

## Frequently Asked Questions About Princeton's Community Master Plan

**1. Why is the Municipal Master Plan being updated?** The Planning Board is responsible for preparing, periodically amending, and adopting a municipal master plan in order to (quoting the NJ Municipal Land Use Law) “guide the use of lands within the municipality in a manner which protects public health and safety and promotes the general welfare.”

While certain elements of the Master Plan have been updated in recent decades, the last comprehensive master plan update was in 1996. The Planning Board and staff believe that a thorough update is essential in order to guide growth in a responsible, sustainable, and equitable way: protecting Princeton's historic assets and charm, fostering economic vitality, implementing smart growth principles, and responsibly addressing to housing affordability imperatives and the climate emergency.

Reflecting the times we live in, rumors and misinformation about the contents and impact of the proposed plan have found their way into the public discourse. This FAQ is intended to clarify some of those issues, but the Planning Board encourages residents to review the plan itself. Copies are available at the Planning Office at 400 Witherspoon Street and the Princeton Public Library, and online at [engage.princetonmasterplan.org](https://engage.princetonmasterplan.org) or [princetonnj.gov](https://princetonnj.gov).

**2. What does the plan envision for Princeton?** The thoughts, opinions and insight of thousands of residents, through surveys as well as dozens of in-person meetings and interviews, led to this vision statement:

*Princeton will be a **vibrant, growing, and welcoming community** with a **diverse mix of land uses** that accommodate a broad variety of needs, **housing ample and diverse** enough to accommodate all who want to live here, a **robust transportation system** that de-prioritizes cars, **ample open space and recreation** opportunities, **first-class community facilities** that serve and protect all stakeholders, a **diverse and growing local economy** that leverages but is not solely dependent on Princeton University, and **an unrivaled quality of life** for all residents.*

**3. Will the proposed plan that was released on October 30 incorporate some changes before the Planning Board votes?** Yes. Errors that are identified in the draft will be corrected. Some clarifying language will be added. In the Historic Preservation Element, certain suggestions related to terminology, historic sites and routes, and priority districts will be incorporated. These changes will strengthen the element.

The vision, findings and assumptions articulated in the plan's Introduction will not change.

Planning Director Justin Lesko will present recommended amendments at the board's November 30 meeting. The Planning Board appreciates the constructive criticism and suggestions offered by residents.

**4. Do the Mayor and Council vote to approve the Master Plan?** No. A municipality's Community Master Plan is the sole responsibility of the Planning Board. That said, two seats on the board are reserved for a council member and the mayor or his/her designee. Those two elected officials vote on the plan, as members of the Planning Board.

**5. I saw a petition that says the plan fails to address the environment, traffic, schools, parking, and trees, and it warns of the consequences of unplanned development. Are those things true?** No. In fact, the proposed plan is an antidote to development without appropriate planning. Moreover, it speaks directly, and in detail, to environmental priorities, traffic mitigation, school facilities, parking, transit, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and more.

Much information and many references can be found within these FAQs, and we hope they are helpful. As noted in the first FAQ above, we invite and encourage residents to read the plan, which speaks for itself. Copies are available at the Planning Office at 400 Witherspoon Street and the Princeton Public Library, and online at [engage.princetonmasterplan.org](https://engage.princetonmasterplan.org) and [Princetonnj.gov](https://Princetonnj.gov).

**6. Will there be a public referendum on the Plan?** No. To quote the 2022 edition of the seminal *New Jersey Zoning and Land Use Administration*, "Since 1953, statutes have provided for the adoption of a master plan by the planning board. This provision was carried over into the 1976 Municipal Land Use Law and allocated to N.J.S. 40:55D-28." There is no provision in state law or local ordinance under which a master plan is subject to referendum.

**7. Will there be a pause in the process, or will it be extended?** The master plan update is long overdue. Most of the old plan is outdated and/or no longer factual or relevant. Princeton urgently needs an updated master plan in order to successfully respond to climate change and the housing crisis, and to ensure that our planning goals are equitable, sustainable and compliant with current state statutes.

The update process has been lengthy, thorough, well publicized, and has involved robust public engagement. Pausing or changing course would not only undermine the integrity of the process, but would require an additional infusion of taxpayer dollars.

A Community Master Plan is meant to be a living document. The planning director and board are committed to revisiting and updating the plan more frequently than has been done in the past.

**8. I hear the Master Plan does not change zoning. I also hear the Master Plan will trigger zoning changes. What's the truth?** The plan is a policy document, not a legislative one. It does not change zoning; only Princeton's governing body can do that via the ordinance process. That said, zoning ordinances should be "substantially consistent" with a municipality's master plan, so the Planning Board anticipates that zoning amendments will be crafted for Council's consideration. The plan contains detailed recommendations (pp. 48-49) to complete the consolidation and harmonization of the former Borough and Township zoning codes, and to provide relief to homeowners on "nonconforming" properties, including those that were built prior to the adoption of zoning. The plan also contains more general land use recommendations (pp.

44-47), some of which begin with “study” – indicating that careful analysis is warranted before changes are initiated.

If and when zoning ordinances change, new requirements can and should be specific as to scale, form, fit and orientation. This can be done with zoning ordinances that ensure that new buildings fit the context of the neighborhood.

**9. Does the plan ‘upzone’ the Municipality to allow four homes on each lot?** No, the plan does not call for four units on each lot in town. The Proposed Land Use section (beginning on p. 39) provides guidance for growth that reinforces and strengthens Princeton’s community fabric.

The Land Use Plan map (p. 42) lists 10 general land use categories. These categories are not synonymous with the nearly 70 zoning districts and overlays that comprise Princeton’s current zoning. The zoning districts will not be changed by this plan; only Council has the power to change zoning through the public ordinance process.

The 10 land use categories provide generalized guidance for use if and when land use changes occur. These are shown on a per-acre basis, not a per-lot basis, and are based on existing zoning. Further analysis and outreach, including input from those most affected, will be needed to determine where changes should be made and what exactly they would look like.

**10. Why add more housing in old, established neighborhoods?** The plan recommends that Princeton allow – not require, but allow – existing homes that are located relatively near to downtown and transit to be converted or retrofitted, to create multiple smaller units. These could be used as rentals to offset costs to “empty nesters” or could be used to house relatives in a way that promotes multigenerational living, which carries positive impacts. The point is to add options for housing diversity – if and only if homeowners want to utilize those options, or if they sell to a new owner that wishes to do so. Specifically, the recommendation (p. 45) reads “Study permitting the conversion of large single-family homes into attached dwelling residential buildings, particularly in neighborhoods near transit stops or with existing off-street parking.” “Study” means just that: proceeding with care, detailed analysis, and input from those who would be most affected.

Importantly, the proposed plan does not contain or recommend any mandate to change the character of any neighborhood; it recommends allowing more of what already exists. There are a number of beautiful old neighborhoods in Princeton where large historic homes or structures house multiple units; these sit comfortably side-by-side with single family homes, with no change in the appearance of the neighborhood and no adverse impact on property values.

**11. Why plan for any more housing at all?** Princeton is growing and will continue to grow. The master plan provides guidance for meeting the needs of an additional population in a sustainable, equitable manner. Public engagement and feedback in open houses, surveys and listening sessions revealed strong consensus that more housing affordable to middle-income people is needed in Princeton. Additionally, like all New Jersey municipalities, Princeton will be required to accommodate additional affordable housing. The master plan acknowledges the need to begin identifying opportunities to create new affordable units in anticipation of the next round of affordable housing requirements.

**12. What does “missing middle” housing really mean? Is it a price point, or a type of housing?** Ideally, it is both. In planning parlance, however, it is more a type of housing than a price point. Nothing in a municipal master plan can control real estate market pricing. Princeton is a highly desirable location, for many excellent reasons. The town’s housing stock comprises mostly large, detached, single family homes that are very expensive. Many people who rent apartments in town would like to own a home but cannot afford to buy in Princeton. Adding more housing choices of a smaller scale would begin to address housing needs in Princeton and is one tool to stabilize prices. Locating those new homes in proximity to jobs, shopping, parks, leisure and transit enables a more affordable, sustainable and, to many people, a very appealing lifestyle.

**13. Will providing “missing middle” housing bring prices down?** The market will determine housing prices; Princeton’s housing prices and values probably will remain high relative to many other municipalities. There is an unmet demand in Princeton for smaller-sized homes to buy. Adding more modest-sized dwellings in walkable areas, as many in the community say they want and need, may well stabilize housing prices and provide a new price point. The plan would, we hope, result in more owner-occupied dwellings, which contribute to stable communities and usually help build family wealth.

**14. Smaller homes are being torn down and replaced by much bigger ones in my neighborhood. What does the plan do to stop this?** Many of the ‘teardowns’ that we’ve all seen in Princeton in recent years are allowed by the standards of the properties’ zoning. Any development, including a teardown, that meets those standards does not go to any Board for review or public comment; the development is allowed ‘by-right.’

The proposed master plan recommends providing additional options as alternatives to tearing down an existing home to build a much larger one. Recommendations include eliminating complex barriers that prevent the creation of duplexes, triplexes and quadplexes even where those building types are currently a permitted use, or adjusting the standards for accessory dwelling units to make it feasible to keep the existing house and build a small accessory dwelling unit in the rear of the lot. The proposed land use map does not propose allowing significant increases in the number of dwelling units per property.

**15. Some days traffic is terrible! Won’t adding housing in the center of town increase traffic?** Adding people to the center of town need not translate to more car traffic downtown. Nearly 24,000 workers commute to Princeton each work day. If more people who currently commute were able to live in Princeton and walk or bike to work, that could put a dent in traffic congestion.

Traffic is made worse by people circling to find parking. There is strong consensus that it needs to be much easier to find a parking spot in Princeton! The Mobility Element recommendations (pp. 92-94) enumerate strategies to address congestion, including parking apps, wayfinding, incentives for shared parking and public/private parking agreements and more.

The Mobility Element of the plan speaks to the need for a more logical, connected transit system and includes recommendations (pp. 91-92) to achieve this goal. Acting on the

recommendations should reduce traffic and will benefit Princeton residents who live outside of walking distance from many local destinations.

In survey responses and during public meetings, many residents reported they would walk and bike more, and drive less, if they felt safe doing so. Thus, improving pedestrian and bike infrastructure is another key to addressing traffic congestion.

**16. Doesn't more housing mean crowding out green spaces and losing Princeton's magnificent trees?** Protecting and adding to Princeton's tree canopy is critically important for climate resiliency, public health, quality of life, and to preserve the beauty of our town. The master plan contains a number of recommendations that, collectively, add up to "Green As We Grow." The plan urges expanding the urban tree canopy; maximizing green infrastructure (for flood control and habitat); amending zoning and design standards to incentivize or require more densely vegetated alternatives to lawn; adopting tree planting standards that implement best practices for urban forestry; mitigating the "heat island" effect in built-up areas by maximizing vegetative cover and shade tree plantings in public spaces and along public streets. The goals and recommendations are articulated in the Land Use Element (p. 62) and in the Conservation, Recreation and Open Space Element (pp. 169-170).

A key master plan goal is to "make the built environment greener and more absorbent." Another is "retrofit urban areas to accommodate more green infrastructure, enhanced vegetation and resiliency to the effects of climate change." All of this translates to protecting trees whenever and wherever possible – with the exception of invasive trees like the so-called Tree of Heaven that hosts the spotted lantern fly.

Princeton residents have seen many grand old oaks and ash trees removed from highly visible streetscapes. This is heartbreaking to many, but it is due almost entirely to the emerald ash borer and, in the case of pin oaks and red oaks, the bacterial leaf scorch. Fortunately, the municipality is investing in replacing those old beauties with native street trees. And when the Planning Board reviews an application for development, close attention is paid to saving trees whenever feasible. Native trees and shrubs are almost always required for landscaping, to support birds and pollinators.

**17. How will the schools deal with an additional infusion of school children?** For decades, people have been moving to Princeton specifically to send their children to our public schools. Studies show that large homes tend to generate large numbers of children, and the proposed master plan does not recommend zoning for more large homes; quite the contrary. That said, it's important to understand that local officials are forbidden by law from making land use decisions designed to exclude families with school children. We should expect that the school population will grow. The plan lays a foundation for responsible, incremental growth.

The plan includes significant input from public school leaders and advocates. A member of the school board served on the Master Plan Steering Committee, as did a school administrator. At least two other members of the steering committee have children in the public schools. The planning director and consultants met with the School Board's Long Range Facilities Committee. Municipal leaders and the School Board will continue to work together to ensure our schools deliver outstanding education and enrichment to the children of Princeton. Recommendations specific to educational facilities are on p. 143 of the proposed plan.

**18. I didn't know this planning effort was happening. How was the community engaged?**

A Steering Committee was formed in April 2022 to advise staff and consultants, to help connect the planning process to the community, and to provide direct input (through subcommittees) as the elements of the plan were refined and finalized. The Steering Committee consisted of representatives from the municipality, Princeton University, Princeton Public Schools, small businesses, as well as residents – some with deep roots in Princeton, others recent “transplants” – with diverse, often-untapped networks including African American, Asian, Latino, and LGBTQ populations.

Beginning in early 2022, each of Princeton's municipal boards, commissions and committees were consulted and encouraged to offer input into the plan. Fifteen meetings with presentations and Q&A were held with neighborhood organizations, community groups, committees and local merchants. “Tabling” with master plan information and staff were on hand for public events at Hinds Plaza, the YWCA Block Party, Princeton eCommuter Fest, Community Night Out and others. Twelve listening sessions were held: one online, and 11 in-person. The in-person listening sessions were held in neighborhoods, at Monument Hall, the Arts Council, the Jewish Center, the high school, and in Spanish at Witherspoon Presbyterian Church. The listening sessions were open to all residents and were publicized via traditional media, social media, the municipal newsletter, and the schools' virtual backpack. Three surveys, one focused on consumer preferences and two on community vision (with questions about housing needs, mobility, parks and recreation), were widely circulated, with good response rates. Planning Office staff had tables and flyers at community events and in various public spaces around Princeton, including at the University's student center. The planning director gave progress reports to the Planning Board at virtually every public meeting in 2022 and 2023.

**19. Was the Historic Preservation Commission consulted?** Yes. Between October 2022 and August 2023, the planning director and the consultants that were hired to write all elements of the plan reached out repeatedly to the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) to share information, pose questions, and to ask for input. A subcommittee of the HPC chose to write a separate element. The Municipal Land Use Law and Princeton's municipal ordinance are clear that the Planning Board is responsible for creating a master plan, while a Historic Preservation Commission does not create a master plan or any elements within it, but advises on it.

HPC has now provided specific recommendations, many of which likely will be incorporated into the plan. Constructive and valuable input received from independent experts is also being incorporated.

**20. How and when will the Master Plan be implemented?** The authority to adopt changes to municipal policies and ordinances (including zoning) that turn the master plan's recommendations into reality rests entirely with Princeton's elected leaders: the Mayor and Council. They also make all decisions related to infrastructure investments, which would be required to fulfill some key recommendations: for example, pedestrian and bike safety improvements, transit, open space and recreation, flood mitigation and other climate resiliency measures, and community facilities upgrades.

Princeton's elected leaders are not bound by law to act on every recommendation in the Master Plan. The Land Use Element of the plan, however, is required to be the basis for any zoning ordinance, and is the basis for many land use decisions, including decisions made by the

municipality's land use boards: the planning board and the zoning board of adjustment. Assuming the final draft of the plan is adopted, crafting zoning changes that add the Housing types/choices that are envisioned, in ways that speak clearly to form and fit, and anticipate the law of unintended consequences -- that is, getting it right -- will be painstaking (and interesting!) work that likely will unfold over years.

(end)