

Here is the Planning Commission's **PROPOSED DRAFT REVISION** of the '**Introduction**' of the **Bethel Town Plan**. By State Statute, the Town Plan is revised every five years. The Planning Commission will hold a duly warned public hearing in mid-June on this and, depending on comments received then, will transmit it to the Select Board, which will hold a hearing at the end of July. Public comments are appreciated. Formal adoption by the Select Board is anticipated by August 13, 2006.

## **I INTRODUCTION**

### **A. SHAPING BETHEL'S FUTURE**

Bethel has undergone major economic and social changes over the past 45 years. It has moved away from the traditional base of agriculture and forestry to one of service industries and light manufacturing. Bethel's population increased from 1,356 to 1,962 between 1960 and 2000. However there are now more workers residing in Bethel who work outside of town than those who have jobs in town. Bethel has become a 'bedroom community'.

Change stimulates the need for the community to examine its current conditions and to evaluate its prospects for the future. Change can be beneficial or it can be detrimental to the long-term welfare of the community. In order to understand the implications of change, the community must understand the problems and opportunities facing it, and identify goals for the future. Bethel has made a deliberate choice to establish a municipal planning program, to provide for orderly development, to balance its natural and built environments, and to retain its rural landscape.

A grounded Town Plan is the foundation for ensuring appropriate development and conservation of the community's resources. Effective town planning will reduce conflicts arising from change.

### **B. ORGANIZATION OF TOWN PLAN**

1. **Table of Contents:** Listing of topics addressed in the Town Plan sections in the order that they appear.
2. **Background:** Narrative with relevant facts and up-date information for each section, which helps give context to the planning process.
3. **Appendices:** Consolidated 'Goals,' 'Planning Principles,' and 'Recommendations for Action' for each section appropriate for the ensuing five years:
  - a. **Goals:** Broad-based statements setting forth the long-term objectives of the community;
  - b. **Planning Principles:** Statements and strategies that direct possible courses of action to implement Bethel's goals;
  - c. **Recommendations for Action:** Specific activities Bethel could take to implement the Town Plan goals.

### **C. GENERAL PURPOSE AND INTENT OF THE PLAN**

The Bethel Town Plan is an official statement on the growth and development of the Town. The Plan serves as an expression of values and a vision for growth and management for the next five years. It is not intended to be a static or inflexible document. The Planning Commission will periodically review and update this Plan to reflect new conditions and needs. The public has a responsibility to remain involved in implementing this Plan. Under the provisions of the Vermont Planning and Development (24 V.S.A. Chapter 117), this Plan is effective for a period of five years from date of adoption or amendment, unless readopted.

The format of this Plan is intended to include all plan elements as required by law and to be consistent with the general purposes and goals of 24 V.S.A. Section 4302. The Bethel Town Plan is compatible with the approved plans of other municipalities in the region and with the Regional Plan. This compatibility insures a coordinated, comprehensive planning process and policy framework to guide decisions of municipalities, regional planning commissions and state agencies.

The general purposes and intent of this Plan are:

1. To establish land use goals that provide adequate space for needed types of land use, both public and private, in locations that minimize the adverse impact of one land use on another;
2. To facilitate a process that allows for the protection of, and judicious use of, the Town's soils, minerals and stone, forests, agricultural lands, waters, wildlife, and other natural resources;
3. To provide for a healthful distribution of population and structures in the Town taking into consideration traffic congestion; fire, flooding, and other dangers; reduction of noise, air and water pollution; and protection of access to light and air; To facilitate the adequate and economical provision of transportation, water, sewage disposal, schools, parks, and other public requirements in relation to growth and to encourage the appropriate and efficient expenditure of public funds and economy in the process of development;
4. To provide an energy plan for Bethel which will analyze the Town's energy resources, needs, scarcities, costs and problems, and which will encourage energy conservation; and
5. To conserve the Town's historic sites and districts, which are significant contributors to the Town's essential character and economic vitality. To identify a process for the future preservation of sites and structures and village center that might deserve local, state, or federal designation.

The specific objectives of this Plan are:

1. To protect the rural character of the Town;
2. To continue Bethel village as a town center;
3. To protect existing and future historical resources;
4. To provide safe, healthful and affordable housing for all segments of the population;
5. To prevent the creation of traffic hazards and congestion and aesthetically displeasing development on Routes 107 and 12 and within the village center; and
6. To promote environmentally sound development practices.

### **D. HISTORY OF TOWN PLANNING IN BETHEL**

Bethel's planning history began in 1948 when a Planning Committee was formed and which produced "A Twenty Year Plan for Bethel." This Plan provided a review of the community's

needs and plans for the future, including community services, taxes, education, and economic development.

Bethel established a formal planning program in the early 1970's when the Select Board appointed a Planning Commission. One of first tasks of the Commission was to develop a Town Plan. Following completion of the Plan in 1975, the Planning Commission drafted the first comprehensive zoning regulation that was adopted later that year. This regulation required local approval of land and building development prior to commencing a project. This regulation or amendments to it have been in place since that time. In the late 1980's, the Town adopted subdivision regulations. On October 15, 1996, the Development Review Board (DRB) was created to approve all subdivisions prior to division or sale. In 2005 the *Bethel Zoning Ordinance* and *Bethel Sub-division Regulations* were updated, revised and harmonized with the state's revision of the Vermont land use statute, Chapter 117 of the *Vermont Statutes Annotated*.

In January 2006, the Planning Commission sent a public survey to all registered voters and landowners in Bethel. The intent of the survey was to identify current attitudes regarding land use and development for consideration in this Town Plan up-date. From labels generated by the Town Listers (landowners) and Town Clerk (registered voters), one thousand two hundred and fifty-seven (1,257) surveys with return postaged envelopes enclosed were sent out. Forty-two (42) surveys were returned as 'undeliverable' by the postal service for which current addresses could not be unearthed, resulting in one thousand two hundred and fifteen (1,215) surveys distributed. Five hundred and two (502) returned surveys were available for the final tally- an exceptionally high response rate of just over forty-one per cent (41.1%).

Looking at 'numbers only' for each question, the following sentiments prevailed:

1. Commercial development should be focused in the Village Center.
2. It is important to have the Town Offices located in the Village Center.
3. Bethel's municipal infrastructure should not be extended.
4. More development than current zoning permits should be granted on a piece of property if soils and slope allow.
5. We should not continue to grow without further limits.
6. Bethel should try to attract tourist-related businesses and activities to town.
7. There are areas in Bethel where growth should not occur: critical wildlife habitat, forests & woods, and agricultural land.
8. The town should not pave more dirt roads.
9. Personal, professional and business life is affected by lack of access to wireless telecommunications technology.

Two to five single-spaced pages of comments accompanied each of these first nine questions on the survey. An over-riding sentiment was: 'fix what we already have before expanding.' Comments covered a wide range from opinion to personal experience –and- were not necessarily specific to the question they followed: many related to or overlapped with other questions as well. In general, comments were sincere, thought-provoking, and could undoubtedly assist as a foundation regarding public sentiment and aggregate priorities well beyond the Planning Commission's current task to up-date the Bethel Town Plan.

10. A plethora of suggested uses for the Town Hall as a community / recreation center were submitted. These responses in their entirety were forwarded to the Town Hall committee.

11. 'Very important' (>50% affirmative) desired atmospheres & environs, in descending order to respondents, are: Clean and healthy environment; Condition and maintenance of town roads; Woods and forests; Well-planned development; Wildlife; Farms and fields; Employment opportunities; Small town atmosphere; School system; Sense of community; The White River and its branches; Privacy; Village center; Rural character; Stores and public services; Scenic views.

'Somewhat important' desired atmosphere and environs are, again in descending order: Affordable housing; Zoning and land use; Light pollution; Building regulations.

Only four items were rated as 'not important' in double-digits, these same items however, were also in a 38-40% range as 'somewhat important': Access to I-89; Available child care; Available housing; Sidewalks and bike paths.

All materials pertinent to this endeavor (breakdown of landowner and voter numbers, tabulation of responses and all comments – as well as returned surveys) are on file at the Bethel Town Office. Copies of response tallies and all comments can be made available to interested parties and have been made available to Town Officials and local organizations (BBA, Rotary). Posting each question with accompanying comments on the Town webpage is being pursued.

Bethel's Plan expired in August 2006. This Plan replaces that earlier version. It contains all the elements required of a Plan per State law and includes sections pertaining to land use, transportation, natural resources, utilities and facilities, historic and cultural resources, energy, and implementation of the Plan.