

Our 4-Town Future Forum Notes

Compiled from focus group discussions held with residents and the VCRD Visiting Team at forums in South Royalton on February 21, 2019

These notes capture the many interesting and diverse thoughts and ideas shared during community discussions. These notes represent a starting point of brainstormed ideas. Throughout the “Our 4-Town Future” Forums, ideas will be captured and compiled to be shared with the residents of the 4-Town region for prioritization. Priority action items will be selected at a 4-Town region priority setting session in April (date TBD).

Economic & Cultural Vitality

Visiting Team: Amy Cunningham, *Deputy Director*, Vermont Arts Council; Kim Gilbert, *Regional Planner*, Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission; Joan Goldstein, *Commissioner*, VT Department of Economic Development; Bob Haynes, *Executive Director*, Green Mountain Economic Development Corporation; Jenna Koloski, *Community and Policy Manager*, VT Council on Rural Development; Jenna Lapachinski, *Field Services*, Preservation Trust of VT; Nancy Larowe, *Local First Alliance Manager*, Vital Communities; Jon Muise, *Vermont Area Director*, USDA Rural Development

What are the Assets in this Area?

- Vibrant local schools.
- Local farms.
- Wonderful array of restaurants and food and CSA’s lead to cultural vitality.
- Beautiful natural environment that attracts people to the area.
- Cultural events with the Lebanon Opera House, Dartmouth, Woodstock, etc. nearby.
- Community owned food coops.
- Libraries in all 4 towns.
- Two-Rivers Ottawaquechee Regional Commission (TRORC)
- Local beer – 2 micro brewers – biggest concentration in US.
- Local community radio station.
- Vermont Law School for diversity and educational opportunities for the community.
- Best broadband internet (not in all 4 towns) – EC Fiber by end of next year all 4 towns.
- 3 of the 4 towns have ice skating rinks.
- White River.
- Proximity to the interstate.
- Rich architectural heritage – great buildings.
- Historical attractions:
 - Joseph Smith birthplace
 - Justin Smith Morrill Homestead
- Town meetings.
- Great public buildings – Royalton Academy, 7 stars center, Tunbridge Town Hall for music events, parties, weddings. Venues for events.
- Organized sporting events get people out doing something healthy.
- Amazing people, some of them musicians.
- Tunbridge World Fair.
- Town Band.
- Town Rec Programs.
- Great trails – logging, biking, skiing.
- Churches open to everyone.
- Manufacturing like GW Plastics that encourage workplace learning for students.
- Diversity of farms – sizes, types, structures.
- Strong emergency services. Rescue squad is shared in 2.5 of the towns. All fire departments are mutual aid and will go to the other towns.
- Stagecoach bus out of Randolph supported by each of the 4 towns. They go to the senior centers, take people to doctor’s appointments.
- Sharon has a community nurse with office hours and is available to visit people that have needs.
- Tunbridge and Strafford has neighbors helping neighbors.
- Food shelves in all 4 towns.
- Meals on wheels for seniors and on the holidays.
- The skills of people in the area – can find people that know how to do things.
- Lions clubs.
- Visual artists – strong painters, poets, writers, journalists, photographers.
- 7 Stars is an arts center in Sharon.
- People’s art on walls in South Royalton.
- The place is an asset – you can wander here and feel free between the river and the hills.
- Fall foliage.
- The railroad goes through but it should be used more.
- Bale building is a nice community building.
- The health center in So Royalton and Sharon.

What are the Challenges?

- Hard to get places, Stagecoach only runs once a day.
- Small scale farms aren’t economically vibrant enterprises.
- Aging infrastructure: roads, bridges, and sewer.
- Not enough childcare options.
- Declining enrollment in the schools.
- Parking is a challenge in South Royalton.
- Lack of plan development for zoning.
- Trail access and connectivity.

- No common repository for where the trails are, no map of what's available in the whole region (Strafford has maps).
- True broadband connectivity to every household.
- Cell phone service is spotty.
- Long commutes to employment is considered normal.
- Lack of an Interstate exit for So Royalton and Tunbridge means visitors don't stop to spend money (or it's an asset depending on how you look at it).
- Drawback for business development is the low underpasses – trucks can't bring products in.
- Auditory challenge of living near a loud train but can't hop on the train – Amtrak goes right through but doesn't stop.
- No robust waste management service in the region, no clear consistent or economically viable way to manage waste when the new law kicks in.
- Recycling centers have different rules so hard to know what they take.
- Population is aging.
- Real estate sales driven by retirement purchases.
- Have 7 Stars in Sharon, but no community center to gather and meet up with your neighbors.
- Great local businesses but their hours are limited or unreliable.
- Climate change will be more and more a challenge over time, impact of hurricane Irene on the region.
- Higher than average poverty rate in Sharon and Royalton.
- Growth in the working poor population.
- All libraries are 1 room libraries and are under staffed (except one of them).
- Lack of affordable housing and affordable rents.
- Finding balance of offering quality education and affordability.
- Not much middle range housing available.
- Not affordable farm houses.
- Hard to get around – need all-wheel good car or can't live here. (It was noted that the Sharon road crew is doing a great job with the roads this winter).
- Winter is tough. Can't enjoy all the assets we listed above for months out of the year as people stay home.
- Declining volunteerism and impacts on our emergency services.
- Lack of racial and ethnic diversity.
- Opioid drug and alcohol abuse as well as domestic abuse.
- Cost and time to find out what you don't know. No one-stop source to get help for good ideas. Going through Act 250 is an education. Cost and time to get through the regulations is a drawback to a lot of things. Barriers to accomplishing priorities.
- Town office could be more accessible and more of a resource, not inviting to walk there in Royalton.

Opportunities: What Should Be Done?

- Tax air intake manifold vehicles and proceeds support electric car purchases.
- Sharon Health Initiative nurse/community coordinator is warehouse for needs. Sometimes hard to find the right person in a state agency to help.
- Economic Development staff person to help people navigate through barriers.
- With housing being such an issue, look at house sharing programs or programs like that that are working.
- Hard to get into existing farmland. Preserve rural landscape but make smaller tracts of land available for farming and learning. Remove the barriers for new farmers to get access to existing farmland – can only do it currently if willing to take 50 acres or more, but has to be a way to work around that for viability of small diversified farms. Making land available in smaller chunks would help farmers looking for land to farm.
- Connect people that have land they want farmed with people that want to farm through a forum or network.
- As a farmer, don't know what land is available that we can use – what land in land trusts are available.
- Use railroad.
- Local transportation options, connect people that live nearby that need to go to the store, etc.
- Ask Stagecoach to explore ways to expand their service options in the 4 communities.
- Recreation opportunities are huge, towns working hard to keep open land and individuals allow others to ski or walk on their land. Have a group that maps it and show where the parking is to access it.
- Fund to seed new businesses as loans or equity.
- VLS is piloting a new course on entrepreneurship and legal advice – people can get free legal advice with social environmental focus. Get the word out.
- Royalton has revolving loan fund.
- White River investment club out of BALE have pooled money and taking applications for loans.
- If have farmers in transition from conventional to organic farming, they need bridge money to build their soils before they can convert.
- Royalton help Tunbridge with neighbors helping neighbors.
- To address opioid issue – provide teenagers with out of school activities after school hours.
- Clearinghouse for land swapping, volunteerism. Need to consolidate all the forms of communication – we have too many currently.
- Share emergency services and resources for people when they have power outages, for example.
- Small solar projects that serve 4 to 5 houses. Most transportation will be electrified and need to control it locally.
- Do more to clear trees along power lines preventatively to prevent power outages.
- Make Tunbridge Fairgrounds a year-round asset – utilize the venue as a space for events and activities.
- See strength in being together but the region is “a community” rather than “4 communities” Each community has its own assets and we need to share things between us better. If we had a central library could have a hell of a library. Think about ourselves as a single community – shared service opportunities where more can be done together.

- Many more communities – Barnard, etc. but we are all little groups right down to our families.
- Regarding disaster preparedness, there's a move toward community resilience projects like in Sharon. Towns could come together and coordinate resilience planning.
- Currently, emergency service people from towns come together every other month.
- More planning on watershed scale which is what connects us all together. As a watershed, ecologically-speaking need to think in those terms.
- Bicycling is strong in the area – people come here and bike. When roads are repaved, there is an opportunity to get shoulders put in. In planning ahead, need to make more bike friendly. Can get grants for bike paths, etc. improve bikeability and walkability of the region.
- Evaluate if towns are getting adequate funding from the state in relation to what they are paying in.
- Support local businesses, municipalities sharing crushing operation for gravel and sand. Need more and more these days, communities struggle with accessing it, trucking it.
- Have a place where musicians, artists, writers meet with children to connect and learn. Parents can't afford private lessons or can't drive the kids around because of work, etc.
- More evening events available. A lot of socializing is done in homes, but hard to break into local social circle.
- Make winter shorter.
- A hub or central communication source to share all the things that are happening. Need to consolidate the many lists that already exist.
- Could have an app with a calendar of all the local events. It could also list needs, like someone needing help washing windows, etc. Youth helping elders, building community, good for youth and elders.
- Bethels revitalization initiative brings a lot of people out – Arnold block co-working space, kitchen, venue, all-purpose space. Could be good for this region.
- Toolshare.
- Not great web presence for local businesses or town offices. Hard to find information online about anything local. Improving web presence of town offices would be great.
- Chamber of commerce for the 4 towns.
- In revitalized block would love to see an artists coop where local craft people and artists could sell their work.
- Whistle stop for Amtrak – wave and the engineer would stop. We have VLS and no stop for their students. Would be benefit them and others. It costs \$600 each time they stop.
- Paying attention on climate change – in next 20 years it will impact and cost us more and more. When you get flooding, it's because the water is running off the land. It won't if you have taken care of the land and it's absorbing it. From climate perspective, get a cooling action which cools the planet. Anytime we do projects, we ought to be thinking about whether we can also make it cooler at the same time. Anything to do with land, transportation, bringing more farmers to the land, etc.
- Underlying value – will do collective vision and value exercise at next session.
- Whole systems thinking for ecological function, ecosystem services, water quality, influx of people because we have water, forward thinking of regional planners.
- Regional business association to unify the region and eventually serve as incubator for new businesses in various industries.
- Small local farmer incubator or resource hub.

Reflections of the Community Visiting Team

- Infrastructure challenges, wonderful assets, not sure how to access or share them. Bethel "Better Block" project is great, but the revitalization initiative also created the Bethel University that offers free classes. A lot of opportunities to share wonderful resources. Have fabulous downtowns, village centers, historic resources. Incorporate the ideas from today into the village centers to keep them vibrant for the next 50 to 100 years.
- 12 regional development corps around the state help provide info and resources. In terms of references, 2 Rivers Ottauquechee is another source of info, challenges with permitting can be solved. Norwich has a fantastic website. Good project to work on. Communication is part of it. Need broadband for life. Funding available from VEDA, USDA, NBRC, small investment loans, revolving loan funds. Grant planning assistance. The glass is way more than half full here. Great opportunity to coalesce.
- Local food, beer, artists, quintessential Vermont. Great resources here with VLS, broadband coming, rich cultural and people assets. Collective but independent. Have opportunity for consistency and market self as destination region will help with economic development. Share resources whether it's a person, platform of communication, will come up with great ideas. USDA RD needs specific actionable items to fund.
- Need to do some planning. Although have tremendous assets, there are gaps. In ED we talk about gaps. We could refer people, farm viability program through VHCB good in technical assistance, transitioning to organic with small pots of funding. On big issues, like underpass is long term planning. How to do it as a 4-town coalition or as a region. Worthy of thinking of a master plan for the infrastructure improvements of roads, bridges, watershed and stormwater management, built in would be resiliency and shared services. Proper planning will lead to the funding.
- VAC has been around for 55 years. State arts agency and non profit. We invest in orgs and artists. Vermont Creative Network about lifting up the creative sector in the state. It's a significant economic driver in the state. WRJ April 18th is region wide convening for what can be done to lift creative vitality in this region in the state. New grant round for community building.
- Cover 30 town area. Similar challenges we hear in other towns. Work directly with towns as they update their town plans.
- Strong sense of place here, love of community.

Affordable Housing and Senior Living

Visiting Team: Paul Costello, *Executive Director*, VT Council on Rural Development; Josh Hanford, *Acting Commissioner*, VT Department of Housing and Community Development; Monica Hutt, *Commissioner*, VT Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living; Mike Kiess, *Workforce Housing Coordinator*, Vital Communities; Seth Leonard, *Managing Director of Community Development*, VT Housing Finance Agency; Tom Roberts, *Executive Director*, Vital Communities; Gus Seelig, *Executive Director*, VT Housing and Conservation Board; Beth Stern, *Executive Director*, Central VT Council on Aging

What are the Assets in this Area?

- There is a senior subsidized property in Royalton, that will also allow for younger residents.
- Homes are very large. Difficult to move to the area and downsize.
- The rental market is very tight: the Law School and Upper Valley create pressures on demands.
- Wages were relatively flat in the area while housing prices increased (comment from a former lister).
- One law student that came in May from Maryland had a very difficult time finding rental housing. The stock was also low quality, or had absentee landlords.
- Tunbridge discussed pulling together resources to build more homes.
- Transportation to services, specifically for the aging populations, is a challenge.
- Individuals maintain multiple jobs to ensure they can afford housing. Quality of housing is a detriment to being able to work from home. "I pay 75% of my income to maintain housing where I can work".
- It takes a long time for homes to turn on the market.
- In the mid-\$250k-\$300k there is a good inventory".
- The recent Tunbridge conversation was about supporting a network of volunteers to support each other. Neighbors Helping Neighbors in Tunbridge and Strafford provides services if needs are identified such as firewood.
- The Sharon Health Initiative assists in accessing medical care or federal/state services.
- Strafford, Chelsea, and Royalton all have Senior Centers.
- There is a need for more Stagecoach transportation access, need more drivers for this service.
- Bethel is a nearby town where services can be accessed.
- There is not a focused group around housing in any of the towns or from a regional perspective.
- Homeshare Now was referenced by visiting team member, but only one attendee had heard about the service.
- Norwich's affordable housing ss a potential example to strive towards.
- Mini-Houses or Tiny Homes have been utilized in Strafford. This assisted with younger individuals being able to buy homes

What are the Challenges?

- Strafford had a conversation about bringing in senior housing, but it fizzled out. It was challenging or overwhelming to individually support housing initiatives around the creation of housing.
- Confusion around the definition of Affordable Housing. Typically small "a" affordable versus capital "A" affordable.
- Law School students create a strain on demand in Royalton which increases prices. Lower income non-students have NO options and it is difficult to stay.
- Need for affordable housing, especially for seniors.
- Single Family Homes are not as affordable as they used to be.
- If you are modest income, it is hard to get to homeownership – condition of homes and barrier of down payment.
- Strafford has had several groups to attract Senior Housing. Have run into issues around location and land.
- Zoning was referenced as a barrier (specific to the Strafford Senior Housing efforts), with lack of density permitted.
 - Strafford is only town with zoning, other three do not.
- Town Water/Sewer issue. All attendees identified water/waste water (mostly or all septic in the villages) – Strafford, Tunbridge
- Sidewalks and pedestrian infrastructure do not exist outside downtown Royalton.
- Homes require too much care or maintenance for aging population.
- Airbnb and short-term rental are putting stress on rental availability.
- Lack of connection to shared or regional services, community networks are dependent on people knowing people and lend to isolation. "Stubborn Yankee Independence".

Opportunities: What Should Be Done?

- We need a contiguous bus service. There is no identified group organizing that conversation. Lack of funding for Rural Transportation.
- Randolph Concept: RACLT project (VERMODs just outside downtown Randolph) as a potential model.
- Recognition that each community is taking on issue of supporting seniors, and regional coordination could be beneficial.
- Co-housing development and or home share expansion.
- Royalton became eligible for New Market Tax Credits. Royalton has "Hope Property" and the Town Offices land that it is considering for co-housing (or other development). There is not currently housing on these properties – but with one being owned by the town, there was real interest in its potential.

- Interest in supporting the childcare expansion of existing private facility.
- Royalton was discussed as being a convenient center between the towns.
- Is there a “general massing” of people that justifies investments in housing and infrastructure? Concern about the population.
- There are large homes that are vacant in Strafford that could be potential redevelopment properties.
- There is a lack of duplexes... “lots of studio apartments, old farm houses, but nothing in between”.
- South Windsor Street in Royalton - Journey Church/Lumber Yard. Noted these properties are for sale and could be combined, but no current housing exists there.
- We need apartments the size of Exeter Block.
- “Old Grain Mill” in Royalton is privately owned. No current housing on site, but was identified as a potential housing redevelopment site.
- No private sector development is occurring in the area.
- “All the Nice Homes Are Second Homes”
- Buildings in the area build other places because it is hard to get permits.
- Are there private sector investment? Town Steeple (\$100k) example in Strafford; Upper Valley Land Trust – preserved a piece of land with private donations.
- Engage VLS volunteers in addressing housing needs.
- VLS Development: they have talked about developing housing.
- Getting Access to down payment assistance or “rent-to-own.”
- Work at creating a vision.
- Identify reasons why homes are sitting on the market. Find opportunities to reinvest in them, maybe energy efficiency upgrades.
- Single family affordable housing development is expensive....so does it make more sense to reinvest in existing stock?
- Old Farms and Barns that are tax burdens for owners. Perhaps seek to change some of these into housing?
- Sweat Equity and community energy. Energy has popped up in times of crisis.
- More inclusion between students and region...harness and use the student energy.
- Untapped and unorganized human power exists.

Reflections of the Community Visiting Team

- Energy can be harnessed.
- Gave examples of potential smaller scale affordable housing. Expense of housing development at this scale.
- Housing Committee, get conversations in the hopper before money starts being spent.
- You want housing that affordable and accessible, and location matters....the themes were consistent across demographics. Integrated communities matter – cross-generational.
- Dynamic Vision can drive energy if it is organized well. Lock-in, set priorities, drive them forward. Squeaky wheel begs the resources of state and federal funders. Use the youth.