



To: Weston Planning Commission

From: Matt Bachler, Senior Planner

Date: January 4, 2024

RE: Review of Natural, Scenic, Historical, and Cultural Resources Chapter and Education Chapter

Review of Natural, Scenic, Historical, and Cultural Resources Chapter

WRC will lead a discussion with the Planning Commission at the January 11th public meeting on the Natural, Scenic, Historical, and Cultural Resources Chapter. As an attachment, I have provided a copy of the 2016 Town Plan (see page 20) and the Natural Resources Map from the plan.

Statewide Planning Goals

In reviewing this chapter, it can be helpful to keep in mind the statewide planning goals for this section of the Town Plan and consider how the current plan is doing at achieving these goals. The relevant state planning goals are provided below:

- To identify, protect, and preserve important natural features of the Vermont landscape, including significant natural and fragile areas; outstanding water resources, including lakes, rivers, aquifers, shore lands, and wetlands; significant scenic roads, waterways, and views.
- To maintain and improve the quality of air, water, wildlife, and land resources.
- To identify, protect, and preserve important natural and historic features of the Vermont landscape, including significant scenic roads, waterway and views, important historic structures, sites, or districts, archeological sites, and archaeologically sensitive areas.

WRC Recommendations

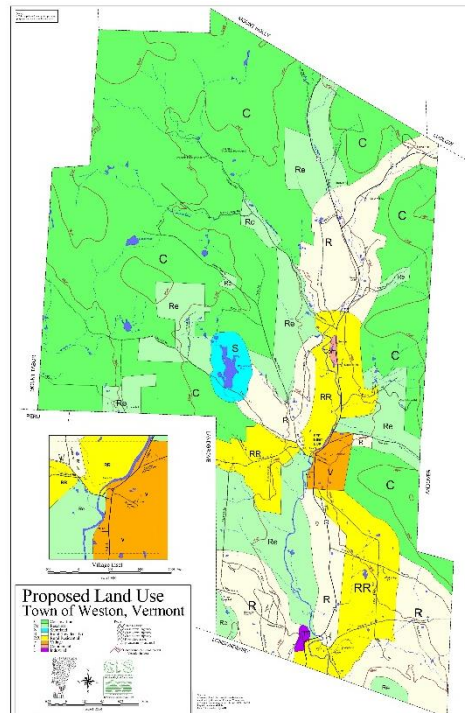
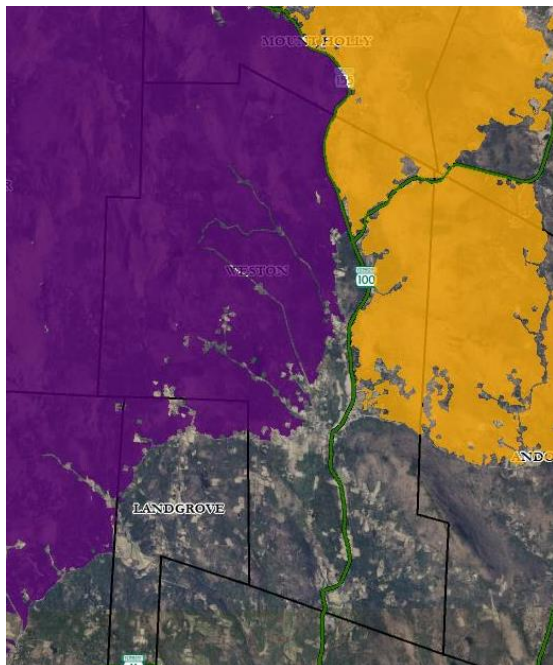
The existing Natural, Scenic, Historical, and Cultural Resources Chapter is very thorough and I would only recommend a few updates to the chapter in addition to any background data or information that needs to be updated since the last Town Plan was completed.

A. Natural Areas and Wildlife

Since the Town Plan was last updated, Act 171 has gone into effect requiring towns to include information on significant forest blocks and habitat connectors in their communities and policies on how the town will reduce forest fragmentation, enhance forest health, and support ecological functions. Forest blocks and habitat connectors have been mapped statewide by the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR). State statute provides the following definitions for forest blocks and habitat connectors:

- Forest Block: a contiguous area of forest in any stage of succession and not currently developed for non-forest use. A forest block may include recreational trails, wetlands, or other natural features that do not themselves possess tree cover.
- Habitat Connector: land or water, or both, that links patches of wildlife habitat within a landscape, allowing the movement, migration, and dispersal of animals and plants and the functioning of ecological processes.

The map below on the left shows High Priority Forest Blocks (purple) and High Priority Habitat Connectors (orange) as identified by the ANR in Weston. These areas largely correspond with land within the Green Mountain National Forest or the Okemo State Forest. The Proposed Land Use Map from the 2016 Town Plan is provided below on the right. You will see that there is general overlap between the High Priority Forest Blocks and Habitat Connectors and the Conservation District (dark green) designated by the town.



The Land Use Chapter in the 2016 Plan notes that the Conservation District contains lands that are very sensitive development and are characterized by significant resources such as productive forests, high elevations, steep slopes, wetland areas, and stream banks. The Plan includes the policies that lands in the Conservation District are not desirable for dense development and that the primary use of these lands should be for agriculture, forestry, open space, and low-impact recreation. The Natural, Scenic, Historical, and Cultural Resources Chapter also includes policies on ensuring that settlement on lands of resource value for woodlands should not substantially reduce the area or woodland productivity of those lands and that fragmentation of forest blocks should be avoided.

B. Water Resources and Quality

I would recommend updating this section to include information from the state on local surface water quality. Since the last plan update the Basin 11 Plan for the West, Williams, Saxtons, and Lower Connecticut Rivers has been updated. This plan includes recommended water quality improvement projects in Weston and I would recommend including a discussion on any recommended projects from the Basin Plan in the Town Plan. Finally, the Town is currently completing a study on the Old Mill dam on the West River and a discussion on this project should be included.

C. Cultural Resources

I would recommend expanding the section to include more information on the cultural resources in town and highlight the importance of these resources for the quality of life of residents and attracting visitors to the community. The impacts of the July 2023 floods on the Weston Playhouse Theater Company and other historic structures in the village area should also be included and the importance of flood resiliency for protecting these historical and cultural resources.

D. Policies

I would recommend the following new policies and changes to existing policies. Additional policies or changes to existing policies may be added as this section is reviewed and updated:

- I would recommend updating Natural Resource Land Use Policy #11, "Encourage efforts to continue the preservation of the Old Mill Dam," to reflect the current planning process for the dam.
- Natural Resource Land Use Policy #14: I would recommend updating to include required forest block and habitat connector language from Act 171.
- I would recommend adding a policy under the Natural Resource Land Use section on encouraging property owners to enroll in the Vermont Land Use Appraisal Program for forest and agricultural lands.
- I would recommend adding a policy under the Surface Water, Wetland, Watercourse, and Shoreline section on restricting development in flood hazard areas and river corridors and protecting the natural characteristics of these areas.
- I would recommend moving Historic and Cultural Policy #1 ("Strengthen the role of cultural and artistic disciplines in public education") to the Education Chapter.

Review of Education Chapter

WRC will also lead a discussion with the Planning Commission at the January 11th public meeting on the Education Chapter. The Education Chapter begins on page 27 in the 2016 Town Plan. The relevant state planning goal for the Education Chapter is provided below:

- Broaden access to educational and vocational training opportunities to ensure the full realization of the abilities of all Vermonters.

WRC Recommendations

The main recommendation I have for this chapter is updating the background section to address changes to the local education system based on the Act 46 reforms. This will likely require some modifications to the educational policies and recommendations for actions as well.