



To: Weston Planning Commission
From: Matt Bachler, Senior Planner
Date: March 25, 2024
RE: Review of Land Use and Economic Development Chapters for Weston Town Plan Update

Background

WRC will lead a discussion with the Planning Commission at the April 1st public meeting on the Land Use and Economic Development Chapters for the Town Plan update. As an attachment to this memo, I have provided these two chapters and the Proposed Land Use Map from the 2016 Town Plan.

Land Use Chapter

Statewide Planning Goals

The following statewide planning goal is relevant for the Land Use chapter. In reviewing the chapter, it can be helpful to consider how the current plan is doing at accomplishing this goal:

To plan development so as to maintain the historic settlement patten of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside:

- a. Intensive residential development should be encouraged primarily in areas related to community centers, and strip development along highways should be discouraged.*
- b. Economic growth should be encouraged in locally designated growth areas, employed to revitalize existing village and urban centers, or both, and should be encouraged in growth centers.*
- c. Public investments, including construction or expansion of infrastructure, should reinforce the general character and planned growth patterns of the area.*
- d. Development should be undertaken in accordance with smart growth principles.*

WRC Recommendations

A. General Recommendations

I would recommend including a short discussion at the beginning of the chapter on the existing land use development pattern in town to provide context. To make this chapter more consistent with other chapters in the plan, I would recommend moving and combining the policies and recommendations for action under each land use district to the end of the chapter.

B. Village District

This section should be updated to include changes in the village since the 2016 update, including the opening of the Walker Farm facility and the July 2023 flood. More discussion should be added about how the lack of public wastewater and flood vulnerability will limit any significant additional development in the village. There were several public comments about the need to ensure that development in the village is consistent with the scale and design of existing buildings. There may be opportunities to better address this in the zoning bylaws.

C. Residential Districts

Currently, the Rural Residential, Rural Low-Density, and Resource Districts are all grouped together under one general description in the Land Use Chapter. I would recommend including a separate discussion for each to more clearly differentiate these different land use districts. Having separate descriptions of the residential districts would help support future zoning changes. For example, there may be an opportunity for smaller lot sizes in the Rural Residential District (currently 2 acres) but also a need for larger minimum lot sizes in the Resource District (currently 3 acres). There may also be a need to rename, consolidate, or change residential district boundaries to better reflect the community's goals for future residential development.

D. Commercial District

Currently, there is only one Commercial District area in town on the west side of Route 100 between Greendale Road and Maple Hill Road. I would recommend including more discussion on how the town should explore additional areas for commercial development due to flood vulnerability in the village. For example, the gas station and convenience store in the village has been closed since the July 2023 flood and there may be a need to provide adequate land area outside of the village for this type of commercial use.

E. Shoreland District

The Proposed Land Use Map includes a Shoreland District around Wantastiquet Pond, but the Town Plan does not include a description of this district. I would recommend adding a new paragraph explaining the purpose of the Shoreland District.

F. Land Use Implementation

I would recommend creating a new section for land use implementation strategies and to move the existing discussions on the village center designation, PUDs, and Agricultural Zoning under this new section.

Economic Development Chapter

Statewide Planning Goals

The following statewide planning goal is relevant for the Economic Development chapter. In reviewing the chapter, it can be helpful to consider how the current plan is doing at accomplishing this goal: *To provide a strong and diverse economy that provides satisfying and rewarding job opportunities and that maintains high environmental standards, and to expand economic opportunities in areas with high unemployment or low per capita incomes.*

WRC Recommendations

I would recommend keeping the current economic development approach for Weston, which is building on the town's existing assets including its cultural, historic, natural, and recreational resources as a way

to encourage tourism. The background information will need to be update to include relevant events and efforts in the village since the 2016 plan update, including the new Walker Farm facility, other new businesses, and the impacts of the July 2023 floods.

One area where the chapter could be expanded is the growing opportunity for remote work. As broadband service improves, remote work will become more feasible and there is an opportunity to encourage seasonal homeowners to spend more time in Weston if they can work remotely. This in turn helps support local businesses. I would also recommend including information about the “Discover Weston” website and any other efforts by local businesses to promote the town.

Land Use

The land use districts, defined in the following paragraphs, are a guide for the growth and development of Weston. Currently, Weston has 7 land use districts: the Village, 3 residential districts, a conservation district, a commercial district and an industrial district. These land use areas provide for a variety of residential, commercial, agricultural and recreational opportunities for the future while considering local environmental constraints as well as existing land use patterns. For purposes of this plan, the Planning Commission has considered the three residential districts together. While the Town Plan is not a zoning ordinance it does provide guidance for zoning changes and updates. The Proposed Land Use Map, designating the boundaries of each district, is an integral part of the future land use plan.

Village District:

The village center is the focal point of the Town, containing a high density grouping of buildings without public water and sewer. The Town offices, the library, two churches, an inn, two restaurants, the town green, the Weston Playhouse, the fire station, two museums, and several retail uses are located in the Village Center in addition to many residences. The village center provides a center for community interaction and a sense of community place.

Three recent events have affected or will affect the Village District.

1. In 2008, Weston voters approved a set of zoning changes that modified lines defining the Village zoning district in a way that corresponded with all the properties that were presumed to be part of the village center and brought minimum lot sizes and setbacks into conformity with actual practice.
2. In 2014, the Town completed an addition to its Town Office, increasing in size by almost 50 percent, meeting its needs for the foreseeable future. Conversely, the Library cannot easily expand in its current location, does not have sanitary facilities and is unable to provide them in its present building.
3. The Weston Playhouse Theatre Company has acquired the 5-acre Walker farmstead property at the north end of the village center and plans to begin construction on a year round campus for play performance and development.

It is the goal of this Plan that the pattern of settlement in the Village district shall maintain and reinforce the village center as the focus of the town.

Village Center Designation

The Town of Weston received approval from the Vermont Division of Community Planning and Revitalization for renewal of our Village Center Designation in April 2016. By renewing our Village Center Designation, we increase our opportunities to continue to revitalize our Village Center. The tax credit incentives in the areas of historic tax credits, code improvement credits, and technology credits, all present opportunities that support our goal to maintain and reinforce the village center as the focus of the town.

Policies for the Village District:

1. Future development in the Village should continue the historic development patterns and scale of a traditional New England Village, including density, setbacks, lot sizes and parking. Continued residential uses in the village center should be encouraged, lest the village become only a tourist-oriented commercial center.
2. Pathways/sidewalks for safe pedestrian travel should be considered, especially in the north end of the village.
3. Ways to control the speed of traffic through the Village on Route 100 should be addressed with the State.
4. A plan for the expansion or relocation of the library should be developed.

Residential Districts (Rural Residential, Rural Low Intensity District, Resource District):

Rural residential settlement in the outlying areas of the Town was historically associated with farming and related agricultural uses. For this reason, homes were generally located on land that was suitable for residential purposes and at the same time compatibly related to the pattern of open fields and woodlands. However, recent rural settlement has not been related to farming, but to the construction of single-family homes as permanent residents or second homes. This type of housing and country lifestyle is highly valued, yet usually breaks up continuous tracts of land formerly used for agriculture or silviculture and often contributes to sprawl.

The Residential Districts are intended to accommodate the demand for rural housing (usually single-family, a few farm animals, a garden and one or two out-buildings), with minimal economic and environmental impacts. Lands within these districts are already committed to residential development and appear capable of accommodating a portion of the expected growth in Weston. These areas are generally accessible by improved highways, and generally appear suitable to residential uses, although some of the lands have serious limitations to development (e.g., steep slopes, wetlands or limited access). Also, some are in productive agricultural use or have high natural, recreational, scenic or other special resource values.

The development of residential housing creates the largest growth pressure in Weston. Every effort should be made within this district to have development sited in locations that preserve open space, scenic vistas, forested areas and natural resources. The use of PUDs is one method of achieving these goals.

Planned Unit Development (PUD):

The Town of Weston has adopted both zoning and subdivision bylaws that permit clustering of rural residences in planned unit developments (PUDs). The number of residences/structures in a PUD is governed by the density permitted by the zoning rules for the district (i.e., 5 residences on a 10-acre tract in a two acres zone), but the structures can be placed close together. This permits the conservation of open space on the remaining portion of the parcel. PUDs, in contrast to typical tract subdivisions, encourage flexibility of design and development that promotes the most appropriate use of land, facilitates the economical provision of streets and utilities and preserves the natural and scenic qualities of the open lands and forests of the town. When updating the zoning and subdivision bylaws, the Planning Commission will re-examine and update the sections pertaining to PUD and subdivision.

Agricultural Uses:

Agricultural uses in Weston have expanded over the last decade in a broad and diverse manner with sheep, cattle and dairy operations finding new and viable niche markets. Significant haying operations have continued and are of increasing importance supporting the growing “farm to table” market. The continuation of agriculture in Weston depends directly on the availability of large amounts of undeveloped land with moderate slope and productive agricultural soils.

When updating the zoning bylaws, the Planning Commission should consider whether zoning regulations should contain provisions, which would limit subdivision of large lots in prime agricultural areas into residential parcels unrelated to farming. Density bonuses should be explored by the Planning Commission for development that protects scenic vistas or agricultural lands or which minimizes the impact on or need for municipal services.

Policies for Development in Residential Districts:

1. Scenic vistas, environmental qualities and the preservation of open spaces should be encouraged and preserved.
2. Clustering (PUDs) should be encouraged as a way in which subdivisions can be planned to allow for conservation of open space and agricultural land.
3. Agricultural lands should be preserved whenever possible.
4. Houses should be sited and exterior lighting should be designed so as to avoid impact on scenic vistas.
5. Home businesses suitable for Rural Residential districts should be encouraged.

Conservation District:

Conservation areas contain lands that are very sensitive to development for a variety of reasons. They are usually characterized as significant resources such as productive forests, high elevations, steep slopes (often with shallow soils), wetland areas, and stream banks, among others and areas of scenic, ecological, cultural or historical significance. They are essentially undeveloped and may lack access to improved public roads or utilities and services. The Federal and State governments own most of the land in this District. This District also contains lands that are protected from development above the 2,500-foot contour by Act 250.

In general, lands in this district are suitable for silviculture, including logging, and low impact recreational uses, such as nature and hiking trails, cross country skiing and hunting. Large contiguous open spaces should be preserved in the Conservation District.

When updating the zoning bylaws, the Planning Commission should consider a Ridgeline/Hillside Overlay or other zoning bylaws to protect scenic vistas and ridgelines, particularly with respect to exterior lighting. The Planning Commission should also explore the possibility of linking development restrictions to topography and elevation.

Policies for Conservation District:

1. Lands in this district are not desirable for dense development because of their attributes.
2. Primary use of lands should be for agriculture, forestry, open space and low-impact recreation.
3. Agricultural lands should be protected from substantial development.

Commercial District:

This district contains the commercial uses that are not located in either the Village or Industrial Districts. This area is appropriate for additional commercial uses. However, new businesses and/or expansions of existing businesses shall be consistent with the policies and goals of this Plan and shall be in a scale appropriate to other businesses in the district and in keeping with the character of the neighborhood. Growth of businesses in Residential districts has created the need for additional commercial space in Weston

Policies for Commercial District:

1. Maintain scale of the commercial district to be consistent with other Town policies and goals while seeking to find adequate space/land for future commercial growth.

Industrial District:

This district is the primary location for industrial uses in Weston. This area is appropriate for any additional industrial uses; however, new businesses and/or expansions of existing businesses shall be consistent with the policies and goals of this Plan and shall be in a scale appropriate to other businesses in the district and in keeping with the character of the neighborhood.

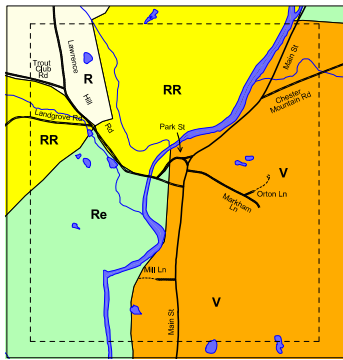
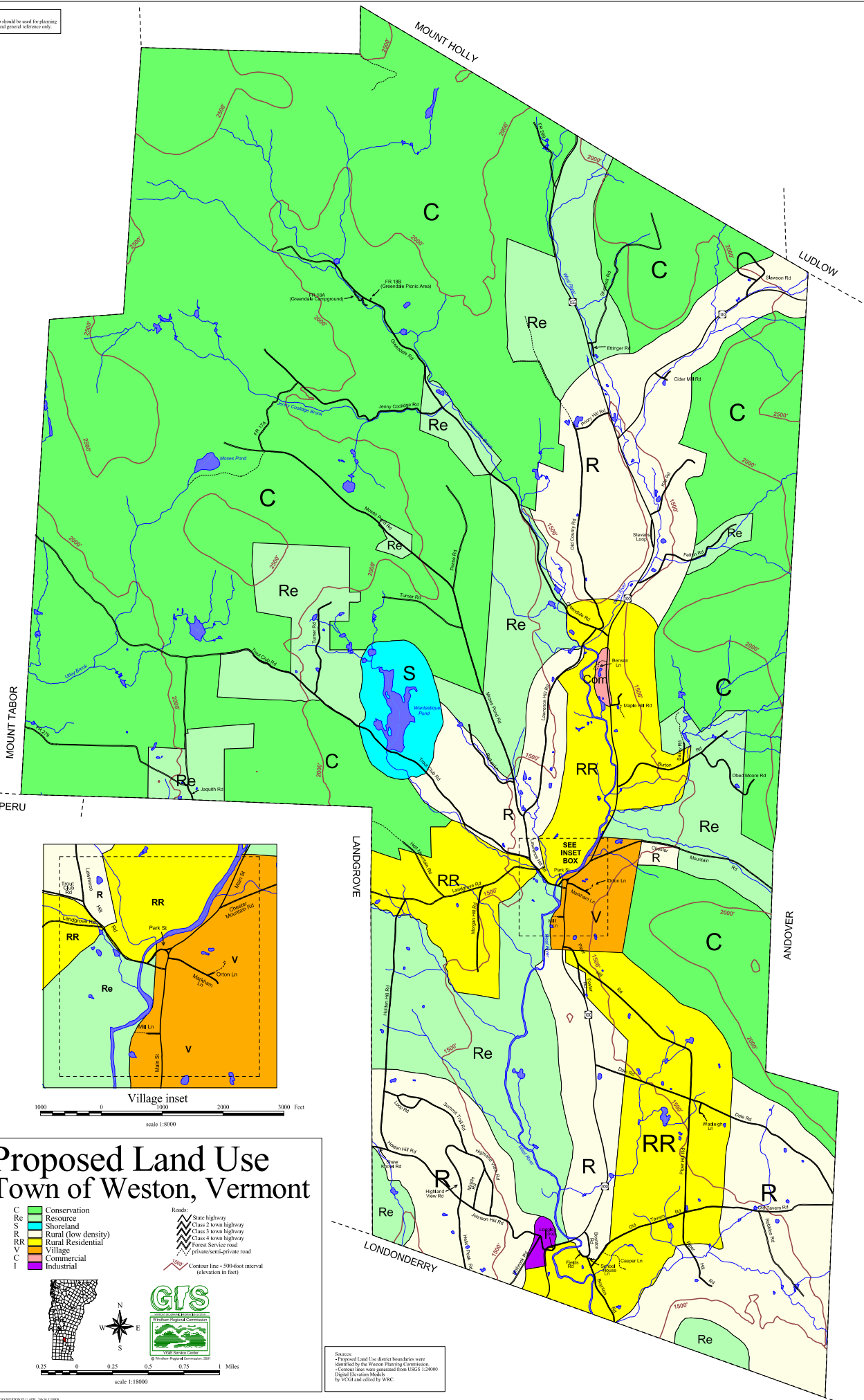
Policies for Industrial District:

1. In general, industrial applications and growth are not in keeping with the emphasis of Weston's other goals and policies and, as a result, the current Industrial District should serve adequately for the foreseeable future.

Recommendations for Action:

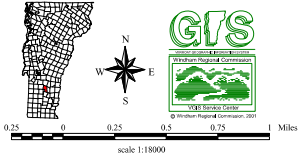
1. Review zoning regulations in all zoning districts with emphasis on lot sizes, setbacks, and other requirements for conformance to the Town Plan.
2. Review the adequacy of the current Commercial District for future growth.
3. Explore areas for commercial expansion.

Note:
 * This map should be used for planning purposes and general reference only.



Proposed Land Use Town of Weston, Vermont

- | | | |
|----|---------------------|--|
| C | Conservation | State highway |
| Re | Resource | Class 2 town highway |
| S | Shoreland | Class 3 town highway |
| R | Rural (low density) | Class 4 town highway |
| RR | Rural Residential | Forest Service road |
| V | Village | private/semi-private road |
| C | Commercial | Contour line = 500-foot interval (elevation in feet) |
| I | Industrial | |



Source:
 * Proposed Land Use district boundaries were identified by the Weston Planning Commission.
 * Contour lines were generated from USGS 1:24000 Digital Elevation Models.
 * by VCCG and edited by WRC.

Economic Development

Goal: To encourage a stable economy in the Town of Weston that provides employment opportunities, encourages agriculture and forest related enterprises and allows for the development of new businesses as well as the expansion of existing ones.

Background:

Historically, and typical of a small rural town, Weston's economy had been a diverse one, including retail commerce and inns in the Village, small farms producing agricultural products, harvesting the forests in the surrounding areas and small manufacturers refining locally produced natural resources.

The current economy is largely dependent on transient visitors and second homeowners. The Town is centrally located among several major ski resorts, and Route 100 traffic provides a steady stream of visitors throughout the year. The historic character of the village center, the scenic agricultural land and natural beauty of our river valley, and the forested ridges surrounding the Town make it a desirable tourist destination, inviting visitors to stop and shop, eat and sleep, and take advantage of the outdoors and cultural and spiritual offerings. An abundance of recreational opportunities are easily accessible in Weston or nearby, including golf, fishing, skiing, snowshoeing, hunting, swimming, boating, hiking and snowmobiling. Major attractions in Weston include the Vermont Country Store, the Weston Playhouse, Kinhaven Music School, the Green Mountain National Forest and the Weston Priory, among others.

Weston's village center, natural and cultural resources and continued preservation of its scenic resources have contributed to the popularity of Weston as a second home location and tourist destination. The increasing number of second homes has stimulated the economy by creating opportunities in service related businesses such as: construction, landscaping, caretaking and real estate sales and rentals.

The prevalence of tourism and second home ownership does have some undesirable side effects including extreme traffic congestion in the village center during peak seasons and a very cyclical annual business pattern.

The last decade has also seen renewed expansion of agricultural enterprises as well as growth in home-based businesses; whether service or professional oriented. The latter being facilitated by the availability of reliable high-speed Internet access and cell phone service.

Inventory of Town Businesses	2006	2011	2015
Antiques	1	1	1
Art Gallery	1	3	2
Churches	3	3	4
Cultural Arts School (seasonal)	1	1	1
Grocery/Convenience store/gas station	1	1	1
Inns/Bed & Breakfasts	4	5	4
Library	1	1	1
Licensed Trades	3	3	3
Manufacturers/Industry	0	0	0
Non-profit Organizations	6	6	6
Pre-school & Childcare	1	1	1
Professional Offices	1	0	1
Real Estate Office	1	1	1
Restaurants	4	4	4
Retail Establishments	3	2	3
Theatre Company	1	1	1

Economic Development Policies

1. Support economic development that provides diversified and stable local employment opportunities with competitive wages that will enhance Weston's small town rural character and that will protect the community's natural resources.
2. Encourage those industries which best utilize the raw materials or labor already available in Weston and which do not adversely affect the natural resources or scenic beauty of the Town.
3. Encourage up-to-date communication services.
4. Require that all agricultural, industrial and commercial operations adequately control wastes, be environmentally responsible, relate satisfactorily to existing land uses and account to the Town for both direct and indirect municipal costs.

5. Encourage businesses that support tourism and second homeowners by providing lodging, dining, recreational activities and necessary services.
6. Encourage home-based work and entrepreneurial ventures that preserve and revitalize the Town's character and add to the diversity of culture and activities available to residents and visitors.
7. Encourage farmlands to remain in a productive state and encourage land that has previously been used for farming to be returned to farming uses whenever possible. Encourage production and marketing of land-based activities such as agriculture and forest products.
8. Encourage and support Weston's cultural and spiritual based economy including civic, religious and non-profit organizations that contribute much to the quality and diversity of life in Weston.
9. Require that the construction, expansion or providing of public facilities and services not reduce the resource value of adjoining agricultural and forest lands.
10. Encourage sensible forest management practices in accordance with United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and applicable State law.

Recommendations for Action

1. Consider joining forces with other towns in the district to utilize the resources at Flood Brook School and nearby technical training centers to enhance employment opportunities for local residents.
2. Help the Town prepare a capital budget.
3. Form an economic development committee to prepare an economic development plan for the Town to enhance business capabilities, including high speed, broadband telecommunications service.