

COMMUNITY WORKSHOP SUMMARY

February 15, 2010

Town of Danville

The Danville Planning Commission organized a community workshop with help from the Conservation Commission and Smart Growth Vermont on February 15, 2010 as part of a project to determine how best to implement the goals in the town plan relating to enhancing rural character. Posters were distributed throughout the town, notice was given in the Town Report, and the meetings were advertised in the Caledonian Record. The Select Board, Planning Commission and Conservation Commission members volunteered to reach out to ask as many possible to attend the sessions. As a result, nearly thirty people attended the first meeting on President's Day.

Planning Commission Chair, Jeff Frampton kicked off the meeting with an overview of the project. He noted that the community workshop was part of an extensive community outreach process that also includes focus groups, a survey (paper and on-line) and other community meetings. The goal of the outreach is to better understand how the residents of Danville feel about the following:

- The how and why of the key elements of rural character that make Danville a special place
- The threats that these elements might be facing
- Which tools might best ensure that Danville retains its rural nature while encouraging new homes, businesses and forest and farming operations

Noelle MacKay, Executive Director of Smart Growth took over facilitating the remainder of the meeting after participants introduced themselves. Noelle provided an overview of the current Town Plan's vision:

Danville "the village in the hills" is a small rural community defined by several distinct compact historical villages surrounded by farmland, forests and scenic vistas with a strong connection to the land... Citizens overwhelmingly want Danville to maintain its current small-scale rural character and way of life well into the future preserving the attributes that makes living and recreating here so unique and special.

As well, key Goals and Objectives from the Land Use Section of the Plan were summarized:

- Establish residential areas with lot sizes and sub-division requirements that meet resident needs while complying with planning criteria that support the preservation of rural characteristics.
- Identify and establish conservation and sensitive areas that protect scenic vistas, natural resources and wildlife.
- Update the rural land use map that defines the areas with important agricultural land, forestland, wetlands and critical wildlife habitat that should be protected from development. Establish zoning ordinances that protect these defined areas.
- Adopt subdivision regulations to shape orderly development consistent with the town's rural small town character.

- Establish a policy with supporting ordinances that addresses visual distractions from the rural character of the Town such as signage, inappropriate structures, transfer stations, etc.

We then discussed what was learned from the five focused groups and viewed the maps prepared that showed scenic resources, natural constraints to development and a map of the current zoning districts. A summary of both the focus groups and the trends from the map can be found at <http://tinyURL.com/danvillevt>.

Then participants were asked several questions. Their comments are shared below. Over the next few months, the Planning Commission will work with Smart Growth Vermont to hold two other community meetings that will build on this meeting and introduce tools that the community can consider to protect the rural nature of Danville. We then plan on developing a matrix of possible strategies and tools for the community to consider based on the community input we receive. This matrix will then serve as guidance for the development of top-ranked options for consideration by the Planning Commission, Conservation Commission and Select Board.

For copies of the current draft maps, project reports and summaries, and all other project information, please visit <http://tinyURL.com/danvillevt>.

What does Rural Character mean to you?

The conception of what constitutes “rural character” in Danville is remarkably diverse. Three major themes emerged from this question:

1. *Working landscape*
2. *Open lands*
3. *Community connections*
4. *Access to wildlife and outdoor recreation*

Working landscape. This theme was at the top of the list and participants emphasized that they felt that rural character = working lands = farms and actively managed forests (not clear cutting). They also noted the diversity that encompassed farming – cows, corn, orchards, sugarbush, goats, etc. Participants felt that working lands was related to maintaining the viability of the economics of working the land.

Open lands. Participants also defined rural character as open lands. Upon exploration of what “open lands” evokes, visions of meadowlands, pastures, fields, and houses around the edges of a field or on a hillside emerged. People mentioned dirt roads, back roads, low traffic, and the “sense of freedom as you don’t have to go the same way home.” Participants also mentioned trees and stone walls next to the road.

Community connections. Participants across all of the groups expressed an appreciation for the sense of community and the activities and events that bring the residents of Danville together. They highlighted the school with the small class size, the events and the spirit of the community. They mentioned community dinners, the Farmer’s market and concerts on the Green, the library,

historical society and the volunteer groups (fire, ambulance, town officials). Small businesses - in people's homes or the small, local shop or those that work over the internet - are also important to rural character and creating community connections.

Access to wildlife and outdoor recreation. Rural character also meant places where wildlife could thrive and residents were able to see and enjoy it. People mentioned that you can hear coyotes and see turkeys, moose and bear. As well as having wonderful ecosystems for wildlife, these areas also offered opportunities for active and passive recreation like hunting, fishing, horseback riding, biking and snowshoeing. Participants also mentioned that some key recreation – snowmobiling and ATV riding – were an economic plus for the town as visitors stayed in hotels and bought food and gas locally.

What features of the landscape or areas of town exemplify rural character for you?

- Danville Green
- Joe's Brook area – rural and views
- Scenic views
 - Diamond hill – view of town
 - Joe's Pond
 - Langmaid Farm – view and farm
 - Views to White Mountain – lots of places
 - top of dip (where wildlife corridor)
 - Across from cemetery
- Hay fields cut; raked and ready to bail
- Trees – have meaning; natural historical sites
- Stone walls
- Covered bridge
- Two Indian cemeteries
- Old North Church
- Historical Areas
- Century Farms – entrance points to the village
- Old barns that go with farms
- Walden and across trestle
- Joe's Pond
- Keiser Pond – very rural
- Access to local produce
- Oneida road – rural but it has newer homes and farms; also beautiful vistas
- Lack of traffic
- Village – development; style; age; well kept
- Hamlet of North Danville

What do you see as the biggest threat to the rural nature of Danville?

Participants wanted to expand these areas to include both the threats and opportunities. When discussing threats, they identified the threat and also potential consequences. Ridgeline development, 10-acre sewer rule, demise of farms, “junk forest,” commercial strip sprawl, large scale development, becoming a regional bedroom community, creeping residential sprawl, and development outside of the village were all mentioned as threats.

Participants noted that these threats could impact the town and that uncontrolled development could result in a “pressure to change” when new people moved into town with unrealistic expectations of rural community services. Others were concerned about high taxes, increased traffic, higher infrastructure costs to build and maintain, while others were concerned about a diminishment of tourism.

Opportunities exist for individual property owners to contribute to retaining Danville’s character by thinking carefully about their own land transactions. One participant gave an example of dividing his own land intentionally into very large lots and taking into account the potential purchasers’ development plans for those lots in making land sale decisions. Other people recognized the area around that land as a good example of a nice mix of preserved scenic views and farms with newer well-integrated homes.

The group was optimistic about the opportunities that were also present in Danville. Some felt that the opportunity to control development and have zoning that allows for growth, but is less haphazard and does restrict “certain things” is an opportunity to guide future growth. [Note: “certain things” was not further defined at this meeting] During this discussion, it was noted that there is a fine line when considering restrictions on allowing people to develop their property.

Participants recognized the current use program that many landowners participate in as well as the local food movement as an opportunity for the future of farming in Danville. There was a concern expressed by several people that, given the extent of lands in Current Use in Danville, threats to the Current Use system, such as legislative proposals to weaken the program or abuse of the system by speculative developers presented a significant threat to Danville’s rural character. Opportunities to keep taxes low and affordable to all residents and to invest in small businesses were discussed. A key opportunity or strength of Danville was that “people could still get together and talk about issues.”

Should the town use land use regulations to maintain rural character?

If yes, which features?

If no, why?

Everyone at the meeting agreed that the town should use land use regulations to maintain rural character. One participant said, “If we don’t do anything, it will be developed; it is a matter of degree.” However, there was variation or qualifications on this “yes.” Many felt that zoning could offer “a fit of guideline and allow for development, but still fit into the rural character.” Others felt that traffic and the number of lots should be considered. All felt that any land use regulations needed to be enforced, and enforced equitably, while others suggested a system to tax those that do not follow the regulations. Others mentioned that perhaps there was a way to compensate through incentives, bonuses or taxes. Participants felt that any changes should consider the use versus the cost to the town versus taxes.