

HISTORIC
PRESERVATION

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COPING WITH THE
ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS:
IMPACTING LOCAL ECONOMIES

THE RECESSION: GOOD NEWS IN BAD TIMES

THE PITTSBURGH EXPERIENCE:
FINANCING PRESERVATION PROJECTS IN
LOW- AND MODERATE-INCOME DISTRICTS

OKMULGEE, OKLAHOMA: BUST TO BOOM

THE MAD RIVER VALLEY INITIATIVE

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THE MAD RIVER VALLEY INITIATIVE

Local, state, and national organizations join forces to protect the rural character of Vermont's Mad River Valley.

BRIAN SHUPE

While communities across the nation have fallen prey to development and a consequent erosion of community character, residents of Vermont's Mad River Valley have demonstrated an uncommon commitment to protecting their community's special qualities. This commitment involves a comprehensive, integrated approach to identifying and protecting the rural landscape of a three-town area.

The Mad River Valley is characterized by a mountainous perimeter, broad farmlands, and a meandering river bottom. Defined by a nineteenth-century settlement pattern that includes village clusters and a scattering of farmsteads and rural residences, the Valley is a remarkably scenic area with a dynamic sense of community. A modern commercial ski resort, Sugarbush, provides the Valley's economic base yet occupies a surprisingly limited portion of the land.

Valley residents have long been concerned about the impact of development on the area's historic and scenic resources. This concern has fostered broad public support for aggressive growth management, which resulted in a number of innovative programs for dealing with growth and development issues. These include the formation of a unique multitown planning district, a negotiated public/private partnership for

managing ski-area growth, coordinated local planning programs, and a comprehensive open-space and historic preservation initiative known as the Mad River Valley Rural Resource Protection Program (RRPP).

Despite a shared identity, three distinct political entities, the towns of Fayston, Waitsfield, and Warren, constitute the Mad River Valley. Local officials recognized the fact that cooperation, cost sharing, and communication enhance town governments' ability to address issues of mutual concern. This history of cooperation, which began in the late 1970s, was formalized in 1984 with the formation of the Mad River Valley Planning District. Created by an act of the voters, the district is governed by a selectperson, a planning commissioner from each town, and a representative of the local chamber of commerce.

The designation of the Mad River Valley Planning District as a Certified Local Government (CLG) by the National Park Service with the assistance of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation was the first result of a series of partnerships that provided the technical expertise and resources necessary to develop and implement the ambitious RRPP. As Jeff Squires, the director of the planning district from its inception until early 1988, explains, "When the rural resource program was first envisioned, the importance of collaborative relationships between different entities had become an accepted part of the Valley's planning culture."

Since its inception the planning district has assisted Valley towns with the development and implementation of planning efforts to address local problems and effect change in the Valley. With the initiation of the RRPP in 1987, the planning district reinforced its commitment to the preservation of the Valley's landscape. While previous planning efforts focused on land use and facilities planning, the RRPP combined historic preservation, open-space protection, and recreation planning as a means of preserving the rural character of the Mad River Valley. This plan was an attempt to catalog the character-defining elements of the Valley's rural landscape and to develop a comprehensive program of strategies for preserving that character.

According to Squires, "The Rural Resource Protection Program reflected an awareness that the Valley should not sit back in a defensive posture and respond to threats to important community assets. Rather, we recognized that the defensive [regulatory] tools were in place, and that the community values and objectives had been fairly well defined. The next step was to inventory those critical resource properties that together shape the Valley's scenic landscape and implement protection measures before those properties were threatened with development."

The RRPP was developed under the direction of Virginia Farley, the central Vermont director of the Vermont Land Trust. The participation of the trust resulted from the trust's evolving presence in the Mad River Valley and is another example of a collaborative relationship effectively addressing

any potential changes in ownership or use of these properties. The commission found that many landowners were not aware of existing conservation programs—state current-use and tax-abatement programs, for example—and were pleased to receive this information. Also included with the partnership information packet was a commitment on the part of the planning district and the Vermont Land Trust to provide conservation and land-planning consultation should the owner be contemplating land development. Many owners were pleased at the opportunity

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to have their legitimate financial expectations recognized and to consider the towns' conservation objectives up front prior to regulatory reviews. The results have been more sensitive development proposals and a less adversarial, more productive, development/review process.

Most importantly, the partnership will provide the commission and the towns with an "early warning system" to preclude the need to react in the eleventh hour when critical properties are threatened with inappropriate development.

As important as timely information to the success of conservation projects is the availability of the resources necessary to respond when critical properties are threatened. To this end the planning district, again with the assistance of the National Trust's Critical Issues Fund and the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, initiated a process for identifying available funding mechanisms for resource conservation in the Valley and a program for taking advantage of those opportunities.

A working session was held last year to bring concerned Valley residents together with individuals experienced with other local land-conservation efforts. Participants included representatives of the Trust for Public Land, the Maryland Environmental Trust, the Cape Cod Compact for Conservation Trusts, Vermont's Mettowee Valley Conservation Project, the Town of Stowe Conservation Commission, the Division for Historic Preservation, and the Vermont Land Trust.

Meeting on June 2, 1990, the group evaluated the Valley's conservation objectives as quantified in the rural-resource data base. Existing conservation efforts in the Valley also were evaluated, and opportunities for expanding these efforts were discussed. It was agreed that a Valley conservation fund for rural-resource protection efforts should be pursued. In addition to strategies for raising the money necessary to institute the conservation fund, other programs to meet the special needs of individual towns were identified, as were measures for ensuring widespread citizen involvement in future protection efforts.

According to commission chair Jenny Duel, "The opportu-

nity for local residents active with our resource-protection efforts to sit around a table and share information with such a great group of conservationists was invaluable. The most important outcome of the session was the positive reinforcement it gave us, especially the opportunity to find out that what we have been up to for so long was actually pretty innovative."

The work session further stimulated thinking about the three towns' common regard for the Valley's rural resources. It was especially timely for the session to take place in June 1990 when New England was on the verge of a major economic downturn. While a stagnant economy and declining tourism have made the task of raising new funds for land conservation more difficult, it has underscored the common perception that what makes the Mad River Valley stand out in a crowded world of resort areas is its remarkable landscape and rich natural heritage.

The planning district's efforts and the assistance of such supporters as the National Trust, the Division for Historic Preservation, and the Vermont Land Trust are beginning to reap positive preservation results. In January the owner of a scenic sheep farm agreed to donate the development rights of his farm to the Vermont Land Trust. Soon thereafter a neighboring property owner, who wished to subdivide a 600-acre parcel, agreed to donate 360 acres of important recreation and wildlife land to one of the Valley towns. And perhaps most importantly, the absentee owner of a highly visible dairy farm has agreed to sell the 460-acre parcel to the Vermont Land Trust at a bargain price.

When combined with approximately 700 acres of land previously protected through the RRPP and the work of the Vermont Land Trust, these projects will result in the permanent protection of more than 1,500 acres of important resource properties.

The Valley towns also took advantage of other opportunities to further the objectives of the RRPP at the March 1991 town meeting. The town of Warren voted to continue funding its conservation program, and the town of Waitsfield, for the first time, voted to establish its own conservation fund. Meanwhile, Fayston voters adopted a transfer of development rights program, which was first envisioned at the June 1990 work session.

While these short-term success stories are encouraging, they alone will not guarantee the long-term protection of the Mad River Valley's rural character. No community is immune to development and economic pressures that threaten to erode its unique qualities. However, through the dedication of dozens of enthusiastic volunteers and the technical expertise of committed sponsors the Mad River Valley has shaped a vision for its future and has set itself on a direct course for making this vision a reality.

Brian Shupe is the executive director of the Mad River Valley Planning District.

Valley concerns. The perspective that Farley brought to the RRPP was influenced by her 1988 participation in the United States/United Kingdom Countryside Stewardship Exchange program during which U.K. planners and conservationists hosted their American counterparts.

Visiting the Lake District and parts of Wales and reviewing the British approach to countryside stewardship reinforced Farley's belief that a resource-protection program should target the entire historic landscape. Says Farley, "An important aspect of the rural-resource project was the inclusion of a historic preservation element, a result of our recognition that the relationships of historic structures with open fields and of open land with wooded hillsides combine to create a whole landscape. We wanted to identify the different features that create the Valley's historic landscape and attempt to protect those features."

The effort to inventory and prioritize rural-resource properties was carried out by a committed group of volunteers serving on the planning district's rural resource commission and its three committees responsible for developing the various elements of the plan. Committee members had varied backgrounds. Some were asked to participate because of their specific skills or expertise; others responded to local newspaper articles that solicited public involvement in the rural-resource protection planning process.

The committees examined historic, archaeological, open-land, agricultural, scenic, and river and trail resources. This effort to address access to land as well as the preservation of land was another outcome of Farley's U.K. experience. As Farley explains, "The commitment to public access to private property was pervasive, the result being a mutual understanding between landowners and land users and a general acceptance of their respective obligations and responsibilities."

The inventory process was aided by the commitment to resource and landscape preservation in the Valley. The committees were able to begin with the premise that widespread popular support existed for resource protection. A random telephone survey and three town-meeting surveys conducted as part of the planning process confirmed that an overwhelming percentage of residents strongly supported resource protection. These surveys also provided the committees with direction in their attempts to define community standards regarding resource values.

Once important resource properties were identified, an overlay map was developed to identify areas in the Valley where two or more of the four resource categories could be found on the same property. These areas were then identified as outstanding rural resources and mapped accordingly.

Upon completion of the resource inventory, the committees developed strategies to protect and enhance the various resource properties. Special attention was focused on how these strategies related to other growth management programs in the

Valley. Since the committees recognized the fact that sophisticated regulatory mechanisms already existed, an effort was made to identify only nonregulatory incentive-based strategies.

Since the RRPP's publication the district has focused on the implementation of its various protection strategies. Implementation efforts include the development of a recreation path and greenway that run parallel to the Mad River between Warren and Waitsfield villages, the creation of a Conservation Project Feasibility Fund to cover the project-development costs associated with conservation projects, and the nomination of one farm complex and two historic districts to the National Register of Historic Places, including a rural/agricultural district that recognizes the historic significance of the entire landscape, the farm buildings, and the nearby fields and woodlands.

Perhaps the most important implementation effort to date was the recent attempt, with support from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Critical Issues Fund and the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, to further define the rural-resource inventory by building a comprehensive data base consisting of a wide range of information relating to critical resource properties.

This data base was designed, in part, to foster ongoing communication with owners of critical resource properties. The data base also serves as a means of quantifying the resource property base in the Valley in order to identify possible funding mechanisms to support rural-resource preservation objectives.

The rural resource commission, working with the planning district staff, identified the owners of all properties possessing outstanding rural-resource values and began compiling property profiles. These property profiles provide a consistent framework for data collection and enable the commission to keep track of acreage, resource values, current use, landowner plans and objectives, estimated and appraised value, and other relevant information. The commission stored the property profiles in a computer data base using standard IBM software. The data base is easy to maintain and update.

In addition to providing a detailed property-specific catalog of outstanding properties, this data-collection exercise serves as the basis of a landowner outreach program, the Rural Resource Partnership. The partnership notifies owners of outstanding resource properties of the special status of their land, provides information regarding voluntary conservation options and other available programs, and asks them to inform the commission of

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