



## CHAPTER 8

# COMMUNITY SERVICES & FACILITIES ELEMENT

The community services and facilities element of a master plan should anticipate the buildings and other types of facilities a local government will need in order to meet future demands for municipal services. A **public facility** is any town property that has been developed for particular public purposes, such as a town hall, library or school. It also includes local utilities such as public water or municipal light service, along with parks, playgrounds, and cemeteries. Together, a town's buildings, land, infrastructure and equipment make it possible for municipal employees and volunteers to provide basic services. The adequacy of town facilities for the functions they serve depends on many factors: the form and size of local government, the community's land use pattern, and the expectations of residents. Further, providing adequate facilities and services depends on the amount of revenue that is available to support local government operations.

Princeton has a very small population, but its local government is a complex organization that spends more than \$10M each year on a variety of public services, capital projects and utilities.<sup>1</sup> About 65% of Princeton's \$7M general fund operating budget pays for local children to attend public school in Princeton or at the regional high school in Holden, excluding debt service for school construction projects. Many town departments rely on funding sources other than general fund revenue to cover some or all of their operating costs. Princeton's small local government is extraordinary for the amount of revenue it obtains from grants, user fees and charges, permits, rental income, lo-

<sup>1</sup> This includes revenue from the Princeton Municipal Light Department (PMLD) and approximately \$6.8M appropriated for municipal operations.



Princeton's beautiful public library, overlooking the town common in Princeton Center. (Photo by Joyce Anderson, Princeton Historical Commission.)

cal fundraising and donations. However, it is also clear that some departments find it increasingly difficult to provide the services expected of them. Princeton takes pride in having so many dedicated, professional volunteers engaged in all aspects of civic life, yet the town has unmet needs for personnel, equipment, and property management that should be addressed soon regardless of population growth.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

### Form of Government

Princeton's form of government is similar to that of most small towns in Massachusetts. Incorporated in 1759, Princeton operates under the general laws of the Commonwealth, special acts of the legislature, and local bylaws. Its relatively decentralized government is led by a three-member Select Board, which has general responsibility for the health, safety and welfare of the town and shares executive-branch powers with other elected officials such as the Planning Board

and Board of Assessors. One elected board, the Electric Light Commission, is a semi-autonomous body that oversees a municipal enterprise, the Princeton Municipal Light Department (PMLD). Princeton has about 27 elected and appointed committees and individual office holders such as the Town Moderator, all performing a public service, and some functions have been professionalized, notably the Town Administrator. The town's legislative body is an open town meeting.

Princeton participates in a K-12 regional school system with neighboring Holden, Paxton, Rutland and Sterling. The Wachusett Regional School District (WRSD) is overseen by a 20-member School Committee, with representatives elected by the voters in each town. Princeton has no other formal inter-local agreements, but it works cooperatively on an as-needed basis with neighboring communities. For example, its public safety departments supply mutual aid to surrounding towns and participate in regional funding opportunities for public safety equipment. In addition, Princeton is one of 45 members of the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC), the regional planning agency serving Worcester-area cities and towns.

## Public Buildings

Princeton owns and manages 11 buildings and some accessory structures in various locations throughout the town. The major facilities include:<sup>2</sup>

- **Bagg Hall**, built in 1885, is an impressive Richardsonian Romanesque building that serves as Princeton's town hall. Located on Town Hall Drive at the top of the Town Common, Bagg Hall houses nine municipal offices, including the Select Board, Town Administrator, the Town Clerk, the Board of

Assessors, Board of Health, Town Accountant, Town Treasurer, Tax Collector, and the Building Inspector.

- The **Town Hall Annex**, a small, one-story building located behind Bagg Hall, is used primarily for meeting space and storage.
- The **Public Safety Building**, also located behind Bagg Hall, supports the Police Department, Fire Department, Dispatchers, and Emergency Medical Service (EMS) personnel. The building consists of an older fire station that was renovated and expanded approximately 20 years ago. The one-story portion holds Fire Department vehicles and the Fire Department's offices, and the expansion section is two stories, each with at-grade access. The Police Department and dispatch center occupy the upper floor and the lower floor is divided into two bays for fire, ambulance and police equipment.
- The **East Princeton Fire Station** (Fire Station #2) on Route 140/31 (Redemption Rock Trail), holds Fire Department vehicles and equipment, including one of two Advanced Life Support (ALS) ambulances.
- The **Princeton Center Building** on Boylston Avenue once served as the town's primary and secondary school. A Shingle Style building constructed in 1906, it currently supports some town services such as recreation activities and the senior center, and other space is leased for private offices. The Princeton Center Management Committee oversees and maintains the building.
- **Princeton Public Library** (Goodnow Memorial Building), a Richardsonian Romanesque building also located on Town Hall Drive, was constructed in 1882-83. The present building originally served as both as a library and public school, but the library operation

<sup>2</sup> Sources: Community Facilities and Services Subcommittee, Princeton Master Plan Steering Committee; and Joyce Anderson, Princeton Historical Commission.

expanded to include the entire building after the Princeton Center School opened. The library was renovated in 2001 with local funds supplemented by a construction grant from the state Board of Library Commissioners. In addition to the collections and circulation area on the first floor, the library has upper-story and basement-level meeting space and a repository of local history records.

- The **Highway Department Garage** at Krashes Field on East Princeton Road. The same town-owned site includes the current highway garage (built in 2001), a salt storage facility, an older highway building now used to store public works and recreation equipment, and playing fields for youth sports.
- **Thomas Prince School** on Sterling Road (Route 62), built in 1967-68 and expanded in 1991, is owned by the town and operated by the Wachusett Regional School District. Princeton's only public school, the Thomas Prince School includes K-8 classrooms, core facilities and a gym/cafeteria that doubles as space for large meetings. This facility also has a fully equipped playground, playing fields and the "Snack Shack" concession stand.
- The **Princeton Municipal Light Department** at 168 Worcester Road serves as PMLD's headquarters and offers meeting space for general community use. PMLD renovated the property with financing from the State House Notes Program.
- **Mechanics Hall** on Main Street in East Princeton has been substantially vacant for about 60 years. A beautiful Greek Revival building constructed by the Mechanics Association in 1852, Mechanics Hall once served as a school in East Princeton. Its future is uncertain due to the cost of capital improvements required to comply with current codes.

## Other Public Facilities

Princeton owns other facilities that serve the public. They include:<sup>3</sup>

- **Sawyer Field:** a recreational facility on Leominster Road that includes a partially equipped playground, an unlined soccer field and one Little League field.
- **Princeton Center Park:** located on Boylston Avenue behind the Princeton Center Building, including a playground, one Little League field, an unlined soccer practice field, and a walking track.
- **Princeton Park at Krashes Field:** a new community recreation center on East Princeton Road, offering hiking trails and three full-size soccer fields. This site will soon have a basketball court with lighting, along with a snack shack (concession stand). Princeton Park is a good example of local efforts to implement the town's most recent (2000) open space and recreation plan.
- **Thomas Prince Playing Fields:** a fully equipped playground and cross-country trails maintained by WRSD; and adjacent to the school, one softball field, two Little League fields and storage shed, five youth soccer fields, one basketball court, and a snack shack.
- **Public Parks:** Town Common, Goodnow Park, Boylston Park, and Dingman Park.
- **Public Cemeteries:** North Cemetery, South Cemetery, Parker 1 and Parker 2 Cemeteries, Woodlawn Cemetery, West Cemetery, and Meeting House Cemetery.

<sup>3</sup> Information based in part on an inventory of Princeton's recreation facilities from Marcia Sands, Princeton Town Clerk's Office, 7 September 2006; and Community Facilities and Services Subcommittee, Princeton Master Plan Steering Committee.

- **PMLD Assets:** 16-acre Wind Farm off Westminster Road, power lines and associated infrastructure.

Princeton does not have public water or sewer systems, so its population depends on private wells and on-site wastewater disposal.

## Community Services

While public facilities provide physical space for local government services, actual service delivery depends on people: municipal workers and volunteers. The cost of constructing, maintaining, staffing and equipping public facilities falls almost entirely upon local governments, for other sources such as grants are difficult to obtain and not always available from state or federal programs.

Princeton's vibrant local government relies on a small group of municipal employees and the service of numerous volunteers. As a percentage of total expenditures, Princeton's very small payroll is comparable to that of other semi-rural, low-density towns across the state. About 104 people work on an intermittent or seasonal basis for the town, ranging from call firefighters and special police officers to election workers.<sup>4</sup> However, its mainstay workforce includes 26 full- and part-time regular employees. Many services such as planning, development review, recreation programs, and senior services rely heavily or exclusively on civic-minded volunteers. About 27 committees participate actively and regularly in governance of the town, and several others serve on an as-needed basis.

**Administration & Finance.** Less than 5% of Princeton's annual operating budget is allocated to the functions of administration and finance. The Town Administrator manages and coordinates Princeton's financial operations, assisted by the

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Rindone, Princeton Town Administrator, to Judi Barrett, Community Opportunities Group, Inc., 17 October 2005.

### FY 2006 GENERAL FUND OPERATING BUDGET (SUMMARY)

Administration & Finance	\$366,978	4.8%
Public Safety	\$728,679	9.5%
Planning & Development	\$18,917	0.2%
Public Works	\$730,375	9.6%
Culture & Recreation	\$177,258	2.3%
Human Services	\$15,498	0.2%
Schools	\$5,084,558	66.6%
Fixed Costs/Other	\$511,814	6.7%
Total	\$7,634,077	100.0%

*Source: Dennis Rindone, Town Administrator. Amounts shown include debt service for applicable departments (schools, library and highway department).*

town accountant, treasurer, tax collector, and part-time assessor. Their work is supported or guided by several elected and appointed boards, including the Select Board, Advisory Board (also known as the Finance Committee in some towns), Board of Assessors, Insurance Advisory Committee, Trustees of Trust Funds, and the Personnel Board, which oversees the compensation schedule and conditions of employment for full- and part-time non-unionized municipal workers. Each of these committees has a specialized or statutorily prescribed role in financial and administrative policy. However, plans and special projects carried out by other town committees have a significant impact on operating and capital spending decisions, notably the Roads Advisory Committee.

Princeton has an appointed Town Clerk and a part-time Assistant Town Clerk. Under state law and local bylaw, the Town Clerk serves as the official keeper of record, with wide-ranging responsibilities such as maintaining the roster of registered voters, the jury list and the annual census, recording town meeting and election votes, organizing and overseeing the elections process, issuing a variety of licenses and certificates, maintaining and cataloguing records of all town property, serving as the repository of meeting and public hearing minutes of town boards and committees, and



maintaining the official record of decisions by the Planning Board, Board of Appeals and others. In Princeton, the Town Clerk also maintains the town's official website and calendar.

**Public Safety.** In most communities, public safety involves a relatively large percentage of the operating budget, and Princeton is no exception. About 9.5% of the general fund operating budget pays for police, fire, dispatch and dog officer functions, and some public safety services are offset by (and dependent upon) other sources of funds. The Princeton Police Department employs a full-time police chief, five full-time officers and seven part-time (permanent intermittent) officers, along with full- and part-time dispatchers, a dog officer and part-time clerical support. In a typical week, the combined hours of deployed part-time police officers represent about 1.4 full-time equivalent (FTE) personnel.<sup>5</sup> Overall, the Police Department's budget accounts for about 79% of all public safety costs covered by Princeton's operating budget. The department also receives state and federal grants for various equipment and community policing programs.

Civilian dispatchers based at the Public Safety Building direct all incoming police, fire, emergency medical, animal control and PMLD calls. Over the past two years, the number of incidents responded to by the Police Department declined slightly, yet some types of calls increased. For example, motor vehicle accidents and reports of suspicious persons, vehicles and vandalism decreased, but arrests, mutual aid, support to the Fire Department and emergency medical response, and larceny calls were noticeably higher in 2005 than 2004.<sup>6</sup> Although long-term trends cannot be established from two years of incident data, growth in demands for mutual aid service seems



Princeton's Public Safety Building in the Town Center.  
(Photo by Community Opportunities Group, Inc.)

inescapably linked to population growth throughout the region. Moreover, the Police Department's support on Fire Department calls, especially emergency medical calls, is indicative of growth in demands placed on the latter and gradual changes in the make-up of Princeton's population.

The Fire Department operates with call firefighters and emergency medical personnel. Fire suppression, mutual aid, inspections, investigations and enforcement functions are carried out by the chief and call firefighters, but more than half of the Fire Department's calls each year involve emergency medical services that require ambulance response. The department owns two ambulances, both equipped for Advanced Life Support (ALS) and operated by ALS personnel. From 2004-2005, ambulance calls in Princeton rose by 25% and a majority of the calls required ALS services. In order to maintain its state ALS certification, Princeton is required to provide 24-hour, year-round ALS service.<sup>7</sup> The town's ambulance service is a self-supporting operation, with expenditures and revenue of about \$60,000 per year (FY 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Master Plan Community Services and Facilities (CF-S) Subcommittee, Meeting Minutes, 7 February 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Report of the Police Department, Incident Statistics, Annual Town Report, 2004, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> CF-S Subcommittee, Meeting Minutes, 24 January 2006, and Report of the Fire Department, Annual Town Report, 2004, 2005.

Princeton separates the responsibilities of dog officer from animal control officer. The former duties are handled by a part-time dog officer and assistant dog officer and the latter, by police officers and dispatchers. The dog officer's role, defined by statute and local bylaw, ranges from addressing dog complaints to sheltering loose, stray or "nuisance" dogs, and enforcing dog and kennel licensing requirements.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, an animal control officer responds to public safety and welfare complaints associated with other domesticated or undomesticated animals.

Many people think of the Building Inspector as a development permitting official, but inspectional services are mainly a public safety function. Princeton's Building Department consists of part-time building, plumbing, gas and electrical inspectors and part-time clerical support. The Building Inspector also serves as Zoning Enforcement Officer. From 2004-2005, the number of new residential construction permits in Princeton declined from 16 to 11, which is similar to region-wide trends and indicative of the economy. Additions and alterations, a key generator of "new growth" tax revenue in most towns, also declined modestly in Princeton, from 62 to 58 permits in the same period. Nonresidential alterations (commercial or industrial, institutional and public buildings) make up a small portion of the department's permitting activity, but not necessarily a small portion of its workload. Together, permit fees for new construction and alterations, and gas, electrical, plumbing and fire inspection service fees generate most of the revolving fund revenue that offsets Building Department expenditures.

**Public Works.** Responsibility for roads, parks, street lights, cemeteries, solid waste disposal, and public buildings and grounds lies with several departments because Princeton does not have a consolidated department of public works. As in most towns, however, Princeton's Highway Department

provides more services than road maintenance and to some extent, it functions as a *de facto* public works department. In addition to resurfacing, reconstructing, plowing and sanding local streets and repairing associated drainage structures, the Highway Department mows and maintains all public parks and playing fields as well as the Town Common. It also assisted with construction of the new playing fields at Krashes Field. The Highway Department's services are supported by general fund operating revenue, highway grants and, as applicable, appropriations for park development, maintenance or other special projects. It works closely with the Roads Advisory Committee to secure local and non-local funds to maintain and improve the quality of Princeton's roads.<sup>9</sup>

The Princeton Board of Health oversees solid waste disposal service. Private contractors collect and transfer solid waste from Princeton households and businesses to the Wheelabrator Resource Recovery Facility in Millbury. Until Wheelabrator opened in 1987, Princeton operated its own municipal landfill on Hubbardston Road. The town closed and capped the landfill after entering into a waste disposal agreement with Wheelabrator in 1988, and the landfill continues to be monitored. A licensed municipal solid waste combustion facility that serves 35 communities in Central Massachusetts, Wheelabrator produces and sells electrical energy at wholesale to the New England Power Company. Under Princeton's disposal agreement, the town pays per-ton tipping fees from revenue generated by local solid waste charges. Princeton's entire annual outlay for solid waste disposal is offset by revenue accounted for separately from the general fund, i.e., without an impact on the tax rate.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> CF-S Subcommittee, Meeting Minutes, 7 December 2005; Report of the Highway Department, Roads Advisory Committee, Expenditure Report-General Fund and Expenditure Report-Other Funds, Annual Town Report, 2004-2005.

<sup>10</sup> Princeton Board of Health, Annual Report, and Town Accountant, FY 2005 Expenditure Report:

<sup>8</sup> See Princeton General Bylaws, Chapter XII.

The Cemetery Department maintains Princeton's six public cemeteries and obtains revenue for that purpose from the general fund and other sources, notably the sale of burial lots and grave opening fees. It has a part-time Cemetery Superintendent and summer workers, and is overseen by an appointed Cemetery Commission. In a typical year, the Cemetery Department sells 5-6 burial plots and accommodates 7-10 burials. The Cemetery Commission estimates that town cemeteries have reserve capacity for about 260 burial spaces and many additional cremation spaces, but Princeton's burial plot documentation is incomplete because records were destroyed in a fire several years ago. The Town Clerk and Cemetery Commission have been working together to re-establish these records in a database.<sup>11</sup>

**Electric Light Enterprise.** Several town departments generate revenue to cover all or a substantial portion of their operating costs, but PMLD is Princeton's only municipal enterprise. Legally established as a non-profit public service corporation, PMLD acquires electricity from wholesale suppliers in New England and New York and provides service to residential, farm, business and public customers located within the town. PMLD owns the power lines that supply electricity throughout Princeton and co-owns the utility poles with Verizon. Moreover, it owns the oldest wind power facility in the Commonwealth and one of the oldest in the country.

In the late 1970s, Princeton town meeting adopted a resolution to oppose purchasing electricity from the Seabrook Nuclear Power Plant and promote the use of alternative energy sources. By 1984, PMLD had constructed several wind turbines off Westminster Road. The turbines generated power for nearly 20 years, but PMLD eventually decommissioned them due to high maintenance costs and declining productivity. Two state-of-the-art turbines are slated to be built in the same location. PMLD has estimated that the new turbines could supply up to 40% of the power consumed by Princeton property owners, or enough locally controlled electricity to stabilize customer rates.<sup>12</sup>

**Planning and Development.** Community planning, development review and permitting functions are carried out through a fairly traditional structure that includes the Planning Board, Board of Appeals, Conservation Commission, Board of Health and Historical Commission, and currently the Master Plan Steering Committee as well. In Princeton, the Planning Board is responsible not only for acting on proposed subdivisions and other lot plans, but also for approving site plans and issuing a limited number of special permits. Over the past few years, the Planning Board's workload has consisted primarily of endorsing "Approval Not Required" or "Form A" plans for lots with enough area and frontage to satisfy existing zoning requirements, but it has also approved two small subdivisions and reviewed several

Other Funds, Solid Waste, Annual Town Report, 2005; CF-S Subcommittee, Meeting Minutes, 5 December 2005; Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, Bureau of Waste Prevention, "Inactive or Closed Solid Waste Landfills," May 2005, and "Active Municipal Solid Waste Combustion Facilities," September 2005, at <<http://www.mass.gov/dep/>>; and Wheelabrator Technologies, Inc., "Wheelabrator Millbury," at <<http://www.wheelabratortechnologies.com/index.asp>>.

<sup>11</sup> CF-S Subcommittee, Meeting Minutes, 5 December 2005 Report of the Princeton Cemetery Commission, Annual Town Report, 2004, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Princeton Municipal Light Department (PMLD), Annual Town Report, 2005; PMLD, Wind Farm History at <<http://www.pml.com/windfarm.asp>>; P. Booth, "Fourth lawsuit filed against wind farm project," The Landmark 10 November 2005, at <<http://www.thelandmark.com>>; A. Paulson, "Going with the wind," Christian Science Monitor 19 December 2002, <<http://www.csmonitor.com/>>; S. Kirsner, "Wind power's new current," New York Times 28 August 2003 <<http://www.nytimes.com/>>; and Massachusetts Division of Energy Resources at <<http://www.mass.gov/doer/home.htm>>, select "Renewable Energy Programs," select "Windpower," select "Princeton."

nonresidential site plans, including PMLD's Wind Farm. Although the Planning Board has authority over preparation of a master plan, Princeton established a special master plan committee with representation from multiple town boards, like many communities throughout the state. The Board of Appeals serves as special permit granting authority for most special permits and exercises statutory jurisdiction over variances and comprehensive permits.<sup>13</sup>

The Conservation Commission administers the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act, M.G.L. c.131 §40, and has broad responsibility for protecting natural resources. Its duties also include reviewing forest cutting plans that require approval from the Department of Conservation and Recreation. In some towns the Conservation Commission oversees open space planning and acquisitions, but Princeton has a permanent Open Space Committee that performs these functions.

Princeton does not have a public sewer system, so all homes and businesses rely on private, on-site wastewater disposal systems that require the Board of Health's approval under Title V of the Massachusetts Environmental Code. Properties with older septic systems are effectively "grandfathered" until the point of sale, at which time the septic systems must be inspected and brought into compliance with current standards. Since 2004, the workload of the Conservation Commission and Board of Health has measurably increased. For example, the Conservation Commission conducted 36 site visits and issued 3 enforcement orders in 2005, compared to 21 site visits and 5 informal enforcement orders in 2004; similarly, the Board of Health issued 25 septic system permits and supervised 39 Title V inspections in 2005, compared to 26 septic system permits and 24 inspections in 2004.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Report of the Planning Board, Annual Town Report, 2004, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Report of the Conservation Commission,

The Princeton Historical Commission's planning work focuses on historic preservation, mainly by identifying buildings and areas eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and coordinating the nomination process. The town currently has three National Register Districts, East Princeton, Princeton Center and Russell Corner, and a fourth nomination is underway (West Village).<sup>15</sup> There are no local historic districts (i.e., areas within which certain improvements would require review by a local historic district commission) and Princeton does not have a town-wide cultural resources inventory, although a considerable amount of work has been done to catalog historic properties. Princeton's accomplishments in historic preservation planning and advocacy are amazing given that all of the work has been done by residents donating their time and expertise.

**Culture and Recreation.** Princeton's Public Library is among the town's most valuable assets. Aside from the building's beauty and commanding presence at the top of the Town Common, the library meets cultural, intellectual and social needs that no other single institution in a small town can address. Its patrons include persons of all ages, and they visit the library for many reasons beyond seeking access to its holdings. The library offers weekly story hours for pre-school children, book groups and knitting groups for adults and children, craft classes for children, and a summer reading program. People use the library for purposes ranging from chess games to cultural programs sponsored by the Friends of the Library or Princeton's Cultural Council.

Since the library is largely accessible to persons with mobility impairments, it is one of the few public places in Princeton that can accommodate any interested resident. A major renovation project in 2001 not only brought the building into

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Board of Health, Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Report of the Princeton Historical Commission, Ibid.



substantial compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, but also modernized the entire building, achieved better space utilization and opened the basement to public use. The project was financed by the town and a grant from the state Board of Library Commissioners.

Like most town departments, Princeton's library is staffed primarily by part-time personnel and approximately 20 volunteers. Its only full-time employee is the library director. Unlike other departments, the library is overseen by a private, self-perpetuating board of directors. Its collection currently includes 18,820 materials, 72 subscriptions and a number of electronic databases, 1,655 video and DVD holdings, and 811 Books on Tape. In addition, the library has public computers with high-speed internet access, which until recently was unavailable in many parts of Princeton. Through the Central Massachusetts Regional Library System (CMRLS) and the Central/Western Massachusetts Automated Resource Sharing Network (C/WMARS), Princeton offers its own residents access to materials and electronic resources in 150 libraries, including inter-library loan service. The library also maintains a web site that enables library card holders to download "e-books" from home.<sup>16</sup>

The Cultural Council administers grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Arts Council to support and promote the arts locally. From its small state grant allocation each year, the Council has paid for special programs offered at the Princeton Public Library, and a number of music performances. It has no staff and no designated space for meetings or cultural events.

The Princeton Center Building provides space for social, cultural and leisure-recreation activi-

<sup>16</sup> Wendy F. Pape, Library Director, Princeton Public Library Long-Range Plan: 2005-2010 (September 2005), 9-10, 12, 14; CF-S Subcommittee, Meeting Minutes, 16 November 2005; Princeton Public Library, Annual Town Report, 2005.



The Princeton Center Building on Boylston Avenue, a cultural, social and recreational asset for the entire community. (Photo by Community Opportunities Group, Inc.)

ties. When the building was no longer needed for a school, Princeton instituted a plan to reuse it for other public purposes, generally to support education and the arts. The Princeton Center Building is a two-story structure with a basement-level gymnasium, and the site includes a small park with playground equipment and a playing field. The Council on Aging maintains an office and activity space on the first floor of the building, while the upper-story office space is leased by private tenants. Monthly rents and user fees pay for the facility's operating costs, but these sources do not provide enough revenue to support a capital reserve for extraordinary maintenance and repairs. The Princeton Center Building is partially accessible to people with disabilities.<sup>17</sup>

Most of Princeton's recreation programs serve young participants, which is common in small towns. Princeton does not have a staffed Recreation Department, so all of the activities depend

<sup>17</sup> CF-S Subcommittee, Meeting Minutes, 16 November 2005; MMA Consulting Group, Town of Princeton Americans with Disabilities Act Compliance Report (December 1995), cited by Princeton Open Space Committee, Open Space and Recreation Plan, Appendix D, May 2000; Princeton Center Building Management Committee, Annual Town Report, 2005.

on coordination by dedicated volunteers. The Park and Recreation Committee sponsors a number of programs, coordinates playing field use with the Princeton Youth Soccer, Baseball/Softball and Basketball Associations, carries out fundraising drives, and enlists volunteers to assist with special projects. It played an instrumental role in obtaining funds to develop the new sports facilities at Krashes Field. The Committee also sponsors arts, crafts, and holiday events. Park and Recreation programs generate user fees that Princeton applies to operating costs through a revolving fund.

In addition, Princeton hosts several annual community events, including a popular Memorial Day Parade, summer band concerts in the bandstand on the town common, and the Annual Chandler Bullock Labor Day Tennis Tournament.

**Human Services.** “Human services” refers to public health and social services for a clientele with unique, age-based or other special needs. More than 100 years ago, local governments provided a wide range of social, financial and shelter services, but these responsibilities gradually shifted to state and federal agencies. Today, municipal human service delivery usually centers on programs for the elderly, public health services, veterans assistance and tax relief for populations protected by state law. Cities and large suburbs often provide a range of youth services as well, but the state’s smallest towns rely on public schools, youth sports and other recreation activities to serve children and adolescents living within their borders.

The Council on Aging supplies or coordinates a majority of the services that directly assist senior citizens. As a small operation with very limited funding, the Council on Aging relies on many volunteers whose work is coordinated by a part-time director. Some of the activities offered locally include monthly or weekly social and leisure events, monthly blood pressure screening staffed by Fire Department volunteers, and a senior lunch sponsored monthly by one of the local churches.

Many services are available only on a regional basis, however, such as senior transportation, at-home meal delivery, and assistance with medical, home heating and other needs. The town has one senior residence, Wachusett House, an affordable rental community for 24 income-eligible elderly households. Princeton also offers senior tax relief and an abatement program that allows interested, age-eligible homeowners to contribute public service hours in exchange for reduced property taxes. Through this program, elderly residents have assisted on special projects in the Princeton Public Library and the Town Hall.

Princeton’s other human service offerings are quite limited. For example, the Board of Health sponsors some traditional public health services each year, such as flu and rabies immunization clinics. Massachusetts also requires cities and towns to provide certain types of financial assistance to veterans, the blind, surviving spouses and the elderly. The types and amounts of assistance vary by statute and program. Each community must appoint a Veterans Agent to help veterans and their dependents with financial, medical or burial benefits. The state reimburses 75% of eligible expenditures through the “cherry sheet,” or the official notice of local aid payments to be made in the following fiscal year. Princeton has a Veterans Agent, but the absence of veterans aid reimbursements on Princeton’s cherry sheet since FY 2002 indicates that the town has not received requests for veteran’s assistance in a long time. However, it has approved property tax exemptions for seniors and others nearly every year, and received prorated reimbursements from the state. Most of the tax relief reimbursements have assisted Princeton’s elderly homeowners.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Council on Aging, Board of Health, Annual Town Report, 2004, 2005; CF-S Subcommittee, Meeting Minutes, 5 December 2005; Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Division of Local Services, Cherry Sheet Manual (2005), and “Cherry Sheets,” Municipal Data Bank, at <<http://www.dls.state.ma.us/mdm.htm>>.

## Public Schools

Princeton provides its children with K-12 public education through an agreement with the Wachusett Regional School District (WRSD). K-8 students from Princeton attend the Thomas Prince School on Sterling Road, and high school students travel to Wachusett Regional High School in Holden unless they opt for a vocational program at the Montachusett Vocational-Technical School in Fitchburg. WRSD also participates in a large regional special education collaborative based in Shirley (FFLAC).



The Thomas Prince School on Sterling Road. (Photo by Community Opportunities Group, Inc.)

Approximately 90% of all school-age children in the five-town area attend public school.<sup>19</sup> During the 2005-2006 school year, WRSD's K-12 enrollment, including all seven elementary schools and the regional high school, exceeded 7,000 students. A small percentage of the district's enrollment represents "School Choice" students, i.e., children from other towns attending WRSD schools on a non-local tuition basis. WRSD began to participate in the state's School Choice program in FY 2004. In the past few years, the district has sent more of its own students to other schools than the number of non-local students it received, but this trend seems to be changing. WRSD students also have the option of applying to one of the region's charter schools, such as the North Central Charter Essential School in Fitchburg and the Abby Kelley Charter School in Worcester.<sup>20</sup>

Since the mid-1990s, WRSD's K-12 enrollment has increased by about 1,000 students, or an average of 95 students per year. A change in

the district's jurisdiction from a 9-12 to a K-12 program in FY 1995 coincided with accelerated rates of enrollment growth in Eastern and Central Massachusetts, including towns adjacent to Princeton. The same period produced a historic high in school construction projects: new schools, modernization and expansion projects, and school consolidations. Accordingly, Princeton expanded the Thomas Prince School and decommissioned the Princeton Center School, Holden replaced two aging elementary schools with a new, larger one and built a new middle school, Rutland built a new middle school, and a major expansion and modernization project at the regional high school is nearly complete.<sup>21</sup> These investments have affected each town's debt service commitments and the regional operating budget as a whole.

WRSD's average per-pupil expenditure for the region as a whole is relatively low. According to statistics reported by the Department of Education, WRSD traditionally spends less per student than other regional school districts in the Com-

<sup>19</sup> Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE), Wachusett Regional School District, School District Profile Series, at <<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>>.

<sup>20</sup> DOE, Trends in School Choice Pupils and Tuition, FY 1996-2005, and Massachusetts Charter School Office, School Finance, District/School Administration.

<sup>21</sup> Wachusett Regional School District (WRSD), Wachusett Regional High School Building Committee, Monthly Status Report: May 2006, at <<http://www.wrsd.net/WRHSBC.htm>>. See also, WRSD, District Schools, at <<http://www.mec.edu/wachusett/schools.htm>>.

**TABLE 8.1: WRSD K-12 FOUNDATION ENROLLMENT TRENDS, 2000-2006**

Community	Fiscal Year					
	2000	2001	2003	2004	2005	2006
Holden	2,745	2,753	2,803	2,820	2,893	2,885
Paxton	687	691	690	676	677	673
PRINCETON	652	654	659	633	614	598
Rutland	1,118	1,158	1,245	1,366	1,395	1,441
Sterling	1,240	1,247	1,273	1,268	1,307	1,316
Total	6,442	6,503	6,670	6,763	6,886	6,913
Princeton %	10.1%	10.1%	9.9%	9.4%	8.9%	8.7%

Source of Data: Massachusetts Department of Education, Chapter 70 Program. FY 2002 data unavailable.

Note: "Foundation enrollment" refers to the estimated number of K-12 students for which each community is financially responsible in any given year. It includes children in WRSD schools as well as out-of-district placements and charter schools, but omits non-resident children attending WRSD on a tuitioned-in basis. Foundation enrollments generally represent the total number of children enrolled on October 1 of the previous fiscal year, converted to full-time equivalent. Since foundation enrollment is a statistic used in determining the minimum amount a community should spend on public schools, the enrollment count does not match the average actual enrollment reported in Table 8.2.

monwealth.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the difference between WRSD expenditures per student and per-pupil expenditures in other regional districts or the state overall has widened in the past nine years. For example, in 1997, WRSD's per-pupil expenditure was 94% of the average per-pupil expenditure for all 55 regional school districts in the state, and 90% of the statewide average. By 2005, it had fallen to 84% of the regional school district average and 78% of the state average. Still, WRSD's per-pupil spending trends do not necessarily mean that member towns appropriate less than they should to support the schools, and not everyone agrees that state comparison statistics are a useful or appropriate way to measure adequate school spending.

While school enrollment growth continues to occur elsewhere in the region, Princeton has begun to experience a declining school-age population. Its estimated K-12 enrollment for FY 2006 was 598 students, or 8.7% of WRSD's district-wide K-12 enrollment, the smallest percentage of all five towns. In 2000, Princeton generated 10.1%

of the district's total enrollment.<sup>23</sup> Although its enrollment share was very small seven years ago, Princeton has experienced a noticeable decrease in K-12 students in the same period that enrollments have grown in most of the district's other towns, particularly Rutland. To some extent, the make-up and size of Princeton's school-age population today could be foreseen in the last federal census. In April 2000, a comparatively large percentage of Princeton's school-age population was comprised of middle-school and high-school age children – students who subsequently progressed through the secondary grades and graduated.<sup>24</sup> Due to the town's very low growth rate, low rate of housing turnover and high cost of housing, Princeton has not generated new enrollment growth at the same rate as other towns nearby.

Despite Princeton's enrollment trends, its state-mandated spending per student has increased significantly. From 2000-2006, Princeton's Net

<sup>22</sup> DOE, "Per Pupil Expenditure Report, FY 2005," February 2006, [School Finance](#).

<sup>23</sup> WRSD, FY 2006 Appropriation, Appendix 1, [Annual Report](#), <<http://www.mec.edu/wachusett/>>.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Census 2000, Summary File 1 Tables P34, P36.



**TABLE 8.2: COMPARISON EXPENDITURES PER PUPIL, 1997-2005**

Fiscal Year	Wachusett Regional Schools		Average Per Pupil Expenditure		
	Total Education Spending†	Average # K-12 Students*	Wachusett Region	All Regional School Districts	State Average
1997	\$34,713,956	6,407.0	\$5,418	\$5,764	\$6,015
1998	\$36,224,105	6,557.0	\$5,525	\$6,056	\$6,361
1999	\$38,473,759	6,456.2	\$5,959	\$6,329	\$6,692
2000	\$41,724,351	6,564.3	\$6,356	\$6,822	\$7,149
2001	\$43,607,574	6,619.0	\$6,588	\$7,239	\$7,562
2002	\$46,414,031	6,761.9	\$6,864	\$7,556	\$8,005
2003	\$47,620,250	6,841.5	\$6,960	\$7,835	\$8,273
2004	\$47,136,348	7,053.3	\$6,683	\$7,917	\$8,584
2005	\$48,962,386	7,014.8	\$6,980	\$8,363	\$9,101

Source of Data: Massachusetts Department of Education.

†"Total Education Spending" includes most of the district's annual expenditures on schools, but not debt service, capital improvements, adult education programs, school choice or charter school tuitions, the school lunch program, or expenditures from state or federal grant revenue.

\*"Average # K-12 Students" is the average number of students enrolled throughout the school year, expressed in full-time equivalent. It includes non-resident students enrolled in the regional schools, but does not include local children attending school outside the district.

Minimum Contribution per student for children attending the regional schools rose by more than 40%, yet the region's other towns experienced much slower rates of mandated spending growth, as shown below.

Under the Chapter 70 aid formula, a community's ability to pay for public schools is based in part on local wealth. Each city and town in the state is assigned a minimum "foundation budget," though

many communities exceed the foundation budget due to cumulative, prior-year school spending choices made by town meetings. In a regional school district, the foundation budget is proportionally assigned to each member community on the basis of enrollments, such that when converted to a foundation budget per student, parity is achieved throughout the region. However, the local wealth component of the state's aid formula means that some communities pay a larger per-

**TABLE 8.3: NET MINIMUM CONTRIBUTION, WRSD MEMBER TOWNS, 2000-2006**

Community	Fiscal Year						Change
	2000	2001	2003	2004	2005	2006	
Holden	\$4,284	\$4,186	\$4,531	\$4,865	\$5,070	\$5,407	26.2%
Paxton	\$4,107	\$3,902	\$4,409	\$4,710	\$5,008	\$5,273	28.4%
PRINCETON	\$4,073	\$4,238	\$4,601	\$4,798	\$5,233	\$5,735	40.8%
Rutland	\$2,746	\$2,850	\$2,928	\$2,793	\$2,861	\$2,950	7.4%
Sterling	\$4,404	\$3,884	\$4,481	\$4,977	\$5,167	\$5,280	19.9%
Total	\$4,000	\$3,865	\$4,217	\$4,446	\$4,649	\$4,886	22.1%

Source of Data: Massachusetts Department of Education, Chapter 70 Program.

centage of their share of the foundation budget. Since Princeton's households tend to be somewhat wealthier than households elsewhere in the school district, the town pays more per student than the amount assessed to other participating towns. From 2001-2006, Princeton's total appropriations for schools, including debt service for the Thomas Prince School project, absorbed 67-68% of each year's operating budget.<sup>25</sup>

The district's five towns have K-8 facilities in different grade configurations, all managed and operated by WRSD. Princeton and Paxton, with the lowest enrollments in the district, each have a single K-8 school. Holden has three K-5 elementary schools and a middle school for grades 6-8; Rutland has two K-5 schools and a middle school for grades 6-8; and Sterling has one K-4 elementary school and a middle school serving grades 5-8.

## LOCAL TRENDS

### Operating Revenue

Like most small towns in Massachusetts, Princeton depends primarily on property taxes to pay for municipal and school services. Property taxes typically account for 85-87% of all general fund revenue in Princeton, i.e., revenue that supports the town's operating budget.<sup>26</sup> Over the past 20 years, single-family homes have generated an increasingly large share of the town's tax levy, from about 81% in the late 1980s to 87% in FY 2006. However, the average single-family tax bill in Princeton has not increased as rapidly as single-family tax bills elsewhere in the state. For example, Princeton's average single-family tax bill was 1.30 times the state average in FY 1990, yet by FY 2006, the local-state tax bill ratio had dropped to 1.13.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Town Administrator Dennis Rindone, "FY 2006 Budget Summary" [in Excel].

<sup>26</sup> DOR, "General Fund Revenue," 2000-2005, Municipal Data Bank.

<sup>27</sup> DOR, "Average Single-Family Tax Bills" and

Local aid from the state contributes a very small percentage of Princeton's operating revenue due to the town's residential development pattern, very low population density, low population growth rate, high property values, and high household wealth. Most local aid allocable to Princeton is paid to WRSD as a Chapter 70 supplement to the town's appropriation for public schools. A remarkable aspect of Princeton's revenue history is that in FY 2005, net local aid (minus state charges) barely exceeded the amount the town received ten years earlier, in nominal dollars, i.e., dollars valued in the year they were received or expended. Table 8.4 shows that in constant or inflation-adjusted dollars, however, local aid has declined. Moreover, growth in other revenue sources has lagged behind inflation since 2000.

### Operating Budget and Expenditures

Budgeted revenue is not the same as actual expenditures. Growth in total revenue and change in the mix of revenues conveys only one part of a town's financial history. Since 1990, Princeton's operating expenditures – the amounts actually spent on public services – increased by a modest 23% in constant dollars (2005), but education expenditures rose by 30% and municipal expenditures, only 14%. However, the town's municipal spending declined slightly during the 1990s (adjusted for inflation) even though its population increased by about 5%.

Changes in Princeton's municipal spending partially reflect a gradual transfer of costs from the operating budget to other sources of revenue, i.e., "off-budget" expenditures. This can be seen even recently, for until a few years ago, the operating budget carried some of the funding associated with Building Department and Board of Health services. Over time, Princeton seems to have converted all or significant portions of some municipal services to special revenue or revolving fund operations that do not rely on the general operat-

"Assessed Valuation," 1988-2006, Municipal Data Bank.

**TABLE 8.4: LONG-TERM REVENUE TRENDS (2005 CONSTANT DOLLARS, ROUNDED)\***

Fiscal Year	Tax Levy	†Local Aid	Local Receipts	Other Funds	Total
1985	\$2,724,000	\$910,200	\$311,200	\$144,700	\$4,090,000
1990	\$4,096,000	\$804,000	\$685,900	\$801,000	\$6,387,000
1995	\$4,676,000	\$919,800	\$586,700	\$236,400	\$6,418,000
2000	\$4,643,000	\$963,100	\$826,700	\$742,500	\$7,175,000
2005	\$5,556,000	\$807,800	\$741,200	\$738,500	\$7,843,000
% Change					
1985-2005	104.0%	-11.3%	138.2%	410.4%	91.8%
1985-1995	71.7%	1.1%	88.5%	63.4%	56.9%
1995-2005	18.8%	-12.2%	26.3%	212.4%	22.2%

Sources: Community Opportunities Group, Inc.; DOR, Municipal Data Bank. Constant dollar conversions based on CPI, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

\*Includes all sources of revenue, not only General Fund revenue.

†Beginning in FY 2006, school construction reimbursements were no longer reported as cherry sheet aid. These payments are now made by the School Building Assistance Authority.

**TABLE 8.5: GENERAL FUND EXPENDITURE TRENDS (2005 CONSTANT DOLLARS, ROUNDED)**

Fiscal Year	†Population	Schools	*Municipal	Total
1990	2,900	\$3,133,000	\$2,739,000	\$5,872,000
1995	3,331	\$3,082,000	\$2,645,000	\$5,727,000
2000	3,364	\$3,269,000	\$2,689,000	\$5,959,000
2005	3,549	\$4,084,000	\$3,122,000	\$7,206,000
% Change				
1990-2005	9.7%	30.4%	14.0%	22.7%
1990-2000	5.1%	4.3%	-1.8%	1.5%
2000-2005	4.4%	24.9%	16.1%	20.9%

Sources: Community Opportunities Group, Inc.; DOR, Municipal Data Bank, and Town of Princeton FY 2005 Year-End Schedule A Report, and Claritas, Inc. Constant dollar conversions based on CPI, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

\*Includes school construction debt service.

†2005 Population estimate from Claritas, Inc. Note: as of 2004, Census Bureau population estimate for Princeton was 3,499.

ing budget for support, which also means that the revenue generated by these activities is restricted for their use. In turn, revenues committed to the operating budget – mainly property taxes, unrestricted local receipts such as excise tax revenue, and local aid – have been absorbed by growth in three areas: the school budget, public safety, and employee health insurance. These conditions are not unique to Princeton; communities throughout the state have wrestled with similar issues for many years. Furthermore, financing town services

with fees and segregating departmental revenue from the general fund has become a way of life for Massachusetts municipalities since Proposition 2 ½ went into effect in 1981.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See David Tyler, “A Tale of Eight Cities & Towns: Prop 2 ½ Yields Different Results in Different Places,” *CommonWealth*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer 1996), at <<http://www.massinc.org/>>.

Growth in Princeton's local government expenditures seems to have had little to do with population growth because the town's population has not increased significantly since 1990. However, the town has experienced growth in households and housing units. These conditions have placed additional demands on local services, but they also have produced additional operating revenue. As residential development continues to spread into outlying parts of town, the cost to deliver basic services will change not only because of growth in total housing units, but also because of the *location* of those units. When service cost components change, such as the payroll impact of hiring additional police officers to patrol a larger geographic area, the result is known as a marginal cost increase. Efficient land use patterns hold greater promise for efficient use of local revenue because the cost of public services in a small area is generally much lower per capita than across a larger area. The trade-off for communities with large-lot zoning, with or without water or sewer service, is that the cost of community services accelerates more rapidly in response to new development.<sup>29</sup>

## Debt Management and Reserves

Princeton has made some noteworthy investments in public facility improvements over the past decade, partially due to growth and partially to address long-standing needs. For example, the public library was renovated in 2001 with local funds matched dollar-for-dollar by a state library grant, and the recreation complex at Krashes Field was constructed, largely through fundraising, volunteer support and help from the town's highway department. The new highway garage also was financed through borrowing. The town appears to spend about as much as its operating budget can comfortably absorb for debt service, which has ranged from 9-12% of each year's general fund

operating budget over the past five years. Princeton's debt service commitments currently include repayment of bonds for the Thomas Prince School, the library, and highway department equipment.<sup>30</sup> The debt service for Thomas Prince School is partially offset by reimbursements from the state School Building Assistance Authority.

For a small town with scarce opportunities to generate extra revenue from fees and user charges, Princeton does quite well at maintaining and managing its reserves. In the past five years, the sum of Princeton's "free cash" and stabilization fund balances has approximated 8-9% of the total operating budget. Princeton's conservatism is also evident in its approach to funding local services from the tax levy. In a typical year, Princeton has excess (unused) levy capacity of about 6%, which is roughly three times the statewide average. By maintaining excess levy capacity, the town essentially leaves some of its tax levy power in reserve. On average, the unused levy capacity equals about \$325,000.<sup>31</sup>

## PAST PLANS, STUDIES & REPORTS

Princeton does not have a master facilities plan or a municipal space needs analysis. Its planning for facilities and infrastructure improvements has largely been a function of periodic master plan updates and volunteer work by special study committees.

### 1970 Town Plan

Princeton's first master plan (1970) reflects the nation's post-war experience with suburban development and highway construction, both made pos-

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Robert Burchell et al., The Cost of Sprawl 2000, Transportation Research Board (2002); and Metropolitan Area Planning Council, Toward a Sustainable Tax Policy, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2001).

<sup>30</sup> Dennis Rindone, FY 2006 Operating Budget; and DOR, "General Fund Expenditures," 1987-2005, Municipal Data Bank.

<sup>31</sup> DOR, "New Growth Applied to the Levy Limit," "Free Cash and Stabilization Fund Balances," and "Excess and Override Capacity," 1992-2006, Municipal Data Bank.



sible by an economy and a culture transformed by the car. In some ways, the Princeton Town Plan 1970 imagined Princeton as a low-density suburb of the future. The town's school-age population was just over half that of the present decade, and Princeton had recently built the Thomas Prince School. According to 20-year forecasts contained in the 1970 Town Plan, Princeton would have a total population of 2,828 people, including 933 school-age children, by 1990.

To accommodate growth in the town's under-18 population, Princeton would need six acres of playgrounds, 20 acres of playing fields, and 21 elementary school classrooms for a projected enrollment of 520 children in grades K-6. In fact, the 1970 Plan anticipated that eventually, all children in grades 7-12 would transfer to regional schools. It also predicted needs for roadway extensions to support through-town traffic, an outdoor swimming area, land acquisitions for a public water system, and a number of seemingly routine improvements such as a storage shed for highway department equipment. In light of growth along the eastern side of town, the 1970 Plan called for a fire substation and playing fields in East Princeton. To finance these improvements, the plan urged Princeton to adopt a systematic approach to capital budgeting, including annual (and gradually increasing) set-asides in a stabilization fund.

### 1975 Town Plan

During a master plan update process in 1975, the master plan committee endorsed many of the capital improvement recommendations from the 1970 Town Plan. While committee members noted that Princeton's rate of school enrollment growth was not as high as the earlier plan had predicted, they questioned whether Princeton should maintain the Princeton Center School, expand the Thomas Prince School, or consider a regional alternative. The committee had other capital needs in mind, however, such as land for a skating rink, a new public safety building in the town center, and enough land to meet needs

for three public drinking water wells and 1.7M gallons of water storage capacity. In addition, the authors of the Princeton Town Plan 1975 looked at local capacity to deliver services, i.e., the town's personnel and volunteers. Based on growth trends and the development of Wachusett Mountain as a year-round recreation area, the master plan committee predicted that Princeton would need a full-time police chief by 1978 as well as a full-time emergency dispatch system.

### 1980-1985 Town Plan

Changing ideas about local government can be seen in the Princeton Town Plan 1980-1985, which called for more centralized oversight by the Board of Selectmen and a part-time executive secretary to coordinate day-to-day operations. In keeping with the theme of centralization, the 1980-85 Plan proposed converting several elected offices to appointed positions, such as the Electric Light Commission, the Town Treasurer, Tax Collector and Assessors. The master plan committee that wrote the plan identified needs for more office space for several town departments and meeting space for town boards, and reinforced the previous plan's recommendations for a full-time police chief and sergeant (this time by 1982). They recommended that Princeton build a town pool on land next to the Thomas Prince School, and unlike their predecessors for the 1975 Plan, the 1980-85 Plan committee endorsed keeping middle school students in the Princeton Center School.

### Other Plans

An updated plan authored ca. 1986 (Town Plan Report) echoed the same concerns about Princeton's lack of full-time police, but noted that the East Princeton fire substation had finally opened. As a sign of its own times – post-Proposition 2 ½ – the last master plan update predicted full K-12 regionalization and lamented Princeton's inability to build a municipal pool, a project that had been abandoned due to lack of funds. The same

plan urged Princeton to consider new ideas such as operating the ambulance as “a separate cost center,” i.e., as a special revenue or revolving fund, in order to protect ambulance receipts and build a capital reserve to buy replacement ambulances and supplies, and to move as many school programs as possible “off budget.” Indeed, the 1986 Plan foretold the consequences of development in outlying areas, in passages such as these: “When growth occurs in a town’s farthest corners, [school bus] transportation costs can skyrocket,” and “As the Town spreads out, more highway maintenance will result.” On that note, it also urged Princeton to arrest the deterioration of local streets, noting that many had fallen into disrepair.

Princeton has implemented many of the public facility and service recommendations of previous master plans. Today, the town has a professional Town Administrator, full-time police officers, and a fire substation and a small recreation facility serving the eastern side of town. Athletic fields have been constructed at Princeton Park (Krashes Field), and the town has made some form-of-government changes to centralize its administrative and financial operations. The town also has a Capital Improvements Planning Committee, which reviews major equipment and vehicle requests, land acquisition proposals and other items eligible for debt financing, and makes recommendations to town meeting each year. Full K-12 regionalization has occurred, though not quite the way that drafters of earlier plans imagined. The Thomas Prince School was expanded not because K-6 enrollments reached 520 children by 1990, but rather because the Princeton Center School was decommissioned and eventually reinvented as a community center. What the prior plans omit is as interesting as the content they cover. For example, current issues such as the fate of Mechanics Hall or access to the second floor of Bagg Hall appear nowhere in these earlier reports.

## ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

For local governments, public facility planning usually reflects assumptions about housing and population growth, the location of new development, demands caused by outside factors, and foreseeable revenue. Master plans prepared 40 years ago often focused on needs for new schools, parks and roadways, but today, town plans rarely promote new roads; instead, they emphasize the safety, condition, function and appearance of existing streets. Moreover, planning for public schools has changed significantly. In 1970, class sizes often exceeded the class size policies of today’s school committees. Kindergarten and first-grade classrooms were staffed differently, and the inclusion of children with special needs was neither a matter of law nor a principle broadly endorsed by educators.

The conditions that cause communities to invest in public facility improvements today relate not only to overall population growth, but also demographic change. Even in towns with very low or stable growth rates, demand for public services responds to changes in household types, population age, household wealth and the expectations of residents. Further, new mandates have come into play since Princeton’s previous master plans were written, notably the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended, and more rigorous accessibility codes at the state level. When growth in demand and changes in need contribute to cost increases without commensurate revenue growth, communities find it very challenging to finance improvements and still maintain the quality of services that residents expect.

Princeton’s small population, fairly large land area and broadly distributed development pattern present several challenges to providing adequate facilities and services. On one level, choosing to remain small implies a willingness to forego the convenience of having services that larger towns

**TABLE 8.6: COST OF COMMUNITY SERVICES STUDY (FY 2005)**

TABLE 6-1 COST OF COMMUNITY SERVICES STUDY (FY 2005)				
		Class of Land Use		
	Total	Residential	Commercial	Open Space
General Fund Expenditures				
Municipal	\$2,545,381	\$2,175,707	\$87,606	\$282,068
Schools	\$4,660,558	\$4,660,558	0	0
Total	\$7,205,939	\$6,836,265	\$87,606	\$282,068
General Fund Revenue	\$7,218,522	\$6,170,510	\$188,120	\$859,892
Surplus (Deficit)	\$12,583	-\$665,755	\$100,514	\$577,824
Cost-Revenue Ratio	1.00	1.11	0.47	0.33
<i>Sources: Community Opportunities Group, Inc.; American Farmlands Trust Cost of Community Services Model, Department of Revenue Municipal Data Bank; Town of Princeton Assessor's Parcel Database, FY2005 Schedule A Report to DOR and FY06 Tax Recapitulation Sheet. Constant dollars adjusted by CPI, Bureau of Labor Statistics.</i>				

provide as a matter of course, yet choosing to remain a small, very-low-density town also involves a fairly high cost of services per household. As development continues along Princeton's rural roads, reaching those "farthest corners" alluded to in the 1986 plan, the cost of basic services will most likely accelerate. Table 8.6 shows that in Princeton today, residential development costs about \$1.11 for municipal and school services for every \$1.00 of property tax and other revenue it generates. The gap is filled by revenue from Princeton's tiny commercial base and large tracts of privately owned (taxable) open space.

The needs Princeton faces today are somewhat different from the needs identified in previous master plans. Though people yearn to keep Princeton "just as it is," the town has changed in ways that may not be obvious to newcomers or even to those with longer ties to the town, for some of the changes have occurred gradually, over a long period of time. Further, previous master plans identified needs that have not been addressed, either because the town decided to focus on more pressing issues or lacked the resources and consensus to proceed. Princeton's facility and service challenges are numerous and complex, and they will be inextricably affected by long-term land use policies.

- **Communications Technology.** High-speed internet access was not part of any local government's planning process in the mid-1980s, yet today, it is a fact of life and an essential business tool for small companies and people with at-home employment. Princeton may be ambivalent about the desirability of home occupations, but the reality is that many residents already work at home in professional "zero-commute" occupations.
- **Data Management and Analysis.** Basic planning and data management technology such as a Geographic Information System (GIS) was rarely of interest to those outside the nation's leading universities, the Census Bureau or the military in 1985, yet today, the absence of a usable GIS parcel map in Princeton complicated many aspects of the present master plan process.
- **Emergency Medical Services.** Princeton recently established a committee to study the town's emergency medical service staffing needs. Together, an aging population and residential development spread across a broader area mean that Princeton will experience an increase in medical emergencies and longer travel distances for ambulance staff.

At issue is whether Princeton has access to enough ALS- and EMT-certified personnel to assure a timely, appropriate response to emergency medical calls. Although the reimbursement rates for ALS service usually generate enough revenue to pay for salary, expense and equipment replacement costs, the town loses a significant share of the revenue whenever non-local providers act in place of the town's own ALS responders.

- **Emergency Response Planning.** The realm of emergency response has changed significantly since the mid-1980s and in particular, since September 11, 2001. Today, communities need not only appropriate plans and trained personnel to address hazardous materials incidents, but also to participate in a coordinated response to terrorism. Although Princeton participates in regional emergency response planning, the absence of career (paid) fire department personnel and health department staff make it very difficult for Princeton to train, test, evaluate and improve its emergency response capabilities.
- **Public Safety Building.** The existing public safety building is not adequate for modern police, fire and dispatch operations. It is cramped and too small to house new fire vehicles, it needs ventilation and mechanical system improvements, and it does not have appropriate facilities for officer training, booking and records storage. The town needs to determine whether the present site can accommodate major alterations and expansion for a new, suitably equipped public safety complex.
- **Storage of Highway Salt.** The salt shed at the Highway Garage is used to store salt, but salt mixed with sand is stored outside and exposed to the weather. Since the Highway Garage is adjacent to a water supply area, it is important for Princeton to provide and maintain an

environmentally safe, adequately sized storage facility for road salt. An improved, more attractive facility also would be appropriate given the adjacent playing fields and the storage shed's visibility from Route 31.

- **Asset Management.** Princeton needs a policy framework for making choices about acquiring, improving, maintaining and disposing of town-owned property. If any town building illustrates the need for asset management policies, it is Mechanics Hall. Due to the estimated cost of renovations, it is very unlikely that Princeton will be able to pay for the improvements from existing revenue sources. Capital improvements are only part of the problem, however: even if the building is restored with public funds, the town will need to pay for ongoing operations and maintenance. Unless Princeton can find the means to take care of Mechanics Hall, it would be better to consider selling the building so that a private buyer can put it to new, economic uses. As currently zoned, however, the site's only economic use will probably lead to tear-down and rebuild without variances from the Board of Appeals.
- **Master Facilities Plan.** The Community Services and Facilities Subcommittee prepared an extensive inventory of Princeton's public buildings and toured all of the facilities for this master plan. Princeton has basic systems in place to budget for capital improvements and routine building and grounds maintenance. For the size and age of the public buildings that Princeton is trying to maintain, however, annual allocations for operations and maintenance are strikingly low. Princeton needs a master facilities plan that includes code analysis, an energy audit, a space needs plan and capital budget for all key town buildings, prepared by a registered architect experienced with public buildings and historic preservation. The town *also* needs revenue to implement the plan, and policies to guide



the allocation of available revenue. Princeton should consider establishing a standing Town Buildings Committee to advise other officials and town meeting on building improvement and maintenance priorities.

- **Land Acquisitions.** There is considerable interest in Princeton in acquiring and protecting open space. The town also needs land for municipal purposes, such as future cemetery space, and it may need a relocation site for the public safety building. As a general principle, communities should take care to purchase land that meets identified needs and avoid the tendency to buy land simply because it is available on the market. Princeton needs clear criteria to guide land acquisition choices: first, the town cannot acquire all of the vacant land that remains undeveloped; second, some types of development ought to be encouraged in order to provide a sustainable revenue base; and third, like any asset, land should be managed. Land management plans should be established as part of any land acquisition initiative.
- **Planning and Development Review.** Princeton would benefit from a town planner to support the work of its Planning Board, Board of Appeals and Historical Commission, and to coordinate development review with the Conservation Commission and Board of Health. In all communities, development has become a more complex process for applicants as well as local permitting officials. Although Princeton is a very small town, it has preservation, development design, environmental planning and technical assistance needs that cannot be met with existing staff resources. Princeton is remarkable for all that it accomplishes with volunteers and very few full- or part-time employees, but the town does not have a coordinated approach to planning and development review.
- **Public Schools.** When the town closed the Princeton Center School and expanded the Thomas Prince School, the school committee and Princeton voters made a policy decision that one facility is appropriate for K-8 use. This decision pre-dates the complete regionalization of the Wachusett Regional School District in 1995. Princeton's declining enrollments and growth occurring elsewhere in the region should be monitored with an eye toward considering other options for middle-school age children. It is very difficult (and not always cost-effective) for a school district to maintain parity for students entering high school from vastly different middle school experiences. The issue is not whether the Thomas Prince School is substandard; rather, it is that financing a diverse, competitive curriculum that enriches students at all levels requires more resources than a very small school can provide. Options such as middle school regionalization or an intra-district "school choice" program may need to be explored.
- **Regionalization and Inter-Local Agreements.** Due to the structure of state-local government in Massachusetts, the state does not have many successful models of regional service delivery. Some organized regional entities such as the Cape Cod Commission and Franklin Regional Council of Governments do exist, but inter-local agreements – formal pacts between two or more communities to share services and revenue – are atypical in Massachusetts except for the regional school districts. However, towns such as Hamilton and Wenham have entered into successful inter-local agreements for their public library and recreation programs. In light of Princeton's desire to remain a small, largely rural community, it should explore inter-local opportunities for services such as solid waste disposal, emergency response planning and senior citizen programs.

**TABLE 8.7: LONG-TERM CHANGE IN TAX LEVY & GENERAL FUND EXPENDITURES PER CAPITA**

Fiscal Year	Population	Per Capita (2005 Constant Dollars)			Levy %	
		Expenditures	Tax Levy	Income	Expenditures	Income
1990	3,189	\$1,841.23	\$1,187.43	\$31,967	64.5%	3.7%
2000	3,353	\$1,777.09	\$1,384.63	\$36,544	77.9%	3.8%
2005	3,549	\$2,030.41	\$1,565.40	\$39,557	77.1%	4.0%

*Sources: Community Opportunities Group, Inc.; Department of Revenue Municipal Data Bank, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, and Claritas, Inc. Constant dollars adjusted by CPI, Bureau of Labor Statistics.*

From a facilities and services perspective, Princeton's most critical need is revenue from a sufficiently diverse mix of land uses that the costs triggered by very-low-density single-family residential development do not continue to dwarf the town's tax base. Lack of revenue has impeded the road improvements plan, achieving accessibility in Bagg Hall, acquiring open space, and providing adequate staff for municipal offices. Despite the town's relative affluence, or perhaps because of it, Princeton has experienced a gradual decline in the amount of non-tax revenue that supports general fund operations. In constant dollars (2005), the ratio of Princeton's tax levy per capita to general fund expenditures per capita has increased over time.

## COMMUNITY SERVICES & FACILITIES RECOMMENDATIONS

### Public Safety Building

A Public Safety Building Study Committee should be established to plan and oversee construction of a new public safety facility or renovations to the existing facility in the town center. While Princeton also needs to initiate work on a master facilities plan for its other public buildings, the existing public safety building is clearly inadequate for modern police, fire, emergency medical and dispatch operations. It lacks space for new fire vehicles, it needs ventilation and mechanical system improvements, and it does not have appropriate facilities for officer training, booking and records storage.

As part of the planning process for a new public safety complex, Princeton should determine whether the present location can accommodate a major alterations and expansion project. The town will need suitable, central space for an ALS ambulance and ALS personnel in the near future, and office space for a full-time fire chief or full-time training officer.

### Ambulance Service & Staffing

The town recently established a special study committee to evaluate Princeton's staffing and equipment needs for emergency medical services. The issues range from hiring and retaining personnel with Advanced Life Support (ALS) certification to maintaining and replacing ALS-equipped ambulances – and obviously, how a small town like Princeton can afford to support ALS service in the long run. This study came out of deliberations by the Community Services & Facilities Subcommittee during its work on the master plan, and it represents one of several "recommendations in progress" that the town needs to implement.

### Master Facilities Plan

Princeton should appropriate funds for a master facilities plan, retain a qualified architect, and establish a special committee to oversee the plan's development. The committee needs representatives from Princeton's major policy-setting, financial planning and advisory boards, staff with building management responsibilities, and constituents affected by Princeton's unmet or inadequately met space needs.

Although Princeton has basic procedures in place to budget for routine building and grounds maintenance and capital improvements, the annual appropriations are strikingly low considering the size and age of the buildings that Princeton is trying to maintain. The town needs to commission a code and building systems analysis, an energy audit and a review of the feasibility of utilizing renewable sources of energy, an analysis of municipal space needs, capital improvement recommendations and preliminary cost estimates, for its primary public facilities: Bagg Hall, Princeton Public Library, the Princeton Center Building, the Highway Department Garage and Salt Storage Shed, the Town Hall Annex, the East Princeton Fire Station, the Thomas Prince School.

In addition to the basic office, meeting and storage space requirements of any organization, Princeton needs storage facilities for historical artifacts and documents. It also has no space for fine and performing arts events except for small productions held in the library. A master facilities plan should consider the feasibility of providing special events space on the second floor of Bagg Hall.

### **Asset Management**

The main purpose of a master facilities plan is to identify capital improvement needs in public buildings and establish a schedule for addressing them, considering existing and future space needs for the functions a building serves. However, municipalities are responsible for more types of facilities than public buildings, and sometimes they have more assets than they can manage. Just as a private-sector organization tracks the usefulness and market value of its assets and the associated costs and benefits of retaining them, governments need to look at their real estate holdings, infrastructure and equipment, and set some priorities.

In Princeton, Mechanics Hall is a good example of an asset threatened by deterioration due to lack of adequate maintenance and lack of use. By any standard, Mechanics Hall is a historically signifi-

cant building. It needs major capital improvements – presumably more than Princeton can afford, because if the town had the resources to take care of Mechanics Hall, the property would be in much better condition.

Many residents say they want the town to retain ownership of Mechanics Hall, yet there is no plan for how the building will be restored and used if Princeton decides to keep it. The longer the building sits vacant and receives only emergency repairs, the more it will deteriorate. Princeton needs policies and standards to make tough choices about the disposition of property that it cannot afford to preserve or maintain. Absent a resource like Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds or voter willingness to authorize borrowing to pay for renovations, it may be better to sell Mechanics Hall, subject to a preservation restriction, and allow the building to be redeveloped for a “light” use, e.g., office space. The building probably could support limited public uses, too, such as a gallery or a small museum with an archive for Princeton artifacts and historical records. Still, the town would have to invest in a feasibility study in order to explore options for wastewater disposal, parking, operating costs and a capital reserve.

### **Volunteer Recruitment, Training & Retention**

Many volunteer boards and officials share responsibility for making decisions and providing services in Princeton. For all of the advantages this form of government has to offer, it has the disadvantage of requiring many volunteers to share the workload. It also requires plenty of meeting space so that boards and committees can perform their duties, and it has the potential to create a significant liability for the town. Princeton is fortunate to have dedicated volunteers, but it needs ways to involve more residents so that existing volunteers do not “burn out” from too many hours of public service. Involving more residents also creates a vehicle for public education and consensus.

Non-profit organizations typically have staff responsible for recruiting and managing volunteers. They screen applicants for volunteer positions, assess each applicant's skills and availability, and try to align a volunteer's interests with the organization's needs. They also provide training, structure, support and periodic recognition programs to reward hard-working volunteers. Local governments could adopt a similar system, but in very small towns like Princeton, recruiting new volunteers requires outreach and mentoring by *existing* volunteers. Recognition programs also help, but they do not address some of the issues that keep people from volunteering: lack of time, lack of knowledge about local government, or fear of the criticism that often comes with public service. Some recruitment strategies to consider in a small town like Princeton:

- Continuing to post volunteer opportunities on the town's website, and distributing public service announcements through a "broadcast" email to all subscribers on PMLD's new high-speed internet system;
- Personal networking;
- Outreach through the schools;
- Approaching residents who frequently attend town meeting but are not currently serving on a town board or committee;
- Providing a "welcome" packet to prospective volunteers, with information about local government, opportunities to serve, current "hot topics" and community projects, and the names of three or four experienced local officials who serve as points of contact and mentors for new volunteers.

### **Building Staff Capacity**

Princeton wants to remain a small, close-knit town with a resident-controlled government that

depends on volunteers. It is an admirable goal, and since Princeton is an unusual town it may be able to continue functioning with a small, conservative, decentralized government that focuses on the basics. However, even if Princeton's population does not increase significantly in the future, the composition and size of its households and the age of its householders will change to a degree more or less consistent with national trends. Accordingly, Princeton needs to anticipate the possibility that over time, its residents will come to rely more on paid staff to provide services that have historically been handled by volunteers.

As fewer people work in their own towns or close by, it is becoming more difficult for communities to find not only unpaid volunteers, but also residents who can fill positions that offer a modest stipend or occasional pay, such as call firefighters and emergency medical personnel. Moreover, small towns often find it difficult to compete for qualified employees because they cannot provide the same levels of compensation found in larger or wealthier suburbs. Princeton has a good track record for retaining municipal employees, yet on occasion, even Princeton has lost workers to higher-paid positions in other cities and towns.

In some of the state's smallest towns, local government employees also serve as call firefighters, highway workers perform other traditional public works duties, and administrative and clerical employees are trained to move seamlessly from one department to another so they can respond to intermittent changes in workload. One of Princeton's master plan goals is to maximize opportunities for cross-training municipal workers. Toward that end, Princeton should examine its existing job descriptions and compensation schedules, and screen job applicants for their ability and interest to perform more than one function. Sometimes, the advantage of efficient use of personnel may be offset by the disadvantage of losing qualified applicants who do not wish to perform duties outside their particular area of expertise.



## Maximizing Non-Tax Revenue Sources

Princeton should review all non-statutory fees charged for municipal services on a biennial basis, and perhaps annually for programs that serve many users, such as recreation activities. A methodology for setting and reviewing fees should be established jointly by the Town Administrator, Select Board and Advisory Board in order to assure consistency across municipal departments. Since Princeton is so small, it is unlikely that the town will ever generate much revenue from fees. Still, wherever costs can be recovered from user fees, the result is reduced pressure on the tax levy.

Every town in the Commonwealth struggles with setting fees for municipal services. Local officials do not want to impose unreasonable charges on residents, despite pressure to generate revenue from sources other than the tax levy. Many towns survey the fee schedules of nearby communities and set local fees within range of prevailing practices elsewhere. Unfortunately, this approach masks the possibility that fees in other towns may bear little relationship to the actual cost of service delivery.

Local governments need to approach fee setting with more precision than they do, particularly in Massachusetts where municipalities have such

limited taxation power. Erring on the side of caution, however, towns often collect less revenue from user fees than they could. Setting fees that capture actual costs can be difficult unless communities have procedures in place to track all of the direct and indirect costs involved with delivering a service. Princeton could consider conducting an intensive study of one service at a time and gradually establish a consistent protocol across town departments.

## Regional Service Delivery

Although regional services are common in other parts of the country, Massachusetts has very few successful models of regional cooperation. Here, the most common form of regionalization is a regional school district. Not surprisingly, the average cost of local government services per capita runs fairly high in Massachusetts. Small towns like Princeton should explore regional opportunities wherever possible. For example, Title V inspections, permitting, monitoring and enforcement could be provided through an inter-local agreement with neighboring towns. In addition, animal control, technology and conservation agent services have been mentioned in Princeton as potential candidates for a regional approach to service delivery.

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