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LYNDON

Officials, Residents Begin Community Visioning Process

BY AMY ASH NIXON Staff Writer

LYNDONVILLE — The first leg of a process aimed at helping the community identify priorities to improve its future began with a visit from the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) on Thursday.

Community leaders and members, plus representatives from the USDA Rural Development, Northeastern Vermont Development Association (NVDA), Northern Communities Investment Corporation (NCIC) and the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (VACCD) and many other organizations and agencies took part in forums held at Lyndon Institute, the municipal building, the Cobleigh Library and at the Thaddeus Stevens School.

Nine different sessions were held on topics identified earlier by the visiting team as well as local leaders, which included: marketing Lyndon, housing and transportation, trails and greenspaces, economic redevelopment, schools, college and community partnerships; entertainment, events and the arts; revitalizing downtown and gateways; supporting strong families, and recreational opportunities.

The goal was to brainstorm a list of the community's strengths and needs.

In a session called "Marketing Lyndon" the question posed was what efforts are in place to "...get people to get out of their cars?"

Strengths identified in the region included education, the work force, recreational opportunities and community events, from the farmers' market, to Lyndon State College, Lyndon Institute, Kingdom Trails and the Lyndon Area Chamber of Commerce and its seasonal visitor



PHOTO BY AMY ASH NIX

Paul Costello, executive director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, leads a session on Marketing Lyndon, part of a three-month project to help the community identify its assets and priorities.

center.

LSC faculty member Ann Nygard said the college's marketing emphasizes the authentic Vermont lifestyle here, saying the fact there are no big box stores is a selling point.

Realtor Patty Emery mentioned the town's municipal sewer system as critical for supporting growth.

Industrial buildings that could be re-purposed, like the former Kennametal building on Main Street, were identified as possible sites for redevelopment.

Jim O'Reilly, co-owner of The Wildflower Inn, said the people – and the attitude here – are an asset that many inn guests comment on.

Areas in which the town could still improve include not having a tourism brochure or advertising campaign to bring people to town, broadband issues, a challenging business environment, and more.

Executive director of the VCRD Paul Costello facilitated the Marketing Lyndon session and said, "By the end of this process, we're going to come up with a list of which are the most powerful ones that we can

actually get done."

Suggestions included making sure front line workers know a few key phrases in French to welcome French-speaking Canadians; a tour to promote the region's offerings around things like biking, snowmobiling, and farmers' markets.

Costello asked how people locally feel about the local economy, if they were optimistic.

"We used to be," said Emery and a few others. "Lifestyles have changed, things have changed. I don't think it's the same that it used to be."

O'Reilly said, "We don't have an elevator speech."

Some of the assets that were discussed in the region are based in neighboring Burke, but people come through Lyndon to get there, and Lyndon needs to find a way to capitalize on that and give people reasons to stay in town.

Ted Brady, deputy secretary of the VACCD, said, "I've been telling people they have to get to Burke to see the incredible view."

"Lyndon," Emery corrected him. "Exactly," said Brady. "In this

case it sure seems like the assets are equally split between two incredible towns. You've identified a fantastic opportunity here," to get Lyndon's name out there more and tout its offerings.

Economic Development

Another session focused on economic development.

Among the assets identified were the strong educational system and strong work force, as well as a good work ethic among residents.

"We do have a dedicated work force, and that's what I've always told people," said David Lussier, a realtor and a local auctioneer. "We are lucky with what we've got, but we have lost a lot in the last 30 years, too."

The proximity to Canada and the interstate are strengths, too, as well as the industrial park.

David Snedeker, executive director of NVDA, said there are more than 20 lots available in the Lyndon-St. Johnsbury Industrial Park. He added that manufacturers often look for existing buildings, so getting more buildings in the area might attract more jobs.

Kim Crady-Smith, who owns a bookstore and coffee shop in Lyndonville, wants to see busy Saturday afternoons downtown, instead of it being "completely barren," which it often is. "It's a very difficult business environment in the spring, and this time of year...It's really hard for businesses to keep their doors open."

In March the rural development council will return to help narrow down the ideas that were gathered this week, to help set priorities, Costello said and in April, representatives of the many agencies and organizations involved will return to help plan next steps and connect local initiatives with resources that can help move ideas to fruition.

