

ROUTE 7 VISUAL ANALYSIS
FERRISBURGH TO MIDDLEBURY

Northwest Vermont Project STP SPR-1(41)

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Addison County Regional Planning Commission

By
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Historic Perspective of the Route 7 Corridor

The Route 7 corridor of today is heavily influenced by historic patterns of use over past centuries, even predating the beginnings of colonial settlement. Route 7 developed in earliest days as a footpath along the relatively flat and accessible terrain of the Champlain Valley. A route chosen originally for accessibility now provides travelers with the enjoyment of one of Vermont's most scenic road corridors with sweeping vistas to the Green Mountains in the east and the Adirondacks and Lake Champlain in the west.

The lowlands of the Champlain Valley and the soils in Addison County have fostered a long history of agricultural use. Although farming has changed over the centuries with grains, sheep and cows each predominant at different times the open land associated with agriculture has been one of the corridors defining features. Route 7 provided a link between farms, support services and markets.

Route 7 is one of the oldest roadways in the state, having been established as early as the late 1700's and designated as a "highway" by 1791. As development slowly advanced in the Champlain Valley the importance of this rough roadway as a corridor connecting communities and agricultural markets grew.

The advent of the railroad through western Vermont in the 1840's provided a more efficient means of transportation than most roads of that era, however, Route 7 continued as an important corridor and areas such as the New Haven junction, where roads and rail intersected, became even more prominent. The New Haven rail station, still in existence today, is one of the state's oldest and stands as a reminder of the importance of this area in the transportation system for this section of Vermont.

The emergence of automobile traffic began an even steadier increase in the prominence of this corridor as the main north south artery in western Vermont and in 1925 the road was officially designated as U.S. Route 7. The late twentieth century boom in the Burlington metropolitan area and the impact of that growth felt all along the corridor contributed to sharp increases in traffic and development along the road. As an example, traffic counts in New Haven increased from an average of 7000 vehicles per day in 1988 to over 8100 per day in 2003, a 15% increase in 15 years.

Although growth in development and traffic has begun to erode the traditional pattern of villages surrounded by open land, the agricultural heritage of this area together with sweeping views to the mountains on either side of the corridor are still the principal landscape features.

Section Descriptions

The Route 7 corridor from the Charlotte/Ferrisburgh town line to the New Haven/Middlebury town line has distinct variations of both settlement and landscape

Route 7 Visual Analysis

May 4, 2005

Page 2 of 2

patterns. The following descriptions are divided into sections based on those landscape and development patterns.

Section 1. Ferrisburgh/Charlotte Town Line to Lewis Creek (mileage 0.0 to 1.0)

The entrance into North Ferrisburgh village is identifiable by the commercial structures on both sides of the road, in contrast to the more rural landscape to the north. Topography on the east limits views while the west is more open, with distant views to fields and mountains. Conserved land on the west side, at the more northerly end of this section behind the commercial frontage, forms a greenbelt that marks the clear delineation and transition from open lands to village. This clear line is an example of an important Vermont landscape feature— that of villages surrounded by open space – and is an illustration of a technique for preserving this feature.

Development within this section is predominantly older with structures close to the road and multiple curb cuts in close proximity to each other. There is a mixture of residential and commercial uses within this area.

At the southern end of this section the road dips down to Lewis Creek and its floodplain, creating a definable boundary to the North Ferrisburgh village. The Creek is an example of a natural feature that intersects the road and forms another greenbelt that clearly delineates a visual transition. Land on the north side of the creek has been conserved and this protects not only the natural resources of the waterway but also the scenic values.

Section 2. Lewis Creek to Ferrisburgh Artisans' Guild (mileage 1.0 to 1.7)

South of Lewis Creek the road rises with higher banks on both sides providing a sense of enclosure. At the crest of the hill views open up with scattered houses, the Dakins commercial site, open fields and woods. These have less visual impact because of their settings among areas of vegetation. Views begin to open up to the west providing glimpses of mountains in the distance. Houses are generally sited to provide less obstruction to these views. The Ferrisburgh Artisans Guild is an example of a complex of older structures adapted to commercial uses. Their visual interest and setting within the site reduce their impact on the rural surroundings, even with the increased usage as commercial ventures.

The overall pattern of development and glimpses of distant views to the west make this section a transition from the more densely settled village area to the north and the more clearly rural area to the south.

Section 3. Ferrisburgh Artisans' Guild to Ferrisburgh Fire Station (mileage 1.7 to 3.4)

South of the Artisans' Guild the landscape becomes noticeably more rural with an orchard and then farm fields on the west side of the road with broad sweeping views to the Adirondacks. The prominence of the western views and the east side's heavier

vegetation and topography make the eastern views of minor visual interest. This section is important as the greenbelt separating Ferrisburgh and North Ferrisburgh. If future development within this area is not carefully placed and screened that separation will be eroded by a sprawl of scattered development.

Section 4. Ferrisburgh Fire Station to Commercial Buildings (Irvins Tack Shop and Mid-State Sports) (mileage 3.4 to 4.8)

This section includes Ferrisburgh village. The Ferrisburgh fire station acts as a distinct transition point to the beginning of the village. At the northern end the pattern is of newer homes with large road setbacks and frontages. On the east side of the road a conserved farm creates a boundary beyond which a clear village pattern begins. Moving south, the pattern of older houses set close to the road and the addition of public structures define the core of the village. South of the Middlebrook Road/Little Chicago Road intersection uses become predominantly commercial. Route 7 crosses Little Otter Creek on the south end of the village, providing a natural boundary to the village, however that line is blurred on the west side by development south of the creek.

Section 5. Commercial Buildings to Monkton Road Intersection (mileage 4.8 to 6.7)

This section is far less distinct as a unit than those to the north and illustrates the potential impacts of scattered development along the road corridor. Views are more open to the west but the foreground views of overgrown pasture contribute to the lack of distinct pattern and diminished scenic qualities. Houses and some commercial use are scattered along the eastern frontage.

Route 7's intersections with Route 22-A and the Monkton Road are two major features in this section and development patterns around those will continue to shape the visual character of this area. The northwestern quadrant of the Route 22-A intersection is planned as a park and ride center, with potential for some industrial growth, although the Route 7 frontage is conserved and will remain open. Topography will limit development on the southwestern quadrant but the eastern side of the road could be vulnerable to development that would impact both the visual openness and the traffic safety of this heavily traveled intersection.

South of the 22-A intersection open land along the road creates a green visual buffer to background views of the City of Vergennes. This buffer is an important feature as a visual frame for the prominence of the Vergennes views.

Section #6. Monkton Road Intersection to Woodman Hill (mileage 6.7 to 7.4)

Although commercial development already dominates the northern half of the Monkton Road intersection the southern half remains open and there are sweeping views across open fields to Woodman Hill in the middleground, with mountains beyond. This sharp transition between rural and developed lands is an important visual feature and should be

maintained through careful siting of future development or conservation of the most significant pieces. This division is especially apparent looking north from Woodman Hill when the open meadows along both sides of Route 7 are viewed as another area of green buffer between Route 7 and the City of Vergennes.

Section #7. Woodman Hill to South Middlebrook Road (mileage 7.4 to 8.5)

In this section steeper topography and wooded areas adjacent to the road create a sense of enclosure. Views are restricted and scattered development is less of a visual impact because of this setting. This section is not of high visual significance on its own, but is an important contributing feature to the scenic qualities of the next section.

Section #8. South Middlebrook Road to Lime Kiln Road (mileage 8.5 to 10.6)

Views along this stretch of Route 7 are among the most visually prominent in the study area. As the topography and vegetation close to the road ends, views become sweeping and highly scenic. This transition from enclosure to openness heightens the sense of scenic expanse and is a notable landscape feature.

The openness along this stretch is one of its most prominent features and is a major factor in its scenic qualities. Although there are some clusters of homes and commercial buildings, their small scale in relation to the vast views lessens their impact. Although this is the case now, continued development along the Route 7 frontage in this section would adversely affect the scenic qualities. Care should be taken to ensure that commercial uses remain small scale and clustered within the existing commercial areas and that development does not spread along the road frontage.

At the southern end of this section is a view of particular note. As the road dips and rises there is a broad view to the east of well tended farm fields in the foreground, with a middleground view of house, barn and silo backdropped by the Green Mountains. This view is an example of a landscape feature that is significant because it is so representative of Vermont's scenic landscape and agricultural heritage.

Section #9. Lime Kiln Road to Route 7 and 17 Junction (mileage 10.6 to 11.4)

From the crest of the hill at Lime Kiln Road Route 7 dips down to the junction of two major roads. This area represents another settlement pattern along Route 7, different from the two linear villages in Ferrisburgh, and is instead a settlement based more on being a hub for transportation modes and their associated uses. Commercial uses in this area seem to fit in better because topography serves as a backdrop and buffer and because the uses are compatible with their surroundings – the former OMYA plant seems logically sited at the junction of road and rail, therefore is less obtrusive because of that fit.

Section #10. Route 7 and 17 Junction to New Haven Power Equipment Building (mileage 11.4 to 13.8)

South of the junction scenery again becomes rural with scattered houses interspersed among fields and woods. Route 7 rises to two plateaus and crests in an area near Rolands Restaurant. In this section of the road views are to the east and become more striking as the road rises.

South of Town Hill Road a series of lots run from the road to a large wetland complex to the east. The predominant feature in this section is the broad view to Bristol Notch and the Green Mountains beyond. The road's elevation above the surrounding fields and wetlands has a positive impact on the scenic quality of this area. The barn at the junction of Route 7 and Town Hill Road and the houses on the east side are sited below the line of vision from the road, leaving views relatively unobstructed. Other houses in this area are set among trees and hedgerows or at field edges, all examples of siting that retains scenic resources.

Section #11. New Haven Power Equipment Building to Maplefields (mileage 13.8 to 14.9)

A cluster of houses on the east and the New Haven Power Equipment building on the west signals the transition from a rural area into a commercial zone. In contrast to the older settlement areas to the north, however, this commercial area exhibits more of the characteristics of sprawl. Buildings are more spread out and do not relate to each other, there are multiple curb cuts and very little landscaping or screening. However, within this area are examples of ways to minimize the visual impact of scattered development. The Green Haven Nursery is heavily screened with plantings and the buildings have features related to the agricultural structures of surrounding areas. The New Haven Power Equipment facility is an example of reusing an agricultural structure for a new commercial use. Although this can help the building fit better into its surroundings, the profusion of power equipment in the front yard area is a visual impact in this instance.

There is still open space within this commercial district and the pattern of future development will determine the eventual impact on this area. Keys to successful future development will be to cluster structures or set them against natural features and mature vegetation so that open vistas remain and to reduce the impact of multiple curb cuts and parking areas. Structures can be designed with features that relate to the surrounding older residential and agricultural structures. Landscaping should be related to the rural patterns of hedgerows and clumps of indigenous species, rather than introducing the more formal pattern and species common to a suburban landscape.

Section #12. Maplefields to River Road (mileage 14.9 to 16.4)

The Maplefields facility marks the end of the commercial area and south of it the land dips down to the New Haven River. The New Haven Reformed Church, on the east side of the road, is out of the line of vision when heading south but is far more visible heading north. Because its design relates to traditional church architecture and the topography hides its parking area the overall visual impact is positive. Views are predominantly to the east in this section and the Green Mountains seem in much closer proximity to the road, making them a dominant feature. The landscape pattern is of fields, hedgerows and woods, so that the scattered houses among those landscape features are of lesser impact. This mix of field edges, hedgerows and woods provide places where new development can be sited to keep fields open and reduce visual impacts.

Section #13. River Road to Middlebury Town Line (mileage 16.4 to ???)

South of River Road the frequency of commercial development increases, signaling an approach to Middlebury. The New Haven Highway Storage facility represents a common commercial use along road corridors. Some of the site's features illustrate ways to reduce the visual impact of large storage facilities. The building is set back from the road and at a lower elevation so that it does not dominate the line of sight. Instead of contrasting colors for siding and doors, using the same color reduces the disjointed look of most storage facilities. As clumps of plantings mature they will help break up the visual impact of the large expanse of wall. Lighting that is downcast and shielded also helps reduce the visual impact of the facility.

Visual Character and Changes

The Route 7 corridor in northern Addison County is a landscape in transition, yet it retains many of the visual characteristics of the traditional Vermont landscape. This rural pattern of small settlements and a patchwork of fields and woods, intersected by riparian corridors, is important as a visual link to Vermont's more agrarian past and as a setting from which the stunning views of the Green and Adirondack Mountains can be viewed.

In addition to the aesthetic appeal of the landscape is its importance to the economy of the region, for tourists and for residents. This pattern also directly impacts the safety and function of Route 7 by clustering curb cuts and traffic within relatively compact areas separated by longer stretches of open roadway.

Route 7 is no different from most modern corridors in that the proliferation of scattered development is the most significant change to the historic landscape patterns. This change means that village edges become less distinct as development spreads along the road. Both the conversion of existing structures to more intensive commercial use, without carefully integrating the parking, signage and lighting that comes with the new use, and new structures that spring up along the road, without architectural or landscape relationship to their surroundings, contribute to the erosion of clear village edges.

Route 7 Visual Analysis

May 4, 2005

Page 7 of 7

In addition to the impact of sprawling commercial growth is the proliferation of scattered residential structures. Houses are often built in open fields with little or no landscaping to screen them from view of the road. Large lot development with curb cuts and drives for each traverse fields and impacts both views and the continued agricultural use of those fields.

The decline of farms in this section of Addison County, as in much of Vermont, also causes a profound change to the landscape pattern, even before structures are built in those once open areas. As fields become overgrown the line between field and woodland becomes less distinct. The early succession plants of saplings and scrub/shrub have far less visual interest than the more mature woodlands. Sweeping views, one of the defining characteristics of this section of Route 7, will become reduced in places as open vistas revegetate.

Retaining Visual Character

The striking visual characteristics of the Route 7 corridor in northern Addison County are vulnerable, but there are numerous ways in which development can be accommodated without adversely affecting the landscape. Examples of development that has minimal impact on visual resources do exist within the study area and can be the basis for ideas to guide future growth.

The mixed pattern of field, woodlands and hedgerow in many parts of the corridor provides opportunities to site new structures on field edge or in wooded areas so that open vistas can remain. There are many areas where existing vegetation along the road can serve as backdrops to development, softening the views of these structures and reducing their perceived size. In areas where development in open fields has already occurred the patterns of existing vegetation can be replicated to blend structures into the surrounding landscape.

Topography can also provide a screen and a backdrop to development to minimize impact to scenic views. In several places along the corridor the road drops down so that new structures can be built below the line of sight to distant views. New development can also be sited behind the natural contours of the landscape, protecting both views from the road and the impact of the road on residential uses.

Design of new structures and converted structures is important in retaining the visual characteristics of the area. Several examples of conversion exist in the corridor where older residential or agricultural structures have been adapted to new uses. New structures have also used design features of older buildings to create a more compatible look.

There are areas along the corridor of such visual significance that conservation is the most appropriate tool for retaining scenic character. Large open vistas that draw the eye

to prominent distant features can be preserved through conservation. One such example is the view across from Roland's Restaurant in New Haven (section #10) where land was conserved to prevent additional houses close to the road which would diminish the view.

The open space at the edge of villages can be important for conservation as a means to retain the clear visual break between open lands and developed areas. The conserved farm on the east side of Route 7 in Ferrisburgh (section #4) serves this function of creating a green edge to the village. The conserved farmland at the north end of North Ferrisburgh village (section #1) is another such example.

Water courses cross Route 7 in several locations and these are areas of importance for visual and natural resource values. In areas such as the southern end of North Ferrisburgh village (section #1) watercourses form a distinct landscape boundary marking transition from developed to open areas. Conservation of riparian corridors would have the advantage of retaining those transition areas and the natural resources of the river.

Summary

The Route 7 corridor in northern Addison County has some of the most striking views and vistas along this road. This area is also among the most vulnerable to the pressures of growth in Middlebury and Burlington. As growth inevitably spreads along the corridor careful siting of new structures, retention of open fields, enhancement of villages and other settlement areas, and conservation of the most important parcels will be essential if the visual qualities of the corridor are retained. Understanding the components of the landscape along the road will be an important first step in working toward those objectives.