

2. Background and Vision

2.1 Development History

Although little is known of the earliest settlement of the area by Native Americans, we do know that about 6,000 years ago, warm, dry weather blossomed the spread of population into the upper Winooski River Valley. By the year 1200, extensive settlements developed throughout the region and were linked by trading networks. The rich floodplains and relatively warm southern exposures were conducive to settlement. After the arrival of European settlers between 1600 and 1800, war, disease, and dispersal virtually destroyed Native American settlement. However, early investigators in the mid-1800's reported burial mounds and other evidence of Native Americans. Otherwise, material evidence is limited to three recorded sites in the Vermont Archeological Inventory. All of these were random, chance finds of stone tools and spear points. This lack of evidence is probably due to intensive development in highly sensitive areas and past flooding which wiped out remains.

In contrast to prehistoric archaeology, historic archaeology is well documented. The earliest settlement lies west of the North Branch River along Elm Street, where Colonel Davis built a log cabin in 1787 or 88. Although much of earliest Montpelier has been replaced, significant evidence of our early settlement remains, much of it buried and waiting to be discovered.

Montpelier was originally chartered in 1781 as a grant to settlers from Massachusetts. The first settlement was established along the North Branch in 1787, during the time Vermont was an independent republic. Original grantors envisioned the main portion of the town growing on high ground around Montpelier Center, but the availability of transportation routes and mill sites attracted early settlement along the riverbanks. By the time statehood was achieved, and the settlement was organized as a town, Montpelier had a population of 113. The early years of the community saw rapid growth with an influx of settlers who built saw and grist mills, roads, schools, churches and inns.

By 1805 the town had a population of 1,200. In that year the State Legislature sought a permanent home. Montpelier was selected because of its central location, and the support from local residents who provided land and money. A humble statehouse was constructed on State Street. This first legislative home was replaced in 1836 by a statehouse designed by Ammi B. Young, largely at the community's expense. This granite structure was gutted by fire in 1857. The present statehouse, designed by Thomas Silloway, was constructed on the same site in 1859.

In 1811, the growing town was selected to serve as shire town for Washington County. In 1828, the financial service sector was established by the Vermont Mutual fire Insurance Company. In 1848, the National Life Insurance Company was established, followed by the Union Mutual Fire Insurance company. Also by the mid-1800's, the railroad arrived which stimulated the business of the town. Thus, by the mid-nineteenth century, the principal economic components of the community, which continue to this day, were firmly established.

The configuration of the early village was strongly influenced by geography. As early as 1799, a bridge was constructed across the Winooski to Berlin. By 1858, the form of the main streets paralleling the rivers was developed. The downtown street pattern has changed very little since that time (Figure 1).

In 1849, Montpelier Village separated from the rest of the town, which was reorganized as East Montpelier.

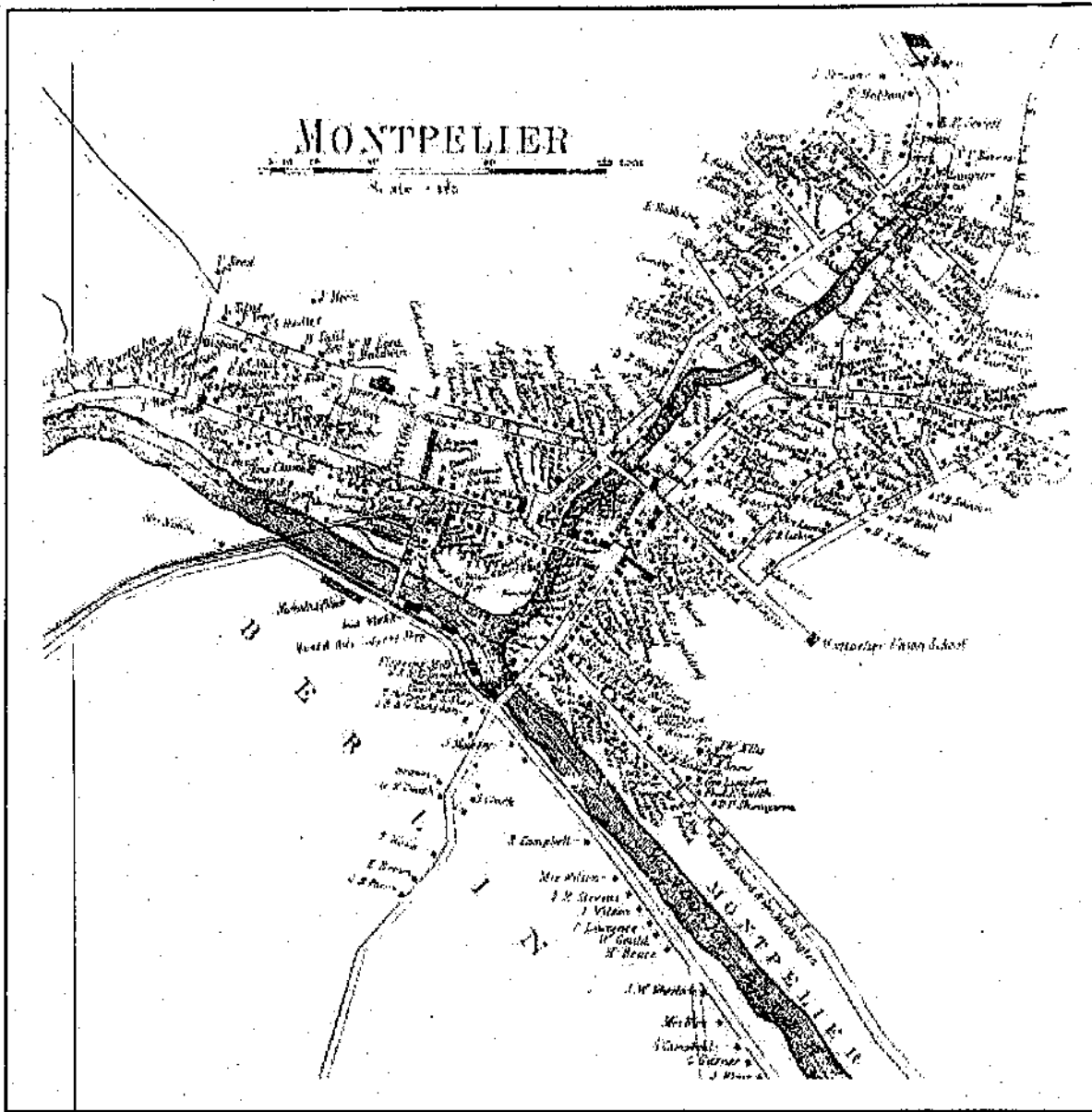


Figure 1: Montpelier in 1858

Source: Vermont Historical society

After the Civil war, the antecedent of Vermont college moved to Montpelier from Newbury, Vermont, and became known as Montpelier Seminary. In 1936, it became Vermont Junior College, and in 1953 it was converted to Vermont College for Women. In 1972, the college was acquired by Norwich University.

As the bottom lands along the rivers became developed, homes were established along the surrounding hillsides, frequently on land claimed from the incredibly steep slopes.

Several natural disasters figure prominently in the development of the City. In 1875, a large fire destroyed many downtown buildings. In 1927, a great flood brought twelve feet of water at State and

Main Streets and did great damage. Nearly all bridges connecting the banks of the North Branch and Winooski rivers were replaced after the flood. Many of these steel truss bridges are now considered landmarks in the community.

A view of Montpelier in 1883, Figure 2, shows a compact village with many features which exist today - the Statehouse, County Courthouse, the Pavilion Hotel, many churches and the retail buildings of downtown. The view indicates that stone working was established in the town, as were tanneries and other small manufactories. By 1925, nine granite works were established in the City to refine stone from the famous quarries in Barre.

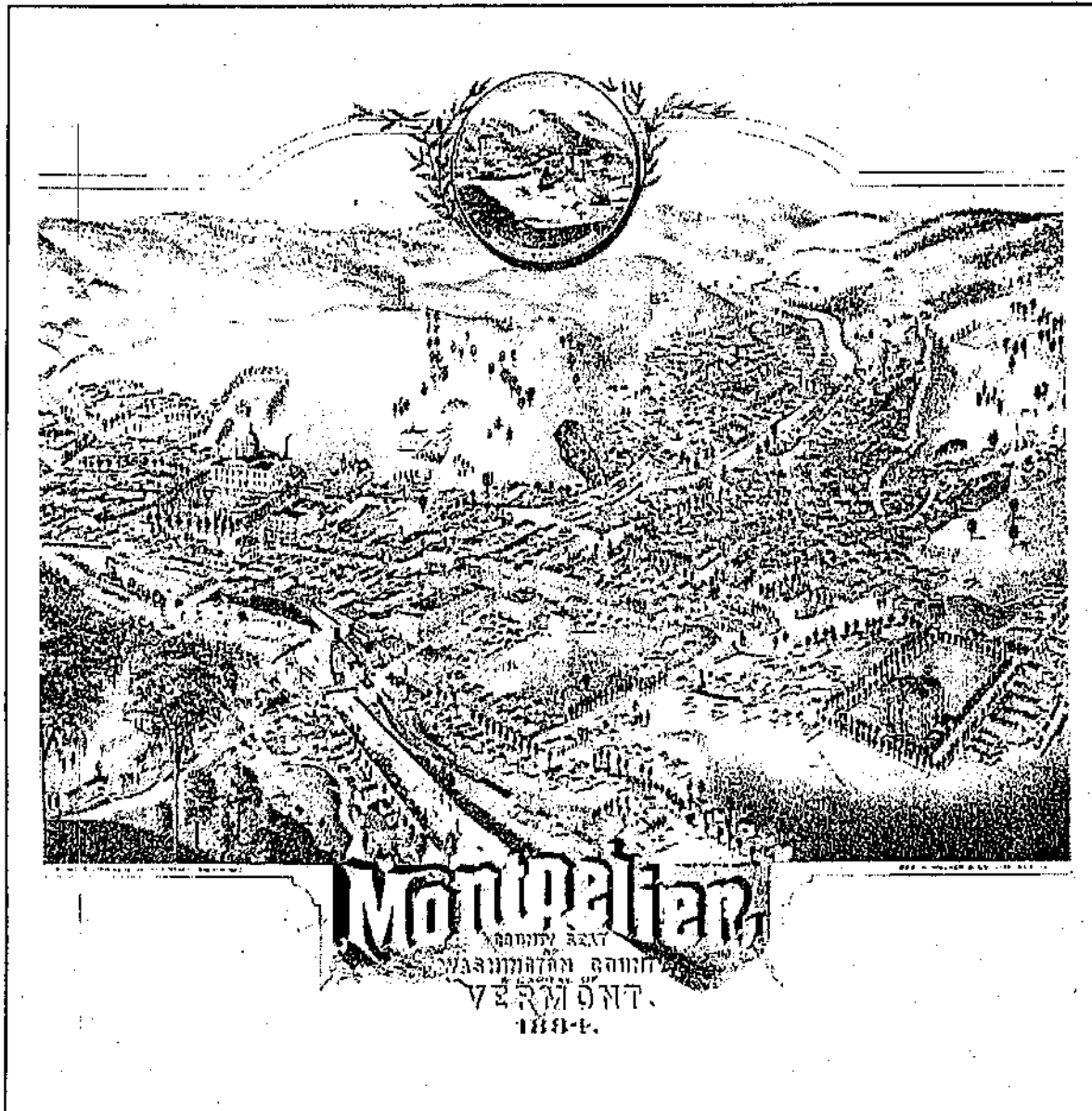


Figure 2: Montpelier in 1883

Source: Vermont Historical Society

In 1895, Montpelier reorganized as a city. In 1898, the northern portion of the Town of Berlin on the southern bank of the Winooski chose to be annexed, and the present form of the city became established. At that time, what we now call Berlin Street was in actually in the town of Berlin and the Berlin Opera House was located near School Avenue.

In 1899, the City was given 134 acres of land by John E. Hubbard for use as a park. In 1911, additional land was donated where the present Hubbard Park tower stands. The park was expanded to its present size through a donation of 50 acres in 1991 by the Heney family.

The city grew slowly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century during the period of intensive out-migration from the state to new lands in the West, or to industrial centers elsewhere in New England. Montpelier was already established as a government, market, service and industrial center in the region. When the automobile arrived, new state highways were routed to the city limits, and traffic then circulated through the original streets. In 1954, a new bridge was constructed at Bailey Avenue which linked to an extension of Winooski Avenue, now Memorial Drive, and diverted some of the traffic from the downtown area.

Remarkably, Montpelier's residential population has been stable at a little over 8,000 residents for the past 60 years. This is a significant factor in explaining why Montpelier has maintained its small and friendly character, making it the special community we cherish as a place to live, work, and raise our families. However, during the same period, the number of people employed in Montpelier has grown from 3,800 in 1940 to about 9,000 in 1999¹. This influx of commuters who come to work in Montpelier is a significant factor in explaining the changing character of the city, bringing increased traffic congestion and increased demand for parking and housing.

At the same time, Montpelier's role as a regional center for arts and entertainment continues to evolve. We have attracted many new restaurants to our community that are heavily patronized by our daytime workforce and many people from the surrounding communities into the evening hours. This has enriched the vitality of the downtown area.

2.2 State and Regional Context

For most people in Vermont the word Montpelier is synonymous with the city's role as the state capital and the seat of the state government. That role makes it imperative to consider Montpelier not only in its regional context, but its relationship to the state as a whole. Montpelier's central location and relative accessibility to all parts of the state were important factors in its selection as Capital City.

Some impacts of being the state capitol include the increase in demand for limited parking and the increased demand for city services. In addition to the needs of city residents, plans for Montpelier's future and for municipal services must take into account the needs and demands of government workers, legislators, and assemblies that accompany the state capitol role.

Figure 3 shows Montpelier's regional relationship. The concentration of state offices and insurance companies in Montpelier is balanced by the significant manufacturing sector in Barre.

Major areas of regional commercial growth are located in the towns of Berlin and Waterbury. Resort development is located to the west in the Mad River Valley towns of Warren and Waitsfield to the west, and Stowe to the north. Residential development is more dispersed throughout the region.

¹Vermont Department of Employment & Training, 1999.

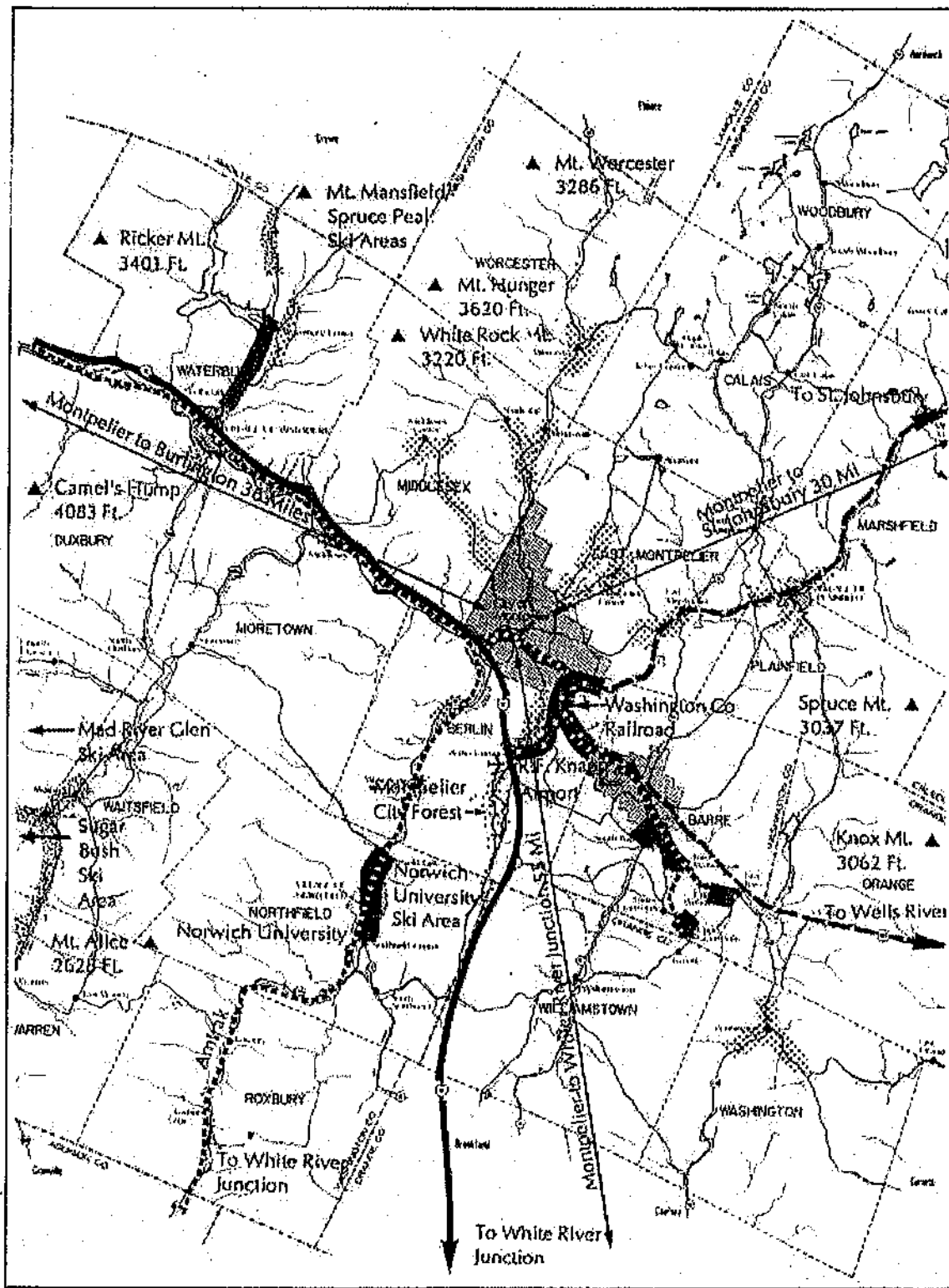
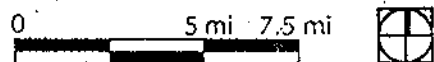





Figure 3. Regional Context, 1990



Regional Growth Patterns

-  Residential
-  Commercial/Industrial
-  Recreational

With the opening of the interstate highway along the important transportation corridor of the Winooski River to Burlington, the Central Vermont region has begun to share the many regional functions with prosperous Chittenden County. Today a significant number of commuters from Montpelier travel daily to the employment centers of Chittenden County. In addition, many Vermonters commute to Montpelier for employment.

Montpelier, along with 22 other communities in Washington and Orange Counties, is a member of the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC), created in 1967 under 24 VSA Chapter 117. CVRPC is an advisory planning agency charged with developing a comprehensive regional plan, providing assistance to communities on local planning issues and making recommendations on development. CVRPC is responsible under Act 200 for consultation, to help municipalities understand and implement the Act; and confirmation that municipalities are engaged in the planning process. Each city and town is granted one vote on the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission, regardless of land area or population.

2.3 The Characteristics of Montpelier

The Montpelier Master Plan is rooted in the everyday characteristics of the city, which are often taken for granted by citizens. These roles compose the fundamental nature of the city; and, while trends may change over time, these roles will continue to define the city well into the future. The following basic characteristics should serve as the essential principals for growth and development in the future.

A City of Residential Neighborhoods: Montpelier is composed of neighborhoods which the citizens relate to in an intimate fashion. Each neighborhood has a strong identity which needs support if the high quality of life in the city is to be maintained.

A City of History, Culture and Natural Beauty: The distinctive architectural quality of Montpelier's buildings and the intimate scale of the urban environment, established in a magnificent natural setting, is a very special and unique resource. Rivers, wooded hillsides and ridges give the city unique form and character. *Arts, museums, and culture are also a vital part of the city.*

A Center of Government and Institutions: As state capital, county seat, and home to four institutions of higher learning, the importance of Montpelier extends well beyond the boundaries of the region, and creates a center of statewide significance.

A Center of Commerce and Industry: As a regional center of trade, financial services and such major industries as granite working, Montpelier has a diversified economic base which contributes to its vitality and interaction with the region and the state. Montpelier's role as a regional center sometimes competes with the small town quality of life desired by the city's residents.

2.4 Montpelier's Vision for the Future

MONTPELIER IS A COMPACT COMMUNITY OF NEIGHBORHOODS LOCATED IN THE WINOOSKI VALLEY.

WE HOPE TO:

Promote development that reinforces our compact urban form and enhances the small-scale, intimate character of our city.

Strengthen the role of neighborhoods and citizens in the planning and development process.
Reinforce existing development before extending settlement further.
Discourage automobile-dependent growth in the downtown core.
Improve and enrich pedestrian, bicycle, rail, and shuttle access.
Encourage a diverse local economy.

Preserve the natural and historic features that distinguish the City of Montpelier.

- Revitalize the Winooski River and all its associated branches as a special focus of the city.
- Protect our ridge lines from development.
- Preserve the architectural heritage of the city by considering becoming a Certified Local Government, revising the zoning ordinances and design review process, and establishing a more comprehensive planning process.
- When possible, in light of public safety concerns, preserve the historic features of the bridges over the Winooski.
- Promote our natural and historic, as well as cultural, attractions as a tourist and regional resource.

Ensure efficient and reliable community services, including education, utilities, public safety, recreation and transportation.

Encourage a diversity of housing opportunities in all neighborhoods of the city.

- Define the scope of housing need in the city.
- Encourage the preservation and maintenance of existing housing.
- Use transportation options effectively to encourage suitable types of housing.
- Encourage the development of new housing. Ensure that new development respects existing neighborhoods, preserves key natural areas and provides effective and safe use of existing or enhanced vehicular, bike and pedestrian transportation networks.

Encourage growth which strengthens the city's tax base.

Encourage locally owned business.

Support growth in established commercial and industrial areas outside of the downtown core.

CHANGES TO OUR CITY, OUR ORDINANCES AND OUR SERVICES WILL BE CONSIDERED SUCCESSFUL TO THE EXTENT THEY:

- Improve the quality of life.
- Preserve and protect our heritage and environment.
- Encourage diversity of population and commerce.
- Provide long term benefits to the community and its residents.
- Strengthen the city's tax base.