

Town Services & Community Life Element

Overview

The Town Services and Facilities Subcommittee was charged with reviewing town services, facilities, traffic flow, government and intergovernmental relations. The Quality of Life Subcommittee was charged with reviewing quality of life issues including community image, youth and elder issues, financial issues, community information, and the relationship of the town and nonprofit institutions. The concerns and issues identified by the Town Services and Facilities and Quality of Life Subcommittees were often interrelated, and are being reported together in this Element. These Subcommittees identified the following primary issues:

- Operational/general issues, including:
 - Americans with Disabilities Act compliance at Town Offices;
 - Limited support staff for departments, resulting in limited hours of operation;
 - Limited/non-existent integration between information systems; and,
 - Increased regulatory requirements.

- Financial issues, including:
 - Maintaining a strong tax base to support necessary and desirable public services;
 - Limited Funding Based on Propositions 2 1/2 restrictions;
 - Unfunded/Under funded State/Federal mandates (e.g., Special Education); and,
 - Being more proactive in addressing budget issues.

- Capital issues, including:
 - Improving High School infrastructure in order to keep accreditation;
 - Lack of adequate space for Council on Aging;
 - Need to make Town Offices handicapped accessible;
 - Increased area needed for Recycling Center and Town Yard;
 - Upgrade Community House wiring/adapt to meet Town needs;
 - Update Fire Department equipment; and,
 - Street, sidewalk, and signage improvements to improve traffic flow and pedestrian and bicycle safety.

- ▶ **Governmental issues, including:**
 - Lack of coordination between departments/committees;
 - No ultimate authority for managing town affairs;
 - Lack of resource sharing; and,
 - Under utilization of new technology (Internet).

- ▶ **Other issues, including:**
 - Lack of low and middle income senior housing;
 - Absentee electorate;
 - Lack of information received by residents;
 - Lack of backup for various department heads;
 - Resident dissatisfaction with the structure and process of our present form of Town government;
 - Need for town officials and residents to communicate better, in order to set priorities for the whole community;
 - Preserve and protect town character, including historic properties, open space, and public safety;
 - Need to examine zoning bylaws;
 - Concern for improving the quality of life for youth and seniors;
 - Lack of job opportunities and public transportation for teens; and
 - Desire to explore relationships between Town and non-profit institutions to enhance services, programs, and resources.

In order for the Town to continue providing the quality of life that our residents have come to expect, the Town needs to look creatively at all of these issues. The next steps will require our elected leaders to show true leadership as we proceed towards the next ten to fifteen years.

Introduction



Town Services and Facilities

The Town Services and Facilities Subcommittee were charged with six tasks:

- Maintain/improve town services (including schools);
- Maintain/improve town facilities (including schools);
- Review feasibility of additional facilities;
- Address circulation (traffic control, road conditions, sidewalks, bike paths);
- Review town government structure; and,
- Review intergovernmental relations.

The Subcommittee was comprised of representatives from town government, town employees and residents. They began by identifying the various services and facilities that the town provides. Members of the Subcommittee then chose areas that they would review and present to the Subcommittee as a whole. After much research and discussion, the Subcommittee felt that its mission would be better served by inviting representatives from the various town service providers to meet with the Subcommittee to identify their issues. These meetings were conducted during the late spring and early summer of 2002. The town representatives were asked to prepare a one-page summary of their departments services and needs over the next ten to fifteen years. These summaries are attached to this report in the Appendices.



Quality of Life

The Quality of Life Subcommittee was charged with reviewing six areas:

- *Define Quality of Life*, including community image, education, public safety, and other factors;
- *Address Youth Issues*, including in-town places to go, jobs/opportunities, and defining key issues;
- *Address Elder Issues*, including senior housing/assisted living, senior center, maintaining services, defining key issues;
- *Address Financial Issues*, including affordable housing, tax level, non-tax revenue alternatives;
- *Review Community Information*, including improving communications, awareness of community resources; and,
- *Town & Non-profit Institution Relationships*, including opportunities with Bay Path College and other institutions.

The Subcommittee included four members of the Long Range Planning Committee and five town residents. The Subcommittee developed the following vision of Longmeadow based upon their work.

Quality of Life Vision

In the Longmeadow Long Range Plan, quality of life means that Longmeadow maintains its image of a lovely and safe community which values and provides the highest standard of education for its youth and population of all ages. Longmeadow is concerned about and protective of its history, its open/green spaces and its recreational areas in order to provide its citizens with the opportunity to enjoy its natural beauty. Longmeadow assures the safety and well being of its citizens by maintaining a strong financial tax base to support those public services necessary for the town's continuing success.

Longmeadow provides space and encourages development of programs and services that support the health, welfare and dignity of all its citizens, including adequate housing for a broad spectrum of income levels.

Current Conditions and Future Needs



Town Services

Public Safety

Public Safety is comprised of Police, Fire and Board of Health. These services provide the safety net for our community and help to promote the quiet, safe environment in which we live. Since September 11, 2001, these departments have encountered increased training needs and responsibility to respond to terrorist threats.

The Fire Department is staffed with twenty-six firefighters (twenty-one career and five on-call). As the average age of the residents in town rises, the department will need additional, continuing training to provide state-of-the-art paramedic services. Periodic EMT and Firefighter training needs outside of the station are expected to continue at a manageable level.

The Fire Department is housed in a brand new building. The fire apparatus that the department uses is aging rapidly. Two of the engines are twenty-five years old and no longer meet national safety standards. In addition the self-contained breathing apparatus and auto extrication tools are near the end of their life expectancies.

The Board of Health is currently located in the basement of the Community House. This facility is not handicapped accessible, which affects multiple town departments and is an impediment to meeting the needs of many of our aging residents. The Department is staffed with a Health Inspector and a clerk. Neither of these individuals works full-time. There is an opportunity to work with other communities to provide a more regional Health Department. This would facilitate economies of scale and provide trained back-up should the need arise.

The Police Department is staffed with twenty-nine officers (1/2 the level of Springfield on an officer-per-capita basis). Ninety percent of the police budget is personnel. Since September 11, 2001, the police department has been conducting homeland security preparedness training. The State and Federal government fund most “new” equipment that may be needed for homeland security. Cruisers are currently funded through the town budget. These are replaced on a staggered schedule with some cruisers being replaced each year. The headquarters are adequate for the next fifty years.

Schools

The town currently operates three elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school. The major issue facing our schools over the next fifteen years is maintaining high academic excellence in the face of fiscal constraints. Short term, the schools expect a continued increase in enrollment of one- to two-percent per year. In combination with expected salary increases, there will be no money available for other areas including maintenance of buildings, technology improvements, and replacing aging instructional materials.

All of the elementary schools have been updated in the last eight years. However, the high school will require immediate attention to address infrastructure concerns including space constraints and technological improvements particularly in the music, science and computer areas. Within the fifteen-year time frame, it is expected that renovations will also be needed at the two middle schools.

Given fiscal constraints, recruiting and retaining outstanding teaching and administrative staff will be a challenge. It is expected that within the next fifteen years many experienced teachers will retire. Longmeadow will need a competitive salary scale to attract new staff.

Overall, a reliable funding stream must be found to support our schools, whether it is for day-to-day operations, special education, or infrastructure. Outstanding schools are necessary to maintain home values. Outside organizations such as Longmeadow Educational Excellence Foundation (LEEF) and the PTO can help, but the town will be required to provide the bulk of the support. The state and federal government cannot over the next fifteen years, be considered a reliable source of funding and are likely to decrease funding.

Public Works

The Streets and Engineering Department and the Water & Sewer Department are all supervised by a single Department Head. The Water & Sewer Department reports directly to the Water Commission and is self-funding. The fees received cover the expenses of the department. Currently, all water is purchased from Springfield. This exposes the Town to price risks should Springfield decide to increase prices. It also exposes the Town to supply risk should something happen to Springfield's water supply (either contamination or break in service).

There was a Master Plan for the Water & Sewer Department produced in 1978. At this point, most of the items from that plan have been completed. Many of the water and sewer lines were put in place during the 1960's and 70's, during a significant growth period for the Town. The majority of the other lines are significantly older than that. There is not currently an inventory of water and sewer lines that include the year they were installed and the materials used in the line. This makes it difficult in planning replacements of existing lines in a timely manner. Currently lines are replaced on an emergency basis.

The Streets and Engineering Department maintains the roads and sidewalks in town. The routine plowing and trash/leaf collection is performed by this department utilizing Town funds. All planned road repairs and replacements are paid with Chapter 90 state funds. Recently, the town's allocation of Chapter 90 funds has decreased 50 percent. The Town Yard will need to be renovated and/or replaced over 10-15 years.

The Recycle Center, operated under the auspices of the Recycling Commission, provides a resource processing items that are not discarded through the curbside pickup. The biggest concern over the next 5-10 years is escalating costs associated with state and federal mandates concerning processing of hazardous waste. In addition, the space on which the Recycle Center is located is becoming inadequate to meet the needs. A new, expanded location will be needed.

Town Administration

Several different departments perform the day-to-day administration of the Town. The Assessors office (reporting to the Board of Assessors) is located on the second floor of Town Hall. The department is staffed by a Department Head and two clerks/secretaries. The office uses a computer-based system for tracking valuation information. This information is updated by the staff on site, instead of being sent to a vendor. The department is currently operating well, but the office is not handicapped accessible, making it difficult to get to for many residents. Its location also limits its ability to call upon other staff for backup.

The Town Clerk, Treasurer and Collector is a single, elected position. The office is responsible for the following:

- Clerk
 - Voter registration
 - Election procedures
 - Dog/hunting/fishing licenses
- Treasurer
 - Maintenance of bank accounts
 - Bond-related disclosures
 - Paying agent for certain bonds
 - Collection of Ambulance fees
 - Various account reconciliations
- Collector
 - Quarterly Real Estate tax collection

The computer system that is used by the office is inadequate and requires a manual reconciliation of accounts receivable. Many functions are currently not being performed timely, or at all. Improvements could be achieved by separating the Town Clerk from Treasurer and Collector.

The Town Accountant's office is staffed with 3.33 full-time-equivalent staff. This is 23 percent less staff than five years ago. The office is responsible for accounting of all Town finances and reporting to State and Federal authorities. The office oversees procurement and employee benefit administration for the Town. The office utilizes an outdated DOS-based computer program that does not interface directly with the Town Collector's system.

Recently, a new accounting standard (GASB 34) has been implemented that requires a change from cash-based to accrual accounting and the recording and depreciating of all fixed assets. There will be significant challenges in moving to compliance with this standard. Additional staff and technology will be needed to meet these needs.

Resident Activities and Services

This category includes Parks & Recreation, Senior Center, Storrs Library and Longmeadow Community Television (LCTV). The Parks & Recreation Department oversees all town parks and playing fields. It also runs the town's Extended Day and Day Care programs. In addition, it coordinates and oversees the youth sport programs and activities for the community. The Parks Department is virtually self-supporting. The only non-fee-reimbursed expenses are the staff.

The Parks & Recreation Department seeks to replace the liner at the Greenwood Park pool (\$300-400k). There is also a desire to develop a skate park. This has received community financial support. The Department also would like to finish development of additional ball fields at Turner Park.

The Senior Center is located in the old Greenwood School. The number of seniors served by the Center is expected to increase dramatically over the next decade. Space and staffing are a major concern for the Center. Currently only \$6,800 is provided by the Town to support the Center, with the balance coming from State and Federal grants. The Center relies heavily upon its volunteer base. If volunteerism were to decline, services would be cut drastically. The Director feels that the Town should address the need to develop housing options for low and middle-income residents and affordable services for seniors desiring to remain in their homes.

At the 2000 Longmeadow Faces the Future Forum, town residents identified providing adequate facilities and programs for youth and seniors as a key concern. There was interest in exploring the creation of a community center to serve both youth and seniors.

The Storrs Library is in very good condition. Insufficient parking at some hours is problematic. There will continue to be future needs in electronics equipment. This need could be handled by normal budgetary expenses. Stable population should not cause any pressures for additional expansion.

Longmeadow Community Television (LCTV) has been a self-supporting service. It provides educational, cultural and governmental programming. Due to a recent FCC ruling, revenues will be reduced by \$25,000 per year. While other grants may possibly be available to cover the shortfall, representatives from LCTV have requested that the Town should consider some sort of contribution.



Town Facilities

The majority of the town facilities are in good condition. The most notable needed improvements are:

- Town Hall – This building needs to be made handicapped accessible. There is no elevator and many offices are on upper floors.
- Community House – This needs to be made handicapped accessible. Many offices are located in the basement. In addition, the wiring is over 80 years old and should be upgraded.
- Greenwood Center – This facility is becoming inadequate for use as a Senior Center and Day Care. The building either needs to be renovated/expanded, or a new facility should be found.
- Public Works building – There are significant environmental issues at the current location. In addition, the roof needs to be replaced.
- Greenwood Park – The pool liner should be replaced, as was the liner at Bliss Park.
- Sewage Treatment Plant – This facility is currently unused. Should it be demolished?

- ▶ Longmeadow High School – Significant renovations are needed to maintain accreditation. Attention should be given to space constraints and technological improvements in the music, science and computer areas.
- ▶ Williams and Glenbrook Middle Schools – These facilities will need some significant renovations over the next 10-15 years.



Circulation/Traffic Flow

Traffic has become a significant issue in the town. Because of Longmeadow's location, it has become the major route to the highway system for the towns of East Longmeadow, MA and Hampden, CT. East Longmeadow has a substantial commercial presence in its town. Several manufacturing plants are located in East Longmeadow, in addition to numerous retail outlets. Consequently, because of its connections to East Longmeadow, Converse Street experiences a significant volume of commercial traffic at all hours of the day.

Longmeadow Street is frequently at a stand still during the morning and afternoon rush hours. This situation has been exacerbated by the installation of traffic signals at the exit to Forest Park. In addition, during the Bright Nights displays, traffic flows even slower than normal.

The roads and sidewalks in town are in fairly good condition. Many of the sidewalks have been replaced in recent years. Road repairs are performed using Chapter 90 funds from the State.

There are currently no formal bike paths in town. Many neighboring towns have added bike paths. The riverfront is a natural place to put a bike path that could be linked with other paths in neighboring towns.

Pedestrian and bicycle safety is a concern. The Bliss Road/Williams street shopping area could be more pedestrian-friendly. Signs are confusing and one-way streets are not well marked. Also, circulation of traffic flow around schools is problematic.



Town Government Structure and Inter-governmental Relations

Longmeadow utilizes a Town Meeting form of government. All decisions regarding funding and Bylaws need to be approved by a vote of the electorate at a Town Meeting. The town elects a three-person Board of Selectmen to oversee town administration. In addition to the Board of Selectmen, the town elects the following:

- Board of Assessors
- Town Clerk/Treasurer/Collector
- Housing Authority
- Moderator
- Board of Parks Commissioners
- Planning Board
- School Committee
- Board of Water and Sewer Commissioners

All of these Boards are independent and oversee their own areas of town government. The only coordination between these departments comes through the Capital Planning Committee and the Appropriations Committee.

Most of these Boards take the responsibility to contract for their own services and purchases. Many have their own computer systems that are not integrated with other departments. In addition, the support staff is often isolated from other departments, limiting their ability to support each other through cross-training and replacement staffing.

One of the greatest strengths of our town is the dedicated and talented men and women who volunteer their time as public officials. One of the concerns we have about our town government is its limited base of volunteers. Most of the elected positions are either volunteer, or receive meager compensation. While the people we have working for the town in elected capacities have great skills, there are a number of other people who also have great skills that could be offered, but choose not to participate in town government.

There were numerous discussions during Long Range Planning Committee meetings concerning the way decisions are made in the town. Most of the key decisions need to be made at Town Meeting. It is not uncommon for groups with special interests to “pack the house” to get their issue passed.

There are a number of residents who have concerns about how the town is run, but are ill informed about the details of town operations. From speaking with these individuals, they feel that money is routinely wasted, and that the town should tighten its operations. From speaking with town employees, they feel that they are already running lean, and that any further cuts in funding would result in decreases

in services. It appears that despite the efforts of town officials to disseminate information to the residents, many of our residents are not properly educated as to how the town is funded and operated.

The town has been spending its cash reserves to balance the budget for the last three fiscal years. In 2002, the Town approved a \$2 million operating override for FY02-03 to offset the money that had been taken from reserves. Even with this override, cuts in services were needed to balance the budget. Town officials and the voters need to make difficult choices between reducing the services currently offered or seeking new funding sources.



Town and Resident Communication

There is a widespread desire among town residents for our town officials to improve communication, curb miscommunication, and make information more accessible to the average, busy citizen. There is no central town communication vehicle or method that everyone uses. Many people do not reliably read the local papers. Accurate coverage in the printed press is spotty, often with misinformation that is too late in coming. Many residents get their news via the internet, radio, television, or New York, Boston, or Hartford papers.

The Town publishes a monthly newsletter for seniors and a quarterly listing of activities for the Parks & Recreation Department. The annual Town Warrant is published as an insert in *The Reminder* and on the web site. Longmeadow has an excellent web site, www.longmeadow.org, which is very effective when town officials post calendar announcements and summaries of issues or activities, minutes of meetings, and other information. LCTV, the community access cable television station, posts announcements and televises Board of Selectmen and School Committee meetings, and a limited number of special programs on town affairs.

Despite these efforts, there is a need for timely, reliable information from Town Hall, and for improving opportunities for citizens to communicate with their government.

Newcomers from other areas of the USA or foreign countries are generally unfamiliar with Town Meeting form of government, and would benefit from an orientation or materials provided by town government.

Recommendations

Based on the previous findings, the Town Services and Facilities and Quality of Life Subcommittees recommend the following options and actions.

Create Financial Stability / Budgeting

- Stress to our elected Boards, as well as our residents, the need to lobby our State Representative and State Senator regarding the need to support Local Aid appropriations, based on fair distribution formulas, including the return of 100 percent of lottery money to municipalities.
- Analyze the costs of unfunded mandates, such as Special Education, and examine options for management and political action.
- The Appropriations Committee, Board of Selectmen and School Committee should develop, and agree on, a policy for the Town regarding what conditions would “trigger” an override recommendation and vote.
- Adopt a town-wide policy freezing all budgetary line item descriptions to enhance year-to-year comparisons of departmental operations.
- Review town budgetary documents to consider alternative formats that might enhance resident understanding of the Town’s finances.

Increase the Financial Base

- Study the creation of a “Community Chest” or “Endowment Fund”, seeking donations from residents to support town operations.
- Review the Town’s fees and fines structure.
- Study the advisability/desirability of altering zoning bylaws to permit alternative housing situations and increased density.
- Encourage “New Growth” by supporting additions/renovations of the existing housing stock, coupled with reassessment of such properties.
- Conduct real estate evaluations in a timely manner as required by law to ensure that assessments are accurate.
- Explore the Massachusetts Community Preservation Act of 2000 as a source of funding for historic preservation, housing and conservation land acquisition, subject to voter approval. This revenue is not subject to Proposition 2 ½ limitations and would be eligible for matching funds from the State.
- Consider the use of the school and park and recreation facilities and fields as a potential revenue source, including fees for service for all groups.

Improve Capital Infrastructure

In the next decade, the Town will need to make significant capital improvements to Longmeadow High School, Glenbrook and Williams Middle School, and the Town Yard, and make our municipal facilities fully accessible to people with disabilities. There is interest in building a community center to serve elders and teens.

- Continue to support and improve the process conducted by the Capital Planning Committee. Evaluate and look at other models to improve the process.
- Identify and pursue all grants which might support the acquisition of needed equipment. Chief among these would be the School Department and the Police and Fire Departments, i.e. Homeland Security issues.
- Increase annual budgetary support to fund capital improvements and acquisitions.
- Review options to relocate town offices to a single ADA compliant facility.
- Create a study group to explore the construction of a new community center at Greenwood or other appropriate location. Consider locating affordable senior housing adjacent to the facility.

Maintain High Academic Excellence

- Once the new Superintendent of Schools is chosen, a thorough review of school goals and operations should take place, with recommendations on how to maintain excellence at a level of local spending the townspeople will support.
- Ensure the High School does not lose its accreditation by bringing physical conditions up to state standards. Develop initiatives to provide better equipment and upgrade technological resources for students.
- Support the Longmeadow Educational Excellence Foundation (LEEF), PTOs and other organizations working to enhance our schools.

Improve Town Management and Efficiency

- Study departmental relationships and interdependencies to determine if further departmental consolidations or cross training of staff can be undertaken to achieve efficiencies.
- Study the need for a Chief Financial Officer for the Town, including consolidation of the Collector/Treasurer functions, the Town Accountant and the Director of Business Services.
- Study the role of the IT Department throughout the Town, including the School Department. Study those uses to which technology can be applied to further reduce operating expenses, such as online registrations or routine bill paying. Acquire a centralized information system of tracking receipts and accounting systems.
- Elected Boards and Town Officials need to actively support the work of the Charter Commission, publicize its findings and support the public debate of its recommendations. If the vote fails, Town leaders should support Bylaw changes to improve the efficiency of town government, including but not limited to the appointment (rather than election) of the Water & Sewer Commission, Parks & Recreation Commission, Town Clerk, and Town Collector/Treasurer.

Improve Communications

- Study the usefulness and costs of a community-wide newsletter.
- Utilize web-based meeting minutes, meeting notices, contract documents, departmental plans, etc. to share information on a wider basis than might currently be done. A study to evaluate the advisability of consolidating Town and School Department websites should be included.
- Develop a plan for more intensive, consistent and improved use of Longmeadow Cable Television by Boards, elected officials and department heads to inform residents and disseminate decisions and plans.
- Encourage elected officials and Boards to better utilize available public relations/ media vehicles.
- Distribute a survey to town residents to evaluate needs and provision of services. Explore the possibility of including non-binding questions on ballots, or filling out a survey on Election Day.

Develop and Pursue Collaborative Relationships

- Collaborate with Bay Path College and other non-profit institutions on town service usage and demands, support and planning for town functions and services, and other opportunities.
- Collaborate with neighboring municipalities on sharing of services where appropriate, joint ventures utilizing the model of the Scantic Valley Health Trust, traffic issues and mutual aid and support agreements for public safety issues.
- Explore the use of grants or partnerships with State, Federal and private agencies for development of park, recreation and conservation lands.

Focus on the Needs of Youth and Seniors

- Address youth issues, including lack of teen job opportunities and public transportation.
- Address senior issues such as affordable housing, educational opportunities, and a new senior center.
- Promote opportunities for multi-generational activities and volunteering.