

# Plan NH Visits Belmont, NH

June 4 & 5, 2010

## Who is Plan NH?

Plan NH is a professional association for those working in the *built environment*. The organization includes architects, planners, engineers, bankers, construction managers, historic preservationists, and others who concern themselves with buildings and communities. It was established to create a forum for bringing together these different professional groups and as a catalyst for spurring interest in community development. Part of Plan NH's mission is to make a positive contribution to New Hampshire communities. One way in which Plan NH is doing this is through the offer of free design assistance to communities with demonstrated needs.

## So what is a Design Charrette, anyway?

Simply stated, a Design Charrette is a brainstorming session where lots of ideas are brought forth by both professional designers and local citizens, in an attempt to resolve a problem of local interest. Because of the compressed time frame, the conclusions reached are usually conceptual. They discuss how different plan elements should relate to each other, as opposed to the details of how a particular building would actually be constructed.



At their best, Charrettes blend the broad experience of design professionals with local citizen's knowledge of their community to produce a plan of action that deals with a particular issue of concern to that community. The Charrette provides an overall framework within which final solutions can be developed. It sets a tone and gives a direction against which future decisions may be measured.

## How did the Plan NH Charrette come to Belmont?



In February of 2010, the Town of Belmont submitted a proposal to Plan NH for design assistance. Of the Six proposals submitted, Belmont was one of communities selected for a Charrette.

Plan NH is interested in providing design assistance to communities that seem ready to move forward with a project, where there appears to be the organizational expertise and where there is the ability to move forward with recommendations that surface in the course of the weekend event. Plan NH is looking for community problems that may



have transferability to other communities.



# The Charrette Process & Executive Summary

**Local residents are the experts on the community — what makes sense, what history has brought forth, what will pass at the local board meetings — the design team relies on resident input and knowledge to develop viable suggestions and proposals.**

Belmont Town Officials and community residents gathered with the Plan NH Charrette team on a Sunny Friday afternoon in June of 2010 to discuss the details of the task in front of us. Design professionals on the team included architects, planners, civil engineers, cost estimators, and Real Estate professionals. The critical piece that the Charrette Team lacked, which only the local residents could offer, was the knowledge of the Town of Belmont.

With that in mind, the team and residents began formulating the future of a new village center for Belmont.

Discussions began with an overview of wants and needs that will become the basis of the charrette analysis. Events need to be created to bring more people into the village. Such events include farmers market, flea markets, Old Home Days, create walking and biking trails along the river, to the town owned forest and along route 140 to Tilton. Other measures to change the downtown is to add green space, move the bandstand, reconstruct old Kimball Bridge so that overflow parking can be created on the west side of the river. Expand the Food For Thought Café in the mill for more and different uses. Parks and Recreation department needs a new building. The police department needs a new station. There are space



deficiencies at the town hall. The library has plans for a new addition.

After the completion of the master plan in 2002, a section of Route 106 has been determined to qualify as a National Historical District. It is not presently on the registry. The library is on the National Registry.

The Conservation Commission want to expand open land. They have already purchased some property, mostly along the river. They all would like to see a riverwalk starting at the new location of the bandstand..

Near the old B&M railroad, is land owned by a local resident who presently does not want to sell. This property will help with needed parking in the village area.

The existing Belmont mill facility, which was the subject of the first Plan NH charrette back in 1996, currently house community services including Belknap Family Health Center, Belmont Early Learning Center, Belmont Senior Center, Lakes Region Community College Culinary Arts department, and classrooms, and a student-run "Food For Thought Café". The building and land in front of the mill is privately owned. The Belmont Veterans Memorial Park and is next to the Mill. The Tioga River runs behind the mill. On the north side of mill is the Belmont Freight Depot near the RR tracks. The bandstand is 100 years old and next to the memorial park. Plans to move the bandstand 20' on a new foundation have been made to allow for the library expansion and use most of the current green space. There has been discussion to take down the abandoned bank building to the south of the library.

The town office building is only usable on the first floor. The second floor needs structural work to utilize the space. Accessibility to meet current codes is also an issue.



Upgrades to exterior lighting, including coach style lanterns with conservation conscious LED fixtures, have been approved for federal funding at Sargent Park. Sargent Park has a skate park, and has become an older kids hangout.

A playground was constructed in summer of 2010 for younger kids that will hopefully attract parents with younger children to the park. In 2009, an eagle scout project built a shelter that is used for different events. Parking expansion is sorely needed with the planned expanded use of the park.

During race weekends, a tremendous amount of traffic on Routes 106 and 140. Bike week usually only impacts Route 106.

The old police station could be transformed into the new Recreation Department. The new police station could be built near the fire department, closer to Route 106.

In 1993 the Gale School was determined to be eligible for the National Register of Historical Places. It is one of Belmont's most architecturally significant buildings. A committee has been established to look at options for the building. A private developer is being sought to move the building to create an adaptive reuse in the village center.

A remnant of the old Penstock in the vicinity of the old dam, still exists. The peninsula of the dam would be a nice gathering area for a picnic area and a walkway.

# Belmont's Proposal

*"Growth is inevitable and desirable, but destruction of community character is not. The question is not whether your part of the world is going to change. The question is how." -- Edward T. McMahon, The Conservation Fund*

Fourteen years ago, Plan NH volunteers started the charrette program with a charrette in Belmont. The exercise focused on whether the Belmont Mill, ravaged by neglect and a massive 1992 fire, could be adapted for public reuse—or if the demolition already underway, should continue.

The effort proved an engaging epiphany, and in August 1998, the 1833 Mill was proudly rededicated. Journalist and local native Roger Amsden, termed it “The Miracle on Mill Street,” and a NH Division of Historical Resources official said, “Belmont had regained the heart and soul of its town”. Today’s mill in the historical village, stands as proof of the possibilities when visionary planning and community consensus are combined.

Although measurable progress has been made with the mill and the evolution of Belmont Village, another charrette, in 2010, providing assistance, developing a cohesive town village plan, would offer important traction. Revisiting and building on the 1996 charrette, with the professional and collaborative perspective of Plan NH, could provide:

- Updating, with the mill’s adaptive reuse as a focal point
- Integration of new ideas, including a Tioga River Walk, Mill adjacent outdoor pavilion for community events, and ideas for maximizing village green spaces such as Sargent Park and Penstock Park
- Consideration of special local landmarks including the 100 year old Bandstand and public library
- Recommendation of any appropriate design, signage, zoning for the village, as well as funding opportunities to move forward

The 2001-2002 Master Plan, noted for a broad spectrum of citizen participation through a very active committee of 41 volunteers,

considered the village and its mixed use, one of eight priorities for Belmont’s future, fundamentally based on a commitment to “...the protection of its unique natural resources, history and recreational opportunities...”

Belmont residents have consistently placed the preservation of its rural nature alongside the need for economic development. Despite proximity to Route 93-Tilton-Exit 20 major retail offerings, that kind of growth and development has bypassed the town. Opportunities such as Metrocast is Belmont based, offering strong technological/bandwidth linkage. Belmont village intersects with Shaker Road that leads to the nationally significant Canterbury Shaker Village, with thousands of annual visitors.

Belmont’s “Factory Village District” remains a pedestrian-friendly neighborhood bordered by the Tioga River, with residences, schools, government, senior center, health care, a Lakes Region Community College facility with education and a café, a library, recreational spaces and activities, excellent internet access, major crop-producing farms, considerable land and building holdings by Town in center, strong interest in campus-based municipal services, and most of all : **POTENTIAL**

Belmont is a crossroads town; contrasted by Tilton’s exit 20 and the City of Laconia, with growing development impact on Route 106 vis-a-vis the NH Motor Speedway in Loudon and The Lodge in Belmont, one of the sites in consideration for expanded gaming activities.

If a comprehensive plan and a go-forward strategy is not developed, the future of Belmont will remain a “drive-by”, bedroom community with unrealized opportunities for minimally invasive development and synergy to nearby recreational/historic/tourist destinations including Canterbury Shaker Village and Lake Winnepesaukee.

The jewel of an historic village is as precious as the access afforded to Concord, the Lakes Region and North Country venues. Planning will help Belmont residence better and newly

define options to update the town’s “brand”, community confidence, and provide longer term opportunities.

