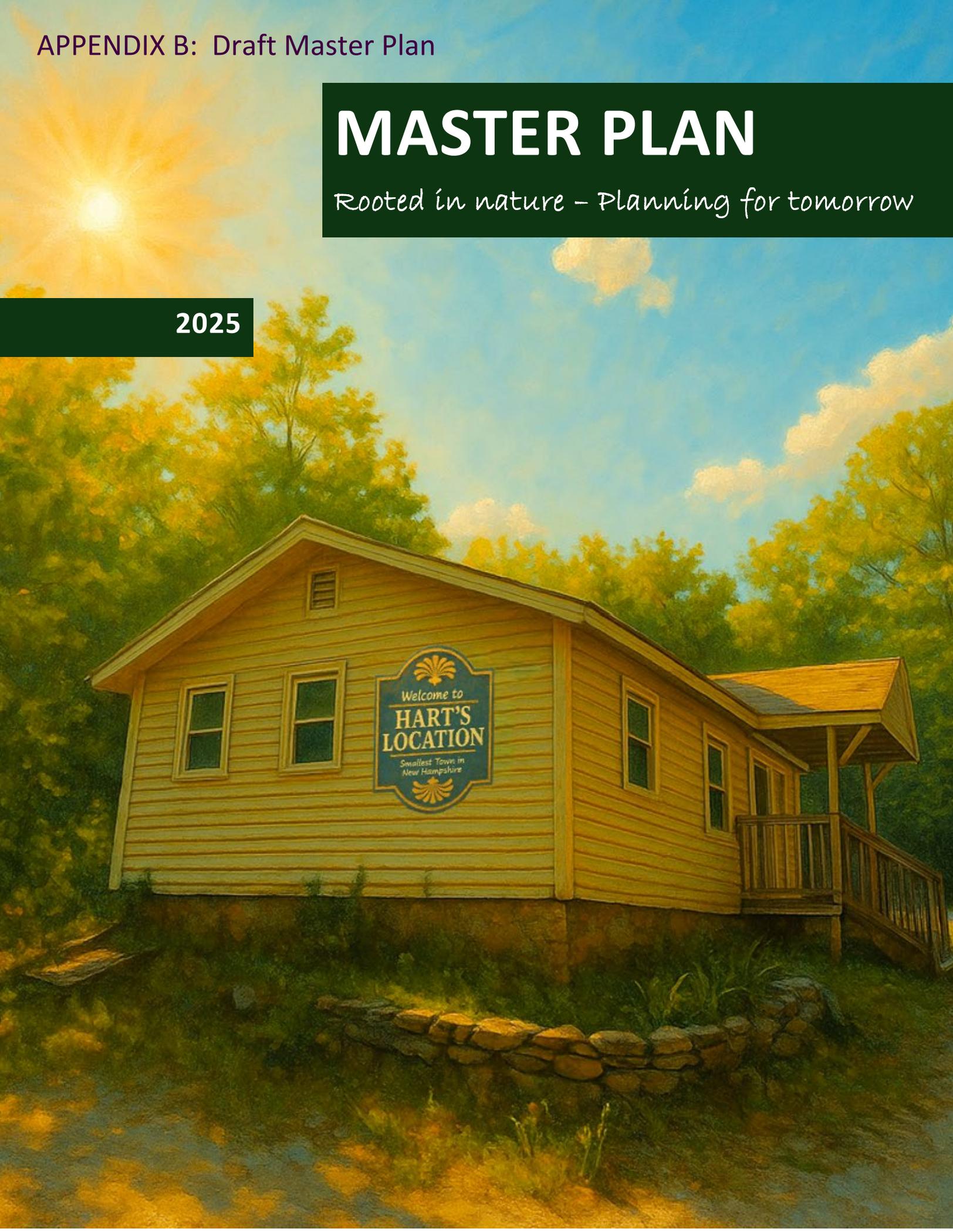


MASTER PLAN

Rooted in nature – Planning for tomorrow

2025



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Welcome to
HART’S
LOCATION
Smallest Town in
New Hampshire



INTRODUCTION

Photo By: Liz Emerson, Senior Planner, North Country Council

In 2025, Hart's Location embarked on the process of updating the Master Plan working with the North Country Council to develop the future vision for land use that reflects the community's values and challenges.

A Master Plan serves as a blueprint that helps direct a community into the future. This Master Plan provides a foundation for land use decisions which will provide long-term resilience.

It offers tools to uphold the shared values by those who live here today and generations to come while safeguarding against unwanted development.

In an effort to preserve the character of the community, broad land use planning principles are focused on maintaining the key aspects of Hart's Location which makes it one of the smallest and most unique towns in the state.

Hart's Location Residents say it best!

Quiet Scenic Resilient
Thriving Beautiful Rural Limited Edition
Natural Peaceful
Wilderness Small Town Feel

The Planning Process

Master Plans are typically updated every 10 years, and although more time has passed, the current Hart’s Location government embraced the opportunity to take on the important task of updating the plan.

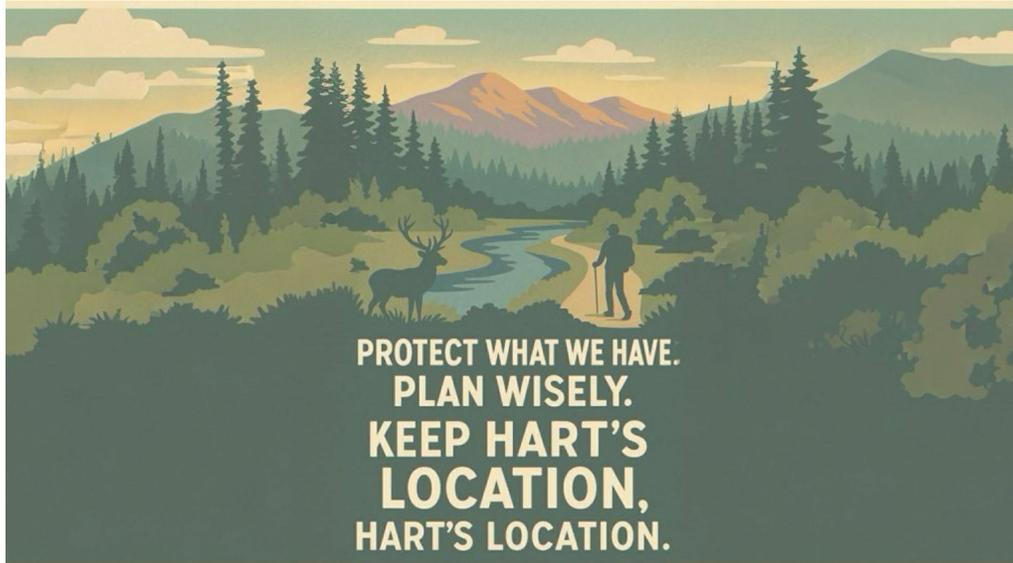
Over the past year, Hart’s Location has worked closely with its residents with assistance of the North Country Council to update its Master Plan. This planning effort was grounded in a strong commitment to public involvement, transparency, and thoughtful data analysis. Recognizing the importance of capturing the unique character and priorities of the town, the Planning Board emphasized community engagement from the start. Nearly half of the community participated in the process through a combination of surveys, phone calls, emails, interviews, focus groups, and online feedback.

In parallel with outreach, extensive data was collected and analyzed to understand existing conditions, trends, and potential challenges. This included reviewing land use patterns, transportation infrastructure, natural resources, housing conditions, and demographic information. A community visioning process helped identify shared goals and values, which created the foundation of the Master Plan and guided the development of the Land Use Element. The input gathered through public engagement and technical research was carefully synthesized to ensure that the final plan aligns with the community’s long-term aspirations while preserving its rural character and natural assets.



VISION

This Vision Element serves as a guiding light for all subsequent planning efforts. Every goal, policy, and strategy should be grounded in the simple but powerful message voiced by its residents:



The vision provides a view into the future. It highlights what is important in Hart’s Location as it relates to the character of its beautiful and natural environment. The vision was created with input from the Planning Board, stakeholders and the community.

Known for its rugged natural beauty, rich history, and iconic role as the first town to cast ballots in presidential elections, Hart’s Location is defined by its pristine environment, quiet lifestyle, and deep-rooted community pride.

A Community Rooted in Preservation

The future vision for Hart’s Location is clear: to remain natural, rural, quiet, and beautiful. Residents do not envision major change but instead emphasize preserving what exists today. The town’s greatest assets are its forests, rivers, mountain views, wildlife, and recreational trails, all of which should be preserved for future generations. Maintaining the town’s small scale and unspoiled character is a top priority. When asked to describe their hopes for Hart’s Location, a common refrain was simply: *“Keep it the same.”*

This emphasis on preservation does not mean resistance to all change. Rather, it reflects a desire for thoughtful planning that respects the land and the people who live here. Residents expressed strong support for policies that protect sensitive areas, manage development pressures, and ensure that any growth aligns with the town’s values and capacity.

Looking Toward 2035 and Beyond

Hart's Location embraces the opportunity to build on the values that have long defined its character, natural beauty, peace and quiet, community pride, and environmental stewardship. Looking ahead, the town envisions itself as a model of small-town resilience, preserving its distinct sense of place while making thoughtful, forward-looking decisions that protect its future while maintaining its quiet charm and close-knit community. Hart's Location remains welcoming, inclusive, and prepared for what lies ahead. These recommendations reflect a balanced approach; one that upholds fiscal responsibility while promoting long-term environmental and community sustainability.

Hart's Location Goals & Actions

Planning with Purpose

Public engagement revealed a strong desire to:

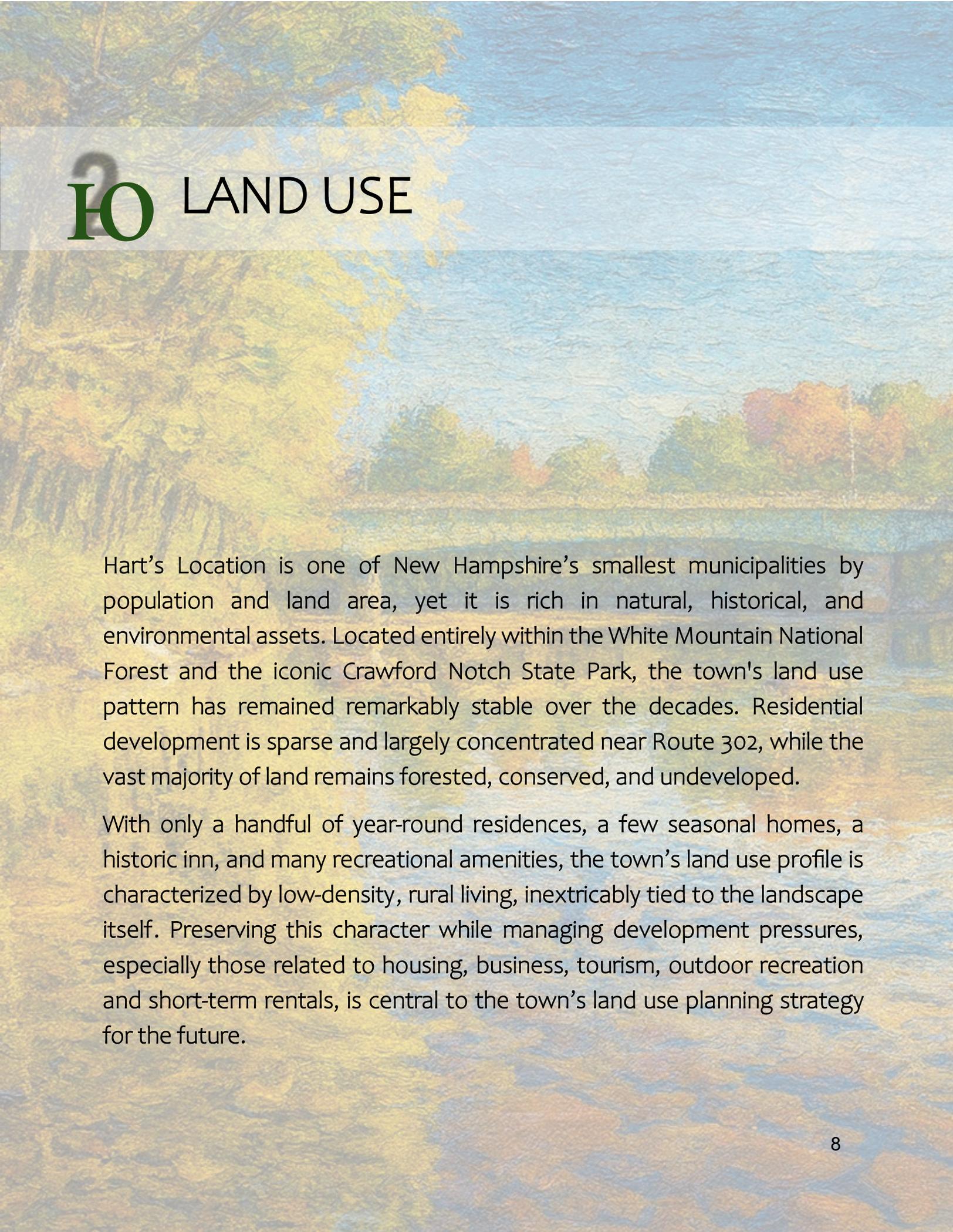
- Improve broadband;
 - Continue working with regional partners and state programs to expand high-speed internet access. This ongoing project is expected to be completed by June 2026.
- Improve Cell Service;
 - Encourage colocation on existing structures (e.g., utility poles, town buildings, or shared towers) to reduce costs and environmental impact.
- Enhance emergency preparedness for increasingly frequent natural disasters;
 - Coordinate with neighboring towns and county agencies to strengthen emergency response and hazard preparedness for floods, storms, and other natural disasters.
- Provide basic support systems for the aging population;
 - Connect older residents with local and regional resources for transportation, healthcare, and in-home support services.
- Support for renewable energy;
 - Encourage renewable energy projects through policies and incentives.
- Upgrades to emergency services;
 - Maintain strong partnerships with mutual aid departments in surrounding communities.

Supporting Those Who Call It Home

Survey respondents emphasized:

- The importance of services that allow people to age in place safely, including fire and rescue readiness, emergency shelters, and access to healthcare;

- Coordinate with nearby towns and the Carroll County Emergency Management Office to identify designated emergency shelters accessible to Hart’s Location residents during severe weather or extended power outages. Develop a clear communication plan to notify residents of shelter locations and transportation options.
- Create a “Hart’s Location Neighbor-to-Neighbor” volunteer system or phone tree to check in on vulnerable residents during emergencies or extreme weather events.
- Avoid overburdening residents with future decisions that will heavily weigh on taxpayers;
 - Develop a Capital Improvement Program (CIP) to schedule and prioritize major expenses such as road maintenance, emergency equipment, and infrastructure upgrades, spreading costs over time.
 - Pursue state and federal grants, regional cost-sharing agreements, and partnerships with neighboring towns to reduce the local tax burden for large projects.
 - Maintain adequate reserve funds for emergencies or unexpected infrastructure needs to minimize sudden tax increases.
- Ensuring access to affordable housing, basic services, and community support systems.
 - Review zoning and land-use regulations to allow for small homes, accessory dwelling units (ADUs), and limited, small-scale multi-family dwellings that fit the community’s rural character while expanding housing choices. Such housing shall remain consistent with zoning and applicable wastewater and health standards.
 - Encourage home modification programs, accessibility retrofits, and local volunteer assistance to help seniors and residents with disabilities remain safely in their homes.
 - Work with regional providers to ensure residents have reliable access to transportation, healthcare, broadband, and emergency services despite the town’s small size and geographic constraints.
 - Explore state, federal, and nonprofit funding (e.g., Community Development Block Grants, NH Housing programs) to support local housing rehabilitation, energy efficiency, and service expansion.

An impressionistic painting of a landscape. In the foreground, there are trees with yellow and green foliage. A river flows through the middle ground, reflecting the sky. In the background, there are more trees with autumn-colored leaves (red, orange, yellow) under a blue sky. The overall style is soft and painterly.

2 LAND USE

Hart's Location is one of New Hampshire's smallest municipalities by population and land area, yet it is rich in natural, historical, and environmental assets. Located entirely within the White Mountain National Forest and the iconic Crawford Notch State Park, the town's land use pattern has remained remarkably stable over the decades. Residential development is sparse and largely concentrated near Route 302, while the vast majority of land remains forested, conserved, and undeveloped.

With only a handful of year-round residences, a few seasonal homes, a historic inn, and many recreational amenities, the town's land use profile is characterized by low-density, rural living, inextricably tied to the landscape itself. Preserving this character while managing development pressures, especially those related to housing, business, tourism, outdoor recreation and short-term rentals, is central to the town's land use planning strategy for the future.

Current Land Use Patterns



Photo By: Liz Emerson, Senior Planner, North Country Council

Residential Uses: Scattered, low-density single-family homes make up most of the private development in Hart's Location. These are located along Route 302 or on private roads, and many are seasonal or part-time residences. The town's zoning is designed to reflect this low-intensity pattern, with large lot size requirements and limited infrastructure.

Commercial Uses: Commercial activity is limited and primarily supports tourism and lodging. Lodging facilities are the most prominent commercial uses in town, blending with the natural surroundings and preserving the historic character.

Conservation & Forest Land: Nearly all of Hart's Location lies contiguous with the White Mountain National Forest and Crawford Notch State Park. This ensures that large tracts of land will remain

permanently undeveloped, serving as both a natural buffer and a source of recreation, environmental protection, and community identity.

Recreational & Special Use Areas: Trails, swimming holes, and scenic viewing areas along Route 302 contribute significantly to local use and tourism appeal. These places are deeply valued by residents and are considered integral to the town's rural quality of life.

Land Use Trends and Pressures

While development in Hart's Location has remained minimal, the Master Plan survey conducted between June and August provided community feedback which highlighted several emerging challenges and considerations:

Short-Term Rentals: The rise of platforms such as Airbnb and VRBO has introduced concerns about noise, nuisance, housing availability, and property value impacts. Though opinions vary, many residents support stronger regulations or limitations to ensure rentals remain compatible with the town's character.

Housing Affordability and Access: Though the town does not aim to grow significantly, there is concern about maintaining affordability and ensuring housing exists for aging residents, essential workers, or future generations who may wish to remain in the community.

Infrastructure Limitations: The lack of broadband, public utilities, and emergency services infrastructure limits the scale and scope of future development. Many respondents emphasized a preference for very limited or no new housing unless it fits the town and does not burden resources.

Land Use Regulation and Enforcement: Comments suggest a need to revisit zoning ordinances to ensure they remain clear, fair, and reflective of current concerns especially regarding property condition, short-term rental oversight, and environmental protections.

Community's Desired Future Land Use

Natural Resource Protection & Resilience

Natural resource protection emerged as the highest land use priority with the consistent desire to preserve Hart's Location's rural character, natural landscapes, and small-town identity.

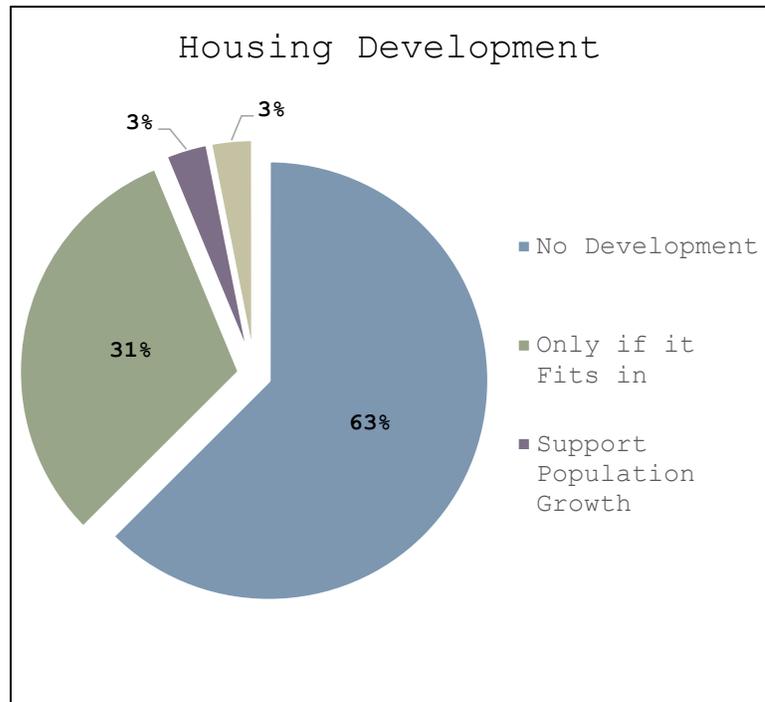
Residents repeatedly expressed that Hart's Location's identity as New Hampshire's smallest town, its location adjacent to extensive State and National Forest lands, and its limited development footprint are defining features that should be protected.

Survey responses consistently emphasized that change does not equal progress, and that thoughtful land use policies should prioritize conservation, resilience, and long-term sustainability over growth.

Housing

More than 60% of respondents stated that the Town should not encourage additional housing development, and an additional 30% supported housing only if it clearly fits the Town’s rural character, reinforcing the desire for large-lot zoning and low-density development.

Over development, population growth, and tax impacts associated with increased housing and infrastructure demands are amongst the strongest concerns.



Commercial Uses and Home-Based Businesses

The survey indicates mixed but cautious support for limited economic activity in Hart’s Location. Most respondents expressed a preference for home-based or very small-scale businesses, provided they are carefully regulated to minimize impacts on the Town’s rural character. At the same time, there is significant opposition to additional commercial uses reflecting concerns about over commercialization and growth pressures.

Land Use Goals & Actions

Hart's Location remains committed to protecting the vast majority of its land from development and wants to ensure that the public always has access to outdoor recreational opportunities with long-term conservation goals and preservation of the rural character.

All land use regulations adopted pursuant to this Master Plan shall be consistent with RSA 674 and other applicable New Hampshire Statutes.

- Review and update Subdivision Review Regulations.
 - Subdivision Regulations are local rules adopted by the Planning Board under RSA 674 and RSA 676 that govern how land can be divided into two or more lots. According to the Zoning Ordinance, these regulations were originally adopted in 1976. It is important to review and update these regulations to ensure alignment with State law changes and the local Land Use Regulations. These regulations establish the standards for things like lot layout, roads, drainage, utilities, access, and environmental protection to ensure new subdivisions are safe, functional, and consistent with the community's vision.
- Preserve Natural Landscapes and Maintain Low-Density Rural Development
 - Retain the minimum lot size of 2.5 acres and required setbacks.
 - Retain the 2.5 story or 40-foot height limitation.
 - Establish lot coverage limits to ensure development remains modest in scale and visually unobtrusive.
 - Minimize the length of new roads and discourage unnecessary forest fragmentation.
 - Require preservation of vegetated buffers and appropriate replanting following land disturbance.
 - Adopt architectural and site design standards that minimize visual, lighting, and environmental impacts, including:
 - Dark-sky-compliant outdoor lighting
 - Screening of dumpsters, loading areas, and mechanical equipment
 - Limits on highly reflective materials
 - Exterior materials appropriate to local climate conditions
 - Consider adoption of a Scenic Route Overlay District along U.S. Route 302 to:
 - Limit clearing along road frontage
 - Encourage retention of mature trees
 - Restrict clear-cutting associated with development
 - Prohibit invasive species in landscaping
 - Protect scenic views and rural character

- **Subdivision & Site Review**
 - Ensure subdivision & site plan review emphasizes land conservation, protection of natural features such as natural contours, existing vegetation, significant natural features, and minimal site disturbance.
 - Apply clear performance standards to protect scenic, forested, and environmentally sensitive areas.
- **Conservation & Land Protection**
 - Identify priority forest blocks and environmentally sensitive lands for long-term protection.
 - Pursue conservation easements, land acquisitions, and partnerships with land trusts and state agencies.
 - Coordinate with the U.S. Forest Service and other public land managers to maintain recreational access and wilderness connections.
 - Consider establishing a Conservation Commission under RSA 36-A to advise town boards, conduct natural resource inventories, and support conservation planning and stewardship efforts.
- **Clarify Regulations on Short-Term Rentals and Property Use**
 - The town should consider enacting clear, enforceable rules that address the impacts of short-term rentals, limit nuisance issues, and ensure a level playing field for all property owners.
- **Explore Limited Housing Solutions for Community Need**
 - Housing types such as accessory dwelling units, in-law apartments, or small-scale, elder-friendly homes can provide flexible living options for year-round residents, aging households, or caregivers while maintaining the Town's low-density character. Allowing limited, small-scale housing can support local needs without compromising the rural, forested landscape that defines Hart's Location.
 - Such housing should be evaluated through a careful, case-by-case approach that emphasizes minimal visual impact, compatibility with existing homes, protection of natural resources, and continued compliance with large-lot zoning and health and safety standards.
 - Create and apply clear review criteria and thoughtful design standards. This may include encouraging cohesive designs to the primary dwelling, using existing structures, limiting site disturbance, relying on existing access, septic, and water systems with DES approval.
- **Encourage Compatible Home-Based and Low-Impact Businesses**
 - Adopt Site Plan Review Regulations to ensure there are clear performance standards and criteria to safeguard Hart's Location's rural character.

- Require home-based business activities to remain secondary and unobtrusive to residential use, ensuring that any associated structures retain a residential scale and character with no outward appearance of commercial activity beyond limited signage permitted by ordinance.
 - Consider including limits on employees, deliveries, hours of operation, exterior storage, scale, and appearance of any nonresidential use.
 - Ensure ongoing compliance with approved conditions through periodic review to protect neighborhood character and quality of life.
 - Refine Zoning Ordinance language to clearly define permitted home-based and low-impact business activities to limit inconsistent interpretation of what a low-impact use is.
- **Strengthen Land Use Ordinances**
 - As development pressure increases regionally, Hart's Location should periodically review and, where necessary, update its land use ordinances to ensure growth remains limited, intentional, and consistent with the community's long-standing values. The Town's regulatory framework should continue to prioritize protection of natural, scenic, and forested resources while providing clear, predictable standards for property owners and decision-makers.
 - Ensure that existing regulations remain effective, enforceable, and aligned with current conditions, state law, and community expectations by clarifying provisions, reinforcing performance standards that prevent adverse impacts, and ensuring that review processes support careful site design, minimal land disturbance, and preservation of rural character.
 - Perform a comprehensive review of zoning, subdivision, and land use regulations to identify outdated or ambiguous provisions, resolve internal inconsistencies, and ensure alignment with applicable New Hampshire statutes and recent legislative changes to maintain clarity, enforceability, and legal defensibility.
 - Add or refine purpose statements, definitions, and performance standards to clearly communicate expectations related to scale, intensity, site disturbance, and neighborhood compatibility.
 - Evaluate whether existing provisions adequately protect forests, steep slopes, wetlands, scenic views, and dark skies, and clarify standards where needed to prevent incremental degradation.

- Update review criteria to emphasize context-sensitive design, preservation of open space, minimization of grading and tree removal, and protection of scenic and environmental resources.
- Develop guidance documents or checklists to support consistent interpretation and application of ordinance provisions by boards, staff, and applicants.
- Ensure enforcement mechanisms remain clear and workable, including triggers for review and corrective action when ordinance standards are exceeded.
- Establish a regular schedule (e.g., every 5–10 years) for ordinance review to keep regulations aligned with community goals and changing conditions.

Looking Ahead

Hart's Location is not a town that seeks growth for its own sake. Instead, it seeks to ensure that any development is intentional, small in scale, and beneficial to residents. As neighboring areas evolve, Hart's Location residents want the Town to remain vigilant in protecting what makes it different: its forests, quiet, and sense of place.

Through thoughtful land use policies that uphold these values, the town can continue to be a model of sustainable, conservation-based rural living, and approach the future that reflects both its natural setting and the priorities of its community.

Implementation of this Master Plan will occur over time through collaboration among residents, Town boards, regional partners, and state agencies. Not every recommendation is intended to be pursued immediately; rather, the Plan provides a framework for evaluating opportunities as they arise. Regular review and periodic updates will ensure that the Plan remains relevant and continues to reflect community goals.