

City of Keene
New Hampshire

MASTER PLAN STEERING COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, December 3, 2024

6:00 PM

**Council Chambers,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Harold Farrington, Chair
Alex Henkel, Vice Chair
Councilor Michael Remy
Cody Morrison
Leatrice Oram
Joshua Meehan
Emily Lavigne-Bernier
Dr. Joseph Perras
Alexander Von Plinsky, IV
Joe Walier
Jay Kahn, Mayor, Alternate (Voting)
Councilor Philip Jones, Alternate (Voting)

Staff Present:

Mari Brunner, Senior Planner
Megan Fortson, Planner

Members Not Present:

Elizabeth Wood
Juliana Bergeron
Councilor Catherine Workman, Alternate
Kenneth Kost, Alternate

1) Call to Order & Roll Call

Chair Farrington called the meeting to order at 6:04 PM.

2) Minutes of the Previous Meeting – October 1, 2024

A motion by Councilor Jones to adopt the minutes of the October 1, 2024 meeting was duly seconded Councilor Remy and the motion carried unanimously.

3) Future Summit Debrief

Mari Brunner, the City's Senior Planner, recapped the first of two Future Summits and asked for feedback/suggestions from those who attended so that improvements could be made for the second on June 3, 2025, from 5:00–7:00 PM. The first was on a Saturday from 9:00 AM–12:00 PM with the project consultants present to recap the visioning phase of the project. Then, a giant map was

rolled out on the floor and participants used yarn, Legos, and sticky notes to add their thoughts and ideas to the map. Participants also visited stations around the room to provide feedback for each of the six Strategic Pillars—or themes—that were identified. At the end, the group debriefed and shared key takeaways. Some suggestions from the Summit were incorporated into the revised [Vision Report](#), including suggestions about lifelong learning and fostering an educated citizenry, as well as changing one Pillar name from “Healthy Community” to “Vibrant Neighborhoods.” Ms. Brunner thought the Future Summit format worked pretty well, but sought feedback.

Chair Farrington thought the first Future Summit was excellent, especially with the hands-on floor map activity, which he said was useful for understanding what people do and do not like about the specific geography of Keene. He commented on the fact that in a planning process like this one, it is common to get repeat engagement from the same people and voices, but noted that there were still a limited number of regular Keene citizens who had not been reached through the various activities in this Master Planning process, despite the active and good efforts. Still, Chair Farrington thought the Future Summit was successful and went well. He was left with one question at the end: What is the target population of Keene at the end of this time horizon? Should it go up or down? Was there consensus? He thought this was an interesting question worth wrestling with as a starting point.

Councilor Jones thanked Ms. Brunner and other City staff for their efforts, noting how well they had done in the recent absence of a Community Development Director. He added that the six Pillars were still changeable and flexible. He said a lot of work went into the map and he thought it provided a lot of inspiration. He thought it might have been the first time that people were catching on to what this master planning process was about because he said participants at many other meetings thought that it involved the downtown project. Now, he thought people were seeing a vision for Keene in 20 years, which he appreciated.

Mayor Kahn asked what would happen to the map now. Ms. Brunner said it was in the Community Development Department. It had been displayed at Birdies on Main Street during the Pumpkin Festival so people could look at it. Because it is so big, Ms. Brunner noted the limitations on where it could be displayed. Mayor Kahn was curious about how else the map could be used, noting that many community members suggested zoning considerations, which were key takeaways that the Mayor hoped would evolve from this process relative to the Pillars. He thought there might have been some confusion in how some of the pillars had evolved.

For example, in “Flourishing Environment,” he was unsure that “*flourishing*” was the right word, noting that “*sustainable*” tends to be a more commonly used word in the community. He was also unsure that all these Pillars needed two words, stating that perhaps they could be simplified to: Environment, Neighborhoods, Workforce, Housing, Mobility, Economy. The Mayor added that healthy lifestyles and healthcare are not things that only Cheshire Medical Center (CMC) cares about; the community has a broader role. He also agreed that the “Vibrant Neighborhoods” Pillar still needed work and the Committee would need to hear more voices from the neighborhoods.

Mr. Morrison was only present for one hour of the Future Summit, but he thought it was very interactive. He thought the format of using the large map engaged more people than would otherwise have participated. He noted that if someone had accessibility issues, they might not have been able to take part with the map on the floor, so he wondered what other options there could be next time.

Councilor Remy responded to the Chair's question of whether the City's population should shrink, stay the same size, or grow. The Councilor's personal opinion was that the City should grow because if the City is not growing, then the population would be declining. He noted that Keene's average population has been shifting older and he thought the community needed to be thoughtfully growing. He was not suggesting a 40% spike in population, but something like 10% every five years, for example. Councilor Remy agreed that it would be important to find an answer to this question that the community could live with.

The Deputy City Manager, Andy Bohannon, spoke from his perspective as the former Parks & Recreation Director to echo the Mayor's comments on public health. Mr. Bohannon had spoken with Ms. Brunner about the importance of public health being a strong piece of this Master Plan. He spoke about how some of the Vision 2020 and Healthy Monadnock public health initiatives that came from the 2010 Master Plan had lost momentum since. However, Mr. Bohannon knew of existing programs across the state that could be brought to Keene (e.g., 10-minute walking initiatives) that he said should be worked into the Master Plan in collaboration with CMC because this is a very health-focused community. It would be a matter of connecting all these resources to the people who need them in the community.

Dr. Perras said those were great points. He noted that CMC would be kicking off another Health Needs Assessment in the spring; these occur every three years. CMC has a Community & Population Health Department run by Tricia Zahn and Dr. Perras had started attending the community meetings, though he said there did not seem to be momentum. He was not local when the group's work began in 2020, but said it was a great process and the goal was to re-energize it. Dr. Perras would be happy to bring the initial results of the Health Needs Assessment to this Steering Committee and suggested inviting Dr. Zahn to speak to this Committee too when talking about healthy communities and vibrant neighborhoods. Dr. Perras shared Mayor Kahn's concern about losing the word "health" from some part of the Master Plan.

Mayor Kahn also suggested contacting Julie Schoelzel at the Chamber of Commerce for a presentation on its Northern Borders Grant, the initiative to grow the community's population. He said they put together a nice, descriptive slide show, describing how to help the community grow in a variety of age demographics, particularly ages 16–29, to Councilor Remy's point. Chair Farrington asked Ms. Brunner to add this as an agenda item in January.

4) Online Discussion Boards

Ms. Brunner said that all committee members received an e-mail with the link to the online discussion boards and she hoped everyone would look at them and provide feedback because it was

still possible to add information or change the format if Committee members thought it would be helpful. Specifically, she asked for the Committee's help completing the "History" and "Currently Happening" sections of each discussion board. Ms. Brunner looked forward to hearing everyone's input and thoughts via the discussion boards, which would be the forum to provide input and feedback for anyone not participating in the upcoming task forces. The discussion boards would be the vehicle for members of the community to provide input on this process while the task forces are running. She noted that people are more likely to leave a comment if they see other people commenting—it could help spark ideas or they might feel more comfortable—so she encouraged Committee members to comment.

Ms. Oram asked if the minutes of the task force meetings would be uploaded online to spur discussion. Ms. Brunner did not believe so because they are not official public bodies, but said that presentation materials could be posted. She said staff and the consultants had also talked about posting notes from each task force in some form.

Chair Farrington was unsure everyone had done their homework prior to the meeting, so he encouraged everyone to review and complete those steps.

Mr. Von Plinsky liked how each Pillar had its own page on the website so he could quickly read through the history, macro trends (which was helpful; what is affecting us that we cannot control?), and what is currently happening (focused on what people literally talked about on the survey). He said the snapshot highlights were helpful because the City is paying the consultant for those insights and their expertise. So, Mr. Von Plinsky said that overall, the website was designed well for starting the discussion.

Ms. Brunner described the "Office Hours" that Community Development Department staff would be hosting at the Keene Public Library from December 11th–13th from 10:00 AM–4:30 PM. For anyone in the community unable/unwilling to use computers, staff would be available to assist with the discussion boards, with a TV screen set up to enter comments in real time.

5) Strategic Pillar Task Forces

Ms. Brunner recapped the Strategic Pillar task forces: community leaders have been reached out to and engaged as part of the process because of their specific interest in one of the six Strategic Pillars. Following an introductory meeting, each task force will be meeting in January, February, and March and will have a consultant assigned to help lead it. The consultants are researching, looking at other communities similar to Keene, and finding case studies Keene could learn from. The task force meetings will not have a specific format. The first meeting for each task force will set the stage, present data and case studies, and orient everyone to what has been learned from the community so far. The next two meetings will be to hear from the task force members about specific ideas and actions that they think the community, the City, or its partners should be taking to achieve the goals articulated in the Community Vision Report. This is the part of the project in which the community would be asked to help develop an Action Plan, and the discussion boards would be the opportunity

for members of the public to weigh in on that. So, any information and comments from the discussion boards would be shared with the task forces as well.

Councilor Remy asked about the process for deciding on the membership of the task forces. Ms. Brunner said the task forces will not be formal public bodies. Members of this Steering Committee could join a task force and the other members had either volunteered or signed up to participate at meetings or outreach events. There was also specific outreach to organizations like the Chamber of Commerce, Keene State College (KSC), and CMC. Councilor Remy asked if the membership of each task force would be published.

Ms. Brunner was unsure and said she would get back to him, though she did not necessarily see it as a problem; she would want to notify the members first. The Councilor stressed the importance of membership of groups like these being balanced, similar to when the Mayor vets members to form City committees. Ms. Brunner did not think these task forces would be creating any actual deliverables, which would only be done by this Steering Committee. The task forces would more so be generating ideas to share with staff and the project consultants.

Ms. Lavigne-Bernier asked about the cap of members on each task force. Ms. Brunner said roughly 12, with the “Livable Housing” task force having the most. There will be City staff members on each as well.

Mr. Morrison thought that when signing up for a group with a broader municipal process there should be some expectation of one’s name being published. He added that he thought the task force membership would be retrievable via a public Right-to-Know request and Ms. Brunner agreed, but she wanted to consider it before adding the participant lists to the website.

Dr. Perras asked if people had requested to participate on the task forces. Ms. Brunner said some came to meetings, heard about the task forces, and signed up there. Some signed up at tabling events—the Future Summit being the main one—and the Steering Committee meetings.

Mr. Meehan wondered if those who signed up had mainly been those who were engaged in the process otherwise, to the Chair’s initial question. Councilor Remy wondered—if there was no process for deciding the task forces—if there was a chance for the membership of those who signed up for a task force to not be those best suited to guide that task force’s development, in which case Mr. Meehan said the Steering Committee might recommend that staff seek additional members to supplement the task force and Councilor Remy agreed. Chair Farrington said he thought staff might already have been doing that and that the consultants might already have been aware of that.

Chair Farrington asked if Steering Committee participation was needed on the task forces. Ms. Brunner said that if available, that direct connection would be helpful. Ms. Brunner still welcomed recommendations for more task force members. She offered to email the existing task force membership to the Steering Committee after this meeting. Mayor Kahn thought that would be essential, stating that as this Master Plan process moves forward, this Steering Committee will have

to take responsibility for who is on those task forces. Also, he said there was buzz in the community at this time because there was a high level of engagement in this project, and he thought it would be important not to lose that. The Mayor commented on the importance of these interconnected relationships and urged his fellow Committee members to suggest more task force members before the January meeting.

Chair Farrington asked Ms. Brunner to email the list of task force members and asked Steering Committee members to send Ms. Brunner suggestions of community members to serve on the various task forces before the January meeting, or to reach out to them personally.

Ms. Oram asked what information would be used to establish balance on the task forces? Based on what information? Would the individuals be asked to identify a role or demographic information? Ms. Brunner said she knew a little bit about some people because she had met them before, but noted that there were some she did not know. Councilor Remy said it was a good question and his point was that if he did not see someone on the list for a task force that he would have expected to see because of their expertise, he would make sure they had been asked.

Chair Farrington asked if there was an application. Ms. Brunner said it had mostly been people who signed up or who were volunteered. Staff reached out to some because they felt strongly that KSC and CMC should have representation, for example.

Mr. Von Plinsky returned to discussion about wordsmithing some of the particular Pillar names. He said words matter, and he suggested considering some of these now before sending them to the task forces since it seems that not everyone is fully content with the language. Ms. Brunner said “Vibrant Neighborhoods” has been challenging because it focuses on the strong social fabric. For “Flourishing Environment,” she saw the Mayor’s point, and suggested *healthy* instead of *flourishing*. She agreed that the names of the Pillars are important, and the Committee could workshop those, but she advised that if the Committee had substantive changes for the descriptive content under each one, she would want to bring the consultant in for that. Mr. Von Plinsky was clear that he was only concerned with wordsmithing and only with the two mentioned. Instead of “Vibrant Neighborhoods” he suggested “Healthy Neighborhoods” to align with the earlier discussion of a healthy community; “community” felt more abstract than “neighborhood” to him.

Councilor Remy liked the idea of “Vibrant, Healthy Community.”

Ms. Lavigne-Bernier said she felt that there was a hole in the “Vibrant Neighborhoods” Pillar regarding the social fabric idea Ms. Brunner spoke about. Ms. Lavigne-Bernier spoke of personal experience since moving to East Keene the previous year and experiencing how Keene has very strong neighborhoods, and how each neighborhood has its own identity. She suggested, “Vibrant Neighborhoods: Healthy Neighbors, Healthy Community.”

Dr. Perras wondered if the task forces could help with the wordsmithing. To an earlier point, he also wondered if focusing on the second word in these phrases would help to streamline this in a way the

Steering Committee, staff, and consultants had been grappling with. Mayor Kahn agreed that focusing on the noun and not the adjective was more important, and the adjective could evolve; or he was unsure an adjective was needed at all. He added that “Neighborhoods” are not public health, but he said—at this time in Keene—that health was the pressing issue of the day, whether pandemic, disease, lifestyle, or mental health and as task forces were popping up, people were expressing concern that the community as a whole was not doing what it should. Dr. Perras said CMC’s focus would be health equity and ensuring that no matter what neighborhoods are called, that people in each neighborhood have equitable health outcomes and the same access to care. So, he suggested focusing the task force’s insight on that.

Ms. Lavigne-Bernier was concerned that prospective members of a “Vibrant Neighborhood” task force would not know what they are signing up for: What they want their neighborhood to look like in the future? Public health? Ms. Brunner learned at the Future Summit that people thought what the Planners were calling “Healthy Community” was really about public health, whereas it is actually about place making, neighborhood characteristics, and historic preservation, among other characteristics.

Ms. Lavigne-Bernier said that was her point. She asked which of the existing task forces Dr. Perras would sign up for as a public health expert and guessed probably not “Vibrant Neighborhoods.” Dr. Perras said probably not and added that as an employer and from a public health perspective he would likely sign up for “Adaptable Workforce.” He shared Ms. Lavigne-Bernier’s concern that what they thought about the public health importance might not have matched the public’s feedback. Still, he said they were at risk of losing the health focus because it would not fit neatly into any of the other Pillars.

Councilor Remy questioned whether public health is within the purview of a Master Plan or just something the Steering Committee was passionate about. He knew it was a focus of the 2010 Plan, but he was unsure if it was within the City’s scope of control. Councilor Remy also said that he thought there could be confusion or overlapping interest between “Livable Housing” and “Vibrant Neighborhoods”; as well as between “Adaptable Workforce” and “Thriving Economy.” He was unsure that health needed to fit into one of the Pillars.

Mr. Meehan noted that the “Vibrant Neighborhoods” Pillar talked about social and emotional well-being, and while it would need more work, he said health could fit there.

Councilor Jones referred back to the term “neighborhood fabric” and said many things could fall under the umbrella of a neighborhood: safety, bug resistance, walkability, and commercial nodes, for example. So, he thought this needed to stay more generalized, while everyone was being specific in their minds.

Ms. Oram referred to her experience with strategic planning and said that there could be an impulse to categorize, pull together, and cohere. She wondered if the Steering Committee had spent enough time having this conversation and she considered what the group might be missing vs. what was

adequately categorized or captured. Chair Farrington said it was a good thought. Ms. Brunner said that one overarching theme had been collaboration, which was identified early on in this project as a key strength of this community and region. So, she said there had been some discussions with the consultant team about emphasizing collaboration as part every Pillar.

Ms. Brunner also spoke about weaving sustainability and the economy throughout all the Pillars, and she wondered if population/community health would fit similarly throughout. She provided the example of housing and issues like lead paint remediation or mold aligning with population health. She could envision overarching themes relevant to all the Pillars that the six task forces could workshop. Chair Farrington said that energy emerged as a similar overarching theme during some of the community meetings, but he said that would need to be defined (i.e., individual, gasoline, heating, etc.). Ms. Oram said there could be cross cutting themes about desired outcomes for community health, sustainability, renewable energy, etc. Perhaps they are not Pillars.

Chair Farrington asked staff to work on these ideas with the consultants.

6) Phase II Schedule

Ms. Brunner described Phase II of the Master Planning schedule as shown in the [Community Vision Report](#). Phase II would be the process of developing the Action/Implementation Plan and Future Land Use Map. The discussion boards, task force meetings, and Steering Committee meetings would inform the Action and Implementation Plans. The consultants will be putting together online story maps to help with the future land use discussion. She explained that a story map was posted on the Keene Parks and Recreation website, for example, to help people visualize different areas of Keene and provide feedback.

She explained that there would be a second community survey in April 2025 to ask the community for ideas and input to prioritize the ideas and action items that came from the task forces. These activities would lead up to the next Future Summit on June 3, 2025, in advance of drafting the Master Plan, which would be presented to this Steering Committee for final approval. Once this Steering Committee approves the Master Plan, it would be presented to the City Council for its vote and endorsement before being presented to the Planning Board for adoption. There would be public hearings before both the Planning Board and City Council.

Ms. Oram asked if City staff or the consultants felt that the process was behind schedule at all; she felt that things were on schedule. Ms. Brunner said that the two-year project was on schedule at this time and said it was a very ambitious schedule, but if adhered to, the City would stay on track with its consultant contract.

7) New Business

Chair Farrington recalled the requests for the Chamber of Commerce presentation and a discussion of target populations in an organized way. Additionally, the Chair noted that bringing data into these

discussions would be useful. He also noted that the Steering Committee had not discussed attracting target industries to Keene, and he thought it would be good to discuss developing a City–industry collaboration plan.

To the Chair’s latter point, Mayor Kahn said that on December 4th, he was convening the Keene Area Manufacturing Consortium, including people from Markem-Imaje, Timken, and more. He said it is amazing what can happen in this community when you reach out to people directly. He added that in January, Taylor Caswell, the first NH Commissioner of the Department of Business and Economic Affairs, would be coming to Keene to follow up with this Consortium. Mayor Kahn said he would be pitching to Mr. Caswell, the Governor, and others that the optics, engineering, and manufacturing industries in Keene are what bio-fabrication is to Manchester and that the concentrations in these two areas are what could propel NH in economic prosperity and growth. The Mayor noted the concern that with a Master Plan, there could be an attempt to do everything for every group. He thought there were opportunities to hone messages and articulate synergies. Chair Farrington appreciated the Mayor’s leadership focused on smart growth. Mayor Kahn noted that Vice Chair Henkel leads an innovative business.

Councilor Jones discussed environmental and flooding standards related to pervious and impervious surfaces and a long-term plan for future technologies. He referenced the area behind 800 Park Avenue that had consistently started flooding since the Black Brook Industrial Park was built upstream. He noted that it had never flooded like that before. He suggested considering future technology for parking lots and sidewalks with pervious surfaces to mitigate flooding. Chair Farrington said that the Planning Board was dealing with that issue at this time, noting that pervious surfaces allow water to drain through them as opposed to off them.

Councilor Jones reiterated his thanks to Ms. Brunner and City staff for their efforts. Ms. Brunner thanked the Steering Committee.

- 8) **Next Meeting: Tuesday, January 7, 2025, 6:00 PM (to be confirmed)**
- 9) **Adjournment**

There being no further business, Chair Farrington adjourned the meeting at 7:26 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katie Kibler, Minute Taker
December 10, 2024

Reviewed and edited by,
Megan Fortson, Planner