

VALLEY NEWS

Editorial: Welcome to Exit 4, Vermont

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It's hard to imagine that anyone familiar with the stunning landscape around Exit 4 of Interstate 89 in Randolph would greet with equanimity, much less enthusiasm, the prospect of replacing it with a vast development.

Enthusiasm, however, is precisely the reaction of Gov. Peter Shumlin and the Randolph Selectboard, who, among others, have wholeheartedly embraced plans by Greenwich, Conn.-based developer Jesse "Sam" Sammis to build a sprawling mixed-use development on 173 acres comprising two parcels that straddle Route 66 just west of the Exit 4 interchange.

Lest you think the adjective "vast" is an exercise in hyperbole, consider this: Built out over 20 years, the Green Mountain Center, as the project is known, would be made up of 274 residential units; a 180-room hotel and conference center; 280,000 square feet of office space; 236,000 square feet of light manufacturing space; a 10,000-square-foot fitness center; retail space totaling 25,000 square feet; a \$15 million, 5,000-square-foot visitors center/rest area; and a 40,000-square-foot Vermont Products Center. The total? An eye-popping 1.15 million square feet. All this in a town of about 5,000.

Of course, Shumlin and the Selectboard do not have the final word. The project must still pass Act 250 muster. The District 3 Environmental Commission began that land-use review last week, focusing for the moment on two questions: whether the project conforms with local and regional plans; and whether it complies with Act 250 protections for prime agricultural soils. These are quasi-judicial matters and probably will take a long time to sort out. If the project moves forward after that, its compliance with other Act 250 criteria presumably would be assessed.

The project certainly raises broader issues that need to be sorted out, too. The Selectboard's backing for the Green Mountain Center appears based on a sincere and straight forward assessment that it would be good for business. "The project package could create opportunities for increased tourism, conference travel, venture capital investment and job growth — all of which are sorely needed in Randolph," Town Manager Melvin Adams wrote to the District 3 Commission on behalf of the Selectboard.

It could. But it seems just as likely to us that the 500,000 projected visitors a year might well scratch their Vermont itch within the confines of the Green Mountain Center itself, without spilling over into the downtown a couple of miles away or further afield.

We also question whether the goal of attracting more tourists would be well served by building something that they might easily encounter at home in Connecticut or New Jersey. People visit Vermont because of the way it looks now and the magnificent rural vistas it provides. Moreover, Vermont's "brand" is rapidly coming to encompass not only its scenic beauty but also a small-farming renaissance that is making a name for the state as a producer of wholesome and delicious food. Sacrificing a couple of hundred acres of prime farmland hardly seems a good way to further that objective.

Moreover, the state for many years had a well-founded policy of discouraging development at highway interchanges and encouraging it in compact, established downtowns. It's obvious why developers prefer to work in wide open spaces: It's cheaper. But that's not a good reason to depart from a sensible policy aimed at concentrating growth where development already exists rather than sprawling it over the open landscape.

That's part of what makes Shumlin's support for the project so troubling. The other is that it suggests a quid pro quo: Sammis will build the rest area and the Vermont Products Center for the state, but only if the development is approved in its entirety; thus Shumlin announces his support for the public-private partnership before state regulators have even reviewed the project.

This is certainly a way to do business, but not a good way to do the public's business. If Vermont truly needs a \$15 million visitors center in Randolph, combined with a Vermont Products Center, then the state should build them and let the Green Mountain Center rise or fall on its own merits.