SMART GROWTH in Vermont
Many small Vermont towns are losing their sense of community as their village stores close and post offices and town halls move to the outskirts of town. Not so in Starksboro. The town rallied together to reverse this trend by purchasing three acres in the village between the Town Hall and Village Meeting House for a new town office. With residents volunteering their labor, a new town office was completed, sidewalks were installed connecting several buildings, and shared parking facilities were created. The old town office, housing the Post Office, was transformed into a general store. This project has brought a community together, enhanced the town center and sparked other smart growth projects.

In 2005, Enosburg Falls suffered a terrible loss from a fire that destroyed a block in the center of the village. Three years later, Housing Vermont, the Champlain Housing Trust and Village of Enosburg Falls partnered to construct a new three-story building on the site and renovate the two upper floors in the Merchants Bank. The new building features a restaurant and retail/office space on the first floor, and 24 apartments on the second and third floors. The upper floors in the bank building consist of six apartments.

Vermont Law School, located in the small town of South Royalton, has integrated a modern campus into the fabric of a small Vermont village. The school worked with Truex Cullins and Partners to renovate and expand Deboevis Hall. The school’s attention to historic precedent, scale and architectural detail serve as a model for developing modern institutional facilities that embody smart growth principles.

In 2006, the median-priced home was $197,000. To purchase that home, a household would need an income of $66,000 – 67% of all Vermont households’ annual income is below that amount. Creating housing opportunities in or near established neighborhoods reduces both community infrastructure costs and living expenses for residents.

Seeing the need for new housing opportunities in existing neighborhoods, the City of Montpelier designed an innovative program to assist homeowners to create new accessory apartments (commonly referred to as mother-in-law apartments). The One More Home program accomplishes this through a combination of homeowner education, changes to the City’s zoning bylaw, technical assistance, and grant funds. Launched in the summer of 2006, the program has resulted in twelve new units in various stages of completion and serves as a model for other communities.

The Marble Works Residences, set in a historic district on the banks of Otter Creek in Middlebury, add the missing element to this downtown location – housing. Redstone Commercial Group and Housing Strategies, Inc. teamed up to build 30 units on one acre, providing new homeowners with pedestrian access to a lively mix of restaurants, shops, professional offices, and recreational opportunities.

With last year’s enactment of a new growth centers law, Vermont established a new approach to land use planning that builds on the investments we have made in our downtowns and village centers. To assist municipalities and regional planning commissions to apply for growth center designation, the state Growth Centers Planning and Coordination Group prepared the State Growth Centers Implementation Manual. The manual provides detailed guidance for communities interested in growth centers planning and applying for growth center designation.
As Vermont’s recent land use patterns have fragmented both our communities and the natural landscape, this much is clear: How we use and protect our land is a key factor in tackling many of the economic, social and environmental challenges facing our state today.

Smart growth provides a vision, framework and tools for creating land use policies that respect our unique landscape. Land use decisions that reflect smart growth principles can make it easier to rehabilitate a historic building, protect a family farm, build homes in a village neighborhood or create park and ride facilities for carpooling. Making the right decisions requires reliable research, patience and an ability to bring together divergent interests to forge a common vision. Together, we can ensure our communities remain places where people connect, prosper and protect what makes Vermont special.