

Here is the Planning Commission’s **PROPOSED DRAFT REVISION** of the ‘**Agriculture & Forestry**’ 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.

XI. AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

A rural setting is valued by most people whether they work the land directly or not. The community’s welfare ultimately depends on the land. Our forest and agricultural lands contribute significantly to Vermont’s attractiveness to tourists, hunters, fisherpersons, hikers and campers, and they contribute indirectly to the economy by protecting our watersheds and our health. Land has been used for farming and forestry in Bethel since the town was first settled and the two have always been in flux. Most of Bethel’s 29,144 acres are forested, while 100 years ago a comparable amount of land was open and used for farming and grazing.

There are presently five dairy farms in Bethel, although they tend to work more acres than previously when there were more dairy farms. Farming has diversified with many small and part time agricultural operations growing things like lamb, beef, vegetables, maple syrup, herbs, flowers, nursery plants, and Christmas trees. Increasingly small processing operations are adding value to local agricultural and forest products, thus greatly increasing the amount of money that can be realized from these products and increasing local – and locally controlled – employment opportunities. Examples of value-adding processes include cordwood or furniture-making operations and cheese-making. Interest in locally grown high quality foods is increasing and is something that can benefit everyone in Bethel. As fossil fuels become more expensive growing foods closer to home will provide cost, as well as health, savings.

The viability of forestry is threatened by several state-wide trends. Land parcels are increasingly being subdivided into smaller lots. This trend has been most evident in areas close to Vermont’s major towns and cities, and spreads particularly where development suitability and road access is good. Another factor affecting the long-term sustainability of forestry is the relatively high level of taxation on land, compared to the low rate of return on the investment. Additionally, Federal and State estate tax laws can put family landowners into financial straits where they need to subdivide or develop farm or forestland in order to pay estate taxes.

Vermont’s Current Use Appraisal Program began in 1980 and has eased the tax burden on some of Bethel’s farm and timber landowners. Participation in the program has increased, although actual tax benefits have decreased over the years. The following chart compares 1994 and 2005 Current Use statistics for Bethel.

Year	# parcels enrolled	Total acres Enrolled	Acres in Agriculture	% in Agriculture	Acres in Forestry	% in Forestry
1994	85	9,250 a.	1,250 a.	14%	8,000 a.	86%
2005	125	12,087 a.	1,306 a.	10.8%	10,746 a. (+35 a. in non-productive forest)	88.9%

Forestry is a significant part of the area's economy, providing jobs for the lumber and wood products industries. Agriculture continues to employ area residents, providing food products, keeping local money in the local economy, providing open space and scenic views, and continuing a land use tradition characteristic of Bethel.

Both forestry and farming are long-term economies which demand patient and long-term approaches to land use. Local planning can help to sustain agriculture and forestry. The goals can be to conserve these resources over a long period of time and also to work to reduce the overall tax burdens facing open space property owners.

[See Appendices A, B & C for 'Goals,' 'Planning Principles,' and 'Recommendations for Action,' respectively, for Agriculture & Forestry and other sections of this Town Plan.]