

# Community Facilities & Services

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## I. Issues, Goals and Recommendations

A community facility is municipal property that has been developed or improved for public use: a town hall, parks, playgrounds and beaches, municipal parking lots, bike paths or a water treatment plant. Though seemingly intangible, “community service” is the more important consideration. The need for facilities is dictated by services, and services are dictated by a combination of law, local policy, custom, and the changing size and make-up of a community’s population. In other parts of the country, county governments deliver many of the services that cities and towns provide in New England. Here, municipalities run their own schools, maintain streets,



develop and manage public utilities, own substantial amounts of real property, provide for police and fire protection and offer a variety of resident services. Sometimes they deliver services jointly, such as regional schools or health programs. Local government handles so many functions that it is one of the largest employers in a number of the Commonwealth’s small towns, including Hamilton.

Community facilities and services are the civic infrastructure that local governments provide in order to enhance the quality of life for their residents. Since cities and towns depend mainly on local revenue to operate, civic infrastructure and fiscal impact are mutually dependent public policy issues: each is driven by land use choices made at the local level. Just as a town provides services and collects revenue to support the cost of governance, it largely determines the kind of community it is today and will be in the future by the choices it makes to manage the land within its borders. A municipality is a political, economic and fiscal unit. When it can maximize both the amount and proportion of revenue that comes from its own land and manage the costs generated by land use, a community will have greater control over the quality and long-term stability of its local government.

### Important Questions

The community facilities and services element addresses five questions that form the basis for the policies and recommendations outlined in the master plan:

- What public services does Hamilton provide, and how does the town pay for them?
- Does Hamilton have adequate facilities to accommodate future development?
- Do Hamilton’s land use policies promote fiscal stability?
- What capital improvement and service needs are reasonably foreseeable today, and how should the town plan for them?
- Is Hamilton’s form of government adequate for the challenges of managing growth and change?

## Discussion

Few towns know better than Hamilton how difficult it is to provide adequate facilities and services. In August 2003, more than 1,700 voters from Hamilton and Wenham convened for a landmark event: a joint town meeting to agree on a school budget for FY 2004 (July 1, 2003 -June 30, 2004). After Hamilton voters rejected two proposed overrides of Proposition 2½ to fund the schools, the regional school committee and local officials labored to find a manageable, less costly alternative. At times the deliberations were bitter, pitting families against seniors and school advocates against fiscal conservatives. Ultimately, the school committee sought a much-reduced increase in the school budget while parents organized a private fundraising drive to help pay for new teachers and other needs. The joint town meeting was harmonious, but the conditions that led to it are hardly resolved. As one resident said in a letter to the local newspaper, "Just about everyone...realizes that the current situation is not sustainable. At a certain point, which we may have just reached, we can't keep asking people for more and more money, if for no other reason than they just won't pay."

Hamilton's form of government is much like that of other small towns: decentralized, volunteer-driven and highly democratic. Its executive branch includes a three-member board of selectmen at the helm and other elected boards with some independent powers. Since the local legislative body is an open town meeting, residents control appropriations. Their budget choices determine how much they will pay in taxes each year and the kinds of services they receive from the town. Hamilton does not have many employees, in fact its workforce seems small compared to the number of people employed by local governments elsewhere. The size of town government explains, at least in part, Hamilton's modest expenditure per capita for town and school services. Although the town's average single-family tax bill ranked 31 out of 351 communities in Fiscal Year (FY) 2002, its total operating budget, measured per capita, ranked 210. Hamilton's public spending is fairly low compared not only to the state as a whole, but also to towns of similar size.

For all that the Commonwealth's communities have in common, their differences make statistical comparisons very difficult. Highway networks, watersheds and labor markets support some types of regional analysis, but they have little to do with the fiscal condition or demographic make-up of individual communities. Of the state's 351 cities and towns, 74 are similar to Hamilton in year-round population and 43 in land area, but only 10 are reasonably similar to Hamilton in both total population and land area – none in the immediate region. The median income of Hamilton homeowners is above the upper quartile for the state as a whole, but barely so: on the continuum of household wealth, Hamilton is unlike any of the other towns with high-ranking average single-family tax bills, including those in its own part of the state. Whether the cost to live in Hamilton is affordable to many, the same cannot be said for all, or perhaps even most, of the town's homeowners.

Hamilton residents obviously care about public education, yet they worry about taxes. While Hamilton and Wenham spend the same amount per pupil, they do not spend the same amount per capita. Hamilton ranks 89 in the state for education spending per capita and Wenham ranks 206 (the actual difference is about \$270 per person). When the CAPC conducted a survey in 2002, 69% of the respondents registered satisfaction with the Hamilton-Wenham Regional Schools, including 28% who said they were very pleased. A plurality (44%) said that if they could decide how to spend their own tax dollars, they would keep spending about the same amount on education, yet other respondents were divided equally between spending more (26%) on schools or less (27%).

However, the survey all but foreshadowed this year's budget dispute, for 69% of the respondents were unhappy with Hamilton's property tax bills – including 46% who felt strongly that their tax

bills had risen too fast. Overall, the survey results do not portray a town that dislikes paying for education or any other service. Rather, they shed light on a town that is not homogeneously affluent. Custom, land use policy and location have made Hamilton very attractive to families. It ranks 37 in the state for percentage of family households (80.7%), and its families are fairly large. The average number of school-age children per family in Hamilton (.74) ranks 29 statewide. In light of these statistics, the town's strong commitment to schools, culture and recreation makes great sense. In Essex County, only Boxford surpasses Hamilton for percentage of families or average number of school children per family. However, Boxford also ranks 7 for median household income and its equalized valuation (EQV) per capita<sup>1</sup> is \$170,868; Hamilton ranks 62 for median household income and its EQV per capita is \$125,161. Compared to Boxford, Hamilton spends more per pupil on public education, but its slightly less affluent taxpayers pay more of their income on property taxes to finance the cost of town and school services.

In most cases, municipal service costs in Hamilton are about the same as or somewhat lower than the state average. Its education costs are much higher, however, and Hamilton's historic deference to school spending has a great deal to do with its modest commitment to other services. Despite the town's small government, Hamilton does not suffer from low-quality civic infrastructure. It is a thoughtfully run community where officials and staff accomplish a great deal with the limited resources at their disposal. Hamilton's town hall is particularly impressive. The town also has fine parks and recreation areas, often filled with children at play. In addition, Hamilton and Wenham recently opened the state's first regional public library. The library partially explains why Hamilton, after many debt-free years, has begun to make annual loan repayments. The town also borrowed to finance its share of a conservation land purchase with Manchester, and to build a treatment facility that removes iron from drinking water. In a state where debt service typically averages 6.5-7% of local expenditures and .20% of EQV, Hamilton's low 3% and .06% respectively suggest a town that is not only conservative, but also one that may not be spending enough to preserve and enhance the value of its capital assets.



Hamilton and Wenham have an unusual regional service history. In addition to schools and the new library, the towns operate a joint recreation department and they share emergency dispatch services. Against the backdrop of these long-standing ties, many in Hamilton and Wenham had hoped to partner on a new public safety building, but a majority of Wenham voters decided to improve their own facilities instead. Hamilton's congested, outdated police and fire station has operated in South Hamilton for more than 40 years, and it needs to be replaced. The former library next door is underutilized and minimally maintained, providing a temporary home for Hamilton's Council on

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<sup>1</sup> Equalized valuation (EQV) is the market value of land adjusted to a common assessment year for all communities in the state. Massachusetts uses equalized valuation per capita, along with other factors, to determine how much local aid cities and towns will receive each year.

Aging. Hamilton owns so little land that even if local officials wanted to move their public safety complex to a new location, they could not find a suitable site that is already owned by the town. In fact, Hamilton was not accustomed to buying land until recently, when it joined Manchester to acquire conservation land around Chebacco Lake. Despite the size of Hamilton's open space inventory – about 4,800 acres – the town itself owns only 273 acres, not including land controlled by the Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District. Moreover, a majority of the town's land is for water supplies, unusable for schools, parks, police or fire stations, cemeteries and other facilities that residents may need in the future.

While Hamilton is not expected to grow dramatically in the next 10 years, it will grow and perhaps more significantly, its population make-up will change. Today, the town faces operating and capital needs that it does not have the wealth, tax base or cash reserves to support. In addition to an obsolete public safety building, Hamilton has struggled for decades to provide high-quality drinking water. Indeed, the town's first master plan (1965) describes water problems that sound much like those discussed in reports written as recently as 1994. The issues range from supply and quality to storage and the general condition of Hamilton's distribution mains, along with a shrinking list of potential well sites. Hamilton also does not have a senior center, yet its elderly population has increased by 10.4% in the past decade. Regional forecasts show that between 2010-2015, the number of seniors in Hamilton could reach 1,200 – if elderly households can still afford to live in town. Adult recreation program enrollments have also increased significantly, but it is not at all clear that the town has enough outdoor and indoor recreation facilities to meet the needs of both adult and youth residents.

Though beautiful on the outside, the Town Hall needs renovations that may not be obvious to residents who use the building infrequently. In addition to lack of second-floor and basement access for persons with disabilities, Town Hall is not designed to function as a modern office building. It has plenty of space, but the space is poorly configured, it lacks organized storage facilities, and it needs designated meeting rooms to separate public activity from employee work areas. Whether these issues seem minor compared to the urgency of building a new police and fire station, Hamilton must remember that it is not only a political institution but also an employer. In small towns that rely heavily on volunteers, municipal buildings serve the dual purpose of offices for employees and meeting areas for boards and commissions to conduct public business. Hamilton needs to devote equal attention to both of these functions and as the town grows, the present limitations of its town hall will become ever more obvious. With enough advance planning and local capacity, Hamilton may be able to obtain grants to improve its historic town hall, as many other towns have done over the past decade.

Hamilton's challenges go beyond the conventional. Residents want more shops and restaurants, but the only realistic way to increase business activity in Downtown Hamilton is to facilitate more intensive land use with shared wastewater and parking facilities. It may seem odd for government to participate in matters usually thought of as private, but downtown is a public place. Its needs cannot be met solely by private property owners because they have neither the resources nor the individual authority to solve district-wide problems. Some communities form a partnership between local government and downtown businesses. They assume responsibility for improvements that the owner of an office building, ice cream shop or retail center cannot provide. Hamilton has a compelling interest in safe, well-managed wastewater disposal, convenient parking, and the amenities that turn modest downtowns into vibrant ones: attractive walkways, sitting plazas, lighting, bicycle facilities, and generous landscaping. Of course, business owners should contribute to these improvements. However, they should be asked to invest in a commonly understood vision

of the downtown area, not in a vision negotiated incrementally, site plan by site plan. Moreover, the town has to understand that by limiting business to such a small zone, it has also limited the types of businesses that settle there. Specialty retailers and bakeries will bring desired products to Hamilton, but they are not the types of establishments that finance large-scale capital projects. The town also must do its part, such as by acquiring land and initiating financing for a package treatment system and parking, before shop owners can expand their buildings and services.

For Hamilton and most communities, residential development costs more in municipal and school services than it generates in revenue: property taxes, user fees and other charges, and state aid. Since Hamilton allows for only one form of development, it is not surprising to find that single-family homes constitute more than 90% of the town's "new growth" revenue each year. As long as Hamilton confines private development to a single, cost-intensive land use, the town will continue to cultivate fiscal imbalance. Last year, Hamilton spent about \$1.13 in services for every \$1.00 of property tax and other general fund revenue generated by homeowners. In contrast, its commercial base cost very little to serve. For every \$1.00 of revenue generated by commercial properties, Hamilton spent about 30 cents to serve them. However, the commercial tax base is so small that it supplied less than \$300,000 in net revenue, i.e., the surplus available for schools and other residential services. Open space – such as vacant undeveloped land, farms or a large taxpayer such as Myopia Hunt Club – was also fiscally advantageous. Open space cost about 32 cents for every \$1.00 it generated in total revenue. Since Hamilton has so much taxable open space, the revenue surplus was about \$1 million. Significantly, every remaining acre of open space in Hamilton is zoned for detached single-family residences on large lots despite their associated service costs.

To some, fiscal indicators such as these argue for more controls against new growth. Open space is lucrative and its conversion to single-family homes is not, so the solution seems so obvious: reduce development and eventually the town will achieve fiscal stability. The situation in other suburbs and Hamilton's own experience suggests otherwise, however. Towns that already have an established base of homes and very little commerce are often the very communities that find it most difficult to accommodate school population growth. Although the number of housing units in Hamilton increased by a modest 6% over the past decade, the number of households increased by 8.5% and the number of families, by 9.3%. In the same period, the town's population increased by 14%, households with children by 19.5%, and the total number of school-age children, by more than 25%. As for school expenditures, Hamilton's total education cost – including its school appropriation plus its share of state aid to the Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District – rose by 89.3% and its per pupil cost, by 51%. The impacts of new growth and older home re-sales on a predominantly residential suburb can be seen in Hamilton tax bill trends, for the town's average single-family tax bill rose by 80% during the 1990s – well above the 53% tax bill growth that occurred statewide. Hamilton has a substantial housing inventory that attracts and will continue to attract families. Of course, their children are not the problem. Rather, it is the imbalance caused by a tax base that creates more costs than it can possibly generate in revenue unless the town raises property taxes so high that it displaces all but the most affluent households.

While it is tempting to place all of the blame for school cost increases on incoming families and new homes, the problem is more complicated. In the past 15-20 years, U.S. public schools have undergone significant changes, all toward improving educational quality: smaller class sizes, teacher aides in elementary school classrooms, new technology and special education programs, and school building improvements affect the amount that communities spend on schools regardless of student enrollments. Moreover, public schools have found it increasingly difficult to attract and retain math and science teachers. Accordingly, teacher salaries have increased at rates that sometimes attract

criticism, yet schools everywhere have been under tremendous pressure to improve. In response to demands for greater accountability, schools spend more today on professional development and curriculum supervision than they did 20 years ago. These kinds of cost increases have very little to do with new growth. Instead, they reflect policy choices made at the state and local level. Communities sometimes blame their fiscal problems on each new home when the cause is the lack of a diverse tax base to absorb the costs of resident services.

Cities and towns can manage their future or be controlled by it. In an effort to keep spending down and provide high-quality schools, Hamilton has survived for many years by deferring costs. As a result, the town lacks the resources it needs in order to manage its present and future condition: funding, personnel, and facilities. Hamilton does not have to sacrifice its open space or charming, small-town qualities in order to build a stronger base of local resources, but it will benefit from better ways to meet the needs of all residents. Land use, capital spending and organizational policies can help the town preserve what residents cherish and in the long run, the right combination of policies may be Hamilton's only path to growth management success.

### **Community Facilities & Services Goals**

- 1) Evaluate and forecast Hamilton's community service needs, particularly in the areas of public safety, water, solid waste disposal, education and elder services.
- 2) Establish and implement an effective five-year capital improvements plan (CIP) process.
- 3) Explore economies of scale through regional solutions, and pursue them accordingly.
- 4) Provide high-quality community services at levels adequate to meet Hamilton's present and future needs, considering the town's size, population, and ability to pay.
- 5) Establish and implement a process for identifying, selecting and pursuing opportunities to reuse obsolete or decommissioned public buildings.

### **Community Facilities & Services Policies**

- 1) Wherever possible and appropriate, Hamilton will seek regional solutions to public service needs that it has in common with neighboring communities.
- 2) Hamilton will provide equally high-quality services and facilities for persons in all age groups and persons with disabilities. Toward that end, the town will review the performance of all programs and services using quality standards developed in concert with residents and local businesses.
- 3) Hamilton will work to maintain combined free cash and stabilization fund balances of 7-10%, an overall debt level per capita of \$1,000-\$1,500, and a debt burden (debt to market value) of 3% or less.
- 4) Hamilton will acquire and maintain an inventory of general-purpose municipal property in order to assure adequate sites for future schools, recreation facilities and water supplies.
- 5) Where possible and appropriate, Hamilton will minimize the amount of permanent debt incurred from land acquisitions by sponsoring limited development that meets other objectives of the Master Plan.

## Recommendations

### Bylaws & Regulations

- 1) Adopt a capital improvement plan (general) bylaw that requires the development of a five-year capital plan, including a clear definition of capital projects, short- and long-term financing strategies, and a process for developing, overseeing and reviewing the plan.
- 2) Include a fiscal impact analysis in the permit granting criteria for special permitted residential uses, mixed commercial-residential uses and planned developments.
- 3) Review the zoning bylaw and assure that appropriate consistency references are made to both the Master Plan and the town's Capital Improvements Plan for all allowed and special permitted uses, and site plan review.
- 4) Provide realistic ways for developers to contribute to capital improvement needs in Hamilton. For example, amend the town's parking regulations to allow fees in lieu of providing off-street parking spaces and establish an Off-Street Parking Fund for the downtown area.

### Policy, Program and Capital Investment Actions

- 1) Establish an annual town goal-setting process directed and coordinated by the Board of Selectmen.
- 2) Authorize a bond issue for agricultural, conservation, water supply, park and recreation land purchases. Place responsibility for coordinating acquisitions under the (proposed) Department Planning and Community Development.
- 3) Complete a review of options for the present public safety building on Bay Road and move forward with a financing plan to replace it.
- 4) Commission the services of a preservation architect to conduct a code analysis of town hall and recommend alternatives to addressing space configuration, accessibility and storage needs in the context of the building's historic character.
- 5) Establish a complete set of acceptable debt indicators and baselines, and use them to monitor the adequacy of debt financing over time.
- 6) Establish and implement an annual, systematic review of all user fees, penalties and fines for municipal services.

### Implementation Capacity

- 1) Appoint an ad hoc town government study committee to review Hamilton's form of government and departmental staff levels to determine whether the town has sufficient capacity to manage its responsibilities.
- 2) Establish a standing capital planning or asset management commission, appointed by the Board of Selectmen.
- 3) Assign the (proposed) Department of Planning and Community Development with responsibility for coordinating the capital improvement plan process in order to maximize the alignment of capital spending and planning policies.

## II. Community Facilities & Services Analysis

### Form of Government

Hamilton was incorporated in 1793, and throughout its history the town has operated under a combination of general laws and special legislative acts. Some communities in Massachusetts have adopted “home rule” charters, but Hamilton, like most of the Commonwealth’s smaller towns, has never chosen to establish a charter commission or constitute itself under a charter form of government. In Hamilton, a three-member Board of Selectmen acts as the town’s chief elected officials. Other elected officers and boards share some executive-branch responsibilities, but the selectmen have ultimate control over most local policies, personnel and financial management, and they are the only officials empowered to commit the town to contracts. The town also has many appointed committees: volunteers appointed by the Selectmen or Town Moderator to perform a public service. Hamilton has professionalized a few municipal functions, e.g., a Town Administrator and Director of Public Works, both accountable to the Board of Selectmen. The town’s legislative body is an open town meeting that convenes annually in May.

Hamilton also participates in formal and informal regional arrangements to provide community services. During the 1950s, Hamilton and Wenham entered into a regional school district agreement to operate a joint high school; today, the Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District oversees a well-respected school system for K-12 students. The two towns also operate a joint recreation department and emergency dispatch service, and more recently, they agreed to construct and manage the state’s first regional public library. The history of regionalism between Hamilton and Wenham is very unusual and it appears to have benefited both towns.

### General Trends

Much like Hamilton’s population, its civic infrastructure is small. The total municipal payroll of \$2.9 million includes about 190 people, but most are part-time, intermittent or seasonal employees, call firefighters and reserve police officers.<sup>2</sup> The town owns a limited number of town buildings, parks and playing fields, and a water supply, treatment and distribution system. Hamilton’s community service expenditures per capita fall slightly below the median for its immediate North Shore area, yet education as a percent of all spending in Hamilton is the region’s highest and its integrated per pupil cost, the third highest.<sup>3</sup> However, the rule of thumb for any comparative statement about local government – particularly in New England, where the duties of county, municipal and regional jurisdictions vary so widely – is caution. The differences that exist among Massachusetts cities and towns are complex and often, they are rooted in unique local traditions that make inter-local comparisons difficult and occasionally irrelevant.

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<sup>2</sup> Town of Hamilton to Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR), “FY01 Schedule A Report and Certification,” in EXCEL format [SCHEDA01.xls], 20 February 2002; Susan Wiltshire, “Town Services,” [unpublished document] 3 December 2002, supplied by Peter C. Clark to Community Opportunities Group, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> DOR, Municipal Data Bank, [database online] “General Fund Expenditures,” in EXCEL format [exp90.xls sequentially through exp01.xls], INTERNET at <<http://www.massdor.gov>> [updated 11 October 2002; cited 24 October 2002].

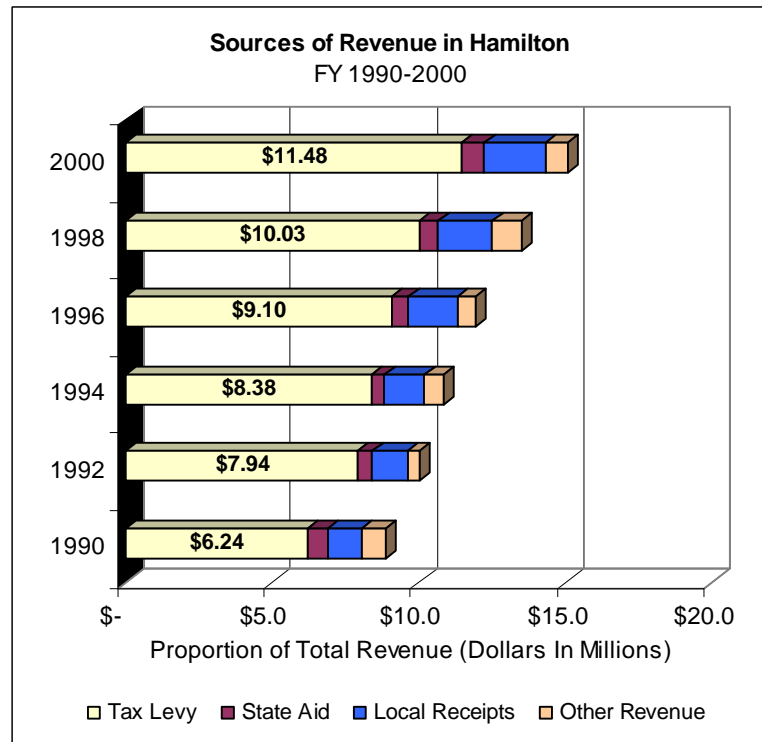


### Expenditures and Revenues

To standardize the classification of local government revenue and expenditures, the Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR) specifies a format for fiscal year-end data reported by all municipalities. DOR also maintains a substantial database and periodically issues statewide profiles. Much of the information collected by DOR is transmitted to the U.S. Census Bureau, which in turn reports local government data for the entire nation and at the state level through the Census of Governments. Both federal and state sources use conventional public finance categories to report local expenditures: general government, public safety, public works, health and welfare, culture and recreation, debt service, fixed

costs, intergovernmental transfers, and simply, "other." As these terms are defined, Hamilton's expenditures in several service areas rose significantly during the 1990s while other cost categories increased minimally (and in constant dollars, they declined). Education, public safety (mainly fire and dispatch), general government and fixed costs all increased by more than 60%. Though debt service had become virtually non-existent by 2000, only one year later, debt payments for the water treatment facility and temporary borrowing to build the regional library had begun to reverse this trend.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, there are four categories of local government revenue: the local tax levy, state aid, non-tax receipts for local services, and miscellaneous funds. These sources and their corresponding expenditures constitute a town's "general fund," or the fund used to account for nearly all revenues and expenditures processed by local government. During the 1990s, the amount of general fund revenue obtained from local taxpayers in Hamilton increased by 84% while state aid fluctuated significantly, culminating in a decade-long increase of only 18%.<sup>5</sup> However, most of Hamilton's state aid is actually paid directly to the Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District, where assistance payments skyrocketed by more than 170% between 1990-2000.<sup>6</sup> The increase reflects partial cost



<sup>4</sup> Ibid., and Fleet National Bank for Town of Hamilton, "General Obligation Bonds Financing Summary," 15 May 2001.

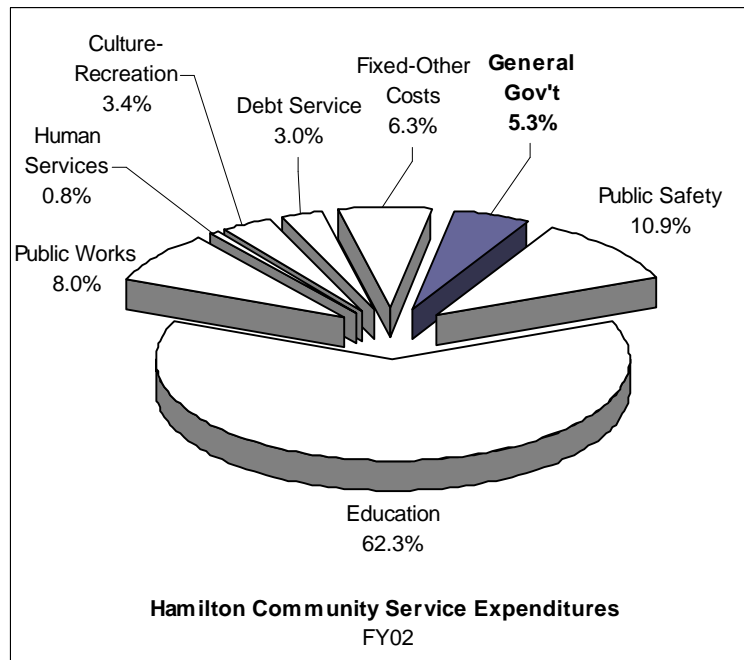
<sup>5</sup> DOR, Municipal Data Bank, "Revenues by Source," in EXCEL format [revs90.xls sequentially through revs00.xls], [updated 10 January 2002; cited 16 January 2002].

<sup>6</sup> DOR, Municipal Data Bank, "Cherry Sheets: Receipts and Charges for Municipalities and Regional School Districts," in EXCEL format [cs90.xls sequentially through cs00.xls], [updated 17 February 2002; cited 21 February 2002].

reimbursement for school construction debt and the rise in state contributions to most public schools under the Education Reform Act of 1993. When the Commonwealth’s fiscal condition is strong, aid payments to cities and towns are usually predictable, both in the amounts of revenue and the number of state aid programs administered by state government. A weakened economy or election cycles often lead to chaotic state aid policies, leaving local officials ill-equipped to make municipal and school budget choices because they cannot predict how much state aid they will receive. Against the backdrop of a recession, a change in state administration and new state policies, Massachusetts communities absorbed sizeable aid reductions from 1990-1992. In the same period, Hamilton voters agreed to increase their own property taxes by overriding Proposition 2 ½, mainly to avoid school budget cuts.<sup>7</sup>

### Town Hall and General Government Services<sup>8</sup>

Built in 1897, Town Hall is the centerpiece of the Hamilton Center Historic District on Bay Rd. A handsome, distinguished institutional building that befits the character of the town, Hamilton Town Hall houses the town’s traditional municipal functions, primarily general government – executive branch officers, administration and finance, planning, and related departments – along with inspectional services and public works. The departments at Town Hall employ a small workforce of 16 full-time and 6 part-time people. Officials with the greatest amount of day-to-day public contact are located on the first floor of the building, e.g., the



Town Clerk, Assessor, Treasurer-Tax Collector, Town Administrator and Selectmen. The Town Accountant, Building Inspector, Planning Board, Conservation Commission and the Public Works Department’s administrative offices occupy partitioned spaces on the second floor, a large, open room with high ceilings and a stage that attest to its original use as a large meeting hall. Parking for employees and the public is available in the front, back, and side of Town Hall, and is generally considered by building users to be sufficient for current needs.

<sup>7</sup> DOR, Municipal Data Bank, “FY83-01 Override Votes,” in EXCEL format [ovd8301.xls], [updated 17 April 2002; cited 5 May 2002].

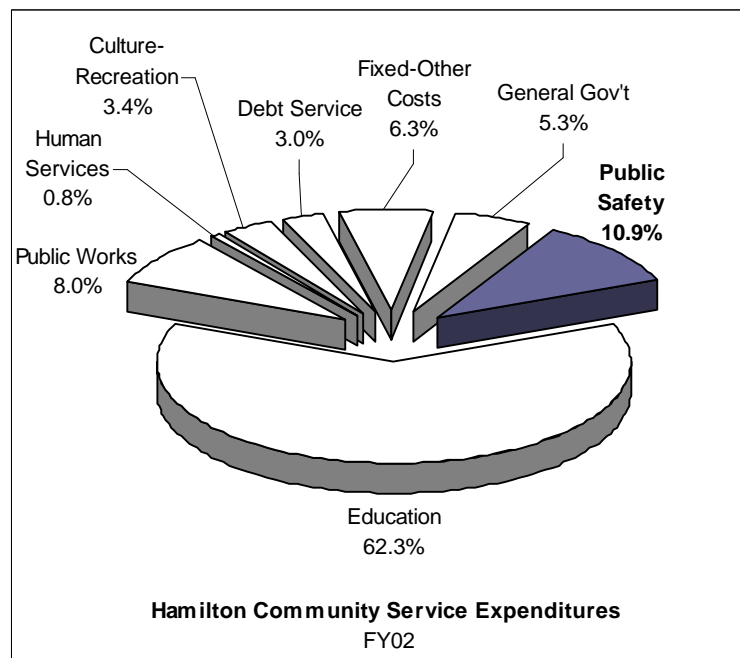
<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise noted, this report’s descriptive profile of public buildings is based on a tour of town buildings and interviews with department heads on 28 October 2002, by Rahul J. Young of Community Opportunities Group and Peter Clark, CAPC Chair, and follow-up interviews with municipal and regional school district staff on 25 November-9 December 2002.

Like all town halls, Hamilton's serves multiple purposes: from providing copies of birth certificates, selling dog licenses, collecting tax payments to seating attendees at a public hearing, storing official records and offering a suitable work environment for staff. It doubles as offices by day and a public gathering place by night. Though its 8,240 ft<sup>2</sup> of usable floor area<sup>9</sup> appears adequate for current and perhaps future operations, Hamilton Town Hall suffers from some obvious design and space configuration problems. First, the second floor of the building is inaccessible to persons with disabilities. Town Hall's only designated meeting area is the Board of Selectmen's first-floor meeting room. When the room is occupied, town departments and committees sometimes use the second floor as ad-hoc meeting space, but they do so at risk of violating the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Another problem with the second floor is that it lacks privacy. The entire space is an open floor plan, subdivided by modern workstations and file cabinets, making it nearly impossible to hold confidential appointments. In addition, meetings relocated upstairs when the Selectmen's meeting room is in use bring noise and congestion into the same space that employees rely on as their work area. Third, Town Hall storage capacity is severely limited. The vault in the Town Clerk's office is adequate for a small town. However, the basement of Town Hall is used by the Hamilton Historical Society and a loft above the second floor, which holds archived records, is close to reaching capacity.

## Public Safety

"Public safety" encompasses police, fire, emergency medical response, dispatch, and inspectional services. As is true for most communities, Hamilton devotes the vast majority of its public safety dollars to three of these functions – police, fire and emergency medical services – a sector that ranks second only to public schools in the percentage of General Fund revenue it consumes each year.<sup>10</sup> The Building Inspector is located at Town Hall, but the Fire, Police and Ambulance Departments operate from a combined Public Safety Building that was constructed in 1957 next to the former library on Bay Road.

The Public Safety Building is a 1.5-story facility with 3,240 ft<sup>2</sup> of usable floor area,<sup>11</sup> divided into a private office, a dispatch office, restrooms, two cells, and a conference room that doubles as a bunkroom at night. In addition, there are two administrative offices used by the Police Chief,



<sup>9</sup> Hamilton Assessor, "FY02 Parcel Data," in EXCEL format [Hamilton Assessor2002Data.xls, created 28 February 2002].

<sup>10</sup> DOR, Municipal Data Bank, "General Fund Expenditures." See also, "FY02 Schedule A Report."

<sup>11</sup> Hamilton Assessor, "FY02 Parcel Data."

Lieutenant and Detectives in a trailer situated next to the building. Since the Public Safety Building has virtually no remaining storage capacity, the Police Department keeps its equipment in one of the cells and a shed that was transported not long ago from a Hamilton resident's property to the rear of the building.

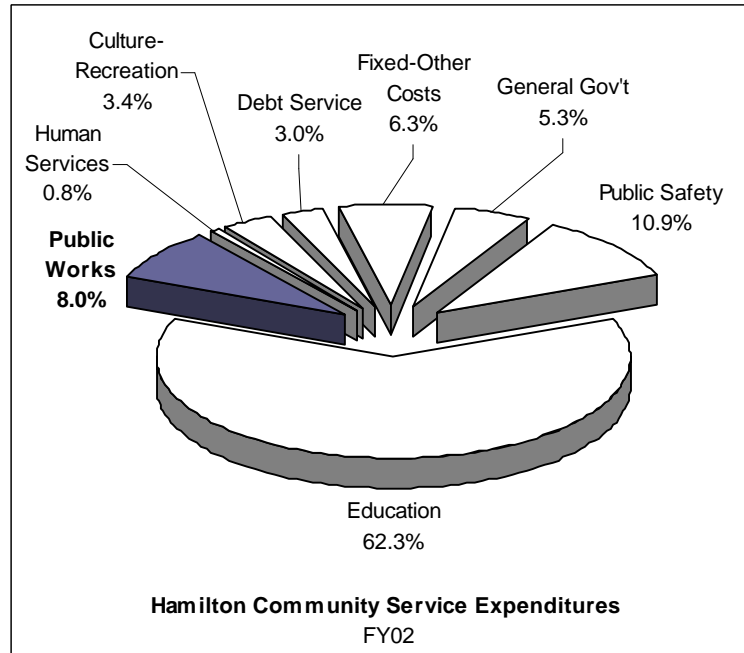
The Hamilton Police Department receives over 11,000 service calls per year and employs 15 fulltime officers, five full-time dispatchers, 10 reserve officers and five part-time dispatchers. The Ambulance Department is actually a subset of the Police Department. It operates a municipally owned ambulance and is made up entirely of police officers, all certified as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT). Each year, the Ambulance Department collects approximately \$75,000 of user-fee revenue, retaining 50% in a departmental revolving account and returning the other half to the town's General Fund. The Fire Department employs a full-time chief and four full-time firefighters, along with 30 "call" firemen. In addition to fire protection for residents and local businesses, the Hamilton Fire Department is responsible for various functions ranging from smoke detector inspections and underground fuel storage installation and removal permits to hazardous materials response. Ninety-five percent of Hamilton's public safety budgets are devoted to personnel costs, making equipment needs vulnerable when the town has to reduce departmental budget requests in order to bring them in line with estimated revenue.

Hamilton's Public Safety Building is too small for current operations and cannot accommodate any future growth. Local officials, including public safety employees, have been studying options for a more appropriate facility. The options under review include a new building, modernization and expansion of the existing building, reuse of the old library, or a shared facility with Wenham. Nearly two years ago, town meeting rejected plans for a new public safety building because voters thought the proposed solution was too expensive. At about the same time, Wenham decided to fund a larger police station, a move that prompted Hamilton to explore the possibility of a regional solution to shared space needs. Formal regionalization appears unlikely because Wenham officials have said they want to proceed on their own. However, voters there recently voted down additional funds for the project and the League of Women Voters has been studying regional options for several months. Regardless of what happens in Wenham, Hamilton needs to address shortcomings in the existing facility on Bay Road. For example, the Public Safety Building has only one bay available for ambulance and police cruisers. As a result, when police vehicles need to be repaired, the town has no choice but to park its ambulance outside, in violation of state law.

## **Public Works**

In Hamilton, all traditional public works functions have been consolidated into one Department of Public Works (DPW). The DPW maintains 51.6 miles of public roads, along with fields, parks and the cemetery, it manages the water system and sanitation services, and it handles miscellaneous transportation and equipment hauling. As in most towns, Hamilton's DPW performs tasks that no other department can do simply because it has the equipment and personnel. The full-time DPW Director reports to the Board of Selectmen, which acts in the capacity of public works commissioners, e.g., by setting water rates and trash collection fees. In addition to the director, the DPW employs two office staff, 10 year-round field laborers, and seasonal workers as needed. The DPW's administrative office is located on the second floor of Town Hall in an area that appears sufficient for current and projected operating needs.

DPW field operations are housed in a small complex of buildings behind Town Hall. The Municipal Garage consists of nine vehicle bays: six for highway equipment, two for machines, and one for the water division. Three of the bays have smaller doors that do not allow access for all DPW equipment. The DPW's equipment roster includes five large dump trucks, one small dump truck, six pickup trucks, two backhoes, one front-end loader and small miscellaneous equipment housed in a trailer. According to the DPW Director, the equipment inventory is generally adequate, but in the near future the department will need another dump truck and a tree truck with a bucket.



In addition to the Municipal Garage, the DPW also maintains a salt shed that the DPW Director believes to be sufficient for Hamilton's road salt storage needs, now and in the future. Hamilton Cemetery, a historic and currently used cemetery on Bay Road across from the Congregational Church, is the town's only cemetery facility. It covers about 18 acres and is close to capacity. However, an abutting landowner donated approximately 30,000 ft<sup>2</sup> of land to the town about four years ago. Hamilton plans to use the land for cemetery expansion, and according to the Town Administrator, the expanded facility should meet local needs for the next 20 years.

## Recreation, Culture and Human Services

### Recreation

Since 1995, Hamilton and Wenham have sponsored a joint recreation department that runs programs and services at the Hamilton-Wenham Recreation Center and a number of public parks and playing fields in both towns. A Joint Recreation Committee with three representatives from each town oversees the Recreation Department's programs, finances, recreation center operations and facility improvements. The Hamilton Board of Selectmen appoints members to three-year terms while the Wenham Board of Selectmen appoints two members from the elected Wenham Park Commission and one additional person to serve on the Joint Committee for three-year terms. Departmental personnel include a director and a part-time administrative assistant.

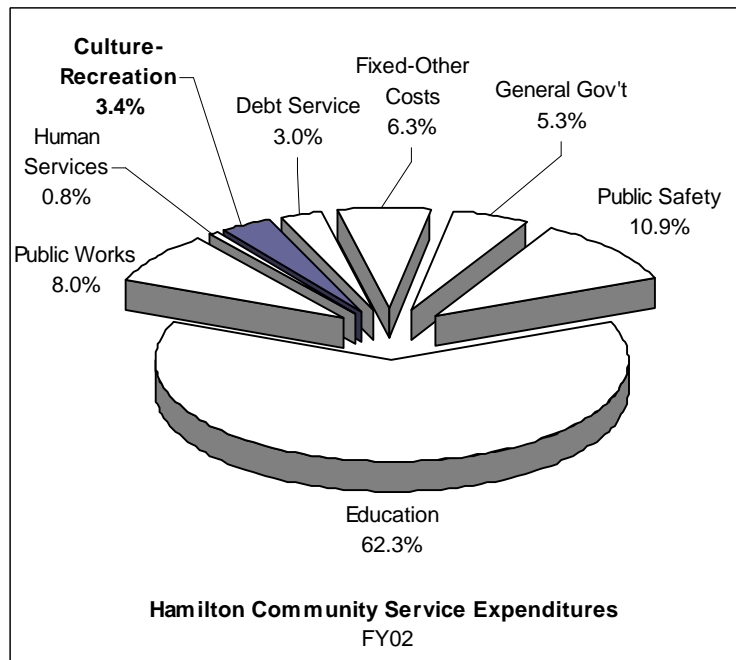
The Hamilton Department of Public Works and the Wenham Highway Department maintain all park and recreation facilities. The Joint Committee and staff work with these departments to establish maintenance priorities, assist with funding and communicate scheduling. The Joint Recreation Department's operating costs are divided proportionally between the two communities: Hamilton (63%) and Wenham (37%). All of the revenue comes from user fees paid to a revolving account, and private fundraising. Staff salaries are paid for with tax dollars. The program budget increased 79 percent between FY98 and FY01 and all recreation programs are self-supporting. Surplus fees in the revolving fund pay for maintenance and the development of new programs.

The office of Hamilton’s park foreman is in a storage garage at Patton Park, where the town also owns a combined restroom/concession stand. The garage contains not only the park office, but also public bathrooms and one bay for equipment and a maintenance vehicle. The restroom/concessionaire building adjoins the public pool at Patton Park and it is used only in the summer. The DPW would like to expand the storage garage by adding a second bay to allow for more extensive vehicle and equipment storage.

Program Participation and Planning

About two years ago, the Joint Committee completed a recreation master plan that has three objectives: (1) to forecast and plan for recreational activities in Hamilton and Wenham for the next three years, (2) to match capabilities against the requirements of the community, and (3) to set objectives and spending priorities. The plan identified several trends, including recreation needs of new and growing groups like seniors, children, at-risk youth and handicapped residents. Other trends cited included the need to provide day care, a new focus on health and fitness among adults, the rise of extreme activities, the increase of female participation, the growth in both youth sports and adult programs and partnerships with other community agencies.

Demand for recreation programs in Hamilton has increased significantly. Participation in the Joint Recreation Department's organized recreation programs grew by 44% from 2,980 in 1997 to 4,292 in 2000. The department maintains and reports participation statistics for three groups: Youth Sports



Associations, Adult Sports Organizations and Recreation Youth Programs. Youth Sports include soccer, basketball, football and cheerleading, Little League, Babe Ruth and lacrosse. Participation in these traditional programs grew by 29.2 percent between 1997 and 2000, and youth sports participants comprised 44.9 percent of all recreation participants. Adult Sports Organizations include men's basketball, town baseball, men's softball, church softball and badminton. In addition, there are adult recreation programs for aerobics, volleyball, lap swimming, water exercise and walking. Recreation Youth Programs include girls’ softball, girls’ kickball, gymnastics, indoor tennis, the nerf league, singing and teen clubs, the Hurricanes swim team, a summer tennis league, and summer programs that include sports clinics for a variety of sports.

These distinctions are very important for recreation planning. The 2001 Recreation Master Plan does not demonstrate growth and demand for specific adult and youth programs as clearly as growth in participation in traditional youth sports associations, yet participation in adult and youth programs increased by 58.8 percent between 1997-2000 from 1,487 to 2,362. The activities with the largest growth are the Walking Club, adult and youth tennis and the annual summer program. More playing and game fields are needed because the existing ones require maintenance and time to rest.

However, the demand for adult recreation, alternative recreation and the summer program suggests that while organized youth sports leagues are important to Hamilton-Wenham residents, opportunities for wider community participation as well as less structured, more casual recreation are increasingly valued. The numbers of children and teens in the summer program also suggests that it is an increasingly important component of summer child-care. Summer program participation increased by 92.2 percent, from 510 to 980, between 1997-2000.

#### Recreation Facilities

Hamilton and Wenham have a variety of recreation facilities. The largest, Patton and Pingree Parks, provide fields and pitches for baseball, soccer, tennis, basketball, volleyball and horseshoes. There is also a pool at Patton Park. The Joint Recreation Department manages the Hamilton-Wenham Recreation Center, which has a gym, locker rooms and departmental office space. Most of playing fields are located at schools in the two towns, and on Sagamore Street. In addition, there are public beaches at Chebacco Lake, which is closed for swimming, and Pleasant Pond. Table 5 includes a description of these shared recreation facilities.

**Table 5: Hamilton-Wenham Recreation Facilities**

Jurisdiction	Facilities
<b>Hamilton</b>	
Hamilton/Wenham Recreation Center	Gym, multi-purpose room, locker rooms, office and storage
Patton Park	1 public swimming pool, 3 tennis courts, 1 basketball court, 2 multi-purpose fields, volleyball court, horseshoe pits, playground
Cutler Park	Open area
School Street Park	Playground and picnic area
Fairhaven Field	1 multi-purpose field
Chebacco Lake	Beach Closed to swimming
<b>Wenham</b>	
Wenham Recreation Building	Leased to a nursery school and American Legion
Iron Rail Building	Leased to private recreation groups; 3 soccer fields
Pingree Park	4 tennis courts, 3 multi-purpose fields, playground
West-Wenham Recreation Area	1 tennis court, 1 basketball court, 1 multi-purpose field
Iron Rail Field	1 multi-purpose field
Pleasant Pond Beach	Public beach
<b>Hamilton-Wenham Regional Schools</b>	
Buker School	1 gym, 2 baseball fields, 1 field used for soccer
Cutler School	1 gym, 1 baseball field
Winthrop School	1 playfield field, used for lacrosse
Hamilton/Wenham Regional High School	4 fields
Miles River Middle School	1 softball field, basketball courts
Winthrop School	1 multi-purpose fields

Sources: Hamilton-Wenham Recreation Master Plan (2001); CAPC (2003).

According to the Recreation Master Plan (2001), Hamilton and Wenham have five high-priority needs, including:

- An acceptable swimming pool facility that will support the much-applauded summer park program (need has been partially addressed).
- Field space to support soccer and lacrosse, which will require annual upkeep.
- Upgrading tennis courts (need has since been addressed).
- Senior center and program to support the changing demographics of our community;
- Skateboard park and teen center.

The Hamilton-Wenham Recreation Committee predicts that by next year, the two towns will need recreation facilities for 6,000 participants.

#### Hamilton-Wenham Library

The Hamilton-Wenham Public Library at 14 Union Street opened in December 2001. The regional library came at the heels of a multi-year planning effort by local officials and residents in both communities, with construction funded by a combination of long-term debt (\$5.6 million) and a state library construction grant (\$3.2 million). While Hamilton and Wenham share responsibility for debt service according to the ratio of their total assessed valuations, Wenham has operational responsibility, i.e., it is the employer of record for library staff, processes library expenditures and revenues, and receives periodic payments from Hamilton for its share of the library's operating costs. A joint library committee with members from each town provides general policy guidance and oversight. The library has eight full-time employees, including a director, and nine part-time employees along with a part-time custodian. Its 29,809 ft<sup>2</sup> of usable floor area provides ample space for shelf, administrative, technology and reading area needs, and includes two conference rooms for community meetings. The library circulates about 3,900 books per week.

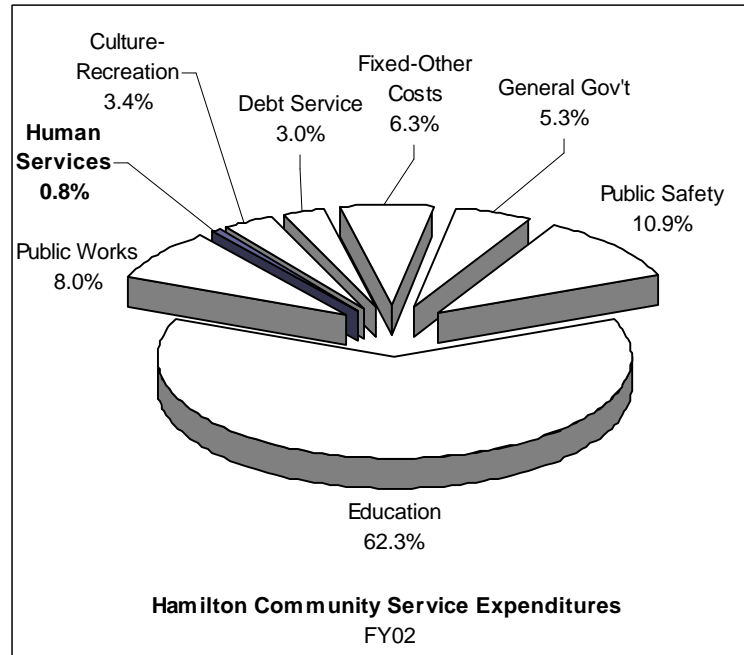
Although the new building has no pressing capital needs, library officials say they are understaffed – a common problem for new municipal and school facilities. Over the next few years, the joint library committee will most likely seek budget increases to hire an assistant director and additional librarians, and upgrade the custodian to a full-time position. The Library Director wants to augment the number and types of scheduled programs for children and adults, and provide community outreach to serve elders and persons with disabilities who cannot travel to the building.

#### Elder Services

The Hamilton Council on Aging (COA) recently moved from the private home of its former chairman to the old Hamilton Library on Bay Road. The COA is a small operation with one paid employee, a coordinator who works eight hours per week. The organization hosts a number of regular events, including a monthly meeting, and hopes to offer more frequent activities from its new location. Other services offered by the COA include periodic safety and health meetings for senior citizens, movies in the Hamilton Community House, luncheons, a website and the Hamilton Senior News, a quarterly newsletter.



According to COA representatives, the most significant need among Hamilton elders is transportation to medical appointments, local stores and shopping areas. Approximately 10% of Hamilton's elderly households do not own a vehicle.<sup>12</sup> To meet the transportation needs of these and other senior citizens in town, the COA runs bus trips each month to outlet malls and other facilities, except during the winter. In the past, these trips were offered free of charge to Hamilton senior citizens but recently, the COA has begun to charge a small fee to supplement the \$10,000 appropriation it receives from the town. Together with Wenham, the Hamilton COA obtained a "SeniorCare" grant to purchase a van, enabling them to increase transportation service to elderly persons in both towns.



The old library has potential to fulfill the space requirements of a typical council on aging. These requirements generally include an arrangement of rooms suitable for offices, meetings, and large- and small-group activities. Some of the state's councils on aging also provide meals, making space for food preparation and meal service a necessity. However, the old library's uncertain future will be an ongoing issue for the Hamilton COA because the town has no other facilities available for conversion to a senior center. In addition, it is difficult to forecast the space needs of a very small COA that has not been able to offer many programs because it operated without any dedicated public space until quite recently. During the past decade, Hamilton's elderly population increased by 11.4%, a rate more than double that of the state as a whole, yet federal census data show that in 2000, the number of persons over 65 in Hamilton was only 85% of what it was estimated to be when the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) published population-by-age forecasts in the late 1990s.<sup>13</sup> If near-term population changes are consistent with recent demographic trends, Hamilton's over-65 population will rise to about 1,100 by 2010.

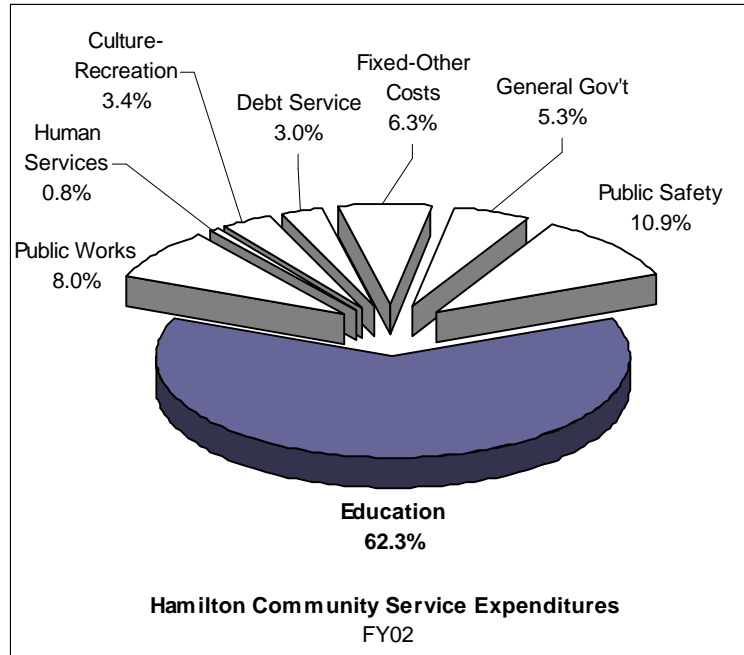
## Public Schools

When Hamilton and Wenham entered into a regional school district agreement in the late 1950s, the towns had a combined population of slightly more than 4,000. The Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District (HWRSD) was created to provide a high school, but several years later the two

<sup>12</sup> Bureau of the Census, Census 2000, Summary File 3, Table H-45. Here, "elderly household" refers to a household headed by a person over 65. In most communities, eligibility for council on aging services applies to persons over 60.

<sup>13</sup> Census 2000, Summary File 2, Table PCT2; MAPC, "Population by Age Group," available at <http://www.mapc.org/>, INTERNET [cited 24 February 2001].

communities amended their agreement to include middle- and elementary school facilities. By 2000, the district's K-12 enrollment had reached 2,156 students distributed across five school buildings: Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School, Miles River Middle School, and Cutler and Winthrop Elementary Schools, all in Hamilton, and Buker Elementary School in Wenham (see Table 6). The district currently employs 422 people, including 211 teachers, 70 teaching assistants, and administrators, along with support, clerical staff and custodial staff. Approximately 70% of the school district's budget is devoted to staff salaries.<sup>14</sup> The HWRSD's central administrative offices are located on School Street in Wenham.



**Table 6: Hamilton-Wenham Regional School Buildings**

School	Year Built-Renovated	Size (in ft <sup>2</sup> )	10/2002 Enrollment
Bessie Buker Elementary (K-5)	1953-1989	34,000	231
Cutler School (K-5)	1952-1989	42,050	353
Winthrop School (K-5)	1959-1989	44,140	401
Miles River Middle School (6-8)	1999		500
Hamilton-Wenham RHS (9-12)	1962-1999	217,000*	718

Source: Hamilton-Wenham Regional Schools, November 2002. \*Combined area, MS-RHS.

The most recent school district expansion occurred in 1999 after taxpayers in both towns agreed to invest \$26 million in a new middle school and renovations to the high school. The Miles River Middle School was built and adjoined to the existing Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School. At the same time, the High School was slated for extensive renovations, yet construction cost overruns forced school officials to scale back the scope of the project, e.g., lockers, auditorium seating and field bleachers. Though the two schools have separate classroom areas, they share several core facilities: assembly and gym space, athletic fields and parking. According to school administrators, both parking and field space are in very short supply. Parking permits are dispensed on the basis of seniority, leaving out many students, and field space is overused, forcing sports to share fields and cutback practice times.

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District, 2002-03 Superintendent's Budget, 20 February 2002.

The High School (grades 9-12) has a planned operating capacity of 740 students,<sup>15</sup> which provides ample space for its current enrollment of 718 – including the 123 “School Choice” students from communities outside the HWRSD. Enrollment forecasts generated by the New England School Development Council (NESDC) indicate that the high school should have enough space to accommodate a projected student population growth of less than two percent per year for the next five years.<sup>16</sup> In the event that student enrollments increase more rapidly, the district has the flexibility to reduce School Choice participation. However, like several other prestigious public school systems in Massachusetts, the Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District has become increasingly dependent on School Choice revenue to supplement local appropriations and state aid.<sup>17</sup> While the high school will be able to hold students from Hamilton and Wenham, the issue is whether the towns will be able to afford to teach them.

The Miles River Middle School’s planned operating capacity is 550 students, more than sufficient for the district’s 500 students in grades 6-8. It is a beautiful facility, equipped with modern classrooms and a gymnasium that often doubles as large-group meeting space for community events. Since it is a new building, the middle school has no pressing capital improvement needs. However, school officials report that the middle school suffers from a significant lack of storage space – much like other HWRSD school facilities. A particular constraint for Miles River Middle School is the site’s high water table, which limited design possibilities for a basement-level storage area.

The district’s three elementary schools – Buker, Cutler and Winthrop – were built in the 1950s and renovated in 1989, following a series of Proposition 2 ½ debt exclusions approved by Hamilton and Wenham voters the previous year.<sup>18</sup> Hamilton’s two elementary schools are pleasant facilities designed for young children, but they are also dated. The Cutler School, for example, has a pressing need to replace its steam heating system. Unlike the High School or Miles River Middle School, the HWRSD’s elementary schools are rapidly reaching capacity. Space pressures at the Buker, Cutler and Winthrop Schools directly correlate with changes in population age that occurred in Hamilton and Wenham during the 1990s. While the under-5 population declined across Massachusetts over the past decade, Hamilton, Wenham and many other desirable communities in the state witnessed substantial increases in preschool- and early primary-age children (see Table 7). It appears that all of the HWRSD’s elementary school buildings lack the space required for a program that many parents and educators think is important: full-day kindergarten.

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<sup>15</sup> “Planned operating capacity” means the number of students a school building can accommodate under the school system’s current operating and class size policies.

<sup>16</sup> New England School Development Council, *Hamilton-Wenham Public Schools Demography and Enrollment Projections*, February 2002

<sup>17</sup> Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District, *3-Year Plan for Financial Projections*, 28 February 2002.

<sup>18</sup> DOR, “Debt Exclusion Votes, 1981-2001.”

**Table 7: Population Change by Age, Hamilton and Wenham: 1990-2000**

	<u>Hamilton</u>			<u>Wenham</u>			<u>Cumulative +/-</u>	
	1990	2000	% Change	1990	2000	% Change	Number	%
Under 5 years	501	571	14.0%	197	231	17.3%	104	14.9%
5 to 9 years	552	693	25.5%	263	303	15.2%	181	22.2%
10 to 14 years	463	676	46.0%	127	272	114.2%	358	60.7%
15 to 17 years	268	340	26.9%	110	173	57.3%	135	35.7%
Over 18	5,496	6,035	9.8%	3,515	3,461	-1.5%	485	5.4%
Total	7,280	8,315	14.2%	4,212	4,440	5.4%	1,263	11.0%
Over 65	778	867	11.4%	540	631	16.9%	180	13.7%

Source: Bureau of the Census, Census 2000, Summary File 3, Table P-12; 1990 Census of Population and Housing, Table P0-13.

A critical issue for the HWRSD and most public school systems across the state, full-day kindergarten poses two local finance problems, especially for districts with above average to high rates of student population growth: capital investment in classroom space and the operating cost impacts of hiring additional teachers and classroom aides. Since Hamilton-Wenham elementary schools provide half-day kindergarten, working parents often place their children in private, full-day pre-schools. First-grade enrollments sometimes increase significantly as these children transition from private to public school. Though full-day kindergarten may be educationally desirable and a practical necessity for many households, HWRSD administrators say they do have enough elementary school space to accommodate it. This year, the Cutler, Winthrop, and Buker Schools (K-5) have respective enrollments of 353, 401, and 231 students. All three schools are close to capacity, creating a district-wide challenge to absorb school population growth and simultaneously maintain class sizes acceptable to the community. As a result, HWRSD administrators are considering options to convert art and music rooms for regular classroom use in order to keep the average class size consistent with school committee policy.

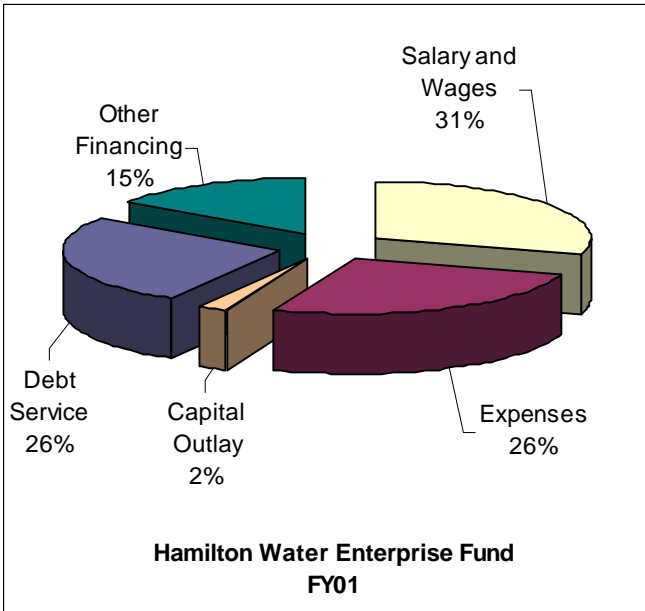
Planning for school facilities is generally done on the basis of five- and ten-year enrollment forecasts, a service that NESDC provides to Hamilton and scores of school districts throughout New England. Current forecasts for the HWRSD assume a 2% average increase per year for the next several years. It is not clear how Hamilton and Wenham plan to meet long-term space needs as their student population grows. Space reallocation, grade realignment, temporary classrooms, expansion and modernization of existing schools and new school construction are the traditional choices available to communities with space shortages or obsolete school buildings. Voters in both towns have to agree to any future land acquisition or capital improvement project carried out by the regional school committee, and it appears that neither community has explicitly acquired or set aside land for new schools. In the unlikely event that both Hamilton and Wenham ever achieved residential build-out at the levels predicted in a recent statewide study, their combined school-age (K-12) population could reach 3,270 students.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, Community Preservation Program, Hamilton and Wenham Build-Out Studies, INTERNET at <<http://compres.env.state.ma.us/#>> [cited 26 February 2002].

### Public Water System

Most Hamilton homes and all of its downtown businesses are connected to the municipal water system. Hamilton first established public water service in the early 1930s with a small water supply and distribution mains in South Hamilton. Today, the DPW Water Division manages an extensive distribution network that serves more than 93% of the town’s population,<sup>20</sup> five operating wells, a water treatment plant, and subsurface storage facilities.

Households and businesses that obtain water from the town pay user charges in accordance with a rate schedule set by the Board of Selectmen. Hamilton tracks water revenue and expenditures separately from the general fund through an enterprise fund



– a type of special revenue fund for municipally owned public utilities, hospitals, airports, golf courses and other revenue-generating capital assets that provide a self-supporting service. Ratepayers in Hamilton generate approximately \$705,000 in revenue each year. The revenue is used to pay for water division salaries, expenses and debt service while some is reserved for future capital improvements. Though most governmental services are “salary-intensive” in that a majority of their expenditures apply to personnel, a water system is “capital intensive,” i.e., expenditures are mainly for capital asset maintenance, repair and improvement, and upkeep and replacement of fixtures and equipment.

Hamilton’s public water system relies on groundwater pumped from five gravel pack water supplies, though most of its water comes from a cluster of three wells (i.e., a well field) on Pine Tree Drive. Public water supplies are regulated by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), which operates under a layering of federal and state environmental laws that emanate from the U.S. Clean Water Act of 1972.

As a supplier of public drinking water, the town is required to monitor the quality of water it distributes to households and other customers, to track and report annual consumption statistics for the community as a whole and for each major class of land use, and above all, to live within the guidelines of state-issued permits for total water withdrawal under the Massachusetts Water Management Act (WMA).

The state periodically reviews WMA permits for all public water systems and relies on annual water consumption reports to gauge local compliance not only with DEP regulations, but also with federal mandates that bind all 50 states to a national environmental policy framework. None of these requirements existed when Hamilton established its small public water system more than 70 years ago. Today, water supply management is a complicated and expensive arena, one that subjects the

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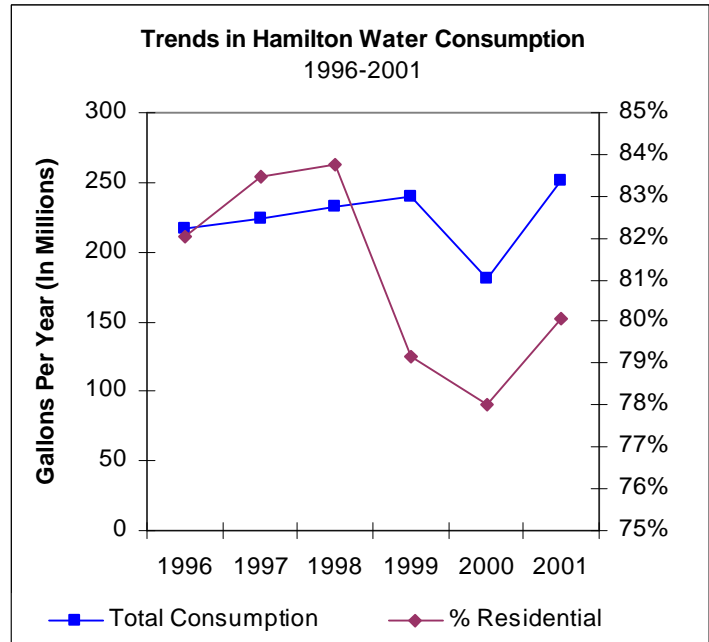
<sup>20</sup> Weston and Sampson Engineers, Inc., Town of Hamilton Water System Evaluation: Phase II-a (December 1995), 6.

development of new wells or reservoirs to a long review and approval process. Ultimately, the cost of compliance falls on ratepayers: households, businesses, farms, hospitals, schools and other institutional water users, including local government. Over the past several years, residential water users have accounted for 81-82% of the demand placed on Hamilton's water system. The remaining demand comes from agricultural, school and municipal users, with a very small share of demand (less than 3%) attributable to businesses in the downtown area.<sup>21</sup>

Concerns about adequate water supply have a long history in Hamilton, evident in both the number of engineering studies the town has

commissioned in the past 25 years and the attention paid to future water needs in Hamilton's first master plan (1965). Seasonal water bans, low domestic water pressure and fire flows in some parts of town, and poor water quality characterized the Hamilton water system for many years, prompting the town's former board of water commissioners to conduct a system-wide evaluation in 1983-84. The board's consulting engineers made a number of findings and recommendations, urging Hamilton to move forward not only with a new water supply (there were four wells at the time), but also an extensive survey for leaks in the distribution mains and meter inspections at all of the pump stations.<sup>22</sup> Over a period of years thereafter, the town developed a fifth supply, used mainly for emergencies – Idlewood #2 – and invested heavily in leak detection surveys, water main repairs and replacement, and various equipment repairs inside the pumping stations. By 1995, Hamilton had made major strides in reducing overall water consumption, from 163 gallons per capita per day (gpcd) in 1983 to about 93 gpcd in 1994. Significantly, however, the water supply planning standard under DEP guidelines is 75 gpcd.

Until two years ago, Hamilton could not reliably operate the Idlewood #2 well because of problems with water quality and pumping capacity. In 1999, the town constructed a water filtration and treatment plant on Pine Tree Drive in order to remove iron and manganese from the Idlewood #1-2 and Caisson wells. The facility includes one office for the four rotating staff persons, a restroom, a chemical room and storage and pumping equipment. Its treatment capacity of 900 gallons per minute (gpm) should be adequate to meet Hamilton's average-day needs under normal operating conditions for the next 20 years, assuming the town can reduce per-capita consumption to a level more like the state's 70-75 gpcd planning standard. "Average day" is a regulatory concept that simply reflects the sum of all water consumed in a given year divided by 365. In Hamilton, water



<sup>21</sup> Town of Hamilton to DEP, "Annual Public Water Supply Statistical Reports," 1996-2001.

<sup>22</sup> Camp, Dresser and McKee, Inc., Report on Water Supply and Storage Requirements for Hamilton, Massachusetts, (March 1984), 3-4, 20-24.

users consume an average of .78-.81 million gallons per day (mgd), but the more important measure of water supply adequacy is “maximum day demand.” According to DEP guidelines, a public water system that depends on groundwater must have enough reserve pumping capacity to meet “maximum day demand” with the highest-yield well out of service. The maximum day often coincides with the hottest day in the summer, and in recent years, Hamilton’s maximum-day demand varied throughout the 1990s, from 1.09 to 1.32 mgd.<sup>23</sup>

Seven years ago, an engineering consultant advised Hamilton officials that in order to meet maximum-day usage by 2010-2015, the town would have to develop a sixth well. Even if Hamilton implements a water conservation program that brings consumption in line with DEP guidelines, the town faces future water supply shortages under maximum-day conditions and may find it increasingly difficult to meet average-day conditions. The reasons are several, including the declining useful life of Hamilton’s older wells (Patton and School Street) and inadequate water storage capacity for fire flow requirements and emergencies. The town’s WMA permit is presently under review by DEP, and as part of that process, Hamilton hopes to obtain approval for another supply in the Idlewood well field. However, DEP is concerned about the amount of water already withdrawn by suppliers throughout the Ipswich River Watershed. Statewide watershed management policies may complicate Hamilton’s request and force DPW officials to explore for new well sites in another part of town. The DPW director reports that a number of parcels with potential for moderate- to higher-yield wells are no longer available to the town because they have been placed under conservation restrictions.<sup>24</sup>

## Issues and Conclusions

- 1) To accommodate rapid population growth between 1950-1970, Hamilton made major investments in municipal and school facilities. Today, the faces several facility and service challenges for which it seems inadequately prepared:
  - Major renovations, modernization and/or expansion of existing public facilities, including the police-fire station, Town Hall, and outdoor recreation areas.
  - New facilities to replace those which are obsolete, too costly to renovate, or inappropriately located with respect to population growth.
  - Needs brought about by the changing make-up of Hamilton’s population, such as an increase in the number of elderly residents.
  - Needs brought about by sustained growth in the town’s school-age population, owing to new-home construction and the recycling of older single-family homes.
  - Higher operating and debt costs to serve a growing population, but declining amounts of new-growth revenue from non-residential land uses.
  - Coordinated planning to meet the town’s conservation and open space, water supply and other public facility needs, including cemeteries.
  - Coordinated, systematic capital improvements planning by town departments and policy officials.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Steven Kenney, Director of Public Works, interview by Judith A. Barrett, 21 October 2002.

- 2) The town needs to establish a process for identifying acceptable levels of service. Though most people like to use community comparison statistics as a guide, objective measures often mask important information. Also, standard data sources sometimes conflict. For example, if the town based its estimates of need for police officers on national standards, Hamilton would increase the size of its police force from 15 to 17 full-time officers.<sup>25</sup> If the town consulted the Census of Governments, the data would argue for 23 officers.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Hamilton's expenditure per capita on general government services is lower than seven of the eight towns in its immediate region, yet Census of Governments data suggest that the departments classified as "general government" – town administration, accounting, treasurer-collector, assessing, the planning board and conservation commission – are adequately staffed for a population of 8,315. Though data are useful, they should never be used as a substitute for community consultation.
- 3) Nearly all of Hamilton's protected open space is located in the western part of town. There are few open space parcels in the eastern part, but most recreation facilities are located in areas reasonably accessible to residents of both Hamilton and Wenham. There are few parks and open spaces in the eastern part and in neighborhoods. Whenever possible, it is important to locate parks, playgrounds and athletic fields near population centers in order to assure their accessibility to the elderly, persons with disabilities and those who do not drive. These recreation enhancements seem particularly important in Hamilton:
- Athletic fields. Hamilton needs additional fields of a quality that can support youth league competition for soccer and lacrosse. The Hamilton-Wenham Recreation Director reports that between 2-4 fields are needed. The Joint Recreation Department is investigating sites at Fairhaven, Asbury Grove, Gordon, Gordon/Conwell and Bradley Palmer State Park.
  - Outdoor game courts. Hamilton's tennis courts have been upgraded, but the town needs additional basketball courts.
  - Playgrounds and tot lots. Children in the central and eastern areas of town are underserved. The Joint Recreation Committee identified Pleasant Pond, School Street and West Wenham as the best location for new tot lots. In addition, as subdivisions are developed, consideration should be given to dedicating space for a playground. Under M.G.L. c.41 § 81-U, Planning Boards may require the reservation of one subdivision lot for a future playground. The town must purchase the lot within three years of the Planning Board's approval of the subdivision plan; otherwise, the developer may build on it.
  - A teen park or skateboard park. The Hamilton-Wenham Recreation Department has the funds to develop a park, but no land. The Recreation Director has asked both the Hamilton and Wenham Boards of Selectmen to site this park and each Board deferred to the other. A potential site for this purpose is the parking lot at the former Hamilton Library.
  - Bridle paths, walking and ski trails. The trails need a management plan. The town may want to seek technical support from the Department of Environmental Management (DEM). To qualify for improvement grants, Hamilton will need a long-term management plan. The Planning Board

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<sup>25</sup> International City Management Association (ICMA), *Local Government Police Practice*, 2nd Ed., (ICMA Training Institute, 1989).

<sup>26</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Census of Governments*, [database online] "1999 Public Employment Data," in TEXT format [99locma.txt], INTERNET <<http://www.census.gov>> [cited 24 December 2002].



should work with private conservation organizations to acquire easements to ensure public access.

- Outdoor ice skating. Weaver Pond at Patton Park has generally not been maintained in terms of clearing the ice of snowfall. The Department of Public Works needs funding to remove invasive species and maintain the access.
  - Swimming pool. The Patton Park pool was built in 1962. The 2001 Recreation Plan's recommended renovations have been partially addressed, but the pool needs a shallow area for very young children.
  - Chebacco Lake. Access may be achieved by improving septic systems and by developing and implementing a solid waste disposal strategy.
- 4) Some local officials and residents remain concerned that Hamilton lost an opportunity for shared service delivery when the town and Wenham did not pursue a combined public safety building. A few communities in the Commonwealth have explored a regional approach to public safety and concluded that it would not work, though for varying reasons that may not apply to Hamilton and Wenham. Regionalism has merit and it is the cornerstone of government operations elsewhere in the United States. In Massachusetts, the structure of state-local government effectively discourages regional collaboration. Hamilton is unusual for having moved beyond a regional school district to establishing a joint recreation department, emergency dispatch services and library.

Possibly Hamilton, Wenham and other communities nearby would benefit from a structured way of conversing about regional service delivery and community facilities so they could plan more effectively. Toward that end, the town may approach an existing organization such as the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) or the Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA) for technical assistance or institutional support. Formal regional service delivery areas can be established in Massachusetts, such as the conversion of former counties to regional councils of government, subject to an act of the legislature.

- 5) The CAPC's Master Plan survey suggests that for the most part, residents are satisfied with the services they receive from town government. Still, some of the survey items suggest little consensus or outright disagreement, and possibly they would make good candidates for organized focus-group discussions sponsored by the CAPC. Three examples:
- Slightly more than half of the survey respondents had no opinion or were neutral on the adequacy senior citizen services. This may indicate that many respondents did not know what Hamilton offers – or does not offer – to residents over 60, or that respondents had no frame of reference to evaluate what the town currently provides. Population forecasts show that Hamilton's elderly population will continue to grow throughout the next decade.
  - Seemingly the town should be planning for a permanent senior center, as a number of comparable-size and smaller towns have already done. However, Hamilton may not need its own senior center because other regional organizations provide similar services – or Hamilton could join with another town to provide a regional senior center. The issue is the services that elderly residents need, and second, whether delivering the services requires a building or dedicated space within an existing building.
- 6) Residents seem to want more open space, but when asked if they think the town has taken adequate steps to protect open space, survey respondents again expressed a division of opinion. Possibly they did not know what Hamilton has already done to save land, and possibly they

were satisfied with the collective efforts of town officials, non-profit land trusts and private landowners. Three questions seem important for local officials to address in future updates of the Open Space and Recreation Plan:

- What constitutes “enough” open space?
  - What criteria should govern the town’s decisions about acquiring land?
  - What land priorities are most pressing in Hamilton – conservation land, a future school or water supply site, land for an additional park or soccer field, a cemetery?
- 7) A sizeable number of survey respondents – though not a majority – said their tax bills had risen “too quickly.” Still, many thought that Hamilton should purchase open space, sponsor an affordable housing development for seniors, or build bike lanes on major roads. One of the five master plan goals for community facilities and services is to provide high-quality services...considering “ability to pay.” What does “ability to pay” mean to people who live in Hamilton? If alternatives to single-family homes could lower the town’s rate of cost growth, would residents be more open to them?
- 8) Hamilton has not institutionalized a formal process for developing and maintaining a capital improvements plan (CIP). Without one, the likelihood of successful master plan implementation will be very low. An effective CIP has several features:
- It is a program, not a report. As a program, it has the town’s sustained attention and a commitment of staff and volunteer resources, and it is institutionalized through the adoption of a capital plan bylaw.
  - It occurs as part of a larger goal-setting process, often steered by the Board of Selectmen.
  - It begins with an accurate inventory of existing conditions and an unbiased review of existing needs and deficiencies. A city or town capital improvements plan can be likened to any other capital asset management plan: assets cannot be managed unless they are first understood
  - It is generally structured as a five-year plan, updated annually.
  - A CIP process requires:
    - A qualified town employee to coordinate the planning process, and a committee charged with reviewing capital project requests and developing a five-year plan.
    - A clear definition of “capital project,” e.g., the expected useful life of an asset, or all purchases exceeding a certain dollar threshold.
    - A schedule (program calendar), explicit procedures for departments to follow when submitting a capital project request, and clarity about the information the capital planning committee needs in order to make a decision.
- 9) A public review process, much like the finance committee’s review of operating budgets before town meeting, and ideally, a system that permits interested departments, boards and committees to participate in choosing projects for inclusion in the five-year plan.
- Criteria to guide a financing strategy, such as devoting a fixed percentage of each year’s total financial resources to capital projects, establishing a rational basis for allocating costs to long-term debt, and identifying all possible sources of revenue to support the capital program. The benefits of a standing CIP process are numerous, including:

- Conversations about capital planning encourage town employees, members of boards and commissions, and residents to focus more on community goals and resources than on the particulars of a budget request.
- It provides a structured way of resolving conflicts before town meeting.
- It creates a sense of equity for town departments because staff, volunteers and constituents can anticipate when their requests will be addressed – if not this year, then at another, agreed-upon point in the five-year planning cycle.
- It encourages people to see capital needs and departmental operations as part of a coherent whole.
- It promotes coordination so that projects occur in an orderly sequence. As an example of the kind of coordination that a CIP supports: planning to build a new, replacement library and planning for the disposition of a retired building should be done simultaneously or in sequence. Hamilton already faces the challenge of deciding what to do with undersized or obsolete buildings. A CIP would be an invaluable tool for managing this process.
- It may encourage an entrepreneurial approach to local government if one of the project ranking criteria is whether a proposed facility or equipment purchase will generate revenue and the data exist to support a costing-of-services analysis.