

# A Town's Vision

## Mason, New Hampshire

On September 29, 2001, people from all corners of Mason gathered at the Mason Town Hall to begin developing a plan to guide the future development and preservation of our town, a very special town, Mason, New Hampshire.

### **The Workshop Attendees**

96 people of Mason attended and signed their names on the welcome sheet. 96 out of a population of 1275 is 7.5%, a huge showing for this kind of activity.

### **What is a Master Plan?**

Planning board members Pam Lassen, Mark McDonald, and Dotsie Millbrandt, and Southwestern Regional Planning Commission planner Carol Ogilvie, led a discussion on what a master plan is, why we need it, and how to start developing it.

A Master Plan is:

- ✧ A town's vision of itself: How do a town's people see their town? What is important to people? How do people want their town to develop over time?
- ✧ A set of policies: What kinds of land use and types of businesses should be encouraged? What conservation and preservation techniques are important? What town services need improvement, and what improvements should be undertaken sooner than others?
- ✧ A set of goals: specific items to achieve. For each goal, a set of objectives: actions to take to implement the goal.
- ✧ A place to present facts and statistics: Data about population, housing, transportation, and community services.
- ✧ A state requirement: A town that has a zoning ordinance ("The Town of Mason Planning Ordinance of 1967") must have a master plan to support it. The master plan must address the town's goals and objectives, and include a land use plan.

## **A Lively Discussion**

What issues are important to the people of Mason in September, 2001? Here are the issues people raised in the workshop, reordered slightly to group similar topics.

### **Historical places**

- ♦ Identify and preserve. How to preserve?

### **Zoning**

- ♦ Current zoning minimum lot sizes (3 acre lots with 250 feet of frontage, or 2 acre lots with 200 feet of frontage in the Village Residential district) encourage narrow "bowling alley" lots.

### **Growth management tools**

- ♦ Building permit limitation scheme: Mason had a growth management ordinance in effect between 1986 and 1990, a time of high growth pressure. It limited the number of building permits that could be issued in a year.
- ♦ Phased development scheme: Planning board works with each developer to determine how many subdivided lots will be developed per year. No annual limit on town as a whole.
- ♦ Comments from Carol Ogilvie of the Southwestern Regional Planning Commission (SWRPC): Over the past two decades, a number of lawsuits have been brought to court by developers over building permit limitations. The court tends to side in favor of the developers unless the town's growth rate is significantly higher than the growth rate of the surrounding towns. Mason's growth rate over the past decade has been lower than neighboring towns. Phased development schemes, on the other hand, have not been subject to adverse court decisions.

### **Land use planning tools**

- ♦ Open space reservation: Milford now requires developers of 4 or more lots to reserve 30% of the parcel being subdivided as open space. Open space should be accessible to all. Developers should leave open space areas in good condition.
- ♦ Impact fees: Charge a fee per building permit issued or per lot subdivided. Comments from Carol Ogilvie of SWRPC: State law imposes many restrictions on impact fees. The schedule of fees (e.g., amount of fee assessed per lot) must be developed with substantial documentation of town service costs. Fees collected must be distributed among all town departments (highway, police, fire, library,

etc). There are restrictions on what collected fees can be used for. Collected fees must be used within a time period or fees revert to payer, with interest. In southwestern NH, only the town of Jaffrey has an impact fee ordinance.

- ♦ What currently happens: Planning board works with developers to strongly encourage them to make road improvements in the vicinity of the subdivision, especially if the subdivision is on a gravel road. Developers of all major subdivisions on gravel roads since 1986 have either funded these voluntary improvements, or performed the work themselves. The cost of these improvements has sometimes been higher than the fee that would be assessed under the Jaffrey impact fee schedule.

## **Roads**

- ♦ We like dirt roads.
- ♦ We like roads with trees.
- ♦ Development on Class VI roads. A Class VI road is a public right-of-way "closed, subject to gates and bars". (If you open a gate or bar, please close it.) Current policy is to only allow subdivisions on Class V or better roads. Landowners on Class VI roads can upgrade road and petition Board of Selectmen to accept the road as a Class V road. Then all the improved area becomes subdividable. Is this a good policy? What other options are available?
- ♦ What roads are/aren't Class VI roads? Requires research to find out. For some, may not be able to determine status. Mason has many old roads, trails, logging trails.

## **Recreation**

- ♦ Railroad bed. ATV and dirt bike traffic is noisy. Safety concern for people walking, especially with children.
- ♦ Make swimming beach at Pratt Pond? State property, may not be allowed. Liability issues. Snapping turtles.

## **Conservation**

- ♦ What aquifer protection do we have? Need water protection map overlay and policies.
- ♦ Wildlife corridors: mapping of known wildlife habitation areas.
- ♦ Greenways: setting aside long contiguous areas of undeveloped space.
- ♦ Logging: Logging policies, clear cutting restrictions, logging setbacks, preservation of trees.

## **Farming**

- ♦ One full-time family farm left in Mason. A farm is a business. Needs to have a farm stand on property to sell produce.

## **Business**

- ♦ What is a home business? Zoning ordinance lists specific criteria. Needs an update for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- ♦ What kind of business is allowed by special exception? What kind of business is allowed in different town zones or areas? Find balance between rights of landowners and rights of abutters. Rights of landowners to use the land they own. People lose jobs in bad economic times, need to be able earn a living on their property. Rights of property abutters to peace and quiet and to maintain property value. There are specific criteria in the zoning ordinance for allowing a special exception. May need updating and clarification.
- ♦ A commercial zone? Study advantages, disadvantages. If so, where?

## **Town services**

- ♦ What town and community services are available? Are each sufficient for current needs? What plans for future needs?

## **Other comments**

- ♦ Building lots in Mason are too expensive.
- ♦ What determines property value?
- ♦ Present results of 1996 Master Plan survey of town opinion.

## **The Committees**

Interested people from the workshop signed up to work on committees. Over the next year, committees met, invited speakers, held discussions, combined with other committees, held more discussions, made progress, hit ideological roadblocks, despaired, and sometimes members faded away. Eventually, though, they formalized their ideas and wrote plans. Five committees presented reports:

**Land Use**  
**Conservation**  
**Historical Preservation**  
**Roads and Transportation**  
**Business Development**

The following sections of this document contain their reports. In each report, the format of section headings and bulleted lists has been edited for consistency, a highlight section has been added (*in italics*) to all reports except Land Use, a bit of grammar has been tweaked, but otherwise the content and flavor of the committee reports are presented intact.

# Land Use Goals for the Master Plan

*Do you remember Mason, Uncle Sam?  
As you walk the troublesome places of the world  
Do you sometimes think of the quietness,  
The peace, the sweetness in the air,  
The piney woods, the laurel in bloom,  
The sparkling brooks,  
The gold of the maples in autumn?  
Do you remember your favorite spot  
Where you used to go to think things out?  
Wondering what there was for you to do,  
Deciding that to live a good life  
Of the highest quality,  
Honestly and graciously,  
In partnership with God,  
Is the best anyone can do –  
Pondering about tolerance,  
Honesty and uprightness,  
Asking a question  
And hearing the answer:  
It isn't so much what a man does  
As what he is, how he lives  
And what he stands for  
That matters.  
Do you remember Uncle Sam?  
Things haven't changed much, in Mason.*

This poem was written by Elizabeth Orton Jones, a children's book author and illustrator. She is best known for "Twig" and "Big Susan," just to name a few of her works. Elizabeth Orton Jones has lived in Mason for over 50 years. The poem above was from Our Uncle Sam, a pageant written for the children of Mason. This poem best describes what Mason was in yesteryear and also what Mason is today. Some of the surrounding towns have not planned for growth and they are starting to feel the effects. The Land Use Master Plan Citizens Committee feels it is important to plan for the future of Mason in order to preserve our precious resources as they exist in Mason today.

As available land in surrounding towns becomes scarce, land in Mason becomes more precious. The increase in development also creates pressure to alter Mason's landscapes. Two of the most critical resources a town can possess are its land and water. It is very important that we consider the appropriate use of land and place safeguards on aquifers when planning for

the town's future. As the community grows in size, profound changes will occur within the environment. The need for public services and facilities will increase as the population expands. Regulations regarding growth and development are imperative to protect and preserve Mason as we know it today.

Below are presented planning goals and objectives, and why they are important. Additional specific recommendations are also included.

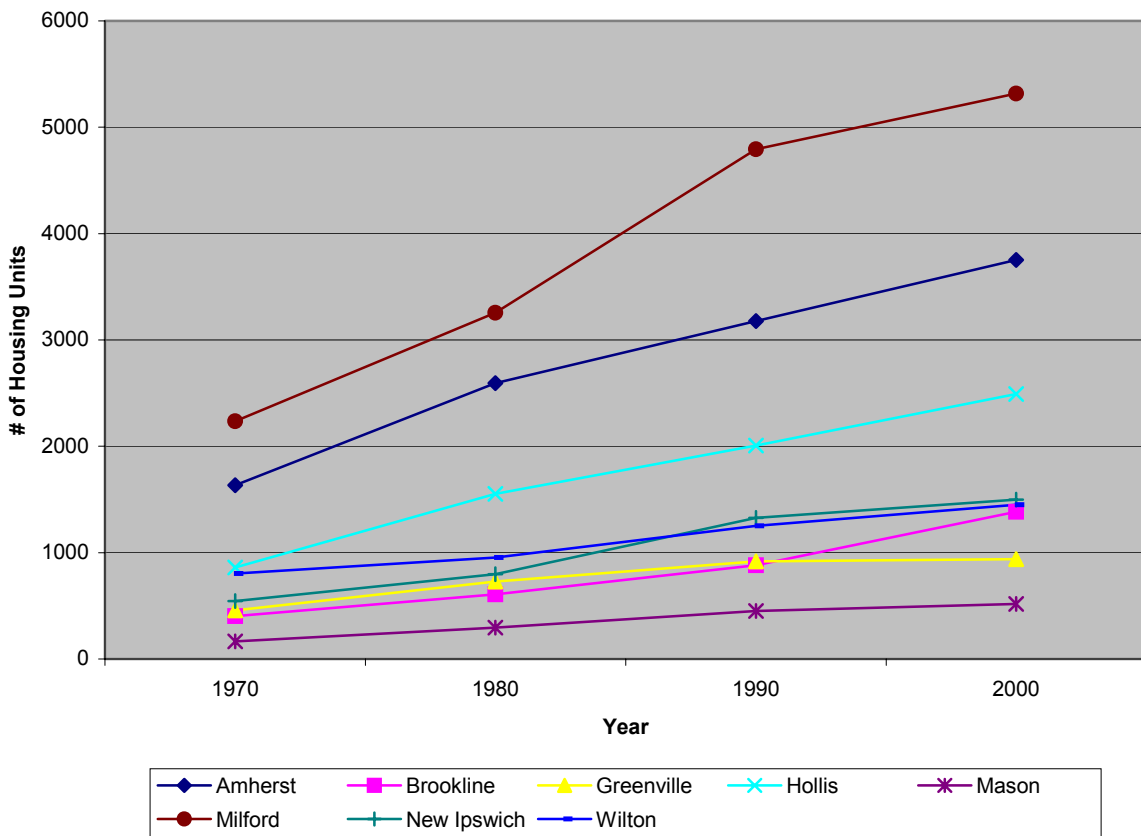
## **Goals**

- Maintain and preserve the rural character that has been so much a part of Mason.
- Preserve the country dirt roads.
- Protect and safeguard forested areas that provide a natural habitat for wildlife.
- Preserve the "small town" feeling.
- Protect and preserve the integrity of historical landmarks.
- Protect and safeguard natural resources within the Town of Mason
- Protect Mason's water resources, aquifer, watershed, wetlands, ponds, and streams.
- Safeguard and protect open spaces.
- Preserve and safeguard scenic vistas.
- Control the pace of growth taking into account the impacts on services and infrastructure.

Substantially all of Mason's drinking water comes from ground water in aquifers. The Land Use Master Plan Citizens Committee feels strongly that safeguarding our aquifers when planning for the town's future is vital. Keeping our water free from contaminants requires careful planning. Bedrock (drilled) wells draw water from rock joint system. Contaminants can enter joints at some distance from the wells, but can also enter via a poor casing seal at the bedrock surface. It is estimated that septic tanks may contaminate up to one to two percent of the nations aquifers. Because septic tank effluent contains bacteria, viruses, and high level of nitrates from human waste, contamination is a major concern in the incidence of water borne pathogens in private wells. Placement of wells in relation to septic tanks is an imperative factor in preventing contamination. One way to safeguard wells is to increase our

setbacks and separations of wells and septic systems. If setbacks are increased, then lot size and frontage requirements also must be increased. This would lessen the likelihood of contamination. Septic designers and the local inspector are responsible for proper placement and construction; while the maintenance is the responsibility of the homeowner. Water usage is also a concern. Withdrawing too much water from our aquifers could be detrimental to our town. Water is an invaluable resource; without it life cannot exist. We need to create an acceptable water use policy that will place limits on the proposed uses and withdrawal of water from aquifers within our town. These restrictions will prevent a negative impact on surrounding properties.

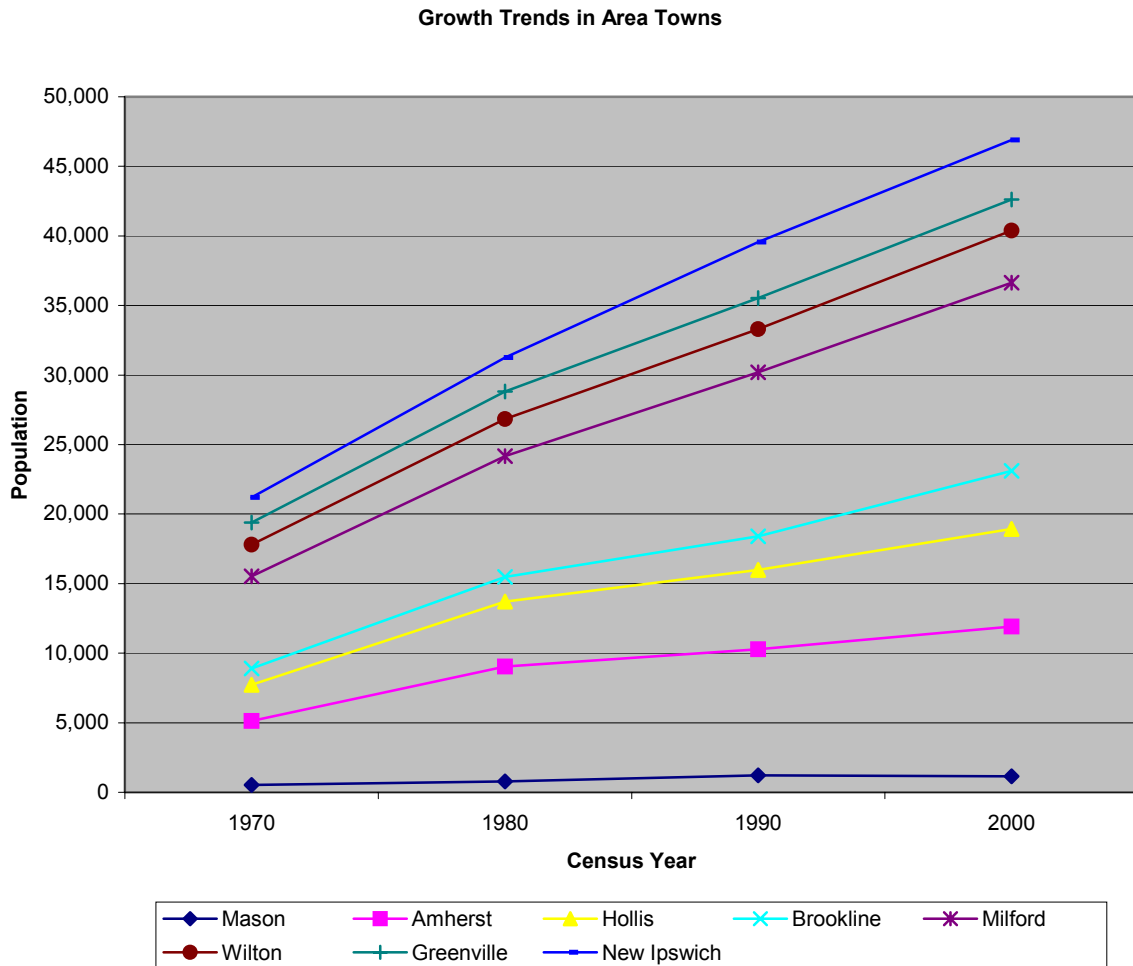
Housing Unit Trends



Towns surrounding Mason are growing at considerable rates, as evidenced by the number of housing units. With increasing population there is an additional burden on police department, fire department, road maintenance, town offices, school and other public services. One step that requires further consideration is enacting a rated development regulation to limit growth in the town to a set annual percentage, therefore allowing town resources to grow accordingly. This should be done in conjunction with the town developing a Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). The CIP could then be used in setting the growth rate that will ultimately be part of the rated development. The restriction for

back lots should be retained. Scopious development of frontage lots should be avoided. Open space protection should be included when planning for potential future development. The areas to be protected should not only be those that are considered unbuildable but also those that include natural resources and scenic vistas.

The chart below illustrates the population growth over the past thirty years. Many of the surrounding communities have grown at a higher rate than that of the services that the town can provide.



A single building site can alter the operation of the existing ecosystem. There is an increase in air pollution, solid waste, and nutrient loss from a developed site. We must consider the change that occurs when we alter the natural landscape to a developed landscape. The possible changes include storm water runoff, soil erosion, siltation, fluctuation in available soil moisture, downstream flooding, water pollution, changes in surface water volumes, i.e. lakes and streams, and also a decrease in ground water recharge. One building site may have the potential of affecting the environment drastically.



The Planning Board and the Board of Adjustment should exercise prudent judgment when approving land development.

In 1999 a questionnaire was sent out to all Mason residences. The results of the survey were similar to the results of a town-wide survey done in 1980. Responses said that preservation of rural character was very important among the citizens. Dirt roads, forested areas, scenic views, historical land marks, stone walls, and a small town feel are among the characteristics most enjoyed by the people of Mason. We should consider additional guidelines to preserve the rural character we currently enjoy.

Guidelines should be developed for light and noise. Inappropriate outdoor lighting in rural areas can result in glare, over-lighting, and wasted energy. This is an increasing concern as the landscape continues to develop. Light pollution also alters the rural character of the town. We should strive to maintain part of the rural heritage by minimizing the amount of light cast into the night sky, allowing current and future generations to see the night sky, an experience that is virtually gone from many localities. One suggestion would be that any outdoor light source may not be visible from the roadside. Adopting a noise ordinance detracts from the very reason many families move to New Hampshire – freedom. Recreational activities (mowing lawns, target shooting) that many people enjoy produce noise. This noise usually lasts for a short period. We should not place undue restrictions on these activities; instead we should merely adopt a common sense policy and ask that people be considerate of their neighbors.

Another consideration would be to implement limits on roadside clearing to provide a natural buffer between new construction and the road. The intent is to preserve and enhance the rural character of the town as seen from its roads.

## **Specific Objectives**

- Increase setbacks and separations for septic systems and wells. Also proportionally increase lot size.
- Increase the frontage requirement.
- Develop light and noise guidelines.
- Require a natural buffer between new construction (dwellings) and the road.
- Enact a rated development regulation to limit the growth of the town to a set percentage, therefore allowing the towns resources to grow at an appropriate rate.

- Create a water use policy regarding acceptable uses and limiting water withdrawal from the aquifers, watershed, and ground water to prevent a negative impact on surrounding properties.
- Provide better guidelines for approving special exceptions and variances to prevent negative impact on the abutting properties and/or the town.
- Develop a Capital Improvement Plan/Facilities Plan to prevent major untimely impacts on the community i.e. tax burden, lack of resources, etc.
- Use the plan in setting the growth rate that will ultimately be a part of the rated development.
- Set a growth rate relative to a CIP.

## **Additional Recommendations**

The Land Use Master Plan Citizens Committee has further specific recommendations concerning the Town of Mason. They are as follows:

- Consider making Greenville Road a scenic road because of its scenic vistas.
- Require public building expansion to fit with the character of the town. Consider the compatibility of exterior design, arrangement, texture, and material to be used in relationship with other existing building structures or surrounding area.
- If the town wants to preserve a parcel of land, the town should make a realistic effort to acquire it.
- The town should consider additional specific rules and regulations for subdivisions. Design review should consider the preservation of existing features including trees, scenic ponds, brooks, streams, rock outcroppings, water bodies including vernal pools, natural resources, historic landmarks, and stonewalls.
- Telecommunication towers are becoming more prevalent. The town should have considerations with regard to these facilities. Possibly we should prohibit construction in locations within the historic/village residential district or allow facilities to be built only on town owned land.

Proper growth management is important to maintaining the small town character that is the heart and soul of this small community in Southern New Hampshire. If growth cannot be controlled, the rural character we enjoy most will disappear. There are many considerations when planning for growth. We

must contemplate those that are physical and environmental and incorporate them into guidelines that promote the future vision of the town.

## References and Resources

Pipeline. "How To Keep Your Water Well." Summer 2002.

New Hampshire Minimum Impact Development Partnership. Three Infrastructures of New Hampshire Communities.

[HTTP://www.nhmid.org/infrast.htm](http://www.nhmid.org/infrast.htm). November 2002

New Hampshire Minimum Impact Development Partnership. How Development Changes Undeveloped Land. [HTTP://www.nhmid.org/changes.htm](http://www.nhmid.org/changes.htm) .

Southern New Hampshire Planning Commission. Capital Improvements Programming Handbook.

New Hampshire Office of State Planning. Technical Bulletin 16-Outdoor Lighting. [HTTP://state.nh.us/osp](http://state.nh.us/osp).

With inspiration from the towns of Mason, Pepperell, Amherst, and Hollis Comprehensive Plans.

A special thank you to Elizabeth Orton Jones for permission to use Our Uncle Sam.

A thank you to Joanne and Peter LeCount for helpful suggestions.

Respectfully submitted by,  
Jenny Scholl  
Douglas Whitbeck  
Mark Richardson

# Conservation Goals for the Master Plan

These goals were developed during the Master Plan Conservation meetings on December 1, 2001, on January 14, 2002, and on February 11, 2002. They were amended at the general Master Plan meeting on April 6, 2002.

*Mason's quiet nature and large blocks of open space are very important parts of Mason's character.*

To conserve and enhance Mason's natural resources, the Town of Mason should:

## **Protect all large tracts of land wherever possible for wildlife habitat and water quality.**

- Encourage use of conservation easements to protect land while keeping it in private hands.
- Encourage town to put conservation easements on tax title lands using land use change tax funds.
- Identify contiguous parcels for wildlife corridors. (For example, Walker Brook has a family of moose.)
- Encourage sustainable forestry as a long term land use for large parcels.

## **Draw up a list of special places for conservation.**

For example:

- ◆ The Cascades and Mason Brook
- ◆ Walker Brook Gorge
- ◆ Mason Quarry
- ◆ Old cemeteries
- ◆ Town Pound
- ◆ View from Greenville Road
- ◆ Wolf Rock area, Scripps Lane
- ◆ Open valley with wetlands on Old Ashby Road near Cascade Road (a good bird habitat)
- ◆ Old mill on Spaulding Brook on Woody Fifield's property

- ◆ Network of wetlands along Spaulding Brook upstream of town conservation land.

## **Protect water supplies.**

In Mason, we will always be dependent on our own land for water supply (wells) and wastewater treatment (septic systems).

Buffers of forested land along brooks help protect water quality. Mason should:

- Establish an aquifer protection district to limit land uses that would threaten water quality. Some types of home businesses may not be allowed or would require protective steps.
- Provide education on maintaining septic systems
- Encourage sustainable forestry as a long term land use to protect water quality.

## **Educate people about land and limitations inherent in the land.**

- How wetlands and steep slopes affect building sites
- How to landscape with native plants and wildflowers (and avoid planting invasive exotic vegetation)
- Design a "Welcome to Mason" brochure covering environmental concerns for homeowners (good reference - Merrimack River Watershed Council brochure entitled "Environmentally Friendly Home Ownership")
- Integrate schools in conservation activities

## **Promote ways to reduce noise and light pollution.**

Noise and light pollution can threaten peace and quiet.

- Use outdoor lighting without glare so stars can be visible at night. (For information, see the Harvard, MA, ordinance on lighting.)

# Historic Preservation Goals for the Master Plan

Mason residents value the rural and historic character of the town, as shown in the 1996 Town Survey. Mason's Historic Preservation District was established in the Mason Planning Ordinance of 1967: "The purpose shall be to preserve and protect from encroachment the historical heritage of buildings and lands in the District."

*The character of an Historic District can be defined through the ages and architectures of its structures. Mason's stone walls, winding tree-lined roads, and cemeteries outside the defined Historic District contribute to the town's character as well. These historic features, once lost through neglect or disinterest, can never be replaced.*

The Historical Preservation committee for the Master Plan presents the following recommendations.

## **Preserve structures and places in the Historic District**

While the "character" of a town may be difficult to quantify, the character of the already established Historic District can be defined through the ages of its structures and their architecture. Specific structures deserving of attention within the Historic District include:

- ◆ Ebenezer Hill House
- ◆ Benjamin Mann House
- ◆ Capt. Mann's Store
- ◆ Uncle Sam's House
- ◆ Town Pound
- ◆ Wolf Rock

## **Preserve structures and places outside the Historic District**

Mason's stone walls, winding tree-lined roads, cemeteries and other features outside the Historic District also contribute to the town's character.

Preservation of these structures can be encouraged by increased awareness of their existence. This can be achieved through techniques such as historic markers, brochures, and walking or drive-by tours:

- ◆ Old Mason Quarry (private land)
- ◆ Old Stone Schoolhouse
- ◆ Brick Schoolhouse
- ◆ Any other remaining schoolhouses
- ◆ Any remaining mill sites such as:
  - Old Potato Starch Mill
  - Elias Elliot's sawmill off Black Brook Road
  - Stone bridge to that sawmill (see Mason Bicentennial book, pages 136-137)
  
- ◆ Any houses one hundred years of age or older
  - Dean Bassett House (yellow house on Valley Road)
  - Nutting Hill area
  - Any houses listed in Bicentennial Book that remain standing (list?)
  - Hurricane Hill and Briggs Road
  
- ◆ Railroad bridge on Jackson Road
- ◆ View from Greenville Road

## **Restore the Historic District Commission**

Those qualities which contribute to the town's character, once lost through neglect and/or disinterest, can never be replaced. It is therefore recommended that the Selectmen of Mason be encouraged to maintain and preserve the character of the town through revitalization of the Historic Commission. The charter of the renewed Historic Commission should include the following:

- The Historic Commission should be user-friendly.
- It should serve as a resource to the residents of the Historic District and the town in general by providing information on restoration techniques, material and financial resources.
- It should be charged with the preservation of the town's heritage.
- It should be encouraged to work with the Historic Society to identify, record and preserve information about historic structures, and to establish standards and guidelines for maintenance and preservation of historic structures.

## Other Suggestions

- Promote communications with historic organizations sponsored by the State of New Hampshire and in surrounding towns:
  - ◆ Brookline
  - ◆ Greenville
  - ◆ Townsend
  - ◆ Ashby
- Preserve roadways or paths to historic areas.
- Consider places which may be viewed as historic in the future:
  - ◆ Parker's Maple Barn
  - ◆ Pickity Place
  - ◆ Twig's studio
  - ◆ Hardscrabble store
  - ◆ Fletcher's quarry
- Promote the resources of the Mason Historical Society.
- Encourage the Historic Society to conduct house tours, walking tours/picnics to promote Mason and its resources in area newspapers.
- Create a photographic record to identify items considered worthy of preservation, document their existence and condition, and educate owners and town residents on the existence and value of these structures.
- Collect historical photographs and postcards which can serve as incentives for preservation and informational resources.



# Roads and Transportation Goals for the Master Plan

The Roads Committee reviewed much data, historical and current, including the previous Mason Master Plan, regulations and surveys, and data from other towns and states.

Reviewing this data, one topic emerged of key importance to the future development of Mason:

*Landowners on Class VI roads can upgrade the road and petition Board of Selectmen to accept the road as a Class V road. If the road is accepted, all land with frontage on the Class V portion of the road becomes subdividable.*

## **Is this how we want our town to grow...not by planning, but by petition?**

As specified in the Mason Planning Ordinance of 1967, all zoning districts in Mason require frontage on a Class V road or better. Most of the roads upon which we travel in Mason are Class V roads, except for the numbered state highways. Yet many miles of Class VI roads exist in town. If 10 miles of Class VI road were upgraded to Class V, and if lots were subdivided on each side of the road with 250 feet of frontage per lot, 422 new lots could be created.

### **State of New Hampshire RSA 229:5 Classification:**

**VI.** Class V highways shall consist of all other traveled highways which the town has the duty to maintain regularly and shall be known as town roads [...].

**VII.** Class VI highways shall consist of all other existing public ways, and shall include all highways discontinued as open highways and made subject to gates and bars, [...], and all highways which have not been maintained and repaired by the town in suitable condition for travel thereon for 5 successive years or more [...].

The Roads Committee submits the following goals:

## **Change how town roads are accepted**

Utilize a method of accepting town roads called "Dedication and Acceptance" whenever possible. Use the "Layout" method only when required.

- ✧ "Dedication and Acceptance" (RSA 231:22-a) means that a landowner dedicates the road to the town, and the town meeting votes to accept the road as a Class V town road.
- ✧ In the "Layout" method (RSA 231:8-30), a landowner petitions the Selectmen to accept a road. Hearings are held, and the Selectmen make a decision. (Note that RSA 231:22-a Paragraph V states that the Selectmen always have the authority to upgrade a Class VI road upon petition).

## **Create a working map of town roads for use by town boards**

Indicate whether a road is a state highway, Class V road, or Class VI road. Note known discontinued roads and date of discontinuance. List roads of uncertain status, that may or may not be town roads.

## **Educate townspeople on road classifications, impacts, processes via handouts, displays and posters:**

- ✧ 1991 Mason Planning Board report, "Recommendations Concerning the Upgrading of Class VI Roads".
- ✧ 1990 Municipal Law Lecture Article, "A Hard Road To Travel: The Tortuous By-Ways of NH Local Highway Law" H. Bernard Waugh, Jr., formerly of the NH Municipal Association.
- ✧ Display titled "U.S. DoT Federal Highway Administration: Gravel Roads, Maintenance and Design Manual".

## **Create informative posters to provide information and provoke discussion on roads issues:**

- ✧ Poster I: Gravel versus paved roads
  - Cost comparisons over time
  - Aesthetics
    - Subjective - some people like dirt

- Preserve roadside trees and stone walls
- "The rural nature of the town"

→ Environmental considerations

- Because pavement is impervious, substances on paved roads run off the road during rainstorms, sometimes into wetlands, streams and wells:
  - Paving materials
  - Oil, gasoline residues
  - Salt, winter treatment
- Gravel roads absorb some of these materials, making them less detrimental to the surrounding area

◇ Poster II: Accepting Class V roads

- Define road classifications
- Explain the methods a town can use to accept roads
- How do these methods work for:
  - New Class V roads
  - Upgraded Class VI roads
- When can a town use "Dedication and Acceptance"
- When must a town use "Layout"

# Business Goals for the Master Plan

## Overall Statement

The Business Committee with an open mind viewed our mission as one of reviewing the past Master Plan, reviewing current residential and commercial growth in Mason and more importantly growth in the surrounding towns, reviewing current businesses in Mason and how they fit into the rural character of Mason, and trying to ascertain future residential growth and future commercial growth and requirements. Granted, seeing into the future is not possible but basing future plans and practices on current facts and implementing these plans will allow the Town of Mason to have control of its future and not be controlled by it.

*We, Mason, been left intact as an underdeveloped, almost pristine rural community and this condition is rare.*

*Given this blank page, we are fortunate that we do not have to repair or despair of many past mistakes and we can by proper planning maintain who we are if we realize as a community that change will come here whether we want it to or not.*

*Planned and regulated growth (residential and commercial) based on precise zoning regulations can and will maintain a rural character if written with that in mind.*

## Our Goals

- To learn as much as possible about future growth, how other towns are handling their growth, review other towns' zoning and master plans.
- To look at what businesses or industry would be in keeping with the rural character of Mason.

- To discuss if commercial and light industrial growth is a possible factor in Mason's growth.
- Lastly, to review Mason's zoning in light of these above forementioned factors.

## **Why Important**

The Business Committee thinks that given the relatively undeveloped nature of Mason and the pressure of growth in surrounding towns, it will soon be apparent to developers and the general public that Mason is an attractive, quiet, and clean town. It is an easy commute to the larger business or industrial areas in both NH and MA. We are all aware of the increase in housing subdivisions in Pepperell, Townsend, MA and Brookline, Milford and Amherst NH to know that the more residential housing there is (the average home built today has 4 bedrooms), the more demands there are for commercial services.

The Business Committee has accumulated many articles over the past 10 months about towns trying to cope with increased traffic, unwanted businesses (because of inadequate or outdated zoning laws), destruction of open spaces, loss of family farms, businesses that are esthetically discordant with the environment of the town, and surprises such as the look of a building or residential development after it is built and it is too late to do anything about it. This is not uncommon.

The Business Committee thinks given the inevitability of the above residential pressures that the zoning areas of Mason should be thoroughly reviewed, removing many of those businesses that are allowed in the current Village and GRAF zones and placed in a business/commercial zone. Whether the zoning is rewritten to contain business and/or light industrial areas, a complete review using data from other towns and how their zoning laws were changed is overdue. This is especially crucial since currently "Special Exceptions by the Board of Adjustment" can be granted for a variety of business in all zones.

By establishing a commercial and light industrial zone, Mason will be able to strictly regulate the types and locations of businesses, control of light, air, noise and water pollution, greenbelt requirements, structural esthetics, incentives for conservation, traffic control, and growth potential of each permit issued. We think undue burden is placed on the Board of Adjustment members to grant these exceptions, given the growing complexity of today's world. It also charges them with interpreting the general requirements outlined in the present zoning ordinance and wishes of the residents of Mason without definitive guidance.

This zoning review is particularly important to the development of residential housing more than commercial or industrial. The pressure on the land and a town's resources always is based on increase of the population. This does not mean we are actively seeking businesses, but merely putting in place a comprehensive plan that we can use when responding to any potential interest from small or large enterprises. This allows Mason to have all the regulations in place so we are prepared and all the residents of Mason are in accord about what is acceptable to them.

## **Specific Objectives**

The Business Committees thinks the following action items should be incorporated in the review of the zoning. Again, whether or not the zoning is changed most of the below items would be invaluable.

- Determine the % of land that could be business and light industrial area. Base this % on review of what other towns of similar size have determined to be appropriate.
- Review of what areas of Mason would be an appropriate commercial and/or light industrial area. This could be done by actually driving around Mason and collecting data as to what areas would be appropriate. After this preliminary step is taken, a review of property records and outstanding building permits and impact of current residential use would be necessary. The Business Committee did view Mason and thought that currently the area along Rt 31 and Rt 124 near the Mass border is relatively open. There are some businesses already there. Also up along Rt 124 towards New Ipswich there is open space. And Rt 123 (Valley Road) near the Townsend, Mass border is relatively open. These are suggestions and there could be many other small areas that could be designated as an overlay district (see Hollis, NH zoning or Amherst NH Zoning).
- In keeping with our rural character, a business zone could incorporate some residential use. By incorporating this idea in the zoning regulations this will naturally determine type of business and keep these areas from being dead zones when not open for business. This could be mixed housing such as units for elderly and starter homes or units 1 or 2 bedrooms for singles mixed in with small offices. See Hollis, NH Master Plan on overlays districts and Amherst NH Master Plan.
- Mail a survey to all businesses in Mason which will give us current data as to type of business, growth potential, number of people working in that business, whether it's a home business or not, why they are doing business in Mason, what types of businesses if any they would like to see

in Mason, and how they currently dispose of their hazardous waste (hair salons, automotive repair, pesticides) if any.

- If Mason does decide to zone for business and light industrial, our current businesses will need to be considered and properly incorporated into our future plans. Our review of businesses in Mason found that the majority of them were small home businesses which would probably continue as presently listed in the zoning regulations. However, there are some home businesses (such as a cleaning business) which do fit into the present criteria of a home business but could have a large amount of to and from traffic due to employees checking in two times a day, and this could be disruptive to neighbors. Or a hair salon which is dumping chemicals down the drain. These particular outcomes of a home business are issues we need to examine more closely - hence the survey would help which particular types of home business need more definite regulations.
- In the Master Plan of 1980 it was suggestion that an economic development commission be organized. This committee came to the same conclusion that this is an essential tool for the present and future of Mason. We suggest a committee be formed from conservation, historical preservation, business community, and municipal arenas. Its functions and or mission could be determined with input from the Zoning Board, Selectmen and other Town authority and in conjunction with the Town. This "idea" could be outlined in the "survery" mentioned above.
- Mason's Town Center. This committee thinks that the greatest tool in maintaining our rural character is to create a community. In creating community the Town Center is the heart. When there is sense of community the residents will be more willing to be involved in the management and care of the town. Should we think about maybe making the Town Center more viable so that it is a place people are drawn to?
- Telecommunications Ordinance. The Town of Mason should consider enacting zoning which will guide the siting of telecommunications towers or any future developments in communications or energy (such as windmills or solar farms). It is the consensus of both the Business and the Land Use Committees that the town should benefit from any revenues realized and should have in place guidelines that disallowed any such structures that will interfere with scenic views, historic buildings or districts or major view corridors.
- Establish esthetic guidelines for commercial growth, whether or not there is a change in the zoning areas of Mason. The Business Committee suggests specific guidelines be instituted in regards to the architectural design of any new or renovated building for business purposes and that

fencing, lighting, or signage associated with these buildings have specific criteria. This would include height restrictions, set backs, replacement of indigenous trees, etc, lighting design and hours of use, sign design, placement and lighting thereof, size, design and placement of parking lot, design, type and placement of dumpsters if required, hours of trash removal allowed and most importantly open natural space made available or kept available from their parcel so that there is a contiguous corridor for wildlife. All of these guidelines and any others the town deems appropriate should be considered and all should be in keeping with our rural community. Again see Hollis, Amherst Master Plans and Zoning Ordinances. Also see Technical Bulletin 16 from New Hampshire Office of State Planning concerning light pollution.

- Other Criteria for New Business Plans to be submitted by Business seeking permits:
  - ◆ Environmental impact: water, traffic, noise, wildlife, trees, other types of pollution.
  - ◆ Ongoing beautification plan: seasonal plantings?
  - ◆ Potential growth and expansion plans: This mainly lets Mason determine two things, type of business (if small with not a large growth potential or if too large could outgrow space and would or could we accommodate it without having to expand our business of light industrial area?)
  - ◆ Potential hiring of local residents? Or training programs? Or certain jobs must be designated for locals?
  - ◆ Are they importing employees which may increase our residential building?
  - ◆ Road access to their business? Does it involved widening or straightening roads, adding an access ramp? Is this acceptable and in what circumstances.
  
- Come up with a listing of desirable business. Our committee has discussed the following as acceptable (meaning mininum impact on the town):
  - ◆ Cross country skiing course, academic summer camps, small coffee shop (no franchises) small bank branch, vet clinic, offices such as doctor, dentist, sawyer, computer software services, small appliance repair, crafts stores, bakery, florist, catering, small daycare. These are mainly business that support the local community, not general retail.
  
- To put in place a more easily accessible bulletin board of events, news and meetings concerning the Town of Mason. This can be either electronic (for example, a web site for Mason) or a once a month mailing containing news items and ongoing concerns/reports from the Selectman,



Police, Fire, Library, School and Town Hall. It has been said many times in our meetings that if you are a resident without children in the school system, you are limited in your contact with the local goings on. In an effort to engage residents in a positive manner, we think the aforementioned would be a step.

- A thorough review of the Board of Adjustments function and mission as charged in the Planning Ordinance (Zoning) reprinted in May 1997 is suggested. This should include the selection process of board members by the Board of Selectmen. Since the Board of Adjustments has the authority to "hear and decide a case" the criteria and experience of these members is crucial. Should minimum standards be set as to town government experience, business or educational background? We realize in a town this size that there may not be many volunteers to choose from however the Business Committee and Land Use Committee would like to see a list of criteria established. We also believe if there is no change in the Zoning Laws that the Board of Adjustment will become more important as the years pass in regards to granting "special exceptions" for maybe many undesirable businesses/or industry.

In closing, The Business Committee, found after a year of study that there are a few facts that are undeniable.

Fact 1: We, Mason, have for a variety of reasons, been left intact as an underdeveloped, almost pristine rural community and this condition is rare in 2002.

Fact 2: Given this blank page, we are fortunate that we do not have to repair or despair of many past mistakes and we can by proper planning maintain who we are if we realize as a community that change will come here whether we want it to or not.

Fact 3: Planned and regulated growth (residential and commercial) based on precise zoning regulations can and will maintain a rural character if written with that in mind.

The Business Committee would also like to volunteer its services for accomplishing any of the above.

Submitted  
October 2002

Martha L. Ward