

**SUSTAIN SOUTHERN MAINE  
STANDISH, STEEP FALLS PILOT CENTER  
LESSONS LEARNED**

**April 15, 2013**

**Realities and Assets in a Rural Village Environment:**

1. Declining rural villages **face development challenges:**

- **Lack of goods and services:** Rural areas have few goods or services available on site. This requires residents to **travel long distances for even day to day needs**. These trips are costly for residents in terms of both dollars and time spent.
- **Distance from jobs:** Rural villages commonly **lack employment centers** in the modern age. This again causes residents to travel long distances every day, incurring high transportation costs and loss of time.
- **Lack of pedestrian amenities:** While rural villages are built at a small scale, road design over the past decades was focused primarily on auto travel, making it often very **hard to walk from one part of the village** to another due to the lack of sidewalks or even shoulders.
- **Changing nature of passing traffic:** Many rural villages experience mixed traffic: local traffic plus travelers using the main road as the shortest route to their destination, with **speeding a common byproduct**. This creates a conflict between pass-through traffic and the needs of residents to enjoy a safe and neighborhood-oriented environment.

2. But rural villages do have assets that **present opportunities for future development:**

- **Traditional center based layout:** Most rural villages are the product of a rich history. They are **built around civic focal points and historical job centers. Amenities are close together**. While most of the rural employment centers have faded in recent years, in Steep Falls, many of the village center amenities, such as libraries, schools and post offices, still exist.
- **Developable land:** Rural centers by their very nature have **abundant undeveloped and underutilized land**. While some of this land may be environmentally constrained or protected, there is still opportunity to bring back employment and business to the area while carefully expanding residential uses to support it.
- **Natural resources/rural character:** The abundance of undeveloped land and farmland in and around a rural village is a primary contributor to the look and feel of the area. It provides **visual and recreational amenities**, fosters residents' connection to the land and is a major attraction for people looking to adopt a rural/outdoor-oriented lifestyle.

**Place in Hierarchy of Centers**

3. Thinking about the growth potential of an existing district requires understanding its place in the hierarchy of centers: does it have the draw (from largest market area to smallest) of a regional, community, neighborhood, or convenience center? Steep Falls is currently a convenience center with its one commercial store drawing mostly on the immediate population and capturing some level of pass-through traffic.
4. Once its place in the natural hierarchy of centers is identified, it is possible to look at ways that the center can fulfill its potential. Steep Falls has great potential to become a small neighborhood/village center, particularly with the traditional village center services of the post office and library that already exist. By developing additional residences in the immediate area, encouraging small business commercial growth at the village crossroads, and ensuring safe pedestrian access between the two, a traditional small village center could develop and thrive here. The potential of a Mountain Division line stop in the future would enhance this potential.

### **Capacity for Growth: Potential Growth**

5. Steep Falls is representative of a rural village center. This type of location has capability to absorb growth. A review of development potential suggests that Steep Falls has the capacity to absorb 5-10% of Standish's projected residential housing growth over the next 25-35 years or some 68 – 135 units. In addition, 10% of job growth projections for Standish could generate 33-35 jobs in this area. Depending on the mix of retail, food service and office space, this could translate to between 16,500 s.f. and 17,500 s.f. of commercial space.
6. The capacity for growth of a location such as Steep Falls depends partly on the amount of buildable, vacant land in the area. Rural villages commonly have large amounts of undeveloped land just off the primary roads as well as former commercial or manufacturing land that is now vacant or underutilized. The Steep Falls pilot suggests:
  - **Formerly developed commercial or manufacturing land is a good place to consider siting similar projects.** In Steep Falls, the former train station property at the crossroads could be used for small retail development, while the former Sanborn Mill property just off the main road is suitable and large enough for light industrial, commercial, mixed use development or some combination of these.
  - **Large vacant parcels off the main roads can provide good locations for residential development.** Given the area's rural setting, single family homes are likely the best use here but the land will support a variety of housing types depending on what the market and local community is willing to accept. The relatively low land costs could also make this area suitable to fill the need for affordable housing; younger people starting out and older people downsizing who prefer a rural environment and a walkable neighborhood would find this an attractive location.

### **Where to Start**

## 7. Improve the pedestrian experience

- Most rural villages do not currently have sidewalks and an immediate action to improve quality of life for residents is to **create sidewalks on the major roads through the center**. This will connect residents to each other and to stores and amenities in the village. In Steep Falls, recreational walking is common, both on roadways and over an extensive trail system. Adding sidewalks and strategically sited crosswalks at civic uses will increase the safe recreational use of the area.
- Speeding traffic is typically a problem on rural roads passing through village locations. **Narrowing the roadway** through such techniques as roadway striping, landscaping, fencing and signage along, along with adding sidewalks, will create a visual reminder to passers through that they are entering a village; a more pedestrian-oriented place. In Steep Falls, speed tables may also be an appropriate solution, though they sometimes create more noise. Slower traffic reduces traffic noise as well as making the road safer for pedestrians.
- If through-truck traffic is an issue, **communicating with the owners of those enterprises** about what a town is trying to achieve in such a village area can sometimes be helpful in terms of **slowing truck speed**.

## 8. Address the need for community septic systems

- Rural areas are not generally served by public sewer. This means that engineered septic systems will be a large part of any potential development. State law requires that in areas not served by sewer or community septic, residential densities must be no more than two housing units per acre, so **if a rural village is interested in even moderate densities it must address this issue**. There are a number of things a village can do to prepare for septic based developments:
  1. **Make sure soils in the area are sufficient** for septic before attempting to encourage development there. In Steep Falls, the soils are generally sandy.
  2. Town ordinances can be made to **expressly allow shared septic systems**.
  3. Public funds, including TIF revenues, can be used to help fund the construction of such systems. These **public-private partnerships can help lower the barrier to village-type development** that the lack of a public sewer may present.
  4. As septic systems are largely underground, **public lands such as parks and ball fields can be used as locations for shared septic systems** while still being used as public space. In Steep Falls, a septic system that would serve the former train station property could be located under the town green.

## 9. Protect the visual identity of the village

- An older village typically has a significant number of buildings with strong architectural elements. **Design standards can be considered by the community** to maintain the current visual feel of a traditional rural village if residents want to make sure that new development honors this style.

1. Architectural styling: Architectural standards can be enacted that require new construction or significant reconstruction to be done in the traditional style evident elsewhere in the village.
  2. Location of parking: Parking lots can be required to be behind buildings rather than in front so as to more closely resemble the existing driveways for residential units.
  3. Massing and site location: New buildings or significant renovations can be required to resemble the existing housing stock in terms of height and size. They can also be required to be located along the road and landscaped consistent with the traditional houses in the area.
- Many traditional rural villages have central parks or commons. These can be built up and maintained by the town or by interested groups of residents. **These become a major amenity for the community, a central location where residents can interact socially and events can be held.** In Steep Falls, an active and effective Neighborhood Association already exists, a huge asset to rebuilding this village area.
  - If Town-owned properties are well maintained and landscaped, this can **set the tone for the rest of the Village to keep the area attractive.** Property owners along key corridors can be encouraged and if possible assisted in improving the aesthetics of their properties. This will help maintain the identity of the village, increase resident's sense of pride and ownership, and contribute to development potential.

#### 10. Preserve environmental assets

- One of the most prominent assets and attractions of rural Maine communities is access to natural environments. A town can work with local residents and with land trusts to **preserve portions of undeveloped land** so that they can continue to be enjoyed by residents. Steep Falls has many miles of trails through wooded portions of the area, most on private land. Making sure these trails remain open to residents and taking extra effort to preserve the areas through which they pass is a good strategy to promote residential development.
- Rural communities that are built on or near rivers and streams are typically used by residents for boating, swimming, and/or fishing. The Saco River is a major asset for Steep Falls. **Creating publicly controlled access points** will help reduce property owner conflicts and allow for maintenance of these areas, which can be overseen by citizens groups in cooperation with the municipality.

#### 11. Keep in mind the potential for rail service

- Historically, rural villages were often the site of a train station. While only a few rail lines are active today, the railroad rights of way are often still in existence and owned by rail companies or the state. Local and national opinions are turning back to favor trains again. While the potential for restoring train lines may be some ways off, the opportunities for communities along these lines cannot be underestimated. **Any plans for a village located on a historical rail right of way should keep the potential revival of that line in mind and provide support whenever possible.** If the historic rail station no longer exists, towns should consider preserving options for the best location to re-

construct ticket platforms, windows and related amenities while considering that facility's interface with other transportation modes