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Comprehensive Plan Visioning

Introduction

The current Town of Yarmouth Comprehensive Plan was adopted by the Town Council on December 16, 2010 and was submitted to the (then) Maine State Planning Office for review. The 2010 Comprehensive Plan was found consistent with Maine's Growth Management Act in October 2011 with a finding of consistency for 12 years or through October 2023. The 2010 Comprehensive Plan was subsequently amended to incorporate the Complete Streets Policy, adopted by the Town Council and added to the plan as an appendix on November 19, 2015. The amended Comprehensive Plan was reviewed by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry, which found that the amended Plan continued to be consistent with the Maine Growth Management Act. This finding remains valid until October 2023.

There has been some demand in the community to provide an opportunity for community members to provide input on the direction of the community. The Town will be in a position to start a Comprehensive Plan update in 2022 but plans to undertake a visioning process first. The purpose of this effort is to capture a picture of the community's future that arises from a fair and representative process that will frame the Comprehensive Plan update.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to determine where the Town of Yarmouth is now and help the community decide what it wants to be in the future. This should take into account what makes Yarmouth unique and special, and how the Town can use these characteristics to prepare for the future. The vision describes what the community wants, and the comprehensive plan will provide the roadmap to get there.

The vision cannot just represent one individual's or just one group's point of view. It must represent the consensus of the community developed through a fair and representative process.

Workplan

The community vision process must have a strong public engagement program. It will consist of facilitated public meetings, surveys, meetings in a box, and other outreach methods. As various attitudes toward pandemic health and safety continue to evolve, the engagement program will need to be varied and utilize technology to ensure that everyone feels comfortable participating.

"Our Latchstring Always Out"

Facilitated Public Meetings:

The public meetings will consist of the following:

1. The first public meeting is an introductory meeting. At this meeting, the concept of visioning will be introduced, the benefits of visioning, and the roles and responsibilities of various Town Boards and Committees like the Town Council and the Planning Board. Issues that should be addressed during the visioning sessions will be identified. Stakeholders will be identified.
2. The second public meeting will be the first visioning session focusing on the preferences of the community are now and in the future. An exercise may be used to have attendees identify community features that stand out, features that represent the community's identity, and features that would change the community if lost. These features are not necessarily physical in nature but can also be community values.
3. The third public meeting will be the second visioning session. A key piece of the comprehensive plan is to identify areas appropriate for growth, so the third session will include a brief presentation with baseline data about the community's demographics and trends in the local economy, housing, transportation, and other key items that were identified in the first meeting. An exercise may be used to identify areas of town where the future vision could be achieved.

Surveys:

Surveys are a useful tool to receive feedback especially as the pandemic continues to limit in-person events. A survey could duplicate what would occur during the facilitate public meetings but allow participants to complete on their own time and safely from their homes. The survey can include short videos that provide introductions to guide participants through the survey.

Once the draft vision is completed, a survey may also be used to receive feedback from the community.

Meetings in a Box:

Not everyone in the community will be interested in attending a large in-person event, so a meeting in a box allows a small group of friends, neighbors, or community group to meet and provide their feedback. The meeting in a box will provide the small group all the materials needed to facilitate their own visioning session, including an overview of what visioning is and how it fits into the comprehensive plan, discussion questions to ask, and forms that can be completed by participations. These materials can be sent back to the Department of Planning and Development.

Other Outreach Methods:

Other outreach methods might include the Director of Planning and Development and other staff attending committee meetings, both standing town committees and community committees, and town wide events to obtain feedback. Our GIS platform could also be used to give the community the option of providing geographic feedback or could be incorporated into a survey tool.

Support

An experienced community facilitator should be hired to assist in running the facilitated public meetings. The facilitate must have a background in planning and facilitation, who can take a neutral position, and encourage constructive conversations. The facilitator will lead the public meetings and will be required to deliver a summary of the three facilitated sessions. The facilitator will also assist Town staff in the development of other outreach events and the development of the draft vision statement following the completion of the outreach events.

Budget

It is anticipated that hiring a facilitator to support this effort would be approximately \$20,000. The Director of Planning and Development has a special projects fund of \$10,000 and the Economic Development Advisory Board committed \$10,000 toward comprehensive planning. There may be additional GIS costs to host an online version of the community meetings working with our GIS consultant, for which a budget source has not yet been identified.

Timeframe

If this workplan sounds appropriate, the timeline to put out an RFP and to hire a facilitator may take the remainder of 2021. It is anticipated that these events could kick off in 2022 and take about 6 months as we prepare to undertake an update to the updated comprehensive plan. As noted previously, the full cost of preparing an updated comprehensive plan could range between \$150,000 and \$175,000 depending on the scope of work and is currently unfunded.