

## Land Use

As noted elsewhere, the pattern of land use in Sullivan has long reflected the community's desire to have a rural-residential character—something in between a suburban “bedroom community” and rural community of farms, fields, and forests. The large amount of privately owned property in current use and the acreage in conservation easement has kept housing development confined to our highway system. Moreover, our rough and broken topography has discouraged any large-scale development of our back land. Our Community Planning Ordinance's definition of a house lot as having a 2-acre minimum with a 200-foot frontage on a Class V or better road has done much to keep new housing from clustering too close together. This has also served to limit access for the development of the larger pieces of land away from our road system. Finally, our lack of municipal water and sewerage practically guarantee that housing will have to be on fairly large lots.

All of this has provided a certain balance that has addressed housing needs while maintaining the community's perception of itself as rural-residential. However, one must also consider Sullivan's size and the growth in housing over the last 50 years and how all of that impacts our land use.

The total amount of land in Sullivan is 11,980 acres. About 14% of the land is taken up by the road network, areas of open water and land currently designated as wetlands. 27.6% of our land has conservation easements which basically prevent further development. 34% of our land currently has a dwelling unit located on it. Much of that land includes lots that are greater than 2 acres and could be subdivided further. Another 143 acres (.02%) is owned by the town. That includes land for town buildings and the 113-acre Winch Forest which cannot be sold or developed. That leaves about 23% (or almost 2800 acres) of our total land area that does not currently contain residences.

Another consideration is the average acreage per dwelling unit. According to a survey of the property listings contained within the annual town reports, in 1970, the average dwelling unit included 39 acres of land. By the year 2000, the average had dropped to 15 acres. That should not be surprising as some 55% of our current housing was built during that 30 period. The period between 2000 and 2020 saw less growth and a more modest fall in average acreage to 14 acres. That would seem to indicate that our housing growth is largely in line with our desires for a rural-residential community.

However, one must also consider where our housing stock is located mostly along our Class V highways. Using the same methodology used in the previous paragraph, an analysis was done using the 2022 Town Report list of properties but then applied to specific streets. For the most part, the averages were similar to the 14 acres noted in the 2020 survey. However, if one disregards those properties on large lots (20 acres or greater) then the average drops nearly 5 acres. For example, Apple Hill Road contained 18 properties with a dwelling unit at the time of the survey and an average acreage of 14 acres. By removing the 3 properties with 20 acres or more, the average drops to 6.1 acres. Most of the other roads surveyed had averages ranging from 4 acres on Hubbard Road to 6 acres on South Road.

If we look at the remaining property with no housing, we find that much of it is “back land” that has no or very limited access to a Class V or better road. Much of that land contains wet areas and steep slope which would make development difficult and expensive. Under current regulations contained in the Sullivan Community Planning Ordinance and Sullivan Subdivision Regulations, development off of our highway system would require special exceptions, the construction of new roads, and other obstacles. The costs involved in such projects would discourage all but the well-financed developer which is probably the reason why the planning board has received few serious proposals of this nature.

The conclusion of the analysis might lead one to think that Sullivan is running out of standard housing lots (2 acre minimum, 200 feet of road frontage). Such a conclusion would be incorrect—at least in the near term. As noted above, the average property containing a dwelling unit is still greater than 2 acres. Those lots with greater than 4 acres are still “subdividable.” However, whether or not they will be subdivided in the near future will still depend on the desires of individual properties owners combined with the town’s regulations regarding frontage, the adequacy of the land for water and septic facilities, topographical obstacles, etc.

Most importantly, future subdivisions will depend on individual land owners. A survey of subdivisions that occurred from 1970 to 2000 showed that almost all of them were by individual land owners and not by real estate or commercial developers. Moreover, subdivisions and the resulting new housing has been a slow and incremental process. Given this past, there is no reason to believe that the pattern will change significantly in the near future.

That conclusion is also informed by projections for growth in our population. Unlike other New England States, New Hampshire’s population continues to grow. If current trends continue, the state’s population (according to the State Planning and Development Office) is predicted to grow some 9% by the year 2050. However, most of the growth will occur in other parts of the state. Cheshire County’s growth for the same period is expected to fall by 3.5%. Perhaps because these projections are based on current population trends, Sullivan’s population decline since 2000 leads the state’s planners to project a 14.7% decline by 2050.

Such predictions of events 30 years from now are, of course, subject to a great deal of changeability. However, they seem to predict that Sullivan’s land use will continue to add new housing lots at a steady pace regulated by our 2-acre minimum and will continue along our Class V or better highways. For the most part, large scale development of our back land would be too expensive to accomplish profitably.

Still, the town, and particularly the planning board, must be prepared for proposals to develop land off of our Class V or better highways. The state-wide pressure for more housing will probably lead to new legislation in the near future which will call into question our town’s commitment to single family housing on a 2 acre or greater lot. This means a constant, perhaps annual review of our regulations to make sure they conform to changes in the state law as well as potential changes in real estate transactions and new subdivisions. As noted in the housing section, the planning board will need to continue consideration of alternatives to single family dwellings.

## **Current Use**

Current use refers to a series of state laws that were passed after World War II and modified over the years. The purpose was to preserve forest and agricultural land from housing or commercial development. It did so by changing the tax structure to rate the property's valuation at its current use rather than its potential use for housing or commercial activities. That led to the preservation of open and forested land across the state which was seen as a way to preserve farms and forest resources. It also had a secondary benefit of preserving a "rural atmosphere" in order to attract tourists.

A property owner has to maintain the current use in order to retain the lower valuation. Unlike a conservation easement, which is practically impossible to change, a property owner can remove their current use on some or all of their land at any time. There is a cost for doing that involves paying back to the town a portion of the money saved by having a current use valuation. This would be a major consideration for a property owner considering developing their property.

Sullivan has a great deal of land (both "back land" and land with frontage on a Class V or better highway) in current use. A survey conducted in 2012 using data from the New Hampshire Department of Revenue Administration found 9,800 acres of land in current use in Sullivan. At the time this represented 83% of our land and was somewhat higher than our "comparator towns" (Nelson, Gilsum and Stoddard). Of course, the 3,300 acres in conservation easement was included in that figure. That still leaves about 54% of our land in some form of current use. This is probably what contributes to our rural-residential character as much of the current use land surrounds or abuts our housing areas.

## **Conservation and Preservation**

Since the 1970s, Sullivan has had a very active Conservation Commission. They have promoted best forestry practices; urged home owners to avoid planting invasive species; conducted annual road-side clean up days; and promoted hikes to educate the community about our wildlife, plants, wetlands, and town history. Members of the Commission have advised the Board of Selectmen, the Planning Board, and the Zoning Board of Adjustment on issues related to wetlands as well as issues air and water quality. They have promoted land conservation and have assisted land owners interested in conservation easements. The results of those efforts have preserved important acreage for wildlife corridors, hiking, fishing, hunting, and forest preservation. Many of the tracts of land under conservation easement also connect with conservation land in Gilsum and Stoddard which form large areas of protected land..

The work of the Conservation Commission and private land owners have done much to preserve the rural residential character of the town. However, much of the land that is in conservation easement is located in the northern portion of town. As noted above, much of the remaining undeveloped acreage in the rest of town is private property restricted by current use regulations. Such land, of course, has the potential for development, but at the cost of removing it from current use.

Previous master plans have noted areas in town that are environmentally sensitive. In the future, the planning board must continue to take that into consideration should a development plan be presented. The following list represents land that previous master plans have identified and their current status. This status has not changed since the last master plan:

- Bolster Pond: Currently protected on all sides by conservation easements.
- Chapman Pond: The west side of the pond contains developed land (average acreage is 3 acres) and some current use land. The east side is in current use.
- Otter Brook Watershed (upper end): The Ellis Reservoir wetland, and much of the main brook (including Otter Falls) is in conservation easement. The land containing seasonal streams flowing from Warren Ridge is in current use.
- Otter Brook Watershed (lower end): Most of the area contains a major wetland and a stratified drift aquifer. The area along Valley Road contains housing (average lot size 7 acres). The east side of the brook contains land in current use.
- Otter Brook Watershed (Spaulding Brook): Most of Spaulding Brook (including Great Brook and Chapman Brook) flows through land in current use. Once it begins following Valley Road, it passes developed land (average acreage 15) until it flows into Otter Brook. Its other major tributaries (White Brook, Stony Brook, and Meeting House Brook) flow through a mix of residential and current use land.
- Otter Brook Watershed (Granite Lake Brook): Granite Lake Brook follows Old Concord Road which is mostly residential with some current use land (average residential acreage is 18 acres).
- Ashuelot River Watershed: This includes the Hemenway Brook as well as a number of seasonal streams. While much of this watershed begins on conservation easement land, it soon flows through land in current use.
- Ferry Brook Watershed: This area begins at Centre Street and flows through a number of significant wetlands in the area around Price Road and along Ferry Brook Road. This area is a patchwork of some house lots and large tracts that are in current use.
- Hubbard Brook Watershed: This area contains a number of significant wetlands and flows through land in current use.
- The ledge land leading from Sullivan into Bears Den: Some of the approaches to the area are in conservation easement, the approaches to the south are on current use land.
- The Brooks land on South Road: The members of the Brooks family have placed several parcels under either agricultural, restrictive, or conservation easements.
- Jewett Park: The land for the park is owned by the town. The area is underutilized, but its location within the Center makes it perfect for town-wide gatherings such as special events and picnics. Trails connecting the park with the Winch Town Forest have been proposed in the past.
- The 70-acre parcel at the corner of Church Street and Gilsum Road: The land was formerly a farm, a golf course, and a night club. The parcel borders on the Winch Town Forest and has been found to contain excellent

agricultural soils. It is relatively flat which makes it ideal for development and it is not in current use.

The preservation of open space and forested land—especially around our important natural areas—is one of the components of our rural residential character. However, a major part of preservation is also to retain physical reminders of our past. This is especially important in our modern era when our population is highly mobile and has many interests outside of the community.

At the present time, there is no committee or board in Sullivan with the specific mission of historic preservation. Thus, the preservation of our heritage has fallen to the Conservation Commission, the Town Archives, the Planning Board, and various interested individuals. Information regarding the history and past uses of land should be part of the considerations for the future development of the town. It should be noted that there are no structures or sites in town that have designations as National Historic Register sites or New Hampshire Landmark sites.

The following list contains areas within the town that are historically sensitive:

- **The Center:** Generally speaking, this is the area along Centre Street from Church Street to the Sullivan Public Library which contains Sullivan's public buildings. The area to the north of the Center includes the Winch Town Forest and the Meeting House Cemetery. Most of the land to the south of the Center is in conservation easement. While this preserves the Center in its current state, it makes any further development of public facilities difficult if not impossible.
- **The Soldier's Monument:** This was the first Civil War monument to be raised and dedicated in New Hampshire. Jewett Park surrounds the small space for the obelisk.
- **The United Congregational Church of Sullivan:** The structure was built in 1848 and represented a break from tradition in that it was built strictly as a house of worship rather than a town meetinghouse. It is also one of the few churches in New Hampshire that has retained its horse sheds. It was recently designated as a site worthy of preservation by the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance.
- **The Sullivan Public Library:** The library building served as the Sullivan Town Hall from 1851 to 1970. It was built on the site of the Second Meeting House and many of the meeting house's timbers were incorporated into the library building.
- **The Four Corners (where South and Gilsum Road meet Centre Street):** From 1800 to 1860, this was the center of Sullivan. It is difficult to visualize, but a one time it contained a store, a meeting hall, a potash factory, the Baptist Church, the militia armory, a black smith, a post office, a shoe maker, and was a stop for the Keene to Newport stage route. Today, most of the houses in the area have been built in the recent past. There are two cellar holes and remnants of a third on private land. The southeast corner is in conservation easement. The site also contains the Four Corners Cemetery where many of our first settlers are buried. Finally, there is the stone fence that once served as the town pound which is owned by the town. Mention should also be made of the privately owned house at 35 South Road which has the significance of being the only brick house in town.

- **East Sullivan:** The village was once the center of Sullivan's mill operations and supported two tanneries, a large saw mill, a grist and fulling mill, a wood products manufacturing company, and a blacksmith. Changes in the location and bridges on Centre Street and Route 9 have done much to remove any evidence of the mill village. A corner of the foundation of Goodnow-Hastings Mill was preserved and the cellar hole of the second tannery is still visible.
- **The Goodnow Turning Mill:** South of the village of East Sullivan and sandwiched between Route 9 and Otter Brook is a foundation and sluice way that supported Leslie Goodnow's mill. It is located on land that is in current use.
- **Mill sites on the Otter Brook Watershed:** There two significant sites on Otter Brook that are located within the conservation easement. The first is the Dauphin Spaulding Mill located south of Otter Falls. The second is the Ellis-Harris Mill located south of Ellis Reservoir. Both are stone foundations. The Ellis Reservoir is now a marsh land but was once the pond that provided the water power to run the mills down stream as far as East Sullivan.
- **The Jacob Spaulding Mill Site:** The is located at the junction of Cross Road and Boulder Road. The site includes a stone dam and foundation. The land is in current use.
- **The Norcross Mill Site:** This was the last of Sullivan's water powered mills (1920-1931) and is located on land in conservation easement. Although it is located on Spaulding Brook, the power was provided by diverting water from Otter Brook and running it through a penstock to the mill site. The wooden structures are long gone, but their concrete supports still show the location of the mill and its penstock.
- **The Felt Brothers Mill Site:** This is the remains of a stone foundation located on private land (169 Old Concord Road) along Granite Lake Brook.
- **Stone Walls and Foundations:** Much of the Sullivan's land contain stone walls and cellar holes. Many of these are on private land and some are on conservation easement land. For the most part, these have been preserved over the years. However, poor forestry practices have destroyed some sites and walls. While destroying stone walls—especially those marking property boundaries—is illegal, enforcing the law is difficult. Future development could also threaten cellar holes which mark the location of early settlements. Several of these on private property have been bulldozed over the years to make way for new housing.
- **Meeting House Rock:** This marks the site of Sullivan's first meeting house and is located on the Winch Hill Town Forrest.
- **Masonian Patent Line Marker:** This small stone monument was erected to mark the location of the Masonian Patent Line in Sullivan. It is on land in conservation easement. The line marked the western boundary of the royal grant to John Mason. The grant marked the first official recognition of the colony that became New Hampshire. The line bisects Sullivan from south to northeast. The stone was placed where boundaries of three of our predecessor towns (Keene, Gilsum and Packersfield) joined.
- **Nims Monument:** This marks the location of the farm of Frederick Nims. It is on land in current use. While the stone marks the site of the family home and commemorates the Nims family, it also marks the location of a farm settled in 1777. Among the owners over the years was the family of Peter and Catherine Freeman who were the first African Americans to live in Sullivan (1798-1808).

- Rugg Monument: This marks the location of the Kendall-Rugg farm on Kendall Lane. The Rugg family was prominent in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is on land in conservation easement.
- 30 Centre Street: This is now a privately owned apartment house. It was constructed in 1869 and served as a community gathering place. It once held the Honor Bright Grange and the Union Evangelical Congregational Church. It served as the Sullivan Town Hall from 1970 to 1995.
- 33 Centre Street: This is now a private home, but was once the District #1 Schoolhouse (East Sullivan).
- 492 Centre Street: This privately owned property contains the parsonage once owned by the First Congregational Society and the District #2 Schoolhouse (Center School).
- 279 Boulder Road: This privately owned property contains the District #3 Schoolhouse (the Fifield or Seward School). Past owners of the property have maintained the school in its original condition (as of 1930) and it's a good example of a rural one-roomed school.
- 334 South Road: This privately owned property is the District #4 Schoolhouse. It was purchased by the Brooks family and used by different family members as a summer home until the 1970s. It deteriorated badly over the years and is now being restored by the property owner.