

QUICK GUIDE TO THE BRISTOL TOWN PLAN

The citizens of Bristol will be asked on Town Meeting Day whether to approve the revised Bristol Town Plan. The Plan is a long document - 169 pages. This document will explain:

- Why we have a Plan
- What the Plan says
- How the Revised Plan differs from the plan approved in 2017
- How it could impact you, as a resident of Bristol.

(The Plan is available on the Town website <http://bristolvt.org/> under the Planning Commission tab.)

Why a Plan?

The Plan "defines a long-term vision for the Town...and a means of achieving that vision...(it is)a primary reference when making community decisions" and provides "guidance to local officials when setting public policy." (6) In plain words, it sets out where we want to go and how to get there: Goals, Policies and Actions.

What the Plan Says

The Plan is built around some basic principles (6). These are to:

- Protect our natural setting
- Foster our human community
- Support our downtown
- Sustain our natural resource industries.

While we think most residents would agree with those basic principles, conflicts can arise in applying them. The Plan gives guidelines on what is permitted and where in Bristol. Some will want greater restrictions believing they will lead to community good, others will want fewer restrictions on individual rights.

The Plan:

"accepts the premise that individuals may find that some property rights may need to be restricted in order to preserve the rights of others in the community. At the same time, the town continues to place a high value on property rights and intends that restrictions to those rights should be no more than necessary." (8)

Getting that balance right is crucial.

How does the Plan work specifically? One of the things it does is divide Bristol into three Planning Areas (103):

- the Village Planning Area - the densely populated area in the Village (5% of the Town land area)
- the Rural Planning Area - land used for or suitable for agriculture, plus some forest/brush land (44%)
- the Conservation Planning Area - mountains, steep slopes and environmentally sensitive areas (51%).

The Plan aims to "to reinforce and continue the settlement patterns that have already developed." (103) This means in general to

- concentrate retail, light industry and residential growth in the Village Area,
- preserve open space in the Rural Area, while providing for appropriate commercial and light industrial growth, and
- discourage dense development and promote uses compatible with the special features of the Conservation Area.

(103-05, including maps)

The Revised Plan bases its analysis and recommendations on information, and it contains a lot of interesting data. Here's an example. The section on Population and Housing shows us that:

- Bristol's population has been flat since 1990
- The population is aging, with the population above age-65 increasing quickly
- Average household size is decreasing, while the number of households is increasing
- The housing stock is increasing slowly, while housing prices - to buy or rent - are increasing quickly.

The conclusion: Bristol has a housing problem. Young families have trouble finding affordable housing of the right size, while older families may be in houses much larger than they now need. The Plan makes suggestions on how to make more affordable, right-sized housing available, such as through more flexible zoning regulations. (10-20)

The Plan follows a similar process in different areas - Economic Development, Education and Childcare, Recreation, Transportation, etc. For each area it sets out Goals, Policies and Actions. A table of Implementation Actions for each section, with a timeline, is included (118-121.)

What's New?

Siting of Renewable Energy Projects

The most momentous addition is the Enhanced Energy Plan (122-167, including maps.) The EEP defines the Town's Energy Goals, including meeting the State goal of 90% of energy obtained through renewable resources by 2050 ("90 X 50") (122). The EEP follows the format of other sections of the Plan: it analyzes the situation, sets out targets, and describes actions to meet those targets. These targets will be met through a combination of conservation, efficiency and a switch to renewable resources.

The siting of solar arrays, especially large commercial ones, and other renewable energy projects, such as windmills has been one of the most controversial issues in Vermont in recent years. Approval of the EEP is crucial in giving the Town a greater say in where and how these projects are sited. The Public Service Commission (PSC), which has the ultimate say, at present has to give only "due consideration" to the Town's views. If the EEP is approved, the PSC will be required to give "substantial deference" to the Town. While this will not give the town veto power over siting, it will increase the Town's say in the matter.

Flood Hazards

The new Plan contains a Flood resilience Plan that identifies Flood Hazard and Fluvial (River) Erosion Hazard areas. (94-95, 110, 120, including maps)

Forest Blocks

The Natural Resources chapter now includes maps and descriptions of areas that are important as forest blocks and habitat connectors. The Goal is that land development in those areas should minimize forest fragmentation. (85-90, including map)

Why does it matter? What does it mean to you?

If you live in Bristol, you will be affected by Town decisions that will be guided by the Plan. If you care about the built and natural environments around you, the Plan will guide how they are developed. Look at the Plan, ask questions, vote on Town Meeting Day.