

CHAPTER 5:

COMMUNITY CHARACTER



Preserve and encourage those features that contribute to Ridgefield's character

OVERVIEW

The population of Ridgefield has tripled since the early 1960's, but the community proudly retains much of its rural character and its identity as a quintessential New England town.

When residents are asked to identify important elements of Ridgefield's community character, responses include a list of physical characteristics of land, historic areas, buildings and architecture. Cultural resources and civic activities, identified as elements of "community spirit," are equally important in establishing the high quality of life enjoyed by Ridgefield's residents, and in characterizing Ridgefield as a welcoming place to live.

The 2002 *Image and Physical Character Study* is a "qualitative study among a broad cross section of Ridgefield residents," confirming that "most people moved to Ridgefield because of the commutable location, affordability, and the sense of community that is projected upon visiting the town." The school system, rural beauty, and family-friendly nature of the community were also identified as important characteristics. The 2002 study and more recent workshops confirmed the following features as especially important to residents in defining Ridgefield's character:

Physical Characteristics

- Landscapes and vistas
- Rural settings
- Buildings and historical resources
- Streetscapes, especially Main Street

Community Spirit

- Arts and cultural offerings
- Civic participation and volunteerism
- Community activities and special events

Community Character in this Plan

Community character is intertwined with other topics in this Plan, including open space, natural resources, historic resources, and community structure. Additional strategies related to those and other features are found in those individual chapters.

Physical Characteristics

Landscapes:



Photo 3: Pierrepont Lake (Ginny Carroll).

Rural Settings:



Photo 4: (Laura Barber).

Buildings:



Photo 5: House on Main Street.

Streetscapes:



Photo 6: Ridgefield Center.

Tree-lined Roads:



Photo 7: Road in Ridgefield.

Landmarks:



Photo 8: Cass Gilbert Fountain (Vicki Biehl).

Community Spirit:

Arts Community:



Photo 9: Aldrich Art Museum.



Photo 10: Ridgefield Playhouse for Movies and the Performing Arts.

Civic Participation and Community Events:



Photo 11: Memorial Day parade (Helen Dimos).



Photo 12: Memorial Day parade (Helen Dimos).

The Town should continue to preserve and protect those features that contribute to Ridgefield's character and encourage future development to enhance character.

The Town has taken steps to protect character, including completion of the *Image and Physical Character Study* by the Ridgefield Design Council in 2000. The Commission adopted Village District regulations for the Town Center in 2007, appointed a Village District Design Consultant, created regulations to allow flexibility when improving historic properties, and requires design review for many types of development. The Ridgefield Design Council also serves as a resource to the Town on issues related to the design of public buildings, spaces and streets.

Natural Landmarks

The Ridgefield Design Council's publication *About Ridgefield – Where We Were – What We Are* provides an inventory of character-defining natural landmarks.

Natural landmarks include:

- Notable trees
- Rocks, cliffs, stone outcrops
- Waterfalls
- Ponds and lakes
- Rivers and streams
- Open fields

PHYSICAL CHARACTER

Ridgelines and Scenic Views

The terrain in Ridgefield is distinctive and varied, with ridgelines and hillsides that provide panoramic views. These sites contribute to the scenic character of Ridgefield and should be protected or given special consideration to preserve the unique beauty of the Town.

Ideally, development that would impact the integrity of scenic areas should be discouraged. These areas may best be preserved as open space or by obtaining scenic easements. Where avoidance and / or preservation is not possible, the Town should work with property owners to preserve scenic aspects of the site by avoiding construction on ridgelines or ensuring that any development along the ridgelines blends in with the natural environment and preserves tree lines.

Scenic Roads

Scenic roads significantly contribute to Ridgefield's character. Residents particularly appreciate tree-lined roads and stone walls found throughout the Town. Designating local roads as scenic roads can ensure that road alterations maintain the essential character of the road. Ridgefield has designated seven local scenic roads (see Cultural Resources Map on page 9-3):

- Pelham Lane
- Florida Road
- Silver Spring Road
- Old Branchville Road
- Neds Mountain Road
- Lounsbury Road
- Pine Mountain Road

Vegetation

In addition to significant individual trees, mature vegetation in Ridgefield is an important aspect of community character. Through the site planning and subdivision processes, the Town can help landowners find ways to preserve notable trees and maintain as much vegetation as possible, especially along roadways. The Tree Committee and Design Council have identified significant trees in Ridgefield; their work can serve as a resource. The Town also developed a *Forestry Management Plan* which establishes planting and maintenance standards for public trees, and practices to protect trees during construction on town-owned land.

Architectural Review

Building architecture significantly contributes to overall community character. The Architectural Advisory Committee and the Village District Consultant should continue to ensure that building scale, design and materials are compatible with neighboring buildings, especially in Ridgefield Center.

Rural Features

Ridgefield contains many stone walls, barns and other buildings and features that remind residents of a rural heritage. These structures and features contribute to community character and the Town should seek to retain these and other aspects of Ridgefield's rich heritage. Ridgefield should consider adopting guidelines or an ordinance to preserve stonewalls that are solely or jointly owned by the Town and should continue to encourage landowners to protect private stonewalls.

Ridgefield Center

Residents are proud to have a town center in an historic setting, with a mixture of uses including local businesses, civic buildings, and public spaces such as Ballard Park. Because of the wealth of historic resources located here, parts of Ridgefield Center have been designated as Local, State and National historic districts. The charm and character of Ridgefield Center attracts visitors and customers. Many community events, parades, and festivals are held in the Center along with special events to promote local businesses. It is critical to strike a balance between maintaining the character of the Center and the needs of businesses so that they can thrive. Preserving the village style streetscape, historic buildings, and maintaining a mixture of uses and activities will help to preserve Ridgefield Center's character. Detailed strategies related to Ridgefield Center are found in Chapter 9.

Other Features

Natural features, open space, fields and historic resources make significant contributions to community character. Specific strategies related to the preservation of these resources are identified in later chapters.



Photo 13: Stonewall and open field on Old Stage Coach Road.

Notable Local Facilities

Ridgefield is proud to be home to a number of notable facilities. While there are too many to list here, some are:

- Community facilities such as the Library and Recreation Center
- The Aldrich Museum
- Pierrepont State Park
- Community Center (Lounsbury House)
- Tiger Hollow
- Ballard Park
- Ridgefield Playhouse for Movies and the Performing Arts
- Keeler Tavern
- ...and many more

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Local Recognition

Connecticut Magazine continues to rank Ridgefield as one of the best Connecticut communities in which to live. Residents seem to concur, as evident in the high level of community pride and spirit. Factors contributing to Ridgefield's ranking include quality of the schools, a low crime rate, and cultural and leisure opportunities.

Volunteer Contributions

Many volunteer committees and organizations work to maintain Ridgefield's quality of life. Many more volunteers are elected or appointed to serve on local boards and commissions. Their tireless devotion has helped preserve community character, build community spirit and make Ridgefield the place that it is today.

Local Facilities

Certain local sites and facilities build community spirit. These include general areas such as Ridgefield Center, community facilities, open space, local educational facilities, religious institutions, major corporate businesses, and other facilities that people recognize as being unique to Ridgefield (see sidebar). To encourage the enjoyment of facilities by all residents, the Town should improve accessibility of its buildings and public sites, encouraging private and non-profit entities to do the same.

Local Programs or Events

Community events (such as the Nutmeg Festival, other festivals, antique shows, Artists Guild, fireworks displays, community concerts, symphonies, etc.) raise the Town's visibility as a special place and add to community spirit and character. Events also provide an opportunity to bring together a mix of generations. The Town should continue to provide support to community events (e.g., financial, labor, promotion) when feasible.

COMMUNITY CHARACTER STRATEGIES

Protect and Preserve Scenic Resources and Areas

1. Preserve scenic areas by protecting ridgelines and scenic views.
2. Where possible, preserve open space or obtain scenic or conservation easements from property owners to protect ridgelines with panoramic views, steeply sloping hillsides, and areas with rock outcrops.
3. Encourage ConnDOT to designate State highways in Ridgefield as scenic roads.
4. Continue to designate local roads under the Scenic Road ordinance.

Protect and Preserve Physical Character

5. Work with land use applicants to minimize the amount of vegetation cleared during development.
6. Maintain the Architectural Advisory Committee and the Village District Consultant to ensure that buildings are compatible with neighboring structures and districts, especially in Ridgefield Center.
7. Retain aspects of Ridgefield's rural heritage, such as stone walls, barns, and other buildings and features.
8. Protect and enhance natural resources, open space, cultural resources, and Ridgefield Center to preserve community character.

Promote Community Spirit

9. Encourage local recognition, volunteer contributions, and special local services, facilities, programs, and events.
10. Ensure that people of all ages and physical abilities can enjoy local amenities.
11. Provide opportunities and facilities for various age groups to gather together.

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