

**MAD RIVER VALLEY PLANNING DISTRICT STRATEGIC PLANNING OVERVIEW**  
**DRAFT v.4**  
**February 15, 2018**

The Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission reviewed several documents specific to the Mad River Valley including the Mad River Valley Economic Study; the Mad River Valley Active Transportation Plan; the Mad River Valley Housing Study; and notes from the Mad River Valley Economic Vitality Series. Based on this review, common themes and strategies were noted in multiple documents. These include:

- Tourism is a major part of the economy resulting in seasonal swings
- Wayfinding and tourism actions may be the most critical to ensure new visitors can get around safely, conveniently, and by multiple means
- Consideration for the push and pull of families that want amenities for their day-to-day needs and tourists that want amenities that elevate their experience
- Quality affordable housing continues to be a challenge for the Valley
- Infrastructure investments, including water and wastewater, could help support density that may improve affordability
- As facilities expand or are upgraded, year-round recreation is becoming a more important component of planning in the Valley
- Establishing a common and shared identity for the Valley will help focus the multiple planning efforts that are on-going

In addition to the common characteristics noted in each of the documents that have been reviewed, specific elements are outlined below.

**Mad River Valley Economic Study, 2014**

The Mad River Valley Economic Study, completed in 2014, provides an analysis of the economic trends and features of the Mad River Valley. Four major components of the economy are identified:

1. Agriculture
2. Recreation & Tourism
3. Professional Services
4. Manufacturing

These four sectors represent the changing economic climate within the Valley. Specifically, all four sectors have generally dominated the economic landscape of the Valley at one time or another. Additionally, each sector still has a presence within the Valley and, in some cases, seen a resurgence of sorts. As an example, agriculture has transitioned from widespread hill farms to a smaller number and more customized operations that cater to and support local foods and products. A similar trend has been seen with manufacturing in the Valley as well where businesses have started but then moved on to larger facilities in other parts of Vermont or the U.S.

The Economic Study also notes that population continues to grow in the Valley, but the 20 to 34 year old demographic is leaving the Valley. Similarly, the 0-19 and 35-44 demographics are moving into the Valley. Households with school-aged children are moving into the Valley to take advantage of the quality educational opportunities being offered as well as community amenities that exist such as access to recreation, a sense of place, and low crime.

A key factor discussed is the lack of quality affordable housing in the Valley. The housing stock is outdated or older and doesn't meet the demand of current residents. This is also supported by the Mad River Valley Housing Study that was completed in 2017. Additional findings from the Economic Study are supported and reiterated in both the Housing Study and MRVPD's annual data report.

One specific recommendation included in the Economic Study is the development of a recreation plan for the Valley. This is a common theme that is noted in other documents intended to help focus the Valley's resources on the recreation and tourism sector which is critical to the future economy of the Valley. Other recommendations that are identified in the Economic Study include developing a brand or identity for the Valley, but specifically for Waitsfield and Warren; address the gateways into and out of the Valley; expand links to the Mad River Path; and promote general merchandise, specialty merchandise, and restaurant retail uses. Additional recommendations are included to address specific policy issues related to municipal development such as parking, land uses, sign regulations, and development review.

### **Economic Vitality Series, 2015**

Notes from the EVS cover many topics relative to direct opinions and input from the Valley. One of the overarching themes that is noted in most of the topic areas is a lack of quality affordable housing and lack of skilled employees. This was identified in many of the sessions including retail and professional services. Other key findings and needs for the community include placemaking, transportation options, and marketing of the community. Specific actions related to these topics are noted in several of the other documents that were reviewed and are noted later in this summary.

### **Mad River Valley Active Transportation Plan, 2016**

The Mad River Valley Active Transportation Plan (MRV Moves Plan) provides a framework for bicycle and pedestrian transportation options throughout the Mad River Valley. This plan focuses on ways to integrate additional transportation measures, including on-road and off-road facilities, that encourage bicycle and pedestrian activity, but also as a means to positively influence and impact the Mad River Valley's economy. This positive impact on the economy is created by leveraging the existing natural resources to enhance and extend the interaction with residents and visitors to the valley.

The MRV Moves Plan outlines specific actions that should be taken in order to most effectively develop a system of both on and off road facilities for bicycles and pedestrians. The primary focus of the MRV Moves Plan is on bicycle and pedestrian facilities with a lean towards non-snow related activities. That is to say, there is discussion in the plan regarding cross country skiing or snowshoeing, but the primary focus is on bicycle and pedestrian use in the form of trails (for hiking, biking, and running), sidewalks, and on-road facilities.

The MRV Moves Plan also identifies specific actions to implement the plan. Actions are identified as short-term, medium-term, or on-going. Additionally, there are several required planning items that are needed in order to most effectively implement this plan. These planning items include:

- Develop an Active Transportation Tourism Marketing Plan
- Develop a Bicycle and Pedestrian Wayfinding System
- Identify Major Off-Road Path Land Access Needs
- Identify Minor Off-Road Path Land Access Needs

Based on the action plan, the development of an active transportation tourism marketing plan seems to be the most important as it is a necessary planning component for multiple actions. However, the Planning District does not directly focus on tourism as part of its work program. With this in mind, it may be more appropriate for the Planning District to focus on the second item regarding the development of a bicycle and pedestrian wayfinding system.

In support of this potential work task, 25% of the Planning District's proposed FY19 work plan (as presented on 10.19.2017) is dedicated to "Recreation." Within the recreation component is implementation of the MRV Moves plan, and a specific item is related to wayfinding in the form of trail signage and mapping. Additionally, a portion of the "Placemaking" category also includes wayfinding and signage. Together, almost 27% of the proposed work plan includes some aspect of wayfinding, signage, mapping and related placemaking.

### **Mad River Valley Housing Study, 2017**

Identifying and maintaining quality affordable housing has been an on-going challenge for the Mad River Valley. This is noted in many studies that discuss economic development. The Housing Study identifies specific challenges in the Valley including the cost of land, limited capacity for wastewater, aging housing stock, and proliferation of second homes. Additionally, the study notes that half of the workforce is employed in low-wage hospitality and retail jobs, which further limit affordability due to a lack of disposable income.

While many of the challenges to affordable housing are understood, the opportunities to overcome these challenges require a substantial and comprehensive effort. The Valley, including some of its key employers, are making efforts to overcome these challenges and increase the inventory of affordable housing for owners and renters alike. Groups have been formed such as the Mad River Valley Housing Coalition and its Valley Affordable Land Initiative to assist in advocacy and affordability; the municipalities have updated regulations to support affordability; groups such as Downstreet Housing & Community Development have projects in the Valley; and the general awareness of affordability has been elevated throughout.

Like many communities, affordable housing is a critically important issue for the Valley. Significant work has been done to identify challenges, opportunities, and partners to address affordability. With that said, the extent of what the Planning District can do to influence the development of affordable housing is limited. This is reflected as 10% of the proposed work plan for the Planning District (as presented on 10.19.2017) is dedicated to "Affordable Housing". This would seem to indicate that the Planning District intends to stay involved with affordable housing issues through a supporting role in the community and not necessarily a priority for staff to lead this effort.

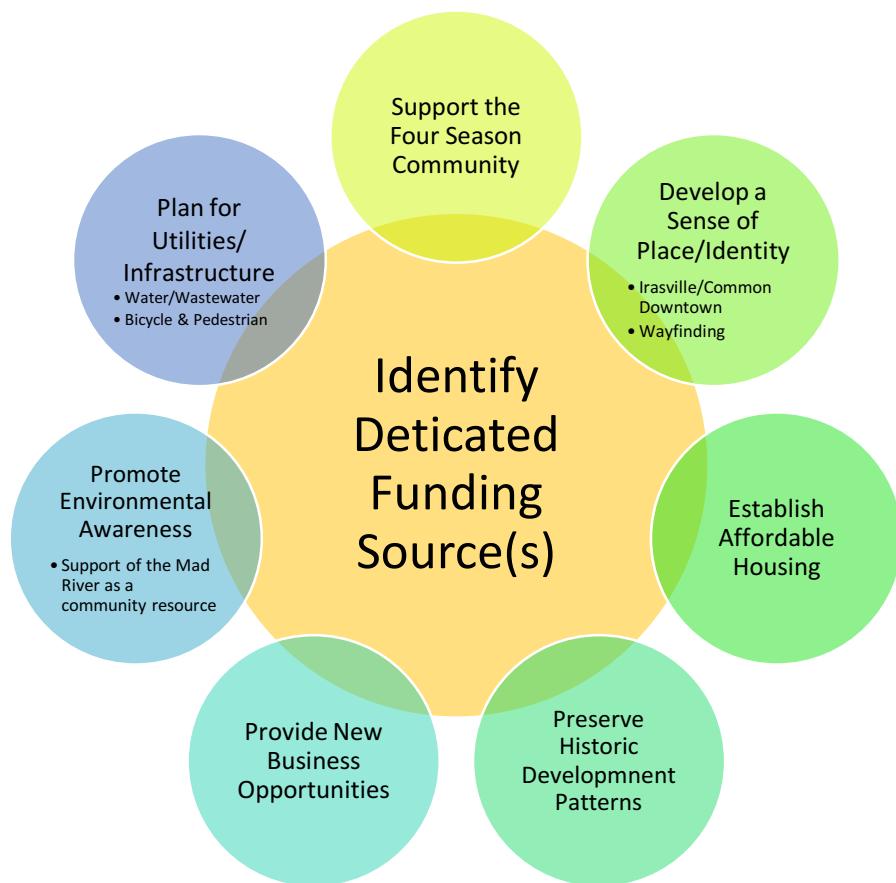
### **Conclusion**

Based on the studies and documents that were reviewed, it would seem that strategic priorities for the Mad River Valley Planning District should focus on wayfinding, placemaking, and establishing a consistent identity for the Mad River Valley. As a union municipal district recognized by the State of Vermont, the Mad River Valley Planning District represents the Valley and is guided by the elected and appointed

officials of Fayston, Waitsfield, and Warren, as well as Sugarbush, Mad River Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Central VT Regional Planning Commission. As such, they are uniquely suited to take a lead role in organizing the efforts to establish consistent and cohesive actions that represent the Valley as a whole. The efforts needed to organize, support, and establish consensus on wayfinding, placemaking, and developing a consistent valley identify would be best handled by the Planning District. This is supported by the documents listed above, and the allocation of resources currently identified in the draft budget for the Planning District.

## **Next Steps**

The following information provides an overview of a plan of action for the Mad River Valley Planning District to consider in order to move forward with implementation of the key objectives that have been identified previously. The diagram below identifies the key points or ideas that have been included in the various reports and studies. The one factor that links them all together is identified in the center. While there will inherently be overlapping ideas and actions in the outer ring of priorities, without the “centerpiece” of the diagram, advancing these priorities may be protracted and have to be reprioritized on a regular basis to ensure resources are available. An analysis of each item is included below.



## Funding

Multiple studies and significant work has been done to identify the challenges that are facing the Mad River Valley. Many of the actions that are identified to address these challenges are similar and cross over many different sectors. Moving forward, the primary action that should be taken to support the work that has been done to date is to identify a dedicated funding source. A dedicated funding source will provide the necessary on-going resources to ensure the Planning District and its partners can establish continuity in the projects and tasks that will accomplish the goals outlined previously. The chart below identifies the interaction between the multiple actions and program areas that could be supported by a dedicated funding source.

## Four Season Community

It has been extensively documented and easily identified that the Mad River Valley is a four season community. Each season, however, brings with it different challenges. Maintaining and supporting the uses that may rely on one or two seasons in particular will help these businesses grow and thrive in “off season” times. A four season community requires infrastructure that supports the different seasons. In the winter, for example, vehicular traffic is more prevalent due to inclement weather and travel patterns into the mountains for the ski resorts. Conversely, the summer brings more people onto the streets and sidewalks, therefore pedestrian and bicycle facilities are necessary to provide safe, convenient options for the community. Balancing these needs and identifying other specific amenities that are impacted by the seasons will be necessary for the Valley.

## Sense of Place/Identity

The Mad River Valley has struggled with establishing a community-wide identity. This is influenced by the seasonality of the valley as different times of year bring in different visitors or residents. It has been noted previously that there is no distinct place where visitors to the Mad River Valley are directed to feel a sense of being in the Valley. A unifying identity has been started with the Mad River Planning District, Chamber of Commerce, and MRV Recreation District to establish consistent branding, however this is just the first step. Additional work should be done to identify the gateways and activity centers within the Valley, and promote them. Creating a sense of place or identity for the Valley will make visitors and residents alike feel as though they have “arrived” and remind them of the Valley when they have left.

## Affordable Housing

It has been widely reported and noted that affordable housing options in the Mad River Valley are lacking. Due to the service oriented nature of the Valley, affordable housing is one of the most critical needs to ensure the people that are working in the Valley have the opportunity to live in the Valley. The completion of the 2017 Mad River Valley Housing Study provides significant detail on the challenges, needs, and opportunities that can lead to an increase in affordable housing units.

## Business Opportunities

It has been noted that from a business perspective, the Valley is very successful in growing and maintaining small to medium size businesses. However, when a company begins to grow and needs to

expand, the common step is to relocate out of the Valley. Many factors influence these decisions including available space, available workforce, available infrastructure, or financial reasons. Identifying and promoting locations within the community that have access to the necessary resources for businesses to expand, grow, or change is vital to the long-term commitment and financial investments that can create economic anchors within a community.

### Environmental Awareness

The Mad River Valley is often characterized by its overwhelming natural resources including mountains, valleys, and the Mad River. These environmental features have been instrumental in the four season appeal of the Valley. Updated guidance regarding stormwater, habitat protection, forest fragmentation, and flood protection from the state has impacted the Valley's ability to develop lands. Natural formations that can support flood resiliency such as wetlands, marshlands, vegetated slopes, and riparian areas will play a greater role in how the Valley is developed in the future. A focus on protecting these sensitive resources may require smaller lots to be developed which will increase density and emphasize the need for infrastructure to support this development.

### Historic Development Patterns

The Valley prides itself on being recognized as having quintessential New England style villages. This is best represented by the historic villages of Waitsfield and Warren. Furthermore, development in the villages includes small boutique shops, restaurants, and other establishments that typically cater to non-valley residents. Maintaining these villages including their architecture, land development patterns, and style while also allowing for expansions, changes to businesses, and incorporation of mixed uses will help ensure the classic village development can continue to thrive and be supported by the community.

### Utilities/Infrastructure

A key aspect of any development plan is ensuring that the utilities and infrastructure needs are in place or planned in order to maximize density and development potential to meet an identified goal. Utilities and infrastructure, including water and wastewater facilities will provide the catalyst for development density. Development density is required to support businesses, create affordable housing, and create the sense of place that is lacking in the Mad River Valley. Infrastructure can also include the alternative transportation options such as public transit, off-road paths, and pedestrian facilities to establish the links and connections that will further allow for residents and visitors to engage in their surroundings.

### Additional Considerations

#### Master Plan

Many common threads can be found woven throughout the various program areas noted above. With this in mind, a potential step that would help focus the overlapping components to better maximize work efforts would be to develop a master plan for the Valley. A valley-wide master plan would provide the basis to formalize specific aspects of the community such as where valley-wide resources should be focused, while still providing each municipality to have its own identity and maintain localized services. Support for a valley-wide master plan was noted in the summary from the Valley Vision 2020 which was

completed in 2004. Specific aspects of a master plan could be limited to focus on the items listed above as a way to better understand their relationships including common goals or tasks that would support multiple initiatives. Some specific topic areas to explore may include:

**Land Use**

- Preferred growth areas
- Protected natural areas
- Identification of Activity Centers

**Transportation**

- Trail planning
- Wayfinding
- Transit options

**Housing**

- Affordability
- Locations for new units

**Natural Resources**

- Protection of the River
- Protection of slopes
- Public access points

**Infrastructure**

- Water needs
- Wastewater needs
- Locations for services
- Sidewalks
- Pedestrian amenities