

CVRPC Northwest Growth Study and Buildout Analysis: Moretown, VT

I. Purpose:

This analysis is intended to provide a general overview of Moretown's growth and development issues in the context of its existing Plan, its land use bylaws, and CVRPC's development potential analysis. The latter was prepared in consultation with the Moretown Planning Commission using GIS technology. It attempts to identify the location and intensity of future growth based upon current zoning densities, physical restrictions, and available infrastructure. It is not intended to suggest or predict the exact sites of future homes or businesses.

This analysis is part of a broader program being undertaken by five regional planning commissions (Central Vermont, Chittenden, Addison, Lamoille and Northwest) to examine the wider impacts of growth in Chittenden County and the evolving land use and commuting patterns such growth may engender.

The report that follows is not intended to be an in-depth critique of Moretown's land use regulations or planning policies, but rather a broad-brush look at current trends, existing controls, and future land use scenarios and options.

II. General Description/Current Land Use:

Moretown is a predominantly rural community of just over 1,700 people located primarily in the Mad River and Winooski Valleys. Currently, Moretown is about heavily forested but contains some open land as well. Its northern border is defined by the Winooski River. The northern end of the Northfield Mountain Range dominates the geography of the Eastern half of the Town. Elevations range from a few hundred feet along the Winooski to over 2,500 feet on the Peak of Bald Mountain. The two main highway within the community parallel the rivers - with Vermont Route 2 running along the Winooski (southeast to northwest) and Route 100B following the course of the Mad (south to north). While Moretown Village is the social and cultural center for the Town, the northwest corner of Moretown, near the intersection of Routes 2 and 100, has a closer association with Waterbury and Duxbury and some locales in the northern and extreme eastern portions of Town may relate more to Middlesex or Berlin.

Moretown is easily accessible from I-89 (via either exit 9 for North Moretown or 10 for the Mad River Valley). As such, it is conveniently located to job centers in Chittenden County, Waterbury and the Barre-Monpelier area).

The current land use breakdown (by percentages) for Moretown's 25,304 acres is as follows:

Forest Land - 87 % of total land
Agriculture and Open Land – 8 % total
Scrub/brush – 1% total
Residential/Other Developed Land – 3% total
Water and Wetland – 1% total

III. Trends/Growth:

Moretown's location is conducive to growth and change. Its accessibility to major employment, cultural, recreational, and tourism centers (i.e., Montpelier, Burlington, Stowe and the Mad River Valley) and still largely rural nature make it a highly desirable location for homes and businesses. Consequently, Moretown is witnessing some dynamic changes.

As of 2005, Moretown comprised 5% of the land area of the Central Vermont Region, and hosted 2.6 % of its population, 2.6% of its housing supply, and 1.2 % of its jobs. Its population density (42 persons/square mile) is considerably below the County average (84 persons/square mile). While it does host some local economic activity (and employment within Town is on the rise), Moretown is essentially, and increasingly, a "bedroom community".

Population figures for Moretown show a significant increase during the past decade and forecasts predict continued growth. The Town's population grew by 16.8% in the 1990's (as compared to 5.7% for Washington County. According to Vermont Department of Health estimates Moretown had added another 56 residents by 2005. According to CVRPC estimates, by 2020, nearly 600 people will be added to its rolls (for a total of 2,301). Moretown's population growth, which was heavily influenced by natural increase in previous decades, now owes more to in-migration (68% of total growth). According to the Town Plan, this trend is expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

Moretown is, not surprisingly, experiencing rapid residential growth as well. In fact, it is projected to be one of the fastest growing municipalities in the Region over the next 20 years in that regard. A total of 373 new housing units are expected between 2000 and 2020 (for a total of 1,023 or 57% growth). According to the Town Plan, by far the greatest increase in residential units has been in the R2 category (single family dwellings on more than six acres) – most of this in the Mad River Watershed in close proximity to routes 100 and 100B. Despite the Plan's support for "a diversity of housing types", no multi-family housing has been developed in Moretown in the past decade."

While, historically Moretown has been one of the Region's more affordable communities with respect to housing, this may be changing as well. Moretown's increasing affluence, desirability as a bedroom community, and proximity to the resort housing market may be having an effect on its housing market. According to the 2000 Census median housing value in Moretown ranked somewhat above that of Washington County (\$120,900 vs. \$105,200). Similarly, rents in

Moretown were slightly higher than average. By 2005, the average price of a single family home in Moretown was \$224,357, a price exceeding the County average by almost 20%. While it should be noted that “home price” includes only those homes sold in a given year, the startling difference in both raw numbers and comparison figures between 2000 and 2005 is noteworthy and would appear to suggest a dramatic increase in housing prices is occurring in Moretown.

While the above statistics demonstrate Moretown’s evolution as a “bedroom” community, the Town is also evolving as a job center. Unlike many central Vermont communities, Moretown’s recent residential development has been accompanied by robust economic development. While Moretown is not a major employment center, there are a considerable (and growing) number of jobs in Town. As of 2005, 49 employers in Town provided 401 jobs. The latter figure represents an employment growth rate of 73% percent since 1990. Less than 18% of Moretown’s workforce of 925 (2000 Census) are employed within the municipality. The rest commute to an array of destinations, primarily to the “core” area of the Region (i.e., Waterbury, Barre, Montpelier and Berlin) but increasingly, to Chittenden County, as well. In fact, the percentage of Moretown residents traveling to Chittenden County for work doubled (9% to 18%) between 1990 and 2000. Not surprisingly, commuting times and distances for Moretown’s workforce are above Regional and State averages and have been on a steady incline for several decades.

These commuting patterns may reflect in the fact that Moretown’s population is wealthier and better educated now than at any time in its history and more so than most communities in the State. Its median family income (2004) of \$56,245 is somewhat higher than Washington County and State of Vermont figures. Approximately 33% of its population 18 years of age or older hold a bachelors or advance degree, exceeding County (29%) and State (21%) educational achievement rates.

Land Use and Land Use Policy:

It is Moretown’s expressed desire “*to protect the historic pattern of development with its traditional Vermont Village surrounded by countryside.*” However, the Town Plan (2003) acknowledges that “*current land use trends, especially scattered residential development, may undermine (land use goals) and diminish the Town’s rural character and working landscape.*” The Plan also laments that, relative to neighboring towns, Moretown has “*very little protected open space and/or public land.*”

While Moretown’s landscape still generally reflects the historic settlement patterns, the Plan acknowledges that the town is experiencing rapid and scattered residential growth. Causative factors include “*a unique location adjacent to the State’s major transportation corridor, an attractive landscape with an abundance of natural and cultural resources, and a reputation for good schools*”, according to the Town Plan. The Plan further opines that “*Moretown’s housing market appears to be influenced by the same general trends affecting housing demand in the western portion of Washington County, in addition to the tourism/second home development pressures in the Mad River Valley*”.

According to its Plan, Moretown has no true “town center”, but several neighborhoods or communities; “*To further understand existing land use and development patterns in Moretown it is useful to look at the distinct neighborhoods defined by historic settlement patterns and the mountains and river valley*”. Each area, as described below, has its own set of land use issues.

- **Moretown Village** – sewage disposal is a limiting factor for new development.
- **Mad River Valley** (outside of Village) - Most of the houses built in the last few years have been in the Mad River Valley along the 100B corridor and near Moretown Common and South Hill.
- **Moretown Mountain Road** (Northfield) – Most development occurs within 500 feet of either side of the main road. The area east of Moretown Gap has experienced a much slower rate of growth than the rest of the Town.
- **Jones Brook/ River Road** (Montpelier) – Because of high costs associated with providing services the Plan suggests that the Town may wish to limit future development here.
- **North Moretown** (Cobb Hill/Route 2 Corridor including Route 2/100 Intersection) – A mixed use area. Land surrounding intersection is in transition, and trending towards auto oriented commercial and industrial uses. East of landfill to the Middlesex bridge, Route 2 is characterized by low density development, and is mostly rural.

Other land use recommendations in the Moretown Town Plan include:

- Prohibiting development on slopes over 25%.
- Developing subdivision regulations.
- Allowing only compatible rural uses in the preserve and agricultural-residential districts (i.e., farming, forestry, mining, quarrying) (**Note: It is assumed that the authors meant to include residential uses. If not, this would be a dramatic change, removing from development areas where most new residential growth is occurring!**)
- Considering “*uplands overlay and Mad River corridor overly zones*” to “*ensure development doesn’t harm historic and scenic character*” (Route 100 Corridor 300 feet east and west of 100 year floodplain)
- Discouraging “*the extension of existing town roads to accommodate new residential development and shall not take over new or existing private roads.*”

The Plan contains several policies intended to control the rate of future growth. These include:

- “*Over next 10 years the annual rate of population growth should average 1.4 to 1.8% (23-30 new residents)*”
- “*Accommodate, through land use and community facilities goals and policies, a level of development over the next 10 years that does not exceed a 2.0% average annual rate of increase in the number of households (average 13 new units/year.)*”
- “*Avoid a level of growth in housing that exceeds an annual rate in excess of 2.5% for more than 3 consecutive years (16 households annually).*”

Zoning:

Moretown's recently updated zoning bylaw generally reflects, but does not mirror precisely, the neighborhoods described above. The Bylaw establishes the following districts:

Village District: One half acre minimum lot size. The purpose of this district is to “*encourage a concentration of residential, commercial and civic activities within and immediately adjacent to the Moretown Village in a manner that respects the Village’s small scale, historic character and residential uses.*”

Commercial District: One acre minimum lot size. The Route 2 corridor represents the commercial and industrial sector of town. The purpose of the district is to allow for the location and expansion of commercial uses in appropriate locations in a manner that is compatible with residential uses and the Town’s rural character.

Agricultural/Residential District: One acre minimum lot size. A significant portion of the Town lies within this zoning district. Most of the building permit activity for the past decade has occurred in this district. This district is intended to provide for medium density residential development and to permit the continuance of agricultural operations. Its overall goal is “*to encourage clustered housing units, to preserve open space, and preserve the significant resources of the District.*”

Preserve District: Five acre minimum lot size. The purpose of this district is to protect significant forest resources and water supply watersheds and to limit development in areas with steep slopes, shallow soils, unique or fragile resources, and poor access to town roads and community facilities and services. It is the Town’s goal for this District “*to remain largely undeveloped.*”

V. Development Potential (GIS Analysis):

CVRPC’s GIS Department conducted a spatial analysis of Moretown’s development potential using existing zoning districts, physical infrastructure and development constraints (in various combinations) as a basis for assigning future growth potential ratings and building points to lands within the Town under different scenarios. Development constraints/factors considered (in varying degrees) included: slope, flood hazard, wetlands, deeryards, prime agricultural soils, septic suitability (soils), sewer and water service territories and stream buffers.

Map 1 depicts the model’s assessment of Moretown’s capacity to accommodate development. At the request of the Town, only areas within one quarter mile of Class 3 and under highways were considered. Land areas are divided into one of five categories, including: **Built Area, Low Potential, Moderate Potential, High Potential**, and areas with either prohibitive constraints or occurring outside of the study area, labeled “**None**”. These distinctions are not intended to suggest specific densities, only relative suitability for development. **Maps 2** displays a distribution of potential new residential building points under current zoning and parcel configurations with the above development constraints factored into the model. **Appendix B** consists of the numerical data tables for the maps.

CVRPC's analysis presents some interesting findings. Among these are:

- According to the land capability portion of the analysis, the Town's land area breaks down as follows:
 - **Built** – 661 acres (2.6% total)
 - **None/Not Considered** – 18,768 acres (73% total);
 - **Low** – 1,759 acres (6.9% total);
 - **Moderate** – 1,709 acres (6.7% total), and
 - **High** – 2,791 acres (10.9% total).

- The current breakdown for residential units occurring in Moretown various zoning districts is as follows:
 - **Agricultural/RR** – 450 units (66% total)
 - **Commercial** - 141 units (21%)
 - **Preserve** – 56 units (8%)
 - **Village** – 37 units (5%)

 - **684 Total Units**

- The Buildout model, with constraints factored in, projects future units as follows:
 - **Agricultural/RR** – 3,714 units (95% total)
 - **Commercial** – 153 units (4%)
 - **Preserve** – 45 units (1%)
 - **Village** – 0 units (0%)

 - **3,912 Total Potential New Units**

- The model projects **6,000 new residential units** without constraints being factored.

VI. Issues/Conclusions/Considerations:

Moretown appears to have significant remaining development potential. Even with the removal of nearly three quarters of its land area from consideration under this study, over 4,500 acres within Town boundaries has been rated as having either “High” or “Medium” development potential. Furthermore, under current zoning, CVRPC's GIS analysis estimates that almost 4,000 new residential units could be built, even with the identified constraints and the survey's limited scope.

While such growth may not happen for many decades – if at all - it is clear that Moretown is growing and changing about as rapidly as anyplace in the Central Vermont Region. Unfortunately, despite the Town’s stated support for more concentrated, traditional development patterns, much of Moretown’s residential growth has been accommodated largely through the construction of single family homes along back roads at fairly low densities. Continuation of this trend could threaten to erode the Town’s rural character and its natural resources. Furthermore, as it is generally agreed that escalating land costs are the major force driving home prices in Central Vermont, it may threaten the economic and cultural diversity of the community if people who are not well off find it difficult to find housing in Town. Alarming, the buildout modeling predicts an exacerbation of this trend absent any regulatory changes or large scale conservation efforts. It predicts no growth for Moretown Village (or any other concentrated settlement) while 95% of future development is allocated to the Agricultural/RR zone.

In spite of the dynamic forces in play, Moretown remains, for now, a fairly diverse, essentially rural, community. Accordingly, Moretown would be well advised to consider its long term future growth. This study may useful first step in this effort insofar as it depicts the direction in which existing regulations may be taking the community and demonstrates how various parts of Town may be impacted by future growth. The challenge for the community is how to respond to change in a way that affords citizens the highest quality of life possible, responding to both human needs and environmental imperatives. In short, Moretown must find a way to accommodate new growth and development without losing the values important to its current residents.

The density-building strategies and other measures discussed below not only have the potential to provide opportunities for developing more varied and affordable housing options, but could decrease sprawl and protect the Town’s rural character, as well.

1. Planned Residential Developments (PRD’s):

Recent amendments to Chapter 117 allow municipalities to *require* PUD/PRD design for development based on either the location (i.e. host district) or the size of a proposed development. In addition, the legislative changes have removed the previous limit on density bonuses, enabling municipalities to provide greater incentive to developers to create affordable housing, preserve valuable open space, or achieve other local goals. The newly enabled “mandatory cluster” requirement may be an interesting option for the Town’s rural resource zones and could be accompanied by a “sliding scale” density bonus system awarding greater density to developments which are closer in proximity to existing settlements/neighborhoods (and/or accessed by improved roads).

2. Rural Hamlets:

A “hamlet” is small, rural cluster of primarily residential buildings that lack the range of civic or commercial activity common to a true village. They are a common feature of the Vermont landscape, dating back over two centuries of change. Some communities are trying to resurrect this form in order to promote traditional development in rural locales that may be particularly suitable from both a land capability and location point of view. Typically, **hamlets** contain a cluster of 4 to 20 houses on lots ranging between .25 to .5 acres. With Moretown’s generally favorable soil conditions community septic systems can make such density possible.

The 2006 Waitsfield Town Plan provides a more detailed explanation of this concept. (See **Appendix A**).

3. North Moretown “Village”?:

The area in the vicinity of North Moretown exhibits a paucity of physical constraints and generally favorable development conditions (much of the area in this locale is rated as having “High Development Potential”). Furthermore, it lies in close proximity to sewer and water infrastructure, sidewalks, two State highways, and an interstate interchange. In view of these conditions, and the need to accommodate higher density housing, the Planning Commission may wish to consider promoting a more traditional mixed use village type of development in this locale (as opposed to the large lot industrial/commercial growth). Design control guidelines could help ensure aesthetic compatibility of a “new village/neighborhood” in this are with the rest of Moretown.

4. LESA/Community Land Fund:

The protection of agricultural land is a recurring theme in the Moretown Town Plan. The Central Vermont community of East Montpelier has been extremely successful in pursuing a non-regulatory approach to farmland preservation. They began their program by conducting a town-wide *Land Evaluation and Site Assessment* (LESA) study. This was followed by the establishment of a local land conservation fund. The *Land Fund Committee* uses LESA to evaluate and target acquisitions and easements. To date, over 2000 acres of agricultural land has been protected with support from this local program (See **Appendix B**). Moretown may wish to review the East Montpelier model to see if it could fit the Town’s own conservation needs.

5. Overlay Districts:

The Moretown Town Plan also discusses the possibility of adopting protective overlay zoning in its land use bylaws. This approach can be effective. For instance, the Town of Warren has had good results with its *Meadowland Overlay District* (**Appendix C**) in guiding development proposals on important agricultural parcels. Many communities through Vermont have been implementing high elevation overlay zones designed to minimize impacts when homes are built on environmentally and visually sensitive uplands. This notion is raised in the Moretown Plan as well. A good example from the town of Waitsfield is provided in **Appendix D**.

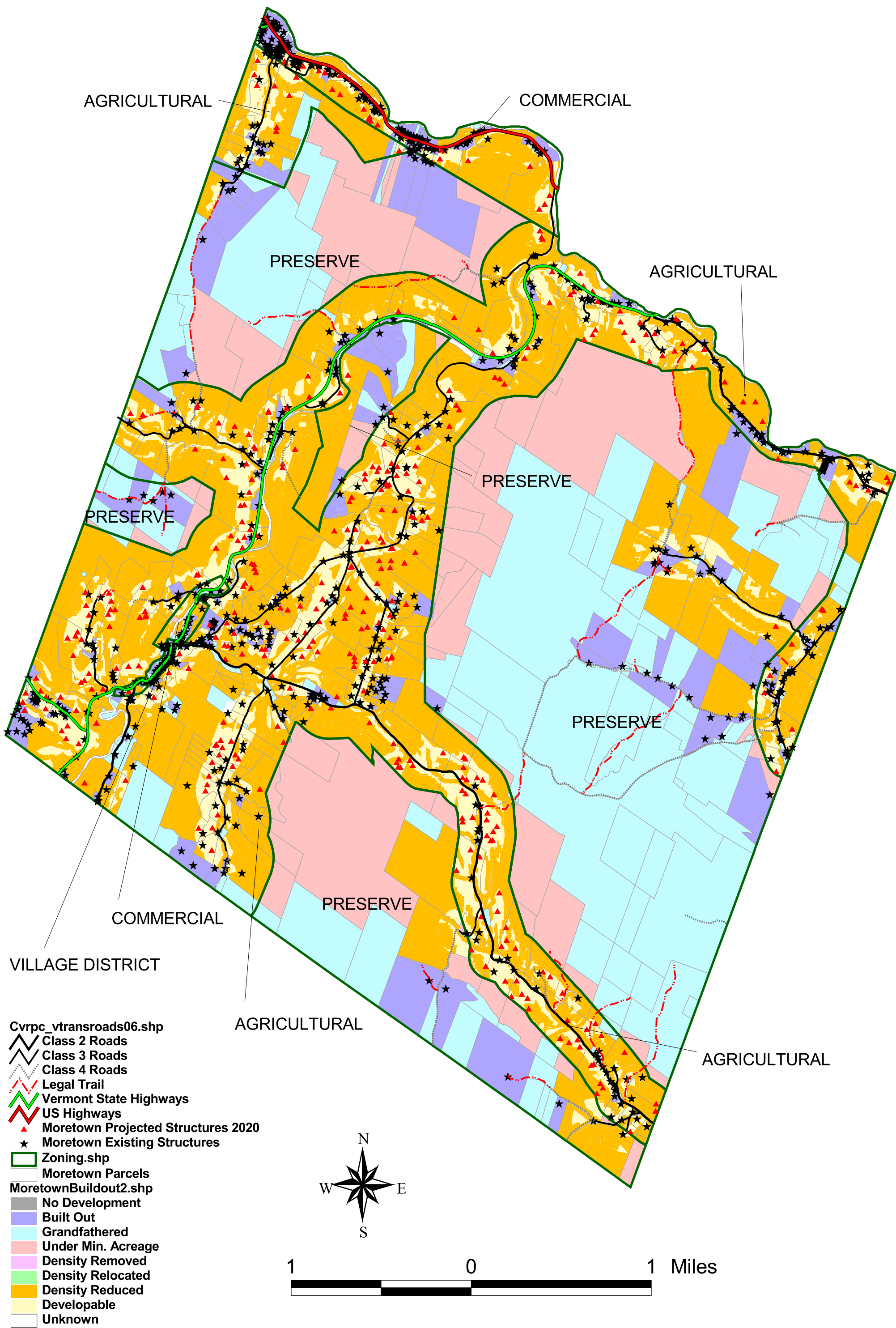
Final Notes:

Only 773 out of over 14,000 acres of land in the Preserve District were analyzed under this study. The remaining land, if parceled out at allowable densities (5 acres/lot), would result in the creation of over 2,700 lots. Obviously, such a buildout would be impractical and impossible. However, the Town’s considerable developable acreage remote from public roads will no doubt receive some of this growth as the cost of private road construction becomes less of an obstacle to an increasingly affluent population. Accordingly, it might be worthwhile for Moretown to undertake a land capability analysis for the unexamined portion of the Preserve District.

CVRPC will be happy to work with the Town to explore any of the issues or scenarios discussed in this in this review (or otherwise suggested). Furthermore, the GIS model used to generate the growth projections discussed here can be adapted to provide additional information and maps on the consequences of such actions as:

- Changes in zoning districts and/or density requirements.
- Expansion/creation of water/sewer service territories
- Increased development pressures on natural resource areas
- Increased occurrence of accessory apartments, PRDs, etc.
- Other assumptions/scenarios the Town may wish to examine.

Moretown Build Out Map 2020



Buildout Potential Category	Legend Color	Code Values	Description:
No Development	Grey	8.	This represents areas of a parcel on which no development can occur. For example, a theme may represent Conservation Easements or Public Lands. Development within those areas is not likely to occur. As a result, any portion of a parcel that falls within such areas can be marked as no development.
Built Out:	Dark Blue	7	This represents parcels that are fully built out. Therefore, no further subdivisions (development) can occur.
Grandfathered	Light Blue	6	This represents areas of a parcel that have no existing development located on it, but the parcel does not meet the minimum acreage requirement for the zoning district(s) in which it falls. It is assumed that it is a pre-existing (grandfathered) parcel. Each grandfathered parcel is given one potential unit.
Under Min. Acreage	Rose	5	This represents areas of a parcel that fall within two different zoning districts and the parcel does not meet the minimum zoning requirement in one of those districts
Density Removed	Pink	4	This represents areas of a parcel that fall entirely within an area where structures cannot be located, such as wetlands, flood plains, etc. These areas are referred to as 'No Build' areas. This essentially means that, while development is possible, there is no permissible place to locate the structures
Density Relocated	Green	3	This represents areas of a parcel that fall partially within an area where structures cannot be located, such as wetlands, flood plains, etc. It is assumed that the 'permissible density' of structures can be located on adjoining areas of the parcel where structures can be located.
Density Reduced	Orange	2	This represents areas of a parcel that fall within an area where structures can be located, such as deeryards, poor onsite wastewater capacity, ect, but are limitations to development, resulting in areas of the parcel having a lower density.
Developable	Tan	1	This represents areas of a parcel that have no restriction to development
Unknown	White	0	This represents areas that cannot be classified by the Build Out as any of the above values