



Master/Comprehensive Plans

What is a Master Plan/Comprehensive Plan?

For cities and towns, a Master Plan offers a detailed vision of the future, explaining how the community can grow, prosper, and adapt, all while serving the needs of the entire community. A Master Plan typically covers a wide variety of topics, including:

- Natural environment
- Transportation
- Economic development
- Housing
- Historic and cultural resources
- Recreation
- Demographics
- Infrastructure
- Zoning
- Land Use

Master Plans take a long-range approach, envisioning what the community will need 10-20 years into the future. Through establishing goals and objectives and creating a prioritized action plan, a Master Plan is the implementation blueprint for what the community can achieve collectively. Unlike a strategic or area-focused plan, a Master Plan considers community-wide needs, everything within the geographic boundaries of the municipality.

Master Plans are developed through an open, public process that includes residents, neighborhood groups, business owners, town boards, municipal staff, educators, elected officials and others. Meeting facilitators and plan preparers take the time to listen to the needs expressed by the public and work to incorporate those needs into a shared vision for the community.

In developing a Master Plan, previous comprehensive plans, master plans or strategic plans are reviewed for what was implemented, what was not and, most importantly, what remains relevant today.

Preparing a Master Plan

Some communities have never prepared a Master Plan. Other communities may have a Master Plan that is outdated and lost much of its relevance. Still other communities may simply need to update their existing Master Plan. Getting started means reviewing previous plans and the options for who will prepare the new plan.

Many towns in the Berkshires have chosen Berkshire Regional Planning Commission to help them to prepare a Master Plan. This provides the town with the services of a professional planner at the commission. A private firm specializing in Master Plans is also an option. The preparation of a Master Plan is not typically accomplished by municipal staff due to the substantial amount of time and effort involved.

BRPC PROGRAM

Community Planning Program
berkshireplanning.org/programs

Benefits of Master Plans

Through the development of a Master Plan, a community can be proactive about their future. Where to direct development, transportation improvements, or infrastructure is outlined in a Master Plan and avoids a reactive or piece meal approach that is often costly. With a comprehensive plan in hand, a municipality can find ways to reduce municipal expenses while at the same time generating additional tax revenue.

With the high cost of housing impacting residents and businesses, a Master Plan will recommend how the supply of housing, both market rate and affordable, can be increased.

Protecting natural resources helps save critical wildlife habitat, maintains access to clean drinking water, lessens the risk of flooding, and provides open space for recreation. A Master Plan determines where the protection of open space would be most beneficial. Berkshire County cities and towns need to assess their vulnerability to climate change and respond with appropriate infrastructure improvements. A Master Plan determines where larger culverts are needed, where future erosion is likely to occur, and the preferred options to lessen the impact of more frequent flooding events.

Master Plans in Practice

Lenox completed a Master Plan in 2021. The last comprehensive plan was completed over 20 years prior. With analysis and recommendations that include demographics, environment, culture, and infrastructure, this new plan is expected to serve the community for the next 10-20 years. The Lenox Master Plan Steering Committee, a volunteer group of local board and committee members, town staff, and residents led the process that included extensive data analysis and community engagement.

In June 2022, West Stockbridge was nearing completion of the Master Plan process with the help of BRPC. The town last developed a Community Development Plan in 2004. BRPC staff worked with a committee of town stakeholders to survey the town's residents, gather the relevant information, and then incorporate that information into a Master Plan that will direct the town's priorities through 2040.

During the spring of 2022, Windsor and BRPC staff began the process of developing the first Master Plan for the town. One of the preliminary steps is a survey of the town's residents to collect feedback on the needs of the townspeople and how they envision their community in the future.

During 2022 and 2023, BRPC will also be working with Monterey and Lee to complete their Master Plans.

Law related to Master Plans

Massachusetts General Law [Chapter 41, Section 81D](#) explains what is to be included within a plan. The sections are known as elements of the plan. A community may find that additional elements are needed within their Master Plan.

Public Input Process



Maps at a public hearing in West Stockbridge

Master Plans are most effective when they have input from ALL stakeholders in a community. To receive input from the community, outreach is tailored to various organizations and residents to ensure the voices of underrepresented groups are heard. In some cases, this may mean language translation of materials, such as meeting notices and opinion surveys. At public meetings, language translators may be needed. If public input meetings at city or town hall are not widely attended, it may mean holding neighborhood meetings at key locations in the community.