

History of Valley planning

by Lisa Loomis

According to planner Jeff Squires, the right people were in the right place at the right time when planning efforts began in earnest in the Mad River Valley in the late 1970's and early 1980's. "We had talented people and creative local leadership. The Valley is blessed with thoughtful and broadminded public officials.

"I think everyone involved in the first planning efforts and the first Valley Perspective Series loved The Valley and felt that they had a stake in its future. People were critically interested," said Squires, original director of the Mad River Valley Planning District.

As the second series of forums dealing with growth and development issues gets

under way, Squires detailed an historical perspective of how the planning process evolved in The Valley, and how Valley planning efforts have come to be lauded statewide.

In 1978, Squires was working with the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission providing technical assistance to Valley towns.

A GROWTH BOOM

"At the time, the Valley towns were requiring about 60 percent of the technical assistance that the regional planning commission had to offer. Between 1977 and 1982/83, The Valley was experiencing a growth boom. The demand on local planning commissions and selectmen was high, and each town had town plans and zoning ordinances that dated

back to the 1960's, Squires recalled.

Waitsfield architect and urban planner Don Swain approached the regional commission with a proposal for an analysis of opportunities for growth in The Valley and how growth might best be managed.

"At the time, there were two things going on in the towns. There was opposition toward development per se, and no one could quantify how much development could be handled. Second, there were a lot of developers coming in with projects that weren't really feasible for The Valley, some ill-founded ideas," Swain said.

BASIS OF STUDY

"My idea was a study that would satisfy the towns' desire to control growth, and also show where necessary and justified growth could occur. Providing guidelines for both entities was the basis of the study," Swain added.

With Squires, Swain found a program through the Rural Development Act of the Federal Department of Agriculture that offered 90 percent matching funds. They asked the towns of Waitsfield, Warren, and Fayston to spend \$333 each and the federal government funded \$27,000. The study project was overseen by an ad hoc group consisting of a selectman and planning commissioner from each town.

The first year of the study produced an interim report

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that detailed, among other things, thresholds for growth in electricity, utilities, schools, Irasville soils, land use, solid waste management, hydrology, traffic, housing, police protection, and public administration. Additionally, the interim report considered growth potentials in agriculture, industry, and tourism and recreation.

PREVAILING ATTITUDES

Crucial to that first report was the inclusion of the prevailing attitudes about growth and development. The first Valley Perspective Series provided much of the input for that section.

"Hundreds of people participated in the forums and the attitudes survey. The response was incredible. With regards to questions about the Valley's future and what was important, there was almost a consensus on an incredible range of issues. People didn't want to see a polluted environment, traffic congestion, over development, and they did want to see good jobs, low taxes, good schools and balanced ski area development," Squires said. Out of that first year of study came ideas that would be used to set public objectives for managing growth.

"We didn't get everything

done in the first year that we wanted to, so we asked if we could continue it a second year and try to build what we'd learned into town plans and zoning ordinances," he added.

Swain, after having invested a great deal of time and effort into the first year of the study, handed the reins over to Beth Humstone, a planner who now works in a private company with Squires in Burlington.

REFLECT CHANGES

During the second year, the town plans and zoning ordinances in each of the three towns were redrafted to reflect the changes that would protect the Valley's resources and foster controlled growth.

Although the three towns had gone through the first two decades of ski area development with very little adverse affect, things began to change on the mountain.

Sugarbush wanted to expand the ski area to include the Slide Brook intertie area, joining Sugarbush North and South.

Because a large percentage of Sugarbush is located on lands leased from the U.S. Forest Service, the ski area was asked by the forest service to create a master plan for land use.

HADN'T BEEN ACTIVE

"Sugarbush hadn't been very active in the planning process until they were asked to do a master plan. Very quietly, they created a master plan and submitted it to the forest service," Squires said.

The U.S. Forest Service felt that the ski area's plan had the potential for environmental impact and asked for an environmental impact statement.

"That request was critical to taking a good planning process and jettisoning it into something spectacular. During the two year study process, by having representatives from each town meet monthly, we'd unknowingly created a cooperative, unified voice for the three-town community," Squires added.

SERVED IN GOOD STEAD

That cooperative, united voice served the Valley towns in good stead when Sugarbush's first environmental impact statement was revealed.

An environmental impact statement, according to Squires, was supposed to look at physical, environmental, and economical issues, and although the impact area could have been considered just the physical on-mountain terrain that Sugarbush leased from the forest service, people had, through the perspective series and other planning work gained an understanding of the off-site impacts of on-mountain development.

ALL THREE TOWNS

The three-town group, known as the steering committee, got very involved in the environmental impact study (EIS) and convinced the forest service that the impact area should include all three towns.

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"The EIS brought town, regional, state and federal planning processes together with a potent and private business, Sugarbush Valley Incorporation," Squires reported.

"The steering committee commented on each step of the project and was only partially successful. Sugarbush had hired their own experts to do the research and had omitted some issues and misrepresented others. They wanted to double the ski area in a short amount of time and put off resolution of the problems that caused until an undefined time in the future," he continued.

NEGATIVE REACTION

But the newly enlightened consciousness of the Valley planners and residents caused a strong and negative reaction to the ski area's draft EIS.

"The owners of Sugarbush at the time misjudged the resolve of the steering committee and the Valley people and their commitment to having a say in their future. The steering committee set up its studies on issues that the ski area's EIS had overlooked," Squires continued.

While the draft EIS recommended full build-out of all properties that Sugarbush owned or leased, it also specified where skiing could take place and how to market the skiing.

"Their first EIS took maximum amounts of terrain plus skiers and came up with total build-out. That's fine in business, it's the American way. But it's only fine in a business that has no social costs. Skiing is not that kind of business, and U.S. Forest Service lands are a public resource. There's nothing wrong with maximizing potential return from a ski facility investment, but not without looking at the social impacts," Squires insisted.

**ENTERED INTO
NEGOTIATIONS**

The draft EIS came out in late 1982 while the local economy was still strong. After the protest over the first version, Sugarbush entered into a negotiating and planning process with the ad hoc steering committee.

Their discussions were aimed at answering the following questions: What do you think we need to do? How can we select different alternatives to maximum growth or build-

out? How can we address today's problems before authorizing additional growth, traffic, and on-mountain services? And finally, recognizing that no one is smart enough to know what the next twenty years will bring, how can we create a phased master plan instead of a concrete long-term one with no flexibility?

"We wanted to be able to have growth phased in so that we could monitor change and impacts as Sugarbush grew," Squires explained.

MOU CREATED

After months of work, an EIS which all parties felt was objective, and a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the towns, the ski area, the forest service, and the state was created.

The MOU has become the crucial tool used by the tri-town planning body. The MOU specifies a monitoring process for assessing the impacts of segmented growth, major segment reviews before each segment of growth occurs and gives Act 250 jurisdiction over the applications for development on federal forest lands.

Also built into the MOU was an agreement that would formalize the existence of the steering committee as a union municipal district, which would recognize that tri-town group as a legitimate planning body. Included in the MOU was the stipulation that Sugarbush become a party to the tri-town group.

HAND IN HAND

Those tools, first, the two-year study initiated by Swain, which resulted in revised town plans and zoning ordinances, as well as a recognized public commitment to controlling growth, went hand in hand with the creation of the steering committee, and the process which lead to the final EIS and the MOU.

The steering committee formally became the Mad River Valley Planning District in 1984 and has been functioning

since. In recent years, the planning district has frequently used the tool put in place by the MOU, most recently in 1988 when Sugarbush received approval for the first phase of on-mountain improvements.

But, Squires adds as a footnote, that while the well-developed planning process may have prevented many inappropriate projects from being built in The Valley, the ongoing growth which the whole planning process was created to handle waned.

NO DEMAND

"We had elaborate plans and processes, but no demand. The place was built up by the time we had the MOU in place. In 1985, after the bloom was off the rose, building slowed and the economy flagged. The planning district undertook a business climate survey and found that businesses needed growth in their bottom lines. We didn't necessarily need real estate growth, we needed economic growth, and there were two ways to do that. We could increase the number of people here at peak periods, or we could round out the peaks by having more people here at off peak times. Increasing revenue without having to add capacity made the most sense, and the district expressed a commitment to diversifying the economy," Squires noted.

GROWTH TASK FORCE

That diversification hasn't happened to the degree that the earlier planners had hoped, he said. The Fly-In industrial park, off Route 100 in Fayston, is still underused, and Squires suggested that possibly a Mad River Valley Economic Growth Task Force should be created to help round out the local economy.

Squires will be one of the featured speakers at a September 17 forum on land use patterns in the Mad River Valley. That will take place at Founder's Hall in Waitsfield at 7:00 p.m.