

Kensington Community Design Charrette

October 20th and 21st, 2017



PLAN NH
Visioning for Sustainable Communities



Kensington Community Design Charrette Acknowledgments

Sincere thanks go to those individuals who donated their professional and personal time to make this charrette a success. Also, many thanks to the citizens, businesses, and Kensington town officials and volunteers who shared their time, services, thoughts, and knowledge with Plan NH.



The Plan NH Charrette Team

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The Kensington Team

Without the support and participation of the dedicated leadership team, comprised of Kensington resident volunteers and town leaders, this charrette would not have been possible: Thank you!

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Joni Praded

Peter Merrill



Who is Plan NH and what is a *charrette*?

Who is Plan NH?

Plan New Hampshire, the Foundation for Shaping the Built Environment, is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization formed in 1989.

The **mission** of Plan NH is to foster excellence in the planning, design and development of New Hampshire's built environment. Plan NH has a **vision** of healthy and vibrant communities in the Granite State.

Plan NH champions principles and ideas that balance building projects, including anything built in the public realm, such as buildings roads, bridges, memorials, public sculpture, etc. with:

- ◇ The needs of people where they live, how they get around, what services are necessary, and what they value.
- ◇ Maintaining the “sense of place” of our towns, cities, and villages that make them unique, including preserving historic assets, open spaces, agriculture, and farming.
- ◇ The protection of our air, water, flora, and fauna.

Among signature Plan NH programs is the *Community Design Charrette*, an exercise that brings professionals from Plan NH membership (and beyond) together with communities to explore design ideas, usually around a town center or significant neighborhood. Through recommendations made, Plan NH can demonstrate the role and importance of the principles and ideas noted above in concrete, real examples.

What is a Design Charrette?

Simply stated, a charrette is a brief, intense brainstorming session. The process engages planning and design professionals in direct dialog and conversation with local residents and each other to collect information needed in order to develop good and relevant recommendations about how to address a particular challenge.

The Charrette Process:

- ◇ Identify the need or opportunity
- ◇ Collect information from community members to understand more deeply and broadly the situation
- ◇ Analyze and evaluate what is seen and heard
- ◇ Develop recommendations for meeting the need or addressing the challenge

Plan NH sees this part of the process as a period of discovery: discovering who the community is, what is important to the citizens, and what they really want. This community input is essential and critical to the value of the outcomes.

The results of the Plan NH Charrette are general and overarching planning and design *recommendations*, rather than specific directions. Plan NH does not dictate, but suggests. Most often, the outcome of a Plan NH charrette is described as a “vision”: an expression of how things might be, based on what the team saw, heard, and learned.



Why did Plan NH come to Kensington?

In April 2017, Plan NH received an application for a Community Design Charrette from Norman DeBoisbriand, Chairman of the Board of Selectmen. The completed application included thoughtful answers to Plan NH's questions about characteristics of the community, challenges, and the scope of the project that Kensington hoped to pursue.

The town of Kensington, described on the town website as a "community where old-fashioned values still prevail", has a rich history with a number of historic buildings in the village area. On one end of the village area is the lower village, which includes the Kensington Social Library, the Grange Hall, and the Hilliard Prescott House. On the other end is the upper village, which includes the town hall, and the Unitarian and Congregational Churches.

According to the application, the goal of the Community Design Charrette was to "improve functionality and usability of the downtown village core in a way that will encourage people to gather, communicate, learn, and experience a sense of community pride and togetherness".

Some of the key challenges were identified in the application:

- To start, Kensington's village area is bisected by NH Route 150 (Amesbury Road), which connects Exeter, NH to Amesbury, MA. This major road is heavily used by NH residents, including many Kensington residents, commuting to Massachusetts every day for work.



- In addition to the high traffic volume and speed, the road lacks adequate shoulder space or sidewalks, making it unsafe for pedestrians and cyclists.
- The application also noted the lack of businesses, including eateries and retail stores, remaining in town as an obstacle. With the closing of the country store, places for organic connections are nearly non-existent in the village area.
- Limited parking in the village area, especially in the lower village, was also identified as a challenge.

This over-arching goal of improving the functionality and usability of the downtown village core includes :

- unifying the two village areas,
- creating opportunities and places for residents to gather, and
- better utilize the historic properties.

Kensington residents are open to allowing some mixed-use development in the village area, but stress that any development in town must fit the rural character of Kensington.

Ultimately, Kensington wanted to enhance the health and vitality of the town that they love in order to strengthen the community fabric.

"When Elaine Kaczmarek was growing up in Kensington, residents walked or biked everywhere, and everyone knew everyone else. Enter commuters, computers, multi-career families and the use of Route 150 as a cut-through to bigger if not better things... Kaczmarek and several other Kensington residents long for the sense of community that was lost with the 20th century."

- Kathleen D. Bailey, for Seacoast Online (read the full article [here](#))

The Kensington Charrette—what the team heard

On Friday, October 21, the Plan NH charrette team gathered in Kensington to start the project. They were met by the Kensington Charrette Steering Committee.

First, the team enjoyed a guided bus tour of the target area, followed by a walking tour.

After a quick lunch, the team first met with Kensington town leaders for a general discussion about the challenges and opportunities they saw. This was followed by two public “listening sessions,” during which citizens sat in small groups and discussed what they saw in Kensington’s village center, what they would like to see, and what else the Plan NH team needed to know in order to make good recommendations.

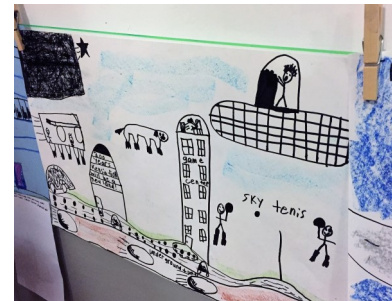
Local leadership expressed four major concerns: pedestrian and cyclist safety on Route 150, access to recreational assets, minimal opportunities for gathering, and expensive housing stock.

Kensington residents shared their love of their town’s rural character, history, and green space. While the village center is rife with beautiful, historic buildings, residents noted that these buildings are widely underutilized and they rarely have an excuse to visit the area.

Given that the village center is bisected by NH Route 150, it was not a surprise that pedestrian and cyclist safety emerged as a major theme during the community listening sessions. Sidewalks and bike lanes were among the most common things that residents want to see in Kensington.

Many residents expressed the desire for more affordable places to live. Kensington lacks economic diversity, and the population of young families is shrinking.

Overall, the residents who participated in the charrette process love Kensington for its natural resources and historic character.



What Kensington told Plan NH

What do you see?

- Rural character, with beautiful views, and a quaint feel spotted with historic buildings
- Plenty of green space, trees, and natural views
- Upper and lower villages are isolated from one another
- Fast traffic and curvy roads create unsafe conditions for pedestrian along Route 150
- No sidewalks or bicycle lanes
- Limited commercial activity
- It is difficult or dangerous to access park from school
- There are minimal places to gather/share information in town



What do you want to see?

- Year-round, indoor and outdoor opportunities for gathering, appropriate for all ages.
- More pedestrian-friendly features: sidewalks, crosswalks,
- Better use of existing, underutilized buildings (such as the Grange Hall), including more parking
- Reinstatement of town meetings or alternate ways of providing residents with information
- Something for teens to do in town, such as a teen center
- Better use of existing trail behind Grange Hall and trail maps
- Workforce housing-friendly zoning (such as changes to the lot size requirements)
- Services for elderly residents, including housing options for residents looking to downsize, and assistance accessing basic amenities (e.g. public transportation, grocery-delivery)



What else should we know?

- Kensington does not want to become a tourist magnet!
- There is a general sense of disconnectedness among residents, and many residents don't feel a sense of ownership.
- Kensington is frugal, and is hesitant about change.
- Bedroom community with a significant number of residents commuting to work every morning
- Population growth has slowed, and Kensington lacks young adult residents and economic diversity
- For teens in high school, the late bus drops them off in the center of town, but there is nowhere for them to go and nothing for them to do.



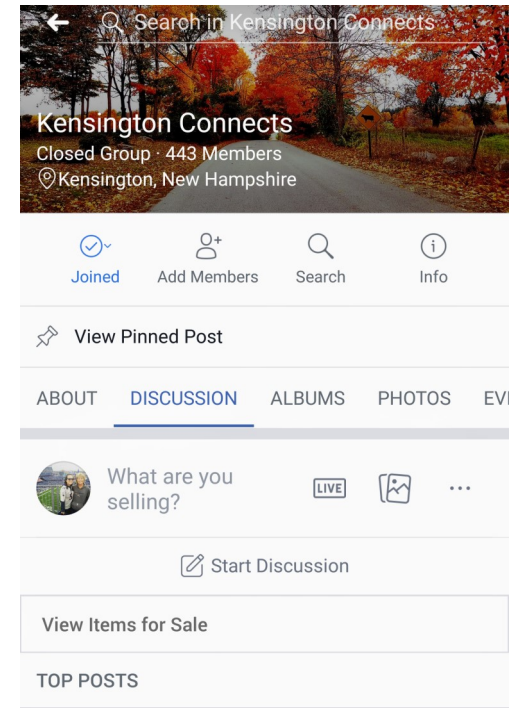
Communication

While not an element of the built environment, communication and lack of clear information was a major theme of the community listening session— so, the Plan NH team opted to include the topic in their considerations.

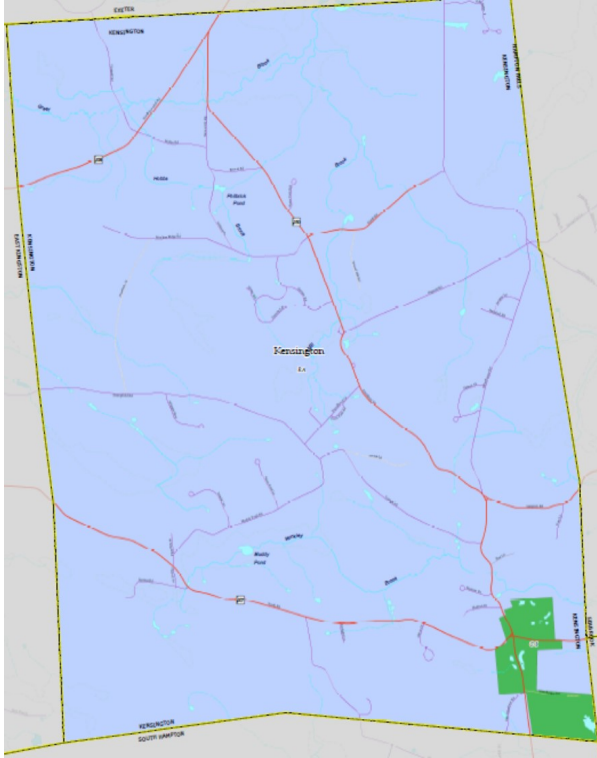
With the closing of the town’s general store, many residents lament the loss of the town bulletin board—a place they previously counted on for easy access to information about the goings-on around town. Kensington does have an active Facebook page for residents, but not all residents use social media.

Community members expressed a desire to have access to information about community events, issues that the planning and select boards are looking at, information about issues being voted on, and other general news.

Recommendation: Consider creating a steering committee of events with an information coordinator that works with the town hall to integrate information, and distributing a regular town newsletter to residents.



Zoning and Housing



Zoning

Kensington's village area is predominantly zoned as residential-agricultural, limiting commercial activity in the area. Existing businesses, including the Country Brook Café, exist due to special exceptions.

In order to create a more vibrant village area with public gathering spaces, the Plan NH Charrette team recommends creating a *village center overlay zone*, which would allow a mix of uses.

To protect Kensington's rural character, the recommendation includes the use of *character-based zoning*, which will allow the planning board to ensure that development is low-impact, and all development will fit the vibe of Kensington. The use of character-based zoning in the village center will maximize flexibility, while preserving the town's character.

The Plan NH charrette team recommends creating a *village district overlay zone* for Kensington's village district, and include character-based zoning to protect the character of the town from high-impact or inappropriate development.

Housing



The issue of housing affordability arose during the public listening sessions and the conversation with the local leaders. The perception among residents is that high housing costs are discouraging young families from moving to town, and making it difficult for elderly residents looking to downsize to stay in town.

Kensington's population also lacks economic diversity, as a result of high housing costs.

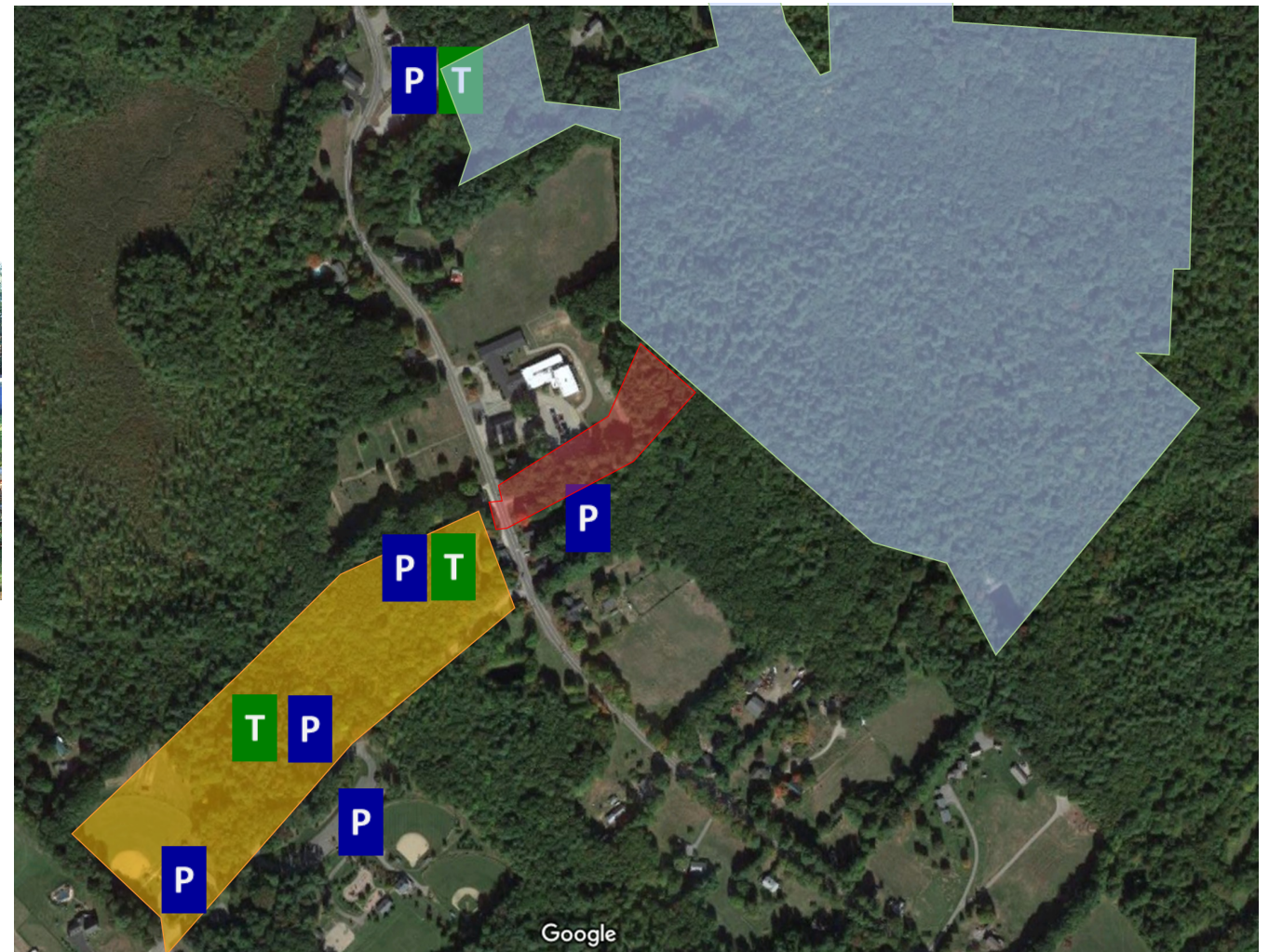
The Plan NH charrette team recommends conducting a housing needs analysis to determine housing needs in Kensington, including interviews, and surveys with current residents.

Recreational Trail Assets

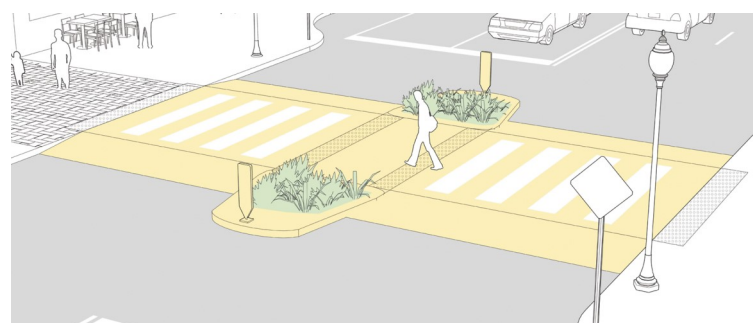
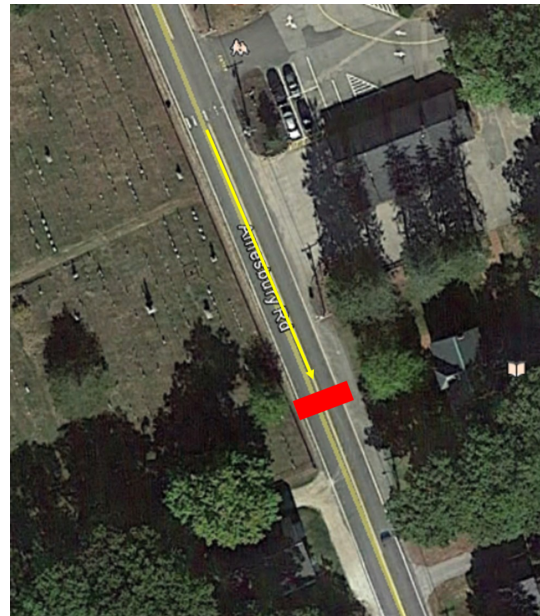
Kensington has a great existing trail system with a trail running behind the Grange Hall, across from the school, and leading to Sawyer Park, and an additional trail (the Meetinghouse Trail) on Osgood Road.

The Plan NH team recommends connecting existing trail networks, adding wayfinding signage, providing residents with trail information using the town website, and providing support for the trail committee.

The map on the right demonstrates how the existing trails on either side of Route 150 could be connected by the crosswalk (recommended on page 10 of this report) between the library and Grange Hall, and trail extension (shown in red).



South Village Crosswalk



The Plan NH team recommends moving the existing crosswalk, which currently connects the school to the graveyard, slightly south so that it connects the library to the Grange Hall. This spot provides better access to the Grange, and takes advantage of the existing light pole in front of the library. This crosswalk will also mark the spot where the (recommended) sidewalk will shift from the Northbound to the Southbound side of the road.

In addition to moving the South Village Crosswalk, the Plan NH team recommends enhancing the crosswalk to further slow traffic in this area increasing safety for pedestrians. Textured crosswalks, signage, and/or a speed table are appropriate traffic calming tools for this area.

The NH DOT Planning and Community Assistance Section, District #6, and Traffic Bureau can provide assistance identifying an acceptable design for crosswalk.

Traffic Calming and Right of Way

The speed limit on Amesbury road is posted at 35 miles per hour (with signage recommending 25 miles per hour, and a 25 mph school zone).

Recommendation: Request a free speed study from the NH Department of Transportation, with the goal of reducing the speed limit through town to 30 miles per hour, the minimum speed limit on state roads.

In addition to reducing the posted speed limit, other measures, like a traffic calming bulb (splitter island) can help slow down traffic, as well.

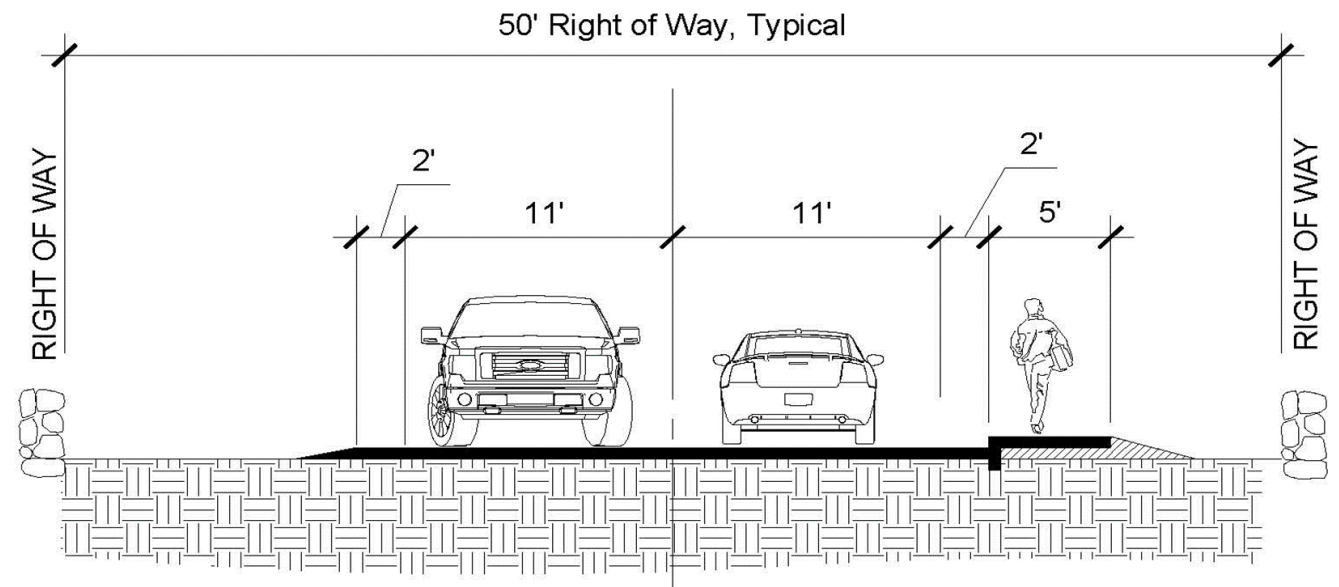
Recommendation: Add a traffic calming bulb in the center of the roadway on the southern end of the South Village.

The addition of sidewalks and added shoulder length, would help Kensington increase safety for pedestrians and cyclists on Amesbury road.

Recommendation: Narrow lanes on Amesbury Road from 12 to 11 feet, increasing the shoulder from 1 foot to 2 feet, and creating 5 feet of sidewalks on one side of the road.

Narrowing the lanes is a win-win since it would slow traffic, and create more shoulder space for pedestrians and cyclists.

Sidewalks would make pedestrian travel safer, and connect the upper and lower villages.



Streetscaping — South End



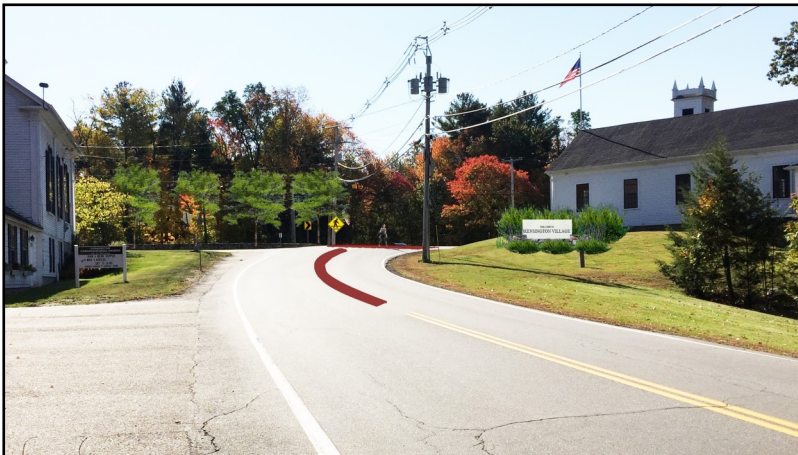
Recommendations:

- Add crosswalk connecting the Kensington Social Library to the Grange Hall and trailhead.
- At crosswalk, transition sidewalk to the southbound side of the road.
- Create parking and continue sidewalks behind the Hilliard-Prescott House.
- To calm traffic at the new crosswalk, consider adding textured pavement in place of the center line on either side of the crosswalk, using signage to alert drivers to presence of crosswalk, or adding a speed table at crosswalk.
- Add a traffic calming bulb south of the Hilliard–Prescott House, and take advantage of the median to add another “Welcome to Kensington Village” sign to signal to drivers that they are entering a village center.
- Add signature landscaping to either side of road to signal to drivers that they are entering Kensington’s village center.

Streetscaping — North End

Recommendations:

- Add a crosswalk between parking lot and town hall entrance.
- Signal to vehicles that they are entering Kensington's village center using a prominent "Welcome to Kensington Village" sign.
- Calm traffic by adding textured pavement in place of the center line on either side of the dangerous curve in Amesbury Road.
- Add sidewalks to the northbound side of the road. Recommended sidewalks will continue on this side of the road until the Kensington Social Library.
- Add signature landscaping to either side of road to signal to drivers that they are entering Kensington's village center.



Historic Resources—Recommendations



Kensington's village center is home to several beautiful historic buildings: the Grange Hall, the Hilliard-Prescott House, the Union Meetinghouse, the North School, the Town hall, the Kensington Social Library, and the Congregational Church.

Unfortunately, some of these buildings are underutilized. At the public listening sessions, residents remarked that they see "many great buildings, but no people" in the village center.

While the Town hall, Congregational Church, and Library are frequently-visited buildings, the Grange Hall, the Hilliard-Prescott House, the North School, and the Union Meetinghouse are under-utilized or never used.

Creating a Heritage Commission.

The Plan NH charrette team recommends establishing a Heritage Commission for the "proper recognition, use, and protection of resources, tangible or intangible, primarily man-made, that are valued for their historic, cultural, aesthetic, or community significance within their natural, built, or cultural contexts" (According to RSA 674:44, a-d). Heritage Commissions take on a variety of tasks including beautification, survey work, restoration of town-owned historic buildings, education and advocacy, and fundraising. The Plan NH Charrette team also recommends creating a Heritage Fund, a non-lapsing fund that can be used for acquiring, restoring, or holding easements on property.



Other Recommendations:

- Investigate using existing spaces before constructing new spaces (for example, better utilize the Grange Hall before investing in new/different spaces).
- List district to the National Register to assist in planning and fundraising
- Work on building public-private relationships to facilitate maximized utilization and increase village vibrancy
- Continue excellent stewardship of town-owned resources



The Hilliard Prescott House and the Union Meetinghouse

These buildings vary in condition, and as a result, some may not be appropriate for some uses. The recently rehabilitated Grange Hall complies with ADA code and has an operational kitchen and bathroom, but is not heated in the winter and is only used about 10 days per year. The condition of the Hilliard-Prescott House and Union Meetinghouse provide some challenges that will need to be considered as part of their future rehabilitation.

The **Hilliard-Prescott House** is a beautiful and historically significant building. The future uses of the building may be difficult if full code compliance is necessary, even with the consideration provided in NH's building code for existing buildings. For example, the doors in the Hilliard-Prescott House are not wide enough to allow most public uses. The Plan NH Charrette Team created two viable options for the HP House.

Recommendations:

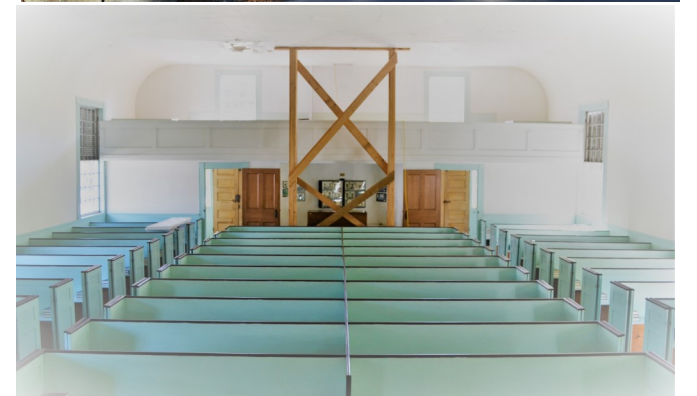
Option A: Put a preservation easement on the building, and prepare it for private sale.

Option B: Transform the Hilliard-Prescott House into a low-impact museum and research center. This option would create much-needed space in the Sawyer Room in the Kensington Social Library. Using the Hilliard-Prescott House as a museum will allow for greater leniency in how the building is rehabilitated to meet code.

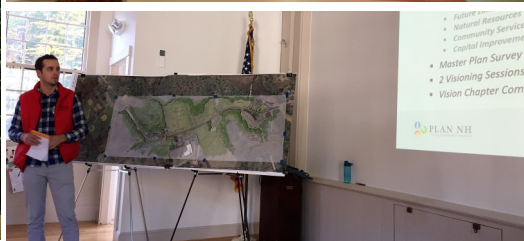
The **Union Meetinghouse** is currently used only occasionally during the summer season. The building's tower has a structural issue that is stabilized and safe, but not corrected. The Union Meetinghouse is not currently town-owned, but is significant to the town's history.

Recommendation:

Position the town to prepare for the building's future that reflects the planning goals for the village, if the building comes on the market.



Summary of Recommendations



1. Increase use of existing trails by connecting trails, providing residents with information and maps, and adding wayfinding signage.
2. Create a *village district overlay zone* allowing for a mix of uses in the village center, and adopt *character-based zoning* to protect the character of Kensington.
3. Conduct a housing study to analyze the housing needs of Kensington.
4. Request a free speed study from the NH Department of Transportation, with the goal of reducing the posted speed limit from 35 to 30 miles per hour in the village center.
5. Implement appropriate traffic calming measures, such as traffic bulbs, textured pavement, narrower roads, signage, and sidewalks.
6. Narrow travel lanes to widen the shoulders and make room for future sidewalks.
7. Move the south village crosswalk so that it connects the Kensington Social Library with the Grange Hall.
8. Visually separate the village center from other parts of Route 150 using signage and signature landscaping.
9. Create a Heritage Commission and Heritage Fund.
10. List the district to the National Register.
11. Increase use of existing buildings (such as the Grange Hall) before constructing new buildings or investing significant resources.
12. Explore future uses for the Hilliard-Prescott House and the Union Meetinghouse.
13. Establish a steering committee to help communicate the town's goings-on.

Helpful Resources

Rockingham Planning Commission

156 Water Street
Exeter, NH 03833
603-778-0885
<http://www.rpc-nh.org/>

There are different funding sources and opportunities to apply throughout the year. However, these may also change from year to year, so we recommend the Town keep in touch with your Planning Commission Circuit Rider and others.

The Rockingham Planning Commission can also provide you with other important resources, such as the Regional Master Plan and Regional Housing Needs Assessment.

NH Division of Historical Resources

19 Pillsbury Street, 2nd floor
Concord, NH 03301
603-271-3483
<https://www.nh.gov/nhdhr/>

NH Preservation Alliance

7 Eagle Square
Concord, NH 03301
603-224-2281
www.nhpreservation.org

Department of Transportation

7 Hazen Drive
Concord, NH 03301
603-271-3734
<https://www.nh.gov/dot/>

Workforce Housing Coalition of the Greater Seacoast

61 Locust Street
Dover, NH 03820
603-842-5682
www.seacoastwhc.org

