

Planning & Zoning Issues



Photos: 400 Main Street on the corner of Putnam Square (top); parking near School Street and Pleasant Street (middle); residential apartments at 326 Pleasant Street (bottom).

Traditional land uses in central Bennington include commercial development along Main Street and North Street; large, high-style single family houses and institutions along much of Pleasant Street; and smaller scale, denser residential development along Union Street. The smaller side streets reflect the character of the larger streets which surround them. Although much of their original character still remains, serious intrusions and deletions have eroded the historic and esthetic qualities of Bennington's primary streets.

The once-continuous line of buildings along Main Street has been interrupted by new buildings whose design has not been carefully thought out, and by voids left after fires and demolition. Parking lots along Main Street and Pleasant Street break up streetscapes. The west end of Union Street has taken on a commercial character in contrast with the residential nature of the street. While current zoning sometimes reflects use changes that have been made in the past, in some cases it also serves to encourage more of the same, to the potential detriment of the town's character.

A look at the recent zoning maps for the center of Bennington will help explain this evolution. Central Bennington was overlaid by three separate land-use zones as defined by the Town of Bennington's Zoning By-Laws adopted in April, 1982. The western half of the area falls in the Central Business Zone (CB-10). This zoning permitted the kinds of uses which have traditionally been found here - public and semi-public uses, retail, offices and financial institutions, restaurants, hotels, places of commercial amusement, services, dwellings and, under certain conditions, warehouses.

A small area in the northwest corner is zoned Village Commercial 12 (VC-12). VC-12 zoning permits public and semi-public uses, retail, offices, restaurants, hotels and motels, commercial amusement, services, funeral homes, dwellings and, under certain conditions, warehouses. These uses are consistent with the patterns of use which have evolved in this area over the years.

However, the eastern portion of Central Bennington, including all of the south side of Union Street, is zoned Office and Apartment Use (OA-20). OA-20 zoning permits public and semi-public use, dwellings for up to six families, new residential development, offices and customary home occupations. Conditional uses include restaurants, motels, public parks, public buildings, clubs, community care homes, services and retail. The overwhelming character of the streets covered by OA-20 zoning is now single-family residential, and has been so historically. While many of the permitted uses can be accommodated by the existing buildings, many cannot

be. For new construction, the OA-20 zoning required lots which are much larger than most existing ones. This could encourage demolition of existing buildings to assemble larger lots, resulting in a loss of historic buildings and a radical change in scale, character and use. The results of this kind of zoning have been seen at the eastern end of Pleasant Street, where a few insensitively designed apartment buildings have been constructed. Their massing, placement and poor design have harmed the street, and new buildings like them could do more of the same.

Carefully modifying the existing zoning would help eliminate the possibility for damage like this in the future. Planning and zoning can be powerful tools for protecting the sense of place and history which gives central Bennington its special identity. If thoughtfully designed, they can be powerful forces for growth at the same time, encouraging positive development in harmony with the existing environment.

Residents and visitors alike can feel a particular character - a sense of time, place and architecture - in Bennington's historic commercial and the residential streets. Just what makes up this character? Familiar landmarks like the clock at the Chittenden Bank? The way buildings curve around the corners at Putnam Square? Porches on Union Street houses? Storefronts along Main Street? Does character come from elegant neo-classical ornament or from straightforward factory walls; from Greek Revival cottages or from Queen Anne mansions? The answer is that Bennington's sense of time and place comes from all of these, from the largest buildings down to the smallest details. Bennington's character has built up piece by piece, and it continues to evolve as its buildings and streetscapes change every day.



This handbook looks closely at historic character in the center of Bennington - an area including much of Main Street, North and South Streets, Union Street, Pleasant Street, and the smaller streets around them. It is intended to help in understanding the features and forces which create the area's character, and the different ways in which this character is diminished and enhanced.

Much of what made Bennington in the past still makes Bennington today. Many houses and a good number of commercial buildings have kept their historic character over the years. Thoughtful owners have helped others to regain it. Examples like the rehabilitation of the yellow brick Ritchie Block and the dramatic uncovering of the Pennysaver Building's original facade show what an eye for detail and a sense of pride in Bennington's architectural resources can accomplish.

But deterioration, hard use and changes in taste and function have caused Bennington to lose something, too. Industries and businesses which once thrived in Bennington, such as the nationally famous Norton and United States potteries, now remain only as archeological sites underneath yards and pavement. Old buildings, demolished or burned, have been replaced by parking lots or uninteresting one-story infill buildings that weaken the continuity of streets or blur the lines defining important places like Putnam Square. Destruction of ornamental details, covering of walls and decorative trim with aluminum siding, and removal or covering of historic storefronts have all contributed to a slow erosion of the very things that make Bennington a place with character.

Character and use have always gone hand in hand. The ways in which land and buildings are used, and the planning and zoning regulations which govern this use, play a powerful role in shaping the fate of all historic places. This is clearly true in Bennington, where use trends and current zoning regulations hold the power to build on the town's traditional character, or to transform it profoundly.



Photos: Bennington Police Station on South Street, formerly the Post Office (top left); window along River Street (top right); view outside the Putnam Hotel on Main Street (bottom).