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A fork in the road: Forest and land use planning in Vermont:

By Kathy Doyle

Correspondent

The Middletown Springs Select Board is considering a proposal by a property owner to develop a 1,500-foot road on what may be a town right-of-way across private forestland to access their home over the border in Wells. Doing so would allow the landowner shorter access over the ridge to Route 133 — instead of driving around through East Wells.

The process could eventually result in reconnecting two dead-end roads to develop a through road between Middletown Springs and Wells, although that is not the intent at this point. The right-of-way in question is difficult to discern in places, but it shows up on old maps such as the 1869 Beers' Atlas of Rutland County.

Road issues like this one in Middletown Springs may have more than local implications. According to a Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department guide to conservation planning, "studies have demonstrated that growth will occur where a community chooses to construct and maintain roads, utilities and facilities ... There is no infrastructure decision that has more effect on how and to what extent development proceeds than the town road network."

Development is changing the character of forests in the Northeast. For the first time in 150 years, forest cover is declining in all the New England states. Forests are becoming increasingly fragmented as land is being subdivided into smaller pieces and multiple ownerships.

According to a 2010 publication by a group of researchers at Harvard Forest, these trends began about 20 years ago in the densely populated southern New England states, but are now evident in even more sparsely populated Vermont and Maine. In 2007, Vermont experienced the first decline in forest cover since the peak of land clearing in the mid 1800s. The 2010 Vermont Forest Resource Plan reports that the number of smaller parcels, one to nine acres in size, has more than doubled since 1983.

Jamey Fidel, forest and biodiversity program director at the Vermont

Natural Resources Council, warns that “parcelization” and fragmentation have real implications for the health of Vermont’s communities and landowners. Vermont’s forests are critical to the state’s rural economy and its tourism, recreation and forest products industries. Vermont’s forests provide vital ecological functions, including wildlife habitat, water quality and the storage of carbon dioxide — the main greenhouse gas causing global warming.

To help identify where large areas of unfragmented habitat exist, the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department and the Vermont Land Trust have created a statewide map of forest habitat blocks that are relatively unfragmented by roads and development. And the Staying Connected Initiative, a group of Vermont organizations and agencies, is working across the Northeast from New York to Maine to identify and protect key forested areas, called linkages, which provide connections between some of the most unfragmented landscapes.

The maps show that the forested area on the border of Wells and Middletown Springs, where the road is proposed, is found in a large habitat block — greater than 8,000 acres. This forested block is one of the largest unfragmented blocks of forest in Middletown Springs and adjacent areas. It is also within a priority linkage that connects the Green Mountains and the Adirondacks, and it has been identified as regionally important by the Staying Connected Initiative.

Middletown Springs residents approved a town plan in March that supports maintaining “large areas of contiguous, unfragmented forest with natural streams, wetlands, cliffs and ridge tops to insure habitat for all naturally-occurring species and to maintain viable natural communities.” But there are barriers to ensuring that this vision is carried out. The town lacks a formal zoning ordinance and specific regulations to guide development.

In their report “Wildlife Considerations in Local Planning,” the Vermont Natural Resources Council and the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department claim that although Vermonters overwhelmingly support the conservation of wildlife habitat, there is a “noticeable disconnect between wildlife values Vermonters say they want to conserve and the actual implementation of those goals in zoning and subdivision regulations.”

While 82 percent of Vermont communities have zoning ordinances, the report says communities need to pay more attention addressing issues that affect wildlife and habitat conservation, such as “habitat

fragmentation, habitat connectivity, invasive species and climate change.”

Resources are available to help Vermont communities identify conservation priorities and plan for their protection in light of development pressures. The Fish & Wildlife Department’s Community Wildlife Program, regional planning commissions and other groups provide valuable technical assistance.

Jamey Fidel is excited about the Forests, Wildlife and Communities Project that is a collaborative effort of Mad River Valley communities. Many constituents in area towns are working together to improve forest land and wildlife conservation by improving town plans and zoning and training Realtors and engineers to talk to clients about natural resources issues.

“There is a lot of good work being done in Vermont,” Fidel said.

Addressing competing interests in Vermont communities is complex. Residents who serve on select boards and other town commissions are volunteers who deal with issues from forest fragmentation to finance, conservation to culverts and solid waste to subdivisions — often on a case-by-case basis, without clear mandates.

In view of the changes occurring on the landscape, it makes sense for communities to come together and plan proactively for the future sense. Elizabeth Thompson writes in “Vermont’s Natural Heritage,” a Vermont Biodiversity Project report, that conservation planning is not simple: “Conservation efforts at the community level need to be aware of the complexity and tension that will accompany this work ... This reality is not a reason to fear such efforts; it is in fact a force that, if honestly and thoughtfully faced, can build and strengthen communities and the environment in which communities happen.”

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On the net:

Staying Connected Initiative: www.stayingconnectedinitiative.org

Forest, Wildlife and Communities Project: www.mrvpd.org/fwc.php



Old Garron Road in Middletown Springs, shown here, could be extended as part of a plan to allow a landowner shorter access to Route 133, but the proposed road would pass through one of the largest unfragmented blocks of forest in Middletown Springs and adjacent areas. Emmett Francois Photo.