

Protecting Vermont's Air, Land and Water

Vermont is known for its natural beauty. Vermonters are known for their love of it. Fifty years ago, during the 1970 session of the Vermont General Assembly, lawmakers passed a piece of legislation designed to protect the state's scenic landscape. Act 250, as the Land Use and Development Law was called, was the first legislation of its kind to be passed anywhere in the United States.



In the 1960s the beauty so loved by native Vermonters began to draw others to the state. Newly built highways made Vermont more **accessible** to tourists from metropolitan areas like Boston and New York City. As more and more persons poured into the state to enjoy its scenery and recreation, the demand for land increased. As a result, land values rose. Many Vermont farmers took advantage of the new, higher prices and sold their land to out-of-staters who turned the once-working farms into "summer places." Governor Deane C. Davis spoke about the changes.

"I realized that the so-called second homes before too long turned out to be first homes and when they are first homes, there are children in the home, schools have to be taken care of, roads have got to be built to them and they were building \$200,000 houses on dirt roads up on the mountain where the soil was fragile."

Other lands were purchased and **subdivided**. This swift

and unplanned development damaged the environment that had attracted people to Vermont in the first place.

Between 1860 and 1960 Vermont's population had grown by 75,000 people. The average annual growth rate during those one hundred years was 2%. Suddenly the population jumped. In the ten years between 1960 and 1970 the population increased by 14%, growing by 55,000 people. No longer did cows and sheep outnumber human residents.

With the people came new homes, the need for bigger schools, better roads and more of them, more **municipal** services and higher taxes. Fragile mountain regions, perhaps home to just a few, developed into large recreational complexes. Vermont was indeed changing.

Vermonters, their legislators, and their governor were concerned. "How can we have economic growth without destroying the secret to our success - our environment?" asked Governor Davis. He felt Vermont could balance a healthy economy with a healthy environment and that developers should not build on land without first taking into account the effects on the soil, air, and water. Davis worked with interested citizens and the state legislators to create a fair law that would regulate development and protect the state's natural resources.

In the spring of 1970, Act 250 went into effect. The law requires developers to prove, before they begin to build, that their planned construction will not pollute the air or water, cause soil erosion, increase traffic, overcrowd schools, or harm the area's scenic beauty, wildlife, or historic sites. Applications are reviewed by one of nine district commissions and the State Environmental Board. When the developer has met all of Act 250's **criteria** a building permit is granted.

In the fifty years that Act 250 has been law, debate over it has continued. Like any legislation it has its **opponents**. Many complain that it is too tough on developers. Still others feel it is not tough enough. In 1984 when the Vermont General Assembly worked to make a change in Act 250 feelings were still strong. The outcome pleased some and angered others. The change **eliminated** what was known as the “ten acre loopole.” Now Act 250 can regulate parcels of land under ten acres as well as those that are larger.



The wilderness that settlers found here was beautiful and unharmed. The water and air were pure. Rivers were full of fish and the forests were alive with animals and birds. As the years passed our environment has changed. Much of what Vermont’s first settlers saw is now gone. Acid rain has made two of the state’s lakes fishless. Homes and businesses dot what used to be undeveloped land. Problems unknown to our forefathers like toxic waste and air and water pollution are familiar to all of us today. We read about them in the paper, hear about them on the nightly news and see the changes in our own environment. Time has taught us to beware of hurting our natural world.

In Vermont, known for its wise land protection, the changes are far less great than in other states. Laws like Act 250 combined with the concern and care of the state’s citizens have helped preserve its beauty - at least so far.

VOCABULARY

accessible - easily reachable

subdivide - to divide into parts

municipal - relating to city or town government

criteria - standards or rules

opponent - someone who takes the opposite side

eliminate - to get rid of

