What is a Master Plan and Why Would it Benefit New Canaan?

by the Town Center Planning Group

A master plan is a road map for the future. It is a comprehensive long range document that guides development and future growth of a community’s facilities for 20 or more years. A plan helps decision makers maintain a balance between protection and conservation and growth and development. The information contained in the plan is intended to guide decisions related to public and private use of land and public facilities in a manner compatible with the land’s character and adaptability, thus promoting good stewardship of resources. Importantly, a plan is a policy-based document. It does not regulate land use, zoning, or properties. The plan itself has no authority, but instead, if formally accepted by town bodies, will provide guidance to authorities and land users to help accomplish the vision set forth.

Development of a plan benefits town decision makers by giving them:

• a consistent point of reference against which to make decisions,
• the ability to make more informed decisions,
• more predictability regarding budgeting and planning,
• potential to optimize resource use,
• means to preserve community character, and
• potential to produce positive economic development.

Towns face limited revenue and opportunities and a plan can assure that important land-use decisions are not made in a vacuum.

In the summer of 2008, First Selectman Jeb Walker and Town Council Chair Mark DeWaele appointed task forces composed of members of the Boards of Selectmen, Finance, Education, and the Town Council, to undertake reviews of municipal best practices, budget processing, and master planning. The recommendations of all three task forces affirmed that successful practice of government budgeting should include a goal-driven approach that includes planning that takes into account a longer range and more comprehensive perspective of capital expenditures and better prioritization of those expenditures. A municipal facilities master plan can provide a cohesive framework to achieve those recommendations.

The typical process for master plan development begins with an inventory and analysis of existing conditions and solicitation of public input. Goals and objectives are determined and a plan is developed. The questions “What do we have?”, “What do we want?”, and “How do we get there?” are answered. A plan is not simply a solution to a puzzle where buildings are simply placed. Plans may include goals, policies, land use objectives, housing, economic development, natural resources, open space, recreation, public facilities, public services, and transportation. When a town adopts a plan, it should be flexible and dynamic so as guide change and periodically, be reevaluated to keep current with the vision. Development of the plan is an open process, with public
participation to help guide priorities and maintain the sense of community and history. However, successful planning also must include professional town planners who bring valuable insight from their training, experience, and success in other communities.

New Canaan is faced with land use, capital expenditure, and chronic parking decisions whether a plan is undertaken or not. There are demonstrable improvements needed for many municipal facilities, including town hall, the fire station, and parking. The library has announced plans for an upgraded facility. Understanding the impact and consequences of these decisions is the reason for a master plan.