

# 10. Economic Development

**This plan describes policies and actions to maintain and strengthen economic opportunity for the citizens of Irasburg, in keeping with the planning principles of respect for the environment, sound economics and regard for community values.**

Much of Irasburg's local economy derives from the fields, forests, rivers and streams that characterize the landscape. Many residents work outside the town but choose to live in Irasburg for its quality of life. Future economic development should occur within the constraints of available municipal services. In line with community values expressed in the 2016 Community Survey and in community meetings, this plan encourages economic development that preserves the town's essential character.

## **Economic Conditions Today**

Irasburg residents carry on a remarkable number and variety of commercial activities. Existing commercial enterprises, some of which are carried on as home-based businesses, include the following sectors:

*In this Chapter:*

- *Economic Conditions Today*
- *Economic Development*
- *Goals & Actions*

## **Services**

A small grocery store and deli; a convenience store/deli/gas station/weigh station; a real estate agency; a meatcutter; a barbershop; two hair salons; several house-cleaning services; a video store and gun shop; a locksmith and security company; a purveyor of specialty foods and baked goods; a processor of hemp oil; a registered day-care center

## **Working Lands**

Farms; a farm service business; a farm-equipment business; a sawmill; two cedar fence companies; two taxidermists; a sharpening service; a dairy supply business; logging and firewood operations; maple sugaring; a yoghurt producer; a bulk milk transport business

## **Travel / Tourism**

A B&B; a campground; a summer camp

## **Industrial / Mechanical / Construction**

Several building and excavation contractors; a concrete company; a stonemason; a foam insulation installer; several trucking companies; a small engine repair shop; a collision-repair shop; several vehicle repair, parts and maintenance shops; a gravel pit and asphalt plant.



Sweet Corn Stand at Tree Corners

Besides these enterprises, Irasburg is the home of writers, painters, potters, woodworkers and other artisans who sell their work online, at craft shows and from their homes. Irasburg's small commercial center, located on the Common, includes Ray's Market and the U.S. Post Office.

The average annual unemployment rate in Irasburg was 4.8 percent in 2017, down from 5.1 percent in 2015. Almost three-quarters of residents (73.5 percent) work outside the town; 20 percent work outside Orleans County.

**S**afe, reliable and affordable childcare is an important resource for Irasburg's economic and social well-being. The lack of sufficient childcare facilities poses a particular hardship to single parents struggling to find and keep employment. The Vermont Department for Children and Families Bright Futures Child Care Information System lists one licensed child-care center in Irasburg. Independent day-care homes and relative care are other possible options. A free public pre-school program offers excellent early education opportunities for Irasburg's three-to-five-year olds. Held five days a week for full or half days, in two locations (Albany and Barton), the program incorporates Head Start and Early Head Start services and provides an exceptional resource for educational, social and emotional development.

Regional agencies and organizations that offer child care programs or provide referrals to programs include Northeast Kingdom Community Action, Inc. (NEKCA), which oversees the Headstart and Early Headstart programs in the region; and Umbrella, Inc., which operates the Kingdom Childcare Connection program.

*Farms have a significant impact on the community and the surrounding area as contributors to the economy, employers, and stewards of open space.*

Working lands have a dominant role in Irasburg's economy. Farms and forestry operations, plus support systems from mechanics and machinists to equipment supply, contribute to the tax base and to employment opportunities. Industry-wide trends in dairying, forestry and maple sugaring have significant current and future implications for these industries.

There are approximately 14 active dairy farms in Irasburg, of which two are classified as large (499 cows and up), two as medium (199- 499), and the rest as small (1-199). These farms, scattered throughout the town, have a significant impact on the community as contributors to the economy, employers and stewards of open space. They enhance the beauty and define the rural character of the community, as they have done for generations. Another farm raises buffalo and elk for their restaurant. There is one Community Supported Agriculture enterprise

and a farm that raises rare breeds of poultry, goats and pigs. There are at least two commercial beekeepers.

**M**aple sugaring is an important economic activity in Irasburg, with 23 sugaring operations making more than 70,000 taps and producing some 25,000 gallons of maple syrup annually. Maple sugaring is a million-dollar-plus(!) economic activity for Irasburg. Canadian domination of the maple-sugar market strongly affects the price of US-produced maple products.

Forestry—cedar logs, pine and hardwood lumber, and greens for the Christmas holiday market—is an important economic generator. The town is one of the remaining few in Vermont with an operating sawmill. Quantifying the economic role of forestry in Irasburg is difficult, since many residents harvest timber from their property for construction,

handcrafting or firewood, and dollar values are not calculated for these secondary sources of income.

### **Economic development**

Irasburg intends to change and grow within its means and in harmony with its character. Future commercial enterprises are encouraged to locate near existing infrastructure, such as power lines and roads, and to be compatible with neighboring uses. For both economic and environmental reasons, current businesses and future development should incorporate best practices in energy efficiency and conservation, making use of resources and incentives from state programs such as Efficiency Vermont and electric utilities. Irasburg intends to apply for Village Center Designation. Such a designation would help to support energy efficiency and conservation initiatives.

Irasburg's residents support encouraging diverse economic development. The 2016 Community Survey showed strong support for home-based businesses, agriculture and forestry, value-added processing, professional services, day care centers, and tourism/hospitality. The Survey showed strong opposition to large-scale retail business, such as "big box" stores, office/business parks, and manufacturing/industrial business.

This plan encourages agricultural and forestry enterprises throughout all of Irasburg, along with activities that provide value-added opportunities for these businesses: cheese-making, wool products, a farmers' market and agritourism; and activi-

ties and events, such as Kingdom-Farm and Food Days, Maple Open House Weekend and Open Farm Week, that bring visitors to farms and forests.

This Plan encourages the development of commercial businesses including small convenience stores and grocery stores and enterprises that support tourism and hospitality, such as inns and cafes. Re-use of existing structures is a way to encourage redevelopment of Irasburg's historic buildings. Village Center Designation would play a key role.

Improving some of the town's amenities could help foster the type of development favored by Irasburg's residents. Reducing the speed and volume of traffic around the village center and Common and impro-

*Reliable high-speed internet would give the many artisans in Irasburg critical access to online platforms.*

ving telecommunications infrastructure are examples. Improved telecommunications infrastructure would support home-based enterprises and allow workers to telecommute from home, saving time and energy. Reliable high-speed internet would give the many artisans in Irasburg critical access to online platforms

for selling their products. It could also be used for home visits by physicians via Skype or similar platforms. Increasing the number of safe and affordable child-care options would help parents find and keep employment.

This Plan encourages innovative and creative opportunities for economic development, particularly in efforts to make Irasburg a destination for Vermonters and visitors alike. In June 2016, Irasburg hosted a debate of Vermont gubernatorial candidates that drew an audience of some 300 people. Might that event mark the start of a series of Irasburg events that engage Vermont citizens in the discussion of civic and political issues of the times? The Irasburg Common is the crossroads for a growing volume of traffic at the intersections of Routes 14, 5, and 58. How might existing and future enterprises offer goods and services to attract the people passing through? How could Irasburg develop a "town brand," perhaps incorporating our Ira Allen heritage, that would add value to new and existing businesses?

## Goal

Irasburg's strong and resilient local economy provides a future of economic opportunity for the town's citizens, in accord with the planning principles of respect for the environment, sound economics and regard for community values. Development keeps pace with the ability of the town to provide services, incorporates best practices of energy efficiency and conservation, and preserves Irasburg's natural and historic character.

## Actions

- Apply for Village Center Designation.
  - Encourage and support strong and diversified agriculture and silviculture.
  - Support state and regional efforts to improve telecommunications so that all residents have access to affordable high-speed internet and mobile telephone service.
  - Work with state legislators, agencies, NVDA, providers and other entities to increase the availability of safe, affordable childcare for house.
  - Support the efforts of the Orleans Supervisory Union, employers, and young adults to
  - improve young people's access to meaningful employment; and to ensure that they are exposed to a broad range of future careers and have the ability to learn the skills needed for post-high-school employment.
  - Seek out and encourage commercial ventures that match the village's scale and rural character, including home-based businesses and farmers' markets. This plan strongly discourages the development of box stores or similarly-scaled businesses in Irasburg.
  - Create a business directory of home-based occupations in town to advertise and promote local businesses and assist residents and visitors in finding local businesses that meet their needs.
  - Encourage innovative and creative approaches to using the town's natural, historic and human resources in support of a strong economic future. Develop an "Irasburg brand."
- Use every opportunity to strengthen trust and cooperation among Irasburg citizens, and discourage directions and developments that threaten to fracture and divide, in order to provide a context for citizens to work together despite their differences, for the common good.

“Made in Irasburg”