

Reading Town Plan



Adopted July 18, 2005

Planning Commission Hearing: **June 6, 2005**
Selectboard Hearing: **July 18, 2005**
Approved by the board of SWCRPC: **September 20, 2005**

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Since the last Reading Town Plan was adopted in 1996, the Town has undergone gradual growth and change, not unlike other towns in southern Windsor County. Changes in the economy, including the continuing decline of the machine tool industry in Springfield and Windsor over the last ten years, have affected the regional economy and the populations of towns in the region. The contrasting strength of the economy of the Upper Valley and the draw of the resort towns of Ludlow and West Windsor have also affected the town of Reading and surrounding communities.

In 2003, the Reading Planning Commission applied for and received a Municipal Planning Grant to complete a community-wide Town Plan Survey, to collect and update Census data, and to hold a public Town Plan Forum in preparation for updating the Town Plan. The purpose of this project was to look at trends that have occurred in the region during the 1990s and to gather input from the community about how to plan for the future of the town. Results of both the survey and forum are integrated in the chapters of the 2004 Town Plan. Census data is used to demonstrate how the town has changed over time.

Purpose of a Town Plan

Towns have the authority to adopt Town Plans under V.S.A. title 24, Section 4381. A Plan expires after five years unless it is re-adopted by the legislative body of the town. A Town must have a duly adopted Town Plan in order to make amendments to zoning or subdivision regulations; an adopted Town Plan is also used for review of development projects under Act 250. A Plan that is approved by the Regional Planning Commission enables the Town to receive municipal planning grants from the Department of Housing and Community Affairs. In order to be approved by the Regional Planning Commission, the Town Plan must comply with the goals under Act 200 (V.S.A. title 24, Section 4302) and must contain the elements listed in V.S.A. title 24, Section 4382.

This Plan is intended to:

- Protect traditional land use patterns, as identified in the Goals and Policies sections of each chapter. These include not only historic patterns within the Town of Reading, but also regional patterns that have helped to define Reading's unique and valued character;
- Reinforce Reading's role as a small, rural community, and allow the most concentrated and extensive development to occur in the established village centers;
- Promote the statewide planning goals identified in 24 V.S.A. §4302, and allow for the effective and coordinated implementation of plans developed under Title 24 in adjacent communities and regions;
- Support and complement the land use and development goals of the Southern Windsor County Regional Plan.

Landscape and History

Reading's rural character is defined by its compact, historic village centers surrounded by a rural landscape of farms and forest land. Reading's landscape is primarily hilly, with the exception of

several tracts of flat agricultural land in the southern end of the Route 106 corridor. The town boasts several scenic working hill farms including Springbrook Farm, the Jenne Farm, the Newhall Farm, and others listed in Table 2.1 (page 10).

The village of Felchville is the commercial and activity center for the town. The town offices, post office, general store, greenhouse, and school are all located in Felchville, within comfortable walking distance of higher density, historic residential structures. The Tyson Road leads westward up the hill out of Felchville and into the small historic hamlet of South Reading. The Stone Schoolhouse, a historic structure owned by the town, no longer operates as a school but offers a glimpse of a more bustling village center in previous centuries. Hammondsville, north of Felchville on Route 106, is another historic hamlet that is now home to a restaurant at the site of the former Hammondsville store.

Population and Demographics

Reading’s population has grown steadily since the town’s all-time low of 437 residents in 1940. At its peak in 1820, the town was home to 1603 people. The draw of farmers to the Midwest led to a mass loss in population in Reading and other towns in Vermont until the early 1900’s. At that time, the machine tool industry began to move into the region and population rose steadily for a number of decades. The closure of several large plants in the 1980s led to a slight decline in Reading’s population between 1980 and 1990, but the decade between 1990 and 2000 showed a population growth of 15%. According to Census data, this rise was strictly due to people moving into town. The “natural increase” (births minus deaths) showed a drop of 9.5 persons between 1990 and 2000.

Figure 1.1 – Population (Reading, VT) 1790-2000

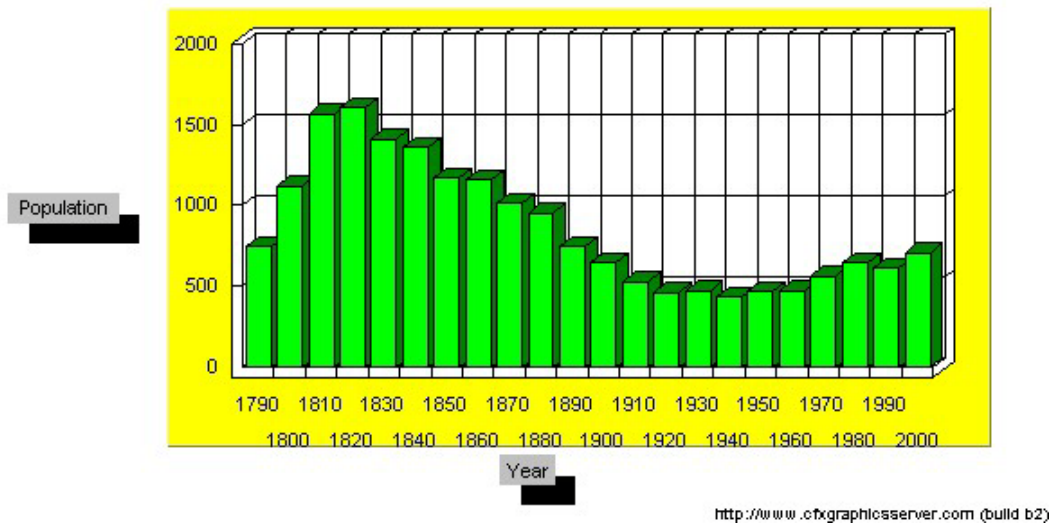
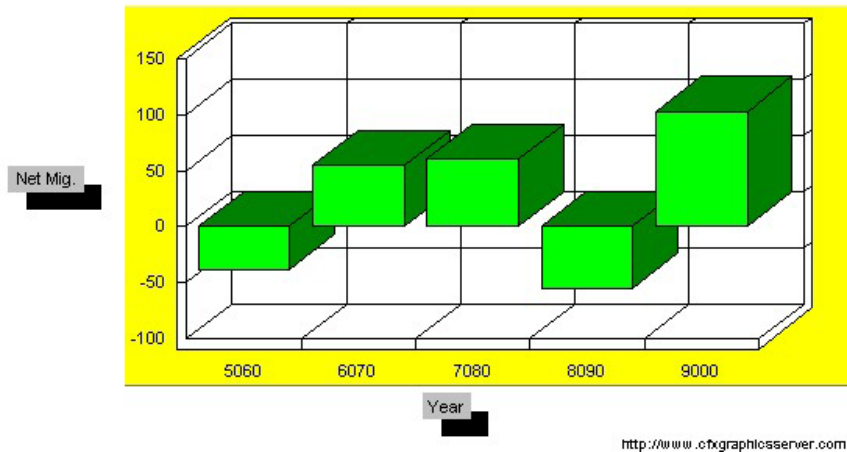
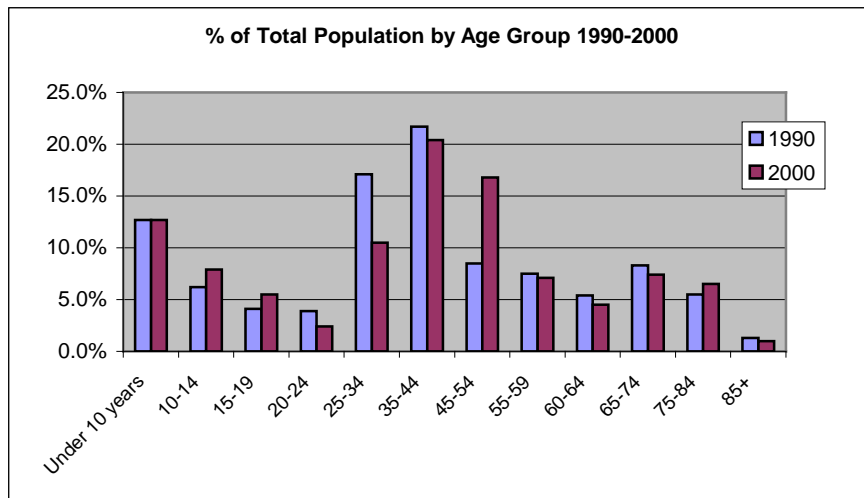


Figure 1.2 – Net Migration (Reading, VT)



The age of town residents has shifted toward the older set. The 25- to 34-year-old age group showed a drop of over 25% between 1990 and 2000, while the 45- to 54-year-old age group grew by 128%. This trend is prevalent throughout the region, indicating the shift in the baby boom population. The 35- to 44-year-old age group makes up the greatest percentage of the town's population. However the number of individuals in this age group is increasing at a slower rate than the 45- to 54-year-old group.

Figure 1.3 – Population by Age Group (Reading, VT)

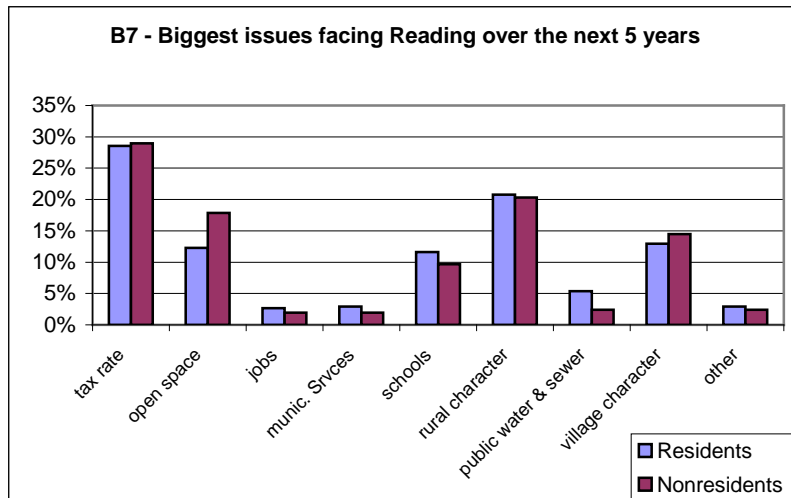


Approximately 22% of the housing in Reading is seasonal. The number of seasonal housing units declined by 20% since 1990 as units were converted to year-round units. Throughout the Upper Valley and the state as a whole, demand for housing has increased faster than the supply, creating a shortage especially for low to moderate-income households. Between 1990 and 2000, housing costs in Reading rose by 43%. The median housing cost in Reading was \$127,900 in 2000.

Town Plan Survey

In March of 2003, the Planning Commission sent out a survey to 750 residents and property owners of Reading. The survey received 228 responses, or approximately 30% of those who received the survey. Of those who responded, 69% were full-time residents and 31% were

Figure 1.4 – Biggest Issues Facing Reading in Next 5 Years



nonresident property owners.

19% of respondents had school-aged children. Approximately 58% were employed and 36% of those worked at home or were retired. Just over half of those who commute to work responded that their commute time was between 15 and 30 minutes.

The purpose of the survey was to gauge the feeling of the community on issues typically discussed in a Town Plan. By far, the most important issue facing the town over the next five years was the tax rate. This concern also

came out in the Town Plan Forum as the greatest challenge facing the town. Most survey respondents were happy with the rate at which Reading has been growing. Almost 60% chose “preserving rural character” as the biggest issue facing the town, while approximately 40% chose preserving open space and the character of the villages.

Town Plan Forum

The purpose of the Reading Town Plan Forum was to present the results of the Town Plan Survey as well as trends that became apparent through an analysis of survey data. Participants were asked to list major challenges that Reading is likely to face in the short and long-term, and to vote on which of those challenges are the most important. A full summary of the Town Plan Forum is included in Appendix C.

The compiled responses from the Town Plan Forum revealed that the Town’s rural character is what makes the town a special place for most of the forum’s participants. Related responses included: the small size of the town that make it possible to know almost everyone, open spaces, village centers, location, and scenic attributes. Other responses included safety, dirt roads, trees and wildlife conservation areas, slow pace, history, government, and the school.

“Lower taxes” was by far the most popular answer for what would make Reading a better place to live. Related answers included more economically sound ways to educate children, or better schools. Education was an area of much discussion during the forum, as enrollment at the elementary school has been falling over the last several years. The rising cost of land and the need for a diversity of housing types were both listed as challenges for the town. Education discussions led to the formation of a subcommittee called the Reading Futures Committee, which

is looking into the choices the town faces concerning the future of the Reading Elementary School.

Preserving open land and historic resources, including wildlife habitat and ridgelines, were topics of discussion at the forum with respect to future challenges. Participants also discussed the problems of controlling junk cars and clutter, and the need to support small businesses. A few participants listed additional town services (including rubbish disposal), village revitalization, transportation issues (bus service to Springfield, Woodstock and Windsor), regulations (concern about mini estates and other residential development), and affordable housing as problems the Town faces in the near future. In discussions about Village Centers, the three most important issues according to participants were promotion of small businesses, water and sewer in the village centers, and preserving historic character of villages and historic structures.

The following chapters provide in-depth background and discussion of the issues identified in the Town Plan Forum and Survey. Each chapter presents a number of goals, action steps, and policies for the topics discussed in that chapter. The final chapter lists the action steps that the Reading Planning Commission felt were the highest priority in terms of implementing the goals of the Town Plan.

The following are the overarching goals of the Town Plan as they were stated in the Town Plan Survey and Forum. These goals will be repeated and supported by the goals, action steps, and policies in the remaining chapters of the Plan.

Goals

1. Maintain Reading's rural character as defined by:
 - Undeveloped fields and woodlands;
 - Historic settlement patterns of compact village centers surrounded by rural farm and forest lands;
 - Historic structures;
 - Scenic views of rolling hills and open fields and ridgelines.
2. Strengthen the capacity of village centers to serve as centers of community and commercial activity.
 - Ensure that buildings and properties maintain historic and scenic qualities that make the village an inviting place to congregate.
3. Provide recreational opportunities consistent with the character of the town.
4. Provide a safe and efficient transportation network that follows the historic settlement patterns of the town and encourages these patterns to continue in the future.
5. Protect significant natural resources.
6. Allow for growth to the extent that the Town and local residents are not disproportionately affected by the costs of that growth.
7. Investigate ways to address decreasing enrollments in the Reading Elementary School and the increased burden this has on residents and businesses.