

3. THE MASTER PLAN

Each community is defined by the natural and cultural features that make it unique. To conserve community character, the community must understand what it has, what it wants to preserve, and why. The master plan document articulates that understanding, and is used as a guide to the physical form that development patterns will take as the community grows. When the time for growth comes, a thoughtfully prepared, strong master plan will focus the efforts of the community and outside developers on creating a place where it is safe and healthy to live, work, and play.

The master plan document for a community contains the basic statement and guiding principles for development. These statements describe a vision for the future of the community. Objectives, which are more specific statements, elaborate on the goals. Specific strategies, or tools, that the community will use to accomplish the goals and objectives, are also part of a master plan document.

If a goal of the municipality includes the conservation of existing tree and woodland resources, that intent must be clearly explained in the master plan. Tree and woodland conservation should be directly addressed as a goal. The statement should be positive, and emphasize tree and woodland conservation specifically. Planning and zoning strategies that will be used to advance these conservation goals should be laid out.

Statements in the master plan should be fairly general to allow flexibility as new information and techniques are developed. Yet, they should be specific enough to be easily and clearly understood by the general public, the governing body, and outside entities that may impact the community.



In New Jersey only a planning board may adopt a master plan. The governing body of the municipality adopts zoning ordinances to implement proposals in the master plan. Zoning regulations must be consistent with the master plan. All other community planning documents, strategic plans, regulations and tools should be consistent with the master plan. The purpose of these other documents is to clarify and implement the master plan.

SAMPLE STATEMENT EXPLAINING THE BENEFITS OF TREES

Taken from the Hopewell Township Draft Master Plan by Banisch Associates, Inc.

Woodlands and other native vegetation perform a series of important functions related to the ecological balance. Forests produce oxygen, giving them intrinsic value. They reduce soil erosion and surface runoff, absorb pollutants and promote aquifer recharge, because of the high moisture holding capacity of the forest soils and tree canopy. Forests provide habitats for plants and animals and provide open space and recreation lands. They enhance the visual character of scenic corridors, create a feeling of privacy and seclusion and reduce noise impacts. And they affect local climatic conditions near or within their boundaries, such as the cooling effect on trout streams. Woodlands and other native vegetation also provide visual diversity in the terrain, enhancing the value of property. Removal of trees and other vegetation can result in ecological, hydrological, and economic impacts.

SAMPLE GOAL STATEMENTS

Taken from the Lebanon Township Master Plan prepared by Banisch Associates, Inc.

LAND USE AND MANAGEMENT GOAL:

To protect and maintain the prevailing rural character and unique sense of place of the Township, including diverse residential neighborhoods, historic settlement areas and scenic landscapes, which result from the natural topography, agricultural lands, woodlands and watercourses.

COMMUNITY DESIGN GOAL:

To retain to the greatest extent practicable attractive vistas from public rights-of-way, including views of hills, valleys, ridgelines, woodlands, farmlands, hedge rows, stream corridors, flood plains and other natural areas.

NATURAL RESOURCE PROTECTION GOALS:

To protect environmental resources which contribute to the rural character of the Township, including but not limited to steep slopes, ridgelines, trout streams, wetlands, stream corridors, potable water supplies, watersheds, aquifers, rivers, view sheds, forests and other vegetation, habitats of threatened and endangered species and unique natural systems.

To promote the protection of biological diversity through the maintenance of large contiguous tracts and corridors of recreation, forest, flood plain and other open space lands.

To identify and manage stream corridor buffer areas by maintaining undisturbed vegetation in order to protect and improve water quality, and provide wildlife corridors and opportunities for passive and active recreation.

SAMPLE STRATEGY STATEMENTS

Taken from The Conservation Element of The Hopewell Draft Master Plan Document prepared by Banisch Associates, Inc.

Hedgerows and forest areas along traveled roadways and established property boundaries should be retained and enhanced, where appropriate, with native species.

Performance standards should encourage the conservation of habitat areas that are as large and circular as possible, gradual and undulating at the edges and connected by wildlife corridors wide enough to maintain interior conditions (i.e. 300' or more).

Woodland areas along open space corridors should be preserved and interconnections among existing woodlands should be promoted.

THE CONSERVATION PLAN ELEMENT OF THE MASTER PLAN

Factual inventory data about tree resources in the community is the basis for community design and policy decisions. For this reason, the data should be presented somewhere in the master plan. A logical place to present this information is in the Conservation Plan Element.

The Conservation Plan Element of the master plan should discuss the protection of all natural resources, scenic views, cultural features, and other characteristics that contribute to the livability of the community. Trees and woodlands should not be isolated as an environmentally important feature, but viewed as one critical element in a functioning ecological system. The presence or absence of trees impacts steep slope conservation, soil conservation, the health of streams and groundwater resources, storm water management and availability of habitat for wildlife. Wherever natural resources are mentioned in the Conservation Plan Element or other parts of the master plan, trees should be included in the reference.

Ideally, a complete natural resource inventory should be prepared before the Conservation Plan Element is undertaken. It should include an inventory map that shows the relationship of woodlands to other natural resources. When critical features are overlaid, a summary map can be generated and used by the community to assess the level of impact a proposed development will have on environmental features. This type of map allows communities to clearly identify areas containing the most environmentally critical resources.

Typical statements about the benefits of trees, including ecological, economic, cultural, visual, and other functions, should be included in the Conservation Plan Element. The Conservation Plan Element should also contain justification for the conservation of trees and woodlands and discussion about the negative impacts of tree removal. In order to be legally defensible, the justification must be tied back to health, safety, and welfare of the general public.

Although the Conservation Plan Element discusses the protection of all natural resources, one section should be devoted specifically to tree and woodland conservation. Maps showing the general location of all individual trees that have historic or cultural importance, hedgerows and woodlands should be included. For large tracts of forests, forest associations should be mapped, including where they are located, which are important and why they are important.

The general type and quality of each resource should be documented, and priorities for their conservation should be clearly identified. The rationale for established priorities for conservation should be discussed.