

The Fall 2020 Plan for a “Visioning in the Spring” is Being Revisited Lessons From the 1985 Rye Master Plan

Dominique Winebaum, March 18, 2021

This essay is a third in a series of articles relating to the next update to the Master Plan. The second part of this essay takes a close look at the 1985 Master Plan, which served as a model for the 1998 Master Plan. Both were comprehensive and well executed plans, but for the lack of a Visioning; instead, what guided the formulation of these plans were a set of eleven goals (listed below). The organizational framework and a cohesive and systematic approach to content, including a stand-alone implementation section, of these earlier Rye Master Plans, are missing from the “present” Master Plan.

Since my first publication in the December Civic News, I have been advocating for a Town wide process for planning the next update to the Rye Master Plan, starting with the creation of a Steering Committee made of 8-12 individuals appointed by the Select Board.

In addition, I have raised awareness about the status of the “present” Master Plan and provided some guidance in developing a better approach in planning for Rye’s future. I have sent my publications to the following Town Boards: Town Administrator, Becky Bergeron & Select Board; Planning Board; Conservation Commission; Library Board of Trustees; Historic District Commission; Town Center Committee; Energy Committee; Budget Committee and CIP Committee.

As of this writing, it appears that the original plan of holding a “Visioning in the Spring,” which was then rescheduled after the Town Election, is currently being “revisited.” As per a statement made during a meeting held by the Rye Conservation Commission on 03/11/21, the “Planning Board” is sending a questionnaire with 4-5 questions to all Town Boards in preparation for a Visioning. A request to the Planning Department for a copy of the Rockingham Planning Commission (RPC)’s contract for the Visioning and the amount budgeted in 2020 for the next update to the Master Plan (Visioning), have not as of yet been provided.

With the “settlement” of the Swap, entities such as the Rye Public Library and the Library Board of Trustees, are taking a central role in planning for a “revival” of the Town Center. Likewise, the Town Center Committee is working to implement some aspects of the Rye Community Design Charette (2019). In addition, the Historic District Commission received a \$20,000 grant for the preparation of Historic District guidelines (a recommendation made as a result of the Charette). In parallel, the Rye Conservation Commission budgeted \$15,000 to commission for the preparation of a Natural Resources Inventory (NRI), which document can be part of the Master Plan. (See below recommendations made in 1985 for such a plan.)

A Master Plan Steering Committee would provide a platform for all Town Boards and Departments and non-board affiliated at large resident members to come together in planning

for Rye's future . Who is going to decide what kind of Master Plan will guide Rye's future? The current budget appropriation is in the range of \$5,000 (it might be more) limits the scope of the project. What is the time frame for the project? Another piecemeal approach by starting with a Visioning and then what? Lack of in-house professional support in the Planning Department; lack of implementation and enforcement. Select Board members Phil Winslow and Bill Epperson do not appear to be that concerned about the status of the "present" Master Plan or for the need for a best-in class Master Plan, such as the Stratham and Exeter now have.

How much more growth can Rye handle? Back in 1984- 1985, Rye took actions to "control growth" by hiring a professional planner (as a consultant) and to "revive" its master plan. This effort was spearheaded by a member of the Select Board, Maynard L. Young.

The 1985 Master Plan

The 1985 Master Plan is a well-executed and comprehensive plan. Michael Donovan, who had been hired by the Town to act as a professional planner on a consulting basis (1984), prepared the 1985 Master Plan with the participation of the Planning Board (\$10,000 grant).

As described in the 1985 Annual Town Report, Selectman, Maynard L. Young, was instrumental in "the revival of the Master Plan" and this with the intent of bringing sound planning to Rye:

Upon my arrival in 1983, I found our master plan gathering dust. Since then it has been basically completed, and many revisions are going before the voters. This revival of the master plan came on line in the nick of time as the following year it was mandated by the state to be completed by 1986 and very necessary if we want to have some control over the rapid growth of Rye. We are issuing building permits of new buildings and remodeling of nearly \$5,000,000 each year for the past two years. To control growth we must have this master plan and also adopt a master capital improvement formula for the future (*Annual Town Report, 1985, Selectmen's Report p.29*).

For Selectman Maynard L. Young sound planning mattered, and rightly so. The project was completed in less than a year (November 1984 – June 1985). There was no public input via Visioning sessions; instead, public hearings (3) provided a platform for the public to comment on the plan prior to its adoption. What guided the formulation of the 1985 (and 1998) Rye Master Plan were a set of eleven goals (see below). In many respects, these goals are similar to the wishes and needs formulated by residents during the Visioning Sessions (2004) that guided the "2006" Master Plan, which was adopted in 2007.

A summary of the 1985 Master Plan was mailed to each household (*Annual Town Report*).

Some of the Recommendations made in the 1985 MP that lacked Implementation (verbatim)

- Relocation of the town salt shed
- Public sewage for Rye's entire developed coastline. Planning must begin now so that problems resulting from on-site systems located on shallow to bedrock soils in areas

abutting tidal marshes; on barrier beaches, and in areas of tidal flooding can be eliminated. Additionally, it is recommended that the planning for sewerage extensions along Route 1 include the entire Route 1 area, and not just the mobile park.

- Rye should prepare an Open Space Acquisition and Preservation Program that specifically identifies tracts appropriate for fee or easement acquisition or current use preservation. The town should also seriously review its spending priorities with respect to open space preservation.
- Prime Wetlands Map. The Rye Conservation should file a prime wetlands map with the NH Wetlands Board so that Rye's wetlands will receive full statutory protection.
- The Planning Board should be persistent in advocating the policy of the master plan to extend sewerage to all of Rye's developed coastal areas (WOMP recommendations).

The organization of the 1985 Master Plan

The organization of the 1985 Master Plan (MP) differs from the "present" Master Plan. The content is organized as followed:

Introduction + Table of Contents

Part I - Assessment Reports

- Historical
- Demographic & Socioeconomics
- Natural Resources
- Land Use
- Housing
- Regional
- Public Utilities & Services
- Transportation
- Communities Facilities
- Recreation and Open Space

Part II – General Statement of Goals and Objectives

Part III –Plans

Part IV –Implementation

Appendices.

The goals guiding the formulation of the 1985 Rye Master Plan:

1. To maintain the present rural character of the inland areas of Rye.
2. To maintain the present character of Rye's coastal areas.
3. To preserve the presently good water quality of Rye. Its surface and subsurface water.

4. To preserve and protect Rye's wetlands.
5. To preserve and protect Rye's unique scenic and natural resources.
6. To preserve Rye's heritage.
7. To encourage an orderly spatial pattern of growth.
8. To continue a rate of growth consistent with the town's regional responsibilities, environmental limitations and the capacity of services to absorb growth in an orderly, planned manner.
9. To provide for a diversity of housing consistent with the town's regional responsibilities, economic realities, the preservation of water quality and other environmental limitations.
10. To assure that Rye's communities facilities develop in a planned manner compatible with the town's planned growth rate.
11. To otherwise promote the general health, welfare and safety of the residents of Rye.

To be noted, the 1985 Master Plan has an Introduction, a Table of Contents, and several sections, such Community Facilities and Regional, as well as an Implementation Plan, which are non-existent in the "present" Master Plan. Several sections, such as Historical and Public & Utilities Services, have their own sections, which is not the case with the "present" Master Plan.

The Content of the 1985 Rye Master Plan

There are 10 sections under "Assessment." Each section is developed in a sequential manner: part I, description and assessment; part II, development within a framework of objectives, goals, and assumptions; part III, documentation of facts via plans/tables; and IV, the implementation plan. Some of the sections have summaries reiterating the findings.

Some Key Points from the 1985 Master Plan Reproduced here:

1. Because Rye's other historic structures and sites are spread out along its many roads, expansion of the Historic District to other areas is not warranted. However, other, site-specific approaches can be incorporated in the towns development ordinances to further historic preservation. (Historical)
2. The natural environment significantly constrains development in Rye. The constraints are mostly caused by soil conditions, floodplains and wetlands with much land being constrained by all three conditions. (N.R)
3. Land fill operations pose the greatest threat to Rye's wetlands. However, the Wetlands Conservation ordinance, adopted in 1977, if properly enforced, should prevent encroachment on wetlands. (NR)
4. Because of the importance of the preservation of water quality in Rye, future land use decisions should be made with an understanding of the characteristics of each the six watersheds (Land Use).
5. Septage problems appear to be the major problem related to Rye's present housing supply. According to the WOMP [1982, Water Quality Management Plan], 84 percent of Rye's 1979 housing supply was built before 1968 when the NHWSPCC began getting

standards for on-site septic systems. Many systems built in earlier days, to inadequate design standards, have failed (Housing).

6. Rye's Conservation Commission has traditionally become the responsibility of open space preservation. In 1978 it hired a consultant, Philip E. Reynolds, who prepared a lengthy Conservation Master Plan for the Town of Rye, N.H. The plan report presents excellent descriptions of the natural resources of Rye. It recommended four priorities, as follows: Preservation and protection of the Bellyhack Bog – Berry's Brook watershed; Preservation and protection of the Cedar Run – Brown's Pond – Burke's Pond ecosystem; Protection of the Fairhill Marsh rare cedar stands; Acquisition of the Beach Grove adjacent to the Town Cemetery. This plan provides an excellent beginning for open space preservation planning, particularly as information resource. However, the plan did not target many specific parcels for acquisition strategy. It is recommended that the 1978 effort be followed-up with a study particularly targeted to specific tracts, with highest priorities given to the Bellyhack, Bailey Brook and Fairhill Marsh areas identified in the 1978 plan (Open Space).
7. Rye Harbor Basin and Bailey Brook Basin have the greatest potential for development change that would challenge the environment.
8. It is recognized that the Rye Water District and other entities [Aquarion] have responsibility for providing public water in Rye and that the planning board and town officials have traditionally exercised little influence over the long range planning of the water system.
9. Rural character can best be maintained by preserving open space along Rye's roads: by encouraging the development of housing that is architecturally compatible with the rural environment; and by preserving as much as open space as possible as Rye's interior lands developed.
10. Another area of concern is the relationship between Rye's roads and its wetlands. Some local observers feel that inadequate culvert structures at locations where roads cross wetlands may be preventing the proper "flushing" of wetlands.
11. The public wells had nitrite/nitrate nitrogen levels among the highest in New Hampshire, but the concentration did not approach the primary safe drinking water standard of 10mg/l. The concentration at the Jenness Beach well were attributed to residential development in the recharge area. *(Editor's note: there are approximately 9 homes with septic systems in the "so called" Sanitary Protective Radius (Well 5A). Why were the homes in the "recharge area"/SPR not connected to the Sewer System? Former Selectman Priscilla Jenness seemed to have been opposed to the idea of a public sewerage according to a since deceased long-time resident involved in the sewer's development. Her husband, Bill Jenness, was a Commissioner of the Jenness Beach Village District (JBVD) for 20 years (1963-1983). All JBVD residents and Rye Beach Village District are connected to the Sewer System. As required by New Hampshire Administrative Regulations, the area within the sanitary protective radius shall be maintained in a natural state at all times.)*

After laboring over the drafting of the 1985 Master Plan, Michael Donovan, stated in his conclusion (Implementation Section):

The implementation of Rye's master plan will depend upon the adequate enforcement of Rye's planning ordinances and regulations. Additionally, cooperation among all town officials and boards and commissions is paramount. In the five months in which the consultant has worked with the Town of Rye, he has heard scores of criticisms of administration and enforcement and observed a general reluctance among Rye group's to "pull together" towards common goals. The consultant believes that the master plan is not the place to deal with specific solutions to perceived enforcement and administration problems which are partly misperceived, partly accurately perceived and definitely entangled in town politics. *(Implementation)*

It has been my observation that the lack of "adequate enforcement" has been a perennial problem and is deeply rooted in the culture and comes in many forms and clearly continues to this day. In conclusion, I will quote from the 1998 Rye Master Plan "the need to grasp the 'big picture' of Rye's direction is becoming dramatically greater" and "the growth of the town and the increasing complexity of all technology has tested our planning capabilities" *(Introduction)*.

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