

Chapter 1. Introduction and Vision

1.1. Purpose of the Master Plan

Under New Hampshire state law, planning boards have the responsibility to “prepare and amend from time to time a master plan to guide the development of the municipality.” The Master Plan provides a framework for the Planning Board to ensure that it carries out its activities in a manner that will achieve the goals of the community. The Master Plan also represents the Planning Board’s recommendations to other town boards and committees and to the voters regarding decisions that will affect the future growth of the community.

The relevant question is not simply what shall we do tomorrow, but rather what shall we do today to get ready for tomorrow?
Peter Drucker

The Master Plan is a living document that serves to direct and guide the development of the town and to be the foundation for local land use regulations as well as other town programs, major expenditures and public-private partnerships. The plan represents the Planning Board's recommendations for how the town can best balance and further the goals and meet the needs of the community.

1.2 Process Used to Produce This Update

Alton’s original Master Plan was developed in 1965 by the Planning Board, Selectboard, other Town officials and an outside consulting firm. The report was an accumulation of monthly studies obtained through the cooperation of department heads and residents from each of the five areas of town: Alton Village, Alton Bay, West Alton, East Alton and the islands. To keep the plan up-to-date, the Town has held a charette, community forums, and distributed surveys in 1985, 1989, 1990, 1997, and again in 2005 in preparation for the 2007 update. In 2007, the Planning Board adopted a comprehensive Master Plan update. A Vision Chapter contained not only a Vision Statement but also discussion of high priority issues covering a wide range of topics including land use, community facilities, transportation and natural and historic resources.

At Town Meeting in 2020, voters approved funding to hire a consultant to assist the Planning Board with the next Master Plan update. A Master Plan Committee was appointed by the Planning Board to oversee and guide the update. After a competitive bid process, Community Planning Consultant Tara Bamford was hired to assist with the update.

A link to a web-based survey to obtain community input on priorities and needs was mailed to all 5,723 voter and property owner addresses and provided to all Town employees. A total of 818 responses were received. In addition, several former and current local officials and other community leaders were interviewed to obtain their thoughts on what the town's priorities should be over the next ten years. The results of the surveys and interviews guided this update and are integrated throughout the plan.

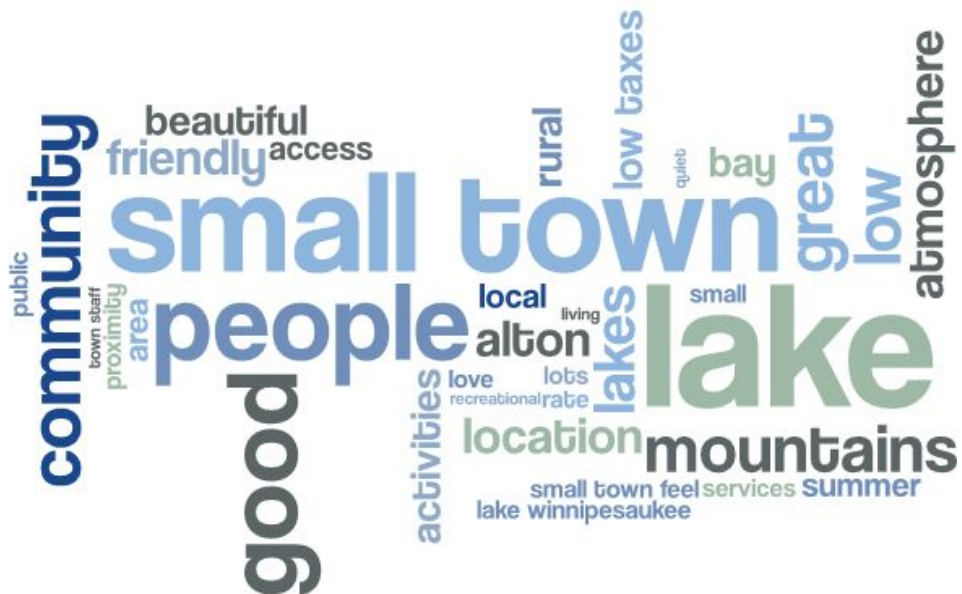
[Add public input on draft goals]

[Add rest of process]

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1.3 Vision

This graphic, called a "word cloud," shows the words or terms most used by community members in response to the survey question, "What do you like best about Alton?" The size of the words in a word cloud is proportional to the number of times the word was used.



It is clear that both Alton's friendly atmosphere and our beautiful landscape are essential ingredients to Alton's treasured small town feel. The small town feel and Lake Winnepesaukee form the foundation for the character of our community. Many people reported that they value the friendly people including town staff and businesses, outdoor activities and community events, and the low tax rate.

The vision for the future of Alton is one where these attributes are stewarded and built upon, where: *[remove numbering after public hearing]*

- 1. The town continues to be a place where both year-round and seasonal residents continue to enjoy a friendly small town atmosphere.
- 2. Everyone feels welcome at community events, town staff are friendly and helpful, and people of all ages can enjoy the beautiful natural landscape.
- 3. Lake-oriented activities, businesses and homes remain an important feature, while diverse four-season recreation opportunities have expanded, improving the sustainability of local businesses.
- 4. Good capital and fiscal planning has enabled high quality community facilities and services to continue while maintaining the relatively low tax rate.
- 5. Good land use planning has enabled some growth to occur while maintaining the distinctive characters of the town's various village and rural areas.
- 6. It is recognized that "business-friendly" and "conservation-minded" are not in conflict with each other, but are one in the same, that the town's clean water, recreation opportunities and scenic resources are the foundation of the town's economic base.

Chapter 2. Priorities for the Next Ten Years

2.1 Goals

The following goals, developed and updated with input from the community, guided the Planning Board's development of this Master Plan update, determined focus areas of the plan and specific recommendations: *[remove numbering after public hearing]*

- 1. Continue to celebrate and build upon Alton's location in the Lakes Region.
- 2. Maintain the small town character of Alton.
- 3. Integrate consideration of livability for all ages into decision-making regarding land use, transportation and other capital investments, and programs, policies and partnerships.
- 4. Protect and improve water quality throughout town; incorporate water quality considerations into decision-making, including land use regulations, programs and policies, and capital budgeting.
- 5. Consider protection of the town's water resources, important habitats and natural areas, scenic views, and linkages between natural areas when prioritizing land for conservation.
- 6. Support community and individual efforts to preserve and highlight the town's cultural and historic structures and features as important elements of community character.
- 7. Continue to support the town's recreation economy, while also encouraging other business development that is compatible with the small town character of the community and will increase job opportunities for residents and the resilience of the local economy.

- 8. Ensure that the Zoning Ordinance, other land use regulations, and capital improvements work together to maintain the rural character of the less developed areas of town.
- 9. Maintain a stable tax rate by balancing expenditures with the tax base and planning ahead for large expenditures.
- 10. Maintain an efficient transportation network with provisions for safe bicycle and pedestrian use.
- 11. Ensure that the town's facilities meet the changing needs of residents, businesses and visitors in an efficient and cost-effective manner.
- 12. Ensure that information technology is integrated into community and municipal infrastructure planning and budgeting.
- 13. Continue to build upon the town's strong recreation focus by maintaining, and, where necessary, improving or expanding existing facilities or adding new public and private facilities when needed.
- 14. Continue to develop and maintain the town's multi-purpose trail network using public and private partnerships.
- 15. Increase the resilience of the community by implementing the town's Hazard Mitigation Plan.
- 16. Maintain the relevance of the Master Plan, e.g., integrate the Action Plan into the development of zoning amendments and annual updates of the Capital Improvements Program, and hold a multi-board meeting annually to review the Action Plan, celebrate progress and identify priorities for the year.

2.2 Priority Issues

The following are issues of high importance to the community. In the Master Plan Update Survey, each suggestion for "What would make Alton even better?" that was made by 25 or more respondents related to one of these issues. Each of these issues also cuts across traditional topic areas in a town plan and needs to be considered in more than one chapter of the plan. They are each important to the well-being of the community and should be a lens through which the town's decision-makers assess alternative courses of action regarding future land use, facilities and services.

Commercial Development

When asked, "What would make Alton even better?", the greatest number of survey responses focused on commercial development. Almost 200 suggestions were provided regarding Alton Village and/or Alton Bay. These included redevelopment, filling empty storefronts, beautification, support for small local businesses, more small businesses/shops, improving walkability and parking, and enhancing historic character. In addition, almost 200 comments were provided regarding the need for more businesses in town without reference to either village area. Comments were provided by those who would like to see more restaurants or retail opportunities in town and those who mentioned jobs, the tax base, specific businesses, and the need for more year-round businesses. Several recommended that any new businesses should be located in or adjacent to the existing commercial areas.

The most recent place-of-work data show that of 906 primary jobs in Alton, only 202 are filled by Alton residents. More than ten times that many employed Alton residents, 2,087, work outside Alton. (US Census Bureau OnTheMap, 2018 data) Economic development that aligns with the skills and education of Alton residents may benefit the community by reducing the time and expense of a commute.

Viewed in the context of the community's highly valued small town feel, it is clear that great care will need to be taken to ensure that future commercial development enhances and complements the town's existing village areas. Context and unintended consequences will be important considerations when reviewing the Town's Zoning Ordinance and other land use regulations as well as when considering improvements to community infrastructure or siting new facilities.

Water Quality

Lake Winnepesaukee is the heart of the community and lake water quality is the lifeblood. The importance of water quality to the community was reported by more than 25 survey respondents. Over 25 respondents also suggested a town sewer system for the village areas. In addition to the Lake being the most common answer to "What do you like best about Alton?", many respondents wrote about the importance of swimming and boating on Lake Winnepesaukee.

The 2017 report from UNH Extension on the results of water quality monitoring from 1984 to 2017 in Alton Bay reported increasing phosphorous levels. The report recommended implementation of best management practices to decrease sources of nonpoint pollution such as stormwater runoff. The map displayed by WinnepesaukeeGateway.org shows Alton Bay as

mesotrophic, meaning only "fair" water quality based on the average phosphorous level reported in the last season's monitoring.

Cyanobacteria has been identified at unsafe levels in several locations in the Merrymeeting River Watershed. Cyanobacteria growth is caused by excess nutrients and is associated with toxic "algal blooms." A watershed management plan with recommendation to address this issue was completed in September 2019.

Dense cottage development on and around the Lake shore over the years has led to a large amount of septic system effluent going into the ground in a small area. Many of the septic systems are undersized by today's standards. Fortunately, septic system failures have been rare and most have been addressed right away by homeowners. NHDES and local officials have worked with homeowners to find solutions to upgrade systems as needed due to failures, enlargement or replacement of homes or conversion from season to year-round use. However, septic loading has been increasing as seasonal cottages are replaced by larger homes and seasonal use increases to year-round. So far, the well-drained soils have prevented any significant impacts on Lake water quality.

Maintaining the water quality in both the town's surface and groundwaters in the future will be essential for both the economic well-being of the community and for the continued enjoyment of water-based recreation. Water quality will be an important consideration in the Town's natural resource, land use and infrastructure planning decisions.

Small Town Feel

Alton's small town feel was second only to the Lake when survey respondents were asked, "What do you like best about Alton?" Many respondents focused on the town's small town atmosphere when asked, "What would make Alton even better?" Over 50 respondents commented on keeping Alton small and rural, a desire to see less development, limiting development, or keeping rural areas rural. Although a large number of respondents expressed a desire for more business development in town, a significant number expressed a desire not to see any more chain stores or chain restaurants. Some specified no more large businesses. Summer traffic volumes were also reported as a concern by many.

Although "small town feel" will mean something slightly different to different people, and be a somewhat relative term, some of the necessary ingredients can be deduced from the survey responses:

- Friendly people, including town employees and businesses
- Small locally owned businesses
- Walkable village areas that have a clear contrast from quiet rural areas with low density development
- Abundant outdoor recreation opportunities

These will be important considerations in the town's natural resource, land use and infrastructure planning decisions.

Recreation Focus

The importance of Alton's outdoor recreation facilities to the community was evident in the survey results. Many made suggestions for additional facilities or improvements to existing facilities when asked, "What would make Alton even better?" Over 50 respondents commented on the town beach, many expressing a desire for a town beach that is more family-friendly, away from the boat ramp. Several would like to see a town beach that is just for residents or taxpayers. Others commented on the size of the beach, its condition or adequacy of parking. Quite a few respondents expressed a desire for a community/recreation center; some mentioned especially the need for year-round activities, sports facilities, a facility for all ages or a place for teens. Over 50 respondents provided suggestions for more outdoor recreation opportunities. These included a desire for water access, more parks and recreation for all ages, trails in general or specifically developing a rail trail to connect with other towns. Upkeep of existing facilities was also mentioned. In addition, over 25 respondents expressed a need for more public docking space and for more parking for the boat launch. Also mentioned by some was a desire to see more access to the lake for residents/taxpayers and improved circulation for launching and parking. Other ways of enjoying Alton's outdoor environment were also mentioned as potential improvements, such as making the town more walkable and holding more community events.

Planning considerations for outdoor recreation include natural resource impacts, compatibility with nearby land uses, and cost. Partnerships and support for private investment in recreation facilities will continue to be important.

Tax Rate

Alton's tax rate, 23rd lowest in the state in 2019 when that year's Department of Revenue Administration equalization ratio was applied, was reported by many survey respondents as one of the things they like best about the town and one that is important to hold onto. Over 50

respondents expressed a desire to keep taxes/expenses low or lower them. Some mentioned concern about taxes on waterfront properties specifically or the ability of retirees to pay taxes.

At the same time, many of the improvements desired by the community, such as more access to the Lake for residents to swim or boat, a community/recreation center, more trails and sidewalks, would commonly be built and maintained with property taxes. Similarly the improved traffic control and enforcement of speed limits and increased road maintenance and paving, each suggested by over 50 respondents, would all require more property tax revenues.

This is not unusual of course. Who doesn't want great services and low taxes? In Alton's case shorefront and island properties and others with Lake access are a great asset for the tax base and enable the community to have quality facilities and a high level of services while benefiting from a relatively low tax rate. Going forward, as both growth and expectations increase demand for facilities and services, it will be important to ensure that the value of existing property in town is maintained, and that increases in any services and facilities funded by property taxes are offset by increases in the tax base. This will require, for example:

- Increased partnerships with local organizations to provide recreation facilities, services and events
- Maintaining an up-to-date capital improvement program and using it each year for capital budgeting
- Good land use planning to ensure that adequate developable land area is identified for desired growth in locations that will be compatible with efficient provision of service, and that new development is compatible with maintenance of property values
- incorporating hazard mitigation considerations into land use and infrastructure planning

Having adequate road specifications in the town's land use regulations and ensuring that adequate provisions are in place to ensure long term private upkeep of new subdivision roads is also essential for ensuring that new roads do not add to the town's maintenance costs.

Changing Demographics

Data indicate that the number of housing units occupied year-round in Alton has been increasing much faster than the town's overall housing stock. From 2010 to 2020, the number of housing units increased just 1% (from 4,281 to 4,309), while the number of occupied units increased 16% (from 2,145 to 2,480) (US Census, 2010, 2020). Many towns in New Hampshire and other northern New England states are reporting "COVID in-migration," people of all ages moving into their seasonal homes year-round, or renting or buying the homes of others, to escape the dense populations and higher case counts of COVID-19 of urban areas and live

where there are numerous opportunities for safe mask-free outdoor recreation. However, age-related data indicate that this is not the trend behind Alton's increase in year-round occupancy. Data from the 2020 US Census show that Alton has continued to grow in population, with a reported increase from 5,250 in 2010 to 5,894 in 2020 (US Census, 2010, 2020). Data also indicate that the make-up of that population has been changing. The 2010 Census reported that 17% of Alton's population was age 65 and over at that time. Sample data indicate that this figure has been increasing; the American Community Survey 2015-2019 5-year average estimate for Alton's population 65 and over was 28%. At the same time, school enrollment has been falling. On October 1, 2010, Alton had 549 students enrolled in pre-K through grade 8. By October 1, 2020, enrollment had dropped to 419 students. Rather than increasing with COVID, this was even fewer students than either of the previous two years (427 in 2018 and 435 in 2019). (NH Department of Education)

Viewed altogether, these figures indicate that retirees represent a significant portion of Alton's recent growth. It will be important to monitor this trend going forward. Shifting demographics indicate a need for the community to evaluate services and facilities to ensure that adequate focus is placed on meeting the needs of Alton's seniors, especially as this demographic continues to age. The town's only senior housing facility already reports a waiting list. Public transportation is not available in Alton for those who have become unable to drive or become unable in the future.

In addition to ensuring that appropriate housing choices are available for seniors wishing to downsize without leaving their home town, some small towns have initiated community-based approaches to assist those aging in place, such as an organized system of checking on residents after storms and during power outages and volunteer driver networks. AARP's Age-Friendly Community program is a great resource for helping town's think about the areas of need that may be associated with an aging population.