

CHAPTER ONE – PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

In order to be representative of community interests, a comprehensive planning process depends on participation from the community. The following section highlights and discusses the committee's major activities.

1. Workshop on Public Participation

Early on in New Gloucester's process, the planning committee held a workshop on public participation to discuss past efforts and to determine what were the most useful techniques to pursue. The following is a summary of that workshop.

Why is Citizen Involvement Important?

- The basis of government is free expression of citizen needs and wants.
- To bring fresh perspective to a venture.
- To educate the public.
- To test new concepts.
- To establish ownership of a product.
- To increase the support base for Town Meeting.
- To develop public interest before Town Meeting.
- To comply with legal mandates.
- It builds leadership, expands volunteer base and number of people who are willing to run for office.

Values and Beliefs about Public Participation

- Educating the public is hard; educating the "choir" is easy.
- It is hard to get points across at large meetings.
- Often we assume silence is positive feedback.
- Public interest groups are valuable.
- Moderators and facilitators should be neutral.
- People who come to public meetings are generally angry.
- Insufficient preparation time leads to an unproductive meeting.
- Focused small group discussion meetings work better than "hearings".
- People are often opposed to ideas, but don't suggest alternatives.
- Simple techniques work.
- When people aren't heard, there are lingering bad feelings; people are hesitant to participate again.
- The board or committee needs to listen and should not be defensive.

What Works

- Use of a newsletter or New Gloucester News.
- Arrange for consistent press coverage.
- Have plenty of preparation time for efforts.
- Have synopsis of meeting materials available.
- Focus on a specific issue.
- Have a meeting facilitator.
- One on one contact.
- Contact at stores, gathering places.

Barriers to Effective Public Participation

- Last minute efforts.
- Use of technical jargon.
- Apathy, over commitment, frustration.
- Lack of private sector support or involvement.

The group went further and identified specific groups and individuals who should somehow be brought into the process. Ideas from the workshop were used throughout the process and are reflected in the goals and strategies for citizen involvement in Chapters 3 & 7.

2. 1990 Public Opinion Survey – Contrasts with 1982 Survey

As part of the planning process, the New Gloucester Comprehensive Planning Committee conducted a public opinion survey in August and September of 1989. Almost 300 households responded out of 1200 surveys sent out, for a response rate of roughly 25%. This number of respondents is considered good for a mail survey. Complete survey results and a shorter summary of those results can be found in Appendix A. Rather than further elaborating on the survey results, we have chosen to contrast the responses of 1982 with those of 1989 in the following section.

General Land Use

In the 1982 survey, respondents were split over whether there should be a concerted effort to attract new industry or expand commercial activities. If industrial expansion were permitted, over 50% felt that its location should be controlled. In the 1989 questionnaire, over 50% continued to be against permitting industrial parks and heavy manufacturing. However, 71% of the respondents did feel that light manufacturing should be permitted, but confined to specific areas. The majority, and up to 75% in some cases, suggested that permitting commercial development was alright, again confining the uses to specific zones.

In a specific response to present commercial zoning, most 1990 respondents felt that commercial zoning along Route 100 should be expanded. A similar, but somewhat weaker (70%) response called for commercial zoning along Route 26 to be expanded.

Housing

In the 1982 survey, 85% of the respondents felt that the population was about right in New Gloucester, while just over 50% did not favor the construction of condominiums or apartments. 61% of the respondents felt that the growth rate was about right. Those favoring the construction of senior citizen housing amounted to 63% of the respondents.

1990 respondents suggested continued support for senior citizen housing, although an increasing number of the respondents called for such housing to be confined to specific areas. While the design of the questionnaires was different, there did seem to also be a decline in the opposition to condominiums and apartments; again, there was a call for controlling where those uses should be located.

Manufactured housing, not strongly addressed in the 1982 survey, was so in the 1990 survey. Respondents slightly favored permitting manufactured housing everywhere over those who felt locations should be limited. When contrasted to older “mobile homes”, the majority favored confining the use to specific areas. Finally, regarding mobile home parks, the consensus was to confine them to specific areas, with some 22% suggesting that they not be permitted at all.

Town Character

In the 1982 survey, respondents felt that there should be a concerted effort to regulate growth in a manner which would preserve New Gloucester’s general character. In 1990, respondents defined those things most important to Town character as clean water, a reasonable tax rate, the natural environment, rural character and the quality of the school systems. Maintaining clean water received the greatest response, at 87%, with the tax rate following at 79%. Given concerns over salt contamination and other water quality concerns (the 1982 survey also called for the Town to take significant action), it is unsurprising that water quality remains an issue. The tax rate issue, a concern for most of the respondents, may also be a reason why some felt that there should be some expansion in commercial or light manufacturing.

Local citizens successfully addressed one of the issues of the 1982 survey, by establishing a local land trust and having that land trust become active in a number of land preservation activities. The 1990 survey called for further activity in the development and permanent protection of a system of woodland trails and open space throughout the Town (including the use of municipal and other funds to purchase such rights or properties). Concurrently, this open space/trail system should be tied into a series of critical scenic areas identified in the survey: the Opportunity Farm, the Intervale, Lower Village, Shaker Village, and Sabbathday Lake.

Impacts of Growth

Impacts of growth were certainly a concern in New Gloucester in 1982, but there was a feeling that the growth rate was “just right”. In an examination of indicators related to growth in 1989, respondents felt that basic town services had remained the same, with the exception of police protection, which they felt declined. As has been noted, there was a concern for increasing tax rates. Yet, use of tax dollars was praised in some areas; at least 46% noted improvement in recreational facilities, while 40% noted improvements in school facilities.

Of major concern to New Gloucester residents was the issue of quality of life, as it relates to the natural and rural environment. Up to 66% of respondents noted a decline in available open space, while 50% noted a decline in the quality of the natural environment.

The greatest decline noted by 67% of the respondents was the affordability of housing. The perception of growth impact in New Gloucester set up an interesting paradox that will need to be balanced by the planning process: the natural environment was the number 1 concern, while the number 2 concern consistently was property taxes.

Town Services

In the 1982 survey, the town was fairly evenly split, 50% feeling that services were fair to good, the remaining 50% calling for improvement. The 1990 survey suggests that the town has indeed improved in a number of areas. Greater than 80% of the respondents noted that

the work of the Planning Board, Appeals Board, Town Hall, Library and Town Manager were either good or very good.

Three areas, with a common link, were identified as being good and needing improvement: road paving, street lights and road maintenance. In fact, under transportation, a number of roads were identified as needing repair, while several others noted specifically dangerous intersections. (see Appendix A). Previous discussion in this area was fairly limited and may have been the product of increased traffic volume and new residents. In either case, this opinion must be dealt with as it relates directly to the negative perception of growth and development.

Conservation/Preservation of Natural Resources

In the 1982 survey, New Gloucester residents noted a major concern with salt contamination, improper disposal of toxic substances, industrial pollution and large scale chemical spraying. In all cases, the single most important issue was the protection of brooks, streams, wetlands and ground and surface water supplies from contamination.

This emphasis on water quality and natural environment has only grown since the 1982 survey. Clean water and the natural environment were noted as the most important factors related to why respondents chose to locate in New Gloucester. In reviewing development impacts, protecting water quality was far and away the most important factor. Other natural resources and “rural character” ran close seconds. This continued emphasis should strengthen the planning committee’s commitment to new and different ways to balance growth by protecting the qualities that the community finds to be so important. It should also help the Planning Board and Board of Selectmen to act decisively in cases where water quality protection and impact on the rural character are threatened.

3. The Municipal Family Gathering

At the workshop on public involvement discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it became apparent that the Comprehensive Planning Committee had immediate access to at least 150 – 200 possible participants by contacting those people that presently serve on New Gloucester’s numerous boards and committees. A “municipal family meeting” was organized to bring this group together under the direction of the former Town Manager. A tremendous turnout for the meeting allowed the comprehensive planning committee an opportunity to present an overview of the planning process. Participants also played “The Future’s Wheel”, a game which asks players to respond to a series of municipal crisis and demographic/economic changes over time by planning a strategy. The goal of the game was for each participant to leave with an understanding of how present planning affects and influences long term opportunities.

4. Slide Show – New Gloucester Yesterday and Today

A slide show was put together to document the changing landscape of the Town to use as an introduction to public meetings. Photographs of historic structures were reproduced and contrasted with new development. At its initial viewing, the slide show induced a lot of emotion on the part of the viewers, and a general notion of pride in the community.

5. Interlocal Meeting #1 – Cluster Development

The New Gloucester Planning Committee joined with the Pownal Committee in hosting a presentation by Randall Arendt of the Center for Rural Massachusetts. Randall presented his ideas on cluster development and retention of traditional forms of development to an enthusiastic audience.

6. The Interlocal Meeting #2 – Joint Planning

New Gloucester's Comprehensive Planning Committee invited representatives from Auburn, Durham, Poland, Gray, Pownal, and North Yarmouth to participate in an interlocal meeting of planning committee representatives to discuss possible subregional planning efforts in the areas of lake watershed protection (specifically phosphorus control), greenbelt planning, transportation and aquifer protection. The light turnout suggested that it will be difficult to attract people from other towns while they are still involved in their own comprehensive planning efforts. The meeting did offer an opportunity for Gray and New Gloucester representatives to talk about their proposed joint planning efforts.

7. Participation by High School Students

The foundation of a program for involving high school students in ongoing planning projects has been initiated. Staff to the committee met with the principal of Gray-New Gloucester High School and developed a list of potential projects. Follow-up is needed to carry out the program.