

Application Guidelines for Village Center Designation

Introduction

Village center designation, as provided for in 24 V.S.A. chapter 76A, was created by the legislature to recognize and encourage local efforts to revitalize Vermont's traditional village centers. While village center revitalization is an ongoing *process* to improve a community's vitality and livability, village center designation is only one tool and its focus is on supporting commercial activity in the center of Vermont's villages. Communities who pursue village center designation are encouraged to undertake other activities that support long-term revitalization.

These Guidelines provide instructions for communities preparing applications for village center designation. *Revitalizing Village Centers*, included in the second half of these Guidelines, offers additional information designed to help communities improve their village centers.

Application Requirements

In most cases, an application is made by the Town selectboard, and designation may be sought for more than one village center if each one individually meets the requirements. However, if an incorporated village has an approved municipal plan and planning process independently confirmed by their regional planning commission, then it will be the applicant for designation of its village center. An application must be complete to be considered, and applicants are encouraged to contact Vermont Downtown Program (VDP) staff in advance to discuss their proposed boundary and clarify application requirements. There are no specific forms to fill out, but an application must contain the following elements and information:

- A. **Cover letter:** the cover letter must contain the following:
 - Name of the Town or Incorporated Village;
 - Name, address and daytime phone number of the primary contact person;
(Please note that this number may be disbursed as a contact to media unless you indicate otherwise)
 - Signatures from a majority of the selectboard or trustees, or minutes or resolution from their publicly warned meeting, showing that the application for village center designation has been authorized by the Town or Incorporated Village.

- B. **Notification:** Both the regional planning commission and the regional development corporation must be notified of the municipality's intent to apply. The application must include copies of the letters to each of these organizations notifying them of the intent to apply.

- C. **Confirmed Planning Process:** A letter from the municipality's regional planning commission must be included in the application, stating that its planning process is "confirmed" under 24 V.S.A. §4350 by the commission. Confirmation means that the municipal land use plan, and planning process, have been reviewed and approved by that regional commission.

D. Village Center District Boundary: The boundaries must be consistent with the following statutory definition:

“Village Center” means a traditional center of the community, typically comprised of a cohesive core of residential, civic, religious, and commercial buildings, arranged along a main street and intersecting streets. Industrial uses may be found within or immediately adjacent to these centers.”

The boundary should be drawn around the center or core of the village including its traditional anchor points such as the post office, commercial buildings, town hall, churches and other public buildings that typically comprise the center of a village.

The following list of common characteristics of village centers is provided to help further define a village center for the purposes of designation. These are supplemental to the statutory definition (above), and intended to help communities draw appropriate boundaries.

- A traditional center of socio-economic activity.
- The center, or core area of the village, which often will be different, and smaller, than the village (municipal) boundary.
- Development densities should be uninterrupted, although there may be some public space, like a park or green, within a village center. Development is also consistently more compact than development outside the village center.
- Pedestrian-oriented rather than auto-oriented.
- Commercial (and industrial, if it exists) activities should be within and part of the traditional development pattern, not on the outskirts.
- Smaller scale than a downtown, but often with a mix of uses that can be similar to downtowns.
- Unique character within the designated area, evolved over time, reflecting a community’s economic, social and cultural changes. The center is also defined by the activities that take place there.

In addition:

- Residential and industrial properties that occur within the core area may be included, but areas that are predominantly residential or industrial should not be included in the village center boundary.
- If a center is clearly a downtown, then application should be made for designation as a downtown rather than a village center. If in doubt, applicants are encouraged to call VDP staff.
- Finally, a village center should not be confused with a growth center. The purpose of village center designation is to support *revitalization* of what exists rather than to support areas where new growth should be targeted. Certainly there can, or should be new development that can fit within a village center. However, the identification and planning for growth centers is a separate issue.

1. **Map and Ortho photo:** A map must be included, delineating the boundary of the proposed village center district, clearly showing the buildings and properties that are within the district. In most cases, an orthophoto should be used as the base map, with the information below superimposed over it:
 - a. Streets by name
 - b. Buildings identified by type (e.g., commercial, civic, industrial, residential). This is typically done by color coding the buildings or properties.
 - c. Boundary clearly indicating which buildings and properties are within the boundary
 - d. North arrow and scale
 - e. Property lines should be shown, but if not available, are not required.

The boundary should follow property lines. However, where a building that should be included in the village center sits on a large tract of land, the boundary should be drawn to exclude the excess open land by using a setback from the center of the road, or other means that make clear what land and which buildings are within the boundary. Large parcels of undeveloped land cannot be included in the village center district.

The regional planning commission may be able to help with mapping. However, if a map or certain information is not available, the applicant should contact VDP staff to discuss alternatives.

2. **Photographs:** Photographs are required, showing key areas of the village center district, particularly at the edges and other areas where there may be questions about the consistency with the definition of a village center. Photographs should show the streetscape rather than just individual buildings, giving a sense of the context of the area. Photos should be clearly keyed to the map.
3. **Optional Information**
 - Zoning District Boundary – Zoning boundaries can often help explain the community’s intent for development and uses within the village center. In such cases, applicants are encouraged to include these boundaries on their village center maps.
 - National Register Historic District boundary - Any commercial buildings listed on the National Register that are within the designated village center boundary may be eligible for both state and federal tax credits for the rehabilitation of historic buildings, which is one of the primary benefits available to designated village centers. In order for property owners, the municipality, and VDP to easily determine which properties in the village center are listed on the National Register, it is suggested that the boundary of any National Register Historic District - or any buildings individually listed on the Register - be indicated on the village center map submitted as part of the application. The municipal office or regional planning commission should have information on National Register properties, or contact the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation at 802-828-3540 (*Diane.McInerney@state.vt.us*).

Application Information

A municipality should submit 1 copy of the full application on paper, a copy of the full application on CD (or send documents by email to [Wendy Tudor](mailto:wendy.tudor@state.vt.us)), and 15 printed copies of the map. The copies of the map should be in color if the original is in color. The applications are due at the address below no later than 4:30 p.m. on the first Monday of any month in order to be considered for that month's meeting. Applications will be considered by the Downtown Development Board, which meets on the 4th Monday of each month, usually in Montpelier from 12:30 to 4 p.m. A village center must have received designation before any application for benefits will be accepted.

Representatives of the municipality are strongly encouraged to attend the Board meeting when their application is considered. A meeting agenda and a copy of the staff review will be sent to the contact person identified in the application about a week before the Board meeting. By statute, the applicant's regional planning commission and regional development corporation are members of the board when an application from their region is considered, and they can provide additional information at the hearing.

Application materials should be submitted to:

Vermont Downtown Program

Division for Community Planning and Revitalization
Department of Economic, Housing and Community Development
One National Life Drive, 6th Floor
Montpelier, VT 05620

Phone: 800-622-4553 or 802-828-3211

www.HistoricVermont.org

Vermont Downtown Program

Wendy Tudor

Phone: 802-828-5249 email wendy.tudor@state.vt.us

Leanne Tingay

Phone: 802-828-3220 email: leanne.tingay@state.vt.us

Renewal of Village Center Designation and Amendments

A village center will remain designated for five years, at the end of which the municipality must submit a request for renewal, demonstrating that it continues to meet all of the requirements for designation. A reminder will be sent to each community several months in advance. If the renewal date is missed, designation will be continued for 3 months to allow time to get the renewal application submitted, but no benefits will be considered during that time. If no renewal application is received after 3 months then the Board will withdraw designation. A community may submit a new application for designation at any time after that.

Amendments to the district, if necessary, may be made in any month during the designation period, upon application to and approval by the Downtown Development Board.

Revitalizing Village Centers

While the information above spells out the requirements for designation, there is a lot more to revitalizing a village center than simply preparing this application. This section provides additional information that may be helpful to your community in developing a village revitalization *process*. The information below is distinct from, and is **not required** for, designation.

What is revitalization?

Revitalization means mobilizing community efforts and energy to improve the village center. It means identifying projects - and activities - that will make it a more vibrant, attractive, and livable place, and organizing the people and money needed to make it happen. In particular:

Projects: Around Vermont, there are many physical improvements and projects being done to improve our village centers – such as:

- Community centers
- Recreational space and facilities
- Sidewalks, landscaping, benches
- Roads, traffic calming, parking, bike paths, and other transportation improvements
- Water and sewage capacity
- Schools
- Retention of US Post Office facilities
- Improvements to historic buildings
- Business improvements
- New infill development

Activities: The vitality of a community is defined as much by the shared sense of belonging to that community – seen in the activities that take place – and the level of involvement in those activities, such as:

- Public celebrations (festivals, concerts and fairs),
- Civic functions (school activities, libraries, post offices, churches, and recreation facilities),
- Support of local businesses where people congregate (general stores, hardware stores, coffee shops, beauty salons, etc.).

What links all of these activities together is volunteer efforts to make it happen. Often this will take place around one structure or improvement, like improvements to a community center or town green. Or perhaps a committee is formed to organize a harvest festival.

It would be a mistake to think that town government is responsible for everything – it often can be the catalyst for a project, or may be the place where various projects are coordinated. But it is the willingness of people to volunteer their time and expertise to help improve their village center that leads to a vibrant community.

How to get started?

Successful revitalization processes generally seem to begin in one of two ways. The first arises from a general sense that there are problems or threats in the village center, but no one is quite sure what to do. This in turn leads to a community “visioning” process, identifying both problems and assets, setting goals, and planning for the projects and activities that will lead to a more vibrant community. The “doing” may come later, usually with the people involved in the planning effort stepping forward to lead the various projects. (Some communities seek planning help through grants from the Community Development Block Grant Program or the Municipal Planning Grants Program, both available through the Department of Economic, Housing and Community Development).

As an alternative, a group of people may come together to do a specific project – restore an historic building into a community center, or create a sidewalk or path so people can safely walk around the village center. At some point, some of these groups expand their purpose, and begin to take on additional projects leading to a revitalization process.

Common Characteristics

- **Local leadership.** Successful revitalization efforts come about as a result of local leadership. Key players are typically the selectboard/village trustees, local volunteer groups (like the historical society and conservation commission), and the planning commission. Other local organizations, like schools, might also play an important role. Sometimes outside organizations – like regional planning commissions (planning activities, transportation projects), affordable housing groups (building projects) or land trusts – get involved on a project-by-project basis. But it takes local leadership and vision to pull together the community and make things happen, and typically a strong volunteer-based effort. Identifying all the local organizations and groups in a community is likely to reveal opportunities for building support.
- **Existing assets.** One of the lessons learned from downtown revitalization is that a community should base its efforts on improving what it already has, not in reinventing itself into something new – a lesson that applies equally well in village centers. Since most village centers are historic, the preservation of the historic structures is frequently an early focus of village groups – town halls, granges, schools, libraries, or churches – whether they continue their traditional use or are adapted for a new function. Conservation and improvement of natural resources such as paths, trails, riversides and

streambanks are also popular local projects. A community often may need to improve town greens, sidewalks, water and sewage systems, transportation improvements, and other infrastructure. Finally, many communities have traditional events – like fairs, harvest dinners, music events, holiday gatherings – which are existing assets that help define the community and can play a very prominent role in a revitalization process.

- **Incremental.** Revitalization takes place over time, and through a *series* of projects and activities. Very rarely is there “just one thing” that will fix all problems. Successful communities understand that revitalization is a *process*, not one big project, and develop a variety of projects and activities that will lead to long term improvement of the village center. Patience pays off in the end.
- **Growth and planning.** Villages are not frozen in time. They have evolved over the years, and there will likely be changes in the community in the future. Among other changes, this means there will likely be growth in the community, which needs to be guided in order for the village center to remain an attractive place to live. Successful village centers have thought through various growth issues, including residential infill, where new residential growth areas might be located, and where new commercial development would best fit within the village fabric. Strip development and low density housing generally are not consistent with historic village patterns, and can detract from their attractiveness and viability. A number of communities have adopted a design review process as part of their zoning review in order to ensure that development is designed to enhance, rather than detract, from the existing village environment.

Getting Help

While village revitalization is locally led, that doesn't mean there isn't help available. Once a local group has been formed and organized, there are several places to turn, including:

- **Regional Planning Commissions.** Every Vermont municipality is a member of one of the 12 regional planning commissions. They can provide help on a broad range of topics, including (but not limited to) land use and transportation planning, community facilities, capacity studies, mapping, and community organizing. They may also be able, on a project-by-project basis, to identify other programs that can provide targeted assistance. To find which commission serves your community, visit <http://www.vapda.org>
- **Preservation Trust of Vermont.** PTV offers both field staff and small grants that can help a community plan for and carry out projects that rehabilitate historic buildings. They also have a good web site that offers more information at www.PTVermont.org.
- **Smart Growth Vermont (SGV) and their programs** have recently merged with the Vermont Natural Resources Council. The former SGV programs now fall under the Sustainable Communities Program at VNRC and will offer a wide range of publications and training opportunities to support local efforts to support downtowns and village centers, and reduce sprawl. Their web site offers a tremendous amount of information at <http://www.smartgrowthvermont.org/>
- **Department of Economic, Housing and Community Development.** DEHCD offers a number of programs that can assist a community – including Historic Preservation,

Community Development, Housing, and Land Use Planning – all of which are outlined at <http://www.dhca.state.vt.us/Planning>.