

Bristol Planning Commission's final report to the Bristol Selectboard on the amendments to the Town of Bristol Zoning Regulations, January 2017

24 V.S.A. 4442 requires the Bristol Planning Commission (PC) to amend the report it filed with the Selectboard (SB) accompanying the PC's draft amendments to the Bristol Zoning Regulations (November 1, 2016). This report, submitted on behalf of the PC, reflects the Selectboard's changes to the amendments to the Bristol Zoning Regulations now to be considered by Bristol's voters in March, 2017.

Bringing the Town's zoning regulations into conformity with the Town Plan, using the new planning areas as a guide

In November 2012 Bristol's voters approved a new Town Plan ("Plan") that mandated expanded residential and economic opportunities. The Plan divided the entire town of Bristol into three planning areas and created a vision for each area. The three planning areas include the Village Planning Area, based roughly around the former village of Bristol, the Rural Agricultural Planning Area, consisting largely of Bristol's agricultural and rural settlement areas, and the Rural Conservation Area encompassing the remainder of Bristol including most of its forested area. Zoning Regulations implement the vision of the Plan. Accordingly, after passage of the Plan, Bristol's Planning Commission turned its focus to creating a new set of Zoning Regulations that would implement the vision of Bristol's 2012 Plan without disrupting traditional development patterns and trends.

Zones within the Rural Conservation Planning Area and Rural Agricultural Planning Area

The PC began its work by reviewing and considering each zoning district. The PC started with the Rural Conservation Planning Area. It retains one zone, the Conservation zone, within that area and seeks to foster uses designed to conserve the character of that area mandated for expanded residential and economic opportunities while keeping that zone intact based on environmental, forest industry, and natural resources objectives and uses. One exception to preserving the Conservation zone involved creating a new zone in 2014, the Bristol Pond Camp zone, which allows very limited development of seasonal camps in a small area around Bristol Pond, largely acknowledging the existing development pattern that already exists in this area.

The PC reviewed the Rural Agricultural Planning Area and decided to retain four zones there: the Rural Agricultural 5, 2, and 1 zones and the Commercial zone. The PC sought to encourage agricultural uses and preserve the right to create compatible rural residential and commercial development in this planning area. The PC also sought to allow home businesses and other enterprises that support agricultural activities. The PC recognized that certain commercial activities that already exist in this area would probably not work well within the Village Planning Area. Accordingly, it sought to expand in this area commercial opportunities to the west side of Rt. 116 (south of Rt. 17) to create a place for light industrial but not large retail growth that would compete with Main Street. The PC also expanded number of proposed commercial and business uses allowed in this zone.

Zones within the Village Planning Area

In 2013 the PC began discussing zones within the Village Planning Area (VPA). The VPA, which encompasses the former village, includes a large number of very similar zoning districts. The PC sought to combine some similar districts, retain retail and business opportunities along Main Street / Rt. 116, create mixed use business opportunities within and adjacent to the "village" and preserve, expand and strengthen Bristol's residential neighborhoods. The PC started its review in the northern portion of the VPA and concluded this would be a good area to allow expansion of Bristol's residential neighborhoods. A new zone called "Village Residential" will allow for greater density of residential development (in locations previously zoned RA5 and RA2).

In the area around Main Street, the PC created an expanded Village Business zone, replacing the current Block Commercial and current Neighborhood Commercial (NC) zones now proposed for elimination. Along Rt. 116 the PC revised the uses in the Residential, Office, Commercial (ROC) zone to allow for a larger and more cohesive “core” traditional business zone.

The PC considered the High Density Residential zone, leaving the boundaries nearly unchanged. The PC then proposed an expanded ROC zone by absorbing the remainder of the existing NC zone area. Following, the PC created a new proposed Village Mixed zone, encompassing the current Mixed zone areas, and absorbing and eliminating the current Municipal and Residential Commercial zones in order to encourage a larger, more cohesive zone that would accommodate light industrial uses. (Note: immediately to the west of the new Village Mixed zone lies the Commercial zone where even larger or more intense industrial uses are proposed for consideration.)

The Recreational zone remains unchanged except for the addition of the lot owned by the Bristol Recreation Club along West Street being added back into the REC zone.

The PC then reviewed, again, each of the proposed zones, including the zone boundaries, revising the narrative Objectives and Guidelines, generally increasing Allowed Uses (permitted, Site Plan review, and Conditional Use Review), and revising Dimensional Standards to ensure the new regulations reflect current development practices and would extend the fabric of Bristol’s village to include new development.

Addition of many new and newly defined uses and development of Site Plan review for certain Permitted uses

The amended Bristol Zoning Regulations propose Site Plan review criteria. Site Plan review would be required for particular permitted uses throughout Bristol. Citing the Town Plan’s emphasis on (and encouragement of) residential and business development, and the numerous proposed additional and newly defined uses in every zone (from approximately 56 currently listed to 83 uses now proposed), the PC understands that a new level of attention would be required to address site plan features of proposed projects. These features need to be environmentally sound, energy efficient, and protective of the existing character of neighboring properties. Site Plan review would be the responsibility of the Planning Commission, different from Conditional Use review which falls under the purview of the Zoning Board of Adjustment.

A newly organized and clearer document

After that large body of work was completed, the PC proceeded to review the remaining elements of the Town of Bristol Zoning Bylaws & Regulations, now referred to as simply the Bristol Zoning Regulations. Since January 2016, the PC worked to propose a draft document that presents an order of business that more logically follows the development and zoning permit application process and begins with a clearly written introductory overview.

Public hearings and final approval for consideration at Town Meeting, March 6-7, 2017

On Tuesday, November 1, 2016, following its October 4th public hearing and subsequent meetings, and making changes to reflect important public input, the PC voted to convey its draft updated zoning regulations to the SB believing the document would implement the vision of the Town Plan, expand business and residential opportunities particularly within the Village Planning Area, and preserve the conservation and agricultural areas for rural residential housing and working lands-based activities and conservation.

The SB held its own public hearings on November 21st and December 19th and also discussed the PC's draft at its December 5th meeting where it received further public input. The SB made several changes to the PC's draft as follows:

1. Elimination of a proposed new overlay zone at Daniel's Four Corners, where Routes 116 and 17 intersect. This newly proposed overlay zone, like the existing overlay zones for the Downtown Design Review area and the Flood Hazard Area, would have called for special development and design standards in the area of Daniel's Four Corners in order to guide development in that area as an important entrance to Bristol's core.
2. Change to the zoning district in the Rocky Dale area proposed by the PC to be Residential 1 (RA1) so that the zone's area to the south/east of Rt. 116 now be Village Mixed (VM) in order to account for current and possible future business and economic development there.
3. Change to Section 603 regarding the storage of campers on private property within zone setback requirements.
4. Change to Section 730 regarding the storage of particular vehicles within the High Density Residential (HDR) and Village Residential (VR) zones.

At its December 19th meeting, the SB approved its amendments to Bristol Zoning Regulations now for consideration by the voters of Bristol at Town Meeting, March 6, 2017 and for vote on March 7, 2017. The document may be reviewed at the Town Offices at Holley Hall and online at the Town of Bristol's website.

January, 2017

Compiled and submitted by Bristol Planning Commission chair, Susan Kavanagh and co-chair John Elder