

II. Chapter Summaries

1. Economic Development Chapter Summary

According to Massachusetts General Law, the Master Plan will include an “economic development element that identifies policies and strategies for the expansion or stabilization of the local economic base and the promotion of employment opportunities”.

Vision

Brookfield has a thriving local economy that provides employment and meets the needs of residents. The Village area is a model for mixed-use development that maintains the town’s historical character. Commercial buildings that were vacant in years past have been re-purposed into attractive residential and retail spaces. Tourism is a growing part of the local economy. Some visitors come to enjoy the network of hiking and biking trails; others are attracted by fishing and boating on the Quaboag River. Still other visitors come to explore the historic walking tours that are available at the town’s historical museum.

There is a wide variety commercial activity in town, including high-end “boutique” manufacturing, professional services and retail shops. There is a passenger rail stop at the location of the old train station on Rte 148. At the rail stop, there is a parking area as well as a small shopping complex with convenience and specialty stores. In addition, there is a bus stop which connects people to areas in town as well as to the extensive network of regional mass transit routes.

Brookfield has implemented a comprehensive “buy local” program that has fostered a local sustainable economy. The local school system purchases over 5% of its budget from local suppliers, much of that is locally grown food. The town’s agricultural sector has experienced a re-birth and is a significant part of the local economy for the first time in over 100 years.

The current reality

There are many small businesses in town but they do not provide a significant amount of employment. The entire commercial sector of the town is less than 5% of the total tax base. With just under 50 employees, Gavitt Wire & Cable is the town’s largest and most prominent employer, located in a large 100 year old building in the center of town. However, Gavitt is currently phasing out its Brookfield location, having acquired a 10 year old building in West Brookfield. The next largest employer is town government, primarily the elementary school. Otherwise, Brookfield has a commuter oriented work force. The average commute is over 30 minutes each way. The vast majority of workers have jobs in Worcester County although some commute to Boston, Springfield and elsewhere. There are a number of vacant commercial properties, giving the town somewhat of a “ghost-town” appearance.

Goals

The goal of Brookfield’s economic strategy is to encourage entrepreneurial activity that promotes a sustainable local economy. Major recommendations include:

(1) Establish a local Economic Development Committee to coordinate and market all the various elements of an economic development strategy for Brookfield. The committee would review such items as zoning, tax policies, permitting process and infrastructure plans as they relate to attracting new business. It would then work with the various municipal boards and departments to develop an economic development strategy for Brookfield.

(2) Have as a town policy to promote a sustainable local economy. All departments will be charged with finding ways to buy local and promote local businesses. The Selectmen will include in their charges to all future town committees this goal.

2. Housing Chapter Summary

According to Massachusetts General Law, the Master Plan will include a “Housing element which identifies and analyzes existing and forecasted housing needs and objectives including programs for the preservation, improvement and development of housing. This element shall identify policies and strategies to provide a balance of local housing opportunities for all citizens.”

Vision

There is housing for a diversity of income levels and ages, including an assisted living center for the elderly and housing options attractive for young families. The town has fulfilled the state mandated goal for low and moderate income households. There are strict Planning Board procedures for future residential developments so that the town can provide services without hardship and so that new housing developments do not change the town’s rural, small-town character. Houses in Brookfield, both new and old, are models of energy efficiency. Homeowners of older housing units have taken advantage of public and private grant programs for housing rehabilitation. The town has explored the feasibility of improving infrastructure (water, sewer, drainage, etc.) and is implementing a long-range plan which uses the latest green technology. The vibrant local economy has created a number of jobs for residents so that the percentage of the job force that works in the town is comparable to surrounding towns (around 25% as compared to 13% in the year 2000).

The current reality

Using data from the 2000 US Census, Brookfield has 62.3% single-unit homes, 20.9% mobile homes, and the balance in multi-unit housing. Almost half of Brookfield’s housing stock was built before 1960. While this makes for a quaint village atmosphere, it also signals that many homes will require significant rehabilitation.

Brookfield mirrors national trends in smaller household size (The average in 1970 was 3.47 people per household; in 2000 it was 2.53.), and increasing median age (26 in 1970 to 38.9 in 2000). Brookfield has seen a decrease in population in the 20-44 year-old range and in the number of children 5 and under. Meanwhile, those aged 45-64 years increased by 50%.

Brookfield’s per capita income in 2000 was \$20,144, 87% of the Worcester County average. Brookfield had the second highest median sales price of single family homes of surrounding town for the years 2007, 2008 and first quarter of 2009. The 2010 property tax figures (from www.mass.gov), indicate that the average Brookfield tax bill is slightly above the average when compared to like communities in the area.

According to town residents surveyed in 2008, one of the top 3 weaknesses in town is the high tax rate. Lack of a sewer system and limited availability to town water are other concerns that are consistently mentioned both in the survey and public forums. On the other hand, some people feel that the lack of a sewer system has helped the town avoid the uncontrolled growth that has afflicted other towns.

The town has limited availability for housing development due to constraints of the land available. In addition, a large percentage of the town has been permanently protected from development land owned by the state and nonprofits.

Goals

The Housing Chapter identified two goals: (1) Ensuring that the new residential development is created in a controlled, well-planned manner for a variety of income levels and ages; and (2) Assist homeowners of older housing units in utilizing various housing rehabilitation.

3. Land Use and Zoning Chapter Summary

According to Massachusetts General Law, the Master Plan will include a “Land use plan element which identifies present land use and designates the proposed distribution, location and inter-relationship of public and private land uses. This element shall relate the proposed standards of population density and building intensity to the capacity of land available or planned facilities and services. A land use plan map illustrating the land use policies of the municipality shall be included.”

Vision

Brookfield has a Town Center and Common preserved with historic integrity and character. The rural character found throughout Brookfield has been retained and preserved through low density residential development, agriculture, and other compatible uses. The town has placed a great priority on preserving its expansive open spaces.

Limited growth has been directed toward the Town Center and in areas rezoned for small-scale commercial activity including multi-use, office and professional services. A clear and up-to-date zoning by-law administered by professional planning board and zoning board of appeals directs the growth.

Brookfield has developed a Geographic Information System (GIS), providing officials with greater understanding of existing conditions and more information concerning future development options. This system empowers local citizens by providing them with a greater understanding of their community. The town has also developed an energy policy to help reduce consumption of non-renewable energy sources and promote a clean environment.

The Current Reality

Brookfield has established Zoning By-Laws; however, they are somewhat vague and at times contradict each other. The Zoning By-Laws do not encourage commercial or residential growth in the village district. There is no adequate zoning map available for use by various municipal board members and other related professionals.

Brookfield is divided into residential, town center and rural areas. Since the land use pattern has changed little in the past 50 years, in many respects, Brookfield has retained the character of an old New England village. Therefore, the predominant developed land use in Brookfield is residential.

The Town Center is very pedestrian friendly, as a result of multiple street network improvement projects. Brookfield Common is on the National Register of Historic Places. While placement on the Register affords distinction, it does little to protect the area from unwarranted changes.

As you move away from the Town Center, Brookfield’s rural aspect prevails with widespread forests and expansive open spaces. Brookfield attracts families seeking a rural lifestyle. Brookfield does not have a public sewer system, a characteristic lending to Brookfield remaining a predominantly rural town with the continuation of current land use patterns and limited development potential.

Brookfield does not currently have an energy policy to guide actions to reduce non-renewable resource consumption. Also, the Zoning By-law contains limited standards to regulate the appearance and impact of commercial and industrial development throughout the town.

Goals

The goal of Brookfield’s land use and zoning strategy is to preserve the rural quality of the town, retaining its small town character while maintaining open space. Major recommendations include:

(1) Create a local historic district surrounding the town common. This would prevent future development of the common district while preserving the historic and residential aspects of the neighborhood surrounding the town common.

(2) Consider re-zoning certain areas of the town to include additional property within the Business A District. This would allow a stronger concentration of businesses in the center of town and the ability of the town to have some control over the overall appearance of these businesses.

(3) Develop a GIS to include computerized mapping linked with assessors' data. This would bring the on-line database of the Brookfield property records available to all town boards and professionals and eliminate any discrepancies in zoning lines.

(4) Develop an amendment to Zoning By-Laws in order to reduce set back requirements in Village District. This will allow continuation of the current use in the Village District. Current restrictions require larger lot sizes and setback requirements and this should eliminate some of the special permit and variance applications.

(5) Develop standards to regulate the appearance and impact of commercial and industrial development. This will establish guidelines for future commercial and industrial development to improve its function and appearance so as to establish visually pleasant sites, locate parking at rear of commercial lots, limiting curb cuts, lighting requirements, provide pedestrian amenities and implementing a parking table.

4. Transportation Chapter Summary

According to Massachusetts General Law, the Master Plan will include a “Circulation element which provides an inventory of existing and proposed circulation and transportation systems.”

Vision

Travel by car is pleasant. Throughout the year the roads are all clear and well paved, the speed limits are respected, the road signs are clear, and the traffic is minimal. It's easy and pleasurable to walk and bicycle between all areas of town on the well-kept sidewalks and beautiful trails that connect Brookfield. All of the bridges are attractive and in excellent condition. The town works hand in hand with the state to continually maintain and upgrade the quality of the roads and walking/hiking/biking paths. By public transportation we are able to get from Brookfield to almost anywhere in the developed world. The service is friendly, affordable, clean, and on time. Citizen who are unable to drive have access to affordable, friendly, clean, and on time shuttles and small buses.

The current reality

The roads in Brookfield are well maintained by a well equipped and professional highway department. Efforts have been maintained to improve signage throughout the town and for the most part the road signs are clear, although there is some confusion about private roads. The traffic levels in Brookfield are all reasonable for the size of the existing roads.

Traveling by foot or bicycle, however, is a more dangerous proposition. Outside of the village area, especially over the causeway along route 148, there is almost no room for those who choose to walk or bicycle. Also, the hiking trails in town, while they do exist, are poorly marked, mostly unknown, and are poorly maintained.

The boat launch along 148 is in relatively poor condition as is the boat launch at South Pond. Upcoming projects in both areas may improve upon current conditions.

The Worcester Regional Transit Authority provides public Transportation by bus. There is train service from Worcester at Union Station and limited air travel from the Worcester Regional Airport.

Goals

1. Protect the rural and historic character of Brookfield streets.

2. Promote traffic calming and increased safety on neighborhood and residential streets.
3. Establish “Connectivity” for non-motorized streets users.
4. Improve opportunity for Mass Transit: regional and public transportation as well as other alternative means of transportation.
5. Implement strategies that limit negative vehicle and traffic impacts from new development.
6. Communication.
7. Clarify Private Roads.
8. Review and Update Gravel Removal Bylaws.
9. Utility Work Policy.

5. Open Space, Recreation, Natural and Cultural Resources

Chapter Summary

According to Massachusetts General Law, the Master Plan will include an “Open space and recreation element which provides an inventory of recreational and resources and open space areas of the municipality, and policies and strategies for the management and protection of such resources and areas”. In addition, the Master Plan will include a “Natural and cultural resources element which provides an inventory of the significant natural, cultural and historic resource areas of the municipality, and policies and strategies for the protection and management of such areas.”

Background

Brookfield’s first Open Space and Recreation Plan was approved in March 2010 by the Massachusetts Division of Conservation Services. The approval allows Brookfield to participate in DCS grant rounds through December 2016. The Plan has been incorporated into the Master Plan as part of this chapter.

In addition, in 2008, Brookfield was privileged to participate in a project sponsored by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). This project, the Brookfield Heritage Landscape Program, inventoried significant natural and cultural resources in the Town. The report that resulted is also incorporated into the Master Plan in its entirety.

Vision

Brookfield has a number of large parcels of permanently protected open space that contribute to its character, provide active and passive recreation and are habitat for a number of wildlife species. Agriculture has experienced a re-birth and is an integral part of the sustainable local economy while also contributing to the traditional rural New England character of the town. Residents and visitors have easy access to canoeing, kayaking, fishing, hunting, hiking, biking, swimming, and playing basketball, soccer, baseball, and any other sport they wish to pursue. Hiking and Mountain Biking trails that explore the town’s impressive open spaces are well maintained, well marked, and safe. There are trails to destinations of historical significance and natural beauty. Ecotourism and Heritage Tourism are thriving in Brookfield, and an important part of a prosperous local economy. There is community support for the preservation, upkeep, and access to natural and historical resources. The local swimming area at South Pond is beautiful, clean, and well loved by the people of Brookfield and the surrounding towns. Boat access to both North and South Pond is well maintained and safe. Lewis Field and the Brookfield Elementary School provide a wide variety of recreational activity for children of all ages, including several ball fields, tennis and basketball courts, and playground equipment. Both recreational areas are safe, easily accessible, well used, and beautifully maintained.

The current reality

Brookfield is fortunate that it already does have large parcels of permanently protected open space. From the results to the town wide survey and public forums, residents value our rural character and place a premium on preservation of open space. Agriculture is just beginning to show signs of recovery, with grass-fed beef and locally grown products being much sought after by consumers. There is access to many outdoor recreational activities. The volunteers recently donated a state-of-the-art playground for the elementary school. Although there are a number of hiking and biking trails, they are not well marked. A pathway from the center of town to Tantasqua is a very popular idea but to date no progress has been made on accomplishing it. Ecotourism and Heritage Tourism are happening on an individual basis. At present the town does not provide any support for these activities.

Goals

There are a large number of goals and objectives for the OSRP, including:

- 1) Maintain Brookfield's Rural, Agricultural, And Historic Character.
- 2) Preserve And Enhance Brookfield's Water Quality And Unique Habitats.
- 3) Work Toward Self Sufficiency And Sustainability.
- 4) Provide Brookfield With Diverse And Well Maintained Open Space as well as Recreational Opportunities And Facilities.
- 5) Educate And Build Awareness About The Treasures That Lie Within Brookfield's Borders.

There is a five-year action plan with detailed action steps, time frames, and responsible parties so Brookfield can move toward its goals. The OSRP draws heavily on the Heritage Landscape Inventory Report that was produced in Spring, 2008 and appears in the OSRP as an appendix. In addition, the Master Plan includes goals taken directly from the Heritage Landscape Inventory Report.

6. Government Services and Facilities Chapter Summary

According to Massachusetts General Law, the Master Plan will include a "Services and facilities element which identifies and analyzes existing and forecasted needs for facilities and services used by the public."

Vision

Note: An extended version of the vision statement is available in the chapter.

Brookfield's government is housed in beautiful and exceptionally functional town buildings that are excellently maintained, accessible, and use minimal energy. Within the walls of these buildings one will find courteous and efficient town employees who can clearly guide a local citizen, business owner, or visitor through any task they need accomplished. The education of the students of all ages in town is second to none, and the recreation opportunities reflect the tremendous natural and developed resources in the town. Roads are well maintained and safely navigated, and the water infrastructure is in top condition. The public well protected and served by a professional police, fire and emergency staff. The burden on the taxpayers is reasonable, and the money is wisely allocated for the best present and future use. All of these aspects of the town government are accessible and linked through the very functional and easily found and searched website, which holds and shares critical resources for all members of the community.

The Current Reality

Brookfield's town hall is in poor condition, the town is renting a residential building for use as a police station, the permitting procedures within the town are often confusing and poorly explained, and the website and computer network for the town are out of date. The library and the fire department facilities are in need of maintenance and upgrades. Many of the volunteers and employees feel overcommitted.

Costs associated with solid waste removal, energy, health care/insurance, and litigation are increasing and property values and state aid are decreasing.

On the brighter side, the fire department and emergency services are well staffed and professionally run. They are appreciated by the community for the work they do. The schools are in good condition and attract students from other towns for school choice. The roads are well maintained and quickly cleared in emergencies. The town operates close to its budget, and the employees and many volunteers are dedicated and hard working.

Goals

1. Upgrade website and integrate into Town Hall processes.
2. Create a regulations manual for obtaining permits.
3. Consider regionalization opportunities.
4. Review by-laws for consistency, overlapping duties and currentness.
5. Consider the possibility of hiring a town manager.
6. Improve the condition of municipal buildings.
7. Develop a volunteer training and support program.

7. Implementation Chapter Summary

According to Massachusetts General Law, the Master Plan will include an “Implementation program element which defines and schedules the specific municipal actions necessary to achieve the objectives of each element of the master or study plan. Scheduled expansion or replacement of public facilities or circulation system components and the anticipated costs and revenues associated with accomplishment of such activities shall be detailed in this element. This element shall specify the process by which the municipality’s regulatory structures shall be amended so as to be consistent with the master plan.”

The Master Plan Committee recommends that the Planning Board, together with the Select Board, establish an Implementation Committee that will follow up on the goals, objectives and action items detailed in this Master Plan. The Implementation Chapter provides an Implementation Matrix that identifies the action items.