

Exploring Sprawl 1st Issue in a Series



Number 1

Vermonters' Attitudes on Sprawl

THE VERMONT FORUM ON SPRAWL has conducted a poll of over 2,300 Vermonters on the subject of community values and sprawl. The poll provided information on the relationship between public attitudes and development patterns through a series of questions on quality of life, Vermont values, community, choice of residence, shopping patterns, and sprawl.

Summary of Findings

The results of the poll show that Vermonters value community life, agricultural heritage, a quality environment and opportunity for a good education. They believe communities should consist of compact settlements with good access to preserved open land and a nearby working landscape. At the same time, they often make personal choices that work against this vision. Nevertheless, they believe we can have growth without sprawl and that there is a need to take action to address sprawl in Vermont.

Key Findings on Sprawl

1.	A clear majority of respondents (61%) felt there is a need to take action to stop sprawl. Only 28% felt that no action should be taken.
2.	Sprawl is not inevitable according to the respondents. Of those who thought current land use patterns would lead to sprawl, 81% believed it is possible to stop sprawl.
3.	Overall, 72% of respondents said that sprawl and growth were not the same.

4. Of those who thought sprawl and growth were different, 90% said it is possible to have growth without sprawl.

Method

A national polling firm, Macro International, undertook the poll for the Vermont Forum on Sprawl. The 2,325 interviews were conducted by telephone with randomly sampled Vermonters between August 24 and October 6, 1998. The telephone numbers were obtained using the Random Digit Dial technique. This method generates telephone numbers randomly from the set of all possible valid telephone numbers, insuring that the sample accurately represents all Vermonters with telephones.¹ An approximately equal number of interviews were conducted in each of six regions of Vermont. The sample size was designed so that percentages reported within each region are accurate to within $\pm 5\%$ with 95% confidence. Results based on data for the state as a whole are accurate to within $\pm 1.36\%$ at 95% confidence. The overall response rate was 76% which provides a high degree of confidence in the representativeness of this sample.

For all research the Vermont Forum on Sprawl is conducting, municipalities have been classified in four categories: traditional centers, new growth towns, outlying towns and resort towns. (See map below.) The poll results were analyzed by the six regions of Vermont, town types, age, gender, income, and years lived in Vermont.

Regions and Town Types of Vermont

■ Traditional Centers

■ New Growth Towns

■ Outlying Towns

■ Resort Towns

1 Champlain Valley

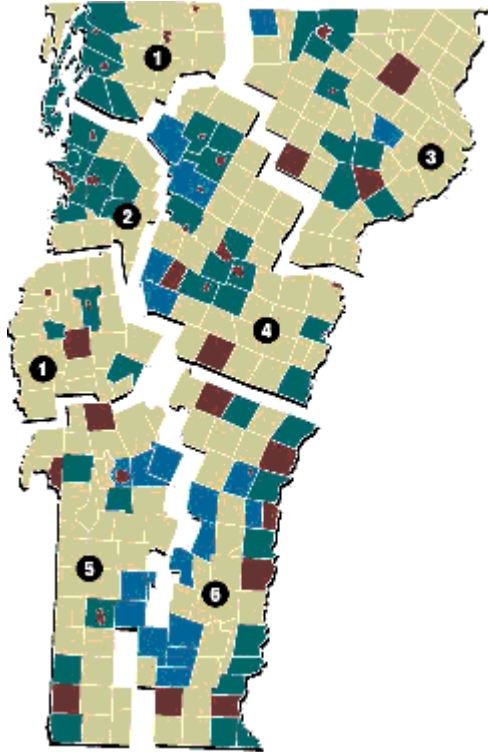
2 Chittenden County

3 Northeast Kingdom

4 Northcentral Highlands

5 Taconic Southwest

6 Connecticut River Valley



Vermont Values

No matter where they live, Vermonters value the quality of the environment, low crime rates, residents helping each other, the working landscape and a quality education. These results are consistent with findings of the Governor's Commission on Vermont's Future, who reported in 1988 that a set of four values were commonly held by Vermonters: community life, agricultural heritage, environmental quality and opportunity for a better life, including education, jobs, and affordable housing.

The following tables illustrate what the poll revealed about Vermonters' top four values by type of community and by region.

Rank	Overall	Traditional Center	New Growth Town	Outlying Town	Resort Town
1	Quality Environment	Quality Environment	Low Crime Rate	Quality Environment	Quality Environment
2	Low Crime Rate	Low Crime Rate	Quality Environment	Low crime/ residents helping	Low Crime Rate
3	Residents helping each other	Residents helping	Quality Education	Working Landscape	Working Landscape
4	Working Landscape	Quality Education	Residents helping	Slower pace of living	Residents helping

Rank	Champlain	Chittenden	Taconic	Ct. River	N Central	NE Kingdom
1	Quality environ./ resid. helping	Quality environment	Quality environment	Quality environment	Quality environment	Quality environment
2	Wkg. landscape	Low Crime	Low crime	Low crime	Low crime	Low crime
3	Low crime	Quality education	Residents helping	Residents helping	Wkg. landscape/ residents helping	Residents helping
4	Quality education	Working landscape	Wkg. landscape/ residents helping	Working landscape	Locally-owned businesses	Working landscape

Community Character

When asked what features may or may not be desirable in a community and where certain features should be located, a broad picture emerges of a community that Vermonters value. This image resembles a village with public gathering places, shops and services, and some housing located in the center or within walking distance of each other. There is access to sidewalks, bikepaths, and public transportation. Public green spaces and parks are also within the center or near residential neighborhoods. Preserved open land is a very important feature in this community. While some places of employment would be located in the town center, most employment would be outside the center or elsewhere in the region.

With the exception of the location of employment, the poll results reinforce the statewide vision of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside. When such a place was described to respondents, 48% said that they would have some interest in living in this community vs. 31% who would be less interested. Others were neutral to the idea.

The overall ranking of features that are "desirable" or "extremely desirable" is:

preserved open lands.....	94%
access to sidewalks and bikepaths.....	85%

mix of housing, stores and services within walking distance.....	84%
access to public transportation.....	83%
mix of housing types.....	80%

Choice of Place to Live

Respondents were asked whether or not they considered particular characteristics when choosing a place to live. Not surprisingly, the cost of a residence was considered most often. Natural beauty, privacy, safety and appearance of the neighborhood were other high-ranking responses. These findings are in keeping with the high value given by Vermonters to the environment and low crime. When choosing where to live, accessibility to shopping, schools, recreation areas, and public transportation and the ability to walk to places in the neighborhood ranked in the middle to lower third of the items. However, Vermonters felt that such accessibility was important when they responded to general questions about community life. This discrepancy indicates that Vermonters don't always act consistently with values that are important to them.

These results also indicate the importance of providing for natural beauty, privacy, safety and a good appearance in all neighborhoods - urban, village and rural - no matter where these neighborhoods are located in the state. Communities that are anxious to improve existing neighborhoods should consider these priorities of Vermonters.

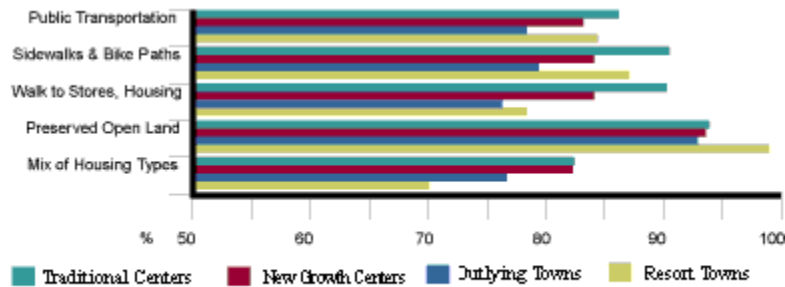
Respondents were also given a hypothetical choice between buying a \$100,000 home in an urban or village area close to public transportation, work and shopping or a larger home in an outlying area with longer commutes and more yard space. Overall, 21% of the respondents chose the home in the urban or village area and 74% chose the home in the outlying area. Those choosing the urban or village setting are more likely to be female and older and most of them currently live in a traditional center. A large portion of those choosing a rural setting live in an outlying town. Again, these results show a discrepancy between Vermonters values and the choices they make.

When the desirability of features in a community were analyzed according to town type, some interesting findings were made:

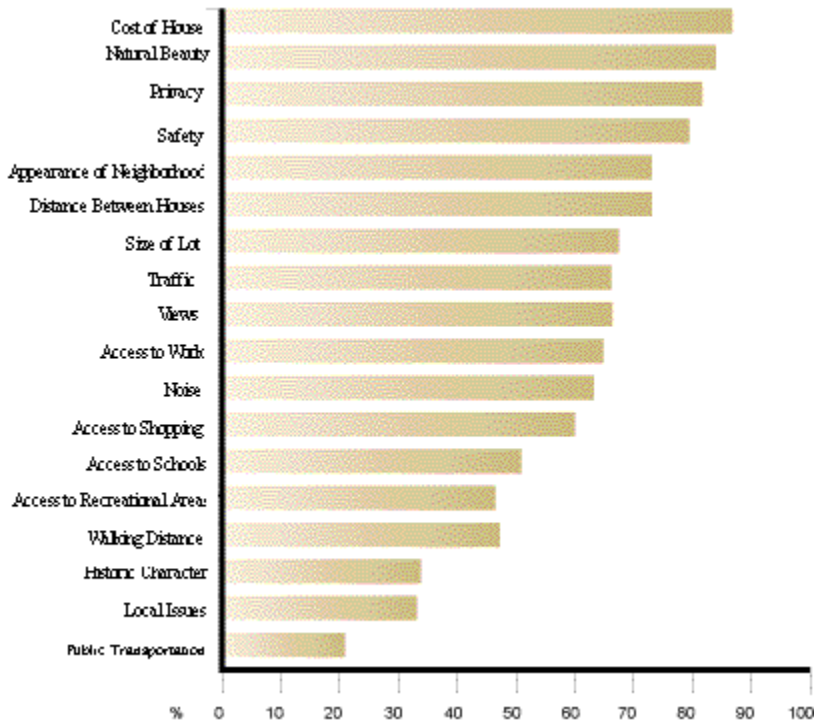
1.	Respondents living in resort towns rated preserved open lands higher than the overall average (99% vs. 94%) and mix of housing types lower than the overall average (70% vs.
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	80%).
2.	Those respondents living in traditional centers rated a mix of housing, stores, services, within walking distance significantly higher than the overall average (90% vs. 84%).
3.	Eighty-six percent of respondents who live in traditional centers said that access to public transportation was a desirable feature in a community, compared with 79% in outlying towns.
4.	Those respondents living in outlying towns rated a mix of housing, stores, services, within walking distance significantly lower than the overall average (76% vs. 84%), and access to public transportation lower than the overall average (79% vs. 83%).

Desirability of Features by Town Type



Features Considered When Choosing a Residence



Shopping Patterns

Shopping behavior was explored with a series of questions about where respondents shopped and why. When asked about shopping during the past month, 84% of respondents had shopped in a downtown or town center, 71% in a mall or other shopping center, and 41% in a big box store. Just over half of Vermonters (52%) shop most frequently in a downtown or town center, with two of the main reasons being closeness to home and a local connection. Thirty percent (30%) of respondents shop most frequently at malls or shopping centers. Among the reasons given for shopping at malls is the large variety of items in one location. A much smaller percentage (9%) shop most often in a big box store. Respondents say that these stores offer lower prices and large selections.

Respondents are very supportive of downtowns and town centers as places to shop. However, it is clear that accessibility, or proximity, to these locations is a major reason for people shopping there. Malls, shopping centers and big box stores are still in fewer locations in Vermont. It is interesting that respondents did not identify lack of parking in downtowns as a major reason to shop at malls and shopping centers. Accessibility or proximity, a large variety of items in one location and offering lower prices are important to shoppers.

The percentage of respondents who shopped most frequently in a downtown or town center was fairly uniform across age, gender and income. However, there were significant differences by town type and region. Far fewer respondents in the Chittenden region chose to shop in downtowns (43%) than in any other region (49%-62%) and significantly more respondents in the Northeast Kingdom (62%) shopped most frequently in downtowns and town centers. Significantly fewer respondents from new growth towns shop most frequently in downtowns (45%) than respondents from traditional centers (53%) or outlying towns (58%). These differences among regions and types of communities may reflect the availability of more shopping centers or malls in growth towns or growth regions.

Characteristics and Extent of Sprawl in Vermont

Over half of Vermonters are aware of sprawl and recognize the following characteristics of sprawl:

Commercial development strung out along a highway	88%
Increased amount of paved areas - roads, parking	72%
Single family homes spread out on former farm fields	72%
Widely spaced development with a scattered appearance	58%
Development that requires an automobile	56%

Respondents who were aware of sprawl in Vermont were asked to identify the towns in which they had noticed sprawl. Over half of Vermont municipalities were mentioned. Williston was the most frequently mentioned (44%) community.

Respondents who had never heard of sprawl were given a definition of sprawl in order to answer other questions in the poll. The definition used was: Sprawl is dispersed development outside of compact urban and village centers along highways and in rural countryside.

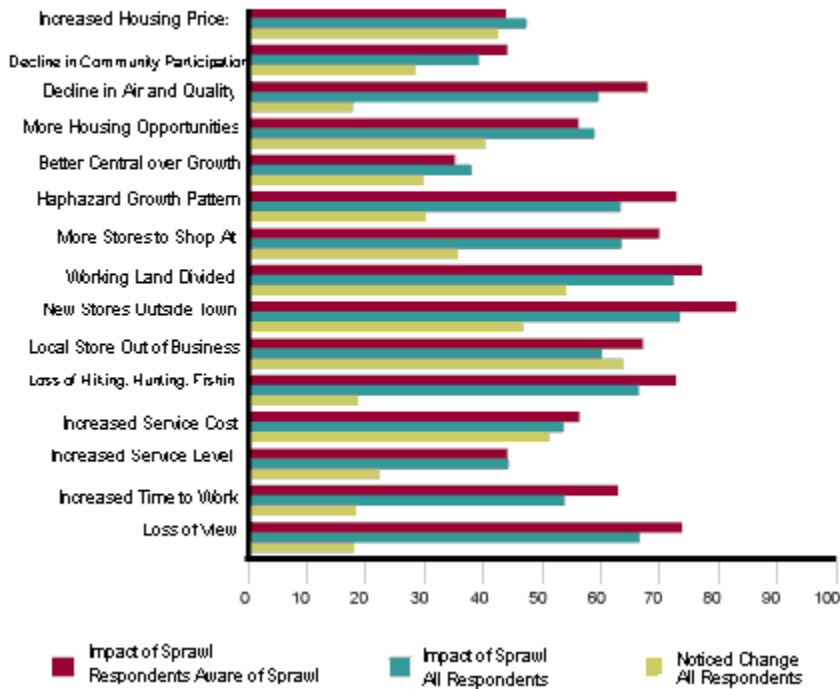


Subdivision of agricultural land into large residential lots (below)



.....Incremental strip development on a rural highway (left)

Perceived Impacts of Sprawl



Impacts of Sprawl

When asked if they had noticed any of a set of items representing change in their communities, respondents most frequently (64%) mentioned a locally owned store going out of business. Respondents were later asked if any of these same items were a potential impact of sprawl development. The most commonly perceived impacts were: new stores outside of town (73%), working landscape divided into house lots (72%), loss of places for hiking, hunting or fishing (66%), loss of a favorite view (66%), haphazard growth patterns (63%), more stores to shop at (63%), and local store going out of business (60%).

The impacts of sprawl that showed significant differences by town type were:

Loss of a favorite hiking, hunting or fishing spot (overall, 66%) with new growth towns (63%) significantly lower than either outlying towns (69%) or resort towns (78%).

Working landscape being divided into residential lot (overall 72%) with resort towns (85%) significantly greater than traditional centers (70%).

Growth vs. Sprawl

Respondents were asked whether or not sprawl and growth meant the same thing. Overwhelmingly, respondents said they were different. Overall, 72% said they were different, 21% said they were the same, and the remainder didn't know or didn't answer. The level of response was consistent by town type and region except in Chittenden County where a higher percentage (82%) of the respondents said that growth and sprawl were different.

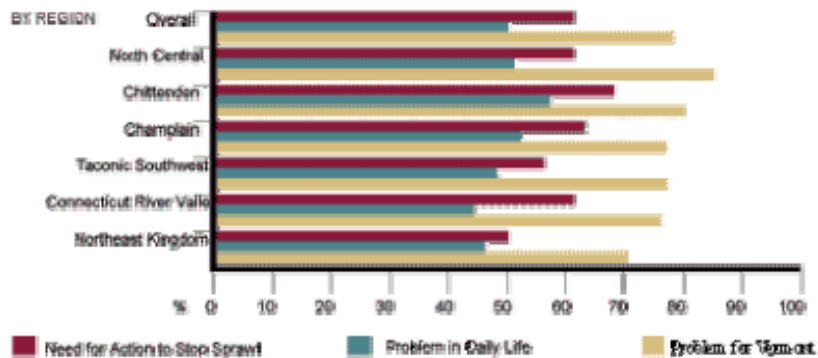
As a follow up question for those who thought growth and sprawl were different, respondents were asked whether or not it was possible for their communities to have growth and development without sprawl. Nine out of ten respondents said that it was. This response was consistent across town type and region of the state.

Sprawl as a Problem

Throughout Vermont and in each of the six regions and the four town types, over half of respondents felt that current land use and development patterns, if unchanged, would lead to sprawl. Of all the regions, Chittenden County had the highest percentage (70%) of respondents agreeing with this statement.

Respondents who thought that current patterns would lead to sprawl were then asked if this would be a problem in their daily lives or for Vermont overall. While 78% identified sprawl as a problem for the state, fewer (50%) felt it would be a problem impacting their daily lives. There was no significant difference in the perception of sprawl as a problem when analyzed by town type, gender or income. As the table below shows, the region with the highest percentage of respondents (85%) identifying sprawl as a problem for the state was the North Central region and the region with the highest percentage of respondents (57%) identifying sprawl as a problem in their daily lives was the Chittenden region. The region with the lowest percentage of respondents (70%) identifying sprawl as a problem for the state was the Northeast Kingdom and the region with the lowest percentage of respondents (44%) identifying sprawl as a problem in their daily lives was the Connecticut River Valley.

Sprawl as a Problem, Need for Action



Is Sprawl Inevitable?

Sprawl is not inevitable according to the respondents of this poll. Those who thought that sprawl would happen if current land use patterns continued overwhelmingly (81%) believed that it is possible to change development patterns so that they do not lead to sprawl. This response was consistent by region and town type.

Need to Take Action on Sprawl

Overall, 61% of respondents felt there is a need to take action to stop sprawl development. Only 28% felt there was no need to take action and 11% didn't know or didn't answer. The percentage identifying a need to take action increased to 71% among those who were aware of sprawl. The need to stop sprawl did not vary by town type although it did vary somewhat by region. The need to take action was felt most strongly in Chittenden County (68%) where more respondents also felt that sprawl was a problem in terms of their daily lives.