

INTRODUCTION

Atkinson's Setting

The Town of Atkinson is located in Rockingham County, New Hampshire, in the lower Merrimack River Valley, on the northern border of State of Massachusetts. This region is one of the most rapidly developing regions in the United States. Rockingham County is one of the fastest growing counties in the southern New Hampshire Growth Belt. Over 60 million people live within a one day drive of the Merrimack Valley.

Atkinson is bordered by Hampstead and Derry to the north; Salem to the west; and Plaistow to the east. Salem and Derry comprise two of the six largest municipalities in the State of NH; the three largest, Nashua, Manchester and Portsmouth, respectively, are all within a 35 mile radius of Atkinson. Concord, the capitol of NH, is less than an hour drive from Atkinson via Route 93. Likewise, Boston, MA, an international, commercial and population center, is also within an hour drive from Atkinson, again via Route 93.

Atkinson is positioned in the middle of the New England Transportation Triad. Manchester Airport is easily accessible to the northwest, as is Pease International Trade Port to the northeast in Portsmouth/Newington and Boston's Logan Airport to the south.

NH Route 111, which runs east/west through the northern part of Atkinson, is heavily used by Town commuters, as is north/south Route 121 (Main Street) which bisects the Town. Additionally, Atkinson is located within close proximity to Route 125 to the east, Route 93 to the west, Route 101 to the north and Route 495 to the south in Massachusetts.

The Boston and Maine rail line, runs through the southern part of Atkinson, connecting Portland, ME, to Boston, MA. Commuter rail service from Portland to Boston is presently expected to be restored in 1999.

History of the Atkinson Master Plan

The first Master Plan for the Town of Atkinson was prepared in 1980 to document the needs of the Town and desires of its residents. It also contained recommendations for improving the existing zoning ordinance and provided the necessary scientific data to support these changes. The 1985 Master Plan Supplement made recommendations to allow Atkinson to meet its obligation to provide its fair share of low-moderate income housing while continuing to maintain the Town's rural character. The 1990 Master Plan amended the original plan, bringing it up to date with the changing needs of the town.

At the time of preparation of the 1980 Master Plan, Atkinson was coming off of the rapid growth period which had occurred in the late 1960's and early 1970's, and the Planning Board was looking for ways to avert similar growth patterns in the future. At the same time, the Planning Board recognized the need for zoning which was based upon scientific documentation. The Town was learning to recognize a need to integrate the rights of the individual landowner with restrictions designed to protect the rights of many to enjoy their property and preserve their property values. Thus, the Introduction of the 1980 Master Plan includes an extensive treatise on the importance of land-use regulations to promote orderly growth and protect the larger community from the actions of individuals.

By the mid 1970's, it was apparent that the majority of Atkinson citizens recognized a need for strong, but fair, land-use regulations. In 1976, a separate Conservation Commission was appointed which, two years later, prepared a Wetlands Ordinance, subsequently adopted by the Town. This measure was supported strongly in all community surveys. In the following years, Atkinson completely revamped its regulations and repeatedly supported this process at the polls. In addition to comprehensive zoning and revised and strengthened subdivision regulations, the town adopted Site Plan Review regulations, an Excavation Regulation, road construction specifications, and National Fire Association Standards.

Atkinson residents place a significant value on the preservation of the rural character of the Town, as shown by the results of all four surveys conducted over the past 18 years. The 1985 survey indicated that 58% of the residents chose to live in Atkinson for this reason, and the 1998 survey results confirm the residents' desire to maintain the Town's rural character. The strong value placed on maintenance of open space and preservation of wetlands, along with the related desire to responsibly control growth, must be recognized in developing future land-use regulations.

The 1998 Update

This most recent update to the Master Plan strives to incorporate the history of prior planning efforts in Atkinson, along with current data, philosophy and citizen opinion. In addition, a new format has been introduced with the hopes that from this update forward the Plan itself becomes a usable "living document" that is both easy to comprehend, utilize, and update. Individually, the chapters stand alone for comprehensive treatment of particular issues and for ease of updating on a singular approach; together they form a more complete and in-depth picture of the current status of the Town of Atkinson and a more tangible and direct vision of specific issues and solutions for Atkinson's future.

First, there are larger margins. These margins are provided to allow people using this document to keep notes and maintain a constant "file" of data with the Plan itself, for when updates are necessary or when decisions and interpretations are made that enhance the usability and understandability of the document. Second, the document itself is presented in a three-ring binder format to allow for individualized updating when needed. Rather than viewing the

document only as a comprehensive singular statement, this choice reinforces the concept that the Master Plan is a compilation of statements of a variety of issues and that each chapter presents its own unique policy. This format eases individualized updating and permits the involvement of numerous town boards and commissions in the process. Furthermore, changes in the status of public facilities or policy shifts regarding public services can be reflected in an update to that chapter without having to reproduce the entire plan. Chapters can be easily discarded, making way for the new, and the Plan will thrive as the living changing document it is meant to be.

Each Chapter will be individually numbered and provided with its own date of revision. Furthermore, with each revision a sheet at the front of the Plan will include the latest update for each chapter. Recommendations will appear both at the end of each individual chapter, as well as within a separate recommendations section which can be more easily reviewed.

In preparation for the writing of this Master Plan, the Planning Board conducted an informal survey, the goal of which was to ascertain how Atkinson residents feel about their community, what they feel are the Town's strengths and weaknesses, what is special about Atkinson and how they would like to see their community develop in the future. The results of this survey have influenced the production of this Master Plan.

The Master Plan provides the basic data and rationale and expresses the broad principles which serve as guidelines to the Planning Board, Selectmen, and other town bodies as they plan for the future.

The Planning Board is authorized under the provisions of RSA 674 et seq. to develop a strategy, in the form of a Master Plan, to guide the future growth of the community.

This document is that plan. It replaces the existing plan and brings it up to date with respect to the changing needs of the community.

The Plan serves many purposes. It brings together an analysis of the social, economic and physical characteristics of the community, the distribution of population, income statistics, where people work, the capacity of public facilities, and the amounts of open space, forest, and playgrounds. The Master Plan also provides a means to coordinate land development with Town facilities, including schools, recreation, police, and fire, as well as other services provided by the Town. The Plan serves as a guide in the making of daily decisions regarding development and the use of land in terms of their long-range consequences.

Today more than ever, planners must become ever more involved with environmental concerns. The conflict between growth and preservation of natural and cultural resources becomes more and more apparent as the amount of open, developable land diminishes. The balance between property rights and regulation becomes more focused as governments struggle to preserve disappearing resources that are an integral part of community identity, health, and well-being. The Master Plan must provide a statement concerning the objectives for the protection of wetlands, streams, forests and floodplains. The tenets of historic preservation strive to keep important the buildings that are a part of the permanent environment. Through these actions our

future generations and current citizens will be able to connect with and learn the lessons of our past, while looking toward the future.

The people we serve are the people of Atkinson. This is not just the people who vote at today's election, but our ancestors, and most importantly our children who stand to inherit the results of our decisions and actions. It is they who will benefit from the solid and well-reasoned decisions we make today; they will be forced to suffer the consequences of our mistakes. This Master Plan must reflect these interests and priorities, and the programs that are implemented must help the community survive and maintain the desired quality of life which is a critical aspect of Atkinson's identity as a town. At the same time, we must be aware that people have also become more sophisticated in pursuing special interests. They are better informed, understand the laws and procedures have greater political skills, and are more persistent. They have learned that planning brings order to change, and therefore, seek to influence the process of planning. The challenge of planners is to balance the demands of competing interests into a dynamic community consensus sufficient to enhance their decisions.

In the future, planners will continue to work under conditions of scarce economic resources and will constantly be faced with the competing priorities of residents, neighborhoods, interest groups, and both resident and non-resident developers. The delivery of adequate public services will pose serious problems for the foreseeable future. As our town continues to grow, it will undergo recurring adjustments. It is the task of the planners to minimize the impacts these cycles of change have on the town's residents.