

Town of Cabot Planning Commission Report

On the Proposed Town Plan Update

November 7, 2011

This report has been prepared by the Cabot Planning Commission in accordance with 24 V.S.A. §4384 which states: When considering an amendment to a plan, the Planning Commission shall prepare a written report on the proposal. The report shall address the extent to which the plan, as amended, is consistent with the goals established in §4302 of this title. Since this plan also proposes changes to land use zoning districts if and when the Town amends the Cabot Zoning Regulations (land use development regulations), this report must also cover the points in 24 V.S.A. §4384(c).

The previously approved Cabot Town Plan expired in 2008. Town plans have a duration of five years. This plan updates statistical data, land use inventory data, goals and implementation strategies, and proposes changes to zoning districts and development standards within those districts – these proposed changes would become effective only upon amendment of Cabot’s Zoning Regulations. A prerequisite to zoning amendments is a currently approved town plan. This Town Plan update also addresses numerous new statutorily required elements that have been adopted into state law since the last plan update. An approved town and confirmed town plan also allows the Town to apply for state-issued municipal planning grants to further the goals in the plan.

The Planning Commission must hold at least one public hearing on the Town Plan update before presenting the Plan to the Selectboard. The Selectboard then holds a public hearing on the plan within a specified timeframe. Following the Selectboard hearing, the Selectboard may adopt the plan or may make revisions. However, if major revisions are made, the Selectboard must hold another public hearing.

The proposed Town Plan update is consistent with the goals established in 24 V.S.A. § 4302(c) as follows:

- (1) **To maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village separated by rural countryside:** The plan proposes a newly designated Village Center District that promotes compact village settlement and proposes to permit smaller lot sizes and additional lot coverage, while retaining setbacks necessary to maintain traditional patterns of development. The Housing and Population section of the plan identifies this district as the preferred location for the majority of future housing growth. The plan also recognizes the desire to maintain the rural landscape and proposes the adoption of

subdivision regulations that will promote the conservation of open space, clustering of housing units, and further protection of prime agricultural soils.

- (2) **To provide a strong and diverse economy:** The Economic Development section of the plan calls for a community and economic development plan that strengthens the Village Center District as an economic hub while improving parking, pedestrian access, and village attractiveness. The plan also supports a non-profit community development organization (currently in the formative stages) to implement initiatives to strengthen and diversify the local craft and artisan trades as well as to support the agricultural economy as a growth area for local employment.
- (3) **Broaden access to educational and vocational training:** The Plan encourages collaboration between the Cabot School and the Town to enhance the school as a community resource and enhance educational enrichment programs for all community members. In addition, the plan encourages enhancement of civic engagement/involvement for Cabot students.
- (4) **To provide safe, convenient, economic, and energy efficient transportation systems:** The plan includes numerous transportation goals and strategies such as exploring public transportation opportunities, improving bike and pedestrian routes in and around the village center, improving parking, and improving traffic safety in the village. The relocation and reconstruction of the town garage as well as a capital improvement plan for transportation equipment and infrastructure will support this goal.
- (5) **To identify, protect and preserve important natural and historic features:** The Natural Heritage section has identified several goals and strategies including natural community mapping, landowner education, and protection of significant natural communities through zoning tools. The Historic Resources section recommends a more up-to-date inventory of historic structures, educational efforts, and zoning tools to achieve this goal for historic features.
- (6) **To maintain and improve the quality of air, water, wildlife and land resources:** The plan contains implementation strategies such as an overlay district for the source protection areas of the town wells. Water quality enhancement goals and strategies include educational and regulatory tools to enhance stream bank and shoreline protection. The plan calls for regulatory and educational tools to protect important wildlife habitat and significant natural communities. Prime agricultural soils are identified as an important resource to protect through land use regulation.

- (7) **To encourage the efficient use of energy and the development of renewable energy resources:** Goals and strategies are included in the Energy section that promote energy efficiency and development of renewable energy resources at appropriate sites.
- (8) **To maintain and enhance recreational opportunities:** Recreational resources are reviewed in the Community Facilities, Utilities, and Services section. The plan calls for the continued development of recreational resources such as recreational trails.
- (9) **To encourage and strengthen agricultural and forest industries:** The importance of valuable forest and agricultural lands are discussed in the Natural Heritage section and various strategies are recommended to maintain the working landscape.
- (10) **To provide for the wise and efficient use of Vermont's natural resources:** Existing natural resources are identified and discussed in the Natural Heritage section including strategies to ensure their efficient and safe utilization.
- (11) **To ensure the availability of safe and affordable housing:** The Housing and Population section examines housing demand and affordability with the goal of ensuring the availability of affordable housing options for all age groups. The plan also encourages safe housing by ensuring that Rental Housing Health Code is enforced.
- (12) **To plan for, finance, and provide an efficient system of public facilities and services to meet future needs:** The plan includes a discussion of existing public facilities in the Community Facilities, Utilities and Services section and discusses the need for a capital budget and plan especially for the municipal wastewater system. In addition, the need for a policy/procedure for allocation of reserve capacity in the wastewater system is identified.
- (13) **To ensure the availability of safe and affordable child care and to integrate child care issues into the planning process:** Existing child care facilities are identified. The plan identifies a strategy to review the zoning regulations to ensure safe and accessible child care facilities.

The proposed Town Plan update will, in the opinion of the Cabot Planning Commission have the following impacts on the points listed in 10 V.S.A. §4384(c):

- (1) **The probable impact on the surrounding area, including traffic and the overall pattern of land use:** The plan proposes that the Medium Density Developed District and the Undeveloped Village District be merged into a Village Center District. The elimination of minimum lot size and establishment of a maximum density of structures

(consistent with current average densities) will provide more flexibility in siting new development in and around the historic settlement areas. This is consistent with the state planning goals of maintaining compact village centers surrounded by rural countryside. In the Low Density Residential and Agricultural District, the Planning Commission proposes to replace two- acre minimum lot size, with a minimum lot size on the order of ½ acre with a maximum density provision (one unit per 3-10 acres). In land subdivisions, this will allow for the potential to cluster housing units closer together, thus preserving open space for agricultural, recreational, and aesthetic purposes. The overall impact is to direct future growth in a way that is consistent with state goals and the goals expressed by Cabot residents. The Planning Commission believes that planning for additional parking in appropriate areas of the village and improving pedestrian and bicycle access, as well as reduction in village speed limits in the most dense areas of commercial, residential and civic activity will improve overall vehicular traffic safety.

- (2) Impacts on tax base:** The impacts on the tax base should be neutral; the proposed plan will strengthen certain development patterns, but not necessarily impact the amount of development.

Need for public facilities: The proposed plan will not increase the burden on municipal facilities such as water, sewer, and road maintenance beyond current capacity. More users may be brought onto drinking water and sewer systems which will be a benefit to revenue for operation and maintenance of these facilities.

- (3) Amount of vacant land which is already subject to the proposed new designation and actually available for that purpose, and the need for additional land for that purpose:** The Cabot build-out analysis conducted by the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission has shown that there is an abundance of vacant or undeveloped land to accommodate future residential and commercial development in the areas discussed above.
- (4) The suitability of the area in question for the proposed purpose after consideration of appropriate alternative locations; alternative uses for the area under consideration; and the probable impact of the proposed change on other areas similarly designated:** The newly proposed Village Center District allows more flexibility in the siting of structures within the traditional town center and should direct more growth to a compact village center than might otherwise happen under existing zoning districts. The Planning Commission's opinion is that there are no other suitable alternative areas in town to create such a center of compact development that serves as a

focal point for commercial and civic activity interspersed within a residential community.

- (5) The appropriateness of the size and boundaries of the area proposed for change, with respect to the area required for the proposed use, land capability, and existing development in the area:** The area for proposed Village Center District approximates that of the current Medium Density and Undeveloped Village Districts combined and the build-out analysis shows that this area is adequate in size to accommodate a significant number of future structures.