

TO: Town of Hingham Planning Board
FROM: Gordon Carr, Chair, 2020 Hingham Master Plan Committee
DATE: March 6, 2021
RE: Transmittal Message for the 2020 Master Plan

My colleagues and I on the Hingham Master Plan Committee are pleased to present to you the final draft of the 2020 Hingham Master Plan. This is a product of nearly 18 months of work, which began with perhaps one of the most extensive community engagement and outreach efforts in our town's history to gauge the wants, needs, and concerns of our fellow citizens. The Committee and the Barrett Consultant Team held 6 town-wide community visioning sessions, 5 more targeted student and senior sessions, 6 smaller group meetings, and a public online survey that generated nearly 1,000 responses. This gave the Committee a clear picture of what our fellow citizens cherished, prioritized, and worried about, and served as a foundation for a set of Vision and Goals we established at the start of our process to guide the development of the Plan.

The COVID-19 pandemic altered our schedule a bit, but our commitment remained the same – to complete the Master Plan and provide our town and fellow citizens with a framework for how to view and shape the next decades of Hingham's future. After just a few in-person Committee sessions to start 2020, we shifted to online "virtual" meetings. Yet we still had almost full participation of the Committee at what turned out to be 19 meetings over the course of the Plan development process, which represents many hundreds of hours of personal participation and engagement by the Committee members. The virtual meetings also had the benefit of making all our meetings fully accessible to the public, so anyone could listen in on our discussions in real time or view the recordings and provide comment electronically through the Master Plan website. While we might have all preferred to be meeting in person, the result provided perhaps unprecedented opportunity for public awareness and engagement.

This 2020 Master Plan looks both back and forward. It builds on the last master plan prepared by the town in 2001 and continues many of the goals and pursuits included in that plan. The 2020 Plan is a celebration of our heritage and the decisions and leadership that have gotten Hingham to where it is today. It is also an assessment of where we stand today on a range of issues, and finally it is a vision statement on where we want to go – what should be preserved for future generations, where we can do better, what should be changed, and what uncertain circumstances can be anticipated and prepared for.

Despite the implications of its name, a Master Plan is not a mandate of what must be done, and it is certainly not a directive agenda for the near term. The Committee was aspirational in the development of the Policies, Goals, and Recommendations in the Plan. They reflect priorities we as a Committee feel must be considered when difficult decisions are to be made by our community in the years ahead. These priorities need to be continually assessed and balanced based on immediate needs and resources and must be evaluated based on the future consequences of decisions made.

There are over 140 Recommendations across seven broad categories. The Recommendations represent a strong consensus of the 15-member Committee, though some were not unanimous. This is to be expected and speaks to the complexity of many of the issues addressed and the amount of discussion and debate we undertook. Overall, the results of the 2020 Master Plan can be illustrated through the following statement:

In 2035, Hingham residents will live in a well-run, economically vibrant, and diverse town that is working together to prepare for and tackle the universal problems such as transportation, housing and climate change while honoring town character and providing services that create a livable, safe, and engaging community for everyone.

As the Committee concluded its work, the Goals and Recommendations revealed several broad themes, which can be summarized in this way:

1. Prepare for the Future

- Monitor this plan and recommendations by delivering regular updates
- Implement smart planning and prudent budgeting to manage tax dollars

2. Be Proactive in Addressing our Challenges

- Always take the long view – consider how future generations judge us
- Rely on our tradition of participatory government and resident engagement
- Engage the talents, intelligence, and creativity of our residents to address our challenges
- Deliver proactive strategies, including on housing, economic development, and sustainability

3. Celebrate and Share the Best of Hingham

- Care for the health, safety, and well-being of all our citizens
- Promote and preserve our history
- Be welcoming and inclusive for all
- Encourage visitors, tourism, and new residents and businesses

The Committee expects a continued robust debate about all of these issues, and we hope this Plan serves as a reasoned and thoughtful framework for those debates. Hingham will face “trade-offs” which cannot be thought of casually. We as citizens and collective decision-makers need to be prepared to soberly weigh choices of policies and investments. We must consider what the impacts of those decisions will be on all our citizens, not simply those directly involved or advocating for or against a particular issue. We need to hear from all voices and perspectives, and we must also fully understand and accept that doing one thing may in many cases mean our inability to do others. We will need to determine how to allocate, deploy, preserve, or expand key resources – such as land, water, and revenues – to ensure a safe and prosperous future for those who follow us.

The year 2020 reminded us that the future – even the near future – is uncertain and can change in an instant. It means that continuous planning and preparation is needed to plan and invest for tomorrow while managing day-to-day operating efficiencies and contingencies. The general expectation is that Master Plan update efforts such the one we just completed should be done every decade or so. The Committee recognizes that these Recommendations will need to be re-visited regularly – likely annually – to measure these priorities against an evolving set of circumstances. Balancing the preservation of the heritage and culture and the long-held qualities that make Hingham such a special place with the demands of progress and evolving needs will require an ongoing assessment of temporary or permanent changes – demographic, cultural, environmental, or political – that will influence our chosen direction.

As the Planning Board reviews and ultimately adopts the Plan, I encourage you to keep in mind the amount of time, effort, thoughtfulness, and commitment by the Master Plan Committee that this document represents. It has been a pleasure and an honor to serve with my 14 colleagues on the Committee. The collegiality and collaborative spirit of our shared experience truly represents the essence of what makes Hingham such a special community.

The Committee will continue to be available to provide additional information or context for the Plan, and we remain committed to advancing the Goals and Recommendations and will continue to be engaged on behalf of our town.