

Master Plan Implementation Committee  
Report to Town Meeting  
July 2024

The Town completed its second full year under the updated Master Plan in spring 2024. The Master Plan Implementation Committee (MPIC) met with committees and boards throughout the year to monitor progress and challenges encountered. Under the revised reporting schedule adopted in spring 2023, MPIC members met with all entities at least twice during the year, collecting midyear “work in progress” reports in January and final reports in spring.

As last year, we are pleased to report considerable progress, which we describe below under each Master Plan goal. In reviewing reports from entities, we also noted that several were adopting practices likely to advance the Plan.

- Cooperation among entities seems to be increasing: the Senior Center, Bike Walk Committee, Disabilities Commission, Historical Commission, Sustainability and Energy Commission each report reaching out to other groups to advance their work, as, of course, has the Library, which is always a standout.
- We have noted more collaboration between various Town entities and Mount Holyoke College, a very welcome sign.
- Four entities sought approval of new governance bylaws for themselves, in part with an eye to advancing Master Plan goals: MPIC, the Council on Aging, the Capital Planning Committee the Bylaw Review Committee have all revisited their organizational structures, proposing revised bylaws that have been approved by Town Meeting.
- Perhaps the most consequential administrative reorganization effort, led by Town Administration and the Select Board, has been to create a Department of Human Services that will bring into close collaboration the Senior Center, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Recreation Department, which together are responsible for supporting numerous Master Plan goals.

The Master Plan Update identifies four major goals. They are outlined below with examples of progress—and some summary comments.

**The first goal is that South Hadley become a community where everyone can thrive.**

Many entities are pursuing this goal—certainly, there is work for everyone.

- The Senior Center has expanded its programming to include classes in German and Spanish; and, in collaboration with the College and the schools has offered presentations on the experience of LGBTQ persons and communities. Staff members also worked to support the development of the new Housing Production Plan, with an eye to increasing housing options, including for seniors. And it has contributed to the MVP 2.0 project engaging seniors and other vulnerable populations in learning about the potential impacts of climate change and efforts to mitigate them.

- The Cultural Council supported and organized “Showcasing South Hadley” which brought a world of cultural experience to nearly every corner of Town.
- The Bike Trail Committee, working with others, developed Spanish language maps and signage to expand access to the Town’s recreational resources.
- The Commission on Disabilities has continued its exemplary work seeking to expand opportunities for disabled persons (as well as others) through advocacy and consultation. And it has signaled its interest in becoming more engaged in housing issues, review of bylaws with an eye to identifying discriminatory effects, and provision of charging stations that could serve not only electrical automobiles, but personal mobility devices.
- The Board of Health developed and approved a new Rental Registration program to safeguard public health and the living conditions of residents, particularly people renting their homes.
- The Planning Department and Planning Board are working to expand housing options, including affordable housing (both deed-restricted and “missing middle”). They achieved Commonwealth approval for a new Housing Production Plan and are drafting new bylaws for public review and eventual action by Town Meeting, including a revised Flexible Development Bylaw that would incentivize preservation of open space as well as affordable housing (both deed-restricted and “missing middle”). This spring Town Meeting approved a zoning proposal that will expand housing options while also supporting businesses by allowing for housing in connection with businesses in some business districts.
- The Human Rights Commission, now in its first year, has identified tasks it will pursue in collaboration with other entities to make South Hadley a more open and welcoming community.
- The Historical Commission is working with the Library and faculty members at Mount Holyoke College to develop programming that will highlight the experience of BIPOC communities in South Hadley.
- SHELD actively promotes its low electric rates as well as its now completed Fiber Optic Network, as a means of attracting new businesses to Town. (The goal of making South Hadley more “business friendly” as a means of drawing jobs, new tax revenue streams and desirable services to Town, should not fall to SHELD alone, of course.)

**The second goal is that as a community we preserve our natural and cultural resources**

- The Planning Board is preparing revised subdivision regulations that will be more protective of the environment, including water resources.

- The MVP 2.0 program launched by the Conservation Department is working with representatives from vulnerable populations to identify and address climate change impacts.
- The Conservation Department is exploring best practices for managing river front flooding zones.
- The Historical Commission and Library are collaborating to preserve and present historical materials, seeking a Historical Survey and Planning grant. And the Historical Commission is seeking to create an historical district focused on the Old Firehouse in the Falls.
- The Planning Department has submitted a grant to support development of a forestry plan to conserve forests, including by preventing wildfires.

**Goal three states that as a community we seek to promote resiliency and sustainability**

- The Sustainability and Energy Commission is preparing to apply for Green Community status, which would make the Town eligible for grant support for additional efforts. It has also launched new public education programming, offering presentations on climate change impacts and “green practices” for households and the Town. And it is engaging the College’s sustainability leader around possible Town-Gown collaborations.
- The Select Board and Town Administration have developed and are enacting realistic long term funding strategies for replacing and maintaining outmoded wastewater facilities.
- The Water Districts have re-initiated discussion regarding possibilities for sharing services.

**Goal four centers on communications, among Town entities and between the Town and the public.**

- Last year’s Master Plan Forum focused on how to improve municipal communication by improving communication skills, and it seems to have provoked new attention to this goal.
- Numerous entities, including Town departments, have ramped up their communication efforts, updating websites, offering more public presentations, expanding their social media presence (including, in at least one case, moving beyond Facebook to Instagram!).
- Some are also offering workshops intended to introduce new users to IT resources: the Library, SHELD, the Senior Center.

- The Town Meeting Review Committee, in its report on the functioning of Town Meeting, has identified several specific changes in practice—and communications infrastructure—that might improve communication between citizens and members of Town Meeting, and possibly strengthen engagement of Town Meeting in Town government.

#### SOME CHALLENGES:

- As last year, we continue to observe that while most entities support our efforts to monitor and facilitate their work related to Master Plan goals by returning written reports (at least 20), some have been less responsive. This is to be expected for many reasons, not the least being that so much of the work of the Plan rests on the shoulders of volunteer boards that are understaffed or not staffed at all. And that membership on boards and committees is constantly shifting. MPIC asked entities for less reporting this year and simplified the reporting process. This seems to have been appreciated. We are now considering increasing our attendance at meetings on a case-by-case basis, which could help us better understand entity successes, needs and ways we might be helpful without creating new burdens on committees.
- Drawing new businesses to Town that might provide jobs, new tax revenue streams, and provision of desirable services, is a task identified in the Plan. It is a task likely requiring action by the Planning Board, but also other regulatory entities that could work together to simplify permitting processes.
- While we are pleased to see more examples of cross entity cooperation, we are aware that there are important barriers. Indeed, some entities that can legitimately report success in finding collaborators, are also politely asking for more help. MPIC understands one of its responsibilities is to help connect likely partners, and we will try to do more in the coming year (having benefited, fortuitously, by the arrival on our own committee of three new members). But we are also eager for advice on what more can be done to support collaborative work.
- As cheering as it is to see evidence of more communication across groups and departments and more evidence of groups reaching out, there is still need for more communications infrastructure, including the long planned citizen's guide (virtual and printed) to town government; a "how to" manual for committee chairs that could help them manage their committee webpages and keep the public informed; a regularly updated email directory facilitating communication among committee chairs and between committees and the public; perhaps also a more assertive (if gentle) monitoring of adherence by committees to a clearly defined set of standards. These needs are especially serious given the kind of work required to achieve two major goals: building a thriving community in which all can prosper; building for sustainability and resiliency.

- Promoting diversity, equity and inclusion: It is a good sign that many entities are seeking to address the goal. And it is exciting that the Master Plan Forum in fall 2024 will focus on DEI. It is also very good news that the Human Rights Commission is now up and running. But meaningful progress will require time and probably new forms of cooperation.
- Planning for sustainability and resiliency is another large goal that seems likely to require similar efforts, and perhaps the equivalent of a Human Rights Commission to help build public support and guide implementation.

## CONCLUSION:

In its advisory and facilitative roles, MPIC is eager to continue supporting implementation of the updated Master Plan in close collaboration with the Planning Board, Selectboard, and Town Administration. We want to especially acknowledge the Selectboard's decision to meet in retreat this summer to focus on goal setting, with particular attention to the Master Plan and the Housing Production Plan.