

MEMORANDUM

To: Wellesley Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee
From: Larissa Brown, Goody Clancy
Re: Review of the 1994 Wellesley Comprehensive Plan
Date: September 27, 2004

As part of the 2004 update of the 1994 Comprehensive Plan, the Planning Board requested a “debriefing” on the 1994 Plan. This memorandum provides an evaluation of the plan based on a reading of *The 1994 Wellesley Comprehensive Plan with Background Materials*, as well as a review of the edition of the Plan without the background materials (which is the Plan that interested residents were likely to read). The Town has followed a number of the recommendations in the 1994 Plan and accomplished some of the actions called for in the Plan, particularly in the area of economic development.

The Plan acknowledges that the 1994 process produced valuable discussions about certain key choices facing Wellesley but ultimately did not result in a consensus to resolve them. The underlying question was how much of an active role the Town should take in shaping future land use and development in Wellesley in three areas: the future of the few large open parcels remaining in Town; changes in the village commercial districts; accommodating new needs and circumstances in neighborhoods while protecting their character. Many of the recommendations focused on increasing residents’ shared base of information and understanding to create a foundation for incremental progress towards consensus

Comprehensive But Not Strategic

As those of you who may have participated in the process will know, this four-year effort in three phases was a very detailed, thorough, and measured updating of the 1981 Plan. However, the 1994 Plan is comprehensive but not strategic, at least in an explicit way. Each element of the Plan has a large number of goals and policies, with a great deal of overlap and even repetition. But the Plan does not assign priorities. The text, particularly in conjunction with the more detailed narrative and discussion in the Background Materials, often points implicitly to priorities, but there is no explicit ranking, even on a scale of High, Medium, Low. The implementation section, in a table at the back of the Plan, provides target dates for action items, but also does not give any priority ranking. Moreover, there are no overall priorities that come out of the plan as a whole.

Some of the narrative makes it clear that on some issues it was difficult to reach consensus on goals and policies on certain subjects, such as affordable housing, let alone specific action items. Under those circumstances, trying to reach a consensus on the most important goals and actions may have seemed daunting. A different way to approach priority-setting that was also not explicit in the plan is to proceed from the bottom up, that is, by identifying the actions that are easiest to accomplish and highlighting them for early action. At the same time it is possible to establish the conditions to achieve goals that might be more important in an overall sense but more difficult to accomplish for a variety of reasons.

The current update process is intended to last about two years. It seems likely that most of the fundamental goals and many general policies identified in the 1994 Plan will be confirmed during this update. The 2004 planning process can then seek to make this update both comprehensive and strategic by focusing effort on establishing and balancing town-wide priorities, neighborhood and village priorities, and priorities within the various planning areas.

Organization and Public Process

The Steering Committee for the 94 Plan was made up of the Planning Board, the Planning Director and representatives of the Selectmen, Natural Resources, and MAPC. This group was mainly concerned with project scope, budget, schedule, the public participation model, and phasing. As a result, it appears that the Planning Board was somewhat removed from the actual planning process, which was carried out by the Comprehensive Plan Coordination Group, an extremely large committee representing a variety of town decision makers and interests whose size was capped at 50 persons. The role of this group was to oversee the writing of the plan and organize two day-long public forums for the first two phases of the plan. The group made decisions by consensus. In the third phase, the planning process outside the Coordinating Committee was oriented around large meetings for town departmental staff. The Coordination Group had the virtue of broad representation from many Wellesley government and civic groups, but a committee of that size can be very unwieldy when it is necessary to make decisions.

We will be following a different model in this process, with a smaller and more active Steering Committee made up of members of the Planning Board and Town Meeting representatives from each precinct. This has the benefit of providing geographic representation from all parts of Wellesley and including members of one of the key decision-making bodies in town. Additional members of boards and commissions, civic groups, and other knowledgeable persons will be asked to participate in discussions about and review of specific plan elements. Steering Committee members will also visit boards and commissions and other groups during the course of the comprehensive plan process to bring updates on the progress of the plan and ask for input.

The public will be involved through a concentrated period of neighborhood, town-wide and business workshops to be held early in the process, open Steering Committee meetings, as well as a dedicated web page on the town's web site with a regular newsletter on the project, draft documents and an email suggestion box. It is a testament to the rapid expansion of the Internet to realize that only ten years ago most people were not connected to online resources and the town did not have a web site. The availability of the web site and email communication offers the opportunity to make documents easily available to a wide public and the email suggestion box gives people who otherwise may not have the time to participate the chance to make their opinions known in an easy and convenient way.

No Executive Summary

Other than a one-page discussion of central themes, the Plan lacks an Executive Summary to convey the essential message of the Plan to the public and decision makers. Without an Executive Summary to focus attention on the most important aspects of the planning process and the plan recommendations – and why they are the most important -- the Plan seems to have a very large number of goals, policies and actions that are hard to digest and to evaluate within a town wide context. An Executive Summary of no more than 10-12 pages is more likely to be read by more people than the full plan and can be more widely disseminated.

Housing

Three goals were paramount in the housing section of the Plan: protecting and enhancing the residential character of Wellesley; expanding the diversity of housing types; and expanding housing affordability for senior citizens and families with children. The booming real estate market since the late 1990s has tended to reduce the diversity of housing types and sizes in Wellesley and proposals to further regulate residential redevelopment and growth have not been accepted. It was difficult to reach consensus on affordable housing for families, so the plan focused especially on senior housing because it had more widespread support. However, a senior housing strategy was not created, as recommended.

Accomplishments:

- The Plan set a goal of moving from 4.5% affordable housing to 5%. The Town is now at 4.8% and that goal will soon be met with the construction of 52 apartments in the Hastings Village 40B project.
- The recommendation to revitalize the Wellesley Housing Partnership was fulfilled through the creation of the Wellesley Housing Development Corporation, which has been leading affordable housing efforts.

Economic Vitality

Because the 1994 Plan was written when the region was still in a serious economic recession, there was a strong focus on fostering economic vitality in the Town's business districts, ensuring the continued prosperity of the commercial villages that serve Town residents, enhancing the Town's commercial gateways, and planning proactively for redevelopment of commercial sites.

Accomplishments:

- Rezoning of the office park district on Route 9 to Dearborn Street
- Rezoning to extend the business district at the Natick line to the Cochituate Aqueduct.
- Charrette and successful planning process for the MassHighway Route 9 depot site.
- Commercial district plans for Lower Falls, Wellesley Square, Wellesley Hills, Linden Street, and Cedar Street.

Natural and Cultural Resources

This section of the 1994 Plan drew on the Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan. The natural resource focus was on developing protection strategies for specific open space parcels and on protecting and improving the water quality of both surface water and groundwater. Compared to previous plans, the Plan also added a more detailed consideration of cultural resources.

Accomplishments:

- Improvement and beautification project for Fuller Brook Parkway.
- Sewering of small lots at Morse's Pond to eliminate pollution from septic failure
- Nonpoint source pollution reduction programs under development as part of the Town's efforts to comply with the US EPA Phase II Stormwater Regulations.
- Updating of the Open Space and Recreation Plan (currently in progress).

Services and Facilities

The Plan found that Wellesley has a strong system in place to meet Town needs for maintenance and replacement of physical facilities, so the Plan focused more on program recommendations for seniors and for youth.

Accomplishments:

- Creation of a new Recreation Center and a Youth Services Director position.
- Senior bus service.

Open Space and Recreation

The major goals of this section were to preserve open space that is significant because of its size or its location; expand the trail system to link destinations town-wide; and provide recreation facilities to meet town needs.

Accomplishments:

- Creation of a new Recreation Center.

- Active Trails Committee that has opened and marked new trails and offers guided walks.
- Trails Committee web page with trail maps.
- Natural Resource Commission web page with information on open space accessible to the public.
- Lower Falls Riverway Plan.
- Post Office Square Framework Plan.

Circulation

Improvement in traffic and parking management, pedestrian improvements in commercial districts, town-wide pedestrian and bicycle planning, intersection improvements at selected locations, creation of an intra-town public transportation service, and creation of a transportation coordinator position in town government were among the goals of the 1994 Plan.

Accomplishments:

- Improvements to Route 9 are underway.
- The Board of Selectmen created the position of Transportation Program Coordinator.
- Route 16 streetscape improvements.
- Parking studies in commercial districts.
- Traffic calming projects.
- Tailby Lot Committee.

Implementation

The implementation section of the 1994 Plan organizes the recommended implementation actions both by the type of action and by the group that would lead in accomplishing the action. As noted earlier, although these charts also indicate a general time frame for each of the actions, there is no explicit identification of priorities. The Plan does not recommend creation of a group to serve as the steward of the overall comprehensive plan and give regular reports to the Planning Board, Board of Selectmen or Town Meeting about implementation progress and/or changed circumstances.