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COMPREHENSIVE TOWN PLAN

FOR THE

TOWN OF BENSON, VERMONT

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**Benson Selectboard  
Benson Planning Commission  
2004**

Adopted March 18, 2004

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **a. Purpose**

In 1972 the Selectboard of the Town of Benson ("Benson" or the "Town") established the Benson Planning Commission (the "Commission"). The Commission consists of seven members appointed by the Selectboard. The Commission was directed to develop a comprehensive plan to help direct the future growth and development of Benson (the "Plan").

In June of 1988, the Commission drafted its first Town Plan, which was adopted by the Selectboard. That Plan represented substantial effort by the Commission and substantial involvement by the community. At that time, the Town wanted to encourage certain types of growth, at an appropriate rate, such as single family homes, vacation homes, agricultural activities, small business, light industry, and professional educational and health services. The 1998 Town Plan was built on the work done to develop that first Plan. The 1998 plan was adopted by the Selectboard and was amended in 1999 in order for the Town to obtain Rutland Regional Planning Commission approval.

### **b. Statutory Authority and Requirements**

It is important to understand that a Town Plan is not a zoning ordinance. The Town Plan has many uses, such as outlining areas of community concern and priorities requiring attention. It also can help the Town or other organizations in the Town attain funding and support for activities that the Plan has listed as having support in the community. A Town Plan also allows the Town to express its voice in state land use permitting proceedings. The Town Plan is a precondition to a local zoning and subdivision ordinance and other land use ordinances; and any such ordinances are based on the goals set forth in the Plan. This Plan has been prepared in order to express the Town's planning goals and objectives and to incorporate the results of the Commission's community outreach efforts. This is an attempt to balance the many interests affected by growth and development within the Town.

### **c. Preparation of the Plan**

In preparation of this revision to the Town Plan, the Planning Commission has consulted the relevant census data, Rutland Regional Planning Commission (RRPC) information, RRPC's revised requirements for Town Plans, Town land records and maps, as well as the results of a 1997 survey. The State Statutes have listed 10 elements that must be addressed in a town plan to obtain approval by RRPC. They are: a statement of the objectives, policies and programs; a land use plan & map; a transportation plan & map; a utility and facility plan & map; a statement of policies on the preservation of rare and irreplaceable natural areas, scenic and historic features and resources; an educational facilities plan & map; a recommended program for the implementation of the objectives; a statement indicating how the plan relates to development trends and plans for adjacent municipalities, areas, and the region; an emergency plan; and a housing element including a program for addressing affordable housing needs. State statutes also list 12 statewide planning goals that this plan should address. The concerns voiced by townspeople in the 2000 survey are also being addressed in this revision of the Town Plan.

#### d. Spring 2000 Survey

In 2000, the Planning Commission hired Decision Assist to perform a survey of Benson landowners and registered voters to determine the importance and priority of issues related to planning in Benson. There was a 32% response rate, which was much higher than expected. A 5% response rate is considered usual. This response rate demonstrated that Benson citizens want to contribute to planning their future. This survey told the Planning Commission a lot about Benson's general community values. Water Quality is ranked as "Most Important." After this most important issue, Agriculture came a close second, followed by Natural Areas (3<sup>rd</sup>) and Septic Systems (4<sup>th</sup>). This plan aims to address these issues.

The 2000 survey defined the term "water quality" to mean "Protect quality of ground water and water in lakes, natural ponds, streams and rivers." The term "agriculture" was defined to mean "protect, preserve and encourage agricultural land uses." "Natural areas" was defined as "Protect land from development to preserve wildlife, plants and natural resources." The term "septic systems" was defined to mean "ensure proper placement of septic systems to protect health and adjoining properties."

#### e. Hearings

The process of adopting the Town Plan has several steps: The Planning Commission warns and holds a public hearing, followed by a vote after incorporating any changes to the plan. Then the plan is sent to the Selectboard. The Selectboard warns a hearing, and after the hearing, adopts the Town Plan after making any required changes.

## II. BENSON: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

#### a. Location

Benson is a small town in the northwestern corner of Rutland County. It is bounded on the west by Lake Champlain, which separates Vermont from New York. It is bounded on the North by Orwell, which is the Addison-Rutland county line; bounded on the east by Sudbury, Hubbardton, and Castleton; and on the South by West Haven and Fair Haven.

#### b. History of Benson

Historically, Benson was a farming community. Our Town Charter was signed on May 5, 1780 and by 1790 the village was a prospering market center. The Town was supported in part by traffic and trade that traveled on the Whitehall to Vergennes Stage Road (Stage Road) and the road to the lake and Benson Landing (Lake Road).

Benson Landing was created after the completion of the Champlain Canal. The canal connects Lake Champlain with the Hudson River. Benson Landing served as an access to the lake and connected the Town to lucrative markets that used Champlain as a way to transport goods. Farmers were close to the source of transportation and their goods didn't have to travel as far by land thus putting them at an advantage. In the early nineteenth century, Benson was home to many profitable sheep farms. Wool traveled by way of Lake Champlain and the Hudson River to the markets of New York.

Traffic was diverted from the Village and the Stage Road when the Fair Haven Turnpike was completed in 1810. By the 1840's sheep farming had reached its peak of prosperity. Lowering of tariffs for Australian wool at this time was a decisive factor for the decline in sheep farming.

In the 1850's, railroads were created within the State resulting in a decline in lake traffic and trading patterns. Town merchants and local farmers adjusted to the change by diversifying their economic activities. Herds of dairy cows became more common and eventually replaced the flocks of sheep as the primary agricultural activity.

For most of its history, Benson was a community of small hamlets that sustained as many as eleven elementary school districts and one two-year high school. With the improvement of roads and modes of transportation Benson became more centralized.

The Village has maintained its integrity and the buildings look very much as they did during the Civil War era. Benson is honored to be included in the National Register of Historic Places. To this day, the Town still has residents who are descendants of early settlers of Benson. In 1980, Benson celebrated its 200th birthday and at that time our museum was founded. The museum is located in the Town Office Building.

c. Present Community Profile

**Population and Growth Projections**

Benson's population is growing. If very recent trends are any indication, the rate of growth in Benson will be about 2% per year.

<b>Table 1: Population Growth</b>							
	Population						<i>Projected Population</i>
	<b>1960</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b>Benson</b>	549	583	739	867	1,039	1250*	1500*
<b>Rutland Region</b>	46,465	52,388	57,951	62,448	63,400	66000*	68500*
<b>Vermont</b>	389,881	444,732	511,456	566,615	608,827		
Growth Rate (% increase per decade)							
	<b>1960-70</b>	<b>1970-80</b>	<b>1980-90</b>	<b>1990-2000</b>	<b>1960-2000</b>		
<b>Benson</b>	6.19	26.76	17.32	19.84	89.25		
<b>Rutland Region</b>	12.74	10.60	7.70	1.52	36.44		
<b>Vermont</b>	14.07	15.00	10.78	7.45	56.15		
<i>Sources: U.S. Census &amp; Rutland County Regional Planning Commission</i>							

\* Projections based on rate of increase method

## Age Distribution

Estimates of age distribution are useful for anticipating the level of municipal services demanded by different age groups in Benson's population, particularly school children and the elderly.

Trends by age group: The number of children under 5 has steadily increased while percentage of children under 5 has remained quite constant. The number of children in the 5 to 19 age group – those children most likely to be in the Town's schools system – has increased, while the percentage of the population in this age group has been declining. In the 20-64 age group, both actual numbers and percentage of the population have increased. In the 65 and over group, actual numbers have increased while the percentage has only increased slightly. In-migration can alter the age-distribution of the population, making it important to conduct regularly a census of pre-school age children in the Town to track school-age populations. The median age of Benson's population has been steadily increasing.

<b>Table 2: Population by Age</b>						
<b>Benson</b>						
	<b>1980</b>		<b>1990</b>		<b>2000</b>	
	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>under 5</b>	57	7.6%	62	7.3%	81	7.8%
<b>5 to 19</b>	208	27.8%	210	24.8%	233	22.4%
<b>20 to 64</b>	406	54.2%	483	57.0%	603	58.0%
<b>65 and over</b>	78	10.4%	92	10.9%	122	11.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>749</b>		<b>847</b>		<b>1,039</b>	
<b>Rutland Region</b>						
	<b>1980</b>		<b>1990</b>		<b>2000</b>	
	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>under 5</b>					3,273	5.2%
<b>5 to 19</b>					13,251	20.9%
<b>20 to 64</b>					37,396	59.0%
<b>65 and over</b>					9,480	14.9%
<b>Total</b>					<b>63,400</b>	
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau</i>						

<b>Table 3: Median Age</b>			
<b>Year</b>	<b>Benson</b>	<b>Rutland</b>	<b>Vermont</b>
<b>1980</b>	28.5	31.0	29.4
<b>1990</b>	33.3	34.3	33.0
<b>2000</b>	35.5	39.5	37.7
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau</i>			

## Households and Household Size

	1980	1990	2000
Benson	222	312	391
Rutland Region	20,455	23,525	25,678
% Change		<b>1980-90</b>	<b>1990-00</b>
Benson		40.54%	25.32%
Rutland Region		15.01%	9.15%
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau</i>			

	1980	1990	2000	2010 <i>Projection</i>
Benson	3.33	2.71	2.57	2.44
Rutland Region	2.83	2.71	2.39	2.11
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau</i>				

Average household size in Benson was 2.57 in 2000, slightly above the regional average. Household size is expected to continue to decline over the next 20 years. This, in combination with continued population growth, will result in an increasing number of households and housing units. The population of Benson is projected to increase by 44 percent over the next 20 years, but the number of households is projected to rise by 51 percent.

### d. Goals of the Town of Benson

Given this history and current trends, the future will require careful planning. To further the needs of the community identified by the Commission, the Plan has been drafted.

- Preserve the Town's rural character
- Protect and promote traditional and diversified agricultural uses and activities
- Protect the Town's natural resources and environment
- Protect and improve water quality
- Protect the Town from sprawl
- Protect the Town from development that puts undue burden on the capacity of Town roads, water, sewer and other infrastructure and the capacity of the environment to support these developments, and only promote development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs
- Encourage the wise use of energy resources
- Promote a healthy economy
- Promote safe and decent housing for current and future residents
- Sustain the Town's heritage

These Plan goals are consistent with the planning efforts of adjacent communities and can only be accomplished through the coordinated use of our human and natural resources and the commitment of the Town and other affected governmental agencies and authorities. Accordingly, the Town is encouraged to adopt effective regulations and ordinances to further the goals of this Plan.

### III. COMMUNITY FACILITIES AND SERVICES

#### a. Benson Town Office

Benson's Town Office is located in the historic old school house on Stage Road in the Village center. It was renovated in the early 1990s to house the Town Clerk and Selectboard's office, the Town's records vault, The Town Museum and the Town's wastewater laboratory. The Planning Commission, Listers, and other committees also use these facilities.

Adjacent to the Town Office is the site of an old Benson School classroom building. While not currently developed, the site is home to many Town events and a playground, and presents the Town with an asset, the public use of which should be the subject of further consideration of the Town and the Planning Commission. Current plans are to improve the playground adjacent to the Town Office.

#### b. Benson Free Library

The Library is housed in the Community Hall and is open to the public twice a week for a total of 8 hours a week.

Goals:

- Encourage expansion of the Library collection and hours
- Support providing computer and internet access for public and educational use

#### c. Community Hall

The Community Hall serves as a Municipal Building where meetings, social functions, sports and physical education events are held. Town Meeting and classical music concerts are also held in the Community Hall.

Goal:

- Encourage improvements and further planning of additional uses

#### d. Post Office

Benson's post office is located in the Benson Village Store. The post office services in Benson are limited.

Goals:

- Encourage the expansion of postal services in Benson, while keeping the Post Office located in the Village area
- Encourage the addition of more postal boxes



#### e. Health Services

Benson has a Town Health Officer. Sewage and water questions should be directed to the health officer. Benson has no doctor or medical clinics. Several nearby health organizations and services are available to Benson residents

#### Goals:

- Encourage a general practitioner to set up an office in Benson
- Work with regional institutions to assure continued access to adequate health care and enhance the number and variety of physicians and clinics in or near Benson

#### f. Rescue Services

Benson First Response is a Basic Life Support service that works in conjunction with Fair Haven Rescue Squad to provide emergency response services to Town residents. First Response is staffed by volunteers and is looking to expand its roll of volunteers from the community. The key necessity for Benson First Response is to expand the volunteer membership. Community members are encouraged to contact Benson First Response to arrange for training and to join as a volunteer.

#### g. Emergency Management

The Town of Benson should develop and maintain a current Emergency Management Plan.

Factors to be considered include, but are not limited to:

- A generator in the school for emergency power so that the school can be used as an emergency shelter
- An Emergency Preparedness Plan to prepare for a prolonged electricity power outage, such as the ice storm of January 1998
- A plan to have an emergency response plan that is distributed to Town officials and contains an evacuation plan and contact numbers for the public
- A generator for the Community Hall (that also supplies water) so the building can be used as an emergency shelter
- A sufficient quantity of basic medical supplies should be stored and kept current at each shelter location
- An evacuation plan that does not utilize RT 22A should be developed – no exit to west, only 144 to east --- considerations should be taken in an evacuation plan
- The most serious hazard that could affect Benson would be an accident on RT 22A, which is traveled by many trucks at great speed carrying potentially dangerous chemicals. The Emergency Management Plan should address this hazard.

The goal of the emergency management plan is that the Selectboard, School, Road Crew, Fire Department, and other local services and officials work together to provide emergency management services.

#### h. Public Safety & Police

Benson has two constables. Vermont State Police and The Rutland County Sheriff provide service to Benson.

##### Goals:

- Develop a plan to enhance law enforcement and to encourage the Town Constables enforcement of Town ordinances
- Encourage the Town to provide training to enhance their effectiveness

#### i. Fire Protection

Benson is serviced by a volunteer Fire Department of approximately 23 members. The Fire Department is always looking for new volunteers, especially during daytime hours. In addition, Orwell, West Haven and Fair Haven Fire Departments will respond in case of an emergency. Several dry hydrants have been installed in Town.

##### Goals:

- Install more dry hydrants. The fire rating of the Town is directly related to the fire protection services of the Town including dry hydrants
- Assess housing needs for the fire department and first response and consider improvements.
- Investigate options and prepare a plan to improve the housing for the Fire Department and First Response
- The Town should support and help provide for the needs identified by the Fire Department

#### j. Benson Highway Department Building (services under transportation)

The Town needs to make improvements to the Town Highway Facilities, which houses most of the highway equipment.

##### Goals:

- Investigate options and prepare a plan to address the needs of the highway department and to comply with stormwater runoff rules  
(Please see Transportation section (below) for more details)

#### k. Telephone and Television Services

Telephone services are furnished by Shoreham Telephone Company. Now that Benson is serviced by DSL and Satellite internet access, telephone services provided by a broadband connection to the internet are also available. Wireless (cellular and PCS) telephone services are available in some areas of the Town. Benson currently does not have other utilities such as cable television, though Satellite television (both C band and digital) service is available. Moreover, a variety of dial up providers make Internet access available within the Town, as well as DSL service provided by Shoreham Telephone, and Satellite internet access provided by DirecWAY.

## l. Wireless Telecommunications Facilities and Services

There are currently no wireless communications towers in Benson. There is great concern about where these towers may be placed in the future, and what type of towers may be installed.

Goal:

- Encourage the Selectboard to adopt an ordinance regulating the size, placement, and appearance of wireless communications towers. Also, placement should be regulated to protect the natural beauty of our community, especially in very populated areas where the tower may be considered more of an eyesore. Consideration should naturally be taken such that permitted placement locations are logical choices for good tower reception.

## m. Wastewater Treatment Facility

Benson has a municipal waste treatment facility located on Stage Road, south of Benson Village. Sewer lines feeding the facility are limited, running along Stage Road and Lake Road within the Village only. The permitted flow of the Plant is 17,700 gallons per day. Presently the plant is operating at approximately 60% of its capacity, with an additional 10% committed and allocated to lots that have not yet been developed. There is a fee for sewer service for connected dwellings. The remainder of Benson residences (outside the Village area) depend upon on-site treatment systems, for which the State has enacted wastewater treatment rules.

The stream, into which the municipal waste treatment facility discharges, has been listed as impaired by the Agency of Natural Resources. As the village grows, it may be necessary to expand the Town's waste treatment facility, and a plan for expansion should be in place before the current facility reaches capacity.

Goals:

- Ensure that the Town's wastewater treatment facility does not contribute to degradation of water quality
- Encourage the efficient use of the Town's wastewater treatment facility by encouraging such things as more compact development in the village area than elsewhere in the Town, water savings devices in homes and businesses, while discouraging development that would create excessive traffic through the village, or overwhelm the municipal wastewater system and other services. Major expansion of the Town Wastewater Treatment Facility's Collection District should be at the builder's or developer's expense.

## n. Water Supply

Presently, Benson does not have a municipal water system. Water is obtained from wells and springs located on residents' properties. The quality and quantity of water obtained from these sources vary greatly. In the Village area, there is generally insufficient water, of an unknown quality.

Goals:

- Conduct a study to investigate options and develop a plan to improve the water supply to the Village. (A municipal water supply could solve the quantity issue in the village)

o. Solid Waste Disposal

At this time, Benson participates with other towns in SWAC, the Solid Waste Alternatives Committee, which annually provides a day for hazardous waste collection. Benson currently contracts with Casella Waste Management, Inc. to transport and dispose of our solid waste and JR's Rubbish & Recycling and others to haul recyclables from the Town's transfer station located on Old North Lake Road. Maintaining certification of that facility is critical to the Town.

Goals:

- Investigate options for alternative services for solid waste disposal that would be less expensive
- Recycling should be encouraged, and the types of items that we are able to recycle should be expanded
- Investigate the possibility of developing a community compost to reduce our dependence on waste removal, and also provide useful organic matter to community gardens and for Town resident's use
- Consider developing a drop off area for unwanted but still useful items that other Town residents could pick up for free
- Create a community information campaign to further minimize the Town's waste stream

p. Cemeteries

Benson has four cemeteries. Two are well maintained.

Goal:

- Make improvements to the Temple Cemetery and to the Carter Street Cemetery to protect the Town's historical sites

q. Recreation

There is a small gymnasium located in the Community Hall. The school has a gymnasium and athletic field as well as a nature trail.

There is also a public fishing access to Lake Champlain including a boat launch; and a public fishing access at Perch Pond. For further details, see the VII Recreation section below.

Goals:

- Provide access to Sunset Lake
- Provide access to Perch Pond, Lake Sunrise, and expand access to Lake Champlain for uses beyond those permitted by Fish & Wildlife at the Benson Landing access point
- Encourage creation of a Town park, beach area, additional picnic areas, and recreational facilities and lake access, using State and federal funds, and/or funds from private sources

## IV. ENERGY

The electricity provided to Benson comes from a combination of nuclear, hydropower, and a small percentage of fossil fuels. Heat is primarily provided by wood, oil and propane. It is important to consider and encourage other forms of energy, where cost effective. It is also important to ensure that energy use and development does not produce any negative impact to the Town, the environment, and natural resources in Benson.

### a. Wind Mills

Many areas of Benson are suitable for erecting wind mills to produce electricity. The Town should consider including regulation of windmills in any ordinance, or should create an ordinance specifically to regulate wind mills. Of particular concern is the fact that the guy wires that support the tower are a great hazard to birds that fly at night. With little extra effort, towers can be constructed such that these wires are unnecessary, or greatly reduced in number. In addition, the concern of the visual appearance of windmills should be addressed so as not to destroy the natural beauty of the Town. This means limiting the erection of towers on ridges and in areas of historic or environmental significance. The windmills should fit into the natural landscape as much as possible.

### b. Solar

Solar power is under exploited in Benson. Public perception is that the climate is too cold and too far north to utilize solar power, however this is not the case. Solar gain is used effectively in this climate in the winter to heat homes and to provide hot water, both with fossil fuel back up. In addition, most of the year, it is feasible to utilize solar electric panels to generate electricity. The power produced by solar panels will not be sufficient to operate a home unless energy efficiency measures are taken. Unlike wind and hydro, the collection of solar radiation does not pose environmental concerns, however the power produced per dollar invested in the system is less in most cases. The Town should encourage the use of solar energy and encourage energy efficient appliances, as well as insulation and weather stripping.

### c. Hydro

There are many sites in Benson that could be considered for generating electricity from running water using a micro hydro turbine. There is, however, an environmental concern. If new dams are erected where there previously were none, this could affect the ecology of the streams and wildlife in and around them. Therefore sites must be chosen carefully. It would be wise to consider some regulation of sites to protect the Town's surface waters.

### d. Methane Digestion

Inform farmers of possibilities for development of farm energy systems that utilize the anaerobic digestion of agricultural products, byproducts or wastes to produce electricity or produce electricity from other renewable sources. The use of such technologies not only provides a source for renewable electricity, they also help to improve environmental quality through better waste utilization while promoting local economic activity that helps to diversify farm operations.

### e. Energy Efficiency

Identify the most cost-effective ways to reduce energy use in homes and businesses. Energy efficiency investments will pay off now and in the future, by reducing energy costs, strengthening our economy and protecting our environment.

f. Electrical Utility Service

Central Vermont Public Service Corporation of Rutland provides electrical service to the Town.

Energy efficiency programs and services are available from Efficiency Vermont, the statewide certified energy efficiency utility.

g. Other

Fossil fuels are provided by competitive suppliers; and alternative fuels, such as wood, are widely available. Benson currently does not have other utilities such as natural gas. A net metering program exists in Vermont for residential and farm properties. Further information is available from the Public Service Board.

h. Goals

- Encourage individual, non-profit, and governmental efforts to conserve available energy supplies
- Encourage the use of energy efficient appliances, and insulation and weatherization of residential, commercial and Town buildings
- Encourage the development and use of Renewable Energy (including but not limited to Wind, Solar, Micro-Hydro, & Methane Generation) where such installations will not adversely affect the environment or scenic beauty in Benson
- Promote the use of cost effective renewable energy for Town facilities.
- Encourage the conservation of available energy supplies
- The Town should investigate funding opportunities for cost effective energy efficiency, alternative energy and renewable energy programs

## V. EDUCATION

To meet growing demands for elementary education, and to resolve building code and accreditation issues, the Town opened its new Village School on Lake Road in 1993. High school students from Benson attend Fair Haven Union School in Fair Haven. The Town provides transportation to and from school. Residents from Benson have access to Stafford Technical Center in Rutland.

Benson Village School is an approximately 10,000 square foot wood-frame building. A bond of \$600,000.00 will be paid off in 2013. The school building currently contains 10 classrooms for Early Essential Education (EEE) through eighth grade students. Other rooms include a library, kitchen, mezzanine area and a multi-purpose room. The multi-purpose room is used for physical education, lunch, several educational programs and miscellaneous community activities. An outdoor playground area includes a baseball field, basketball court, skating rink and a developing nature trail.

One other Town building, the Community Hall, is used occasionally for a variety of educational programs and is part of the school's emergency evacuation plan.

In the school year 2002-2003, 157 children enrolled in the Benson Elementary School (pre-Kindergarten through eighth grade), and 44 students enrolled in the Fair Haven Union High School. The latest State of Vermont Public School Enrollment report (not including the current 2002-2003 numbers) shows that Benson Village School has the largest compounded annual growth rate of any school in Rutland or Addison Counties.

With a steady increase in the number of students almost every year since the new School was built, space as it is being utilized today is proving to be inadequate. This was particularly true in the school year 2002-2003, when the School enrollment increased by 18 students and the number of students requiring para-educators continued to grow.

Due to the increase in student enrollment, as well as the need for individualized instructional areas, there is an urgent need for more storage and instructional space.

This year the School asked for, and the Town voted to spend, up to \$10,000 for an architectural feasibility study, which will include a study of the future use, as well as the current use, of the facility. An important part of the study addresses the possibility of making use of the mezzanine area for instructional use, as it is an existing space that is currently not being fully utilized.

Benson has a high special education population. Although special education is supported through Federal and State programs, these programs are not fully funded and the high cost of special education remains a burden on the School's budget.

Even small increases in enrollment, given the facility's current space shortages, require careful planning to make sure all the students' educational needs are met. If enrollment trends at Benson Village School continue, it will be important to closely monitor the number of children in Benson and student enrollment numbers. However, any external factors causing a significant number of families to move into or out of the community could have an impact that is often not possible to foresee.

Benson has a few families who have chosen to teach their children at home. There exists a healthy acceptance and cooperation between homeschoolers, the School and the local community.

The School's voluntary reading program is very successful and involves 20 volunteers who assist students with reading skills each week.

Because the street leading to the School is not safe for children to walk, all children are either bused or driven to school by their parents. The Benson Village School contracts two buses with Betcha Company. There was some discussion in the past about creating a walking path from the school to the village area.

The Benson Village School is a large employer in Benson, employing the full-time equivalent of approximately 28 people. The Village School has an annual budget of \$1,160,787.90, and the Town spends nearly another \$348,952.00 to send high school students to Fair Haven.

The Fair Haven Union High School provides for the needs of Benson, Castleton, Fair Haven, Orwell, and West Haven. The school has a total budget of \$5,511,596.00. The school meets the requirements of the Vermont Standards, and is aiming to expand their programs. The High School

has recently completed work on a track, allowing the sports teams to train and have meets on campus. Additional plans include purchasing additional land adjacent to school property for future expansion.

Goals:

- Provide additional learning opportunities and experiences for Benson residents
- Build school, home and community relations
- Create a pedestrian sidewalk or path from the School to the Village
- Improve ingress and egress to school property
- Pursue the Architectural Feasibility Study and look at the options it will present

## VI. **NATURAL RESOURCES** (*see Natural Resources Map*)

The Town of Benson has a wealth of naturally occurring resources that enrich our lives. These natural resources include a broad spectrum of everything around us, such as, water, soil, trees, wildlife and the beauty of the area. It is our task to identify these resources and maintain and create an environment that doesn't interrupt the balance of their existence.

In the past, there was a unique woodland in Benson as well as in other towns in the Champlain Valley. The remnants of this natural community have been called Clayplain Forest. This forest is identified by:

- Its history of having once been an ancient lake bed
- Its soils
- The local climate
- The types of vegetation
- The animal populations that are supported

The fertile clay soil and the warmth of the Champlain Valley allow this area to support several tree and shrub species, which exist at the northern extent of their range. Four different oak species, as well as hickory, beech, maples, and a host of other trees and shrubs make this the most diverse woodland in the Northern Hardwood Forest. This was a very productive forest that supported a large population of animals.

Since this area of Vermont has fertile, clay based soil, it was and is prized for agriculture. Forest clearing was completed in the 1850s, and today, we have no examples of old growth forest in the Champlain Valley. What remains today are rare examples of natural regeneration in a highly altered and fragmented landscape. The majority of the fragments of this forest type are limited to areas that are less than 100 acres. This fragmentation limits the long standing viability of this forest.



Within Benson, restoration efforts are taking place to bring this forest back. The Southern Lake Champlain Valley Program of The Nature Conservancy and the Poultney-Mettowee Watershed Partnership have been working together to supply native plants grown from local seed sources for local ecological restoration and vegetative buffer plantings. Several landowners in Benson have signed up for federal cost-share programs to remove riparian areas from agriculture use. This federally funded stream bank protection program is called Partners For Wildlife. The goal of this restoration project is to mitigate the impacts of agricultural practices on water quality. At the same time, we have the opportunity to work at restoring clayplain forests in some of the areas where it once existed. The restoration effort will also expand the wooded corridor along our local rivers, stabilize the riverbanks, help decrease erosion, and help reduce sedimentation that is adversely impacting our water quality. Game and non-game animal species will benefit from these efforts, sustaining and increasing their populations.

a. Climate, Topography, & Geology

Benson has one of the longest and warmest growing seasons in the State of Vermont (according to the State of Vermont, Fish and Wildlife Department's Nongame and Natural Heritage Program), though it gets very cold in winter due to air drainage from the surrounding higher areas. Benson has slightly less rainfall than much of the state, and is well suited to agriculture. Maps are attached of soil types and wetlands. Benson has great biodiversity, both diversity of species, as well as genetic diversity of individuals within species, due to the unique climate and soil types that exist here. For these reasons, conservation becomes very important and unique in this area.

b. Agriculture, Forestry and Mineral Resources

Benson's forestland is vital to the Town in many ways. Commercial timber production has been operating for many years. This timberland has also served as a source of habitat for wildlife, recreation, aesthetics and watershed protection. The wealth of wild game that has supported hunting in this area is due largely to this forestland.

There are several active gravel pits and areas where shale is mined on the surface as well as other mineral deposits. They have both been very important in supplying material for Town roadwork as well as private driveways.

The soil on which our farming industry is based has been mapped and areas that are classed as prime agricultural land have been identified. Relatively recently Benson has transformed from a community of many small farms to fewer, larger farms. Moreover, remaining open lands are often utilized by active farms. Also we have seen the loss of agricultural land to primary and secondary residences on subdivided lots, which utilize land that historically was farmed.

c. Water Resources (refer to maps & etc)

i. Watersheds

Watersheds are geographic areas bounded by topographic features and height of land that drains water to a shared destination. Not only does a watershed drain, it also captures precipitation, filters and stores water, and determines its release. A watershed, therefore, is a drainage basin that divides the landscape into hydrologically defined areas. Within the watershed, there are many distinctive biotic and abiotic components, whose functioning is interrelated. It is essential to protect watershed areas in Benson in order to preserve water quality. Proper management of a watershed controls the quality and quantity of water that flows into a watershed, whether it be from roads and their maintenance, septic systems or other human activity within the watershed. Water moves downstream in a watershed. Any activity that affects water quality, quantity, or rate of movement at one location, therefore, can change the characteristics of the watershed at locations downstream. Thus, it is important for everyone living or working within a watershed to cooperate to assure good watershed conditions.

ii. Surface Water

Benson is home to many lakes, ponds, rivers and streams. Ultimately these all flow into Lake Champlain. The Hubbardton River grows from a small stream to a good sized river in Benson, and passes many fragments of Clayplain Forest. In the very northern part of Benson most streams flow into the East Creek watershed. Lake Champlain is the western border of Benson and of Vermont. The quality of Lake Champlain is affected by many towns, both in Vermont and New York. See the attached maps of surface waters in Benson.

iii. Threats to Water Quality

There are many threats to water quality in Benson. Agricultural practices are one of the non-site-specific sources of pollution and sedimentation of streams, rivers, ponds and lakes. By educating farmers and the public about the threats to water quality, they can be encouraged to create buffer strips between areas that are plowed, treated with pesticides and/or herbicides, or are grazed. The buffer strips will slow the speed of the water running off the agricultural areas and filter contaminants before the water reaches waterways. Research has been done on the effects of agricultural chemicals, such as atrazine, therefore requiring their responsible use. The state of Vermont has tested wells in Benson (*Vermont Department of Agriculture, Food & Markets, Pesticide Monitoring Division, Plant Industry Division d*) and discovered persistent herbicides; thus, the control of this kind of pollution is an important priority. Further information about water testing is available from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food & Markets.

Benson's wastewater treatment facility flows into a stream, which has been listed as an impaired waterway by the Agency of Natural Resources. It's important to ensure that the Town's facility is not responsible for the degradation of the stream.

The effects on water quality in Lake Champlain come from many sources. One point source of possible contamination is the paper plant owned by International Paper, located in Ticonderoga, NY. While Benson's frontage on Lake Champlain is several miles away, it's important to consider how lake pollution may be affecting not only the water supply of Benson's households on the shore of Lake Champlain, but also the possible effects on the health of Town residents who swim, boat, waterski, etc. on and in the lake and who eat fish from the lake. The water quality issues may even affect expansion of tourism attractions in Benson, as the waterfront area could be developed into a vibrant social and community gathering place.

#### iv. Wetlands

Benson's wetlands support a diversity of wildlife. Wetlands are defined as those areas that are inundated by surface or ground water with a frequency sufficient to support plants and animals that depend on saturated or seasonal saturated soil conditions for growth or reproduction. These areas are commonly known as ponds, bogs, fens, marshes, wet meadows, shrub swamps, and wooded swamps. Wetlands in Benson need to be protected because they provide many valuable and irreplaceable functions that benefit the public. Some functions and values that wetlands provide include surface and ground water quality maintenance, flood water storage, fish and wildlife habitat, erosion control, threatened and endangered species habitat, open space and aesthetics, recreation, and education. The preservation of Benson's wetlands is vital to water quality and a healthy ecosystem.

#### v. Ground Water

There are many natural springs in the Town, but as of this date, to our knowledge, no watershed or aquifer recharge areas have been mapped by the State. Lakes, ponds, streams and wetlands have been placed on topographic maps and there has been renewed interest in their importance since they support a great diversity of plants and wildlife and provide recreation and other opportunities. The various waterway flood plains are critical areas that also need attention. These are locations along streams and rivers that, due to low elevation, can flood easily. For this reason activity in these areas has to follow established guidelines.

#### d. Flood Hazard Areas

There are many flood hazard areas in Benson. Goals: Prevent loss of wetlands and prevent building in flood hazard areas. Maps and regulations for use are available of flood hazard areas in the Town Clerk's Office.

#### e. Wildlife Habitats and Fragile Areas

The Vermont Heritage Foundation, a department of the Agency of Natural Resources, has identified habitats of rare, threatened and endangered species, critical wildlife habitat and unique natural areas in Benson. Shaw Mountain is one of these unique areas that has received national recognition due to the existence of endangered species found there. The site is now a preserve under the management of the Nature Conservancy.

#### f. Air Quality

Benson should encourage the Vermont State Attorney General to continue actions to stop acid rain and pollution.

#### g. Open Space and Scenic Resources

Protecting Benson's Open Spaces and Scenic Resources for the enjoyment of present and future generations is a priority. Benson's diverse landscape includes rich agricultural lands, scenic ridges and wooded hills, unique wildlife habitats, streams and lakes, historic areas, and tree lined roads. A prime goal is to preserve and enhance Benson's uniqueness.

The Use Value Program was established by the legislature “to encourage and assist in the maintenance of Vermont’s productive agricultural and forest land.” Other stated anticipated outcomes include conservation, preservation, and protection of land and prevention of accelerated conversion to more intensive use.

The Vermont Land Trust has conserved many farms in Benson. Similarly, The Nature Conservancy has purchased land in Benson, and bought the conservation easements on land in Benson. The Poultney Mettowee Natural Resources Conservation District is protecting and replanting the Clayplain Forest in Benson. The Town should continue to support such efforts, especially when they protect water quality, watersheds, wetlands, and ecosystems.

#### h. Conservation Commission

A conservation commission had 3-9 members, and should have geographical disbursement in the Town, and differing points of view. Conservation commissions are advisory not regulatory in nature.

The four duties of conservation commissions are:

- To create an Inventory of Natural Resources
- To receive, own and manage land
- To help and advise boards in Town
- To educate the public about conservation

Mostly Conservation Commissions help planning commissions in an advisory role. Conservation Commissions are a part of Town government – usually with a \$0 budget. Conservation Commissions write grants and bring money into a town. Often they get \$12 in grants for every \$1 spent.

#### i. Natural Resources Goals, Policies and Programs

##### i. Agriculture and Forestry

Small farms and family farms are important to the community and to the Town. Large commercial farms are not a priority.

- Support remaining small and family farms
- Encourage development of additional small and family farms
- Encourage farming that provides a local food source to Town residents
- Regulate factory farming to mitigate negative impacts, especially environmental
- Support the conservation of land for agricultural usage
- Support Clayplain Forest restoration
- Encourage landowners to preserve trees and other vegetation in existing clayplain forest fragments.
- Encourage the expansion of a “wooded corridor” that connects clayplain forest fragments along the edges of streams and rivers.
- Discourage the use of pesticides and herbicides that contaminate water (both ground and surface waters)

ii. Water Resources

- Encourage the protection of the quality of ground water and water of our lakes, natural ponds, streams and rivers
- Encourage maintenance of good surface water conditions to protect drinking water, swimming, recreation, wildlife habitat, and fish consumption
- Support the Partners For Wildlife project to protect stream and river banks
- Encourage landowners to create buffer zones between waterways and agricultural & silvicultural land
- Limit development along waterways, lakes and ponds

iii. Flood Hazard Areas

- Protect wetlands from degradation.
- Prohibit inappropriate construction in wetlands.
- Encourage the identification and protection of ecosystems for rare, threatened and endangered species, environmentally fragile areas, critical wildlife habitats and unique natural areas in Benson, with the cooperation of landowners.

iv. Fragile, Unique Habitats and Open Space and Scenic Resources

- Preserve and enhance Benson's uniqueness
- Support efforts for ecological restoration.

v. Additional Goals

- Promote proper habitat for wild game and maintenance of naturally occurring plants and animals.
- Control development within the flood plain zones.
- Promote the preservation of lands and resources for recreational purposes.
- Put forward to the voters the opportunity to create a Conservation Commission

## **VII. RECREATION**

*a.* Recreation

Although the Town has definite room for improvement in its recreational offerings, Benson residents and visitors alike are provided a variety of recreational opportunities.

Recreational facilities include, but are not limited to:

- A playground at the Town Office
- A gymnasium, athletic field, basketball court as well as a developing nature trail located at the Benson Village School, with limited accessibility to Town residents.
- A small gymnasium located in the Community Hall
- A picnic area on Route 22A
- A nature trail and hiking trails on the Shaw Mountain preserve owned by The Nature Conservancy

Recreational organizations include, but are not limited to:

- The Fish and Game Club, which is in charge of a skeet range located on Route 22A and is active with several Town activities
- Ethan Allen Snow Travelers, a snow mobile club re-organized in 1997 and part of Vermont Area Snow Travelers (VAST), with approximately 180 members from Benson and surrounding towns of Orwell, West Haven and Shoreham. This club maintains 50 miles of snowmobile trails, of which 12-14 miles are in Benson.
- Benson ATV Club, which has a network of trails combined with marked gravel roads (designated by the Selectboard for ATV and Snow mobile travel) mostly on the westerly side of Route 22A.

Both the Snow Mobile and ATV club have successfully negotiated permission to use private lands, greatly enhancing their trails. The safe use of both private and public land is essential to continued permission.

Lake recreational accesses:

Benson is fortunate to border Lake Champlain and to be home to some of the cleanest lakes in Vermont: Lake Sunset, Lake Sunrise, and Perch Pond. These lakes contribute a major source of income to the Town through vacation homes and other tourist activities. However Benson residents have limited access to these lakes.

- Public access to Lake Champlain, including a boat launch, is primarily a fishing access and swimming is not permitted. Similarly, launching boats for non-fishing recreation and parking for these non-fishing users is only with permission.
- Public access to Sunset Lake, legally defined as state waters, has historically occurred near the outlet into Lake Sunrise. The Sunset Lake Committee has been formed to explore options for public access to Sunset Lake. Maintaining public access to Sunset Lake is a priority.
- Perch Pond and Lake Sunrise, legally defined as state waters, currently has no public access.

#### b. Tourism

##### i. The Town's Historic and Rural Character

Benson, like much of Vermont, benefits from its historic and rural character and from the well-preserved ambiance of its Village. Building on this character, continued development of recreational opportunities for Benson residents and visitors will be an important contribution to the community's overall quality of life.

##### ii. Roadside Trees

The protection of Benson's unique rural character, and Vermont's rural character, are closely tied to its scenic views of forest and farmland and the roadside trees and vegetation. This is key to Benson's and Vermont's agricultural and tourism economy. Roadside trees are part of our historical and cultural heritage.

### c. Recreation Goals

- Encourage maintenance and enhancement of recreation resources and opportunities.
- Explore opportunities for funding the improvement of existing recreational facilities
- Continue efforts to improve the quality of lake water
- Encourage maintenance and improvement of public access areas and facilities on lakes

Further consideration may be given to the development of other public recreation uses including hiking, pedestrian, horse and biking trails, recreational centers, boat launches, improved access to the Lakes.

The Town should pursue opportunities for funding the development of new recreational facilities and activities. Projects in which there have been public interest include:

- Creation of a path along Lake Road from Benson Landing to the Village center
- Creation of a path from the Benson Village School to the Village Center
- Creation of a path somewhere near the edge of Lake Champlain
- Expansion of the public access to the waterfront at Lake Champlain  
(perhaps a swimming area or picnic area or park)
- Creation of a public access point to lakes and ponds in Town
- Improvement and enhancement of the recreation area at the Town Office
- Improvement to Sidewalks in the village area to encourage pedestrian traffic
- Development of snow mobile trails, ATV trails, biking trails, hiking and pedestrian trails, horse trails, and trails for other forms of recreation

## VIII. HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

### a. Historic Resources

The lower Champlain Valley played an important part in the early history of the nation, and the area surrounding Benson abounds in historical sites and facilities, including Fort Ticonderoga, Mount Independence, Crown Point, The Hubbardton Battlefield and the Skenesborough Museum. The Military Road from Mount Independence to Hubbardton passed through Benson. Other important aspects of local history, such as the birth of several important religious sects, and the once-flourishing commercial life of the Champlain waterway, are less conspicuous, but still form a part of the ambience of the region. Benson's role in this rich and tumultuous history has left us with few historic sites or conspicuous landmarks other than the story told by its surviving architecture. Parts of the Town remain much as they did during the time of the Civil War. Benson Village is included in the National Register of Historic Places, and a number of structures elsewhere in the Town are listed individually as historic places. The Historic Architecture of Rutland County, published by the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, describes these sites and their locations in detail.

### b. Historic Commission

Benson has an active group of Volunteers whose most visible effort is seen in the Benson Historical Museum, located in the Town Office Building. The museum contains historical archives and records, as well as numerous artifacts relating to Benson's history and the role of its citizens in world affairs.

#### c. Cultural Resources

In recent years, Benson's village center has begun to see a return of small businesses, and the Town is now home to a variety of artists, artisans and musicians, craft and antique shops and a book store. The Community Hall provides facilities for musical and other events, most notably a regular series of concerts given by the Capitol Chamber Artists each year. The Benson Free Library, also housed in the Community Hall, provides another valuable resource, and plans are now underway to expand both its collection and other services. Each August, the Town hosts Benson Family Day. There is a parade based on some appropriate and timely theme. Recent themes have been Y2K, global warming and el Nino. There is also a welcome wagon for new residents of the Town. In the afternoon, the Fire Department and Rescue Squad have hosted a luncheon to raise money for their organizations. The Fire Department also sponsors a haunted hay ride in October.

#### d. Trees and Roadside Vegetation

Benson's unique rural character, and Vermont's rural character, are closely tied to its scenic views of forest and farmland and the roadside trees and vegetation. This is key to Benson's and Vermont's agricultural and tourism economy. Roadside trees, while part of our historical and cultural heritage, are also fundamental in mitigating the potentially damaging effects of storm-water runoff. Roadside trees and vegetation provide erosion control in roadside ditches and can help prevent snowdrifts in winter.

#### e. Monument to Veterans

Currently under development is a project to create a permanent monument honoring Benson's Veterans from the Revolutionary War onward. At present, a significant portion of the necessary funding has been obtained, and a committee has been formed to implement the plan.

#### f. Churches

There are two churches in the Town; the United Church of Benson and a Roman Catholic Church, Christ Sun of Justice.

#### g. Cemeteries

Benson has four Town cemeteries. Two are located in the village center and two are in outlying areas, and have not been actively used for many years. These are historic cemeteries from the time when the Town was a collection of hamlets. Of the two in the village area, one is historic and the other is being actively used for interment. There are many private cemeteries located throughout the Town.

#### h. Historic and Cultural Resources Goals, Policies and Programs

Although the Town Plan contains little specific to historical issues, our goal is that the other parts of the plan will provide for the continued preservation of Benson's historical resources, both those which have been identified and those which have not. While planning for Benson's future, we must remain mindful that the character of the Town, which though intangible, remains one of its most important historical features, is also preserved. We hope also that with appropriate planning, the village will continue to attract artists, craftspeople and other small businesses, and that the existing facilities for cultural events will continue to be used to their fullest.



To preserve the Town's rural character and sustain its heritage, the following recommendations are established:

- Identify and preserve historic sites in Benson and educate the public about these sites.
- Encourage maintenance and repair of the Town cemeteries, especially the two historic cemeteries in outlying areas, which have been somewhat neglected.
- Implement a program, in conjunction with the tree warden, to protect existing roadside trees and vegetation, and to plant trees in appropriate locations along roads with the approval of the landowners abutting the roads.
- Manage growth and development within Benson
- Encourage the use of land for agriculture and forestry
- Protect surface waters and waterways by planting buffers and conserving areas near water and waterways from development
- Discourage large developments which are inconsistent with the Town's rural character or exceed the capabilities of municipal services
- Protect the Town from sprawl
- Encourage the preservation of historical structures and places within the Town
- Encourage public and private efforts to record the Town's history and ensure a continuity of knowledge about the Town
- Encourage maintenance of Town buildings and land
- Propose an ordinance to control the placement of cell phone towers and other towers in areas that do not interfere with the Town's rural character and natural beauty

## IX. HOUSING

### a. Existing Conditions

Current information on the grand list and tax rate are available from the Town Clerk.

Table 5: 2002 Grand List			
	1990	2002	% Change
Residential parcels* on 6 acres or less	89	115	+29.2%
Residential parcels on more than 6 acres	58	132	+127.6%
Mobile Homes without land	31	40	+29.0%
Mobile Homes with land	24	58	+141.6%
Vacation Parcels on 6 acres or less	111	84	-24.3%
Vacation Parcels on more than 6 acres	35	28	-20.0%
Commercial Properties	8	10	+25.0%
Commercial Apartments	0	3	N/A
Farms**	46	20	-56.5%
Woodland	11	15	+36.4%
Miscellaneous***	126	131	+4.0%

*Source: VT Dept of Taxes, Division of Property Valuation and Review*

Table 6: 2002 Grand List Assessed Values	
Residential parcels on 6 acres or less	Average 74,020
Residential parcels on more than 6 acres	139,652
Mobile Homes without land	11,240
Mobile Homes with land	64,746
Vacation Parcels on 6 acres or less	56,379
Vacation Parcels on more than 6 acres	81,868
Commercial Properties	154,740
Commercial Apartments	195,467
Farms	260,087
Woodland	28,388
Miscellaneous	33,001
<i>Source: VT Dept of Taxes, Division of Property Valuation and Review</i>	

\*A parcel of land is contiguous land that is owned by a single person or entity. Residential, vacation and farm parcels may have more than one dwelling.

\*\*Farms are properties where income is derived from growing crops or raising animals, or from selling animals or animal products.

\*\*\*A miscellaneous parcel is land with no dwelling that is not categorized as woodland.

Table 6: Housing Units by Type, Occupancy and Tenure												
	Total Units		Seasonal Units		Year-Round Units		Single-Family Units		Multi-Family Units		Mobile Homes	
	#	% Change	#	% Change	#	% Change	#	% Change	#	% Change	#	% Change
<b>Benson</b>												
1980	360		133		227							
1990	490	36.11%	157	18.05%	333	46.70%						
2000	519	5.92%	117	-25.48%	391	17.42%	356		40		120	
<b>Rutland Region</b>												
1980	25,480		3,646		21,834							
1990	31,054	21.88%	5,519	51.37%	25,535	16.95%						
2000	32,311	4.05%	5,293	-4.09%	25,678	0.56%	21,176	65.6%	8,709	25.9%	2,387	7.4%
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau</i>												

Table 7: Housing Units by Owner / Renter Occupied					
	Owner-Occupied Units			Renter-Occupied Units	
	#	% Change		#	% Change
<b>Benson</b>					
1980	172			50	
1990	219	27.32%		93	84.00%
2000	278	26.94%		113	21.51%
<b>Rutland Region</b>					
1980	14,005			6,450	
1990	16,111	15.04%		7,414	14.95%
2000	17,901	11.11%		7,777	4.90%
<i>Source: U.S. Census Bureau</i>					

#### b. Drinking Water Supply for Village

Currently the village area of Benson obtains water from private wells. The density of the area, combined with shallow soil and ledge has created water problems that result in summertime water shortages for some residents and businesses, and year round shortages for a few. To serve the plan's goals, the Town should consider how to meet its residents needs for potable water, and seek grant money to study the problem.

#### c. Housing Affordability

Benson has a wide range of residential buildings. There are many options for low and moderate income households, and the Town has annually voted money for affordable housing through our contributions to BROOC and the Vermont Council on the Aging. Some of the affordable housing is in the form of trailers in rural areas of the Town. Many of these need rehabilitation to provide safe, sanitary housing. Benson also has affordable single family houses in the Village area, as well as a large senior housing multi-family building. At Benson Heights, subsidized rents allow seniors to live within walking distance of the post office, store, a restaurant, a bookstore, the library, the Town Office and other amenities. Other forms of affordable housing permitted in Benson include in-law apartments attached to or contained within existing housing. Affordable housing is a statewide and regional responsibility. Benson's current inventory of residential buildings contains a large proportion of existing affordable structures. Benson should expand the tax base by encouraging the balance between affordable and other residential structures. The Town should encourage Rutland County to develop affordable housing – evenly dispersed throughout the county and state.

#### d. Future Housing Needs

In Benson, the growth of housing far outpaces the growth of the population resulting in a smaller household size. There are many 2<sup>nd</sup> homes, vacation homes and seasonal homes. The growth rate of housing and population in Benson exceeds that of both Rutland County and Vermont as a whole.

#### e. Village area

The Village area is the social center of the Town because of the many activities that occur there. The Town Office, Museum, Community Hall, Fire Department, Library, and a church are in the village district, as well as a playground and several diverse businesses.

There is an "Official Village Designation" program in Vermont, which is a new program to provide state tax benefits to Village districts like the one in Benson. This should be investigated to discover if grant monies are available, and/or if the tax benefits would permit the village area to be even more beneficial in providing affordable housing to people in Benson.

#### f. Historic Commission

Currently Benson has no historic commission. The Town should consider creating a commission to identify and help preserve historically important sites. This commission should not attempt to interfere with the operation of the Benson Museum, but instead to be focused on identifying and protecting historic buildings, cemeteries, monuments, sites and other historic places throughout the entire geographical area of the Town, as well as the adjacent area of Lake Champlain.

#### g. Green Mountain Council Exemption from Taxation

In 1967 the Vermont Legislature exempted property owned by the Boy Scouts of America from local property taxes. Green Mountain Council owns 193.8 acres of waterfront property in Benson. This exemption has resulted in a loss of property tax revenues to Benson in excess of \$500,000 between 1967 and 2003. Benson believes it is inequitable for the state to require a few towns to carry the burden of this tax exemption for the entire state. The Selectboard supports the possibility of amending the PILOT program during the appropriation process to compensate the few impacted Vermont towns.

#### h. Housing Goals

- Study the village drinking water supply problem and fire protection needs.
- Investigate participation in the “Official Village Designation” program
- Identify and preserve historically important sites in Benson.
- Examine and debate what types of housing would best suit the Town’s future needs.
- Preserve property values and Town character by discouraging substandard housing.

### **X. TRANSPORTATION**

The principal means of transportation in Benson and to commercial service centers in nearby and adjacent towns from Benson is private motor vehicle. To facilitate this type of transportation, Benson is served by two types of highways: Vermont State Highway and Benson Town Highways (classes 2, 3 and 4, as well as “trails”). Given Benson's present traffic conditions, the existing highway system is generally adequate to serve Benson's transportations needs. Should Benson experience population growth, some additional highways and highway improvements may be required. However, as there is no clear pattern of growth, which would indicate that any particular highway is inadequate, no new highways are proposed. Should any developments be proposed in Benson requiring new roads, the construction and maintenance of said roads are the responsibility of the project's developer.

Primary access to Benson is afforded via Vermont State Highway, Route 22A. Route 22A is a secondary arterial highway which bisects Benson connecting Vergennes, to the north, with Fair Haven, to the South. Primary West to East connections are afforded via State Highway 144 with secondary connections provided by an integrated system of Vermont Highways and Benson Town Highways. Remaining roadways are a combination of Town Highways and private roads. For a detailed description of Benson's transportation system, please see the maps attached.

Route 22A is a heavily trafficked highway which is frequented by both light and heavy trucks as well as passenger vehicles and farm machinery. Due to Benson's rural nature, other Benson highways are also utilized by a combination of farm machinery, trucks, passenger vehicles and horse traffic. Over the years, Route 22A has seen significant increases in traffic raising safety concerns. The accident rate on Route 22A has alarmed many Benson residents. The Town should investigate options to improve, or encourage the state to improve, safety conditions on Route 22A.

Benson's highways are scenic rural roads. Many are tree lined with full or partial tree canopies. Vistas and long views of Benson's rolling landscape help to enhance the Town's charm and character.

Benson is not served by any railroads and does not have any airport facilities. These services are available at nearby locations.

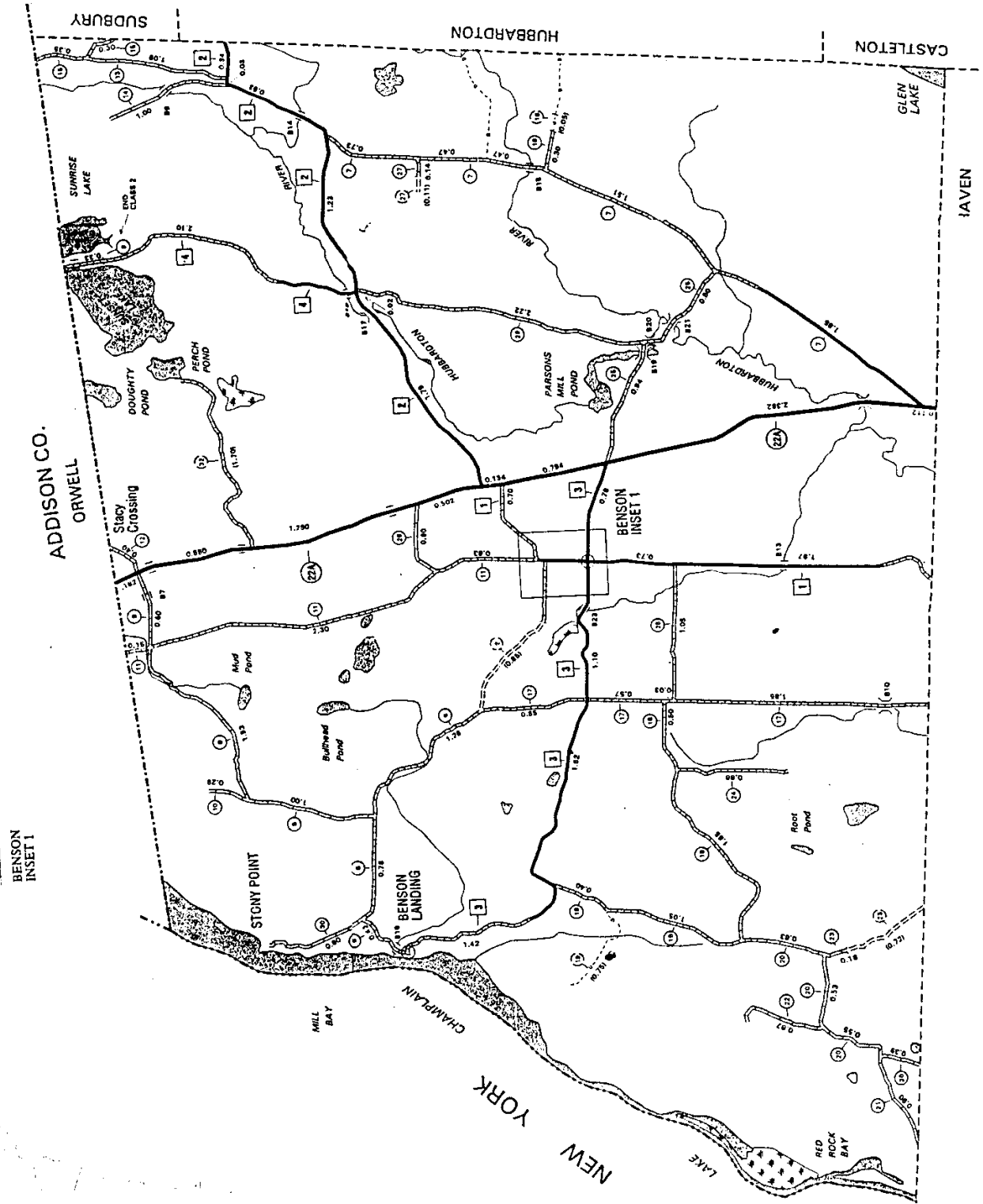
Benson has historically been served by water transportation on Lake Champlain, and while this service has been reduced significantly, Lake Champlain remains a minor transportation route.

Benson has an abundance of snow mobile and ATV trails on private and public land, which are used as a minor form of transportation, but are primarily used for recreation.

a. Benson's Highway System

Class	Town Highway #	Mileage	TOTALS
1	-	0.000	Class 1 0.000
2	1	3.720	Class 2 14.960
2	2	4.240	
2	3	4.900	
2	4	2.100	
3 - 4	6	2.950 - 0.850	Class 3 36.610
3	7	5.030	
3	8	3.130	
3	9	0.330	
3	10	0.290	
3	11	3.280	
3	12	0.400	
3	13	1.090	
3	14	1.000	
3	15	0.650	
3 - 4	16	0.300 - 0.050	
3	17	3.300	
3	18	3.600	
3	20	2.100	
3	21	0.900	
3	22	0.620	
3 - 4	23	0.180 - 0.720	
3	24	0.860	
3	25	1.740	
3	26	1.050	
3	28	0.600	
3	29	2.220	
3	30	0.800	
3	31	0.050	
4	19	0.750	Class 4 4.180
3 - 4	27*	0.140 - 0.110	
4	32	1.700	

See next page for map of Town highways by highway number.



The surface conditions of Benson's roads vary. Benson has mostly gravel roads, and a few paved roads. The paved roads are: Route 22A, Route 144, a portion of East Road, a portion of Lake Road, and Stage Road in the Village area. The condition of these roads is good to excellent. The condition of gravel roads in Benson is largely dependent upon the weather conditions and season. Generally the roads are considered acceptable, and the Selectboard has created a highway infrastructure report indicating conditions and areas for improvement. The Selectboard is responsible for the maintenance of the Town highways.

Parking facilities in Benson are generally adequate at this time, except for the lack of parking in the village and in public access areas, such as along Sunset Lake and at Benson Landing. As the population increases, parking solutions need to be studied.

Roadside trees and vegetation have a role in erosion control as well as protecting the quality of our surface waters from road runoff.. Benson is part of a "scenic byways" area and the roadside trees and agricultural land play an important role in this designation. It is essential to protect the roadside vegetation while maintaining safe visibility on Town Highways.

In 2002, the Benson Selectboard was approached by a private group wishing to create a bike route the length of Lake Champlain. The Selectboard approved of the proposed route on Stage Road from Orwell to West Haven. Signs have been erected identifying the route.

There is a need for recreational paths and a path from the Benson Village School to the Village area as a form of bicycle and pedestrian transportation. Additional areas should also be considered for such paths in the Town.

Benson is serviced by the "Bus," a form of public transportation in Rutland County. Additionally Lake Champlain is used for both recreation and transportation. Rail transportation is available in Fair Haven, Whitehall NY, and Rutland. Air Transportation is available from Burlington, Rutland, and Albany, NY.

#### b. Highway Department

Benson's highway department is located in the Village area. The Town has the following equipment: 3 Trucks (2002, 1997, 1988), Grader (1999), Loader (1992), Backhoe (1984). Benson is considering infrastructure improvement to handle salted sand.

#### c. Green Up Day

Each spring, Benson participates in Vermont "Green Up Day" program, where volunteers pick up all the roadside trash and are able to dispose of it for free at the Transfer Station. This program has been immensely successful at controlling litter.

#### d. Transportation Goals, Policies and Programs

To preserve the Town's scenic rural character and maintain public services the following recommendations are established:

- Assure that Town roads are kept in good repair and open for safe driving.
- Investigate options to improve safety conditions on Route 22A
- Encourage local, county and state action to improve safety conditions on Route 22A
- Encourage the planting of road side trees & Vegetation, and the elimination of dead road side trees, obstructive brush & grass. Note however, that road side plantings should be accomplished in such a manner so as to provide adequate room for snow removal, utility services, and adequate view corridors for safety.
- Discourage the development of industries and developments whose transportation and trucking requirements will impose undue burdens upon and impair the useful lives of Benson's roads and highways.
- Consider methods to allow a developer to mitigate costs to the Town for improvement and maintenance of affected roads.
- Encourage the development of screening to mask structures which would be highly visible from roads and highways, which are inconsistent with the Town's scenic rural character.
- To further protect the natural beauty and rural character of certain Benson highways, the Town should consider taking whatever steps are required to designate the following highway "scenic roads" within the meaning of Title 19 of the Vermont Statutes Annotated:
  - Route 22A;
  - Route 144;
  - Lake Road;
  - East Road;
  - Mill Pond Road;
  - Stage Road;
  - Sunset Lake Road;
  - Frasier Hill Road;
  - North Lake Road.
- Manage the development of snow mobile, ATV, biking, hiking and pedestrian, horse and other alternative forms of transportation trails, balancing their use for recreation and transportation against noise, environmental and safety concerns..
- Promote participation in the "Green Up Day" program.

## **XI. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

The economy of the Town of Benson is predominately a component of the Rutland and Addison Counties' economy. It is both an agricultural and rural economy. Local employment is generally related to agriculture, forest products, and commercial and service industry sectors. A substantial number of residents commute to service sector jobs outside of the Town.



a. Commercial and Employment Activity in Benson

Benson is home to agricultural and silvacultural operations, several small industries and commercial establishments, as well as many home based businesses. Small industries are generally located at resident's homes or on other parcels where they do not have adverse effects on the community's development. Benson is not home to any large industrial or commercial developments. Benson Village School is one of the largest employers in Benson, although not considered a traditional economic activity.

b. Trends in Employment and Economic Development

<b>Table 6: Place of Work</b>				
	<b>Total # Employed</b>	<b>People Working in Benson %</b>	<b>People Working Outside Benson %</b>	<b>People Working Outside USA %</b>
<b>Benson</b>				
<b>1980</b>	280	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>1990</b>	410	26.09 %	73.91%	11.46%
<b>2000</b>	537	18.81%	81.19%	0.60%
<b>Rutland Region</b>		<b>In County</b>	<b>Outside County</b>	
<b>1980</b>	25,688	n/a	n/a	
<b>1990</b>	30,870	n/a	10.08%	
<b>2000</b>	33,237	86.4%	13.6%	

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau*

<b>2002 Income Table</b>		
<b>Income</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Families Total.....	278	100%
Less than \$10,000	14	5.0%
\$10,000 - \$14,999	21	7.6%
\$15,000 - \$24,999	27	9.7%
\$25,000 - \$34,999	42	15.1%
\$35,000 - \$49,999	84	30.2%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	55	19.8%
\$75,000 - \$99,999	12	4.3%
\$100,000 - \$149,999	23	8.3%
\$150,000 - \$199,999	0	0.0%
\$200,000 or more	0	0.0%
<b>Median Family Income \$40,833</b>		

*Source: 2000 US Census*

c. Unemployment Rate

Of the 781 residents in Benson over 16 years of age, 537 are in the labor force. Thirteen are unemployed, which represents 2.4% of the civilian labor force. There are 244 people in Benson over the age of 16 who are not in the labor force. While the unemployment rate may appear low, Census data does not indicate how many of the 244 people, who are not in the labor force, wish to be employed, nor how many are not designated as unemployed because they have been unemployed too long to remain on unemployment roles.

*Source: 2000 US Census.*

#### d. Economic Development Goals

Tourism and agriculture are of importance to Benson's economy. Tourism brings customers to many of the Town's businesses; and for this reason, consideration should be placed on the Town's rural and scenic character. Preservation and enhancement of the rural scenic character should be a priority in land use decisions.

While Benson is a farming community, the Town also supports a range of other businesses and pursuits. Business growth over the last decade has been steady, and additional businesses may move to the Town in the future. The most promising and undeveloped aspect of the local economy relates to tourism and recreation. Benson could easily attract more visitors who are trying to "get away from it all." The Town recognizes that tourism and agriculture are closely linked; and that the number of tourists will not increase if Benson's open and beautiful scenery is not maintained.

To improve Benson's economic base:

- Encourage the development of home occupations and cottage industries
- Encourage the expansion of local businesses, especially when such businesses utilize the Town's wastewater treatment facility
- Maintain the village core, the character of the Town, and the landscape and natural resources
- Conditionally permit future small commercial and light industrial developments which are consistent with the Town's rural character and complementary to its agricultural heritage
- Discourage future large commercial and heavy industrial developments which are inconsistent with the Town's rural and agricultural character
- Protect, Preserve and Conserve available agricultural lands, encouraging land conservation efforts by Vermont Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy
- Permit additional agricultural land uses and activities within the Town

## **XII. LAND USE AND GROWTH**

In order to incorporate the goals, objectives and recommendations set forth within this Plan, attached to this Plan are a collection of land use maps which identify current agricultural areas, public investments (including Town highways and Public Facilities), residential, recreational, forest, and commercial land uses. These maps also indicate flood plains, soils, topography, wetlands, critical wildlife habitat, conservation areas and a land use map.

The Plan anticipates the use of the above maps as aids to guide the development of land within Benson. Consistent with the Plan, land uses are encouraged that will conform with the goals set forth below.

#### a. Existing Conditions

The Town consists of rural agricultural land and natural areas. The Village area is a mix of closely spaced commercial and residential uses. There are clusters of closely spaced residential structures in

several other areas of Benson, including around Sunset Lake, and Perch Pond, as well as along areas of Route 144 and at Benson Landing.

Currently there is limited land use regulation at the municipal level in Benson. Exceptions include ordinances pertaining to driveway installations, road standards, placement of junk motor vehicles, and mobile home and trailer coach parks. Additionally State land use regulations exist, though the Town does not have the authority to enforce these laws.

b. Conserved Land

There are conserved agricultural land and natural areas in Benson. For information on conserved land and trusts that conserve land, contact the Vermont housing and conservation board. These trusts hold development rights of agricultural land, forest land and other land, and sometimes ownership of ecologically sensitive areas. Attached is a map highlighting some of the conserved land in Benson. In addition to these, the State of Vermont owns land in Benson.

c. Future Direction of Benson Land Uses

It is the goal of the Planning Commission to development of land use regulations for review and adoption by the voters of Benson. It is hoped that this effort will protect water quality, limit the loss of agricultural land, protect natural areas, protect forests and forestry, and encourage development in a way that preserves the Town's rural character and natural beauty. For this reason, six land use districts are proposed, with differing objectives in each. It is not the goal to prevent development, but to direct development such that the unique social, environmental and historical characteristics of Benson are preserved. It is for this reason that sprawl is to be discouraged. It is the goal of the Planning Commission that there will be great opportunities to work in Benson. Entrepreneurship is encouraged along with home businesses and cottage industries.

d. Land Use Districts

• Agricultural and Rural Residential District (ARR District)

To preserve the community's rural character and to provide a mechanism for viable agricultural, residential and commercial uses with minimal adverse impact.

ARR is intended to provide land area for low-density residential development, farming, forestry, recreation, commercial and other rural land uses. Any such growth should be consistent with the rural character of the area and site conditions. Conservation of a working landscape of open space and natural resources should be a high priority to maintain Benson's rural atmosphere. The Town encourages traditional and diversified agricultural uses and activities in this district. Support the right to farm for family farms. The Town should promote activities that preserve scenic and agricultural lands. The goal of this district is an attractive functional countryside.

- Village District

To provide for mixed residential, commercial and public uses in the area generally served by the municipal waste treatment facility.

The purpose of the Village District is to allow residential housing and commercial enterprises of a scale that will blend well with existing residences and complement the “village” atmosphere preferred by Benson’s residents. All development in this district is to have adequate parking, suitable landscaping, screening, lighting, and signage and be designed to minimize traffic impacts in order to protect the character of the neighborhood. Low traffic flow businesses are to be encouraged. It is important to preserve the historic nature of the village district.

- Lake Shore District

To conserve and protect those lands adjacent to the ten lakes and ponds as indicated on the Lake Shore District on the proposed land use map, excluding Lake Champlain.

The purpose of this district is to protect water quality, public access, and natural ecosystems. The land in this district is within 500 feet of the mean water level of lakes in the sections indicated on the land use map. The purpose of this district is to protect water quality, while balancing the desire for development with the need for protecting public access, the shoreline and wildlife habitat. The names of the lakes and ponds in this district are: Lake Sunrise, Sunset Lake, Perch Pond, Doughty Pond, Parsons Mill Pond, Glen Lake, Mud Pond, Bullhead Pond, Beaver Meadow, and Root Pond (including the two unnamed lakes nearby).

- Lake Champlain Shoreline District

This district should promote similar goals as Shoreline District 1, except it must recognize the special circumstances and opportunities presented by Lake Champlain.

- Flood Hazard Area Overlay District

To promote the public health, safety and general welfare, to prevent increases in flooding caused by the uncontrolled development of lands in areas of special flood hazard, and to minimize losses due to flooding. Benson has existing regulations that regulate flood hazard areas.

e. Land Use and Growth Goals, Policies and Programs

- Consider the creation of a Route 22A Corridor District or Overlay District (the intent of this goal is to allow any future land use regulation to have a Rt. 22A Corridor District or overlay district if it is deemed desirable, even though it has not been created in the land use districts section and land use map of this Town Plan)
- Encourage compact development in the Village district
- Encourage improved professional, educational and medical services in Benson
- Encourage traditional and diversified agricultural and forestry land uses.
- Discourage large commercial, large residential and industrial developments that are inconsistent with Benson's Rural and village character.
- Encourage the efficient use of the Town's wastewater treatment facility by encouraging such things as more compact development in the village area than elsewhere in the Town, and water savings devices in homes and businesses.
- Discourage development that would create excessive traffic through the village, or overwhelm the municipal wastewater system and other services
- Establish standards for developments along Town streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes
- Encourage development that is integrated into the rest of the community
- Explore adopting a Junkyard Ordinance

Through the administration of this Plan, the Town desires to continue orderly growth and development which protects Community resources and provides for the appropriate use of all lands while preserving open spaces, forest. conservation areas and agricultural lands within the Town. In short, this Plan recommends that Benson take steps to preserve its rural character and permit such growth and development as would benefit the general good of the Town.

### **XIII. MUNICIPAL AND REGIONAL COORDINATION**

The Planning commission has made every attempt to coordinate the elements contained within this Plan with the plans of surrounding towns and with the Rutland Regional Plan. Benson has similar goals to Orwell and West Haven for the continuance of a working landscape in the Lake Champlain basin. The Town's goals for maintenance of the many lakes in the community complement the development patterns in Hubbardton, Sudbury, Fair Haven, and Castleton.

### **XIV. IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAMS**

In order to give meaning to the goals and recommendations contained within this Plan, the Town, State agencies and regional and local authorities are strongly encouraged to abide by the Plan's goals, policies and programs. The Plan should be interpreted to the strongest extent possible to promote the Town goals contained herein. The Benson Planning Commission certifies that this Plan promotes the best interest of Benson and its Townspeople. It is the goal of the Planning Commission to consider the development of land use regulations for review and approval by the voters of Benson and to have Benson enforce the Town's ordinances and regulations.