



Northwest Regional Planning Commission

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To: Fairfield Planning Commission
From: Emily Klofft, Regional Planner
Date: April 21, 2025
Subject: Recommendations on Zoning Recommendations

Based on the Planning Commission's discussion at the March meeting, there is interest in three areas:

- Clarity of regulations
- Subdivision Layout and Aesthetic Standards
- Accessory Dwelling Units

Attached to this memo are the following supporting documents:

- Updated Summary of Topics Discussed
- Section 8.4 with comments
- Example parcel maps showing fields, soils and slopes.

Clarity of Regulations

While the Town's bylaws have standards related to the preservation of agricultural soils and farmland, there has been a concern that these standards lack effective clarity. The following are standards in the existing regulations which could be clarified.

Protection of Agricultural Resources

See attached comments on Section 8.4. There are four areas where there could be additional clarification

- Specify what intensity or density of subdivision requires a vegetated buffer area from agricultural areas, as well as the required size of the buffer area.
 - E.g. a 200 ft buffer to the edge of the building envelope.
- Define fragmentation of agricultural land
 - Fragmentation may be defined in part by the ability of the remaining land to continue to be used for agricultural purposes- Underhill, VT bylaw is an example of this.
- Define what topographical or environmental constraints would prevent structures from being located at field and pasture edge.

- These specific resources could include steep slopes, wetlands, presence of rare, threatened or endangered species- review list from constraints analysis.
- Clarify prioritization of fields and meadows compared to agricultural soils. If both are on site but not at the same location- which should be preserved first?

Master Planning

Clarify intensities, types of uses or density of subdivision which require master planning.

Landscaping Standards

Clarify the types/intensities/densities of use and/or the areas and scenic corridors in which landscaping standards apply. Standards for landscaping could also be improved by increasing specificity for appropriate buffer vegetation when required, such as size and spacing of plantings. See below for examples of standards related to landscaping and screening.

Subdivision Layout and Aesthetic Standards

As identified by the Planning Commission, beyond the need to protect specific resources, there is a need to consider the aesthetic impacts of a subdivision on the rural landscape.

Minimizing Visual Impact via Siting & Screening

Standards to reduce visual impact consider the form of development and the natural features of the landscape to locate buildings in the least obtrusive sitings possible. For instance, moving buildings towards the edges of forested areas reduces their visual impact (see Figure 1).

Screening standards aim to soften the view of new development. When screening is achieved via vegetation, they generally close off open vistas. Figure 2 provides an example of vegetation screening standard which calls for trees and shrubs of set sizes and spacing.

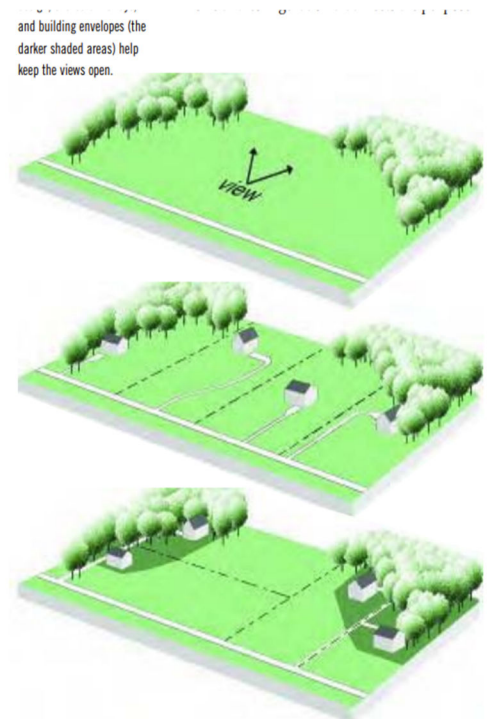


Figure 1. Source: Vermont Roadscapes Guide

There are several existing standards in Fairfield's bylaws that address siting and screening.

- **Siting:** All structures shall be located at field or pasture edges, or if not feasible due to topographical or environmental constraints, on the least fertile soils on the lot (based on the latest NRCS soil survey).
- **Existing Vegetation:** Existing vegetation such as trees and shrubs may be required to be retained by the Planning Commission or Board of Adjustment for screening and aesthetic purposes.
- **Screening:** The Planning Commission or Board of Adjustment may require landscape improvements for the purpose of reducing the visibility of unsightly or incompatible areas from the road and adjoining properties... (full standard attached)

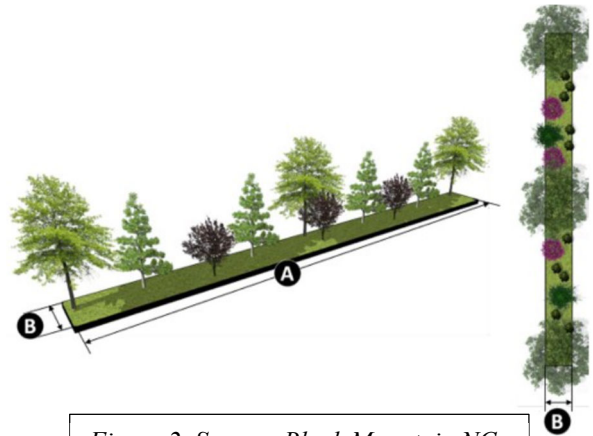


Figure 2. Source: Black Mountain NC Zoning

Possible standards include:

- **Setback:** Require a larger front setback from existing public roads but a smaller setback from new development roads. The existing setback is 50 ft.
- **Topography:** Requiring buildings to be placed on lower areas of the site or where visual impact from roadway will be lesser.
- **Existing Vegetation:** Require preservation of existing vegetation. Require buildings to be sited near existing vegetation.
- **Form of Development:** Require forms & materials consistent with the existing character of rural Vermont.
- **Screening:** Require a vegetated buffer along the edge of development. Standards generally set specific sizes and spacing of vegetation.

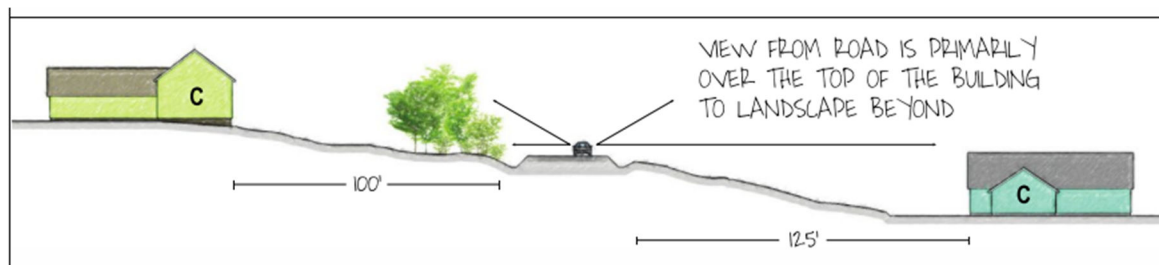


Figure 3. Screening via existing vegetation and topography. Source: Westford, VT Zoning

Accessory Dwelling Units

The minimum allowable standard for accessory dwelling units is to permit 1 unit with a maximum size of 900 sq ft or 30% of the building square footage (whichever is greater). The Town currently allows an ADU of up to 40% of the primary home size. Fairfield's bylaw also allows up to 2 single family residences of any size to be used for housing for farmworker households. Options for increased flexibility include:

- Allow more than 1 ADU per lot.
- Allow a larger minimum size. May use a proportional standard (e.g. the ADU must have 60% of the frontage width of the main home).
- Allow a larger minimum size if the ADU is an existing building.
- Reduce parking minimum for ADUs

Zoning Tool	Summary of Planning Commission Comments	Interest in Moving Forward with Potential Zoning Changes
Subdivision Regulations- Density Standards		
Minimum Lot Size: Increase minimum lot size to increase open space. Very large lots (25+ acres) are most likely to preserve farmland based on current use enrollment standards.	After public outreach, there was not a clear path forward on changing lot size standards. Many noted that the aesthetic impacts were not	No
Separating Lot Size from Density: Separate the standards for lot size and density, allowing for smaller lots while limiting overall density.		
Remove Undevelopable Land in Density Calculations: Remove undevelopable or resource sensitive lands from the calculation of total density, thereby reducing density in sensitive areas.		
Requiring a Building Envelope: Require each subdivided lot to designate a building envelope to ensure developed portions of lot are not on sensitive or resource areas. May also set a maximum building envelope.	Prefer to keep as is, where a building envelope is required only when conservation resources are present.	No
Frontage: Consider definition of frontage (whether or not to include private ROW) and whether to have frontage as a standard.	Would like to have further discussion, could be considered under lot layout standards.	Yes
Adding Additional Zoning Districts		
Higher Density District Adjacent to Village District: Designate land near existing village for medium/high density residential neighborhood residential development.	The Planning Commission was concerned that adding additional zoning districts could unfairly burden landowners in some districts over others.	No
Resource-Based Districts: Zoning districts that restrict development based on natural resources such as prime agricultural soils.		No
Districts Based on Roadway Types: Divide districts on the basis of their proximity to Class 3 and above roads,		No

Zoning Tool	Summary of Planning Commission Comments	Interest in Moving Forward with Potential Zoning Changes
with the goal of reducing fragmentation of land far from existing roads. Can potentially lead to rural sprawl.		
Resource Protection Standards		
General Regulations: Regulations applied to all development that go above and beyond state regulations for those resources (e.g. wetlands, shorelands).	Generally, the Planning Commission felt that state regulations for resource protection were sufficient.	No
Required Planning Commission Review: Require Planning Commission review for projects that have conservation resources, even if the underlying use is permitted.	No need for additional standards.	No
Agricultural Resources: Consider relative importance of standards that protect prime agricultural soils versus standards that protect actively farmed lands.	There can sometimes be conflict between protecting prime agricultural soils and preserving actively farmed land.	Yes
Site Layout & Road Standards		
Planning & Design/Subdivision Standards for Resource Protection: Standards that apply to subdivisions/conditional uses that either directly protect certain natural resources or that reduce fragmentation of forest/farmlands.	Aesthetic impact of subdivision is a major concern for residents. Visual impact from main roadways needs to be mitigated. Layout must balance avoiding fragmentation, conserving resources and ensuring aesthetics.	Yes
Landscape, Screening and Aesthetic Layout Standards: Standards that apply to subdivisions that address landscaping, screening and aesthetic standards.		

Zoning Tool	Summary of Planning Commission Comments	Interest in Moving Forward with Potential Zoning Changes
Road Standards: Standards that prevent the creation of long/inefficiently laid out development roads/driveway that can fragment forest/farmlands.	No specific concerns noted.	No
<i>Planned Unit Development/Conservation Subdivision Standards</i>		
Conservation Subdivisions: Subdivision standards incentivize or require a percent of the subdivided lot to be conserved.	There is some interest in standards that would limit the amount of area developable for large subdivisions while allowing for minor subdivisions with less land area.	Yes
Planned Unit Developments: A planning tool that allow for increased flexibility in development, in rural areas this often involves conserving a portion of the land and/or incentivizing certain types of development such as affordable/senior housing.		Yes
Transfer of Development Rights: A voluntary tool which allows developers to build more densely in areas targeted for growth by purchasing development rights from areas targeted for protection. Administratively complex to administer.	Lack of administrative resources to administer complex tools such as this one is a concern for the Planning Commission.	No
<i>Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Standards</i>		
Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUS): Consider expanding ADU standards to allow for more housing.	Interested in exploring ADU standards that are more permissive than state minimum standard/	Yes
<i>Process Changes</i>		
Clarity of Regulations	Need to set specific standards in areas that may be currently unclear, while allowing for sufficient flexibility.	Yes

SECTION 8.4 Conservation Resources

A. **Applicability.** This section shall apply to land development subject to Planning Commission and/or Board of Adjustment review and involving Conservation Resources. For the purpose of these regulations, Conservation Resources shall include prime and statewide agricultural soils and other farmland, and steep slopes greater than fifteen percent (15%) grade.

1. **Farmland and Agricultural Soils.** Farmland and land area with prime and statewide agricultural soils shall be subject to the following provisions:

- a. The Planning Commission and/or Zoning Board of Adjustment may require a vegetated buffer area between existing agricultural uses and other uses to minimize land use conflicts.
- b. The fragmentation of farmland and land area with prime and statewide agricultural soils shall be minimized.
 - i. Where sites include linear features such as tree lines, stone walls, and/or fence lines, all access roads, driveways and utility corridors shall follow such features to minimize the fragmentation of farmland and/or prime or statewide agricultural soils, unless the Planning Commission and/or Board of Adjustment determines that doing so will cause such fragmentation. The Planning Commission and/or Board of Adjustment may require that access roads, driveways and utility corridors share the same right-of-way.
 - ii. All structures shall be located at field or pasture edges, or if not feasible due to topographical or environmental constraints, on the least fertile soils on the lot (based on the latest NRCS soil survey).
 - iii. For subdivision and PUD applications only, all building envelopes shall be located at field or pasture edges, or if not feasible due to topographical or environmental constraints, on the least fertile soils on the lot (based on the latest NRCS soil survey).
- c. Where farmland and/or prime or statewide agricultural soils are present within a subdivision or PUD, all or part of this land shall be included in any required open space or conservation lot.

Commented [EK1]: Are there circumstances where this should always be required? Consider setting a size of potential buffer area e.g. "up to 200 ft"

Commented [EK2]: In defining fragmentation- consider impact on future agriculture

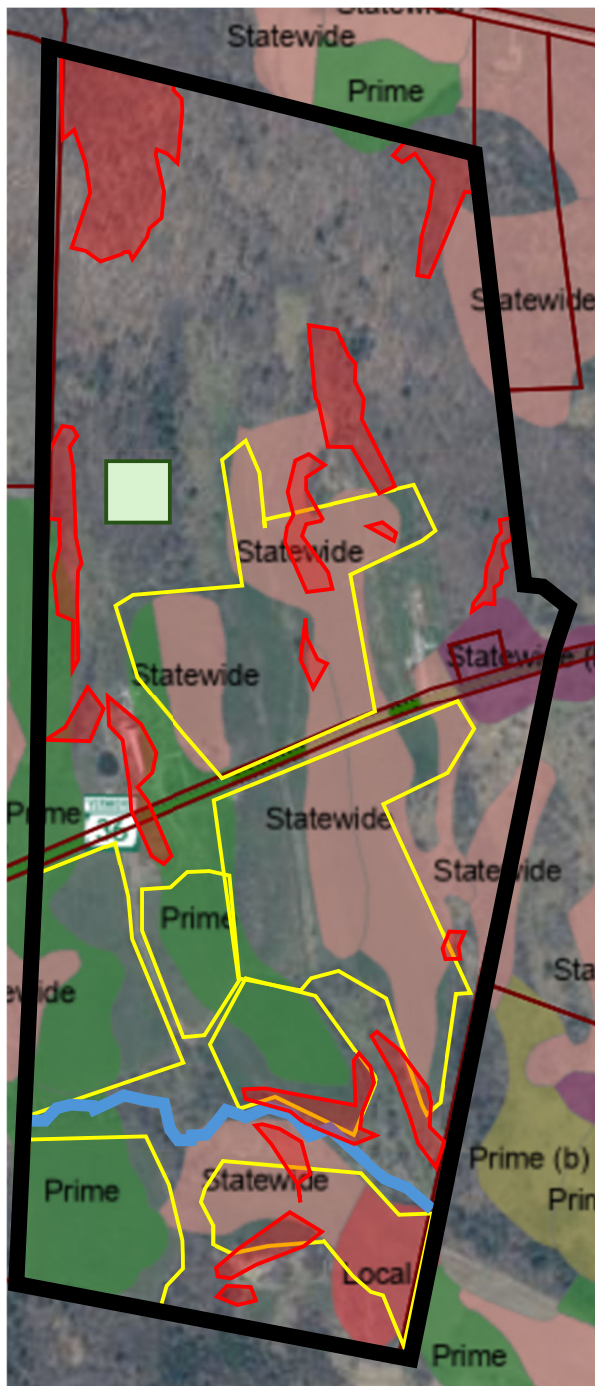
Commented [EK3R2]: Underhill: "The subdivision of farmland, to extent physically feasible, shall be configured to allow 6 for continued access to and ongoing management of productive farmland for 7 agricultural use. Lot lines shall be located and configured to minimize farmland 8 fragmentation and, where feasible, to incorporate farmland within separately conserved 9 agricultural lots to be held in common or individual ownership."

Commented [EK4]: Prioritize- clarify which is most important to the Town if the farmland and prime ag soils are not the same on site








Commented [EK5]: Consider defining what environmental constraints make development not feasible

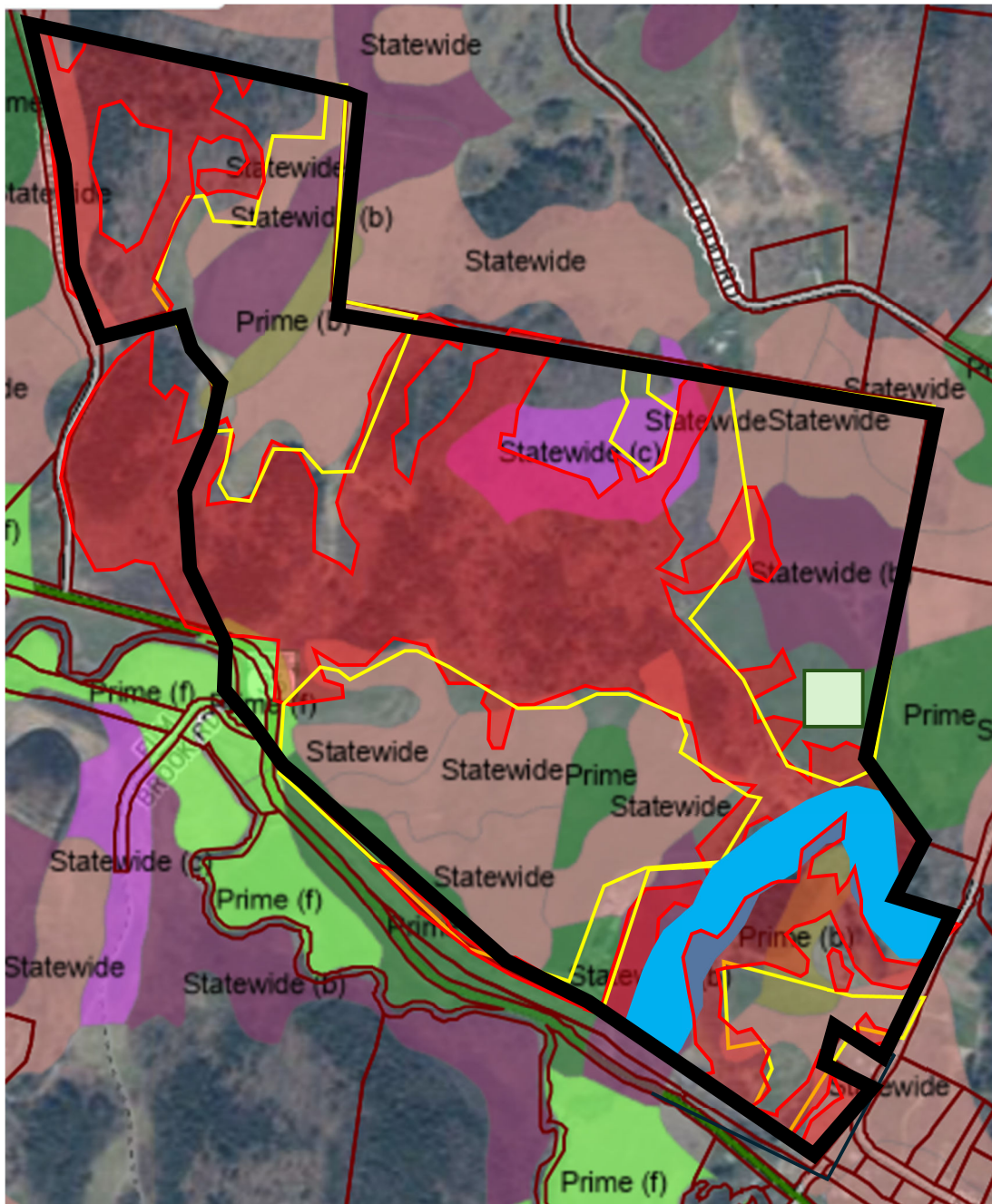
Example Fairfield Parcels

The following maps are examples of large, currently agricultural parcels in Fairfield showing the location of conservation resources as defined in the Fairfield regulations: steep slopes, agricultural soils, and existing farm fields. The intention is to assist the Planning Commission with an understanding of how current and proposed regulations could impact developable areas and the layout of subdivisions.



Key

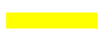
-  Size of 1 acre (for reference)
-  Existing Fields (Approx.)
-  Steep Slopes (15% or greater)
-  Stream & Stream Corridor
-  Prime Agricultural Soils
-  Statewide Agricultural Soils
-  Statewide Agricultural Soils



Key



Size of 1 acre (for reference)



Existing Fields (Approx.)



Steep Slopes (15% or greater)



Stream & Stream Corridor



Prime Agricultural Soils



Prime Agricultural Soils



Statewide Agricultural Soils



Statewide Agricultural Soils



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