

# **MASTER PLAN**

**For the**

**Town of Sharon, NH**



**Revised March 3, 2020**

## **Introduction**

The Peterborough Territory, which included Peterborough, Sharon and Temple was first settled in 1738. The portion that encompasses present-day Sharon was known as Peterborough Slip or Sliptown, the name it retained when the eastern part of the territory was incorporated as Temple. In 1777, the so-called Sliptown residents petitioned for annexation to Peterborough, which was denied. In 1786, they petitioned for a separate township and asked for a mile of land from the east end of Jaffrey and the south end of Peterborough. This request was granted, and it was incorporated as Sharon in 1791, named after a Connecticut town from which many settlers had come. At that time, the census (1790) showed 259 residents. While our population has fluctuated from a high of seven-hundred-plus down to seven, the town is now home to about 360 residents.

Sharon remains a very rural town; one of the three smallest towns located southwest of the Lakes Region of New Hampshire and closest to the Massachusetts border. It has two state highways (NH123 and NH124) that bring traffic to the Peterborough area, neither of which provide any commerce or employment opportunities to the citizens of Sharon. The last Master Plan for Sharon was prepared in 2002. As a result of past careful planning, Sharon continued to be one of those very rare places of natural rural charm in Southern New Hampshire. However, the forces of change continue to shape this entire region. It is time for the residents of Sharon to review our goals, potential challenges, and existing land use regulations.

## **Vision Statement**

As part of any Town Master Plan, the Vision Statement serves to encapsulate the hopes and desires of the citizens for the future of their community. Therefore the Vision Statement is used as the inspirational source for both the Land Use Plan and the town Ordinances and Regulations.

In developing the Vision Statement, and to guide the development of the current Master Plan, data was obtained from three sources\*:

1. The Open Space Report (July 2012): the result of a study by the Conservation Commission, which included a resident survey, and carried out under the supervision of the Monadnock Conservatory.
2. A public hearing: jointly held by the Planning Board and the Conservation Commission. (August 14, 2012)
3. Master Plan Survey: begun in August 2011 and completed by Town residents.



*\* The Open Space Report, the minutes of the Joint Meeting and the Master Plan Survey are available on the Town Website.*

*In order to preserve the rural character of our Town and protect the natural resources that benefit our residents, the citizens of the Town of Sharon desire to:*

- plan and manage growth to minimize impacts on our natural resources and our ability to enjoy them,*
- balance the rights of individuals' use of their land with the rights of their neighbors to avoid devaluation of their property, and*
- maintain a level of infrastructure that allows access to technology without compromising our rural community.*



## **Land Use Plan**

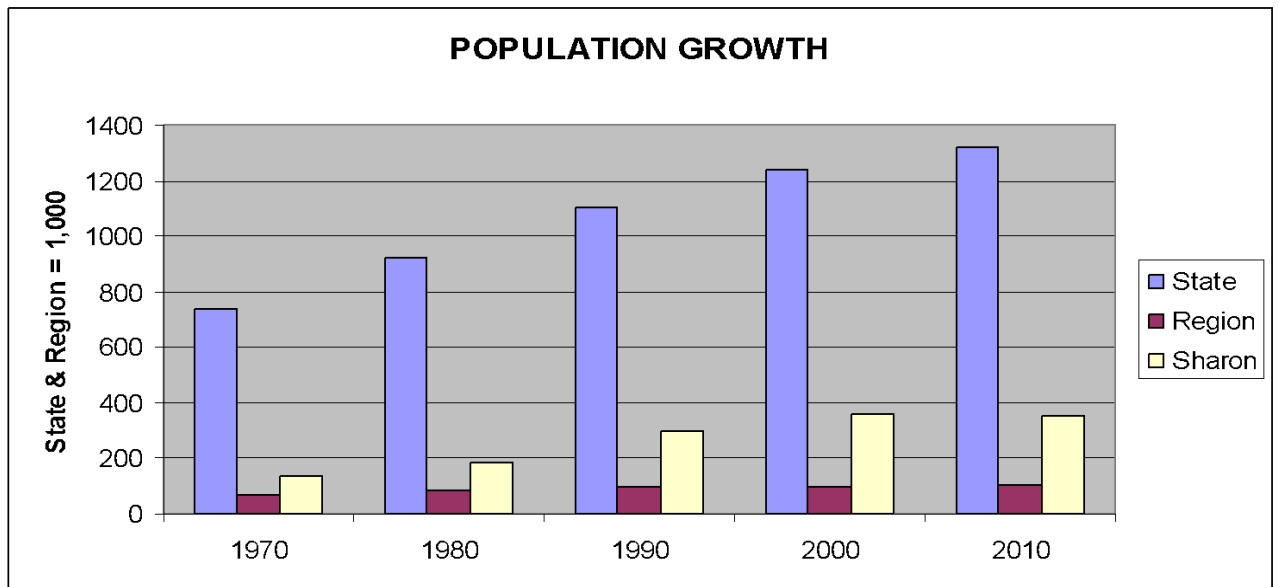
Some communities have elaborate municipal water and wastewater systems, which combined with roads, drainage and utilities makeup that community's infrastructure. Sharon has neither the resources nor the population to warrant either a municipal well or a wastewater treatment plant. Our "natural" infrastructure, every bit as important and even more complex than the man-made systems found in more urban areas, is essential to the safety, health and sustainable future of the Town.

Our natural infrastructure is also largely free of cost but requires protection. Sharon's tax base is small, composed exclusively of the value of land and residential homes.

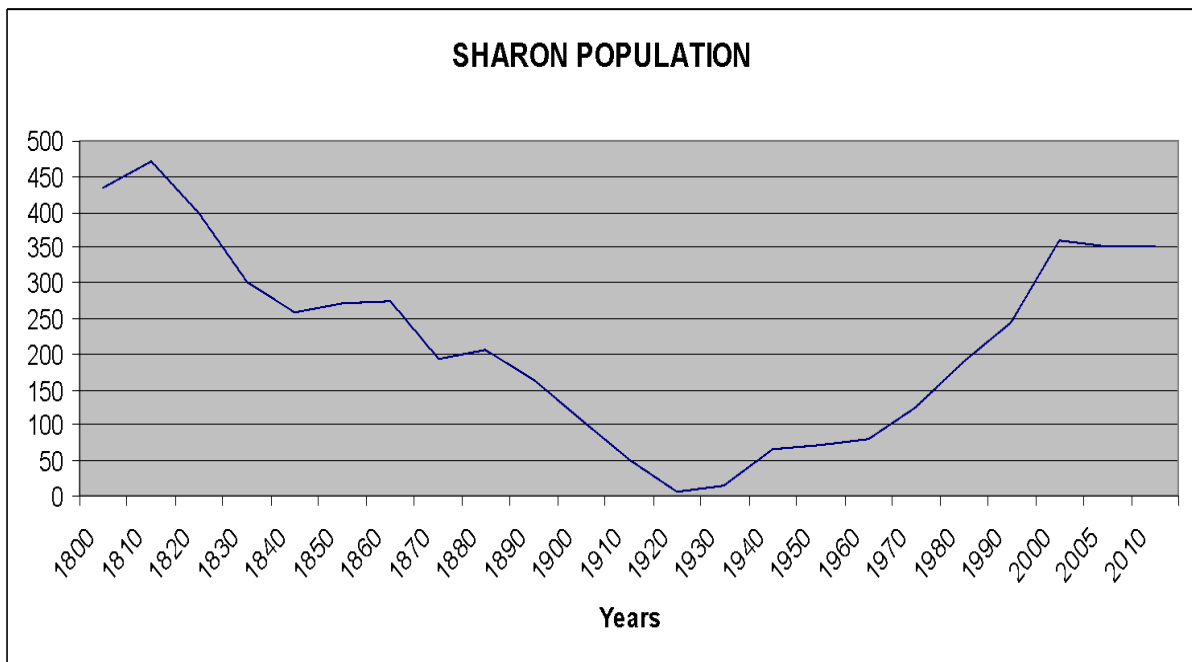
Funds are not available to establish or even tie into an existing municipal water system, a wastewater treatment system, or public drainage system. Therefore, to ensure the long-term sustainability of Sharon as a community, we must proactively protect our existing natural infrastructure.

## Demographics

The population of New Hampshire has doubled in the last forty years, increasing from 737,681 in 1970 to 1,316,256 in 2010, but only projected to 1,412,000 in 2030. All available projections anticipate a continued rate of slow growth.



Much of the eastern part of southern New Hampshire is now either urban or suburban in form, making the "rural charm" of Sharon very enticing to people seeking the quiet and solitude of a "rural-residential" community. Any substantial growth in the region's population represents a threat to the beauty, charm and rural character of Sharon. As in the past, Sharon will accommodate its share of growth, but great care must be taken to manage expansion and hold fast to our desired character.



### Age of Sharon Residents

The State of New Hampshire is known to have the third oldest median age of citizens in the United States. The Southwest region is considered the “oldest” in the state, and the population of the Town of Sharon has been reported by the NH State Census (2019) as having the oldest median age in the Southwest. What impact does “aging” have on the future of the Town? It is unknown, but the probable future will see Sharon to continue to be a “retirement” or “home-occupation” destination.



## **Growth Within the Town**

1. In the 1800s, the town was entirely, agrarian with a couple of mills providing milling and lumber. As the country spread westward, many Sharon citizens abandoned their “scratch” farms for more fertile land. This migration expanded after the Civil War to the extent that by 1925 there were fewer than twenty-five persons living in Sharon. Land was cheap, the forests had been cleared, and only the stone walls and cellar-holes were reminders of earlier times. With the abundance of inexpensive land, summer cottages and camps appeared where farms previously existed, but as the town’s population expanded, the camps disappeared, and homes reappeared, using up most of the easily accessible plots. As the demand for building lots grow, the town will experience pressure to allow lesser desirable properties to be utilized.
2. As the population increases, there may be a demand for the provision of more town services. Sharon has been able to function with a limited tax base because its residents have been willing to accept the contracting of certain town services and facilities. We rely on neighboring towns for services and should strive to foster good and strong relationships with neighboring towns.
3. A growth in population means that more homes will be constructed. To retain the fabric of Sharon in a mixture of traditional style New England homes and forested roads, care must be taken to reduce the “suburbanization” of the town. If roadside trees are cut and stone walls destroyed as part of development, the rural essence of the Town will change.
4. Of necessity, many of us commute each day to some other place to work. There is no Post Office or local store where we can maintain our sense of connection as friends and neighbors. To avoid becoming a community of strangers, we must encourage increased interaction, socialization and municipal participation amongst our residents, new and old.

## **Growth within the Region and State**

1. It is inevitable that if the population of the United States and New Hampshire continue to grow, Sharon will change. The best that can be accomplished is to direct and channel that change, and to minimize the impact it has upon the Town and its residents.

2. As Southern New Hampshire urbanizes, people in the region will want more of what Sharon has to offer. They will want to extract its sand and gravel; they will want to harvest its trees; they will want to build on its hillsides, floodplains and wetlands; and they will want to extract its groundwater. We must continue to monitor what should be preserved, and what activities must be carefully controlled.
3. Sharon's open space will increasingly become a resource of regional importance. The wooded ridgeline trails, forested roads, and clean rivers and streams will lure our urban neighbors. We must find ways to educate the public of the complexity, fragility, beauty and wonder of our natural resources. A potential challenge will be to deal with traffic and pressures to modify the character and appearance of our roads. As more people understand and love what is so special about Sharon, the easier it will be to gain their support for protecting it.
4. We must work with all individuals and organizations who value Sharon to establish management plans for the thousands of acres of open space. A time will surely come when the number of visitors using public areas will likely need to be limited, both to protect the fragile environment and to maintain the quality of the open space experience which already draws more and more visitors to Sharon each year.

## **Renewable Energy**

Bloomberg Energy Resources reported in 2018 that nationally three percent of the energy used within the United States came from renewable sources and is expected to expand to at least 30 percent by 2030. While recognizing that much of the increased renewable energy used would be devoted to industrial and highly populated areas of the country, Sharon must be situated to allow its citizens to participate in this growth while protecting the town's pastoral image.

The town currently has regulations addressing wind and solar energy while protecting its rural character. It is important to be vigilant of any other renewable technologies that may be developed in the future.



## **Communication Infrastructure**

Throughout Sharon, cell phone service and high-speed internet capability is poor-at best. There are many 'dead-spots' in cell coverage, largely due to our terrain and the scarcity of cell towers. High speed internet is not available to most of our residents. While these services are being upgraded in the region, there are no active plans for our township. These upgrades are essential to provide our citizens with needed services and to maintaining competitiveness in the real estate market. This will only become a more major issue in the future.

## **Roads, Traffic and Growth**

Virtually all the towns in Southern New Hampshire are expected to experience growth during the next 20 years; additionally, some communities in the Monadnock region have developed as commuter or “bedroom” communities. The result will likely be an increase in traffic, both on primary and secondary roads. As a result of the regional growth, Sharon must anticipate increased traffic on its roads, even if there is no further development within the town.

Historically, Route 123 has been one of the State’s major north/south connectors. As an increasing number of residents of adjacent bedroom communities commute to Massachusetts, there will be pressure to “improve” and alter the scenic character of the road. Case in point, as a result of increased traffic, a small section of this roadway received “major improvements”. Additionally, Route 124 will continue to experience rising volumes of traffic since it serves both as a local connector and a major north/south route.

### **Protecting the Character and Beauty of Sharon Roads**

Sharon’s character is largely defined by what we see from the edge of our public roads. When natural buffers of mature trees and the boundary stone-walls are maintained, the rural character and natural beauty of Sharon is preserved. For example, leaving a buffer of trees and stone-walls along the road on the front of properties will help to retain this rural atmosphere.

Our goal is to avoid the urbanized appearance that is now prevalent in much of Southern New Hampshire.



## Protecting Sharon's Natural Resources

Several conservation organizations have recognized the fragile nature of Sharon's natural resources, and hundreds of acres are now permanently protected. But if Sharon is to retain its special character, avoid rising infrastructure costs and minimize the impact of natural disasters, then more open space must be protected.

## The Natural Infrastructure of Sharon

Some communities have elaborate municipal water and wastewater systems, which together with roads, drainage and utilities make up the community's primary infrastructure. Sharon has neither the resources nor the population to warrant either a municipal well or a wastewater treatment plant; nor does Sharon have a system of catch basins and drains to handle storm water runoff.

Instead, Sharon relies upon natural deposits of water found under each house lot for its water supply. The town also relies upon the limited capacity of naturally occurring soils for the proper operation of our septic systems. We depend upon forested hillsides, wetlands and natural flood storage areas to prevent valley flooding.

***Our 'natural infrastructure', every bit as important and complex as those man-made systems found in more urban areas, is essential to sustain the safety, health and future of the Town.***



We must protect this natural infrastructure because it supports a community of more than 350 residents and is also largely free of cost to the town. Sharon's tax base is small, composed exclusively of the value of land and residential homes and a small amount of agriculture. If the Town needed to establish a municipal water system, a municipal wastewater treatment system, or an elaborate public drainage system, the cost would be a prohibitive tax burden to the households of Sharon.

It must be the highest community priority to ensure the continued functioning of our natural infrastructure in order to keep our municipal costs affordable and ensure the long-term sustainability of Sharon as a community.

## **Protecting Sharon's Forested Hillsides**

Forested hillsides absorb approximately 50% of rainwater and stabilize steep slopes that might otherwise erode. Forested hillsides slow the rate at which snow melts in the spring, thus reducing the potential for spring floods. Tree roots anchor slopes that might otherwise erode or wash away. Natural vegetated hillsides help prevent sediment from choking headwater streams.

Sharon must work with private landowners and various conservation organizations to make sure that most of our hillsides remain forested in order that they can continue their protective role. Therefore, development should be discouraged on the upper slopes of the higher hills, especially along the Town's eastern border. Paving or hard surfaces result in increased runoff which in turn can cause valley flooding, such that homes with steep driveways can represent a safety hazard and are discouraged.

Also, the forested hillsides of Sharon now provide a major recreational resource, including the Wapack Trail. These hillsides, especially along the eastern border, have much to do with the "rural" character and natural beauty of the Town. I observed that throughout the early 1900s, most of the hills of Sharon were free of trees to accommodate agriculture. Mass removal of those trees today would change the character of the town, destroy high value natural habitat, diminish recreational trails of regional importance, and could result in a degree of flooding that would overwhelm the limited resources of the Town.

Land with mountain views (or the potential for such views) will remain in demand as residential lots in the future. Sharon must anticipate increased residential pressure on steep hillside areas (and along the Town's borders to both the east and west). Additional land use controls may be required to assure that hillside development does not clog our rivers and streams with sediment or result in excessive public expense.

Approximately half of the eastern hillsides in Sharon are now protected by the New England Forestry Foundation. However, the town still has hundreds of acres of sensitive hillside land that can and might be developed, to the detriment of the environment, the rural character of the Town, and the future cost of maintaining hillside roads. We must continue to identify any key land that should be preserved so that everyone in Sharon can enjoy mountain views.

The town must continue to support our Conservation Commission working with state and national conservation organizations to continue their successful preservation efforts. Sharon does not have a sufficient tax base to fully finance all the needed protection. We must continue to rely upon the farsighted generosity of individual

landowners and the financial and technical assistance of state and national organizations for the continued preservation of Sharon's resources.

## **Protecting Sharon's Rivers, Streams and Aquifers**

*"Water is our most valuable natural asset, and if we manage it well, our water offers New Hampshire a competitive advantage. It supports and is vital to a healthy environment, individuals, communities and the state economy. In short, New Hampshire lives on water".*

*New Hampshire Water Sustainability Council – Final Report.  
(NHWSC-FR)*

The Gridley River is one of the Town's most precious resources. It is the principal natural drainage system of the Town, and this function must be protected. Its is of region-wide importance, and it contributes to the natural beauty of Sharon. Therefore the "Plan for the Protection of Sharon's Open Spaces" has as a principal goal: conserve and protect river corridors and wetlands associated with the Gridley River, Meadow Brook, Town Line Brook and their tributaries.

Additionally, these waterways are historically important to Sharon since they provided waterpower for several mills. We must strive to protect the remaining mill sites as part of the Town's cultural heritage . These waterways are an important part of the Town's colonial and native American history.

If watersheds are improperly developed, there could be significant additional flooding and water contamination impacting not only Sharon, but also downstream communities along the Contoocook River valley.

There is an important aquifer overlaid by a series of sand and gravel glacial deposits located under the Gridley River. There are also important wetland resources and other aquifers that could be damaged by sand and gravel mining and any other development.

We must protect these aquifers and associated deposits. Commercial and/or municipal extraction of these materials in the most sensitive areas of the Town must be avoided to protect future water supplies, sensitive wetland resources and to avoid expensive impacts on Town roads.



Our stream and forested hillsides certainly contribute to the beauty and rural character of the Town. What may not be as evident is that these natural features of the landscape are also what makes our town function without significant infrastructure and keeps our taxes at a relatively affordable level. These must be protected for Sharon to survive. When our watersheds are kept in a natural condition, then flood hazards will be avoided, natural beauty will be retained, and a significant element in the town's rural quality will remain.

*“If we do not learn to take note of what we are using and how, and if we do not take time to understand the natural systems we rely on, our cumulative impact may result in there not being enough good quality water where and when it is needed to meet human demand and ecosystem needs.”*  
( NHWSC-FR).

The Town Forest is a key resource that not only assures public open space, but also protects Meadow Brook. The Town must continue its efforts to expand the boundaries of the Forest, eventually providing pedestrian and wildlife corridors

between the New England Forestry Foundation to the east and the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests to the southwest.

Should Sharon experience significant development, more storm water runoff will be generated, creating a potential for localized or regional flooding. Development will also increase the likelihood of sedimentation that can choke streams and reduce their flood conveyance ability. Protecting our waterways will require not only water basin protection, but also more attention to sedimentation and erosion control throughout the entire watershed. A forested landscape can absorb up to 50% of rainwater, while also moderating the rate of spring snowmelt. Any forest harvesting must conform to best management practices.

The Town must give priority to working with individual property owners and various conservation groups to continue to preserve open space. Specifically, landowners should be encouraged to place conservation easements on their land, and the town should augment the town forest through the purchase of land or easements. The people of Sharon have identified places throughout the town which should be preserved if at all possible.

## **Goals and Recommendations**

The following summarizes the primary goals of the Master Plan for the Town of Sharon, New Hampshire:

1. To preserve the essential rural character of Sharon in a growing and urbanizing world.
2. To keep the costs of growth within the limits of Sharon's tax base.
3. To provide as many as possible public services through contracts with other towns and the private sector.
4. To protect the health, safety and welfare of Sharon's residents.
5. To avoid or minimize natural hazards such as landslides, fires and flooding.
6. To identify and protect environmentally sensitive lands and waters such as streams, rivers, aquifers and wetlands.
7. To establish and maintain open spaces which can be linked by trails and corridors for wildlife and pedestrian passage throughout the town.
8. To encourage the preservation of large tracts of open woodland.
9. To protect forested hillsides.
10. To preserve the rural character of all roads in Sharon.
11. To encourage Sharon and its residents to increase our use of renewable energies which will also improve health.

In order that we can achieve these goals, the following recommendations are made:

- Prioritize the Town's roadside buffer regulations.
- Expand the Town Forest.
- Protect the entire length of the Gridley River, its aquifer and watershed.
- Continue to maintain good working relationships with our neighboring towns.
- Educate our residents to understand the importance of keeping Sharon rural.
- Promote our conservation plan.
- Make every effort to purchase or protect environmentally sensitive gravel bearing lands.
- All logging in town, especially on steep slopes and environmentally sensitive areas should be encouraged to conform to "Good Forestry in the Granite State:

Recommended Voluntary Forest Management Practices for New Hampshire (current editions).

- Formally review and as necessary revise the Master Plan, at least every five years.
- Establish a Sharon Energy Committee to review and recommend renewable energy power options to the Town and to inform and encourage residents about clean energy.
- Establish a Sharon Communications Committee to review and offer recommendations on technology infrastructure.

