

1980

E. ATTITUDES

MAD RIVER VALLEY PERSPECTIVES

Mad River Valley Perspectives is a fourteen-part series of public forums designed to examine issues of growth and development in the towns of Warren, Waitsfield, and Fayston. It is supported by grants from the Vermont Council on the Humanities and Public Issues and the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission, and is intended both to bring experts from various fields into the Valley to provide some perspective on the complexity of the issues being considered and to stimulate discussion among Valley residents in the hopes of soliciting local opinion on those issues. The character of the series has been determined by the Humanities Council, which is interested in bringing the knowledge of humanities scholars to bear on matters of public policy, and, in this case, stresses values, cultures, and ideas involved in the issues of growth and development.

The series has been divided into three sets: the land, the economy, and the people, with the sets including five, three and six forums respectively. The first two sets were concluded by the end of February; the last set is currently two-thirds completed. Despite the intensity of this schedule, interest in the forums remains high. Approximately 725 people have attended the first twelve forums, with the number of distinct participants slightly less than half that figure. The average attendance at the first twelve forums has been 60. For each forum, an effort has been made to attract those in the Valley with a special interest in or knowledge of the evening's topic and this effort has met with reasonable success. At the forum on farming in the Valley, for example, eleven farms were represented; at the forum on the recreation industry, all three alpine ski areas were represented, as were sport stores, realtors and tourist services.

\* See Appendix C for a summary of each forum



The five forums on the land and landscape examined, in order, America's cultural preferences for landscapes, the history of strip development, attitudes toward the land and the effect of those attitudes on land use,

theories of land regulation and the history of social attitudes toward that regulation, and America's tendency to distort the reality of its landscape in favor of popular images. Scholars were drawn from Middlebury and Dartmouth Colleges, Vermont Law School, Charlotte and Montpelier, and represented the fields of geography, historic preservation, history, philosophy, environmental law, and art history. According to a questionnaire distributed at the last land forum, Valley residents felt the final forum was the most informative in helping them reach an understanding of the issues facing the Valley, but the first forum elicited the most significant local feeling toward those issues.

Discussion at all five forums was lively and broad. Topics ranged from the visual effect of scattered development on the Valley landscape to the role of the mountains in defining the borders and character of the Mad River Valley to local feeling toward various methods of land regulation. In general, it was impossible to detect a consensus among the many opinions expressed on so many topics. Nevertheless, through the repetition of certain opinions and the obvious empathy of the audience with these opinions, it was possible to find a base of agreement widely shared by Valley residents. That base is comprised of a general preference for:

- a) Valley-wide planning, possibly in the form of a Valley planning commission
- b) Local control
- c) The continuation of farming in the Valley



- d) The preservation of scenery and village clusters along all main roads
- e) The preservation of open spaces and scenic vistas
- f) The continuation of an essentially rural way of life
- g) The control of development and population increases

The three forums designed for economic interest groups within the Valley were directed toward small businessmen, people involved directly or indirectly with tourism and recreation, and farm families. The presentations involved scholars from Norwich University, the Upper Valley-Lake Sunapee Council of New Hampshire, and the University of Vermont. The forums examined the special character and needs of businessmen in tourist areas, the history of recreation in Vermont, the effect of tourism on the state and its communities, and the image and problems of the Yankee farmer.

It is not possible to combine the discussions of these three forums in the way that it was possible to consider the land forums as a whole. There was less repetition of audience and, hence, less continuity within the series. Moreover, the specific interests of the groups tended to restrict the range of discussion. However, diversification was a concern at every forum. Small businessmen were interested in exploring the possibility of attracting industry to the Valley to stabilize the fluctuating economy common to tourist areas; people in the recreation industry were concerned with keeping agriculture active in the Valley because of the role it plays in attracting tourists; and farmers expressed some interest in widening the base of farming in the Valley to include small vegetable, sheep, or berry farms. Stability was also a common concern, expressed by businesspeople who currently suffer from seasonal swings, recreation-oriented people who want to better utilize their resources and investments on a weekly and seasonal basis, and farmers who fear that a combination of government regulations and development pressures on their land may undermine farming in the Valley. Finally, there was a common concern with growth and development. Every group stressed that the Valley could be over-developed,



thereby destroying a high quality of life that includes an essentially rural landscape, and recreational business opportunities. However, the level at which that balance was destroyed was different for the different groups.

The other concerns and preferences expressed at the economic forums were specific and may not apply to a wide cross-section of Valley residents. The presence of these businessmen, farmers, and recreation people at the earlier land forums, however, suggests that they share the list of preferences expressed at those meetings. The result, therefore, is a general planning agenda for the Mad River Valley that shows clearly some priorities of a significant number of its residents.

The four forums concluded to date in "the people" set have examined, in order, the role of town meeting in community decision-making, the role of women in the Valley's life and future, the significance of place-names in defining regions, and the issues of intermunicipal cooperation and intra-town dialogue. Scholars have been drawn from the University of Vermont and Montpelier and have represented the fields of political science, economics, geography and history. Attendance has been somewhat lower at these forums, due in part to forum spacing, topic and the duration of the series, but discussion has remained lively and significant.

Like the economic forums, the sessions in this last set range over a variety of topics and their discussions are not easily combined in one summary. If there has been a common theme, however, it has been a continuing discussion of the nature of community: how it is defined; its characteristics; and the necessity of preserving a spirit of community. At the Mock Town Meeting on March 25, this was expressed in two of the mock votes. One supported a proposal to retain Warren's rural character by vetoing the paving of the Roxbury Gap Road and



another supported the erection of wind turbines on Lincoln Mountain with the idea of giving the area a more conservation-oriented image and turning the energy future of the area over to its residents. A discussion of the decline of a spirit of community dominated the next forum, on women's issues. It was generally conceded at this session that the rise of the Valley as a resort, in conflict with its rural history, had been detrimental to the local spirit of the community, because it attracted second-home owners and transients who often lacked commitment to the community as a whole. This feeling was reiterated the following week when the forum, "What's in a name?" attempted to relate place-names to images. At this forum it was quite clear that, to local resident, "Mad River Valley" conjures up pleasant images of an essentially rural community, while "Sugarbush Valley" represents a large local ski resort. There was a strong preference for retaining the original name for the Valley, partly in deference to tradition, but partly because it seems to define a broader community and more diversified local activity. Finally, at the intermunicipal cooperation forum on May, discussion focused on the necessity of continuing and improving both inter-community and intra-town communications. The point was clearly made, however, that this cooperation had to be on a voluntary basis and that it was important to local residents to maintain strong municipal autonomy.

Over the course of the twelve Perspectives forums briefly summarized here, a wide variety of topics have been discussed, provoking opinions of even greater variety. At no time have has consensus been a goal of the forums. What is remarkable amid the variety of opinion, therefore is that so many goals and values are shared by the cross-section of the Valley community that the forums have been able to attract.