

Introduction



Rural roadsides are public places, managed through town-owned right-of-way easements on neighboring land. At times, right-of-way vegetation can be indistinguishable from neighboring forests or fields. In other places, the transition is stark: young beech trees may end abruptly at a private lawn, or a cleared roadside ditch may border private mature maple trees.

While many of us never picture picnicking in these roadside bands of trees, shrubs, grasses, or even wetlands, we look at them all the time. Driving, bicycling, or walking by, we take in views of what our Vermont countryside can be: thick tunnels of trees, historic vistas, open farmland, or emerging forests. The character of a local road is decided by the community; together, we change and manage our roadsides to reflect expanding neighborhoods, more stringent safety and environmental regulations, ever-shifting budgetary priorities and constraints, and the effects of forest pests, invasive plants, and storms.

In most towns, road management involves dozens of stakeholders: the road foreman, road crews, selectboard members, conservation commission members, homeowners and landowners, farmers, outdoor enthusiasts, truck and school bus drivers, and new residents wishing to build, to name a few. As such, it is no surprise that each town handles its municipal right-of-ways differently. Conflicting priorities can lead to knee-jerk reactions from road crews, contractors, or private landowners; identifying these conflicts and frequently revisiting local priorities and town-wide progress on roadside vegetation can promote compromise and create long-term management strategies that benefit all town residents.

There are tens of miles of unpaved road in even the smallest Vermont towns, often maintained by one- to four-person road crews. Town highway budgets are constrained by competing needs and, sometimes, shrinking populations. Yet it is still important to plan for community stewardship of rural roadsides, weighing the daily decisions that road crews must make against long-term goals identified by landowners and residents. Ultimately, some roads may lose their tight, shaded, and rural character in favor of meeting clean water regulations and providing safe passage for motorists. Other roads, however, can retain or restore healthy trees and other vegetation to slow erosion, improve stormwater infiltration, and perhaps most visibly, grow local character. No one solution will work in all places, but creating guidelines and expectations for the individual elements and general processes that govern our backroads ensures a plan that all, or at least most, residents can support.

Managing roadside vegetation requires a thoughtful, cooperative, and integrated approach. Given the budgetary constraints and multifaceted nature of right-of-way management, towns should view roadside vegetation growth and management as an ongoing process and use a step-by-step methodology to identify and act upon each priority. Through targeted and well-planned tree removal, appropriate planting and pruning, judiciously scheduled mowing, and timely communication with right-of-way partners such as utility companies, farmers, and the general public, towns can treat right-of-way vegetation as an important piece of municipal infrastructure and public space.

Like any community process, timing is everything, and some roadside vegetation initiatives may take decades to come to fruition. Good communication among town selectboard members, road crews, and residents encourages a long-term vision for municipal roads that incorporates short-term changes or setbacks. With this planning, communication, and overarching vision, towns have the capacity to grow utility, beauty, safety, and resilience along their roadsides.



Municipal right-of-ways cross all types of landscapes, from forests and farm fields to riversides, lakeshores, front lawns, and community spaces.

About the Resilient Right-of-Ways project

The Vermont Urban & Community Forestry Program created the [Resilient Right-of-Ways](#) project to identify key programmatic, environmental, and policy-driven factors that affect the growth and management of trees, shrubs, and plants within urban and rural municipal right-of-ways. With funding from the United States Forest Service, Resilient Right-of-Ways has been the umbrella for case studies in ten rural and ten urban communities to identify the processes, values, budgets, and partners that impact how roads and their surrounding vegetation are maintained. Field assessments, research, outreach, and technical workshops yielded a body of observations and recommendations that can serve small Vermont municipalities looking for best practices to manage roadside vegetation.

Urban communities wishing to design, plan, and build Green Streets in Vermont climates can reference the [Vermont Green Streets Guide](#)¹ and its accompanying resources and suite of [instructional presentations](#).²



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1. Vermont Urban & Community Forestry, *Vermont Green Streets Guide* (2018), bit.ly/VT_GreenStreetsGuide.

2. "Vermont Green Streets Guide," Vermont Urban & Community Forestry, vtcommunityforestry.org/Green_Streets_Guide.