



On Saturday, November 21, 2009, the Town of Sturbridge convened a public forum to discuss the 2010 Master Plan Update project. Approximately 80 people attended the forum, which was held at Old Sturbridge Village from 8:30 AM until 12 noon. The forum was attended by Jean Bubon, AICP, Town Planner; Sandra Gibson-Quigley, Chair of the Master Plan Steering Committee; members of the Master Plan Steering Committee; and representatives from the consulting team (Ralph Willmer, AICP; Juli Beth Hinds, AICP; Joe Wanat, P.E., PTOE; and Mike Casino).

After a presentation on Sturbridge land use and demographic data, a Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities and Threats (SCOT) analysis was conducted. Participants were asked to describe aspects of living, working, shopping and playing in Sturbridge that was both positive and negative. After the lists were generated, they were given four “voting dots” which were to be placed next to those items that the audience thought was most important issues to address in the master planning process.

The results are listed below.

SCOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS

- Schools ●●●●
- Highway access & location
- Open space & common areas ●●●●●
- Historic quality & continuity
- Old Sturbridge Village ●●●●●●●●●●
- Sturbridge “Brand” & identity
- Natural resources – lakes, ponds, river ●
- Tax base ●
- Community Preservation Act
- Library
- Town support for and quality of public services & senior center
- Conference center

- 43D zoning (streamlined permitting process for commercial development on parcels of land designated as priority development sites)
- Recycling center
- Number of hotel rooms
- Balance – economic growth & preservation
- Low crime rate
- Conference space
- Bike trails
- Historic character & continuity ●●●●●
- Community involvement generally
- Location within New England
- Water: lakes, ponds, river ●●
- Beauty of landscape-trees, hills, lakes
- Low crime rate – sense of safety
- Passive recreation & trails ●
- Restaurants & variety of unique shops ●
- Park land (state and local)
- Part of “Last Green Valley”
- The balance that the town strives to maintain ●

CHALLENGES

- Job opportunities lacking – high commuting time ●
- Continuity & integration of assets
- Traffic congestion
- Lack of public transportation (especially for seniors)
- Walkability & transit ●●●●●●●●●●
- More, better shopping, nearby ●
- Development of economic base ●●●●●
- Lack of recreational ball fields (soccer, baseball, golf, swimming)
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
- Divisive town politics
- Keep identity but be progressive (with respect to development)
- Commercial sprawl that imperils mom & pop retail – need to protect “charm” retail
- Public beach
- Coherent open space preservation ●●●
- Water resource preservation awareness (sustainability) ●●●●●●
- Revenue vs. open space ●
- Storm water & roadway infrastructure
- Town water & town sewer ●
- Main St. identity – Rt. 20 vs. Rt. 131 ●
- Lack of year-round, family indoor activities – family activities

- Need to keep diverse tax base ●●●
- Lack of municipal parking – Main St.
- Lack of access to river
- State highway through half of Main St. with over signage
- Small business perception of Sturbridge potential
- Architectural/historic building preservation
- State road through town – MassDOT control vs. local control ●
- State aid reliance
- Dilapidated structures
- “Perception of remoteness” ●
- Affordable housing shortages ●●
- Lack of enriching cable access
- Future of visitor center – need one
- Lack of news coverage (trustworthy/local) ●
- Local job opportunities – must travel for jobs other than service work
- Lack of continuity/connection - theme of tying together parts of town split by highways, roads ●●
- More & different shops – there are some holes! ●●●
- Becoming a green community
- Adding things we want without losing character ●●●●
- Lack of a defined town center ●
- Preserving open space for outcomes – wildlife corridors
- Water/wastewater infrastructure but are we protecting water sustainably?
- Knowing/understanding where overall job & retail climate is going and how Sturbridge fits in or can capitalize
- Small business climate & development ●●●
- Future of visitor’s center
- Supporting the arts ●

OPPORTUNITIES

- [illegible]

- Conference meeting space/hotel capacity & accessibility
- Symbiosis between OSV & other village/retail/services ●
- Coming together around “Americana” theme
- Encouraging visitors to add a day for tourism-recreation, national areas - build brand identity & market ●
- Outdoor activities, especially winter–skating, XC ski, festival–in addition to horses, biking, hiking ●●●●●
- Re-evaluate town committee structure & purpose
- Find ways to engage others (Fish & Wildlife, non-profits) in stewardship & management of land & resources
- Bring D.O.D. & other visitors from Southbridge conf into Sturbridge
- Professional forums on economic development
- Marketing plan & PR
- Highway image – place to stop
- More tourist/family destinations – year round – open space package to market ●
- Zero waste policy ●●
- Re-evaluate town committee structure & purpose
- Combine open space & share responsibility ●

THREATS

- Charlton
- Global warming ●●●
- Sidewalk quality or lack of (ADA mobility lacking) ●●●
- Declining trends
- Ability of government to deal with threat ●
- Growth in surrounding communities & neg. impacts
- Perception of being not business friendly ●●●●●●●
- Rural identity threatened by retail expansion ●●●●●
- Economy going up or down
- Lack of engagement in community activism
- Perception is major threat ●●
- Zoning stymies business opportunities ●●●●●●●
- Traffic – I-90, I-84, Route 20 ●●●
- Traffic off I-90 onto Route 20 ●●
- Town meeting time and format not conducive to parents of children, consider daycare
- Regional bus (Peter Pan) used to come – no public transportation options
- Residents vs. tourists
- Communication on desired outcomes
- Not enough reasons for tourists to extend a stay ●
- Going too far to support tourism
- Casinos, other large uses that like the highway access

- Disconnect between zoning & desired outcomes ●●
- OSV's long-term outlook
- Political polarization need to find ways to be positive & common ground ●●●●●
- Loss of regional bus transit
- Ability of form of government to deal with threats ●
- Providing times & access for people beyond current form & schedule
- Misinformation – letters in paper become “facts”
- Need reality check on facts – growth rates, etc. ●
- Large uses in border towns do affect town
- Rural identity – if retail expands & further suburbanized ●●●●
- Lack of community diversity – feels “stagnant” ●
- Rezoning without a plan for “fast money” ●●●
- A lack of local news coverage & common outlet that is trustworthy

MASTER PLAN SURVEY QUESTIONS

A sample of survey questions were asked that gave participants an opportunity to quickly give their opinion on six different issues facing the Town. A more detailed survey will be mailed to each household in early 2010. The results were as follows.

Question 1. Do you favor or oppose mixed-use development with both residential and commercial uses in the same building?

1. Strongly favor – 25%
2. Somewhat favor – 37%
3. No opinion – 10%
4. Somewhat oppose – 10%
5. Strongly oppose – 17%

Question 2. Do you favor or oppose purchasing farmlands, forests, and open space for conservation?

1. Oppose, not needed – 15%
2. Favor, but not with higher taxes – 34%
3. Favor, even with higher taxes – 52%

Question 3. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the amount of recreational facilities such as parks, playgrounds, and ballfields?

1. Very satisfied – 5%
2. Somewhat satisfied – 23%
3. Not very satisfied – 31%
4. Very dissatisfied – 41%

Question 4. What would you like to see happen to the Rt. 15 corridor?

1. Leave it as is – 22%
2. Allow limited development in designated areas – 21%
3. Allow small scale commercial development – 32%
4. Allow large-scale commercial development – 25%

Question 5. What would you like to see happen to the Commercial-Tourist District on Rt. 20?

1. No changes are needed at this time – 2%
2. Pedestrian-friendly with commercial uses that serve local needs, but not tourism-based businesses – 13%
3. Pedestrian-friendly setting with tourism-based businesses – 78%
4. Encourage commercial development without hampering automobile travel – 8%

Question 6. What is the most pressing transportation need?

1. Improve condition of roadways – 6%
2. Build and/or repair sidewalks – 44%
3. Congestion – 25%
4. Lack of mass transit options – 17%
5. Bicycle access and safety – 6%

BREAK OUT GROUPS

The next part of the forum involved eight breakout groups that were asked to answer a series of questions. Each attendee at the forum had an opportunity to participate in two different groups. The breakout groups discussed the following topics:

- First session
 - Land Use
 - Housing
 - Economic development
 - Transportation
- Second session
 - Natural, cultural and historic resources
 - Public facilities
 - Energy and sustainability
 - Open space

Each group was asked to answer several questions. The following is a synopsis of the questions and group responses from each breakout session.

HOUSING

1. Identify the most successful housing developments in Town? What makes them successful?
 - Preserve open space
 - Older development in general – large acreage, variety in architecture
 - Tall Pines has sidewalks and lanterns
 - Historic District – mixed use
 - Walker Pond has open spaces, ball field in neighborhood, beach, feeling of community, variety of housing, association
 - Crescent gate – variety of condos, quality of life, common rooms, proximity to Town
 - Sturbridge Hills – walkable and good location
2. Identify the 3 biggest housing-related challenges in Sturbridge?
 - Affordable housing in general
 - Retirement lower income housing
 - Building senior housing around amenities with transportation and walkable
3. How has Sturbridge approached these in the past? Discuss remedies to help overcome these challenges.
 - Town has not approached this subject in the past
 - Review zoning laws
 - Continue work on the guideline form to create a clear direction for projects to flow through the process

LAND USE

1. What are your top three land use objectives for Sturbridge? (These could include topics such as village centers; mix of uses; density; natural resources; accessibility/connections)
 - Natural resources – maximize value and identify ways to create tourism activities; expand awareness of and activities on the lakes
 - Protection of resources
 - Public uses – residential
 - Tourism use/commercial
 - Green corridors
 - Find a way to use resources and land to develop economic opportunities for residents
 - History of decentralized village – 1800 maps show Fiskdale/Common area as population centers
 - Mill-based history and charm – don't lose identity
 - Safety and accessibility in conjunction with youth-based outlets
 - Cluster housing – implement recent bylaw (open space helps transportation)
 - Mixed use – variety
 - Expand commercial base vs. light industry (quality vs. quantity in commercial)
 - Diversity is needed, including telecommuting
2. What are the biggest obstacles to achieving these objectives?
 - State controls Rt. 20
 - River cross over on Main St.
 - Lack of sidewalks
 - Outsourcing

- Lack of parking
 - Lack of bike racks
 - Obstacles to light industry
 - Resources and cheap labor
 - Example – Evergreen outsourcing
 - Infrastructure – lack of water and sewer
 - Cost reduction in revenue – tax incentive financing
 - Current economic conditions
 - Differentiating our community
 - Develop zoning for biomed research
 - Technology backbone – lack of high speed internet
 - Developing common vision
3. How can the Town be better prepared to manage growth and development?
- Define communities
 - More aggressive on positives and outreach to obtain them
 - Focus needs to be on coordinating efforts that work for Sturbridge
 - Push the positive attributes, increase awareness of resources (natural and highway infrastructure)

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

1. In terms of economic development (jobs, retail, office, industry), what do we want/need in Sturbridge?
- Maintain existing business
 - Complimentary businesses (retail-small)
 - Light industry/high quality jobs
 - Non-retail, non-service jobs
 - Municipal parking infrastructure, sidewalks
 - Outreach to businesses – wants/needs
 - Need Economic Development Coordinator position in Town government
 - Recognition of business/welcome wagon
 - Need info on how to navigate the Sturbridge government
 - Merchants Association/Regional Chamber/Sturbridge Tourism Association (don't all get along)
 - Improved information to businesses/residents
 - Website/overall navigation
 - Encourage diverse economic base
 - Ball fields/tournaments/recreation
 - Publicize trail system
 - Indoor winter recreation
 - Leverage infrastructure
 - Co-op marketing
 - Eco-tourism
 - Family recreation/entertainment

- Hospital/clinic
2. What should the Town be doing to achieve those goals?
 - Shop
 - Movies/entertainment
 - Ball fields/tournaments – can host large regional tournament in Sturbridge and cross-market with OSV
 - Need to find cross-marketing investments
 3. How critical is the tourism focus and how important should it be in the future (include any thoughts on the Commercial-Tourist zoning district)?
 - Clarify identity – Sturbridge not really a tourist town – it is a town with tourist attractions in it
 - Update and enhance tourism experience – leverage it, but it is not core of local economy
 - People do not associate OSV with an actual community that has other things that people want to do
 - Create better tourism experience – leave OSV and feel like you are still in New England

TRANSPORTATION

1. What part of the transportation system works well in Sturbridge? What part does not work well?
 - Crosswalks & sidewalks (lacking, Route 131, ADA, maintenance)
 - Rt. 20 congestion
 - Mass DOT roads – more cars
 - Divided highway is barrier – pedestrians, bikes, business access
 - Senior Center/Pizza Shop – Arnold Rd.
 - Crosswalk enforcement – state law
 - Municipal parking area on Rte. 20. (Commercial district) & shuttle
 - More pedestrian friendly – Mass DOT challenge
 - No public transportation
 - No marked bike lanes or signs
 - Bike bridge across river – across to wetlands for pedestrians/bikes
 - Nothing works well – lots of problems
 - Elder bus runs well. Paratransit works - needs to improve turn-around service
2. What are your concerns regarding mobility in Sturbridge, including the Commercial-Tourist zoning district (vehicles, pedestrians, bicyclists, bus, etc)?
 - Paramedic transportation has improved
 - Casella Rt. 131 access is detriment (weight of the traffic)
 - Rt. 20 rutting, example
 - Rt. 20 to 131 right-turn lane
 - Weigh trucks more
 - Pilot station out of way
 - Rt. 20/Hobbs Corner getting worse – trucks/eyesore
 - Car carriers, heavy & fast moving

- Way finding issues – bury utility lines or move them to back side of buildings
 - Cedar/Rt. 20 traffic light – good spot, flashing lights
 - Slow traffic down – calming devices such as plastic reflectors
 - 35 MPH on Rt. 20, should be closer to 25
 - X-way to 148 - beautification – streetscaping & traffic calming
 - Gateway creation
 - Signage clutter is a detriment
 - I-90 toll elimination – diversion
 - Not very stroller-friendly area – more sidewalks
3. Please tell us of something that has been completed in the last 5-10 years that has improved transportation in Sturbridge, if applicable. Tell us of something that has made transportation conditions worse.
(No time to discuss)
 4. If you could fix 3 transportation problems in Sturbridge, what would they be? Suggest 2 or 3 remedies (for each) that may help overcome these issues (Assuming no constraints)
 - Covered to some extent above.

OPEN SPACE & RECREATION

1. Identify Sturbridge's most significant open space assets? How has the Town performed in preserving/developing/utilizing them?
 - Wells State Park and OSV land that was purchased by town (which includes the River Lands and 838 additional acres)
 - Open Space isn't promoted to out-of-towners
 - Signage is going up on much of the land soon, and brochures will be provided to identify the trails and the allowed uses.
 - Trails are currently being developed on the properties and then the trails will be promoted.
 - Property on Finlay Road is part of a certified forestry cutting program, and the proceeds for the wood that is sold will be used to pay for trail development on other properties
2. Identify any additional resources that may be considered critical in Sturbridge's open space network.
 - None identified
3. What are the most significant recreational needs? If new facilities are needed, identify potential locations.
 - Need additional active recreation facilities in town. Adult ball fields could be used to host regional sports tournaments. This would bring in more customers for the town's restaurants. Identify the appropriate open space in town for active recreation use and use CPA funds to make this happen.
 - There was consensus to open up the area along the Quinebaug River in the Commercial/Tourist district and build a river walk to make the river more visible and accessible.
 - There was consensus for the Town to purchase the Holland Mill property (at the corner of Holland Rd. and Route 20), which is riverfront property. It could be used for open space and housing.
 - Recreational opportunities

- Running track such as Webster Lake has (Lake Chargoggagoggmanchauggagoggchaubunagungamaugg). The whole community uses this (all ages). Healthy, safe, scenic.
- Public running/bicycling infrastructure
- Safety
- Walking and hotels
- Parks & places for dog walking & play areas – people meet there too

NATURAL, CULTURAL & HISTORIC RESOURCES

1. What do you consider to Sturbridge's greatest natural, cultural and historical assets? Briefly evaluate their condition.
 - Use OSV more as a resource
 - Town Common – in good condition; encourage continued preservation of area
 - Natural beauty, open space and water – better utilize these resources
 - Hall estate
 - Hobbs Brook
2. Are there opportunities to improve these resources? Think about existing assets as well as the potential to identify new ones.
 - Old buildings and cemeteries
 - Town Hall
 - Blackington Building
 - Geographic location
 - Open space conditions vary
 - Need to make a connection between OSV and Town
 - Understand value of local history
 - Historical Society and materials
 - Needs a place
 - Encourage people to learn and understand their history – what is historical significance?
 - Make connections between planned trails and existing resources
 - Bring in families for sports tournaments
3. Can natural resources be better utilized in Sturbridge? How?
 - Opportunities for recreation
 - Plans need to be more public and tie in together
 - Media communications/public relations
 - Town website improvements

PUBLIC SERVICES & FACILITIES

1. What types of new or expanded public facilities are needed in the future? (consider location of new facilities, if needed).
 - Internet - telecommunications - public zones & speed (FIOS)
 - Public parking – Main Street
 - Sports recreation – skating rink (indoor & out) indoor family recreation center (Rt. 15)
 - Sidewalks – Main Street
 - Water access, public swimming areas

- Teenager hang out areas – central & observable
 - Walking/biking bridge across river
 - Crosswalks/Rt. 20 beginning section
 - DPW is stretched thin
 - Need to make sure we can maintain
2. Which municipal services serve the community best? What enables these services to perform well?
- Police, DPW, Senior Center
 - Town Planner very active
 - Recycling center – expand
 - School system
 - School survey (How many children do you hope to have, when will you have them)
 - Recycling – open up for business community, zero waste policy – more support for DPW, public health, pay as you throw
3. Which town services or facilities are not meeting the needs of the community? What is needed to improve the performance of these services?
- Funding for road maintenance & repair, catch basin maintenance, brush cutting
 - Enhanced internet infrastructure
 - DPW lacks funding to tackle issues – sidewalks
 - Better interaction/integration between departments
 - Expansion of school services
 - Town's water supply - sodium levels
 - Increased waste treatment
 - Surveys – include teenagers (important demographic)
 - Need activities for teens to keep them
 - “Know Your Community” for teens
 - Economic development services
 - Board of Health – full time support
 - Need more resources to expand services
 - Water supply/sodium
 - possibly caused by road salting (Mass DOT)
 - town does not use salt
 - Better way to solicit adult volunteers

ENERGY & SUSTAINABILITY

1. What should the Town do to reduce its “carbon footprint”?
- Waste management
 - Alternative energy sources-house-solar, etc.
 - Pedestrian/bicycle friendly
 - Internet/telecommuting (FIOS)
 - Energy audits – incentives to qualify for funding waste water, etc.
 - Co-op/farmers markets encourage use of local agriculture
 - Carpooling/connecting park & ride
 - Recycling
2. Where should new development occur in order to enhance energy efficiency and sustainability?
- Attract “lite” industry – green industries
 - Explore wind/solar energy sources

- Development to utilize existing resources
- 3. What other things could be done to incorporate energy and sustainability principles into daily life in Sturbridge?
 - Recycle, composting at transfer station, buy local
 - Encourage/educate residents on recycle, composting at transfer station, buy local
 - Town purchase renewable energy
 - Bio-fuels/recycle
 - Committee to focus on this issue