

What are the measures of a good and desirable housing development project?

The land possesses sufficient resources to support the people who would live there. Existing positive attributes of the area are maintained or enhanced. There is an order to the project, a reasoning at work behind the design that makes sense functionally and aesthetically. The project conforms with town zoning and the vision and details of the town plan, as well as state regulations and policy. The development reflects and ideally improves the character of the area in which it will exist. Lastly, the project rewards and leverages public investments already made to maintain and enhance that character.

Based on the sketch plan subdivision application, the sketch plan narrative, the sketch plan property lot design and the sketch plan of existing conditions, the 12-house development proposed for south of Lake Road and west of Greenbush Road fails every one of these tests.

1. Sufficient resources: This area of Charlotte is already known for a low water supply. Joan Aicroth has to purchase 3,000 gallons of water nearly every summer when her well runs dry. When they built their house, Tony and Sarah Blake had to drill to 1,100 feet, and then frack, to find a trickle of water. Liam Murphy had to reduce his development proposal by more than half, due to water shortage. As a favor to the developer as much as the community, this project should not proceed without demonstrated proof of an adequate water supply – in addition to an analysis of its impact on adjacent wells and wetlands.
2. Attributes maintained: The proposed development would take place in an area with a classic Vermont viewshed, a value that is appreciated by neighbors on all sides, as well as people who enjoy use of the Charlotte Park and Wildlife Refuge, drive by on the federally designated Scenic Road, or ride by on the Champlain Bikeway. Just as the town rejected proposals for development just below Mount Philo, because of viewshed impacts, this project merits similar treatment.
3. Order to the design: There is none. One house, on a tiny lot, stands off by itself. Two others also stand apart, on larger parcels. The rest are clustered with no coherent design scheme. Contrast this approach with the order of Ten Stones, from its circular road to enhance the neighborhood feel, to the shared garden, event facility and solar power array. Compare this proposed plan with the Champlain Co-Housing project on Greenbush Road, in which the housing and common land enhance one another, the impact on the viewshed is nil, and the town link trail skirts some of the best natural resources. There is a method and intent to those developments that is the opposite of this proposal, whose organizing principle seems simply to be packing as many houses on the property as possible.
4. Conforming with town plan and zoning. Aside from seasonal residences, the cluster of homes in lots 3-10 will establish the highest density housing in Charlotte. That would contradict the regulations and intent of the town's rural zoning area, in which the property stands. It would also contradict the language and intent of the town plan, which prizes the protection of open working landscape, and supports denser development in the two village centers.

Meanwhile, merely declaring that a larger lot would be a farmstead is not the same as having a plan for how the land will be farmed, what could be produced there, and what the impact of farms' freedom from regulation would be on the new homeowners. Should they expect manure spreading on the field surrounding them? Might they expect a Philo Ridge operation to share their driveway? Such questions reveal how little thought this design applies to what it would actually be like to live in this new place, concerned as it instead seems to be with maximizing the financial return.

As for state policy, parcels 6, 8 and 9 are classic spaghetti lots, the bane of Act 250 and land use planning for a generation.

5. Character of the area: Imagine how this project would look when it was finished: one house on the slope, a farm house on the ridge, another down in the woods, and in the middle a bunch of houses packed together, mostly on lots of less than a third of an acre. Nothing about that land use looks like the rest of Charlotte. None of it looks like the residences and farms in the vicinity. None of it, in fact, looks like any other development in town.

Charlotte has made a sustained and consistent effort to conduct thoughtful planning, with updates approved by public vote, specifically to prevent dense housing from happening in farm fields. This project contradicts all of those efforts.

For comparison's sake, consider Burlington's Flynn Avenue, the artery that links US 7 with Pine Street, the South End Market, the trucking depot for oil and gas distribution, and Oakledge Park. Most of the residential lots on that busy road are larger than five of the lots in the Charlotte proposal. This proposed project would drop that degree of housing density into a field currently populated by cows. It could not be less in character with the neighborhood.

6. Rewarding investments already made: The proposed project site is the beneficiary of a fortune in investments made to preserve the area's rural character. The land immediately to the north was conserved by multiple organizations including the Charlotte Land Trust (which is to say, in part, the taxpayers of Charlotte). The land immediately to the east is a wildlife area given to the town after a philanthropist acquired it for \$8 million. The Champlain Bikeway runs beside the property, a state- and federally- funded program to enhance the area's tourism appeal for economic and aesthetic reasons.

In short, this parcel is an island surrounded by investments that Charlotters, fellow Vermonters and others have repeatedly and generously made to maintain and enhance its value. Every summer, it is surrounded by land trust signs proclaiming those properties to be conserved forever.

But that's not all. The proposed development land has itself been the direct recipient of protective investments. A 150-foot conservation easement buffer protects the banks of Holmes Creek. I'm told (but was unable to verify in time to file these comments) that the land's previous owner received property tax breaks through the current use program, which means that state and town taxpayers have been paying to keep that land open, productive and undeveloped.

The proposed project would sit immediately adjacent to all of these protected lands, the happy beneficiary of these investments. And yet, with its three disconnected homes and

nine more in a tight cluster, the project would negate and contradict all of those efforts. Will the 150-foot creek protection be sufficient, for example, when farmland becomes lawns and driveways? Or will runoff increase, the creek's phosphorous load follow suit, and the town beach's occasional closure result?

When a dense development sits beside conserved farmland, and lies in the direct viewshed of a wildlife area, it enjoys the rewards of others' work and generosity, as the same time it completely undermines them.

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