

2004 Johnson Community Visit

Introduction

When the VCRD Visiting Team reviewed the challenges faced by the Johnson community they were impressed by three things.

First off, in all the forum discussions at the Community Visit Day, Visitors saw enviable strengths and assets in the community:

- dedicated volunteers and community members,
- a beautiful “classic Vermont” setting with rivers, mountains, and open land,
- a robust downtown with an interesting variety of businesses and preserved heritage,
- strong Town and Village Government working with energetic and competent citizen committees for planning, youth recreation, education, and downtown development,
- tremendous intellectual, artistic, and human resources brought to the community by the presence of Johnson State College and the Vermont Studio Center.

Together, the unique assets of Johnson make for a terrific set of opportunities, and, correspondingly, a special array of challenges—hurdles to overcome to fully realize these opportunities.

The second major impression of the Team, was the complexity of activities, the stresses on volunteers, municipal government, and committees, and the sheer variety of loosely connected (or uncoordinated) activities all leading to a critical need for better and more systematic means of communication in town. One resident talked of the ‘diverse and separate communities’ consisting of the College, the Studio Center, native-born Vermonters, part-time residents, village and town people, and the active volunteers that move so many projects forward. Others assured the Visiting Team that Johnson is united, but stressed the complexity of communications between groups and throughout the entire community. In the end Johnson voted “Communications and Events Coordination” as one of the most critical challenges ahead, and set up a strong committee to address these issues.

Everyone in the community development field these days talks about “human capital”, the people skills and organizational capacity that the residents of a community have to make things happen. The third aspect of Johnson that really struck the Visiting Team is the unique mix of people and skills in this community and the tremendous talent pool available to support community initiatives. From Duncan Hastings, the municipal administrator, to Dean West, the Chair of the Community Visit process, to the chairs and members of the Selectboard, Trustees, Planning Commission, Main Street Project, PTA, Studio Center, JSC, new Johnson Task Forces, and other community groups, Johnson is truly fortunate in the breadth, skill, and capacity of its leadership.

Priority Challenges

Identified by Johnson Community Meeting – April 27, 2004

- **Economic Development:** Many jobs in the Johnson area are low-paying, Johnson incomes are well below county averages, and there are few opportunities for youth employment. Economic opportunity is crucial for the future health and well-being of the Johnson community, and attracting new employers and nurturing entrepreneurial development should be a top priority.
Telecommunications: Because the lack of ubiquitous broadband access coupled with poor cell service in Johnson could have a negative impact on economic opportunities in the future, telecom access should be a key agenda of Johnson's economic development efforts. Pro-active planning and pre-site development might lure better cell service. Demand survey and aggregation toward negotiation with providers could help draw telecom deployment. **Tourist Economy:** Johnson is poised by its location, beauty, and natural resources to benefit more broadly from the regional recreation economy; these opportunities are integrally tied to the community's economic development efforts. Does Johnson want to be a "destination" in VT? Johnson could systematically plan to welcome visitors to the community by attracting a hotel or B&B, expanding and improving river access for canoeists, completing the Pathways Plan, building a downtown information kiosk, and developing a marketing campaign around its assets and recreational resources.
- **Communications and Events Coordination:** There is little structure for communications throughout the Johnson community for youth activities and recreation, college and community events, and town/village developments. Communications are sometimes fragmented between the numerous groups in town, and there is no single means of communication that works to unite the entire community. The development of a common calendar of events could unify current communications from JSC, the Studio Center, Johnson Elementary School, Lamoille Union HS, Town and Village government, and volunteer committees. Such a calendar could be multimedia, employing the web, a public notice board or kiosk downtown, a newsletter, and the college radio station.
- **Housing:** There is a lack of adequate single, multi-family, and elder housing in town. The loss of single-family homes in the village to meet student housing needs and the expansion of the Studio Center creates pressures that should be addressed through a common planning process. Are there ways for the Village, JSC, and the Studio Center to plan together?
- **Zoning:** The lack of zoning and by-laws is a long-term challenge to the character of Johnson and its working forest and natural resources. Its absence may slow downtown investment and undermine the housing market. Village zoning should

be effected soon and town zoning be planned. Development pressures from Chittenden County (partly spurred by the circumferential highway) will inevitably and increasingly affect Johnson. The more Johnson plans, the more it can condition its future development.

- Implementing the Main Street Plan:** The implementation of the Main Street Plan will mark an historic watershed in the renewal of downtown Johnson and may be the best investment to attract new businesses and jobs to the community. Making the investments and leveraging the needed resources will require broad public adoption of the Main Street Design and hard decisions around priorities in the design, including decisions on the burial of power lines. Johnson residents should unite to support this crucial step in downtown and community development. **Downtown Parking:** A strategic plan to enhance downtown parking and build a Park and Ride lot in Johnson should be developed and implemented. **Downtown Development:** The community should support and expand the role of Johnson Works and pursue a Village Designation in the Downtown Program to unify marketing and development efforts, build momentum, and set a collaborative framework for the progress of the Village center.

- ★ Participants decided that each significant community effort should develop a br vision statement to be conjoined to form a unifying vision for Johnson.

VCRD Resource Team Members

Resource Team

<p>Joss Besse, Director Vermont Downtown Program-VT Dept of Housing & Community Affairs</p>	<p>Carlen Finn, Executive Director VT Children's Forum</p>
<p>Michelle Boomhower, Executive Director Lamoille County Planning Commission</p>	<p>Peter A. Gilbert, Executive Director Vermont Humanities Council</p>
<p>Andy Broderick, President Housing Vermont</p>	<p>John Hall, Commissioner Housing and Community Affairs</p>
<p>Paul Bruhn, Executive Director Preservation Trust of Vermont</p>	<p>Seth Herman UVM Center for Rural Studies</p>
<p>Hal Cohen, Executive Director Central Vermont Community Action Council</p>	<p>Brian Keefe, Community Liaison U.S. Senator James Jeffords</p>
<p>Paul Costello, Executive Director Vermont Council on Rural Development</p>	<p>Candy Koenemann, Executive Assistant Vermont Council on Rural Development</p>
<p>Amy Darley, Human Services Coordinator U.S. Senator Jeffords Office</p>	<p>Jolinda LaClair, State Director USDA - Rural Development</p>
<p>Bethany Eisel UVM Center for Rural Studies</p>	<p>Karen Temple Lynch Lamoille Economic Development Corp.</p>
<p>Allen (Chip) Evans, Executive Director</p>	<p>Patricia A. McDonald, Secretary</p>

Human Resources Investment Council	VT Agency of Transportation
Wayne Fawbush, Executive Director Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund	Anita Rios Moore, Special Programs Coordinator USDA-Rural Development
George Robson, Natural Products Spec. VT Dept of Economic Development	Gus Seelig, Executive Director Vermont Housing and Conservation
Chuck Ross, State Director US Senator Patrick J. Leahy	Richard White, President Community National Bank
Fred Schmidt, Director Center for Rural Studies	Jonathan Wood, Commissioner VT Dept of Forests, Parks and Recreation

Resource Day Visitors

Michelle Boomhower, Executive Director Lamoille County Planning Commission	Candy Koenemann, Executive Assistant Vermont Council on Rural Development
Andy Broderick, President Housing Vermont	Chuck Leif The Hartland Group
Curt Carter, Economic Development Director VT Dept of Economic Development	Mike Miller, Planner Lamoille County Planning Commission
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