

Building on success

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By The Times Argus | on January 13, 2018

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At a time when political malaise, overwork and ever-expanding reliance on electronics threatens positive community life, celebrating and building on successes becomes more important than ever. The recent protection of land at Exit 4 in Randolph is just such a local success. Two years ago, a massive, sprawling big-box commercial development was proposed to overtake the open farmland that borders the Interstate in Randolph. An outpouring of support arose from across the state and the region when community members joined farmers and environmental advocates to first highlight the travesty of this proposal in the Act 250 proceedings, and then purchase the land. Instead of commercial development, it will be permanently protected and in the hands of farmers.

The Act 250 process earned its mettle when testimony showed that paving farmland to foster sprawl by the interstate should be a nonstarter. Farmers testified about the value of the land for growing food and crops. The protection of the land means that Randolph will not see the sprawling blight that exists at Tafts Corners outside Burlington, and along many other highways throughout New England. Instead, the community, and not developers' profits, will decide the future of this iconic landscape at the gateway to Randolph.

The challenge now is how to build on this success. Across Vermont, sprawling development still threatens communities, farms and forests. The threats are particularly strong along Vermont's two interstate highways, where the exits continue to be highly attractive to big-box and retail development. When left unchecked, these developments along the interstates burden community services, like water and sewer, and force us all to pick up the tab when additional lanes and traffic signals are required to accommodate the new rush of cars and trucks.

Fortunately, there are some good resources to turn to. When Howard Dean was governor, he issued an executive order that highlighted the threats to communities from sprawl by the interstates, and directed state agencies to put policies in place to avoid this blight and to support development in downtown areas. Building on this, when Jim Douglas was governor, his administration produced design guidelines for planning and development at Vermont interstate interchanges. Both these resources provide valuable information and guidance and highlight how communities can provide for protecting land while also supporting commerce.

Fast-forward a little more than a decade and the Vermont Legislature now has a bill to put many of these good policies into law. The bill would limit sprawl development at interstate interchanges. It would prioritize conserving farmland in these areas, as well as protecting other scenic, natural and historic features. It would also prioritize the investment in safe travel to avoid the high cost of new development causing highway congestion and expensive rebuilds. And it would support development in downtown areas to foster stronger communities.

Tight budgets mean making sure we spend money wisely. Climate change means growing more food closer to home, keeping more natural features intact to foster resilience, and supporting commerce in our downtowns where people can live, work and shop nearby.

Vermont's interstates are a statewide resource and should not be handed over to ill-conceived and expensive sprawl. Instead, Vermont law can build on the success in Randolph and foster similar success in other communities. As shown in Randolph, supporting local farms helps communities be more resilient to climate change and provides a valuable antidote to the political malaise of our times.

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