

**RE: TOWN OF TOPSHAM, VERMONT
PLAN REVIEW
CASE # 24-2**

BACKGROUND

Pursuant to 24 V.S.A., Section 4350, the Town of Topsham, Vermont requested TRORC to review and approve the Town Plan proposed to be adopted on August 21, 2023. The Plan encompasses all land in the Town of Topsham and is referred to hereinafter as the Plan.

Section 4350 provides that prior to approving a Plan, the Regional Commission find that the Plan meets four tests. These tests are that the Plan is:

- A. Consistent (as defined in 24 V.S.A. Section 4302(f)(1)) with the planning goals in Section 4302 of Chapter 117;
- B. Compatible (as defined in 24 V.S.A. Section 4302(f)(2)) with the Regional Plan;
- C. Compatible (as defined in 24 V.S.A. Section 4302(f)(2)) with the approved plans of other municipalities within the Region; and
- D. Inclusive of all elements required of a plan as set forth in 24 V.S.A., Section 4382.

Staff have reviewed this Plan and offers the following information and staff recommendations to the Board. TRORC has scheduled and will hold a Public Hearing on this review on September 27, 2023 in Woodstock, Vermont. Based upon the hearing and the Board's action, this review will be finalized as a decision for approval or disapproval.

This review is based upon the Town Plan as adopted.

FINDINGS

A. Is the Plan consistent with the planning goals?

NOTE: "Consistent with the goals" requires substantial progress toward attainment of the goals, unless the planning body determines that a particular goal is not relevant or attainable. If such a determination is made, the planning body shall identify the goal in the plan and describe the situation, explain why the goal is not relevant or attainable, and indicate what measures should be taken to mitigate any adverse effects of not making substantial progress toward that goal. The municipal determination of relevancy of a goal is itself subject to regional review.

General Goals

- 1. Is a coordinated, comprehensive planning process and policy framework established to guide decisions?**

Yes, the 2023 Plan is a comprehensive planning document. With 14 distinct Chapters, the Plan includes elements required of a Plan (24 V.S.A. Section 4382). The Plan addresses principles that help guide municipal decisions.

2. Is citizen participation encouraged at all levels of the planning process?

Yes, the Plan encourages residents' participation at all levels throughout the planning process (p.8).

3. Is consideration being given to the use of resources and the consequences of growth and development to the municipality, region, and state?

Yes, the Plan considers the use of resources, the consequences of growth, and the development to the municipality, region, and state. For example:

- “Maintain the continuance of agricultural activities in our town” (p.7)
- “We...have choices in the way we provide for orderly growth and in the way we balance our natural and built environments” (p.7)

4. Is the municipality working creatively together with other municipalities to develop and implement plans?

Yes, the Plan promotes cooperation with other municipalities by sharing “numerous activities and services with surrounding towns, including school services, rescue squad and fire protection” (p.59). For developing and implementing plans, Topsham plans to “Cooperate with neighboring towns, regional planning commissions and economic development groups, to plan for and maintain a balance between the type and number of jobs created and natural population growth in the region” (p.13).

Specific Goals

A plan for a municipality shall be consistent with the goals established in 24 V.S.A. Section 4302, and must be found to be consistent for regional approval.

1. Is development planned to maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside? (*check their future land use map as well as text*)

Yes, the Plan guides the maintenance of its historic settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers:

- “The density of development in this area should reflect existing settlement patterns, land capability, and the availability of utilities for expansion” (p.34).
- “Projects which adversely affect the rural setting and conflict with existing rural land uses should not be located in this area” (p.35).
- “The use of planned residential development or the cluster development concept, where intensive settlement is balanced by compensating land for open space, is encouraged” (p.36).

- a. Is intensive residential development being encouraged primarily in areas that are identified as community centers, and is strip development along highways being discouraged? (*check their future land use map as well as text*)**

Yes, the Plan states that land use in designated Village Centers (used as community centers) “should be more densely populated than the more rural parts of the community,” and that “residential development should favor multi-family housing when possible” (p.32). The Plan also discourages strip development by saying that “strip development is not encouraged as a land use pattern” (p.30).

- b. Is economic growth being encouraged in locally-designated and any state-designated growth areas, and/or employed to revitalize existing urban or village centers? (*check their future land use map as well as text*)**

Yes, the Plan promotes economic growth in locally/state designated growth areas through encouraging new business development in appropriate locations and guiding the development and market for local foods and services (p.13). The Plan also guides the revitalization of existing urban and village centers through converting structures to enable new and economical uses of property (p.13).

- c. Do plans for public investments, including the construction or expansion of infrastructure, reinforce the general character and planned growth patterns of the area? (*These could be state or town-level. If none are planned, it should note that.*)**

Yes, the Plan states, “major public investments...should be encouraged and endorsed only on finding that they will not unreasonably or unnecessarily jeopardize or endanger the character of the Village Center” (p.33).

- d. Does the plan support development being undertaken in accordance with smart growth principles (as defined in 24 V.S.A. Section 2791(13))?**

Yes, each of the smart growth principles have been address in this Plan.

- 2. Does the Plan support providing for a strong and diverse economy with satisfying and rewarding job opportunities that maintain high environmental standards; and expand economic opportunities in areas with high unemployment or low per capita incomes?**

Yes, the Plan contains guiding principles for a strong and diverse economy through supporting the availability of locally based jobs that maintains Topsham’s rural characteristics (p.13); there are no specific policies promoting the expansion of economic opportunities in areas of high unemployment/low-income populations, as none of Topsham’s areas meet those criteria.

3. Does the Plan support broadened access to education and vocational training opportunities sufficient to realize the full potential of residents?

Yes, the Plan supports broadened access to education and vocational training opportunities, with the intent to provide enough physical space to accommodate or current and future enrollments (p.25).

4. Does the Plan support the provision of a safe, convenient, economic and energy efficient transportation systems that respect the integrity of the natural environment, including public transit options and paths for pedestrians and bicyclers.

Yes, the Plan supports the provision of safe/convenient/economic/energy efficient transportation systems that minimize energy consumption, respects the needs of all populations (beyond automobile users) (p.29), providing pedestrian enhancements that promote safety (p.34), and downgrading discontinued highways into trails for recreational activities—such as biking (p.30).

a. Does the Plan provide that highways, air, rail, and other means of transportation be mutually supportive, balanced and integrated? (*If air or rail is not present, it should note that*)

Yes. While the Plan states, “Highways, air, rail, and other means of transportation should be mutually supportive, balanced and integrated” (p.30), Topsham currently does not have air or rail facilities in the area.

5. Does the Plan identify and support the protection and preservation of important natural and historic features of the community’s landscape, including: significant natural and fragile areas; outstanding water resources, including lakes, rivers, aquifers, shorelands and wetlands; significant scenic roads, waterways, and views; and important historic structures, sites, or districts, archaeological sites and archaeologically sensitive areas?

Yes. For a new development to be built in Topsham’s Rural Residential Area, the Plan mentions that special or unique resources—such as wildlife habitats, historic sites, archaeological sites and wetlands—should be evaluated beforehand (p.35). The Plan states that aquifers should not be significantly depleted by conserving the amount between actual and potential uses (p.45). Under Chapter XI, the Plan recommends that the town conduct an inventory scenic or recreational areas in the community and assess existing historic properties to see whether they’re viable for preservation/restoration (p.51).

6. Does the Plan seek to maintain and improve the quality of air, water, wildlife and land resources?

Yes, the Plan strives to provide a healthy environment for its citizens and to ensure adequate and clean waters and air (p.7), as well as specifically addressing each topic in Chapter X Natural Resources.

a. Are air, water, wildlife, mineral and land resources being planned for development and use under the principles set forth in 10 V.S.A section 6086(a) (Act 250)?

Yes, the Plan's development plan for air, water, wildlife, mineral and land resources adhere to Act 250. For example, "Development other than isolated houses and camps should be designed to preserve continuous areas of wildlife habitat. Large-scale fragmentation of wildlife habitat is discouraged. Effort shall be made to maintain connecting links between such areas" (p.49).

b. Is the maintenance and improvement of water quality supported in accordance with the policies and actions set forth in the basin plans?

Yes, the Plan states that, "Water quality should be maintained and improved on according to the policies and actions set forth in the basin plans" (p.45).

c. Are forestlands proposed to be managed so as to maintain and improve forest blocks and habitat connectors?

Yes, the Plan encourages the protection and preservation of forest blocks and habitat connectors under subsections "Rural residential Areas" and "Forest Fragmentation" under Chapter IX Current and Future Land Uses.

7. Does the Plan support the development of renewable energy resources, efficient use of energy, and reduced emissions of greenhouse gases?

Yes, the Plan encourages settlement pattern, land uses, and construction of buildings and structures that are energy efficient and promotes the development of renewable energy resources for electricity, heat, and transportation in order for the community to decrease reliance on fossil fuel (p.56).

a. Does the plan list any general strategies for achieving these goals, such as: increasing energy efficiency of new and existing buildings; identifying areas suitable for renewable energy generation; encouraging the use and development of renewable or lower emission energy sources for electricity, heat, and transportation; and reducing transportation energy demand and single occupancy vehicle use?

Yes, the Plan lists the following strategies in order to achieve the above goals under the Guiding Principles of Chapter XII (pp.56-57), such as:

- "The rehabilitation or the development of new buildings and equipment should use proven design principles and practices with the lowest life cycle costs"
- "To encourage the development of solar infrastructure in Topsham"
- "To reduce transportation energy demand and single occupancy vehicle use"

- b. Does the plan list any specific strategies and recommendations for achieving these goals, such as those identified in the State energy plan?**

Yes, this would be listed under the Recommendation section of Chapter XII (pp.57-58). Under Chapter XII's Implementing Energy Policy at the Local Level section, the Plan proposes that the Selectboard create an Energy Committee.

- 8. Does the Plan seek to maintain and enhance recreational opportunities for residents and visitors?**

Yes, it is stated in the Plan that the scenic landscape for the recreational use of its residents and visitors will be maintained (p.51).

- a. Is growth being planned so as not to significantly diminish the value and availability of outdoor recreational activities?**

Yes, the Plan states that "Growth should be planned so as not to significantly diminish the value and availability of outdoor recreational activities" (p.51).

- b. Has public access to non-commercial outdoor recreational opportunities, such as lakes and hiking trails, been identified, provided, and protected wherever appropriate?**

Yes. While Topsham currently does not have town-owned recreational lands or facilities, and instead, rely on neighbors to pursue outdoor recreation opportunities, the Plan recommends that the Town consider conducting an inventory of important scenic or recreational areas in the community (p. 51).

- 9. Does the Plan encourage and strengthen agricultural and forest industries?**

Yes, the Plan states that the goal of the town is to "encourage value-added agriculture and forestry of all varieties throughout Topsham", as well as to "support new agricultural developments provided that they continue to maintain the rural character of the town and do not put an undue burden on town resources" (p.34).

- a. Does the Plan encourage strategies to protect long-term viability of agriculture and forestlands, including maintaining low overall density?**

Yes, under Agriculture Valley Area section in Chapter XII, the Plan states that commercial or industrial projects in agricultural/residential areas should be designed as to not affect the rural character of the town (p.34).

- b. Has the manufacture and marketing of value added agricultural and forest products been encouraged?**

Yes, the Plan states that, “It is a goal of the town to encourage value-added agriculture and forestry of all varieties throughout Topsham” (p.34)

c. Is the use of locally-grown food products encouraged?

Yes, the Plan supports the “development of local enterprises that create markets for locally produced goods and services, including locally grown food products” (p.13)

d. Are sound forest and agricultural management practices encouraged?

Yes, the Plan recommends that “The Town of Topsham expects foresters and loggers to use best management practices for forest and agriculture management” (p.49).

e. Are public investments planned so as to minimize development pressure on agricultural and forest land?

Yes, the Plan recommends that “Public investments should be planned to minimize development pressure on agricultural and forest land” (p.49).

10. Does the Plan provide for the wise and efficient use of natural resources and to facilitate the appropriate extraction of earth resources and the proper restoration and preservation of the aesthetics of the area?

Yes, the Plan encourages the construction and management of resource extraction and processing site that does not adversely impact existing or planned uses within the vicinity of project site, with minimizing adverse impacts on water quality, fish and wildlife habitats, and nearby land uses (p.47).

11. Does the Plan ensure the availability of safe and affordable housing?

Yes, to ensure the availability of safe and affordable housing, the Plan aims to provide the opportunity for Topsham residents to have access to safe and affordable housing (p.16), with planning to keep housing affordable by planning for lot sizes, accessory apartments, and clustered development (p.17).

a. Is housing encouraged to meet the needs of a diversity of social and income groups, particularly for those citizens of low and moderate income?

Yes, the Plan states in the Housing chapter under its guiding principles to “Encourage the development of housing to meet the needs of a diversity of social and income groups, particularly for those citizens of low and moderate income, including the provision of manufactured housing and multi-family housing” (p.17). Additionally, the Plan’s Implementation chapter mentions Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP), a grant-based program that provides affordable housing projects that help low/moderate-income citizens.

- b. Does the plan provide for new and rehabilitated housing to be safe, sanitary, located conveniently to employment and commercial centers, and coordinated with the provision of necessary public facilities and utilities?**

Yes, the Plan states that “New and rehabilitated housing should be safe, sanitary, and located conveniently to employment and commercial centers” (p.17).

- c. Does the Plan support sites for multi-family and manufactured housing that are readily available in similar locations to those generally used for single-family conventional dwellings?**

Yes, the Plan encourages multi-family housing to be built in Village Centers (p.33), as well as stating that “All types of low-density residential development are encouraged, including accessory dwellings, multifamily housing, and manufactured housing” (p.35)

- d. Does the plan allow for accessory apartments within or attached to single family residences allowing close proximity to cost-effective care and supervision for relatives or disabled or elderly persons?**

Yes, the Plan encourages cost-effective accessory dwelling units that provide care and supervision to the disabled or elderly (p.17). Relatives is not mentioned.

- 12. Does the Plan for the provision and financing of an efficient system of public facilities and services to meet future needs?**

Yes, the Plan states that, “The Town should consider renewable energy sources when building or renovating public facilities” (p.57), as well as including in Chapter XIV Implementation that, “Collectively these capital projects make clear when public facilities will be placed to accommodate projected growth” (p.62).

- a. Does the Plan include services as fire and police protection, emergency medical services, schools, water supply and sewage and solid waste disposal in its planning for facilities and services?**

Yes, under Chapter VI Emergency Services, the Plan includes fire protection services, police protection services, emergency medical services, and schools. In Chapter V Utilities and Facilities, it is stated that Topsham does not own or operate any public water supply or wastewater disposal systems and does not plan on constructing them (p. 19).

- b. Does the planned rate of growth exceed the ability of the town and the area to provide facilities and services?**

No, the Plan addresses the possibility of growth exceeding the ability of town to provide facilities and services by regulating new development through various means, such as siting, designing new public facilities and services (pp.64-65)

13. Does the plan work to ensure the availability of safe and affordable child care and integrate child care issues into the planning process, including childcare financing, infrastructure, business assistance for child care providers, and child care work force development?

Yes, the Plan encourages the creation of safe and affordable childcare services and calls for integrating childcare issues into the planning process (including childcare financing, infrastructure, business assistance for childcare providers, and childcare work force development) (p.17). However, Topsham currently does not have any childcare services, and in-home childcare providers are unregistered and cheaper than registered facilities (p. 16).

14. Does the Plan encourage flood resilient communities?

Yes, the Plan encourages flood resilient communities in the Current and Future Land Uses (Agriculture Valley Areas and Transportation and Land Use Planning section) and Natural Resources (Wetlands and Flood Hazard Areas, Floodplains, and Flood resilience section).

a. Is new development in identified flood hazard, fluvial erosion, and river corridor protection areas avoided? If new development is to be built in such areas, are polices in place to not exacerbate flooding and fluvial erosion?

Yes, under the guiding principles in Natural Resources, the Plan states that, “New development in identified flood hazard and fluvial erosion areas should be avoided” (p.44)

b. Is the protection and restoration of floodplains and upland forested areas that attenuate and moderate flooding and fluvial erosion encouraged?

Yes, the Plan addresses this issue by stating that, “The protection and restoration of floodplains and upland forested areas that attenuate and moderate flooding and fluvial erosion is encouraged” (p.44).

c. Are flood emergency preparedness and response planning encouraged?

Yes, the Plan states that, “Flood emergency preparedness and response planning is encouraged” (p.44).

B. Is the Municipal Plan Compatible with the Regional Plan?

The Two Rivers-Ottawquechee Regional Plan was adopted on July 15, 2020 and it will remain in effect until August 19, 2028.

The Topsham Town Plan is found to be compatible with the Two Rivers-Ottauquechee Regional Plan. As used in this review, the term "compatible with" has been defined (in Section 4302) as meaning: that the Plan in question, as implemented, will not significantly reduce the desired effect of the implementation of the other plan (emphasis added). If a Plan, as implemented, will significantly reduce the desired effect of the other Plan (in this case, the Regional Plan), the Plan may be considered compatible if it includes the following:

- (a) a statement that identifies the ways that it will significantly reduce the desired effect of the other Plan;
- (b) an explanation of why any incompatible portion of the Plan in question is essential to the desired effect of the Plan as a whole;
- (c) an explanation of why, with respect to any incompatible portion of the Plan in question, there is no reasonable alternative way to achieve the desired effect of the Plan; and
- (d) an explanation of how any incompatible portion of the Plan in question has been structured to mitigate its detrimental effects on the implementation of the other Plan.

C. Is the Plan Compatible with Approved Plans of other Municipalities in the Region?

At the time of review of this Topsham Town Plan, the following municipalities have Plans approved by the Two Rivers-Ottauquechee Regional Commission that are in effect:

Barnard, Bethel, Bradford, Bridgewater, Brookfield, Chelsea, Corinth, Fairlee, Granville, Hancock, Hartford, Hartland, Norwich, Pittsfield, Plymouth, Pomfret, Randolph, Rochester, Royalton, Strafford, Turnbridge, Vershire, West Fairlee, and Woodstock.

These approval decisions and Plans have been reviewed in the context of the above question. Based on this, we find the Topsham Town Plan to be compatible with these Plans.

D. Municipal Plan Elements - Are They Included?

A plan for a municipality shall include the following required elements. These elements or components are, in summary:

- (a) a statement of overall objectives and policies;
- (b) a current and future land use plan and maps;
- (c) a current and future transportation plan and maps;
- (d) a current and future utility and facility plan and maps;
- (e) a statement of policies for "special resources";
- (f) a current and future education plan and maps;
- (g) an implementation program;
- (h) a statement on relationship of plan to trends and plans for adjacent towns and the region;
- (i) an energy plan; and
- (j) a housing plan.
- (k) an economic development plan
- (l) a flood resiliency plan

1. Does the Plan include a statement of objectives, policies, and programs of the municipality, to guide the future growth and development of land, public services and facilities, and to protect the environment.

Yes, most of the sections includes goals, guiding principles and recommendations to guide the future growth and development of land, public services and facilities, and to protect the environment.

2. Does the Plan include a land use plan, consisting of a map and statement of present and prospective land use, that:

a. Indicates those areas proposed for forests, recreation, agriculture, (using 6 VSA Section residence, commerce, industry, public and semi-public uses and open spaces; areas reserved for flood plain; and areas identified by the State, the regional planning commission, or the town that require special consideration for aquifer protections, for wetland protection, for the maintenance of forest blocks, wildlife habitat, and habitat connectors, or for other conservation purposes?

Yes, the Plan addresses all the above in Chapter IX. Current and Future Land Use, Chapter X. Natural Resources, and Chapter XI. Scenic, Historic, and Recreational Resources. The future land use map shows working forest/valley agricultural/village/rural residential areas.

b. sets forth the present and prospective location, amount, intensity and character of such land uses and the appropriate timing or sequence of land development activities in relation to the provision of necessary community facilities and services?

Yes, the Plan sets forth the present and prospective location/amount/intensity/character of such land uses in Chapter IX. Current and Future Land Uses, X. Natural Resources, Chapter XIV. Implementation, and the current/future land use maps.

c. identifies those areas, if any, proposed for designation under chapter 76A of Title 24, together with, for each areas proposed for designation, an explanation of how the designation would further the plan's goals and the goals of 24 V.S. A. section 4302, and how the areas sought meets the requirements?

Yes, under Chapter IX. Current and Future Land Uses, the Plan describes the function and importance of Village Centers, as well as methods to maintain these villages through encouraging shops and services, tourist businesses, lodging and public facilities (if they fit existing characteristics), and prohibiting principal retail (p. 33). Principal retail can only be in East Topsham, Waits River, and West Topsham (p. 34).

d. and indicates those areas that are important as forest blocks and habitat connectors and plans for land development in those areas to minimize forest fragmentation and promote the health, viability, and ecological function of forests?

Yes, the Plan mentions this in IX. Current and Future Land Uses, specifically mentioning “Development other than isolated houses and camps shall be designed so as to preserve continuous areas of wildlife habitat. Large-scale fragmentation of wildlife habitat is discouraged. Effort shall be made to maintain connecting links between such areas” (p.37).

- 3. Does the Plan include a transportation plan, consisting of a map and a statement of present and prospective transportation and circulation facilities showing existing and proposed highways and streets by type and character of improvement, and where pertinent, parking facilities, transit routes, terminals, bicycle paths and trails, scenic roads, airports, railroads and port facilities, and other similar facilities or uses, with indications of priority of need.**

Yes, the Plan includes this in Chapter VIII. Transportation, Chapter IX. Current Land Uses, Chapter XII, Energy, Chapter XIV. Implementation, and the current/future transportation map.

- 4. Does the Plan include a utility and facility plan, consisting of a map and statement of present and prospective community facilities and public utilities showing existing and proposed educational, recreational and other public sites, buildings and facilities, including hospitals, libraries, power generating plants and transmission lines, water supply, sewage disposal, refuse disposal, storm drainage and other similar facilities and activities, and recommendations to meet future needs for community facilities and services, with indications of priority of need, costs and methods of financing.**

Yes, this is mentioned in the Chapter V. Utilities & Facilities. The Plan has recommendations to meet future needs for community facilities. For example, the Plan outlines the needs (in order of priority) and costs of upgrading and improving the Town Office and Town Hall (p.20). As for financing, the Plan strongly considers Topsham create a Capital Budget and Program (p.55).

- 5. Does the Plan include a statement of policies on the preservation of rare and irreplaceable natural areas, scenic and historic features and resources.**

Yes, the Plan addresses the above in Chapter XI. Scenic, Historic, and Recreational Resources in its guiding principles and recommendations. While there are no mentions of preserving rare/irreplaceable natural areas or resources, it is mentioned for historical properties that the Town consider assessing them to determine their viability for preservation and/or restoration (p.51).

- 6. Does the Plan include an educational facilities plan consisting of a map and a statement of present and projected uses and the local public school system. *(Since there are often none to a few proposed facilities, the current facilities and future ones can be on the same map and often are combined with the utilities and facilities map. Note future ones.)***

Yes, in Chapter VII. Education—specifically B. School Building & Services section—the

Plan states how The Waits River Valley School District is now an emergency shelter with a generator (p.24).

7. Does the Plan include a recommended program for the implementation of the objectives of the development plan?

Yes, this is covered in the Chapter XIV. Implementation.

8. Does the Plan include a statement indicating how the plan relates to development trends and plans for adjacent municipalities, areas and the region developed under Title 24? (look especially at shared forest blocks, water bodies, commercial areas, schools or highways)

Yes, this is covered in the Plan's Chapter XIII. Relationship to Other Plans. However, Topsham recognizes that there are no specific development goals that conflict with any of the neighboring towns' plans (p.59). The Plan recommends that the town continues to communicate, cooperate, and exchange planning formation and development data with neighboring communities (p.59).

9. Does the Plan include an analysis of energy resources, needs, scarcities, costs and problems within the municipality, a statement of policy on the conservation of energy (including programs, such as thermal integrity standards for buildings, to implement that policy), a statement of policy on the development of renewable energy resources, and a statement of policy on patterns and densities of land use likely to result in conservation of energy.

Yes, different energy resources (wind generation, biomass, biofuels, hydropower) are analyzed with Topsham's contexts. The Plan asks the Town's Selectboard to create an Energy Committee that would identify ways for the town to save money through reduced energy use and consumption, to consider renewable energy resources when constructing and renovating buildings, picking sites that are ideal for energy production, and considering energy efficiency and use of renewable energy when planning for capital investments (pp. 55-58).

10. Does the Plan include a housing element that shall include a recommended program for addressing low and moderate income persons' housing needs as identified by the regional planning commission pursuant to Section 4348a (a)(9) of Title 24, including the permitting of accessory dwelling units? (Check our housing needs assessment)

Yes, the Plan does the above in the Guiding Principles section of Chapter IV. Housing (p.17).

11. Does the Plan include an economic development element that describes present economic conditions and the location, type and scale of desired economic development, and identifies policies, projects, and programs necessary to foster economic growth.

Yes, the Plan includes this in Chapter III. Economic Base. While Topsham does not serve as an economic hub for commercial/industrial activity (p.12), it is stated under the Guiding Principles that the town cooperate with “Cooperate with neighboring towns, regional planning commissions and economic development groups, to plan for and maintain a balance between the type and number of jobs created and natural population growth in the region” (p.13).

12. Does the Plan include a flood resilience plan that:

identifies flood hazard and fluvial erosion hazard areas based on river corridor maps provided by VT ANR or other maps recommended by the Secretary of Natural Resources, and designates those areas to be protected, including floodplains, river corridors, land adjacent to streams, wetlands, and upland forests, to reduce the risk of flood damage to infrastructure and improved property?

Yes, this is covered in the Plan’s Flood Hazard Areas, Floodplains, Flood Resilience section under X. Natural Resources (pp.41-44).

and recommends policies and strategies to protect the areas identified and designated and to mitigate risks to public safety, critical infrastructure, historic structures, and municipal investments?

Yes, the above is addressed in the same section/chapter as the above question. For instance, the Plan states that Topsham does not build emergency services, power substations, and municipal buildings in the Special Flood Hazard areas (p.43).

CONCLUSION

Based upon the above findings, it is the conclusion of TRORC that the Topsham Town Plan be approved. This approval shall remain in effect until the date that the Plan expires, or until it is amended or readopted and reviewed pursuant to these provisions, whichever occurs first.

Plan, where this Plan includes clear, unambiguous mandatory language regarding development that can be reviewed by these bodies as part of an Act 250 project application.

The 2023 Topsham Town Plan is an improvement from the 2012 Town Plan. Many of the chapters in the current Plan have goals/guiding principles/recommendations. Proposed improvements to facilities have priority of needs/costs/methods of financing (p. 20). The Flood Hazard Bylaw has been updated, and strong policies/recommendations that preserve forest blocks and habitat connectors (as seen on Future Land Use Map) have been included.

Despite these improvements, TRORC suggests the following items be addressed next time the Plan is updated:

1. The Plan would benefit from including a Recommendations section in each chapter for consistency. Under each Recommendation, identify the organization, municipal panel, or citizen who would be responsible for supporting the policy, thereby enforcing the Plan.
2. Stronger word choice would add teeth to the Plan. For instance, expecting loggers to follow best management practices for forest/agricultural development (p.49) could be replaced or reworded to encourage greater compliance.
3. As mentioned, the Town of Topsham will have assessed the viability for preservation and/or restoration for town owned historic properties (p. 51).
4. As mentioned, the Town of Topsham will have conducted an inventory of important scenic or recreational areas in the community (p.51).
5. Police protection alternatives are outlined if the Town has considered it (p.22).
6. Organizing the Implementations chapter to include action items, responsible actors (i.e. the Selectboard), and timeline for easier reading. Using a table might help.

Dated this 27th day of September, 2023 at Woodstock, Vermont.

By: Peter G. Gregory
Peter G. Gregory, AICP, Executive Director