

PLANNING ISSUES

Introduction

The purpose of identifying planning issues is to articulate issues unique to the Town of Atkinson in order to assure that the underlying problems of the community are acknowledged and dealt with to the greatest extent possible, through both local and state enabling legislation. The information included in this section is based on the Consultant's observations and review of surveys conducted by the Master Plan Coordinating Team.

Planning Issue No. 1 Maintenance of Quality of Life in Atkinson

When Town Meeting voted for the two-acre zoning, the primary purpose of this was to maintain Atkinson's residential features. Subsequent surveys conducted by the Master Plan Coordinating Team have indicated that the people prefer the small town atmosphere; they like Atkinson because of its good air and quaintness.

An expressed concern and an issue to be addressed is the maintenance of a slow rate of growth in order to provide the services necessary to maintain the community atmosphere and quality of life that exist today.

Planning Issue No. 2 Town Government vs Individual Rights

Many communities, as they face the question of how to protect the land resources over which they have jurisdiction, have faced the equally perplexing dilemma of curtailing individual freedoms. The residents of Atkinson have indicated a high degree of willingness to yield some measures of personal freedom in exchange for an attractive and healthy town by adopting two-acre zoning and, thereby a land use restriction.

Continued community participation is important to the predominance of the community over individual, indiscriminate development. The issue is: as one gains protection, one must give up certain rights. The majority must exercise their right in controlling the community's destiny over short term individual gains at the expense of the town.

Planning Issue No. 3 Adequate Town Services

Atkinson has maintained adequate community services with a minimum of "dipping into the public trough". This is to say that Atkinson, save for the large school budget, has maintained a frugal and prudent local administrative operation. As the community grows, these services must be continued and can be continued as long as the growth is moderate and within acceptable numbers.

One issue to be addressed in the planning process is the provision for more recreational and open space, which is important as land becomes consumed by the small property owner through the continued subdivision of land.

Planning Issue No. 4 Preservation of Historic Characteristics and Open Spaces

A planning issue must be the identification and preservation of historic sites, historic areas and those areas that are visually unique,

Planning Issue No. 5 Critical Areas of Preservation

An issue is the protection of identified critical land areas. These consist of wetland areas, high water table situations, areas of shallow bedrock and other identified land areas in the Natural Resources Inventory.

As the Master Planning process continues, additional planning issues may be identified and addressed, and suggested implementation measures will be considered at subsequent town meetings.

PLAN ALTERNATIVES

Introduction

The Planning Board, by nature of its function and as provided for under New Hampshire enabling legislation, has been charged with the responsibility of providing the community with measures that will guide future development of a municipality. The Master Plan, by its very nature, is not a stagnant document, but is a guideline that represents the end result of a series of studies. The alternatives, one or a combination of several that ultimately spell out the program, will be translated into a comprehensive Master Plan to be adopted by the Planning Board and serve as a basis for recommendations through legislative and regulatory measures acted upon by citizen vote. At this point, the alternatives submitted are offered for perusal by the Consultant. The Consultant will submit these alternatives and utilize citizen and committee input in order to devise a Land Use Plan and subsequently a comprehensive Master' Plan reflecting the community's choice and based on experience, legislative feasibility, and practicality.

- Alternative I: Continuation of Present Zoning Provisions
- Alternative II: Emphasis on Residential Development
- Alternative III: Emphasis on Conservation
- Alternative IV: Emphasis on Economic Development
- Alternative V: Emphasis on Slow Growth

Alternative 1: Continuation of Present Zoning Provisions

With little planning justification, the town is requiring two acres per dwelling unit. This has led to it-i at-ion and a temporary slowdown in application for subdivisions. In spite of this and a fight money market situation, the community has still grown. The present concept is one allowing for relatively low density development and recognizing the need for some community services in the form of industrial development along Route 111 and commercial development in the center of town and at the southern border near Route 125. The present Zoning Ordinance obviously reflects the wishes of the majority of people in Atkinson. In order to be valid, the Ordinance must be subject to the test of justification under New Hampshire statutes.

Implications of This Alternative

One implication of this alternative is the continued rate of growth in Atkinson. Atkinson has established itself sufficiently in the larger regional content and is a desirable community in which to reside.

A second implication is the continued pressure on the small amount of land areas remaining that are suitable for development. Even though Atkinson has adopted a wetlands regulation protecting these wetland areas, it is this pressure that may ultimately lead to a two-acre density provision rather than the two acre lot size.

Present conditions, with the continued development patterns as they exist based on studies of soil and subsoil conditions, will not provide for the continued potability of private water supply realizing the continued disposal of liquid wastes into the ground. Unless additional restrictive measures are taken, increased developments will ultimately affect the ground water situation as it already has done in some areas.

A further implication of the continuation of this growth pattern is the enforcement of rules and regulations designed to protect the health and safety of those residing in Atkinson.

Should development continue, the possibility of a required public sewer system will be necessary, certainly in areas that indicate waste water seepage into the groundwater table. This would be at a considerable expense to the community and certainly to those required to hook on to such a system.

Growth at the existing rate will place an increased burden on community services as is beginning to be demonstrated through public sentiment. Atkinson has managed to provide excellent community services for its residents to date. Adjustments must be made and can be made without a great increase in the taxes if diligent growth management were applied. The continued two-acre approach does not seem to have the slowing down effect that some may have expected.

This alternative would have a dispersed demand on community services and facilities. This means that rather than provide services in key locations where development is planned to take place, dispersed and therefore expensive community services will need to be provided. Among these are highway improvements, public safety improvements (fire and police), and dispersed open space recreational facilities.

Two-acre zoning throughout the community will have a scattered development pattern as its end result, which is not only expensive to maintain but difficult to provide with simple services. This alternative will continue to provide for a rural residential environment. Careful location of drives and buildings must be practiced in order to avoid giving Atkinson the typical "suburban look" which, thus far, it has managed to avoid.

In evaluating the highway network, this Consultant concludes that two-acre patterns will require highway improvements in order to provide services equal to today's standards.

Alternative II: Emphasis on Residential Development

This alternative, in contrast to the present two-acre zoning, would be one that would allow for indiscriminate residential development requiring a minimum of land area, yet still protecting the wetland areas. The emphasis would be on creating a residential environment that would be conducive to building single and multi-family homes requiring services and increased recreational and open space needs. Along with this would be the increased demand for road construction and road maintenance. Atkinson could adopt such an alternate indicating their desire to develop to maximum density. The most tangible implication would be the necessary provision of either municipal sewer or water and ultimately, both. The ultimate demand would be to create a water system that not only would render potable water but would render a water supply adequate for fire protection.

A residential community generally insists on services not only by the town but for shopping and conveniences. Offices and stores will have to be part of the community plan, to a larger extent.

Experience has shown that once a large number of people congregate in a community, the desire for employment opportunities increases and fosters industrial development. A residential community ultimately seeking industrial development to support its economic base would find it difficult to adopt and practice growth management to a measurable benefit.

Atkinson would develop to a higher density than presently envisioned. The remaining 3,825 acres would, as in the case of nearby communities, accommodate by allowing densities of two families per acre (or easily an additional 20,000 people or a designed population of 25,000) in contrast to the 11 000 designed population under the two-acre proviso. Such an alternate has been adopted by other communities, and the long-range implications of such densities can be observed in communities like Salem and Derry.

Alternative III: Emphasis on Conservation

By connotation, such an alternative would mean the protection of the natural environment. The protection of the natural environment would preclude excessive development and require most careful planning and, in particular, location of any manmade changes to Atkinson's natural environment.

Implications of the Plan

Plans for conservation could essentially have as its implication a no-growth plan. Aside from the conservation of natural resources, it would also mean a conservation of financial resources of a community. The realities of community government, particularly in southern New Hampshire, would make a conservation plan too ideal to be acceptable.

A conservation alternative would be most protective of present private investments. It would encourage historic preservation and stabilize community services and functions. Signs of development such as leach field effluents, advertising signs of home occupations, increased surface runoff through pavements indicate an ever-growing community. Conservation as an alternate would preclude industrial and commercial development of any kind. It would leave Atkinson depending on services and employment opportunities rendered elsewhere.

Nonetheless, in part, conservation must be an element in the Comprehensive Plan and for this reason should be considered as an alternative, parts of which should be incorporated into an ultimate Master Plan for the town.

Alternative IV: Emphasis on Economic Development

Many communities are developing industrial parks designed to provide employment opportunities for the residents of the community and the residents in the surrounding areas. Such industrial parks are often an asset to the community; and, while they do provide employment opportunities for the residents of the area, they place a burden on the services that the community provides.

An alternative of this nature would have to focus on the accessibility to Atkinson via Routes 111 and 125. A strategic location for such a development would be in the southeast corner of the town where not only access to the interstate is available within two miles, but where rail access could be available.

In the long range, such an alternative would have to be designed in a manner to allow for expansion should the community be successful in attracting large scale and small scale manufacturing industries and warehouse operations.

Implications of the Plan

A plan of such a nature would require needed services such as sewer and water. If they could not be provided by the community itself, the money could be raised through federal economic development assistance. The expectation of having manufacturing establishments provide their own water supply necessary for fire protection and waste disposal facilities would place Atkinson in a relatively unfair position competitively speaking.

The second implication of such a measure is Atkinson's shortcomings as far as large-scale community services are concerned. Fire protection and public safety services, while adequate to serve the present residential community, would not be capable of handling any kind of economic development endeavors.

An alternative with economic development in the form of manufacturing industry, warehousing, and large-scale service and shopping facilities would have a severe impact on the community both financially and physically. Such a plan alternative would be topping the community's resources beyond which Atkinson appears to be financially capable.

Economic endeavors apparently carried out in Atkinson largely through home occupations are of significance. The community has accepted such home occupations 'in the past, but the fact that they are increasing must be recognized in the Comprehensive Planning efforts. Areas must be set aside for the location of such "home occupations" which are growing to the point where they are creating adversities in residential neighborhoods.

Alternative V: Emphasis on Slow Growth

A slow growth alternative has less land use implications than it does socioeconomic implications. A slow growth plan alternative takes into consideration the community awareness for the preservation of the quality of life in the Town of Atkinson.

A slow growth alternative would establish protectorates of areas unsuitable for development without large scale expenditures for public sewer and water supply. It would require the establishment of lot sizes recognizing the capability of lands beyond the presently established two-acre limitations. In addition to the recognition of the land's limitation to absorb development, a public policy must also follow that will bring about a greater growth management within the community's fiscal capabilities.

Implications of the Plan

A slow growth plan would place the community in control of future development based on the town's capability to provide adequate services, protect the presently developed areas, and place future developments in locations where soil capabilities exist to carry such development without large scale community investments.

A slow growth plan alternative would require a slowing down of growth from the present rate of 5% to a lesser rate approaching 20% per year or 20% per decade.

In contrast to the other plan alternatives, it would establish a definite time schedule for growth and community investment, recognizing the implications of such growth on the obligations of the community to provide municipal services.

A slow growth policy might have a curtailment of subdivision of land areas (as it is presently experiencing as a result of the two-acre zoning). However, such an initial curtailment in marketability of land areas would have a long-range effect (as experienced in other communities) of increased land values. It would allow for a community development pattern to accommodate not only single-family housing but multi family housing in a cluster development concept basis.

A slow growth plan alternative would recognize conversions of seasonal homes, particularly in the Island Pond area. To slow such conversions, stringent enforcement of year around requirements for water supply and sewage disposal facilities (the requirements of distances to water etc.) should be met, hopefully discouraging conversions from taking place.

The slow growth plan alternative would have as its basis the designation of developable land areas and assigned priorities for development based on community services, both public and private, necessary to support such limited growth.

It would be the responsibility of the Planning Board to supervise the growth, approve subdivision lots on a scheduled basis, paying heed to the community's ability to support growth and development, and, through the Board of Selectmen, curtail issuances of building permits.

A slow growth plan alternative would be a two-fold approach to comprehensive planning and plan implementation. The first would be the physical plan development, the town setting aside areas for development and assigning such developments on a priority basis. The second would be the community's fiscal capability to furnish required services, taking into consideration the realities of local assessment and taxes to be raised.