

Montpelier Municipal Plan
Staff Review and Recommendation
October, 2010

Background:

The following is a review of the Montpelier City Plan under the provisions and standards of Chapter 117, Section 4350, wherein it is stated “a regional planning commission shall review and approve plans of its member municipalities, when approval is requested and warranted.”

Conditions warranting approval include findings that the plan:

- Contains each of the ten elements listed in section 4382 of Chapter 117;
- Is consistent with the thirteen goals established in Section 4302 of Chapter 117.
- (“Substantial progress toward attainment” of these goals is the standard by which consistency is evaluated); and
- Is compatible with the Regional Plan and the approved plans of other municipalities in the Region.

General Comments:

CVRPC has approved previous versions of the Montpelier City Plan in 1990, 1995, 2000, and 2005. The Plan before us now is a complete rewrite. At nearly 250 pages, it is dense and ambitious. It is the product of an impressive and unprecedented public input effort involving over 800 residents and stakeholders. In 2007, an effort called “*Envision Montpelier*” was launched for the purposes of directing this campaign. Through the course of the Plan’s development this group held monthly stakeholders meetings to garner public input. The City also established five citizen committees (*Economics and Livelihoods, Governance, Infrastructure and the Built Environment, Natural Environment, and Social and Human Development*) to work on specific sections of the Plan. Other outreach efforts included a statistically valid citizen’s survey, on-line participation, and other public meetings. The Plan strives to continue to make planning a democratic process in the City, as it contains numerous strategies for future input, feedback and monitoring.

The result of this process was a Plan of great complexity and uniqueness. It has gained international attention, in part for its long- term focus (50 years) and attention to sustainability. It is comprehensive and integrated, addressing not only the dictates of Chapter 117 (the Plan contains a helpful matrix showing where each statutory requirement is addressed in the document), but issues not usually found in municipal plans (health and wellness, food, and restorative justice, for example).

Montpelier’s recently designated Growth Center is the centerpiece of the Plan in many ways. This area is the focal point for many of the City’s strategies for commercial/civic development, and particularly for residential growth. In fact, it was conceived of primarily as a residential growth center and is a critical part of the City’s effort to reverse the population decline and housing shortages of recent decades. The Plan designates the growth center as the “receiving

area” for 80% of the units allocated by CVRPC’s housing distribution plan. State designation increases the likelihood that this goal can be achieved as it qualifies the zone for Tax Increment Financing, a powerful infrastructure development tool.

While this review attempts to provide the reader with an overview and some highlights of the Plan, it is impossible to cover even a small percentage of the ideas and strategies presented in this lengthy document. As such, the reviewer’s analysis generally provides only a few example of the Plan’s response to Chapter 117 mandates.

The Ten Elements:

1. A statement of objectives, policies and programs of the municipality to guide future growth and development of land, public services and facilities, and to protect the environment.

Objectives (“*targets*” in this Plan), policies and programs for guiding future growth appear at the end of each chapter of the document. General goals are also succinctly stated on pages 15-17, wherein the top priorities of the five Plan committees are stated. Additionally, the “*Implementation*” chapter of the Plan (p.236-238) highlights methods by which the overall vision of the Plan will be achieved.

2. A land use plan, consisting of a map and statement of present and prospective land uses...

Land use issues are integrated and addressed throughout the Plan, but are probably addressed most directly in the Chapter titled “*Infrastructure and Built Environment*” (Chapter 4, pages 70-140). This chapter discusses the City’s neighborhood configuration and its vision for future growth and development. It introduces the City’s Growth Center concept and highlights areas prioritized for residential growth for the next 5 to 15 years. It contains maps of both current zoning and land use and planned future land use. (Figures 29 and 30 on pages 117 and 118, respectively).

3. A transportation plan, consisting of a map and statement of present and prospective transportation and circulation facilities...

Section 4.2 (“*Transportation and Circulation*”, covering pages 85- 110 of the “*Built Environment*” chapter) addresses a comprehensive range of transportation issues, including pedestrian and bicycle networks, bridges, public transit, rail, parking, demand management, and

the street network. Maps for both the motorized and non-motorized transportation network appear on pages 87 and 88, respectively.

4. A utility and facility plan consisting of a map and statement of present and prospective community facilities and public utilities...

Utility and facility planning are addressed primarily in Chapter 3 of the Plan (“*Natural Resources*”) wherein public sewer and water systems and solid waste management are addressed, and Chapter 4 (“*Infrastructure and Built Environment*”) which discusses the infrastructural needs for future neighborhoods. In addition, Chapter 7 (“*Social and Human Development*”) addresses emergency services (fire, police, and emergency management), health services and public facilities. A map of the City’s infrastructure and facilities is provided on page 35.

5. A statement of policies on the preservation of rare and irreplaceable natural areas, scenic and historic features and resources.

Chapter 3 “*Natural Environment*” contains numerous goals, targets, and strategies designed to protect Montpelier’s natural resources. Historic features are addressed largely in Chapter 4, which contains a section titled “*Architectural History and Design*” (pages 79-85). Natural and historic resources are also addressed peripherally in other parts of the Plan. The Plan contains numerous maps depicting its natural resource base, including: *Conservation Lands, Biodiversity Conservation Areas, Important Views and Vistas, Wildlife Habitat, Wetlands and Waterbodies, and Natural Communities.*

6. An educational facilities plan consisting of a map and statement of present and projected uses and the local public school system.

Educational resources and facilities are covered extensively in Chapter 7 (“*Social and Human Development*”) and Chapter 5 (“*Economics and Livelihoods*”) of the Plan. These sections contain information on public facilities, enrollment trends, private institutions, and adult education programs. Goals, targets and policies relating to education and childcare appear on pages 217 - 222. School sites are displayed on a *Community Facilities* map, referred to above.

7. A recommended program for the implementation of the development plan.

Every chapter of the Plan contains a set of goals, targets and strategies intended to implement the City’s vision. Responsible parties are identified to help carry out specific action steps. Furthermore, the Plan contains an entire section devoted to a discussion of the methods by which the Plan will be implemented (“*Implementing the Master Plan*”, pages 236-238). This section explains that the document will be used to guide local decision making (including public spending) and help Montpelier participate effectively in regulatory processes, including Act 250.

This section also establishes a framework for monitoring and evaluating the City's progress in implementing the Master Plan over the long term.

8. A statement indicating how the plan relates to the development trends and plans for the adjacent municipalities, areas and the region.

The Plan contains a section titled "*State and Regional Context*" (pages 25 and 26) that:

- * expounds on the City's role as the host of state government and as an employment and educational center for the wider region
- * highlights partnerships with adjacent municipalities
- * briefly explores regional land use patterns
- * acknowledges Montpelier's role as a member of CVRPC

The Plan also discusses the opportunities and potential issues in providing water and sewer services to the Town of Berlin (Chapter 3). None of the challenges seem difficult or insurmountable, but will require continued communication between the two communities.

9. An energy plan, including an analysis of energy resources, needs, scarcities, costs and problems with the municipality, a statement on the conservation of energy, a statement of policy on the development of renewable energy, and a statement on patterns and densities of land use likely to result in conservation.

The Plan addresses energy issues in several different sections, including "*Air and Climate*" (pages 71 and 72 of Chapter 3), "*Infrastructure and Built Environment*", and "*Transportation and Circulation*." Together, these narratives present a detailed view of the City's current energy uses/issues and a vision for a sustainable energy future for the community which addresses each of the components listed under Goal #9.

10. A housing element, including a recommended program for addressing low and moderate-income persons' housing needs.

Housing issues and strategies are addressed primarily in Chapter 4, Section 4.3 ("*Population and Housing*", pages 111-122) and Section 4.5 ("*Housing and Buildings*", pages 132-140). A multitude of measures designed to promote affordable housing are offered in the document. Some are continuations of current programs and policies. Many are new ideas and offerings. The newly designated Growth Center is the focal point for many of these strategies and its continued existence/recognition is critical for an effective response to Goal #10.

The Goals:

1. To plan development so as to maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside.

The City's commitment to the implementation of its newly designated Growth Center is a strong indicator of its desire for an overall land use pattern characterized by a compact urban center separated by rural countryside. The Plan states that the City will "*promote high density development within the Growth Center*" by increasing allowable densities and even enforcing "*minimum density*" requirements (page 134). The Plan strive to maintain lower densities, conserve important resource lands, and maintain its existing parks and conserved lands outside of the Growth Center (see Goals 5 and 6). The Plan also recognizes that Montpelier's successful implementation of a Growth Center (and the new housing choices it could generate) could reduce development pressures on neighboring rural towns.

2. To provide a strong and diverse economy that provides satisfying and rewarding job opportunities and that maintains high environmental standards, and to expand economic opportunities in areas with high unemployment or low per capita incomes.

Despite the fact that Montpelier's percentage of total jobs within the region is declining slightly, it is still *the* job center of Washington County, hosting more than twice as many jobs (Just over 10,000) than any other municipality. The Plan contains a detailed and comprehensive chapter on the local economy ("*Economics and Livelihoods*", pages 146 - 180) which establishes policies designed to maintain an economy that is strong, diverse, vibrant and sustainable. This section addresses current and future employment statistics, green jobs, the "creative economy", income, childcare, adult education, local food production, processing and distribution, and even alternative currencies. It strives to "*meet human needs*" and "*promote an entrepreneurial spirit.*" Once again, the City's Growth Center is a critical piece of its vision for the local economy. A few of the specific strategies offered in the Plan include:

- * Creation of jobs through the implementation of Biomass District Energy Project (see Goal #7)
- * Policies for local purchasing and investment
- * Creation of a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district for infrastructure investment within the Growth Center
- * Providing incubator space, tax incentives and loans programs for new and expanding business
- * Revising and streamline regulatory review for commercial uses in the downtown
- * Redeveloping underutilized properties, including brownfields

3. To broaden educational access to educational and vocational training opportunities to ensure the full realization of the abilities of all Vermonters.

The Plan states that "*Montpelier is a learning community where people share questions and experiment with ideas. Accessible learning opportunities support a life-long process that fosters*

success and contribution as members of the local, national and global community.” This philosophy is extended to all forms of education for all ages, be it public school education of the City’s children, classes for seniors, vocational/job programs, or merely educating citizens about local issues and government through public forums, local committees, news article or the web. The Plan contains six full pages of goals, targets and strategies regarding the education of its citizens (pages 217 - 223).

4. To provide for safe, convenient, economic and energy efficient transportation systems that respect the integrity of the natural environment, including public transit options and paths for pedestrians and bicyclers.

With respect to this this statutory requirement, the City’s most relevant, encompassing goals reads as follows:

“Montpelier is built at a human scale with a transportation system that serves the access and mobility need of all people through a choice of convenient, comfortable, affordable, and efficient transportation modes.” (Page 126)

As mentioned earlier, Section 4.2 (*“Transportation and Circulation”*, pages 85- 110 of the *“Built Environment”* chapter) addresses a comprehensive range of transportation issues, including pedestrian and bicycle networks, bridges, public transit, rail, parking, demand management, and the street network. Some of the strategies designed to improve and integrate Montpelier’s transportation systems are:

- * Promote street connectivity and “walkability” through land use decisions
- * Extend sidewalks along major arteries.
- * Manage parking and street network demand through promotion of public transit, car sharing, park and ride lots, carpooling, telecommuting, and pedestrian and bicycle facilities
- * Expand public transportation between Montpelier and Barre
- * Explore options for intersection improvements, including roundabouts, turning lanes and left turn prohibitions
- * Commit funds to the non-motorized network
- * *“Develop a municipally owned communications network over a state of the art fiber optic network”*

(An interesting side note: The City may be unique in the Region in that it is experiencing significant increases in the use of public transit as well as the percentage of workers walking and carpooling to their jobs. Montpelier clearly intends to build on this trend)

5. To identify, protect and preserve important natural and historic features of the Vermont landscape, including significant natural and fragile areas, outstanding water resources, significant scenic roads, waterways and views and important historic structures.

AND

6. To maintain and improve the quality of air, water, wildlife and land resources. In accordance with Act 250.

The Master plan does a remarkable job identifying the above resources. It contains discussions of, and maps depicting: *Steep Slopes, Ridgelines, Flood Hazard Zones, Endangered Species, Conservation Lands, Biodiversity Conservation Areas, Important Views and Vistas, Wildlife Habitat, Wetlands and Waterbodies, Agricultural soils/parcels, Historic Districts, and Natural Communities* (mostly in Chapter 3).

Furthermore, the document strives to protect the City's most important resources through an array of goals and policies, including, but not limited to:

- * Control of invasive species
- * Expanded buffers for flood protection
- * Density bonuses for development projects that avoid or protect important resources
- * Alternative transportation initiatives to save energy and reduce emissions (see also Goals 4 and 7)
- * Promotion of Low Impact Design (LID) techniques, such as green roofs and rain gardens
- * Reducing waste through "green purchasing", and offering better composting/recycling/reuse options for residents and businesses
- * Protection of sensitive areas through, fee purchase, voluntary easements, transfer of development rights and resource overlay districts
- * Focusing new growth and in-fill development in the designated Growth Center (See Goal #1)
- * Creation of a plan for stormwater management
- * Attention to urban trees and street trees
- * Continued use of Design Review in the Historic District (Vermont's largest!)

7. To encourage the efficient use of energy in the development of the renewable energy resources.

Montpelier's vision with respect to energy issues is summarized in the following quote:

"Energy efficiency in Montpelier is maximized. Montpelier's energy is generated by renewable sources of local origin. The delivery of energy is structured to encourage efficient use and affordability." (page 126).

Among the ideas offered to attain this vision are:

- * The implementation of a combined heat and power Biomass Energy Plant to serve the downtown core (The City recently received an \$8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to pursue this project)
- * Creation of a Clean Energy Assessment District (CEAD), as per Vermont's recent enabling legislation
- * Development of a wood pellet processing plant within the City
- * More energy conscious purchasing by the City

- * Increased home weatherization programs
- * The various alternative transportation initiatives and land use goals discussed previously in this review
- * Encouraging the use of LEED standards in new buildings

8. To maintain and enhance recreational opportunities for Vermont residents and visitors.

Page 57 of the Plan expresses the following vision for open space and recreation in Montpelier:

“Montpelier residents and visitors have ample opportunities to recreate outdoors.... There are abundant green and open spaces throughout the City for both ecosystems and recreation. The city parks are linked to each other, to neighborhoods and to surrounding open spaces, forming green spaces, pathways, trails, and corridors..”

To this end, it recommends, among other things:

- * The completion of Segment 2 of the Winooski West Bike Path
- * The construction of a bike path link between Taylor Street and Stonecutter’s Way
- * Increasing access points to existing parks
- * Surveying citizens to determine unmet needs

The Plan acknowledges that the City is already well served by its larger parks but *“could use more options in its downtown core”*

The Plan contains a detailed inventory of existing public parks and recreation areas.

9. To encourage and strengthen agricultural and forest industries.

As mentioned previously, the economic development chapter of the Plan contains substantial narrative and targets regarding the development of a local food network. This discussion encompasses production, processing and distribution, and all of these endeavors are promoted within City boundaries (see pages 177-180. Chapter 3 of the Plan contains a section titled *“Agricultural Soils”* (page 49) that identifies soils and parcels that are actively farmed (Incidentally, one of the largest undeveloped prime ag. parcels is the home of the Two Rivers Center for Sustainability, an active farm). Several of the land protection strategies discussed under goals 5 and 6 are intended to apply to important agricultural and forest lands, when warranted.

10. To provide for the wise and efficient use of Vermont’s natural resources and to facilitate the appropriate extraction of earth resources and the proper restoration and preservation of the aesthetic qualities of the area.

The Plan states that the City should “*enact zoning regulations to insure that the extraction of earth resources is in compliance with best practices to minimize harm to all other resources and insure that site restoration is completed so that the aesthetic qualities of the area are preserved and enhanced.*” (page 74).

The Plan’s response to other natural resource questions has already been addressed under Goals 5 and 6.

11. To ensure the availability of housing for all Vermonters.

The Plan states, as one of its primary goals, that “*Montpelier (have) a mix of housing that is affordable, safe, healthy, accessible, eco-efficient, in diverse neighborhoods that enhances the experience of people who live here and fosters community.*” (page 126).

In accordance with this Goal, Montpelier has been actively seeking ways to arrest and reverse the population declines and housing unit slow-downs witnessed over the second half of the last century. Indications suggest that these efforts are yielding results, as the average number of units being created per year jumped from about three during the 90’s to around thirty in the first half of the 2000’s. The City’s continued commitment to “growing” this trend is evidenced in its Growth Center planning and designation. Montpelier conceived of its Growth Center as primarily a residential one, realizing that all of the City’s other goals for a vibrant and flourishing community were dependent upon its resident population. It is the City’s hope that the Growth Center designation will qualify it for Tax Increment Financing (TIF) to expand infrastructure as well as other state and federal community development programs.

The City has designated the Growth Center as the “*preferred receiving area*” for 80% of the 476 new units allocated to the Montpelier under CVRPC’s Housing Distribution Plan over the next ten years (narrative page 116, Map page 117). In fact, the Growth Center has been designed to accommodate an even larger number of unit than this.

Furthermore, and in accordance with the Distribution Plan, the City strives to “*accommodate an average of 50 new housing units per year*”, citywide (page 137). The Plan also contains a map depicting the location of all housing units developed over the five years preceding the Plan (page 118), as required by the CVRPC Distribution Plan .

These ambitious goals for the creation of new housing are not just idle talk. The Plan contains numerous strategies and action steps to help bring them to fruition. A very small sample includes:

- * Maintaining the City’s Housing Trust Fund for affordable housing
- * Reducing sewer and water hookup fees for accessory apartments
- * Revising zoning to make it less cumbersome for homeowners to add rental units and for the creation of mixed use projects
- * Reducing density requirements and considering “maximum lot sizes” in the Growth Center

- * Continuing the City’s Housing Preservation loan program for renovation loans to mod/low income homeowners
- * Using density bonuses and inclusionary zoning to promote affordable housing
- * Promoting clustered multifamily projects in low density zones.

Additional strategies can be found on pages 132 to 140 of the Plan.

12. To plan for, finance and provide an efficient system of public facilities and services to meet future needs.

This goal is met in different ways, in different chapters of the Plan. Chapter 3 (“*Natural Environment*”) discusses and establishes goals for the sewer and water system and waste management. Chapter 4 (“*Infrastructure and the Built Environment*”) expounds on the transportation infrastructure, and Chapter 7 addresses emergency/health services and some public buildings. The various “sectors” of public facilities and services are tied together (at least with respect to this goal) by Chapter 6 - the Plan’s section on “*Governance*”. Therein, it is made clear that Montpelier intends to have a local government that acts in the interest of efficiency, public need, and the will of the public in the provision of services and infrastructure.

13. To ensure the availability of safe and affordable childcare and to integrate child care into the planning process.

The Montpelier Plan contains an extensive narrative on the importance of childcare to the community and a detailed accounting of currently available childcare resources. (“*Childcare*”, pages 198-201). The Plan contains strategies designed to provide “*a variety of quality, affordable care for parents and guardians of young children.*” (page 217).

Compatibility:

Chapter 117 states that “for one plan to be compatible with another, the plan in question (should) not significantly reduce the desired effect of the implementation of the other (approved) plan.” This reviewer finds nothing in the Montpelier City Plan that would inhibit the successful implementation of the surrounding town’s plans. In fact, the City’s recognition, through its growth center planning, that its efforts to promote focused residential and business can potentially alleviate some of the development pressure on communities without infrastructure is laudable. In the cases where surrounding communities may have interest in acquiring some of Montpelier’s excess capacity, the City seems quite willing to work with them.

In short, in this Plan, Montpelier “steps up to the plate” to assume its role as a regional growth center.

Conclusion:

The Montpelier Master Plan has clearly and unequivocally met all the statutory mandates of Chapter 117 required for “approval” of the document by the CVRPC. On that basis alone, the Town Plan Review Committee recommends its approval to the full Commission. In addition, it is important to understand that many of the bold and innovative goals and strategies for housing development and “smart growth” land use principles proposed in this Plan are dependent on the continued good standing of the City’s current State Growth Center designation. As such, any action other than approval would not only defy CVRPC’s statutory responsibility, but jeopardize the implementation of the Master Plan and aspects of the Regional Plan, as well.