

Chatham – Keep Farming Aesthetics Team Assessment Report

Team Goals:

The goals of the aesthetics assessment team are to:

- Inventory the rural and agricultural character of the community.
- Determine which aesthetic characteristics are desirable and which are not.
- Determine those characteristics or physical areas that should be preserved because they are key to maintaining the rural and agricultural feeling of our community.
- Determine those that should no longer be permitted because they are in conflict with the rural and agricultural feeling of our community.
- Determine the value that agriculture contributes to both desirable and undesirable aesthetics.

Methodology:

Part 1:

The team of 11 members divided the town into 8 sections. A complete photographic inventory of each section was taken. Each member mapped where the photograph was taken and the direction it was taken in on a town map. Each member also wrote their assessment of the photograph they were taking, noting the character defining features in the photograph that contributed to the town's rural character. This inventory focused on the following features that define our rural agricultural character:

- Circulation Networks - Photographs were taken of all roads from state, to county to town paved and town dirt roads. The character defining features that differentiated each of those roads and the feelings they invoked were noted.
- Clusters - The clustering of development both in hamlets and in the countryside was recorded.
- Spatial organization in the Hamlets - Representative photos were gathered in the hamlets, noting the relationship of structures to the roads, their organizational relationship to each other, and the overall architectural style and materials. Differences in Pre WWII and Post WWII development were noted.
- Spatial organization in the country side - Representative photos were gathered in the countryside, noting the relationship of structures to the roads, their organizational relationship to each other, and the overall architectural style and materials. Differences in Pre WWII and Post WWII development were noted.
- Vegetation – Photos were taken of vegetation or vegetative patterns such as crops, woods, tree canopies, abandon fields, hedgerows, etc., and their aesthetic value was noted.

- Other landscape features –features such as bridges, signs, stone walls, etc., were recorded and their aesthetic value noted.

Part II:

The group also compiled a collection of photographs from within and outside the town. The team met, discussed the photographs and reached consensus on an assessment of which photographs represented characteristics that were desirable in a rural agricultural town and which were not. This assessment was documented by categorizing the photographs into these two groups.

As a result of this project, the team has a valuable baseline of information that may be used to create strategies for:

- preserving all that is desirable because it is in harmony with the rural agricultural character of the town, and
- prevent future creation of those characteristics that are in conflict with the rural agricultural character of the town.

From the hundreds of photos taken our team identified visual characteristics that define Chatham. Chatham has distinct characteristics reflective of its rural and agricultural heritage. They're listed below and correspond with photos on display. These examples will also be at www.keepfarming.org - please encourage friends and neighbors to visit the website.

Visual Characteristics of Chatham that define it as rural:

- Human settlement is clustered in hamlets
- Non-hamlet land is sparsely settled and primarily used for agriculture
- Agricultural land is a mix of open fields and woodlots
- Old stone walls are often visible from roadways
- Waterways are mostly undisturbed by human commerce (historically they supported industry)
- Bridges tend to be narrow (some are architecturally distinctive)
- The impact of trains on Chatham is still visible and defines many Town gateways
- Indigenous wildlife still plays an integral role in land dynamics
- State and county maintained roads are wider, paved, have painted lines and guard rails
- State and county maintained roads provide scenic, far-reaching views
- Town roads are typically narrow, dirt, of slower speed, and unmarked by painted lines
- Town roads are mostly canopied by deciduous trees
- Town roads tend to follow the contour of the land and are winding rather than straight
- Most roads in Chatham have no streetlights
- There is not a single traffic light in the Town of Chatham
- Few businesses have lighted or neon signage
- Only the Village has sidewalks and streetlights

- There are few large parking lots
- A number of Town structures are significant enough to qualify for historic register status
- dearth of public lighting means little ground light clutter - night skies are visible (weather permitting)

Pre-WWII structures are:

- set close to the road (5-50ft)
- have barns/outbuildings directly across the road from a farm residence
- include barns or silos 3 or 4 stories in height
- constructed of wood, brick or stone in specific regional architectural styles
- have unpaved driveways

Post-WWII structures are:

- set much farther back - anywhere from 75ft to a half mile
- are a greater mix of non-traditional architectural styles
- often use metal, concrete, plastic building materials
- are often set on high hilltops
- tend to have paved driveways and parking lots

Result: Chatham's rural character received an enthusiastic thumbs up from the residents who participated in our discussion. Many cited it as the reason they settled here, or why they stay. Most of the photos we evaluated were scenic panoramas of farms, homes and livestock. A lot of our discussion was of the incredible vistas, both local and far-reaching, from many of the roads in Chatham. The visual reward of uncluttered open space ranked high on our team's list of things we cherish about living in Chatham. Chatham's agricultural community creates a quality of life that residents clearly prefer to a non-agricultural lifestyle.

Chatham's rural character was credited with:

- Easing or relieving stress
- Creating community
- Being a healthier environment than an urban or suburban setting
- Making residents feel more connected with nature
- Making townsfolk feel valued when they buy from local shops
- Providing peaceful, scenic commutes
- Creating a sense of pride because Chatham is beautiful and has its own personality
- Offering greater outdoor sports opportunities
- Offering residents a better quality of life

While these benefits are hard to quantify with statistics, they are vital measures of quality of life.

Participants also identified non-rural characteristics they didn't want to see in Chatham. Our participants felt that quality of life in the US deteriorated in direct proportion to the rate that franchises, malls, suburbs and "planned communities" transform rural towns.

These distinctly non-rural characteristics were deemed a threat to Chatham's rural character and quality of life.

Non-rural characteristics:

- retail businesses that require acres of parking and excessive ground lighting
- global franchises that offer the same product the world over
- global franchises that build the same buildings regardless of location
- enormous shops with no local character
- retail zones that sprawl for miles
- huge lighted shop signs
- assembly line residences
- gated communities
- residences not clustered enough to be hamlets but too evenly spread to be rural
- signage clutter

Conclusion: Agriculture sustains a quality of life Chatham residents prefer. Farming keeps vast tracts of land sparsely settled. It fosters community. Agriculture preserves the views we cherish. It provides habitat for the livestock and wildlife we love to live amongst. Farming keeps our shops and restaurants locally owned, operated, and stocked with regional products. Farming keeps ground light and traffic jams out of our lives, so we can enjoy traveling our roads and seeing the stars from our yards. It brings tourists and their dollars to our shops, restaurants and farm stands. Retention of Chatham's rural character hinges on the continued success of our farmers.

Team Co-leaders: Rick Werwaiss, Melissa Pollack

Team members: Steve Gilger, Bart Gulley, Judy Grunberg, Alison Heaphy, Barry McWilliams, Sara McWilliams, Henry Spliethoff, Bryce Waldrop

Assistance: Mary Gail Biebel, Roy Carwile, Arther Frederick, James Huth, Sharon Koomler, Adrianus Ooms, Rebecca Perkins, Randi Walker, Alice Witherell