

East Montpelier Land Conservation Summit
October 10, 2016
Summit Summary

Selectboard Chair Seth Gardner welcomed everyone and introduced Facilitator Cindy Cook. Cindy invited everyone to introduce themselves. Approximately 55 people attended the meeting. The room was packed!

Overview of Conserved Land in Town

Britt Haselton of the Vermont Land Trust (VLT) gave a slide presentation regarding conserved land in East Montpelier and how it relates to other towns in central Vermont. Among Vermont municipalities, East Montpelier is average in terms of total land area protected/conserved through forms of state, federal, or private land ownership. The amount of agricultural lands conserved, however, far exceeds the norm, due to a combination of large amounts of good ag land and the town's consistent support of conservation. Approximately 20% of the land in town has been permanently conserved and 47% is in the state's Current Use Tax Abatement Program. There is a large overlap between the two categories, resulting in about 50% of the town's land conserved or in Current Use.

History of Town Trails

Nona Estrin and Mary Stone gave a history of the recreational trail program, detailing how land conservation in general and the town's conservation program made trail development possible.

Conservation Fund Advisory Committee Process

Charles Johnson noted that the Conservation Fund Advisory Committee role is to review proposals and make recommendations to the Selectboard when someone makes a request for money from the Conservation Funds.

Charles summarized the committee's review criteria the draft goals. The draft goals have been presented to the Selectboard for their consideration. The committee does not have a weighting system for the criteria, but instead discusses and considers proposals in relation to the criteria, until group agreement emerges.

A summit participant suggested adding water resources and swimming, fishing and other forms of recreation in addition to trails. Summit participants agreed that it might be a good idea for the Selectboard to postpone action on the draft goals for a while as the town engages in post-Summit discussions.

Big Picture Issues

Participants identified the following "big picture" issues:

- What do we want our town to be like in 20-30 years?
- What is an ideal population size?
- How do we allocate land?

- How much can we grow and where should that growth be? What should it look like?

Farming

The group discussed how subdivision of parcels reduces their ag potential. And a participant noted that future farming practices may change, so that smaller parcels of ag soils may become viable for ag use.

Farming may be the biggest business in town (\$12-15 million/year).

Housing

Creating additional housing in town is challenge because of the:

- high land values;
- lack of municipal water and sewer systems;
- minimal public transportation; and,
- dearth of areas where one can walk or bike to food stores.

Gus Seelig, Executive Director of the VT Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB), noted that it is difficult to combine ag conservation and affordable in a single project.

Eileen Peltier, Executive Director of Downstreet Housing & Community Development, suggested efforts to preserve and create housing that is affordable ought to focus on villages and downtowns where public services and amenities are available.

Participants noted that young people seem to be looking at different housing models. There seems to be a decreasing interest in owning one's own home, an increased emphasis on walkability and bikeability, and a growing openness to small and tiny houses and clustered houses.

The town-owned LaPerle Farm has bus access and may be an opportunity for a housing project.

Seth noted that the Selectboard is more interested in having land available for affordable single family houses than in multi-unit affordable housing projects.

A participant noted that town housing projects ought to build in mechanisms to ensure that they are perpetually affordable.

Another person noted that keeping land blocks intact is important for their future viability for ag use, and would like the town to encourage multiple units on a parcel w/o subdividing the parcel.

Participants discussed the existing rental housing units that are quite affordable whose owners are elderly (e.g., housing in North Montpelier). It may be in the town's interest to work with these owners to develop a plan for future ownership of these housing units.

A participant noted that lots of houses in town have unused bedrooms. 27 houses are currently for sale.

A participant suggested that co-housing is an option.

More Info Needed

Participants discussed the following areas where it may be helpful to have more information:

- Amount of ag land in town that has been permanently conserved;
- Amount of ag land that's currently used for ag that has been permanently conserved;
- Number of people employed by farms in town;
- Town population projections;
- Analysis of future housing needs;
- Amount of land available for housing; and,
- School population projections.

Next Steps

The Planning Commission will hold an October 20th Open House at the elementary school from 6:30 to 8:00 to get public input/feedback on zoning concepts for East Montpelier Village.

Participants discussed the following possible next steps:

- Create an Affordable Housing Committee, perhaps through a revitalization/reformatting of the Revolving Loan Advisory Committee;
- Encourage the Planning Commission to:
 - Look at zoning and how it might be changed to optimize the use of ag land and land that's suitable for future housing; Calais and Middlesex may be useful models;
 - Complete the East Montpelier Village Master Plan; and,
 - Develop a Master Plan for North Montpelier Village.
- Create a committee to gather info regarding how people in other towns and countries have addressed these issues creatively;
- Create a committee to focus on specific actions the town can take;
- Conduct a process to consider what townspeople want the town to look like in the future (similar to the visioning process that was conducted 30 years ago); and,
- Apply for a state planning grant.