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## **In defense of local control: Why the Planning Board matters**

### **Summary**

- The Planning Board works within the legal framework of the State laws, and, more importantly, within guidelines established by the voters and concerned citizens of Stratford
- The Board consists of Stratford residents who volunteer their time
- The Board's duties are:
  - Master Plan: a guiding document for the town's future development, written with the input and viewpoints of Stratford residents
  - Subdivision Regulations to ensure wise expansion of development and to protect property owners
  - Collaboration on the Town's Capital Improvement Program (CIP)
  - Assistance with processing land-use ordinance proposals, all of which must be given to the voters for their final decision at a Town Meeting
- **What happens when the Planning Board is abolished?**
  - Everything that the voters of Stratford have voted for related to the Planning Board and the future development of the Town would be lost.
  - Stratford's only two land-use ordinances would lapse, including one relating to waste issues and other public nuisances, and one related to flood plain development.
  - Town's participation in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) would end, causing loss of federally guaranteed flood insurance. Federal development grants and mortgages would be unavailable in flood plain areas, and FEMA assistance would be limited after a flood.
  - **In short: Stratford would lose local land use control and be left vulnerable to outside influences regarding the town's future.**

### **More**

In 2018, a petition initiated by a group of Stratford voters was circulated asking to abolish the town's Planning Board. The petitioners garnered enough signatures to place the petition on the official ballot as a separate question and put it before voters during the 2019 town election.

During a public hearing in January on the matter, only one representative from the initiative to abolish the Planning Board was present, while many of the remaining attendees spoke out in favor of keeping the Planning Board, which has been in place since 1967.

The Select Board of the Town of Stratford views this petition with considerable concern and would like the voters of Stratford to know why the Planning Board has been, and continues to be, very important to the future of the town.

The Planning Board consists of residents, volunteering their time to conduct the board's business on the community's behalf. According to NH state regulations (RSA 672.1) "planning, zoning, and related regulations have been and should continue to be the responsibility of municipal government". This is one of the few areas where towns in NH are able to maintain a measure of local control, rather than being governed entirely by State and Federal regulations.

One of the Planning Board's key responsibilities is to compile the master plan, which is a town's vision and road map for its future development. While a master plan is not a legally binding document, it carries weight both inside and outside of a town. Securing grants may require a town to have an up-to-date master plan, for example, and the SEC's denial of the Northern Pass permit was based on the nature of the master plans and local land use ordinances of the towns along its proposed route. Residents play a determining role in developing a master plan and are actively encouraged to take part in the planning process. Stratford's current master plan dates from 2008 and is now due for a major revision. There is much change going on in the North Country and revising our master plan is a powerful way of ensuring that the Town's residents have a say in its future.

The Planning Board also consults and advises during the development of a town's Capital Improvement Program (CIP), which coordinates development and improvement of the town's public facilities both systematically and under the guidance of the master plan. Although Stratford currently has not yet authorized a CIP, its potential advantages are effectively closed off if there is no master plan and no Planning Board.

Another responsibility of the Planning Board is to establish subdivision regulations, which help to ensure a town's wise growth and expansion. The regulations protect landowners, help maintain property values, and promote the town's health, safety, and overall resilience. Stratford's subdivision regulations were recently updated after two public hearings.

Finally, a Planning Board is instrumental in the process of proposing land use ordinances to enhance a town's long-term sustainability and well-being. Currently, Stratford has one land use ordinance relating to waste and other public nuisances, and one related to flood plain development and the National Flood Insurance Program.

What happens, then, if the voters decide to abolish the Planning Board?

All guidance and regulation dependent upon it would end. This means that both our land use regulations would lapse. It would end the town's participation in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), which requires the town to have a flood plain ordinance in place, and families within the flood zone would lose their federally guaranteed flood insurance. It would also mean that federal development grants, mortgages, and loans would be unavailable in FEMA flood plain areas, and that following a flood, federal disaster assistance for flood damage would be limited. The protections provided by the master plan, our land use regulations, and the NFIP would be lost, and it would leave our town with very few tools to deal with any future land use issues.

Abolishing the Planning Board would end local land use control and leave our town vulnerable in many ways. Without actively exercising local control, development can happen without regard to consequences. Our town would no longer be a place where families and residents can join together in providing a future for everyone's benefit.