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Article published Dec 1, 2008

Bellows Falls boosters honored

By [Susan Smallheer](#) Herald Staff

BELLOWS FALLS — One is an artist and the other a planner and historian. Together they played pivotal roles in the current renaissance of Bellows Falls and both were honored recently for their work by the Vermont Council on Rural Development.

Artist Robert McBride and Rockingham's former development director Richard Ewald were honored with the 2008 Community Leadership Award in front of 400 of their peers at the Vermont State Housing Finance conference in Burlington, according to Paul Costello, executive director of the council.

"They both have both sides, the left and right brain," said Costello. "They were both essential to the renaissance of Bellows Falls. Sometimes they worked together, sometimes they worked on their own. They built the momentum," he said.

McBride, a New York City artist, came to Vermont 26 years ago for a party and ended up buying a house overlooking the historic Bellows Falls Canal. He has lived in Bellows Falls full time since 1994.

He is the founder of RAMP, the Rockingham Arts and Museum Project, and has been a sparkplug for the revitalization efforts, Costello said, starting with the restoration of the Exner Block and its transformation into a vital part of the community, housing apartments, a café, artists' galleries and stores.

Ewald, who resigned this summer after working for the town of Rockingham for more than a decade, helped spearhead the restoration of the Bellows Falls Opera House, along with other building projects in downtown Bellows Falls, including the restoration of the fire-ravaged Howard Block and the still-pending plan of restoring an old railroad hotel, the Hotel Windham, into a more lively part of the downtown scene, including a small boutique hotel.

McBride said that he and Ewald worked together on some projects and pursued their own projects and goals, but together they were always thinking of making their town a better place.

"I think things are great in Bellows Falls. The momentum is still here," McBride said, noting that while the economy was troubled, local businesspeople were working hard not to be "sucked into the collective" stories of doom and gloom.

"What is smoke and mirrors? People are still running stores," said McBride, adding that people who were creative about marketing their businesses would survive.

McBride paid tribute to entrepreneurs in Bellows Falls who were committed to keeping

downtowns vital and relevant.

"The merchant people are getting together and being creative and clever," he said.

The village has a great hardware store, a bookstore, and the store that is simply called Sam's, a combination outdoor outfitter, men and women's clothing and shoe store.

Ewald, a resident of Westminster West, resigned as the Rockingham development director this June to take a job with the Connecticut River Watershed Council in Greenfield, Mass. But he remains close to Rockingham, both physically and mentally.

Ewald said he hopes his biggest contribution to the town isn't something necessarily tangible, although he said the public often associated McBride with the renovation of the Exner Block and his signature project was the renovation of the Howard Block, which had been gutted by fire about 10 years ago.

"From my perspective, Bellows Falls and Rockingham managed to do something very significant and that was to turn, and change, people's ideas about the town and I think it started from within," Ewald said.

"People were taking responsibility for their own community, and just following through," he said.

Ewald said the town benefited from leadership in municipal and state government, and help from everyone from the state's Congressional delegation to nonprofit groups both local and statewide.

"There was leadership in municipal government that recognized an opportunity to do some big things and didn't shy away from investing in those things," Ewald said, who listed the Howard Block, the renovation of the Rockingham Town Hall and Opera House, and the planned renovation of the Hotel Windham as his "tangible" successes.

McBride said he recently returned from a road trip from St. Louis to Tulsa, Okla. "I saw a lot of dead downtowns," McBride said.

The trip renewed his belief that Vermont downtowns are unique, noting they were recently compared to such travel icons as the Scottish Highlands and the barrier reefs of Australia.

"You just take it take it day by day, by day by day," he said of any change. "The interesting thing about Vermont is the scale of it, the possibility of it."

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