



# Charlotte East & West Villages Project Update #4

May 2024

Charlotte Planning & Zoning office

## **Initial Project Outreach wrapped in April. Here's a summary of how many residents participated, and what we learned:**

From January through April, the project Steering Committee reached hundreds of Charlotters through a variety of methods. More than 85 residents participated in 14 listening sessions held in various venues across town. Another 68 participants joined two design workshops, one in-person and the other virtual (online). Around 300 residents completed two online surveys.

We now have an emerging picture of the community's needs, preferences and hopes for the future of Charlotte's two historic village centers. Here's what we heard:

**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. 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 Charlotters would like to have more stores, restaurants and other services available right here in town, rather than driving to Shelburne or Hinesburg villages to get their basic needs met.

**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.

**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 lead to creating urgently-needed housing for downsizing seniors, smaller households, and affordable homes for working adults with young families.

**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.

**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 the town has not acted to reduce speed limits within the villages, and have not implemented typical traffic calming measures, such as:

- Reducing lane widths.
- Speed bumps or tables.
- 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 now 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, some residents fear 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. This research will be presented as part of the conceptual plan, due for release in the next few weeks.

**Some residents are concerned that current zoning rules 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. Many 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 wetlands, forests & farms.

**Residents view both villages as larger than the defined village district boundaries as shown on the town’s official zoning map.** Participants’ opinions of the functional extent of the East and West Villages varied, but generally were larger than the existing village zoning district. (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.

**Charlotte’s reputation as a community hostile to development is perceived as a barrier to change.** At times, it seems almost any proposed development becomes a ‘lightning rod’ for opposition. There is anecdotal evidence that this attitude has discouraged some property owners and developers from even applying for permits. However, most residents do 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.)

**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.

*A more detailed version of this summary, including a list of all outreach & public engagement activities completed to date, and upcoming project milestones, can be found on the town website's project page, at: [https://bit.ly/Charlotte\\_Village\\_Plan\\_project](https://bit.ly/Charlotte_Village_Plan_project)*

## **What's Next:**

- Consultants 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 publicly-warned meeting(s) in late June or early July, and also be made available for review. Public feedback will be used by the consultants and project steering committee to refine that draft, to be finalized by mid-summer. (Note: this will be a planning document only, not a final plan for formal adoption.)
- Meanwhile, the consultant team will work this summer to produce detailed draft zoning bylaw (LURs) 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.

## **Recent media coverage & online resources:**

- A recent article in the Charlotte News reported on the project's current status at: <https://www.charlottenewsvt.org/2024/05/02/opportunities-abound-for-your-vision-for-towns-future/>
- Consulting team's project website: [Village Master Plan story map website](#)
- Resources on 'smart growth' and why this concept is central to this project's focus: <https://www.planetizen.com/definition/smart-growth>
- An overview of planning principles that respect the historic character of Vermont's traditional neighborhoods & village centers, which is a core value and theme for this project: <https://vnrc.org/community-planning-toolbox/tools/vermont-traditional-neighborhoods/>

## **Where can I find out more?**

- If you have questions, concerns or suggestions to share, please contact the Town Planner at: [townplanner@townofcharlotte.com](mailto:townplanner@townofcharlotte.com) or at (802) 425-3533 ext. 206.
- The project Steering Committee invites every Charlotte resident to be part of this exciting visioning process. To learn more, visit the project website at: [http://bit.ly/Charlotte\\_Villages\\_project](http://bit.ly/Charlotte_Villages_project). You can also sign up to receive project updates (like this one) at this link: [https://bit.ly/Sign\\_up\\_for\\_notifications](https://bit.ly/Sign_up_for_notifications).