

Purpose of *Better Models*

Background

The Valley is a Special Place

THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY, known worldwide for its beauty and its history, has an immensely productive and pleasing natural setting, a compelling history, a strong economy, and neighborly communities. The Valley's attractiveness and its proximity to urban centers make it certain that our population will continue to grow.

Our ancestors have left us a priceless legacy. From the Native Americans who called the Shenandoah the "Daughter of the Stars," to the hardy settlers who established the development pattern still evident today, to farm families who have worked the land for generations, those who have lived in this Valley have always recognized its natural assets. These farm clusters and villages and towns were sited to fit the terrain and were built according to local custom, becoming themselves a pleasing complement to the Valley landscape.

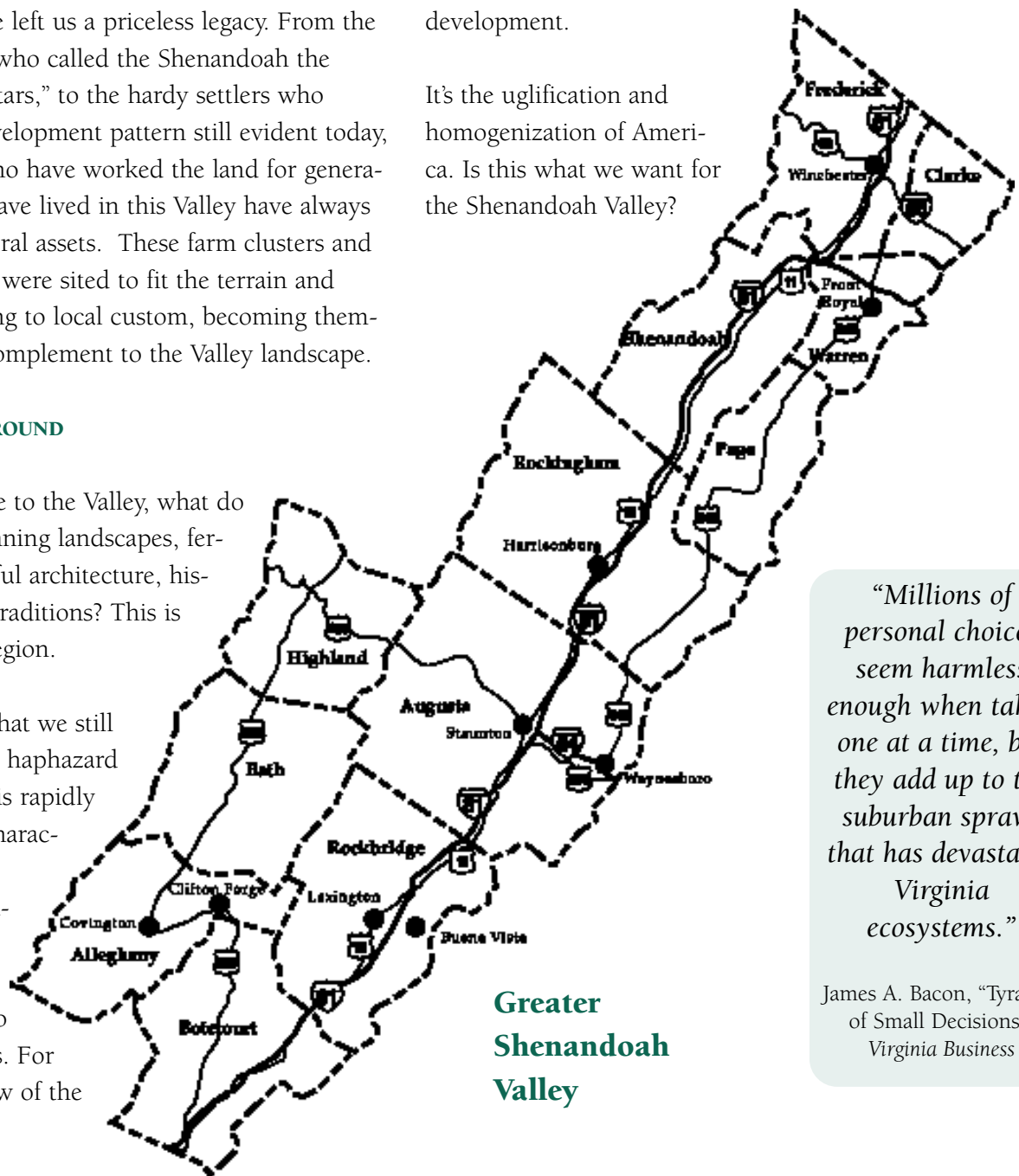
WE'RE LOSING GROUND

When people come to the Valley, what do they look for? Stunning landscapes, fertile farms, wonderful architecture, historic towns, rural traditions? This is the image of our region.

But is this really what we still see? Unfortunately, haphazard new development is rapidly eroding the very character that makes the Valley special. Cluttered signs and wide pavement mark the entry into many communities. For every beautiful view of the

mountains, another is marred by houses on the ridge line. When a farmer dies, often the next thing to crop out of the ground is a sign advertising "lots for sale." Add to that look-alike fast-food restaurants, big-box retailers, gaudy service stations, and large-lot subdivisions. Too often, the results look so brash, monotonous, or out of place that many citizens are beginning to cringe at the prospect of new development.

It's the uglification and homogenization of America. Is this what we want for the Shenandoah Valley?



"Millions of personal choices seem harmless enough when taken one at a time, but they add up to the suburban sprawl that has devastated Virginia ecosystems."

James A. Bacon, "Tyranny of Small Decisions,"
Virginia Business

Public opinion surveys and local planning and visioning exercises say not. Valley citizens do care deeply about the beauty, natural character, and historical assets that surround them. In a 1990 survey, Shenandoah Valley residents gave the highest importance to environmental issues of any region in the state. This response reveals both a threat and an opportunity. Valley citizens do care, but because of the increasing growth pressures, we will need to do more to prevent our special region from going the way of all too many American communities that have become “anywhere USA.” Like wise investors, we need to find ways to enjoy our assets without squandering them.

ECONOMICS AND ENVIRONMENT CAN WORK TOGETHER

Development does not have to mean destruction of the things that people love. The models presented in this book prove that economic development and environmental protection can be compatible. In fact, maintaining the natural and historical integrity of our region could be viewed as our number one priority for assuring our economic future. Attractive communities have more choices. To sell short our natural and cultural assets would cost more in the long run, socially and economically as well as environmentally. Increasingly, communities across the country are recognizing this link.



Shenandoah Valley farm

“Each year development pushes out across more than a million acres, yet the expansion of highways, housing tracts, and other suburban construction rouses fewer cheers than at any time in the past.”

Philip Langdon,
A Better Place to Live

IT'S OUR CHOICE

No place will retain its special character by accident. Successful communities always have a “vision” for the future. And often the communities that have a design-oriented vision are among the most desirable and economically sound in the nation. Working to maintain a distinctive local character can pay off.

The Shenandoah Valley has the potential to retain its special character, because the quality and design of new development can be significantly improved. Too often, the debate over development is seen as an either/or contest: development or no development, progress or preservation. A more useful framing of the issues is to concentrate on “how” and “where” we develop. Once we define what is damaging or unsatisfying about conventional development, we can address those concerns. The three critical elements are the *location*, the *arrangement*, and the *design* of new development.

We can grow without ruining the special character of our area. It's a matter of choice. Each community can choose how it develops. If we accept the lowest common denominator in new development, that is what we will get. When we set higher standards, we can achieve higher results. The problem cannot be laid on “the developers.” All of us, citizens, elected officials, and community leaders, can determine the future of our Virginia communities—if we put a high enough priority on the things we really care about.

BUILDING A SHARED VISION

The key is for each community to develop its own shared vision for the future and raise expectations throughout the region. This sense of shared future up and down the Valley is especially critical for regional issues like landscape protection and heritage tourism, particularly for Civil War sites. Only with widespread recognition of what makes this place special do we

have a chance to safeguard the treasure that is the Shenandoah Valley.

Better Models should not be seen as a call for more regulation. Rather, it is a call for a more thoughtful approach to new development. Many of the projects featured here were undertaken by individuals of their own accord. At the same time, focused policies, including incentives, land use planning, and other tools, can help result in better development.

USING BETTER MODELS

Across the nation, throughout Virginia, and within the Valley, there are many examples of “better development.” Downtowns are being rejuvenated, open space is being preserved, community landmarks are being restored for new uses, farmers are banding together to protect their way of life, and individual buildings placed well and designed attractively are appreciated daily.

This book showcases such projects. These real-life images, in contrast to the image of standard development, are glimpses into one possible future—a future which retains the Valley’s unique character. The coming decades will determine what subsequent generations will experience here. Either we replicate the unsatisfying building patterns of fast-growing areas such as Northern Virginia and the eastern part of the state, or we take action now.

NECESSARY ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESS

Preservation of the Valley’s unique character relies on a few key actions:

- Committing Valley-wide to the goal of preserving the character of our region
- Identifying important natural, scenic, historic, and cultural assets
- Building local plans

In a recent survey of Sierra Nevada business owners on the most significant advantages of doing business in the area, 82 percent identified “the high quality of life,” which these business owners clarified as meaning “the rural character of the overall region” and “the landscape surrounding my immediate community.”

Planning for Prosperity: Building Successful Communities in the Sierra Nevada, Sierra Business Council

around the preservation and enhancement of key assets

- Raising the level of expectation for the quality of new development
- Meeting the needs of both landowners and the community
- Paying attention to aesthetics as well as economics
- Assessing the impacts of land use policies
- Providing incentives and flexibility from standard regulations

Background



Downtown, Lexington

WHO CAN HELP

- Individual citizens
- Builders and developers
- Local business and citizen groups
- Local governments
- Valley Conservation Council

The protection of the Valley’s sense of place depends on all of us. With a widespread ethic that this issue is important, the Shenandoah Valley can remain not just a special place that reflects what was given to us, but a special place where new development adds to this legacy.

Character of the Shenandoah Valley

Importance of Identifying Features to Protect

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to say, “protect the character” of the Shenandoah Valley? Obviously you can’t protect character until you identify what it is. Yet many character-defining features can be so ingrained in the consciousness of residents that they are taken for granted—until it is too late.

Community character derives from both the natural setting and the elements that humans add. What is important is not just to protect individual historic sites



Mountain vistas

or natural areas, but to protect their context as well. This makes visitors stay longer, spend more and come back again. More important, residents can experience this quality of life every single day.

The accompanying checklist identifies just some of the most appealing and distinctive natural and man-made features of the region.



Agricultural traditions



Small towns



Special places

“You don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone.”

Joni Mitchell

Defining Features of the Shenandoah Valley

■ NATURAL LANDSCAPE

The Valley has unsurpassed natural beauty. Mountains and ridges bracket hospitable valleys.

- Mountains as a backdrop
- Hardwood forests, especially on slopes
- Swift-flowing mountain streams
- Meandering rivers
- Sweeping views of open fields
- Limestone outcrops

■ AGRICULTURAL HERITAGE

The productivity of the land is evident in the large number of evenly spaced and prosperous farms, with historic farmhouses and outbuildings.

- Rolling farmland
 - pastures
 - crop fields and orchards
- Clusters of farm buildings
 - substantial, well-made farmhouses
 - large barns, mostly German-style bank barns
 - spring houses, often stone, and other outbuildings
- Mills and other rural industries

■ VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT PATTERN

Early settlements grew along streams and as small linear villages spaced a day's travel apart along the north-south arteries. Later, railroad access sparked "boom towns" of the late nineteenth century.

- Linear villages
- Small towns, often along streams

■ URBAN VARIETY

The Valley's cities have typically been small to medium-sized, each with its own unique character and sense of place. No one city dominates the region.

- Winchester - rich history, rollicking frontier origins
- Harrisonburg, Waynesboro - traditionally smaller; robust twentieth-century industries

- Staunton - architectural gems, Victorian/turn-of-the-century heyday
- Lexington - rich history, college town

■ RICH ARCHITECTURAL TRADITIONS

The Valley was a melting pot of building traditions of the German, Scotch-Irish, and English immigrants who settled here. Limestone, brick, and log were all available materials. The high quality and design of the many historic buildings reflect the overall prosperity of the region.

- Distinctive Building Materials
 - Limestone - primary material for houses and outbuildings, very common as foundation material and in retaining walls and curbstones
 - Brick - common for all building types, for sidewalks and walls
 - Wood - common as structural material and as decorative trim
 - Wrought iron - used for fences and railings
 - Metal roofs with standing seams
- Site Elements
 - Stone walls
 - Brick walls and walks
 - Wrought-iron fences

■ LOCAL FEATURES

Many places are distinctive or remembered for a particular sight. The destruction of these subtle views by a development project can trigger a great sense of loss.

Some examples of distinctive local features:

- a large grove of trees
- the friendly old country store
- an especially pleasing pastoral scene
- a distinctive curve in the road
- a panoramic view of the mountains

Identifying Your Assets

LOCATION ... location location. Successful communities know where their assets lie. If the region's character, as expressed through its natural, scenic, and historic assets, is to be safeguarded, the first step is identifying the location of particularly important features. Among these might be historic sites, water resources, riparian areas, special habitats, prime agricultural soils, large blocks of contiguous forestland, steep slopes, and scenic views.

Recognition is the important first step. Once citizens clarify what they care about, they often will want to find strategies to give these places protection. Clear values also give direction to elected officials and offer landowners and developers more certainty.

The key to protecting natural areas is to protect the working landscapes, the farms and forests that automatically enhance scenic views and for the most part protect natural habitat. Keeping large tracts in productive use also is essential to assure the critical mass



needed to support a resource-based economy. The “rural heritage” of the Valley has meaning and relevance for all Valley residents, whether city or town dwellers or in the countryside.

TOOLS TO USE:

Visual Assessments - Citizens view slides of local development and give them either negative or positive ratings. Discussion of the results clarifies what makes a development project pleasing or disappointing and helps pinpoint what citizens care most about.

Community Visioning - Citizens and local leaders are led through exercises to help them think ahead to identify what they think the community should be like in the future. This “vision” can then be established as a goal for policy making.

Resource Inventories - Specific resources, including natural areas, historic sites, open space, scenic views, prime farmland, and so on, are identified and mapped. These inventories can be indispensable for planning the future and for building community awareness and consensus.

Named “the dirtiest city in America” in 1969 by the federal government, Chattanooga has picked itself up so thoroughly that U.S. News & World Report recently profiled it as one of six “Smart Cities” worldwide. How was this turnaround accomplished? Vision 2000, a community-wide visioning process begun in 1984, identified 40 goals for the city; 85 percent of these had been accomplished eight years later. The city is famous for public-private partnerships to rejuvenate its downtown and the river front.

Six Principles for Better Development

1. CONSERVE THE VALLEY'S NATURAL AND SCENIC ASSETS

The first principle of better development should be identifying where not to develop. The region's natural, agricultural and scenic assets can be enjoyed by all—or destroyed by the careless decisions of a few. Successful communities identify the areas that are most important in terms of natural and scenic resources and develop policies to protect these features. The linchpin of protecting natural areas is to protect the working landscapes, the farms and forests that enhance scenic views, protect natural habitat and contribute to the economic vitality of our communities.

2. MAINTAIN A CLEAR EDGE BETWEEN TOWN AND COUNTRYSIDE

Safeguarding the rural character of the Shenandoah Valley also means maintaining a clear edge between town and countryside. This can be done by; protecting open space and encouraging more compact, walkable communities. By maintaining this clear edge, the Valley can preserve its rural landscapes and at the same time enhance the vitality of its communities.

3. BUILD LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

Villages, towns, and cities can absorb most of the growth in the Valley. Attractive and livable communities are the flip side of protecting the rural areas of the Valley. Growing in, not out means rejuvenating downtowns and existing neighborhoods and carefully extending the community. These traditional cores are the heart and soul of Valley communities and the distinctive image that people take with them. Opportunities for infill development abound on under-used or overlooked parcels. All local policies can encourage this focus. And additional high-quality close-in development, done well, can have convincing advantages over suburban sprawl. Wherever new development occurs, location, siting, and design decisions should be made carefully.

4. PRESERVE HISTORIC RESOURCES

Virginia's rich history is still evident in the wealth of historic and archaeological sites found in cities, small

towns and rural areas throughout the Shenandoah Valley. Historic assets should be identified and protected, and developers should be encouraged to rehabilitate and reuse historic structures. Protecting historic resources such as Civil War battlefields or small-town main streets is also important because historic preservation generates jobs and attracts tourists.

5. RESPECT LOCAL CHARACTER IN NEW CONSTRUCTION

Eighty percent of everything ever built in America has been built since the end of World War II, and much of it is cookie-cutter, off-the-shelf junk. New buildings can either complement the character of Shenandoah Valley communities or they can turn the Valley into "Anyplace USA." Valley communities should do more to ensure that new construction—particularly chain stores, shopping centers, and franchises—respect local character. The Valley's natural setting, historical development pattern, and architectural traditions make this a distinctive place. By identifying what makes each community unique, and what harms that uniqueness, localities can develop standards that encourage developers to construct new buildings that complement existing community character.

6. REDUCE THE IMPACT OF THE CAR

Reducing the impact of the automobile means providing more transportation choice. It also means designing transportation facilities that are beautiful as well as functional, that meet the needs of people as well as those of motor vehicles and that respect and enhance local communities. Standards for neighborhood streets, roads, bridges, parking lots and other transportation facilities should be reexamined to make them more human-scale and community friendly. Even minor adjustments in design and placement can lessen the negative visual and environmental impacts of new roads and bridges. Transportation choice can be expanded by building more sidewalks and bike paths, and communities can foster healthy neighborhoods by considering traffic-calming measures like reducing speed limits or narrowing roads to slow down traffic.