

Chapter X

LAND USE

A. Overview

This chapter is intended to describe past and current land use patterns in Williamstown and to articulate expectations and desires regarding the town's future growth and development. The Planning Commission believes that the values expressed here are in concert with the beliefs and ideals of the residents of Williamstown.

- Protect Williamstown's rural character
- Grow at a measured and careful pace
- Avoid poor development & poorly designed projects that can be bad for business and quality of life
- Enhance and invigorate Williamstown Village
- Develop new common spaces to help bring the community together while fostering aesthetic enhancement and recreational opportunity
- Respect individual rights while recognizing that private actions must be balanced against community welfare
- Have clear, fair rules and policy in place to guide growth

There are different ways to approach land use planning and different balances that can be achieved between competing uses. While there is no correct answer, we can make choices. As the community moves forward, residents must work together to plan the way they want to use the land in Williamstown. Ideally, we will do so in a way that will benefit the common interests of our residents *and* our natural environment.

B. History

Early on, most of Williamstown's land was used for farming. Farm families grew, or manufactured, almost everything they needed to live. Self-sufficiency on the family farm was a product of necessity because of isolation. Our villages started to develop in the middle 1800's due to the railroad and improved transportation that connected Williamstown to other communities. In time, they became symbolic of culture, close friendships, and places to work and residents developed beautiful public spaces that conveyed civic pride.

Originally, in the 1700's, all the land in Williamstown, and all other Vermont towns, was plotted-out on 100-acre lot grids. The State regulated the land use on a *Lot and Range* numbering system. Many of the town roads, tree lines, stonewalls, fence lines, property boundaries tend to follow these so-called straight lot lines. For example, Williamstown's Lot 2, Range 15 was originally designated as "School Lease Land." Long abandoned, this old grid system no longer applies to land ownership or taxing structure.

C. Evolving Land Use Patterns

Historically in Williamstown, as in many Vermont communities, most new growth occurred in a compact form within or adjacent to established centers. This pattern allowed businesses and residents to take advantage of existing services and facilities and helped to reinforce the economic and social importance of our cities and villages. It also allowed resource based industries (farming, forestry and mining) to operate with minimal interference from residential uses and access to prime land resources.

Over the past several decades, however, this pattern has changed. Much of the residential construction over the past thirty years has taken place on large lots located on back roads in more rural parts of town. With the number of new housing units outpacing population growth the impacts of this phenomenon on land use in Williamstown are significant. In some adjacent municipalities, new businesses have located along the state highways, interstate exits, and collector roads which bring commuters back and forth to work and tourists to and from their destinations, or in areas where other infrastructural improvements have been provided. While only a few locations have experienced full blown "strip development," or suburban sprawl, most of the region's communities, including Williamstown, are witnessing the emergence of these patterns to some degree. (Footnote: The Vermont Forum on Sprawl (www.vt.sprawl.org), a project of the Orton Family Foundation, defines sprawl as "low-density development that spreads from compact village centers along highways and into the countryside. Sprawl separates the places that people live from the places where they work, shop, learn, worship, and play").

In spite of these recent trends, Williamstown's historic landscape remains largely intact. There are still distinct village areas separated and surrounded by a rural countryside - characterized by farm and forest lands interspersed with residential uses.

D. Desired Future Land Use

Introduction

It is in Williamstown's best interests to preserve its traditional land use pattern – not just for its intrinsic values, but also because we recognize the pitfall of "sprawl." The argument is often made that sprawling patterns of growth are unnecessarily consumptive of land and energy, taxing on public services, destructive of downtowns, inflationary for land and housing costs, and in conflict with the aesthetic character of Vermont. As such, the notion that our interests could be best served by concentrating new development in or near existing settlements and/or mixed use areas is gaining traction. Williamstown, too, supports this so called "smart growth" concept with the expectation that a future influenced by this model could deliver economic, social, and environmental benefits to its residents, specifically:-

- maximizing the utility and efficiency of public service, energy and infrastructure expenditures;
- reinforcing and revitalizing the role of Williamstown village as the center of commerce, industry and community life;
- reducing development pressures on important natural resource lands;
- preserving the character and aesthetic integrity of the town and thereby, the tourism economy

Williamstown recognizes that not all new growth will or should occur within growth centers. In fact, some industrial or warehousing operations may be incompatible with the mix of uses found in residential, and

hence better suited to single use industrial parks. Furthermore, residential uses in the rural parts of town can be designed to be more sensitive to aesthetic and environmental concerns.

The following sections set forth the town's land use vision for four distinct areas of our community.

Village/Mixed Use Areas

Williamstown village is the hub of our town. The village is laid-out in a linear configuration, with one square pattern in the center of the village. It contains a mix of development types and people who live in its residential areas have access to the downtown. The downtown provides the variety of employment, shopping, services, and social and municipal activities typical of a traditional village center. Another advantage for people living in the village area is that their homes are served by the public sewer and water system.

This infrastructure should also allow for expansion of this relatively dense mixed-use development pattern into the future. Williamstown therefore encourages concentrated growth in and in close proximity to the existing village and encourages a mixed-use concept within these areas. Shops and services within the village, and the school, should all be within walking distance of homes, thereby reducing reliance on cars.

There is a growing awareness that the village has lost some of its historic appeal and beauty due to unplanned growth. Furthermore, the square has been developed without setting aside a common/green space. As the Williamstown grows, it will be important to ensure that the village center is a visually interesting and an aesthetically pleasing place to live and visit.

Foxville Village (also known as Graniteville) may also provide room for guided expansion. The area of Cogswell is served by a municipal sewer from Barre Town through an inter-municipal agreement. Mixed use growth is envisioned for this area in the long-term future. Williamstown should consider any additional infrastructure improvements needed to implement this vision.

Williamstown Industrial Park is located south of the Williamstown village. Currently, the industrial park is fully developed.

Other areas that exhibit some characteristics of more traditional neighborhoods include Chelsea, Stone, Felicity, McGlynn, Graniteville, Mountain View, and Crabapple Ridge Roads. In the long-term future, these areas could be studied and considered for light mixed-uses including country stores, small shops, office space, common spaces, roadside vegetable/flower stands, and the like.

Densities for new development in Williamstown Village should reflect the traditional pattern. Lot sizes for residential uses should be relatively small (~1/4 acre or less) as should setbacks and street frontages. Commercial uses should be relatively close to the street, forego front yard parking, and be architecturally compatible with a Vermont village setting.

Residential/Agricultural Areas

The purpose of the Residential and Agricultural District is to balance residential development with agricultural needs, open space, and natural resource protection by supporting low-density or "clustered" development that is appropriate with the physical capabilities of the land. Residential and agricultural land uses include, but are not limited to houses, farms, flower and vegetable stands. Other appropriate use may include small businesses, low-impact outdoor recreation, forestry and mining, and educational uses.

Open land continues to contribute to the rural character and scenic beauty shared by all our residents. Fragmentation of open areas by non-agriculture uses should be carefully evaluated. Development should occur away from the prime agricultural soils, whenever possible. To minimize the loss of existing or potential agricultural land within these areas, “cluster” housing, (i.e., “open space subdivision”, or Planned Unit Development).

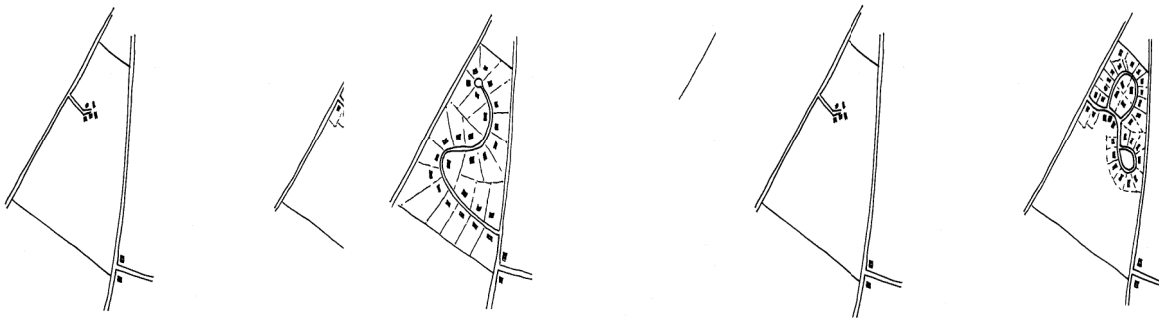
Open space subdivisions provide for increased density on a portion of a subdivided parcel in return for a commitment to keep some portion of the tract undeveloped. This can help a community meet its open space and natural resource protection goals, and concentrate its service areas, while allowing the landowner to realize his or her property equity. In addition, this form of development may reduce the cost of housing while providing home buyers with reasonably sized lots and access to protected open spaces. Research has shown that homes in "clustered" subdivisions generally appreciate faster than those in conventional subdivisions, may reduce the developer's infrastructure investment by 30 to 50 percent, and can reduce municipal service costs significantly.

Open Space Subdivision

Existing Farm
■ 75 acres

Conventional Subdivision
■ 25 three acre lots

Open Space Subdivision
■ 30 one acre lots
■ Preserves farm & open/ag land



Overall densities in the Residential/Agricultural areas should be lower than in those areas with sewer and water infrastructure. Lot sizes under an 1 acre are discouraged except as part of a PRD/PUD subdivision.

Interstate Interchange Areas

Interstate interchange areas tend to receive high pressure for the development of commercial and industrial uses. A study conducted by VAOT concluded that “Once development starts in these areas, sprawl begins by filling in the vacant lands between the commercial use areas. Commercial development also tends to increase. Soon people find it difficult to enter or leave businesses or homes along the road. Serious accidents increase, resulting in a higher public cost of lessening these impacts. In response, Towns tend to widen the roads in order to handle more cars and install traffic signals. The overall town population increases at a rapid pace.”

Large-scale commercial/industrial development close to the Interstate Interchange areas could lead to a decline in economic development for Williamstown village, an overtaking of town roads, increased congestion and accidents, and increased local taxes. Such development can also place undue impacts on our natural

resources, wildlife, and scenic areas. However, thoughtful development of interchange areas could provide needed services, jobs, and reinforce existing development patterns. It should be recognized that not all interchange zones are appropriate for the same kind or degree of new growth.

The State of Vermont, by Executive Order and under the auspices of the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, has recognized the importance of interstate interchange areas through the production of a manual titled “*Vermont Interstate Interchange Planning and Development Guidelines*.” This document explores policy issues, characterizes interchange areas by type and offers text and pictorial guidelines to illustrate both the consequences of poor design/policy and the advantages of alternative design options.

Conservation and Forestry Areas

The purpose of the Conservation and Forestry Area is to protect high elevation lands that have shallow soils and steep slopes, and the fragile resources that occur there. These areas also provide significant recharge to the ground and surface water supplies of the municipality and the region. This district encompasses the least accessible and more sparsely developed area of town where limited developmental potential exists.

Compatible uses in this district include agriculture and forestry, game preserves, environmental education, recreation, and very low-density residential development. Lot sizes under – acres are discouraged. Use of open space design principles is encouraged, where feasible. Town officials shall not provide community facilities and services to these areas.

E. Growth Management Tools

Act 250

Act 250 is the law governing Vermont’s unique development review process. Under this Act, larger development proposals come before a citizen panel known as a “District Commission”. This panel uses a quasi-judicial process to review proposals under its jurisdiction for compliance with ten environmental criteria. These criteria address issues ranging from traffic to water quality, wildlife and aesthetics. In order for a project to receive an Act 250 Land Use Permit, the District Commission must make “positive findings” under each criterion – that is to say it must find that the project will either have no significant undue adverse impacts, or militate against the same where they do occur.

Because Williamstown is without local land use regulations, the town’s knowledge of, and participation in, Act 250 is particularly important. Criterion 10 of the Act states that all projects must be shown to be in conformance with the municipal plan before being permitted. Generally speaking, plan language must be explicit and its directives clear to be enforceable. While the District Commission welcomes municipal participation (in fact, the host town is a “statutory party” to the proceedings), it, rather than the town makes the final judgment and ruling on this “conformance” issue.

A study of the Vermont Natural Resources Council discovered, “Act 250 is one of the reasons that Vermont has one of the strongest banks in New England: it discourages undercapitalized development that can lead to bad loans, and bad development is bad business.” However, while Act 250 can help to realize better designed and more environmentally sensitive development, most new construction in Williamstown is not large enough to trigger jurisdiction.

District 5 of the Environmental Commission covers Williamstown. Anyone with questions about Act 250, or needing assistance in preparing an application for a project can contact the office on 324 North Main Street, Barre, Vermont 05641 at (802) 476-0185.

Local Land Use Regulations (Zoning & Subdivision)

Williamstown voters have, in the past, rejected the idea of using locally developed standards to regulate and track new development. However, the planning commission and residents should strive to understand the pros and cons of local regulation in case future circumstances should call for more direct action on land use patterns.

The vast majority of municipalities in Vermont employ local land use regulations to help enforce community goals as expressed in the town plan. Originally, the primary intent of land use regulation was to separate incompatible land uses. However, it has evolved into a more sophisticated science designed to reinforce land use goals, protect important resources, promote economic development and safeguard the public health, safety and welfare. Generally speaking, zoning bylaws prescribe allowable densities and land uses for various districts within a community, while subdivision regulations control the design and layout of projects. These mechanisms are authorized by the Vermont Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act (commonly known as Chapter 117).

Non-Regulatory/ Incentive Based Programs:

While land use regulations provide the most direct avenue for impacting and implementing land use pattern goals, there are some non-regulatory strategies Williamstown could consider:

- **Land Trusts/Use Value Appraisal**

As previously discussed, land trusts can enable open land to remain productive by infusing capital into agricultural or forestry operations, through the purchase of easements and/or development rights. Vermont's Use Value Appraisal program allows productive land to be taxed on the basis of current uses rather than development value.

- **Village Center Designation**

The Vermont Downtown Program, established under the Department of Housing and Community Affairs, recently released its application guidelines for the village center designation process. This village center designation, as provided for in 24 V.S.A chapter 76A, was created by the Legislature to recognize and encourage local efforts to revitalize Vermont's traditional village centers. The definition of a village center, according to the statute, is: "Village center means a traditional center of the community, typically composed of a cohesive core of residential, civic, religious, and commercial buildings arranged along a main street and intersecting streets. Industrial uses may be found within or immediately adjacent to these centers." According to the Downtown Program, village centers are to be designated to support the revitalization of what exists, not as a growth center. New growth should be expected in these village centers; however, they should not be used as a target for all new growth in a municipality.

Applications for designation must be made by the select board. Decisions regarding designation will be made by the Vermont Downtown Development Board. A municipality may seek designation for more than one village center, but each must meet the specific application requirements. Also, village centers will be designated

on a three-year basis, so renewal requests will be due every three years. These renewals must demonstrate that the village center continues to meet all requirements for designation.

If a Village Center is designated under this program it will be eligible for the following benefits:

- * 5% Vermont Income Tax Credit for Substantial Rehabilitation of Certified Historic Buildings. This credit is available for income producing buildings that apply for and qualify for the 20% Federal Rehabilitation Investment Tax Credit. Therefore, qualifying projects receive a total tax credit of 25%.
- * 50% Vermont Income Tax Credit for Code Improvements to Commercial Buildings. This credit is available for capital improvements to commercial buildings in order to comply with: fire, life safety, and accessibility codes; Health Department rules for food establishments; Agriculture Department rules for the sale of dairy and meats; and Agriculture Department rules on weights and measures. Only one award, up to \$5,000, can be awarded to any one building.
- * Designated village centers will be given priority consideration for all grants administered through the State's Municipal Planning Grant Program and the Consolidated Plan for HUD funding, including the Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG).
- * Designated village centers will be given consideration and priority by the State Building Department when leasing or constructing buildings, in consultation with the community.
- * A special assessment district in a designated village may use funds for operating costs in addition to capital expenses

- **Landowner/Developer Education**

Even in the absence of land use regulations, the Planning Commission may wish to consult with landowners and prospective developers, on a voluntary basis, to identify and mitigate potential development impacts and discuss design alternatives.

LAND USE

| Goals | Policies & Tasks |
|--|--|
| <p>1. To maintain vitality of Williamstown and Foxville Village areas by encouraging high-density growth.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deny infrastructure extensions for any large development outside Village/mixed Use areas. • Establish design guidelines in mixed-use areas, such as: lighting requirements, landscaping, pedestrian amenities, community gathering places, walking paths, recreational opportunities, services, and signage. • Study expanding the Williamstown Industrial Park • Study undeveloped land in the Williamstown village to determine if the Town sewer system has the physical capacity to accommodate average single-family residences. • Consider seeking Village Center designation for Williamstown Village • Conduct GIS “sampling” of village areas to determine prevailing densities, setbacks and frontages. |
| <p>2. To preserve working landscape by sustaining farm and forest land and other rural resource lands to maintain contiguous tracts of open land and minimize land use conflicts.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Encourage future development to occur in the following locations or areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - on the edges of fields where scenic and agricultural resource values are low - in forested areas that are not critical to wildlife habitats/water supply/public recreation wetlands * Work with developers to create innovatively designed cluster developments, and conservation subdivisions * Conform to recommended slope development suitability as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 0-3% is suitable for development - 3-8% is most desirable for development - 8-15% is suitable for low density development - 15-25% is unsuitable for most development and septic systems - 25% is not acceptable and should be avoided • Strive to have new development be consistent with the form and function of existing uses in each of the proposed land use districts • Strive to update the next Town Plan to include an Official Map that includes all public improvements planned for the community that includes sidewalks, paths, village common areas, and others. • Consider the principles highlighted in the Interstate Interchange Design Guidelines Manual • Encourage repurposing and reusing of existing commercial structures |
| <p>3. Adopt an ordinance that regulates designs of all new commercial structures</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage exterior designs in keeping with the rural landscape already established • Subject to review of the Planning Commission |

CHAPTER XI

ADJACENT MUNICIPALITIES AND REGIONAL COORDINATION

A. Overview

Williamstown does not live in its own world isolated from our neighboring towns. Our local land use decisions can have impacts outside our jurisdictional boundaries. Consideration of bordering communities' plans can help assure that the Williamstown Town Plan is consistent with the efforts our neighbors, and vice versa.

B. Summary of Contiguous Towns

Williamstown shares boundaries with 6 other municipalities: Barre Town, and the Towns of Brookfield, Berlin, Northfield, Chelsea, and Washington. A summary of the existing and planned land uses follows:

Barre Town

Williamstown shares its northern boundary with Barre Town (except for a minor section of land near the Interstate at the northwest corner). Recommended uses for areas adjoining the Barre Town border land include residential, agricultural, and recreational. It should be noted that there are many wetland areas mapped in this area. Williamstown coordinates sewer disposal with Barre Town. Barre Town serves Foxville Village. Mutual agreements are in place. Effort needs to be invested to avoid sprawl that is continuing to spread along Route 14 into Williamstown.

Brookfield

Brookfield shares one of our most important natural resource areas, Ainsworth State Park, as well as a moderate span of land at the southwestern section of our Town's border. This land area is very rural, mostly forested, hilly, and has a number of wetland areas and areas of significant habitat. The areas along Route 14 and Stone Road have scattered residential, and flood hazard areas. Land uses in both communities are agricultural, low-density residential, and recreational. Brookfield's zoning ordinance restricts most developments to 5-acre lots along the road corridors on the Williamstown border. Williamstown Gulf is protected within Ainsworth State Park.

Berlin

The town of Williamstown shares a small boundary with neighboring Berlin along our northwestern corner. This part of Williamstown is mostly forested, hilly, and contains some wetlands. Berlin considers this area as "Highland Conservation". Williamstown is linked to Berlin via Hebert Road, South Miller Road and Route 63. The town should work with Berlin to solve potential traffic/safety concerns and land use issues on the access road especially near the interstate interchange area.

Northfield

The Town of Northfield occupies Williamstown's western boundary along Interstate 89. Williamstown links roads with Northfield via interchange 5. Northfield considers this interstate exchange area as rural. If Williamstown decides to develop this area, town officials should work with Northfield town officials to solve potential traffic/safety concerns, impacts on natural heritage areas, and land use issues.

Chelsea

Williamstown borders Chelsea at its southeast corner. The area is characterized by low-density residential uses. Our land use areas and planning goals are largely compatible with Chelsea except that however, Chelsea has expressed concerns about Williamstown’s lack of zoning and increasing population growth. Williamstown should support efforts that balance the concerns of both towns.

Washington

At our eastern border is the town of Washington. Our land uses here are mostly low density and are compatible with Washington’s town plan and zoning regulations.

Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission

The Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC) was created in 1967 to provide planning assistance to municipalities within the region and create a forum for addressing those issues which transcend municipal boundaries. Williamstown is a member of the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC). The Williamstown Planning Commission worked with the CVRPC in preparing this town plan to ensure it was consistent with statewide goals and compatible with the plans of adjoining towns. The Williamstown town plan is also in compliance with the Central Vermont Regional Plan.

ADJACENT MUNICIPALITIES & REGIONAL COORDINATION

| <i>C. Goals</i> | <i>Policies and Tasks</i> |
|--|--|
| 1. To cooperate and communicate with surrounding communities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage information sharing and working with other local, regional, and state agencies to ensure that good planning practice are followed. • Continue support for, and participation in, CVRPC. |