



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IMAGINE SHARON

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COMPREHENSIVE MASTER PLAN
Sharon, Massachusetts
JULY 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

The Sharon Master Plan Steering Committee (MPSC) held its first meeting in December of 2016 to begin work on defining the goals for the Master Plan and preparing a Request for Proposals for consultant assistance in preparing the plan. The Town of Sharon has never had a comprehensive Master Plan and the Steering Committee articulated the need for a clear vision to frame the Master Plan and an implementation plan to ensure that the Town can move forward with recommendations and action items. Major benefits of master planning for the town include:

- Allow the Town to plan across multiple areas of interest and explore connections and opportunities for multi-benefit strategies and initiatives.
- Understand the full range of recommendations to enact over the next decade, enabling prioritization of actions and spending.
- Guide the Town towards effective short-term decision-making that does not preclude long-term opportunities.
- Illustrate how changing demographic trends and advancing technologies will impact conditions, but also foster new opportunities and initiatives.
- Provide specific action plans to support implementation and collaboration among local government, organizations, and residents.

The MPSC consisted of 15 members and represented a diverse range of skills and interests (see Acknowledgements for a list of MPSC members). The MPSC set a two-year time frame for the planning process and issued the Request for Proposals in August 2017. CivicMoxie, LLC was selected as the Master Plan consultant and worked commenced in early 2018.

Traditional comprehensive master plans are organized by planning elements which are required by Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 41, 81D:

- Natural & Cultural Resources
- Economic Development
- Housing
- Land Use
- Open Space & Recreation
- Facilities & Services
- Circulation & Transportation

Each master plan must also have an implementation section.

In addition, the Sharon MPSC decided to include Community Health as a Master Plan element and received a grant and technical assistance from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) to complete that work. This element was written by members of the MPSC with assistance from MAPC.

THE PROCESS

The first six months of the planning process involved collecting data and documenting existing conditions. The consultant team conducted one-on-one interviews with Town staff and key stakeholders, facilitated focus groups around some of the planning elements, and a project kick-off survey was launched to inform residents of the master planning process and solicit initial input. The first public meeting was held in June 2018. In the fall of 2018, the planning team presented initial findings and existing conditions and asked stakeholders to give feedback on various options and scenarios for the future of the town in the form of draft Master Plan goals. Between October 2018 and the spring of 2019, the planning team conducted supplementary outreach, tested draft planning goals and recommendations with the senior leadership team for the Town of Sharon, and revised the draft Master Plan according to all feedback. During this time, members of the MPSC, with assistance from MAPC, developed the Community Health element of the plan.

In May 2019, the third public meeting presented the full draft plan goals and recommendations for final feedback. Throughout the planning process, the consultant team met with the MPSC to discuss elements of the plan and to ensure that the goals and recommendations of the plan were aligned across Town functions and departments as much as possible. Integration and alignment of plan elements was seen as necessary to optimize resources and achieve strong community support. The Master Plan also aligns with the *Open Space and Recreation Master Plan Update 2019* efforts that were underway concurrently with the master planning process, as well as the *Sharon Housing Production Plan Update 2018*.

In addition to the three public meetings, other outreach methods were used to ensure as many community members as possible participated in the planning process. Outreach tools included a second, more extensive online public survey, outreach by MPSC members during Sharon public events and festivities (tabling), and a “Do-it-Yourself” meeting kit that was distributed in hard copy and online to allow residents to organize small meetings in their homes or other locations to offer feedback in ways most comfortable for them. Select board, committee, and other board members also attended public meetings. Many of these comments are reflected in the pages that follow. The planning team used a public feedback, professional analysis, MPSC input, and comments from the Town’s senior leadership to help shape the substance of this plan.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PLAN

Section 1 – Introduction

Section 1 gives a broad overview of the planning process and major issues facing the town, as well as recent and current planning efforts and projects.

Major Issues Facing the Town

- Limited developable land available to plan for housing and expanding the commercial tax base.
- Ongoing attempts to enhance Post Office Square, constrained by septic system limits.
- A comparatively high residential tax rate and Town revenue that relies heavily on residential taxes.
- An aging population with few affordable and age-friendly options for downsizing, despite older residents’ desire to remain in town.
- A robust arts and cultural community which lacks a unifying voice and organizational structure to seek grant funding, raise visibility, and attract donors and audiences.
- The ongoing need to monitor and maintain natural resources to provide for future quantity and quality of drinking water.
- Risks associated with climate change creating the need for investment in sustainable and preventive solutions as well as emergency preparedness.
- A lack of safe and viable transportation alternatives to connect key destinations within town.
- Limited parking capacity at the commuter rail station, restricting residents’ access to Boston and Providence via commuter train.
- Recent increase in new building and infrastructure projects to meet the service needs of residents, without additional tax base to support and sustain these new investments.
- The desire to invest in and maintain a high-quality school system, while also keeping taxes affordable for residents throughout their life course.
- Consideration of future staffing and planning needs to adequately address these issues and implement the goals and recommendations in this Master Plan.
- Recognition of how challenges related to housing, transportation, and climate change fit within the broader state and regional context, creating new opportunities for regional partnerships, planning, and coordination.

Section 2 – Demographic Trends

The Town of Sharon's estimated 2016 population was 18,193 and grew at a slower rate than the county or state between 2000 and 2016.

Key trends and characteristics of the town population (2016) include:

- The town is growing more racially diverse with a composition of: White 79%, Asian 16.3%, Hispanic 4%. The increased racial diversity includes a two and a half times increase in the Asian population since 2000 (from 4.9% to 16.3% of the town's population). In addition, the number of Hispanic residents has more than doubled during that same time period.
- Sharon's median age was almost 43 years old in 2016 compared to 39 years for the state and 41 years for the county; 14.7% of town residents are 65 or older and Sharon's share of older adult residents grew from 10.9% to 14.7% between 2000 and 2016.
- In 2016, almost one-third of Sharon residents (30.3%) were children and teenagers 19 years or younger.
- Compared to the county and the state, Sharon's percentage of the population between 20-34 years old was considerably smaller at 9.8%, compared to the county (18.4%) and the state (21%).

Key household characteristics for Sharon:

- Sharon's estimated homeownership rate was 86% in 2016, compared to 68.5% for the county and 62.1% for the state.
- Families constituted 83.9% of Sharon households in 2016 versus 66% for the county and 63.6% for the state.
- Sharon has a higher percentage of households that include children and youth. Among Sharon households, 43% included persons 18 years or younger, compared to almost 31.8% and 30.1% for the county and the state, respectively.
- For households with a person over 60, Sharon (39.1%) matched the county (39.7%) and state (38.1%) shares.
- Sharon's estimated median household income in 2016 was \$127,500, 41.3% higher than the county (\$90,226) and 79.7% above the state (\$70,954).
- Sharon stands out with 27.6% of households with incomes of at least \$200,000—far above 15.2% for the county and about 9.6% for the state.

Takeaways

- Across interviews, focus groups, and surveys, Sharon residents and stakeholders have identified diversity as a key strength of the community.
- Sharon must address the needs of its aging population including more affordable housing choices for older adults who wish to downsize, and increased services for this population.
- The quality of Sharon Public Schools is a major reason residents' decide to live in Sharon and contributes to the the high number of families with children who live here.
- There are concerns about resident turnover, specifically families leaving Sharon when their kids graduate high school, and the town losing engaged citizens who have been an active part of the community.

Some major trends that will influence the future of Sharon include:

- The Town will have to consider how to fund increasing expenses for infrastructure and service maintenance, as well as increasing demand for services that support the high quality of life residents have come to expect.
- The ongoing costs associated with maintaining the quality of public education and the expected tax increase to fund construction of the new high school and public library buildings could have an impact on the town's demographics. Residents are concerned with the continued ability of the Town to support the diversity in its population that residents value.
- There is a growing movement in town to embrace and actively apply sustainability principles and practices to Sharon's policies and goals. The Town will have to consider how it will coordinate its sustainability actions regionally and statewide.
- There is an increase in the number of households, even as the total population of the town remains fairly constant over time. What does this increase mean for land use considerations and the need for zoning regulations to respond to changing needs of residents?
- The Town must consider the aging of the population and Sharon's ability to offer residents necessary social services and affordable housing options that allow for aging in community.

Section 3 – The Vision for Sharon

Throughout the planning process, strong themes emerged regarding the special character of Sharon. These themes centered on the importance of the community and the connectedness of residents in Sharon. Overwhelmingly, when asked what makes Sharon unique, residents, Town staff, and business owners answered, “the people.” This strong focus on the connectedness of residents shapes the Master Plan vision:

The vision for Sharon’s future is an inclusive, accessible, and vibrant community that aims to improve quality of life for all. This vision is “*Sharon Connected*,” a town that connects people to people, place to place, and ideas to action, to preserve our past and forge our future.

“*Sharon Connected*” prioritizes initiatives that celebrate civic connections, which nurture a sense of community and encourage social interaction and regional cooperation, and those that improve quality, accessibility, and connectedness of neighborhoods, infrastructure, and community resources.

This vision is supported by the goals and recommendations in the Master Plan and are specified in each master plan element and will be integrated through a robust implementation plan. **The vision, as related to the elements of the plan, is described below in the order of the master plan elements, not priority.**

- Arts, cultural, and historic resources enrich our lives, bring people together, and provide social, economic, and educational benefits.
 - Economic vitality is the engine of a vibrant live/work community.
 - A variety of housing options promotes socioeconomic diversity and an age-friendly community.
 - Thoughtful land use and zoning supports the Town’s goals and initiatives.
 - Protection, preservation, and enhancement of open space, natural resources, and recreational areas are essential to community health.
 - Public facilities, services, and infrastructure are the backbone to maintaining a functioning community.
 - Transportation and mobility enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians and cyclists of all ages and abilities.
- Health policy, universal design, and targeted programming foster improved community health and quality of life.

Section 4 – Plan Elements

Section 4 includes all of the plan elements and for each element, the plan includes an introduction, existing conditions, “what the community said,” and goals and recommended policies and actions. This *Imagine Sharon* Master Plan advocates for a cohesive approach to planning that avoids putting separate planning elements in silos and that embraces a cross-disciplinary approach to planning across Town departments and interests. For ease in understanding the roles of various Town departments, and to meet State requirements for master planning, this section of the Plan is organized by plan element; however, there are references throughout to link plan recommendations across elements to ensure a cohesive and integrated approach to planning.

Section 4.1 Cultural and Historic Resources

Sharon’s cultural resources are cherished by residents. From the many volunteer efforts and nonprofit cultural organizations, to the public school arts programs, and the individual artistic efforts of residents and businesses, these resources are seen as a defining characteristic of the town.

Goals:

1. Support a unified approach to coordinating, funding, and marketing cultural and historic assets and events in the town.
2. Make strong connections through communication and coordination between Sharon’s arts, culture, historic, and business communities to support sustainable, vibrant public spaces and robust amenities and services for residents and visitors.
3. Better use existing buildings and physical spaces for arts and culture and identify new opportunities for multi-use arts and cultural spaces in town.
4. Document and make known the full breadth of Sharon’s history and historic resources.

Section 4.2 Economic Vitality

The Town's economic stability is a high priority for residents of Sharon. Maintaining and growing Sharon's economic base is important to alleviate the tax burden on residential property owners. Many residents have voiced a desire for creative economic investment to sustain Town expenditures and services and maintain affordability for residents.

Goals:

1. Enhance and reinforce Post Office Square as a community center for local businesses and activities.
2. Create a strong, supportive environment for local businesses and self-employed/start-ups.
3. Expand commercial and industrial development to create a more balanced tax base.
4. Create septic and sewer capacity to foster economic development.
5. Develop new capacity to undertake economic development and related activities.

Section 4.3 Housing

For over 50 years, the Town's boards and committees have worked to increase housing diversity in Sharon. The *Sharon Housing Production Plan, 2018-2023 Update (2018 HPP)*, provides a recent in-depth snapshot of the current housing conditions in town, along with recommendations to meet the housing demands identified as the town population's needs change. The 2018 HPP is intended to guide housing creation and preservation in Sharon, help the Town maintain its State-mandated affordable housing goals, increase affordable housing opportunities, and provide housing options for residents of all ages. The Master Plan supports the goals and recommendations in the 2018 HPP while also viewing housing goals in concert with other town-wide goals.

Goals:

1. Support and encourage mixed-use development in appropriate areas in town (e.g., Post Office Square, Cobbs Corner, Shaw's Plaza, and the Heights Plaza area).
2. Promote and allow housing types for aging in community, especially options that foster community and intergenerational connections in walkable neighborhoods with access to services and shops.
3. Create green and sustainable housing, including mixed-use options and walkable locations in close proximity to shops and services.

4. Create and preserve affordable units, particularly rental units, to ensure continued socioeconomic diversity and to maintain at least 10% of Sharon's year-round housing stock as affordable per MGL c.40B.

Section 4.4 Land Use and Zoning

Land use regulations have implications for all of the other elements of Sharon's Master Plan. As one of the Town's main tools to maintain and direct uses the community wants, zoning and land use regulations are critical to the Town's effort to be proactive about directing change and protecting the features that residents wish to preserve.

Goals:

1. Encourage mixed-use development, where appropriate, to support connectivity, walkability, aging in community, and local businesses.
2. Encourage economic growth and development, following sustainable practices and concepts, in the town's commercial and industrial districts to generate an increase in commercial tax revenue and to create destinations for residents and visitors.
3. Maintain the character of the town and its neighborhoods while allowing appropriate redevelopment and growth.
4. Coordinate Town efforts to plan for future infrastructure, services, programs, facilities, and finances.

Section 4.5 Open Space, Recreation, and Natural Resources

As much of Sharon's town character, history, and current recreational opportunities are tied to its distinct abundance of open spaces and natural resources, ensuring their ongoing maintenance and protection will be crucial to the continued vibrancy of the town.

Goals:

1. Preserve and actively maintain the town's natural resources and water quality and supply, incorporating sustainable concepts and systems whenever possible.
2. Ensure long-term preservation of open space and agriculture properties and make new strategic acquisitions where possible.
3. Connect passive and active recreational spaces, trails, and natural resources, including the Lake.
4. Expand recreational opportunities for all age groups and abilities in town.

Section 4.6 Public Facilities and Infrastructure

Access to high quality services, robust infrastructure, and appropriately maintained public facilities is a critical component of quality of life for residents in town. The growing and changing needs of the population impact the current and future needs for public facilities and infrastructure while also impacting Town finances.

Goals:

1. Improve the septic and sewage treatment conditions and facilities in town.
2. Maintain and improve existing Town facilities.
3. Maintain and improve physical infrastructure systems in town.
4. Expand funding sources to improve infrastructure, programs, and services.
5. Improve communication and social service systems in town.
6. Support the continuing quality of the Sharon Public Schools.

Section 4.7 Transportation and Mobility

Sharon, known for its farms, Lake Massapoag, and other beautiful natural resources, is also a commuter town. With excellent access to the regional highway network, including Route 1, Route 24, Route 27, and Interstate 95 (I-95), as well as an MBTA commuter rail station, many residents commute north to Boston and Cambridge, south to Providence, and to surrounding towns. The location of housing, public facilities, and other major destinations all greatly impact the ease of mobility of residents. As a result, considerations about land use as it relates to social and physical connections and residents' mobility are a main focus in this Master Plan.

Goals:

1. Continue to adhere to and promote Complete Streets principles with all roadway infrastructure improvements to increase walkability and bikeability.
2. Improve pedestrian safety and accessibility for all ages and abilities through Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance.
3. Expand local and regional transportation networks by partnering with existing organizations that support transit and shared mobility.
4. Implement transportation policies and infrastructure improvements holistically to promote transportation and land use connections.

Section 4.8 Community Health

Population health is shaped by our collective exposures to healthy and unhealthy environments – it begins in our homes, in our children's schools, in the natural and built environment, and at our places of employment. Sharon is committed to being a town where everyone has access to a healthy environment (social, economic, physical) regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, age, economic circumstances, or abilities.

Goals:

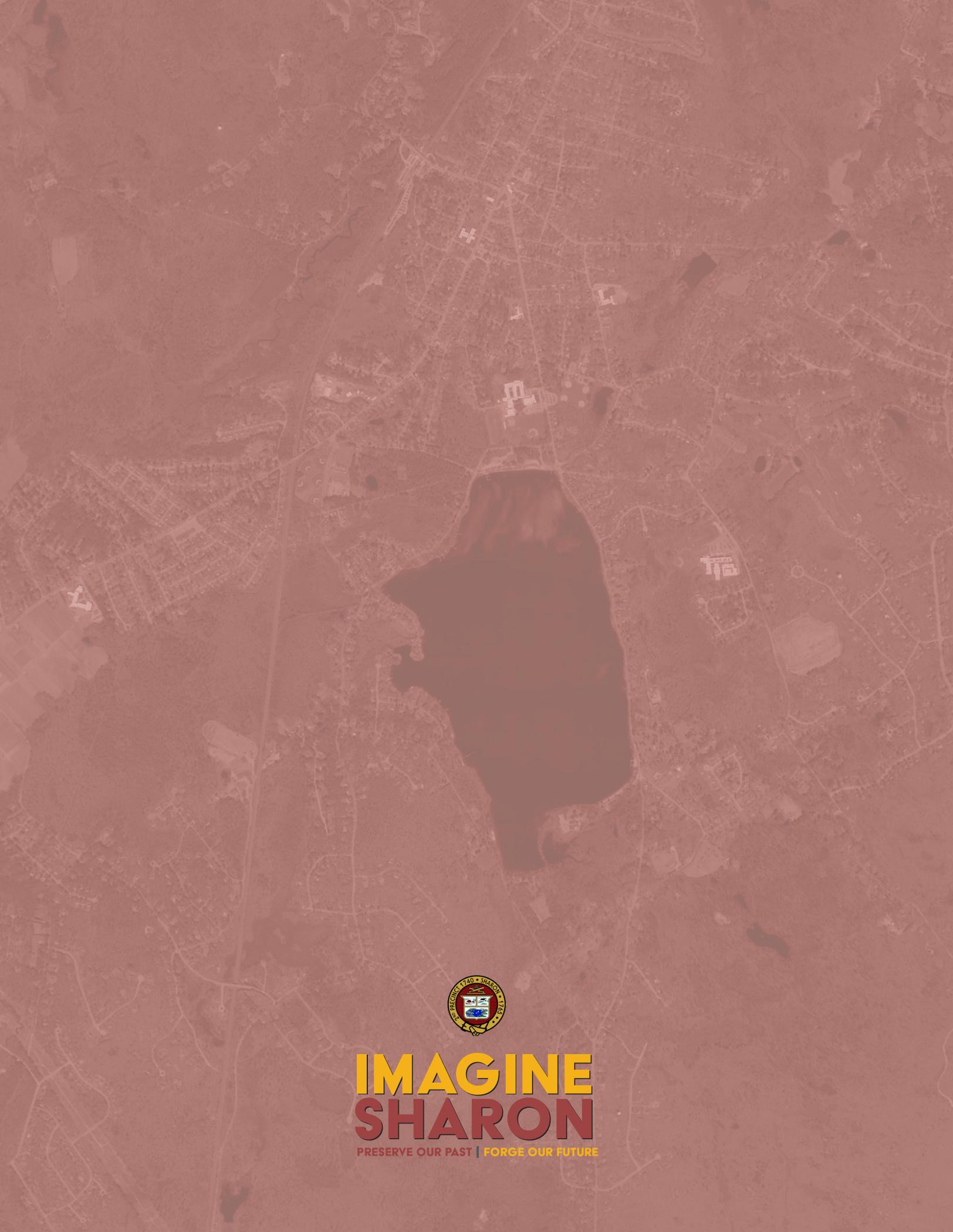
1. Promote environments that foster formal and informal connections among neighbors and peers to enhance social capital and intergenerational ties.
2. Support the mental and emotional wellness of children and youth to reduce the potential for risky behavior and to increase opportunities among all youth in town.
3. Enhance local public health resources to address environmental exposures and respond to health threats, including those created by climate change, that could affect the physical health and mental wellbeing of residents.
4. Continue prioritization of active transportation and traffic safety investments to support daily physical activity and exposure to health-supporting environments.
5. Pursue an Age- and Dementia-Friendly Strategy to increase opportunities for residents to age in community.
6. Consider health impacts of proposed projects and policies by integrating a Health and Equity Lens into local decision-making.
7. Improve communication and coordination across health and social services in Town, with considerations for the unique needs of all residents throughout the life course.

Section 5– Implementation Actions

The Master Plan employs a systems approach to align goals across plan elements and to assist the Town in making the best use of its resources by encouraging boards and committees, Town departments, and residents to seek and coordinate mutually beneficial solutions across disciplines and interests. In the spirit of this approach, this section outlines both the actions (the “what”) and the processes (the “how”) of plan implementation by including:

- **The Master Plan Systems Checklist** – a formalized list of considerations to be discussed and questions to be answered as each proposed action moves forward. This will enable information to be gathered and understood in an interdisciplinary manner regarding financial, environmental, health, and other impacts prior to action. The checklist is a guide that ensures an interdisciplinary approach to planning and implementation and is intended to be edited over time based on use.
- **The Master Plan Implementation Action Chart** – a list of actions, as described in the Plan Elements section of this Master Plan (Section 4), that is categorized by major plan elements.
- **Master Plan Implementation Start-ups** – detailed step-by-step and other information to help the Town get started on four selected focus areas for implementation:
 - » Support a unified approach to coordinating, funding, and marketing arts, cultural, and historic assets and events in the town (relates to Section 4.1);
 - » Create a civic or business organization to assist local businesses and entrepreneurs (relates to Section 4.2);
 - » Increase septic and sewer capacity within the town (relates to Sections 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, and 4.6); and
 - » Enhance the characteristics of an age-friendly community for residents and visitors at all points in the life course (relates to all Sections).

The start-ups are provided in this Master Plan because of the Town’s somewhat unique position of not having a town planner who can oversee the plan, coordinate between departments and initiatives, and identify grants and funding sources to support plan recommendations. Many recommendations in the plan support the addition of a town planner to Town staff in the recognition that the benefits incurred by having someone coordinate efforts and identify funding far outweigh the fiscal costs of the staff position.



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