

Randolph VT: Protecting the I-89 Interchange¹



A case from the library of “smart growth” leadership case studies prepared by the New England Environmental Finance Center, available at <http://efc.muskie.usm.maine.edu/pubs.htm>

Abstract. A community with a variety of conflicting interests and philosophies manages to build consensus around zoning changes to protect land around its interstate access. The work on I-89 Exit 4 extended over a long time period and suffered from attrition and frustration. However, key residents in the town of Randolph, Vermont, were able to put aside differences long enough to agree upon a course of action to benefit the community as a whole. It remains to be seen whether the proposed zoning will indeed be passed by Randolph’s Board of Selectmen and accepted by the community.

¹ Prepared by Maggie Jones for the New England Environmental Finance Center’s “Next Communities Initiative,” Richard Barringer, ed., Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine, Portland, May 2006. Copyright © 2006 Muskie School of Public Service

Randolph. The several settlements that comprise Randolph Township are in an area of rolling hills and small rivers and streams in central Vermont. Randolph was incorporated in 1781 during the brief period when Vermont was an independent republic. Randolph Center, as its name implies, was the original town center and site of the first meeting hall. In the 1800s, however, the many saw mills in the West Randolph section spurred development there; and when the railroad came through, the station was placed in West Randolph rather than Randolph Center. This relocated town government, business, and industry to West Randolph, and it has been the area “center” since. The U.S. Post Office made it all official in 1900 by changing West Randolph’s name to, simply, Randolph.

In layout and architecture, Randolph today appears a classic New England town center, with a densely developed main street of three- and four-story brick buildings. Retail businesses occupy the first floors, with offices and residences above. A small green with a gazebo creates a gateway onto the main street from the direction of I-89, as travelers drive west along Route 66.

The site in question comprises a group of parcels some 2.5 miles east of Randolph’s downtown, surrounding the Exit 4 interchange from I-89, Vermont’s principal north-south, limited-access highway from Massachusetts to Canada. It is a largely undeveloped swath of farm and forest land that separates Randolph to the west of I-89 from Randolph Center to the east.

The minimal development now in place at Exit 4 includes a gas station and a McDonalds, located directly off the west-going egress from I-89. Though just two buildings, this linear, strip-style development, located in what residents had seen as a pristine rural environment, galvanized the community. People began to talk about how to plan for development that would not disrupt the visual character of the community or damage the environment. The discussion was first taken up by a group formed much earlier, to address a related problem.

First steps. In 1991, three fires took place in downtown Randolph, destroying buildings that were vital to the town’s sense of itself. Randolph had already seen a slowdown of its

traditional industry and agriculture, and the catastrophic fires deepened the felt need to revitalize the downtown. A group of business interests joined together to form the Randolph Redevelopment Corporation (RRC). Over the years they rehabilitated the main street, revamping and adding to the sidewalks, rebuilding a department storefront that had been destroyed by fire, and transforming the original railroad station to its new use as a community transportation center.

Eventually the group pondered the land around Exit 4, its major concern being jobs. The Randolph Chamber of Commerce decided to work with the RRC to look at ways to generate new industry in Randolph. According to Jim Kennedy, a member of the RRC, “We looked at everything. The only feasible area to put additional industry was around Exit 4, since it’s right off the highway. Other places required transportation through Randolph or Randolph Center.”

The First Exit 4 Committee. In 1997, the Town received funding from the state to examine development options for Exit 4, and so the first Exit 4 Committee was born, with Kennedy as its chair. The RRC chose who would be on the committee, according to Kennedy, and intentionally went for a diversity of opinion. “We could have stacked the committee and gotten everything done, but we went for diversity and tried to build consensus at the start.”

A State of Vermont Community Development Block Grant funded market and engineering studies, the former indicating need for a business incubator at the site. The engineering study, performed by Dubois and King, whose headquarters were actually in the study area on one of the few developed parcels, provided a “raft of information” on land formations, sensitive areas, the availability of infrastructure, etc. It reported that only a portion of the site was developable due to aggressive slopes, and concluded that light industry, office use, and technical operations were best suited to the site.

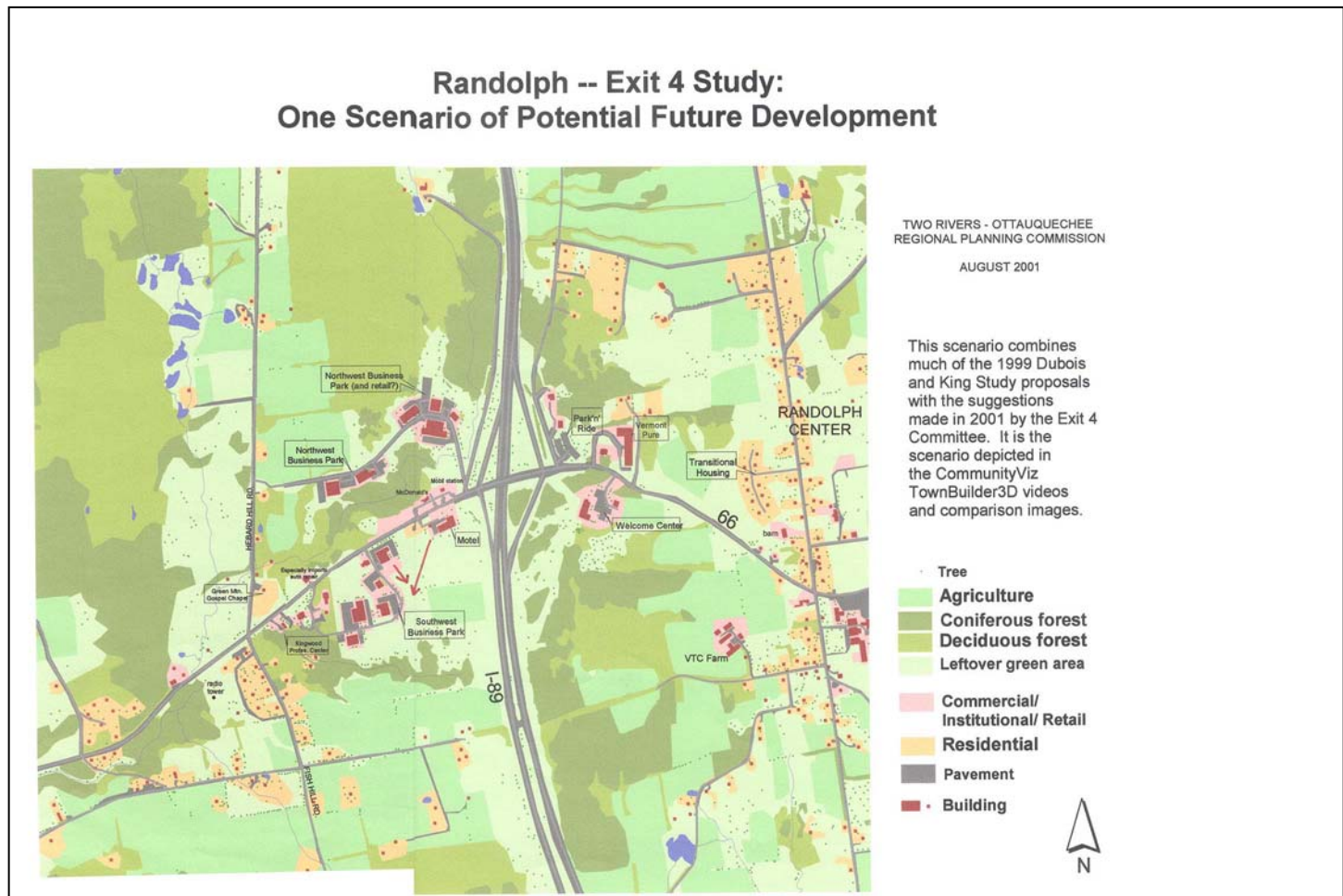
From the start, the Exit 4 Committee made it clear that retaining the rural character of the area was a priority. The State, itself, for reasons of public safety and convenience, was keen on having as few curb cuts as possible along Route 66, the access

road to I-89. The committee preferred that all development take place away from the main road, and this objective guided both the market and the engineering study.

Then, the embryonic development plan was put on the shelf, largely due to the lack of involvement of the principal landowner, Sam Sammis. He had originally approached the committee with plans for development that relied heavily on retail, particularly “boutiques.” The committee did not feel that a retail use was economically sustainable, and that it would naturally continue the linear strip-development begun by the gas station and the McDonalds.

At the same time, some long-awaited zoning changes presented by the Randolph Planning Commission and unrelated to Exit 4 failed to pass the Town’s Board of Selectmen, “largely because the Planning Commission failed to present a unified front,” according to Kennedy. The Planning Commission was a contentious group, with strongly differing opinions on how land use should be regulated in the town.

Randolph -- Exit 4 Study: One Scenario of Potential Future Development



Our Town, Your Town. Around this time, Julie Iffland of Vermont’s Trust For Public Land moved to town; with her background in land use planning, the Town asked her to chair the Planning Commission. According to Iffland, “The first [Exit 4] committee was really about job creation; but there was ongoing concern about retaining the character of the land. There was a contentious Planning Commission that still had to do (zoning) regulations. I was new to town, and they asked me to join commission because I wasn’t in one camp or the other. The only thing the commission could agree on is that we needed more public input.”

Iffland mused on some of the barriers she saw to coming up with a workable plan for Exit 4. “There were a lot of bruised feelings about what had happened in the previous (failed zoning change) effort, since people had spent a lot of time on it. Yet, there were really only a handful of issues that were contentious, and I think it would have been easy to fix; but the members just could not come back to the table. So, with all the cross-over between the two efforts, we had to start over from scratch, and several years had already passed: start from scratch, and start with public input, and see where it leads us.”

In December 2000, Randolph’s Planning Commission organized a day-and-a-half-long meeting called “Our Town, Your Town,” facilitated by Delia Clark of Vital Communities, a nonprofit organization that “works to engage citizens in community life, and to foster the long-term balance of cultural, economic, environmental and social well-being” in the upper Connecticut River valley. The goals of this meeting were to garner public input on matters of community concern and citizens’ priorities, and to generate ideas for development that would strengthen the town’s economy while protecting its natural and cultural environment.

The meeting covered a good deal of territory, according to Iffland, including a discussion on Exit 4 that revitalized interest in the character of development there. As a result, a *second* Exit 4 Committee was set up that included some original members and some fresh volunteers who came forward at Our Town, Your Town. According to Kennedy, a key for the re-formed Exit 4 Committee was the more direct involvement of



Sam Sammis, the principal landowner. Sammis had participated in the “Our Town, Your Town” meeting, “rubbing shoulders” with the residents and getting their input.

The Second Exit 4 Committee. The second committee took up the plans and studies of the first committee, and got to work. One project was to get a visualization of different development scenarios to aid decision-making. Using Sustainable Development Challenge Grant money from the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs, the committee used “Community Viz” software to present three different development scenarios for the site. The committee received technical assistance on the software use from the Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission and retained the services of planner Brian Shupe, who would later assist with drafting appropriate zoning and regulation changes.

The goal of the second committee, according to Iffland, was to “reconcile the first committee’s work with the concern of some people on retaining the character of the area around Exit 4.” There was a larger concern on the part of the Planning Commission and the Town, however: some of the contentiousness around Exit 4 had spilled over into work on the town plan. “We needed a new town plan, and we had to work on it, and there were

many issues not specific to Exit 4 that were a hindrance. But it was pointless to change any regulations [regarding Exit 4] until the town plan was ironed out,” said Iffland.

Iffland describes the process that the second Exit 4 Committee and the Planning Commission went through as “painfully incremental.” A major issue, beginning with the first committee and extending into both the second committee, the Planning Commission, and the overlapping work with the town plan, was attrition and turnover. “We started off pretty well, we had some structure; but perhaps because it dragged on a little bit—and this is a problem we have in Randolph – there wasn’t a set group of people who had a set amount of time to come up with a clear plan. So, it worked for a while, and it dragged on for a bit.

“The community process was more cumbersome (and time-consuming) than we expected. People thought they would be seeing life-like buildings computer-screened within weeks. And then people began to get antsy, and the dividing lines got clearer. Then the more community-oriented people dropped off, and the hard-core interests were left. And for a while it completely broke down and people weren’t talking to one another. I tried to get the work groups back together, and people talking.”

Finally, the committee came up with a plan they could present to the community, which they did in conjunction with a presentation on the new town plan. This took place at a second Our Town, Your Town event in February 2002. Very slowly, consensus on what to do at Exit 4 began to develop. The Community Viz models allowed community members to see that development around Exit 4 could be screened from the road, with density occurring off side-roads from Route 66.

Still, there were holdouts. Some came from the older, farming section of the community, who basically don’t approve of land use regulation on philosophical grounds. Other, newer members of the community – suburbanites from Connecticut and New York who had moved to Randolph to “get away from it all” – disapproved of any development at all, according to Kennedy. “There was an element that was saying, ‘I don’t want my morning commute to look different.’” Still, by the end of the second town-wide meeting, there were far fewer dissenting voices.

Ultimately, the community recognized that the limitations of the site, itself, would determine the type of development. Route 66 is “incredibly problematic,” according to Iffland, and became a focal point on agreeing what would happen at Exit 4. “Even if you agree to a Wal-Mart from a philosophical viewpoint, the road couldn’t handle it,” said Iffland.

Town Plan & Regulation Changes. Finally feeling that they had become a unified force with the backing of the community, Iffland and the second Exit 4 Committee, in conjunction with the Planning Commission, set about drafting the new regulations for Exit 4, to be folded into the town plan. They would encourage what was desirable, and discourage what was undesirable; this proved more difficult than expected.

Because their biggest concern was keeping development away from the road, the Exit 4 Committee decided to do zoning based on density. They came up with three zones for the parcels: a restricted zone, where no development would happen; a limited zone, with up to a certain percentage of development; and a preferred zone, which could have transfers of development from the limited zone. This method worked extremely well in theory but became problematic in its details, according to Iffland, because it involved guessing what the main landowner, Sam Sammis, would do.

The method has also created a problem in that *other* landowners have lately made their voices heard. “Right now [mid-2006] the regulations are essentially drafted,” said Iffland, “but we have issues now with some other landowners. One of the town’s largest employers has one of the most visually sensitive parcels, and they’ve just planned an expansion with a very large warehouse that doesn’t fit our density requirements. It has actually made some noise that it might leave if it is not accommodated. But,” says Iffland, “we’re down to a very few issues: density, and some largely administrative issues.” The strategy is to get the regulations in the town plan passed by the Board of Selectmen, then move on to the zoning changes that are close to a final draft.

The Current Situation. Meanwhile, good news for job creation at Exit 4 turned up in the form of Vermont Technical College, which moved into the former Dubois and King

headquarters after the engineering firm moved to a vacant school in Randolph's downtown. The college has become the needed business incubator deemed necessary by the market study performed years ago.

Iffland feels that if the Planning Commission presents the draft zoning regulations to the Board of Selectmen as a unified front, they will become a reality. "This group needed to become a group, because they couldn't talk to each other civilly; and we were going to sit at the table until we learned each other's language. It extended things tremendously because we had to do it ourselves, and I think we eventually came up with a really good plan under the circumstances. We can go into the Select Board and try to change significant parts of the town plan and stand as a unified board, and we never could have done that without slogging through that process. The process made us a group. Now, everyone wants the regulations to pass and get it over with. We've literally exhausted our options."

In July 2006, the Planning Commission had a joint session with the board of selectmen to bring them up to date on the draft zoning. Although Mardee Sanchez, zoning administrator for the Town, stated that commission was still "hammering out the final details" of the draft, the joint session determined that the proposed zoning changes could start the public hearing process in October 2006.

TEACHING NOTES:

Important ideas illustrated in the case include:

1. Setting clear goals and a reasonable time frame in which to accomplish them is important; an open-ended process may lead to group disintegration and attrition.
2. Communicating with all stakeholders throughout the entire process is key; a major employer in Randolph came close to derailing the work on Exit 4.
3. People will take things personally; try to get people talking based on their interests rather than their positions or emotions, in spite of past conflicts.
4. Leadership is often crucial; be prepared to step in to get a project back on track.