

**Town of Vershire Planning Commission Meeting Minutes
Special Topics Forum on Natural Resources/Current & Future Land Use
Wednesday 9/27/23 at 7pm at the Town Center.
There will be a remote option for this meeting via Zoom or by phone.**

Attendance: Gregory Wilson-co-chair, Gretchen Harvey-secretary, Mark Harvey, Debra Kingsbury, Kathy Hooke-science/ecology educator, Jeanie McIntyre-Upper Valley Land Trust, and Markus Bradley-Redstart Forestry consultant.

Jeanie McIntyre - Upper Valley Land Trust introduced herself and provided a summary of the UVLT's mission and work in the region. The organization is somewhat unique in that it operates in two states (VT/NH) and serves about 45 towns, including facilitating conservation easements in Vershire. The UVLT focuses its conservation efforts in four areas:

- Farmland
- Water resources
- Forest and habitat
- Lands designated for outdoor recreation/education

Consideration of these categories using a climate-change lens can mean (among other things) preserving farm soil as a means of maintaining food security; protecting water resources that serve as flood plains, aquifers, and to mitigate flooding and protect infrastructure; and forest conservation practices to include carbon sequestration and habitat protection.

The Nature Conservancy has a mapping tool online for resiliency that layers a geographical analysis.

Vershire is a town that still possesses a relatively high degree of biodiversity and ecological resilience within the larger region. It is important to remember how the town functions within a regional context. There also is less fragmentation in Vershire relative to the larger area and towns surrounding it.

Markus Bradley-Redstart Forestry introduced himself and explained some of his work as a forestry consultant. He spoke about his own family's land and the way he and his two brothers manage their 124 acres of forested lands—most of which is in conservation easement (permanent) and some of which is in current use (liens are transferable). Current use allows for tax savings and it is the #1 tool for land conservation in Vermont.

He also helps people write forestry plans, execute logging jobs, and initiate ecological restoration programs including invasive plant control strategies. The track record in the U.S for controlling invasives is dismal. He also indicates that we need to be realistic and honest about our consumption of wood products and manage the land accordingly. He believes it is better to harvest wood responsibly from our own backyard rather than contribute to deforestation elsewhere around the globe. Moreover, Audubon (for example) encourages open spaces from cutting as vital habitat for certain songbird populations.

One of the conservation practices he wanted to share is a program that leaves wood/downfall in streams in a strategic manner, as would have been normal prior to European settlement. Big logs need to lay in the small streams that are all over Vermont for the purpose of restoring aquatic habitat and water quality. This is an inexpensive strategy that is currently being used in the Northeast Kingdom. It is trickier to employ in larger streams that may be closer to human

infrastructure, but anyone managing their own woodlot can leave some cut trees in the stream area.

Kathy Hooke - science/ecology educator summarized the history of land use in this region and in Vershire in particular, which was carved up into 100 acre lots at the time of European and American settlement beginning in 1781. Similarly, roads were laid out to connect these early farms and this is the 'development' template we have inherited. Since then, many hill farms have been abandoned and settlement has narrowed considerably. Much of this cleared (19th century) farm land has become reforested with much younger trees, depending on when farming was abandoned and/or the history of logging on the land in question. Early settlers also cleaned out and straightened streams and rivers to take advantage of water and water power. Current thinking is to let them run and meander and flow in a more natural and shifting course. In 1970, Act 250 established land-use management rules designed to protect natural resources from unregulated development

Some of the challenges the Planning Commission faces is how to draft a Town Plant that **encourages:**

- Denser development on smaller land parcels and within or adjacent to the Village District and near existing infrastructure—including lower ends of roads that are near VT 113.
- Large landowners to conserve their land, but discourage conservation easements within the Village District and areas closest to VT 113
- Managing land (forests/streams/farmland) with an awareness of climate change and the anticipated weather disruptions that Vershire will experience.
- Forest management for timber production AND carbon sequestration/water quality and habitat protection.
- A historical ethic of land use—i.e., to allow for public access to lands that include freedom to traverse private lands, and to walk and hunt them.

Debra Kingsbury was invited to share her expertise (as lister, realtor, and prior planning commission service). She noted that ¼ of the properties in Vershire (approx. 124) are in current use; there are thousands of acres enrolled in this program. Although this program provides some tax relief for owners, permanent residents in Vershire without lands in conservation easement experience the 3rd highest tax rates in the state. Also, she noted that 49% of Orange County properties are owned by part-time, out-of-state residents and of Vershire's current use properties, 80% are owned by part-time, out-of-state residents. She believes that the 2 and 10 acres formula has worked in Vershire for a long time.

Final Comments for Town Plan revisions:

- It does matter where development occurs. How to discourage houses on "top of every hill top"
- It will become increasingly more difficult to serve a lot of remotely located residents during bad weather events.
- Cluster housing/zoning in the Village is an obvious solution, particularly for an aging (over- housed) population that currently fears not being about to find a smaller place to live in their community
- What brings young families to Vershire to settle—how to encourage.
- Include values and aspirational statements in the plan, but know that changes will come.
- Encourage legacy planning
- With a common educational affinity between Vershire, W. Fairlee and Fairlee, what does K-12 education in the future look like?

- What are the best ways to encourage the conservation of Vershire's natural resources while also encouraging a tax environment that allows for affordable housing and modest priced home ownership. The pressures from regional climate migrants (the gentrification leading edge—<https://www.crjc.org/calendar-projects/makingroom/>) will continue to challenge affordability according to the CT River Joint Commission.

The Forum ended at 8:30 pm.