

**Worcester Municipal Plan  
Committee Review and Recommendation  
1/08**

**Background:**

The following is a review of the Worcester Town 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 last reviewed a Worcester Plan in 2000. That Plan dated from the late 1990’s. Worcester adopted a new Plan in 2002 but did not request regional approval at that time. The recently adopted 2007 version is similar, but not identical to the previous documents. It contains a new section on childcare as well as a more complete and updated set of maps. The Town has also updated most relevant data and statistics – albeit somewhat inconsistently (*updated* charts often accompany *outdated* narrative).

The new Plan strengthens some of its policy language to be “mandatory” rather than “optional”. While this may be intended to provide reassurance in a community that wishes to preserve its essential character without protective land use bylaws, these edits occasionally lead to overly broad strokes and/or ambiguous messages (An example of a policy exhibiting both flaws: “Development that *threatens to erode* recreational opportunity *shall be discouraged.*”)

**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.**

The Town’s planning priorities are set forth in the Plan’s initial chapter (p.3). In addition, goals and policies appear at the conclusion of each chapter and are repeated in the last section of the document (Appendix D, pages 70-79) wherein they are categorized under the following overarching goals:

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

This element is addressed in the section of the Plan titled "Land Use Planning" (Part X, pages 44-50), wherein distinct land use districts are described and prospective land uses are discussed. Several useful maps accompany the text.

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

This element is addressed in Transportation section of the Plan (Part V, pages 30-32) wherein the existing transportation infrastructure is discussed, planned for and mapped.

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

The Utilities, Facilities and Services section of the Plan (Part IV, pages 22-29) contains narratives, goals and policies on water supply, sewage systems, electric power, solid waste, emergency services, public safety, recreation, and other government services. A Utilities and Facilities Map displays these resources, to the extent they exist.

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

This element is addressed primarily by the goals and policies contained in Part III of the Plan, "The Land and its Resources" (pages 13-21) as well as the "Land Use Planning" section (see above).

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

The Plan addresses education in the Utilities and Facilities section (pages 23 and 24) wherein Worcester's schools are discussed and planned for. The site of the Doty Elementary School sites appears on the Utilities and Facilities Map.

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

The introductory section of the Plan states that Worcester will implement its plan through participation in the Act 250 process, in reviewing the plans and activities of State agencies, in local decision making processes through its membership in CVRPC, and by using the document as a foundation for any future land use regulations (page 4).

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

The introductory Section also contains a "Compatibility Statement" (page 4). This narrative convincingly states that Worcester has minimal potential for conflicts with neighboring towns or the Region due to its geography and topography.

9. **An energy plan, including an analysis of energy resources, needs, scarcities, costs and problems within 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 contains a brief energy section (Part VI, "Energy", pages 33-35) that addresses land use patterns, conservation and renewable energy.

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

The Plan contains a housing section (Part VII "Housing", pages 36 -39) that addresses housing growth, affordability and availability, and contain policies that generally encourage housing opportunities, albeit without specifics and along side of some more ambiguous policies. (see 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.**

Worcester's response to development pattern issues is, essentially, to defend the status quo. Any new growth is expected to be consistent with the existing character of each of its four Land Use Districts (Village, Village Transition, Rural Residential and Forest). While this pattern may support Goal 1 to the extent that Worcester currently fits the statutory description ("compact village surrounded by countryside"), there are problems too. Among them:

- The "character" of existing development is inadequately defined (what is average density, lot size, setback for instance?).
- Worcester's current growth *trend* is toward large lot residential development on back roads. The Plan makes little effort to address this.
- The Plan is not particularly accommodating toward new Village growth (especially non-residential growth often seen as critical to maintaining small village vitality).

This reluctance is, to some extent understandable given that Worcester is a small, rural community without the infrastructure to handle major growth and without protective land use bylaws. However, the Town must do a better job in deciding where new growth can and should occur and how it may do so in accordance with and in support of traditional development patterns.

Finally, while "cluster development" is encouraged, no real incentives are provided and there is, in fact a "limitation" on large subdivisions (more than 15 units from a single project over a 5 year period) in the Plan. Staff concedes that a project of such size would be quite large and intimidating for such a small community but believes the Town should focus more on the quality of new development than quantity as such a limitation may actually hinder the ability to realize creative subdivisions or replicate village patterns (not to mention provide affordable housing)

On a more encouraging note the Plan does list as "Town Planning Priorities" (p.3) the following:

- "Explore a solution and purpose for Worcester's Village District"
- "Explore the possibility of Land Use Regulations that can guide growth in Worcester while ensuring private property rights."

In sum, staff believes it can be argued that the Plan *has* made *some* progress towards Goal 1, but future iterations of the Plan must provide clearer guidance on land use patterns.

- 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.**

*None of what type of business?*

The Worcester Plan contains an Economic Element (Part IX Economy, pages 41-43). The primary goal of this section is "To promote an economic environment that ensures employment and quality of life to all Worcester resident." Support for home occupations and resource-based industries is the primary vehicle for implementation of this goal. As mentioned above however, The Plan is not particularly hospitable toward commercial business in the Village.

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

The Plan recites this goal almost verbatim (p.29) and states that "new development that will place significant burdens on the local school system shall address and mitigate those impacts." *adult ed?*

- 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.**

The Plan overriding Transportation goal is "to provide a transportation infrastructure that will enable the quick, efficient and safe movement of people, goods and services". *bike/ped*  
Among the policies offered in support of this goal are encouraging multi-modal travel options and encouraging traffic calming measures and pedestrian access in the Village. It also "requires" that "development patterns reflect the capacity of the existing function(al) classification of roadways."

- 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.**

With its low population density and mountainous terrain, Worcester possesses a rich natural heritage. The Plan recognizes the value of its resources and offers a variety of strategies to help protect them. Protective measures endorsed by the Plan include:

- PUD/cluster development
- Advocating for resource protection in Act 250
- Support for the recently formed Conservation Commission
- Continued participation in the NFIP
- Restricting development in the environmentally sensitive, high elevation Forest
- Support for vegetated buffers along surface water
- Encouraging adherence to Acceptable Management Practices (AMP's) in timber operations
- Investigating non-regulatory conservation tools such as easements/acquisition on important parcels
- Identification and protect scenic roads

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

The Plan states two energy goals:

1. "To encourage energy conservation through guidance of land use patterns, the facilitation of alternate modes of transportation and other methods."
2. "To encourage the development of alternative and renewable energy sources.

To this end it support home weatherization programs, retention of productive forest/timber lands, and attention to energy issues in new construction. It also contains an ill-considered (in staff's opinion) policy prohibiting the illumination of signs townwide. Not only is this not an effective energy policy, but it inappropriate for Village areas. If aesthetics is the concern, the Town could regulate sign dimensions, and the type of illumination (exterior vs. interior, and impose shielding requirements. It gets dark during normal business hours from November until February in Northern Vermont.

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

The Plan recognizes that Worcester's wild landscape and ample public lands provide ample opportunities for outdoor recreation. It supports this situation and an active lifestyle for residents and visitors through policies encouraging public access, use of Class IV roads and public trails, and continued participation in the Wrightsville Beach Recreation District.

**9. To encourage and strengthen agricultural and forest industries.**

The Plan seeks to accomplish this goal primarily through protection of the land base for these activities. Accordingly, it promotes:

- Cluster development/creative site design to avoid development of important resource lands/soils
- Participation in Act 250 to advocate for the protect of agricultural and forest resources
- Restrictions on development in area of high elevation and/or remote from roads primarily through the "Forest" district requirements.
- Compliance with Acceptable Management Practices (AMP's) and the use of wood as a renewable fuel.
- Protection from "nuisance" claims.

**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.**

Most natural resources are addressed in the response to Goals 5 and 6. Regarding "earth resources" the Plan states that "Gravel extraction...shall be compatible with (its) surrounding land uses. Traffic types and volumes and noise levels will be factors in making this determination. In addition, active sites shall be well screened and mined areas quickly reclaimed."

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

Although it is a "Basic Goal" of the Plan "To ensure the availability of safe and affordable housing for Worcester residents" the document seems tentative about housing growth. On the positive side, it does encourage cluster site design to reduce infrastructure and land costs, and promotes working with the State and non-profit housing groups to create housing. On the other hand, it "encourages housing development that *reinforces* and *complements* existing neighborhoods" with out ever defining those terms in the context of its neighborhoods and states that it seeks "to prevent the location of new housing development from having *any negative impacts* on human health, ecological quality, scenic values and the Town's rural character" – a seemingly impossible standard (State law is trending towards the term "undue adverse impact", in the Act 250 and zoning arenas.). As mentioned previously, the Town lack of a designated area for more dense housing, as well as its special limitations on "large scale" development place it in a difficult position to control the land costs of housing development.

The Plan's housing statistics have been updated for the most part, but the "affordability" (p.37) analysis is rendered less meaningful by the use of out of date housing costs. Worcester's housing costs were well below Regional averages in 2000, but are now substantially above average.

Regional  
Housing  
with action  
plan

dense  
housing

affordable/  
senior  
housing

On the positive side, the housing section, unlike that of most other plans, does acknowledge CVRPC's housing needs analysis through the year 2020.

Clearly the Plan has shortcomings with respect to Goal 11. However, it can be argued that its basic philosophy (as expressed in the Introductory Section) and its data updates provide some progress towards this goal. Still, Worcester must do a better job delineating specific locations and densities for housing in its next iteration of the Plan.

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

It is a "basic goal" of the Plan "To encourage the provision of efficient and necessary public facilities, utilities and services." (p.3). The Plan also seeks to "provide reliable government services to Worcester's residents at a reasonable cost." (p. 22). To this end the Plan support proposals in the Legislature for payment in lieu of taxes on publicly owned land, and growth rates and patterns that do not place undue burdens on infrastructure and services. (The limitation on large scale development is also offered as a fiscal planning tool in this regard).

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

As mentioned under "General Comments", the Plan contains a new section addressing child care that provides an overview of the current situation locally and information on various State and County resources. While no goals or specific policies are offered, staff believes "progress" has been made with respect to this goal.

**Compatibility:**

Chapter 117 states that "for one plan to be compatible with another, the plan is question (should) not significantly reduce the desired effect of the implementation of the other (approved) plan." The Committee finds nothing in the Worcester Town Plan that would inhibit the successful implementation of the surrounding town's plans.

**Discussion/Conclusions:**

Despite the shortcomings identified in this review, the Worcester Town Plan contains the essential elements of a municipal plan and at least makes some progress towards attainment of the 13 statutory goals. The staff therefore suggests that the Town Plan Review Committee recommend "approval" of the Plan under the standards of Chapter

*no goals  
provision*



117 by the full Commission. Staff further urges that any resolution recommend that the Town of Worcester address the concerns of this review prior to the end of the five year cycle.

