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IMPLEMENTING GROWTH CENTERS IN VERMONT

A View from the Towns

Prepared for
THE VERMONT PLANNERS ASSOCIATION

by

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Approved by the Vermont Planners Association
Executive Committee
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The Vermont Planners Association (VPA) is an organization representing citizen and professional planners, landscape architects, housing and economic development specialists, developers, and engineering consultants from throughout the state. VPA is committed to advancing the art and science of planning.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: This study attempted to assess interest in growth center planning among local planners, to identify obstacles faced by local planning efforts, and to identify possible state incentives that could encourage or enhance local growth center planning efforts. It was found that there is a lot of interest among Vermont's municipalities in growth center planning. A very high percentage of local planners are aware of the state's goal of creating compact settlements surrounded by rural areas. Most towns appear to have at least one growth center.

In addition, there is ongoing need for keeping local planners informed about growth centers and growth center planning techniques. In particular, the distinction between growth centers and downtowns or village centers seems unclear.

Many, if not most, Vermont municipalities are actively trying to encourage new development within their growth centers, primarily using zoning tools (higher densities and more non-residential uses).

Growth center planning efforts frequently encounter obstacles. The most common is the lack of infrastructure (primarily water and sewer service) to support additional development in growth centers, particularly at moderate densities. Other obstacles include lack of developable land, and local lifestyle preferences.

There appears to be considerable support for some type of formal process for designating growth centers as a means for targeting state programs and facilitating compact areas of development. There also appears to be support for additional state inducements to encourage both growth center planning and development within growth centers. Top among these is funding for infrastructure and increased funding for planning grants.

I. INTRODUCTION: The idea of growth centers as a land use strategy in Vermont has been discussed for over 25 years¹ when Vermont's Land Use and Development Law (Act 250) first included criteria addressing such concerns as the costs of scattered development and the impact of development on public investments. Throughout the 70s and 80s, the discussion evolved with various reports assessing the importance of encouraging some form of compact settlement patterns, and attempting to develop a specific definition for the term "Growth Center". In 1988 the Legislature passed Act 200 which amended Vermont's Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act and added the goal of planning development so as to "maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village or urban centers separated by rural countryside".

Throughout the 1990s, various definitions of "Growth Center" were proposed, all of which addressed different aspects of compact settlement. It was not until 1999 when the Vermont Planners Association published its report "Growth Centers in Vermont: A

¹ See "The Growth Center Concept in Vermont: A Timeline". Compiled by Cyndy Kozara of the Southern Windsor County Regional Planning Commission, January, 2006, and Appendix A of "Growth Centers in Vermont: A Vermont Solution to Sprawl.", Vermont Planners Association, 1999.

Vermont Solution to Sprawl” that it was recognized that attempting to develop a single, traditional definition was futile and that it would be more productive to identify a set of defining characteristics, most of which would be exhibited by a true growth center²

This approach began to be operationalized in such places as the Consolidated Plan prepared by the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs, which provided guidance for the federally funded Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, and the priority system used by the Agency of Natural Resources for funding local sewage treatment projects.

Closely related to Growth Centers, Vermont adopted a program to encourage the rehabilitation of and investment in historic downtowns and village centers (this was later expanded to include new town centers).

Nevertheless, as the twenty-first century began, it was evident that rural land was being converted to suburban and other uses at a rate far greater than the rate of increase in housing units or population. Sprawl was continuing. Growth centers were not capturing significant portions of new development.

In 2003, Governor Douglas established a broad based planning group to explore ways to encourage development in densely developed or compact areas, including downtowns, and village centers. The group’s report, “Draft Proposal for Growth Center and Master Plan/Master Permitting Legislation” was released in October of 2004³. This was followed in 2005 by attempts to create legislation that would implement the Growth Center concept by establishing incentives to both municipalities and developers. The Vermont Planners Association was an active participant in those discussions and early drafting efforts.

As the 2005 legislative session drew to a close, it was apparent that additional work was needed before effective legislation could be prepared. A legislative study group was established to work over the summer of 2005 to attempt to resolve differing approaches and generate revised legislation. In late 2005, a consolidated draft growth centers bill was prepared by the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy, and circulated for review and comment

As the Vermont Planners Association (VPA) participated in and listened to this discussion, VPA recognized that there was one group that was not being heard—local planning commissions. These were the people who were in the forefront in developing local municipal plans and the bylaws to implement them. VPA determined to initiate an outreach effort that would attempt to tap this unheard voice, to consolidate the thoughts and suggestions of local planners, and to communicate those ideas to the legislature and others interested growth center planning. VPA retained Michael J. Munson, Ph.D., AICP, to undertake this outreach effort. The project consisted of two parts. First, a

² “Growth Centers in Vermont: A Vermont Solution to Sprawl”, op. cit., pages 6 and 7.

³ The report of the Snelling Commission, October, 2004.

survey was sent to all municipal planning commissions asking a series of questions about growth centers, growth center planning, and State involvement in growth center implementation. Second, a series of regional growth center forums were conducted across the State, where local planners were asked for their assessment of how, specifically, the state could encourage more growth center planning and/or development in growth centers. The entire project was to be completed in time to share the results with the Legislature before it acted on the pending growth center legislation. This is the report from that study.

II. THE RESEARCH PLAN: In October of 2005 the VPA created a Growth Centers Committee⁴ to develop a proposed outreach initiative. It was recognized early in the design process that this effort would benefit from a partnership with Vermont's regional planning commissions. An agreement was reached for joint sponsorship of the effort with the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA). VPA agreed to retain a consultant to head up the project and report on the findings, and VAPDA, through its member regional commissions, agreed to distribute the survey questionnaires and arrange for a series of growth center forums.

A. The Survey: The intent was to survey municipal planning commissions throughout the State. The eleven regional planning commissions agreed to distribute the questionnaire to the chair of every municipal planning commission in its region, along with instructions to take the questionnaire to a planning commission meeting, respond to the questions, and return the completed questionnaire to the consultant by February 1, 2006. Questionnaires were sent to each of the approximately 250 municipalities in the State. A total of 80 useable questionnaires were returned, a response rate of over 30 percent. This is considered to be extremely high for a mail-out survey. While the questionnaires were anonymous, information from return envelopes suggested a reasonable statewide distribution.

The survey itself was brief, consisting of twelve questions. Respondents were first asked about their knowledge of Vermont's growth center policy and their perceptions of what constituted a growth center. The next series of questions focused on what towns were doing to implement growth centers if they had any. A third series of questions addressed sources of assistance in growth center planning. Finally, the notion of formal designation of growth centers was discussed, and possible incentives by which the State could encourage growth center planning were explored. A copy of the Questionnaire, a tabulation of responses to closed questions, and a list of responses to open-ended questions are included in the Appendix to this report.

B. The Forums: As a follow up to the survey, a series of forums were planned throughout the State. These forums were intended to both share the survey findings and further explore the types of incentives that local planners felt would be effective in

⁴ This committee included Michael Munson (chair), Sharon Murray, Sarah Hadd, Lee Nellis, and Karen Van Gilder. As the project evolved, participation from the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) was requested, and Greg Brown was designated as VAPDA's representative on the committee.

encouraging growth center planning and development. The regional planning commissions agreed to host and organize a series of four such forums, one serving each of the four quadrants of the State⁵.

The forum design was simple and was the same for all forums. Upon entry, participants were asked to identify what they felt were the most important defining characteristics of a growth center from a list derived from the original survey question and the responses to the open ended survey question. Then the results of the survey were shared and discussed. This was followed by a facilitated discussion of what incentives respondents felt would be effective in encouraging local growth center planning/development. This discussion ended by having participants identify those suggestions that they felt were most important. Finally, respondents were asked to state what they felt would be measures of success if we were to look back after ten years of growth center planning. A copy of the agenda and results for each forum are included in the Appendix. Unfortunately, the forums were not heavily attended, attracting a total of just over 30 participants.

D. Synthesis: The consultant was charged with preparing a written report that presents the findings of the survey and the forums, and that consolidates those findings into conclusions.

III. THE FINDINGS: Based on the survey, local planning commissions constitute a knowledgeable group. Just over 85 percent of the respondents reported that they were aware that Vermont had a policy of encouraging the settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside, otherwise known as growth centers⁶. There was no significant difference between responses from towns reporting that they had one or more growth center and responses from town reporting that they had no growth centers.

A. What is a Growth Center?: Respondents were not asked to define a growth center. Instead, they were presented with a list of seven characteristics and asked to check those that they thought were critical or defining characteristics of growth centers. The list is presented below, along with the percent of all respondents indicating that it was a critical or defining characteristic of a growth center.

For the most part, local planners agreed that the seven characteristics were important to growth centers. As might be expected, planners in municipalities that reported that they had at least one growth center were somewhat more inclined to agree that these seven

⁵ A Forum in South Burlington focused on the local planners in Addison County, Chittenden County, Franklin County and Grand Isle County. A forum in Hardwick served local planners in Caledonia County, Essex County, Lamoille County, Orleans County, and Washington County. A forum in Springfield served local planners in Orange County, Windham County and Windsor County. Finally, a forum in Wallingford was scheduled to serve local planners in Bennington and Rutland counties, but was cancelled due to lack of attendance.

⁶ A simple tabulation of the responses to the closed questions on the questionnaire is presented in the Appendix.

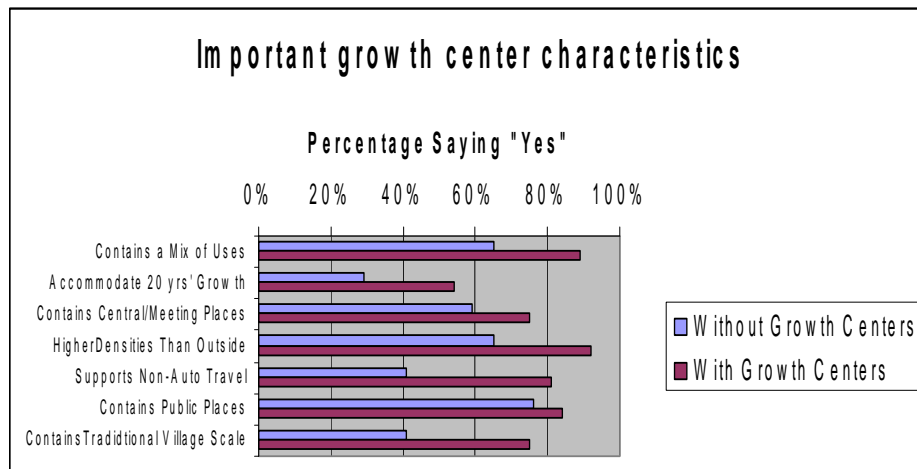
characteristics were important. Figure 1 illustrates the difference in responses between towns with and without growth centers.

**TABLE 1.
CRITICAL OR DEFINING GROWTH CENTER CHARACTERISTICS**

a. Mix of residential and non-residential uses.	83% said yes
b. Designed to accommodate most of the town's growth anticipated in the coming 20 years.	48% said yes
c. Contains central places and focal points.	70% said yes
d. Contains or is planned for densities higher than in surrounding areas.	86% said yes
e. Suitable for pedestrian and non-vehicular travel and supports transit use.	73% said yes
f. Contains public places that promote social interaction.	83% said yes
g. A pattern and scale of buildings that reflect traditional villages and urban areas.	68% said yes

The lone characteristic that was not obviously identified as being an important characteristic of growth centers is the one referring to being designed to accommodate most anticipated growth over the coming twenty years. Of all respondents, equal portions (48 percent) selected it as being important and left it blank. Of respondents from towns with growth centers, 54 percent selected it as important. Of respondents from towns without growth centers, only 29 percent selected it as important.

FIGURE 1.



The uncertain response to this characteristic may also reflect some confusion as to the difference between a growth center and a downtown or village center. The latter are designed to encompass primarily the historic centers which are already quite built out and

have limited capacity to accommodate future growth. Respondents who believed that growth centers were the same as downtowns or village centers would probably be uncomfortable with a defining characteristic of being able to accommodate twenty years of growth. On the other hand, respondents who believed that growth centers would include not only the historic center but substantial surrounding lands would not have that discomfort.

In addition to verifying the initial list of growth center characteristics, survey respondents were also asked to list additional characteristics that they felt were important. We received a total of thirty six suggestions, ten of which asserted that being served by municipal and public services (primarily water and sewer) was important, and three of which indicated that compact geographic size and clear separation from rural areas were important characteristics.

The following characteristics each received two mentions: Historic structures, cluster development, affordable housing, high speed internet service, and complete wireless phone coverage. Other suggestions were mentioned only once⁷.

The survey responses simply verified and supplemented the list of growth center characteristics. At the forums, an attempt was made to rank-order these characteristics by asking each forum participant to place one sticky dot on each of the five characteristics that they felt were most important. In this case the list included those on the original survey plus the most frequently offered suggestions received from the survey. The five top rated characteristics are shown in Table 2.

**TABLE 2.
TOP RATED GROWTH CENTER CHARACTERISTICS**

1.	Contains a mix of uses	Selected by 70% of participants
2.	Served by municipal services and facilities (water and sewer)	Selected by 67% of participants
3.	Designed to accommodate 20 years of anticipated growth	Selected by 55% of participants
4.	Suitable for pedestrian and non-vehicular travel and supports transit use	Selected by 55% of participants
5.	Contains densities higher than in rural areas	Selected by 52% of participants.

All other characteristics were selected by 41 percent or fewer of the forum respondents.

B. Local Efforts at Implementing Growth Centers: Most, but not all, survey respondents were from towns that actually contain growth centers. A total of 79 percent of the respondents reported that their town contained one or more growth centers, while 21 percent reported that their towns had no growth centers. Of those reporting growth centers, 57 percent stated that they had only one such center while 33 percent stated that

⁷ A complete list of responses to all of the open ended questions is presented in the Appendix.

they had two such centers. The remainder reported having more than two. The average number of growth centers in a town that had any growth centers was 1.6.

Of the respondents stating that their towns did have at least one growth center, 69 percent stated that they were actively trying to implement growth in their growth centers. Twenty-three percent reported that they were not actively trying to implement growth in their growth centers.

An open ended question asked respondents to indicate what tools they were using to encourage development in growth centers. We received 52 responses to this question, of which 48 percent stated that their town allowed higher densities in the growth centers than elsewhere, and 17 percent cited unspecified zoning provisions that probably refer to higher allowed densities. Other frequently cited incentives included incentives associated with designated downtowns or village centers, provision of water and sewer service within the growth center, and allowing mixed (commercial) uses inside the growth center.

Through a similar open ended question, respondents were asked to indicate tools they were using to discourage development in areas outside of their growth centers. We received 39 responses to this question. As might be expected, the most frequently noted tool was the requirement of lower densities outside of growth centers. This received 36 percent of the mentions. Similarly, unspecified zoning provisions (probably also density) received 23 percent of the mentions. Fifteen percent of the responses to this question asserted that no attempt was being made to discourage development outside of the growth centers.

Respondents were also asked to identify difficulties that they faced in attempting to implement their growth center planning. A total of 35 responses were received, all but five of which were mentioned by only one respondent. Those receiving multiple mentions included lack of waste water treatment capacity (7 mentions), lack of or inadequate zoning (5 mentions), geographic space constraints (5 mentions), no commercial center to start with (2 mentions), and second home owners don't want compact living areas (2 mentions).

Finally, respondents were asked if they were receiving assistance in their growth center planning efforts. Of all respondents, only 36 percent reported that they were and 58 percent reported that they were not. Of respondents stating that they were not receiving assistance, 38 percent stated that they would like some assistance. When only towns that reported having growth centers were considered, 42 percent stated that they were receiving assistance and 52 percent stated that they were not receiving assistance. Of the growth center towns stating that they were not receiving assistance, 58 percent stated that they would like some assistance. This may well represent an opportunity for regional planning commissions.

When asked what types of assistance would be helpful, a total of 59 separate suggestions were offered. In most cases a suggestion was offered by only one or two respondents,

reflecting the needs of their towns. However, four suggestions were offered by multiple respondents, and may help focus future efforts to assist in growth center planning. Most common was a plea for financial assistance for planning, and for the design and implementation of infrastructure. This was followed by requests for assistance in plan and ordinance writing to support growth centers. Finally, a few respondents asked for general information about growth centers, and for assistance in infrastructure planning.

As a closing question on this topic, respondents were asked if they were interested in learning more about growth centers and growth center planning. Three out of four respondents (75 percent) stated that they would. When only those towns that reported having one or more growth centers were considered, 79 percent stated that they would like to learn more. Surprisingly, among towns that did not report having growth centers, 53 percent of the respondents indicated that they would like to learn more about growth centers.

C. State Participation in Growth Center Planning/Implementation: Vermont is a state of small municipalities, and takes pride in the fact that land use decisions are, for the most part, made at the local level. Unfortunately, reliance on local planning to achieve the growth center objective of compact centers surrounded by rural areas has resulted in mixed and limited progress. In light of this, the final portion of the survey, and the forums, were designed to explore with local planners ways that state efforts could stimulate more effective growth center planning at the local level.

In recent years two state agencies have attempted to target some programs towards growth centers. First, the Department of Housing and Community Affairs attempted to target Community Development Block Grant funds to growth centers via the Department's Consolidated Plan. Second, the Agency of Natural Resources developed a priority rating process that attempted to direct funds for water and sewer system funding to growth centers. These efforts were noted on the survey form and respondents were asked if they thought that more state programs should be targeted to designated growth centers.

Of all respondents, 69 percent answered in the affirmative. There was virtually no difference between the responses from towns having one or more growth centers and those from towns having no growth centers. While local planners appeared to feel that targeting state programs to growth centers was a good idea, they were not as sure that doing so would encourage them to do more growth center planning. Only 56 percent of all respondents indicated that targeted state programs to growth centers would cause them to do more growth center planning. This was slightly higher (62 percent) among respondents in towns having growth centers.

Respondents were then asked to consider the situation where more state programs were actually targeted to growth centers, and then queried as to whether they felt that there should be some form of designation process for the targeted growth centers. Of all respondents, 68 percent thought this was a good idea. There was little difference between towns having growth centers and towns with no growth center, but the latter

group showed a slightly higher (72 percent) rate of affirmative answers.

When asked if they had any suggestions on how such a designation process should work, 39 respondents provided 54 separate comments. Not all of these suggestions were actually responsive to the question, and most were only noted by a single respondent. Nonetheless, the list makes interesting reading and is presented in the Appendix.

Of the 54 suggestions, eight were pleas for local control, and seven were suggestions that municipalities should work with the regional planning commissions to designate growth centers. Three other comments were noted by two respondents each: 1) A state level body, 2) The same people as administer the downtown program, and 3) designation should be part of the town plan.

The final question on the survey addressed the question of whether there were incentives that would encourage communities to do more growth center planning, and if so, what those incentives might be. Only 75 percent of the respondents answered the first question, and of those, 72 percent said yes, incentives would encourage them to do more growth center planning. As might be expected, the affirmative response was stronger among towns having growth centers. Of these growth center towns, 76 percent answered the question and of those, 83 percent answered in the affirmative.

The questionnaire listed some possibilities (exemption from or streamlined Act 250 review, priority for state infrastructure funding, local tax revenue options, off-site mitigation for prime agricultural soils and/or other environmental impacts, increased planning grants for growth center planning, and/or others), and invited respondents to list as many as they thought might be effective. A total of 50 respondents entered something after this question. The complete list is included in the Appendix.

The five most frequently mentioned incentives were the five examples presented in the questionnaire. Ten respondents simply stated that all five would be helpful. Others selected those among the five examples that they felt would be effective. Table 3 shows the rank ordering of those five incentives, based on the survey responses.

TABLE 3
MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED INCENTIVES

Funding for Infrastructure	30 mentions
Increased planning grants for growth center planning	20 mentions
Exemptions from or streamlined Act 250 review	20 mentions
Off-site mitigation of ag. soils	15 mentions
Local revenue options	15 mentions

It was hoped that the open-ended nature of this question would solicit new suggestions for effective incentives, even if they were mentioned by only one or a few respondents. The responses that addressed the question are summarized in Table 4.

TABLE 4
OTHER INCENTIVES MENTIONED

Staff Assistance	4 mentions
Priority for highway funds	3 mentions
Affordable housing assistance	3 mentions
Tax incentives	2 mentions
Tax credits for adaptive reuse	2 mentions
Favorable comments on businesses wanting to locate in growth centers	2 mentions
Mechanisms for non-zoning towns	1 mention
Local land use control	1 mention
Real carrots <u>and</u> real sticks	1 mention
Keep Act 250 review	1 mention
Population growth	1 mention
Commitment to put state buildings in growth centers	1 mention
Brownfield remediation	1 mention
Free environmental impact study of growth centers	1 mention

The Forums: The notion of incentives was a major focus of the growth center forums held as follow up to the survey. In each forum, participants worked through a facilitated discussion of possible incentives, and were then each participant was asked to identify the five that he/she thought would be most effective. The lists generated by the three forums are presented in the appendix, along with the rank ordering by the forum participants. There is little overlap except for the need for financial assistance with infrastructure and the need for planning assistance. It was also clear from the forum discussions that municipalities are seeking incentives both for growth center planning

and for development within their growth centers. If there is no growth, if growth cannot be attracted to growth centers, or if infrastructure cannot support growth in growth centers, the best of growth center planning will be in vain.

D. Measures of Success: Participants at the forums were asked to think about how we can determine that growth center planning is successful. In particular, each participant was asked to write down one or more measure of success that could be used when looking back after ten years of growth center planning. The lists of suggested measures of success from each of the forums are presented in the appendix. They make interesting reading, both in terms of setting forth what we hope to accomplish, and in terms of assessing our efforts to date.

While each forum generated its own list, there several common threads. Most development will have occurred within growth centers, as measured by housing starts, zoning permits, or jobs. Growth centers will contain healthy businesses and active, happy people. There will be a clear delineation of growth centers from surrounding rural areas. And finally, rural areas will contain healthy, profitable farms, and the rural character will have been retained.

IV. CONCLUSIONS: There is a lot of interest among Vermont's municipalities in growth center planning. A very high percentage of local planners were aware of the state's goal of creating compact settlements surrounded by rural areas, and most towns appear to have at least one growth center.

There is ongoing need for keeping local planners informed about growth centers and growth center planning techniques. In particular, the distinction between growth centers and downtowns or village centers seems unclear. Downtowns or village centers are typically delineated very tightly to include historic structures in traditional centers, and often have little capacity for future growth. Growth centers, on the other hand, include the traditional centers plus surrounding land capable of accommodating most anticipated future growth.

Many, if not most, Vermont municipalities are actively trying to encourage new development within their growth centers, primarily using zoning tools (higher densities and more non-residential uses).

These efforts, however, frequently encounter obstacles. The most common is the lack of infrastructure (primarily water and sewer service) to support additional development in growth centers, particularly at moderate densities. Other obstacles include lack of developable land, and local lifestyle preferences.

There appears to be considerable support for some type of formal process for designating growth centers as a means for targeting state programs and facilitating compact areas of development. There also appears to be support for additional state inducements to encourage both growth center planning and development within growth centers. Top among these is funding for infrastructure and increased funding for planning grants.

The current level of local interest in and support for growth centers represents an opportunity for Vermont to make significant progress in achieving its stated goal of compact settlements surrounded by rural areas. That interest and support must be matched by coordinated state programs and significant investments in the infrastructure needed to allow designated growth centers to accommodate the anticipated growth.

Vermont should not fail to take advantage of this opportunity.

APPENDIX

- A. Growth Center Concept Time Line (Southern Windsor County Regional Planning Commission)
- B. Survey Questionnaire and Responses
- C. Summary of the Forums
 - South Burlington
 - Hardwick
 - Springfield
 - Wallingford

The Growth Center Concept in Vermont: A Timeline

Planning for growth in specific areas protects open spaces, allows for a mix of housing opportunities, enables choices in transportation modes and revitalizes historic areas. When our existing downtowns and village centers cannot accommodate projected new development, well-planned growth centers can offer a solution.

Currently, different definitions of growth centers are utilized by state agencies, regional planning commissions and communities. It is time to develop a consistent definition that governs state investments and serves as a guide for local and regional planning.

The evolution of the “Growth Center” concept in Vermont goes back at least two decades. In **1970**, Act 250 (Vermont’s Land Use and Development Law) contained review criteria which were directly related to patterns of development. These are found primarily in Criterion 9 and deal with the impact on the growth of the town or region (9-A); the costs of scattered development (9-H); and development affecting public investments (9-K).

In **1988** the Legislature passed Act 200 which amended Vermont’s Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act in several ways, including adding the goal of planning development so as to “maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village or urban centers separated by rural countryside.” Act 200 created the Municipal and Regional Planning Fund to be supported by revenues from the Property Transfer Tax, and to be used specifically to support local and regional planning efforts. Finally, Act 200 established the Council of Regional Commissions to serve as a vehicle to ensure compliance with the goals set forth in Section 4302 of the Planning Act.

Later in **1988**, a Summer Study Committee began to focus on growth management planning and identified specific growth areas, such as local growth areas and regional growth centers.

In **1990**, the Vermont Planners Association (VPA) set forth a policy on growth centers which defined them as: “*a locally-designated, compact geographic area (no more than 100 acres in size) providing for higher density, mixed use development within its borders.*”

In **1991**, the Vermont Natural Resource Council defined local growth center as: “*a compact (not less than 15 acres, but conducive to pedestrian use from boundary to boundary), geographically discreet area planned for high density, mixed uses.*”

In a **December 1991** draft of House Bill 339, definitions for two kinds of economic development centers appeared.

From **May 1993 to November 1995**, the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs conducted a pilot project to test planning techniques and the

resources needed for towns to plan growth centers. The pilot project also helped to refine the definition and criteria, the planning process needed and possible state incentives which could be applied to growth centers. The pilot project funded work on growth center plans in Hinesburg, Jericho, Middlebury, Morristown and Brattleboro. One result of the project was action steps the Agency of Commerce and Community Development could take under existing statute and resources to encourage growth centers.

As one of those steps, the Department of Housing and Community Affairs, in April of **1996**, issued its Consolidated Plan which included the following definitions of “Growth Center”:

“a land area (or areas) designated by a municipality in its duly adopted plan to accommodate concentrated commercial, residential and industrial growth over a twenty year period. The area designated will specify where the municipality desires growth to occur and where it has made or will make public investment to support such growth. The amount of land needed to accommodate growth over the twenty year period shall be calculated using an accepted methodology based on objective data. Municipalities should locate growth centers to avoid or to mitigate negative impacts on important resource areas and on lands of state-wide interests as designated in state agency plans required under VSA 4020. A growth center may take one of two forms:

a) compact settlement: an area sufficiently compact in size and providing for a mixture of civic, commercial, recreational and residential uses, and a density of development that enables and encourages use by pedestrians and, as such, encourages and enhances public transit options, car pooling, bicycle options, and shared parking where appropriate;

b) business park: an area designated for uses inappropriate to a compact settlement due to impacts such as noise or traffic generation, or to extensive space requirements. Heavy industry, warehousing, auto sales, and building supply sales are examples of such uses; office space, general retail and personal services are not. A business park is designed to have limited impact on the traffic moving function of adjacent highways by minimizing access points to the highways and by providing a well defined pattern of internal circulation.”

In **July 1999**, a report was released from the Vermont Planners Association, *Growth Centers in Vermont: A Vermont Solution to Sprawl.* This report was based on an earlier report in 1996 prepared by a special Growth Centers Committee established by the VPA and revised by the Executive Committee in 1998. The Committee was charged with developing a draft position statement regarding growth centers which VPA would use to encourage the implementation of the growth centers concept.

The report explains a “Growth Center” as *a planning concept that refers to one (or more) area(s) of a community as designated by that municipality in its Municipal Plan, and/or designated by the Regional Planning Commission in its Regional Plan, to accommodate a significant amount of the growth anticipated by the municipality over the coming*

twenty years. It is a distinct, centrally oriented organization of uses, densities, circulation, structures and other elements. A growth center is designed for and characterized by the following:

- 1. A mixture of uses, such as houses, churches, schools, stores, parks and other community facilities.*
- 2. A density that is higher than that found in other parts of the community.*
- 3. A pattern and scale of development that reflects traditional patterns of compact villages and urban areas (buildings are close together) separated by open countryside and appropriate to the growth center's purpose.*
- 4. A circulation system that is conducive to pedestrian and other non-vehicular travel, and supports public transit. Small enough to encourage walking between destinations.*
- 5. A design that includes public spaces which promote social interaction, such as public parks, coffee shops, a town hall, post offices and other formal and informal places to gather.*
- 6. A distinct organization around central places or focal points of the area, such as a town green.*

The Agency of Natural Resources adopted a new rule in **2002** on the priority system for state funding of sewage treatment projects. Under the new rule, state funding may only be used for sewer expansions that serve designated growth centers. Exceptions are made for immediate health problems and industrial parks with acceptable controls on sewer hook-ups. The "Municipal Pollution Control Priority System" adopted August 30, 2002 defines "Designated Growth Center" as: *1) a "downtown development district" as defined in 24 V.S.A. §2791(3) and the downtown's surrounding residential neighborhoods; 2) a traditional town or village center; 3) a new or emerging downtown, town or village center; and 4) existing and proposed industrial parks. A designated growth center is included in a duly adopted and approved municipal plan and anticipated growth within the municipality is directed there. Growth centers, with the exception of certain industrial parks, include the physical characteristics or an existing settlement.*

In late **2003**, Governor Jim Douglas created a planning group to spearhead a broad collaborative effort to explore ways to encourage commercial, industrial and residential growth in designated downtowns and other growth centers. Vermont had already passed legislation to designate downtowns, village centers and new town centers through the Vermont Downtown Program. Those designations allow benefits such as grants, tax credits, and expedited permitting to boost downtown development. Governor Douglas' initiative was to establish a designation policy and process to encourage development in these and other growth centers.

Mark Snelling, chairman of the Governor's Council of Environmental Advisors and Harlan Sylvester, chairman of the Governor's Council of Economic Advisors led the planning group to outline the policy development process and discuss the details of the growth center proposal. In **October 2004**, the Committee released its *Draft Proposal for Growth Center and Master Plan/Master Permitting Legislation*. Throughout **2005**, VPA members have actively commented on early drafts.

Among the proposed incentives to encourage development in growth centers is a master plan permitting process which would allow a municipality or public-private partnership to apply for a master plan permit for a designated area(s) within a growth center. Once the master plan is approved under Act 250 and other state permits, individual projects that are consistent with the master plan could go forward without redundant state reviews. The master plan permit would carry additional incentives for developers including tax credits and funding for infrastructure and housing.

There is also discussion in the legislature as to whether and how development on primary agricultural soils protected under Act 250 should be mitigated. There are currently strict standards limiting the development of these important soils. The bill before the legislature seeks to authorize off-site mitigation; promote the use of off-site mitigation in designated growth centers; and provide guidelines about when off-site mitigation is appropriate. Off-site mitigation is the practice which allows developers who want to develop primary agricultural soils to do so in some circumstances if they pay money into a fund that preserves primary agricultural soils in other locations.

The VPA Legislative Committee and Executive Board are closely monitoring the Legislative Working Group on Growth Centers, which is expected to report by **January 15, 2006** with one or more bills dealing with State designation of growth centers (perhaps called 'opportunity zones'), and related primary agricultural soils mitigation, growth center scoping and planning, incentives/benefits for subjecting a community to designation.

The VPA has initiated a Growth Center Project, which includes a survey of municipalities distributed by the regional planning commissions in early **January 2006**. The purpose of the survey is to determine how much understanding local officials have of growth centers and what types of incentives would benefit towns for which growth centers are designated.

In **February 2006**, the VPA and the regional planning commissions will conduct a series of evening growth center forums at four locations around the state. Recommendations will be developed and sent to the legislature as it formulates legislation concerning growth centers in the coming session.

Sources:
Vermont Planners Association

Vermont Forum on Sprawl
Vermont Environmental Monitor

Revised: 1/10/06

SURVEY ON GROWTH CENTERS

Vermont Planners Association

Greetings:

The Vermont Planners Association (VPA), an association of professional and citizen planners and others interested in planning, is conducting this survey in conjunction with Vermont's Regional Planning Commissions. The intent is to gain an understanding of the degree to which Vermont's growth center policy is familiar to planners and local government officials. In addition, we are interested in your thoughts on ways that state agencies might more effectively support growth center planning.

We are specifically surveying Planning Commissions. We ask that you *discuss this at a commission at a meeting in January of 2006*, complete the questionnaire, and **return it to Michael J. Munson, 83 Park Street, Essex Junction, VT 05452 by January 31, 2006.** All responses will be kept confidential. We appreciate your willingness to take a few minutes to complete and return this questionnaire.

1. Are you aware that Vermont is pursuing a land use policy to encourage the settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside? This concept has come to be known as growth centers.
Yes **(85.2%)**, No **(12.3%)**.

2. In your mind, what are the critical or defining characteristics of a growth center? Of those listed below, please check those that you feel are important, and feel free to add to the list.
 - (82.7%)** a. A mix of residential and non-residential uses.
 - (48.1%)** b. The area should be designed to accommodate most of the growth anticipated in the coming 20 years.
 - (70.4%)** c. The area contains central places and focal points.
 - (86.4%)** d. The area contains or is planned for densities higher than in surrounding areas.
 - (72.8%)** e. The area is suitable for pedestrian and non-vehicular travel and supports transit use.
 - (82.7%)** f. The area contains public places that promote social interaction
 - (67.9%)** g. The design calls for a pattern and scale of buildings that reflect traditional villages and urban areas.
 - _____ h. **(See responses to open ended questions)** _____
 - _____ i. _____
 - _____ j. _____
 - _____ k. _____

3. Does your Town’s Municipal Plan designate one or more growth centers or similarly identified area of concentrated development? Yes **(78.8%)**. No **(21.2%)**. If more than one how many? **Average 1.6**

4. What distinguishes the growth center(s) or area(s) of concentrated development in your community from the rest of the community?
See response to open ended questions

5. Is your community attempting to implement its growth center plan? Yes **(54.3%)**, No **(34.6%)**.
a. If Yes, What incentives are being used to encourage development within the designated area(s)?
See responses to open ended questions

b. If Yes, what disincentives are used to discourage development outside of the designated area(s)?
See responses to open ended questions

c. If No, what difficulties have been encountered?
See responses to open ended questions

6. Is your community receiving assistance in its growth centers planning? Yes **(35.8%)** From whom? _____
No **(58.0%)** Would assistance be helpful? _____

7. Would your community be interested in additional assistance in growth centers planning? Yes **(60.5%)**, No **(21.0%)**.
a. If Yes, what kind of assistance would be helpful?
See responses to open ended questions

8. Would you be interested in learning more about growth centers and growth centers planning? Yes (74.1%), No (23.5%).

9. Some State Agencies have linked some of their programs to growth centers (e.g. Community Development Block Grants, Agency of Natural Resources funding for water and sewer facilities). Do you think that more state programs should be targeted to designated growth centers? Yes (69.1%), No (19.8%).

10. If more State programs were targeted to growth centers, would that encourage your community to do more growth center planning? Yes (55.6%), No (28.4%).

11. If more State programs were focused on growth centers, do you think that there should be some designation process for ensuring that the State programs actually focus on clearly defined growth centers? Yes (67.9%), No (22.2%).

a. If Yes, do you have any suggestions on how that designation process might work and who might administer it?

See responses to open ended questions _____

12. Are there incentives that would encourage your community to do more growth center planning? Yes (53.1%), No (21.0%).

a. If Yes, what incentives would you suggest? Possibilities might include exemption from or streamlined Act 250 review, priority for state infrastructure funding, local tax revenue options, off-site mitigation for prime agricultural soils and/or other environmental impacts, increased planning grants for growth center planning, and/or others. Please list as many as you think might be effective.

See responses to open ended questions _____

As a part of this study, the Vermont Planners Association, in conjunction with the regional planning commissions, will convene a series of evening Growth Centers Forums in February, to discuss the growth centers concept, explore incentives for growth centers, and explore possibilities for a growth centers designation process. Your regional planning commission will be letting you know when and where the forum in your area will take place. We hope to see you there.

**Please return the completed questionnaire by January 31, 2006
to:**

**Michael J. Munson
83 Park Street
Essex Junction, VT 05452**

Responses to Open Ended Question 2h

- Clear boundaries separating it from rural areas.
- Geographic size is compact
- Must be clearly defined
- Location of municipal services & P.O.
- Growth centers should not be used as a way to deny landowners outside the "center" a way to develop their land
- Definitive edges surrounded or separated by drastically contrasting rural (open/wooded) countryside
- Maintain integrity of historic structures
- Promote infill
- Municipal services--water & sewer
- Senior Housing
- Area to include high speed internet access
- Area to include cell coverage
- Cluster development
- High speed internet service
- cell phone coverage
- Municipal services, schools, post office, and other (illegible) facilities.
- Availability of water, sewer, elect., and transportation
- Adequate infrastructure is available for higher density housing.
- 4 out of 5 communities in county have no expectations of any town sewer
- Affordable housing
- Area serves as a regional commerce center
- High degree of community involvement
- Suburban growth center development to preserve our traditional village and rural area
- Has adequate infrastructure to support the growth
- Avoid rural sprawl,
- Maintaining/increasing infrastructure
- The area uses clustered development and preserves open spaces
- Affordable housing which is sustainable & not just low income
- Infrastructure (water & sewer), shopping & jobs w/in walking distance
- jobs w/in walking distance
- The area is suitable for development,
- (consideration for natural resources, etc.)
- We are a very small town. Therefore a growth center is not really appropriate
- We will participate in conversations at the regional level
- Mix of housing types, elderly, rentals, affordable home ownership
- Public infrastructure -sewer, water, roads
- Infrastructure to accommodate growth

Responses to Open Ended Question 4

- Set in Village zone
- Already has mixed use.
- Rest of town is primarily residential subdivisions.
- Balance of Town is Residential at lower density
- Intense growth at ski resort
- Nothing in Village Center
- Schools
- Historical center/hub
- Town Hall
- Town water system
- Higher Densities
- Mixture of Uses
- Commercial Uses allowed
- Water District
- Traditional Village Center
- Allows denser development at base of ski mountain
- Set up as separate zoning district
- Use of PUDs & PRDs
- Higher densities
- Mixed uses
- Higher densities
- Mix of residential and non-residential uses
- Historic village center
- A mixture of office, retail and multi-family
- School, General Store, church, cluster of houses, 2 auto repair shops, town green, gazebo
- Higher density, mixed use, municipal water and sewer service, separated by low density, open wooded/rural area
- Growth center is zoned for significantly higher density and for many more uses, including most commercial uses
- Services. Infrastructure, Town Plan
- Density, mixed use, gathering areas
- Activity and traffic, commercial and mixed use,
- The criteria from q#2, building height/density
- Traditional growth pattern, concentration of housing, paved intersections
- US Route 5, High density, Municipal sewer,
- Historic village (Algiers)
- Central location, Mix of residential and non-residential uses, traditional village type look
- Northfield is both a Town and a village
- Density appropriate for village
- Not so much so with the Town
- Smaller lot size, Density. Sidewalk,
- Zoning District
- Density/mix of uses
- Historical downtown will have limited growth
- The position of the interstate has changed and will continue to change our growth pattern
- State highway (rte 100)
- Pre-existing village areas
- The Village Plan
- Historic village and its surroundings
- Higher density

- Mixed uses
- Traditional village centers now to be served by wastewater treatment facility
- Nothing
- Public buildings, Most commercial businesses,
- Community sewer systems, building density
- Sidewalk& street lights, municipal water & sewer
- Only changes in permitted uses
- Compact residential, smaller lots, close to school, store, P.O. and bus route
- Most of Barre City is considered a growth center since large portions are developed
- We also have a designated downtown
- Existing commercial center on Rte 7,
- Geographic center of town,
- Designated by zoning for high density commercial/mixed use growth
- Density, central location, mixed uses, proximity to interstate, accessibility
- Tradition, Higher density, Stores
- Higher densities, compact development (in the outlying areas of our downtown)
- Village
- Different setbacks, Different acreages for bldgs,
- Different uses.
- Higher density, commercial allowed, close to school, not far from Rte 7, traditional center
- Density, availability of utilities & municipal services, pedestrian friendly
- Location/Density
- Downtown & Commercial & industrial areas are pre-existing.
- Topography & available land are limiting factors.
- Population density, infrastructure (schools, town garage, town office, historic patterns
- Many small lots. Close to school, post office, 4-5 stores, public services.
- Commercially zoned, smaller lot sizes and more dense settlement patterns.
- A diversity of residences, multi-family structures,
- Traditional and historic downtown settings and architecture, number and density of commercial activity.
- Located on major highways and historical growth areas in town
- 3 villages in town, each with some infrastructure, i.e. stores, schools, & retirement home, gas, garage, repair s
- The rest of the community is rural & residential in nature
- It is in the village area.
- The designated area is an industrial park with no residential development
- Historic village settlements
- Different parking regs, different setback regs.
- Mixed use, density (residential), access to sewer & other infrastructure
- Traffic concerns-near major routes (the Circ)
- Higher densities than surrounding areas,
- Contains central places and focal points (stores, P.O., fire station, town offices, library)
- Public places that promote social interaction(stores, library)
- Community buildings, public spaces, recreation facilities, por soils.
- Concentration of many buildings, variety of activities
- They are currently the village centers
- Our town plan promotes development in the village
- Town water, septic, Route 5, I 91 highway access
- Smaller lot sizes, smaller set-backs
- Designation of new large subdivisions in Town Plan,
- Designation of industrial zones (2)
- Most of Derby is still rural farm and forest land with no municipal services

- Smaller lots, public buildings
- Lot sizes, setbacks
- Higher density residential, commercial activities,
- Civic buildings
- They are those areas that historically were our centers of community activity and commerce.
- They continue to include a majority of our commercial and concentrated residential uses
- Multiple uses allowed, More flexible zoning allowances (e.g. setbacks, # of allowed uses, smaller minimum lot size, frontage, etc.)
- Allowed density is greater.
- More municipal services - sewer, water, sidewalks, etc.
- More activity, including traffic
- Denser zoning (smaller lot sizes)
- Schools, churches, stores, municipal buildings
- Smaller lot sizes, mixed residential& non-residential uses, no industrial uses, multi-family dwellings
- Public facilities
- 2 villages, 1 area with potential for water/sewer
- Infrastructure

Responses to Open Ended Question 5a

- 1/2 acre density
- Too early, just adopted plan
- All driven by ski resort
- Beautification efforts
- Ask groups to energize the village
- Greatest density of houses
- Density bonuses
- Zoning
- Rutland City offers no "incentives"
- Have a "neighborhood/commercial zone in the village"
- Have Village Designation
- We have already implemented most of our plan
- High density, mixed use, reduced dimensional limitations, reduced or eliminated parking requirements.
- Densities, higher buildings, high lot coverage, flexible regulations (PUD)
- Haven't gotten to this point yet
- Have applied for Village Center designation
- Uncertain, possible grants
- Fix regulations
- PUD Village Designation
- Expanded municipal septic & water system
- We are looking at changes in our zoning regulations with some incentives or density bonuses
- Village designation
- Smaller minimum lot size, shorter setbacks, wider range of permitted uses
- Through proposed zoning and subdivision ordinances and town plan
- Zoning
- The municipal plan calls for increasing the allowed densities in the multi-family district.
- We also have a downtown marketing plan with various strategies.
- Last, there are downtown state tax incentives for downtown development
- High density zoning, No setback requirements, planned extension of sewer line to growth center
- Allocation of housing units via phasing, zoning regulations

- Reduced acreage,
- Others being considered
- Zoning will be revised
- Small lots, Smaller setbacks
- Have town plan - just beginning
- Zoning to implement PRD & PUD, also designation of mixed use areas
- Smaller lot sizes
- Town Plan and Zoning regulations
- Smaller lot sizes
- Historically, one village has municipal water system
- Zoning bylaws
- We have a village center application pending at the Vermont Downtown Board
- Providing public sewer to villages
- Zoning allowing multi-family dwellings
- Enlarging existing buildings for multi-family
- By-law zones
- Zoning Bylaws
- We do not have a growth center per se
- Reduced setbacks, density bonuses, multi-family housing zones, mixed use buildings
- Density (residential)
- We are proposing incentives in our revised land use and development regulations which have not yet been adopted
- Increased density in village areas
- Density bonuses for clustering (PRDs, PUDs)
- Focal points of higher density, mixed use & open spaces
- Zoning density, Transferable of development rights currently being studied
- Smaller lot sizes
- We are working on developing a growth center plan
- TIF, liberal setbacks
- Encouraging citizens to vote for a bond to finance
- Not really applicable. Very small town.
- No pavement, No commercial activity, etc
- Village Center, High density, plus PUDs, PRDs
- Village center designation in Hardwick.
- Available sewer capacity, higher density residential (zoning)
- Smaller lot sizes with higher densities of building coverage and availability of local revolving loan funds for bus low &
- Moderate income housing
- As listed in question 4, Plus town is more likely to take over new roads
- None
- Already exists

Responses to Open Ended Question 5b

- Greater density
- Districts that allow commercial
- None
- Zoning
- We do not allow uses that should be in a growth center to be developed in rural areas
- Lower densities, less intense uses allowed
- None presently (no zoning or land use regulation, but we're working on it)

- Lack of sewer facilities/infrastructure
- Larger lot zoning
- Limitation on permitted uses
- Our regulations the reason for less density - i.e. ag soils
- We're working on it
- Larger minimum lot sizes, longer setbacks, limited range of permitted uses
- Place to do it
- Through proposed zoning and subdivision ordinances and town plan
- Zoning
- We have a Conservation zoning district which requires larger lots that are not likely to be developed on a few larger parcels not suitable for development
- Lower density, No planned infra-structure improvements in zoning districts surrounding the growth center
- Same
- Zoning
- Zoning
- Comprehensive zoning regulations with varying districts and subdivision regs
- Larger lot sizes
- Town plan and zoning regulations
- Larger lot sizes
- Conservation District
- Zoning bylaws
- Lack of municipal sewer and water
- water, sewer and municipally maintained roads
- Larger lot sizes, strict sub-surface sewer disposal
- Not maintained Class 4 roads
- Same
- Prohibition
- Large lot sizes, cluster development, roadside development, PD's required
- No disincentives
- Greater acreage requirements for lot sizes
- Lower density, i.e. large lot size requirements
- Zoning, Act 250, town plan
- Large lot sizes, restriction of commercial & multi-family uses
- None
- None
- Commercial development is restricted outside village centers
- Larger lot sizes, restrictions on commercial uses, much lower densities of building coverage
- Not a lot other than lower densities, larger lot sizes, greater emphasis on preservation of important natural fea
ag. soils
- none

Responses to Open Ended Question 5c

- No waste water capacity
- No zoning
- Few local ordinances
- Septic is limited
- Have no zoning, no subdivision regulations, no land use ordinances, only a town plan as the "vision".
Implementation is in the future
- Space constraints,

- Monetary constraints
- Rural with no commercial/village area to start with
- The land, topology, and other physical characteristics limit development. We need to find a new growth center
- See above
- Confusion about the meaning of "The Town Plan"
- Need to revise class IV roads and write some regs for them
- We do not have a growth center
- No zoning
- Finding time to address this issue
- We have not installed proactive zoning to review/guide development in this way nor provided infrastructure (town septic, H2O)
- Septic and water issues are limiting/stopping growth in villages
- No need at this time
- Topography and available land
- Septic system laws, Clay soils
- Failing systems on small lots
- Town centers are limited land area with water concerns (i.e. river)
- Septic for growth suspect.
- Proposed changes have not been approved in new land use and development regulations
- Many 2nd home owners & retirees don't want to live in growth centers, they want their own piece of land in the rural areas
- Low development pressure
- None (town has not pursued private development)
- Need - getting organized
- Lowering allowed densities in rural areas very controversial, especially with existing landowners depending on development potential for retirement, kids' college funds, future generations, etc.
- No obvious areas available to serve this function, given topography, floodplain & existing land use.
- Very small town
- Rating the new land use status and rating the new land use status and also updating our town plan
- Lower priority than updating zoning.
- Vtrans projects in village stalled
- No detailed plan for implementation

Responses to Open Ended Question 7a

- Would like to know more
- Money is short
- More interested in affordable housing
- Help to identify logical boundaries
- Help identifying uses
- Help identifying infrastructure
- Presentations at PC meetings
- Workshops
- Assistance with writing this into Town Plan and Zoning Regs
- Build-out study
- Economic growth planning workshop
- Visit by growth planning expert to identify options for Reading
- Funding for hiring prof. assistance, for consultants expert on issues/solutions facing our town
- Funds for infrastructure, especially parking infrastructure
- Money is short

- Design charrette, master planning
- Funding for sewage/water study, housing analysis, implementation, and all of the above
- Give us whatever Stowe had for their Town Plan (just kidding), Consultant on municipal water
- Uncertain
- Build-out of Town Zoning
- How to integrate with Town Plan
- To look at different possibilities for a growth center around Exit 18
- Planning grants
- Finances, expertise
- We'd like to do a sidewalk
- What works best in the real world, Best practices
- Grants for sidewalks, land purchase, and regional facilities
- Would like to know what's available
- Pay for sewer, then we'll think about it
- CVRPC & private consultant work - help in writing grants to pay for study and planning
- Additional state programs and grants to benefit growth centers
- Infrastructure planning
- Money, People to gather specific info,
- Performance based zoning.
- Consultant help
- We don't know what we don't know, but we know there are things that we don't know
- Sewer & water infrastruct.
- Planning Grants
- Legislation approving more alternative adaptable septic system approvals
- Assistance in upgrading zoning
- We need affordable housing badly.
- A new Wal-Mart in Woodsville, NH, by 2007 will tax already high priced rental market
- All
- Specific content of the plan
- Aid in drafting the plan
- Funding for additional municipal planning staff
- Septic capacity analysis
- Build out analysis based on suitability
- Money & knowledgeable professionals
- Experience of others
- Case studies - what's worked, what hasn't, and "before" and "after" studies of growth center planning efforts
- Money, technical assistance
- Industrial and business development
- Facilities study & engineering, housing inventory, grant monies
- Planning and implementing
- Need better coordination between sewer and water capacity and zoning densities in service areas
- Downtown designation, which we're currently pursuing
- Funding to upgrade municipal wastewater treatment system
- Holistic storm water management analysis & engineering for entire growth area instead of just project by project
- Donated
- Probably a bit later it would be great to have a knowledgeable person talk to our PC

Responses to Open Ended Question 11a

- Done at state level by a state planning office with clear guidelines
- Yes - but local control
- Keep it as local as possible
- An independent body insulated, to the extent possible, from political pressure
- Only growth centers that truly meet the criteria should be designated--no commercial strips
- Too much bureaucracy
- Municipality working with RPC should implement it
- Locally administered based on state goals
- It's the way of the future. We'd like a public forum here for the community
- We (PC) are the only ones who know about it and are enthusiastic
- It should be implemented by same people as downtown designation
- Clarify differences between village centers and growth centers
- Regional Planning Commissions as administrators
- An agency/assistance from State Guidelines to help over-see and administer
- It should be part of our Town Plan, and our regulations should be part of that
- The money should fund anti-sprawl measures
- Need more clarification
- Regional Commissions
- Planning and Zoning Commissions
- Regional Planning
- Communities/projects aimed @ providing affordable housing
- Regional Planning Commissions should designate regional growth centers based upon a definition and general criteria applied statewide
- The application process must be reasonably simple
- Most growth centers are easy to identify due to past growth or new development
- Unsure
- Objective criteria should determine what is a growth center
- Infrastructure planning and implementation
- No
- Who is in charge should perform their assigned tasks
- Administered by regional planning commissions
- Designation and administration might be VPA or VLCT
- There is an inherent distrust for state involvement in any sector in the town
- Although we need to plan for these things many people regard it as only attracting people.
- Generally the town doesn't want much growth
- Chart town growth over last 10 years.
- Decide on support for infrastructure.
- Commercial needs to balance with housing needs (Planning Commission)
- Regulations established to treat rural areas fairly as urban areas
- Act 250 needs to protect Vermont
- No suggestions
- Require local officials to define growth centers
- Designate a central planner and a democratic process for implementation
- There has to be a balance such that our small communities retain their character
- Our growth centers have limited capacity for additional growth (septic capacity)
- Towns themselves can tell you what they want to be a growth center
- Administration by RPCs?
- Towns should administer themselves

- Local, local, local
- The Downtown board would need to be housed in a different area (not historic preservation) and then staff in planning would be needed to evaluate applications
- It should be "bottom up" process with municipalities designating & mapping their growth center(s) under state guidelines
- The review and approval process should go to the RPCs, then up to a state board with RPC concurrence.
- The state board should have members from municipalities, RPCs and state
- Let local folks decide
- Not enough knowledge
- Select board use of petition signed by residents to secure/indicate community support.

Responses to Open Ended Question 12a

- Favorable comments to businesses that would come to centers
- We are a volunteer Commission with high turn-over. We lack the time to write large grants. We could use staff to help small towns vs. larger (with paid staff).
- Also would be helpful if there were guidelines regarding mechanisms for non-zoning towns in helping manage the land
- Increased planning grants
- State funding of water & sewer systems
- Tax credits for adaptive reuse
- All of these could be helpful
- Grants for sewer treatment plants (like Shoreham)
- We are in the process of researching land use controls/ordinances that would give the town more local control over development review decisions, not more state control
- All of the above. In addition, increased funding to protect open space outside of growth centers and programs to protect interstate interchanges from development.
- There must be real carrots and real sticks.
- Local tax revenue sharing
- All of the above, raise residential Act 250 review thresholds
- All
- Keep Act 250 involvement, Local review options, Off-site mitigation, money for traffic and transportation studies, incentives for senior housing
- Infrastructure funding
- Priority for infrastructure planning and funding
- Increased planning grants
- The historic downtown is not where growth will take place.
- The need for grants, for senior housing, affordable housing
- Yes, all that plus more people moving to our area
- Respondent underlined "priority for state infrastructure funding, increased planning grants for growth center planning and/or others"
- Need more clarification
- Respondent underlined "priority for state infrastructure funding, increased planning grants for growth center planning and/or others"
- Exemption from Act 250
- Grants targeted to growth centers for community improvements
- All of the above (i.e. what was listed in the QRE)
- It seems you have reached certain conclusions and are simply looking for validation
- Exemption from Act 250 except for the largest projects.
- Priorities for highway funds to improve existing state roads (such as Main St in Barre)

- Priority for development/lease of state offices. All state offices should be in growth centers unless there is a written report why that is not feasible.
- State tax incentives for new homeowners to build within growth centers as opposed to further out in rural area
- Continued funding of existing state incentives including downtown transportation program, preferential treatment on state grants, and downtown tax credit program.
- Abolish Act 250 review of designated Downtown growth centers & streamline application of Act 250 process in general.
- Vtrans placing community impact on any prioritization list,
- Regional sewer planning/implementation, Transit funding,
- Affordable housing assistance, \$ to protect open space outside the growth center & regulations & tax policy, stormwater abatement.
- Respondent circled "priority for state infrastructure funding" and "increased planning grants for growth center planning".
- Municipal wastewater \$
- Priority for state infrastructure funding
- Local tax revenue options
- Increased planning grants
- Brownfield remediation
- We are so limited by lack of available land
- Sample zoning regulations, including actual language, which have been effective in influencing a Town's growth to a center
- A free environmental impact study of our growth center
- All of the above would be effective. Any financial incentives are always helpful.
- Exemption from Act 250 review, tax credits.
- State infrastructure funding-including parking/sidewalk/utilities
- Increased planning grants, Local tax revenue options.
- Funding, Local tax revenue options, planning grants, off-side mitigation for prime ag soils
- Encouragement of commercial & professional offices in order to truly get mix. All others OK.
- Infrastructure funding, planning grants.
- We should not sacrifice valuable natural resources
- A municipal waste water disposal facility could be built.
- All of the above, soil and aquifer studies.
- Help w/ affordable housing - monetarily, and planning
- Financial and technical assistance
- Respondent circled "priority for state infrastructure funding"
- State should waive current use penalties & prime ag mitigation fees in designated growth areas to facilitate housing/affordable
- Primarily need for center and local initiative
- Increased planning grants for growth ctrs
- Act 250 streamlined permits and exemptions from prime agricultural soils mitigation would be appropriate, priority for infrastructure funds
- All of the above are good. More state & federal transportation agricultural soils mitigation would be appropriate
- All of the above, Funding and technical assistance.
- Infrastructure funding for sewer and water systems

SOUTH BURLINGTON GROWTH CENTER FORUM

February 15, 2006

1. **Welcome:** (RPC Representative or Michael Munson)
2. **Purpose:** Brief statement of the purpose of the project and the forum (VPA representative or Michael Munson)
3. **Summary of Survey Results:** Michael Munson will present some of the high points from the recent growth centers survey.
4. **Small group discussion of growth center incentives:** Forum participants will break into small groups for a self facilitated discussion of incentives that will encourage towns to continue and enhance their efforts at growth centers planning and encourage development to locate within growth centers. Instructions will be provided.

Each group will select someone to record comments on flip charts, and will then have 30 minutes to answer the following question:

“What State inducements would best persuade/encourage your communities to identify one or more growth centers, or would help you to effectively implement growth centers that you have already identified?”

The recorder for each small group will record all comments and suggestions. At the end of the discussion, each group shall finalize its answers and post them on flipchart sheets for presentation to the larger group.

5. **Presentation of group conclusions/recommendations:** Each group will present its conclusions/recommendations to the forum. If time permits, some discussion will follow.
6. **Measures of Success:** Each participant will be given a 3x5 card and asked to record one measure of success – one way to measure whether Vermont is being successful in adopting and implementing a growth centers policy - on their 3x5 card. People will then take turns walking to a board at the front of the room, reading their idea aloud and posting it.
7. **Adjourn:**

Project Report: Michael Munson will collect and summarize the final lists of incentives and measures of success. A written report will be made available through VPA and the Regional Planning Commissions.

**MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF A
GROWTH CENTER
SOUTH BURLINGTON FORUM (2/15/06)**

- a. Mix of residential and non-residential uses. *****
- b. Designed to accommodate most of the town's growth anticipated in the coming 20 years. **
- c. Geographically compact. *****
- d. Contains central places and focal points. ***
- e. Contains densities higher than in surrounding areas. *****
- f. High speed internet service
- g. Suitable for pedestrian and non-vehicular travel and supports transit use. *****
- h. Contains public places that promote social interaction. *****
- i. Affordable housing. **
- j. A pattern and scale of buildings that reflect traditional villages and urban areas. ****
- k. Served by municipal services and facilities. ****
- l. Clearly separated from rural areas. *
- m. Historic structures
- n. Complete wireless phone coverage.

The number of asterisks (*) indicates the number of votes each characteristic received.

GROWTH CENTER INCENTIVES OFFERED AT THE SOUTH BURLINGTON FORUM (2-15-06)

- #2 **Need tools to conserve lands outside growth centers, including forest lands.**
- #1 **Design & fund infrastructure.**
Location of state buildings in growth centers.
- Tie #3 **Funding public transit & Park-&-Ride.**
Fund pedestrian sidewalks/curb cuts, appropriate signals.
- Tie #5 **Tools to support farmers to preserve rural nature outside of growth centers.**
- Tie #5 **Growth centers should be part of an overall strategy on land use—Town Plan.**
- Tie #5 **Need to control rural sprawl.**
- Tie #3 **Enable transfer of “density” values between parcels under one owner.**
Public capital facility planning and support is crucial. TIFs not used.
- Tie #5 **Legal assistance for municipalities to enforce bylaws.**
Funding for rehab & reuse of buildings in growth centers.
Traffic management within & between growth centers.
Use build-out analysis to understand outcome of current plans.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS OFFERED AT THE SOUTH BURLINGTON FORUM (2/15/06)

1.
 - a. European type landscape—town surrounded by open land (forests & farms, etc.)
 - b. Pedestrian friendly towns.
 - c. Less cars on roads.
2. Measure the number of building permits issued in growth centers vs. those outside the centers. Compare to a baseline of what is the ratio now.
3. Regional = Vermont. Local =- 30 miles. All services and food to sustain life will be available locally. You will know your neighbors and farms will be on the slightest increase. Go Green!
4. % growth inside vs. outside of growth center boundary.
5.
 - a. Preservation of rural space.
 - b. Cluster development.
 - c. Maintain quality of living.
 - d. Clear town center which creates a sense of place.
6. When driving through VT, success can be measured by the clear & concise rhythm of Town centers separated by un-fragmented greenbelts, undiluted by suburban sprawl & strip development.
7. Outside of growth centers there are vibrant & profitable farms.
8. That the rural landscape is preserved (or still exists).

HARDWICK GROWTH CENTER FORUM

February 21, 2006

1. **Welcome:** (RPC Representative or Michael Munson)
2. **Purpose:** Brief statement of the purpose of the project and the forum (VPA representative or Michael Munson)
3. **Summary of Survey Results:** Michael Munson will present some of the high points from the recent growth centers survey.
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7. **Adjourn:**

Project Report: Michael Munson will collect and summarize the final lists of incentives and measures of success. A written report will be made available through VPA and the Regional Planning Commissions.

**MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF A
GROWTH CENTER**
(HARDWICK FORUM 2/21/06)

- i. Mix of residential and non-residential uses. **
- ii. Designed to accommodate most of the town's growth anticipated in the coming 20 years. *****
- iii. Geographically compact. ***
- iv. Contains central places and focal points. ***
- v. Contains densities higher than in surrounding areas. ***
- vi. High speed internet service **
- vii. Suitable for pedestrian and non-vehicular travel and supports transit use. *****
- viii. Contains public places that promote social interaction. ***
- ix. Affordable housing. *
- x. A pattern and scale of buildings that reflect traditional villages and urban areas.
- xi. Served by municipal services and facilities. *****
- xii. Clearly separated from rural areas. *
- xiii. Historic structures.
- xiv. Complete wireless phone coverage. *

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GROWTH CENTER INCENTIVES OFFERED AT THE HARDWICK FORUM (2-21-06)

- Help** focusing on where not to have growth centers—not on ag lands, flood plain, ridges, etc.
- Tie #2 **Waste water treatment \$.** (Fed \$ cut in half, local/state match increased to 25%).
- Tie #4 **Additional planning assistance,** particularly in small towns.
Help solving traffic, circulation, and parking problems.
Mass transit.
- Tie #6 **New solutions to land use/transportation problems.** Professional training to enable them to help towns.
Assistance with all infrastructure.
Assistance with affordable housing.
Acknowledge and plan for industrial development within growth centers.
Assistance on how to work with existing commercial parks.
- Tie #4 **Assistance in dealing with the “equity” issue for owners of land outside of growth centers.**
Help assessing the impact of our aging population.
Consider whether access to health care can be linked to growth centers.
- #1 **Assistance in achieving a mix of housing types and a variety of family types in growth centers.**
- Tie #2 **Help** in envisioning our communities after 20 years of growth.
Planning grants for facilitated town visioning sessions.
- Tie #6 **A simple designation process.** Town planning commissions are volunteers.
Allow growth center designation to last for ten years. Census data come out at ten year intervals.
Ability to realistically assess the value of fragmented natural resources within growth centers.
A good working definition of “fragile areas”.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS OFFERED AT THE HARDWICK FORUM (2/21/06)

- 1. Growth centers that have met or exceeded expectations/planning goals with limited unplanned growth in the rest of the town or region.**
- 2. An increase in:
 - a. Occupied buildings**
 - b. New in-fill buildings**
 - c. Increased employment**
 - d. Housing of all types****
- 3. Preserved rural character yet provided equal opportunities in housing, employment and quality of life.**
- 4. Positive economic growth while preserving essential character of the community.**
- 5. There is a clear visual delineation between “built-up” – “growth centers” and surrounding working landscapes. Oregon Green line.**
- 6. “All” citizens embrace compact development over sprawl via zoning regulations that implement said goals.**
- 7. We find that a majority of growth has occurred within this growth center. The growth center accommodates a mix of uses and housing. (Growth centers will not prevent all problems. It is one tool to achieving the plan.**
- 8. Vital healthy businesses in centers, people walking on the streets and surrounding countryside.**
- 9. Growth is falling geographically within our “growth centers”. Visible signs include:
 - a. Ag land remains viable.**
 - b. Water resources remain clean**
 - c. Infrastructure supports higher density growth**
 - d. Options for moving within center include other than fossil fuel****
- 10. Growth center includes housing for diverse...**

SPRINGFIELD GROWTH CENTER FORUM

February 23, 2006

1. **Welcome:** (RPC Representative or Michael Munson)
2. **Purpose:** Brief statement of the purpose of the project and the forum (VPA representative or Michael Munson)
3. **Summary of Survey Results:** Michael Munson will present some of the high points from the recent growth centers survey.
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**MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF A
GROWTH CENTER
SPRINGFIELD FORUM (2/23/06)**

- a. Mix of residential and non-residential uses. *****
- b. Designed to accommodate most of the town's growth anticipated in the coming 20 years. *****
- c. Geographically compact. **
- d. Contains central places and focal points. ***
- e. Contains densities higher than in surrounding areas. ****
- f. High speed internet service **
- g. Suitable for pedestrian and non-vehicular travel and supports transit use. ***
- h. Contains public places that promote social interaction. ***
- i. Affordable housing.
- j. A pattern and scale of buildings that reflect traditional villages and urban areas. *****
- k. Served by municipal services and facilities. *****
- l. Clearly separated from rural areas. **
- m. Historic structures.*
- n. Complete wireless phone coverage.**

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GROWTH CENTER INCENTIVES OFFERED AT THE SPRINGFIELD FORUM (2-23-06)

- Is Act 250 exemption really meaningful in ten acre towns?
- #3 Expedited permit processes.
 - Tie #1 Financial assistance: CDBG Grants, waiver of sales tax or other taxes, etc.
 - Tie #5 Fund municipal grants according to formula.
 - Growth centers to have priorities for municipal planning grants.
 - Tie #7 Include industrial zones.
 - Eliminate match for transportation projects in growth centers.
 - Tie #1 Public water and sewer dollars and/or permit alternative systems.
 - Limit number of housing starts and give priority to growth centers.
 - Fixed (limited or maximum) amount to be spent for historic preservation (e.g. not more than \$x [per square foot].
 - Preferential treatment for brown field redevelopment.
 - #4 Beef up incentives for downtowns, village centers, etc.
 - Designation process must be simple and not discourage towns from applying.
 - Assistance in establishing high speed internet access. State to make bandwidth available in designated growth centers.
 - Higher density must be linked to easy access to open spaces and outdoor recreation.
 - Tie #7 Make growth center living appealing.
 - Focus on keeping young people here.
 - Tie #5 Incentives to grow retail businesses in growth centers.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS OFFERED AT THE SPRINGFIELD FORUM (2/23/06)

- 1. Over 50% of new housing units are built in growth center.**
- 2. # Building permitted annually w/in growth centers vs. outside growth centers.**
- 3. Growth centers actually developing in all counties.**
- 4. Most development is in growth centers and development increases.**
- 5. Jobs increase in growth centers—both #s and \$s.**
- 6. Fully redeveloped downtowns—infill property developed**
- 7. Elimination of commercial strip zoning into rural areas.**
- 8. Higher/better building occupancy/usage.**
- 9. Greater availability of products/services.**
- 10. Businesses inside have stayed and grown during that time, and new businesses last longer than a few years.**
- 11. From Springfield—Jobs, houses, offices, services created in the existing buildings within ½ miles of center of town.**

WALLINGFORD GROWTH CENTER FORUM

February 27, 2006

1. **Welcome:** (RPC Representative or Michael Munson)
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Unfortunately, this forum was cancelled due to lack of attendance.