

In the News

Natick's strategic goals being finalized

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News staff
Sun Nov 11, 2007

Natick residents value safety and education, survey finds

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News staff
Sep 26, 2007

Natick 360 event considered successful

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News staff
Jun 15, 2007

Natick 360 challenges residents to address their future

By Andrew J. Manuse
GateHouse News Service
Jun 07, 2007

Natick planning effort slated for this weekend

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News Staff
Jun 06, 2007

Natick strategic planning process in final stages

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News staff
May 04, 2007

Planning process could be guide for state, neighbors

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News staff
Associated Press
Feb 14, 2007

Youthful ideas for downtown

By Kathy Uek
Friday, April 06, 2007

Holmes: Building a community vision

By Rick Holmes/MetroWest Daily News columnist
Sunday, February 18, 2007

Natick 360 offers a revealing self portrait

By Jennifer Kavanaugh / NATICK BULLETIN & TAB
26 January 2007

Urbanism is good for the planet

By **Anthony Flint**
Friday, October 27, 2006

What makes Natick so desirable?

By **David Parish and Craig Ross**/ Guest Columnists
Friday, October 20, 2006

Local view: Natick's finances and long-range planning

By **Phil Lemnios, David Parish, and Craig Ross**
Friday, October 13, 2006

Column: The town's future is grounded in its history

By **David Parish, Craig Ross, Anne Schaller**
Friday, October 6, 2006 / Natick Bulletin

Input sought on 'Vision for the Future'

By Jennifer Kavanaugh/ Daily News Staff
Tuesday, October 3, 2006

Group looks to future of town Seeks to provide vision, set goals

By *Jennifer Fenn Lefferts, Globe Correspondent* | August 6, 2006
Boston Globe

Planning committee gets ready for the fall

By Charlie Breitrose/Daily News Staff
Thursday, August 3, 2006
MetroWest Daily News

Natick's strategic goals being finalized

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News staff
MetroWest Daily News
Sun Nov 11, 2007

NATICK -

Five local boards are finalizing a list of about a dozen goals that will help the Natick 360 Committee complete the five-year strategic plan it's preparing.

Rather than specifically say the town needs a new high school or a senior community center, the goals are more general. Those suggestions would fall into a broad goal to "develop and implement a plan for extraordinary capital projects," according to the draft list.

A specific idea such as "facilitate affordable housing to gain control of development and maintain economic diversity" would fall under the general goal to "proactively plan for new development appropriate for neighborhoods and the community," for example.

Craig Ross, co-chairman of the Strategic Planning Oversight Committee, which is coordinating the five boards' efforts as part of the Natick 360 process, said the Board of Selectmen, the Planning Board and the Finance Committee have already weighed in on the consolidated goals. The School Committee and Conservation Commission are expected to add their stamp of approval or minor modifications later this week, he said.

Once the five boards approve the list of "consolidated goals," each will meet separately and list the "action items" under those goals that they intend to pursue in the five years after the final report is ratified, he said.

"The guidance we're giving them, is we have five autonomous boards that can choose any way to implement actions to reach the consolidated goals," Ross said.

Besides the two consolidated goals mentioned above, other proposals include assuring short- and long-term financial stability for the town, keeping the public informed and involved in their local government, maintaining public safety commensurate with growth and change, improving education for all children, developing a system to maintain infrastructure, improving traffic, encouraging environmental sustainability, attracting high-quality jobs, improving Natick Center and providing opportunities for residents to improve themselves.

Ross said he expects the final action list that will stem from the consolidated goals to be compiled in December and hopes Town Meeting will ratify the final five-year strategic plan in the spring.

(Andrew J. Manuse can be reached at amanuse@cnc.com or 508-626-3964.)

[top of page](#)

Natick residents value safety and education, survey finds

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News staff
Wed Sep 26, 2007

Natick -

Most people move here and stay because of a low crime rate and the quality of schools; and they also enjoy the low tax rate, according to a random survey of 1,192 residents.

Kansas-based ETC Institute administered the strategic planning survey in July, and will present the results at 7 p.m. Tuesday in the Wilson Middle School auditorium.

Natick's Strategic Planning Oversight Committee, which is overseeing the Natick 360 process, anticipated 800 responses to the

survey, which it commissioned.

The 50 percent response rate of 1,192 residents across town has left organizers feeling the entire community is represented by the results, according to Craig Ross, co-chairman of the oversight committee.

Going forward, residents are evenly split on whether property taxes should be raised to cover the cost of public services, the survey found. While 61 percent of the public is willing to consider some increase in taxes, only 20 percent said they would pay more to keep the town from cutting services; 20 percent said they would pay more to cover rising costs, but would accept some service cuts; and 21 percent said the town should mostly cut services, but they would agree to pay modest tax increases.

Among the top priorities for survey respondents were improving educational outcomes for students, building a new high school, maintaining public safety services commensurate with growth, improving traffic flow on major routes and reducing negative impacts on the environment.

"The survey results will be used to inform Natick 360's five sponsoring boards what the community is thinking," Ross said.

The committee worked with Blackerby Associates to come up with the strategic options.

All of these efforts are leading to a final Natick 360 report that will state what the town valued historically, deems important currently and wants for its strategic direction in the next five years. The committee is hoping to seek final approval of the report by Thanksgiving from the sponsoring boards - the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Finance Committee, School Committee and Conservation Commission. Once the boards approve the report, it will go before spring Town Meeting for adoption.

Town Meeting allocated about \$150,000 to Natick 360 and local businesses donated about \$39,000 to the process. The money has been used to pay Blackerby and ETC Institute.

(Andrew J. Manuse can be reached at 508-626-3964 or amanuse@cnc.com.)

[top of page](#)

Natick 360 event considered successful

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News staff
Fri Jun 15, 2007

Natick -

About three-quarters of residents who registered to participate in a strategic planning meeting this past weekend showed up for at least one of six scheduled sessions, an organizer said yesterday.

The weekend event, planned by the nine-member Natick 360 resident committee and its consultant, Blackerby Associates, was one of the final steps in a long-range planning process. Members of the public were asked to weigh in on the projects, programs and policies they want to see the town pursue.

"A lot of people got a lot out of the process and a better appreciation for the scope and scale of things the town is considering," said Craig Ross, Natick 360's co-chairman.

For the weekend, 141 of the 199 who registered showed up. Ross attributed lower-than-expected attendance to rain Saturday, which encouraged people to take advantage of the sun on Sunday.

He stressed, however, that 70 new people registered to participate in the weekend's events who had not otherwise taken part in the process since Town Meeting set up Natick 360 in April 2005.

Attendants spent 2 to 3 hours in sessions with facilitators in groups of 12 to 15 and were given a list of goals in Natick 360's report of strategic options. Groups ranked the 10 ideas they thought were most important for the town to tackle within two years, before five years and after a five-year period.

Options in the report range from building a new high school and senior center to creating a Cochetuate Rail Trail, smart development and helping to improve traffic on Rte. 9.

Ross said the ranking of options from the weekend would not be available until combined with results from a survey the committee's

consultant, ETC Institute, will send out to about 800 Natick households early next month.

He said the committee would set up materials used in planning sessions on its Web site, Natick360.org, so people who couldn't make it to weekend sessions could still rank the strategic options important to them. The interactive Web site will ready next week, Ross said.

The group intends to send the Natick 360 report, with finalized rankings, to the five sponsoring boards - the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Finance Committee, School Committee and Conservation Commission - for approval. Then, the report will go before Town Meeting in October.

Sponsoring board members, town department heads, local business leaders, focus groups and the general public helped generate the strategic options in the report and consulting firm Blackerby has helped to coordinate the process.

Town Meeting allocated about \$150,000 to Natick 360, which has been used to pay Blackerby and for other purposes. So far, Natick 360 has stayed on schedule and on budget, Ross said. The group has also raised about \$39,000 from local businesses that it will use in part to pay ETC Institute to conduct the survey.

(Andrew J. Manuse can be reached at 508-626-3964 or amanuse@cnc.com.)

[top of page](#)

Natick 360 challenges residents to address their future

By Andrew J. Manuse
GateHouse News Service
Thu Jun 07, 2007

Natick -

Natick, what's important to you? A new high school? A new senior center? A historic rail trail across town for bikers and hikers? Reducing the student/teacher ratio? A better town Web site? What about an "owner's manual" to help you figure yourself out or a sense of how you fit in with neighboring communities?

It's time to turn yourself around, Natick – all the way around – and take a look forward with a new perspective. To live deliberately, to live an examined life, it's what the best minds have always done.

This weekend, Natick 360 is inviting town residents to come to Kennedy Middle School and help prioritize the strategic projects, programs and policies that five sponsoring boards, town department heads, local business leaders and the general public have assembled for the community to focus on in the next five years. Two-and-a-half-hour workshop sessions will take place at 8 a.m., 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. All are welcome, according to Craig Ross, Natick 360's co-chairman.

"We're living deliberately," Ross said. The process is "about making government accessible in new ways, and to engage people."

The process, spawned by Town Meeting in April 2005 and managed by a nine-member resident committee, has created a vehicle for people to learn more about the community and how they can help shape things, Ross said. It has also created a vehicle for the sponsoring town boards — the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Finance Committee, School Committee and Conservation Committee — to find ways to work together. Finally, it's helped planners realize that some things are beyond the town's control, such as improving Rte. 9 traffic, and require regional efforts, he said.

"This is really a unique experiment in participatory democracy," Ross said. "People feel empowered. People really appreciate the opportunity to voice their opinion. In general, they love Natick, they think it has wonderful qualities and are concerned and want to keep those qualities preserved. This process will help preserve what they want to keep and resolve what's missing."

When asked to opine about his take on Natick, Ross said Natick is not like other towns, where you have "an address you sleep at, but you don't engage."

"Everywhere I turn here, there are people who are engaged," he said. "It's a really energetic community with great people who care a lot about each other and care a lot about the town."

Selectman Joshua Ostroff said he appreciates the opportunity for everyone in town to "look at the big picture and help guide the decisions that the community and leadership will make in the coming years."

"It's refreshing to hear from the people who hold the most important job in civil society, and that is being a citizen," Ostroff said. "I'm encouraged by the people who have participated in (past Natick 360) events, and will (participate) in the upcoming weekend."

Paul Griesmer, vice chairman of the Finance Committee, said, "It's a good opportunity for people of the community to provide input to the future direction of the town."

About 120 people had pre-registered to participate in this weekend's events, according to Ross, but pre-registration is not required to attend, he said.

Patrick Reffett, Natick's community development director, said Natick 360 is "an important collective planning effort many members of town have helped prepare."

"A lot of communities work on what's considered a vision statement," Reffett said. "This has probably been more intense with more involvement than other communities doing it. The town should be proud of it."

Planning Board member Julian Munnich said the "broad process" answers a "multitude of questions." While towns generally deal with all of their issues by electing board members, this process opens up the planning experience to everyone in town, he said.

"It's not just a question of what's next, but also a question of participation," Munnich said. "When it comes to making decisions, it's about priority and degree. It also addresses issues of compartmentalization."

Ultimately, the strategic plan that comes out of the Natick 360 process will not be binding, but it will give the five sponsoring boards and Town Meeting a barometer of the community's desires, according to Ross.

Town Meeting allocated about \$150,000 to the Natick 360 process, which has been used, in part, to pay the consulting firm Blakerby Associates to help coordinate the process. So far, Natick 360 has stayed on schedule and on budget, Ross said.

The group has also raised about \$38,000 from local businesses that it will use in part to pay ETC Institute to conduct a survey after this weekend's events. The final plan will have to be approved by the five sponsoring town boards and adopted by Town Meeting in October.

"What happens next is it's up to the individual boards that have jurisdiction to take things off the plan, put them onto their agendas and get things done," he said.

For more information about the process, visit www.Natick360.org.

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[top of page](#)

Natick planning effort slated for this weekend

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News Staff
Jun 06, 2007

Natick -

Residents this weekend will review the long-range strategic planning effort known as Natick 360 and rank a list of possible actions to guide the town's future for the next five years.

By Friday, the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Finance Committee, School Committee and Conservation Commission will have signed off on the Natick 360 document, which includes some 110 strategic options that community members came up with as part of the Natick 360 process.

Then it will be up to residents this weekend to outline the town projects, programs and policies they want town officials to focus on in

the next five years. Residents will also have to be willing to pay for the items, which have been assigned an estimated cost in the report.

"We're making a conscious effort to take a long-range view and plan specific steps to move toward the long-term vision, as opposed to reacting to one critical issue after another that gets put in front of the community," said Craig Ross, the organization's co-chairman. "It's an innovative project, it's challenging and there are a lot of moving parts."

The planning weekend begins at 7 p.m. Friday at Kennedy Middle School, when Marc Draisen, executive director of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, will deliver a keynote speech about a regional planning effort called Metro Future.

Then, acting Town Administrator Martha White will give a summary of the town's budget situation, and Consulting firm Blackerby Associates of Arizona, which has been assisting in the Natick 360 effort, will tell participants about the upcoming 2-hour workshops at 8 and 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

During the workshops, any Natick resident can attend and help prioritize the strategic options, from building a new high school and senior center to creating the Cochituate Rail Trail and helping to improve traffic on Rte. 9. The options are divided in seven categories, including: public education; civic engagement and leadership; environment, health and safety; enlivening Natick Center; improving the town's infrastructure and transportation options; planning for change and managing growth; and town financing strategies.

After the weekend effort, ETC Institute of Kansas will develop a survey based on the results to send out to at least 800 households in July. The final results will be approved by the five sponsoring boards, then will head to Town Meeting in October to be adopted.

The strategic plan is not binding, but it will give the five sponsoring boards and Town Meeting a barometer of the community's desires, Ross said.

"What happens next is it's up to the individual boards that have jurisdiction to take things off the plan, put them onto their agendas and get things done," he said.

Natick 360 is managed by a nine-member resident committee and was spawned by Town Meeting in April 2005. Sponsoring board members, town department heads, local business leaders, focus groups and the general public helped generate the strategic options in the report and consulting firm Blackerby has helped to coordinate the process.

Town Meeting allocated about \$150,000 to the process, which has been used to pay Blackerby and for other purposes. So far, Natick 360 has stayed on schedule and on budget, Ross said. The group has also raised about \$38,000 from local businesses that it will use in part to pay ETC Institute to conduct the survey.

(Andrew J. Manuse can be reached at 508-626-3964 or amanuse@cnc.com.)

[top of page](#)

Natick strategic planning process in final stages

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News staff
May 04, 2007

Town officials behind the long-range strategic planning effort known as Natick 360 are preparing a menu of possible actions that residents will pick from to help direct the town's future.

The Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Finance Committee, School Committee and Conservation Commission will meet this month to weed out some of the 110 strategic options that community members came up with as part of the Natick 360 process, said Craig Ross, the organization's co-chairman.

Natick 360 is managed by a nine-member resident committee and was spawned by Town Meeting in April 2005.

"I don't know what will come out of the process," Ross said. "I recognize that what ultimately ends up before the public could be 50 percent or less of what is on the list now."

The ideas, meant to help the community prioritize town projects, programs and policies for the next five years and beyond, were generated from the sponsoring board members, town department heads, local business leaders, focus groups and the general public.

They are divided into seven sections in a draft report: namely, public education; civic engagement and leadership; environment, health

and safety; Natick Center; infrastructure and transportation; managing growth; and financing strategies.

At least one of the strategic options has already been accomplished. The Board of Selectmen on Monday decided to join the Regional Transportation Authority while maintaining the RIDE program for people with disabilities.

Other infrastructure improvements on the list are still under consideration, such as requiring sidewalks to be installed whenever new streets are accepted or existing streets are improved; building an overpass at the Oak Street-Rte. 9 intersection to improve traffic flow; and engaging the state, Wellesley and Framingham in regional improvements to Rte. 9.

Education goals on the list include building a new high school with green building design and materials that can be used by students and other residents or renovating and updating the existing Natick High School.

Improving the town Web site by posting more pertinent information online, preparing a town "owner's manual," purchasing Agricultural Preservation Restrictions for local farmlands, buying land for open space, building a downtown parking garage, publishing a simplified budget report, balancing the budget and managing growth are among a host of other goals listed.

"The financial situation of the town is something we're planning to educate the public about," Ross said. "When everyone is dreaming about things that can be done, we have to know the financial realities."

The public will weigh in on a slimmed down list of strategic options during a June 8-10 Strategic Choices Weekend at Kennedy Middle School. Each strategic option listed on a menu will have a description and estimated cost, Ross said.

Priorities will be finalized through the efforts of a professional research firm that will conduct a random poll and get a better sense of the overall community's goals in July. The town has already posted a request for proposals from research organizations, Ross said.

The ultimate goal for the group is to submit a strategic plan for approval at Fall Town Meeting, he said.

(Andrew J. Manuse can be reached at amanuse@cnc.com.)

[top of page](#)

Planning process could be guide for state, neighbors

By Andrew J. Manuse/Daily News staff
Associated Press
Feb 14, 2007

NATICK - A Natick 360 director said Tuesday the town's long-range planning process could be used as "a model of civic engagement" for the state and other Massachusetts communities.

The Natick 360 process, managed by a nine-member resident committee, attempts to develop with town residents a long-range strategy for improving the community while maintaining a hold onto its roots. The effort, launched out of Town Meeting in April 2005, is now seeking strategic options for the town.

As a part of the process, Natick 360 met with key players from outside the town such as Ted Welte from the Framingham-based MetroWest Chamber of Commerce and Conrad Crawford of Gov. Deval Patrick's executive office of transportation and construction to brainstorm potential goals.

Ideas included solving existing traffic and parking problems, forming regional alliances to leverage collective resources, building a new high school and community center, connecting the town's center with the Golden Triangle shopping area, and making natural resource conservation a standard practice.

At the meeting, Natick 360 co-Chairman Craig Ross called the overall process a "model of civic engagement" and "an experiment in participatory democracy."

"This is a rare occurrence where state agencies and representatives can look at a community's innovative approach," Ross said. "I think it's a model other communities can follow."

The committee used \$119,700 of its budget to hire Blackerby Associates of Arizona, which helped facilitate the meeting yesterday. Natick 360 received \$150,000 from Town Meeting and about \$28,000 from local businesses for the project.

“The idea is to identify where the town falls short of its own vision, its aspirations and what kind of policies, programs and projects can fill those gaps,” said Phillip Blackerby of Blackerby Associates. “Then we can figure out how much each idea will cost.”

In the final phase this June, Natick residents will pick from a menu of options and their costs for the town to use going forward, then Town Meeting will vote on a final strategic plan.

“We don’t want this to be another plan that sits on a shelf,” Town Administrator Phil Lemnios said. “We expect it to be a plan that the public can follow and that they can see the outcome.”

For more information, visit www.Natick360.org.

[top of page](#)

Youthful ideas for downtown

By Kathy Uek

Friday, April 06, 2007

A community center, a parking garage with a cafe and a dressed-up alley are some of the projects 17 students envision for Natick’s Center.

In Kids Create Natick Center, an innovative five-week program, students from Natick High and Kennedy and Wilson Middle schools used real world planning maps and architectural tools to plan a Natick Center they want.

Students in Kids Create Natick Center worked with teachers and architects, Avigail Shimshoni of Natick and Ann Sussman of Acton, and created models and collages of their vision.

Abby Craig and Molly McEachern, both eighth-graders, chose to make the alley on Adams Street in downtown Natick more attractive by adding awnings and flower boxes to the buildings.

Seventh grader Sarah McEachern designed a ’50s-style cafe at the train stop with a playground nearby.

As part of the Kids Create project, students looked at photos of Natick’s past and discovered the town once had a fountain with a street light at the intersection of Main Street and Rte. 27,” said Ann Sussman. “They all fell in love with it. It was a symbol of the center. Three different groups of students worked on a project rediscovering the fountain.”

Natick High senior Aly Goldman worked on a new multi-level parking garage with a cafe.

“She was very interested that the facade would fit in with Natick’s architecture and look like a building and not just a slab for a garage,” said Shimshoni.

According to Sussman, Aly was also concerned that the garage be an active and interesting part of the street, which is why she had cafe on the ground floor.

Seventh-grader Matt Schneider said Natick needed a community center and made a programmatic study of what it would look like. “He tried to show a pool, a fitness room and an event hall and he did it all to scale to fit on the site in place of the missing tooth building,” Sussman said.

Eighth-graders Matt Eldridge and Spencer Cohen designed a reflecting wading pool with a bridge over it for the common with two fountains nearby, according to Sussman.

Sussman works with Learning By Design, a design education program of the Boston Society of Architects. At Community Visioning, which is part of Learning By Design, Sussman has worked in several area cities and towns and plans to take the community planning project state wide.

“It makes it more democratic,” she said. “In this case the people are doing the architecture. The program teaches people to read and work with plans. To explore the concepts that could improve Natick.”

According to Program Director Deb Sayre at Kids Connect, students learned architectural skills and worked with large models and plans. “The kids loved it. The creativity of the kids was incredible.”

Every Wednesday from Feb. 28 to March 28, the students met for two hours — for a total of 10 hours. Some worked individually on a project, while others worked as a group.

"People underestimate what the kids can do, said Shimshoni, a board member of Natick Center Associates, who represents them on the design review board. She has also been involved in educating children in schools about Natick Center.

During Kids Create Natick Center, Shimshoni's children Nitzan and Lior Zippel, 9 and 7 respectively, sometimes helped out.

"It's amazing the kids really care about their town," said Shimshoni. "I loved every minute of it. I thought it was very enlightening to see a group of youths so committed and interested in their town. They had great ideas."

The Kids Create Natick Center received funding from the Boston Foundation for Architecture. It received additional funding from Natick Center Associates and was run in coordination with Natick 360, the town of Natick's strategic planning initiative. Many Natick citizens as well as Learning By Design, a children's design education program of the Boston Society of Architects, contributed additional logistical support.

"It was incredible how much support, help and advice we got from the community including Gini Lyster from the Historical Commission who provided a lot of materials and worked with the kids, the GAS in the DPW, which made maps possible for us and talked to the students, Natick Center Associates provided funds so the children didn't have to pay for the materials, the 360 was very supportive throughout the project and Abby Reidy from the library and Debsan also helped," said Avigail.

Students plan to present models and collages of their ideas for Natick Center's future at the Wilson Middle School gym Tuesday, April 10, from 7 to 7:25. The presentation is a special event just prior to Town Meeting which convenes in the Wilson auditorium at 7:30 PM.

Please note because of the recent voting issues, Selectmen will decide Wednesday evening if Town Meeting will be postponed. For more information on the status of the meeting and Kids Connect visit www.kids-connect.org.

With the success of Kids Create Natick Center, Sayre hopes to have Natick High School students design a new high school.

"Kids do important work and express their creativity in a way useful to town."

Kids Connect now tutors more than 40 students from second grade through high school, according to Deb Sayre, who founded Kids Connect five years ago. "We believe in the kids so much. I watch these kids bloom and get proficient in their subjects and they feel so much better about themselves. It's incredible."

(Kathy Uek can be reached at 508-626-4419 or kuek@cnc.com.)

[top of page](#)

Holmes: Building a community vision

By Rick Holmes/MetroWest Daily News columnist
Sunday, February 18, 2007

What do you want your town to be like?

For most people, the answer is directly tied to when they moved in. True natives wish their hometowns could be like they were in the good old days, when they were kids. Transplants often feel the town they chose with great care started going downhill as soon as they finished unloading the moving van.

Our towns are constantly changing and there's no freezing them in place - not that some planning boards haven't tried. But most planning boards are too buried in current applications to do much planning.

Besides, it takes more than a planning board to come up with a community vision, especially one that can be translated into concrete steps. That requires a larger conversation, one that builds toward a sustainable consensus.

Volunteers and public officials are engaging in such conversations in many MetroWest cities and towns, but none is as ambitious as Natick 360.

The "360" describes the project's horizon, as does its motto: "Honoring Our Past, Planning Our Future." It will take at least two years to get from defining Natick's identity to endorsing a strategic plan, and the process is well under way.

The process started with gathering facts about Natick today: demographics, economics, commuting patterns, town services. Last

October, more than 300 residents - most of them not town government regulars - participated in a weekend "visioning" session, starting with basic questions. What do we like about Natick? What do we value in our town? What kind of future do we aspire to create?

Lots of talk, process, and word-smithing resulted in value and vision statements that aren't exactly loaded with surprises. They value Natick's "small-town" feel, its open spaces, its good schools, its lively downtown, its convenient location, its varied businesses. They want Natick to be a healthy, diverse community, with a range of transportation options, a vibrant economy, accessible natural areas, quality services. Visit natick360.com for the details.

It's all good stuff, and the organizers stopped short of a townwide endorsement of apple pie and the American flag.

The process of translating those ideals into choices is just beginning, and here's where it gets interesting.

Participants, for instance, say they value economic diversity. "Natick is proud not to be one of the W towns," Craig Ross, one of Natick 360's co-chairmen, told a group of "key informants" at a workshop this week. Natick has always had more working-class residents than Weston, Wellesley or Wayland, but it is quickly becoming unaffordable to anyone not earning six figures. The consensus about sustaining diversity will have to be leveraged into a plan for more affordable housing, which is rarely an easy sell.

A consensus is emerging that downtown Natick should be a destination "18 hours a day." But it will take a lot more parking to make that work, and perhaps a further liberalizing of the town's liquor laws. There the future meets the past: After Natick got a reputation as a honky-tonk town back in the 1930s and '40s, it went essentially dry in the '50s. The town loosened up the law a few years back, allowing restaurants to have areas where diners could drink while waiting for their tables, but the only stand-alone bars are private clubs.

Consensus around an ideal makes it possible to seize an opportunity. A case in point is the decision by CSX to officially abandon a rail line between Saxonville and downtown Natick. Turning it into a rail trail is a long, expensive process, but if it was done, it would provide both recreation and transportation benefits. It would link downtown, with its commuter rail station, to the jobs and housing being created at the expanding Natick Mall. Tying that developing neighborhood - the "Nouvelle Natick" upscale condos and a highrise across Speen Street with affordable housing may be just the beginning - to the rest of town is a planning priority.

Every town faces similar issues and choices on housing, schools, natural resources, transportation. Too often each choice is made in a vacuum, pushed by narrow interests instead of a broad vision. Decisions are made by the loudest voices in the meeting, oblivious to the needs and wishes of the residents who were doing something else that night, not to mention the generations of residents yet to arrive in town.

Other communities are engaged in their own visioning and planning processes. I'm involved in a similar effort in my hometown of Upton, where volunteers and town boards have spent years identifying historic, scenic and recreation resources that should be preserved if the town is to survive the next wave of growth with its spirit intact.

A state program, the Heritage Landscape Inventory, is providing grants to help other area communities identify and preserve the places and views residents deem most special.

These long processes can be exhilarating and frustrating, especially when it comes to the specifics required to keep the final product from becoming just another report gathering dust on a town hall shelf. Natick 360 is following a model from an Arizona town that included putting dollar amounts on every recommendation. The message: You won't get your vision without paying for it.

The Natick group is also working at building buy-in from town leaders. Five boards - selectmen, school committee, planning board, conservation commission and finance committee - are sponsoring the effort and being asked to sign off on its work. Town Meeting ponied up \$150,000 for the project, with businesses and community groups being asked to contribute \$50,000.

The trick is to build enough support for the vision so that the action steps can stand up to the opposition that always arises to something new. A small group of leaders can spend years learning why such-and-such is best for the community's future, only to see it shot down by neighbors attending their first municipal meeting.

But the more people involved in the process, the stronger the community and the less likely its work will be stonewalled or forgotten. As the Natick 360 folks and those involved in similar efforts elsewhere in MetroWest know, the towns we grew up in are long gone. The future won't wait for us to figure out what our towns should look like.

The time for building a community vision is now.

Rick Holmes is opinion editor of the MetroWest Daily News. He can be reached by e-mail at rholmes@cnc.com.

[top of page](#)

Natick 360 offers a revealing self portrait

By Jennifer Kavanaugh / NATICK BULLETIN & TAB

26 January 2007

Through the Natick 360 planning process, the community's long-range look in the mirror has already prompted some self discovery, as

the town examines what it looks like now and how it wants change in the future.

The Natick 360 process is the town's effort to plan for its future and decide how to maintain Natick as a nice place to live and work in the face of growing development, congestion and financial pressures. The nine-member Strategic Planning Oversight Committee has been soliciting insights from the public, and plans to turn the ideas into concrete steps for the town.

The first two of the project's four phases have been completed, and they involved drafting a community profile of Natick, and soliciting feedback from residents, leaders and businesspeople about what they value most about town and what they want it to look like in the future.

"The whole point of this report is to open people's eyes — 'oh, I didn't know that about Natick,'" said Craig Ross, a co-chairman of the committee, along with David Parish.

The reports include several tidbits about the town. Natick's population is getting older, smarter and more affluent, as more people head toward retirement, and education and income levels rise. In 20 years, one in four residents will be a senior citizen.

According to the reports, Natick's two train stations put more people on the commuter rail than any other town along the Worcester-Boston line. And in 2004, the biggest spot for car crashes was Rte. 9 at Speen Street. It had 122 crashes, and 54 of those were rear-enders.

To proceed to the third phase, the strategic committee has been in the process of getting the five sponsoring committees to approve the reports from the first two phases. The sponsors are the selectmen, the School Committee, the Finance Committee, the Planning Board and the Conservation Commission. The selectmen approved the reports at its Monday night meeting.

In part, the reports discuss how Natick's relative affordability and good location have drawn many people into town, but that popularity is now driving up home prices and putting more pressure on town finances. People who have participated in the process worry that rising prices will drive out the town's socio-economic diversity.

"Natick residents like living in Natick," one of the reports states. "The town is not divided by competing factions or controversy; instead, residents generally agree about their values and hopes for the future. For many residents, a desirable future would simply be an extension of the present. Natick's greatest challenge for the future may be to build effectively upon its success."

Through public forums and surveys, Natick 360 participants said they value Natick's "small town" character; its stewardship of open space and natural resources; its emphasis on educational services; its diverse business mix; a vibrant Natick Center; and the town's mix of public services and cultural, recreational and educational facilities, as well as proximity to transit programs.

In terms of a vision for the future, the reports state, people want a town that welcomes a diverse group of people to live and work; that preserves natural resources and makes them publicly accessible; maintains and enhances Natick Center as a community focal point; maintains quality of the public schools; has a government that is fiscally sound and serves the public well; has a well-managed infrastructure; and engages in regional cooperation to solve problems and improve quality of life.

After getting the five committees to sign off on the reports, the group plans to launch into the third phase, which involves having consultants work with town officials to consider what actions the community could take.

In the fourth phase, the organizers will show the work to the public, and ask people prioritize the options. The committee expects to bring the final plan to Town Meeting in the fall.

The project got \$150,000 from Town Meeting, and Ross said the committee has raised more than \$25,000 from donors. The private sponsors include Middlesex Savings Bank, Natick Federal Savings Bank, Eastern Bank, Belkin Family Lookout Farm, MetroWest Subaru and WebReply Inc.

When asked the process has taught him something about Natick that he didn't know before, Ross said he had been a bit nervous going into the project, wondering how much people would want to engage in the process.

"The most satisfying thing was finding out that there are hundreds of people who are very interested in helping plan Natick's future," Ross said. "That's the most exciting thing of all."

Jennifer Kavanaugh can be reached at 508-626-4416 or at jkavanau@cnc.com

[top of page](#)

Urbanism is good for the planet

By Anthony Flint

Friday, October 27, 2006

It's been clear to a large number of planners, environmentalists and others that we need to change the way we arrange ourselves on the land, for some time now.

Why? Because with far-flung subdivisions, big-box strips and office parks that are 100 percent dependent on the car for navigation, we're guaranteeing our continued dependence on foreign oil. When we do so much driving to get around these dispersed environments, we're spewing carbon into the atmosphere, at a time when we need to cut down emissions, to at least make a stab at averting the looming disaster of global warming.

Those advocating smart growth and New Urbanism say that more concentrated, compact, transit-oriented development, and revitalized urban neighborhoods and existing older suburbs, provides the energy-efficient, more environmentally friendly alternative. For many years these advocates have been talking about this new paradigm as the right thing to do, as they decry the evils of sprawl. But this year, the sustainable development movement finds itself in the enviable and slightly unusual position of simply being in vogue.

The American consumer is leading the charge, because sprawl is becoming very costly. Recent research has shown that transportation is creeping up on housing as the biggest chunk of the family budget. Despite a recent - and temporary - downturn in gasoline prices, it's become much more expensive to make that 90-minute commute from home in the far-off exurb to the workplace. It's become more expensive, as well, to heat and cool that 3,000-square-foot home.

Getting hit hard in the wallet has been the last straw for many homebuyers. Other inconveniences have gnawed at our sense of well-being. Not being able to get home in time for the 5:30 Little League game, for example. And most want a sense of community, a sense of place, and a neighborhood to feel a part of. That's what most of the 70 million aging baby boomers say they want, according to surveys by the AARP.

Developers of urban infill parcels and New Urbanist projects - and, increasingly, the big corporate homebuilders - have already picked up this trend. Urbanism has become an amenity, and something that adds value. Builders who clearly see they have created quite enough single-family subdivisions are getting into the density business.

What's equally clear for state and local governments is that they need to get busy accommodating these shifts in demand. Most often that means reforming zoning, to allow multifamily housing, a diversity of housing types, mixed-use in downtowns and town centers, and the speedier redevelopment of vacated industrial land, including the old mill buildings and factories so common in Massachusetts and New England.

There are many statewide efforts to promote what's generally known as smart growth: in Vermont, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Michigan, Oregon, Washington and Massachusetts. Illinois is providing incentives to employers to support workforce housing. South Carolina changed its school siting process to discourage new construction out in farm fields. [\[continue\]](#)

In most places, however, the real test is at the local level. Local zoning very often prohibits mixed-use development or multifamily housing, restricts accessory apartments and makes builders create too much parking. A new approach is the concept of form-based codes, which shifts the rules on the arrangement and appearance of buildings, rather than what goes on inside them.

Most communities find that an increase in the supply of housing, and a range of housing choices, whether single-family homes on smaller lots or rental apartments, helps increase affordability. Further measures are sometimes necessary, though, to ensure that convenient, amenity-rich urbanism isn't only for the well-off. That's why state funding under Chapter 40R and 40S - the incentives for dense residential development -- as well as money for transit-oriented development carry the requirement of 20 to 25 percent affordability.

Inclusionary zoning ordinances require that all new residential development be 10 or 15 percent affordable. Community Land Trusts, an area of analysis at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, take the cost of land out of the homebuying equation.

It's all hard work, compared with the automated protocols of sprawl. But with demand for less car-dependent living on the rise, more local governments are getting into the business of not so much doing the right thing, but giving people what they want.

Anthony Flint, author of *This Land: The Battle over Sprawl and the Future of America*, (Johns Hopkins University Press)(www.anthonylflint.net), is public affairs manager at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy (www.lincolnst.edu), a think-tank based in Cambridge. Formerly education director at the Office for Commonwealth Development, he will share his analysis of development trends and smart growth measures from across the country Friday Oct. 27 at the Natick Vision for the Future forum at the Wilson Middle School.

[top of page](#)

What makes Natick so desirable?

By David Parish and Craig Ross/ Guest Columnists
Friday, October 20, 2006

Why is Natick a great place to live? In large part, because so many people already believe Natick is a great place to live - and are willing to work to make it so. There are many different responses to what people value most about the town, but it is clear for many, Natick is the home they have chosen, the place where they want to live their lives.

As Natick 360 gets underway, we have begun to hear from people about what they value in the town, their areas of concern, and their hopes for the future.

At this phase of the Natick 360 process we have not attempted any systematic analysis of the responses we have received, but a few general themes are emerging. We will hear from more people at the "Vision for the Future Weekend" at the end of this month. Every voice is important.

People living in the community come to appreciate the "neighborliness" that some call Natick's "small town feel." Residents become familiar friends by participating in Natick's many recreational and cultural activities, volunteering in community organizations, or simply bumping into each other in Natick's neighborhoods. Many see Natick as "family and kid friendly."

People say Natick is relatively affordable and economically diverse. Natick's single family home values are about 12 percent lower than the regional average and tax bills are also proportionately lower. Natick is home to individuals and families with a wide range of incomes, and one of the town's unique qualities has been its ability to sustain an economic diversity that many of its citizens value.

People like Natick's location, its proximity to Boston and its access to major roadways and public transportation. More commuters board a train at one of the Natick stations than any other community on the Worcester-Boston line. More than 59,000 cars travel Rte. 9 toward Boston on a given day. The Massachusetts Turnpike is accessible at the edge of town.

Natick offers a broad range of services and amenities, including a well-staffed public safety department, schools with a solid reputation, even curbside trash collection, and a community bus service. Natick's park and recreation department offers a large array of programs for residents of all ages.

Natick has ponds and lakes for swimming, and miles of hiking and biking trails. There are still parts of Natick that almost feel like wilderness, and that support an unexpected degree of plant and wildlife diversity.

Natick's downtown is often mentioned by residents as a wonderful amenity. Less than three miles from Natick Mall, Natick Center offers a completely different kind of experience, with local, family-owned stores and restaurants. Natick Common, the Morse Institute Library, and The Center for the Arts in Natick (TCAN) offer a wealth of cultural programs and activities.

However, the things that make Natick desirable to so many residents are the very things that people fear will change in the future.

Neighborhoods will change with increased development, and Natick may lose much of its valued open space. If demand for homes is high enough, property values may continue to rise to a point where homes become less affordable.

The delicate balancing act between municipal services and taxes may be pushed in one direction or another. A reduction in municipal services may make the community unlivable for some, while an increase in taxes may make the community unaffordable to others. Without attention to Natick Center's parking needs, downtown buildings and businesses will be starved of tenants and customers.

Some communities simply let the future happen - they react to issues as they become critical. Natick is choosing a different course. The residents of Natick are taking steps to create a vision of the future that they desire, and they are creating a plan to make that future a reality. That is what Natick 360 is all about.

Natick 360 will start with a vision - the community's collective vision of a desirable future. Your voice needs to be heard in creating that vision. No one else can offer your unique point of view about what makes Natick special.

Your chance to add your voice to the conversation is the "Vision for the Future Weekend" at Wilson Middle School on Oct. 27-29. On Friday, Oct. 27, at 6:30 p.m. you can come to the Opening Session.

You will hear a fascinating keynote speech by Anthony Flint, author of *This Land: The Battle over Sprawl and the Future of*

America, a cultural and political account of changing development patterns in the U.S.

You will also hear a presentation by consultants from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council describing Natick as it exists today. You will learn about the interesting demographic and economic trends that will shape Natick's future.

On Saturday, Oct. 28 and Sunday, Oct. 29, you can spend two hours speaking with skilled facilitators, planners, and consultants at any one of six focus group sessions scheduled throughout the weekend. Saturday sessions start at 8:30 a.m., 10:30 a.m., 1 p.m., and 3 p.m.. Sunday sessions start at 1 p.m. and 3 p.m..

Pre-registering for the event will help us plan food, traffic management, and facilitation resources. You can pre-register by picking up forms at the Town Clerk office, the Morse Institute Library, or the Senior Center. You can also register online at www.natick360.org.

Don't leave planning Natick's future up to someone else. Come and have your say at the "Vision for the Future Weekend."

David Parish and Craig Ross are both members of the Natick 360 Strategic Planning Oversight Committee.

[top of page](#)

Local view: Natick's finances and long-range planning

By Phil Lemnios, David Parish, and Craig Ross

Friday, October 13, 2006

What do you cherish about Natick that makes it a special place? If you could make Natick a better place, what would you change? What types of services do we want to offer to the community in the future? How do we fund the things we want? These questions are at the root of our long range planning efforts.

These questions are important and your suggestions and ideas need to be heard on Oct. 27-29 as part of the "Vision for the Future Weekend" at Wilson Middle School.

In this, the second of four articles leading up to the "Vision for the Future Weekend," we provide some background about Natick's finances, the cost of services, and the methods of funding these services.

Natick's budget is used to pay for services including schools, police and fire services, water and sewer services, and to pay for the buildings and equipment used in the delivery of these services. Municipal services are delivered by people - teachers, firefighters, police, librarians, and the engineers and technicians who provide public-works services.

More than 80 percent of Natick's budget is spent on workers who provide services to the community, including their salaries, pension costs, and benefits such as health insurance. Another 10 percent of the budget is used to pay off bonds and supply capital to maintain Natick's buildings and equipment. Less than 6 percent of Natick's budget is spent on discretionary services such as the Neighborhood Bus and recreational programs.

Natick's budget is proposed by the Town Administrator in January, reviewed by the Finance Committee during February and March, and voted by Town Meeting in April of each year.

Funding for the budget comes from three sources: local property taxes (68 percent), local receipts from fees and excise taxes (20 percent), and state aid (12 percent).

In 1980, the Massachusetts voters passed Proposition 2 1/2, setting the maximum increase in total property tax collections to 2 1/2 percent per year. Under Proposition 2 1/2, if Natick's total property taxes are \$59.6 million in fiscal year 2006, then the maximum increase in tax collections is \$1.49 million for fiscal year 2007. It is the responsibility of the Board of Selectmen to vote each year on the tax increase and the resulting tax rate.

Proposition 2 1/2 does not mean that every household in the community will see its property tax bill go up by exactly 2 1/2 percent each year. Tax bills are determined by the Assessors office and are based on the change in individual property values. If the real estate market drives up home values for condominiums faster than larger homes or commercial properties, then tax bills will increase more for those properties.

The cost of delivering municipal services for Natick, and every community in the Massachusetts, has been rising at a rate faster than 2 1/2 percent per year. For example, since fiscal year 2000, health insurance costs have been rising 14.5 percent per year, property and

liability insurance 15.5 percent per year, and fuel/utility costs 8.5 percent per year.

To address the gap between the Proposition 2 1/2 limit and the cost of delivering services, communities use some combination of these options: reduce services to bring the budget in line with revenues, vote to increase property taxes by way of a Proposition 2 1/2 override, and/or attract development and growth to increase the property tax base.

Natick has been able to leverage growth and development through its commercial properties throughout the 1990s - anchored by the expansion of the Natick Mall in 1995. However, the state fiscal crisis in 2002 resulted in a reduction in payments of state aid to Natick of 20 percent. Natick has been using reserve funds to plug the hole created by state aid since 2002. The town no longer has sufficient reserves to continue this practice.

The latest projections indicate that the new expansion of the Natick Mall will create tax revenues sufficient to replace the lost revenue from state aid. Money from expansion of the new Natick Mall may only be sufficient to return the town to its revenue position in 2002.

The budget constraints resulting from rising costs and the desire to keep property taxes low both create pressure for continued development. How should Natick strike a balance between services, taxes, and growth? What type of development do we want to encourage as a community? What types of services do we want to fund?

These are critically important questions and your input is needed. Natick 360 is your chance to express your opinion about the future of our community. Natick 360 starts with the "Vision for the Future Weekend" on Oct. 27-29 at Wilson Middle School.

You can spend two hours speaking with skilled facilitators, planners, and consultants at any one of six focus group sessions scheduled throughout the weekend. There will also be an engaging keynote address on Friday where Anthony Flint, an expert at the Lincoln Institute on Land Policy will talk about these pressures facing the community.

Come and have your say at the Vision for the Future Weekend. Registration and details are available on-line at www.natick360.org.

Phil Lemnios is Natick's town administrator. David Parish and Craig Ross are on the Natick 360 Strategic Planning Oversight Committee.

[top of page](#)

Column: The town's future is grounded in its history

By David Parish, Craig Ross, Anne Schaller
Friday, October 6, 2006 / Natick Bulletin

The Town of Natick has invited all of its residents to help plan the future of the community. What do you love about Natick that you would like to preserve for the future? What could be changed to improve our community? You are invited to participate in the Natick 360 "Vision for the Future Weekend" at Wilson Middle School the weekend of Oct. 27-29.

Residents of the town will have a chance to spend two hours in small focus groups sharing their ideas about Natick's future with skilled facilitators, planners, and consultants. The focus groups will run all day on Saturday Oct. 28 and on Sunday afternoon Oct. 29. On Friday evening, the community is invited to a kick-off event with a keynote speech by Anthony Flint, author of "This Land: The Battle over Sprawl and the Future of America," a cultural and political account of changing development patterns in the U.S. The opening reception will start at 6:30 p.m. and the proceedings will begin at 7 p.m.. More information, and the opportunity to register for the focus groups, is available by visiting the Natick 360 website at www.natick360.org.

Planning for Natick's future should begin with a thorough understanding of Natick's history and the factors that shaped the community as it exists today. This is the first in a series of four articles to be published in the Natick Bulletin and Tab setting the stage for Natick's "Vision for the Future Weekend." In this first article, we look at Natick's history.

The Puritan minister John Eliot established Natick as the first Indian settlement to be recognized by the General Court of Massachusetts in 1651. Eliot directed the construction of a meeting house on the site of the current Eliot Church in South Natick and an Indian agricultural community was settled around this central village. The Indians built a wooden bridge across the Charles River enabling cultivation on both sides of the Charles River.

Today, more than 350 years later, we can still feel the influence of this early agricultural settlement on the South Natick community. Eliot Street, Union Street, and Pleasant Street still radiate out from the central village that was founded in 1651. Residents can cross the bridge at Pleasant Street and visit Belkin Lookout Farm with fields that have been under continuous cultivation for more than 300 years.

As the town grew, new homes were established to the north in villages in Natick Center and further north in Felchville (near today's Rte. 9 and Rte. 27). Each of these villages was connected by horse paths which are now Rte. 27, Rte. 16, and Rte. 135. This was the configuration of Natick through the Revolutionary War and much of the 18th century.

As more people settled in the community, not all could support themselves by working the land. People began to work in cottage industries, picking up raw materials from wholesalers, making products in their homes, and selling them back for distribution. The most successful of these industries in Natick was the shoe industry. Leather was purchased by cobblers and brought back to their homes where they would craft shoes in small workshops behind their properties.

Natick's most famous cobbler was Henry Wilson, Vice President of the United States under Ulysses S. Grant, in whose memory a cobbler shop is located at the corner of Mill Street and West Central Street.

When the Boston-Albany railroad was constructed and routed through Natick Center in 1836, the shoe industry in Natick expanded and wooden commercial blocks were built in Natick Center to support this industry. These commercial blocks expanded into factories and through the early years of the 20th century, workers from around the world immigrated to Natick to work in one of 23 different shoe factories operating in the community. Natick was also home of the Harwood Baseball Company - inventor of the figure-8 hand-stitched baseball and the first baseball factory in the country.

In 1874 a fire burned Natick Center to the ground. Fortunately, the industries were well-insured and Natick Center was reborn in the years immediately following the fire with large brick commercial blocks that still line Main Street today. The buildings in Natick Center reconstructed in this time period were all designed with an interesting "neo-gothic" architectural style that provides a striking facade lining Main Street. A person standing on Main Street in Natick Center today can see 150 years of history in the streets, rail lines, and architecture of the downtown.

Natick is also a community rich in natural resources - more than 600 acres of land in the town is water, dominated by Lake Cochituate. This lake, once a major reservoir for Boston, was also a recreational destination for Boston families. Many small cottage homes were built on the shores of Lake Cochituate and the other ponds in Natick. To this day, entire neighborhoods in Natick are defined by these former camps and cottage homes.

After World War II, Natick's population soared as large developments such as Wethersfield were built. The post-war suburban boom was accompanied by a boom in car sales. Rte. 9 was expanded to accommodate more cars and the trolley line which once ran along the road was removed. The Massachusetts Turnpike was built and an exit located at Natick's northwest corner. The turnpike enabled development of office parks, the Golden Triangle retail district, and the further expansion of Natick as a suburban community.

Residents today can travel through the community and see the impact of historical development going back as far as 350 years: from South Natick's village layout, to Natick Center's industrial roots, to waterfront cottage homes, to the burgeoning expansion of Natick's retail Golden Triangle.

What decisions might we make today that people will reflect upon in the next 100 years? Join with the entire community in planning a bright future for Natick at the "Vision for the Future Weekend" on Oct. 27-29 at Wilson Middle School. Next week we will touch upon financial and other pressures facing the community today.

David Parish and Craig Ross are on the Natick 360 Strategic Planning Oversight Committee; Anne Schaller is a member of the Natick Historical Society.

[top of page](#)

Input sought on 'Vision for the Future'

By Jennifer Kavanaugh/ Daily News Staff
Tuesday, October 3, 2006

NATICK -- The people who are trying to build a better Natick say the town belongs not just to the officials, civic leaders and the perennial volunteers -- but to anyone who dreams of a better future.

The town's Strategic Planning Oversight Committee has been managing Natick 360, a multiphase plan to assess the town's present and help determine its future. To that end, the group will host the Vision for the Future Weekend from Oct. 27 to Oct. 29 at Wilson Middle School.

Organizers hope residents will sign up for one of six two-hour workshops held Saturday, Oct. 28, and on Sunday, to give suggestions for improving the town, or other comments. The weekend will start with a reception, overview presentation and talk on Friday evening.

"All we're asking is that people spend two hours with us, and help plan Natick for the next 20 years," said David Parish, the

committee's co-chairman.

The Natick 360 project began as a way to figure out how best to serve a growing and changing community, and meet community needs and allot resources. The five-year action plan is scheduled to be completed around the time of Natick's 360th birthday in 2011.

The project's first stage involved the creation of a report examining Natick's past and present, by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. The group is reviewing a draft of that report, Parish said. The Board of Selectmen recently agreed to give \$120,000 to Blackerby Associates, an Arizona consulting firm, to conduct the next stages.

To register for a workshop, or for more information about Natick 360 and the Vision for the Future Weekend, go to www.Natick360.org. Parish said organizers are seeking a diverse range of opinions.

"That's a major part of this," Parish said. "We're trying to reach out to everybody in town, whether they have been involved in the past or not. We want to get beyond the 200 or 300 people who are consistently engaged in these issues."

(Jennifer Kavanaugh can be reached at 508-626-4416 or at jkavanau@cnc.com.)

[top of page](#)

Group looks to future of town *Seeks to provide vision, set goals*

By Jennifer Fenn Lefferts, Globe Correspondent | August 6, 2006

BOSTON GLOBE (WEST WEEKLY) NATICK

As Natick prepares to celebrate its 360th year, a group of nine residents is busy sketching out plans for the town's future.

The Strategic Planning Oversight Committee is working on a document that members say will provide a vision for the town over the next 20 years and outline the steps the town must take to reach its goals.

The key question for the committee is, "What do we aspire to be as a community?" said Craig Ross, the committee's cochairman.

Members have been working at a brisk pace over the past few months in anticipation of a public launch during Natick Days on Sept. 9.

"There's a lot going on right now," Ross said. "We have a very ambitious schedule."

Town Meeting this spring approved spending \$150,000 to help the town put together "Natick 360, Honoring Our Past, Planning Our Future." The goal, Ross said, is to take a full 360-degree look at Natick and develop a blueprint for the future. The project's title also alludes to the fact that in five years, Natick will celebrate its 360th birthday.

The first phase of the planning process is gathering information, Ross said. "Before you can plan your future, you have to understand your present," he said.

To that end, committee members have been interviewing residents, business owners, and volunteers active in town. The members wanted to hear their impressions of the town today, their thoughts on potential challenges, and their ideas for making Natick a better place to live and work, Ross said.

The committee has also sent out questionnaires to dozens of community organizations, asking for feedback, Ross said. Residents will also get a chance to provide input at a booth during Natick Days.

"We want to publicize that this is underway," Ross said. "By far our most important task is getting the community involved."

Natick has gained regional attention recently with the expansion of the Natick Mall and the growth of medical device company Boston Scientific, which is headquartered in town. Committee members have also been working with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council to put together a snapshot of Natick today as a starting point for the discussion.

Researchers will look at the town's demographics, housing stock, economy, transportation infrastructure, government, finances, utilities, and open land.

Holly St. Clair, director of the MAPC's Metro Data Center, said the plan is to have preliminary findings available for the public to

review during Natick Days. She said the center plans to put together some easy-to-read charts and tables for public display.

While it has been a challenging, task so far, the process is going well, said David Parish, the committee's cochairman.

"It's impressive to me that a core group in Natick is willing to take time and resources to step back and ask what Natick is and what it will become," Parish said.

Parish said town leaders are often so overwhelmed with the day-to-day challenges that it is difficult to look toward the future.

"This potentially thoughtful, well-coordinated process will give the town the opportunity to think about ways to do its work more efficiently for the residents over time," Parish said.

Ross said the data-collection phase will be over in September, allowing the committee to move on to the "visioning phase," when members will seek residents' input about what Natick should offer 20 years from now.

He said the committee plans to hold a "Vision for the Future" weekend Oct. 27-29, during which members of the public will be invited to voice their opinions.

[top of page](#)

Planning committee gets ready for the fall

By Charlie Breitrose/ Daily News Staff

Thursday, August 3, 2006

NATICK -- While much of town government has taken it easy during the hot days of summer, the Strategic Planning Oversight Committee is rolling full steam to get ready for the fall.

The group overseeing long-range strategic planning, dubbed Natick 360, largely has operated under the radar, but has been meeting regularly to prepare for the its first public splash in September, said Craig Ross, committee co-chairman.

"We are making plans for Natick Days, which will be our big kickoff," Ross said.

The project will take about a year, and in the end the town will have a better idea of what residents want Natick to look and be like in the future, said co-chairman David Parish.

"The goal of the project overall is to reach out to as many people and organizations in Natick as we can," Parish said. "We want to get a sense from them what are the strengths and the challenges facing the town."

The first interviews were conducted in July, Ross said, when organizers talked to representatives from a variety of Natick organizations including veterans groups, open space advocates, neighborhood associations and arts groups.

Another 70 groups -- churches, community organizations and not-for-profits -- have been sent surveys, Ross said, asking for similar information.

"There are only about four or five questions, but they are big questions," Ross said. "What kinds of challenges does the community face today? What sorts of things do you love about Natick?"

Residents will be given the chance to express their views, too, starting at Natick Days. How that will be done has not been determined, but Ross said it could be a survey.

In October, a major event, known as Vision for the Future Weekend, will be held where residents will be invited to participate in focus groups, Parish said.

"At that point we will have initial work done, a description of where Natick is now -- demographics, housing, major things acting on the town," Parish said. "We want to find out where people would like town to be in 20 years."

The study of where the town stands now will be done by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. A report should be finished by the end of September, Ross said, which will be the end of the first of four phases.

The committee is also looking for a consultant to conduct the last three phases of the project, including the Vision for the Future

Weekend. The committee recently put out a request for proposals, or RFP.

"Responses should be coming in by Aug. 10," Ross said. "About 26 firms have requested the RFP. That is a very healthy number."

(Charlie Breitrose can be reached at 508-626-4407 or cbreitro@cnc.com.)