

The Purpose of Enhanced Consultation

The Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission's contract with the Department of Economic, Housing, and Community Development (Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development), and Vermont Statutes require the Commission to carry out consultation meetings with all of the towns in the region. The goals are to develop a more consistent and meaningful relationship between the RPC and the Municipality, and to improve the effectiveness of municipal and regional plans, and planning programs by achieving the goals of Title 24, §4302.

Outcome of Consultation

Through this consultation process we hope to better understand the needs of our communities and to have our communities understand how we can work together to advance better planning. Consultations will involve the discussion of important local and regional issues, local planning and training needs, new statutory requirements, planning programs and opportunities available through the TRORC, and importantly, consideration of how effectively the municipal plan addresses Vermont's statutory planning goals.

This consideration will include a qualitative review of the municipal plan, with suggestions as to how the plan might be improved to more effectively satisfy the statutory goals referenced above. Specific findings are reported on each of the following questions:

1. Which parts of the plan are particularly effective in implementing the statewide goals?
2. In which areas do we believe the plan falls short in advancing those statewide goals?
3. What specific opportunities exist to improve the town plan so that it more effectively addresses the statewide goals?

This consultation and plan review is separate and distinct from the formal municipal plan approval process carried out pursuant to 24 V.S.A. §4350, but it does contribute to the municipal confirmation action specified under that section of the Planning and Development Act.

Enhanced Consultation Agenda Items for Tuesday, January 15th, 2013

- Important local & Regional issues
- Local planning and training needs
- New statutory requirements
- Planning programs and opportunities
- TRORC services
- Qualitative review of Municipal Plan

Thetford Town Plan Review

The Thetford Town Plan was re-adopted on May 14, 2011. The Plan has not been approved by the Regional Planning Commission due to the potential for conflicts outlined below.

Required Elements

1. **Statement of Objectives, Policies, and Programs:** The Plan uses a confusing mix of language instead of “objectives”, “policies”, and “programs” as is indicated by state statute. Utilizing a differing vernacular is acceptable, but clear definitions of their relationship to the terms in statute should be made.
2. **Land Use Plan:** The Plan does not effectively identify land use areas. The location, amount, intensity and character of proposed land uses is discussed in terms of how land is regulated by the current zoning ordinance, not in terms of future land use. There are very few policies within the land use chapter that would guide land use.
3. **Transportation Plan:** The Thetford Town Plan adequately addresses Transportation.
4. **Utility and Facility Plan:** The Utilities and Facilities plan is only a general inventory. It does not contain any information regarding future needs of facilities, potential costs of maintenance or upgrades and potential financing methods as is required by statute.
5. **Natural Areas, Scenic and Historic Features:** The Plan discusses natural, scenic and historic features acceptably.
6. **Educational Facilities Plan:** Education is briefly addressed. There is no discussion about projected uses for the school.
7. **Implementation Plan:** The Plan has a general overview of implementation methods, but lacks specific recommendations for action.
8. **Relationship to adjacent towns and the region:** The Plan adequately addresses its relationship to other plans, although it fails to identify conflicts with the Regional Plan.
9. **Energy Plan:** The Plan contains a very brief section on energy resources. It does not discuss the energy needs of the community, scarcities or costs of energy. There is no discussion about what pattern of land use would most likely result in the conservation of energy.
10. **Housing Element:** The Thetford Town Plan does not adequately address affordable housing. The housing element is primarily a snapshot of present-day conditions. There is little information that addresses the needs of the community, the types of housing or where such housing should be located. Multi-family housing is not addressed.
11. **Economic Development Plan (new):** The Plan has a brief “business development plan” that discusses Thetford’s role in terms of economic development, but no formal Economic Development element. The Plan does not address the location, type or scale of economic development.

Statewide Planning Goals

1. **Land Use:** The lack of defined and discussed land use areas make it difficult to identify how the Plan is furthering the goal of maintaining the historic settlement pattern of “compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside” indicated in state statute. Additionally, the size of the Village land use areas appears to be larger than what is currently developed. This excess size extends along relatively undeveloped stretches of road in a pattern that, if fully developed, would create a pattern of strip development.
2. **Economic Development:** The Thetford Town Plan does not have a formal economic development chapter.
3. **Transportation:** The Plan addresses transportation adequately.
4. **Natural, Scenic, and Historic Resources:** The Plan effectively focuses on natural, scenic and historic resources. A substantial amount of the Plan is directed at preservation of these resources.
5. **Air, Water, Wildlife, and Land Resources:** The Plan successfully addresses these resources.
6. **Energy:** The Plan briefly discusses energy efficiency and renewable energy resources.
7. **Recreation:** While recreation is primarily discussed in terms of available recreational resources, the land use patterns suggested by Thetford’s approach to natural and scenic resource protection appear to protect recreation.
8. **Agriculture and Forestry:** The Thetford Plan does indicate a desire to protect farmland and forestland. However, the focus is exclusively on the land itself. There is no discussion about the actual act of farming or the local food system. The need for sound agricultural and silvicultural practices is not discussed.
9. **Efficient use of natural resources/extraction and restoration of earth resources:** Earth extract is not discussed in the Thetford Town Plan.
10. **Safe and affordable housing:** The Plan does not adequately address affordable housing.
11. **Community Facilities and Services:** The Plan does not effectively discuss future investments in facilities or services.
12. **Child Care:** Child care is minimally addressed.

Regional Plan

Regional Land Use areas are established in order to adhere to the goals of §4302(c)(1):

“To plan development so as to maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers surrounded by rural countryside.”

To that end, the Regional Commission has identified East Thetford and Post Mills as Village Settlement areas, and North Thetford and Thetford Hill as Hamlet Areas. All other lands in Thetford are treated as Rural or Conservation areas. Because the Plan lacks specific information regarding future land use areas

it is impossible to identify conflicts. However, if Thetford's current zoning districts are considered as though they were future land use areas, conflicts can be identified. They are:

Post Mills Village Center Land Use Area – The scale and type of development in the Post Mills Village Residential district is consistent with the Regional Village Settlement area. These areas are intended to be an appropriate location for dense residential and mixed use development. However, the size of the district itself is much larger than what is mapped in the Regional Plan. This difference in size is a major obstacle for receiving Regional approval of the Thetford Town Plan.

As indicated by the Regional Commission the Post Mills Village Settlement area should be compact. It begins just north of the junction of Routes 113 and 244 and ends approximately ½ mile south on 113. As indicated on the Thetford Future Land use map, this district runs north on 113 for an additional ½ mile past the Regional boundary to the border of West Fairlee, and nearly a mile past the Regional boundary on route 244. The uses intended in this land use area appear to include “retail shops, restaurants and convenience-type retail shops” (noted as Village Commercial & Roadside Commercial uses in the newly drafted zoning ordinance). Given the sprawling nature of this land use area in comparison with the compact nature of the Regional land use area, we consider this the encouragement of strip development, which conflicts with the Regional Plan as well as the goals of §4302.

Thetford Hill Village Center Land Use Area – The Regional Plan designates this land use area as a Hamlet. Hamlet areas are generally smaller than Village Settlement areas but still contain a mix of uses including stores and businesses. Some community facilities may be located in these areas, but they are not the primary location for municipal buildings. Thetford appears to be encouraging the same uses types of as in all other Village Center areas, including “retail shops, restaurants and convenience-type retail shops” (noted as Village Commercial & Roadside Commercial uses in the newly adopted zoning ordinance). Such uses are more appropriate in a larger village area than Thetford Hill.

While the intensity of uses and densities implied by the Village Residential District may be greater than those outlined in the Regional Plan’s Hamlet areas, the greater concern is the size of the Thetford Hill Village Center Area. The western extension of this land use area from the junction of Route 113 and Academy Rd. all the way to the I-89 Interchange creates a strip that could easily include the types of development associated with urban sprawl – convenience retail, etc. We consider this the encouragement of strip development, which conflicts with the Regional Plan as well as the goals of §4302.

North Thetford Village Center Land Use Area – As with Thetford Hill, the Regional Commission has designated North Thetford as a Hamlet area. Hamlet areas are generally smaller than Village Settlement areas but still contain a mix of uses including stores and businesses. Some community facilities may be located in these areas, but they are not the primary location for municipal buildings. Thetford appears to be encouraging the same uses types of as in all other Village Center areas, including “retail shops, restaurants and convenience-type retail shops” (noted as Village Commercial & Roadside Commercial

uses in the newly drafted zoning ordinance). Such uses are more appropriate in a larger village area than North Thetford.

The Thetford Planning Commission may want to consider creating an additional Hamlet district which allows for mixed use development at the scale outlined by the Regional Planning Commission. This new land use area would be appropriate for Thetford Hill and North Thetford.

Union Village Center Land Use Area – Union Village is designated as part of the Regional Rural Land Use area. Rural Areas are generally intended to be low-density residential, with home occupations, small service businesses, inns and professional offices being the only commercial types of development that are appropriate. These should be allowed only when they fit in with the surrounding area well.

The distance of Union Village from Thetford community services and rural nature of the area does not lend itself to most commercial or civic uses. Encouraging the types of uses outlined in the Village Center districts is inappropriate.

Summary

Strengths

- The Thetford Plan indicates a desire to protect farmland and forestland.
- The Plan effectively focuses on natural, scenic and historic resources. A substantial amount of the Plan is directed at preservation of these resources.

Weaknesses

- The lack of defined and discussed land use areas make it difficult to identify how the Plan is furthering the goal of maintaining the historic settlement pattern of “compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside” indicated in state statute. The Plan does not include any policy statements as is required under state statute. The location, amount, intensity and character of proposed land uses is discussed in terms of how land is regulated by the current zoning ordinance, not in terms of future land use.
- The Utilities/Facilities chapter does not contain any information regarding future needs of facilities, potential costs of maintenance or upgrades and potential financing methods as is required by statute.
- The Plan contains a very brief section on energy resources. It does not discuss the energy needs of the community, scarcities or costs of energy.

Opportunities

- Work with the Regional Planning Commission to meet the requirements of state statute and to eliminate conflicts with the Regional Plan.
- Collect information regarding community facilities from the Selectboard to provide further detail to Utilities/Facilities chapter.

- Utilize TRORC energy chapter template to draft an energy chapter that meets state planning requirements.