

Town of Stratford

Master Plan 2021

Prepared by the Stratford Planning Board

Approved August 8, 2021

Vision Statement:

Our Town values its natural resources, and our citizens wish to preserve and protect this quiet, clean environment while promoting a sustainable economy for our community. The integrity of our small town heritage is important to us as we remain primarily a rural residential community. Stratford's future will depend on how successfully it meets current challenges to its well-being in the face of climate change and other stresses, including energy and food dependencies, regional economic options, and a fluctuating and aging population. Also among these challenges, technology is changing the way people work, shop and learn. The consequences for Stratford are difficult to foresee, but that only accentuates placing emphasis put on a future in keeping with this vision. It is the Town's intent to encourage careful and orderly growth and development in appropriate areas of the community while protecting its rural character, making efficient use of its public services, and preventing development sprawl.

History:

For thousands of years our area of the Connecticut Valley watershed was utilized at least seasonally by the Abenaki. More recently, Euro-American settlers incorporated Stratford in 1773.

Stratford was primarily a farming and logging community until the late 1800s. Small family farms raised animals, produce, and grains for local and distant markets. Stave, shingle, saw, and grist mills also employed residents.

The Connecticut River and its tributaries as well as the railroad brought Stratford's products to regional markets. In addition to transporting goods and passengers, the railroad was also an important link for both mail and telegraph services.

By the beginning of the Twentieth Century, much of Stratford was owned by large paper companies. Their subsequent decline resulted in the sale of large tracts of land in the 1980s and 1990s, and to employment loss as local mills closed in the early 2000s. Today, the local economy is primarily driven by health care, social services, and education; retail trade; and accommodation and food services. Wood cutting remains active as does some farming, but both are now relatively minor contributors to employment. Stratford, and Coös County in general, have higher unemployment and lower wages than the rest of NH, as well as higher rates of poverty.

Heritage:

Throughout the past two and a half centuries Stratford has experienced rises and declines in population and prosperity. Old growth Acadian forest gave way to crop and pasture land, and later became young woodlands and residential and vacation home developments. The Town takes satisfaction and pride in retaining markers from our past that provide a sense of place and continuity. Our old and significant buildings, including the Grange, the library/railroad station, the school, our churches and museum, as well as the monuments, cemeteries, and other connections to the past draw our community together and provide foundations on which to build our future.

Heritage Goals:

- The Town will create and maintain an inventory of buildings, monuments, and other records of, and connections to, the Town's past.
- The Town will continue to work with and support the Cohos Historical Society.
- The Town will encourage the preservation and appropriate restoration of iconic buildings utilizing grants, matching funds and other tools available to keep the historical character of the Town intact.
- The Capital Improvement Program (CIP) process will include recommendations for investments in preservation and restoration.

Surveys and Meetings

Through survey results and public meetings, citizens have expressed hopes and concerns for Stratford's future, as follows.

Hopes:

- Stratford remains primarily a rural residential community and maintains its natural environment.
- Residential development is mostly on state maintained roads or close to our village centers.
- Commercial development is primarily on state maintained roads; secondarily on town maintained roads.
- Site-plan regulations for new businesses.
- Expanded partnerships with neighboring communities to provide services, whenever practical.
- The community continues to value pure drinking water supplies, farmland, lakes, rivers, streams and wetlands, and wildlife corridors and habitats.

- Stratford’s historical sites and records are protected and preserved.
- Expanded outdoor recreation opportunities, especially in the non-motorized recreation sector.
- Young adults will find reasons to move here or stay here and work and raise families. “They are our future!” one person commented.
- The town will have economic diversity serving the local community. No one surveyed or in a public meeting desired a ‘big box’ type store in town.

Concerns:

- There is a concern about lack of a local police presence.
- Speeding and other dangerous driving behaviors on State and Town roads.
- The viability of the public school.
- Town road maintenance and costs.
- OHRVs on town roads.
- Fragmented development that would endanger our natural resources and our overall resiliency.

Natural resources:

We live in a time of climate change. This includes changes in weather patterns that may cause warmer winters, less snow cover, increased flooding and increased drought. Non-native species are moving into the area; habitats for plant and animal species are being compromised and fragmented. People are migrating due to climate and economic change. Other natural hazards, such as a pandemic, can cause major disruptions on a local and world-wide basis.

As a community we acknowledge that all nature is connected; we are within a web of life, not outside it. Our actions as a town have far-reaching effects that we can’t always envision or control. Therefore, it is in our interest to consider human and natural systems in our planning.

Clean water and air, healthy forests and soils, benefit everyone. The Town’s residents understand that in order for the whole community to thrive, other species also need appropriate habitats. We all enjoy the beauty of our forests and open spaces. Maturing forests act as carbon sinks in this time of increasing CO₂ in our atmosphere.

Natural Resource Goals:

- Water resources will not be given up to private concerns for commercial development.

- The town will develop a water source protection plan, which locates the Town's surface and groundwater, and identifies actual and potential contamination sites.
- Site plan regulations will require new businesses to address water run-off, contamination and erosion where applicable.
- No use of chemical herbicides or pesticides on town-owned lands.
- Town-owned woodlots will be managed primarily for public recreation and education, wildlife habitat, and for CO₂ sequestration and storage.
- The Conservation Committee will have a presence on the town website to inform visitors and the community about issues pertaining to the environment, conservation, and local opportunities for outdoor recreation.

Current and Future Land Use:

Respecting the expressed wishes of the present community and responding to both the economic and environmental exigencies of the coming decades, the Town will seek to preserve its natural heritage, yet still provide opportunity for local economic development that will lead to a sustainable and resilient community.

The Town will therefore maintain well connected natural habitat, conserve its farmland, ensure public safety and clean water, and minimize scattered and premature development. Development will be focused near the villages and along State maintained and existing class V Town Roads.

Current and Future Land Use Goals:

- Site Plan Review regulations for new businesses.
- A land use ordinance to optimize source water protection for public water supplies. This would allow the town to apply for State grant monies to aid in buying land to protect public water supplies.
- Orderly development consistent with this master plan protecting land, re-source, and citizen health and fostering public safety.
- Annual review and updates to town regulations to ensure compliance with this and future master plans, research based best planning practices, changes in NH RSAs, and the wishes of the community.
- A Natural Resources Inventory of the town.
- An active Capital Improvement Program.
- Annual review and updates to the master plan

Economic Development:

The closing of local mills just before the 2008 recession changed the economy in Coös County. Relatively low wages, increased commutes, lack of child care, and a shortage of affordable housing are pressing issues for working families. On the other hand, internet access allows more people to work remotely, and may provide new opportunities for current, and potential new residents.

Economic diversity attuned to our changing world is key to a thriving community.

Economic Development Goals:

- Local ,easily accessible businesses that provide the vital services needed by the community.
- Be an appealing destination for visitors, potential new residents and businesses by protecting and promoting the Town’s historical, agricultural, and natural environments through a diversity of cultural and business activities.
- Incentivize the development of safe, energy efficient, community integrated, affordable housing.
- Adequate and affordable broadband capacity.
- Continued Town participation in County and regional broadband development committees.

Transportation:

Stratford is almost exclusively dependent on private cars and trucks for access to goods and services, commuting to jobs, and participating in community activities. Rail and air services are non-existent; bus and taxi services are extremely limited.

Route 3 links our widely dispersed town together but can be a barrier for humans and wildlife. In the North Village, Route 3’s dangerous crossings and lack of sidewalks make it difficult for pedestrians, especially children and the elderly or disabled, to safely walk or bike to school, town offices, or stores. In Stratford Hollow, there is no defined pedestrian/ bicycle access to the local small store on Rt. 3 and the village roads are narrow with no

sidewalks.

Rt. 3 in Center Stratford from the Hogback to the Grange, is especially dangerous due to its narrow, unpaved shoulders, poor sight distance, 50 mph speed limit, and lack of adequate parking.

Residential development in Stratford is very low density. This leads to higher taxpayer burdens both for Town road maintenance and for provision of emergency services.

Transportation Goals:

- Work with NH DOT and North Country Council to develop projects and funding for pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure on Route 3. Develop walking trails and bicycle routes that safely and attractively connect the villages with the State's and the region's trail and bicycle path networks.
- Work with NCC and Tri-County CAP to increase public transit options in our area.
- Provide a “Park and Ride” area set aside on Route 3 for ride sharing.
- Provide an electric vehicle charging station tied to the Town’s solar power facilities.
- Existing Class V Town Roads will be evaluated for traffic volume and maintenance costs.
- Regular review of Class V roads to determine if they are appropriately classified will be performed.
- Major updates to roads will be addressed in the Capital Improvement Program.
- Due to taxpayer burdens associated with scattered and premature development, development on Class VI and private roads will be discouraged.

Utilities/Energy:

In 2007, Article 20 of the Town Warrant passed, requesting the select board to “consider the appointment of a voluntary committee to recommend local steps to save energy and reduce emissions.” At Town Meeting in 2012, Article 11 passed stating in part: “...there shall be no further overhead development of alternating current or direct current high voltage transmission lines within the borders of the Town of Stratford without the benefit and approval of the Town.”

Utilities and Energy Goals:

- No new above ground high voltage transmission lines, in keeping with Article 11, 2012.
- Ridge line commercial wind energy projects, which create substantial physical and aesthetic scars that impact the health of woodland and high altitude habitats as well as the marketability of the town as a recreational and residential destination, will be opposed.
- Solar energy installations will be developed and maintained by the Town, as endorsed at the 2020 and 2021 Town Meetings.
- In keeping with Article 20, 2007, the Conservation Commission will create an energy sub-committee to inform and educate residents about energy efficiency and energy conservation.

Community Development:

Strengthening our community bonds and making Stratford an appealing place for visitors and new residents will enhance its resilience and viability.

Community Development Goals:

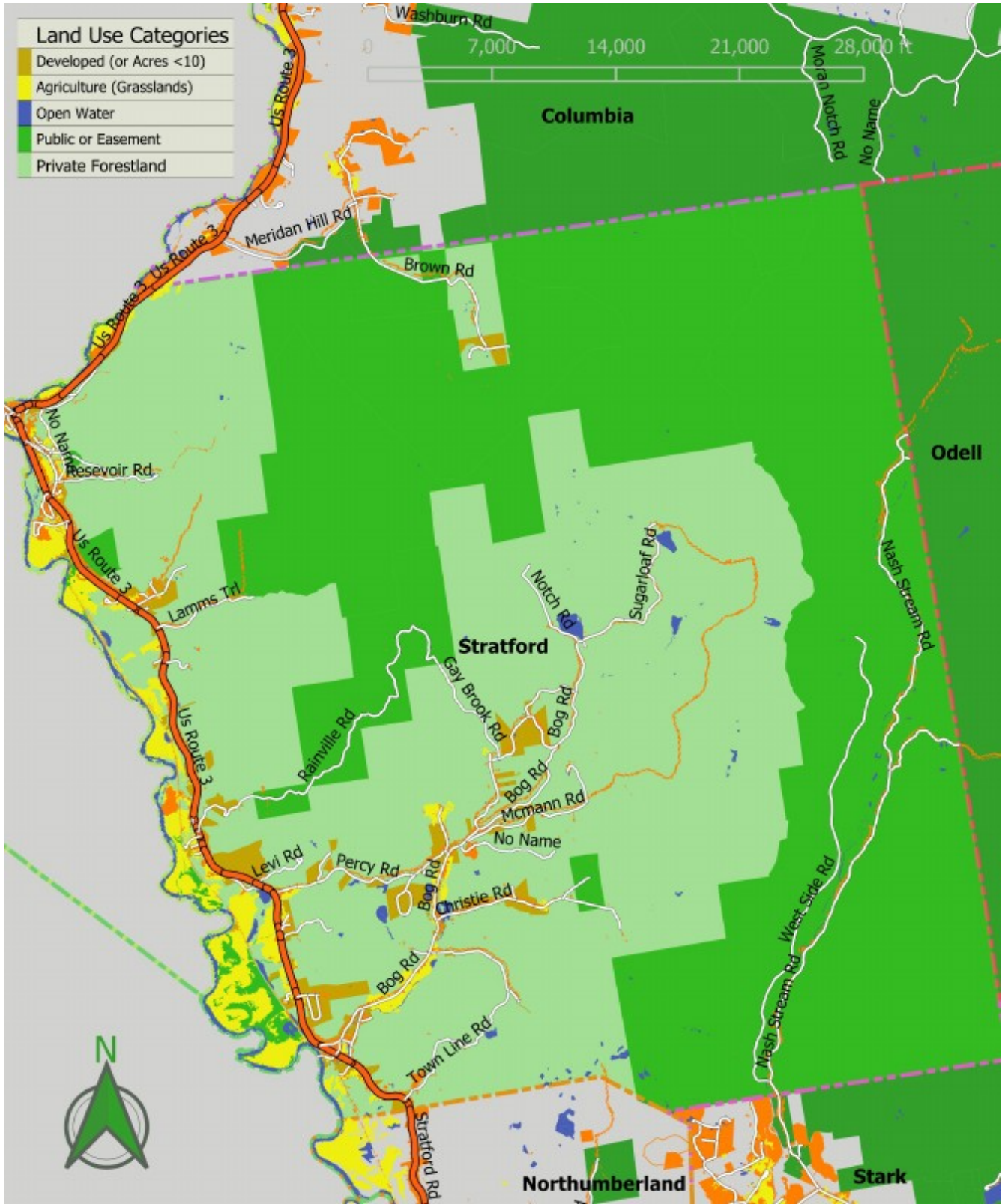
- Develop gardens, markets, and other community events.
- The Town website will become a resource for the Town’s residents and visitors for energy, conservation, public offices, public assistance, economic opportunity, up-coming events, education, news, and social connections.

- The Capital Improvement Program will include investment in amenities and features that will attract businesses, visitors, and new residents.
- The Town will have improved communication with the school, and highlight and honor academic achievement.
- The Town will support the establishment of scholarships that assist its residents to advance their education.
- The Town will actively pursue its Hazard Mitigation and Emergency Management Plans and consider how hazard mitigation and emergency management can be enhanced through its CIP and land use decisions.

In Closing:

We can't predict the future, but we can plan to meet it as best we can. This master plan reflects our community's commitment to maintaining the peaceful, rural atmosphere so intrinsic to the Town's values as we work towards sustainability in our ever changing world.

The Planning Board would like to thank the citizens of Stratford for their time and valuable input while this Master Plan was being developed. Also, special thanks to Brendan Prusik for the Current Land Use map, below.



Map courtesy of Brendan Prusik

Summary of Master Plan Public Input Process:

In the summer of 2020, two public hearings were held, a paper and web-based survey was distributed to all Town property owners, informal conversations at public and private venues were engaged, and written comments were solicited.

The printed and web-based survey was particularly productive of specific responses indicating the direction the involved members of the community wished the Town to take. In total there were 90 respondents who took the time to answer the 42 survey questions.