

# Charlotte Conservation Commission

August 28, 2023

To: Chair Charlie Pughe and Members of the Charlotte Planning Commission

RE: Vision

Every Charlotte Town Plan, past and present, has stated its residents' desire to maintain the rural character of our town and protect its open landscape and natural areas.

Over the years, extensive mapping has been undertaken to help identify critical wildlife habitat and corridors. Charlotters have voted to adopt land use regulations that help protect these habitat blocks, corridors, and other Areas of High Public Value. Despite all these efforts, town commissions and review boards have been reluctant to apply the regulations that protect these Areas of High Public Value. Instead, our Rural District has become more fragmented each decade – carved into 5 acre lots along our rural roads while our villages remain largely unchanged.

We are now at a crossroads. With growing development pressure and legislation at the state level that impedes our autonomy to grow our town as we see fit, now is the time to amend our land use regulations to save the fields and forests that our flora and fauna depend on.

While efforts have been made to conserve prime agricultural land through land trusts, little has been done to protect forest land. Forests support recreation, tourism, and the working landscape and are integral to Vermonters' way of life. Only about 29% of Charlotte is forested, but with a worsening climate crisis, we need the mitigating effects of mature forest blocks – such as absorbing carbon dioxide, filtering air and water pollutants, and protecting us from floods. Therefore, conserving forests will not only benefit biodiversity, but ultimately all of us.

The Charlotte Conservation Commission (CCC) knows that successful regulations will need broad support. One way to do that while protecting natural resources is a Natural Resource Overlay District. This district would:

- ✓ Allow development and offer more flexibility in siting than a Conservation District.
- ✓ Include forests, critical wildlife habitat, corridors, and other important natural areas.
- ✓ Have stricter parameters including but not limited to small lot sizes or clearly defined building envelopes outside of critical wildlife habitat, limits to road/driveway length, forest management plans, limited tree removal on slopes of 15% and up and no tree removal on slopes over 25%, subdivision master plans, etc.

In addition, our current 5-acre zoning leads to sprawl and fragmentation. We should consider separating lot size and density in all applicable districts – not just villages. For the Rural District and the potential Natural Resource Overlay District, the CCC suggests a lot size no smaller than 1 acre and a density no more than 1 dwelling unit per 10 acres. Decreasing density and requiring small lots clustered together towards the edge of large parcels will keep a larger area of forest or wildlife habitat intact. The town should also consider setting aside 80% of a parcel to be subdivided in a major subdivision as open space and connecting open space between developments.

Successful regulations also need to be clear, specific, and consistent and therefore enforceable, legally defensible, and fair to applicants. We need to replace ambiguous words like “should” or “may” with words like “shall” or “must.” Doing so will make it easier for the Development Review Board to interpret and apply our regulations and avoid costly court challenges.

Nearby towns have adopted similar regulations to preserve the rural character, open landscape, and natural areas that Vermonters value. To conclude, our proposals are neither radical nor unreasonable as they simply reflect the policies mandated in our Town Plan (Chapter 1, pages 3-5).

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

—The Charlotte Conservation Commission