

Report by the Committee on Roads

Town of Chatham, NY

Submitted November 16, 2017

The Task

The committee was tasked by the town supervisor to create a format for reviewing roads in the town of Chatham. This format is to be used for planning future use and growth on our roads while honoring the directives of the comprehensive plan.

We considered and studied other towns' road plans. We consulted the Cornell Study Guidelines for New York State Rural Town and County Roads. The observations of this committee have resulted in a highway classification system that is unique to the small, rural town of Chatham. We studied the current inventory of roads and considered the many differing characteristics of those roads—gravel or paved, county or state—in giving them definitions for the classification system.

The committee brought to the forefront and defined a distinct set of filters through which all of these roads should be viewed when deciding on future growth, development, new construction, or situational changes that would alter traffic volume and flow.

Using these filters over the inventory of roads with their differing characteristics gives the clear ability to the town board and planners to look at growth and traffic flow. This analysis will be in line with the mandates of the comprehensive plan and at the same time responsive to the pressures on our town's highway department that arise from the world evolving around us. So, both planning interests and maintenance/cost interests are addressed.

The town must safeguard the rural character, historic importance, environmental, resource, and geographic overlays quantified in the comprehensive plan. In addition it must weigh the impacts of potential density from growth and build-out of existing capacity with the resulting pressure on roads and changed traffic flows. Both of these forces put demands on the town's highway department to confront rising costs from maintenance and capital construction and to protect the health and safety of the residents on Chatham's roads.

Utilizing the highway department's Inventory of Current Roads, we saw characteristics and patterns that allowed us to classify each road. In general, we saw a natural distinction of our low-volume gravel roads as a distinct classification. We recognized that current paved roads facilitate higher volume and will thereby both receive and attract increased traffic, speed, weight, noise etc. This can change neighborhoods, valleys, winding roads, and farm areas quickly. Roads in transition are potentially explosive to changing rural characteristics. Many other pressures beyond mere residential construction can quickly increase traffic flow on these

roads. We came to realize that we must increase our awareness that, whenever, possible a proactive underpinning of road usage should be to direct our commuting traffic, business traffic, and traffic flowing to and from the Taconic State Parkway and I-90 onto existing county and state roads. We also realized that when traveling in the town we need to encourage people to use larger paved roads rather than gravel roads that are not built for increased use. We should plan traffic flow around narrow, gravel, rural, agricultural, scarcely populated roads.

One of the most important decisions the town board must make is whether to encourage or discourage the transitioning of a road. This is the first line and often the last line of defense in protecting the rural nature and health and safety of a rural gravel road. This is the place to keep down the highway department's costs of increased maintenance and possible widening and paving.

Lastly, we explored a small number of roads that we called *problematic* because they require disproportionately high maintenance costs per residence. We recommend that these short, dead end, private, sparsely populated or unpopulated, seasonally used, and extremely low-volume roads need to be comprehensively addressed for reduction in liability and highway department costs.

Classifications of Current Roads

(See Addendum 1.)

Gravel Roads

Gravel roads differ dramatically in the lay of their land, original settlement, traditional usage, and unique geographical and biological compositions. No two are alike. Together, their differences combine to make up the character of the town of Chatham as experienced through its roads.

These roads are and should continue to be narrow, low-volume, low-speed passageways that, while taking us from here to there, continue to present us with the beauty and quietness of our rural surroundings. These roads do not, as they exist and as they should be maintained, lend themselves to dense residential development along their entire lengths, nor can they handle a high volume of commercial traffic or enterprise. They should continue to be maintained commensurate with their individual characteristics—narrow or steep, shaded or winding, occupied or vacant. Here is where policy from the town board in conjunction with the highway superintendent can allow for a latitude of minimum to maximum maintenance as required by weather conditions without substantially altering the road. We recognize the importance of a road superintendent who knows the history of our roads and understands that changing them changes our community. A superintendent must have the skill to maintain these roads, recognizing that changes to surface or dimension threaten loosing these heritage resources.

Paved Roads

Our current paved roads came to be so for many reasons. Remember, they were all gravel once—Hudson–West Stockbridge Road, Albany Turnpike, Birge Hill Road. They carried our ancestors, their necessities, and their products from city to farm, from farm to Market. Some roads became thoroughfares, or main routes of travel, like Albany Turnpike. The automobile and commerce put heavy wear on the surfaces, and eventually paving became the best alternative for maintenance and health and safety. Other roads, such as Hudson–West Stockbridge, lost their importance as stage routes and fares of commerce. They became intersected by busier routes. This caused most of their mileage to fall into disrepair, become field roads, and eventually be abandoned, their part in our early development lost in history.

Some of these gravel roads became more intensively used with the advent of the automobile and the necessity of dependability, and therefore they were paved. Others were paved as a supposedly simple solution to remediate wet areas, potholes, steepness, erosion, or dust.

Paving brings with it a new set of concerns and expenses: the initial cost of building the bed, the drainage for an impervious surface, the laying of the initial asphalt, and the expense of replacement when the asphalt wears out. While paving theoretically gives better traction and allows traffic to travel more safely, it also allows traffic to move faster, which can create many unsafe conditions. So, paving these gravel roads is a serious community issues that must be considered carefully with weighty deliberation. There is no natural clock that says it's time to pave the next road. The safety of the users of our roads and the residents who live on them require equal deliberation. These users—including children playing in their front yards, bicyclists, walkers, joggers, equestrians, birdwatchers, farmers, and kids waiting for school busses—are all impacted by the higher volumes and higher speeds that pavement inherently brings to a road.

Transitional Roads

A transition is a trending towards permanent change in a road's usage or traffic flow. It can happen to any current road—gravel or paved, public or private. It is important to note that temporary changes in the flow or volume of traffic caused by events such as bridge closings, major road construction, or large construction projects involving heavy traffic should not be used as evidence of a road transitioning or justification for changing a gravel road to a paved road.

To date what has been missing in our town planning is a clear policy that recognizes how uses in the zoning code can bring unanticipated impact to roads throughout the town. There are many uses allowed in the comprehensive plan (and in the zoning code arising from the plan) that could bring with them unforeseen impacts on the roads on which they are located. There is a difference in usage that occurs when a high-traffic use is allowed at one end of a gravel road

flowing onto a county or state highway, as compared to a similar allowance in the middle of a three-mile-long narrow gravel road. The first case will likely have a minimum impact if all of the traffic is directed onto the end that flows into the county or state road. Such a requirement can be mandated in the permit to construct.

On the other hand, the same high-traffic use allowed in the middle of the gravel road would impact the road's entire length, causing the road to go into transition. It will be transitioning from a low-volume, rural gravel road into a high-volume and possibly high-weight or high-speed road. This is not a "natural" consequence of growth. Rather, it is a poor planning consequence, resulting not only in drastic change to the rural character of an area but also in great increases in the resources the highway department must dedicate to the road. This translates into added costs to the town. By contrast, allowing the same use at the end of the gravel road would cause little change of maintenance on the road and minimal or no additional cost to the town.

There are situations, such as the closing of bridges (either temporarily or permanently) or the remapping of a route by Google, that can cause a road to transition overnight. In some cases it will be prudent for the town to transition a road proactively to accept higher traffic volume in order to save multiple other rural roads from having to absorb that increased volume. This would save maintenance resources and additional cost to the town while protecting the rural character of the area to the greatest degree.

So, there is every reason to be aware of the importance of transition. The town board may want to discourage or disallow the transition of a road in conformance with the comprehensive plan for the good of all Chatham residents.

Problematic Roads

A number of roads require special consideration. They are mostly short. Many are dead ends. Some are private. Some have as few as one house of permanent or part-time occupancy. All require a disproportionate amount of maintenance and therefore have very high costs for next-to-no usage. The highway superintendent and the town board should develop a plan to reduce the number of these roads on the town's inventory of roads. *(See Addendum 2.)*

Abandoned Roads

The town board should create a policy for abandoning roads. The cost of abandonment should be weighed against the long-term maintenance costs. Such a policy should secure the town's future position on roads that have been abandoned. In some cases, abandonment back to adjacent landowners with restrictions and covenants could be the best solution for the town to eliminate some problem roads. *(See Addendum 1.)*

New Roads

The town of Chatham currently has an abundance of potential build-out inventory for residential, farming, and light business uses. There is no need for the construction of new roads. The town board should formally establish a policy that it will not expend highway funds to construct or maintain any new roads.

Private Roads

Any future construction or development requiring a private road should be subject to strict road-design standards. The town board should develop and adopt into the zoning code road-design standards that are in keeping with the comprehensive plan and subject to the overlays that are part of the plan and are in concurrence with best practices of the town's highway department and with the spirit and recommendations of this report.

Filters for Planning Future Usage and Traffic Flow of Chatham's Roads

Town of Chatham Comprehensive Plan and Overlay Maps

The comprehensive plan expresses an overall vision for protecting the future of the town of Chatham. It contains extensive overlay maps that make plain both characteristics and sensitivities in all areas of Chatham. These overlay maps should be viewed as filters for planning purposes and should be used **before approval** in all construction and development reviews to assist in determining the impact of additional traffic on our roads arising from **any application**. The comprehensive plan can help town officials understand what the impacts are and why they should be considered seriously. The six key filters are below.

1– Agricultural Protection

Chatham has a long-term commitment to being and remaining a farm community. During the comprehensive planning process the town embraced the Keep Farming program, which engaged nearly fifty volunteers. These volunteers donated dozens and dozens of hours in addition to their knowledge, expertise, and skills. Engaging dozens more Chatham residents with discussions, questionnaires, planning meetings, and other outreach, they produced a detailed planning document, the Town of Chatham, Agricultural Protection Plan, which was adopted by the Town Board on September 17, 2009. Our roads, their capacity, and their condition are integral to the success of the adopted Agricultural Protection Plan and to the individual farms that make up so much of our town's heritage, economy, and beauty. By carefully managing our roads and deciding how to maintain their capacity, the town benefits

our agricultural base by ensuring farming activities are possible, appreciated, and not in competition with housing and other development.

2—Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Natural Resources

The many overlay maps relating to this area of the comprehensive plan cover resources including domestic water, estuary flow, open space, wetlands, sensitive steep slopes, ridgelines, and agricultural lands. Many of these characteristics have impact on and are impacted by roads. They should be consulted by the Planning Board and the Zoning Board of Appeals **before approval** of any driveways or new construction and especially in the delicate work of **transitioning** any road in the town of Chatham for greater usage or higher traffic.

3—Historical Protection

The exceptional landscapes of our lovely town are integral to Chatham's beauty, economy, sense of place, and quality of life. As residents of Chatham, we value our splendid historic buildings, structures, scenic roadways, burial grounds, stone walls, woods, and powerful streams.

One of the goals for this committee centers on preserving and utilizing our road system in order to protect all of the attributes of the town that define and highlight its history. The town's comprehensive plan's vision statement states, "As a place where history, landscape, and community are tightly intertwined, the town of Chatham is treasured by its residents. For over 250 years, Chatham has been distinguished by a special sense of place, and the values that flow from its relationship to the land. With its historic settlement pattern of hamlets and farms connected by open space, woods, and steams, Chatham [embraces] the challenges and opportunity of change and an unwavering commitment to protecting our land and preserving our heritage." Although the town's roads are not specifically cited in that vision statement, it is clear and obvious that they are an integral component—indeed, the ties that bind together our historic hamlets, open spaces, and viewsheds.

4—Recreation Access and Services

Another goal for this Committee is the preservation and utilization of our road system to protect all. The comprehensive plan recognizes recreational activities as an integral part and strength of the Chatham community. Although this document is the first attempt at clarifying the connection between recreation and roads, such an interconnection exists is evident. The citizens of and visitors to Chatham have a long history of using the roads to recreate. Equestrians use the roads to ride. Walkers, runners, and bicyclists use the roads for their individual and group activities. Birders use the roads, as do hunters. Most of these activities are

ideally pursued on roads that have little vehicular traffic and have a surface conducive to the activity. For these reasons, gravel is the surface most often preferred.

Our intricate network of narrow, rural gravel roads lends itself to safe enjoyment of these activities. Pursued individually or in small groups, they add little pressure on maintenance or competing uses. They do not affect density, produce noise, or impact the environment. Even when these activities attract larger groups, the safety of participants is ensured by the quieter, little traveled nature of our rural country roads.

If citizens and visitors alike are to use these gravel roads for such activities, it is imperative to maintain their interconnectedness. Recreation is one of several principle reasons to keep the gravel roads we have and to keep those roads from becoming problem roads or transitioning to paved roads. To achieve this goal, the highway superintendent must continue to maintain the gravel surfaces of these roads so that they can accommodate all recreational activities. The planning board, zoning board of appeals, and building department must communicate with the highway superintendent to determine how a proposed project would affect such recreational usage of a road—potentially changing it from gravel to transitional, problem, or paved.

5—Cultural Support and Enhancement

Chatham has a history of being a center of local cultural activities and large group recreational activities and has a goal of future growth for these activities. We have active churches that date back to 1781. We have vibrant hamlets that are home to local civic groups. We have a vibrant cultural arts center. The town has recently fostered a hybrid recreational-cultural institution based on nature. These activities should be limited to roads that are built to handle a higher volume of traffic and have access to places for adequate parking. These would include a limited number of town paved roads and county and state roads that are part of the town's infrastructure. However, protecting gravel roads is a major reason why special-use permits for large group recreational activities should be granted only under highly unusual circumstances.

An example is the town's development of Crellin Park into a center of private/public partnerships that can accommodate the town's need for this category of large recreational activity. Because visitors to the park enjoy direct ingress and egress from a state highway, gravel roads best suited for individual and small group recreational activities need not be disrupted. The town has other such parcels of open land that could be developed for this purpose as well.

6—Housing Opportunities and Adaption to Current Roads and Settings

Chatham's comprehensive plan puts forth a vision in which new housing reflects the town's rural character; does not negatively impact its open spaces, viewsheds, and historic resources;

and contributes to walkable neighborhoods. Our road system requires vigilant long-term planning, constant maintenance, and foresight to ensure that the town does not push development into open spaces or across viewsheds nor negatively impact the town's historic resources, agricultural heritage, or agricultural economic base.

The Importance of Planning Usage and Traffic Flow

Costs and Loss of Control from Not Planning

The Town of Chatham must safeguard to elect a highway superintendent who has the depth of understanding of Chatham's roads to be able to look forward, to plan for and to execute the best practices at the most cost efficient expenditure of town resources.

Through our work on this report, this committee became acutely aware of the importance of handling the transitioning of a road correctly. We also became acutely aware of the constant need for the highway superintendent to balance the costs of gravel versus paved surfaces while at the same time meeting the criteria for maintaining the rural nature of our town.

We have all seen the cost to quality of life when the nature of an area is swallowed up by growth and development. Roads, their proper maintenance, their carefully developed traffic flows, speeds, weight limits, speed bumps, narrower dimensions, and signage all play extremely important roles in maintaining the rural nature of our town. Looking beyond motor vehicles to *all other* users of our roads in all of our road planning will help keep the focus on maintaining the beauty of what we have—beauty that is all too easy to lose. As necessary as it may be in some instances going forward to widen and pave an existing gravel road, once that is done the narrow, tree-canopied ambience will have disappeared. The town board and the highway superintendent need to control that decision rather than let a lack of planning lead to a decision that controls them.

The actual financial cost to the town for maintaining of a gravel road can and should be calculated in a detailed manner. Not all gravel roads are equal in their usage or required maintenance. Likewise, the initial costs of conversion—including widening, tree removal, culverts and surface runoff, the road bed, and the surfacing itself (chip seal, asphalt, etc.)—should also be calculated in a detailed manner. The town board and the highway superintendent can then create five- or ten-year cost comparisons, which would become key components in deciding the future of growth, traffic flow, and road transition.

This analysis should be used by the town board in conjunction with the objectives cited in the comprehensive plan to determine any changes to the classification of any road.

Specific Recommendations

1) Develop a close relationship between the town board and the highway superintendent. If this committee has learned anything, it is that the highway department and the town board must continue to build a close and communicative relationship. Many creative solutions become possible when there is open collaboration and clear understanding.

2) There should be regular workshop meetings (semiannually or even quarterly) attended by the town supervisor, the other town board members, the highway superintendent, the building inspector, and the members of the planning board. In these meeting, the participants should focus on current road condition, new problem areas, possible transition pressures, construction concerns, and the ways in which growth in a given area may affect its roads and character. These sessions would facilitate the development of close working relationships and also promote collaborative decision making regarding the future of the town using all of the tools identified in this report.

3) The highway superintendent should include in his monthly reports to the town board all changes in traffic flow or volume resulting from temporary causes such as road construction, bridge closings, and the like. He should also report all apparent or proposed changes in our town's traffic flow or volume resulting from projects or destinations in other towns. Additionally, anticipated changes in road usage resulting from newly proposed projects in the application stage should also be reported.

4) The signature of the highway superintendent should be required on all new building projects **before any permit is issued** to ensure that the impacts of such projects on our roads are known and acceptable or mitigated. This includes the expansion of existing homes or businesses to screen for additional traffic.

5) The planning board and zoning board of appeals should use the comprehensive plan overlay maps and the filters presented in this report when considering projects that alter traffic flow or increase traffic on Chatham's roads. Any observations or concerns that arise should be shared with the highway superintendent **before the project is approved**.

6) The planning board and zoning board of appeals need to determine the amount of extra traffic and related stress and wear a proposed construction project for any purpose, residential or commercial, will cause. The size of the trucks and equipment; the frequency of deliveries and returns for materials, aggregates, and concrete; and the number of workman arriving and leaving daily must be accurately stated in applications. The duration of the work also needs to be transparent. Additionally, it should no longer be assumed that any construction, even a small accessory structure or a home addition, will have little to no impact on a road. The information regarding size and scope of a construction project and the resulting amount of construction traffic must be discovered by the planning board or the zoning board of appeals. This information must be made available to the highway superintendent and the building inspector and their comments or restrictions incorporated **before an application is approved**.

7) The town board should require applicants to post bonds for any construction project expected to cause damage or abnormal, excessive wear to any road, gravel or paved and to pay for additional maintenance or repair.

8) The planning board and the highway superintendent must focus closely on the transitioning of roads. They must proactively manage any pressures that could cause a given road to transition. They must also keep the town board aware of factors pushing a road towards transition, both from the growth side and from the traffic flow side. There are currently several situations in which gravel roads are experiencing the kind of extreme pressures that may cause them to transition. More careful scrutiny by the planning board and the zoning board of appeals could have exposed these pressures before permits were issued. This is a good lesson for the future. Vigilance and diligence here are key.

9) In the near future, the town board and highway superintendent should visit each of the problematic roads identified in Addendum 2 and seek to resolve the issues attributed to them.

10) The town board, planning board, and zoning board of appeals must pay attention to the classification of roads when considering future growth. We strongly recommend that bringing the classification of Chatham's roads to the forefront of all permit applications and understanding their characteristics is a key piece of appropriate growth planning for the future. We also see clearly that the detailed analysis of the differing costs attributed to the maintenance and capital expense of improving these roads is central to balancing health and safety and maintaining and protecting our rural character.

11) The town board should recognize and support the highway superintendent's varying maintenance of differing roads. This is cost effective and allows for the protection of much of the rural character of our gravel roads.

12) The town board should consider modifying the existing gravel-mining law to allow small, temporary mines on private lands to be used by the highway department for the maintenance of gravel roads. This would be similar to the exemption in the current law for farmers to extract limited amounts for agricultural purposes. Gravel roads can be maintained at less expense to taxpayers when the gravel is close by. The cost of transporting gravel is higher than the cost of the gravel itself.

13) The town board should adopt a policy that the town will not maintain any new roads. . This policy should not be enacted into the zoning code, however, because that would limit the ability of the town to control new roads in the future should circumstances change.

14) The town board should control all new road-design specifications. It should develop and codify its own rural road-design standards to reflect the current characteristics of our gravel road network.

15) The highway department and the town board should investigate and utilize all tools available to a town to control road usage and traffic. In relations to our gravel roads, they

should use signage (i.e., *No Thru Traffic, Local Traffic Only*, etc.), weight limitations, narrower dimensions, single-lane speed bump restrictions, intersection aprons, walking-biking-riding lanes, and all other appropriate means to bring attention to and control traffic on gravel roads.

16) The town board should develop and adopt a road abandonment policy.

17) The town board should create an official map of our current roads per New York State guidelines. Such a map should include the classifications and descriptions attached to this report. Highly recommended by New York State, this map would provide the basis for long-term planning, and control of new, private, and abandoned roads and any maintenance thereof.

ADDENDA

1- Classification List of All Roads

2- List of Problematic Roads

3- Current Map used by the Highway Department

Respectfully Submitted by the Roads Committee of the Town of Chatham,

Van Calhoun , Chair

Rick Werwaiss, Co-Chair

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John Wapner, Chatham Town Board Member

Henry Swartz, Chatham Town Board Member

Sue Tanner, Chatham Resident

Maria Lull, Chatham Town Supervisor (ex officio)