

Supporting Agrotourism and Private Stewardship in Williston, Vermont: A Public Opinion Survey

A Collaboration between the UVM Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources and
Town of Williston

The Town of Williston has had a longstanding goal to protect working lands and open space in the rural parts of town. Williston's Vision Statement in the Comprehensive Plan says the town will:

- *sustain rural landscapes by requiring an open space pattern for subdivisions, conserving lands identified as high priority through acquisitions or easements, and supporting continued stewardship of working lands; and*
- *use regulatory and non-regulatory tools, including funding for the acquisition of development rights or land to protect water quality, wildlife habitat including forest blocks and habitat connectors, scenic views, and other natural and cultural resources.*

The [Comp Plan](#) also states a policy to:

Ensure that the Town Bylaws Permit a Reasonable Range of Uses in Working Landscapes. *The town will periodically review its bylaws to ensure promotion of the development of diverse, innovative agricultural activities, including farm stands; cottage industries like cheese making or other value-added enterprises; farm waste recovery for energy generation; and fee-based recreation, hospitality, and educational activities.*

However, despite the above goal, the [town's regulations](#) still permit only very limited uses in the rural parts of town – primarily low-density residential uses, farming, forestry and outdoor recreation. In Williston and throughout Vermont, traditional farming is becoming increasingly economically unsustainable, and as a result much farmland continues to be lost to development. Retaining farmland will require diversification and/or other measures to ensure economic sustainability. In recent years we have received inquiries from rural landowners (farmers) who wish to have a greater diversity of uses on their land to generate income such as outdoor education, weddings, outdoor theater, festivals, campgrounds, etc. – most of which the bylaw doesn't currently allow.

We would like to explore the idea of expanding uses in the Ag/Rural zoning district, and more specifically, public sentiment about allowing these uses generally lumped under "agrotourism." We are seeking a team of students to develop a survey to distribute online to explore the community's sentiments around this. Some questions we would like information about include:

- What activities/uses would you support? (list the possible uses)
- What part of town do you live in? (rural, suburban, Taft Corners, etc.)
- Would you support these uses if they help to protect open space and working lands?
- What concerns do you have about these activities? (noise, traffic, environmental, other)
- What limits should be placed on the activities? (maximum number of people, special event permit, hours of operation, noise limits, etc.)
- Are agrotourism uses preferable to a housing development?

For the rural landowners/farmers perspective:

- How do you currently use your land?
- Is the use economically viable?
- Are you enrolled in Vermont's Current Use program?
- Do you currently engage in "agrotourism" type activities on your property (list them)?
- Are you considering diversifying, adding other nontraditional or "agrotourism" uses on your property? If so, what?
- What are the current obstacles to diversifying?
- Are you considering any future residential development on your property?
- If so, how many units? (0-5, 5-9, 10-20, 20+)
- Is your property conserved under a Conservation Easement?
- If not, would you consider a Conservation Easement?
- Would you consider a Transfer of Development Rights? (Will need to explain what this is)

This project would be split up into two semesters. During the current semester – Part 1, the students would work with Conservation Planner Melinda Scott and the Conservation Commission to develop a survey and a survey distribution plan. During Part 2, taking place in the summer or fall session, the student team would carry out the distribute of the survey according to plan, collect results and present and summarize the results. We're hoping to get more information about what the townspeople want – from the perspectives of traditional farming landowners and nonfarmers.

An outline of recommended specific tasks is as follows:

Part 1: Develop Survey and Survey Distribution Plan

1. Review background materials including Williston Comprehensive Plan Chapter 13 and Williston Development Bylaw Chapter 31. Work with Melinda to compile a list of active farms and working lands in Williston with landowner names and addresses.
Deliverables: Project proposal, spreadsheet of farms/working lands.
2. Develop survey questions, make a plan for distribution.
Deliverables: Survey questions and survey distribution plan.

Part 2 (future semester): Survey Results

1. Collect survey responses and summarize results.
Deliverables: Raw survey responses and results summarized numerically and graphically.
2. Present survey results and overall findings.
Deliverables: Presentation to Melinda and Conservation Commission relating methods, results and overall conclusions; final report.

Specific skills needed: Ability to use online survey tools (Survey Monkey or similar), ability to frame questions thoughtfully, ability to summarize responses and present in an engaging and easily understandable format.