

# Barrington: Small Town Makes Big Plans for Aging Population

**Barrington, New Hampshire**, is a rural town of about 7,500 people, which covers nearly 50 square miles (2000 Census). It is located in southeast New Hampshire, and is 30 miles from Concord and 20 miles from Portsmouth. Boston and Portland, Maine, are both approximately an hour away by car. Approximately 7% of its residents are at least 65 years old. Median rent in Barrington, at the time of the 2000 Census, was \$583. Monthly homeowner costs, for people with mortgages, were \$1,195.

Providing adequate affordable housing for older adults is a growing challenge for many small towns around the country. In Barrington, New Hampshire, town officials see the creation of the town's first downtown district, Village Center, as a great opportunity to provide housing to meet this need.

The Village Center plan, which includes affordable housing for older adults and design elements to create a walkable community, cleared a major hurdle in July 2006, when it was approved by the Planning Board. As Barrington moves ahead, the town is reassuring its older residents of their valued place in the community by making senior housing an essential element in its first downtown plan.

## Preserving Rural Charm

Throughout the Village Center planning process, the town has been sensitive to the importance of preserving its rural character. Maintaining Barrington's identity as a rural community is especially important to older residents, many of whom point to its rural charm as one of the reasons why they have chosen to live out their years there.

Many of Barrington's older adults, along with most of its residents, want to preserve the beauty of Barrington's many lakes and pastoral setting. However, the town also would like an



opportunity to take part in the regional economic growth going on around it. The small node of retail settled at the intersection of two of the town's main roads is no longer sufficient, so the town wants to increase its public infrastructure in order to support an expanded commercial center. Planning for Village Center aims to strike a balance between maintaining the town's traditional rural character and opening it up to become a stronger regional economic competitor.

When Village Center is completed, older adults residing in the new senior housing will be able to enjoy the convenience and safety of living in a pedestrian-friendly section of Barrington. Walkability is an important element in the Village Center plan because the town lacks public transportation, so older adults who do not drive currently have limited opportunities to work and socialize. Town officials have taken this problem into

consideration throughout the planning process by carefully evaluating site locations. They want to make sure that the new senior housing is located near retail and community destinations so that older adults will have more opportunities to interact with other people in town.

Barrington officials are considering locating Village Center in an area adjacent to the town's existing historic buildings, a post office, medical facilities, and schools. Senior affordable housing would be built all around Village Center. Some of the proposed senior housing would be located near a community center which is adjacent to the town's elementary school. In another section, plans call for senior housing next to an open area where the town's future library would sit. Nearby, they hope to see a grocery store built.

Early designs for Village Center have included trails and walkways that cover the entire area. The plans call for extensive parking that would be located behind buildings to preserve the streetscape. The plans will give older adults better access to community destinations and work opportunities, and more opportunities to interact with other town residents.

## Broad Community Support

Planning for Village Center began four years ago when Barrington updated its master plan. During the planning process, officials gathered residents' views on how the town's land should be used through a series of public meetings, surveys and presentations. The new version of the master plan details a significant need for more affordable senior housing. It also expresses the community's desire for a centralized

downtown. To meet both goals, the town is making affordable senior housing one of the essential elements in the plans for Village Center.

Town officials are confident that local older residents support those plans. When they heard about plans for future senior housing, many of them asked to be included on a waiting list for that housing. They also have shown their support during community meetings for the master plan update, and town officials have heard from residents who have long been active in town government through volunteer work or business activity. All have been strong advocates for more senior housing in town.

Stakeholders from the local business and residential communities also have shown their support for the Village Center plans. Many have expressed their interest during community meetings or by directly contacting local government officials. Barrington officials have met one-on-one with property owners of land in the proposed Village Center area and found almost all of them to be very supportive of the project. The property owners see an opportunity to be part of the biggest development project that the town has ever seen, and they support the Village Center's goal of preserving the town's rural character.

### Zoning Strikes a Balance

In order to ensure that the Village Center plan complements the area's rural character while also providing affordable housing and mixed-use development, the town had to update its zoning. The updated ordinance provides for a new zoning district for Village Center. In that Village zoning district, the rural character is protected with maximum square footage requirements on commercial/retail establishments that discourage big box retailers. Property owners also have to leave vegetated buffers on their land and include at least a 50-foot wide swath of the town's natural white pines on property frontage along the major street that borders Village Center.

Barrington also has allowed for increased density in the Village district to achieve a "downtown" look and feel in Village Center. For example, the new regulations allow for attached housing on smaller lot sizes. However, as planning for Village Center gets underway, it has become increasingly apparent that more zoning changes are needed.



### Town Seeks Funding Partner

After changing its zoning ordinance, the town issued a Request for Proposals for a Village Center concept design, and it selected Stantec Corporation. The town and Stantec Corporation worked on the conceptual plan for Village Center and presented it on July 28, 2006, to the Planning Board, where it was enthusiastically accepted. Citizens had the opportunity to provide feedback until August 17, as part of the public review process.

Although there is broad community support for the downtown plan, the challenge for Barrington officials has been to find a partner to help cover some of the associated development costs. They say funding groups appear to be interested only in supporting economic development in existing downtowns. The town has yet to find a group that is willing to provide funding to create a new downtown.

Barrington officials say the town is prepared to pay for some of the public infrastructure improvements needed for the development, but it is seeking partners to help limit those costs. Without adequate outside funding, they say the town runs the risk that voters will not support the project.

### Staying True to the Vision

Town manager Carol Reilly notes that Barrington's persistence and vision have been critical to its success in the Village Center planning process. The town has focused on its vision of maintaining its rural look and feel while also providing retail stores, office space, municipal buildings, senior housing, and affordable housing. This vision is included in the Master Plan, which reflects the views of residents, stakeholders, and town officials.

By keeping plans for Village Center in line with that Master Plan vision, the town has involved all sectors that have a role in developing the new downtown. All of the major landowners at the heart of the Village zoning district have agreed to develop their remaining lots under the guidelines of the Village Center plan. The Economic Development Committee has been pleased to see that the town itself is driving development with a detailed plan, rather than risking development that might destroy the town's distinct identity. And the Conservation Commission has been instrumental in helping Barrington develop a downtown that maintains its rural vision. The commission has protected various natural resources, including historic farms and wetlands, through acquisitions and easements.

In the end, Barrington's persistence and vision should result in a downtown that will protect its treasured rural identity and allow it to thrive for future generations.

#### For more information, contact:

**Carol Reilly**  
Town Administrator  
41 Province Lane  
Barrington, NH 03825  
603 664 9007  
603 664 5179 fax  
townhall@metrocast.net

