



Natural Resource Network

Connecting Research, Teaching and Outreach

North Country Community Master Plans and the Forest Resource

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■ Introduction

Do north country communities use town master plans to encourage protection of productive forest lands? The Forest Resources Committee of the North Country Resource Conservation and Development Area (RC&D) believed that future timber supply depended on sound long term planning. The committee was concerned that volunteer planners, and even some professional planners, had insufficient understanding of the forest resource or the forest industry to address forest-related issues effectively. Their opinion was that if professional foresters developed closer working relationships with communities, planning for forest resources would improve.

Tom Spiro, a student at Antioch New England Graduate School, was hired as a summer intern in 1993 for a project to assess current master plans and make recommendations as to how communities could incorporate forestry considerations into their planning. Spiro's observations and recommendations were the basis for this research report.

The project had three objectives:

- A review of the current master plans of twelve communities in the north country demonstrated how forest resources were currently being addressed.
- A sample of north country planning boards were queried to ascertain their knowledge, awareness and interest in the forest resources in their communities.
- A sample of licensed foresters were surveyed to gauge their understanding of the planning process and interest in future involvement in the process.

■ The Community Master Plan

The community master plan is mandated by New Hampshire statute as a means of setting guidelines for development in each town. Components of the plan should include a general statement of long term goals for physical and socio-economic development; sections on land use, housing, transportation, utility and public services, community facilities, recreation, conservation and preservation of resources, and construction materials; and appended supporting data. The document is drafted from community input, approved by the planning board, and periodically updated. It serves as a guideline for decision-making by the town land use boards: the planning board and the zoning board of adjustment. Town or city ordinances in conformance with the master plan enable community development to take place in keeping with the townspeople's collective vision and expectations for their future.

The researcher analyzed the current master plans of twelve towns, focusing on sections concerning town goals and objectives, land use, land capabilities, natural resources, conservation and preservation. With some exceptions the plans showed consistency in their goals (Figure 1.) Achievement of any of those goals could have consequences which affect the forest resource.

Goals Common within a Sample of North Country Community Plans.

- Development and expansion to provide for population growth.
 - Preservation of rural character.
 - Protection of open space.
 - Preservation of agriculture.
 - Upgrading of infrastructure.
 - Desire for commercial development to increase tax base.
 - Exclusion of heavy industry.
 - Expansion of recreational facilities.
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With two or three exceptions, forest resources were not addressed comprehensively. Only one community had done a natural resource inventory. The ecological relationships between the forest cover and the specified resources were not usually established. Where natural resources were identified and assessed, there was not always a connection made as to how that information could or should be used. Resources were discussed in relation to the visual setting of the community, as part of the present economic base for the community and in terms of environmental quality. The values of the forest as a community resource for the present and future were not addressed in most cases.

The uniqueness of each north country town was reflected in the plans when local issues were addressed, some of which were related to forestry. The town with a ski industry needed the attractive forest backdrop. The town with large acreages of industrial forest was interested in future ownership patterns. The steep slopes in one tourist town needed protection. Flood control was a concern of a town located on a river.

Resource protection components emphasized water quality, open space, agricultural land, wildlife, and endangered species, but not forests. Most plans included some recommendation for methods of resource protection though they varied widely in the extent of discussion. Each of the following methods was suggested in at least one master plan. Location of development, establishment of resource districts, public ownership and easements would protect land areas. Environmental assessments, GIS mapping, and natural resource inventories would provide data for decision-making. Educational programs, professional advice, management plans, Best Management Practices, sharing expertise with neighboring towns, and current use taxation were other tools recommended for conservation of resources.

Seven of the twelve master plans discussed ownership and/or management of town forest lands. In a few cases the parcels were only listed, with no mention of their values to the community or management goals. In contrast, comprehensive discussions of management with professional assistance to achieve town goals were included in three plans. Nine of the towns either used or recommended the use of the services of UNH Cooperative Extension Forestry Educators, Natural Resources Conservation Service personnel, and/or licensed consultant foresters. The overall assessment is that the forest resource is not addressed in the master plans so comprehensively as it could be. The towns which are the exceptions are the towns which had considerable natural resource professional participation in the planning process.

■ Community Officials' Perceptions

The researcher interviewed officials in the twelve communities whose plans were analyzed. Most had served on the planning board and had participated in the master planning process. His findings were as follows.

The Process

- Townspeople were satisfied with their plans and planning process.
- In most cases towns had used a written questionnaire as the survey instrument.
Response to the survey was the principle form of public involvement.
- That master plans were not widely used by local officials was evident in their lack of familiarity with the contents.
- There was a general lack of appreciation of forest planning for both public and private lands as a benefit to the community.

The Forest Resource

- Forest protection per se was not seen as so important as watershed and agricultural land protection. The inter-relatedness of natural systems was not acknowledged.
- Communities were more interested in protection than utilization of the forest resource.
- Forests were thought to provide stability to the town environment.

Forest Management

- Officials felt secure in their established working relations with the UNH Cooperative Extension Forestry Educators. The county forester would provide any needed advice to the town, his/her services were free, and there was a good history of experience in that relationship.
- Private consultant foresters were thought to provide good service to private landowners.
- In some cases the conservation commissions did the forest planning and management of the town land with the aid of a local forester volunteering services as a commissioner.

■ The Professional Foresters

Licensed foresters were surveyed by telephone in July and August 1993. Of 68 foresters chosen from throughout the state, 53 completed surveys, twelve were non-respondents, and three were unreachable. They were asked to respond to a set of questions regarding their understanding of the master planning process, their participation in local planning efforts, and their willingness to work with planners locally and regionally. The survey results were tabulated by northern, central and southern regions of the state. In most cases there weren't considerable regional differences in the responses.

Their own understanding of the master planning process was rated poor to fair by 57% of the foresters. A higher percentage of those in the north country rated their understanding as poor than did those in the southern region of the state.

Participation in the process was reported by 45%, with involvement listed as conservation commission (12), master planning committee (2), zoning board (3), UNH Cooperative Extension (2), and others. Of the respondents, 23% had served on their planning boards.

Currently, 19% of the foresters had a contractual relationship with a town for timber tax assessment/ monitoring (7), current use evaluation (3), and other(3). Most of those contracts were in the northern part of the state.

Of the 53 responding foresters, 42 would volunteer their participation in master planning in their own communities, 23 would volunteer regionally and 38 would participate if they were paid.

Goals for management of forest resources were not clearly stated in master plans according to 73% of the respondents. Master plans met the expectations of only 21% for content.

Because a focus of this research was to ensure a productive forest in the future, the foresters were asked if they thought the communities used their master plans to encourage the forest industry or to limit forestry activities. The responses varied widely: encourage 32%, limit 19%, neither 21%, both 5%, and 23% didn't know.

■ Conclusions

Town officials were satisfied with the community master plans which they had developed and written. Their awareness of the need for resource protection was focused primarily on water and agricultural land. They were not particularly aware of a need to manage and protect the forest resource for future health and productivity. The few communities which had written comprehensively about forests had considerable participation of natural resource professionals in the planning process.

In contrast, the professional foresters believed that the forest resource was not adequately addressed in master plans. Many foresters, though, said they did not have a good understanding of the process of developing a master plan. Many of them would volunteer to participate in master planning in their own communities, and some would volunteer elsewhere in their region.

Community decision-making, of which master planning is a part, can have tremendous impact on the forest resource. It is vital that communities understand the inter-relatedness of the natural systems and the consequences of their social and economic actions on the natural resources. It is at the community level of discussion that it becomes important to identify natural resources, their unique local characteristics, and the related issues of concern to the community. By virtue of their education, training and experience, the forestry professionals within the community can help develop understanding and education about forests. They can assist in developing alternative strategies from which the community can choose options and set goals for the future.

Professional foresters can become more familiar with the master planning process in several ways, both formally and informally. At the formal end of the spectrum, continuing professional education sessions can be designed to meet their specific needs. Participation does not have to be in an official capacity. It can be informal participation in a community-generated natural resource inventory. Or it could be hosting a community woodlot tour. Public agency professionals are available to support that kind of effort.

Local foresters have a wealth of information about the landscape and they can learn to share that information casually or formally within the community. Education about the forest resource for townspeople of all ages is an important early step in improving community awareness. Forester participation in local educational processes such as school programs, youth group activities, service club programs, and community events can be starting points.

Community officials may need training or guidance for preparation of a comprehensive natural resource component as they update their master plans. As suggested in New Hampshire's nearly completed state forest resource plan and in partnership with the regional planning agencies, a training program which incorporates community natural resource inventories, FLESA, and other forest-related topics can be developed. In terms of building working relationships, trust and experience in the community planning process, joint participation in training of community officials and foresters may be the most effective approach.

The Natural Resource Network Research Reports

The Natural Resource Network presents this material as a part of a series of research reports and publications of interest to educators, resource professionals, landowners and the public. Additional copies are available from the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Publications Center, 120 Forest Park, UNH, Durham, NH 03824.

The mission of the Natural Resource Network is to enhance interaction among the natural resource research, teaching, and outreach communities in New Hampshire by providing an ongoing mechanism for identifying, addressing and communicating natural resource issues.

Natural resource professionals are working toward improved ways to conserve and use the natural resources of New Hampshire. The Natural Resource Network was formed to improve the interaction among researchers and those who provide outreach education in many kinds of programs. Teachers, outreach professionals and resource managers can bring research-based education to diverse audiences. At the same time, those audiences, or consumers, identify issues and needs for educational programs which can be addressed by controlled research. Well informed and knowledgeable professionals, free-flowing exchange of information, an advantageous and gratifying professional environment, and natural resource planning are goals of the Natural Resource Network.

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