



To: Weston Planning Commission

From: Matt Bachler, Senior Planner

Date: April 30, 2024

RE: Weston Town Plan Update – Review of Introduction, Vision & Goals, Community Profile, Weston Values, Implementation, and Consistency with Vermont State Planning Goals Chapters

Background

WRC will lead a discussion with the Planning Commission at the May 6th public meeting on recommended updates to the following chapters of the Town Plan: Introduction, Weston Town Plan Vision and Goals, Community Profile, Weston Values, Implementing the Town Plan, and Consistency with Vermont's State Planning Goals. These from the current Town Plan are provided as an attachment.

Introduction

I would recommend including a discussion in this chapter about the process for the Planning Commission went through to develop the plan, including the community survey, public kick off meetings, the Planning Commission's monthly public meetings, and providing drafts of the chapter updates on Town's website. I would also recommend including information on the Town's authority to plan and the relevant statute sections.

Weston Town Plan Vision and Goals

Housing and flood resilience were important themes that came up during the Town Plan update process. The existing Objective #11 addresses housing, but it could be updated to better reflect current issues and the recommendations in the Housing Chapter. There is not currently an objective addressing flood resilience and I would recommend adding one to this section.

Community Profile

This chapter would be updated to include the data from the community profile completed at the beginning of the project. I would also recommend including a discussion under the Population section about the impact of seasonal and intermittent of second home population on provision of public facilities and services.

The Weston's Future section should be updated to better reflect the current challenges and concerns for the community, including rising housing costs, the need to balance additional residential development with protecting community character, and flood resiliency.

Implementing the Plan

In place of “Community Needs/Actions”, I would recommend using a table that includes all of the recommended actions from the different chapters. The table could include recommendations on who in town should take the lead or partner on the action step, the timeframe for completion (short-term, long-term, or on-going), and potential funding sources. This table could be placed at the end of this chapter.

Statute requires the Town Plan include a section that addresses the compatibility of Weston’s Town Plan with the plans for surrounding towns and the Regional Plan. This is currently addressed under “Relationship Between Plan and Plans for Surrounding Areas.” It would be beneficial to expand on this to better meet the statute requirement.

Consistency with Vermont State’s Planning Goals

I would recommend presenting the State Planning Goals and where they are addressed in the Town Plan in a table rather than list format. The Town Plan is not required to address the four process goals from statute and the town could consider removing these from the plan.

Introduction

The Town of Weston is a rural-residential community, located in the Green Mountains and noted for its open lands, natural forests and small compact village center. Although approximately half of residences in the Town are second homes, the people of Weston have a strong sense of community spirit.

Purposes of the Town Plan:

This Plan has been prepared to set a direction for the Town's future that will sustain a vibrant and strong community. It represents a community vision of the future character of the Town, especially with regard to its priorities for land use and conservation of historical, cultural, social and natural resources.

A primary objective of the Plan is to formulate public policy for the effective and harmonious economic, environmental and social development of the Town. The underlying aim of the Plan is to promote the public health, safety, convenience, efficiency, economy, and general welfare of the community and its residents. In doing so, the Plan seeks to foster a proper balance for future growth in the Town, taking into consideration the desires of the people who live in Weston, community needs, the economic and environmental impacts of possible changes, and the physical and economic constraints to development.

This Plan will serve as:

- > A policy framework for the Town to help achieve the objectives of its people, and to define the opportunities and limitations for prospective changes in the Town.
- > The foundation for existing and future by-laws or ordinances.
- > A guide for the Selectboard, Planning Commission and other town officials in their routine business, in implementing the actions recommended in the Plan, and in their consideration of proposals which would have an impact on the Town.
- > A guide for the District Environmental Commission and Regional Planning Commission as they review any proposals for development and subdivision that come under their respective jurisdictions.

Weston Town Plan Vision and Goals

Town Plan Goals consist of statements of objectives, policies and programs to protect the built and natural environment and to guide future growth and development in the Town of Weston. The objectives of the Plan are:

1. To protect and preserve the rural nature, scenic quality and sense of community of Weston.
2. To encourage, support and maintain a community of residents and property owners with age, social and economic diversity.
3. To address the Town's changing needs through a continuous planning process involving input from members of the community.
4. To maintain the Town's historic development pattern with a compact village center (tight, cohesive settlement patterns without strip development or sprawl) within a rural setting, surrounded by undeveloped areas.
5. To assure that basic needs of health, safety and education will be met and maintained at appropriate levels in accordance with the Town Plan.
6. To maintain the Town's growth to be consistent with the Town's ability to provide and pay for satisfactory educational, highway, fire protection and other usual public services, and to discourage growth that will place an undue burden upon the Town's taxpayers or otherwise leads to excessive increases in the tax rate.
7. To encourage and preserve the use of lands for agricultural and forestry purposes in order to keep these resources productive and to preserve the rural character of the historic landscape outside the village center.
8. To encourage energy conservation and work to achieve a balance between the use of renewable energy sources and the aesthetic impacts of renewable energy facilities.
9. To assure that any project for increasing the capacity of any existing highway or developing any new highways will be consistent with the general character of the Town and to require that, where possible, public utilities and transmission facilities share the use of corridors in order to minimize the impact on the environment and to assist desired development patterns.
10. To protect significant natural areas and locations of special educational, scenic, historical, architectural, and archeological significance.
11. To encourage housing that meets the needs of a diverse population and will serve residents from all walks of life.
12. To maintain and support a strong, sustainable, diverse economy that provides employment and ownership opportunities for Town residents.
13. To preserve the character of the village center with mixed uses at a scale appropriate to the architecture and historic character of Weston.
14. To encourage the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational endeavors.
15. To encourage the continuation of community spirit and service and to foster an atmosphere conducive to community endeavors.
16. To assure the availability of safe and affordable childcare and early childhood education.

Community Profile

History of Weston:

Weston was originally the “West Town” of the town of Andover, whose charter was granted in 1761 as part of the New Hampshire Grants. Over the years Weston became a thriving village with mills, inns, other enterprises, farms and houses. In 1799, Weston was separated from Andover and incorporated as a town by the Vermont Legislature. By 1840, Weston had a population of 1,032.

Settlement Patterns:

In the 19th and early 20th century, the village center was the main commercial area of Weston, surrounded by lands that were predominantly dedicated to agriculture and forestry with many of the parcels in excess of 100 acres. Over time many of these operations became uneconomical, and their owners abandoned the farming or forestry, often selling to people who were not dependent upon or interested in these pursuits. Some of these large parcels reverted to their natural state; others saw a reduction in the acreage of fields.

In the 1930s, the H.C. Jacquith Co. sold several hundred acres to the National Forest, further changing the future of Weston’s landscape. At the same time, many part-time/second homes began to be built. Land that was once valued for its commercial and agricultural use became valuable for its “appearance”, including open fields and quaint farmhouses and barns. Land that was not appropriate for agriculture or pasture became valued for its views and vistas.

Present land use in Weston is primarily rural-residential in character and is still somewhat related to agriculture and forestry although not as much as in the past. Several hundred acres have been placed under conservation easements. Because of conservation efforts and the National Forest, the overall density of settlement is relatively low. The settlement pattern has been influenced by the physical composition of the land, especially topography and its septic capacity.

At the center of Weston is the designated Village Center containing numerous residences and community facilities. These include the Town offices, the fire station, the Weston Playhouse/community center, two churches, a library, restaurants, the post office, an inn and several retail establishments. The village center is very picturesque with a village green and many 19th century buildings that are on the National Historic Register. Today the village center is a “tourist attraction” with thousands of visitors flocking each year to visit the Vermont Country Store, and the Weston Playhouse.

Residential settlement occurs mainly along the many gravel roads that fan out from Route 100, which is the major N-S thoroughfare through the Town. Farm acreage and open fields continue to be converted to residential use. Over the years there have been a number of small subdivisions of 2 to 9 lots and four major subdivisions. There also is a significant pattern of large individual lots of 25 acres or more. This development pattern fragments the landscape and has raised the concern the character of Weston may become more suburban in nature with a population of retirees or people commuting elsewhere to work. However, despite this development, Weston still has a considerable amount of undeveloped open land and forest areas. Preserving these spaces and encouraging working use of the landscape is vital to maintaining the rural character valued by Weston residents.

Outside the Village Center there are three inns/motels, a summer music school, and the Weston Priory. Many home occupations are scattered throughout the Town. The public and quasi-public land under local ownership is associated with the municipal buildings, the firehouse, churches and cemeteries. Several properties are owned by non-profit organizations including the Weston Playhouse, the Village Green, Kinhaven Music School and the Weston Recreation Club.

Population:

Weston's population peaked in the 19th century with close to 1,000 residents and fell to a low of about 400 people in the 1930s, the 2014 estimated population is at 586. Weston has a significant second-home population, a majority in fact. If each second home averaged 2.5 occupants Weston's overall population would be in the vicinity of 1200 individuals.

According census data and estimates from the American Community Survey (ACS), Weston's resident population is older and wealthier than the State of Vermont average. Further, according to the Vermont Department of Labor, Weston's current unemployment rate is below the state average. As will be discussed in the Education chapter, Weston's number of school age children, despite some year to year fluctuation, has been declining.

Year	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1920	1930
Number of Weston Residents	1032	950	932	931	987	864	756	436	411

Year	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2014
Number of Weston Residents	457	468	442	507	627	488	630	566	586

Sources: Windham Regional Commission- *Town of Weston Profile 2014* Windsor County Town Census Records: *Vermont History Explorer*

Housing:

In 2014, the number of houses in Weston totaled 589 with 274 as primary residences and 315 second homes. New housing construction dropped significantly after the 2008 recession with only one, two or three new residences constructed each year compared to a half dozen or more prior.

Economic Base:

Weston's economy, chiefly dairy farming and forestry through the 19th and first half of the 20th century, is now based on retail sales, construction and service businesses, including providing services to second homeowners and retirees. The Vermont Country Store and the Weston Priory attract a large number of visitors year round and the Weston Playhouse Theatre Company and Kinhaven Music School, in addition to attracting visitors, bring a significant number of actors, musicians, and technical staff to the Town. Several recent agricultural ventures are showing economic viability and are adding a new dimension to Weston's commercial base.

Topography/Physical Attributes:

Open fields, forests, tight mountains and the West River Valley characterize Weston, with a total of 22,247 acres. The Green Mountain National Forest owns 9,340 acres, approximately 860 acres are in the Okemo State Forest, an estimated 450 acres are used for agriculture, and 36.2 acres are in the village center. Some of the present farmland and the Village Center lie in the floodway and flood hazard areas of the West River.

Weston's Future:

During the last two decades of the 20th century and up to the 2008 recession too rapid growth was a major concern to Weston residents. Robust real estate sales, rising home prices and multiple subdivision developments in town and the region drove fears that Weston would lose its character, would be un-affordable to the less affluent and would look more like suburbia than the rural retreat many found so appealing.

Changing economic conditions, social and cultural attitudes and practical realities have slowed growth and some of the concerns associated with it. Agriculture is making a slow comeback, real estate prices, while still considered high by many, have stabilized and little development is currently taking place.

Many of Weston's residents, second homeowners and visitors may feel the Town is experiencing a particularly optimum combination of factors for the time being. The Town's cultural institutions (The Weston Playhouse Theater, Kinhaven, The Priory, Church on the Hill) are popular, well regarded and generously supported. Commerce, though not growing significantly, appears to be stable. Weston remains a popular tourist and second home destination providing the Town with a meaningful economic benefit. Development has slowed, much open land has been conserved and agriculture is experiencing a rebound.

Despite this relative satisfaction with current conditions and, as Vermont and Weston have seen before, this could change rapidly and in unpredictable ways. The Town's population is aging, young families find it difficult to locate affordable housing and good, long term, stable employment. School population is declining. Changing tastes may diminish Vermont's appeal as a destination location. Taxes remain a concern. Dependence on tourism as the prime economic driver does not make for a diverse economy. Environmental issues, from local development to global warming, are a continuing threat. Major weather events such as Tropical Storm Irene can devastate the community with little warning. Substance abuse is at crisis levels in the region.

These concerns and others present a challenge to Weston's citizens, elected officials and the Planning Commission. It is the goal of this Plan to address many of these issues on a local level and look for common understanding and solutions.

Weston Values

The Town offers an outstanding “quality of life” to its residents, both permanent and part-time, including:

- > A rural-residential town, with a cohesive and picturesque village center comprised of residences, thriving businesses, and public facilities.
- > A clean environment with natural beauty -- open fields, scenic vistas, mountains, river, valleys, wildlife and forests.
- > A sparsely populated community of people with diverse backgrounds and interests working together to maintain a cohesive community.
- > Opportunity for outdoor recreation.
- > Opportunity for cultural and spiritual activities.
- > Opportunity for community participation and service.

The people of the Town value these qualities and wish to protect and perpetuate them for future generations, while recognizing that over time change is inevitable. This Plan is an attempt to manage and guide this change in a way that will maintain and improve our quality of life.

The Weston Planning Commission also recognizes that as the needs of a community change, the laws, which protect its citizens’ way of life, must reflect and support their needs, desires and rights. With this in mind the Planning Commission is committed to periodic evaluation and modification of the Plan to see that it remains responsive to the wishes of the community.

Implementing the Town Plan

Effective implementation of this Plan requires careful consideration and action by the Townspeople, their Selectboard, Planning Commission, and other local boards, commissions and organizations. As the Town continues to grow and come under additional development pressure, Weston will need to develop methods to deal with the inevitable problems. Among the many available methods which should be considered, are the following:

1. **Planning:** The Weston Town Plan must constantly be reviewed and, if necessary, amended to reflect new developments and changed conditions affecting the Town. The existing planning program should be strengthened, with the Town boards, especially the Planning Commission, taking the lead. Discussions of planning issues should become a regular part of their agendas. Effort by all the people of the Town is needed to sustain and enrich such programs.
2. **Community Needs/Actions:** The Plan contains a set of recommended actions. . Following approval of the Plan, the Planning Commission should work with representatives of the community and establish a schedule for the discussion and possible implementation of these recommendations.
3. **Land Use Regulations:** Zoning bylaws, including flood hazard, shoreland and wetland regulations, subdivision regulations and other ordinances allow the Town to permit, prohibit, restrict, regulate and determine land development, including, without limitation, the following:
 - a) Specific uses of land, watercourses and other bodies of water.
 - b) Dimensions, location, erection, construction, repair, maintenance, alteration, razing, removal, and use of structures.
 - c) Areas and dimensions of land to be occupied by uses and structures, as well as areas, yards and other open spaces and distances to be left unoccupied by uses and structures.
 - d) Density of populations and intensity of use.

Such land use regulations may, if necessary, be used to assure the public health and safety, environmental quality and protection of the quality of life.

4. **Land Acquisition:** Acquisition by the Town in fee simple, by lease, by easements of development rights, and by gift are the most certain methods for protecting and assuring access and enjoyment of valuable recreational and scenic lands. Landowners can also negotiate conservation agreements with organizations such as the Vermont Land Trust, and the Nature Conservancy to protect productive agricultural and forestlands, protect wildlife habitat, natural areas, or public recreation lands.
5. **Taxation:** Vermont's Use Value Appraisal Program encourages long-term agriculture and forestry uses of property through tax incentives. The Program encourages the maintenance of undeveloped land for farming, forestry, and public recreation. The Town may also provide property tax relief for qualifying farm, forest, and open space landowners by adopting local tax stabilization programs to reduce local property tax burden. For general purposes, the assessing and taxing of land shall seek to strengthen the policies spelled out in this Town Plan, so long as they do not conflict with State laws or policies.

6. **Voluntary Action:** Privately-agreed restrictive covenants binding on purchasers of land, special attention and consideration given by private landowners to the objectives of this Plan and its policies when they decide to build or subdivide, formation of non-profit conservation or community land trusts, participation in the Act 250 review process by abutting landowners, and participation in Town planning by citizens concerned about the future of Weston are all ways to implement this Plan.

7. **Relationship Between Plan and Plans for Surrounding Areas:** The relationship between the Plan and the development trends in, and Plans for, the surrounding area has been considered. It is the goal of this Plan, and future planning processes, to communicate and cooperate with neighboring towns in addressing mutual concerns on matters such as roads, educational facilities, state aid, health care, economic development, land development, waste disposal and recycling. Further goals include planning regional development by participating actively in the Windham Regional Commission and in the Mountain Towns Regional Education District (RED).

Consistency with Vermont's State Planning Goals

Weston's response to the Vermont Planning Goals (24 V.S.A. § 4302) can be found throughout the Plan. Often times the goals, and therefore the responses, overlap from section to section. Our specific responses to the goals will be listed as they are found in our objectives, policies and action steps.

The Weston Town Plan was prepared by the Weston Planning Commission with assistance from the Windham Regional Commission. It contains all of the required statements, plans, elements and maps pursuant to 24 VSA Section 4382 .

As required by Act 200, both the Planning Commission and the Selectboard held public hearings prior to the re-adoption of this Plan by the Selectboard. In addition, prior to the public hearings the Planning Commission conducted an informal meeting to get input from the general public, and received advice and assistance from the Windham Regional Commission. Comments were solicited from bordering towns, Windham Regional Commission and the State Agency of Development and Community Affairs.

Under Vermont law, a town plan expires five years from the date of adoption. This Plan updates the previous Town Plan adopted by the Selectboard in 2011. In 2021 the Town must review this Plan, revise it where necessary and readopt or replace it.

Goal 1: *To plan development so as to maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside. Intensive residential development should be encouraged primarily in areas related to community centers, and strip development along highways should be discouraged. Economic growth should be encouraged in locally designated growth areas. Public investments should reinforce the general character and planned growth pattern of the area.*

- Results of Public Meeting
- Town Plan Goals
- General Land Use Policies
- General Land Use Actions
- Residential District Policies
- Village District Policies
- Economic Development Policies
- Transportation Policies
- Natural Resources Land Use Policies
- Historic and Cultural Policies
- Historic and Cultural Actions

Goal 2: *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.*

- Town Plan Goals
- Commercial District Policies
- Industrial District Policies
- Economic Development Policies

Goal 3: *To broaden access to educational and vocational training opportunities sufficient to ensure the full realization of the abilities of all Vermonters.*

- Town Plan Goals
- Educational Policies
- Historic and Cultural Policies

Goal 4: *To provide for safe, convenient, economic and energy efficient transportation systems that respects the integrity of the natural environment, including public transit options and paths for pedestrians and bicyclers.*

- Results of Public Meeting
- Village District Policies
- Economic Development Actions
- Transportation Policies
- Transportation Actions
- Recreation Actions

Goal 5: *To identify, protect and preserve important natural and historic 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; important historic structures, sites, or districts, archaeological sites and archaeologically sensitive areas.*

- Town Plan Goals
- Economic Development Policies

Goal 6: *To maintain and improve the quality of air, water, wildlife, and land resources.*

- Town Plan Goals
- General Land Use Policies
- Rural Residential District Policies
- Commercial District Policies
- Transportation Policies
- Recreation Policies
- Natural Resources Land Use Policies
- Wildlife Policies

Goal 7: *To encourage the efficient use of energy and the development of renewable energy resources.*

- Town Plan Goals
- Energy Policies

Goal 8: *To maintain and enhance recreational opportunities for Vermont residents and visitors. Growth should not significantly diminish the value and availability of outdoor recreational activities. Public access to noncommercial outdoor recreational opportunities, such as lakes and hiking trails, should be identified, provided and protected wherever appropriate.*

- General Land Use Policies
- Recreation Policies
- Natural Resources Land Use Policies

Goal 9: *To encourage and strengthen agricultural and forest industries. Strategies to protect long-term viability of agricultural and forest lands should be encouraged and should include maintaining low overall density. The manufacture and marketing of value-added agricultural and forest products should be encouraged. The use of locally grown food products should be encouraged. Sound forest and agricultural management practices should be encouraged. Public investment should be planned so as to minimize development pressure on agricultural and forestland.*

- Results of Public Meeting

- Town Plan Goals
- General Land Use Policies
- Rural Residential District Policies
- Rural Low Intensity District Policies
- Commercial District Policies
- Economic Development Policies

Goal 10: *To provide for the wise and efficient use of Vermont's natural resources and to facilitate the appropriate extraction of earth resources and the proper restoration and preservation of the aesthetic qualities of the area.*

- General Land Use Policies
- Natural Resources Land Use Policies
- Mineral Resources Policies

Goal 11: *To ensure the availability of safe and affordable housing for all Vermonters. Housing should be encouraged to meet the needs of a diversity of social and income groups, particularly for those citizens of low and moderate income. New and rehabilitated housing should be safe, sanitary, located conveniently to employment and commercial centers, and coordinated with the provision of necessary, public facilities and utilities. Sites for multi-family and manufactured housing should be readily available in locations similar to those generally used for single-family conventional dwellings. Accessory apartments within or attached to single-family residences which provide affordable housing in close proximity to cost-effective care and supervision for relatives or disabled or elderly person should be allowed.*

- Town Plan Goals
- General Land Use Policies
- Energy Policies
- Housing Policies

Goal 12: *To plan for, finance and provide an efficient system of public facilities and services to meet future needs, including fire and police protection, emergency medical services, schools, water supply and sewage and solid waste disposal. The rate of growth should not exceed the ability of the Town to provide facilities and services*

- Result of Public Meeting
- General Land Use Policies
- Transportation Policies
- Transportation Actions
- Town Government, Community Facilities and Services Policies
- Natural Resources Land Use Policies

Goal 13: *To ensure the availability of safe and affordable child care and to integrate childcare issues into the planning process, including childcare financing, infrastructure, and business assistance for child care providers, and child care work force development.*

- Town Plan Goals
- Educational goals

Goal 14: *To assess and plan for potential emergencies resulting from heavy inundation and erosion events and be prepared for such events. Also to identify river corridors, floodplains, wetlands and forest areas that attenuate and moderate flooding and erosion in order to protect them from unnecessary development or degradation.*

- Town Flood Resilience Plan
- Town Local Hazard Mitigation Plan



Process Goal 1: *To establish a coordinated, comprehensive planning process and policy framework that shall guide decisions by municipalities, regional planning commissions, and state agencies.*

- Results of Public Meeting
- Town Plan Goals
- Education Policies
- Process Goal

Process Goal 2: *To encourage citizen participation at all levels of the planning process, and to assure that decisions shall be made at the most local level possible commensurate with their impact.*

- Results of Public Meeting
- Education Policies

Process Goal 3: *To consider the use of resources and the consequences of growth and development for the region and the state, as well as the community in which it takes place.*

- Results of Public Meeting
- General Land Use Policies
- Natural Resources Land Use Policies
- Economic Development Policies
- Flood Resilience Policies

Process Goal 4: *To encourage and assist municipalities to work creatively together to develop and implement plans.*

- Results of Public Meeting
- Education Actions
- Process Goal