

Case Study I Mad River Valley

While in the Mad River Valley, Case I participants and Valley citizens will focus on the three issues related to farming, tourism and land use planning. Each issue will be the subject of round table discussions among local residents and exchange team members, and will be based on background information provided through a combination of site visits, short presentations and printed materials distributed prior to the meeting.

1. Planning in the Mad River Valley

The Mad River Valley has long been recognized for its innovative approach to planning and growth management. Through a variety of local and regional government boards and private organizations, Valley residents have demonstrated a strong commitment to preserving the Valley's striking landscape and rural character. Despite these efforts, farming has continued to decline and open land to be developed. This discussion will focus on the conflicts between development and farming and open space preservation, and how those conflicts are being mitigated in the Valley.

Participants in the discussion will include local planning commissioners and representatives from such non-profit groups as the Mad River Pathway Association, Friends of the Mad River and the Valley Certified Local Government (Rural Resource Protection) Commission. The discussion will be preceded by a tour of the Valley which will include examples of how land use planning is being implemented through regulation, removal of development rights and mitigation.

Questions:

How successful has the Valley's planning policies been in protecting agricultural land from development? How might they be more successful?

Most development in the Valley is very small scale, which limits the effectiveness of many of the regulatory tools in place. Are there better mechanisms for dealing with small scale incremental development?

While the Valley's economy is heavily dependent upon the recreation industry for tourism, there is a surprisingly limited public recreation infrastructure in the Valley. What tools are available for maintaining perpetual public access to the countryside for hiking, hunting, fishing, swimming and other active and passive recreation?

2. Green Tourism (Relationship between Landscape and Economy)

The Mad River Valley's economic base is heavily dependent upon visitors to Sugarbush Ski Area. This reliance on the ski industry has resulted in economic instability due to poor winter weather and declining skier visits. Increasingly, Valley businesses are looking to the spring, summer and autumn to make up for unreliable winter business. An obvious opportunity for expanding "off-season" tourism is to promote the Valley's scenery, pristine environment and rural character. In that the Valley's scenic character is defined in part by farming, the relationship between agriculture and tourism should be further explored.

This discussion will focus on the relationship between tourism and farming, and opportunities for strengthening this relationship. Participating will be representatives of local business's attempting to capitalize on the Valley's natural amenities in attracting tourists, including local innkeepers, guides and other recreation oriented business people and chamber of commerce officials.

Questions:

What opportunities exist for better connecting tourism with farmland and natural resource protection in the Valley? Does the tourism industry have the greatest to lose from the decline of farming and erosion of the Valley's rural character?

How might we better promote the Valley's beauty and unspoiled environment to potential visitors?

How can we provide a greater diversity of opportunities for the tourist to experience the countryside? Does farming have a role in creating opportunities?

Is there a danger in promoting greater year round tourism? Will success wind up killing the goose that laid the golden egg?

3. Agricultural Viability (Keeping Open-spaces Open)

Towns in the Mad River Valley, with the assistance of the Vermont Land Trust, have been moderately successful in preserving important farm land. However, little has been done to improve the economic viability of keeping large acreages of land in productive agriculture. This discussion will focus on issues relating to agriculture in the Valley, including the outlook for dairy farming, agricultural alternatives to dairy, and the role of the public and private organizations in affecting the economic viability of local farming.

Represented will be dairy farmers (past and present), and people active in less traditional Vermont agriculture such as vegetable growers, stable owners and deer farmers. The discussion will also involve a visit to at least one local farm currently dealing with the issues discussed.

Questions:

What are the issues affecting agriculture in the Valley? How do land values, taxes and the decline of an economy based on agriculture affected the outlook for farming in the Valley? How can these issues be addressed?

If the decline of dairy continues, are there other land intensive and economically viable options for the landowner? What has been the experience with agricultural diversification in the Valley? Has it been successful? If not, why not?

What is the role for local government, private interests and citizens in improving the viability of agriculture?

To what extent is the Valley's landscape dependent upon "hobby" farming for its open appearance? What support should be devoted to non-viable or artificial means of maintaining open land?