



Vermont Council on Rural Development

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by Joseph Gresser as published in the Barton Chronicle: <https://bartonchronicle.com/tag/newport/>
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NEWPORT ? Residents of Newport defied a cold stormy day and gathered to dine and discuss important issues affecting their city. Over the course of six hours on Wednesday, December 13, around 140 citizens talked over Newport's advantages as well as its problems. The event was dubbed reNewport by the local steering committee that helped the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) plan the day's activities, and it focused on seeking opportunities to move the city forward in a number of areas. Local residents participated in nine discussions over the course of the day. They were joined by 28 representatives from government agencies, nonprofits, and federal officeholders. Staff members from the offices of all three members of the state's congressional delegation attended the meeting, as did employees of several state agencies and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development program. The outside experts listened and took notes as Newport citizens offered ideas on how to improve aspects of life in the city. Only at the end of the discussion did the outsiders offer opinions. In general, those were summations of positive things said during the conversation and comments noting community assets.

The conversations were moderated by representatives of the Council on Rural Development, who skillfully steered participants away from hashing out the merits of individual proposals and toward adding their own ideas to the mix. A scribe attended each discussion, taking detailed notes of the proceedings that will be used in future meetings.

The Council on Rural Development has run such events, what it calls community visits, for more than a decade. The visits are meant to help towns uncover their most pressing concerns and assist residents' efforts to organize and make necessary changes. The process is divided into three stages. In the first, which for Newport was the December 13 event, local people gather in a series of discussions centered on broad topics. Organizers return for the second meeting, which will be held on January 17, with a complete set of notes from the first meetings and city residents vote on their top issues. The third meeting, which will be held sometime in February, will winnow down those issues to three top concerns and start community members on the path toward resolving them.

Moderators at the nine discussion groups held on December 13 gently guided participants to

distinguish between things they would like to see happen in Newport and those they can make happen themselves. The day began with simultaneous meetings on housing, health and wellness, and public transportation, held at the city council chambers, the Goodrich Memorial Library, and United Church. Jenna Koloski, VCRD's community and policy manager, led the health and wellness meeting at the Goodrich library. She began by asking people to name things the city already has that promote health and wellness. The list grew quickly. Casey Baraw of Inspire Yoga told how her studio gives breaks to nonprofits that want to pay for classes as a benefit for employees. Louise Whipple of the Memphremagog Ski Touring Foundation spoke of her organization's efforts to encourage crosscountry skiing. After a time, Ms. Koloski switched gears and asked about challenges. One person quickly noted the potential for recreation around Lake Memphremagog and said it is excruciatingly painful that more has not been done to promote activities at the lake. Another complained there was limited room in some child development programs in the area and some parents had to take their kids to programs in Brattleboro.

Over at the municipal building a similar process was playing out over housing. Ben Doyle, a community development specialist from USDA Rural Development, was hearing how older residents had to give up their pets to get into senior housing. Another person said getting people into housing in Newport is harder than it is in St. Johnsbury even though the same nonprofit runs the program in both towns. Others worried that Newport's housing stock is not accessible to older people and people with disabilities. Newport has an insufficient number of affordable apartments. Mr. Doyle asked if there is resistance to building such housing. "Perceptions can be a challenge or a barrier," the moderator noted. "Sometimes people say they don't want housing."

Some of the same issues were under discussion down the street at the public transportation meeting where some worried whether the city's sidewalks were safe for older people or people with disabilities. Mary Pat Goulding had seen at least one positive sign. "There was a woman on a motorized chair on Main Street this morning," Ms. Goulding reported. "She seemed to be doing fine." When the time came for ideas about possible improvements, Patricia Sears suggested installing charging stations for electric cars. "Governor Scott talks about 100,000 electric cars by 2020," she said. "They will need a place to charge." Creating more bicycle trails was also on the list. Some wanted to expand the idea of alternative forms of transportation to include ATV and snowmobile trails, too. Ms. Sears brought up a topic that had been raised at the health and wellness meeting "how, over time, access to the lake has decreased. Unbeknownst to each other, the wellness and transportation meetings were taking a similar path. Such confluence was common throughout the day, suggesting a thread of concern that might connect topics in unexpected ways.

At several discussions, including the one titled Connecting Our Community, the question of a central source of information about community events was raised. Paul Costello asked early on in the day whether the chamber of commerce had a website that could serve that function. He was told the chamber is not working well. When at a later meeting someone mentioned the chamber's lack of capacity, Mr. Costello gave a little smile and said, "I've heard that."

The VCRD offers its services free of charge to communities that invite it to come to town for a community visit. The only requirement a town has to meet, other than sending out a mass mailing

to all residents, is putting on a community dinner. Newport's dinner was catered by the East Side Restaurant. The city and Community National Bank shared the cost of the meal. Ted Brady, deputy secretary of the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development conveyed Governor Phil Scott's greetings. "I told him a lot of his people would be in Newport today," Mr. Brady told the crowd. "The Governor brightened up and said, "Tell the people in Newport the state is here ready to do what you tell us to.?" Mr. Brady moderated one of the discussions after dark, focused on economic development. Many of the ideas, like those earlier in the day at the downtown discussion, were focused on the hole on Main Street. Some wanted to build a hotel on the site, others wanted to have an arts and cultural space to attract people to the city. Several people proposed trying to attract an educational institution. One suggestion called for the University of Vermont to build a new campus on the bluffs. Another person noted the aging population of Newport, pointing to former city manager John Ward as an example of the trend. Many older people, he said, will need care, and there is a shortage of nurses. Perhaps Vermont Technical College can set up a nursing program in Newport in collaboration with the North Country Hospital and North Country Career Center, he said. Mr. Brady laughed. "I love that your proposal for economic development is to put John in a home," he said, before fielding more ideas. The proposal for a nursing program will be among the hundreds posted on the walls of the city's gym on January 17 as part of a winnowing process the VCRD hopes will result in city residents picking ideas they are willing to back with time and effort as a way to renew Newport.

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