February 20, 2009

Survey takes pulse of Underhill

By Matt Ryan, Free Press Staff Writer

UNDERHILL — The people of Underhill have spoken.

The majority of participants in a recent survey said they want to protect the town's open space, but they also want restaurants and small-scale retail. They like the condition of their roads, though 73 percent would like to extend the shoulders of the roads to accommodate biking and walking. Only 49 percent want to pay for it.

The survey asked participants to comment on a range of town issues, from bus service to housing development.

Michael Moser, a research specialist for the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont, conducted the survey for Underhill officials, who are working to renew the town plan. The plan expires this year. Underhill paid the center $6,000 to conduct the survey.

Moser shared the results with town officials Wednesday night at the Underhill Town Hall. He said he conducted similar studies in several Vermont towns, including Essex, Jericho and St. Albans.

Moser said he randomly mailed surveys to 1,193 Underhill residents and stakeholders, and received responses from 367 of them. The survey had a five percentage point margin of error, he said. About 3,000 people live in Underhill.

More than 80 percent of survey participants opposed large-scale retail, and favored the development of renewable energy sources and to keep the town's open space open. The majority preferred to use tax incentives and zoning regulations, instead of density bonuses and land exchanges, to keep open lands undeveloped.

"I like the results," said Dick Albertini, chairman of the planning commission, though he questioned Moser's methodology.

"People who feel strongly one way or the other respond," Albertini said. People without strong opinions or sufficient free time tend to pass on the survey, he said.

In the anonymous comment section of the survey, a few participants took shots at the study.

"I would like to see the town government stay out of issues outside of their responsibility," read one comment. "Stop wasting money on one-sided surveys where most of the questions have nothing to do with functions of government. The free market will work just fine in Underhill without the planning commission."

Most comments supported an item embraced by the majority of participants.

In general, the survey results resemble residents' sentiments in a survey taken 40 years ago.

In 1969, the Underhill Planning Commission polled residents and found 96 percent "wished to retain the rural aspect of the town.

"Housing developments were vetoed by 65 percent, regardless of their character or regulation, and 61 percent saw no need for a shopping center," according to the survey. "The establishment of a motel or restaurant was favored by only 44 percent, with emphasis being on a small, good restaurant."

About 70 percent of the town's 700 residents participated in the 1969 survey, planner Betty Moore said. Contact Matt Ryan at 651-4849 or mryan@bfp.burlingtonfreepress