

Charlotte Villages project outreach & public engagement: executive summary & themes, Winter-Spring 2024

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Outreach milestones:

- **Listening sessions & focus group meetings, Jan. 11 – April 11.** Groups reached: Charlotte Grange, Library & Senior Center staffs, CCS PTO, CCS administrators, Charlotte Land Trust, Sustainable Charlotte, Lewis Creek Association, Food Shelf, business owners, village developers & planners, Senior Center participants, West Village residents, East Village residents. *Total unduplicated participant count:* approx. 85 residents.
- **Design workshops:** In-person @ Charlotte Cong. Church – March 16 (55 participants); Virtual (online only) workshop – April 10 (13 participants), in addition to Steering Committee members. *Total unduplicated participant count:* 68 residents.
- **Community Questions Survey:** (accepted both written & online responses; active from early January – mid February). 115 total responses received. Topics included: how residents value & experience both villages today; travel patterns to access needed services; perceived obstacles to village-scale development; daily challenges; desired types of development; infrastructure & transportation needs, esp. re: bike & walk access & parking.
- **Visual Preference Survey:** (online only: active Feb. 22 – April 11). 184 responses received. Participants were shown a range of photos depicting different examples of walking paths, wayfinding (signage), commercial/mixed usage, housing, parking lots, community spaces, and village center layouts. Participants were asked to share their likes & dislikes of various examples shown, and rate them on a scale of 1 to 5 (dislike to like). Folks also had the opportunity to comment on the reasons for their ratings & many did.

Major Themes:

Residents enjoy & appreciate the villages as they are now, but want more options: Many respondents stated they love the charm of their historic, compact, and friendly villages. Some specific points of pride were the Library, Old Brick Store, and Stone's Throw Pizza. Respondents also said they loved the villages' rural character, existing architecture, locally owned businesses, the surrounding natural environment, and the dark skies at night.

That said, most residents would prefer to have more services located in the villages, rather than driving to Shelburne or Hinesburg to get their basic needs met. Some of the most popular responses were: (affordable) food options such as restaurants, cafes, bakeries, and grocery stores; a larger gas station; shops and services, such as a hair salon, general store with everyday items, or hardware store; a community center for recreational/ after-school activities; and health services.

Residents support increased density in the villages: most residents strongly support enabling more housing and limited commercial development in the villages, while maintaining their historic character. Small-scale, mixed-use projects are preferred over large, modern construction and commercial chain stores, reflecting a desire to preserve the community's unique identity. Respondents stated there was more potential for commercial development in West Charlotte than in East Charlotte (some residents believe that settlement doesn't constitute an actual village, just a rural crossroad and hamlet). While there was not a consensus among all respondents that more housing is needed, even those skeptical of development acknowledged that allowing small scale, infill-style housing could work in the villages.

Housing density, scale, and affordability are important: Residents want to maintain the small-town character and aesthetic of Charlotte's villages when considering new housing developments. There was a strong preference for housing that blends with existing historic architectural styles, and is scaled to the rural village setting. Many participants hope that allowing more density for housing on smaller lots in the villages will help facilitate urgently-needed housing for downsizing seniors, smaller households, and affordable homes for working adults with young families.

Re: affordability, there was concern for how new housing in Charlotte could be made affordable, and what "affordable" would actually mean (in terms of sticker cost, and for whom). Respondents value development that incorporates open spaces and shared use areas, such as 'cottage courts'. They oppose modern, multi-story apartment buildings (i.e., over 3 stories), and sprawling, intensely developed subdivisions such as Shelburne's Kwiniaska Ridge.

Both villages would benefit from more (or enhanced) community spaces: Many participants want the villages to provide more opportunities to interact casually in public with other residents. They expressed a need for welcoming and inclusive spaces and events that would serve the community as a whole, and strengthen bonds between people. These should balance serving the needs of Charlotte residents while encouraging visitors (such as bicyclists and hikers en route to Mt. Philo) to stop and enjoy Charlotte, rather than just passing through. There is strong support for small-scale improvements, such as:

- Indoor community gathering spaces that would facilitate friendly interactions, including potentially a cafe, bookshop, restaurant, or market/essentials store.
- Improving or adding public parks (adding a gazebo & picnic table in front of the Library; additional "pocket parks") to invite both formal and informal small group gatherings.
- Art or sculpture garden, outdoor seating, farmer's market, skating rink, picnic area, playground.
- Expanded network of connected walking paths between village destinations and beyond. (The lack of pedestrian infrastructure leads to an over-reliance on cars to access basic needs and services for residents, even between destinations within the villages.)

Speeding traffic in both villages is experienced as a significant and ongoing threat to resident safety and quality of life. Both village residents and other Charlotters noted that excessive speed by drivers through the villages, combined with the lack of sidewalks or multi-use paths separate from roadways, renders walking and cycling between village destinations unsafe. Many residents are frustrated that despite long-time resident demands, the Selectboard has not acted to reduce speed limits within the villages, and have not implemented typical traffic calming measures, such as:

- Reducing lane widths.
- Speed humps or tables.
- Locating businesses closer to the roads.
- Adding planted areas or street trees.
- Creating gateway signage and other treatments to indicate a change of use to drivers.

Infrastructure needed to support new development: Because Charlotte generally lacks available community wastewater capacity and water supply in the villages, many residents commented on these factors as a major obstacle to more development there. Particularly in the West Village, residents expressed fears that allowing any new construction will deplete private wells there. There is also concern about whether taxpayers would be 'on the hook' for the capital costs of building new sidewalks, water and wastewater systems, and road improvements.

It is not a question if Charlotte's villages will need additional water and wastewater capacity to grow, but how much, and where. Although it's beyond the scope of this project, the project team has been conducting preliminary research into potential water and wastewater solutions for the villages, and the range of options available to address these challenges. These solutions can best be explored in a Feasibility Study, which is planned by CCRPC as a follow-up to this Villages Project. However, first determining the capacity needs for the level of development desired, then having this preliminary information publicly available as part of this project's final report, will be important steps in laying the groundwork for capacity studies that will follow.

Some residents are concerned that current zoning rules actually encourage widely dispersed (sprawl) development in the rural district, while discouraging development in the villages. Some participants pointed out that the Town's current 5-acre zoning enables low-density sprawl, allowing large homes on large lots in rural areas of town, while blocking increased density in the villages, especially for new housing. A significant number of residents asked that in addition to revising zoning rules for the villages, this project also consider changing permitting rules for the rural district, perhaps by increasing open space requirements to better protect Charlotte's remaining wetlands, forests & farms. (This is outside the scope of this project, but certainly within the purview of the Planning Commission later on.)

Residents view both villages as larger than the defined village district boundaries on the zoning map. Participants' opinions of the functional extent of the East and West Villages varied, but generally were more expansive than the actual village boundaries. (This was particularly evident in the drawing exercises done during the design workshops.) This may indicate that a re-imagining of the village boundaries on the official zoning map (which define what types of uses are allowed, and dimensional standards) should be considered. Or it may mean that the areas outside of the village boundaries need to be consciously included in the village planning process. Or both!

Charlotte's reputation as a community hostile to development is itself seen as a barrier to change. There is anecdotal evidence that this attitude has discouraged some property owners and developers from even applying for permits. However, most residents did not themselves express personal resistance to growth. (Only about 3-10% of VPS respondents said they do not favor any type of housing or commercial growth in the villages.) Some noted this 'anti-growth' posture disproportionately impacts young families, who largely can't afford to move here now, given current housing costs driven in part by a very tight market, which is exacerbated by our often-contentious permitting process. Some expressed frustration about a few residents appealing the planned rebuild of the Charlotte Family Health Center, which they saw as evidence of a vocal minority overriding the needs of the community. Several respondents expressed the hope this project can effectively balance the competing desires of different demographic groups, and allow development that benefits the entire community.

There is support for Charlotte (or the state) creating a designated 'Park & Ride' lot in or near the West Village, to encourage residents who work outside of town (67% of employed residents) to carpool, and as a possible stop for future commuter bus service. Many residents said they already use existing parking lots as unofficial park & rides in town, including the Town Hall lot, the Library, and the Post Office. It's less clear if most residents support adding additional surface parking lots in either village, to provide overflow parking for occasional special events.

Overall conclusion of this outreach: there is strong interest in allowing Charlotte’s villages to grow to a modest extent. Most residents want to ensure that any growth is carefully planned, aligns with the town’s existing rural character, and supports community needs without excessive expansion. The community values its small-town aesthetics and natural landscapes, and prefers village development that would not compromise these aspects.

Next steps:

- The consultant team from Dubois & King are on track to produce a conceptual plan for both villages that will depict proposed village center designs for further discussion by mid-June. This plan will include housing, commercial and mixed use concept drawings, village road, street and multi-use path designs and street sections, examples of multi-use community green spaces, and possible park & ride lot designs.
- The draft conceptual plan will first be reviewed and vetted by the Planning Commission at a publicly-warned meeting(s) in late June or early July. Feedback received will be used by the consultants and project steering committee to refine that draft, to be finalized by mid-summer. (Note: this is a planning document only, not a final plan for formal adoption.)
- Meanwhile, the consultant team will work this summer to produce detailed draft bylaw changes that closely follow from the broad-brush parameters that were presented (and refined) in the village conceptual plan. The goal is for that team to present these bylaw changes as a package for review by the Planning Commission by Labor Day.
- The Planning Commission will review and mark up these draft amendments to the Land Use Regulations on a fast track early to mid-autumn. The Commission’s goal will be to forward these vetted LUR amendments (following formal public hearings) to the Selectboard for their consideration by January 2025.
- From that point forward, these proposed changes to the LURs will be in the Selectboard’s hands. Given recent changes in state statute, the Selectboard could modify the draft LURs, adopt them directly, or warn them for consideration by residents on the March 2025 town meeting ballot. They could also choose to do nothing at all.
- If some or all of the LURs amendments are adopted, CCRPC staff will work with the town next winter & spring to apply for public funding (grants) for engineering feasibility studies to scope and design community wastewater systems and water supplies sufficient to accommodate the level of anticipated housing and commercial growth in the two villages.
- The required rewrite of the Charlotte Town Plan in 2025 will also address these adopted LURs amendments, so that it is fully aligned with the amended zoning rules.

Source documents for this summary (available upon request; most are posted to the town’s website [here](#)):

- Community Questions Survey Results (5 pages)
- Notes from various listening sessions (20+ pages)
- March 16 Design Workshop Summary (12 pages)
- April 10 Virtual Design Workshop Summary (2 pages)
- Visual Preference Survey Results Summary (24 pages)