

**Village of Johnson  
Municipal Development Plan  
2013 -2018**

*Adopted by the Village Board of Trustees on June 10, 2013*

This Plan was prepared by:  
**The Johnson Planning Commission**

Maps were created by:  
**The Lamoille County Planning Commission**

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## **VISION**

The Plan's vision is to make Johnson Village one of Lamoille's most attractive and healthy communities. This includes making the Village a desired location for people to live, operate their business, attend higher education, visit, and recreate. The components that will allow this vision to be met are in existence or are attainable. Continuing to work towards this vision takes a commitment of the community and various players. The effective implementation of this Plan will assist in allowing the Village of Johnson to attain the desired future for the community. The Village Development Plan can set the framework for this vision.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE MUNICIPALITY**

Johnson is a town of 3,446 people nestled in the heart of Lamoille County. The town is comprised of approximately 29,492 acres or 46 square miles. Mountains and forest dominate Johnson's landscape and the spine of the Green Mountains winds through the town northeast to southwest. Butternut Mountain is the highest peak that falls entirely within the town. The peak of the 3,715-foot Sterling Mountain (also known as White Face Mountain) is located just south of the Johnson town line.

Johnson, granted in 1782 to Samuel Johnson and others, was chartered as a town in January, 1792. In 1856, Johnson annexed part of the town of Sterling, and in 1894 the Village of Johnson was incorporated. Today, the Village is home to about 43% percent of Johnson's population, or 1,443 people. The Town and Village of Johnson remain separate governmental bodies.

Johnson Village represents the community's cultural, commercial and institutional center. The Village is a compact community that is home to a number of unique businesses, heritage buildings and residential neighborhoods. The Village has long been a center for education and today up to 42% of in-town jobs are in educational services. Johnson State College's roots go back to Johnson Academy School, founded in 1828. Today, Johnson State College has approximately 1,950 students. Founded by artists in 1984, the Vermont Studio Center is the largest international artists and writers' Residency Program in the United States, hosting 50 visual artists and writers each month from across the country and around the world. The Vermont Studio Center, in conjunction with Johnson State College's Fine and Performing Arts Program represent a uniquely gifted and diverse artistic community present in Johnson year round.

The Gihon and Lamoille rivers are a major recreational and scenic resource. In the past, the Gihon provided the foundation for Johnson's water-powered mill economy. The first generating plant in town was located on the falls just north of the Power House Bridge. Johnson Woolen Mills dates back to 1836, when sheep outnumbered cows, and to date remains a core feature of the Johnson Village business district. Around the turn of the century, talc was the prominent industry in Johnson. Today, trees continue to be Johnson's largest crop – for fuel, saw logs, pulp, Christmas trees and maple products. Stowe and Smugglers Notch Ski Resorts located in neighboring communities of Stowe and Cambridge are major contributors to the regional tourism economy.

## **VILLAGE GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION**

Johnson Village is an incorporated village within the Town of Johnson, established by Charter in 1894. It is governed by an elected Board of five Village Trustees, an elected Clerk and Treasurer and various other officers as established in the Village By-Laws. The Village operations and budgets are divided into several departments: General, Water, Sewer, Electric and Fire.

There is a Municipal Manager (shared with the town) who reports directly to the Trustees and has overall responsibility for these departments. Day to day department operations are overseen by a Superintendent of Public Works. The Fire Department has its own officers, who report to the Trustees. Water and Sewer Departments have Chief and Assistant Operators and the Electric Department has a Head Lineman. There are 7 full time "field" employees.

Office staff is also shared with the town, as is the Municipal Office building and equipment and systems. There is a Clerk/Treasurer, Asst. Clerk/Treasurer, Accounts Receivable/Billing Clerk and Administrative Assistant. A part time Community and Economic Development Coordinator plays an important role in promoting community and economic development activities, planning initiatives, grant research, application and administration of grants and programs, dissemination of information, community liaison and other critical functions.

Overall, these units of village government provide a very high level of service at relatively low cost. Though town and village are separate legal entities, in many ways the town and village have "functionally" merged. There is a great deal of sharing of equipment, personnel, land and buildings and resources. Town and village governing bodies are committed to the policies and practices which benefit their citizens.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE PLAN**

The principal purpose for a municipal development plan is to be a guide for the achievement of a community vision. The plan is not a regulation, rather, it is a document meant to state a desired direction for growth and development. The framework for planning in Vermont has been established by two major pieces of legislation. The first is 24 V.S.A. chapter 117, the Municipal and Regional Planning and Development Act, also known as the Vermont Planning and Development Act or Chapter 117. The second is 10 V.S.A. chapter 151, known as Act 250, which regulates land use and development projects. A municipality is not required to plan, but is enabled by statute to develop and adopt a municipal plan. If a community chooses to do so, Chapter 117 sets forth the elements that are required as part of a municipal plan.

An adopted plan has the potential for many uses. The Planning Manual for Vermont Municipalities recognizes the following uses of the plan:

*A long-term guide:* The plan is a long-term guide by which to measure and evaluate public and private proposals that affect the future physical, social, and economic environment of the community.

*A basis for community programs and decision-making:* The plan is a guide to help achieve community goals. Information in the plan is used for developing the recommendations contained in a capital budget and program or an impact fee program, for establishing a community development program, and for providing direction and



content of other public and private local initiatives, such as, farmland protection, recreation development and housing.

*A basis for municipal regulatory actions:* The plan serves as a foundation for the provisions of zoning regulations, subdivision regulations, an official map, shoreland bylaws, and flood hazard area bylaws, and as a guide for the decisions made under these regulations.

*A source of information:* The plan is a valuable source of information for local boards, commissions, citizens and businesses, and other governmental organizations, such as, neighboring towns, state agencies and regional planning commissions.

*A source for planning studies:* Few plans can address every issue in sufficient detail. Therefore, many plans often recommend further studies to develop policies or strategies to meet a specific need.

*A standard for review at the state and regional levels:* Act 250 and other state regulatory processes identify the municipal plan as a standard for review of applications. Municipal plans are important to the development of intermunicipal, regional and state agency plans and programs.

#### **HOW THIS PLAN RELATES TO THE TOWN PLAN**

The Town of Johnson is a separate governmental entity that has its own municipal development plan. The Town Plan addresses issues and strategies pertinent to the Town. The current Town Plan will expire in August 2016. Since the Planning Commission is responsible for drafting both town and village plans, the plans have been drafted to be supportive of each other. In the future, the concept of merging the Village and Town Plan may be explored.

#### **HOW THIS PLAN RELATES TO PLANS OF NEIGHBORING TOWNS**

Per statutory requirements, and with an input from the Regional Planning Commission, copies of the proposed *Village of Johnson Municipal Development Plan* were sent to the Town of Johnson, the Lamoille County Planning Commission and the Department of Economic, Housing and Community Development. As mentioned above, the village plan was reviewed for consistency with the Town of Johnson plan, as the Village is an incorporated Village within the Town of Johnson. The town plan will be reviewed for consistency with plans of adjacent towns at the appropriate time.

#### **HOW THIS PLAN RELATES TO THE REGIONAL PLAN**

Regional Plans now only need to be updated every eight years instead of the every five years required for municipal plans. We believe municipal plans should be accorded the same time frames for plan updates to be consistent with regional planning required effort in this regard. The Regional Plan was reviewed for consistency with the municipal

plan and was found to be consistent with the village plan. Conversely, our review indicates no conflicts between the Village plan and the regional plan.

**HOW THIS PLAN IS CONSISTENT WITH THE ACT 200 PLANNING GOALS  
AS DEFINED IN 24 VSA SECTION 4302**

24 VSA Section 4302 sets forth 4 general planning goals and 13 specific sub-goals. 24 VSA Section 4382 sets forth the specific plan elements which a municipal plan must contain. It states the plan for municipality *may be consistent with the goals of 4302.* 24 VSA Section 4350 sets for the process for obtaining regional approval of the municipal plan. It requires approval if the plan is: (A) Consistent with the goals established in section 4302; (B) Is compatible with the Regional Plan; (C) Is compatible with approved plans of other municipalities in the region; (D) and contains all the elements included in section 4382 (a) (1) – (10) of this title.

Regional Planning Commission staff has indicated this plan cannot receive regional approval unless it contains a “statement” about citizen participation during the planning process, arguing that without such a statement they have no way to measure compliance. We see no statutory requirement for inclusion of “statements” in the plan regarding consistency with the goals. We believe it is the statutory obligation of the Regional Planning Commission to make determinations for consistency with the goals. The Regional Planning Commission could make such a determination by direct consultation with the affected community, for example.

Denial of a request for regional approval has negative consequences for the Town and the Village and while we strongly disagree with the approach for plan review and approval being taken by the regional planning commission, we offer this statement regarding consistency of the village plan with the goals established in section 4302.

We also note that the goals of Act 200 were never envisioned to be used as a specific standard for review. 4302 (b) states “It is also the intent of the legislature that municipalities, regional planning commissions, and state agencies shall engage in a continuing planning process that will further the goals”. They are goals, and by their nature and definition are broad statements to be used as a guide to the process of planning to be applied to state, regional and local governments as they develop their plans. These goals are intended to provide a generic framework for the diverse levels of planning efforts from large state agencies all the way down to municipal plans. They are not and never were intended to be measurable standards, and review of our plan by the regional planning commission for “consistency” with these goals should be undertaken with an awareness of the purpose of the goals.

Goal 1. The Town and Village have a strong demonstrated record in local planning efforts which have resulted in implementation of several impressive projects, such as the Main St Improvement Project. The Town and Village have employed professional management and community and economic development personnel to assist the elected boards and commissions with preparation and implementation of projects. The

combination of these efforts has enabled the over 15 million dollars worth of projects to be constructed over the last dozen years. This record should speak for itself.

Goal 2. The Town and Village have encouraged citizen participation and decision making at the most local level possible. It should be noted that these goals are more than 20 years old and do not recognize the reality of trying to encourage direct citizen involvement in something as amorphous as planning. The regrettable reality is that despite the laudable goal of 4302, citizen participation is on the decline at all levels of local governance. We are lucky if 8 or 10 people attend Village Annual Meeting where budgets are approved that have the very direct impact of setting tax rates. It is an understatement to say that widespread citizen participation is not something we are likely to achieve.

That said, notices were posted on Front Porch Forum, Friends of Johnson municipal newsletter and the Town webpage seeking involvement and soliciting comment on the plan. Any such comments or feedback will be carefully considered. The required public hearings will be held and citizen input will be considered and incorporated where appropriate. Any member of the public may attend any meetings of any Town or Village board or commission and are encouraged to do so.

Goal 3. This plan has been developed with consideration of the use of resources and the consequences of growth, first and foremost of our community (the town and village) and with consideration of the region and state.

Goal 4. This goal is another dated goal from the late 1980's and while laudable, is also very amorphous and difficult to quantify in any meaningful way. To the extent that we can work creatively together to develop and implement plans we are open to doing so, with the clear understanding that our planning efforts must be directed first and foremost to the needs of our community.

With regard to the specific sub-goals enumerated in section 4302, this plan addresses them in each plan section as deemed appropriate and applicable by the planning commission. These sub-goals are written so broadly as to encompass the planning efforts of large state agencies, to regional plans and down to the level of municipal plans. It should be noted therefore, that both the goals and the specific plan elements refer to things that are not applicable to a plan for an incorporated village within a town. While we may not have listed every exception explicitly, we hope that regional planning commission staff can apply some level of common sense in their review. As an example of plan elements that are not meaningful in our plan are: detailed review of and policies relating to identification and protection of agricultural and forestry resources within the village limits. We think it should be obvious that this level of review is most appropriate for the town level planning efforts. The village also does not own or maintain the highway system in the village (the town does) and therefore the transportation section does not address this.

## **GENERAL AND SPECIFIC PLANNING GOALS**

## GENERAL PLANNING GOAL

The general planning goal is to provide a healthy, clean and safe place for the population to live.

The Plan will make efforts to identify and plan for those uses that contribute to a high quality of life for people that choose to live in the Village. This includes the consideration of links between urban form, the natural environment, the economy, and quality of life.

Quality of life indicators, which can positively affect the health of individuals and the Village of Johnson include: the extent to which basic needs (shelter, food transportation) are met; the level of economic security and the range of employment opportunities for residents; safety and security of residents; opportunities for education and skills development; well-being (social, emotional, physical) of individuals; the extent to which individuals feel part of the community; and, the conservation of cultural and natural heritage features. The Village of Johnson is a compact, attractive and healthy community. Village residents benefit from the diverse opportunities offered by the community's commercial, institutional and recreational uses.

The Johnson Planning Commission has prepared a municipal development plan that intends to build upon some of the existing attributes located in the Village and develop other attributes so that the community attains certain goals. The overall objectives of the Village's planning efforts are directed to the following:

- a) Continuous downtown enhancement and the development of linkages between the downtown and community's recreational, cultural and educational assets.
- b) Support of planning efforts that address the character of future development in the Village
- c) Enhancement of recreation opportunities for the benefit of local community and economy.

## SPECIFIC PLANNING GOALS

*To encourage retail and business (e.g. professional and business offices) as well as appropriately scaled commercial/light industrial and mixed use development in the Village.* The Village's downtown core is a relatively compact area. The downtown is the home for a 30+ retail businesses, financial and local-government institutions and non-profit organizations. Main Street businesses include: Johnson Woolen Mills, Marvin's Country Store, Ebenezer Books, The Hub Pizzeria & Pub, Edelweiss Bakery and Café, and Lovin' Cup Café. Johnson is an attractive community for residents and visitors alike. This Plan envisions making the downtown center even more inviting.

Recent efforts have identified suitable locations for light industrial/commercial development with the possibility of mixed-use residential development at the west end of the Village and along the rte 15 corridor. The area currently is predominantly mixed use, encompassing a re-developed mobile home park, single family residences, a convenience

store service station, the Vermont Electric Coop headquarters and maintenance facility and office space. This area is well served by municipal water, sewer and electric utilities and has good access to Rte 15. It is likely that some existing single family housing will be converted to small business or commercial use, given the access to utilities and transportation, but mixed use should continue to be encouraged in this district. Light industrial/commercial development is also encouraged where there is access to services and transportation and there are not flood zoning issues. This plan amendment recognizes and addresses these changes and modifies the district boundaries. District boundaries attempt to follow property lines so as to eliminate conflicts between districts.

Additionally, the town and village established a Town Sewer Service Area immediately adjacent to this district which allocates 25,000 gpd of sewer capacity for development. Less than half of the capacity has been allocated, so this area should be considered as prime area for future development with commercial/light industrial and mixed use residential development encouraged.

*To establish Johnson Village as a preferred location for compatible commercial, light industrial and residential development in the Town.* There are various residential neighborhoods in the Village of Johnson. The retention and maintenance of the housing stock is largely the responsibility of the landowner. However, planning efforts can help ensure that the neighborhoods are protected from potentially incompatible land uses. It can also help ensure that the landowners are provided with a degree of assurance that their investment in their housing is securely protected.

*To promote the Village of Johnson's diverse cultural, educational and community assets.* The Village of Johnson is fortunate to be the home of Johnson State College and the Vermont Studio Center. The College is a major employer and offers various benefits to Johnson's residents and businesses. However, the College is sometimes the source of conflicts between Village residents and college students, particularly in the residential neighborhoods. The Vermont Studio Center (VSC) is an internationally recognized arts facility that has a significant presence in the Village. The VSC has acquired and renovated a number of buildings, some of which are in high-profile locations. It is also a key employer in the Village.

The Village will promote itself as the educational and cultural 'heart' of Lamoille County. It will develop a strong connection to the Studio Center and the College and will seek to develop a higher profile of both institutions in the Village.

*To conserve and protect the natural and heritage features which contribute to Johnson's unique and attractive character.* The Village of Johnson; the Lamoille and Gihon Rivers; the lands adjacent to the rivers; historic buildings; the orientation of buildings to one another that contributes to the pleasant character and atmosphere of the community; the Lamoille Valley Railroad corridor; surrounding rural lands and hillsides.

*To promote the community's tourism and recreation opportunities.* The location of the Village along Route 15; a number of unique businesses that attract visitors to the Village; the attractive qualities of the Village itself (compact, heritage buildings); location between Stowe and Smuggler's Notch ski areas; proximity to the Long Trail hiking trail; fall foliage.

**PLAN, ELEMENTS AND DATA**

