

1991 CHARLESTOWN COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The Comprehensive Land Use Plan Act was passed by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1988 in order to establish a program of comprehensive planning in each municipality and establish procedures for review, approval, and future planning. The purpose was to ensure that each municipality examined a variety of factors, from natural resources to housing to economic development, in developing land use controls and other policies and programs.

The Act requires all cities and towns in Rhode Island to prepare an updated Comprehensive Plan based on a detailed set of criteria. Each city or town's Plan is adopted as an official municipal document, and approved by various State agencies. According to the Act, once a Plan is adopted and approved, future municipal and state policies must be consistent with it. The General Assembly has strengthened the importance of the Plan by passing a new Zoning Enabling Act, which requires each municipality's zoning to be in conformance with its newly developed Comprehensive Plan and provides municipalities a great deal of flexibility in developing land use management tools.

The Act requires local plans to be consistent with State goals and requires plans of adjacent communities be compatible. The Act also stresses the importance of public involvement in developing the plans and includes requirements for public hearings.

This Plan has been developed to:

- Update the 1984 Comprehensive Plan;
- Provide the documentation consistent with the Act - consisting of inventories and needs analyses in the various elements listed below;
- Explore the direction that Charlestown should take in future years and identify the means and schedule for proceeding in that direction.

Process

The development of this Plan has taken over one year and has involved extensive data collection and involvement of Town boards, commissions, and staff, a Citizens Advisory Committee, and the public. The Comprehensive Plan Process consisted of the following:

- Identification of Issues, through a Town survey of residents and discussion with town officials and residents;
- Development of Goals and Policies based on the issues identified and further discussion.

- Development of Plan Elements which included the statement of goals and policies, an inventory of existing conditions using available local and state data, analysis of issues and/or needs, and development of recommendations. The following Elements are summarized in this document and presented fully in the Plan:
 - Land Use
 - Natural Resources
 - Cultural Resources
 - Open Space and Recreation
 - Circulation
 - Housing
 - Economic Development
 - Services and Facilities
- Development of Implementation Strategies - which identifies priorities, schedule, responsible parties, and capital cost estimates. Each Element contains an Implementation section, and the Plan contains a consolidated Implementation element.
- Coordination with State goals and other municipalities. The goals and recommendations of each element were reviewed for consistency with State goals. Town officials met with officials from neighboring communities, including the Narragansett Tribe of Indians, to discuss the Plan.

Town Input

The Comprehensive Plan process has relied heavily on input from town officials and residents and has included the following:

- Town Issues Survey - conducted in 1990, mailed to all property owners. Nearly 1,300 responses;
- Comprehensive Plan Citizens Advisory Committee (CPCAC), consisting of town residents appointed by the Town Council. The CPCAC was divided into subcommittees reflecting the Plan elements. The CPCAC has held 10 monthly meetings and a special meeting since January 1991 to develop statements of issues, goals, and policies and to discuss the individual elements. Many subcommittees of the CPCAC met more often. All meetings of the CPCAC and its subcommittees were open to the public and posted at the Town Hall. Regularly scheduled CPCAC meetings were also advertised in local newspapers;
- Workshops and meetings, Town Commissions, Councils, and Boards. A total of 14 meetings were held with the Planning Commission, Town Council, Zoning Board of Review, and Conservation Commission. All

meetings were open to the public and advertised in local newspapers. The Planning Commission appeared at all Comprehensive Plan workshops of town boards and commissions and at all CPCAC meetings;

- Meetings with Town staff, state officials, and other organizations. Thirty-two meetings were held with local officials and organizations and State officials. Two of these were held with Tribe officials to discuss the Plan and related issues. In addition, Charlestown's Comprehensive Plan was discussed at monthly meetings with other Town Planners in the region. The Tribe and other neighboring communities have received a draft copy of the Plan for review;
- Public workshops/hearings. Two public workshops were held during the development of the plan to discuss issues, goals, and recommendations. As part of the adoption of this Plan, two public hearings were held. Both public hearings have been advertised in local newspapers, and a notice of the hearings was sent to all property owners;
- Approximately 200 copies of the Draft Plan elements were sent to town officials and representatives of other organizations and communities. Copies of the draft plan elements have been available for review at the Town Planner's office and the Cross Mills library for several weeks.

Overview

This Summary presents the findings, goals and policies, and prioritized recommendations for each of the elements. The composite Implementation section is presented at the end. This Summary is accompanied by a Proposed Future Land Use Plan map.

LAND USE

Findings

- The zoning and other land use controls adopted as a result of the 1984 Comprehensive Plan are generally appropriate for protecting the town's natural resources.
- Because zoning indicates how the land potentially could be developed, it is crucial that the land use plan and the zoning that is derived from the land use plan reflect the goals of the town's residents.
- The zoning developed in 1984 contains a few areas of concern regarding properties that could be developed or redeveloped inconsistently with the goals of residents.
 - "Spot" zones, which may not be consistent with surrounding land uses but were designated to reflect existing land uses. If these properties change hands, they could be redeveloped as relatively intensive or inappropriate uses in accordance with the existing zoning.

- Large bands of "general business" zones that could result in intensive commercial uses along Route 1. This raises concerns about the visual character of the roadside, the effect of numerous curb cuts/driveways on traffic safety, and the cumulative effects of numerous paved parking lots on storm water runoff and water quality.
 - One-acre residential zoning along Route 2: This zoning allows relatively dense development along the major north-south route through the town, raising similar concerns of visual and traffic impacts as cited in the previous example.
 - Industrial Research and Development off Route 112. This land is largely over an aquifer (major groundwater supply) and the access probably would not be adequate for intensive industrial development.
 - While the town's 2- and 3-acre residential zones are justified by the natural resources and constraints in Charlestown, the 5-acre residential zoning along Route 216 appears to be excessively strict, based on natural resources and constraints.
- The Town shares borders with four towns and encircles much of the land owned by the Narragansett Tribe. The uses allowed by each community along these borders affects the character of both communities that share the border.
 - The State's new Zoning Enabling Act provides a great deal of flexibility to municipalities in developing zoning ordinances but requires careful definition of terms and objective standards. Unless otherwise noted, the provisions of the Act apply to all new zoning ordinances or amendments as of January 1, 1992 and to all existing zoning ordinances as of July 1, 1993. Other specific changes include:
 - Single family, group homes, and family day care residential uses will be allowed in all zones unless specifically exempted from commercial/industrial zones for health and safety reasons. (Effective January 1, 1992);
 - Municipal land use regulations must specify a stage in the development review process at which a developer's rights are vested (after which zoning changes will not apply to the development). (Effective January 1, 1992).
 - The State of Rhode Island has identified land along Route 216 north of the current Industrial zone as a potential site for a new state landfill. This is considered an inappropriate location because of the following factors:
 - The location offers poor road access;
 - A landfill would be incompatible with surrounding low and medium density residential use;
 - All surrounding residents rely on private wells with no likelihood of public water being provided in the near future;

- Hydric soils along Route 216 indicate the probable presence of wetlands;
- The proposed landfill site spans groundwater drainage divide. Groundwater would drain into the Wood-Pawcatuck sole source aquifer to the north and into Quonochontaug Pond to the south, both recognized as significant water resources by local, state, and federal agencies.

Major Goals and Policies

Major Goal

To protect the natural and cultural resources and rural character of the town while providing the housing, economic base, and services necessary for the broad range of residents to enjoy the high quality of life associated with the town.

Major Supporting Policies

- Preserve the visual qualities of the villages, shorelines, important natural features, historic areas, scenic roads, and major collectors and arterials.
- Preserve vegetated buffers between land uses and roads, streams and wetlands.
- Maintain the current general patterns, scale, and densities of development, with the most dense development occurring in villages and generally low density development occurring outside the village areas.
- Maintain Old Post Road from Town Dock Road east to the South Kingstown town line as the center of business.
- Manage growth and development to reflect the natural characteristics (resources and constraints) of the land.
 - Ensure that town staff and the boards and commissions that review land development proposals have adequate mapping to make well-considered land use decisions, including zoning, property, and resources/constraints.
- Provide flexibility in land use management tools where appropriate based on natural constraints to encourage alternative land use developments.
- Work with neighboring communities, including the Narragansett Tribe, to ensure that land uses along the common borders of communities are compatible.

Priorities

High priorities

General Changes

- Amend zoning and subdivision regulations to comply with Zoning Enabling Act requirements that take effect January 1, 1992:
 - Define the stage in the development process at which developers' rights are vested;
 - Change zoning language to allow residential uses in all zones, except: Industrial and certain Commercial for health and safety reasons and publicly owned Open Space/Conservation/Recreation districts.
- Develop adequate mapping, with highest priority given to developing a reproduceable zoning map (described in Zoning Changes below). Use the resource maps developed in this plan as a first step.
- Work with adjacent communities and the Tribe to define the appropriate character of key resources and to cooperate in protecting them.

Zoning Amendments/Changes

Develop a reproducible zoning map with clearly marked dimensions and boundaries and revise the zoning ordinance to incorporate the following:

- Develop overlay districts in which to specify aesthetic design standards or natural resource protection standards. These districts may restrict land use. Note in zoning requirements that developments be designed in keeping with surrounding district. Some of the districts would include:
 - Groundwater protection overlay - 2 districts: high protection (mapped reservoirs and recharge areas) and moderate protection (rest of town) using land use controls and performance standards;
 - Village districts - designate districts around current villages in which design standards reflect village character. (Unobtrusive signage, sidewalks or pedestrian ways, buildings in keeping with surrounding village in regard to roof line, building materials, style etc.);
 - Roadsides (major collectors and arterials) require vegetated buffers, buildings in keeping with surrounding neighborhood. Encourage preservation of important views;
 - Scenic roads - standards to consider include vegetated buffers, preservation of stone walls, preservation of narrow, winding roads where possible from a safety standpoint, with a possible reduction in speed limits;
 - Historic districts: Shannock, Carolina, Cross Mills.

- **Planned Development district.** Re-zone the Research & Development/Industrial zoned land west of Route 112 and current Planned Business district to Planned Development, which would include standards to address the town's concerns for aesthetics, open space, overall density, and environmental protection. The purpose would be to allow a low intensity mixture of uses, providing developers more flexibility in selecting the types and location of uses while providing the Town with control over the ultimate development of a large parcel. Development in the Planned Development zone would be reviewed as a master plan by the Planning Commission.

Some uses that are not considered appropriate include raising livestock, trade schools or colleges, hospitals, funeral homes, automobile repair shops, gas stations, airports, freight terminals, or manufacturing.

- **Commercial Zones.** Focus general business commercial zoning in the existing commercial zone east of the historic Cross Mills area and the eastern side of Route 2 at its intersection with Route 1. Encourage village/neighborhood commercial uses in existing GB zones in the Cross Mills area and along Routes 2, 91, 216, and 112. Encourage tourist/visitor related commercial uses in existing GB zones along Route 1.
- Consider deepening commercial zones, to encourage vegetative screening and parking in the rear of the buildings.
- Develop 3 commercial zones in order to encourage commercial development that is appropriate to the surrounding areas and thus preserves the general character of the town and the value of commercial and residential properties. The specific definitions and boundaries will be developed following the adoption of this Plan in an 18-month process involving numerous public forums on amendments to the Zoning ordinance and map. The forums will be designed to encourage participation by the business community and other interested parties. In general terms, the 3 commercial zones would include:
 - **Commercial 1.** This district is characterized by businesses that depend mainly on local vehicular and pedestrian traffic and that are compatible with a village or neighborhood area, such as but not limited to, retail, professional, and service businesses. The district is designed to provide convenient local shopping services, to promote public safety for both pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and to have minimal adverse impact on neighboring residential properties or the character of residential areas. Such districts are most appropriately located in the current GB zones in the Cross Mills area, along Routes 2, 91, 216, and 112, and other areas currently zoned GB north of Route 1 and its contiguous properties.
 - **Commercial 2.** This district is characterized by businesses that depend on a great volume of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, such as but not limited to, businesses that primarily provide for the retailing of commodities and furnishing of services. The district is designed to concentrate services for the convenience of the motoring and pedestrian public, to prevent an unsafe mixture of commercial uses and

inappropriate residential uses. Such intensely used areas should be buffered from residential areas and other low-intensity areas. Such districts are most appropriately located in the current GB commercial areas east of Cross Mills and the eastern side of Route 2 at its intersection with Route 1. Current GB areas north of the Route 1 properties are not considered appropriate for Commercial 2 uses due to the residential nature of the nearby properties.

- Commercial 3. This district is characterized by businesses that depend on a large volume of vehicular traffic and proximity to major highways, such as but not limited to retail establishments, restaurants, gasoline stations, transportation firms, and motels. The district is designed to concentrate such services for the convenience of the motoring public, to prevent an unsafe mixture of commercial and residential uses. Such uses should be buffered from residential uses and other low-intensity uses. Such districts are most appropriately located on U.S. Route 1 (Post Road) in current GB zoned areas, with the exception of the eastern side of the intersection of Routes 1 and 2, described above as appropriate for a Commercial 1 area. The current GB districts north of the Route 1 properties are not considered appropriate for Commercial 3 uses due to the residential nature of surrounding properties.

Design standards would apply to each according to the overlay district in which they are found.

- Eliminate the following "spot" zones, which may allow redevelopment that is inconsistent with surrounding land uses and natural resources:
 - Industrial zones along Biscuit City Road and Route 216.
 - Easternmost portion of commercial zone at eastern end of Matunuck School House Road.
 - Commercial zone on Shannock Road.

Note: The existing uses would be allowed to continue and expand to a certain extent.

- Re-zone the 5-acre residential zone located in the Ross Hill Road Area to 3-acre residential.
- Change the zoning along Route 2 south of the intersection with Route 112 to 2-acre residential (R-80).
- Create municipal use zones to apply to town-owned parcels, which would allow uses that meet the town's goals, including provision of services, recreation, affordable/alternative housing, and natural resources protection.
- Rezone all recreation, open space and conservation lands held by public agencies to open space/conservation/recreation.
- Define the seaward setbacks along the barrier beach communities to be the most severe erosional dune scarp (edge), i.e., the erosional scarp from the blizzard of 1978 or more severe erosion after 1978.

Medium priority

- Develop a land trust for conservation purposes.
 - Consider the use of a property transfer fee/tax or other means to fund land trust purchases.

NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

Findings

- The natural and cultural resources of the town define its character and represent major attractions for its residents and visitors. The town contains a sole source groundwater aquifer, the Pawcatuck River, important wetland and upland habitats, salt ponds, and the barrier beaches. Many of these resources are unusual in the state and important to protect. The town contains such cultural resources as historic villages and Native American artifacts. Many of these resources can be adversely impacted by inappropriate development.
- The soils, bedrock, topography, wetlands and floodplains present constraints to development through most of the town.
- The quality of the town's surface waters and groundwater is very good throughout most of the town.
- Protection of the groundwater quality is essential to providing potable water for the town's residents and visitors and maintaining the water quality of the town's surface waters. The impacts of development to fresh and salt water bodies is largely determined by the direction of groundwater flow: from the moraine, which lies just north of Route 1, the groundwater flows into the salt ponds; whereas north of the moraine, the groundwater flows toward the fresh water ponds and the Pawcatuck River.
- The salt ponds have periodically shown signs of threatened water quality, including algae blooms and high amounts of certain bacteria. The volunteer pond watcher groups regularly collect water quality data. It is generally understood that inadequate or failing septic systems in densely developed coastal neighborhoods may be contributing to water quality problems. However, no studies have been done to specifically identify problem areas and their effects on the water quality. Other factors, such as storm water runoff, boating, and even large amounts of animals, may also contribute to water quality problems.
- After the 1984 Comprehensive Plan, the town has taken the initiative to protect its natural resources through its zoning map, cluster zoning ordinance, and site plan review processes. The town has also worked to streamline the development review process so that requirements are easily understood and met, including checklists, clearly defined procedures, and coordinated review of proposals. The town should continue to modify its zoning and other land use controls to improve the environmental protection it affords.

- Industrial/Research and Development zone is located over a major groundwater aquifer.
- The town has erosion control provisions but they are difficult to enforce.
- Protection of the groundwater and salt ponds requires additional water quality controls that density/use based zoning can provide.
- By actively identifying natural resources and constraints, the town can help ensure that state and federal environmental requirements are met and can also help developers understand the nature of the resources and constraints on the sites of proposed developments.
- The town shares important resources with its neighboring towns and the Tribe. Protection of these resources requires cooperation among the communities and common goals and definitions of what resources are important to protect.

Major Goals and Policies

Major Goals

To protect and encourage appropriate use of the town's natural and cultural resources, including groundwater and surface water (fresh water and salt water), a variety of wetland and upland habitats, the barrier beaches, historic villages, historic cemeteries, tribal artifacts and sites, and scenic views and corridors.

Major Supporting Policies

- To allow and encourage development that protects the natural and cultural resources and reflects the natural constraints of the land.
- To protect natural and cultural resources through zoning and the development review process, using innovative techniques as they become available or feasible.
- To monitor water quality in the fresh water bodies and salt ponds through the volunteer pond watcher groups' efforts and other studies, identifying specific problems or improvements, and where necessary researching and implementing feasible improvements that remedy specific problems identified.
- To promote establishing protective undeveloped zones along water resources and other habitats through the use of setbacks, design standards, exactions, open space dedication, and where necessary the purchase of development rights or property.

Priorities

High Priorities

- Designate the protective overlay district described in the Land Use section.
- Develop and implement a soil erosion and sediment control ordinance based on the recent State Enabling Legislation. The ordinance will require examination of natural features such as wetlands, slopes, and soils for most developments (even frontage development) and will provide means to collect fees for evaluation and to enforce the requirements of the ordinance.
- Develop a planner's database, combining environmental/cultural resource and constraints maps with lot information to be used as a "red flag" in reviewing developments. (Burden of proof on developer to prove constraints not on site.)
- Implement Wastewater Management District:
 - Compile existing water quality data into single source of information, regularly maintain this database;
 - Intensive water resources management survey in densely developed areas, especially south of Route 1 and in historic villages in north (Shannock, Carolina). This is a crucial step to determine what the specific problem areas and issues are. The study should include surveys of water quality of well water and nearby pond water, shoreline surveys to identify single sources of pollutants, lot by lot surveys of water usage, water-using appliances, and age and condition of septic treatment facilities;
 - Investigate and develop solutions based on results of the above study, including regular septic system pumpout, upgrading current systems, multi-family wastewater treatment options. Provision of public water should be investigated. This task could be included in above study;
 - Critically review and amend existing draft wastewater management ordinance as appropriate in light of the above studies and this Comprehensive Plan;
 - Develop wastewater management function in town government, either based on subwatershed or individual homeowner responsibility, depending on results of the above study;
 - The town should use the services of URI (e.g., Planning or Natural Resources interns or studios) as much as possible to minimize costs in performing time-intensive studies;
 - As a longer-term aspect of the wastewater management district, continue to investigate sludge disposal methods, including local composting;

- Work with Tribe and neighboring communities to delineate and protect shared resources;
- Include additional provisions for water resource protection through zoning and other land use controls: Groundwater protection overlay district (discussed above); enforcement of state vegetated setbacks from streams and wetlands; water quality performance standards;
- Continue educational efforts and group activities that raise awareness of environmental protection, e.g., septic system brochure, Conservation Commission sponsored clean-ups, or activities for schoolchildren.

Medium Priorities

- Develop a land trust for conservation purposes.
- Promote access to and appreciation of many of the natural resources as appropriate through the continued development of shore access points, hiking paths, and other opportunities for outdoor activities.
- Continue to cooperate with agencies such as the Wood Pawcatuck Association and pond watcher groups in educational activities and preservation of undeveloped parcels.

Lower Priorities

- Identify areas for increased protection through dedication or acquisition of development rights or property. Promote acquisition of these sites by the town, land trust, or other conservation organization, as the opportunities present themselves.
- Explore alternative measures of resource protection as they become available or feasible, including alternative flexible zoning measures, and the use of alternative technologies to remove nutrients from wastewater.

OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

Findings

- The Town's Open Space and Recreation resources and programs are central in defining its character, protecting natural resources, providing access to natural resources, and attracting seasonal or daily visitors and retirees, who represent much of the economic base of the town.
- The programs offered by the Parks and Recreation Department along with its volunteers are highly used. There is more demand for recreational programs than the Department can currently accommodate. The recreation programs are generally revenue producers.
- Ninigret Park represents a significant resource for organized sports, festivals, and other outdoor activities.

- Proposed State open space and recreation projects include a north-south hiking trail from Burrillville to Westerly, passing through northern Charlestown; and a coastal bicycle route.
- The Open Space and Recreation Element of this Plan identified the following needs:
 - Community center to provide a site for evening activities and a variety of activities for all age groups;
 - Additional playing fields and tennis courts; lighting at existing playing fields and improvements to existing tennis courts;
 - Small playgrounds in densely developed residential areas;
 - Additional access to the shore and water;
 - Routes that are safe for pedestrians and bicycles, especially in the shore communities.

Major Goals and Policies

Major Goals

To promote appreciation and appropriate use of Charlestown's natural and cultural resources and a focus of community activity by providing a wide range of recreational opportunities for Charlestown's residents and visitors of all ages.

Major Supporting Policies

- Continue to provide and expand opportunities for organized activities including sports, field trips, and festivals.
- Provide opportunities for active and passive recreation throughout the town.
- Continue to provide and expand opportunities for access to fresh and salt water resources, while protecting the resources from adverse impacts of overuse.
- Continue to protect natural resources, cultural resources, and important views and visual corridors through open space acquisition or dedications.
- Promote safe pedestrian and bicycle travel.

Priorities

High Priorities

- The town should continue to fund the Parks and Recreation Department programs.
- Preserve visual access to the water through design standards along Routes 1 and 1A, Charlestown Beach Road, East Beach Road, West Beach Road, and at important viewing locations along the Pawcatuck.
- Continue requiring exactions of developers to preserve open space, especially as undeveloped buffers to natural resources. Continue encouraging clustered developments with surrounding open space.
- The town should continue expanding its recreational base by:
 - developing a community center;
 - developing additional playing fields (Columbia Heights, Ninigret);
 - making improvements to the Columbia Heights, Grand Pre, and Schoolhouse Pond parcels to encourage the uses for which they have been acquired;
- Develop small scale access ways to the shore, which would allow a few visitors each, such as anglers, hikers, or people who wish to sit and look at the water. Tax lots and easements could provide this opportunity. Provide limited parking at each;
- Protect important views through design standards or acquisition of development rights or easements.

Medium Priorities

- Develop small playgrounds in neighborhoods.
- Investigate historic rights of way to the shore through deed research.
- Provide safe routes for pedestrians and bicyclists using wide road rights of way, and low speed limits in coastal settlements.
- Develop a land trust for conservation purposes.

Lower Priorities

- Over the long term, develop networks of paths for bicyclists and pedestrians, connecting with features such as state trails, village centers, and water access or views.
- Divert some beach-goers from the Town Beach to other public beaches, including East Beach or the town-owned parcels west of the Town Beach. This is more of a medium-to-long term project, which would involve investi-

gation of transportation or parking solutions, possibly allowing visitors to park at Ninigret Park for a fee and shuttling them to beaches.

- Acquire additional open space land as the opportunities arise and budget allows, with a focus on providing buffers and/or limited access to natural resources.
- Develop additional tennis courts and improve existing ones.
- Provide lighting at ballfields.

CIRCULATION

Findings

- The major roads in Charlestown allow north-south travel through the center of the town and east-west travel along its margins. A cross-town east-west connector has been explored periodically; however, the current need would not justify the significant environmental impacts of developing a new road.
- The town's roads provide an important impression of the town to drivers and automobile passengers; the rural qualities of these roads should be protected.
- The Public Works Department maintains and upgrades 65 miles of town roads with a relatively small crew of 5 staff. Many narrow winding roads, inherited as "two-rod" country roads (33 foot right of way) are being upgraded systematically to allow safe travel.
- 55 percent of the roads in Charlestown are private roads. The Town has instituted a process whereby residents may jointly request as Homeowners Associations that roads be upgraded and accepted by the town; the costs of upgrading are incurred by the residents of the upgraded roads.
- Charlestown has a low accident rate relative to other coastal communities, and a similar accident rate to other rural communities. The largest number of accidents occurs along the travel routes to the beaches, at the intersections with Route 1 or 1A.
- Between 1970 and 1990, Routes 1 and 1A have seen significant increases in the average amount of traffic annually on the roads.
- In the coastal areas, automobile traffic varies widely between seasons. Traffic congestion is not yet a major concern among residents.
- Pedestrian and bicycle travel is difficult along narrow or heavily traveled routes, such as in the coastal neighborhoods.
- Charlestown is serviced by limited paratransit opportunities and by no mass transit.

Major Goals and Policies

Major Goals

To provide for safe travel through the town while protecting the rural character, scenic nature, and natural and cultural resources along the roads and throughout the town.

Major Supporting Policies

- Provide adequate funding and staff for the town to maintain and improve its roads.
- Actively work with RIDOT to identify problem areas and possible solutions to maintain the amenities of the town.
- Protect the rural and natural scenery along the town's roads, including vegetation, stone walls, historic structures and landscapes, and views. Where safety allows, maintain less heavily travelled roads as winding country roads.
- Where possible promote safe bicycle and pedestrian travel and other modes of transportation.
- Monitor RIDOT and local reports of traffic volumes and accidents, especially along heavily travelled routes, to alert town staff and officials of increased problems.

Priorities

High Priorities

- Continue providing funding required for road maintenance and improvements and DPW staffing.
- Designate scenic roads and develop standards to protect scenic qualities.
- Develop a liaison function to work with RIDOT regularly in discussing upcoming projects and their impact on the town, and the town's needs. This should be instituted as a regular (e.g., yearly or quarterly) memo to the Planning Board and Town Council, with requests for input. Possible liaisons would include Town staff from Public Works and the Planning Department.

Medium Priorities

- Encourage bicycle and pedestrian travel as specified in Open Space and Recreation priorities.
- Investigate mass transit or para-transit alternatives.

Lower Priorities

- Investigate the use of a beach shuttle.

HOUSING

Findings

- The rapid development and extreme increase in the price of land and housing has reduced housing options for a wide variety of Charlestown residents and potential residents of various ages, income levels, and other needs.
 - Charlestown's elderly population is increasing, and many cannot maintain their current homes or would prefer to live in smaller homes, with family, or in alternative housing arrangements. These alternatives are generally not available in Charlestown.
 - Many young families cannot afford to purchase homes in Charlestown; many young people who grew up in Charlestown can no longer afford to live in the town after leaving their parents' homes.
- The needs for housing alternatives in Charlestown can be addressed through relatively small scale, incremental approaches.
- Solutions for housing needs must be responsive to the considerable amount of natural resources and constraints to development within the town. Housing alternatives should be consistent with the rural character and scale of the town.
- Increasing the amount of housing opportunities will require a combination of efforts from the town, non-profit organizations, and developers.
- The town can help to reduce the costs of construction by incorporating flexibility in certain standards, such as reducing the number of parking spaces required, and allowing accessory apartments on a limited scale.
- The recently adopted State Zoning Enabling Act requires that single household residences, group homes, and family day care facilities be allowed in all zones except where exempted from Commercial or Industrial zones for health or safety reasons.
- The recently adopted State Low and Moderate Income Housing Act allows simplified review for subsidized housing developments and provides a state level appeals process.
 - If 10 percent of each town's housing has not been subsidized for construction or rehabilitation, developers* of subsidized housing may obtain town approval for the development as a "Special Use" through the Zoning Board of Review (ZBR).

* Limited equity housing cooperatives, public agencies, or non-profit organizations. Private developers may use this procedure if the housing will remain low to moderate income rental housing for 30 years or more after first occupancy.

- The ZBR must consider the needs of the town as defined in the Comprehensive Plan concerning housing and other aspects such as natural resources protection.
- If the ZBR denies approval or imposes excessive conditions, and the town has less than 10 percent subsidized housing, the developer may appeal the decision to the State Housing Appeals Board. The Housing Appeals Board reviews the decision based on the town's Comprehensive Plan and the consistency with which conditions are imposed on all developments (subsidized and otherwise). The Housing Appeals Board's decision is binding but may be further appealed to the supreme court.

Major Goals and Policies

Major Goals

Achieve and maintain a range of housing alternatives in keeping with Charlestown's tradition of being home to people of different times of life, family circumstances, and levels of income.

Provide for means of new homes to offer a good quality of life while fitting into Charlestown's social and physical setting.

Tailor and implement housing efforts to be in keeping with the Town's limited financial resources.

Coordinate housing policies and programs as much as possible with other groups and public bodies.

Major Supporting Policies

- Help residents of low income to be able to stay in their homes through such efforts as:
 - grants and low interest loans for rehabilitation and reconstruction;
 - increasing local employment opportunities;
 - purchase and management by non-profit organizations for rent or ownership;
 - ownership programs that protect lower priced housing from market inflation (i.e. South County Community Action).
- Give priority to increasing housing opportunities for the groups of people who are being displaced from the community: young people, working families, elderly, year-round renters first time homebuyers.

- Amend and administer zoning to encourage development of the types of housing that fit the needs and resources of these groups:
 - mixed use
 - apartments
 - rental homes
 - starter homes
 - homes combined with services such as day care for families, or cooking and health care for elderly
- Design and implement regulations and programs to increase the number of safe, affordable year-round homes available to individuals, couples, and families. (Define "affordable" to mean that the cost of payment rent or the costs of ownership do not exceed 30% of a household's income).
- Use incentives, negotiation, and requirements to meet as many housing needs as possible through private and non-profit development.
- Use Town and other public resources to help groups whose needs are not met by the private market: young people, families, elderly renters.
- Coordinate regulations and programs with the Town's economic development program so that there are the right types of homes in the right locations to meet businesses' need for employees and customers.
- Regulate the density of housing to keep with the capacities of soils to sustain the development over time.
- Plan for residential development in conjunction with transportation, child care, health care, employment, and other services and opportunities which are necessary to sustain a healthy, productive life.
- Explore feasibility of combining efforts with benevolent and non-profit organizations so that each party contributes what it can:
 - land;
 - development expertise;
 - management over time;
 - access to public and private sources of funds.
- Meet with neighboring towns to compare housing needs and potential joint efforts. Seek ways to combine and coordinate efforts.
- Meet with the Narragansett Indian Tribal Council to discuss progress in implementing the Town's housing program and the Narragansett's housing program for Tribal members who live in Charlestown. Consider how the Town and the Tribe might work together for services such as: meals for elders, a health center, transportation.
- Continue to promote housing that protects the town's natural and cultural resources and rural character, and reflects the natural constraints of the land.

Priorities

High Priorities

- As described in the Land Use section, revise the zoning ordinance to allow residential uses (single household residences, group homes, and family day care) in all zones, with the exception of the Industrial zone for health and safety reasons and the publicly owned Open Space/Recreation/Conservation districts.
- Encourage development of housing that is in low supply and high demand, e.g., in-law apartments, affordable housing, elderly housing.
- Revise the zoning ordinance to allow single accessory apartments with owner-occupied housing.
- Work with the SCCA Land Trust to identify parcels or funding to help develop housing alternatives.
- Become familiar with the requirements and definitions of the state Low and Moderate Income Housing Act.

Medium Priorities

- Explore the use of town-owned land for alternative housing, e.g., tax lots for individual homes.
- Continue to monitor the housing situation over the long term to identify needs and possible solutions; revising the housing program as necessary.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Findings

- The town's natural and cultural resources and recreational opportunities represent its major economic resources. Charlestown's quiet setting, scenery, and recreational opportunities attract long-term summer visitors and retirees, who contribute significantly to the town's tax base.
- Recreation opportunities such as golf courses, and vacation packages oriented toward natural resources and historic village settings are currently in high demand in the entire region.
- The relatively difficult highway access to Charlestown, the lack of supporting infrastructure (public water, sewer), and the large amount of sensitive natural resources and natural constraints make the town an inappropriate location for major industries.
- Charlestown's small year-round population will not provide an adequate market for major commercial enterprises.

Major Goals and Policies

Major Goals

To promote economic development that relies heavily on the town's natural, scenic, and historic amenities and protects the important resources of the town.

Major Supporting Policies

- Continue to protect and provide access to the natural and cultural resources and rural character of the town.
- Promote the development of appropriate recreational opportunities that focus on the town's natural and cultural resources, including organized sports, a community center, festivals, passive outdoor recreation, access to the shore, and commercial sports such as golf. Include sufficient controls to ensure that these uses protect the natural and cultural resources of town and the rural character.
- Encourage the development of a diversity of businesses that are in keeping with the village character.
- Explore other tax generating land uses that may be developed in keeping with the town's rural character.

Priorities

High Priorities

- Continue focusing business development in the commercial zone east of the historic Cross Mills area on a scale and with design standards compatible with the surrounding area. Encourage development of a variety of businesses consistent with village settings in other village settlements.
- Implement design standards to preserve the visual quality of the major roads and villages.
- Designate the current Planned Business and Industrial Research and Development zones as Planned Development districts for less intensive and more appropriate uses. (See Land Use section) Where appropriate elsewhere, consider commercial recreational uses.
- Designate several commercial districts to encourage development of businesses appropriate to villages, roadsides, or the business center in current general business zones, thereby providing buffers between intensive uses and less intensive uses. (See Land Use section)
- As discussed in the Land Use Priorities section, consider deepening commercial zones, especially along Route 1, to allow buildings to be set back with vegetated buffers.

- Priorities listed in previous sections concerning natural and cultural resources protection, preservation of the rural aesthetics, and recreation are equally priorities for economic development, as these resources support the economic base of the town. Important areas to develop design criteria include the key entrance points to the town: Shannock, Carolina, Cross Mills, Route 1, Route 2, and the eastern end of Route 1A.
- Continue to attract visitors through festivals at Ninigret Park. Consider other festivals and events, e.g., arts, antiques, July 4 celebration, or concerts.

Medium Priorities

- Promote and recognize volunteer efforts:
 - to improve village and rural aesthetics (e.g., landscaping, litter patrol, brush removal);
 - to encourage cooperation among businesses, e.g., with reciprocal coupons for local businesses.
- Continue to develop and market specific recreational opportunities and focuses, with an emphasis on natural and cultural resources, e.g., historic trails along the Pawcatuck River villages, hiking trails, or antiques/arts festivals.

Lower Priorities

- Over the long term, consider allowing development of congregate care facilities.

SERVICES AND FACILITIES

Findings

- The town benefits from a high level of professional expertise and dedication in its staff and volunteers.
- Several town and school system facilities have been expanded recently, providing a higher level of service. However, with continued growth in the community and growing demand for services, further expansion and re-design of certain facilities will be required, including the police station, the elementary/middle school, and the landfill.
- The issue of providing town water and/or sewer service has arisen frequently in recent years. The provision of either would involve considerable cost to the town as a whole or to individual residents, and the effects of providing either have not been determined. It is important to define the problems that these services would address and explore various alternatives for addressing the problems.
- Some new residents may not understand that the services provided in Charlestown reflect its rural nature, low population, and reliance on volunteers, and may have unrealistic expectations.

Major Goals and Policies

Major Goals

To continue to provide Charlestown residents and visitors with a high level of services, which will support the quality of life enjoyed in the town.

To develop facilities and services in a way that is compatible with protecting the town's natural and cultural resources and rural character, and reasonable tax rate.

Major Supporting Policies

- To maintain the high level of expertise that currently exists among town employees and volunteers.
- To plan for expansions or changes in services and facilities in advance, with full study given to needs, alternatives, and costs.
- To maintain and upgrade the level or amount of staff or space as appropriate to meet the changing needs of the residents and visitors.
- To provide support where possible to volunteer and quasi-public organizations in their efforts to provide community services.

Priorities

High Priorities

- Maintain the high level of professional expertise which currently exists among municipal employees, through salary review and adjustments and development and adoption of a personnel ordinance. This high level of expertise will help to ensure the cost-effective, successful implementation of other Plan recommendations.
- Maintain and upgrade, when necessary, the level or amount of staff, facility space, and equipment required to maintain or improve the levels of service currently provided by the Town in order to meet the needs of a growing population.
- Fund special studies in the short-run to address critical service/facility concerns:
 - Water resources management study to include both water supply and wastewater disposal components;
 - Landfill facility plan to address future needs, capacity and expansion potential for municipal solid waste disposal, material recycling, and septage treatment/disposal;
 - Hurricane damage impact study/contingency plan for coastal floodplain area;
 - Community Center feasibility study.

- Evaluate whether to remain in the Chariho district based on the costs of remaining in the district, the costs of constructing and operating a new school, and the residents' goals for their educational system.
- The Town should evaluate alternative sites for a new school in the town, should the need for new facilities be identified.

Medium Priorities

- Develop an understanding with the Narragansett Tribe of Indians regarding the role of police and fire protection on Tribal lands.
- Support local fire, rescue, ambulance, library and other volunteer services to maintain these services at a reasonable cost to the community. Encourage and provide recognition for volunteerism in the fire, rescue, ambulance service, library, Parks and Recreation Department activities, town boards and commissions, and other volunteer services.

Lower Priorities

- Develop a pamphlet explaining municipal and other public services that are available to Charlestown residents. The pamphlet would be made available to various parties for distribution to the public, particularly new or prospective residents.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Implementation sections of the Plan identify the tasks, schedule, responsible parties, and resources necessary to implement the recommendations.

5-Year Implementation Program

The 5-Year Implementation Program presents the tasks involved in implementing the highest priority recommendations. Further details are presented in the Priorities sections in this Summary, in the Implementation section of each element, and in the consolidated Implementation element. The 5-Year Implementation Program identifies the following tasks as most necessary in the short term:

Ordinances

1. Amend zoning and subdivision regulations to comply with Zoning Enabling Act requirements that take effect January 1, 1992.

Time Frame: Immediate

2. Develop a reproduceable zoning map with clearly marked dimensions and boundaries and revise the zoning ordinance to incorporate the recommendations identified in the Land Use priorities. Encourage involvement of the business community, other interest groups, and the general public throughout the process. Consider including involvement of

the existing CPCAC or a newly developed bipartisan citizens advisory committee to provide broad-based review throughout the process of developing the zoning changes.

Time Frame: Adopted by July 1, 1993.

3. Develop and implement a soil erosion and sediment control ordinance based on the recent State Enabling Legislation.

Time Frame: 0-2 years

4. Develop a land trust for conservation purposes.

Time Frame: 3-5 years

5. Prepare and institute a Town Personnel Ordinance.

Time Frame: 3-5 years

Programs

New

6. Implement Wastewater Management District, as discussed in Natural Resources Priorities, including an in-depth preliminary study to identify specific problem areas.

Time Frame (studies): 0-3 years preliminary studies; 3-4 years or earlier to implement program.

7. Become familiar with the requirements and definitions of the state Low and Moderate Income Housing Act.

Time Frame: Immediate and on-going

8. Develop a planner's database, combining environmental/cultural resource and constraints maps with lot information to be used as a "red flag" in reviewing developments.

Time Frame: 0-5 years

9. Fund special studies in the short-run to address critical service/facility concerns:

- Water resources management study (Discussed above)

- Landfill facility plan to address future needs, capacity and expansion potential for municipal solid waste disposal, material recycling, and septage treatment/disposal.

- Hurricane damage impact study/contingency plan for coastal floodplain area.

- Community Center feasibility study.

Time Frame: 0-5 years

10. Evaluate whether to remain in the Chariho district based on the costs of remaining in the district, the costs of constructing and operating a new school, and the residents' goals for their educational system.

Time Frame: 0-1 year

11. The Town should evaluate alternative sites for a new school in the town, should the need for new facilities be identified.

- Additional facility space is likely to be needed in the short-term for fifth grade students or early elementary students.

Time frame: 0-5 years

On-Going Programs

12. Maintain the high level of professional expertise which currently exists among municipal employees, through salary review and adjustments and development and adoption of a personnel ordinance. This high level of expertise will help to ensure the cost-effective, successful implementation of other Plan recommendations.

Time Frame: 0-2 years for salary review and adjustments, on-going periodically afterward. 3-5 years for ordinance.

13. Continue to support on-going town programs, and improve them in accordance with municipal finances and local needs.
14. As municipal financing allows, maintain and upgrade staff, facilities, and equipment to meet needs of growing population.

Liaison/Educational

15. Develop an understanding with the Narragansett Tribe of Indians regarding the role of police and fire protection on Tribal lands.
16. Work with neighboring communities, including the Narragansett Tribe, to ensure that land uses along the common borders of communities are compatible.
17. Continue to cooperate with agencies such as the Wood Pawcatuck Association and pond watcher groups in educational activities and preservation of undeveloped parcels.
18. Develop a liaison function to work with RIDOT regularly in discussing upcoming projects and their impact on the town, and the town's needs.

19. Continue educational efforts and group activities that raise awareness of environmental protection, e.g., septic system brochure, Conservation Commission sponsored clean-ups, or activities for schoolchildren.
20. Promote and recognize volunteer efforts:
 - to improve village and rural aesthetics (e.g., landscaping, litter patrol, brush removal);
 - to encourage cooperation among businesses, e.g., with reciprocal coupons for local businesses.
21. Support local volunteer services to maintain these services at a reasonable cost to the community. Encourage and provide recognition for volunteerism in the fire, rescue and ambulance services, library, Chamber of Commerce, Parks and Recreation Department activities, town boards and commissions, and other volunteer services.
22. Support development of north-south hiking trail.

Capital Improvements/Improvements to Land

23. Provide adequate funding for the town to continue implementing the Department of Public Works road maintenance and improvement program.
24. As local finances permit, the town should continue expanding its recreational base by:
 - developing a community center;
 - developing additional playing fields (Columbia Heights, Ninigret);
 - making improvements to the Columbia Heights and Schoolhouse Pond parcels to encourage the uses for which they have been acquired.
25. Develop small scale access ways to the shore, which would allow a few visitors each, such as anglers, hikers, or people who wish to sit and look at the water.

Time Frame: On-going as possible

20-YEAR IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM

- Update Plan, revise zoning. Required every 5 years, optional at shorter intervals.
- Explore additional land use management/resource protection tools.
- Continue to develop mapping. Consider developing GIS or other computer mapping capability.

- Wastewater management district: Continue to investigate sludge disposal methods, alternative wastewater treatment technologies.
- Continue on-going tasks from 5-year plan, including liaison efforts; promoting educational and volunteer efforts; and funding departmental staff, space, and equipment needs.
- Continue development of recreational base: shore access ways, playing fields, play lots, lighting at ballfields, development of tennis courts.
- Identify areas for acquisition and promote acquisition by town/land trust/non-profit.
- Identify and develop bicycle and pedestrian routes as possible under budgetary constraints.
- Investigate diverting some beach-goers to other town-owned beach parcels or other beaches, possibly with use of beach shuttle.
- Investigate and promote opportunities for mass/para-transit.
- Explore use of town-owned land for alternative housing.
- Monitor and revise housing program as necessary.
- Continue to market recreational opportunities associated with special attractions of Charlestown, e.g., historic villages, bird-watching, sailing events, Pawcatuck River, arts or antiques festivals, etc.
- Consider allowing congregate care facilities.
- Develop pamphlet describing the Town's services and facilities.