

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Grappling with Growth

In 2004, the Town of Bolton appointed a Master Plan Committee (MPC) to consider where Bolton will be headed over the next 20 years, and suggest what can be done in the future so development does not overwhelm the rural vistas and small-town character that attract residents and visitors. The MPC has built on work done by the Long Range Planning Committee, hired a consultant, been assisted by Bolton's new town planner, met with many town groups, and run two public workshops.

Any long term view of Bolton has to grapple with growth, as Bolton is one of the fastest growing towns in the state per capita. The rapid population growth has caused an urgent need for school space and other town services, which in turn has caused an escalation of town debt and taxes. In the last twenty five years Bolton's population grew nearly 80%, property taxes per person grew more than four fold, and town debt per person grew more than twelve fold. High growth will continue as more houses are built on traditional lots, and will accelerate in the wake of the many higher density housing projects now in the planning and permitting stages.

Bolton's growth cannot be stopped, as the town lies in the path of Boston's sprawl and still has a lot of undeveloped land. The goal is to moderate this growth, not stop it; much of the Master Plan is about moderating this growth, and coping with its impact. The two most important strategies for tempering this growth are to efficiently meet the State's affordable housing requirements, and to remove open land from development when it can be done economically. These two strategies are covered in **Chapters 5 and 6**. But first, the report will describe a vision for Bolton in 20 years, and then review the recent and projected growth data to see just how fast Bolton has been growing.

1.2 The Community Master Planning Process in Bolton

Creating a Master Plan is a process that starts with data collection and an understanding of general goals, and leads toward specific planning proposals. Throughout all steps of the process, community residents guide the plan by identifying important issues and challenges in the town, setting goals, and responding to possible planning strategies. In the case of the Bolton Master Plan, public input was solicited directly—in a town-wide survey conducted in 2002 and two public meetings in Spring 2005—and through the representative Master Plan Committee (MPC), which includes past and present members of town boards and commissions, as well as residents and business people within the town. The MPC made a conscious decision to reduce the size of the Master Plan, and rather than a traditional boilerplate report that could be used for planning "Anytown, USA", the document better reflects the personality of Bolton. Technical assistance was provided by Daylor Consulting Group, Inc. of Braintree, Massachusetts and the Bluestone Planning Group of Cambridge, Massachusetts, both of which worked with the Committee to help frame key issues and opportunities for public discussion, lead public meetings, develop Master Plan recommendations, and prepare reports, maps and graphics.

1.3 Key Findings

A number of important themes came to light through the master planning process following the analysis of background research, the investigation of the most recent planning tools available to towns like Bolton, and solicitation of public opinion. These key findings include:

- Bolton has been one of the fastest growing towns in our area, and this is projected to continue through 2030.
- In a recent survey, Bolton residents identified three top priorities: moderating tax growth, providing good schools, and preserving rural character. The pressure of population growth makes it difficult to satisfy all of these priorities.
- Two proactive moves that Bolton can make to significantly slow population growth over the next twenty years are: to efficiently meet the State's affordable housing requirements, and to remove land from development when it can be done economically.
- To meet the State's affordable housing requirements, developers should be encouraged to build 40B projects with an increased percentage of affordable units, rather than just the 25% minimum requirement. Some multi-family rental projects count 100% toward the State requirements and also provide a range of housing for residents.
- The Town should continue its practice of preserving open space, especially landmark parcels, at a relatively low cost per acre, as it both preserves Bolton's rural character and slows the growth of taxes from what they would become if the land was developed into housing.
- The Bolton age groups that are growing fastest are families with student-age children. It would provide a more diverse town, and help taxes, if housing for other age groups and life stages, both young and old, were encouraged.
- Encouraging business growth does not greatly reduce residential tax bills, as even doubling all the business in town would only lower residential taxes 5%. Many towns along I-495 that have added lots of business use do not have lower tax bills.
- Businesses compatible with Bolton's character should be encouraged. Agriculture should be fostered by initiating a Bolton Agricultural Commission and Right-to-Farm bylaw.
- Bolton should try to protect its most important landmarks and natural resources, including its six large unprotected farms, three forests, and a potential future water source.
- Bolton's historic resources should be protected by establishing a local historic district along Main Street in Bolton Center.
- Bolton should pass the CPA (Community Preservation Act) to tap into a major state funding source that can be used for acquisition and preservation of open space, historic buildings and landscapes, and the creation and support of affordable housing.

Final 31 August 06

- Enhanced Zoning Bylaws can further improve our open space zoning, create design review guidelines to encourage compatible commercial buildings, and control modern uses that have been created since the Table of Uses was last updated, such as the “big box” store.
- A temporary Bolton School Needs Assessment Committee should evaluate when and where new classrooms and school space will be needed to meet the expected student population growth. As a result of the MPC’s suggestion, this committee was appointed in September 2005. Refer to **Chapter 10** for this committee’s findings.
- A permanent Bolton Capital Planning Committee should be formed to advise on all capital projects including library, police station, town hall, recreation space, school buildings and open space protection. This would provide more perspective across all the competing investment needs of a very rapidly growing town.

1.4 Report Organization

Following this brief introduction to the Master Plan, Bolton’s Vision and Goals are summarized in **Chapter 2** and the major issues facing Bolton are covered in **Chapter 3**. The Plan commences a detailed discussion of the strategies for moving forward in **Chapters 5 through 11**. Finally, **Chapter 12** outlines the suggested steps towards implementation of the plan, with an evaluation program to help the Town measure its progress.

1.5 How to Use the Plan

This plan is a compilation of many hours of research and analysis on issues specific to Bolton and the town’s future. While this document is not law, town officials and committees should refer to it for strategies that will help Bolton progress towards the vision shared by its citizens. As a policy document, the Plan provides guidance on proper execution of the strategies and the Implementation Plan in **Chapter 12**. Over time certain strategies may prove to be more successful than others; subsequently, the town should revisit this document in five years both to gauge its progress towards achieving the goals and vision outlined in this Plan and revise elements that may be outdated.



Bolton team at the Firemen’s Muster