

THE 5 TOWN ACTION INITIATIVE

Preserving the Character and Vitality of the Villages of Chesterfield, Conway, Goshen, and Williamsburg

University of Massachusetts Extension and the Trustees of Reservations' Highland Communities Initiative

Introduction: Why care about villages?

Villages are the physical heart and soul of a community, and are the product of centuries of growth, change, and community interaction. They may contain any number of important structures, from historic homes, civic buildings like churches, grange halls, and senior centers, as well as important functional buildings like the post office, town hall, library, and general store. In rural towns where houses are often spread out over great distances, the village serves as the community gathering spot that provides opportunities for social interaction and gives a community its unique identity. As communities grow in the future, vibrant village centers can also expand to absorb new development, thus relieving some growth pressures from outlying farms, working forests, and other large parcels.



New England is known for its scenic village centers, and Chesterfield, Conway, Goshen, and Williamsburg are each fortunate to have at least one identifiable and functional village. These villages grew over the course of many decades according to community and business needs and the opportunities and constraints offered by the land. Villages were often located at a historic crossroads, a prime riverside location, or another physically distinct and strategic area. Historically, buildings in a village were built relatively close together due to limited transportation options and a desire to create a close-knit community.



This compact pattern allowed residents to walk to their jobs, shopping, town halls, and churches, and created a cohesive neighborhood. Buildings in villages were also often built along a consistent line along the street, which provided an appealing sense of visual order to the street and village.

The Threat

Though it may not be apparent or imminent, the unique characteristics and features of the 4 towns' villages are at risk in the long term. Ironically, zoning, the very thing that can protect and enhance the villages, could cause their eventual decline.

A town's zoning bylaws can be the blueprint for the future, laying out the requirements and standards for all new development and setting the stage for a community's future. Zoning evolved to prevent undesirable uses of land, and to avoid problematic conflicts

between uses. As a result, zoning typically regulates what people can't do with their land, rather than articulating and encouraging what the community does want. The desirable uses of land that communities can agree on are usually the most traditional uses in rural areas-- single-family homes, farms, and forestry businesses. The resulting zoning typically focuses on regulating the density and locations of residential housing, thus grandfathering all existing uses and buildings and ignoring the future of the villages.

If one were to rebuild the villages according to the existing zoning, the result would be unrecognizable from the villages that stand today. Without zoning regulations that recognize the villages as distinct places separate from surrounding residential, agricultural, and forested areas, new buildings and businesses will eventually undermine the cohesive historical character of the villages just by following the laws that the community has laid out for itself.

A Planned Incremental Approach

To lessen the likelihood of this unwanted change from happening, new village zoning bylaws are necessary. We recognize that doing so might be beyond the political will and planning capacity of the four towns at this time. In response, the goal of this project is to offer helpful strategies in the form of smaller, incremental changes to zoning that can help perpetuate the existing village development pattern and encourage a more vibrant town center.

In reality, the density of villages is often dictated by drinking water needs and wastewater treatment regulations that protect public health. The technology of wastewater disposal is changing rapidly, and when the regulations catch up to the advances in science, the development potential in the four towns may increase significantly. This report also contains an overview of alternative systems that have the potential to increase density in villages, or better serve the wastewater needs of existing buildings.

Note: Many of the following suggestions emphasize a pedestrian oriented village, which is an assumption that should be tested in each community. Traditional rural villages were by definition pedestrian-oriented, though their carpaths and roads also functioned well for cars and trucks. Suburban-style zoning shifts the focus of new development to the car, giving parking and wide roads primary consideration. Strip-mall style development is the result, and there are no shortages of car-dominated commercial developments in neighboring towns. Compare them to the compact, walkable villages that contain sidewalks, trees, flower beds between the road and sidewalk, and the difference between suburban and village developments is clear. The choice between the two is up to the community.



VILLAGE ZONING CONSIDERATIONS

I. LOT SIZE

Implications and concerns

There is a major discrepancy between the lot sizes that currently exist in villages and what is required for new development. Requiring larger lots is a common strategy of towns to reduce the amount of new housing built, and to disperse it throughout the town. This may be the desired result for more suburban residential areas, but is the antithetical to creating and maintaining village centers. The average existing lot size is between .25 and 1 acre, which is part of what sets the village apart from the rest of town and gives it a distinctive feel, but in two of the towns the largest allowable lot size is 2 acres. Uniform large lot zoning may force large separations between buildings, thus making the village much less appealing to pedestrians.

Recommendations

Smaller village lots are consistent with existing village areas, promote compact, walkable areas, and use land efficiently. Consider reducing the minimum lot size to less than .5 in the village districts, and letting Title V requirements dictate needs for well and wastewater disposal locations.

CURRENT LOT SIZE REQUIREMENTS

Chesterfield	2 acres
Conway	1 acre
Goshen	2 acres
Williamsburg	1.5 acres



Large lot zoning forces buildings much further apart and prevents village style developments from being built.



Smaller lots with a variety of building uses are what makes villages distinct from the rest of town.

2. FRONTAGE

Implications and concerns

Frontage is the length of a parcel of land measured along a road, and is often one of the key requirements for determining if a lot is buildable. Large frontage requirements have similar effects as excessive lot size requirements-- it forces buildings to be far apart from each other, thus reducing the density and walkability of a village and wasting land. Frontage requirements were often designed to force buildings apart as a fire protection method, which is no longer necessary given the advances in fire retardant building materials and sprinkler systems.

Recommendations

Examine and measure the existing frontage distances in villages that serve both businesses and people. The shorter the distances between buildings, the more apt people are to walk, which is an attractive feature for businesses that might benefit from foot traffic. Consider the differences between village areas and purely residential areas in creating frontage requirements, and write regulations that reflect the areas that function well as villages and community centers.



Buildings on small lots with less frontage are part of what makes the village distinctive.

Requiring excessive frontage spreads new development out, but is inconsistent with the characteristics of a village.



CURRENT FRONTAGE REQUIREMENTS

Chesterfield	200 ft
Conway	200 ft
Goshen	200 ft
Williamsburg	200 ft

3. FRONT SETBACKS

Implications and concerns

Setback requirements are some of the most influential dimensional requirements in creating a consistent and uniform line of buildings along a street. Buildings that are in a fairly consistent line, within 10 to 25 ft. of the street, demarcate the village from residential areas, slow car traffic, and make buildings more accessible to foot traffic. Setback requirements over 25 ft. will most likely force new buildings further back than existing buildings, and will thus disrupt the consistent, traditional pattern. Excessive minimum setbacks force new buildings much further back from the sidewalk and street, which detracts from the perspective from the street and creates a much more suburban environment with large front yards.

Recommendations

Reduce setback requirements to the line that existing buildings are currently located on, and consider a maximum setback limitation to require new buildings to support and enhance a consistent pattern.

CURRENT FRONT SETBACK REQUIREMENTS

Chesterfield	50 ft
Conway	50 ft
Goshen	30 ft
Williamsburg	40 ft



An excessive setback requirement forced the newer building on the right to be located much farther back from the street, thus breaking the consistent line of buildings facing the street.



Note the difference in setbacks between these two houses, and how differently each frame the street.



A consistent line of buildings close to the street encourages pedestrian traffic and slows vehicular traffic.

4. SIDE SETBACKS

Implications and concerns

Side setbacks force buildings into the center of their lots, and were encouraged when spreading fire was a more pressing threat. Expanding side setbacks was also seen in past eras as a means of increasing light and air where there was densely packed multi-family housing. Today, however, side setback requirements keep buildings from being situated next to each other. If a compact, walkable village is a goal, excessive setback requirements will prevent this building arrangement.

Recommendations

Reduce setback requirements to 5-10 feet for detached housing and 0 for attached housing, and examine new buildings on a case by case basis based on their use.



Side setback requirements no longer serve a public purpose and prohibit traditional village style development.

CURRENT SIDE SETBACK REQUIREMENTS

Chesterfield	20 ft
Conway	25 ft
Goshen	10 ft
Williamsburg	15 ft

5. MAXIMUM LOT COVERAGE

Implications and concerns

Maximum lot coverage requirements dictate how much of a lot can be built upon. In traditional rural environments, multiple buildings per lot were common and necessary. Limiting lot coverage and the number of primary structures per lot encourages the suburban model of one house with an attached garage. Lot coverage requirements force builders to waste land for no clear benefit.

Recommendations

Raise maximum lot coverage in village areas to 75-90%.



This building is taking up almost its entire lot to no detriment to the town's character.

CURRENT MAX LOT COVERAGE REQUIREMENTS

Chesterfield	20% including accessory buildings
Conway	---
Goshen	1 structure/lot
Williamsburg	50%

6. PARKING

Implications and concerns

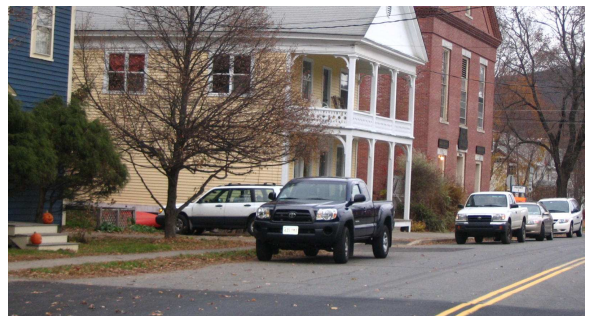
While necessary for modern businesses, parking requirements are generally excessive and can create pressure to raze buildings to construct required parking lots. On-street parking, on the other hand, slows vehicular traffic and creates a buffer between the street and sidewalk. If the town feels compelled to require businesses and new buildings to provide parking, the best way to preserve the village character is to allow flexibility in how those requirements are met. Shared parking lots that are used by a variety of businesses and civic buildings may be the most practical solution. Similarly, staggered parking takes advantage of the different times that buildings utilize parking spaces. For instance, a bank, a small apartment building, and a church all use parking spaces at varying times of the day and week, and one lot can provide ample parking for all three uses.

Recommendations

Consider the use of the proposed building, rather than a blanket parking space requirement. Look for opportunities to share parking, especially in buildings that have staggered schedules, such as a church and a store. If the town requires parking, insist that its location is on the side or back of the building rather than the front. Chain stores and gas stations prefer to offer abundant parking close to the street, which significantly detracts from the traditional village character. By moving the parking to the building's side or rear, the same amount of parking can be provided, but the building can face the street and maintain the village's visual consistency.



Where a building once stood, a parking lot now greets potential shoppers.



On street parking and curb extensions (below) help protect pedestrians and make walking more appealing.



CURRENT PARKING REQUIREMENTS

Chesterfield	1 space/250 sq ft
Conway	---
Goshen	---
Williamsburg	---

Summary

Many current zoning bylaws do not take into account the pre-existing character of rural communities or their village centers. They may regulate and disperse new residential development but they rarely allow for much flexibility. The villages of the Highlands are fortunately still intact, but as stores, gas stations, restaurants and other businesses expand or open, particularly franchise operations with a standard development module and a reliance on excess parking, they will be required to alter the traditional patterns and character that make the villages distinct. To avoid these situations, changes to the existing zoning are necessary. Start by appreciating what is currently in place, and determining how it is different from current regulations. Respecting the past will help new buildings preserve what makes each and every village distinctive and unique.

The appendices offer some examples of village style zoning for small towns, each with differing approaches and strengths and weaknesses. The most important thing, however, is to take stock of what works and what doesn't work in your village, and make your bylaw reflect the changes that that the town wants to see while preserving what the community needs and values.



This building offers an appropriate amount of onsite parking, but also caters to pedestrians with a porch, displays, and sidewalks.