
“How do we do more with what we have as a city?”

Much has been written about *genius loci* – the spirit of place – in recent years. This is what distinguishes one community from another, one neighborhood from another. It is shaped as much by the cultural landscape as the physical, it incorporates the built as well as the natural. For a town or small city, contributing factors may be their location adjacent to a significant landform or body of water, or the casual gathering places where people pick up a newspaper or share a cup of coffee. Identifying the key characteristics that contribute to a community’s unique identity is essential so that, in planning for the future, those elements are not lost or degraded.

Easthampton has been shaped both by its **physical location** and its **pattern of development**. Mount Tom’s profile dominates the eastern boundary, from which residents have a unique view of their community. The fertile agricultural fields below have a long productive history. The Manhan River and associated ponds have been a recreational resource, a rich ecological system and a source of power for the mills that were built along them. Neighborhoods, clustered around local schools and religious institutions near the center of town, are spreading out to the peripheral lands more recently. But from Mount Tom, it is the massive scale of the old mill buildings and their central location within the city that is a prominent and identifying characteristic.

The mills represent another component of Easthampton’s unique character: the strong **entrepreneurial spirit** that not only built the industries within the original mills, but that has reclaimed and reused those mills in innovative and community-enhancing ways. Not simply icons to a dying economic model, the mills embody what has become the signature feature of Easthampton’s new growth – small businesses, artisan studios and galleries, residences, social service agencies – a rich mix of uses that has revitalized and energized Easthampton and made it a model of the new economy. And that revitalization has resulted from the initiative and collaboration and industry of its citizenry.

When the Economic Development Committee summarized its discussion from the Community Planning Days, they ended with this underlying question: “How do we do more with what we have as a city?” That critical question depends first upon identifying what it is the city has – its identity and heritage and landscape and citizenry and skill base and ingenuity – upon which the future will grow.

Guiding principles

At the beginning of the Community Planning Days forum, we summarized three principles that may help shape the master plan for Easthampton. These principles – **accessibility**, **diversity** and **sustainability** – have multiple connotations and can be applied across the various topics which the master plan addresses.

Accessibility:

Most often understood in a physical context such as making public buildings and sidewalks barrier free for universal access, this principle relates as well to many aspects of the community. Easthampton must assure its residents that they have equal access to housing, to jobs, to quality of life. The strong concern for providing affordable housing means that everyone who lives in Easthampton, regardless of income level, has access to housing suitable to their needs. There is also physical access to open space and recreational lands – through trails, bikeways and well-linked greenways. Public transportation is another mode of access, one that needs improvement particularly if we are to rely less on cars and fossil fuel.

A more conceptual interpretation of access has to do with being an approachable community: How do people find out about events in town? How do they participate in decision-making? How can they form partnerships, generate funding, and initiate new ventures in town? So access is as much about communication as it is about physical linkages. An accessible community is an interactive one.

Diversity:

In ecological terms, the greater the diversity, the healthier the environment. Monocultures are vulnerable to rapid decline should they be infected by disease or pest. We are still learning about the interrelationship of species upon which our ecosystems depend. The same can be said about cultural and economic diversity. Easthampton's vibrancy is largely a result of varied demographics – family make-up, economic class, age, length of residency, ethnicity. And economic diversity has in large part helped Easthampton recover from the collapse of a mill monoculture, where small and micro-businesses now comprise an ever growing economic base.

It is essential to protect diversity in land use as well – from the mix of commercial and residential in the city center, to the balance of industrial and agricultural outlying lands. As said earlier, housing stock needs to be diverse to maintain a diverse residential base. As with fragile ecosystems, it is often the smallest members that may have the most critical role in sustaining the health of the whole, so Easthampton must support those smallest businesses and minority residents with the same attention it gives to larger enterprises and majority populations.

Sustainability:

This is a term more easily used than defined. Again, it has multiple applications. In terms of energy, attention is placed as much on conservation and reducing energy consumption as it is on generating power with renewable resources. Waste is simply a resource whose use has not yet been discovered or embraced. Economically, a well-conceived and sustainable system can ride out both boom and bust years. A sustainable society supports its elders even as it finds ways to encourage youth to remain and rebuild the community. It invests in its educational system so that its youth has the tools to contribute in meaningful ways as they become the next generation's leaders.

For Easthampton, finding ways to retrofit, rehabilitate and reuse its old mills – and its old schools – for community-building ventures is a key component of a sustainable future. Sustainable systems look for ways to be self-sufficient, which would include growing more food locally, generating energy locally, creating more local jobs, keeping local businesses alive by purchasing locally made (or grown) items. And sustainability is about balance – building what needs to be built, while saving what must be saved. So, for example, identifying and protecting those irreplaceable agricultural lands and concentrating development where the infrastructure exists to support it – which also means a more walkable urban core – will lead to a more sustainable future.

Themes from the Community Planning Days

These principles are reflected in the ideas, actions and comments put forward by the participants in the Community Planning Days (and whose comments are transcribed from the newsprint in a separate document).

People spoke at length about **LINKAGES**:

- Bus and rail connections with Holyoke, Springfield, Hartford, NYC
- Physical links between protected open spaces – filling the gaps between Mount Tom and the oxbow
- Trails and greenway corridors for walking, biking, birding, etc.
- Walkable and bikeable downtown – improved sidewalks and destinations
- Economic links with abutting towns
- Intergenerational links – connecting youth and seniors, a cradle-to-grave educational concept where each generation educates the others
- Communication links – fiber optics, wireless domains, city web site – ways for the community to be in touch with what is going on
- Ways to bring the community together – sponsor events, media centers, “tell the story” of Easthampton through an annual play – an interactive community

In addition, there was a good deal of focus on **LOCAL RESOURCES**:

- Support local businesses, jobs, ventures
- Retain local, neighborhood schools; protect neighborhood identity
- Inventory local skills – again, understand who the resources are within the city
- Grow more food locally, support local farms, create community gardens, build “value added” opportunities into the agricultural economy
- Use local materials when building, manufacturing, planting, etc.
- Support artisans as Easthampton’s new “light manufacturing” economy
- Buy locally made goods even if they are more expensive
- Control a local municipal utility

Nearly every discussion group recommended **PRIORITY INVESTMENTS** which would help Easthampton move forward in critical ways:

- Provide incentives and technical support for micro-businesses
- Improve older buildings; conduct energy audits, make them more efficient, create “green” building codes
- Bring in fiber optics, wireless, up-to-date technology for new businesses
- Purchase land specifically dedicated to affordable housing (with CPA funds)
- Invest in the schools, specifically with technical, science and auditorium spaces
- See the schools as community centers, expand their hours to address the 16-hour day
- Establish a recycling center – community swap, transfer station
- Create a downtown trolley to reduce traffic in the center of town
- Plant trees – sequester carbon, fight global warming
- Establish mixed-use (residential/commercial) gateways to the community that provide a better “read” of what Easthampton is
- Prioritize open space acquisitions

And there were suggestions to establish new **CITY COMMITTEES** and/or **STAFF** to provide focus, momentum, regulatory guidance or otherwise implement the priority actions, such as:

- Community Transportation Committee
- Municipal Utility Company
- Committee to review City regulations to reduce impact on open space
- Part-time conservation agent to expand protection of wetlands
- PR coordinator for the schools
- Affordable housing advocate/coordinator/implementer
- Regulations to encourage environmental protection, green building
- Review (ease?) permitting for new businesses and industrial space

Clearly this is a big agenda. It is also an exciting one. A critical task for Easthampton will be finding the right **balance** between wise investments in its future and maintaining an affordable present. In the past, Easthampton has managed this through the dedication and commitment of citizen volunteers. Most of the successes have resulted from the creative partnership of motivated individuals, supported by a flexible and responsive City Hall and funded in part by local businesses. This public-private collaboration is the hallmark of Easthampton, and must be encouraged.

It also should be noted how investment in one arena supports the goals in the others. A strong economy enables greater investment in the schools; better schools enhances property values and draws people to town; dense and walkable neighborhoods, and homes on a reduced footprint, reduces energy consumption and protects greater expanses of open space; a lively mix of residential and commercial uses draws consumers to local businesses; the list goes on.

Review of 1998 and 2003 Visions

In 1998 and again in 2003, WCA had the pleasure of leading several Visioning sessions for Easthampton. It seems useful to start with those goals as a basis for and bridge to the current master planning work.

In 2003, ample progress was noted in protecting open space, reorganizing governance, improving the physical streetscape and town center, increased community services, and a good measure of positive press for the City. All of this led to an increased pride in Easthampton.

The community priorities included

- investing in youth and in their educational curriculum and facilities
- continued education about, protection of, and access to natural resources and recreational opportunities, identifying priority parcels, needed improvements, and leveraged funding opportunities
- a more fully coordinated delivery of human services, with a particular focus on services to youth
- a broad range of affordable housing types to meet the needs of diverse residents
- continued focus on a pedestrian-friendly downtown, promoting existing businesses and attracting new ones, while slowing gentrification
- embracing and supporting the energy and economy nurtured through the arts.

The effort also noted the need for coordinated communication of information and ideas, for broader citizen and constituent representation in planning and decision making (including Easthampton's youth), and for the non-apologetic marketing of Easthampton. These themes included celebrating neighborhood differences, affirming diversity as the life blood of Easthampton, and the need to continue to build genuine community.

Not surprisingly, these goals were repeated and expanded upon in the recent Community Planning Days.

Consultant Comments

Investing in Easthampton

As we review the recorded comments from the Community Planning Days, we note those concerns and potential conflicts addressed by the participants. People were concerned whether the people of Easthampton are willing to make the commitment to the recommended goals. Are these goals feasible? How do we deal with issues beyond our control? What administrative capacities are necessary to undertake these ambitious strategies? How do we establish priorities among conflicting goals? And ultimately, how can Easthampton afford to implement these strategies while remaining an affordable community?

In our opinion, it is more useful to think of these challenges as opportunities rather than sacrifices. Even though a post-oil economy is likely to make demands on our lifestyles, there is no reason to think we need to sacrifice human comfort and safety. So the challenge is really to generate the excitement and commitment to making some changes that will be strong investments in Easthampton's future. As John Mullin reminded us at the community supper, investing in excellent schools is not optional; it is mandatory for a healthy community. Similarly, being prepared for new businesses by providing up-to-date and full communications capability is essential. Finding ways to extend the business day to a full 16 hours will enliven and reenergize the downtown.

Conflicts and concerns

Although occasionally mentioned, we do not consider saving open space and providing affordable housing to be in conflict; there are many opportunities to do both simultaneously. However, reading between the lines, we find subtle and implied issues that need to be addressed. These possible conflicts or dilemmas need further discussion:

- A. the potential gentrification of Easthampton due to its recent renaissance and the "Northampton sunami;"
- B. public aversion to forms of concentrated density as the necessary antidote to development sprawl;
- C. the disparity between the investment in retrofitting existing mills and other available buildings with high-tech, energy efficient services, and their use by low income artisans and incubator businesses;
- D. the desire to encourage a growing economy while still needing a good clearing house of organized economic information portfolios.

A. Easthampton has historically been characterized by providing the region with a more affordable housing and commercial market. This critical quality must be maintained, even as property values are rising. The tendency for all cities to become **gentrified** displaces essential businesses that cannot afford increased costs and drives out families who can no longer afford to live here.

B. People need to understand that conventional (residential) development patterns lead to a predictable sprawl already visible in Easthampton. Citizens need to actively consider and **embrace density**, infill, clustering, as a vital counter force to the more traditional low density residential and land-consuming frontage development. Similarly, concentrated pockets of mixed use and commercial development are preferable to strip development along arterial routes. The concept of neighborhood is a critical component of Easthampton's future vision.

C. At the same time that Easthampton treasures its mill history and identity, and embraces their reuse for studios, small businesses, residences and community gathering

places, an equal priority is to make these drafty, inefficient and aging structures energy tight and technologically wired. The considerable initial costs of “green conversion” doesn’t match the economics of the entry level businesses and artisans who most need this type of space.

D. Economic investment depends on accessible information, with a strong central economic organization that can identify opportunities, needs, available space, and funding. In this way, Easthampton can shape, direct and attract the desired economic investment. This is the informational counterpart to providing a “turn-key” site, providing potential investors and businesses with one-stop shopping.

In conclusion

Easthampton has an exemplary history of proactive efforts and partnerships, starting at the grass roots. This tradition will be essential to the next chapter of Easthampton’s rebirth. The many identified recent successes must kindle an even greater proactive role for priority projects. This will depend upon the willing commitment to and genuine love for the City, expressed by each citizen, business, organization and agency.

Easthampton must build on its inherited natural and cultural landscape, it must be dedicated and proactive, not see conflicts where they do not exist, see linkages and interrelated benefits among the various goals. The City must assess and articulate its character carefully to assure continued diversity, must embrace and plan green for a post-oil economy, and must continue to concentrate its efforts on a vibrant and interactive town center.

Moving toward a vision statement

Easthampton in 2027 ...

- **...is alive with interactive community spirit**
 - Informal gathering places, linked by pedestrian routes, encourage conversation, provide casual respite, invite visitors, provide destinations of choice
 - Diverse cultural and art events are a regular component of community life, bringing people together in multiple venues
 - The streetscape is infused with cultural and artistic influence, inviting visitors and residents to linger
 - The historic buildings that have established Easthampton's character are preserved and reused in creative and economical ways
 - Youth is celebrated and their energy embraced

- **...has invested in its schools and educational system as a foundation stone of community life**
 - Schools are community centers of life-long learning, with adult education, child care and elementary/secondary education interwoven throughout the 16-hour day
 - Intergenerational learning and teaching makes use of the broad range of skills and abilities of Easthampton's diverse residents
 - Older buildings find a new life as incubators, media centers, after school and continuing education centers, cooperative economic ventures

- **...reflects, supports and invests in its entrepreneurial spirit**
 - Small, diverse, locally owned businesses populate Union, Cottage, Main, Pleasant Streets
 - The City provides a range of economic incentives to encourage new businesses to locate in Easthampton
 - Public-private partnerships generate innovative ideas and funding for new ventures
 - The scale of new commercial development is limited to promote locally owned businesses
 - Mix of residential, commercial and entertainment uses downtown keeps the center lively 16 hours/day
 - Easthampton's iconic mills are vital components of the new economy – technologically up to date, energy efficient and green
 - Incubator and affordable rentals for fledgling businesses are available in central locations
 - New industrial space is accessible and compatible with its agricultural surroundings
 - The city maintains a current inventory of investment opportunities, resources, consultants and investors to facilitate efficient initiatives

- **...enjoys and protects the beauty and productivity of its agricultural lands and open spaces**
 - Locally grown food is featured in Easthampton's schools, restaurants and groceries
 - Community gardens feature the produce of Easthampton's culturally diverse community, and provide another means of community interaction

- Well-planned greenways link outlying areas into core of community, and feature/connect to Mount Tom
 - Community native tree planting takes place annually, as Easthampton continues to “green” itself
 - Recreational opportunities for all ages and abilities in neighborhood play areas as well as Nonotuck Park and Nashawannuck Pond
- **...has reduced the reliance on individual cars by providing multi-modal transportation alternatives**
 - Bikeways, trails and sidewalks bring people to the town center and encourage healthy activity
 - Bike and car share options reduce traffic throughout the community
 - Business-sponsored (electric?) trolley brings people downtown without their cars
 - Regional railways or hybrid buses link Easthampton to Holyoke and Northampton as well as Brattleboro, Hartford, Boston and New York
 - A reduction in automobile traffic makes the streets safer and contributes to a pedestrian- and bike-friendly town center
 - **...concentrates residential development in well-defined neighborhoods affordable to residents of all income levels**
 - New construction incorporates affordable as well as market rate homes thanks to a popularly endorsed inclusionary zoning regulation
 - New and rehabilitated housing is energy efficient, with incentives for owners to upgrade their homes
 - At least 10% of Easthampton’s homes are barrier-free or visitable
 - There is a range of ownership and rental options in all areas of town
 - Neighborhoods are diverse and walkable, and include some mixed use as well as green pockets
 - Easthampton provides incentives and regulatory guidance for green (LEED) construction practices
 - There is widespread support for denser development patterns around existing infrastructure as a way to protect outlying open space and create a more walkable community
 - **...has invested in an infrastructure that supports a sustainable community**
 - Up-to-date technology is efficient and accessible to businesses, schools, and homes
 - Wireless services are located in community gathering places
 - Alternative renewable energy sources – hydro, solar, methane – are locally owned and are replacing fossil fuels
 - The new transfer station offers municipal composting, a community swap center, and education about recycling; it is one of the places the community gathers

Four Priority Actions

At the end of the Community Planning Days, the participants were asked to identify priority components of Easthampton’s emerging master plan. Given only four votes, they had to limit what they could endorse. A clear priority emerged:

1. Identify key open space parcels to be protected and work with existing landowners now to find mutual solution for their protection in perpetuity.

2. Use all available tools to provide a diverse stock of affordable housing (inclusionary zoning, friendly 40B, conversion of existing stock, etc).
3. Be energy sustainable through a locally controlled, municipal power company, making use of a range of renewable sources.
4. Increase the emphasis on infrastructure and facilities improvement, going beyond the capital plan to incorporate green and cost-effective measures.

What is next?

We have yet to suggest an overriding vision statement for Easthampton's Comprehensive Master Plan. The elements are there in the goals and strategies within each component topic. As the various subcommittees continue to inventory, assess and document current conditions in Easthampton and map out strategies to guide growth and conservation in the future, keep in mind the overriding principles we've articulated:

- Will these actions improve **accessibility** in Easthampton?
- How do we best protect and embrace Easthampton's **diversity**?
- How do we ensure the community we envision is **sustainable**?

Continue to look for **linkages** – ways in which the community comes together, reinforces the individual actions, and finds mutually beneficial solutions. How can the efforts continue to support and encourage **local** ventures? What **investments** are critical to ensure the best future for Easthampton? And what can be done to generate the necessary **commitment** and entrepreneurial enthusiasm to engage public and private entities in realizing this future?

Addendum

Potential Conflicts/Concerns

Looking over the list of concerns articulated at the end of the Community Planning Days, we have grouped them according to questions of feasibility, community commitments and staffing, and cost. These concerns are typical planning considerations: Do we have the correct priorities? Are the strategies feasible? Can we afford it? What will it take to secure the commitment?

Feasibility

- What issues are beyond our control? E.g., the housing market
- Need to identify, make use of existing resources – and regulatory measures
There are economically feasible alternative energy options
- How do we measure the amount of open space protected or needed – per capita or overall acreage?
- Need for a thoughtful planning review of these ideas; we want the master plan to be taken seriously

Staffing and commitment

- Commitment – what is Easthampton prepared to commit itself to?
- What administrative capabilities are needed to deal with the bureaucracies required to implement some of these strategies?

Investment cost

- Limited city funding: have to move beyond taxes as the only source of revenue
 - Must have a sustainable economy
 - Need joint venture with private sector (e.g., munic generation plant)
 - Community-owned wealth
 - Must establish priorities to generate the funds
- Cost of creating a municipal power company: how feasible is this? Investment in new power vs. making existing facilities more economic, environmentally sound
- The cost of rehabbing/reusing old buildings while also making them energy efficient and green – less costly to build new

Although initially listed as a potential conflict, we agree with the participant who said that open space and affordable housing are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are interdependent. Some additional education may be needed to dispel this misconception.

Questions to be addressed

As with the concerns and conflicts, we find the questions to be in three categories:

Definitions

- What is affordable housing? Make sure people understand the definition(s)
- What is open space? Similarly, needs clarification

Options/alternatives

- What can the city do to control development, given private property rights?
- What obstacles block good projects? (e.g., Paradise One)
- What are the opportunities for private citizens to get involved?
- Can we afford not to secure more open space? Or not to find alternative means to generate our own power?
- How do we obtain agreement on priorities?
- What are the opportunities for private citizens to get involved?

Informational details

- What keeps cities from establishing their own power system?
- What is the fair market price for (WMECO's) transmission lines and distribution system?
- How risky is it? What is the risk?
- What are the criteria for open space acquisition? Open space purchase for what purpose?
- Does the city have the personnel to manage these programs?

Overriding vision statement (to be crafted)

SELECT VISION CAPTIONS FOR COMMITTEE CONSIDERATION

Easthampton is a model of innovative green technology, building on its industrial heritage for a healthy economy.

Easthampton is a proud and proactive community that uses an integrated private, organizational and governmental approach to guide change for an improved future.

- Historic Easthampton : a vibrant community where innovation thrives, citizens exhibit pride and prosperity, and opportunities are widely shared.
- Building on the past and investing wisely in the future
- Family friendly Easthampton – an interactive and multigenerational community
- Easthampton Center of and for the Arts
- An affordable destination of choice
- Easthampton – modeling being as good as we can be!
- Easthampton – Casual place - quality living!
- Easthampton tomorrow – continuing the story
- Building on imagination, aspiration, innovation and experience
- Easthampton putting its best self forward

Visions should have image and action words

Maintain, sustain, improve, promote, encourage, provide, support

Regulations

- Limit the size of commercial buildings through zoning
- Incentivize green zoning/building regulations
- Tax Incentive Financing TIF
- Implement mandatory conservation to reduce energy demand
- Reconsider inclusionary zoning

Education and communication

- Sponsor intergenerational learning/programs
- Improve and invest in schools to become # 1 regionally
- Create a complete and readily available economic portfolio – assets, needs, consultants, investors
- Tell “the story” of Easthampton – play it annually
- Bolster Easthampton’s “Pride of Progress” with regular updates on accomplishments
- Prepare a “City character study” by existing city district
- Establish required communication exchanges and channels between DPW, Police, Fire, School, Recreation, civic, senior
- Hire those staff needed to implement key components of the vision

Project and program works

- Connect affordable housing to land protection
- Use the vacant mills – green, wired, tight, energy efficient
- T 1 Line everywhere – latest communication technology
- Create a Town Farm – ethnic gardens
- Cooperative store -- from socks to nails
- Cable car to Mt Tom
- Geothermal heating and cooling for civic buildings
- Create a municipal power company & shut down Mt Tom generator
- Zip car program
- Bike share program

What do these “wilder ideas” really suggest or portend?

Easthampton needs to build on its proven proactive capabilities. It needs to up the proactive boldness and investment. Its citizens need to see alliances where few currently exist, to see systemically and ecologically across boundaries/borders. It needs to have information readily available, and to have clear priorities that are responsive to both importance and timeliness.

Easthampton needs to be cutting edge and review and adopt technology readily.