

D. Statement of Project Understanding and Approach

We will broaden and deepen the understanding gained in Phase 1 through continued, focused outreach in Phase 2 and through technical analysis of the data. We will also do further analysis of the Phase 1 survey results. Bringing the inventory and technical analysis into the outreach process is what we call “community conversations” on the key issues. Planners Collaborative’s team will use our multi-disciplinary experience and knowledge of state-of-the-art community planning to suggest strategies for grappling with the issues and identifying actions that move Acton toward meeting your goals and realizing your vision.

Our Phase 1 work illustrates our approach and our commitment to a vibrant and effective community conversation that includes all Actonians. We will continue with this approach to refine, validate, and finalize the vision and goals as we go forward. At the same time we will employ a strategic planning approach to clarify issues, identify opportunities and constraints, suggest alternative actions to address issues, help the Town to evaluate and visualize the outcomes of these actions, and weave the best alternatives into a coherent implementation plan. The resulting Plan will be documented in a clearly written and well-illustrated report that the average person can comprehend and will enjoy reading. An effective Plan is more than a document on a shelf: we will produce a guide to public decision-making by Town Boards, Town Staff, and Town Meeting.

Our Understanding of Acton’s Issues and Core Values

A host of issues and values was identified through the Phase 1 process. Although we intend to widen the conversation as much as possible in Phase 2 and to validate our understanding through further analysis of the Phase 1 surveys and additional Phase 2 surveys, there seems to be more consensus on the basic points than differences of opinion among the many Actonians who attended workshops and responded to surveys. Those issues and values revolve around preserving Acton’s rural character, open space, and historic heritage; addressing growth to insure that it is sustainable and compatible with those values; connecting the villages and neighborhoods; creating places for community gathering; and fostering compatible development that will help support community life and a tax base that will fund an excellent array of schools and other town facilities and services. Our understanding is reflected in the Phase 1 Report, which will be revised as necessary to fully reflect the comments of the reviewers.

Our Approach

Planning is complicated. A Master Plan is a decision-making tool that must also meet the guidelines of MGL Chapter 40, Section 81D. The 1998 Plan Update did this and was a high quality document, but its success was hampered by too many actions without a clear set of priorities, and division into the 81D elements. We aim in Phase 2 to keep the “big picture” uppermost so that people can see where each issue, alternative, and proposed action fits into it.

An example is enhancing village centers, which involves land use, economic development, design guidelines, preservation of cultural resources, ways to get to the village center, and ways to circulate within it. Addressing all of these interrelated aspects requires a coherent strategy that might be called “sustainability.” Preserving rural character involves acquiring, protecting, and managing open space, which in turn involves land use controls, budgeting land acquisition and

upkeep, which affects the overall fiscal picture and town resource needs in both the capital spending and operating budgets. Resolving all these issues to meet the goals is the job of the master plan, and that requires tradeoffs, setting priorities, and potentially improving Town governance to facilitate decision making.

More is said in the proposed scope of work about each of the above points, but the basic approach is to integrate the issues and recommendations into a coherent whole (potentially through the sustainability element) and to make the implementation element reflect a coherent set of priorities. The other master plan elements will provide more background on the issues and explain how the implementation plan affects future land use, transportation, etc. The element on town services and facilities will be expanded to address the issues set forth in the RFP, and a governance element will play a key role in structuring the implementation plan.

Continued Outreach, Education, and Community Conversations. Our approach to community outreach is embodied in the collaborative process of Phase 1. In Phase 2 we will continue that process but focus it on the discussion of information and options needed to create a master plan. The process will include “background briefings” (public education) on the planning process and issues.

Inventory and Analysis. Our experience in all kinds of master planning (including comprehensive community plans, area plans, institutional plans, transportation plans, etc.) is that an inventory and analysis of key data is essential as a means to insight about key facts and conclusions that illuminate the issues. We will not only assemble the data but also find the key facts in the data and bring them into the development of the plan.

Priorities and Tradeoffs. We have done many plans to guide public and private decision-making for which making tradeoffs between available resources and setting priorities is essential. We will bring this perspective to Acton and use the community conversations and public education to move up a shared learning curve and toward an effective level of consensus.

In summary, our own core values are to work with communities to make choices that will be successfully implemented to advance the community’s vision and goals. The proposed scope of services expands on the points of this section of the proposal.