

A TOWN VISION

What is Chester:

Our Connecticut environment is changing. For our town to survive and prosper, we must be perceived as “competitive” for newcomers...and those who live and work in Chester must love it. Therefore, it is appropriate to take stock of ourselves and determine what our town should be.

What do we want Chester to be?

We propose to develop a vision for Chester. Knowing what we want to be will allow our residents, businesses and government to focus and grow toward what we want to be. Without a vision, we stand little chance of being truly successful and competitive in the 21st century.

What needs to be done to create a vision?

- Constitute a Visioning Committee
 - Responsibilities – review current Town plan – assess current attributes of the Town – develop a vision for the Town based upon the combined input of the committee.
- Attributes of committee members
 - Committed
 - Aware
 - Caring
 - Perceptive
 - Possess a spectrum of differing viewpoints
- When will this work begin?
 - The committee could be constituted as early as March 15, with meetings held during the 3-month period immediately following the effective date. We envision a total of 3 four-hour meetings but there might be as many as 6 meetings, depending upon how the committee interacts. Meetings will be scheduled for Saturday afternoons, noon – 4:00 p.m., in a local meeting place. **As soon as the vision is developed, the committee will be disbanded.**
- Process
 - Bring everyone to a common ground – the first session will involve a motivational segment in addition to a historical and financial review of the past and present. The history, economics, and diversity of our Town must be fully explored so the members of the committee are aware of where we started and where we stand.
 - Investigate what is right for Chester. A facilitator will be provided in the second and third (or more) meetings. Ideals will be fully discussed.
 - Put it in writing and test. Once the investigation is complete, the ideas will be reduced to writing and then thoroughly tested. The result will be a new vision for Chester.
 - The visioning committee will be overseen by two stewards appointed by the Town Selectmen.

CHESTER VISION COMMITTEE - FINAL REPORT

Introduction:

It is a recognized fact that life in small American towns is under siege. Chester has not escaped the increased pressures and demands to adapt in a rapidly changing society. If we, as a community, are to survive and flourish, we must assess our strengths, address our shortcomings, and lay strategic plans to guide the people who live and work in Chester. We must be adequately prepared to welcome those who may seek to live in our Town and ensure that the cost of living and conducting business in Chester is reasonable and affordable.

Our Town future is one with many faces. Such vital concerns as a reasonable cost of living, a competitive business environment, reliable municipal services, and quality of life are only some of our priorities. It is time to take stock of our Town and ourselves and determine a course that will serve us well in the challenging years ahead. Without a vision, our community may well be threatened by haphazard or impulsive choices.

With an eye to establishing what our course might be, the Chester Vision Committee was appointed by Chester Selectmen. A call for volunteers who would be interested in serving on the committee was made, and seventeen Town residents were selected. These people represent a cross section of Town life. Five members were born in Chester; five members have lived in Chester from ten to thirty years. The balance of the committee has lived in Town from two to ten years. Of the seventeen people, eight have or have had businesses in Chester. All have been involved in Town organizations, boards or commissions. The members brought to the committee a wide variety of educational, professional, civic, and business backgrounds coupled with a strong volunteer spirit and commitment to the preservation of the quality of life Chester now enjoys.

The committee often struggled to define that quality. There is a sense of compatibility of the people living in Chester, coupled with a tolerance for personal style. The committee agreed that Chester is a Town that makes very few class distinctions, and as such, a person living here has a sense of personal "ownership" by becoming an active member in any aspect of Town life. No one is limited from working for the good of the community if they so desire, and as such it is an easy Town in which to take pride.

In terms of responsibilities, a Vision Committee has the best of all worlds. Our tenure was limited. Committee members were people with similar thoughts and attitudes about the importance of protecting and planning for the continued health of our Town. Most important, we were limited only by our imaginations.

We were unfettered by the mandates and legal restrictions that guide most other committees or boards. We were allowed to “brainstorm” ideas, indulge in speculation, and generally give free rein to our creative energy. The result is we covered a great deal of territory, restating support for some long-held ideas and advocating new approaches. We came to understand that we all cherish our Town. We believe that we can begin to remedy some stubborn problems, and avoid serious, new difficulties by charting a sensible course for the essential elements of Town life.

We recognize that for this, or any other set of ideas, to be successful, they must rest on a solid foundation of Town wide approval and active support. By developing a vision of Chester, we feel we can protect those qualities that make Chester such an uncommon place in which to live and work, and also institute a plan for prudent and sensible growth. We issue the invitation now to all residents to move forward and establish a vision that will both protect our long and illustrious past and ensure a healthy and secure place in the 21st century.

Report is respectfully submitted by The Chester Vision Committee, October 15, 1994:

Raymond Archambault	James Dengler	Timothy Moore
Marian Bairstow	John Ivimey	Leif Nilsson
Sosse Baker	Nathan Jacobson	Michael Rush
Margaret Meehan	Harold Jones, Jr.	Max Showalter
Catherine Conant	Carol LeWitt	Barbara Delaney
Joann McAllister	James Zanardi, Chairman	

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

It is the opinion of the Chester Vision Committee that the goals stated in the Town Plan are reasonable and practical and therefore, the Committee endorses the Town Plan. As stated in the Town Plan, we must work “To maintain the heritage and character of Chester by encouraging preservation of a strong sense of community and beautiful physical features and appearance, while providing for sensitive development, growth and change that will not only preserve, but enhance and strengthen that character.”

Balancing the needs:

As a Town we must have a long-range growth plan with an eye to balanced development. **The committee believes that a Resource Development Position should be created in the municipal government.** This position, called, for the sake of convenience, the Chester Advocate, would support existing businesses and seek to attract stable, new businesses that would complement those already in operation, and work to implement the Town Plan Goal as stated above. In addition, it would be essential that the Resource Development person would view all the aspect of Town life, economic, social, education, and aesthetic, as important. It would be reasonable to search for a retired individual with extensive business and community experience. This would be a part-time marketing, public relations, and creative position requiring excellent communication skills and energy.

Business development:

For many years the downtown area has been the focus of Chester. It is a significant tourist draw, and the impact of visitors affects everyone in Town. It would be the responsibility of the Chester Advocate to work with the Chester Merchants Association to build on success and attract new businesses to Town.

The Town should work toward a business development goal of “zero vacancy rate” for existing business and industrial properties. Given the amount of existing space, this is seen as an achievable goal. The focus should be on attracting small businesses, branches of larger corporations, and home industries. We must prepare the way for new business by reducing red tape as much as possible and providing tax incentives.

Explore the possibility of “incubator programs” to encourage the establishment of arts-related businesses in Town. Such incubator programs subsidize new businesses with economic and strategic assistance by providing reasonably priced rental spaces to encourage growth.

Civic pride:

Volunteer activity has been a mainstay for Chester and should be encouraged. **We should consider developing a “Clearing House” referral for volunteers.** It would act as an umbrella organization to match those willing to help and those with needs. There must be widespread recognition of the fact that without volunteer involvement this Town would cease to run. Local religious and service organizations are valuable resources and should be encouraged to participate more. Volunteer contributions of time, energy, and skills are essential to keep taxes down. The town of East Haddam has instituted a “Volunteer of the Month” program in which residents who provide significant voluntary services to the Town are publicly recognized and thanked. Chester should consider establishing such a program.

Focus on education:

The education of Chester children is paramount. Our commitment extends beyond the questions of taxes to fund facilities and staff. Rather, it means taking advantage of all the resources here in Town – volunteers, business owners, and people who do not have children in the school system. Town residents should learn more about our entire district school system and recognize that to support the development of responsible, well-rounded students is to make a prudent investment in the Town’s future.

Encourage old and new businesses to develop apprentice programs targeting local youths who may not be going to college. Develop a strong connection with Region 4 schools to build a relationship that will benefit both students and community.

Encouragement of the arts:

The arts are a significant part of life in Chester. We are very fortunate to have in our Town two nationally recognized theatrical companies with commitments to innovative productions. **Chester should work with the Goodspeed-at-Chester and the National Theater of the Deaf management to create a more active community partnership.** More programs should be considered, including show openings, previews, dress rehearsals. In addition, encourage the Goodspeed-at-Chester to make its facilities available to Town organizations with scheduling permits.

Recognizing the remarkable artistic endeavors in Town, we should try to attract businesses that are compatible with the arts. Those kinds of businesses might be sound studios, graphic arts companies, publishing, music and art companies.

Fully utilize Town assets and resources:

Celebrate Chester and our successes. The entire community should join in showcasing what makes Chester special. Following a model of the Chester Merchants Association, we should continue to schedule celebrations around weekend events: races, shows, house tour, festivals, concerts, etc. More community events should be organized for the enjoyment of residents of all ages.

Develop and distribute “Welcome Home to Chester” packets to new residents.

This would consist of such things as a copy of the current Town report, maps, possible discounts or gifts from local merchants, calendar of events, directory, etc. Such a packet would serve both to educate newcomers and echo our commitment to have everyone in our community involved and informed.

Adequate parking for Chester Center is essential as we strive for broader commercial expansion. The Town should consider acquiring property for public parking. Perhaps in time Chester could acquire the Shawmut Bank Drive-In building property for parking expansion and development as an information center.

Sign revue:

We support the new sign review committee of the Planning and Zoning Commission and urge the use of attractive signs to draw attention to Town sites such as the Meeting House. A sign should be placed at the corner of Routes 154 and 148 to direct Connecticut River Ferry passengers to the downtown area.

It is time to re-examine the possibility of having Chester Center declared a historic district. The benefits of and restrictions on making Chester Center a historic district should be calculated with an eye to future development.

An improved relationship with the Connecticut State Police is essential.

Chester is one of a handful Connecticut towns without a resident trooper. While the committee does not endorse hiring a trooper, it is critical that the Town be perceived as having a good relationship with the State Police. Public safety is a high priority.

Public transportation should be a priority. Encouragement should be given to some sort of tri-town bus or trolley service for those who cannot or do not wish to drive.

State Properties. A significant portion of Chester land is state owned. Develop programs to make more intensive use of state land and forests.

The Rivers and Lakes. Currently the rivers and lakes in Chester are not fully utilized, either by public use or business. We should set acquiring Connecticut Riverfront property for the town as a top priority and consider development of a riverfront park for town residents. The example of Deep River's town landing is a good one to follow.

Open Land. There is only a limited amount of open land left in Chester. The opportunity to purchase land either to develop for some municipal need, or to hold as open space should be considered. The Board of Finance should be empowered to recommend setting aside a certain amount of money in the annual budget towards the eventual purchase of such property.

The recommendations we make here are intended as a basis for a long-range plan for the Town of Chester. Other areas of concern can be addressed within this framework. All of the categories of town life are closely related, and this interrelationship is, of necessity, a driving force in any plan for the future. Only by bringing into balance Chester's economic, cultural, educational, leisure, and service needs will we assure its future.