

1. Common Ground





This Irasburg Town Plan describes a historic village center with a handsome Common, set in a classic Northeast Kingdom landscape of fields and forests, hills and ridgelines, with a history dating back to the days of Ira and Jerusha Allen in 1781. The Plan considers agriculture and forestry and tells of dozens of small businesses and hardworking families whose roots often go back for generations. The Plan outlines the challenge of preparing for development in a changing economic and energy environment while preserving the unique natural and historic resources that Irasburg citizens hold dear.

All of these elements paint part of the picture of 21st-century Irasburg, but they leave out the most important piece. Above all, Irasburg is a town of neighbors helping neighbors. Living as we do among people we know and trust, we see examples of mutual help and cooperation every day.

- We pull each other's cars out of snowbanks.
- We drive each other to the doctor's office and the grocery store.
- We all turn out for the Church Fair on the Common on the third Saturday in July.
- We bake the "Cookie of the Week" for story hour at the library.
- We spread sand on the icy driveway of an elderly neighbor.
- We open the doors of our Town Hall for a free Thanksgiving dinner for one and all.
- We feed the neighbors' chickens when they (the neighbors, not the chickens) go on vacation.
- We share our shower when a neighbor's well runs dry.
- We welcome newcomers, while at the same time we treasure friendships that go back to Mrs. Hilliker's third grade in the schoolhouse that is now the Town Clerk's Office.
- We take each other's recycling to the recycling center.
- We don't charge fines for overdue library books.
- We serve home-made corn chowder at the blood drive.
- We coach Little League and turn out to watch each other's six-year-olds pick dandelions in right field.
- We share overflow tomatoes and squash and apples from our gardens and orchards.
- We hold fundraisers to help when catastrophe strikes.
- On third Thursdays, the ladies and gentlemen of the church make lunch for seniors.
- After school, our enrichment program ensures that our kids can go to cooking class, pottery class, dinosaur class, circus tricks class....
- We invite our neighbor's little girls to dinner so that their mom can attend the meetings of the Planning Commission.

Any citizen of Irasburg could add to this list. With all of these actions, and many more that go unrecognized, we weave a network of community trust and cooperation that is Irasburg's greatest strength.

We are fortunate to live in such a community. In other parts of the nation, trust and cooperation are on the decline. A recent survey of more than 15,000 Vermonters found that Vermonters know and trust each other at more than double the national average. Seventy-eight percent of the Vermonters surveyed said that their neighbors trust each other versus only 38 percent of Americans that say they trust their neighbors. The survey also showed that 89 percent of Vermont respondents say their neighbors help others, and 79 percent say that their neighbors pitch in on community projects.

Not surprisingly, the survey also showed that 85 percent of survey respondents in Vermont are optimistic about the future of the community where they live versus 44 percent of Americans who feel hopeful about the future of their neighborhoods. That makes sense, because experience and research show that the best predictor of the success of a community is the strength of its citizens' relationships of trust, mutual help and cooperation.

Far away from Irasburg, a famous study of the regions of Italy makes this case very clearly. Beginning in 1970, the Italians established a nationwide set of regional governments. These 20 new institutions were essentially identical, but the social, economic, political and cultural contexts of each region differed. Now, almost 50 years later, some of these regions have prospered, while others have been dismal failures. What accounts for the difference? Researchers have found that it is not politics, demographics, economics, ideology, or affluence. Instead, the best predictor turned out to be the level of civic engagement, the quality of interactions of citizens with each other. In areas where citizens trust one another to act fairly and obey the law, where they value solidarity, civic participation, and integrity, democracy works and the regions prospered.

Regions at the other end of the spectrum, where civic engagement, trust and cooperation are lacking, failed to thrive and still lag far behind.

Back home in Irasburg, we have our differences. We often look at issues from different points of view and advocate different approaches to dealing with them. But our ability to work together cooperatively and respectfully for the common good of Irasburg, despite our differences, is our greatest resource.

This Town Plan is based on the principles of respect for the environment, sound economics and regard for community values.

What will Irasburg look like in 20, 30, 50 years? With the best of intentions and the most careful planning, we cannot predict all of the opportunities and challenges that will come our way. The effects of climate, the national economy, technology, state and national politics—all of these will inevitably affect Irasburg, but we have little influence on the direction they will take. However, we do know that our most important resource in confronting an unpredictable future is our network of relationships of trust, cooperation, respect and mutual help—and those we can influence. As a community, we can collectively act to strengthen our common ground.

This Town Plan considers the various elements of town planning according to the criteria of respect for the environment, sound economics and regard for community values, as expressed in the planning process, in a survey of Irasburg residents, by a petition and at the ballot box. The Plan also looks at Irasburg's future from the perspective of community trust, cooperation and respect. It encourages and supports policies, practices and activities that strengthen trust and cooperation among our citizens and discourages directions and developments that threaten to fracture and divide. It attempts to provide a context in which citizens can work together despite their differences—the best predictor for the common good of Irasburg, now and 50 years from now.