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An evaluation of Master Plans and their Land-Use Elements

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MASTER PLANS & LAND USE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chapter 41, section 81D of the Massachusetts General Laws states that every municipality with a planning board is expected to complete a Master Plan. A Master Plan is a tool used by municipalities to guide decision making for long-term land use development. The specific Land-Use Element of a Master Plan is used to identify present land uses, as well as to determine proposed distribution, location and inter-relationships of public and private land uses. This Master Plan must be consistent throughout each element, and should take into consideration population, building intensity, and trends. Master plans are expected to be updated by the planning board from time to time to stay current with development patterns within the municipality.¹

The Fall 2013 Regional Planning Studio course, led by Dr. Darrel Ramsey-Musolf, was tasked with looking at municipalities in Massachusetts to evaluate the Land-Use Element of their Master Plans. The class was randomized into teams of three, and each team chose two municipalities to explore. The teams were required to create a planning consultancy firm to work under, then wrote mission statements and crafted agreements regarding work expectancy and guidelines to handle disputes. Each team read their municipalities Master Plan's Introductions, Executive Summaries, and Land-Use Elements. Following this, each team conducted site visits which then informed "gut" assessments of their municipalities. These "gut" assessments evaluated whether recent development, within the last five to ten years, was consistent with the land use goals, objectives, and policies of each Master Plan. If the Master Plan was written within the last five years, the group explored whether the Master Plan addressed land-use related issues identified in the site visit. Ten municipalities were examined: Brookfield, East Brookfield, Easthampton, Great Barrington, Greenfield, Holyoke, Orange, Pittsfield, South Hadley and West Springfield. The municipalities presented themes of downtown revitalization, commercial development, sustaining tourism, sprawl, adaptive reuse, spurring growth and creation of a creative economy.

¹ Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 41 Section 81

The following report will summarize each team's findings from the Land-Use Elements, followed by the "gut" assessment. A paragraph will be dedicated to each municipality and will include aspects of the Land-Use Element, the "gut" assessment, and the overall analysis completed by each team. The teams are as follows: Athena Consulting Group, consisting of Tara Gehring, Sarah Spencer and Stacy Wasserman; BSF Consulting, consisting of Ivette Banoub, Jef Fries, and Jane Schonhaut; JCG Planning, consisting of Greg Lewis, Caitlin Michniewicz, Jay Rosa; MAC Consulting Group, consisting of Calliope Bosen, Madeline Jacknin, and Alex Mello; and Team Planalytics, consisting of Karl Allen, Mark Berube, and Alex Train. The analysis focused specifically on the Land-Use Element of the Master Plan and each team had limited interaction with city planners. Additionally, each team had a limited timeframe to complete the analysis, as the overarching goal was preparation for the larger Springfield based studio projects.

ATHENA CONSULTING GROUP (WEST SPRINGFIELD, EASTHAMPTON)

Athena Consulting Group chose West Springfield as their first municipality to evaluate. The West Springfield Master Plan Land-Use Element addressed issues of sprawl and laid out various goals for controlling it. These goals touched upon keeping development close to the downtown and maintaining areas already developed. During their "gut" assessment, Athena took note of various strip malls and four lane highways throughout much of West Springfield. This, in addition to an abundance of residential subdivisions, confirmed land use related issues of sprawl. While West Springfield's goals are ambitious and well targeted, there appeared to be a disconnect between the Master Plan and the reality of the town.

Easthampton was the second municipality reviewed by Athena Consulting Group. Similar issues were found in Easthampton in regards to sprawling development. Sprawl was addressed in the town's Master Plan regarding future "build out," but their goals were not coherent throughout the Plan. Easthampton, however, has an active downtown that includes a rail trail for easy biking and walking access, and a strong emphasis on a creative economy in its revitalized mills. While the downtown seemed to be more walkable, much of the town appeared to be car-based development with increased residential subdivisions, emphasizing sprawl related concerns.

BSF CONSULTING (BROOKFIELD, EAST BROOKFIELD)

BSF Consulting assessed the rural town of Brookfield. The Land-Use Element of the Brookfield Master Plan appeared to lack many specific long or short-term goals. A community survey within the Master Plan alluded to the idea that residents are resistant to development and do not want to see suburbanization in their open space area. BSF Consulting found that Brookfield has a walkable town center that includes a town green, various municipal services, and a church. There appeared, however, to be a lack of businesses in this area. While Brookfield could benefit from some local business and economic growth, this community desired to stay a rural, bedroom, community.

East Brookfield was the second municipality assessed by BSF Consulting. The Master Plan indicated an interest in expanding local businesses around the lake region and possibly increasing tourism in the area. BSF Consulting found that East Brookfield is more rural than Brookfield, but has a commuter population that uses route 9, I-90 and I-84 to travel to neighboring cities. The town is home to Lake Lashaway, which is considered a great asset. While similar to Brookfield, East Brookfield does not have a town center, making it almost entirely car dependent.

JCG PLANNING (GREENFIELD, ORANGE)

JCG Planning took a look at Greenfield as a community on an economic up-rise in the Pioneer Valley. The Land-Use Element provided goals to encourage downtown revitalization, and focused on development where it can be supported by infrastructure. These goals have helped lead the downtown into the up-rise it is currently experiencing. Greenfield is Franklin County's commercial and population center, despite the long economic decline it experienced after the national decline in manufacturing. While the Master Plan has been successful thus far, as the city approaches "build-out," JCG Planning assessed that Greenfield will need to adjust the Master Plan's goals and objectives.

JCG Planning also explored Orange, located east of Greenfield on route 2. The Land-Use Element of the Orange Master Plan addressed the need for downtown revitalization and local job creation. Orange was also hit hard by the decline in the manufacturing sector, leaving the downtown with empty factories and an almost non-existent tax base. There were revitalization

efforts by local residents, who created unique businesses such as skydiving and outdoor adventure businesses, but much more effort is needed in the area. The rural town also needs a rehabilitation of its housing stock, as much of appeared to be beginning to age.

MAC CONSULTING (GREAT BARRINGTON, PITTSFIELD)

MAC Consulting Group analyzed Great Barrington, located in the Berkshires. Great Barrington has a historic downtown, industrial buildings, and compact neighborhoods with green space and farms along the outskirts of town. The Master Plan sets goals that reinforced these aspects, and worked to preserve them. While the town appeared to have a great sense of community, the population also appeared to be declining and aging. With the aging community, it is essential the town address the need for sidewalks and accessibility improvements. The tourism based economy keeps the town going, so making sure that this fiscal sustenance continues to be feasible is very important.

Pittsfield, also located in the Berkshires was the second municipality MAC Consulting Group evaluated. The Master Plan addressed the desire for a strong creative economy via attracting small businesses into their mixed-use commercial core. The town aims to become a center for innovation, while creating a “people climate” for people to live and work. The downtown area appeared dormant, but there is an effort by the town to bring back its former vibrancy (e.g. “Heart of the Berkshires”). With these improvements, however, there is risk of gentrification and residential and commercial dislocation.

TEAM PLANALYTICS (SOUTH HADLEY, HOLYOKE)

Team Planalytics reviewed South Hadley, which consisted of historic industrial and agricultural land uses. The Master Plan addressed the need for additional affordable housing and increased residential density. Team Planalytics assessed that the town’s new village center was very walkable, and adjacent to Mount Holyoke College. While this area is easily accessible to many, the rest of the town struggles to meet this walkable standard with its car dependence and aging infrastructure. While many of the goals correctly addressed the needs of the community, there appeared to be a disconnect with implementation.

Holyoke, an old industrial mill town, was the second municipality examined by Team Planalytics. The Master Plan laid out goals to revitalize its downtown area, as well as adaptive reuse of the Flats -- a residential area mixed with industrial buildings. There are efforts to revitalize the Canal District through a creative economy with a focus on arts, design, and technology. While these efforts have just initiated, there are still issues with poverty, crime and high vacancy rates. The Master Plan goals are well suited for the community, but the biggest hurdle may be changing the perception of the area.

In closing, we are providing a poster that synthesizes the reports. Through this process, the Regional Planning students conducted an in-depth site analysis, along with document exploration. This opportunity guided their understanding of perception versus reality when examining a municipality's vision and the subsequent planning implementation.