have been detached single family homes. Overall, our housing stock is relatively older and larger than that of the surrounding communities. Recent homes listed for sale in Princeton had asking prices ranging from \$275,000 to nearly \$1 million. These are higher than any other town in the region.

Princeton's 1,166 households are predominantly families and its median household income exceeds that of all surrounding towns. Not all Princeton households are well-off – approximately 75 elderly households, for example, have much lower incomes. Among Princeton's low and moderate-income households, most are homeowners, not renters, and although the elderly comprise only 15% of all households, they are about half of the lower income households in town.

When Princeton residents speak of housing affordability, they usually mention affordability for their adult children and seniors, and they mean modestly priced housing. The absence of housing choices such as multi-family dwellings or townhouses makes it difficult to create housing in a price range attainable for young families and seniors.

Goals:

- **Town Character.** Create housing policies and procedures that will help to promote and protect Princeton's rural character and scenic views.
- **Housing Diversity.** Create residential development regulations and policies that will allow a broader mix of housing choices.
- **Interconnected Neighborhoods.** Adopt zoning policies and planning board regulations that encourage interconnected neighborhoods and recreation lands.
- **Affordable Housing.** Adopt an effective strategy to assure that comprehensive permit developments are well designed, consistent with local needs, conscious of impacts on the town, and compatible with the goals of the Town Plan.

Economic Development

Existing Condition:

Princeton is gradually evolving as a small, low-density town with visual characteristics that resemble rural development.

Residents rely on nearby suburban or urban areas for their livelihoods, goods and services, entertainment and culture, and health care. They hold jobs in employment centers spread across four states and a very small percentage of the labor force is employed by local establishments. Also many residents work as professionals, artists, contractors or service providers in home-based businesses.

The exclusion of a recognizable business base is striking. While residents of rural areas often travel to population centers for major purchases, it is far less common for them to have few if any choices for convenience goods and basic services.

There is an undeniable mismatch between Princeton's commercial districts, the location and mix of businesses, and the vision of the town's future. Some areas, particularly the Town Center, contain non-conforming commercial uses while business-zoned areas offer few if any opportunities for commercial use or expansion. Adjusting the boundaries and some of the uses permitted within these districts make them more responsive to local needs for economic livelihood and protect Princeton's interest in rural character.

Goals:

- **Business Districts.** Reduce the number of business zones to enhance the viability of desired commercial activity.
- **Town Center.** Maintain the Town Center as a predominately governmental & cultural area.
- **Economic Incentives to Preserve Land.** Take steps to encourage businesses that maintain Princeton's rural character.
- **Local Artists.** Promote the work of local artists and craftsmen.
- **At-Home Businesses.** Allow entrepreneurial activities that are compatible with residential neighborhoods.
- **Government-Business Partnerships.** Improve communication among local businesses, town government and potential developers.

Transportation

Existing Condition:

Transportation is more than just roads. Overall, Princeton's relatively small road network is composed of winding, rural byways that radiate from the center of town and make an indelible contribution to the community's visual character. The roads and highways provide scenic backdrops as much as they provide access to land parcels and the regional highway system. Unpaved (dirt and gravel) roads in Princeton contribute to the scenic character of the town while providing additional linkages and access.

Sidewalks are just about non-existent in Princeton, so most roads double as pedestrian ways and travel ways for large and small vehicles, bicycles and horses. Also, Princeton is a regional recreation resource and portions of its road system support activities such as bicycle races and tours.

Trails provide both transportation and recreation opportunities. Princeton has an informal system of trails that connects to neighboring towns, provides intra-community connections, and serves as recreational nature trails for local residents. Local trails also provide access to open space and opportunities to link open space areas to one another. Among the most developed are the Midstate Trail, internal trail systems in the Wachusett Mountain State Reservation and the Leominster State Park, and smaller trail networks located in Minns Wildlife Sanctuary and Thomas Prince School.

Princeton is not directly served by public transportation but the town is not remote from the region's major rail facilities.

Adequate funding for road maintenance and reconstruction is a critical need and a basic responsibility of government. But even if all of Princeton's roads were in excellent condition, the Town would still have unmet transportation needs and issues to resolve.

Goals:

- **Roads Plan.** Implement the Roads Advisory Committee's Six-Year Plan for reconstructing roads in Princeton.
- **Route 140.** Improve the Route 140 corridor through East Princeton for vehicle and pedestrian safety.
- **Trail Connections.** Enhance trail system connections and access coordination with the Open Space Committee.
- **Trail System Development.** Investigate the feasibility of developing bike paths and walking trails, utilizing public ways and the railroad right-of-way.
- **Scenic Roads.** Reach agreement about the criteria that are needed to maintain the rural character of Princeton roads.

Community Services & Facilities

Existing Condition:

Princeton is known for its excellent fiscal management, and its qualified and motivated volunteers. These are critical for our future.

The annual Town Meeting appropriates approximately one-third of Princeton's annual budget to support the delivery of high quality municipal services. The remaining two-thirds is for educational costs, placing pressure on our ability to fulfill local service needs.

As Princeton grows, patterns of development and land use regulations will affect not only service needs, but possibly service locations, facilities and staffing levels. Likewise, evolving demographic changes (i.e., an aging population) will shape Princeton's efforts to provide new or expanded services.

Goals:

- **Public Safety.** Preserve appropriate public safety standards through a long-term ambulance policy and maintaining the proficiency and competence of public safety personnel.
- **Asset Management.** Develop an asset management plan, including mechanisms for the acquisition and disposition of town-owned buildings, land, and public safety and public works equipment.
- **Infrastructure Improvements.** Maintain and improve essential infrastructure, including roads, technology and the wind farm.
- **Staffing and Space Needs.** Analyze and plan for staffing and space needs for municipal buildings, cultural facilities and a public safety complex.
- **Retention and Recruitment of Volunteers.** Provide technology, professional support, recognition programs and uniform policies to enhance the work of town boards, commissions and committees and to retain qualified volunteers.
- **Community Events.** Promote and support community events and festivals to connect townspeople, nurture community pride, and sustain Princeton's culture of outdoor recreation.
- **Financing Town Services.** Work toward self-sustainability of programs from potential fee-based services.
- **Regionalization of Services.** Support efforts to regionalize services with neighboring towns where beneficial.