Chapter I: Vision

Introduction

The following Vision chapter provides the Town of Wilton with goals for its near future, in the next ten to twenty years. The chapter focuses on community feedback which stems around conservation, maintaining the Town's rural character, encouraging appropriate development in the Town, and redeveloping the Downtown. The vision statements, explained at the end of the chapter, aim to equip Wilton with the appropriate processes, goals, and strategies to improve and cultivate Town ideals.

Wilton's current Master Plan has been updated on a chapter-by-chapter basis, with chapters ranging from 2015-2026. The Master Plan, as described in NH RSA 674:2, serves as the guiding document for the Town of Wilton with respect to Town growth, land use, vision, economic development, natural resources, transportation, population and housing, town facilities and services, historical and cultural resources, and transportation. In simpler terms, the Master Plan serves as a roadmap for future growth in the Town of Wilton.

In recognition that the Wilton Master Plan should be responsive to current local, state, and national conditions, the Planning Board began the task of updating the Master Plan Vision Chapter in 2025 through a Housing Opportunity Program Grant (HOP).

The Vision Chapter sets the precedent for the remaining chapters in the Wilton Master Plan by breaking down what direction the Town should move towards in the future. To gauge public opinion, a Master Plan Vision survey was distributed townwide in early 2026 to find out why residents value Wilton, how they would improve it, what uses they would like to see in the future, and the community's overall vision for Wilton over the next ten years. The Planning Board also hosted its first virtual engagement webpage, where it held an online asynchronous visioning workshop to understand essential areas of Wilton to protect for conservation, town character, and future development. The main functions of the platform were to create a community gathering space, to provide an opportunity for Wilton residents to interact with land use regulations in a new way, and to understand concerns and recommendations for Wilton. Additionally, the Economic Development team produced a survey in the latter part of 2025, which provided insight into specific development goals for the town and resident opinion on different future growth models.

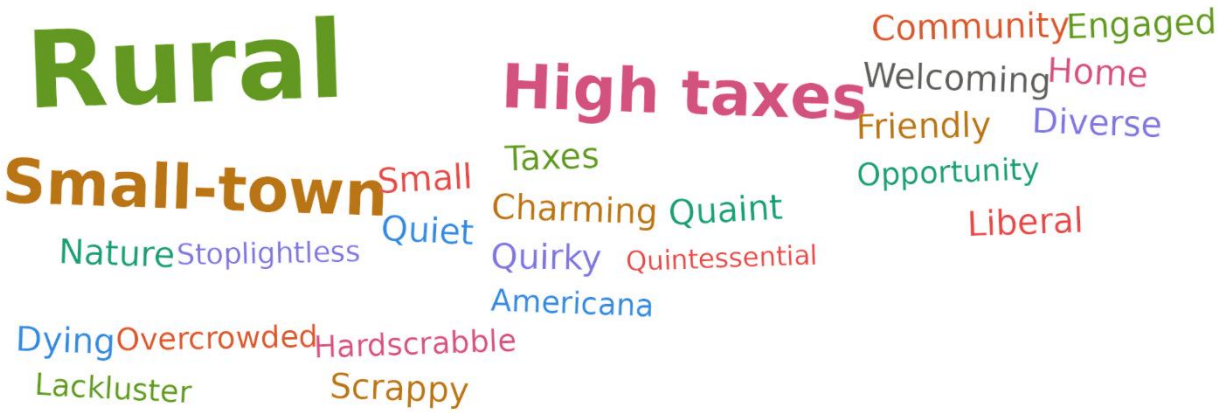
What We Heard

Wilton residents were asked a variety of questions to inform this Vision Chapter. The following topics were most commonly heard across survey responses:

- Property Taxes
- Wildlife & Natural Resource Protection

- Preserving Town Character
- Improving the Planning & Zoning Process
- Revitalizing the Downtown
- Supporting Small & Agricultural Businesses
- Supporting Young Families & Seniors Aging in Place

To identify an overarching Town identity, residents were asked to provide a single word that they felt best describes the Town of Wilton. The word cloud shown below is a graphic generated from the responses. The more often a word occurred as an answer, the larger it appears in the image, while the less frequently a word occurred as an answer, the smaller it appears.



As seen in the word cloud, the most frequent responses consisted of “rural,” “taxes,” and “small.” However, across the rest of the responses, there is a wide variety of differing language. While this question was originally designed to identify an overarching Town identity, it ultimately found that the Town of Wilton does not currently have a clear identity. This reveals an opportunity for the town to establish its individuality now through the implementation of different programs, town character, community events, and elected officials. However, there is a clear desire from residents for Wilton to remain a small, rural Town.

“Let's keep it rural and small.” - Wilton Resident 2026

Another area of the survey that received significant feedback was an issue that currently plagues the state of New Hampshire: property taxes. Residents of Wilton are struggling with the cost of property taxes in the Town and are searching for relief. In fact, 79% of all respondents listed property taxes as their greatest concern for the Town. Contrarily, residents are steadfast in their desire for Wilton to remain small and rural and are in opposition to development that would help to significantly diversify the tax base. Attempting to strike a healthy balance of residential to non-residential development will be essential to improving property tax rates.

"We need to prioritize maintaining the existing perks of small-town living while finding a way to balance the funding needs." - Wilton Resident 2026

Additionally, the planning and zoning process, which includes the Wilton Zoning Ordinance, the planning and building departments, the Land Use Boards, and additional town regulations, was found to be quite arduous for residents. The survey found that out of residents who were either familiar or very familiar with the Wilton Zoning Ordinance, 56% found it difficult to work with. There was significant feedback that the process in which Wilton residents engage in planning and zoning issues was cumbersome, clunky, and in need of improvement.

"The Town needs to promote ADUs by deleting impact fees and an excessively slow approval process. Large businesses should have a place in the plan because they provide employment." Wilton Resident 2026

In relation to future development in Wilton, most respondents wished to see an increase in small businesses like barbershops, restaurants, agricultural businesses, and boutique uses, while starkly opposing larger box stores or big developments. The clear consensus from the survey results is the Town's wish to remain small and to avoid the large-scale development that can be seen east of Wilton.

"I think we need to be mindful not to allow condos and big businesses, but rather to encourage smaller, local businesses." - Wilton Resident 2026

Unsurprisingly, there was shared sentiment across residents to increase the amount of conserved land and to protect the community's natural resources. This is in line with the Town's current vision and is a clear priority for residents. The people of Wilton value their natural resources, wildlife, and conservation land above many other issues, and they should remain a top priority for the Town. In fact, when asked what percentage of remaining undeveloped land in Wilton should be protected and undeveloped in the future, 75% of respondents wished for at least 25%-40% of remaining undeveloped land to be protected and undeveloped in the future.

Vision Statements

The present vision for Wilton builds upon the past work of the Wilton Master Plan Committee, which first met in 1987, as well as the goals and objectives of the 1999 and 2015 Master Plans. The vision statements below incorporate longstanding goals from those previous Master Plans while also incorporating new ideas that arose during public outreach in 2025 and 2026. Additionally, below each vision statement, the Planning Board has provided potential implementation strategies to help achieve

each goal. Each implementation strategy is merely a suggestion for how the Town may want to move forward to achieve its goal; they are in no way mandatory or required to be completed.

The overall vision for Wilton is a combination of the following statements:

- Statement 1.1: To remain a small town that protects its rural environment, historic charm, and natural resources while welcoming growth that is compatible in character and scale with the existing community.
    - Implementation Strategies:
        - Adopt a cluster regulation ordinance that promotes residential growth while maintaining the Town's rural character through required open-space requirements for larger subdivisions.
        - Establish a Forest Retention standard that would be applicable to new residential developments that require a minimum percentage of existing tree cover to be preserved on each lot to retain the rural Town character and history.
        - Create a Rural Character Design Standards document, found within the Site Plan and Subdivision Review regulations, that defines clear guidelines to give the Planning Board a metric towards development's potential impact on community character.
        - Conduct a comprehensive buildout analysis to quantify how much additional residential development is possible under current zoning regulations, and if the current zoning regulations are serving the growth that residents desire.

- Statement 2.1: To support residential development and local businesses that respond to the current needs of the community without significantly changing Town character or size.
    - Implementation Strategies:
        - Through the Economic Development Committee, promote a small business incubator program that provides technical assistance with starting a business in Wilton.
        - Consider creating a Community Character Audit on a recurring ten-year cycle that provides measurable metrics for evaluating the current town character against the past.

- Statement 3.1: To be a Town whose downtown functions as a thriving civic and commercial center that promotes tourism, while celebrating the aspects of Wilton that preserve Town character.
    - Implementation Strategies:
        - Evaluate the recently adopted Downtown Industrial Adaptive Reuse District to ensure that the historic and rural character of the Town is being preserved, while promoting new economic development.
        - Conduct a formal study on Downtown walkability utilizing public engagement, environmental considerations, and researching eligible funding resources to help

improve the existing conditions. Linking the downtown and the biking capabilities of 101-A.

- Develop a Downtown Action Plan with direct input from business owners, property owners, and residents, which recognizes specific short-term and long-term goals for the downtown, with clear goals such as façade improvements, public space utilization, or business recruitment.

- Statement 4: To be a vibrant and collaborative Community that provides support and opportunities for its young, old, and ages in between to affordably live, work, visit, play, and stay for a lifetime.
    - Implementation Strategies:
        - Evaluate the current Accessory Dwelling Unit ordinance to ensure that it allows residents a practical and accessible opportunity for aging in place or supporting an additional revenue stream.
        - Conduct a Community Needs Assessment that surveys residents across all age demographics about their housing needs, addressing service gaps and barriers in Wilton, such as transportation, access to amenities, and quality of life.

- Statement 5.1: To be a Town that nurtures the creative and educational life of its community through celebrating the arts, local history, and cultural tradition.
    - Implementation Strategies:
        - Develop a Cultural and Historic Resource Inventory that documents Wilton's existing historical, educational, and art institutions to use as a foundation for identifying opportunities to grow the Town's cultural identity.
        - Work to establish a Public Art Program through the Town that utilizes interested residents and community volunteers to create, support, and direct artistic endeavors and events. Promote or encourage
        - Create a Heritage Tourism Program that partners with the Wilton Historical Society to promote local history and cultural traditions within the Town.
- Statement 6: To be a Town that is committed to environmental stewardship, with policies involving energy, natural resources, building standards, and land use patterns that are critical to Wilton's long-term sustainability.
    - Implementation Strategies:
        - Evaluate existing Wetland, Watershed, Stormwater, Aquifer Protection Districts, Solar and Wind Ordinances to ensure progressive environmental policies.
        - Establish a recurring Natural Resource Inventory update with the Planning Board and Conservation Commission to distinguish the Town's environmental assets and inform land use regulations.
        - Create a Municipal Energy Plan that establishes clear metrics for reducing energy usage across the Town and in Town facilities, with an emphasis on solar- and wind-powered energy alternatives.

- Statement 7: To be a Town that permanently protects its forests, wetlands, farmlands, and open spaces as fundamental community assets through strategic conservation efforts, land use regulations, and community input.
    - Implementation Strategies:
        - Establish a formal conservation target for the Town within the Natural Resources Chapter of the Master Plan that is in-line with public input.
        - Create a Conservation Fund with a dedicated annual budget to be appropriated for conservation acquisitions and easements, if the opportunity arises.
        - Evaluate and improve existing natural resource protection standards within the existing Subdivision and Site Plan Review Standards that would mitigate impacts on wetlands, agricultural soils, aquifers, wildlife habitat corridors, and riparian buffers.

- Statement 8: To be a Town growing at a rate that does not outpace its ability to provide safe, adequate public services and facilities.
    - Implementation Strategies:
        - Continue to utilize the Capital Improvements Program Committee for annual reports and improvements to roads, bridges, utilities, emergency facilities, and schools.
        - Update the existing Impact Fee Schedule to be current with existing conditions in the Town
        - Develop a Municipal Land Evaluation analysis for residential versus non-residential land uses to quantify the fiscal impacts of different development types.

- Statement 9: To be a Town that provides a variety of transportation options to allow all people to get to where they need, without impacting the Town's scenic and rural character and natural resources.
    - Implementation Strategies:
        - Explore partnerships with regional transit providers, including a volunteer driver program, ride-share arrangements, or another form of regional transit to allow more access for residents in the region.
        - Develop a Town-wide Bicycle and Pedestrian Network that inventories all existing trails, sidewalks, shoulders, and paths to identify connectivity gaps across the Town, with an emphasis on solutions oriented towards the Town's steep slopes.

- Statement 10.1: To be a Town whose land use, building, planning, and permitting process is clear and consistent and has readily accessible technical guidance for land use issues.
    - Implementation Strategies:
        - Create a "plain-language" Land Use Regulation Guide for residents that is available on the website and at the town hall, which provides clear explanations of the existing planning and zoning processes.
        - Commission an independent audit of existing Land Use Regulations and permitting procedures to create an action plan to improve the current ordinance.
        - Establish an applicant satisfaction survey, or resident survey, to give feedback on the planning and zoning process to create an action plan to address notable concerns.

- Statement 11: To be a Town that takes deliberate and sustained action to grow its non-residential tax base through actively recruiting and retaining small and agricultural businesses that generate municipal revenue to help reduce the fiscal burden on residential property taxpayers.
    - Implementation Strategies:
        - Continue to utilize the Economic Development Committee to conduct targeted business recruitment and retention strategies.
        - Conduct a comprehensive review of the existing 79-E Revitalization District and the Industrial Zone to identify whether the current zoning designations fit the character of the area.
        - Review the complexity and requirements for starting a small business in Wilton that would fit Town character.

The following Chapters of this Master Plan contain guiding principles and recommendations based on these Vision Statements and Implementation Strategies in support of the overall vision of Wilton.