

Introduction and Executive Summary of the:

MAD RIVER VALLEY GROWTH STUDY

INTERIM REPORT:

INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

MAY 15, 1980

Prepared by Donald Swain
LandPlan, Inc.

Sponsored by the Central Vermont Regional
Planning Commission, through a grant from
the Farmers Home Administration

INTRODUCTION

The Mad River Valley Growth Study began in July of 1979, with the goal of assisting the study towns of Warren, Waitsfield and Fayston in managing their future. Toward that end, a substantial amount of information has been gathered and analyzed by the study staff. This report summarizes the results of that effort.

The project's specific objectives include the critiques of existing Town Plans and Zoning Ordinances, as well as the drafting of Capital Programs* for each town. The study's progression from data analysis to recommendations will require consultation with local officials, regarding the desired extent (magnitude) and nature of future growth. A ten-year planning period (1980-1990) will serve as the time frame. It is hoped that the information provided herein will equip you to assist the study staff in narrowing alternatives for the future.

An attempt has been made to structure this report in an uncomplicated and accessible fashion. For the most part, only findings are reported, with supporting data and discussions of methodology limited, or removed to the appendices.

The report is divided into two sections; an Executive Summary, containing the "bottom line" for each topic, and a Discussion section which elaborates the presentations. The wide range of topics covered in the report are organized as follows:

TRENDS - An analysis over time (1960-1979) of growth or change in topics ranging from population and school enrollment to incidence of crime and traffic accidents.

* Capital program is a management tool, helpful in anticipating and budgeting for major, one-time expenses such as construction of a facility or purchase of a major piece of equipment, and also the costs of operating and maintaining new equipment and facilities.

THRESHOLDS - An evaluation of local services, support systems and facilities, in terms of capacity, current demand and ability to support growth. For example, school facilities are reviewed for adequacy under current and prospective enrollments.

MUNICIPAL FINANCE - The past performance and current stability of each town's accounts are analyzed with an eye toward the future. Data regarding revenues, expenditures and tax burden are presented and discussed.

POTENTIALS - The three "legs" of the economic stool - Agriculture, Industry and Tourism/Recreation - are reviewed for growth potential in the Valley. It is the economic activity that serves as the impetus to area development.

ATTITUDES - The results of a Valley-wide survey are presented, while impressions derived from the Valley Perspectives Series are reported.

A substantial amount of "land based" information has also been gathered.

While very little is provided herein, it has all been mapped and will be available for review.* The maps include the following:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| - Land Use | - Visual/Historic Features |
| - Ecological Features | - Traffic Analysis |
| - Bedrock Hydrology | - Prime Agricultural Land |
| - Soils & Soils Hydrology | - Wetness of Soils |
| - Recreation/Tourism | - Undeveloped Land Potentials |

This information will take on greater utility in coming weeks, when the study focuses on recommendations regarding the distribution of future development.

In addition to the critical findings presented in this report, information is being gathered and analyzed on gravel supply, fire protection, employment, and village water systems. This booklet is intended as an introduction to the ongoing findings of the study, and not its final product.

* A set of maps will be available to each town.

5. LAND USE - Detailed land use measurement was achieved through the use of remote sensing equipment and has been mapped. Some significant conclusions drawn from the land use analysis are:

- over 50% of residential land uses are located in Warren
- the ratio of vacation homes to permanent homes is approximately 2:1 in Warren and Fayston, but is 1:2 in Waitsfield, where the tax rate is substantially higher than the other towns.
- almost 90% of the retail and office space is located in Waitsfield
- residual lands available for development, after the exclusion of prime agricultural lands, water resources areas, fragile areas, wildlife and other ecological areas are so extensive as to pose no constraint to growth in the foreseeable future.

Wet and poorly drained soils, however, do pose substantial limitations to the use of remaining land. These conditions indicate the need for site plan review of development proposals.

6. WATER - An analysis of the quantity of water available in the Valley, as compared to the amount being consumed, indicates an extreme margin for growth in water consumption. In addition, community or industrial scale groundwater deposits have been identified and mapped.

While water availability does not present a general growth constraint, it does represent considerations regarding the location or distribution of future development. Availability will vary from one watershed to the next. Further, the large deposits referenced above, as well as their recharge area, must be protected from degradation. Water should therefore be a key concern in land use planning.

7. TRAFFIC ANALYSIS - The traffic analysis was divided into 5 sections:

- analysis of key road way section
- analysis of major intersections
- roadway safety analysis
- analysis of the impact of currently planned development projects on the existing road system
- a threshold analysis for Rte 100 at Irasville

Capacities of roadways and intersections have been calculated. Traffic volumes in 1985 have been compared to capacities to determine levels of service (the ability to handle traffic) now and in the future. All roadways and intersections were found to be functioning at acceptable levels of service at 1980 traffic volumes; projected 1985 traffic volumes will cause the intersections of Rte 100 and Rte 17 and Rte 100 and the shopping centers to approach levels of service which will cause long delays for vehicles entering from side streets.

Roadway safety has been assessed in terms of the occurrence of accidents and whether delays in entering the stream of traffic from side streets will cause drivers to make risk taking maneuvers. The frequency of accidents was found to be highest at the Sugarbush Access road and Rte 100 intersection and along Rte 100 at the Rte 17 and Bragg Hill intersection. High traffic volumes and poor visibility are the major causes. The alignment of Rte 17 at the Baird Mill culvert also causes a high frequency of accidents. The Rte 17-Bragg Hill Road intersection will most likely become a critical safety problem during the 10 year planning period.

Currently planned development projects have been analyzed in terms of the number of vehicle trips generated and the impact of the additional traffic on surrounding roads. The planned improvements to the Sugarbush Access Road-German Flats road intersection will offset the impact of additional traffic at this intersection. By 1985, the traffic volumes with these projects included will cause long delays at the intersection of Rte 100 and the Sugarbush Access Road. The section of the Access Road from Rte 100 to German Flats could experience the onset of congested conditions by 1985. It would be at 92% of its capacity with the planned projects' traffic. The slope, curvature and road width significantly reduce the capacity of this section of road.

The Threshold analysis for Rte 100 at Waitsfield indicated that there was a reserve capacity of 450 cars in 1980. Traffic planning standards for trip generation by small shopping centers indicate that 35-40,000 sq. ft. of commercial floor space could be constructed before the reserve capacity of the roadway would be exceeded. By contrast, the amount of land available for development, if developed at present density ratios, could result in an additional 180,000 sq. ft. of commercial floor area. This clearly exceeds the foreseeable demand, but does indicate that the development potential of presently zoned commercial lands far exceeds the present traffic capacity of Rte 100.

4. HOUSING - Housing studies in 1977 and 1979 have indicated that there is a very low number of dwelling units in poor or dilapidated condition and that overcrowding is not a problem. This is largely due to the fact that most of the housing stock has been constructed in the past 20 years, in response to the growing recreation industry demand.

The strong vacation home market has, however, created some dis-equilibrium in the distribution of housing. First, most of the vacation home construction has occurred in Warren, and very little in Waitsfield. Waitsfield's tax base does not reflect the substantial increase in value found in Warren, and, to a lesser extent, in Fayston. Consequently, Waitsfield's tax rate is considerably higher.

The vacation home market has had a strong inflationary impact on land values and rental and owner housing. This is causing a growing imbalance between the demand for and supply of employee housing. Income analyses indicate that 70% of the Valley's labor force earn less than \$15,000 per year. A survey of the rental market has shown that only 10% of rentals

fall in the \$2500 per year and under bracket, the affordable ceiling for this level of income. The possibility of low and moderate income groups to own their own homes is very small. Rarely is a house offered on the market for less than \$50,000. Even at the most optimistic commercial loan terms, this would require an annual income of over \$20,000.

The existing government housing programs are of questionable effectiveness in the Valley. the Farmers Home Administration mortgage assistance program is all but infeasible due to rising construction costs coupled with high land values. Rent subsidy programs offer greater hope, but are also hindered by high land values and low density zoning.

The shortage of employee type housing can have serious repercussions on any attempt to expand and diversify the economy. Without a labor force business cannot grow. It is therefore very important that the communities participate in the housing market, either passively through zoning incentives, or through active intervention in the development process, as explained in the following discussion of housing.

9. POLICE - Police protection was indicated as a service worthy of "priority attention" by a majority of the respondents to the recent area-wide survey. Crime appears on the rise in the Valley. In light of the uncertain future of the State Police Outpost in Waitsfield, the need for local participation in police protection may be at hand.

While Warren and Waitsfield appear to be nearing a few of the statistical thresholds for institution of a local force, the decision is really one of local preference and priority. Among the options are the following:

- Institute a local police force
- Contract for coverage with a private service
- Supplement funding of state manpower

Depending on the degree of coverage, the cost will vary. Full-time coverage would require roughly \$100,000 per year.

10. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION- At present, the Selectman/Town Clerk arrangement appears adequate in handling local affairs. The cost of government operations has not risen as a percent of all government expenditures. Town (public) employment is minimal, as are the number of programs requiring administration. A town manager, either for individual communities or area-wide, does not seem indicated.

Shared, professional planning and growth management assistance has been suggested during the Valley Perspectives discussions. A proposal by CVRPC to provide this service is currently under discussion.

Should local governments choose to initiate programs or add staff to address housing, police, or growth questions, the need for a more sophisticated approach to administration should be reviewed.

C. MUNICIPAL FINANCE

1. Real Property and Grand List Growth - In real (constant dollar) terms, Grand Lists in the three communities have either declined or remained stable since the recession of 1974-75. On a per capita basis, the decline in value of that major financial asset has been more pronounced. This decline has increased the per capita tax burden in each of the three communities.
2. Taxes Assessed and Collected - In real terms, the aggregate amount of taxes assessed in all three communities has been steadily increasing. On a per capita basis, taxes assessed have been generally declining in Fayston since 1968 and since 1973 in Waitsfield. Since 1974, per capita assessed taxes in Warren have trended downward to approximate the per capita assessed tax burden in Fayston. Collections approximate the same trends.
3. Expenditures - Road expenditures exhibit no significant trends, although they appear to be only weakly related to population growth. School expenditures per pupil have been relatively stable over the period of study in Fayston. School expenditures in Waitsfield and Warren exhibit some sensitivity to economic (inflationary) conditions.
4. Financial Stability - Over the past twenty years, tax revenues collected have remained a relatively stable proportion of Grand Lists. This circumstance implies that the financial condition of all three communities has neither deteriorated nor improved over the period of the study.

D. POTENTIALS

1. AGRICULTURE - In terms of the near future, the number of dairy farms in the area appears to have stabilized. This would be a more favorable conclusion were it not for the already small number of farms in the Valley. Every farm which leaves production is very likely to impact negatively upon those units seeking to remain in production, since this works against the "critical mass" necessary for long-term productivity. There is likely to be a slow but steady reduction in the number of farms in the Valley unless steps are taken to turn things around. Perhaps this can most accurately be described as a process of "nickel and diming" farming to death, a phenomenon discernible in other parts of Vermont also under severe development pressures.

The continual erosion in the structure of agribusiness, observable in terms of farm machinery retailing and repair businesses, local markets, the failure of bulk milk carriers to service the area are matters of great concern. Farmland retention strategies which do not address the need for the necessary economic infrastructure will not produce the working rural landscape so fundamental to Vermont's well-being.

The lack of land available to farming, and at prices consistent with the nature of capital returns from agriculture, is likely to remain one of the driving forces leading to the further reduction and erosion of farming in the region. Yet, whenever land is available at reasonable rates, expansion of farm units has occurred; and it may be suggested that farms which sell their development rights for example, could easily be sold to other, younger farmers in the Valley.

The farms which remain in production can be typified as being well managed, with low debt loads, and a very high production per acre and per cow. A spirit of cooperation and mutualism permeates the agricultural community, though many uncertainties cloud the future. While local people in the non-agricultural sector are sensitive to the loss of farmland, tools and mechanisms to retain farmland and to enhance the economic viability of agriculture do not exist at the local level.

2. INDUSTRIAL POTENTIAL - Industrial growth in the Valley will depend largely on policy decisions to encourage growth and maximize potentials. In terms of satisfying criteria that management evaluate when locating, (labor force, transportation, public services, financing, taxes, available sites, business climate and living environment), the Valley can successfully compete with other rural communities. However, to encourage industry to locate in the Valley, positive steps must be taken to indicate a willingness to accept industrial development. These could include: creation of industrial zones; provision of tax contracts; an active Local Development Corporation; construction of industrial subdivisions; etc.

E. ATTITUDES

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS - In summary, the respondents to this survey, representing roughly 40% of the three town population, feel quite strongly that aesthetic resources should be protected, growth and development should be controlled and concentrated, and that economic expansion should not detract from these aesthetic and land use considerations. The response is less unanimous on what type growth should occur, with narrow majorities supporting job creation and economic diversification through industrial development. A narrow majority opposes continued ski/recreation expansion, with a strong minority in support.

The quality of local services receive mixed praise with schools, roads, and public safety indicated as priority items. A scarcity of affordable housing and recreation facilities is also perceived. Finally, those responding indicate a willingness to generate tax revenues to achieve preservation goals and improve selected public services.

VALLEY PERSPECTIVES - Approximately 725 people have attended the first dozen of the fourteen forums comprising the Mad River Valley Perspectives series. This series, funded largely by the Vermont Council on the Humanities and Public Issues, has attracted roughly 12% of the Valley's adult population (representing nearly every activity) to one or more of its forums. It was designed to examine the human values inherent in public policy issues and to engage humanities scholars and the Valley population in discussions of the benefits and problems of growth and development.

Although the purpose of the forums has been to promote discussion, not to insist upon consensus, they have revealed considerable sharing of goals among the participants. Throughout the first set, "The Land", there was significant interest expressed in preserving the essentially rural quality of the Valley; throughout the second set, "The Economy", there was a clear preference for a strongly diversified local economy; and the first four forums in the last set, "The People", have revealed an overwhelming desire to retain a strong sense of community within the three Valley towns.

The study has identified several tracts of land that have good characteristics in terms of physical criteria for industrial sites. A need for approximately 25 to 30 areas is anticipated over the next ten years if an active policy to encourage industrial development is established.

3. RECREATION INDUSTRY - As in any other industry, success in the recreation market depends on the ability to supply a product that will attract a growing number of consumers. Recreation industry demand analyses have shown that almost all types of recreational activity are showing increasing levels of participation. Activities showing substantially higher rates of participation are already part of the Valley's recreational base. These are downhill and cross country skiing, tennis and racquet ball.

The most common criteria people use in determining where they participate in activities are the availability and degree of congestion of the service, the quality of the service (including consideration of environment and such secondary services as lodging, food, etc.), and cost. The distance travelled to participate has not become a constraint despite the gasoline crisis and rising cost of mass transportation.

Consequently, the Valley is in an excellent position to compete with other resort areas for certain segments of the growing demand for recreational services. Its natural attractions are well known and well preserved; it has an established base of excellent and diversified recreational activities; and it has an experienced service-sector labor force exhibiting ever improving managerial capabilities.

The degree to which the Valley can capture a share of the growing recreational services market will depend on its ability to expand and improve recreational services. To a large extent, this depends on policy decisions by the towns to accommodate growth. In other words, the growth potential of the local recreation industry is largely a function of supply, given the growing demand.