

Morristown residents set priorities for town's future

By Lisa McCormack | Posted: Thursday, May 19, 2011 2:00 pm

Morristown residents want to fill empty downtown storefronts, promote local foods, make the town much friendlier to pedestrians, and support new and growing small businesses.

Next month, some of Vermont's top economic-development experts will visit the town and work with citizens to set up action plans to make all these goals possible.

Nearly 100 Morristown residents and business owners met May 4 with an official from the Vermont Council on Rural Development to discuss things about the town that worry them, and to make a priority list to tackle in the next year or so.

Last year, the council selected Morristown for its Community Visit Program, and in March brought 30 federal, state, business and nonprofit leaders to town for an inaugural community forum attended by about 150 residents.

The community gathering began a three-month process in which residents will examine issues, decide their top priorities, and develop concrete plans for action.

The nonprofit council works for the advancement of rural communities. In the past 12 years, it has worked in more than 30 communities across Vermont.

Morristown was eligible for the visitor program because it earned downtown designation from the Vermont Division for Historical Preservation in 2003, making it eligible for state grants, tax credits, Act 250 waivers and other benefits.

The council will provide experts to guide the town, but it's up to citizens to join committees and get the work done.

"We know that the best decisions are made locally, and that local leadership and the participation of residents is the real key to progress," said Paul Costello, executive director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development. "But we also know that local efforts sometimes need the assistance of state or federal resources to be completed."

Participants at last week's forum spent more than two hours whittling down a list of 20 issues identified at the March forum to four priority items — filling empty storefronts, creating a business incubator and a light-industrial center, promoting locally produced foods, and building walking trails and a pedestrian bridge near the Oxbow to better connect the north and south sides of down.

The priority list "should be about the things you are ready to stand for and work to achieve, not about what you want other people to do," Costello said.

A majority of forum participants said the town's top focus should be filling the growing number of empty downtown storefronts. Without a vibrant downtown, it will be difficult to attract new businesses

and impossible to get tourists passing through town on their way to the local resorts to stop and stay awhile, they said.

“It’s important for the economic benefit of Morrisville,” said Theresa Breault; she and her husband, Arthur, own the Arthur’s Department Store buildings. The business closed last November, leaving a huge hole on Main Street.

“The No. 1 problem is the empty storefronts,” said Ed Debohrs, a longtime resident and village trustee. “Without something there, how are we going to get new businesses to incubate? They don’t want to be in a place with empty storefronts. And, expanding the local tourism industry — come on, now.”

Costello will return to Morristown June 1 with a team of experts for a final community forum.

The experts “will make recommendations on where to start, based on what’s worked for other towns,” Costello said.

Citizens will form teams, based on the issues they want to work on; learn about resources they can tap into to help; and devise action plans and timetables.