

Planning Charlton Development By Cindy Cooper

The results of three long-range planning activities in Charlton are now available. During the past two fiscal years the Planning Board has obtained grants that supplement the town budget. The outcomes of this funding are studies and maps that assist in carefully planning the development of the town.

Executive Order 418 was signed by the governor to provide a grant opportunity of up to \$30,000 for community development planning. Charlton applied early in the program, using the Master Plan as the basis for identifying the planning priorities of the town. When the grant was approved, the study concentrated on four areas:

- Analysis of Route 20 development. The completion of this component resulted in the creation of the Business Enterprise District approved at Town Meeting last year
- Study of the opportunities in Charlton Center, leading to the possibility of small scale development that preserves the historic aspect of the area
- Exploration of affordable housing options that establish strategies for meeting local housing needs
- Researching ways farming can remain a viable business in town

The process for completing the study is contained in "Charlton Community Development Plan." Included are the comparisons of the zoning provisions in other towns that resulted in economic development opportunities, Charlton's population and housing trends, a draft village district proposal for future consideration, and information on how to include agricultural businesses in the zoning regulations. Copies are available for viewing in the Charlton Planning Board office.

Independent of the Executive Order 418 process described above, the Planning Board worked in conjunction with the Economic Development Commission to examine economic development opportunities along Route 169. The purpose was to determine the areas most favorable to attracting low-impact businesses that maintain high property value, in order to increase the real estate tax base. Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) was contracted to create maps displaying existing environmental features that limit construction, current land use, and zoning designations along a 2000 feet wide corridor the entire length of Route 169. This Developmental Constraint Analysis, using Geographic Information System mapping technology, resulted in identifying two areas for further study. The conclusion is summarized within the final CMRPC report: "In reviewing the maps and analysis, the Boards agreed that there is limited potential to create a new high-end office or research park in the corridor...The topography in the area places limitations on development and fragments parcels...the lack of water and sewer services and cost of constructing extensions to this part of Charlton is another reason not to establish new districts for economic development purposes."

A \$3,500 grant from Quinebaug and Shetucket Heritage Rivers Corridor, Inc. provided funding for a map study of the public trails and permanently protected property in town. The color-coded map provides an overview of the open space sites that contribute to the rural character of Charlton. Training in hand-held Global Positioning System units allowed volunteers to accurately transmit trail locations on the map. The map will be used to visualize the best locations for open space parcels within flexible developments, in an effort to create continuous greenways for passive recreation and optimal wildlife habitat.

Each of these studies allows the town to make informed land use decisions. The research is valuable for demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses currently existing in Charlton's zoning regulations. The recommendations and data provide a solid foundation for open discussions on town planning issues.