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# Planning & Community Development 2004 Annual Report

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*Mission: To serve the community by facilitating the creation and preservation of a healthy, safe, and high quality living environment through the management of an effective, on-going planning and implementation process.*

Each word of this mission has very specific meaning. In carrying it out, the department has several areas of responsibility:

- To protect and improve Montpelier's built and natural environment;
- To strengthen the local economy and tax base;
- To help meet the housing and employment needs of low and moderate income residents;
- To engage the community in planning for growth and change;
- To provide information and service to the public; and
- To be accountable.


These are implemented through Montpelier's planning, zoning, and community development programs. Most of our housing, loan, and economic development activities are carried out through an arm of our department referred to as the Community Development Agency (CDA), a moniker that remained long after the City's planning and zoning functions were added to it in the late 1980s and early 90s.

Although a number of accomplishments stand out, 2004 was also defined by staff turnover, transition, and delays as the department's staff resources were in almost constant flux. The year started with both the Administrative Officer (Zoning Administrator) and GIS/Web Specialist positions being vacant. Gail Lawson came on board in mid-February as the new Administrative Officer and Eric Scharnberg joined us in late-February as our new GIS/Web Specialist. During the time Gail was with us, we made a variety of adjustments in our development review procedures. After she left in mid-August, another recruitment process resulted in Stephanie Smith, our Planner, being selected to fill the Administrative Officer position. Her experience fulfilling the duties of the Administrative Officer over the past year made her an excellent choice. She began her new duties in October, leaving the Planner position vacant.

During last year's budget review, we faced the proposal of eliminating an unspecified position and showed the range of projects and activities that would be affected if either the Community Development Specialist or the Planner position was eliminated. Either scenario would have quite different outcomes, would mark a shift in the direction of the department, and would have a significant impact on the delivery of services to the community. At that time, both positions were spared. However, with the continued and understandable pressure to cut costs to reduce the property tax burdens on city tax payers, and in light of the attention on the number of staff people in the department compared to other communities, it was no surprise when the Planner position was not authorized to be filled and is now slated to be eliminated in the FY06 budget.

This comes at a time when our planning needs are at an all-time high with the Master Plan update under way, the need to make substantial changes in our zoning regulations is clear,

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and pivotal questions are being asked about Montpelier's future. At the same time, we have had core obligations and commitments made with the expectation of full staff that needed to be met.

Each year the budget process rightly prompts people to ask what the planning department and its staff does and why. The following is a summary of this past year's activities and accomplishments.

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## PLANNING

**Planning Commission.** Each year the budget process rightly prompts people to ask what the planning department and its staff does and why. The following is a summary of this past year's activities and accomplishments (see <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/pc>).

**Open Space Advisory Committee.** The Planning Commission formalized the ad hoc Open Space Advisory Board into a subcommittee of the Planning Commission and appointed Barry McPhee, Alan Goldman, Ethan Parke, Rachel Castle, Christine Zachai, Anne Campbell, and Chris Smart. For more information, visit <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/pc/osac.cfm>.

**Bylaw Updates.** Bylaw amendments in progress were put on hold when the City Council hired a consultant to develop zoning amendments for Sabin's Pasture as well as citywide. Mike Watkins from Duany Plater-Zyberk presented his company's SmartCode at a meeting on November 16. Efforts are now focused on working with the draft zoning amendment produced by the City Council Rezoning Committee. The Planning Commission hosted a public hearing on December 1 to get public input on the City Council Rezoning Committee's draft and has held a number of special meetings in addition to regularly scheduled meetings in its effort to review the draft and provide a proposal for permanent zoning to the City Council, which has included a number of special meetings .

**Master Plan Update.** The Planning Commission completed its series of forums and turned attention to developing vision and goal statements to set the tone for the Plan. Several of the other initiatives described below intersect with the Master Plan and will influence the direction it takes. The Planning Commission prepared a minor amendment late in the year to coincide with their efforts to develop permanent zoning for the Sabin's Pasture area. They will continue their work on the more complete Master Plan Update in the coming year. Public involvement will continue to be an essential part of defining a vision for Montpelier's future and developing the Master Plan that will help achieve it. As it develops, information will be posted on-line at <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/pc/masterplan>.

**Transportation Plan Update.** Smart Mobility, Inc. of Norwich Vt. completed their work to develop a draft transportation plan. The Planning Commission will continue to work with this draft, which was funded through a municipal planning grant, to integrate it in the updated Master Plan and make the connections between Montpelier's transportation system and impacts on land use, economic development, and other issues.

**Downtown Traffic and Circulation Micro-Simulation Study.** Wilbur Smith Associates continued to work with us and State and Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission staff on the development of a computer model to simulate the traffic and circulation impacts of various downtown development scenarios. Present day baseline data was completed and the future conditions baseline to 2020 is in the final stages of being fine-tuned. This will show how traffic and circulation is expected to change based on current growth trends in Montpelier and surrounding areas. Once set-up of the models is complete, we will use them to test scenarios like the build-out of the Capital District Master Plan, or how changes in intersection controls or

circulation patterns (i.e., introducing a one-way street) affect movement through the downtown (see <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/wip/trafficsim>).

**City Hall Rear Lot Parking Structure Study.** Wilbur Smith Associates continued their study of whether a parking structure could functionally fit in either or both of the Pitkin or Blanchard lots behind City Hall. Although a structure could functionally fit on either lot, preliminary conclusions suggest that it would not be efficient in terms of the cost per number of spaces gained. A final report has not yet been presented to the Parking Committee and the City Council (see <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/wip/rearlot>).

**Municipal Planning Grant for Fiscal Impact of Growth Study.** Michael Crane and Jeffrey Carr were hired with municipal planning grant funds to study the likely fiscal impact of residential or commercial development on the community's fiscal well-being. The results are expected to help us sort out fact from fiction about whether new housing or other types of development are likely to have a positive or negative fiscal impact on the community. The conclusions of this study will help inform some of the City's policies in the Master Plan.

**GIS.** We began the year with a vacancy in our GIS/Web Specialist position when long-time part-time employee Sara Moulton and GIS pioneer moved on for full-time opportunities. Eric Scharnberg, who also works part time for the Cross Vermont Trail Association, joined the team in February. One of his first tasks was to resume our work with Information & Visualization Services (IVS) of Burlington on the update and correction of our property line base map. That project suffered some setbacks with our staff turnover, but is back on track and should be wrapped up soon into the new year. Throughout the year, Eric worked closely with other city departments, the Conservation Commission, the Planning Commission, and citizens using the city's geographic information system to conduct special analyses, develop new data layers, and display information in specially-produced maps. Many maps are available on the Web at <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/gis>.

**Certified Local Government / Montpelier Historic Preservation Commission.** In March of this year, Montpelier was the 11th municipality in Vermont to become a CLG when the 5-member Montpelier Historic Preservation Commission was formed, whose main role is planning and advocacy for the protection of Montpelier's historic resources. Also in March, the new MHPC applied for and was awarded a grant through the CLG program to update Montpelier's design review guidelines and standards. Unfortunately, we were forced to return a portion of the grant when staff turnover required Stephanie Smith, our planner and staff person to the MHPC, to assume the duties of zoning administration full time. Some funds were retained for training and memberships to the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions and National Trust for Historic Preservation. Despite the reduction in staff, the MHPC has applied for yet another grant to update the inventory of historic structures within Montpelier's National Register Historic Districts. For more information about the MHPC, visit <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/mhpc>.

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## **ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

**Downtown Revitalization.** We continue to work closely with the Montpelier Downtown Community Association on a number of downtown initiatives, including its Design and Economic Restructuring committees, parking issues, the Capital District Master Plan, downtown designation tax credits, and other initiatives.

<http://www.montpelier-vt.org>. Montpelier's official Web site continues to evolve and some parts of the site are in better shape better than others. We hope to make it a reliable, useful tool for citizens and visitors to find the information they need, whether it's planning a visit, relocating a business, or keeping in touch with local affairs.

For more information about Montpelier's budget process and annual meeting ballot items, visit <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/budget> or <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/annualmeeting>.

**Dickey Block.** With renovations completed to space on the second floor, the Dickey family has taken the first step in their plan to renovate the building privately. Stairway to Style, a reincarnation of stylists who were displaced when Heads Up on Main Street burned in May 2003, is now thriving there. Though they are waiting to see if the City intends to pursue the potential construction of a parking garage on the lot behind their building, the Dickey family intends to seek other tenants and renovate to suit. The City remains concerned, however, about structural issues identified in the 2001 feasibility study.

**Alley to Alley Fire Protection Project.** Well before the terrible fire in May that destroyed one major, historic downtown building and has severely threatened another and displaced local businesses, the City had been taking active measures to protect citizens and buildings from fire by encouraging the installation of sprinklers. The City received a \$100,000 grant in 2001 through the Vermont Downtown Program to help cover the costs of installing sprinklers in the 32-64 Main Street block. The project was delayed for a number of reasons, and the Planning Department took it over in 2003 in order to move it ahead and get it done. In the end, only one property owner of the three remained committed to the project and the sprinkler installation was completed this year in the Dickey Block.

**Turntable Park.** We finally received the amended lease between the City and VTrans (AOT), which was a condition of the \$11,575 grant from the Downtown Transportation Fund and the \$33,362 sales tax reallocation grant awarded in March 2003. Efforts to secure the sales tax reallocation got underway but is progressing slowly. Meanwhile, a Phase I environmental assessment revealed contaminants that will require changes to the park's design and removal of the hazardous substances. These issues and the unknown details of the neighboring Pyralisk's redevelopment plans have continued to stall this project.

**AOT Enhancement Grant Application.** The \$40,000 AOT Enhancement Grant for the design and engineering of the North Branch RiverWalk and Langdon Street improvements has been executed. The next step is to prepare the request for proposals and hire a design team. Further work on the project has been delayed, however, due to the loss of the Planner position and our current focus on the City Council's priority to develop permanent for the Sabin's Pasture area.

**Carr Lot Redevelopment.** Redevelopment. Wilbur Smith Associates completed the bulk of the work on the parking replacement study, though their report has not yet been finalized and published. That part of the project was paid for through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) earmarked funds administered by the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans). The next step is to re-issue the request for proposals for a consultant to undertake the environment review for the prospective parking replacement sites as well as the transit center site. Before we can use the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) funds through the second earmark for the environmental review and design process, however, we must first complete the FTA application process, which remained stalled due to staff turnover and reduction and overall complications in the process. The project has now been reassigned to the Community Development Specialist, which will be a priority in the coming year. It hasn't been updated in a while, but more information can be found on the Works in Progress page at <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/wip/carrlot>.

**Main Street Area Urban Area Redevelopment Plan.** In response to the now-vacant lot at 66 Main Street, the contemplation of a parking garage on the North Branch parking lot, the number of other under-utilized properties on Main Street, the potential extension of Barre Street as shown in the Capital District Master Plan, and the

opportunity to enhance this major downtown gateway, we applied for and received full funding of a \$15,000 municipal planning grant toward the development of a Main Street area urban redevelopment plan. The intent is for a design team to lead the community through a process to develop a unified vision for how all of these issues best fit together and what it might look like. Because the project is estimated to cost approximately \$45,000, we also submitted a planning grant application to the Vermont Community Development Program for \$30,000, but later withdrew it because of some readiness issues under the program's requirements. The municipal planning grant requires the project to be complete by May 8, 2006. Due to the loss of the Planner position, our current focus on the City Council's priority to develop permanent for the Sabin's Pasture area, and the need to secure additional funds, it's not certain when this project will be started.

**Community Rating System Benefits.** We managed to once again maintain our CRS rating of 9 by carrying out a wide range of on-going flood hazard mitigation activities to deduce or eliminate losses of property or life due to flooding. This reduction from Class 10 lowers both the City's flood insurance premiums, as well as those of all property owners in the flood plain, by five percent. Montpelier is one of only three communities in Vermont to achieve this lower rating (see <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/flood>).

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## HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

**Montpelier Housing Task Force.** George Seiffert, Community Development Specialist, continued to work closely with the Housing Task Force though the year on numerous initiatives. The MHTF was instrumental in revising the accessory apartment language in Montpelier's zoning and subdivision regulations and has worked closely with the Planning Commission to develop policies that will help increase the supply and quality of housing in the city. Through the MHTF's initiative, the City received a \$3,500 grant from the Vermont Forum on Sprawl as seed money to develop the One More Home campaign, which will continue to take shape this coming year. The Task Force also worked with the City to draft a rental housing inspection program which may be implemented in the future. More information about the Housing Task Force can be found at <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/mhtf>.

**River Station Apartments.** The City was awarded a \$589,000 implementation grant through the Vermont Community Development Program to assist the development of 36 new housing units at 221 Barre Street, 29 of which will be perpetually affordable. These funds were leveraged by funds from other sources, including \$100,000 from our revolving loan fund totalling over \$6 million. George continues to work with the developers on Phase II, which is expected to produce 14 condominium units and is likely to include another grant application to the VCDP and additional funds from the revolving loan fund.

**Housing Data.** George continues to compile and maintain information about housing developments, conversions, and costs in the city.

**Housing Preservation Grant Program.** We received yet another \$50,000 grant through the Housing Preservation Grant program to help low-income Montpelier homeowners renovate and weatherize their homes. Each HPG round takes about 2 years to complete. This new round, HPG 10, was matched by \$90,000 from our revolving loan funds and we are currently working with 15 new applicants and projects for the coming year. This past year we closed on 4 new loans and completed 4 current projects. To date, this program has assisted 90 households and benefitted 240 persons (see <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/cda/hpg.cfm>).

**Central Vermont HomeShare.** At the end of its second year, the CDBG-funded

Central Vermont HomeShare program received 65 applications and, to date, made 7 matches, which has exceeded the program's expectations. Though the grant funds (which have been administered by George) are expected to run out in March of this coming year, Betsy Reid has been busy fundraising to keep the program going. The goal of the program is to match elderly or disabled homeowners with individuals who are seeking a place to live in exchange for helping with household chores, providing companionship or a protective presence in the home. In addition to all the start-up and outreach necessary for this new venture, For more information, see <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/cda/homeshare.cfm>.

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## **DEVELOPMENT REVIEW**

**Permit Activity.** According to our permit database, 188 applications were processed in 2004, comparable to the 190 from the year before. Of those, 19 were signs, 21 required site plan review, 15 required conditional use approval, 31 required design review approval, 19 required variance approval, and 78 were issued administratively. In addition, the DRB considered one AI-PUD amendment, 4 sketch plan reviews, 3 subdivisions, and at least 2 appeals. Two DRB decisions were appealed to the Environmental Court.

**Development Review Board.** Phil Zalinger was reelected chair, which he as served since the DRB formed in July '02. Kevin O'Connell was elected vice chair. Guy Teschmacher was appointed in June to fill the seat vacated by the resignation of Sharon Allen. Ken Matzner was re-appointed as an Alternate in June. Doug Bresette joined the Board in June first as an Alternate in and was appointed a regular member in November to replace Dave Keller who resigned (see <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/drb>).

**Design Review Committee.** Margot George continued as chair this year. Ru Russell and Andrea Stander resigned and the two Alternate positions went unfilled for the rest of the year (see <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/drc>).

**Staff Support.** The Technical Review Committee (TRC), comprised of representatives from the Planning, Police, Fire, DPW, and Parks departments and the Conservation Commission, continued to meet in the Planning office twice a month on Tuesday mornings to jointly review applications, evaluate site plans, and provide comments and recommendations to the applicants and the DRB. Staff reports are prepared that correlate the relevant details and issues of an application with the appropriate review criteria and distributed to the DRB, the DPW, the applicants, and others prior to the meetings. A more preliminary staff report is provided to the DRC and applicant prior to their meetings.

**Updated Fee Structure.** In October, a revised permit fee structure was presented to the City Council for review. Some good questions were asked and the Council asked for information about fees charged by other city department that are applied to new development.

**Revised Permit Application Forms.** Earlier in the year, considerable effort was made to develop more clear, user-friendly permit application forms. Staff turnover and the need to focus on other priorities prevented us from completing this, but it remains a goal for the coming year.

**Public Outreach.** DRB and many PC meetings continue to be broadcast on Adelpia Cable channel 17. As we try to do every year, a mailing was sent to property owners in the flood plain and design control districts to remind them about some of the permitting details they should consider when planning home improvement or other projects.

To help inform neighbors and the public of development activities that might affect them, we continue to:

- publish full DRB agendas are the Thursday 2 weeks prior to the meetings;
- publish information about permits issued administratively without Board reviews with the DRB agendas;
- require that the big red Z-card be posted on-site prior to the DRB meeting;
- require that the blue Zoning Permit placard be posted on the site during the 15-day appeal period;
- provide notice to abutters by mail of certain applications requiring DRB review; and
- post meeting and hearing information on the Web site.

**Renovation Plans? New  
Construction?  
Do You Have All Your Local  
Permits?**

**PLEASE, PLAN AHEAD**

- Zoning Permit - 223-9506
- Subdivision Permit - 223-9506<
- Design Review Approval - 223-9506
- Building Permit - 223-9504
- Access Permit - 223-9508
- Filling Permit - 223-9508
- Excavation Permit - 223-9508
- Water or Sewer Connection - 223-9508

<http://www.montpelier-vt.org/permits>

For a time, the Director's Reports were posted on-line at <http://www.montpelier-vt.org/planning>, but the reports stopped being produced in August as a consequence of the staff turnover and shortage.

Though it's said every year, it remains true that this department could not do all that it does without the thoughtful and hard work by the staff, the individuals who volunteer on commissions and committees, the support from local officials, interest of the community, and the participation of many other people and departments within and outside of City Hall. Montpelier is especially fortunate to have so many highly motivated, skilled, and interested citizens willing to give of themselves, their time, and their energies to make so many things happen.

**Valerie Capels, AICP, Planning & Community Development Director**

*Page updated February 15, 2005*

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