

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

We Are Living in Someone Else's Future

Thirty years ago Vermonters grappled with the opportunities and concerns inspired by the proposed Pyramid Mall development at Taft Corners in Williston. This was not only one of the first large scale commercial property developments proposed for Vermont, but also one of the first major tests for Act 250, the land use and development planning law enacted in 1970.

Government planning dates back to Vermont's original land grant charters. The earliest charters envisioned a population center clustered around a town commons. Many charters set out minimum number of acres for cultivation or even a minimum square footage (18 foot square) for dwellings.

A more formal state planning office dates back to at least the 1930s. Originally attached to the State Development Department, the planning function was eventually moved under the direct supervision of the governor's office. At various times it was known as Central Planning, the Planning Council, the Planning Division, the State Planning Board, the State Planning Office, and the Office of Policy Research and Coordination.

The planning office was originally enacted to promote development. By the 1960s rapid, unplanned development, linked in part to the new inter-state highway system, created support for managing development in ways that preserved Vermont's character. Governor Deane C. Davis (1969-73) became a champion of planned development and of what became Act 250 (see his farewell address at: <http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/gov/govinaug/farewells/pdf/Davis1973.pdf>).

In the mid-1970s the Pyramid Corporation proposed a 494,000 square foot enclosed mall on 94 acres at Taft Corners, just off the inter-state exit. The mall would include two major department stores, approximately 80 other retail stores, and 20 restaurants. Some Williston residents raised concerns about the impact of such a large development on the nature of their town and its services. Surrounding communities, notably Burlington, wondered about the regional economic impact of the mall. Burlington pointed to its own development plans as evidenced by its commitments "to such projects as: the Southern Connector, the North End Connector, the Church Street Mall, the Waterfront, and the Civic Center." (undated draft "Statement of the City of Burlington with Regard to Certain Retail Expansions in the Trade Area," Pyramid Mall Background Information folder, State Planning Office, Pyramid Mall files). Would a large mall only five miles away undo those plans?

Governor Richard Snelling directed the State Planning Office to coordinate various impact studies conducted by state agencies. Among the impacts studied were regional employment and income, traffic flows, loss of prime agricultural land, stream and air pollution, state and town expenditures and revenue, population growth and increased demands on local services from education to public safety. The impact reports were gathered in 1977 and 1978. In October 1978 the Pyramid Mall proposal was rejected by the State.

The reports from agencies, consultants, and from Pyramid Mall and its opponents are fascinating reading. Some provide a snap shot of Chittenden County's retail environment some thirty years ago. For example, University Mall had, at the time, one occupant: Zayre's. There were a number of "mini-malls" built around a single major store, such as Gaynes or, in two cases, Ben Franklin stores. Some of the reports

highlighted the need for better coordination of the permitting processes within agencies, such as storm water permits within the Agency of Natural Resources. Others underscored the need for moving beyond municipal zoning to regional or statewide planning to address the broader impacts of large developments. And yet others noted the economic and social divisions exacerbated by the proposal. Shouldn't farmers, for example, be able to sell their land for development to escape the economic and other strains of agriculture?

The reports are also fascinating when viewed from our current perspective and the development that subsequently took place at Taft Corners. How, for example, does the projected peak traffic flow of 1,075 cars per hour in 1978 compare to current traffic patterns at the Corners?

Underlying this are core questions about the nature of planning. We are living in someone else's future. Is the present development of Taft Corners the future envisioned by past planners? If not, why not? Which, if any, of the impacts projected in 1977-78 have come to pass? Can municipal, regional or state plans be sustained in the face of continued development pressures?



This, in turn, emphasizes a role of archival records. Can we use the archival records from the State Planning Office from 1977-78 to better understand and evaluate planning? A sound, comprehensive archival management program can provide the metrics we need to better measure the long term results of our deliberations and actions. In order to do so, however, we must know how to improve the appraisal of records to identify records with archival value. We need to manage those records so they, and information they contain, are accessible to those who can use them.

The information on the Pyramid Mall debate of thirty years ago comes from two State Planning Office boxes the Archives recently acquired under the new authorities enacted in 2003 (currently found in 3 V.S.A. §117). Those records had presumably been in the Office of Policy Research and Coordination, a successor to the old State Planning Office. Since 1996 they had been in the record center in Middlesex. Their existence, much less their content, was largely unknown. They existed, but were effectively inaccessible.

The Archives recently began to test new appraisal and processing approaches through work with the two boxes on the Pyramid Mall. How, for example, do these records fit within the larger planning functions? How can we trace that function across changing mandates, corporate names (State Planning Office to Policy Research and Coordination, for example), and administrative placement? How can we present the information so it is accessible and useful to current planners and others? As we develop those tools we will share them through our website.

Planning, as a collective, structured effort to describe not only who we are but also what we want to become, is an important government function. At the municipal level it would be useful to compare original town plans against what actually evolved, for example. It is important not simply to preserve such records but also to make them known and accessible. Let's plan on it.

In Memoriam

John A. Williams (1908-2006). Colonel John A. Williams passed away on December 26, 2006. Col. Williams directed the State Archives from 1963 to 1974, when the position was known primarily as Editor of State Papers or State Historian.

During his tenure Col. Williams edited and annotated eight volumes of the State Papers of Vermont series, more than any other director of the Archives. He was an amazingly productive editor, publishing the Laws of Vermont, 1781-1784 in 1965; the Laws of Vermont, 1785-1791 in 1966; the Laws of Vermont, 1791-1795 in 1967; the Laws of Vermont, 1796-1799 in 1968; Journals and Proceedings of the General Assembly of Vermont, 1791-1792 in 1970; Journals and Proceedings of the General Assembly of Vermont, 1793-1794 in 1972; and the Journals and Proceedings of the General Assembly of Vermont, 1795-1796 in 1973 (the latter three volumes he edited with Marlene Wallace). In 1968 he edited and published the Public Papers of Thomas Chittenden, 1778-1789; 1790-1797.

Col. Williams continued his love of Vermont after his retirement publishing histories of the Battle of Hubbardton, Mount Independence, the First Congregational Church of Essex Junction, and the Lake Champlain Yacht Club.

Under Col. Williams the Archives began to move beyond the publication of annotated volumes of government records. Most notably he, with Marlene Wallace, began a document conservation program that restored many of Vermont's early government records.

On a personal note I greatly appreciated Col. Williams continued interest in the Archives. I looked forward to the occasional letters of support, usually typed by his wife Joyce, encouraging us in our work and expressing support for our adoption of a full archival management program. We are grateful for his many contributions to making Vermont's history more accessible and to the development of the Vermont State Archives.