

Plan of Conservation and Development Progress Report – DRAFT
Town of Washington Planning Commission

October 1, 2019

To: Town of Washington Planning Commission

From: Tim Cole

Re: Mid-course Progress Report on 2014 Plan of Conservation and Development

Attached you will find summaries of input received from leading members of the Board of Selectmen (Jay Hubelbank), the Conservation Commission (Suzie Payne), the Economic Development Committee (Dan Sherr) and the Zoning Commission (Nick Solley). They comprise responses to itemized lists of goals set out in the town's 2014 POCD for which each body was assigned primary responsibility in the Plan. I had very helpful personal conversations with each of the individuals mentioned as part of the process of soliciting their input.

The Plan identified a total of eighty-nine goals to be addressed during the 10-year span it covers. Of these, twenty-eight were assigned to the Board of Selectmen, seventeen to the Zoning Commission, twelve to the Conservation Commission and twelve to the envisioned Economic Development Director. As we know, early on the decision was made to substitute an Economic Development Committee for the Director. The committee has assumed responsibility for addressing the pertinent goals set out in the plan. Together these four bodies are responsible for sixty-nine of the goals.

At this stage in the process, my primary take-away is that, except for the Economic Development Committee, the POCD does not provide active guidance for the work of the other bodies. Understandably, in many instances their activities address issues and concerns identified in the Plan, because those issues and concerns were prominent when the Plan was created. Generally, however, each body focuses its attention on the demands of the moment, for which it has clearly defined responsibility or longstanding concerns. Longer term objectives spelled out in the Plan do not command the same degree of attention.

Altogether, the results to date are mixed. Although Washington is a small town and leading members of the respective bodies know each other well and may serve together in other capacities, coordination of efforts by the respective bodies depends on the needs or opportunities of the moment – such as the very promising initiative to bring wi-fi service to the Depot. The Plan may serve as a reminder of longer-term objectives, but it does not appear to provide active guidance.

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Drawing on my experience as a strategic planning consultant, I will say this is a common result of many well-intentioned planning efforts. Committed and engaged stakeholders actively participate in a limited-term process which provides opportunities to become clear with each other about the challenges and opportunities facing them over a reasonably foreseeable time period. A Plan is created spelling out strategies for addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities. Participating stakeholders sign off on it. Life happens. The people who took part carry the legacy of the process with them, but the Plan *per se* may play little role in how they proceed with their work together in real time, unless and until an important outside body such as the State, a leading funder, or a governing board calls for an accounting. When resources, financial or human or both, are limited, the present needs of the moment command attention.

Highlights:

Plan goals are set out under six headings:

1. Demographics and Housing
2. Economic Development
3. Village Centers
4. Sustainability
5. Natural Resources and Open Space
6. Community Facilities

Demographics and Housing

Three main themes run through the list of goals: diversification of housing stock to attract younger residents and improve options for seniors; improve services available for seniors, with appropriate facilities and access; generally, make the town more attractive for younger people by leveraging cultural and environmental assets. Overall, it appears that there continues to interest in moving forward towards these objectives. The Housing Trust has projects underway. An Adult Services Steering Committee is actively working on options to improve services to seniors. The town is working closely with Region 12 to ensure that families with children are comfortable with the educational options available. However, progress toward enhancing housing options for both younger and older people is moving very slowly due to concerns about zoning and environmental impacts. There is strong interest in improving the senior center facility, either by a full rehabilitation of the present building or by creating a new facility. Sites on Bee Brook Road or at the former town garage location on Titus Road have been mentioned. All options will have a significant impact on the town budget. It is also proving challenging to move forward with the goal of increasing employment opportunities. The leading employers are Region 12 and the private schools. The retail sector may have limited growth potential, given

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competition from neighboring towns and the fact that for a significant portion of Washington residents their properties here are second homes. The Economic Development Committee is exploring the idea of setting up co-working space comparable to the Makery in New Milford, in order to attract younger professionals and independent business owners.

Economic Development

The idea of hiring an Economic Development Director as a first step towards implementing the Plan appears repeatedly through the document. However, once the decision was made to transfer the responsibilities assigned to the Director to a newly configured Economic Development Committee, promptly went to work. With a modest line item in the town budget, a promotional website and newsletter were set in motion with positive results. The Committee has formed a cooperative relationship with the Washington Business Association to ensure the concerns of local retailers are heard. Additionally, the EDC has provided leadership in the creation of the Judy Black Memorial Park and Gardens and getting the exciting and very visible programming up and running in collaboration with local arts and environmental groups and active support from the town. Together with the redesign and renovation of the Bryan Hall Plaza, this work has given the center of the Depot a new look and feel. In addition, the EDC has supported the effort to bring wi-fi service to the Depot and collaborated with the Washington Arts Association on the creation of the Titus Park space on the site of the old town garage.

EDC members work closely with the Northwest Hills Council of Governments to ensure Washington is part of regional development efforts. Through its relationships with neighboring towns, the Committee play an active role in the launch of a website to promote tourism opportunities in the region: ColorsoftheLitchfieldHills.com. As noted previously, the EDC is the one body that appears to keep Plan goals actively on its radar screen. Attention is already being given to tasks envisioned for the second half of the Plan cycle. These accomplishments are impressive, especially considering the fact they have been achieved by a very energetic, experienced and dedicated group of volunteers. To the degree that growing the employment base and promoting opportunities for new residents remains an important goal for the town, I believe more capacity will be needed to get there. This would require that the town revisit the question whether a paid position, possibly part time, would be helpful. To be determined is what the value added would be from an increase in the economic development budget line item relative to enhancement of the town's economic viability.

Village Centers

The Depot and New Preston have commanded much attention during the first half of the Plan cycle. The results in the Depot are very visible, as already mentioned. The story in New Preston

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is more complicated. While there is active interest in reconfiguring pedestrian and traffic patterns in the retail district, getting there is proving challenging. Disruption of traffic flow while reconstruction is underway is to be expected. Local retailers understandably worry about the impact on customer flow and revenue when the center of the village turns into a construction site. Under the aegis of the Conservation Commission, progress is being made toward construction of a park to facilitate access to the Falls. Divisions set in motion by the transfer of The Pavilion to Plain Goods remain strong among local businesses and may inhibit further efforts to attract more customers from the pool of visitors to Lake Waramaug. The other village centers seem to be attracting much less attention by comparison. Projects in Marbledale (expansion of the White Horse) and at the Green (One Kirby Road) have raised issues for the Zoning Commission to attend to which appear to have been resolved.

Sustainability

With the creation of the Sustainability Committee as a subcommittee of the Planning Commission, the commitment to adopting sustainable practices in land use, facilities management and business practices now has an agent and advocate. Some tasks initially assigned to the Conservation Commission and the Zoning Commission have been taken over by the Committee. The Committee is leading an effort to achieve certification for Washington as a Sustainable Community by SustainableCT. Meeting the requirements for certification entails covering many of the sustainability goals set out in the Plan.

Natural Resources and Open Space

With strong leadership from the Conservation Commission and support from the Zoning Commission, overall the commitments to preserving the town's natural resources and promoting sustainable agriculture listed in the Plan are being consistently followed through on. Like the Economic Development Commission, the Conservation Commission has dedicated and experienced advocates among its members who do not lose sight of the conservation and sustainability goals spelled out in the plan. Less clear, however, is the degree to which there is strong interest in moving forward with the housing and economic development goals spelled out in the Plan that may need focused attention to ensure environmental impacts are taken seriously without becoming game stoppers for advancement in those areas.

Community Facilities

With support from the Buildings and Properties Commission, the Board of Selectmen has primary responsibility for ensuring that essential services are competently provided for and facilities are well maintained. Generally, the record is encouraging. The need for Senior Center facilities renovation or relocation has already been mentioned, as has the fact that this will likely

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be a costly undertaking either way. One area where work has yet to be done concerns meeting the goal of “completing an energy audit of municipal facilities; and retrofitting with efficient equipment and features where feasible.” From both a sustainability and an environmental perspective, this remains an important task yet to be fulfilled.

In closing, I offer three observations:

1. Overall, good people are doing good work across the board respecting the areas of concern spelled out in the Plan.
2. There is room for improvement as far as consistent coordination of efforts and communication among the bodies responsible for carrying out the Plan are concerned. The Planning Commission may have a role to play in encouraging and facilitating such improvements.
3. In all areas, there appears to be insufficient capacity to move forward more assertively and comprehensively. To address this primarily would require increased staff support at Town Hall. To pay for more staff will have budgetary implications. The question on the table is whether opportunities to strengthen the town’s position going forward may be missed for lack of resources to pursue them.

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Board of Selectmen – Tasks Assigned in 2014 Plan of Conservation and Development

1)	Work with Region 12 to respond to new demographic trends and create strategies for addressing future needs.	Board of Selectmen (BOF)	Immediate Implementation
<p>Selectmen actively supported Region 12 adoption of Ag Stem program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selectmen actively supported creation of a regional primary school. Turned down by voters in Roxbury and Bridgewater <p><u>Green light</u></p>			
2)	Educate public on ramifications of inaction, particularly with regard to implementing GOAL ONE: Reverse Washington’s population decline and create a stable population. (Diversification of Housing Stock)	Board of Selectmen (BOF/PC)	Immediate Implementation
<p>Selectmen have taken no action on educating public about population decline and creating a stable population base.</p> <p><u>Red light</u></p>			
3)	Craft job description and hire new Economic Development Director to coordinate business activities.	BOS/Planning Commission (BOF)	Immediate Implementation
<p>Selectmen supported transfer of responsibilities to Economic Development Committee. No action taken.</p>			
4)	Hire a new Economic Development Director to coordinate village center economic development.	Board of Selectmen (BOF/PC)	Immediate Implementation
<p>Selectmen supported the transfer of responsibilities to the Economic Development Committee, which has been working to coordinate economic development in the town.</p>			
5)	[Washington Depot] Appoint an ad hoc group to address pedestrian and parking alternatives.	Board of Selectmen (PC/ZC)	Immediate Implementation
<p>Selectmen secured state grant to improve drainage. Appointed Depot Study Committee.</p>			

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	<u>Green light.</u>		
6)	[New Preston] Appoint an ad hoc group to address pedestrian and parking alternatives.	Board of Selectmen (PC/ZC/EDD)	Immediate Implementation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Building and Properties Commission has been working on a solution. A committee has been appointed. Developing a practical plan to create alternatives is meeting resistance from local business owners due to concerns about interference with business flow. The New Preston Falls park project is moving forward with leadership from the Conservation commission. 		
	<u>Yellow light</u>		
7)	Complete an energy audit of municipal facilities; retrofit with efficient equipment and features where feasible.	Board of Selectmen (BPC)	Immediate Implementation
	No systematic action taken. Some improvements made when timely.		
	<u>Yellow-Red light</u>		
8)	Maintain current level of services; hire new Economic Development Director.	Board of Selectmen (BOF)	Immediate Implementation
	Excepting hiring of EDD, good progress. Town now has a full-time fire marshal and Parks and Recreation director, as well as a full-time constable. Social work services are now being provided through the Danbury Community Action Agency.		
	<u>Green light</u>		
9)	Work with Region 12 to reach logical and fiscally prudent reconfiguration solution.	Board of Selectmen (BOF)	Immediate Implementation
	As noted, the Town worked with Region 12 on the elementary school issue. In the referendum, town voters voted in favor.		
	<u>Green light</u>		

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10)	Address immediate needs of each village center as quickly and effectively as possible.	Board of Selectmen (PC/ZC/BOF)	Immediate Implementation
<p>Clear progress in the Depot. New Preston efforts ongoing. Marbledale’s issues are not on the Selectmen’s radar screen.</p> <p><u>Yellow light</u></p>			
11)	Plan for the community services and needs of a growing senior population.	Board of Selectmen (BOF/ELD)	1-3 Year Implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A committee under leadership by Dan Sherr and Tony Bedini has been appointed to assess the needs of the elderly and the level and quality of services currently available. • A survey of the town’s elderly has been completed with assistance of the Connecticut Economic Resource Center. • The Municipal Agent for the Elderly, Pam Collins, would benefit from additional staff support. • Recognized need to improve or relocate the Senior Center facility. <p><u>Yellow light</u></p>			
12)	Assess current state of Town’s senior facilities and programs and compare with survey findings.	Board of Selectmen (BOF/ELD)	1-3 Year Implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An architect will undertake an assessment of the existing facility and make recommendations to the town regarding improvements or relocation. <p><u>Yellow light</u></p>			
13)	Pursue economic development funding through state grants; designate town funds for economic development as an annual line item.	Board of Selectmen (EDD/BOF)	1-3 Year Implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A \$50,000 line item has been added to the town budget to support the improved website, which appears to be having a positive impact for residents and in attracting visitors. • There has been no effort to secure economic development grants from the state • The imminent arrival of wi-fi service in the Depot area is viewed as a major plus. <p><u>Yellow light</u></p>			

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14)	[Washington Depot] Install pedestrian friendly streetscape and landscape elements to encourage walkability.	Board of Selectmen (BOF/ZC/PC)	1-3 Year Implementation
<p>This has been accomplished in the immediate Depot area. More work on Route 47 north of the town hall plaza has yet to be undertaken.</p> <p><u>Green light</u></p>			
15)	[New Preston] Install pedestrian friendly streetscape and landscape elements to encourage walkability.	Board of Selectmen (BOF/ZC/PC)	1-3 Year Implementation
<p>Little progress, though a process to promote these goals is underway.</p> <p><u>Yellow light</u></p>			
16)	Assess physical plants of Town facilities. Reach consensus on future use of old Town Garage site.	Board of Selectmen (BPC/PC)	1-3 Year Implementation
<p>There has been minimal discussion of the Garage site. The Building and Properties committee is undertaking an assessment of the physical plants of other town properties.</p> <p><u>Yellow-Green lights</u></p>			
17)	Pursue all possible educational scenarios, including those that may not require present region.	Board of Selectmen (BOF)	1-3 Year Implementation
<p>Not on the table.</p> <p><u>Red light</u></p>			
18)	Conduct septic capacity/feasibility studies for Washington Depot and Marbledale.	Board of Selectmen (BOF/PC)	1-3 Year Implementation
<p>Not done. No action has been taken.</p> <p><u>Red light</u></p>			

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19)	Implement context-sensitive roadway designs and create safer bicycling pathways.	Board of Selectmen (BOF/PC/HD)	4-6 Year Implementation
<p>Selectmen have had no discussions about this.</p> <p><u>Red light</u></p>			
20)	Require energy-efficient systems and designs for all construction and renovation; install LED street lighting.	Board of Selectmen (ZC/BPC)	4-6 Year Implementation
<p>LED lighting has been installed. The Building and Properties committee is involved. For properties not owned by the town, the Selectmen have no authority to require energy-efficient systems and designs. Responsibility lies with the Zoning Commission.</p> <p><u>Yellow light</u></p>			
21)	Incorporate green cleaning and maintenance practices at all municipal properties.	Board of Selectmen (BPC)	4-6 Year Implementation
<p>Town has adopted green cleaning and maintenance practices per DEEP regulations.</p> <p><u>Green light</u></p>			
22)	Establish a Historical Society; coordinate efforts with State Historic Commission; provide education and assistance.	Board of Selectmen (HDC/PC)	4-6 Year Implementation
<p>No action has been taken on this, other than providing funding to the Gunn Library in part to support the Museum.</p> <p><u>Red light</u></p>			
23)	Adopt demolition delay ordinance; require investigations of areas with archaeological potential.	Board of Selectmen (PC/CC)	4-6 Year Implementation
<p>No action has been taken on this. Unclear what the expectations were when this was included in the POCD.</p> <p><u>Red light</u></p>			

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24)	Promote Town’s quality of life, positive attributes, and rural character as attractions for new residents.	Board of Selectmen (PC/EDD)	Ongoing Effort
<p>The Economic Development Committee has been instrumental in making this happen. Important launch of the Explore Washington website. Town is supportive of its arts organizations and programs. Leadership in this area has been helpful.</p> <p><u>Green light</u></p>			
25)	Provide tax deferments, promote clean industry, support cultural and academic establishments, and improve technology infrastructure.	Board of Selectmen (BOF/EDD)	Ongoing Effort
<p>Improvements in the technology infrastructure is a priority. Besides the wi-fi in the Depot project, there is a line item in the budget to continue upgrading the town’s own IT systems.</p> <p><u>Green light</u></p> <p>Otherwise, there has been no action to date.</p> <p><u>Red light</u></p>			
26)	Continue curbside recycling; consider a regional organic recycling facility.	Board of Selectmen (CC)	Ongoing Effort
<p>The single stream curbside recycling program is being successfully implemented. The town is looking to DEEP for leadership on establishing a regional organic recycling facility.</p> <p><u>Green light</u></p>			
27)	Educate citizens on property tax exemptions and renewable energy credit programs.	Board of Selectmen (TXA/PC)	Ongoing Effort
<p>There has been some effort to educate citizens about property tax exemptions. Periodic notifications are included in the weekly email blasts.</p> <p><u>Green light</u></p> <p>There has been no effort to promote renewable energy credit programs.</p> <p><u>Red light</u></p>			

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28)	Continue to maintain emergency services; support equipment upgrades; improve cellular communications.	Board of Selectmen (BOF/WVFD) Ongoing Effort
<p>Yes. These efforts continue ongoing.</p> <p><u>Green light</u></p>		

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Conservation Commission (CC)

Responses provided by Susie Payne, CC Chair

1)	Provide a clearinghouse of information for sustainable practices throughout the community.	Conservation Commission (PC)	1-3 Year Implementation
Sustainability Committee is working on this. Limited capacity on CC and at Town Hall			
2)	Educate land use commissions on conservation designs and techniques appropriate for Washington.	Conservation Commission (PC)	1-3 Year Implementation
Limited capacity. Suggests reinstatement of monthly meeting of Commission chairs to promote information sharing			
3)	Prioritize stewardship of open space and conservation easements and expand baseline reviews.	Conservation Commission	1-3 Year Implementation
Need to include conservation easement information on land records. Should be standard practice at Town Hall. Stewardship of open spaces generally in good shape. Longstanding practice.			
4)	Acquire outside open space funding resources. Continue use of PA-490.	Conservation Commission (BOS/BOF)	1-3 Year Implementation
CC lacks capacity to pursue outside funding sources. Task needs to be assigned to someone who can dedicate time to it.			
5)	Highlight the dangers of runoff, septic failure, clear cutting and the importance of wetlands. Reduce non- point pollution through zoning and design regulations.	Conservation Commission (HD//ZC/IWC)	1-3 Year Implementation
Lake Waramaug Task Force and Lake Waramaug Association are working on this. Inland Wetlands Commission has an important role on this. CC has strong focus on clear cutting now.			
6)	Continue farmland protection and coordinate with neighboring communities on a regional agricultural plan.	Conservation Commission (PC/BOS)	4-6 Year Implementation
Overall farmland protection good. Capacity limitations affect CC's ability to lead on regional agricultural plan. Connection with Northwest Conservation District may be key here.			
7)	Develop linkages between town-owned and private open space and maintain pathways.	Conservation Commission (P&R)	4-6 Year Implementation
Impressed by Steep Rock Association's commitment to this. Conversion of former town garage site a positive.			
8)	Continue to pursue 30% open space goal and coordinate efforts with Town agencies.	Conservation Commission (BOS/PC)	4-6 Year Implementation
We are close on the goal. Steep Rock Association may have information. Looking to Town Hall to lead on coordination of efforts			

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Notes from Conversation with Nick Solley

1)	Review Zoning Regulations to enhance the viability of each village center.	Zoning Commission (PC)	1-3 Year Implementation
<p>The Commission is making progress reviewing lot coverage, setback and easement issues. For Marbledale and the Depot modification of the regulations is under consideration to allow under a special permitting process commercial zoning rules to apply for properties that are subdivided between commercial and residential. The Planning Commission would like to see a similar arrangement applied in all districts.</p>			
2)	Study the possible expansion of the B-1, B-2, and B-3 district boundaries via multi-zoned lots.	Zoning Commission (PC)	1-3 Year Implementation
<p>There have been no changes since 2014. Concerned about setting undesirable precedents, the Commission handles applications on a case by case basis.</p>			
3)	Modify regulations to require buildings in the villages to be closer to the road and locate parking behind structures.	Zoning Commission (PC)	1-3 Year Implementation
<p>There has been no movement on this because there appears to be no need. When the plan was created there was concern about a strip mall developing in Marbledale. The development of the Judy Black park in the Depot is a good example of a workaround.</p>			
4)	[Washington Depot] Encourage mixed uses as of right and permit a higher density of housing. Establish unit types and development sizes that supersede existing soil-based zoning.	Zoning Commission (PC/HC)	1-3 Year Implementation
<p>In the Depot, there are significant sewer issues in the way of moving in this direction. The Commission believes it is important to protect soil-based zoning requirements. Regulations permit residences above commercial buildings.</p>			

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5)	[Marbledale] Encourage mixed uses as of right and permit a higher density of housing. Establish unit types and development sizes that supersede existing soil-based zoning.	Zoning Commission (PC/HC)	1-3 Year Implementation
<p>The Housing Trust was able to move forward with its project on trust-owned property. The same concerns about modifying soil-based zoning regulations apply here as well.</p>			
6)	[New Preston] Encourage mixed uses as of right and permit a higher density of housing. Establish unit types and development sizes that supersede existing soil-based zoning.	Zoning Commission (PC/HC)	1-3 Year Implementation
<p>Same concerns about sustaining soil-based zoning. At most sites, physical constraints preclude such development.</p>			
7)	Determine village center boundaries; modify Zoning Regulations to increase residential density by Special Permit for senior and moderately priced housing.	Zoning Commission (PC/HD)	4-6 Year Implementation
<p>There are no regulations for age-restricted housing. Consideration might be given to a “floating zone” option to be applied on a site-specific basis. Hypothetically, condos on the Wyckham Rise property might be developed to provide downsizing opportunities for aging residents. It would fall to the Planning Commission to consider such an option.</p>			
8)	Encourage appropriate development along 202 corridor while guarding against sprawl.	Zoning Commission (PC/EDD/CC)	4-6 Year Implementation
<p>Expansion at the White Horse is a good example of how this can work. The Commission sees its role in such cases as being a matter of “support” rather than “encouragement.”</p>			

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9)	Incorporate “farm friendly” policies and practices to promote sustainable agriculture.	Zoning Commission (CC/PC)	4-6 Year Implementation
<p>These are already in place. They allow for tree removal when needed to promote agricultural purposes. Note that PA 490 provides tax incentives.</p>			
10)	[Washington Depot] Review regulations to possibly revise watercourse setback and floodplain requirements; determine potential impact.	Zoning Commission (PC/IWC)	4-6 Year Implementation
<p>Two-foot contour mapping of the floodplain is available. The Commission can rely on this when making its determinations.</p>			
11)	Include scenic resources in development reviews; restrict development on steep slopes exceeding 15%; enforce and improve outdoor lighting and fencing regulations.	Zoning Commission (CC/PC)	4-6 Year Implementation
<p>This is already standard practice.</p>			
12)	Use soil-based zoning to conserve agricultural land by allowing small lots while preserving bulk of land.	Zoning Commission (PC)	4-6 Year Implementation
<p>The Planning Commission has primary responsibility here.</p>			
13)	Modify regulations to increase commercial and mixed uses on multi-zoned lots in business districts.	Zoning Commission (PC)	Ongoing Effort
<p>The Commission handles this on an ongoing basis.</p>			

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14)	[Washington Green] Coordinate future development efforts with existing cultural, social, and educational institutions.	Zoning Commission (BOS/HDC)	Ongoing Effort
Permitted uses have been grandfathered in, recognizing the needs of the existing institutions.			
15)	Incorporate sustainability goals into Land Use Regulations. Modify regulations to minimize site disturbances and incorporate low-impact development techniques.	Zoning Commission (PC/CC)	Ongoing Effort
The Sustainability Committee now has a leading role here. The Commission handles specific requests on an ongoing basis.			
16)	Continue soil-based zoning policies and encourage conservation design subdivisions.	Zoning Commission (CC/PC)	Ongoing Effort
Encouragement of conservation design subdivisions is not an issue. Generally, it is neither practical nor needed. The Commission remains committed to adhering to soil-based zoning policies.			
17)	Monitor increasing development at Lake Waramaug; consider stricter coverage requirements.	Zoning Commission (IWC)	Ongoing Effort
Major developments have already been done or are underway. The Commission has now revised its regulations on nonconforming structures.			