

# Do local planning tools work?

by Lisa Loomis

Ten years ago, over 725 people attended Mad River Valley Perspectives, a fourteen-part series of public forums designed to examine issues of growth and development as well as people's attitudes towards growth and development.

The forum series, sponsored to a large degree by the Vermont Council on the Humanities and the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission, brought experts from various fields into The Valley to provide information and stimulate discussion on growth issues. From that series of forums came a clear idea about what characteristics of the Valley residents and visitors valued and how growth and development should take place.

Also from that forum series came the attitudes that lead to the Valley's acclaimed planning processes and controlled development.

## ANOTHER LOOK

Now, ten years later, the time has come to take another look at where The Valley has

come in a decade and where it is going in the next ten years. The 1990 Valley Forum Series, starting September 17, will set into motion the means for reassessing existing planning tools, and reassessing local sentiment on a variety of issues, from land use to the economy to the Mad River.

A look at land use patterns and the future of growth in The Valley will open the 1990 Valley Forum series, sponsored by the Mad River Valley Planning District. The 1990 series will include discussion of issues relevant to change in The Valley. The September 17 forum will be held at Founder's Hall in Waitsfield starting at 7:00 p.m.

## PLANNING TOOLS

Arising from the first forum series on land use were town plans, zoning ordinances, a sense of understanding how Valley residents wanted to see the area developed, and strong, well-developed planning tools to carry out their visions.

Ten years after the first forum series, the second forum series begins with a look at

open space and how it is used. The Valley is praised and admired for many things: skiing, the restaurants, the lodging, the people, the recreational opportunities, and many others.

One thing that is mentioned consistently and also is a source of great pride to those who live here is what's known as the Valley's rural character.

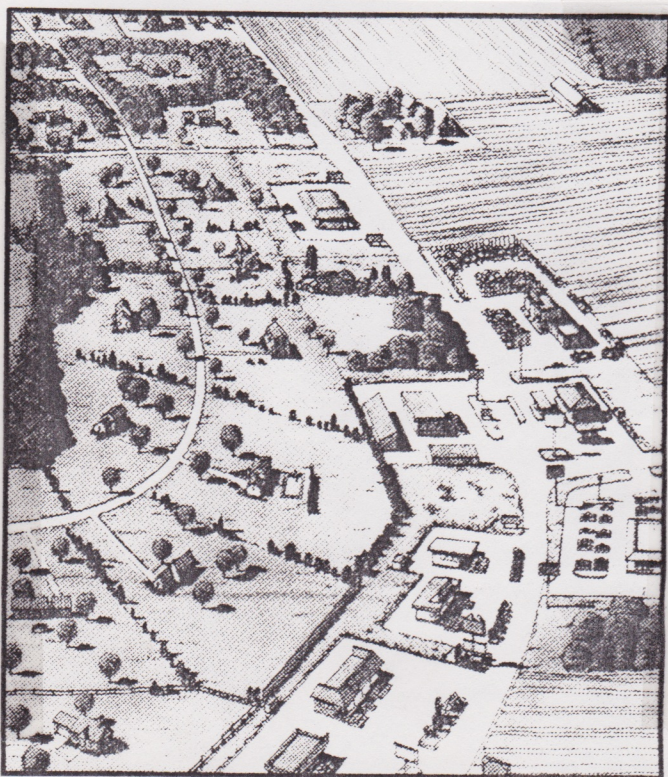
What does rural character mean?

Webster's defines rural as "open land, of or relating to the country, country people or life, or agriculture. Rural suggests open country and farming."

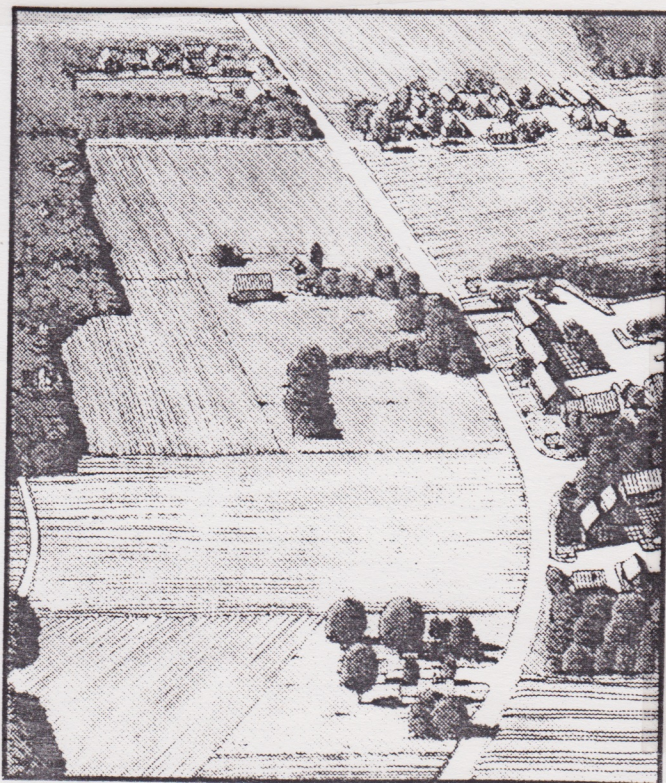
## CONTROL DEVELOPMENT

One of the most commonly expressed sentiments during the 1980 forum series was a desire for preservation of rural scenery and village clusters along all main roads, the preservation of open spaces and scenic vistas, the continuation of an essentially rural way of life and a desire to control development and population increases.

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Rural area after conventional development, this could happen.



Same area after creative development designed to preserve open land. This could also happen in The Valley.



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Open land is one thing there is plenty of in the Mad River Valley. Open land is plentiful due to farms still in operation, strict land use, and zoning regulations in each town, land conservation programs in local towns, stringent subdivision regulations and specified growth areas. In other words, the early planners and their efforts a decade ago were seemingly successful in protecting The Valley from over development and excessive growth.

#### NEVER OCCURRED?

Or were they? Could it be that the type of growth which early planning efforts saw and sought to prevent never occurred?

Despite zoning and planning efforts that work, the future of the Valley's open spaces could be in jeopardy. The land use regulations established in the late 1970's and early 1980's were created under the assumption that growth in The Valley would follow different trends. Commercial growth was anticipated and was to be located in designated growth centers.

During the 1980's, the Mad River Valley experienced a rate of population and housing growth higher than the corresponding rate for Washington County and the State of Vermont, according to Brian Shupe, director of the Mad River Valley Planning District.

#### DURING PAST FIVE YEARS

And a majority of the growth occurred during the past five years when skier visits have declined steadily. Instead of the economic growth which was anticipated (which planning regulations were designed to deal with), The Valley saw housing and population in-

creases. This meant that while businesses struggled and faltered, traditionally rural areas of The Valley were being subdivided into building lots for single family homes.

Although the numerous subdivisions have not marred the rural character of The Valley irreparably, they could. If the same settlement patterns which occurred in the past ten years continue into the future, The Valley will no longer be a rural area with concentrated villages, Shupe warned. Instead of open fields and wooded stands, The Valley could come to resemble other suburban areas.

#### LAND USE PATTERNS

Shupe, who organized this second forum series, suggests that now is the time to take another look at land use patterns and regulations for The Valley. To that end, the first 1990 Valley Forum Series features a look at the cumulative impact of incremental development of The Valley's landscape and a historical perspective about the Valley's growth management and land use regulatory programs.

Jeff Squires, director of the Mad River Valley Planning District from its start in the early 1980's to his departure in

1988, will present the historical perspective. Squires, who now is a partner in Humstone Squires, a Burlington-based planning and consulting company, was instrumental in all of the early planning in The Valley.

In addition to Squires, Randall Arendt, associate director of The Center for Rural Massachusetts and principal author of *Dealing with Change in the Connecticut River Valley: A Design Manual for Conservation and Development*, will be present.

#### DIFFERENT MANNERS

Arendt is renowned for his work in innovative development methods that respect traditional New England land use patterns. The pictures below demonstrate the same stretch of land, developed in

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entirely different manners. That stretch of land could easily be a section of Route 100 between Warren and Waitsfield, or between Waitsfield and Fayston.

"Ideas similar to Arendt's have been the guiding principles behind efforts to manage growth and development in The Valley. The forums will provide the opportunity to discuss how our planning mechanisms might be improved in a manner which allows for the towns to benefit from additional growth while protecting the Valley's historic settlement patterns and stunning landscapes," Shupe added.

Visitors and residents are encouraged to attend the entire forum series. For further information, contact Shupe at 496-7173.