

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## INTRODUCTION

After more than a year, the Master Plan Steering Committee and the ten subcommittees that have been actively working on this Master Plan Update have gathered an enormous amount of data and investigated and discussed seemingly endless details and implications. During the work on the Master Plan, we have found that the community's sense of itself has been consistent throughout past planning efforts and the core beliefs remain the same.

We are a "University town" with all that implies- both good and bad. While there is a significant component of the Town that has no formal relationship with the University, we all benefit from a healthy and successful university and should support its needs at the state level.

We are a community deeply committed to the quality of life of our citizens. We do not have to create jobs or deal with significant poverty, which plagues many other towns. We want to preserve the small-town atmosphere and rural landscapes that make our Town distinctive. We are intensely proud of our abundant natural resources and cultural heritage as well as our shoreline, farmland, and waterways.

The entire Master Plan is a condensation of all the work done over the past year. To condense the work even further is perhaps folly, but it has been done for the following four reasons:

- To ensure that even the most time constrained individual can participate in the process,

- To ensure the most important recommendations are not lost within the mass of the Plan,
- To consolidate and focus issues that might be treated in several subcommittee reports and ensure their importance is recognized, and
- To highlight controversial issues and insure a public airing.

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## **PLANNING CONTEXT**

The context for the planning process is discussed in the Preface, but is important enough to reiterate here. As this Master Plan was being prepared, the Town was just beginning to enjoy the fruits of the improvements to Main Street in the downtown. In addition, the State DOT project that will widen and install traffic controls in the "Gasoline Alley" section of Route 108 will have considerable impact on the Town. However, the State's disarray on taxes is the greatest unknown in this process, and it impacts the very fabric of our fiscal planning.

But, even without the State's failures, we are in a cycle of increasing taxes that may make it impossible to implement many of the most important recommendations included in this Plan. To remain fiscally healthy and become the town we want to be, we must stabilize the tax base through a combination of managing the addition of single-family homes, attracting acceptable commercial growth, and protecting land through conservation.

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## **PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The scope of this Master Plan is so expansive that there is the danger it will simply overwhelm the reader. Even the Executive Summary of Recommendations covers nearly forty recommendations.

This concern has led the Steering Committee to bring forth a short list of ten projects for primary focus. We chose these ten on the basis of their immediacy, their impact, and/or their ability to respond to demonstrated public interest. Interestingly, they are almost equally divided among large structural or physical changes that can be costly, and affordable programs, some of which are already underway.

There are several projects that could have been included in these primary recommendations, but were not because it is our belief that they will be

accomplished without the need for the focus this list provides. Examples include the safety complex, the swimming pool, and additional ball fields.

With the exception of our first recommendation (Route 108 Sunoco), the following recommendations are not presented in any order of priority. The hope is that all ten will be given serious and immediate attention.

- Redevelopment of the Route 108 Sunoco Property
- Implementation of Zoning Changes and the Conservation Development Process
- Review the School District Funding Formula
- Support of Conservation Easements
- Programs to Improve Town and Citizen Communication
- Continued support of the Main Street Program and similar programs
- Development of a Joint Town/UNH Office Park
- Implement a Northwest/Southeast Transportation Linkage Study
- Complete the Main Street and Downtown Streetscape Improvement Project
- Examine Consolidation of Water and Sewer Utilities

Discussion of the primary recommendations follows the Executive Summary.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

The previous section listed the "top ten" recommendations that should be implemented as part of this Master Plan. The following section is an executive summary of the Plan's recommendations and is intended to give the reader a general picture of the content and recommendations contained within the Plan. It in no way encompasses all of the recommendations from the Plan. For more detailed information, see the chapters of the Master Plan.

### **QUALITY OF LIFE**

#### *Town Center*

The need for a Town center to improve our sense of community has been discussed and recommended in the 1989 Master Plan and the 1995

Community Development Plan. It was again supported in our survey, workshops and public comments. As envisioned, the Town center will provide a visual focus for the Town, apart from the University, and it will provide a place for social as well as civic interaction. Components could include the following:

- Town offices,
- Town library,
- Meeting rooms, and
- Community offices

There is a sense of urgency to selecting a site since two likely sites are currently available. Failure to act will almost certainly result in these sites being developed for other, perhaps less desirable, purposes. The options for sites with proper attributes and good location are extremely limited.

The Steering Committee recommends the formation of a task force to more accurately define the elements of the Town center, evaluate the locations, ensure community support, determine the amount and form of funding, and option the properties as appropriate.

Durham needs to enhance communications with its citizens by continuing to update and expand the Town's web site, and by re-establishing a newsletter/newspaper. This would provide a forum for discussion of local issues and a place for announcements by all kinds of organizations. The Town should investigate a partnership with businesses and the University to fund and manage an enhanced communication program.

### ***Recreational Needs***

Durham is heavily dependent on the Oyster River Youth Association (ORYA) to provide a recreation program for our youth. The ORYA has done an outstanding job and is expected to continue, but community recreational needs are growing faster than the ORYA's ability to respond. In addition, no programs exist for preschoolers, teens, adults, and seniors. It is recommended that a recreation director be hired to coordinate with the ORYA, to provide recreational opportunities to age groups that ORYA does not address, to manage the planning and operations of Wagon Hill Farm, to work with the University and other organizations or commercial operations, and to coordinate communications.

The facilities available in Durham, Lee, and Madbury are currently strained to the point that desirable programs are not offered because of a shortage of fields. In addition, the existing fields suffer from overuse and a

lack of proper oversight. It is recommended that two baseball and two soccer fields be constructed. This Master Plan includes potential sites for consideration.

The UNH outdoor pool must be closed after the Summer 2001 season, due to requirements of the Department of Environmental Services. A Town/UNH committee is currently studying the options for a new joint facility. In the event agreement cannot be reached with UNH, it is recommended that the community pursue a Town-owned or private facility.

The Town acquired Wagon Hill Farm in 1989. It has been underutilized to date and there is little agreement on how it should be developed. The first step recommended is for the Town to actively pursue and determine, once and for all, whether the north 40 acres is marketable. If possible, the Town should sell the north 40 acres with conservation easements as a buffer along the Route 4 frontage. All proceeds of the sale would be placed in a fund solely for Wagon Hill Farm improvements. Other recommendations for Wagon Hill include implementing a user fee for non-Durham residents, completing repairs to the trail system, and adding a parking area.

### ***Conservation***

Durham has traditionally supported efforts to protect its rich array of natural and cultural resources. Our aquifer is surprisingly fragile and deserves special attention to ensure pure drinking water. The maintenance of the aquifer in turn impacts farmlands, the flora and fauna, and our greenway and scenic vistas.

It is recommended that the Town pursue, or help individual landowners pursue, grants and easements to protect scenic and endangered areas. Mill Pond and Beards Creek have been identified as two resources in need of active management. Additionally, the Town should work to make GIS mapping available for the use of Town committees and boards as well as for the general public.

## **DOWNTOWN/COMMERCIAL CORE**

The Town and the University abut most dramatically in our downtown. A vibrant, viable, and attractive downtown is important to attract students for the University and to provide all residents a source of convenient, quality retail options and services. The downtown enhancement project is an example of the merchants and the Town working together to revitalize the

physical appearance and efficiency of downtown. The Plan recommends that the enhancement project be completed through successive phases.

Both the Town and the University envision a “walking core” which emphasizes a pedestrian rather than an automobile-oriented experience.

### ***New District Division***

The report has been configured with the commercial core broken into six districts, a change from the previous single district established for the downtown. A new Professional Office and Multi-Unit Residential District is proposed along Madbury Road from Main Street to Dennison Road to Bagdad Road to Strafford Avenue.

### ***Traffic***

It is recommended that traffic calming and alternate route signage be used as a means to make downtown safe and to encourage pedestrians, bicycles, and other alternative forms of transportation.

### ***Parking***

The perceived need for parking is never ending. It is recommended that the Town work cooperatively with UNH to inventory parking and to develop a plan that controls the need for increased student and faculty/staff parking. Parking is also discussed under “Infrastructure” in the Executive Summary.

### ***Central Business District***

To encourage commercial viability, increased retail activity, and merchant success, the following recommendations have been made.

- Encourage increased building density by modifying zoning regulations to require two stories, by permitting increased building height for buildings with office/retail uses on the second floor, and by eliminating restrictive parking requirements.
- Improve appearance through clarified signage and business-friendly architecture codes.
- Study the necessity and feasibility of additional automobile access to the Mill Plaza.

### ***Gasoline Alley***

The improvements by the State to Route 108 will change many of the businesses in Gasoline Alley, thus creating an opportunity to redevelop

this important commercial area. Recommendations include some zoning changes to encourage commercial development and discourage additional residences. The inclusion of drive-through restaurants and carry-out restaurants in this area was rejected after public discussions on those items.

***Coe's Corner***

This Plan recommends that complimentary commercial use be added with size, setback, and architectural standards to encourage the conversion of rental housing to professional offices.

***Route 108/Route 4 to Madbury Line***

This area has always had an open rural quality that should be preserved, yet it is also appropriate for properly scaled, architecturally sensitive development. It is recommended that zoning be changed to allow less intrusive office and agricultural development, but disallow intensive residential or retail development.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT**

While there is no immediate crisis in the development and maintenance of the Town's infrastructure, there are major projects that have been recommended in previous Master Plans that remain unresolved in addition to several new recommendations.

***Northeastern Transportation Linkages and the Northern Connector***

The idea of a connection to the UNH campus from the Route 4 bypass has been discussed in the 1969, 1980, and 1989 Master Plans. The construction of the Whittemore Center, and the resulting parking problems and traffic jams have all impaired access from the north and east, making this issue more important than ever. The planned addition of a center for performing arts and an intermodal transportation center add to the need for the linkages and the connector. A definitive study for the needs and alternatives for transportation from the north and east should be conducted immediately.

***Intermodal Transportation Center***

While the automobile is likely to remain the primary mode of transportation, there is an increasing need to lessen our dependence on the auto and provide for rail and bus transportation, along with expanded parking. It is recommended that a study be conducted to consider the construction of such an intermodal center between the Whittemore Center and railroad tracks on the Craig Supply property.

***Transportation Education***

The use of alternate traffic routes already available could help relieve some of the congestion and delay on the Town's most heavily used roads. It is recommended that a program of education and signage direct drivers to less congested and equally effective alternative routes.

***Safety Complex***

The lease for the UNH/Durham Fire Station and Durham Ambulance Corps locations will expire in the year 2009. The University intends to put the space to other use. The UNH Communication Center is in need of expansion and modernization and will also likely lose its space. Strong consideration should be given to combining all three organizations in a new safety center. Several locations for the safety complex have been evaluated. The Town and University should jointly evaluate the locations and begin the process of land acquisition, design, and construction. The Durham police facility on Route 108 is adequate for the Town's police use for the foreseeable future.

***Water Supply/Treatment, Wastewater Treatment and Solid Waste***

The Town and University must keep up with the demand for drinking water while safely disposing of wastewater. This is currently well managed, but growth and changing standards will likely put strains on the system in the future. The water treatment facility will need to be upgraded by the year 2003, based on current projections. In anticipation of the renewal of the wastewater treatment discharge permit, the Town needs to maintain a proactive stance in providing site-specific data to mitigate the imposition of excessively stringent standards that would significantly reduce the capacity of the wastewater plant. Additionally, the Town and University should plan for and develop a joint recycling center to replace the facilities going off-line. In the capping plan for the landfill, the Town should plan for alternative uses on the cap such as recreation, or the recycling transfer station.

***Water/Sewer Authority***

The current joint program for water and wastewater treatment has worked well. However, it may be advantageous to consider participation in regional commercial ventures or the creation of an independent water/sewer authority to reduce costs and capital commitments.



***New School Site***

Enrollment projections call for a new elementary school in the year 2004 to relieve crowding at the elementary level and to allow fifth graders to return to the elementary school, which in turn will lessen crowding at the middle school. Since Lee and Madbury already have elementary schools, Durham is the likely location for a new school. The Foss Farm site on Orchard Drive is already owned by the school district. Changes in septic technology and potential access from Route 108 make this site worth investigating via a feasibility study. UNH, as abutter, may be interested in sharing access expenses.

**LAND DEVELOPMENT**

***Growth***

Growth is a reality that must be accepted. Durham is predicted to grow at a rate of 1.2%, which is comparable to the rest of the region. Because of the nature of our Town and quality of our schools, Durham has become a magnet for single-family homes, and the Town has not encouraged commercial development. The resulting cycle of tax increases has strained our community resources and population diversity. A better balance between residential and commercial development can have the dual advantage of tax stabilization and preservation of our environment.

***Resident Education on Relationship between Development and Taxes***

The majority of residents surveyed believe the addition of single-family homes is beneficial to the tax base. The opposite is true. The average new home in Durham is valued at \$250,000 (equalized), houses 0.73 school-age children, and generates vehicle and property tax revenues of \$8,452, but costs the Town \$10,490 for school, municipal, and county services. In effect, the addition of an average new single-family home with an average number of children in public school costs the Town \$2,000. The costs for schools and other Town services for a household with 0.73 school-age children requires a property tax value of \$465,000 in order for the taxes paid to balance with the costs for services incurred.

Residents need to be more informed about which development is fiscally beneficial and which is fiscally disadvantageous in order to make informed decisions about Durham's future.

***Enact New "Conservation Development" Subdivision Regulations and Zoning Ordinance***

The Steering Committee believes this is simply a better way to handle subdivision development. The core premise is that all development starts

with soils-based density standards, then follows the contours, site lines, and natural and manmade features of the land rather than a rigid set of frontage and lot size requirements. This would replace “cookie cutter” and frontage-based subdivisions along existing roads and provide for better utilization of the land in general. Unlike many cluster developments, unusable land is not the sole open land. Instead, the open land would be areas that protect special natural and human-made features of the site (e.g., wildflower meadows, stone walls, scenic views, wetlands, etc.). In addition, the density would not exceed the number permitted under conventional “cookie cutter” plans. Conservation development would be the required method.

## **TAX STABILIZATION**

Taxes can be stabilized through reduced spending or through added revenue. The following recommendations will have a positive impact on the Town’s bottom line and help stabilize tax increases.

### ***Commercial Development***

Currently Durham is perceived by many as “anti-business”. Fiscally advantageous and community acceptable development should be encouraged by active support provided by the Town. Recommendations include the following:

- Hire an economic development director to assist those interested in locating acceptable business in Durham, or create an economic development authority to do this.
- Encourage appropriate, economically viable development by assembling parcels, negotiating sewer and water extensions, and promoting Durham.
- Selectively re-zone to stimulate business development.
- Creating development standards for items such as architecture and landscaping.

### ***Impact Fees***

Impact fees have been recommended in past Master Plans. This is an opportunity to ensure that the Town is reimbursed for capital expenses by their development.

### ***Consolidated Police Force***

The presence of the University creates unique law enforcement needs. To date these needs have been addressed through two complete forces, one

serving the Town and the other serving the University. This creates jurisdictional issues as well as inefficient utilization of resources. It is recommended that the Town and the University commission an independent study to isolate operational and jurisdictional issues, as well as potential savings, and make recommendations for reorganization of the police departments.

***Oyster River School Funding Formula Review***

The current formula governing the share of costs attributed to each of the three towns within the school district is based on a combination of assessed value and per-pupil head counts. This serves as a disincentive to increase commercial development (or any increase in the tax base) as any increase in assessed value increases the Town's share of school costs. We should investigate the fairness and financial implications of a funding formula based solely on a per pupil assessment.

***UNH/Durham Office Park***

There is a demand for additional office space in Durham. The University has expressed interest in a jointly developed office/research park on University land that would be taxable. This could create a revenue stream for both entities as well as adding to the tax base.

***Revenue from Commercial Enterprises at UNH***

University facilities are exempt from property tax; however, some University facilities include commercial activities. The Town should work with the University to develop a process whereby the Town could realize revenue from for-profit commercial enterprises occupying UNH property.

***Senior Housing***

Because of our abundance of natural resources, a tranquil atmosphere, and the educational and cultural opportunities in our community, Durham is a very attractive location for seniors. Seniors are also very attractive as potential residents of Durham. They add to the diversity of the Town, contribute through volunteerism, and because they have no school age children they have a positive impact on the tax base. Durham should work to attract seniors and ensure that housing designated for seniors stays that way.

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## **CONCLUSION**

In closing, there are many, many, more recommendations found in the complete Master Plan. However, the above recommendations are those that best represent the overall tenor of the Master Plan and are also those that the Town should first undertake when implementing the Master Plan.