

VTS SCENIC LANDSCAPES 1991
LSP COMMISSION

Even in the face of current political realities, we must willingly pursue fundamental changes to post World War II planning, zoning and land use policies—many of which run contrary to traditional settlement patterns and often encourage large lot sprawl and strip development. Design guidelines will not transform a development into something different. If a highway corridor has been zoned for strip development, strip development is what will occur despite any number of design considerations.

Third, agriculture as an economic force has shaped the Vermont landscape. Vermonters are now forced to address a landscape very much in transition. A slower rate of growth and continuously viable agriculture have, thus far, better preserved the evidence of our historical patterns of settlement—the same patterns existed throughout New England into the second half of this century. How *our* generation values agriculture and *the working landscape* will profoundly affect Vermont's future aesthetic quality. What brings us together is the common realization that this landscape, dominated by an agricultural heritage, is becoming increasingly important to Vermont's ability to compete in the economic marketplace.

Can local communities, state agencies and the Legislature successfully confront the politics of planning? Can we encourage and implement land use plans and socioeconomic policies that complement our rich and distinguished settlement heritage? We enacted Act 250 more than 20 years ago and defined environmental planning and regulation for a generation. This committee believes the people of Vermont can and will take the necessary steps to protect our highly prized rural landscape. Whether to achieve our economic or aesthetic goals, it is in our interest to maintain Vermont's appealing rural countryside.

Finally, the guidelines developed in *Vermont's Scenic Landscapes: A Guide for Growth and Protection* cannot and should not replace the need for sound land use planning. This book takes an important first step in defining the substantive issues affecting the Vermont landscape and equipping readers with the knowledge and tools to address them.

Design Issues Study Committee

April, 1991

1991

The traditional rural scene in Vermont, characterized by concentrated settlement in villages and open countryside dotted with farms, is disappearing. The sharp distinction between village and countryside is blurring throughout the state. Highways between towns are becoming ribbons of residential and commercial development. Where strip development has become intense....the effects have been highly detrimental.

Finding the Root of the Problem

This observation by the Vermont Planning Council in its 1968 *Vision and Choice* statement has been at the heart of the debate about Vermont's scenic landscape for more than 20 years.

Some say the state land use law, Act 250, has become a band-aid that does little more than soothe the impact of development which may simply be proposed for the wrong place, or that towns are unable to adequately plan for growth. Others charge the automobile, developers or designers with degrading the Vermont landscape. Nevertheless, consensus appears to be emerging that 1) Vermont's environment is integrally linked to the state's economic condition; and 2) The future of Vermont's scenic landscapes depends on our ability to change our patterns of growth.

On the surface, it might appear that all that is needed to protect Vermont's scenic landscapes is a greater sensitivity on the part of architects, engineers and developers.

But once the design issues are isolated, it is clear that they are *hitched*, in John Muir's words, to everything else including state, regional and local land use planning, zoning and property taxation. In order to address design issues, then, the underlying land use planning issues must be considered.

A central purpose of Vermont's land use planning is to guide development into appropriate growth centers while protecting prime natural, cultural and scenic resources. At least that is the theory. In practice, Vermonters rely heavily on commercial land uses and property taxes to finance public services, tipping the scales at times toward inappropriate development.

The need to recognize this economic-environmental dynamic and its effect on our scenic landscapes grows more urgent every day. Meanwhile the question remains: How do we encourage healthy new growth without sacrificing the scenic landscapes Vermont depends on for its environmental, social and economic survival?

Vermont's Scenic Landscapes: A Guide for Growth and Protection is a document for planners, project reviewers, the development community and its consultants. It is intended to help educate those involved with planning, project review, design and development about Vermont's scenic resources and their protection.

Vermont's environment is integrally linked to the state's economic condition.

The future of Vermont's scenic landscapes depends on our ability to politically confront the need to change our patterns of growth.

Vermont's Scenic Landscapes Today

Many New Englanders identify with the sentiments of Ralph Waldo Emerson who longed for the best of both worlds: *City facility and polish, and rural strength and virtue.* This search for a balance between the best from the city and the best of the countryside has resulted in a significant reshaping of many Vermont landscapes. Ironically, in

searching for the ideal of both worlds, we may be losing the sharp distinction between the two.

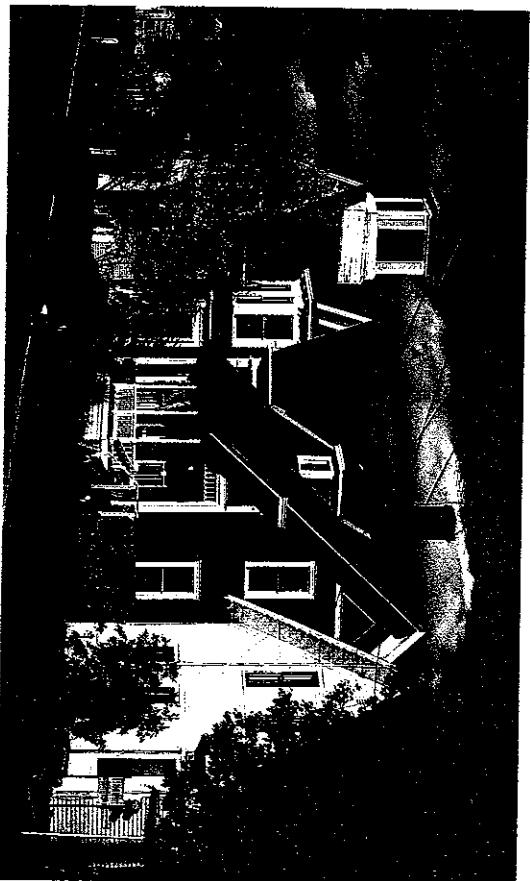
The growth that has occurred in the state has been the result of national and regional trends. Almost all of Vermont is within three hours of either the Boston or Montreal suburbs, and within five hours of the New York suburbs. Vermont is part of a natural greenbelt between two metropolitan areas along the Atlantic coast and the St. Lawrence Valley. New technologies also tie

Vermont's economy, and thus its landscape, more closely to regional, national and even international forces. As a result, few Vermont towns have escaped development pressures.

Long-time constraints to development, such as topography, distance or economics, no longer impede growth. Rather than isolated rural communities, many parts of Vermont are loose appendages of populated areas, with a litany of planning problems including suburban sprawl and commercial strip development.

Still, growth is necessary and can provide significant advantages, particularly in the creation of employment opportunities and affordable housing. There have been many examples in recent years of developments that harmonize with the natural landscape. But growth has also brought less desirable developments which have disfigured Vermont's landscapes.

Roxbury,
Vermont.
Narrow village
streets and a lack
of sidewalk
setbacks typify the
traditional village
settlement pattern
of many Vermont
towns.
photo: Curtis Johnson



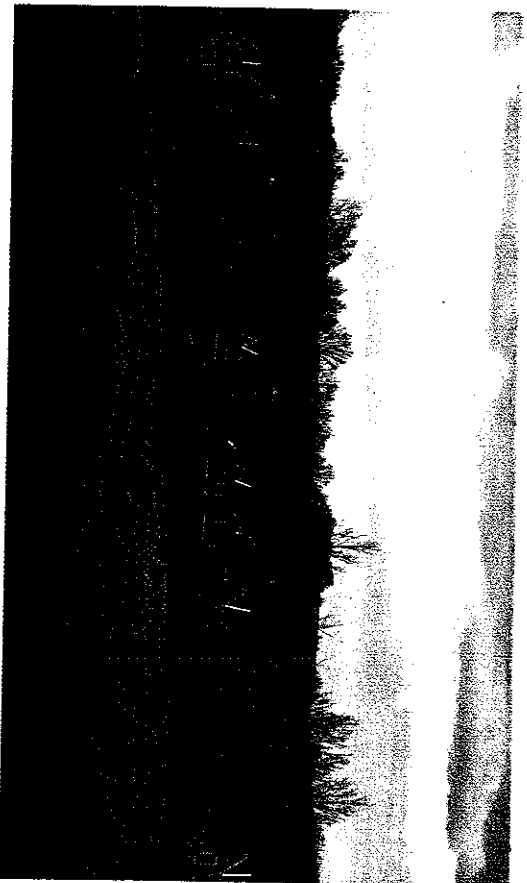
Two hundred years of economic forces have helped shape the Vermont landscape. Until recent times, its pastoral character was punctuated by compact rural villages, mill towns and small cities. The picturesque results of those years of labor are a major reason why individuals and businesses want to stay here and tourists want to visit. Moreover, many aesthetic aspects of the environment have strong social overtones. Places that are aesthetically enriching naturally encourage a sense of well-being in the people who live and work in them. The smallest element in a designed environment—a park bench, for example—can promote or hinder social interaction, a sense of community and pride of place.

Ironically, many of the characteristics which contribute most to Vermont's special sense of place such as narrow village streets and lack of side yard setbacks, are today illegal in most communities with subdivision regulations.

The next step toward thoughtful, creative land use cannot be taken until it is acknowledged that 1) Sprawl (although largely generated by the use of the car) often happens not because of a lack of regulation, but because of regulation that was ill-conceived; and 2) No amount of architectural design guidance in and of itself can overcome this defect.

Ironically, many of the characteristics which contribute most to Vermont's special sense of place such as narrow village streets and lack of side yard setbacks, are today illegal in most communities with subdivision regulations.

*Norwich,
Vermont.
A contemporary
response to the
traditional
settlement pattern
is a clustered
residential
development,
designed to protect
open space while
providing
necessary housing.
photo: John Martin*



Vermont's Unique Conditions

Vermont's rich, varied landscape reflects a history of successful adaptation to eclectic social, economic and physical forces. The first flamboyant Victorian-era home must have shocked viewers when it appeared in a village of 19th century-style buildings. Yet these structures were effectively integrated into their townscapes and landscapes and are today among the most beloved of the state's architectural heritage.

Vermont has some of the finest examples of small cities, townscapes, rural landscapes and natural areas in the world. Visitors come to enjoy and recreate in this natural beauty. Tourism is the second largest source of income next to manufacturing in the state. Vermont's quality of life is rooted in its scenic landscape. It is a major attraction for businesses locating here. Clearly, a beautiful environment yields economic benefits.



*Chester, Vermont.
An eclectic grouping
of buildings
surrounding the
green in Chester
reflects a rich and
varied architectural
heritage.*

photo: John Martin

An early expression of this concept was Vermont's 1968 law that abolished billboards. More recently the 1989 Governor's Commission on the Economic Future of Vermont put it bluntly: *We consider Vermont's environment to be the goose that lays golden eggs. In recommending a coordinated effort to strengthen the economic link between tourism and agriculture, the commission noted, "...visitors come for many reasons, but primarily they come because they like what they see.*

A 1990 Vermont Business Roundtable study conducted by the St. Michael's College Center for Social Science Research, concluded that of the top 11 characteristics of Vermont worth preserving, scenic views ranked third behind clean air and a low crime rate.

