

Sub-committee on Rural Character
Notes for July 19, 2005 (prepared by Walter Levy)

Attending: Mike Baden, Kirk Lawson, Terry Ritter, Richard Geldard, Walter Levy, Alex Miller, Stella Miller, Brit Baker, Pam Duke

The committee sifted the list of definitions of rural character that were collected during discussions held at Town Meetings held in May, 2005.

The responses collected once again indicated the community's intense regard for rural character, which is second to taxes as a Town concern. Based on the May responses, Kirk Lawson grouped entries of similarity, coming up with the following eight groups:

Nature/Open Space/Preservation of those (26 entries)
Farms/Agriculture/Preservation of those (18 entries)
Control of Development/Tighter Zoning (16 entries)
Promote local business/products (8 entries)
Wildlife preservation (6 entries)
Historic Home preservation (4 entries)
Live and Let Live attitude (4 entries)
Diversity (3 entries).

When combined the first two groups show that what our townspeople consider most important about rural character are the scenic qualities of the town and the farming and other agricultural endeavors. Though there has been a significant decrease in farming and agriculture, farms are part of the natural landscape (aside from being economic ventures) and our townspeople would like to see them preserved. The threat that the Davis Farm, though no longer farmed, might developed into a 200+ housing community and a strip mall, seemed to sum up the feeling that farmland was a vital to maintaining the open space in the Town of Rochester.

The third most often cited rural quality is the need for controlling development, presumably for the sake of maintaining a balance for community needs and scenic qualities. Britt Baker pointed out how this reflects the problem of improving Accord.

Surprisingly, rather limited interest was expressed for outdoor recreation, hunting, and camping.

The combination of maintaining open space, biodiversity, and an economic development seems to runs constantly through discussion. Mike Baden pointed out that economics is the underpinning of rural character and that without a sound economic base the town's open space and scenic qualities would suffer. Terry Ritter and Walter Levy thought that it might be the way around. The friction between nature and economic development is an important aspect of understand rural character. So, too, is the notion that rural character is a state of mind. Unanswered is the question of how tourism relates to rural space and the local economy. Local responses to the question of rural character may vary widely from

responses from tourists, who have not been canvassed. The committee did not consider this issue, and it may be that we have to figure out a way for finding out what tourists expect and get from TOR and the region.

Also unanswered are the shifts in the Town's demographic profile. Is the town aging as the 2000 Census indicates? If this is a fact, how does this affect perceptions of rural character?

What we think of rural character has much to do with our sense of community and individuality which Richard Geldard thought was central. He proposed "that Rural Character means first and foremost an accepted sense of community in which residents are willing to work together to preserve and protect the general welfare." This reflects the category of Live and Let Live.

After much discussion, it was agreed the subcommittee adopted the following working definition of rural character prepared by Ann Morris and David Curtis:

In the physical sense, "rural character" means a landscape dominated by open spaces, farmland and natural woodlands still capable of sustaining native wildlife, with the population tending to cluster around small town centers and hamlets. Family farming and related businesses still account for a sizable proportion of the rural economy, and businesses are locally-owned and home-grown. Homes and business structures, even when new or renovated, still respect the historic heritage of the region.

In the spiritual sense, "rural character" also has to do with the values inherent in a rural way of life. These include individuality, self-sufficiency, simplicity, tolerance, neighborliness, privacy, and a sense of community based on shared values – the most important of which is a connection with the land, its natural beauty and its bounty.

It was also agreed that committee members should work toward revising the Morris/Curtis draft and submit their revisions to Walter Levy, who will distribute them for continued discussion.

Next meeting: Monday August 15, Town Hall, 7:00-8:30 PM
Agenda to for that meeting will follow.

Notes: Rural Character Rankings for July 2005

From Richard Geldard:
General Comment

From the list

1. A diverse community with open space, light industry, housing, business and farming thriving as one
2. Farms & open space
3. Rural character is more than visual; however, the visible manifestations include scenic views of nature, farms and open spaces. It also includes family owned businesses that promote products made locally and grown locally.
4. Clean green space, low density housing and commerce
5. Rural character has a lot to do with preserving uniqueness. In other words, not allowing cookie cutter development either commercially or residentially. This would also include preservation of older structures and undeveloped open landscape.
6. Countryside with open views and quiet living, clean resources and viable agriculture (farms) in operation.
7. The combination of business and their ability to attract townspeople to gather and a feeling of community

From Ann Morris and David Curtis:

WHAT WE MEAN BY "RURAL CHARACTER"

Richard Geldard's revision of the Morris/Curtis definition of Rural Character

Here is my 'tweak' of the Morris/Curtis statement

At the outset, it should be stated that Rural Character cannot be separated from the Town of Rochester itself as an historic and geographic entity. We could say "Rochester Character" and mean the same thing. With that in mind, Rural Character for the Town of Rochester means:

- a landscape uniquely characterized by open viewsheds of the Catskills and the Shawangunk Ridge
- where active farmsteads remain a major feature
- where natural woodlands sustain native wildlife
- where businesses are locally owned and home-grown
- where business structures and homes respect the historic heritage of the region
- where individuality is respected while a sense of community is fostered
- where residents and businesses alike respect rural character as the town's identity as well as its future

With these principles in mind, Rural Character will serve as a standard with which the town, its governance, and its residents will measure future growth and inevitable pressures to change.