

RESIDENTIAL PATTERNS & HOUSING NEEDS:

VISION: Vernon will continue to offer an array of housing choices and see an increase in homeownership. Lower density patterns will continue to characterize southeastern Vernon, preserving its unique character and protecting sensitive natural resources. Higher density residential neighborhoods will be enhanced.

STRATEGIES

PROTECT
Residential neighborhoods

MAINTAIN (WITH SOME UPDATES)
Overall residential density patterns

ENSURE
Multi-family development occurs in appropriate areas and contributes to community structure

INCREASE
Homeownership opportunities

Residential Patterns and Housing Needs

This section outlines residential strategies that generally apply town-wide. For strategies specific to Rockville, see page 70.

Vernon has a wide array of housing types and housing prices which help meet regional housing needs. As discussed in Chapter 3, Conditions and Trends:

- Just over 15% of Vernon's housing stock meets the State's definition of "affordable".
- Median sales prices in Vernon have been lower than the that of the State.
- According to the Vernon Housing Authority, they have a surplus of available elderly units and there are many others that provide elderly housing in Vernon.

Since Vernon's housing stock helps to meet housing needs (and the Commission aims to maintain the stock of affordable housing), this Plan focuses on other key housing issues which emerged during the planning process:

- Protecting existing neighborhoods from adjacent commercial development.
- Rebalancing Vernon's "housing portfolio". The housing stock, which has a high percentage of multi-family housing, could be balanced with more ownership and single-family housing opportunities.
- Managing the location of and characteristics of new multi-family or planned residential developments.

Protect Residential Neighborhoods

Residents value the convenience of having retail and services nearby, but also wish to protect neighborhoods from real or potential impacts of nearby commercial development. Vernon's Zoning Regulations include stipulations to minimize possible impacts (e.g., restricting delivery hours, hours of operation, etc.). Also, many types of businesses require a special permit if located within 200 feet of a residential structure and the Commission can require landscaped buffer strips be provided. These provisions allow the Planning and Zoning Commission to minimize potential impacts and should continue.

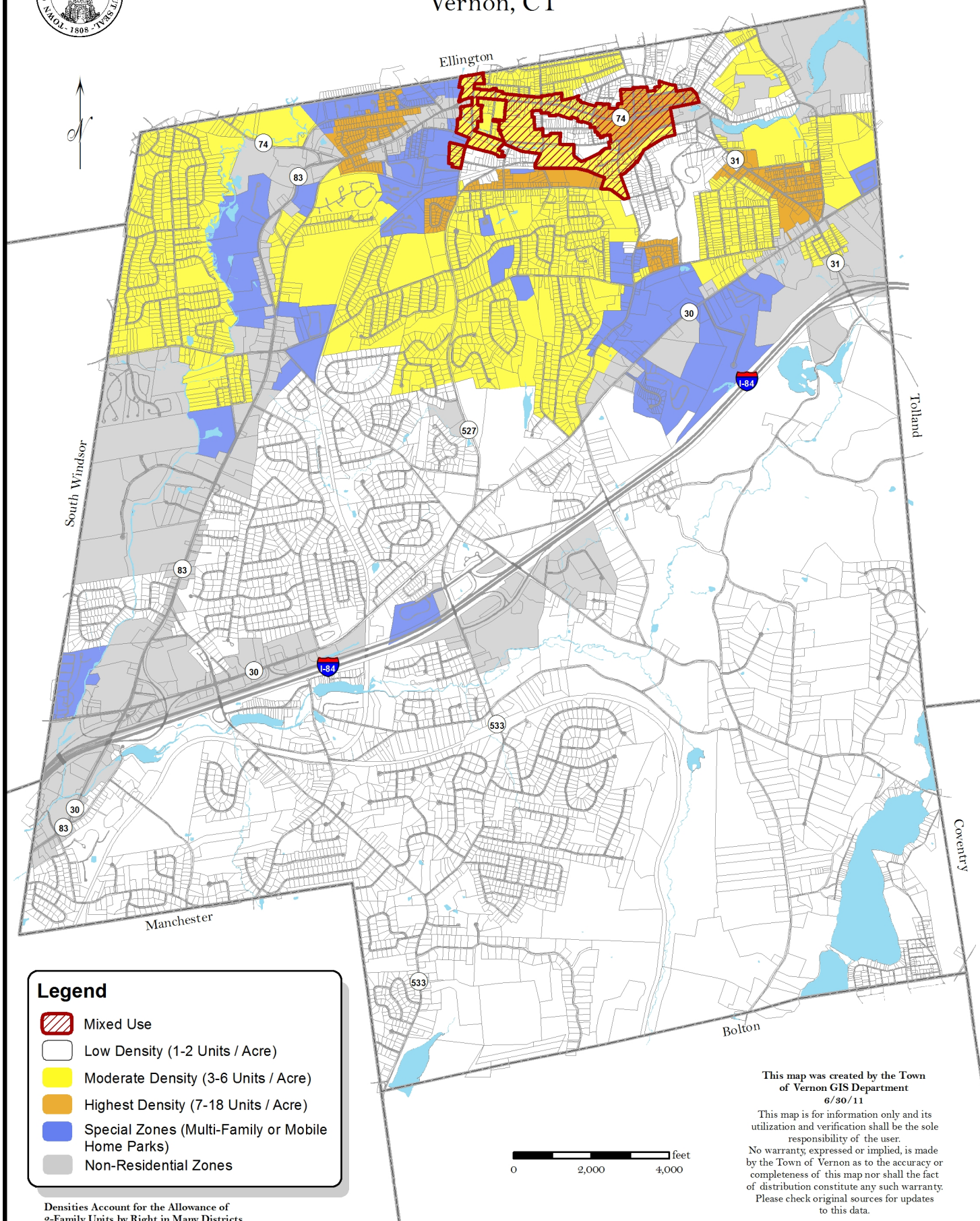
Protect Residential Neighborhoods:

1. Continue to manage potential impacts of business uses that are adjacent to residential neighborhoods through zoning.
2. Continue to ensure that development provides adequate buffers when adjacent to residential neighborhoods.



Residential Densities Plan

Vernon, CT



Maintain Overall Residential Density Patterns with Some Updates

With over 70% of land in Vernon zoned for residential uses, the form and pattern of housing will continue to strongly influence Vernon's character. Historic settlement patterns set the residential framework. Today, the availability of water and sewer service and the presence of natural resource constraints reinforce the patterns.

Rockville should remain a generally higher density area. However, there may be cases where a slight decrease in density can improve the quality of life on a given street or neighborhood (see earlier discussion of Rockville). In addition, mixed use (buildings that contain commercial and residential uses) should be encouraged since a variety of uses contributes to a village atmosphere.

The R-40 areas are generally more rural in nature and are home to sensitive natural resources. The Town should examine extending the "developable acreage" zoning concept to all new housing developments in this area of Town to better match future densities with the ability of the land to support the development.

Maintain Overall Residential Patterns with Some Updates:

1. Decrease densities in parts of Rockville where the quality of life will benefit from such a decrease (see earlier strategies).
2. Consider extending the "developable acreage" concept to the R-40 areas to better match the density of future development with the ability of the land to support development.

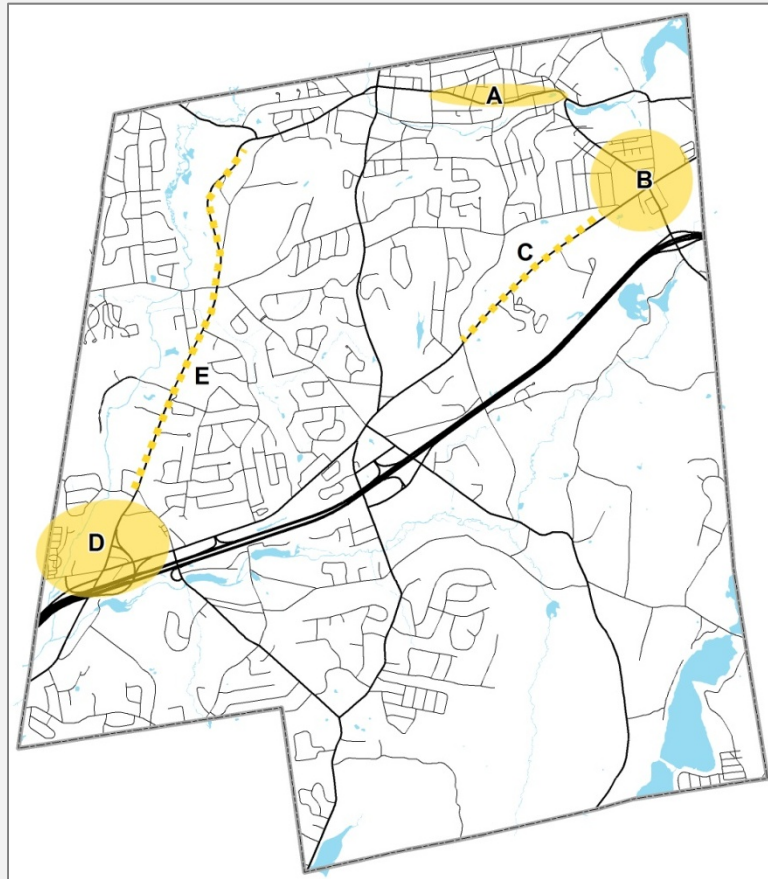
Ensure that New Multi-Family Development is Appropriately Located and Contributes to Community Structure

Vernon's multi-family and planned residential developments provide a range of housing choices for residents of the Town and Region. Some residents have a concern that Vernon has too much of this type of development. But often, these types of development tend to attract smaller households and contribute positively to the tax base. There are areas in Vernon where well-planned multi-family development can contribute positively to Vernon's Community Structure, provided certain criteria are met. Rather than recommending a restriction on further multifamily and planned residential developments, this Plan suggests adopting policies regarding appropriate areas and standards.

Ensure that New Multi-Family Development is Appropriated Located and Contributes to Community Structure:

1. Update zoning to require that future multi-family development meet specific criteria depending upon which parts of Vernon they are to be located in.

Policies for New Multi-Family or Other Planned Residential Developments*



Legend

Policy Areas for Future Multi-Family Housing

New multi-family or planned residential developments should meet the following goals :

Area A:

- Be part of a mixed use development or entail the redevelopment of a large historic industrial building (e.g., mill).
- Provide sidewalks

Area B:

- Provide sidewalks or pathways to connect to commercial areas
- Does not reduce the amount of business-zoned land
- Mixed use (apartments above business uses) might be appropriate near the Route 30/31 intersection.

Area C:

- Provide buffers along the frontage to screen the development from Route 30
- When located next to a non-residential land use, provide a buffer
- Sidewalks connect units to Route 30 and provided along frontage of property on Route 30

Area D:

- Mixed use (apartments above business uses) in business zones or stand-alone multi-family developments are appropriate here.
- Sidewalks should connect to commercial areas.
- Coordinate with neighboring uses to consolidate / reduce the number of driveway curb cuts.

Area E:

- Consolidation of smaller properties is encouraged.
- Coordinate with neighboring uses to consolidate /reduce the number of driveway curb cuts.
- Sidewalks connect units to Route 83 and provided along frontage of property on Route 83.

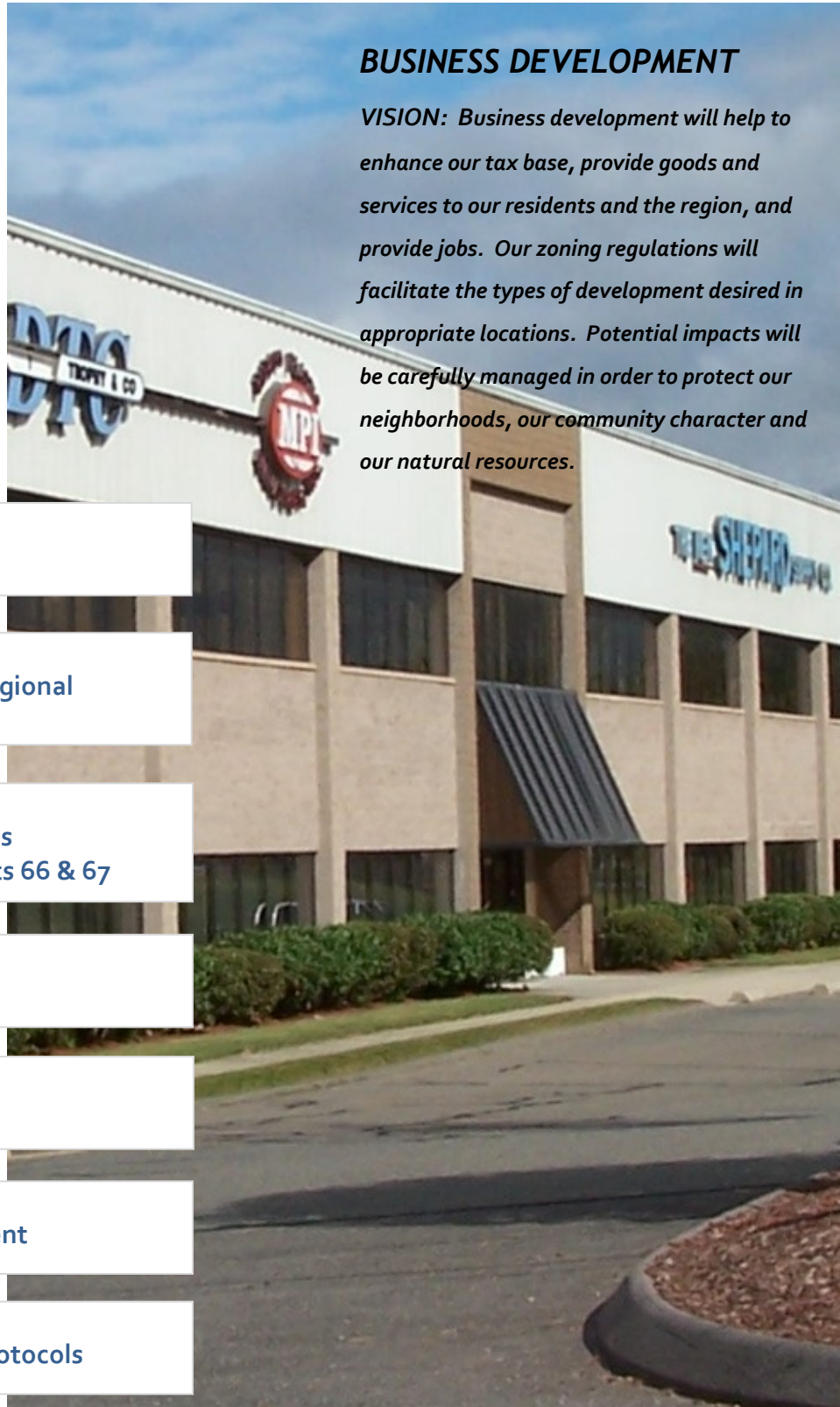
* Does not apply to subdivisions pursuant to zoning and subdivision regulations.

Increase Homeownership Opportunities

As discussed in the Rockville section, increased homeownership is very important for Rockville's revitalization. Increasing homeownership should be encouraged town-wide also. Homeownership represents a commitment by the homeowners to Vernon and thus they may be more likely to volunteer for boards, commission, and other groups.

Increase Homeownership Opportunities:

1. Retain zoning patterns which reserve appropriate areas of the Town for single-family homeownership.
2. Encourage programs that provide incentives for owner-occupancy of two- and three-family structures (see Rockville section).



BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

VISION: Business development will help to enhance our tax base, provide goods and services to our residents and the region, and provide jobs. Our zoning regulations will facilitate the types of development desired in appropriate locations. Potential impacts will be carefully managed in order to protect our neighborhoods, our community character and our natural resources.

STRATEGIES

UPDATE

Commercial zones

MAINTAIN

Vernon Circle as a regional destination

ENCOURAGE

Appropriate business development at Exits 66 & 67

REDEVELOP & RETENANT

Vacant buildings

RETAIN

Businesses

PROMOTE

Business development

CONTINUE TO IMPROVE

Business-friendly protocols

Business Development

Historically, Rockville was the Town's business center. The advent of the automobile and construction of I-84 opened up Route 83 and parts of Route 30 for business development. Gradually, businesses located along key intersections and business / industrial parks were created, mainly along those routes that lead commuters through Vernon to the interstate. Today's business development pattern consists of business zones located throughout Town.

Business development provides:

- goods and services for residents and other businesses,
- job opportunities, and
- a tax base.

The tax base benefit is particularly important to Vernon and communities throughout Connecticut. Connecticut communities rely upon the local tax base for the majority of funding. The most recent Town data indicates 68% of Vernon's total revenues are from the local property tax. While the State has explored alternative options for communities to raise revenues to support local services, the current system is not expected to change during this Plan's 10-year planning period. As such, Vernon will need to continue to strive to increase its tax base in order to maintain the quality of life enjoyed by residents and to provide essential local services.

At the same time, land is a finite resource. As shown on page 18, only 8% of land in Vernon is zoned for business purposes. Due to this limitation, this Plan emphasizes:

- the importance of retaining business-zoned land for development (e.g., by discouraging the acquisition of business-zoned land for open space);
- promoting redevelopment of vacant buildings and underutilized sites (see Rockville section and the discussion in this section); and,
- promoting new business development in business zones (see this section).



Residents support additional business development. Overall, a majority of residents support additional light industry (72%) while half (49%) support additional large retail businesses.

Update the Commercial "C" Zone to Better Match Goals for Specific Business Areas

The majority of Vernon's business areas are zoned Commercial - C. As a result, very different areas are zoned the same, such as Vernon Circle, areas just west of Rockville, the Exit 66 area, and elsewhere. The C zone currently allows 11 uses by right and 27 uses require either a special exception or special permit. The special permit process provides the Commission broad discretion in determining whether a use is appropriate

for a particular area. However, the process creates uncertainty and greater risk for landowners because they do not know what types of uses might be acceptable until after an application and site plan have been prepared and submitted.

As a result, many uses that seem appropriate for Vernon Circle must go through the special permit process. Conversely, there are many uses by Special Permit that might not make sense in all commercial areas. For example, a hotel might be very appropriate in the Vernon Circle area, but not appropriate just west of Rockville or near the Vernon Avenue / Route 30 intersection. The Commission could tailor the C zones to make it easier to obtain approvals for appropriate businesses while still requiring a special permit for certain uses.

To accomplish this, the Commission could consider the following zoning adjustments (see Business Plan map):

- **Vernon Circle Zone.** This area is more appropriate for larger / regional scale businesses. Many uses currently allowed by special permit, could be allowed with site plan approval.
- **Neighborhood Commercial.** Rezone the commercial area west of Rockville and the Vernon Avenue area as neighborhood commercial zones, offering goods and services to residents and commuters that pass by. Smaller retail, restaurants and services would be allowed as permitted uses, with site plan review. Larger scale and more automobile oriented uses could be prohibited or require a special permit. This approach helps create more definable “nodes” (see Community Structure Plan).
- **Route 83 Updates.** Consider rezoning some of the C zone along Route 83 to Planned Commercial, so as to encourage the consolidation of small lots and to manage curb cuts.

Virtually all C zones are located within the Aquifer Protection Zone. Uses that pose a high risk to contamination should still be prohibited and aquifer protection measures should still be required and evaluated during the site plan review process.

As noted in Chapter 3, Conditions and Trends, Vernon has little land zoned for industry when compared to the region. Some land near Exit 66 is zoned for industry, while adjacent land is zoned C. The Commission should continue to allow for research and development uses in this area. While residents showed stronger support for small retail stores here (62%), there is support for light industry (57%).



Update the Commercial “C” Zone to Better Match Goals for Specific Business Areas:

1. Create a separate Vernon Circle Zone and neighborhood commercial zones.
2. Rezone some Commercial C zones along Route 83 to Planned Commercial.
3. Continue to allow research and development uses in the C zone near Exit 66.

Maintain Vernon Circle as a Regional Commercial Destination

Vernon Circle remains a regional retail center attracting Vernon residents and residents from the larger region.

The highway, its interchanges and the major arterials are important regional transportation features and will continue to be a dominant feature in this area. Vernon Circle would not be a successful regional destination without this transportation infrastructure, yet residents express frustration with the level of traffic, the prevalence of pavement, and the need to drive a car to get from business to business.

The appearance of buildings, signs and landscaping contribute to the character of Vernon Circle. The continued design review of buildings and signs can help to improve the overall appearance of the area. For existing buildings, property owners could be encouraged to improve the appearance of buildings and landscaping and provide additional pedestrian amenities. The Town might also provide zoning incentives that encourage consolidation and redevelopment of properties. For example, regulations can provide incentives to consolidate by allowing greater development potential for larger properties.

There are a number of residential neighborhoods within walking distance of the stores here. The addition / extension of sidewalks can help to better connect these neighborhoods to the businesses and property owners can be encouraged to work together to provide pedestrian connections between adjacent properties (see sidewalk discussion on page 105).

Access management is important for safety and aesthetic purposes in this area. The Town should continue to encourage the closing and / or consolidating of curb cuts and encourage consolidation of smaller properties for better access and coordinated development. As discussed later, the Town should encourage the State and property owners to undertake additional measures to better manage traffic.

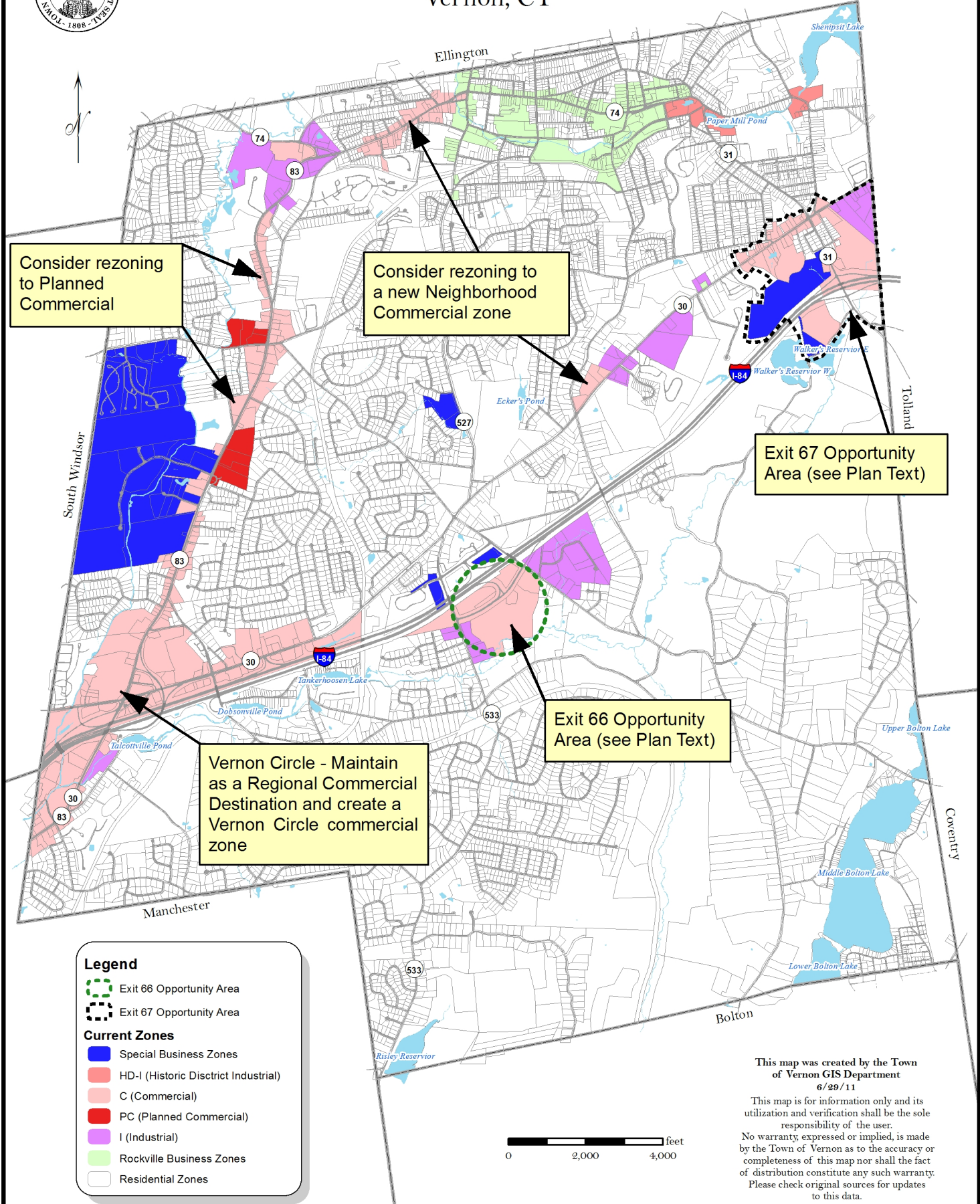
Maintain Vernon Circle as Regional Commercial Destination:

1. Maintain Vernon Circle as a regional node.
2. Continue to require design review for development in this area.
3. Encourage existing businesses to improve the appearance of buildings and signs and to provide pedestrian amenities.
4. Add / extend sidewalks, especially to provide connections from nearby residential neighborhoods.
5. Improve pedestrian connections between properties.
6. Continue access management.
7. Encourage the consolidation of smaller properties when developed / redeveloped.



Business Development Plan

Vernon, CT



"Exit 67 Area"

For the purposes of the POCD, discussion about the Exit 67 area extends beyond the few parcels that have received the most attention. The Business Development Plan identifies this larger area generally.

Form Based Zoning

Zoning regulations tend to focus on uses and provisions to ensure that buildings are not too large, too tall, too close to property lines, and so forth. They tend to focus on what is not wanted rather than what is desired. Communities often find that buildings may not look appealing, even though the zoning requirements were met.

With form based zoning, the community determines the physical form it would like to see and then establishes regulations to create the desired form. Form based zoning is a tool to implement a vision for a specific area.

While the uses of the building are still a consideration, often these play a lesser role.

Encourage Appropriate Business Development at Exits 66 and 67

Land near highway interchanges often presents a tremendous business development opportunity. The exit 66 and 67 areas are no exception.

Over the past decade, the Exit 67 area has generated much community discussion due to uses which have been proposed or planned. Residents appear more likely to support the development of small retail shops (70%) or light industry (62%) in this area compared to larger retail (51% supported).

Three key principles for the Exit 67 area emerged during the planning process:

- **Opportunity.** This area provides opportunities for economic development.
- **Gateway.** As an eastern gateway to the Town, its appearance will help convey Vernon's image and let visitors know that they are in Vernon.
- **Environmental Sensitivity.** Development should be planned and designed to protect important water resources here (surface and ground water).

A range of zoning approaches were analyzed during the planning process. The option that seemed to best balance the various interests in this area is a "Market-Based with Focus on Form / Design" approach (see sidebar for a description of one possible tool – "Form Based Zoning.") As discussed on p. 76, it is important to manage potential impacts of businesses that are adjacent to residential areas.

Possible Zoning Approaches for Exit 67 Area*		
Less prescriptive		Most prescriptive
<p>Market-Based Approach</p> <p>Maximum flexibility in form / design and use.</p> <p>Allow a wide variety of uses.</p> <p>Do not regulate form beyond setbacks, building height, and other standards typically contained in zoning regulations.</p> <p>Detailed vision not needed.</p>	<p>Market-Based Approach with Focus on Form / Design</p> <p>Form / design is a priority and regulated; use is less important.</p> <p>Allow a wide variety of uses.</p> <p>Regulate (or incentivize) development to meet a certain form such as campus-style, neotraditional, etc.</p> <p>Requires a detailed vision to determine desirable forms / physical aspects.</p>	<p>Managed Approach</p> <p>Form / design and use are both priorities and regulated.</p> <p>Limit the allowed uses to those desired.</p> <p>Regulate (or incentivize) development to meet a certain form such as campus-style, neotraditional, etc.</p> <p>Requires a detailed vision to determine desirable uses and form / physical aspects.</p>
*There are many variations between these approaches.		

A similar approach might also be warranted for the Exit 66 area. To implement this approach, the community would first need to determine the desired form / style of development in this area (create a vision). As shown in the table on page 15, many of the Town's largest taxpayers are planned residential developments. Planning for these two areas should explore if residential uses in a mixed use or village setting are appropriate.

Planning for the Exit 67 area should encompass a larger area (possibly all of the business zones in this area) and the desired form may vary within the area. Based upon the outcome, zoning should be updated to either require or provide incentives for landowners to meet the desired form or style. In addition, zoning regulations should explicitly prohibit those uses that would clearly detract from the gateway.

Encourage Appropriate Business Development at Exits 66 and 67 While Protecting Natural Resources and Providing an Attractive Gateway to Our Community:

1. Encourage business development.
2. Work with residents, landowners, and local economic development officials to determine desired form / style of development for both areas.
3. Update zoning regulations to:
 - a. allow a wide variety of uses
 - b. regulate or create incentives for the desired form / style

Redevelop and Re-Tenant Vacant Buildings

Vacant buildings / space in Vernon is found in larger, historic buildings in Rockville (e.g., Citizens Block), mills (e.g., Talcottville Mill) and newer retail space (e.g., along Route 83). At public workshops, residents stressed the importance of reusing vacant business space.

Often businesses find it more cost effective to build on a vacant site than to update or rehabilitate an existing building. Challenges include financial (e.g., handling contaminants, structural issues) and meeting regulatory requirements such as zoning and building codes. In addition, the layout of older buildings might not be suitable for modern needs.

The Town recognizes these challenges and has successfully helped owners of vacant buildings identify and obtain financing. It is important for the Town to maintain staff that is knowledgeable about funding sources and can work with owners. In instances where the reuse of a building for business purposes will have a clear community benefit, the Town should explore options to provide direct financial assistance / financial tools. The Town should also continue to reduce assessments for the redevelopment of blighted buildings.

In terms of regulatory challenges, the zoning regulations allow for adaptive reuse of buildings for business purposes. This provision provides the flexibility often needed when redeveloping unique and challenging mill sites or other older vacant buildings. Recommendations discussed under Rockville, may also reduce regulatory barriers to redevelopment and facilitate upgrades that help meet modern needs.

Lastly, the Town had maintained a list of vacant business properties (land and buildings) to aid in attracting business to Vernon. The Town should continue to take an active role in marketing and regularly update the vacant property listings.

Redevelop and Re-Tenant Vacant Buildings:

1. Maintain the organizational capacity (e.g., staff) to identify funding sources for redeveloping vacant buildings.
2. Continue to facilitate the reuse / redevelopment of vacant buildings through zoning and update regulations as needed.
3. Maintain listings of vacant buildings and actively market their availability.
4. Determine incentives for the redevelopment of older vacant properties.

Retain Businesses and Promote Additional Business Development Opportunities

Overall, the Town should continue to promote business development in its commercial and industrial zones and work to retain existing businesses. Vernon's proximity to the University of Connecticut and Hartford might present opportunities for businesses that focus on research and development or provide incubator space. These and other opportunities should be explored.

This section highlights three strategies to increase the amount of potential development within existing business zones – the first relates to sewers and the others relate to parking.

As discussed on page 111, the Town may wish to extend sewers to commercial and industrial zones that currently lack sewers to promote additional business development. This would open up additional development opportunities for land already zoned for business uses.

Next, Vernon is home to four commuter lots (three are owned by the State and one is leased from a religious institution). 2009 data from the CT Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) indicates low usage of some lots (although the count was taken during an economic downturn). But the count might indicate that Vernon has more land dedicated to commuter parking than necessary. To serve their purpose, commuter lots must be located near the highway and the land also tends to be prime land for economic development. Long term, it is important to maintain adequate commuter lot capacity to encourage increased car-pooling and bus use. However,

opportunities for meeting commuter needs and additional business development could be explored. The Town could discuss options with ConnDOT for allowing the development of underused lots so long as current and future commuter needs could be met by expanding other lots or through other creative approaches (e.g., lease private lots).

Another way to “find” additional land for business development is to rethink the parking requirements set in zoning. Providing more parking than is necessary can have environmental and economic impacts. The environmental impacts are straightforward – increases in impervious surfaces impact water quality.

However, the economic impacts of parking requirements are rarely discussed or considered by communities. Parking lots can be expensive to install and maintain and may not result in the highest economic return (or value) for the property owner, or the Town. Each parcel has a limited buildable area – the more that is used for parking means that less can be used for buildings. For property owners, having more leasable square footage can increase profits and the value of the property. For the Town, increased property values will strengthen the Grand List and produce more property tax revenue. In denser areas like Rockville, high parking requirements can freeze redevelopment; often the older, vacant buildings that a community desires to see redeveloped cannot meet parking requirements. Specific approaches to reduce parking burdens while still addressing safety and congestion concerns are outlined in the transportation discussion (see page 108).

The Town is exploring innovative approaches to economic development, particularly related to energy (the recently adopted Energy Improvement District ordinance). Providing lower-cost energy options can help to retain existing businesses and attract new ones. Other innovative possibilities include capitalizing on the rail-to-trail users (see sidebar), marketing Vernon’s cultural and natural amenities to attract visitors, and providing free WiFi coverage throughout Vernon. These options should be explored.

In addition to attracting new business development, the Town should continue to work to retain existing businesses.

Rail Trail Business Opportunities

There are many studies that outline the positive economic impacts that bike paths have had on communities. Dollars spent by trail users often focus on food, beverages and lodging. And bike paths tend to draw users with higher income levels, and therefore more disposable income.

Bike-related retail and services could capitalize on those who ride through Vernon. The presence of the bike path could help draw tourists to Vernon, benefitting the local economy.

For more information see: <http://www.americantrails.org/resources/economics/businessoftrails.html>.

Retain Businesses and Promote Business Development:

1. Actively promote business development in commercial and industrial districts.
2. Capitalize on the Town’s proximity to both UConn and Hartford.
3. Consider extending sewers to business zones not currently served by sewers.
4. Identify additional innovative approaches to economic development.
5. Discuss options with ConnDOT for allowing the development of underused commuter parking lots.
6. Reduce parking requirements to increase business development potential of parcels in business zones.

Continue to Improve Regulations and Protocols to be More “Business-Friendly”

A clear, predictable application process can help create a “business-friendly” atmosphere. There are a number of simple steps that can help achieve this goal. The first step is to ensure that land use regulations are user-friendly; i.e., easy to determine what is allowed and what the process is to obtain permits and approvals.

Applicants often must work with many staff and commissions during the permitting process. As discussed in the Community Facilities section (see page 94), currently building / land use staff are located in different buildings. Having staff in one area can facilitate coordination among staff and make it easier for applicants.

Regular training for land use related commissions can help ensure that members are up-to-date on their mission, best practices for procedures, and law. This can result in a smoother and timelier approval process.

Communities are making more forms and services available on-line. One such initiative in the CRCOG region is the recent introduction of a regional on-line permitting system. The system, being piloted in a handful of communities, allows applicants to apply for permits on-line. Vernon should consider joining or creating its own online permitting system.

Continue to Improve Regulations and Protocols to be More “Business-Friendly”:

1. Update land use regulations to improve user-friendliness.
2. Continue coordination among staff and boards / commissions that conduct permit / application reviews and approvals.
3. Consider housing all building / land-use related staff in one space or in the same building.
4. Provide the opportunity for regular training for land-use related commissions.
5. Provide more permit-related services on-line.