

**Athol Master Planning Committee
VIRTUAL Zoom Meeting
March 27, 2024**

Attendees:

BSC Group: Heather Gould, Jeff Bagg

Town Staff Present: Heidi Murphy (PCD), Deborah Vondal (Public Health Director)

Rebecca Bialecki (Select Board), Tom Russo (Board of Planning & Community Development), Mary Holtorf (Downtown Vitality Committee, Open Space & Recreation Committee), Jean Shaughnessy (Library, Historic Committee); Kathryn Norton (Board of Planning & Community Development)

Rebecca called the meeting to order at 6:05 pm.

Mr. Russo indicated that the first item on the agenda is to review the Survey Results.

Jeff provided a summary of the survey results, in a PowerPoint format, and developed some draft goals/priorities/objectives for the Committee's consideration and discussion.

- Survey results, summary of goal and objectives.
 - o Housing, Transportation, Economic Development, Community Facilities and Services, Open Space and Recreation, Natural and Cultural Resources, Land Use and Zoning, and Public Health
 - o 242 survey responses were received. Healthy range of ages who took the survey. A lot of people have lived in Athol for 30+ years.
- Housing: Two Types of Questions – Some consensus on small single-family housing in need, senior 55+, assisted living communities and accessory apartments/dwelling units.
- Transportation: Highest priorities are to improve roadway infrastructure, prioritize bridges for rehabilitation, and improve roadway infrastructure.
- Economic Development – More events and festivals, improved public spaces, and more dining and shopping were popular answers at close to 60% in agreement.
 - o Small, independently owned businesses, small-scale production, and medical facilities and healthcare services were most voted for types of economic development respondents would like to see in Athol.
- Community Facilities and Services: Preserve land for future water supply ranked as highest priority followed by implement infrastructure improvements and increase public safety and emergency preparedness.
- Land Use and Zoning: High priority answers include minimize new development and maximize protection of open space, encourage commercial development, and promote clustered/compact residential development that protects open space.
- Public Health: High priority answers top three ranked include youth development, violence prevention, and access to affordable healthcare.

- Open Space and Recreation: For high priority rankings – improve existing parks and recreational areas, protect more open space areas to keep them as open space, and provide better maintenance at riverfront area, lakes, and beaches. Combining medium and high priority choices, there is support for creating new parks and recreation facilities and improving rail trails and/or access to the Millers River.
- Natural and Cultural Resources: Protect natural water systems, protect forests and farmland, and actively maintain existing conservation areas. This slide supports what is in the open space and recreation plan as well.
- Should the Town adopt the Community Preservation Act? Most people said yes. 194 people answered it, and 17 people skipped it. 74% said yes and 26% said no. An Educational campaign and lead work to get people to understand what it is about and vote for it via the ad hoc committee that would be formed. It was mentioned that BSC should be able to explain CPA briefly at the public meeting on 3/8/24 and/or have a fact sheet on CPA available.

In response to the survey results, Ms. Murphy indicated that the master plan is one guiding document that town departments are going to utilize to pursue future grant funding, so it is an important document.

Ms. Bialecki indicated that at the public meeting on 3/8/24, we need to lead that presentation by raising awareness of the numerous existing plans/planning efforts the town has made thus far.

A brief discussion explored how formation of a Cultural district may be tough – not sure Athol is there yet. Could Lord Pond Plaza be the town common? The Downtown Vitality Committee could help promote.

Regarding the public health slide, could we ask to have the town's DV/SV local provider come to the meeting to talk about what they do currently for Athol relative to outreach on domestic violence education and prevention? Ms. Murphy indicated she will email NELCWIT and see if a staff member can attend the public meeting on 3/8/24.

Ms. Holtorf indicated that the Open Space Committee discussed on 3/26 that the Town needs to form a board to promote the CPA. It is worth having a fact sheet to begin the discussion on potentially pursuing CPA passage in the future.

Relative to housing production – Deborah informed the group that there is a vacant and abandoned committee in town, it has not met in 3-4 years (COVID impact). There are quite a few of these properties in town and the committee should become active again, houses just sitting there bank-owned and would like to push this effort.

Ms. Bialecki moved, seconded by Ms. Holtorf and VOTED 5-0 to adjourn the Master Plan Committee meeting at 7:05 p.m.