

## **Westford Act 181 Working Group**

April 16, 2025

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### Agenda

1. (6:00pm) – Welcome & Recap of Last Meeting
2. (6:10pm) – Continued Discussion of Housing Targets & Future Land Use Areas
3. (6:30pm) – Consideration of Tier 1B Areas for Partial Act 250 Exemption
4. (7:00pm) – Next Steps, Recommendations to the Planning Commission and Selectboard
5. (7:25pm) – Wrap-Up & Future Meeting Scheduling
6. (7:30pm) – Adjournment

### In attendance/introductions

- Working Group Members
  - Lori Johnson – resident (lives in Town Common)
  - Mark Letorney – resident, owner of Rovers North
  - Rebecca DeVanon – resident (lives in Town Common)
  - Ben Bornstein, representative to CCRPC & resident
  - Sarah Pinto – resident
  - Max Tyler, Westford Planning Commission
  - Arlo Pouliot – resident
  - Bree Drapa, Library Director and resident
- Municipal Staff
  - Harmony Cism - Town of Westford, Administrative Officer and Planning Coordinator
- CCRPC Staff
  - Darren Schibler
  - Kate McCarthy
- Members of the Public
  - Dick Lavalley
  - Pat Haller, Selectboard
  - Barb Peck, Fence Viewer and Resident
  - Sheila Franz – Westford Resident and landowner
  - Alex Larson – live on woods hollow

### Welcome & Recap of Last Meeting

Darren led introductions and welcomed people to the meeting. While there will not be public comment at this meeting, attendance is appreciated.

Darren reviewed the agenda. The key issue for tonight's discussion is Tier 1B, which would allow the town to receive a partial exemption from Act 250 if it chooses.

Darren recapped the last meeting:

- The group discussed future land use areas and how they fit with housing targets. In particular, the group discussed whether the historic village and surrounding area could accommodate the housing called for in that target.
- The group talked about other places Westford might grow, and what planning and infrastructure would be required.
- The group discussed rural future land uses. There were some questions and concerns about regulatory implications for those mapped areas, and how it aligns with Westford's planning and zoning work.
- CCRPC also heard that feedback may reflect people's perceived concerns about impacts on property use – and the need to be clear about not just what the map shows, but what it means. (For example, the rural categories don't have a regulatory impact.)

#### *Continued Discussion of Housing Targets & Future Land Use Areas*

Rural areas:

- At the last meeting CCRPC heard that there is a lot of overlap, and some confusion, about the definitions and intentions of rural ag forestry category and the conservation category. CCRPC has heard this from other municipalities as well. To incorporate this feedback, CCRPC will be looking at these rural categories again, smoothing the edges, and looking at broader landscape level questions more than individual parcels. These changes will be made by CCRPC after May 19<sup>th</sup>, when the comment period closes.
  - Darren reiterated that the rural categories on the Regional Future Land Use Map do not result in regulation.
- Separately from the Future Land Use Mapping process, the Land Use Review Board is studying whether and how to regulate important natural resources through Act 250's new "Tier 3" jurisdiction area.

#### *Discussion*

- How are conserved parcels represented on the map? Some parcels are permanently conserved *and* enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal program (current use). These are mostly showing as ag/forestry parcels, but can be changed to Conservation.
- What about conserved properties within village areas? Darren notes that the Common is an important civic use and ties things together; it is indicated as PGA but will not get developed. Parcels on the edge may be removed. Darren invites Pat to point that out on the map using the comment feature online.

- <https://www.ccrpcvt.org/our-work/our-plans/ecos-regional-plan/ecos-engagement/#future-land-use-map>
- Should a parcel of land that's in current use be designated as a Tier 1B exemption area? What if the owner could get a break out of taking it out of UVA if it's in a planned growth area or Village Area.
- How does Tier 3 fit with Rural General, Rural Ag/Forestry, and Rural Conservation? There's concern that the LURB has not defined the areas for Tier 3. A group member suggested being conservative about what we call conservation areas pending Tier 3 methodology. Darren clarified that Rural Conservation will not be Tier 3 on the Future Land Use map.
- Are the different RPCs using a standardized methodology? Yes.
- What scale is this intended scale for this map's use? Darren answered that it's meant to be used at the regional scale. When it comes to areas planned for growth, the map categories will be "snapped" to boundaries, to avoid confusion with parcels in different categories.
- Comment: The people on this call are invested and have learned a lot, but are still confused. When this rolls out to the general public, there will need to be a well-defined legend going along with the map. It's not "there" yet.
- Comment: Mark feels that current zoning helps protect town's rural character, including by focusing on the village center. Thinks that we can maintain this by increasing the Village's size. Doesn't think a lot of change will be needed with land use and development regulations, nor a need to change the town plan. Mark thinks Westford residents need and want a vehicle for affordable housing. How can the state help create the housing that's needed for people who grew up and wanted to stay in the community?

#### Thinking about areas for future growth

- If folks agree that the village area, with a little extra land, can accommodate future growth, the map as made could be advanced.
- Others on the group have shared a concern that the village area cannot accommodate the housing target. Some have interest in exploring new areas for growth. There are differing opinions.
- Regarding transition areas (orange) discussed last time, CCRPC staff took it back to staff, and on further analysis determined that areas in Westford do not meet the definition for "transition." Darren walked through the definition, which is:
  - These areas include areas of **existing or planned commercial, office, mixed-use development, or residential uses either adjacent to a planned growth or village area or a new stand-alone transition or infill area and served by, or**

- planned for, public water or wastewater, or both.** The intent of this land use category is to transform these areas into **higher-density, mixed-use settlements**, or residential neighborhoods through infill and redevelopment or new development. New commercial linear strip development is not allowed as to prevent it negatively impacting the economic vitality of commercial areas in the adjacent or nearby planned growth or village area. This area could also include adjacent greenfields safer from flooding and planned for future growth.
- Without planning, a mix of uses OR residential areas adjacent to a village, or areas served by public water, wastewater or both, it is not possible to designate as transition.
  - Westford could continue planning and discussion that could lead to areas being “transition” areas in the future.

### *Discussion*

- Would some of these areas be better defined as “hamlets”? Cloverdale? Bowman’s Corners? Could hamlets actually be areas for future growth that could be expanded in the future? Darren said that the distinction between hamlets and village centers is that hamlets by definition aren’t planned for growth. In contrast, there are multiple steps of Village Center that signal a spectrum of maintaining what exists to significant growth and evolution – the Westford Town Common area can fall anywhere on that spectrum by choice of the Town. If the community feels it is important to include hamlets on the map, CCRPC can include them, noting that there are no investment benefits or opportunities for Act 250 exemption.
- There are significant limitations to developing in the town center, even though it’s marked as an area for development in the town plan. Growth has historically been on Plains Road and scattered around the Rural 10 district. Darren notes that a purpose of the regional future land use map is to better direct resources and support growth to make it more possible. Putting it on the map as an area planned for growth is a way to try and overcome those limitations. Until there is a change in the town plan, or a formal plan or signal that it needs to change, the RPC needs to follow what’s in the plan and the work that’s been done by the community over the years.
- How can changes be made to the map in the future, for example, after more planning?
  - There is not yet consensus about additional areas planned for growth, but this can be discussed locally and added later if there is consensus. This would involve going through a local planning process, and updating the future land use map and policies to indicate new areas planned for growth.
  - What would signal to CCRPC that there should be a change on the Regional Future Land Use Map? A statement/description in the municipal plan about the

intent to change zoning, make investments, undertake capital planning, etc. to advance growth in other places. Once these pieces are in place in the town plan, CCRPC would review this during the plan confirmation process, and consider whether the regional plan needs to be amended.

- CCRPC is committed to developing a process where map updates can be made.
- What is on the regional future land use map today seems to be consistent with Westford's planning to date. Darren showed excerpts from the municipal plan that summarize how the town is thinking about certain areas of town. For example, the town plan on page 94 explicitly states that the Plains Road area is primarily residential, mostly built out, and that there are no other areas of town that can support this level of development density. Because of this, CCRPC needs to advance the map without new growth areas, based on planning Westford has already done.

### Consideration of Tier 1B Areas for Partial Act 250 Exemption

#### *Village Center and Village Area boundaries and making a decision about Tier 1B*

Darren emphasizes up front that it is fine if the town is not ready to elect to exempt village areas from Act 250, but would like to discuss it with the group this evening.

#### *Discussion*

- Is the main advantage of Tier 1B is you can do more units without activating Act 250? Yes. One group member thinks that Westford's zoning regulates enough, and Act 250 doesn't add much.
- Rebecca thinks this group should recommend to accept the Tier 1B areas. There is nothing to lose by doing it. Thinks it also shows a willingness to welcome development, to counter the reputation she's sometimes heard of Westford being anti-development and signal openness.
- Arlo think there is a tendency to get tunnel vision when we're looking at the village and how small it is, but notes that there is land around the village. Thinks Tier 1B is beneficial to promote growth in that area. Notes that some of his family's land is in the town center but not included on the map because of walkability; this should be revisited. Development is an opportunity to make it easier to walk and bike. There's bike infrastructure near the school. CCRPC can follow up with Arlo about details, but essentially the request is request to expand the village area to match the town's map. Darren noted we can adjust it for common sense and to align with the Town's maps.
- People walk from the center to the school, a connecting path has been looked at before, and a new property owner is more amenable to supporting this.

- *Mapping change:* Darren summarized: He is hearing to take the village area boundaries out to the edges of the T2(?) transect.
- *Mapping next step:* Look at land along Brookside Rd that's labeled "village area" but not developable due to conservation. Follow up with Arlo.
- Wastewater land
  - Owned by town. What will the town do with it? Could it be used to facilitate housing?
- Is there any appetite to give people an avenue to buy back development rights? If we're looking at how to meet housing goals, and trying to find available land within the village area.
- Darren said we can make adjustments to the map, and share a PDF.

Darren summarizes:

- We have heard support for Tier 1B in a limited area (existing Neighborhood Development Area)
- There is some interest in supporting development where it's currently planned, recognizing constraints.
- There is also interest in looking at alternative future growth areas, through planning.
- *Discussion*
  - Interested in looking at fragmentation of parcels to understand where it's happening It could guide thoughts on where else they may want to look at future growth – or where sprawl might be happening. CCRPC staff referenced the VT Parcelization website ([vtforesttrends.vnrc.org](http://vtforesttrends.vnrc.org)) and how Westford could use this to address topics of forest fragmentation and wildlife habitat preservation in its next Town Plan as required under Act 171.

#### *Next Steps, Recommendations to the Planning Commission and Selectboard*

The group reached general consensus on the map, the ability of village center and village areas to accommodate a portion of the housing targets, and a general shared interest to advance a limited Tier 1B area in the existing Neighborhood Development Areas. There is agreement to keep map as is but align the village areas with the village zoning, minus the legally conserved areas.

Discussion: How do we take this to the community as a whole?

- Selectboards need to make the request for Tier 1B. After that, it will go through a regional review and approval.

- Pat notes that the SB needs to talk to the town about a separate project, and that outreach for that project is time sensitive. There is a concern that doing outreach for both at once could cause confusion. Pat recommends against extensive public outreach for the future land use map given that the Town will be undertaking outreach on a separate project related to the 1705 VT-128 parcel, which could create confusion about different efforts.
- Public outreach options were discussed and could include the items below.
  - Idea of opening up an exemption beyond the village. May be more appetite for that than just the focus on the village.
  - Town Hall meetings, info on town website
  - Continued engagement with the Planning Commission, Selectboard
- Any outreach must be done very thoughtfully given recent divisions, pain, infighting, and hurt. There's healing, and people are getting more neighborly.
- From discussion the group concluded that there is not enough time, and it is not the right time. CCRPC has to move forward but doesn't want to jeopardize Westford's civic conversations, nor do we want to close any doors.
  - CCRPC proposal: Keep regional map aligned with the local map. Advance Tier 1B in existing NDA, since it's been vetted by the community. Consider expanding it later once there is more time for conversation and community input.
  - The group agreed to this approach.
  - CCRPC will confer with Holly and Harmony about bringing the recommendations of this working group to the Planning Commission and/or Selectboard in May and June.

Adjourned 8:00pm