

# Vermont Environmental Report

PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY THE VERMONT NATURAL RESOURCES COUNCIL, A NON-PROFIT CITIZENS' CONSERVATION ORGANIZATION SUPPORTED BY MEMBERSHIP DUES AND CONTRIBUTIONS. VNRC, 26 STATE STREET, MONTPELIER -- VERMONT, 05602; (802) 223-2328. CHAIRMAN: DAVID R. MARVIN; EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: SEWARD WEBER; EDITOR--NATHANIEL FROTHINGHAM.

## 'HARTLAND' DEFEATED at the polls

In January, 1975 the Ottauquechee Regional Planning and Development Commission and the Vermont Natural Resources Council began work on the Hartland Open Space Project. This work was in response to a call for assistance from the Board of Selectmen of the Town of Hartland. At issue in Hartland and in a number of small, rural Vermont towns was the fate of the open countryside. Even if Hartland was not showing visible signs of development to the same extent as neighboring towns, it was in the path of growth, taxes were rising, people were selling out, land was being subdivided, land was going out of active agricultural use, and the Selectmen felt that the time had come to bring specific proposals before Hartland citizens. After over a year of work, four alternative programs were proposed to stabilize taxes on and help maintain present uses of open space in Hartland. One program covered farmlands; another all active agricultural land; a third all undeveloped land; and a fourth an area in Hartland known as the "Densmore Hill Open Land District."

These proposals were explained to voters through meetings, discussions, mailings and were finally offered to Hartland citizens at a formal, public vote. On Tuesday, May 25, citizens in Hartland went to the polls to give their verdict on the Hartland Project. The question was whether an open space program should be adopted in Hartland. When the votes were counted Tuesday evening, May 25, the message from Hartland was clear. The Hartland Project had been defeated overwhelmingly. The broad enabling authority sought by the Selectmen that would have permitted the Town to enter into tax stabilization agreements with individual landowners had been turned back by a 2-1 margin, 302-146.

If it was not readily apparent why the vote had gone against the open space proposals, it was certainly clear that these proposals had been given every chance of adoption. They had been initiated at a local level. (There is no body of government closer to rural Vermont than a local Board of Selectmen.) "Local control" had been served. These proposals had been thoroughly aired. The public had been given a solid crack at understanding them over a period lasting almost a year and a half. They had been endorsed by the Town Planning Commission and by the Town Board of Selectmen. So there was no lack of official support and understanding.

Why then, was the Hartland Project turned down? We went to Hartland, not only to answer this question, but to listen to individual citizens. We hope that the story that follows will enable VER readers and citizens across the State to draw some important lessons, lessons that will not be lost on other communities that are facing the same issues of growth and changing times.

The VNRC wishes to thank the Valley Publishing Corporation for its generous gift that has contributed substantially toward the costs of the June issue of the Vermont Environmental Report.

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# The Vote : 302--146 What Did the Results MEAN?

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Dorothy Crandall is the first woman in the history of Hartland to serve on the Board of Selectmen.

She and her husband bought their place in 1941 and she moved up to Vermont as a year-round resident in 1971. We sat outside in the morning sunshine and shared a plank of her picnic table in the garden. Below us was the road and the narrow valley that winds up past her place and past one of the twelve remaining working farms in the Town of Hartland.

"The vote... What did it mean?"

"I would have been amazed," said Dorothy Crandall, "if it had passed."

She took out a list, the points she had gathered from a conversation the night before. "Number one," she said, "the taxes would go up." She continued reading. "And the freedom of their rights would be endangered." Mrs. Crandall was talking about local people, people she liked, but people who were all the same "stubborn," who were stubbornly pounding away at an old theme, "Nobody is going to tell us what we are going to do with our land."

Mrs. Crandall talked of Woodbury, New Jersey, where she had lived. Woodbury, New Jersey, on its way now to becoming just another in the long line of anonymous, faceless, towns somewhere along the Northeast Corridor on the way to Philadelphia, a town that is now trapped on every side by development, where you cannot get out into the open countryside and the farms anymore. And Dorothy Crandall saw the same pressures growing in Hartland, Vermont, turning farms into subdivisions, subdivisions into homesites, homesites into settlements, and in the final logic of these absurd events, leading to developments and commercial strips.

It was still a raw time, three days after the vote, and feelings in Town were still sore.

"They didn't even bother to look at the booklet explaining the Project," Mrs. Crandall insisted. "They didn't bother to read it. They still think a nice 'Miracle Mile' (an intensively-developed, drive-in, commercial strip in nearby Lebanon, N.H.) would bring the tax rate way down."

"What is the next step?"

"We have not talked yet... Now we are going directly into zoning and we are going to get the same reaction, 'No-one is going to tell me what I am going to do with my land.'"

Across Hartland, to the east, towards Interstate 91, is Chet Eaton's house and land, a dairy farm with 42 milkers. Eaton is Chairman of the Town Planning Commission. He was working in the barn when I arrived. He talked about the prevailing currents of public thought.

"People do not sense there is a problem.. They do not see the Town developing that fast. People still think that the more development you have, the more people there are to pay taxes."

"Well, was there a problem?"

"The problem is there," said Eaton. "It is not immediate, but it is there."

"We have good listers," he explained. We found out that the land was not being treated all that bad." In one sense you could almost claim that Hartland already had tax stabilization, particularly when you looked at neighboring towns, Windsor to the south, Hartford to the north, where the land "was in" for two or three times what Hartland had.

Did this observation make sense? Was Hartland under siege? As an outsider, when you look at Hartland, drive its roads, -- it looks surprisingly intact, surprisingly rural. As Eaton remarked: "No-one seems to know why we are

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