

POSITION STATEMENT ON SMART GROWTH

The Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce and GBIC believe that *growth, development and change are healthy for a sustainable Vermont*. Economic growth and development create the job opportunities and generate the tax revenues that are necessary to make Vermont a special place to live, work and do business.

The organizations further believe that the Vermont Legislature has endorsed the above statement over the years by passing enabling laws to address proper planning and regulation of growth and development. In 1968, the General Assembly passed the Vermont Planning and Development Act, which was amended in 1988 by the Vermont Growth Management Act (Act 200). In addition, in 1970, the Vermont Legislature passed Act 250. That act was amended in 1973 to include a legislative statement of intent and findings about the Vermont Capability and Development Plan and again in 2001 and 2004 with modest efforts to reform the permit process.

According to recent reports by the Vermont Forum on Sprawl, significant growth is occurring outside of our traditional growth centers. These expanding development trends suggest that there are too many disincentives, permitting obstacles and excessive costs involved to build in our growth centers. We must provide incentives and level the playing field economically to encourage higher density growth in these areas or sprawl will continue to occur.

In the view of the Chamber and GBIC, growth and development in Vermont should be guided by the following basic and specific principles:

Basic Principles

- Planning in Vermont is most effective through a locally initiated, collaborative process with coordination and review of plans by the regional planning commission in accordance with broad principles and goals outlined by state statutes.
- We need to integrate into our decision-making processes a regional perspective that recognizes the interdependency of the different parts of the region and accounts for the effects of local actions on the region as a whole.
- We support the designation of growth centers when initiated by the local planning process with endorsement by the regional planning commission. Municipal and regional planning commissions should work together to receive growth center designation from a subcommittee of the state natural resources board and downtown board. Incentives such as the waiver of certain Act 250 criteria if a development application is within a designated growth center must be provided as meaningful incentives to obtaining state approval for growth centers.
- Vermont's existing statutes already provide a number of tools to encourage appropriate growth and development. Planning for growth and development, however, does require adequate funding, including funding for the training of local, regional and state officials

responsible for implementing the state's planning laws. Additional research and education regarding the effects of increasing zoning densities and community impact is needed.

- Growth must be encouraged in designated areas, such as downtowns and other types of strategically planned growth areas. Development in those locations should be promoted through the use of incentives rather than by mandate. Mixed use and higher density development should be promoted and encouraged in these locally planned and regionally endorsed areas. Although more intense growth is encouraged in designated areas, some growth should be permitted outside those areas and it is recognized that many Chittenden County municipalities have single use industrial, wholesale, commercial and office parks.
- More incentives are needed to prevent sprawl in outlying areas by making it more attractive to develop in growth centers. These include changes in regulations to allow higher densities and mixed uses, changes to Criteria 9 B of Act 250 to allow development of agricultural soils, elimination or reductions in fees, streamlined permitting, financial assistance, reduced energy costs, lower taxes, and improved infrastructure such as water, sewer, roads and telecommunications systems.
- Incentives and tools such as tax incremental financing, tax credits and other mechanisms to encourage growth in growth centers are essential to enhancing Vermont's competitiveness. These tools need to be re-evaluated and revised to make them more attractive to developers.
- Within growth centers, the burden of proof as to whether or not natural resources including but not limited to, plant and wildlife habitat, primary agricultural soils, forest soils, and scenic views, will be adversely affected by a development project should be upon the relevant state agency or opposing party if the local or regional planning process has not established these areas as significant. The greater public good should be taken into account by the local planning commission and district environmental commission in weighing the decision as to whether or not these resources should be preserved. A broader perspective and leniency is needed for development applications within designated growth centers.

Specific Principles

(Adapted from Getting to Smart Growth II, by Smart Growth Network and International City Management Association)

Mix uses, and recognize that in some situations, residential uses are not compatible immediately adjacent to commercial/industrial areas.

Encourage compact building and infrastructure (roads, sewer and water) design. Municipalities under significant growth pressure should plan for and anticipate infrastructure needs in accordance with the projected build-out of their community plan.

Create a range of housing opportunities and choices that respond to Vermonters' needs.

Create walkable communities linked to regional transportation networks.

Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.

Direct development toward existing communities and developed areas via meaningful incentives and expedited permitting. Development decisions must be streamlined, predictable, fair, and cost-effective particularly in growth areas designated by local and regional plans.

Provide a variety of transportation choices, built around an integrated regional multi-modal network that is realistic in terms of individual mode preferences.

Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in planning decisions.

Preserve open space, farmland (where economically viable), natural beauty and critical environmental areas that have been identified as significant and worthy of preservation through a collaborative local, regional and state identification process.

The issue of how to encourage "smart growth" is worthy of continued discussions. However, the following items should be a priority for the year 2006:

- Monitor the efforts of various groups working on growth center, Act 250 revisions and permitting legislation to ensure that any proposed legislation is guided by the Chamber and GBIC's basic and specific principles listed above.
- A sufficient and sustained level of state funding from the Municipal and Regional Planning Trust Fund for local and regional planning. Of particular importance is funding for training programs for volunteer municipal and regional planning commissioners and district environmental commissioners.
- A sufficient and sustained level of funding to implement and expand an incentives program for locally designated and regionally endorsed growth areas with recognition of existing industrial/commercial office parks as a type of growth center.
- Preservation of significant open space, farms and forests via either additional funding for land acquisition or economic development strategies that support pre-existing and on-going farming, recreation and timbering. Local, regional and state planning processes must identify these resources up front rather than during the regulatory review process.
- Zoning, regulatory and financial incentives to encourage: (a) high density, mixed-use development, with sensitivity to local character, in appropriate locations; (b) transit-oriented development, including transit-accessible multi-modal buildings and developments featuring a mix of retail, service, office and residential components and private-public partnerships to the extent possible; and (c) innovation in alternative wastewater systems.
- Completion of the Circumferential Highway, the Champlain Parkway and other important road improvements because they will help accessibility to and preserve and enhance the pedestrian friendly character of growth areas and work in combination with transit services.
- Educational efforts to increase public awareness of regional planning and smart growth issues.
- Coordination of economic development activity and more effective communication between stakeholders across the region, thereby supporting the region's long-term economic vitality.
- Active participation on the local and regional level by the business community as a key component for the implementation of smart growth concepts.

Adopted by Chamber and GBIC Executive Committees on October 17, 2005 and Chamber Board on October 26, 2005.

NOTE: The Chamber and GBIC have position statements on related subjects, including environmental permitting, housing, economic development and transportation.