

Town of Seabrook 2011-20 Master Plan



Seabrook, New Hampshire
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- *Adaptation Strategies to Protect Areas of Increased Risk from Coastal Flooding Due to Climate Change, Seabrook, NH, 2009, Rockingham Planning Commission*
- *Smithtown Village- A New Village Concept*

Introduction and Vision Statement

The Master Plan is a Blueprint for the Future

This Master Plan for the Town of Seabrook, New Hampshire is a publicly prepared “blueprint” that represents the citizens’ view of what the town should look like in ten to twenty years (*The Vision*), and how they intend to achieve it (*Implementation Guide*). This document includes maps, charts and supporting text arranged in chapters that describe the current conditions and trends within Seabrook. This plan also addresses issues of concern, such as protection of community character, tradition, and resources, and provides guidance to help Seabrook manage change and growth in a manner that is orderly and meets its Vision.

Master Planning has a Legal Basis

In New Hampshire, one of the major responsibilities of the Planning Board is to prepare and update Master Plans (RSA 674:1-4). It is recommended that these plans be updated every five to ten years.

“The purpose of the master plan is to set down as clearly and as practically as possible the best and most appropriate future development of the area under the jurisdiction of the planning board, to aid the board in designing ordinances that result in preserving and enhancing the unique quality of life and culture of New Hampshire.....” (RSA 674:2)

Seabrook Has an Existing Plan and Land Use Regulations

Seabrook’s most recent Master Plan was prepared in 2000. Since that time there has been much growth and development both within Seabrook and the Seacoast Region. While the town has had a zoning ordinance as well as subdivision and site plan regulations in place to manage growth, it was felt that updating the Master Plan would provide the basis for policies to better accommodate the town’s more recent growth and changes. This plan is intended to guide the town in land use, development and planning decisions for the next 5, 10, and 20 years. The plan does not supplant the town’s previous work – much of the information and concepts outlined in the 2000 plan are still relevant and do not need updating. Furthermore, many of the recommendations and actions outlined in that plan are still applicable and should continue to be revisited.

Throughout the planning process, the town identified several important community values that provided the foundation for the Master Plan Update:

- Protection and conservation of the town’s natural environment—both land and water,
- Providing opportunity for economic growth that encourages high quality businesses and jobs,
- Creating opportunities for residential diversity, and
- Encouraging smaller businesses to locate in the town.

The Seabrook Master Planning Process

In September of 2008, the Town of Seabrook was awarded a state funded grant from the New Hampshire Office of Energy and Planning under the Housing and Conservation Planning Program (HCPP) for a Stage 1 Project. The Stage 1 program required towns to undertake an inventory and analysis of the town’s historic and natural resources as well as its population trends and housing resources. This stage also required an analysis of the potential build-out of Seabrook under current zoning. Since the town wished to update its 2000 Master Plan, it was decided to incorporate the HCPP project as a first step in this overall process.

The Board of Selectmen appointed an HCPP/Master Plan Steering Committee to manage the HCPP project and Master Plan Update that included the following individuals:

- Susan Foote, Chair
- Robert Moore
- Donald Hawkins
- Paul Garand
- Robert Jones
- Lindsey Hamblet
- Paul Himmer
- Barbara Kravitz, Secretary

This Steering Committee selected a planning consultant in October of 2008 to assist them with the HCPP project.

During the following 12 months the Steering Committee and consultant (Mettee Planning Consultants) prepared working papers for each of the major HCPP tasks:

- Population and Economic Trends
- Housing
- Natural Resources including a map set of nine (9) maps
- Historic Resources including an Historic Resources Map
- Build-out Analysis

With the completion of the HCPP project the Steering Committee continued on and completed the remaining chapters for a full Master Plan Update. These additional chapters included:

- Land Use and Future Land Use
- Transportation and Circulation including an in depth look at the Route 1 Corridor
- Economic Development
- Community Facilities
- Implementation Guide

The result is a completed Master Plan Update that is in three parts:

- *An Introduction and Vision Section* that provides an overall view of the 2011-2020 Master Plan Update, documents the public outreach process, and includes a Vision for Seabrook.
- *A Complete Master Plan Inventory* that includes a full inventory and assessment of the community, along with an Action Plan for each chapter.
- *An Implementation Guide* that provides a list of the Master Plan recommended actions, a priority rating for each, and the entity responsible for completing the action.

The Community Has Voiced Its Desires

The Steering Committee was very keen on soliciting input from the community in an effort to reflect the residents' views in the Master Plan Update. The first step in this process was a community forum sponsored by UNH Cooperative Extension that explored Seabrook's future opportunities and challenges. This effort complemented the preparation and dissemination of a Community Survey via the town's website and through several community outlets including Town Hall and the Library. Based on the results of the Community Forum, the Community Survey, and discussions undertaken by the Steering Committee, several common themes were expressed including:

- Protection and conservation of Seabrook's natural and historic resources.
- Educational opportunities for all of Seabrook's citizens.

- Assuring that Seabrook is a healthy community by offering opportunities for medical services and opportunities for a healthy lifestyle—including recreational/cultural programs and facilities, walking paths and recreational trails.
- Providing adequate transportation facilities and services.
- Managing growth—both timing and scale—by encouraging a balance of uses that reflect Seabrook’s small town character—residential, business (small retail, light manufacturing) and institutional (medical).
- Providing employment opportunities for Seabrook’s citizens.

This community outreach effort led directly to the *Vision for Seabrook* that follows.

Many People Contributed to this Master Plan

The Town of Seabrook would like to acknowledge the efforts of many groups and individuals that assisted with the preparation of this plan. The primary effort was led by the Master Plan Steering Committee which was established by the Board of Selectmen. Over a period of almost 3 years this group met and worked with the consultant to develop the final plan.

In addition to the Steering Committee members listed earlier, Town Hall staff members were also particularly helpful in providing information to the consultant and answering the many questions the consultant had about Seabrook. Town Department Heads were also instrumental in providing information about the various community facilities and services. Assisting the Steering Committee and the consultant were the Conservation Commission which provided input into the Natural Resources Chapter of the Plan. Members of the Seabrook Historical Society were also very helpful in providing information for the Historic Resources Chapter, in particular Eric Small and Evelyn Fowler.

Next Steps—Plan Implementation

Given the approval of the Planning Board, this Master Plan Update should be considered a work plan to be implemented over the next five to ten years. During this period the Planning Board and other relevant town boards and departments should work cooperatively to ensure the plan recommendations are considered and implemented. The Implementation Guide will greatly assist the Board in determining priorities. This Guide should be reviewed annually and adjustments made as needed. In this way the Master Plan will be a living document and not a plan that “sits idly on the shelf”.

The Vision—The Future of Seabrook

The following vision statement reflects Seabrook's common values and defines the future of the town—a community that will be prepared to accommodate modest growth and change while preserving its existing community character. It also offers the guiding principles and priorities upon which this Master Plan is based. While the vision does not have the force of law, local officials and the public should consider the Vision Statement in all local plans, actions and decisions.

A Vision for Seabrook

The Seabrook Master Plan Steering Committee was given the task of updating Seabrook's 2000 Master Plan. A key element in this process was the development of a Vision for Seabrook. To come up with the vision the Committee reviewed and analyzed:

- Seabrook's current natural, social and physical characteristics,
- the results of the public visioning forum in the fall of 2008, and
- the results of the community survey in the spring of 2009.

The Committee also undertook substantial discussions on major issues and opportunities facing the town in 2008 and early 2009. Based on this effort the Committee developed the following vision for Seabrook.

Seabrook should be a livable community that: recognizes its historical agricultural, marine, small business and recreational roots; properly manages its natural resources; encourages a balance of land uses that enhance small town values; provides opportunity for business development consistent with its small town character; supports a program of educational opportunities for all ages; provides a transportation system that is efficient and connects the town's neighborhoods and continues to provide good quality community facilities and services. Seabrook should also strive to be a healthy community by supporting cultural and recreational opportunities through the support of facilities, programs and events and by encouraging a system of trails and sidewalks connecting all parts of the town.

Seabrook should also recognize its unique and diverse geography of high quality coastal and estuarine resources, a suburban/commercial central core and a rural western neighborhood; and strive to physically and socially integrate the interests of each of these areas.

This Vision is reinforced by a number of broad community goals. These goals reflect Seabrook's values and will provide the basic "blueprint" for the town's future.

Seabrook should be a town that:

- Properly manages growth that is consistent with the town's vision and character and provides for a balance of residential, business, industrial and institutional activities.
- Preserves and protects its natural and beach/estuarine environment in balance with recreational, economic, business and employment opportunities for its citizens.
- Strives to integrate its diverse geographic neighborhoods.
- Encourages educational opportunities of all types and for all age groups.

- Offers multiple modes of transportation facilities and services that provide connections to neighborhoods, businesses and services as well as regional destinations.
- Continues to provide quality community services and facilities for the benefit of all its citizens.
- Encourages an economic climate that fosters small businesses and industry consistent with Seabrook's small town character and provides employment opportunities for its citizens.

The following discussion provides much of the basis for the Master Plan Steering Committee's Vision Statement for the town.

Seabrook Unique Geographically and Socially

Seabrook is a unique community that is divided both geographically and socially. There are at least three distinct areas that are divided by significant north-south boundaries.

- The Beach and Estuary area is the easterly most portion of Seabrook which has a high seasonal population and is separated physically from the rest of the town by the western marsh area of the estuary.
- The Lafayette Road area (US Route 1) is the suburban middle section and is the area of Seabrook which has most of its population, civic functions and commercial enterprises.
- The Westerly area west of I-95 that remains suburban and rural residential and contains a majority of the town's industrial activity.

Because there are only two east-west connector corridors in the town both of which are state "limited access" highways (NH Routes 107 and 286), these three areas have taken on different personalities and functions.

In addition, to these geographic divisions, Seabrook has a social division with a summer population increase in the beach area, making Seabrook a "tourist" destination for many seasonal residents and vacationers. Although the seasonal figures cannot be statistically verified, estimates indicate that the year round population grows from the permanent population of about 8,500 to approximately 12,000. The beach area is also differentiated politically from the rest of Seabrook, because it is a precinct for purposes of zoning and land use control.

Numerous Changes to Seabrook since the Last Master Plan

Seabrook's last Master Plan was completed in 2000. Since that time there have been many changes in the town—changes that have made a significant mark on the landscape and affected the quality of the community. There were approximately 500 hundred housing units approved and constructed, not as many as the previous decade, but still substantial. In addition, a number of major retailers—including Staples, Home Depot, CVS, Lowe's and Kohl's—have located along Lafayette Road (US Route 1). A major shopping center is currently proposed for a site at the intersection of Lafayette Road and NH Route 107.

Much of this retail development has been driven by a number of factors:

- With the change in state taxation policy for large utilities, Seabrook lost much of its tax base from the Seabrook power station;
- Subsequent to this change, Seabrook engaged in a strong economic development effort to encourage commercial growth that would generate additional property taxes to make up for the loss in tax revenue;

- The land use boards granted more special exceptions and variances to encourage greater commercial retail and industrial activity; and
- Demand from Massachusetts shoppers avoiding the Massachusetts sales tax.

This rapid retail development has generated substantial increases in vehicular traffic, resulting in the reconstruction and widening of Lafayette Road by the NH DOT in 2005. This widening has also created a commercial corridor that is not consistent with Seabrook's small town character, but rather a character that is representative of many other communities where commercial corridors have become locations for regional and national retail commercial chain stores.

This rapid development has also put a strain on Seabrook's infrastructure and natural environment. Even with the widening of Lafayette Road, there is still substantial traffic volume. One of the major challenges identified in the November 2008 Visioning Forum was the need to address traffic and transportation. Impervious cover due to building has almost doubled from 802 acres in 1990 to 1,539 acres in 2005 or from 14% of the town to approximately 27% of the town. This change has resulted in a loss of woodland and wildlife habitat. It has also affected the Seabrook's surface waters. For example, deposition of sediment into the ponds of the Cains Brook watershed has been significant. In part this may have been caused by improperly managed stormwater from the widening of Route 1 and the increased retail construction. There is also evidence that the tidal waters of Seabrook and the Hampton-Seabrook estuary have periodic spikes of bacterial contamination that may be attributable to recent growth. Based on numerous studies, it has been determined that water quality degradation tends to decline once a watershed reaches and exceeds 10% of impervious cover.

Future Changes to Be Considered

As Seabrook continues to grow and change there will be new issues to consider in the planning process. For example, the Rockingham Regional Planning Commission has just completed a study on the impact of sea level rise and its effect on Seabrook particularly in the beach and estuarine/harbor area of the town. This study provided a graphic representation of areas likely to be affected and offered strategies for adaptation, both regulatory and non-regulatory.

In addition, Seabrook must now be cognizant of new state laws affecting land use such as the 2008 Workforce Housing law requiring Seabrook and all communities in the state to provide "reasonable and realistic opportunities" for workforce housing. And while Seabrook may comply with this law today, it may need to consider zoning changes in the future in order to ensure consistency with such laws in the future.

The challenge for Seabrook will be to prepare a Master Plan Update that recognizes these inherent community features and changes and establishes a common vision for the town's future. In recognition of these changes and the potential for future change, the Seabrook Board of Selectmen appointed a Master Plan Steering Committee (Committee) to guide a Master Plan Update. In its first discussion about the Master Plan, the Committee considered how to bring the citizens of the town into the master plan process. After discussions with the New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Service, the Committee decided to hold a public forum and undertake a community survey to take the pulse of Seabrook's residents.

Visioning Forum Identified Challenges and Opportunities

On November 13, 2008 the Steering Committee in cooperation with the UNH Cooperative Extension held a Visioning Forum at the Seabrook Community Center. The results of this forum are documented in the attached document as **Appendix A—Seabrook Master Plan, Visioning Forum #1**. The following challenges for Seabrook represent a synthesis of the many responses from the forum participants.

- The need to address traffic and transportation needs.
- Improving education across the board from existing public education to adult and continuing education.

- Making sure the Master Plan is a living document with accurate data and “smart” goals which can be supported by Seabrook citizens and is monitored for progress on a regular basis.
- Ensuring protection for natural resources and open space as well as providing effective education opportunities.
- Ensuring that the remaining developable land and current vacant store fronts be properly utilized and managed.
- Providing for a sustainable economy with employment opportunities for Seabrook’s citizens through such industries as manufacturing and automotive. Encouraging educational opportunities that lead to jobs such as technical programs and culinary training.

Residents Put High Value on Natural Amenities, but Concerned about the Rate of Commercial and Residential Growth

During the spring of 2009 the Steering Committee in cooperation with UNH Cooperative Extension undertook a community survey to gauge resident attitudes on a number of issues regarding the town. The attached Appendix B—*Overview of Master Plan Survey Findings* provides a good summary of the results of that survey. The major findings include:

- The most highly supported attributes valued by the residents of Seabrook were natural amenities, proximity to highways and the town’s friendly atmosphere.
- Residents valued the town’s natural and historic resources, but they were divided as to whether or not the town provides sufficient support for these attributes—e.g., only 50% agreed there was sufficient support for natural resource conservation.
- Overall respondents agreed that the town was supportive of community services such as fire, police, transfer station and library (all over 65% support), but they were mixed about the support for schools, and park/recreational resources—e.g., only 48% felt the town was supportive of playgrounds.
- Respondents generally indicated that Seabrook was not doing enough to support the land use code and building regulations.
- In terms of economic and business opportunity, survey respondents favored agriculture-related and small businesses including farm stands, light industry and medical services, but were divided on expansion of home-based businesses and recreational businesses.
- Respondents favored the following consumer services—local restaurants and small retail businesses, but not chain restaurants, retail malls, gas stations and commercial recreational businesses.
- Residents expressed concern about the rate of commercial and residential growth and were mixed on the issue of allowing higher density or mixed use developments.
- In terms of housing, respondents tended to favor expansion of senior housing and single-family homes over other forms of housing, such as multi-family and apartment buildings.

Based on the results of the community forum, the community survey and discussions undertaken by the Steering Committee several themes have emerged that provide the foundation for a community vision. These include:

- Protection and conservation of Seabrook’s natural and historic resources.

- Educational opportunities for all of Seabrook's citizens.
- Assuring that Seabrook is a healthy community by offering opportunities for medical services and opportunities for a healthy lifestyle—including recreational/cultural programs and facilities, walking paths and recreational trails.
- Providing adequate transportation facilities and services.
- Managing growth—both timing and scale—by encouraging a balance of uses that reflect Seabrook's small town character—residential, business (small retail, light manufacturing) and institutional (medical).
- Providing employment opportunities for Seabrook's citizens.
- Continuing to support community facilities and services.

Committee Sets Priority—Focus on the Route 1 Corridor to Make a Positive Statement about Seabrook

Over the past 20 years the nature and quality of the Route 1 Corridor has changed dramatically. Once one of the major historic centers of the town that boasted highly valued historic homes and buildings in a setting of a tree-lined street, this corridor has now become a major vehicular artery serving large “big box” commercial retail establishments, numerous regional and national chains and a variety of smaller retail businesses. Interspersed in this commercial strip are only a few remnants of Seabrook and her past, such as the Old South Meeting House. There are also disbursed civic functions including the Town Hall and Community Center.

In addition to the dramatic change in land use, the environmental and aesthetic quality of the corridor has been compromised—the street trees have been eliminated, often not to be replaced; there are numerous curb cuts and traffic signals; large signs compete for business; there are few if any pedestrian amenities; and the roadway has been widened to accommodate the additional traffic generated by the growth in retail business. Some of the widening and large additions of impervious areas have caused environmental impact to Seabrook's natural resources such as wildlife habitat and stream water quality of the town's small watersheds.

The Committee recognized these changes and the impact they have had on the community. The corridor has created a commercial environment that has precluded an opportunity for Seabrook to create a “community environment”. In various discussions, the Committee suggested that the Master Plan process devote a significant effort to improving the quality of the corridor by considering and supporting such strategies as:

- Identifying potential areas for “community or mixed use centers” such in the Folly Mill Road/Town Hall area,
- Establishing standards for facade and building design,
- Making the corridor more pedestrian friendly, and
- Promoting landscape guidelines and street tree planting.