

Here is the Planning Commission's **PROPOSED DRAFT REVISION** of the 'Town History' section 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.

## II TOWN HISTORY

Consisting of approximately 29,144 acres, the Town of Bethel is situated near the center of the watershed of the White River. The region is characterized by steep craggy hillsides covered with lush deciduous/coniferous forest and transected by narrow valleys.

The settlement of the town in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century transformed the virgin forest into a few hundred small farms and two small villages whose locations were rigidly set by topography. The major routes of travel across east central Vermont were restricted to the narrow valleys of the White River and its branches. This fact, together with the location of the best natural water-power sites, fixed the location of both villages. Until about 1835 the east village, then called Kinney's Mills, was the larger of the pair. Since that time the west village, then called Marsh's Mills, has been the largest in town. Its location at the junction of two major valleys, one of which leads to a practical route over the Green Mountains to the west, makes it a natural crossroads. The advent of the railroad in 1848 highlighted this situation. Since that time the growth of the west village continued even at times when the population of the town as a whole decreased. By the time of the Civil War, the name Marsh's Mills had been replaced by "Bethel Village". Rural localities grew during this early period—Locust Creek, 'Lympus, Lilliesville, Gilead, Camp Brook, and Christian Hill. Their schools and/or churches functioned as social centers but none of these localities contributed significantly to the economic development of the town. The 1840 census records 1,886 citizens in the Town of Bethel.

Between 1840 and the 1880's, Bethel experienced a net population decline. The lure of better farmland and employment opportunities in the West combined with declining soil fertility on hill farms encouraged emigration. Where tillage was the poorest, farms were sometimes abandoned. The decline of small hill farm communities continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As this shift occurred, hillsides slowly recovered from open pastures to thick, second growth forestland and some of the more remote roads fell into disuse.

With increased mechanization available toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bethel Village sustained its "Golden Age" from the late 1880's until the early 1920's and developed an industrial character. The three largest industries of the era—the shoe shop, the tannery and the white granite quarry and cutting sheds—flourished because of the ease of railroad transportation, the availability of local workers and the influx of European immigrants skilled in granite extraction, cutting and sculpting. During this period Bethel proudly enhanced its community with major cultural and civic improvements including the town hall, the first high school and library, electric lighting, new churches, and civic and business organizations. Main street businesses thrived as they supported the many needs of the community. By 1910, the town population grew to 1,953 with nearly 50% of the citizens residing in the Village.

Economic markets shifted and by 1922-23, Bethel's leading industries were no longer competitive with larger manufacturing centers. Many of the skilled workers, including recent immigrants, left Bethel in search of work elsewhere. The next 50 years were characterized by only modest employment opportunities in the Village (Fyles & Rice plywood, Bethel Mills, the Creamery and GW Plastics). With the advent of refrigeration and more farm mechanization around WWI, dairy farming and the export of dairy products sustained the agricultural community. Over the next half-century, market forces gradually affected this economic sector until fewer than five dairy farms remained by 1970. The town recorded a low of 1,347 citizens in the 1970 census.

Bethel's population has been increasing over the last 35 years for a variety of reasons: (1) the post-WWII baby boom, (2) the construction of the interstate system and the placement of interstate Exit #3 three miles from the village center, (3) new and expanding major employers and (4) the in-migration of new-to-Vermont residents for recreation, retirement or resettlement. Because of its location and accessibility, the town is growing more so into a "bedroom community" of residents whose work and shopping preferences take them outward in a radius of at least 30 miles. Much of this residential growth has occurred and future growth will continue to occur through the subdivision of remaining large agricultural and forested tracts of land.