

Fairfield Hills Master Plan Review Committee (2018)

Recommendations

1.0 Introduction

In 2001, Newtown voters approved the purchase of the 186 acre Fairfield Hills Campus and surrounding property. Core uses and strategies were established for open space, playing fields, economic development, educational and municipal uses, and the need to preserve the campus character, while maintaining Town control of the property. The 2005 Fairfield Hills Master Plan Ad Hoc committee further developed these uses as part of crafting the original 2005 Master Plan.

The 2005 Plan called for a 5 year review process. The subsequent 2010 Fairfield Hills Master Plan Review Committee recommended adding an overall vision and set of cohesive themes for the property. It also recommended that the open meadows be officially designated as open space, along with a few other changes. A work group (comprised of two members of the 2010 committee, a member of the Conservation Commission, the chair of the Planning and Zoning Commission, and the Director of Planning) reconciled these recommendations and the 2005 master plan, producing the 2013 Fairfield Hills Master Plan.

In 2018, the 5 year review process was maintained, thus forming the 2018 Fairfield Hills Master Plan Review Committee hereinafter referred to as the “Committee.” The primary purpose of the Committee was to review the 2013 Master Plan and make recommendations for revisions to that Plan. The Committee was also requested to leverage community involvement as a part of its effort to build a perspective of what an updated Master Plan should emphasize.

1.1 Our Process

The Committee solicited input and active participation from local residents, town boards and commissions, and town departments. Specifically, we focused on:

- A) **Becoming informed:** From September 2018 through January 2019, members of the Committee focused on understanding the 2013 Master Plan, municipal needs, and the ongoing realities of the property. We hosted 7 meetings, with over 20 invited participants, to better understand the history, current status, and needs of the community. In addition, we hosted an open forum for public discussion and suggestions on “Current and potential uses related to recreation and town services” and “Commercial, mixed use (housing over commercial), and housing.”¹ All meetings encouraged public input.
- B) **Launching a town-wide survey:** We leveraged the 2010 Fairfield Hills Master Plan Review Committee Survey, augmented with questions and ideas gained from our efforts in A), above. The 2019 Community Survey had 1825 valid responses (compared to 1041 responses in 2010).
- C) **Preparing recommendations:** Using our knowledge of and experience from the earlier steps, the Committee deliberated and reached the recommendations provided below.

¹ The quoted text is from the agenda for the January 22, 2019 agenda.

Summaries of our approach and findings for the first two steps are included separately in Appendices A and B. The remainder of this document includes the recommendations and summaries of the discussions that occurred during the final step.

2.0 Summary of Key learnings

2.1 From the Information Gathering Phase

One of the most concerning things we learned of, was the deterioration of the buildings and the related issues of security and overall safety. During the time we were meeting, we found videos online of youth exploring buildings and saw news reports of people entering the buildings to steal copper and other items. As the buildings continue to deteriorate, those who enter the buildings – whether with criminal or mischievous intent – are at risk of being seriously hurt.

We also learned of issues central to re-purposing existing buildings, including overall costs and financing. According to several participants, mixed-use development is necessary for re-purposing the larger buildings because access to financing often requires such diversity in the development. In addition, developers reduce their risk by providing both commercial and housing.

In terms of uses, we heard from seniors that their use of the property is currently limited due to accessibility and lack of amenities. Many seniors do not play standard organized sports, nor do they access the walking trails because of lack of resting spaces and bathrooms. The newly opened *Newtown Senior Center – Center for Active Living* may address some of their programming concerns.

Finally, two new features (in addition to the senior center) have opened in 2019. The Newtown Community Center intends to be an indoor space for people to gather and to participate in cultural and recreational activities/programming. It will also include a cafe for people to have access to some nourishment. An anticipated brew pub will extend the options for food and drink on the campus as well. One concern shared with us is that the impact on parking, because of the new features, is not well known yet.

2.2 From the Survey

In general, the feedback about the current status of the property was positive. The survey respondents did call out the need for more amenities, like bathrooms, food options, and resting areas. In addition, they indicated that they would like more of an emphasis on outdoor entertainment. These preferences were reinforced in later portions of the survey, e.g., “Band Shell,” “Small Food Service,” and “Town Green/Pedestrian Plaza” were the top three identified future services and features.

Housing was uniformly rejected, with mixed use being the least so at 63% total unfavorable. However, 62% of the public felt there was a “Sense of Urgency to Develop,” though only 36% agreed that the town should pay for renovation. In addition, only 44% agreed that the town should “Let Buildings Sit for 5-10 yrs.” Even fewer, 24%, agreed that the town should pay to demolish the buildings.

3.0 Recommendations

3.1 Vision, Use, and Theme Recommendations

Vision Statement

The Committee recommends that the vision remain as is.

The vision is a key part of the Master Plan. The recommendations provided below were approved within the confines of the vision, so we thought it important to reiterate support for the overall vision as a guiding principle for development of the property.

Supported Uses

The Committee recommends that the plan be modified to allow commercial proposals that include a housing component provided that the proposal is for no more than two existing buildings and that the commercial component is consistent with the vision of the property.

As mentioned in section 2.0, we understand that large development projects – like those that would be needed to salvage Kent or Cochran – require some level of a housing component to be financially viable both in gaining initial funding and in operating the business once finished. However, the survey results showed significant distaste for any housing, though there was the desire for additional development. Also, the survey made it clear that town residents would very likely not support spending taxpayer money either to help salvage or to raze the buildings. We also learned that some buildings were deteriorating to the point of raising significant safety concerns.

Given this dilemma, we discussed what would be gained and what lost, should housing be allowed as an ancillary component to commercial development:

PROS:

Cost avoidance – The larger buildings would cost about \$4M each to raze/salvage.

Character – The older buildings have architectural features that many residents find pleasing. The newer buildings (like the NYA and community and senior centers) cannot reproduce these or similar features because they are cost-prohibitive. Allowing housing, as part of re-purposing the buildings, would more likely maintain the overall character of the property.

Safety – There are considerable town expenses to address all safety issues present in the buildings. Development would help offset the overall cost.

Revenue – Added development would provide more revenue to the town.

Population – The added population would help the viability of the community and senior centers along with local businesses – both within the campus and across the town as a whole.

CONS:

Parking – We are concerned about the viability of parking, especially as we do not yet know how, in practice, parking will work when the community and senior centers and the brew pub open.

Shift in focus – The vision specifically calls out that Fairfield Hills is to be a destination for all residents of Newtown. Adding a housing component could shift commercial development to be more service-oriented to those living on the campus

The town as landlord, by proxy – From what we can tell, Newtown would be among the first to have people renting on town-owned land in a privately-owned building.

Aging infrastructure – Housing will put more of a load on already fragile infrastructure, like sewers. While town staff is actively working on grant proposals to address the sewers, the town may see added cost to repair or replace such infrastructure.

The committee then discussed whether there were checks and balances on the process of approving commercial development and if such checks would be able to ensure that any development was consistent with the vision. In addition to the standard Land Use and Fairfield Hills Authority process, the Board of Selectmen and other authorities, as appropriate, must approve any lease. Planning and Zoning approval would also be needed. In the end the committee decided that housing, when alongside a commercial project, would be acceptable provided that no more than 2 buildings on campus contain housing.

The Committee recommends that assisted living facilities be added as a supported use.

The crest of the baby boom population is now around 70. In 10 – 15 years, there will likely be a need for more assisted living facilities. Such a facility may work well on the campus. In addition, the setting could be conducive to the overall health and well-being of the residents.

3.2 Process Recommendations

The Committee recommends that the Fairfield Hills master plan review process be repeated in 5 or fewer years until the vision is more fully implemented.

With the start-up of the brew pub and senior and community centers, there could be unforeseen possibilities and issues that need to be considered.

3.3 Implementation Recommendations

The Committee recommends that Cochran move from the fields table to the private development table.

At this time the town appears to have an adequate number of fields for those in organized sports, so it is not clear that the town needs to carry the financial burden of razing Cochran to provide for more fields. That said, Cochran is in an isolated part of the campus where parking is limited and impact of traffic on the surrounding neighborhood could be a problem. So, any development should be sensitive to these issues.

The Committee recommends that a site-use overlay plan should be developed that provides better guidance for potential development of existing buildings.

The property now provides athletic fields, open space, municipal services, a walking/jogging trail, an ambulance garage, and community and senior centers. Other needs identified several years ago, such

as a fire house and police station, have been sited elsewhere in town. At this point, other (limited) areas within the campus could be used to bring more activity to the campus along with a revenue stream. A site-use overlay could help allay concerns that potential developers may have regarding uncertainty of what happens to the nearby buildings (that could have impact on their development).

The Committee recommends that buildings with no potential re-use be razed as soon as possible.

Some of the buildings are a significant hazard and have been fenced and/or boarded up giving a look of decay to some areas on the campus. While we understand the need to use sound financial principles regarding borrowing money, we are concerned that the risk to public safety is large. In addition, the status of the buildings may deter commercial development that could add more vibrancy to the campus.

The Committee recommends that there must be dedicated outdoor event space that could include a future structure such as a band shell or gazebo.

The committee is concerned that future development could impinge on space needed to support one of the highest priorities voiced in the survey.

4.0 Suggested Priorities

The current state of deterioration and subsequent risk of injury to passers-by is a key concern to members of the Committee. We suggest the town take all steps possible, within the scope of the current vision, to ensure the safety of those who use the campus.

5.0 Concluding Remarks

Fairfield Hills has begun to realize its potential as a community destination, as expressed in the 2013 Master Plan vision. It is a place where many people walk, play games, and access municipal services. With the addition of the *Newtown Senior Center – Center for Active Living* and the *Newtown Community Center* along with the anticipated brew pub, even more people will be visiting the property and, perhaps, staying longer.

However, the hope for limited commercial development as stated in the vision, “Small retail stores, restaurants, and professional offices would be nestled harmoniously within a core section of the campus,” has not come to fruition. In addition, the remaining buildings that have not been re-purposed are deteriorating and posing safety concerns. The town would need to expend large sums of money to address these buildings. According to the survey there appears to be little support from the public to borrow for demolition. Rather than just let the buildings further deteriorate and begin to mar the feel of the campus, the Committee has supported housing as a limited use, and only when associated with development that is consistent with the vision. We have done so warily as we do not wish Fairfield Hills to become a stand-alone neighborhood. Given the amount of oversight – across many different town organizations – that is required for development at Fairfield Hills, we believe there are a reasonable number of checks in place to ensure that any further development will enhance the community’s use of the property.

Appendix A: Informing Ourselves and the Public

Note that the meetings listed below were intended to provide information/context to the committee membership both to help guide the subsequent public engagement efforts and to ensure that past and current experiences and learnings were a part of the final deliberation process.

Development: History, Current Status, Obstacles, and Successes

Uses: Current and Requested

DATE	TOPIC	INVITEES
Sep 25, 2018	Land Use, Zoning	George Benson: Director of Planning
Oct 10, 2018	Infrastructure	Fred Hurley: Public Works Louis Carbone: Water and Sewer Auth.
Oct 23, 2018	Implementation of Plan Describe process from FHA POV, e.g., Brewery.	Ross Carley: Current Fairfield Hills Auth. Chair Thomas Connors: Prior FHA Chair (via email) John Reed: Prior FHA Chair Don Mitchell: Planning & Zoning Chair
Nov 7, 2018	Seniors and Disabled CANCELED²	Anna Wiedemann: Comm. On Aging Chair Pat Llodra: Friends of Newtown Seniors Representative Judith Slason: Exec. Director of Nunnawalk Meadows
Nov 20, 2018	FFH Adaptive Reuse Zoning	Lilla Dean: Prior P & Z Chair Robert Geckle: 2005 FFH Master Plan Comm. Chair
Dec 5, 2018	Cultural, Recreational Uses	Amy Mangold: Parks & Rec Director Carl Samuelson: Asst Director/Parks Edward Marks: Parks & Rec Comm. Chair Laura Lerman: Cultural Arts Comm. Chair
Dec 18, 2018	Current Tenants – What works, what could be improved? All tenants were invited.	Malcolm McLachlan: Newtown Ambulance President Mark Tambascio/Dave: Brewery Dave Kingsley: Brewery Dan Rosenthal: First Selectman
Jan 9, 2019	Commercial Housing	Chris Hottos: Local developer Bryan Atherton: Commercial Real Estate Christal Preszler: Economic and Community Dev George Benson: Director of Planning
Jan 22, 2019	Public Conversation – What is missing? Current thoughts about commercial uses.	
External Meeting	Newtown Schools	

² The meeting could not be held because of technical issues. Given the late notice of the problem the invited participants showed up. The meeting time was used as a conversation among the invited guests. A few committee members stayed to learn, though the number did not constitute a quorum.

Appendix B: 2019 Community Survey

Getting the word out

We viewed the survey as a key part of our community outreach and so developed a multi-phased strategy to keep the community aware throughout the survey period.

Week 1:

- Article in the Newtown Bee
- Near immediate posts on over half a dozen Newtown-oriented Facebook groups
- Town email blast, via the First Selectman's office
- Announcement on the Town website, again via the First Selectman's office
- Physical copies of the survey, with posters and URL cards provided to the senior center, library, and municipal center
- Announcement at the Edmond Town Hall Theater shows

Week 2:

- Newtown Bee letters from First Selectman Dan Rosenthal and an engaged community member
- Posters throughout the Municipal Center along with "homemade" posters on the Edmond Town Hall bulletin boards

Week 3:

- Posters at several local businesses, an official poster at ETH targeting movie-goers, and on the poster stand near the Newtown General Store
- A large sandwich sign at the intersection of Queen Street and Church Hill Road

Week 4:

- Refresh of the Facebook groups posted to earlier.
- Another town blast
- A letter for May 10 issue of the Newtown Bee
- Email chains to friends and local colleagues
- Visibility at the Newtown Volunteer Fair (jointly sponsored by Friends of Newtown Seniors, The Newtown Chamber, and the C.H. Booth Library)

In addition, announcements were made by our Senior Liaison to various senior groups throughout the time period.

Summary of Survey Results

Fairfield Hills

Community Survey Results

This document provides a summary of the input collected by the 2019 Community Survey. It does not represent thoughts or positions of the committee. Over the next few meetings, the committee will be deliberating recommendations for updates, if any, to the current Fairfield Hills Master Plan. These recommendations will be provided to the Planning and Zoning Commission for review and possible action.

The survey data, as well as information from our research phase (gathered during our meetings from Sept. 25 though Jan. 22), will be used to inform the committee's discussion and decision.

Thank you to all who took the time to fill out the survey.

Introduction

The Fairfield Hills Master Plan Review Committee prepared a community survey to gather input directly from Newtown residents about their preferences for the Fairfield Hills campus. The survey was live from Monday, April 15th through Wednesday, May 15 of 2019.

There were a total of 2,201 responses to the survey. Some respondents were technically ineligible to participate, and their answers were removed from analyses because they were either too young (24 respondents under the age of 18) or they did not reside in Newtown. Analyses were conducted using the remaining 1,825 respondents, noting that not all respondents answered all questions.

This document summarizes the overall responses. (All of the respondent data is available [here](#).) It is intended to provide a higher-level interpretation of the survey results for use by the public and to supplement the raw survey data and research information used as part of the Fairfield Hills Master Plan Review Committee deliberations.

Views on Current Status

When asked about currently available activities and amenities, over 50% of the respondents thought that the following items were available at about the right level.

	About Right
Parking (Q8)	73%
Sports Fields (Q2)	69%
Walking/Biking Trails (Q7)	63%
Agriculture (Q6)	55%
Arts (Q1)	52%

However, over 50% of respondents identified the following four items as insufficient, i.e., too little of each was available on the property.

	Too Little
Bathrooms (Q9)	68%
Food (Q4)	63%
Resting Areas (Q10)	63%
Outdoor Entertainment (Q3)	60%

There was uniform agreement that all of the items listed on the survey were either at a good level or needed to be expanded. At most, only 24% of the respondents indicated that an item (pickle ball courts) was overly represented on the property.³ Other than pickle ball, one item had 12% of respondents who answered too much. The remaining items were 0 to 3%.

Views on Future Services and Features

More than 50% of respondents supported the following.

	Total Approve
Band Shell (Q14)	83%
Small Food Service (Q45)	79%
Town Green/Pedestrian Plaza (Q18)	77%
Small Retail Shops (Q17)	72%
Restaurants (Q46)	70%
Pub/Tavern (Q47)	68%
Local Retail Businesses (Q41)	66%
Performing Arts and Community Center (Q13)	65%
Artisan/Craft Market (Q23)	63%
Events Space (Q22)	61%
Water Fountains ⁴ (Q32)	61%
Playground/Water Park (Q21)	59%
Theater for Performing Arts (Q52)	57%
Art Gallery / Museum (Q53)	56%
Main Street (Q15)	56%

³ Note that there was a highly contested appropriations request on the Town Budget referendum for additional pickle ball courts during the time the survey was available.

⁴ The term "Water Fountain" was ambiguous - some thought "Drinking Fountain" while others thought "Water Feature."

Fewer than 50% of the respondents supported the following.

	Total Approve
Basketball Courts (Q31)	45%
Tennis Courts (Q30)	41%
Education Facilities (Q29)	38%
Business Co-op, Innovation Ctr (Q50)	36%
Small Corporate Offices (Q49)	34%
Small Movie Theater (Q19)	29%
Wedding/Event Hall (Q27)	28%
Horse Trails (Q20)	27%
Small Professional Offices (Q16)	24%
National Retailers (Q42)	24%
Boutique Hotel (Q26)	21%
Multiplex Theater (Q43)	20%
Health Services Ctr (Q25)	19%
Large Corporate Offices (Q48)	19%
Banks, Real Estate Offices (Q44)	16%
Light Industrial (Q51)	14%
Multi-level Parking (Q24)	9%

Unfortunately, the survey did not include a question for an ice-skating rink since there were plans at the time the survey as designed to build one on the property.

Views on Housing

Housing on the campus has a history of eliciting strong opinions, and proposed developments that include a housing component have been met with public push-back. Therefore, looking at only the favorable response may be insufficient. Not only is the pro/anti response important, but also the vehemence of that response. The table below shows all favorable and unfavorable responses.

	Very Fav	Fav	Unfav	Very Unfav	Total Fav	Total UnFav
Mixed Use (Q59)	8%	16%	16%	47%	24%	63%
Condos (Q54)	5%	13%	19%	53%	18%	72%
Stand-Alone [S-A] Apartments (Q55)	5%	12%	19%	54%	17%	71%
Rental Housing (Q28)	6%	10%	22%	52%	16%	74%
Age-Restricted S-A Apartments (Q56)	5%	11%	21%	52%	16%	73%
Age/Income Restricted, S-A Apartments (Q57)	4%	8%	22%	56%	12%	78%
Income Restricted S-A Apartments/Condos (Q58)	4%	8%	19%	58%	12%	77%

In all cases, total favorable is less than 25%. Very unfavorable is consistently near or above 50%. If there is a public hearing (and assuming those most vehement show up), it is possible that for every 1 who strongly supports housing, there will be at least 10 who strongly oppose it for standalone housing. It will likely be closer to 1 in support for every 7 against, for mixed use development (apartments over commercial).

Views on Status of Buildings and Related Financing

The survey included a section to gauge the community's view on development, as a whole, and opinions on how to finance the development.

The table below shows views related to overall development.

	Total Fav	Total UnFav
Reserve for Future Needs (Q33)	65%	13%
	Total Agree	Ttl Disagree
Sense of Urgency to Develop (Q11)	62%	22%
No More Development (Q38)	25%	59%

In terms of paying for improving the buildings/property, views are shown in the following table.

	Total Agree	Total Disagree
Renovate, Developer Pays (Q35)	46%	32%
Let Buildings Sit for 5-10 yrs(Q37)	44%	42%
Renovate, Town Pays (Q34)	36%	42%
Demolish Buildings, Town Pays (Q36)	26%	54%

The survey also asked about control for the land and subsequent development. Community views are shown below.

	Total Agree	Total Disagree
Town Maintains Control (Q39)	72%	11%
Land Parcel Sold to Developer(Q40)	34%	50%

Demographics

A survey reflects the opinions of those who respond along with what their experiences were related to the topic of the survey. At times, though, the response to a survey may not represent the overall demographics of a community. The Committee used several communication channels to try to ensure it reached a representative sample of the community and then analyzed the results to ensure that the responses adequately represented the community as a whole.

The demographic analysis examined responses for any gender differences because, compared to the census 2018 population estimates for Newtown, female respondents were over-represented. There were indeed some differences between male and female respondents but in no case did the

differences shift what was considered generally favorable for one gender to be generally unfavorable for the other (and vice versa).

The distribution of the age of survey respondents was similar to the census 2018 population estimates but skewed slightly toward the younger side. For example, census data estimates that 20% of Newtown's population was 65 or older but there were 17% of the respondents who indicated their age was 65 or older. We also examined responses by age group to better understand how opinions may vary by age to better gauge needs across the different groups. Click [here](#) to view the results. While age differences are of some interest, the main reason to focus on this was to recognize that our oldest respondents were slightly underrepresented and as such the committee members could review opinions separately by age category to allow for any adjustment.

Write-In Comments

In addition to answering questions asked on the survey, about 40% of respondents provided additional write-in comments. These write-in comments provide qualitative data that complements the quantitative data provided by the survey. The comments provide ideas and recommendations that town leaders can refer to when considering any changes to the property but do not, necessarily, give insight into overall community support for the ideas.

The write-in comments included remarks about overall themes for the property, concerns, recommendations for additional features, more general comments specific to the property, and a few other comments. Any write-in comment that included more than one type of remark was split so that each remark was separate, yielding a total of about 800 comments. To see a full listing of the comments as originally submitted, click [here](#).

Just under 50% of the respondents called out higher-level themes, including the community destination outlined in the current master plan and others liked a more dedicated sports/youth destination, a shopping (with or without housing) destination, or a central park / open space focus. Of those calling out overall themes, just under 60% appeared to support the current master plan, over 20% requested a more intensive shopping destination, and just over 15% wanted a focus on a more park-like environment. (Comments about themes generally included broader remarks, often including multiple features and some concerns justifying the theme, and were generally not split apart. Therefore, the number of comments about themes is synonymous to the number of respondents.)

About 20% of the comments were about overall concerns, including tax burdens (just over 10% of the respondents) and, to a lesser degree, concerns about conflict with vacant space elsewhere in town, the loss of town/site history, traffic/congestion, the lack of an overall development/management plan, loss of Newtown's small town feel, public access to the property, and pollution/aquifer concerns.

About 10% of the respondents offered other features and recommendations for the property. Just over half of these called out the desire for a hockey rink. Other features included:

- An educational campus for Newtown Public Schools
- Colleges and institutes
- Dedicated bike paths
- ATV tracks and other youth-oriented sporting features

- Access to community-wide transportation
- A gazebo
- Special-needs housing
- A public golf course
- A food hall
- Pet amenities like a doggy drinking fountain, and
- A community garden for growing one's own fruits and vegetables, for those residents whose yards were not amenable to gardening.

The remaining comments emphasize or elaborate on answers given earlier in the survey or provide more general comments that were difficult to categorize.