



Hinesburg Planning News

Rural Zoning – Vote On November 5th

Article Published In The October 24, 2013 Issue Of The Hinesburg Record

Available Online At: www.HinesburgRecord.org

Written by Alex Weinhagen, Director of Planning and Zoning

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After 20 years of consideration, 5 years of Planning Commission work, 7 months of Selectboard deliberation, innumerable public meetings and community forums, and three formal public hearings, comprehensive rural zoning revisions were approved by the Selectboard on September 9. Implementing the bold vision outlined in the Town Plan is not without controversy. A petition was submitted requesting a town-wide vote on the rural zoning changes, and this vote is scheduled for November 5. Voting will be by Australian ballot from 7am-7pm at the Town Office. What zoning changes are proposed? To read the full proposal, see the Town website at www.hinesburg.org. The substance of the proposal revolves around three objectives:

Objective #1 - Expand Allowed Uses – Expand the list of allowed uses to better enable innovative farm/forest based operations not currently allowed. Think value-added agricultural, diversified farms and forest land, event hosting, and agri-tourism. Allowing these new uses will give rural landowners more options, and help foster innovative businesses to keep the rural landscape intact and working. For too long we have sat idly by, watching farm and forest landowners struggle with constrained options – e.g., continue traditional farming/forestry, compete for limited funds to sell conservation easements, or subdivide for new house lots. This new zoning provides new options that reflect the changing face of Vermont’s farm and forest land.

Objective #2 - Improving Design Standards - Guide development within Hinesburg’s rural areas while preserving important resource areas. Clarify regulations and support the process with better definitions and mapped features. Both the Town Plan and this zoning change anticipate that there will continue to be development in the rural parts of Hinesburg. When rural subdivisions are proposed, it is in everyone’s interest to have objective regulations with clear design standards. The new zoning clarifies what resource areas must be considered, and where they are located. For example, thanks to help from the VT Fish & Wildlife Department, we now have a map of core wildlife habitat and wildlife corridors. Under the new zoning, arguments about the what and where of wildlife habitat are no longer necessary. Extremely sensitive features that should not be impacted (e.g., streams, wetlands, steep slopes) have been differentiated from resource areas where impacts are possible (e.g., agricultural soils, wildlife habitat) as long as they are minimized.

Objective #3 - Defining Development Density – Add lot size flexibility and clearly define maximum development potential. Is there any magic to our current zoning that requires that all newly subdivided lots be at least 2-acres in size? Does it make sense for a farmer with 100 acres to be forced to break off 2-acres just to create a new house lot for a child or for revenue? The answer to both questions is no. The new zoning reduces the minimum lot size to a half-acre, so that landowners doing a subdivision have the flexibility to make lots of whatever size (small or large) works best for their goals and the landscape. Does that same 100-acre farm have the potential to be divided into 50 lots under our current 2-acre minimum lot size? The answer to that question is also no. The rural zoning proposal seeks to clarify that by establishing a simple and objective formula to determine the maximum development/subdivision potential of any parcel. The formula was designed to treat all landowners equally – i.e., both small and large landowners use the same formula. With that said, the proposal recognizes that landowners living on mid-size properties (10-30 acres) may have expectations or plans to subdivide to create another building lot in the future. To respect that, the proposal allows an exception for lots of 10 acres or more, such that one final subdivision is still possible. So what does all this mean in practice? Let's take three lots on Shelburne Falls Road – 100 acres, 10 acres, 3 acres. The 100-acre lot would have a build out potential of 10 total lots, which could be increased to 12 total lots if a master plan was created with land set aside for greenspace. The 10-acre lot would have a build out potential of two total lots. The 3-acre lot would have a build out potential of just the one existing lot.

The changes are designed to create clear and equitable system to determine how much development potential exists in the most rural areas. No longer will neighbors have to argue about how big a subdivision can or should be. This most basic piece of information will finally be codified in the regulations, so that discussion at DRB meetings can focus on good design rather than how many new building lots to allow. The intention is to position Hinesburg's rural areas to avoid suburban sprawl while still absorbing a modest amount of additional development.

These changes primarily deal with the most rural zoning districts – i.e., Agricultural and Rural Residential 2 districts. Perhaps you're thinking that this proposal doesn't affect you since you don't live in those parts of town. Does this proposal really matter to you? It should! Even if your property is not directly affected, all Hinesburg residents have a stake in planning the community's future. The AG and RR2 districts comprise the bulk of our community – approximately 80% in land area. Just as importantly, these areas define Hinesburg's rural character – a big reason you enjoy living here. Ensuring that rural character continues, and that future development is done in a coherent fashion, is in everyone's interest!