

# **COMMUNITY CHARACTER INVENTORY**

**Prepared for  
The Town of Burke, VT**

**by  
Smart Growth Vermont  
and the  
Northeastern Vermont Development Association**

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# Introduction

## Purpose of This Report

This report represents the culmination of the first phase of this project, in which the project team used focus groups, surveys, and geographic data analysis to develop an in-depth understanding of a series of issues that were raised but not fully explored in previous planning efforts, surveys, and meetings. Its overall purpose is to establish a shared basis for moving forward with the development of a selected set of strategies that address top community concerns and that have broad local support.

## How to Use This Report

This report has three functions for the Town of Burke. First, it serves as a summary of what the project team has learned from the survey and focus groups about the things that residents see as constituting Burke's "rural character." Second, it gives community residents an overview of the on-the-ground status of each identified element of rural character, reviewing available data and highlighting issues that emerged from an analysis of that data. Finally, it identifies strategies from Burke's Town Plan that are relevant to each element of rural character and assesses which of those strategies have been implemented, either in the Zoning Bylaw or by some other means.

In addition, the "next steps" section at the end of this report lists selected strategies for protecting rural character that might be of interest to the community, along with a brief description of each. This section is intended to familiarize community residents with the information that will be presented in the second phase of this project, in which we will evaluate in detail a range of options for managing new housing in rural areas, guiding new development in and around the villages, discouraging strip commercial development, and protecting farmland, forests, and other natural resources.

Our hope is that this document will help the community understand the range of options available to the Town for preserving rural character in a format that makes clear which strategies are relevant to which aspects of rural character. With this report as a foundation, the community can begin to set priorities for the next strategies for the Town to implement.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the members of the Planning Commission and the Select Board for the time they invested in drafting, distributing, and analyzing the survey, in organizing the focus groups, and in supporting this project generally. We would also like to thank the four dozen community members who volunteered their time to participate in the focus groups and the 228 residents who filled out the survey. Finally, we would like to thank the Town of Burke as a whole for inviting us to participate in this important project.

Detailed reports on the results of the survey and focus groups are available on the project website at <http://tinyURL.com/burkeplanning>.

# Rural Character in Burke: Priorities and Realities

## Scenic Views and Open Agricultural Land

### What People Said

The importance of scenic views and open agricultural land was consistently among the first issues to be mentioned in each focus group. Participants listed many, many specific places and vistas in town that are part of its rural character, including Darling Hill Road, Pinkham Hill Road, and Burke Mountain itself, to name just a few. “If you go one way, you see one view. If you go another way, you see another view,” said one participant in the long-time residents group.

While all participants felt that open land and the views that it afforded were important to the town’s character, there was some disagreement as to whether Burke still had any land in farming. The long-time residents group felt that agriculture was essentially gone from Burke, as agriculture in its traditional form – that is, dairying – is no longer part of the landscape. The other groups, however, frequently cited other agricultural uses (such as haying fields) as something that continues to be a vital part of Burke’s rural character.

Survey data were consistent with the emphasis in the focus groups on scenic views and open agricultural land as key components of rural character. "Scenic vistas" was ranked as the most important element of rural character by survey respondents, with over 90% rating it as either "most important" or "somewhat important." "Agricultural lands" also received high marks, with over 90% rating it as either "most important" or "somewhat important." In addition, the top two "sacred spaces" mentioned by respondents were Darling Ridge and Burke Mountain, both of which are central to the town's scenic qualities. Finally, more than two-thirds of respondents indicated that they were open to the idea of placing additional conditions on new development so as to reduce its visual impact and preserve scenic landscapes or important natural resources.

### What the Data Say

Scenic views abound in Burke, though there is little data that relates directly to scenic views. However, we were able to obtain or create several data sets help to clarify the status of areas of the town that are of scenic value.

**Map I** shows two features of interest: high-elevation areas and scenic roads. Two categories of high-elevation areas are shown: those lands above 1500 feet elevation (that is, the Scenic and Conservation Overlay), and those lands above 2500 feet elevation (which are subject to special scrutiny under Act 250). The scenic roads are based on a map prepared by Phyllis Burbank and cross-checked with input from other focus group participants and from the town survey.

The interesting thing to note on this map is that virtually none of the identified scenic road segments fall within the Scenic and Conservation Overlay district. Therefore, while the district has significant value for helping to protect some of the most important long-distance views in town – that is, views to the mountain and other high points from various locations – it does nothing to protect the scenic vantage points themselves. Therefore, if the town wishes to protect scenic views, some sort of additional or expanded overlay district may be advisable.

**Map 2** shows a variety of features of interest: open lands; parcels that contain land enrolled under the Current Use program; the Kingdom Trails and other off-road paths; designated on-road bike routes; and “sacred spaces” that are landscape features (as opposed to buildings or other cultural features). The “open lands” layer is based on areas classified as “open fields” in satellite land cover data. The Current Use parcels are based on a number of sources, and it is important to note that we were able only to identify parcels with enrolled lands on them (that is, we have no way of knowing what specific portion of a parcel is actually enrolled). The trails network data was supplied by Kingdom Trails and Lyndon State College. The bike routes data came from the Northeast Kingdom Travel and Tourism Guide: Cycling in the Northeast Kingdom. The “sacred spaces” data is derived from the town survey, and the size of the dot marking each sacred space is proportional to the number of people who listed that location as a sacred space.

There are several items of interest that came to light based on this map:

- Almost all of the open agricultural lands occur either on river bottomlands or on relatively flat ridgetops (with little open land on steep slopes). This layout suggests that the Town may wish to pursue two distinct strategies for the protection of open land, given the different economic and aesthetic values of each kind.
- Data on lands enrolled under the Current Use program are not available in a format that permits broad-scale assessment of the geographic distribution of enrolled acreage or the amount of land enrolled as farmland versus as timberland. Given the importance of Current Use to the economic viability of rural lands, it may be in the Town’s interest to work with partners who can obtain and digitize more precise data than we were able to procure for this study.
- Though a majority of off-road trails run through forested land, some portions either cross or run along the edges of open fields. Given the longer sight lines in open areas, these segments are particularly vulnerable to loss of their scenic character as well as their economic and recreational value to the town, and may merit special consideration in future planning efforts.

### **What Burke's Plan and Bylaws Say**

Burke’s Town Plan mentions a variety of strategies that are relevant to the protection of scenic views and open agricultural land. These include:

- “Support efforts of local, regional and statewide conservation organizations to protect open space”
- “Adopt a formal town ordinance to preserve and protect undeveloped high land and time-honored natural horizons”

- “Encourage underground placement of utility wires wherever possible to improve sightlines in scenic areas”
- “Consider establishing criteria for designating a town road as a Scenic Road”
- “Support the continuation and expansion of the state current use program to tax farm and forest properties at their productive value rather than their development potential...”
- “Design land subdivision and development policies to prevent or minimize the fragmentation and development of land characterized by primary agricultural soils”
- “Encourage the establishment of a local conservation fund for the purchase of land and interests in land which have historic significance”
- “Consider requiring that development be sited and/or clustered to avoid undue adverse visual impacts to scenic resources, including open fields, steep hillsides and ridgelines...”
- “Consider the development of a Conservation Commission”
- “Encourage the formation of a historic district that includes the Burke Mountain Clubhouse and East Burke dam area, and the former Darling properties on Darling Hill Road”
- “Evaluate enacting a property tax policy that reduces the tax burden on agricultural land that is actively managed for farming”

Of these strategies, the following have been incorporated into the Town Zoning and Subdivision Regulations or otherwise acted upon:

- Establishment of a Conservation Commission
- Creation of a Scenic and Conservation Overlay district in areas above 1500 feet elevation with enhanced design and siting standards for mitigating scenic impacts
- Adoption of a clustering provision
- Expansion of Planned Unit Development provisions, including requirements for deeded open space

# Historic Structures and Traditional Architecture

## What People Said

Focus group participants cited a great variety of specific structures as central to Burke's rural character, ranging from the Burke Mountain Club House and the Burke Meeting House to the old dam in East Burke. Other features of the built landscape were mentioned in more general terms, including in particular the importance of old barns to the town. There was a strong consensus across all groups that historic structures are just as important to rural character as the natural landscape itself.

There was relatively little emphasis in the survey on historic structures and traditional architecture. The only item that addressed this issue directly was a question about planning priorities for the villages. Respondents indicated that they saw historic preservation and adaptive reuse as either the number one or number two priority for special planning attention across all three villages, which is an indirect indication of the importance that respondents assigned to protecting the town's architectural heritage. It is also important to note that, after Darling Ridge and Burke Mountain, the three most often-cited "sacred spaces" were East Burke Village, Burke Mountain Club House, and Burke Hollow Meeting House, all of which are important in large part because of their historic character.

## What the Data Say

There is very little hard data available about Burke's architectural heritage. Despite the abundance of older buildings in Burke, the town only has a handful of properties on the state or national historic registers.

**Map 3** depicts those structures and sites in Burke that are on the state or national historic registers, as well as structures and sites of local importance that are cited in the Town Plan. There are two conclusions that can be drawn from this data:

- The gap between Burke's historic heritage and the extent to which that heritage has been officially documented points to a need for additional historic surveys to identify those elements of the town's architectural heritage that merit protection. The town may wish to engage the assistance of state historic preservation officials or local historical societies in conducting surveys as necessary to fill gaps. In addition, if it does not do so already, the community may wish to participate in the annual Vermont Barn Survey.
- The fact that Darling Ridge was cited more often than any other place in Burke as a "sacred space" and is under consideration for designation as a historic district indicates that this area may be a prime candidate for establishing an additional scenic overlay district.

## What Burke's Plan and Bylaws Say

Burke's Town Plan also contains a variety of strategies focused on preservation of the town's historic structures and traditional architecture. These include:

- “Explore offering incentives for improvement to cultural and historic structures, such as adaptive reuse provisions for historic barns or other historic structures that no longer serve their original function...”
- “Encourage the establishment of a local conservation fund for the purchase of land and interests in land which have historic significance”
- “Consider becoming a Certified Local Government to have access to increased resources for historic preservation”
- “[Require that the] proposed demolition of any contributing structure... meet associated review standards intended to require the documentation and/or preservation of historic structures”
- “Explore posting metal signs denoting historical sites and buildings”
- “Encourage the re-activation of the ‘Town of Burke Historic Society’ to inventory, catalogue, and map historic features...”
- “Encourage local participation in Act 250 and Public Service Board regulatory proceedings that effect Burke historical and cultural assets”
- “Encourage the formation of a historic district that includes the Burke Mountain Clubhouse and East Burke dam area, and the former Darling properties on Darling Hill Road”
- “Create an assessment of historical and cultural sites”

Of these strategies, the following have been incorporated into the Town Zoning and Subdivision Regulations or otherwise acted upon:

- Establishment of provisions for adaptive reuse of historic structures that allow for additional conditional uses of such structures
- Recent addition of several properties to the National Register of Historic Places, including the East Burke Dam and the former Darling properties on Darling Hill Road

# The Absence of Suburbia

## What People Said

The theme of "absence of suburbia" is defined by what is not in Burke. As one focus group participant put it, "It's more what you don't see that I like." As a consequence, it was not always among the first mentioned, but most focus groups touched on it. Several participants cited the lack of strip malls, high rises, and highways as one of the things they most like about Burke. Another person mentioned their appreciation for the fact that the mountain is "not lit up with a bunch of houses." In addition, multiple focus group participants mentioned dirt roads as a crucial element of Burke's rural character.

Survey data echo in a number of places the theme of concern about suburban encroachment that was woven throughout the focus groups. Most important, there was very strong support – from about 70% of respondents – for encouraging commercial clustering, which is consistent with the high level of concern about strip development that was expressed in the focus groups. In addition, as mentioned above, more than two-thirds of respondents indicated that they were in favor of placing additional conditions on new developments so as to reduce their visual impact and preserve scenic landscapes or important natural resources. Since the question referred to the visual impacts of development generally, it is reasonable to infer that respondents would also likely be open to the idea of placing such conditions on new commercial as well as residential developments. Finally, in the question specifically about rural character, "unpaved roads" was included as an item in the list of elements that respondents were asked to rate based on their importance to Burke's rural character. In response, nearly three-quarters of respondents indicated that unpaved roads were either most important or somewhat important to rural character.

## What the Data Say

There is a good deal of interesting data that illustrate the issue of suburbanization and its potential impacts on Burke's rural character. We have organized this data into three maps, as described below.

**Map 4** shows the town's road network, with major highway corridors highlighted and traffic counts given for each road segment, along with the town's zoning districts. The data for this map are derived from standard layers developed and maintained by the Northeastern Vermont Development Association.

The important thing to note with this map is that the town's state and U.S. highways run through all but one of the town's zoning districts. However, there are no standards in place that treat major highway corridors as an area of special planning focus. While it is true that different standards for highway development ought to apply depending on the context of a given segment of highway – that is, whether it is running through the center of a village or through a rural agricultural area – the high degree of concern regarding the possibility of strip commercial development along these highways suggests that a unified approach to managing growth along each major corridor should be considered as an important strategy for achieving the community's goals.

**Map 5** again shows the road network, but this time with private roads, dirt roads (generally Class 3), and Class 4 roads (dirt roads with minimal winter maintenance) highlighted. The map also displays scenic routes (the same layer as in Map 1) along with identified bicycle routes and trails. Again, these layers are derived from readily available data.

There are two things worth pointing out relative to this map:

- The majority of the town's roads are currently dirt roads. Given the new development that the town is likely to see over the next decade, though, traffic counts on a number of those roads are likely to reach the point where standard VTrans policies would call for paving. If Burke residents wish to keep dirt roads unpaved even as traffic increases, the Town may wish to revisit its road upgrade policies (both for paving dirt roads and for upgrading Class 4 roads) so as to ensure that they are consistent with residents' preferences.
- While most of the designated bike routes through town follow relatively lightly used roads, one segment is routed along the Highway 114 corridor north of East Burke Village up to the juncture with Victory Road. Given current traffic counts on this road (and the strong likelihood of increased traffic in years to come), it would be prudent to investigate the possibility of having bike lanes (or at least wide shoulders) added to the road the next time it is repaved.

**Map 6** shows natural constraints on development, including steep slopes, wetlands, deeryards, prime agricultural and statewide important soils, and endangered species populations. Steep slopes are defined as those greater than 25%. Wetlands are derived from a standard layer whose extent is defined by state and federal authorities. Deeryards and endangered species populations are determined based on surveys conducted by the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources. Soils data are from the United States Department of Agriculture.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from this map is that relatively little of Burke's land area is "protected" simply by virtue of its physical characteristics. Though site-specific constraints that do not show up on this map (such as ledges, high water tables, and the like) certainly are important factors, the town is not dominated by marshes or excessively steep slopes. Similarly, while Burke has a fair percentage of prime agricultural and statewide important soils, it has far less acreage of these soils than do some towns in heavily farmed areas of Vermont. In any case, while all these factors affect developability, they do not necessarily prevent it. (Wetlands, for instance, can be developed under certain circumstances.) What this map underscores, then, is the importance of the Town's ongoing efforts to refine its development standards, as preservation of rural character will happen only through a concerted community-wide effort.

## **What Burke's Plan and Bylaws Say**

Burke's Town Plan includes a variety of strategies targeted at preventing suburban-style development and commercial strip development. These include:

- "Evaluate the creation of Village Commercial Districts along Route 114 in East Burke village and Routes 5 and 5A in West Burke villages"
- "Maintain the town's historic settlement pattern of compact growth centers surrounded by rural countryside"

- “Migrate from one zoning district to multiple zoning districts”
- “Encourage commercial development, higher density residential development and new residential settlements in those areas that are appropriate for such, while discouraging development in other areas”
- “Prohibit large-scale activities and large traffic generators without adequate transportation upgrades [and] ensure that buildings and uses are of a scale and design that is compatible with residential uses...”
- “Consider the creation of a Design Review Board to ensure new village construction and other commercial construction maintains the character of Burke”
- “Require a transportation impact study as part of any new large scale residential or commercial development”
- “[Consider] traffic calming measures... in any improvements to Burke’s existing roadways and any new connecting side roads”
- “Create criteria and a procedure for evaluating any economic development proposal”
- “Examine the establishment of one or more zoning districts for commercial development”

Of these strategies, the following have been incorporated into the Town Zoning and Subdivision Regulations or otherwise acted upon:

- Establishment of multiple zoning districts, including the creation of village mixed-use districts in West Burke and East Burke
- Creation of basic standards for evaluating and mitigating traffic impacts (at the discretion of the Development Review Board) for any project that requires subdivision review, site plan review, or conditional use review, or for any project that is submitted as a Planned Unit Development
- Establishment of frontage requirements (though requirements are uniform town-wide)
- Creation of an option to restrict the size, location, or configuration of parking lots and to require shared parking or pedestrian facilities (among other things) for any project that requires subdivision review, site plan review, or conditional use review, or for any project that is submitted as a Planned Unit Development
- Creation of a shared parking option and a provision for waiving parking requirements for all commercial developments if certain conditions are met
- Establishment of restrictions on the number, placement, and size of curb cuts

# Compact Villages Surrounded by Rural Countryside

## What People Said

Burke's villages were universally cited by focus group respondents as the collective heart of the community. "Three stores, the post office, the church, and ten houses – that's the villages," said one participant. Others emphasized not only their smallness, but also the ease with which one can leave the village and get out into open land. "You're out of the village, and that's it," said another participant. Finally, at least one person in each group brought up the uniqueness of each village, often in the context of how each requires a different approach to protect its character as it grows.

Survey responses also highlighted the importance of the villages. Traffic calming and pedestrian safety was either the number one or number two priority across all respondents for special planning emphasis in each of the villages. Compatible commercial uses, traditional development patterns, and lighting management also received high marks, indicating a strong desire to ensure that the villages retain their essential character. Finally, five of the top ten sacred places cited by respondents were either specific locations within the villages – the Burke Mountain Club House, the Burke Hollow Meeting House, the East Burke Dam – or a village itself.

## What the Data Say

One of the products of this project will be state Village Center designation for East Burke Village and West Burke Village. (This designation is a separate task from the creation of a Community Character Inventory; however, given the stated importance of the villages to rural character, we mention the designation process here.) Though the boundaries of the proposed designated areas are constrained by state guidelines that define what should and should not be included within a designated village center, feedback from the survey and focus groups was factored in as well.

**Map 7** shows the draft proposed boundaries for both villages. It also includes the town's existing zoning districts as they relate to the villages and the political boundaries for West Burke Village.

The one thing that ought to be highlighted relative to this map is the fact that, according to state law, designation is intended for village *centers*, not for villages broadly defined. The boundaries are meant to encompass the mixed-use heart of each village, and adjacent areas that are primarily residential have been left out intentionally.

## What Burke's Plan and Bylaws Say

Burke's Town Plan includes a variety of strategies intended to concentrate and guide new development in and around the villages that is consistent with the villages' historic character. These include:

- "Evaluate the creation of Village Districts in Burke Hollow, East Burke and West Burke"

- “Evaluate the creation of Village Commercial Districts along Route 114 in East Burke village and Routes 5 and 5A in West Burke villages”
- “Evaluate the creation of a Village Mixed Use District surrounding the Village Commercial Districts”
- “Work to ensure that future development is compatible with the villages’ historic character...”
- “Consider the creation of a Design Review Board to ensure new village construction and other commercial construction maintains the character of Burke”
- “Support the creation of a network of pedestrian and cycling paths that interconnect the villages”
- “Support low impact lighting, shared parking, sidewalks, crosswalks, and well-defined streetscapes”
- “Limit the size and lighting of signage to be consistent with the character of the villages”
- “Study the feasibility and impact of providing a municipal water supply and sewage and run-off water processing capabilities for both East Burke and West Burke villages”
- “Should a municipal [sewage] system become a practical reality, coordinate the allocation of available capacity with other policies of this plan so that the system reinforces – rather than undermines – land use, housing and economic development goals of the town”
- “[Lay out] sewage service areas [so as to] correspond with designated growth center boundaries and [design] allocation policies [to] foster the type and rate of development desired by the community”
- “Promote new housing within villages”

Of these strategies, the following have been incorporated into the Town Zoning and Subdivision Regulations or otherwise acted upon:

- Creation of a Village Mixed Use district for the core areas of East Burke Village and West Burke Village
- Creation of a Village Residential district for the periphery of East Burke Village and West Burke Village and for Burke Hollow
- Establishment of standards for signage and lighting
- Establishment of provisions allowing the construction of accessory units
- Establishment of provisions allowing for home-based businesses
- Establishment of provisions for adaptive reuse of historic structures that allow for additional conditional uses of such structures

# Large Blocks of Forest and an Ethic of Public Access

## What People Said

The theme of open land and public access was closely connected to that of compact villages. Focus group participants cited as essential to Burke's rural character the ability not only to "get out of town," but to have somewhere wild and open to go once you are there. Numerous participants expressed their appreciation for the fact that there are large unbroken blocks of forest in Burke, as well as for the landowners who permit trails to cross their land and allow residents to hunt and trap on their property.

Given this level of access, forest contributes to Burke's rural character in several ways: as a place to get away from it all, as habitat for wildlife, and as somewhere to let kids run around where they are safe. Though extensive forest is relatively new to Burke given the town's agricultural history, the woods have already taken on an important role in the community's sense of itself given the ethic of allowing public access that exists in the town. Several focus group participants noted, however, that this ethic is eroding as new people move to town who do not share it.

Survey responses were consistent with focus group data on the issue of forest conservation and public access. "Forested land and open space" was ranked as the second-most significant element of rural character, with over 90% of respondents indicating that this issue was either most important or somewhat important to Burke's rural character. Similarly, three-quarters of respondents were in favor of using land use planning and regulation to encourage land conservation, a far higher percentage than was the case for any of the other options offered in that question (all of which were focused on development rather than conservation).

## What the Data Say

There are a variety of readily available data layers related to forest cover and natural resources. In this section, we have selected a set of layers that highlight the status of forested lands in Burke and identify issues that may warrant action by the Town.

**Map 8** is similar to Map 2. The primary difference is that Map 8 highlights forested land, whereas Map 2 highlighted open land. The map shows a variety of features of interest: forested lands; parcels that contain land enrolled under the Current Use program; and the Kingdom Trails and other off-road paths. The "forested lands" layer is based on areas classified as forest in satellite land cover data. The Current Use parcels are based on a number of sources, and it is important to note that we were able only to identify parcels with enrolled lands on them (that is, we have no way of knowing what specific portion of a parcel is actually enrolled). The trails network data was supplied by Kingdom Trails and Lyndon State College.

There are a couple of things worth noting about the data shown on this map:

- A large portion of the town is still forested. However, very little of that forested land is preserved in any way. As with Map 2, it was not possible given the available data to determine what specific areas are enrolled under Current Use. In any case, enrollment under Current Use is only a disincentive to development; it does not preclude

development entirely. The Town may wish to conduct a more detailed study of the status of forest land in the community, including changes in lot size, physical forest fragmentation due to construction of homes, and size and extent of unbroken forest blocks. (The Windham County Regional Planning Commission recently undertook a study of this kind that would be a useful model for Burke.)

- As noted above, the Kingdom Trails network runs almost entirely on private lands, and many segments run on large parcels that are prime targets for (or are already in the process of) subdivision. If the trail network is seriously compromised, the impacts to Burke's quality of life as well as its economic base could be considerable. Securing easements for priority trail segments is something the Town or an allied nonprofit community organization may wish to pursue.

**Map 9** shows deeryards, wetlands, endangered species (though not location-specific), and bear habitat areas. These layers are all developed by the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources at the statewide level.

The most important thing to note on this map is that the entire town of Burke is considered bear habitat, an indication of the continuing importance of the town for wildlife despite recent development trends. Given this fact, Burke may wish to put in place additional standards to ensure protection of key wildlife areas and of wildlife habitat quality generally.

### **What Burke's Plan and Bylaws Say**

Burke's Town Plan contains a variety of strategies related specifically to the protection of unbroken forest and other key natural resources. These include:

- “[Design] land subdivisions and land development... to control storm water runoff and avoid adverse off-site impacts to water quality”
- “Protect surface water quality through the maintenance of forested buffers along all stream banks”
- “[Prohibit] clear cutting of slopes for the sole purpose of view improvement”
- “[Consider] regulating the amount of trees that can be removed in specified zoning areas and for new developments”
- “Inform landowners of modern techniques for forest management, proper harvesting and logging, timber stand mix, and continuous renewal of the forest resources”
- “[Identify] sensitive areas in Burke [and consider them] for some level of protection through both regulatory and non-regulatory means”
- “Carefully evaluate the impact of any proposed development in wetlands”
- “[Encourage] the use of conservation easements to protect critical wildlife habitat”

Of these strategies, the following have been incorporated into the Town Zoning and Subdivision Regulations or otherwise acted upon:

- Prohibition of development on slopes greater than 25%
- Establishment of a 50 foot required buffer along rivers and natural lakes and ponds

- Establishment of the option of requiring buffers for Planned Unit Developments
- Creation of a clustering option with incentives for the permanent conservation of undeveloped land
- Establishment of standards for preservation of forest cover and placement of structures on lots as part of the Scenic and Conservation Overlay district so as to minimize visual and natural resource impacts of high-elevation development

## **Conclusion**

Burke residents have a strong shared understanding of what constitutes the community's rural character. They also clearly understand the degree to which rural character in Burke is threatened by rapid development as well as the importance of working collaboratively to develop sensible strategies for preserving rural character. This section described some of the most consistent themes that came up in discussions and survey responses related to rural character with the goal of providing a shared frame of reference for prioritizing strategies that the community wishes to pursue. The next section of this report outlines some of those strategies, which sets the stage for the next phase of this project.

# Preserving Rural Character: Strategies and Next Steps

There are a variety of planning strategies that can be effective tools for protecting rural character in a rapidly growing community. The next step in this project will be to develop a series of specific options for the Town to consider that respond directly to community feedback on what approaches are most appropriate for Burke. This section outlines some of the strategies that we will explore over the months to come. Details will be included in upcoming newsletters and on the project website at <http://tinyURL.com/burkeplanning>.

## Balancing New Housing and Conservation in Rural Areas

Effective management of rural residential development has been identified by Burke residents as a key issue facing the community. The challenge is to strike the right balance between keeping the development process flexible and low-cost while at the same time protecting the elements of rural character that are important to the community as a whole. A few of the strategies that are either already in use or under consideration in Burke include:

- **Clustering**, in which a developer has the option of concentrating most of the lots on one portion of his property and then putting the rest of the land into some form of permanent conservation status. In return for protecting open space, the developer is allowed to site a few more lots on the property than he would otherwise.
- **Building envelopes**, in which a municipality requires that all structures on a given lot be located within a specific area on the lot so as to reduce impacts on views. This is typically used only in areas of high scenic value.
- **Screening**, which refers to a range of strategies for reducing the visibility of new construction by requiring that vegetation be preserved or planted in strategic locations on the lot. As above, this is typically used only in areas of high scenic value.

## Guiding Development In and Around the Villages

One message that came across clearly throughout the focus groups and the town survey was a desire to see new development concentrated in and around the existing villages. At the same time, there were numerous issues raised — from lack of wastewater systems to lack of buildable land — that need to be addressed effectively if village development is to be successful. A few of the strategies that might help to address these issues and facilitate village development include:

- **Public infrastructure planning**, which involves developing integrated plans for new streets, sidewalks, wastewater, potable water, parks, civic buildings and functions, and other elements of growth that must be coordinated (and in some cases constructed) by the municipality.

- **Village street grids**, which is an approach to village development that provides incentives or sets standards for developers to follow the historic pattern of interconnected streets that defines Vermont’s villages.
- **Design review guidelines**, which refers to an approach to development in which the local municipality sets standards for various aspects of design — from building style to building materials to landscaping — and then reviews development proposals against those standards. There is no standard set of elements of design that are covered by design review guidelines; each community chooses which aspects make sense to regulate and what areas of town are most appropriate.
- **“Vermont Neighborhoods” designation**, which is a state program that provides financial and regulatory incentives for communities that designate areas in and around village centers for compact residential development.

## Discouraging Strip Commercial Development

The potential for poorly managed commercial development along Burke’s main highways is clearly of great concern to community residents. There is a very strong consensus in favor of putting in place standards for managing commercial development and containing it to limited areas. A few of the strategies that we will explore for meeting this goal include:

- **Commercial clustering**, which refers to the designation of specific, limited areas for commercial development, with a focus on identifying locations that complement existing land uses and community centers in the town.
- **Access management**, which involves a variety of strategies for limiting the number of places where cars enter and exit the public highway. These include restricting curb cuts, encouraging shared parking, and promoting interconnection of parking lots.
- **Design review guidelines**, which refers to an approach to development in which the local municipality sets standards for various aspects of design — from building style to building materials to landscaping — and then reviews development proposals against those standards. There is no standard set of elements of design that are covered by design review guidelines; each community chooses which aspects make sense to regulate and what areas of town are most appropriate. (This is equally appropriate for guiding commercial development and village development.)
- **Collaboration with adjoining towns**, when appropriate. Especially given the proximity of East Burke Village and West Burke Village to Burke town lines, development decisions made in neighboring towns can have a significant impact on the character of Burke and its villages. Initiating shared planning efforts for areas near town lines would be advantageous for both towns concerned.

## Protecting Farmland, Forests, and Other Natural Resources

The conservation of farmland, forests, and other natural resources goes hand in hand with the management of rural residential development. If Burke is to retain significant acreages of forest

and agricultural land — and especially if it is to preserve the economic viability of those lands as the basis for forestry and agricultural enterprises — it will need to continue to strengthen its standards for ensuring that rural home construction is compatible with the rural landscape. With these strategies in place, the town may want to consider complementary approaches that support conservation of natural resources directly, including:

- **Trails planning**, in which communities map trail networks, designate trails formally, identify segments that are at risk, and work to secure easements for trail corridors so that they are protected even if land changes ownership.
- **Scenic/agricultural overlay districts**, which are special districts applied to areas of high scenic value that place additional conditions on development in those areas so as to protect the scenic character of the town. These districts can be applied to a variety of scenic areas, from high-elevation regions to open meadows.
- **Land conservation funding**, which encompasses a variety of mechanisms for protecting land in perpetuity. These can include fee simple purchase, purchase of easements, and transfer of development rights, among other strategies.
- **Partnering with nonprofit organizations** that are in a position to assist the town with natural resource planning and conservation.

## Conclusion

There are a range of strategies available to the town for preserving its rural character. The only limit to their adoption is the community's willingness to find innovative ways to balance community needs with individual rights to the benefit of both. We look forward to working with the community over the next few months to identify those strategies and move towards their implementation.

# APPENDIX A

## Project Context

### Project Overview

When the Ginn Corporation bought Burke Mountain in 2002, the Town of Burke was suddenly faced with the opportunities and the challenges of managing large-scale development. In response, the Select Board and Planning Commission began work on a range of strategies for protecting Burke's rural character, scenic beauty, and ecological value even as the town grows rapidly.

In 2008, the Town selected Smart Growth Vermont and the Northeastern Vermont Development Association (NVDA) to assist with the current phase of the town's efforts. The role of these two organizations is to help the Planning Commission identify options for the community to consider as residents assess how best to respond to development pressures. The project began in summer 2008 and will conclude in late spring 2009.

This project picks up where the town's 2007 planning efforts left off. It builds on the changes put in place by the town's citizens over the past year, including the adoption of a number of amendments to the town's zoning bylaw and the establishment of the Conservation Commission. At the end of this project, the town will have a series of new tools at its disposal for protecting Burke's rural character and managing growth (see below for specifics).

More information about the project as well as copies of all project-related documents can be found online at <http://tinyurl.com/burkeplanning/>.

### Project Goals

This project will build on the work already completed by the Planning Commission, the Select Board, and the community at large over the last couple of years. The Planning Commission is currently focused on four **broad issues**:

- How to manage rural residential development in a way that balances protection of rural character with respect for private property rights
- How to work with large developers to ensure that their development plans benefit the community as a whole
- How to concentrate new development in and around the villages in a way that is compatible with the unique character of each
- How to plan ahead and budget for major town projects such as road improvements, sewer extensions, and equipment purchases so that taxes remain stable as the town grows

The **specific products** that the town will be left with at the end of this project respond directly to these four issues. They include:

1. A capital budget and program that will help the Town plan ahead for major capital expenditures (roads, sewer, equipment, and the like) so as to ensure that new development pays its way
2. A series of practical workshops that will help community members become informed and effective participants in development permitting processes (such as Act 250)
3. Official state designation of East Burke and West Burke's village centers, which will make certain properties within the designated areas eligible for rehabilitation tax credits and other benefits
4. A targeted set of strategies for managing both resort development and rural residential growth

## **Relationship to Past Planning Efforts**

The Town of Burke's most recent round of planning work was conducted in 2007 with assistance from LandWorks, a consulting firm based on Middlebury. The focus of that phase of work was on developing a clear understanding of the current state and long-range impacts of the Town's planning and zoning bylaws so as to establish a solid foundation for future efforts. The most important products of that first phase included:

- An in-depth review of the Town Plan and Zoning Bylaw as they existed in 2007
- A "build-out" analysis that estimated the total number of residences and other structures that could hypothetically be built in Burke under the regulations in force at that time (1-acre zoning)
- Proposed updates to the Zoning Bylaw that would replace the town's single zoning district with a new system of districts, overlays, and other provisions that encouraged the concentration of new development in and around the villages (all of which were adopted by the town's voters in early 2008)
- A series of recommendations for next steps

The current project is intended to help the Town implement several of the recommendations that came out of the previous round of work. We are picking up where LandWorks left off, helping the town to identify and move forward on those action items that will most effectively address the concerns and priorities of Burke residents.

## **Support for This Project**

This project was made possible in part by a Municipal Planning Grant from the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs.