



TOWN OF SWAMPSCOTT

MASTER PLAN COMMITTEE

ELIHU THOMSON ADMINISTRATION BUILDING
22 MONUMENT AVENUE, SWAMPSCOTT, MA 01907

JUNE 1, 2015 MEETING MINUTES

Time: 7:00– 9:00 pm

Location: Swampscott Senior Center, 200 Essex St. (rear)

Members Present: Toni Bandrowicz, Sylvia Belkin, Christopher Bibby, Gail Brock, Erin DeRoche, Neal Duffy, Angela Ippolito, Brett Laker, Amy O'Connor, Jim Olivetti, Robert Powell, Jackson Schultz, Ralph Souppa, Sarah Walker, and Mary Webster

Members Absent: Gino Cresta, Trish Malphrus, and Andrew Steingiser

Others Present: Pete Kane (Town Planner), Matthew Smith (MAPC), Christine Madore (MAPC), Tony Paprocki, and Susan Munafo

Third meeting of the Master Plan Committee opened at 7:05 pm.

Master Plan Committee Meeting #3

June 1, 2015 7:00pm – 9:00pm

I. WELCOME

A. APPROVAL OF APRIL 27 MEETING MINUTES

Minutes approved with the addition of several items: 1) Include first and surnames of members present, members absent; and others present; 2) Use first reference for identifying “Swampscott 2025 The Master Plan” which was shortened to “S25” for convenience in the minutes. 3) Add first names to list of committee members attending/not attending.

II. VISIONING MEETING OVERVIEW

A. GENERAL FINDINGS

Matt reviewed the findings from the visioning forum. He said attendees were engaged and took to the exercises. He said that was an encouraging sign for us as planners, that you have an engaged community. For future forums, it's important to stress in future messaging the need for residents to attend.

i. Open House Exercises

Who attended? Matt reviewed who attended the visioning forum: There were 60 plus/minus attendees: 50% male/50% female; a good range of ages (19% were 30-39, which is encouraging); mostly higher income households (56% had HH income of \$140,000-plus and little representation (11%) from those who earn less than \$80,000); and an encouraging mix of new comers and long-time residents. Matt suggested that the Swampscott 2025 The Master Plan project (S25) might have to find a way to reach out to lower-income households in future forums and create, if needed, focus groups for that cohort.

Word cloud: Matt reviewed the one word that those attending the visioning forum best describes Swampscott. There was, he said, a good deal of agreement and some very different opinions. Ocean, beach coastal were the most common. Neighborhood, small and pretty were also common, as was overbuilt, expensive, and congested. He said his favorite words in the word cloud were “unrealized potential.”

What businesses did attendees want to locate here? Restaurants were most noteworthy, especially since Swampscott has a local options meals tax which could be used to generate additional tax revenue that is non-residential. Matt suggested that there is need to build and diversify revenue in Swampscott. Other businesses were not big surprises, with a couple exceptions such as microbrewery. He also said ideas such as galleries are interesting, particularly if we discuss how history and culture can be blended into the S25 master plan.

What amenities, destinations, or organizations enhance your life the most? Beaches was the most common answer. But biking and connections were also noted. There were not many mentions of businesses in Swampscott.

What transportation improvements are needed? Rail trail/bike path was most common. Pedestrian improvements ranged from sidewalks, access to schools, walking trails, and making Vinnin Square walkable. Mentions about MBTA focused on desire for more frequent and reliable service to Boston: blue line service to Swampscott. Also attendees expressed desire for upgrading train station and parking, and shuttle to train station and ferry in Lynn.

Common theme was about internal connections. He noted that 80% of working population drives to work, but, surprisingly, there were not many comments about roadways in and out of town. That may require further study. Matt said.

What types of housing is needed most in Swampscott? Matt said he was surprised that attendees mostly wanted affordable housing for younger people and families, and for elderly. Matt said we have to delve into the next meeting what people mean by affordable housing: Do they mean affordable market rate, affordable subsidized, affordable for seniors and the like. That’s the point of the other forums, he said. Attendees also expressed a desire for housing for elderly, specifically for “re-use.” Attendees were divided about mixed use, with some saying they wanted it and others no more residential, multi-family, or mixed use.

A member requested a breakdown by percent of people expressing desires for various elements of the slides presented: transportation, housing, etc. Matt said MAPC would provide where possible, but it would be difficult for the “brown paper” exercises. He noted that the point of the housing forum would be used to better understand what residents want.

ii. Assets, Challenges, Opportunities

Six of six tables reported that the ocean/waterfront was the town’s top asset. Six of six table also reported that access to and proximity to Boston was a top assets. Four of six tables said sense of community and attractiveness were a top asset and two of six said schools/education was a top asset. People like the overall feeling of the community, Matt said. There is some consensus which is going to help in building the S25 plan. MAPC can also use these findings to probe further about these assets in future forums.

A member asked for Matt’s opinion about the community’s response to the visioning forum. It was good, and we can build on it. But we always want more; 100 would have been great, he said. Matt noted that social media response has been good with the Facebook page having more than 125 likes. He said the S25 project may have to use social media more to build awareness and participation, and gather data.

Another member noted that attendees came mostly from the middle part of the town, and hardly any one came from the Marblehead side of town. Matt addressed this by saying the population density of the town is much greater by the train station and the middle part of town. But he also said we may need to figure out different outreach strategies, perhaps flyers, for those neighborhoods that weren't represented in the forum.

Another member noted whether it's possible to learn more about people filling out the online survey and whether there are duplicate submissions. Matt noted that the survey uses cookies which can be used to identify unique users, but that only seven people had completed the online survey.

Another member asked whether certain socio-economic strata tend to participate in the master planning process more than others. Matt said it depends on the community, but usually it's the middle socio economic part of the community that tends to participate. And rarely does he see the higher socio economic strata participate. But it will be important to get feedback and buy-in from all strata in the community, Matt said.

With respect to challenges, there was less consensus. Three of six tables said the town's tax rate and red tape was a top challenge; three of six tables said what to do with public facilities, particularly those that are vacant right now, was a top challenge. Three of six tables said transportation (access and traffic) was a top challenge. Matt said Swampscott may need to work with its surrounding communities together to improve traffic conditions regionally. And, three of six tables said the town's direction/engagement was a top challenge.

In terms of top opportunities, Matt said there's interest – but seemingly no consensus – about having revitalized business districts (Humphrey St. and transit-oriented development); bike and pedestrian connectivity (bike lanes, rail trail, walkability); and community amenities/activities/improvements, including open space, vacant public buildings, and beaches (building changing rooms and bathrooms, for instance).

Matt said overall those attending “love the connection with the ocean” and like the business district but want it improved for town residents and visitors. Quality of life issues are also important.

With respect to personal vision statements, Matt said MAPC had transcribed them all.

Matt said MAPC will draft Swampscott's vision statement after the online visioning forum responses are collected and circulate it for discussion.

With respect to the S25 committee's reaction/feedback to visioning forum, and ways to improve outreach, one member suggested using the civic table at the Farmer's Market on Sundays. MAPC staff and S25 committee members could staff it. MAPC has funds for such outreach efforts. Other places for outreach could be kiosks at the library, town hall, outside groceries stores, and the Strawberry Festival, for example. Also, members suggested using temporary signs (though not sandwich boards) or the DPW's roadside electronic bulletin board for outreach. Matt suggested assembling a list of events and places that could be staffed for outreach.

A committee member also suggested that we get community leaders, such as Gov. Baker, Cong. Seth Moulton, and Rep. Lori Ehrlich to promote participation and involvement in the S25 project via, for instance, a letter to the editor. Matt said he would talk to MAPC's engagement specialist to brainstorm a strategy.

III. HOUSING, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & HISTORY

A. *PRESENTATION: CURRENT CONDITIONS*

i. Economic Development

Christine Madore said improving the quality of life for residents is the main point of economic development. It includes taxes and revenue, jobs and workforce, housing options, transportation and connectivity, and amenities and services.

Christine presented an overview of the town's workforce. Swampscott's workforce reflects high educational attainment and median income levels: 67% aged 25+ have bachelor's degree or higher (which is higher than the state overall); median household income is \$92,258 (which is higher than the state's median) and 45% of households earn \$100k+. Unemployment rate is 4% and, a reflection of residents' education and income levels, 52% of residents work in high-skill, high-wage jobs, including management, business, science and arts.

Swampscott is not a regional employment center but has strong, growing industries. For every person in the workforce there is only 0.2 jobs available locally. Many residents work outside of Swampscott; only 15% of residents work in town. Local jobs have lower annual wages (\$38,600) than Lynn (\$49,800), Salem (\$44,850) and Marblehead (\$42,750). But we do have large growing industries. The four main industries are retail trade (24%), health care and social assistance (21%), food service and accommodations (15%), and construction (6%). Two of the industries have the fastest job growth in Mass. through 2022: health care and social services (+26-39%) and recreation and food service (+26%). Those are the opportunities to expand the local workforce, Christine said.

Matt noted that health care jobs are high-paying jobs (\$52,950 is the yearly average).

Christine noted that the costs of living and doing business in Swampscott are relatively high. She noted that Swampscott has the highest residential tax rate in the North Shore; \$17.15 and its commercial tax rate at \$31.74 is the 2nd highest in the North Shore. Local revenues are highly dependent on property tax. The average single family tax bill is \$8,961, the 30th highest in Mass. and the second highest in the North Shore.

Regarding expenditures, 47% of revenue is spent on education (roughly the same as neighboring towns and cities and the state average is about 45%). Just 1.7% (\$850,000 in 2013 according to Mass. Dept. of Revenue) is spent on public works, the lowest in the North Shore and Mass. Christine said this could mean that the town doesn't need to spend so much on public works, or maybe it's not a priority.

A committee member asked whether MAPC took into account Swampscott's split rate. Christine said she believed the data takes into account the split rate.

A committee member asked whether MAPC knows what communities spend on average on public works; he wanted to know whether 1.7% is low, high, or average. Christine said the top towns, such as Lowell, spend 20% to 30%. Christine did not have a comparison to similar towns, but she thought towns on the North Shore spent between 10 and 20%. Matt said MAPC would get those numbers.

A committee member said residents are unsure how revenue is being spent. It's not obvious where the dollars are going, and there's a need for transparency, the member said. Lack of transparency could impact our ability to move forward and get buy-in, the member said.

Matt said part of the exercise of creating a master plan would be to identify and prioritize where and how revenue ought to be spent.

A member suggested that many of the people who work in Swampscott work for the town, and that the salaries for town employees are below that of other towns. But another member noted that town employee salaries have increased lately. Christine said MAPC has a more detailed table that breaks down salaries of workers in Swampscott, which will be in the existing conditions report.

Matt said one issue that will have to be addressed in the master plan is the complaint that the town relies too much on its residential tax base and that part of the goal of the plan will be to increase overall revenue with additional sources of non-residential tax revenue.

Christine noted that Swampscott is at one of its lowest tax rates over the past 10 years, but revenue has been increasing in part because property values are increasing. That allowed the town to lower its tax rate, she said. She said it's worth observing that trend in the years to come and assess whether it's been successful.

A member asked whether the 74% property tax could be split to identify what percent comes from residential and what comes from commercial. The member also asked MAPC to compare these percentages to neighboring communities.

A member noted that when comparing Swampscott to other towns for economic development, housing, and the like that we include towns and cities of similar land area (Swampscott is ranked 347 in area in Mass.) and population density (ranked 25 in the Mass.). (Towns such as Winthrop, Marblehead, Belmont, and Watertown have similar land/population density characteristics.)

With respect to the performance of Swampscott's local businesses, Christine said local businesses can be strengthened to expand the commercial tax base. Compared to Essex County as a whole, sales per capita were lower in all categories – retail trade, professional services, health care, arts and entertainment, and accommodation and food services. The town does have opportunity to improve its commercial tax rate. S25 needs to include strategies to improve businesses performance.

Christine also presented a retail gap analysis which showed, among other things, a huge demand (numbers in green) for health and personal care stores and general merchandise stores from a dollar perspective and used merchandise stores, special food services, and drinking places from a percent perspective. Christine noted the total gap for food and drink at \$8 million, which means residents are spending those dollars in other towns. She said this represents a huge opportunity for food and drink establishments to locate in Swampscott. She noted that attendees of the visioning forum expressed an interest in Swampscott having more restaurants, cafes and pubs. Swampscott has a perfect environment to foster that growth, especially along Humphrey St.

Matt once again noted the importance of having a local options meals tax as a way to increase and diversify revenue. By increasing the number of restaurants, you could increase the amount of revenue for the town, he said.

In towns such as Swampscott, where's there an over reliance on residential taxes, you need to be creative creating other sources of revenue, Matt said.

A member noted that two restaurants recently located to other towns because of the perception that Swampscott is a difficult and expensive place to do business. What can be done to change the perception that Swampscott isn't business friendly, a member asked. Christine noted that its part of MAPC's job to determine what challenges,

barriers and issues were/are when deciding to locate a business in Swampscott or elsewhere. Pete noted that it was the rental costs in the case of the two businesses mentioned.

Matt said the town may have to tweak its commercial tax rate to attract and retain businesses, or change the permitting process.

Matt said one of MAPC's next steps is to interview business owners located here and as well as those that have decided to locate elsewhere or move out of town. Matt asked S25 members to make introductions to business owners and commercial real estate owners, real estate brokers, who might be willing to be interviewed by MAPC for the S25 project and/or attend forums. Christine said they want to know what made them (the business) decide to consider/choose Swampscott in the first place, what were the values and assets they were looking at.

A member noted that a total retail food and drink gap of \$8 million translates into 15,000 square feet of building space and residents already complain that Swampscott is overbuilt. The member asked where Swampscott would put three 5,000 square foot restaurants that generate \$3 million per year in revenue.

Matt mentioned, in response to a question, that MAPC does walk into businesses to conduct in-person interviews instead of asking business owners to attend forums.

A member mentioned that up to three brew pubs are being established in Lynn, because it's allowed. Pete mentioned that Swampscott does not at the moment have a separate brewer's license yet, but that the town can go through the process to get that. Matt noted that it might be worth exploring the idea of seasonal liquor licenses if tourism becomes part of the S25 plan.

In response to a member's question, Pete said town does not employ a business development officer.

Christine noted that Swampscott is well-poised to diversify its commercial base due to its heritage and geography. That would include tourism (waterfront, open space and heritage) and commercial development (health care and quality retail). She said we want to think of ways to bring people to Swampscott and spend their dollars here. We have history and heritage that we can promote and brand, she said. Among other things, Swampscott has its Olmsted District, the waterfront and a proposed bike trail that could be part of a larger regional network.

She noted that Swampscott has a small but not insignificant cluster of health care, and close to larger hospitals and medical centers. Swampscott has an opportunity to capture some of that spending with outpatient services. She also noted the importance of bringing in quality retail – not just any chain store – businesses (such as spas) that work well with the town's waterfront.

Christine mentioned briefly potential strategies for increasing value of commercial areas, but noted that this discussion would be continued.

ii. Housing and History

B. HOUSING ELEMENT: HOUSING PRODUCTION PLAN

Matt said a Housing Production Plan (HPP) guides housing development within a community and it's composed of a comprehensive housing needs assessment; affordable housing goals and objectives; an analysis of development constraints and opportunities; and implementations strategies. He further noted that the town received additional funds through DLTA and PATH to complete this element.

Matt said the HPP is a needs assessment. HPPs help communities to: Influence the type, amount, and location of affordable housing; set a numerical goal for annual low- and moderate- income housing production of at least 0.5% of total units. The HPP will help Swampscott to meet the mandatory 10% threshold and accommodate increasing demand appropriately. If Town meets goals, it has greater control over Comprehensive Permit project proposals.

Matt noted that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts mandates that 10% of all housing units within a community must be subsidized affordable units. Affordable for HHs earning 80% of median income (AMI) or lower. Swampscott's SHI is presently 3.7% (212 units). Matt said that means any developer can come into town and propose to do a large 40B housing development and the town would have very little control over that. Marblehead is at 3.9% and Salem and Lynn are 12.4% and 12.5%, respectively.

Matt said the HPP will serve as the foundation of the Housing Element of the S25 plan. The master plan will also address Middle Income household needs; higher income household needs; Priority areas for housing redevelopment; AND Strategies to help seniors stay in their homes, and identify priority sites.

Matt noted that there will be 468 new HHs by 2030 headed mostly by people over age 60 and that household are projected to get smaller, falling from 2.46 in 2010 (5,610 units) to 2.29 in 2030 (6,027 units). That would result in the need for 416 more housing units even if no growth occurs. Matt noted that every community in the state will need more housing units given population trends.

Matt said part of the discussion for the master plan will focus on whether its residents want people who live here to be able stay here as they age and whether Swampscott wants people to be able to afford to move here.

Matt noted that uses expire; the average commercial area works for 20 to 30 years and then it becomes vacant, and then it can become re-developed. Matt also noted that a developer could come in a build a giant 40B housing complex in Vinnin Square and the town could do little about it.

Members discussed the use Machon for elder housing.

Matt noted that residents appreciate the history of Swampscott, the Olmsted district for instance, and don't want to lose that. Matt said the town needs a strategy in place that preserves what's important to people and what attracts people to living here, while addressing the realities that the community needs to face. HPPs are never an easy process, he said.

Matt discussed the possible need for accessory dwelling units and guest houses, and the need to look at such things to accommodate future housing unit needs.

Matt noted that Swampscott is primarily a residential community, where the majority of units are single family (69%). Only 7% of units are 50 units or more, he said. He noted that these complexes, mostly in the Vinnin Square area, are not very walkable for seniors. He suggested that Vinnin Square could become more mixed use, not unlike Market Street in Lynnfield.

Matt noted that the housing stock is relatively old: nearly 75% of housing stock built before 1940. It's a bonus and a problem, he said. Young people like historic housing stock, but he also noted that older homes often need upgrades to make them accessible/livable for older households. Only 2% of units built after 2000.

The older stock, he said, is all near walkable amenities.

Matt said housing prices in Swampscott are high and increasing. There was a 55% increase in the median price of condos from 2000 to 2015 and a 48% increase in the median price of single family homes.

Matt noted that incomes are high, but many are “housing-cost burdened.” Some 41% are spending more than 30% of income on housing costs and 20% are severely housing-cost burdened, spending more than 50% of income on housing costs. That’s a concern, he said. He also noted that 40% of households are earning less than \$75,000 per year.

Matt said MAPC is still collecting information for its existing conditions report with respect to historical and cultural assets. The S25 plan will look at ways to preserve Swampscott’s history and maximize its value. The plan will attempt to maintain Swampscott’s character and sense of place; identify preservation goals and funding mechanisms to ensure they can be met; and maximize economic benefits from the town’s history, including housing. For instance, Matt noted the possibility of creating heritage tourism and bed and breakfast accommodations, which lead to people spending more money in town. He also noted that there is a local rooms’ tax in Swampscott. Matt also noted that Swampscott is part of the Essex National Heritage area. Matt asked how to make Swampscott a destination site for tourists. Matt said it possible to raise funds through the [Community Preservation Act](#). The Community Preservation Act, codified as General Laws chapter 44B, allows cities and towns that accept certain of its provisions to create a special Community Preservation Fund by assessing a surcharge on annual real estate taxes and to appropriate monies in that fund for open space, historic resource and affordable housing purposes.

IV. NEXT STEPS

Matt noted that the next public forum would take place on June 18, use an open house format, and focus on Housing, Economic Development, and Historic/Culture.

The next meeting is set for June 29, 2015

The meeting adjourned at about 9:00 pm.

Robert Powell

Clerk, Swampscott 2025 Master Plan Committee

With assistance from Sarah Walker