



**Master Plan Implementation Committee  
Report to Town Meeting  
June 2021**

The Master Plan Update – still in draft form as of this writing – centers around ensuring that South Hadley is a diverse and inclusive community where everyone can thrive. Specific goals also address the need to care for our natural, cultural and historic resources, increase our resiliency and improve communication. Although the Plan has yet to be adopted, a significant amount of activity over the last year has been directed towards those goals and has demonstrated some of the Town’s considerable strengths while also exposing areas of challenge.

We are in the midst of a time of great change. The COVID pandemic is a global issue that we experience directly here in South Hadley. The town also shares national concerns about systemic racism. But there are other, local, changes that will continue to have an impact on our lives: we will shortly have a new Town Administrator and a new Director of Planning and Conservation, a new school superintendent and a new master plan.

Some of the COVID-related challenges have included all the tensions around learning to live with a pandemic: shutdowns, virtual work and learning, getting food and supplies, mask wearing, meeting other health needs, and – eventually – getting the vaccine. Adjusting to life in a virtual world was less difficult for some people than others who lacked technology and/or connectivity and were unfamiliar with its use. Job insecurity and hunger and food insecurity affected many; Neighbors Helping Neighbors food pantry has seen a major uptick in the numbers of people accessing its services. And social isolation has been a problem, not just for individuals living alone, but for children deprived of school-based interaction with other children, and for all of us who were unable to get together with family and friends. Many people have suffered from anxiety about what’s happening, or not happening. It has been a

brutal 15 months, and although the vaccines have already made an enormous difference, we're not nearly back to "normal" yet.

We are hugely grateful to Town leaders, staff, volunteers and other community members who have been working so hard to keep us informed and to help us cope with the pandemic. They have ensured the provision of necessary services, as well as the open conduct of municipal business. We hope that rather than simply going back to "business as usual" as the pandemic fades, town government uses the opportunity to examine many of the coping mechanisms that they instituted during the pandemic and retains the ones that increase efficiency and effectiveness, enhance communications and enable more individuals to participate more fully in the life of the town.

Facing COVID has shown that we as a community can be resilient. Town government made a fast pivot to virtual functioning. The Town Administrator, Health Department, Police and Fire Districts established regular and frequent meetings, and the Selectboard met weekly rather than twice a month for about 6 months in an effort to keep on top of the Covid situation and communicate regularly with each other and Town residents. The schools, the Council on Aging and SHELD worked rapidly to get technology and connectivity to people. The Planning Board and others moved to online meetings and hearings, many of which were recorded. This has had the added advantage of enabling people to watch the meetings from home in real time, or to watch them later via the SHCTV-15 video archive. MPIC hopes this will continue in the form of hybrid and recorded meetings even after the pandemic is over.

Town Hall has greatly increased the number of services provided online. The Town Clerk's office enabled anyone who wanted to vote absentee in the primaries and the general election in Fall 2020 and Town elections this spring to do so. The DPW instituted an on-line appointment system, which enabled it to be open for more days than before the pandemic. The Council on Aging set up a comprehensive outreach and communications program; South Hadley Public Library set up curbside pickup options for patrons, and the Gaylord Library posted outdoor story boards.

The School Department worked closely with the Health Department and other communities around remote learning and reopening protocols, helping teachers prep for in class and virtual learning, as well as providing technology and support. Through a USDA program, it also made free breakfast and lunch available to students.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that in at least some parts of town, neighborhoods pulled together. Families with young children formed "pods" so that the children would have social as well as academic interactions. The Chamber of Commerce distributed \$20,000 in grant funding to 22 local businesses negatively affected by the pandemic. Thanks to the Conservation Commission, more Town trails are accessible, and there is new signage and maps. Many people took advantage of the trails and parks for the first time, especially once Mount Holyoke College closed its grounds to the public. The Ledges Golf course had one of its best years, reflecting the relative safety of golf as a group recreational activity. Another silver lining to the COVID cloud

seems to be that air pollution dropped, because so many people have been working from home rather than commuting.

Although the Master Plan Update and its associated list of action items has yet to be approved, many entities are already working on tasks assigned to them in the Update and making progress towards the goals of the plan. The Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) was completed in June 2020, giving the town a blueprint for future action. The Conservation Commission is preserving the Lauzier farmland along Alvord Street and acquiring a parcel along the Holyoke Range. The Woodlawn Plaza development has been approved and will bring more units of affordable housing into the town. Other efforts towards making South Hadley a more diverse and inclusive community included statements in support of diversity, equity and inclusion from the Selectboard, the Police Department, the Conservation Commission and other public and private bodies; the formation of a School Committee Racial Justice task force; ongoing workshops for Town staff; and a weekly vigil on the Town Common.

Town Administration has formed a technology group to work on issues relating to technology, which should lead to more efficient and effective practices and better communications. SHCTV has begun to make short videos describing the work of various parts of Town government, to help people better understand what (for example) the Assessors' Office does. The Historical Commission is working to inventory the various sources of information about Town history, which is currently spread among more than a few sites and entities.

South Hadley continues to face other issues not related to the pandemic, such as an ongoing shortage of board members and other volunteers. Addressing one such situation, the Recreation Commission is currently including the Bike/Walk Committee in its work. This may serve as a model where other boards are not functioning or functioning at a very low level. This is not a new issue. There's a perennial tension between what we'd like to do and who's available to do it, as well as what it would cost, and what that would mean for taxes. How should we balance development with the desire to preserve open space? There is ongoing debate about what types of development, if any, should be encouraged. Where should more affordable housing be located? We say we'd like more businesses in town, but our regulations make it difficult for businesses to locate here. Should we change the regulations? We say we want a more diverse community, but when it comes right down to it, are we willing to do what must be done to ensure that South Hadley becomes more diverse? And how do we make the hard choices, when we know we can't do everything? We need broad-based discussion, but discussion needs to be followed by action.

Over the past year MPIC members have met with some 27 different town boards, committees, and individuals, many more than once, to discuss the draft list of action items in the Master Plan Update. We are very pleased that the various entities have been willing to spend time discussing the Update; they are clearly taking it seriously. One of the concerns voiced by some entities about the 2010 plan was that they felt they were never consulted. Their participation in the planning process for this update is likely to result in a strong degree of buy-in and therefore a greater likelihood that the various action items will be addressed effectively.

Another concern in regard to the 2010 plan was that tasks that really required participation from multiple entities or individuals weren't getting done or were only partially done because it wasn't clear where the responsibilities rested. The Master Plan Update Advisory Committee (MPUAC) attempted to address this in the Update by listing entities that should be partners in tackling various action items. We have been pleased to see that in some instances entities are already combining for projects. To take just one example: the Council on Aging has organized a task force focused on making South Hadley an Age and Dementia-friendly Community. It has pulled in the Police Department, Neighbors Helping Neighbors food pantry, the public library, churches, the Pioneer Valley Planning Council, Friends of South Hadley Seniors, Town administration, the Housing Authority, the Recreation Department, the Planning Department, and MPIC.

One of MPIC's proposed action items is to redo the committee's bylaws. As we began the process it became increasingly clear that a new master plan provided the opportunity to go back to the basic questions about implementation. Who should be involved? Who should be in charge? Who has oversight? Who should be involved in evaluating progress, and recommending shifts in emphasis, timing or methods? How should findings be communicated, and with whom? If an independent implementation committee is the best mechanism, how should the committee be constituted? Over the next 6-12 months we will be exploring those questions, seeking input from the Planning Department, Planning Board, Town Administrator and Selectboard, and asking the various entities how to be most helpful to them as they move forward on their action items. We will also look at models and "best practices."

As usual, we expect to schedule meetings with all boards and committees in the fall, and follow up in the spring, reporting our findings to the Selectboard, the Planning Board, and Town Meeting. Once the Update has been adopted we will begin to monitor and update the list of action items, and post updated lists with our annual report.

Again, we express our heartfelt thanks to all those who have put in so much time and effort to helping our community. South Hadley is a better place because of you.

Respectfully submitted,

The Master Plan Implementation Committee

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