

Agritourism in Vermont Towns: A Guide for Williston Farmers & Planners

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Strawberry Hill Farm, Stowe VT¹

Introduction

This document pulls relevant information from local town plans, zoning bylaws, and regulations from four towns in Vermont: Richmond, Shelburne, South Hero, and Stowe. These towns were chosen based on their similarity to Williston in location, physical landscape, regulations, farms, or a combination of all of these. Some towns, like Stowe and Shelburne, also serve as examples for Williston to base its vision for the future on. With

¹ Strawberry Hill Farm, LLC, Strawberry Hill Farm, 2022, <https://www.strawberryhillfarm.com/>.

each town, the ways in which select farms approach agritourism have been outlined, specifically to inform and inspire farmers and town planners in Williston.

Richmond

Introduction

Richmond is a small, rural town, consisting of forested hills and agricultural lands. Unlike Williston, there is no up and coming town center or development areas. Richmond presents a similar lifestyle to residents who live in the Agricultural/Residential zoning district of Williston. Those who live in Richmond do so for the rural lifestyle rather than the economic opportunities, as most of the town's residents travel outside of Richmond for work. Many of the farms located in Richmond have undertaken a number of rural enterprises to increase profit margins as well as engage and bring in more community members and tourists to their farms. This has been a result of community members and town planners being on the same page about land uses and allowing farms to be creative.

Town Plan and Land Use

Similar to Williston, the town of Richmond places a lot of value on conserving their scenic natural areas and preserving their natural and cultural history.

"Richmond's vision is to be the most livable small town in Vermont. We value our unique combination of authentic Vermont character, diverse local services and accessible location...We will take a forward-thinking approach to emerging opportunities and challenges while honoring and strengthening our close-knit community and rural character."²

The town addresses the challenges of having community members who are looking for positive change in the community and those who like things how they are and don't want to see anything change. This is reflected in their most recent update to the Town Plan goals and zoning. Richmond is specific about their goals for the town in terms of community and

² "Richmond, Vermont 2018 Town Plan," November 6, 2018, <http://www.richmondvt.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2018-Richmond-Town-Plan.pdf>.

economic development. Some of the goals specifically aimed towards agriculture and supporting agrotourism are as follows.

Community Development

Richmond aims to support and create outdoor recreation opportunities that are available to the public. Specifically, they intend to “continue to allow for public events such as festivals, parades, and vendor fairs and create a streamlined approval process for such uses.” This action allows for farms to request permits for uses on their lands that could benefit them economically and not only bring the community together, but also bring tourists and residents of other towns to Richmond.³

Economic Development

Richmond’s first goal is to “support and encourage strong and diverse local businesses and a local economy.” The specific actions for this goal were to “Create a permit to support pop-up and experimental businesses such as special events, temporary markets, food trucks and pop-up stores” and “Support the Richmond Farmers’ Market and other local agricultural business enterprises.”

Richmond’s second goal is to support Richmond’s agricultural and forestry industries including wood products, maple products, recreation, tourism, and a variety of farm enterprises. This goal clearly demonstrates the town’s support towards farms and expanding land uses. Some of the actions associated with this goal were to “update Richmond’s land use regulations to protect [farm] industries by incorporating strategies to reduce forest and farm fragmentation and allow for approved forest and farm based commercial activities.” They also strive to “explore regulatory means of supporting the viability of farm and forest based land uses.”⁴

Most of the land in Richmond, outside the designated village area, is considered the Agricultural/Residential (AR) zoning district. The town plan notes that the future uses of the district are to maintain the current forestry and agriculture, as well as, “commercial and recreational uses that complement or diversify current uses, such as provision of event spaces, recreational activities, value-added enterprises, and agricultural and

³ “Richmond, Vermont 2018 Town Plan,” November 6, 2018.

⁴ “Richmond, Vermont 2018 Town Plan,” November 6, 2018.

forestry-related uses or accessory uses.” According to the town’s zoning regulations, most land uses are allowed as long as they are permitted by the administrative officer or a conditional use permit is issued by the DRB. This leniency in Richmond’s zoning regulations gives farms the ability to diversify how they generate income.^{5,6}

Relevant Examples

Owl’s Head Blueberry Farm

Owl’s Head Blueberry Farm opens their blueberry fields for visitors to pick their own berries in the summer. They host live music twice a week throughout the season as well. Neighbors, community members, and tourists are encouraged to pick berries and bring blankets to enjoy an evening picnic.⁷

Maple Wind Farm

Maple Wind Farm hosts workshops on farm to table cooking including how to prepare meats, among other things. The workshops are 2 hours long and run by the farm’s own Master Meat Crafter. They supply the meat used in the workshop as well as recipes to take home. They raise organic, grass-fed beef, as well as chickens, turkeys, and pigs. The farm’s goal is to connect its customers with the food they are eating and encourage them to buy locally.⁸

Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC)

Richmond is home to the headquarters of this conservation and agricultural nonprofit. This program encourages high schoolers and young adults to learn about conservation through hands-on community service. VYCC runs various projects throughout the state. One example of how VYCC helps local farms is by creating walking/hiking trails for the public to use on farm properties. It might be worth it for interested farms to reach out to the VYCC and have them help increase the vitality of their farm. They are very supportive of conservation with the Richmond Land Trust, Vermont Land Trust, Preservation Trust of

⁵ Town of Richmond Vermont, “Zoning Regulations,” 2017.

⁶ Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission, Official Zoning District Map Richmond, Vermont, 2020, 2020.

⁷ Owl’s Head Blueberry Farm, 2022, <https://www.owlsheadfarm.com/>.

⁸ Maple Wind Farm, 2022, <https://maplewindfarm.com/>.

Vermont, and Vermont Housing Conservation Board holding conservation easements on the land, (Vermont Youth Conservation Corps).⁹

Shelburne

Introduction

In many ways, Shelburne's values align with that of Williston. Like Williston, Shelburne is rapidly growing while still rooted in agriculture. Many of these farms have undertaken rural enterprises to increase profit margins as well as engage and bring in more community members and tourists to their farms. Shelburne has many successful examples including Shelburne Farms, New Village Farms, Shelburne Vineyard, and Bread and Butter Farms.

Town Plan and Land Use

Similarly to Williston, the town of Shelburne places a lot of value on conserving its scenic natural areas and preserving its natural and cultural history. They recognize that these natural areas are, "threatened by growth and development pressures." With this in mind, a main tenant of Shelburne's town plan for land use is based on the idea of, "placemaking." This is defined in the town plan as, "the process of creating quality places where people want to live, work, play and learn." Therefore, Shelburne hopes to, "promote the creation of quality places that combine appropriate uses of land." They promote development occurring at smaller scales that fit the general goals of the town. This includes encouraging diverse mixes of land use functions, and social opportunities within these enterprises.¹⁰

The value held on placemaking shows that the town planners and residents both hold a similar vision of the future of the town. It is inferred that the town's plan is in support of expanding rural land use. For Shelburne, this seems to benefit everyone in many ways. Local farms provide healthy, ecologically farmed vegetables, fun events for neighbors, summer camps for local children, and more.

In terms of rural zoning bylaws for the town of Shelburne, their purpose is very comparable to Williston's. They describe it as, "maintain[ing] and enhance[ing] open spaces, and to

⁹ Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, 2022, <https://www.vycc.org/>.

¹⁰ Shelburne Planning Commission, "Shelburne Vermont 2019 Comprehensive Plan," 2018.

protect agricultural lands, soil, water and other scenic and natural resources. Development in this area shall be limited and must be designed to meet these goals.”¹¹ Below is a list of relevant permitted and conditional land uses according to the zoning bylaws:

Permitted uses

- Housing for full time on-site workers
- Residential care homes for no more than 8 residents
- Bed and breakfast with no more than 6 rooms to rent
- Day care homes for 6 or less children
- Farming/dairy/orchards/nurseries/woodlots/forest, Passive, non-commercial
- Outdoor recreation uses such as parks and nature preserves, without structures except Identification and directional signs

Conditional uses

- Mobile Home Parks on lots of no less than 10 acres
- Artist’s studios in agricultural structures existing on March 17, 2009
- Veterinary clinics
- Garden center or nursery
- Daycares with no more than 75 children,
- Outdoor recreation uses with minor structures customarily associated with those uses
- Outdoor recreation uses (not mentioned elsewhere) with major structures customarily associated with such uses including but not limited to golf courses, bridle paths, nature trails, xc-ski trails, ice skating rinks, open athletic fields
- Campgrounds not exceeding 10 spaces, and not providing electronic hookups, and not providing winter storage for recreational vehicles.¹²

Relevant Examples

Shelburne Farms

Shelburne Farms is a great example of a farm that focuses on rural enterprises and community engagement. They are an educational non-profit, specializing in educational

¹¹ “Town of Shelburne Zoning Bylaws,” 2021.

¹² “Town of Shelburne Zoning Bylaws,” 2021.

programming, raising crops and livestock on their farm, and producing farm products to sell. Within Shelburne zoning, Shelburne Farms is considered under the, “Rural Mixed Use Planned Unit Development” district. Alec Webb, President of Shelburne Farms, explains that, “this requires a master land use plan but also provides greater flexibility for the unique mix of land uses we have here that help support the stewardship of our working landscape.” This type of zoning could be an option for farmers in Williston who are looking to do something similar.¹³

Shelburne Vineyard

Shelburne Vineyard is another success story of a farm that stretched their business plan towards “integrated agriculture,” a term that they actually worked with the Planning Commission in Shelburne to define. Gail Albert, who started the vineyard, explained that when the property was first purchased it was not zoned for any kind of commercial use. Their farm resides in the rural zoning district. Being former City planners, Gail and her husband Ken got creative while navigating their ideas with town planners. One helpful idea they had was to form the “VT Grape and Wine Council,” (VGWC) an organization with other small businesses with similar goals to theirs to advocate for their initiatives. This group worked with local legislators and partnered with beer and liquor producers in order to, “educate the legislature about issues that impede our business success added significantly to the tourism dollars that come to the states.” This could be a great way to go for Williston farmers who have goals that align with other farmers, to group together and pave their future as a team. It is important to note the benefits that VGWC brought to the local economy in tourism dollars, which is another important reason that residents and town planners may be in support of expanding land uses.¹⁴

Many other Shelburne farms have navigated similar struggles as farmers in Williston, and many of them are very open to sharing their experiences, trials and tribulations. Bread and Butter Farms have written exceptionally helpful documents which are shared separately in the folder.

South Hero

¹³ Shelburne Farms, 2022, <https://shelburnefarms.org/>.

¹⁴ Shelburne Vineyard, 2022, <https://www.shelburnevineyard.com/>.

Introduction

South Hero is an island in Lake Champlain with many unique features such as broad scenic views of farm fields, the Adirondack Mountains to the west and the Green Mountains to the east, broad wetlands and natural areas. The land of South Hero is primarily used for agriculture, dairying and apple orchards. The island of South Hero is an attractive place for summer and fall tourists.

Town Plan and Land Use

The Town of South Hero takes pride in their rural landscape and in order to maintain this landscape they have created the rural residential district. The purpose of this district is “to maintain the mixed rural and residential character of the area while providing for appropriate other uses” (South Hero Development Regulation , 2020). Furthermore, new residential or non-farm developments are reviewed to ensure minimal interference with continuing agricultural use. On top of that, South Hero has a 30 percent green space requirement for their rural residential district.¹⁵

While trying to maintain their rural landscape, the town also acknowledges that agriculture and agrotourism are an important segment of South Hero’s economy, as farms provide a market for other businesses. South Hero has a number of objectives to achieve this goal, starting with developing activities that support farmers and are attractive to tourists. Also, they support farming and maintain agricultural land to keep the rural landscape of the town and help the local economy.¹⁶

Relevant Examples

Snow Farm Vineyard and Winery

Snow Farm Vineyard and Winery is a farm located on an island in Lake Champlain. Owners Julie and Dave Lane created the farm in the 1990s as a way to keep their retired dairy land as agricultural land. The farm owners have a goal to maintain the working land to avoid having

¹⁵ “Town of South Hero Development Regulations,” 2013.

¹⁶ The South Hero Planning Commission, “South Hero Town Plan,” 2015.

the land be sold for residential or commercial purposes. Their approach to agriculture is a great model for neighboring farms, and farms throughout Vermont, too. For example, beyond growing grapes and creating wine, Snow Farm is home to many events such as a summer concert series, weddings, art workshops, running events, and even birthday parties.¹⁷

Hackett's Orchard

Hackett's Orchard is a family owned orchard that started in 1967. It is located in South Hero, where the land has been producing apples for the past 100 years. Today, the land in which Hackett's Orchard sits is conserved through the South Hero and Vermont Land Trusts. Hackett's Orchard is popular amongst school children and small groups, where they can participate in orchard tours and wagon rides. Additionally, Hackett's is one of the stops for the annual Open Farm and Studio tour that takes place in the summer. Overall, this orchard is a place enjoyed by local residents and people across the country.¹⁸

Health Hero Farm

Health Hero Farm is located in South Hero, on the shore of Lake Champlain. Owners, Bob Firevoid and Joan Falcoa, are organic cattle farmers that have been in business since 2013. Beyond farming, the two welcome campers on their property through what they call a 'farm stay.' They have two campsites perfect for families and small groups, and they offer farm tours, too. Also, Bob and Joan are enthusiastic regarding teaching guests all about raising grassfed beef, animal welfare and regenerative agricultural practices. Health Hero's 180-acre land is conserved by the South Hero and Vermont Land trusts.¹⁹

South Hero Land Trust

The goal of this land trust is to conserve productive agricultural land in the town of South Hero. The South Hero Land Trust has a program, the Farm Viability program, that sponsors educational activities at local and agricultural events, supports an agricultural and natural

¹⁷ Snow Farm Vineyard & Winery, 2022, <https://www.snowfarm.com/>.

¹⁸ Amanda Hackett, Hackett's Orchard, 2022, <https://www.hackettsorchard.com/>.

¹⁹ Health Hero Farm, 2019, <https://healthherofarm.com/>.

resource based curriculum in the South Hero school system, and connects consumers to local farms and agricultural businesses by publishing and distributing the Champlain Island Grown Guide to Agriculture.²⁰

Stowe

Introduction

Stowe, Vermont is a small town in the heart of the Green Mountains of Vermont. Like Williston, Stowe touts their open landscapes and views as a treasured feature to the town. Additionally, there is a booming village and commercial district in the center of town. It's important to note, though, that much of the town's economic success is based on their renowned ski resorts and other opportunities for winter tourism, which is difficult to promote in the relatively flat town of Williston.

Town Plan and Land Use

As a town, Stowe's tourism campaign is arguably the best in Vermont. They have a dedicated tourism website that promotes the well-known ski resorts and natural beauty of the town, as well as lesser-known restaurants, shops, and farms.²¹ The town plan also reflects the importance that Stowe places on their scenic nature, historic farmland, and small-town charm. As stated, "Open farmland remains an important visual, economic and cultural feature of Stowe's landscape." They also understand the benefit that preserving working farmland has to the town as a whole. "The indirect benefits of the working landscape... are highly valued in Stowe. The scenic qualities of Stowe's remaining open spaces enhance tourism, property values and the local quality of life."

Stowe also recognizes the value that farms play in the town's long term success and the challenges of expanding agritourism: "The long-term viability of Stowe's rural, agrarian landscape is dependent upon a dwindling number of farmers. In addition to the economic pressures of an increasingly competitive global market, local farmers are beset by additional difficulties. These include high land costs, the potential for farm-management conflicts with a growing residential population and the difficulty of finding farm labor in

²⁰ South Hero Land Trust, 2022, <https://www.shlt.org/>.

²¹ Stowe Area Association, Go Stowe, 2022, <https://gostowe.com/>.

Stowe's tight labor market." In response, Stowe offers tax benefits to working farms over 1,800 acres.²²

Stowe has a complex system of zoning districts, with up to five Agricultural and Rural Residential Districts, each with minor differences in the minimum size of a single lot. The purposes of these districts, as stated in the zoning regulations, is to "maintain the natural and scenic qualities which create and preserve the best possible environment for residential development" and "promote the preservation of adequate open space through carefully planned cluster types of development," among others. The purpose of these districts read very similarly to Williston's vision for the future. This similarity may offer inspiration for future zoning regulations in Williston, VT.²³

Relevant Examples

Percy Farm

Percy Farm is a dairy farm situated in the center of Stowe, VT. They are part of the Cabot Collective, a group of dairy farmers that sell their milk directly to Cabot Creamery. Unlike other dairy farms, though, Percy Farm has expanded into agritourism as well. In Stowe, they are best known for their corn maze, which operates every fall and draws in a large number of visitors each year. The farm also operates an Airbnb in Stowe whose revenue supports the farm's operations.²⁴

Strawberry Hill Farm

Strawberry Hill Farm is located on 88 acres of both forested and open land in the center of Stowe. They operate a restored event barn that can be rented out for weddings and other events. In addition, they maintain two overnight stay options: a rambling, six-bedroom farmhouse and a smaller, one-bedroom cottage.

The farm also holds a conservation easement with the Stowe Land Trust to maintain and preserve their red pine forest and the hiking/biking trails that run through it. These trails offer another source of engagement with the public, as dozens of people come to the

²² Stowe Planning Commission, "Stowe Town Plan," 2018.

²³ "Town of Stowe Zoning Regulations," 2018.

²⁴ "Our Story," Percy Farm, 2022, <http://www.percyfarm.com/our-story>.

property each day to hike, bike, horseback ride, ski, etc. on their large swath of forested land.²⁵

Strawberry Hill Farm and Percy Farm cooperate to support one another's business. Percy Farm grows hay and grazes some of their cows on Strawberry Hill Farm's land. In return, the cows add to Strawberry Hill's picturesque Vermont landscape, which adds value to their event barn, farmhouse, and cottage. This cooperation can serve as a helpful example of successful agritourism for farmers in Williston.

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