



## **Anatomy of a development in Shelburne: How the project met its demise**

By Joel Banner Baird • Sunday, April 4, 2010

SHELBURNE -- Residents stopped the bulldozers. Three cheers for environmental action? Not this time.

Developers, exasperated by what they saw as Shelburne's ambivalent review process during the past two years and already having invested considerable time and more than \$1 million, abandoned plans in late March for a 250-unit residential community in Shelburne Village.

The town might have lost a groundbreaking opportunity to better manage its natural resources.

Even as plans for Shelburnewood evaporated, experts described the proposed 20-acre expansion of downtown as a model of village reinvigoration; one that would reduce vehicle use, promote pedestrian and bike traffic and attract better bus service -- and more.

"Transportation is the largest source of greenhouse gases in Vermont, and climate change is our largest environmental challenge," said Sandra Levine, a senior attorney at the Montpelier office of the Conservation Law Foundation. "Giving people the option of living in a village center would get us a long way toward meeting that goal."

As that goal recedes in Shelburne, Levine and other Vermonters familiar with the closely watched project suggest there might be lessons to be learned. They offer theories (albeit through 20-20 hindsight) and advice.

They remind us: It ain't easy. Personalities enter the equation, too. And what must, for now, qualify as out-and-out absurdity -- Shelburne's missed chance sputtered out riding this irony: Anticipated changes in village traffic patterns garnered the "green" endorsements -- and also enabled opponents to stall and kill Shelburnewood.

You heard it right: good traffic, bad traffic.

But let's step back on the sidewalk for a moment.

Out of time

Many Vermont towns, including Shelburne, have adopted town plans and zoning bylaws that foster centripetal (as opposed to centrifugal) development.

Levine, who wrote the foundation's endorsement of Shelburnewood, worked with the town 10 years ago to help craft some of those guidelines.

How were they sidelined? Through a wavering political will, compounded with misconceptions about housing density, Levine said.

"People are concerned about what they don't know," she said. "There's still a big fear of 1960s-era housing projects. People have seen them elsewhere."

But publicly, the specter of traffic jams steered Development Review Board opinion against Shelburnewood.

Its members repeatedly aired skepticism regarding traffic studies (even the one they had commissioned) that showed a "negligible" impact on congestion in the village. The conditions of the project's ostensible approval prescribed another U.S. 7 entrance for Shelburnewood -- after the Vermont Agency of Transportation had declared a second entrance unsafe and "impracticable."

In a simple, emotional farewell, developers John Giebink and Charlie Brush told the public they'd simply run out of time (financing deadlines), money (they'd spent \$1.3 million) and patience.

The greatest loss, experts concluded, had little to do with a 20-acre tract of wildlife habitat along the La Platte River -- land the developers were going to deed to the town as a nature corridor between protected land up- and downstream.

Losing human habitat, they said, is the real shame. Home economics

Since when did dense, mixed-income housing developments get green credentials?

Most planners cite a millennia-old pedigree: Clustered efficiency of dwellings, cultural institutions and commercial activity shapes our villages, towns and cities.

That model remained secure until the second half of the 20th century, when cheap oil drove construction of suburbs accessible only by car.

Humanity's early lessons in civic economy informs the best new designs, including Shelburnewood's, said Brian Shupe, director of the Sustainable Communities Program at the Montpelier-based nonprofit Vermont Natural Resources Council. "They hearken back to traditional village centers, which were compact and walkable -- and most importantly, they had places within them to walk to."

Examples of building within an existing pattern can be seen throughout Vermont, Shupe added; Chittenden County residents need look no farther than Winooski (residential "infill" contributes to an urban core), Richmond (a new grocery store is opening soon downtown) or Hinesburg (paths link new residences to the village).

"We can use our resources to develop in a thoughtful, traditional way," Shupe said.

But he sees no race back to the future in Vermont. The state has been "a little slow" to embrace compact development and density, he said -- in large part due to an overprotective attitude toward village centers. The result? An inadvertent endorsement of suburban sprawl and strip malls, and rising transportation expenditures.

"We've found that location as much as technology shapes energy use," Shupe said. "In a walkable community, people use their automobiles less."

They save energy (and money) in other ways. Levine joins Shupe and most planners in the state when she extolled the economic and environmental advantages of compact growth to taxpayers.

"There's no need to extend water, sewer, roads and electricity out into the countryside -- which has been shown to facilitate even more sprawl development," she said. "As a community, we're saving money by supporting compact growth. And it sets aside more of the limited land we have for farming, forestry, open space and recreation."

University of Vermont Extension Professor and small-farm advocate Vern Grubinger summed up the savings in a recent essay for Green Mountain: "Cows don't go to school, and tomatoes don't dial 911."

## Human resources

The Shelburnewood project got its name from a 26-unit mobile-home park that sits on part of the property that once was slated for development. Those dwellings are almost invisible to passing motorists and pedestrians. Their inhabitants have made their presence known at Shelburne review meetings; the developer's plan included replacement, affordable housing.

But steady support for the project came from residents at nearby (and well-funded) Wake Robin, too.

More than \$2 million in affordable-housing grants, tax credits and interest-deferred loans had been proffered by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Vermont Housing Finance Agency.

On paper, the project looked like a slam-dunk.

No one on the Development Review Board voiced opposition to affordable housing in the village. Discussions of how Shelburnewood might affect "village character" steered clear of demographics.

But at the project's final hearing, members of the public were more direct, leveling charges of snobbery and "class-ist" bias.

The land beneath Shelburnewood's 26 trailers goes up for sale again May 1. So far, no one has come up with a viable plan for where they might move.

A town's failure to secure affordable housing starves residents of a vital civic ingredient, said Paul Bruhn, the executive director of the Burlington-based nonprofit Preservation Trust of Vermont. The loss of that one element -- mixed-income housing, in this case -- can weaken fatally other amenities, he said.

"These are places where people in a community really connect, where people of all stripes and persuasions can have a conversation," Bruhn continued. "These are gathering places where everyone in the community feels good about connecting."

The environmental benefits of biodiversity, he concluded, apply to humans, too.

Fear factor

"People are afraid of the word 'density,'" said Smart Growth Vermont executive director Noelle MacKay. "People have an image of urban crowding and losing personal space."

Like Shupe, MacKay advises Vermonters to re-examine the benefits of life in a village or town, to assert those benefits in discussions with developers as well as town boards.

The much-hyped American Dream of "every homestead on an acre," she said, was in reality affordable only to a select few. A stubborn adherence to that ideal might have subverted plans for a revitalized village, she added.

"I'm disappointed, because in Shelburne, things were really lining up," she said. "The Town Plan supported it; the bylaws supported it; the community supported it. The experts said it would work.

"So why did the DRB ignore all that expert testimony?" she asked. "Why couldn't it have been put on a faster track?"

Most of the board members aren't talking -- at least not in public. Following the advice of legal advisers (and much to the chagrin of the public and the developer), they held many of their meetings behind closed doors. Those so-called "deliberative sessions" are perfectly legal in quasi-judicial boards like the DRB, said Joe Delecki, a former chairman of Grand Isle's board who closely followed the Shelburnewood proceedings.

But the lack of transparency fueled criticism. A recurring challenge from Shelburnewood's proponents: Why isn't the public privy to the arguments that shape the board's decision?

## Myth-busting

Last spring, Shelburne's DRB hired Burlington-based urban design consultant Julie Campoli to critique the Shelburnewood proposal.

Overall, Campoli wrote in her May report, the site was "an ideal location for new housing growth."

She advised the developer to rework several design elements to improve the look and feel of the neighborhood. She advocated for a more-pleasing balance between built and open space.

Giebink and Brush hired a new team of designers. The subsequent changes were well-received by the board. They were generally acknowledged to be improvements.

Campoli's assessment of the project's density (at the time, about seven units per buildable acre), however, went unheeded. More units were needed, Campoli said, to attract significantly better bus service to Shelburne.

At the Board's June 3 meeting, Campoli took questions.

Resident David Webster, one of the few vocal opponents to Shelburnewood, challenged the assumption that density was a virtue.

"I've never really thought of Shelburne as 'urban,' he said. "We're not urban. If we're applying an urban standard, we need to think twice" about the plan, he said.

In the months that followed, the developers, constrained by board requests, reduced rather than increased the unit count -- and the project's financial viability likewise plummeted. Provisions in a modified permit approval filed Friday by the DRB had the potential to lower further Shelburnewood's density, the developers said.

Last week, Campoli, who is serving the final months as a Harvard Design Fellow, said popular imagination might have played a part in the board's reluctance to endorse the project fully: Plenty of theories link housing density with crime, traffic congestion and a dozens of other societal ills.

Current research, she added, consigns those theories to the realm of urban legend.

"Any time you can give people a choice to avoid getting in their cars," she said, "it's an environmental benefit."

And if you don't?

Shelburne Selectboard member Al Gobeille last year warned planners that delays caused by oscillating "red-light/green light" development delays would create a condition worse than traffic congestion. He called it an economic "death spiral" for Shelburne.

Shelburnewood project at a glance A proposal for compact residential development at the northeastern fringe of Shelburne Village poses a question familiar to many Vermont towns:

How can growth preserve -- or even enhance -- the quality of life in a small town center?