

Westford Act 181 Working Group

March 11, 2025

Agenda

1. (3:00pm) – Introductions
2. (3:10pm) – Background on Act 181 & Regional Planning
3. (3:30pm) – Goals of Westford’s Act 181 Working Group
4. (3:45pm) – Review of Draft Regional Plan Future Land Use Map
5. (4:25pm) – Wrap-Up, Next Steps, & Future Meeting Scheduling
6. (4:30pm) – Adjournment

In attendance / introductions

- Max Tyler, Westford Planning Commissioner
- Arlo Pouliot, lifelong resident
- Ben Bornstein
 - CCRPC Rep
 - Also own 400 forested acres, 170 acres have been in family for > 100 years. Take stewardship seriously.
 - Want transparency and inclusive process.
 - May not get map right first time around, want to understand process for making changes.
- Bree Drapa, Westford Public Library Director
 - 20-year town resident
 - Absorb info
 - President of the King Hill Homeowner Association
- Rebecca DaVanon, resident
- Sarah Pinto, Conservation Commissioner
 - Has some professional legal experience with Act 250
 - Worked with Melissa Manka (former town planner) to reduce sprawl / concentrate development
- Lori Johnson
 - Advocate for sensible growth – Westford is unique and isn’t poised to grow significantly.
 - Thinks of Westford as a hamlet, not a Town
 - OK with additional housing, prioritize in place where there is existing development / resources available

- There are barriers to development around the existing common, it would need lots of investment
- Mark Letorney, resident and owner of Rovers North
- *Staff:* Harmony Cism, Holly Delisle, Darren Schibler, Kate McCarthy

Act 181 overview & discussion

- Darren provided an overview of Act 181. A similar presentation can be found here. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sy0GKbqhE-0&t=2s>
- Act 181 helps advance housing goals, in part through implementing statewide planning goal of compact village centers surrounded by working lands.
- Act 181 better connects planning with regulation and investments – less regulation, and more investment, in areas planned for growth. RPC’s future land use maps do not change how other areas are regulated.
 - Because the regional plan identifies those areas, regional plans and maps will now be reviewed by the state Land Use Review Board. That approval leads to automatic designation (centers, neighborhoods), and, if a municipality chooses, reduced Act 250 jurisdiction.
 - Darren notes that one of the goals of the working group is to discuss whether and where Westford wishes to “opt in” to have Tier 1B areas – areas where Act 250 jurisdiction is limited.
- Darren reviewed the current Act 250 interim exemptions, which are in place today in and around designated areas, including villages. <https://act250.vermont.gov/interim-act-250-housing-exemptions>
- Darren concluded this section by providing an overview of housing targets. These were created by Act 181 and before that, the HOME Act. The state provided regional targets, which are being disaggregated to towns. We have had a housing element in local and regional plans for as long as we’ve had plans. With the housing targets, we are attaching a number, providing opportunities for planning and conversations about how we get there.
 - Darren noted that we will spend more time on housing targets at the next meeting.
 - Are the housing targets mandatory? They must be included in municipal and regional plans, but they are only goals, and a way to talk about accommodating the level of growth that is expected, so that growth that happens occurs in a way that advances other local goals.
- Discussion

- Do towns have to opt into every tier – Tiers 1, 2, and 3? No - towns only opt into Tier 1B (via the regional mapping process), and Tier 1A (for which towns apply to the Land Use Review Board).
- Ben asked how forest blocks relate to the rural conservation and ag/forestry categories, and to local R-10 zoning. Darren explained that there is a lot of overlap between the rural sub-categories as defined in statute.
 - Rural conservation includes areas with critical natural resources, such as significant wetlands, rare threatened and endangered species. Forest blocks are recommended as a starting point, recognizing that resources on the ground can change.
 - Agriculture and forestry: Includes working lands in Current Use (a program to reduce how much taxes are paid by land in production), but recognizes that these areas have conservation value as well.
- Max asked about the use of current use as the marker for ag/forestry, but notes it is a voluntary program, and it could change.
- Max shared that the Westford regulations make a distinction in lot size depending on whether something is on a state road vs. a more rural road. This map doesn't seem to reflect that.
 - Darren said that we are not looking at road access specifically in the mapping criteria.
 - Darren emphasized that zoning remains in place, and is the tool towns rely on to shape the amount and location of development in the more rural areas – not the regional map.
 - Darren acknowledged that the current use data is a partial description and starting point for describing agricultural and forestry land, knowing that there may be other parcels, especially in rural general, that also contribute to agriculture and forestry.
 - Darren also notes that the rural categories don't carry any regulatory changes or investment priorities.
- Bree asked about how flexible the land use categories are. Do you see possible changes? And who is making the decisions about the categories?
 - Darren said that there are areas in statute that are clear, and in those cases we need to follow closely.
 - In other cases, this working group is able to discuss any areas where there's room for interpretation. For example - Darren sees room to move between village area and village center. We want to include previously designated areas as centers as a starting point.

- If a town no longer wishes to participate in the designation program, that is a choice that can be made locally in coordination with the RPC and the state Land Use Review Board. This would result in loss of benefits for the Town and property owners.
- There is also room for interpretation in the rural categories, and somewhat in the transition category. We will try not to focus too much on ag/forestry, and conservation, because it doesn't have the same implications (regulatory, incentive).

Goals of the working group

- Are these maps we are developing consistent with local future land use goals?
- Did we miss anything, or is there anything inconsistent?
- Are there areas of the community you'd like to see designated as Tier 1B (partial Act 250 exemption)?
- The group will also discuss the housing targets and may start discussing ways to meet those needs.

Reviewing the Draft Regional Future Land Use Map

- The map will be "going live" on CCRPC's website later this week or early next, with comments due by May 19th. *Now available!* <https://www.ccrpcvt.org/our-work/our-plans/ecos-regional-plan/ecos-engagement/#future-land-use-map>
- Darren showed the new draft future land use map and highlighted that it is similar to the current CCRPC ECOS future land use map, with a core surrounded by largely rural areas.
- Map feedback - general
 - If mapping categories will be locked in and limit people's rights, using current use as a criterion matters. Will people be protected from being locked in to a change that limits use of their properties? Darren answered that this map does not lock in anything – participation in current use, or otherwise. It does not prevent a landowner from entering or exiting current use.
 - The color of the village area looks a little like a Planned Growth Area, which could be alarming.
 - It was noted that the local decisions about development along road corridors don't match the regional future land use map.
- Map feedback – village
 - People need and want more time with the map before they can comment.

- What about parcels in two future land use areas? Darren said we tried to get the land use areas aligned with parcels. However, Between the Village Area and the Rural Conservation area adjacent to the village area, CCRPC followed Westford's local Future Land Use Map.
- Walkability and walking distance are not the same thing – remember that. Infrastructure investments may be needed, and designating an area as Village Center or Village Area can unlock resources from the Community Investment Program to help reach local goals.
- Does this map change zoning? Darren: No. The map is an attempt to reflect planning and zoning. It's also a way to think about where, over time, housing could go so that ag, forest, and natural resources are not fragmented. How you get there with the housing target, is up to the town.
- If land is removed from the village center or village area, is it eligible for the Act 250 exemption? No. Also - properties in the village center or village area are only eligible for exemption if the town opts in.
- Perhaps the town decides that the pink village areas aren't the best for growth; in those cases, could other areas be considered transition for more consideration and planning? Yes, though CCRPC would look for documentation of community interest in such an initiative to help justify mapping an area as Transition to the Land Use Review Board.
- If we decide to look at other areas to be a village, could funding be available? Transition/infill areas would be those that need more planning; whether it translates into funding is an open question.
- Idea for public information sharing
 - The Westford map might not be a great screen share without comparing to other communities, helping to show the color contrast.
 - → Clicking on a parcel shows the category the applies to that parcel.
 - → Please put more street names on, even when more zoomed out, to help people get oriented.
 - → Include municipal highlights, like schools
 - It is important to emphasize that this doesn't supersede the zoning, and doesn't change the designations; it just shows them on a map. This map doesn't impose new rules.
 - Some concern about ag/forestry vs RC, and what it means for landowners. Better messaging for public outreach.

Wrap up and next meeting

- Next meeting
 - Early April? Tuesday, Wednesday , and Thursday during the week of April 7th are all out. Harmony will send a Doodle poll.
- To dos
 - Continue reviewing the handouts
 - Please review the draft map once it comes out
 - CCRPC will share notes, recording, and follow up links.
 - Get in touch with ideas of anybody else who should be involved.