

Town of Columbia
Master Plan
2015

Adopted by the Columbia Planning Board after a duly noticed public hearing on November 4, 2015.

Introduction

New Hampshire state law mandates planning boards to “prepare and amend from time to time a master plan to guide the development of the municipality” (RSA 674:1). The State of New Hampshire has recommended a town’s Master Plan be updated every 5 years to keep it current with changes in the community. Columbia’s Master Plan was last updated in 2007.

RSA 674 has specific guidelines for the planning board in regards to Master Plan design, implementation, and regulation. The master plan shall include, at a minimum, the following required sections (RSA 674:2):

a. “A vision section that serves to direct the other sections of the plan. This section shall contain a set of statements which articulate the desires of the citizens affected by the master plan, not only for their locality but for the region and the whole state. It shall contain a set of guiding principles and priorities to implement that vision.”

b. “A land use section upon which all other sections shall be based. This section shall translate the vision statements into physical terms. Based on a study of population, economic activity, and natural and historic, and cultural resources, it shall show existing conditions and the proposed location, extent, and intensity of future land uses.”

The master plan can also include other segments such as transportation, economic development, natural resources, recreation, utilities, cultural and historic preservation, and many more unique to specific locations. etc.

At this time of updating the Master Plan, the Columbia Planning Board developed a survey asking the people of Columbia numerous questions in an effort to ascertain who we are ,what kind of place we want to be in the future, and what we consider our values for town to be. The Planning Board would like to thank the townspeople for taking the time needed in completing this survey. The people of Columbia’s input is the very foundation of which a “plan” can be developed, thereby preserving our character, quality of life and direction forward in time. We have included the survey, along with the survey results, and have written this plan based upon the respondents input.

The Plan is the resource document used by the Planning Board to help determine whether proposals of change which come before it, are consistent with the views of the townspeople. This Plan is to serve as a guide for the community to use in shaping its future. It is meant to be a wide interpretation of the community vision so regulation can be implemented without hindering development.

A. OUR VISION STATEMENT

From the master plan survey, the opinion of the town's people indicates that the people would like to maintain the natural and rural characteristics of the Town of Columbia. In an attempt to keep these goals in sight with a minimum of regulations and not to impede the independent nature of the area, we have put forth this vision statement.

Columbia is a small rural town located in the midst of a vast and beautiful wilderness area surrounded by the Connecticut River on the west and great stretches of State Forest, National Wildlife Refuge and Forest Preserves and Conservation areas to the east. Many important feeder streams run out of the mountainous interior of town into the Connecticut River or its tributaries. These vast forests help in protecting the water quality of the streams.

In surveys, the people of the Town of Columbia overwhelmingly state that they want to maintain the natural rural characteristics of the Town, and preserve and protect its open spaces, recreational areas, ponds, and forested trails and streams. Of prime concern is that all of the residents of Columbia as well as its tourists and visitors have a safe, healthy and enjoyable outdoors experience geared to hiking, fishing, boating, hunting and , where applicable, limited OHRV trails for snowmobiling and ATVs. At the same time, the residents recognize that a healthy forest environment provides and, indeed, requires proper forest management with selective cutting and harvesting done under professional and responsible forestry guidelines supervised by the State and County and the environmental organizations managing its forest in conservation.

The residents of Columbia also recognize that growth and modernization is inevitable and that it will only enrich our lives to encourage positive growth opportunities for residential living and for small businesses to be established in suitable locations throughout town, including its environmental attributes. The Town also recognizes the extraordinary value of working cooperatively with its neighboring towns by proper networking opportunities for education, medical care, and social needs of its citizens.

Finally, the vision for Columbia's future recognizes that its residents value their responsible independence highly and do not wish to create a complex overlay of regulations to govern all aspects of their lives. The Town of Columbia's vision therefore sees responsible behaviors and independence thriving best within a very modest regulatory framework where all are able to work together to better the Town's residential communities, business opportunities, finances and overall abilities to serve its citizens at the same time that it preserves and protects its way of life and natural environment.

Through thoughtful land use management and guided growth, Columbia should continue to remain a small rural community.

B. LAND USE IN COLUMBIA

Historically Columbia has been a farming and logging community. Today there are just a couple of larger farms still in existence, which are mainly family run operations. A lot of land that was once open pastures and tillable fields now grows mainly trees. Logging and managing the forests are still principal uses of the land today. Undeveloped land has become a “rural quality”. At least half of the land within the township of Columbia is protected from development with some type of conservation easement or under governmental ownership.

The hillsides and valleys are dotted with all types of homes --both year round and seasonal. There are also small home based businesses scattered throughout town, just as there was a hundred years ago in this small New England town. This pattern of development is the essence of who we are and the engine for increasing property values and the town’s tax base.

Back in 1971 the voters of Columbia recognized the importance of managing growth in order to maintain the rural spacious town character and adopted the first zoning ordinance. We still just have the two zones “rural” and “floodplain”. There was then (and there still is today) a 3 acre minimum lot size requirement when subdividing. The Planning Board reviews this ordinance annually and brings any proposals of change to the voters. While there still is no particular designated areas for commercial uses within town, a Site Plan Review process is a requirement for non residential developments.

Columbia along with the whole of Coos County has changed somewhat over the past twenty years to a more recreation based economy. More and more people come to “play” on the land. They come to snowmobile, hunt, fish, ride atv’s and enjoy our rivers and lakes. Some build part-time homes and travel here regularly. Studies show this to be a positive land use as it helps lessen the burden for all in terms of real estate taxes, but these homes can change to permanent residences anytime resulting in possible increases in the cost of town services.

The road types in town vary from the state maintained US Route 3 to narrow dirt lanes both town maintained and not depending upon road classification. Although rural/residential communities can sometimes create traffic, most of the roads are lightly traveled, with the exception of Route 3 which is also a federally designated scenic byway known as the Connecticut River Scenic Byway. Natural roadside buffering creates a quiet, private, rural feeling on a lot of the town roads. The voters of Columbia approve a budget put together by the Selectmen each year at town meeting for both summer and winter maintenance of roads. The Selectmen also determine the necessity for and construction of any new subdivision roads. There is an older railbed owned by the state which has fallen into disrepair.

The "Coos Trail" passes through many great hiking miles within the town. There are also snowmobile and OHRV trails crisscrossing through town and adjoining our neighboring towns. The Connecticut River affords great fishing and boating opportunities. Continuing to provide for public access on private lands may become a challenge. But the town will continue to do what it can to encourage such public access.

The people of Columbia are mindful and respectful of its land and natural resources. There are no public, commercial or town operated sewer or water systems. Instead, our natural terrain becomes the very infrastructure with properly installed individual systems.

Once there was two post offices in town, today there are none. The town is split between Colebrook Post Office (east and everything above Columbia Bridge) and North Stratford Post Office handles below Columbia Bridge and Meriden Hill area. Nor are there any grocery stores in town to help maintain neighborly connections, but there is the Blue Mountain Variety Gas and Convenience Store, and the recently opened "Meat House" at the CJEJ Farm at the south end of town on Route 3. We are at risk of becoming a "community of strangers." Use of the Town Hall and other town properties for community functions, along with providing facilities for sports activities could help in connecting townspeople and others in the region.

The Town of Columbia owns the land around the Town Hall which also borders Simms Stream and has a volunteer run, regionally based sports field in place, storage space for road maintenance supplies, and future space for possible historical use, among other town hall uses. There is also many acres of property between the Town Office Building and the Connecticut River which includes a primitive campsite on the riverbank. There is also a native species nursery in cooperation with the Coos County Conservation District on this property. Lyman Falls on the Conn. River at the south end of town also has public access and primitive camping. Both conserved sites are maintained by the Columbia Conservation Commission.

Land is a finite resource which cannot be replaced. Columbia will continue to be considerate of the town's visual beauty, charm and landscape, it's people's sense of place, and the rural quality of life it affords while still looking to the future for needed growth and change. For these reasons, the town does not foresee any need for the removal of substantial parcels of land from its list of taxable properties.

The Town Boards are aware of other issues having been raised in the responses to the attached survey. Those issues include whether or not the town should include or provide for: cluster housing developments, retaining roadside buffers, allowing accessory units, use of the Town Hall as a community center and solutions for adequate housing. The Boards are aware of these issues and plan to work on them in the future.

Sample of Survey to gather input for Columbia Master Plan updating

Please check all of the below items which best describes your position in Columbia:

Legal resident with 03576 as a zip code _____

Legal resident with 03590 as a zip code _____

Non-resident property owner _____

Which best describes your employment status?

Work full-time _____

Work part-time _____

Retired _____

Unemployed _____

Where is your place of employment?

In Columbia _____

Under 50 miles away _____

More than 50 miles away _____

None _____

What industry best describes your main employment?

Farming _____ Construction _____

Hospitality _____ Work at home _____

Transportation _____ Forestry _____

Retail _____ Other _____

Manufacturing _____ Federal or state employee _____

What age group are you?

Below age 25 _____

Age 25-55 _____

Age 55 and above _____

How many school age children live with you in Columbia? _____

How many years have you lived in Columbia? _____

What type is your home in Columbia?

Single family home _____

Single family with other unit _____

Manufactured home in park _____

Manufactured home on own land _____

Farm _____

Camp/vacation home _____

Other _____

What is the age of your home in Columbia?

Less than 20 years old _____
20 to 50 years old _____
More than 50 years old _____

Please choose the four (4) most important reasons why you live in Columbia:

Rural character: _____
Family roots _____
Employment _____
Recreation opportunities _____
Reasonable taxes _____
Affordable housing _____
Amount of open space _____

Please indicate if you support the following methods for guiding growth within Columbia:

____ Yes No ____ Maybe ____ Would you be in favor of conservation subdivisions (form of cluster development which equals the same acreage requirements, but condenses the area for residences/services thereby preserving more open land)?

____ Yes No ____ Maybe ____ Would you be in favor of retaining natural growth roadside buffers thereby requiring larger setbacks?

____ yes No ____ Maybe ____ Would you be in favor of increasing minimum lot size from the current requirement of 3 acres to 5 acres?

____ yes No ____ Maybe ____ Would you be in favor of creating additional zones? Examples: industrial, commercial, multi-family residential?

____ yes No ____ Maybe ____ Would you be in favor of allowing one accessory apartment per single family unit?

____ yes No ____ Maybe ____ Would you be in favor of requiring future subdivisions to conform to the 1 (width) to 4 (length) ratio?

Do you believe there is adequate affordable housing within town? yes ____ No ____

Do you believe there is adequate elderly housing within town? Yes ____ No ____

Over the next 10 years would you like to see Columbia (check all that apply)

____ Remain primarily a rural residential community?
____ Encourage development of secondary homes/camps?
____ Retain our scenic and natural environment?
____ Encourage recreational land use such as trails for walking, bicycling, OHRV use?
____ Allow businesses scattered throughout town?
____ Allow manufactured housing only in manufactured housing parks?
____ Allow building within the floodplain?
____ Allow use of Town Hall as a Community Center
____ Investigate designating any roads in town as "Scenic"
____ Continue to partner with neighboring towns for services.

Please circle the number corresponding to the level of importance Columbia should give to the following:

Very Important

Unimportant

Protect drinking water supplies	5	4	3	2	1	
Protect aquifers	5	4	3	2	1	
Protect lakes and streams	5	4	3	2	1	
Protect rivers through buffer zones	5	4	3	2	1	
Identify and protect prime wetlands	5	4	3	2	1	
Protect floodplains and reduce flood hazards		5	4	3	2	1
Protect steep slopes greater than 25%	5	4	3	2	1	
Limit ridgeline development	5	4	3	2	1	
Protect views of hills and mountainsides	5	4	3	2	1	
Protect land with conservation easements	5	4	3	2	1	
Protect wildlife corridors and habitats	5	4	3	2	1	
Preserving Historic sites	5	4	3	2	1	
Manage invasive species	5	4	3	2	1	
Attract businesses to help with tax base	5	4	3	2	1	
Road maintenance and resurfacing work	5	4	3	2	1	
Noise and light pollution	5	4	3	2	1	
Regulating junkyards	5	4	3	2	1	
Providing faster internet service throughout town	5	4	3	2	1	
Providing cell phone coverage throughout town	5	4	3	2	1	
Maintaining an up-to-date website	5	4	3	2	1	

Are you mainly satisfied with the current situation of partnering with neighboring towns and regions for services such as schools? _____yes _____no

Fire/Rescue/Police? _____yes _____no

Waste disposal and recycling? _____yes _____no

Libraries? _____yes _____no

Restaurants/gas stations? _____yes _____no

Do you believe the Town of Columbia has adequate facilities for its people?

Town hall/meeting space? _____yes _____no

Town government and boards? _____yes _____no

Cemeteries? _____yes _____no

Animal control? _____yes _____no

Health and welfare? _____yes _____no

Transportation? _____yes _____no

Recreational opportunities? _____yes _____no

What is the BEST thing about Columbia? _____

What is the WORST thing about Columbia? _____

Do you believe the Columbia Planning Board is working well? _____yes _____no

Do you have a “sense of place and belonging” within Columbia? _____yes _____no

Thank you for taking the time to help guide your town by doing this survey!

2015 MASTER PLAN SURVEY RESULTS

In the spring of 2015, a survey of approximately 60 questions was sent out to 700 taxpayers (resident and non-resident) resulting in 161 completed surveys returned.

There were 57 residents out east with a zip of 03576, there were 29 from the southern end of town with a zip of 03590, and there were 75 non resident responders.

Of the residents, the majority (3 to 1) are above the age of 55 with no one below the age of 25 taking survey.

The majority of people have lived in town for at least 11 years and some as much as 50 years. They reside in single family homes with most in the 20 - 50 year age bracket.

A small number choose to live in town for employment and there is also a small number who live here because of family roots, but most live here for the rural country life.

There were only 7 respondents having school children in Columbia.

There are just as many retired people as those that work full time in town.

The majority of those that work are traveling less than 50 miles to work and work in varied positions from construction, hospitality, retail, healthcare, farming, and manufacturing.

The 4 most important reasons people like Columbia:

Open space = 110

Rural character = 109

Recreational opportunities =78

Reasonable taxes = 77

Would you be in favor of cluster development? yes=55, no = 47, maybe = 43.

Would you be in favor of retaining roadside buffers? yes=66 , no=32, maybe = 47.

Would you be in favor or changing minimum lot from 3 to 5 acres? yes =47, no =82,and maybe =32.

Would you be in favor of creating additional zones? yes=45, no = 56, and maybe = 44.

Would you be in favor of allowing an accessory unit? yes = 66, no = 25, and maybe = 51.

Would you be in favor of a 1 to 4 length to width ration for future subdivisions? yes= 30, no =49, and maybe = 64.

Do you believe there is affordable housing in town? yes = 75, no=31.

Do you believe there is adequate elderly housing in town? yes = 27, no = 74.

Over the next 10 years you would like to see Columbia:

Continue to partner with neighboring towns for services = 137.

Retain its scenic and natural environment = 127

Remain primarily a rural residential community = 124

Allow use of the Town Hall as a community center = 112

Encourage land use for trails for walking, bicycling, and OHRV use = 104

Allow businesses scattered through town = 64

Encourage development of secondary homes/camps = 58

Investigate designating any roads as "scenic" = 47

Allow manufactured housing only in manufactured housing parks = 46
Allow building within the floodplain = 7.

Level of importance Columbia should give to:

Protecting drinking water supplies = 119
Protecting lakes and streams = 118
Protecting the aquifers = 101
Protecting rivers with buffer zones = 90
Protecting wildlife corridors and habitats = 86
Provide cell coverage throughout town = 82
Provide faster internet through town = 77
Identify and protect prime wetlands = 77
Preserve historic sites = 75
Protect floodplains and reduce flood hazards = 73
Manage invasive species = 72
Regulate junk yards = 71
Protect views of the hills and mountains = 70
Protect land with conservation easements = 62
Road maintenance and resurfacing work = 62
Limit ridgeline development = 59
Attract businesses to help with tax base = 58
Protect steep slopes greater than 25% = 50
Maintain an up-to-date website = 49
Noise and light pollution = 45

Are you satisfied with current situation of partnering with neighboring towns for:

Fire, Rescue/Police = 133
Libraries = 129
Restaurants and gas stations = 128
Schools = 128
Waste Disposal = 126

Does Columbia have adequate facilities for its people?

Adequate town boards and government = 120
Town hall and meeting space = 118
Cemeteries = 100
Recreational opportunities = 96
Health and welfare assistance = 94
Animal control = 93
Adequate transportation = 72

Do you believe the Planning Board is working well? yes = 99, no = 7

Do you have a sense of “belonging” in Columbia? yes = 123, no = 7

BEST things about Columbia:

No precinct, privacy, the people, natural beauty, friendly people, quiet country trails, clean air and space, rural beautiful setting, tranquility, neighbors, pristine location, open spaces, the

people, its caring government staff, lower taxes, property taxes, small town, rural, small government, very rural, where I grew up, solitude, nice people, quiet, peaceful, friendly people willing to help, the beauty of the land, peaceful and private, quiet, nature and the people, location, nice rural area, taxes are reasonable, rural, quiet, no wind towers, still considered home, ponds, streams, and still undeveloped spaces, being remote, rural character, peace and quiet, atv and snowmobile trails, very nice people, space, mountain views, rural character, great people, country people, country living, rural and quiet, natural environment, family, history, open space and wildlife, its rural nature, rural fields, beautiful country, open space and rural community, people and quiet, growth, business, country living near to all services, peaceful, rural space, natural space, lifestyle, quality of life, rural living with many trails for snowmobiling, etc., rural town government and people, scenic, quality of life, rural living, friendly and thoughtful people, town hall workers, natural area, rural character, open space and country setting, great community, beautiful scenery and the land, rural small government, no government regulations, rural character, quiet and peaceful, peace and quiet, scenic beauty, location, and its originality ... rural qualities, country, rural, rural setting, wide open spaces, it's a safe place to live, snowmobile trail access, it's a great small town, small town values, keep government small, the people, just being Columbia, feeling of community, leave it alone!, "live free or die" heritage and positive community leadership, the citizens of Columbia, scenic landscape and taxes, Marcia Parkhurst, having a quiet space for my home, sense of community, rural, rural community, it's not over developed, views of mountains, small town, small town environment. Seeing wildlife, land base, beautiful area, love living next to the mountains and trees, quiet, small town rural living, rural character, where my home is, wilderness areas, respect for the environment, mountains, country setting, small town, its people, still a small town area, rural scenic area, people, community, open space, natural hills and pastures, trees and the woods, its' beauty, Lime Pond and Marcia Parkhurst, natural beauty, fresh air, friendly helpful people, I love its quaintness and serenity. It's south of Colebrook, good neighbors, it's quiet and beautiful here, rural beauty, having access to snowmobile trails, rural nature, tiny town, rural and quiet, not too many people, rural, rural character, not overly developed, Wilderness.

Worst things about Columbia:

Colebrook school taxes, lack of businesses, unattractive roadside development, roads need more sand in winter, can't think of any, zoning restrictions for home improvement projects, growth, too much interference with property owners, leaving it, road repair, high taxes, having windmills on ridges, middle of no where to travel to, roads, too far away, road conditions and repairs, kids not having choice of schools, too focused on industrial development, no sense of a town, being taxed the same without year round road maintenance, taxes, cell service, emergency services response, limited cell coverage, taxes, atv use on roads, spring conditions of roads (potholes and mudseason), cellphone use, no recreation for children, nothing, too many old people retiring, town hall access, becoming too bureaucratic, bad weather, nothing to report on, lack of employment opportunities, roads, can't think of anything, high taxes on camp that I can drive to only 8 months out of the year, no say in schools children are tuitioned to = biggest tax and lots of fixed income people., no cell phone service, would prefer Stratford for transfer station rather than Stewartstown, too many do gooders in town with personal agendas, no central town, mud season, we don't go there enough.

No cell service in some places, nothing!, taxes, taxes are too high, no cell service, roads, no cell service, nothing bad to say, people wanting to change the area to be like where they came from. town owns too much property, taxes too high, not enough businesses, there is no worse, none. Columbia as a target for exploitation by outside economic forces such as wind energy and transmission lines (Northern Pass) which attack our natural resources and rural heritage for their own profit. Road conditions, some seasonal muddy roads, trailer parks, no cell service, 45th Parallel EMS, no say in school affairs, fast trucks on Route 3, nousey people, it's changing. Ignorant, biased people, school taxes are too high, allowing big land subdivisions, there is no worst, having to travel to Stewartstown for garbage and recycling, some roads, town clerk hours, loss of farming, area medical availability, it's getting too over populated, taxes continue to increase, some building ordinances, no post office, bad roads, atvs, beer cans on Fish Pond Road, dogs roaming the countryside, uncertain of preparedness for possible development of the Balsams and impacts, right of way to my land, Columbia needs to be more independent, no complaints really, not enough 4 wheeler trails, cell service, lack of jobs, climbing taxes, road maintenance, roads. Fish Pond Road is too narrow in areas and seems dangerous.

Other comments and concerns:

Thanks for the opportunity of having a say, just don't over regulate, don't believe town should tell landowner what he can do with his property, having to transport garbage to Stewartstown, no jobs, always remember multiple uses of land is always best for all, town should better schedule dirt road improvements, good job everyone.

I love my town of Columbia. I love the people. No atv/utv trails, medical issues prevent us from being up north, if this survey is to prepare for growth if the Balsams goes in - should you look at getting a building inspector?