



MRI was engaged to conduct an outside review and assessment of the Town's Community Development and Land Use Regulatory Operations, and to make recommendations regarding the management set-up, organizational structure, and staffing approach to best meet the service levels and support expectations of the various elected, appointed, and volunteer officials involved with the process and ensure a responsive, efficient, and customer service orientated system for residents, property owners, and developers.

TWO IMPORTANT FACTS TO KEEP IN MIND:

THERE ARE NO RIGHT ANSWERS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – ONLY CONSEQUENCES.

EXETER IS NOT UNUSUAL – MOST COMMUNITIES ARE STRUGGLING WITH THESE ISSUES.

OVERVIEW

We distributed an on-line survey to 59 volunteers; 32 responses – key takeaways:

- 1) Relatively poor response from a targeted audience after 4 invitations – not sure why
- 2) General satisfaction with and praise for the staff
- 3) Lack of organizational communication
- 4) Difficulty understating roles/responsibilities and regulations – suggested need for training
- 5) Difficulty scheduling and getting input submitted on a timely basis
- 6) Difficulty recruiting interested volunteers
- 7) Need for a clearer/coordinated process

Interviewed Staff, Selectmen, and Volunteers – key takeaways:

- 1) Lack of common vision and shared priorities
- 2) Work load is somewhat unbalanced
- 3) Process is loose and not well documented
- 4) Roles and responsibilities are not clearly understood organization-wide
- 5) Gatekeeper versus collaborator perspective
- 6) Lack understanding of mutual benefits of responsible development

Interviewed Property Owners, Developers, and Project Proponents – key takeaways:

- 1) Difficulty understanding process – frequent inconsistency
- 2) Complexity of regulations and multiple interpretations
- 3) Lack of predictability
- 4) Process seems duplicative – Tech Review effort is often duplicated by Planning Board
- 5) Peer Review requirements are costly and slow down the process
- 6) Too often there's distrust and assumption of conflicting interests rather than cooperation

MRI Observations:

- 1) Beautiful community – one of the premiere village centers in NH with great community character
- 2) Lots of assets – the Academy, preserved downtown, great school system, talented staff, great New England-wide reputation
- 3) Lots of talent – engaged community
- 4) History of successful stewardship, preservation, and conservation
- 5) Ideal location
- 6) Lots of regulation (close to 1,000 pages) – spent the last 13 years regulating with little planning
- 7) Outdated Master Plan with little use of hard data
- 8) Loosely structured process
- 9) Unclear roles and responsibilities
- 10) Reputation as difficult for development
- 11) Operating in Silos - Poor communication
- 12) Declining civility and respectful engagement
- 13) Recent changes in direction from “preservation/protection” to economic development have caused uncertainty and concerns

Recommendations:

- Leadership comes from the top, so BOS needs to establish a policy that a user friendly community development system and positive, responsible, economic development focus is their priority, and that the town is open to work, cooperate, and collaborate with anyone who is prepared to invest in positive, responsible, and sustainable development.
- The BOS then should task the Town Manager to take the steps necessary to implement their policy.
- The Town Manager needs to direct and set priorities for the staff:
 - a. Refine and define planning/approval process
 - b. Define staff roles and clarify responsibilities
 - c. Establish a point person to coordinate
 - d. Reset priorities to emphasize collaboration and assistance
 - e. Set performance measures – example: all 65 day waivers to be reviewed by BOS
- The BOS and Town Manager should establish a Community Development Coordinating Committee consisting of the Chairs of all Board and Committees, a BOS representative, and the Tech Review staff members, to meet quarterly, to keep communication open, discuss community development opportunities and challenges, and refine and enhance the process.
- The BOS should conduct an All Boards Meeting to explain their vision for better coordination and communication, and the need for a more responsive, user friendly approach. They should set written expectations for volunteer service on each Board and Committee that they appoint. Requirements should include a commitment to such things as objectivity, open minded, respectful participation, a willingness to learn, and sufficient time to be available for training and meetings. The BOS should require participation in training as a condition of appointment/reappointment and include the cost in their budget.
- The BOS should initiate a process to update the Master Plan and ensure that it incorporates more data driven decisions (demographics, economic, financial, market, and physical) and measurable outcomes.
- The Town Manager should initiate creation of an Economic Development Strategy that results in preliminary data driven area plans for Epping Road, Portsmouth Avenue, and the Village/Downtown area.
- These last two efforts can and should be coordinated so that they are complementary rather than duplicative efforts.