



Fairfield Hills

Master Plan Review Committee

Executive Summary

1. *Vision Statement:*

The following vision statement is informed by the work of the committee, including our extensive public engagement process. During all phases of this process, we repeatedly heard the call to have a clear and comprehensive vision. The vision we are offering below reinforces and largely coincides with the vision implicit within the current Master Plan, but states it more explicitly.

We envision Fairfield Hills as a vibrant sustainable destination where all members of the community can go to enjoy recreational, social, cultural, indoor and outdoor activities. The campus provides a home for some municipal services and a gathering place for a variety of town-wide events. Small retail stores, restaurants, and professional offices are nestled harmoniously within the campus. The well-designed campus connects the history of the site with its future, with the town maintaining overall control of the property and preserving the campus environment and architectural style.

1.1 *Supported Uses*

Community Culture and Arts: A rich assortment of cultural and artistic events awaits residents visiting the campus. These events may include both indoor and outdoor exhibits and performances, as well as arts education classes tailored to diverse age groups and a garden, commemorating the facility's history, staff, and patients.

Community Recreation: Indoor and outdoor recreation and sports provide year-round entertainment. Athletic fields support local teams and leagues as well as the occasional non-team event, for example pet walks, auto shows, etc. An expanded Parks & Recreation facility houses the department staff, pools, teen meeting zone, etc. During winter, the extended campus becomes a haven for the outdoor enthusiast with cross country skiing and sledding.

Town and Community Services: A portion of the campus provides for community needs, such as social services, emergency services and a town green.

Open Land: Visitors are greeted by open areas offering an interconnecting trail system. Some of these areas are designated for potential future town and community needs while others are more formally protected (e.g., the High Meadow). These areas of the campus are available for non-permanent, community-initiated uses including, for example, expanded community gardens, playing fields, and community event areas.

Commercial/Economic: Limited retail / restaurant businesses are available to serve the needs of those participating in activities on the campus. In addition, a few buildings house small-businesses and professional offices, creating a rich entrepreneurial environment for the Newtown community. This potentially provides a small revenue stream to the town to help reduce the overall financial burden of the campus.

1.2 *Potential Cohesive Themes*

The committee believes that distinctive themes have begun to emerge from the broad vision above that have the potential to inspire the town and galvanize resources for development. These themes surfaced during our public participation sessions and were highly supported by survey results. The themes below are not intended to be mutually exclusive. Rather, they could be

designed to complement one another, thus the long term development of the property may be a blend. At this time, the themes are framed out but in need of further detail. We support the creation of a process (see below) for further exploring these and other possibilities.

A Community Culture and Arts Destination: This theme enhances the cultural opportunities available to visitors by expanding the number and extent of arts venues and educational experiences. It also could grow to include an art school, museums, galleries, and a space for artists' studios, along with retail businesses that cater to artists and their customers.

A Community Recreation Destination: This theme extends the recreational opportunities by working with the private sector to provide a wider range of activities including, for example, an ice rink, arcade, YMCA (or equivalent), retail focusing on recreational activities, and classes like rock climbing and plant identification, etc.

Agricultural Activity and Destination: In conjunction with the general uses for recreation, culture and arts and community services, the campus, along with prime agricultural lands on the other side of Wasserman way, could support a range of activities connected to the sustainable agriculture movement. These might include organic farming of vegetables and livestock and the use of this food (and that from other local farms) in a "farm to table" restaurant and perhaps even in our local schools.

2. Additional Recommendations

2.1 Process Recommendations

Recommendation: Ensure Operational Transparency

This committee's public engagement work identified a great deal of interest and concern about the fate of the FFH property. This work also identified the perception that the flow of information to the public was not optimized. The current Master Plan does not provide for, nor do current processes specifically support, transparency in action planning and decision making beyond scheduled public meetings. We suggest: 1) a review of how we are presently communicating what we are considering for the property and (2) open-minded consideration of all possible options for enhancing communications with the public. One example might be assignment of specific responsibilities to a town employee in the role of a "FFH public communication liaison", to ensure effective public communication of all related activities.

Recommendation: Support Continued Public Participation

As noted above, our work identified a great deal of interest and concern about the fate of the FFH property, including what role citizens might play. We recommend the continued involvement of citizens in key activities as the FFH vision and plans materialize. Continued public participation will maintain levels of interest, commitment, and resources both within and beyond the town borders. The Victory Gardens are a recent example of what can happen when engaged citizens are empowered.

In line with the Operational Transparency recommendation above, we recommend that as part of the revised Master Plan, there should be a specific element outlining public participation in support of the refinement and implementation of the Vision. As an example, town leadership should enable support for the emergence of citizen group(s) to continue development and exploration of the themes suggested by this Fairfield Hills Master Plan Review Committee in section 1.2. Ideally, these citizen teams could be active partners with town personnel in plan implementation.

Recommendation: Drive towards one town-wide plan, but repeat the Fairfield Hills Review process until the vision is more fully implemented.

We believe that Fairfield Hills should not be treated in isolation from the rest of the town properties and needs. However in the near-term, we recommend repeating the existing five

year review process for the Fairfield Hills campus until such a time that the character of the property more fully emerges. We strongly recommend that the subsequent review(s) includes public engagement processes similar to those used by this committee and those specified above. Specifically, the next review can provide an appropriate focus on the unique needs and opportunities of the Fairfield Hills campus, but should also include a town-wide perspective that incorporates all municipal lands, design districts, and the broader needs of the town as we attempted to do for this review.

2.2 Implementation Recommendations

Recommendation: Support the Fairfield Hills Authority's ongoing review of the lease structure and terms.

We support the FHA in their review of the current lease structure in order to make it more viable for development, including reevaluation of the up-front lease payments and term flexibility. However, we highly recommend that any lease include language to ensure that promised action will be taken especially should terms include very long timeframes.

Recommendation: Do not consider selling a parcel of land at Fairfield Hills unless certain guidelines are met.

We do not recommend the consideration of selling a parcel of land at Fairfield Hills unless the following guidelines are met:

- 1) It is in support of a cohesive theme along the lines of section 1.2.
- 2) It includes a robust public engagement process that leads to public support.
- 3) It is limited to those areas targeted for economic development (i.e., "open land" designations should not be considered at any time).
- 4) There is clear economic benefit for the town.
- 5) It is an open and transparent deal.

For a full listing of potential benefits and concerns refer to the full report.

Recommendation: Demolish buildings deemed unusable but act now to save others.

We face a very difficult and unfortunate state of affairs. There is a strong interest – both on this committee and in the town at large – in saving at least some of the buildings on the campus. However, we believe the presence of other buildings represents a substantial barrier to realizing the recreation and public use themes desired by residents as well as economic development. We recommend that the buildings that are most clearly too far gone and which could pose a public danger and liability for the town should be removed on the most aggressive schedule possible. The committee sees Shelton Hall as the clearest candidate in this category. Its site is also suitable for a town green and gazebo – something with a relatively modest cost (once the demo is complete) – that was indicated in our public engagement processes to be highly desired, as it could support community and cultural events. Should the town have the resources for further demolition, we recommend moving outward to Kent, Cochran, and Canaan.

At the same time (and despite the call for demolition after five years), we continue to support the recommendations in the master plan that cite certain buildings as reusable, and encourage continued efforts to salvage and repurpose them. Also, to the extent that they can be identified and the costs are not prohibitive, measures to prevent further serious deterioration should be considered in the most appealing buildings, such as Newtown, Woodbury, Stratford, and Plymouth.

Recommendation: Undertake/Continue a comprehensive review of existing infrastructure.

Most of the sewer and water supply lines are old and have not been maintained well over the years. It is recommended that the water, sewer, and storm drain lines along with other utilities continue to be mapped and evaluated. Recommendation for improvements should be

inventoried. It is recommended that existing Town staff at the Public Works Department along with Land Use departments be used for this work. We do acknowledge that staff may need some consultant evaluation but this could be minimized by a detailed in house review.

Recommendation: Replace the Fairfield Hills Adaptive Reuse Zone with a finer-grained, use-based zoning map.

Currently, the Master Plan designates 150 or more acres as an adaptive reuse zone. We believe that such broad-stroke zoning has been confusing for the citizens of Newtown. Instead, we recommend that specified uses be ascribed to particular areas in the campus. Some areas may be designated for a single purpose, while others may be designated for several. For example, one area may be identified as “Open Land” while another could be identified as “Town and Community Services” and/or “Community Culture and Arts”. The latter area would then be targeted for one or the other use, or a blending of the two. Such zoning will better guide development in achieving a more cohesive character for the overall property. Should development opportunities arise that fall outside of the noted uses for an area, such opportunities should be discussed pursuant to the process recommendations above. The full report includes a hypothetical map to help illustrate this proposal. This map is intended only to clarify the concept, not to make specific recommendations.

Recommendation: Designate High Meadow as a protected area.

The High Meadow is considered by many as the crown jewel of the property. Currently, it boasts spectacular views and an all-purpose trail system. We recommend that this area of campus be explicitly protected for public passive use, including trails, picnic areas, open fields, and potentially sheltered areas.

3. *Not Recommended for the Fairfield Hills Master Plan*

At this time, there is very little support for housing on the Fairfield Hills property. While many of us on the committee believe that diversifying Newtown’s housing stock and encouraging sustainable residential development are critical issues for Newtown, we agree that supporting housing on the Fairfield Hills campus at this time is not in the best interests of the property or the community.

Likewise, there is currently little support for dedicating land at Fairfield Hills for a potential school facility. Therefore, even though the last Master Plan explicitly called out educational uses, we recommend that such educational use be omitted in the revision. Should the need for an educational facility emerge in the future, we highly recommend that alternate spaces and approaches be reviewed fully, prior to using land at Fairfield Hills.