

Mixed Use and Commercial Areas

The city's Mixed Use and Commercial areas share some features among their origins, though over time and shaped by City policy and investment, the current and future intent for these areas have diverged substantially.

History

The first wave of commercial development in the City began before WWII with the establishment of the Burlington Airport. Following the War and continuing through the 1950s and 1960s commercial corridors built up quickly along Shelburne Road, Williston Road, Dorset Street, and portions of Hinesburg Road. I-89 and I-189 were built in this same time period. Business parks north and south of the Airport followed shortly after. In the 1970s, the City began to consider the creation of a downtown for South Burlington, in the area that would become City Center.

Traditional zoning designed cities where residential uses and commercial uses were completely separated from each other to prevent incompatible uses from conflicting uses. What began as a tool to separate industry from housing evolved to create commercial-only strips in many cities. Over time the negative impacts of many commercial uses that created this system have declined as intensive manufacturing and other industrial uses with nuisance-level noise, smoke, odor, and dust have become less prevalent. This means that for most commercial uses being located near residential uses is less likely to cause conflict.

In parallel, the negative effects of commercial-only strips began to be seen, as they provide limited opportunities for community building, are inefficient uses of land, and foster auto-dependent travel and land use. A shift in City policy and regulations began to see residential components added to Dorset Street in the 1990s and subsequently to the Farrell Street areas in the 2000s. Most recently, the City has placed an emphasis on mixed use development along the Shelburne Road Corridor, along Williston Road west of Hinesburg Road/Patchen Road.

As our needs for housing increase and we pursue goals to reduce vehicle miles traveled, increase walkability, and create vibrant spaces in South Burlington, the timing is appropriate to review past policy and consider assigning more areas of the city to allow a mix of uses. This Plan opens the next iterations of this evolution: considering allowing some residential activity with certain business parks and, in parallel, reviewing whether some areas of the city should be reserved only for certain industrial and heavy commercial activities that are truly incompatible with housing.

Balanced Mixed Use Areas

As noted, very few areas of South Burlington originally developed as true mixed use areas. South Burlington is intentionally changing that pattern. The deliberate and long-standing goal to develop City Center into a vibrant, walkable downtown for the city with dense residential uses, pedestrian-scale commercial, and inviting public spaces is the first truly mixed-use environment being constructed. This is facilitated in part by the fact that the core portion of City Center was effectively unbuilt until recently.

A parallel effort and evolution of landscape is underway along the Shelburne Road corridor. The future of South Burlington will include City Center, and similar spaces and intentional development in

other areas including nodes along Shelburne Road. It will take continued, focused effort by the City to fully establish City Center, but the next focus should be other development areas for similar projects.

Analysis and Objectives

Balanced mixed-use areas, including City Center, rely on robust public living spaces for residents and visitors. These areas will orient development to community-oriented, pedestrian-scale, small public areas to develop a network of walkable park and public amenity spaces with a full slate of events, programs, and private rentals. Utilization of existing properties and amenities, like the University Mall property, also provide opportunities for redevelopment and private investment in public-oriented events, programs, and retail and restaurants that provide vibrant evenings. Utilization of public rights-of-way for street events and public art adds to the sense of the streetscape being a community living room.

These areas will be, with investment and focus, South Burlington's urban areas. Businesses and residences will be co-located and complementary to each other. Small commercial establishments, like cafes, coffeeshops, locally-owned retail, small offices and startups, and innovative commercial spaces, serve the dense residences above and around. Signage, parking, public spaces, and public art are more urban in scale, type, and character. Landscaping should be thoughtful, maintaining a healthy tree canopy and streetscape while recognizing the urban character of the area. Residents here will be able to walk, bike, or take transit to employment, shopping, and entertainment. To that end, these areas should be well connected by transit and be hubs for both the transit system and bike/ped network.

These formerly commercial areas share common challenges. The current built environment consists principally of large-lot development, larger-format single story buildings with parking in front. Sidewalks have been installed along the principal roads, but the street rights-of-way remain dominated by vehicular travel lanes with minimal green strips and limited presence of street trees. Off the principal roads, pedestrian facilities exist only in part. Park space is limited and, where they are do exist, they are not directly accessible from the commercial areas.

Even considering those challenges, the opportunity for re-development in these areas is substantial and is being realized parcel by parcel. South Burlington has invested significantly in City Center and invested in infrastructure projects that will support realizing the vision of City Center through TIF District financing. It has to be a primary goal of the City to support growth within the TIF District to reach the revenue target to finance these projects.

Principally Commercial Areas, with supporting residential

While the City's principal transportation corridors – notably Shelburne Road and Williston Road Road west of Kennedy Drive/Airport Drive – have begun a transition to mixed use areas, the City has many areas that are presently exclusively commercial/industrial. These include Technology Park, Tilley Drive, the Meadowland Business Park, Kimabll Ave, the east end of Williston Road, and areas north of the Airport, among others.

In recent decades, most business uses have become quieter and less noxious, like retail, office space, and light manufacturing. This means that for most commercial uses, being located near

residential uses is less likely to cause conflict. As need for housing has increased and the desire (for many reasons) to have people living closer to their workplaces has increased, planning for commercial areas also must shift to allow more residential uses in formerly commercial-only areas. The timing is appropriate to review past policy and consider assigning more areas of the city to allow a mix of uses.

It is not the intention of this plan that commercial areas will transform to residential areas. Instead, we recognize that some limited residential uses will enhance and support the future of our primarily commercial areas.

In addition to adding mixed/residential use to commercial areas, the commercial areas need to adapt to the future of work, employment, and commuting. Many of our commercial areas are not well connected to the bike/ped transportation network or are located on busy transportation corridors that could be improved for bike/ped safety and efficiency. Business parks are designed for large buildings on large lots. These spaces are necessary, but we must also have a healthy range of building sizes, lot sizes, and intensities of building on commercial lots. South Burlington needs to have land, lots, and buildings that accommodate a range of commercial entities from small retail shops to startups to large manufacturing. A sufficient supply of commercial spaces will ensure commercial costs remain competitive. Maintaining such a supply requires planning for land and space for those uses.

However, some important commercial and manufacturing uses are still traffic-generating and noise-generating. These uses are not compatible with being located near residential uses. For that reason, South Burlington proposes to reserve areas for heavy commercial/industrial uses only. This is only to allow space to remain for heavy commercial uses in the future, instead of having no areas available for future flexibility. These uses should include uses with heavy truck traffic (especially if 24/7) or large-scale manufacturing or airport operations that have peak operations at off-hours and would be disruptive to residential character. Generally, these kinds of uses are located on larger lots and with similar kinds of uses.

These areas on the future land use map are the areas that make the most sense to be dedicated to industrial/heavy commercial uses only. They are currently primarily or fully commercial, are located farther from currently residential areas or planned mixed use areas, and are compatible with heavy commercial and industrial uses.

Conservation & Open Space Land

History and Characteristics

South Burlington's landscape was dominated by agricultural uses in the 19th and first half of the 20th Centuries. No land was set aside specifically as State or Federal park or forest land in South Burlington. Over the last half Century, the City and its partners have acquired or placed conservation easements on a number of parcels throughout the City, including each of the city's parks and land conserved by the Vermont Land Trust. Regulations establishing conservation zones, including landscape-level habitat blocks, habitat corridors, and agricultural land, and resource-level requirements for floodplains, river corridors, steep slopes, and wetlands have complemented these efforts.

Key landowners, including notably the University of Vermont, hold substantial tracks of land that remain open and/or used for educational purposes.

Analysis and Objectives

Approximately 51% of South Burlington (by lot) is currently not developable due to permanent legal conservation or regulatory conservation. However, the built area is not all currently built on with asphalt, buildings, or other structures – there is significant underdeveloped land and opportunity for infill in the developed areas. Because of this potential and the goals to enable more compact development to promote vibrancy in South Burlington’s neighborhoods and commercial areas, there are significant areas of the City that can remain undeveloped. This flexibility paired with the environmental, quality of life, and climate change mitigation benefits of having open space and recreational space, allows the City to prioritize conservation.

These areas, however, are not necessarily pristine. Many have had a Century or more of heavy use and are, in many cases, prone to erosion or to invasive species impacts. How these lands are used by members of the community (whether privately owned or public-owned) is also an important discussion for the future. The City has allocated certain areas of the City to remain unbuilt with significant development. Some of these areas are appropriate for recreational (active or passive), agricultural uses, or environmental restoration. Conservation areas should only extremely limited residential development on a minimal number of lots, will not have sewer and water lines and connections, and are not priority areas for transit, bike/ped infrastructure (except to access Citywide recreational amenities like Veterans Park), further public safety service and infrastructure, or commercial development (except in very limited village centers).