

# MEMO

Georgia Vermont Town Plan Update

Public Meeting Notes **DRAFT**  
February 27, 2024 6:00pm Georgia Fire & Rescue



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## Introduction:

A public meeting was held at the Georgia Fire & Rescue meeting room to present the results of the town plan survey, and discuss takeaways and potential updates to the plan.

Michael Allen from Regrowth Planning began the meeting with a slide presentation of the survey results, pausing after different categories to take questions and comments from the audience. This was followed by an open discussion period, where general comments and questions were taken. Approximately 20 attended in person, and 5 people watched via Zoom. The notes from this discussion are provided below, and a copy of the presentation slides have been provided on the project webpage for reference, as well as a link to a video of the meeting. This is not intended as a verbatim transcript of the conversation, but a summary of the main questions and points made.

## TOPIC: GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT

Comment: If the community seems to be against residential growth, how will we have the population to support more businesses in the South Village? How will those businesses thrive at the population levels we currently have? It seems like a tough balancing act.

*Moderator: Instead of taking action which would boost the housing population, which people do not seem to want, the intent is to instead focus on commercial investment. Not sure that we need to have a bigger population to have more commercial. New restaurants are very desired. They may not have survived down in Milton, but in Georgia we have an interchange from the highway which could capture those travelers, which Milton doesn't have.*

Question: Do you have any data on the demographics of the survey respondents? Are they renting, do they own, etc.

*Moderator: Yes, these results are in the last part of the report. Most respondents own their home. Age breakdown was well distributed, but not many younger people below 25. 95% full time residents. Majority commute to full time employment outside of town, second largest group (20%) are retired. Majority have lived here for more than 20 years.*

Question: How do the demographics of the survey compare to the demographics of the town?

*Moderator: Have not looked at that yet.*

Comment: Cost of housing relative to commercial is something to discuss. The survey showed there is a need for it, though the cost of it to the community may not be the \$1.20 shown in other towns, there are a lot of other factors to it that may or may not apply to Georgia. Does the community have water and sewer, plowing, etc. South Village and Georgia Center may not need to spend \$1.20 to get \$1.00 back. A quick study could be done with the Town Assessor to see what actual dollar value these housing developments might bring in and cost to serve, versus the example towns in New Hampshire which might be spread out over a large area and require more municipal effort. A quick study could be done to see if it is instead \$0.80 cents per dollar for some of these proposed developments.

*Moderator: Yes, the cost of serving residential is sometimes higher because it is spread out over a very large area, not as efficient.*

Question: In your experience, is the response to the survey skewed in any way by the fact that a large amount of older and retired people participated in the survey?

*Moderator: It is very typical in communities like this that we see a large response by older residents and seniors, and we often have a harder time getting response from younger folks. However, this wasn't intended to be a "vote", we did not take the expense of mailing this out to every household. This was intended to get a read of the general sentiment of the community. This turnout probably does skew the results somewhat, at least regarding housing.*

Question: You mentioned the town should work toward a wastewater system in South Village, but what about water system?

*Moderator: I misspoke, I should have mentioned both wastewater and water.*

Question: Short-term rentals, do you know if they are "cost-neutral" in terms of taxes? Burlington is trying to regulate them in terms of housing needs. Is there any reason besides housing needs that we need to regulate them?

*Moderator: Yes, in some communities they can be an issue in terms of nuisances, people acting poorly, noise, etc. That can be an issue, but affects some places more than others. In Lake Placid it was a big problem, other places not as much. In general though it can have a positive economic effect because those visitors are usually spending money locally, but it can take away potential housing stock.*

Comment: You implied that a new restaurant here wouldn't make it, however we have about 30,000 people living within 15-20 minutes of here, if you had a restaurant that drew people here it would be successful, you just have to find the right niche.

*Moderator: I have overheard some skepticism on local social media that a new restaurant wouldn't work here, that there isn't enough population, that restaurants down in Milton have gone under, etc. but I think with the highway interchange and other factors it could work.*

Comment: Milton also has half a dozen restaurants competing against each other so that makes it harder for them.

Comment: In the first slide you showed the results of people wanting more or less growth, what were the five categories of responses again? I disagree with your assessment that it was leaning toward more growth, because if you add up all of the responses from the bottom up to the "steady/currently fine" you will find more people wanted less growth.

*Moderator: The largest response was growth has been "just about right" (28%). There were two categories above that for people wanting a "little more growth" (26%), and "a lot more growth" (11%). There were two categories below that for people who felt there has been a "little too much growth" (18%) and "way too much growth" (11%). So 37% seem to lean toward more growth and 29% seem to lean toward less growth.*

Comment: I disagree, I think you should be counting the 28% who feel growth has been about right with the 29% below it, and that would show an overall sentiment wanting less growth instead.

Comment: I don't read it that way.

Comment: There was a traffic study undertaken a number of years ago, and VTrans has suggestions on the docket for 104A and Route 7. It is unknown when, if anything, would happen but a process is in the works.

Comment: I work for Northwest Regional Planning, and VTrans has accepted the South Village transportation issues into the capital program, covering south of Ballard Road to north of the interchange, Skunk Hill Road, park & ride, on and off ramps. Just waiting to have a consultant develop a design. There were alternatives identified.

## **TOPIC: HOUSING**

Comment: All of the housing types that scored “low need” are generally the more affordable variants.

Question: Is there any state data that matches up with this result? If somebody thinks that Georgia has plenty of rental units, that's not true.

Comment: Georgia is its own town, we don't have to do what every other town is doing.

Comment: Accessory Dwelling Units are already permitted where single family homes are, so that already aligns with the Vermont State HOME Act.

Comment: Are you going to cover State issues more? The State has passed the 30/30 Law, with the goal of preserving 30% of Vermont's land area by 2030, and 50% by 2050. This is a current statute, and should be addressed in the town plan.

Comment: The plan to implement the state goals is due by December 2025.

Comment: I think there needs to be a balance - yes there is a housing crisis, we want to maintain our town, we don't want to make it an uphill battle for people to build, but we shouldn't be bending over backwards to benefit a few people in a small limited spot. It may not benefit the town. That \$1 dollar of tax revenue in, \$1.12 out for residential growth is concerning. I looked up the Freemont NH example you gave, and they don't have sewer, so that doesn't explain the costs. Concerned about bending over backwards to help a few.

*Moderator: In other words, what is the appropriate amount of responsibility the Town of Georgia has in addressing the housing issues.*

Comment: To go along with that though if you want to have commercial/industrial growth, you need housing for the people to live.

Comment: People love Georgia for what it is, not what it is going to be in 10 years. So why would we change our community? Why would we want to build more and make it not what Georgia is? I moved here 20 years ago because it was a quiet town with open space and fields and I don't want our community turned into a bunch of developments like Milton or St Albans.

*Moderator: You may have missed response to first question, top 3 responses were all about protecting natural resources, open space, small town character. That should be the top priority of the plan. But if we want to address future growth, the relatively small South Village area is somewhere it can be located with minimum impact to the rest of the town.*

Comment: Since I was on the Planning Commission I have been a proponent of a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) mechanism that would help to preserve areas of farmland and forests and instead allow that development potential to be allowed elsewhere in town where it is not as important to preserve, and that is something we should look at.

Comment: For 20 years the Planning Commission has been looking at these density ideas for South Village of Georgia Center, rehashed many times, but nothing has happened. Its a divided issue between people's wants and needs.

## **TOPIC: LOCAL SHOPS AND SERVICES**

Question: Where these results only from the online survey?

*Moderator: They were mostly from the online survey, there were 15 paper surveys returned. The online and paper surveys were the same.*

Question: So in the list of shops and services, was that a list provided to them to pick from, or were those suggestions people made?

*Moderator: That was a list provided in the survey for people to pick from.*

Question: When you think of things that will actually bring people to Georgia to help support the restaurants, we don't have turf fields, the ice rink is bursting at the seams. Was there any discussion on venues like this that would attract people to town?

*Moderator: Yes, that topic is covered in the survey as part of community services, recreation options, and the possibility of sharing services with neighboring towns. We got a lot of write-in responses to that.*

## **TOPIC: COMMUNITY AMENITIES AND SERVICES**

Comment: People are looking for more communication from town government, the new website is so much better, easier to find info, can see where permits are. A lot of good things are in process.

Comment: State has designated Georgia Shore Road as a bike route already - Champlain Valley Bikeway.

Question: How does the town influence cellular and internet services? Those are independent entities.

*Moderator: It is largely out of our control, but it is something that we should still address in the plan and maybe it will help influence decision making. If we don't put it in the plan, it isn't going to get recognized, could give us more leverage.*

Question: When you said people maybe didn't know what trails were available, what were you referring to?

*Moderator: I have heard people mention they were surprised that off-road trails were needed, because the town has plenty of open space and trails to enjoy. I don't know personally, but it became a question of maybe it was an issue of people not knowing what local trail options were already available. If that is the case, then we should see how we can do a better job letting people know what's out there.*

Comment: I would disagree with that. The Conservation Commission has done a great job advertising their trails and what they have, advertised at the library, schools, online, town meeting day. People need to be responsible for their own knowledge, we can't spoon feed them. They just have to look for it.

*Moderator: So people feel then that there is a need for more trails?*

Comment: I think we can always use more trails, enjoy our community and what we have. It's a great gift, why not have more?

Comment: There are a lot of new community members, people moving here, they may not know what is here. Something like a "welcome packet" could be used to inform them. I have a few new neighbors who aren't aware.

Question: So the option for trails, was that for only walking and biking, or was that for ATV trails?

*Moderator: The survey option was for "off-road recreational walking/biking trails". It did not include ATV's or snowmobiles.*

Comment: (via Zoom) Really appreciate you making this available online for working parents of small children. Really appreciate all the details provided and the community participation. Excited about this process.

Comment: Regarding cellphone and internet service, I believe the town can join the group that is trying to bring internet to underserved communities, and there is a group that is not really our county but the town joined that group. Don't know what we are getting out of it yet.

Comment: That's the CUD(?) Union District. Pretty sure Georgia is still a member.

Comment: Haven't heard anything on it.

Comment: Think they are focusing on Fairfax and Fairfield.

Comment: The Interstate bisects the town and most of the town is cut off from South Village except for two places at Ballard Road and Route 7 for pedestrian access where you can cross, and neither are bike/pedestrian friendly.

*Moderator: That becomes an obstacle to getting around town then. It may also cause an issue from an emergency standpoint, if one of those passages is blocked, then it potentially becomes harder to get to the other side for people or emergency vehicles.*

Comment: Can use the lake.

Comment: For the renewable energy topic, it would be nice if there was something encouraging solar installs on roofs, so then there is less of an impact to land.

Comment: For comparison purposes, of the 251 towns and villages in Vermont, where do people think Georgia ranks population-wise? We are 19th. Of the 16 towns similar in size to us (+/- 1000 people), all but one has police service. Half of them have sewer and/or water. Some of them are smaller towns. We don't have any of these things. These other towns have a lot more services. Our population is growing but we aren't keeping up with the rest of the region.

*Moderator: And many of them have restaurants, which are presumably supported by the local population.*

Comment: The state has designated growth areas of different levels. How many of those 16 town have some sort of growth designation? Kyle Grenier is a huge asset to this town, he is now at Regional Planning, has anyone applied for a sidewalk grant? I would like to see that Georgia is not missing out on these opportunities. The differences between what Georgia has done and other smaller municipalities have accomplished.

Comment: Have to be careful though because the Interstate impacts us differently, don't know how many of the other towns are on the Interstate. We can hop on the highway and be in Burlington in 20 minutes - that is going to affect how and where the growth centers are. They aren't going to want to replicate a new growth center here when there is already one 20 minutes away.

Comment: One of the reasons why we aren't eligible for some of these grants is because we don't have a designated growth center, or village designation, of any sort in the town, which puts us at a disadvantage.

Question: What does Village Designation mean?

*Moderator: For a small commercial hamlet area you can apply, and the state can approve, a delineated area as a designated village center. You can then get priority access to certain grant funding, or access to certain grants for that part of town.*

Comment: But we have a hamlet area, why cant we just do that?

Comment: He made it sound simpler than it really is. There is criteria that you have to meet for this, and we can't meet it.

Comment: Want to clarify that there are different designations, and some of the terms are being mixed up. Each designation has its own requirements. For example South Burlington, new town centers, which are much bigger and more involved, and smaller village ones. Growth Centers, and Town Centers and Downtowns are a much bigger deal, those are not what we are looking to do in South Village.

Comment: Historic Village Center Designation is what we would be looking for. According to the State, these would be for areas which were a village at some point 50 years ago or more, and met certain criteria within it. A guy at the State reviews your information, if he agrees there is or used to be a village there you get the green light to apply. The problem here is that he does not believe that there used to be a village in our South Village area, even though there used to be businesses there. Georgia Center however is eligible for the designation, and the Plains is also. You can get aid in historic restoration.

Question: Why don't we pursue those villages then?

Comment: Because it wasn't identified in the Town Plan at the time, if we want this would need to put it into the new Town Plan.

Comment: Don't have to do it only in one area, could do multiple areas if we wanted.

Question: If we decided to make the South Village "the village" would we have to move the library or town offices there?

Comment: No, don't have to move those functions.

Comment: The Town of Georgia can indicate in the Town Plan that South Village is "a village", but unless it meets other criteria, it won't get the official village designation that gets you the benefits.

Comment: Back before the Interstate the South Village area was farm fields. The highway was what influenced development there. Williston is an example where they designated an area right off the highway for growth because it was easy access, but their actual village is far away from that. Most towns already have an old village where their town grew up, like Charlotte, and they can get grants to help improve it. We are trying to replicate that old village or duplicate it down in South Village where we don't get that grant support, and it is problematic.

Comment: The public should be made aware of the fact that the "cat is out of the bag" for South Village. There are multiple development proposals for the area in the works, and design standards. This has been a vision for quite awhile. Only a few parcels that haven't changed hands, not a lot of shaping that can still happen. Not sure what the benefit of water and sewer would be there anymore when so much has already been designed without it.

Comment: Concerned that there are people who don't want to see any growth and they are ignoring the reality that growth is still going to happen, that we could put ourselves in a situation where we miss opportunities. Need to make sure our Town Plan is robust, recognize that growth is still going to happen so we need to plan for how it happens. Need to maintain and protect rural agricultural areas of the town and have a vibrant center.

*Moderator: I think a big part of the town plan should be looking at the potential of South Village and what it can become.*

Comment: People ranked apartments lower than other housing types because we don't want the impact on the local schools. Concern about the large 60-70 unit development projects in South Village, how are they going to impact the schools?

Question: Troubled by the effort on the Town Plan, the Town Plan has no effect on what happens in town, that is dictated by the zoning, so what is the point of this?

*Moderator: Correct that the zoning actually dictates how the town develops, however the zoning is dictated by the Town Plan, and needs to conform with it. So, if we agree on what goals and policies we want to move forward with, then the zoning would need to be updated to align with the Town Plan.*

Comment: Need to look at the number of housing units per school. GEMS school is experiencing declining enrollment. Has gone from 635 to 599 students, so there is capacity for new students and families.

Comment: I disagree. In reviewing old records from school they have gone from 50 students per class to 70 per class. More kids would stress the system which is already strained.

Comment: You can look at school enrollment in the Town Report to get actual numbers. The reality is that there are "bubble" classes where they get an influx of kids one year but the next year they don't so it is not all uniform. Overall, the enrollment has been in decline.

Comment: School and rental properties are an issue. It's possible that we have room for more kids in the school district, but some are Section 8 housing, I have witnessed many families moving from town to town bringing their kids to the next school and it is a burden on the community.

Comment: Not sure that building the water and sewer infrastructure is worth all the trouble to get apartments.

Question: Why do they have to be three stories?

Comment: It is important to note that these plans are shaped by the people who show up to these meetings, not everyone can make it and participate. Those people aren't represented. Low turnout from younger folks, maybe it isn't cool to come to these events.

**[MEETING END]**

**OTHER:**

**Questions/Comments submitted via the online comment form since the survey report was compiled:**

What was the total N for responses on the town survey? (Total number of responses received.) also, is there any demographic data reflected on who submitted surveys? (Age, gender, etc).