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## **Paving paradise?**

### **Futurists question direction of Vt. development**

By KEVIN O'CONNOR Staff Writer

Is there an answer to the decades-long question of how to balance the state's environment and economy through land-use planning?

The Council on the Future of Vermont hoped so as it set out on a 1-1/2-year study of state concerns for coming decades. Inquiring about needs and wants, it heard resident after resident extol close-knit communities framed by nature.

"In testimony about land use and development, Vermonters focused on their desire for the continuity of the state's historic development pattern of tidy villages and cities surrounded by farms, fields, and forests," the council writes in its 112-page report, "Imagining Vermont: Values and Vision for the Future."

But as the nonprofit, nonpartisan study group held more than 100 meetings at downtown venues statewide, many of the almost 4,000 experts and everyday folk present didn't walk or bike from nearby, but drove from far and wide.

"While Vermonters profess positive attitudes toward the preservation of open land or the working landscape, they often choose to vote with their dollars to build and live in the countryside," the council writes.

As the state's ratio of farmland shrinks — down 16 percent or 174,000 acres in 15 years — development is expanding at a rate more than three times that of the population, according to a council-commissioned study by the Center for Social Science Research at St. Michael's College in Colchester.

Vermont prides itself on land-use planning laws such as Acts 250 and 200. But based on the miles of strip development it has seen, the council reports a growing gap between the rhetoric and reality.

"Despite the stated goals of Act 200 and many town and regional plans, most new housing in Vermont is single-family homes on separate lots. Urban apartments, town houses or clustered housing have been the exception rather than the rule in housing development. ... Vermont's natural environment, working landscape, and typical pattern of development with villages and open countryside are in danger."

What's the fix? The council heard many a farmer and factory worker pinpoint specific problems — but no clear-cut solutions. And so it's left with a new challenge: How do you get Vermonters who've struggled with the puzzle for years to stay focused on the pieces?

## SUBHEAD: Opposing camps

The council's report — available on the Web site [www.futureofvermont.org](http://www.futureofvermont.org) — notes that seemingly everyone testified about their love of Vermont's rural character.

"The connection to the land is an identifying element for Vermonters," the study group writes. "For many reasons — whether the enjoyment of outdoor recreation, the peace of the wild, or the pleasure of a nice view ... Vermonters often emphasized preservation of the environment and opposed risking any natural resource through overuse or development."

But when the council held meetings in county population centers such as Barre, Rutland, St. Albans and White River Junction, most participants traveled past outlying chain stores to take seats in downtown venues surrounded by empty storefronts.

"Despite Vermonters' expressed desire to limit this growth, many parts of the state have seen and felt the impacts of rapid strip development and its contribution to the commercial and economic stagnation of traditional downtown centers," the council writes. "This growth is supported by Vermonters themselves choosing to shop there."

The council isn't the first group of futurists to question what happened to the pre-automobile picture of centralized communities surrounded by working farms and forests. In 1968, the Vermont Planning Council's "Vision and Choice – Vermont's Future" study helped spur the state's pioneering Act 250 land-use law; in 1988, the Governor's Commission on Vermont's Future sparked the Act 200 growth management law.

"Little of the discussion currently taking place around development throughout the state is new to Vermonters," the council writes. "Unfortunately, the dialogue in the state sometimes devolves to where Vermonters rally and rage against one another, overgeneralizing about the mindsets of those who fall into opposing camps."

So how does the state move forward?

## SUBHEAD: 'Dialogue change'

The council started by gathering 500 local leaders this spring for a Summit on the Future of Vermont.

Their verdict: "Today there exists a state of urgency regarding the current system of

land use regulation in Vermont in that it is weak, ineffective, uncoordinated and unsustainable and is leading to incremental growth that represents a disconnect between Vermonters' expressed values and actions," meeting minutes report.

Residents are conflicted on the causes and effects.

"Some Vermonters are adamant that these laws have been responsible for producing what many have called an impossible business development environment in the state, and for the high costs associated with new projects," the council writes. "At the same time, some business owners told the council that the quality of life in Vermont, especially the clean and green environment, is an identity that they can use as they market their products."

For all the discord, people agree on something: They want to find common ground.

"Many were ready to offer solutions, believing that the state should identify the type of development that fits the natural landscapes, local scale, and strong communities for which the state is famous," the council writes. "Many also articulated their desire to balance land-use regulation with essential economic development, job growth, and affordable housing for Vermonters of all economic levels."

Many residents suggested a "dialogue change from what can't be done on the land to what can be done." And more than 80 percent polled voiced concern about a shortage of affordable housing.

"Vermonters recognize this as a major challenge for the future of community and development," the council writes. "The problem cuts across socioeconomic lines and affects longtime residents and newcomers, youth and older residents."

#### SUBHEAD: Investment incentives

Many told the council that local and state planning laws prohibit massive disruption yet inadvertently promote "incremental change."

"People tolerate incremental change more than sudden change," one summit participant said, "but incremental change is what's eroding landscape."

As a result, the council is recommending "better-coordinated" land-use planning at the local, regional and state levels "to balance the needs of transportation, economic development, energy and natural resource assessment."

"Currently, the absence of coordination among levels of planning undermines its utility and effectiveness," it writes.

"To prevent sprawl," a summit attendee added, "we need a vision AND have guts to

implement it."

The study group isn't suggesting more red tape. Instead, summit participants want the Legislative to form a task force to develop proposed reforms to replace "vague language" with clear, consistently enforced standards.

"The words density, rural, countryside, etc., mean different things to different people in different areas," one attendee said. "You can't put these words in regulations without definitions."

The council also suggests more incentives for residents and businesses to locate downtown, be it tax-free zones, financial help with renovating historic buildings and allowances for denser, higher development.

"To preserve working downtowns and to remain an attractive place for tourists and locals alike," the council writes, "local arts and cultural activities, local purchasing, local economic development, and the expansion of Vermont markets should be supported through measured policy and investment."

But that answer, one summit participant cautioned, could spark more questions: "What if we get what we wish for and we successfully attract more development to existing areas and town centers? Is Vermont ready to accept taller buildings and other design standards to concentrate development in urbanizing areas?"

SUBHEAD: 'A dynamic process'

Most Vermonters understand the challenge.

"It seems like Vermont is caught between a competition of 'covered bridge' and 'factory' ideals," one St. Johnsbury resident told the council. "We are here because we like the image of the covered bridge, but without the factory we don't survive. There needs to be a balance for Vermont."

Local leaders agree.

"Looking at the last 80 years, we are still talking about same things," one said at the summit. "If we don't change the regulations, we will be having the same discussion in 20 years. The economic and political will must be there, or else the conversation will continue over and over again."

The council has yet to report anyone implementing any of its specific land-use recommendations. And for all its hopes for the future, it warns against expecting too much.

"Talking about development and land use can be divisive in this state because while

Vermonters share core values in these areas, they differ on the appropriate balance point and the role of the government in defining the balance," it writes. "The resulting tension may be inescapable, as each major decision around land use and development marks a new balance point in both the dialogue and the reality of the state's land use."

The study group, as a result, is encouraging continued discussion. And, perhaps, continued disagreement.

"The ongoing controversy points to the fact that they recognize that land in the state is a finite commodity and they struggle to balance the equal values of the economy, the community, and the environment. Although this dialogue is always passionate and occasionally less than civil, it reflects a dynamic process to achieve balance that is fueled by the great love Vermonters have for the state, the land, and their home communities."

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