

# 1999 Brandon Community Visit

## Executive Summary

The Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD), one of 36 State Rural Development Councils nationwide, was established in 1992 with the assistance of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Governor's Office. VCRD is structured as a nonprofit corporation with a broadly based board of 20 Directors representing five partner groups (federal, state, local, private, and non-profit). In 1996 VCRD learned about a community development tool called a "Community Visit." This model provides a way to listen to rural communities and gain understandings of rural community issues at the ground level. A Community Visit brings together a broad mix of community people, and a "Resource Team" made up of VCRD Directors and state and federal leaders. The Community Visit allows important issues and challenges to surface informally, from a local perspective. The Community Visit model has been used extensively by the State Rural Development Councils in New Hampshire and Texas. Over the past three years, VCRD has used the Community Visit in three other Vermont communities (Richford, Rockingham, and Middletown Springs) and the results have been very positive and productive.

The Town of Brandon was chosen because VCRD wanted to work in a southern Vermont community, and Brandon had a strong network of community level associations, and a cooperative Selectboard. The town leaders sensed that a Community Visit might be beneficial to help the town chart its future and gain perspectives from residents within the community, who normally are not heard. The Community Visit process was coordinated, and the focus groups were selected by a Steering Committee that was appointed by the Selectboard. There were four main stages to the Brandon Community Visit:

1. On June 24, 1999, the VCRD Resource Team met at the Nexus Corporation and split into three separate teams. One team spent the day in Brandon's downtown, another in Park Village (the old Training School site), and the third team spent the day in Forestdale. During the day, the teams attended three different **focus groups** where a broad mix of over 65 community people discussed an array of topics from business and tourism, to social services and health care. That evening the Brandon Selectboard and VCRD co-sponsored a community dinner at the Congregational Church's Fellowship Hall.
2. Next, VCRD condensed the Resources Team's notes from the focus groups, and created a **list of common issues and challenges**. This list reflected the major issues and challenges as identified by the community people who attended the focus groups.
3. The next step was to call a **public meeting** on September 22, 1999 (in Town Meeting style), so that a broadly-based group of Brandon citizens

- could prioritize the list of major issues and challenges. Over 50 people attended this public meeting and the list, of 23 major issues, was whittled down using a modified group voting process. First the list was reduced to ten major issues; then the group agreed on the **top five priority issues**. After the voting was complete, people were asked to sign-up for committees that would deal with each specific issue.
4. The prioritized list of issues and challenges was then distributed to VCRD's Resource Team to solicit their input, recommendations, ideas for funding sources, and specific contact people. These recommendations are included in Section 2 of this **Community Visit Final Report**. This report is meant to serve as a working document to help the various issue committees organize their respective strategic work plans and address the issues.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development is very pleased with the Brandon Community Visit process. VCRD is especially appreciative to the Resource Team members for freely sharing their time and creative ideas. Many thanks also go to the community citizens who participated in the various focus groups and at the public meeting. A special thanks goes to the Brandon Selectboard, Town Manager Mike Balch, and Janet Mondlak, who served as the Selectboard's liaison to the Community Visit process. The Selectboard believed in the process from the beginning and supported it throughout. The Vermont Council on Rural Development wishes the Town of Brandon all the best in its continuing efforts to create a prosperous and sustainable future.

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## Top Twelve Issues

1. **Bypass Issue** - move this discussion forward...can truck traffic be reduced...location of possible bypass, east or west of town...work with State to solve the traffic issues.
2. **Attract Economic Development** - (added at public meeting) need to attract business to Brandon...quality, high paying jobs.
3. **Recreation Issue** - develop new recreational opportunities in Brandon, including bike/walking path and water activities on Otter Creek and the Nashobe River.
4. **Teen Activities Issue** - need to improve opportunities for teen activities and appropriate options for kids after school.
5. **Community Center Issue** - explore the need for a community center to meet the varied needs for seniors, teens and recreational programs.
6. **Village Revitalization Issue** - increase entrepreneurial spirit and cooperation among Village businesses, and expand employment opportunities in the Village.

7. **Public Transportation Issue** - need to improve the options for convenient public transportation, especially for youth and seniors. Focus on buses, vans and trains.
  8. **Brandon's Historic Structures Issue** - explore how to adaptively re-use key historic structures such as the Fire Station, Town Hall and Old High School, use must be economically self-sustaining.
  9. **Destination Tourism Issue** - identify what special events to bring to Brandon that are appropriate and blend with town's needs and history.
  10. **Smith Block Issue** - work to find an economically feasible re-use of the Smith Block (second and third floor), due to its key importance to the Village of Brandon.
  11. **Education Issue** - explore the following matters...the image of Otter Valley High School, bullying in the schools (especially 7th and 8th grades), basic skills, and whether High School and Junior High should be split.
  12. **Smart Growth / Zoning Issue** - maintain the Village of Brandon and promote appropriate development patterns while maintaining respect for individual property rights.
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## Resource Team List

Alex Aldrich, Executive Director  
Vermont Arts Council

Mark Blucher, Executive Director  
Rutland Regional Planning Comm.

Roger Clapp, Deputy Commissioner  
Vermont Department of Agriculture  
Agricultural Development Division

Hal Cohen, Executive Director  
Central Vermont Community Action Council

Michael Dolce  
Community Development Specialist  
USDA -- Rural Development

Barry Driscoll  
Director of Planning and Policy  
VT Agency of Transportation

Darby Gorham, Executive Asst.  
Rutland Economic Dev. Corp.

Barb Grimes, General Manager  
Burlington Electric Company

Bob Justis  
Director of Economic Development  
Central VT Public Service Corp.

Jolinda LaClair, Chief of Staff  
U.S. Senator James Jeffords

Bob McDonald, Housing Director  
USDA -- Rural Development

Cheryl Mitchell, Deputy Secretary  
VT Agency of Human Services

Dave Robinson, B and I Specialist  
USDA -- Rural Development

Fred Schmidt, Director  
Center for Rural Studies  
107 Morrill Hall  
University of Vermont

Jason Simcock, Town Manager  
Town of West Rutland

Richard Smith, Deputy Commissioner  
VT Dept of Economic Development

David Tucker, Director  
VT Office of Economic Opportunity