

Fairfield brand? Town dreams 'big'

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Community settles on three priorities

FAIRFIELD — Development of a farmer's market, a buy-local program and ultimately a Fairfield brand were among the projects proposed when about 50 residents met Thursday night to help shape their town's future. Among other priority projects were a school enhancement program, improved communications and coordination of community volunteers.

The meeting at the Fairfield Center School was the second in the Vermont Rural Development Council's (VRDC) community process. In October, a team of people from state and federal governments, non-profits and other organizations met with citizens to establish a series of forums to discuss Fairfield's needs and future.

VRDC distilled that initial information into 16 possible projects for the community to tackle. They range from improving water and sewer infrastructure to building a slaughterhouse.

Those attending last night's meeting went through two rounds of voting to narrow those ideas to three projects on which community task forces could immediately begin to work.

Some ideas, such as creating a Fairfield brand (much like the Vermont name affixed to products made in the state) and supporting new and more diverse farms, were combined.

Paul Costello, executive director of VRDC, said repeatedly that no ideas would be lost, that they are available for future projects.

Fairfield farmer Jessica Gaudette championed creating a farmer's market and combining it with a buy-local program, describing a market as "achievable" with the creation of a Fairfield brand as a longer-term goal.

Vanessa Kittell, Gaudette's sister, also supported the buy-local program and a Fairfield brand. "We're a community that likes to aim high and dream big," Kittell said.

Kristen Hughes, the local librarian, advocated for improved communications, saying there needed to be a way to tell people what's happening.

Others, including a member of the recreation committee, cited the need to be able to coordinate the community's volunteers.

"It's amazing what towns do with this stuff," Costello said. The Town of Johnson, for example, was able to repair bridges, and is now working to improve downtown sidewalks, as well as affordable housing.

In the next step in the Fairfield process, VRDC will bring in people with experience, expertise or access to resources to support the three priority areas selected by Fairfield.

Although VRDC will be connecting the community with outside experts, "the bulk of the commitment comes from here," said Bridget Howrigan Rivet, the community visit chair.

VRDC will help the town draft a statement summarizing the community's vision of what Fairfield is and what they would like it to be. As part of that discussion, residents mentioned recognizing and preserving the value of Fairfield's agricultural history, preserving the school as a center of the community, preserving the working landscape and the vitality of the community's two downtowns.

"Democracy is not something you vote on and you're done," Costello said in his closing remarks. "If we can't prove it here, we're not going to make it work anywhere else."